

The Universal Brotherhood Under the Law

PERHAPS the greatest implication of Islam's confession that there is no God but God (with its tacit assumption that every man has been endowed by God with natural religion) is its universalism. All men, in its view, are God's vicegerents on earth. All are subjects under moral obligation and all are objects of one another's moral action. Obviously, the greatest threat to this universalism, and hence to Islam, is parochialism or provincialism, the view that some people are to value their distinction from the rest of mankind more than their communion.

That humans do in fact differ from one another is a platitude. There are kinds of differences. Some are natural, like color, shape, tallness and complexion. Others are natural but may be changed at will, such as weight and appearance, language and many customs. Others, like intelligence, vision, smell, taste and memory may be cultivable but less amenable to deliberate change. Undeniable as all these differences may be, the point Islam wishes to make is that they are irrelevant for measuring man's worth, for planning and organizing his societal activity and life. Man's creatureliness before God, the ultimate base uniting him with mankind, is far more important. To hold the opposite is to divide mankind into separate ethnic entities and to invite ethnic egocentrism, or nationalism, the view that limits man's love and care to members of his ethnic group, and allows that the good may be denied

or even taken away from the outsider to the benefit of the insider. Ethnocentrism can also be purely separatist and isolationist, basing itself on negating the relevance of the outsider to anything pertinent to the ethnic group, whether the outsider is dying of hunger and injustice, or overflowing with culture and prosperity.

That charity begins at home is not denied by Islam. Nor is this principle all there is to ethnocentrism. The latter, like all varieties of nationalism, asserts that the ethnic or national group constitutes the limits of goodness, of the obligation to all instituted bodies to bring about well being and prosperity. Indeed, it even asserts the superiority of the ethnic group above all others and tolerates, on the basis of that superiority, taking away from all others to give to its own group. From the Islamic point of view, this is condemnable aberration. Agreeing with the principle of priority to the next of kin, Islam insists on defining the good in terms of the wellbeing of *all* human beings; on planning and organizing societal life and endeavor on *universalistic* basis.

Indeed, in ethnocentrism, Islam recognizes something of a sinister nature. This is not so much the action of ethnocentrism which can nearly always be justified on the basis of “charity begins at home,” but the avowed base on which it rests its case. That its people are “the master race,” “sons of God,” the “chosen of God” while others are “the subject races,” “sons of the devil,” “of other inferior gods,” or simply the creatures of the same God to whom they are not related in the same relationship as “His sons” or “His chosen,” is not only false doctrine. It is sinister because of the deadening effect it has on man’s awareness of his creatureliness before God which he shares with all mankind, because of its stalling effect on man’s will to act on behalf of mankind. It is also sinister on account of the view of God and His creatorship it assumes. Under its view, either there are more than one God with two different creations, one superior the other inferior; or one God created two creations that one may lord it over the other. The former view is polytheistic; the latter is contrary to God’s justice and ultimately, to His transcendence.

Islamic universalism holds all human beings to be entitled by nature to full membership of any human corporate body. For every one is at

once subject and object of the one and same moral law. The unity of God is inseparable from the unity of His will which is the moral law. Under this one law, Islam seeks to rally the whole of mankind on equal terms. It does not have nor tolerates any one to hold a doctrine of election. Nobody, it asserts, has been predestined to any station. Such would contradict the moral nature of man and the divine plan which is the purpose of creation, namely, that man – every man – may fulfill the moral law and achieve felicity. Nor does Islam approve of any “doctrine of the remnant” which affirms that although some or most of the members of an ethnic group may do wrong, go astray or fall off from the state of election, there will always be a remnant that will not, and thus, will justify the ethnic group remaining the elect it claims to be.

This universalism of Islam does not preclude it from differentiating between human beings on the basis of their moral endeavor and achievement. Such would be equally contrary to the moral law which assigns “height” or “moral worth” in direct proportion to men’s moral accomplishment. Indeed, such discrimination is not only well founded and tolerable, it is obligatory. This is what it means to honor the man of knowledge above the ignorant, the wise above the foolish, the virtuous above the vicious, the pious above the atheist or rebel, the just, loving and merciful neighbor above the unjust, hating, resentful, etc. Such discrimination is not only legitimate; it has the positive quality of contributing to general moral felicity by enticing men to excel in the deed. To excel in the deed is the purpose of creation itself. It is all that matters.