

Death in New Zealand: The Christchurch Shootings

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Five weapons were said to have been used, all inscribed with symbols, numbers and insignia. The individual charged with the shootings at two Christchurch mosques that left 49 dead was an Australian with, it is alleged, a simple purpose: inflict death, and on specific communities in worship. Even as the carnage became clear, Christchurch was already the epicentre of twenty-four hour news television, supplying a ghoulish spectacle. Saturation coverage followed, and continues to do so, a point that will warm the attacker's blood (his entire effort was streamed on live video on Facebook).

The alleged perpetrator, one Brenton Harrison Tarrant, [left](#) an unstirring piece – to call it a manifesto would be far-fetched – for those interested before the attack. It is a document of banality and off target assumptions. “Who are you?” he asks himself, suggesting an inner voice in need of reassurance and clarity. “Just an ordinary White man, 28 years old. Born in Australia to a working class, low income family.” Stock: “Scottish, Irish and English”; a “regular childhood without any great issues”.

He did not like education, “barely achieving a passing grade.” Universities did not offer anything of interest. He invested money in Bitconnect, then travelled. A sense of cognitive dissonance follows; Tarrant had recently worked part time “as a kebab removalist”.

No criminal record, no watch list, no registry. Nothing to suggest a tendency towards mass murder, disrespect or mania. What Tarrant did have was a desire to avenge individuals he felt a kinship for, suggesting that the dull witted are just as capable of killing as the charismatically ideological. The “radical”, rooted nature of violence lies dormant in many; all that is required is a match.

The simple language of the note resembled that of various European populist platforms, albeit trimmed of deep historical flourishes: fear the Islamic invader; take to the barricades to repel the forces of Allah. Interestingly enough, Tarrant leaves the detail of the invaders unclear, given that European lands have received all manner of invasions over its existence, of which the Ottoman and Islamic is but one stream. The broad statement strikes a note of nonsense:

“To take revenge on the invaders for the hundreds of thousands of deaths caused by foreign invaders in European lands throughout history.”

Other statements of motivation follow: the “enslavement of millions of Europeans from their lands by the Islamic slavers”; “the thousands of European lives lost to terror attacks throughout European lands”. Rather conveniently, and in manipulative fashion, the spirit of young Ebba Åkerlund, who died in 2017 in a terror attack in Sweden, is also channelled. It was not sufficient to merely mention her; the eleven-year old inspired the shooter to name

rifles after her. “How the hell,” [expressed](#) stunned father Stefan Åkerlund, “can we ever get to mourn in peace?”

The problem with any such event is the risk of immoderate response. Sensible comments have been noted: the risks posed by non-Islamic terrorists have tended to be neglected in budgets and rhetoric, though US President Donald Trump is, unsurprisingly, [insisting](#) that militant white nationalism is fringe worthy rather than common. Under the John Key government, the overwhelming focus of funding intelligence and security efforts was directed at the phantom menace of Islam, burrowing deep into the suburbs. Watch lists of suspects were constantly noted; the fear of returned “radicalised” fighters was constantly iterated. To add a greater sense of purpose to the mission, New Zealand troops were [deployed](#) to Iraq to fight the troops of Islamic State. “Get some guts!” exclaimed Key to his opposition counterpart, Andrew Little, who seemed somewhat half-hearted in committing to the effort.

Other policy recommendations, still embryonic and possibly never to fly, are making their errands. There are suggestions of deploying around the clock security personnel to mosques in various countries, something that risks militarising places of worship.

Vengeful rebuke can also find room in legislative and executive action. In New Zealand, reforms to gun laws are being promised. (These are already strict, and it is by no means clear if safety would be improved by such changes.) In Australia, Tony Burke of the Labor Party suggests punishing hate speech and denying visas to certain right wing advocates of the white supremacist persuasion. Australia’s immigration system is sufficiently intolerant and erratic enough to deny visas to those who might interfere with the false tranquillity of its society but a suspicious paternalism remains the enemy of free speech. Debate, in short, cannot be trusted.

The move to further push tech companies to reign in violent content will also receive a mighty boost. The [response](#) from such companies as Facebook thus far is one of optimism: last year, some 99 percent of content linked with terrorism content promoted by Islamic State and al-Qaeda was successfully purged by artificial intelligence. Calls to do the same for other sources of inspiration are bound to follow.

There is also a stark, uncomfortable reality: no one is safe. The entire field of terrorist and anti-terrorist studies is replete with charlatan impulses and the promise of placebo styled security. There are fictional projections and assessments about whether an attack is “imminent” or “probable”. There are calls to be vigilant and report the suspicious. Political leaders give firm reassurances that all will be safe, a point that, quite frankly, can never be guaranteed.

The actions of Friday demonstrate the ease with which an act of mass killing can take place, the damage than can arise from attacking freely open spaces where people commune. Extremism is said to lack a face or an ideology, but on Friday, it manifested in an all too human form.

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