

## **Violence in the Name of Islam: Not just a Threat to Life and Limb**

Talking to Muslims today, or reading literature coming out of the Muslim world gives one the distinct sense of a community finally coming to terms with the idea that violence in the name of Islam is a bad idea. Some go so far as to question, not just the gratuitous terror that so randomly targets every living thing, but all violence attributed to Islam. Feelings run particularly strong in areas where victims of violence are local, and it matters not if they happen to be non Muslim--few among us, it seems, want their own turned into cannon fodder, no matter how lofty the goal. Ordinary Muslims increasingly find the wanton use of violence even in defense of Islam and Muslims hard to reconcile with common decency. Even those ulama who, swayed by the injustices perpetrated against Muslims, reluctantly relaxed the strict laws that generally regulate the use of violence in Islam, now lament the harm this has done to Islam's image.

All this change is heartening, I must admit, if only because it is likely to inspire alternatives to violence as a solution to Muslim grievances. But it still falls short of addressing the greater threat that violence as a whole poses to the civilization that is Islam. Now, I would be the first to concede that the creative impulse necessary for any civilizational efflorescence is rare among Muslims today. But its potential to bloom will always exist in all Muslim societies that take seriously, the cultural aspects of their faith. The civilization that is Islam is so distinct a feature of this religion that Samuel Huntington, in his otherwise controversial book *A Clash of Civilizations* considered it central to his thesis that Islam (along with Chinese civilization) could potentially lock horns with the West. Whilst much has been written challenging the core elements of Huntington's thesis, including his tendency to use history anecdotally rather than systematically, I think it important to stress two important arguments the book makes. First, "that culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilizational identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world." And second, that Islam as cultural identity has the necessary wherewithal to transform dogma into a viable, alternate civilization.

Not everyone agrees with Huntington on this score, it seems: certainly not those Muslims who wantonly plundered the cultural artifacts of Baghdad; nor those who destroyed Buddhist icons in Bamian; and certainly not those who regularly sacrifice Islam's traditional pluralism at the alter of their newfangled literalism. The cavalier disregard

shown for the harm such behaviour poses to the civilization that is Islam is to say the least, disturbing.

Islam the religion is admittedly restricted to those who subscribe to its tenets, but Islam the civilization is the collective endeavor of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, of Sunni and Shi`ah, male and female, the pious as well as the impious. It is in other words the collective beliefs, values, customs and the means of production of all people who live within the Islamic milieu. What makes this human potpourri Islamic is that it is defined, not by a common belief, but by a specific set of unmistakably Islamic ideas and customs meant to govern civil society. The first of these ideas is an affirmation of the material world. The Qur'an in several places speaks positively of the material world and of our need to partake of it in moderation. It tells us, for instance in 2: 200-1: "And there are men who say: 'Our Lord! Give us (bounties only) in this world; and for them is no portion of the afterlife. And there are men who say: Our Lord! Give us good in this world and good in the afterlife; and protect us from the agony of the Fire". The second is the emphasis Islam places on our collective humanity, best exemplified in 49: 13: "O mankind! We created you from a single male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. . ." And the third is its explicit recognition of the right of others to believe and practice differently, and this again, is best exemplified by 10: 99: "And if your Lord had so desired then all on earth would have believed the same way; will you then force human beings to believe against their will?"

Without these scriptural directives 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia would not have succeeded in overcoming its parochial insularity to turn the word of God into a global civilization for all. It would not have succeeded in overcoming the mighty empires of the day and grafting much of their civic and state structures onto the emerging Muslim polity. And it would not have succeeded in producing the likes of a Jewish Maimonides, an Ismaili Avicenna, and a secular Ibn Miskawayh.