

Beyond dogmas & rites

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EVEN those Islamists who are campaigning for political power to establish a Shariat-compliant civil administration and financial system lay all the emphasis on dogmas and observance of religious rites which are already followed with amazing uniformity by Muslims throughout the world. This notwithstanding minor differences in modalities and irrespective of where and under what form of government they live.

This over-emphasis on the observance of religious rites, which promises a berth in paradise, has made them completely neglectful of their duties as responsible and honest citizens of the state and unmindful of their rights as human beings. Consequently, most of them are being ruled by dictators, hereditary monarchs and a corrupt bureaucracy.

It may appear paradoxical but is, unfortunately, a fact that the people who pray five times a day, fast for a month and go for Umra and Haj at least once happen to be the citizens of such states (barring notable exceptions) where, according to prestigious international agencies, corruption is rampant and social development indices are touching rock bottom. It is for the religious-political leaders to ponder why this baffling contradiction in terms stares them in the face and what corrective approach is indicated.

This is a typical case of missing the wood for the trees. The sheer frequency with which the Quran exhorts the believers to 'establish Salaat (worship in all its forms) and pay Zakat (poor-due)' was led to the false assumption that this is the be-all and end-all of faith.

The fact, however, is that this repetitive exhortation covers, symbolically, the requirements of both worlds — present and the hereafter — Zakat to alleviate poverty and mitigate economic hardship and salaar for reward in the next world. But this should not obscure other ideas and axioms which are present in Islam from the very beginning but have remained out of our theologians' focus in spite of the fact that these have been "one by one" and generally, accepted by the West.

"These are the duty of free thought and free inquiry, the duty of religious tolerance, the idea that conduct and not creed or class distinction should be the test of a man's worth in law and social intercourse, women's right to full equality with men before the law, her rights to property, the licence to divorce and remarry, the duty of personal cleanliness, the prohibition of strong drinks..." These quotations are from the British Muslim scholar, Marmaduke Pickthall's "Madras Lectures". These well-known ingredients of the Shariat have been adopted in stages, by the modern civilized societies without acknowledging the debt to

Islam. What is lamentable is that our learned clerics have not treated this subject with the importance it deserves, as it would have acquainted the laymen and students of religious seminaries with the valuable contribution their religion has made to reclaim the West from its barbarism of the Middle Ages and as an example for other non-Muslim societies in respect of social and legal rights of their male and female citizens.

To the ulema such axiomatic principles enunciated originally by Islam, which have now been accepted and adopted universally, are purely secular in character and are outside the purview of religion. This is the main reason why they do not highlight them as

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Islam's contribution to reform other societies that had no inkling of gender equality in the sense that women have the same rights and duties as men, and that there being "no compulsion in the matter of religious belief" (according to Quranic pronouncement) lacked religious tolerance. Thus they waged the infamous crusades, erratically, dragging on for three centuries to finish off a rival religion.

In short, our ulema compartmentalize the secular and the sacred separately, the way the Christian church did in its heyday and viewed with disdain the Islamic axioms and ideas mentioned by Pickthall and called them irreligious and outside the domain of religion. The matter, according to them, concerned itself only with dogmas and doctrines of Christian faith and tenets governing prayers and worship.

Our ulema also overlook the fact that, much before the French Revolution, Islam laid the foundation of a socialist system enunciated by 'revealed' guidance which not only stressed economic justice but also piety and God-consciousness. Allama Iqbal, contrasting Islam with Marxist Communism — "equality of stomachs", as he calls it in Javed Nama — says that the latter is "lacking in the illuminating flash of divine revelation". Therefore, one can call the Islamic system, which lasted in its pristine purity for about 60 years during the lifetime of the earliest four caliphs, as a happy blend of social and economic morality.

Political theorists of post-Renaissance

Europe like Rousseau, Voltaire, and Hobbes, standing on the opposite extreme end, ignored entirely the spiritual aspirations and sensibilities of mankind, just at our present — day 'ulema' overlook the economic and other mundane aspects, considering them irrelevant to their mission.

The banishment of communism from Russia, after the collapse of the Soviet system, proves that a system which has no moral or religious basis and seeks to provide only a square meal a day to all citizens and health care and education to those who need it is bound to collapse like a house of cards once an economic crisis develops in the land. Another lesson that one can draw from the disintegration of the Soviet Union after 70 years of its enforced initially by means of repressive organs (like the dreaded KGB) and exemplary punishments, can work satisfactorily only as long as there is economic satisfaction in the country.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the polemics of whether Shariat can be adopted as the law of the land. It is difficult to convince the majority of right-thinking persons that Shariat, as interpreted by our ecclesiastical class today, which is not different from how it was interpreted by our venerable jurists eight centuries ago, can look after the requirements of the complex fabric of a political-cum-financial-cum-administrative infrastructure in the present age where globalization is the

buzz-word and no state, however strong militarily and economically, can carve for itself a completely independent path.

A path based on ideas and traditions of the remote past is not likely to satisfy the global concerns of human rights. For instance, in respect of harsh punishments like the death penalty which are now being outlawed. It is inconceivable that the world community will not feel outraged if corporal punishments like flogging, amputation of human limbs and stoning to death, according to Hudood laws, are awarded by the judiciary and implemented by the executive arm of the government. Similarly, restricting all overseas trade and commerce to riba-free transactions may not be feasible unless the intention is to stand alone on the world stage, come what may.

This introduces the subject of *ijtihad*, or re-interpretation on the basis of *Qiyas*, or analogy, so as to make the divinely-revealed injunctions applicable in the situation prevailing today on the planet as a whole.

It is an encouraging aspect of our history that, during the last 13 centuries from the Khilafat originating in Madinah till its abolition on the dismemberment of the Ottoman caliphate in the first quarter of the 20th century, Muslim thinkers and administrators displayed an amazing genius in adaptation and transformation of the Byzantine, Sassanid and post-Renaissance European principles and art of government and their application in running and managing the Khilafat successfully.