

Islamic Perspective of Other Faiths

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Abstract:

This paper probes the question as to whether Islam as a religion is exclusivist or intolerant as is commonly presented by some quarters both in the East and West. The core argument presented in this paper is that Islam, both as a faith and practicing religion, is not intolerant, militant and exclusivist vis-a-vis other faiths. Divided into four sections, the paper opens with specific references to some of the general foundational principles bearing on Islam's universal outlook and its intrinsic egalitarianism. The second section discusses some apparent differences that Islam has with other revealed faiths. Third section highlights the relevant Quranic revelations bearing on the core theme of the paper. Finally, a brief reference is made to how far these Quranic principles were acted upon by the Prophet (PBUH) and some of his Companions.

Introduction

Religion per se is a factor in the contemporary world which can be ignored only at the peril of humans. The logic for such a statement is abundantly apparent from the ground-realities that face us across the world; but the specific rationale may be comprehended from the following two quotes:

- a. "One difference between religion and other forms of thought is that religion has more power. So fundamental is its power that one cannot examine individual conduct or desires without references to it. In that sense religion cuts into human personality in a way which ordinary ideological thought rarely does". David Apter, "Political Religion in the New Nations" in Clifford Geertz (ed.), **Old Societies and New States** (New Delhi: Amerind Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1963), p. 64.
- b. "The most fanatical and the cruellest political struggles are those that have been coloured, inspired and legitimized by religion". Hans Kung, **Christianity and the World Religions** (London: Collins Publishers, 1956-1986), p. 442.

As is obvious, the first quote refers to religion as an overwhelming factor impacting human life; but the latter quote draws attention to ominous aberrations of religious spirit in the arenas of turbulent society and politics across the world.

The contemporary Islam and Islamist activities fit into both the perspectives represented by these two quotes. Because of ubiquitous militant manifestations in the recent past and the consequent challenge of it to the democratic and liberal order Islam is now a question of serious concern equally to liberal Islamophile

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and tendentious Islamophobes with anti-Islamic bias. In between these two groups there exists the authors of militant Islam whose only imperative is to impose their own construct of dangerously distorted Islam upon the societies they have been targeting for some time.

In such a context, the pointed question faced is whether Islam as a religion is exclusivist and intolerant vis-a-vis other Religions and their Messengers.

The core argument remains, however, that Islam is not as intolerant or militant as some fanatic and obscurantist Muslims make it appear, or not as exclusivist as some detractors of Islam would have any one believe. The first section draws attention to some of the general foundational principles bearing on Oskam's universal outlook and its egalitarianism. Religious differences and their contexts are referred to in the second section. The third section highlights some of the relevant Quranic revelations bearing on the core theme of this discussion. Finally, a brief references is made to how far these Quranic principles were acted upon by the Prophet (PBUH) and some of his companions.

I

Universal and Englitarian Outlook of Islam

On 19 December 2004 the renowned British historian Professor Eric Hobsbawm gave an interview to the Indian daily The Hindu. This interview was about his views on Islam and the Islamist phenomenon in the wake of 9/11. At one stage he came up with some statements that bore on the intrinsic elements of Islam as a belief system. He said, "...Islam is probably one of the few religions which has continued to expand and, to expand effectively, without the support of either missionaries or states. Islam happens to be in some ways, a very simple religion to adopt and, in some ways, a very formidable religion beacuse there's very little you need to do if you convert to Islam... The element within Islam of, as it were, the feeling that you are no longer subaltern by being a Muslim, that is an element in the situation which has, perhaps, been underestimated".¹

In such a perspective, it would be a facile generalization to categorize Islam as a religion of a specific community, and also its major source-book, the Noble Quran, as a holy reader, meant only for Muslims. A close and discerning look into Islam and the underlying message of the Noble Quran reveals that these were not the intentions of Allah, the Creator of this universe. Indeed, in Arabic, the name Allah is described as **Rabbul al-Amin**, meaning the lord of the universe. It would thus be wrong to assume that he would reveal a religion meant only for some people while excluding others. Indeed, Islam appeared in the host Arab society with the clear agenda of moral and spiritual redemption, and which was supposed to spread across the world. For the same reason the messenger of Islam is described as **Oswatun Hasana**... the ideal for the whole world. As Allah says,

“we sent thee not save as a mercy for all peoples” (Al-Anbiyaa 21:107). Moreover the Prophet (PBUH) is reported to have said: “I have been sent as a guiding mercy”. Moreover, the Noble Quran considers the whole humanity **Ashraful Makhluqat**-best of all creations; and humans **Khalifatullah**, vicegerents of Allah on the earth. It may be noted that not Muslims only but the whole humanity is described as either **Ashraful Makhluqat** or **Khalifatullah**.

It is also worth noting that Islam cannot be defined narrowly as a specific religion limited to a community; on the contrary, Islam is the generic name of the religion that had long been in the process of evolution before the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH); and by the time of this Prophet (PBUH) this process was declared by Allah as completed. As Allah revealed:

“This day have I perfected your religion. For your completed My favour upon you, And have chosen for Islam as your religion”. (Sura Maidah 5:3); and “The religion before Allah is Islam” (Sura al-Imran 3:19).

In the context of these two revelations two pertinent interpretations are in order here. First as Adam (PBUH) was the first messenger the Qalima during his prophethood was **La Ilaha Illallahu Adam Saffullaho**; and during the prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH) this Qalima was changed into **La Ilaha Illallahu Muhammadur Rasulullah**. Thus in between these two messengers there were messengers for revealing Allah's truth to mankind, and all of them had different **Qalimah**. Second as Allah reveals: “We sent not a messenger except (to teach) in the language of his own people, in order to make (things) clear to them” (Sura Ibrahim 14:4). Other Quranic verses of similar vein are: “And there is not a single people to whom a warner has not been sent (Sura Fatir 35:24). “And for every nation there is a messenger. And when their messenger cometh (on the Day of Judgement) it will be judged between them fairly and they will not be wronged” (Sura Yunus 10:47). Mankind is of one nation” (Sura Baqara 2:23). “O, Humanity! We created you from a single of a male and female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other) (Sura Hujurat 49:13). Interpreted rightly and understood properly, these verses have three meanings. First there has been a messenger for each community over the ages. Second by highlighting linguistic plurality the plurality of the speakers of all the languages has been divinely legitimized. Thirdly, different human identities are divinely willed, both which are not meant for division, dissension and conflict. Above all, the Quranic revelations contain foundational principles which are transcendental and egalitarian in nature and, which, if interpreted and acted upon properly, would bring about qualitative improvements for mankind irrespective of any religion or race.

How much and how far Islam emphasizes an inclusive outlook on the part of its followers is manifested in its insistence of **Taruf**, meaning knowing each other.

Taruf in Islam is a necessity, which is raised to being a binding rule. At the 14th annual convening of the World Council of the Islamic Call held in Tripoli on 21 September 2003, Ibrahim Al-Ghuwelli, a Libyan scholar stated: "The need for **Taruf** is deep-rooted, and what is happening is nothing but deviations of the original rules of human relations down the road of history"². Indeed, the need to know each other is instinctive in mankind. **Taruf** is relevant to the present-day world, because we can no longer live in isolation. The whole has become a small village. It is high time to correct the tarnished image of Islam in the West and also to repair the policies, actions and views in the West that have left Muslims as a community aggrieved and marginalized in the contemporary world order. In fact, the Islamic **Taruf** is a recipe for a dialogue, and not for a clash of civilizations".

II

Context of Religious Differences: Islamic Perspective

A commonly observed feature of the follower of any religion is that his/her religion is right, and other religions are wrong. Feelings and mindsets such as these lead to fanaticism and even militancy and communal disharmony. However, there are certain factors that a Muslim mind and heart should be aware of and which are part and parcel of the basics of a Muslim's creed, also the prerequisites of his faith. First, he has to believe that the difference in religious affiliations exists because of the will and wisdom of Allah. Allah says: "And if thy Lord had willed, He verily would have made mankind one nation, yet they cease not differing. Save him on whom thy Lord hath mercy; and for that He did create them. And the word of thy Lord hath been fulfilled: Verily I shall fill hell with the Jinn and Mankind together". (Sura Hood 11:118-119). Moreover, "And were it not that Allah checks the people, some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of Allah is much mentioned". (Sura al-Hajj 22:40).

The judgement for those who go astray, or are non-believers does not take place in this world but in the hereafter, and is not the responsibility of any Muslim, but that of Allah only. As Allah categorically warns: "Unto this, then, summon [O Muhammad]. And be thou upright as thou art commanded, and follow not their lusts, but say: I believe in whatever Scripture Allah hath sent down, and I am commanded to be just among you. Allah is our Lord. Unto us our works and unto you your works; no argument between us and you. Allah will bring us together, and unto Him is the journeying". (Sura Ash-Shura 42:15).

III

Relevant Quranic Revelations on Interfaith Relations

The Noble Quran lays down the bases of co-existence and cooperation with the other faiths in all that is good and beneficial. It is revealed: "Allah does not forbid

you respecting those who have not made war against you on account of [your] religion, and have not driven you forth from your homes, that you show them kindness and deal with them justly; surely Allah loves the doers of justice. Allah only forbids you respecting those who made war upon you on account of [your] forth from your homes and backed up (others) in your expulsion, that you make friends (and ally) with them, and whoever makes friends with them, these are wrongdoers. (Sura Al-Mumtahinah 60:8-9). Other Quranic verses ordaining Muslims to respect religions other than their own are specific and poignant:

- "Let there be no compulsion in religion". (Sura Al-Baqarah 2:256).
- "The believers are but a single brotherhood. So make peace and reconciliation between your two brothers (Sura Al-Hujurat 49:10).
- "Commit no excess in your religion". (Sura An-Nisaa 4:171).
- "Say thou art not one to overawe them by force". (Sura Qaf 50:45).
- "I worship not that which ye worship- To you be your way. And to me mine". (Sura Al-Kafirun 109:1-6)
- "Reville not ye those whom they call upon besides, Allah lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance". (Sura Anaam 6:108).

On the respect by Muslims to all the messengers the following verses contain specific instructions; "We have sent thee Inspiration, as We sent it To Noah and the Messengers. After him: We sent Inspiration to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, And the Tribes to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and to David we gave the psalms. Of some messengers we have already told thee the story; of others we have not And to Moses Allah spoke direct". (Sura Al-Nisaa 4:163-164; also Sura Al-Imran 3:84). Moreover, "We make no distinction between one and another of His Messengers" (Sura Al-Baqarah 2:285; also Al-Imran 3:84).

All Muslims have a firm belief that the Gospel is a Divine Scripture revealed by Allah. They have also unshakable belief that Jesus (Isa) (PBUH) is certainly one of Allah's Messengers who endured untold sufferings to disseminate the messages of Allah. Muslims also believe that Mother Mary was chosen by Allah to be the most honorable among women. They hold her in high esteem. Not a good many Christians know that there is a full chapter devoted to Virgin Mary in the Noble Quran in which it is unequivocally declared: "O Mary! Allah hath chosen thee and purified thee...chosen thee above the women of all nations". (Sura Al-Imran 3:42). Moreover, numerous verses of the Noble Quran describe many of Jesus' miracles not found in many Gospels.

Islam orders Muslims to argue with tolerance toward others, especially the people of Scriptures (Jews and Christians). Allah says: "And argue not with the people of Scripture unless it be in [a way] that as better...." (Sura Ankaboot 29:46). In this light Muslims are also instructed to resort to the best form of constructive

dialogue when arguing with people of other faiths. As Allah says: "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in the way that is best. Indeed, your Lord is most knowing of who has strayed from His way, and He is most knowing of who is [rightly] guided". (Sura an-Nahl 16:165).

Islam has determined relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in the two verses the Noble Quran. These two verses serve as a regulatory code to the norm of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. Allah says: "Allah forbiddeth you not those who warred not against you on account of religion and drove you not out from your homes, that ye should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo! Allah Loveth the just dealers. Allah forbiddeth you only those who warred against you on account of religion and have driven you out from your homes and helped to drive you out, that ye make friends of them. Whosoever maketh friends of them [All] such are wrongdoers". (Sura al-Mumtahinah 60:78). These two verses were originally revealed to shape the nature of relationship between Muslims and polytheists.

The people of Scripture are further granted a special status. Islam allows a Muslim to have a wife from among the people of Scripture [i.e. Christians and Jews]. Such a sacred bond as marriage dictates that wife's kith and kin deserve kind treatment. Understood rightly this means that Muslims are not barred from social interactions with Jews and Christians on the best possible terms.

It is not sure how many Buddhists know that some exegetists and commentators are of the opinion that the **Ficus Indica**, the Bo-tree under which Lord Buddha obtained nirvana has been referred to in sura **Tin** (95) in the Noble Quran. The renowned exegetist Abdullah Yusuf Ali even goes to the extent of reaching such a conclusion as, "If accepted it [the suggestion that **Tin** refers to the **Ficus Indica**] would cover pristine Buddhism and ancient Vedic religions from which it was an offshoot. In this way all the great religions would be indicated."³

At this stage it becomes pertinent to close this section with quotes from three Western authorities who demonstrated their deeper understanding of Islam both as a belief system and a factor in history. In **Message of the Quran**, for example, John Davenport testifies to the tolerant attitude of Islam to other faiths: "Islam has never interfered with the dogmas of any faith never established and inquisition. It offered its religion, but never enforced it."⁴ This testimony is strongly corroborated in the H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers edited **The Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam**: "Even down to the time of the Crusades there prevailed in Islam a tolerance towards the unbelievers, especially the **Ahla-Kitab**, such as is impossible to imagine in contemporary Christendom."⁵ And, Comte de Gobineau comes up with the ineluctable conclusion: "No religion is more tolerant than Islam to the followers of other creeds."⁶ If for some reason the contemporary Islam appears to be intolerant to other religions or religionists the fault is not with Islam, but Muslims, who, as followers of this religion have either distanced themselves from or distorted pristine Islam for purposes certainly not holy.

Examples by the Prophet and His Companions

Through dictating the Charter of Madina and construction a pluralistic and tolerant polity in Madina comprising 4,500 Jews, 4000 pagans and 1,500 Muslims the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) provided an empirical example of how Muslims should deal with people of other faiths. For a decade from 622 through 632 he led this composite community in an environment of what may be termed in contemporary parlance good governance.⁷ In Madina he permitted the members of the Christian delegation from Najran to say their evening prayer in the same mosque wherein he himself led the **Maghrib** prayer. It was indeed a beautiful scenario of mutual respect and tolerance created by Muslims and Christians saying their respective prayers under the same roof, but facing two opposite directions. We should pause and ponder the question whether such a scenario could be repeated these days.

Once a funeral procession passed by, and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stood up solemnly in respect. The disbelieving companions of him informed that it was a Jewish, and not a Muslim funeral. The Prophet replied: "Death is a fearful event. So when you see a funeral stand up and show respect."⁸ This anecdote is perhaps news to the fanatics of any religion, because funerals of all religionists are meant to be respected by Muslims.

This mindset of tolerance as well trust for other faiths induced the Prophet to allow Jews Mukhairiq and Nadri to participate in the Battle of Uhud, the second Muslim war against the infidels. Allah supported such acts of His messenger of Islam: "Those who believe [in the Quran], and those who follow the Jewish [scriptures] and the Christians and the Sabians...any who believe in Allah and the Last Day and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord. On them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" (Sura Baqarah 2:62). The exegetist Abdullah Yusuf Ali interprets the term **sabians** as meaning the "followers of Zoroaster, Buddha, Confucius and other Teachers of Moral Law".⁹

Perhaps the best testimony of Islam's tolerant attitude vis-a-vis other faiths was provided in the Prophet's Last Sermon. He addressed.

O people, Your lord is One and your father is one. All of you are traced back to Adam, and Adam was created from dust. No privilege of a certain person over the other save the righteous deeds. O, people! Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you. Remember that you will indeed meet your Lord, and indeed he will reckon your deeds... All mankind is from Adam and Eve, and Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab, also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any superiority over a white except by piety and good action. Do not therefore do injustice to each other. Remember one day you will meet Allah and answer your deeds.

While on a walk with Ali® and companion of him after having seen Christians praying in a Church remarked that kafirs (unbelievers) were praying. Visibly annoyed, Ali retorted: "Do not call those who pray kafirs". This retort may appear to be a poser to those obscurantist and fanatic Muslims who are often prone to call people of other faiths kafirs.

Concluding Remarks:

Islam is essentially a belief system that appeared originally to redeem humans spiritually and morally within a social construct. A true Muslim endowed thus with the best possible spiritual and moral attributes is bound to be a friend, not foe to humans across the world. The conflicts and clashes between and among human communities that have long been distorting the socio-political landscape of the globe cannot and should not be understood in a religious context; and certainly not in the context of "clash of civilizations". These conflicts and clashes have underlying geo-political and geo-economical causes; but there is however, no denying the fact that religion is sometimes used to either provoke or legitimize these conflicts and clashes. But Islam, and for that matter, all other faiths, if understood and followed properly can promote a dialogue of civilization. In this age of globalization we can no longer live in isolation. There is no doubt there exists radical differences in belief systems. But let us not forget our many common spiritual values, which we have to recognize and make these serve to the best interest of our societies and times. Amity, not enmity, be it religious or otherwise, is the need of the day. The closing of the ranks by all religionists across the many superficial divides by cashing in on the all too apparent moral and spiritual affinities can be one of the most potent recipes for ensuring a desirable habitat for the *homo sapiens* on this planet earth.

Notes and References:

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See Syed Anwar Husain, "Islam in the Democratic Matrix", paper presented at the International Conference entitled Different Facets of the Islamic Ummah in a Globalized World held in Karachi on 6-7 December under the sponsorship of the Area Study Centre for Europe, Karachi University and Goethe Institut, Karachi.

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