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Islamists cannot be permitted to abuse our tradition of tolerance

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN JANUARY 26, 2015 12:00AM

THE French love the idea of France, Americans their country's shining ideal of liberty. Australians simply love their country as it is. And nothing is more integral to the achievement we celebrate on Australia Day than the easygoing tolerance of difference.

But tolerance was hardly on display at the demonstration Hizb ut-Tahrir organised last Friday night in Lakemba, which refused to condemn the attack on Charlie Hebdo. And though the organisation is on the fringe of Australia's Muslim community, its views, and those of other fundamentalists, find a broad and growing echo in the Islamic world.

Whether our model of pluralism can remain unchanged as religious hatred spreads, including into Australia's suburbs, is a problem that demands honest discussion. At the heart of that problem lies the fact that Islam finds it difficult to accept religious freedom and the freedom of expression that goes with it.

The UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines religious freedom in terms of each person's ability to "change his religion or belief" and to manifest that religion or belief "in teaching, practice, worship or observance". But data from the Association of Religion Data Archives shows that while they endorse that declaration, severe restrictions on religious freedom are imposed in almost 80 per cent of Muslim-majority countries with a population of two million or more, compared to 10 per cent of Christian-majority countries.

Those restrictions have dramatic consequences, with serious religious persecution more than twice as likely in Muslim-majority countries than in their Christian-majority counterparts. What were once large Jewish populations have almost entirely disappeared; increasingly, Christians are targeted too, with their numbers plummeting, while Christian proselytism is commonly prohibited and routinely punished. As for the Baha'is and Zoroastrians, repression is their daily fate.

That is not to deny that many victims are themselves Muslims: in 70 per cent of Muslim-majority countries, governments persecute other Muslims, typically from minority sects. But that merely betrays a fanaticism which continually breathes fresh life into centuries-old doctrinal disputes.

Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland may fight, but their quarrels never invoke 16th-century differences on transubstantiation.

Every day, however, Sunnis and Shi'ites slaughter each other over the rightful successor to the prophet Mohammed.

That fanaticism breeds a demonisation of enemies, apparent in Islamists' portrayal of Jews, that encourages religiously-inspired violence. Muslim-majority countries have a relatively

low incidence of conventional homicide; but even excluding the conflict in Chechnya, Muslims account for more than 60 per cent of all high-casualty terrorist bombings since 1999, with most of those bombings targeting civilians in Islamic lands.

As Muslims comprise less than a quarter of the world's population, the thesis Montesquieu advanced 250 years ago — that “the Mohammedan religion, which speaks only through the sword, continues to act on men with the destructive spirit which founded it” — retains its element of truth.

That truth grates against Australia's founding principles. It wasn't by accident that the founders of the federation ensured it would accommodate religious diversity, not favouring one faith or denomination over any other. Rather, the Constitution's reticence on matters of religion was a conscious choice, made despite what might readily have been overwhelming pressures.

Just on its first day, for example, the 1897 Constitutional Convention received a petition with more than 17,000 signatures asking for the constitution to state that “God is the Supreme Ruler of the world and the source of all law and authority”; and in the next three days alone, that petition was joined by 16 others, signed by 140,000 people. But though they were deeply religious, the founders rejected those requests, convinced that the expression of faith had to be a private matter. That position, abhorrent to the Islamists, remains vital to the “feeling of free citizenship” Henry Parkes exalted. The issue is how it can now be defended.

To that question there are no simple answers: just as Jonathan Swift wisely observed that “it is useless to attempt to reason a man out of a thing he wasn't reasoned into”, so the abject failure of costly “deradicalisation” programs shows the intolerant cannot be lulled into tolerance. What is clear, however, is that religious neutrality can no longer mean indifference. It is, in other words, an illusion to believe “tolerance for the tolerant, Islamism for the Islamists” makes any more sense as a policy than “liberalism for the liberals, cannibalism for the cannibals” (to use Martin Hollis's phrase): for like all plans to appease wolves by throwing them carcasses, what begins with other people's bodies invariably ends with one's own.

Rather, a response is needed that measures up to the threat. Yes, the fanatics will smoulder with rage; but no Islamist should qualify for Australian residence or citizenship. And if the government sees merit in retaining section 18C, it should see even greater merit in enforcing longstanding prohibitions on incitement to violence, which have played too little role in dealing with the Islamists and their fellow travellers.

All that raises many legitimate questions. How can it be, for example, that the government blocks access to websites suspected of breaching copyright, but allows jihadi websites to flourish? And how can it be that SBS, using taxpayers' funds, helps subsidise Al-Jazeera, whose executive producer called “I am Charlie” an “alienating slogan” while suggesting the Paris attacks might only be a “targeted” response to Abu Ghraib and to French action against Islamic State?

That is not the country today celebrates. Nor should it be that our children inherit. Australia's “indissoluble Federal Commonwealth”, the Constitution tells us, was achieved “humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God”. It will take all our human vigilance to keep those

blessings intact.

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