

Islam and Public Morality

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These days corruption is a major news in Indian newspapers. Various government functionaries and officials are involved in major scandals involving thousands of crores of rupees. In such a situation naturally question arises whether religion can play any part in combating corruption and if so, what is the stand of Islam? First we will hint at the role of religion in general and then that of Islam in particular.

Religion can play vital role in our life depending on which way we accept it. Religion can be made to play multiple roles in our life depending what way we treat it. It can become a source of solace when we are distressed; it can provide us a sense of security when in danger (we invoke God and pray to Him when our lives are in danger); it can also be a source of superstition (though by itself religion is not a source of superstition) when we fail to succeed in our efforts and look for some miracle to happen by enchanting some verses or mantras and so on.

It all depends what situation we are facing and how we make religion to come to our rescue. Also, the priesthood, in order to make few extra bucks reduces religion to a bundle of superstitions and miracles. It is more a psychological than moral or spiritual phenomenon. Even highly educated people, when in real distress and finding no immediate solution, begin to look for such miraculous solutions and that puts off rationalists. Instead of understanding human weaknesses and fragilities, they begin to attack religion per se.

Also, religion is made to play a vital role in the form of identity. Religious identities play important role in multi-religious or multi-cultural modern democracies. It is our religious identity which is often invoked for our struggles for share in power and in government jobs and support of the entire community is sought for individual gains. We may not even believe or practice religion but we do invoke it for our struggles for our share in government jobs or share in political power. In modern democracies this is the most important role religion plays in our lives. In this way religion becomes a source of conflict.

However, most vital role religion should play and for which religion came into existence is human morality. If we seek guidance from religion for enriching our spiritual inner self and for being good moral human being religion would become an important source of inner and outer peace and our world would indeed be much better place to live in. Thus between religion as morality and religion as identity, we choose the later as it stands to benefit us.

In fact religion is essential part of struggle to control our inner self, our greed, our anger and our feeling of revenge (morality), but we use it instead as identity and for our struggle for power and other economic and other benefits and thus religion becomes part of problem rather than part of solution. So much so that we begin to feel that religion is root cause of all our troubles and bloodshed.

For religion to become a source of public morality we have to change our entire approach towards it. We have to invoke religion as a rich source of our inner struggle *against* ourselves rather than *for* ourselves (please mark the emphasis). We always use religion. It is Sufis, saints and rishis who use religion to struggle against themselves i.e. against their lust, greed, revenge and anger and thus distance themselves from corruption and freed and achieve spiritual serenity.

Since we use religion for ourselves we use it more as an identity than morality or spirituality. It is not to suppress our greed but to feed it and hence it is tagged with our ego and it becomes vehicle of our interests. It is this misuse of religion which also creates problem of public morality. Religion is something spiritual and hence it keeps our conscience alive and sensitive to any form of moral corruption. But for those who use religion for self aggrandizement become spiritually dead and their conscience insensitive.

Each religion lays down set of moral rules and they are often expressed through symbolism of rituals too. For such people religion becomes mere set of rituals and these rituals are performed for rituals sake empty of all meanings. Religious identity is also expressed through certain external visible signs, not through inner convictions as external visibility is all that interests them to fulfill their purpose which is material, not spiritual.

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Islam, like other religions has its own other worldly doctrines and this worldly morality. There are so many verses in the Qur'an which approve of certain code of conduct and denounce some other practices. It strongly disapproves of greed, anger and revenge. It lays great emphasis on truth, justice, doing good to others (*ihsan*), compassion and wisdom besides other virtues.

Among other virtues is to earn ones *rizq* i.e. daily provision through honesty and with ones own hard labour. This concept of earning ones bread and butter through honest efforts is called *halalan taiyyiba* (i.e. through rigorously honest and approved means). *Halal* and *ma'ruf* are the key words in this respect. It is also important that one must earn not only through honest and approved means but also through one's own efforts.

It is for this reason that while usury is strongly condemned, trade and commerce is considered *halal*. Here the underlying emphasis is on non-

exploitative means of earning. That is why the Prophet (PBUH) has condemned share cropping as the peasant works hard to cultivate the land the land lord enjoys the fruit without doing any work. Had Islam's teaching been put in practice millions of peasants would not have so acutely suffered. It is great tragedy that feudal economy became part of Muslim rule throughout centuries and peasantry continued to suffer.

Our Ulama, mostly dependent on these landlords for their survival never denounced it as un-Islamic and found out ways and means of justifying it. But, on the other hand, kept on denouncing in strong words giving and taking interest as their own survival was not dependent on mercantile class and in most of the Muslim countries the ruling classes consisted of landowning classes.

There was not much of agriculture in areas where Islam emerged i.e. Mecca and areas around it. The tribe of Quraish was mainly a trading tribe and its main leaders flourished through trade but once Umayyad and Abbasids succeeded in building huge empire from Arabia to Africa to Iran and central Asia and China trade became secondary for them and their ruling class became land-centred and land revenue became the most important source of revenue and in this process the Prophet's teaching of denouncing share-cropping was completely sidelined.

And, as pointed out above, interest and usury became greater target of attack by the Ulama. But in modern times when a section of Muslims are taking to trade and industry the question of interest is becoming more central. It is being debated by Muslim intellectuals and bankers what is exact meaning of *riba*, a word used by the Qur'an and usually translated as 'interest'.

Many modern Muslims now point out is that what is meant by *riba* is not ordinary banking interest but usury which has been so strongly denounced by the Qur'an. In medieval ages when the economy was mainly dependent on land revenue interest could be strongly denounced as trading had become marginalized in medieval economy of Islamic empires.

However, with land-based economy now becoming marginalized and trade and industry acquiring central role, denunciation of interest could no longer be ignored and hence either it is being challenged and many feel no pangs of conscience or public morality involved or some are establishing interest-free banking which has its own problems as main economic structures are based on interest dependent.

Share market operations are justified and approved as *halal* by the mainline clergy. But the clergy fails to understand that modern share market is much more complex than simple trading and it tends to become greatest source of exploitation, in any case more than simple banking interest. There are two things involved: one, share holders invest in any industry which delivers greater profit whether that industry produces forbidden products like wine or liquor. So some Muslim economists have come out with the concept of shari'a conforming industries i.e. those industries which produce only *halal* products Any product whose consumption has been prohibited by shari'a, it would not be permissible to invest in its production.

Two, the clergy does not understand that modern day share market is based more on speculation than on honest trading and the Prophet (PBUH) has denounced speculation. For example one cannot sale crop standing in the field which is not yet ripe as one does not know how much of it will mature or survive. Similarly one cannot sale or buy dates on tree which have yet not been plucked. This leads to exploitation. Share market operations, similarly based on several speculative factors and its earnings cannot be called as *halal* earning through ones hard work. Most of the money made in share market is through speculation and cannot be said to be *halal*.

The Qur'an also advises believers "And swallow not up your property among yourselves by false means, nor seek to gain access thereby to the judges, so that you may swallow up a part of the property of men wrongfully while you know."(2:188) Here there is condemnation of bribing the judges so that the bribe-giver could swallow a part of the property of others.

There is one more verse in the Qur'an which condemns bribery." And thou sees many of them vying one with another in sin and transgression, and their devouring illegal gain. Certainly evil is that which they do." (5:62) Here devouring 'illegal gain (suhut) is nothing but reference to bribery and it is denounced as 'evil' which indeed it is. Bribery goes against the concept of *kasb-e-halal* i.e. what we can call right livelihood or what is earned in a permissible manner.

One of the central values of Qur'an is justice and taking or giving bribery goes against it in a flagrant manner. Bribe is generally taken or given to deprive someone else of his/her just share in property and this means injustice. The Qur'an says that "In yet another verse Qur'an equates justice with duty and piety *taqwa*. It says, "Do justice, it is nearer to *taqwa*." (5:8). Just a bribe taker is an unjust person and hence he can never be *muttaqi* i.e. pious or God fearing.

It is justice which ensures peace and social health. One cannot think of peace without justice and Qur'an desires from believers rigorous observance of norms of justice. Justice is also in conformity with truth (*haq*) and Haq is one of Allah's names. Justice implies speaking truth. True worship of Allah means worshipping truth and speaking nothing but truth. A bribe taker can never speak truth.

Qur'an says in the above verse, "O you who believe be upright for Allah, bearer of witness with justice; and let not hatred of people incite you not to act equitably." (5:8). Thus we see that even hostility with people also should not come in the way of being just or equitable, as it is justice which will ensure peace and healthy society. One who is truly religious has to be strictly truthful and ethical in behaviour.

Also, devouring someone else's property and being greedy is worst kind of corruption, as a religious person has to be simple and humble. Greed, on the other hand, makes one accumulate more and more and aspires to be powerful and arrogant. Arrogance (what Qur'an calls *istikbar*) is the worst

trait of ones character and its worst example is Pharaoh and Nimrod. It was their arrogance which led to their downfall

Qur'an also strongly denounces accumulation of wealth and we see in our own society that those who accumulate beyond all limits, they wield influence out of all proportions and transfer their money to Swiss banks whereas our financial institutions are starved of funds. This also leads to inflation and pushes prices up which cause great suffering to masses of people in our society.

Thus accumulation which often results from bribery and greed sets in motion a cycle of corruption which cannot be easily controlled and we are witness to it in India. They become so powerful that neither governments nor investigating agencies can do anything. Investigations and proofs are fudged by bribing them. Thus bribery becomes very widespread and develops its own dynamics.

When individuals become very powerful, institutions become powerless and hence corruption among few individuals spreads fast among others and paralyzes democratic institutions. That is why what we need among public servants is to have individuals who have virtues like honesty, truthfulness, honesty, humility, compassion for suffering and passion for service. Only a person with these virtues brings credibility for public servants.

In fact a public servant with such virtues is very hard to come by and lust for higher consumption and rate race for possessing have driven us crazy and we have lost our inner serenity. As noted disciple of Freud Erich Fromm puts it succinctly we are always focused on having rather than being. We are too much occupied with having more and more at the cost of concentrating on our inner being. We have no time even to reflect.

Our ancient sages and murshids (i.e. guides) renounced the world and dedicated themselves to enriching their being. Mahatma Gandhi was a good model for us for public morality. He led very simple yet very rich life.

While he dedicated himself for liberation of India he never neglected his inner being. Thus on one hand, he was actively involved in a huge task of freeing this nation, he also gave equal time on reflections and on enriching his inner being through spiritual practices.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also had great and onerous task of liberating this world from ignorance, superstitions and amoral or even immoral life, he also found time for continuously enriching his inner life. One can say he was in the world and yet not of it..While liberating the world he also undertook to liberate people from lust and greed and enriched their spiritual life. It is very difficult to achieve this balance but great people ensure it and become great role model

Plato, in his *Republic*, much earlier in which also Plato is mainly concerned with public morality and hence he proposes that a class of rulers - mainly bureaucracy, will not marry and have family so that they can resist temptation to be immoral. Thus concern with public morality is as old as human history as corruption is equally as old as establishment of human governance.

It is very difficult to ensure total public morality as neither religious exhortation nor fear of punishment deters all human beings from being corrupt. It is only ones own conscience and inner voice and integrity which can make difference. For ordinary people it is their personal or group interests which influence their behaviour not exhortations about public morality. While one has to live with amoral or immoral practices, one also has to constantly struggle to establish public morality.