

No Place in Islam for Triumphalism

SOCIAL media for us the journalists is like a street. On a daily basis, we have to stroll through it. It's a gossip shop, but we have to deal with it, sifting out the fake news and other stuff in the coffee shops of Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter.

The other day I noticed (on a certain WhatsApp group) that people were still having these interminable "interfaith" town hall debates, the kind the late Ahmad Deedat used to have, and emulated by Dr. Zakir Naik – until Singapore, and other countries finally banned him for hate speech.

I am not here to criticise the late Shaykh Deedat, who was undeniably a man of his times for his times, which was the 1970s and early 80s. But I do think we have all moved on from proving others wrong, just to prove that we are right.

My personal position is that if I debate something, I'm right with the possibility of being wrong, and if I'm wrong, it's with the possibility of being right. This is what the great legal mind of Imam Shafi'i taught us. Open your heart and listen.

I loathe and detest religious triumphalism in any form, and whilst I am proud to be Muslim, I don't see the point of ramming my Islam down somebody else's throat. That someone else might be proud to be who they are too. Compulsion is not in the make-up of Islam, the Qur'an expressly stating (in the Chapter of the Heifer) that there should be no compulsion in faith.

My biggest bugbear is that these debates assume there has to be a winner, and the underlying assumption is that the winner takes all. So if Religion A debates better than Religion B, Religion B loses. This is reductionism of the worst kind, the kind of reductionism that has fed into most of our contemporary problems.

The point is that none of us is going to change the other person's mind in front of a jeering, or cheering, mob. Faith, which is primarily a personal thing before it is socialized, suffers massive indignity when it is reduced to this kind of farce. And, if you destroy another person's faith, raw hatred rushes in to fill the vacuum. So how can that ever have any redemptive value?

If I publicly humiliate someone of another faith, are they going to like mine? I doubt it. Also, I don't have the right – constitutionally, morally, or just in terms of good manners – to sit back and think I'm superior because I belong to a certain belief. I do not have the right to sit in judgment of others.

This point of decree – or raw prejudice – was poignantly illustrated in a tradition when a Prophetic Companion slew an unbeliever in battle, who professed faith just as the sword was being raised above his head. After the battle, the Prophet had asked the Companion: why had he killed the man?

When the Companion had replied that the unbeliever had claimed faith only to protect his life, the Prophet had become extremely angry, asking the Companion whether he'd had the superhuman ability to look into his opponent's heart.

It is for all these reasons I fail to understand why people still want to have these silly "debates" where some poor old Christian evangelist is set up against some self-righteous Muslim "evangelist" to see who is best. I really struggle to understand the point of it all.

Most times, these tawdry affairs focus on trying to prove to the Christian that Jesus – the Prophet 'Isa – is a prophet and not the son of God. Of course, as Muslims, we support the view that Jesus, beloved by all, was a prophet.

But that doesn't mean to say we have to play the clown master in a tent. Surely, the better option is to

focus on the human things that bring us together, and not those that have the potential to divide us?

And no, I'm not saying we have to deny our differences. Far from it. We can still discuss issues, yes, but *discussion* is a long throw from the winner takes all of "debate". In Arabic it is called the "adab ul-ikhtilaf", the conduct of differences, where two parties will examine, discuss and review issues without animosity, agree to differ and still part as friends.

My feeling is that we should all dissociate ourselves from these public "debates". Life is too short. There are so many more burning issues to deal with, rather than to play the fiddle on the walls of the citadel.