

Islamic Society and Civil Society: A Direction for Pakistan

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What I would like to focus on in my presentation is my understanding of what it means to be a Muslim, what I understand an Islamic society to be, what is the role of religion in civil society, and what I believe is the best direction for Pakistanis who care not only about rehabilitating political and economic stability in the country, but also - and more fundamentally - about rebuilding its moral foundations.

Let me begin by asking a question that is talked about often but seldom reflected upon with any seriousness or profundity. The question is: "What does it mean to be a Muslim?" To be a Muslim is to live in accordance with the will and pleasure of God. Muslims often say, with joy and pride, that it is easy to be a Muslim since Islam is "the straight path" leading to paradise. What this means, in other words, is that the principles of Islam are simple and straight-forward, free of ambiguities, confusions, inconsistencies or mysteries, and that comprehending them or living in accordance with them is not difficult. The assumption here is that if one, somehow, comes to "the straight-forward path" by accepting Islam, which is God's last and final revelation to humanity, one will fairly effortlessly arrive at the destination which is a state of eternal blessedness in the presence of God. I must confess that I am totally amazed, and overwhelmed, by this assumption. To me, being a Muslim seems to be exceedingly hard, for to be a Muslim one has constantly to face the challenge, first of knowing what God wills or desires not only for humanity in general but also for oneself in particular, and then of doing what one believes to be God's will and pleasure each moment of one's life.

In view of the stereotyping of Islam and Muslims which has gone on in the West for many centuries, and especially since the Arab oil embargo of 1973 and the Iranian Revolution of 1979, it is necessary to state at the outset that "the world of Islam" is not a monolith and that

Muslims differ as sharply within their *ummah*¹ of more than one billion persons as do adherents of other major religious traditions within their own respective communities. Therefore, my perception and understanding of Islamic ideals and Muslim realities as presented here ought not to be taken as those of Muslims in general. At the same time, from my encounter with many Muslims in different parts of the world, I believe that my response to the question “What does it mean to be a Muslim?” is grounded in an Islamic perspective which is shared by a number of contemporary Muslims.

To be a Muslim means, first and foremost, to believe in God, who is *Rabb al-‘alamin*: Creator and Sustainer of all peoples and universes. The Qur’an, which to me is the primary source of normative Islam, tells me that God’s creation is “for just ends”² and not in “idle sport”³. Humanity, fashioned “in the best of moulds”⁴, has been created in order to serve God.⁵ According to Qur’anic teaching, service of God cannot be separated from service to humankind, or – in Islamic terms – believers in God must honour both *Haquq Allah* (Rights of God) and *Haquq al-‘ibad* (Rights of creatures). Fulfilment of one’s duties to God and humankind constitutes righteousness.

As I reflect upon the Qur’an, I am struck deeply by the integrated vision of the Qur’an, which does not separate belief in God and God’s revelation (*iman*) from righteous action (*‘amal*), or regular remembrance of God (*salat*) from regular discharge of one’s financial and moral obligations to God’s creature (*zakat*). Thus, to be a Muslim means – in a fundamental way – to be both God-conscious and creature-conscious, and to understand the interconnectedness of all aspects of one’s life, of the life of all creation and of our life in this transient world to life eternal.

For Muslims, the Qur’anic notion of righteousness has been actualized in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (p. b. u. h.) – known in the Islamic mystic tradition as *Insan al-kamil* or the complete human being. Through his God-centeredness, the Prophet of Islam attained the highest degree of *‘ubudiyat* (service of God) and became a model of righteous living not only as the spiritual and political leader of the Muslim *ummah*, but also as a businessman, citizen, husband, father, friend and a human being in general. Following him, there have been individual Muslims –

1 *Ummah*: community.

2 *The Qur’an*, Surah 15: *Al-Hijr*: 85

3 *Ibid.*, Surah 21: *Al-Anbiya’*: 16

4 *Ibid.*, Surah 95: *At-Tin*: 4.

5 *Ibid.*, Surah 51: *Adh-Dhariyat*: 56

recorded and unrecorded - in every age, who have known that being a Muslim means more than seeking or worshipping God. The poet Iqbal speaks for them when he proclaims,

There are many who love God and wander in the wilderness,
I will follow the one who loves the persons made by God.⁶

Considering the emphasis placed upon the interrelatedness of *Haquq Allah* and *Haquq al-'ibad* both in Qur'anic teaching and in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), the exemplar par excellence of this teaching, it is difficult to understand their compartmentalization in the minds and lives of many present-day Muslims. But what has happened is not surprising given the fact that many generations of Muslims have been told by their leaders that the primary duty of a Muslim is to engage in '*ibadat* – which is understood as “worship” rather than “service” of God – and to obey those in authority over them rather than to engage in *jihad fi sabil Allah* (i.e. to strive in the cause of God) to ensure that the fundamental rights given to all creatures by God are honoured within the Muslim *ummah* or Islamic society.

There has been much discussion in the last three decades on what an Islamic society is. To some it is a society with rigid, unchanging, unchangeable laws where the primary emphasis is on obedience to laws or traditions which are regarded as sacred or sacrosanct and not be questioned. To others it is a society which is anti- democratic, anti-modern, anti-human rights and anti-women's rights. I do not subscribe to either of these points of view. In my perspective how one defines or describes “Islamic society” depends upon how one defines or describes what it means to be “Muslim”. Both terms denote an ideal which is embodied in the ethical teachings of the Qur'an and the practice of the Prophet of Islam (p. b. u. h.). From both we learn that mercy, compassion and justice are the most strongly emphasized attributes of God. William James said very insightfully almost a century ago that in every age human beings make God in their own image. It is a profound tragedy of our times that in so many world religions which profess to be God-centered, God is seen not as the Creator and Sustainer of all creation whose mercy is boundless and who wants humanity – the crown of creation – to know and to grow – and tells us in the resounding words of Surah 53: *An-Najm*: 42 : “Unto God is your limit”⁷, but as a super- policeman who wants to control and to punish.

⁶ Muhammad Iqbal, *Bang-e-Dara* (Lahore: Shaikh Ghulam Ali and Sons, 1962), p. 151.

⁷ Translated by Allama Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1971), p. 57.

As a Professor of Religion I am all too aware of the fact that through much of history, religion has been used by persons and societies to disenfranchise large segments of humanity particularly those who were socially disadvantaged such as women. As a Muslim I am painfully aware of the fact that for hundreds of years now, Muslims have been taught that they were created to serve God by obeying those in authority over them and by enduring with patience whatever God willed for them. Muslim masses were enslaved by Muslims in the name of God and the Prophet. They were made to believe that they had no rights, only responsibilities; that God was the God of Retribution, not of Love; that Islam was an ethic of suffering not of joyous living; that they were determined by *qismat* (Fate) not masters of their own fate. The heroic spirit of Muslim thinkers such as Syed Ahmad Khan and Allama Iqbal brought about a renaissance in the Muslim world and liberated Muslim masses from political bondage. Their work however was not completed, since the traditionalism which has eaten away the heart of Islam continues to hold sway over most of the Muslim world. What we are witnessing in the Muslim world today is of extreme interest and importance for we are living in an age of both progression and retrogression, of both great light and great darkness. It is imperative that Muslims rethink their position on all vital issues, since we can no longer afford the luxury of consoling ourselves for our present miseries and misfortunes by an uncritical adulation of a romanticized past. History has brought us to a point where rhetoric will not rescue us from reality and where the discrepancies between Islamic ideals and Muslim practice will have to be accounted for.

But though Islam, like other major religions of the world has been widely manipulated and misused by self-seeking leaders, whether political or religious, it has not only the potential, but the power, to enable human beings to rise to the highest moral level. Those who say that human rights can never flourish in a so-called Islamic society because Islam and human rights are essentially antithetical, have obviously never read the Qur'an. If one reads the Qur'an without bias one can see that it is the Magna Carta of human freedom. One of its deepest concerns is to free human beings from the bondage of traditionalism, authoritarianism (religious, political, economic, or any other), tribalism, racism, sexism, slavery or anything else that prohibits or inhibits human beings from actualizing their God-given potentialities to the fullest. Though it is necessary to set limits to what human beings may or may not do so that liberty does not degenerate into license, the Qur'an safeguards against the possibility of dictatorship or despotism.

It is vitally important for Muslims and Pakistanis who want to create an Islamic society to carry forward the message of the Muslim modernists who raised the cry “Back to the Qur’an” (which in effect also means “Forward with the Qur’an”)⁸ and insisted on the importance of *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning) both at the collective level (in the form of *Ijma’* or consensus of the community)⁹ and at the individual level – as a means of freeing Muslim thought from the dead weight of outmoded traditionalism. In this context it is good to hear the refreshing voice of Allama Iqbal - modern Islam’s most outstanding thinker and visionary - who was a passionate advocate for *Ijtihad* which he, insightfully, called “the principle of movement in Islam”. In his lecture on *Ijtihad*, Allama Iqbal says:

I know the ‘*Ulema*’¹⁰ of Islam claim finality for the popular schools of Muslim Law, though they never found it possible to deny the theoretical possibility of a complete *Ijtihad*...¹¹ For fear of... disintegration, the conservative thinkers of Islam focused all their efforts on the one point of preserving a uniform social life for the people by a jealous exclusion of all innovations in the law of *Shari’ah* as expounded by the early doctors of Islam. Their leading idea was social order, and there is no doubt that they were partly right, because organization does to a certain extent counteract the forces of decay. But they did not see, and our modern ‘*Ulema*’ do not see, that the ultimate fate of a people does not depend so much on organization as on the worth and power of individual men. In an over-organized society the individual is altogether crushed out of existence...¹² The closing of the door of *Ijtihad* is pure fiction suggested partly by the crystallization of legal thought in Islam, and partly by that intellectual laziness which, especially in a period of spiritual decay, turns great thinkers into idols. If some of the later doctors have upheld this fiction, modern Islam is not bound by this voluntary surrender of intellectual independence...¹³ Since

8 In this context, the “double movement” outlined by Fazlur Rahman in his book *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of a Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 5-8, is important.

9 Iqbal’s remarks about *Ijma’* in modern times, stated in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, pp. 173-4, are thought-provoking.

10 ‘*Ulema*’: scholars

11 *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, op.cit.*, p. 168.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

things have changed and the world of Islam is today confronted and affected by new forces set free by the extraordinary development of human thought in all its directions, I see no reason why this attitude (of the *'Ulema*) should be maintained any longer. Did the founders of our schools ever claim finality for their reasonings and interpretations? Never. The claim of the present generation of Muslim liberals to re-interpret the foundational legal principles in the light of their own experience and altered conditions of modern life is, in my opinion, perfectly justified. The teaching of the Qur'an that life is a process of progressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessors, should be permitted to solve its own problems.¹⁴

In my judgment the most important issue which confronts Pakistani society, as well as the Muslim *ummah* as a whole, today is that of gender-equality and gender-justice. It is a profound irony and tragedy that the Qur'an, despite its strong affirmation of human equality and the need to do justice to all of God's creatures, has been interpreted by many Muslims, both ancient and modern, as sanctioning various forms of human inequality and even enslavement. For instance, even though the Qur'an states clearly that man and woman were made from the same source, at the same time, in the same manner, and that they stand equal in the sight of God, men and women are extremely unequal in virtually all Muslim societies, in which the superiority of men to women is taken to be self-evident.¹⁵

The Islamic tradition, like the traditions of the world's major religions, namely, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism, developed in a patriarchal culture which was male-centered and male-controlled. Through the centuries of Muslim history, the sources of the Islamic tradition have been interpreted only by Muslim men who have arrogated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women. Despite this reality, I believe that if one can separate the normative teachings of Islam from patriarchal interpretations which reflect negative cultural

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹⁵ Those interested in the issue of woman-man equality in the Islamic tradition may refer to several of my writings (e.g. "Equal Before Allah?" in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, XVII : 2 (January-May 1987), pp. 2-4, and "The Issue of Woman-Man Equality in the Islamic Tradition" in *Women's and Men's Liberation: Testimonies of Spirit*, co-edited by Leonard Grob, Riffat Hassan and Haim Gordon (Westport: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1991), pp. 65-82

assumptions, ideas and attitudes regarding women, Islam can become most powerful means of women's empowerment. My statement is based upon the fact that the vast majority of Muslim women – including Pakistani women – have a deep faith in God. This faith has been a sustaining factor in the lives of millions of them and enabled them to survive in conditions of great hardship, suffering and oppression. This faith can become an empowering factor if instead of being brainwashed into accepting themselves as less than fully human, girls in Pakistan and other Muslim societies could be educated to internalize the liberating and enlightening vision of the Qur'an.

While the Qur'an, because of its protective attitude towards all downtrodden and oppressed classes of people, appears to be weighted in many ways in favor of women, a review of Muslim history shows that many of its women-related teachings have been used in patriarchal Muslim culture against, rather than for, women. Since the nineteen-seventies, largely due to the pressure of anti-women laws which have been promulgated under the guise of "Islamization" in a number of Muslim countries, women with some degree of education and awareness have begun to realize that religion is being used as an instrument of oppression rather than as a means of liberation from unjust social structures and systems of thought and conduct. This realization has stemmed from the fact the women have been the primary targets of the "Islamization" process. In order to understand the motivation underlying this process, it is necessary to take into account the ambivalent attitude towards modernity which exists in the Muslim world.

Unable to come to grips with modernity as a whole, many Muslim societies make a sharp distinction between two aspects of it. The first – generally referred to as "modernization" and largely approved – is identified with science, technology and a better standard of life. The second – generally referred to as "Westernization" and largely disapproved – is identified with emblems of "mass" Western culture such as promiscuity, break-up of family and community, latch-key kids, and drug and alcohol abuse. What is of importance to note, here, is that an emancipated Muslim woman is seen by many Muslims as a symbol not of "modernization" but of "Westernization". These days Muslim girls as well as boys go to Western institutions for higher education. However, often when a young man returns from the West he is considered "modernized", but when a young woman returns she is considered "Westernized". This is so because she appears to be in violation of what traditional societies consider to be a necessary barrier between "private space" (i.e., the home) where women belong and "public space" (i.e., the rest of the world) which belongs to men. Muslims, in general, tend to

believe that it is best to keep men and women segregated. i.e., in their separate, designated spaces, because the intrusion of women into men's space is seen as leading to the disruption, if not the destruction, of the fundamental order of things.

Women-related issues pertaining to various aspects of personal as well as social life, lie at the heart of much of the ferment or unrest which characterizes the Muslim world in general. Many of the issues are not new issues but the manner in which they are being debated today is something new. Much of this on-going debate has been generated by the enactment of manifestly anti-women laws in a number of Muslim countries. For instance, many Pakistani women have been jolted out of their "dogmatic slumber" by the enactment of laws such as the *Hudood Ordinance* (1979), the *Law of Evidence* (1984), and the *Qisas and Diyat Ordinance* (1990), which discriminate against women in a blatant manner. These laws which pertain to women's testimony in cases of their own rape or in financial and other matters, and to "blood-money" for women's murder, aim at reducing the value and status of women systematically, virtually mathematically, to less than that of men.

Given the fact that there is more Qur'anic teaching on the subject of how to maintain justice in the home preserving the rights of all members of the household equally, than on any other subject, it is deeply disturbing that even at the start of a new millennium after so many advances have been made in the realm of human rights, many Muslim women are subjected not only to physical and economic subjugation, but also to moral, intellectual and spiritual degradation through a misrepresentation of the essential message of Islam.

Having spent almost twenty-five years in doing research on women-related passages in the Qur'an, I know that the Qur'an does not discriminate against women. In fact, in view of their disadvantaged and vulnerable condition, it is highly protective of their rights and interests. But this does not change the fact that the way Islam has been practiced in most Muslim societies for centuries has left millions of Muslim women with battered bodies, minds and souls. If the Pakistani society, or the Muslim *ummah*, is to actualize its highest potential, it will have to make a strong commitment that it will give its highest priority to the issue of gender-equality and gender-justice. No society can claim to be truly Islamic unless it recognizes, in word and in deed, that man and woman are equal before God and that each has an equal right to develop his or her God-given capabilities to the fullest.

While Muslims in general have always regarded the Qur'an as the highest source of Islam, they have often focused more on rituals and dogmas than on Qur'anic ethics. Ethics pertain to the universal principles

governing human action and Qur'anic ethics provides the normative framework within which Muslims are enjoined to live their lives. Many present-day Muslims, having heard all their lives that "the Qur'an is a complete code of life" expect to find in the Qur'an specific or direct statements pertaining to all the issues or subjects which are of importance to them. When they do not find such statements they assume that the Qur'an has nothing to say about these issues or subjects. This perceived "silence" of the Qur'an regarding a number of significant "modern" issues – such as the issue of family planning – creates a theological and ethical vacuum which different persons and groups fill in different ways. Qur'an is not an encyclopaedia which may be consulted to obtain specific information about how God views each problem, issue or situation that human beings may be confronted with. Nor is the Qur'an "a legal code", as pointed out by Allama Iqbal.¹⁶ By regarding the Qur'an as a Book in which they will find ready-made laws, regulations, prescriptions or assessments relating to everything in life, a large number of Muslims have lost sight of the main purpose of the Qur'an. This purpose, as stated by Allama Iqbal, is "to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his relation with God and the universe... The important thing in this connection is the dynamic outlook of the Qur'an".¹⁷ In other words, the main purpose of the Qur'an is to provide the ethical framework in which all significant matters are to be considered.

While there may be issues, such as family planning, which are not directly addressed by the Qur'an, it is an error to assume that the Qur'an is "silent" on these issues. I consider it of critical importance that Muslims, to see that they will receive the guidance they seek from the Qur'an not by looking for selected verses on specific subjects but by understanding its ethical framework consisting of universal principles which form the core of Islam.

Living in the West, I am all too painfully aware of the fact that Westerners in general – including many Christians and Jews who, like Muslims, are "People of the Book" – perceive Islam as a religion spread by the sword, and Muslims as religious fanatics who are zealously committed to waging "Holy War" against non-Muslims or even against non-conforming Muslims. While it is beyond the scope of this presentation to examine the historical roots of these perceptions, being a Muslim means not turning away in hatred or anger from those who regard Muslims as "adversaries" but engaging in dialogue with them in a

¹⁶ *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, op cit.*, p. 165.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-6.

spirit of amity and goodwill.¹⁸ Being a Muslim means paying serious heed to the Qur'anic teaching that God, universal Creator and Sustainer, who cares for all and sends guidance to all, has decreed diversity for a reason, as the following passage tells us: "O humankind! behold We have created you out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of God. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware." What this passage says to me is that we should be mindful both of our unity and our diversity, that one of the basic purposes of diversity is to encourage diverse groups and persons to "know one another," that a person's ultimate worth is determined not by what group he or she belongs to but how God-conscious he or she is.

Being a Muslim means taking serious note of the Qur'anic imperative, "Let there be no compulsion in religion", knowing that the right to exercise free choice in matters of belief is unambiguously endorsed by the Qur'an, which says: "The Truth is/From your Lord:/Let him who will/Believe, and let him/Who will, reject it."¹⁹

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¹⁸ See *The Qur'an*, Surah 29: *Al-Ankabut*: 46.

¹⁹ This passage (Surah 49: *Al-Hujurat*:13) is taken from *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, translated by Muhammad Asad (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1980), p.793.