

“I come not to bring peace but a sword,” Jesus once said.

Under this government, Jesus would have been done for extremism. Jesus was violent, hung out with terrorists, called for a religious state and the end of the world. So why are we so ready to accuse Islam of having the problem?



I wonder. Would the current government’s crackdown on non-violent extremism have silenced the founder of Christianity? How difficult would it be to construct a case against him in terms of the new counter-extremism strategy? Not that hard, I suspect.

For the man you know as Jesus Christ was radicalised at a desert training camp in the mountains of Judea by an extremist preacher called John, or “the Baptist”. It was from these notorious mountains that guerrilla resistance to the remnants of Alexander the Great’s empire had been successfully launched 200 years before. But now the occupying enemy was the Romans. And “the Baptist” preached the importance of readiness. Soon God would come and drive the hated and heretical foreign invaders from God’s land. Baptism was spiritual preparation for battle. “The ax is already at the root of the trees,” he said. Get ready, God is coming. John was beheaded by the authorities sometime in AD28/9.

John saw Jesus as his natural successor. Both were looking towards the imminent arrival of a

worldwide theocratic state directly ruled over by God himself. But unlike the wildman John, who wore ripped clothes and lived off insects, Jesus was more of an entryist type, superficially at ease with mainstream society. He would talk a lot about peace – but sometimes the mask would slip: “I come not to bring peace but a sword,” he once admitted. And, like John, he too hung out with known terrorists, in particular his close companion Simon the Zealot. Jesus’s particular focus of trouble-causing was the political hotspot of the Temple mount. He would often fall out with the religious professionals of the established church, condemning them as Roman stooges. And he was caught vandalising one of the outer courtyards, smashing up the tables. He predicted that the temple, only just completed at the cost of billions of shekels, and vital to the growth of the economy, was soon to be destroyed, “not one stone would stand”, he said. So of course he’s a security threat. And in declaring himself to be some sort of religious king – in defiance of secular authority – he directly challenged the legitimacy of the state.

As David Cameron said in his speech back in July: “You don’t have to support violence to subscribe to certain intolerant ideas which create a climate in which extremists can flourish.” And Jesus was clearly a part of the broad movement of religious resistance to Roman authority that ultimately led to violent revolution. He wasn’t a democrat. He wasn’t a liberal. He didn’t believe in human rights or sexual equality.

He was one of those who stirred up a frenzy of political/religious expectation that ultimately led to revolution, to the religious army of the Zealots, to the assassins of the Sicarii, who went round stabbing innocent Romans and fellow Jews whom they targeted as Roman collaborators. Forget about all that gnomic pious whitewash about rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s. He thought everything belonged to God. It was people like Jesus of Nazareth who made the Middle East the mess it is today. He deserved the full weight of the law and consequently a Roman punishment that was congruent with being a dangerous revolutionary: crucifixion.

Of course I don’t believe a word of all that. There are more plausible and convincing ways of telling the story. But as Reza Aslan has made plain in his bestseller *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, something like this remains one possible explanation of the story, especially if one adopts a suspicious hermeneutic. Which, I suspect, was part of Aslan’s point. As a Muslim, he has witnessed first hand how easy it is to popularise an interpretative frame in which everything relating to Muhammad is seen through the lens of violent extremism, when even non-violent Islam is condemned as a pathway to violence. Theresa May is a vicar’s daughter and a practising member of the Church of England. How can she not see that her campaign against non-violent extremism is so expansive that even Jesus Christ could easily have been convicted of it?

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