**Descent into fanaticism**

BY A S F A N D Y A R W A R R A I C H 2020-11-15

VERY recently, we witnessed the occurrence of two terrifying incidents of vigilante justice, and although they were separated by many miles, whatever they lacked in geographical proximity, they made up for in a unified ideology both were carried out in the name and on the pretext of religion.

First, there was the horrific murder of Imran Hanif, a bank manager in Quaidabad, who was gunned down in broad daylight by a security guard employed at the same establishment. Although later reports indicate that there may have been an element of personal enmity involved (apparently the two had had an earlier tiff), once the deed was done, the guard declared the manager a blasphemer. This was not murder, he asserted, but an execution. His motive was pious all he wanted was to avenge the honour of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

As word spread, a throng of people gathered around the killer. But, rather than decry the fact that he had taken another life, they showered him with admiration and praise.

Videos made shortly af ter the incident depict the murderer not being taken into custody but marching to the police station, boldly and defiantly. And he does not march alone. Escorting him is a whole coterie of fans. They are in thrall, it appears. One kisses his cheek, overwhelmed by emotion.

Another caresses him, almost in awe, as though he is an object of reverence. As for the rest, they rally behind and around him, making videos and snapping pictures and chanting slogans.

More ominously, even after their arrival at the police station, the guard and his devotees were given carte blanche to do as they please, and so, they clambered onto the rooftop of the building, where the self-confessed killer was allowed to take one final stand like a gallant hero basking in the glory being heaped upon him. One is compelled to ask: if we have come to the point of venerating premeditated murder, an egregious crime in law and an egregious sin in religion, where are we truly heading? The second incident took place at Kohat University of Technology, and is eerily reminiscentof the brutal lynching of Mashal Khan only three years prior. A young student accused of posting blasphemous content on social media was assaulted by a gang of his colleagues on university premises, no less. Thankfully, due to the timely intervention of the vice chancellor (vc) the student was escorted to safety and law-enforcement agencies promptly alerted. This, however, was not the end of the saga.

As anti-riot police arrived, students put the entire campus on lockdown. They shuttered the gates and besieged the VC`s office, demanding that the student be expelled, failing which they would be forced to kill him. It was only when the VC issued a formal notification of expulsion that the mob of pupils finally relented. As of now the particular student is safe but, unfortunately, his ordeal has only just begun. Before him lies a long and dangerous trial andfor theforeseeable future, his life shall remain at risk, as will the safety of those around him his family, friends, lawyers and, should there be an acquittal, perhaps even the judge presiding overhis case.

These episodes, not to mention countless others just like them in the not-so-distant past, all point to a rising tide of fanaticism, and in a country where moral uproar is rarely lacking over the most trivial of matters, both these incidents have been met with deafening silence. Mainstream electronic media, normally so eager for stories of violence, has barely given this any coverage. Religious organisations have remained mum, along with most prominent members of the clergy. And Twitter-friendly parliamentarians, typically chirpy, suddenly became tongue-tied.

Most disturbing, though, is the muteness of the state. The incumbent government, while bemoaning Islamophobia globally and passionately championing the case for making `defamation of religion` an internationally recognised crime, has here at home chosen to exercise silence in the face of such barbarity. No hue and cry has been raised. No denunciation delivered. This bout of paralysis is telling even the state has succumbed to fear.

Today, blasphemy has become a crime of suchexplosive sensitivity that to be merely accused of it is a death sentence in itself. Let us face it since their crystallisation, blasphemy laws have become a rallying call for radicalism, and under their cover, crimes of unspeakable violence have been committed. They are consistently being weaponised and abused before our eyes, and thus make quite an urgent case for their own review.

Contrary to what some commentators may suggest, blasphemy is neither a colonial product nor a novel invention attributable solely to the Zia regime. The legal rationale for enacting and enforcing blasphemy laws in an Islamic state actually lies in orthodoxinterpretations ofthe Sharia.Its status as a capital offence has been endorsed by a nearunanimous consensus of classical fugaha though admittedly, they too differ on questions of minutiae, such as whether repentance is acceptable in such cases, or whether the death penalty applies to a non-habitual non-Muslim blasphemer. If and to what extent these traditional interpretations ought to be applicable in the context of modern-day Pakistan is a subject unto itself, and so must be left for another time.

For now, it is more imperative to find a point of congruence. This should not be difficult murder is unacceptable no matter the guise it may adopt.

As long as we keep conferring sainthood upon these individuals, sections of the public shall continue to look up to them. The misguided zeal fuelling this feverish vigilantism cannot be stopped until it is condemned and corrected loudly, boldly and from each and every quarter. Till then, this frenzied trigger-happy bloodlust shall only continue to pick up pace.

Writing on the subject of fanaticism in his rather peculiar encyclopaedia, the Philosophical Dictionary, Voltaire likened the phenomenon to a disease, remarking that once it has `gangrened the brain of any man, the malady may be regarded as nearly incurable`. We, as a nation, must by necessity disagree with Voltaire, for if he is correct in his fatalistic prognosis, we may be too far gone already. The writer is a barrister.