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April 2013

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Jan-e-Alam Khaki

Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi

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Recommended Citation

Khaki, J. A. (2013, April 26). Sects and sectarianism. Dawn. Karachi.



Sects and sectarianism

By Jan-e-Alam Khaki

SECTS and sectarianism have been an enigma for almost all world religions, and the cause of much strife. Almost all religions comprise sects and sub-sects, which appear to be a historical phenomenon, quite common across history.

More often than not, sects and sectarianism have posed a great challenge to world faiths, leading often to intellectual debates but also to physical entanglement.

So if this is a historical fact, is there a way to approach this problem more constructively? Or do we have to continue to fight for another millennium over these issues?

Historically, sects have been seen as anathema to a faith/community, and therefore as a negative development. In the postmodern world, however, there is an alternative approach that focuses on multiple narratives rather than focusing on one standardised view of a set of interpretations taken from a certain period of time.

In the postmodern world, alternative or multiple interpretations of basic beliefs, tenets of faith, values, rituals, cultures and histories are seen as the richness of faith, not as a weakness. People having different interpretations are not hated but appreciated, encouraged to coexist and even celebrated.

If we were to take the word 'sect' to mean deviation or heterodoxy, it would lead us to a totally different attitude. For a long time in history, this attitude has often prevailed. This is one more reason why sectarian fighting has been taking place among different groups.

As a consequence of this attitude, one sect claims the 'ultimate truth' or having God only on its side or only their party going to paradise and the rest destined for hell. Members of one's own sect are commonly seen as 'brothers' in faith and the 'others' as enemies.

Such attitudes then regard the interpretations held by others as 'deviant' or 'heterodox' (deviating from the 'true' faith). This attitude may be called sectarianism or communalism. The key features of this attitude may include exclusivity and a 'win-lose' attitude.

The other attitude, in which other sects are seen as having an ‘alternative’ belief or opinion (unless they are extremists or militants, hell-bent on destruction), leads to a positive approach towards the ‘other’.

One of the words used to refer to sects in Muslim societies has been *firqa*, which literally means a branch. This is a powerful metaphor, connoting a branch of a giant tree.

A gigantic tree is expected to have numerous branches as it grows further. Similarly, a rich faith or tradition is always potent with numerous interpretations. Any tradition having only one interpretation for centuries will be a very poor tradition. Unity in this context is not necessarily a good quality of the tree; in fact it can be a debatable one.

This metaphor works beautifully when seen in the context of great world religions which have tended to be split, acquiring multiple interpretations, each one rich in its own way. Many Muslim thinkers and mystics have grappled with this question of unity and diversity in Muslim societies with immense wisdom. Rumi has addressed this issue in multiple ways. In the *Mathnavi* he uses the metaphor of an elephant and blind men to help us appreciate how human experiences can be subjective and therefore the need to respect others’ experiences and their interpretations.

The world of scholarship, fortunately, is moving towards understanding sectarian divisions, (not sectarianism), in a positive vein. Many scholars are building bridges among communities and across communities, and even across civilisations by initiating meaningful dialogue through analysing histories and traditions in a way that promotes better understanding among members of the same faith or across faiths. Dr Farhad Daftary, a renowned contemporary Muslim scholar, rightly regards the *ummah* as “communities of interpretations”. He argues that these communities are entertaining differing interpretations of the same faith due to many factors including historical, political, economic and cultural.

For one reason or another, a community has been holding an interpretation of its own background, but within the same faith. So, instead of seeing this diversity as a blessing, for reasons political, economic, racial and parochial, the diversity of interpretations has been regarded as something bad. We know what consequences this attitude has had.

Yet the notion of pluralism is, happily, gaining momentum and brings with it greater promise of avoiding clashes among sects or religions by ending ignorance.

For centuries, communal wars among communities have taken a huge toll on human life and it would be a pity if we were to continue to fight over interpretations of the same or other faiths. Communities, rather, should come together to solve their problems by pooling their resources to help raise the standard of life of their people.

There is indeed hope as we see today many people working across communities and borders without letting their sectarian interpretations become an obstacle.

In sum, sects have been an integral part of Muslim societies for over 14 long centuries. We cannot just wish them away. What we need to do is to look at them with a positive attitude which may lead us to be inclusive and respectful of the multiple interpretations of the Muslim faith.

What needs to be discouraged, however, is sectarianism, which often leads us to exclusiveness, arrogance and violence against those who happen to have a different interpretation of faith.

The writer teaches Histories and Cultures of Muslim Societies at a private university in Pakistan.