

Believing and Belonging in a Pluralist Society **Ataullah Siddiqui**

'O mankind, We have created you from a single (pair) of male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other.' Qur'an 49:13

What is the meaning of having a belief that creates an exclusive community when the community by virtue of shared belief cannot live in isolation and demands participation? The community of believers is asked to engage in a society that is largely 'illiterate' about religion. Here one is entitled to believe without belonging to a community and one can belong but may not believe. Here one may have a personal religion, and one may pick and mix and create his/her own belief. The Muslims' dilemma is that they are a faith-based community - believing and belonging to the community - the ummah - go hand in hand. By virtue of belief one belongs to and by virtue of belonging one believes in. Here we will explore some of the Islamic resources for a religiously pluralist society.

The Qur'an is the anchor of that believing and belonging community and the Prophet Muhammad is its leader. The subject matter of the Qur'an is human beings and they are the basic addressees of it. And to establish a cohesive, humane and just social order is its earthly objective. The Qur'an creates a society where the individual and the society are under an obligation to 'enjoin good and forbid evil' (3:104; 110; 9:71). The Qur'an regards the Prophet Muhammad as one among many Prophets. It claims that for every community God has sent messengers and they will be 'judged between them with Justice, and they will not be wronged' (10:47). It also declares that for each community God has appointed a different path (shir'ah) and way (minhaj) (5:48.). These different communities with various emphases of beliefs are encouraged to 'compete with one another (as in a race) in righteous deeds. Wherever you are God will bring you all together...' (2:148).

Differences of belief are seen as God's plan. The abolition of such differences is not the purpose of the Qur'an nor is the Prophet Muhammad sent for that purpose. The Qur'an also emphasises that such differences do not suggest that their origin is different; rather it emphasises that human beings have a common spirituality and morality (7:172, 91:7-10). These differences are there because God has given human beings the freedom to choose.

In this Qur'anic vision of unity and diversity the human task is to find a way to handle the differences. In a society matters should be discussed, debated and a consensus should emerge and no force be allowed to countenance aggression and violence (22:39-40). In all these processes Muslims are bound by their belief to co-operate with all - Muslims or not - in securing peace and justice.

These few verses from the Qur'an suggest that Muslims have enough resources to allow them to rethink and relocate their theological resources. If a clear direction is not found in the Qur'an, Muslims are encouraged to look into the practices of the Prophet. If nothing is found there, the Muslim community - through their learned scholars - is encouraged to reach a consensus which is nearest to the spirit of Islam. In this process any attempt to freeze the society in the norms of the past is not acceptable, nor is it tolerable to drag the society back to the past. What is required is to look back, keep the connection and not lose track. A keen eye is required to differentiate between what is central and what is peripheral. In an Islamic vision of a pluralist society, the mission of the Prophets includes all human beings and justice and dignity is at its core. The Prophet Muhammad's mission was no different.

A landmark event took place when the Prophet migrated to Medina. The first thing he did was to establish a Covenant between the Ansar - natives of Medina - and the migrants from Mecca who had left behind their business and property, known as Muhajirs, and the Jews - the entrepreneurs of Medinan society. The Covenant was of great significance in that it took place against the backdrop of bloody and ruthless tribal conflicts. It dealt with the concerns of those who had left their homes and had nowhere to live and the concerns of those who, like the Jews, wished that their culture and norms should not be impeded. There was recognition that each party had a right to pursue their way of life and livelihood without encroaching upon others' rights and that each party had a duty to help and protect the other in times of crisis and aggression from outside. It also recognised and established an acceptable pattern of compensation for the loss of life and property for all the people of Medina. The Covenant was drafted after proper consultation with the leaders of the respective communities and that provided the kind of political system which was acceptable to all.

Another incident in the Prophet's life indicative of his inclusiveness was shown in his relations with the ruler of Abyssinia, the Negus. He was a Christian and was known for his generosity and kindness. When the nascent Muslim community faced persecution in Mecca, the prophet encouraged his followers to take refuge in Abyssinia and these qualities of the King were highlighted by the Prophet. Gradually, in small numbers, the Muslims began to arrive in Abyssinia and some of them interacted with the larger community and lived as a minority amongst the Christian majority. The Meccans however tried to win over the king with gifts and persuasion so that he would hand over to them these 'bandits' and 'culprits' of their society. The king refused and gave the refugees all the help they needed.

The Negus died a few years after this incident. When the news reached the Prophet he told his Companions that their brother had died, and that they should pray for him. He performed a special prayer which meant that the Negus died as a Muslim. But no one saw the Negus praying as a Muslim prays nor did he fast during the month of Ramadan as Muslims did. Throughout his life he remained a Christian and was known as generous and just. This incident suggests that we should not be judgmental about what is in the hearts of others and how God will judge a person for his/her belief. Our belonging has a much wider meaning than just to belong to our own community or ummah. We do connect with others in our humanity. In the development of our own community we owe a great deal to others and by their contribution to ours, in some way, they too become part of us.

A faith based identity emerged and continued to provide a framework where all others could play a constructive role within and outside their communities. As far as Muslims were concerned, the society's order and norms must be dictated by three elements: elimination of prejudice, easing hardship and establishing justice. These three elements are to be established in the society irrespective of religious belonging.

The Muslim world was largely divided between those who lived in Muslim territories (Dar al-Islam) and those who lived outside its domain, generally considered as the territories of War (Dar al-Harb). But this description of the world was already on its way out. By 1839, the Tanzimat reforms in the Ottoman Caliphate changed the whole minority-majority concepts within and outside its boundary. The Tanzimat reform removed the faith-based identity and replaced it with citizenship.

The increasing importance of the nation states where countries are dependent on migrant workers, has changed the debate against faith-based identity in favour of citizenship as the basis of identity without denying the fellowship of the ummah.

Today the Muslims' socio-religious discourse is largely dominated by the discourse of Muslims living in a predominantly Muslim society. Muslim jurisprudence and its legacy are largely an exploration of how they ruled and conducted their affairs within and with the outside world. They do discuss minorities but within their domain. It is a rich and excellent source. Those living as a significant minority for centuries are almost lost in this discourse. Muslims lived as a minority, for example in Cyprus, and conducted their affairs in peace and harmony. But how did they live there? And how did they conduct their affairs in the midst of a Christian majority? How did they maintain their identity as Muslims and at the same time feel at ease living there? It seems Muslims have little resources to explore this co-existence and to derive and contextualize anew the circumstances they find themselves in today. Over the centuries, and particularly the last hundred years or so, Muslim discourse has been led by political priorities and has had little opportunity to explore the issues of jurisprudence and theology and the challenges faced by significant Muslim populations today. The recent mass migration of Muslims to the European and North American countries is forcing Muslims to revisit their theological roots and reconnect them with today's world. There is an urgency to search for a new language, that will recognizably be Islamic, which will not only take note of those Muslims living as a minority but also those minorities living in the midst of Muslim majorities. Believing demands that our relationship with God be strengthened but it also demands that our communal belonging should not be conducted in isolation of all other communities. *f*

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