

The challenges of integrating Islam in modern life?

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Thank you very much for inviting me to give a talk at Leicester secular society. I am privileged to be in the oldest secular society in the world!. It is an honour to give a talk in a place where people like George Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell had spoken

The Colour of my skin

Whenever I looked in the mirror, a naive question comes to my mind about the colour of my skin. Since it's not black or white, I would always ask myself whether I am the descendant of two human races. Then, I discovered that the colours of skins are countless and can't be reduced to black and white, in the same way that forms of conflicts are countless and variable.

I do not want to go into a philosophical debate about the origin of conflict and prejudice in humans and whether human instinct is towards aggression or peace? Instead I will try to discuss how identity contributes to the developmental personality and adds to spiritual and social dimensions of human beings

From civil life to religious life

I was born in a family of a mother working in the medical field and a father who is a writer and a journalist. We lived in an ancient city spreading over the banks of river Tigris. The city, Alkadhimya, has a religious character and more than 1,000 years old

The brutal crushing of the popular uprising of March 1991 in Shiite areas by Saddam's regime awakened my religious emotions. These emotions have driven me, as I was a teenager, to start my religious studies in the most important and the most ancient religious capital of the Shiites in the world, the city of Najaf, 120 km, and south of Baghdad.

I studied religious sciences by traditional methods under Shiite clerics from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, the Gulf, and Lebanon. I discovered, rather in a complicated way that I could identify with other people who don't belong to the same community nationality or speak the same language. I could identify with them because I share with them the same religious sect and ideology. I found myself exchanging loyalty with people of non Arabic speaking origins and who didn't belong to the clans that I am proud of being one of its descendants. Prior to that, the bond of religion and sect was not strong. Prior to that, my identity was defined by being part of a family and by belonging to my homeland, Iraq. Prior to that, my identity was simpler, away from the complexities of having different religions, sects, languages, tribes, and ethnicities within the same nation..

In-depth religious studies (such as Islamic law , jurisprudence, language, Quranic interpretation and others) made a significant change in me and in the way I perceived religion. Religion is no longer a source of spiritual and moral values, such as looking after children, helping the poor, telling the truth and confronting the unjust powers. I discovered that all these values have been written and modified by various clerics to come up with different and conflicting interpretations which suit their situation. I discovered that what I thought to be the core of the religious experience, the moral and spiritual values, was in fact not essential to my surprise. Instead, what is more essential was to be more rigid and strict complying with sharia laws and observing religious rituals such as praying on times, fasting etc.

I discovered that one could have sex outside marriage using certain religious justifications like temporary marriage. To me, this was like promoting adultery. Similarly, stealing state funds and robbing non-Muslims of their possessions are in fact religiously justified. This was a shock to me as it is, unquestionably, a religiously masked theft

The ontological religion and the ideological religion

Religious studies have made me change my conception of religion. Religion is no longer a source of moral restraint which stops people from committing sins. Religion was only justification of wrongdoings, or committing sins under wide spread cloak. This feature is not restricted only to the Islamic doctrine. The church is never embarrassed of showing off with its vast wealth and gold decorated balcony of the Pope from which he demands that everyone

should help hungry children in Africa. It is the same spirit with which Synagogues that hold its silence about what atrocities are committed on Palestinian children by the state of Israel.

For me, religion moved from the spiritual ontological domain to the ideological domain. Religion became totalitarian ideology shunning art, beauty and love, an ideology which assumes that the other is seen as an enemy and should be converted to Islam or be gotten rid of; An ideology that assumes that the access to power is sacred and should not be reached through the ballot box but through religious legitimacy. An ideology that assumes that God gave his opinion about astronomy, chemistry, physics, mathematics, engineering, geology and every other science in the Quran, the holy book of Islam. It also supposes that in Koran has many secrets, symbols and puzzles that the humanity is yet to understand . It also asserts that Al Mahdi, the promised Saviour, will reveal all those secrets in his reappearance at the end of time.

Al- Sadr the martyr

Here stood out the most influential personality in my religious life (Imam Mohammad Al-Sadr). He was a defiant Iraqi Shiite cleric who rebels against the traditional Shiite authorities approach that was in authority for hundreds years. Al- Sadr was a humble, strong, generous, intelligent cleric; he was very cultured, fluent in English and Farsi, wrote poetry and was well informed in the field of philosophy, sophism and history. He was also a left wing conformist cleric and a fundamentalist in his writings in Fiqh or Jurisprudence. Al-Sadr challenged Saddam's regime and equally disagreed with the Khomeini doctrine in Iran. He was killed in a mysterious way in 1999, leaving a rebellious movement of thoughts carrying his defiant genes to stand against the traditional Shiite authorities in Iraq and challenge the religious authorities of Iran.

Religion competes with the identity rather than enriching it

There is an everlasting conflict between the Salafi Shiites, the most fanatical and dangerous reformist movements and the moderate and isolated Shiite mainstream. The national identity remains as a serious problem since the Shiite still reject the Caliphate Sunni State, while they themselves do not have a primarily ideological state before the re-appearance of the Al-

Mahdi, the Saviour. Thus, the Shiites dedicate their loyalty, as a replacement, to the shrines of the grandsons of Prophet Mohammed, the awaited-for Al- Mahdi and the rituals of Ashura

The Sunni state, however, still suffer complex forms of alienation and identity confusion since the fall of the Abbasid state. Religious doctrine and Arab nationalism overlapped for the Sunni sect. That's why, when a British converts to Islam, John, for example, may become Muhammad, and the convert would wear the Arab traditional clothes and then begins to learn Arabic, as happened to many non-Arab converts such as Mohammed Ali Clay. A Sudanese preacher, Hassan al-Turabi proudly stated that he and his companions brought the Arabic language to Sudan where in the last three decades centuries ; the people of Sudan speak Arabic. That's exactly happened to many minority groups like Iraqi Nabatis, Aramaic and Coptic Egyptians when they were "Arabised" due to their conversion into Islam.

Faith interferes with identity, largely amongst Muslims and it seems to show more evidently among Sunni Muslims; therefore, a national-state has failed to produce a local mixed society. Iraqi Sunnis remain compassionate towards their identity obligations for the Palestinians, Egyptians, Jordanians and Libyans, but would ignore the suffering of Yezidis, Baha'is or Iraqi Jews. Egyptian Sunnis do feel responsibility towards Afghans and Serbians, while not sympathising with the Coptic and Jewish Egyptians

The crushing of Mu'tazila

The prosperity of the Islamic state in the Abbasid era was because it was a secular State based on a healthy social, cultural and political movement. The 7th century was distinguished by the existence of genuine intellectual groups such as Al-Mu'tazila, Al-Asha'ira, Sufism, and Atheism. They have a lot in common with the contemporary liberals, conservatives and leftists. Besides, there was an Islamic intellectual movement or Ijtihad to meet the needs of the Moslem individual as well as the Islamic state. That was "Al Raie" which was the school of Opinion established by Imam Abu Hanifa to meet the actual needs of the community. The terrible mistake committed by Abbasid Al- Mutawakkil was when he approved of Al- Ash 'aria and eradicated Al- Mu'tazila. This action has created social exclusion which helped in bringing to the surface the violent and savage face of Islam, which, in turn, resulted in the failure of the state and its eventual collapse

Sunnis and Shiite, from politics to religious ideology

The Ottoman and Safavid empires had a great influence on the formulation of the current format of the Muslim societies, particularly the Sunnis and the Shiites, but they have taken Islam out of the Arabs to reproduce it out of its natural incubator. This has led to more distortions and complications. We have to understand that when we wonder about Islam's ability to integrate into the modern life, we should realise that the disengagement between identity and belief is very necessary for the reproduction of local public awareness. In order to reach such disengagement we have to re-evaluate the theological question within its critical context. The religious experience, as a subjective spiritual one, must be separated from the tenets of the religious phenomenon and its ideology.

Creed, religion and Sharia

The elements of the Holy Trinity (Creed, religion and Sharia) have to be dismantled in order to establish a more accurate and conventional terminology. Religion participates in the formation of the social identity while Sharia competes with the state and its institutional structure. Creed is a mere uncontrollable personal and spiritual experience that should neither be suppressed nor criminalised.

Jewish Islam and Christian Islam are permanently present and active in the in the minds of Muslims and the Islamic discourse is completely submerged in this trilogy. Christian Islam is more evident with the Shiites and and Sufis because Shiites are more attached to the martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Mohammed than to the prophet and the Koran. The spiritual Sufis' are closer to adopting on mind "core" over matter or meaning over substance. Whilst the Jewish Islam is a widespread ritualistic process which is dominant and in control of the centres of power in the Islamic world as it is the Islam of fatwa, violence, excommunication, money, jihad and power

Aggressive and destructive Holly wars

The Symmetry between Christianity and Islam is symbolic. In the same way, the core of the Jewish Islam is the faith in the concept of the holy nation “God's chosen people”. Muslims believe they are the best nation that ever lived on earth, that God promised them an everlasting support and that they will conquer the world with the aid of the long waited for “Imam Al-Mahdi” at the end of time. The whole world will submit to the global Islamic state. In this way, The discourse used by the Sunni groups (jihadist and nationalist) and Shiite groups (Islamic resistance Wilayat Alfaqih or state of the clerics) with the ideology of the Jewish state.

The ongoing war in the Arab and Muslim world is seen as a holy war and its roots are embedded in the Quran. It is recited by Muslims in their daily prayers, and exists also in the Torah and Al- Talmud. Devoted Muslims, as well as devoted Jews do not feel alienated by the ongoing mutual hatred speeches. These dialogues are nourishment to the faith and a reflecting image of its substance.

Suicide bombers, the victims of religion

The adoption of smart, thoughtful and serious programs to assist the people of the Middle East, especially Muslim regions, in re-evaluating the religious heritage as a social movement contributed to the formation of local identities that are beyond geographic boundaries. This will help in deciphering the complex interactions between what is religious, what is spiritual and what is social in Islam.

Without the disengagement of the overlapping elements of the trilogy “Creed, religion and Sharia” through adopting educational and social schemes, the mission of peace will be very difficult, if not impossible. This overlapping could create generations that act like time bombs ready to explode in many forms the least of which are explosive belts, car bombs or perpetrators of heinous crimes due to the feeling of alienation and inferiority.

The widespread of excessive violence in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya and other countries was a review of the scenarios of taking revenge for (God) and take revenge on God's enemies in the literature taught to children by “secular governments” linked to international community through solid relationships

The Imagined Islam Vs the Inherited Islam

The most important question is "will it be possible for Islam to integrate in the modern world"? The answer to this question presupposes the existence of a clear definition of Islam that a billion and a half Moslem agree with!

In my opinion, there is more than one formula that should be in place regarding the question. One of these should be to define which Islam we are talking about! Is it the imagined Islam or the inherited one!

The essence of imagined Islam is spiritual and of sincere values to the souls and imagination of millions of Muslims who believe that the Prophet of Islam cannot accept religious violence, cannot allow marrying a child under Sharia laws, cannot allow rape of yazidi women in the name of holy faith, cannot allow torture, hatred, and other atrocities that are nowadays practiced by specific Islamist groups. Meanwhile the inherited Islam endorses these actions and many others more hideous practices.

If we understand the difference between these two versions and that those who believe in the inherited Islam are only a minority's, about 10% of the general Sunni and Shiite Muslims in the world. It's a surprising number, isn't it. We should all know that the tolerant majority of Muslims are governed by the violent ideological minority. centres of power in the Islamic world are dominated by religious fanatic groups which promote hatred and violence, starting from the Wahhabi Gulf countries to the Faqih state of Iran to the Islamic Brotherhood of Turkey, Egypt, Syria and so forth

The making of peace

Making peace in the East and the whole world would start when we open new horizons for the creative capabilities in those communities in sciences, arts, democracy and human rights to enable the people to practice their rights of equality, justice, health and education. The role of the regimes that are supporting terrorism must be minimised as well those who promote hatred, extremism, jihad and terrorism.

Salafist Wahhabi groups have realised the importance of the use of money and investments in influencing public opinion; therefore, they are investing in the most important decision-making centres such as, the United States, Britain and the European Union. They managed to use pre-set lobbies and media industry as pressure tools to justify their crimes and violations of human rights and their support for terrorism.

It's very obvious to any public observer that there is a Russian- US division and disagreement in Syria. For example, Russia is backing up Bashar al-Assad's regime in his ugliest crimes of genocide and war offences against his own people. In addition to that Russia is supporting the militias in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, which is considered against the International Bill of Human rights. On the other hand there are the United States, Britain and the European Union with their support to the jihadist groups that have produced Daesh, Al- Nusra and other organisations that represent the advanced generations from Al- Qaeda.

The Imam Muhammad Hassan al-Sadr was known as the leader of the Iraqi revolution against British colonialism in 1920. He was the strongest instigator for the using of arms against the British presence. I am honoured to say that my ancestors, the people of my tribe (Bani Tamim) were used as a striking force in the area around Baghdad Belt, South-West of Baghdad and in the area leading up to North-East approaching the furthest point in Diyala on the Iranian borders. But the Imam al-Sadr became the prime minister of Iraq in 1948 and played then a positive role in supporting the civil life of the Kingdom of Iraq.

In 2004, I was working as an assistant to Shiite Iraqi leader Moqtada Al-Sadr when the Mehdi Army carried arms and fought the US and British presence in Iraq. The Mehdi Army even used violence on civilians to impose a certain religious thoughts under what was called "Islamic law". Today, Al- Mahdi Army, the armed wing of Al-Sadr movement has its military activities frozen and has been transformed to a movement of reformist civilians defending the rule of law after being reassured of its interests in civil life.

Europe and the Islamists

All attempts to integrate Islamists in the European societies have failed. Moreover they have become a real security threat and thus posing pressure on those secular Muslims that originally adapted to the Western life and have already integrated in within the European societies. The mosques and religious institutions are in fact, and in most cases, incubators for extremism and are used to spread the beliefs of Salafist, Wahabism and radicalism. However, the creative, artistic and cultural activities of secular and civil institutions have not received any support. Hatred and discrimination are on the rise among Muslims in Europe, Britain and America. Distinction should be made between the ideological groups that adopt hatred, violence and excommunication as their sacred policy and belief, and the non-existent spiritual Islam. This could be done by strengthening and co-operating with the latter, meanwhile restricting and limiting the role of ideological groups.

A large number of young people who were prisoners in the detention camps of Boca and Cropper were run by the 134 US Army Division in Iraq from 2003 until 2010. These prisoners were not carrying ideology of terrorism, but they have become victims of religious and military Islamist leaders, especially al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood and Revolutionary Iranian Guards. Some of them hold advanced positions today in the organisation of the Islamic state (Daesh) as well as the Iraqi Shiite militias that belong to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

This task is not easy, but it's not impossible, we need to re-evaluate the allies and programs, but in a responsible way.