

## **Pagans Reject the Idea of Evil -- How Do We Respond to Terrorism?**

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After the terrorist bombings in London that ripped apart a bus and several tube stations and killed more than 50 people, British Prime Minister Tony Blair declared the need to wipe out the "ideology of evil" that the bombs represented.

Evil is a construct Pagans try to avoid. Our theology, or rather, thealogy, (Goddess-knowing) teaches us that dark and light, life and death, creation and destruction exist in balance, and to cut off or condemn one aspect opens us to the imbalance that leads to cruelty and horror. We might say that the simplistic formulation, "They are evil; we are good" leads to its corollary, "We are justified in destroying them by any means whatsoever." And that is the very ideology that motivates the bombers, as well, and which throughout human history has led to the worst atrocities.

But if we reject the concept of evil, how do we respond to horrific acts? Is there a specifically Pagan response to such violence? There is no central Pagan authority, no Pagan Pope to issue bulls, no Pagan rabbinical authority to say who does or does not have the right to interpret for us. We have no sacred scriptures to interpret, anyway. As Pagans, we are each our own spiritual authority, each with our own connection to the Goddess.

From that authority, I offer one Pagan's response to the bombings. While we have no Bible, no set of commandments, we do have nature as our teacher, and a set of rough ethics that value life, balance, and interconnection. We feel an immediate, intuitive horror at the taking of life, and at the randomness of this death. To die because I chose to fight in the military, or to take a particular risk, or even because I incurred a particular enemy, at least has some sense of cause and meaning.

To die because I happened to stop for a newspaper or to get on the wrong train seems utterly unfair and senseless.

Yet terror attacks are not senseless, not "mindless violence." They are part of a thought-out strategy, one often pursued by those who do not have the numbers or weaponry to mount a direct military assault. They are not unique to Arabs or Muslims, regardless of what anti-Arab racism would say. In fact similar tactics have been used by the Irish in their struggle for independence, the Basques, and the Stern Gang of the Israeli independence movement who

blew up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem back in the 1940s, and by many other groups throughout history.

If a fighting force cannot outgun the British army or the U.S. military, they can always strike at the civilian population, and hurt the enemy in that way. We rightfully reject and condemn those tactics. Death may be a part of life, but inflicting it on others breaks the fabric of interconnectedness and assaults the sacred embodied in each one of us.

But when we condemn the willingness to kill others in order to pursue one's own ends, we also need to acknowledge that willingness is widespread. What "ideology of evil" motivated Tony Blair to join the United States in pursuing a war in Iraq that has killed tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of civilians, guilty only of being born in the wrong country at the wrong time? Could he please explain to me why, if it is evil to kill civilians on a bus or in the London tubes, it is okay to kill civilians in bombing raids on major cities? Why acts that are "evil" when done by small groups of extremists are moral and good when pursued by governments and armies? The willingness to sacrifice others for one's own good is not limited to war. It is also part of the context of endemic violence woven into our current political and economic system. The UN Commission on Children tells us that six million children a year die from the policies the International Monetary Fund imposes on third world countries, that result in lack of access to health care and clean water. In a neighborhood near mine, young men kill each other in drug and gang wars born of hopelessness and despair. The very integrity of the earth's climate and life support systems are in jeopardy from global warming, while efforts to address this crucial life issue are stymied deliberately by a few defending their own economic interests.

And while this constant killing goes on, we are distracted and desensitized. Turn on the television any night of the week, and notice how our imaginations are colonized by violence. Crime shows, jewel thieves, cop shows, war stories, battle scenes march endlessly across the screen, filling our inner vision with images of mayhem, broken bodies and blood, as if we can only be entertained by vicarious pain and endlessly replayed dramas in which someone else dies and I live.

We should be shocked and horrified at the bombings. Our hearts go out to the victims and their loved ones with compassion and grief.

But we should also be shocked and horrified at the larger context of violence in which they take place. What would happen, how would the world change, if our hearts went out with compassion to the children of Iraq, of Africa, of the Brazilian favelas, of the inner city of Los

Angeles? If we were as quick to condemn the perpetrators of endemic economic violence as we are to condemn bombers? If we were as horrified at the oil company executive who suppresses evidence of global warming as we are at the gunman?

A Pagan response to violence might say there's enough death, enough drama inherent in nature, in the course of life and the changes of the seasons and the cougar's pursuit of the deer. Let's not add to it. As human beings, we're put on this earth to develop those things the cougar does not have: compassion, gratitude, conscious appreciation and wonder at the beauty and mystery of life. Let's stop killing each other, and get on with it.

I want to live in a world in which I can safely board a bus, in London or New York or Tel Aviv, without wondering if the bus will explode. And I want to live in a world in which a child can safely go to bed in Baghdad or Jenin or Darfur, without wondering if bombs or tanks or bulldozers will destroy her home by morning, or if her family will have food the next day.

We are all interconnected. Perhaps that simple, Pagan truth could lead us to reject murder as a way of resolving our issues with each other, whether the killing is done by opposition groups or by the state itself or by a ruthless and unjust economic system. We are all part of the circle of life. That understanding must lead us to create a world in which the fabric of life is cherished, in the individual and the whole, and violence is transformed by love.

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