

Religious Intolerance - The Crumbling of Civilizations

M. Shihar Hassan, MBA (Reading)
Attorney at Law (Finalist).
shiharhaq@yahoo.com

Abstract

A 30 year long war, which was said to have won by our motherland with a cost of thousands of lives and billions of rupees, has yet not taught us the lesson. Religious intolerance has again erupted to take many lives in the recent past, burnt-down houses and businesses and left many permanently disabled even after 2009.

Religions have always been criticized by the modern day atheists for being the fundamental reason for inciting violence and the means for oppression in the history of the world. More significantly, religions today are identified by the so-called pacifistic atheists as the root of all the wars that had crumbled modern day civilizations and for killing millions of lives.

Religious intolerance has caused a major impediment to the world economy by harnessing instability and economic breakdown in many of the world countries. The Middle East, many Asian countries and some of the African countries are still in this Pandora's Box that has become impossible to shut down and which is always attributed as being the result of religious intolerance; or more eloquently put, 'religions' as a whole. The question might arise "if all the religions teach peace, why is it that people of religions kill one another?" on the other hand, is it religions or the political interest attached to it that causes religious hatred and violence? Or is it because some try to keep other civilizations in war and chaos by inciting inter and intra-religious violence to achieve their political and economic control over the world by making the world believe that religions are the cause of it?

The paper will tend to discuss that, is it just the religions that had caused inter-religious and sectarian violence or is it more political and economic in nature than religious? Is there something more that should take priority before we divide ourselves into religions? It will further extend to discuss the backgrounds and causes of religious intolerance and the means of overcoming the complex issues faced by the world community under the guise of religious intolerance.

The background

Religions have been an integral part of human evolution. Though religions are said to have come from divine sources, many of the philosophers from the entire known history have contradicted in the understanding of Man, God and the Universe. The very emergence of the universe, its control and its sustenance themselves are matters of controversy between religions, let alone other factors such as rituals and worship in religions.

In the earliest civilizations, man had always fought for survival; to fulfill his needs; to outrun the race for food and shelter. Later when human mind developed to form ideas, the difference in ideas led to more fighting and killing, where the prime motive was to answer and establish the 'who is right?' question by shutting out the other once and forever. The evolution and formation of religions too had the same fate. One had to establish the worth of his religious ideology (or rather, the theological ideology erupted in his mind in the early part of religious evolution) by the slaughter of the one who has a different ideology.

Throughout history, though all other aspects of human life evolved, theological beliefs remained sacred and constant in the minds of humans, where any potential or perceived threat or marginalization against any particular religion was felt to be of direct threat for their entire community and was fought for and paid by blood for its survival until today.

As of today, religions as a whole and a certain religion in particular have become a center point of controversial debate as being the root cause of bloody violence or many of the above observations are perceived and resorted to throughout history as religions being the cause of continuous bloodshed in human history.

While the debate about particular religions causing bloodshed is at large, the modern atheist movements have accused 'Religions' themselves by its nature, are prone to violence. Among them is the movement known as 'New Atheists' including prominent scientists and scholars like Dawkins (2006), Dennett (2006), Harris (2004) and Hitchens (2007), who have advanced a highly polemical attack on religions. Sam Harris notes in his book *The End of Faith* that faith and religion are "the most prolific source of violence in our history."

Religion: The cause of bloodshed in the trail of history?

The prominently quoted history has credulously made the world believe that religions had caused bloodshed in the world by quoting every battle in the name or guise of religion as prime evidence. Early Christianity and Islam being two of the major religions have been commonly quoted as being the prime cause of spilling blood, whereas Jews are painted as being the single major victims of the two among others. Whenever religion is involved or slaughter is done by men with a religious veil, history has had it blown big like a balloon. On the other hand, all other wars, conquests, slaughters, world wars and mass murders whether political or geographical in nature are painted under the 'common' column, regardless of it done by men with a sound religious attribution. What about all these 'other' wars, chaos, mass murders and bloodshed? To which religion do they belong to? And why aren't they generalized as being the cause of some ideology? These questions might arise to a man with some sense.

Religious ideologies were formed to bring peace to man. To compel him to surrender to something superior to him since he wouldn't surrender to anything that he perceives to be equal. These ideologies which are believed to be revealed by God or felt by great men through enlightenment later became the means of fighting and killing. If these religions meant to bring peace, how did the fighting begin?

This is where we should understand the human desires that are attached to the religious ideologies. More specifically, humans were able to be unified under one roof for a common cause under the superior power or deity of religions. The human aspirations were able to be fulfilled better in the guise of religious beliefs since the disciples engulfed by the so called religious merits were and are ready to annihilate anything in their path at any cost when they are profoundly influenced by religion, which they would not do by any other means whatsoever. Professor Horowitz (1985) observes "in divided societies, ethnic conflict is a center of politics. Ethnic divisions pose challenges to the cohesion of the states and sometimes peaceful relations among states. Ethnic conflict strains the bond of civility and is often at the root of violence which results in looting, death, homelessness, and the flights of large numbers of people. In divided societies, ethnic affiliations are powerful, permeative, passionate and pervasive". Thus, religion has been a major tool to persuade the disciples into obedience with much lesser cost and effort and to instill rewards for every act they were commanded to do in the name of religion including killing in the name of God.

It is a blatant lie that religions as a whole and a specific religion in particular have the highest score of killing, since it's obvious that the killings that took place for various other reasons whether we call it conquest, war or genocide, are much higher than any 'religious' killing by a zillion times. It is not solely the religions that have caused killing of millions which are said to be so. Most of them are actually more in line with the 'common' category than religious. How? Most of the wars fought in the name of religion whether it be crusades or any other mass murders, were mostly fought for the human desire of conquest and rule over the ones who did not oblige to the demands of one particular group, while they themselves had enslaved their disciples by making them believe as being the submission to the word of God. The worst blood feuds in the history of human kind are the result of misuse of this 'submission to the word of God' theory which in reality had no religious base at all, except for the name tag of a religion that the violence carried.

It is true though, that certain wars and battles were fought in the actual cause of religion or over religious controversy. Even if we cannot regard them as small to be shredded off the list, they are not as gloomier as exaggerated, in contrast with all other 'non-religious' or 'common' violence. As it is as intriguing as it may sound, what matters the most is, how far religions have contributed to the violence trail in the world history out of the whole lot?

It is very interesting to note that all those who blame religions as a whole and certain religion in particular for causing war and chaos in the trail of history, particularly the invasions of Islamic rule being quoted for the bloodshed of millions (which though should not be disregarded) ingeniously turn a blind eye on the blood spilt by great wars of Alexander The Great, The Roman Empires, The Mongolian and Tartarian Invasions and the killing of millions of native American people including the Commonly known Red Indians, Cherokee, Iroquois, Onondaga, Mohawk, Cayuga and Seneca, the modern day wars of Vietnam, 1st and 2nd world wars, Russian revolution by Lennon and Stalin etc, ignoring the fact that the one single war under the so called 'common' category would put all the wars in the name religions into shame. The Encyclopedia of Wars by Philip and Alexrod explains this fact that out of the most significant wars in human history, only an astonishing 6.98% (123 out of 1763) are attributed to be religious in nature. Thus, the argument that religions are the cause of bloodshed through the trail of human history is a concocted theory to marginalize certain religions to run the political agenda of keeping the world immersed in war and chaos.

The story of religious violence and Islam in the Modern Era

The modern era, i.e. the post 19th century has marked significant power shifts and changes in the world. The centuries of conquest, colonization and rule by the French, British and the neighboring European monarchs faced a significant threat from the Islamic Ottoman Empire which had significant control over economic and political dices in the world. Thus, the western colonialists needed the systematic disperse of the Ottoman Empire, which was descended from the powerful Islamic Caliphate of more than 1200 years. The Caliphate was a safe haven for all, Muslims and Non-Muslims alike as opposed to the concocted theories of barbaric rule by monarchs. It is significant that at some point in 1800s, the major part of the Ottoman Empire's population were Christians made up of around 80% of the total, who willingly submitted to the Empire. The perceived persecution of Non-Muslims was never prevalent in most of the Islamic rule, while some rulers by their own nature than religious attribution have abused their enormous power over the world. The rule which was said today to have been taken at the point of sword and with so much blood in the name of Islam, actually remains until today as a religion of Minority in many countries including India which was ruled by Muslims for 800 years under the Mughal Empire. Should the Muslim rulers wanted to spread their religion, it can well be said that they could have converted each and everyone in the country into Islam, since India until today remains to inhabit the second largest population of Muslims in the World after Indonesia.

The more troubling news for the late 19th century colonialists was that the Ottoman Empire failed to give any room for exploitation of resources from their colonies and the power of the Ottoman Empire remained a constant threat for their expansion of power over the world. Especially Constantinople, the strategic trade route from West to East which was blocked by the Ottomans made it imperative for the Western colonialists to disband the Ottoman Empire, which they succeeded through systematic seclusion of people through nationalism, tribalism and sectarianism. This was also the base to set up a Jewish state in Palestine by the Zionist movement later with the help of the western forces like America and the colonialist Britain, which was earlier denied by the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II even after being offered 150 million pounds of gold by Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionist movement.

The fall of Ottoman Empire paved way to the continuous sectarian and nationalistic seclusion and violence as a result of the British system of divide and rule, let alone the thought of another Islamic

Empire, which ensured the prevalence of the British rule. The more isolated system of Muslim civilization also led to their back fall in the industrial and information ages in the latter part of the 20th century which made them heavily dependent on the education and technology of the West as opposed to the *vice versa* in the Islamic Empire. This resulted in the feeding of the concocted history regarding Muslim rule of the world which was widely believed even by many of the Muslims of 20th Century to be true.

Why the above history is relevant is because, the absolute power-shift of the world to the West from all other odds and especially from the Ottoman Empire has been the important reason for the perceived Islamic Bloodshed in the history. Nevertheless, the modern day wars and chaos circle around certain specific matters of importance to the super powers of today, such as Power, Wealth and Information. The easiest way to keep control of the game is to shuffle it so often before the game stabilizes, which is exactly the strategy used by the super-powers of today to keep the world under their watch. The modern day wars on Vietnam by the US, its continuous and unconditional support for the Israeli atrocities in the Middle East from its inception and the US intervention and its intelligence gimmicks in the Middle East region from the Iranian revolution to the Gulf War, the creation and Training of Taliban and Al Qaeda to get rid of Russia from Afghanistan and then later using the same forces as the means to wage war to control an entire region of the Middle East are few of the very elegant examples of the above facts. The controversial Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL) of today is itself a rogue Al Qaeda wing, which is also explained by many of the modern political analysts, as a US board game to control the region by continuously keeping it in war, thus ensuring it never to become a threat while making it easy to exploit petroleum resources from many countries without any intervention.

The continuous oppression, marginalization and discrimination in political, social and economic contexts by one community over another have been the actual causes of religious and ethnic disharmony in the world as of today. The African region which has been segregated and disregarded by the world community has resulted in many terrorist organizations and rebels being formed in many of the African countries. The Central African Republic, Congo, Uganda and Nigeria can be some examples among various others. The Middle East which has been fed more and more with the already prevailing nationalist, tribal and sectarian ideologies have created a never ending chain of bloodshed today. Thus a more objective perspective over religious and ethnic disharmony in the world should be taught to overcome today's ethnic rivalry.

The Sri Lankan Context

Sri Lanka being under the same colonial British rule, also being a direct victim of the divide and rule strategy of the colonial government faced a significant back fall with the emergence of the armed struggle between the Tamil Tigers and the mainly Sinhalese backed Sri Lankan forces. The trail of disharmony among Sri Lankan communities is very sparse before independence except few significant incidents like the riots of 1915, while it increased in frequency after independence, namely the Gal Oya riots of 1956, the riots of 1958, the Black July of 1983 and the arms struggle with the North as well as the recent riots of Aluthgama and Beruwala in 2000 and 2014, sparing enormous scars in the hearts of the people.

The main reason for ethnic rift is the voluntary seclusion of certain groups in terms of language based ethnicity that can be traced back from the early 20th Century. The rift between Tamils and Sinhalese fired up with the introduction of the Sinhalese superiority concept by Mr. Bandaranayaka in 1956, which blasted into a reign of rivalry between the two that later turned into an armed struggle. The Tamils themselves had an attribute of seclusion from the mainstream country affairs, identifying the needs of their community in particular and demanding to fulfill them from the rulers. This was in turn countered by the Sinhalese majority rulers by not obliging to the bargaining politics. The same sort of bargaining politics erupted with the emergence of certain Muslim political movements, which were of great importance to the community in the era of war in the battered zones. This resulted in the same flow of ethnic based political order for each and every ethnic group in Sri Lanka, except for Christians.

The reason for many of the incidents in the modern history of Sri Lanka can be reduced to very few reasons. One which is notable is the fear of losing the nationalist identity of an ethnic group. The others are the feeling of superiority over another community or one treating any others lesser Sri Lankan, which in turn sparked into very serious ethno-political battles.

The recent eruption of Muslim related feeling of insecurity, or more precisely, the feeling of Muslims invading the country and trying to take over the only Sinhala land had become the major slogan in the last few years that ended up with a heavy loss of life and property in certain parts of the country. The fear of the majority Sinhalese can be justified given the past experience with the Tamil tigers, but a more objective look would render the argument invalid.

The almost 10% Muslims who can hardly match the 73% Sinhala majority, had never demanded for any divided land nor have asked for special privileges except for what they are entitled to through the Constitution. They have never held ties with the Tamil Tigers, which would have certainly given them a chance of a single piece of land for Muslims if they pledged their allegiances. Instead, they were chased out in 24 hours by the Tigers for not pledging their allegiances with nothing but the dress that they wore. It is noteworthy that the longest living Internally Displaced People in the world are the Sri Lankan Muslims, with a history of over 23 years in displacement, a price they paid for their loyalty to the motherland. The majority of the Muslims also feel that the bargaining politics prevalent in certain Muslim Political parties should be gotten rid of, resulting in a unified state with a common mission to uplift the Sri Lankan interest and the Sri Lankan identity. Dr. Lorna Dewaraja Notes, “historians have traditionally been attracted by wars and rebellions whereas the peaceful coexistence of groups of people over long periods tends to be overlooked”. She further adds, “In the history of Sri Lanka few are aware of the harmonious relationship which had developed between the Sinhalese, its indigenous inhabitants, and the Muslims who initially were foreigners, and that both have lived together peacefully for over a thousand years. Perhaps because it was such a peaceful relationship, it has passed unnoticed by the historian”.

Conclusion

Ethnic disharmony has its roots. The continuous doubt, oppression, marginalization whether political or social or injustice caused to certain groups can result in the ever-lasting war and chaos. Most wars in the name of religion are more economic, political or social in nature than religious in the first place, over a dispute of land, rights or resources that one desire more to snatch from the other or by oppressing the other to limit them. Most of the modern historians, political analysts and terrorism experts including Robert Pape conclude that the fundamental reason for religious intolerance is one of the above.

It is essential to realize that the element of humanity should always come forward before we divide ourselves into religions. We should also understand that the fighting over things, superiority and religion are old ideas that should be gotten rid of and a trend of intellectual battle should be formed over the bloodshed and killing. The concept of sharing of resources, values, knowledge, technology and ideas should be encouraged. Taking care of the needy, the feeble and the marginalized should be prioritized. This would reduce the struggle for basic human needs and reduce rift between the underprivileged and the elite. One should learn to effectively communicate with other communities, express concerns, convince than control, introduce cohesiveness than bargain and inculcate Humanity over nationalism and sectarianism.

These will tend to resolve all the above issues faced by human kind, and all kinds of violence can be resorted peacefully and amicably. Hate is the cause of all evil. We pass on hate for generations while some don't even know why they hate the other. Doubt can create mischief that would end up in a never ending blood feud. Thus, to feel the true meaning of 'Sabbe Saththa Bavanthu Sukki Thaththa', giving the space and treating the other the same way one wishes to be treated, will give a better world to live in. Most of all, it will give a better meaning for life to live for.

Bibliography

- Brian Landers (2011). Empires Apart: A History of American and Russian Imperialism. Open Road Media.
- Diana Lary (2012). Chinese Migrations: The Movement of People, Goods, and Ideas over Four Millennia
- Jack D. Eller, "Cruel Creeds, Virtuous Violence: Religious Violence Across Culture and History," Prometheus Books, (2010).
- G. Scott Davis, Ed. (1996), "Religion and Justice in the War over Bosnia," Routledge,
- Finkel, Caroline. (2005). Osman's Dream . New York: Basic Books,
- Hourani, Albert Habib. (1997) A History Of The Arab Peoples. New York: Mjf Books.
- Ochsenwald, William, and Sydney Fisher. (2003), The Middle East: A History. 6th. New York: McGraw-Hill,
- Collins, Roger (1989). The Arab Conquest of Spain 710-797. Oxford, UK / Cambridge, USA: Blackwell
- Dewaraja, Lorna (1994), The Muslims of Sri Lanka: one thousand years of Ethnic harmony 900-1915
- Alan Axelrod, Charles Phillips (2004) Encyclopedia of Wars- Volume III
- Horowitz. (1985). Ethnic groups in conflict. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Danios (2012), Most Victims of Islamic Terrorism are Muslims... And Why America is to Blame For It, Feature, Loon Politics