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- Scott Atran, who says that religious terrorism came ‘out of nowhere’ in the 1970s
Richard Pohle for The Times

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Scott Atran has spent a lot of time in the past few years talking to terrorists and would-be suicide attackers, or to the people who love and support them. Now he’s in the Waldorf Hilton in Covent Garden talking to me. It’s his book tour, so I get to be the anthropologist, asking him questions and observing his behaviour.

Talking to the Enemy, subtitled *Violent Extremism, Sacred Values and What it Means to be Human*, is an important book, by turns fascinating, dense, scientific, debatable, illuminating and irritating. Parts really have to be read by anyone seeking to understand modern jihadism, other sections reflect Atran’s wide knowledge of anthropology, but great dollops of evolutionary psychology ‘conjectural at best and certainly untestable for the moment’ send the readers on unreliable journeys.

Atran is a wonderful guy to spend a morning with. Now in his late fifties but mistakable for 45, he started in the anthropology business in 1969, when he embarked on what can best be described as a gap decade. Atran had won the Westinghouse scholarship for advanced

mathematics at Columbia University in New York. It was a time of student protest, and one of these brought about an encounter with the legendary anthropologist Margaret Mead. The two of them had an argument about tactics, which somehow led to the teenager being invited up to her tower office in the Museum of Natural History in New York, which was 'the tower of Ali Baba', Atran says, 'With thousands of skulls. Zulu spears, various effigies.'

While he was there, 'Andy Warhol called. He wanted to make a film with Mead and Salvador Dalí, called *The Elysian Fields*. And I said, 'This is kind of thing I want to do'. Things that I couldn't and hadn't anticipated.' Out went the maths, in came anthropological linguistics.

Next came an offer to work with the great palaeoanthropologist Richard Leakey in Kenya on account of Atran also being 'pretty good at deciphering skulls from casts. But I never made it, met a Mexican girl on the road.' Atran and his inamorata headed instead for Spain, where Franco was on life support, and joined the revolution.

That moment passed, and Atran invited a couple of male Mexican friends to join him on a motorcycle trip from Amsterdam to China, looking for field sites 'a journey that took him through mid-Seventies Afghanistan. He then got a Fulbright scholarship to the Middle East, and found himself in Lebanon at a time of civil war. There he spent a year in the mountains with the mysterious Druze, whose mysteries he will not divulge.

Next Atran taught part-time at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he began documenting Palestinian villages that had existed before 1948 and then disappeared. While he was doing this he came into contact with the fledgeling Hamas. Then he was gone again. Atran and his Chilean wife spent 15 years in Mexico and Guatemala on the anthropology of the modern Maya. And then along came 9/11.

'The first I saw was Palestinians on TV dancing in the streets, and the US commentators immediately going on to how this was Muslim glee at the attacks on the United States. Within a week that was toned down, only a fringe blah, blah, blah, but the tone had been set. The US Administration made it out as an attack on America and its Empire and an incredible amount of hysteria hit the media. I had to know, first, why was this hysteria being created. Never before in human conflict had so much fear been created in so many by so few.'

This is one of Atran's more boilerplate anti-imperialist observations. For him Dick Cheney is Darth Vader, and 9/11 simply an excuse for exercising American hegemony. So we move quickly on from his standard ideas about WMD to what is important about his insights.

'There was this notion of the clash of civilisations. When I trekked with the Mujahidin [in Indonesia], they talked about it as well. But when I was going round the world I was witnessing a collapse of cultures, civilisations were floundering, and traditional forms of hierarchy and organisation were disappearing. Young people were looking for an identity and connecting peer to peer in completely new ways. And it had nothing to do with what people were talking about. There were no cells. There was no command and control. I couldn't find it anywhere in what I was reading. The entire narrative was so skewed and so bizarre.'

Atran's instinct was that everyone else had got it wrong. They were looking for a centralised, organising force that probably didn't exist. Atran was inclined rather to believe that what was happening was the product of new forces of rapid change ' globalised society and communications. 'This had all happened at a time when the media has taken a quantum leap forward. You could go to Borneo, which literally was cannibals two generations ago, and you could be seeing the same things you could be seeing in London or Argentina.'

Also, remembering his contacts with Hamas, he couldn't imagine that they had mutated into something like al-Qaeda, interested in global jihad. It 'didn't make sense'.

So Atran set about finding out, and that meant making contact with the Mujahidin. For various reasons, not least to do with a 1905 book on the Celebes islands of Indonesia that he had read as a youngster, he chose Sulawesi, the base for the Bali bombers. 'Whatever had happened to that part of the world,' he reasoned, 'has happened to our planet.' And the idea was to use anthropological techniques to discover new truths about the characters who were on the island to be trained for jihad.

Through various contacts Atran found himself being driven round Sulawesi by a Mujahid called Farhin, who would stop chatting every now and then to fantasise about bombing a Hindu wedding. They bonded when having to mend a tyre in the back of beyond; Atran deployed the key tool of the anthropologist's trade ' empathy. And so Atran found himself in Sulawesi's main port, Poso, 'the jihadi capital of the world', where various groups were training to kill Christians in East Timor and elsewhere.

Atran's subjects were members of 'The Fighting Group for Suicide Warriors', and after letting them vent on Chechnya and the Palestine question, he hit them with his questionnaire. The questions were unique, but meaningful, so they couldn't be answered with slogans, but nevertheless the answers would be useful. They included queries such as 'Would you give up a suicide bombing to carry out a roadside bombing, if possible?' and 'Could you give up a suicide bombing to make the only possible trip of your lifetime to Mecca?'

'These guys put their rifles down and started talking and I told them, 'You talk to one another. It's got to be from your heart.' So they went into their corners. One asked to speak to his religious leader. I said no.' The results told Atran a lot about the values and the group identity of Mujahidin. But could he imagine, I ask him, sitting down with a group of SS Einsatzgruppen in 1941 and getting them to fill in questionnaires? He could.

After the Sulawesi Mujahidin and the Bali bombers, Atran followed the Madrid bombers to their origins, mostly in Morocco. He sought out the families of Palestinian bombers from the West Bank. He went to Harburg, near Hamburg, following up on Atta and the 9/11 participants. 'I knew Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taleban, and there was something very different about al-Qaeda and the other groups which claimed global jihad. They were so locked into their parallel universe. The Harburg pilots, the Madrid bombers, the London bombers, the Bali bombers. They're not Salafis, as people imagine, they're Takfiris. It's a bit like the difference between an armed white supremacist and a Christian fundamentalist.'

Both Takfiri and Salafi are forms of Islamic fundamentalism. Atran argues that Salafi, being evangelical, rather than sectish, is relatively less dangerous. Takfiri means to withdraw, before re-engaging. 'In Harburg, where the 9/11 people lived, the place stank. There were 20 mattresses, and they stayed in there and psyched themselves up. Then they came out of their cocoon wanting to do something. They wanted to go to Bosnia, but the Bosnians didn't want them. Then they met some guy in a train and he said 'Go to Pakistan', and they ended up in Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's hands.'

'Then the Madrid bombers, they were an array of disparate types from all over who had these scatterbrained ideas. It's always like that. You get groups of friends, they hook up with guys from Denmark, Canada, and build up this imaginary world, which is easier and easier to do on the internet. You are the world with your friends.'

This is exactly the model, of course, used in Chris Morris's spoof *Four Lions*. And sometimes, despite chaotic planning and fluid disorganisation, it works.

This brings us to Atran's most controversial point. He argues that refusing to deal with Salafi-type organisations, both in the West and in their incarnations as Hamas or the Taleban, sabotages the battle against Takfirism. 'When people talk about getting rid of Salafis, that drives me nuts, because these are the only guys who have got these people away from doing crazy things. Like Pentecostals are much better at getting white supremacists away from their nuttiness than a rabbi from Brooklyn would be.'

So you set a Salafi to catch a Takfiri? Surely, though, the problem is that Salafi ideology often contains the seeds of Takfir within it, with its anti-Jewish, anti-Western, anti-modern and conspiracist rhetoric. Do we treat them as friends, offering them facility and encouragement?

'Look,' Atran says, 'there is about 7 per cent support for 9/11 in the Muslim world. That's 200 million out of 1.3 billion. Of those, the ones who are actually willing to commit violence is paltry ' about 2,400 in all of Europe. So the specificity of jihadism cannot possibly be explained by exposure to Salafism, etc.'

'The fascinating thing when I first started examining South-East Asia, years ago, I went to all the great scholars and nobody had any idea of what was happening. In the 1970s it was the great secular divide between communists and liberals, and religion was nowhere. Then all of a sudden ' bam! ' it seems to come out of nowhere.'

'No, the jihadi movement has caught something, has caught a disaffection, a sense of underachievement, of belonging to the driftwood of globalisation. And my framework is Abraham Lincoln's: why destroy my enemy when I can make them my friends?' Lincoln didn't say that until after Sherman's annihilating march through Georgia and four years of war, in which 677,000 people died, but Atran has an important point here ' it is about dividing our enemies and converting some of them, not lumping them all together.

Oddly, part of the book is devoted to an attack on the 'evangelical atheism' of Richard Dawkins, who comes out of Atran's work considerably worse than anyone from the Taleban. Why?

‘Because he should know better! It’s like Spencer Tracey in *Judgment at Nuremberg* and he’s saying to Burt Lancaster, who’s this judge, and he condemns him by saying, ‘You were in a sense the worst of all. You knew better’.’

I agree to some extent with this and that it is pointless always to be arguing whether God exists in a world of universal belief. But isn’t Dawkinsism driving Atran crazy out of all proportion to its influence? The professor, after all, doesn’t set counter-terror strategy.

‘I don’t see how we can manage a world in which science has something to say and to do by simply wishing away the things that we don’t like. We have got to deal with unreason and the role of religion in the world. Take the kids in Morocco that I met. Their heroes are footballers, bin Laden and Obama. They’re thinking about the future, they’re thinking about the world, about who they want to be, and it can go any way. How are you going to persuade them?’

Talking to the Enemy by Scott Atran is published by Penguin at £25. To buy it for £22.50 inc p&p call 0845 2712134, or visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop