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INHERENT PROBLEMS IN ISLAM'S ENCOUNTER WITH OTHER RELIGIONS

Introduction

In spite of the clear cut Quranic statement that "There is no compulsion in religion (2. 256);¹ there are certain factors inherent in very fabric of Islam that make its encounter with other religions difficult and problematic. Some of its claims such as to be the religion of the whole humankind, primordial as well as the last, a panacea for all the evils of the society for all the times, to possess a scripture that has corrected, cancelled or abrogated all the previous revelations and to have a prophet with whom prophethood has been sealed for ever etc. may not be easily accepted by the members of other religions. The wars fought by Muslims down the centuries and the fear and misconceptions regarding its rapid spread through out the world force students of history to feel that there are certain issues inherent in Islam which force them to believe that it is impossible for Muslims to have a positive and friendly relationship with the adherents of other religions. A brief attempt is made in the following pages to analyze those factors with some indications how to overcome them.

1. Belief in the Unity of God

Belief in the oneness (Tauhid) is the corner stone of Islam. The first part of the Islamic creed *La ilaha ill Allah* (there is no God except Allah) itself contains a connotation that there are other people who believe in more than one God. *Shirk* or ascribing partners to God is the greatest sin a human being can commit which will not be forgiven by God.

1. All the Quranic quotations in this article are taken from "*The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*", translation by Mohammed M. Pickthall, New American Library New York, Twelfth Printing.

Lo! Allah forgiveth not that a partner should be ascribed unto Him. He forgiveth (all) save that to whom He will. Whosoever ascribeth partners to Allah, He hath indeed invented a tremendous sin (4.48).

The idolaters have incurred the wrath of God. "Those (the idolaters) are they whom Allah hath cursed, and he whom Allah hath cursed, thou (O Muhammad) wilt find no helper" (4.51).

2. The Question of Idolatry

Idol worshippers associate themselves with Satan and so their end will be with him in hell. "Lo! Allah pardoneth not that partners should be ascribed unto him Whosoever ascribeth partners unto Allah hath wandered far astray. They invoke in His stead only females (the idols which the pagan Arabs worshipped were all females). They pray to none else than Satan, a rebel whom Allah hath cursed ... Whoso chooseth Satan for a patron instead of Allah is verily a loser and his loss is manifest For such, their habitation will be hell, and they will find no refuge therefrom (4.116 f.).

Idolaters are not permitted even to come near the sanctuaries of God. "It is not for the idolaters to tend Allah's sanctuaries, bearing witness against themselves of disbelief. As for such, their works are vain and in Fire they will abide" (9.17). "The idolaters only are unclean. So let them not come near the Inviolable Place of Worship" (9.28).

The believers (Muslims) are asked to wage war against the idolaters. "Wage war on all the idolaters as they are waging war on all of you" (9.36).

The Muslims are prohibited even to pray for the idol worshippers even if they are closely related. "It is not for the Prophet, and those who believe, to pray for the forgiveness of idolaters even though they may be near of kin (to them) after it hath become clear that they are people of hell-fire" (9.113). "And may punish the hypocritical men and the hypocritical women, and the idolatrous men and the idolatrous women, who think an evil thought concerning Allah. For them is the evil turn of fortune, and Allah is against them and has cursed them, and hath made ready for them hell, a hapless journey's end" (58.6).

3. Who All are Idolaters?

In this context it is also necessary to see who all belong to the category of idolaters. In order to glorify the mission of Muhammad some Muslim writers have given too dark a picture of Pre-Islamic Arabia. It is called jahaliya or "period of darkness" in which the native Arabs, though claimed to be the descendants of Abraham through Ismael, were immersed in various types of idolatry. The primary task of Muhammad was to bring back the people to the monotheistic belief and practice of Abraham. So it was but natural that he used severe and harsh language against the idol worshippers.

4. Christians Among Idol Worshippers!

Theologically one cannot easily ascertain what is idolatry. This is clear from the fact even Christians are included among the idolaters because of their belief in the Trinity. It is interesting to note that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is also included among the three persons of the Holy Trinity. "And when Allah saith: O Jesus, son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah?" (5.116).

Historians do admit that considerable number of Christians lived in Arabia at the time of Muhammad. However, the Christianity of that period is described by Muslims as expiring under a motely and enormous heap of superstitious inventions with neither the courage nor the force to raise her head or display her national charms to a darkened and deluded world. The presence of various Christian sects in Arabia like the Greeks, Nestorians, Eutychians, Monophysites etc. and the dissensions and heated controversies among them might have given Muhammad a distorted concept of Christianity. The excessive importance and veneration given to Mary, the mother of Jesus, also gave rise to several religious controversies. According to some Christian writers Muhammad received only cursory and imperfect information from unorthodox sources about Christianity. It is this strange situation that made him confuse the doctrine of Trinity to be a Tritheism of God, Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary.²

O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah,

2. Hughes Thomas Patrick, *Dictionary of Islam*, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 1977, p. 53.

Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His Word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not "Three"-Cease! (it is) better for you-Allah is only one God. Far is it removed from His transcendent majesty that He should have a son (4.171).

Eventhough the Quran rejects the cardinal Christian concepts of Trinity and the Divinity of Jesus, it has given high respect to Christians. "Thou wilt find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe (to be) the Jews and the idolaters. And thou wilt find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe (to be) those say: Lo! We are Christians. That is because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not proud" (5.82).

The Christians, however, are also included among the infidels and idolaters and so threatened with severe punishments and will certainly be excluded from the paradise.

They surely disbelieve who say; Lo! Allah is Messiah, son of Mary. The Messiah (himself) said: O Children of Israel, worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord. Lo! whose ascribeth partners unto Allah, for him Allah hath forbidden Paradise. His abode is the Fire. For evil doers there will be no helpers.

They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the third of three; when there is no God save the one God. If they desist not from so saying a painful doom will fall on those of them who disbelieve (5.72-3).

5. Jesus, the Sign of Contradiction

Christians believe that they have received salvation through Jesus Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity, the eternal Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, and became one with us in all things except, sin. His death and resurrection are the corner stones of the Christian faith. But Quran very plainly denies such articles of faith.

The Messiah, son of Mary, was no other than a messenger, messengers (the like of whom) had passed away before him. And his mother was a saintly woman. And they both used to eat (earthly) food. See how we make the revelations clear for them, and see how they are turned away (5.75).

There is no doubt that the Quran pays rich tributes to Jesus Christ-about his miraculous birth through divine intervention from the immaculate virgin Mary, his mission, his miracles etc. It is important to note that the Quran gives more information about Jesus than about Prophet Muhammad. It, however, denies two of the most aspects of Jesus, namely his divinity and the salvation he offered to humanity through his ignominious suffering on the cross, death and the glorious resurrection on the third day.

And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, Allah's Messenger - They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them; and lol those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof; save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain, but Allah took him unto Himself. Allah was ever Mighty, Wise (4.157-8) (3.54-55).

Some of the Muslim writers quoting these Quranic verses categorically deny the historical fact of the death of Jesus on the cross. They argue that there are various other sects who too deny the death and resurrection of Jesus. Ahmed Deedat calling CRUCIFIXION as CRUCI-FICTION argues as follows:

Muslim believes this categorical Quranic statement to be from God. Hence he asks no questions and seeks for no proof. Could any one have been more EXPLICIT more EMPHATIC, more DOGMATIC, more UN-COMPROMISING in rejecting the dogma of a faith than this? "IMPOSSIBLE" is the answer Had the Christians accepted the Holy Quran as the Word of God, the problem of the crucifixion would never have arisen. They vehemently oppose the Quranic teaching and attack everything Islamic. In the words of Thomas Carlyle - "THEY (the Christians) HAVE BEEN TRAINED TO HATE THE MAN MUHAMMAD AND HIS RELIGION."³

3. Deedat Ahmed, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction*, International Islamic Publishing House, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, p. 4.

After describing the annunciation and the birth of Jesus using a lot of material taken from the apocryphal gospels the Quran speaks about Jesus as follows: "Such was Jesus, son of Mary: (this is) a statement of the truth concerning which they doubt. It befitteth not (the Majesty of) Allah that He should take unto Himself a son (19. 34-35).

Christians are called a perverse people because of their belief in the divinity of Jesus.

And the Jews say: Ezra is the son of Allah, and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah. That is their saying with their mouths. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved of old. Allah (Himself) fighteth against them. How perverse are they (9.30).

6. People of the Scripture (Ahlu'l Kitab)

Jews, Christians and Muslims are called "People of the Book, in the Quran since these three claim to have received revelations from God which they possess in book form. Some sects of the Shiah include the "Majusi" (Magi) also under this term. There is no doubt that Jews, Christians and Muslims have Abraham as their common progenitor and so are specially related to each other. But as history testifies the followers these three so called monotheistic religions keep perennial hatred and have fought more fierce wars among themselves in the name of religion than perhaps by the adherents of other religions.

The main charge levelled against Jews and Christians in the Quran is that they have wilfully corrupted the sacred revelations given to them by God.

7. Judaism

Many references to Jews can be seen in the Quran. They are called under the names of Yahudi (pl Yahud) and Banu Israil, (Children of Israel). Moses is their special lawgiver, though Abraham is their Father of faith. They are a people highly favoured of God. It is believed that after the death of Moses and later in A.D. 70 when the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed, the Jews were scattered and many of them might have migrated to Arabia. Most of

the Jews were merchants and they became so powerful as to establish their own Kingdom in South Arabia. Living side-by-side, the Arabs were well acquainted with the Jewish dogmas and practices. However, the Jews in general were hated by the Arabs since they were exploiting them through their trades. Hence, they were considered as the blood-suckers of the poor Arabs. This could be one of the main reasons of the deeprooted hatred the muslims have towards the Jews. "O Children of Israel! Remember My favour wherewith I favoured you and how I preferred you to (all) creatures" (2. 122).

But like the Christians, the Jews are also cursed by God for their disbelief in the revelations given to Prophet Muhammad by God.

O ye unto whom the Scripture hath been given! Believe in what We have revealed confirming that which ye possess, before we destroy countenances so as to confound them, or curse them as we cursed the Sabbathbreakers (of old time). The Commandment of Allah is always executed (4. 47).

We bestowed upon the house of Abraham (of old) the Scripture and Wisdom, and We bestowed on them a mighty kingdom. And of them were (some) who believed therein. Hell is sufficient for (their) burning. Lo! Those who disbelieve Our revelations, We shall expose them to the Fire. As often as their skins are consumed We shall exchange them for fresh skins that they may taste the torment (4. 54-6).

The Jews are also charged with the grave sin of corrupting the revelations that were given to them.

Some of those who are Jews change words from the context and say: "We hear and disobey; hear thou as one who heareth not" and "Listen to us!" distorting with their tongues and slandering religion. If they had said: "We hear and we obey; hear thou, and look at us" it had been better for them, and more upright. But Allah hath cursed them for their disbelief, so they believe not save a few (4.46).

The holy Quran has made numerous references to convince the Muslims that the Jews have wilfully changed the previous revelations for selfish interests and so are worthy of very severe punishment from God.

Have ye any hope that they will be true to you when a party of them used to listen to the Word of Allah, then used to change it, after they had understood it knowingly? (2.75). Among them are unlettered folk who know the scripture not except from hearsay. They but guess.

Therefore, woe be unto those who write the Scripture with their hands and then say, "This is from Allah," that they may purchase a small gain therewith. Woe unto them for that their hands have written, and woe unto them for that they earn thereby. (2.79).

No attempt is made in this section to analyze critically the earliest contacts between Jews and Muslims recorded in history and traditions. Authors like Barakat Ahmad have started re-examining such events. Barakat has quoted Ellis Rivkin in the "Epilogue" of his book *Muhammad and the Jews*. A brief summary of it may throw some light on the matter.

There is no phase in Islamic history that does not resonate through Jewish history and no form of Islam that does not have its counterpart. And though during many periods the differences between Islam and Judaism were stressed to rationalize hostility, these differences also were responsible for catalyzing some of the most creative achievements of the Middle Ages. Under the Umayyads and the Abbasids, Jews prospered and found their way to virtually every part of the empire . . . The record is clear: the differences setting Islam apart from Judaism did not always generate hostility.⁴

8. Holy war (Jihad)

Jihad literally means "an effort", or a "striving". However, it has been understood (or misunderstood?) in several ways. According

4. Barakat Ahmad, *Muhammad and the Jews*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1979, p. 126.

to some interpreters it comes from the Arabic root *jahada*, i.e. ability, exertion or power. So *jihad* means exerting one's power in repelling his enemies. There are three types *jihads*: a) against a visible enemy, especially when a Muslim nation is attacked by a non-Muslim nation the leader of the Muslim country may request the other Muslim countries for help to fight against the unjust invaders and then that war becomes a holy war; b) against the devil, c) against oneself. We read in the Quran: "Those who strive hard (*jahada*) for us, we will certainly guide them in our ways" (22.78). In this sense it is a spiritual struggle to attain nearness to God by subduing one's evil tendencies.

Jihad, however, acquired another significant meaning, namely, religious war with the infidels. According to Hughes "It is an incumbent religious duty, established in the Quran and in the traditions as a divine institution, enjoined on every Muslim, specially for the purpose of advancing Islam and of repelling evil from Muslims".⁵

Usually when the Muslims conquer a Non-Muslim country its inhabitants are offered the following three options: 1) To become Muslims, in which case the conquered are accepted into the fold of Islam; 2) Pay the poll-tax called *jizyah* by which the non-Muslims, if they are not idolaters, get protection from their Muslim rulers; but they are reduced to the status of *Zimmis* or second class citizens; 3) to face death for their adherence to a particular religion.

Then, when the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever ye find them, and take them (captive), besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush. But if they repent and establish worship and pay the poor-due, then leave their way free. Lo! Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. And if anyone of the idolaters seeketh thy protection (O Muhammad), then protect him so that he may hear the word of Allah, and afterward convey him to his place of safety. That is because they are a folk who know not (9.5-6).

Numerous verses from the Quran and the Hadith can be quoted to show that the people who were conquered by the Muslims had to face severe persecutions from the Muslim soldiers.

5. Hughes Thomas Patrick, Op. Cit, p. 243.

9. The Fate of the Apostates

The punishment meted out to the "apostates (Murtidad) was also very severe. According to Islamic law, a male apostate is liable to be put to death while a female apostate is not subject to capital punishment, but she may be kept in confinement. But, if a boy under age becomes an apostate, he should be imprisoned till he comes to full age and if he still wishes to continue to be an apostate he is also liable to be killed (Hughes T.P. p. 16).

10. The Question of Ka'bah

The Ka'bah at Mecca is the most important pilgrim centre of the Muslims. Traditionally it is believed to have been built by Abraham and his son Ishmael when the former in obedience to the commandment of God showed his readiness to sacrifice his own son. It existed before Muhammad who, as a wise man of inculturation, Islamicized the ancient practice of making pilgrimage to Ka'bah and made it as one of the five pillars of Islam. In this sense Ka'bah is the patrimony of all the three Semitic religions. But non-Muslims are strictly prohibited to visit it. If any non-Muslim is found near the Ka'bah, he will be put to death then and there. Non-Muslims are also not permitted to build any place of worship anywhere in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They cannot take a Bible or any other religious article to that country. Very often the question is asked "why non-Muslims cannot visit the Ka'bah"? The usual answer is that it is a political question. It is also to be noted, with a few exceptions, that Christians are not permitted to build churches in Muslim countries. If the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad are so positive towards the members of other faiths why do Muslims of the Arab nations put so many restrictions on non-Muslims in practising their religions. The experiences shared by the non-Muslims who return from Saudi Arabia reveal the hardship they have to undergo to live and work there just because they belong to other religions.

11. Conclusions

At the end of this study I have to make some important observations. First of all, our approach may sound a bit negative in the sense I have chosen only those issues which are certainly bound to make Islam's encounter with other religions uncomfortable.

By this approach I do not say that Islam was always inimical to other faiths. There are so many verses in the Holy quran itself that clearly show the positive approach of Islam towards other religions. Let me quote only one example.

Say (O Muslims): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the Prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered (4.136).

This verse has been extensively quoted by Muslims and many others to show the universality of Islam and also its respect and acceptance of other religious traditions. But a closer look at this sentence will tell us that it will not take us very far. It is true that Muslims have to believe in all the prophets of God and also that various books have been given by God to humankind as revelations. So far so good. But when the following verses so vehemently accuse Christians and Jews of corrupting the divine scriptures that were given to them and then go on to say that the Quran is the only book that contains the revelations of God in its purity and totality, the above mentioned verse does not take us that far as we are told by some Muslim apologists.

All religions lead their followers to their ultimate goal which is conceived differently by the followers of each religion. We can not subscribe to the popular dictum that all religions are equal. But we may agree that each religion is unique. The followers of all religions should believe in, uphold, confess and teach the uniqueness of their respective faiths. But this should not be done at the expense of other religions, nor in a sense of superiority complex. But unfortunately this is precisely what the orthodox Islam has done. They vociferously speak about the positive attitude of the Quran towards other religions but are usually silent about its negative attitude towards other faiths. We may even find some Muslim religious leaders who in their simplicity and enthusiasm stress too much the superiority of Islam over other religions. As a result the vast majority of the orthodox Muslims are fully convinced that "they

have the Best prophet, the best religion and the most perfect scripture". There is nothing wrong in itself in considering one's own religion is best suited religion for him. In fact any honest believer should believe and confess so. But the problem arises only when somebody begins to absolutize his own religion and impose it on others, even using unethical means and distorting the religious teachings of other religions and facts of history.

The crux of the problem lies in the fact that if some of the Muslims want they can have divine sanction to keep negative attitude and approach towards the believers in other religions in the light of the above quoted Quranic verses. The Quran is the Word of God and it contains nothing but Truth. I have noticed that even some of the most progressive Muslims are not willing to make any compromise on this point. Hence, it would not be very easy for many Muslims to have positive respect and appreciation for other faiths. How can they sincerely love, appreciate and assimilate values and spiritual practices from religions like Christianity and Hinduism, which, in the light of the teachings of the Holy Quran, contain elements of the greatest sins of polytheism and idolatry?

Is there any way to solve this dilemma? We cannot suggest any change in the verses of the Quran. That would be tantamount to destroy the very foundation of Islam. So the only way out is to give a proper interpretation to the above cited "negative passages". There is no doubt that the message of the Quran is universal and meant for the people of all times. But at the same time we have to bear in mind the background of the people - the Bedouin Arabs - for whom the Word of God was principally composed. It then has certainly made use of their language and culture as its means of communication. In the place of the normal literary interpretation, a new attempt is to be made for an objective and realistic understanding of the Quran.

I am not advocating anything new or drastic. This has been already suggested by so many Muslim scholars. But the outcome so far is not very encouraging. Not only that, many of those open minded scholars are not well accepted in the community. A good number of the *ulema* that come out of the *madradas* (theological

seminaries meant for the training of *Imams* or religious leaders) are trained well to defend Islam but not to relate themselves meaningfully and positively to the members of non-Muslim religions.

Islam has to make a conscious effort to come out of its world of self-sufficiency and to meet with other religions which too have similar means to help their followers to reach their ultimate goal—God. What is more important is not to make the world Muslim, Christian or Hindu but to establish the reign of God on earth.

Finally, let me add a word of caution. By pointing out these issues the author has no intention to say that only Islam has such problems when it encounters other religions. Each religion has its own difficulties inherent in its structure to make its encounter with other religions difficult and problematic.