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Debating Inter-Faith Relations: Will We Descend into another Cold War?

By Tuty Raihanah Mostarom

Synopsis

Religious discourse dominates current affairs: everything from women's issues to channeling of humanitarian aid are seen through this prism. The key question: Where is the world headed to if this keeps up?

Commentary

THE WORLD appears to have descended into a contemporary version of the Cold War, with two camps viewing events not in isolation but as part of a larger narrative involving conflict and absolute truths. The constant sloganeering: 'Islam is a religion of peace', 'it is a tolerant faith', 'all Muslims are terrorists', 'death to all infidels'; among many other similar statements are passing off as intelligent argument. The narrow and ill-informed views held by Muslims and non-Muslims about each other are creating a polarised environment where the grim reality of increased conflict is all too real.

Humanitarianism takes a blow

The perceptions of conflict are shaping the wider public reaction to any event in the Muslim world. The dispute over the aid to the victims of the floods in Pakistan is one recent example. The delay in supplying vital aid, compared to Haiti's case, is attributed to the fear that the donations may be misappropriated by terrorists groups in Pakistan. The implications of the delay are becoming self-fulfilling prophecies as Islamist hardliners from groups in Pakistan such as the Jamat-ud-Dawa, which is linked to the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, are fast filling up the vacuum in rendering aid to the flood victims and increasing their status vis-à-vis the government. For the millions who are dependent on aid for their very survival, the source is irrelevant. The United Nations and countries like the United States have increased their aid into the country, but the political damage may already be done. The population will remember who arrived, when, and will also be influenced by the reasoning behind the delay: that the west is anti-Muslim. It may not be true, but it hardly matters.

Instigations and reactions

The reaction of the West to Islam in their own lands is hardly better. The Dove World Outreach Centre, a non-denominational church in Gainesville, Florida, has plans to host an "International Burn a Quran Day" on the ninth anniversary of the September 11 2001 attacks. Interviewed on the CNN, Pastor Terry Jones from the church claimed that Islam is "a violent religion", and the event is held to take a stand against Islam. He went on to state that Islam should not be defended due to the injustices he observes in "Islam-dominated countries"

under Islamic law, citing honour killings and the oppression of women.

The US State Department has issued a statement condemning the plans by the centre, calling it “disrespectful”, “abhorrent” and “un-American” as they violate the values of religious tolerance of the United States. But while the vast majority of citizens reject the actions of this church, given the polarised environment it only takes a few extremists to ignite a much larger conflagration.

The situation is just as bleak for minorities in Muslim majority societies. The Coptic Christian minority in Egypt has faced a regular threat from Muslim extremists. During the Christmas midnight mass in 2009, at least seven Christians were killed in Nag Hammadi in a drive-by shooting. During the victims’ funerals, some three thousand Muslims broke into Coptic properties and business, burning and looting.

Human Rights Watch has also reported on the killing of Christians in various parts of Iraq. The list continues and is growing. Just as the actions in Florida are not representative of the almost two billion Christians, the actions of the above or the terrorists killing in the name of their faith does not reflect the 1.5 billion followers of Islam either.

It’s not what it seems, not yet

The grim examples above seem to validate the notion of an inevitable religious conflict, but not exactly. While conflict has begun to define the current relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, it is not a permanent feature, and one that is actively rejected by religious leaders, who are trying to reclaim their faiths from the violent fringe. Those who claim to be fighting in the name of their faith are wilfully ignoring and sabotaging efforts to find common ground amongst faiths. Pope John Paul II’s numerous speeches about the amity between Islam and Christianity as well as his own actions provides a powerful counterweight to the violence of the fringe.

Pope Benedict XVI has continued the efforts through his exchange of letters between the 138 Muslim authorities, and 300 representatives of Christianity, who have lauded the ongoing efforts. Even historically Prophet Muhammad himself displayed much tolerance and good faith towards non-Muslims. The Sahih al Bukhari, one of the six canonical hadith collections of the Prophetic Traditions, is replete with narrations of how the Prophet would visit non-Muslims who were ill to ask of their health and also of instances when he would exchange gifts with them. Perhaps his attitude towards non-Muslims is best summarised when he said “Whoever hurts a non-Muslim, I shall be his complainant and for whoever I am a complainant, I shall ask for his right on the Day of Resurrection.” So there is no religious basis for the current tension, only a distorted political narrative that uses the camouflage of faith to justify despicable actions.

Fortunately, there are still many amongst us who are vividly aware of how religion is being manipulated to pit people against one another. Cordial relations between different faiths still exist in many parts of the world, be it in established institutions, NGOs or simply between friends for which the relations develop and grow naturally. Various Muslim and Christian groups have united in their total rejection of the Dove World Outreach Centre.

But more such responses are required if the conflict narrative is to be rejected. But going beyond rejection of extremism, devoted efforts to engage each other with mutual respect and understanding is necessary. More contact focusing on issues that touch on and transcend religious issues will help to lessen the opportunity for extremists to hijack the agenda with half truths, distortions and lies.

This is not just an academic exercise. It was the very manipulation of the prejudices in a society for political ends that led to the Holocaust. The horrifying end was reached at the end of a long process of distorting, isolating, dehumanising, and then destroying a people who had a different religion. Does a cold war exist? Not yet, but should the situation deteriorate to that point we must remember that cold wars do have a tendency to turn hot.

Tuty Raihanah Mostarom is an Associate Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. A graduate of the National University of Singapore, she obtained her MSc. in International Relations from RSIS.