Toward the latter days of indiscriminate violence, be like the first and better of the two sons of Adam who said, "If you raise your hand to kill me, I will not raise mine to kill you; surely I fear God, the Lord of the worlds."

FROM A SOUND TRADITION OF THE PROPHET ﷺ
NARRATED BY IMAM TIRMIDHI.

Religion, Violence, and the Modern World

by Hamza Yusuf

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MANY OF US, in the hustle and bustle of modern life, have little time for reflection; yet as these days are marred by violence of the worst kind, reflection – on the part of those who regard themselves 'religious' as well those who consider themselves 'secularists' – is more needed than ever. With continual terror in Iraq and Palestine, and now, most recently, with the bombings in Turkey, Muslims are confronted with the increasingly tragic reality of religious violence and the subsequent retaliations of secular violence.

A strange dual consciousness pervades the Muslim when it comes to modern violence. When Khalil Sarakiti, the Palestinian intellectual of the 40's and 50's reminded the Palestinian leadership of the importance of adherence to the highest principles of engagement in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, he remarked in his journal that they viewed it as romantic chivalry, incompatible with the realities of modern warfare. And sadly, this is the reality of modern man: expediency has won out over principle.

The modern Muslim has learned well the lessons of his secular counterpart. American military action rarely distinguishes between combatants and civilians. The Pentagon callously refers to them as 'secondary effects' or 'collateral damage.' When some Muslims use tactics of indiscriminate violence toward objects of hate, too often other Muslims are quick to point out that, 'They kill our innocents and expect us to sit by

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and watch.' Defenders of American foreign policy parry with, 'Collateral damage can never be equated with terrorism because we don't specifically target civilians and in fact attempt to avoid civilian casualties.' Apologetics for wanton killing of women and children on both sides nauseates anyone who considers the very real impact of innocent blood spilt so injudiciously.

Like all things in which humans engage, religion has many paradoxical aspects. On the one hand, it elevates our ideals and aspirations to the heavens themselves giving us such priceless principles as, *"The entire Torah can be summed up in two statements: love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself; everything else is commentary"; "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you";* and *"Taking one life unjustly is as if you have killed all of humanity."* These are taken from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths, respectively. Meanwhile, some adherents to each faith justify with their teachings the most heinous depredations against their fellow men. Jonathan Swift remarked, "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another." Perhaps that is true; for many people, religion is no longer a solution to anything but very much part of the problem.

The great tragedy of modern religion is that it is now seen as a toxin polluting the waters of possibility. We who claim faith and commitment have too often made our faiths the objects of hatred. With our zealousness, we

have driven away countless people who see the worst aspects of humanity embodied in religious peoples. For some of us, it is easy to write them off as skeptics, mockers, or secularists who just hate religion, but the truth is that most of them are not so. They are simply people who know intuitively that the behavior of those claiming to be religious is both inhumane and irreligious, and they seek other philosophies to guide them. They look to Epictetus or the Tao Te Ching or even Deepak Chopra, or they give up the search for meaning altogether, contenting themselves with film and music as fulfilling past-times. Organized religion, with its self-righteous pugnaciousness and its officious meddling in the affairs of others, has driven many moderns to relegate it to the dustbin of discarded ideas. The irony, of course, is that the religious people feel the secularists are the pugnacious ones forcing secularity down their throats, ignoring their most sacred beliefs or relegating them to a few minutes on shows such as *Thought for the Day.* The more religion is marginalized, the angrier religious people get; the angrier they get, the more others want to marginalize religion, ad nauseam. We have found ourselves in a vicious cyclical clash between secularists, who, in many ways, abandoned the Englightenment project of a more humane world long ago, and religious utopians battling for a piece of turf in the modern world – both sides bitter, both sides with minorities that use indiscriminate violence to lesser and greater effectiveness, both sides becoming increasingly intolerant.

Tragically, the very reason so many Europeans felt disillusioned with Christianity was the centuries of intolerance and pointless religious violence. The Muslims, on the other hand, were far less prone to internal religious violence, and the level of tolerance toward other faiths was unparalleled in the premodern world. Unfortunately, explosions in Riyadh, Karachi, Turkey, and countless other places show that violence and intolerance have

become the paths of pursuit among religious thrill-seekers in much of the Muslim world. The unexpected side-effect is that it is not just non-Muslims that find Islam odious, but many modern Muslims are increasingly becoming disillusioned with Islam, blaming the behavior of the practitioners on the religion, seeking alternatives in other faiths or philosophies. I believe many Muslims are in deep denial about this, refusing to even consider it, but I am seeing its signs everywhere, and it troubles me deeply.

Those of us who are committed to Islam should seriously ask ourselves if we are indeed representatives of the Religion of *ar-Raḥmān*, the Merciful: *"The servants of the Merciful are those who tread lightly on the earth, and when ignorant people deride them, they reply 'peace'"* – are we as the Qur'an so wonderfully describes the true servants of God?

Muslims are commanded to avoid backbiting, slander, lying, cheating, treachery, pride, anger, sloth, greed, and all of the other tragic qualities of beastly humanity. We must remember that much of the worst crimes we see in the world are simply our own sins magnified on a grander, more grotesque scale. The vice of setting aside our principles in small matters that apparently harm no one leads to the heinous enormities of our time as the vice continues while the scale increases. Religious people who set aside every true and universal religious principle in the name of religion are worse than any secular beast doing the same in the name of 'might makes right.' The reason is obvious: one acts in the name of religion and causes others to hate religion; the other acts in the name of power and causes others to rightly hate the worst qualities of man.

It has been said that a religious fanatic is someone who redoubles his efforts after forgetting his cause. I think a sounder definition is someone who cannot risk considering that his life's work has been meaningless; that his efforts have been in vain; that his victories

are, in truth, defeats; and that his successes are utter and bitter failures. Violence is not a religious truth – it never has been, and it never will be. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, "Never desire to meet anyone in battle, but if ever forced to do so, be virtuous." He also said, "Kindness is never present in an act except that it embellishes it and is never removed from any act except that it defiles it." In addition, he said, "God gives with gentleness what He will never give with harshness."

The Qur'an speaks to the Prophet ﷺ, reminding us about his noble character: "It is a mercy from God that you were made gentle in nature, and had you been harsh and hard-hearted, people would have fled from your presence." In a sound tradition narrated by Imam Tirmidhi, the Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said,

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In an increasingly violent world in which the individual can now inflict harm that armies of the past were incapable of, religious people in particular must categorically reject and condemn any vigilante retaliations for injustices and question deeply the compatibility of modern warfare with religiously sanctioned military action that emanates from pre-modern just-war principles in the Abrahamic faiths. ❧