Religion, Ethics and Violence: Developing a New Muslim Discourse

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Introduction

On September 11, 2001, four domestic flights within the United States were hijacked by persons identified by American intelligence agencies as being of Muslim and Arab origin. Two of these planes hit the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, while a third one hit the Pentagon in Washington, DC The fourth plane crashed in Pennsylvania, killing all aboard. The nature of the assaults and the efficiency with which they had been conducted shocked not only the Americans but also the rest of the world. Horror-stricken, millions around the globe watched the massive tragedy unfold before them on television screens. As the reality of what had happened - the damage done to buildings which were symbols of American power and prestige - and the loss of thousands of human lives - sank in, many people in the United States began to feel that the world had changed forever.

The post September 11 world was - and is - radically different from the world which had existed until that fateful day. The sense of invulnerability and invincibility which had characterised the consciousness of the only remaining superpower in the world was suddenly, and irrevocably, lost. The crumbling of the gigantic structures of the World Trade Center towers seemed to remind all of us of the finite and fragile nature of all human constructions, and of our own mortality.

Waves of disbelief, grief, anger, fear, and bewilderment swept through the viewers of the death scenes with varying degrees of intensity. In the face of the most serious attack ever on American soil, it was understandable that many people in the United States (US) wanted to lash out at those who had been responsible for the heinous crimes. The immediate perpetrators were dead and could not be punished. But there were others - like Osama bin Laden - who were believed to have masterminded and financed the crimes. Apprehending Osama bin Laden and his network of operatives including the 'sleepers' who were said to be in the country, seemed to be necessary in order to make a bleeding nation whole again, and to restore confidence in the 'manifest destiny' of the United States to lead and control the world.

In the aftermath of September 11, more attention has been focused on Islam and Muslims and the association of both with violence than perhaps at any other point in modern history. Much of this attention - particularly in the case of mainstream US television channels - has been negative, not only with regard to those who committed the criminal acts, but also with regard to Islam and Muslims / Arabs at large.

The September 11 assaults on the U.S have been condemned strongly by the global community including a large number of Muslims from all walks of life ranging from leaders of Muslim countries to ordinary people. However, the crisis was perceived - and described - from the outset in terms which polarised the world into two absolutely opposed camps. The worldview which became dominant in the discourse of both American administration and media was symbolised by expressions such as 'us versus them,' 'either you are with us or you are against us,' 'good versus evil.' Dualistic thinking which permeated this discourse seemed, at times, to be cosmic in magnitude. It appeared as if the so-called 'clash of civilisations' between 'the West' and 'the world of Islam' posited by Samuel Huntington (1996) had indeed come to pass.

However one interprets the fateful events of September 11, 2001, one thing is clear. The world changed forever on the day. There is now no going back to the situation which existed prior to this day. We cannot go back - we can only go forward. This poses a serious challenge both for (non-Muslim) Westerners and for Muslims. How and on what basis are we going to create a new world order in the aftermath of what happened on September 11, 2001? Is it possible to depolarise the world and to build a bridge between 'the West' and 'the world of Islam'?

History of Negative Imaging of Islam and Muslims

George Santayana, literary philosopher, had stated with acute insight that "those who do cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (Santayana 1905: 284). Those who do not know their history can only replicate it. As we reflect on the critical questions posed above, we need to be aware of the long history of negative stereotyping and imaging of Islam and Muslims in the West. Though there are a number of Americans who had not paid any serious attention to Islam or Muslims until the Arab oil embargo of 1973, or the Iranian Revolution of 1979, propaganda against Islam and Muslims is nothing new in the West.

It is as old as the first chapter of Islamic history, when the new faith began to move into territories largely occupied by Christians: Muslims were seen not only as 'the Other' but as 'the Adversary.' Dante Alighieri, the great poet of medieval Christianity, painted a gruesome picture of the Prophet of Islam in his well-known poem *The Divine Comedy* [1308-1321] (2002: Canto XXVIII). Portraying

him as physically 'divided' with his guts hanging out, Dante assigned the Prophet Muhammad to all but the lowest levels of hell for the grievous 'sin' of dividing the world of Christendom.

St. Thomas Aquinas, the most outstanding Scholastic philosopher, who owed such profound debt to the thinkers of Muslim Spain - who were the precursors of the Renaissance in Europe - described Islam as nothing but a construct to accommodate the lust of Muhammad. Christian voices such as those of Dante and Aquinas form the backdrop of Thomas Carlyle's historic lecture on 'The Hero as Prophet: Mahomet: Islam,' the second lecture in a series of six entitled "On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History.' Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Carlyle urged his fellow Christians to dismiss 'our current hypothesis about Mahomet, that he was a scheming Imposter, a Falsehood incarnate, that his religion is a mere quackery and fatuity..." (Carlyle [1840] 1900).

How persistent has been the misrepresentation of Islam, Muslims and Arabs in the work of 'Orientalists' who have played a major part in shaping Western perceptions of all three? This has been very ably documented by Edward Said, who was Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York. One major result of Said's landmark work *Orientalism* (Said 1978) was that non-Muslims who have written about Islam subsequent to the publication of his book no longer call themselves 'Orientalists' since this term is now been discredited. However, the mindset exhibited by so-called scholarly experts on Islam from Bernard Lewis ('The Roots of Muslim Rage' 1990) to Samuel Huntington (*The Clash of Civilisations* 1996) as well as so-called media experts appearing daily on American television channels, is very similar to that of the non-Muslim detractors of Islam of earlier times.

Given the reservoir of negative images associated with Islam and Muslims in 'the Collective Unconscious' of the West, it is hardly surprising that, since the demise of the Soviet Empire, 'the world of Islam' is - once again - being seen as the new 'Enemy' which is perhaps even more incomprehensible and intractable than the last one. The routine portrayal of Islam as a religion spread by the sword and characterised by 'Holy War,' and of Muslims as barbarous and backward, frenzied and fanatic, volatile and violent, has led, in recent decades, to an alarming increase in 'Muslim-bashing' - verbal, physical, and psychological - in a number of Western countries. After September 11, 2001, the 'crusade' against Islam and Muslims so evident on television screens in the United States, has become even more relentless and intense.

The Politics of Language: Fundamentalism and *Jihad*

One major difficulty that many Muslims encounter in the negatively-charged, media-dominated environment in the post-September 11 U.S., is the use of 'loaded' language to refer to central tenets in Islam. Two words which have been used extensively to depict Islam as a religion which is narrow, rigid, and militant are *fundamentalism* and *jihad*. However, from an Islamic perspective, the way in which these two terms are used in popular discourse leads to deep misunderstanding about Islam and Muslims.

The word fundamentalism comes not from the history of Islam but from the history of American evangelical Protestant Christianity of the 1920s. As pointed out by Mircea Eliade's *The Encyclopedia of Religion*:

> "Fundamentalism' is a subspecies of evangelicalism. The term originated in America in 1920 and refers to evangelicals who consider it a chief Christian duty to combat uncompromisingly 'modernist' theology and certain secularising cultural trends. Organised militancy is the feature that most clearly distinguishes fundamentalists from other evangelicals. Fundamentalism is primarily an American phenomenon..." (Eliade 1987: 190-191).

However, Muslims who know English but are mostly unaware of the history of the word fundamentalism in American Christianity, use the term fundamentalist to refer to a person who believes in the fundamentals of something. The vast majority of Muslims believe in the fundamentals of Islam such as belief in God and the prophets sent by God, in prophetic books, the Day of Judgment, and duties directed toward God (*Haquq Allah*) as well as those directed toward God's creatures (*Haquq al 'ibad*). Therefore, if they are asked whether they are 'fundamentalist,' they are likely to answer in the affirmative, unaware of how this statement is going to be interpreted by someone who associates being a fundamentalist with being an extremist if not a terrorist.

There is no counterpart of the word fundamentalism as it exists in the history of American Christianity in any Islamic language. It is most unfortunate that this word has acquired wide currency not only amongst non-Muslims but also amongst Muslims. However, colonised people often internalise the vocabulary of the coloniser hence the adoption of this word by many Muslims is not surprising even though it is highly regrettable.

Another word which is constantly been misused, especially by US media, is *jihad*. This is a core Qur'anic concept which derives from the root-word *jahada* meaning 'striving' or 'making an effort.' The highest form of *jihad* in Islam (*jihad al akbar*) is against one's own shortcomings and weaknesses. It is an ongoing struggle

to make one's self better in every way. A lesser form of jihad (*jihad al-asghar*) is struggle against social ills and injustice. Defensive war can be a part of the lesser *jihad* but the Qur'an repeatedly points out that 'God loves not aggressors.' *Jihad* as ongoing effort is a part of everything that a Muslim is required to do - from praying five times a day (*salat*) to fasting in the month of Ramadan (*siyam*) to wealth-sharing (*zakat*) to performing pilgrimage (*hajj*) to standing up for justice and testifying to the truth. It is so pivotal to Islam that it cannot be abandoned despite its persistent vandalisation by the American media. It must, therefore, be purged of the negative images attached to it, and understood as a moral struggle for the attainment of a higher state, both by individuals and by societies.

All too often *jihad* has been translated as 'holy war' which is understood as a war undertaken for God or an absolute cause. Those who engage in this war must continue the fight until victory or death. The Qur'an which regards the rational faculty as the greatest gift of God to humanity and constantly urges humankind to make use of reason, does not support any war that is non-defensive or conducted outside of the bounds of rational thinking. 'Holy war' is the translation not of *jihad* but of *crusade* - a term used to refer to wars undertaken by Christians in Europe in the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries, to liberate the Holy Land from the 'infidels' (Muslims).

Normative Islamic (Qur'anic) Teachings on Pluralism

All-too-often in a number of so-called inter-religious dialogues it is customary for one group (a) to fail to distinguish between the normative or ethical teachings of a religion and the practices of its adherents, and (b) to compare the highest or best ideals or practices of one's own religion with the worst practices of the adherents of the other group(s). The persistent demonisation of Islam in the US and some other parts of the world since September 11, 2001, makes it evident that before there can be any authentic dialogue amongst Muslims and Jews and Christians, there must a correct understanding of the framework of normative Muslim ethics. Given below is a brief overview of the teachings of the Qur'an (the most authoritative source of Islam) that pertain to religious and ethical pluralism.

The cardinal principle of Islam is belief in the absolute oneness of God, or *Tawhid*. In the opening chapter of the Qur'an, *Al-Fatiha*, God is described as *Ar-Rahman* (The Most Merciful), *Ar-Rahim* (The Most Gracious) and as *Rabb al-'Alamin* (The Lord of all the peoples and universes). As pointed out by Fathi Osman, in the Qur'an God is not related to any particular place or people but to all creation (Osman 1999: 23). In this context it is interesting to note that whilst the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament refers to God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Qur'an *does not* refer to God as the God of any particular prophet. God is the one and only creator of everything that exists and from the unity of God

comes the unity of creation. The Qur'an points out that God not only creates and sustains all creatures but also gives moral guidance to humanity which has been made 'in the best of moulds' (Surah 95: At-Tin: 4).

The Qur'an affirms that God 'cares for all creatures' (Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 268) and testifies that the message it contains is universal as may be seen from the following verses:

> "Hallowed is He who from on high, step by step, has bestowed upon His servant the standard by which to discern the true from the false, so that to all the world it may be a warning" (Surah 25: Al-Furqan: 1) (The Message of the Qur'an).

> "(The Qur'an) is but a reminder and a divine discourse, clear in itself and clearly showing the truth, to the end that it may warn everyone who is alive (of heart)" (Surah 36: Yasin: 69-70) (The Message of the Qur'an).

> "This (divine writ) behold, is no less than a reminder to all the worlds" (Surah 38: Sad: 87). (The Message of the Qur'an).

> "This (message) is no less than a reminder to all mankind - to every one of you who wills to walk a straight way" (Surah 81: At-Takwir: 27-28) (The Message of the Qur'an).

The universal mission of the Prophet of Islam is also affirmed by the Qur'an as, for instance, in Surah 34: Saba': 28, which states, 'Now (as for thee Muhammad), We have not sent thee otherwise than to mankind at large, to be a herald of glad tidings and a warner' (The Message of the Qur'an).

The non-exclusive spirit of Islam also comes through the oft-repeated teaching of the Qur'an contained in verses such as the following:

> "Verily, those who have attained to faith (in this divine writ), as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians - all who believe in God and the Last day and do righteous deeds - shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve" (Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 62; this verse is repeated in almost identical form in Surah 5: Al-Ma'idah: 69) (The Message of the Qur'an).

> "And they claim, 'None shall ever enter paradise unless he be a Jew' - or 'a Christian.' Such are their wishful beliefs! Say: 'Produce an evidence for what you are claiming, if what you say is true!' Yea,

indeed: everyone who surrenders his whole being unto God, and is a doer of good withal, shall have his reward with his Sustainer; and all such need have no fear, and neither shall they grieve" (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 111-112) (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

"And be conscious of the Day on which you shall be brought back unto God, whereupon every human being shall be repaid in full for what he has earned, and none shall be wronged" (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 281) (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

Since God is the universal creator who sends guidance to all humanity, Muslims are commanded by the Qur'an to affirm the divine message given to all the previous Prophets. It is stated in Surah 40: *Ghafir*: 78: "And, indeed, (O Muhammad,) We sent forth apostles before thy time; some of them We have mentioned to thee, and some of them We have not mentioned to thee" (*The Message of the Qur'an*). While only twenty-five Prophets are mentioned in the Qur'an, the above-cited verse indicates that there have also been other Prophets. Indeed, Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 84 tells us that God "shall raise up a witness out of every community" (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

Muslims are required to affirm the continuity of Islam with previous revelations and Prophets and not to make a distinction amongst them, as can be seen from the following verses:

Say: "We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed to Moses and Jesus, and that which has been vouchsafed to all the (other) prophets by their Sustainer: *we make no distinction between any of them*. And it is unto Him that we surrender ourselves" (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 136) (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

"Step by step has He bestowed upon thee from on high this divine writ, setting forth the truth which confirms whatever there remains (of earlier revelations): for it is He who has betowed from on high the Torah and the Gospel aforetime as a guidance to mankind, and it is He who has bestowed (upon man) the standard by which to discern the true from the false" (Surah 3: *Al: 'Imran*: 3) (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

Say: "We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that

which has been vouchsafed by their Sustainer unto Moses and Jesus and all the (other) prophets: *we make no distinction between any of them.* And unto Him do we surrender ourselves" (Surah 3: *Al 'Imran*: 84) (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

"Behold, We have inspired thee (O Prophet) just as We inspired Noah and all the Prophets after him - as We inspired Abraham, and Ishmael. And Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants including Jesus and Job, and Jonah, and Aaron, and Solomon; and as We vouchsafed unto David a book of divine wisdom; and (We inspired other) apostles whom We have mentioned to thee ere this, as well as apostles whom We have not mentioned to thee; and as God spoke His Word unto Moses: (We sent all these) apostles as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, so that men might have no excuse before God after (the coming of) these apostles: and God is indeed almighty, wise" (Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 163) (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

"In matters of faith, He has ordained for you that which He enjoined upon Noah - and into which We gave thee (O Muhammad) insight through revelation - as well as that which We had enjoined upon Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus: Steadfastly uphold the (true) faith, and do not break up your unity therein" (Surah 42: *Ash-Shura*: 13) (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

One major reason why the Prophet Abraham is so important in the Islamic tradition is that he is seen as a symbol of the unity of all believers implicit in Qur'anic teaching. Not only is he the Prophet most often mentioned in the Qu'ran after Muhammad, but he is also regarded in a significant way as the first 'Muslim' because he surrendered his whole self to God. The Qu'ran repeatedly describes Abraham as *hanif* - the true in faith - or one who turns away from all that is not-God to submit to God's law and order. It also emphasises the point that Abraham was 'neither a Jew nor a Christian.' Abraham is regarded as a model monotheist whom the Qur'an refers to as 'a friend of God' (*khalil Allah*):

"Who can be better
In religion than one
Who submits his whole self
To God, does good,
And follows the way
Of Abraham the true in faith?
For God did take
Abraham for a friend" (Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 125) (*The Holy Qur'an*).

Surah 37: *Al-Saffat*: 83 and 84 point out that Abraham approached God with a heart and mind in total accord with the will of the creator and that God recognised and rewarded the faith of Abraham. In his poetry, Muhammad Iqbal - modern Islam's most outstanding poet-philosopher - frequently pictures Abraham as an iconoclast who is shown breaking his father's idols. To Iqbal it is necessary to negate all that is not-God (signified by the *'la'* in the *la ilaha illa Allah*: 'There is no god but God' in the Islamic *Shahadah* or confession of Faith) before God's existence can be affirmed. Iqbal's motif captures the spirit of the Qur'anic epithet *hanif* which refers not only only to a belief in the one God but also a complete refusal to associate anything or anyone with God. Abraham is *hanif* precisely because he upheld the oneness and allness of God in the face of all opposition and obstacles.

According to the Qur'an, it is the spirit of Abraham which would enable Muslims (and other believers in God) to become 'witnesses for humankind' as stated in Surah 22: *Al-Hajj*: 78): "And strive hard in God's cause with all the striving that is due to Him: it is He who has elected you (to carry His message), and has laid no hardship on you in (anything that pertains to) religion, (and made you follow) the creed of your forefather Abraham. It is He who has named you - in bygone times as well as in this (divine writ) - 'those who have surrendered themselves to God,' so that the Apostle might bear witness to truth before you, and that you might bear witness to it before all mankind" (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

Amongst the rights given by God to all human beings which are strongly affirmed by the Qur'an, the following may be regarded as particularly pertinent in the context of ethical pluralism:

Right to Life

The Qur'an upholds the sanctity and absolute value of human life and states in Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 151: "...do not take any human being's life - (the life) which God has declared to be sacred - otherwise than in (the pursuit of) justice: this has He enjoined upon you so that you might use your reason" (*The Message of the Qur'an*). In Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 32, the Qur'an 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:

> "We ordained
> For the Children of Israel
> That if any one slew
> A person - unless it be
> For murder or for spreading
> Mischief in the land -
> It would be as if

He slew the whole people:
And if any one saved a life,
It would be as if he saved
The life of the whole people" (*The Holy Qur'an*).

Right to Respect

In Surah 17: *Al-Isra'*: 70, the Qur'an says "Now, indeed, We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam" (*The Message of the Qur'an*). Human beings are deemed worthy of esteem because of all creation they alone chose to accept the 'trust' of freedom of the will (Surah 33: *Al-Ahzab*: 72). Human beings can exercise freedom of the will because they possess the rational faculty, which is what distinguishes them from all other creatures (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 30-34). Though human beings can become 'the lowest of the low,' the Qur'an declares that they have been made "in the best of moulds" (Surah 95: *At-Tin*: 4-6), having the ability to think, to have knowledge of right and wrong, to do the good and to avoid the evil. Thus, on account of the promise which is contained in being human, namely, the potential to be God's vicegerent on earth, the humanness of all human beings is to be respected and considered an end in itself.

Right to Freedom

A large part of the Qur'an's concern is to free human beings from the chains that bind them: traditionalism, authoritarianism (religious, political, economic), tribalism, racism, classism or caste system, sexism, and slavery. The greatest guarantee of personal freedom for a Muslim lies in the Qur'anic decree that no one other than God can limit human freedom (Surah 42: *Ash-Shura*: 21) and in the statement that "Judgment (as to what is right and what is wrong) rests with God alone" (Surah 12: *Yusuf*: 40) (*The Message of the Qur'an*). 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" (Surah 3: *Al-'Imran*: 159)' (Ishaque 1980: 157).

The Qur'anic proclamation in Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 256. "There shall be no coercion in matters of faith" (*The Message of the Qur'an*) 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. For instance:

"If it had been God's Plan
They would not have taken
False gods: but We
Made thee not one
To watch over their doings,
Nor art thou set
Over them to dispose
Of their affairs" (Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 107) (*The Holy Qur'an*).

"If it had been thy Lord's *will*
They would have all believed,
All who are on earth!
Will thou then compel mankind,
Against their will, to believe?" (Surah 10: *Yunus*: 99) (*The Holy Qur'an*)

"But if they turn away,
Thy duty is only to preach
The clear message" (Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 82) (*The Holy Qur'an*).

"If then they turn away,
We have not sent thee
As a guard over them.
Their duty is but to convey
(The Message)" (Surah 42: *Ash-Shura*: 48) (*The Holy Qur'an*).

The right to exercise free choice in matters of belief is unambiguously endorsed by the Qur'an in Surah 18: *Al-Kahf*: 29, which states:

"The Truth is
From your Lord:
Let him who will
Believe, and let him
Who will, reject (it)" (*The Holy Qur'an*)

The Qur'an also makes clear that God will judge human beings not on the basis of what they profess but on the basis of their belief and righteous conduct, as indicated by Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 62 and Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 69, cited earlier.

The Qur'an recognises 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 are not aggressing upon Muslims). For instance, Surah 6: *Al-An'am*: 108 states:

"Revile not ye
Those whom they call upon
Besides God, lest
They out of spite
Revile God
In their ignorance.
Thus have We made
Alluring to each people
Its own doings.
In the end will they
Return to their Lord,
And We shall then
Tell them the truth
Of all that they did" (*The Holy Qur'an*).

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' 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 (Surah 4: *An-Nisa'*: 135). While the Qur'an commands believers to testify to the truth, it also instructs society not to harm persons so testifying (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*: 282) (see also Parwez 1981: 34-35).

The Qur'an regards diversity of peoples as well as religious and ethical perspectives as a part of God's design. In a remarkable passage in which reference is made both to the unity and diversity of humankind, the Qur'an states: "O men! Behold, We have created you all 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 Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware" (Surah 49: *Al-Hujurat*: 13) (*The Message of the Qur'an*). From this verse it is clear that one of the basic purposes of diversity is to encourage dialogue among different peoples and also 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.

That plurality of religions (and ethical viewpoints) is sanctioned by God is attested by the Qur'an in a number of verses. For example:

"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) (*The Holy Qur'an*).

"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) (*The Holy Qur'an*).

'And (know that) all mankind 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 have been settled (from the outset)" (Surah 10: *Yunus*: 19) (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

The Qur'an advocates gracious conduct and tolerance toward persons who hold different religious and ethical views as a life-attitude. This can be seen clearly from verses such as the following:

"When a (courteous) greeting
Is offered you, meet it
With greeting still more
Courteous, or (at least)
Of equal courtesy,
God takes careful account
Of all things" (Surah 5: *Al-Ma'idah*: 86) (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

"...If the enemy
Incline towards peace,
Do thou (also) incline
Towards peace, and trust
In God: for He is the One
That heareth and knoweth
(All things)" (Surah 8: *Al-Anfal*: 61) (*The Holy Qur'an*).

"If one amongst the Pagans
Ask thee for asylum,
Grant it to him,
So that he may hear the word
Of God; and then extort him
To where he can be secure" (Surah 9: *At-Taubah*: 6) (*The Holy Qur'an*).

"Call thou (all mankind) unto thy Sustainer's path with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner: for, behold, thy Sustainer knows best as to who strays from His path, and best knows He as to who are the right-guided. Hence, if you have to respond to an attack (in argument), respond only to the extent of the attack leveled against you; but to bear yourselves with patience is indeed far better for (you, since God is with) those who are patient in adversity" (Surah 16: *An-Nahl*: 125-126) (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

"And do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner - unless it be such as are bent on evildoing - and say: 'We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you: for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we (all) surrender ourselves'" (Surah 29: *Al-'Ankubat*: 46) (*The Message of the Qur'an*).

The ethical imperative central to Qur'anic teaching and the normative Islamic worldview is to enjoin the good - *al-mar'uf* - and forbid the evil - *al-munkar*. Within the parameters of this categorical imperative, Islam is open to accepting and cooperating with any ethical perspective. As pointed out by Fathi Osman in his encyclopedic work *The Concepts of the Qur'an*, 'God is not biased with or against any race, ethnicity, or gender, so His guidance secures absolute justice' (Osman 1999: 667).

Critical Issues in the Islamic World

Many people in the West are as unaware of the critical thinking that has been going on in a number of Muslim societies as they are of the normative teachings of Islam. I believe that it is very important for dialogue-oriented Jews and Christians to know that liberal and progressive Muslims have been engaged in a long struggle to reform both Islamic tradition and Muslim societies from within. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the history of this struggle, but I would like to mention three areas which are of great importance in the context both of intra-Muslim dialogue and of inter-religious dialogue of Muslims with people of other faiths.

Reflection on the Qur'an and the Shari'ah

Between 1850 and 1950 there was a renaissance of critical thinking in a number of Muslim countries. During this time - the final phase of colonialism in much of the Muslim world - the issue of political independence was a paramount concern for many Muslim thinkers. Like Jamal ad Din Afghani, they sought to identify the internal weaknesses of Muslim societies which had made possible their colonisation by Western powers and to find ways of overcoming them. Realising the negative impact on the lives of masses of Muslims of fossilised traditions sanctified by reference to religion or culture, many significant thinkers of this period came to the conclusion that Muslims had 'to go back to the Qur'an' and 'go forward with *Ijtihad*' (independent reasoning). In other words, in order to become free and strong people, Muslims had to discover the universal ethical principles highlighted by the Qur'an and apply them by means of their rational understanding to real-life situations.

In recent times there has been much fear in the West that Muslims want to create 'theocratic' societies in which the *Shari'ah* of Islam would be the supreme law. There has also been much discussion in Muslim societies on what the *Shari'ah* stands for. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a prominent Iranian scholar, states the following viewpoint:

> "The *Shari'ah* is the Divine Law by virtue of accepting which a person becomes a Muslim. Only he who accepts the injunctions of the *Shari'ah* as binding upon him is a Muslim although he may not be able to realise all of its teachings or follow all of its commands in life. The *Shari'ah* is the ideal pattern for the individual's life and the Law which binds the Muslim people into a single community. It is the embodiment of the Divine Will in terms of specific teachings whose acceptance and application guarantees man a harmonious life in this world and felicity in the hereafter... The *Shari'ah* is Divine Law, in the sense that it is the concrete embodiment of the Divine

Will according to which man should live in both his private and social life. In every religion Divine Will manifests itself in one way or another and the moral and spiritual injunctions of each religion are of Divine origin. But in Islam the embodiment of the Divine Will is not a set only of general teachings but of concrete ones. Not only is man told to be charitable, humble or just, but how to be so in particular instances of life. The *Shari'ah* contains the injunctions of the Divine Will as applied to every situation in life. It is the Law according to which God wants a Muslim to live... (It) is the blueprint of the ideal human life. It is a transcendent law which is at the same time applied in human society, but never fully realised because of the imperfections of all that is human. The *Shari'ah* corresponds to a reality that transcends time and history. Rather, each generation in Muslim society should seek to conform to its teachings and apply it anew to the conditions in which it finds itself. The creative process in each generation is not to remake the Law but to reform men and human society to conform to the Law" (Nasr 1975: 93-96).

There is much in the above passage which is of crucial significance for modern Muslims. However, before reflecting on this, it may be useful to note that the term *Shari'ah* comes from the root *Shar'a*, which means 'to open, to become clear.' Edward William Lane points out in his monumental *Arabic-English Lexicon* that, according to the authors of authoritative Arabic lexicons, the *Taj al-'Arus*, the *Tadheeb*, and the *Misbah*, the Arabs do not apply the term *shari-at* to "any but (a watering place) such as is permanent and apparent to the eye, like the water of a river, not water from which one draws with the well-rope" (Lane 1863: 1535). A modern lexicon, *Lughat ul Qur'an*, states that the term *Shari'ah* refers to straight and clear path, and also to a watering place where both humans and animals come to drink water provided the source of water is a flowing stream or river (Parwez 1960: 941-944). It is not a little ironic that the term *Shari'ah*, which has the idea of fluidity and mobility as part of its very structure, should have become the symbol of rigid and unchanging laws to so many Muslims in the world.

That the *Shari'ah* has played a pivotal role in Islamic history as a means of bringing diverse groups of Muslims within a single legal religious framework, is beyond dispute. However, the assertion that one is a Muslim only if one accepts the *Shari'ah* as binding upon oneself, and, further, that the *Shari'ah* is divine, transcendent and eternal, needs in my judgment, to be subjected to rigorous moral and intellectual scrutiny.

Being a Muslim is dependent essentially only upon one belief: belief in God, universal creator and sustainer who sends revelation for the guidance of humanity. Believing in God and God's revelation to and through the Prophet Muhammad - preserved in the Qur'an - is, however, not identical with accepting the *Shari'ah*

as binding upon oneself. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith has remarked insightfully "A true Muslim... is not a man who believes in Islam - especially Islam in history; but one who believes in God and is committed to the revelation through His Prophet" (Smith 1957: 146).

Most Muslims regard the *Shari'ah* as a sort of umbrella that stretches over the length and breadth (and perhaps even the depth) of their lives and they feel secure under its cover. However, many of them do not know about the sociological process whereby the 'divine' *Shari'ah* came to be codified. Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes the process in the following passage:

> "In essence all of the *Shari'ah* is contained in the Qur'an. The Holy Book, however, contains the principle of all the Law. It contains the Law potentially but not actually and explicitly, at least not all the different aspects of the *Shari'ah*. There was, therefore, a gradual process by which this Law became promulgated in its external form and made applicable to all domains of human life. This process was completed in about three centuries during which the great books of law in both Sunni and Shi'ite Islam were written, although the exact process is somewhat different in the two cases. The principles of Law contained in the Qur'an were explained and amplified in the prophetic Hadith and Sunnah which together constitute the second basic source of Law. These in turn were understood with the aid of the consensus of the Islamic community (*ijma'*). Finally, these sources of Law were complemented by analogical reasoning (*qiyas*) where necessary. According to the traditional Islamic view, therefore, the sources of the *Shari'ah* are the Qur'an, Hadith, *ijma'* and *qiyas*, of which the first two are the most important and are accepted by all schools of law while the other two are either considered of lesser importance or rejected by some of the schools" (Nasr 1975: 99).

It is to be noted that of the four sources of the *Shari'ah* mentioned in the above passage, three are human, and not divine, in origin, and that two "are either considered of lesser importance or rejected by some of the schools" (Nasr 1975). The author has also accepted that while the Qur'an contains the Law 'potentially,' it does not do so 'actually and explicitly, at least not all the different aspects of the *Shari'ah*' (Nasr 1975). What this means, in other words, is that while the Qur'an elucidates the essentials of Islam, the details of the code of rules and regulations pertaining to all aspects of a Muslim's life which is cumulatively referred to as the *Shari'ah* cannot be regarded as divine - as many Muslims assert - since the Qur'an categorically rules out the possibility of any human being (including the Prophets, the Imams of the Shi'as and the great scholars of Islam) being divine. Unless all of the *Shari'ah* can be shown to be of non-human origin - as Muslims

believe the Qur'an to be - the claim that it is divine, transcendent, eternal or immutable cannot be validated logically or theologically.

Today it is vitally important to remember that for Muslims God and God's word alone is divine and that deification of Muslim tradition and law runs counter to the fundamental teaching of Islam. In this context it is good to hear the refreshing voice of Muhammad 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, Muhammad Iqbal says:

"I know the Ulema [scholars] 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" (Iqbal 1971:168). "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 organisation 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 organisation as on the worth and power of individual men. In an over-organised society the individual is altogether crushed out of existence..." (Iqbal 1971: 151). "The closing of the door of Ijtihad is pure fiction suggested partly by the crystallisation 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 ..." (Iqbal 1971: 178). "Since things have changed and the world of Islam is today confronted and affected by new forces set free by the extraordinary development or 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" (Iqbal 1971: 168).

To me the challenge of being a Muslim in the 21st century means carrying forward the message of the Muslim modernists who have raised the cry 'Back to the Qur'an' (which, in effect, also means 'Forward with the Qur'an')(reference here is to *The Holy Qur'an*, Surah 53: *An-Najm*: 42 in translation by Iqbal 1971: 57) and insisted on the importance of *Ijtihad* - both at the collective level (in the form of *Ijma'*) (reference here is to *The Holy Qur'an*, Surah 2: *Al-'Imran*: 79.) and at the individual level - as a means of freeing Muslim thought from the dead weight of outmoded traditionalism.

Reflection on Women's Rights

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

In my judgment the most important issue which confronts the Muslim *ummah* as a whole in the 21st century is that of gender equality and gender justice. 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. While it is encouraging to know that women such as Khadijah and A'ishah (wives of the Prophet Muhammad and Rabi'a al-Basri (the outstanding woman Sufi) figure significantly in early Islam, the fact remains that until the present time the Islamic tradition has remained largely male-dominated, inhibiting the growth of scholarship among women particularly in the realm of religious thought.

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 favour 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 'Islamisation' in a number of Muslim countries, women with some degree of education and awareness have begun to realise 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 realisation has stemmed from the fact the women have been the primary targets of the 'Islamisation' 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 'modernisation' and largely approved - is identified with science, technology and a better standard of life. The second - generally referred to as 'Westernisation' 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 'modernisation' but of 'Westernisation.' 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 'modernised,' but when a young woman returns she is considered 'Westernised.' This is so because she appears to be in violation of what traditional societies consider to be a necessary barrier between 'private space' (that is, the home) where women belong and 'public space' (that is, 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 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. According to a popular *hadith*, whenever a man and woman are alone, *ash-Shaitan* (the Satan) is bound to be there.

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 characterises 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, since the nineteen-seventies, 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 in the 21st

century 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 thirty years in doing research in the area of Women 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.

Here, it is apt to mention that some Muslim reformers in the modern period have attached primary importance to the issue of women's empowerment which they have regarded as being pivotal to the future of the Muslim *ummah*. The classic works on the rights of Muslim women by Mumtaz 'Ali (in India) and Qasim Amin (in Egypt) were published more than a hundred years ago and presented a compelling case for improving the status of women. A number of contemporary liberal Muslim scholars who have been critical of cultural attitudes and practices which are detrimental to women have also stressed the importance of recognising and implementing women's rights. The intellectual work being done to liberate women from injustice and oppression is being supplemented on the ground by numerous grassroots groups which are helping girls and women through projects relating to various spheres of life including literacy and education, health and family planning, economic and political development, and protection from domestic and social violence.

It is important to point out that today an increasing number of Muslims - especially those belonging to women's groups, youth groups and a number of other grassroots groups - are realising more and more that if the Muslim *ummah* is to become worthy of being the *khalifah* (or vicegerent) of God on earth and to actualise its highest potential, it will have to make a strong commitment to establishing gender-justice and gender-equality in all spheres of life. No society can claim to be truly Islamic unless it recognises, 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.

Reflection on How to Understand Islam and the Qur'an

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. What needs, urgently, to be done - in my opinion - is a critical review of the idea that the Qur'an is a complete code of life. Certainly, the 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 Muhammad Iqbal (1971: 165). 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 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" (Iqbal 1971: 165). 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. It is critically important for contemporary Muslims to realise 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 of core of Islam.

Contemporary Discourse on Islam: Pakistan as a Case Study

Understanding the nature of contemporary discourse on Islam in Muslim societies is key to seeing how Muslims relate to the issue of Religion, Ethics and Violence. As a case study I would like to focus on Pakistan which is a front-line Muslim country in the war on global terrorism that has been waged in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

The discourse on Islam and Human Rights in Pakistan is dominated by two highly vocal and visible groups that represent opposing mindsets. In some ways both of these mindsets can be described as 'extremist.' The first mindset is represented by persons who consider themselves the custodians of 'Islam' which they generally define in narrowly-construed literalistic and legalistic terms. The second mindset is represented by others who consider themselves the guardians of 'human rights' which they see as being incompatible with religion, particularly Islam.

A review of Pakistan's history shows that 'religious' extremists have, in general, opposed any critical review or reform of traditional attitudes and practices which

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have become associated with popular Muslim culture. They have, in particular, been opposed to any changes in the traditional roles of women and have regarded the movement for women's rights as a great threat to the integrity and solidarity of the Muslim family system. Averse in general to 'modernity' which they identify largely with 'Westernisation' of Muslim societies, 'religious' extremists have raised a red flag and shouted that 'the integrity of the Islamic way of life' was under assault, each time any government has taken any step to address the issue of gender inequality or discrimination against women.

While 'extremism' is associated most often with 'the religious right' referred to above, it is important to note that it is also to be found in the utterances and actions of those who regard religion, especially Islam, negatively. In asserting that 'Islam' and 'human rights' are mutually exclusive, advocates of human rights adopt a position which is untenable both on theoretical and pragmatic grounds. The Qur'an strongly affirms all the fundamental human rights. In pragmatic terms, it is evident that Muslims generally - including the vast majority of Pakistanis - are strong believers in God and Islam, regardless of how they express or enact their beliefs. The insistence by 'anti-religious' advocates of human rights that Islam should not be made part of the ongoing discourse on human rights in Pakistan is, therefore, vacuous. Whether acknowledged or not, Islam - which defines the identity and ground reality of millions of Pakistanis - is already, and inevitably, a part of this discourse. Furthermore, it is important to know that 'religious' and 'anti-religious' extremisms feed into one another. The more the 'anti-religious' extremists marginalise Islam in their rhetoric, the stronger is the outcry from 'religious extremists' that 'Islam is in danger.'

Here I would like to make an important clarification between what I have termed 'anti-religious extremism' and 'secularism.' As pointed out by *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 'The term secularisation came into use in European languages at the *Peace of Westphalia* in 1648 where it was used to describe the transfer of territories previously under ecclesiastical control to the dominion of lay political authorities' (Eliade 1987, Vol. 13: 158). A secular society is one in which religion is not the controlling factor in the lives of the people or one in which no one religion is privileged. A person who is 'secular' may not attach much significance to religious consciousness, activities and institutions in the context of society, but is not 'anti-religious.' Whereas 'secular' people may be open-minded and tolerant of different viewpoints, 'anti-religious' persons can be just as absolutist, closed-minded and intolerant as 'religious extremists.'

I believe that it is possible for persons of different religious, ideological or philosophical perspectives to work together in pursuit of the common good. When this has been done (as in Latin America with the rise of 'liberation theology' when Catholics, Protestants, Communists, persons of indigenous religions and others joined hands to combat social evils) the results have been inspirational.

Conclusion: Developing a New Paradigm in Discourse on Islam

Vocal and visible as the extremists in Pakistan are, they constitute a small percentage of the total population of Pakistan. The vast majority of Pakistanis are middle-of-the-road people who neither subscribe to nor support extremism. While they have a strong Muslim identity and their faith is very important to them, they also aspire to be a part of the 'modern' world through acquiring education, awareness of contemporary values, and the means to have what the Greeks called 'the good life.' In other words, they want both 'Deen' (religion) and 'Dunya' (the world). This is a position supported by Qur'anic teaching and the Prophetic example which describe Islam as a religion of balance and moderation, stressing the complementarity of various spheres of life.

It is a matter of utmost gravity that in Pakistan the discourse on Islam has been hijacked by 'religious extremists' and the discourse on human rights has been hijacked by 'anti-religious extremists.' In my judgment, it is vitally important to broaden the discourse both on Islam and human rights to include a third option. This option means the creation of a new discourse or an alternative paradigm which is grounded in the ethical principles of the Qur'an and relates to the beliefs as well as the aspirations of middle-of-the-road Pakistanis.

Islam is, undoubtedly, the sustaining factor in the lives of millions of Muslims - including Pakistanis - many of whom live in conditions of great hardship, suffering or oppression. It can easily become a source of empowerment for them if they begin to see that they have been given a large number of rights - not by any human agency but by God. Once the masses which constitute 'the silent majority' of Pakistanis become conscious of their God-given right to actualise their human potential to the fullest, they can be mobilised to participate in building a dynamic and democratic society. But in order to make this happen, a new perspective on human rights (including women's rights) grounded in normative Islamic ideas of universalism, rationalism, moderation, social justice and compassion must be disseminated as widely as possible.

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