

Easter: Feast of new life

FATHER PATRICK GOMES

ALLELUIAH! Today is Easter Sunday! Today, Sunday, March 27, the Christian community joyfully celebrates the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, the Christian faith and dogma is grounded in the redemptive death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ through which the whole of humanity is guaranteed eternal life in heaven. With this salvific event, the door of heaven is opened for mankind. The grace-filled humanity rejoices for it is now freed from the bondage of sins and an eternal relationship (covenant) is being established. His resurrection is a historical event that speaks of the reality of the end of evil, a new dawn has begun; mankind has passed from the sinful passage of life to the blissful world of grace. This mystery in reality is called *pasch*, a Hebrew originated word meaning passing over or crossing over.

Paschal mystery

History: The biblical narrative of the liberation of the people of Israel, God's chosen people, from the bondage of slavery in Egypt is written in the book of Exodus as an epic. Through the divine intervention of God, through his faithful servant Moses, the people bring victory over Egyptian dominion and persecution. Crossing the Red Sea and being liberated they sing the song of victory (Book of Exodus, Chapter 15). This figurative event took its fulfillment and completion in and through Jesus Christ, the new Moses, the beloved Son of God.

The empty tomb: The event of Christ's resurrection narrated in the Bible by the gospel writers

speaks of the empty tomb. According to the resurrection narrative, Jesus's disciples Peter and John rushed to the tomb only to find the tomb empty. Both saw and believed that Christ is not in the tomb but is risen. The sitting angels tells them of this good news of Christ's resurrection. Today when we celebrate Easter we need to witness the empty tomb of Jesus like Peter and John and proclaim to all Christ's resurrection not merely in words but in deed. Where there is empty tomb there is new life of the risen Lord, Jesus.

The Risen Christ: With his death and resurrection, Jesus initiates a new world for mankind; with the Risen Jesus the whole humanity is risen. Victory over sin and death is obtained for the crying mankind. St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "Jesus ... was put to death for our sins and raised to life to justify us" (4:25). He died and was raised that we may have eternal life in heaven. With this good news every year the Christian community joyfully celebrates Christ's resurrection which is the ultimate, and goes through Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. In fact, the 40-day season of Lent that begins with Ash Wednesday (February 20) is a spiritual preparation with fasting, penance, almsgiving, works of charity, prayers, etc. for the celebration of this week of paschal mystery traditionally called Holy Week.

Each year's Easter celebration not only takes us back to the divine resurrection history but brings our life to the present. The Risen Christ brings a new time filled with grace, and he lives in this new time. We, for whom Jesus died and brought

Let us also take the challenge to live unto its demand: a new and transformed personal and social life implementing peace, social justice, love and service in our life, in our society and at large in our country. And this Easter call is not only for Easter Sunday but is ever constant and contemporary; and it is not only for the Christian community, but it is universal. May the Risen Christ bless our country, bless all our brothers and sisters -- Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian. Happy Easter to all! Let us sing in one voice: Alleluiah!



victory over sin and death through his resurrection, can now enter into his victory and be healed of our sinful state. It is therefore a new *kairos* where we enter being risen with the risen Lord, being glorified with his glorified existence. Only a transformed person can see the Risen Jesus ever present in the present historical time called *chronos*.

The disciples and a woman named Maria of Magdala had to make the step gradually from historical Jesus to the Risen Jesus. Maria of Magdala made a very big mistake to see Jesus with mere historicity and thought the risen Jesus was a gardener; the disciples on the way to Emmaus could not recognize him until the breaking of bread by Jesus. Resurrection of Jesus is a history of God's intervention that made Jesus raised from the dead and be in a totally transformed state, a state glorified where every one of us is called to. This glorified Jesus is ever present in this historical time and we are urged to preach this risen Christ to others through our "risen," "new," and "glorified" life. We must move forward from the "tomb" of sins to the "state of glory." Then only will be fruitful our celebration of Easter.

Easter celebration

Liturgy and prayer: Liturgically it

begins from the Easter vigil liturgy in the night of Saturday, Holy Saturday which is centralised with the message of liberation from the bondage of sins. This is very well expressed by the blessing of fire and lighting of the big paschal candle from which all light their candles; blessing of water and sprinkling of water over all expressing the bath with the water of the risen Lord; renewal of baptismal promises, i.e., renouncing Satan and his activities and faith in God and Jesus Christ. The whole salvation story runs through the chanting the Easter preface. Easter vigil liturgy announces the resurrection of Jesus singing Alleluiah, meaning praise the Lord! He is Risen! It follows then the Holy Mass with joyful hymns.

In the morning of Easter Sunday all come to Church for Easter liturgy, i.e., a very joyful and meaningful prayer service, we call Eucharistic Celebration or Holy Mass presided by Catholic priest. The worshipping community takes active part in the Easter liturgy with Bible reading, singing Easter hymns, listening to the priest's Easter reflection, praying to Christ the risen Lord for various needs. After the liturgy people with a new fervor greet each other happy

Easter wishing Christ's Easter blessing.

Family and socio-cultural heritage: Each family tries its best to fast on Good Friday and make every endeavour to have peace and reconciliation among the members in order to have real joy on Easter Sunday and of course the days after. On Easter Sunday family members exchange Easter greetings and young ones receives Easter blessings through *Shelam*, or *Podo Dhuli Grohon* or among the Adibashies through *Dobok' Johar*. Special food like curd, puffed rice, banana, puffed rice powder (*chatu*) is very common to find in every family. However, unlike Christmas, Easter festivity and its sentiments lasts for a short time in the society.

Call of Easter

As it is a feast of new life the Easter directly call to every one to rise from the strange and dreadful state and situation of sins and see the risen Lord present in his/her life. How do we celebrate the feast of new beginning while we remain still in the old. The reality is very challenging. There are sinful attractions, sinful activities, sinful attitudes, sinful motivations, even sinful strategies in the name of doing good in the political, social, economic or even religious area of life in our country. We very realistically observe the "tombs" of sins: fighting and killing, terrorism, cheating and bribe, hypocrisy, double personality in dealing with people, materialism, hedonism, distorted sexuality and marital relations, etc. Easter calls all to take the challenge to bring a new situation. The daily newspapers bring us despair and discourage-

ments; yet the Risen Christ when we reflect his victory for us over death and sin brings hope and encouragement.

Conclusion

On the one hand with the development and science and technology the society is becoming modern very fast and so the celebration of Easter and like this any major celebration is loaded with modern techniques. The characteristics of celebration are not as simple as it was one day. On the other hand, people tend to remain only at the level of celebration only ending with fantastic dress with food and drink accompanied by modern music, attractive liturgy, and prayer service. Without ignoring this impressive development, we must come to the reflection, a deep reflection on the Easter event, and take its call as a challenge. We are happy today, we are joyful today, for today is Easter. Let us also take the challenge to live unto its demand: a new and transformed personal and social life implementing peace, social justice, love and service in our life, in our society and at large in our country. And this Easter call is not only for Easter Sunday but is ever constant and contemporary; and it is not only for the Christian community, but it is universal. May the Risen Christ bless our country, bless all our brothers and sisters -- Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian. Happy Easter to all! Let us sing in one voice: Alleluiah!

Motivated journalism troubling Bangladesh

HELAL UDDIN AHMED

WHEREAS our counterparts in neighbouring India display both professionalism and patriotism in the realms of press and politics alike, the situation appears to be just the reverse in Bangladesh.

Take for example, the recent denial of US visa to Narendra Modi, the avowedly Hindu fundamentalist Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat. Despite his controversial role in the massacre of more than one thousand minority Muslims by Hindu extremists in the year 2002 and despite the fact that the ruling Congress party itself brought accusations of criminal abetment against him for innumerable times, the Congress government suddenly jumped to his defence the moment he was refused visa by the Bush administration.

The Indians may be at each others' throat in domestic politics, but whenever the question of Indian national interest and national pride comes, they are ever ready to join hands in facing external threats. But ironically, the situation appears to be quite the opposite in Bangladesh. Be it politics or the press, political affiliation is so blinding that one does not even hesitate to condemn the entire nation and rip asunder the country's

image alongside that of the government if that is convenient for partisan political agenda.

An example of such journalistic bigotry has been the recent coverage given by a section of our press to the comment on Bangladesh made by the US Secretary of State Dr. Condoleezza Rice during her visit to India on March 16. I browsed the official websites of the US State Department, the US embassy in New Delhi as well as the relevant Indian and Bangladeshi press sites and found some interesting twists to the whole episode.

For example, Bangladesh was mentioned not even once in the US State Department transcript on the joint press conference in New Delhi (March 16) attended by Indian Minister for External Affairs Natwar Singh and US Secretary of State Dr. Rice. The same was true in case of the statements issued by the US embassy in New Delhi. But surprisingly, the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS) circulated a news on March 16 quoting an unnamed senior US embassy official as saying that the US had suggested that the "two countries work together in Bangladesh" in view of the "general deterioration of security" in Bangladesh. "The official was referring to the spiralling violence and the

growing assertiveness by fundamentalist groups in that country," so said the IANS despatch.

Judging from the anonymous nature of the source, it is most likely that the Indian news agency had

Subrahmanyam noted in the story that "there had been independent reports that Al-Qaeda activists had become active in Bangladesh." Another analyst Ajay Sahni said the US interest in Bangladesh amounted

South Asia region. Let me quote the motivated question asked by Mr. Chengappa of *India Today* and the reply given by Dr. Rice:

Mr. Chengappa: Looking at the region, you know, we're surrounded by

interests. That's sort of the history of Afghanistan, that there was interference in Afghanistan because people didn't trust a stable Afghanistan with all of its ethnic divisions. Now we are seeing the emergence of a unified,

that is becoming quite troubling. So in the region, there is a great deal that we can do. But I think we'll also see that also internationally, India, and globally, India will start to play more of a role.

It is quite clear from the foregoing that there was no mention of any Indo-US joint initiative on Bangladesh during the interview and the comment on Bangladesh was just a passing remark to a leading question.

But based on the above transcript, the first line of our BDNews story as published by the leading national dailies was: "UN Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has said Bangladesh is becoming 'quite troubling' and there is more that the USA and India could do." What a distorted presentation of facts! A section of the Indian and Western press may be justified in forever seeking holes in the social and political fabric of Bangladesh, but it is beyond comprehension why our very own press should go out of the way to put slur on the Bangladeshi nation.

The latest twist in this whole string of anti-Bangladesh propaganda centring on Dr. Rice's visit to India was the UNB story published in the national dailies on March 22. The story said: "There has been no development of specific initiatives on US-Indo cooperation on issues pertaining to Bangladesh, a spokesperson for the

US embassy told UNB, responding to a query about what US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had stated in India about the US-India initiatives to deal with the security situation in Bangladesh."

If the story had been done as an admission of serious reporting errors in the past, that would have earned kudos from the adherents of ethical journalism. But the story continued with another round of vitriolic utterances on the state of affairs in Bangladesh: "The US mission in Dhaka, along with counterparts of other donor organisations, are concerned by the deterioration of governance in Bangladesh especially by political violence and the law and order situation."

The spokesperson actually said, "Threats to, and attacks upon, the press, the political opposition, cultural institutions, and minority communities are all causes for concern."

This is what I would call motivated, partisan, hostile, and unpatriotic journalism.

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Jihad against partisan political use of Islam

Struggle of a Bangladeshi Muslim

TAJ HASHMI

FATEMOLLA is a familiar name, mainly among internet users/readers interested in the critique of political Islam, especially among Bangladeshi Muslim freethinkers. He is one of the leading crusaders against persecution of women, minorities and others in the name of Islam. While sections of liberal-democrat-secular Bangladeshis adore him for his maverick views and bold ideas, some conservative and traditional Muslims have already declared him an *ibless* or devil and a *murtad* or apostate.

However, despite being fully aware of the implications of getting branded as a *murtad*, Fatemolla has remained unstopable. He has been hitting hard the core of obscurantist mullahs and the so-called Islamic thinkers and philosophers like Hasan Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Abul A'aa Mawdudi and their modern adherents. The most interesting aspect of his writing is his unique way of hitting political Islam, not with atheism or secular philosophy, but with Islamic texts, mainly the Quran and some authentic *hadises* or sayings of Prophet Muhammad in the light of history. Islamic dogmatism and the mindless conformity of the ultra-orthodox Muslim clerics, who lack both the ability and understanding for the need for changing the Shariah law in accordance with the changed circumstances of our age, have been the main targets of Fatemolla's blitzkrieg.

This highly misunderstood, prolific writer has been running a web page called *jamatepislami* since mid-2004, posting his own thoughtful essays, poems, and satiric writings and a few relevant news items from newspapers and journals. The web page has become quite popular among a large number of Bangladeshis. Some of

his postings came out in Bangladeshi newspapers and his satiric play depicting the plight of Muslim divorcees is being turned into a feature film in Canada.

This diligent and self-taught, sincere and honest "Islamic Modernist" of the internet age lives in the West and devotes his spare time solely to research and writing on the abuse of Islam both by Muslim clerics, village elders and their counterparts in urban Bangladesh. His prose is lucid, style is modern and the approach is very convincing and argumentative. The text is garnished with scores of contextual and relevant Quranic verses, historical facts and anecdotes from the lives of the Holy Prophet, his companions and the various Muslim jurists and theologians.

Unlike what the Islam-bashers do, attack Islamits Prophet and scripture for the violation of human rights and all the prevalent vices present among Muslims. Fatemolla has consistently defended the Quran and the Prophet. The main thrust of his argument is that the Quranic verses and the authentic sayings of the Prophet should be taken contextually and that the Muslims in our times should apply common sense and reasoning (*aqel* and *ijtihad*) to get the right meaning and message of the Quran. He has argued that nothing short of an Islamic Reformation can salvage the downtrodden Muslims who have been one of the most backward, illiterate, superstitious, poor and stigmatized communities in the world. He thinks that Muslim orthodox and stubborn mullahs' obduracy to reform and reinterpret the teachings of Islam in the light of new knowledge and changed circumstances are mainly responsible for the appalling image of Islam and its adherents throughout the world.

The title, *jamatepislami* (literally stands for "the slimy *jamaa*"), might be misleading, as it rhymes with "Jamaa-e-Islami", an Islam-oriented ultra-rightist political party of Bangladesh (and Pakistan and India), which is stigmatized among the average Bangladeshi for its active collaboration with the Pakistani occupation army during the Liberation War in 1971. Some readers might consider it only as an anti-Jamaat platform of Fatemolla, who has been campaigning against "political Islam" for quite some time. Once they have gone

to the so-called *hadises* and the reactionary Shariah law, created in the medieval era by agents of patriarchy, monarchy and autocracy in the name of Islam.

Some of the very interesting essays and articles by Fatemolla are: *Mukh Kholo* (To Open One's Mouth), *Khamba* (Pillar), *Pislami Syllabus* (A Critique of Al-Azhar University's Reactionary Syllabi) and *Ke Murtad?* (Who is a Murtad?). The other pieces on female leadership, honour killing, polygamy, female testimony, arbitrary issuance of *fatwas* (religious

decrees) by the mullah to the detriment of women and minorities are thought provoking, very well argued and reflective of his missionary zeal to save Islam as well as the victims of "political Islam." While on the one hand he is critical of some of the modern stalwarts of "political Islam" for their denial to separate religion from politics; he on the other hand takes certain Islamic groups like the *Al-Mohajeroon* of Britain to task for considering those Muslims who take part in the British Parliamentary elections as apostates, as the Parliament enacts secular laws, which often go against the tenets of Islam.

Contesting the legitimacy of the "sixth pillar" of Islam, as espoused by Baana-Qutb-Mawdudi type Islamist thinkers (vide *Khamba*), which does not separate religion from politics, Fatemolla reiterates his point quite convincingly that the prophets did not come as politicians or administrators but guides for mankind. He thinks it is high time

against the non-Muslims as obligatory; c) treating the non-Muslim subjects as *dhimmis* or "protected people," forcing them to cut their fringe on the forehead as their symbol of identity, denying them the use of horse but donkeys instead; and e) the ban on music and musical instruments. Fatemolla has rightly compared these draconian rules with the edicts of Mullah Umar of Afghanistan under the Taliban.

The moral of the story is that unless Bangladeshi Muslims are saved from the hands of the obscurantist mullah, a replication of the Al-Azhar dogma of hate and violence is possible in Bangladeshi *madrassas* or Islamic seminaries. Fatemolla has pointed out (vide *Ke Murtad?*) how very similar to Al-Azhar mullahs, who never stop from issuing *fatwas-to-kill* Egyptian "*murtads*" Nagib Mahfouz, Nawal Sadawi, Nasr Zaid and their likes, Bangladeshi mullahs have been issuing such *fatwas* against sev-

eral prominent poets and writers for alleged blasphemy and apostasy. He has cited Quranic verses, including 4:137 (Sura Nissa), in buttressing his argument that the Quran does not prescribe death penalty for apostasy at all. His logical justification for female leadership in Islam, rejection of polygamy as un-Islamic, and advocacy of equal rights and opportunities for women and minorities in Muslim countries are too difficult to demolish by the conformist, traditional Muslims.

progress and knowledge. The blind followers of the Shariah, including people like Shah Abdul Hannan, neither apply reason nor the teachings of the Quran to evaluate (accept and reject) the man-made Shariah law. Fatemolla has skillfully exposed this flaw in the *Islamic Ayn*. He has correctly pointed out the main flaw in Hannan's exposition that Imam Abu Hanifa and his companions not only codified the Shariah for their age but for the Muslims everywhere in all ages. He has buttressed his argument that Shariah is obsolete in our times and has no eternity like the Holy Quran by citing several Islamic scholars of our time. They include Hashim Kamali, Abdur Rahman Doi, Abdur Aziz Sachedina, Fazlur Rahman and others who have all rejected the divinity of Shariah law. While Hashim Kamali has pointed out the inadequacies of the Shariah in meeting the needs of modern Muslims, and has suggested drastic changes and modifications in the so-called Islamic code, Sachedina has succinctly stated that the needs of the past and present are very different.

What we get in this interesting web page is that:

a) Shariah or the predominantly *hadis*-based code often goes against the teaching and spirit of the Quran, protects the institutions of slavery, absolute monarchy, patriarchy and misogyny, concubinage and illicit sex with slave girls and many other revolting and inhuman institutions and practices.

b) The fundamental problem with both the *hadis* literature and the Shariah is their being equated with the Holy Quran as divine and eternal by the bulk of the *ulama*

throughout the Muslim world. It is a pity that Muslim theologians, jurists and philosophers during the heyday of the Abbasid and Ottoman dynasties, as subservient employees of the autocratic rulers (also known as caliphs), justified autocracy, patriarchy, polygamy, slavery and other vices through the so-called sayings of the Prophet or *hadises* and the Shariah. Thus the compilers of the *hadises*: Imams Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Dawood, Tirmizi and others as well as the Muslim jurists like Abu Hanifa and Shafi have occupied the stature of saints, almost with the infallibility of the Holy Prophet. Meanwhile, Sufis and saints like Abdul Qadir Jeelani, Mansoor Hallaj, Rabiya Basri, Muminuddin Chishti, Bahauddin Zakariya Multani, Nizamuddin Aulia and many others tried in vain to stage an Islamic Reformation, promoting anti-feudal, liberal doctrine of love and peaceful co-existence of Muslims and non-Muslims, believers, agnostics and non-believers in the true spirit of Islam.

c) Unless the Muslims learn about the flaws of the *hadis* literature, including the unreliability of many *sahih* or "authentic" *hadises*, and the limitations of the man-made Shariah, there is no way out for them towards freedom from the clutches of autocracy, terrorism and "mullahocracy" almost everywhere in the Muslim world, including Bangladesh.

In sum, although Fatemolla's *jamatepislami* is not a comprehensive, flawless compendium of ideas to eradicate terrorism and inhuman laws created and nourished in the name of Islam, through his incisive writing he has taken a bold step towards reason and rationalism, always inculcated by Islam.

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