

Issues/Discussion Forum

Who speaks for Islam in India?

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In the absence of a clergy within Islamic social order, it becomes difficult to identify representative voices within Muslim society. Questions will be asked about multiple voices speaking in the name of the community and representing themselves in ways that they think are Islamic. For some, it can be argued that such a state of affairs has made the question of legitimacy and authority within Muslim societies confusing. The absence of a clear cut hierarchy and an apex body of decision makers has not only produced a crisis of legitimacy but has also made the process of religious reform difficult. It is argued that it would have been much better for the state to deal with a body of Muslims rather than different maslaks and faith orientations within Muslims who have never ending arguments with each other. The problem is that if such an arrangement of power is made within Muslim society, then only the orthodox Ulema will find space within it.

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The recent debate in India on the question of retention or abolition of triple is an important example in this regard. Simply put there are two different positions on this debate. Muslim feminists, progressives of all hues including some Ulema favour the abrogation of triple Talaq due to different reasons ranging from religious to secular. They are arraigned against a belligerent body of Muslim orthodoxy (a silently supported by other religious orthodoxies) who are dead against any change in the existing mode of Muslim divorce and argue that it will amount to interference in the Muslim personal law, an Anglo-Muhammadan law which they think is akin to a sacred canon.

An acerbic attack has been launched by the orthodox on those who want change within the personal law of Muslims, particularly revocation of triple Talaq, Nikah Halala and polygamy. Since the movement for the revocation of these practices has been led primarily by Muslim women, they are at the centre of these attacks. Apart from calling them stooges of RSS and the government, some very personal remarks have been passed which only goes on to show that the orthodox would go to any extent to discredit those championing the cause of change within Islamic law. The orthodox has not even spared the government of the day accusing it of trying to subvert the ‘age old’ personal law of Muslims. The fine print in all this is that the orthodox Ulema are convinced that only they are the custodians of Islam in India and consequently only they can opine on what constitutes proper Muslim law and whether any change is possible within it or not.

But this position is absurd to say the least. Islam consciously eschewed the institution of clergy. Any Muslim can lead the prayer as Islam proclaims a direct relationship between Allah and the individual believer. A man or a woman has equal right to offer supplication to the Almighty. Moreover, the very fact that Islam places an obligation on all believers to acquire knowledge can only mean that it does not expect that some Muslims should be more knowledgeable than others. Quran, like most other religious scriptures, has been an open book. Multiple readings of the text have spawned a plurality of denominations within Islam and each of them has their own valid interpretation of Islam. This can only mean that the reading of Quran as is being done by Muslim feminists is as valid as those done by the Ulema. From an Islamic point of view then it is not correct to say that someone’s interpretation of Islam is not valid or untrue. It seems that the Ulema, in their attempt to become the champions’ defenders of Islam have forgotten the simple fact there has never been a singular reading of the Quran which has been acceptable to all Muslims.

This can mean only one thing: that what sections of the Ulema are arguing is patently anti-Islamic. They are innovating against the established traditions which hold that multiple readings of the Quran are possible and are valid. There is a reason why Islam did not establish a clergy in the first place. The Ulema in trying to usurp the role of the clergy are

therefore doing a great disservice to the spirit of Islam. Islam's wisdom and its beauty lies in its plurality and diversity of views. Sadly it is the so called custodians of Islam who are hell bent on destroying this historical and theological heritage.

(Courtesy: newageislam)