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The Concept of Society in Islam

Islam is well-known to be a religion of community and it does not actively promote an individual approach to worship. The rituals such as prayers—that are best to be done in congregation—the pilgrimage (Hajj), or the other main pillar of the faith, Almsgiving, is all about caring for and sharing with others. It is also well established that Islam is not only a religion but rather a way of life that permeates into every sphere of existence for a person who believes in One God, Allah.

ISLAMIC SOCIETIES TODAY

In an ideal world, we would all live in peace and harmony. We would all understand each other's needs and would live according to a theory that creates an ideal society. Perhaps Muslim intellectuals would not be left out from discussions about important issues such as Turkey's accession to the European Union, or perhaps the situation of young Muslims in many parts of today's Europe would be far more satisfying.

By looking at the largest Muslim nations, we will not be able to identify what an Islamic society is like, as they each have a unique setup and system that works for them. The list of those Muslim nations contains one of the poorest countries in the world today (Bangladesh), some of the countries with the highest corruption rates (India, Indonesia, or Nigeria). In addition, the most populated country in the world, China, contains a growing Muslim population. These countries deal with their own problems in different ways, and each can be identified as Islamic. Yet millions of questions are unanswered; many problems are unresolved in Muslim societies where the ideal of a society would

be, or should be, the society the Prophet Muhammad established after his migration to Madina. But, overall, what is the concept of society in Islam?

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIETY IN ISLAM

Islam is based on equality both economically and spiritually. The society is responsible for those who are less fortunate and tries to ensure that the gap between the rich and poor narrows. The concept of *Zakat* (almsgiving) is commended partly to make sure that the rich do not get richer than they should, but also to ensure that the poor have an opportunity to enjoy a reasonable standard of living through assistance from those who live in abundance.

Islam divides chores both in the home and in the workplace. It promotes a healthy balance between the needs and the capabilities of men and women by using their natural dispositions to create a more harmonious society.

While women are allowed and often promoted to perform certain jobs, they are the only ones who can give birth to children. Therefore, they are the most suitable for raising children and nurturing them spiritually and physically. This frees them from the pressure of being turned into material creatures who are always exhausted, have no time for family and children, and run out of breath by the time they reached their home after the day's work in a demanding job. This freedom is a great tool for a more balanced society which, by no means, indicates the degradation of women in terms of their intellectual capacity and their talents.

Society is a concept in Islam which is based on moral principles

and values that are stipulated by the Quran and the Sunnah, the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Morality in Islam is within the boundaries of what is acceptable by the members of that society, focussing on what causes the least harm to anyone in the given society, but most importantly, on what is set forth by God. It is not the individual who is the primary focus, but rather the society as a whole. An individual may not like certain things, but if something is for the benefit of a wider group (i.e. the society) he or she ought to accommodate. Islam looks beyond the needs of the individual only; it calls for the establishment of a community spirit with mutual rights and responsibility.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES, JUSTICE AND FREEDOM

No right exists without responsibility. For any individual to claim rights, they need to fulfil their responsibilities first, and Islam acknowledges this very basic human truth. The youth are responsible for the elderly, parents are responsible for their children, the healthy are responsible for the sick, and the rich are responsible for the poor. We all fulfil at least two roles in our lives, if not more, and we have to carry out our roles in a responsible manner to ensure a rightful way of living. Islam sets forth the boundaries within which humanity and any given society operate, but the logistics of things are left for every individual to address, bearing the community spirit in mind.

The main pillars of Islamic society are justice and freedom. Although there are not many Muslim societies (in fact, none) that fulfil

Suggested reading

ESPOSITO John, *What everyone needs to know about Islam*. Cambridge, 2002.
KAMALI Mohammed Hashim, *Freedom of expression in Islam*. Cambridge 1997.
HAMID Abdul Wahid, *Islam the Natural Way*. Mels, 1998.

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this criteria in its absolute sense, the ideal society would embrace freedom in its most comprehensive form and justice would be practiced in attempts to reach as close as possible to absolute justice. Shariah, as the divine law, is a guiding tool for Muslims, but it does not entail the executive power to hang, kill or stone to death in any part of the world. In reality, the concept of Shariah has become too loosely

used in the West when referring to certain Muslim societies. It has to be studied and understood in a much more elaborate and sophisticated manner than it is currently being studied in the light of modernity.

Islam promotes a just, equal, and harmonious society. It calls for community spirit, mutual respect and understanding while giving floor to disagreements and differences of opinions. However, the

newly revamped and modern understanding of freedom has proven that in a free society where morals and principles have diluted or almost disappeared, there is little hope. A society based on individual desires and whims can only succeed in the short term, and even if it does endure longer, it will not leave a permanent mark in the history of humanity.

Iva BERANEK:

War and Peace Start in People's Hearts:

On a Spirituality of Reconciliation

Freedom has become a luxury in many countries. Wars and conflicts around the world are changing the face of the Earth, often making it look rather depressing. Amidst the terror, it is generally hard to see hope for our society. As Christians, we regularly pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven," but often find it difficult to see the kingdom of God present in our surroundings. In this essay, I will argue that the fear of "otherness," which occurs in conflicts, can be overcome by a change of heart. The starting point is that "changing human hearts and changing human society are not separate tasks, but are as interconnected as the two beams of the cross" (Nouwen, 20). Jesus is the one who teaches us about reconciliation and is a bridge-builder across the divide. If we decided to follow Christ on his road of reconciliation, maybe then we would see the kingdom of God growing among us. In the end, hope for more stability and peace may emerge out of our decision for engagement as well.

DIVERSITY AS A CHALLENGE FOR PEACE IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

The Bible tells us that in the beginning was harmony, characterised by trust between humans and God, for the "first two chapters of Genesis affirm the covenantal

relationship of trust between God and humanity and the ontological priority of peace over conflict and violence" (Stevens, 50). In the story of the Fall, however, we see the beginning of human conflict and violence, for

fundamental in the Genesis story is how alienation from God brings a deep insecurity into human affairs. Fear of the neighbour, rather than trust in God, becomes a governing factor in human relations. The neighbour becomes an oppositional 'other' who threatens us.

(Stevens, 50)

God created "our common humanity" and our diversity, but it seems that we have forgotten to live united in our diversity, to live in a tension of being so different and unique, personally, culturally and religiously, and still sharing the same condition of being human (Stevens, 50). Not knowing how to live with our diversity, we often decide to build walls between ourselves and others. Alienation happens between individuals as well as between larger groups, even nations. Especially in societies wounded by conflict, like in Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine, or in the former Yugoslavian countries, alienation of one group from the other becomes common. Even when the conflict is over or is silenced, destruction is still visible on buildings, in the cities and in the environment. In Croatia,

near Vukovar, where the war in the 1990s was severe, there are still mine fields with signs warning "do not walk here." If the wounds and signs of conflicts remain in the physical world, they are even more etched in human souls.

Unfortunately, people have mines in their hearts as well. These inner "mine fields" often carry similar messages of a lack of trust, messages warning "do not come near." Personal mines need to be healed or an incident might happen where someone will step on a mine and they will explode causing even greater damage. Where the wound of conflict is deep, the alienation is rarely temporary. This leads to building walls, first in our hearts and then later in the outside world. Sometimes manifesting the multitude of our inner conflicts results in actual brick walls, like the Peace Walls in Belfast or the wall in Jerusalem, built in order to separate the divided groups (McEwen, 14-16). Walls represent fears, insecurity, and false peace. Though "such 'solutions' lessen the possibility of violence... they are ways of life based on fear and mistrust of the neighbour" (Stevens, 50).

Whenever there is a lack of trust between people, the fear of the other is present, for "One of the central issues we face is how we know ourselves in relation to diversity, which is about the acceptance of 'otherness'; how we view