

## Seminars, Conferences, Addresses

### Pluralism in Islam

Cairo, Egypt

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Jamāl al Dīn 'Aṭīyah, academic advisor to the IIIT—Cairo office, recently presided over the office's monthly public lecture entitled "Pluralism in Islam." Among the speakers were Jamāl al Dīn 'Aṭīyah, Muḥammad 'Imārah, Muḥammad al Ghazzālī, Muḥammad Kamāl Imām, Sa'īd 'Ashūr, and Muḥammad Salīm al 'Awā.

In his presentation, 'Aṭīyah emphasized that the concept of pluralism is not limited to politics, as it is actually the source, if we compare it to the true unity or oneness which is an attribute of Allah alone. This being the case, everything else is subject to pluralism.

'Aṭīyah, expounding upon the Qur'anic verses which mention pluralism in creation, said that they were many and that they illustrate the Creator's greatness as well as His creation's uniqueness. The signs of plurality in nature turn humanity's attention to the purpose for which plurality was created: the manifestation and uniqueness of the One Creator in the variety and difference of creation. There is also the concept that a pluralistic creation seeks to get the sexes as well as various peoples and tribes to know each other so that they can produce a civilization and progress. Requiring such interaction leads to cooperation, and this difference in abilities—as in the case of the sexes—leads to completion. If we imagine that there is only one type of person, people will not get to know each other, and each one of us will be a copy of the others.

'Aṭīyah explained that the concept of pluralism was clear to people at the international level both before and after Islam. He said that no single nation has ever ruled over or controlled the entire world. In short, pluralism leads to balance and competition among nations, thus preserving the order of creation. As for pluralism within the ummah, he said that the ummah is united and that this has been stated in many texts. The ummah established its unity in the early years of Islam with the founding of the Islamic state in Madinah.

As for political pluralism or political groupings within the Islamic ummah, 'Aṭīyah said that the ummah must encourage those political activities which will allow the development of several parties. These parties may be divided into two types: those which work inside and those which work outside the framework of general Islamic concepts. This idea is not universally accepted, however, for some say that only the first type of party should be allowed.

Thus, they argue that all secular, socialist, nationalist, or other types of parties must be banned. At the same time, those who hold this opinion say that they do not object to there being parties of all types in a Muslim country, but only before the Islamic state is set up. 'Aṭīyah related his opinion that just as we benefit from the freedom given to all political parties in making our ideas known, if our Islamic parties come to power it would be our duty to accord other parties the same freedom of ideas and activities that we enjoyed.

'Aṭīyah concluded his presentation by pointing to the general rules for pluralism in Islam and said that despite its striving for unity, Islam recognizes reality and attempts to organize it by regulating pluralism and differences. In fact, Islam has developed complete sciences for just this purpose, such as the science of disagreement (*ilm al ikhtilāf*), which clarifies the reasons for disagreement (i.e., whether it has to do with principles or with particular instances). Other sciences related to disagreement also appeared, such as the etiquette of disagreement.

In the discussion led by 'Imārah, al Ghazzālī emphasized that our ijtihad-based differences concerning *mu'āmalāt* may lead us to group together and establish parties. This is how England got its Labour and Conservative parties, and America its Democrats and Republicans. These parties have many differences, but these are basically on matters related to what they think is in their country's best interests. Such disagreement is a duty in Islam and has existed since Islam first appeared. However, it should never be allowed to become a cause of animosity.

Al Ghazzālī emphasized that although he agrees with the establishment of parties, he refuses to accept the existence of those parties which seek to destroy the Islamic state. The state has a specific order, and this order does not give any person the right to destroy the state and its foundations. He also said: "I do not oppose the existence among us of even a thousand parties, but only on the condition that their goal is not to divide the ummah.

Imām and 'Āshūr also participated in the discussion. At the end, 'Imārah asserted the necessity of enriching the discussion of pluralism, as it is a pivotal issue which is causing confusion among Muslims and non-Muslims, particularly within the Islamic movement and the various schools of Islamic thought.

According to al 'Awā, pluralism is also related to the activities of those who are committed to the principles of Islam, those who are calling for the ummah's reform based on its creed (*'aqīdah*) and the Shari'ah. In his lecture, he also said that: "In reality, pluralism means allowing for differences. That differences do exist is a fact which no intelligent person can deny. It is the right of those who differ that no one forbid them to differ, or to believe in something different, or to invite others to share their beliefs."

He also emphasized the importance of attributing the principle of pluralism in Islam to three causes:

- a) Ideas about the use of force in Islamic thought and the Islamic order are actually based on the writings of early Muslims (i.e., the *fuqahā'* and others) which describe the realities of their times. Thus, it is neither possible nor realistic to use them as a criterion for making judgments about Islam and government.
- b) Research on Islamic order and thought still revolves around history. Scholars and researchers pick what they want from Islamic history to fit their ideas and then ignore the rest. As a result, historical research only leads to more conflict and confusion.
- c) As far as the contemporary Islamic movement (the "Islamic awakening") is concerned, most of its adherents are content with raising banners and slogans. Unfortunately, this alone is not sufficient for the development of strategies that will put the common people on the road to solving their problems.

On the issue of political pluralism, al 'Awā said that the Shari'ah texts on political matters, an area where charges of totalitarianism and dictatorship are often made, refute these charges. In fact, he stated that Islam is far more flexible than any other religion or set of laws in this regard, for the Qur'an and the Sunnah merely state general principles and then let the people work out the details for themselves.

After cutting through the ambiguity over the saying that political pluralism is one of the fundamental features in the ideational, social, and political order of Islam, al 'Awā dealt with the issue of whether Islam does or does not recognize political pluralism. He said Islam does indeed recognize political pluralism, and stated that: ". . . the history of Islam from the political and social angle is the history of parties and groups."

Al 'Awā closed his lecture by emphasizing that the people's interest at this time can only be realized by allowing political parties so that the differing opinions on the ummah's affairs can be expressed. He also stated that the decisive criteria for a party's success or failure are popular support and free ballot boxes, and that parties are not established to destroy religion, but that by their actions they support religion, which Allah sent to His Prophet in the interest of the people.

'Imārah pointed out the problem of viewing the issue of plurality in a Western framework. He said that Islam regards plurality as being conditional, for it must be within the framework of unity. He added that oneness and

