

# Peace and mercy gone for a toss

Farida Khanam locates the scriptural illogic of today's Islamic fundamentalism and shows why and how it has turned into barbarism

**O**n the publication of the Satanic verses by Salman Rushdie, the Muslim reaction was to have him killed forthwith; he had committed an unpardonable offense against Islam and the Prophet. All over the world, Muslims demanded his head. They were not prepared to settle for anything less than that.

Even in this modern age, the campaign spread like wild fire. This gave the impression that Muslims were very vengeful and violent people. Consequently, in certain Western countries notice boards were put saying, "Beware of Muslims". This showed the extreme fear engendered by the Muslim fundamentalist threat.

In all fairness one can ask, Is this Islam? Never. Allah has been represented in Islam as a All Merciful, and the Prophet has been proclaimed the Prophet of Mercy. It is ironical that in the name of such a magnanimous religion, a certain section of the fundamentalists could not appreciate such sentiments, far less promote them. Islam could never incite people to committing murder in the name of religion, simply because someone had written a book which ruffled their emotions. In fact, this is not the religion of Islam: It is the religion of certain bigoted Muslims.

In the days of the Prophet a large number of Rushdies and Taslima Nasreens ex-

isted, but none of them were beheaded for the offence of insulting Islam and its prophet. On the contrary, in the times of the Prophet the principle of countering words with words was followed. That is why those who spoke out against Islam no matter to what lengths they went were not penalised in any way. All that happened was that the Prophet appointed a poet called Hassan to give a befitting answer in verse to the offenders, poetry being the main mode of public expression and sentiments. This is the example we should follow for the resolution of all such problems in true Islamic spirit and earlier traditions.

In the present age those who are overzealous in their approach to Islam are called fundamentalists, but a better name for them would be deviationists. For the original meaning of fundamentalism was adherence to the principles of one's religion. But zealots have actually deviated from the fundamental principles of Islam. If they had been fundamentalists in the traditional sense of the word, they would have followed the example of the Holy Prophet. They would have fought ideas with ideas. But nowadays they are fighting words with bombs and bullets. Such people are

not true fundamentalists: they are distorters of religion.

Religion is basically a matter of persuasion, but fundamentalists make it a matter of imposition. That is what begets violence. This is where fundamentalism assumes the form of extremism. But here-in lies a fallacy. That is, if one takes fundamentalism in its literal sense, then it should be the same basic teachings and

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tenets of Islam as are emphasised in the Islamic scriptures themselves. There is a Haddith which gives us clear guidance in this matter. The Prophet observed that Islam is founded on five pillars: bearing witness that there is no god, except the one indisputable God and that Muhammad is God's Messenger; the regular saying of prayers (*salar*), alms-giving (*zakat*); performing a pilgrimage to the Kabah, the House of God in Mekkah (*haj*) and fasting during the month of Ramadan (*sawm*).

The rest of the teachings of Islam fall into the category of detailed explanations of and elaborations upon the five basic principles which propagate a peaceful striving. Holding any other precept besides these to form part of the basic tenets of Islam is misguided and unacceptable.

Therefore, the objectives set by the fundamentalists is that politics is only a relative part of Islam. That is why, we find no express injunction in the Quran pertaining to words such as these: "O, Muslims, establish the political system of Islam." But regarding the fundamental principles the Quran gives specific Commands to establish them.

The absence of such directives clearly

shows that politics in Islam is a relative concept, and not a real part of it. Since, Islamic fundamentalists target the Islamisation of the state rather than reform of individuals, their only plan of action is to launch themselves on a collision course with the rulers, both Muslims as well as non-Muslims. And thus their movement takes the path of violence.

From the Quran and Haddith we learn that reform of the individuals through peaceful method is the goal of Islam. And once their targeted enemy is removed from the seat of power, fighting for the division of power goes on and on endlessly as we see in Afghanistan. Without doubt, idealism and perfection are highly desirable virtues in Islam, but the direct target of Islamic idealism is not society, nor the state but the making of an ideal individual. There is no express injunction in this regard in the Quran and the Haddith.

Furthermore, Islamic fundamentalism, launched in the name of Islam, has dealt a death blow to the image of Islam as a religion of peace and mercy. The basic weakness of the modern distorted version of fundamentalism lies in that it sees religion, or an ideology, as a matter of imposition rather than of persuasion. And in its practical shape, its inevitable logic of coercion turns it into barbarism.