

From *Religion in Politics* by Eqbal Ahmed

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[...]

Here I discuss how [the] 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 nafsihi*) 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. [...]

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.

[...]

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.

[...]

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.