

Islam And Pluralism In The Modern Muslim State

Pervez Hoodbhoy

DEFINITION: Pluralism in its broadest sense refers to the belief that a diversity of beliefs and practices should be accommodated within a society with equal citizenship rights. But in this talk pluralism shall refer to religious pluralism rather than other kinds of pluralism such as cultural, political or ethnic.

I shall further understand religious pluralism to mean that worldview according to which one's religion is not the sole source of truth, and thus that at least some truths and true values exist in other religions. As such it must be distinguished from toleration, which allows only for coexistence. We know that there exist exclusivist religions which insist on their divinely revealed truth as the only real truth with all others being false. Examples abound in the history of Christianity, where Catholics and Protestants battled out their theological differences in the pre-Enlightenment era.

Religious pluralism may be further disaggregated into:

- 1) *inter-religious* pluralism, which relates to other religions
- 2) *intra-religious* pluralism, which relates to sects within the same religion

DOES ISLAM SANCTION RELIGIOUS PLURALISM?

- *Intra-religious pluralism* is certainly consistent with Islam and the Qu'ran – at least in principle. No Muslim sects are defined in the Qu'ran because, as is well known, the division into Sunni and Shia sects came about roughly 25 years after the death of the Holy Prophet and was occasioned by the issue of succession to the caliphate. Muslims can therefore legitimately argue that there is no room for sectarian conflict in pristine Islam. Hence *intra-religious* pluralism can be woven into the legislation of an Islamic state. Doing so in practice has turned out to be difficult and will be commented upon later.
- *Inter-religious pluralism* is more complicated. Since Islam does not have a centralized authority, there cannot be one answer. But I will argue that the accurate answer is twofold. Dogmatically and ideologically, it appears that Islam does not sanction religious pluralism. The injunction *la ikraha fi-al-din* (there is no compulsion in religion) and *lakum dinukum, wa liya din* (to each his own faith) are often quoted as proof that Islam supports pluralism. Modernist Muslims quote this to prove that Islam can coexist with a secular sphere and that Islam is a belief system that can combine with a any political order that you like.
- However, the matter cannot be considered resolved because if Islam does permit religious freedom then an individual who is born a Muslim, or has converted to Islam, should be allowed to leave the religion. But, according to

the hadith, this amounts to *irtidad* (apostasy) for which a majority of scholars agree the penalty is death.

- As a faith, Islam is a set of immutable principles that does not need compatibility with anything other than itself. As such, it is the business of Islam to reject and combat pluralism and secularism to the very end. Let me identify notions within the Faith that negate pluralism: *jizya*, *zimmi*, and *but-shikinee* (destruction of idols). *Jizya* literally means penalty. It is a protection tax levied on non-Muslims (*zimmis*) living under Islamic regimes affirming that their legal status is not that of a full citizen.
- Maulana Abul Ala Mawdudi, a sub-continental religious aa'lim whose influence extends deep into the Middle East, states that "*the acceptance of the Jizya establishes the sanctity of their lives and property, and thereafter neither the Islamic state, nor the Muslim public have any right to violate their property, honor or liberty.*"

Mawdudi lauds the fact that *jizya* is a symbol of humiliation and submission because *zimmis* should not be regarded as full-fledged citizens of the Islamic state even if they are natives to the country. *Zimmis* are not allowed to build new churches, temples, or synagogues. They are allowed to renovate old churches or houses of worship provided they do not add any new construction. "Old churches" are those which existed prior to Islamic conquests and are included in a peace accord by Muslims. Construction of any church, temple, or synagogue in the Arab Peninsula (Saudi Arabia) is prohibited. It is the land of the Prophet and only Islam should prevail there. Yet, Muslims, if they wish, are permitted to demolish all non-Muslim houses of worship in any land they conquer.

Mawdudi, who is a Hanifite, nevertheless expresses a more generous opinion toward Christians than the Deobandis and Salafis. He says:

In their own towns and cities zimmis are allowed to do so (practice their religion) with the fullest freedom. In purely Muslim areas, however, an Islamic government has full discretion to put such restrictions on their practices as it deems necessary.

As a monotheistic religion, Islam has little tolerance for idol-worship. *But-shikinee* is considered mandatory for Muslims. Idols include statues (the Golden Calf in particular), persons (including Jesus), gods other than Allah as well as Jinns and Satan. The Qur'an states:

"Make war on them until idolatry shall cease and God's religion shall reign supreme." (Surah 8:36-)

Not surprisingly, the destruction in 1024 of idols in the Somnath Temple in Gujrat made Mahmud Ghazni a hero for many Muslims on the Indian subcontinent. His achievement is powerfully eulogized by popular 20th century Muslim writers like

Nasim Hijazi. But Hindus bitterly resent the destruction of their temples by the many Muslim raiders from Arabia. The Somnath destruction was used by Hindu fundamentalists as their justification for destroying the Babri mosque in 1992. Thousands of Muslims were killed in the subsequent riots. Idol destruction continues in modern times: Afghanistan's Taliban regime destroyed the 2000 year old Buddhas of Bamyān. Condemnation from the Muslim world was sparse.

IS INTER-RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IMPOSSIBLE IN ISLAM?

There are so many passages in the Qur'an that are harsh in regard to idolatry that reading them, one is almost forced to the conclusion that Islam is committed to perpetual war against Hinduism and Buddhism. However, at the risk of being dismissed as apologists, some important Muslim scholars have escaped this stark conclusion.

The modernist logic is exemplified by the Islamic scholar, Fazal-ur-Rahman. He insists that the "*asbab al-nuzul*" (the historical circumstances surrounding a specific revelation) should be used to examine any particular Qur'anic verse. Thus, "historical Islam and normative Islam" are to be separated. He states that the multitude of Qur'anic revelations took place "in, although not merely for, a given historical context". Muslims must recognize the essential feature in the revelation which is meant not only for the specific context in which it was revealed but is intended by the Creator to "outflow through and beyond that given context of history". He says that Qur'an must be resurrected from the accumulated debris of tradition, precedents, and culture of the past millennium.

Fazal-ur-Rahman summarizes his methodology as follows: "In building any genuine and viable Islamic set of laws and institutions, there has to be a two fold movement: First one must move from the concrete case treatments of the Quran—taking the necessary and relevant social conditions of that time into account—to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges. Second, from this general level there must be a movement back to specific legislation, taking into account the necessary and relevant conditions now, obtaining."

From this point of view slavery, polygamy, *jizya*, *zimmi*, and *but-shikinee* are all anachronisms that made sense only around the time of the Prophet. Such arguments are used for softening the Islamic penal code such as the death penalty for apostasy or stoning to death for adultery.

Rahman's views are similar to those of other liberal Muslim thinkers like Syed Ameer Ali, Abul Kalam Azad, Asaf Ali Fyzee, Taha Hussain, and other. But do they constitute the "correct" Islam or mere apologia? Reversing the earlier trend towards increasing acceptance of modernity, a majority of Muslims are now

moving towards literalists and anti-pluralists like Syed Maududi, Syed Qutb, Hassan Al-Banna, and Ayatollah Khomeini.

THE MUSLIM HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

Although textually and formally Islam may not appear to permit any real degree of integration of non-Muslims into a Muslim society, Muslims have frequently lived together peacefully with other religious communities. This indicates a dichotomy between Faith and Practice, with Practice being more accommodating of pluralism than the Faith. Indeed, Muslims have responded to widely differing environments and rapidly shifting historical circumstances, proving themselves highly compatible with all the major types of polities and varied forms of social and economic organization. Islam as a world-historical religion has unquestionably succeeded in implanting itself in a variety of societies and cultures, from the tribal-nomadic to the centralized bureaucratic to the feudal-agrarian to the mercantile-financial to the capitalist-industrial.

There are numerous examples:

- The most spectacular and most often quoted example is that of Moorish Spain. Between 711 and 1492 a unique civilization existed. A melding of Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions created its culture. Each group contributed its best, thrived and prospered, while maintaining its separate religious tradition. Churches, synagogues and mosques were open to worshippers; those who were atheists coexisted with believers. Perhaps the earliest example of a political culture where church and state were separate. Moorish Spain was different from other Muslim civilizations in Arab or Persian lands because of the coexistence of different faiths. Rightly so it is considered an epitome of a state based on universal religious principles, accommodating and accepting citizens irrespective of their faith.
- The great Moghul emperor, Akbar-i-Azam (b. 1542), was a Sunni Hanafi Muslim who is considered the symbol of religious syncretism and adaptation. From the 15th century, a number of rulers in various parts of India had adopted a more liberal policy of religious tolerance, attempting to foster communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims. These sentiments were further encouraged by the teachings of popular saints like Guru Nanak, Kabir and Chaitanya, the verses of the Persian poet Hafiz which advocated human sympathy and a liberal outlook. One of Akbar's first actions after gaining actual control of the administration was the abolition of *jizya*. Akbar met Portuguese Jesuit priests and sent an ambassador to Goa, requesting them to send two missionaries to his court so that he could understand Christian doctrines better.

- Muslim societies have a long tradition of charismatic Sufi masters like Mansur al-Hallaj and Jalaludin Rumi who invested in the concept of subjugating the self (*jihad bi nafsih*) to the service of the Creator and His creation. Allah, they argued, must be worshiped not out of duty or fear but because he loved his creation and was loveable. Many dedicated their lives to the service of the weak and needy. In searching for that divine love, Sufi Muslims pray at shrines, venerate local saints, sing, and dance themselves into ecstatic oblivion. In India, Sufi saints continue to be revered by Muslims and Hindus alike.

PLURALISM IN MUSLIM STATES TODAY

As religious fervour grips Muslim societies around the world, there is a perceptible move away from pluralism. Non-Muslims, as well as marginalized Muslim sects, who had once lived in peace are now systematically intimidated and terrorized in many Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and recently Indonesia as well.

Pakistan, in particular, has changed much over the last 3-4 decades. It is no longer the fairly open, liberal, and tolerant culture that it once was. Mobs have rampaged through Christian neighborhoods (Shantinagar, Gojra) and burnt hundreds of homes. Hindus have been abducted, forced to pay *jizya*, and terrified into withdrawing subsequent complaints. Rather than live life on the margins, good fractions of Pakistan's Christian, Hindu, Ahmadi, and Parsi communities have chosen to emigrate.

Pakistan's blasphemy law 295-C is perhaps the most draconian and threatening weapon that is used against its religious minorities. It prescribes death as the minimum penalty for any offence against the Holy Prophet, with the nature of the offence being unspecified and one which cannot be repeated in court lest that itself qualify as blasphemy. The governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, was murdered by his own security guard for attempting to save the life of a poor peasant Christian woman accused of blasphemy and for criticizing this law. His murderer is now a public hero.

The clear cost of doing away with inter-religious pluralism has been a diminution of intra-religious pluralism. The list of what may be considered religious minorities has steadily expanded. In Pakistan's early years, Hindus, Christians and Parsis were the minorities. The Ahmadis were added on 1974, and several small communities – Ismailis and Zikris in particular – have made their way to the list. This has expanded further to Shias, and now to the Sunni Barelvis as well. Many major Barelvi shrines in Pakistan have been attacked by suicide bombers in recent years. A shrine is attacked almost every other week in spite of precautionary measures.

Shrines and dargahs such as that of Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi or Data Darbar in Lahore, are experiencing a precipitous decline in the number of devotees. The “soft Islam” of Sufis and saints is losing out against “hard Islam”.

Hard and soft Islam have long competed against the other. *Wahabism*, which originated in the 18th century, started as a reaction to Shia’ism and Sufism. In its early years, it succeeded in destroying all shrines, together with priceless historical monuments and relics from the early days of Islam. Muslims of the *Deobandi-Salafi-Wahabi* persuasion fiercely decry the syncretism of popular Islam, claiming that it arises from ignorance of Qura’nic teachings.

Hard-liners dismiss the fact that Sufis were responsible for much of Islam’s rapid spread after its initial military conquests in the 7th and 8th centuries. Converts from caste-ridden Hinduism were attracted towards a people-friendly religion – Islam. The Kurds of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey were also converted in this way and still maintain their brand of folk Islam. Today’s Pakistani and Afghan Taliban share the Wahabist hatred for shrine worshippers, who they equate with idolaters. Rahman Baba, a Pakhtoon Sufi poet of the 19th century who played the rubab and loved to sing and dance, was the particular object of an attack in Swat in 2009 by those who claim to be anti-imperialists. A Pakistani journalist sardonically observed that “Islamist warriors won a great victory in the ongoing global jihad against the satanic western powers, especially the United States, when they successfully bombed and damaged the mausoleum of Rahman Baba.”

WHY THE HARD-LINERS ARE WINNING

Sufism is losing out on the Indian subcontinent (and possibly elsewhere too). Unlike Wahabis, followers of Sufism tend to be reflective, rather than be aggressive proselytizers who freely brandish the threat of apostasy. But it is also a consequence of growing global literacy. This enables more individuals to read the abundant religious literature, and to absorb the dominant back-to-the-Qur’an line. Thus there is a growing feeling that “soft Islam” is not proper Islam.

While shrines rely upon relatively small local donations, petro-dollar funding for madrassas and mosques has steadily worked in favor of the hardliners. Across the world, and in the West as well, hard-line Islamist clerics have their salaries paid for by donations from oil-rich countries. The *Tablighi Jamaat* religious movement, headquartered in Raiwind near Lahore has annual congregations that rank in size second only to that of the Haj pilgrimage. With an estimated following of 70-80 million people of *Deobandi* persuasion, it is spread across Southwest Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. In France it has about 100,000 followers and by 2007, Tabligh members were situated at 600 of Britain's 1350 mosques. *Tablighis* despise mystical Islam, which they equate with idolatry and ancestor worship.

The TJ represents only the tip of the religious iceberg. Attendance at mosques has skyrocketed, as has adherence to prayers, fasting, and other rituals. In Pakistan, an observer who grew up in a military family notes that “until the late 70s, the mosques located at the armed forces bases (military, air force and navy), were 90% *Ahle Sunnat Wal Jama't* (Sufi), 8% *Deobandi*, and 0% *Salafi*. Currently 85% of the mosques are *Deobandi* or *Salafi*, and less than 10% are *Ahle Sunnat Wal Jama't*.” This is an enormous transition, and has strong implications for what Pakistan’s military will become in the future. Steadily, the culture of the mosque is defeating the culture of the shrine.

One should not conclude from the above, however, that the dominance of sufi Islam would assure pluralism in the Muslim polity. For example Barelvis, who worship at shrines, have taken a harder line than Deobandis on the blasphemy issue. Indeed, it was extremely difficult to find any aa’lim in Pakistan willing to condemn the assassination of Governor Taseer.

A MESSAGE FOR AMERICAN MUSLIMS

The intrusion of religion into the public sphere in multi-religious societies is a recipe for conflict. Muslims living in multi-religious societies, such as America, surely know that that mixing religion with politics is a recipe for marginalization and could relegate them to becoming second class citizens. But if the separation of religion from state is dear to them, then they must apply the same yardstick and logic to Muslim majority countries. As yet this point appears not to have gotten through.

Muslims cannot reasonably insist on building the Ground Zero mosque – which would add yet one more to the thousands of mosques in the US – while not a single church is permitted in Saudi Arabia. Nor can Muslims complain about discrimination in the West without protesting the de-juro and de-facto discriminations practiced against religious minorities in most Muslim countries.

Consider the First Amendment to the US Constitution which reads “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” Compare this against the 19th section of the Pakistani Constitution which says that freedom of speech and expression are “subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam”.

CONCLUSION:

The hard, literalist Islam of the Kharijiites, Wahabis, Deobandis, and Salafis is unforgiving and does not accept religious pluralism. Imam ibn Hanbal, Ibn Taimiyya, Shah Waliullah, Maulana Maudoodi, Syed Qutb, and many others sought a return to pristine Islam with its harsh penal code. But there is also the kinder, gentler, accommodative Islam of Sufis and poets which extols pluralism as a fundamental virtue. The lands of Islam are full of heroic figures whose

message (often in the form of poetry) was, and remains, on the lips of the people. Sages and Sufis like Shah Abdul Latif, Sachal Sarmast, Baba Farid, Hafiz Shirazi, Maulana Rumi, Shams-i-Tabrizi, etc were venerated as saints of peace and toleration.

I shall end with a translation by Anne Marie Schimmel of a poem by Rumi's teacher, Shams-i-Tabrizi, whose message remains just as powerful and poignant almost 900 years later:

I am not a Muslim
None may call me Christian or Jew
I am not of the East, nor the West
I am neither of earth nor water
I am not of India or China
I am not of the kingdom of Iraq
I am not of this world nor the next,
not of heaven, nor of purgatory.
My place is the placeless,
My trace is the traceless.
It is not the body nor is it the soul,
for I belong to the soul of my love.
If I should win a moment with You,
I will put both worlds under my feet
and dance forever in joy.
O Shams of Tabriz, I am so drunk in the world
that except for revelry and intoxication
I have no tale to tell.