

Islam, Peace and Religious Pluralism: An Analysis of the Works of Asghar Ali Engineer

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Abstract

At a time when religion has assumed a particular potency in shaping and defining inter-community and inter-state relations the world over, the need for evolving alternate understandings of religion to creatively deal with the fact of religious pluralism has emerged as a pressing necessity. This is an issue for concerned and socially engaged believers in all religious traditions. This paper deals with how, contrary to widely-head stereotypical notions, Islam can be interpreted to promote inter-faith dialogue and amity between followers of different faiths. This discussion centers on the work of a noted Indian Muslim scholar-activist, Asghar 'Ali Engineer, seeing how he deals with the primary sources of Islam in order to develop an Islamic theology of pluralism and social justice. Given the fact that in many parts of the world today conflicts involve Muslims and people of other faiths, Engineer's creative approach to the Qur'an offers us an alternate way of imagining Islam and Islamic rules for relations between Muslims and others. In turn, this way of approaching Islam, fashioning Islam as an instrument of peace instead of a tool for war and bloodshed, can provide insights and inspiration to work towards the peaceful resolution of many conflicts in which Muslims are involved.

Keywords: Religious; Pluralism; Peace; Islam.

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1. Introduction

Asghar 'Ali Engineer was born in 1939 at the town of Salumbar, in the Udaipur district of the western Indian state of Rajasthan. His father, Shaikh Qurban Hussain, was the priest of the town's Shi'a Isma'ili Bohra community. From his father he learnt the Arabic language, as well as Qur'anic commentary (*tafsir*), Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the sayings of or about the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) as contained in the books of the Bohras. Alongside this, he was also provided a secular, modern education. He earned a degree in engineering from the University of Indore and then worked for some twenty years as a civil engineer with the Bombay (now Mumbai) Municipal Corporation.

In 1972, Engineer quit his job and immersed himself in the struggle against the Bohra head-priest, Sayyedna Burhanuddin, protesting against what the reformers saw as his exploitative practices. Along with other reformers, Engineer was instrumental in setting up the Central Board of the Dawoodi Bohra Community, to carry on the reform campaign. The reformers did not seek to challenge the Bohra religion as such. Rather, they defined themselves as believing Bohras, and argued that their sole concern was that the Sayyedna and his family should strictly abide by the principles of the Bohra faith and end their tyrannous control over the community, which they branded as 'un-Islamic'. In the course of the struggle against the Sayyedna, Engineer developed his own understanding of Islam as a means and a resource for social revolution. One can discern in his thought and writings a multiplicity of influences: Mu'tazilite and Isma'ili rationalism, Marxism, western liberalism, Gandhism, and Christian liberation theology, and the impact of the Iranian 'Ali Shari'ati as well as Indian Muslim modernists such as Sayyed Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal.¹

His active involvement in the Bohra reformist movement led Engineer to establish contact with other progressive groups working for social transformation in India. Gradually, the focus of his activity broadened from activism within his own community to embrace several other causes. Of particular concern to him was the growing conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India. Engineer wrote extensively on Hindu-Muslim relations, insisting that new understandings of religion were needed to help promote better relations between the two communities. In 1980, in order to promote new, more progressive understandings of Islam, he set up the Institute of Islamic Studies in Mumbai, through which he

1. See: F.Engineer, 2000; Engineer, 1991.

established links with progressive Muslims in other parts of India and elsewhere. In 1993 he established the Centre for the Study of Secularism and Society, also in Mumbai, in order to investigate incidents of Hindu-Muslim conflict, to promote new interpretations of both Hinduism and Islam as a means to promote communal harmony, and to network with activists and the media.

2. Engineer's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an and the Islamic Tradition

The Qur'an forms the basic source for Engineer's hermeneutical project. As Engineer sees it, the Qur'an, like any other text, can be interpreted in diverse ways. It is not a closed book, with only one set of clearly specified meanings. Being rich in symbolism, it can be interpreted in different ways by different people in order to promote different political projects. New ways of understanding the text also emerge as a result of, and a response to, the development of human knowledge in other spheres and the maturation of human experience.

While the Qur'an itself is eternal and God-given, the interpretation (*tafsir*) of the Qur'an by ordinary human beings is always, he insists, a human product. Like all other human products, he argues, interpretations of the Qur'an carry the imprint of their times. They may, to varying degrees, reflect the truths of the Qur'an but cannot claim to represent the divine truth in its entirety. Since the interpreters of the Qur'an, like other human beings, are members of certain social groups, located in specific spatio-temporal and social contexts, their understandings of the Qur'an are naturally coloured by their own location. Hence, their own interpretations of the Qur'an cannot be said to be free from human biases. Indeed, to claim that one can gain access to the total truth of the Qur'an, and to insist that the historical *shari'ah*, which is a product of human reflection on the divine commandments, represents the Will of God, has no justification in Engineer's understanding of Islam. It is, he obliquely suggests, tantamount to commit the biggest sin in Islam, that of claiming infallibility, which is akin to *shirk* or the crime of associating partners with God.

Engineer contends, Muslims can only hope to gain further, but always limited, understanding of the Divine Will, by engaging in constant reflection on the Qur'an in the light of new and unfolding circumstances. The hermeneutical key to this contextual understanding of the Qur'an is to be found in the distinction that Engineer makes between the 'spirit' and the 'letter' of the Qur'an, which he sometimes also refers to respectively as the 'normative' and the 'contextual' aspects of the divine revelation.

The foundation of the Qur'an is provided by a set of values that infuses the entire revelation. Four key values are said to form the basis of the entire divine document: justice (*'adl*), benevolence (*ihsan*), reason (*'aql*) and wisdom (*hikmah*). The basic intention of the Qur'an, Engineer argues, is to bring human beings into close communion with God, while at the same time inspiring them to actively work for a society that is based on these cardinal values. Engineer notes that while the Qur'an is replete with general exhortations to the believers to submit to God and to actively struggle for a just and peaceful social order, it contains only a few detailed legal statements as to exactly how the cardinal divine values should be actually implemented. This, he says, is hardly surprising, for the Qur'an is not meant to be a book of detailed law. Rather, it is, above all, a call for a just social order based on new value system, and the institutional forms that express these values can, and indeed must, radically differ across space and time.¹

Since it is the divine values that are the corner stone of the Qur'an, they must infuse any contemporary interpretation of the divine revelation if it is to be truthful to the Will of God. Engineer contends that any truthful attempt to understand seeks God's Will for humanity as expressed in the Qur'an must be firmly grounded in this set of values. This has particular relevance in interpreting the clear legal commandments of the Qur'an on issues such as women's rights or relations with non-Muslims.

In Engineer's scheme of Qur'anic hermeneutics, a constant dynamic and dialectical relation is sought to be established between the particular social context, on the one hand, and the Qur'an, as the fundamental source of Islam, on the other. Praxis, active involvement in changing society for the better, must be related to new understandings of the Qur'an. Likewise, new visions of Islam must be developed in order to promote or legitimise practical action in working for social transformation inspired by the fundamental ethical impulse or foundational values of the Qur'an. This way of reading the Qur'an uncovers new meanings of the divine revelation in the process of actively intervening in the world in order to transform it. In turn, this inspires Muslims to work in new directions and in new ways to change society in accordance with the Divine Will. The ever evolving understandings of Islam that emerge from this process of praxis-reflection-praxis are said to be a sign of the Qur'an's eternal validity, in terms of the values on which the entire scripture is based. In this dynamic,

1. See: Engineer, 1999.

the constantly evolving understandings of Islam are to be rooted in reason, for the 'word of God' cannot contradict the 'work of God' as expressed in the laws of science. Hence, as human knowledge expands, the understandings of Islam must also be accordingly transformed. The distinction that Engineer makes between what he describes as the normative core and the context-specific portions of the fundamental sources of Islam enables him to produce a vision of Islam that he sees as dynamic, open and eternally relevant.¹

2.1. Towards a Contextual Islamic Theology for India

As Engineer sees it, the Qur'an is open to a variety of interpretations, and can be used to justify a diverse range of political projects. His primary concern is to develop a theology of Islam that is rooted in and relevant to the particular context in which the Muslims of India find themselves placed. The particular situation in which the Muslims of India find themselves today, which forms the basis on which Engineer's formulates his own contextual theology, is characterised by multiple oppressions, including of caste, class, gender and religion. Traditional understandings of religion are, as Engineer sees it, sometimes part of the problem rather than the solution, for these, he argues, have been sometimes formulated by dominant groups to justify their own interests, to preserve the status quo and to justify these multiple oppressions. These understandings of religion have also been employed to promote conflict between people of different faiths. For Engineer, a truly Islamic theology for contemporary India is one that takes the context of multiple oppressions and the existence of religious plurality seriously, and is at the same time based on what he sees as the cardinal values of the Qur'an.

As Engineer views it, since the foundational values of the Qur'an consist of justice, benevolence, equality and peace, a meaningful contextual theology for India, faithful to the Qur'an and God's Will, must be constructed in such a manner as to promote social justice in terms of relations between castes, classes and the genders, and peaceful relations between Muslims and people of other faiths.²

3. Islam and Peaceful Inter-Faith Relations

Promoting better relations between Muslims and people of other faiths is one of Engineer's principal concerns. He has been involved in several inter-faith

1. See: Engineer, 2001: 179-90.

2. See, Engineer's, 'Religion, Ideology and Liberation Theology: An Islamic Point of View': 136-48; 'Islam and the Challenge of Poverty': 149—72, in Engineer, 1988.

dialogue initiatives, both in India as well as abroad, and has written extensively on the subject. Engineer argues that a faithful understanding of Islam in today's context must take the pluralist predicament seriously. To be religious today is, in fact, to be inter-religious. To ignore the question of religious pluralism and the need for harmonious relations between people of different faiths, as several traditional 'ulama seem to have, he warns, is to consign oneself to complete irrelevance.

In fashioning a theology of religious pluralism, Engineer addresses the central question of the nature of truth. Is truth one or many? Is truth absolute or relative? Are there different degrees or levels of truth? Can one religion claim to possess the whole truth? Are all religions other than Islam without any truth? Can non-Muslims be saved by following their own religions if Islam is really the one true religion? In answering these questions Engineer examines the Qur'anic perspective on humankind and the universality of revelation. He writes that all human beings, irrespective of religion, are creatures of God, made from one set of primal parents, and in that sense, equal in His eyes. All human beings are 'of inestimable divine value' and hence must be not just equally respected, but also equally loved. He argues that all religions come from the same source, the one God, and reflect the Truth in different ways.¹

As the Qur'an insists, God has sent prophets to all nations, and all of them have taught the same basic religion or *din*, *al-Islam* or 'submission' to God. Further, the Qur'an also clearly lays down that a Muslim must believe in all the prophets of God, including those whom it does not mention by name, and hold them in equal respect. The various prophets taught the same religion, but some prophets were assigned with teaching a new law (*shar'iah*) which was meant to suit the particular conditions of the people to whom they were sent. It is, however, the *din* that is the fundamental message of God as expressed through the prophets. While the *din* remains the same, the *shari'ah* can differ, and hence the former is primary.²

All historical religions, therefore, are emanations from this primal *din* of God, and hence they are, at root, in their original forms, the same. They are seen to share a common set of value orientations, such as truth, non-violence, love, justice, equity, tolerance and compassion. He recognizes that in terms of doctrine and ritual practice they do differ from each other, as also in matters of prayer and ritual. These, however, are to be treated as secondary. For God,

1. See: Engineer, 1998: 3.

2. See: Engineer, 2000: 3.

Engineer argues, what is most important is the ethical orientation and action of a person and not the content of his belief or the ritual forms in which that belief is expressed. Engineer seems to suggest, therefore, that ultimate salvation hinges on good deeds and not simply on 'correct' belief or ritual action. While recognising that rituals 'have a significance of their own', as 'psychological supports', he contends that they are 'not central to a religion'. Thus, a 'truly religious person' is said to be one who, inspired by these values, does good deeds.¹

While Engineer's argument of the universality of revelation and the unity of the *din* is strictly Qur'anic, he does not pay sufficient attention to the Qur'anic account of how and why the different historical religions differ from each other, despite their common origins in the primal *din*. He does not seriously engage with the Qur'anic understanding of *tahrif* or the 'corruption' by people of the scriptures given to them by prophets before the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w). Engineer's answer is that the differences between the different historical religions, which he sees as different forms of the same *din*, are not to be denied, for that would be to ignore the very real differences between them as well as the uniqueness of each religion. However, he argues, it is for God alone to judge where the religions differ and to decide which one is true or possesses a greater degree of truth. This would come about only on Judgment Day. Till then, the best course for human beings is to focus on what the different religions share in common rather than on what divides them from each other, and to work, in accordance with the Will of God, for social justice and peace for all. Meanwhile, human beings should shelve all religious and doctrinal disputes, desist from trying to prove the superiority of one religion over the others, and, instead, 'vie with each other in good deeds'.

This, then, calls for people of various faiths to dialogue with each other on the basis of what they have in common. Participants in inter-religious dialogue, Engineer insists, must abide by certain basic rules. They must not simply tolerate other faiths but, in fact, respect their valid and good teachings. Dialogue must be impelled by a desire to move towards discovering the Truth, which can be approached by being open to multiple expressions of truth that one comes to face with through dialogue. Finally, even if the dialogue partners fail to agree on every point, they should not allow the encounter to take the form of polemics.

For Engineer peaceful dialogue between Muslims and people of other faiths

1. See: Engineer, 2001: 8.

is seen as integral to the Qur'anic message. Islam is seen as positively exhorting Muslims to dialogue with people of other faiths. Thus, dialogue is actually a divinely ordained duty for Muslims, and not something that they can treat as an afterthought. The basic framework of the dialogue project is seen as having been laid down in the Qur'an itself. Thus, the Qur'an insists that Muslims must recognize that God is 'The Sustainer of the Worlds' (*rabb ul-'alamin*) and not just of Muslims alone. The Qur'an accepts religious pluralism as a sign of God's Will. Indeed, it is, Engineer suggests, a part of God's plan for the world, for if He had so willed he could have made all humans to follow just one religion.

Thus, the Qur'an says that although God could have made all people one, He has, in His wisdom, 'appointed a law and a way' for different communities, so that he can 'try them', despite their differences. This is said to suggest that the different historical religions, in all their diversity, have been created by God Himself. To attempt to destroy this plurality by insisting on the truth of one religion alone, even if that religion be Islam, is thus said to be 'against His will'. The Qur'an adds, immediately after, that people, following different laws and ways, must vie with each other 'in virtuous deeds'. This implies, Engineer argues, that the Qur'an 'clearly discourages believers to [sic.] enter into theological polemics', and, instead, encourages them to 'excel each other in good deeds'. In other words, what pleases God is not so much 'correct' belief as 'correct' ethical action. Furthermore, the Qur'an insists that Muslims preach their message through 'gentle words' and in a manner that would not provoke hostility or conflict.¹

Then again, the Qur'an reminds Muslims that there can be no compulsion in religion, for it recognizes the inherent right of all people to believe in what they want. Dialogue can take various forms and be engaged in for several purposes. The first is what Engineer calls the 'dialogue of life'. This is a form of dialogue that is not formally articulated in theological statements. People of different religions interact with each other informally, as friends or colleagues in the work place, and attend each other's religious festivals. The second, more structured, form of dialogue is the exchange of views between theologians, in the course of which each comes to learn about the religious beliefs of the other. In the course of such dialogue one deepens and enriches one's own faith, for in the process one gains insights from other faiths that one's religion lacks or

1. See: Engineer, 1988: 6.

does not seem to stress adequately. No religion, Engineer argues, is radically sufficient by itself. Rather, through dialogue one realizes how, in many respects, religions can be 'complimentary' to each other. Thus, he writes that while Islam stresses justice, Buddhism stresses non-violence and Christianity love. By dialoguing with Buddhists and Christians, then, Muslims can gain new insights that can be used to evolve new interpretations and understanding of their own religion. In this sense, all religions are invited to a form of 'conversion' through dialogue. This does not, however, mean that in the process of theological dialogue all differences between the religions would be negated or denied. Rather, partners in the dialogue process should, at first, try to reconcile their differences, and Engineer offers the example of numerous Sufi and Bhakti saints of India who attempted to do this. If, despite this, certain doctrines or beliefs of one religion cannot be accepted by the followers of another, the dialogue partners must learn to live together in amity and respect their differences.

The third, and more promising, form of dialogue is when social activists, along with socially-engaged theologians, come together, each inspired by his or her own religion, to work for common social projects and causes, such as social justice, peace, love and harmony between people of different faith traditions. Islam, and indeed, other faiths, is seen as having a divine mandate to radically transform social structures, to end poverty and the multiple oppressions of caste, class, ethnicity and gender. Hence, a major goal of the dialogue project is seen as bringing Muslims together with people of goodwill from other faiths to jointly struggle for a new, socialist society where the fundamental social contradictions are resolved. Engineer thus seeks to develop an Islamic theology of liberation and pluralism which he regards as having been the essential mission of all the prophets of God, but which Muslims, like others, have long forgotten, having reduced religion to a set of sterile doctrines, dogmas and rituals. The role of true religion, Engineer stresses, is not simply to interpret the world, but also to transform it, to create a new society based on the cardinal values that he sees all religions sharing in common: justice, equality, benevolence, compassion and freedom.

Since Engineer's principal concern is to develop a relevant theology rooted in the Indian context, dialogue between Muslims and Hindus is seen as particularly urgent. New understandings of Islam, and, for that matter, Hinduism, are regarded as essential to promote better relations between Hindus and Muslims and to counter groups among both communities which seek to promote conflict

between the two based on their own distorted understandings of their religion. In formulating a relevant Islamic theology of religious pluralism for India, Engineer is forced to come to terms with traditional Muslim understandings of Hinduism as a religion and of Hindus as a faith community.

These understandings, he argues, are rooted in a 'feudal Islam' that developed at a time when political power was in the hands of Muslims in India, and when Hindus were seen by many 'ulama as political, and hence, religious enemies of Islam and Muslims. Hence, he claims, these traditional understandings do not actually reflect the 'true' Qur'anic position and must be adequately revised. Since God has sent prophets to teach his *din* to all peoples, He must, Engineer argues, have sent prophets to the people of India as well. Indeed, as he points out, several Muslim scholars and Sufis have argued that Rama and Krishna, worshipped as gods by the Hindus, might actually have been prophets of God. Consequently, Muslims must hold these figures in high regard. Further, even if these figures were not prophets of God, the Qur'an insists that Muslims must not revile or abuse the objects of worship or reverence of people of other faiths. If Muslims were thus to abide by the Qur'an in this matter, Engineer suggests, they would be able to clear many misunderstandings that Hindus have of Islam, and thereby help promote inter-communal amity.¹

For many Muslims, the ambiguous status of Hindus in Islamic law constitutes a major hurdle in promoting dialogue with them. Unlike the Christians and the Jews, they find no mention in the Qur'an, and have often been seen as idolators, with whom dialogue is ruled out. While noting that many 'ulama have described the Hindus as *kafirs* and *mushriks* (polytheists), Engineer argues that this is misleading, for many Hindus, he contends, are actually monotheists and that their holy book, the Vedas, might actually have been a divine revelation. Hence, they must, he insists, be treated as 'People of the Book' (*ahl-i kitab*) instead, sharing a similar status to the Christians and Jews. Recognising the inability of traditional *fiqh* to provide positive images of the Hindus, Engineer suggests that Muslims should seek inspiration and guidance from the teachings of certain Indian Sufis, as well as Hindu saints, who were concerned to explore the similarities, rather than focus on the differences, between Hinduism and Islam. He argues that in today's India the 'openness' of Sufism and Bhakti Hindu devotion are essential resources in helping to promote inter-faith harmony.²

1. See: Engineer, 1995: 4.

2. See: Engineer, *Resolving the Hindu—Muslim Problem: An Approach*, <http://www.prerana.com/pviews/viewpoint/resolving—hindu>.

For Engineer, inter-faith dialogue is an urgent necessity, not simply because the Qur'an mandates it, but also in order to actively promote peace in a society that continues to witness unrelenting violence between people of different faiths. As Engineer sees it, Islam encourages its followers to actively struggle to promote peaceful relations with people of other faiths. One of Engineer's major concerns, therefore, has been to promote an Islamic theology of peace. He argues that peace is a central tenet of Islam, and points out that the one of the meanings of the word 'Islam' is 'peace'. Peaceful relations, he says, are seen as the norm in Islam, and Muslims must work to establish peace in society and in the relations between different religious communities.¹

In addressing the question of peace in Islam he pays particular attention to the notion of jihad. Grappling with verses in the Qur'an that refer to jihad, he writes that the term refers to any form of struggle for the sake of God, in particular for upholding what he sees are the cardinal values of the Qur'an: peace, justice and equality. To struggle through peaceful means for establishing social justice and social equality is thus one of the highest forms of jihad. He makes a crucial distinction between jihad as any form of struggle to implement God's Will, on the one hand, and *qital*, or the use of physical force, including violence. It is true that the Qur'an does not advocate complete non-violence, he says, but it considers it as a weapon to be used only in self-defence and not for aggression. Further, it is to be resorted to only when all peaceful means for defending oneself have been tried and have failed.²

Even here, strict conditions are to be observed, and innocent non-Muslims cannot, under any circumstances, be attacked. Engineer concedes, however, that the roots of conflict in many cases have little to do with religion per se or with differences of religion. In large parts of the Muslim world, he writes, economic inequalities and political authoritarianism, combined with various economic, political and cultural policies of hegemonic Western powers, have bred a situation conducive to violence. To preach peace and harmony in such a situation can only help promote the oppressive status quo that would, in turn, engender even more violence. Efforts for establishing peace, Engineer argues, must go hand in hand with the quest for social justice if peace is to be indeed long lasting and firmly rooted.³

1. See: Engineer, 2001: 7.

2. See: Engineer, 2001: 8.

3. See: Engineer, *On Religious and Inter-Cultural Dialogue*, <http://ecumenc.org/IIS/csss01.htm>.

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