

## Religion not the root cause of conflicts

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Mainstream media tend to associate extremism and terrorism with Islam, but evidence shows otherwise. The root causes of most present-day conflicts have very little to do with religion even if they may appear to have religious implications.

For instance, the Israeli-Arab conflict is about land, dispossession and the right of self-determination, even if some religious fanatics are exploiting the issue for their own ends. The conflict in Kashmir is also about the right of self-determination; it is not a Hindu-Muslim conflict. This is also true of the Mindanao conflict in the Philippines, which is about autonomy and historical rights, poverty and unemployment. The Rohingya conflict in Myanmar, and those of the Muslims of southern Thailand are also not about religion. They are about citizenship rights and disempowerment issues.

Historically, the colonialist onslaught on Muslim communities and nations was a European phenomenon entirely motivated by conquest of land and resources. If we look at the 20th century, the most violent century in the whole of human history, the two world wars, the Holocaust, the mass carnage that happened under Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Pol Pot were not caused by religion or religious fanaticism. None of the names mentioned had any religious affiliation, and some had openly renounced religion.

Instances of conflict over the understanding of religious principles have arisen in early Islamic history around the second century Hijrah, some of which also involved extremist interpretations of the scripture. The *Qadariyyah* (advocates of free will or *qadar*), for instance, subscribed to the view that man is the sole creator of his own conduct. The *Jabriyyah* subscribed to total predestination; the *Murji'ah* (suspenders of judgment and upholders permanently of hope or *rija'*) suspended passing any judgment on sinners, whereas the *Kharijites* (outsiders) held the extremist view that committing a major sin amounts to renunciation Islam.

The 21st century, the era often said as the “clash of civilizations” — to use Huntington’s phrase — brought religion and violence a step closer to one another, even though civilisation is not identical with religion as such, but has a wider scope that includes custom and culture, history, lifestyle and values. It would still be incorrect to say that Islam and Christianity, or Islam with any other religion for that matter, are in conflict. On the contrary, Islam shares a great deal with other world religions such that it is difficult to say that Islam is in conflict with them. That said, issues pertaining to religious values and beliefs, such as the cartoons issue, burning the Quran, exaggerated interpretations of jihad, etc, have come into the picture and led to violence. The violence we have seen in the last two decades or so is also reactive for the most part to dictatorship and disempowerment from within, and to foreign invasion and humiliation, espoused often with the collapse of government and rule of law. These are also not caused by religion.

Following the January 2015 Paris Charlie Hebdo attacks, United States Senator John McCain urged in a statement, carried in *New York Times*, in which he called for a more aggressive American military strategy across the greater Middle East, Syria and Afghanistan. *The Washington Post* columnist Fareed Zakaria followed this with the comment that military intervention had actually been the cause of a great deal of violence and in particular suicide bombings. Zakaria went on to quote Robert Pape and James Feldman who analysed all the more than 2,100 documented cases of suicide bombings from 1980 to 2009 and concluded that the vast majority of the perpetrators were acting in response to American military intervention in the Middle East rather than out of a religious or ideological motivation. The reasons vary from a sense of adventure to radicalism, but battling a foreign intervention is often high on the list. Also quoted by Zakaria was Andrew Bacevich, who pointed out that “before Syria, Washington had already launched interventions in 13 countries in the Islamic world since 1980. Will one more really do the trick?”

The world has been witness to horrendous atrocities also by newly emerging warlords, drug barons and mischief-makers in war-torn Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia and others. Included in these are, of course, those who terrorise innocent people, committing crimes against humanity in the name of caliphate or any other name. These are the enemies of Islam and peace, destroyers of people’s lives, not entitled to use Islam’s name in association with their heinous crimes. There is absolutely no room for atrocity and shedding of innocent blood in Islam by anyone, including the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, Taliban, al-Shabab, Boko Haram and the like. Justice must be served, truth uncovered and told, through due process of law, as far as possible, or amnesty granted in the hope for a peaceful end to hostilities. Only then can one nurture a realistic prospect of a peaceful future for the affected individuals and communities.

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