

Public lecture by Anwar Ibrahim at the London School of Economics,
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Let me begin with a cryptic line from T.S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton":

Go, go, go, said the bird: Human kind cannot bear very much reality.

But I say bear it we must for indeed, it is a stark reality of our world that certain religious groups hold that only certain fundamental doctrines may lead to salvation. This exclusivist outlook unfortunately cuts across the board as between religions as well as within the denominations. In Christendom, we have seen the schisms and consequent upheavals arising from this sense of exclusivity. Within Islam, Sunni, Shiite and Sufi denominations have had a chequered history and continue to present the world with a scenario of violence and bloodshed. The backlash against Muslim migration to Europe has become more acrid in the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7 with right wing political parties benefitting from the new bout of xenophobia and fearmongering. France's ban on the burqa has elicited heated emotion on both sides, but many Muslims scratched our heads in disbelief when Switzerland outlawed minarets.

Back in the 13th century, the mystical poet Jelaluddin al-Rumi wrote in the Masnavi:

The lamps are different but the Light is the same, it comes from Beyond; If thou keep looking at the lamp, thou art lost; for thence arises the appearance of number and plurality.

Those verses couldn't be more relevant for us today. Despite rancorous debates linking religion to conflict and discrimination, it remains a fact that at a personal level religious experience boils down to certain universal concepts. Where does man come from? What is his purpose? What happens when he dies? The spiritual path subscribes us to a universal quest for truth and the pursuit of justice and virtue. We rejoice in beauty, both within ourselves and in what surrounds us. We long for knowledge, peace and security amid the mysteries and uncertainties of the universe. In our disjointed world filled with ugliness, violence and injustice, religion gives all of mankind an opportunity to realize values which unify humanity, despite the great diversity of climes and cultures.

Dante – one of the great poets of the Christian tradition – had much to say about this issue. Surrounded by civil strife that tore asunder the landscape of his 14th century Italian countryside, Dante was well acquainted with factionalism and the

struggles for power between the Lords Temporal and the Lords Spiritual. Seeing the damage inflicted by the attempts to overcome these divisions he perceived a solution that was not merely political in nature. Writing in *Monarchia* he said that the ultimate aims in life are twofold – happiness in this worldly life as well as happiness in the eternal life basking in the vision of God. The attainment of these two goals would come with great difficulty:

“only when the waves of seductive greed are calmed and the human race rests free in the tranquillity of peace.”

Dante’s vision of universal peace could be achieved only when the nations of the world unite in an undivided planetary polity. This was surely a utopian dream but being European it is worth noting that his dream was not of an imperial Europe. Nor did he envision the Church expanding beyond its walls. The ruling authority in this utopian landscape would be the faculty of human reason, linking Dante’s vision directly to the philosophical outlook of Muslim luminaries including al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd.

Of course such a new world order never materialized. On the contrary if there is an enduring legacy of Enlightenment thought on the political geography of the world it is the dissection of empires and dynasties into individual, competing nation states rather than a greater unification.

Much blood was spilled to create and then protect these boundaries. Despite attempts by some to purify their lands, the boundaries drawn around the nation-state have been blurred by the advent of modern transportation and communication. Today’s world is perhaps more diverse and integrated than was the case in the golden age of Muslim Spain, where Christians, Jews and Muslims lived in peaceful harmonious coexistence. And yet we can hardly say that the overwhelming result of this new connectivity is peace and harmony.

Today, freedom of religion without which there can be no religious pluralism, is an entrenched constitutional liberty in the established democracies. As such, favouring one religion over another or granting it a position at the expense of others may be considered as being against the spirit of religious pluralism. Yet this still happens even in certain established democracies in Europe while in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia this ambivalence has been virtually taken for granted until recently.

This is why the discourse on religious pluralism must deal with the fundamental question of freedom of religion and by association the freedom of conscience. The question arises as to whether it is the diversity of religions which makes the divided world more divided or the denial of religious freedom that causes it.

I believe I’m not alone in saying that for religious pluralism to flourish in a divided world, it is morally unacceptable to say to people of other faiths:

We believe in our God and we believe we are right; you believe in your God, but what you believe in is wrong.

If the Qur'anic proclamation that there is no compulsion in religion is to mean anything then it must surely be that imposition of one's faith unto others is not Islamic. But to say this is not to deny the reality of religious diversity for the Qur'an also tells us clearly:

“O people! Behold, we have created you from a male and a female and have made you into nations and tribes to that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware.”

The Guru Granth Sahib tells us that he who sees that all spiritual paths lead to the One shall be freed but he who utters falsehood shall descend into hellfire and burn. The blessed and the sanctified are those who remain absorbed in Truth.

Whatever the religion, whether it be Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism and many others, I believe that the higher truths which go beyond mere practice and ritual all converge on the singular truth: and that is from God we were sent forth and unto God shall we return.

Yet certain leaders of the major world religions continue to make exclusivist claims to the eternal truths rather than accepting the commonality that binds us. If we accept that there can be unity in diversity, religious pluralism can therefore be a unifying force, not a cause of division. That is the way to take us away from darkness into light, from war to peace and from hatred and evil to love and kindness.

As for Muslims, there continues to be the problem of those who reject the value of free speech, free press, democracy, and freedom of conscience. They see the culture of religious pluralism as part of a grand conspiracy by 'others' particularly Christians to proselytize and convert Muslims. Pluralism is also a ploy of smuggling Western-style democracy through the back door.

But this is actually an aberration when it comes to the application of Muslim jurisprudence. Outside certain concerns of public policy there is no religious obligation upon Muslims to impose the laws and values of Muslims on the entire society. The Ottoman millet system is but one example of a system crafted by a Muslim state which was grounded in the principle of respect the recognized the rights of non-Muslims to follow freely the dictates of their religion. It was recognised that this was essential to maintain harmony in a pluralistic environment of an expanding empire. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah, an eight century Hanbali legal scholar offers us a more vivid case. In the case of the Zoroastrian practice of self-marriage whereby men are encouraged to marry their mothers, this is an act deemed morally repugnant from the Muslim perspective. When

asked whether the Muslim state should recognise such unions, however, al-Jawziyah affirmed the rights of the Zoroastrians provided their cases not be presented in a Muslim court and that the said practices are deemed permissible within their own legal tradition. So, he said, the Muslim state has no business to interfere.

It is unfortunate that some of the wisdom of Islam's classical scholarship are forgotten. Ideological rigidity remains the stumbling block to progress and reform. Muslims must break free from the old practices of cliché-mongering and name calling, move beyond tribal or parochial concerns. A rediscovery of the religion's inherent grasp of pluralism is very much in need.

The Qur'an declares: Say He is Allah, the One, Allah, the eternally besought of all. One of the greatest medieval Torah scholars, Maimonides, also known by the Arabic moniker Abu 'Imran Musa bin 'Ubaidallah Maimun al-Qurtubi, in expounding the unity of God in Judaism said: God is one and there is no other oneness like His. With reference to the phrase "hallowed be thy name" from the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9), the late Swami Prabhavananda wrote that God's name can be viewed as a mantra, the repetition of which both confers spiritual power and purifies the aspirant's heart and mind. By means of this practice, God's "name is experienced as living and conscious, as one with God—and illumination is attained."

Historically, Muslims viewed the Qur'an as addressing the intellect as well as the spirit. It set out the order in the universe, the principles and certitudes within it, and demanded a thorough examination of them so that we can be certain of the validity of its claims and message. This pursuit would inevitably lead to the realization of the eternal principles of the Divine Unity which in turn springs forth from the Divine Laws. But the Shari'ah was never cast in stone and evolves continuously through this dynamic process. In order to maintain a middle ground, the essential ingredients of an Islamic methodology must then be conceived in a holistic perspective which will be universal and eternal in appeal.

It is said that pluralism in a divided world serves only to cement the schisms leading to the tired and tiring refrain of the 'clash of civilizations' akin to the beating of 'an antique drum'. This seems to be the metaphor that appeals to the imagination of historians and political scientists. The upshot is a clash of visions of history, perceptions, and images which in turn brings about differing and often opposing interpretations, not just of history, but world views. Nevertheless, as Eliot says:

History may be servitude, History may be freedom

We should therefore disabuse ourselves of this notion of the clash between civilizations and refocus our attention on the clash that has been brewing within the umma. We see a more dangerous and portentous clash as one that is intra-

civilizational – between the old and the new, the weak and the strong, the moderates and the fundamentalists and between the modernists and the traditionalists.

If we look at history as servitude, we could gloss over the historical perspective and consign it to the realm of academia on the ground that we are already in the 21st century.

Turkey and Indonesia are clearly blazing the trail of democracy for other Muslim nations to follow. The impending accession of Turkey into the European Union is also a clear statement of the level of liberal democracy attained though unfortunately the obstacles thrown in the way by some member countries is very telling of the state of Islamophobia. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia has already reached the finishing line while her Muslim neighbors are still stuck at the starting block. So history is indeed freedom if indeed we are prepared to learn its lessons.

Today, jihad has been invoked by certain quarters to legitimize acts of violence in varied forms and guises, blurring the line between jihad and terrorism. Thanks to the Obama administration, we have seen some palpable change from the Bush policy of selective ambivalence in the war on terror, supporting autocrats in the Muslim world on the one hand, and championing the cause of freedom and democracy on the other. Although after more than a year since the administration took office we have yet to see substantive changes in the substance of American foreign policy with the Muslim world.

Within Islam, freedom is considered one of the higher objectives of the divine law in as much as the very same elements in a constitutional democracy become moral imperatives in Islam – freedom of conscience, freedom to speak out against tyranny, a call for reform and the right to property.

In closing permit me once again to draw on my perpetual reserve in Eliot's Four Quartets:

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.