



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Religion and Globalisation: Perspectives for the New Millennium”

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The following is an edited version of the talk given at the conference.

Abstract

What can be the contribution of Religion to globalisation? For millennia, religions have been a vehicle in which ideas, ideals, ethics and values have navigated the globe. Today, the forces of globalisation have helped to facilitate a dialogue amongst the world's religions to resolve common issues through shared values. These values however have no practical merit simply as abstractions unless they are translated into action. Drawing upon a letter written to Malik al-Ashtar, the newly appointed Governor of Egypt, from the Imam-Caliph 'Ali b. Abi Talib, the author draws upon how one such value, justice, can be externalised as social action, proposing a human dimension to the policies and strategies pertaining to globalisation.

The Role of Religion in Globalisation

The document circulated by the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe explains the purpose of this meeting. To put it succinctly, this purpose is to deliberate on the role of Religion in contributing a human dimension to the current phenomena of globalisation.

Faith traditions are no strangers to these phenomena. For millennia, they were the vehicles through which the message of one humanity traversed the barriers of geography, culture and language. This was their original impulse, not the pride of dominion, nor the greed of exploitation but an honest exchange of ideas and trade among the children of Adam.

Common Values

The project on Religion and Globalisation is therefore a feasible endeavour; for major faith traditions are united in the values which espouse the notion of a shared humanity. These fundamentals help to define a framework for dialogue, constructive debate and joint action, first to confront that which is an affront to civilisation, namely the persistent scourge of material poverty, and the malaise of bigotry, intolerance and inequity, whether based on religion, nationality, race, culture or gender and then to address creatively the challenges of globalisation and take advantage of the opportunities it may offer.

With the permission of the Chair, let me try to articulate these fundamentals from the perspective of the faith to which I belong. Islam is explicit in its affirmation of the essence of the message that was revealed to diverse communities before its own advent through the Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him). The Holy Qur'an, thus, commands Muslims: “Say; We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed upon us, and bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which was given to

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Moses and Jesus, and that which has been vouchsafed to all the (other) Prophets by their Sustainer; we make no distinction between any of them” (2:136).

The message of universality, and therefore of respect for the plurality of religious traditions, beyond the Abrahamic family, is further reinforced in the Islamic revelation: “Verily, We have sent thee [Muhammad] with the truth, as a bearer of glad tidings. There never was a community among whom a warner has not passed” (35:24). For added emphasis, this Qur’anic theme continues: “We never sent a Messenger save in the language of his people that he might make (the message) clear for them” (14:4).

Like other faith traditions, Islam thus espouses an inclusive vision of society, where human diversity is celebrated as an indication of divine mercy and grandeur. “And of His Signs”, says the Qur’an, “is the creation of the heavens and earth and the variety of your tongues and colours” (30:22).

By the eloquence of its frequent exhortations, the Islamic scripture seeks to inculcate the notion of a single human family: “Oh humankind, We have created you male and female and appointed you races and nations that you may know one another. Surely, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the best in conduct” (49:10).

Social Responsibility

Diversity, like creation itself, is purposeful. The reality of its prevalence is reason enough for people, whatever their origin or background, to come together in an effort to know one another. This coming together, this dialogue, can only be sustained if merit or virtue is associated with the quality of one’s conduct, irrespective of one’s creed, race, colour, gender or material status in society.

Abstractions of good, just as protestations of righteousness, are of no avail unless translated into practical, good deeds. Without active social responsibility, religiosity, according to Qur’anic injunctions, is a show of conceit. Helping the weak and marginalised, being just, even at the expense of one’s own or one’s family’s apparent welfare, repelling evil and inequity with that which is good and equitable, are the true marks of piety. This is the challenge which the Qur’an poses, not only to Muslims but to people of all faiths, who have their own laws to abide by, and directions to follow. All are invited by Islam to a shared endeavour for goodness. In the words of the Qur’an: “Every person has his direction to which he turns; so be you forward in good works” (2:148). To be good and to do good is the mark of decency and the essence of true faith.

The project of dialogue and joint action being proposed by the North-South Council is thus close to the heart of a Muslim for this is what he or she is commanded to do by the faith of Islam.

The Letter of Imam ‘Ali to Malik al-Ashtar

The North-South Council document, enunciating the project proposal, asks for examples of best practices, germane to the theme of this dialogue. If I may, I would like to cite an example from the early decades of Islam’s history.

Upon the death of the Prophet, responsibility for the governance of the Muslim polity passed on, successively, to four leaders who are known as the four rightly guided caliphs. The fourth



of them, after Hazrat Abu Bakr, Hazrat ‘Umar and Hazrat ‘Uthman, was Hazrat ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, also revered as their first Imam by Shi‘i Muslims. In a letter to Malik al-Ashtar, appointing him governor of Egypt, Imam ‘Ali set out guiding principles for the governance of an expanding polity, invoking above all, the foundational principle of justice. “Be just with God and be just with people [giving them what is their due] from yourself...Whoso establishes well-being between him and God, God establishes well-being between him and mankind.”¹ Grounded in the sense of the sacred, the notion of justice calls for moral rectitude on the part of those entrusted with authority or endowed with advantage relative to others. For advantage, whether of office, talent or material wherewithal, is a means through which one is put through a test.

Malik is advised to abide by divine injunctions, not just as a legal obligation, but as a way of seeking spiritual liberation. “For truly”, says Imam ‘Ali, “the soul incites to evil, unless God has mercy.” This is a reflection of Joseph’s plea when he had to endure the allure of evil temptations. Joseph’s prayer is poignantly depicted in the Qur’an: “God does not bless with His guidance the artful schemes of those who betray their trust...verily man’s soul does incite to evil, and saved are only they upon whom my Sustainer bestows grace” (12:52/53).

Articulating Social Justice

Justice, compassion, ethics generally, endure only when they are part of a lived spirituality, mirroring a soul at peace with its Lord and itself. Injustice, corruption, pride, tyranny, untrustworthiness, immoral conduct generally, by contrast, are an outward reflection of a spiritual malaise.

The Imam strongly commends to his governor the sacred virtue of mercy, an attribute which God has prescribed for Himself (6:45). Compassion, says the Imam to Malik, must be administered equitably for all, without any prejudice whatsoever, stressing thereby also the unity of the human family. The advice says: “Infuse your heart with mercy for the subjects, love for them and kindness toward them. Be not like a ravenous beast of prey above them, seeking to devour them. For they are of two types: either your brother in religion or your like in creation. Mistakes slip from them, defects are manifest by them, deliberately or accidentally. So bestow upon them your forgiveness...; just as you would have God bestow upon you His forgiveness and pardon; for you are above them and the one who appointed you as governor is above you and God is above him who appointed you.... And through them He tests you.” In other words, a capacity for compassion must not be debased by arrogance of authority and power.

Ethics, Values and the Sacred

The Imam’s letter draws his governor’s special and urgent attention to the condition of those of his people who lack any resources to take care of themselves — the destitute, the crippled, the orphans, the elderly. They are “most in need of justice from you, and should be treated in a manner such that God may excuse you on the day you meet Him. They and those others,

¹ In citing translated quotations from *Nahj al-Balagha*, I rely on a paper entitled “A Sacred Conception of Justice,” presented by a colleague, Dr Reza Shah-Kazemi, at a recent conference in Tehran.



who refuse to beg but are in need, should receive the help of the governor who should appoint an officer to survey, and bring to light, the needs of the helpless.”

The governor is asked to exercise care in selecting his officers and advisors. He must shun those who are miserly, avaricious and lacking in courage. He must rely on people who are courageous and honest who will not be afraid of offering sound advice in the interest of the citizens. And the governor must institute a system to enable consultations with his citizens on matters which bear on their well-being.

The Imam said to Malik: “This is onerous for the governors, and [fulfilment of] all rights is onerous, but God makes it light for those who aspire to the Hereafter, who restrain their souls in patience and trust in the truth of that which is promised them by God.”

It is the ever-present awareness of the sacred, the never-ending attempt to seek proximity to the divine, according to the Imam-Caliph ‘Ali, which bestows upon just people the well-spring of sustaining power in their pursuit of just causes.

Justice, thus defined, is the bonding principle of our common or universal ethic that is the only way to ensure a human dimension to policies and strategies pertaining to globalisation.

Thank you.