

Salaam

ISSN 0970-5384

Quarterly to Promote Understanding



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Indian Muslims: Challenges and Opportunities
Paul Jackson's "A Jesuit Among Sufis"

ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION

Vol. 39

JANUARY 2018

No. 1

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CHALLENGES FACED BY MUSLIMS IN THE PRESENT AGE

Maulana Farhad Ahmad

What are the challenges and opportunities faced by the Muslims in India? I would like to discuss two points with reference to this question. Firstly, the greatest challenge that Muslims face today is their inability to apply Islam in their lives in the modern age. The reasons can be discussed in detail. During the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, when the Qur'an was revealed there was a direct applicability of the teachings. In later times, however, it was important for these teachings to be re-applied. This process of re-application of the teachings of Islam is called *ijtihad*.

Ijtihad: Re-application of Islamic Teachings in the Present Age

After Islam was established as a religion, gradually Muslims gained political dominance. The Muslims held political power in many countries. They re-applied the message of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet in their lives quite successfully. After a while, the process of re-application took a backseat. Eventually, re-application ceased to exist in the lives of the Muslims. There is huge difference between the previous age and the modern age. In the modern age, the process of re-application needs a different approach.

Let us look at some examples for further clarity. For example, how can Muslims and non-Muslims co-exist in a society on peaceful terms? Generally, Muslims have the tendency to fight and create their own separate state wherever they go. If we study the life of the Prophet of Islam, we find that he lived in Makkah for 13 years. At the time of his

migration to Madinah, he told his followers that had the Makkans not chased him out, he would have never left Makkah. He left Makkah when all other options had run out. At that time, Makkah was inhabited by both non-Muslims and Muslims. If we re-apply the teaching from this incident to present times, we will learn that in a modern society where there is an opportunity for Muslims to co-exist with non-Muslims, they must co-habit peacefully. We get this lesson from the life of the Prophet Muhammad. In the modern age, there is no religious persecution, as was the case in previous times. We are free to follow any religion along the lines of peace.

In Madinah, the Prophet made a pact with its Jewish and pagan residents in which he mentioned that the Jews and pagans were free to follow their religion and the Muslims their own. Although the Muslims were in majority in the society of Madinah, the Jews were free to practice their religion and culture. But today Muslims are unable to re-apply this particular message in their respective societies, which has resulted in continuous fights in various Muslim countries.

Muslims' Relations with Non-Muslims

Another point of contention is whether the non-Muslim should be treated with respect or not. The Prophet of Islam and his followers were respectful to members of other religions in their society. Let us look at an example of such respectful behaviour displayed by the Prophet and his followers. Once, two companions of the Prophet went to Iran where they saw a funeral procession of a local Iranian in progress. When they paid their respects, people asked them the reason for showing respect to a non-Muslim. Explaining the reason, the companions of the Prophet narrated an incident from his life. One day, when he was in Madinah, a funeral procession went by and the Prophet stood up in respect of it. When it was pointed out to the Prophet that it was the funeral

An important remark of the Prophet is that the entire world be made a place of worship for mankind. It means that an age will arrive when religious persecution will disappear. All human beings, including the Muslims, will have the freedom to follow their chosen religion. The Muslims will be free to offer their prayers anywhere in the world without fear. But the Muslims of the present age do not understand this positive change that has come about in the present age. Muslims disregarded the important teachings of the primary sources of Islam, i.e. the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and laid more emphasis on secondary sources, such as fiqh, or Muslim jurisprudence which was developed in the later periods.

Attitude to Modern Technology

A very important challenge in the lives of the present day Muslims is their inability to accept the positive aspects of technology. When the loudspeaker was introduced, the Muslim scholars had denounced it saying that it is forbidden in Islam. When printing press was invented, it became a forbidden item in the Ottoman Empire. Injunctions were issued against the printing machines. The reason behind this was ignorance of Muslim scholars of the nature of technology.

Let us see an example from the life of the Prophet. When the Prophet went to Madinah, he saw few Muslims performing artificial pollination. He enquired from them about what they were doing and when he explained to them that they were pollinating the flowers so that the harvest increases, the Prophet remarked that the process would not be of much help. Hearing these words from the Prophet, people stopped using the method of artificial pollination. The yield of harvest happened to be considerably less that year. On questioning, the Prophet came to know that people had stopped the process of pollination upon hearing his remark. The Prophet then explained to them that they must seek and accept spiritual advice from him. But where technology was

concerned, they must use their own understanding since they had better knowledge about their worldly matters. Similarly, Muslims of today have to understand the positive aspects of technology in their lives.

Conclusion

In India, Muslim scholars are silent about important issues like blood donation and organ donation. When the benefits of these procedures have been proved on scientific and medical grounds, everyone should be allowed to donate blood and organs, if they want to.

Muslims should consult the Qur'an and the sayings and teachings of the Prophet for guidance on spiritual and religious matters. But for matters related to technology, science and medicine, one must use one's judgement, worldly experience and know how to understand their benefits.

(Maulana Farhad Ahmad is an Islamic scholar and a member of Centre for Peace and Spirituality in New Delhi)