

ISSUES / DISCUSSION FORUM

Dilemmas of Muslims Living in the New Age: The Biggest Problems of Muslims Today

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The biggest problem facing Muslims today is that they still do not know that they are living in a new age. They have no idea of the implications of this. Their leaders, and they themselves, still cling to centuries old mindset which is totally out of date. Because of this, they are unfit for the new age. This is also true for the majority of Muslims who live in the West, because they share the same mindset. They may have studied in Western universities but their mindset is almost identical, and this is reflected in what they read, think and talk about in their homes. They wish to impose this old mindset on everyone else. Of course, this is impossible and is nothing but day dreaming and wishful thinking.

The old mindset of Muslims, which is still so deeply-rooted even today, was a product of an authoritarian political system. Today, we live in an age of democracy, and so we need a total revolution in our way of thinking. For thousands of years, kings ruled, and so popular culture was also authoritarian. There was a single king and the rest of the people were his subjects. There was a single master, and the rest of the people were his slaves or servants. A radical break occurred in the seventh century, with the advent of the Prophet Muhammad. The Quran talked about democratic decision-making, what is called shura. This represented a veritable revolution. However, the Arabs and others who later embraced Islam were mentally not prepared for the democracy that the Quran heralded. Their minds were deeply moulded for many centuries before the advent of the Prophet by authoritarian culture, and this could not be changed overnight after conversion to Islam. That is why the democratic notion of Khilafat was soon subverted, and, although the term was still used, it became a cover up for authoritarian monarchy after the period of the 'Four Rightly Guided Caliphs. And so in the name of Khilafat various despotic Sultans ruled over Muslim lands.

This was the case everywhere-under the Abbasids and Umayyads, under the Mughals, under the Arab rulers of Spain. The word of the Sultan was the law, and anyone who dared to oppose him was summarily killed.

Why Muslim Countries Lack Democracy

Because of this, democratic culture was never able to prosper in Muslim lands, although this was precisely the intent of the Quran. This continues to be the case even today. Scores of Muslim countries style themselves as 'democracies', but they are nothing of the sort at all. In fact, they are all dictatorships. Not a single of the 57 member states of the Organization of Islamic Conference is a democracy in the real sense of the word. One reason for this is that self-styled Islamic ideologues wrongly insist that democracy is 'un-Islamic'. This claim is not true at all. I see no contradiction between Islam and democracy.

Belief is the real part of Islam but politics is only relative. So far as belief is concerned Muslims should follow the eternal teachings of Islam as it is. So far as politics is concerned, it should be left to the democratic process. Free and fair elections should be held after the completion of each term and the elected candidate should be allowed to complete the term and given full opportunity to govern. According to my study of Islam this is in full conformity with Islamic teachings.

The democratic principle of shura that the Quran stressed took centuries to culminate. This happened not in a Muslim country, however, but in France, in the wake of the French Revolution. Islam had started this process of democracy, of revolt against dictatorship, but the process culminated in a non-Muslim country. It did not happen in a Muslim country because for centuries Muslim culture had remained deeply authoritarian and inimical to democracy, which is a complete contradiction of the Quranic spirit.

Democracy is based on the notion of equal rights for all. In a democracy, the prime Minister has, in theory, the same citizenship rights as a commoner. This is a complete contradiction of monarchy. Lamentably, Muslims have not been able to accept this basic principle of democracy. They want rights for themselves which they are unwilling to let others enjoy.

A democracy is characterized by a culture of give-and-take. Authoritarian monarchical culture is based on taking without giving. This is the basic problem of Muslims today. They want to take but not to give. They demand rights and privileges for themselves but do not want to give these to others or to allow them, too, to enjoy these rights. In this Why, they end up denying themselves the many opportunities and spaces that democracy could otherwise provide them with.

Let me clarify this issue with the help of an example. The Government of Pakistan imposed a ban on the social networking site Facebook because it carried a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad. Now, I don't know much about computers but I believe that Facebook is a great blessing, a wonderful means of communicating where you can convey your message throughout the world at no cost at all. In fact, my team at the Centre for Peace and Spirituality uses it almost every day to send out our messages. It is truly a great blessing.

Democracy means that everyone has the same rights. When it comes to Facebook, Muslims have as much right to use it as do others. If Muslims want to use Facebook or any other form of communications to convey the message of Islam to the world (as I and my team are doing), they cannot stop others from using it.

Islam teaches us to search for and use opportunities and to ignore the problems. Facebook provides us with such great opportunities to convey the message of Islam to others. Naturally, some people might misuse it, as they have in this case, but the right approach is not to ban Facebook and to create a huge hue and cry. The misuse of Facebook cannot be stopped. It is best left ignored, while Muslims should creatively use the same technology for their own purpose of explaining the truth of Islam to others. If Muslims have the right to propagate Islam, others too have the right to propagate their views no matter how different they may be to ours. We cannot seek to ban them from speaking.

Let me clarify this with the help of a personal example. Some years ago, I was in Lucknow, where I met a scholar of Hindu background, who was something of an atheist. He argued that if the Prophet Muhammad had not been born, it would have made no difference to human history. Now, had some other Muslim been in my place he might have got inflamed by

such a remark. He might even have resorted to violence. But I did not react in this way. After all, just as I had the right and freedom to speak, so did he. Instead of getting angry, I turned my attention to researching the life of the Prophet Muhammad, on the basis of which I wrote two books in Urdu 'Islam Aur Daur-e Jadid Ka Khaliq' and 'Paighambar-e Inqilab,, which were later translated into English as 'Islam: The Creator of the Modern Age, and The Prophet of Revolution' respectively. These books proved to be immensely popular.

Had I responded to the Lucknow scholar with violence or agitation, as is the common Muslim response to provocation I would not have been able to write these books and thereby influence so many people with my arguments. Had I reacted negatively by becoming angry, this would have further reinforced his negative views of Muslims. This is not the Islamic way of doing things. After all, even in the prophet's time his opponents said bad things about him, but he never reacted by ordering that they should be forcibly silenced or killed. Unfortunately, as the Facebook controversy in Pakistan shows, Muslims have not learnt the democratic, which is also the truly Islamic means to resolving contentious issues. Hence, they create even more problems for themselves and for others.

Sadly, this is not what Pakistani Muslims or the Pakistani Government chose to do. Instead, they overreacted, banning Facebook, thus effectively denying to themselves the wonderful possibilities that this technology provides of conveying the true message of Islam to others. At the root of this is the authoritarian mindset of Muslims which is ill at ease with the demands of the democratic age. This is causing them to face grave problems, while also further reinforcing negative stereotypical images about Islam and Muslims in the minds of non-Muslims.

Let me clarify my point about the lack of democratic culture proving to be a cause of serious damage to Muslims themselves with the help of the case of Iraq today. Iraq was ruled by Saddam Hussain, a military dictator, for over two decades. He came to power not through democratic means but, rather, through a military coup. He continued to stay in power through rigged elections that made a complete mockery of democracy. After supporting him for several years, America began to feel that its interests were being harmed by him and so decided to unseat him in order to bring democracy to Iraq. It asked Saddam to step down, for free elections to be held and for a new elected government to come to power. The Iraqi ulema

ought to have agreed to this proposal .After all, dictatorship is un-Islamic and genuine democracy is supported by Islam. They ought to have given a fatwa in favour of democracy and called for the end to Saddam's un-Islamic dictatorship. However, they did not do so largely because democracy is against their mindset, the same authoritarian and thoroughly un-Islamic mindset that millions of other Muslims share. Had they lent their support to democratic elections by issuing fatwas to that effect, thereby facilitating Saddam's exit and his replacement by a democratically elected leader, it is likely that Iraq would have been spared the horrors that it has had to witness in the course of the American invasion of that country.

It is sad but true that, because of this mindset, most Muslims simply cannot fit comfortably in the democratic age. They still mentally live in the age of authoritarian kingship. Some of them even believe that they should rule the entire world and that no one else has the right to rule. They believe that they alone are right and everybody else is wholly wrong. Needless to say, such thinking is a complete affront to democracy. This attitude is a major cause for negative feelings and attitudes towards Muslims on the part of others. One can safely say that it is not non-Muslims but Muslims themselves who are their own greatest foes.

Barring, of course, the primary sources of Islam, almost all the literature that we Muslims read today is based on this authoritarian model. Scores of self-styled 'Islamic' ideologues, pen-pushers and poets also peddle a completely distorted, highly authoritarian and wholly anti-democratic interpretation of Islam that has nothing to do with Islam as it really is. This is based on the notion, wholly unwarranted in Islam, that only Muslims have the right to rule and that the rest of humanity must remain subordinated to them, that Muslims must be emperors and others their subjects. With a mindset like that, how at all can Muslims live in today's new, democratic age?

In the meanwhile, non-Muslims are going ahead and adjusting very well to the demands of the new age and are willing to listen to other views. Just the other day I was invited to a Hindu-run college to speak on Islam. When my team requested the manager of the college if they could distribute copies of the English translation of the Quran that we have prepared, he was delighted, and we were able to give scores of copies of the Quran to the almost entirely Hindu audience, who very happily and willingly accepted them. We are often

invited by Hindu organizations to talk about Islam and we have never had any negative experiences with them. In fact, most of the Hindus we have met are sincerely interested in our work and are more than willing to cooperate with us, because they believe that truth has many dimensions. The contrast with the authoritarian, dictatorial and anti-democratic Muslim mindset is really stark. In today's age those who can creatively adjust to and champion democracy will survive and flourish. Those who consistently oppose it are fated to remain misfits in the present world. This is what is happening with the Muslims today. Their own anti-democratic attitudes are responsible for their bad image in the eyes of the rest of the world. They continue to cling to the old, authoritarian model, based on the notion of a single dictatorial leader and of subjects who have no right to express their views. Muslims want the right to speak and preach, but are unwilling to let others, too, enjoy the same right. This approach of theirs is in fundamental contradiction to democracy. It is this that lies at the root of the widespread and deep-rooted intellectual crisis of Muslim thought today. Unless the Muslim mind is changed, intellectual crisis will become even more acute with every passing day.

Muslims regard democracy as un-Islamic, but this is not true at all. Today, democracy has resulted in the creation of numerous opportunities to serve Islam, rather than hinder it, contrary to what Islamist ideologues assert. In today's age, opportunities have been decentralized, no longer centrally controlled by kings. Power is also becoming increasingly decentralized, and governance is transforming itself into administration. This is all a result of democracy. According to a Hadith report, before the end of the world, the word of God would be brought to every home. The possibility of this happening is very real today with the development of new means of communications such as Facebook, which, as I pointed out, instead of using to spread the word of God, the uninitiated in Pakistan are seeking to ban. But it is God who is creating these new possibilities for His word to enter every home-through new means of communications, freedom of speech and expression and democracy, which allow people to choose whatever religion they wish to follow. Lamentably, Muslims do not understand the wonderful possibilities of dawah that democracy, free expression and exchange of views and modern communications afford. Instead, they keep complaining against them, thus doing the greatest damage to the dawah mission. Instead of imbibing the spirit of democracy and relating to other people in a friendly and loving manner, which is essential for dawah, they brand them as 'enemies, and 'conspirators', thus further alienating

them from Islam and creating a bad image of themselves and of Islam as well. Ignoring, or even denying, the wonderful opportunities that democracy has opened for us to engage in dawah, they are actually going against God's will.

Another reason why Muslims are proving to be failures in adjusting to the realities of the new age is their tendency only to react to events or developments, without a positive agenda of their own. Just the other day, a big delegation of some self-styled Muslim 'leaders' went to meet the Indian Prime Minister with a long charter of demands, asking for this and that. What blindness is this that they completely ignore the wonderful opportunities that God has bestowed on us in this modern age-such as freedom of thought, democracy, global interaction and methods of instant communications that are great blessings for us to engage in our principal task of dawah-and all they can think of is few reserved jobs, for instance, that the prime Minister can provide them with, if at all! They can see the prime Minister, but they totally ignore the wonderful possibilities that God has opened up to us through democracy for dawah. Instead of cherishing and using these possibilities, they are simply running after a few dozen jobs! What a tragedy!

I constantly appeal to Muslims not to get provoked by inflammatory remarks or writings. That is neither the democratic nor the Islamic way of reacting. I appeal to them to exercise patience, what is called sabr in the language of the Quran. Some critics blame me of thereby seeking to turn Muslims into cowards, but this is completely wrong. They do not understand what sabr actually means. In fact, sabr is a form of great wisdom. It entails ignoring the problems and using the opportunities that any situation affords. If Pakistani Muslims won't exercise sabr in the face of the cartoons on Facebook, if they do not ignore this problem and, instead, focus on the wonderful possibilities of dawah that Facebook provides, they will only be harming themselves and the dawah cause, which should be their principal concern.

It is a natural law that problems will always remain. God has given human beings the capacity of choice-to do good or bad-and this freedom of choice can be misused to create problems. A foolish person is he who remains obsessed with the problems, real and imaginary, that he faces and hence is rendered incapable of taking advantage of the opportunities that the situation also provides. This is how Muslims typically behave. On the

other hand, a wise person is he who ignores the problems he faces, is undeterred by them, and who instead focuses on the available opportunities. This is a positive formula. Unfortunately, although this is a basic Islamic principle, Muslims have failed to learn this basic truth. Scores of self-styled Islamic ideologues are completely ignorant of this principle.

My whole active life has been spent trying to reform the authoritarian Muslim mindset, which is a complete contradiction of the democratic Islamic ethos. For this task I have had to face much opposition from Muslims but I continue my work undeterred, even in this old age of mine. Yet, I have not given up hope. It is a natural law that, like individuals, communities also go through various phases-birth, adolescence, maturity, old age and decline. Muslims have passed through these stages and are presently in the state of decline. All communities pass through this cycle, and Muslims are no exception to this rule. But it is also true that a community in decline need not be in that state forever. It can be rejuvenated again. This is what I have been trying to do all these decades.

(Courtesy: Sociology of Islam)
