

THE QURANIC APPROACH TO PRESERVING IDENTITY

Once a Wiseman, Abu'l Ula, was presented with a delicious roasted Quail. He declined to eat the bird since he was a strict vegetarian, a man of strong will capable of resisting such temptation. However, he took advantage of the situation and started a dialogue, he asked "O' poor bird tell me for what sin were you mercilessly killed? It's really a pity that you did not become a falcon and your eyes did not see the signs of nature! The verdict of the judge of fate has always been punishment for the crime of weakness is sudden death.

Iqbal (1938) narrates this story to warn Muslims against being weak and unprepared. His message encapsulated the Islamic spirit of being strong and ever ready to face hostility. A common image he employed in his poetry to describe a true Muslim was that of a falcon, the prince of birds a powerful bird of prey, which lives independently high in the mountains.

However, some of our contemporary Muslim leaders and social scientists are calling Muslims to be more accommodating, more willing to integrate, more liberal and less fundamentalist. By using big sociological terms like 'Diaspora', 'heterogeneous nature of Muslim societies', 'paradigm shifts' and diatribes of simple Muslims they certainly are pleasing someone out there.

There is no confusion about identity for Muslims it is firmly rooted in belief in the creator of the universe, in emulating the 'perfect man' and yearning for the akhirah.

The parameters of Muslim identity are clearly delineated in the Quran and the Sunnah. Eating curry or sushi, fish and chips or pizza, wearing shalwar kameez or jalabiya, speaking Arabic or English are not determinates of this Muslim identity ! Statistics will not change this reality.

The question that really concerns thoughtful Muslims is not about diet, dress, language and outer appearance it is more about how we can preserve our fundamental beliefs and safeguard the moral and spiritual values of Islam. The fear is of losing our uniqueness, distinctiveness as Muminun- true believers, muttaqun- God conscious souls, Salihun- Righteous beings! The question is how can Muslims preserve this unique identity?

Some people think that the only way forward for the British Muslims is to constantly appeaser and please others by compromising their principles, modifying traditional practices, diluting Islamic values and shying away from speaking the truth. They suggest we become mealy-mouthed and tolerant of things around us. However, the Quran is forcefully critical of such compromising approach to social harmony in plural societies. In the early days after Hijrah the Muslims were a minority in Madina, there were Jews, the Christians and the idolaters. The Quran speaks to the Muslims in this terse tone,

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
وَلَنْ تَرْضَىٰ عَنْكَ الْيَهُودُ وَلَا النَّصَارَىٰ حَتَّىٰ تَتَّبِعَ مِلَّتَهُمْ قُلْ إِنْ
هُدَىٰ اللَّهُ هُوَ الْهُدَىٰ وَلَئِنْ اتَّبَعْتَ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ بَعْدَ الَّذِي جَاءَكَ
مِنَ الْعِلْمِ مَا لَكَ مِنَ اللَّهِ مِن وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ

"The Jews and Christians will never be pleased with you until you follow their religion. Say 'Allah's guidance is the true guidance' If you were to follow their whims and desires you would find no protector or helper besides Allah (Surah Al-Baqarah, Ayah 120)."

'The Jews and Christians' may be read as 'modern secular fundamentalists' who are liberal and certainly antireligious (against all religions). Therefore no matter how much they are appeased they will never be happy until Muslims are renegades, who have abandoned their faith! Which Muslim is willing to pay such a price?

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There is another group of passive Muslims allowing integration willy-nilly. A policy that will inevitably weaken Muslim identity. The Quran sternly warns against such passive attitude and outlines dire consequences of this approach in the following passage:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَوَفَّيْتَهُمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ
ظَالِمِينَ أَنْفُسِهِمْ قَالُوا فِيمَ كُنْتُمْ قَالُوا كُنَّا مُسْتَضْعَفِينَ فِي الْأَرْضِ
قَالُوا أَلَمْ تَكُنْ أَرْضُ اللَّهِ وَاسِعَةً فَهَاجِرُوا فِيهَا فَأُولَئِكَ مَأْوَاهُمْ
جَهَنَّمُ وَسَاءَتْ مَصِيرًا

"The angels ask those they take while they were wronging themselves, what were your circumstances? They reply 'we were oppressed on earth'. The Angels say 'was Allah's earth not wide enough for you to have made Hijra elsewhere in it?' The shelter of such people will be hell, what an evil destination. Except for those men, women and children who really are oppressed and do not have any other possibility and are not guided to any way" (Surah An-Nisa, Ayah 96).

The following commentary on this passage is very revealing; Mualana Shabbir Ahmad Usmani says: "There are some genuine Muslims who live under kafir government and are oppressed. Because of the government fear they are unable to openly express their Islam or to take part in Jihad. It is obligatory for these people to migrate from such country." This is why the Ulama stipulate a condition for living in a non-Muslim country. The condition is you must be able to express your faith freely without a compromise. What is most disturbing is that some Muslims (including Muslim leaders) are imposing unnecessary restrictions on themselves and making compromises.

So what strategy does the Quran recommend for preserving the unique and distinctive Muslim identity? The following passage provides a clear way:

"You who have Iman! Do not take the Jews and Christians as your friends; they are friends of one another. Any of you who take them as friends is one of them. Allah does not guide wrong doing people. Yet you see those with sickness in their hearts rushing to them, saying 'we fear the wheel of fate may turn against us! But it may well be that Allah will bring about victory or some other contingency from him. Then they will deeply regret their secret thoughts. . .

You who have Iman! If anyone of you renounces your deen, Allah will bring forward people whom He loves and who love Him, humble to the muminun, fierce to the Kafirun, who do Jihad in the way of Allah and do not fear the blame of any censurer. That is the unbounded favour of Allah, which He gives to whoever he wills. Allah is boundless All-knowing.

Your friend is only Allah, His messenger and the Muslims. Those who pray pay Zakat and are humble. As for those who make Allah, the messenger and the Muslims their friends they are the party of Allah and they are victorious. " (Surah Al-Maida: Ayah 51-56)

In this passage the Quran is reminding Muslims of their uniqueness. How they are different from others and emphasising the need to preserve this 'difference' and not dilute it by friendships with others. The resolute and angry tone emphasises the division between Muslims and the 'others'. The 'friendship' (Wilayat) to be avoided means, "Taking them as supporters, helpers, the near ones and intimacy" (Al-Razi). "Do not take the Jews and the Christians as your friends" certainly does not imply that we should hate them nor does it mean we should be intolerant towards others, neither does it hint that we should not co-operate with one another. On the contrary the passage is promoting good relations based on solid principles of being unique and different!

The passage is simply telling the Muslims not to compromise their beliefs, rituals, values and customs to be accepted by others. Islam believes in freedom of thought and religion "There is no compulsion in religion" (Al-Baqara). But it stresses being honest about it, forthright and proud of whom you are. This passage highlights the plurality of human society where individuals and groups can adopt any religion, language and culture; in short different people should be able to coexist.

However, this ideal is rarely accepted by societies, the dominant and powerful ones will always subordinate the weaker and smaller groups, they will look down on them, deprive them of their rights and discriminate against them. What happened to Jews in Germany under Hitler, the Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo at the hands of Serbs and what happened in Chechnya at the hands of Russians are all examples of extreme intolerance and injustice.



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However, the minorities, whether racial or religious, will always get a raw deal if they do not stand up for their rights. This Quranic passage was revealed when the Muslim community was in minority and the kafir and Jews were in majority. The danger was that the Jews who controlled the economy were intimidating others and exploiting their weakness. The Quran tells the Muslims to be assertive and firm against such aggression. It is telling them to be loyal to their own traditions. The Quran gives every minority this right, not only Muslims! Let people be who they are, and be proud of themselves. Then they will flourish and will be able to contribute to the well being of the whole society. If the majority is always breathing down their neck, they feel they are not free; they are under pressure to change. Under such harsh conditions the minority lose their will, lack institutions and competence but more importantly the majority does not give them the freedom to take their affairs in their own hands.

In our modern society, the dominant liberal-secularism seems to rule everything, and in the name of liberalism the rights of minorities are trampled, not overtly (except of Muslims) but covertly and through institutions and over a period of time the minority lose their distinctiveness as the majority assimilates it. The minorities crumble, eventually dying away remaining only in name. The only way for less-powerful minorities to survive is to become strong and stand on their own feet. The Quran encourages this for all! The Quran is warning Muslims against this and is reassuring them that by being together, united and in love with Allah and the Messenger ﷺ they can never be beaten, they cannot lose their identity and will triumph InshaAllah.