

Support the Ahmadiyya

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It is a sad sign of the times that in all religions, fundamentalist pressure is exercising an intolerant influence that is spreading rather than receding. Some may argue that the times require it, that the perniciousness of libertarianism is the modern paganism and only strictness and protected environments can counteract the destructiveness of Western societies, but the negative impact this wave of religious suppression has on the weaker sectors of each community are more serious than we allow. Some religions recognize these pressures. In others they prefer to turn a blind eye (or are frightened).

In Judaism, the majority of its adherents are not Orthodox. As a result, the room to exert pressure in the Diaspora is limited. Within orthodoxy the assault focuses almost entirely on the moderate or intellectually open Orthodox. In Israel, of course, it is all a game of political power and the very Orthodox do try to impose their will on the majority there, with the result that anti-Orthodox feeling, rather than simple antipathy, characterizes much of Israeli society. However, for all the bluster and aggressive demonstrations, no serious religious leader has yet called for violence against less Orthodox coreligionists.

Sadly, much of Islam is still living in a pre-modern world where religious violence is often acceptable and tolerance is a dirty word associated with corrupt western values (don't take my word for it, you can read Ed Husain's book, "The Islamist", or the even more blunt Ayaan Hirsi Ali). Last week's Economist listed two examples. In Saudi Arabia, a woman whose husband had shot her twice could not report the abuse because she needed her husband's presence to go to the police, otherwise she would be prosecuted for consorting with other men. The second is the campaign to ban the Ahmadiyya in Indonesia.

Who are the [Ahmadiyya](#)? They are a relatively small and moderate sect of Islam based mainly in Pakistan but spread throughout the Muslim world and beyond it. The movement was founded in India (in the area now called Pakistan) in the nineteenth century by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. He wanted to return Islam to what he saw as its original spiritual purity. He did not accept the later reinterpretations of the Koran, and he rejected the idea of jihad as a physical religious obligation and tool of expansion, but confined it to the idea of self-improvement. He committed his movement to conciliation and reaching out to other religions, instead of confronting them or proselytizing. He believed that Jesus, after his resurrection, came to India and there laid the foundations of Islam and that he, Ahmad, would return as the Mahdi, the Messiah.

In some ways the Ahmadiyya are similar to Lubavitch Hassidim, with their warmth, unfailing cheerfulness and dedication to a minority religious interest, as well as their heterodox messianic opinions. But the way the

Ahmadiyya came to be regarded by mainstream Islam is closer to the way much of Orthodox Judaism looks at American Reform—as a heretical, backsliding door out, rather than a way further in.

During my years of interfaith work, I was invited to the opening of the huge [Ahmadiyya mosque in south London](#). I found those I met there to be really warm, spiritual, friendly people. They presented an aspect of eastern Islam totally different to the one more familiar in the west. I have admired them and felt protective of them ever since, and I have been frankly outraged at the way they have been and are treated by many other Muslims.

Comparisons are rarely accurate. I have often heard the very Orthodox excoriate Reform Jews, but I have never yet heard anyone call for them to be killed. Demonstrators against the Ahmadiyya in Jakarta a few weeks ago carried placards saying “Kill, Kill, Kill”. The Indonesian Ulema’s Council is pressing for them to be banned and prosecuted as heretics and it looks like the authorities will give in, as they did with another unorthodox Muslim mystic, Abdul Salam, who on April 23rd was jailed for four years for blasphemy. I fear these attitudes are increasingly tolerated in the West.

I had no idea of how much the Ahmadiyya are reviled and hated until I became friendly with a Pakistani Muslim, whom I initially met when he and I crossed swords at a public meeting, over how wicked Israel and the Jews were. Despite this unpromising start we became friends. I visited his home and he and his wife visited mine.

After we had known each other for a year, he confessed to me that he was a member of the Ahmadiyya. But he swore me to secrecy because he feared that if the fact were known he would be physically abused, or at least totally ostracized, by the Muslim community in Britain of which he was an important member. This was when I realized how strong the hatred was.

I won’t deny the seriousness of the battle between Orthodox and Reform for the souls of Jews. It goes both ways. In the nineteenth century the great Orthodox German Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch refused to join the Reform scholar Graetz in setting up a joint school for Jewish children in Israel to save them from the Christian missionaries who were taken advantage of their poverty to seduce them away from their tradition. He was so worried about corrosive Reform ideology that it looked as though he would rather they became Christians than Reform Jews. In recent years, some of the most vituperative sermons I have heard in New York have been the other way—Reform ridiculing Orthodoxy.

But, for all this, it is a long, long way from what many Ahmadiyya suffer. I would argue that we, as a community, should support them, but I fear that, in the current mood of most of the Muslim world, having allies such as us would only make their lot worse. What a sad, sad world.