

Article Title: “Name the problem: The world must support those within Islam speaking up for reform”

This article was published on ‘The Times of India’ on 6th July 2016

Shortlink: <https://goo.gl/PmoUZy>

To keep insisting that terrorism has nothing to do with religion after every new jihadi atrocity is no longer tenable. It is galling for millions of people, not just Indians but around the world, when this clichéd phrase is parroted even as reports go viral of the attackers’ in-your-face assertion of religion.

Followers of most major religions have killed in the name of their faith (more on this later). But as author and TV host Fareed Zakaria has said, “The next time you hear of a terror attack – no matter where, no matter what the circumstances, you will likely think to yourself, ‘It’s Muslims again’. And you will probably be right.”

However, the vast majority of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims do not consider jihadi killers as representative of their religion. They stress that such killers are violating some of Islam’s basic tenets of compassion. And that most victims of such terrorism are Muslims. The spate of murderous jihadi attacks during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, or Ramzan in South Asia, has been denounced by many Muslims as desecrating their faith.

Most world leaders echo these sentiments. With few exceptions, it is standard for politicians everywhere to publicly say that jihadis do not represent the religion they claim to. Yet that extreme political correctness of denying any connection with religion, even as terrorists shout religious slogans and test Quranic knowledge while slaughtering victims, has led to growing public anger.

Another common refrain is that only moderate Muslims can respond to this “internal” challenge in Islam. But when they do respond, they often face extreme hostility, not only from other Muslims but also, shockingly, even in secular institutions of the media and universities. There are many documented instances of these, even in that Mecca of free speech, the US.

Many disillusioned moderate Muslims have either stopped believing, at great risk since jihadis violently enforce Islam’s intolerance of apostasy, or resigned themselves into quiescence. It is these voices, and not just the good Samaritans who empathise with victims but dare not push for religious reform, that deserve the support of those who are truly secular.

After the Boston Marathon bombings, Pakistani-Canadian writer Ali A Rizvi wrote, “The ‘anything but jihad’ brigade is out in full force again. If the perpetrators of such attacks say they were influenced by politics (or) nationalism ... we take them at face value. But when they consistently cite their religious beliefs as their central motivation, we back off, stroke

our chins and suspect there *has* to be something deeper at play, a 'root cause'. It is often religion itself ... that is the root cause."

This sort of candour is lacking among most mainstream commentators in modern, liberal democracies today. Calling out jihadi terrorism is inhibited for fear of being labelled prejudiced, Islamophobic or, oddly, even racist.

The holy texts of most ancient religions – including Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism – contain exhortations to both love, tolerance and kindness on the one hand, as well to as to revenge, misogyny and violence on the other. Barack Obama has reminded the world "that during the crusades and the inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ".

Virtually all major religions have had fanatical, murderous adherents. Even in modern times there are several examples of religious killings besides those by Islamists. For instance, by Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Myanmar and Christian abortion-clinic bombers in the US. India has seen terrorism by Sikh extremists, and among Hindus there is Dara Singh, convicted for life for killing an Australian missionary and his children. Other instances of alleged Hindu terrorism from 2007 to 2010 (Samjhauta, Malegaon, Ajmer) are being adjudicated in courts.

But in sheer scale, number of attacks and fatalities, nothing comes close to jihadi terrorism. Even "traditional", non-religious, left-wing extremists like Germany's Baader-Meinhof, Italy's Red Brigades, Columbia's FARC, Peru's Shining Path and our very own Naxalites are now either defunct or well past their peak.

The numbers speak for themselves. 2015 statistics cited by political scientist Ian Bremmer show that the world's top terrorist organisations are IS (8,420 fatalities), Boko Haram (6,299), Taliban (5,215) and Al Shabab (1,586). That al-Qaida doesn't even rank any more shows how exponential the growth of Islamist radicalisation has been.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a bestselling author and Somali refugee has said, "It simply will not do for Muslims to claim that their religion has been 'hijacked' by extremists. The killers of Islamic State and Boko Haram cite the same religious texts that every other Muslim in the world considers sacrosanct ... The biggest obstacle to change within the Muslim world is suppression of critical thinking."

It is not that other religions have sanitised their religious texts. But they have coped with modernity better. As Zakaria puts it, "Islamic terrorists don't just hate America or the West. They hate the modern world." For jihadi terrorism to subside, this must change.

What the world needs now is not more platitudes and political correctness. It needs support for those within Islam speaking up for reform, to adapt to modernity. Otherwise, the sacrifice of many brave Muslims who stand up to terrorists – like Faraaz Hossain, who died in the Dhaka attack because he refused to abandon his friends – will go in vain.