

[Back Magazine](#)

Comment

Murder of the divine

TABISH KHAIR

Violence is not only a betrayal of the sense of sacred but a denial of one's own humanity too.



Varanasi: Embodying human possibilities and limitations.

YOU do not need to be religious in order to have a sense of the sacred.

And for me, Varanasi — or Benaras, as we called it — is one of the few places I have known that are seeped in the sacred. It is not the sacredness bestowed by devotional verses that I read in school, or even the sacredness of the main temples of Varanasi, which might never admit me because I am a Muslim. It goes beyond that kind of ritualised holiness. Varanasi is imbued with sacredness in a deeper sense: the sense of human possibilities and limitations, of human hopes and aspirations, of human continuity and connections, the majestic flow of the Ganga that, in spite of the clogging and pollution, still communicates a sense of all that exceeds the limits of humanity and all that makes us human. Raja Rao's excellent collection of fictional sketches, **On Ganga Ghats**, captures some of this.

God and the sacred

For, you do not need to believe in the God of any religion in order to have a sense of the sacred. Perhaps if you believe too literally in the God of any religion, if you believe that a book or a holy man can reveal to you the very mind of God, you fail to sense the sacred. For, the sacred is a sense of the vast possibilities of life, of which human experience forms a major but by no means only part. Just as God is an index of human possibilities and limitations. We are only human to the extent that we are not divine. But we are also human only to the extent that we have that in us which can comprehend the divine, or conceive of it. It is not, as some militant atheists believe, that human beings create Gods; it is more that human beings become human beings because they can conceive of a God.

In our humanity, we are both much less than God and slightly more than mere animals. This realisation is essential to a true sense of the sacred.

Which is why when we, in the name of some God or the other, appropriate to us the powers of God, we betray the sacred. Perhaps the people who are most irreligious are those people who use religion to justify murder and genocide. Perhaps it is a greater blasphemy to claim that you are doing the work of God than to claim that you cannot believe in a God — for the person who claims to be the will of God claims that he knows the mind of God. But who except God can know the mind of God?

You do not even need to believe in God in order to realise that the man who claims to be God, or do the direct will of God, appropriates to himself more than human possibilities and limitations can ever allow. But if you believe in God, how can you take a human life that was never in your power to give? How can you plant bombs outside sacred places in India or drop bombs on sacred places in Iraq that take the life no human being can give back?

Not an answer

But if such acts of violence can be seen as unholy acts, acts that deny the sense of the sacred that is essential to all religions, they also need to be condemned from a pragmatic perspective. For violence, contrary to what Bush Junior and Bin Laden say in their different ways, is never an answer to violence. That is so because violence spreads through violence. To react to violence with violence is to spread violence. Violence is not a wound; it is more like a virus. Gandhiji was the one man in the 20th Century who saw this with absolute clarity. Violence came to him too. Even before his violent death, violence came to him again and again. And every time he stopped it by refusing to succumb it. By refusing to catch the virus of violence, he managed to prevent it from spreading.

That is all we can do too, because that is the only effective antidote to violence and because that is the only true expression of a sense of the sacred and of our humanity. For it is not enough to say that the person who planted the bomb outside the temple in Varanasi committed a heinous crime. We have to add that by that act of mortal violence he killed the human in himself - and the God he had believed in.

Tabish Khair is Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Aarhus, Denmark.

© Copyright 2000 - 2009 The Hindu