

How do we respond to terrorism?

On the evening of Nov. 13, 2015, a series of violent attacks in Paris and the northern suburb of Saint-Denis killed 130 people and injured nearly 400. The attacks, the deadliest in France since World War II, prompted a renewed sense of outrage against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which claimed responsibility. But it also triggered a wave of fear and fierce reprisals. François Hollande, the French president, immediately declared a state of emergency, soon followed by dozens of police raids, new restrictions on civil rights, the cancellation of many public events, and a massive anti-ISIL bombing campaign that struck targets in Al-Raqqa and other cities in northern Syria.

In the United States, the attacks in Paris—played out against the backdrop of the contentious presidential primaries and a simmering national debate over the status of undocumented immigrants—sparked renewed debate among Mennonites about how we should respond to such events. Those who expressed their solidarity with the people of France on social media were quickly—and often sternly—reminded that U.S.-led drone attacks in Pakistan, Syria and Yemen have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of innocent people who have often gone unlamented. Some sought to frame ISIL's goal of establishing a caliphate within the historical context of the Crusades and the humiliating legacy of western imperialism; others insisted that Islam is a religion of peace. But many Mennonites, no doubt, were fully supportive of the renewed wave of anti-Muslim suspicions that has prompted 31 U.S. governors to oppose settling any Syrian refugees in their states, including orphaned children.

Attitudes within the broader global family of Anabaptist-Mennonite churches are equally varied. In some contexts, such as the GKMI church in Indonesia, Mennonites have been leaders in promoting interfaith dialogue and collaborative projects. Elsewhere, particularly in Nigeria and East Africa, relationships are more fraught.

As I have followed the news in recent weeks, talked with friends abroad and listened to the conversations on social media, I was reminded again of the powerful movie *Of Gods and Men* (*Des hommes et des dieux*), which recounts the true story of seven Trappist monks living in a monastery in Algeria who found themselves caught in the crossfire of violence between radical Islamist groups and the repressive Algerian army in the

early 1990s. In the face of threats, and then a bloody massacre, most Europeans fled the region. For the monks who had long worked among the villagers—bearing witness to Christ's love by sharing fully in their lives—finding an appropriate response to the political crisis became a central question. Should they, too, leave? Should they openly declare their allegiance with the Algerian army? Or should they simply continue in their long-established disciplines of prayer, offering compassionate aid to all who asked and seeking to promote understanding and reconciliation wherever possible?

Here we return to the ancient question, focused anew by the threat of terrorism and the desire for security, as to whether Christians are obliged to provide a political narrative for those in power—a narrative that will justify the righteousness of one side of a conflict and that, presumably, will “redeem” the inevitable violence that follows by blessing it with the sanctity of God's name. As history has shown, responses to this question are never simple, especially in the face of innocent suffering.

In the end, the monks of Notre-Dame de l'Atlas refused either to flee or to submit to the logic of redemptive violence. Instead they opted simply to continue living among the villagers, pursuing their practices of prayer and compassion. That decision sealed their earthly fate.

For Christians committed to the gospel of peace, *Of Gods and Men* is both inspiring and unsettling. It reminds us that Christian pacifism is never passive; nor does it come with any claims regarding short-term “effectiveness.” Clearly, there were moments when the monks, despite a lifetime of disciplined prayer, were deeply afraid. They had no desire for martyrdom. But once their decision to remain in the village became clear, fear simply lost its hold on their lives.

Amid the familiar Christmas scenes of the saintly Mary, adoring shepherds and angelic choirs, bathed in the glow of a gentle star, it is easy to forget that the Nativity story is really an account of refugees, living in the context of empire and terror that will soon force Mary and Joseph to flee with their newborn baby to a foreign country.

Yet the steady refrain of the Christmas narrative echoes still today: Do not be afraid. **TM**



John D. Roth is professor of history at Goshen (Ind.) College, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism and editor of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.

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