

Fintan O'Toole: Killing is easy, living decently in the face of it is hard

Manchester attack shows if you want to force horror into people's minds, it is better to attack children

© Tue, May 23, 2017, 14:53

Updated: Tue, May 23, 2017, 15:04

Fintan O'Toole

[Follow @IrishTimesNews](#)

Follow [@@fotoole](#)

 Video

 Images



Twenty-two people have been killed and more than 50 have been injured in a terror attack at Manchester Arena. The explosions happened at 10.30pm on Monday night, after a concert by the US singer Ariana Grande. Video: Reuters



Mass murder is easy and the more outrageous it is the easier it gets. Flesh is soft and easily shredded. Lives are fragile and easily shattered. Decency, humanity, compassion are flimsy and precarious. The barriers that separate earth from hell and civilisation from barbarism are porous and full of holes.

It is part of the way we live now to know that these barriers can be crossed at any instant, that we can go from ordinary happiness to endless horror in a flash.

And to know that other human beings can go with remarkable ease from being sons, brothers, workmates, friendly neighbours to being the implacably cruel creatures who will push us into the abyss and exult in the depth of the suffering they have wrought.

We keep that knowledge at bay because we must. Just to live, to get on with things, to preserve the ordinary bonds of trust and decency that hold societies together, we have to relegate it to the margins of our consciousness. But it will not stay there. The point of an atrocity like that in Manchester is precisely to bring it to the front of our minds, and to lodge it there so firmly that trust and decency are crowded out and society breaks apart.

Warped view point

There is not much point in calling these terrorists cowards. From the warped point of view of the terrorist, courage consists precisely in being willing to do the worst. If you want to force horror and hatred into people's minds, it is much better to attack children than to take on soldiers, much braver to venture across all moral boundaries than to stay within any codes of honour. Taboos, for the terrorist, exist in order to be broken. The unacceptable is the most desirable, the unthinkable the most inspiring, the unspeakable the most eloquent form of articulation.

ADVERTISEMENT

We in Ireland know this demented logic all too well. We know that the people who commit heinous acts, who put bombs at concerts or in pubs or at memorial services, are not – alas – monsters. They are just true believers. They believe that there is a future place, a state of political grace, in which everyone will be happy and justice will reign. And they know that others, the soft, impure ones, are preventing the arrival of this state of grace because they cannot see the truth.

They are not enlightened. They are fools who think that the present – the imperfect present with its compromises and complacencies and ordinary pleasures – is tolerable. And this makes the unenlightened contemptible.

It is but a small step from contempt to killing, from thinking others beneath you because they lack your zeal to thinking that they deserve to be sacrificed for the cause.

The almost unbearable truth is that so long as there are people among us who are sufficiently convinced that this way of thinking is not just acceptable but righteous and superior, atrocities will be part of our reality. We need our states to be vigilant and smart and efficient. We need policing and intelligence services that understand the communities and cultures in which the deathly mentality arises.

Discourse

We need political and religious discourse that, while conceding nothing to this viciousness, refuses to demonise or alienate those communities. We need governments that are not goaded by atrocity into abandoning democracy, human rights and the values of an open society. But we also know that even if we have all these things, the killing is easy. It can be done anywhere, with any weapon, against any human target - the softer the better.

And what can we do with this knowledge? All we can do is to live with a paradox – we must remember it and forget it.

We must mourn the dead, “name their several names”, feel as much as we can bear of what their loved ones are feeling. We must do this because it is what keeps civilisation alive.

It is what keeps us from barbarism – this mourning, this infinite sorrow, this grief that every one of these lives was unique and miraculous and is gone. The bells that toll for them toll for all of us – and if we cease to hear them, if we are so hardened and inured that the dead become just numbers, we are lost.

But we also have to retain a capacity to forget. We cannot allow our minds to be inhabited, as the killers wish them to be, by the nihilism of horror and despair. We cannot let the wave of revulsion and anger drown out the ordinary things of life.

There is always a question of shame – how can we go on laughing and eating and loving and dancing and listening to silly songs when there is such dread around us and such evil among us? But we can’t afford to be ashamed of the ordinary because that is precisely what the killers want of us. They have no shame but they want us to be ashamed of our daily decadence and our trivial, mundane lives.

Their courage lies in shattering the boundaries of the ordinary, breaking through those limits of common humanity and humdrum affability that hold our societies together. Our courage lies in shoring up those same boundaries and living our lives within them. Ours is greater than theirs – killing is easy, living decently in the face of it is hard.

READ MORE

- “ Owen Jones: Manchester is suffering now – but its spirit will overcome this atrocity
- 🕒 The Keepers shows the struggle between good and evil in the church
- » UK election: Theresa May seeks ‘hard’ Brexit mandate
- » Sea dog – An Irishman’s Diary on John Marra, a Corkman on James Cook’s voyage of 1772-1775
- » Fine Gael leadership contest



MORE FROM THE IRISH TIMES

Opinion
Colly Toynbee: A second Brexit referendum would be a disaster

Opinion
Vladimir Rachman: The democratic case for stopping Brexit

Opinion
Níallán Ó Toole: The homeless are trapped in a hellish circle

Opinion
Garry Hynes: Human condition is based on people and place

SPONSORED

The Dublin story at the heart of Powers Whiskey
Boora Fairy Festival fundraiser for Barretstown

ADVERTISEMENT

Your Comments

[Sign In](#)

We reserve the right to remove any content at any time from this Community, including without limitation if it violates the Community Standards. We ask that you report content that you in good faith believe violates the above rules by clicking the Flag link next to the offending comment or by filling out this form. New comments are only accepted for 3 days from the date of publication.

92 Comments

powered by:  viafoura

Commenting is now closed for this story.

Newest

Druid Rank 77

Fintan you skirt the issue -

There are communities now among us who are indoctrinated with the idea of the superiority of their religion and who view us as infidels.

They live here but have no intention whatsoever of "assimilating".

They state clearly that they will "integrate" but not "assimilate".

And those are the moderates!

What on earth is the advantage to Ireland and its people of this influx?

1 month ago 12 Likes

[Like](#) [Share](#)

Show 10 older replies

Druid Rank 77

@Vauvenargues ...a smart-aleck deflection...like your life perhaps?...can't face the matter head on...

1 month ago 2 Likes

[Like](#) [Share](#)

tomnewnewman.org Rank 32

@Govinfos u. Moderates-Critical mass-Terror

1 month ago 0 Likes

[Like](#) [Share](#)

DonOBrien Rank 0

Well said. Nothing more to be said.

1 month ago 2 Likes

[Like](#) [Share](#)

ElisonJohnes Rank 414

Spot on. Well said.

Scorpio Rank 0

@ElisonJohnes How do you people sleep at night when your hearts are so full of hatred?

1 month ago 1 Like

Like Share

ElisonJohnes Rank 414

@Scorpio

What in the name of god are you talking about??

The article is about living decently and respecting civilisation and the rule of law, despite extremists carrying out their appalling acts of terrorism. It's about not allowing them to change us.

Who exactly are the "you people" you speak of? I'm a Dub born and bred...My heart holds no hatred.

1 month ago 4 Likes

Like Share

EndaOBrien Rank 9015

For times like this when "words can't express" what we're feeling or thinking, these words by Fintan do a pretty good job.

1 month ago 2 Likes

Like Share

Dermotb3 Rank 136310

Nicely put Fintan. We cannot be afraid to live our lives decently in the face of whatever is thrown at us. But we must also learn how to combat it intelligently without sacrificing what our multi-cultural society has gained.

1 month ago 1 Like

Like Share

Govinfos Rank 0

"We need governments that are not goaded by atrocity into abandoning democracy"

Except of course they already have.....many times over and continue to abandon democracy every time they indiscriminately bomb and strafe civilian populations in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. And then they pretend not to see any connection between what they do and what their own home-grown terrorists do.

1 month ago 5 Likes

Like Share

Show 21 older replies

DIG Rank 1623

@Govinfos: It was 16 years ago, do keep up. And the modus operandi of Islamic extremists hasn't changed much since then, i.e. murdering anyone who disagrees with their antediluvian ideology, especially civilians.

I've provided some academic backup for what I'm suggesting, please feel free to quote from more contemporary studies if they support your stance. In contrast, vauvenargues and your own contributions thus far have been entirely opinion-based.

The evidence thus far suggests that many... » more

1 month ago 2 Likes

Like Share

georgemcully Rank 10

@Govinfos Salman Abedi, as they say, ticked all the boxes. 22, intelligent, son of Libyan refugees, a stalwart of Didsbury mosque including the call to prayer with his father, travelled to Libya and Syria recently, his father is encamped back there. Security forces believe that his friend was killed in a drone strike.

This man was obviously a sleeper waiting to act and others could be involved in this attack. There are 3000 people like this man registered with the authorities. It takes 20... » more

1 month ago 3 Likes

Like Share

Guillaume Rank 0

Evil has no boundary. We try to keep it in that dark place but we are human and it seeps out through the sewer to destroy life.

The children of Manchester is but another example of our failure to confront the worst of mankind thereby travelling the long road to more horror. The victims deserved love and life... We gave them hate and evil.

1 month ago 0 Likes

Like Share

NiDoinin Rank 0

What a bunch of platitudes. The more Muslims you take in the more likely it is that this kind of atrocity will happen. Solution is to stop Muslim immigration and deport any Islamists espousing violence. This will actually take the heat off Muslims living here as they won't have the pressures of having to deal with radicals in their midst and will give them a chance to assimilate properly

1 month ago 11 Likes

Like Share

lindas Rank 23711

@NiDoinin truth be told there is a lot to that. Unfortunately. The greater the numbers....

1 month ago 3 Likes

Like Share

georgemcnulty Rank 10

This insidious Islamic religious indoctrination which teaches young people that martyrdom guarantees them an instant journey to heaven must be exposed and banned for what it is, a licence to create carnage amongst innocent men, women and today, children.

Western democracies will have to take steps to monitor the secretive, seditious Sharia teachings which are a part of this religion's toxic influence on young minds.

Whilst Fintan makes good sense, he fails to mention that over the past few... » more

1 month ago 7 Likes

Like Share

Show 1 older reply

BobbyL Rank 18484

@georgemcnulty We won't get a decent solution unless we make the connections between what the West has been doing and continues to do in the Middle East. Huge arms sales to vicious regimes by the US, UK and France. Illegal invasions on spurious pretences that killed millions of innocent people - remember 'Shock and Awe' and the pounding of Iraq? Unsurprising that some people are filled with hatred when faced with that scale of atrocity. Or that others just want to flee. Most people in such... » more

1 month ago 2 Likes

Like Share

georgemcnulty Rank 10

@BobbyL Are you trying to justify this attack on innocent children?.

1 month ago 6 Likes

Like Share

Mark Rank 2068

Profile
Identify
Monitor
Neuralise

1 month ago 3 Likes

Like Share

BrianOGrady Rank 0

@Mark How is that check list any different from the steps taken by the bomber in Manchester last night.

1 month ago 3 Likes

Like Share

Mark Rank 2068

@BrianOGrady It's probably not any different. What's your point?

1 month ago 3 Likes

Like Share

Show More

