

Sermons, Speeches & Addresses

House of Lord's Debate - Iraq

7th September 2004



My Lords, as we came to terms with the terrorist attack of 9/11, one of the commentaries on the state of the world was that Islam had now displaced communism as the major ideological threat to the West.

In the popular mind 9/11 evidenced a "new" threat, with commentators widely reporting that with this event "the world had changed". The popular view saw communism as the age-old enemy whose place had now been usurped by a new and powerful religious force.

If that is so, there is something ironic here that communism, which drew so much from a man who dismissed religion as the opiate of the people, should have been replaced in its role as challenger to the capitalist West by a religion.

The truth is that, in the context of history, communism appeared as a relatively recent and short-lived phenomenon; the major tension that has dominated the landscape of the world for more than a thousand years is the relationship between two cultures—one rooted in Christianity, the other in Islam.

What happened on 9/11 was not the eruption of a new threat but a return to and a re-emergence of an historic tension that had lain relatively dormant and in the past century been eclipsed by war with Germany and the threat of communism.

I believe that this lack of historical perspective has added to the errors of judgment in the way that both America and Britain engage with the Arab world.

We have failed to understand the history of the relationship between the two cultures, and how actions will be interpreted and understood by each party in the light of both history and religion—as with, for example, the careless use of the word "crusade". There are major theological and ideological differences between the two cultures of Christianity and Islam; there is also common ground between the two. Speaking from these Benches, and conscious of many friendships with Muslims, never in the history of the planet has it been so important to take religion so seriously. What is required by religious leaders is not just dialogue, but an urgent summit on how we shall live together.

Christianity and Islam are both missionary religions, both given to proselytising. This makes the task of finding a way to live together peacefully one of the great challenges of our time.

On the political front, governments must understand that all actions have an historical and a religious context. Present actions in Iraq and the Middle East will be interpreted in the light of that thousand-year relationship. To ignore this, or to have little regard for it, is to make the world not a safer, but a more dangerous place. That is why, on these Benches, while we have shared the Government's desire to make the world more secure, we have not been persuaded that the Government have fully understood the historical and religious dimensions of their actions. As the noble Lord, Lord Watson, said, a truly safer world cannot be secured by military intervention alone. In support of much of what the noble Baroness, Lady Falkner, has said, what is needed is this soft diplomacy, and also a patient understanding of the historic and religious roots of the conflict of cultures and by the conviction that in today's world the well-being of one culture depends not on the destruction but on the well-being of the other.

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