

Selective Islam

By Imran Khan

My Generation grew up at a time when colonial hang up was at its peak. Our older generation had been slaves and had a huge inferiority complex of the British. The school I went to was a similar to all elite schools in Pakistan, despite becoming independent, they were, and still are, producing replicas of public school boys rather than Pakistanis. I read Shakespeare which was fine, but no Allama Iqbal. The Islamic class was not considered to be serious, and when I left the school I was considered amongst the elite of the country because I could speak English and wore western clothes. Despite periodically shouting Pakistan Zindabad at school functions, I considered my own culture backward and Islam an outdated religion. Amongst our group if anyone talked about religion, prayed or kept a beard he was immediately branded a Mullah. Because of the power of the Western Media, all our heroes were western movie or pop stars. When I went to Oxford already burdened with this hang up from my school days, things didn't get any easier. In University, not just Islam, but all religions were considered anachronism. Science had replaced religion and if something couldn't be logically proved it did not exist. All supernatural stuff was confined to the movies. Philosophers like Darwin who with his half baked theory of evolution was supposed to have disproved the creation of man and hence religion. Moreover, the European history had an awful experience with religion. The horrors committed by the Christian clergy in the name of God during the Inquisition had left a powerful impact on the western mind.

To understand why the West is so keen on secularism, one should go to places like Cordoba in Spain and see torture apparatus used during Spanish Inquisition. Also the persecution of scientists as heretics by the clergy and convinced the Europeans that all religions are regressive. However, the biggest factor that drove people like me away from religion was the selective Islam practiced by most of its preachers. In other words, there was a huge difference between what they practiced and what they preached. Also, rather

than explaining the philosophy behind the religion, there was an over emphasis on rituals. I feel that humans are different to animals whereas the later can be drilled, humans need to be intellectually convinced. That is why the Quran constantly appeals to reason. The worst of course, was the exploitation of Islam for political gains by various individuals or groups.

Hence, it was a miracle I did not become an atheist. The only reason why I did not was the powerful religious influence wielded by my mother on me since my childhood. It was not so much out of conviction but love for her that I stayed a Muslim. However, my Islam was selective i.e. I accepted only parts of the religion that suited me. Prayers were restricted to Eid days and occasionally on Fridays, when my father insisted on taking me with him. If there was a God I was not sure about it and certainly felt that he did not interfere with my life. All in all I was smoothly moving to becoming a Pukka Brown Sahib [Totally Anglicized Pakistani]. After all I had the right credentials in terms of the right school, university and above all, acceptability in the English aristocracy, something that our brown sahibs would give their lives for.

So what led me to do a lot a turn your back to on the Brown Sahib culture and instead become a Desi? Well it did not just happen overnight. Firstly, the inferiority complex that my generation had inherited gradually went as I developed into a world class athlete. Secondly, I had the unique position of living between two cultures. I began to see the advantages and the disadvantages of both the societies. In western societies, institutions were strong while they were collapsing in our country. However, there was an area where we were and still are superior, and that is our family life. I used to notice the loneliness of the old-age pensioners at Hove Cricket ground (during my Sussex years). Imagine sending your parents to Old Peoples' Homes! Even the children there never had the sort of love and warmth that we

grew up with here. They completely miss out on the security blanket that a joint family system provides.

However, I began to realize that the biggest loss to the western society and that in trying to free itself from the oppression of the clergy, they had removed both God and religion from their lives. While science can answer a lot of questions, no matter how much it progresses, two questions it will never be able to answer: One, what is the purpose of the existence and two, what happens to us when we die? It is this vacuum that I felt created the materialistic and the hedonistic culture. If this is the only life then one must make hay while the sun shines-and in order to do so one needs money. Such a culture is bound to cause psychological problems in a human being, as there is going to be an imbalance between the body and the soul. Consequently, in the USA, which has shown the greatest materialistic progress and also gives its citizens the greatest human rights, almost 60 per cent of the population consult psychiatrists? Yet, amazingly in modern psychology, there is no study of the human soul. Sweden and Switzerland, who provide the most welfare to their citizens, also have the highest suicide rates; hence, man is not necessarily content with material well being he needs something more.

Since all morality has its roots in religion, once religion was removed, immorality has progressively escalated since the 70's. The direct impact of it is on the family life. In UK, the divorce rate is 60 percent, while it is estimated that there are over 35 per cent single mothers. The crime rate is rising in almost all western societies, but the most disturbing fact is the alarming increase in racism. While science always tries to prove the inequality of man (recent survey showing the American Black to be genetically less intelligent than whites) it is only religion which preaches the equality of man. Between '91 and '97, it was estimated that total immigration into Europe was around 520,000, and there were practically motivated attacks all over, especially in Britain, France and Germany. In Pakistan during the Afghan war, we had over four million refugees, and despite the people being so much poorer here and in the NWFP, they suffered a

considerable loss in their standard of living as a result of the refugees yet, there was no racial tension. No wonder, last year in Britain religious education was reintroduced in their schools.

There was a sequence of events in the 80's that moved me towards God as the Quran says: "There are signs for people of understanding." One of them was cricket. As I was a student of the game, the more I understood the game, the more I began to realize that what I considered to be chance was, in fact, the will of Allah, the pattern which became clearer with time. But it was not until Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses that my understanding of Islam began to develop. People like me who were living in the western world bore the brunt of anti-Islam prejudice that followed the Muslim reaction to the book. We were left with two choices: fight or flight. Since I felt strongly that the attacks on Islam were unfair, I decided to fight. It was then I realized that I was not equipped to do so as my knowledge of Islam was inadequate, Hence I started my research and for me a period of my greatest enlightenment. I read scholars like Ali Shariati, Mohammad Asad, Iqbal, Gai Eaton, plus of course, a study of the Holy Quran.

I will try to explain as concisely as is possible, what "discovering the truth" meant for me. When the believers are addressed in the Quran, it always says, "Those who believe and do good deeds." In other words, a Muslim has dual function, one towards God and the other towards fellow human beings. The greatest impact of believing in God for me, meant that I lost all fear of human beings. The Quran liberates man from man when it says that life and death and respect and humiliation are God's jurisdiction, so we do not have to bow before other human beings. As Iqbal puts it, *Who ek sajda jisay tu giran samajhta hai, hazaar sajdon say deta hai admi ko nijaat*. [The bowing that you despise is such that it will free from bowing down before thousands.]

Moreover, since this is a transitory world where we prepare for the eternal one, I broke out of the self-imposed prisons, such as growing old (such a curse in the western world, as a result of which, plastic surgeons are having a field day),

materialism, ego, what people say and so on. It is important to note that one does not eliminate the earthly desires, simply that instead of being controlled by them, one controls them.

By following the second part of believing in Islam, I have become a better human being. Rather than being self-centered and living for the self, I feel that because the Almighty gave so much to me, in turn I must use that blessing to help the less privileged. By following the fundamentals of Islam rather than becoming a Kalashnikov-wielding fanatic. I have become a tolerant and a giving human being who feels compassion for the under privileged. Instead of attributing success to myself, I know it is because of God's will, hence humility instead of arrogance. Also, instead of the snobbish Brown Sahib attitude towards our masses, I believe in egalitarianism and strongly feel against the injustice done to the weak in our society according to the Quran, "Oppression is worse than killing." In fact only now do I understand the true meaning of Islam, if you submit to the will of Allah, you have inner peace. Through my faith, I have discovered strength within me that I never knew existed and that has released my potential in life. My education program that I intend to announce is far more ambitious than the cancer hospital project. I feel that in Pakistan we have selective Islam. Just believing in God and going through the rituals is not enough one also has to be a good human being. I feel there are certain western countries with far more Islamic traits than us, especially in the way they protect the rights of their citizens, or for that matter their justice system. In fact some of the finest individuals I know live there. What I dislike about them is their double-standards in the way they protect the rights of their citizens and yet consider citizens of other countries as being somehow inferior to them as human being, e.g. dumping toxic waste in the Third World, advertising cigarettes that are not allowed in the west and selling drugs that are banned in the west.

One of the problems facing Pakistan is the polarization of two reactionary groups. On one side is the westernized group that looks upon Islam through western eyes and has inadequate knowledge about the subject. It reacts to any one

trying to impose Islam in the society and wants only a selective part of the religion. On the other extreme is the group that reacts to this Westernized elite and in trying to become a defender of the faith, takes up such intolerant and self-righteous attitudes that are repugnant to the spirit of Islam. What needs to be done is to somehow start a dialogue between the two extremes. In order for this to happen, the group on whom the greatest proportion of our educational resources is spent in this country must study Islam properly. Whether they become practicing Muslims or believe in God is entirely a personal choice; as the Quran tells us that "there is no compulsion in religion". However, they must arm themselves with knowledge as a weapon to fight extremism. By turning up their noses at extremism is not going to solve the problem. The Quran calls Muslims "the middle nation", i.e. not of extremes. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) was told to simply give the message and not worry whether people converted or not, therefore, there is no question in Islam of forcing your opinions on any one else. Moreover, we are told to respect other religions, their places of worship and their prophets. It should be noted that no Muslim missionaries or armies ever went to Malaysia or Indonesia. The people converted to Islam due to the high principles and impeccable character of the Muslim traders. At the moment, the worst advertisement for Islam is the Muslim countries with their selective Islam, especially where the religion is used to deprive people of their rights. In fact, a society that obeys fundamentals of Islam has to be a liberal one. If our westernized class started to study Islam, not only will it be able to help our society fight sectarianism and extremism, but it will also make them realize what a progressive religion Islam is. They will also be able to help the western world by articulating Islamic concepts. Last year, Prince Charles accepted that the western world can learn from Islam during his speech at the Oxford Union. But how can this happen if the group that is in the best position to project Islam gets its attitudes from the west and considers Islam backward? Islam is a universal religion and that is why our Prophet (PBUH) was called a mercy for all mankind.