
ENAYAT ON ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

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Enayat was a professor of Political Science at Tebran University and at Oxford University until his untimely death in 1982. This is a commented extract from H. Enayat, Modern Islamic Political Thought, MacMillan Publisher.

He argues that if Islam comes into conflict with certain postulates of democracy, it is because of its *general* character as a religion. Every and any religion is bound to come into a similar conflict by virtue of being a religion -- that is to say, a system of beliefs based on a minimum of immutable and unquestionable tenets, or held on the strength of received conventions and traditional authority. But an intrinsic concomitant of democracy, whatever its definition, is ceaseless debate and questioning, which unavoidably involves a challenge to many a sacred axiom.

For the definition of democracy Enayat assumes that no form of government, whatever its ideological underpinning or its social and economic configuration, can be entitled to the epithet *democratic*, as the term is generally understood in our times, without being predicated on a number of principles which would be either implicit in the attitudes and social values of its subjects, or explicitly formalised in its laws. The most important of these principles are a recognition of the worth of every human being, irrespective of any of his or her qualities, the acceptance of the necessity of the law, that is a set of definite or rational norms, to regulate all social relationships, the equality of all citizens before the law, regardless of their racial, ethnic and class distinctions, the justifiability of state decisions on the basis of popular consent, and a high degree of tolerance of unconventional and unorthodox opinions.

Islam contains many basic principles which would make it highly responsive towards some of these moral and legal, as distinct from sociological, prerequisites of democracy.

Commenting on the first principle, Enayat asserts that the equality recognised by Islam, contrary to that among the Greeks, for instance, is not subordinated to any prior condition. Equality for the Greeks had meaning only within the range of law. Their isonomy guaranteed equality, in the words of Hannah Arendt, "not because all men were born equal, but, on the contrary, because men by nature were not equal, and needed an artificial institution, the polis, which by virtue of its *nomos* would make them equal". Equality existed only in this specifically political realm, where men met one another as citizens and not as private persons. The difference between this ancient concept of equality and our notion that men are born and created equal and become unequal by virtue of social and political, that is man-made, institutions, can hardly be over-emphasised. The equality of the Greek polis, its isonomy was an attribute of the polis and not of men, who received their equality by virtue of citizenship, not by virtue of birth. It may be argued that the equality envisaged in Islam also depends on a political pre-condition, which is the membership of the *Ummah*, the community of the faithful. But while this pre-condition could be

achieved by any person through the simple act of conversion to Islam, for the Greeks the access to the political realm, which was the precondition of equality, was possible only to those who owned property and slaves -- a privilege which could not certainly be enjoyed by the majority of the people.

The difference between the Islamic and classical Western concepts of equality is reflected partly in the political terminology of the two cultures. The Qur'an recognises Man (*insan*), irrespective of his beliefs and political standing, but has no word for *citizen*. That is why Muslims in modern times have had to invent new terms for the concept: *muwatin* in Arabic, *shahr-vand* in Persian, and *vatandas* in Turkish, are all neologisms. However much the political rights of the individual may be considered to be undefined or ill-defined in the traditional sources of Islamic political thought, the position of Man himself, in his pre-social state, is ennobled in the Qur'an as God's "*vicegerent on the earth*"(2:30). Conversely for the Romans, the Latin word *homo*, the equivalent of Man, "suggested originally somebody who was nothing but a man, a rightless person, therefore and a slave".

Likewise, if by democracy is meant a system of government which is the opposite of dictatorship, Islam can be compatible with democracy because there is no place in it for arbitrary rule by one man or a group of men. The basis of all the decisions and actions of an Islamic state should be, not individual whim and caprice, but the *Shari'ah*, which is a body of regulations drawn from the Qur'an and the Tradition. The Shari'ah is but one of the several manifestations of the divine wisdom, regulating all phenomena in the universe, material or spiritual, natural or social. The use of multiple words in the Qur'an to define this normative character of God's wisdom -- *sunnat-Allah* (the way or tradition of God), *mizan* (scale), *shir'ah* (another term for the shari'ah), *qist* and *adl* (both meaning justice) -- is perhaps one way by which Islam has tried to impress its significance on the minds of the faithful. Again, at a purely abstract level, all this satisfies another pre-requisite of democracy which is the rule of law. Some authors maintain for the same reason that a proper Islamic state should be called, not a theocracy, but a nomocracy. The distinction may not be of much value when one considers that what is sacred and binding in Islam is not law in general, but only the *Law*, which is of divine inspiration.

But what is pertinent to our discussion is that by upholding the shari'ah Islam affirms the necessity of government on the basis of norms and well-defined guidelines, rather than personal preferences. This alone should establish considerable common ground with all the opponents of personal rule, so that the dispute as to whether the norms and principles should be determined by reason or revelation, or both, or what kind of authority is to decide whether a particular policy or attitude is sanctioned by the Shari'ah or not, and how controversies over the correct interpretations of the Qur'an and Tradition can be settled to the satisfaction of all those concerned, may be put off until a later stage. The derivation of the concept of man-made law from the notion of the Shari'ah may seem to any Westerner or Westernised Muslims to be an unsatisfactory way of deducing so vital an element of social engineering. But remaining within the frame of reference of the same critics, one cannot in all fairness find much fault with this method, except in its being rather archaic, because in the history of western political thought also the modern concept of law was a by-product of the development of the medieval debates on the divine wisdom. The idea of law as " a rational ordering of things which concern the common good; promulgated by whoever is charged with care of the community" was extracted by men like St Thomas Aquinas from the perception of the reason of God as the source from which all the levels of the cosmic order emanate.

Concerning the justifiability of state decisions based on popular consent, Enayat reasons that this is met by the principles of *shura* (consultation) and *ijma'* (consensus), which are drawn from both the Qur'an and the Tradition. In enumerating the qualities of a good Muslim, the Qur'an mentions consultation on the same footing as compliance with God's order, saying the prayers and payment of the alms-tax. The Prophet and the first four Rightly-Guided caliphs (*Rashidun*) are known to have accordingly made consultation with, and in some cases deference to, the opinions of their critics, an abiding characteristic of their rule. According to Mawdudi, they took council not from a bunch of "hand-picked men", but only from those who enjoyed the confidence of the masses. These practices were admittedly discontinued after the assassination of Ali, except for brief, exceptional periods of the rule of just and pious rulers. But Muslims were henceforth generally less tolerant of disaffection with their own ranks, than of non-Muslim groups, or the "People of the Book". The Muslims' record, over the whole span of history, on this rare civic virtue in inter-cultural relationships is decidedly superior to that of Westerners. Anti-Semitism, in the form prevalent in European history, was unknown among Muslims, and in any case there were no Islamic equivalents of the mass expulsions of the Jews such as those which took place in Germany, Spain, France, England, Rumania and Poland. The Muslim tolerance of other great religions may not be directly connected with the moral prerequisites of democracy, but as a concrete historical precedent, especially when added to the practices of the Prophet and the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, it provides a persuasive subsidiary argument in favour of Muslim democrats against advocates of intolerance.

Produced by Hoggar Institute 2007