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Fight extremism by demolishing us-versus-them world view

By Zakir Hussain

ALL too often today, religion is seen as a source of conflict, even though no religion promotes violence.

It is not hard to see why this perception exists, as extremists distort what religions actually teach and dress their world view in the cloak of religious language.

Take the radical view that armed jihad in defence of an embattled ummah is a noble undertaking.

Radicals believe that such a holy war in defence of the ummah or the global Muslim community - whether achieved by taking up arms or being a suicide bomber in Afghanistan or Iraq - is justified in Islam.

But as Muslim scholars and others have made clear repeatedly, such views have no basis in the Quran.

As renowned historian Karen Armstrong, who gave a talk here this week, told reporters: 'Ummah is supposed to be about community and love, not violence. You're supposed to come to the aid of your brother, but not fight and kill other people.'

But for many, the line between aiding one's 'brother' and fighting those who oppress him can be a thin and difficult one to draw.

So long as this is so, extremists will continue to draw upon the image of an ummah under siege to legitimise the murder of innocents, as they do on radical websites today.

Many of these sites target young Muslims eager to find out more about Islam.

Perhaps the way forward is for religious leaders to articulate a more inclusive definition of the ummah - one that includes all of humanity, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Muslim scholars have said the ummah can be defined in this manner, but it is not a definition cited very often.

Today, many Muslims worldwide view the perceived oppression of their Muslim brothers in the Middle East who want to impose their version of Islam on society, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the American invasion of Iraq as damning evidence that the West is out to destroy Islam and weaken the ummah.

Yes, the position of mainstream religious scholars on violence as a means of redressing these perceived infringements is clear. In a booklet addressing misconceptions of jihad published earlier this year, two local Islamic religious scholars noted that acts like hostage taking, hijacking public transport, attacking public places and suicide operations are prohibited in Islam.

'These acts constitute among the greatest sins,' noted Ustaz Haniff Hassan and Ustaz Mohamed Ali.

But despite these clear prohibitions, a minority of Muslims still feel they are right in pursuing violent aims - and online and offline, they cite the defence of the ummah as a factor.

Recent news on the detention of 28-year-old law graduate Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader, who had plans to travel to Pakistan and Afghanistan to pursue militant jihad, underscores how society here is not free from followers with such a world view.

Of course, the way forward must be for religious leaders to counter beliefs that feed such abuse of faith.

They must debunk exclusivist and intolerant interpretations of the faith, leaving Muslims in no doubt that these are against Islamic teachings. It is a message that requires consistent and persistent amplification.

The problem is because, while not all who hold such views will necessarily pursue violence, there is a higher chance that once you internalise such views, you will find it easier to see others as less worthy of respect. And that is a short step away from viewing the life of others as somehow worth less than that of a fellow believer's.

Several religious leaders say this mindset - which believes Muslims can be loyal only to fellow believers and that non-Muslims must be shunned - is common among those who believe terrorism is justified.

They also tend to support the belief that Muslims must establish a political order which reflects such a morality, and some who share this view believe the end justifies violent means.

But these ideas are ahistorical and not grounded in the progress of Islam over the centuries which, if anything, has never condoned such a view of humanity as being divided between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Another way to guard against such a warped mindset is to emphasise the primacy of Islamic teachings on compassion and kindness, as many urge.

While this will help, there should be no illusion that such a move is enough to tackle the intolerance and hatred of the 'Other' that makes it easier for a person to turn to violence in the name of religion.

Yes, religious and community leaders must continue to preach that such intolerance, let alone violence, has no place in Islam - as many here already do.

But in a multicultural, cosmopolitan world, Islamic religious leaders should go further and deal squarely with issues like an appreciation and embrace of diversity in all forms, including in matters of faith.

At a time when some Muslims may feel that loyalties to the ummah inevitably mean viewing non-Muslims in a different light, a more inclusive ummah will hopefully further delegitimise the us-versus-them world view that extremists hold, thereby limiting their appeal to young Muslims.

But it will also remind everyone that whatever we believe, it is the shared thread of humanity that binds us all together, and the same blood that runs through our veins.

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