

# Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

## RELIGION AS I VIEW IT

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Ali Engineer, Asghar
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-08 09:38:24
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/182664">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/182664</a>

## RELIGION AS I VIEW IT

Asghar Ali Engineer

*(Islam and Modern Age, February 2010)*

I am now about to complete 70 years of my life. I have faced many challenges and have gone through much turmoil in life. However, on the whole I am quite satisfied with my life and my modest achievements. I initially gave up my engagement with philosophy and theology in favour of engineering for better material prospects. But with hindsight I feel that it was not a correct decision that I had taken.

I came back to this intellectual arena when I decided to resign my job as a civil engineer in 1981 to re-engage with these subjects. I feel I would have hardly achieved any thing as a civil engineer though perhaps I would have had better and more comfortable life in the material sense. But spiritually and creatively I would have died a non-descript man. When my involvement with social and religious issues intensified, I decided to give up my job and re-engage with philosophical and theological issues.

My education was not in very reputed institution but only in municipal or government schools and colleges. My father taught me Islamic theology based on Qur'an and hadith and he had the knack of implanting it deeply in my intellect. It was as a result of this that I never lost my interest in these subjects throughout my life. Not even as an engineer. However, as a result of orthodox Islamic education I could not develop a critical mindset. I was taught not to question but to accept.

However, my father, despite his orthodoxy was a tolerant soul and I learnt from him to tolerate other viewpoints. Developed further, it resulted in developing critical thinking. Later, by the time I graduated in engineering I could appreciate one thing: real education results in rejection of what is and developing in what should be. It is this tension in what is and what should be leads to the creation of a new world.

Conforming mindset results in reinforcing the status quo which benefits the leaders of the established order. One who is lost in this world finds it very easy to live with establishment but those who wish to create a new world would never accept the given. All prophets, *rishis* and *munis* and great thinkers always rejected the world they were born in and left a new world behind before they died.

For these prophets and great thinkers, one who is lost in this world is a *kafir* (one who hides the truth and lives with falsehood) and one who creates a new world is a *mu'min* (believer in truth, in justice and human dignity). They lived and died for new possible world. The other world is always possible. From Buddha to Christ to Muhammad they all rejected the given world and showed us the way to create a new world.

Buddha, Christ, Muhammad (PBUH) gave up their comforts of life and spent years reflecting on possible new world. Instead of losing themselves in the comforts of given world they preferred to engage with blue print of a new world. Those who are lost in this world live for themselves and those who struggle to create a new world live for

others. Kings and rulers who lived for themselves are part of history and their burial places are also not known. But prophets, *rishis* and *munis* continue to inspire us long after their death and their burial places and *samadhis* are visited by millions.

When I understood this secret of life I tried in my own humble and limited way to work for another possible world. It also changed my understanding of the word *kafir* and *mu'min*. I had inherited certain fixed meaning but now a new meaning dawned which was more in conformity with the Qur'anic spirit. It is not that one who does not accept Islam is *kafir* and one who does, is always a *mu'min*

A real *kafir* is one who lives for himself and for comforts of his own life making serious compromises with fundamental values of life such as truth, justice, compassion, human dignity and inflicts suffering on others for his own comforts and lust for power and self. He lives in *this world*. And real *mu'min* (believer) is not only one who formally accepts Islam but one whose life is a continuing struggle for truth and who refuses to compromise with falsehood, is an embodiment of compassion and is always engaged in relieving others' suffering.

To me the Prophet of Islam is what the Qur'an aptly describes him as *Rahmatun lil 'Alamin* i.e. Mercy of the Universe. It is mercy and compassion which results from tenderness of one's heart, from living and feeling soul, which helps in relieving the entire humanity of all suffering. It is the hard-heartedness and lust for gain which inflicts suffering on others. However, later Muslim rulers, to fulfil their lust for power, changed the image of Islam and reduced it to some formal observations and beliefs while inflicting suffering on others. All the later theological debates (with certain honourable exceptions) and *fatwas* of *kufr* (unbelief) were the result of this reversal of Islamic spirit.

It has happened in the history of all religions that the founders' Herculean efforts to create a new world are reduced to naught by those who convert religion into an immutable formal theology to retain their control over power. The real spirit of religion (I am not using the word 'religion' here in its pro-establishment theological sense) is to keep on challenging coercive powers. And the Prophet (PBUH) rightly defined *jihad* as telling truth on the face of a tyrant ruler.

Thus, from the above saying of the Prophet (PBUH) I conclude that real *jihad* can never be violent in form; much less using violence for achieving one's objectives. Jihad is nothing but constant struggle to challenge coercive and unjust powers for creating the other world where there will be no violence or even coercion. According to my own understanding of the Qur'an, jihad is nothing but ceaseless spiritual struggle for a just world and violence is permissible in exceptional circumstances to defend oneself. And for that too it should be avoided as far as possible.

I believe any change brought about by violent or coercive means will never do away with injustice and can, at best, result in greater coercive powers. Violence, in other words, continues to reproduce itself. I also believe that religion, instead of going along with

political power, should remain its strong critic. Since power corrupts, power will corrupt religion also and we have seen this in history.

However, it is happening even in the twenty first century in many countries including some advanced countries of the West. Politicians misuse religion and corrupt its teaching and practices most cynically to reap political benefit.

Initially it may appear that religion is a value-giver and a moral force and hence it would put politics on the right track. Every time it has proved to be an illusion and I believe religion should in no case be married with politics. Politics is all about power games and hence the best role for religion and religious leaders would be to maintain its distance from politics and act as strong critic of political establishment.

The doctrine, later on invented by some Muslim leaders, that religion cannot be separated from politics in Islam be reinvented to say that religion, while maintaining its distance from politics, should, through criticism of political authorities, try and correct their course. Religion, by becoming part of any establishment, much less political establishment, loses its very moral spirit. Not only that, if it becomes its own establishment, religion gets corrupted. Religion, therefore, should not become an establishment at all. All religious establishments develop their own politics of control and hence suppress people, even eliminate its critics.

I believe that no religion is possible without freedom of conscience and fearlessness and commitment to truth. A religious person jealously guards his/her freedom of conscience and commitment to truth. It is lack of this commitment to truth that results religion becoming an obstacle rather than being helpful to human beings. Without this freedom of conscience and commitment to truth, religion ends to become lifeless and ritualistic.

It is my conviction that religion should spur healthy change rather than become an obstacle. However, change should be for the benefit of the whole humanity and not for a section of it at the cost of others. Value-based traditions should not be compromised and change should be guided by general human welfare. Traditions should not be spurned just because they are traditions and should not be worshipped because they are traditions. Traditions must change if they cease to play a healthy role for the humanity.

It is my opinion that religion should not divide but unite humanity. Human solidarity is the common denominator of all religions. The feeling of superiority over other religious traditions is human arrogance rather than true religious spirit. A true religious believer would never claim superiority over other religions. Since truth is the core of all religions (no religion would be acceptable without this core of truth) one truth cannot be superior over the other. However, their cultural expressions can differ and it is these cultural and linguistic differences which make one religion different from the other. Customs and traditions and parts of religious rituals are products of culture more than religion.

Cultural diversity should be celebrated and this diversity is the way of life for the entire humanity in these days of rapid transportation. Qur'an refers to this diversity as creation of Allah and all Muslims should all the more welcome it. If cultural diversity is

accepted, it helps ease inter-religious tensions also as most of our religious practices are cultural in origin. Cultural and linguistic differences are more fundamental than religious ones.

Also, all religions have urged human beings to resist temptation, anger and feeling of revenge. Forgiveness is one of the highest qualities of religious life and in Islamic tradition Allah has been repeatedly described as *Ghafur al-Rahim* (i.e. Pardoner and Merciful). Thus a worshipper of God has to forgive and control his anger and feeling of revenge. These are truly religious qualities.

If one can suppress one's greed, anger and feeling of revenge, there will not be much violence in the world. One commits violence because one is greedy and wants to take away what belongs to others or when one is angry and wants to take revenge and fails to forgive. Even world wars have taken place because of these negative attributes in an individual or group or nation. Our world would be a much better place to live if these negative qualities could be suppressed.

Here I am reminded of a Sufi called Sarmad who was contemporary of Aurangzeb. His story is very inspiring and also illustrates what it means to be religious. He had supported Dara Shikoh, also inclined towards Sufism, and hence Aurangzeb wanted to kill him. He obtained *fatwa* from the 'Ulama on the grounds that he did not recite *kalimah* (profession of Islamic faith) fully. He would only say *la ilaha* (there is no god) but did not say *illallah* (except one God).

On the basis of the *fatwa* Aurangzeb ordered his execution and when the executioner raised his sword, one of Sarmad's disciples rushed and whispered in his ear: 'now at least say *illallah* and save your life.' Sarmad replied 'do you want me to speak lie to save my life?' The disciple, surprised at this reply said, 'is it lie to say *illallah*? 'No', said Sarmad, 'it is the highest truth but for me it would be a lie'? 'Why', the disciple asked. 'Because', Sarmad said 'I have not been able to really deny so many gods of desire still sitting in my heart. How can I then say *il lallah* (except One God)? I am still worshipping so many idols of desire and not free of them'. And his head was cut off.

Unless we deny these idols of desire we cannot become truly religious. This was the message of Sarmad. Not only we worship these idols of desire, we fail to suppress anger and feeling of revenge and purify our heart. Thus being religious is a constant effort, a continuing jihad against all evils we are controlled by. We are not free persons because we are shackled by desire, greed and revenge. A truly free person should be free of all this and his/her only passion should be truth and justice.

I also believe that passionate love of Creator and all human beings irrespective of their religion, colour or ethnicity should be our motivating force. 'A heart without love', says Jalaluddin Rumi, 'is nothing but a handful of dust. A human devoid of love is not worthy of humanity'. Jalaluddin Rumi whose *mathnavi* (an epic poem in several volumes) is called Qur'an in Persian was a great scholar holding a high place in the court of the King of Quniya in modern day Turkey but was devoid of love.

It was a roaming *dervish* Shams Tabriz who introduced him to the importance of love so much so that he began to say: 'I am neither Muslim, nor Christian, nor Jew, nor from earth nor from heavens, nor from east nor from west nor from north nor from south, but my only identity is love and love of my beloved'. It is this passionate love that made Maulana Rumi to write *mathnavi* which made him eternal and people revere him and read his *mathnavi* with great fervour even today.

Another great Sufi saint Muhiyuddin Ibn Arabi also makes love fundamental in his school of thought. He says in one of his poems that 'love is my religion and love is my Shari'ah (law). Love indeed sustains life on this earth'. This love is universal and in fact I believe one can love God only through love of His creation. Life will be barren without love. It is love which frees human person of all negative passions i.e. anger, hatred, greed and revenge. It removes the feeling of 'otherness' of the other.

Love transcends all barriers; religious, linguistic, cultural as well as ethnic. Pure love can be only in pure heart. It admits of no interests. There should not be any expectation in love. It admits only of sacrifice for the sake of one's beloved. It also does not admit of any sense of possession. Beloved cannot be possessed. Any sense of possession destroys the spirit of love as love is supposed to be selfless.

Religion often creates a sense of otherness for people of other religions whereas love creates feeling of oneness and thus love is a superior most feeling. Love also implies the respect for beloved's integrity. For Sufis real beloved is Allah and a Sufi considers death as *wisal* i.e. union with Allah. For a lover the greatest joy is union with his beloved and hence love takes away the fear of death from the lover's mind.

There are two categories of love '*ishq-e-haqiqi* (real love) and *ishq-e-majazi* (figurative or metaphorical love). Love of Allah is real love (*ishq-e-haqiqi*) and love of human person is called '*ishq-e-majazi*. Sufis express their love of God through love of human persons. For them real love has to be expressed metaphorically. I, therefore, maintain that human life is incomplete without love. Also, richness of life can be appreciated only through love. It is through love that one finds worthiness of life.

I also believe that real religion does not lie in rituals like prayer, fasting, pilgrimage and so on. These are means to an end and the end is inner perfection, ridding one's heart and soul of all evils. If rituals become an end in themselves, inner perfection cannot be achieved. These rituals may be necessary but never sufficient for true religiosity. However, for many, religiosity consists more in performing these rituals than perfecting oneself.

I think rationalist attack on religion is not justified. They think reason is an end in itself. Reason is also a means, not an end. Human life is incomplete without emotions, particularly emotion of love. Reason, in philosophical sense, enables us to understand this world and hence reason plays an important part in progress and development. But reason without faith is lame. A perfect human being stands on two legs – reason and faith. It is perfect faith accompanied by reason makes human life properly balanced.

Once a human person arrives at certain conclusion with the help of reason, the role of reason ceases there and the role of faith begins. It is faith in one's goal which infuses spiritual energy in human person to act. It is again faith which enables human beings to make supreme sacrifices to achieve one's goal. Reason can show the way but cannot take one to its destination.

If I am convinced that human freedom and dignity are important goals, I must act to achieve these goals. Here, not reason but faith enables us to act and do whatever possible to achieve these goals. I admit faith in its extreme and devoid of reason, can be exploited by unscrupulous elements and blind faith becomes powerful tool for exploitation of many gullible people. In this sense I am one with rationalists but I disagree with them that faith is always blind and only reason helps.

As blind faith is undesirable, scepticism, the extreme form of reason, is equally undesirable. Once the founder of scepticism fell into a ditch in his old age while walking with his disciples and cried for help. However, his disciples, true to his teaching began arguing whether it is worth saving the master's life. But one of his disciples said human life must be saved and he pulled out the master from the ditch, risking his own life.

According to the Islamic tradition, when Ibrahim (Abraham) was asked by Nimrod to jump into the fire as he was fighting against his tyranny and oppressive rule, Abraham jumped into it to save the oppressed whereas reason was only analyzing whether it is worth doing so. It is faith in values which allows human beings to sacrifice for others. Reason is important for progress and development but faith is essential for deciding the direction of progress and development.

Today's progress and development is motivated by greed, profit and consumerism and is utterly directionless and it is achieved through the misery of millions and total destruction of our climate and ecological balance. Today's progress and development, made possible through technology, is utterly destructive of all values and finer and sensitive aspects of inner human life. It is also not possible without using violence against the weak. The developed countries are using violence in the African and Asian countries to sustain their unsustainable growth based on greed and consumerism. Without violence they cannot sustain this so called growth. Reason is quite neutral to this destruction and only faith in human values and human goals can show the way.

Humanity today needs faith in these values and sensitization towards others suffering as never before. We are destroying our planet earth with utter impunity. Thus we need a world without violence and thousands of years ago insights of great religions like Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Bahaism showed us the way. However, even these religions became prey to human greed and there is a great need to revive their real spirit. We should also remember that all great prophets, seers and saints were from oppressed classes and were critics of powerful and arrogant rulers and liberators.

I believe that all religions are a source of rich values and a precious heritage of entire humanity and coupled with reason, a precious gift of God, we can transform our earth

into a real paradise of peace. Thus what we need is real synthesis of faith and reason to achieve our goal. Faith, reason, love and non-violence are our real saviours. These should be the guiding stars of our life and to humanize our progress and development. We will be really humanized.

-----  
Institute of Islamic Studies,  
Mumbai.  
E-mail: [csss@mtnl.net.in](mailto:csss@mtnl.net.in)