

APPROACHES TO MODERN ISLAM

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A survey was recently conducted by the Academy with regard to the questions given below. The objective was to gain a better understanding of the public opinion and to gain insights into the reasons for which certain erroneous but widespread perceptions come to be accepted about Pakistan. The questionnaire was the following.

- How would you characterize the majority opinion in Pakistan on issues such as religious pluralism and women's rights?
- Do you believe there is a correlation between Islamic education and religious intolerance in Pakistan?
- Would you recommend reform on religious education or public education regarding religious minorities?
- Given Islam's long legal tradition of guaranteeing religious freedom, how would you recommend promotion of pluralism in Pakistan?

The Survey was conducted in the area of Lahore and outlying townships, across a wide cross section of Pakistani society. It included 66 persons from different walks of life, representing various religious affiliations and diverse educational and professional back grounds, ranging from the "Secular, Liberals" to religious groups of different persuasions (both Shi'ite and Sunni) and other stake holders of the society. Maximum effort was made to identify the finer shades of religious affiliations by indicating the groups to which the individual giving their opinions belonged. Political affiliations were also noted. In what follows we have tried to present the "lay of the intellectual landscape" that emerges from our Survey.

General Observations and Points of Agreement

Almost all the participants of the Survey were keenly aware of the widening breach between the points of view and the growing debate on the issues singled out for the Survey. There was a general agreement on the point that there is an evident polarization of our society between westernized rejectionism and religious extremism/political violence. The “ultras” are no more a minority, forming only a tiny wart on the face of the worldwide attempt to revivify Islam and we can no longer enjoy the luxury of ignoring them. The extreme has broadened, and the middle ground, giving way, is everywhere dislocated and confused.

Enfeeblement of the middle ground, more often identified with “moderation”, is in turn accelerated by the opprobrium which the extremists bring not simply upon themselves, but upon committed Muslims everywhere.

“Moderation” emerged as a key-concept around which most of the issues were debated. Apart from the fact that it was embraced officially as the strategy enunciated by the present Government, it was seen as a Middle Course— the foundational critique and suggested remedy of the present crisis that seeks to regain the required equilibrium— religiously, intellectually, and culturally. There was no consensus, however, on its exact definition and implications. It was noted that it received support as well as opposition and criticism from the participants of the Survey. Objections, reservations and disagreements about the idea of Moderation, of the Middle Path, have been voiced by those who harbour certain suspicions about its rationale and reality. Suggestions were made that along side addressing these objections, it was also needed to move beyond the confines of merely suggesting a conceptual shift towards actually remedying the prevailing situation in terms of building bridges across divergent views and promoting confidence for the “other” that could bring us to create a reliable and effective national strategy for solving the problem.

It was evident from the responses of the participants of the Survey that as soon as the approach that advocates the idea of Moderation, of the Middle Path, moves beyond the advocacy of a conceptual shift and tries to translate itself into action, certain conflict zones immediately come into

focus. There are five major areas of conflict, which subsume a number of secondary issues, where the approach that looks for a Middle Path is immediately confronted with opposition and severity of divergent views:

- Gender Issues (Subsuming: Status and rights of women, employment, education etc.)
- The Religious “other” (Subsuming: Status of Minorities, Human Rights, International Relations with Non Muslims, Jihad/Terrorism)
- Cultural Issues (Subsuming: Cultural Values– Islamic/Western, Fine Arts, Entertainment, and Media Forms etc.)
- State– Religion (Subsuming: the questions related to the intervention of State in individual/private life– issues like *Hisbah Act*/Implementation of laws etc. The invasion of the public life with sectarian activities is the flip side of the question)
- State Legislation (Subsuming: the questions related to the *Hudud Ordinance/Riba/ Blasphemy Law* etc.)

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Important points of criticism were encountered during the Survey concerning the framework in which the questions were being asked. These concerns were more frequently voiced by the “lay” but religiously musical and well informed people among the participants of the Survey. These could be summarized as follows:

- I– The West should put the question to itself first; Where in the Muslim world the fanatics are in the positions of decision making? In the West, especially in the US, that is an undeniable fact that the decision making ranks are bustling with fanatics/fundamentalist!
- II– Recent polls reveal that 85% of the western population approved of civilian killings, under what ever pretext or logic, while only 45% of the Muslim population approved of this course of action!
- III– Throughout Europe, the borderline right wing fascist parties are in the ascendancy. It presents a sharp contrast with the Muslim world.

IV– Amendment in the Laws of the land has been observed to curtail civil liberties and rights in the West. Who is doing it? The moderates?

The upshot is that the predetermined framework forces the participants of the Survey to reach conclusions that are not correct in the larger perspective!

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This part summarizes the findings that the responses from the participants of the Survey have yielded in reply to the set of questions given above:

How would you characterize the majority opinion in Pakistan on issues such as religious pluralism and women’s rights?

Women’s rights:

There are three levels of responses that could be discerned from the opinions expressed in reply to the question. On the first level both the religious and the liberals (and to a large extent the seculars– 60%) agree that women’s rights are guaranteed in the basic Islamic texts and the later Islamic law and mention it with a sense of pride (80%), some even comparing the Islamic record with the lackluster performance in the West up till the modern times (even the examples of Cambridge University’s admittance of female students/teachers came up as examples; 30%). There is a difference, however. The “lay” but religiously musical and well informed people among the participants of the Survey often pointed out certain parts of the basic Islamic texts that they thought problematic (60%; the “lesser status in intelligence and, by implication, in creation”; “sanction of wife beating in the Qur’an”; male superiority etc.) while the religious people (80%) simply glided over it silently, mostly because of a chauvinistic attitude that was thinly disguised and some times worn on the sleeves!

On the second level almost all (90%) of the liberals/moderates and the seculars (if they cared to comment) talked about the duplicity or

dichotomy of thought/claims and practice in vast sections of the Pakistani society, especially rural and tribal areas, *vis a vis* the question of women's rights, cited examples of customs, conventions, attitudes that hamper or violate women's rights and emphasized a need of social/legal reform. Most of the religious participants of the Survey, however, stopped short at platitudes about women's rights (60%) or side stepped the issue (40%) by relating it to the western agenda (a theme that come up later as well).

On the third level the question was responded to on a conceptual level with a divided opinion as some of the participants of the Survey traced the issue back to its conceptual underpinnings (60% [40% religious scholars 20% liberal lawyers]). They were sensitive to the fact that the whole question of women's rights, as well as the larger issue of human rights, was conceived and evolved differently in the modern discourse of human rights/social sciences as it did in the classical Islamic tradition in the conceptual framework of *maqasid al-shari'a*, hence the difficulty that it faces to sink in the Islamic society.

The same idea entailed the related issue of male chauvinism and negative stereotypes of the feminine in Islam that hampers the process of reform and legislation (60% of the total participants of the Survey). The seculars asserted that it was inherent to Islam as well as to religion as such, some of the liberals (40%) attributed it to an erroneous interpretation of Islamic texts and the attitudes prevalent among the religious people, a tiny minority of the religious (20%) grudgingly admitted that it was related to misplaced religious arguments (claiming at the same time that it was nothing specific to Islam, citing Hindu and Christian instances). Some of the participants of the Survey (15%) rejected the idea out of hand and attributed it to western propaganda and the American agenda of globalization / westernization / modernism/ political aims etc.

Religious pluralism:

Conceptually, the question of religious pluralism was not of supreme importance for the seculars as, explicitly or implicitly, they maintained the position that religion was a human phenomenon that developed in response to the psychological, social, etc. challenges and needs of the

humans. Practically almost all the seculars regarded religion as irrelevant to the concerns of modern life and state hence religious pluralism was not seen as a problem, all religions being equally redundant. It should however be noted that, unlike their western counterparts, none of the Pakistani seculars took the next logical step of denying the transcendent or the divine (perhaps for lack of conviction or the fear of the public reaction!).

For the religious side, we take the responses in turn, conceptually first. For the religious, both lay people and the authorities, diversity of religions was some thing divinely ordained which, according to the Qur'anic perspective, had a wisdom pertaining to the geographical expanse and ethnic diversity of mankind. As such they had no problems with religious pluralism. The problem, as we discerned it, lies elsewhere. Muslims have been encouraged to believe, and the majority have been only too eager to believe, that Islam has superseded all other religions and that it is therefore the sole truly valid religion on earth. But however absolute the claims of Muslim theologians and jurists may be, they are shown in fact to be relative by the tolerance which Islam makes obligatory towards Judaism and Christianity and the Qur'anic praise of the groups of Jews and Christians. There seemed to be a confusion on the question of religious pluralism. Taken with that 'grain of salt'— though few were found fully conscious of it— the claims in question were not fully palatable but, nevertheless, stopped them from seeing the full implications of this exclusivism.

On the practical level the situation was similar to the opinions expressed in reply to the question of women's rights, that is, both the religious and the liberals agreed that rights of the minorities were guaranteed in the basic Islamic texts and the later Islamic law and mention it with a sense of pride (75%) that the Islamic historical record on that count outshined the Christian, Jew and the Hindu etc. When confronted with the issue of "the persistent attacks on minority Shia's, Christian, and Hindu communities" the responses were both divided and unanimous. These were unanimous in saying that such acts were not sanctioned by Islam and were the doing of individuals or groups who believed in religious extremism/political violence. The responses were, however, divided on the issue of

responsibility. The most common of the responses to such arguments (60%) was to dissociate oneself from the monstrosities by saying that it was not true Islam. The other (40%) argued that it amounts to side stepping the question and turning a blind eye to the fact that the groups in question from among the Muslim communities are putting forward religious arguments to validate their actions and the conceptual framework and basic assumptions through which these operate are claimed to be supported by their basic religious texts. In this case one cannot absolve oneself of one's responsibility by simply disowning the group or groups in question. One must place the sin at the doorsteps of a definite group, school of thought or mode of interpretation in one's community and try to hold a mirror to their thinking.

A small number of the participants of the Survey (20%) suggested that the lack of accommodation and tolerance for religious pluralism stemmed from the growing tendency of equating the Non-Muslim with the faithless/unbeliever (*kafir*), in the authorities and, under their influence, in the lay people. Thus there was a shift from the earlier inclusivity to an overwhelming exclusivity.

Do you believe there is a correlation between Islamic education and religious intolerance in Pakistan?

Almost all (90%) of the seculars and some of the liberals (20%) agreed that there was a correlation between Islamic education and religious intolerance in Pakistan; termed as the hot bed of intolerance. Rest of the liberals (80%) and the religious denied that there was any connection between Islamic education and religious intolerance. A small number of the participants of the Survey (20%) denied the manifestations of religious intolerance. The rest admitted of its existence but attributed it to the shift from inclusivity to exclusivity mentioned earlier. The religious authorities were more explicit on the question as they pointed out the fact that the texts/syllabi used in the *madrassa* system for the last five centuries contained no such materials that promoted religious intolerance. Some even went to the extent of mentioning the fact that no student of Islamic

education ever had the chance to read a work like *The Green Mantle* that was a common school book in the West! According to them it was not the text but the context that drove toward such extremism. It was the mind set of the management, the men at the helm that gave the interpretation and created the ethos.

Would you recommend reform on religious education or public education regarding religious minorities?

Though some (10%) of the seculars had some misgivings about the question, almost all the other participants of the Survey saw no need for a reform on public education regarding religious minorities since the settlements/models used in Pakistani public education in this regard have worked well. Not only there were no polemical or hate promoting texts in public education but, what was more important, there was a solid system in which there was no coercion. Both the Muslim and Non-Muslim students studied common subjects together and parted company when Muslim students studied Islamic Studies and the Non-Muslim students opted for Ethics etc.

Reform on religious education regarding religious minorities met with a mixed response from the participants of the Survey. Some (40%) of the seculars regarded it necessary with the argument (refuted by the religious) that it was the religious education that was responsible for negative stereotyping of the Other, a view that was shared by a tiny minority of the liberals. The rest of the participants of the Survey referred it back to the correlation between Islamic education and religious intolerance discussed earlier as far as the question of religious education regarding religious minorities was concerned. More informed among them mentioned the initiatives that have been taken with the help of the Norwegian government in this regard where in the Islamic religious authorities responsible for *madrasa* education system (*Wafq*— The Association of Islamic School) was brought into dialogue with their Christian counterparts. They suggested that such interaction and exchange was

required instead of *madrasa* bashing and superfluous, uninformed talk of religious education reform.

Given Islam's long legal tradition of guaranteeing religious freedom, how would you recommend promotion of pluralism in Pakistan?

There was no uniform response from the participants of the Survey. Almost all (90%) of the seculars recommended a secular or at least a neutral public sphere for the promotion of pluralism in Pakistan and some of the liberals (15%) agreed with them. With the religious, the mention of Islam's long legal tradition of guaranteeing religious freedom elicited the same response as it did with the question of women's rights; that these were guaranteed in the basic Islamic texts and the later Islamic law and mentioned it with a sense of pride (80%), some even comparing the Islamic record with the lackluster performance in the West up till the modern times. Argument was forwarded that there was no flaw in the Islamic law or its provisions; it was the haphazard way of its implementation or the mishandling/corruption of the executing authorities that gave rise to the problems. Not many concrete recommendations were received for the promotion of pluralism in Pakistan except those mentioned earlier. Some of the participants of the Survey, however, suggested greater number of dialogues, talk shows, cultural activity and publications on the issue to enhance awareness.