Pluralism and Islam

By Asghar Ali Engineer*

When Islam emerged on the scene in early seventh century, Arabs were divided among different tribes but nevertheless spoke one language, Arabic, and more or less followed one religion (although with different traditions) i.e. worshipping different idols placed inside Ka'ba and some idols which were outside Mecca. Thus we cannot really call that society a pluralist society. Of course there were Jews in Madina and Christians in some parts of Arabian Peninsula. In a limited way it was a multi-religious society as Christians and Jews were present in small minorities.

Despite all this the Qur'an did not reject religious pluralism. It not only accepted religious but also linguistic and ethnic pluralism. There are verses in the Qur'an to this effect, two of which I would like to quote here:

1)   "For every one of you we appointed a law and a way. And if Allah had pleased He would have made you a single people, but that He might try you in what He gave you. So vie one with another in virtuous deeds. To Allah you will all return, so He will inform you of that wherein you differed... (5:48)

2)   And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours (ethnic diversity). Surely there are signs in this for the learned. (30:22).

Both the verses quoted above not only accepted diversity of religions, languages and ethnicities but describe them as a sign of Allah. Thus Allah has created pluralism and it must be respected. If Allah so desired He could have created all of us as one people with one religion, one tongue and one colour. But Allah did not do so and instead created diversity of every kind and made it a test for us whether we can live in harmony despite these diversities and, instead of making it a source of conflict, as it often happens, we should make it a source of excelling each other in good deeds.

The Arabs were very proud of their language and ethnic origin and hence Qur'an emphasized that there is no need for taking pride in ones language and Arabness as Allah has created other languages and ethnic groups and all need to be respected as none is superior to the other and all are Allah's creation and Allah's signs.

Thus believers were taught to respect other faiths, languages and ethnicities. Qur'an also told believers not to abuse others gods lest they should abuse Allah without knowledge. The Qur'an went one step further and maintained that to every people their own faith appears to be fair and good and so one should see others faith in their perspective and not from one's own faith perspective. (See later part of 30:22)

But in this world people don't behave according to their scriptures, be they Muslims or people of other faiths. They behave more according to their own interests and benefits. The Arabs continued to feel superior over non-Arabs including non-Arab Muslims. It always remained a challenge to unite Arab and non-Arab Muslims. Arabs looked down upon non-Arab Muslims and considered Arabs as better Muslims.

Islam first appeared among Arabs but soon spread to many parts of the world, and various local cultures and traditions of non-Arab societies began to reflect in local Muslim communities. Thus Islam did not remain monolithic as many theologians continued to assert. Local cultures became an integral part of various local Muslim communities. Instead of 'Islam' there were 'Islams' with differing practices.

Theologically and legally too Islam split into several different sects and legal schools. Political splits also acquired theological hues. To begin with the succession to the Prophet was a political question but soon it became theological and Shi'ah Islam acquired its own separate theology and Sunni Islam its own. Both became irreconcilable and ethnically too they were embraced by different ethnic groups.

Though there are several Arab countries like Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Bahrain having Shi'ah population either in majority or minority, Shi'ah Islam was mainly embraced by Iranians, a non-Arab Persian speaking people who had sense of superior culture and civilization heritage. Similarly different tribes in Central Asia embraced Islam with their own customs and traditions which remain their hallmark.

Islam thus became bewilderingly diverse internally. In Africa Hausa Islam is so radically different from 'mainstream' Arab Islam that many Muslims would not even recognize them as Muslims. When Hausa Muslims were depicted during a festival of Islamic celebrations in the late seventies, some Pakistanis watching the Hausa Islam exhibition remarked how these people could be described as Muslims?

Ethnic and tribal prejudices come into play in all such matters. Nevertheless all of them feel they are true Muslims. Then there are among Shi'ah and Sunni Islam several different sects with substantially differing theologies. In Lebanon we have Druze Muslims and Ismaili Muslims who considerably differ from 'mainstream' Shi'ah Islam. Among Ismailis there are Agakhanis and Bohras who differ from each other considerably in theological issues.

In fact if we see Baghdadi's book *Al-Farq bayn al-Firaq* in the first century of Islam he counts more than 100 different sects all claiming to be representing 'true Islam'. While many sects came into existence due to political differences, some came into existence due to theological differences too. If one goes by Qur'anic pluralism one must accept both internal pluralism as well as external pluralism i.e. coexistence between Islam and non-Islamic religions.

However, let alone coexistence between Islam and other religions, there have been serious conflict between different sects of Islam. Today Sunni terrorists are continuously attacking and killing Shi'ah Muslims in Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere. Similarly there is serious conflict in Indian sub-continent between Wahabis and Barelvis. Also Ahmadiyas are denounced as non-believers. In fact each sect condemns the other as non-believer (kafir). The word kafir is used quite irresponsibly.

Perhaps a Muslim can co-exist more peacefully with non-Muslims than with Muslims of other sects. Justice Munir who inquired into anti-Qadiyani riots in Punjab in Pakistan in early fifties writes in his report that he examined all leading theologians of Muslims in Pakistan but no two of them agreed on definition of a Muslim and yet all of them agreed that one who is not a Muslim should be killed.

Thus despite Quranic doctrine of religious and cultural pluralism, in practice, Muslim theologians have not accepted it in practice. In one conference in Iran on pluralism one of the leading Ayatollah said that Islam cannot accept pluralism as it means all religions are equally valid. This cannot be accepted. I stood up and said, "Sir, this is not Qur'anic approach. One realizes importance of pluralism only when one lives as a minority." The Ayatollah then said, "I do not mean that pluralism should not be accepted but that equal validity of all religions cannot be accepted." I said, "For this Qur'an clearly says in 5:48 that it is Allah who will decide, not human beings like us. We human beings should only try to excel each other in virtuous deeds instead of judging who is right and who is wrong."

While theologians challenge each other and create conflictual situations, the Sufis, especially of *wahdat al-wujud* (Unity of Being) philosophy accept religious and cultural pluralism since they believe that Allah is manifest in every human being and everything. Thus they have no problem with equal validity of all religions. Also, they accepted local languages and local traditions without any hesitation.

It is also important to note that pluralism and diversity enriches our life and its absence makes our language and culture quite colorless. When a religion is followed by millions of people of various cultures, languages, customs and traditions, its understanding and interpretation cannot remain monolithic. Had Islam remained confined to Arabia, perhaps it could have remained monolithic but after it spread in different parts of the world it embraced local philosophies and different traditions. Needless to say different cultural traditions greatly influence our understanding of a religion which may have originated elsewhere.

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