

11/06/2003

The problem is of extremes

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THE close association of the Prophet Muhammad with Jews and Christians, and later Muslims with the many nationalities encountered in the course of their conquests (and defeats), provided lessons and inspiration for many of the modern features of the Islamic world.

But rapid and ongoing modernisation and globalisation have provoked the ultra-conservative Islamic theologians and those who consider themselves heirs to the Syariah mode. They cannot cope with or control the swirling forces of change and are therefore threatened into chastising any form of liberalisation as un-Islamic or atheist, or worse.

The wrong images of Islam - as virulent, fanatic, terrorist, jihad, etc - and other assumptions impede understanding. Now let me restate: Islam is neither an exclusively Arab phenomenon nor a monolithic unity. It should be, but isn't like Christianity.

Though Islamic tenets interact with modern governance and in other varied ways, they by no means always play the leading role. Islam, unlike Roman Catholicism, has no centralised religious hierarchy to assert worldwide spiritual, much less political, leadership. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini's Shia interpretation of Islam is dominant, while here it is the sunnah wal-jemaah (Sunni).

However, all Muslims are fundamentalists, as are Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and anyone else of any creed. Every believer who steps into a place of worship, who kneels or clasps his hands in prayer, or makes any sincere gesture to a pervasive Almighty is a fundamentalist.

Fundamentalism lies at the heart of religion and constitutes the pillars of belief that go on to influence and affect everything else - morality, behaviour, attitudes, society, laws, customs. Religion has imbued politics and even the most supposedly secular democratic governments for years.

Take the Christian Democratic movement in Europe, for example, or the Bharatiya Janata party in India or Umno in Malaysia or the Christian Right in the United States, whose born-again champion George W. Bush is now president. America's founding spirit - "In God we trust" - is inherently fundamentalist, notwithstanding the constitutional separation of church and state.

Yet fundamentalism when applied to Islam takes a different, distorted meaning. It is seen as irreconcilably opposed to secularism and its manifestations comparable to the excesses of holy war. It has been magnified and generalised by the fanaticism of a few, much more so than other religions.

Very little is inferred from Judaism in the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands by orthodox Jews, or of Christianity in the burning of abortion clinics by American pro-life zealots, or of Hinduism in the massacre of Muslims by militants linked to the Shiv Sena. There are as many dots to connect the ummah of Islam to al-Qaeda as there are between the Vatican and Eric Rudolph, the alleged fundamentalist bomber of the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympics and an abortion clinic in the state of Alabama.

A Washington Post report on Rudolph's arrest last month quoted a sociologist as saying that if Christians take umbrage at the juxtaposition of the words "Christian" and "terrorist", "that may give them some idea of how Muslims feel" when hearing the term "Islamic terrorism". It elicited a minor roar of protest from Christian groups.

However, too few Muslims, engrossed in their own local worries (or

perhaps even gloating in the depiction out of frustration and powerlessness), have bothered to make the same hue and cry.

The association between fundamentalism and extremism in Islam has gone so far without riposte that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad won applause in Tokyo recently when he asserted that he belonged to the former, but certainly not the latter.

The leap from basic belief to an urge to kill and destroy is a huge one, in Islam as much as in other religions.

It is no wonder that he found a receptive audience in Japan, whose pacifist traditions in Shintoism and Buddhism were no deterrent to militarism. In his column "Dr Mahathir's World Analysis", in the Mainichi Daily News of Nov 1, 1999, he drew a clear line between Islam and the cruel politics to which its adherents have been subjected.

"There is a general feeling worldwide that Muslims tend to be extreme and violent. They do not seem able to govern their countries well. They seem inclined toward terrorism. This is only partly true. Mostly it is due to media hype (who monopolises the international media?). When acts of terror involve Muslims, the terrorists are always described as "Muslim terrorists".

"Yet, there are Christian, Hindu and even Buddhist acts of terror but the terrorists are never linked to their religions. They are never referred to as Christian terrorists or Hindu terrorists or Buddhist terrorists. Yet their terrorism is no less unthinking and violent than that of the Muslims.

"As a result of the media invariably referring to Muslim terrorists, most people have come to associate Islam and Muslims with terrorism. Even responsible government leaders talk of Muslim terrorists, and they immediately point a finger towards them if any terrorist acts occur, as in the case of the bombing of a government building in America that actually involved Christians.

"In fact, Muslims are the real victims of organised terror. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Chechnya, Palestine, Iraq, Iran and Libya, Muslims have been massacred, and bombed by anti-Muslim groups and democratic governments even."

Islamic fundamentalism does not by definition undermine democracy or politics. Its critics, however, contend that Islam's failure to divorce the institutions of faith from those of government has been inimical to both. But it has also been argued that the separation of church and state was itself a product of religious exigency.

Christian history from the time of Jesus Christ is littered with persecution and sectarian conflict. The actual development of the distinction between earthly and divine authority took centuries of strife, after which the church wanted to be freed of state intervention and control, and the state wanted to preempt the clergy from the coercive powers of government.

Nothing like that took place in the domains of Islam (look at Iran and, briefly, Taliban Afghanistan, where the two spheres were repressively combined).

According to historian Bernard Lewis, "The reasons why Muslims developed no secularist movement of their own, and reacted sharply against attempts to introduce one from abroad, will thus be clear from the contrasts between Christian and Muslim history and experience. From the beginning, Christians were taught both by precept and practice to distinguish between God and Caesar and between duties owed to each of the two. Muslims received no such instruction."

And for a long time they never needed to. I remember when Muslims were simply Muslims, who vowed their devotion to a single God, Allah, and

Muhammad the last messenger and Prophet, who prayed five times a day, went for the Haj, fasted in Ramadan, paid the zakat (tithe), abstained from pork and alcohol and who were secure enough in the verities of their faith that they were unwilling to make demands on others.

The majority of Muslims still feel that way, although the onset of modernisation and globalisation has sent many of us back into a search for meaning and relevance.

That is as it should be. Jihad is above all a holy war of conscience, a quest for self-perfection and a battle against the infidel within. Where fundamentalism can become a danger to both democracy and politics is when it escapes the realm of personal piety and translates into intolerance (such as holding hands in, of all places, Ipoh; if it were in Kota Baru or Kuala Terengganu, I would not have been so stupefied), oppression and violence. No individual, nation or religion is immune from this, and all must beware of the temptation of converting God's will to narrow political ends.

The continuing polemic between the extremists and the modernists is over interpretation and adaptation, not changing the edict, of course. Whether Muslims like it or not, compromise is the prerequisite of survival, in the present as in the past.

Perhaps, I should reiterate that Islam is now experiencing a renaissance of sorts, simply because of our contact with the West and our greater understanding of the religion.

Modern Islamic scholars and thinkers should continue, like Dr Mahathir, to critically scrutinise every aspect of modern existence, which Muslims are facing even in the teeth of ferocious ultra-orthodox opposition. Otherwise, Muslims will remain weak, bullied and humiliated.

They must either change or forever remain under the influence of a self-righteous, unctuous and canting clique of ustaz, ustazah and religious mandarins.