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## WHO IS A PROGRESSIVE MUSLIM?

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## WHO IS A PROGRESSIVE MUSLIM?

*Asghar Ali Engineer*

In the AMAN (Asian Muslim Action Network) assembly which took place in Pattani, Thailand in the last week of February 2011 a discussion took place as to who is a progressive Muslim and what are its characteristics. I was asked to throw light on this subject. I am presenting here what I spoke there. I had the following to say.

A progressive Muslim is one who is firmly grounded in the Qur'anic values of truth (haq), justice ('adl), compassion (rahmah), wisdom (hikmah) and does service to others rather than being served by others. A progressive Muslim does not believe in sectarian Islam (sunni or shi'ah or Isma'ili or Deobandi or Barelvi or ahl-e-hadith or salafi Islam but rises above all these sects and gives importance to Qur'an above everything else.

A progressive Islam not only does not adopt sectarian approach but is respectful of entire humanity and human dignity as per Qur'an (17:70). He leaves mutual differences, ideological and theological to Allah alone and does not condemn anyone who differs from him/her as kafirs as often sectarian Muslims do. It only widens differences and intensifies conflict. A progressive Muslim uses, as per Qur'an, wisdom (hikmah) and goodly words (maw'izat al-Hasanah) in discussion and leaves rest to Allah. He does not try to be judgemental.

A progressive Muslim is least influenced by personal prejudices and always gives more importance to knowledge than his opinion. Qur'an condemns prejudiced opinion (zan) and promotes knowledge ('ilm). Also, openness of mind is a seminal quality and avoids arrogance born more out of ignorance than knowledge. Those who have little knowledge are more arrogant and those who have greater degree of knowledge know limitations of their own knowledge and hence tend to be humble.

A progressive Muslim first of all studies his/her own religion in depth and tries to understand, as objectively as possible, the causes of differences between different religions and shows full respect for others beliefs. It is those who do not know their own religion, much less those of others, who condemn religion of others. The Qur'an says, "And abuse not those whom they call upon besides Allah lest, exceeding the limits they abuse Allah through ignorance." (6:109). Further in this verse Allah says, "Thus to everyone people have We made their deeds fair-seeming; then to their Lord is their return so He will inform them of what they did." Thus ultimately it is Allah who will judge. We human beings when we judge, we judge more out of ignorance and arrogance of our ego than knowledge and selflessness.

The key words in this verse are that for every people We made their deeds fair-seeming to them. Then who are we human beings to condemn others beliefs and deeds. Let then Allah alone to judge who is right and who is wrong.

Also a progressive Muslim celebrates diversity as diversity is creation of Allah and if Allah desired He could have made entire humanity one community. (5:48). The Qur'an also 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.” Thus a progressive Muslim will never have any prejudice against any language or colour of skin or any colour for that matter as these are all creations of Allah.

Also, both men and women are creation of Allah and both need to be treated with same degree of dignity. Allah has created all species in couples and it is necessary for survival of all species. No species will survive unless it is created in couples. Thus feminine of the couple is as important as masculine and in human beings both gender must be treated equally. Moreover gender is social and cultural construct. Whereas sex is natural gender is social and cultural.

A progressive Muslim knows this very well and treats both men and women with equal dignity and believes in giving equal rights to both. And in today’s context gender equality becomes a crucial test for a progressive Muslim. Female servitude was purely feudal cultural creation and Islam opposed it and pronounced the doctrine of gender equality in clear terms (2:228) A progressive Muslim knows that certain Shari’ah provisions establishing male superiority were in response to cultural needs of a patriarchal society than based on Qur’an and hadith.

Thus a progressive Muslim will give more importance to Qur’anic pronouncements of gender equality than feudal female servitude and would not consider these [provisions of Shari’ah laws as eternal and unalterable. A progressive Muslim, therefore, would reconstruct Shari’ah laws in this respect and accord equal rights to women who are also believers. One believer cannot be superior to another believer. Male superiority is a human construct and human construct cannot override divine injunction. Also, functional differences i.e. bearing children should not result in distinction of superior and inferior.

A progressive Muslim would accord seeking knowledge highest priority as knowledge has been equated with light (nor) and ignorance to darkness (zulmat) and Allah brings out believers from darkness to light. And the Prophet (PBUH) has said that a moment’s reflection is more important than whole nights worship (‘ibadat). Thus knowledge has priority over worship.

Thus these are the characteristics of a progressive Muslim and those who imbibe these characteristics would survive all the challenges of all the times and would not face any difficulty in keeping pace with the changing times.

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