

?How Does Islam Regard Other Religions

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This century has witnessed the growth of a new awareness that mankind must live together, every group interdependent with all the others. The unity of mankind is being felt with increasing intensity around the globe. There are a number of implications regarding the interdependence of Man from Islam's theory of God, its theory of revelation, its theory of Man and its theory of society and each of these in turn carries implication for the place of other faiths in Islam's consideration.

THEORY OF GOD

Islam's insistence on the absolute unit and transcendence of God is an affirmation of God's lordship over all men. To hold God as Creator means that all men are His creatures. Muslims therefore, believe that God has not granted any special status to any person or group. His love, providence, care for and judgement of all men must be one. In Islam, all people, Muslims and non-Muslims, stand to God in identically the same relationship, i.e. they are judged objectively by the same law. This is made clear in the following verses of the Holy Qur'an.

"On that day (the Day of Judgement), men will come forth in sundry bodies so that they may be shown their works. 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." (99:6-8)

THEORY OF REVELATION

In Islam, the Divine Will, the thought or content of the religious and moral imperative is knowable directly through revelation or indirectly through science. Muslims believe that revelation is not a privilege peculiar to Muslims but that the phenomenon or prophecy is common to, and present in every people and nation. The Qur'an says:

"There is no people unto whom we have not sent a prophet warner."

Muslims, therefore, believe that non-Muslims are not underprivileged in this respect although their revelations may have, according to the Islamic perspective, been dissipated, lost or tampered with. Science is an indirect way of learning the Divine Will. Its prerequisites are the senses, intellectual curiosity and the will to research and discovery, the availability of data and communicability of experience, memory and the preservation of knowledge, reason and

understanding or the capacity to grasp synthesis and develop knowledge. None of these are the monopoly of any group.

THEORY OF MAN

Muslims believe that Man is not a fallen being but innocent; that God has created him in the best of forms and endowed him with a purposive, causal efficacy. The Muslim does not look upon the non-Muslim as a fallen, hopeless creature, but as a perfect creature, as a perfect man capable to himself of achieving the highest righteousness. Together with this dignity, Muslims believe that non-Muslims what Islam calls Din al-fitrrh or natural religion the sensus numinis by which Man recognizes God as transcendent and holy and hence worthy of adoration.

"Lift up your faith towards the religious like a hanif. That is the natural religion with which God has endowed all men at their creation, No exception or change befalls God's creation," (30:30)

Muslims believe that Din al-fitrah or religio naturalis is something both Muslims and non-Muslims possess by birth. In other words, din al-fitrah is original religion which Muslims define as Islam. In Islam's view, the historical religions are outgrowths of din al-fitrah containing with them different amounts or degrees of it.

From the Islamic perspective, the differences of the various religion of din al-fitrah are due to accumulations, figurisations, interpretations or transformations of history, i.e., of place, time, culture, leadership and other particular conditions. The Muslim, therefore, respects the adherent of another religion as a carrier of din al-fitrah, the religion of God as well as his own religious tradition as one based on din-al-fitrah.

Islam's discovery of din-al-fitrah and its vision of it as the base of all historical religions is, Muslims believe, a breakthrough of tremendous importance in inter-religious relations. For the first time, it has become possible for an adherent of one religion to tell an adherent of another religion:

"We are both equal members of a universal religious brotherhood. Both our traditional religions are similar for they have both issued from and are based on a common source, the religion of God which He has implanted in both of us equally; din al-fitrah".

"Rather than see how much your religion agrees or disagrees with mine, let us both see how far both our religious traditions agree with din al-fitrah, the original and first religion".

"Say, O people of the book ! Come now to agreement with us, based on a fair principle common to both, namely, that we shall worship none but God. That we shall never associate any other with Him; that we shall never take one another as lords besides God." (3:64)

"Rather than assume that each of our religions is Divine as it stands today, let us both, co-

operate wherever possible, try to trace the historical development of our religions and determine precisely how and when and where each has followed and fulfilled or transcended and deviated from din al-fitrah. "Let us look into our scriptures and other religious texts and try to discover what change has befallen them, or been reflected in them, in history". Islam's breakthrough then is the first call to scholarship in religion, to critical analysis of religious text of the claim of such texts to revelation status. Islam assigns to the confession of faith the value of a condition, only acclaims the good works where and by whomever they are done, it regards them as the only justification in the eyes of God and warns that not an iota of good work or mischief will be lost on the Day of Reckoning.

The non-Muslim, therefore, has the public record of works he has done to justify him in Muslim eyes; to establish him as a man of great piety and saintliness. For in Islam, good deeds earn merit with God regardless of the religious adherence of their author. From the Islamic point of view, moreover, salvation consists of nothing more than such merit as the good works earn. The act of faith is a work which is added and whose inclusion affects the whole. Islamic ethics being totally world affirming, positive and governed by public law, the non-Muslim has as much potential and room for meritorious work as the Muslim.

Muslims believe that it is only Islam that allows its adherents to call non-adherents to the religion than they themselves, and to do so religiously.

PERSUASION, NOT COMPELCTION - THEORY OF SOCIETY

Islam has defined the Will of God, the norms of human conduct and ends of human desire in terms of values which are social. Muslims believe that they must strive to transform this world and mankind into an actualization of the Divine pattern. This cannot be achieved unless mankind is convinced of its moral and utilitarian value and, therefore, the non-Muslim will need to be involved. This can only be achieved voluntarily. Islam lays down very clearly that there must never be any compulsion in religion. The Qur'an laid down the method of persuasion to be used by Muslims when attempting to discuss matters with non-Muslims.

Islam teaches that the majority, no matter how large or overwhelming, have no right to coerce even a single person. Islam recognizes that the non-Muslim is not to be coerced or subversively influenced to conversion, but that he is fully entitled to pursue his non-Muslimness and pass it on to his descendants.

The very survival of the Eastern Churches in Asia, regarded as heretical by the rest of Christendom, is evidence of Islamic tolerance. No religion has preserved the shrines of another in its own base to the same extent as Islam. Muslims are taught that it is their religions

obligation to enforce the observance of the religious law of others as long as the adherents of these religions live in their midst. Muslims believe that Islam's concept of din al-fitrah is the only idea capable of pulling modern man out of his predicament.

FROM THE QURAN

"Religious goodness does not consist in your ritual worship, turning your faces towards the east or towards the west. Rather, it consists in believing in God, in the Day of Judgement, in His angels, Books, and Prophets, as well as in sharing one's wealth, for His sake, with the relative, the orphan, the destitute, the wayfarer; in spending it for the ransom of those who are not free, as well as in observing the prayers, paying the zakat, fulfilling one's contracts and promises, in holding firm in good times and ill times, or under constraint; in being always truthful. These are the truly felicitous." (2:171)

Perhaps the greatest implication of Islam's confession that there is no god but God (with its tacit assumption that everyone has been endowed by God with natural religion-din al-fitrah) is its universalism. All humans are, in Islam's view, potentially God's vicegerents on earth. All are subjects under moral obligation and all the objects of one another's moral action. Obviously the greatest threat to this universalism, and hence to Islam, is particularism, the view that some people are to value their distinction from the rest of humankind more than their communion. Of course humans do differ from each other. But undeniable as the difference may be, the point that Islam makes is that they are irrelevant for measuring a person's worth. A human's creatureliness before God, the ultimate base uniting each person with all humanity, is far more important. To assert the opposite is to divide humankind into separate entities with the danger that an individual will feel that his group is superior to the other and on that basis, take away from all others to give to his own group. Although Islam agrees with the principle of the priority of next of kin, it insists on defining the benefits of society in terms of the well-being of all people.

NO MASTER RACE

Islam rejects therefore all varieties of ethno-centrism which leads to the concept of 'the master race', 'the people of God', 'the chosen of God' who regard others as 'the subject races', 'people of the devil', 'people of inferior gods'.

Islamic universalism holds that all people are entitled by nature to fill membership of any human corporate body, for everyone is at once subject and object of the one and same moral law. The unity of God is inseparable from the unity of His will, which is the moral law.

Under this one law, Islam seeks to rally the whole of humankind on equal terms. It does not hold or tolerate to hold, a doctrine of election. Nobody, according to Islam, has been predestined to any station in this world or the next. The universalism of Islam does not, however, preclude it from differentiating between people on the basis of their moral endeavour and achievement. Such preclusion would be equally contrary to the moral law which assigns

'moral worth' in direct proportion to a person's moral accomplishments.

Indeed, discrimination based on moral worth is obligatory, for this sort of discrimination encourages people to excel in good deeds, which is the purpose of creation itself.

Islam, however, is a missionary religion and missionary zeal is a duty incumbent upon every Muslim. Mission is endemic to Islam as a universal religion for every Muslim wishes that Islam would be the conscious religion of every person. In fact, Muslims believe that Islam was the original religion of everyone but that it has been changed by time and culture into something else. Islam's missionary spirit of da'wah (calling) does not contradict its recognition of all

religions as being similar. Islam invites the adherents of all religions to the task of criticism. According to Prof. Ismail Faruqui, a noted Muslim scholar, no religion is priority ruled out by the Muslim even though Muslims believe that Islam is the truth among many competing claims. A Muslim on meeting some one who worships, for example, an 'x' or 'y' whatever that may be, is not free to call him a pagan or to regard him as condemned by God; rather he must talk with him to discover what his relation is, in the belief that God must have sent a prophet to him. Prof Ismail Faruqui states that believing that God, in His mercy, must have told him something, the Muslim meets with the non-Muslim with a view to being instructed about his faith, and then the Muslim invites the non-Muslim to research his own tradition in order to

discover the essential message that God has given him.

And, if in relation to that central revealed core, it turns out that the rest of the beliefs and practices of that religion as developed through history have been distorted, that would be an empirical discovery for the Muslim. But Muslims must never make a decision which condemns a man because he does not believe in 'my God, my way'. However, if it is found that another man's religion has been corrupted and falsified beyond recognition, then the Muslim has a duty to tell the non-Muslim about the Qur'an, which Muslims believe to be God's final revelation and

to present it to him as rational truth and invite him to consider it.

From the Islamic point of view, to say that the adherents of other religions are equal members of a universal religious brotherhood because all religions are based on a common source, does

not mean that all religions are the same or that Islam is trying to syncretise different faiths.

Muslims accept other religions as close and believe that true tolerance means permitting every

adherent of a religion to live his life in accordance with the religious values and traditions no matter how incorrect they may seem from the Islamic point of view. It is not tolerance to try to pretend that differences do not exist. For example, when presented with two objects one of which is black and the other white, it is not tolerance to say that both are grey. Neither is it tolerance to say that one particular religion is the same as another religion.

To say that religions with different beliefs, dogma and practices are the same is either hypocrisy or stupidity, and neither hypocrisy nor stupidity can be the basis of tolerance.

For Muslims tolerance lies in the willingness to accept difference and acknowledge the right of others not only to believe differently but do order their lives according to that belief. Further, to say that all religions are the same or that they are equal, is neither logical nor rational because it would mean the juxtaposition in consciousness of contrary claims to the truth without the demand for a solution of their contradiction.

TRUE TOLERANCE

By avoiding all these pitfalls and shortcomings through its concept of din al-fitrah as the base of all historical religions, Islamic da'wah invites the non-Muslim to examine his religion, to analyse his religious texts and see how close or how far his religion is from din al-fitrah which, for Muslims, is the criterion for determining truth. With the rising tide of Islamic awareness in the world and calls by Muslims for the implementation of Islamic law (the Shar'ah), some quarters have voiced concern about the effect on non- Muslims.

It would, however, be a wrong presumption to assume that under Islamic law non-Muslims would lose their rights and suffer. In fact there are clear guidelines in the Qur'an and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.a.), which speak of straightening and cementing relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens. The basic foundation of the relationship is found in the Qur'an:

"God does not forbid you to act considerately or to act fairly towards those who have never fought you over religion nor have evicted you from your homes. God loves the fair minded. God only forbids you to be friendly with those who have fought you over religion and evicted you from your homes and who helped others in your eviction. Those who befriend them are wrongdoers." (60:8-9)

The words 'does not forbid you', are in fact, in this context positive command ordering Muslims to deal with non-Muslims kindly and justly unless they are clearly out to destroy the Muslims. The best example of such treatment can be seen from the life of Prophet Muhammad

(s.a.w.a.) himself who ordered the Muslim convert Asmah Abubakr to visit her non-Muslim mother and to treat her well as Asmah was under the misguided notion that she should not be friendly with her (the mother) after she had converted to Islam.

PROTECTION

The fundamental rights of non-Muslims, according to the Shari'ah, are their protection from all external threats, their protection from internal tyranny and persecution and their right to their own personal law according to the teachings of their own religion.

The protection from external threats is the normal duty of any state. It is the duty of the head of state and those in authority to look after the interests of all the citizens. Of more relevance to the contemporary scene is the question of the rights of non-Muslim citizens under the Shari'ah. The most important protection to be accorded to non-Muslim citizens is protection from internal high-handedness, persecution, tyranny and injustice. To assault, injure or abuse a non-Muslim or even to backbite him is just as immoral as it is to do such things in respect of a

Muslim.

The Muslims are duty-bound to spare their hands and tongues from hurting the non-Muslim citizens. They must not keep enmity or hatred against them. Since Muslims believe that God hates tyrants and punishes them both in this world and the next, Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.a.) himself warned Muslims against any high-handedness towards the non-Muslim citizens (called dhimmi in Arabic) - e.g. "One who hurts dhimmi hurts me, hurts God. also whosoever I am a complainant I shall ask for his right on the Day of Resurrection."

In Islam all humans are equal and even if one does not choose to follow the religion of Islam he has every right to live in peace and tranquility in a Muslim country as an honored citizen with all rights and privileges. According to the teachings of the Qur'an neither the religion of Islam nor the Shari'ah can be forced on anyone against his will. The main emphasis of the Shari'ah is on the sanctity of the concept of legal due process to guarantee the life, liberty, property and honor of every human being, Muslim and non-Muslim. Therefore Islamic law is fair to all.

Muslims believe that the guarantees of the Shari'ah go far beyond the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Shari'ah guarantees freedom of opinion and the right to advocate one's idea in public both in speech and writing. The Shari'ah guarantees the inviolability of a citizen's home, private life and honor and prohibits the authorities from doing anything against this fundamental guarantee. Because the right to express one's opinion is meaningless (and perhaps even dangerous) without sound knowledge, Islamic makes it the citizen's right and the Government's duty to have a system of, education which would make knowledge freely

accessible to every man and woman in the country.

PROGRESS

A Muslim government also is responsible, according to the Shari'ah, to provide its citizens with such economic facilities as are necessary for the maintenance of human happiness and dignity. Therefore the affairs of the community must be arranged in such a way that every individual man and woman, Muslim and non-Muslim, shall enjoy that minimum of material well-being without which there can be no human dignity, no real freedom, and in the last resort no spiritual progress. This does not mean that the state should or ever could, ensure carefree

living from its citizens. It does mean, however, that every citizen has:

- a) The right to productive and remunerative work while of working age and in good health.
- b) Training at the expense of the State, if necessary, for such productive work.
- c) Free and efficient health services in case of illness.
- d) Provision by the state of adequate nourishment, clothing and shelter in cases of disability resulting from illness, widowhood, unemployment due to circumstances beyond individual's control, old-age or under-age.

JUSTICE

The socio-political scheme of Islam aims at justice for Muslim and non-Muslim alike and the desire of Muslims to establish the Shari'ah is driven by moral considerations. The Qur'an makes it obligatory to provide justice for all people and under the Shari'ah. Non-Muslims enjoy freedom of religion and religious worship, the freedom to maintain their own languages and customs and open their own schools, their right of life, honor, privacy and free movement. The Islamic Shari'ah also guarantees freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention, the right of peaceful assembly and association, freedom of expression and association and political freedom. The right of non-Muslims to property, freedom to practice any profession or trade and to assistance from the public treasury of the Muslims, if they are in need, are all guaranteed.

All personal matters of non-Muslims are to be decided in accordance with their own personal law. The corresponding laws of the Shari'ah are not to be enforced on them. If something is forbidden to Muslims but allowed in their religion then they will have the right to use that thing and the courts in the country will decide their cases in the light of their own personal law. This has been the rule of all Muslim governments since the time of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.a.). The non-Muslims are given the fullest freedom in the performance of their religious rites and

communal festivals. Once Imam Ali (as) noticed an old non-Muslim begging and he fixed a pension for him, saying: "By God it is undoubtedly not just that we derive benefit from a person in the prime of his youth but leave him to beg in the streets when he is stricken with old-age."

The Imam also fixed pension for all the aged and invalid non-Muslims.

PENAL CODE

Every non-Muslim enjoys security and equal justice under the Shari'ah. Under the Shari'ah no distinction of race, religion, citizenship, economic or social status or personal capabilities can ever obliterate the rights of a non-Muslim. Muslims and non-Muslims are to be treated as equal before the law. The penal laws of Islam are the same as for the Muslims and the non-Muslims - although some according to other schools of thought, exempt the non-Muslims from the Islamic punishment for adultery and they state that such cases should be referred to

the offender's co-religionists.

The penal laws of Islam are only a small part of the Shari'ah which is primarily concerned, as can be seen from the above, with social and economic justice. The penal laws of Islam are concerned with theft, murder, highway robbery, rebellion and accusations of adultery. The laws concerning the other matters are too detailed to discuss here but the aim is prevention but only on clear evidence. The penalties often mentioned for such offences are, as has been mentioned, the maximum penalty. Islam imposes a rigid code of punishment for the microscopic minority of hard-core criminals to ensure an atmosphere of peace and security for

.the rest of the society