Religion and Violence
Culture of Death & Death of Culture

◯ **Ramin Jahanbegloo**

Religious violence is a very slippery topic; it tends to be even more problematic than religion itself. Religion is a mixed blessing; it can promote a sense of community and provide valid service to its members. But one should not be blind to its vices and harmful effects. Historically, religious ideas have been used to justify both war and peace, both violence and reconciliation. We can observe it in Islam, in Christianity, in Hinduism, in Judaism, in practically all religions. What remains open to question is whether religion makes anybody good or non-violent who would otherwise be malicious and violent. This is the big question. And this reminds me of what Mary McCarthy used to say, "Religion is only good for good people." When cloaked in religion people can display great tolerance and generosity, but sometimes it reduces them to the lowest forms of cruelty.

That is why the relationship of religious belief to social and political action is profoundly obscure. It cannot be predicted with certainty which religious belief will lead to violence and which to mercy in a particular situation, in a particular mind, in a particular civilization or culture. What we may need to understand is how to recognize the nature of belief as belief, and not as a directive that requires a specific form of action under all circumstances.

> **Moderate voices within the Muslim community, who insist that Islam should have nothing to do with hatred and that Islam should have nothing to do with terrorism, find themselves politically marginalized**

I am not a religious person. I am more of a person who believes in the idea of spirituality, and in the force of non-violence. I do not practice any religion; I think that belief should stay as a belief and not as a directive. The big challenge of our times is: How do we apply critical judgement to our beliefs instead of transforming them unthinkingly in compliance with an idolater's ritual implementations? We need to develop the power to distinguish, in one's own culture, in one's own religious psychology, between what we can call a belief that is pluralistic, a belief that integrates diversity, and a belief that destroys others through a violent act. This is the distinction that we have to make if we want to talk about religion and violence.

Any religion, if followed to the letter, literally, can be interpreted in a way that it is incompatible with a pluralistic way of life. Let us take the example of Islam. What is going on in the Middle East, especially the post 9/11 interpretations of Islam, have stirred up a sometime acrimonious debate about Islam and violence. Some commentators in the West and elsewhere, as in India, conclude that Islam is by nature a violent religion. Others, myself included, ask why Islam lost the pre-eminence that it enjoyed as a civilization for a long period – and wonder if Islam can ever recapture some of its past glory. Why did the death of earlier Islamic culture, Islamic civilization, give way to the Islamist culture of death? Why does the death of a culture give way to a culture of death?

Violence and Islam

Has Islam always been a violent religion? We certainly have examples of different forms of violence in Islam, of large-scale massacres that were committed in the name of Islam. It starts very early, actually in 627 AD, with the massacre of the entire male population of Banu-Quraiyza soon after the battle of the Trench. There are several other examples of religious violence in Islamic countries closer in time and space to us.

However, it is wrong to say that most believers in Islam believe that the terrorism and suicide bombings

> **It is not a civilizational discourse and it does not subscribe to the traditional interpretations of Islam.**

we are witnessing, are ways of carrying out their religious duty. Actually, in the opinion of many moderate Muslims, who live around the world, extremists and fundamentalists are people who distort true religious beliefs and are the ones who cause religious violence. Yet I think that moderate voices within the Muslim community, who insist that Islam should have nothing to do with hatred and that Islam should have nothing to do with terrorism, find themselves politically marginalized in India, Pakistan, Iran, Sudan, Egypt and practically the whole Muslim world. And as a result of this those Muslims who argue for democracy and pluralism seem to be

shouted down in the public arena as people who are not Muslim enough.

This is very puzzling, because when you look at the current Islamist discourse regarding the centrality of violence to observing the faith you see that it is not a civilizational discourse and it does not subscribe to the traditional interpretations of Islam.

Most of the Islamists are far from the *sunna* and far from civilizational Islam. They are very far from this traditional interpretation of Islam, which is today supported by philosophers like Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Abu Fazal. Actually, contemporary forms of Islam that worship violence are based on a double movement and tension. First of all, those groups have an antagonistic posture toward modernity, and secondly, they practice a form of ideologization of tradition or ideologization of religion.

Islamism operates as a sort of ideological amalgam between different schools of Islam and a national culture. That's why Islam in India is different from Islam in Saudi Arabia, or in Sudan.

In radical Islamism it is activism or terrorism that provide, or rather impose, a new source of legitimacy for the Islamic idea. One could ask the question — and this is the question always asked by Islamic fundamentalists — who will decide what is licit or illicit in Islam? Who has the authority over the interpretation of religious texts? Who can give a *fatwa* or declare a *jihad*? These are all important questions, essential questions in today's world. These questions become very problematic as Islamic tradition becomes an ideology in the hands of the radical Islamists.

Civilizational Crisis

The central question addressed to Islamists in particular and the Muslims in general is to know the ways in which they can come to terms with their own experience of civilization. Islamic civilization, because it has a civilizational factor, is more of an intrinsic value and a lived practice.

Civilization is a way of life (*modus vivendi.*) It is not an ideology. Islamic terrorism represents a radical and anti-civilizational process. But by the same token its practitioners have confessed to being close to Islamic civilization. So there is a paradox here.

> **Civilization is a way of life. It is not an ideology. Islamic terrorism represents a radical and anti-civilizational process**

They say they are close to Islamic civilization, but at the same time they are participating in anti-civilizational processes. These radical actors of the Muslim world, who are destroying the troubling symbols of modern civilization like the Twin Towers in New York, are also destroying their own cultural and civilizational dynamic and vitality. The death of the civilizational factor in Islam ends up in a culture of death.

Today Muslims in India, in Pakistan, in Iran and elsewhere who have a civilizational standing, mourn for their own civilization. And this is why, for those Muslims who argue against violence in Islam, the urge to reclaim an Islamic heritage that has enriched humanity and contributed to its progress is another way of emphasizing ideas such as rationality, representative politics, pluralism and diversity. In India those who are for

> **Today Muslims in India, in Pakistan, in Iran and elsewhere who have a civilizational standing, mourn for their own civilization**

the Islamic heritage of India are most of the time against Islamist terrorism, they are against Muslim fundamentalists, they are against the violence that we see in Islam today.

The Andalusian* experience marks a remarkable period in the history of Islam and Europe. Cordoba* could work as a civilizational paradigm for us today. It accomplished at least two main objectives. First, it created a cosmopolitan forum for different scholars of different religions — Christianity, Judaism and Islam. And secondly, it contributed to the transfer of Hellenistic knowledge through medieval Europe to the West. This transfer was done mainly through Persians and Arabs. The Andalusian experience was inter-religious and inter-societal. It made room for the universal and for the particular. And it can justly be called a symbiotic and pluralistic experience.

During medieval times, the Muslim city of Cordoba in Al-Andalus was the most advanced city in the entire European continent. In philosophy, architecture, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, poetry, theology, and numerous other fields of human endeavor, medieval Islam was the world's most advanced civilization. Al-Andalus in particular, and Islamic civilization in general, served as both the repository of ancient Greek knowledge and science, and the transmission point in its journey to the Christian-dominated West. The culture of Al-Andalus is now justly celebrated for the extent that religious pluralism and tolerance were hallmarks of this most glorious age.

Search for Empathetic Islam

For all those who are in search of what we can call an empathetic Islam, religious empathy in a world full of intolerances and extremisms, the Cordoba experience appears in all its lucidity with a very surprising timeliness. But unfortunately the Cordoba experience is not the path that is taken by the radical followers of Islam today. And this is what we see.

Islam is like Janus, the god with two faces. Islam today has two faces. There is a tolerant peaceful face and there is an intolerant violent face. The two faces of Islam are as unavoidable as they are unavoidable in any other religion. We have it also in Hinduism, for example, among those who killed Mahatma Gandhi. And it is especially unavoidable in the 21st century because this is a time when huge transformations are occurring at a very unprecedented global scale.

Some Muslim philosophers and theologians feel that, if Muslims are eager to solve their problems, they should just return to the Koran and the Sunna. Many have taken this path in India, Iran and elsewhere. But this approach, even if it has many advantages,, also has many problems. Returning to the Koran and Sunna in the 21st century is not a very easy task. It does not guarantee that all radical Islamists will put an end to their violence and to their monolithic interpretation and reading of religious text.

There is an art of reading a religious text as a philosopher or as a theologian. When we talk about religious violence what we need to have in mind is that religious texts are open to multiple levels of reading but each reading inevitably provides a kind of openness to the best and the worst. You can read it anyway you like. I believe that the reading of a religious text is never strictly speaking a reading. It is testimony about a new conception of truth. It is a way of putting forward a new truth. Reading of a religious text creates something universal, which goes beyond the evident universals we have.

We can talk about a "hard reading" and a "soft reading". A fundamentalist reading is a "hard reading" of religious texts in any kind of religion, even in Christianity or Hinduism. But we also have soft readings of religion, for example, Gandhi's or Tagore's way of reading religion. Then there is the mystic way of reading religion, as we have it in Islam among the Sufis and individuals like Hallaj, Rumi and Hafiz. When you

> **Peace will come not when any one terrorist network has been neutralised, but when a dialogue of religions has emerged among believers in each religion.**

have a hard reading of religious texts such as the Koran or the Bible what you do is you oppose an unambiguous collective entity, which you can call, for example, in Islam, the *Umma* against the "other". The "other" could be a corrupt person or he could be a deviated person. You then judge this person according to this presumed unambiguous collective identity.

Hard Readings, Hard Politics

Hard readings of religious texts produce a hard doctrine of international politics. They produce what I've been calling in my debate with Richard Rorty, the American philosopher, "hard universalisms". George W. Bush, who in the name of God and Christianity sends American soldiers to kill and get killed in Iraq, practises hard universalism. You can also find it in the name of Hinduism, which gives birth to the massacre of Muslims in Gujarat. This hard reading of religious text brings you to either become a conquering missionary, as in Christianity, or a fighter for the "house of warfare (*dar al harb*)" in Islam.

Thus, there is a difference between a non-violent, non-aggressive adherent of faiths like Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism and a dogmatic vision of God. People like Gandhi, Tagore, the Dalai Lama or Thomas Merton have a non-dogmatic vision of religion. They believe that there is equality among all religions because they are all looking for God behind God, as Paul Tillich said. They are looking for a spiritual God behind the ideological God of monolithic religions. And they are not using the carrot and the stick as used by fundamentalists in different religions.

— In the long run there cannot be any definitive sorting out of good religions from bad religions. There is no such thing as a good religion or a bad religion. Peace will come not when any one terrorist network has been neutralised, as Mr. Bush thinks, but when a dialogue of religions has emerged among religious persons, among religious leaders, and among believers in each religion.

Let me end with a saying from Gandhi "We must not, like a frog in the well who imagines that the universe ends with the walls surrounding his well, think that our religion alone represents the whole truth and all the others are false." ❏

Professor Ramin Jahanbegloo is an Iranian-Canadian philosopher and presently the Rajni Kothari Chair in Democracy at the CSDS.