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ISLAM AND THE CONCEPT OF TOLERANCE AND CO-EXISTENCE

The human conscience seems to have come to a stage to put a stop to the exploitation of religions in the pursuit of political gains or the settlement of long-standing disputes. This trend has been clearly manifested in the recent discussions to find a peaceful solution to some of the bloodiest and most violent conflicts in recent times attributed to religious or ethnic differences such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, crisis in Ireland or the ethnic problem in Bosnia.

India is the home of several religions. It has a privileged position among the comity of nations to understand and promote inter-religious dialogue. India and the Arab world share the advantage of being the cradle of almost all the major religions known to mankind. Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism were born either in India or the Arab world. India which has declared itself by Constitution as a secular state has in fact the second largest number of Muslims in the world.

Incidentally, I wish to make a reference to another significant event which I participated at the beginning of this month at Casablanca in Morocco. It was the first Middle East/North Africa Economic Summit. More than 2,500 people comprising of heads of states, ministers, administrators, businessmen, academicians and other opinion leaders participated in the Summit. This Summit was held after achieving a remarkable breakthrough in the political reconciliation process between the Jewish state of Israel and its Arab neighbours. This process commenced in 1991 at the Madrid Peace Conference which led to the historic signing of peace treaties between Israel and Palestinians and subsequently between Israel and Jordan. Egypt concluded a peace treaty with Israel way back in 1977.

At this point, it is significant to make a reference to the clear divine order of God to the Muslims, in the context of their relation

with their enemies, that they should respond positively to any offer for peace made to them. Quran says:

“If the enemy incline towards peace, so thou also incline towards peace”. (*Quran 8:61*)

At the Casablanca Summit, the Arab and Israeli officials, decision-makers, business leaders and investors put their heads together in a cordial atmosphere and discussed about the future regional economic co-operation. They mixed freely without inhibitions and discussed on the possible business ventures, exchange of visits etc.

As we know, the Arabs and the Israelis were enemies in the recent past. In the name of Judaism and Islam, these sons of Abraham fought five major wars during the past five decades with tremendous loss of lives and resources and disappointment to both parties politically and militarily. It has been proved beyond doubt that wars could succeed only in generating despair and desolation to human beings. The Arabs and the Israelis in Casablanca seem to have decided to join hands voluntarily and almost dramatically to fight against their real and common enemies of poverty, extremism, political exploitation and misuse of their faiths by the vested interests. Ironically, not a single adverse reference was made at the Casablanca Summit on Judaism or Islam. Through the Casablanca Summit, the whole world has come to realise that it was not Islam or Judaism that was the cause of the conflicts between the two nations. These two religions were not genuinely responsible for the bloodshed, deaths and destruction inflicted over five decades of bitter enmity. These two religions are certainly not liable for the material damages, financial drains and the resources wasted by the two nations.

The two warring factions spent an average of US\$ 60 billion annually on arms and ammunition alone. Over US\$ 700 billion is believed to have been spent by them for armaments during the past decade. All these resources could have been easily utilised in creating and providing a better standard of living for the people of these countries.

The Arabs and the Israelis finally seem to have realised that the region which they live in share similar characteristics in many

ways. They face identical problems as well as challenges. They share the same historical and cultural heritage. Their aspirations for socio-economic development and cultural rejuvenation are identical. The people of these two regions are sincerely longing forward to a peaceful and prosperous life free from tensions.

Religion has never been a barrier or a cause for social friction and political conflicts. In fact, Islam and Judaism belonging to the same root could easily become a common platform for reconciliation, brotherhood and cooperation. They can become the beacon light in the path of progress, prosperity and peace. The adherents of these two religions have hopefully decided to work together with renewed confidence and determination. They have to realise the full potential for building the necessary infrastructure for a just and lasting peace. It is a region where the people should be inter-dependent and their interests inter-related. It is going to be a region without barriers where the private sector will become the engine of growth and will be fully integrated with the rapidly evolving global economy.

It was amazing for me to see how the people with the bloodiest history in recent times could transcend themselves to an era of peace, forgetting their bitterness and enmity and engage themselves in a serious dialogue related to regional development and cooperation. The participants at the Summit discussed about specific and realistic issues which include the development and expansion of the requisite modern infrastructural facilities such as roads, railways, causeways, tunnels, bridges, sea and airports, industrial estates, free zones etc; enhancement of industrial and agricultural activities; production, distribution and management of water; development of tourism; establishment of joint banks and other financial institutions; development of telecommunication highways etc. These were not mere ideas or objectives. Instead, they were supported with the feasibility studies of specific projects. A representative list of the projects is attached.

As demonstrated, to some extent in the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict or what it used to be described until recently as the Jewish-Muslim conflict, religion is not the real cause of the conflict between nations belonging to different faiths. Violence has never been advocated or approved by any religion. I am of the view that all religions

in the world including Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism promote love, justice, mutual respect, stewardship and honesty. All these religions have laid a common and solid ground for the cooperation, tolerance and co-existence of mankind.

All the major religions of the world have played a significant role in the evolution of the human civilization and culture. They evolved as a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe and grew as an organised system of beliefs that bound people to become a close-knit society.

Out of over five billion people belonging to different religions of the world, Christians constitute 34 percent or 1.7 billion of the world population. Christianity began as a movement within Judaism. Jesus was a Jew as were his followers, the Apostles. "Christ" or the chosen one, was sent to this world to fulfil God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jesus Christ who commands now the largest following in the world advocated and preached about the Kingdom of God.

Hinduism is the religion of 85% people of India and is the oldest and third biggest religion in the world with 665 million adherents. Almost all Hindus are in Asia and mostly in India, with about 1.5 million in Africa and scattered in other countries. In Hindu Vedantic thought one can abstract such principles as the all-pervasiveness of the divine, the divine spark inherent in each individual, the essential unity of all religions and the concept of humanity as a single extended family or *Vasudaiva Kudumbakam*.

As far as Vedantic Hinduism is concerned, it starts with the basic principle referred to in Rig Veda. "There is only one being or truth is one, the learned men speak of it variously. That which exists is one; sages call it by various names." (*Rg Veda*, 1.22)

I recall what Swami Vivekananda has said years ago: "Sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendent, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often with human blood, destroyed civilizations and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time has come; and I fervently hope that the bell that

tolled in honour of the Parliament of Religions may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen and all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal."

Unfortunately, his optimistic hope has not been fulfilled. But we cannot abandon the vision; it simply means that we must redouble our efforts to achieve the goals that he has eloquently articulated. For this, it is necessary to highlight the golden thread of mysticism that reins through all the great religions of the world. Whether it is the glowing vision of the great Upanishadic seers, the luminous sayings of the Buddha, the passionate outpourings of the Christian saints, the amazing assertions of the Muslim Sufis or the noble utterances of the Sikh Gurus, we have ultimately to find that the light within us has become one with it. Then only will the true significance of the inter-religious dialogue become manifest.

Islam is the second biggest religion with 881 million adherents spread over 45 countries. In Arabic, Islam means submission, obedience or peace. It is meant as obedience and submission to God to attain peace in the world. The believers of this universal religion are called Muslims. They believe in one and only God. For them, the Holy Quran is the word of God confirming and consummating earlier revealed Books.

The Holy Quran was revealed to Prophet Mohammed, the last of a series of messengers of God to mankind - from Adam through Abraham to Moses and Jesus. Quran says: "He has revealed to you (Mohammed) the Book with the truth, confirming the scriptures which preceded it; for He has already revealed the Torah and the Gospel for the guidance of men and the distinction between right and wrong". (*Quran III-3-4*).

"We discriminate against none of His Messengers" (*Quran II-285*).

Prophet Mohammed's sayings and deeds (Sunnah) serve as a second basis, besides the Quran of the beliefs and practices of Islam. To quote again from the Quran: "Verily in the messenger of God, you have 'a good example to follow'" (*Quran XXXIII-21*)

Prophet Mohammed advocated and preached the unity of God and the concept of a unified and consolidated community of mankind bound by a universal belief and a universal truth.

It is not merely the admission of faith but supreme love that makes faith penetrate the heart. The way of living life and moulding society in accordance with the teachings of the Quran and the way to find inner strength that reaches the source within man, come from the Holy Prophet. He was the messenger and the man who created a new man and a new society and led to the creation of a new civilization and culture.

The life of the Prophet is the best example for Muslims to emulate as it embodies the Holy Quran in practice. In fact, the only way to live by the Holy Quran is to follow the life of the Prophet. Sunnah, the life example of the Prophet is nothing but the Quran in practice.

Prophet Mohammed was born and lived in a time and era that was characterised with ignorance, cruelty, superstition, profligacy and internecine tribal warfare. The land of Arabia from AD 500-650 witnessed unending wars between clans and tribes. The Prophet struggled very hard to bring peace and amity to them so that they could be welded together in a single brotherly unit. Revelation instructed the Prophet to be kind and helpful in dealing with his opponents.

Prophet Mohammed was such a mercy that he declared that to remove an obstacle from another's path leads one into Paradise, to quench the thirst of a dog entitles one into Paradise, and to tie a cat until it dies makes one deserving of Hell-fire. Such was the mercy that the Holy Prophet professed and such was the mercy of which his model was the living example.

The greatness and grandeur of the stirring message brought to the world by the Holy Prophet and his entrancing personality have fascinated many non-Muslim intellectuals such as Michael H. Hart, renowned American historian, astronomer and mathematician, George Bernard Shaw, Voltaire, Tolstoy, Thomas Carlyle, John Austin, Edmund Burke, Charles Francis Potter, H.A.R. Gibb et al.

George Bernard Shaw in his work "The Genuine Islam" says: "If he (Prophet Mohammed) were alive today, he would solve all the problems which threaten to destroy human civilization in our time". According to Voltaire, Prophet Mohammed was a great man and a trainer of great men by his example of virtue and perfection. A wise law giver, a just ruler, an ascetic Prophet, he raised the greatest revolution the earth has seen. Edmund Burke has stated: "The Mohammedan law is binding upon all, from the crowned head to the meanest subject. It is a law interwoven with a system of the wisest, the most learned and the most enlightened jurisprudence that ever existed in the world".

Through the Holy Quran (29-46), the divine instruction was clearly given as follows: "Let there be no compulsion in religion".

Islam is a missionary faith and Muslims are enjoined to propagate and preach this Divine way of life and establish the word of God on His earth. There are two aspects of this propagation – enjoining right and virtue and forbidding evil and oppression. Islam believes in individual brotherhood and effaces all distinctions of colour and race.

The relevance of Islam to modern society is based on the evergrowing importance of universality in a religious doctrine. The simple and natural message of Islam, in laying down the ground-rules of relationship between the creator and the created, without reference to geographical, racial and ethnic barriers is a sublime principle for all time.

Right from the beginning Islam acquired its characteristic ethos as a religion uniting in itself both the spiritual and the temporal aspects of life and seeking to regulate not only the individual's relationship to God (through his conscience) but human relationship in a social setting as well.

The cornerstone of Islamic doctrine is that all humankind descends from one archetype of Adam-Eve and is one family. The Quran says: "O mankind, we created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes" (*Quran 49:13*). Hence, we can meaningfully speak of human nature. The common origin

is a basis for the shared constitution and nature of the human identity. In other words, humanity is one indivisible soul (*Nafsin Wahida*), the strongest Quranic foundation for mutual compassion and tolerance. As souls, "we are of God and unto God we return".

God, according to Islam, gave mankind the position of Khalifa or steward on earth and thus have a special role and responsibility which requires him to live in perfect harmony with himself, His collective existence, His environment and the entire creation around Him. It has been rapidly proven in our modern times that interdependence of people especially on the economic sphere or matters related to their livelihood create greater contact, better understanding and reciprocal co-operation which in turn lead to co-existence, tolerance and harmony. That is why the concept of common markets and global economy are being promoted these days as foundations for peace and coexistence between nations. Quran says: "It is we who portion out among them their livelihood in the life of this world and we raise some of them above others (from the standpoint of resources and capacities) in degrees so that some might obtain labour of others." (*Quran 43:2*)

The basis of interaction and cooperation has been laid down by the Quran itself. "Cooperate with one another on the basis of righteousness and God consciousness and do not cooperate with one another on the basis of sin and transgression.

Islam laid a great emphasis on the value of science and knowledge and rated the scholar's ink more precious than martyr's blood. Action based on knowledge and understanding is normally free from any kind of extremism and militancy.

In conclusion, man cannot advance on the long road of his spiritual growth without disciplining his urges for physical satisfaction. He has to bring a certain measure of stabilisation in his inner life through such discipline by his own knowledge and efforts. What the world needs today is the 'soothing comfort' of religion, the different religions retaining their identity and their followers pursuing their different paths with an absolute sense of freedom. Inter-faith harmony and the consciousness of the essential unity of all religions are the *sine qua non* for a better world order.