

# The Fundamentals of Islam and Islamic Fundamentalism

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If the title reads strangely it is because the fundamentals of a religion give it basic tenets, but fundamentalism indicates narrow orthodoxy and bigotry. The fundamentals of Islam are sound because the Quran itself starts with the invocation “Bismillah Rehman E Rahim”. The best translation would be “in Thy name, Allah, the embodiment of compassion”. In the Fatiha the words are “Al hamd ul Illah, al Rab ul aalemeen”, which translates as “to the greater glory of Allah, Lord of the universe. The Quran does not restrict Allah to Islam only but makes it clear that He is the Lord of all creation. There cannot be a more ecumenical statement in any religion and for a person who accepts the fundamentals of Islam he must also accept the opening words of the Quran. Is this very different from the Sanatan concept of Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam, or that the universe is one big family?

At the time of founding of Islam the Arab world was idolatrous, socially fragmented and subject to a whole raft of social ills. The tribes were at war with each other, moral values had degraded, women were treated as chattel and female infanticide was practiced. Islam reformed Arab society, gave it a religious focus, created a moral code of conduct as also codified laws in the form of the Shariat, banned female infanticide and gave women a status which they have not hitherto enjoyed. Of course there is criticism of how far this reform went and the various loopholes left in giving women complete equality, but nevertheless Islam did recognise that women have a place of honour in society. Islam also put an end to rampant polygamy and through the fourth Sura of the Quran, “Sura al Nisa”, laid down stringent conditions under which more than one marriage could be contracted. By making the marriage relationship a contract Islam gave protection to women by laying down the concept of Mehar or the amount which had to be paid to the woman if the marriage contract was ended by divorce. All reform has to be seen in context and considering the prevailing circumstances Islamic reform gave a new face to society.

The real spirit of Islam resides in the word “Ilm” which means knowledge, Allah first taught his Prophet (PBUH) reading and writing before He revealed the Quran so that a person who claimed that he was illiterate was able to read the words of the Quran as they flashed on the rock face. That is why in Islam there is so much respect for the Ullema, or the learned ones.

Even with sound fundamentals the practices of a religion have to adjust to changing circumstances. For example, the hours of fasting in the birthplace of Islam would be between dawn and dusk in the month of Ramzan and this would not be any great hardship because in these latitudes day and night are roughly equal. But if a Muslim resides in Norway and Ramzan falls in the summer when the day is almost with 22 hours long, would the keeper of the Roza have to fast for that long? Or if Ramzan is in the winter when night is 22 hours long, would the fast last for only two hours? It is to deal with these questions that the Quran itself provides for the holding of periodic religious conclaves called Ijma, during which the Ullema would hold Ijtehad or religious discussions on issues pertaining to the religion and its interpretation. Unfortunately the extreme Sunni sect of the Wahabis has steadfastly opposed Ijtehad, which is why under Wahabi’s influence the fundamentals of Islam have been converted into Islamic fundamentalism. Today it is this form of bigotry which has given Islam an extremely cruel face and set it in opposition to the rest of the world.

As proof of the basically liberal character of Islam one can only refer to the Moorish Kingdom of Spain, in which period every form of science, art and technology flourished. When Isabella and Fernandes re-conquered Spain for Christianity the Moorish Kingdom broke and Islam reverted to

fundamentalism, which prevails even today. In India it is Sufism which tried to combat fundamentalism so that the fundamentals of Islam may once again shine.

One can only appeal to Muslim savants, religious leaders and those who are true believers to come out in the open and restore the fundamentals of Islam so that fundamentalism disappears.

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