

Seven Letters To My RSS Friend: Letter #7

My Dear Judge Sahab,

The theory and practice of organized Hinduism does not regulate or control every sphere of human life to the same degree or extent, as does Islam through 'shariah'. Hindu society has been rather permissive and tolerant of plural interpretations of both creed and law. In ancient times it accommodated Jain and Buddhist ideas and values within the wider Indian culture. According to judicious historians, due to this conceptual 'openness' of early Brahmanical society Buddhist agnosticism, more or less completely, came to over-shadow Brahmanical orthodoxy in several parts of the land. This lasted till the rise and spread of Shankaracharya's revivalist movement in the 9th century. Thereafter both Jainism and Buddhism declined or rather withered away and the contours of Hinduism, as we understand it today, emerged. Scholars have viewed this crucial process differently. Some regard it as the result of persecution of dissent. Others say it happened due to the extreme 'porosity' of Hindu thought and culture. Due to various factors the Hindu population absorbed the conceptual and social innovations of Jain and Buddhist reformers, and, as it were, took the wind out of their sails.

By the 10th century Brahmanical thought became rigid, as Al-Beruni points out in his monumental work on Indian thought and culture. Hindu creativity had become a spent force, as generally happens in the human family. Political infighting between the Hindu rulers and chiefs and a vicious social stratification had resulted in a shocking dehumanization of the lowest class. By the same time the Islamic revolution had grown into a mighty world current. This, rather than the sword of Islam, acted as a catalyst in different parts of the then known world. In India the creative impact of Islam led to the ideas of ethical Theism and 'bhakti'. A little later in Western Europe it led to Protestant and Unitarian versions of Christianity.

The Islamic revolution, however, was far from being a finished or perfect product. Its message of social equality was qualified by the idea of the brotherhood and equality of all Muslims, irrespective of race or region, rather than of all men, irrespective of religion or faith. Not only this, this equality and the republican spirit or impulse of Islam remained entangled in the thorns of racial pride and kingly authoritarianism. To make matters even worse, the Sultans in India and the entire nobility could not emancipate themselves from the evil of the vicious caste system in India. Thus, the seeds of early Islamic republicanism and democracy lay fallow and dormant for several centuries before they could flower and flourish in the Western representative democracy of modern times. As we all know, this consummation took place in the Christian rather than in the Muslim world. The scientific and technological revolutions that took place in Western Europe from the end of the 18th century onwards have played a major and crucial role in the full flowering of the seeds of the spiritual Humanism of early Islam. Whether one likes it or not, the West is still at the wheel, and its creativity is intact. However, it has been forced to listen to the wisdom of the East in order to correct several imbalances in the value system of a, hitherto, rather, over-confident and assured modernity.

Western creativity and modernity reached India via Bengal in the late 18th century. Under its impact as well as the earlier influence of Islamic ideas Ram Mohan Roy redefined Hindu spirituality. Almost a century later Sir Syed, leader of the Aligarh movement did the same for Islam. The liberal Hindu vanguard retain, till today, the considerable advantage of their early lead. Moreover, the flame that Ram Mohan ignited soon lighted several other lamps in other parts of the great land. The Brahmo movement stirred a new vision before the Hindu psyche leading to the birth of Ramkrishna Mission, Vivekananda, Tagore, Aurobindo, Krishnamurti, et al, and Nehru himself. Sir Syed, on the other hand, to the misfortune of Indian Muslims, in spite of his laudable creative work on Islamic liberalism, merely founded the M.A.O. College that produced good cricketers, Deputy

Collectors and lawyers for British India, and, of course, the famous Ali Brothers. But no corresponding rethinking on or redefinition of Islam emerged in a big way from the efforts of Sir Syed. I think, his followers, specially his successors, failed him. He died in 1898, and the partition, fifty years after his death was the nadir of their failure. The responsibility for partition, however, is not theirs alone.

The partition has greatly slowed down the cultural interaction between Islam and Hinduism that had begun in medieval India. However, it is patently clear that the process cannot be arrested, no matter what the political constraints and interests of India, Pakistan and Bangla Desh may demand. None of these independent countries can insulate themselves from the pressures and pulls of cultural modernity, economic inter-dependence and a growing globalism. They are all faced with problems and challenges from every side, pressure of overpopulation, corrupt politics, misuse of religion or caste for political gains, poor political will and discipline, irresponsible trade unionism and a host of others. Yet, it is a fact that the common man everywhere yearns for mutual understanding and peace and is moved by the simple goodness of the heart, above all talk of religion or politics, in the name of Jihad, Hindutva or Western civilization.

I firmly and honestly believe that through trial and error, blood and tears the human family is reaching out for a 'religion of the spirit' without any call for converting to any particular theological creed or tradition. This approach to religion leaves intact the distinctive idiom, and symbols of each historical religion, but unites them all in a common search for values. This is the inter-faith approach of all enlightened and noble souls in the world today. Gandhi was the prophet of this religion of the spirit. I cannot help remarking, in all humility, that he remains the most outstanding combination, in modern times, of mass political leadership, conceptual creativity, statesmanship and sainthood. I have no objection if the RSS has different ideas and if its source of inspiration and light lies in the life and teachings of Hedgewar, Savarkar or Guru Golwalkar, or if a Bal Thackery looks up to Shivaji for inspiration and guidance. I respect all sincere devotees and believers, without necessarily agreeing with them. I shall respect all sincere beliefs but I shall remain committed to truth as I see it. However, I shall protest with all moral force at my command, when the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena and others resort to violence for achieving their objectives. If militancy or terrorism is evil in the case of Jihad, it is also evil in the case of Hindutva. There can be no double standards. This is the crux of the matter. I am constrained to express my deep pain and anguish that double standards of behavior have been abundantly displayed in Gujrat at the highest level, notwithstanding the poetic and humanist conscience of the Prime Minister. How and why this happened is a matter I shall not try to judge here. May India prosper and may truth prevail.

With these words, dear Judge Sahab, I shall close my correspondence with you on matters of common interest and deep concern.

All the best to you and family and the greater Indian family.

Yours as ever,

Jamal Khwaja