

The Equality of Believers in Islam

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Islam came with a universal concept of brotherhood. Its foundation is based on tawhi-d, the belief in One God. And its social program is also based on unity of the believers. Just as in tawhi-d, one first has to reject the false gods and then declare faith in the One and Only God, similarly, Islam rejects all artificial and man-made marks of distinction. No one can claim any superiority over the other based on race, colour, language or wealth. Allah clearly declares in the Qur'a-n: O you mankind! We have created you of a male and a female, and then We made you into races and tribes so that you may know each other. Surely the most honourable of you in Allah's sight is the one who is the most pious among you; surely Allah is All-Knowing and Aware. (49:13)

According to this verse, all humans can trace their origin to Adam and Eve. Allah has divided them into different tribes and races so that it may be easy to recognise each other. Thus the difference in race, tribe, colour and language are to facilitate the recognition of each other. These physical and material differences cannot be a standard for preference or superiority of one over others. Besides knowledge and jiha-d, the only mark of distinction recognized in Islam is taqwa, i.e., piety and Godfearing. As Allah has said, "Surely the most honourable of you in Allah's sight is the one who is most pious among you."

Islam preached and promoted racial equality and harmony among the believers. It does not say that one should not feel fraternity towards the believers who belong to his tribe or culture. However, a Muslim crosses the acceptable limits of ethnic fraternity when he starts preferring the evil person of his own tribe over the good Muslims of another tribe. Such racial prejudice is .not allowed in Islam at all

Examples from History

When the adha-n, the call to prayer, was introduced in Medina, the Prophet selected Bila-l as the first mu'azzin — even though Bila-l was not an Arab, he was an Ethiopian. He could not so instead of saying "س" properly; it sounded like "sin" ش even pronounce the letter "shin" "Ash-hadu an la- ilaha il-lal-la-h," he used to say "As-hadu an..." Some Arabs came to the Prophet and complained about his choice for the first mu'azzin. The Prophet rejected their complaint and said Alla-h hears the sin of Bila-l as shin.

Juwaybar was a native of Yamamah who came to Medina in search of the truth about Islam. He soon accepted Islam. Since he had neither money nor any friend, he was temporarily accommodated along with other poor Muslims in the Mosque by permission of the Prophet. The Mosque, however, was not a place of habitation; therefore, the Prophet selected a site outside the Mosque and erected a shed over it for the homeless people. This place came to be known in history as "Suffa".

One day the Prophet came to the people of Suffa and started talking to Juwaybar. He said, "How good it would be if you could marry and start a family, ending this loneliness and isolated life?" Juwaybar said, "O Messenger of Allah, I have neither wealth nor beauty; nor have I a noble descent or lineage. Who will marry me? And which woman likes to be the wife of a poor, short, dark complexioned and ugly man like me?"

"O Juwaybar," said the Prophet, "God has changed the worth of the human being in Islam. Many people were high-placed in the pre-Islamic society and Islam brought them down. Many were despised nonentities and Islam bestowed them with honour, high rank, and brought them up. Islam abolished racial discrimination and pride of lineage. Now all people irrespective of their colour and origin are equal. Nobody has superiority over others except through piety and obedience to Allah.

"Therefore, O Juwaybar, do as I say. Go to the house of Ziya-d bin Labid to ask for the hand of his daughter in marriage."

Ziya-d was one of the wealthiest persons of Medina and was held in high status by his own tribe. When Juwaybar entered his house, Ziya-d was surrounded by his relatives and some of his tribesmen. Juwaybar took a seat, paused for a moment and then raising his head, he said,

"I have brought a message from the Prophet. Do you like to hear it confidentially or openly?"

Ziya-d: "A message from the Prophet is an honour to me, better tell it openly."

Juwaybar: "The Prophet has sent me to request you for your daughter for myself."

Ziya-d: "Did he himself make this suggestion to you?"

Juwaybar: "I don't speak on my own accord. Everybody knows me, I am not a liar!"

Ziya-d: "Strange! We do not give our daughters to persons of unequal status nor outside our tribe. You go back; I shall go to the Prophet and have a talk with him myself."

Juwaybar left the house murmuring, "By God whatever the Qur'a-n teaches and whatever is the purpose of the prophethood of Muhammad is totally against what Ziya-d says."

Those nearby heard the murmuring of Juwaybar. Zalfa, the lovely daughter of Ziya-d, heard these words. She came from behind the curtain and said to father: "Father, who was the man who just went out saying something? And what did he mean?"

Ziya-d: "He had come to ask for your hand in marriage and was claiming that the Prophet had sent him for this purpose."

Zalfa: "Isn't it possible that he had really sent him, and thus your rejection may amount to disobedience of the Prophet's order?"

Ziya-d: "What do you feel about it?"

Zalfa: "I feel you should bring him back before he reaches to the Prophet, and then go yourself to find out the truth." So Ziya-d went behind Juwaybar and persuaded him to come back to his home. Then he went hurriedly up to the Prophet.

Ziya-d: "O Messenger of God, Juwaybar came to me with such and such message from you. I would like to inform you that our custom is to give our daughters to persons of equal status from our own tribe who all happen to be your companions."

"O Ziya-d," said the Prophet, "Juwaybar is a faithful man. That dignity and honour of which you are talking of has not been abolished. Every believer man is equal (for the purpose of marriage) to every believer woman."

Ziya-d returned to his house and explained the matter to his daughter. She said, "Please do not reject the proposal put by the Prophet. This matter concerns me. I accept Juwaybar whatever his condition may be. If the Prophet is pleased with it, I am also pleased."

The wedding was duly solemnized. Ziya-d paid the mahr (marriagegift paid by the groom to the bride) and also provided a house and its essential items to the newly wed from his own wealth. When the night came, Juwaybar was dazzled by the beauty of his bride and the richness of the house which was given to him. He was completely overwhelmed by the unexpected blessings of Allah; in spiritual ecstasy, he went to a corner of the room and spent the whole night in recitation of the Qur'a-n and prayer. It was dawn when he came to himself and then decided to fast in gratitude to God.

When the women from Ziyad's family came to see the bride the next morning, they found her untouched. They kept the matter secret from Ziya-d. Two nights and days passed in the same manner: Juwaybar prayed during the nights and fasted during the days. Now the women informed Ziya-d about this unusual situation because they thought that perhaps Juwaybar was impotent. Ziya-d took the matter to the Prophet; the Prophet called Juwaybar and inquired about the unusual behaviour seen in him.

"O Prophet!," answered Juwaybar, "when I entered the house and found myself amidst that affluence, a state of gratitude and devotion over took me. I thought it was necessary to offer thanks and prayers to Allah before doing anything. Tonight I shall go to my wife."

Juwaybar and Zalfa lived a most happy life. When the call for jiha-d came, Juwaybar

participated in it with enthusiasm typical of a brave Muslim, and attained martyrdom under the banner of Islam. After his martyrdom, Zalfa was the most sought after woman for a wife and people were eager to pay the greatest mahr for her. The example of Bila-l (a non-Arab) and Juwaybar (a poor and "status-less" Arab) shows that the concept of equality was not only presented on a theoretical level in Islam rather the Prophet demonstrated equality among the Muslims during his own lifetime in a practical manner. It was in light of this teaching that he married his cousin to Zayd bin Ha-ritha, a freed slave, and gave the sister of 'Abdu 'r-Rahma-n bin 'Awf (a Qurayshite) in marriage to Bila-l, an ex-slave of Ethiopian origin. In his last khutba, the Prophet openly declared: "There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab over an Arab, nor for a white man over a black, nor for a black over a white, except by piety. All of you are from Adam and Adam was from the dust

Promotion of Equality & Brotherhood

Islam has also instituted certain rituals that promote the sense of equality among the followers of Islam. One important way of promoting brotherhood among the Muslims is the sala-t in both forms: fura-da (individual prayer) and jama-`at (congregational prayer). In the fura-da prayer, you are required to recite surah al-Fatiha (the first chapter of the Qur'a-n). If you read the meaning of this surah, you will notice that half of the surah uses plural pronouns. For example: "Only You, WE worship; and only You WE ask for help." "Guide US to the straight path..."

You have to say these sentences with plural pronouns even if you are praying fura-da, on your own. You have to say "We...We..." even when you are praying alone. Why? Firstly, because Allah wants you to realize and feel that you are not alone; that you are part of a brotherhood known as "the Islamic brotherhood"; that you belong to a community known as "the Islamic ummah."

Secondly, Allah wants us to think of the Islamic ummah even when we are all alone. Islam is not a personal religion; it is a social religion. Thinking about other Muslims will surely promote the sense of brotherhood among the followers of Islam all over the world.

Although the daily prayers can be said individually as well as in congregation; however, to say the daily prayers in congregation has been highly recommended because it promotes the feeling of brotherhood and equality in Islam. How?

Firstly, all stand in lines regardless of any difference of race, tribe, colour, language or wealth. It often happens that a poor person will be standing in the front row while a wealthy person will

be standing in the second row. And this means that in the position of sajdah (prostration), the head of the wealthy person will be at the feet of the poor person! This will make the wealthy person realize that in God's view, rich and poor are all equal.

Secondly, there is no reservation in the rows of congregational prayers. No one can come and say to someone else that "move from here, this is my place." And if a person forcefully removes someone else, then his sala-t will be invalid (ba-til). This rule ensures that everyone feels equally related to God.

Thirdly, in jama-`at prayer, every one will be reciting in the same language, and doing exactly the same action at the same time—takbir, ruku`, sajdah, etc. And also saying "we...we...". This will surely create a sense of unity among the Muslims.

It is because of this aspect of congregational prayer that Islam has strongly recommended the jama-`at prayer on a daily basis. And it is because of this aspect of jama-`at prayer that Islam has even increased the spiritual reward of group prayer as follows:

Number of Persons Reward for 1 rak`at is equal to:

2	150 prayers
3	600 prayers
4	1200 prayers
5	2400 prayers
6	4800 prayers
7	9600 prayers
8	19,200 prayers
9	36,400 prayers
10	72,800 prayers

more than 10 nobody knows but Allah.

Another important practical demonstration of equality and brotherhood in Islam is the ritual of hajj—the pilgrimage to Mecca. Although hajj is obligatory only once in a lifetime for those Muslims who can physically and financially afford the journey, it is indeed an experience that leaves longlasting and deep impressions on the psychological and spiritual dimension of the pilgrim.

Before entering the holy territory of Mecca and its vicinity, it is necessary that all pilgrims change into ihra-m. Ihra-m (pronounced as ehra-m) is simple dress for pilgrims: For men, it consists of two extra-large size white towels—one to be tied from the waist down to the knees, and the other to be placed over the shoulders. For women, it consists of a two-piece simple white dress. Also, no cosmetics are allowed while a person is in the ihra-m. This dress takes

away all means by which a person would distinguish himself by the use of dress and cosmetics; you are not even allowed to look at yourself in the mirror. When the pilgrim reaches Mecca, he has to proceed to the Holy Mosque and do tawa-f—going around the Ka`bah seven times. This uniformity in dress and action—all believers moving around the Ka`bah has a strong impact in bringing out the real identity of a person: you are nothing but a slave of God, and in this there is no difference between you and the next person doing the tawaf.

It is appropriate to quote the impression which hajj had on one of the most famous Muslim figures in the Afro-American community of the USA, Malcolm X. "There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experience in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white.

"America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered `white'—but the `white' attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen ".sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color