Bias against Islam

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Islam

Friday feature

Expressions such as "Islamic extremism" reflect both a misunderstanding as well as a bias against the religion. The Quranic world view is that of peace and tolerance while aggression is expressly prohibited.

It is, nevertheless, also true that Islam spread like wildfire within a hundred years of the Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) death. Arab armies established a vast empire stretching from Spain, across North Africa to the river Indus in what is now Pakistan.

In Islamic history, there has never been any forced conversion because the Quran prohibits coercion in matters of faith. Consequently, no wars of religion have ever been waged. There has never been any Inquisition as in mediaeval Europe and no heretic has been burnt at the stake.

Violence is anathema to Islamic doctrine. In the year 630, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) triumphantly re-entered his native city, Makkah. The event changed history. In 1882, Stanley Lane-Pool wrote: "The day of Muhammad's greatest triumph over his enemies was also the day of his grandest victory over himself. He freely forgave the Qureysh all the years of sorrow and cruel scorn in which they had afflicted him and gave an amnesty to the whole population of Makkah." Not a drop of blood was shed. In contrast, the Crusaders massacred without pity more than 70,000 Muslim men, women and children when they entered Jerusalem in 1099.

Hatred of Islam has been a recurrent theme of history. Political and military violence against Muslims did not end with the Crusades in Palestine or even with the successful completion of the Reconquista in Spain when, on January 2, 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella received the keys of the Alhambra, the Muslim palace in Grenada.

The 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed aggression against and occupation of Muslim territories in the Middle East and North Africa. In 1830, the French colonized Algiers, the British captured Aden in 1839. These colonial powers between them took Tunisia in 1881, Egypt in 1882, the Sudan in 1889 and Libya and Morocco in 1920. They promised independence to

East and Kashmir.

The Crusades signified outright aggression against Islam; the 19th and early 20th centuries, colonization. From 1945, till the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the West was selective in its approach to the Islamic world. It supported those countries that could promote its cold war objectives, but was indifferent to the grievances of those it did not need to defeat its former superpower adversary, the Soviet Union. Even through this period, some intellectuals of the West openly expressed contempt for Muslims.

The post-cold war era has witnessed unparalleled terrorist violence. Most of these atrocities whether in Russia, Spain, Pakistan, the US, Indonesia, the Middle East or elsewhere have been perpetrated by men and women professing Islam. These incidents resulted in the perception that violence is encouraged by the Quran and obscured its doctrinaire emphasis on peaceful coexistence and tolerance.

> The question arises how a small number of extremists have managed to distort the inherently peaceful message of Islam. A possible answer is that the Holy Quran is quoted out of context and misinterpreted by persons professing to be Muslims. Their pronouncements have been unthinkingly accepted by those who are determined to project Islam as a religion that endorses extremist violence.

The first revelation allowing Muslims to fight is in Chapter 22 Verse 39 of the Quran which came immediately after Prophet Mohammad left Makkah for Madinah in 622. However, the permission was conditional and restricted to fighting only in self-defence. This stress against aggression is further elaborated in the second chapter revealed about a year later and repeated in other Quranic passages. The clear and simple message is that the only justification in Islam for war is to fight against aggression. Muslims are also obliged to terminate warfare should the aggressor subsequently incline towards peace.

vast and is not confined to war which, in any event, can only be waged against an aggressor. The Quran urges Muslims to defend all places of worship where the name of God is mentioned including churches, synagogues and mosques. Any attempt to prevent followers of other creeds from practising their religion is prohibited.

One of the early Quranic commentators, Ibn Sa'd, narrates a striking illustration of this principle when a delegation of Christians from Najran called on Prophet Mohammad shortly before his death. They were given free access to his mosque and allowed to perform all their religious rites even though the attribution of divinity to Jesus, or to any person, violates a fundamental Islamic tenet.

At another level, "jihad" implies the continuous struggle that man must wage against himself and on behalf of himself. The same principle applies to Islamic society which has to be built upon the bedrock of social welfare, justice and equality of opportunities.

Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani was undoubtedly right when he insisted that the malaise in Islamic communities could only be remedied through a proper understanding of the Quran. The Book is stylistically extremely concise and its contents can only be interpreted against the background of its entire text. A few commentators, even among Muslims, have erroneously held the view that some of the earlier verses of the Quran were abrogated during the process of revelation which began in 610 and continued for more than two decades. In other words, this warped theory militates against the concept of Divine infallibility which is central to all religions that believe in God.

Two indispensable principles, therefore, emerge for a correct interpretation of the Quranic message. The first is that its injunctions cannot be taken out of context and have to be understood against the pronouncements of the Quran as a whole; the second is that not a single verse or statement was abrogated during the long process of its revelation.

Extremists have extracted passages of the Quran to justify suicide bombings and other terrorist acts. They have also exploit-

these countries but, in effect, divided the region between themselves into spheres of influence and occupation.

Through all this and much more, the crusader attitude towards Islam continued to prevail in the West. In the introduction to her biography of Prophet Muhammad, Karen Armstrong writes that on entering Jerusalem in 1917 General Allenby boasted that "the Crusades had been completed" and when French troops reached Damascus their commander went straight to Saladin's tomb in the Great Mosque and declared: "Nous revenons, Saladin!" ("We have come back, Saladin") The knee-jerk American reaction to the barbaric terrorist acts in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 was a commitment to launch a "Crusade" against terrorism.

The Balfour Declaration of 1917 which eventually resulted in the emergence of Israel in Arab and Palestinian territories in 1948 set a modern-day precedent for ethnic and religious cleansing in which Muslims were the victims. This is as true of the Balkans as it is of the Middle

Furthermore, kindness and not hostility towards those professing other beliefs is ordained: "As for such (of the unbelievers) as do not fight against you on account of (your) faith, and neither drive you forth from your homelands, God does not forbid you to show them kindness and to behave towards them with equity: for, verily, God loves those who act equitably." Muslims are also obliged to grant protection to "those who ascribe divinity to aught besides God" and escort them to a place of safety should they ask for such help.

With a global vision so enlightened and moderate, the question arises how a small number of extremists have managed to distort the inherently peaceful message of Islam. A possible answer is that the Quran is quoted out of context and misinterpreted by persons professing to be Muslims. Their pronouncements have been unthinkingly accepted by those who are determined to project Islam as a religion that endorses extremist violence.

The word "jihad," for instance, is completely misunderstood. Its implication is

ed the flawed concept of abrogation. For instance, the conditional permission to fight is misconstrued as authorization for indiscriminate slaughter. Consequently absurd theories have emerged about a "sword verse" although the word "sword" does not appear even once in the Quran. It is interesting that Quran itself predicts in one of its verses (Chapter 3:7) that some of this pronouncements will be deliberately distorted by people who refuse to accept its actual message.

Finally, there is ample scope for legislation in Islamic societies. Professor M.A.S. Abdel Haleem in the introduction to his recent translation of the Quran observes: "The percentage of strictly legal text in the Quran is very small indeed. The Quran contains some 6,200 verses and of these only 100 deal with ritual practices, 70 verses discuss personal laws, 70 verses civil laws, 30 penal laws, and 20 judiciary matters and testimony." This implies that there is no impediment in the way of parliaments in Islamic countries from enacting laws in line with modern values.