

My article was printed in San Mateo Times and other newspapers in California.

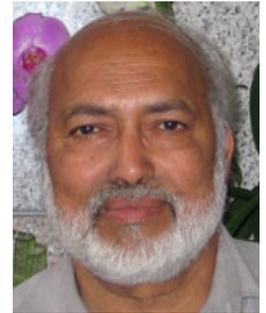
July 13, 2006

Fundamentalism and Muslims

By Iftekhhar Hai

Understanding and interpreting the Koran is an art, a science, and an inspired act. Sufi commentators living in the classical time period of Islam from the 10th to the 15th century answered these questions in their own unique way.

That every verse of the Koran has four kinds of meaning: an exoteric sense (*zahir*), an inner sense (*batin*), a limit (*hadd*), and a lookout point (*muttala*). What this means is each person is an island, gifted with varied intelligence, flowering in pluralism and diversity, where differences of opinions and perceptions was looked upon as a blessing in building an intra lingual and intra cultural societies.



All this is far, far removed from the Koran, when interpreted by the fundamentalists and the ignorant mullahs, also known as religious clerics.

When the West was undergoing profound technological, economic, cultural and political changes - often amid considerable suffering and with major ebbs and flows - Muslim societies were falling behind because of fundamentalist thinking in an idealized theocratic system - held sacred and disseminated through schools.

The Sufi thinkers were welcoming alien import of ideas by reformists who did not wish to sacrifice either Islam or modernity. They always insisted – in been genuinely democratic and representative.

But the theocratic leaders refused to learn foreign languages, science and technology ensuring backwardness for their people.

European Renaissance owes a lot to Sufi minded Arabs who had translated and enriched Greek philosophy and sciences, which were lost. And Arabic numerals were introduced into Europe in the 10th century by Sylvester II, the first French Pope, and an "admirer of Arab-Islamic civilization".

Author Karen Armstrong wrote in A History of God: "We have to know how to read our scriptures. They demand an imaginative effort. Judges say that the worst way to read a Constitution is to read it literally and that every document must be read as a whole."

In a dishonest interpretation of the Koran, Muslim women have suffered for centuries at the hands of men and mullahs and they still do.

Thirteenth century Mullahs justified the execution of the great Sufi thinkers leading to the causes that precipitated the decline of the Muslim world - the ever more violent repression discouraged and eventually stifled any attempt at reflection or innovation. The principles of democracy were forever buried.

Fundamentalists maintain nothing has changed since the age of the Prophet. And they do not like it when the incompatibility between fundamentalist interpretation of divine Islamic law and human rights is pointed out to them.

Even to this day, the role of reason and research is dictatorially stifled; the spirit of memorization and imitation is practiced over the spirit of reason and reflection in the Muslim world.

Moderation in Islam is not incompatible with human rights, nor is Islam incompatible with pluralism and its corollary, a secular state. Muslims are enjoined to respect democracy and respect authority.

For me there goes not a day when I, together with the Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, worry about how a theology of liberation can be used towards freeing religion from social, political and religious structures and ideas based on injustice and exploitation.

Lessons of love, compassion and forgiveness which are integral part of the great faith are altogether absent in the teachings of the fundamentalists. So are scholarship and reflection. Their agenda is political. Religion is just another weapon to be used along with the gun besides recourse to violence, intellectual terrorism and religious blackmail.

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