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CAN ISLAM BE CONTEXTUALISED?

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TO some Muslims, the notion of one God, one Holy Book, one *Qiblah* (direction of prayer), one *ummah* and one brotherhood means that there is only one way to practise Islam. It also means one viewpoint for Muslims on all issues, or in all circumstances, regardless whether they are Europeans, Americans or Singaporeans.

While the underlying intention of this “one view fits all” approach is noble, which is to promote unity among Muslims, such a perspective could also lead to problems. One could fall into the grave mistake of applying the rulings made by the classical *ulama* without understanding the context in which the opinions were decided upon hundreds of years ago.

This mistake could lead to extremism, as the subscriber of such a view may accuse those who differ with him on the grounds of differing contexts or considerations as lesser Muslims. This “one view fits all” perspective will inevitably cause the imposition of one view on others, which does not fit the pluralistic nature of creation.

I would argue that the notion of a ‘European Muslim’ or ‘Singaporean Muslim’ is not fundamentally wrong in Islam. Instead, it is part of being contextual in practising the religion, which is one of the fundamental characteristics of Islam.

Contextual Islam

Islam is a faith built on its contextual setting. It takes into account the realities of the time as well as other factors in determining the rules and practices of the faith. Hence, the ruling for a certain matter may change to take into account differing realities. What is forbidden in one context could be permissible in another. A good Muslim is one who is not only able to uphold the fundamentals of the religion but also contextualise the teachings when the need arises - without sacrificing the principles of the religion.

The very nature in which the faith was revealed supports this idea. Islam was revealed gradually to Prophet Muhammad over a span of 23 years. The main reason behind this incremental Revelation was to cater to the evolving context and development of Muslim society at each point in time. The incremental nature of the Revelation avoided the sudden imposition of religious practices.

A good example was the prohibition against alcohol consumption, which was a deeply entrenched habit among the pre-Islamic Arabs. It would have been difficult to immediately

and totally prohibit them from drinking alcohol. Islam started by criticising the habit first. Later on, it prohibited Muslims from consuming alcohol when they wanted to perform prayer. Only 15 years after the Revelation of the Quran did Islam finally prohibit Muslims from consuming alcohol totally.

The Quran was revealed gradually over a span of several years. During the first thirteen years after the prophethood of Muhammad and before his migration from Mecca to Medina, most of the revelations were on matters pertaining to faith and conduct. This was to suit the context of a young faith, whose followers were a weak and powerless minority facing persecution in pre-Islamic Mecca. Once Muslims became a governing faith community after the migration to Medina, the faithful needed to translate religion into societal rules. Thus, many of the revelations on criminal justice and business transactions started only after the migration.

Governing an evolving society necessitated laws, which could equally evolve with the times. Islam allows for this through the doctrine of abrogation. Some of the *syariah* laws were abrogated due to the changing circumstances of the Muslim society. In the case of the prohibition of alcohol, *syariah*'s earlier stance of mere dissuasion was subsequently abrogated in favour of complete prohibition.

Individuals are given space to live and worship. The Quran enjoins Muslims to practise the religion "to the extent of his ability" (2:286). This implies that Islam recognises constraints faced by Muslims in practising the religion. Thus, Muslims are only obliged to strive the best that they can, and not beyond rational constraints. This is the essence of contextualism in Islam. To demand from Muslims beyond what is realistic and practical is against the principle of justice -- a fundamental attribute of Islam and God Himself.

***Rukhsah* or flexibility**

The *syariah* allows for flexibility. *Rukhsah* refers to a provision in the *syariah* which allows exemptions from a general rule, in the event that the rule involves or causes a debilitating difficulty. The exemption is specific to the need. *Rukhsah* allows the *syariah* to cater to the varying contexts faced by man.

For example, although drinking alcohol is prohibited in Islam, it is permissible for a stranded traveller who has lost his way and cannot find any water to drink except for alcohol. If his situation is so critical that he will die without consuming the alcohol, then the rule of drinking alcohol changes for him from one of prohibition to one of compulsion. It becomes compulsory for him to drink the alcohol because Islam does not allow a human being to endanger himself or cause destruction to his body. In Islam, the obligation to preserve one's life takes precedence over the prohibition of alcohol if the circumstances warrant it.

Context is always part of the *ulama*'s consideration in issuing a *fatwa* or religious ruling. One who studies the opinion of the early *ulama* will find that they changed or modified their *fatwa* from place to place and time to time to give due consideration to differing situations and circumstances.

In Singapore, the Mufti issued a *fatwa* disallowing organ transplants in 1973. The *fatwa* was changed in 1986 because the advancements in medicine had changed the basis of the *fatwa*.

Special fiqh for Muslim minorities?

Because being contextual is a fundamental characteristic of Islam, some Muslim thinkers and religious scholars are increasingly recognising the differences between Muslims who live as a majority community and Muslims who are in a minority. Minority Muslims are deemed, according to this view, a different segment of the Muslim *ummah*; their unique context requires different solutions and approaches to their problems. Thus the emergence of the idea of a special *fiqh* (jurisprudence) for minority Muslims and the establishment of the European Council for Fatwa and Research chaired by the eminent Islamic scholar, Dr. Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi. One of its main purposes is to issue *fatwas* which meet the needs of Muslims in Europe, solve their problems and regulate their interaction with the European communities.

The idea has also gained ground with the increased awareness and efforts by minority Muslims in Europe, America and other countries to integrate with the mainstream societies in the non-Muslim countries where they live. The new generation of Muslim migrants are increasingly making attempts to entrench their roots in their country of adoption and disassociate themselves from the historical contexts of their forefathers. A prominent figure in this work is Tariq Ramadan who wrote *To be a European Muslim*.

But like any other religion, Islam possesses fundamentals that are absolute and unchangeable. What remains in contention is what are the absolutes that may not be changed. And in the event that the absolutes are not feasible, when exactly may *rukhsah* be applied, and how contextualisation is to be carried out.

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