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The Muslim Attitude to Conversion

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Like Buddhism and Christianity, Islam is a missionary religion. From the day the Prophet Muhammad was entrusted by God with the mission to revive the Abrahamic tradition by conveying afresh the divine message regarding ‘the concept of the unity of God and man, he and his followers were placed under obligation to preach Islam, i.e., submission to God. The Quran is the scripture of Islam. According to ‘the faith of a Muslim’, it is the word of God revealed to the Prophet through the mediation of arch-angel, Gabriel. No force or economic persuasion was to be used as the Quran accommodates and accepts variety and diversity in culture as a fact of human life. It says : ‘If the Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people. But they will not cease to dispute, except those on whom the Lord has bestowed his mercy” (Quran.11 18-19). Influenced by the teachings of Quran, its followers showed tolerance to non-Muslims. In every conquered land, the non-Muslims were given full religious freedom and also conferred the status of ‘protected person’. The burden of taxes upon the non-Muslims was alleviated as the Canon law of Islam permitted only the collection of Kharaj (one fifth of the agricultural produce) and poll-tax from them.

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Like Buddhism and Christianity, Islam is a missionary religion. From the day the Prophet Muhammad was entrusted by God with the mission to revive the Abrahamic tradition by conveying afresh the divine message regarding 'the concept of the unity of God and man, he and his followers were placed under obligation to preach Islam, i.e., submission to God. The Quran is the scripture of Islam. According to 'the faith of a Muslim', it is the word of God revealed to the Prophet through the mediation of arch-angel, Gabriel. No force or economic persuasion was to be used as the Quran accommodates and accepts variety and diversity in culture as a fact of human life. It says : 'If the Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people. But they will not cease to dispute, except those on whom they Lord has bestowed his mercy' (Quran.11 18-19). Influenced by the teachings of Quran, its followers showed tolerance to non-Muslims. In every conquered land, the non-Muslims were given full religious freedom and also conferred the status of 'protected person'. The burden of taxes upon the non-Muslims was alleviated as the Canon law of Islam permitted only the collection of Kharaj (one fifth of the agricultural produce) and poll-tax from them. Furthermore, respect shown by

the rulers to the principles of social justice and equity, and the egalitarianism practised by Muslims during the early centuries of Islam made their religion attractive to the downtrodden everywhere. Its success was both spectacular and phenomenal in the very first century of its rise.

Almost the whole of Arabia converted to Islam during the life-time of the Prophet (d.6). Soon, Iraq and Iran in the east, Syria, Palestine and Egypt in the north and north-west of Arabia were annexed to the Islamic commonwealth. In each country conquered by the Muslims, Islam made rapid progress. This phenomenal success led Western scholars of Islam (i.e. Orientalists) to seek explanations in terms of economic, political and other non-religious factors. Invariably, they put forward the view that Islam being a religion of conquest won converts both through peaceful means and the use of military might. This erroneous perception is being perpetuated even to day.¹ It is also worth recalling that many modern Orientalists, committed to world-peace through inter-religious dialogue are interested in scientific delineation of the role performed by a particular religion. To them the age of polemics is something of the bygone time. Here the example of Wilfred Cantwell Smith may be cited.

He is an arabist and a leading scholar of Islam. In an international conference on Indigenous Christian Communities in Medieval Islamic Lands, held in October, 1986, in Toronto, he sharply reacted against this perception of his co-religionists. First, he asked the question: "Why and how was it that a shift took place on a very large scale from one major religious movement to another?" Answering his question himself, he referred to the Jews who also lived in the same countries who did not convert to Islam like the Christians. He states: "We have what scientists like to call a "control group", in that the Jewish community in classical Islamic times was in much the same situation as was the Christian, yet the percentage of converts from it was drastically smaller." Thereafter he turns to explain the sectarian differences between the followers of the Latin, Greek and Syriac Church. He says: "These three were of comparable size and numbers. By the end of the millenium or a little later, the last had not quite disappeared, yet it was so minor in comparison that when, for instance, I myself studied Church history in a Western theological College early this century all the eastern Churches were together and in effect dismissed in one small chapter called "*The Oriental heresies*." My idea here is this: that the semitic speaking world never did quite understand, or any way was never fully at ease with, the Greek metaphysical concepts in terms of which the dominant Western church formulated its theology, nor the importance that Church gave to them, and indeed to theology generally to a person thinking in a semitic language (with its prac-

tical moralist orientation), the Islamic *Weltanschauung* might well have seemed to capture more faithfully than did official church doctrine the reality that Christians had been brought up to see, but seemed unable satisfactorily to clarify in words."²

By way of further illustration, mention may be made of the countries which were never invaded and conquered by Muslims but turned Muslim on account of their contact with peaceful Muslim traders, engaged in overland and over-seas trade. Unlike the modern missionaries, the primary aim of these traders was not to spread Islam but promote their trade in foreign lands. It was, however, the pattern of behaviour displayed by them in their dealings with non-Muslims that seems to have impressed the latter. In Malaysia and Indonesia the social elite was Hindu as the sanskrit words in their language and the remnants of Hindu temples tend to suggest. The Hindus having been impressed by Islam converted *en bloc* to Islam because of the conviction of the mind and the acceptance of the heart. Their example was followed by the masses even in the interior both in the Malaysian peninsula and the Indonesian islands. Consequently, these countries are Muslim majority countries.³ As regards other south-eastern countries of Thailand, Burma and even China, they received Islam both through traders and mercenaries. In these countries also the Muslims had their commercial establishments and married local women. They multiplied with the passage of time. The slaves purchased by the Muslims also added to their numbers. To-day in communist China sale of chil-

dren is not possible, "but it is impossible to say how important the in-marrying of Han (Chinese) girls into Muslim families has become."⁴ In each country the Muslims are found in sizeable numbers. Even in communist China, Muslims maintain their cultural identity.

Lastly, we may discuss the factors responsible for the spread of Islam in the Indian sub-continent. India needs a detailed study of the problem because religious communalism is on the increase in this country and religious minorities, the Muslims and Christians, have become victims of persecution by the fascists in the majority Hindu community. The charge leveled against the Muslims and Christians is that they have been converting Hindus to their respective religions through inducements as well as by the use of force since medieval times. To say that Hindus turned to Muslim or Christian faith for reasons of prestige or monetary or other advantage is an insult both to Hinduism and the religion adopted. Nobody abandons his religion lightly or abandons it for reasons other than he considers attractive and valid. Neither Islam nor Christianity was successful in winning converts from among high caste people in large number at any time, because the members of high caste had their share in the greatness of Hindu Culture. Both of these religions attracted lower caste people because they were denied civil rights and had to live for the service of high caste people.

The coming of Islam to India may be traced back to the very first century of its rise in its classical land. The Ar-

abs had their trade relations with India since pre-Islamic times.⁵ They also had their establishments in the port cities along the Malabar Coast. These establishments were looked after by their wives and slaves who happened to be either of foreign origin or Indians who followed the religion of their master. The Muslims were granted religious freedom by the Hindu Rajas with the permission to purchase Indian slaves and have mosques constructed. This was possible because the foreign trade controlled by the Arabs constituted an important source of income to the Indian rulers. Later, the Muslim merchants and traders spread 'to the Coromandel, the Konkan and the Gujarat coasts and founded their colonies in different port cities.⁶ They married local women (generally low-caste or out-caste) and purchased slaves wherever they settled down. Their number also increased on account of the sale and purchase of slaves in India.

With the establishment of Muslim rule in North India towards the close of the twelfth century, far-reaching changes took place in the socio-political life of the country. The caste based towns were changed into cosmopolitan urban centres, as their gates were thrown open to all irrespective of birth and creed. The construction of new palaces, graceful domes and minarets transformed the skyline every where. In the changed circumstances the artisans who were low-caste people and lived outside the towns prospered as they were provided with work in the expanding towns and new cities. The progress of foreign trade attracted merchants from foreign countries. The foreign merchants came

in caravans with choice merchandise of different countries and also returned loaded with Indian products. The foreign trade benefited the artisan class, suggesting ideas for the introduction of new crafts and modification of old and indigenous ones. The Muslim rulers, officers and merchants established large *karkhanas* (manufactories) that created job opportunities for men of skill. In these *karkhanas* Hindus worked with Muslim slaves, skilled in different crafts and soon this intermingling brought about the mixing of ideas. The religious freedom enjoyed by a slave along with his master, at least in the mosque, seems to have impressed the Hindu artisans who were denied the privilege to worship gods in the temples. This was one of the main factors responsible for the spread of Islam among low caste Hindus belonging to the artisan classes. The landless labourers in the countryside who also belonged to the class of outcaste or low-caste people remained outside the pale of Islam on account of the absence of dedicated preachers in Islam. It was only in the urban centres or the surrounding area that one artisan caste was followed by another in accepting Islam, in spite of the fact that the Muslim rulers followed a policy of non-interference with the Hindu social system. They questioned the privileges of the high castes nor did they try to do away the degradation of the low ones.⁷ It is, however, to be emphasised that the centrality of the Sharia (religious law) in Islamic society did promote a sense of the equality of the believers. Islamic culture continued to be marked by an egalitarian under-current at odds with the social realities and the hierarchical

ideas of a stratified society. The Islamic principle that all believers are equal before God and the instituted law held a fascination for people suffering from the hierarchical models. The Islamic *sharia* takes no account of differences even between the free born and the slave.

It is also worth mentioning that the conversion of low caste Hindus to Islam during pre-modern times did not lead to estrangement between Hindus and Muslims. The change of faith among the low-caste or out-caste Indians was not a matter of concern to the upper caste Hindus. In fact, the castes which provided Islam with converts did not belong to the core of Hindu Society. Any importance of numerical increase or decrease in a religious community was out of question before the modern age; it began with the all India census, conducted in 1872 when each community was given representation on the local bodies in proportion to its actual numerical strength.

Similarly, the allegation against the Christians that they convert Hindus to Christianity through economic inducement is baseless. The language media project Christianity as if every Christian is for conversion. On the contrary the Pope and his followers have been taking an interest in promoting inter-religious dialogue the world over for creating an atmosphere of fellowship of believers in God to prevent people from turning wholly materialistic in life. The document on dialogue between the religions released at the time of the Council, Vatican some thirty years ago, affirms that all men, especially those of living faith, should rise above all dis-

crimination, should live in harmony and serve universal brotherhood. In response to this document, the Indian Church has been promoting inter-faith dialogue to serve the cause of peace. I have been attending conferences organized by them since 1990, but I have not found any priest or member of the Christian community interested in conversion. It is really sad that after the killing of Graham Staines and his sons by militant Hindus in Orissa no national leader was able to show moral leadership to the nation. The statement by the Prime Minister that a debate should be held on the issue of conversion was unfortunate. The murderers of the Australians got encouragement in this statement. Soon after they killed one Muslim trader and a native Christian priest in Orissa. Dara Singh, the leader of the murderers, has not been arrested as yet. In its role of protector of all believers, the secular state in India should not be an active partner of the majority community. No individual who wants to embrace a religion of his choice should be denied his right to do so. The Muslims and Christians may not preach their religion for converting people but they cannot prevent any person from embracing their religion if he makes such a

choice. In India Muslims do not preach their religion among non-Muslims; they avoid preaching it because they do not want to incur the wrath of the majority community. What matters for Muslims of India is not so much to spread the Islamic faith as to survive with it. Unlike India, the new converts to Islam in Europe and U.S.A.. show great enthusiasm in preaching the religion of their choice. Therefore, the conversions are a common phenomenon in the West. In 1985 one report published in the *London Times* mentioned the number of conversion as one thousand a year in the United Kingdom alone. All these conversions take place in the West on purely intellectual grounds.⁸ In India such conversions to Islam are few and far between after 1947. Recently Ms. Madhavi Kutty, a distinguished novelist of English and Malayalam, is a case in point. She says, "I have made a new discovery. Islam is the religion of love, it gives protection to women and I need protection. I am an orphan, I have no one. Hindu gods punish, Allah forgives sins. I want a forgiving God."⁹

The country needs leaders who can provide moral leadership and prevent the shedding of human blood in the name of religion.

Notes

1. Bolojun, I. A. B., *Religious Understanding and Co-operation in Igeria* (ed.) Proceedings of a Seminar, University of Ilorim, 1978, pp. 50-67.
2. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Muslim Christian Relations: Questions of a Comparative Religionist", *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 8 (Jan. 1987) 1, pp. 18-21.
3. Cf. I. D. Fatimi, *Islam Comes to Malaysia*, ed. Shirle Gordon, Singapore, 1963, pp. Also N. A. Baloch, *Advent of Islam in Indonesia*, Islamabad, 1980, pp. 24-42.
4. Cf. Raphael Israeli, *Muslims in China: A Study in Cultural Confrontation*, London: 1980, pp. 5, 20; also Marshall Broomhall, *Islam in China: A Neglected Problem*, London: Margan and Scott, 1910, p. 228.

5. Mark J. Hudson, "Religion and Ethnicity in Chinese Islam", *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 8., No. 1, p. 158.
6. Cf. Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, *Islam and Muslims in South-Asia: Historical Perspective*, Delhi: 1984, pp. 1-6.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-50, for medieval Perso-Arabic Sources of information.
8. Cf. Carline Moorheads, "Lure of the Islamic Faith", *London Times*, September 25, 1985.
9. *Indian Express*, New Delhi: December 13, 1999, p. 7.