

Role of Religion in overcoming Stigma and Discrimination

Caught between two eternities the vanished past and the unknown future, human beings never cease to seek their bearings and sense of direction. We inherit our legacy of the sciences and the arts-the works of the great discoverers and creators, but we all remain seekers. Man is the asking animal.

All the knowledge in our universities and all the treasures in our museums do not satisfy us.

Human culture has witnessed at least three grand historical epochs of seeking - each with a dominant spirit, enduring spokesmen and distinctive problems. We have gone from the “Why?” to the “How?”, from the search for purpose to the search for causes.

First was the heroic way of prophets and philosophers seeking answers-salvation or truth-from the God above or the reason within each of us.

Then came an age of communal seeking, pursuing civilization in the liberal spirit.

And most recently there was the age of the social sciences, in which man was ruled by the forces of history. We can draw on all these ways of seeking in our personal search for purpose, to find meaning in the seeking.

During these three epochs of seeking, the concept of facts changed, and as John Maynard Keynes says : “When the facts change, I change my mind”.

Social behavior has evolved and changed, so must our minds. Here it is important to underline the following two points :

- a- There is a difference between religion and tradition. Religion is not tradition. Some believers mix up between the two, and by doing this , they misinterpret and mis-present religion.
- b- There is also a difference between religion and culture. Religion is a solid and permanent dogma. Culture is open and changeable code of values. Religion is sacred, culture is human.

In Islam Religious literature tells us that at the beginning, man enjoyed a life in Heaven –Paradise- characterized by eternal bliss. After having fallen into temptation, committing sin and the showing penitence, man has led a life in this world based on principles that can be derived from the Holy Quran as follows:

Man is not held guilty for an offence he has not done and, consequently, he is not born guilty but endowed with an innate character i.e. designed to search for God and belief in Him.

“Every soul draws the meed of its acts on none but itself : no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another” (Sura 6, Verse 164).

Man is God’s vicegerent on this Earth and God’s vicegerency is a task that reflects the loftiest divine honor bestowed on man: “Behold, thy Lord said to the angels : I will create a vicegerent on earth. They said : Wilt thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed

blood? – whilst we do celebrate thy praises and glorify thy holy (name)? He said I know what ye know not”. (Sura 2, Verse 30).

God has created man “in the best moulds” (Sura 96, Verse 4) “and has made his shape in the best form” (Sura 64, Verse 3), starting from the living cell with its contents of genes and functions up to the thinking mind and whatever it can reach in terms of knowledge and creative and deductive. That is, all human beings are honored by God, regardless of their color, ethnicity or religion.

The honor conferred by God on man in Islam is an honor for man’s human entity and his role as God’s vicegerent. God has conferred on man special favors over a great part of his Creation (Sura 17, Verse 70). God has given man preference even over angels whose sole work is simply worshiping God and whom He created from light while He created man from clay. This preference has been demonstrated when God commanded angels to bow down to Adam who is a human being.

The honor bestowed by God on man-woman- as stated in the Holy Quran is to be understood in an absolute sense. Man is divinely honored whether he is a believer or a disbeliever in God, and whether he submits to God or renounces Him. Thus, honor is not restricted to one group of people to the exclusion of the other. For human dignity, which is derived from God’s will and benevolence, embraces all peoples regardless of race, color, language or faith, or health conditions. Even those who suffer from

sickness or being disabled, enjoy a status of preference and priorities.

That's why respecting the human dignity of the victims of HIV (or any other disease) means respecting God's will; and humiliating that dignity is a challenge to God's will.

When Prophet Mohammad was asked : who is the Muslim, he answered : the Muslim is the one who does no harm by his hand or his tongue (i.e by action or by a word), to anybody”.

An HIV victim can be a Muslim or Christian, or a Jew, or anybody. But above all he is a human being, that should be respected and dignified not humiliated or harmed by any act.. or any word.

This religious principle opposes any kind of discrimination. It is one of the principles of social inclusion and of human harmony, based on religious teachings.

Jean Paul Sartre, the French philosopher, says, “The other is an intermediary between myself and my ego. He is the key to understanding myself, and experiencing my existence.”

The other might be healthy or sick, and in both cases he remains what he is, an intermediary or even a complementary to myself. With this fact I am supposed to share him his agony by helping him to overcome it; and the main entrance to this is to respect him and to care positively for him.

Here again I like to quote Prophet Mohammad's; when he spoke about Muslim society he described it as a one body, and said that “if any organ of the body is sick, the whole body will feel the consequences of fever and pain”. Besides that to be sick by HIV or any other disease does not

deprive man from his rights and noble privileges as a human being dignified by God. On the contrary he's endowed to enjoy above these religious and humanitarian rights the priorities of respect and care that he –or she- deserves to overcome his –or her- agony.

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