

ISLAM AND PLURALISM

Today's world is fast becoming pluralist with variety of religions, languages and cultures in one country particularly due to fast developing processes of modernization, liberalisation and globalisation. Also, feudal socio-economic and socio-political structures have either crumbled or crumbling very fast in the third world also of course with certain exceptions. In the past there was no concept of civil society at all and the state was all powerful. The subjects people did not enjoy any rights, they had to discharge only duties towards the state. The modern democratic state, on the other hand, has to concede well defined rights to the citizens. The civil society has its own autonomy in a democratic set up and the notion of human rights has acquired great significance.

The notion of human rights is quite fundamental to a society which is pluralistic. All religious, linguistic and cultural groups should enjoy well defined rights and should not live at the mercy of the state or the majority community. Thus it will be seen that the notion of civil society is very fundamental to the modern pluralist society. It is unfortunate that the Islamic world is yet to cope up with the notion of civil society. Most of the Islamic countries do not have full-fledged democracy and there is no respect for human rights in these countries. In fact most of the rulers condemn human rights as a western notion and some, even 'un-Islamic'.

Here it is important to examine, from theological perspective, what is attitude of Islam towards pluralism? Does Islam approves of pluralism or promotes a monolithic society? Also, when we talk of pluralism, are we referring to political pluralism or religious and cultural pluralism? As far as this paper goes we are referring to religious and cultural pluralism though political pluralism has its own importance, it is very seminal for religious and cultural pluralism.

If one goes by the Qur'anic pronouncements Islam not only accepts the legitimacy of religious pluralism but considers it quite central to its system of beliefs. There are very clear statements to this effect. First we will refer to the verse 5:48 in this respect. The verse goes as follows:" Unto every one of you We have appointed a (different) law and way of life. And if Allah had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but (He willed it otherwise) in order to test you by means of what He has given you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto Allah you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ."

This is very seminal statement in favour of religious and legal pluralism which Muslims, specially the Muslim regimes, have not considered seriously. Many classical as well as modern commentators have commented on this significant verse. The most significant and operative part of this verse is "Unto every one of you have We appointed a (different) law and way of life. The term 'every one of you' obviously denotes different communities. Every community - obviously religious or religio-cultural community - has its own law (shir`atan) and its own way of life (minhaj) and it attains its spiritual growth in keeping with this law and way of life of its own. The term shir`ah or shari`ah signifies, literally, "the way to a watering place" (from which men and animals derive the element indispensable to their life), and in the Qur'an to denote a system of law necessary for a community's social and spiritual welfare. The term minhaj on the other hand, denotes an 'open road' that is a way of life. (See Muhammad Asad, The Message of the Qur'an, Gibraltar, 1980, PP-153)

Thus it will be seen that the prophets of Allah sent to different communities (ummah) gave laws and indicated way of life to their people in keeping with their genius and that which could ensure their spiritual and material growth. This is further emphasised in the next part of the verse i.e. "And if Allah had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community'. It was not difficult for Allah to make entire mankind one community. But Allah graced us with pluralism as it adds richness and variety to life. Each community has its own unique way of life, its own customs and tradition, its own law. But these laws or way of life should be such as to ensure growth and enriching of life, howsoever different and unique they might be. Allah does not want to impose one law on all and creates communities rather than community.

Allah has created different communities on purpose: to try and test human beings in what has been given to them (i.e. different scriptures, laws and ways of life). And that test is to live in peace and harmony with each other which is the will of Allah. The differences of laws and ways of life should not become cause of disharmony and differences. What is desirable for human beings is to live with these differences and vie with one another in good deeds.

In the last part of the verse Allah says that unto Him all will return and it is He who "will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ." Thus it is not for human beings to decide for themselves who is right and who is wrong. It will lead to disturbances and breach of peace. Thus it should be left to Allah to decide when they return unto Him. The human beings should only vie one with the other in good deeds. I think the Qur'an is pioneering in this idea. It is the best way to do away with inter-religious and inter-

cultural conflict and to promote acceptance of the 'religious and cultural other' with dignity and grace.

This verse has also another important dimension. It leads to what some scholars like Shah Waliyullah and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad from India have described as the concept of *wahdat-e-Din* i.e. unity of religion. The earlier part of this verse (5:48) says, "And We have revealed to thee the Book with the truth, verifying that which is before it of the Book and a guardian (*muhayman*) over it." This is also very significant pronouncement and most modern in its approach. The Qur'an has thus come to vouchsafe for what was revealed earlier to different communities through their prophets. The *shari`ah*, the law and the way of life may be different as we have discussed above, but the essence of all religions - *Din* - is the same. All religions are based on the revelation from Allah. The Qur'an has come to be guardian of earlier truth revealed through other scriptures.

This is inclusive approach and is very vital for acceptance of the 'religious other'. The laws, the ways of life, may differ and yet *din*, the divine essence, the divine truth, is the same. It is reflected in all religions, in all spiritual traditions and we humans have no right to reject the 'other' as illegitimate, much less, false. Thus it is our human ego which rejects the religious other and not the falsity of other faith traditions. The Qur'an has named several prophets and the list of prophets in the Qur'an is illustrative, not exhaustive. Thus more faith traditions could be included in the list of those mentioned by the Qur'anic commentators. The Sufi saints from India were inclined to include Indian religions also.

The Qur'anic pluralism finds different expressions in different places. The Qur'an does not maintain that there could be only one way of prayer to Allah. There could be more than one. Thus the Qur'an says: "For each community there is direction in which it turns, so vie with one another in good works." (2:148) All commentators from companions of the Prophet down to others interpret this as a reference to the various religious communities and their different modes of 'turning towards God' in worship. Ibn Kathir, in his commentary on this verse, stresses its inner resemblance's to the phrase occurring in 5:48 (discussed above) "Unto every one of you have We appointed a (different) law and way of life".

This verse clearly refers to different directions different religious communities have adopted whereto they turn for prayer. All of them, however, submit to God and pray to Him. The Qur'an conveys that the direction of the prayer, whatever its symbolic value for a religious community, does not represent the essence of the prayer or faith. This is further

corroborated by the Qur'an in the verse 2:177.

This verse also makes a very significant statement: "It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East and the West, but righteousness is the one who believes in Allah, and the Last Day, and the angels and the Book and the prophets, and gives away wealth out of love for Him to the near of kin and the orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask and to set slaves free and keeps up prayer and pays the poor rate; and the performers of their promise when they make a promise, and the patient in distress and affliction and in the time of conflict; and these are they who keep their duty."

Thus the above verse proves beyond any doubt that the real aim of the Qur'an is to produce an ideal human person who is virtuous, is sensitive to others suffering and hence spends of his wealth on the needy, on setting slaves free, taking care of orphans, is true to his word and is patient in times of distress and conflict. And only such persons are truly muttaqun i.e. God conscious and keepers of their duty to Allah. This verse too, needless to say, lends great support to the basic premise of religious pluralism by de-emphasising a particular way of prayer and extolling the importance of human conduct and sensitivity to others suffering and one's own steadfastness in the face of calamities and afflictions.

The Qur'an does not take narrow sectarian view as many theologians tend to do. Its view is very broad humanitarian and its emphasis is not on dogmas but on good deeds. And it strongly condemns evil deeds which harms the society and humanity at large. In this respect also it makes no distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims. Thus the Qur'an says in 4:123: "It will not be in accordance with your vain desires or the vain desires of the people of the Book. Whoever does evil, will be requited for it and will not find for himself besides Allah a friend or a helper." Thus no one, Muslim or the people of the Book, can claim any exception from this iron law of Allah; one who does good will be rewarded and one who does evil will be punished. Elsewhere the Qur'an states, "So he who does an atom's weight of good will see it and he who does an atom's weight of evil will see it." (99:7)

The Qur'an is very particular about freedom of conscience and freedom of conscience is key to pluralism. The Qur'an clearly states that there is no compulsion in religion (2:256) and maintains that all children of Adam are honourable (17:70). It does admit of inter-religious dialogue but with decorum: "And argue not with the People of the Book except by what is best, save such of them, as act unjustly. And Say: We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our God and your God is One, and to Him we

submit." (29:46)

The Qur'an lays great stress on unity of humankind. It says in 2:213, "Mankind is a single nation. So Allah raised prophets as bearers of good news and as warners, and He revealed with them the Book with truth, that it might judge between people concerning that in which they differed. And none but the very people who were given it differed about it after clear arguments had come to them, envying one another. So Allah has guided by His will those who believe to the truth about which they differed."

This whole verse is suffused with the spirit of pluralism and freedom of belief and conscience. According to this verse entire mankind is one but different prophets in their given situations come with revealed scriptures to guide them or warn them and thus, depending on their specific situation, different ways of life emerge. But then people start differing from each other and envying one another instead of respecting each other's specificity and this people get divided. That is not the purpose of divine guidance. Allah guides those who believe to the truth about which they differed.

The theme of oneness of humankind is repeated in the Qur'an in different ways. We are told that all human beings have been "created of a single soul" (4:1); again that they are all descended from the same parents (49:13); still again that they are as it were dwellers in one home, having the same earth as a resting place and the same heaven as a canopy.

Apart from oneness of humankind the Qur'an also lays stress on racial, linguistic and national identities. These identities are projected as signs of God. "And of His signs", the Qur'an says, "And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours. Surely there are signs in this for the learned." (30:22) Thus diversity is projected by the Qur'an as sign of God and hence to be respected. Different identities are for recognition and hence necessary. In the verse 49:13 it is said, "O mankind, surely We have created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may know each other." Thus national and tribal or for that matter other identities are necessary for knowing each other and it should not lead to any conflict. Thus different identities are product of national and tribal diversities and play a useful social role. Thus the Qur'an clearly accepts the legitimacy of diversity.

It also makes it clear quite forcefully that all places of worship should be respected and

protected. The Qur'an states, "And if Allah did not repeal some people by others, cloisters, and churches, and synagogues, and mosques in which Allah's name is much remembered, would have been pulled down." (22:40) It is significant that Qur'an maintains that be it church or synagogue or mosque, Allah's name is much remembered in these places. No single religious place is being privileged in this respect. Thus here too religious pluralism is stressed.

The Prophet of Islam when he migrated from Mecca to Medina found himself in a pluralist situation. There was religious as well as tribal diversity. He not only accepted this diversity but legitimised it by drawing up an agreement with different religious and tribal groups and accorded them, through this agreement, a dignified existence and rights of their own. this agreement is known in history of Islam as Misaq-i-Madina.

It begins thus:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate!

This is writing of Muhammad the prophet between the believers and Muslims of Quraysh and Yathrib (Madina) and those who follow them and are attached to them and who crusade along with them. They are a single community distinct from other people."

This agreement can be called the constitution of Madina and it was definitely a milestone which sought to lay the foundation of a new political and religious culture. What is significant to note in this agreement is that all together - Muslims of Quraysh from Mecca, Muslims of Madina belonging to the tribes of Aws and Khazraj and Jews belonging to different tribes - together constituted a single community - an Ummah. The agreement was also quite democratic in spirit. The Holy Prophet did not claim to be the ruler of this community. The emigrants (Muhajirs) were, in fact, treated as a clan, and the Prophet was their chief, and there were eight other clans with their chiefs. If the Constitution is a good evidence at this point, he was only marked off from other clan chiefs on two counts: firstly that for the group of believers i.e. Muslims he was a prophet and whatever was revealed to him was binding on the believers; secondly, the Constitution states that 'whatever there is anything about which you differ, it is to be referred to God and to Muhammad'. The idea seems that the holy Prophet should act as arbitrator between rival factions and maintain peace in Madina. The Qur'an also describes as one of the functions of the prophet as an arbiter. It says: "And for every nation there is a messenger. So when their messenger comes,

the matter is decided between them with justice, and they are not wronged." (10:48)

It is interesting to note that the eminent Muslim theologians of India represented by Jami'at ul-'Ulama-i-Hind had cited this constitution of Madina drawn up by the holy Prophet in support of their acceptance of composite nationalism. They opposed separate nationalism based on religion advocated by the Muslim League. They argued, citing the Constitution of Madina, that the Prophet had accepted different religious and tribal groups as part of a single community - ummah wahidah. The Medinese society was, thus, a democratic civil society which had tribal, religious and racial diversity.

The modern democratic civil society cannot become a strong stable and prosperous conflict free society unless religious diversity or pluralism is accepted as legitimate way of life. It is unfortunate that most of the Muslim countries do not adhere to this spirit of pluralism and diversity in the Qur'an and Sunnah. The extremists and fundamentalists among the Muslims in these countries attack the spirit of pluralism and want to create a monolithic society.

Many socio-political doctrines which we consider as 'pure Islamic' and worthy of emulation today developed during medieval age when mulukiyat (personal and monarchical power structure) had become all pervasive and the Qur'anic values and Islamic spirit were hardly practiced. There was of course no question of any concept of civil society because the ruler was all powerful and followed his own personal whims or went by compulsions of power rather than the injunctions of the Qur'an. Also the arrogance of power and all pervasive authoritarian atmospheres also influenced for formulation of Islamic political doctrines. These medieval doctrines can hardly have any validity today.

It is for the Islamic political theorists of today to develop new political theories which are in keeping with the Qur'anic injunctions and Sunnah on one hand, and takes the realities of modern world, on the other. There need not be any sharp contradiction between the two. The concept of civil society which respects autonomy of a citizen and his/her religious, cultural and political rights does not, as shown above, in any way, contradictory to the Qur'anic injunctions. Human rights respect the dignity and freedom of conscience of every individual. The Qur'an clearly states that all children of Adam have been honoured (17:70). This of course includes right to live with dignity and to promote one's own religious, cultural and linguistic or ethnic interests.

We must enter the 21st century not with the imitative (taqlidi) mind set but with a creative and critical mind set which, while adhering to the Qur'anic values, enables us to live freer life and life of full dignity while, at the same time, accepting the dignity of the other. The Qur'an, accepted, fourteen hundred years ago, the Christian other and the Jewish other with full dignity and respect for their beliefs. It was later accepted to the Zoroastrians and even Berbers. Many 'ulama and the Sufi saints extended it to the Hindus also.

It is interesting to note that the words 'kafir' and 'mushrik' have definite historical connotation and should be used with great caution and restraint. Unfortunately many Muslims use these terms very loosely and describe every religious other as kafir or mushrik. These being terms of contempt are resented by others. Only those who refuse to accept truth in any form and negate good (ma'ruf) completely and advocate munkar (evil) would qualify as kafirs and those who refuse oneness of God and associate partners with Him will qualify as mushrik. And, it is also important to note, even kafirs and mushriks would have civil rights as long as they do not cause any disturbances in society and maintain peace. The Qur'an has given the kuffar also the right to worship in their own way and have their own beliefs. The freedom of conscience cannot be taken away from any human person, whatever his or her beliefs. Thus it will be seen that Islam does not come in the way of promoting a pluralist civil society ensuring dignity and freedom of conscience to all.

But it has yet to be realised in all Muslim countries. In many Muslim countries like Turkey and Iraq, let alone non-Muslims, even Muslims of other nationalities and ethnic origin like the Kurds are severely persecuted. It is in clear violation of the Qur'anic injunctions, as pointed out above. An Islamic civil society should treat all with equal degree of dignity and accord them equal citizenship rights.