

Religious Belief in Today's World

The question before us is the condition of religion in today's world, and the calling and difficulties the religious believer faces. We may refer to all religious believers, be they Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, but in the first instance I mean we Muslims, even though this may apply to non-Muslims who seek dignity and self-respect as well.

As a Muslim who wants to live in his own time, focused on a future in which he wants to be instrumental while remaining dignified, I put forward my question regarding religion. This is a personal question in that I do not speak as an impartial and neutral person, but as an interested Muslim who is inquisitive, even though it might be necessary in some instances to look at religion from the outside so that we are not mired in prejudice and we do not descend into the abyss of ethnocentricity. So when I ask what conditions we Muslims are in, both sets of questions, both internal and external perspectives must be clarified.

We Muslims once had a dominant civilization and were shaping human history in a way that we are no longer capable of today. We want to regain our place in history, and, if possible, build a future that is different from our present and even our past, without rejecting those who are different from us, and without ignoring scientific thought and the practical achievements of humanity.

But what do I mean by 'today's world?' Briefly, I mean 'Western Civilization, which dominates the world. This means that our economic, political, social, and cultural life is strongly influenced by the West; without its legacy and achievements, life is impossible for us Muslims. We see the effect of the West everywhere: the design and management of the city that we live in, communication technologies and much else that we use on a daily basis are all Western creations.

Today's world is Western in its orientation, techniques, and thoughts, such that even if one lives outside the geographic boundaries of the West, one must incorporate the West into one's values and life. The West has indeed brought great achievements to humanity, but it has also created great difficulties. But the key issue here is that our difficulties are more compounded than the West's because Westerners at

least have a culture that is in harmony with their civilization and thus do not suffer from a precarious identity.

But our problems are compounded precisely because on the one hand the West, a civilization whose foundations we have not absorbed and internalized, directly influences our personal and social lives. On the other hand, aspects of our culture belong to a civilization whose time has passed. Even though there is no definitive, ultimate view of what culture and civilization are, in my view civilization consists of the material aspects of social life and all institutions and organizations that act as political, economic, industrial, and other frameworks for social organization.

Culture, the way I conceive it, is the collection of rooted beliefs, as well as habits of thought and emotion in society.

Some might see the West's crisis as being attributable to the antagonism between its motivations and human nature. We suffer from the same problem, albeit second hand. But the problem of non-Westerners is more acute because the culture that dominates our minds does not match the realities of life in this age. We suffer more severely from these contradictions than Westerners.

It is indeed possible to differentiate culture from civilization. A culture that is adapted to a civilization can remain in people's lives long after the demise of that civilization. Civilization is the basis and foundation of a culture; on the basis of its schism with culture, civilization loses its innovative and creative power, actually becoming an impediment in the way of development, for it is not deeply rooted and gradually comes apart.

One of our most central problems is that important aspects of our culture belong to a civilization whose time has long passed, and our life is influenced by modern civilization, which requires a culture appropriate for it.

As Muslims who want to hold our heads high and maintain our historical identity, which for us is Islam, what are we to do?

Do not expect me to provide a manifesto on this, for I admit my own mental incapacity before such a grand task, and second, people's lives cannot be corrected by manifestos. One of the most powerful manifestos was that of Marx and Engels, and we saw what it led to, even though these two, especially Marx, were brilliant and powerful thinkers and the greatest pathologists of the capitalist order.

We must confess in all sincerity that life is a collective effort, which cannot go forward except through debate, critique, and cooperation, and be recognizing the limitations and relativity of all perspectives. What we are proposing here is merely one set of possibilities, not a final and definite solution. We need more open debate and thoughtful and sincere participation in the process of serious questioning, and a

more concerted effort in finding answers. First, let us look at religion.

Religion is among the oldest human institutions. Life in the absence of religious belief and resignation to a higher order is devoid of meaning. Whether they want it or not, humans have a sense of the infinite supernatural deep in their beings and grasp this from the depths of their souls.

Humans are creatures that can understand the essence and secret of being and that is why they want to uncover the nature of being—witness how many secrets have been uncovered by human efforts so far. But existence is so complex that as soon as one question is answered, many more appear soon after. Humans knowingly live in a sea of mysteries and curiosity about being, dazzled by existence and all its complexity and intricacy.

Religion is the most stable, firm, and sincere answer to people's awe before, existence. I believe that while there is a human race there will be awe, and while there is awe the place of religion in the life and mind of humans is more secure than any other institution or phenomenon, for religion empowers the incomplete but curious human mind to grasp the all-knowing creator. There is no one who deep in his or her heart can deny the existence of the infinite and the transcendent. But people are affected, by nihilism, ignorant of the transcendent reality, which is as harmful as the other extreme, which is thinking of transient and changing phenomena as eternal and static. Much of the catastrophes in history have originated from these two mistakes.

A Godless life, especially without the monotheistic religions and the God of Muslim mysticism or 'Irfan—which is different from the God of the superstitious or even the God of philosophers—is dark and narrow. This is a God that is at the peak of nobility and grandeur. With all their limitations and inability, humans can make direct contact with this God and establish a sincere emotional and linguistic relationship with it. In an anxiety-ridden world replete with uncertainty, humans can get in touch with the center of being and draw advice and direction from this source.

This is a God that is magnificent and majestic. Humans are in love with it but also reverent toward it. This relationship is different from the weak's fear of the strong, similar to the anxiety of the incomplete in search of fulfillment before a being that is complete and free of need. Reverence is the basis of rectitude. True rectitude is all reverence, and reverence is being free of the bounds of belonging to the earth. The earthly are dependent on this world, but the truly reverent see the world as being at their disposal, merely a tool for enriching the spiritual aspects of their being.

Of course, we have also had negative 'Irfan and piety. These are all signs of the limitations and fallibility of humans that must be explored. It is evident that the believer who shuns the material world has more tranquility and gratification than those who only possess material comfort and wealth, for while the happiness of the former is eternal, the latter—food and sexual desire—are transient, and because the means of their attainment are dependent on hundreds of factors, the anxiety of losing future pleasure

kills the present pleasure.

Thus in all fairness, religious belief is rooted in the depths of the human soul. And according to the Holy Qur'an, the human constitution is religious and monotheistic. The essence of religion is holy and transcendent, and if we extricate these two qualities, we will not have religion anymore. And anywhere there is holiness and transcendence, there is also absoluteness. Here I want to touch on one of the biggest afflictions that threatens the religious life of people.

The human heart is in touch with the divine and the transcendent, and whenever the human conscience achieves union with this spirit, this is itself a signal that the essence of humanity is in touch with that transcendent reality which has been referred to as the spirit of God. But human existence has two facets: natural and Godly. Humans have their heads in the sky, but their feet on the ground, predestined to live on this planet.

And because they live on this planet, their lives and minds are in constant flux, reflecting the dynamic nature of this world. Because they are natural beings, they are unsettled. Humans are circumscribed by time and space, and thus their thinking is relative and fallible, affected by history and hence dynamic. Neither the body nor the mind remains constant.

Of course, I do not believe that all human perceptions are relative and that there are no constants in human life, but that most human constructs and all the guiding theoretical knowledge are indeed time-bound and temporary. Our knowledge is relative and constantly in flux. There is no escaping the relativity of our beliefs and knowledge, and humans have no choice but to carry on with this uncertainty and put their knowledge and skills to the test of trial and error and to modify them.

History is all about the evolution of beliefs and assumptions about the world. Has the human mind remained the same over history? All the diversity among different traditions, views, and religions, and even among the sects of the same religion is proof that no one can claim to understand all reality from all angles.

For example, when we speak of Islam, which Islam do we mean? Abu Dharr's Islam, Avicenna's Islam, Ghazali's Islam, Ibn Arabi's Islam, the poets' Islam, or the Sufis' Islam? These are all indisputable aspects of history attesting to the relativity of human understanding, even of religion. Today, irrespective of creed, we differ from our parents in thought and deed.

One of the main difficulties of the community of believers is that on the one hand they take some realities to be absolute, transcendent, and holy, and on the other hand, since they are themselves relative, they see all this through the prism of the relativity of their own minds and bodies. As long as they concede their limitations and the root of this contradiction, their internal problems will not create a catastrophe.

The more acute malaise of believers appears when the absoluteness and holiness of religion affects the time- and space-bound and fallible human interpretations of religion, such that the prescriptions of a few may come to be viewed as religiosity itself. A believer is seen only as someone who subscribes to this specific view. Many frictions have their root here.

We have religion and a shared capacity for rationality that is the tool of communication and mutual understanding among humans, and if we believe, as many philosophers do, that the human mind is governed by some absolute concepts that are valid at all times and places, let us also concede that human understanding is so limited that these relative interpretations are fallible. The wide spectrum of opinion and beliefs among different schools and within schools is the most eminent proof for the veracity of this claim.

Does this mean that all doors to the absolute are closed to the human mind? We know that a number of modern philosophers in the West have answered this question in the affirmative. They have either denied the existence of absolute reality or have at least proposed that we have no way of comprehending these realities, and thus many Western thinkers have reached the conclusion that at least in this-worldly social life, religion has to be cast aside.

But for the pious who believe in the omnipotence of God this can never be convincing, even though there is no way of knowing this with certainty. To call ordinary people to a place that they cannot reach would be unwise.

In my opinion, the only secure way of understanding God is through the heart, not the mind, through direct experiential contact, not the intellect. All religions have emphasized this heavily. The leaders of Islam have taught us that the intellect can be used to worship the compassionate God, not to understand it. In another place they have suggested that the way to reach the absolute is worship, not extrapolating from the known to the unknown.

As said in the Qur'an, the way of the absolute and enlightenment is worship and good conduct, and the cleansing of the inside, meaning that the preferred way to know God is direct experiential contact, not understanding.

Of course, this in no way denies the importance of philosophical and scientific intellect, especially in Islam, which emphasizes their important role. But it is necessary to recognize the limitations of the intellect, and the true believer must travel the path of the heart. The truth of religious belief is an experience, not a thought, an experience based on self-development, controlling earthly desires, and resignation before the grandeur of existence, and enchantment by the loved one. If this path is traveled, humans will reach God.

Understanding is an intellectual endeavor where through known concepts one can reach the unknown,

and corresponding to the position of the person in space and time, the intellect is relative. What I have said is not new, as is evident in many religious teachings. Great mystics have all warned about the inability of the intellect, saying that the reasoning mind is based on a wooden, unstable footing. The important point is that great philosophers such as Avicenna, who had great faith in the deductive and inductive powers of the intellect, have never claimed that conceptual intellect can get us to God. The intellect, if it can go all the way, can only reach the vicinity of the transcendent, not to the divine itself.

The path of the heart is a path that leads us to truth and righteousness. The religious experience flows from the depths of the soul. Many philosophers and mystics have tried to pinpoint the intellectual underpinnings of the religious experience, but the path remains experiential, not intellectual.

The delicate point here is that the path of the heart, which is the sure way of getting to God, must be traveled alone; it cannot be achieved vicariously, nor can one transmit this sort of enlightenment to others.

At the same time humans are social beings who must live on the earth; such a being is in need of tools to share with others such that she can communicate with them. Language is an important agent of contact between humans, but language is an outward manifestation, a reflection of a psychological reality that exists in the human mind. Humans are capable of interpretation and transmitting their interpretations to others through language.

One can understand through the intellect that the link between intellect and enlightenment is human understanding, and this understanding is often beyond the control of humans. Human talents know no limits, and truly, the grandeur of human existence cannot be limited to material and natural things, but humans are limited in time and place, and thus have truncated vision. Humans are affected by emotions, and their enlightenment must flow from this emotionality, but since this emotionality is relative and fallible, human interpretations cannot be absolute.

Humans have signs of the superior being in them, but must use their fallible intellect that nature has bestowed on them to deal with nature. With this intellect, humans try to make sense of two separate matters: the natural and the supernatural worlds. Despite the relativity of human understanding, some believers see the absoluteness of religion as being the same as their limited and incomplete view of religion.

But with the passage of time and transformations in human life, old interpretations do not suffice anymore. Instead of shedding their truncated vision and looking at religious issues with open-mindedness to be able to develop a more complete and dynamic view of religion, they try to impose their disjointed thinking on reality. This is impossible in the long term and the source of much calamity in the short term.

Human views of nature today are vastly different from those interpretations in the past. Some have, of course, tried to give a holy veneer to human interpretations. In Christian history, a specific interpretation of the natural world was espoused by the Catholic Church and for centuries this static view did not allow new beams to be projected onto it, and what hardships this imposed on thinkers and scientists! But this thinking was slowly transformed and today very few people, be they Muslim; Christian, or of other religions, believe that the Holy books and direct contact with God can guide humans in understanding natural phenomena.

Instead, all have accepted that to understand the world and nature we must use rationality and intellect to arrive at theories that are valid and capable of answering questions and fulfilling needs. These theories constantly await falsification, but this view is still not accepted in the human sciences. We must, of course, distinguish between theory and empirical observation, to allow for thinkers and philosophers who believe in some constant and general principles in the sciences.

All interpretations are limited, not only regarding knowledge of the natural world, but also religion. Yet the limited nature of the human understanding of religion will not undermine religion itself, unless believers mistake their interpretations of religion for religion itself. Much friction in history has arisen out of this mistake, making people suspicious of religion because specific interpretations change.

Serving religion in this age requires that we courageously distinguish between the essence of religion and the incomplete interpretations of humans such that religion maintains its central place deep in the hearts of believers, in a way that we can modify religious thinking to adapt to the demands of our time.

Given the multiplicity of views of religion over history, we must ensure that we do not think that our view of religion is the only see to it that our reference to religious sources is guided by proper logic and clearly defined methods that are themselves in constant flux. True, these are sacred matters, but our interpretations of them are human. Only through this realization will humans open their minds to the experiences and innovations of others.

It is only in this case that commensurable with questions and needs, which are constantly being renewed, we can achieve a more instrumental and useful understanding of religion. Of course, we cannot view all religious interpretations as being equally valid, just as we cannot view lay people's interpretations of the natural world as advanced physics or biology.

Valid religious interpretation, similar to scientific thinking, requires that we be loyal to the authentic sources, which for Muslims are the Holy Qur'an and knowledge of past methods of reaching religious enlightenment. Still, all we are left with is our interpretations of religion, and the eternal life of religion is ensured by the realization that religiosity cannot be confined to any time- and space-bound interpretation. It is such a view that will open the door to the evolution of all facets of the believers' lives, without allowing misdirected thinking to inhibit thought and development, simultaneously upholding the

essence of religion.

At the same time, a dynamic and instrumental view of religion depends on being intelligently present in this world, capable of handling and shaping current realities without losing our historical identity. In my view, Western civilization is the powerful reality of our age, even though the West does not seem amicable to us politically, and few are the non-Westerners who have not seen the pain of the West's political and economic oppression either in the form of the old colonialism or the hegemonic policies of the West today.

But the political-economic West is only one facet of that civilization. The whole of the West is a civilization that has its own culture, and this civilization is based on a specific world view and value system. Without understanding these values, our grasp of the West will be superficial and misleading. At the point of appraisal, we must shun the extremes of hating the West or being completely enchanted by it, so that on the one hand we can guard against the dangers posed by the West, and on the other hand utilize its human achievements. All this will be possible only if we reach a stage of intellectual and historical maturity to gain the capability to discern and choose, and accept the responsibilities.

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