



“Why Don’t Muslims Condemn Terrorism?": Western Violence and Scapegoating in an Age of Islamophobia

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Author Biography

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When President Obama addressed the National Prayer Breakfast in February 2015, he did so in the midst of a new global crisis: the rise and spread of ISIS. News stories of ISIS beheading Western journalists and burning alive a Jordanian pilot, along with widespread calls to condemn this violence, loomed heavily over the event as Obama devoted considerable time in his prayer breakfast remarks to exposing and condemning the horrors of ISIS.

But Obama was also sensitive to the possibility that ISIS's crimes could fuel an anti-Muslim backlash in the United States. For this reason, Obama decided to take a two-sentence detour to remind his audience that violence in the name of religion was not something limited to Islam.

*And lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place, remember that during the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ. In our home country, slavery and Jim Crow all too often was justified in the name of Christ.*¹

Obama's remarks drew swift condemnation from religious leaders, politicians, and journalists. Russell Moore of the Southern Baptist Convention labeled Obama's comments "an unfortunate attempt at a wrongheaded moral comparison."² Jim Gilmore, the former governor of Virginia, called Obama's comments "the most offensive I've ever heard a president make in my lifetime."³ Rick Santorum, a GOP presidential hopeful at the time, insisted that Obama's remarks were "insulting to every person of faith," while his fellow GOP contender, Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana, mockingly retorted that the "medieval Christian threat is under control, Mr. President."⁴

¹ "Remarks by the President at the National Prayer Breakfast," The White House, February 5, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/ycn32e29>.

² Juliet Eilperin, "Critics pounce after Obama talks Crusades, slavery at prayer breakfast," Washington Post, February 5, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/yb4zdy4e>.

³ James Fallows, "The 'Most Offensive' Comments a President Has Ever Made," *The Atlantic*, February 6, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/y74xp6my>.

⁴ Alexandra Jaffe, "Obama takes fire for Crusades comparison," CNN, February 7, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/yc3vumgf>.

On NBC's Meet the Press the following Sunday, foreign affairs correspondent Andrea Mitchell rebuked Obama in no uncertain terms. "The week after a pilot is burned alive," she said, "you don't lean over backwards to be philosophical about the sins of the fathers."⁵

What did Obama do that was so bad? He talked about the wrong kind of violence. He talked about white Christian violence. He talked about the sins of the fathers. He didn't talk about this for long. He devoted a whopping twenty-four seconds to this topic in a twenty-four minute speech. But it was clear that it was twenty-four seconds too many.

Islam's most vocal critics, from Bill Maher to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, believe the West is too afraid to criticize Islam and to talk candidly about Islam's relationship with violence. That's not true. It's violence perpetrated by whites and white Christians that we cannot have a frank discussion about. But linking Islam and violence? That's pretty much the only show in town.

The Bush administration went to war linking Islam with violence, labeling the threat posed in the war on terror variously as "Islamic radicalism" and "Islamofascism" and infamously referring to the war as a "crusade."⁶ Registration programs, detentions, deportations, extraordinary renditions, surveillance, profiling, Countering Violent Extremism initiatives, the Muslim ban, anti-sharia laws, and other government practices since 9/11 all assume violence is endemic to Islam and that Muslims must be treated as a suspect and securitized population that is predisposed to terrorism.⁷

⁵ "Meet the Press Transcript – February 8, 2015," NBC News, March 18, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/y9bbzobd>.

⁶ George W. Bush, "President Discusses War on Terror at National Endowment for Democracy," The White House, October 6, 2005, <https://tinyurl.com/y7rzs6w>.

⁷ Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2014); Todd H. Green, *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 267–76, 279–84, 286–87, 299–302; "Anti-Sharia Law Bills in the United States," Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://tinyurl.com/yctqv2h6>.

Beyond state-sponsored policies, linking Islam with violence and terrorism seems to be the favorite pastime of journalists and politicians alike across the ideological spectrum. We see this at work most prominently when Muslims are asked (or otherwise commanded) to condemn terrorism.

For example, Roger Cohen of the *New York Times* insists we will never be able to tackle the threat of terrorism “until moderate Muslims really speak out—really say, ‘This is not our religion.’”⁸ Sean Hannity of Fox News asks: “Will prominent Muslim leaders denounce and take on groups like ISIS, Hamas, and condemn and also fight against unthinkable acts of terrorism?”⁹ Cohen and Hannity represent left-leaning and right-leaning media outlets respectively, but they fundamentally agree that Muslims aren’t doing enough to repudiate terrorism. They have plenty of company among politicians. David Cameron, Scott Morrison, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, among others, have all called on Muslims publicly to say or do more to reject terrorism.

Why don’t Muslims condemn terrorism? When are moderate Muslims going to speak out against terrorism? These questions are ubiquitous. They’re also racist. But they’re not going away anytime soon. And that’s because they serve a larger, more insidious purpose. That purpose is distraction.

The eminent African American author, Toni Morrison, once said that “the function, the very serious function of racism, is distraction.”¹⁰ She was talking about anti-black racism in America, but her insights can be applied to anti-Muslim racism as well, because fundamentally, that’s what Islamophobia is—racism.

Asking Muslims to condemn terrorism is a distraction that prevents us from facing our violent histories and from coming to terms with our ongoing complicity in a

⁸ “NYT Columnist: Moderate Muslims Held Responsible Too,” video, 1:55, CNN, January 9, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/y7upgaa5>.

⁹ Ellie Sandmeyer and Michelle Leung, “Muslim Leaders Have Roundly Denounced Islamic State, but Conservative Media Won’t Tell You That,” Media Matters for America, August 21, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/y7zygmep>.

¹⁰ Cited in T. Elon Dancy II, “The Black Male Body and the (Post?)Colonial University: Identity Politics and the Tyranny of Meritocracy,” in *Black Men in the Academy: Narratives of Resiliency, Achievement, and Success*, ed. Brian L. McGowan, Robert T. Palmer, J. Luke Wood, and David F. Hibbler Jr. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 165.

violent world order. And for the purpose of this essay, when I use language such as “we,” “our,” and “us,” I primarily mean whites and white Christians. “We” are the ones who, by and large, have failed to recognize the utter hypocrisy involved in asking Muslims to condemn terrorism while doing so little to come to terms with our own violent legacy.

It’s telling that in the United States, white Americans have little difficulty publicly commemorating horrific violence, particularly if we see ourselves as victims of this violence. But if we see ourselves as the perpetrators of unjust violence, of violence targeting civilians, the innocent, or marginalized populations, we often go out of our way to sanitize the historical record or to erase this violence altogether from our collective memories.

We go to great lengths to remember 9/11. We have built monuments and memorials from coast to coast to remember this violence. The massive 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York City was erected to commemorate that horrific day of violence. Mantras of “Never Forget” have penetrated every corner of the country and have been plastered on billboards, bumper stickers, and buildings so that we, in fact, “never forget” that the United States was attacked by Muslim extremists on that horrific day.

But white violence? Or white Christian violence? Particularly if it’s violence that has targeted civilians or marginalized peoples? We don’t typically construct memorials or conjure up mottos for this kind of violence. This is violence we work hard at forgetting. And we use Muslims to help us do this, with plenty of help from the mainstream media and its obsession with framing Islam as violent.

Studies indicate that the media overwhelmingly depict Islam in the context of violence and terrorism. In one 2017 study, researchers discovered that while Muslim extremists committed 12.4 percent of terrorist attacks in the United States between 2006 and 2015, those attacks were four and a half times more likely to receive media coverage than attacks by non-Muslims.¹¹ Another study from 2015

¹¹ Erin Kearns, Allison Betus, and Anthony Lemieux, “Yes, the media do underreport some terrorist attacks. Just not the ones most people think of,” *Washington Post*, March 13, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ycdswbq7>.

revealed that the *New York Times* depicts Islam more negatively than alcohol, cancer, and cocaine, with many stories about Islam focusing on terrorism or extremism.¹²

Along with the persistently negative media coverage comes explicit efforts by journalists to create an organic link between the horrors of ISIS and Islam. The most notable instance of this is Graeme Wood's highly cited article in *The Atlantic* from 2015 titled "What ISIS Really Wants." Wood argued that "the Islamic State is Islamic. Very Islamic."¹³ The implication was that the horrors of ISIS derive not primarily from political and social conditions, despite the general consensus of the scholarship on terrorism, but from something hardwired into the ideological DNA of Islam itself.

By extension, this means that the worst violence perpetrated by ISIS—slavery, torture, genocide—is something that all Muslims must explain because all Muslims are presumed guilty of harboring violent inclinations due to their connection to Islam. All Muslims therefore are kept on the defensive, distracted by questions and accusations about their supposed complicity with terrorism.

But it's not only Muslims who are distracted. We are distracted as well. As long as Muslims are on the defensive, we need not consider that the horrors of ISIS—slavery, torture, genocide—characterize our history too. These three examples, among others, each constitute a chapter in the history of Western violence. It's just that we don't want to remember this history, nor do we want to consider the possibility that unjust violence continues to play a role in how Western nations engage with civilian and marginalized populations within and beyond our borders.

We are the ones who don't want to remember that chattel slavery, with its utter brutality and subjugation of Africans based on assumptions of racial inferiority, forged modern America's racial divide, a divide that continues to manifest itself in the killing of unarmed black men by law enforcement and in the system of mass

¹² Dorgham Abusalim, "Study: 'NYT' portrays Islam more negatively than alcohol, cancer, and cocaine," *Mondoweiss*, March 5, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/ybxjk35y>.

¹³ Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/mb5os8d>.

incarceration. Slavery also paved the way for America to become a global economic power. Modern American capitalism was built on the backs of slaves, including Muslim slaves.¹⁴ The racism and violence that permeated slavery translated into other forms of racial terrorism and white supremacist violence after slavery, from lynchings to Jim Crow.

We are the ones who don't want to remember the prominent role played by torture in our history. I'm not just talking the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the witch trials of the pre-modern era. I'm talking about modern history. I'm talking about the Nazis and their use of attack dogs, whippings, electrocutions, and water torture, not to mention their "scientific" experimentation on living human subjects.

I'm talking about torture in the French empire from Vietnam to Madagascar to Algeria. Paul Aussaresses, the French military officer who oversaw much of the torture used against the Algerian National Liberation Front during the Algerian War (1954–1962), said years later: "Only rarely were the prisoners we questioned during the night still alive the next morning."¹⁵

I'm talking about torture in the British empire from Malaysia to Kenya. In the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya (1952–1960), the British employed the widespread use of torture in detention camps as a means of suppressing colonial rebellions, relying on beatings, castration, rape, and forced labor to subdue dissidents.¹⁶

I'm talking about the US-sponsored Phoenix Program during the Vietnam War that targeted and tortured civilians to expose supposed Vietcong sympathies. The

¹⁴ Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage, 2014); Greg Grandin, *The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Deception in the New World* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014).

¹⁵ Cited in Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 60; see also Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954–1962* (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2006).

¹⁶ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005); Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005).

program possibly killed as many as forty thousand people, most of them innocent of the accusations leveled against them.¹⁷

I'm talking about US-sponsored torture regimes and dictatorships in Latin America, with many of Latin America's top military dictators and officers trained in the art of torture at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia.¹⁸

I'm talking about torture in Abu Ghraib and at CIA black sites, the details of which have emerged more clearly in recent years. The types of torture victims were subjected to in these sites include sleep and sensory deprivation, ice water "baths," forced rectal feeding, rape, mock executions, and waterboarding.¹⁹ Donald Rumsfeld once dismissively referred to some of this torture as the actions of a "few bad apples," while years later, President Obama proclaimed that torture ran contrary to American values.²⁰ Both Rumsfeld and Obama were wrong. Torture has been a widespread and systemic practice used by the United States in the name of the war on terror. In this sense, it's very much reflective of our values. Much of this torture would not have been possible without the complicity of US allies, including the assistance provided by European countries in the extraordinary renditions of terrorist suspects.

And we are the ones who don't want to remember that genocide occupies a central place in Western history. This includes the Holocaust in mid-twentieth-century Europe in which millions of Jews, among others, were deported, starved, tortured, gassed, and exterminated. But this also includes genocide in North America, particularly efforts to annihilate the continent's indigenous populations. When Christopher Columbus first "discovered" America, the indigenous population numbered in the millions, with perhaps as many as 16 million living on the

¹⁷ Seymour M. Hersh, "Moving Targets: Will the Counter-Insurgency Plan in Iraq Repeat the Mistakes of Vietnam?," *The New Yorker*, December 15, 2003, <https://tinyurl.com/y6wt0f3q>; Michael Otterman, *American Torture: From the Cold War to Abu Ghraib and Beyond* (London: Pluto, 2007), 71.

¹⁸ Lesley Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁹ For the full report on US-sponsored torture in the war on terror, see Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program*, December 3, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/hltk455>.

²⁰ Ed Pilkington, "Senators accuse Rumsfeld over abuse of detainees," *Guardian* (UK), December 11, 2008, <https://tinyurl.com/yhmtfqs>; Barack Obama, "Statement by the President Report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," The White House, December 9, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/yajx9uo5>.

continent. By 1900, around 237,000 native peoples remained according to the census.²¹ Some of this decline was the result of deliberate efforts to cleanse the land of indigenous peoples, as seen in battles such as the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 and in the systematic decimation of the Yuki of northern California in the late nineteenth century.²²

In all of this, we don't want to remember that white Christians were central actors. White Christians justified chattel slavery by invoking biblical texts and themes, from the "Curse of Ham" story in the Old Testament (Genesis 9:25) to the New Testament command for slaves "to obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling" (Ephesians 6:5). White Christians developed and enforced the slave codes and the systemic violence that kept slaves "in line." White Christians led the lynch mobs that beat, maimed, and killed over 4,000 African Americans between 1877 and 1950.²³ White Christians fought to maintain Jim Crow segregation and to use violence if necessary to resist the nonviolent direct action of civil rights activists. It was white moderate Christians that Martin Luther King took to task in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" for standing by and mouthing "pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities" as African Americans suffered grave injustices and violence in their struggle for racial equality.²⁴

White Christians tortured Jews and Muslims, political opponents and prisoners, from the Middle Ages onward. White Christian support for torture persists to this day. In 2014, a *Washington Post* poll indicated that 66 percent of white Catholics, 69 percent of white evangelicals, and 75 percent of white mainline Protestants found CIA "enhanced interrogation techniques" justifiable.²⁵

²¹ Chris Mato Nunpa, "A Sweet-Smelling Sacrifice: Genocide, the Bible, and the Indigenous Peoples of the United States, Selected Examples," in *Confronting Genocide: Judaism, Christianity, Islam*, ed. Steven Leonard Jacobs (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2009), 61.

²² Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 73–75; Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846–1873* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

²³ "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror," Equal Justice Initiative, accessed December 28, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/yck9x3d8>.

²⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," African Studies Center – University of Pennsylvania, April 16, 1963, <https://tinyurl.com/y9xqb2xn>.

²⁵ Sarah Posner, "Christians more supportive of torture than non-religious Americans," *Religion Dispatches*, December 16, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/m3nybrf>.

White Christians in colonial America prayed to God that “our Israel” would prevail “over the cursed Amalek.”²⁶ This is a reference to the Old Testament story from 1 Samuel 15 in which God commands King Saul to wipe out the Amalekites—women, men, and children. Puritan Christians had little difficulty conceiving of themselves as establishing the new Israel with a divine mandate to cleanse the new promised land of its indigenous populations (the new Amalekites).

White Christians invoked Manifest Destiny to justify their campaign “to Christianize and civilize, to command and to be obeyed, to conquer and to reign” over indigenous populations and to “hunt the red devils to their holes and bury them.”²⁷ White Christians pursued cultural genocide by using Christian missionary schools to “civilize” indigenous population according to white, Christian standards.

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White Christians in the form of the Deutsche Christen joined forces with the Nazis in Germany and provided the theological foundations that justified a genocidal state.²⁹ They did this by drawing on German Christianity’s anti-Jewish heritage, including Martin Luther’s infamous treatise “On the Jews and Their Lies.”³⁰

Of course, this is not all that white Christians did. They also fought for abolition, marched on Selma, protested CIA torture, and resisted Nazi cooptation. But one cannot tell the full story of the violent episodes discussed here apart from the role played by white Christians.

What’s tragic is that this is a history we have worked so hard to whitewash or otherwise forget. After all, where is the equivalent of the 9/11 Memorial Museum

²⁶ John Corrigan, “New Israel, New Amalek: Biblical Exhortations to Religious Violence,” in *From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America*, ed. John D. Carlson and Jonathan H. Ebel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 114.

²⁷ Brendan C. Lindsay, *Murder State: California’s Native American Genocide, 1846–1873* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 67).

²⁸ George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

²⁹ Robert P. Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

³⁰ Martin Luther, “Concerning the Jews and Their Lies,” in *The Protestant Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 137–49.

for the genocide of indigenous populations? Where can I go inside the 9/11 Memorial Museum to visit the exhibit on CIA torture? Where are the bumper stickers and billboards in white Christian America commanding us to “never forget” slavery and lynchings?

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Relentlessly asking Muslims to condemn terrorism is a distraction. It forces Muslims to explain themselves, to prove their innocence, to defend their humanity. Yet the rest of us remained unconvinced by their efforts. So we keep asking the same questions. Over and over.

But asking Muslims to condemn terrorism distracts us too. It keeps us from facing our own violent history and from recognizing that Western nations rose to prominence and power due to heinous, brutal violence. It keeps us from asking critical questions about how our current national security initiatives and foreign policies help to justify a violent world order, one that still bears the imprint of white supremacy and Western hegemony. It keeps us from using the word “terrorist” to describe violent people who look like me, share my cultural or religious background, or serve in my government.

When we are this distracted, we remain blind to the utter hypocrisy involved in demanding Muslims reject the kinds of violence that we are seldom, if ever, asked to reject, much less atone for.

In the end, Muslims don't owe me, or people like me, or the United States government, or the political and media elite of Western nations any explanations, any defenses, when it comes to Islam and violence. None.

It's we who need to explain ourselves to Muslims and to make amends for what we have said and done to Muslims in the name of national security, in the name of the war on terror, and in the name of empire.

It's we who need to tell truths about our own history of violence and to face up to “the sins of the fathers”—and the sins of their children for that matter.

It's we who need to end the distractions and to focus our efforts on dismantling the military industrial complex, the war machine, and the regimes of torture that we have helped to create and that have fueled the conditions that breed so much violence and terrorism.

It's we who need to find the courage to see Muslims not as our adversaries but as our allies and our fellow architects in the effort to tear down an old world order built on exploitation and greed, destruction and death, and to rebuild a new world order, one that reflects the best principles of both Islam and Christianity—justice, mercy, compassion, and peace.