

THE TIMES

Edition 1WCSAT 19 MAR 2005, Page 27

The virus of religious moderation; Comment; Opinion**SAM HARRIS****FEATURES**

PERHAPS it should come as no surprise that a mere wall of water, sweeping innocent multitudes from the beaches of 12 countries on Boxing Day, failed to raise global doubts about God's existence. Still, one wonders just how vast and gratuitous a catastrophe would have to be to shake the world's faith. The Holocaust did not do it. God's ways are, indeed, inscrutable. It seems that any fact, no matter how infelicitous, can be rendered compatible with religious faith. In matters of faith, we have kicked ourselves loose of the earth. Given the degree to which religion still inspires human conflict, this is not the good news that many of us imagine it to be. One of the greatest challenges facing civilisation in the 21st century is for human beings to learn to speak about their deepest concerns - about ethics, spiritual experience, and human suffering - in ways that are not flagrantly irrational. Incompatible religious doctrines have Balkanised our world and these divisions have become a continuous source of bloodshed.

Indeed, religion is as much a living spring of violence today as it was at any time in the past. The recent conflicts in Palestine (Jews v Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians v Catholic Croatians; Orthodox Serbians v Bosnian and Albanian Muslims), Northern Ireland (Protestants v Catholics), Kashmir (Muslims v Hindus), Sudan (Muslims v Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims v Christians) and Iran and Iraq (Shia v Sunni) are merely a few cases in point. These are places where religion has been the explicit cause of millions of deaths in the past decade.

It is in the face of such pointless horrors that many people of goodwill now counsel "moderation" in religion. The problem with religious moderation is that it offers us no bulwark against the spread of religious extremism and religious violence. Moderates do not want to kill anyone in the name of God, but they want us to keep using the word "God" as though we knew what we were talking about. And they don't want anything too critical to be said about people who really believe in the God of their forefathers because tolerance, above all else, is sacred. To speak plainly and truthfully about the state of our world - to say, for instance, that the Bible and the Koran both contain mountains of life-destroying gibberish - is antithetical to tolerance as moderates conceive it.

In so far as religious moderates attempt to hold on to what is still serviceable in orthodox religion, they close the door to more

sophisticated approaches to human happiness. Rather than bring the full force of 21st-century creativity and rationality to bear, moderates ask that we merely relax our standards of adherence to ancient superstitions and taboos.

But by failing to live by the letter of the texts -while tolerating the irrationality of those who do -religious moderates betray faith and reason equally. As moderates, we cannot say that religious fundamentalists are dangerous idiots, because they are merely practising their freedom of belief. We can't even say that they are mistaken in religious terms, because their knowledge of scripture is generally unrivalled. All we can say, as religious moderates, is that we don't like the personal and social costs that a full embrace of scripture imposes on us. It is time we recognised that religious moderation is the product of secular knowledge and scriptural ignorance.

Religious moderates imagine that theirs is the path to peace. But this very ideal of tolerance now drives us toward the abyss.

Religious violence still plagues our world because our religions are intrinsically hostile to one another. Where they appear otherwise, it is because secular knowledge and secular interests have restrained the most lethal improprieties of faith. If religious war is ever to become unthinkable for us, in the way that slavery and cannibalism seem poised to, it will be a matter of our having dispensed with the dogma of faith.

Moderation in religion has made it taboo even to acknowledge the differences among our religious traditions: to notice, for instance, that Islam is especially hostile to the principles of civil society.

There are still places in the Muslim world where people are put to death for imaginary crimes -such as blasphemy and where the totality of a child's education consists of his learning to recite from an ancient book of religious fiction. Throughout the Muslim world, women

are denied almost every human liberty, except the liberty to breed.

And yet, these same societies are acquiring arsenals of advanced weaponry. In the face of these perils, religious moderates -Christians, Muslims and Jews remain entranced by their own moderation. They are least able to fathom that when jihadists stare into a video camera and claim to "love death more than the infidels love life", they are being candid about their state of mind.

But technology has a way of creating fresh moral imperatives. We can no longer ignore the fact that billions of our neighbors believe in the metaphysics of martyrdom, or in the literal truth of the book of Revelation -because our neighbors are now armed with chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. There is no doubt that these developments mark the terminal phase of our credulity. Words like "God" and "Allah" must go the way of "Apollo" and "Baal" or they will

unmake our world.

*Sam Harris is author of *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*

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