

Understanding Rage, and Its Antidote

by Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib

*J*ust days ago, I was asked over a dinner conversation with several interfaith practitioners: "Why are Muslims such an angry people?" The riots over the film *Innocence of Muslims* was certainly on their minds. It took me a while to respond.

First, there is an unstated presumption that most, if not all, Muslims are prone to anger.

Second, a string of incidents from recent decades seems to suggest that any form of provocation to the Muslim faith is sure to lead to riots and vengeful killings across the Muslim world.

Who could forget the death fatwa issued on British novelist Salman Rushdie for *The Satanic Verses*, which denigrates the founder of Islam, Mohammed; and a similar response to the Danish *Jyllands-Posten's* cartoon in 2005?

It seems as if provocations directed at Muslims have heightened in the last few years. In 2008, Dutch film-maker Geert Wilders released his movie *Fitna*, which depicted the Quran as evil and promoting hatred and violence.

Two years later, Terry Jones, pastor of a small church in America called for a Quran-burning day that sparked worldwide protests and violence.

Yes, perhaps Muslims have a legitimate basis to feel angry. There is a sense of injustice felt when hate-speech is disguised in the garb of free speech. More so, when there is rising Islamophobia perpetuated by extremists in Europe and America. The shocking massacre by Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik who held anti-Islam views is a case in point.

REINFORCING A STEREOTYPE

Yet, I also feel unease over the way some Muslims have responded to these provocations.

The worldwide violence that occurred in cities ranging from Islamabad to Jakarta to Sydney ironically reinforces the very stereotype that the low-budget film *Innocence of Muslims*, seeks to perpetuate: That Islam is a religion of

violence. Never mind that the film is crude and aesthetically hopeless; no serious viewer would find it convincing, only an already warped and prejudiced mind.

When American Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three others were killed in Benghazi, Libya, during protests over the film, it raised the whole issue of what some have been calling the "Muslim rage".

This face of Islam - that of vengeance and violence in the face of provocation - is alien to me. How can a person proclaiming daily the invocation "In the name of God, Most Merciful, Most Compassionate" spout so much hate and violence in a single breath?

How does one call oneself a follower of "Islam" - a derivative of the Arabic root word "salam", meaning "peace" - yet be so willing to commit acts of violence at the first instance of provocation? There is a disjuncture between the acts of these Muslims and the tradition of Islam that more than a billion Muslims around the world have been brought up in.

If one claims to protect the dignity of the beloved Prophet Mohammed, why not take a leaf or two from the manner in which Mohammed treated those who hurled insults at him? Never had the Prophet acted in ways other than compassion.

In one instance out of the many, he tended to a Jewish woman when she was too ill to continue hurling garbage at him. Even in the capture of Mecca, he provided amnesty and granted forgiveness to his enemies among the Quraysh tribe bent on destroying him. "Keep to forgiveness," God commanded Mohammed, "and enjoin kindness, and turn away from the ignorant."

If such was the ethical quality and mission of Mohammed, why do those who claim to be his most ardent believers not display the same mercy and compassion in the face of adversity?

BAGGAGE OF HISTORY

The answer, I believe, lies in the tumultuous relationship that the Muslim world has had with some of the forces that shape modern global society.

First, there is the baggage of colonialism that continues to haunt the Muslim psyche. A people once dominated and relegated to an "inferior status" in the ladder of civilisation will eventually subvert that very narrative and adopt a diametrically opposite set of categories - that of its own "superiority" and the "bankruptcy of the West".

Anti-West sentiments are part of the burning coal for Muslim reactionary movements. The occasional insults to Islam are mere triggers to a deeper trauma resulting from centuries of domination and humiliation.

Second, post-colonial developments in the Muslim world have not brought reprieve but further injury. The failure of democratic ideas and social justice to take root across many Muslim-majority countries were a further blow to the psyche.

This would eventually take the form of erratic displays of rage and anger - a way, as social psychologists would impute, of not dealing with one's own inadequacy, frustration and exclusion from being part of a creative process for positive social change.

Third, the ascendancy of extremists within the political institution of democratic governments in Europe and America, as well as within the Religious Right dominated by Christian conservatives, exacerbate the situation through their drumming of Islam as the antithesis of Western civilisation, an enemy of modernity and an evil religion out to dominate the world.

Such views unfortunately inform or eventually seep into many of the policies that determine how Western governments deal with the Arab Muslim world.

The result can only be a pitting of two contrasting ideologies - the "clash of civilisation" thesis promulgated by American political theorist and consultant to the US State Department, Samuel Huntington.

RAGE ISN'T EXCLUSIVE

The question posed at the dinner table led me to re-examine what has gone wrong within the Muslim world today. I do not see the vengeful and violent act of several thousand Muslims across the globe as representative of the Islamic faith.

To me, there is no such thing as an exclusively "Muslim rage". There is only rage, which is a type of violent anger that all humans are capable of. And to understand this rage is to delve into the nexus of history, politics and even psychology. Theology cannot answer why some Muslims respond with anger and violence.

One cannot solve the problem of extremism through mere appeal to "right Islam" as opposed to "wrong Islam". One must dig deeper for the solution, and it is not just about having the "moderates" speak up. It is about ensuring that peace-loving people of all persuasions find each other and provide mutual support in an increasingly volatile and polarised world.

Extremists tend to feed off each other. The last thing we want is for them to dictate the terms of engagement for the rest of us. We must reach out to the progressive elements within each faith community, and build bridges to strengthen the common good for all of us.

In this, there is hope and joy that might quell the hate and anger within all of us. []

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