

Islam and Nationalism: A Theoretical Point of View Part 2

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Al-Islam.org

Message of Thaqalayn Vol.11, N.2, 2010

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Publisher(s):

[Ahlul Bayt World Assembly](#) [2]

In this paper, the author examines the position of nationalism in Islam and whether or not it prevents Islam from fulfilling its role in developing a just society. He highlights the fact that nationalistic biases never stemmed from religion itself; rather, its followers possessed prejudices that often led to disputes.

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Islam and Nationalism: A Theoretical Point of View Part II

Sayyid Ahmad Rahnamaei

Nationalism and Islam: Clash or Reconciliation?

The phenomenon of ‘nationalism in religion’ according to S. W. Baron is considered to be an obstacle that prevents religion from fulfilling its role in human life. The necessary balance between organized humanity’s social responsibility and the right of each state would be gained through organized religion.

In *Modern Nationalism and Religion*, Baron attempts to show a way to achieve this aim. For the sake of this aspiration, he makes the proposal that “religion must try to purge itself of its nationalist biases.” In this regard, he believes that “the impact of religious bodies can make itself felt most strongly and effectively.”¹ He further adds:

The world religions have long represented large-scale approaches to the riddles of existence. While stressing individual beliefs and observations and, at times, overemphasizing parochial duties and attitudes, they also have taught man to think in terms of a universal godhead, the cosmic relevance of

even minutiae of ethical behaviour and the essential nature of an all-human brotherhood.^{[2](#)}

The religions that Baron is speaking of here are the most dominant surviving religions in the West, i.e., Christianity and Judaism. Referring to the position of the Judeo-Christian heritage, Baron remarks that it “has been endangered by the rise of the neopagan forms of extreme nationalism and the idolization of race and state”^{[3](#)}

The negative impact of nationalism on the living religions of modern Western societies seems obvious. It should be emphasized, however, that the nationalist biases within a divine religion have never had their origin in the religion itself; rather, it is the adherents and followers who burden themselves with such prejudices. This will be made clearer when I later consider the Qur’anic teachings in this area and the philosophy of prophethood.

To fulfil the objectives of the present study, I should restrict myself to a description of nationalism in the mirror of Islam only. From a theoretical point of view, I can see that there are not many similarities between Islam as a divine religion which has its own especial doctrine of human life, and nationalism as, let us say, a political movement in terms of its fundamental elements.

A distinction between the attitude of Islam and the practice of its adherents has been suggested by Soekarno. He, criticizing nationalists’ and Marxists’ comment on Islam, remarks that: Nationalists and Marxists both blame Islam for the down-fall of the Moslem nations, their present backwardness and the fact that most of them are under Western domination.

But they are confused! It is not Islam, but rather its adherents who have been at fault. Seen from a nationalist and socialist perspective, it would be hard to find a civilization comparable in greatness to that of the early Islamic world. The downfall of national greatness, the downfall of Islamic socialism was not brought about by Islam itself, but by the moral downfall of its leaders. ... Once the “Caliphs became kings,” the true nature of Islam was suppressed.^{[4](#)}

Soekarno also says: “I am certainly not saying that Islam accepts Materialism; nor do I forget that Islam transcends national boundaries and is supra-national in character.”^{[5](#)}

Once the Muslim *Ummah* was established in Madina in 632 A.D., the leader of Islam proclaimed the message of Islam on a universal scale. In his *Political Theory of Islam*, Abul ‘Ala Mawdoodi remarks: “A state of this sort evidently cannot restrict the scope of its activities. It is a universal and all-inclusive state.

Its sphere of activity is co-extensive with the whole of human life”^{[6](#)} Islam, from the very beginning, has been a monotheistic religion of “supra-national and universal human scope.” Islam, rejecting racism and nationalism, “did not stop at the call to the faith. It rose to establish a state which embodied a new nation, which is that of the believers, Islamic *Ummah* or *Ummah Muslima*.”^{[7](#)} P. J. Vatikiotis, in paraphrasing this point, states:

The very basis of this new nation and its nationalism, if you wish, has been the religion of Islam. The state has been and remains its instrument. The state, therefore, has no value in itself; nor is it set up temporally for a particular people, as a nation–state, to the exclusion of others. Rather, it is based on the universal principle of Islam to safeguard the religion and extend its message.[8](#)

The Muslim *Ummah* is built on the basis of the Qur’anic faith and certain self–evident truths such as the equality of all people before God, friendly relationships among fellow believers, and kindness towards people. Here are some words from Imam ‘Ali b. Musa al–Rida (765–818) where he says:

To be friendly with others denotes one half of wisdom.

The believer who is endowed with a good temper will have the strongest faith.

Perfection in intellect is primarily to have faith in God and secondly to behave well towards others.

To bear enmity towards people is the worst provision for the journey to the Hereafter.[9](#)

The members of the Muslim Community, recognizing that humankind is endowed by the Compassionate Creator with certain inalienable rights, like the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, are encouraged to do good, to help the persecuted and to fulfil the desires of the needy.[10](#) As Majid Khadduri mentions:

In the Tradition, Muhammad is reported to have conceived of the Muslim community as “a single hand, like a compact wall whose bricks support each other,” and in the Qur’an it is often referred to as a distinct “nation” (*ummah*) or a “brotherhood,” bound by common obligations to a superior divine authority.[11](#)

Thus, one finds neither inspiration nor encouragement towards nationalism within the constitution of the Muslim ummah.

Regarding the attitude of Islam towards nationalism, there has been a very long discussion among the theoreticians of the political and social sciences. Those who express negative feelings towards nationalism are themselves divided.

Some believe that nationalism is in conflict with Islam, but at the same time, they maintain, as a kind of justification, the existence of temporal secularism within the power structure of the Islamic nation. One such theoretician is Vatikiotis, whose attitude is clarified in the following passage.

Nationalism (*qawmiyya*)[12](#) as an ideology is incompatible with the world of Islam, for it implies a pre–Islamic kind of tribal particularism, or *jahiliyya*. In fact, nationalism is Islam’s deadliest, for it represents an attempt to separate Islam from polity and isolate it from the resolution of temporal matters.

That is, it postulates the separation between religion and polity, religion and the state, or it denies Islam

its central role in the regulation of Muslim earthly political affairs. The nation state in Islam is then an ideological, not a territorial concept. It comprises the community of the faithful or believers wherever they may be.¹³

Vatikiotis explains that the nation state of Islam implies “the structure of temporal–secular power.”¹⁴ The author justifies this kind of “temporal–secular power” as a means of safeguarding the *ummah* “against its external, infidel enemies and ensures that the believers can lead the life of observant Muslims.”¹⁵

This is in spite of the fact that the Qur’anic nation state of Islam by itself has nothing to do with secularism, even in its temporal form. Islam is a religion, and between it and secularism there can be found no harmony. From the genuine Islamic point of view, the believers are even taught not to accept an unbeliever ruler who governs not by the revealed *Shari’ah* of Islam.¹⁶

As Kohn mentions:

From the very first Islam was not only a religion, but a political and social system as well. The Koran, the Sunna, and the systems based upon them, contain not only religious commandments but also the principles of private and public law.¹⁷

A glance at the Qur’anic passages

There are two Qur’anic terms that imply more or less the notion of a nation. One of these is *milla*, which is mentioned seventeen times in fifteen verses. In defining the concept of *milla*, Raghib Isfahani, in his dictionary of Qur’anic words and expressions, states that *milla*, *imla’* and *imla’* are all of the same root.

The infinitive *imla’* meaning ‘to dictate’, contains the notion of something which is dictated from any divine or undivine, mighty or unmighty, holy or non–holy source. The word *milla* in its religious sense means a way, a path, or a cult which is dictated and presented by a divine¹⁸ or perhaps undivine leader or group. Both cases have been exemplified in the *Qur’an*:

“Say, verily, my Lord has guided me to the straight way, a right and steadfast religion, the *milla* (religion–trode) of Ibrahim, the true in faith, and Ibrahim certainly joined not gods with Allah.”¹⁹

This verse hints at Ibrahim’s *milla* as a divine path and religion. On the other hand, we recite in the *Qur’an*:

“And the unbelievers said to their apostles, ‘Be sure we shall derive you out of our land, or you shall return to our *milla* (religion).’”²⁰

Since a divine religion like that of Ibrahim was revealed and dictated by Allah, it is called *milla* in the sense that it is a dictated path that should be followed by the adherents of that divine religion. Thus, *milla* in its most elementary concept is employed to mean path, rite or religion itself, as it may be applicable to people who follow that rite or religion.

In either case, *milla* in its divine sense is also attributed to the prophet or to the leader of a religion.^{[21](#)} According to the *Qur'an*, people are requested to recognize and practice the divine religion of the prophet Ibrahim:

“Say, Allah speaks the truth, thus, follow the religion of Ibrahim (millata Ibrahim), the sane in faith; he was not of the pagans.”^{[22](#)}

The *milla* of infidels, by contrast, is a satanic cult which is considered to contradict the divine paths of God's prophets.

Islam is an Abrahamic religion, and Muslims are to honour the *milla* of their father Ibrahim^{[23](#)} by following the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims then form an Abrahamic *milla* with especial qualifications, all of whose elements are based on divinity without taking any racial, territorial, linguistic, or other differences into consideration.

This is because, as we understand from the Qur'anic verses, there is an eternal togetherness between the nation of Islam and Islam itself. Hess Andrew C. mentions that the word *millet* [*milla*] though basically employed to mean “religion”, later in Islamic history is extended to include “religious community”, i.e., the community of Islam.^{[24](#)}

The word ‘*ummah*’ is another Qur'anic term, referring to the religious nation of Islam. This word occurs more than forty times in the *Qur'an* as well as a number of other times in two other conjugations, i.e., *ummatukum* (your *ummah*) and *umam* (different *ummahs*).

The passages that contain the word *ummah* are so varied that its meaning cannot be rigidly defined.” But is the term in its Qur'anic concept identified with what R. Paret deems as always referring to “ethical, linguistic or religious bodies of people who are the objects of the divine plan of salvation”?^{[25](#)}

We may take this definition of *ummah* as applicable in the case of some other ethical religious nations in reality; nevertheless, it seems a problematic concept when we are concerned with the notion of a Muslim community referring to the Qur'anic passages that contain the term *ummah*.

Accordingly, there is no supposition of elements like language or ethnicity as playing a role in the formation of the Islamic *ummah*. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri says:

In an Islamic state, Islam cannot be treated as a personal affair of an individual or a belief or faith of a particular group. ... It negates the idea of duality of religious and secular life as it practically exists in present-day Christianity in the form of incompatibility between church and state.^{[26](#)}

Thus, an Islamic state and secular life contradict one another. In a secular state, religion has no obligatory role in providing the authority; rather, it is the people themselves who are the source of its authority. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri says:

“But the authority of an Islamic state derives from the Almighty Allah ... and Islam is the basis in polity in an Islamic state; it regulates both individual and state affairs.”[27](#)

The usage of “ummah” in the Qur’an and the concept of an Islamic ummah

To some extent, the usage of the term *ummah* in the *Qur’an* does not answer our understanding of the concept. On a few occasions, the exegetes of the *Qur’an* qualify the term as referring exclusively to the Islamic community. Allamah Tabataba’i[28](#) describes the literal concept and other usages of the word *ummah* in the *Qur’an* by offering four definitions:

1– It may be literally translated as ‘people’, meaning a group of people, as in the verse:

“Mankind was but one single ummah (people, nation) ...”[29](#)

2– Sometimes the word is meant to describe a single human being, as in the verse:

“Surely Ibrahim was an ummah devoutly obedient to Allah.”[30](#)

3– ‘A long period of time’ is another usage of the word, as is implied in the verse:

“And remembered after an ummah”,[31](#)

meaning after a long time.

4– ‘Religion’ is considered to be a fourth usage of the term, such as in the verse:

“And surely this is your single ummah and I am your Lord, therefore, fear Me,”[32](#)

or in the verse:

“Surely this your ummah is one ummah and I am your Lord, therefore, worship Me.”[33](#)

Allamah maintains that “In both these verses, according to some commentators, the word *ummah* ... has been used for ‘religion’.”[34](#)

Allamahh regards the first usage of the above-mentioned ones as the original meaning and remarks that the other kinds of usage are based on this fundamental one.[35](#) In the case of the fourth concept, he prefers to explain the word *ummah* in the sense of a ‘people.’ Accordingly, it represents the notion of one single Muslim nation that believes in Allah, worships Him and is faithful to Him.

Once again in dealing with the notion of the Prophet’s *ummah*, Allamah interprets the word *ummah* in the two latter verses to mean nothing more or less than a group of people. He furthermore states that the reference to Muhammad’s *ummah*, in the sense that it includes all those who have believed in his

call, gained currency after the revelation of the Qur'an and the expansion of Islam.^{[36](#)}

In his commentary on the verse:

“Verily this is your ummah, the unique ummah, and I am your Lord, then worship Me,”^{[37](#)}

Allamah mentions that the word *ummah* hints at a group which gathers around the same objective. Such a translation is understood from the first root of the word *ummah*, which is *amma*, i.e. “had an aim.”

Therefore, *ummah* is a company of people “which has a single aim, a single goal and a single ambition, and that unity of aim unites all the members, and makes them one people. That is why it is correct to use it for one human being as well as for many ...”^{[38](#)} On another occasion, Allamah maintains that the unification of the *ummah* springs from its unique *shari‘a*, that is, the *Shari‘a* of Oneness (*Din al-Tawhid*).^{[39](#)}

The constitution of the first Islamic community

The formation of the Islamic community dates from the time of the Prophet in Madina. He created a new community there shortly after arriving in this first city-state of Islam.^{[40](#)} Ibn Ishaq in his *Sirat Rasul Allah* relates the following passage^{[41](#)} which is translated by A. Guillaume:

The apostle wrote a document concerning the emigrants and the helpers in which he made a friendly agreement with the Jews and established them in their religion and their property, and stated the reciprocal obligations, as follows: This is a document from Muhammad the prophet [governing the relations] between the believers and Muslims of Quraysh and Yathrib, and those who followed them and joined them and laboured with them. They are one community (*ummah*) to the exclusion of all men.^{[42](#)}

The broad outlines of an Islamic state were established within this first constitution of the city-state of Madina. Through this constitution, the Prophet declared Madina to be a political unit. As depicted in article 2 of the constitution, Muslims established a “unique communication” (*ummah wahida*) as “distinct from all the people of the world.”^{[43](#)}

The Prophet “went beyond the circle of Muslims proper and included those citizens of Madina who had not yet heeded his religious appeal in one political combination.”^{[44](#)} Within the framework of the constitution it is expressly stated that all citizens, including the Jews and other non-Muslim minorities, lived under the protection of the Islamic state.

At any rate, this single *ummah* constituted by the Prophet was a Muslim *ummah* under whose political aegis many non-Muslim minorities had been given protection.^{[45](#)} In short, as Khadduri states: “The conception of the ummah or brotherhood constituted the basis of the Islamic community in whose membership alone the believer obtains prosperity in this world and salvation in the next.”^{[46](#)}

The Qur'an, appreciating the wise act of the Prophet, says:

"It is the milla (cult, nation) of your father Ibrahim. It is He (God) Who has named you Muslims, both before and in this revelation."[47](#)

Furthermore, the Prophet, in order to reinforce the position of the newly born *ummah*, "instituted brotherhood between his fellow emigrants and the helpers, and he said, ... 'Let each of you take a brother in God.'"

One of the aspects of the Prophet's conduct (*sirah*) that discourages nationalism and focuses on faith as the key-element of Muslim unity is this brotherhood between people of several nations and tribes. One may go further and say that even the wars that occurred between the Qurayshi Prophet and the infidel tribesmen of the Quraysh were intended to discourage tribalism as well as nationalism.

The Prophet and Muslims, as depicted in the Qur'an,[48](#) were allowed to defend themselves and fight against the Quraysh since he and his followers had been unjustly treated by the Quraysh simply because of their faith in Allah.[49](#)

In this case, the nationalist and tribalist interests were disregarded for the sake of the monotheistic faith of Muslims in contrast to the idol-worship of the Quraysh. This means that the faith of the *ummah* at that time overshadowed all other elements and aspects of life.

The role of religion in the formation of the "ummah w^{ah}ida"

Ever since Islam was first revealed, Muslims have been encouraged to live together and to work towards establishing a single Muslim nation embracing all Muslims around the world. The Qur'an, in explaining the role of the prophets, goes beyond the concept of one Muslim nation and explains how humankind used to be one community, but because of internal disputes became divided:

(All) people were a single nation, so Allah raised prophets as bearers of good tidings and as warners; and with them He revealed book with the truth, so that it might judge between people in that in which they differed and struggled; and none but the very people who were given the book, after clear signs (and arguments) had come to them, differed about it, due to their selfish contumacy. [50](#)

This verse is addressed to all people belonging to the human race.[51](#) Allamah Tabataba'i states:

This verse refers to the beginning of humanity when they were united, lived a simple life and had simple thoughts. There were no differences or any tug-of-war in matters of life or livelihood, nor were there any disagreements about religion or religious matters.[52](#)

During the early period of human history, there were no considerable struggles over matters affecting

both everyday life and religious beliefs. Year after year, and generation after generation, human beings have been continuously climbing “the heights of knowledge and thought and ever progressing along the path of learning and culture.”⁵³

Day by day new ways to improve human civilization are found, and newer instruments invented “to make life more and more comfortable.”⁵⁴ People in primitive times did not become entangled in any serious disagreements; “nor there occurred among them any lasting differences.”⁵⁵

However, since human beings possess “the natural urge to take advantage of others” and have a natural need to cooperate with others, they cannot avoid quarrelling with one another. Since some individuals were stronger in body and mind than others, they used to take more from the weaker “than they gave them in return.”

Thus, human mind was occupied by two different motivations with two opposite consequences. On the one hand “whenever he used a newly-acquired expertise, it opened new avenues of progress and dexterity for him.” On the other, he was in need of cooperation with others.⁵⁶ Allamah Tabataba’i states:

It may seem strange that the same natural urge compelled men to remain together, on one hand, and led them to quarrel and find differences on the other. But ... there is a third faculty above them to judge and decide, and to create a balance between them.⁵⁷

I have paraphrased at length Allamah Tabataba’i’s interpretation of the verse 2: 213 to show that according to his interpretation, God’s prophets, whose major responsibility was to call people to the religion of Oneness and to establish a monotheistic religious nation, were the great architects of the *ummah wāhida*.

For the sake of unity, people of all nations and races are asked to follow the path set down by those guides who themselves have been guided by Allah. Muslims, regardless of national, racial, tribal, and ethnic differences, are expected to follow the Prophet Muhammad as the Seal and as the Last of the prophets.

They are called to embrace Islam with their whole existence and to worship one God, follow one prophet, acknowledge one book, one *shari’ah* and one direction, so that they might form one single community, even though they may be from different nationalities or territories.

The same Qur’anic verse encourages people to form a single community and avoid any conflict among them. However because of moral, behavioural and practical problems such as selfishness, greed, ungratefulness, injustice, etc., human beings have always contended with one another, except for those who sincerely believe.

Accordingly, the best way to establish a real single community is to follow the teachings of Allah’s prophets and to adhere to the divine religion revealed to them. Since the messages of all the prophets

fundamentally are the same, as they all call attention to the Oneness of God and belief in the Hereafter, their sincere followers, by respecting these principles, may get along together more comfortably than unbelievers.

The uniqueness of the divine religion is manifested in the following verse:

“Verily, the only religion before Allah is Islam”,[58](#)

illustrating that all messengers had basically the same path and religion.

Allamah Tabataba'i states concerning the interpretation of the Qur'anic passage: “the verse explains why religion was promulgated and mankind obliged to follow it, and why differences occurred in it.”[59](#)

Going into more detail, Allamah explains that religion plays an important role in the formation of a single *ummah*. The creation of a single *ummah* is a goal which is in harmony with the nature of humankind. He maintains that “mankind having been created with a natural urge to remain together and cooperate with each other, were in the beginning one single group.”

Disputes however occurred that caused them to lose their togetherness. As a result of differences and disputes, people were divided into different groups and sects. These differences occurred either because of “the acquisition of the necessities of life” or “because of the revolt of the very people who were given the book, after the fundamentals and characteristics of religion had been fully explained to them and the proof of Allah had been completed for them.”[60](#)

No factor other than divine religion, such as nationality, language, race, blood, territory, etc. can bring people under a single umbrella; rather, they by themselves may introduce differences of opinion. In this regard, what the verse is implying is that there are two sorts of differences: “first, the differences based on worldly gains, which was but natural; second, the differences regarding religious matters which were based not on nature, but on the revolt of mischief-makers.”[61](#) To remove both kinds of differences, Allah created divine laws based on true faith, fine character and good actions.[62](#)

Based on this interpretation, Allamah remarks that the problem of human differences can be solved only by means of divine religion, whose perfect role within human society can help in the formation of one single *ummah* and the establishment of social justice. He states:

The divine religion is the only means of happiness and felicity for the human species, and it keeps life in order. It creates a balance between various human instincts and urges, and keeps them on the middle path, preventing them from going towards either extreme. Thus, there appears the best system and the highest discipline in the human life both of this world and of the Hereafter, the material as well as the spiritual.[63](#)

Here, “an outline of the social and religious history of human beings” is given in the verse.[64](#)

Due to the premise that human beings are social by nature, there is a natural instinct to take advantage of others just as others may benefit from him.

This 'give-and-take' promoted men to live in society and to cooperate with each other in their affairs. It necessitated the safeguarding of the rights of every member of that society to keep a balance between their rights and their duties. This is called social justice.[65](#)

Throughout history, social justice has been the chief goal of human beings. However, this same history shows that because of the negative aspects of character, human beings always engaged themselves and their fellows in personal and social problems. Consequently, they let difficulties and disasters develop and remain unsolved. Some of the characteristics of human beings are mentioned in the Qur'an as follows:

"Surely man is unjust, ignorant"[66](#);

"Surely insan is created avaricious"[67](#);

"Surely insan is unjust, very ungrateful" [68](#);

"Nay! Verily insan is wont to rebel as he sees him/herself free from want."[69](#)

With respect to such comments, Allamah remarks:

This is why whenever a man acquires power over his fellows, the dictates of social justice are forgotten; and the mighty one ignores the rights of weaker ones. It is as much true in the case of individuals as in that of nations and states; and this has been going on from the early history of mankind until the present, which is called the age of civilization and freedom![70](#)

This is a common problem for human nations including Muslim societies all around the world. It is clear that ever since it emerged within the Muslim world, nationalism, inasmuch as it is mostly a political movement, has not been yet able to overcome such problems. From a historical point of view, the wave of nationalism among Muslim societies dates to the late nineteenth century.

The phenomenon of national consciousness emerged first in Europe and then manifested in other continents including Muslim countries. Due to some political reasons, the first inspiration of nationalism showed itself in the territories of Ottoman Empire.[71](#)

Nationalism, though it may answer some of the needs of a nation or eliminate certain of its problems, can never remove them all; in fact it is likely to cause further problems. Thus, there has always been a vital need for a strong and authentic instrument by means of which human beings may do away with their personal and social problems and bring social justice into practice.

Allamah, writing of the differences and disputes that have resulted in people failing to remain as a single

community, insists that divine laws, based “on the belief of the oneness of Allah, on true faith, on fine character and good deeds” provide the only solution.⁷²

Within the framework of the constitution of Islamic society, the afore-mentioned points are significant. Islamic society is something of a phenomenon in our present time, potentially maintaining as it does a certain unity in spite of the fact that it is composed of several nationalities, and these widely separated geographically.

Today, Muslims all over the world are members of this society, sharing many common ideas, feelings and causes. Establishing brotherhood,⁷³ the Qur'an encourages believers to have as well as to show a powerful sympathy and integration between them. In fact, it has only been because of military or political matters, or perhaps due to colonial interference, that Muslims, albeit unwillingly, have separated from each other.

As was mentioned before, in recent centuries, the Western powers have been one of the main causes of this separation. However, nothing has been able to destroy the basis of the unity which is rooted in the faith and implemented in the hearts of Muslims. As Iqbal, the great poet, says, “the truth is single one; though our tents (homes) are not connected to each other, our hearts are alike and united.”⁷⁴

The annual pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca during the month of *Dhi'l-Hijjah* is a remarkable gathering of Muslims of every nationality, and an indication of the importance that they attach to the principles in which they believe in common. The cooperation manifested in the hajj may be regarded as nothing less than a model for a potential or real United Muslim Community.⁷⁵

The Problem with Religious Nationalism

Peter Van der Veer, in his work *Religious Nationalism* wherein he offers a case study of Hindu and Muslim religious struggles in India, tries to interpret this phenomenon by describing it as ‘religious nationalism’. It is doubtful however whether such a problematic doctrine truly reflects reality or is merely an unfounded allegation. The author himself, being aware of this problem, says,

The claim that something like religious nationalism exists will be rejected by many students of nationalism for the simple reason that both nationalism and its theory depend on a Western discourse of modernity. This discourse constitutes the ‘traditional’ as its antithesis and interprets difference as backwardness. A crucial element of the discourse of modernity is the opposition of the ‘religious’ to the ‘secular’.⁷⁶

Van der Veer’s response to this objection does not seem satisfactory. He points out two factors which are to him necessary for understanding religious nationalism in India: first, “an analysis of ‘traditional’ that is not prejudiced by the discourse of modernity” and second, “a theory of the impact of colonialism and orientalism that does not deny agency to colonial subjects.”⁷⁷

Van der Veer's main illustration of his argument depends on just one event that happened in Ayodhya, an important religious centre in India.⁷⁸ There was an old mosque in Ayodhya "that had been long under dispute between Hindus and Muslims." This site, according to Hindu tradition, was the birthplace of Lord Rama the prime god of Ayodhya."

Van der Veer describes the event as such:

In 1982, however, the relative peace of the place was suddenly disrupted when a campaign 'to liberate the birthplace of Lord Rama' was launched. The initiative was taken not by local monks but by a Hindu nationalist movement with branches all over the country.⁷⁹ ... Hundreds of people have died in riots between Hindus and Muslims.⁸⁰

Finally, on 6 December 1992, the mosque was demolished by a Hindu mob. Van der Veer concludes that: The Ayodhya case reflects all the elements of religious nationalism in which I have come to be interested. While this book is not principally about Ayodhya, the Ayodhya case is taken here as the main illustration of my argument.⁸¹

He then attempts to show that religious nationalism "builds on a previous construction of religious community."⁸²

What may be said in response to Van der Veer's argument is that the case of Ayodhya reflects nothing more than a rigid religious bias and prejudice on the part of both Hindus and Muslims against one another. Like many disputes between people of different religious rites and sects, the Hindu-Muslim prejudice in the case under study is concerned with the religious traditional heritage of both sides and not with their nationalism.

This comment seems sound when one considers the definition of nationalism as being opposed to religion and religious customs. Even the distinction between the sacred languages of Hinduism and Islam, as it is another aspect of Van der Veer's argument,⁸³ cannot support the idea of religious nationalism, because first, it is problematic to state that language itself may play an important role in the formation of nationalism, and second, the sacredness of language is more relevant to the description of a religion than of a nationality.

Another case-example of the so-called religious nationalism is illustrated by Martha Lee. Considering the African American movement, Lee goes on to elaborate a kind of the black Americans' religious movement.

Her attempts have no further result than to affirm a significant role and place for religion in awakening the black nation of America. There is no doubt that religion played such an important role in encouraging the black nation to re-discover their humanity and identity and in helping them to direct their destiny.⁸⁴ Martha Lee remarks:

The Black population of the United States has long struggled to find its identity in the context of the

society and republic in which it must exist. This struggle is not surprising; the political question “who are we?” must be answered by reflection upon and interpretation of the past. ... As Black Americans know well, slavery is an institution that denies humanity and political visibility.

A restoration of their community therefore requires a comprehensive explanation of their origins and an interpretation of the meaning of their existence.^{[85](#)}

The same author then concludes: “One of the most appropriate ways to examine this problem is through religion.”^{[86](#)} In reaction to what Lee indicates, I believe one should be cautious about interpreting or recognizing this role of religion as religious nationalism.

Conclusion

Due to their respective principles and characteristics, Islam and nationalism each has its own message, teachings and space. We have seen that since the very beginning, Islam has discouraged tribalism, racism and prejudice in all of their forms.

This discouragement extends itself to the realm of nationalism in the modern age. In fact, considering its negative attitude towards nationalism, it cannot be said that Islam regards internationalism in any more positive a light. This is because the concept of internationalism is too restricted to represent Islamic social thought.

The idea that emerges out from within the Qur'an and Islamic tradition indicates that Islam, on a universal scale, calls for the creation of a single community and encourages humankind to practice justice and to live in peace. Imam 'Ali, in his address to Malik Ashtar on appointing him as the governor of Egypt, wrote:

Remember, Malik, that among your subjects there are two kinds of people: those who have the same religion as yourself and they are brothers unto you and those who have other religions than yours and yet are human beings like you ... Let your mercy and compassion come to their rescue and help in the same way and to the same extent that you expect God to show mercy and forgiveness to you.^{[87](#)}

Although nationalism did emerge within the Muslim world, nevertheless, the movement was never derived from Islamic teachings. The only thing that we may find in Islamic tradition is a *hadith* that advocates devotion to one's nation: “*One's love for his country is a matter of faith.*”

Some Muslim scholars believe that this saying contains a mystical rather than a patriotic message. The famous poet Iqbal says, “Our hearts do not belong to any homeland, whether it be Greece, India, Syria or elsewhere. In fact, there is no border encircling us or defining us other than Islam.”^{[88](#)}

Regardless however of its mystical sense, the *hadith* encourages Muslim believers of every nation to work hard in achieving material benefit for their respective homelands. It urges them to make progress in

every field of knowledge in order to meet, and thus avoid having to be dependent on non-Muslim countries.

Again the hadith, heartening Muslims to show their love for and loyalty towards their homelands, declares a supranational message for all Muslim nations and does not restrict itself to a specific nation.[89](#)

As Soekarno states, "...true Islam requires all its adherents to love and to work for the country in which they reside, to love and to work for the people among whom they live."[90](#) Finally, love and loyalty are derived from our instinctive feelings and consciousness, whereas nationalism is an ideology whose birth place was the political arena.[91](#)

The people of a nation may express the same love and loyalty towards their great figures of science, their national pride, their epic history and all their distinguished achievements. Islam, which encourages Muslims to respect their own material and spiritual values and wealth as well as to be independent and steadfast in their loyalties, is certainly not opposed to this kind of attitude.

Muslims are allowed to take pride in their nation loyalties so far they do not encourage or cause any prejudice in theory or in practice. The Qur'an condemns only those who sacrifice the faith by clinging to ancestors or by aping national figures. There is no problem as such with imitating these personalities so long it does not conflict with Islamic teachings.

In accordance with the divine teachings and prophetic missions, Muslims are requested not to follow the example of any one whose path is in direct contradiction to God's commands.[92](#) As depicted in the Qur'an, prophets were continually being responded by their people that what they taught "was against the prevalent customs and traditions of the country" and those of their ancestors.

The prophets strived to call people to the Oneness of God, to the monotheistic faith, but the people's response was that they observed their fathers' customs and wanted to follow them.[93](#)

A global education seems necessary to ultimately create mutual understanding and cooperation between the different nations of the world. It is the obligation of Muslim educators in particular and all others in general to cooperate with one another in order to provide a peaceful global environment. The survival of our planet earth greatly depends upon our carrying out this obligation.

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15. Ibid.
16. Perhaps it is understood from the verse: "Allah never gives by any means the unbelievers a way against the believers", The Qur'an, 4: 141.
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18. Cf. Mutahhari, Khadamat, pp. 39–40.
19. The Qur'an, 6: 61.

- [20.](#) Ibid., 15: 123.
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