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“Enemies” of God: Extremists’ Perception of the Religious Other

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Synopsis

Muslim extremists perceive people of other religion as “enemies” of God. This perception is formed through a perverted interpretation of Islamic scriptures.

Commentary

ONE HIGHLY debatable issue currently discussed in contemporary Islamic thought is defining the acceptable code of conduct between Muslims and non-Muslims. A major source of the debate comes from Muslim extremists who claim that love and loyalty should only be reserved for fellow Muslims while all others should be disavowed.

These Muslim extremists consider people of the Religious Other as “enemies” of God. Their extreme position covers a spectrum of resulting actions: from hating and disavowing the Religious Other to declaring war on them and justifying their killings. The hostile perception of the Religious Other is derived from their perverted interpretation of Quranic verses.

Hatred and Disavowal of the Religious Other

Muslim extremists’ hatred of the Religious Other can be acutely observed through their strong belief in the concept of *Al-Wala’ wal Bara’* (Loyalty and Disavowal). Through this concept, they claim that Muslims can only give their loyalty and associate with their co-religionists while performing disavowal of the Religious Other.

Muslim extremists believe that the Quran provides the instruction for Muslims to hate and disavow people of the Religious Other. For example, the 60th chapter or surah of

the Quran known as *Surah Al-Mumtahanah* (literally: Chapter of 'The Woman Who is Examined') is often used by them to justify their hatred and enmity.

A comprehensive understanding of this chapter is vital to comprehend how hatred of the Religious Other is formulated by Muslim extremists. The chapter exposes the characteristics of the "enemies of God and Muslims" with whom alliance is forbidden. It is also from this chapter that the concept of *Millat Ibrahim* (The religion of Abraham) is believed to be taken by Muslim extremists to illustrate the importance of disavowing the Religious Other. Muslim extremists refer to *Millat Ibrahim* to show the urgency of following the footsteps of Prophet Abraham in disavowing non-Muslims.

The chapter's first verse was revealed through the story of Hatib Bin Abi Balta'ah, a companion of Prophet Muhammad who was perceived as a traitor when he discreetly informed the Meccans of the Prophet's plan to conquer Mecca. This forms the basis for Muslim extremists' claim that Muslims are prohibited from giving their loyalty to the non-Muslims. They argue that Hatib's action of betraying the Muslims by revealing their secret to the enemies clearly indicates disbelief (*kufr*) due to his loyalty and alliance to the enemies of the Muslims.

"Enemies" of God and Muslims

The first verse in *Surah Al-Mumtahanah* uses the term *'aduw* (enemy) to refer specifically to the hostile Meccans who were non-Muslims. In fact, the use of the term "enemy" in its different variations is mentioned four times in this chapter. The use of these words repeatedly is significant as it sends a strong message that those who do not believe in *tawhid* (oneness of God) are the real enemies of God, Islam and the Muslims who should be disavowed.

These enemies as stipulated in the verse are described as "people who have disbelieved"; "have fought the Muslims because of their religion" and "have driven the Prophet and Muslims out of their homes".

The historical context of this verse shows that the enemies are no ordinary non-Muslims but those who are hostile to the Muslims. Hence, the definition of the "enemies" here suggests that the verse excludes other non-Muslims who do not fight the Muslims because of their religion nor chase them out of their homes.

As such, these non-Muslims must not be regarded as enemies of Muslims. This notion is reinforced in the same chapter where the Quran instructs Muslims to treat non-Muslims who do not fight them with justice and kindness.

Following the Steps of Abraham

The chapter also speaks about the story of Prophet Abraham who disavows his own idol-worshipping community including his father who refused to believe in *tawhid*, the oneness of God. Like the story of Hatib, this also becomes the basis for Muslim extremists' negative perception of the Religious Other. It is from this story that disavowal of non-Muslims by Muslim extremists is conceptualised. Based on this story, they claim that disavowal of non-Muslims is a necessity of *tawhid*.

The verse that reveals the story of Abraham also mentions him as uttering: “Verily we are free (*bura-a-u*) from you and whatever you worship besides God. We have rejected you, and there has started between us and you enmity and hatred forever until you believe in God alone.”

The concept of *Millat Ibrahim* as contained in this verse refers to the sincerity and loyalty of Abraham who submits himself devotedly to the worship of one God. His sincerity towards *tawhid* is further shown by his destruction of the idols which are worshipped by his community and his disavowal of them as illustrated in this verse. The verse portrays Abraham’s disavowal of those who worship idols including his own father.

Abraham and his followers uttered the word “*bura-a-u*” (literally: free from or disavow) which shows that they were free from what is being worshipped other than one God. In essence, the word “*bura-a-u*” was misconceived and taken out of context by Muslim extremists to push for the necessity of disavowing the Religious Other.

Nuanced Understanding Needed

Muslim extremists have misused the true meaning of Quranic verses to conceptualise and justify the type of relationship they desire with people of the Religious Other. However, what these extremists fail to appreciate is the holistic nature of Islam’s guiding principles and the need to engage the Quranic verses in context. Once these two considerations are employed, their negative perception can be countered and nullified.

In the final analysis, a nuanced understanding of the religious scriptures in tandem with contemporaneous issues is critical to guide Muslims towards the direction of positive inter-religious relations and integration. This is especially crucial as a negative perception of the Religious Other vis-a-vis the concept *Al-Wala’ wal Bara’* is especially problematic and injurious to today’s social environment where minority Muslims need to co-exist and live harmoniously among plural communities around the world.

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