

Religion in Politics

A decade ago I spent a couple of hours with Morarji Desai, a well known politician and one-term prime minister of India. I was researching the campaign by Hindu religious parties to build a shrine to Lord Rama on the spot where then stood the 16th century Babri mosque. They claimed that the site was the birthplace of Rama, an avatar who lived, according to traditional Hindu belief, sometime in the years 3000 B.C.

During an earlier visit to Prime Minister Desai in 1977 I had been impressed by his traditional style and his devotion to Hinduism. So I thought he will be a good man to interview on the subject of Hindu 'fundamentalism'.

Mr. Desai was critical of the BJP and its allies. He worried that they would inflict damage to India's fragile unity and its secular dispensation. As he fulminated in particular against the RSS, Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Shiv Sena, I was startled at one point when he said: "They are distorting Hinduism out of shape. In effect, they are un-circumcised Mussulman fanatics." What do you mean? I asked, and he proceeded to talk about the imitation of monotheism in their singular focus on Rama, their cult of violence, and their mobilization of a virtual Jihad over 'Ram Janam Bhoomi' as un-Hindu attitudes and activities.

At the time I had felt uncomfortable with this remark as it smacked of a communal outlook. Later, as I continued to research the Ram Janam Bhoomi movement, I appreciated his comparison between contemporary Muslim and Hindu militancy. But Moraji Desai was wrong in one respect. The similarities were not an outcome of the parivar imitating their Muslim counterparts. Rather, the distortion of a given religious tradition and other shared patterns of attitude, behaviour and style are products of common roots in the modern times and its unique tensions. I have argued this point in an earlier essay. Here I discuss how these so-called fundamentalists, in particular the Islamist variety, relate to the religious tradition they claim to cherish and represent.

The religious idiom is greatly favoured in their discourse, its symbols are deployed and rituals are observed. Yet no religio-political movement or party has to my knowledge incorporated in a comprehensive fashion the values or traditions of Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism in their programmes and activities, nor have they set examples of lives lived, individually or collectively, in accordance with the cherished values of the belief system they invoke. What they do is to pick out whatever suits their political purposes, cast these in sacred terms, and invest them with religious legitimacy. This is a deforming though easy thing to do.

All religious systems are made up of discourses which are, more often than not, dialectically linked to each other as in light and darkness, peace and war, evil and goodness. Hence, it is possible to detach and expropriate a part from the whole, divest it of its original context and purpose, and put it to political uses. Such an instrumentalist approach is nearly always absolutist, that is, it entails an absolute assertion of one, generally de-contextualized, aspect of religion and a total disregard of another. The phenomenon distorts religion, debases tradition, and twists the political process wherever it unfolds. The idea of Jihad is a case in point.

It is an Islamic precept with multiple meanings which include engagement in warfare, social service, humanitarian work, intellectual effort, or spiritual striving. The word is formed from an Arabic root jehd which denotes an intense effort to achieve a positive goal. Jihad entails then a striving to promote the good and overcome the bad, to bring light where there is darkness, prosperity where there is poverty, remedy where there is sickness, knowledge where there is ignorance, clarity where there is confusion. Thus

mujahada (as also jihad) in early Islamic usage was an engagement with oneself for the achievement of moral and spiritual perfection. A mujtahid is a religious scholar who does ijtihad, i.e. strives to interpret religious texts in the light of new challenges and circumstances.

In early Islamic history when the need to defend and also enlarge the community of believers was deemed paramount, Jihad became widely associated with engagement in warfare. Following a prophetic tradition, some early theologians divided Jihad in two categories: The 'physical jihad' participation in religious wars of which the rules and conditions were strictly laid down - was assigned the "Lesser Jihad" category. Its premises were strictly defined.

As Muslim power and numbers increased and pluralistic patterns of life and outlook emerged, there were clashes between points of view no less than personal ambitions. Similarly, wars and dynastic conflicts frequently involved convergences of interests and alliances between Muslims and non-Muslims, and battles were fought. Traditionally, these were described variously as harb, Jang, qital or muqatala but not as Jihad, a tradition which has been all but jettisoned by contemporary Islamists.

The Greater Jihad was that which one undertook within the self and society - to conquer greed and malice, hates and anger, ego and hubris, above all to achieve piety, moral integrity, and spiritual perfection. The great sufis invested in the concept an even deeper meaning of striving to subjugate the Self (Jihad bi nafsih) to the service of the creator and His creation. Many of them dedicated their lives to the service of the weak and needy, by their example attracted millions to embrace Islam, and in such places as India continue to be revered by Muslims and Hindus alike.

It is a rare Islamist party today that devotes itself meaningfully to the mission of helping peoples and communities. To the contrary contemporary Islamists view with disfavour those who would follow the example of the sufi saints who in their time had waged the Greater Jihad. Two such figures in Pakistan today are Dr. Akhtar Hamid Khan and Maulana Abdul Sattar Edhi. Both are deeply influenced by the Sufi tradition, both are continuing to build social institutions that assist millions of people, and both have been persecuted by those who claim to be champions of Islam.

Without a hint of doubt, contemporary Muslim ideologues and militants have reduced the rich associations of jihad to the single meaning of engagement in warfare, entirely divested of its conditions and rules. Thus the war against a Marxist government in Afghanistan and its Soviet ally became the most famous jihad of the 20th century even though it was armed and financed by the United States, a non-Muslim superpower. Today, such activities as terrorism, sectarian strife, and the killings of innocent people are claimed as holy warfare. This reductionism is by no means unique to the Muslim world.

Next door in India, Hindu militancy is doing much the same despite their very different religious tradition. They have cast Hinduism as a religion of violence, warfare and force. There are of course elements of violence in the Hindu tradition. Mahatma Gandhi was a reformer who recognized that violence had a part in India's religious and cultural tradition but also viewed ahimsa as the essence of Hinduism. In his study on Gandhi, Rajmohan Gandhi mentions that when his friend C.F. Andrews observed that "Indians had rejected 'bloodlust' in times past and non-violence had become an unconscious instinct with them, Gandhi reminded Andrews that 'incarnations' in Indian legends were 'bloodthirsty, revengeful and merciless to the enemy'." (The Good Boatman. P35)

But Gandhi was a humane and imaginative leader. So he understood the essential lesson of the Mahabharata, which ends in a handful of survivors, differently - that "violence was

a delusion and a folly." By contrast, in the discourse of militant Hindu parties one scarcely finds a mention of ahimsa as a Hindu value while the emphases abound on violence, force and power. The same obsessions occupy the Jewish and Christian variants of religious-political movements. Not long ago, a ranking rabi of Israel ruled that in the cause of expanding Israeli settlements in Palestine the killing of Arabs was religiously ordained.

In the Islamist discourse I am unable to recognize the Islamic - religion, society, culture, history, or politics - as lived and experienced by Muslims through the ages. The Islamic has been in most respects a pluralistic civilization marked with remarkable degrees of diversity and patterns of antagonism and collaboration. The cultural life of the traditional Muslim was formed by at least four sets of intellectual legacies. Theology was but one such legacy. The others were philosophy and science, aesthetics, and mysticism.

Contemporary Islamists seek to suppress all but a narrow view of the theological legacy. Professor Fazlur Rahman was arguably the most eminent scholar of Islamic philosophy in our time. I knew him to be a devout Muslim who was more knowledgeable about classical Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish than any Islamist scholar I have known. When Mohammed Ayub Khan proposed to establish an Institute of Islamic Studies in Pakistan, he resigned his position at McGill University to lead this institution and make it into a world class academy. A few years later, a sustained campaign was launched against him and he was forced to leave the country.

Religious scholars, artists, poets and novelists, including Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz, have suffered persecution and assault at the hands of self-appointed champions of Islam. Complexity and pluralism threaten most - hopefully not all - contemporary Islamists, because they seek an Islamic order reduced to a penal code, stripped of its humanism, aesthetics, intellectual quests, and spiritual devotion. Their agenda is simple, therefore very reassuring to the men and women who are stranded in the middle of the ford, between the deep waters of tradition and modernity.

Neither Muslims nor Jews nor Hindus are unique in this respect. All variants of contemporary 'fundamentalism' reduce complex religious systems and civilizations to one or another version of modern fascism. They are concerned with power not with the soul, with the mobilization of people for political purposes rather than with sharing or alleviating their sufferings and aspirations. Theirs is a very limited and time bound political agenda.

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