

ISLAM

Differences of opinion are a must

By Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

Once, I met a Western scholar and asked him what he thought was the secret of the West's progress in many fields. He replied that it was the freedom of dissent, which the West has come to consider as sacrosanct. Undoubtedly, what he said is true.

This is not something specific just to Western thought, though. It is actually a law of nature. This law is expressed in a Hadith, according to which the Prophet Muhammad is said to have declared that differences of opinion are a mercy for my community.

Differences of opinion are generally expressed in the form of critique. Ideally, intellectual critique should engender analysis and further study of issues on which differences of opinion exist. This critique should seek to facilitate an open exchange of views on such matters. It should help bring different minds together to honestly express what they know about issues and also what they feel about each other's views. This sort of open exchange of views is indispensable for intellectual development. Knowledge as such is limitless. This is true of knowledge of both religious as well as secular matters. Undoubtedly, differences of opinion are a mercy. There is only one condition for expressing such differences, though—and that is, that those who disagree with each other should do so on the basis of accepted evidence and must abstain from hurling allegations against others. Those who are expressing their view should base it on objective facts and those who critique the point of view expressed should also be thoroughly objective in their criticism. Differences of opinion are immensely beneficial. They help bring to the fore new dimensions of issues under discussion and to uncover hitherto hidden aspects of a subject. They help promote creative thinking. They also enable people to benefit from the results of the intellectual contributions of others.