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ENCOUNTER OF HINDUISM WITH ISLAM IN ISLAMIC COUNTRIES

The term 'encounter' usually connotes a violent conflict, a physical struggle between two belligerent forces. Fortunately, in recent political history, such belligerence between two nations belonging to two different faiths is becoming less and less common, although it has by no means disappeared. There are still certain areas in the world, where Christians and Muslims, Muslims and Jews, Muslims and Hindus and even Catholics and Protestants are ranged against each other with fear and hatred. In recent years, the term 'encounter' has however been applied to spiritual contact and dialogue between two religions, cultures, ideologies and societies. Ideologies have been transmitted from one culture to another sometimes violently, though with the approach of the 21st Century, there are good signs that ideology as a political force is slowly disappearing from the world.

In this essay, when we deal with the 'encounter' between Islam and Hinduism, we refer to both types of contact: the political and military on the one hand and religious and cultural on the other. When dealing with such a theme, a historical reference to events of the past seems to be unavoidable, however much one would like to forget the sad mistakes of past cultures. Such a reference would at least help us to pay attention to contacts and lessons that one can learn from the other. The first part of this essay will deal with the historical background of the encounter between Islam and Hinduism; the second will deal with the ideational, doctrinal, and cultural consequences of such an encounter. The third and concluding part will be devoted to some speculation regarding the possible future effects of this contact between two religions and cultures.

As every student of history knows, the medieval period of World history could really be called the age of the Islamic conquest and but for the defeat of the Turkish forces at the decisive battle of Tours, European history would have taken a different turn. Then again the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in the middle of the 15th Century

also shaped European political and cultural history during the centuries subsequent to it. Such decisive events have also determined the course of Indian history, e.g. the defeat of Prithvi Raj Chauhan at Thaneshwar, Mohammed Bhaktyar's conquest of Bengal, the three battles of Panipat all saw the triumph of Islam as a political force to be reckoned with for many centuries. Except for some pockets in Afghanistan, Hinduism never went beyond the Western frontiers, though successive invasions from the West from the time of Alexander the Great were tempted again and again to conquer the sub-continent. The influx of the Greeks into India did indeed result in some kind of synthesis of the two cultures as reflected for example in Architecture. It may however be noted that Hinduism did go beyond its boundaries in the East; the remarkable artistic, literary, religious, linguistic, social and legal influences of Hinduism and Buddhism in South and South-East Asia are still very much noticeable. The reason why Hinduism (and Buddhism) could not penetrate into Western Asia lies perhaps in the fact that the influence of the Semitic religions was so powerful that it could not allow any foreign cultural influence to enter into even the remotest frontiers of their geographical areas. Later on, religions like Christianity and Islam even made inroads into far-eastern culture in Malaysia, Borneo and Indonesia, but even they failed to uproot the traditional Hindu and Buddhist influences.

Thus, when we talk of 'Hinduism in Islamic countries' we certainly cannot refer to any area in Western Asia or North Africa, where Islam has been predominant for many centuries, but only of the regions in South and South Asia, which would include the newly-created Muslim nations of Pakistan and Bangladesh. It might include the whole of Indian sub-continent, which was under Muslim dominance for over 600 years, from the middle of the 12th Century to the beginning of the 19th Century A.D. At that time the Mughal Empire and before that the Sultanates of Delhi could indeed be characterized as Islamic because the ruling dynasties and classes were overwhelmingly Islamic in character, though the subjugated Hindu people were numerically always in a majority. The state could not be called 'secular' in any sense in which the term is used in the modern Indian context, except perhaps for a brief period during the reign of Emperor Akbar. Though the historians have glorified this period in Indian history, it may be said that much of the animosity of the Hindus (especially in the rural areas) towards the Muslims owes a great deal to the seeds of hatred sown during this age.

First the destruction started with Mahmud of Ghasni, who led more than a dozen expeditions into India, killing and plundering all the way to and back from the sub-continent. The pillaging of the great temple of Somnath is well-known. 'Death to the infidels' was the main battle cry those days and this cry seems to have been followed literally. Events of later centuries like the destruction of the universities and libraries in the Eastern part of India by Mohammed Bhaktyar, the depredations of Allauddin Khilji, the successive destructions of the temples at Banaras, Mathura and other places, execution of the Sikh gurus Arjan Dev and Teg Bahadur, imposition of *jezia* on the Hindus, forcible conversions of minorities are all well recorded by historians so much so that a great amount of bitterness has been carried to subsequent generations till this day. Of course, there is no reason why these events of the past should still guide the mentality of the Hindus of the present generations, but it is understandable psychologically. The destruction and desecration of religious places of one religious community by another, whether it has occurred in the past or in the present is a serious blot on civilization and it is difficult to forget or forgive such atrocities. There is no reason to penalise the present generation for what their ancestors did centuries ago.

Such bitterness, lack of trust and hatred between Muslims and non-Muslims can be seen to-day in Palestine, Bosnia, Cyprus, Lebanon, Bangladesh and in Kashmir, although the Muslim territories in South-east Asia have been relatively free from this atmosphere of tension and conflict, although the Hindu population in most of South-east Asia has almost been wiped out. One finds in Indonesia for example, that many of the old Hindu relics of art and architecture have been preserved in their unique form. A visit to Borobudur will make this obvious. In the island of Bali, Hinduism as a religion is still preserved and is followed by a large majority of population. Hinduism in the South Asian countries was first overtaken by Buddhism and then by Islam, which is still the main religion of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, though there is a large proportion of people belonging to other religions, viz. Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. One notable remnant of Hinduism in Indonesia is the Ramayana legend, in literature, folk-lore, theatre and music. The various forms of the great epic is also to be found in Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia and

Laos.¹ It must also be noted that Sanskrit language has greatly influenced the development of the South East Asian languages, side by side with Pali in Buddhist countries.

II

One could go into more historical details of the role played by Hinduism in some Asian countries. Unlike the religions belonging to the Semitic group, Hinduism is not a missionary religion. However, in recent years, there have been a number of Hindu missions like the Ramakrishna Mission, the so-called Self-realization Society of Paramahansa Yogananda etc. The former operates from Dacca also, and has earned a name in Bangladesh for its social and relief work during natural calamities. But this is only a recent phenomenon in the history of Hinduism. Except the Ramakrishna Mission, other missions do not operate from Bangladesh, and no mission, either Christian or belonging to any other religion operates in most Islamic countries. Even in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia, where some of them do have their offices, they work under highly restrictive conditions. In Saudi Arabia, propagation of non-Islamic religious ideas is punishable under the law of that land. This is also true of Iran, where a fundamentalist government has been ruling for the last fifteen years, since the overthrow of monarchy (which was certainly not liberal, but tolerated non-Christian religions within the land). We have heard of even Ahmediyas being declared as *kafirs*² and Christians suffering a lot of deprivations in Pakistan. Not everything is Indian propaganda. From my own brief visits to Pakistan, I can declare without any hesitation that it is very difficult for the Hindus to practise their religion or even observe festivals like Holi or Deepavali openly in that country. I learn that Christians face similar difficulty in observing their festivals. Only countries like Algeria, Egypt and Turkey are trying their best to eliminate Islamic fundamentalism from their body politic.

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1. During the last ten years, a Rmgyana festival is held periodically in various countries, where the lore is popular, and these countries include Indonesia and Malaysia.
 2. The term '*kafir*' is pejorative and can be applied even to heretics of Islam. It is much more derogatory than the term 'pagan'.

Fighting holy wars, trying to destroy faiths other than one's own, subjecting the religious minorities to severe persecution, discrimination and violence (which has sometimes led to large scale massacres) was sometimes approved by the religious leaders; violence is regarded as a matter of historical necessity. Of all the religions of the world, perhaps only Jainism and Buddhism have taken a positive stand against violence. In the case of Hinduism, loving one's neighbour, honesty, brotherhood, compassion are all at least theoretically accepted. Now and then saints like Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda have appeared to preach the path of love. Sufis of Islam have also been such saints. But in pre-partition India, Gandhi's teachings were regarded with great contempt by a large section of the Muslim population (and perhaps also by some Hindus, one of whom assassinated him), and the Muslim state of Pakistan which was founded as a result of this hatred, still nurtures strong prejudices against the minorities, 99% of whom were driven out during the short period after partition. No doubt Sufi saints like Jāmi, Attār, Hujwiri etc. have spoken of 'love', but this love is not love of fellowmen, but a gnostic love of God as the beloved. Saints like Moinuddin Chishti, the Sufi saint of Ajmer have however stressed friendliness and generosity even to one's enemies as a pre-condition to the gnostic love of God, but such mystic intellectualism is not and perhaps cannot be social in its context.³

The idea of the holy war (*jihad*) perhaps corresponds to a loose interpretation of a war against all non-Muslims in practice. It is something like *dharmayuddha* in Hinduism, but the latter can be waged also by non-violent means. If it is thus interpreted as a holy war against all non-believers no matter if it leads to a lot of suffering and bloodshed, then such a concept is not worthy of any religion. No wonder, 'jihad' continues to provide an excuse for those practising *Realpolitik*, for going to war with one's neighbours. It is a cry by fanatics and fundamentalists in stirring up the emotions of the faithful. R.C. Zaehner, whose keen understanding of the comparative problems of comparative religion is unimpeachable, is forced to remark:

3. Refer in this connection to R.S. Bhatnagar: *Dimensions of Sufi Thought*, Delhi: Moti Lal Banarsidass, 1984, pp. 133-151.

From the very beginning Islam was a militant, aggressive, potentially a persecuting religion⁴

In support of his view, Zaehner quotes the following passages from the *Quran*, though it is possible that he may be quoting out of context:

Fight against those who do not believe in Allah nor in the Last Day, and do not make forbidden what Allah and his Messenger have made forbidden, and do not practise the religion of truth those who have been given the Book, until they pay the tribute off-hand, being subdued.⁵

Fight against them until there is no dissension, and the religion is entirely Allah's⁶

Consider also passages like the following:

Slay them (=the *kafirs*) whenever you find them, and drive them out of the place they drive you from. Idolatry is worse than war. But do not fight them from within the precincts of the mosque unless they first attack you there. But if they do not attack you there, then slay them. Such is the reward of the unbelievers. If they do mend their ways, know that God is forgiving and merciful. Fight them until idolatry is no more and Allah's religion is supreme.⁷

Of course these punishments would not be meted out to them if they convert themselves to Islam, or totally submit themselves to the Muslim masters, who may kill them or spare their lives. It is because such passages were taken seriously that Islam (rightly called the 'religion of the Sword') had such fiery wars which could spread the doctrine of Mohammed as they understood it throughout a substantial part of the globe, in spite of resistance from other religions like Hinduism and Christianity. The Christians in medieval Europe could send Crusades against an enemy who had conquered the holy lands of Christendom. For religions of India like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism however, there was hardly any defence till

4. R.C. Zaehner: *Concordant Discord*, Oxford, 1970, p. 371.

5. *The Holy Quran*, 9. 29.

6. *The Holy Quran*, 8.50. (Also quoted by Zaehner, op. cit. p. 373)

7. *The Holy Quran*, Sura ii.

the 17th century, when the Mahrattas in the south and Sikhs in the north could organize a banner of revolt. Such resistance is hardly noticeable in Islamic countries of West Asia, where Hinduism and Buddhism along with Zoroastrianism (which was a native religion of Iran) and the Baha'is recently were destroyed. Recent events in India like the destruction of the Babri mosque (which in spite of all that I have stated above, is inexcusable, because wrongs committed several centuries in the past cannot be set right after the perpetrators of the original act of vandalism have long been dead), are the result of several centuries of hidden hatred. Although even the Roman Catholic Church in the past was associated with the waging of holy wars (one of the popes, Pope John XII even commanded the army of the crusaders in what was called variously as *bellum justum* (just war) and *bellum auctore* (war sanctioned by God). Of course, no one after reading the New Testament and the Sermon on the Mount can say that Christianity is an aggressive religion. Possibly these wars against the Muslim invaders of the Holy Land was born out of necessity.⁸

There are of course also passages in the *Holy Quran*, which preach kindness and compassion towards fellowmen and extol the virtues of charity. But such passages are ignored by the fundamentalists, who have expounded a kind of *jihad* against all non-Islamic peoples. Those who interpret religious texts always have a very difficult problem: which of the passages which are contradictory in import, have to be taken as the original message of the scripture? The *Mahābhārata* for instance expounds the concept of *dharmayuddha*, in the same vein as it talks of '*ahimsā*' being '*paramodharma*'. There is in the East no such notorious treatise like Clausewitz's famous essay on war, but naive inter-

8. Cf. Carl Erdmann, *Origin of the Idea of the Crusade*, tr. by M. W. Baldwin and W. Goffart, Princeton University Press, 1977, pp. 4-5: "The Christian religion was at first unfavourable to holy war. The special character of Christian ethics was not the principal obstacle. To be sure, the love of the neighbour preached by Jesus is very different from the spirit of war; but since the Gospels contain no specific condemnation of war, theology was gradually able to reconcile the contradiction, as part of the progressive transformation of Christian ethics. A much stronger deterrent to Holy war was that Christianity, from its very beginning, was a universal and missionary religion." Though this is very much true in theory, in practice the attitude of the medieval Christian Church had been different; it was aggressive towards the Islamic conquerors of the Holy land.

preters of the *Gita* think that Lord Krishna asks Arjuna not to shirk going to war even against one's own relatives. Human history is full of instances, where the mob, the ill-educated politicians have forced war on their own people. Guru Nanak, who lived in this era of hatred, preached love to all beings whatever their faith:

With lust and with anger,
the city that is the body
is full to the brim.

Meet as saint and destroy
that lust and that anger.⁹

III

It is difficult to foresee whether this conflict between Hindus and Muslims both in Muslim as well as non-Muslim, countries will end, and under what circumstances. The fundamentalists must realize everywhere that tolerance is unavoidable and that violence and hatred cannot solve social and religious problems. The tendency nowadays in all countries of the world is to have pluralistic societies, in which coexistence of religions and cultures is unavoidable. A spirit of dialogue needs necessarily to be inculcated. A truly 'secular' approach (meaning thereby a spirit of sympathetic understanding of all religious beliefs and practices) is inescapable if we want to build a humane society, free from hate, strife and war. The pugnacious element of religious belief has to be eradicated. Even when conflict becomes unavoidable because of the belligerent behaviour of certain sections of the community, the situation should not be allowed to get out of hand. Muslim governments (like those in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Syria, Palestine etc.) should try their best to see that religious differences are not perpetuated. Terrorism as it is practised in and even encouraged by some Muslim governments must give place to social justice. A little bit of non-violence as advocated by Gandhi must surely be helpful in this regard in order to develop a civilized society:

9. *Selections from the Sacred Writings of the Sikhs* (Sponsored by UNESCO) London 1968, p. 39.

Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the evil-doer but it means the putting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honour, his religion, his soul and lay the foundation for that empire's fall or its regeneration.¹⁰

10. M. K. Gandhi: *The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, London, 1949, p. xi f.