

# Islam on fanaticism

**W**hat is fanaticism? It is defined by Webster as "excessive and unreasonable enthusiasm or zeal." Used in the religious context, it connotes "religious extremism." Zealots may act under the banner of religion, but it must be borne in mind that their actions are the very negation of the true religious spirit.

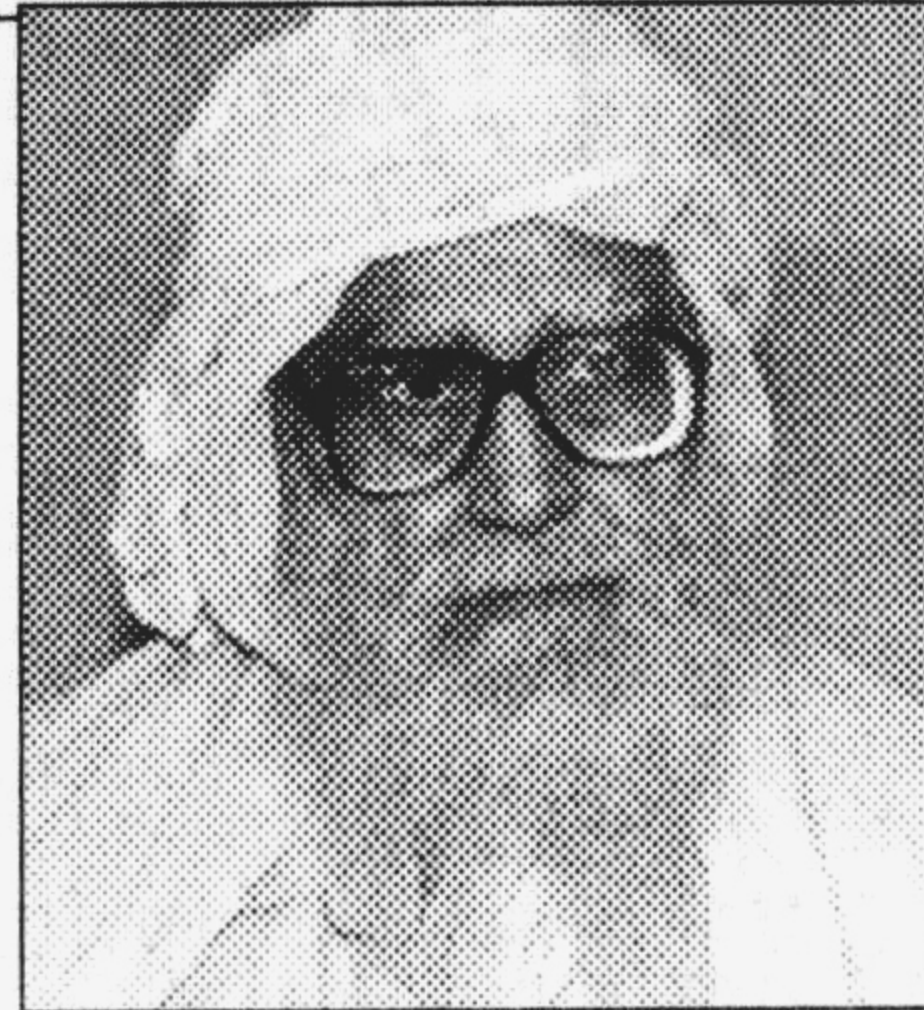
Whenever someone adopts a creed, he does so because he regards that as the truth. There is nothing wrong in this. Islam wants us to believe in the veracity of our creed and to practise it as far as possible in our daily living. But this should not be taken to extremes, for Islam does not approve of fanaticism, which it holds to be a kind of ideological madness, a form of *ghulu* (extremism) which, along with bigotry, has been expressly forbidden. (Qur'an, 4:171).

The Prophet of Islam once observed: "I have been sent with a religion which exhorts gentleness." That is, he had brought to mankind a religion which made concessions to others and which was completely free of all rigidity. This is not to say that Islam has no distinct ideology: its moral principles are certainly very well defined. But, in practical matters, it advocates dealing gently with others, while adhering strictly to Islamic tenets, as being in the true spirit of religion.

The Prophet of Islam lived for the first thirteen years of his prophethood in Mecca, during which period there were no less than 360 idols within the precincts of the Kabah. By religious persuasion the Prophet believed implicitly in the One God. Even so, he went to the Kabah to say his prayers. He made no attempt to remove the idols, nor did he come into conflict with the idol-worshippers. If the Prophet had been an extremist, he would not have been able to exercise such restraint.

When the Prophet was in Mecca, he used to pray facing in the direction of the Kabah. On

## Horizons



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reaching Medina, he should have continued, as was his wont, to pray facing towards the Kabah. But, there being many Jews living in Medina at that time, the Prophet bowed to the established Jewish custom by praying in the direction of Bait-al-Maqdis (Jerusalem). Had the Prophet been a fanatic, he could never have acted in this way.

Once, a Bedouin villager entered the Prophet's mosque in Medina and proceeded to defile the place by urinating. Now this particular mosque (Masjid-e-Nawabi) is held very sacred in Islam. And the Prophet's companions wanted to give the man a good beating. But the Prophet forbade this. Instead, he asked them to fetch a bucketful of water to wash the place clean. Had the Prophet been an extremist, he would have had the offender soundly thrashed.

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**Islam wants us to believe in the veracity of our creed and to practise it as far as possible in our daily living**

During the early Meccan period, the city was under the domination of idolaters. Twenty years later, when Mecca was conquered, it came under the rule of the Prophet of Islam. Since ancient times, it had been the custom to place a cover (*ghilaf*) over the Kabah, and at the time of the conquest of Mecca, this holiest of shrines was shrouded in a cover prepared by the idolaters. In this new age of monotheism, such a symbol must have been anathema, and one of fanatic mentality would have immediately torn down the trappings of polytheism. Not so the Prophet. He left the cover where it was. But then, after some time, it caught fire and was destroyed. Only then did the Prophet have it replaced. Had he been a fanatic, he would have behaved very differently.

Religious fanaticism falls into two categories. One relates to the self and the other to one's conduct in society. On the individual plane, no one is supposed to exceed the bounds set by religion. If he does so, this amounts to fanaticism. For instance, fasting is a form of worship in Islam, to be performed for a certain period each year. However, if one started fasting the whole year round that would be transgressing the prescribed limits, which is anti-Islamic. In the second case, fanaticism in relation to others generally arises from being provoked by anything which runs counter to Islam, and then taking stern action. For instance, drinking, unlawful in Islam, is punishable by flogging. But if the would-be reformer started flogging just any drinker he came across, that would be sheer fanaticism and, as such, an un-Islamic act. It is only when all efforts to reform the alcoholic have proved unavailing that he should be punished. Even then, his punishment should not be by some irate individual, but by a properly constituted religious court. Islam's first imperative, in fact, is a proper religious education for all in order to ensure correct behaviour at all times, in private and in public.