

Is Pluralism a Practical Possibility?

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Bismillahi'r-Rahmani'r-Rahim

I would like to begin with a personal anecdote. I was at University in Britain. As a student I visited Spain. In the city of Toledo we were being shown around a Jewish synagogue. Its architecture was so reminiscent of Islamic design that I asked the tour guide: Is this really a synagogue? Why is it so full of Muslim influences? She replied: It was built by the Muslims for the Jewish community during the long Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula. This experience has had a lasting impact on my life! Through my 4 years of under and post-graduate studies, far away from family and community, in a totally different climate and culture this example of the tolerance and open-mindedness of my faith, Islam, gave me pride and protection at an impressionable age in the midst of every kind of influence.

Later I read and learnt about many historical facts. Even those of minimum exposure to Islamic history know of the holy Prophet Muhammad (sallallahu `alayhi wa alihi wa's-sallam)'s Medina Constitution which respected and protected the rights of diverse communities and religions. The Ottoman Empire gave refuge to the Jews fleeing from the persecution of the Christian King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella after the fall of the Muslims in Spain. Today they are one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world. All educated and well-informed people know that Abbasid Damascus, Umayyad Cordoba and Fatimid Cairo were thriving centres of knowledge, learning and research which were fuelled by scholars of every religion, sect and nationality. Respect for diversity in their times has endowed a rich heritage of discovery and knowledge for later generations of scientists, doctors and academics to build upon.

In the context of this, the question therefore arises: Why are the conditions of our present time so different? The answer is complex and multi-dimensional. However in a seminar such as this where time is at a premium, we can only focus on selected dimensions: From the 17th Century to the Second World War in the last century, world history witnessed the long phase of colonialism and imperialism with its concomitant theories of the inferiority of certain races to justify their subjugation and oppression. Some scientific theories were propounded and books written to give such ideas so-called 'academic credibility'. Against this backdrop of discrimination and prejudice many derogatory expressions were coined which even today surface in the media, for example, the opponents of ex-President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle, circulated their photographs juxtaposed with pictures of monkeys to show that they were inferior because of their race! This of course is a demonstration of extremist sentiments. On an academic level, the word "Other" is more

favoured and has found its way into common usage to describe people of another race or religion.

Human psychology too plays a very significant role - we know that when we describe ourselves we tend to emphasize what we are not, rather than our positive identity. We focus more on our differences than on our commonalities. Fear of differences makes us forget our common, shared human attributes. Similarly we see around us that it is easier to bring people together around a negative cause rather than a positive one.

However, since the collapse of Imperialism and later towards the end of the last century of the Cold War, the technological revolution that has occurred and is continuing, has completely and fundamentally changed our world. In 1969 when the American astronauts Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins went to the moon, looking back at the earth they were overwhelmed to see the reduced size of our planet. The realization dawned on them that it was indeed "One Earth" in contrast to the perception of earth-bound people who always think in terms of continents, countries and provinces, etc. In other words, narrow geographical divisions were gradually replaced by the One Earth concept. There are several such words and phrases in current popular use, such as 'Global Village', which appropriately describe our contemporary condition. Technology has eliminated geographical distance - far distant places and people are in front of us at the mere pressing of a computer key!

This process is supplemented by mass migration of human beings forced to leave their homes by wars and conflict or by economic necessity. People who were 'alien' to us are often now living in the same apartment blocks or across the street. In short, on the one hand we experience the centripetal forces of globalisation and its parallel interconnection and on the other there are centrifugal forces at work which are the cause of fragmentation and polarisation. In such an environment, the challenge for pluralism is to reconcile our distinctive identities with our common humanity. Pluralism does not mean that we efface our differences and erase our distinctions to become a monolithic mass. Rather as H.H. Aga Khan IV says: "Going beyond tolerance, simply being sympathetic or sensitive to others, we must be ready to study and learn about others to the point where we are able to see others as they see themselves. In learning about others we can also come to learn lessons about ourselves. This learning then contributes to our experience of the Cosmopolitan Ethic, an ethic of respect that values human diversity. It rejects division as a necessary outcome of diversity, seeking instead to identify the qualities and experiences that unite rather than divide us as people and to forge a shared stake in the public good."

Saluting the initiative of Chitral University to promote harmony in a highly diverse society, a worthy vision for all institutions of learning, let us reflect on some essential prerequisites to promote and embed pluralism as a state of mind in a constantly changing world:

- First, through dialogue and discussion at all levels of society, starting with Early Childhood education to post-graduate studies, we must cultivate the need to

acknowledge our fear of difference. This was brought home to me recently in a speech made by Ms. Mehreen Farooqi who has been elected as a Senator of the Australian Parliament. She "unapologetically" stated to her parliamentary colleagues that she was proud to be a "brown, Muslim, migrant, feminist woman and a Green [Party] Senator". She urged that we should eliminate the practice of stereotyping people or looking at them in a monolithic way, in other words, we should individualise people. Finally, switching to Urdu she said: "Mazrat chahti hun - magar afsos nahin. Yeh [ya`ni Australia] mera ghar hai awr men kahin nahi jaungi". She further added to the thunderous applause she received that she would struggle to eliminate racism and sexism wherever it occurred.

- Secondly, we must be aware that in promoting pluralistic thinking we must not expect universal agreement. In genuine dialogue there must be space for participants to agree to disagree, without closing the doors to research and learning.
- Thirdly, as mentioned in the quotation above of H.H. Aga Khan IV, pluralism requires not merely sympathy or tolerance but a genuine empathetic understanding - the ability to put oneself in the shoes of others. All Abrahamic Traditions and many other religions teach the Golden Rule: 'Do unto others what you would have them do to you.'
- Fourthly, it will be necessary to reinforce time and again that pluralism does not mean effacing difference or erasing distinctive characteristics. In predominantly Muslim societies this may be easier because the Final Revelation of Allah, the Glorious Qur'an speaks of God's signs 'ayat' in nature, which is full of diversity at every level of creation from the mineral kingdom, through the vegetative, animal and human realms. Such references will abound in the papers of the other participants of this seminar, however Surah 49, ayat 13 is explicit about Allah creating humankind from a male and a female and creating different tribes and races, that we may KNOW each other (li ta`arafu). Indeed, the noblest in the eyes of Allah is the one best in conduct (Inna akramakum inda'llahi atqakum).
- Fifth, pluralism is not an objective in itself which can be achieved overnight or in a short span of time. It is in fact a continuous process, which requires constant dialogue, learning, a readiness to compromise and to be humbled by what we discover. Again all religious people will readily accept that the nature of human understanding is incomplete and we acknowledge without hesitation the immensity of the Divine.
- Sixth, the dire need to promote the understanding that in an ever-shrinking, ever more diverse world, a genuine sense of pluralism is the indispensable foundation for human peace and progress, the opposite of which we all know has brought misery and conflict and pain throughout human history.

In conclusion, as a Muslimah the challenges of pluralism are mitigated for us all in the Hadith of the holy Prophet Muhammad Al-khalqu iyalu'llah: "People are God's household

and the most beloved to God is the one who helps His household." We can all draw immense inspiration from such words and the strength to work for all of humanity, the cream of Allah's creation.