Communal Harmony: A Critique to Mohammed Arkoun of Algeria

Mohammad Teisir Bin Shah Goolfee

Mauritius,
Research Scholar, Department of Islamic Studies
Aligarh Muslim University
gteisir@gmail.com

ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Article History: Published Online: _Published_ **Keywords**: *Communal Harmony, the Qurān, Mohammed Arkoun, Interreligious Dialogue, Hindrance, Measures*	Communal harmony refers to the coming together of people from different religions and lives with a fraternal and equal sense, irrespective of caste and creed. It marks the absence of communal rigidities, discords and disturbances. It leads to the emergence of goodwill and prosperity among different communities, thus aiming to nurture an atmosphere of coexistence originated or influenced by religio-cultural principles. The Qurān has emphasized on residing with peace and harmony so as to develop positive feelings for each other thus giving birth to mutual understanding. Mohammed Arkoun, a 20th century Islamic intellectual, has discussed about the relationship between the three monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam). The aim of this paper is to underscore some Qurānic verses on love and harmony as well as to shed light on the views of Mohammed Arkoun regarding interreligious dialogue.

Introduction

Given the turmoil ravaging almost every sphere of life in this post-modern period, the universal mass has entered into a state of

thinking and living, which restrict them in catering only for its own specific religion, faith and tongue, thus seeking to serve its egotistic culminations. Such type of thought-process is undoubtedly menacing and creates the tendency of disintegrating the different segments of the society in the long run. Therefore, the need of the hour is to combat the enemies of unity and harmony and to work incessantly for the attainment of communal harmony and peace. To live a life of love and harmony is a constant process via which communal respect, comprehension, caring and sharing, kindheartedness, social responsibility, unanimity, and lenience of diversity among the people are internalized and executed collectively to rectify and resolve issues and to work towards the construction of an impartial and free, prosperous and egalitarian society.

Communal harmony refers to the formation of togetherness of people of different communities and residing with a sense of brotherhood and parity, irrespective of their caste, creed and religion in the quest of mutual goals. However, it does not only refer to the absence of communal anxieties, dissentions and insurgences but also includes affirmative co-existence, collaboration and harmonization between all the constituents of a

community. Harmony means proper conformity of the parts to one another and to the whole. In short, communal harmony is the feeling of civility and love for people of all religions. Without it, neither knowledge proceeds nor social prosperity is prevailed.

Love: the Cornerstone of Islam

Love and Harmony is the cornerstone of the religion of Islam. However, it definitely looks very unnatural that a religion whose name itself refers to peace and harmony can propagate the message of violence and aggression. The religion of Islam is revealed to humanity with the objective to present a prosperous and harmonious life. Allah Himself commands all the people to reside in accordance with the moral and ethical values so that compassion, mercy, peace, and love can be experienced all over the world.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ادْخُلُوا فِي السِّلْمِ كَافَّةً وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ ۚ إِنَّهُ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُبِينٌ

O you who have believed, enter into Islam completely
[and perfectly] and do not follow the footsteps of Satan.
Indeed, he is to you a clear enemy.[i]

The above-cited verse clearly gives the indication that the religion of Islam doubtlessly teaches to establish peace and fosters a life in total genuineness and uprightness before the Lord of the universe. Hence, it is of utmost importance for each and every individual to believe in Allah with his own wish and observe His commands via personal meticulous contentment.

The nature of love and harmony is that it brings people on the platform of unity and amicability. Man is supposed to behave in a mellowed manner to other fellow-citizens. Islam preaches to establish goodness and eradicate evils and most importantly not to insult even the bitterest enemies. Instead, Islam advocates forgiveness. The Qurān says:

وَأَنْفِقُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَا تُلْقُوا بِأَيْدِيكُمْ إِلَى التَّهْلُكَةِ ۛ وَأَحْسِنُوا ۛ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

And spend in the way of Allah and do not throw [yourselves] with your [own] hands into destruction [by refraining]. And do good; indeed, Allah loves the doers of good.[ii]

In another verse of the Qurān, Allah says:

لَا يَنْهَاكُمُ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ

As for those who do not kill you for your faith nor drive you from your homes, God instructs you to deal with them with justice and the utmost respect.[iii]

Allah has categorically stated that the existence of people from other religions and thoughts is something that we must acknowledge and welcome whole-heartedly. This is how He created and predestined humanity in this universe. Allah states in the Qurān:

لِكُلٍّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَمِنْهَاجًا ۚ وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَٰكِنْ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا آتَاكُمْ ۖ فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ ۚ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

To each of you We prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed,

He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all together, and He will [then] inform you concerning that over which you used to differ.[iv]

In acknowledgment of the above-mentioned verse, the Muslims do possess an internal love and care for people of all faiths, races and nations. This is so as they consider them as the manifestations of God in this world and depict a respectful and positive comportment towards them. This is the very foundation of communities directed by Islamic ethics.

The Qurānic values and morals command the Muslim community to treat all people, both Muslims and non-Muslims, with every possible kindness and justness. They are also to protect and provide help to the needy people and prevent the flow of mischief. Mischief consists of all types of anarchy and terror that destroy safety, security and harmony. Allah says in the Qurān:

وَاللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الْفَسَادَ

God does not love corruption.[v]

The Arkounian Approach

Mohammed Arkoun (1928-2010) was considered to be one of the most famous and influential scholars in the field of Islamic Studies in the 20th century. Having a fruitful literary career, spanning over 40 years, he was a successful searching critic of the theoretical rigidities entrenched in the history of Islamic thought and a brave public academician as well. He has been involved in interreligious dialogue, especially Muslim-Christian dialogue, for more than

twenty years, for the promotion of communal harmony and possesses a number of academic writings on his name which deal with the critical assessment of the religious heritages of the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

Mohammad Arkoun has always taken the upper hand to discuss sensitive issues which major experts of the fields restrict themselves from doing so due to their controversial effects and consequences. He always believes that Islam must be practiced according to time and space. It is a natural fact that every period has its own issues and challenges and that all of them need to be tackled according to the convenience of that period. Therefore, it is the duty, he says, of the concerned professionals and intellectuals of the religious fields to come up with solutions on the basis of the religious principles as well as the social science methodologies to deal with the modern problems faced by the current societies and not turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to them.

While analyzing the methodology adopted by Mohammed Arkoun towards the initiation of inter-religious dialogue between Islam and other faiths with the objective to promote communal harmony, one can deduce the fact that he was not promoting a get-together between Christianity and Islam. Rather, his attempt was to give birth to the thinking-process towards every different religious community. He interacted with people in the name of humanity. His intellectual friendship with scholars of various faiths such as

the great French Protestant thinker, Jean Paul Gustave Ricœur (1913-2005), depicted that there exists a huge scope towards the reconciliation between different religions.

Hindrances

Mohammed Arkoun has identified certain obstacles which impede the process:

  (i) Political struggle between Muslim and Western societies.
  (ii) Ongoing conflict between Jews and Arabs (Israelis and Palestinians).
  (iii) The presence in European communities of significant Muslim minorities.
  (iv) Confusions and distortions feeding the social 'imagination' of every country or community against each other.

Post 9/11 Episode

He states that rather than searching for novel prospects to open up the space for acquiring knowledge, participating and reviewing old prejudices, we witness the opposite scenes. Violent mass-media campaigns, radicalism, fundamentalism, violence and terrorism are witnessed. Arkoun opines that such titles (after the 9/11 episode) are forcefully labeled to the Muslims due to the fact that the journalists are not ready to engage themselves to speak about liberal Islam, despite many liberal scholars are trying their best to write, teach and take part in challenging intellectual debates on the

current problems. In his eyes, in the last quarter of the 20th century, only Leonard Binder (1927-2015), an American political scientist, stepped forward to publish a book titled as *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Institutionalized Ignorance

Mohammed Arkoun discusses the relationship between the Muslims, Jews and Christians.vi He visualizes the three Abrahamic religions as 'Scriptural Religions.' They consult their sacred texts, which require the process of continuous exegesis and application. However, all three of them have the same issue; Modern textual interpretation. With their fundamental message of monotheism, the three Faiths invite towards the service of the Only Creator. Mohammed Arkoun is of the viewpoint that since the one God is same for all the three monotheistic faiths, it undoubtedly guarantees universality. But, during the course of their historical development, the three religions have landed themselves into the state of institutionalization. They have adopted only their own social and structural forms. These forms have consequently been considered as fixed and unalterable. They have developed their own theology, principles, beliefs and religious laws with the objective to fix their own religious structure and safeguard their own zone against the influence of others. They have declared their own appeal and verity to be exclusive. Mohammed Arkoun blames

the traditional jurists and theologians for the hindrance of communal harmony. He says that the most competent theologians have not taken the appropriate measures to make themselves intellectually ready to get involved into a relevant analysis on common theological challenges on a novel scientific basis. They have only favored their own religious interpretations and did not cater to develop consciousness and realization for broader responsibilities.[vii] He states that the theological references have never been used as instrument to cross the conservative boundaries and develop novel religious thinking. He calls such kind of intellectual fragmentation as psychological obstacle.

Lack of Scholarship

The second point mentioned by Mohammed Arkoun which prevents a fruitful inter-religious dialogue is that of scholarship. He states that scholarship in the departments of religion, history, sociology and anthropology, both in the private and public universities, does not provide an evolving aid to push the students towards the process of refreshed thought-process. Religions, in his eyes, are still taught in the traditional ways and there is a huge presence of weak interdisciplinary exchanges. He is of the opinion that Islam is not projected and studied as a case study in the above-mentioned departments. It is rather relegated to departments of Near-Eastern studies or to a Middle Eastern Center in case it is taught in religious departments. Therefore, the development of a

general approach and a vital program for the three revealed Faiths or the religions of the book goes missing. In other words, each religion is taught separately thus closing the lane of interactions. There is the failure of exposition to questions regarding the other two Faiths.

Mohammed Arkoun mentions that during the period of colonization (19th – 20th Centuries), Christianity held the upper hand in knowledge and power. Even today, that is, the period of decolonization, Christianity is still in the front row of being the religion followed by highly developed societies. It has secularized its thoughts and conditions. Arkoun says that the status of religion is highly questionable in societies such as France and even in Italy. When debate is initiated between Christianity and Modernity, the other two Faiths (Judaism and Islam) are excluded in the list, which should not be the case, as per the views of Arkoun, because they also mark their presence everywhere in the European societies. This really depicts, according to him, how the societies that are profoundly focused on the scientific and technological advancements can close the doors as such. They show hostility towards values and cultures, taking them to be foreign, bothersome, old-dated and even not civilized. Mohammed Arkoun is really astonished to witness how these societies, which supposedly promote modernity, freedom and egalitarianism, are showing reluctance to ponder upon their prejudices, rational

illiberalism, xenophobia and cultural restrictions, mixed with a haughty assertion of supremacy, real knowledge and development.

Need for Reconciliation

According to Mohammed Arkoun, if such attitude is rampant amidst the ideological struggles, then it looks completely out of relevance and pointless to take part in debates between religions regarding the traditional faiths, ethics and beliefs. Therefore, he demands the ending of ideological battles and urges the scholars of all Faiths to identify religions as a solidified source for the promotion of prosperity and reconciliation. Mohammed Arkoun perhaps wants to convey the message to the scholars that as long as they are involved in the battle of proving each other's religion to be superior to the other, there will never be an opening way towards peaceful interaction for the promotion of communal harmony which is really the need of the hour. If looked from the Muslim perspective, the Qurān provides the solidest rationale for dialogue:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا

O mankind! Indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another.[viii]

In short, one finds that Mohammed Arkoun is against the ideologization of Islam in Islamic activism. Simultaneously, he does not spare the western scholars and theologians either who hold

such views which lay emphasis on fatalism and the absence of liberty of human being in the religion of Islam.

One of the other causes of hindrance is the teaching of history for nationalist objectives. Arkoun is of the viewpoint point that history must be taught with a critical scrutiny of all the historical forces at work in a huge arena disputed by various nations for their own interest. This approach, according to him, will create a better comprehension of the ideological role of every religion in the genesis of nations and nationalism.

The last point highlighted by Mohammed Arkoun is that in nearly all the religious studies departments or institutions, the syllabi are restricted towards the teaching of a specific religion only. This also becomes a hindrance because according to him, they are confined to their own religion and theological traditions and references. The new space for knowledge towards other faiths comes to a dead-end. Hence, he suggests that all the concerned departments must take the initiative to introduce the study and teaching of other religious communities (the study of comparative religions) so as to enable the young minds also to play an important role in the establishment of a reconciliatory dialogue among other faiths. In other words, maybe he is trying to say that the task of interfaith dialogue is not restricted to the religious experts only. The students must also engage themselves through interactive sessions which deal with inter-religious dialogic developments.

Conclusion

Based on the above-mentioned points, it can be said that Islam is a religion of love and harmony which caters for every segment of the society. It is the responsibility of every individual irrespective of his religion to pay respect to each other and most importantly to reside with collective accord. However, Mohammed Arkoun has depicted one of the main causes of the prevention of communal harmony in the post-modern period which is the ideological battles and struggles between the different faiths. He suggests that the communal harmony can take place through inter-religious dialogue only if the theologians of the different faiths avoid in indulging in the projection of superiority of their religion's textual interpretations.

Interfaith dialogue is an exchange of thoughts which helps to establish peace and justice. Social goals are of utmost importance in the process of solving inter-conflicting dilemmas. As rightly said, global issues require global cooperation. It is the duty of every individual to step into the realm which focuses on greater humanity as is found in the teachings of varying faiths across the globe. As closely linked to social justice, interfaith dialogue is an efficacious attempt to solidify the individual via the exposures of different perspectives. To reconcile with other faiths as found in interfaith dialogue demands preparedness to dismantle oppressive regimes and stand for the marginalized sections of the society. The combat for the termination of hatred between religious

communities includes learning, dialoging and most importantly perseverance. Man needs to come out of his safety bubble and explore other unfamiliar topics. The more we are united, the stronger we become.

Notes and References

i Al-Qurān, 2:208

ii Al-Qurān, 2:195

iii Al-Qurān, 60:8

iv Al-Qurān, 5: 48

v Al-Qurān, 2:205

vi Arkoun, Mohammed., *New Perspectives for a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue, in Muslims in Dialogue: The Evolution of a Dialogue,* L. Swidler, ed, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, New York, 1992, pp. 224-229.

vii Omar, Irfan A. *Islam and Other Religions: Pathways to Dialogue,Essays in honour of Mahmoud Mustafa Ayoub*, Routledge, 2006, pp. 14-15.

viii Al-Qurān, 49:13