

THE WAR WITHIN ISLAM

By Dr. Terry Lacey
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Juli Shahin`s book published earlier this year in Pakistan, "The War Within Islam" could have been written for all those intellectual European Muslim converts in Indonesia who have been wondering if they did the right thing. The book is about the writings of Niyaz Fatehpuri and his struggle against fundamentalism in Pakistan. (Available from Ferozson`s Bookshops in Pakistan or at support@Ferozsons.com.pk).

The starting point for Muslim converts to Indonesian Islam prior to 9.11 was that little was heard of Islamic extremism in Indonesia and Indonesian Islam was generally considered tolerant and laid back, with more than 40 schools of Sufism in the country and a national political framework which defended the rights of Christians, Hindus and Buddhists alongside Muslims.

Most Indonesian Muslims knew little and cared less about the Sunni-Shiite conflict and remained detached from Palestine and Middle East politics, along with Iraq, Afghanistan and all those tribal places with no real shopping malls.

This tranquil picture of Indonesian Islam as being nearly all goodness and light and mostly about being nice to your mother-in-law and mildly monotheistic was not only rudely interrupted by 9.11, and the Bali and Jakarta bombs but was also a profoundly ahistorical view of the long battle against extremists and separatists since the foundation of the Indonesian Republic, and before.

With so much stress on ritual, recitation and outward forms and so little, except among a relatively small elite, on theology, the political history of Islam, or any kind of critique of the ideas presented, one could be excused for concluding that minimalist genuflections towards social conformity could seem more important than the extent of real religious belief. Only the strong Javanese traditions of mysticism, translated into versions of Sufism might convince one that an inner spirituality was actually alive and well, but mainstream mechanical Islam in Indonesia often does not often convey such commitment and can appear to be semi-detached from morality, especially on corruption.

That is apart from ill-informed political clap-trap preached by activists who use religion for their own purposes, rather than a quest for truth, justice and compassion, but they do not convey an Islam that Niyaz Fatehpuri would have had much time for.

The saga of the terrorist Noordin M. Top and his rural and suburban networks of wives, kampong sidekicks and followers has resulted in the emergence of a more realistic scenario, that this may not be the end of a decade-long struggle with extremism going back to 9.11 and Al Qaeda, but is perhaps the beginning of another cycle of a longer battle rooted in authentically Indonesian hardline support networks reflecting 70 years of family, village and political loyalties to groups like Darul Islam.

So the first thing you learn as a liberal convert to Islam in Indonesia (or anywhere else) is that you are involved from the start, and whether you like it or not, in a struggle to save the religion, and the Muslim modernizing political culture that can go with it, from political extremists, hijackers and the frequently infantile antics of political opportunists.

So reading about Niyaz Fatehpuri may encourage you, not only that there are other liberals aside from yourself, but also that the liberals might actually win.

Meidyatama Suryodiningrat (or MDS) wrote in The Jakarta Post only recently that the struggle within Islam is more challenging than the comparable battle for reform and reformation previously fought within Christianity, since the Roman Catholic church had a centralized structure to provide a unifying edifice, sometimes historically as a bastion of dogmatism and oppression, but later representing an attempted compromise with the advance of science, reason and liberalism.

Indonesian Muslims remain almost totally ignorant of the roots of Western European secularism and of the 1848 revolutions that broke out all over Europe, except the UK, not against the state, but against the power of the church and of the priests. In the UK the state had already broken the back of the church using torture, repression and secret police to do it, and had taken it over, replacing it with a new state-backed religion.

These struggles preceded historically the much later battles over pedophilia and sex-crimes in the church and the backlash in Ireland and the US against the brutality and backwardness of some church children`s homes and social institutions. When I worked in developing countries helping Catholic and Protestant schools and hospitals I was much encouraged by the selflessness and dedication of the generation of lay-workers I had the privilege to work with, but sadly it was not always thus on the home turf.

The more narrow-minded Ulema would have a lot to learn from what happened to these clerics and the power of anti-clericalism in Europe, but happily for them, and unhappily for Islam, they seem blissfully unaware, so far, of these historical facts and of the dangers of what can happen to religious scholars and clerics who overplay their hand.

In Catholic Venezuela in the 1930s all seminaries were closed by the state. And in the Middle East some states have put severe restrictions on the mosque and clerics, even controlling centrally what is said on their loudspeakers, because it is so frightened of their potential power. How many lessons do the new zealots need to learn so that they will not fly too high and then fall too far? How will history treat them differently from those who made the same mistakes before ?

MDS commented that the problem for Islam was that its dogmatic wing works on the fringes around a religion with no real tradition of an organizing center, so they turn to capturing Muslim hearts and minds (and come to dream of taking over the whole caboodle, mosque by mosque). Self-delusion and pride followed by a fall.

MDS concludes however that at the end of the day religious politics is about power and that narrow-minded old-fashioned clerics don't like having their self-proclaimed and aspiring monopoly over the interpretation of the word of God challenged by people who stop behaving like passive peasants, and start thinking of independent interpretations, and their application to society, for themselves (ijtihad).

Of course you would expect someone like Fatehpuri to reject the Western view of Islam as being medieval and backward. He argued in response to this that narrower and backward Ulema did not necessarily represent the spirit of Islam, which is neither.

One reason why many so many fallacies crept into the development of Islam is because the religion got completely mixed up with the politics of the reign of Islam, so there was no distinction for many people between the basics of the religion and the justification of an historical political struggle, and the different viewpoints upon it.

So there never was a separation of church and state, they were one. Perhaps the impact of the Muslim reformation now is that as Muslim modernization moves towards secular democracy, Islam is learning more to separate itself from state power, and to stop trying to eat the state, before the state eats Islam.

According to Fatehpuri the fundamentalists have tended to base their arguments on the strictures of the hadiths (authoritative sayings) whereas the liberals tended to argue for a return to the spirit behind the Holy Koran.

As Nurrohman argues in The Jakarta Post (1.10.09) the spirit of the Koran is the moral spirit which stresses monotheism and social justice. Fazlur Rahman, the noted Pakistani scholar, heavily influenced Indonesians like Nurcholish Madjid and Syafii Ma'arif when he argued, rather like Niyaz Fatehpuri, that the Koran was not entirely the word of God, but rather that it was wholly the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and a response to the socio-economic and moral problems facing Mecca at that time.

Of course the fundamentalists would also say that they were Koran-based but tend to be vulgar, simplistic, narrow and literal in their interpretation of the Koran, whereas the liberals would argue that interpretation should reflect its spirit in every historical age, adapting to new conditions, helping Islam adapt to the needs of contemporary society, just as it did when first enunciated in Mecca.

It is hardly surprising that Fatehpuri carried out a crusade against the Ulema whom he considered responsible for the stagnation in Muslim religious thinking, and which in turn, made them suffer even in social and economic spheres. In other words he thought backward religious teachers made for a backward society, and made Islam look backward.

But he argued that rationality and reason could put all this to rights, and that Islam could always be placed in a modern context and that even forms of worship could be adapted, for example to the conditions faced by Eskimos.

Fatehpuri would have liked the idea I produced myself, but it can't be original, that we could build a mosque on the exact opposite Antipodean position to Mecca on the other side of the world, if necessary by putting it on an oil rig or an aircraft carrier.

The Ulema would say there is only one way to pray towards Mecca and every mosque has a little arrow to show the right way, or is built at the right angle.

But at the exact opposite point to Mecca on the globe, then every single direction would point equally directly to Mecca from the Antipodean point at the center of a round mosque. Then you would face Mecca by choosing any angle facing outwards so long as you started from the center. So all roads would lead to God and not one.

Now that's my kind of Islam, but I might have to travel a long way to find it. If I do go all the way down that road one day, then Niyaz Fatehpuri would have helped inspire me to do so.

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