

Opinion



Rights of Citizens and the Classification of People into Believer (*Mu'min*) and Non-Believer (*Kafir*)

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As a researcher in theology I am of the view that differences, struggles and conflicts among the people of religion are all due to that categorization of citizens into believers and non-believers. Religion, through categorization of people into believers and non-believers, is accused of dividing people creating enmity, hostility and eventually leading to bloodshed. With such distinctions, it is natural that followers of a religion would deem followers of another religion as non-believers and distance themselves from the other and eventually lead to bloody conflicts.

The only route towards harmony is to abandon such divisions in matter of citizenship and instead opt for the division in terms of “one at peace” (*musalim*) and “one at conflict” (*muharib*).

There is no doubt that crises resulting from the categorization of believers and non-believers are in the interest of those global players who stand to gain from the internal conflicts caused by such ideas. However, the question we need to ask is not who is benefitting from the believer-non-believer schism; rather how the schism is created. In other words, what ideological tool and theological rationale are at play that motivate and fuel such divisions? In my view, *takfirism* is at the heart of this problem. *Takfirism* is a theologically based ideology that legitimizes the branding of the other as a non-believer and consequently, degrading their human status from being an equal to becoming lesser than a believer.

Takfirism is a historical reality that has existed within both theistic and non-theistic faith systems. Due to this, religions are accused of being the cause of classifying people into believers and non-believers. The followers of each faith deem their own as believers and others as non-believers and consequently, through such a distinction, classify people of state or a society as their own and the other. This distinction does not remain confined to the mind only; rather, it becomes very quickly an attitude that impacts relations at a societal level, to a level where only a believer has the right to live whilst the non-believer is left with no rights at all, neither the right to live nor the right of personal ownership or freedom and ceremonial purity. Not having rights is one thing but then it translates into religious degrees where the believers are ordained to kill, enslave, subdue and impose

jizya on the non-believer.

The problem is further accentuated when the right to declare the other as a non-believer becomes the prerogative of each and every one. Who decides what constitutes non-belief? Worse than that is when believers feel obliged to search out the non-believers within their society. Worse still is when the determination of belief and non-belief falls in the hands of the heads of states and politicians. This has resulted in indescribable horrors where for decades, people of faith legitimized killing, plundering and beheading the non-believers even to the extent of butchering women and little children.

Takfirism has claimed countless lives in the history of humankind. Four centuries prior to the common era, Socrates was charged with non-belief by a jury. During the Middle Ages, enlightened thinkers were charged with non-belief and consequently, condemned to be burned at the stake by the church. The interesting thing in all of this was that the people who were condemned claimed to be believers but because understanding of faith conflicted with the interests of the church, they were branded as non-believers.

So, we ask, what is the way forward? How can this ideology be undermined or at the very least, exposed for what it truly is?

In my view, belief and faith are matters that are confined to the hearts. They should not be influential at the level of societal interaction let alone be impactful at the level of citizenship and collective coexistence. Undoubtedly the Quran does contain notions of belief and non-belief; however, these distinctions are only used as properties of the human soul and not in terms of societal categorization or in relation to determining the rights of citizens. I feel the yardstick of distinction ought to be ‘one at peace’ (*musalim*) and ‘one at war’ (*muharib*) instead of believer and non-believer. *Musalim* is one who does not seek to fight, take up arms and does not disrupt social order or threaten the lifestyle of others, whereas a *muharib* seeks to actively fight against us or disrupt our social order. It is this second group that we are commanded to fight by the Quranic ordinances and is termed as defense.

I have derived this view personally from the Quran.

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It is true that the Quran does state, “He it is Who has created you, then from you are those who are non-believers and others are believers and Allah sees all that you do.” (*Taghabun:2*). However, it is clear that this is pointing to the fact that Allah does not compel any soul. In other words, God created you and through freedom of choice, some of you became believers whilst others chose non-belief. God could have made you all into believers but the wisdom of God did not allow it in the case of humans. In any case, such verses do not pertain to societal relations. The following verse in particular talks of faith at a societal level:

“The nomads claim we have brought faith. Say you have not brought faith rather say we have embraced Islam, faith has yet to enter into your hearts. And if you are obedient to Allah and His Messenger then your deeds will not go unrewarded (i.e. your societal rights will be accorded to you), indeed Allah is most forgiving, most merciful.” (*Hujurat:14*).

This verse highlights a few things; first, that faith belongs to the hearts and second, that none save God can determine an individual’s status of faith. Even the Prophet could only inform of what is within the hearts through God, not independently. The other thing we find from the verse is that individuals who were not believers were allowed to be a part of the community and enjoyed full rights. This was true of even the likes of Abu Sufyan whose hypocrisy was well known to the extent that he and his children availed themselves of the equal opportunities and quickly rose to power. Another verse that clarifies this understanding is the following:

“O you who believe when you go forth in the path of Allah then take due care in ascertaining the status of others and do not say to one who bids you peace that you are not a Muslim seeking the gains of worldly life, indeed Allah has many treasures. Such was your state prior to Allah bestowing upon you, thus take due care in ascertaining, indeed Allah is all-knowing and informed of what you do.” (*An’am:94*).

According to this verse, the criterion for coexistence is the notion of *musalim*. Through the mere act of displaying the sentiment of peace, no confrontation and friendship, a person will be considered a part of the society. No one is permitted after that to delve deeper into their inner status of faith and belief. Consider the following verse that most emphatically conveys this understanding:

“O you who believe enter into a state of peace (*silm*) altogether and do not follow the footsteps of the devil, indeed he is an open enemy for you.” (*Baqara:208*).

The verse is addressing the believers and not the non-believers, which implies that certain believers may also not

be in a state of peace. Accordingly, Islam invites all humans, be they believers or non-believers at heart, to harmonious coexistence in a state of peace. The word *musalim* that I have chosen to use is an active participle of the word *silm* as used in the above verse. A person in the state of ‘peace’ (*silm*) is termed as ‘one in a state of peace’ (*musalim*). Therefore, *musalim* is one who, despite his inner beliefs, chooses to peacefully coexist as opposed to a *muharib* who is in a state of war and conflict with the society.

In brief, I am in my seventies at this point of my life. As a student of seventy plus I have spent the major part of my life, if not the whole of my life, in the study of religion. I suggest, in order to solve our social problems, that instead of categorizing people as believers and non-believers (which are the attributes of the soul), we distinguish them in terms of ‘one at peace’ and ‘one at war’, in the sense that we embrace whoever displays peace and friendship as the Qur’an states:

“Fight (only) those who fight you and do not transgress. Indeed, Allah dislikes the transgressors.” (*Baqara:190*)

The logical contrary inversion of this proposition would read “do not fight those who do not fight with you.” Consequently, warfare with a non-*muharib* would constitute aggression and transgression whilst God dislikes the transgressors and aggressors. Those committing acts displeasing God are His enemies. We ought not to displease God, least of all in the name of God.

Conclusion

- 1- Belief and non-belief are the concealed attributes of the souls. Societal statuses and rights are not based on the attributes of the souls; rather, they are based upon what is displayed through actions and attitudes.
- 2- The governing bodies responsible for safeguarding the rights of its citizens in civilized societies should not distinguish among its people in terms of first class and second class citizens based on their status.
- 3- According to the above, within the modern world with the notion of citizenship, there remains no debate for the non-discrimination and equal rights of the minorities. Minorities, whether religious or otherwise, will in addition have full rights to practice their faiths and ceremonies.

Conflict of Interest Disclosures

None.

Ethical Statement

Not applicable.

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