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PROBLEMS OF PLURALISM

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When Islam emerged on the scene in early seventh century, Arabs were divided among different tribes but nevertheless spoke one language Arabic and more or less followed one religion (though had different traditions) i.e. worshipping different idols placed inside Ka'ba and some idols which were outside Mecca. Thus we cannot call that society a pluralist society. Of course there were Jews in Madina and Christians in some parts of Arabian Peninsula. So in that way it was a multi-religious society to an extent as Christians and Jews were in small minorities.

We do not know about any religious conflict between pagan-Arabs and Jews and Christians. Though Judaism and Christianity were organized religions and Arabs had none, pagan Arabs were wary of accepting these religions for fear of political consequences. They thought Christianity is official religion of Roman Empire and converting to it may subjugate them to Roman Empire and they may lose their independence. Also, some Arabs in the border area who embraced Christianity were far from happy and they faced persecution from Roman Empire. Later they embraced Islam as mainly religion of the Arabs.

Despite all this Qur'an did not reject religious pluralism. It not only accepted religious but also linguistic and ethnic pluralism as well. There are verses in the Qur'an to this effect two of which I would like to quote here:

- 1) "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 one with another in virtuous deeds. To Allah you will all return, so He will inform you of that wherein you differed...(5:48)
- 2) And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours (ethnic diversity). Surely there are signs in this for the learned. (30:22).

Both the verses quoted above not only accepted diversity of religions, languages and ethnicities but describe them as sign of Allah. Thus Allah has created pluralism and it must be respected. If Allah so desired He could have created all of us one people with one religion, one tongue and one colour. But Allah did not do so and instead created diversity of every kind and made it a test for us whether we can live in harmony despite these diversities and, instead of making it a source of conflict, as it often happens, we should make it a source of excelling each other in good deeds.

The Arabs were very proud of their language and ethnic origin and hence Qur'an emphasized that there is no need for taking pride in ones language and Arabness as Allah has created other languages and ethnic groups and all need to be respected as none is superior to the other and all are Allah's creation and Allah's signs.

Thus believers were taught to respect other faiths, languages and ethnicities what could be described as most contemporary or modern attitude. Qur'an also told believers not to abuse

others gods lest they should abuse Allah without knowledge. The Qur'an went one step further and maintained that to every people their own faith appears to be fair and good and so one should see others faith in their perspective and not ones own faith perspective. (See later part of 30:22)

But in this world people don't behave according to their scriptures, be they Muslims or people of other faiths. They behave more according to their own interests and benefits. The Arabs continued to feel superior over non-Arabs including non-Arab Muslims. It always remained a challenge to unite Arab and non-Arab Muslims. Arabs looked down upon Muslims of inferior variety and considered Arabs as better Muslims.

Islam appeared among Arabs but soon spread too many parts of the world and various local cultures and traditions of non-Arab societies began to reflect in local Muslim communities. Thus Islam did not remain monolithic as many theologians continued to assert. When local cultures became integral part of various local Muslim communities and thus now instead of Islam there were Islams with differing practices.

Theologically and legally too Islam split into several different sects and legal schools. Political splits also acquired theological hues. To begin with succession to the Prophet (PBUH) was a political question but soon it became theological and Shi'ah Islam acquired its own separate theology and Sunni Islam its own. Both became irreconcilable and ethnically too they were embraced by different ethnic groups.

Though there are several Arab countries like Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Bahrain having Shi'ah population either in majority or minority, Shi'ah Islam was mainly embraced by Iranians, a non-Arab Persian speaking people who had sense of superior culture and civilization heritage. Similarly different tribes in Central Asia embraced Islam with their own customs and traditions which remain their hallmark.

Islam thus became bewilderingly diverse internally. In Africa Hausa Islam is so radically different from 'mainstream' Arab Islam that many Muslims would not even recognize them as Muslims. Hausa Muslims were depicted during festival of Islam celebrations in late seventies, some Pakistanis watching the Hausa Islam exhibition remarked how these people can be described as Muslims?

Ethnic and tribal prejudices come into play in all such matters. Nevertheless all of them feel they are true Muslims. Then there are among Shi'ah and Sunni Islam several different sects with substantially differing theologies. In Lebanon we have Druze Muslims and Ismaili Muslims who considerably differ from 'mainstream' Shi'ah Islam. Among Ismailis there are Agakhanis and Bohras who differ from each other considerably in theological issues.

In fact if we see Baghdadi's book *Al-Farq bayn al-Firaq* in first century of Islam he counts more than 100 different sects all claiming to be representing 'true Islam'. While many sects came into existence due to political differences, some came into existence due to theological differences too. If one goes by Qur'anic pluralism one must accept both internal pluralism as well as external pluralism i.e. coexistence between Islam and non-Islamic religions.

However, let alone coexistence between Islam and other religions, there have been serious conflict between different sects of Islam. Today Sunni terrorists are continuously attacking and killing Shi'ah Muslims in Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere. Similarly there is serious conflict

in Indian sub-continent between Wahabis and Barelvīs. Also Ahmadiyas are denounced as non-believers. In fact each sect condemns the other as non-believer (kafir). The word kafir is used quite irresponsibly.

Perhaps a Muslim can co-exist more peacefully with non-Muslims than with Muslims of other sects. Justice Munir who inquired into anti-Qadiyani riots in Punjab in Pakistan in early fifties writes in his report that he examined all leading theologians of Muslims in Pakistan but no two of them agreed on definition of a Muslim and yet all of them agreed one who is not a Muslim should be killed.

Thus despite Quranic doctrine of religious and cultural pluralism, in practice, Muslim theologians have not accepted it in practice. In one conference in Iran on pluralism one of the leading Ayatollah said that Islam cannot accept pluralism as it means all religions are equally valid. This cannot be accepted. I stood up and said sir, this is not Qur'anic approach. And one realizes importance of pluralism only when one lives in minority. The Ayatollah then said I do not mean that pluralism should not be accepted but that equal validity of all religions cannot be accepted. I said for this Qur'an clearly says in 5:48 that it is Allah who will decide, not human beings like us. We human beings should only try to excel each other in virtuous deeds instead of judging who is right and who is wrong.

While theologians challenge each other and create conflictual situations, the Sufis, especially of *wahdat al-wujud* (Unity of Being) philosophy accept religious and cultural pluralism as according to their philosophy Allah is manifest in every human being and everything. Thus they have no problem with equal validity of all religions. Also, they accepted local languages and local traditions without any hesitation.

While theologians always strived for 'Islamic purity' Sufis gave great importance to cultural assimilation. That is why Muslim masses had great respect for Sufi saints and flocked to them and to their tombs after their death and hardly even knew much about theologians, let alone flocking to them or their tombs. Sufi Islam has tremendous popularity even today as, through cultural assimilation, they won the hearts of local masses.

It is also important to note that pluralism and diversity enriches our life and its absence makes our language and culture quite colorless. When a religion is followed by millions and peoples of various cultures, languages, customs and traditions, its understanding and interpretation cannot remain monolithic. Had Islam remained confined to Arabia, perhaps it could have remained monolithic but after it spread in different parts of the world it embraced local philosophies and different traditions. Needless to say different cultural traditions greatly influence our understanding of religion which has originated elsewhere.

Arabia had no rich philosophical and cultural traditions before Islam. There were no written traditions either. Like in tribal culture emphasis was on oral rather than written traditions. Qur'an was the first written text and its language, spirituality and philosophical depth was unique. Its simple but profound spirituality and philosophical depth was nothing short of miracle that too from someone who could not read and write.

However, Arabs due to their monolithic and simple folk traditions, could not fully appreciate philosophical and spiritual richness of Qur'an. It was understood more linguistically than philosophically and spiritually. However, when it spread to other civilizations like those of

Iran and India, it began to acquire richness, complexity and profundity. But it came at a cost i.e. diversity.

Also, Islam had become universal religion for Arabs right in the first decade after the death of the Prophet (PBUH). And by the end of first century hijrah it had spread to large parts of Asia and Africa and some parts of Europe. In these countries it was not only internal diversity that it had to cope also with external diversity i.e. it had to co-exist with other religious traditions. Thus now Islam had to face challenge from within and challenge from without.

Challenge from within was no small challenge and now challenge from without made things more complex. And it was not mere coexistence but also with competition for power. And from unique historical situation in Arabia theologians developed a doctrine that in Islam religion and political power go hand in hand. In fact this doctrine cannot be supported from any Qur'anic text but it was result of total power vacuum in Arabia. When Islam became universal religion Muslims also became rulers there being no ruling monarchy or any other form of political power before Islam.

Now equipped with this theological doctrine Muslims began to aspire for political power and came into clash with the Christian rulers in several countries which were under Roman Empire or non-Christian power of Persia. This clash of political power also was seen as clash of religions. In fact Qur'anic teachings have no place for clash of religions. The two great religious traditions in the area i.e. Judaism and Christianity were accepted as religions brought by Allah's Prophets and Muslims were allowed to marry women of the people of the book i.e. Jews and Christians. This also shows clearly that there was no clash of religions at all and Qur'an had accepted religious pluralism.

It is also well-known fact of history that Islamic regimes never persecuted Jews and Christians and many Jews and Christians held high administrative offices under Abbasid, Fatimid and other Islamic empires. But elsewhere competition for power also brought about clashes. Especially with Christians. With Jews there were no such clashes as Jews had no political empire of their own.

Jews enjoyed full religious freedom throughout the Middle East and coexisted in peace until 1948 when Israel was created in Palestine area. This itself shows clash with Jews is not religious in nature but political. Palestine issue has become a sore point in modern Islamic history. The USA-Arab relation does not have a different story. What has been called clash of civilization by US Harvard scholar Prof. Huntington is not clash of civilization but it is clash of interests.

Muslims do not hate USA but resent its unqualified support to Israel and suppressing the rights of Palestinians, throwing them out of their homes and hearths and continues to do that. Thus it is not, as media projects, fight between Christianity and Islam but a fight between oppressors and oppressed. US also has selective approach towards Arabs. Wherever it has installed or supports monarchs, dictators and sheikhs, considers them friends and has best of relations with Saudis, Kuwait, Qatar and other Gulf regimes. Interestingly among dictators also it hates those who do not fall in US lines like Saddam Husain, Asad of Syria. It is also at odds with Iranian regime but until yesterday it had very friendly relations with Shah.

It is not religious pluralism which is a problem, it is clash of interests which at times, but not always, which results from religious pluralism which becomes a problem. Thus problem of

religious pluralism has to be understood in its proper perspective. Also, with changing situation nature of religious pluralism changes. Today there seems to be great solidarity between Western Christians and Jews. In medieval ages Jews were hated and there were pogroms against them. And Hitler in Christian Germany killed them in millions. Today entire west stands by not Jews but Zionists in suppressing Palestinians. Thus perception of problem of plurality changes with change in situation.

There are no permanent friends and permanent enemies. Power has its own logic. Obama who had extended his hand of friendship towards world of Islam and Muslims welcomes his election to the August post of President of USA, is changing his plan of action towards Islamic world and his hand of friendship seems to be in withdrawal mode.

Religious pluralism by itself is most enriching and must be consolidated. No part of the globalized world can ever be mono-religious or mono-cultural. At one time America took pride in its melting pot model of identity as all those who came to America were protestant Christians from Europe (most of whom were victims of religious persecution at the hands of Catholic Church). This model remained valid only when migrants were Protestant Christians came from Europe.

However, it is no more so. In post World War II migrants began to come from post-colonial countries of Asia and Africa and they refused to merge their identities with those of Americans and melting pot became irrelevant and has been replaced by mosaic model and all migrants from non-European countries and non-Christians describe themselves with their original identities i.e. African American, Arab Americans, Indian Americans and so on.

Mosaic model is much closer to the spirit of pluralism. Thus problems of pluralism can be resolved only in democratic spirit and justice to all religious groups coexisting together. This in today's world democracy, diversity and dialogue become extremely crucial for peaceful coexistence. But regrettably even in 21st century our world is bereft of these ideals and values.

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