

Islam and Modern Age

There are several hostile myths around Islam thanks to Western media and communal forces in India. Western media by and large was never sympathetic to Islam but after 9/11 it became downright hostile and did not feel shy in spreading all sorts of myths about it. The Zionist factor can also not be discounted. In India the Sangh Parivar and particularly the RSS¹ has gone an extra mile to defame Islam. Lastly, we should not ignore the role the Muslim extremists play in discrediting Islam through their own shameful role.

Generally people form their opinion about anything by reading newspaper headlines. And newspaper headlines tend to be sensational. The events of 9/11 provided newspapers one more opportunity to sensationalise news about Islamic militancy. Even social scientists and scholars studying Islam in Western world project Islam as religion of violence and fanaticism. Also, Islam is projected as anti-modernism, anti-science, anti-democracy and anti-women.

If not media people at least social scientists and scholars should be able to make distinction between what a religion teaches and how social structures impact a believer's behaviour. But most of the western scholars also do not make such distinctions and whatever happens in a Muslim society is blamed on Islam. A religion finds its own level in a given society. Thus one has to understand social structure as much as religious faith. A religion is not practiced in a vacuum, it is practiced in a concrete historical and social conditions. A religion may stand for most modern and democratic ideals, but same cannot be practiced in a backward feudal society.

If the Muslim countries do not have democracy and modern political institutions, it is not because of Islam but because these countries have feudal social structure. There is nothing in the Qur'an or Islamic teachings, which opposes democracy or democratic governance. No Muslim country has had industrial revolution without which it is not possible to have genuine democratic governance. Most of the Islamic countries were colonised by western countries and it is these countries, which foisted one or the other form of dictatorship, monarchy or sheikhdom and throttled democratic movements in their own interests. It is USA, which has supported monarchies, sheikhs or military dictators in these Muslim countries. And now they blame Islam for lack of democracy in these countries.

The Qur'an requires even the Prophet (PBUH = Peace be upon him) to consult his companions in all secular matters (3:158) and also Muslims should consult each other in their affairs (42:38). Thus the Qur'an clearly encourages democratic institutions and this was required when the world had not known democracy at all. However the pre-modern society was not prepared for democratic governance and Muslims came under the influence of Roman and Sassanid institutions and soon monarchy developed in the Islamic world. Islam was totally feudalised and continues to be so in the absence of modern capitalist revolution.

If one studies the Qur'an carefully and impartially one will find it refreshingly modern, liberal and humane in approach. It emphasised human dignity (17:70), freedom of conscience (2:256) and equality of all human beings without any discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, language or tribe or colour as these distinctions are only for identities, not for discrimination (49:13). These are most modern ideals and part of UN human rights declaration of 1949. The Prophet (PBUH) again and again exhorted his followers not to discriminate among Arabs and non-Arabs. Muslims never practiced racism and gave equal rights to black people right from the beginning. The western countries practiced racism until recently and are yet not completely free of racial discrimination. The Prophet (PBUH) appointed Bilal, a liberated black slave as his *muazzin* (i.e. caller to the prayer) a great honour to which many of his eminent companions were aspiring.

Islam, as the popular myth has, is a religion of violence, religion of jihad. It is far from true. Contrary to this myth Islam is a religion of compassion and love, as much as any religion like Buddhism or Christianity is. It is true Islam came into existence in a most violent society and the Prophet had to face violent opposition and it was not easy to establish peace in that society. One has to face the situation in concrete historical conditions and has to try to go beyond it.

The main aim of Islam was to establish a just and compassionate society but Muslims also had to respond to given situation. The Qur'an nowhere glorifies violence but permits it reluctantly in the given situation making it clear to Muslims not to be tempted to be aggressors as Allah does not love aggressors (2:190). Also, the Qur'an requires Muslims to fight to liberate men and women and children who are weak from the oppressors (4:75)

The Qur'an never permitted war of aggression and never allowed Muslims to kill a single soul as it will mean killing whole humanity and taught them to save innocent life as saving one innocent life amounts to saving whole humanity (5:32). Had Muslims followed this Qur'anic teaching they would have been a great example for peace and non-violence but in that violent Arab society of the time it was so difficult to follow this exemplary Qur'anic teaching.

Some people either out of ignorance or with deliberate intention quote the verse 9:5 to the effect that the Qur'an requires Muslims to ambush unbelievers and kill them until they believe. It is far from the case. This verse refers to those unbelievers who broke their pledge with Muslims and attacked them. Naturally the Qur'an, in the given conditions, requires Muslims to wage war against such betrayal until they embrace Islam and establish prayer and pay the poor rate. But it is certainly not a general permission to kill any unbeliever or force him at the point of sword to embrace Islam. The very next verse (9:6) belies such an assumption. This verse clearly lays down that if the unbelievers lay down arms and seek protection, provide them with protection and convey him to the place of safety so that no harm comes to him. Unfortunately this verse is not referred to and only previous verse (i.e. 9:5) is quoted to prove that Islam is a violent religion and teaches its followers to kill non-believers or convert them at the point of sword.

Another aspect of Qur'an which even Muslim scholars (*'ulama*) are often unaware of is transcendent aspect of the Qur'anic teachings. The Qur'an takes realistic attitude of the given but does not confine itself to it but wants to go beyond the given situation and desires to create an ideal one based on higher values. If it exhorts Muslims to defend themselves with weapons, if attacked, it also requires Muslims to work for establishing justice and peace so that humanity can flourish.

It does not want to stuck with war and violence even for defence but wants to go beyond and forgive and show compassion. Forgiveness and compassion are certainly higher values and revenge, retaliation (*qisas*) are in keeping with human nature. The Qur'an does not disregard given situation but also does not take it as final and encourages to go beyond and establish higher values.

Thus for stealing it provides harsh punishment (for hardened criminals) but in the very next verse (i.e. 5:39) it says, "But whosoever repents after his wrongdoing and reforms, Allah will turn to him (mercifully). Surely Allah is Forgiving and Merciful." Thus it is not punishment alone but forgiveness and mercifulness, which is more important. Punishment should be meted out where necessary but stress should be on reforming those who are repentant and one must show mercy and compassion to such people.

Similarly the Qur'an permits slavery in view of the given situation but encourages believers to go beyond the given situation and liberate slaves and even exhorts them to spend part of the zakat money on liberation of slaves. It also exhorts Muslims to treat slaves like themselves (i.e. feed them same food they eat and clothe them what they wear) until they are unable to liberate the slaves.

Similarly it requires Muslim to fight for self-defence where absolutely necessary but work for justice and peace so that world becomes violence-free. The situation in the Arab society was such that it was not possible to do away with violence easily and so violence was permitted in that context but ultimate aim was to establish peace, which is an ideal condition. That is why the Muslims were made to greet each other with peace (*salam 'alaykum* and *wa 'alaykum salam*). Thus it will be seen peace is fundamental, not war.

It is unfortunate that many Muslims themselves think that jihad is essential part of Islam and mean thereby that one has to use violence for establishing Islamic values. In fact the Qur'an does not use the word jihad in the sense of war or violence. The Qur'anic use of the word jihad is in its literal sense i.e. to make utmost efforts for spreading goodness (what the Qur'an calls *ma'ruf*). As shown by us in another article the use of the word jihad in the sense of war is a post-Qur'anic usage.

Thus it will be wrong to infer, as people often do, that Islam is religion of jihad (in the sense of war) and wages war against non-Muslims. The fact is that Islam permitted war reluctantly as it was absolutely necessary but made it clear that ultimate aim is to establish a peaceful society. In other words violence is existential and peace is transcendent and ideal. Ideally a Muslim should try his best to establish peace and minimise use of violence.

It is true that there has been abundant use of violence in the Muslim history but that is because the Muslims hardly ever followed the Qur'anic ideals in their lives. It happens with the followers of all religions. All of us pay lip service to the ideals of our religions or quote them to prove its superiority but hardly ever follow it in our practical lives. The Christians too stress love and compassion but their history too is full of violence. But the problem is that we wrongly compare history of one religion with ideals of other religion.

If we compare teachings of Islam with those of Christianity both stress forgiveness and compassion but if we compare history of Islam with teachings of Christianity we find violence in Islam and love and compassion in Christianity but this is not fair and objective comparison. But this is what we often do and derive wrong conclusion. It is necessary to compare teachings with teachings and history with history.

The Qur'an in fact repeatedly stresses four fundamental values i.e. justice (*'adl*), benevolence (*ihsan*), compassion (*rahmah*) and wisdom (*hikmah*) and these are Allah's names too. Thus a good Muslim should be just, benevolent (for humanity), compassionate and wise. If he does not practice these values he cannot qualify as good Muslim. These values must be established and one must constantly struggle to establish these values. That is real jihad. The Prophet (PBUH) is also reported to have said that real jihad is to speak truth in the face of a tyrant and he also is reported to have said that to fight with the sword is 'small jihad' and to control ones desires is 'great jihad'.

Also, one has to bear in mind that in any religious tradition there is no single trend but there exists multiple trends and one should not cite example of one particular trend and generalise it. What media does is to cite example of few extremists among Muslims and then generalise it for all Muslims. It is most unfair and unscientific method. It is true a few Muslims use violence and justify it in the name of jihad but it is wrong to say all Muslims agree with such an untenable position. Most of them oppose such indiscriminate use of violence but media hardly listens to their voices, as it does not make sensational news and the media hungers for sensational news.

There are peaceful trends in Islam represented by Sufi Islam, which is followed by a great majority of Muslims. The very basic doctrine of Sufis Islam is *sulh-l-kul* i.e. total peace and peace with all. There is absolutely no place for violence and intolerance in the Sufi Islam. Peace, tolerance and respect for all faiths is very basic doctrines among the Sufis. One of the Sufi schools believes in what is called *wahdat al-wujud* (i.e. Unity of Being) which implies all are manifestation of one being and so all distinctions of caste and creed become irrelevant. This is the most inclusive trend in Islam. Ibn al-Arabi of Spain was founder of this doctrine. Love is very central to this school of Sufism. Most of the Muslims all over the world follow Sufi Islam and not Wahabi Islam which is purist and tends to be quite intolerant.

Unfortunately the western media often cites example of Wahabi Islam of Saudi Arabia and show that Islam is intolerant. In Saudi Arabia too reality is not static. It is changing and now changing fast. The Muslims, as well as the ruling family, is realising the consequences of sectarian and intolerant approach and are bringing about changes and working for peace and attacking terrorism. One should understand that Islamic world is no more static. It is changing and trying to adjust with new realities although its pace may not be satisfactory for some. People take time to adjust in matters of religion and tradition. Social change is very complex process and requires great deal of patience.

There is another powerful myth about *kufr* and *kafir*. It is thought that Muslims regard all non-Muslims as *kafir* and hate them and either want to convert them or to kill them. Once again it is far from true. It is unfair to quote some of the Qur'anic verses to this effect without understanding its context. Qur'an clearly distinguishes between *harbi* and non-*harbi* kafirs and advises Muslims to live in peace with the latter. Not only that it requires Muslims to fulfil covenant with *kafirs*, if any and never to renege on the covenant unless they renege. To honour a covenant with *kafirs* is a must for Muslims.

The verse 9:4 makes it clear to Muslims that they must honour the covenant with polytheists. It says, "Except those of the idolaters with whom you made an agreement, then they have not failed you in anything and have not backed up any one against you, so fulfil their agreement to the end of their term. Surely Allah loves those who keep their duty." It is clear from this verse that Muslims must keep their agreement with the idolaters as long as they do. There is no question of renegeing on it and killing anyone of them or even forcing them to embrace Islam.

The chapter 109 of the Qur'an is quite seminal in this respect. The *kafirs* are free to follow their religion as Muslims are to follow their own. It is clear declaration of harmonious co-existence with anyone, whatever their belief. And even if one calls someone to the way of Allah it has to be not only in peaceful but also in the best possible manner and with wisdom. Thus the Qur'an says, "Call to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the best manner." (16:125)

In view of this verse who can say that the Qur'an wants to impose Islamic beliefs with coercion? Its very basic doctrine is freedom of conscience as pointed out above and in the verse 2:256. Faith and freedom go together; one cannot separate one from the other. And in fact there can be no real faith without genuine freedom. Faith is matter of conviction and conviction cannot be imposed with

coercion, it can be acquired only by exercising one's freedom. That is why the Qur'an stresses the importance of freedom of conscience.

Also, every non-Muslim cannot be described as *kafir*. In Arabic the word *kafir* means one who hides truth and refuses to accept it. Those who possess truth in the form of earlier scriptures like Torah or Bible or any other scripture (like the ones possessed by Hindus) are not *kafirs* as they possess truth from Allah. Allah has sent his guides (*hadith*) to all the nations (13:7). The Sufi saints in India accepted Hindus as possessing truth through their scriptures like Vedas and others. They refused to call them *kafirs*.

Thus the word *kafir* should be applied with circumspection and not loosely as many Muslims tend to do. It is either out of ignorance or arrogance of possessing 'superior' faith. They need to be educated in the Qur'anic terminology. The problem is of religious leadership also. They insist on traditional meanings which themselves were product of specific historical situation. That historical situation exists no more but the tradition persists and these traditions are adhered to.

The word *kafir* has assumed very different internal dimensions too. Every sect of Islam considers the rival sect as being *kafir*. Thus one can say the Muslim theologians have declared more Muslims as *kafirs* than non-Muslims. Thus there is great need to sensitise Muslim religious leadership itself in this matter. In fact the word *kafir* has been used by the Qur'an for those who actively opposed Islam when the Prophet (PBUH) was preaching. They were not only opposing but persecuting him and his followers. The whole concept of *kufr* has to be related to that historical situation.

If we carefully study the general tenor of the Qur'an it should be left only to Allah to decide who is *kafir* and who is not. Secondly, even if there is consensus on someone's being *kafir*, one must coexist harmoniously with him unless he adopts hostile and aggressive attitude towards Muslims. It is also important to note that in history of Islam there has not been general consensus among Muslims who is and who is not *kafir*. In view of all this it is best left to Allah to decide, as He alone knows the inner thoughts of human beings.

Thus it will be seen from above that there are so many myths about Islam and these myths are not grounded in reality. These myths must be critically examined before being accepted. One should not, as it often happens, quote the Qur'anic verses without understanding their historical context. It is, to say the least, being either unaware of methodology of understanding a scripture, or adopting a priori hostile view. Most of the scholars take a priori hostile view and help spread such myths about Islam.

Such myths create unnecessary hurdles in promoting peaceful co-existence, which is so vitally needed in modern world which is becoming more and more diverse and plural, thanks to the faster means of communication and economic migration which is taking place on ever increasing scale due to globalisation. There is great need to understand world religions more objectively and sincerely to promote world peace. There was time when religious rivalries were rampant. But now time has come to shed these rivalries and promote peaceful co-existence.

However, there may or may not be religious rivalry there are powerful political interests who misuse religion and religious hostilities for their own ends. The USA under the leadership of Bush deliberately chose to pursue the policy of confrontation with Islam and built up anti-Islam ethos through use of media. Huntington also wrote a book *Clash of Civilizations* to serve the US political agenda after collapse of communist regime in Russia.

One has to be wary of such developments and political misuse of religion. We must do everything possible to create proper understanding of every religion so that in our pluralist world everyone can live in peace and harmony.

¹ **RSS** = Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh – Hindu-Nationalisten – Hindu Nationalists – nationalistes hindoues – nacionalistas hinduistas

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Zusammenfassung: Islam und modernes Zeitalter

Ashgar Ali Engineer, indischer Muslim, der den „Alternativen Nobelpreis“ 2004 verliehen bekam, bemüht sich intensiv darum, die Werte des Miteinanders durch spirituelle Toleranz zu realisieren. In diesem Beitrag, den der Autor im Juni 2005 zum ersten Mal auf seine Internetseite setzte, wird aufgezeigt, dass der Islam keineswegs der Moderne entgegensteht, sondern dass er sich wie alle Weltreligionen auf einer sachlichen Basis einbringen wird und einbringen muss, um dem Frieden in einer pluralistischen Welt zu dienen. Die religiösen Rivalitäten müssen auch deshalb aufgegeben werden, weil politische Interessen – besonders unter den Hegemonialansprüchen der

USA – politische und militärische Konfrontationen leider nicht beseitigen werden, sondern unter dem Stichwort des „clash of civilizations“ als zwangsläufig angesehen werden. Keine Religion darf sich für Gewalt instrumentalisieren lassen.

Summary: Islam and the modern age

Ashgar Ali Engineer, an Indian Muslim, who was awarded the "Alternative Nobel Prize" in 2004, is taking intensive efforts to realize the values of cooperation by spiritual tolerance. In this contribution, which the author first published on his homepage in June 2005, he shows that Islam is in no way opposed to the modern age and that it has to and is going to take part, on a neutral basis, in serving peace in our pluralistic world just like all the other world religions do. Religious rivalries must also be given up because political and military confrontations – especially hegemonical claims of the USA – will otherwise not be eliminated but will be regarded as inevitable with reference to the cultural "clash of civilizations". Religions must not in any case serve as an excuse for violence.

Translation: Elke Westerhoff

Résumé: Islam et l'âge modern

Ashgar Ali Engineer, musulman indien, reçut le Prix Nobel Alternatif en 2004. Il s'efforce de réaliser les valeurs de vivre ensemble à travers une tolérance spirituelle. Dans cet article, que l'auteur mit sur son site internet la première fois en juin 2005, il montre, que l'islam ne s'oppose pas du tout à la modernité. Par contre – comme toutes les religions mondiales – il va et il doit s'introduire à une base objective pour servir au paix dans un monde pluraliste. Il faut aussi renoncer aux rivalités religieuses parce que des intérêts politiques – particulièrement sous les prétentions hégémoniales des États-Unis – n'élimineront malheureusement pas les confrontations politiques et militaires, au contraire, ils sont considérés comme nécessaires sous le mot „clash of civilizations“. Aucune religion ne doit se laisser utiliser pour la violence.

Traduction: Edeltraud Reindl-Beckel

Resumen: El islam y la edad moderna

Ashgar Ali Engineer, un musulmán indio, que recibió el Premio Nóbel Alternativo en 2004, se esfuerza intensivamente por realizar los valores del vivir junto con los otros mediante la tolerancia espiritual. En este artículo, que el autor publica por primera vez en su pagina de Internet en junio 2005, se muestra que el Islam no se opone en absoluto a la modernidad, más bien que como todas las religiones mundiales se introduce y se debe introducir sobre una base objetiva para servir a la paz en un mundo pluralista. Por eso hay que renunciar también las rivalidades religiosas, porque los intereses políticos – especialmente las pretensiones hegemónicas de los Estados Unidos – por desgracia no eliminarán las confrontaciones políticas y militares, al contrario, son considerados como necesarios bajo el lema "clash of civilizations". Ninguna religión se deberá dejar instrumentalizar para la violencia.

Traducción: Yenny Buholzer Sepúlveda

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