

Guilt in An Age of Jihad

by Dexter Van Zile (August 2016)



In late July, a Catholic priest, Rev. Jacques Hamel, had his head cut off by *jihadists* in Normandy, France. The killers, who were shot by police after the murder, videotaped themselves as they murdered the priest. They were proud of what they did and wanted others to either be terrified or energized by their actions. There have been lots of attacks over the past few months, but this one got to me. As a Roman Catholic, I can see it play out before me.

When I say I am a Roman Catholic, people can assume with some assurance that I believe Jesus is the loving, forgiving, obedient, crucified, resurrected and redeeming Son of God. They will also have reason to believe that I go to mass on a weekly basis, pray the Rosary, go to confession, and celebrate Christmas and Easter at the appointed times of the year. They also know that I pray to God who restrained Abraham's hand on Mount Moriah.

If they are knowledgeable of Catholic history, people will also know that as a Roman Catholic, I belong to a church that has a troubled past. Catholics tortured heretics and Jews in the Middle Ages, killed Jews and fought with Muslims during the crusades, had terrible conflicts with Protestants after the Reformation. They will know that Rome told political leaders in Europe that the

New World was theirs for the taking through the Doctrine of Discovery. They will know that Catholic explorers perpetrated acts of genocide against indigenous peoples around the world.

They will know that during the 1800's and 1900's, religious orders affiliated with the Catholic Church operated Magdalene Laundries in Ireland where "fallen" women were kept as slaves in prison-like conditions for much of their lives in a vain effort to reduce prostitution and generate income for the religious communities that ran them. They will also know that in the 20th century, Catholic bishops allowed priests to rape young boys and girls with impunity in parishes throughout the world.

If you or someone you love belongs to one of the groups of people who were victimized by the Church, this history matters. It matters a lot. If you come from one of the groups whose land was taken by European conquerors acting under the authority of the Doctrine of Discovery, this history matters. If you or one of your relatives was kept in a Magdalene Laundry in Ireland or raped by a Catholic priest, this history matters.

Hopefully, you will understand that as an individual member of the Church I'm not personally responsible for these outrages, but at the same time, you will probably want to know where I stand in reference to them. If I am indifferent or in denial about these tragedies, you might not like me very much and not want to be my friend in the private sphere and you will view my actions in the public sphere with suspicion.

If you are a member of the queer community, you will also want to know where I stand on gay rights. If after reading the book of Leviticus I want gays and lesbians stoned to death, just as the Bible says in passages that most people, even devout Jews, pass over in silence today, well, you are not going to like me, which is understandable. Most people don't want to be around people who think they should be dead.

In addition to being a Catholic, I am a white guy. You can tell by looking at me. Consequently, if you are an African American, a Latino or a Native American you'll want to know where I, a white man, stand on a number of issues related to imperialism, slavery and genocide of indigenous people. Again, if I respond defensively or dismissively when these painful topics come up on conversation,

or worse if I deny these outrages altogether, you might decide to steer clear of me, with good reason.

Then there is the Church's relationship with Jews. If you are a Jew and I tell you that I'm a Catholic, you'll probably know that I belong to an institution that has done incalculable damage to your people. The early Church Fathers defamed Jews, declaring them to be collectively responsible for the death of Jesus Christ. They condemned the Jews to wandering the earth for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. As a Jew, you will also know that Christian antisemitism laid the groundwork for the Holocaust, which resulted in the near destruction of the Jewish people in Europe.

As a Jew, you will also know that as a Christian, I read many of the sacred texts you do, albeit from a different perspective. In addition to reading the Hebrew Scriptures (which Christians call the Old Testament), you'll know that I read another set of sacred texts, which we call the New Testament. These texts include some harsh polemics against the Jews of Jesus' time and that some Christians use these passages to inform their attitudes about Jews in the modern world. And if you have read any of the articles I have written over the past decade or so, you'll know that many, but not all Christians, have been silent in the face of the growing threat of antisemitism in the world and that some churches have actually cooperated with this process.

As you interact with me, you'll probably want to know how I interpret anti-Judaic passages in the New Testament and how I regard the role Christianity has played in causing the suffering of the Jewish people.

If I respond dismissively about the Christian role in the Holocaust, you will do what you can to avoid interactions with me. Obversely, if I have an overly idealized view of the Jewish people and treat you as some sort of "magical other," as some Christians do, you'll steer clear of me, because being around people who think you are magical is tiresome and frankly creepy. And if I engage in a persistent effort to convert you to the Christian faith you will probably want to stay away from me as well.

There is also something else. Whether you are a Catholic or not, you might want to stay away from me if the only way I express my Christian virtue (such as it is) is recount all the terrible things the Church and white people have done

over the centuries. People who engage in this sort of chest-beating are insufferable to be around. Individuals who spend too much of their time recounting the sins of the institutions and communities to which they belong are oftentimes ignoring the sinful aspects of their own lives that make it difficult for people to get along with them. Such behavior is not an attempt to actually correct the injustices in question, but a stratagem used to cow and bully other Catholics into submission.

You see this a lot with white liberal human rights activists who ostensibly struggle against racism. The people who talk the most about white privilege are oftentimes the folks who have the most of it and want to make sure it stays that way, so they heap abuse on white people who are not as “progressive” as they are and in so doing, signal to the world that they are morally and ethically superior than the people they seek to lord over and as a result, are worthy of the power and influence they enjoy.

In order for this strategy to work, they need somebody from a historically victimized community to stand next to them and give them cover. Sometimes it’s an African American, other times it’s a Latino, and sometimes it is someone from the LGBTQ community.

As a method of making the world a better place, such guilt-mongering is not very effective. People who behave this way are particularly unpleasant to be around. They use white guilt as a weapon against other white people to demonstrate their moral superiority, not to make things better. It is a power play, and a pretty obvious one at that.

This is not to say that white guilt is always bad. Recrimination on the part of white people in the United States played a significant role in bringing an end to lynchings in the United States after the Civil War. In the 1960’s, white guilt played a role in according African Americans their rights as U.S. citizens during the Civil Rights movement. White people who were not directly responsible for the outrages perpetrated against African Americans by white supremacists and segregationists in the years after the Civil War still felt responsible for bringing these outrages to an end. They could not longer be bystanders.

White guilt was a good thing, back in the day. Sometimes it still is.

One of the factors in eliciting these feelings of guilt was the writings of

black commentators who had some very harsh things to say about white people in the United States during the 1950s and 60s. *In The Fire Next Time* (1993, Vintage International) James Baldwin declared in 1962, "White people cannot, in the generality, be taken as models of how to live. Rather, the white man is himself in sore need of new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him once again in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being."

That is a pretty harsh indictment but it is gentle compared to the assessment Eldridge Cleaver offered of white people in his 1968 book, *Soul on Ice* (Dell). "A young white today cannot help but recoil from the base deeds of his people." After recounting the sins of genocide, slavery and imperialism perpetrated by white people throughout the world, Cleaver states: "There seems to be no end to the ghastly deeds of which his people are guilty. GUILTY."

Black liberation theologian James Cone went so far as to ask what type of god white Christians in America worshiped. They remained silent over the suffering of their fellow citizens who were black, suggesting they worshiped a god that did not care about the suffering of black people. In his 1970 book *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone suggested that deicide would be necessary if the god that inhered in white violence against blacks in the U.S. actually existed, writing, "If God is not for us, if God is not against white racists, then God is a murderer, and we had better kill God."

As a white man, I am tempted sometimes to take umbrage at harsh polemics like this and argue these indictments are too generalized and don't take into account the good deeds of white people who fought against slavery in the Civil War, for example.

But even a cursory examination of the terrible history of lynchings, massacres and other unspeakable acts of violence perpetrated by white supremacists in the years after the Civil War, recounted in part by Ida B. Wells, suggest that maybe it's a good idea to suck it up, be quiet, listen, and place what the writer has to say in the context of his life. It is part of the challenge of living together.

All of this is a roundabout way of saying that people pay very close attention to what goes on in other peoples' heads – even if they are not able to conclude with certainty what people are actually thinking. They look for clues and

signals that give people a sense of whether they will be treated fairly by the people around them. And one of the signals that people look at closely is someone's religious community.

When I learn someone is a Muslim, I know a number of things. I know that like me, they pray to a God that restrained the hand that held the blade on Mount Moriah all those years ago. I also know they adhere to a religion that regards a man by the name of Muhammad as an exemplar for all humanity to follow and that this man was a political and military leader who killed and conquered his enemies and called upon his followers to do the same after his death.

I know that for many Muslims this religion has been a great source of solace and peace for huge numbers of people, but at the same time, it has promoted violence and an attitude of supremacism toward non-Muslims. I also know that *jihad*, or holy war, is a central aspect of this faith.

I also know that when Muslims become a majority in an area, sharia law is enforced with horrific consequences on the status of non-Muslims, women and gay people. I know that Muslims have engaged in genocidal violence against Christians in the Middle East and against Buddhists in the Indian subcontinent, where they were virtually wiped out.

I know that Islam promotes patriarchal attitudes and misogyny that has been roundly condemned in Western societies. I know that the person is an adherent of a faith whose leaders have expressed contempt for democracy as a man-made system, contrary to the divinely ordained Shariah laws.

I also know that like Christianity, Islam has promoted a particularly hostile view of the Jewish people and that Muslim antisemitism has made Jews the low-cost, no-cost targets of oppression and violence in Muslim-majority countries throughout the globe and as a result, the Muslim-dominated Middle East is effectively *Judenrein* or completely free of Jews.

I also know that Islam has historically imposed a set of rules on non-Muslims, Jews and Christians especially, that are intended to humiliate and abase non-Muslims and put them in an inferior social position to their Muslim neighbors. I also know that in many (but not all) Muslim countries families practice female genital mutilation on young girls, that gays and lesbians are executed for homosexual acts and that in some Muslim countries, slavery is still practiced.

In sum, I know that the practice of Islam typically (but not always) brings with it a number of contemptible practices that Western civilization has struggled to consign to the dustbin of history.

Surveying the human rights catastrophe that is unfolding before our eyes in the Middle East and now in Europe, I might feel justified (if not compelled) to steal a few pages from James Baldwin, Eldridge Cleaver or James Cone and say that in general Muslims can't be taken as models for how to live, that they are in sore need of new standards by which to live, that young Muslims today cannot help but recoil at the base deeds of his coreligionists and that wherever they look, there seems "to be no end to the ghastly deeds of which the adherents of Islam are guilty. GUILTY."

I might even go so far as to say that if God requires this type of behavior from his followers, then "God is a murderer, and we had better kill God."

I also know that while there are efforts afoot to change how Islam is practiced in the modern world, there are real obstacles facing the people who want to make these changes. On the other side of the debate are those who wish to establish a Caliphate, or global superstate where sharia law is imposed, non-Muslims are oppressed and men put in an unalterably dominant position over women.

I do not know if my Muslim neighbors are intent on imposing sharia law in the society we share, nor do I know if they have embraced the supremacist ideology that has ruined the lives of so many people in Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Maybe they moved to the United States to get out from the oppressive aspects of life in their homeland where sharia law is practiced.

While it is important for me to not reduce Muslims to their scriptures and to pigeon hole them as wanting to do to me, my fellow Christians and to my Jewish friends what the Koran and other Islamic sources requires them to do to us, I also have an obligation to look for clues that shed some light on how they intend to practice their faith.

I have an obligation to my fellow Christians, my Jewish friends and most importantly, to my wife and family to be ready to defend them against the mistreatment that so many people have endured throughout the past 1,400 years.

In a multicultural and multiracial society, one thing people do to improve their ability to get along with others is to make preemptive gestures of reconciliation. They will go out of their way to send a message that says "We're not one of *those* [insert burdensome social identity here] that you have reason to fear."

Young Evangelicals, for instance, go to great lengths to demonstrate that they are not the fire-breathing, gay-hating fundamentalists of yore, but they are a new group of hip, slick and cool, post-modern Christians who support the Palestinians and support gay marriage, even if they have to keep a little quiet about their support for gay rights for it so as to maintain their membership in the wider evangelical community.

This process isn't unique to Evangelical Protestants in the U.S. For the past fifty years or so, white Americans (and Europeans) have engaged in a decades long campaign to demonstrate that they have gotten out of the oppression business and that they have no intention of returning to the evil ways of their ancestors. We're out of the slavery business, we have given up lynching and are no longer intent on depriving African Americans or anyone else of their right to vote.

To demonstrate the seriousness of our *metanoia* we have elected politicians who have been reluctant to enforce laws against illegal immigration for fear of being called racists. We have enacted affirmative action policies that have given historically oppressed communities an advantage in the hiring process even if these policies make it harder for working-class white people to get into prestigious colleges or get hired in government jobs.

And when white police officers use excessive force on African Americans and it is caught on tape, the outrage is nearly universal. We do all these things not only because we think it is the right thing to do, but to demonstrate we want to deal justly and live in peace with people groups who have suffered as a result of the historical misdeeds of our ancestors. Our efforts to make amends have not been perfect and they are not universally supported, but they have gone a long way towards making it easier for us to live together in peace.

On the religious front, Christian churches have gone out of their way to make amends to the Jewish people who suffered as a result of Church teachings

regarding the Jews. The Doctrine of Discovery has been repudiated. The U.S. is not the only place where this has happened. Germany, for example, has worked to make amends for the Holocaust.

In sum, the descendants of white Europeans in both North America and Europe have become particularly adept at sending off signals of reassurance to prove they are not the imperialistic, genocidal, enslaving devils of yore.

As a result of all of these gestures, we know what repentance looks like and we simply have not seen enough of it in the Muslim community. Yes, there are hopeful signs that this process is beginning, but overall, instead of confronting the legacy of imperialism, slavery, genocide, misogyny and their roots in Muslim scripture, doctrine and jurisprudence, all too many Muslim organizations located in the West and the Middle East work quite successfully to stifle the work of Muslims and non-Muslims to put these issues on the agenda.

Yes, there are people like Maajid Nawaz, Zuhdi Jasser, Tarek Fatah, Zeyno Baran, Ahmed Mansour and others who are struggling to force their fellow Muslims to confront their tragic history and to bring an end to the hateful ideology and practices that have ruined so many lives. And yes, there was a gathering in Marrekesh where Muslim scholars recently put forth a declaration calling on Muslims to respect the rights of non-Muslims, but recent events indicates that this message isn't getting much traction.

The bad guys are still on the ascendance and anyone who says so is likely to be called an Islamophobe.

And sadly enough, human rights activist in the West go along with this process. For example, in the days after the massacre of 49 people at a gay nightclub in Orlando by a Muslim who declared his allegiance to ISIS during the attack, a number of institutions went out of their way to say, predictably enough, the attack had nothing to do with Islam. This denial of reality has a corrosive effect on the credibility of the human rights movement.

When it comes to condemning human rights violations, Muslim oppressors are treated with kid gloves. The rules are relaxed for adherents of Islam, a group that has a 1,400-year history of imperialism, ethnic cleansing, genocide, slavery, oppression and misogyny that it simply undeniable. And more to the point, *jihadists* are doing terrible things to people throughout the world

without much push back from the human rights community. To make matters worse, politicians have continually struggled to suppress discussion of these bad acts.

Instead of confronting the adherents of Islam with the misdeeds of their co-religionists in the way that white people in the U.S. were confronted for the misdeeds of their ancestors and white supremacists in the United States, commentators and peace activists go out of their way to emphasize that they are not collectively responsible for the misdeeds of a few Muslims, which is true. But they can't leave it at that.

The fact remains that as Muslims, they are responsible for bringing an end to the violence done in the name of their faith, just as white people and Christians were responsible for confronting the evils done by their fellows.

Maybe the model we need is the one used to transform the attitudes of white Americans during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Not every white person was culpable for the bombings and the lynchings of African Americans in the Old South but Martin Luther King Jr, made it perfectly clear that every white person in America (Christians especially) had to show the world where they stood in response to the horrors of the American South.

They may not have been guilty for the bombings, but they were responsible for bringing them to an end. Once they were presented with the reality of what was going on, they no longer could be innocent bystanders.

They would be *culpable* bystanders.

And that was what made all the difference. Prior to the 1960s Ida B. Wells told the world about lynchings in the U.S. and it got anti-lynching legislation moving.

The result of the Civil Rights movement has been imperfect but long lasting. White kids on college campuses are doing everything they can to demonstrate to the rest of the world that they are out of the oppression business.

You may not agree with every cause they support, but the point is, MLK's strategy *worked*. It discredited the system of oppression that existed in the American south for more than a century after the Civil War. Most people want nothing to do with this legacy, which is good. The upshot is that white folks

deserved to feel guilty over what was happening to African Americans in Bull Connor's south.

And guess what? Muslims deserve to and ought to feel guilty over what is happening to Muslims, non-Muslims and women in the Middle East, Europe, Africa and Asia. They deserve and ought to feel guilty for the violence done in the name of their faith.

Is every Muslim responsible for the beheading of the Catholic priest in Normandy? No!

Is every Muslim responsible for the murders of Christians, Yazidis in Iraq and Syria? No!

Is every Muslim responsible for the acts of Boko Haram? No!

Is every Muslim responsible for the terrible acts of violence perpetrated in Europe during the past few months? No!

But even if Muslims are not collectively responsible for the acts of violence, they are still obligated to tell us how they are going to bring it to an end *and then end it.*

Just as European and American leaders are obligated to protect their citizens, Arab and Muslim leaders are obligated to demolish – simply demolish – the theologies and ideologies that justify Islamic supremacism and the violence used to achieve it.

In the short term, we need to see lots and lots and lots of open casket funerals of the victims of *jihadist* violence in the Middle East and in the West. Such funerals will indict every Muslim leader and put them on the spot, just as Emmet Till's open casket funeral put every white politician in the U.S. on the spot.

This process, which to some extent has already begun, needs to accelerate. Muslims need to be put on the spot about the actions of their co-religionists just as whites in the U.S. were put on the spot during the 1960s.

We need to put Muslim intellectuals and leaders on the spot just the same way Eldridge Cleaver, James Cone, Martin Luther King, James Baldwin and Malcolm X put white Christians on the spot back in the 1960s.

The propaganda campaign that put white Americans on the hook for the misdeeds of a small number of white supremacists *was right and just*.

Confronting the Ummah with the actions of its supremacists is right and just as well.

Dexter Van Zile is Christian Media Analyst for the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA). His opinions are his own.

To comment on this article, please [click](#)