

The lesson of 9/11 we do not heed

by Lev Tsitrin



I wonder how the tribes inhabiting Amazon jungle manage to survive. There are predators lurking all around, on the ground, in the trees, in the water. And yet, humans survive, generation after generation. What helps them, one would think, is that the enemy is clearly marked: snakes, jaguars, piranhas, alligators have distinct shapes that identify them, and alert a human seeing them to either flee or fight.

On the other hand, predator humans are indistinguishable from the benign individuals. Look at the pictures of the the unholy trinity of 20th century political life, Stalin, Hitler and Mao. No blood is dripping from their bared fangs; they wear suits and, often, a tie – figures as mundane as any other human – and yet between them, they killed some hundred fifty million people. And far from seeing themselves as monsters, each saw in the mirror the greatest benefactor of humanity who ever lived.

How is this possible? Well, we are hard-wired to do what is right. And that what is true is what is right. And truth is what great people tell us is true. Consider Karl Marx, the human that towers above everyone else in discerning the laws that guide humanity. He proved, beyond the shadow of doubt, that humans exist in swarms, or “classes,” the small class of the rich taking advantage of the large class of the poor, making the poor work while the rich enjoy idleness. This results in class struggle, and the ultimate – and historically inevitable – victory of the working class over the exploitative rich. Soon, no one will be rich, and no one will

be poor (the very notion of property will be gone, in fact) – but everyone will contribute to the common well-being by giving his utmost to the society, and having all his needs covered in return, never suffering the want. Obviously, for this to happen the rich and their fellow-travelers who cannot sacrifice what they think is theirs to the greater common good, insisting on individual “rights,” must be killed off. This was obvious to Stalin and Mao – and replacing the “rich” with the “Jews” and the “poor” with “Aryans,” one gets the perfect picture of Hitler’s mind, too. Those three managed to infect millions of others with their ideas. thought. speeches and papers – very much like a computer virus jumps from one computer to another via the internet – and the millions of defenders of the “truth” whose minds got infected killed millions of people, committing what we call today “crimes against humanity”. Since it is one’s mindset that determines one’s behavior, the results of infecting the mind with mental garbage like Communism or Nazism is pure horror. As they say, “garbage in, garbage out.”

So one would think that to avoid such tragedies, we should be clearing out the garbage from the minds. After all, this is exactly what open public debate is all about: push your view, get a push-back, and let the stronger argument win. Explain what’s wrong with Communism or Nazism, and people will abandon them. By influencing the mind, you influence the behavior.

This is reasonable enough, but two problems arise. One is censorship – the Communists understand the power of the argument too, and physically suppress it. The citizens of China know it full well; those of Hong Kong just started to learn.

While this is to be expected from Communists who are far indeed from being intellectually honest, our own self-censorship is less explainable. Heaven forbid saying something that puts so much as a scratch on another person’s “culture”! One’s “culture” underpins the “identity” – and in today’s

world of easily-bruised egos, the “identity” is better left alone. Hence, “multiculturalism” – tiptoeing around inherited bad habits of mind by declaring all “cultures” to be equally valuable and valued – even those that are underpinned by a factual error.

This is hugely problematic, since it allows wrong ideas to keep poisoning minds. While Communism and Nazism are not considered “cultures” and criticism of them is permitted in the West, the criticism of an idea that underpins Islamism is a different matter entirely – Islam is given a status of a “culture,” and criticizing it goes counter to “multiculturalism” and its corollary, the sacred “identity.”

And yet, the idea that underpins Islamism is simply wrong. To an Islamist, Islam is not a culture, it is not an inheritance from prior generations, it is not a matter of custom, it is not an appealing tradition. Rather, it is the truth, the ultimate manifestation of the will of God – hence it goes without saying that, just as with Communism and Nazism, the others must be made to see that truth, and follow it. The largest buildings of every Soviet city were decorated (of if you will, disfigured) with huge signs that read “the victory of Communism is inevitable;” replace “Communism” with Islam, and you have in a nutshell the thinking of an Islamist. To him, the ultimate world-wide victory of Islam is also obvious, because Islam, to him, is truth.

Yet considered by the standard of factual (rather than political) correctness, this is logically fallacious. Sure, Mohammed thought that God spoke to him, and it is hard to blame him for saying so. But no one else can possibly know whether God talked, or did not talk to Mohammed (in a book I wrote some fifteen years ago I called this epistemic phenomenon “the problem of the third party”). An Islamist’s logic can be summed up thusly: “because Mohammed said that God spoke to him, God spoke to him.” This is a classical example of what logicians call a “does not follow” fallacy: just

because Mohammed thought that God spoke to him, does not at all mean that God spoke to him. God *may have* spoken to him – that has to be acknowledged as one of the possibilities – but it is far indeed from the only one. Yet, “God may have spoken to Mohammed” is not much to build on since “God may *not* have spoken to Mohammed” is its exact logical equivalent. Given that no one can possibly know what, if anything, actually transpired between God and Mohammed, it is an error to state categorically, as Islamists do, that God spoke to Mohammed. In fact, in purely religious terms this logical error results in what is called “idol-worship” – worshiping a product of one’s own hand or mind. In essence, today’s Islamists conflate themselves with Mohammed, speaking as if they were him. Marxists commit the same error of conflating completely distinct entities when they talk of “classes” because only individuals actually exist, not “classes”; Nazi theoreticians also fell into the same pitfall when speaking of some mystical “races” rather than individuals.

All of which get us to the perpetrators of 9/11. Twenty years passed, trillions of dollars were sunk into fighting those who sent the hijackers, thousands more of Americans were killed. Yet, the problem isn’t solved. The reason is simple: the problem is located in the Islamist’s mind, and can only be fixed by clearing the error out of his mind. Yet, influencing the mind requires a resolve to go against the grain of “multiculturalism” and the willingness to dispense with political correctness, focusing on factual correctness instead. In twenty years that passed since 9/11 we couldn’t do it – for that matter, we couldn’t bring ourselves to even thinking of doing it.

Until the Age of Enlightenment, Europe suffered greatly from religious strife. Millions died in Central Europe just in the Thirty-Year War. English Civil War was a bloody religious conflict, too. America’s founding fathers learned from what was to them a not-so-distant European history, constructing

the Constitution that avoids even the remotest possibility of religious conflict by allowing uninhibited profession of any religion, and acknowledging, by inference, that religious truth is not something that is reliably attainable. It is not a complicated idea, and is as applicable to Islam as it is to any other creed.

We have every tool needed to prevent another 9/11 – we have a clear understanding of the limits of theological thinking, and the free speech rights to express it. Unfortunately, we have not used those tools to defeat Islamism. Time has long come to explain to Islamists where their thinking has gone wrong – their error turning them from God-fearing humans of their imagination to the deluded, idol-worshiping monsters that are worse than any beast in a jungle.

Lev Tsitrin is the author of