

## Religions and their Representation

Written by Dr. khandaker Abdullah Jahangir  
and published in Bangladeshi daily  
"The Independent" on November 22, 2006

Thanks to Dr. Dennis D Datta. He justly observed that a religion should not be held responsible for crimes of its followers, even though it is the highest religious institute of that religion. This is what we ask Pope Benedict XVI to reflect on. If Islam is considered violent or irrational for wrongdoing of its followers, then Christianity must be blamed in the same way.

Human history is full of violence. Violence is a part of human nature. In many occasions a human being, a community or a state may be engage in violence in the name of religion or ideology and we may trend to held that religion or ideology responsible for the crimes of its followers, as if the followers truly represent their religion. This may lead to various misunderstandings.

Starting from Constantine the Great, who gave Christianity the statehood, the Christian clergy and church waged a 'Zero tolerant' war against every dissident. Not only the followers of other faiths, like Jews and Muslims, but also the Christians having different views about some articles of faith were mercilessly suppressed, killed or burnt alive and their property, books and other belongings destroyed.

Such brutality and violence took two dimensions. In many cases the Christian kings, lords, barons or princes engaged in such inhuman cruelty in the name of Christianity. Such as brutality against the Jews in Spain, France, England and most of the European countries, against Muslims in Christian Spain, against Muslims and Jews during the Crusades and brutality of Catholics and Protestants against each others during the wars of religion in Europe. Their atrocities included economic exploitation, indiscriminate killing, burning, forcible conversion under the edge of sword, confiscation or destruction of property, mass expulsion etc. Usually the religious leadership represented by the church and the Pope supported such actions. Even sometimes they celebrated such brutality. In August 24/25, 1572, Massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day took place. About 70,000 Protestants brutally killed by the Catholics in France and Pope Gregory XIII had a medal struck to celebrate the event.

In other cases the church or the Pope initiated and engaged in such brutality in the name of Christianity. Under the papal order of 'Inquisition' to 'punish heretics and wipe out the spiritual leprosy' thousands of Muslims, Jews and so-called heretic Christians were persecuted and burnt alive. The third Lateran council (1179) decreed "the punishment of heretics by the secular arm after prosecution by a bishop". A papal edict in this regard says: "we give you a strict command that by whatever means you can, you destroy all these heresies and repel from your dioces all who are polluted by them ... If necessary you may cause the princes and the people to suppress them with the sword." (The Story of Civilization, The Age of Faith, part-IV pages 773-774)

Pope Innocent III proclaimed a sacred war against Albigenses, a Christian sect considered heretic by the church. During the Albigensian Crusade thousands of people were massacred, which is considered- as mentioned in Encyclopaedia Britannica- the first modern case of genocide. Arnold Amaury, the papal legate, reported this event to the pope saying: "Our men sparing neither rank, sex, nor age, slew about 20,000 men with the edge of sword; and when a huge slaughter of men had been made, the whole city was pillaged and burnt, the Divine Vengeance wondrously raging against it". .... At the

massacre of Lavaur 400 people were burnt in one pile and 'they made a wonderful blaze and went to burn everlastingly in hell'. (Rev. W. P. Hares, the Teaching and Practice of the Church of Rome in India Examined, p 122, John William Draper, History of Intellectual Development of Europe, Vol II)

A number of scientists, philosophers, thinkers and reformers were also persecuted, killed, burnt or imprisoned by the church. The church even killed and burnt her own people for reading the Bible in vernacular translation. In 1525 William Tyndale brought out an English translation of the Bible. The poor translator was strangled and burned at the stake in 1536 by the Church. In 1380 when John Wycliffe had done English translation of the Bible, the same treatment was meted out to him. Thirty years after his death, in May 1415, under the decree of the Council of Constance, his eaten up and decomposed bones were dug out from his grave and condemned to ashes and cast into a nearby stream. The readers of his translation were burnt with the copies round their necks, men and women were executed for teaching their children the Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments in English... (Dr. Paterson Smyth, How we got our Bible)

Such brutality in the name of Christianity led a number of people to blame Christianity itself. The renowned philosopher Bertrand Russell says: "You find as you look around the world that every single bit of progress in human feeling, every improvement in the criminal law, every step towards the diminution of war, every step towards better treatment of coloured races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organized Churches of the world. I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in the churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world." (Bertrand Russell, Why I am not a Christian, pages 20-21)

But nowadays most of the Western scholars are not willing to blame Christianity for wrongdoing of its followers. This is what Dr. Dennis D Datta explains by saying: "The Christianity President Bush or Prime Minister Blair follows does not represent Christianity any more than the Islam that extremists and suicide bombers follow does not represent Islam... Whatever the Holy See says does not always represent the totality of Christianity..."

We agree with him in this regard. But when the case of Islam comes, most Christian scholars hold Islam itself responsible for the crimes of its followers. It is notable that Muslim 'secular leadership', such as rulers, kings, sultans and generals- not religious leadership- committed such brutality. We do not find well-known Muslim religious leaders or Imams initiating or commanding any campaign against heretics or infidels. But the Muslim rulers waged wars or invaded other countries, sometimes to protect their own countries and sometimes to occupy other countries in the pretext of 'preemptive just war'. Naturally, in either case they used the name of Islam and Jihad to justify their warfare and provoke the people to participate and support it. Sometimes we find unknown small fanatic groups engaged in such atrocities.

Generally, Christians believe in sanctity and infallibility of the church and the Pope and consider them the absolute authority to interpret and represent Christianity. Even though they are not willing to consider Christianity responsible for the inhumanity of the church or the Papacy, but they put the blame on the church or the popes. Kings of Europe engaged in brutal warfare in the name of Christianity, Catholicism or Protestantism. But people are not blaming the religion, but the rulers only and trying to forgive and forget the past and live in peace and harmony.

The rulers of Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Morocco, Muslim Spain or Turkey in using the

name of Islam are like the rulers of Spain, France, England, Austria, Germany or Italy in using the name of Christianity, Catholicism or Protestantism. But Pope Benedict XVI and his supporters are still following the mentality of their medieval predecessors in creating animosity toward Islam and Muslims for past misconduct of Muslim rulers or atrocities of contemporary Muslim fanatics.

One may observe that Jesus Christ did not call for revenge or war, but Islam ordained Jihad that might have opened the doors of atrocities. This observation contradicts the historic facts. In the light of actual facts we see that absence of clear instructions and legislation regarding war in the Gospels led the Christians and Christianity to a perpetual dilemma and was the main cause of atrocities committed by the Church. Here we should consider the following things:

Jesus did not claim that he came with a new system or law, but he insisted that he came to fulfil the Law of Moses and previous Prophets. Moreover he urged his followers to strictly abide by the Jewish Law and religious system. He said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:17-20

Jesus also declared that he left his teachings incomplete, as he said: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come". John 16:12-13

The Christians- rulers and laity- and Christianity-represented by the Church- could never avoid war. Naturally a religious person seeks instructions of his/her religion in every aspects of life. In absence of clear instructions about warfare in the Gospels they naturally depended on the instructions of the Old Testament for indiscriminate killing of all combatant and non-combat male, female and children and wholesale destruction of their property. Furthermore, they interpreted these teachings in their own way assuming that the Holy Ghost is with them that will guide them into all truth. But actually they were guided to all evil.

I am giving an example of such interpretation. Isaac Badarkan was a prominent Arab Protestant Christian. In 1849 he published a book titled "AL-Thalatha Ashrata Risalah" or "The Thirteen Letters" to discuss the corruption of the Church. In this book he mentioned that the Bible Index printed in Rome in Arabic and Latin under the Letter Ha (H) stated: "It is our Duty towards the heretics to uproot and annihilate them. The Bible teaches us to do so. Because, Jehu the son of Jehoshaphat, king of Israel deceived the false prophets and killed them under the edge of the sword. (2 Kings 10:18-28). And Prophet Elijah also slew the prophets of Baal. (1 Kings 18:40)".

Thus they interpreted the teachings and acts of Biblical Prophets and kings to support their brutality. Even the Protestants could not free themselves from such evil. Martin Luther demanded wholesale slaying of the Jews in the name of Christianity. He wrote: "We are at fault for not slaying them, rather we allow them to live freely in our midst despite their murder, cursing, blaspheming, lying and defaming." (Encyclopaedia

Britannica, article. Anti-Semitism)

On the other hand, Islam closed the door of such dilemma. Nobody can imagine a state without option of war. We may all agree that the doctrine of wholesale forgiveness, such as "whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" is to be followed in personal affairs, not in state affairs. When a state is attacked by its enemies, we can not ask it to open another frontier to welcome the enemy. All we can do to keep war- when it is inevitable- as less destructive as possible and prevent targeting non-combatant people.

This is what Muhammad (PBUH) taught and did. He legalized Jihad or war with a lot of clear restrictions, as I explained in my previous article. Scopes of transgression are very limited. If someone attempts to do so others have the right to protest. This is why we see that the atrocities committed by Muslim rulers or generals were fewer and much less brutal than those of Christian rulers and the Church. A simple comparison between the Christian and Muslim societies of medieval age disclose the truth. In a time when the Christian church persecuted, killed and burnt scientists, philosophers, thinkers and dissident Christians as heretics and also killed, burnt or forcibly converted the Jews, Muslims and Pagans, we do not find such things in Muslim societies.

Above all, if Islam is to be blamed for legislation of war when inevitable with so many restrictions, then Judaism, the Old Testament and all biblical prophets must be blamed for legalizing and waging brutal warfare, indiscriminate killing and wholesale destruction and Christianity must be blamed for the same reason, because, though Jesus Christ did not set any new law for war, he confirmed that he had come to fulfil the laws of the Old Testament.

So, I earnestly request Dr. Dennis D Datta to convey our message to pope Benedict XVI that you should not follow the footsteps of your medieval predecessors in promoting and patronizing religious hatred or initiating and supporting the crusades of secular rulers. On the contrary, you should follow the way of your immediate predecessor in mending the fence. According to atheist faith every religion is irrational. On the other hand, followers of every religion believe that their religion is the most rational one. You may try to prove rationality of Christianity, but it is not your job to blame other religions. It may provoke others to investigate for irrationality and inhumanity in Christianity. Such statements may come from an ordinary Mullah or cleric. But it is extremely unfortunate to hear such an irrational and provocative statement from a Pope of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

(Written in reference and coherence to Dr. Dennis D Datta's article: "Interpretation of the Old and the New Testament" published in the Independent on October 31, 2006.)