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THE ISLAMIC OUTLOOK ON INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

I firmly believe that we have gone beyond the age of conversions. It is an age of dialogue. We have differing beliefs, but we must dialogue with each other to understand each other's convictions. The great religions of the world, in my humble opinion, really did not believe in the kind of conversions which came into practice later on. It became a cause for a great deal of violence. I include both Christianity and Islam in this category. It is wrong to say, if we go by scriptures that there is no injunction in Holy Quran to convert anybody to that particular faith. On the contrary, there are two clearly laid out things in Quran. One is that Quran does not give you any new truth. It only preaches to you the truth which was already preached by other prophets. What is already there amongst you, we have come to confirm the truth. Secondly, Quran says "O people, O Muslims, call people to the way of God". The word used is the way of God; not Islam. Call people to the way of God. Quran could have used the word Islam, but Quran does not use the word "Islam" because it had altogether different implications. But it said call people to the way of God, and that also not violently. Call people to the way of God by way of wisdom and by good words; by exhortations in a good manner. So there is no question of violence at all.

The misconception of people that Islam believed in spreading itself through sword is result of two things. One is animosity of those vested interests who Islam attacked. It did not attack other religions. It attacked vested interests among other religions. Those who corrupted the truth in their own religion for their own sake. And to what extent that can go, that we experience in our own life. Corruption is only a universal thing. So this corruption prevails not only in our age and not only in our country. It is truly universal. It had been there in all the ages of history, in all the epochs of history and in all the countries, among all peoples and among all the religions. It is so universal, because it serves vested interests,

Real fight has never been between different religions. The real fight has been between vested interests. And this instrumentality of religion we have to understand. These powerful vested interests legitimize their interest by invoking religion and religious beliefs. There is nothing wrong with fundamentalism if you really and sincerely wish to go to the original truth of religion. In that form I do not think fundamentalism is a curse, but fundamentalism is a boon.

I am not using the word fundamentalism as commonly understood - invoking religion for one's own purposes, especially political purpose. Every religion according to me, was an option for the poor, for the weak and for the exploited. Take Islam for example. I am a student of Islam. So I am talking with reference to Islam. But it is true of all the religions, that is my belief. There are powerful exhortations in Holy Quran: "Do not accumulate wealth, because accumulation of wealth leads to corruption and violence". It destroys the original inspiration of religion. All Muslims, recite five times in their prayers certain verses in the Quran. I wish they understood those verses and they were sincerely following Islam. If they were sincerely offering their five time prayers, they will not do what they are doing now.

One of the Surahs, we Muslims recite in our daily prayer says: "Look at that man, look at that person who collects wealth and counts it again and again and thinks that his wealth will give him eternal life; no, he is sadly mistaken. This wealth will turn into hell-fire and will destroy him and it will reduce entire society to pieces". It is fight over wealth which always reduce society to pieces. After all what we call communalism or fundamentalism in our widely understood sense, is not in pure form.

What is it about if not using religion for acquiring more wealth or acquiring more power or acquiring more prestige? Had this not been there, even the question of Babri Masjid and Ramjanmabhoomi would not have been there. Because it is crystal clear to any student of Indian Politics today that Ramjanmabhoomi - Babri Masjid controversy became important only after Mandal commission was implemented. The controversy existed. Not that it did not exist. But it acquired that kind of intensity only after the implementation of Mandal Commission was announced. Why? Because it threatened the existing power - structure in the country. It became a major threat for those in

minority who wielded power, who held all the key positions in politics, in economics, in bureaucracy, in police, in the army, everywhere. And that is why it was described by BJP again and again as an attempt to divide the Hindu society. Who has divided the Hindu society? Not Mandal Commission, it is the caste system that divided the Hindu Society.

It is not essential part of Hindu teachings according to me. Many Hindu scholars have argued on the basis of the Vedas that there is no concept of caste system as it is practiced today. But we are concerned with the system which exists among us. We are not concerned only with the scriptural form; we are concerned with the form that exists today. And it has made society highly unjust. The Meccan society was also a society, highly divided not along caste lines, but along tribal lines, along class lines. The Islam came with a new morality, and that morality was a morality of justice and equality, equality of all human beings, not of Muslims. Even the most orthodox Oolemma agree on this point that Quran talks of equality of human beings not of Muslims alone. It exhorted entire human beings, because it repeatedly addresses peoples, not Muslims. O People – that is the main form of addressing in Quran. It addresses believers also. But it is only when talking about the community of believers, at that time. Otherwise it always invokes most universal form of belief. That is communality of all human beings. And according to me, equality of sexes is also included. Islam very much emphasizes equality of human beings, including equality of sexes. But this was totally disregarded by Muslims and Muslim society was also falling to pieces. It is these interests which reduce society to pieces.

And I believe there is no use of discussing the concept of secularism and all that. All of us who are pundits in our own way, know what secularism is; what secularism means in western context and what it means in Indian context. My point is that if you really want to usher in a secular society of the dream of our great fighters for freedom, then you will have to achieve three things in society.

The first, which is very fundamental according to me, is social justice. We must establish an egalitarian society where there is no caste system in practice, not in theory. In theory, we have already done that. Our Constitution has abolished untouchability and caste system.

We can go on saying again and again that no religion preaches hatred. And to repeat this is also important, because others who are using religion are again and again saying that it teaches hatred. So we also have to repeat that no religion teaches hatred. All religions teach love, compassion and humanity. But we should also be very clear that we cannot have a truly harmonious, peaceful, secular society without achieving certain things in practice. There should not be any discrimination between one citizen and other citizen in practice, whatever his or her religion might be. That is very important thing.

A third thing: religion should not have anything to do with politics. At least not in the sense of dogmas and theology. It might impart values and its moral and ethical systems to politics and that is what Mahatma Gandhi said when he wrote that religion is as necessary to politics as nose to breathing. Even Nehru was baffled by this kind of observation as to what Mahatma Gandhi meant. But he himself explains that probably what Gandhi meant was not orthodox dogmas of a particular religion, but morality and ethics. And it is in this sense that we have to condemn fundamentalism, that we invoke traditions, we invoke dogmas, we invoke orthodox beliefs in order to play our politics.

Now how many Muslims, I would like to know, invoke the concept of equality and justice in Islam? Very few. If they become fundamentalists in this sense, it will be the greatest boon for not only the Muslim society but for the whole world society. Because Quran says: "do justice." It is nearest to piety. That is, Quranic concept of piety depends very much on justice. This is the injunction: "Do justice." It is an injunction from God. It is closest to piety; you cannot become pious by offering prayers five times and by fasting during the month of Ramzan and by performing Haj. You can become pious only when you are just to all others. Quranic concept of justice also has been explained as "be just even if it goes against you, your parents, and those in favour of your enemies". These are the words of Quran in respect of justice. So how many Muslims are fundamentalists in that sense? And, we find in Vedas. "lead me from darkness to light, lead me from false to truth." If these are fundamentals of Hinduism, I wish all Hindus to become fundamentalists. And there will be nothing but truth in our country; there will be nothing but justice in our country. But for political reasons, you become fundamentalist in a different sense which brings more conflict and injustice in the society.

One of the Muslim League Ministers in Kerala recently refused to light the lamp saying that it is against the belief of Islam. Either he did not know the "abc" of Islam, or he was just using religion for his own political aim, just to become more popular in his own community. One of the verses in Quran says, the god brings us out of the darkness into light. These are the very verses of Vedas. Allah brings us from darkness to light. If you light a lamp, you extinguish darkness and bring light into existence. You invoke the very presence of God. Allah is light of earth and heavens. If Allah is light, by lighting a lamp, you are bringing the presence of Allah. Where is the question of it being against the belief of Islam? These people distort the truth. And it was this distortion of truth earlier, which brought Islam into existence.

"For each people we have appointed a prophet," Quran says, "for all, for every people, we have appointed a different way of worshipping; do not quarrel about them. Excel each other in good deeds". For every people we have a different direction in which they turn to worship. Excel each other in good deeds. That is the law.

One day Nizamuddin Olliah, the great sufi was going along the banks of Yamuna and some Hindu women were bathing in river Jamuna, worshipping sun. Nizamuddin said to his friend: "these women are also worshipping Allah. They have their own way of worshipping him." But they are also worshipping Allah and he recited a few verses from Quran. It is this sufi model of Islam that we have to follow. If we follow sufi model of Islam, Bhakti model of Hinduism, there will be no problem in this country. If we are taking religion for political end, it is a different thing altogether.

Sufi Islam believes in two seminal doctrines. One is unity of being: the real being is one; we are all human manifestations of that being. So there cannot be distinction between one human person and another human person. Second is peace for all.

We consider ourselves much modernized, much more educated. I wonder whether we are really modernized, really educated. We are being guided not by our religion, we have been guided by our own interest. That is why, it is middle class, educated middle class, which spreads the poison of communalism, and not the so-called illiterate masses whom we hold in contempt. We have seen in riots that it is not

Hindu and Muslim who wanted this violence. They always become targets of violence. Hutments can be burned very easily; poor riksha puller can be killed very easily. But it is more difficult to kill a middle class, educated person or to set fire to a concrete building. The hot targets for violence have always been religion. Even Bombay riots have proved that. So it is only middle class, educated middle class people who are really spreading this poison. They are spreading that religion which benefits them, which serves their interest. And we don't have to point to any religion. We have to point to our own vested interests.