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Beheading bedevils us

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va. I don't get many opportunities to think about beheadings here in Blue Grass unless we're talking about chickens, which I'm not.

I have no first-hand experience with beheading, either as giver or receiver. (*N.B:* I did not say first-hand experience, which shows that I'm maturing as a semi-comedic writer.)

I'm as angered and appalled at ISIS's beheadings of captured western aid workers and journalists as anyone. None of the four recent victims -- David Haines, Alan Henning, James Foley and Steven Sotloff -- were, it appears, either combatants or carrying out undercover intelligence missions. Another American, Abdul-Rahman (Peter) Kassig from Indiana who was aiding Syrian refugees, is now facing the same fate.

ISIS says that it is executing these westerners to stop the American-led alliance from continued air attacks on its people and its jihadist soldiers in Syria and Iraq. I think they're doing it to provoke more attacks.

Beheading has been a human practice for a long time.

In the Hebrew Bible, Abraham is told by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to demonstrate his fear of God. Abraham is about to decapitate Isaac and then burn him when an angel tells him to stop...in the nick of time. A ram magically appears with its horns stuck in a thicket and is offered up in Isaac's place.

The Quran also recounts this story with Abraham who is renamed Ibrahim, with Isaac as Ishmael.

After 40 days of challenging King Saul's men of Israel to a one-on-one fight to determine which people would be enslaved, the diminutive shepherd David takes on Goliath, the 9-foot-9-inch Philistine soldier. David is told that if he kills Goliath -- saving

Saul's bargain so to speak the King would make his father's house free in Israel and be given great riches along with his daughter.

David's sling was a familiar military weapon 3,000 years ago. It was light, accurate and deadly. David probably used a smooth, round stone that would have ranged in size from a golf ball to a tennis ball. A slinger could hurl a stone as far as a quarter of a mile, depending on its size.

With Goliath dead on the ground, David cuts off his head and later presents it to Saul in Jerusalem.

And then there's Judith, a comely widow who asks God to help her defeat the Assyrians by the deceit of her lips. She charms her way into the tent of the Assyrian commander, Holofernes, who has filled himself with wine leaving him dead drunk. She grabs his scimitar and, striking him twice, takes away his head from him.

In the New Testament, Salome beguiles the drunken King Herod after he promises her anything up to half his kingdom for a striptease. Following her mother's instruction, Salome demands the head of Herod's prisoner, John the Baptist, who has scolded the King for divorcing his wife and taking up with Salome's mother, his brother's wife. For speaking truth to power, John is decapitated, and Herod has his head delivered to him on a silver platter. Herod also beheads John's brother, James.

Two apostles, Paul and Matthias, suffered this fate.

Thirty-eight Catholic saints have been beheaded, from the Spaniard, Saint Acisclus, to the popularly acclaimed Welsh Saint Winifred who was decapitated by her suitor, Caradoc, after she announced that she wanted to become a nun.

Decapitation has been widely used by many regimes and religions for thousands of years.

On the orders of Marc Antony, the philosopher-orator Cicero, with whom I battled unsuccessfully in high school Latin, was

beheaded for his Republican opposition to the Empire of the Second Triumvirate in 43 B.C. He is said to have told his two assassins: There is nothing proper about what you are doing, soldier, but do try to kill me properly. With that, Cicero stuck his neck out to give them a clean shot.

Antony had Cicero's head nailed to the Senate's podium in the Roman Forum just to let folks know what was what. There, his wife, Fulvia, according to one source, spat on Cicero's head, pulled out his tongue and repeatedly stabbed it with her gold hairpin. She was getting back at Cicero for his nasty comments about her and her husband.

In 1191, Richard the Lionheart of England had 2,700 Muslim prisoners beheaded after the Battle of Acre in what is known as the Massacre of Ayyadieh. Saladin responded in kind to his Crusader prisoners and refused to turn over the True Cross, which, it is said, he shipped to Damascus.

English kings ordered the beheading of more than 160 notable political opponents and rebels between 1076 and 1697. Included were two of Henry VIII's six wives (Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard), Sir Thomas More, Mary Queen of Scots, Sir Walter Raleigh and Thomas Cromwell.

The last axe decapitation in Great Britain occurred in 1817 when Jeremiah Brandreth, an unemployed stocking maker and Luddite, was executed -- first by hanging -- after he failed to overthrow the government and end poverty forever.

Wingina, a Secotan (Roanoke) Indian chief, was beheaded by the first English settlers in America in 1586. The U.S. Navy named a tugboat after him in 1944.

Austrian composer Joseph Haydn was buried in 1809 and lost his head to two phrenologists who wanted to examine his skull for clues to his genius. Haydn's head was reunited with his body in 1954. It rests next to a substitute skull that was added after the original was pinched.

The guillotine claimed as many as 40,000 heads during the

French Revolution, including those of King Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, Charlotte Corday, chemist Antoine Lavoisier and Robespierre. France used it last in 1977.

Hundreds of Americans, Dutch, British and Australian POWs were beheaded by sword-wielding Japanese soldiers during WWII.

Nazis beheaded some of their special political enemies. Among the victims were six members of the White Rose resistance including student Sophie Scholl, a Lutheran, who circulated anti-war pamphlets at the University of Munich in 1943.

Islam has a 1,500-year history of beheading enemies and nonbelievers.

Two sections of the Quran are cited to support the decapitation of soldiers, prisoners, hostages and non-Muslims.

Sura 47 contains the verse: When you encounter the unbelievers on the battlefield, strike off their heads until you have crushed them, then bind the prisoners tightly. *Sura 8:12* reads: I will cast dread into the hearts of the unbelievers. Strike off their heads and strike off all of their fingertips.

In 627 A.D., the Prophet Muhammad ordered the decapitation of 700 to 900 Jewish prisoners of the Banu Qurayza tribe in Medina for opposing his military plans.

In one year, 2003, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia beheaded more than 50 people, both Muslim and non-Muslim. During the last 20 years, the Saudis, who are now fighting ISIS, decapitated at least 1,100 for crimes such as witchcraft, apostasy and drug running.

The four ISIS beheadings have an Islamic foundation while also being based in history and modern psychology.

ISIS is videotaping beheadings for propaganda, not military purposes. Publicly decapitating four non-combatants does nothing to gain ISIS more territory or resources.

Americans in America -- and almost everywhere else -- are not at risk.

But we *are* at risk of being suckered into another war-occupation in the Middle East, which, this time, is overtly about religion.

Senators McCain and Graham now argue that we should depose Syria's President Bashar al-Assad militarily by embedding U.S. advisers with our foreign partners as they head into combat and deploying U.S. forces on the ground in Syria to direct airstrikes. (John McCain and Lindsey Graham, To Defeat Islamic State, Remove Assad, Wall Street Journal, October 7, 2014.)

While advisers and spotters on the ground will be more effective than the alternatives, they are not enough to defeat either Assad or ISIS, which both Senators understand but won't say.

A small number of American boots in Syria now is the required down payment for big American troop investments later as ground soldiers are needed to prevent defeat and finish the job.

The Senators do not state how much they are willing to pay in American lives, injuries, time, taxes, dollars and opportunity costs to remove Assad, exterminate ISIS and occupy Syria indefinitely to keep it stabilized. We have no national interest that would justify these spendings. I find McCain and Graham to be profoundly dishonest.

It's hard to find historical evidence to support the idea that military campaigns, repression and occupations ever eliminate religious beliefs. If they did, we would have neither Christians nor Jews with us today. Massive bombing did not break the will of either the armies or the civilian populations in WWII Japan and Germany, or in North Vietnam.

A smart bomb falling on an ISIS soldier in Syria is not likely to persuade others like him to abandon their harsh version of Islam. It *is* likely to make them hate us even more.

Better ideas persuade people to give up or modify less good ideas.

Much evidence shows that better ideas rise...eventually and supplant lousy ideas...eventually. This process trickles up from within a group.

When better ideas are imposed by an outside power, they usually generate resistance, rebellions, instability and independence struggles.

Within religions, better ideas seem to rise over time, long periods of time.

Reasonable Roman Catholicism replaced the nine Crusades and the Inquisition.

Reasonable Protestantism replaced the repressiveness of the Puritans and the genocide-justifying beliefs of John Calvin. (See Calvins Commentary on Joshua 6:2, in which he argued that Joshua's ...indiscriminate and promiscuous slaughter [of those in Jericho], making no distinction of age or sex, but including alike women and children, the aged and decrepit, might seem an inhuman massacre, had it not been executed by the command of God.

Reasonable Judaism replaced the Hebrew Bible's acceptance of stoning as punishment, slavery and its instruction to the Israelites to ...put all...males [from a defeated city] to the sword.. , and ...in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall utterly destroy them.... (*Deuteronomy 20: 10, 16-18.*)

In light of the powerful modernizing influences of technology, commerce and information, can't we expect that reasonable Islam will eventually marginalize and replace ISIS's despicable version?

But if we bring war to accomplish that end, we will radicalize the moderates and fence-sitters.

From North Africa to Pakistan, more than a dozen repressive Islamic states and many groups have wished us harm in various degrees since 1945.

Some of this hostility is based on 1,500 years of periodic conflict and differences in religion. Another part is based on the mutual hostilities of oil economics, which makes consumers begrudgingly

dependent on suppliers they don't like and suppliers begrudgingly dependent on consumers they don't like.

America has never done well, or much good for that matter, when we've intervened to change regimes in this region or stamp out those of its ideologies we find dangerous.

Bombs, bullets and American boots on this unstable ground don't have a good track record of making reasonable Islam the popular choice.

We seem to be more effective in reaching that objective through the engagement of our media, commerce, technology, culture, fashion, education, finance and investments.

I think we need to accept the fact that the beheader wing of Sunni Islam will always find some support for a program of death to nonbelievers. All other major religions have had similar adherents at one time or another.

The instinct to genocide in human beings shows up in all races, religions, ethnic groups and nationalities. The task is to confine it to a small minority.

This leads me to a final point: As repulsive and repugnant as beheading is, it is simply a perverse public-relations tactic whose purpose is to recruit funds and persons to the ISIS cause, frighten its enemies and provoke the West into a war not of our choosing.

One way to lower our vulnerability to such taunts is to prohibit western aid helpers and journalists from working in exposed areas.

ISIS wants us to put our boots on their ground, because that is where they can drain our resources and weaken our example.

To the extent that they get us to victimize them with our military strength, occupy their lands and make them martyrs to their rancid ideology, they win the war for the hearts and minds of their fellow Sunnis. We will lose a piece of that war every time we win a battle.

ISIS understands that beheadings push our buttons. So they bait us with these outrages.

The beheadings of four individuals who knowingly accepted that possibility is not a reason to make war against ISIS in Syria or Iraq and accept the enormous costs and implications of that act.

Big fish should be smart enough to not swallow a baited hook.

