

We need to defend both our lives and our way of life

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Terrorist atrocities have a way of bringing the nation together, albeit temporarily. We need a glue to keep us together, to protect our lives and our way of life, writes Stephen Evans.

There's a lot to be said for Britain's calm, defiant response to the threat of terror. Immediately after the 7/7 bombings in 2005, Londoners clambered aboard the city's buses and underground trains, posting 'We Are Not Afraid' messages on social media. One of the first images I saw following the latest attack was of a man fleeing London Bridge, but being careful not to spill his pint.

But as each terrorist atrocity apparently strengthens our resolve, it also risks numbing us to terrorist outrage. One thing we can't afford to do is regard terrorist attacks as the "new normal" - however depressingly familiar they become.

With the prospect of jihadis returning to Europe after fighting alongside ISIS in Syria or Iraq, the UK's independent reviewer of terrorism legislation has suggested that "Britain is facing a level of threat from Islamic State militants not seen since the IRA bombings of the 1970s".

I grew up in an era of IRA-related terrorism, when news of murderous and bloody attacks seemed as grimly familiar as they do today. But the threat we currently face, motivated by an Islamic extremist ideology, is of a different magnitude, and unlikely to be resolved by a 'peace process' anytime soon. There is no silver bullet.

However well intentioned, the usual platitudes about these acts of violence having 'nothing to do with Islam' must be resisted. They clearly have something to do with Islam and it's wholly counterproductive when politicians and other commentators pretend otherwise.

An evil ideology that uses scripture to glorify martyrdom and promise salvation through suicide attacks clearly has a noxious influence on the minds of the gullible and pathetic individuals who are driven to murder innocent people in the name of Allah. The vast majority of Muslims will reject this interpretation of Islam, but it is nevertheless an interpretation of Islam being espoused in modern Britain by British Muslims, and we need to recognise that.

Inevitably, after any Jihadist attack, there are those that seek to demonise all Muslims. Anti-Muslim bigotry is an utterly mindless response to terrorism. Ordinary Muslims are as much victims of Islamic violence and depravity as anyone else. If the terrorists divide us they win and we lose. But in the wake of the latest spate of attacks we need unity, but also unflinching honesty in confronting the problem before us.

The threat we face in Britain, and across Europe, is not just to our physical lives, but also to our way of life. A pernicious mindset that regards religion as the source from which all authority is derived is perhaps a greater threat to our liberal democracy than terrorism will ever be. Governments and civil society must also therefore challenge the theocratic worldview that underpins Islamic terrorism.

An ugly ideology that condones arbitrary violence, the subjugation of women and the supremacy of God's law over secular law is not compatible with the British way of life, and people of all faiths and none must unite in rejecting it.

But these views must be challenged, not censored. Anti-terror laws that suppress free speech will only undermine civil liberties and fundamental human rights. Whilst there is a relationship between extremist views and terrorism, they are two different things and policy makers need to be careful about confusing them. Knee-jerk responses to terror attacks born out of a 'something must be done' mentality are unlikely to make us safer.

What should be welcomed, however, is Theresa May's pledge to break down segregated communities. Unfortunately, her words ring hollow in the face of her regressive plan to abolish the 50% cap on faith-based admissions, paving the way for a new wave of religious schools.

Unprecedented levels of migration and our drift away from Christianity means Britain today is characterised by a diversity of creeds and cultures like never before. As long ago as 2011, the former Prime minister David Cameron admitted that the doctrine of state multiculturalism had failed, pointing out that "for too long different cultures have been encouraged to live separate lives".

Schools are the best chance we have to break down barriers, but this golden opportunity is being squandered by successive Government's dogged attachment to faith-based education. Any strategy to better integrate Britain's diverse population must include a commitment to phase out faith schools. Britain's youngsters should be educated together, not divided by religion and ethnicity. And whether it be found in the state, independent or burgeoning 'illegal' sector, religious indoctrination and exposure of children to Islamist ideology in schools should be considered an abuse of child rights.

A bleary-eyed nostalgia for Britain's Christian past must no longer stand in the way of us carving out modern secular identity, robust enough to see off the Islamist threat.

Terrorist atrocities have a way of bringing the nation together, albeit temporarily. We need a glue to keep us together. Political leaders and civil society must work together in building a more assertive culture that robustly, actively and unashamedly promotes democratic values such as the separation of religion and state, the rule of law, human rights and equal treatment. In that way, secularism can protect us all.

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