

Meeting Rivers Series - 13

ENGAGED ISLAM

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The Islamic world on the whole tends to take very conservative stands on a number of issues. For example, the laws pertaining to women are in great need of change, particularly keeping in mind the attitudes of the Taliban and Saudis. The implementation of meaningful and just laws does not mean Islam is under attack.

These are matters that Muslims have to reflect deeply about so as to engage themselves in the serious project of changing society in keeping with Islamic values. A Muslim is, above all, a believer in these values. Islam had conceived of the emergence of a new man – a *mu'min* – who firmly believed in Islamic values and engaged himself in changing the world in accordance with those values.

First, I would like to throw some light on these Islamic values. The most fundamental Islamic value is justice, *'adl*, and Allah's name is 'Aadil i.e. Just. Allah is Just. A Muslim cannot be a Muslim without being just. He or she has to engage in promoting justice in the whole world.

Another important Qur'anic value is *ihsan* – benevolence, doing good to others. Allah's name is Muhsin i.e. Benevolent. Allah is the benefactor of one and all without any distinction of caste, creed or colour. A Muslim also has to be benefactor of all Muslims and non-Muslims. The prophet has also said that a hand of a *Mu'min* should not do any harm to another person.

Another significant Islamic value is equality. All human beings are equal in as much as we share our humanity with each other. All children of Adam, according to the Qur'an (17:70) possess honour and dignity accorded by Allah. This is to be seen in conjunction with freedom of conscience (2:256). One cannot think of human dignity without the concept of freedom of conscience. Thus, equality, human dignity and freedom of conscience are all related with each other and cannot be compromised in any way. A society which is Islamic in a substantial way must ensure all three to all human beings.

Yet another important value is compassion, called in the Qur'an as *rahmah*. Allah is called Rahim, Compassionate. He is also referred to as Rahman which means almost the same thing i.e. compassionate. *Rahman*, according to the theologians is Allah's attribute of Mercy for all, whatever the caste, creed or nationality. Thus a Muslim must display compassion for all and should be extremely sensitive to others' suffering. A Muslim cannot be indifferent to the suffering of others, including animals.

A *mu'min* should also strive continuously for removing suffering from earth. It comes very close to Buddha's concept of *dukkha* (suffering) and its removal from the earth. A Muslim must dedicate himself to the removal of suffering in all its forms. And any form of injustice causes suffering and hence the establishment of justice is directly related to removal of suffering from the

earth. The Qur'an repeatedly condemns oppression and exploitation, what it calls *zulm*. The word *zulm* is derivative of *z.l.m.* which means deviating (from the right or just course). *Zulmat* in Arabic means darkness. Injustice leads to darkness.

Thus an engaged Muslim must devote himself to fighting *zulm* i.e. any form of injustice and oppression on earth. He should help all those who are victims of injustice. According to the Qur'an, Moses actively helped the Israelites overcome the bondage under Pharaoh. He rid them of oppression and exploitation and gave them a sense of dignity and honour as a free people.

In our own times we have various forms of oppression and exploitation, be it capitalist exploitation, be it globalization or be it any other form of injustice between two individuals or between two nations or communities.

A real jihad for a Muslim is to fight against all forms of injustices and all forms of exploitation and make all forms of sacrifices to remove these injustices to establish real peace on earth. As long as there is any trace of injustice and exploitation on earth there will be violence in some form or the other and it is the duty of a *mu'min* to wage a struggle to remove all traces of injustice. An engaged Muslim has to be committed to peace on earth, and without peace this earth will not be worth inhabiting.

And peace can be established only through jihad against all forms of *zulm* on earth. Another important value is truth, called *haq* by the Qur'an. Allah Himself is referred to as Haq in the Book. Thus an engaged Muslim has to fight for truth. Truth is God and thus god cannot be realised without realising truth in all its forms.

Truth, it is important to note, is much more than mere conformity with fact or empirical reality. Truth is nothing if not value-oriented. The given facts of life may not be conducive to promoting justice and peace. There may be *zulm* all around us. A committed Muslim cannot accept such a reality. His dedication to truth will inspire him to fight against such a situation filled with exploitation and oppression. Being truthful means being just. Truth is not a mere statement but a praxis.

A Muslim who is engaged seriously with his religion and his conscience would never be at ease with himself if there is gender injustice in his society or country. Today gender injustice is widespread throughout the world. The Prophet of Islam, both through revelation and through his own words and practices (*sunnah*), did all he could not only to improve the status of women in society but also to accord them equal status with men.

Islam and freedom

Islam has never approved of monarchy or authoritarianism. Monarchy developed in Islam under the influence of feudalism and under the influence of Roman and Sassanid empires, not because of Islamic teachings. In fact The Holy Prophet was not followed by any monarch but by a Khalifa elected by the Muslims (according to Sunni Muslims) or by Imamat (according to Shi'ah Islam). Authoritarianism has no place at all in Islamic teachings.

In fact all early Islamic thinkers approved of rebellion, if it was inspired by Islamic teachings, against any ruler who was deviating from the teachings of Islam. Most of the great

Islamic thinkers and companions (or companions of the companions) of the Prophet (PBUH) strongly opposed the Umayyad rule because it deviated from the system of khilafah and usurped power undemocratically, converting to dynastic rule. An Islamic thinker of the eminence of Hasan Basri was opposed to the Umayyad rule.

Submission to authoritarian rule itself is un-Islamic. The right to open criticism is a sacred right, not because the western democracies approve it, but because from the earliest Islamic period the Prophet's successors accepted it. The Prophet himself never discouraged any of his followers to ask him questions even when they went against some of his practices. He always gave them satisfactory answers and never allowed, especially in secular matters, any mystique to develop around him. Similarly his successors like Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Ali were publicly criticised and they never took the position that Muslims had no right to question their conduct. There is a hadith that there is no obedience in sinful conduct (*ma'siyah*). The culture of *taqlid* (blind imitation) can never be a part of Islamic culture. Freedom of information and freedom of action are sanctioned by the Qur'an and by the practice of the Prophet.

Thus those committed to democratic and human rights have to fight against very heavy odds, but fight they must under inspiration from the Qur'anic culture of openness and freedom. This has long been lost through the ages. It needs to be revived. It would be a real Islamic renaissance.

For this we need a strong force of committed Muslims equipped with Islamic values and modern knowledge. It has to wage jihad against medievalism and authoritarianism and obsolete knowledge systems. This jihad would be a true jihad and it needs serious efforts and sacrifices. This jihad would be for peace, progress and change and has to be waged against selfish rulers. The Holy prophet is reported to have said that the best form of jihad is speaking the truth in front of a tyrannical ruler. We need Muslims to wage this kind of jihad and it is only this quality of jihad, which can rid the Muslim world of tyrants and authoritarian rulers who suppress all basic rights and deny democracy to people. It would greatly improve the quality of governance in the Muslim world and would help greatly in fighting the terrorism unleashed by the frustrated youth. It would bring real glory to Islam and Islamic teachings.

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