

Issues/Discussion Forum

Demonising Muslims: How the Act is Rooted in a Cynical Reading of Islamic Scriptures

- M. A. Sofi

It's not always the case that a certain faith, religion or an ideology is misunderstood or misinterpreted exclusively by those who happen to profess a different faith, religion or ideology. The fact is that more often than not, it's also the committed, diehard followers of a certain strand of faith or ideology upon whom is completely lost the essence of these epistemic virtues which are fundamental to human life.

Take, for example, the idea of God that has this universal feature that across nations, countries and cultures all over the world, it conjures the image of an omnipotent, omniscient reality. However, in the human consciousness involving common men and women, a god is seen essentially as something no better than someone, something in flesh and blood. That's part of the reason why people across all faiths are seen falling over each other in their efforts to propitiate their (own version of) god by resorting to such things as turning their places of worship into dens of deafening noise and clamour. This ungodly spectacle is more pronounced in the subcontinent where people of different faiths are seen to vie with one another by raising the decibel levels to an unbearable pitch in mosques as much as in *mandirs* and *gurdwaras* as part of the divine obligation – now a ritual – seeking their god's blessings. The idea in doing so is this: higher the decibel levels in places of worship, higher the level of smugness in the thought of having reserved a place in *Janna't*, *Swarag* and what have you. The full throttle blaring of *azaans*, *bhajans* and *kirtans* has led to unacceptable levels of noise pollution all over the place and needs to be curbed, or at least brought down to acceptable levels. The hope of seeking peace of mind and soul in the midst of an otherwise quiet, calm and quiescent place has turned to be a will o' the wisp! What a gigantic mess one is being treated to in the name of religion and spirituality!

Along the same lines, it's much worse when it comes to the concept of *Tawheed* (monotheism) that constitutes the most vital and defining feature of Islam as a fundamental principle. It's here that Islam, and more generally all Abrahamic religions, differ from Hinduism and other religions in a most fundamental sense in that Hinduism represents a complete antithesis of this idea in view of its belief in the multiplicity of gods including idol worship.

However, far peskier are the ideas of *Kafir*, *Ummah* and *Jihad* in Islam which remain scarcely understood in large sections of the Muslim community no doubt, but have been among the chief reasons for the ubiquitous spectacle of Islamophobia now being witnessed around the world. It's not for nothing that in his recent outburst, the RSS 'ideologue' Ram Madhav says that "Muslims must forsake these three concepts of kafir, ummah and jihad to avoid the assimilation of Muslims into the Hindu society at large".

Now how does one make sense of this averment by Ram Madhav? Before doing so, let's try to understand what exactly do these concepts signify in the light of Quran?

In the general sense of the term, a Kafir, by definition, refers to one who is a disbeliever, a denier or one who rejects the idea of God as per the tenets of Quran and Islam and as such has nothing pejorative about its use inasmuch as the word merely stands for the Arabic equivalent of these terms. In essence, however, it has nothing to do with the absence of belief in the Islamic doctrine of divinity and prophecy. As stated by Najmul Hoda in an article that had appeared in the Deccan Herald about two years ago, no verse of the Quran identifies people of other religions as kafirs, an antithesis of Muslim. Islam could coexist with other religions without othering the followers of those religions or by treating them as impious sinners. For instance, a non-Hindu is not the antagonistic other to Hinduism as much as a non-Muslim need not be seen as being the hostile other to Islam. Such individuals certainly do not fit the appellation of a kafir. The Quran does not classify any community or individual as kafir on the grounds that they don't believe in the religion of Muslims. Only such individuals, or groups, have been thus designated who actively campaigned against Islam. Abu Talib, the Prophet's uncle, in spite of having never professed Islam, has not been called a kafir in the Islamic traditions since he protected the Prophet and made it possible for him to carry out his mission. He was not from the People of the Book, and so didn't belong to any major organised and recognised religion known to the Arabs of that time. At best, he was a *Mushrik*-one who associates partners with God- and so fell afoul of *Tawheed* – the unicity of God – a cardinal principle of Islamic faith as mentioned earlier.

Coming to the concept of *Ummah* which is the Arabic term for a community or a group of people who share common religious beliefs, specifically those that are viewed as the objects of a divine plan of salvation according to Islam, the concept also entails the idea of striving to initiate steps to improve the conditions of the community in terms of its welfare involving its economic well-being, education, healthcare and security of the community. However, that is not to preclude the possibility of the Ummah reaching out to other communities during the times of crises like an epidemic, floods, earthquake and other such natural calamities that may take their toll on life and property of human beings, regardless of their ecumenical persuasions.

Finally, Jihad refers to a personal struggle in devotion to Islam especially involving spiritual discipline and human struggle to promote what is right and to prevent what is wrong. It also refers to the practice of patient forbearance by Muslims in the face of life's struggles and toward those who wish them harm. According to the Quran, it also entails an informed intellectual discourse involving those who reject the message of Islam. But by no means does it grant the Muslims the 'divine right' to force their will to enforce the Islamic code involving the *Shariat* law in a system where people have opted for alternative forms of governance.

On the contrary, these concepts may indeed appear to be problematic if the essence of these concepts is lost on those who practice them or if the intention is to distort and interpret them by those who have a vested interest in promoting an image of Islam that is radical, regressive, antediluvian and violence-prone. The current fad of Islamophobia around the world derives primarily from this sinister plan of demonisation of the Muslim community by insinuating it as the inheritors of a supremacist ideology which the Sangh, and aided in good measure –

without weighing in the implications – by a tiny fraction of it comprising certain groups of Muslim zealots and constituting the fringe of the community. The distorted view as espoused and propagated by them involving the three terms referred to by the *Sangh pracharak* may be broadly summed up as follows.

Kafir, as someone who is not a Muslim, and hence a sinner and so is deserving of being excommunicated, looked down upon or kept at an arm's length. Ummah, as an exclusive club, a community of people sharing the same faith and religious belief who have no use for reaching out to or making friends with those who happen to profess a faith or religion other than Islam.

Jihad, as a war against non-Muslims in an effort to convert them to Islam or else remove them from the way by recourse to violence, if necessary.

In view of the colossal disparity between what is enshrined in the scriptures as the true spirit surrounding these concepts and what the Islam/Muslim-bashers in the shape of the likes of Ram Madhav would want the world to believe, the jury is out on the vacuity of his fulminations against these precepts and of his gratuitous advice to Muslims on the choice of the latter's 'grey areas' where, as he advises, they need to get their act together- by forsaking these concepts.

Of course, Muslims do need to look within and set their house in order. But that primarily entails, not their espousal of the aforesaid principles as understood and practiced by certain fringe sections of them where they surely need course correction in the light of Quranic injunctions, but also in the field of modern education and science where their track record remains lackadaisical and where they can't afford to wait more in order to matter and be counted.

The crux of the matter is that in spite of such fundamental differences of the idea and practice of faith between Islam and other religions involving, especially Hinduism, it's still possible for the followers of Islam and of Hinduism to live in peace and harmony as long as it's ensured that they steadfastly avoid the temptation to hold the other religion in contempt or as a lesser strand of faith for whatever reasons. This is not to suggest that an informed, intellectual debate on religions should be avoided at all costs between their adherents. Far from that actually! However, such debates and discussions should ideally be confined to those who are sufficiently well versed in and have a fair amount of understanding of comparative religions, especially of their own faith and religion. That, I think, is about the only way for the two largest religious communities in India to co-exist and to mend fences with each other. Else, the religious faultlines besetting the relations between the two largest religious communities in India shall continue to get more and more exposed and exploited to pit one against the another by the vultures who live off such vulnerabilities. In the interests of peace, bonhomie and fraternity between peoples of different religious communities, it's high time to resist and rein in the temptation to demonise and diabolise the other.

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