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ISLAM, PLURALISM & MULTI-CULTURALISM

Muhammad Haniff Hassan *

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EXTREMISTS often see the world in a binary Manichean perspective: ‘us’ versus ‘them’. Similarly, Muslim extremists see the world to be in a constant battle between believers and disbelievers. All disbelievers are perceived to be in some sort of a conspiracy to destroy the believers. They will not be pleased with the believers until they follow the disbelievers’ way of life.

According to the extremists, Muslims are to be wary and suspicious towards all disbelievers and whatever comes from them. They should not associate themselves with the disbelievers so as to avoid anything that may dilute their identity and sacrifice Islamic principles. Some even proclaim that co-existing with ‘the infidels’ will deny Muslims God’s Paradise in the Hereafter. For extremists, Islam as a way of life means Muslims do not require anything from others to live in the contemporary world.

If such a perspective is accepted by Muslims, it will mean a tremendous challenge for them to live in a pluralistic and multi-cultural setting, especially for Muslims living as minorities in largely non-Muslim countries. Even Muslims living in predominantly Muslim countries should not take the issue for granted, because globalisation predisposes them to pluralism.

It is important that Muslims have the correct mindset and attitude towards pluralism and multi-culturalism so that they may achieve peace and harmonious living in this world, which is the essence of Islam.

Pluralism is Natural

Islam teaches that pluralism is part and parcel of the laws of nature. There are numerous references to this in the Quran which, for example, refers to the diversity of nature. Even fruits, though of one type, may look and taste different (Quran, 6:141-142). The Quran states that God created the different sexes and ethnic groups among mankind for positive reasons, that is, to know and understand each other (49: 13).

Muslims and non-Muslims are also not homogenous, and they come in different forms, types and even colours. God accords each one of them their own status and ruling, as can be found in the verses in 8:72-75 and 60:8-9. For example, the Quran allocates a special status to the People of the Book, by declaring the meat (of animals) slaughtered by them as *halal* (permissible) and that it is also *halal* to marry their women (5:5) and there are also different types of People of the Book (5:82).

More pertinently, another verse explains that religious diversity was intentional (5:48). The verse explains that God could have made mankind as a single community or nation. Instead, He created diversity, wherein every people have their own laws and way of life, so as to test who among mankind are truly committed to peace and the common good. The Quran proclaims that differences among human beings will remain (11:118-119). Hence it is neither possible, nor commanded, to make everyone believe in one faith (10:99).

All these teach Muslims that pluralism and diversity exist in all aspects of God's creation. Diversity adds richness and variety to life, and Islam requires Muslims to live with these differences and vie with one another in good deeds. These also teach Muslims to avoid generalisation in thinking and in making judgments. Instead, each has to be given its appropriate status and ruling.

Living With Pluralism

Thus, in essence, the teachings of Islam celebrate diversity and pluralism. This pluralism includes the diversity in culture, religion and views.

Muslims should be open to the diversity of views. They should look at this positively, as long as it is handled in a civilized, rational and objective manner, and based on the appropriate scientific knowledge. In as much as Muslims have the right to protest the views of others, others too have the right to protest their views. Accepting diversity forms the basis of tolerance, mutual respect and acceptance of the existence and rights of each other.

Islam should not be made the cause of difficulty for Muslims to co-exist with non-Muslims. From its early days, Islam in Mecca existed in a plural society. So it was in Medina, as can be seen from the peace agreements signed between the Prophet and the various pagan Arab and Jewish tribes then in that city.

Accepting pluralism does not mean that there will be no differences or conflict between various groups. Diversity will cause clashes of interest. Whenever there are differing needs, every party will strive to champion its interests above the others. This is normal and cannot be avoided. The important point is to ensure that in striving for its own interests, each party does not contribute to a negative outcome. The striving should be managed to produce a positive outcome, at the least, a better understanding of each other's aspirations.

Muslims are required to observe decorum in handling differences with people of other faiths (29:46). Despite the differences between Muslims and peoples of other faith, they are obligated to respect and protect places of worship (22:40). The fact that Muslims have been obligated to protect places of worship, even those belonging to other faiths, is a tacit approval for Muslims to live and work with others in various circumstances.

Inclusive, Not Exclusive

One of the important traits for harmonious living in a multicultural society is that of being inclusive. Inclusive here means the openness to accept others or what comes from others, and not rejecting them purely because they are not from 'us', or from the same group. Inclusivity is founded on the belief that positive universal values and elements exist in various groups and communities. People and views are accepted or rejected based on their positivity or

negativity, not on the basis of whether they originated from ‘us’ or ‘them’.

Like other religions, Islam requires its followers to preserve its principles and fundamentals. Some of these differentiate Islam from the other faiths and provide Muslims with a distinct identity. Nevertheless, Islam does not call for absolute exclusivism such that Muslims are to detach or separate themselves from other communities or to reject anything that comes from them just because they are non-Muslim.

There are many indications that Islam requires Muslims to be inclusive so that they can help achieve harmonious and peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies. God sent Muhammad as a mercy for all creations (21:107). How can Muslims fulfill this role if they choose to be absolutely exclusive?

On the contrary, Islam encourages its followers to have an open attitude to positive foreign ideas and influence, to learn from the experiences of others, and to strive for what is good. These are important prerequisites in promoting progress and development. Knowledge is regarded as something that should be sought after regardless of its source of origin. Early Muslim scholars encouraged Muslims to seek knowledge in every part of the known world, even from China because it was then a thriving civilization from which Muslims can learn a lot.

It is acknowledged by Western scholars that Muslims were responsible for preserving and subsequently transmitting to the West much of the intellectual heritage of the Greeks. This would not have been possible had the Muslims then not embraced inclusivity.

* Muhammad Haniff Hassan is a research analyst at Institute of Defence & Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University