



The Islam I Believe in

○Syed Owais

Does Islam allow heresy? Most people's answer to this question would be an emphatic "No". To some extent, this response is justified because many examples come to mind about people who have dissented from Islam and have been persecuted — and worse. One only has to think of Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen. From examples like these it would seem that Islam is a completely totalitarian system that does not brook dissent or opposition in any form. And there can be no doubt that this factor is responsible for the fanaticism associated with Muslims and Islam. This strain of intolerance within Islam is a favorite stick with which the people from other communities beat Muslims. Liberal Muslims are hard put to refute these accusations. Indeed, it is difficult for liberal Muslims to explain why writers whose works are not approved of by the orthodoxy are ex-communicated and even threatened with death.

It cannot be denied that in terms of belief and doctrine, a religion like Hinduism is more tolerant and inclusive, and accepts dissent with much more grace. You can be a theist, an atheist or an agnostic and in each case call yourself a Hindu. You can be a polytheist or a monotheist, worship idols or scorn them and still declare yourself a Hindu. To me, this is commendable in many ways, but does not make Hindu culture perfect or without fault. One only has to look at the massively ugly caste based

practice of untouchability to appreciate this. Only a few years ago, a Dalit had the temerity to enter a temple somewhere in Karnataka. The "upper caste" Hindus, shocked by this unacceptable breach of custom, decided to teach him a lesson to ensure that no Dalit would ever try to worship in an "upper caste" temple again. He was tied to a pole and forced to eat human excreta smeared on a slipper. The purpose here is not to denigrate Hindu society, or to pretend that I am doing an exercise in comparative religion. I simply want to underline the fact that different cultures and religions have their own problems that urgently need to be addressed, and if not completely eradicated, at least lessened to a large degree.

To come back to the question of dissent within Islam, there can be no doubt that the lack of permission to dissent within any religion, retards the progress of thought, and proves to be a great disadvantage to the religion itself. It is a well-known fact that whilst Europe was in the grip of the Dark Ages, ruled by a totalitarian Catholic Church, Islamic culture was thriving and well ahead in the arts and sciences. This was precisely due to the fact that Islam allowed greater freedom of thought than that permitted to the Christian world by the Catholic Church. What was said about the successful Mars landing by the head of NASA will underline this: "This is a victory for a free-thinking society."

The Example of Ghalib

It is my contention that Islam *does* allow dissent, but with some qualification. The life of Ghalib is a prime example of this. He never fasted and never read *namaz*. There is a story (one does not know if it is apocryphal or not) about how, when Bahadur Shah Zafar asked him how many fasts he had kept during a particular Ramzan, he replied: "*Huzoor, ek na rakha.*" (Sir, I didn't keep one.) Had he declared his agnosticism (if he was an agnostic) in a belligerent manner, he would not have endeared himself to the king or to orthodox Muslims. Even if we assume this story is apocryphal, it demonstrates that there is a tradition within Islam that allows behaviour considered to be unorthodox without persecution. Even though everyone knows Ghalib didn't pray or fast, he is a Muslim icon and respected by all Muslims, with the exception of a few ultra-orthodox ones. There are many couplets by him that point to his liberalism as well as his Sufi background. Here is an example:

*I shall offer namaz at Kashi
And blow the conch-shell at/
Kaaba*

The most wonderful example I know of Ghalib's genius and the nature of his dissent within Islam is by way of a Persian couplet by him. For the benefit of those not familiar with Islamic tradition, I will provide a few facts that will help to understand the couplet. Mansur al Hallaj was a

great Sufi mystic who raised the slogan *Al-al Haq* (I am the Truth). This was considered blasphemous and he was put to death for it. Today, every Sufi utters it. Although he was born a Sunni, Ghalib lived more like a Shia (Shias hold Hazrat Ali in special reverence). Hazrat Ali's sobriquet is Assadullah, which means Lion of God. Lastly, Ghalib's first name was Assadullah. This is the couplet:

*I am the Mansur
Of the followers of Ali.
Hence my slogan:
"I am Assadullah!"*

Had Ghalib declared "I am Hazrat Ali!" he would have been labelled a blasphemer and met the fate of those who blaspheme in Islam. He merely wrote a truism—that his name was Assadullah. Yet the meaning is perfectly clear. However, it simply brings a smile to the lips of even the most orthodox. What genius! Bertrand Russell wrote that a lot can be achieved by wit and eloquence and this couplet by Ghalib is a prime example.

This is not to suggest that Ghalib did not get into trouble with the orthodoxy. He was subjected to all types of slander and many disliked his views. But, as stated by a Sufi master, "a Sufi seeker will not find enlightenment unless he is

condemned by at least 300 devout Muslims." This shows that the conflict between the established church and the mystic are very much in existence in Islam. At times the established church and the mystic are combined into one, as in the case of the much-reviled Ayatollah Khomeini.

Khomeini as a Sufi

I have not read *The Satanic Verses* and therefore cannot comment on the book. However, I have read the poetry of Ayatollah Khomeini (he wrote eight *ghazals* in Persian) and am a fan of his verse. Strange as it may seem to many, he makes fun of the *mullahs* in his poems, writes about how it is pointless to study the scriptures and longs for the intoxication of wine. His poetry consists of the archetypal Sufi quest—the longing for the feminine beloved. When I read Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, I certainly did not find these sensibilities there and was disgusted by his treatment of the character, Padma. Someone has said that even fictional characters have human rights and, to my mind, Rushdie violates those of Padma in this well-known book. I would stick out my neck and say that Khomeini was more of a protective male than the pre-fatwa

interviewed Khomeini and came back mighty impressed by him. Another little known fact is that Khomeini's daughter teaches logic at the University of Teheran.

The point I want to make here is that different cultures have different values and it is wrong to impose one's own values on any one of them. I am most certainly not an apologist for the dress code imposed on women in Iran nor for the other restrictions forced upon them, but I think that every culture evolves in its own way and the best way to help it along is by empathising with it. Einstein said that a scientist should approach the study of nature with "a sympathetic, intuitive understanding." If such an attitude is required in something as impersonal as science, it is obvious that the same attitude should be held when attempting to understand human cultures. One should always allow for the possibility that there is something to be learnt from the culture one is trying to emancipate. I for one have learned a lot from Ayatollah Khomeini.

Carl Sagan, a champion of agnosticism, held public debates with believers in America. He never reached the position of accepting religious dogma like the Immaculate Conception, but concluded that religious devotion is akin to being in deep personal love. At its core, Islam consists of such love for Prophet Mohammed and his family. Anyone who abuses such figures (as Salman Rushdie did in *The Satanic Verses*) is clearly breaking the rules of dissent within Islam and will only result in evoking a fanatical reaction. And that is exactly what happened in the case of Salman Rushdie. It is my belief that dissenting Muslims should not renounce their Muslim identities or take to abuse, but should argue for a Islam based on ethical values and a liberal cultural ethos. Albert Einstein is an example. He wrote that the



Rushdie - Khomeini confrontation in a different light for me, I am not for a moment defending the *fatwa* or justifying Rushdie's persecution. I should add here that the noted feminist Oriana Fallaci once

phrase “religious truth” did not convey anything meaningful to him and declared himself as belonging to the “Mosaic Creed” only once in his life. Yet he called himself a Jew and was proud of being one, at a time when others around him were ashamed of calling themselves Jewish.

Love and Unorthodoxy

I have already stated that dissent is allowed within Islam, if it is done in a spirit of love. Many examples of this abound in the poetic traditions of Islamic cultures all over the world. The Pakistani Nobel Laureate Abdus Salaam makes an incognito appearance in Carl Sagan’s *Contact*. The character which is based on him says in the book: “Sufism is to Islam what Zen is to Buddhism.” Sufism, in other words, is the dynamic aspect of Islam that takes it forward. Consider this example from the renowned Kashmiri poet, Shams Faqir:

*And there I saw
No dawn, no dusk
No kalima, no Ram-Ram
Shams Faqir speaks of beyond the
skies.*

Of course, this is an articulation of the mystic’s experience of the openness of all reality. It is pertinent to note here that Shams Faqir denies the *kalima*, which is the basic affirmation of faith in Islam. While there are people who say that he has gone too far in this, no one issued a *fatwa* against him for it. In my opinion, the reason for this is that the mystic’s dissent is born out of universal love and is not meant to insult or denigrate Islam. In addition, by transcending both Islam and Hinduism, the great mystic brings about a synthesis of the two, much in the manner of Kabir.

In one of his poems, Sheikh Noor-ud-din, known as the standard bearer of Kashmir, says that one should blend with Shiva, for that is *namaz*. I have heard orthodox Muslims say that “Shiva” here, in fact, means “the

Muslim God” and that the Sheikh was using the name for Allah that was prevalent at the time. However, I think that the spirit of what Nund Rishi (another name for Sheikh Noor-ud-din) was saying is unmistakable. He also wrote poems in praise of the Buddha and called him *shehjar* (a tree’s shade).

My favourite example from Kashmiri poetry of dissent within Islam and its acceptance, is a couplet by Rasul Mir, a great poet, who lived at the start of this century. His muse was his beloved Kungi, a Hindu woman. He died at the age of 32 and the people of his village (most of them Muslims) chose the following couplet as an epitaph for his grave:

*Rasul knows well faith and
religion:*

*Your face and the curl of your hair.
Why should he know heresy and
Islam, beloved?*

Not only was Rasul Mir’s renunciation of Islam accepted, it was actually chosen as his epitaph—probably because it typified his life. Does this not show that dissent forms a part of Islam? It should be noted that Rasul Mir dissented out of love. When I brought this couplet to the notice of a fundamentalist I know, he insisted that Rasul Mir wrote it for Prophet Mohammed! This gave me an idea: Is it possible that Islam will allow a relaxation of who the beloved should be? If this happens, Islam becomes synonymous with an attitude of creative love; it retains its spirituality and becomes free of dogmatic assertions. Now this is something really worth thinking about! □

Syed Owais is a poet and writer. He is currently working for the government of J & K in Srinagar.

An Appeal To Our Subscribers

A lot of copies of MANUSHI get lost or stolen in the mail. We appeal to you to let us know if your copy of MANUSHI is not reaching you. A sure sign that you didn’t receive an issue due to you is when your subscription skips one or more numbers - for example, if you get MANUSHI 122 and 124 but not MANUSHI 123.

It is very important to us that you stay closely connected with MANUSHI and do not miss any issue. Therefore, we make it a point to send duplicate copies when a subscriber writes to let us know about copies not received. However, we can send duplicate copies only if you let us know within one month of the succeeding issue number.

Please help us to reach you with every issue.