

FAITH, REASON AND ISLAM

MONA SIDDIQUI

On the path to mutual respect

Muslims must learn that differing views are at the core of a civil society, according to a leading Islamic scholar, and violent calls for revenge over perceived slights only fuel criticism of their religion

Once again we are seeing images of Muslims rioting, burning effigies and shouting for more deaths. Even the more respectable press is speculating on the precise nature of the link between Islam – more specifically the Qur'an – and violence. And once again “moderate” Islam is being asked to explain the actions of a menacing few. Except that the increasing worry is that it might not be a few and that the images of violence are actually a reflection of the hostility that most Muslims feel towards any criticism of their faith, culture or history.

As a Muslim I remain perplexed. Why are Muslims magnifying every incident to the level of a global conflict? Adulation and veneration of the Prophet may be laudable qualities but is this really what this furore is about? I don't think so. The ease with which marches are mobilised and threats directed are symptoms of a community not only feeling under siege but slightly revelling in their victim status. From Cairo to London, we have seen calls for apologies for a comment that could have been consigned to the annals of papal intellectualism; instead the comment became yet another mark of mutual distrust and suspicion between some Muslims and the Western world. This has damaged no one but it has made Islam appear like a complete idiosyncrasy in the West. Islam is a major world religion which doesn't need this kind of weak defence.

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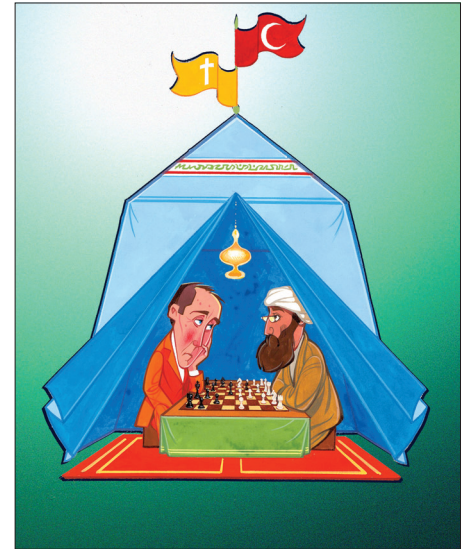
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I'm sure that Pope Benedict did not deliberately intend to offend the Prophet in particular. But as someone who was previously the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, he is not naive and must have known that his speech could be contentious and open to all sorts of interpretations. Whether he was ill advised or advised at all, the fact remains that he now symbolises far more than his academic credentials.

This incident is not about defending freedom of speech – that red herring brought out as the ultimate achievement of Western civilisation – it is about recognising that pitting one faith against another to show the superiority of one and the deficiencies of the other is a dangerous and arrogant exercise. By all means, explore genuine theological differences, but not on the assumption that one faith perspective has all the right answers. Both Christianity and Islam have blood on their hands. Both are missionary religions often struggling to accept the essential truth of any other faith. Both come together mostly when they want to condemn certain sexual or fertility practices as an affront to human dignity.

Intellectuals and academics must have the right to posit any arguments they want if they can support them with rigorous evidence. But in this speech one of the connections being made by the Pope was that Islamic views of divine transcendence have left very little room for reason or logos in Islam. This is unlike in Christianity, where reason and revelation have complemented each other for a very long time and provided the fundamental basis for Western society, a society where religious violence and coercion have no place. Eradicating religious violence must be a desirable objective for all of us.

The problem here is that if we continue to judge Islam only by the current images of violence then there will be very little desire to tolerate this faith, never mind see it as a legitimate expression of the Divine. Why some Muslims are so quick to resort to violent acts may be more about political self-interest than any genuine search for justice. There are no easy answers as to why acts of intense violence



have become such a defining aspect of the Muslim faith.

Unfortunately, very little seems to have changed since the Rushdie affair. But let's remember that there have always been different intellectual conversations and ideologies within Islam and, even today, it would be completely wrong to think that such debates are no more than peripheral or academic to mainstream Islam. One has only to look at the discussions around sharia law and pluralism to understand that there are many people from all levels of society who are actively engaged in working for a more inclusive and just world.

The real reason why Pope Benedict's lecture touches on so many sensitivities is because the theological analysis carries within it serious political ambitions. For Pope Benedict, Christianity cannot just be Europe's past; it must also be Europe's future. It is the Pope's aspirations to make Christianity once again a living force in the West that underlies so much of his current thinking both in relation to other faiths and in his attempts to unify the Christian Church. As a Pope, he has every right to work towards this goal but Europe is not just the Catholic Church, nor is the Catholic Church just the pontificate.

The Pope cannot ignore the growing diversity within his own faith nor in the other faiths that are also a major part of Europe. True, he is concerned about the challenge of secularism, which sees itself as the repository of reason, but if religion and reason are to come together to face contemporary challenges, can it be any religion or can it only be Christianity?

Muslims must learn that differing viewpoints and multiple voices are the very essence of civil society. Even when the viewpoint touches on something as sacred as the Prophet and his legacy, responses must be dignified and respectful. This would reflect the true essence of Islam; calling for revenge and retribution is doing little more than proving all the critics right.

■ Professor Mona Siddiqui is Director of the Centre for the Study of Islam at Glasgow University.