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Islam *minus* Religion, Muslims *minus* Islam

Mahmoud Al-Zayed

There is a dominant phenomenon apparent in the popular and political discourses on Islam and Muslims. This phenomenon is the tendency to see Muslims as a generic category, as rigid cultural actors sans what Islam means to them, and similarly to see Islam sans religion and its theology i.e. sans the complex and diverse schools of jurisprudence, (*Fiqh*), that vary in their interpretations and understandings of the Islamic foundational texts, Quran, and Hadith.

The first point to be made about the category of *Muslim* in the global scene is the absence of equivalent categories for Christians, Buddhists, Hindus¹ or any religious groups in the world. The term Muslim does not simply refer to ordinary humans who happen to be Muslim, nor does it simply give pride of place to Islamic cultures and traditions, or to the Muslim communities. It has become a brand of humans, a distinct category, who are excluded from humanity, marked by the impossibility of integrating into cultures of regions which are not considered as ‘natural’ regions of Islam. This category has been solidified after 9/11 and hence, Islam has been associated with terrorism, to the extent ‘Muslim’ and ‘terrorist’ have become irrelevant distinctions and, practically, interchangeable categories. Since then, *Muslim* has become an emblem of terror, and this terror has a language: Arabic. Consequently, Muslims are simply under suspicion till they prove otherwise.

What makes a Muslim Muslim, in popular and political discourses, is not the declaration of their faith, or level of their religiosity, but things that are largely cultural markers, like the place of origin (living in or being originally from a majority-Muslim country), belonging to a generically termed minority (like Muslims in India), their Arab or Islamic name, or their language. These cultural markers do not necessarily have anything to do with their religion, which may or may not play a major role in the formation of their identities. There are those who are adherent to Islam as a religion, regardless of the level of their religiosity, and those who consider themselves culturally Muslim though they may or may not practise their religion, and in some contexts, like that of the Arab world, there are those who consider themselves belonging to Islamic culture though they are of different faiths altogether.

In terms of practices of everyday life, there are many factors that are at work prodding Muslims to behave in various manners: class, caste, race, gender, tradition, and unwritten rules of the dominant culture. What role does Islam as a belief play in the formation of one’s identity in such contexts? The answer can vary from one person to another, from one context to another. However, the

subject of the discourse is generically and loosely named Muslim, as a category that has to do with culture rather than religion. In other words, they are Muslims, minus Islam. In the West, for example, even if one is unapologetically atheist, of Arab origin or Muslim faith, he/she is seen and treated as a Muslim, nonetheless. Even when one looks at Islam as a culture, Muslims are highly heterogeneous and differentiated individuals and communities. They are multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-racial, multi-regional and sub-regional, multi-class, and in some cases acquiring many aspects of different faiths, races, cultures, languages, and literatures which they are exposed to.

Islam on the other hand is viewed either as a political ideology or a culture minus religion and its theology. The symptom of this is the binary oppositions that are historically constructed and Islam being one of the sides. The other side of the equation has nothing to do with religion: Islam vs. the West, (as two supposedly opposing cultures, as assumingly opposing 'ways of life', or an opposing ideologies) or other wrongly constructed binaries like Islam vs. modernity, Islam vs. democracy, and so on. One should note in the binary of Islam vs. the West, the two sides of the equation do not belong to the same category; while the former is a religion, the latter is a geopolitical category – Christianity, though still vibrant in the political and cultural life of the West, is not posed as a defining factor of different societies in the West. This makes such a binary one between Islam and a secular entity, i.e. the West. Needless to say, all these binaries are historically constructed and politically charged. They are overwhelmingly framed by Western discourse since Communism was replaced by Islam by the end of the Cold War, and this culminated in the tragic event of 9/11 and the infamous 'War on Terror', a discourse that homogenises Muslims as one well defined entity. Such generic generalisation about Islam and Muslims is not only found in the discourses produced by the West but also by some who belong to Islam and Muslim regions. Though Muslims belong to Islam – as a religion or culture –, Islam itself remains a highly discussed religion with so many interpretations, so many schools, so many groups and sects. Scholars of Islam, Islamists, and ordinary people within Islam do not agree upon issues pertaining to Islam as practice. However, the proponents of Islamophobia speak of one Islam – neatly defined and as if well-known to them – and deem it as the core of the problems/evils. Even though they themselves have (not) a vague or even the slightest idea about the basics of Islam as a religion, they perpetuate the same stereotypes. All stereotypes have a little truth in them, one may argue, but the problem arises when these stereotypes become the defining factors, regulating all the circulation of discourses, images, imaginations, about Islam and Muslims, and thereby becoming subtexts for applying direct and structural violence on Muslims.

Violence is so often associated with Islam though the majority of victims are Muslims. Apart from the fact that all human beings, regardless of their religious or political affiliation, can resort to violence largely for political purposes, there is another dominant form of violence that is always ignored, which is the institutional violence exerted by 'secular' forces. In the 20th century, 210 million people got killed out of which only 6 to 8 million were the victims of religious or quasi-religious conflicts, while more than three quarters of the 210 million were killed by secular forces or nation states.² Even religious and ethnic violence, Nandy convincingly points out, is neither religious nor ethnic but secular because ethnicity and religion are manipulated and used for purposes that have nothing to do with religion or ethnicity (Ibid: 41).

Among all forms of fundamentalism, be it economic, political, religious or cultural, religious fundamentalism is singled out, and here too fundamentalism is associated with Islam. All these

forms of fundamentalism exclude any alternative possibility in the ordering of history and reality. For example, without the economic fundamentalism in its capitalist form (Thiong'o 2016: 17-63) religious, political, or cultural fundamentalisms cannot thrive. Nonetheless, there is always a tendency to associate fundamentalism solely with religion, Islam in particular, and ignore other forms of fundamentalism.

Islamophobic discourse essentialises Muslims as well-defined subjects, homogenous in character as evil, or at least as suspect and largely stigmatised as the Other. Nevertheless, though the proponents of Islamophobic discourse could encounter or at least know of Muslims in their lived lives who do not fit the stereotypical image of Muslims as evil, such encounters and knowledge often fail to alter the fact that Muslims are demonized, for, at the popular and political level, the construction of the Muslim images as evil has no bearing on or interest in being in correspondence with reality. This constructed image is perpetuated as long as it serves the political interest of those who circulate it. Thus, Islamophobia is always cut off from reality because it is based on an idea that is uprooted from the histories and geographies of Muslims. Reality itself, for the proponents of Islamophobia, becomes a conformist category; it enters the frame only when it fits.

To counter the Islamophobic discourse is not to bust its stereotypes and prove them historically wrong. One needs to question why they need Islam as the Other to sustain their own identities. One must be cautious of being trapped in a defensive position. Given all the complexities Muslims and Islam are endowed with, the proponents of Islamophobia have already disqualified themselves as thinking subjects. To argue with them is to retroactively legitimise their discourse as a matter for discussion, thus retrospectively giving much credit to them, undeservingly.

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Notes

¹ Though this is true in the global scene, in India, due to historical reasons, communities are bordered mainly through religion: Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, etc.

² As cited by Ashis Nandy based on data by R. J. Rummel. See Nandy (2010: 32).

References

Nandy, Ashis (2010): "Violence, Cultural Diversities and the Fantasies of Monolithic Nation-State," in Rita Manchanda (ed.), *States in Conflict with Their Minorities: Challenges to Minority Rights in South Asia*, New Delhi: Sage:31-41.

Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ wa (2016): "Privatize or Be Damned: Africa, Globalization and Capitalist Fundamentalism," in *Secure the Base*, Calcutta: Seagull Books.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed is Research Associate in Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.