

# Harmony in a Multi-religious Society: an Islamic view

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Historically speaking, human beings have now lived for centuries in multi-religious or multi-ethnic societies. It is very difficult to ensure uniformity of faith or ethnicity in a human society, much less so in a modern industrial one with its own migratory inducements and shifting patterns. Faith as an identity, not as an ideology, has been one of the most powerful factors responsible for much bloodshed in modern history, particularly in the third world countries. Most of the third world countries are multi-religious and multi-ethnic, and these cleavages have often caused grave situations of violence and bloodshed.

India saw a great bloodbath in 1947 when it got divided apparently on religious lines. More than a million people were slaughtered then and thousands continue to be killed even now manifestly on account of religious differences. Similarly, the ethnic conflict in far-away Southern Africa and next-door neighbour Sri Lanka is rocking our conscience. Hundreds of innocent persons are getting killed in these ethnic conflicts. It is, therefore, necessary to understand not only the political and socio-economic causes of this conflict but also its religious and ideological dimensions. If communal violence is to be successfully combated it is necessary to grapple with the religious aspect of the problem too.

However, before we proceed further it is important to grasp the distinction between faith as an identity and faith as an ideology. In medieval society it was faith as an ideology, with its ritualistic orientation, which held sway, but in the emergent modern industrial societies of the third world it is faith as an identity which has assumed increasing significance in socio-political life. In these third world societies faith as an identity ensures a greater degree of political and socio-economic power as well as a greater degree of the communal solidarity which is badly needed in the alienating modern societies. Thus faith as an identity has come to play an ever greater role in our lives.

The distinction between faith as an ideology and faith as an identity may be quite clear to social scientists and discerning minds, but this distinction gets blurred in the minds of common people. Moreover, when faith as an identity assumes greater importance, a few ideologues too try to make hay in its sunshine. Therefore it is necessary to throw some light on faith as an ideology before we come to terms with faith as an identity. We will, in this article, first discuss from the ideological point of view the Islamic position on communal harmony in a multi-religious society.

## II

It has often been assumed that Islam is intolerant of other faiths and tends to encourage communal discord. Many verses from the Qur'an shorn of their situational context or understanding are cited to substantiate this point of view. It is also assumed, again without much contextual understanding, that it is a highly politicised religion: so much so that it is inseparable from politics. These powerful myths hold sway over the Muslim community as well as over onlookers. The Islamic position on these issues is in fact quite different from this.

To live amicably among the followers of different faiths and ethnic and cultural groups is a very challenging task. All sorts of tensions, ideological and political and socio-economic, keep on arising. Nevertheless it is a challenge we are very often required to face. The Qur'an, it is interesting to note, is well aware of this challenge and requires of its followers to face it successfully. It is in fact described as their 'test'. First it would be quite pertinent to quote the verse in full:

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 with one another in virtuous deeds.

This is one of the most significant verses in the Qur'an on communal amity in the midst of diversity of faiths, cultures, races, and languages. First, Allah says that for everyone He has appointed a law and a way, which means He approves of diversity of religions, faiths and way of life. Further, a much more significant statement has been made, i.e. if Allah so pleased He would have made all a single people ("ummatan wahidatan") without diversity of ways and laws. But—and it is important to note—He decided to try them, by giving diverse ways, whether they can live in amity. Thus the Qur'an emphasises the unity of mankind but not its uniformity. Uniformity is not in keeping with the divine wisdom, unity is. This verse also goes on to say that what really matters in doing virtuous deeds. It is desirable to compete with each other in virtuous deeds, not in asserting superiority of one's faith, culture, creed or race.

It is in fact this verse which led Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a noted commentator on the Qur'an, to propound the concept of separateness of "din" and "shariah". According to Azad "shariah" may differ from people to people, depending on time and place and modes of living in differing conditions, but "din", which is essence of religion or faith, is one among all. The Qur'an, in other words, emphasises non-particularism in matters of religion and particularism in matters pertaining to "shariah". Perhaps it is the most progressive attitude one can take in this matter.

In another verse the Qur'an gives yet another reason for humankind having been divided into different tribes and nationalities. It says:

O mankind, surely we have created you from a male and a female, and made you tribes and nationalities ("shu'uban") that you may recognise each other. Surely the noblest of you with Allah is the most dutiful of you.

Thus it would be seen from the above verse that division into different tribes, nationalities and similar other groups is for the sake of identity, not for superiority, much less for promoting any conflict or hostility. Also, nearest and dearest to Allah is one who excels in duties, or good deeds. Thus the Qur'an accepts the psychological significance of identity (the question of ethnic identity has assumed increased importance in our modern society, but this is not something to discuss here). However, the Qur'an does not allow it to be a symbol of superiority. It is only nobility of deeds which entitles one to be proud, and nobility of deeds includes all life-promoting processes. The doctrine of particularism by way of birth is recognised but particularism is not allowed to become a distinct mark of superiority. Needless to say, such an approach is absolutely essential for promoting harmony in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society.

Another important condition for harmony is equal respect for all religious as well as for all ethnic groups. The Qur'an recognises the importance of this fundamental approach for harmony in a multi-religious society:

Say: We believe in Allah and in that which has been revealed to us, and in that which was revealed to Abraham, and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and in that which was given to the prophets from their Lord, we do not make distinction between any of them and to Him do we submit.

Thus it is incumbent on all Muslims to believe in all other prophets and not only this but also not to make any distinction between them, in other words to hold all of them in equal respect. There is another side of this. One people or one group should not ridicule the other people or other group. Such an attitude can lead to serious breach of mutual harmony. The Qur'an says:

O you who believe, let not people laugh at people perchance they may be better than they; nor let women (laugh) at women, perchance they may be better than they. Neither find fault with your own people, not call one another by nick-names.

One religious group often ridicules the beliefs of another religious group and calls it by nick-names, leading to violent conflict. The Qur'an therefore, in the interest of harmony and mutual respect, warns the believers not to indulge in such mud-slinging. In the same spirit they have been forbidden to abuse those who worship other than Allah, as it would invite sharp retaliation. The relevant verse reads:

And abuse not those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest,

exceeding the limits, they abuse Allah through ignorance.

Thus to every people have we made their deeds fair-seeming.

Thus only those deeds of a people would be construed as fair-seeming which manifest themselves in restrained interaction even with hostile religious groups. Only such a restraint is worthy of believing people. Inter-religious harmony, according to this verse, is more precious than one's enthusiasm in believing in Allah. This is another cornerstone of policy of religious harmony as propounded by the holy Qur'an.

Related to this doctrine is the doctrine of voluntary acceptance or rejection of religion:

There is no compulsion in religion. ... The Truth is from your Lord, so let him who wishes believe and let him who wishes disbelieve.

The same theme is repeated in the following words:

Indeed there have come to you clear proofs from your Lord: whoever will therefore see, it is for the good of his own soul, and whoever will disbelieve, it shall be against himself.

The Qur'an also states: 'For you is your faith; for me is my faith.'

It is not difficult to see there cannot be harmony between various peoples or religious groups if, apart from mutual respect, there is no sense of justice. The sense of justice should not be marred even if there is active hostility between them. It is only the sense of justice which would restore amity and confidence. The Qur'an thus says:

... and let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably. Be just; that is nearer the observance of duty.

This is the most difficult condition to fulfil; in fact it is lack of concern for justice that goes on reinforcing the sense of hostility between two religions, national or ethnic groups. It would not be wrong, though a bit oversimplified, to maintain that India would not have been partitioned if this sense of justice had prevailed over that of hostility. However, that was not to be and we paid the price.

The Qur'an also takes a very sober view regarding all not turning to the faith who are being preached to by the Prophet. The Qur'an tries to allay the subjective anxiety of the Prophet in these words:

And if the Lord had pleased, all those in the earth would have turned faithful, all of them. Wilt thou then force men till they are believers?

Thus it is Allah's pleasure that all should not turn to one faith. Nor can one force all of them to do so.

It is thus for people to promote inter-faith dialogue, inter-faith harmony, rather than to convert all to one faith. It is the only course left for us. It would be sheer defiance of the Qur'anic injunction and common sense to set about converting everyone to the Islamic faith; in contrast, it would be honouring Allah's wish to promote inter-communal harmony.

That this is Allah's desire is made abundantly clear from the

following Qur'anic verse:

For every nation we appoint acts of devotion, which they observe, so let them not dispute with thee in the matter and call to thy Lord.

As Allah has appointed different ways of devotion for different nations there is no need to dispute about this. And those who are patient and fight evil with what is good will be doubly rewarded:

These will be rewarded twice, because they are steadfast, and repelled evil with good and spent out of what we have given them.

Thus evil has to be repelled with good and hence aggression in matters of faith does not help, it aggravates the problem.

Also one has to avoid mischief at any cost. Allah does not love those who indulge in mischief, be it in any name:

... and do good (to others) as Allah has done good to thee, and seek not to make mischief in the land. Surely Allah loves not the mischief-makers.

All these verses are clear proof of the fact that the Qur'an does not only discourage force and compulsion in the matter of faith; it also encourages diversity of faiths and construes this diversity as a challenge and a test for peaceful coexistence. Thus the Qur'anic teachings become highly relevant to our multi-religious society, which had adopted secularism as the anchor-sheet of its policy. It would be in the true interest of communal harmony if the state did in reality keep equal distance from all religions and the people showed equal respect to all. Many of India's problems stem from the fact that in reality neither the state maintains equal distance from all religions nor do the people show equal respect for all.

### III

Faith, as pointed out at the outset, has two aspects: ideological, but also psychological, i.e. of identity. So far we have discussed the question from the ideological point of view as stated in the Qur'an. We now propose to throw light on this question from the viewpoint of identity.

As far as India is concerned, it is not the practice of religion that causes acute problems but the assertion of religious identity—though, of course, assertion of religious identity manifests itself also through the practice of certain rituals, and this aspect must not be underrated. And assertion of religious identity is more often for non-religious rather than for religious purposes. In a democratic country like that of India, where votes and numbers count, such an assertion provides a religious community with an important leverage. The political and religious élite within the community promote this sense of religious identity more and more aggressively. Such an attitude starts an unhealthy competition between rival communities for assertion of their respective identities,

leading to several communal strains.

Of late this trend has acquired new respectability, and the élite of both the major communities—the Hindu as well as the Muslim—are fully exploiting it. The aggressive assertion of Hinduism by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad after the Meenakshipuram conversions and the taking out of Rath Yatra in the name of Ekatmata Yagna, and equally aggressive assertion of Islamic identity by the Muslim Personal Law Board and Tahaffuz-e-shariah Committee (Protection of Shariah Committee) after the Supreme Court Judgement in the Shah Bano Maintenance case, are the most interesting examples. Both the campaigns, it may be noted, are politically and not religiously motivated, whatever their apparent pretensions.

In a modern democratic polity such an assertion of communal identity, whatever the consequent problems, is in a way inevitable. It is a universal phenomenon. Both developing and developed countries are experiencing it. Nor is it confined to our era alone (though in our times it has acquired certain unique features and political overtones). Such an assertion was prevalent in the medieval period also. Ibn Khaldun's theory of "asabiyah" (groupism) is nothing but assertion of tribal identity.

The assertion of communal identity certainly acquires a sharper edge in a democratic society as such a society gives more place to one's rights not only to profess and practise one's religion but also to have a due share of political power as well as a share in the country's economic development. In a democratic society communal polarisation greatly helps in the fight for the perceived share of power and economic development, and this fight often leads to unmanageable communal conflict. Often closely related communities also get communally polarised on such issues and violently attack each other. The Hindu-Sikh conflict falls into this latter category.

Another instance of violent conflict between closely connected communities is that of the conflict between the Shi'ites and Sunnis both in India and Pakistan. Violence often breaks out between these communities in Lucknow in India and Karachi in Pakistan. Such clashes have frequently occurred in Karachi recently. Recently even Pathans and Bihar Muslims, both predominantly Sunni, fought against each other in Karachi, more than 50 Pathans being killed. Purely secular issues were involved.

Thus we see the urgent need for distinguishing carefully between faith as an identity and faith as an ideology, although both aspects are closely interrelated. In a modern secular society the conflict often breaks out not on account of faith as an ideology but on account of faith as an instrument of communal identity, and the conflict becomes sharper if the perceived injustice is greater. It is for this reason that it is often observed that such conflicts are actively led by secular rather than religious élites of the communities involved, although the involvement of the latter is

not completely ruled out. The whole movement for Pakistan was led by secular élites of the Muslim community.

The Qur'an, therefore, rightly emphasises that one must be just even to one's own enemy and enmity with a community should not lead to perpetration of injustice against it. We have already quoted the relevant Qur'anic verse in this respect. Even if there is active hostility, its edge can be considerably blunted if one of the communities shows the generosity of being just with the other, for injustice is the root cause of such conflicts. Communal prejudices act as powerful vehicle and emotional tool, but these are not the root causes, as they are often perceived.

#### IV

Is the communal conflict avoidable? No social conflict is unavoidable and inevitable. Yet the whole of human history is full of such conflicts. Why? Every society has its quota of vested interests, political, religious, or socio-economic. Conflict situations are either created or taken advantage of by these interests. When their hold becomes precarious they tend to provoke such divisive conflicts and bring about communal polarisation. This not only guarantees their leadership, but also enables them to control socio-economic resources.

There is basically nothing wrong with communal identities. On the contrary, such identities can play a creative role, especially in democratic societies. A true democratic society is supposed to promote full flowering of all communities, their languages and their cultures, and this objective can be achieved only if society's members take pride in their religious, linguistic and cultural identity. It would be in fact quite wrong to demand obliteration of different identities in the name of secularism. Such a demand can only lead to fascistic tendencies in the society.

However, one should note that the matter is a great deal more complex than many imagine. Encouraging distinct identities can also lead to divisive tendencies, that will be taken advantage of by vested interests as pointed out above. Sense of identity has both creative and divisive aspects.

Each religio-cultural complex has its genius which enriches human civilisation in its own way. It is therefore patently wrong to demand assimilation of all cultures into one. Islam and Muslims have contributed a great deal to Indian culture and in turn have been profoundly influenced by it. They have thus developed a unique identity which is neither purely Arabic-Islamic nor purely Indian. They are justly proud of this composite identity and would like to retain it. It is also interesting to note that Muslim personal law has become of the symbols of this identity, and hence any suggestion of change or interference arouses strong resentment.

Minorities, it has been noticed, are far more sensitive about the question of identity, and for understandable reasons. They are more

apprehensive of their religion and culture, and vested interests that wish to perpetuate the status quo take advantage of this sensitivity and bring about communal polarisation to oppose any change. This, in India, is what we have been witnessing in the Shah Bano case. The Supreme Court judgement is being exploited to the full by religious as well as political vested interests among the Muslims. No doubt personal law is (as has been said) an integral part of Muslim identity, and its obliteration would be justly resented. However, that does not mean no change is called for and that all misuses should be allowed in its name. It is high time serious thought was given to bringing about necessary changes in keeping with the true spirit of the Qur'an. A creative and progressive approach is highly necessary. Any attempt at meaningful change is being denounced as anti-Islamic. But, as was pointed out early in this article, the Shariah is neither divine nor immutable. It is as much based on human opinion ("rai", "qiyas") as on divine injunctions contained in the Qur'an. Whereas the latter is immutable, the former is certainly not. It is mutable to the extent that it is based on human opinion, as has been recognised by eminent Islamic thinkers like Muhammad 'Abdu-khu of Egypt, Sir Syed, Justice Amir Ali, and Iqbal.

Despite these dangers faith as an identity has to be respected, even encouraged, while one is simultaneously struggling for meaningful change. Life is full of dilemma, and this particular dilemma will have to be squarely faced. It becomes more acute in a secular, democratic society comprising numerous religious groups. In such a society, in order to protect and promote communal harmony on the one hand and to respect overall norms of secular, democratic society on the other, one has to concede something in order to gain something more meaningful. This might often lead to tensions but such tensions can be creative. Purity of faith as demanded by ideologues has never been historically practised, not even in the earlier era of Islam—empirical reality even then influenced it. Stress on purity of faith in a modern democratic and secular society can lead to impossible situations. Pragmatic adjustments are called for if we are to pass the test of successfully facing the challenge of multi-religious society, as required of the faithful by the Qur'an.