IDSS COMMENTARIES (29/2005)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

Religion, Terror and the Fundamentalist Mentality

Kumar Ramakrishna*

2 June 2005

These days it is often said that terrorists who claim to execute their destructive acts for religious purposes are in fact motivated not by religious impulses but rather baser instincts: in particular, the old-fashioned lust for power. The militants appeal to religious faith to impart to their heinous acts a degree of religious respectability as well as to mobilise support for their political agenda from the wider religious community. Hence it is said that one counter-strategy to win the "ideological war" against the likes of Al Qaeda or Jemaah Islamiyah is to expose them for what they are: power-hungry, callous militants cynically exploiting religious beliefs for narrow political ends.

While there is a degree of truth in this diagnosis and the accompanying prescription, the analysis risks over-simplifying matters. While there are clearly within the ranks of these religiously motivated "new terrorists", leaders who cynically manipulate religion for political purposes, it would be folly to imagine that religion plays no role at all in the complex motivational mix of these individuals. The uncomfortable truth is that certain understandings of religion, together with what we may call a "Concretist" mindset, can under certain conditions coalesce dangerously to generate the radicalized, terrorist worldview. This is how rank and file terrorists can quite genuinely believe that they can justifiably kill in the name of their faith. So apart from the naked quest for power, religion, unfortunately, can indeed be part of the motivational complex that drives the new terrorists of today.

Religion remains important because of the universal human desire to reject existential meaninglessness, to find reasons for suffering and tragedy, and to seek the promise of a better afterlife. Religion addresses this human need for a meaningful cosmos and human existence.

In this context globalisation, which many non-Western societies tend to associate with Westernisation, is destabilizing. With its remorseless emphasis on market logic and its social and political accoutrements, globalisation promotes the secularisation of society as well as moral relativism. This is why sociologist Charles Selengut explains that for many people in the developing world, to follow the West is to become "spiritually and psychologically homeless, without a transcendental anchor to provide security and safety during life's journey".

Enter the "Concretists"

Of course individuals in any society respond to the moral complexities inherent within globalised modernity differently. This is where Jungian personality theory is most interesting. Among other things, Jungian analysts postulate two basic types of individual: the

Intuitive and the Concretist. The Intuitive tends to be creative, open to new ideas and change, and problem-oriented. Concretists, on the other hand, tend to prefer a fixed, uncomplicated way of understanding the world and are strongly solution-oriented. They need answers. So while Intuitives, as psychologist Ronald Johnson says, see "what could be", Concretists can only see "what is".

Concretists by and large don't cope with change very well. In fact, rapid social change with too much choice, especially in relation to identity, can be positively frightening. This is precisely why religious fundamentalism is so attractive to many concretists. Charismatic fundamentalist leaders offer their flocks clear, simple, practical, and absolute directives for their lives. For the Concretist struggling to make sense of the social, economic, political and moral upheavals associated with the shift toward advanced capitalist modernity, the quest for absolute ideological security can be a most powerful motive indeed. It is worth recalling that many Singapore JI members gathered around the charismatic local JI spiritual leader Ibrahim Maidin because, like classic Concretists, they, as a Singapore Government White Paper put it, wished to "free themselves from endless searching as they found it stressful to be critical, evaluative and rational". Simply because "JI leaders had quoted from holy texts", local JI members felt assured that "they could not go wrong".

It's the Mindset, Stupid

In other words, Concretists are attracted to religious fundamentalism - Hindu, Christian or Muslim - because of its black-and-white certitudes. Studies even show that once some Concretists believe that they have found ideological security in a specific worldview, they are likely to defend their new beliefs with considerable emotional intensity, including even aggression. This is why scholars like J. Harold Ellens regard religious fundamentalism as problematic not so much because of its specific content but because of its rigid, inflexible nature. The Concretist/Fundamentalist cannot easily embrace ambiguities and differing interpretations of reality. Thus Ellens goes so far as to consider the fundamentalist mindset as a form of "psychopathology", and a sign "a very limited ability to live with the ambiguity inherent to healthy human life".

That's not all. Not only do many Concretist/Fundamentalists seek the desire for certainty, they tend to also want, as critical theorist Stuart Sim laments, the "power to enforce that certainty over others". This is what makes the religious fundamentalist so inherently problematic. Condemning religiously motivated terrorism alone does not necessarily imply open-mindededness in all matters of faith. In seeking to define truth not only for himself but for everyone else around him - both co-religionists and others - the religious fundamentalist legitimates an unhealthy us-and-them worldview that in some circumstances may well nudge a few individuals further down the pathway of violent radicalism. Political scientist R. H. Dekmejian in this respect notes that hard-core religious fundamentalists, with their "rigid beliefs, intolerance toward unbelievers", and a "vision of an evil world", are psychologically susceptible to a variety of potentially destructive ideologies. Al Qaedaism is such an ideology.

Is Education the Antidote? It Depends

Is education therefore the antidote to the ossified Concretist/Fundamentalist mindset? Yes, but it also depends on the type of education one is talking about. In this connection, astute observers such as Moojan Momen have uncovered a curious phenomenon: when "scientists

(especially from the physical sciences) and engineers become religious, they often tend towards fundamentalist religion". Psychological research suggests that natural or physical scientists in fact tend to be more religious than social scientists such as sociologists and psychologists. This is because of the so-called "scholarly distance" thesis. Two respected psychologists of religion, Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi and Michael Argyle, explain that while "the natural sciences apply critical thinking to nature; the human sciences ask critical questions about culture, tradition and beliefs". Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle suggest that simply "choosing human society or behaviour as the object of study reflects a curiosity about basic social beliefs and conventions and a readiness to reject them". In contrast, "physical scientists, who are at a greater scholarly distance, may be able to compartmentalize their science and religion more easily".

Before one rushes to dismiss the scholarly distance thesis as wildly simplistic, one should reflect for instance on the relatively high proportion of Islamic fundamentalist activists worldwide with backgrounds in the hard sciences and engineering. For example, on university campuses in Iran and Egypt, such activists constitute 25 percent of humanities students, but 60-80 percent of students in medicine, engineering and science. The Egyptian scholar Khalid Duran draws attention to the "odd" fact that "Islamic fundamentalism" has always had "it's strongest appeal among engineers". He wryly observes that in Egypt "they always say the Muslim Brotherhood is really the Engineering Brotherhood". Duran's analysis is that with notable exceptions, engineers are generally not trained to "exercise their fantasy and imagination. Everything is precise and mathematical. They don't study what we call 'the humanities'. Consequently when it comes to issues that involve religion and personal emotion, they tend to see things in very stark terms".

In matters of religious faith, therefore, the Concretist-minded scientist/engineer tends to engage in what Malise Ruthven calls monodimensional readings of scripture, as compared to his counterpart in the arts and humanities, whose training requires him to "approach texts multidimensionally, exploring contradictions and ambiguities". This is precisely why Duran holds that an "education in literature or politics or sociology seems to inoculate you against the appeals of fundamentalism".

The Real Antidote: Critical Thinking Skills

Ensuring that a religion like Islam today is not politicized and exploited by terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda or JI certainly requires a war on the ideological front. But merely promoting a progressive interpretation of the faith while undercutting the legitimacy of the Qaedaist worldview is not enough. A more profound battle looms: the much more systematic and comprehensive promotion of critical analysis and thinking skills worldwide. Hard science and technical education, while important, needs balancing out by more emphasis on the "softer" arts and humanities disciplines that emphasise critical analysis of social life. The Intuitive mentality must become more widespread. As scholar of religion Charles Kimball points out, only when society learns to question dogma in all spheres of social life, including religion, can the worst effects of the Concretist/Fundamentalist mindset, the true villain of the piece, be ameliorated.

---

* Kumar Ramakrishna is Head (Studies) and Associate Professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University. This is a personal comment.