

## REFORMING INCLUSIVITY OF INDIAN MUSLIMS IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETY, THROUGH A 'PEACE-LENS' OFFERED BY MAULANA WAHIDUDDIN KHAN

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### Abstract:

This review paper proposes a theoretical framework for understanding intra-religious divergences within Islam that politically and religiously position a minority group having varied approaches to applying faith in context to gaining inclusion or fighting for exclusive rights in a multi-faith society. It attempts to unravel 'peace' in its facets and facades of interpreting Islamic texts and creating reformed philosophies of practice by renowned Islamist scholars in the modern world, aspiring towards preserving cultural identity alongside gaining seemingly inclusive rights under the pretext of secularism. 'Are exclusive rights to minorities anti-secular and undemocratic in nature?' is a common question posed by marginalised sections of Indian society.

Unless we, as Muslims, redefine our historic meanings attributed via cross-cultural engagements - to peace treaties, to our ancestral past of invasion and conquest, to the proliferation of religious identity and the principle tenets that dictate universal truth and justice in Islam, we will be considered a threat or anti-national element of any macro-society that has made provisions for our continued stay in their homelands. Indian Islam with the regional faiths must contextualize its specific demands for equal treatment of its believers in a secular nation-state, and not in comparison to the rights enjoyed by the people of majority faith in the country.

Maulana Wahiduddin's works entail such contextualization of Islam in India, making room for a secular way of being to arise amongst the Muslim brethren, in a society of plural cultures and modern views that value harmony over discord across cultures. By reconciliation and inner healing of enlivened traumas of the past, both as victims and perpetrators of colonial feuds, Muslims can gain acceptance by embracing India's rich cultural diversity, rather than being subject to polarized exclusions.

**Keywords:** Interfaith dialogue, cross-cultural relations, critical discourse on peace, inclusive rights of the marginalized, secularism for Islam.

**Introduction:**

Islam in the context of India borrows traditions from a rich history of cultural diversity because Muslims have spread pan-India via journeys of faith conversion by conquer and rule, or people embracing the spiritual aspects that the faith is known for. Sufism as a philosophy of life has both cultures of Hinduism and Islam deeply embedded in the ways of 'peer-saahibs' across India. The political claims of the origin of 'Dattatreya' to one religion seem futile, in a secular populace where cultural exchange manifests itself in divergent ways of knowing and experiencing the divine via shared beliefs.

With resistance to cultural and religious expression, from faiths in the majority that want to preserve their traditions in a secular country, Muslims are unable to voice out their need for being integral to their faith in the larger public discourse on the rights of minorities in India.

Islam has culturally evolved to contextualize its beliefs and practices that are essentially borrowed from other dominant religions to sustain itself in foreign territories. Their conservative ways need constant modernised adjustments and are questioned and argued on the relevance of orthodoxy in a globalized era. Contestations are regularly clarified to preserve Islamic ways of life while witnessing and being a part of evolving cultural landscapes. 'Modernity and all its essentials have been activating Muslim intellectuals to respond to these new situations since the 19th century. In return, Muslims addressed these challenges with diverse solutions or alternatives.' (Habib et al., 2021) Out of the many pathways that intra-Muslim groups adopt to find a place in identifying themselves as Muslims in a society with predominantly mixed cultures, the path of peace externalizes as well as polarizes anti-national terrorist activities performed by foreign-threat elements that also associate with Islam.

'According to Maulana, peace is not simply the absence of war. It means the absence of all kinds of negative feelings, such as hatred, anger, and intolerance, because violence is only a manifestation of these negative feelings. Peace, therefore, is the presence of all kinds of good, such as love, compassion, and tolerance.' (Khan, 2010) Indian Muslims are consistently demanded to exemplify such peace and are often denied opportunities for peaceful protests too. Any act of violence by a person with a Muslim name is superimposed on the irresponsibility of a community as a whole - to maintain social peace. Even intra-communal riots serve as examples of intolerance of Muslims toward their brethren who have diverging values or norms.

Thus, it is evident that the larger society keeps a keen eye on the actions and behaviours of minority groups considered foreign, who are forced to comply with social norms more than that followed by people of majority faiths.

**Cultural Context:**

Islam in India represents the cultural heritage of the Middle East in terms of monuments of archaeology, markets of trade, and the merging of linguistics and cuisines of Afghani, Arabian, and Persian roots with Sanskriti, Aryan and Dravidian cultures, for example. With a history of invasion and conquest has come the current lack of liberty that Muslims feel in expressing their views, or having a sense of belonging to what they now call home. Decades and centuries of migration have displaced Muslims from their cultural roots, often leaving them stranded with no choice but to adapt to the ways of their present external landscape of alternate cultures. Migration distress has dissolved an essence of cultural exchange and co-dependencies, both in the recent history of Islamic traders as travellers and in the pre-Islamic narratives of the establishment of Islam as a religion amidst polytheism and cross-cultural markets.

While the prophetic journeys across Abrahamic faiths encapsulate meditative isolation seeking divine clarity, the crux of today's practice of Islam rests in the community's efforts to safeguard the image of oneself as a Muslim and protect the faith from being tarnished, without critically examining extraneous reactions as a reminder to find grounding in one's understanding of the original text. 'Islam is described as a divine message calling for individual commitment and knowledge. Hence, Islam requires a setting of freedom, peace, and stability so that believers can choose its message without restriction. The Quran is regarded as highlighting non-violent patience as the most significant virtue and peace is both a divine quality as well as a requirement for salvation.' (Dahlkvist, 2019) But current-day followers have misconstrued values such as harmonious relations with people of other faiths, in light of the vulnerability they encounter to preserving their own cultural identity in a political landscape of majority faiths reclaiming their sense of religious ideology. The battle between two faiths, only serves the agendas of politics, with no relevance to safeguarding secular values that are imbedded in the constitution of the nation towards equality. Defending one's God and religion has become the new norm creating intolerance among the masses, both within and across cultures.

**Relevance of Review:**

This review paper examines the multiple meanings of and hidden agendas associated with using the term 'peace' in differing contexts to benefit parties, both Muslim and non-muslim - towards arriving at or destabilizing the concept of harmony. 'The term "peace" has innumerable connotations. The oldest understanding of peace is synonymous with equilibrium and stability. Peace is the greatest concern of man; all religions attach much importance to it.'

(Anjum & Wani, 2017) Both, peace - within a community and in its relation to other sects, depends on socio-cultural norms and ties that build over generations of engagement and existence. The sense of inner and outer peace represents the capacity of people belonging to a particular faith to prioritize meaningful bonds with greater humanity. In pursuit of economic security, maintaining social status etc., the vulnerabilities of marginalized groups trigger disharmonious acts that are called out as anti-social by the larger society. To establish peaceful relations, one must inwardly delve into what causes unrest within the self, intrinsic to familial hierarchies, across genders within a household, and within people disagreeing on aspects - yet belonging to the same faith. The outer dimensions are a mere reflection of inner troubles with tolerance/acceptance of other faiths or embracing diversity and overemphasizing uniformity in law and practice. Not reasoning with the current relevance of generations in practising certain beliefs, and blindly complying with patriarchal structures of religious interpretation leads to the crumbling of any religious system, backed by pre-dated texts that aren't evolved to suit the needs of present-day societal dynamics.

This paper attempts to examine potential points where self-created and community-formed barriers that prevent inter-religious interactions - could be dissolved towards a moment of harmonious insight - ensuring peaceful relations in diverse nations. Taking India as a case of reference, the paper engages in the critical discourse of the values Islam holds with people's varying interpretations that govern differing behaviour and attitude, both inside and external to the community in responding to ever-changing social settings. And the collated responses add to the judgments of the community, by the larger society - dictating conclusions of unpeaceful socio-environments about a generic sense of Islam by people of other faith.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR PEACE IN ISLAM**

The theory of peace dates back to invasions across the world, by nations then in power, navigating the restoration of rights of the people of the land. Religious indoctrination across geographies has been common in Abrahamic faiths and other majority cultures. All establish an essence of peace while traversing foreign terrains, journeying away from homelands in the hope to spread 'the word of God'. This has been a seemingly apolitical contribution by ministries of the Church, by clerics of Tabernacles and by leaders of Mosques, to migrate and invite people into their faith. Each group claims to lead people 'astray' into finding the 'truth' established by their religious preachings documented extensively in texts that claim to be unaltered by mankind. Their efforts are often peace-based and don't promise more than a direct connection with their 'divine' sense. Politics has used religion to assure tangible incentives by faith conversions, making the basis of religion hollow and shallow.

In India Islam has survived turmoils of rebellion and unrest, specific to the partition of India post-independence, and the creation of new nation-states such as Bangladesh and Pakistan. Separatist groups in Jammu-Kashmir, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir as well as pro-India supporters have torn the once princely state into three sections of politics. It has been almost impossible to resolve such a complex issue while maintaining social decorum.

In a study that examines 'peace' as extrinsic versus internal as opposed to spiritually liberating notions of 'peace', amongst 'all mentions of peace in the Qur'an, external peace constitutes 68%, internal peace 21% and meta peace 11%. This result emphasizes the importance of peace between nations and states to gain stability in the world.' (Karama, 2020) Keeping international and inter-regional peace as a tenet of Islam, many conflicts regarding exclusion, deprived rights and marginalization can be resolved. If only there existed a healthy modality of dialoguing differences between Muslims and non-muslims.

Even the terms used by Muslim scholars, such as 'non-believers' can 'otherize' a global community of secular thoughts from engaging with the issues within Islam, and the problems that Muslims face in being represented equally in the larger society.

'Wahiduddin Khan's approach to Islam constitutes a necessary corrective to those other theories of Islam which attempt to explain all religious activity in terms of external processes determined by essentially political forces.' (Omar, 2001) He delves deeper into the layers of truth and justice that are integral to being human, which surpasses political bias and guides us via an inner core of righteous response to the world.

The term 'jihad' has been misappropriated to waging wars for a religious cause, and an intricate examination of the usage of such terminology's positions Islam quite differently from the narrative built via observed action of extremists led by radical thought. 'True jihad is founded on the concepts or ideas of peace, tolerance and non-violence.' (Goolam, 2015) It is as much Gandhian as self-preservation and establishing healthy relations with our neighbours.

The varied forms of violent acts are misidentified with a religion that has been misconstrued by the people who build their identity on false pretexts of protecting their faith. Islam dwells in an inner seeking through forgiveness, rather than misdirected anger with vengeance. 'Islam focuses on the spirit and not form.' (Khan, 2011b) Thought and emotion lie in the spiritual realm of intellect and feeling, whereas congruence in responsive action can be achieved only by an inner dialogue with the ancestral traumas that resonate a sense of unpeaceful insecurity. Healing the wounds of the past, both caused to others and unto

ourselves, must be completely void of residual hurt, guilt or shame. Only then can Islam find grounding in a set of core values that dictate humaneness over self-defence.

Central 'to establish(ing) the foundation of dialogue in the spirituality of the sources of Islam, the word Jihad does not stand for violent warfare but for the struggle that every Muslim, indeed every person, should go through to remain obedient to God's Word and to bring about the will of God on Earth.' (Omar, 2008a) If this inward journey is embarked on at madrassas and through religious talks by leaders of faith, a more inclusive and conscious community of Muslims shall emerge.

Muslims need to converse with people of varied faiths and find ways to coexist in a world of diversifying cultures. 'Interfaith dialogical theory profits from a deep understanding of moral psychology and social learning theory. Reconciliation belongs to the Abrahamic legacy, advanced civilizations characterized by relatively harmonious coexistence between Muslims, Christians and Jews' are established via dialoguing with and accepting the "other". 'It is through reconciliation that we regain our humanity.' (Hussain, 2020) The only way to reconcile peaceful relations is by a healthy space for critical discourse on the basis and relevance of a certain set of beliefs, and how the macro-society can create room for cultural expression and continuity in the value systems dear to one's faith.

### **Findings and Suggestions:**

This review builds upon a theoretical framework to engage with reconciliation as a strategy towards peace treaties that ensure secular and inclusive rights for Indian Muslims. The study emphasises the traditional understanding of and re-examining values associated with peace. The research argues for interfaith dialogue across plural faiths and multi-cultures towards restoring a healthy spirit and form of Muslim identity. Finally, it suggests that discourses on the cultural evolution of migrant religions must inform the relevance of continued traditional practices to the present needs of a community, in context to what is laid out in the constitution of the home country.

### **Conclusive Standpoints:**

With this inspiring quote by Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, the study anchors and invites Muslims to seek an internal journeying to one's core where fundamental values create space for peaceful relations with the outer world. The study suggests an inner healing that has the potential to untangle Islam from a prehistoric past of vulnerabilities in being established as a

religion. It urges readers to comprehend subconscious traumas that are continued via narratives that seed extremism in subsets of Islam.

'The man, Islam aims to build is one in whom a two-fold activity is set in motion at the same time, one form of activity being internal and the other external. The result of this twin activity is that the spiritual side of his nature develops in parallel with his intellectual advancement, both processes going on unhampered. On the one hand, there is a strengthening of the moral fibre by which his personality assumes its permanent shape, and on the other, there is a broadening of his intellectual horizons.' (Khan, 1984)

Reinterpreting meanings of peace and appropriating Islam's identity with its core values contextual to mixed-faith interactions can restore inclusivity for Muslims in a pluralistic society such as India, whose historical narrative has been ridden with a colonial era of 'divide and rule'.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this paper are solely the author's comprehension of relationships amongst religions, experienced with the self as an Indian Muslim engaging with macro-society. The author intends no harm to any religious sentiments or beliefs and trusts that the inner and outer conflict within each human is resolved via critically examining one's sense of cultural and religious identity in the context of one's own country providing citizenship, amenities, rights and other provisions entailing the safety and prosperity of minority groups.

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