

Living Spirituality in a Multi-faith Society

Baring Your Soul: An Honest Reflection of the Primordial Light

I begin as we always should, in praising God, the One who has enabled us to come together, the One who stirs us in our very being, the One in whose remembrance truly do hearts find tranquillity and peace. Shukr or Gratitude is a very important aspect of worship in Islam, and we are eternally grateful for all the bounties that God has bestowed on us; bounties that, in the absence of even one of them, would cause us to fall into anguish. One values what one loses.

May God's peace and blessings descend upon all the Prophets that have been sent to us, and upon all the greats, the saints that walked the Earth, male and female, young and old, from all the different races, who made Jihad in the Way of God, striving to uphold justice and righteousness in the face of incredible adversities, and whose love for their fellow humans has shone like a beacon through the centuries, for us to emulate. Ameen.

My dear colleagues, respected Reverends and Imams, brothers and sisters, I greet you with the greeting of Jews, Christians and Muslims, Peace be upon you all.

The Islamic worldview or ideology finds it quite easy to cope with difference, whether it be races, tribes, colours, origins and even with different religious creeds and communities or multi-faith as we call it today. This might sound utopian on paper, and the sceptic may indeed look at the practice today and disagree, and there would be some truth to his or her scepticism. But I speak from the texts, from the Qur'an and from the Sunnah, the Way of the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh – peace be upon him) and his companions, indeed from the Way of all the Prophets and their true disciples and from periods in the history of the Muslim world where these texts and sentiments shaped an ethos where tolerance prevailed over oppression, and love prevailed over hatred.

I have extracted 10 principles that from the Islamic belief system that I believe are instrumental in shaping how we Muslims view the 'other'.

1. Everything is the Creation of God. One sees God in all creation. All is God's handiwork. If one loves God, one automatically shows compassion and love to God's creation. One loves what God loves. When you're in love, and your beloved has made something, maybe for you, but they have made it, you feel it is special, and it has a different meaning to you than anything else. You feel for it. And so it is for the creation of the God. The level of compassion and love one has for the creation of God is a measure of the love for God. There are numerous traditions about showing compassion to God's creatures and we have ample stories of the Prophet become incredibly concerned when animals were mistreated.

2. The Trust. In addition Muslims have a duty of care for all things. We have been placed on Earth as Guardians or Vice-regents. In Islamic terminology it is an Amanah: or a Trust. God has made us Guardians and placed the whole of creation at our feet as a Trust. We have to be faithful to that deep sense of responsibility that comes with such a Trust. The second Khalifa, Umar felt this greatly when he remarked that he would be questioned by the Creator for even the donkey who hurt itself because the path was not maintained in a distant region of the growing Muslim empire. It is in that light that the Qur'an talks about the sanctity of life and upholding it: "...whoever saves a life, it would be as if he [or she] saved the life of all the people" (5:32).

3. The Origin of Mankind. Muslims believe that God created Adam (Aadam) and Eve (Hawwa), pbuh, and from them all humans. So from the outset we are related by blood. We are all one big family. Hence I find it unfathomable how a Muslim can be racist? It beggars belief. Racism was the first sin. The sin of Iblis (Shaytan) when he refused to obey God and with disdain said: "I am better than he". When you look at a fellow human you see your family, your brother and your sister.

God says: "Verily in [My] sight, the most honoured among you is the most God-fearing." And the Prophet (pbuh) drove the message home in his farewell Hajj speech when he said: "There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab and for a non-Arab over an Arab, nor for the white over the black nor for the black over the white, except in piety" When the Prophet (pbuh) spoke his famous tradition: "He is

not a man of faith who eats his fill when his neighbour is hungry”, it applied to all neighbours irrespective of division.

For centuries many Muslim scholars have attempted to break traditions and structures that divide mankind: tribalism and nationality, colours and races, even slave and master concepts. It is difficult to fit the modern nation state with its national anthems and flags, passports and visas, within the Islamic worldview. The dangers are all apparent as self-interest reigns and ‘our countryman’s life is more precious than others’.

4. The People of the Book. God says in the Qur’an: “We have ordained a law and assigned a path for each of you. And if Allah had pleased He would have made you (all) a single nation, but that He might try you in what He gave you, therefore strive with one another to hasten to virtuous deeds; to Allah is your return, of all (of you), so He will let you know that in which you differed.”

In Islam there is a special place for Jews and Christians. They are described as “the People of the Book”. Within the Islamic State they are given the title “Ahlel Dhimmi” or the People of Protection. We as Muslims have to safeguard their rights. Although we have some skeletons in our cupboards with a few scholars who had quite harsh views regarding relationships with Jews and Christian, the vast majority have maintained the stance brought out by the Qur’an and traditions:

"And nearest (among people) in love to the believers (Muslims) you will find those who say 'We are Christians'.. because amongst these are priests and monks, and because they are not given to arrogance" (5:82)

The Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have said: "He who hurts a Dhimmi (a Jew or Christian) hurts me, and he who hurts me annoys Allah." (At-Tabarani). The Prophet (pbuh) said: "On the Day of Judgment I will dispute with anyone who oppresses a person from among the Ahlel Dhimmi, or infringes upon his right, or puts a responsibility on him which is beyond his strength, or takes something from him against his will." (Abu Dawud)

5. The Purpose of the Shariah is to protect five basic rights of all citizens of the Muslim state. These are the protection of life in all its capacities, the protection of the religion of God, the protection of property and wealth of citizens, the safeguarding of the family and finally the protection of mental well-being and thought. These are for all citizens irrespective of religion and race.

6. The Natural Disposition. We Muslims have the belief that all souls knew God at the beginning. God created us all on a natural disposition (the fitrah) which is tuned to the Creator. "Surely We created the human being of the best stature" (95:4). It is the innate urge to know God, to seek God. It is the inner conviction to what is right. It is the spirituality within. According to the Sufis it is the reflection of the Primordial Light of God. There is no fallen man. We instinctively love beauty and perfection.

7. Salaam. The Prophet (pbuh) said: "A Muslim is one from whose hands and tongue mankind is safe". The meaning of Islam contains within it submission and peace. It is in our job description to walk the earth spreading peace.

8. The line of Prophets. We believe through the ages God has sent many Prophets. These Messengers sent to guide their communities to right conduct and belief. We believe that all nations were sent prophets, indeed one weak tradition mentions there to be 124,000 prophets! Hence a Muslim may well wonder as they travel the earth, whether Buddha could have been a prophet or who were the prophets sent to the Eskimos or the Aborigines. It allows us to put a thread through the teachings of all religions and have deep respect for the hard work Prophets would have undertaken.

9. The Concept of Qadr. Together with many Christians and Jews, Muslims believe that whatever one does God is fully aware. God is In Charge, not us. We can only try our best and then leave the rest to the Creator. Hence frustration and worry and anxiety should be within a general boundary of "I've done my best, and I'll leave the result to the Will of God." Sometimes we need to chill out. The ultimate Judge of all affairs is God Himself.. "your return in the end is toward Allah.. He will tell you the truth of the things wherein you disputed." (6:164)

10. The Alliance of the Virtuous. The Prophet (pbuh) joined together with idolaters in Makkah to set up the Hilf al Fudul 'The Alliance of the Virtuous', whose aim was to help combat injustices within the merchant world. There are many issues where we Muslims, Jews, Christians, and all others need to come together to 'enjoin the good and forbid the bad'.

Muslims, Christians, and Jews share common history. We tell stories of the same events and people, all unified around the theme of dedication to worship of the same God, and all affirming fundamental human values: fundamental values of family, the search for knowledge, compassion and forgiveness, peace, respect for elders, justice, efforts to create a better world for future generations, respect for all life and the environment, sense of sacred, honesty, love for fellow humans.

These 10 points shape the Muslim worldview and create an ethos and framework of how we perceive the 'other' and our inter-relationships. But there is one important point that I want to leave us with and that is honesty and transparency.

We have to overcome the deep-seated suspicions that each of us have about the other. It's alright to believe that we are different, and not compromise on our differences, and have different beliefs that make us who we are, but that we can work together for the common good.

We need to bare our souls and open ourselves up. Yes that would make us ourselves expose our vulnerabilities. But we trust in God, if they abuse you and betray your trust, then poor them, shame on them for not following the way of the Prophets. We need to get beyond our cups of tea and address issues and get to know each other and build friendships, and not always be stepping on egg-shells. A true friend can really be abusive and not worry!

If you're Muslim then know that the Prophet (pbuh) was open and transparent, he didn't put on an act, he had people's full trust. He was called Al-Amin (The Trustworthy) and As-Sadiq (The Truthful) by non-Muslims who knew him.

And if you're Christian, then know that this is not the way of Jesus (pbuh) of the Gospels. He was always open to all. His heart was exposed. I was asking a priest friend of mine what Jesus would have done if I'd knocked on the door just as the Last Supper was commencing, would he have given me the sacrament, or would he have asked me wait outside, or inside to one corner and be a spectator. His way was open-hearted. Lepers, the sick, irrespective of religion and tribe and background came to him and he accepted them.

All parallel societies need is a little nudge and the path of convergence will begin. Bare your soul, here is my weakness, now you can stab me. And if you do, I won't call you Christian.

We say we are friends, but let us not use that word lightly. Friendship contains within it the concept of love, and love contains within it 'being true to the other' and the possibility of sacrifice. We are entering into difficult times and difficult times require friends pulling together. 'Should the need arise I'll be there for you, and I know in my heart of hearts you'll be there for me'. Why? Because that is what Muhammad (pbuh) would have done for Jesus (pbuh), and what Jesus (pbuh) would have done for Muhammad (pbuh). Because that is what it means to be Christian and Muslim. Self-reflection is part of both our traditions and we have to constantly monitor ourselves: are we truly doing what he (Muhammad or Jesus pbuh) would have done in our boat? Are we truly reflecting His Light within us?