

Talking to the Enemy – Violent Extremism, Sacred Values and What it Means to be Human by Scott Atran.
Allen Lane 2011.

The issue of Islamic religious extremism is all too often considered in political, military or sociological terms and it is refreshing and enlightening to read the results when a respected anthropologist courageously engages with the subject.

Scott Atran, a director of research in anthropology at the National Centre for Scientific Research in Paris, looks not just at the issues that have given rise to Islamist terrorism in all its horror and brutality but also at the lives of individuals who have embraced terrorism and the networks, familial and other, that have sustained them and encouraged them. From this research he draws conclusions that are challenging and deeply thought provoking. Atran has interviewed terrorists, their families and supporters across the Islamic world, sometimes at great personal risk, and he emerges from this book as a writer and thinker worthy of real respect.

Talking to the Enemy is divided into seven parts: The Cause, The Religious Rise of Civilizations, Whither Al Qaeda? Bali and Madrid, The Wild East, War Parties – Groups, God and Glory, “The Mother of All Problems” – Palestine, the World’s Symbolic Knot, and The Divine Dream and the Collapse of Cultures.

The most powerful thesis in the book, stated right at the start, is that the author’s research has demonstrated to him that terrorists, especially suicide bombers, are not motivated by the cause for which they ostensibly die, but rather by those closest to them, their kin or those who most directly share their religious *weltanschauung*. To fight and die for a cause may be deemed the most glorious of ways for human self-sacrifice, but Atran attests, quintessentially in chapter 17 – All in the Family: Imagined Kin, Friendship and Teamwork - that it is rather to die for those they love and whose beliefs they share that is most terrorists’ primary motivation.

The sixth part, on Palestine, is also a key section that will only serve to add to the despair many feel when contemplating the Israel-Palestine death dance.

In the final part Atran looks at the ways in which liberal societies unwittingly play into the perceptions and misconceptions of those who are inimically opposed to them, and although his purpose throughout is to provide information that might help to build bridges across the divide the conclusion that many will draw from this excellent book is that what separates the jihadists from the liberals is a yawning chasm that is unlikely to be spanned in our lifetime, if ever.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh