

Religion: Predicament of the Middle East

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To understand the role of religious extremists today in the Middle East, and indeed the whole Islamic world, a glance at history may be instructive. Before Christianity, two millennia ago, the peoples of the Middle East identified themselves as belonging to a certain clan or tribe, and as subjects of a ruler, such as the Roman Emperor or Persian king. Religion was not significant in the identity of a person, since he and his neighbors paid homage to various deities. About the fourth century the concept of universal religions developed, and intolerance replaced the more relaxed attitude toward other beliefs. Orthodox and heresy appeared, but more importantly people who previously had pride in being a Roman citizen, now identified themselves as Christians. Religion replaced other allegiances, the Roman Empire consequently declined and the Middle Ages was born. In the multi-ethnic Middle East bonds of faith united people more than language, culture or society, especially when the state adopted one religious persuasion as official and proscribed others. This new attitude could be exemplified by a contemporary colleague of mine, who in examining candidates for the priesthood asked a question. "If you believe you have absolute truth, and you must if you go forth to preach this truth, then what right do you have not to persecute others who do not believe?"

Throughout time in the Middle East religious minorities were persecuted or restricted in ghettos under their own religious chiefs. The coming of Islam in the 7th century merely continued this established practice. In the Ottoman Empire, down to the end of World War I it was called the millet system, in which Jews and Christians were responsible to their leaders, as the latter were to the government. In Iran Zoroastrians were included in the system. In the 19th century nationalism grew, and people began to identify themselves as members of a

common linguistic, social or state organization. Secularism was in the air, but after World War II, when many hopes for political freedom of minorities were dashed, people returned to religion for guidance and comfort. Support for Medieval theocracies promised more results than any secular institution. The Middle East reversed direction, back to the Middle Ages and against Western civilization and globalization. In the 1950s in Karachi, Pakistan conflicts occurred between local Sindhis and Muhajirs, or refugees from India; by 2003 clashes had become religious, between Sunnis and Shi'ites. In Afghanistan formerly enmity between Pushtuns and Tajiks was prevalent, but in 2003 Sunni Taliban supporters attack Shi'ites. In the past in Iraq Arabs and Kurds were at odds, now it is Sunnis versus Shi'ites or Muslims against Christians. In Palestine it was the Arabs against the Israelis, and now it is Muslims against Jews and Christians. Where formerly secular concerns were important now religion dominates the rhetoric of fanatics who inflame their followers. Ethnic cleansing has been replaced by religious cleansing, and religion as the opiate of the masses has been replaced by cocaine or speed of the masses.

Religious fanatics are the most dangerous of all extremists, for they do believe they have the right to persecute others who do not accept their beliefs. Moderates fear fanatics which is why the latter are successful. The choice is clear, either with religious fanatics and intolerance, or for secular moderates and tolerance. In all parts of the world we must support the latter. Remember Nehru, first president of India, who said "The trouble with India is that there is too much emotion and religion and not enough reason and science."