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Religious Intolerance and Sectarianism Weakening the Muslim Ummah: An Iqbalian Perspective

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Abstract: Religious intolerance and sectarianism have emerged as serious and persistent challenges within the contemporary Muslim Ummah, gradually weakening its unity, stability and intellectual progress. Although Islam fundamentally emphasizes peace, justice, brotherhood and coexistence, these core values are often distorted by sectarian interpretations that transform religious diversity into sources of conflict, mistrust and violence. This situation is further intensified by political manipulation, extremist ideologies and the selective misuse of religious authority, resulting in deep-rooted social and ideological fragmentation across Muslim societies. This study examines these issues in the light of the philosophy of Allama Iqbal, who considered Muslim unity essential for the revival of Islamic civilization.

Key words: Religious Intolerance, Sectarianism, Muslim Ummah, Collective Muslim Identity, Tolerance and Coexistence, Allama Iqbal, Muslim Unity, Islamic Thought

Islam, a religion founded upon the principles of peace, justice, compassion and universal brotherhood, unequivocally rejects all forms of religious intolerance, hatred and sectarian division. The essence of Islamic teachings lies in the promotion of unity, coexistence and respect for human dignity regardless of ethnic, social or ideological differences. The Holy Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ consistently emphasize harmony among believers and warn against disunity, discord and internal conflict. One of the central foundations of Islam is the concept of the unity of the Muslim Ummah which transcends racial, geographical and sectarian boundaries. The Qur'an explicitly commands Muslims to remain united:

وَٱعْتَصِمُواْ بِحَبْلِ ٱللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُو [1]

"And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided."

One of the central foundations of Islam is the concept of the unity of the Muslim Ummah which transcends racial, geographical and sectarian boundaries and establishes a collective identity rooted in faith, justice and mutual responsibility. Iqbal says:

منفعت ایک ہے اس قوم کی' نقصان بھی ایک
ایک ہی سب کا نبی' دین بھی' ایمان بھی ایک
حرم پاک بھی' اللہ بھی ' قرآن بھی ایک
کچھ بڑی بات تھی ہوتے جو مسلمان بھی ایک(۲)

In this context, the philosophy of Allama Iqbal holds profound relevance and significance. Iqbal regarded the unity of the Muslim Ummah as the essential foundation for the revival of Islamic civilization and strongly opposed sectarianism, intellectual stagnation and internal divisions among Muslims. Through his poetry and philosophical thought, he emphasized spiritual awakening, selfhood (Khudi) and collective consciousness as the driving forces behind Muslim strength and progress. Iqbal believed that Islam transcends narrow sectarian identities and unites humanity under the universal principles of justice, equality and brotherhood.

The importance of Iqbal's philosophy in the contemporary Muslim world lies in its ability to provide an intellectual and spiritual framework for overcoming intolerance and sectarian conflict. His message encourages Muslims to move beyond rigid ideological divisions and rediscover the dynamic and universal spirit of Islam based on unity, tolerance and coexistence. In an age marked by increasing polarization and fragmentation within Muslim societies, Iqbal's vision remains highly relevant for restoring harmony, strengthening collective Muslim identity and promoting peace and civilizational progress.

Dr. Rafiuddin Hashmi writes:

"Iqbal has exposed the long centuries of Muslim subjugation and the mental condition that developed under its influence, and like a compassionate doctor, he has performed its operation."(3)

Religious intolerance refers to the unwillingness to accept, respect or peacefully coexist with individuals or communities holding different religious beliefs, interpretations or practices. It emerges when differences in faith are viewed not as part of human diversity but as threats that must be rejected, suppressed or condemned. Religious intolerance often manifests through prejudice, discrimination, exclusion, hate speech and in extreme cases, violence against those perceived as religiously different. Such attitudes undermine social harmony and weaken the principles of justice, coexistence and mutual respect that are essential for stable societies. Religious intolerance stands in direct contradiction to the fundamental teachings of Islam. As stated in the Holy Qur'an:

لَآ إِكۡرَاهَ فِى ٱلدِّينِ ۖ قَد تَّبَيَّنَ ٱلرُّشۡدُ مِنَ ٱلۡغَىِّ ۚ [4]

There shall be no compulsion in (acceptance of) the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong."

Historically, religious intolerance has existed in various forms across civilizations and societies. In the Muslim world, differences in theological interpretation, jurisprudence and political leadership gradually contributed to the emergence of sectarian identities. While intellectual diversity and scholarly debate were once regarded as signs of intellectual vitality within Islamic civilization, these differences increasingly became politicized over time. Political rivalries, dynastic conflicts and struggles for power transformed theological distinctions into rigid sectarian divisions, creating long-term tensions within Muslim societies. As Iqbal states:

فرقہ آرائی کی زنجیروں میں ہیں مسلم اسیر
اپنی آزادی بھی دیکھ، ان کی گرفتاری بھی دیکھ
چاک کر دی ترک ناداں نے خلافت کی قبا
سادگی مسلم کی دیکھ، اوروں کی عیاری بھی دیکھ (۵)

In the contemporary era, religious intolerance has taken more complex and destructive forms. Extremist ideologies, political manipulation of religion, media propaganda and socio-economic instability have intensified sectarian polarization in many Muslim societies. Religious differences are frequently exploited to justify violence, marginalization and ideological exclusion, resulting in social fragmentation and weakening of the collective Muslim identity. Such intolerance not only damages internal harmony within Muslim communities but also contributes to the global misrepresentation of Islam as a religion associated with conflict rather than peace and coexistence.

Dr. Liaquat Ali Khan writes:

"And I consider the Western conspiracy to keep Islam fragmented and internally in conflict as one of the major causes of the decline of the Muslim world. The strategy of the West has always been that Muslims should not remain united. One country should be in conflict with another country, one tribe with another tribe, one family with another family and one sect with another sect, so that their energies collide with one another and ultimately become destroyed." [6]

The philosophy of Allama Iqbal provides a significant intellectual response to these challenges. According to Iqbal, Islam is a dynamic and universal force that seeks to unite humanity under the values of justice, equality and brotherhood rather than divide people through narrow ideological identities.

جو کرے گا امتیاز رنگ و خوں، مٹ جائے گا
ترک خرگاہی ہو یا اعرابی والا گہر (۷)

Sectarianism refers to excessive attachment to a particular sect, ideology or group within a religion, often accompanied by prejudice, hostility or discrimination against others. In Islam, sectarianism develops when secondary theological or jurisprudential differences are elevated above the shared and fundamental teachings of the faith. Rather than promoting diversity of interpretation within a unified religious framework, sectarianism transforms differences into rigid social and ideological boundaries that divide the Muslim Ummah. As mentioned in the Qur'anic teachings:

[8] وَأَطِيعُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ وَلَا تَنَٰزَعُواْ فَتَفۡشَلُواْ وَتَذۡهَبَ رِيحُكُمۡۖ وَٱصۡبِرُوٓاْۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ مَعَ ٱلصَّٰبِرِينَ ٤٦

"And obey Allah and His Messenger and do not dispute and (thus) lose courage and (then) your strength would depart; and be patient. Indeed, Allah is with the patient."

The evolution of sectarianism in Muslim history is closely connected to political and historical developments following the early Islamic period. Disputes related to political leadership, governance and authority gradually evolved into theological and doctrinal divisions. Over time, these distinctions became institutionalized, leading to the formation of various sectarian identities. Although diversity of thought existed throughout Islamic intellectual history, sectarian conflict intensified when political interests and power struggles manipulated religious differences for social and ideological control. It is important to distinguish between sectarian diversity and sectarian conflict. Iqbal regarded sectarianism as one of the greatest obstacles to the unity and revival of the Muslim Ummah.

ہاتھ بے زور ہیں' الحاد سے دل خوگر ہیں
امتی باعث رسوائی پیغمبر ہیں (۹)

The Qur'anic concept of the Ummah represents a unified community bound together through faith, moral responsibility and mutual support. Islam does not define this unity on the basis of race, ethnicity, nationality or sectarian identity; rather, it establishes a collective bond rooted in shared belief in Allah and commitment to justice, compassion and righteousness. Islam recognizes diversity as a natural aspect of humanity but strongly discourages hostility and fragmentation arising from ideological or sectarian differences.

[10] إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ فَرَّقُواْ دِينَهُمۡ وَكَانُواْ شِيَعٗا لَّسۡتَ مِنۡهُمۡ فِي شَيۡءٍۚ إِنَّمَآ أَمۡرُهُمۡ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ يُنَبِّئُهُم بِمَا كَانُواْ يَفۡعَلُونَ ١٥٩

"Indeed, those who have divided their religion and become sects; you, (O Prophet), have nothing to do with them. Their affair is only with Allah; then He will inform them about what they used to do."

The teachings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ strongly reinforce the principles of brotherhood, mercy and tolerance among believers. He ﷺ described the unity of the faithful in deeply powerful terms, stating that the believers are like a single body; when one part of the body suffers illness or pain, the entire body responds with concern, wakefulness and care. [11]

This profound analogy highlights that true Islamic brotherhood is built upon empathy, mutual support and collective responsibility, where the well-being of every individual is inseparably linked to the well-being of the entire community.

Religious intolerance and sectarianism in the contemporary Muslim world are not the result of a single factor; rather, they emerge through a complex interaction of political, ideological, social and historical forces. Over time, these forces have contributed to the fragmentation of Muslim societies, weakening unity, stability and intellectual progress within the Muslim Ummah. Iqbal expresses his grief over the present condition of Muslims in the following way:

شور ہے، ہو گئے دنیا سے مسلماں نابود
ہم یہ کہتے ہیں کہ تھے بھی کہیں مسلم موجود!
وضع میں تم ہو نصاری تو تمدن میں ہنود
یہ مسلماں ہیں! جنھیں دیکھ کے شرمائیں یہود (۱۲)

Understanding the root causes of intolerance and sectarianism is therefore essential for addressing this crisis and restoring harmony within Muslim societies.

One of the most significant causes of sectarianism in Muslim societies is the political exploitation of religion. Throughout history, political leaders, ruling elites and ideological groups have frequently used religious identity as a tool to gain power, strengthen authority or mobilize public support. Sectarian affiliations are often manipulated to create divisions among communities, divert attention from socio-economic problems and justify political agendas. In many cases, political conflicts are deliberately presented as religious disputes, intensifying hostility and mistrust between different sectarian groups. As Iqbal emphasizes:

قوم مذہب سے ہے' مذہب جو نہیں' تم بھی نہیں
جذب باہم جو نہیں' محفل انجم بھی نہیں

This politicization of religion transforms faith from a source of spiritual guidance and moral unity into an instrument of power and control. As a result, sectarian divisions become deeply embedded within political structures, leading to social instability, violence and long-term fragmentation of the Muslim Ummah. Iqbal strongly criticized the misuse of religion for political interests and emphasized that Islam should serve as a force for unity, justice and collective welfare rather than division and conflict.

Iqbal describes the actions and strategies of Iblis in his poem “Iblees ki Majlis-e-Shura” in the following manner:

میں نے دکھلایا فرنگی کو ملوکیت کا خواب
میں نے توڑا مسجد و دیر و کلیسا کا فسوں (۱۴)

Extremism and radical interpretations of religion represent another major cause of intolerance and sectarian conflict in Muslim societies. Extremist groups often promote rigid and exclusive understandings of Islam, declaring their interpretations as the only legitimate form of faith while rejecting or condemning others. Such ideological rigidity creates an environment of intolerance where diversity of thought and interpretation is viewed as deviation or threat. Radical narratives frequently justify hatred, violence and exclusion in the name of religion, contradicting the fundamental Islamic principles of mercy, moderation and coexistence. These interpretations not only intensify sectarian tensions but also damage the global image of Islam by associating it with violence and fanaticism. Iqbal strongly opposed intellectual stagnation and narrow-minded interpretations of religion.

خود بدلتے نہیں، قرآں کو بدل دیتے ہیں
ہوئے کس درجہ فقیہان حرم بے توفیق!
ان غلاموں کا یہ مسلک ہے کہ ناقص ہے کتاب
کہ سکھاتی نہیں مومن کو غلامی کے طریق!(۱۵)

Economic deprivation, unemployment, poverty and social inequality play a significant role in intensifying intolerance and sectarian divisions within Muslim societies. Communities facing chronic economic hardship and social marginalization often become more vulnerable to extremist ideologies and sectarian mobilization. In such environments, frustration caused by limited opportunities, poverty and political exclusion is frequently redirected into sectarian hostility, resentment and violence.

Social and economic inequality also creates conditions of insecurity and mistrust. Extremist groups and political actors often exploit these vulnerabilities by offering individuals a sense of identity, belonging or purpose through sectarian affiliation. As a result, economic instability not only fuels division but also weakens social cohesion and collective harmony within the Muslim Ummah.

دور حاضر ہے حقیقت میں وہی عہد قدیم
اہل سجادہ ہیں یا اہل سیاست ہیں امام (۱۶)

A major cause of intolerance and sectarianism in Muslim societies is the weakness of the educational system in developing tolerance, understanding and mutual respect. In many cases, education focuses mainly on academic knowledge while neglecting moral training, critical thinking and the acceptance of diversity. As a result, students may lack the intellectual and ethical capacity to appreciate differences in religious interpretation and social thought which leads to rigid attitudes and sectarian bias.

دنیا ہے روایات کے پھندوں میں گرفتار
کیا مدرسہ، کیا مدرسے والوں کی تگ و دو!(۱۷)

From the perspective of Allama Iqbal, this educational weakness is a serious obstacle to the revival of the Muslim Ummah. Iqbal strongly emphasized that education should not only transfer information but also awaken selfhood (Khudi), intellectual freedom and moral responsibility. He believed that a dynamic and value-based education system is essential for building tolerance, unity and a strong collective identity among Muslims. Without such intellectual and spiritual development, societies remain vulnerable to division and stagnation.

عصر حاضر ملک الموت ہے تیرا، جس نے
قبض کی روح تری دے کے تجھے فکر معاش
اس جنوں سے تجھے تعلیم نے بیگانہ کیا
جو یہ کہتا تھا خرد سے کہ بہانے نہ تراش(۱۸)

Foreign intervention and the historical legacy of colonialism have played a profound role in deepening sectarian fragmentation throughout the Muslim world. During the colonial era, imperial powers deliberately implemented policies of "divide and rule," exploiting ethnic, tribal, racial and sectarian differences to weaken Muslim unity and secure political dominance. Rather than encouraging collective Muslim identity, colonial administrations institutionalized divisions within societies, creating rivalries and mistrust that continued long after the end of colonial rule. As a result, many Muslim countries inherited fragile political systems, fractured social structures and weakened national cohesion.

Nearly fifteen hundred years ago, the Holy Quran remarkably pointed toward this reality:

وَلَن تَرْضَىٰ عَنكَ ٱلْيَهُودُ وَلَا ٱلنَّصَٰرَىٰ حَتَّىٰ تَتَّبِعَ مِلَّتَهُمْ ۗ [19]

And never will the Jews or the Christians approve of you until you follow their religion."

In the contemporary era, these divisions continue to be intensified through regional and global geopolitical interference. Powerful states frequently manipulate sectarian identities to advance strategic, political and economic interests within Muslim regions. By supporting particular sectarian groups, militias or ideological movements, external powers contribute to proxy conflicts, political instability and prolonged violence across different parts of the Muslim world. From the Middle East to South Asia and Africa, sectarian tensions are often fueled not only by internal disagreements but also by foreign agendas that benefit from a divided and weakened Muslim Ummah. As articulated by Allama Iqbal:

نظر آتے نہیں بے پردہ حقائق ان کو
آنکھ جن کی ہوئی محکومی و تقلید سے کور (۲۰)

Dr. Raziuddin Siddiqui interprets the thought of Allama Iqbal in the following manner:

"Mental slavery is more dangerous than political subjugation. It occurs when a nation abandons its own ideals and adopts the thoughts and ideologies of another group, eventually beginning to act according to them. Therefore, ideology is a major factor in the rise and decline of nations. According to Iqbal, the foremost condition for the progress of a nation is Tathir-e-Fikr (purification of thought), meaning the cleansing and refinement of ideas and intellectual perspectives." [21]

Such interference has devastating consequences for Muslim societies. It prolongs conflict, weakens state institutions, disrupts economic development and creates cycles of violence and mistrust among communities that share the same religious foundations. Moreover, these divisions prevent the Muslim world from developing collective political strength, intellectual cooperation and civilizational progress. Instead of functioning as a unified Ummah, Muslim societies become trapped in internal conflicts that consume their resources, destabilize their regions and make them increasingly vulnerable to external influence and domination. The pain and disappointment felt by Iqbal regarding the condition of Muslims are reflected in the following lines:

کون ہے تارک آئین رسول مختار؟
مصلحت وقت کی ہے کس کے عمل کا معیار؟
کس کی آنکھوں میں سمایا ہے شعار اغیار؟
ہوگئی کس کی نگہ طرز سلف سے بیزار؟
قلب میں سوز نہیں' روح میں احساس نہیں
کچھ بھی پیغام محمد کا تمھیں پاس نہیں (۲۲)

From the perspective of Allama Iqbal, the disunity of Muslims was one of the greatest causes of their political and intellectual decline. Iqbal repeatedly warned that external powers would continue to exploit Muslims as long as they remained divided by sectarianism, nationalism and internal rivalries. Through his poetry and philosophical thought, he emphasized the revival of collective Muslim consciousness, unity and spiritual strength as essential for resisting foreign domination and restoring the dignity and power of the Muslim Ummah.

ہے زندہ فقط وحدت افکار سے ملت
وحدت ہو فنا جس سے وہ الہام بھی الحاد(۲۳)

Modern media and digital communication platforms have become powerful tools in spreading sectarian hatred and intolerance. Social media, political propaganda and sensationalized religious narratives often amplify divisions by promoting misinformation, stereotypes and inflammatory rhetoric. Hate speech and sectarian content circulate rapidly, influencing public opinion and reinforcing ideological polarization within societies. The Holy Qur'an had warned humanity about such dangers more than fifteen centuries ago:

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓاْ إِن جَآءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌۢ بِنَبَإٖ فَتَبَيَّنُوٓاْ أَن تُصِيبُواْ

قَوْمًۢا بِجَهَالَةٍ فَتُصْبِحُوا عَلٰى مَا فَعَلْتُمْ نٰدِمِيْنَ [24]

"O you who believe! If a wicked person comes to you with news, verify it carefully, lest you harm people in ignorance and then become regretful for what you have done."

Instead of encouraging dialogue, understanding and social harmony, certain media platforms contribute to fear, hostility and ideological fragmentation within society. In many cases, individuals and groups, driven by financial interests, political agendas or the desire for influence, compromise their moral integrity and "sell their selfhood" by spreading misinformation, sensationalism and sectarian hate narratives. Iqbal expresses deep anguish over the condition of Muslims in the following words:

جن کو آتا نہیں دنیا میں کوئی فن' تم ہو
نہیں جس قوم کو پروائے نشیمن، تم ہو
بجلیاں جس میں ہوں آسودہ' وہ خرمن تم ہو
بیچ کھاتے ہیں جو اسلاف کے مدفن، تم ہو
ہو نکو نام جو قبروں کی تجارت کرکے
کیا نہ بیچو گے جو مل جائیں صنم پتھر کے (۲۵)

Such actions manipulate religious emotions and exploit sectarian identities for personal or institutional gain, intensifying division and mistrust among communities. Young people, in particular, become highly vulnerable to radicalization through online extremist content that distorts Islamic teachings and promotes intolerance in the name of religion. In this context, responsible media, ethical journalism, intellectual discourse and educational reform are essential for promoting tolerance, critical awareness and peaceful coexistence within the Muslim Ummah. As articulated by Allama Iqbal:

بت شکن اٹھ گئے' باقی جو رہے بت گر ہیں
تھا براہیم پدر اور پسر آزر ہیں
بادہ آشام نئے، بادہ نیا' خم بھی نئے
حرم کعبہ نیا' بت بھی نئے' تم بھی نئے (۲۶)

The philosophy of Allama Iqbal remains highly relevant in addressing these challenges. Iqbal envisioned a Muslim society grounded in intellectual freedom, spiritual consciousness and collective unity. His emphasis on selfhood, moral responsibility and reconstruction of Islamic thought offers a powerful framework for resisting intolerance, overcoming sectarian divisions and restoring harmony within the Muslim Ummah.

اس قوم کو شمشیر کی حاجت نہیں رہتی
ہو جس کے جوانوں کی خودی صورت فولاد (۲۷)

The concept of the Muslim Ummah occupies a central position in Iqbal's philosophy. He envisioned the Ummah as a spiritually and morally unified community bound together not by ethnicity, nationalism or sectarian identity but by shared faith, collective purpose and devotion to Islamic values. According to Iqbal, the decline of Muslims began when the spirit of unity was replaced by divisions based on sect, race, territory and political interests. As Iqbal observes:

نسل، قومیت، کلیسا، سلطنت، تہذیب، رنگ
خواجگی نے خوب چن چن کے بنائے مسکرات (۲۸)

As the Qur'an clearly emphasizes:

وَلَا تَنَازَعُواْ فَتَفْشَلُواْ وَتَذْهَبَ رِيحُكُمْ [29]

"And do not dispute with one another, lest you lose courage and your strength depart."

Iqbal strongly believed that the Muslim Ummah must rise above narrow sectarian identities and rediscover its collective consciousness. In his view, sectarianism weakens the spiritual and intellectual foundations of Muslim civilization by replacing unity with hostility and fragmentation. He consistently emphasized that Islam transcends all artificial divisions and establishes a universal brotherhood rooted in justice, equality and shared moral responsibility.

ایک ہوں مسلم حرم کی پاسبانی کے لیے
نیل کے ساحل سے لے کر تا بخاک کاشغر(۳۰)

It can be concluded that religious intolerance and sectarianism are among the most pressing challenges confronting the contemporary Muslim Ummah. These issues not only reflect theological differences but also manifest as complex socio-political and intellectual problems that undermine unity, disrupt social harmony and hinder the overall progress of Muslim societies. When examined closely, it becomes evident that factors such as political misuse of religion, extremist interpretations, lack of education, economic disparities and media-driven hate narratives have significantly contributed to widening divisions within the Muslim world. In this context, unity emerges not merely as a religious ideal but as a practical necessity for the stability and development of the Ummah. The philosophy of Allama Iqbal further strengthens this understanding by emphasizing collective consciousness, self-awareness (Khudi) and intellectual revival as essential means of overcoming sectarianism. His thought highlights that the revival of the Muslim world depends upon unity, spiritual awakening and a departure from narrow sectarian identities. Therefore, Muslim societies must promote dialogue, educational reform, responsible media practices and inclusive religious understanding to ensure lasting peace, coexistence and meaningful progress.

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