

Jealous gods

by GWYNNE DYER

As everybody knows, the gods are thin-skinned, both the many gods of the classical pantheons (Greek, Roman, Hindu) and the jealous single gods of the monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). Criticize them in any way, and they will punish you severely ? or at least their earthly followers will.

These earthly followers see themselves as the executive arm of their god's powers, which mysteriously only function through human agency. (Waiting for direct divine punishment of the critics is only for sissies.) The faithful followers claim uncontrollable outrage, and attack the attackers. As, for example, in India now.

The ruling BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party ? Indian People's Party) is a Hindu nationalist party whose goal is to turn India into a Hindu-ruled country where all the religious minorities are second-class citizens. The principal target is India's Muslims, who are 15% of the population ? almost 200 million people.

Muslims are the best target because long ago their Mughal ancestors conquered India and ruled it for many centuries. India is therefore a 'wounded civilisation' in the view of Hindu radicals, and the Muslim infection must be purged in order to restore the health of a truly Hindu civilisation.

This rather ignores the fact that the great majority of Indian Muslims are descended not from foreign conquerors but from locals who converted to Islam, whether for religious or for practical reasons, during the long centuries of Muslim rule. It also ignores the fact that Indian Muslims today already lag behind Hindus in prosperity and in education.

Most of all, it deliberately overlooks the fact that the more recent conquerors of India were the British, who left an even deeper mark on the country. But they are no use as a whipping boy because a) they're not in India anymore; and b) it was their overthrow of Mughal power that opened the way for Hindus to rise in the political domain.

Hatred and fear of the Muslims is what brought the BJP to power, and to keep their supporters energised they must constantly find new Muslim outrages to exploit. The latest was the 'discovery' that a historic mosque in the city of Varanasi, one of Hinduism's most sacred sites, was built on the ruins of a Hindu temple.

How do they know? Because the mosque's pool contains a fountain that can, when viewed in the right light with your eyes half-closed, be interpreted as embodying a 'Shivling' or Shiva Linga: a carved stone that symbolises the ineffable essence of the Lord Shiva.

Why Muslims of long ago would have incorporated such a symbol in the mosque's pool remains unexplained, but this immediately became the BJP's claim. Other mosques have been destroyed by Hindu mobs on similarly flimsy grounds, so various Muslim spokespersons immediately leapt to its defence.

One of them, debating on-air with the BJP's national spokesperson, Nupur Sharma, allegedly said harsh things about Shiva. What could they have been? Too many arms? Too prone to destroy things? The video has been 'disappeared'. We shall never know.

At any rate Ms Sharma, provoked beyond reason, replied by casting aspersions upon the prophet Mohammed. As this can be a life-threatening move, I shall not repeat them, but they concerned the age of the prophet's youngest wife Aisha. It's in the Quran.

As for Nupur Sharma, she has suddenly been demoted from national spokesperson to a 'fringe element', suspended from the BJP at least for a while. The BJP's Delhi media chief Naveen K Jindal, who tweeted support for Sharma, has been expelled outright. Is the BJP turning over a new leaf?

Not at all. It is frantically back-pedaling to assuage the anger of the oil-rich Muslim counties of the Gulf, which provide most of India's oil and employ millions of its workers. The BJP's war on Islam is for domestic purposes only.

Similarly, the Gulf states will happily carry on ignoring the Indian government's behaviour at home in return for a sham apology, just as they ignore China's oppression of the Muslims in Xinjiang and keep on selling Beijing their oil. The scale of the hypocrisy is breath-taking ? but it is also dreadfully familiar.

And none of it proves that rival religions are incompatible. Multi-religious societies have thrived peacefully both in the past and in the present, even though every believer must necessarily believe that those who follow any other faith are utterly, even catastrophically wrong. A little politeness goes a long way.

A sense of humour helps, too. ?Mughal architecture is amazing! They always built an ancient Hindu temple in the basement first,? tweeted an Indian Muslim, undermining the BJP's story-line without a single angry word. But it is getting bad in India: religion is being weaponised in ways that have already led to massacre, and could lead to genocide.