

Manju Sarkar (Bangladesh)

Islam and We

Finding Islam to be a topic of great priority to be discussed by the International Writing Program, I was taken aback. It seemed as if *Islam* meant Bin Laden, and a fertile source of terrorism. On the other hand *we* would mean President Bush and his allies. So, I thought, a fierce war had been launched right here in Iowa. Now where will I stand and for whom? Let me be disinterested from the perspective of my country. And it is better to start with *Islam and me*.

Without being named *Mohammed* or some other Moslem word for a first name, my name, Manju Sarkar (*Manju* is a Bengali word which means *charming*, and *Sarkar* is a family title), would not particularly sound like a Muslim name. That is why I am frequently asked by people whether I am Hindu or Muslim. Questions and concerns emphasizing religious identity make me feel uneasy. In this post-modern age, I believe, it is useless and inconsequential whether to be identified as a member of or activist for a certain religious community. It was mere accident that I was born and brought up in a Muslim family, and that I will, maybe, be buried with religious rites and rituals after my death. My childhood was immersed with religion and faith in God. I was nearly a religious enthusiast in my childhood. It happened, I think now, perhaps due to an insecurity issuing from fear—fear of death, fear of hell and fear of Satan. But in my youth, due to growing interactions with the modern world, I found many contradictions and inconsistencies in my religious belief. It seemed very hard to be a *true* Muslim and be a modern man at the same time.

When it was time for me to rebel, I asked my mother, “Ma, why should you recite from the Quran twice a day when you do not know the meaning of what has been written in Arabic? Is it not better to read Bengali books and learn so many good things?” Thus a war had begun between the believer and the skeptic. After a long discourse that continued for days and months, my mother became convinced that though her son was no longer frightened of God and did not pay respect to the Almighty through Namaz and Quran, he was really not a puppet in the hand of Satan. On the other hand, since I could not provide a power alternative to God, I became convinced that there was no harm in my mother's belief in Allah and devotion to his Islamic laws—neither harm for me nor for others. The majority of my countrymen are like my mother. You may call them moderate Muslims. They are poor, helpless, and they feel so insecure that resigning to God brings them a great consolation. I don't know how much their God should be held responsible for inflicting pain and suffering on them, but other natural and man-made causes are very obvious offenders there.

Unless I ensure them a better and secured life, what benefit will they reap if they are pulled out of the fantasy-world of life after death? Without god and without religion, I don't face any problem in leading my personal, social and cultural life; and I pose no threat to any other religious people. Then why should I bother about any religious faith? It is not Islam, but in the name of Islam, that some militant groups are terrifying us. Is militancy or terrorism rooted in Islam or in the Quran? In our country, it has been historically proven that outbreaks of Islamic militancy or terrorism or communal riots are always inseparable with power-politics. To make this point clear, I must draw your attention to the reality of my country.

Since its inception, Bangladesh has been seen as a secular country. Yet presently it is being identified by its government and also by the West as a moderate Muslim country. Out of a population of

almost 150 million, 83% is Muslim, 16 % is Hindu, and among the rest are Buddhists, Christians and Tribal peoples of various religious faiths. As 98 % of our population is Bengali speaking and the vast majority belonging to Muslim and Minority Hindu communities, they live peacefully with a traditional cultural harmony. For them their respective religions are never a source of conflict and terrorism. It is the political and religious leaders who use religion as a weapon in order to achieve their selfish, vested interests. We have seen quite a few times when religion has been used as a weapon in their hands.

After two hundred years of colonial rule, the British rulers, in collaboration with local political leaders, divided India on the basis of a two-nation theory. India and Pakistan emerged as Independent nations in August 1947—India mainly for Hindus, and Pakistan mainly for Muslims. Presently Bangladesh, with the majority of the inhabitants Muslim, has become a province of Pakistan. But during the rule of the Pakistani regime, Bengali speaking Muslims revolted against economic exploitation and cultural suppression. Stressing religious harmony, the Pakistani ruling class tried to isolate Bengali speaking Muslims from their traditional culture. They even ignored their mother tongue, Bangla, and declared Urdu to be the only state language of Pakistan. Since Bengali speaking Muslims were in the majority, they raised a voice of protest, demanding Bengali to be one of the two state languages. On the 21st of February, 1952, police fired upon the protesting people, as a result, many people died for their mother tongue. Since then, this day has been observed every year as a Language Martyrs Day. In honor of this day in 1999, Unesco declared the 21st of February as International Mother Tongue Day.

The Language Movement gave birth to Bengali nationalism; and this spirit of nationalism later encouraged 3 million Bengali Muslims to sacrifice their lives in 1971. Through such a blood bath, once again, they proved that freedom, democracy, cultural tradition and economical emancipation were more important issues than being citizens of an Islamic state. As an independent country, Bangladesh upheld, at least constitutionally, democracy and secularism. But these fundamental principles had time and again been distorted by those who used Islam as a political weapon.

After 9/11, not only Al-Qaeda, but various fundamentalist organizations in the name of Islam, carried out their hideous bomb-blasts and killed innocent people in many countries. They were also active in Bangladesh. In the past few months they have attacked our judges, killing some, along with many members of the public. In the name of Islam they launched war against the democratic system of Bangladesh. In consequence of such terror and killing, Islamic militants have lost the moral support of the Muslim majority. But the hidden relationship between Islamic militants and the state power became almost publicly open. The present government was criticized for not taking timely action against these enemies of democracy.

From the experience and example of my countrymen I am convinced that the Islam of fundamentalists and the Islam of moderate Muslims are not the same. Like any other Christian or Jewish or Hindu country, a Muslim county also has a few fanatics, leftists, rightists, and conservatives, liberals; and there are, of course, a good number of the non-religious people or atheists. But it seems that the West has developed an Islam-phobia and a tendency to believe that Islam means terror and a growing intolerance and hatred of the West. Surely, this is a myopic, and therefore distorted, view of Islam. I believe the majority of Muslims all over the world give a different picture. But the West, especially American foreign policy and its imperial world-view, is fueling terrorism and igniting Islamic militancy.

Interpretations of the Quran state that Jihad (religious war) is imposed on believers when their religion (or their territory) is vulnerable to an external aggression with an intention to destroy Islam. No doubt, worldwide Islamic militants get their inspiration from such a *call of God*. But who is it that is justifying such a call through these wars in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Palestine, and in Lebanon? Muslims from Asia and Africa are experiencing more or less the same amount of economic and cultural aggression by the West. After the occupation of Iraq, President Bush has been considered equally as destructive as Bin Laden, not only by the moderate Muslims, but by the people world wide witnessing the deaths of civilians from war. Western think-tanks produced the *clash of civilizations* and encouraged the fanatic militants from both sides.

So it is not Islam, and not religion, it is controlling chaos, conflict and terrorism that needs to be discussed. It is not the clash of civilizations that needs to be discussed, but controlling the clash of culture and transformation by balancing traditions. Years ago, I read the Noble Peace Award acceptance speech of one of great American heroes, Martin Luther King. I wish to conclude my brief discussion by quoting him.

Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our time—the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression. Civilization and violence are antithetical concepts. Negroes of the United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that nonviolence is not sterile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation. Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. For this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.

Whatever the way or method might be, I believe, we the poets, writers, the artists, are laying foundations of love through our work. Yes, in spite of all sorts of impediments, love for humanity must prevail, and we must not lose faith in ourselves.

Thanks.