

After the Copenhagen tragedy

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Again there has been a sad terrorist attack in Europe. This time, on 14 and 15 February, it was a Jewish synagogue and a cultural centre in Denmark's capital Copenhagen that were targeted. The perpetrator and two innocent victims were killed, and five police officers were injured. Yet, the political and media reaction was far above what was reasonable. That was also the case after the attack on the left-wing satirical magazine "Charlie Hebdo" in Paris, France, on 7 January 2015. Yes, such attacks are very bad, but they are made worse by the reaction. Besides, there are attacks in other countries, too, that go almost unnoticed by the international media. That also includes the terrible attack in Lahore this week.

"Today, I am not Danish", says Professor Jan Øberg, the Danish leader of the Transnational Foundation for Peace and Reconciliation (TFF), located in Lund in southern Sweden, just across the bridge from Denmark that tie the two lands together. Øberg has since the 1980s been a member of the Danish government's disarmament and security committee, and he has worked for the United Nations in war and conflict zones such as Somalia, Burundi, the Yugoslavian areas, Iran, Iraq, and elsewhere. He believes in the Danish solidarity philosophy, the fight for equality for all, Grundtvig's education thinking, and the Danes' empathy with the Jews during WWII – and always, he believes in the importance of working for disarmament and peace.

"Today, Denmark is not only a victim. It has also created victims", Øberg says. "It has committed crimes against the international law and has taken part in genocide against the Iraqi and other peoples. It has, initiated by Fogh Rasmussen (the former Danish PM and NATO Secretary-General), taken part in cultural wars against, not for, other peoples, and we were part of the occupying forces in four dark years in Iraq", Øberg writes on TFF's online newsletter for 17 February 2015.

Because of this and more, including his country's official xenophobic tendencies, Øberg says that he cannot feel Danish today. He is saddened by the government's stance and action, and the PM's demagogic speeches. Øberg himself believes in creating peace through peaceful means – not through force as part of an aggressive and unequal land. "This is the limit for me", says Øberg in TFF's newsletter. And he adds that it is with heavy heart that he feels it his duty to say this.

Does Professor Jan Øberg go too far in his soul-searching reaction? Yes, probably. After all, Denmark is one of the most open and democratic countries in the world. But it is not perfect, and it is perhaps regressing, not progressing, in some fields. In many ways, Øberg expresses a communal guilt. He also seems to feel that the official reaction should have been admitting wrongs in Denmark's recent history, not only blaming the perpetrator – a lone wolf, but probably also with other extremist sympathizers.

As I understand it, Øberg main message is that he wants us to re-consider what we do to people from other culture and religions, in our own countries through national policies of integration and inclusion of people from other countries, cultures and religions from near and far, and inclusion of the poor and others who fall outside mainstream society. True, in Denmark, everyone receives government allowances if they are jobless or in need for other reasons. But there is often lack of empathy and right-wing groups grow less tolerant to outsiders. Foreign policies, including military actions through NATO

and more, are more aggressive than before. That is not only Denmark's problem; it also includes the rest of Europe and America. Well, as for inclusion of immigrants, maybe America is a notch better than Europe. Øberg wants us to re-consider our policies about integration and inclusion of foreigners and people from far away in Denmark, France, and elsewhere.

I believe Øberg has an important message to us all, indeed to people in Europe. It is a brave action to take up these issues publicly, not just debate them in scientific papers and learned debates at universities. He will be criticized hard by the establishment, and today, that means more than three-quarters of the people in his land. Luckily, though, it being Denmark, the establishment, too, will defend Øberg's freedom of speech. Almost everyone will say they agree with his basic premise of human rights for all – at home and abroad.

Yet, what is it that happens when terrorist attacks happen in the West, from 9/11 to the recent events in Paris and Copenhagen? We exaggerate the attacks, and we define them as terrorist attacks before having analyzed them carefully. Maybe be they should rather be labeled as common criminal acts, and criminologists and other social scientists should help us to find causes and reasons, not to reduce the pain of the tragedies, but to find what can be done to avoid such tragedies in future.

We can draw lessons from Jesus' words in Matthew 7:3: "You see the speck in your brother's eye, but not the plank in your own." Few of us are able to turn the mirror towards ourselves and ask the most soul-searching questions. Øberg has done that to himself and he advises us all to do it. He considers it as the road to go to achieve greater harmony amongst peoples and cultures in our world.

In many ways, we are acting against better judgment after criminal or terrorist attacks – indeed in closed, autocratic and undemocratic societies and cultures, but also in the enlightened, liberal and democratic societies, such as Denmark. We know we may be wrong, we know we may have some faults, but we don't want to see it. We don't want to know because it will shatter the image we Westerners have created of ourselves as the custodians of all good intentions and values. We want to do what is right and good, but it is often on our own premises, and our knowledge about 'the others' is often limited.

At this time of reckoning, we must engage in a public, educational debate about immigration and inclusion. In the West, we must realize that we are not always right. When things go wrong, we must not blame it all on the perpetrators and call them terrorists, either they are local or foreign. It usually only makes things worse, and somehow gives the authorities unlimited power to react.

It is urgent that we hold such a debate. We should have begun it many years ago. Let 'war against terrorism' not become a term like the 'cold war'. We ought to be more sober than that, and we must fight those forces who want us to split the world in 'we and the others'. Everyone will gain from a positive and open educational debate. The Danes are good people – but so are the immigrants and the poor, even those who sometimes fall outside the good society. Everyone wants to do what is good and right for themselves and others. That we must never doubt.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid