Rescuing Authentic and Peace-Loving Islam from the Hijacking of Violent Religious Extremism

By Prof. Henry Francis B. Espiritu
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Factually speaking, the current global terrorism that is presently sponsored by so-called "Islamist" extremists and violent "jihadists" are targeted towards both the non-Muslims and the Muslims alike. Muslims who do not adhere to the extremists' violent ideology are considered enemies of this so-called "Islamist" extremists. Religious extremists have killed thousands and thousands of innocent lives, both Muslims and non-Muslims without conscience and without humane compassion. These extremists are hijacking the basic tenets of the peaceful and universal religion of Islam and seek to destroy its 1,443 glorious years of cosmopolitan, multicultural, pluralistic and tolerant Islamicate civilization.

We need to move away from Samuel Huntington's skewed and erroneous scenario of "clash of civilizations" between non-Muslims and Muslims since these different terrorist groups of so-called "Islamist extremists" and violent jihadists do not represent the peace-loving religion of Islam as presented in the *Qur'an* and in the exemplary conduct of the founder of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad. Terrorists are simply terrorists and they do not represent the religion they self-identify with; no matter how these terrorists vehemently declare themselves as protectors of these religions. Religious extremism of all types is an enemy to all peace-loving human beings. Truthfully speaking, so-called "religious" terrorists have no religion since their murderous actions strongly belie their own self-identification to belong to a particular religion.

Religious extremism, specifically the so-called "Islamist" type has a naïve, simplistic and violent-prone bifurcated worldview. Religious extremists partition the world into "*Dar-ul-Islam*" (Realm of Islam) and "*Dar-ul-Harb*" (Realm of War) in which there is unending conflict between these two realms. However, in their terroristic acts, even the so-called Realm of Islam is likewise the domain of the extremists' commission of murder, violence and wanton destruction. Innocent civilian Muslims living in Islamic countries are not immune from

attacks by violent extremism. Observing news depicting terroristic attacks worldwide, one can notice that most of the victims of terroristic attacks done by extremists who call themselves *mujahidins* (jihadists) were innocent Muslim civilians in predominantly Muslim countries.

Many violent religious extremist and jihadist groups justify their attacks on Muslims in predominantly Islamic countries by saying that these Muslims have become *kafirs* (unbelievers) and the government as well as leaders of these countries are purveyors of *kufr* (apostasy) since these regimes in these Muslim countries do not adhere to the violent-prone ideology of these religious extremists. This is why religious terrorists target progressive, secular and socialist leaders of Islamic countries who adhere to a view of Islam that is peace-loving, cosmopolitan, pluralistic, inclusive and tolerant: the genuine Islam of the Qur'an and the practice of the Prophet Muhammad.

It is really very sad to note that religious extremists and jihadists have threatened to destroy the wholesome fabric of Islamic civilization and the cosmopolitanism characterizing the tolerant and diversified Islamicate heritage of worldwide Muslims. These violent religious extremists are destroying the enlightened classical Sunni Islamic civilization famous in world history for its culture of synthesis, universal education, progressive pioneering of development in the sciences, literature, mathematics, philosophy and arts, as well as its advocacy of pluralism and tolerance. These extremist groups have totally thrown-out the regulative Qur'anic principles governing just and defensive warfare, the peace-loving Islamic ethics and the Islamic civilization's history of tolerance and toleration. These violent extremist groups who claim to be Muslims victimize the vast majority of peace-loving Muslims by committing terroristic acts against innocent Muslim civilians in many Muslim countries who do not subscribe to religious violence and terrorism.

The true goal of any authentic faith-tradition is ultimately geared towards universality, tolerance, amity and harmony. Authentic religion awakens in its adherents the feelings of well-wishing and goodwill towards other human beings. Its exponents strive peacefully to pass on the truth that they have discovered for the benefit of their fellow humans. Such religion, far from causing harm to society, becomes a driving force towards ethical and social development of all humanity if utilized for beneficial ends (Cf. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, *The Age of Peace*. New Delhi: Good Word Books, 2015; pp.1-26.).

However, when a particular faith-tradition is hijacked into becoming a violent movement based on pure animosity and hatred, the adherents of this violent movement would consider those who are not like-minded to be enemies. They have an overpowering desire to exterminate the religious "other". They hold that the "others" are the obstacles to their avowed goal of global hegemony and they seek to destroy religious "otherness" so that they can put their own belief-system as replacement. As a result of this negative thinking, they divide humanity into two camps: one consisting of their enemies, and the other of their allies. The moment they have made this distinction between "us-and-them", right thereafter, they permit their avowed hatred for the "other" to conflagrate into virulent and bloody violence against the religious "other" (See Marc H. Ellis. *Unholy Alliance: Religion and Atrocity in our Time*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997; pp. xi-xvii.).

To make matters worse, the hatred felt by religious militancy or violent extremism has become inseparable from its theology and ideology. They hate others who think differently from themselves because they hold them to be ideologically in error and theologically heretical. Experience shows that of all kinds of hatred that is based on an

ideology, more particularly those that are based on religious dogmatism or fanaticism are the most destructive—and its target is the total annihilation of enemies. Not until this very end is achieved will violence ever die down. This is the reason why ideological hatred always assumes the shape of violence and destruction. When it is found that peaceful means of persuasion are showing no results, arms are then resorted to, so that all enemies may be removed from its path. (Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, *What Is Islamic Fundamentalism?. Op.cit.,* pp.19-20.).

According to the contemporary renowned Islamic pacifist of India, the late Maulana Wahiduddin Khan Sahib (1925-2021), any religious extremism is a threat to peace since due to religious fanaticism, its proponents do not stop short of resorting to destructive activity both to others and to themselves such as suicide attacks and indiscriminate bombings of civilian areas. While it is a fact that in these violent activities only a small group is involved, however this small group has indirect or "quasi support" of the majority, who remained silent and did not raise any outcry against such inhumanities in the name of Islam (Cf. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan. *Islam and Peace*. New Delhi: Good Word Books, pp.164-168.).

Peace-loving Muslims must therefore disown these violent people who simply utilize and hijack Islam to further hatred and political-religious extremism. If the majority of peace-loving Muslims will disown these violent extremists, withdraw their indirect support and outrightly condemn religious extremism and jihadism, these fringe groups will lose their mass base of indirect or "quasi-support". Consequently, this will be the starting point when religious extremists who are directly involved in violent activities will hopefully begin to abandon the path of violence altogether and embrace the path of peace and amity (Cf. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan. Islam and Peace, Ibid.p.170.).

It is therefore a very urgent task for the Islamic World and for global Muslims to undertake proper information and educational campaign as to the genuine and pristine teachings of Islam by making use of the independent media on a full scale in order to make people aware of the fact that this violent interpretation of Islam—as capitalized by both extremist groups and by Western mainstream media in describing the terroristic activities of so-called Islamic extremists—is absolutely devoid of basis either in the *Qur'an* or in the examples (*As-Sunnah*) set by the Prophet Muhammad. As opposed to this misinterpretation, the true values of authentic and peaceful Islam, based on global amity, universal fraternity, goodwill and sincere well-wishing for one-and-all should be presented to the general public by the international independent media, the academe, religious scholars, clergies and international peace advocates.

If this authentic interpretation of a peace-loving Islam can be brought to the attention of the general masses through responsible international independent media news outfits in cooperation with peaceful Muslims and authentic Islamic groups (*jamaat*) all over the world, then there is great hope that those who have been espousing violent extremist ideology in the name of Islam will eventually abandon the path of hatred and violence and come back to the genuine Islam of peace and harmony—"to the home of peace" (See *Qur-an* 6:127 and 10:25) as described in the *Qur-an* and in the exemplary practice of the Prophet Muhammad. May it be so!

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Research articles.

Prof. Henry Francis B. Espiritu is Associate Professor-7 of Philosophy and Asian Studies at the University of the Philippines (UP), Cebu City, Philippines. He was Academic Coordinator of the Political Science Program at UP Cebu from 2011-2014, and Coordinator of Gender and Development (GAD) Office at UP Cebu from 2015-2016 and from 2018-2019.

His research interests include Theoretical and Applied Ethics, Islamic Studies particularly Sunni jurisprudence (Sunni Fiqh), Islamic feminist discourses, Islam in interfaith dialogue initiatives, Islamic environmentalism, Classical Sunni Islamic pedagogy, the writings of Imam Al-Ghazali on pluralism and tolerance, Islam in the Indian Subcontinent, Turkish Sufism, Ataturk Studies, Ottoman Studies, Genghis Khan Studies, Muslim-Christian Dialogue, Middle Eastern Affairs, Peace Studies and Public Theology.

He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG).

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