

Islam Still Has Room for Thought

Recent deaths in protests against the behaviour of guards at Guantanamo Bay suggest the Muslim elite should curb the growth of symbolism by promoting a culture of intellectualism

By Nazry Bahrawi

As Muslim communities today grapple with the onslaught of rapid political, social and cultural changes in the spirit of upholding democracy and progress in the contemporary world, many would agree that the age of the heretic is nigh. Before its members can fully convalesce from the after-effects of the much despised infamy initiated by US academic Amina Wadud who led the historical but highly debatable mixed-gender mass prayer, they were rocked by yet another contentious ripple encapsulated by the initially dubious Newsweek media report highlighting allegations of Koran desecration at the US-managed Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba. It is now revealed that there were five instances where the Koran was mishandled, although none suggests that the Holy Book was flushed down the toilet.

Nonetheless, both events have invoked strong reactions from Muslims worldwide. The Newsweek report contributed to an estimated 16 deaths in Afghanistan following protests based on reports by the Qatar-based Aljazeera news network. It is speculated that the recent US report will invoke further demonstrations and cause even more deaths within the Muslim world, despite the fact that Muslim prisoners were also themselves party to mishandling the Koran as a sign of protest against their captors.

Much to their chagrin, practitioners of the Islamic faith have largely been stereotyped as weathered protesters. In the past, numerous other events have incited a flurry of similar mass condemnations, including a ban on the *hijab* at public schools in France, and publication of Salman Rushdie's notorious novel *The Satanic Verses* at the height of the Islamic revivalist movement in Iran during the reign of Islamist ideologue Ayatollah Khomeini. The deadly effect of such religious protests is best seen in the brutal slaying of Dutch movie maker Theo Van Gogh after he released a controversial film about violence against women within Muslim communities. Many considered his employment of images of naked women wearing the *hijab* insulting to the Islamic faith; at least one man was driven to murder Van Gogh.

While there exists little doubt that these acts are offensive to the Muslim majority, the ensuing and often emotional reactions implies a faith community that is perhaps a tad too sensitive when it comes to matters of religious symbolism. In all these incidents, the crux of the matter was generally the alleged defilement of objects that were symbols of Islamic religiosity.

In the cases of Amina Wadud, the *hijab* ban and the Van Gogh film, these reactions suggest that the female personage in the public sphere is hailed as religious when veiled, contained and covert – but despairingly blasphemous when not. Retorts against the Koran mishandling cases at Guantanamo Bay revere this Holy Book as an iconic material object that has

become the symbol of Islamic religiosity, rather than its inherent messages. But those who found Koranic abuse so incendiary to the Islamic faith should remember when the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan destroyed the ancient Buddhist statues of Bamiyan in 2001. Protests from worldwide Buddhist practitioners at that time viewed global Muslim communities as perpetrators of a similarly heinous feat for doing little to stop the destruction.

Why this emphasis by Islam on the outward manifestation of religious symbolism? Some contemporary Islamic scholars see it as a reaction against the hegemonic forces of globalisation. In a recent essay entitled “Globalisation: A Conundrum for the Muslim World?” published in *The Muslim Reader* magazine of Singapore, Indian scholar Asghar Ali Engineer posits that the value of the *hijab* as an expression of Islamic religiosity is especially prevalent among members of diasporic Muslim communities residing in predominantly secular or non-Islamic countries. He points out that even though migrant Muslim men dress in shirts and pants like their Western counterparts, there is an overarching insistence for migrant Muslim women to cover up. Veiling has become more than just a divine duty; it is an uncompromising marker for Muslim identity.

All of this arguably has led to a rise in *taqlid*, or blind faith, and subsequently a dearth of *ijtihad*, or intellectual, theological debate among learned scholars. *Ijtihad* demands exhaustive intellectual process employing rationality and careful inspection of divine sources like the Koran, Sunnah (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad) and other teachings with the aim of establishing an educated opinion about issues affecting one’s life.

Malaysian sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas has actually argued (in an essay entitled “Tumbuh Tiada Berbuah” in his book *Kita Dengan Islam*, 1979) religious authorities closed the door to *ijtihad* as early as 10 CE in order to prevent the misuse of religion by unscrupulous rulers.

In the same essay, he laments that *ijtihad* is further discouraged through the establishment of strict qualifications before one is considered a *mujtahid*, or a person who can perform *ijtihad*. These rules include being proficient in Islamic teachings, a good grasp of Islamic knowledge and its issues as well as contemporary world knowledge and its issues, an understanding of his society’s conditions and the reasons for wanting progress, a masterly command of the Arabic language and other necessary languages, and being concerned about the here and now, and not in the past.

Arguing that it is nearly impossible to fulfill these, Dr. Syed Hussein views the rules as blatant impediments rather than just mere qualifications to performing *ijtihad*. In countering the adverse impact of anti-intellectualism in the Asia Pacific region, he recommends that Muslim elites promote the spirit of unbridled thoughts, and guard against the trappings of feudalism and outdated concerns, as well as blind faith.

In a globalized world where cross-cultural interactions are increasingly gaining headway, an excessive interest over outward Islamic symbolism can prove to be detrimental to world peace. Clandestine individuals or groups vying to gain political mileage can invoke unyielding support from members of largely uncritical Muslim communities by playing up the emotive sentiments about such markers of faith.

When Osama bin Laden of Al-Qaeda mapped his call for armed *jihad* along the lines of liberating Palestine from Jewish hands, he struck a sensitive chord among many Muslims who view the land of Palestine as a symbol of Islamic religiosity. Muslims should sympathise with the sufferings of Palestinians, but they should be discerning enough to react rationally. If they had done so, perhaps the 16 lives lost after news of the Koran mishandling could have been spared.

Closer to home, some focus must be directed towards Muslims in troubled regions of Southeast Asia like southern Thailand, the southern Philippines and parts of Indonesia. Acknowledging that each community is riddled with specific intricacies and multifarious motives for their respective problems, members of these communities are considerably vulnerable to the manipulation of Islamic symbolism for political gains by devious individuals or groups.

There has been speculation that the recent bomb blasts in Tentena, Sulawesi was the handiwork of militants endeavouring to incite communal violence between Muslims and Christians there. If true, this could mean ideologues within such groups have played up touchy issues surrounding Islamic symbolism to mobilise support from uncritical Muslim minds.

While far from exhaustive, these are some sure indications that the fascination with Islamic symbolism is a multi-faceted phenomenon that has its roots in the development of Muslim civilizations of yesteryear. Ultimately, the onus of curbing the growth of such symbolism lies with the enlightened Muslim elite, who must promote a culture of intellectualism among its members. In doing so, the gatekeepers must slowly open the doors to *ijtihad*. In the meantime, others should consider choosing whether to cry heresy or cry freedom in reacting to future controversies.

[This article first appeared in *Bangkok Post*, 13 June 2005]