

Jerusalem - The Open City

The most important prerequisite for a mutual understanding between the Muslim world and the West is a correct appreciation of, and respect for, each others' ethical and social values. Next in importance is a mutual appreciation of what touches most strongly upon our emotions.

For the Muslim of today, such an emotional issue is the question of Palestine and more particularly, the Al-Aqsa with Jerusalem. While none of us denies that this, the third Holiest City of Islam, must always be open to Jews and Christians, we cannot ever reconcile ourselves to the view, so complacently accepted in the West, that Jerusalem is to be the capital of the State of Israel. If we are ever to arrive at a truly fruitful co-operation, between the world of Islam and the West, the latter must become fully aware of what Jerusalem means to us Muslims. Just as Mecca represents the focal point of the Islamic faith and unity, Jerusalem is to us Muslims a symbol of the wider community of all believers in the One God.

The very concept of Jerusalem as an open city is based on the fact of its sacredness to the three monotheistic religions- Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In practical terms, this implies that free access to it and freedom of worship within its precincts must be guaranteed to all and it must be safeguarded not merely as a result of "tolerance" of one religious community towards the others but as an inviolable moral right of each and all of them.

In Islam, this principle is anchored ideologically in the Qur'anic doctrine of the continuity of man's religious experience and of divine revelation. The Qur'an stresses again and again that the faith preached by the Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him] is not a "new" one; its fundamental spiritual premise, foremost among them the recognition of God's oneness and uniqueness, are the same as those preached by all of God's prophets since the dawn of man's consciousness. In other words, whether it was Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus or Muhammad [peace be upon him], all of them postulated man's self-surrender to God

(which, by the way, is the literal meaning of the term "Islam") as the beginning and the end of all true religions. Basing its doctrine on this-to a Muslim-indisputable fact, the Qur'an repeatedly calls upon the Faithful to proclaim:

"We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and in that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed to Moses and Jesus, and that which has been vouchsafed to all the [other] prophets by their Sustainer: we make no distinction between any of them" (Al-Baqarah 2:136).

It follows therefore, that reverence for all the prophets is a basic postulate of Islam. Thus, any offence against the person or the memory of any of the earlier prophets constitutes, from the Islamic point of view, an offence against the will of God as revealed through the Qur'an. To abuse-or even to show lack of respect for any of those earlier Prophets is equivalent to abusing or showing disrespect to the Qur'an itself and to the memory of prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him], through whom this divine writ was revealed to the world.

The Qur'an goes even further than this, and exhorts its followers:

"Do not revile those [beings] whom they invoke instead of God" (6:108).

This categorical prohibition of reviling anything that other people hold sacred – even if it be in clear contravention of the principle of God's oneness and uniqueness – implies that while Muslims are expected to argue against what the Qur'an describes as erroneous beliefs, they are not allowed to abuse the object of those beliefs and thereby hurt the feelings of their erring fellow-men.

Historically, this Islamic morality has always been manifested in recognition of the right of Jews and Christians to worship freely in the holy places in

Jerusalem. Thus, to a Muslim, Jerusalem is and always has been an open city.

The question now arises: How is the "openness" of Jerusalem to be safeguarded? In other words: Who could or, rather, should be the guarantor of its "openness"?

It is obvious that this question could not be divorced from the larger problem of the country in which Jerusalem is situated: That is, the problem of Palestine itself and of its rightful inhabitants.

"Rightfulness" not merely in the abstract or moral sense of the terms but also in the specific connotation arising from millennial history of Palestine as such. At first it might appear – and this has always been stressed by the supporters of the idea of a Zionist state both among the Jews and their sympathisers in the West – that the Jews, who were settled in Palestine for several centuries in the pre-Christians era and were driven from that land by the Romans nearly two thousand years, have a prior – moral as well as historical – claim to it. However, the fallacy of this view becomes apparent as soon as we remember that history is filled with mass displacements of populations, and that, therefore, there can be no valid "claim" of any people to any country after a dispossession lasting for many centuries or as in the case of the Israelites, for nearly two thousand years. If moral validity could be attributed to such a "claim", then the Muslims could claim, with equal validity, the return to them of Spain, over most of which they ruled for more than seven centuries and which they lost entirely only five centuries ago. But no Muslim in his senses would ever raise such a fantastic claim, even in theory, knowing well that the reversion of Spain to the Christian Spaniards is a historical fact, sanctioned by the lapse of centuries, and therefore politically incontestable in spite of the strong emotional links which still tie us to the memory of Muslim Spain.

Moreover, in the case of Palestine the question of "rightful possession" appears in yet another dimension. We must not forget that when the Hebrews gradually conquered Palestine in the last

millennium B.C., they did not come to an empty country. Long before them, many other Semitic and non-Semitic tribes were settled there – the Amorites, the Edomites, the Palestines, the Moabites, the Hittites, and so on. Those tribes continued living there after the conquest of Palestine by the Hebrews, and later, in the days of the kingdom of Israel and Judah. They continued living there after the Romans had driven the Jews away in the first century of the Christian era. They are living there – or in refugee camps nearby – to this day: and they are called "Palestinian Arabs". They are a definite ethnic group, which is by no means identical with the Arabian Peninsula who conquered Palestine from the Byzantines in the seventh century of the Christian era. Those "Arabian" Arabs were always only a small minority among the population: the overwhelming majority of what we describe today as Palestinian "Arabs" are in reality only the Arabianised, original inhabitants of the country. In the course of centuries many of them became Muslims, others remained Christians. The Muslims among them frequently intermarried with their co-religionists from Arabia; and all of them, Muslims and Christians alike, gradually adopted the Arabic language and merged into the orbit of Arab civilisation. In short, the Palestinians, multi-racial inhabitants are the original inhabitants in the sense of having lived there for untold centuries before the appearance of the Hebrews.

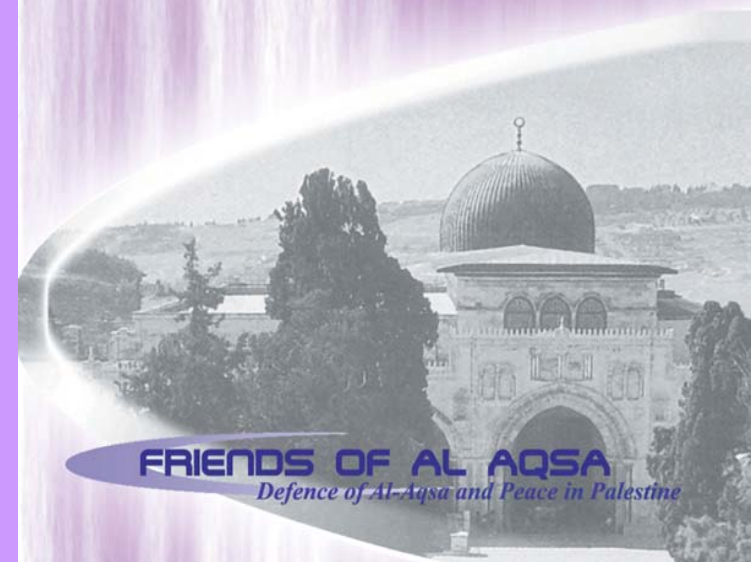
This fact is extremely relevant in the context of the question as to who are the "rightful" inhabitants of Palestine and therefore, historically speaking, the "rightful" guardians of its holy places and, in particular, of Jerusalem. But, this historical aspect touches upon only a fringe of our real problem: the problem of the community morally and spiritually able to safeguard the openness of Jerusalem to the followers of all the three monotheistic religions.

The answer is clear: only the people who recognise all of the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – as being based on a truly divine revelation; the people who revere all the prophets of those three religions; the people who, by virtue of their own religious doctrine, are

prohibited from and therefore utterly averse to reviling anything that is sacred to the two other faiths: only such people can be counted upon to safeguard the three-sided character of Jerusalem. A Jew of moral integrity may be tolerant enough not to abuse the names of Jesus and of Muhammad [peace be upon him]: but he will always regard them as "false prophets" and, therefore, not worthy of reverence. A Christian does certainly revere the memory of all the holy persons mentioned in the Old Testament: but he will not extend the same reverence to the Qur'an and its Prophet. A Muslim, on the other hand, cannot and will not offend against any of the prophets of two other faiths, since all of them are his prophets as well. The prophets of the Old Testament are sacred to him; and although he does not subscribe the doctrine of God's incarnation in the person of Jesus, he sees in him one of the greatest apostles of God: and so he says: "We make no distinction between any of them."

Since there is no political difference among the Muslim and Christian Palestinians, it follows that in a conceivably free Palestine – a state in which Jews, Christians and Muslims could live side by side in full political, religious and cultural equality – the Muslim community should be specifically entrusted with the custody of Jerusalem as a city open to all three communities – and this in pursuance of the Qur'anic call to its followers to defend "monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques, in [all of] which God's name is abundantly extolled" (surah 22:40). The all embracing quality of the Islamic faith predisposes its followers for this sacred task: and it predisposes them in a deeper, more truly historic sense than could be attained by any resolution of the United Nations, or any fictitious claim based on what happened in Palestine two thousand years ago.

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