

“Terrorism and Racism, Twin Sisters?”

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The Colour of Empathy

The terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015 sparked an almost universal sense of solidarity with France. Some quarters labelled them as attacks against “humanity.” Many media outlets, quite rightly, portrayed the events ubiquitously. Facebook unleashed two features in response: first, a “Safety Check,” which allowed Facebook users in Paris to inform their friends that they were safe; and second, a profile picture color filter, which allowed Facebook users to show solidarity or support with France by changing the colour of their profile picture to France’s national flag colours: red, white, and blue.

Some questioned Facebook’s failure to set up similar features for a related terrorist attack in Beirut, Lebanon, just a day earlier on Thursday, November 12, 2015.¹ Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s CEO, responded to these criticisms on Saturday, November 14, 2015, posting:

Many people have rightfully asked why Safety Check was turned on for France and not for attacks in Beirut or other places. Until yesterday, our policy was to only activate the Safety Check for natural disasters. We just changed this and now plan to activate Safety Check for more human disasters going forward as well. . . . Thank you everyone who has reached out with questions and concerns about this. *You are right that there are many important conflicts in the world. We care about all people equally, and we will work hard to help people suffering in as many of these situations as we can* (emphasis my own).²

On Tuesday, November 17, 2015, four days after the Paris attacks and three days after Zuckerberg’s post, Boko Haram, a terrorist organization operating out of northeast Nigeria, and recently expanding to northwest Cameroon, and southwestern Chad, unleashed another deadly terrorist attack in Yola, located in

northeast Nigeria. Consequently, at least thirty-two people were killed, with another eighty injured. One local resident said that “the blast in the Jambutu area happened shortly after evening prayers as people left the mosque to eat.”³ After reading about this attack, I could not locate it on CNN’s website’s homepage. Instead, CNN’s website’s homepage that day had news stories such as Charlie Sheen’s HIV/AIDS status, a mother’s letter to the NFL, Porsche blaming Paul Walker’s death on the deceased reckless driving, and other stories deemed more important to have on CNN’s homepage than the Yola suicide bombings. It is more striking since the Institute for Economics and Peace found that Boko Haram was the world’s deadliest terrorist group.⁴ Listening and reading the news, one might not know this reality.

Some commentators view the fight against ISIS and terrorism in binary prisms: civilization versus barbarism, or good versus evil etc. I shall not delve into the racist, colonial, or imperial undertones of these statements, but I am compelled to point out that if we accept this logic, should we not then equally devote our attentions to all those subjected to terrorism globally? Especially since attacks outside of the western world have been some of the most deadly. As of writing this commentary, Facebook has not implemented a “Safety Check” feature in regards to the Yola attacks, nor has it allowed its users to change their profile pictures to Nigeria’s national flag: green and white. The western media has not yet declared Boko Haram’s assaults as “attacks against humanity.”

Whilst *The Guardian* constructed a very poignant, special feature showing the faces, ages, place of origin, and perhaps a few tweets about the individuals killed in Paris. This was not replicated for the Nigeriens, Chadians,⁵ Cameroonians,⁶ or Lebanese who had their lives cut so abruptly, so violently, so senselessly, and so needlessly by terrorist attacks. One could even argue that the terrorist attack, hostage crisis in Mali, resulting in twenty-seven deaths on November, 20, 2015, received great attention in the western media because westerners were present in the hotel.

Love Thy Neighbour: Immigration & Refugees

Some Republican presidential hopefuls and other like-minded figures have spoken about preventing refugees and in some cases⁷

Muslims from entering the United States because they might be “terrorists.”⁸ Some think only Christian refugees should be allowed in the United States of America.⁹ Pragmatically speaking, how shall they determine who is a Christian and on whose standard of Christianity would they pose this question? Is not the greatest commandment in the *Bible* to love God the Father and then to love your neighbour as He has loved us?¹⁰ Do they forget that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were refugees when they fled from King Herod? Is it Christ-like to dismiss the downtrodden and marginalized? Would these individuals pass their own Christian test?

Many were quick to denounce Trump’s suggestion that all Muslims be barred from entering the United States as “un-American,” or suggested that it was a “recruiting tool for ISIS.” Yet, recently, under the Obama administration, approximately twenty British Muslim families have been denied the right to enter the United States.¹¹ In one particular harrowing instance, a British Muslim family of eleven were denied the right to fly to Disneyland, California, although they had already spent approximately eleven thousand pounds on their vacation plans and received prior clearance to do so.¹² Does the United States currently have an implicit or explicit policy along the lines of Trump’s suggestion? Unfortunately, this would not be first time that the US has barred specific groups from entering its lands. For instance, Jimmy Carter, the former United States president, during the Iranian hostage crisis, barred Iranians from entering the United States.¹³ Even further back in the United States’ history, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prevented Chinese citizens from entering the United States or being allowed to become United States citizens.¹⁴

Finding the Magical Unicorn: White Terrorism

Those seeking to bar other people from entering into the United States because of their religious beliefs or places of origin in many cases tolerate known local terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), an organization founded in 1866 during the Reconstruction Period, to live merrily in the United States without bother. Why has the KKK not received the same scrutiny and formal title of “terrorist organization”? This is a 149 year-old terrorist organization, make no mistake about it. In fact, the group still marches in public spaces, visibly displaying their symbols

of hatred, fear, and bigotry.¹⁵ Besides the racial makeup of their members, what distinguishes the KKK from ISIS?

White terrorism exists and its absence from mainstream media discussions perpetuates the fictitious idea that only non-western bodies are capable of terrorism. Indeed, why has there not been a serious discussion about Dylann Roof's status as a symbol of a long, storied history of domestic terrorism within the United States? Why was Roof allowed to dine at Burger King, a fast food chain, after¹⁶ being arrested for savagely gunning down nine innocent African-American church-goers at a historically African-American church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015? What about the series of seven historically African-American churches being burnt down after Roof's terrorist act within a ten day span?¹⁷ Were these not terrorist attacks, with the intention to inspire fear amongst church-going African-Americans? Where has the public outcry and round-the-clock media coverage of these incidents been? Instead, the media looked into Roof's psychological state to try and explain this actions? Just as it did for Andreas Lubitz, the German pilot, who crashed flight 4U9525 into the French Alps on March 24, 2015, killing all 150 people onboard and¹⁸ for James Holmes, the individual who killed twelve people and injured seventy others in the movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado. But if these acts were committed by an Arab Muslim, like the San Bernardino, California, attackers, the discussion shifts from signs of mental instability to terrorist, demonic intentions, despite the fact that the aforementioned parties all planned and deliberately carried out their attacks.¹⁹

Colonial Relics & Terrorism

When students from South Africa pushed to have apartheid relics removed from their campuses due to the violence and brutality those individuals brought upon their forefathers and mothers and which are still felt today, why did the world not view their fight as one against barbarism? Does the barbarism of colonialism, forced labour, lynchings, racism, and the sort not mean much when it is against non-western European bodies? American students, inspired by events in South Africa, are engaged in a similar effort to remove relics and symbols of oppression, slavery, and racism within their institutions.

However, Ted Cruz, a US presidential hopeful, and others have claimed that college students were (are) spoilt to call for the removal of names and symbols that hang on the walls, banners, and dormitories of their respective schools, which represent the worst of humanity: acts of oppression, slavery, racism, murder, lost lives, etc.²⁰ Would Cruz articulate the same words if his Harvard dormitory were called the Fidel Castro, or Adolf Hitler dormitory, if the Nazi flag was incorporated into the state flag, or if Nazi generals had their names on streets?

Conclusion

Terrorism and terrorists target everybody, regardless of one's religion, race, gender, or place of origin. Each life lost to terrorism is tragic and should be valued and mourned equally. ISIS has killed and targeted more Muslims and Arabs than any other group. In Yola, Nigeria, those killed were Muslims just leaving the mosques after praying. Terrorist victims cannot suddenly become more "valuable" when they are western. We cannot sincerely discuss our fight against terrorism as something against evil or barbarism when we wilfully ignore domestic or state-sponsored terrorism (a topic I have not scarcely broached in this piece). For centuries, the people whose lives have been destroyed by racism, colonialism, slavery, imperialism, sexism, and capitalism have simply asked for a fair shake, nothing more. They have simply asked those in positions of power to feel the same sorrow and empathy for them as they would a westerner.

In recent years, the world has witnessed demonstrations from students in Cape Town, to Black Jews in Israel, to minorities in the United States asking for people to acknowledge that their lives matter too, and not simply in the rhetorically sense. This starts with simple things as opening the Facebook "Safety Feature" or profile picture colour filter to all acts of terrorism, from ISIS in France to Boko Haram in Nigeria. Terrorism has struck everyone. It is not copyrighted by a particular race, people, or religion. This truth must never be lost.

Notes

- ¹ Anne Barnard & Hwaida Saadnov, “ISIS Claims Responsibility for Blasts That Killed Dozens in Beirut,” *The New York Times*. November 12, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/13/world/middleeast/lebanon-explosions-southern-beirut-hezbollah.html?ref=topics> (accessed November 14, 2015);
- ² Samara Lynn, “Facebook Responds to Criticism over Safety Check Feature, French Flag Filter.” *Black Enterprise*. November 16, 2015. http://www.blackenterprise.com/technology/facebook-responds-to-criticism-over-safety-check-feature-french-flag-filter/attachment/facebook_safety_check_zuckerberg_1/ (accessed, November 18, 2015).
- ³ Unknown, “Heavy Casualties Feared After Nigerian Bomb Explosion.” *The Guardian*. November 17, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/17/heavy-casualties-feared-after-nigerian-explosion> (accessed November 18, 2015).
- ⁴ Institute for Economics and Peace, “Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism,” 2. <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015-Global-Terrorism-Index-Report.pdf> (accessed November 20, 2015)
- ⁵ Ludovica Iaccino, “Boko Haram suspects kill 50 in Chad and Cameroon as Nigeria claims army closing in.” *International Business Times*. October 12, 2015. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/boko-haram-suspects-kill-50-chadcameroon-nigeria-claims-army-closing-1523536> (accessed November 28, 2015); Unknown, “Boko Haram: State of emergency declared around Lake Chad.” *BBC World News*. November 9, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34771128> (accessed December 1, 2015)
- ⁶ *Reuters*, “Eight dead after suspected Boko Haram attack in Cameroon.” *The Guardian*. November 21, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/22/eight-dead-after-suspected-boko-haram-attack-in-cameroon> (accessed December 4, 2015); *Agence France-Presse in Yaoundé*, “Two Suicide Bombings Kill at Least 30 in North Cameroon.” *The Guardian*. September 3, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/03/two-suicide-bombings-kill-north-cameroon> (accessed December 8, 2015).
- ⁷ Mary Bruce & Benjamin Siegel, *ABC News*. “Speaker Ryan Calls for ‘Pause’ in Syrian Refugee Program.” November 17, 2015. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/speaker-ryan-calls-pause-syrian-refugee-program/story?id=35253769> (accessed December 20, 2015).
- ⁸ *The Associated Press*, “Donald Trump calls for ‘complete shutdown’ on Muslims entering U.S.” *CBC News*. December 7, 2015. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/donald-trump-muslim-ban-1.3354606> (accessed December 22, 2015).
- ⁹ Candace Smith, “Jeb Bush Says US Should Allow Syrian Refugees Who Can Prove They’re Christian.” *ABC News*. November 17, 2015. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/jeb-bush-us-syrian-refugees-prove-christian/story?id=35263074> (accessed December 10, 2015).
- ¹⁰ Matthew 22:37–40.

¹¹ Ben Farmer, “Revealed: 20 British Muslim families ‘stopped’ from entering US amid fears Trump ban is already in place.” *The Daily Telegraph*. December 23, 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/12065608/David-Cameron-urged-to-intervene-as-US-bans-Muslim-family.html> (accessed December 23, 2015).

¹² Esther Addley, “Calls for Cameron to step in after US bans British Muslim family from Disneyland trip.” *The Guardian*. December 23, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/dec/22/david-cameron-us-america-refuses-british-muslim-family-disneyland> (accessed December 23, 2015).

¹³ Daniel Greenfield, “Carter Banned Iranians from Coming to US During Hostage Crisis: Trump is just like Hitler. Or Jimmy Carter.” *FrontPage Mag*. December 8, 2015. <http://www.frontpagemag.com/point/261062/carter-banned-iranians-coming-us-during-hostage-daniel-greenfield> (accessed December 22, 2015).

¹⁴ Harvard University Library Open Collections Program, “Chinese Exclusion Act (1882),” November 17, 2015. <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/exclusion.html> (accessed December 22, 2015).

¹⁵ Max Blau, “‘Still a racist nation’: American Bigotry on Full Display at KKK rally in South Carolina.” *The Guardian*. July 19, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jul/19/kkk-clashes-south-carolina-racism> (accessed December 17, 2015); Unknown, “KKK rallies for Confederate flag in S Carolina.” *Aljazeera*. July 19, 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/kkk-rallies-confederate-flag-carolina-150718212638339.html> (accessed December 20, 2015).

¹⁶ Simon McCormack, “Cops Bought Dylann Roof Burger King Hours After Charleston Shooting.” *The Huffington Post*. June 23, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/23/dylann-roof-burger-king_n_7645216.html (accessed December 22, 2015)

¹⁷ Adam Withnall, “South Carolina Church Fire: The US is asking - ‘Who is burning black churches?’” *The Independent*. July 1, 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/who-is-burning-black-churches-twitter-outrage-grows-as-seventh-church-burns-down-in-10-days-10357670.html> (accessed December 20, 2015).

¹⁸ Patrick Sawyer, Montabaur and Raziye Akkoc. “Andreas Lubitz: Everything we know about Germanwings plane crash co-pilot.” *The Daily Telegraph*. May 6, 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11496066/Andreas-Lubitz-Everything-we-know-about-Germanwings-plane-crash-co-pilot.html> (accessed June 15, 2015); Unknown, “Lufthansa knew six years ago that pilot who crashed plane in Alps had suffered a ‘serious depressive episode.’” *National Post*. March 31, 2015. <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/world/lufthansa-knew-six-years-ago-pilot-who-brought-down-german-wings-had-battled-depression> (accessed December 23, 2015).

¹⁹ This is not even to mention incidents regarding police brutality in America. One could perhaps imagine the headlines that would reverberate in the United

States if the Russian, Iranian, or Chinese police had killed numerous unarmed minorities in their countries, who were then subsequently not charged with a crime: “No Justice in an Authoritarian State” or perhaps, “Minorities Still Suffering After Years of Slavery & Oppression Whilst the State Looks Away.”

²⁰ Steven Crowder, “Ted Cruz Takes on ‘Pampered’ Whiny College Students with Adam Carolla.” *Louder with Crowder*. December 19, 2015. <http://louderwithcrowder.com/ted-cruz-to-adam-carolla-the-left-is-a-microaggression/#.VneOAMYrLnA> (accessed December 22, 2015).