The new wars of religion

Nov 1st 2007
From The Economist print edition

An old menace has returned, but in very different forms

EARLIER this year Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, speaking to his country's parliament, posed two questions: "Who are our enemies?" and "Why do they hate us?" He described an axis of evil, with Iran's enemies being "all the wicked men of the world, whether abroad or at home". The root cause of their hatred was religious—a loathing of "whomsoever should serve the glory of God". Having described George Bush's atrocities, he told the cheering MPs, "Truly, your great enemy is the American—through that enmity that is in him against all that is of God in you." Fortunately, Iran would not fight alone: it had the support of Muslims around the world. Be bold, he advised, and "you will find that you act for a very great many people that are God's own."

For Mr Ahmadinejad, read Oliver Cromwell; for Iran, England; and for America, Catholic Spain. The quotes above come from a speech made by Cromwell to the English Parliament in 1656. Parliament then passed an oath of loyalty in which English Catholics were asked to disown the pope and most of the canons of Catholic belief, or face losing two-thirds of their worldly goods. Shortly afterwards Cromwell invaded Ireland.

"Faith is a source of conflict," reads a sign at St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in the City of London—adding that it can also be "a resource to transform conflict". Appropriately, the centre was built in a church blown up in 1993 by Irish terrorists, brought up, no doubt, with tales of Cromwell's atrocities.

Conflict, of course, does not necessarily equate to war. But there are some depressing echoes of Cromwell's time.

• Faith is once again prolonging conflict. Religion is seldom the casus belli: indeed, in many struggles, notably the Middle East in modern times, it is amazing how long it took for religion to become a big part of the argument. But once there, it makes conflicts harder to resolve. A squabble over land (which can be divided) or power (which can be shared) or rules (that can be fudged) becomes a dispute over non-negotiable absolutes. If you believe that God granted you the West Bank, or that any form of abortion is murder, compromise is not really possible.

• Once again, politicians are stirring up religious passion. Mr Ahmadinejad may not have told Muslims that the Israeli "has an interest in your bowels" (as Cromwell did of Spaniards), but he has called for Israel's removal and denied the Holocaust. Osama bin Laden rages that Islam is under sustained attack: any Muslim who "collaborates" with the West is an apostate.

American leaders have been more careful, but many use religious imagery. In his new book, "God and Gold" (see article), Walter Russell Mead compares Ronald Reagan's denunciation of the Godless Soviet Union (the "Evil Empire") to Cromwell's speech. Franklin Graham spoke for many on the religious right when he
denounced Islam as a "very evil and wicked religion". American conservatives seem undecided on whether the battle against "Islamofascism" is the third world war (Newt Gingrich) or the fourth (Norman Podhoretz).

• Once again, outsiders are rushing to defend their religions: religious scraps attract money and soldiers. Just as Guy Fawkes, Britain's most famous religious terrorist, hardened his radical beliefs when fighting for Catholicism in the Netherlands, European Muslims have gone to defend their faith in Kashmir, Chechnya and Iraq. Some of the most fervent supporters of India's Hindutva movement come from the diaspora. Many migrants define themselves by their faith, not their new home.

• One of the world's great religions, Christianity, split into Catholic and Protestant in the 16th century. Now Islam is having to contend with a sharpening split between Sunni and Shia. Once again nation states are weak: most Middle Eastern countries are recent creations. And there is a ring of instability on Islam's southern frontier, which runs roughly along the 10th parallel from West Africa to the Philippines.

• Terrorist outrages are once again presumed to have religious connections, as they would have done in Cromwell's time. In the 1970s terrorism seemed to be the preserve of Maoist guerrillas, middle-class Germans and Italians or the then very secular (and partly Christian-led) Palestine Liberation Organisation. Now three out of the four most likely flashpoints for nuclear conflict—Pakistan-India, Iran and Israel—have a strong religious element. The only exception is North Korea.

Wars can be Godless too

It is possible that these similarities could escalate into something horrifying. A confrontation between nuclear Iran on one side and Israel and America on the other would reverberate around the globe. But the idea that the world is reverting to a former age is too simplistic.

Most obviously, humanity can find plenty of reasons for genocide and suffering without troubling God. "The 20th century was the most secular and the most bloody in human history," argues George Weigel, a leading American conservative. What he calls "the Godless religions of Nazism and communism" killed tens of millions of people. Each had its theory of salvation, its rites, its prophets, its sacred places and its distinctive idea of morality; but communists and Nazis did not use God to stir up passions. The Cambodian genocide was similarly secular.
Where it does exist, religious conflict is now far less of a top-down affair. No government officially approves of killing people solely because of their religion, and no significant religious leader sanctifies that killing by blessing armadas or preaching crusades. Last year the pope took issue with Islam in a speech at Regensburg, but he also opposed the Iraq war. Most Islamic authorities preach non-violence. Ayatollah Sistani, the most revered Shia on the planet, has often urged restraint in Iraq.

Of course, this does not prevent individual clerics from committing appalling acts of brutality: Catholic priests helped torture people in Argentina, Buddhist monks have led murderous attacks in Sri Lanka and imams have encouraged suicide-bombing in Israel. But every zealot interviewed for this special report, including those with blood near their hands, insisted that his religion was peaceful.

Meanwhile, the power of governments to control religious politics has declined. The wars of religion took place in an age of “cuius regio, eius religio”, where the monarch dictated the religion. England once turned to Protestantism because Henry VIII found the Catholic church’s rules on matrimony irksome. Nowadays, nobody is trying to improve America’s relations with the Middle East by marrying off the Bush twins to Arab princes.

The new battles

With national armies no longer marching under religious banners, grievances have reappeared in several guises. None of them is easy for the West to deal with.

The one that gets most attention is terrorism—especially Islamic terrorism. States are certainly actors in this: Iran may not openly wage religious war, but it has been happy to back Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. But then neither Hamas nor Hizbullah is a purely sectarian organisation. Like the IRA in Ireland, they both have political-territorial objectives.

Most of the main jihadist terrorist organisations are bottom-up affairs. Mr bin Laden would no doubt like to control another state (as he once did from Afghanistan). But his organisation has been able to mount attacks and recruit volunteers without help from a government.

The second way in which religion thrusts itself into politics is inter-communal violence. Once again, other forces are often at work, such as tribalism in Nigeria or nationalism in India. But religion supplies the underlying viciousness. Sectarian violence has been responsible for most of the killing in Iraq in the aftermath of the war. Some 68,000 Sri Lankans have died since 1983. Other, lower-level conflicts, such as Catholics and Protestants attacking each other in Mexico’s Chiapas, occasionally flare up. Outside parties can play a role in stoking up such struggles (and supplying arms), as Iran has done in Iraq and Syria has done in Lebanon. But most of these fights have a local, tit-for-tat feel. The violence is often set off by events such as marches, feast days or elections.

Third, there is state-based repression, where religion is either the target or the motivation. In the Muslim world the repression is sometimes by theocracies (like Iran or Saudi Arabia), against irreligious sorts, such as adulterers, heretics and homosexuals. But it also goes the other way, with secular states (Syria, Egypt, much of North Africa) discriminating against religious dissidents. In the most bizarre example, China recently banned Buddhist monks in Tibet from reincarnating without government permission. The religious-affairs agency explained that this was “an important move to institutionalise management of reincarnation”. The real purpose is to prevent the Dalai Lama, Tibet’s exiled spiritual leader, from being succeeded by someone from outside China.

Yet the foremost way in which religion has expressed itself around the world has been more peaceful: the ballot box. Religious people have either formed religious parties (such as India’s BJP) or converted secular ones into more faith-driven outfits (such as America’s Republican Party). In places where religion was frowned upon by the state, such as Mexico or Turkey, greater freedom has allowed the pious to form parties, such as the Catholic-oriented PAN party or the Islamic AK Party.

And it has not just been a case of democracy helping religion. Timothy Shah of the Council on Foreign Relations argues that it can go the other way too. By his calculation, more than 30 of the 80 or so countries that became freer in 1972-2000 owed some of the improvement to religion. Sometimes established churches helped to push for democracy (eg, the Catholic church in Poland), but more often it was pressure from the
grassroots: religious people usually look for a degree of freedom (if only to pursue their faith).

All this means that the modern wars of religion are mercifully less violent and all-consuming than their predecessors; but also that tackling the politics of religion is more awkward than it used to be. Culture wars are now global (a subject to which this special report will return).

This complicates foreign policy enormously. Should America focus on the tiny number of angry Muslims with guns, or the millions who have voted for Islamic parties in Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey, Algeria and Palestine? If most religious fanatics were bent on conquest and terror rather than democracy, their causes would be easier to discredit. And if religion were the sole cause of the conflicts, it would be easier to work out “why they hate us”.

Copyright © 2007 The Economist Newspaper and The Economist Group. All rights reserved.