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ISLAM

Are we are moving from the red menace to the green menace? The tensions over Iraq and the massacre of tourists in Egypt have fuelled speculation that Islam is a threat to world peace. Fundamentalist Islam is a great problem within some societies but it is not a threat to international peace and security.

Islam is on the rise again. It has gone through three phases. The first (622-1683) saw the expansion of the faith from Saudi Arabia to Vienna (this period included successful Islamic defence of the Holy Land against the European crusaders of the Middle Ages). In the second (1683-1945) the West, having stopped Islam at Vienna, counter-attacked and colonized the Islamic areas; the defeats of the crusades were avenged. Since 1945 there has been the resurgence of Islam. Moslems today represent about 18.5 per cent of the world's population, and Islam is the second largest religious group after Christianity. It is one of the world's fastest growing religions.

But Islam is not necessarily a threat to western countries. First, the "Islamic world" is not a united monolithic bloc. One lesson from the Cold War is that the "communist bloc" was never the monolithic bloc stretching from Berlin to Beijing that some politicians claimed. The Eastern European countries resented the Soviet occupation, the Soviet Asian Republics resented the (communist) Russian occupation, and the USSR and China were never on good terms.

Therefore, old nationalisms, historical grudges, racism and various other less pleasant aspects of human nature can all erode some form of global religion. We must not assume that Islam is a more unifying force than any other religion or political ideology.

Second, Islam has long been divided. There is, for example, the division between the Sunnis (about 800 million) and the Shi'as (about 110 million). In the Afghanistan civil war, for example, Iran supports the embattled Shi'as based in the north, while Pakistan and the US support the Pathan Talibaan movement (which ironically, is notorious for keeping women at home, banning drugs and hanging televisions from trees).

Third, there is no agreed manifesto with which to unify Moslems against the West. The Koran is not a recipe for waging wars against infidels. Apart from various degrees of hostility towards Israel, there are few issues which unite all Moslems.

Finally, some Moslems may yet succumb to the "vices" of the West, such as consumerism. In Iran, for example, some young people, who cannot recall the pre-1979 regime, want jeans and Coke. The thirst for Coke will bring its own splits within Moslem countries.

Islam presents three challenges to the West. First, the West has to recognize the diversity and complexity of the Islamic world. On Kuwait in 1990/1, for example, many people in the West did not realize just how hated is the al-Sabah regime in much of the Arab world; the Iraqi invasion was praised by many poor Arabs in the Middle East. But the West lined up with a fundamentalist dictatorship and was supported by another dictatorship in Saudi Arabia. This was not a crusade against Islam; Saddam Hussein is somewhat less fundamental in his beliefs than the countries supported by the US. (Ironically, when the 1992 elections were held in Kuwait, women and stateless Arabs were still excluded from the poll).

Second, a sense of history is important. There is still a deep-seated resentment at the West's violence to Islam over the centuries. Many more Moslems have been killed by Christians, than Christians have been killed by Moslems. Colonial countries have tended to forget about their imperial pasts. But Moslems, as the underdog, have a deeper memory of being run by foreigners.

Third, many Moslems are missing out on the economic growth. Years ago, many of the leaders opposing governments in North Africa and the Middle East would have been communist; now they are Islamic. Communism has failed: Moslems have seen the collapse of the USSR and its eastern European allies. They have also derived little benefit from the quasi-socialistic regimes in places like Egypt which are large, inefficient bureaucracies, which cannot cope with rapid urbanization and population growth.

The attacks on tourists in Egypt are partly because tourism is a major source of foreign income and if tourism declines, the Egyptian economy will go into greater chaos (thereby, the Islamic groups hope, creating an opportunity for them to seize power). Additionally, the tourists visit pre-Islamic monuments, such as the Pyramids, and the Moslem extremists disapprove of the foreign attention lavished about these "pagan" places.

Poor Moslems are sceptical of the new-found eastern European passion for the market system of economics: they can see in Western countries how the rich get richer and the poor become more numerous. They are looking for a third way and Islamic leaders are promising them a better future. The West needs to be able to prove that capitalism is a better option.

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