

Islam – A Religion of Peace **Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ**

Some times back under the title ‘The Missing Muslims’, a national English daily brought out a well known fact. The Ahmedabad edition of The Indian Express published a series of front-page reports about the Muslims in India.

The investigative reports proclaimed that the Muslims in India especially in Gujarat are widely discriminated. According to 2001 census the Muslims form 13.43% of the Indian population. But their representation is much less than their population in areas like government and private jobs, education, the three service forces of army, navy and air-force, law, police and semi-government forces, etc.

I see three reasons for this discriminatory approach against Muslims. First, there is wide spread ignorance about the Muslims; second, there are prejudices and misunderstandings about Muslims; and third, self-seeking and communal forces knowingly foster enmity and hatred towards Muslims.

In this situation I feel a two-fold needs. First, there is need to know the true religion of Islam and the Prophet Mohammed, so that we can understand our Muslim brothers and sisters; and second, there is need to do all in our power to do away all injustice and discriminations against the Muslims.

The word ‘Islam’ indicates not only the Islam religion but also tells us the relationship between God and people. In that relationship Muslims acknowledge their submission to God, Allah. In other words, people need completely to submit themselves to God. All Muslims accept this fact and proclaim “Allahu Akbar” meaning, “God is the greatest.”

Muslims are the people who submit themselves completely to Allah and accept Mohammed as his last prophet. Today Islam has spread all over the world. Some fifty countries have Muslim majority. In the countries like Lebanon, Senegal, Nigeria there are Christian Presidents or Prime Ministers even through the Muslims are the majority in those countries. When we take these things into consideration we understand the spirit of tolerance and the openness of the Muslims.

On the other hand, terrorist organizations like Al-Qaida and some Muslim rulers who deprive the religious freedom of non-Muslims in their countries as well as some communal minded Muslim priests portray the Muslims in a bad light.

But basically Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance. ‘Islam’ is an Arabic word. The root of the word ‘Islam’ and of ‘Salaam’, meaning peace, is one and the same. It means peace. In Islam Muslims are expected to submit themselves to Allah and live in peace.

As I understand, Islam holds five basic tenants. The first tenant is the belief of Muslims expressed in the saying “la ilah illillah muhammadursullillah” meaning Allah is the only God and Mohammed is his messenger. Muslims believe that Allah is all-powerful and Hazarat Mohammed is the greatest and the last Prophet of Allah. Islam does not have any rites and rituals

of worship. Muslims believe that people will get to heaven or hell according to their deeds and acts.

A second basic tenant is 'Namaz' meaning prayer. Muslims are enjoined to pray five times a day. Priests in Mosques call the people five times to pray. Many Muslims either go to a mosque or find an appropriate place to pray five times every day. In my long travels I am always impressed by the faith of the Muslims who pray without fail five times a day even in long train journey.

The third basic tenant of Muslims is almsgiving. Almsgiving is important in most religions. But I know that in comparison with other religions the followers of Islam give more alms than others. There is a command of almsgiving in Koran. Among the Muslims both the rich and poor people give alms. Even the poor Muslims give alms sharing the little, which they have.

The fourth basic tenant of Muslims is 'Roza' or fasting. Koran commands all healthy people above the age of 14 years to observe fasting from sun rise to sun set every day in the month of Ramjan. During the fasting time the Muslims do not even drink water. At the end of the fasting the Muslims often enjoy dinner parties with relatives and friends including non-Muslims.

The fifth basic tenant of Muslims is the 'Haj' or pilgrimage to Mecca. It is compulsory for Muslims to make the Haj pilgrimage once in their lives, if they are healthy and wealthy to undertake the pilgrimage.

Mecca is in the centre of Islamic history. In Mecca Kaba – house of God – is the most holy place. There is a black stone there, which is believed to be given by the Angel Gabriel. The Muslim pilgrims go round the Kaba and kiss it.

As I understand, like the five basic tenants of Islamic faith, brotherhood and equality are very important among the Muslims. Thanks to them, there is no caste or distinction of high and low among the believers. All believers are equal in front of Allah. This sense of equality attracts many people to Islam. In Islam there is no high caste or low caste. All are the children of the same Allah.

Like brotherhood and equality, the Muslims also give importance to morality. According Islamic teaching the purpose of life is to lead a good life. In this life a Muslim can live a happy life and attain life eternal in the next life by leading a life according to the law of Allah and being submissive to Allah in all things and also by behaving well with all other people. The Islamic morality deals both with one's religious and social life.

Koran exhorts the Muslims to live justly and morally. Koran commands the Muslims to maintain ethical and moral values and live with justice with all the people. So Islam opposes strongly the exploitation of the poor and the dalit (oppressed) people. In Islam while helping the poor and the dalit people, the Muslims make efforts to see that these people are able to live with pride and self-respect. So in Islam prayer and service go together like two sides of the same coin.

Islam opposes accumulation and hoarding money and wealth at the cost of other people. Islam commands the wealthy people to share their money and wealth with the poor, the dalit and the orphans, etc.

Islam is a religion of peace. There are many statements in Koran advocating peace. All the same, there are Muslims in the world, who misinterpret the teaching of Koran and take recourse to violence and communal clashes. For instance, Muslims have been caught with arms from some Mosques. Firearms and explosives have also found hidden in some Madrassas. But Koran teaches the Muslims to seek peaceful ways to solve problems of life. The Prophet Mohammed has given the message of peace to his followers. Even then there are many instances of wars and strifes in Islamic history over the centuries.

There have been many terrorist attacks around the world and Muslims have been involved in a number of them. Then, we hear also 'Jihad' or holy war from time to time. Often the mass media portray the Muslims as terrorists and so, even many people of good will sincerely believe that the Muslims are terrorists!

If we go deep into many terrorist attacks, we may discover that in a number of cases Muslims have involved in them as a way of self-protection. Then, we may discover that the Muslims involved in some terrorist attacks are not real or practicing Muslims. They are not different in any way from the terrorists from other religions. They are self-seeking or misguided people misusing their religions.

Then, the mass media give wide coverage to terrorist attacks. Compared with the Muslims involved in terrorist attacks, the numbers of terrorist or murders involved in crimes like abortions, female foeticides, dowry deaths, etc. are enormous! Many of these attacks against helpless and innocent victims never get reported in the mass media. So the naked truth is that there are many more terrorists among us than the so-called Muslim terrorists! The ever-reducing numbers of female children and women in India are the uncontestable proofs of this fact.

I firmly believe that the so-called Muslim terrorism will be drastically reduced if we make sincere efforts to understand our Muslim brothers and sisters. We need to give them due representations in all fields and deal with them as our own brothers and sisters without any sort of discriminations and prejudices. Then, we can certainly live in peace without Z plus security and without fear. The Muslims also then prove themselves a peace loving people and Islam a religion of peace. (contact the author: ciss@satyam.net.in)

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