

Similarly, the concept of orthodoxy and heresy do not exist in Islam, which makes it even more liberating. There is no equivalent to the church in Islam. The mosque only functions as a place of prayers unlike the church which functions with a clergy and pope validating an official truth, deviation from which would then be called heresy. Since there is no church in Islam to promulgate the official truth, there is no orthodoxy, thus there could be no heresy.

There are four separate schools of law (Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, Shafii) from which Sunni Muslims may choose from. The body of Hadith is also multiple. To remain a Muslim one has to only adhere to a tiny core, which is the faith: 'Allah is one and Muhammad is His Prophet.' One would also have to believe in the Qur'an as the revelation from Allah. Apart from that, there are no other elements of Islam disagreeing with, which would disqualify one from being a Muslim. Mughal King Akbar even though initiated a faith called Din-i-ilahi was still not considered a non-Muslim. Even strict Sufi reformer Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (also known as Mujaddid Al-fethani or the renovator of the second millennium) who asserted strongly the Islamic monotheist beliefs did not condemn Akbar.

The Qur'an says, 'there is no compulsion in religion.' A Prophetic Hadith says, 'difference of opinion in my community is a manifestation of divine mercy.' Diversity is celebrated in Islam. Membership of Islam is a matter of "allegiance, not creed." Loyalty to the community is necessary, conversion is not. The Western rendering of Muslim invasion has been iconified by the Muslim riding on a horse with a Qur'an on one hand and sword on the other. Bernard Lewis opens his book 'The Jews of Islam' with a joke that in order for the myth of the horse riding-jihad fighting Muslim to be true, the entire Muslim people had to be left handed because no Muslim would carry the Qur'an on their left hands!

Islam offers endless possibilities for assimilation and that is what lies beneath the Muslim expansion between the seventh and the eleventh century. Islam in South Asia was brought in by the Sufi masters of Perso-Turk region. Their teachings became infused with the local elements and found parallel in Hindu and Buddhist philosophy and devotional practices. It is a historical fact that there would be no Islam in South Asia today, if not for the eclectic Sufism.

It is indeed a pity that belonging to a such a liberating religious past and cultural legacy, we still fall prey to the restrictions put on us by the misleading religious scholars who speak as the spokesmen of politicians who are only interested in getting to the point of power, control, and money by using religion against the uneducated mass. ■

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