**The pandemic and beliefs**

BY M U H A M M A D A M I R R A N A 2020-12-27

TWO thousand twenty will be remembered as a year of fear and uncertainty. While the Covid-19 pandemic catapulted human beings into a more globalised and digital lifestyle, it also revealed that they had not been able yet to `manage` the religious, racial, politico-ideological and other sorts of hatred even during these universally testing times.

The year will also serve as a reminder that life remains vulnerable in the realm of nature, thus providing humans the reason to continue their journey of meaning, hope and survival.

During the pandemic, religion has performed its role at several levels. Though many leading religious institutions and leaders across the world have played a part in spreading the virus, including by denying its existence, this also helped in one way or another in overcoming fears and reducing anxieties about the pandemic. As with denials and conspiracy theories about the virus, similar notional responses abounded even before the Covid-19 vaccine was rolled out.

But, as most people changed their viewpoints about the virus af ter confronting the evidence, one can hope that resistance to the vaccine will also gradually wane. Maulana Tariq Jameel`s video message, released after his recovery from Covid19, is an example in which he refuted his previous statement of denying the presence of coronavirus and advised his followers to abide by all the SOPs and precautionary measures.

Understanding a religious mind has never been an easy task, and it doesn`t always demonstrate itself in a settled way. During these times of pandemic and fear, it was entertaining to read Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami, who The Guardian once called a `cult writer`. Norwegian Wood, Kafka on the Shore, 1Q84, and Colourless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrirnage were some of his novels that enhanced the pleasure of reading. But it was Murakami`s fascinating nonfiction Underground that provided better insight into the complex religious mindset.

Originally published in Japanese in 1997, it isbased on interviews with the victims of the Tokyo subway sarin gas attack of March 1995 and members of the Aum Shinrikyo (supreme truth), the cult responsible for this and a string of other attacks. The Aum activists had dropped plastic pouches filled with liquid sarin in several crowded Tokyo trains, killing 12 people and injuring thousands.

This non-fictional work deeply impacted his future writing, especially in 1Q84. A trilogy, which also unfolds the tale of two cults, it reads like a fictionalised version of Underground. However, the latter is better and helps understand why people join religious cults and how one`s personal history, feelings, ideas and identity motivates them to do so. Murakami found that many of the Aum members were well-educated professionals who did not question their master`s orders. His findings support the idea that people are more likely to sin as members of groups than as individuals.

Educated youths are found inclined towards religious institutions in many other societies, including in South and Southeast Asia. They play a major role in developing the networks and infrastructures of these institutions. From the Japanese perspective, Murakami found that the inclination towards cultism could have multiple reasons, but one surprising element he identified was that many of them were interested in the philosophy of life and the world, and were suffering from a kind of intellectual superiority, which triggered a type of anxiety among them. They were alone and wanted to share their anxiety with like-minded people.

The Aum provided them with this opportunity.

Also interesting is that a good number of Aum cult members had read the prophecies of Nostradamus during their academic years in the 1970s and 1980s, as Nostradamus had become popular at that time.

His prophecy about the end of the world at the close of the 20th century had particularly inspired many minds.

Meanwhile, one may find it interesting that the militant Islamic State in Iraq and Syria had built itsvision on a religious prediction, and claimed that it was preparing the ground for Imam Mahdi, who would appear during the `End of Days` to lead the final battles against the infidels. IS designed its flag according to their belief and named their publication Dabiq after a city in Syria near the Turkish border, which features in prophecies as the site of an end-of-times showdown between Muslims and their enemies.

Though there is no comparison between the societies of Japan and Pakistan, we can have few additional, disparate factors that would force many to join religious institutions in these countries. But many religious figures and institutions in Pakistan use their dreams and interpretations of religious prophecies to attract audiences. In the recent past, Dr Israr Ahmed and Dr Tahirul Qadri were among the prominent scholars known for interpreting prophecies and dreams.

Going back to the Japanese writer, the interviews conducted by Murakami revealed that Aum members were afraid of the perceived absurdity of life, and even after the 1995 gas attack most of them preferred to be part of the cult as they were still confused about their and the world`s future. If one digs deeper into an ideological mind here, one may not come out with findings different from those of Murakami`s.

Meanwhile, the ugly part of cultism is the hate against the others who have a dif ferent faith, and it becomes uglier when it triggers violence.

Underground concludes with the following paragraph: `Maybe they think about things a little too seriously. Perhaps there`s some pain they are carrying around inside. They are not good at making their feelings known to others and are somewhat troubled. They cannot find a suitable means to express themselves and bounce back between feelings of pride and inadequacy. That might very well be me.

It might be you.` The writer is a security analyst.