

FOCUS: Ethico-Spiritual Universalism of the *Ummah*

The *Ummah* is admittedly diverse and pluralistic in its currents of ideas, schools of thought, even disagreements (*ikhtilaf*) that had existed, and were largely tolerated, among its thought leaders and ulama. Other factors have also been at work in shaping the unitarian features of the *Ummah* as explained below.

In creating their cultural orthopraxies, Muslims of various regions and cultures used the ethical universalism of the Qur'an and *sunnah*. The Qur'anic call to enjoin what is good and praised (*ma'ruf*) and forbid what is morally evil and disliked (*munkar*) is not a culture-specific injunction. It is addressed to all peoples regardless of their religious affiliations. The notion of the middle community (*umamah wasatah* - Qur'an 2:143) supports the same ethical universalism: "And thus We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that you might bear witness [to the truth] before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you." This ethical-spiritual universalism aims to create an open society based on moral values, not on the received traditions of one tribe, city, or nation. The Qur'an also positions itself against the cultural localism of pre-Islamic Arabia—an invariable factor in the rapid spread of Islam outside the Arabic cultural zone. Once established as major cultural units, Muslim societies articulated their ethical universalism into various societal mechanisms, by which the ideal of creating a virtuous human habitat could be realised. The politics of gaining status and social ascendancy in the Islamic context is thus based on acquiring two universal qualities: knowledge (*ilm*) and virtue (*fadhilah* and *ihsan*) - both being implicit in the Qur'anic notion of God-consciousness (*taqwa*) (Q 49:13), which is the ultimate criterion of nobility among people. In a broad sense, this forms the basis of an Islamic meritocracy whereby every member of the society is urged to contribute to creating a moral and just social order.

Muslim philosophers and scientists regarded seeking knowledge and leading a virtuous life as the basis of their interest in other cultures and traditions. As Ibrahim Kalin elaborates in *Crescent and Dove* (2010), the expanding borders of the Islamic world outside and beyond the Arabian Peninsula made Muslims heirs to all the major cultural traditions of the time. The Greco-Roman heritage through the Byzantine Empire and Persian culture through the Sassanids were the first two important traditions that Muslims encountered in less than a century after the Prophet's death. This was followed by Mesopotamian, Indian, black African, Central Asian, Chinese, and Malay-Indonesian civilisations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The rapid establishment of the different cultural zones of the Islamic world went hand in hand with the rise of the numerous schools of law, theology (*kalam*), philosophy, and Sufi orders, generating a remarkable tapestry of cultural diversity within and across the territorial domains of Islam. Despite occasional sectarian conflicts, such as the Inquisition (*mihnah*) incident in the ninth century, traditional Muslim societies succeeded in creating a stable and peaceful habitat in which both Muslim and non-Muslim members of the *Ummah* contributed to cultivating a world civilisation. The notion of cultural and religious coexistence in this milieu was not based merely on the temporary absence of conflict and confrontation between Islamic and non-Islamic elements. Its positive character was nurtured and sustained by Muslims' inclusive attitude toward other cultures and religious traditions.

A plethora of examples in the history of Islam illustrate the cultural ecumenism of Muslim societies, beginning with Muslim philosophers' attitudes toward pre-Islamic traditions of learning. For these early philosophers, scholars, and scientists, the search for truth occurred both within and beyond religious boundaries. Philosophers of the intellectual sciences (*ulum 'aqliyyah*) interested in Greek-Alexandrian thought as well as the scholars of transmitted sciences (*ulum naqliyyah*), specialised in such disciplines as hadith, Qur'an commentary, and jurisprudence, frequently referred to the Prophet's famous exhortations to "seek knowledge even if it be in China" and that "wisdom is a Muslim's lost [treasure]. He takes it wherever he finds it." Even as some later scholars opposed the philosophical sciences, especially their strictly Aristotelian versions, and defined knowledge (*al-ilm*) as religious science, this did not obstruct the steady development of philosophy and science in the Islamic world. Contrary to Ignaz Goldziher's attempt to present the critical views of certain Hanbalite jurists on the ancient sciences (*ulum al-awa'il*)—meaning Greek philosophy and science—as the orthodox Muslim position, anti-intellectualism remained largely confined to traditionalists (*muhaddithun*), who were as much opposed to the lore of pre-Islamic times as they were to *Kalam* and doctrinal Sufism. For the overwhelming majority of the Muslim intelligentsia, the universality of truth was the guiding principle and ground of their quest for knowledge. Ya'qub b. Ishaq al-Kindi (d. 873 CE), called the philosopher of the Arabs thus wrote eloquently:

We owe great thanks to those who have imparted to us even a small measure of truth, let alone those who have taught us more, since they have given us a share in the fruits of their reflection and simplified the complex questions bearing on the nature of reality. If they had not provided us with those premises that pave the way to truth, we would have been unable, despite our assiduous lifelong investigations, to find those true primary principles from which the conclusions of our obscure inquiries have resulted.

Educated classes across the Islamic world shared the belief that truth transcends the contingencies of history as they studied countless schools of thought, both Islamic and pre-Islamic, producing an extensive literature on the history of ideas. The long list of scholars interested in intellectual history before and after Islam included Ibn al-Qifti (d. 1248), al-Mubashshir ibn Fatik al-Sijistani (d. c. 1000), Sa'id b. Ahmad al-Andalusi (d. 1070), Muhammad b. Ishaq Ibn al-Nadim (d. 1047), 'Amr b. Bahr al-Jahiz (d. 869), as well as major writers of the *milal* tradition, such as Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani (d. 1153) and many others. Among these works, the Egyptian al-Mubashshir's *Mukhtar al-hikam wa mahasin al-kilam* was noticed very early by medieval Europeans, translated into Latin and other languages, and became the first book printed by William Caxton in England in the fifteenth century, as *The Dicts and Sayings of the Philosophers*. The continuity of humanity's search for truth had a normative value for most of these writers, in that their quest for knowledge was part of a larger tradition to which every seeker of knowledge belonged.

The concept of perennial philosophy (*al-hikmat al-khalidah*) enjoyed similar prestige due to the same notion of truth and its persistence in history. Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191), the founder of the school of

Illumination (*ishraq*), made a strong case for the constancy of certain philosophical questions and the answers given to them: The world is never bereft of wisdom and the person who possesses it with arguments and self-evident proofs is God's vice-regent on His earth.

Apart from the sublime world of the intellectuals, the Islamic concept of cultural pluralism was extended to virtually all minorities living in the lands of Islam. The experience of *convivencia* among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Andalusia was a result of the Islamic notion of cultural inclusivism. While the Jews of Europe were subject to woeful vilifications and persecutions during the Middle Ages, a major Jewish intellectual tradition had developed under Muslim rule and included such prominent figures of medieval Jewish thought as Saadiah Gaon al-Fayyumi (d. 942), Solomon Ibn Gabirol (d. 1058 or 1070), Judah Halevi (d. 1141), Moses Maimonides (d. 1204) and others. This resulted in a unique interaction between medieval Jewish philosophy on the one hand and Islamic philosophy, *Kalam*, and Sufism on the other.

On the Indian subcontinent, a cultural syncretism developed between Hindu and Muslim cultures. From the translation of Indian astronomical works into Arabic as early as the eighth century to Abu al-Rayhan al-Biruni's (d. 1047) historic study of India, and Amir Khusraw's (d. 1325) formulation of an Islamic identity in the Indian cultural environment, a vast literature came into being, generating a unique mode of symbiosis between the two worlds at social, philosophical, and artistic levels.