

Talking about Islam after September eleven

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ON that fateful morning of September 11 last year, as I watched in horror from the window of my high-rise Manhattan apartment, the twin towers of the World Trade Centre exploded and collapsed in what then appeared to me apocalypse in slow motion. As the pall of smoke lifted a little, the skyline that I had taken for granted, and come to love for twenty-five years, had gone. There was a vast emptiness where the two familiar giants once stood. And it appeared that the world beyond had changed forever. Nothing would be the same again, was the refrain just about everywhere in the days that followed. I too thought so.

Some nine months on, I am less sure. The events of the day were supposed to have altered forever the way we look at the world. Exaggeration latent in that view became apparent soon enough. The world is too complex and too large to be irrevocably altered by a single event, however monstrous. Nevertheless, such was the nature of the attacks that they could not but produce ardent expectations of very large changes. And of all the areas where the attacks of September 11 were expected to result in tectonic shifts in thinking, Islam stood out. After all, so went the argument, it was all about Islam. If this is the case, the impact of the attacks should probably be seen at this point in time more as a stir than a tempest. Not only did the world remain much the same, the reverberations of the event appeared to die down rather quickly.

What was being said and written about Islam since September 11? The volume of words written on the subject all over the world by now must be large enough to fill a fair number of books. A quick look at the salient points of the scattered writings that I came across must suffice for now. The volume of these writings is itself considerable. These include a number of articles and commentaries, by Muslims as well as others, picked up from the western press as well as those appearing in Bangladeshi newspapers. For the present I have picked up one or two substantial writings as representative the main strands of arguments, but have also supplemented my treatment of them with relevant news reports. I have also read a large number of letters that appeared in The Daily Star. I have felt that these articles, commentaries and letters well represent a wide spectrum of views on Islam after the events of September 11.

The violence of September 11 produced widely different kinds of responses. The views and arguments often were overlapping and sometimes confusing. Nevertheless, a number of strands of thoughts could be distinguished. There were those who would deny that this had anything to do with Islam. The dastardly acts, they would say, were committed by some "misguided" individuals who "hijacked" real Islam, which was a religion of peace. Then there were those who wondered whether the attacks of that day were not a product of a culture of violence latent in Islam. Not unexpectedly, this group saw widespread support for the terrorists of September 11 in the Islamic world. It is remarkable that both groups could produce chapter and literally verses from the Qur-an to support their contention. Also remarkable is a third group of responses to September 11, though closely allied to the first. To this category belonged a considerable number of individual Muslims whose reaction to the shock of the day was to hold even more tightly to the

fundamental tenets of the religion. The group for, example, included individuals to whom purdah was an important issue to talk about and defend, as well as those who took this opportunity to condemn what the considered unacceptable social and private practices of a decadent west in general.

To take the second group first, critics of Islam who would like to stress that violence of September 11 might be something ingrained in Islamic culture could, and did, produce an array of quotations from the Qur-an itself. One or more of the following verses from the Book were used in commentaries of this category:

"And slay them wherever ye catch them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter". Sura Baqara (II: 191)

"And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression and there prevail justice and faith in God; but if they cease let there be no hostility except to those who practise oppression" Sura Baqara (II: 193)

"And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in God altogether and everywhere; but if they cease, verily God doth see all that they do" Sura Anfal (VIII:39)

"But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then open the way for them: for God is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful." Sura Tauba (IX: 5)

"Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by God and his Apostle, nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued". Sura Tauba (IX: 29)

"O ye who believe! Fight the Unbelievers who gird you about, and let them find firmness in you..." Sura Tauba (IX: 123)

"The punishment of those who wage war against God and His Apostle, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land is: execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands from opposite sides, or exile from the land ..." Sura Ma-ida (V: 33)

Few critics of Islam see in these verses of the Qur-an justification of the kind of violence that is intended to take innocent lives. All must also be aware of the historical context of these verses. Some critics may even notice calls for restraint and compassion strewn in these verses and elsewhere in the Book. Yet those who see in the attacks of September 11 as having something to do with Islam draws attention to an Islamic ethos of intolerance towards the unbelievers. "It seems almost as if there is something inherent in religious monotheism to this kind of terrorist temptation", says the author of one of the most balanced analyses of the subject I have seen.² The analysis contained a quotation from Bernard Lewis, the noted scholar of Islam, which is worth repeating here. "There is something," notes Lewis, "in the religious culture of Islam which inspired, in even the humblest peasant or peddler, a dignity and courtesy toward others never exceeded and rarely equaled in other civilizations. And yet, in moments of upheaval and disruption, when the deeper passions are stirred, this dignity and courtesy toward others can give way to an

explosive mixture of rage and hatred ..." The author is quick to point out that the use of religion for extreme repression is not restricted to Islam and indeed that "Europe saw far more blood spilled for religion's sake than the Muslim world did". But that is beside the point in the present context.

This view of Islam is of course greatly heightened by the sayings and action of Bin Laden, whose vision precluded a world that is not divided between believers and infidels. And he is not alone. Critics who view the September attacks primarily as a manifestation of Islamic rage against the unbelievers also point to the growing power of fundamentalism in many Muslim-majority countries. Much blood has been spilled in the last two decades in countries that became hotbeds of Islamic fundamentalism. Women's throats have been slit for merely not wearing the veil. Liberal Muslim intellectuals have been murdered by the dozen, because to the defenders of literal Islam they are mere proxies of unbelievers.

These critics also pointed to the public rejoicing in some Islamic countries at the human tragedy of September 11, and to many pronouncements of Islamic leaders condoning or even openly such acts of carnage. These pronouncements increased in intensity after US

Reason is by no means alien to the history of the Islamic peoples. In fact some of the glorious episodes of this history are known for the use of reason by some of the best minds of the time. The most famous example of the users of reason is the Mu'tazila, who used it as a tool to defend the faith itself, though they were themselves considered renegades by most traditionalist Muslim leaders. But reason must today extend well beyond that and must be used in particular to examine the historical context in which some of Islam's principles were enunciated and practices established.

military action against the Taliban and the Al Qaeda in Afghanistan began. Jihad was on many minds. In one of his Friday prayer sermons in November 2001, the Imam of the Jame Masjid in Delhi called the war in Afghanistan a war between the believers and the unbelievers that has continued for the past 1400 years. Many Islamic leaders in the Arab world thought so too. A groundswell of sympathy for the Taliban since the beginning of US action in Afghanistan, also appeared to lend support to critics of Islam.

A sense of injustice and injury suffered at the hands of western nations has long prevailed among Muslims in many part of the world. Its roots can be traced to a historical past, to a tapestry of glorious achievements of Islamic peoples and their decline, as well as, in more recent times, to what they consider egregious machinations of the west. The plight of the Palestinian people is undoubtedly the most important example of the latter source of resentment. Most post-September critics of Islam seem to recognize the historical and geo-political sources of the resentment, but consider this an afterthought. Bin Laden, they can point out, had done precious little to fight for the Palestinians, for one thing.

Where, more precisely, is such resentment generated? The individual perpetrators of violence may be very unlike the rest of the Muslims, but they do not grow out of thin air. No single answer appears adequate, but this and this may seem rather strange in this global village of ours - but the western world suddenly discovered madrasas, all over the Islamic world hundreds of thousands of them. These institutes of Islamic learning have long existed and have been much talked about only in the aftermath of the September attacks. The best known example of the product of madrasa education has, of course, been the

Taliban (literally, 'students' of Afghanistan. Nurtured by Islamic fundamentalists in Pakistan, and aided by Arab money, these madrasas produced a particularly virulent type of opposition to just about everything that is western. Elsewhere in the Muslim world, not all madrasas produce bigots like the Taliban. But most of these institutes do not go beyond the teaching Islamic theology and jurisprudence and rarely open a window to the world outside. To post-September critics of Islam the madrasa had an important role in the milieu of resentment and hatred towards the infidels in the Islamic world.

Those who think that September 2001 had little to do with Islam are, like its critics, a heterogeneous group. The direct response of the group to the attacks of September 11 is clearly that Islam does not condone such acts. But a thin-skinned defensiveness is also a fair characterization of many of the writings that I have come across here. There is a wholly justifiable outrage among the group at the coarse caricature of Islam at the hands of people like Silvio Berlusconi, Prime Minister of Italy or Benjamin Netanyahu, the former Prime Minister of Israel. But the outrage is more general and has often been directed towards all of those who have anything critical to say about Islam. To such defenders

have, for example, heard many times over the past few months that "Islam is a religion of peace", as if that simple statement says all that can be said of what is undoubtedly a very complex question. Or take the following quotation that I have seen more than once since September: "Those who believe (in the Qur-an) and those who follow the Jewish (Scriptures) and the Christians and the Sabians.... shall have their reward from their Lord: on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve". (sura Baqara: II: 62) The purpose behind the use of this quotation of a rather general nature was to suggest that there can only be brotherly love between Muslims, Jews and Christians. What, then, one should read in the following quotation: " O ye who believe, do not take Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors" (sura Ma-ida: V: 51) ? Once again, the importance of the particular context in which sentences of the Qur-an must be placed becomes clear. As a final example of this propensity to quote, another ayat from sura Baqara was translated as "... this way [God] have made you a moderate sect" II:143). But this too has been placed out of context and the ayat has been translated differently elsewhere, by Yusuf Ali, as "...have made of you an Ummat justly balance..." , which has no necessary relevance to non-

strict purdah. Great exception has sometimes been taken to television newscasters in Bangladesh not covering their heads even during the holy month of Ramadan. There were calls for 'rescue' of females who deviated from Islam by not wearing the veil. Some have suggested leniency in the matter of enforcing the veil and have quoted the Qur-an to suggest that women past child-bearing age needed not be veiled. In a medley of writings, I have even seen at least one piece of prose suggesting that women veiled look more beautiful than women who do not care to cover themselves. Which prompted a response from a (presumably young) woman calling for God's help for delivery from fools who could write such things. A number of writing emphasized that the crux of the matter was modesty and not purdah as such. And there was ardent belief, expressed by men as well as women, some of the latter wearing jeans, that the veil was liberating rather than enthralling: it liberated women from the wicked gaze of ogling men folk.

At least in Bangladesh, September 11 was followed by a renewed call for rejection of old traditions that are supposedly unIslamic. A prominent Islamic leader of the country called the celebration of the Bangla New Year quite contrary to the tenets of the

violence.

A far more sophisticated argument in defence of Islam against blanket allegations of intolerance against it has been to point out that the Islamic world is by no means a monolithic one. The history of the Muslims is the history of many peoples and many rulers and, in common with the history of peoples of other faiths, contains glorious episodes of tolerance, liberality, and creativity well as periods of bestiality, bigotry and decay. A label such as "the Islamic world" perhaps conceals as much as it reveals. The relevance of the point in the present context is rather obvious: do not blame all Muslims for acts of extremism of a group.

In a rather curious response to September 11, many Muslims felt the need to reiterate their obligation to strictly adhere to all tenets of literal Islam in their daily life; and there were corresponding attempts at rebuttal from their brethren in faith. It is curious because no one ever suggested that there was any connection between Islamic religious practices and violence. For this genre of responses I have relied heavily on letters published in the Daily Star. Thanks partly to the internet, these letters were quite numerous. Not so were the points made and these can be briefly highlighted here.

I am at a loss at what triggered the debate on purdah, the veil; but the debate was by turn passionate, critical, silly, and even funny. The Qur-an has often been quoted in defence of the veil. Some have gone on to point out that the Qur-anic verses in the matter make the wearing of the veil compulsory; it is not therefore not a matter of choice for Muslim women whether or not to wear it, as liberal Muslims have contended. Some supporters of the veil pined for the days past when Bengali Muslim women would go outdoor only under male escort an in

want, if it goes against our religion. Being Muslims, Islam is our main identity, and culture follows religion", wrote one of his supporters. Similarly, Bangali women's practice of wearing the teal on the forehead has been called heathen and even the saree, that epitome of female grace, is now under the cloud, not, one hopes, as a consequence of September 11.

What else, apart from being in purdah or enforcing it, makes a good Muslim? Someone raised an interesting, though not new, point here: I do not pray five times a day, though I do pray from time to time; I drink once in a while; I do not care much whether or not the meat on my table is halaal; on the other hand, I never cheated anyone, I do spend on charity; I do not mistreat my wife; and I do not lack filial piety. Am I a Muslim? And if I am, and if I am thus a sinful Muslim, should it not be up to God, rather than to the custodians of religion, to judge me? Similar sentiments, perhaps less blunt, have been expressed by a few others. At least one answer to this was a resounding one: you cannot be a part-time Muslim. The oft repeated dictum is that Islam is a complete code of life and therefore cannot be taken apart. Defence of literal Islam appeared to dominate the scene.

But it is time to extricate myself from this level of response to September 11. In the end, the debate here, as well as much of what was being discussed elsewhere, look all too much like the proverbial going round the mulberry bush. The well-trodden paths are being trodden again and ad infinitum. Only rarely do we find a substantial piece of courageous writing that provokes thought and provides glimpses of hope for the future.³

If the tragedy of September 11 had anything to do with Islam, it is imperative to find out what the connection was. This brief survey of what was being talked about in the wake of the tragedy shows, however, that it is also necessary to go well beyond that connection and

examine the entire gamut of questions of Islam and modernity. And the inquiry has to be made mainly by the Muslims themselves. A good place to start may be difficult to find or agree on. But defensiveness and dissimulation are certainly not among them. Neither is the soporific argument that not all Muslims are to be blamed for acts of extremism of a group or groups. Above all else, however, is the need to make the fullest use of reason in understanding Islam and its place in the modern world.

Reason is by no means alien to the history of the Islamic peoples. In fact some of the glorious episodes of this history are known for the use of reason by some of the best minds of the time. The most famous example of the users of reason is the Mu'tazila, who used it as a tool to defend the faith itself, though they were themselves considered renegades by most traditionalist Muslim leaders. But reason must today extend well beyond that and must be used in particular to examine the historical context in which some of Islam's principles were enunciated and practices established. As a noted scholar of Islam pointed out, "[The] Qur'an and the genesis of the Islamic community occurred in the light of history and against a social-historical background. The Qur'an is a response to that situation, and for the most part it consists of moral, religious, and social pronouncements that respond to specific problems confronted in concrete historical situations."⁴ It is interesting to note that here that few will perhaps disagree that the passages of the Qur-an on the theme of fighting infidels, with which we began this brief discussion, should be seen in the context of early days of the propagation of Islam. The logic needs to be extended to other areas. It is easy to anticipate instant opposition from the religious establishment. But these are desperate times and religion today is too important to be left entirely to its professional interpreters.

Maoist rebellion in Nepal

It's so unnecessary for death to visit the young

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

NEPALESE King Gyanendra and Queen Komla have just paid a six-day visit to India. This was their first visit to India after King Gyanendra was catapulted to the kingship following the tragic events of last June in which both King Birendra and Crown Prince Dipendra perished. Evidently the main thrust of the visit was to seek Indian assistance in crushing the Maoist guerillas who are waging a "people's revolutionary war" in the countryside since 1996. During his visit King Gyanendra was assured by Prime Minister Vajpayee of India's help in fighting Maoist guerillas in Nepal. Addressing a press conference in Lucknow on 28th June Indian Prime Minister said: "We do not believe in the revolutionary ideals of the Maoists in Nepal. We will not allow terrorism to spread in any country". Defence Minister George Fernandez agreed to supply helicopters; utility vessels and mine proof combat vehicles. Earlier in May US President George Bush pledged US aid to the visiting Nepalese Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba in Nepal's fight against Maoist rebellion

Nepal has not been immune either to communist onslaught or to Indian influence in the past. Nepal, a landlocked country, is surrounded on the north by Tibet and on south, east and west by India. Early fifties saw Nepal on the verge of becoming a buffer state between Communist China following its annexation of Tibet. Advent of a new communist state on its doorstep also worried

Concurrent to the military solution of the so-called people's war, Nepalese authorities may consider taking measures for better governance, further strengthening the institutions of democracy, improving law and order situation, visible demonstration of punishment of the corrupt, and above all improving the quality of the life of the people.

India. In February of 1950 then Indian Prime Minister Pandit Nehru declared that "a threat to Nepal is a threat to India" and he warned that India would not tolerate any invasion of Nepal from any quarter. In July of that year India and Nepal concluded a Treaty of Peace and Friendship and a Treaty of Trade and Commerce both were to cause resentment among some sections of Nepalese people. Indeed the 1996 support by the United Marxist-Leninist Party (UML) of the Mahakali Treaty providing for joint Indo-Nepal exploitation of the water resources of Mahakali River including Tankapur Dam and construction of a giant hydro-electric plant caused serious intra-party division with the resultant beginning of the "people's revolutionary war" by the far left and the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist). UML's support to the Mahakali Treaty was a contributing factor among many others leading to the Maoist rebellion.

Like many other Least Developed Countries income disparity between the minuscule super rich and vast multitude of the poor is very sharp. Nepal has a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$5 billion (1999) and a per capita income of \$210(1999). India

and the Indians living in Nepal dominate industry and commerce. One can shop in the Nepalese markets with Indian rupees as easily as with Nepalese currency. Like in some LDCs corruption is reported to be endemic, bureaucracy indolent, and political parties busy squabbling with each other preventing establishment of a stable government. Latest twist was provided by Prime Minister Deuba's recommendation to dissolve the Parliament, which refused to give its consent to an extended period of emergency in order to effectively deal with the Maoist rebellion. This prompted his arch rival former Prime Minister Koirala to expel Prime Minister Deuba from the party and also seek ways to overturn the decision on dissolution of the Parliament. Deuba in turn along with his supporters overturned the decision expelling him from the party. So the saga of Nepal's political drama goes on. The tragic events of June last year not having faded away from people's memory particularly the death of the popular King Birendra, the current antics of the politicians are unlikely to be looked upon favourably by the Nepalese people.

Many political analysts are perplexed at the capacity of the Maoist

guerillas in continuing the so-called people's revolutionary war for the last six years. Unlike the Sri Lankan Tamil guerillas, the Nepalese Maoists do not have an expatriate community to draw funds from an essential ingredient for any guerilla warfare. The politicians and mal-governance by the rulers are what recruiting from among indoctrinated rural people or from the ranks of unemployed educated youth who have become disillusioned. But how does the Maoist finance their operations and that too for six long years? Indian complicity is unlikely. India has nothing to gain from a destabilized and further impoverished Nepal. Then the obvious other foreign sponsor could be China. But that too appears to be far fetched due to Chinese Communist Party's declared policy of ban on export of communism abroad. Besides China has transformed itself so very much under the leadership of late Deng Xiao Ping and current President Jemin. China today is committed to the war against terrorism. As a permanent member of the UNSC and a major nuclear power China is expected to behave like a responsible member of the global community. With the demise of cold war and

Russia having just been taken on board as a member of G8 group at the recent summit held in Canada (added by the promised aid of \$20 billion to dismantle the aging nuclear arsenal) why should China put at stake its membership of the WTO and ever growing stature in APEC and other global fora for the sake of a motley band of guerillas who are unlikely to succeed anyway? Barring die-hard skeptics one can discount Chinese involvement in this Nepalese sideshow. It is, however, possible for the Nepalese guerillas to get moral and material support from insurgent groups operating in the north-eastern states of India. Insurgents are believed to be sympathetic to other insurgents even if their goals remain different.

Concurrent to the military solution of the so-called people's war, Nepalese authorities may consider taking measures for better governance, further strengthening the institutions of democracy, improving law and order situation, visible demonstration of punishment of the corrupt, and above all improving the quality of the life of the people. It is so unnecessary for death to visit the young who cannot quite comprehend the global sea change which has taken place and the almost unshakeable power structure already in place which their meager firepower and outdated rhetoric can do nothing to dislodge.

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