

# The Problem With Zakir Naik

*His puritanical and intolerant approach to religion is the opposite of what Muslims need today*

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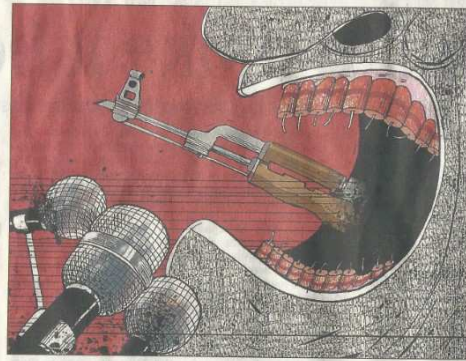
Last Friday – while interacting with media via video conference – preacher Zakir Naik was defensive and elusive, complaining about a “media trial”, “hate campaigns” and “doctored videos”. Even though he condemned terrorism and killing of innocents in terrorist attacks – including the recent one in Nice, France – and labelled Islamic State as the Anti-Islamic State of Islam and Syria, he refused to acknowledge Osama bin Laden as a terrorist and maintained that 9/11 attacks were an inside job.

Further, even while condemning suicide bombing, he added an unacceptable rider on its permissibility: The issue of equality of women in Islam or importance of respect for other religious traditions in India were left practically untouched.

Bearing in mind the present fragile climate, Naik should have touched upon the crucial subject of de-radicalisation of Muslim youth. In the present charged atmosphere where – from IS to Boko Haram to Al-Shabab – the Islamic world is facing a multitude of challenges, we see more and more youth, primarily Muslim, pledge allegiance to extremist and jihadist organisations and succumb to the beguiling allurements of IS.

There is an unprecedented need for collective action on the part of all Muslim communities to protect their youth. The most formidable challenge is that radicalisation is not the monopoly of the unschooled and economically deprived.

Frequent dogmatic and intolerant vocalisations, from different quarters, unfortunately often raise the pitch of xenophobia and Islamophobia, inundating Islam’s instruction on resistance to provocation and aggression through the means of patience (sabr) and gentleness (rifq), to actively reject violence (unf) and fasad (disruption of the social system causing losses in life and property), to protect the sacredness of human dignity and to engage peacefully in resisting oppression (zulm). Islam instructs engagement through peace-making, confidence building and avoidance of confrontation



or conflict. Jihad was an “effort” in this direction. The tradition of the Prophet said, “He who commits acts of tyranny is outside the pale of Islam” (Tabarani).

In sharp contrast to Naik a statement was recently made, not by “liberal” Muslim elements who regularly criticise Salafism, but by Sheikh Abdel Al-Kalbani, former imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca and a Salafi himself: “IS is a true product of Salafism, and we must deal with it with full transparency.” In two articles in the Saudi government daily Al-Riyadh, Al-Kalbani criticised elements in the Salafi stream for appropriating the truth and Islam and for permitting the killing of their opponents, and likewise criticised clerics and society that dared not come out against them. He has harshly attacked suicide bombings, published a fatwa permitting poetry and called for allowing women to drive cars.

Naik, however, did not deem it necessary to acquaint his followers on Islam’s respect for other religions or inter-religious harmony in Arab countries and inform them of the temples, crematoria and churches that exist in several parts of

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Arabia, particularly in Dubai and Bahrain even today. The UAE is known for its tolerance and respect for other religions and residents can freely pray at a Hindu temple, a Christian church, Buddhist monastery or a Sikh gurdwara. Likewise Bahrain is tolerant towards other religions; Catholic and Orthodox churches, Hindu temples as well as a Jewish synagogue are present on the island.

Unfortunately Naik’s discourses border either on the puritanical or on the mundane, without any reference to enlightened values and key concepts in Islam like *ijtihad* (creative interpretation) that require urgent discussion and

application in the modern age. Nor have they attempted to illuminate Muslims and non-Muslims on Islam’s vision on the crucial subjects of democracy (Q 3:159), secularism (Mithaq-e-Madina – the Covenant or the Constitution of Medina), religious freedom (Q 2:256), gender equality both in the material and spiritual world (Q 33:35), human rights – dignity and equality irrespective of religion, ethnicity, race, colour or gender (Q 17:70), peace, reconciliation and non-violence (Q 5:90-94). His ultra-conservative views on Salafi/Wahhabi Islam border on mediocrity.

It needs to be added that hate speeches from all religious and political leaders need to be contained. Inflammatory sermons from leaders like Sakshi Maharaj, Yogi Adityanath and Sadhvi Prachi have so far faced no media trials. Last Thursday Sadhvi Prachi pronounced a death sentence on Naik, thundering that any person who goes to Saudi Arabia and beheads him can take home a Rs 50 lakh reward. This is shocking.

There is an obligation on all religious leaders, including Naik, to observe the rule of law. Decisive action by disciplinary authorities after due investigation, needs to be taken against those who fragment society through hate speeches. Likewise, those who murdered rationalists like Dabholkar, Pansare and Kalburgi need to be brought to book.

Had Naik made the effort to warn young minds on the dangers of extremism and intolerance, striking a note of harmony through compassion and inter-religious dialogue instead of propagating devious views on Osama bin Laden and suicide bombings, he would have done a great service to Islam.

Though contemptuous of the Sufi tradition, he would do well to imbibe the wisdom of Sufi scholar Shalikh Saadi Shirazi in his classical poem ‘Bani Adam’: “Human beings are members of a whole/ In creation of one essence and soul/ If one member is afflicted with pain/ Other members uneasy will remain/ If you’ve no sympathy for human pain/ The name of human you cannot retain!”

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