

## Universalism of the ummah

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NOTWITHSTANDING its wide-ranging diversity in the currents of ideas, schools of thought and madhhabs, the ummah has maintained an impressive profile of unity and inclusivism.

This is a function largely of the ethical universalism of the Quran, and its call to enjoin what is good and praised (*ma'ruf*) and forbid what is morally evil and disliked (*munkar*). This is evidently not a culture-specific injunction, just as it is also addressed to all peoples, regardless of their religious affiliations.

The notion of the middle community (*ummah wasatah* — Q 2:143) supports the same outlook: “And, thus, We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that you might bear witness (to the truth) before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you.”

This ethical-spiritual universalism aims to create an open society based on moral values, not the received traditions of one tribe, city or nation. The Quran also positions itself against the cultural localism of pre-Islamic Arabia.

Once established as major cultural units, Muslim societies articulated their ethical inclusivity into various societal mechanisms, by which the ideal of creating a virtuous human society could be realised.

Gaining status and social ascendancy in that environment depended on acquiring two universal qualities: knowledge (*ilm*) and virtue (*fadilah* and *ihsan*), both being implicit in the Quranic notion of God-consciousness (*taqwa*) (Q 49:13).

In a broad sense, this forms the basis of an Islamic meritocracy, whereby every member of society is urged to contribute to creating a moral and just social order.

Muslim philosophers and scientists regard seeking knowledge and leading a virtuous life as the basis of their interest in other cultures and traditions. As Ibrahim Kalin elaborates in *Crescent and Dove* (2010), the expanding borders of the Islamic world beyond the Arabian Peninsula made Muslims heir to all the major cultural traditions of the time.

The Greco-Roman heritage through the Byzantine Empire and Persian culture through the Sassanids were the first two important traditions that Muslims encountered in less than a century after the Prophet's death. This was followed by the Mesopotamian, Indian, black-African, Central Asian, Chinese and Malay-Indonesian civilisations in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The rapid establishment of the different cultural zones of the Islamic world went hand in hand with the rise of numerous schools of law, theology (*kalam*), philosophy and

Sufi orders, generating a remarkable tapestry of cultural diversity within and across the territorial domains of Islam.

Despite occasional sectarian conflicts, such as the Inquisition (*mihnah*) incident in the ninth century, traditional Muslim societies succeeded in creating a stable and peaceful habitat in which Muslim and non-Muslim members of the ummah contributed to cultivating a world civilisation.

The notion of cultural and religious coexistence in this milieu was not based merely on the temporary absence of conflict and confrontation between Islamic and non-Islamic elements. Its positive character was nurtured and sustained by Muslims; an inclusive attitude towards other cultures and religious traditions.

A plethora of examples in the history of Islam illustrate the cultural ecumenism of Muslim societies, beginning with Muslim philosophers' attitudes towards pre-Islamic traditions of learning. For early philosophers, scholars and scientists, the search for truth occurred both within and beyond religious boundaries.

Philosophers of the intellectual sciences (*ulum 'aqliyyah*) interested in Greek-Alexandrian thought, as well as scholars of the transmitted sciences (*ulum naqliyyah*), who specialised in Hadith, Quran commentary and jurisprudence, frequently referred to the Prophet's famous exhortations to "seek knowledge, even if it be in China" and that "wisdom is a Muslim's lost (treasure). He takes it wherever he finds it".

Even as some later scholars opposed the philosophical sciences, especially their strictly Aristotelian versions, and defined knowledge as a religious science, this did not obstruct the steady development of philosophy and science in the Islamic world.

Contrary to Ignaz Goldziher's attempt to present the critical views of certain Hanbalite jurists on the ancient sciences — meaning, Greek philosophy and science — as the orthodox Muslim position, anti-intellectualism remained largely confined to "traditionists" (*muhaddithun*), who were as much opposed to the lore of pre-Islamic times as they were to Kalam and doctrinal Sufism. For the overwhelming majority of the Muslim intelligentsia, the universality of truth was the guiding principle and grounds of their quest for knowledge.

Renowned philosopher Ya 'qub b. Ishaq al-Kindi (d. 873 CE) thus paid tribute to "those who have imparted to us even a small measure of truth, let alone those who have taught us more, since they have given us a share in the fruits of their reflection and simplified the complex questions bearing on the nature of reality".

Educated classes across the Islamic world shared the belief that truth transcended the contingencies of history. The long list of scholars interested in intellectual history before and after Islam include 'Amr b. Bahr al-Jahiz (d. 869), al-Mubashshir ibn Fatik al-Sijistani (d. 1000), Sa 'id b. Ahmad al-Andalusi (d. 1070), Muhammad b. Ishaq Ibn al-Nadim (d. 1047) and Ibn al-Qifti (d. 1248), and writers of the milal tradition, such as 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani (d. 1153) and many others. Among these works, the Egyptian al-Mubashshir's *Mukhtar al-Hikam wa Mahasin al-Kilam* was noticed very early on by medieval Europeans, translated into Latin and other languages, and

became the first book printed by William Caxton in England in the 15th century as *Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers*. The continuity of humanity's search for truth had a normative value for most of these writers.

The concept of perennial philosophy (*al-hikmat al-khalidah*) enjoyed a similar prestige due to the same notion of truth and its persistence in history. Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191), founder of the school of Illumination (*ishraq*), made a strong case for the constancy of certain philosophical concepts: the world is never bereft of wisdom, and the person who possesses it with arguments and self-evident proof is God's vice-regent on His Earth.

The Islamic concept of cultural pluralism was extended to all minorities living in Muslim territories. The experience of *convivencia* among Jews, Christians and Muslims in Andalusia was a result of Islam's cultural inclusivism. While the Jews of Europe were subjected to woeful vilifications in the Middle Ages, a major Jewish intellectual tradition developed under Muslim rule, including such figures of medieval Jewish thought as Saadiah Gaon al-Fayyumi (d. 942), Solomon Ibn Gabirol (d. 1058 or 1070), Judah Halevi (d. 1141) and Moses Maimonides (d. 1204). This resulted in a unique interaction between medieval Jewish philosophy on one hand, and Islamic philosophy, Kalam and Sufism on the other.

On the Indian subcontinent, a cultural syncretism developed between the Hindu and Muslim cultures. From the translation of Indian astronomical works into Arabic as early as the eighth century to al-Biruni's (d. 1047) historic study of India and Amir Khusraw's (d. 1325) formulation of an Islamic identity in the Indian cultural environment, a vast literature came into being, generating a unique mode of symbiosis between the two worlds at the social, philosophical and artistic levels.

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