

Anglicans and air strikes

England's top cleric challenges Saudis and Qataris on theology

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JUSTIN WELBY, who as Archbishop of Canterbury is head of the Church of England and of the worldwide Anglican Communion, used his seat in the upper chamber of Parliament to offer qualified support for Britain's participation in air strikes on Syria. On balance, he told fellow peers, the "just war criteria...have been met".

But that isn't the most interesting thing he said during a House of Lords debate. First, he acknowledged that air strikes might, among other results, fan the flames of religious zealotry, not just in the ranks of Islamic State but further afield. He also called for a "challenge" to the Gulf monarchies and their propagation of a hard-line version of Islam from which terrorists could draw inspiration. He wasn't saying that those countries directly or consciously fuel terrorism, but it is still a bold statement from a member of the British establishment. (In England's ceremonial ranking, his office comes higher than the prime minister and only just below royalty.) These are some of his words.

Our bombing action plays into the expectation of ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) and other jihadist groups in the region, springing from their apocalyptic theology. The totality of our actions must subvert that false narrative...If we act only against ISIL...and only in the way proposed so far, we will strengthen their resolve, increase their recruitment and encourage their sympathisers. Without a far more comprehensive approach we confirm their dreadful belief that what they are doing is the will of God. There must be a global theological and ideological component, not just one in this country, to what we are doing...And it must include challenging Saudi Arabia and Qatar, whose own promotion of a particular brand of Islamic theology has provided a source from which ISIL have drawn a false legitimisation. It must also show clear support for global mainstream Muslim and other religious leaders.

What can "challenging" the Saudis and Qataris mean? Although both countries have their proxies in the Syrian maelstrom, both declare their total opposition to the group known as Daesh, Islamic State or similar names. But among observers of the Muslim world, it's a commonplace that Saudi Arabia's religious establishment has used its wealth to propagate, globally, its own puritanical school of Sunni Islam, one that despises more elaborate forms of worship and their practitioners. A catchall term for this kind of Islam is Salafism, a school that stresses the life of Muhammad and his immediate successors and distrusts any thinking or practice that emerged later. Salafism can be politically quietist, and it has some peaceful adherents, but it can also be ultra-violent. It can provide soil in which terrorist weeds can flourish.

What about Qatar? That country was long resented by some of its neighbours as the main regional supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement which differs from Salafism not so much in its metaphysical beliefs as in its political practice. (The Brotherhood, while retaining the long-term goal of Islamic governance, favours energetic engagement in the world, through democratic politics and grass-roots activism.) Last year, under pressure from its neighbours, Qatar expelled some senior Brotherhood figures, but the perception of a link still exists.

So by calling for a "challenge" to the Saudis and Qataris, the archbishop is throwing down the gauntlet both to Salafism and the Brotherhood; he does not say which form of Islam he thinks should be encouraged instead, but "global mainstream Muslim leaders" sounds like a reference to products of the traditional theological schools of Egypt or Jordan which are conservative but not especially political or supportive of jihadism.

Some of the people who argue that terrorism in the name of Islam has a theological dimension (in other words, it reflects bad theology, which must be driven out by good theology) weaken their case by over-stating it. This exaggeration can be self-serving. Their implied message is that no other factors (social or economic woes, political or geopolitical grievances) are worth considering and that expert theologians, capable of correcting Islam's current pathologies, are the kind of people that the world needs most.

But Archbishop Welby is not over-stating the case, he is simply stating it, rather obliquely and politely. And it is a case that needs to be stated.

The 2°C limit on global warming

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“NEVER before has a responsibility so great been in the hands of so few,” declared Christiana Figueres, head of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at the opening of COP21 in Paris. The UNFCCC, an environmental treaty, has been signed by more than 190 countries since its inception in 1992. Meetings under way in Paris represent the twenty-first time its parties have met to divert global doom, arguing over climate and canapés. Under the treaty, all signatories agree to curb “dangerous anthropogenic interference within the climate system”. And after a deal at another such meeting in 2010, they also agree on what “dangerous anthropogenic interference” actually means: global mean surface temperature increasing more than 2°C above that of pre-industrial times. But the history of this limit raises questions about its suitability to save the world.

The two-degree maximum appeared initially in papers written by the Yale economist William Nordhaus in the mid-1970s. As “a first approximation” he suggested the world should not warm more than it had in the past 100,000 years or so—the period for which ice-core data were available. Given how little was known about the costs and damages of global warming at that time, Dr Nordhaus admitted that the estimate was “deeply unsatisfactory”. Nevertheless, European scientists discussed the two-degree limit during the next decade or so; in 1990 the Swedish Environment Institute produced a report that argued that, on the basis of “the vulnerability of ecosystems to historical temperature changes,” warming above just 1°C was not advisable. The authors knew it was too late to keep within this level, and so suggested 2°C instead. From thence the maximum was adopted by the European Union’s Council of Ministers in 1996; the G8 picked it up in 2009. During the chaos of the UNFCCC talks in Copenhagen that year, the two-degree limit emerged in glory, forming part of the deal made there between the world’s biggest polluters. In 2010 it was enshrined within UN policy.

The simplicity of the two-degree maximum appeals to policymakers. It concentrates the complexity of climate change into one digestible figure, and tells politicians what to do about it. Two-degrees is a safety barrier supposedly separating the world from catastrophic impacts—or some of the world, at least. Ice is already melting and coasts already flooding; communities on low-lying islands such as Tuvalu and Kiribati anticipate migration. These and other vulnerable countries want the warming limit to become 1.5°C in any Parisian deal. Given the assumptions made to argue that limiting

warming to 2°C is possible, their demands will probably be glossed over.

But the two-degree maximum is not as simple as it seems. Accurate measurements of the world's temperature are difficult to obtain: discrepancies mean arguments rage over whether a hiatus in warming occurred in the 15 years or so to 2013. And different parts of the world warm at different rates, for example, with the Arctic heating up twice as quickly as the global average. A limit linked to the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere could be better: such gases mix quickly and so can be sampled easily. Some argue that levels of soot and methane and ocean-heat content should be watched more closely, too. But to reach new international agreements on these alternative indicators is unfeasible. The two-degree maximum is imperfect, and will almost certainly be breached. But its existence focuses negotiations. And, when more than 190 countries have to agree, that may be enough to prove its worth.