COMMENTARY

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Killing in the Name of God

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Notwithstanding the cultural and interpretive differences between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the God worshiped by Muhammad is the same God that communicated with Abraham and to which Jesus prayed.

This one God, it is believed, revealed sublime values which were then disseminated by the three largest monotheistic religions. It is therefore easy to wholeheartedly support these religions for giving voice to ethical injunctions for centuries.

That is, despite myriad conflicts, religion at its core was created to foster peace, compassion, and brotherhood while providing ethical guidance and nurturing the inherent good in humanity, reflecting a generous and loving Supreme Being.

Giving voice to this truth, Einstein said that without religion, science was lame. Science, he argued, can measure and predict events but cannot directly provide advice concerning what is right or wrong, where religion can offer guidance in ethical conduct.

Considering the ever-present challenge for human survival in a hostile world, it is understandable that religions would occasionally remain silent on the verdict of war or fail in their missions to promote peace and amity.

The World Wars of the twentieth century are historically considered secular wars fought over political, geographic, and economic interests. Yet in Europe, six million Jews were exterminated as a result of centuries of anti-Semitic teachings brewing in the heart of medieval Christendom.

From the time of Muhammad and for nearly thirteen hundred years after, Islam waged religious wars against whole populations, forcing conversion to Islam (excluding Jews and Christians, known as "the people of the book") as a means by which to spread its faith.

The major Christian response to the spread of Islam manifested as the Crusades, which spanned the 11th to 13th centuries.

The European wars of religion between rivalling Christian sects encompassed roughly 125 years of conflict in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Arab-Israeli conflict, though ostensibly fought over territory, contains a powerful religious component, especially in connection with Jerusalem, for which thousands have been killed and many more might die if it is not resolved peacefully.

In all cases, religious conviction, which was repeatedly invoked, amplified a sense of entitlement to the lands and wealth of other.

This begs the question: of what stuff is religion truly made? For in all the conflicts in the history of the world, the violence and atrocities incited by religious fervour comprise some of the worst violations of human dignity.

Historically speaking, a religious war is a conflict exclusively incited and fuelled by diversity in religious identity. While technically less than 10% of all the wars ever fought were wars of religion, only a few did not encompass or embody some religious component or sentiment.

By the same token that we support the ethical teachings of religions, we must all the more and in unison condemn self-appointed messengers and spokespersons of the divine that foment mass murder in the name of God.

For unless we believe that this all-merciful, fatherly, peace-loving, and ever-beneficent God wills for his believers to kill each other in His name, we must conclude that religions are repeatedly corrupted to pit the children of God against each other.

Ironically, conflict more often occurs within religions than between them. Today we witness the eruption of centuries of enmity between Sunni and Shiites Muslims that has been nurtured by prolonged persecution.

The Sunni–Shiite schism occurred when Muhammad died in 632, causing disagreement over the succession to Muhammad's religious authority. Following the murder of Hussein (Ali's son and Muhammad's grandson), the Muslim community became squarely and eternally divided.

Nevertheless, tensions between Sunnis and Shiites are more often about political persecution than strictly theology, though religious convictions are frequently invoked, fomenting anger and resentment.

During the Safavid era in Persia between the years 1501-1736, forced conversion of Sunnis to Shiites was systematically done to change the demographic balance between the two; those who refused were killed.

The 1979 revolution in Iran that brought the Shiites to power (with regional hegemonic ambitions) further heightened the tension between the two sects.

Further radicalization of Shiites came with Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the establishment of the Shiite Hezbollah.

While the average Sunni and Shiite have been relatively able to live in peace, the theological division has allowed despots, like Saddam Hussein, to disempower and dehumanize Shiites.

The 2003 Iraq war, though subsequently bringing the Shiite majority to power, ignited a bloody conflict between Shiites and Sunnis that continues to this day.

Conflicting interests between Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia and Turkey have made Syria the battleground between the two sects, deepening the fissure more than at any other time in living memory.

Though Sunni and Shiites agree on the unquestioned authority of the Qur'an, sectarian factionalism has persisted and remains a destabilizing force in the Middle East, leaving a terrible inheritance passed down from generation to generation.

Children, especially of the disenfranchised and poorly educated, have effectively become not the recipients of the necessary ethical teachings of Islam, but the targets of religious extremism, promoting endless sectarian strife.

Part of the problem is that the codification of religious precepts opens it up to all manner of interpretation; indigent and marginalized peoples are particularly vulnerable to the most radical and violence-producing interpretations of Islam.

It is in this way that a precept, for example, to not murder, is literally turned on its head and becomes the precise opposite; where once religion decried violence, now violence and death are associated with martyrdom. Yet the situation in the Middle East is far graver than this.

When true believers habitually use religious language to explain and frame the events of their lives, the heart and emotions, more often than reason and science, are employed as a means of defining one's place in the world.

Moreover, if the avenue to self-determination is exclusively faith-based, radical responses to extreme situations of disempowerment, as in Iraq post-Saddam Hussein and poverty-stricken Yemen will be more passionate than tempered.

Herein lay the danger, for this is no longer a world where we can afford to view whole peoples as populations to be conquered and converted, whether to a religious, economic, or political paradigm.

The monotheistic faiths must at once embrace their ethical heritage and disavow their antiquated views of God, acknowledging that humanity has invented thousands of gods. All these gods, without exception, reflect the people who invented them and the conditions under which they lived.

In other words, religions spiritually succeed when they embrace the spirit of God embodied in their very ethical teachings but utterly fail when they become little more than a ruse designed to supplant God with tribal, ethnic, and sectarian divisiveness.

The work of Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677) may be of help here. Einstein once said that his God was the God of Spinoza. Pantheism, or understanding God as the cosmos, was already ancient in the East when Spinoza was born.

Yet the idea that God might be conceived by the mind – as in his famous interpretation of *natura naturans* ("nature nurturing") – was relatively new in the West.

While denying a personal God "up there," Spinoza reminds us that we can embrace the idea of an Infinite Being that has passively produced, as part of its very nature, the cosmos. Although the rabbinic tradition considered this heresy and excommunicated Spinoza, I would argue that, far from lowering God's status as the clergy believed, it elevated it.

Such an elevated God inspires a more personal religion wherein virtue is internalized, selfishness is nullified, and a sincere jihad against the biological responses to fear, fight or flight, and insecurity is waged within.

Humanity has suffered for too long due to a lowered conception of the infinite that was easily exploited to pit man against man. Increased used of the scientific method and reason, especially among those afforded a high degree of education, and may tone down emotional and passionate responses to challenging circumstances.

This is not to say that the intellectual approach has all of the answers, lest we forget Einstein's reminder regarding science's ethical limits.

For while the West understandably pays a great deal of attention to the current killing in the name of God in some of the Arab states, the numbers involved do not compare to the fifty million or more slaughtered in World War II alone mostly Christians against Christians.

Intellectually-bent Western societies may introduce the "civility" of war, complete with Geneva Conventions and other rules by which blood can be spilt. But their wars, to date, encompass a far greater destructive power than do the conflicts of any other peoples, especially in the current conflict of Muslims against Muslims in the Middle East.
So the question remains: how can we cease the religious (in the name of God) and corporate (in the name of Mammon) justification of violence?

Understanding violence in the broadest context, the West may in some respects be actually farther away from realizing this goal. While the death tolls of soldiers are easy to disseminate, the daily suffering of millions of dislocated, dishonoured, and stateless lives does not as easily fit into our news diet.

The West also does not live within the scope of history. While for us yesterday is already history, the Arab world lives day in and day out conscious of its histories of divisiveness, colonialism, dictatorships, and arbitrary borders imposed by Western powers that fostered sectarian conflicts and territorial claims and counterclaims.

Nevertheless, the Arab world is left with the challenge to compartmentalize religion and God, just as the West has done; albeit far from perfect, religion in the West remains functional, consistent, and in the spirit of one's personal choice.

For the Muslim world, Islam is more than a mere belief to embrace, but a way of life and part and parcel of a cultural heritage; as such, it remains a part of the heart and self-identity.

That said, nearly 60 percent of the Arab population (250 million out of 422 million in total) is under the age of 25. They yearn for freedom, education, health care, and the opportunity for a better future.

They are Muslims at heart and mind but they do not wish to be ruled by either secular or religious dictators (albeit ostensibly freely-elected) as demonstrated by Egypt's second revolution. They want to be free while adhering to Islamic tradition and culture and draw a balance between secularism and orthodoxy.

Religion, like it is today in Israel and to a great extent in Muslim Malaysia and Bangladesh, may be used to reconcile family issues, including marriage, divorce, children and custody issues, death, and coming-of-age rituals.

Beyond this, religion must go no farther. It must have no bearing on medical science, international relations, or national defence, and a host of other international and domestic issues. Other than that religion must foster unconditional peace, amity, love, and compassion in humankind.

Thus in writing new constitutions in the emerging transitional authorities, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and other Arab states must recognize that whereas collaboration between the religious and the secular is necessary, legislatively codifying Sharia law as a source for legislation is a step backward.

For the world today, Arab states that have overwhelming majorities of youth are not so intellectually poor as to require religion for its only source of ethics. Codes of behaviour flow from secular humanism, law, and philosophical debate.

Those who look to religion for personal guidance are free to do so and their right must be protected, but they must also abide by the laws that separate church and state. No longer should any religious edict be forced on anyone.

Under these conditions, religious freedom goes hand in hand with personal freedom, which is central in promoting all religions' fundamental tenets of brotherhood, compassion, amity and peace.

And perhaps this may bring an end to the killing in the name of God that betrays the essence of why and to what end religion was created in the first place.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/killing-in-the-name-of-god/

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