

God - In the Mind of the Terrorist?

*Dr Jasbir Singh Ahluwalia**

* Former Vice Chancellor, Punjabi University. C/o Kalgidhar Niwas, Plot No. 6, Madhya Marg, Sector 27, Chandigarh. Email: jsa_ks160733@yahoo.co.in

In this essay I shall be addressing the problems of that *kind* of terrorism which is labelled as religious terrorism, that is, terrorism attributed to, or associated, with religion.

Terrorism of any *kind*, in any *form*, is deterrent, a threat to peace and development. But an equally formidable threat to lasting peace and development comes from counter-terrorism in the sense that a vicious circle, a symbiotic relationship is created in which the two phenomena feed on each other.

There is "Terror in the Mind of God" says Mark Juergensmeyer in his recent book bearing that title. "The Lord God is a Man of War," declares the Christian Identity leader Kerry Noble.¹

Violence:

Such conceptualization of religious violence, equated with, or occasioned by, upsurge in the world's religions, in different parts of the globe, implies that such religious resurgence has to be rolled back for restoring secular values; for reinforcing Modern Western Civilization with its inherent polarity between secularism and religion; for strengthening the United States 'as the politico-military champion' against religious terrorism on global level, and for accelerating the forces of globalization which is seen as the great historical force for levelling down ethnic, ethno-religious and religious identities that are perceived as the breeding ground for religious assertions. This is one scenario today.

The other opposite scenario may be termed as God in the Mind of the Terrorist, in the sense that the religious acts, labelled as terrorist acts by the opponents, are of the nature of religiously and morally justified reprisal against state terrorism, now outsourced and globalized by the U.S.-led West that, singling out Islam, has, in the words of Osama bin Laden declared "war on God, His Messenger and Muslims".²

There being no meeting ground between these two extreme positions, it is, therefore, essential to comprehend the dialectics of contemporary social realities expressing itself out in these two opposite scenarios.

Four main characteristics constitute the dialectics of contemporary social reality in the world today; these characteristics have direct or indirect bearing on terrorism attributed or related to religion.

First, the class contradictions that predominated the larger part of the twentieth century have given place to ethnic, ethno-religious, and religious contradictions; whereas earlier the ethnic, ethno-religious, and religious contradictions were mediated in and through the class contradictions, now the class contradictions tend to be mediated in and through ethnic, ethno-religious, and religious contradictions.

Secondly, the last decades of the past century witnessed the failure of the Modern Western Civilization's secular ideologies – liberal democracy, nationalism, socialism, communism – that once held out to humankind the hope, in one or the other form, for redemption of society and state; hence the resultant 'incredulity toward metanarratives'³ of progress and development, in the words of Jean-Francois Lyotard. The vacuum so caused by the betrayal of the secular ideologies came to be filled by religious effervescence and resurgence in different parts of the world, providing alternative religious ideologies for radical transformation of man, society and state, for ushering in a new world order, for bringing about a new multi-focal global civilizational dispensation in place of the unifocal Modern Western Civilizations, now on the way out.

Religious Vs Secular:

This brings us to the **third** characteristic of contemporary social reality: 'the Clash of Civilizations',⁴ propounded by Samuel Huntington in his well-known book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. This clash has become enmeshed with the clash between secular and religious ideologies, for the reason that unlike the Modern Western Civilization, the Eastern Civilizations are intertwined with religious beliefs, rituals and symbols. Religion in the Eastern Civilizations is instantiated in both personal and community life of the peoples. The Modern Western Civilization had, as its foundational category, the 'deified' *reason* that was supposed to reign supreme in nature, history and society, with the promise of bringing about a *rational* society and system, free from inequities and inequalities. The deified *reason* has betrayed its promise and so the Modern Western Civilization's claims of progress and development, which in reality should have brought about empowerment of the peoples, particularly the marginalized ones, also stand betrayed. Contemporary thinkers are, expressing the views that the new global civilization would have *spirit* as its foundational category. This also creates a natural affinity between religion and the new civilizational dispensation in the offing, between positively redemptive religious ideologies and the new, incoming civilizational order.

That the clash of civilizations, the clash between religious and secular ideologies, the clash between religious terrorism and counterterrorism are all enmeshed with each other is becoming clearer day after day. The U.S.-led offensive, enlisting the support of countries after countries, in the name of counterterrorism, is deeper in implication than what it appears on the surface. The U.S. President George W. Bush in his address to the Americans on the 5th anniversary of the September 11 attacks on World Trade Center stated that the United States was engaged in "**a struggle for civilization**" and that this was "**the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century**".

Reacting to the address of Pope Benedict XVI on September 12, 2006 at the University of Regensburg, Germany, in which - quoting a 14th-century Byzantine emperor, the Pope said that Islam's Prophet Muhammad had brought to the world only what was "evil and inhuman", *The Indian Express* in its Editorial (September 15, 2006), rightly observed that this controversial address "may well be construed as Vatican's seal of approval on Samuel Huntington's famous clash of civilisations argument". If the most powerful highest *secular* authority (President Bush) *and* the highly venerated *religious* authority, both in tandem with each other, as it appears, conceive of religious terrorism (particularly Islamic), and counter-terrorism in terms of ideological struggle, then it becomes clear that the target is not simplistically so-called religious terrorism but what is at stake, for the perpetrators of counterterrorism, is the very survival of *their* civilization, which, in other words, means Modern Western Civilization.

By globalising its counterterrorist campaign, in violent forms, the United States has succeeded in outsourcing its offensive against so-called religious terrorism. For instance, till recently the condemnable terrorist acts on Indian soil were region-specific, situation-specific, context-specific, etc. But now, owing to the U.S.-led globalisation of counterterrorism, the terrorist acts in India have not only increased in momentum and frequency but have also become *generalised*, going beyond their earlier region-specific, situation-specific, context-specific character.

Economic Disparity:

Coming back to the dialectics of contemporary social reality in today's world, its **fourth** characteristic is pervasive effect of globalisation, both as an economic dispensation and an ideology, cumulatively, eroding the group identities of ethnic, ethno-religious, and religious

identities of the minorities and migrants in different parts of the world. Joseph Stiglitz, former Chief Economist at the World Bank, has attributed 'ethnic conflicts'⁵ to the discontents of globalisation.

Globalization, as an ideology, has bigger potential than its economic form, for sudden violent eruptions, often in ethnic and religious forms. Globalization is fast fostering a consumerist culture, propped up by credit card borrowings, the illusory prosperity of which is benumbing the voices of discontents, dissents and protests against the exploitative system and is de-sensitizing the marginalized, the deprived and the other have-nots to the earlier redemptive concepts of revolt and revolution leading to their collective mobilization which, now, thanks to globalization, as an ideology, is suffering diffusion, dispersal and dissipation, but, nevertheless, getting repressed in subconscious mind. Like Freudian repressions, the repressed discontents have the potential of sudden volcanic eruptions – with religion, ethnicity, language and regional factors as the new rallying points – in unpredictable places, in unpredictable times, in unpredictable manners. The system, without identifying and coping with the causal factors, *in their specificities*, retaliates by artificially fitting such violent volcanic eruptions into readymade generalized stereotypes of religious fundamentalism, cross-border terrorism, internal mafiadom, etc. That simply wouldn't help.

Catharsis:

Certain fallacious approaches compound and confound the comprehension of the dialectics of contemporary social reality in relation to the problems of religious terrorism. The first fallacy is the one that considers violence to be innate to all religious traditions, implying that violence is embedded in the beliefs, rituals and symbols of all religions. Hence the proponents of such view see 'Terror in the Mind of God'. For instance, for them the **Sikh symbol of *Khanda*** (a double-edged sword) is a domesticized form of violence⁶, though Mark Juergensmeyer hastens to add that such religious symbols of violence, *qua* ritualized domesticization, become sanitized, getting stripped of their violent meaning in the process. Still such scholars who see violence at the core of some of the religious symbols of different faiths contend that the inherent proclivity of such symbols, when ritualized, tend to replicate themselves in existential terms in personal and social life of the faith community concerned. This is a lopsided view; rather ritualization of religious symbols and images, taken from the struggles of a faith community, have cathartic (cleansing) effect on the faith followers.

Identity:

Another fallacious approach to religious terrorism posits secularism against identity symbols of a religious community, particularly when that community is a minority community. Hence the French legislation banning the wearing of visible religious symbols such as Islamic headscarves, Sikh turbans, Jewish yarmulkes, etc., in public schools and work places on the ground that such practices, according to the French President Jacques Chirac are repugnant to "the principle of secularism" (BBC News – 24th December, 2003).

There is still another fallacy to the problem that sees the phenomenon of religious resurgence as synonymous with upsurge in religious violence in different parts of the world.

But a deeper analysis of the two phenomena –religious resurgence and upsurge in religious violence – would reveal that though only temporally related, that is, contemporaneous, these are different from each other, having different root – causes; the dynamics of the one are different from those of the other. For instance, religious resurgence has strongly taken place, in most of the cases, not in countries with backward economies, but in fairly well-developed countries.

In the context of '**religious resurgence versus upsurge in religious violence**', arise a

few agonizing questions : Is religious violence really religious in nature? Another pertinent question is whether this expression – religious violence – is just a conjunction of two words that camouflages the violence of the superpower imperium at one place and the majoritarian imperium at another place. Is state terrorism against a weaker country justifiable simply because it is committed in the name of undoing religious violence in the targeted country? In what category do we place the wiping out of the regime of a weaker country by a superpower under the pretext of wiping out the weapons of mass destruction? **Is the possession of weapons of mass destruction by a non-Western country more dangerous to World peace and development than their possession by a Western country?** How do the defenders of American military attack, with some allies, on Iraq reply and respond to the critics who see in this attack a clash between Islamic civilization and Western civilization that grew out of Western Christendom? If this American attack is symptomatic of the clash of the two civilizations, that have a long history of head-on collision, then can counterterrorism mobilization under the stewardship of the United States succeed against Islamic mobilization the world over? In other words, can the worldwide Islamic mobilization be rolled back on the plank of counterterrorism mobilization? **Is religious violence of a majority community, as in the case of Gujarat in India comparable to the cathartic, retaliatory violence of the targeted religious minority?** Is the so-called religious violence an empowerment of religion through violence? Or sanctification of violence by religious motifs and symbols? Is religious violence due to politicization of religion? Or due to religious underpinning of politics? Is the reappearance of assertive religious consciousness a subordination of rational mode of thought and behaviour to religious dogma?

‘Operation Bluestar’ Recalled:

Almost all living religions of the world today have witnessed the rise of violent religious movements that have diverse aims and goals, depending upon the variables of the context and circumstance. In the Sikh praxis of the last two decades of the twentieth century, the rise of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale – a cult figure of what has been described as Sikh fundamentalism – was integrally related to the Operation Bluestar – the attack by the Indian Army, under the then Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi’s regime, on the Golden Temple Complex, Amritsar. In Japan, a stream of Buddhism, considered as the most pacifist religion, arose in the form of the Aum Shinrikyo movement that, allegedly, released poisonous gas in the Tokyo subway on Mach 20, 1995 killing a large number of the commuters. *Jihad* has emerged, with recharged energy, in the Muslim world. Violent religious movements in America have erupted in the form of Dominion Theology, Reconstruction Theology and Christian Identity Theology; the members of the Reconstruction Theology and Christian Identity Theology have been held responsible for violent attacks on abortion clinics in America. In Israel, Jewish “catastrophic messianism”, proclaims the triumph of the Jews in a great impending violent conflict over the non-Jews.

Retaliatory?

It is problematic whether upsurge of such violent religious movements are, directly or indirectly, internally or externally, related to religious resurgence in the past few decades. However, one point is very clear: In most of the cases religious terrorism, caught in a vicious circle, in symbiotic relationship with counterterrorism, is retaliatory, seeking to deliver retributive justice to its opponents.

Contemporary religious resurgence reveals at least two streams therein. First the resurgent religions seek to provide alternative ideology for redemption of the human kind through realization of the transcendental values common to all religions and to rebuild a new world

order on such commonly shared transcendental values, such as peace, harmony, equality, liberalism and pluralism – religious, social, cultural, economic and political. Seen from this angle the solution to religious conflicts, to religious fundamentalism, lies not in the Western-style secularism based on dichotomous world view but in religious pluralism becoming an essential component of the value system of a new multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-focal global civilization based on a holistic worldview. Modern Western civilization, instead of resolving its self-created antagonism between religion and secularism is, rather, fighting a rearguard battle, for its survival, against what it considered to be its enemy: religious resurgence confused with religious fundamentalism and religious violence. Another stream in the religious resurgence, today, is two-pronged. On the one hand it strives to substitute new religious ideologies for the earlier, outdated, secular ideologies of the Modern Western Civilization; on the other hand it seeks to reshape the world order by imposing its own religious worldview on other peoples. Thus, the contemporary scene is marked by not only the clash between religious and secular ideologies but also the conflict between religious ideologies themselves; this adds to the complexity of the problem.

Religious Liberalism:

In the ultimate analysis, “the cure for religious violence” may “lie in a renewed appreciation for religion itself”, as admitted by Mark Juergensmeyer himself.⁷ In this context, Sikhism with its value pattern characterised by religious pluralism, liberalism, humanism and universalism can play a significant role in the global discourse on the issues under discussion. The foundational category of Sikhism being *spirit*, Sikh religion can make substantial contribution in the making of the third millennium civilization of which, according to leading thinkers today, the fundamental concept is going to be *spirit* in the same way in which *deified reason* has been the basic category of the Modern Western Civilization, now on the way out. **But Sikhism can play such a historic role – thereby realising its so far unrealised *élan vital* – only if contemporary Sikh praxis is updated, coupled with de-feudalization of the Sikh movement, de-vedanticization of the Sikh doctrine and de-brahminization of the Sikh society.**

What is the way out of the vicious circle, referred to in the beginning, created by ‘the terrorism versus counterterrorism syndrome’? Not intensification of the global offensive against religious terrorism. **The solution lies in a radically different mindset, with a seven-pronged approach.** **First**, the US-led globalised assault on religious terrorism in the name, or form, of counterterrorism should be *decentered* (in postmodernist terminology); it would be easier to tackle and contain religious terrorism if it remains, context-specific, situation-specific, region-specific, etc. **Secondly**, the contra-distinction between religious resurgence and upsurge in religious terrorism should be recognized. **Thirdly**, the dichotomy between religion and secularism, embedded in the Modern Western Civilization, should be transcended and sublated into religious pluralism that should be translated into the praxis of national polities of different countries. For instance, the laws such as the French legislation banning the wearing of visible religious symbols in public places, should have no place in a so-called ‘secular’ polity, which is, essentially, pseudo-secular dispensation. **Fourthly**, the group identities of different ethnic, ethno-religious, and religious communities should be respected and all such communities should be treated as co-equal partners, *in their corporate capacities*, in the national polities of their respective countries. **Fifthly**, with the gradual-and inevitable-withering away of the nation-states under the impact of globalization, the fetishized concept of a nation-state with rigid international boundaries should be dispensed with; the days of exclusivist national sovereignties, in the territorial dimension, are numbered, thanks to the growing interdependence on all levels, in all fields.

Sixthly, with the rise in the cases of genocide throughout the world, in the name of ethnicity, culture, religion, etc., time has arrived to confer on the victimized community, a constitutional right to approach, for justice, the international penal tribunal, (envisaged in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide), the jurisdiction of which over the member states of the UNO should be made obligatory by amending the aforementioned Convention (How shockingly surprising that despite so many cases of genocide in India since 1947, there is no mention of the expression *genocide* in the Indian Penal Code which treats such cases only as a crime of murder like any other murder case)? **Seventhly**, accepting the reality of the clash of civilizations, today, this (clash) should be sublated into synergy of World civilizations in evolving a new global multi-focal, multi-cultural civilizational dispensation in which *reason* and *faith*, while retaining their relative autonomies, would become complementary to each other: **religion becoming the matrix of new values for a new world order, and reason ensuring that the spirit of inquiry does not let the spirit of religion getting encrusted with dogma.**

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