

Religious Pluralism in India: An Islamic Appraisal

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Islam is undeniably a universal religion. It is revealed by Allah (SWT) to all human beings and does not differentiate between men and women, between the whites and the blacks. Islam never calls for bigotry; in fact Islam allows the Muslims and non-Muslims to live together happily and peacefully in a country. Islamic doctrine provides for religious freedom (Al-Qur'ān, 2:256) and (Al-Qur'ān, 10:99). Islam has been encouraging interactions and relationships with the Non-Muslims. Nowadays, we strive for the interreligious dialogue amongst the people of different religions. This inter-religious dialogue is very important from Islamic point of view as it was also used by the earlier generations of Muslims in delivering the message of Islam with wisdom and intelligence without involving any elements of coercion and violence (Al-Qur'ān, 16:125). India is a pluralistic society having a rich diversity of cultures, religions, ethnicities, etc. The debates on pluralism and multi-culturalism are among the hottest debates of the present times due to the increasing communication and interaction between people all over the world owing to the phenomenon of globalization. Nobody can deny the fact that pluralism has become an inevitable necessity of the present times when it is impossible to live with complete indifference towards others. But to imbibe the sense of pluralism in the very lives of the citizens, some motivating and inspiring factor is required. The religion has proved to be the most powerful motivating factor throughout human history. Religious pluralism is the recognition of the multiplicity and diversity of religion as a natural or divinely willed Phenomenon. The Indian collective conscience is certainly reflective of the religious inclination. Therefore to realize the pluralistic need of the present times, an analysis of the religious perspective on the same is indispensable. The present paper seeks to look at the Islamic perspective on religious pluralism as Islam is the religion followed by the largest minority of India.

Key Words: Universal religion, Inter-religious Dialogue, Diversity, Religious Pluralism, Multi-Culturalism, Globalization

Religious Pluralism (*al-ta'addudiyah al-dīniyyah*): Introduction

Man is a social being and is required to live with others of the same kind and while going on with their lives they share their experiences and form different cultures and religion under which they try to make their lives going. Biologists have observed that a child requires long parental care and mostly a child adopts actions and thoughts of his parents. As a child initially is not capable of taking any decision on his own about his life and so follows his parents. Having differences of thought and action of different people diversity of religion also takes place and we come to see a multi-faith society. The motives behind such actions have sometimes been religious in character, sometimes non-religious, and very often a mixture of both. Regardless of motive, however, the effect has been the same, namely the strengthening of religious unity.¹ Though the forces described above which give rise to diversity of religious belief and practice are a necessary condition for the development of religious pluralism, they are not a

sufficient cause. But the diversity of religion is not the same as religious pluralism. Religious diversity is far older and more widespread than religious pluralism.² People of different religions and cultural backgrounds may well be present in a place but unless and until they, after ignoring the differences of each other's religion, actively engage with one another.

It is an obvious concept that if pluralism is not accepted in modern times it is difficult to think of existence of more than one religion. Post modern society has laid emphasis on pluralism in order to rehabilitate the religion. Religion is to be accommodated and not to be rejected, as it can co-exist with other ideologies in a pluralist society.³ Religion is not only part of problem it can be part of solution, if handled imaginatively.⁴ The concept of religious pluralism is not new rather it is a very old concept discussed by past philosophers and theologians of various schools in one or another form. However it has taken a new shape in current world due to increased interactions between followers of different religion and inter-faith dialogues.

For almost 1500 years the three great religions of world (Islam, Christianity and Judaism) have lived together from a very long time maintaining all better and worse relationships during the course of their history and so thus a sense of religious pluralism was prevailing already since their origin. So there is a sense in which religious pluralism as a phenomenon has always been with us.⁵

Pluralism in religion recognizes the multiplicity of religious groups and the rights of belief, expression, assembly, and legitimate activities for every individual or each religious group and for the group as a whole.⁶ The religious pluralism is a doctrine according to which some sort of favorable attribution is ascribed to a plurality of religions. This makes it crystal clear that we can expect to find a wide variety of positions that could be covered by the term "religious pluralism." The variety is so wide that the claim that someone accepts religious pluralism in this sense is almost trivial.⁷

Religious pluralism is often treated under three headings in the context of theology, which are exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist. The exclusivists believe that only their belief or faith is true and other existing faiths are false, whereas the inclusivists believe that their faith is true and other faiths are also tolerated or even included within it in some sense. The pluralists, on the other hand, recognize all faiths and believe that they all are true and guide us differently to the same truth or reality.⁸

Religious pluralism, as has already been observed, is the recognition of the multiplicity and diversity of religions as a natural or divinely willed phenomenon. Yet if religious pluralism is to serve as a meaningful framework of constructive dialogue among the followers of the various religions, all religions, or at least all theistic religions, must be recognized as legitimate ways to the Truth or Ultimate Reality. It must be further agreed that the followers of every religion have the right to regard their own faith as the true one for them.⁹

Cyrus the founder of Persian Empire was the first man or authority who promotes religious pluralism in the fifth century BCE. Cyrus founded an empire that stretched from Iran to Central Asia to Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and even into Europe. This great imperial domain was unrivaled until the rise of the Muslim empire following the demise of the Prophet Muhammad(ﷺ), and especially after the phenomenal expansion of 711CE.¹⁰ He honored all the deities of his realm. He permitted the Judean exiles to return to their own lands and rebuild the Jerusalem temple of YHWH their God. This earned him the honor of being called by the author of II Isaiah YHWH's servant or messiah.¹¹ He recognized all faiths of his time and allowed his subjects to worship their own gods and pray for his success and prosperity.

The Qur'ān stands unique among all the religious books of the world, as it views plurality of religion. It has accorded recognition to Judaism and Christianity and the other great monotheistic religions. It regards religious diversity as one of the signs (*ayāt*) of God, second in importance to the "creation of the heavens and earth."¹² The Qur'ān presents its view of religious pluralism in a somewhat progressive manner. Qur'ān proclaims "if God had willed. He would have created all mankind as one faith community but they don't cease to differ among themselves." There is freedom of religion in Islam which is corollary to religious pluralism. As in *Şurah Kāfirūn*, Prophet was ordered, to tell the disbelievers 'I don't worship those that you worship, nor do you worship Him whom I worship... to you is your religion and to me my religion.' This is clear acceptance of religious pluralism in Islam. Many believers of different faiths have come to realize that religious pluralism provides a platform where from the regard towards other religions is learned and led to appreciation of other faiths and do away with fundamentalism where followers believes on one faith fanatically insist that their view is the only source of truth and with it a modern notion of tolerance based not simply on co-existence but upon mutual understanding and respect.¹³

The most common and perhaps acceptable attitude of the modern state towards religion is toleration. From a religious perspective this attitude might not be welcomed, since in this case religion has been put under the authority of law. In other words, if the law wishes it can tolerate religion. But religion especially great religions such as Islam, Christianity and Judaism are not just only set of beliefs and the practices of certain rituals. They have institutions, laws and culture. The modern state might tolerate a freedom of religious association, a right to promote religious and philosophical ideas. It may tolerate religious practices.

Religious Pluralism in India

India from past thousand years experiencing diversity, a community that is proud of its multi-languages and literature, having a polity which tolerates dissent and substantial heterogeneity of diverse political ideas and paying room for different religious and non-religious beliefs. India is the second most populous country (population now over a billion) after China, and socially and culturally the most diverse in the world. One of the typical characteristics of Indian culture was its diversity, which could also be seen in the area of Indian religion. The religious pluralism in India is fairly unique, its ancient religion was Hinduism (actually Vedic Brahmanism) over 82 per cent, and then

Jainism and Buddhism emerged during the period of the *Upanishads*, but are least in number. Islam is India's second largest religion (third largest Muslim population in the world), about 12 per cent, Muslims ruled more than 700 hundred years in India and one can see Islamic influence in all the spheres of Indian culture. Another fastest growing religion of Indian is Christianity, practiced by about 2.3 per cent of India's population. Sikhism is professed today by about sixteen million people in India. Most of them are residing in Punjab, Haryana and Delhi.¹⁴

Contemporary India is a Hindu-majority country, governed under a secular democratic constitution since 1947, when it achieved independence from British rule. India is a 'secular state' where people are free to practise the religion of their choice or to abstain from professing any particular faith. The creation of a law defined as 'Hindu personal law' or 'Muslim personal law' demanded that the categories of Hindu and Muslim should also be properly defined in the Constitution, so that laws could be applied without difficulty. Muslim Personal Law extends to all the Provinces of India. It includes intestate succession, special property of females, marriages, and dissolution of marriage, including *talaq, ila, zihar, lian, khula* and *mubaraat*, maintenance, dower, guardianship, gifts, trusts and *wakfs*.¹⁵

Islamic Perspective of Religious Pluralism

The Qur'an teaches that Allah deliberately created a world of diversity. Multiplicity of races, colors, communities and religions as the signs of His Mercy and Glory exhibited through His creatures, and rather appears to be implying that, diversity is a part of divine intent and purpose of creation; the Qur'an states:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ
وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ
أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتَقْوَمُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

O mankind! Lo! We have created you Male and Female, and have made you different nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. (Al- Qur'an: 49:13)

At another place Qur'an asserts that all mankind has been one single religious community, all mankind by virtue of their humanity share in the *din-al-fitrah (kana al-nasu ummah wahidah)*.¹⁶ It clearly recognizes Islam as universal religion and its book as God's revelation. The God as mentioned in the Qur'an is not only the God of Muslims but of whole humanity.¹⁷ The Quran illustrates this point by stating:

وَلِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ فَأَيْنَمَا تُوَلُّوا فَثَمَّ وَجْهُ
 ٤ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

"To Allah belong the East and West and whither so ever ye turn, there is Allah's Countenance. For Allah is All-Embracing, All-Knowing" (Al-Quran 2:115)

The divine messages from “the Lord of All-Being” (Al-Quran 1:1) can be invaluable in conducting their followers toward a universal pluralism.¹⁸ Qur’ānic exegesis, *Sunnah* and Islamic Jurisprudence have expanded the treatment of this topic and contain wide-ranging discussions of the religious traditions encountered by Muslims in the nascent stage of their history: Idolatry, Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Sabianism. A whole literary genre, known in Arabic as *al-milal wa al-nihal*, developed since the eleventh century onward and includes detailed treatment of Jewish, Christian and Muslim sects, as well as extensive descriptions of the religions and philosophies of Iran, India and Greece.

Islam admires and recognizes the religious pluralism in the holy script “If God had willed, the whole of mankind would have been one *ummah*... (Al-Quran 11:18). Thus it is a divine wisdom (*hikmah*), to give religious freedom and accepts diversity in religion and faith. If one does not accept the religious pluralism that means to argue the spirit and wisdom of God, Who is best creator and wise.¹⁹ The religious plural society not only strategically best served Muslim interests, but that it also had clear Qur’ānic sanction. In the contemporary times the nations are based on territory not on religion. As the outstanding Muslim personality Abul Kalam Azad said in his autobiography:

It is one of the greatest frauds on the people to suggest that religious affinity can unite areas which are geographically, economically, linguistically, and culturally different. It is true that Islam sought to establish a society which transcends racial, linguistic, economic, and political frontiers. History has, however, proved that after the first few decades, or at most after the first century, Islam was not able to unite all Muslim countries into one state on the basis of Islam alone.²⁰

Islam recognizes religious pluralism as an important social, political and moral issue. Islam from its origins developed in and responded to a pluralistic world because both Qur’ān and examples of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) reflects a pluralism that is relatively more advanced and viable when compared to other religious teachings and faiths. The Qur’ān makes clear that Allah has deliberately created the world to be divided in and composed of different nations, ethnicities, tribes, colours, and languages. The Qur’ān states:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ
 أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَأَلْوَانِكُمْ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ
 لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

Among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages, and your colours: verily in that are Signs for those who know. (Al- Qur'ān: 30:22)

The purpose of these differences is not to promote any sort discord, hatred or war, but, rather, they are first and foremost Allah's signs that humans should strive to have a better mutual understanding.²¹ Islam does not seek the negation nor the eradication of "the other" since Allah "created differences as a means of fostering competition in virtue among the nations, a fact that guarantees progress". Each group may resort to the force and coercion to impose its certain particular ideas and values on others, thus breaches into ones freedom of conscience. On the contrary, the Qur'ān sets its principle "no compulsion in religion". One finds numerous examples in the Muslim history such as the Constitution of Medina (*Ṣahīfat al- Madīnah*), placing of Black stone, 'Umar b. al-Khattāb's 'assurance of Safety' to the people of Aelia – Byzantine Jerusalem, thus guaranteeing their safety and religious freedom. As far as the globalised world is concerned which demands diverse ethnicities, faiths, cultures and languages but within a unit (society) with peace and harmony.

Islam and Pluralistic India

The debates on pluralism and multi-culturalism are among the hot debates of the present times due to the increasing communication and interaction between people all over the world owing to the phenomenon of globalization. Globalization as we know is not the new phenomenon for the Muslim world as it is like the universalism/global community concept of Islam. The contemporary globalization operating and accelerating in the whole world, in this wake of revolutionary technological advancements, have turned the world, from Atlantic to Afghanistan, into a global village. The contemporary phase of globalization fleets global interaction and new information systems having far-reaching effects on the worldwide relations, including the movement of goods, services and financial flows. In the new dominant paradigm of power and civilization, America and Europe remain the main players in making the new world order. The reason behind their dominant paradigm is their political influence, economic strength, command over technology and most importantly the control over media. They adopted their norms, values of life, socio-economic institutions and finally the political and economic interests over whole world, in the name of promoting liberalization, privatization, market economy and modernization.²²

The existence of age old inter-cultural and inter-religious interactions among the diverse religious denominations especially Hindus and Muslims has paved an easy way for understanding the religious 'other'. This has developed India into a pluralistic society with rich diversity of cultures, religions and ethnicities. Since medieval times, Muslim and Hindu Intellectuals have made continuous attempts at highlighting their respective understanding of other

religions especially Islam and Hinduism. Islam in India has historically been represented by both its esoteric form of Sufism as well as its various exoteric, traditional forms. Even after ruling large parts of India for eight centuries, Muslims overall remained a minority on the subcontinent. The ruling Muslim minority was generally tolerant towards the majority. This co-existence resulted in an Indo-Muslim syncretism exemplified in art, architecture, and culture throughout the subcontinent.

The founders of Modern India- Gandhi and Nehru- espoused a secular ideology that called on the state not to favor any religion, to extend equal rights to all religious communities, and to grant minorities special protections and privileges. But this structure was frowned upon by both radical Muslims and Hindu nationalists. The radical Muslims wants to make an Islamic state and Hindu nationalists (*Hindutva*) are insisting to reframe the identity on the lines of its Hindu origins and to make Islam and Christianity as subordinates in national life. Three among the twelve presidents have been Muslim and Muslims enjoying regularly representation in parliament and ministerial cabinets. But communal riots, involving Hindus and Muslims, have erupted on several occasions sparked by issues such as the slaughter of cows, triple *talaq* etc. The worst aspect in these communal riots is that, the most of the people which²³suffered are innocent people.

Conclusion

Today, we live in a globalised world where modern communication technology has brought different nations closer; however, this process has also created tensions amongst nations as well as within their respective societies. This situation demands adhering to Islamic teachings and ideals which helped set up pluralistic societies in the past. The teachings and the history of Islam give us the best principles and practices. Keeping in view the realities of today's world it is imperative that we understand the pluralistic ideals and approaches that have the full sanction of Islam. Sincere efforts are needed to make the pluralistic teachings of Islam a part of the individual as well as social life in order to shape and sustain a peaceful society. In India, Religion can be used as a motivational force to uphold the notions of pluralism and to educate its adherents about the notions of pluralism and co-existence in one's religion locally and globally to cope with the challenges of globalization posed by the modern period.

Religious pluralism accepted by the Islam in Qur'ān , Prophetic traditions and in other historical evidences aspire people of different religious faiths, cultures and ethnicity to come together, to strive for individual virtues and for the common good and have mutual understanding, which represents tolerance and pluralism in its real sense.

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