

Not by

WALKING PAST A CHURCH IN SYDNEY, I WAS instantly impressed by the message on its billboard: "God wants spiritual fruits, not religious nuts." A few days later, I again happened to be passing by when a church official was changing the message. When I asked why, he explained that the messages were periodically replaced, but this one had a particularly short life because many church-goers felt offended and had protested about it. "Nuts", I said. "Nuts", he agreed.

Even contemporary Western societies have their share of what one might call "religious nuts". However, what distinguishes Muslim countries is the relatively very high proportion of such people among the population. If one is to define "religious nuts" as people who constantly harp on religion and confine themselves to performing its symbolic rituals while being devoid of religion's spirituality and the high moral values it seeks to inculcate, then it is fair to say that far too many Muslims belong to this category.

Western societies set great store by rational thinking, debate, openness, transparency, planning and accountability. Even Christianity to most Westerners essentially means mercy, compassion and association with charities to help the under-privileged worldwide.

Muslims, on the other hand, live and die in thrall to religious dogma and form while paying lip-service to its spirituality and substance. Consider the two congregations of the Tableeghi Jamaat in Pakistan and Bangladesh, held a few weeks ago in quick succession in Raiwind and Tongi, respectively. Attendance in both was in the millions, from all corners of the globe. In Bangladesh, the highest luminaries of the state from the president down were in attendance. In Pakistan, the congregation was graced by the presence of three chief ministers and a governor.

The 41st annual 3-day congregation in Bangladesh,

called the *Bishwa Ijtema* (World Congregation), was reportedly attended by four million people, including 4,500 from 60 other countries. Around 1.3 million devotees, by some accounts 2 million or more, attended the *ijtema* in Pakistan. At both, the crowning achievement was the *Aakhri Munajat*, or the Final Prayer. The length of the prayer at the Bangladeshi *ijtema* merited special mention in newspapers, 15 minutes by some accounts, 17 minutes by others.

According to one newspaper report on the *Bishwa Ijtema*, "the vast area ... was filled with millions of devotees during the *munajat* and everything in the area appeared to be at a standstill. The overcrowded capital city appeared to be under a shutdown — far more deserted than at a *hartal* [general strike] time — as transport came to a halt and people left their offices and shops to join the final prayer session of the *Ijtema*." An eyewitness was quoted as saying: "It looked like a vast expanse of sea of lakhs of heads in white. Some people also attended the *munajat* over police wireless sets, land-phones and mobile phones, standing far off the main congregation." When it comes to good things, one might say the more and the longer the better.

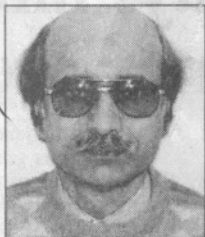
But let us look at some other statistics from the *ijtema* itself. According to the Internet edition of the Bangladeshi newspaper *The Independent*, "several thousand [participants] have fallen sick with various diseases like diarrhoea and fever. ... Some 88 devotees have been admitted to Tongi Hospital while 31 others were sent to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital in a critical condition. Police arrested 54 people today on charges of swindling and pick-pocketing from the midst of the crowds, raising the total number of arrests to 177. Of them, 106 were sent to court. ... Commuters faced immense sufferings. ... Some people received minor injuries when the police *lathi*-charged a gathering near the [*ijtema*] area." Seven people reportedly

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THINKING ALOUD



RAZI AZMI

The number of participants at 'tableeghi ijtemas' increases every year, as does the publicity they generate. So do corruption and social evils, particularly child abuse and crimes against women. Let it not be said that the faithful merely prayed to God while criminals preyed on the destitute, women and children around them

died during the *ijtema*.

Evidently, neither the evil social elements nor the forces of nature suspended their activities on account of the supplications of these millions of men before their Creator.

Tornados lashed the region at precisely this time. "Local people of Tongi said the tornado hit the area when thousands of people, who assembled at a 10-day religious programme at Tongi Biswa Ijtema ground, were saying Zohr prayers at about 1.15 pm. During the tornado, the shade of the Bishwa Ijtema pavilion suddenly collapsed on the devotees and injured them severely." More than 150 of those injured, some in critical condition, were admitted to hospital. Eight people lost their lives.

In Pakistan, at about the same time as the *ijtema* at Raiwind, some stark statistics emerged about the scale of crime and evil in society. According to a news report quoting Malik Ahmad Nasim, the inspector general of Railway Police, "pimps and paedophiles are increasingly targeting runaway and lost children dismounting trains at the Lahore railway station," some twenty kilometres from the venue of the *ijtema*. "Our aim is to get to the runaways before these vicious predators grind them into a world of beggary, thievery, prostitution and drug-peddling."

The inspector general said that the help centres established by the railway police had assisted 1,412 women and children. Of those who had received assistance, 30 percent were children lost because of parental negligence, 23 percent were children who had run away from schools, 12 percent were children who had escaped from forced labour, 11 percent were victims of parental abuse, 11 percent were women mistreated by in-laws, 10 percent were children who had been abused at school and 3 percent were girls who had run away to avoid forced marriages. If reports about police corruption and brutality are any guide, these unfortunate people may only have jumped from a thorny tree onto a bed of thorns.

According to another newspaper report of December 10, quoting Religious Affairs Minister Aamir Liaqat

Hussain, "police are investigating 500 cases of alleged child abuse implicating *maulvis*". The victims included boys and girls mostly under the age of fourteen. Rather than commend the minister for drawing attention to a subject hitherto regarded as taboo — and demand a full investigation, punishment of the culprits and adequate measures to protect children from abuse — the senators of the MMA, who profess to be more Islamic than the rest, denounced him and demanded an apology.

A just-concluded national conference organised by two NGOs in Lahore revealed that 1,788 cases of child sex abuse (526 boys and 1,262 girls) were reported by the media in 2003, a marked increase from the 679 cases reported in 2002. The speakers said that Pakistani children faced the worst forms of abuse and exploitation and were not being protected by the government. "The fate of homeless children is worse; they are abused, tortured, and often killed by both the police and the public." Ashfa Riaz, the Punjab Minister for Human Rights and Women's Development, called upon Pakistanis to overcome social taboos and discuss the "horrifying aspects of society".

Meanwhile, the number of participants at both *ijtemas* increases every year, as does the publicity they generate. Corruption and social evils, particularly child abuse and crimes against women, rise even faster. Let it not be said that the faithful merely prayed to God while criminals preyed on the destitute, women and children around them. One wonders how much difference these millions of people could make if they were to spend their time and money helping charities to prevent abuse of the weak in society and to ameliorate their woeful condition.

The author, a former academic with a doctorate in modern history, is now a freelance writer and columnist

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