

ALI 331: Religious Pluralism

Academy for Learning Islam

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Outline of Discussion

Week One

- Defining Pluralism
- Social Pluralism
- Exclusive, Inclusive or Pluralistic

Week Two

- The Human Condition and Divine Guidance
- Salvation and Divine Justice
- Good Deeds of non-Believers

Defining Pluralism

- Pluralism does not have a single accepted definition
- World religions are equally true or valid in their explanation of the truth and the path of salvation.
- Earliest proponent of pluralism was John Hicks.
- Consequences of pluralism:
 - Reality of the world is beyond human understanding
 - We only have a subjective understanding of the truth
 - Each subjective understanding is as valid as another
 - Differences in religion are superficial

Social Pluralism

- Hicks argued that social pluralism requires religious pluralism
- Social pluralism requires tolerance and respect for human dignity

Say, "O People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you: that we will worship no one but Allah, and that we will not ascribe any partner to Him, and that we will not take each other as lords besides Allah." (3:64)

- Social pluralism is a part of the prophetic seerah. Ayatullah Subhani: "Prophet Muhammad (s) would personally attend the congregational events of the Ahl al-Kitab, and take loans from them, and visit their sick, participate in their burial ceremonies, console them..."

Epistemology of Pluralism

- Human understanding can be subjective
- Human beings have the ability to have an objective understanding of the truth.
- Allah (s) has blessed human beings with faculties that can distinguish the truth from falsehood:
 - Aql (intellect)
 - Fitrah (human nature)
 - Nabi (emissary of God)
- Without asserting this ability, no meaningful discourse can take place.

Islamic Theology and Pluralism

- One of the features of Islamic theology is guidance (hidayah).
- God is the guide (Hadi) who removes His servants out of darkness and brings them into light.

God is the guardian of the believers. He removes them from darkness towards the light. (2:157)

- God also guides His servants from falsehood to the truth.

And Allah will efface the falsehood and confirm the truth with his words (10:24)

- Subjective understanding of salvation is contrary to Islamic theology.

Scripture and Pluralism

- Numerous verses of the Qur'an assert an exclusivist approach towards salvation:

*Should anyone follow a religion other than Islam, it shall never be accepted from him, and he will be among the losers in the Hereafter.
(3:85)*

Indeed, with Allah religion is Islam, and those who were given the Book did not differ except after knowledge had come to them, out of envy among themselves. And whoever defies Allah's signs [should know that] Allah is swift at reckoning. (3:19)

Scripture and Pluralism

- Allamah Tabatabai's commentary in al-Mizan:
- There is only one way of life (din) with Allah (S).
- This way of life is Islam which is submission to the truth (taslim)
- The truth includes the truths of belief and practice
- The variations in the revelation between prophets are not in conflict with each other
- The common factor in the religion is the submission to the truth

The case of Ahl al-Kitab

- Ahl al-Kitab defined as Christian, Jews and Sabeans.
- Community that believes in God.
- Community that believers in a divinely revealed scripture.

Indeed the faithful, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabaeans those of them who have faith in Allah and the Last Day and act righteously they shall have their reward near their Lord, and they will have no fear, nor will they grieve. (2:62)

- What meaning do you take from this verse of the Qur'an?

The Ahl al-Kitab

There are two interpretations of this verse:

- People of the book can enter paradise if they follow the true teachings of their religion.
- Shahid Murtada Mutahhari seems to lean towards this interpretation:
 - Condition for acceptance of deeds is belief in a creator and hereafter.
 - *However, the People of the Book are in a condition in which they can perform good deeds, even if in a deficient manner, and with certain conditions can attain the results of those actions.*
- *What about the verses that condemn them to hellfire?*

The Ahl al-Kitab

- A second interpretation states that people of the book states that the verse is confined to the following individuals:
 - People of the book who lived before the coming of the Holy Prophet (s).
 - People of the book who lived after the coming of the Prophet (s) but are not aware of his message.
- Scholars like Ayatullah Nasir Makarem incline towards this interpretation.

Discussion for Next Week

- What will be the case of atheists and polytheists?
- If Islam is the only right path, then are all atheists and polytheists condemned to hellfire?
- What if they did not know about Islam?
- What if they knew about Islam but could not accept it for genuine reasons?

Divine Guidance

- Divine guidance comes in various forms:
 - Aql: human intellect
 - Fitrah: human nature
 - Wahy: divine revelation
- It seems that everyone does not receive the same amount of Divine guidance.
- Some are born in Muslim families and others are not born within a Muslim family.

The Natural Process

- God creates and guides people through a natural process.
- The human intellect is a product of nature and nurture.
- The human fitrah is also affected by the environment.
- Prophets of God also appear in civilizations that have human beings that are capable of accepting the responsibility.
- Hence some humans will achieve more guidance than others.

Divine Judgement

- God judges people in accordance to their intellect and guidance.
- Seven groups of people will argue on the day of Judgment against Allah (s):
 - Child (of a non-Muslim)
 - One who died between two prophets
 - A very old person who met the prophet but could not understand his message
 - A foolish person
 - A person who is not sane
 - A deaf person
 - A mute

Cultural Muslim and True Muslim

- Many Muslims are cultural Muslims
- This does not mean that they are Muslims in the eyes of Allah (s).
- No one is guaranteed salvation by claiming an Islamic identity.
- Faith must travel from their tongue to their hearts.

Salvation of Non-Muslims

- Can non-Muslims be excused for not following Islam?
- Generally the Qur'an divides people into three categories:
 - Believers
 - Stubborn non-Believers
 - Ignorant non-Believers
- The Qur'an states that stubborn non-believers will be subjected to Divine punishment.
- The ignorant non-Believers are considered to be mustad'af.
- Their fate is left in the hands of Allah (S).

Rational Evidence

- The Shia and Mu'tazilite position is that the human intellect can understand Divine justice.
- Hence, the Shia would argue that the dictates of reason are also the dictates of the sharia or Divine revelation.
- The human intellect understands that punishing a person prior to informing him of his duties is abominable.
- The Qur'an also asserts this rational principle:

And we do not punish (a community) until we send a messenger to them ()

Qur'anic Verses

Surely (as for) those whom the angels cause to die while they are unjust to their souls, they shall say: In what state were you? They shall say: We were weak in the earth They shall say: Was not Allah's earth spacious, so that you should have migrated there in? So these it is whose abode is Hell And it is an evil resort.

Except the weak from among the men and the children who have not in their power the means nor can they find a way (to escape).

So these, it may be, Allah will pardon them And Allah is Pardoning, Forgiving. (4:97-99)

Evidence from Hadith

- Imam al-Sadiq (a)

“Zurārah! [God has made it] incumbent upon Himself that He take the misguided (not the unbelievers and deniers) to Heaven.

“If only people, when they are ignorant, pause and don’t reject, they will not be unbelievers.”

Good deed of non-believers

- Every deed has a spirit and a form
- When the form of the deed is beautiful, it benefits the recipient.
- When the spirit of the deed is beautiful, it benefits the doer.
- Intention and sincerity form the spirit of the deed.
- The Qur'an states that the deeds of non-believers will not be accepted:

A parable of those who defy their Lord: their deeds are like ashes over which the wind blows hard on a tempestuous day: they have no power over anything they have earned. That is extreme error. (14:18)

Good deed of non-believers

- This verse of the Qur'an speaks of an obstinate non-believer
- An ignorant non-believer's deeds will be rewarded by Allah (s).
- This reward may take the form of guidance or protection from Divine punishment.
- The Prophet (s) said to Adiy, the son of Hatim:

A great punishment was lifted from your father on account of his generosity.

Closing discussion on mustad'afeen.

- Who are the mustad'afeen according to the Qur'an?
- Is it only people who did not have access to the truth?
- Is it only people who lived under a non-Muslim dictatorial regime?
- What about people who were introduced to Islam but could not comprehend the truth because of various reasons?
- Allamah Tabatabai states in al-Mizan:

(the term mustad'af) also applies to a person whose intellect did not comprehend the established truths of the religion...rather the truth was concealed from him owing to various reasons that caused it.