

A Muslim's Reflections on A New Global Ethics and Cultural Diversity

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I have been asked to address the topic of a New Global Ethics from an Islamic perspective and to say something about issues pertaining to cultural diversity, the wider context of this discussion.

Let me begin by saying that I find the term 'New Global Ethics' to be interesting but also problematic. It reminds me of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which, although it was called universal, was – as pointed out by Raimundo Panikkar – 'articulated along the lines of historical trends of the Western world during the last three centuries, and a certain philosophical anthropology of individualistic humanism which helped justify them'.¹ The basic assumptions underlying the Declaration were a) of a universal human nature common to all the peoples, b) of the dignity of the individual, and c) of a democratic social order.²

In the decades since the Declaration, the term 'human rights' has become an integral part of both political and popular discourse, particularly among Western, and Western-educated, persons. Until recently most of this discourse has been in largely secular terms. In fact, it has been frequently assumed, as well as stated, by many advocates of human rights, in both Western and non-Western (including many Muslim) countries, that human rights can exist only within a secular context and not within the framework of religion.

Underlying the stance that the concept of human rights is fundamentally secular, and, therefore, outside of, and even antithetical to, the world view of religion, is – of

course – a certain view of religion in general, or of particular religions. In some Muslim countries such as Pakistan, for instance, it is often remarked by secular-minded proponents of human rights that it is not meaningful to talk about human rights in Islam because, as a religious tradition, Islam has supported values and structures that are incompatible with the assumptions which underlie the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The fact that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not acknowledge religion as a source of human rights points to what I consider a critical flaw in the orientation of the United Nations. It is understandable why, in 1948, against the backdrop of massive human conflicts, the United Nations would have wanted to distance itself from any sort of identification with religion which has contributed significantly throughout history to divisiveness and strife in the world. However, it is far less credible that the United Nations should have become so trapped in its secular discourse that it could continue until recently to refuse to deal with the fact that for millions of human beings whose lives are rooted in belief rather than unbelief, human rights become meaningful only when they are placed within the framework of their belief-system.

It has become increasingly clear in the last few years as the United Nations has tried to grapple with concrete issues pivotal to human development and self-actualization, that neither the alleged universality of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights nor the modern Western assumptions which underlie it, are universally acceptable or applicable. This has been pointed out by Johan D. van der Vyver who was one of the co-ordinators of a two-year international project on religion and human rights sponsored by Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, to which I was privileged to contribute. In the introduction to the two-volume publication entitled *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective* which resulted from the project, Professor Van de Vyver stated:

*'There has been a new rivalry looming in international politics, founded, more or less, on an East-West contingent; and in this instance not centred upon the divergence of economic structures, but instead on the schism of religiously-based forces. Eastern religions, with Islam in the lead, are increasingly questioning the Western perceptions of human rights and challenging the claim to prime authenticity of the liberal individualistic nuance of the human rights ideology as devised and understood in the West. While Western traditions by and large founded the typical liberal perceptions of human rights on a secularized base, most Eastern proponents of human rights seek to construct an intimate link of the values embodied in that ideology with decidedly religious presuppositions. In the East, more so than in the West, human rights perceptions are accordingly conditioned by uncompromising tenets of religious belief.'*³

A strong showing of resistance, particularly by Muslims, to what was perceived as 'secular humanism in the West with a strong individualistic nuance'⁴ was visible at the NGO forum of all the recent United Nations conferences, namely, the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, the International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo in 1994, and the World Conference on Women at Huairou

in 1995. The fact that at the conclusion of the Cairo Conference, perhaps the most controversial of all the United Nations conferences to date, religion – which had not been mentioned in the original draft of the conference – and ethics and culture – which had been mentioned a few times only in passing – were clearly recognized as factors relevant in population planning and development, marked a shift radical enough to be called a paradigm shift, in the orientation of the United Nations. That religion – a topic which was long considered taboo – was one of the major subjects of discussion at the NGO Forum in China – shows that there has been a decisive shift away from the wholly secular mindset of the world organization. This development is likely, in my judgment, to make the United Nations more effective in reaching out to masses of people in many parts of the world.

The idea of developing a Declaration of the Religions for a Global Ethic was launched by the Council of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago as part of the commemoration of the centenary of the first Parliament of the World's Religions meeting in Chicago in 1893. This important enterprise represented, in a significant way, an attempt by representatives of world religions to develop a document which would, in some ways, be complementary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But whereas the latter had dissociated itself from religion the new declaration would be grounded in religion.

The task of preparing the draft of this declaration was given to Professor Dr Hans Küng, one of the most eminent religious thinkers and scholars of our times with whom I have had the honour of working in the context of Christian-Muslim interreligious dialogue both in Tübingen and in Pakistan. Referring to this assignment, Professor Küng stated:

*'That was for me an extremely difficult task. However after I was able to deal with the problems of such a declaration throughout the entire summer semester (1992) in an interdisciplinary colloquium with participants from various religions and continents, I was in a position to produce an initial draft and then send it to various colleagues and friends for correction. This first draft received broad agreement from all those to whom it was sent. At the same time dozens of formal as well as material suggestions for corrections were submitted, which I have now taken into account as carefully as possible in a second draft, the text has thereby gained in precision.'*⁵

The Declaration Toward a Global Ethic developed by Professor Küng 'was signed by most of the nearly two hundred delegates who attended the Parliament of World's Religions'⁶ in September 1993. Here, it is of interest to note that in January 1993, at an annual meeting of a Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue held in Graz, Austria, a document entitled 'Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic' had been presented for an in-depth analysis and critique by Professor Dr Leonard Swidler. I have had the privilege of working since 1979 with Professor Swidler who is the initiator of the dialogue or Interreligious Dialogue among Jews, Christians and Muslims, in the United States, and was a participant in the discussion which took place in Graz, although, unfortunately, illness prevented me from attending the discussion on global ethics directed by Professor Küng at Chicago.

I have deep respect for both Professor Küng and Professor Swidler and I know that their efforts to develop documents which could be regarded as universally-agreed ethical guideposts for a world which faces serious moral, political, economic and ecological crises on the eve of the twenty-first century, stem from a lifetime of dedication to the pursuit of truth and justice not only in scholarship, but also in real life. I am also aware of the fact that both Professor Küng and Professor Swidler have consulted with various persons, including scholars, from the major religious traditions of the world in their endeavour to make their documents as representative of a global consensus on ethical principles as they possibly could in their given settings and time-frames. Further, both Professor Küng and Professor Swidler have presented their documents as 'a tentative draft'⁷ and 'not an end but a beginning'.⁸ The Preface to *A Global Ethics* edited by Professor Küng and Professor Kuschel expressed the hope

*'that this document may set off a process which changes the behaviour of men and women in the religions in the direction of understanding, respect and cooperation. And if all goes well, in the not too distant future we shall have other declarations which make the global ethics of the religions more precise and concrete and add further illustrations to it. Perhaps one day there may be even a United Nations Declaration on Global Ethics to provide moral support for a Declaration of Human Rights, which is so often ignored and cruelly violated.'*⁹

While appreciating the intentions and affirmations, and the hopes of my esteemed colleagues Professor Küng, Professor Swidler, and also Professor Kuschel, as a Muslim and as a woman human rights activist I must express the difficulties I experience with the concept as well as the methodology of what is popularly being referred to as a New Global Ethics – a title which troubles me and raises two important questions for me. 1) What is *new* about this ethic or ethics? and 2) in what sense is this ethic or ethics *global*?

While the two versions of the declaration towards, or on, global ethic or ethics with which I am familiar purport to identify and include those ethical principles which are common to most, particularly the major, religions of the world, it seems to me that their fundamental presuppositions are *a priori*. They are not the products of an internal dialogue within each religion regarding its central ethical concerns and principles, widening into a dialogue with other religions on the same matters. Rather, they represent the thinking of post-Enlightenment Westerners who are mostly Christian either religiously or culturally. In this context I find the following remarks by Professor Dr John Hick, another respected partner-in-dialogue, to be highly pertinent:

'The difficulty in offering a distinctively Christian comment on Leonard Swidler's draft is that it is already in an important sense a Christian document. For since the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century Western Christianity has been increasingly suffused with the individualistic, democratic, liberal, historically-minded, science-oriented outlook of the Enlightenment, an outlook that constitutes what can comprehensively be called the ethos of modernity. Indeed Christianity, as a cultural influence, is identified in the minds of many Christians, particularly when they make comparisons with other religions, with these liberal ideas of modernity. From an historical point of view, this is paradoxical. For what has happened is that secular modernity has transformed the outlook

*of most of the Christian World, rather than that Christianity has out of its own distinctive religious resources introduced these modern liberal values into Western culture. Indeed during much the greater part of its history Christianity has been neither democratic, nor liberal, nor science-oriented, nor historically-minded or individualistic in the modern sense. In saying, then, that Leonard Swidler's is a Christian draft I merely mean that it comes out of contemporary Western Christianity and embodies the spirit of post-Enlightenment culture. Anyone reading it can readily identify its provenance, reflecting as it does the concerns and presuppositions of modernity.'*¹⁰

The fact that the comments of non-Westerners or non-Christians have been elicited to the drafts prepared by Western Christian scholars does not alter the fact that these drafts do not reflect the ethos of the religions of the world. The references to selective citations from different sacred texts to support the presuppositions of the drafts do not substantiate the claim that these presuppositions represent a consensus of the world's religions on ethical principles. We have all heard the saying, that the devil can quote the scripture for his purpose. It is not only the devil, but all of us, who are susceptible to the temptation to cite quotations out of context or to look at them in a limited context when we are trying to prove what we consider to be a self-evident truth. In other words – in the language of computer science – when we are goal-driven rather than data-driven, we tend not to see the total picture and its complexity but to be content with simple answers to complicated questions. In this context also, the comment by Professor Hick in response to Professor Swidler's draft, merits serious consideration:

'This first draft, produced by Leonard Swidler (and likewise the basically similar draft produced by Hans Küng), must not stand as the one official draft which is to be amended, added to, and developed by contributions from the rest of the world. It is essential that as early in the process as possible other independent initial drafts be forthcoming from within the cultures of China, Africa, Russia, India, the Islamic world, the Buddhist world, the primal life-streams. Only then, with the comparison and interaction of these perhaps significantly different drafts, will the movement towards a genuinely global declaration be able to proceed beyond its present state. At least as important, then, as the organizing of intensive discussions of our Western draft must be the eliciting of Asian, African, Pacific and other drafts.

In this first stage of the search for a global ethic, rather than getting the peoples of other cultures to debate our Western draft, agreeing or disagreeing with it as the only document on the table, we should say: 'Here is the kind of draft that comes naturally to us in the industrialized West. What kind of draft comes naturally to you, and to you, and to you?' And then the next stage beyond this should be to bring a plurality of drafts together and see what comes out of the interaction between them.

I do not think that in any of this I am diverging from what Leonard Swidler has in mind. I want particularly to stress, however, the need to move as soon as possible from a one-draft to a multi-draft situation. So long as we have a modern Western draft there will be the danger of the whole project looking like an act of Western cultural imperialism. This has never been the intention. And the danger can be avoided by directing every effort to get

people from within the other great cultural streams of human life to participate in the search from their own independent points of view.

It is not a legitimate criticism that the search for a global ethic originated in the West; for it had to originate somewhere! And the West probably contains more abundantly than elsewhere the practical resources required to launch and promote the process. But it would be a ground for legitimate criticism if the search remained concentrated around our Western contribution to it. The challenge is now to find ways of opening the discussion up on an equal basis within all the great traditions of the earth.¹¹

Having stated my wider philosophical reservations to the way in which global ethic or ethics has been conceptualized or developed in the West in the last few years, I wish to respond to the topic of a New Global Ethics from a Muslim *religious* perspective. The ethos of the Muslim world is quite different from that of the Western world which rests on Graeco-Roman foundations and in which reason has generally been regarded as the co-equal if not the superior, or the arbiter, of revelation. For the vast majority of Muslims, however, revelation constitutes the highest source of knowledge and is normative for Muslims collectively and individually, in their public as well as their private lives, both in relation to the material world and inner as well as transcendental reality.

There is hardly any doubt that even though Islam is one of the three Abrahamic faiths and is regarded by many Jews and Christians as a prophetic religion, many, if not most, Westerners find it harder to understand or accept Islam and Muslims than any other major religion or its adherents. This is not the time or place to analyze all the historical, political, socio-cultural and theological factors which have brought about such a wide gap of understanding or amity between Islam/Muslims and many non-Muslim Westerners. However, I find it difficult as a Muslim to accept as authentic or effective the lofty principles relating to justice and equity for all peoples contained in the Declaration of Global Ethics, when I see the violence directed against both Muslim men and women in much of the Western world.

I am saddened when I read the statement that 'one day there may even be a new United Nations declaration on a global ethic to provide moral support for the Declaration of Human Rights, which is often ignored and cruelly violated'. One major reason why the Declaration of Human Rights is ignored is because it is not grounded in reality or in the lives of the majority of the peoples of the world. I do not find it helpful when I travel through the Muslim world talking to the average Muslim woman. They have three characteristics: they are poor, they are illiterate and they live in a village. A large number of the over 500 million Muslim women in the world share these characteristics. If I as a person committed to women's empowerment were to try to reach one of these women living anywhere between Ankara and Jakarta, how would I do it? Could I say to her, 'I bring you liberation or empowerment in the name of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)?' This statement would mean nothing to her. But if I were to say to her, 'You believe in God and you know that God is just. Therefore, it cannot be the will of God that you should live in sub-human conditions

and be brutalized or oppressed'. This makes instant sense to her because her religious beliefs constitute the matrix in which her life is rooted. A light begins to shine in her eyes as she realizes that she is not powerless... that the source of empowerment lies within her since God, the universal creator and sustainer, is a just and merciful God who does not condone injustice in any way.

There is no doubt that the very existence of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an outstanding achievement of humanity as a whole and that if there were to be a complementary Declaration of Global Ethic this also would be a similar achievement. But declarations alone do not bring about moral or social transformation of society or human beings. Even in the West, the validity of the Greek notion that knowledge is a virtue – that knowing what is right necessarily leads to virtuous conduct – was challenged by David Hume and modern psychology. The Qur'an tells us that the condition of people changes only when they change what is in themselves. If the superpowers which had been instrumental in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had practised what they preached and had refrained from violating human rights within their own borders or supporting autocratic, anti-human-rights forces in other countries, the state of the world today would have been very different from what it is today. The lesson to be learnt by those who are engaged in developing a Declaration of Global Ethic – I believe – is that any kind of ethic begins at home, with oneself. And that, often, it is much easier to make generalized statements about abstract ethical principles than to deal honestly and deeply with the specificity and complexity of the lives and beliefs of others, particularly those who are seen as adversaries or aliens.

Just as the strongest resistance to the Western notion of human rights has come from Muslims, it is likely that the strongest resistance to the new Western notion of Global Ethics will also come from Muslims. Setting aside for the moment the political and psychological factors which may be involved in this resistance, let me focus on what I consider to be the major *religious* reason why many Muslims would have difficulty subscribing to a New Global Ethic as is being discussed in this forum. In the first place, for the majority of Muslims the highest source of what they consider to be normative Islam or Muslim ethics is the Qur'an as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. Hence for them there is nothing new about the ethics which is relevant to their lives. Secondly, for them the ethical framework of the Qur'an embraces what may be called 'fundamental human rights' or 'principles of global ethics'. Hence there is no need for them to develop a New Global Ethic.

Given the widespread stereotyping of Muslims as fanatic and irrational, or anti-modern and backward, there is a danger that my words may be misconstrued as representing what the West wrongly calls Islamic fundamentalism. While, like the overwhelming majority of Muslims, I, too, believe that the Qur'an is God's Word and *the* highest source of normative Islam, I also believe that the Qur'an is *the* Magna Carta of human rights and that a large part of its concern 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 the qur'anic vision of human destiny embodied in the classic proclamation: 'Towards God is thy limit.'¹²

Since I have a life-commitment to promoting what I consider to be authentic dialogue in the Buberian 'I-Thou' mode, and have spent almost twenty years of my life intensively engaged in a variety of dialogues with men and women from different religions, ideologies, cultures and races, it is my earnest hope that those who are committed to developing Global Ethics in the West will make a serious effort to understand Islam and other religions not from outside but from within. I would like to facilitate this effort in the context of my religious tradition by sharing with you my understanding of what I call the ethical framework of the Qur'an consisting of the rights and responsibilities which are emphasized by qur'anic teachings.

In the account which follows, reference is made to the Qur'an's affirmation of fundamental rights which all human beings ought to possess because they are so deeply rooted in our humanness that their denial or violation is tantamount to a negation or degradation of that which makes us human. From the perspective of the Qur'an, these rights came into existence when we did; they were created, as we were, by God in order that our human potential could be actualized. Rights created or given by God cannot be abolished by any temporal ruler or human agency. Eternal and immutable, they should be exercised since everything that God does is for a 'just purpose'.¹³

A. RIGHT TO LIFE

The Qur'an upholds the sanctity and absolute value of human life¹⁴ and points out that, in essence, the life of each individual is comparable to that of an entire community and, therefore, should be treated with the utmost care.¹⁵

B. RIGHT TO RESPECT

The Qur'an deems all human beings to be worthy of respect¹⁶ because of all creation they alone chose to accept the trust of freedom of the will.¹⁷ Human beings can exercise freedom of the will because they possess the rational faculty, which is what distinguishes them from all other creatures.¹⁸ Though human beings can become 'the lowest of the low', the Qur'an declares that they have been made 'in the best of moulds',¹⁹ having the ability to think, to have knowledge of right and wrong, to do good and to avoid evil. Thus, on account of the promise which is contained in being human, namely, the potential to be God's viceregent on earth, the humanness of all human beings is to be respected and considered to be an end in itself.

C. RIGHT TO JUSTICE

The Qur'an puts great emphasis on the right to seek justice and the duty to do justice.²⁰ In the context of justice, the Qur'an uses two concepts: *'adl* and *ihسان*. Both are enjoined and both are related to the idea of balance, but are not identical in meaning.

'Adl is defined by A.A.A. Fyzee, a well-known scholar of Islam, as 'to be equal, neither more nor less.' Explaining this concept, Fyzee wrote: '...in a Court of Justice the claims of the two parties must be considered evenly, without undue stress being laid upon one side or the other. Justice introduces the balance in the form of scales that

are evenly balanced'.²¹ *'Adl* was described in similar terms by Abu'l Kalam Azad, a famous translator of the Qur'an and a noted writer, who stated, 'What is justice but the avoiding of excess? There should be neither too much nor too little; hence the use of scales as the emblem of justice'.²² Lest anyone try to do too much or too little, the Qur'an points out that no human being can carry another's burden or attain anything without striving for it.²³

Recognizing individual merit is a part of *'adl*, the Qur'an teaches that merit is not determined by lineage, sex, wealth, worldly success or religion, but by righteousness, which consists of both right belief (*iman*) and just action (*'amal*).²⁴ Further, the Qur'an distinguishes between passive believers and those who strive in the cause of God pointing out that though all believers are promised good by God, the latter will be exalted above the former.²⁵

Just as it is in the spirit of *'adl* that special merit be considered in the matter of rewards, so also special circumstances are to be considered in the matter of punishments. For instance, for crimes of unchastity the Qur'an prescribes identical punishments for a man or a woman who is proved guilty,²⁶ but it differentiates between different classes of women: for the same crime, a slave woman would receive half, and the Prophet's consort double, the punishment given to a free Muslim woman.²⁷ In making such a distinction, the Qur'an while upholding high moral standards, particularly in the case of the Prophet's wives whose actions have a normative significance for the community goes beyond this concept to *ihسان*, which literally means restoring the balance by making up a loss or deficiency.²⁸ In order to understand this concept, it is necessary to understand the nature of the ideal society or community (*ummah*) envisaged by the Qur'an. The word *ummah* comes from the root *umm*, or 'mother'. The symbols of a mother and motherly love and compassion are also linked with the two attributes most characteristic of God, namely, *Rahim* and *Rahman*, both of which are derived from the root *rahm*, meaning 'womb'. The ideal *ummah* cares about all its members just as an ideal mother cares about all her children, knowing that all are not equal and that each has different needs. While showing undue favour to any child would be unjust, a mother who gives to a handicapped child more than she does to her other child or children, is not acting unjustly but exemplifying the spirit of *ihسان* by helping to make up the deficiency of a child who needs special assistance in meeting the requirements of life. *Ihسان*, thus, shows God's sympathy for the disadvantaged segments of human society (such as women, orphans, slaves, the poor, the infirm, and the minorities).

D. RIGHT TO FREEDOM

As stated earlier, the Qur'an is deeply concerned about liberating human beings from every kind of bondage. Recognizing the human tendency toward dictatorship and despotism, the Qur'an says with clarity and emphasis in Surah 3: *Al-Imran*: 79:

It is not [possible]
That a man, to whom
Is given the Book,
and Wisdom,
And the Prophetic Office,

Should say to people:
 'Be ye my worshippers
 Rather than Allah's'
 On the contrary
 [He would say]:
 'Be ye worshippers
 Of Him Who is truly
 The Cherisher of all.'²⁹

The institution of human slavery is, of course, extremely important in the context of human freedom. Slavery was widely prevalent in Arabia at the time of the advent of Islam, and the Arab economy was based on it. Not only did the Qur'an insist that slaves be treated in a just and humane way,³⁰ but it continually urged the freeing of slaves.³¹ By laying down, in Surah 47: *Muhammad*: 4, that prisoners of war were to be set free, 'either by an act of grace or against ransom',³² the Qur'an virtually abolished slavery since 'The major source of slaves – men and women – was prisoners of war'.³³ Because the Qur'an does not state explicitly that slavery is abolished, it does not follow that it is to be continued, particularly in view of the numerous ways in which the Qur'an seeks to eliminate this absolute evil. A book which does not give a king or a prophet the right to command absolute obedience from another human being could not possibly sanction slavery in any sense of the word.

The greatest guarantee of personal freedom for a Muslim lies in the qur'anic decree that no one other than God can limit human freedom³⁴ and in the statement that 'Judgment (as to what is right and what is wrong) rests with God alone'.³⁵ As pointed out by Khalid M. Ishaque, an eminent Pakistani jurist:

*'The Qur'an gives to responsible dissent the status of a fundamental right. In exercise of their powers, therefore, neither the legislature nor the executive can demand unquestioning obedience [...] The Prophet, even though he was the recipient of divine revelation, was required to consult the Muslims in public affairs. Allah addressing the Prophet says: [...] and consult with them upon the conduct of affairs. And [...] when thou art resolved, then put thy trust in Allah.'*³⁶

Since the principle of mutual consultation (*shura*) is mandatory,³⁷ it is a Muslim's fundamental right, as well as responsibility, to participate in as many aspects of the community's life as possible. The qur'anic proclamation in Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 256, 'There shall be no coercion in matters of faith',³⁸ guarantees freedom of religion and worship. This means that, according to qur'anic teaching, non-Muslims living in Muslim territories should have the freedom to follow their own faith-traditions without fear or harassment. A number of qur'anic passages state clearly that the responsibility of the Prophet Muhammad is to communicate the message of God and not to compel anyone to believe.³⁹ The right to exercise free choice in matters of belief is unambiguously endorsed by the Qur'an⁴⁰ which also states clearly that God will judge human beings not on the basis of what they profess but on the basis of their belief and righteous conduct,⁴¹ as indicated by Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 62:

Those who believe [in the Qur'an]
And those who follow the Jewish [scriptures],
And the Christians and the Sabians,
Any who believe in God
And the Last Day,
And work righteousness,
Shall have their reward
With the Lord: on them
Shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.⁴²

The Qur'an recognizes the right to religious freedom not only in the case of other believers in God, but also in the case of non-believers in God (if they do not behave aggressively against Muslims).⁴³

In the context of the human right to exercise religious freedom, it is important to mention that the qur'anic dictum, 'Let there be no compulsion in religion',⁴⁴ applies not only to non-Muslims but also to Muslims. While those who renounced Islam after professing it and then engaged in acts of war against Muslims were to be treated as enemies and aggressors, the Qur'an does not prescribe any punishment for non-profession or renunciation of faith. The decision regarding a person's ultimate destiny in the hereafter rests with God.

The right to freedom includes the right to be free to tell the truth. The qur'anic term for truth is *haqq* which is also one of God's most important attributes. Standing up for the truth is a right and a responsibility which a Muslim may not disclaim even in the face of the greatest danger or difficulty.⁴⁵ While the Qur'an commands believers to testify to the truth, it also instructs society not to harm persons so testifying.⁴⁶

E. RIGHT TO ACQUIRE KNOWLEDGE

The Qur'an puts the highest emphasis on the importance of acquiring knowledge. That knowledge has been at the core of the Islamic world-view from the beginning is attested to by Surah 96: *Al'Alaq*: 1-5, which Muslims believe to be the first revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad.

Asking rhetorically if those without knowledge can be equal to those with knowledge,⁴⁷ the Qur'an exhorts believers to pray for advancement in knowledge.⁴⁸ The famous prayer of the Prophet Muhammad was 'Allah grant me knowledge of the ultimate nature of things' and one of the best known of all traditions (*ahadith*) is 'Seek knowledge even though it be in China.'

According to qur'anic perspective, knowledge is a prerequisite for the creation of a just world in which authentic peace can prevail. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of the pursuit of learning even at the time, and in the midst, of war.⁴⁹

F. RIGHT TO SUSTENANCE

As stated in Surah 11: *Hud*: 6, every living creature depends for its sustenance upon God. A cardinal concept in the Qur'an – which underlies the socio-economic-political system of Islam – is that everything belongs, not to any person, but to God. Since God

is the universal creator, every creature has the right to partake of what belongs to God.⁵⁰ This means that every human being has the right to a means of living and that those who hold economic or political power do not have the right to deprive others of the basic necessities of life by misappropriating or misusing resources which have been created by God for the benefit of humanity in general.

G. RIGHT TO WORK

According to qur'anic teaching every man and woman has the right to work, whether the work consists of gainful employment or voluntary service. The fruits of labour belong to the one who has worked for them – regardless of whether it is a man or a woman. As Surah 4: *An-Nisa*: 32 states:

[...] to men
Is allotted what they earn,
And to women what they earn.⁵¹

H. RIGHT TO PRIVACY

The Qur'an recognizes the need for privacy as a human right and lays down rules for protecting an individual's life in the home from undue intrusion from within or without.⁵²

I. RIGHT TO PROTECTION FROM SLANDER, BACKBITING, AND RIDICULE

The Qur'an recognizes the right of human beings to be protected from defamation, sarcasm, offensive nicknames, and backbiting.⁵³ It also states that no person is to be maligned on grounds of assumed guilt and that those who engage in malicious scandal-mongering will be grievously punished in both this world and the next.⁵⁴

J. RIGHT TO DEVELOP ONE'S AESTHETIC SENSIBILITIES AND ENJOY THE BOUNTIES CREATED BY GOD

As pointed out by Muhammad Asad, 'By declaring that all good and beautiful things of life – i.e., those which are not expressly prohibited – are lawful to the believers, the Qur'an condemns, by implication, all forms of life-denying asceticism, world-renunciation and self-mortification⁵⁵ In fact, it can be stated that the right to develop one's aesthetic sensibilities so that one can appreciate beauty in all its forms, and the right to enjoy what God has provided for the nurture of humankind, are rooted in the life-affirming vision of the Qur'an.⁵⁶

K. RIGHT TO LEAVE ONE'S HOMELAND UNDER OPPRESSIVE CONDITIONS

According to qur'anic teaching, a Muslim's ultimate loyalty must be to God and not to any territory. To fulfill his prophetic mission, the Prophet Muhammad decided to leave his place of birth, Mecca, and emigrated to Medina. This event (*Hijrah*) has great historical and spiritual significance for Muslims who are called upon to move away from their place of origin if it becomes an abode of evil and oppression in which they cannot fulfill their obligations to God or establish justice.⁵⁷

L. RIGHT TO THE 'GOOD LIFE'

The Qur'an upholds the right of the human being not only to life but to the 'good life'. This good life, made up of many elements, becomes possible when a human being is living in a just environment. According to qur'anic teaching, justice is a prerequisite for peace, and peace is a prerequisite for human development. In a just society, all the previous human rights may be exercised without difficulty. In such a society other basic rights such as the right to a secure place of residence, the right to the protection of one's personal property, the right to protection of one's covenants, the right to move freely, the right to social and judicial autonomy for minorities, the right to the protection of one's holy places and the right to return to one's spiritual centre, also exist.⁵⁸

Having outlined the general ethical norms and principles embodied in qur'anic teachings, it should be remembered that there is a wide discrepancy throughout the world of Islam between qur'anic ideals and Muslim practice. For hundreds of years, Muslims have been taught that they were created to serve God by obeying those with authority over them and by enduring with patience whatever God willed for them. For hundreds of years, Muslim masses have patiently endured the grinding poverty and oppression imposed on them by those in authority. Not to be enslaved by foreign invaders whose every attempt to subjugate them was met with resistance, Muslim masses were enslaved by Muslims in the name of God and the Prophet, 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 joyous living; that they were determined by *Qismat*, not masters of their own fate. The heroic spirit of Muslim thinkers such as Syed Ahmad Khan and Iqbal, who were born in India in the last century – products not only of a pluralistic society but also of an East-West synthesis – brought about a renaissance in the Muslim world and liberated Muslims 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 today in the Muslim world is of extreme interest and importance, for we are living in an age of both revolutions and involutions, of progression and retrogression, of 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 theory and Muslim practice will have to be accounted for.

No discussion of human rights or global ethics in the context of Islam would be complete without reference to the situation of women in Muslim societies and communities. Muslim men never tire of repeating that Islam has given more rights to women than any other religion. Certainly, if by Islam is meant Qur'anic Islam the rights that it has given to women are, indeed, impressive. Not only do women partake of all the general rights mentioned in the foregoing pages, they are also the subject of much particular concern in the Qur'an. Underlying much of the Qur'an's legislation on

women-related issues is the recognition that women have been disadvantaged persons in history to whom justice needs to be done by the Muslim *ummah*. Unfortunately, however, the cumulative (Jewish, Christian, Hellenistic, Bedouin and other) biases which existed in the Arab-Islamic culture of the early centuries of Islam infiltrated the Islamic tradition and undermined the intent of the Qur'an to liberate women from the status of chattel or inferior creature and make them free and equal to men.

A review of Muslim history and culture reveals many areas in which – qur'anic teaching notwithstanding – women continued to be subjected to diverse forms of oppression and injustice, often in the name of Islam, while the Qur'an, because of its protective attitude toward all downtrodden and oppressed classes of people, appears to be weighted in many ways in favour of women, many of its women-related teachings have been used in patriarchal Muslim societies against, rather than for, women. Muslim societies, in general, appear to be far more concerned with trying to control women's bodies and sexuality than with their human rights. Many Muslims when they speak of human rights, either do not speak of women's rights at all,⁵⁹ or are mainly concerned with how a women's chastity may be protected.⁶⁰ (They are apparently not worried about protecting men's chastity).

Women are the targets of the most serious violations of human rights which occur in Muslim societies in general. Muslims say with great pride that Islam abolished female infanticide; true, but, it must also be mentioned that one of the most common crimes in a number of Muslim countries (e.g., in Pakistan) is the murder of women by their husbands. These so-called 'honour-killings' are, in fact, extremely dishonorable and are frequently used to camouflage other kinds of crimes.

Girls are discriminated against from the moment of birth, for it is customary in Muslim societies to regard a son as a gift, and a daughter as a trial, from God. Therefore, the birth of a son is an occasion for celebration while the birth of a daughter calls for commiseration if not lamentation. Many girls are married when they are still minors, even though marriage in Islam is a contract and presupposes that the contracting parties are both consenting adults. Even though so much qur'anic legislation is aimed at protecting the rights of women in the context of marriage⁶¹ women cannot claim equality with their husbands. The husband, in fact, is regarded as his wife's gateway to heaven or hell and the arbiter of her final destiny. That such an idea can exist within the framework of Islam – which, in theory, rejects the idea of there being any intermediary between a believer and God – represents both a profound irony and a great tragedy.

Although the Qur'an presents the idea of what we today call a no-fault divorce and does not make any adverse judgments about divorce,⁶² Muslim societies have made divorce extremely difficult for women, both legally and through social penalties. Although the Qur'an states clearly that the divorced parents of a minor must decide by mutual consultation how the child is to be raised and that they must not use the child to hurt or exploit each other,⁶³ in most Muslim societies, women are deprived both of their sons (generally at age 7) and their daughters (generally at age 12). It is difficult to imagine an act of greater cruelty than depriving a mother of her children

simply because she is divorced. Although polygamy was intended by the Qur'an to be for the protection of orphans and widows,⁶⁴ in practice Muslims have made it the Sword of Damocles which keeps women under constant threat. Although the Qur'an gave women the right to receive an inheritance not only on the death of a close relative, but also to receive other bequests or gifts during the lifetime of a benefactor, Muslim societies have disapproved greatly of the idea of giving wealth to a woman in preference to a man, even when her need or circumstances warrant it. Although the purpose of the qur'anic legislation dealing with women's dress and conduct,⁶⁵ was to make it safe for women to go about their daily business (since they have the right to engage in gainful activity as stated in Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 32) without fear of sexual harassment or molestation, Muslim societies have put many of them behind veils and shrouds and locked doors on the pretext of protecting their chastity, forgetting that according to the Qur'an,⁶⁶ confinement to their homes was not a normal way of life for chaste women but a punishment for unchastity.

Woman and man, created equal by God and standing equal in the sight of God, have become unequal in Muslim societies. The qur'anic description of man and woman in marriage: 'They are your garments. And you are their garments' (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 187) implies closeness, mutuality and equality. However, Muslim culture has reduced many, if not most, women to the position of puppets, to slave-like creatures whose only purpose in life is to cater to the needs and pleasures of men. Not only this, it has also had the audacity and the arrogance to deny women direct access to God. It is one of Islam's cardinal beliefs that each person – man or woman – is responsible and accountable for his or her individual actions. How, then, can the husband become the wife's gateway to heaven or hell? How, then, can he become the arbiter not only of what happens to her in this world but also of her ultimate destiny? Such questions are now being asked by an increasing number of Muslim women and they are bound to threaten the existing balance of power in the domain of family relationships in most Muslim societies.

However, despite everything that has gone wrong with the lives of countless Muslim women down the ages due to patriarchal Muslim culture, there is hope for the future. There are indications across the world of Islam that a growing number of Muslims are beginning to reflect seriously upon the teachings of the Qur'an as they become disenchanted with capitalism, communism and Western democracy. As this reflection deepens, it is likely to lead to the realization that the supreme task entrusted to human beings by God, of being God's deputies on earth, can only be accomplished by establishing justice which the Qur'an regards as a prerequisite for authentic peace. Without the elimination of the inequities, inequalities, and injustices that pervade the personal and collective lives of human beings, it is not possible to talk about peace in qur'anic terms. Here, it is of importance to note that there is more qur'anic legislation pertaining to the establishment of justice in the context of family relationships than on any other subject. This points to the assumption implicit in much qur'anic teaching, namely, that if human beings can learn to order their homes justly so that the human rights of all within its jurisdiction – children, women, and men – are safeguarded, then they can also order their society and the world at large, justly. In other words, the

Qur'an regards the home as a microcosm of the *ummah* and the world community, and emphasizes the importance of making it the abode of peace through just living.

Turning finally to the subject of Islam / Muslims and Cultural Diversity, 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, I would like to point out that cultural diversity has been strongly affirmed both by qur'anic teachings and by prophetic example. For instance, the Qur'an states:

*'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.'*⁶⁷

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.

A powerful testimony of how strongly the Prophet of Islam affirmed cultural diversity may be found if one visits the Prophet's Mosque in Medina and looks at the names of his close companions inscribed therein. Prominent among them are the names of Bilal the black slave from Abyssinia who became the first *muezzin* of Islam and Salman who came from Iran. During the first three hundred years of their history when Muslims created not just a vast empire but one of the greatest civilizations the world has ever known, they were proud of their cultural diversity, of the fact that there was an Arab Islam, an Iranian Islam, an Indian Islam, a Turkish Islam, a Spanish Islam and so on. It is most unfortunate that today there are many Muslims who seem to think that there is only one right kind of Islam – namely Saudi Arabian Islam – which interprets the universally-oriented, life-affirming teachings of the Qur'an in a narrow way.

Many Muslims in the contemporary world feel besieged by negative forces – whether these are perceived to be associated with Western political or cultural imperialism or with the oppressive new-colonialism which prevails over much of the World of Islam. Instead of dealing with the reality of their life-situation in a pro-active way, they often tend to regress into reactive modes of thinking and behaviour which make them forget the emphasis which the Qur'an places on the creative aspects of living with those who are different from us. They should remember the message implicit in numerous qur'anic verses such as the following:

To each is a goal
To which God turns him;
Then strive together [as in a race]
Towards all that is good.

Wheresoever ye are,
 God will bring you
 Together. For God
 Hath power over all things (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 148)⁶⁸
 To each among you
 have We prescribed a Law
 And an Open Way.
 If God had so willed,
 He would have made you
 A single People, but [his
 Plan is] to test you in what
 He hath given you: so strive
 As in a race in all virtues.
 The goal of you all is to God;
 It is He that will show you
 The truth of the matters
 In which ye dispute (Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 51)

'And [know that] all humankind were once but one single community, and only later did they begin to hold divergent views. And had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from thy Sustainer, all their differences would indeed have been settled [from the outset].' (Surah 10: *Yunus*: 19)⁶⁹

It is clearly the perspective of normative Islam that God who has decreed diversity has also decreed dialogue in order that we may discover our common roots and journey together toward our common goal. The paths we follow may not be the same but the agony of the quest, the passion of seeking is the same. There is much in the Qur'an which relates particularly to the relationships of the 'People of the Book' – Jews, Christians, Muslims – to God and to each other. I believe that if we could understand what the Qur'an is telling us we would be able to overcome many difficulties which impede our inter-religious or inter-cultural dialogue. But much work has to be done – by Muslims, Jews and Christians – separately and together, before we can comprehend, and transcend, all that separates us as human beings and as believers in the same loving, merciful, just and dialogue-oriented God.

Notes

1. Raimundo Panikkar, 'Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?', in: *Breakthrough*, Global Education Associates (New York, Spring 1989), p. 31.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Johan D. van der Vyver, 'Introduction, Legal Dimensions of Religious Human Rights: Constitutional Texts', in: Johan D. van der Vyver and John Witte, Jr. (eds), *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspectives: Legal Perspectives*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, (The Hague 1996) p. xiii.

4. *Ibid.*
5. Hans Küng, 'Explanatory Remarks Concerning A 'Declaration of the Religions for a Global Ethic' in: Leonard Swidler (ed), *Toward a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic: An Interreligious Dialogue*, consulted in manuscript form by courtesy of the editor.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Leonard Swidler in *Ibid.*
8. Hans Küng and Karl-Joseph Kuschel (eds), *A Global Ethics: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*, Continuum, (New York 1993) p. 8.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.
10. John Hick, 'Towards a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic: A Christian Comment', in: *Towards a Universal Declaration of a Global Ethic: An Interreligious Dialogue*.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Reference here is to The Qur'an, Surah 53: *An-Najm*: 42; the translation is by Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf (Lahore 1971) p. 57.
13. For instance, see Surah 15: *Al-Hijr*: 85; Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 3; Surah 44: *Ad-Dukhan*: 39; Surah 45: *Al-Jathiyah*: 22; Surah 46: *Al-Ahqaf*: 3.
14. Reference here is to Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 151.
15. Reference here is to Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 32.
16. For instance, see Surah 17: *Al-Isra'*: 70.
17. Reference here is to Surah 33: *Al-Ahzab*: 72.
18. Reference here is to Surah 2: *Al-Baqarab*: 30-34.
19. Reference here is to Surah 95: *At-Tin*: 4-6.
20. For instance, see Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 8 and Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 136.
21. A.A.A. Fyzee, *A Modern Approach to Islam*, Universal Books (Lahore 1978), p. 17.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Reference here is to Surah 53: *An-Najm*: 38-39.
24. Reference here is to Surah 2: *Al-Baqarab*: 177.
25. Reference here is to Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 95-96.
26. Reference here is to Surah 24: *An-Nur*: 2.
27. Reference here is to Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 25; Surah 33: *Al-Ahzab*: 30.
28. G.A. Parwez, *Tabweeb-ul-Qur'an*, (Urdu), Vol. I, Idara-e-Tulu'-e-Islam (Lahore 1977) p. 78.
29. 'Abdullah Yusuf' Ali (translation) *The Holy Qur'an*, Amana Corporation (Brentwood, Maryland 1989) p. 148.
30. For instance, in Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 36.
31. For instance in Surah 2: *Al-Baqarab*: 177; Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 92; Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 89; Surah 9: *At-Tawbah*: 60; Surah 24: *An-Nur*: 33; Surah 58: *Al-Mujadalah*: 3.
32. Muhammad Asad (translation) *The Message of the Qur'an*, Dar Al-Andalus (Gibraltar 1980) p. 778.
33. G.A. Parwez, *Islam: A Challenge to Religion*, Idara-e-Tulu'-e-Islam (Lahore 1986) p. 346.
34. Reference here is to Surah 42: *Ash-Shura*: 21.
35. Reference here is to Surah 12: *Yusuf*: 40.
36. 'Islamic law – Its Ideals and Principles', in: A. Gauher (ed), *The Challenge of Islam*, The Islamic Council of Europe (London 1980) p. 157.
37. Reference here is to the Qur'an, Surah 42: *Ash-Shura*: 38.
38. *The Message of the Qur'an*, p. 57.

39. For instance, see Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 107; Surah 10: *Yunus*: 99; Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 82; Surah 42: *Asb-Shura*: 48.
40. For instance, see Surah 18: *Al-Kahf*: 29.
41. For instance, see Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 108.
42. *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 33-34.
43. For instance, see Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 108.
44. Reference here is to Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 256; *The Holy Quran*, p.106.
45. Reference here is to Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 135.
46. Reference here is to Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah* also see G.A. Parwez, 'Bunyadi Haquq-e-Insaniyat' (Urdu), in *Tulu'e-Islam*, (Lahore, November 1981), p. 34-35.
47. Reference here is to Surah 39: *Az-Zumar*: 9.
48. Reference here is to Surah 20: *Ta-Ha*: 114.
49. Reference here is to Surah 9: *At-Tawbah*: 122.
50. For instance, see Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 165; Surah 67: *Al-Mulk*: 15.
51. *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 194.
52. For instance, see Surah 24: *An-Nur*: 27-28, 58; Surah 33: *Al-Ahzab*: 53; Surah 49: *Al-Hujurat*: 12.
53. Reference here is to Surah 49: *Al-Hujurat*: 11-12.
54. For instance, see Surah 24: *An-Nur*: 16-19; also see Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 148-149.
55. *The Message of the Qur'an*, p. 207.
56. For instance, see Surah 7: *Al-A'raf*: 32.
57. For instance, see Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 97-100.
58. In this context, reference may be made to several qur'anic verses. e.g., Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 229; Surah 3: *Al-Imran*: 17,77; Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 1; 42-48; Surah 9: *At-Tawbah*: 17; Surah 17: *Al-Isra'*: 34; Surah 67: *Al-Mulk*: 15.
59. For example, R.A. Jullundhri, 'Human Rights in Islam', in: A.D. Falconer, (ed), *Understanding Human Rights*, Irish School of Ecumenics, (Dublin 1980).
60. For example, A.A. Maududi, *Human Rights in Islam*, Islamic Publications (Lahore 1977).
61. For instance, see Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 4,19; Surah 24: *An-Nur*: 33; Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 187; Surah 9: *At-Tawbah*: 71; Surah 7: *Al-A'raf*: 189; Surah 30: *Ar-Rum*: 21.
62. For instance, see Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 231,241.
63. The reference here is to Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 233.
64. The reference here is to Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 2-3.
65. For instance, see Surah 24: *An-Nur*: 30-31; Surah 33: *Al-Ahzab*: 59.
66. The reference here is to Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 15.
67. *The Message of the Qur'an*, p. 793.
68. *The Holy Qur'an*, p. 60.
69. *The Message of the Qur'an*, p. 291.

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