

ISLAM'S ANSWER TO RACISM

Multiculturalism and racism are the subject of much recent debate in Australia, as well as many other areas of the world . Having been present at yet another discussion of the topic with some friends, my thoughts turned to the answers offered by the driving force in my life, and the lives of one billion muslims in the world today; Islam. Muslims hail from all parts of the world; from African countries such as Ghana and South Africa to Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and the Middle East. They are also to be found all over Europe, Australia and the Americas - I was recently told by a friend of mosques she came across in Brazil and the Carribean Islands. One only has to wander into a mosque to see the diversity of people unified by the one thing they have in common; their religion. As H A R Gibb wrote in his book *Whether Islam* :

Islam possesses a magnificent tradition of inter - racial understanding and cooperation. No other society has such a record of success in uniting in an equality of status, of opportunity, and of endeavours so many

and so various races of mankind...Islam has still the power to reconcile apparently irreconcilable elements

of race and tradition.

A J Toynbee also states in *Civilization on Trial* :

The extinction of race consciousness as between Muslims is one of the outstanding achievements of

Islam and in the contemporary world there is, as it happens, a crying need for the propagation of this Islamic virtue.

So, how does Islam achieve this 'virtue?'

To answer this question one must firstly understand one of the basic principles of Islam, that of Tawheed (Unity of God). This means that one God alone is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe and all that exists in it. He alone has the right to command or forbid. This principle of the Unity of God altogether negates the concept of sovereignty of human beings, individually or collectively. Nothing can claim sovereignty be it a human being, a family, a class or group of people, or even the human race in the world as

a whole. God alone is the Sovereign and His Commandments are the Law of Islam. As part of the Law of Islam then, God states in the Qur'an:

And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours (Al - Qur'an 30:22)

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other)... (Al Qur'an 49:13)

Islam states then that the diversity of human kind is a sign / miracle of God. In fact Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) stated in his last sermon:

O people, all of you are children of Adam, and Adam was created from dust. There is no superiority for an Arab above a non-Arab, nor for a non-Arab above an Arab, or for a white above a non-white. All of you are equal.

However, Islam does not stop at this point. It goes on to put this principle of the equality of man into practice, and there is no better illustration of this than the way muslims pray. The muslim prayer involves bowing down and putting one's forehead to the ground in the direction of Mecca five times a day. This action in itself serves to negate one's feelings of pride or self importance, as bowing down to anyone involves humility. Bowing down to God as we do, further reminds us of the presence of a supreme being who created us all in equality. Aside from praying by one self, there are also occasions when muslims pray in congregation, such as on Fridays at the Jumma prayer or simply when two or more muslims happen to be together and the time for prayer comes around. When praying in congregation, muslims are required to stand in rows and shoulder to shoulder. In this formation, the rich man may stand next to the beggar, and the white man next to the black man. Barriers of class, education, race and culture are broken down and not recognised as you stand with your fellow muslims and bow down together in prayer.

Another occasion where Islam again reinforces the equality of man is during the Hajj pilgrimage. The Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five pillars of Islam, and is obligatory on every adult muslim if he/she has the financial capacity to undertake the journey. It is an annual event. On these pilgrimages muslims are required to discard the adornments of their daily life and wear only white during the four day pilgrimage. This means that once again, all men are equal and one cannot distinguish between the rulers of

countries and the ordinary man as everyone unites together in worship. It was during his performance of this pilgrimage that Malcolm X, the famous US black civil rights activist wrote in a letter to his friends and family back home:

Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and the overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races here in this ancient Holy Land, the home of Abraham, Muhammad and all the other prophets of the Holy Scriptures. For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of all colours....

There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colours, 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 experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white....I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colours together, irrespective of their colour... (*The Autobiography of Malcolm X with the assistance of Alex Haley*, 1965 p 454 - 455)

A further example of Islam's emphasis on the brotherhood of man can be found in the way muslims all around the world greet each other by saying 'Assalamu alaikum' and replying 'Waalaikum assalam'. Translated these phrases mean, 'peace be with you' and 'peace be with you too' respectively. It is on a footing of peace that one commences and attempts to remain on; and peace necessarily requires shedding any feelings of supremacy, self importance and prejudice.

In conclusion then, Islam, while preaching equality also enforces this principle in many ways. The above mentioned instances only scratch the surface of the ways in which Islam instils in muslims respect, tolerance and acceptance of ones fellow human beings. Islam places no emphasis on ones race, class, education or nationhood in any way. A muslim is defined simply as one who submits to the will of God, and righteousness is the only criteria used to judge the quality of any human being:

...Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you...
(Al Qur'an 49: 13)