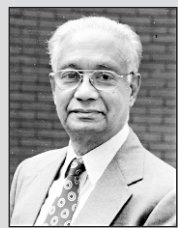


The Pope's jihad



MUSLEHUDDIN AHMAD

THE recent comments of Pope Benedict XVI, the head of the Catholic Church, about jihad or holy war and the way Prophet Mohammad (sm) preached Islam created uproar around the Muslim world. The Vatican explained the situation three times with some form of apology, but that did not fully satisfy the Muslim world. This led the pontiff to address the Muslim envoys attached to the Vatican with a view to explaining his intention. This has largely worked, but some still question why Pope Benedict at all made such a reference.

In *Newsweek* (Sept. 25) Jon Meacham puts it this way: "By quoting a 14th century Christian emperor on an 'evil and inhuman' Islam, Benedict XVI ignited a global storm." What was he thinking? Meacham explains: "Roughly put, his argument was this: to Benedict, Islam's conception of God so stresses God's will that God can be understood to command the irrational."

Here two points are to be noted: God's will cannot be stressed that may force Him to command the irrational. To err is human, God is not a human being that He can make mistakes. Such a view about God may put one's faith under question. God is unseen, self-sustaining, and omnipotent; He does not depend on anybody's will to run His creation and does not order anything that is not rational.

This is the basis of faith – whether one calls oneself Jew, Christian, or Muslim.

To Benedict XVI, "irrational violence is displeasing to God." He is right and there is absolutely no doubt that any irrational thing is displeasing to God. However, if there is "irrational violence," then there must be rational violence and one has to see whether the violence occurring today is rational or not, and look for the reasons and background of such violence. My sense is that present day violence in Afghanistan and Iraq can be categorized as rational violence as a

CONSCIENCE & SOCIETY

One would have thought that instead of quoting a revengeful and offensive statement of a 14th century emperor whose relation with the Muslim Ottoman empire was bad, whose words the pontiff said "do not in any way reflect his personal thought on the matter," he could have taken steps to clear up any misunderstanding already existing between religions. We are told that the pontiff was even eager to call for an inter-faith dialogue which hopefully would be pursued by the Vatican administration. Indeed, his predecessor pontiff, even at his old age worked for religious harmony and even once visited a mosque in Damascus and prayed there for world peace.

result of irrational unilateral violence (attacks) by the other party(s) in the conflict.

All the violence that has been taking place today has very little to do with Islam. One has to go through history to find out the causes. Start with the Christian Crusades. Jon Meacham continues to argue that: "By speaking of Jihad without alluding to Christianity's dark history of violence in the name of God – the Crusades, forced conversions, pogroms, the inquisition – Benedict seemed to be denouncing Islam while failing to acknowledge that any religion, including his own, can be manipulated and perverted to evil ends."

Harvard Divinity School Dean William A Graham said: "It is hard to construe the pope's remark in a benign way. Historically, there is no more basis for arguing the same about Christianity or Judaism. ... there are people in all three who have landed outside the rational. Islam has bloody borders right now, but Christianity has certainly been bloody, as has Judaism in its more extreme forms."

Graham also argues that: "Islam has spread far more thoroughly by proselytizing than by the sword." I would argue that Islam did not proselytize i.e. it persuaded others to accept Islam. The pope himself quoted from the holy Qur'an that "there is no compulsion in religion." So whoever preached Islam, I suppose he did it as Islam says – practice Islam and show the goodness therein and that should attract people to Islam. This is what Prophet Mohammad did. Therefore, it was absolutely wrong to say that Prophet Mohammad preached Islam through the power of the sword. It used to be just the opposite. The prophet practiced Islam in a manner that attracted people to be believers i.e. Muslims.

Prophet Mohammad and his associates fought only those who

declared open war against the prophet's messages that he received from God as His messenger. Indeed, Prophet Mohammad had extremely good relations with the people of other religions who lived in peace and harmony with the Muslims. He indeed, had special ties with the Christian king of Abyssinia (present Ethiopia) and once he sent some of his followers who were under attack from the non-believers to Abyssinia and they received the protection of the Christian king who was very kind to the Muslims. This also showed the greatness of the Christian king. The Abyssinian Christian king would not have extended his hand of support to Prophet Mohammad if the prophet had ever acted against Christians.

One would have thought that instead of quoting a revengeful and offensive statement of a 14th century emperor whose relation with the Muslim Ottoman empire was bad, whose words the pontiff said "do not in any way reflect his personal thought on the matter," he could have taken steps to clear up any misunderstanding already existing between religions. We are told that the pontiff was even eager to call for an inter-faith dialogue which hopefully would be pursued by the Vatican administration. Indeed, his predecessor pontiff, even at his old age worked for religious harmony and even once visited a mosque in Damascus and prayed there for world peace.

Pope Benedict XVI is already seen as one of the conservatives in his approach to other religions. One would expect him to follow his predecessor pontiff and go for more flexible approach as there are already some politicians of the west who can be called extremists in their political thoughts and ideologies, indeed irrational ones, which have been responsible for the present violence in some sensitive parts of the world. But as the pope is not a politician, he could really move ahead rapidly for

forging good relation between the people of faith and there he will receive full support from all peace loving people of the world.

Inter-faith platform

The *New York Times*, however, said in its editorial after the pontiff's speech that: "The world listens carefully to the words of any pope. And it is tragic and dangerous when one sows pain, either deliberately or carelessly. He needs to offer a deep and persuasive apology, demonstrating that words can heal."

The *Times* editorial was really helpful and deserves appreciation. The *Times* board may consider building a platform for inter-faith dialogue, if possible with President Carter or President Clinton, whoever is available to spare some time, as its head. CNN and BBC also could be helpful as these organizations appear interested in such an inter-faith issue.

Incidentally, in this connection, I may mention that some years back I had the privilege of raising very briefly this issue of inter-faith dialogue with HRH Prince Charles when I met him in Dhaka. I found him quite sympathetic to the idea. So under the present disturbed situation that emerged from unilateral actions of some top political leaders of the west and particularly America, it would be necessary to pursue this issue of inter-faith dialogue with some seriousness and the lead should come from religious and social thinkers. I am sure, many others like us, would be prepared to lend full support to such an effort.

Jihad

Jihad, as far as my knowledge goes and I remain open to suggestions, has strict meaning and applications. One may declare jihad against anyone, any group, society, or even a nation if any of them "wage war against God." It is very difficult to



precisely define this term. So, one has to be extremely careful before declaring jihad against anything. There must not be any presumption or assumption in such a sensitive issue as one's wrong jihad may create serious problems for others in the society.

The other reason for jihad could be if any one or any group or any community of people is thrown out of their legal homes, he/they may declare jihad and fight back till his/their homes are recovered. The Qur'an (Sura Baqara, 191) says: "Turn them out from where they have turned you out." Here comes the issue of rational violence. The Palestinians and other concerned Arabs are known to have been waging such a jihad against Israel's

occupation of Arab land. The Palestinians and the Arabs are not fighting Judaism, they are fighting against Israel's occupation. There are however, serious excesses, the "irrational violence" on both sides, which must be condemned.

There may be many other reasons, but the one that is very important and mentioned in the holy Qur'an (Sura Baqara 191-193): "For tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter,... Fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevails justice and faith in Allah; but if they cease, let there be no more hostility." This also applies to the Palestinians as there has been systematic tumult and oppressions by Israel against the Palestinians, which led to violence from

Palestinian side to liberate themselves from Israeli yolk.

While conducting jihad, the Jihadies must also observe the strict Qur'anic principles which are humanitarian principles too that "women, children, and the infirm must not be harmed; trees and crops not to be cut down nor peace be withheld when enemy comes to terms." Jihadies often go beyond what is authorized taking the plea that "we can kill their children as they (enemies) also kill our children."

Islam never allows harming of children, women, and the infirm. Any retaliatory or revenge action by any, because of somebody else's crimes, against innocent women, children and the infirm, for which they should held responsible to God, is un-

Islamic. Allah's orders are very strict -- "fight those who fight you." This means you fight only when you are attacked and not you start the fight. Moreover, the children are obviously not fighting anyone; so, they cannot be made targets. There is absolutely no room for excesses as "Allah loveth not those who transgress limits" (ref. Qur'an) and indeed no amount of fatwa can authorize anyone to kill innocents.

Muslehuiddin Ahmad is a former Secretary and Ambassador and founder VC of North South University. He is also the Chairman of Civic Watch, Bangladesh.

Tribute to a teacher

In addition to his gifted talent of motivating students, another quality was his ability to develop personal relationships with students. I know some of his students who received teaching jobs at different colleges with his blessings. I was also one of them. After the completion of my university courses, he gave me the permission to use his address as my mailing address on my job applications as I did not have permanent residence in Chittagong. I was just one of his students, not a relative or someone who hailed from the same district.

SARWAR ALAM

Dr. Aftab Ahmad, a former Vice-Chancellor of National University, and a Professor of Dhaka University, was shot on September 23 and succumbed to bullet injuries on September 26; another victim of the unhealthy political culture of the country.

So far, law enforcing agencies could not find any clue or motive for this shooting. Killing, institutionalized (such as some preplanned extra judicial killings by the police or Rab) or non-institutionalized, has already become a part of our political culture. But killing of university teachers in recent days, no doubt, has added a new dimension to it.

Educational institutions, especially universities, are, traditionally, places for exercising the freedom of speech. It was the teachers and students who echoed the voices of the masses and stood up against all sorts of repression and dictatorial rules. We experienced the role of these vanguards of the nation during the anti-military movements between the 1960s and 1980s. Students were killed for differences in political ideology.

But killing, or threat of killing, of teachers in recent days is something new in our post-liberation war era of political culture; probably a reflection of the impatient and intolerant practices encouraged and nurtured by our political leaders.

Unfortunately, generally speaking, our political leaders could not develop, or create, a culture of respect for others' political beliefs; they are yet to learn the art of agreeing to disagree. Another issue of concern is that the culprits of political killings usually go unpunished, especially in the universities. Had there been a precedent of bringing them to justice we could have saved doz-

ens of lives on the campuses. And if the political parties patronize the killers, it becomes difficult for the law enforcing agencies to hunt for the culprits.

Right or wrong, Dr. Aftab had a voice; he was a political activist. He was not ashamed of saying what he believed. After his removal as Vice-Chancellor of National University, it is reported that he changed his previous strategy of political activism. He did not participate in the election campaign of the pro-government teachers panel, but instead worked against them, and criticized the government in a television talk show.

We do not know for sure if this shift of loyalty was the main cause of his death. One of the newspapers published a speculative report last Thursday (Daily Janakantha, Sept. 28), which stated that the government agencies might have known about the plot to kill Dr. Aftab before the shooting took place. If there is any truth in this speculation then the days are not far away when teachers would not raise their voices against any political regime. University teachers do not need to fight to protect their right to free speech and the autonomy of the universities, it will stop automatically.

Dr. Aftab was the teacher of Political Change and Development course in my BSS honours, and Politics of Developing Areas course in my Master's classes at Chittagong University. I found him to be a person with a passion for teaching and love for his students. It was common practice among the students to spend time with him in his office room after the scheduled class hours, discussing issues of concern, sometimes with an assurance of getting a ride to town with him on the teacher's bus. As students, we were aware of the fact that he had been a student leader, one of the organizers of the mass uprising of 1969, and a freedom

fighter. During his days at the University of Chittagong he was a bona fide socialist. I can still remember some of his lectures about the evils of finance capitalism, the vices of military rule in the developing nations, and why a new social order is necessary for the emancipation of the masses of this country.

Regardless of our ideological differences, we liked his style of delivering lectures, which at times seemed to be the persuasive deliberation of a political leader, and sometimes seemed to be story-telling. He did not dare to criticize the government, political parties and their leaders, and any public policy of any sort. He could move students. Some of us students used to dream about how good it would be to become a university teacher.

In addition to his gifted talent of motivating students, another quality was his ability to develop personal relationships with students. I know some of his students who received teaching jobs at different colleges with his blessings. I was also one of them. After the completion of my university courses, he gave me the permission to use his address as my mailing address on my job applications as I did not have permanent residence in Chittagong. I was just one of his students, not a relative or someone who hailed from the same district. He used to keep paper cuttings of job ads for his students.

My last meeting with him was in the summer of 2000 at his Raja Bazar residence. At that time, he was just recovering from a stroke; he could not even hold a pen in his right hand when I visited him. Our conversation covered various issues, including politics. I noticed that a different tone in his voice. I was aware of his shifting ideology through the online editions of some

Bangladeshi newspapers.

I remembered the proverb – time changes and so do men. He was, then, a different man with a different perspective. But he was bold and clear, as before, in expressing his newly found pole of political ideology. However, he was frustrated with the traditional curricula of his department at the university. He had a precise idea of the new materials to be incorporated in the study of the culture of developing economies. He was as critical as before against the prescriptions of the World Bank and IMF. I do not know whether he held the same views when he took charge of the Department of Development Studies at the University of Dhaka, with his changed political ideology.

He must have been very controversial in his department. It has been reported in the newspapers that most of his departmental colleagues did not participate in his funeral procession. The department did not hold any special program in honour of his memory, although others did.

It was also noticed that no leader of Awami League paid tribute to this teacher and freedom fighter. Dr. Aftab was imprisoned for his ideological belief, and could not join the Department of Political Science of Dhaka University during the Bangabandhu era, even though in his doctoral dissertation he did not hesitate to pay due honour to that great leader.

Dr. Aftab is dead now. Everything will remain the way it is. Bubbles of some of his political activism will pop up as good examples, or bad examples, among his colleagues, but some of his students, like me, will remember him for a long time. We watched him from close proximity, were moved by his lectures, and encouraged to dream of a new social order. Regardless of his shift in ideology, he will remain as a teacher in our memory.

Sarwar Alam is an ex-student of Dr. Aftab Ahmad.

The Woodward war

The Rumsfeld portrayed by Woodward is bullying and petty. Bush himself doesn't come off much better. The president is folksy and jocular, but incurious to the point of cluelessness. His war cabinet is deeply dysfunctional. Condoleezza Rice is almost a pathetic figure, whining to the president that she can't get Rumsfeld to return her calls. The administration was not just unlucky. It was almost wilfully blind to the risks entailed in invading and occupying a large, traumatized, and deeply riven Arab country.

EVAN THOMAS and RICHARD WOLFME

THE White House had more than an inkling of what was coming. This was Bob Woodward's third book about the Bush administration since 9/11, and it was sure to be less friendly than the first two.

In scores of interviews over many months, Woodward's questions to senior officials had been more aggressive, more hostile. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld seemed to be a particular target of the veteran Washington Post reporter, who remains, three decades after his Watergate debut, the best excavator of inside stories in the nation's capital. White House aides did recommend that the president and the vice president not grant interviews, but it was obvious that Woodward could, and would, get just about everyone else in positions of authority to talk.

When *State of Denial* arrived at the White House Friday morning, a team of aides went to work deconstructing the 576-page volume. Some of Woodward's revelations, like the scenes of Bush rejecting pleas for more troops in Iraq, the White House tried to dismiss as old news. Woodward's depictions of tensions within Bush's inner circle were played down or denied.

It was not true, White House aides told reporters, that First Lady Laura Bush wanted to see Rumsfeld fired. Harder to slough off was Woodward's account of the role played by former chief of staff Andy Card. The White House made no serious attempt to refute Card's campaign to unseat Rummy. (Card himself quibbled over the word "campaign," telling reporters that the discussions about Rumsfeld's future needed to be seen in a "broader context.") Instead, White House spokesman Tony Snow took a dismissive, this-too-will-pass tone. Woodward's book is like "colton candy," Snow said. "It kind of melts on contact."

A truer simile might be to a loud musical instrument. An orchestra of

books has raised a cacophony of doubts about the Bush administration's handling of the war in Iraq. Coming after Bernard Trainor and Michael Gordon's *Cobra II*, Tom Ricks' *Fiasco*, Ron Suskind's *The One Percent Doctrine*, Hubris by *Newsweek's* Michael Isikoff and *The Nation's* David Corn, Woodward's *State of Denial* resounded among the administration's growing chorus of critics like a clash of cymbals.

With the midterm elections over many weeks away, Bush and his political minions have been striving mightily to direct the attention of voters away from Iraq and toward the threat of a terrorist attack. But Iraq keeps coming back into the headlines.

Before the Woodward book began landing in stores, portions of a National Intelligence Estimate began leaking out, suggesting that the war in Iraq was undermining the war on terror. The leaked portions of the NIE, a document representing a consensus of the US intelligence community, disclosed the somewhat unsurprising conclusion that Iraq was turning into a training ground for terrorists. Bush responded by authorizing the declassification of other portions of the NIE, suggesting that if American forces were to quit Iraq, the problem would only grow worse. But simply "staying the course" in Iraq may not satisfy American voters who can see only darkness at the end of the tunnel.

Democrats as well as a few Republicans will renew their calls for Rumsfeld's head, but it is doubtful that Bush will dump his defense secretary before the elections. That might be seen as a concession to the "Defeatocrats," as the GOP likes to call the opposition. (Rumsfeld himself had no comment about Woodward's book.)

But a senior White House official, operating under the usual cover of anonymity, gave a less than airtight guarantee of Rumsfeld's job security. The president, normally one to rely on his inner circle, has been consulting outsiders. The official did not say which ones, but it is known that Bush

speaks on occasion to Henry Kissinger and to his father's former secretary of state, James A Baker. The counsel of the outsiders, says this official, "so far has been that Rumsfeld should stay. But I can't predict the future."

The Rumsfeld portrayed by Woodward is bullying and petty. Bush himself doesn't come off much better. The president is folksy and jocular, but incurious to the point of cluelessness. His war cabinet is deeply dysfunctional. Condoleezza Rice is almost a pathetic figure, whining to the president that she can't get Rumsfeld to return her calls.

The administration was not just unlucky. It was almost wilfully blind to the risks entailed in invading and occupying a large, traumatized, and deeply riven Arab country. Rumsfeld, who pushed aside Rice and Secretary of State Colin Powell to take over even the planning for post-war Iraq, wanted a lean and mean force to get in and get out quickly.

This was all well and good as long as American forces could turn over the job of running the country to an effective group of local Iraqis. But the planning for this was hamstrung by disputes over the post-war role of Iraqi exiles. When Iraq began to unravel, the administration – with little debate – lurched in the other direction. The White House installed Paul Bremer as a kind of grand poobah over all of Iraq, but Rumsfeld refused to give him the forces he needed for a long occupation.

Woodward writes that when General Jay Garner, the man Bremer replaced in Baghdad, returned to Washington in June 2003, he told Rumsfeld that the United States had made "three terrible decisions." Garner told the defense secretary that Bremer had seriously blundered by purging the bureaucracy, disbanding the army, and dismissing an interim leadership group. Rumsfeld shrugged off the concerns, according to Woodward. "I don't think there's anything we can do, because we are where we are."

There is always the risk in these

instant histories that disgruntled former officials will cover their posteriors for posterity. One of Woodward's more obvious and prominent sources is former CIA director George Tenet. In *State of Denial*, Tenet is deeply ambivalent about going to war in Iraq, but it does not appear that he voiced his concerns loudly or well inside the Oval Office. White House spokesmen were not just blowing smoke when they cautioned reporters to look for self-serving motivations behind some of the leaks.

Even so, Woodward's book is studded with documents and memos from Bush insiders that paint a much gloomier view of the war than the president's public statements at the time. After the first two, generally positive, volumes in his "Bush at War" series, Woodward (an object of fascination and much jealousy in the press corps) was widely derided for playing stenographer to the president and his hero-worshipping advisers.

In *State of Denial*, Woodward expresses shock and disbelief in interviews with Rumsfeld at his apparent denials and equivocations. Interviewed by *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz, Woodward was matter-of-fact about his new, more critical tone. "I found out new things, as is always the case when you replough old ground," Woodward said. "The bulk of them I discovered this year. I wish I'd had some of them for the earlier books, but I didn't."

Woodward's new book, like the other critical treatments of the war, is still an early draft of history. But with each new revelation, with each depiction of the chaotic events inside the White House and Pentagon in the months before and after the invasion of Iraq, the picture of Bush's leadership becomes more refined and more disappointing.

With John Barry.

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