

## Issues/Discussion Forum

### **There is no Church in Islam, but the influence of Traditional Theologians is Enormous, Inhibiting Muslims Adapting to Modernity**

**-Mohammad Ghitreef**

In the past and more specifically before Renaissance the Church had been ruling the roost in Christendom. Bishops and holy fathers of different denominations as representatives of the Pope, had been engaged in money-making by selling indulgences to sinners and criminals who confessed their crimes before them. Very lucrative and profitable business indeed.

In countries like Spain after Reconquista some prominent bishops were terrorizing the poor defeated Muslims, Jews, and even Christians belonging to other sects giving them only two options; either be baptized or be burned alive. Those who wrongly felt safe by accepting Christianity due to coercive proselytizing were being suspected to be secretly Muslim and were spied on, and if anyone was found guilty in Inquisition courts then the whole family, even the extended family and group of friends was wiped out or set on fire. So Muslims who had newly converted to Christianity and Jews would face the worst kinds of torture, termination, and heinous killings throughout Spain, Portugal, and other adjoining countries.

The Pope had been so powerful that even kings and emperors had to accept their dictates or face its dire consequences. History tells us that the emperor Henri IV of Italy, had barefooted and bareheaded to knock on the door of a castle in Italy wherein the Pope was residing, for three days and nights, begging and pleading to his majesty the Pope, to open his door, which he simply refused to do. That was the nature of the all-powerful Church once upon a time. Its ruthlessness, and its oppression of the people was on its peak.

In the seventeenth century, some voices of protest and resistance rose from within; the voice of Calvin, Father Erasmus, and of Martin Luther et al, gradually became louder and louder, joined by scholars, artists, writers, and free thinkers, and in due course stirred a revolutionary movement in Florence, other towns in Italy, and elsewhere in Europe. Pastor Erasmus, Martin Luther, and Calvin propagated the notion that anyone can interpret the word of God; the Bible, and not just the Pope.

The Church confronted these dissident and nonconformist voices violently. It incarcerated thousands, burnt hundreds alive, and inflicted on many more the worst kinds of torture and killing. From this Protestantism came out reformation and enlightenment. It led to its first mass demonstration in revolting against the cruel kingship in France and the bloody French revolution broke out on 5 May 1789, culminated on 9 Nov 1799 as a harbinger of a radical political and social change.

In the wake of the French revolution, there followed revolutions, upheavals, and liberation movements in every corner of Europe. The nineteenth century witnessed new scientific inventions, an enormous industrial explosion, and the emergence of new political, economic, and social ideas that eventually created the new western civilization which is still in progress and ruling today's world unchallenged as well as unparalleled.

In contrast to the West, the Muslim world has been living under the duress of its own church. Its church is a unique combination of traditional Ulema, jurists, sultans (kings), and Godmen. This undeclared church has been challenged by free-thinking Ulema like Ibn Hazm, Muslim Philosophers like Ibn Rushd, and luminaries like Ibn Khaldun and latterly Shah Waliullah et al, yet they all miserably failed to bring about a genuine change in the prevalent state of affairs among Muslims globally.

The evolution of Arabic and Islamic sciences and progress of thought among Muslims has come to a halt in the sixth century AH, and it has been declared that the door of ijtiḥād has now been closed. This spirit of Taqlid has become fully entrenched in the Muslim Ummah in every field, be it Quranic arts, Hadees legacy or Islamic jurisprudence etc, and whatever voice has been raised against it has been crushed on the grounds that a different voice is a kind of innovation, infidelity, and heresy.

And thus the ulema believe themselves to be the sole spokespersons of Islam, their monopoly has a resemblance in many ways to that of the Pope. Now the Muslim mind is inexplicably guarded by the same imperceptible church built during the Abbasid period, no one can stand against it. If anyone dares to do so, all the clergy together would side-line him.

With denying the law of causation the Asharites in general and imam Al-Ghazali amidst them, in particular, stood against rationality and reason. Being a Shaikhulisma (the greatest Alim of his age) not only for his age but for the coming generations too, all the other Ulema followed his footsteps unquestioningly, and the situations since his times till day did not change much. As Ghazalian standards of knowledge in Muslim societies are still in use and the majority of Ulema blindly follow the same pattern of thinking set by Ghazali a thousand years ago, while human knowledge is always in constant change and progress. This is why history tells us that when one of the Ottoman sultans wanted to introduce new European techniques in training the army and reorganizing some other governmental sections the then Turkish Shaikh ul Islam was enraged and issued a fatwa against the Sultan invoking the special troops; the Janissaries, loyalists to the royals, to save Islam from this "heretic" step. The result was that they rose in revolt against the Sultan and all the reform was withdrawn.

And Ulema in Arabia described television, telephone, films, and other modern gadgets and media equipment as satanic tools that should be haram and forbidden. And that is why we see Ulema resisting vehemently Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his reform movement in

the Indian subcontinent in the ninetieth century and afterwards. And the story of Ulema around the world more or less is the same. These are, to me, the signs of an invisible church in Islam.

The only difference I can presume between Islam and Christianity in this respect is that we Muslims are privileged to have a protected sacred Divine text, the Quran, while Christians and other people of different faiths, in contrast, are not so lucky to preserve the original religious texts with them.

I think Muslim Ummah could not go ahead in any field without breaking the chains of Taqlid (blind imitation) and without liberating from this blind imitation of elders (Aslaf) and patriarchs. Without this kind of breakup, no breakthrough is possible. For that purpose, there must be a separation between politics and religion in practice, if not also in theory. In fact, the core values of religion are reflected in its moral values and politics more or less is and should be based on human practical wisdom, experiences, and rational thinking. It doesn't mean that it should be devoid of any morality, never, yet human practice and experience lead us to pragmatic ways which are totally indifferent to the nature of religious morality.

However, in practical terms, the traditional Muslim society with all its weaknesses and unhelpful circumstances, under the influence of the rich treasures of Sufism and jurisprudence, had established a practical compromise in which the king or sultan was supposedly looking after worldly affairs and the jurists and Sufis were striving for moral reform in the society. It was as if a balance had been struck. In the present times, the global movements of Islamism have hit hard this balance with their misrepresentation. They have tried to create unrest in politics and ethics alike. With their false rhetoric and the irrational narrative, they have stripped that balance and tried to destabilize both politics and ethics. This has upset the established balance in Muslim societies and has given rise to extremist movements and violent organizations in different countries. This phenomenon is, of course, more harmful to Islam than the forces of Islamophobia could be.

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*(Courtesy: New Age Islam)*

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