

# My fatwa on the fanatics

Ziauddin Sardar

**T**he magnitude of the terrorist attack on America has forced Muslims to take a critical look at themselves. Why have we repeatedly turned a blind eye to the evil within our societies? Why have we allowed the sacred terms of Islam, such as fatwa and jihad, to be hijacked by obscurantist, fanatic extremists?

Muslims are quick to note the double standards of America—its support for despotic regimes, its partiality towards Israel, and the covert operations that have undermined democratic movements in the Muslim world. But we seldom question our own double standards. For example, Muslims are proud that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the West. Evangelical Muslims, from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, happily spread their constricted interpretations of Islam. But Christian missionaries in Muslim countries are another matter. They have to be banned or imprisoned. Those who burn effigies of President Bush will be first in the queue for an American visa.

The psychotic young men, members of such extremist organisations as Al-Muhajiroun and 'Supporters of Sharia', shouting fascist obscenities outside the Pakistan Embassy, are enjoying the fruits of Western freedom of expression. Their declared aim is to establish 'Islamic states'. But in any self-proclaimed Islamic state, they would be ruthlessly silenced.

This is not the first time concerned Muslims have raised such questions. But we have been forced to ignore them for two main reasons. In a world where it is always open season for prejudice and discrimination on Muslims and Islam, our main task has seemed to be to defend Islam.

The other reason concerns Ummah, the global Muslim community. We have to highlight, the argument goes, the despair and suffering of the Muslim people—their poverty and plight as refugees and the horror of war-torn societies.

So, all good and concerned Muslims are implicated in the unchecked rise of fanaticism in Muslim societies. We have given free reign to fascism within our midst, and failed to denounce fanatics who distort the most sacred concepts of our faith. We have been silent as they proclaim themselves martyrs, mangling beyond recognition the most sacred meaning of what it is to be a Muslim.

But the events of 11 September have freed us from any further obligation to this misapplied conscience. The insistence by the Muslim Council of Britain that the Islamic cause is best served by the Taliban handing over Osama bin Laden, is indicative of this shift.

The devotion with which so many Muslims, young and old, in Europe and America, are organising meetings and conferences to discuss how to unleash the best intentions, the essential values of Islam, from the rhetoric of jihad, hatred and insularity, is another.

But we have to go further. Muslims are in the best position to take the lead in the common cause against terrorism. The terrorists are among us, the Muslim communities of the world. They are part of our body politic. And it is our duty to stand up against them.

We must also reclaim a more balanced view of Islamic terms like fatwa. A fatwa is simply a legal opinion based on religious reasoning. It is the opinion of one individual and is binding on only the person who gives it. But, since the Rushdie affair, it has come to be associated in the West solely with a death sentence. Now that Islam has become beset with the fatwa culture, it becomes necessary for moderate voices to issue their own fatwas.

So, let me take the first step. To Muslims everywhere I issue this fatwa: any Muslim involved in the planning, financing, training, recruiting, support or harbouring of those who commit acts of indiscriminate violence against persons or the apparatus or infrastructure of states is guilty of terror and no part of the Ummah. It is the duty of every Muslim to spare no effort in hunting down, apprehending and bringing such criminals to justice.

If you see something reprehensible, said the Prophet Muhammad, then change it with your hand; if you are not capable of that then use your tongue (speak out against it); and if you are not capable of that then detest it in your heart.

The silent Muslim majority must now become vocal. The rest of the world could help by adopting a more balanced tone. The rhetoric that paints America as a personification of innocence and goodness, a god-like power that can do no wrong, not only undermines the new shift but threatens to foreclose all our futures.

*Ziauddin Sardar is a leading Muslim writer.*