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Amelie Vallotton - My Article

From: Csss <csss@mtnl.net.in>
To: AMIN PANAAWALA <amingani606@gmail.com>, Amin Mughal <mohdamin@msn.com>, amin <ahash@super.net.pk>, Ami Shah <ami.shah@hertford.oxford.ac.uk>, ami mehra <ameemehra@yahoo.co.in>, <AmericanMuslimAgenda@yahooogroups.com>, Amena Al-Mehairi United Arab Emirates - Abu Dhabi <administration@dpmio.org>, Amelie Vallotton <vallotton@globethics.net>, Amelie Ponce <a.ponce@unesccat.org>, Amelie Gopalan <amelie@nikocity.de>, Ameerali Jumabhoy <ameerjum@singnet.com.sg>
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Islam: the state or civilisation?

By Asghar Ali Engineer

MANY scholars maintain that Islam and the state are inseparable, thus reducing Islam to a political ideology. This approach, though in a way, historically dictated, has caused much power struggle among different groups of Muslims.

The bloodshed which took place between the Umayyads and the Abbasids is enough to horrify any religious Muslim, and yet this ideology has remained rooted in Islamic society for centuries; it has taken another form in a post-colonial society. In the Islamic world, dictator after dictator has seized power in the name of Islam and declared the establishment of an Islamic state, making 'Islamic' punishments binding.

They have imposed medieval jurisprudence uncritically, resulting, among other things, in serious gender disparity. Countries from various regions of the Islamic world have suffered from this practice. There are only few exceptions to the rule in the Muslim world today. Islam, one must understand, is not primarily a political ideology but a religion which gave rise to a great civilisation, and has its own foundational values. Islam basically arose in an urban setting, and in view of inter-tribal disputes it laid great stress on unity and brotherhood of all (all believers are brothers and sisters [10:49]; the word 'ikhwatun' being inclusive of both genders).

Yet, a lust for power divided Muslims and caused serious enmities. The Quran stresses non-discriminatory behaviour between one tribe and another, one ethnic group and another, whereas power struggles were based on these very divisions. As opposed to that, civilisations are built on cooperation between all groups, not fighting among them. The other foundational values of Islamic civilisation are truth, justice and compassion.

These values were actually practised by the Sufis on the one hand, and ordinary Muslims on the other. The Sufis never allowed Islam to be reduced to a political ideology and kept away from

divisive politics. As opposed to power, they emphasised love, another civilisational value. Great Sufi masters like Muhiyuddin Ibn Arabi and Maulana Rumi believed in the power of love and persuasion instead of power per se.

A power struggle brings about what Prof Huntington has theorised as a 'clash of civilisations'. The US Right needed an enemy after the collapse of communism and hence they invented one in the Islamic civilisation. The former reformist president of Iran, Mohammad Khatami, instead gave a call for a dialogue of civilisations and proposed at a UN meeting to adopt it as its programme.

As against power, the Sufis for ages carried on a dialogue with the people of other religious groups, with Jews, Christians, and Hindus in India. While kings and sultans grabbed power causing so much bloodshed, the Sufis followed the Islamic civilisation's values and pursued the unity of people — Muslims as well as non-Muslims. Ibn Arabi even went to the extent of saying "My Sharia and din is love".

The Quran also lays emphasis on pluralism. According to the Quran, Allah could have created one people but He created diversity and plurality so that He can test us and it is better to cooperate with each other in good deeds (5:48). Thus, rather than fighting, one should cooperate for good deeds the basis on which all civilisations are built.

Today, the world again is torn by conflict, especially countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Yemen. These are the countries where various American interests are at stake, making brothers kill brothers with bombs and acts of terror. Everyday scores die in these countries, taking them away from the path of civilisation.

What Muslims should concentrate on is their fiqh, bringing it in conformity with the spirit of the Quran rather than basing it on disputed historical literature. The Quran's basic emphasis is on justice, especially gender justice, which in turn is the very basis of a great civilisation. Muslim societies desperately need gender equality by giving women their due. The Quran also emphasises the treading of the middle path, whereas we tend to go towards extremism in religion and politics.

The Quran has not addressed a single of its verse to kings or rulers but to the Prophet (PBUH) and the people in general, and believers in particular. If we establish the primacy of politics, it is the rulers who have to be responsible for everything whereas the Quran puts the primary responsibility on all believers who, in cooperation with other non-Muslim groups, should create a just and compassionate society. Thus, it demands of the believers to "cooperate with one another in righteousness and piety and help not one another in sin and aggression" (5:2).

E-mail: csss@mtnl.net.in
Website: www.csss-isl.com