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Compassion in Islam

By Asghar Ali Engineer

EARLIER this month, religious scholars and leaders from around the globe drafted a 'Charter of Compassion', and floated it on the Internet for all to sign up to. According to them, "Compassion should be the plinth of religions."

Prominent among the leaders who have affirmed the charter are Karen Armstrong, Egypt's Grand Mufti Sheikh Ali Goma and the Dalai Lama, besides others. The charter calls for restoring compassion to the centre of morality and religion and ensuring that youth are given accurate information about other traditions, religions and cultures to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity and to cultivate an informed empathy.

The charter underlines that the principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religions, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat others as we wish to be treated ourselves. I would like to discuss this centrality of compassion from an Islamic standpoint. The Quran repeatedly describes Allah as Compassionate and Merciful and so those who worship Allah have to be merciful and compassionate; else what is the use of worshipping a Being whose values we do not follow?

It is known to every Muslim that he/she has to begin any work with incantation of Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim (I begin in the name of Allah who is Compassionate and Merciful). Are then compassion and mercy not at the centre of Islam? But it is highly unfortunate that Islam today is known more for 'jihad' in the hands of those who kill and maim than mercy and compassion. Who is responsible for this?

Is Islam responsible for the acts of such Muslims? A handful of those indulging in terrorism today actually use Islam in their pursuit of power. Today it is Buddhism which is known for compassion rather than Islam. It is true that in Buddhism also compassion is a central value but so it is in Islam. Why then has Islam never been known for compassion in its entire history?

It is known only for jihad. The reason is, unlike Buddhism, Islam got associated with power right from the beginning. Islam appeared among Arab tribesmen among whom violence was rampant. Islam, therefore, made peace and compassion central values so that Arabs could give up violence and make peace and compassion as part of their day-to-day conduct. However, human history shows ideals do not become real and it is reality which prevails over ideals, and the Arabs were no exception to this rule.

It is precisely for this reason that we see so much bloodshed in Islamic history during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods and Hajjaj, among Umayyads, and Saffah among the Abbasids, went down in history as oppressors. This continued throughout Islamic history. Jihad, which never meant waging war in the Quranic terminology, was used by rulers for war and bloodshed.

It is high time this kind of jihad, which has got a new lease of life with terrorists in action, was corrected and once again compassion assumed centrality, as in Quranic values. It should get the much-needed priority. Not that no one ever understood this Quranic message. The Sufis did and kept themselves apart from power struggle among different

dynasties and groups. They emphasised peace, love and compassion rather than power. They emphasised the spiritual over the material. Sufis like Ibn Arabi and Maulana Rum made love central to Islamic ethics and Muslim masses always followed them.

However, Muslim ruling classes always emphasised rituals on the one hand and jihad on the other so that their oppressive and exploitative rule was accepted. Oppression (zulm) is the greatest evil according to Quranic ethics; yet, it became commonplace in Islamic history and there were ulema who came out with a doctrine that, to avoid anarchy, even a zalim ruler (oppressor) must be obeyed if he enforces salah (prayer).

This was a great setback to Quranic ethics. Salah is not an end but means to an end but now salah became an end in itself. Dr Iqbal had rightly pointed out in his Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam that religion in its higher form is neither dogma nor rituals. However, all of us who greatly appreciate Iqbal's poetry never give a thought to such statements of Iqbal.

Today, thanks to Al Qaeda and the Taliban, 'Islam' has been reduced to killing innocent people to gain power and wealth. There should be strong opposition and all sources encouraging such bloodbath must stop. Though it is late but even now ulema from the Islamic world must come out strongly in opposition to such gross misuse of Islam today. The ulema should also draw up a charter of ethics and give it wide publicity to alienate the terrorists from Muslim masses. To remain silent in the face of such horrific killings is to be part of it.

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