



Islam in Post-Modern World

Prospects and Problems

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HOPE
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ISLAM IN POST-MODERN WORLD

PREFACE

This book is compilation of my writings done from time to time during the year 2007-08. All the writings deal with the problems faced by Muslims in the post-modern period. It is unfortunate that Muslim theologians are still unwilling to confront modern and post-modern situations. There are hardly any theologians who are prepared to deal with problems thrown up by globalization.

I feel there are very few, if any, original thinkers among Muslim theologians. They are interested only in repeating and discussing the medieval texts. Their Islam begins and ends with the discussion of these texts. To create any modern Islamic text is an anathema to them. When I refer to the medieval text, I mean the texts other than Qur'an and sunnah. The holy Quran and sunnah are very central to Islamic thinking. What I mean by medieval texts is understanding of Qur'an and sunnah by the Muslim thinkers and theologians of medieval era. Their cultural ethos, their social needs, their intellectual development influenced their theology in a decisive manner. One cannot meet modern and post-modern challenges by repeating those texts. A new methodology, a new interpretation, a new approach is needed to make Qur'an and sunnah relevant to our own times. This is not happening.

These essays included in this book are an humble attempt to begin this process. To make this attempt is in no way means reducing in any way significance of what these eminent scholars did and achieved during their own times. But, and it is important to note, showing respect to their integrity and achievements, does not mean simply repeating what they understood and wrote.

I think process of interrogating the divine texts and creatively interpreting them must be a continuous process. Life flows, so does knowledge. It springs from life itself. Divine does not mean it should be above or beyond history. If space and time are divine creation, history must be taken very seriously. In my opinion history is as important as transcendence. Transcendence is nothing but future history.

If we want to fashion this world as per Divine Will, we must understand this world and emerging challenges in it. We cannot understand divine word without relating it to the contemporary situation. We can understand contemporary world only if we acquire knowledge being produced which our theologians do not do. For them everything new is 'deviation' from the Divine. And according to me everything new is a challenge we must confront to fulfill the Divine intention.

I hope these essays will be seen as an attempt to doing theology in a new way and not as deviation. Though every change may not be necessarily healthy but nevertheless process of change must be thoroughly understood to refashion it, if necessary, or to accept it, if useful. These essays grapple with the changes taking place around us and to do theology to make changes more acceptable.

All may not agree with all that is said here nor is it necessary to agree. What is important is to raise questions, not necessarily to agree with answers. Questions encourage us to think afresh. To submit without thinking is not faith, it is escape from faith.

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ISLAM AS RELIGION AND ISLAM AS HISTORY*

It is often alleged that Islam is religion of violence and jihad and is believed to have spread through sword. It is then compared with other religions like Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. Such argument is hardly flawless. One basic flaw in such argument is that history of Islam is compared with religious teachings of Christianity, Buddhism etc. and not with religious teachings of Islam. Such comparison between religious teachings on one hand, and, history of another religion (Islam) is unfair comparison. Religious teachings should be compared with religious teachings and religion in history should be compared with religion in history.

History of almost all religions is far from conforming to the teachings of that religion. Religion belongs to basically spiritual and moral sphere and history is product of interplay of several factors – human ambitions, personal interests, wars involving followers of one and followers of another religion and so on. Wars are often fought for reasons different from spreading of religion. The two should not be mixed. Religion can never be spread through might of sword. It is a sheer myth. Religion can spread through conversion of hearts and minds. Religion has its appeal to conscience. One can convert if a religion appeals to ones conscience or if one sees in it an opportunity to promote ones own interest by converting to that religion. But there are very few instances of conversion by inducing fear. Such forcible conversions cannot last long.

Also, be it Islam or Buddhism or Christianity, there are great similarities in their moral and spiritual teachings though there may be significant differences in rituals, concepts, theological statements and laws. Both similarities and differences should be properly understood. However, moral and spiritual truths cannot differ in any significant manner. It is on this ground that the Qur'an pronounces doctrine of *wahdat-e-Deen* (unity of religions) which has been developed with great clarity by Indian theologians like Shah Waliullah and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.

We, in this paper, propose to examine causes of differences between Islamic teachings and Islamic history so that we can dispel many myths about Islam and Islamic history. Misunderstandings about Islam cannot be removed by merely quoting certain Qur'anic verses which represent ideals of Islam; Much less one can do so by glorifying history of Islam. One also has to examine objectively and dispassionately history of Islam in the light of complex factors which mould the history.

ISLAMIC TEACHINGS

Islam is one of the great religions of the world which appeared in Arabia and transformed it from a backward tribal society into a great moral society of highest standards. The Arab society before Islam was immersed into superstitions, divided into often mutually antagonistic tribes causing bloodshed and fratricidal warfare, without any moral code and higher spiritual practices. Certain tribes were dominating the socio-economic fabric of society and unscrupulously exploiting weaker sections of society. The poor, the needy and women were reduced to a helpless lot. There was no political authority to enforce any moral and legal obligations. Certain oral traditions held sway as very few people could read and write. Even cadence of Arab poetry was never reduced in writing.

They possessed no scripture to provide moral guidance to them.

It was in this vacuum that Islam appeared as a source of moral and spiritual guidance, which was welcomed by weaker sections of Arab society, on one hand, and by those sections of society who were unsatisfied by superstitious practices totally lacking spiritual and moral power. Islam greatly attracted all these sections of society. However, it was vehemently opposed by powerful vested interests who feared loss of their leadership to the Prophet of Islam and sensed great danger to accumulation of their wealth.

The early Qur'anic verses in Mecca greatly emphasised social and economic justice and powerfully attacked accumulation of wealth and all exploitative practices. Right from Meccan to Medinese period justice (*'adl* and *qist*) remained central to Islamic teachings. Qur'an also exhorted people of Mecca to be sensitive to sufferings of weaker sections of society. Allah is repeatedly described as *Rahim* and *Rahman* (i.e. Merciful and Compassionate – attributes not much appreciated by the powerful and rich of Mecca).

The rich of Mecca had hardly any objection to concept of one God; they would have gladly accepted it had the Qur'an not attacked accumulation of wealth and neglect of poor and needy. The Qur'anic verses of Meccan period attacked, in a way the whole social system in Mecca and wanted it replaced by a just and sensitive system catering to all the needy and poor, besides widows and orphans. This was not simply acceptable to the Meccan tribal leaders who, besides their tribal supremacy, preferred ostentatious living and exploiting the weaker sections to increase their wealth.

Islam advocated equality and dignity of all human beings attacking any sense of superiority of one tribe over the other and of Arabs over non-Arabs. This was nothing sort of revolution and the ruling tribe of Quraysh to which the Prophet (PBUH) himself belonged, was not prepared to accept

at any rate. The Quraysh of Mecca and its ruling strata were determined to maintain its supremacy. It could contemplate no compromise with such revolutionary teachings of Islam and tried to smash this movement in its infancy.

They persecuted followers of the Prophet and even attempted to assassinate him through well-planned conspiracy but failed. The Prophet (PBUH) succeeded in escaping to Madina. He was welcomed with open arms to this city as the Prophet of Islam had successfully acted as peace -maker between the feuding tribes of Aus and Khazraj. Islam firmly stands for justice and peace. One of Allah's names is Salam (peace) and even paradise (*jannah*) is described in the Qur'an as a place of peace and security. We see wars in history of Islam, not in teachings of Islam (Qur'an). I am making this point after careful study of the Qur'an. There are certain pronouncements inducing Muslims to fight *kuffar* of Mecca but it is purely in defence, not at all as aggressors. They are exhorted to fight only when attacked and not to be aggressors. In fact, Qur'an wants Muslims to be harbingers of justice and peace.

The Qur'an emphasises justice to the extent of practicing it even when it goes against one self, ones parents and one's own tribe or community. Peace is possible only when justice is practiced with such rigour. A *mu'min*, a true believer in Islam, has to rigorously believe in these values. In fact a '*mu'min* was nothing but a new human person, a perfect human being (Sufis term it as *insane-e-kaamil*). And a *mu'min* as described by the Qur'an, has to dedicate himself to truth and patience, justice and peace, a dedicated actor to transform this society into a society free of all evils specially from injustices and oppression and exploitation.

Only such a society can be described as a truly Islamic society. Also, justice is a very comprehensive term in Qur'an. It is by no means limited to Muslims; all who live in Islamic society, Muslims or not, should avail of it and oppression and

exploitation will not be permitted even for a kafir. Qur'anic verses are very clear on this. Often some verses are taken out of the context to prove otherwise.

There will be no compulsion of any kind for anyone to follow this or that religion. There would be complete freedom of conscience and even a non-Muslim poor and needy will be entitled to all the benefits, even from zakat and *bait al-mal* (state treasury) if it happens to be an Islamic country.

A *mu'min* can never be unjust and oppressor and he is always active and vibrantly working for promoting justice and peace. He/she will courageously speak truth in the face of a tyrant ruler and this has been described by the Prophet (PBUH) as real and most meritorious jihad. If one becomes truthful and constantly struggles for justice, there will hardly be any need for war with sword. War with sword is needed only to fulfil ones greed and Qur'an attacks greedy behaviour.

A *mu'min* will always stand for weaker sections (described by the Qur'an as *mustad'ifin*) and fight for them against arrogant and powerful rulers (described as *mustakbirin*). Prophet Ibrahim fought against Nimrod, a great oppressor and arrogant ruler and hence Qur'an accepts him as *Hanif* – one who stands for truth and even throws himself into fire lit by Nimrod for the sake of truthfulness.

Moses fought for liberation of Israelis from the oppression and tyrannies of Pharaoh and fought against Pharaoh's arrogance (*istikbar*) and Allah rewarded Moses and punished Pharaoh. Arrogance of power and using ones power for oppressing others is greatest *kufir* and is strongly denounced by the Qur'an. One can be real *mu'min* if one practices this morality and if one simply accepts Islam without rigorously assimilating this morality one can be Muslim but not *mu'min*, Qur'an points out.

One can make this world worth living in peace and tranquillity of spirit only when one is equipped with this

morality. Only such a *mu'min* can transform this world into a just world free of all conflicts and bloodshed.

ISLAM IN HISTORY

It is well known that ideals and religious teachings make history not. The historical dynamics is very complex process and at best, is partly determined by religious teachings and ideals. The main factors determining history are motives of historical actors, their interests, culture and social vision, besides religious ideals. Also, no society rises to ethical and moral standards prescribed by religion but drags those standards to its own level.

For example, neither Buddhism could raise society to the level of teachings of Buddha, nor could Christianity to those of Christ. Various interests soon hijack religious establishment to serve their own interests. Islam met similar fate. The Arabs too dragged Islam to their own level instead of Arabs rising to the level of Islam. In fact many pre-Islamic Arab practices came back and even became party of Shari'a in the guise of '*adaat*'. And during Umayyad period there was systematic revival of *Jahiliyya* culture.

The *Jahiliyya* poetry, *Jahiliyya* music and *Jahiliyya* social -customs and traditions reasserted themselves and gradually became part of Islamic culture. Many of these practices could be frowned upon by any pious Muslim. However, with the conquests and resultant wealth and luxury swept aside pure ideals. The Qur'an had stressed need-based living (2:219) and the Prophet of Islam had provided an exemplary model of it. However, with some exceptions many of his companions started living in style and collected huge amounts of wealth.

Wearing of silk and gold was prohibited for men to usher in simple living but after flow of wealth from conquered countries Arabs began to wear costly brocaded attire and gold and silver ornaments. It was for this reason that honest

companions like Abu Dharr strongly criticised fellow companions for violating Islamic norms and recited the Qur'anic verse 9:34 which talks of painful tidings for those hoarding gold and silver and not spending them in the way of Allah. Since Abu Dharr wanted to see strict Islamic norms enforced he came to be disliked by most of the Prophet's companions who had taken to easy life and he ended up in the desert where he died and his wife had no means even to provide him with shroud and was buried in his clothes.

Also once Arabs emerged as conquerors the whole dynamics of Arab society changed. Islam then spread to non-Arab areas and now was testing time for the Islamic ideal of equality of all people irrespective of tribal affiliations, nationality, race and colour or language. However, this was not to be in practice. The Arab racial arrogance began to assert soon and non-Arabs came to be discriminated.

Whatever religious ideal, the conquerors always behave as conquerors. Islam being religion of justice and equality, attracted large number of people belonging to weaker sections of society and they primarily embraced Islam in the hope of justice and equality. These weaker sections had suffered intensely at the hands of their earlier masters and came to hate them. They helped Arabs to conquer those territories as they saw Arabs as their liberators which initially indeed they were.

However, it did not take long for the Arabs to behave as other conquerors and began to discriminate against non-Arabs. Arabs had always considered themselves as superior to the Ajam i.e. non-Arab people. The Prophet (PBUH) was well aware of this and hence he exhorted Arabs repeatedly to shed their sense of superiority and treat all people equally and the Qur'an also had asserted that all are equal in dignity (17:70) and that all are created equal and their tribal or national differences were only for being recognised (4:13).

But soon this ideal was lost and Arabs began to display their arrogance of being conquering race and non-Arabs began

mawalis (plural of *mawla*) clients, not enjoying equality with the masters. Kufa in Iraq as emerged as a military camp and Arabs and non-Arabs, mainly *mawalis* began to live in separate quarters. Umayyad rule was primarily an Arab rule and it deviated farthest from all Islamic ideals. As already pointed out it was during the Umayyad period that the pre-Islamic (*Jahilliya*) culture was revived and Islamic ideals were slowly discarded.

The Umayyads ruled by sheer force of weapons and even did not hesitate to martyr Imam Husain and his 71 relatives and friends who stood by him demanding revival of Islamic ideals and Islamic way of rule. Husain (A.S.) was martyred in Karbala, near Kufa in Iraq which had emerged as the great centre of military power. The Umayyad seat of power was in Damascus but Iraq was an important military centre.

Now all Islamic ideals were violated with impunity – there was no justice, no equality and no compassion. There was nothing but oppression and exploitation. Kufa emerged as centre of various rebellions as it was centre of non-Arab clients. About 60 per cent of its population was non-Arab. Mukhtar, who rebelled against Umayyads and made Kufa centre of his power, was mainly supported by non-Arab Muslims.

Again it was Hajjaj, the governor of Kufa on behalf of Umayyads, who went down as most ruthless ruler and who slaughtered more than hundred thousand men and put equal numbers in jail. He was most hated by the people and was a terror. What a contrast to the Prophet (PBUH) who did not shed a drop of blood when he entered Mecca after conquering it and pardoned all his enemies.

The Umayyad rule turned out to be most tyrannical as it had usurped power and Umayyads were motivated by their selfish interests and revived Arab culture to assert their superiority. Thus our hypothesis that religion as an ideal is distinctly different from its history whose dynamics is drawn

from self-interests of the historical actors. Of course the Islamic discourse continued but actions never conformed to the ideals of the faith.

The Abbasid period which followed the Umayyad period was no different in its dynamics. Its founder came to be known as *saffah* (i.e. one who sheds too much blood) because he carried out slaughter of Umayyad rulers and wiped out its entire dynasty. Even infants were not spared and graves were dug up wherein Umayyads were buried. Only one member of the Umayyads Abdur Rehman could escape somehow who founded his rule in Spain.

Since the Umayyads had ruled over non-Arabs ruthlessly, the Abbasid revolution was supported mostly by non-Arab people of Iran and Iranians took their own revenge by slaughtering Arabs settled in part of Iran. Historians have recorded that the Iranian wives killed their Arab husbands. So much intense was hatred of Iranians against Arabs.

However, the Abbasids were hardly any different from the Umayyads. Though they captured power by projecting themselves as children of uncle of the Prophet, they turned out to be no less tyrant and great persecutors of members of household of the Prophet (ahl al-bayt). They saw members of household of the prophet as competitors for power and spread net of spies to trace them and kill them. After all power has its own dynamics.

However, it must be said that the Abbasid period turned out to be a period of enlightenment as the Abbasid rulers took great interest in transferring Greek knowledge and Greek philosophy and Indian knowledge and Indian philosophy into Arabic. This was main contrast between the Umayyads and Abbasids. Umayyads power base was entirely Arab and Umayyad rulers were interested only in reviving the pre-Islamic Arab culture and took no interest in non-Arab knowledge.

The Abbasid power base was mainly non-Arab and mainly Persian who had long tradition of learning and culture and hence they helped Abbasid rulers to find house of wisdom (*Dar al-Hikmah*) wherein great treasures of Greek and Indian knowledge and philosophy were translated and disseminated. Also, it was mainly during the Abbasid period that various schools of Shari'ah law came to be compiled.

It was for these achievements that the noted British historian Toynbee described Abbasid state as the universal state of Islam. But that apart, the Abbasid rule was no less tyrannical and ruthless in crushing their political opponents. It faced several rebellions especially the Zanj rebellion which last for over nine years and shook the Abbasid empire. The Zanj were African slaves and mostly worked in salt mines. When exploitation became intolerable they revolted. Similarly the Qaramita revolt took place during this period and Qaramita revolt was more of a peasant revolt communistic in ideal.

Thus these various events in history have nothing to do with Islam and teachings of Islam. Islam is a religion of justice, peace, equality, compassion and freedom of conscience. But these ideals are not reflected in its history as ideals of any religion are not reflected in the history of those religions. Thus teachings of one religion should be compared with teachings of another religion and history of one religion should be compared with history of another religion. But often history of Islam is compared with teachings of Christianity or Buddhism or Hinduism, which is unfair.

✖ Islam and Modern Age, April 2007.

TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN ISLAM*

Every religion today is going through the struggle for change. When new challenges arise some try to reinforce tradition while others strive for change. This struggle goes on. Islam is no exception to it. However, it is nothing new. This tension between tradition and modernity in Islam is not new but started with colonial period in late 18th or early 19th century. However, tension between tradition and modernity has intensified with developments like process of globalization, with West not only insisting on theory of clash of civilization but also launching war against Afghanistan and Iraq and similar other developments.

Also, in countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh with dire poverty among Muslims and consequent illiteracy, tradition has very strong influence. In countries like these tradition and modernity become binary opposites. Tradition seems to be ruling the roost and modernity, as far as masses are concerned, is on the back foot. But it is not so only among Muslims but in all other communities in these countries.

Modernity means change and change is resisted by people on one hand, and, by the leaders on the other, for various reasons. First important reason for resistance to change is sense of insecurity which change implies. Tradition appears to be time tested experience with which generations have lived. Change brings sense of insecurity and uncertainty and even fear. Tradition is deeply embedded in ones inner being and

produces strong emotions. Change, at best, appeals to intellect and poor masses lack intellectuality.

Secondly, the leaders have their own interest in retaining traditions. Old traditions have led to creation of certain establishments and institutions controlled by these leaders. They would not let go these institutions from their leadership. Apart from this these leaders themselves are product of these traditions and they have lived these traditions. They themselves have been trained in these traditions. Thus not only their leadership but also their sense of certainty is threatened by the process of change.

If change prevails then they loose leadership of these institutions for which they can be hardly be expected to be ready. Not only this, their own conviction is hit. One should not underestimate the role of inner conviction. Leadership interests do play an important role, conviction too plays no less important role. All these factors need to be kept in mind while trying to understand resistance to change.

At change, as noted Urdu poet Iqbal said, only is permanent and everything else perishes. No one can avoid change forever. All changes are not of similar nature. Some changes are technological, others are of theological nature. Technological changes are also resisted to begin with but accepted over a period of time. Now technology has become part of ones life and no one resists it but, on the other hand, used as an instrument to disseminate tradition.

Today computer and Internet are used in all traditional institutions. What is worse, the 'ulama have even accepted *talaq* through SMS. Many husbands divorce their wives from other countries through SMS and traditional 'ulama have accepted their legitimacy. However, and it is important to note, they would not accept *khula*' given through SMS by wife to her husband.

Not that technological changes are accepted easily. Initially all technological changes are resisted but subsequently

accepted. However, when it comes to theological formulations, changes are fiercely resisted. Theological dogmas are considered totally immutable on the grounds they are divine. All shari'ah formulations are upheld sacrosanct on the basis of divine origin.

First I would like to argue that every new religion in the world initiated process of change including Islam. Buddhism challenged so many old traditions and rituals and appealed to human reason and promoted certain values of which compassion and sensitivity to human suffering was foremost. Christianity too, challenged the powerful vested interests among the Jewish sacerdotal establishments and emphasized values like love and justice and Christ found his companions among the poorest of the society and worked for their relief.

However, soon a class of priesthood developed among followers of these religions who monopolized truth of respective religions and developed dogmas and built institutions on the basis of these dogmas and traditions. Subsequently these dogmas became divine and no one could challenge these dogmas. Soon huge establishments came into existence around these dogmas which were sought to be controlled by the religious leaders.

Islam also challenged old traditions; and sought to remove social malaise on one hand, and, human suffering on the other. The Qur'an sought to stress rationality and questioned all prevailing 'religious', social and dominant traditions and stressed human dignity, sexual equality, justice and compassion. It too sought to remove human suffering in society by emphasizing just distribution of wealth and strongly condemned accumulation of wealth. Its greatest contribution in social and economic matters was its promotion of economic justice and human dignity irrespective of caste, color, creed, sex, language and nationality. It also stressed rationality and opposed superstition.

It foresaw human rights and gender equality and also invited human beings to reflect on the creation of this universe and obey immutable laws of nature created; by Allah, one and only God who is neither borne nor gives birth to any human being. He creates. The Qur'an also held everyone accountable to only Allah, to no other human being. The Qur'an denounced all superstitions woven around the idols kept in Ka'bah through forceful logic.

The Qur'an rejected all traditional arguments like 'our forefathers have been doing it, were they wrong? The Qur'an's simple argument was why don't you reflect, why don't you exercise power of reason? The Qur'an pitted tradition against reason to liberate people from the grip of superstition and ancestral traditions. Reason, it emphasized, is liberative. Acceptance one and the only God liberates human beings from all kinds of slavery. And since justice was at the centre of Islamic values, all those belonging to weaker sections flocked to embrace Islam.

Islam, to begin with, attracted women, slaves, poor, youth and those who were dissatisfied with traditions to its fold which included some people of intellect and influence. Among later category there were some who were wealthy but were highly dissatisfied with unjust system and tribal customs and traditions, Islam tried to demolish these customs and traditions in no uncertain terms.

The Prophet (PBUH) himself was quite truthful and highly trustworthy though he came from a poor family although it was high in social status. He never claimed any miracles or superstitious powers. When people of Mecca demanded miracles the Qur'an said in unambiguous words Muhammad is a human being like you, he eats, sleeps and walks on earth like you. His only miracle is Qur'an? Produce Qur'an, if you can. Also, Qur'an repeatedly says bring arguments (*hatu burhanakum*) if you can. Thus Qur'an relies on intellectual arguments, not on miracles or unquestionable dogmas.

Now if we reflect a little this most modern approach. What is modernity, if not this? Modernity relies on reason and power of intellect, not on tradition. Modernity does not accept the authority of tradition but of reason. The Qur'an also builds up its case on intellectual arguments and demolishes traditions then prevalent with force of arguments. No where it supports its case on extra-rational arguments.

Thus as far as Qur'an is concerned reason is central, not tradition. Yes, it does emphasize faith (*iman*) but no human being can exist without faith. It is wrong to think that faith is irrational and blind. It is highly superficial approach. Faith, in order to be healthy, has to be rational. Without faith life will become impossible. We have faith in our teacher, in our doctor, in our political leader, or even in theories of science. Any psychologist will tell you this faith is highly necessary.

However, one has to take care that faith should not be blind. Total lack of faith would lead to skepticism and a skeptic lives without any conviction in anything and remains uncertain about everything in life. Life without conviction is life without meaning and life without meaning is life without direction and life without direction is life wasted.

However, faith in tradition is blind faith. Before accepting anything or before reposing faith in anything one has to exercise ones power of reason to thoroughly investigate what one is going to accept with an open mind. Thus a real faithful is always engaged in quest for truth. Once you engage in quest for truth you develop deep conviction and it is this state of mind and heart that creates inner conviction which Qur'an calls *imani*. Thus genuine faith can never be superstitious.

One cannot act without faith. In fact right action is possible only with a state of conviction. One undertakes great hazards and makes great sacrifices only for the sake of inner conviction. No one without inner conviction can ever make great sacrifices to achieve ones goal. One should not confuse, which we often do, between inner conviction and tradition.

One puts ones life at stake for ones inner conviction but tradition can never inspire any human being for sacrifices. Traditions make our life mechanical and our acts become routine without force of inner conviction.

A progressive and dynamic society relies more on reason than on tradition. When a major revolution takes place in any society, that society rejects all traditions and moves on. When Islam appeared on the scene all pre-Islamic traditions were rejected and new values and teachings inspired people and society came alive and Islam inspired people with new ideas and new goals. Traditional society was a dying society.

It was under inspiring teachings of Islam that the Arab society achieved new heights of knowledge. New sciences came into existence and new philosophies were developed. The thirst for knowledge increased and new horizons of knowledge were sought after. Translations from literature from other countries like Greece, Persia and India were begun and *Dar al-Hikmah* (House of Wisdom) was established in Baghdad. All this became possible once pre-Islamic traditions were rejected. The Arabs, who had clung to traditions for centuries could achieve great heights of knowledge.

Now once again traditions have gripped Islamic countries. The 'ulama refuse to accept change even within Islamic framework. For any problem arising they seek solution only in traditions. Any innovation is 'sin'. Thus medieval text has become central. Whatever commentaries were written on Qur'an by early commentators like Tabari, Ibn Kathir, Kasshaf and others have become as sacred as the Qur'an itself. Also, the hadith literature which was compiled two centuries after the death of the Holy Prophet is also treated on par with the Qur'an.

The early Islamic society was quite progressive and dynamic but since early 13th century, it began to stagnate. Besides theology, early Muslims achieved great heights of knowledge in natural sciences and secular philosophies. Any

one could be proud of these achievements. In fact Europe was passing through dark ages when Islamic society was thriving with knowledge. Europe learnt from Arabs. Most advanced universities of the world were located in Baghdad, Cairo and other places.

It is true there were problems. Some theologians opposed dissemination of secular sciences and philosophies. There was polemical debate between Ibn Rushd (Avveros) and Imam Ghazzali. Imam Ghazzali wrote his famous work *Tahafut al-filasafai* (Bewilderment of Philosophers) to which Ibn Rushd replied with a book *Tahafut Tahafut al-Falasifah* (Bewilderment of Bewilderment of Philosophers).

Imam Ghazzali himself had studied philosophy in depth but felt dissatisfied and ultimately could find inner peace in *tasawwuf* (Sufism). Philosophy, he felt, fails to answer ultimate questions of our destiny and leads to more intellectual anxiety and it is only religion which ensures spiritual growth and inner peace with conviction. It is true intellect cannot give answers which could provide inner peace. Those who seek inner peace take refuge in religion or in spiritual sciences like the Sufis.

But those who are ever inquisitive about this universe its origin and its end, never tire of intellectual inquiry. Quest for truth is a continuing process. It is continuing intellectual inquiry which leads to new dimensions of knowledge. Theologians in all religions generally resist intellectual inquiry. It is also interesting to note that once theology is born based on scripture and other social and historical influences, it becomes 'divine' for coming generations of theologians. Re-thinking in the field of theology is strictly prohibited.

Theology cannot be treated, strictly speaking, as wholly divine. It is partly divine and partly results of human intellectual efforts to grapple with the meaning and significance of scriptural injunctions. And any intellectual effort cannot escape social, historical and geographical

influences. Thus any product of intellectual inquiry should not be treated as closed under the term divine.

The Prophet of Islam (PBUH) always encouraged efforts to find solution of the problems facing the believers. He encouraged his companion Jabal bin Ma'adh to make intellectual efforts to solve problem through what is called *ijtihad* and even said if you make mistake in finding solution still you will be awarded single merit and if you find correct solution Allah will reward you doubly.

However, this is acknowledged by all 'Ulama yet no one encourages *ijtihad* to meet new challenges arising in the contemporary world. All great Islamic thinkers like Mohammad Abduh who grappled with new problems, resorted to *ijtihad* and encouraged others too to resort to it. Today the Islamic world is stagnating because any fresh inquiry or thinking is discouraged. The Islamic world today is clinging to traditions developed during the medieval ages.

What is unfortunate is that early Islamic society was most dynamic. Whole corpus of shari'ah law developed through lively debates on the problems that arose and great deal of intellectual efforts went into developing this body of law that exists today. This spirit of inquiry has been totally lost. When Islam spread to non-Arab parts of world host of new problems arose on which no direct guidance was available to the doctors of law who were trying to develop new corpus of law.

It must be said that what these jurists (*fuqaha'*) developed was most progressive and just law of the day. It was also most comprehensive law in the field of personal laws, criminal law, procedural law and property law. Such corpus of law did not exist before. This was possible only because of intellectual vigor and dynamism. However, today we witness just the opposite in Muslim societies – total stagnation. The 'ulama have become highly conservative and do not allow any change.

Some modern intellectuals who try to re-think this corpus of law, these 'ulama oppose it with all force they command. There have been many victims of their wrath. Latest among them is Abu Nasr Zaid of Egypt who had to run away to Holland as the 'ulama declared him kafir and also issued fatwa that his wife is haram on him. He and his wife had to flee Egypt to avoid being arrested. Earlier Fazlur Rehman from Pakistan had to flee his country to spend rest of his life in the USA where he died.

We can certainly be proud of our tradition but cannot allow it to be impediment in our further development. Allah creates ever-new situations and these new situations become challenge for us. It is because of this overwhelming weight of tradition that Muslims have been divided in number of sects and each sect considers itself on true path and other sects on error. They keep on denouncing each other and spend more time in proving the other wrong than on meeting new challenges. For them last word has been said on every thing and there is absolutely no need to think any more.

Today, in the globalised world, there is urgent need to evolve a new fiqh (jurisprudence) and new theology. The Qur'an is most modern in various aspects of life. It anticipates human rights, which is pre-second World War concept but in Muslim world there is no freedom to think. Freedom of conscience is most fundamental to Qur'an, which declares unambiguously that 'there is no compulsion in religion'. There can be no clearer pronouncement of freedom of conscience and freedom of faith.

In fact this is most modern concept and the whole Qur'anic approach makes it clear that genuine faith requires complete inner satisfaction through thorough intellectual inquiry. If one is not permitted to satisfy oneself intellectually through such an inquiry his/her faith will have no inner conviction and satisfaction and such belief will be empty. Freedom of inquiry is a must for real *iman* (faith) and hence the Qur'an invited

people to satisfy themselves with full freedom of inquiry before they accept Islam.

Thus it is highly necessary today to recreate this atmosphere of free inquiry in the Islamic world. It will create new vigor and will make Islamic world most dynamic and more and more people will be attracted towards Islam. Needless to say Islam spread so fast in the world not because of any supernatural miracle. Its real miracle was its values of justice, compassion and strong sympathy for weaker sections of society, on one hand, and its emphasis on freedom of conscience, on the other hand.

It was this freedom of conscience which attracted great intellectuals of the time from the Persian, Roman and Indian worlds. Islam had come to liberate humanity from all dogmas and age-old traditions but Islamic world today is again is under the grip of these dogmas and traditions.

We have to revive the spirit of early Islamic centuries when great Islamic minds were busy indulging in inquiry. There were invigorating debates like human person is free or determined, the Qur'an is created or coeternal with Allah, something is good as Shari'ah says it is good or Shari'ah says it is good because human reason says it is good. These debates are unthinkable today and we have just to submit, in the name of Islam, to what 'ulama declare through their fatwas, to be true.

Let that early spirit of Islam be reborn when it was greatest project for social justice and human freedom.

✱ Islam and Modern Age, July, 2007.

3

ISLAM AND INTER-FAITH ENGAGEMENT*

Islam is being projected as intolerant of other faiths. This perception of Islam is based on certain selected events, not on Qur'anic teachings or Prophet's ahadith. It is one thing to judge a religion by its teachings and another to see it in the light of some instances of intolerance by some individuals. Also, such events are picked up selectively to suit certain assumptions, often politically motivated.

First of all it is necessary to closely study the Qur'anic position both normative and contextual. Then we have to study certain historical event of tolerance or intolerance, also in proper historical context. Also, one has to study the Qur'anic approach of engaging with other religions. What Qur'an emphasizes as common with other religions and what it differs with. Does it finds anything in common with other religions or totally rejects them? And what is its position where it totally rejects any religion?

QUR'AN AND OTHER RELIGIONS

Qur'an was revealed over a period of twenty-three years in two cities Mecca and Madina. The revelations began in Mecca and ended in Madina. Mecca was an international trade centre of great significance in that area and the main tribes of Mecca, particularly the Quraysh, a leading tribe of Mecca, was among those carrying on trade with Roman Empire who pursued Christianity. Then in Madina and in some other parts of Arabia, there were Jews. Thus Arabs were in touch with these

two great Biblical religions. Arabs, for various reasons, had refrained from adopting these religions, though few Arabs on border region had embraced Christianity in its monophysite form, one different from Roman version.

In Mecca of course there were no Christians or Jews. The Meccan Arabs were all idol worshippers, having no revealed truth or scripture. The Prophet (PBUH) was also borne and brought up in Mecca. He seems to have instinctively rejected idol worship and began to meditate in the cave of Hira in search of truth when he receives revelation and he proclaims himself as the Prophet of Allah (Rasulallah or Messenger of Allah). He faced stiff opposition from his own tribe and his own close relatives.

However, he was deeply committed to his mission and readily faces severe persecution from his opponents. Despite this he proposes to his persecutors that "for you is your religion and for me is mine" (109:6). Thus Qur'an never imposed anything on unwilling hearts. It also pronounces same principle in surah revealed in Madina, "There is no compulsion in religion – the right way is indeed clearly distinct from error. So whoever disbelieves in the devil and believes in Allah, he indeed lays hold on the firmest handle which shall never break.(2:256)

Thus the Qur'an lays down a principle here: there is no compulsion in religion. Religion has something to do with ones heart and soul and appeals to ones inner conscience; and thus can never be imposed. All Qur'an does is to make right path distinct from path of error and leave it to people to accept right path or that of error. Those who accept right path are laying their hand on a firmest handle which will never break.

Thus both in Meccan and Madinian revelation Qur'an is firm about one thing, there cannot be any forcible imposition of religion, one can only show right path or warn about consequences of pursuing path of error and then leave it to the choice of the person concerned. Thus an individual and his/her

conscience is at the centre of decision making. There is no mistaking about it.

The Meccans did not possess higher truth; they were immersed in superstition woven around various gods and goddesses on one hand, and, the upper class Meccan merchants were by and large hedonists – making super profits, enjoying life and hardly cared for morality and truth. The masses suffered due to poverty and neglect and found some solace in superstitious beliefs. The Qur'an tried to address this situation in Mecca and exhorted the Meccans to believe in revealed truth and not to consider this worldly life as an end in itself. The upper class Meccan merchants ridiculed the very idea of any revealed truth. Material pleasures was an end in itself for them.

However, there were other religions present in the area i.e. Judaism and Christianity. While Qur'an termed Meccans who possessed no higher truth as unbelievers (*kafirs* – literally those who hide truth) and Christians and Jews who possessed revealed scriptures as *ahl al-Kitab* (i.e. people of the book). The Qur'an accepts all Biblical prophets from Adam to Christ and those in between as prophets of Allah and calls them all either as *anbiya'* (plural of nabi – prophet) or *rusul* (plural of *rasul* – messenger).

In fact Qur'an requires Muslims to believe in all the prophets and forbids to believe in some and not to believe in others. Thus Qur'an says: "Those who disbelieve in Allah and His messengers and desire to make a distinction between Allah and His messengers and say: We believe in some and disbelieve in others; and desire to take a course in between – these are truly disbelievers and We have prepared for disbelievers an abasing chastisement." (4:150-51) that one should not make distinction between one prophet and the other is repeated in verses like 2:136, 2:285 and 3:86.

Thus Qur'an accepts truth content of all previous religions as this truth was brought by Allah's messengers. Thus Qur'an

mentions various prophets by name in chapters like “The Family of al-Imran” (chapter 3), “Yunus”, - Jonah (chapter 10), “Ibrahim – Abraham (chapter 14), “Al-Qasas”, The Narrative (Chapter 28 and so on. The running thread of the Qur’an is the concept of what many Qur’anic scholars like Shah Waliyullah, Maulana Azad and others have called *wahdat al-din* i.e. unity of religions.

Shah Waliyullah has developed this concept in his opus magnum *Hujjat Allah-i- al-Balighah*¹ He extensively argues on the basis of the holy Qur’an which says, “To every nation We appointed acts of devotion; which they observe, so let them not dispute with thee in the matter, and call to thy Lord. Surely thou art on a right guidance.” (22:61). This is again repeated in the verse 2:148 which says, “Everyone has a direction to which he turns (himself), so vie with one another in good deeds.”

The clear implication of this verse is that there are different directions (and also different ways) of saying ones prayer. That is not the essence, it at best is symbolic. However, what is of substance is good deeds. Thus different communities may continue to pursue their ways and directions of prayer but what is more important is to excel each other in good deeds.

The Qur’an has expressed this in yet another way in verse 5:48 wherein it says: “For every one of you We appointed a law and a way. And if Allah had pleased He would have made you a single people, but that He might try you in what He gave you. So vie one with another in virtuous deeds”.

This verse clearly implies that Allah did not create all human beings as one community but created them as different sects and communities with distinct ways. If Allah had willed He could have created them all as one community but He did

1. See chapter on “Essence of religions is one and laws and ways are different” in Shah Waliyullah *Al-Hujjat al-Balighah* (Deoband, India, nd) vol. I. pp-212-216.

not do so to test them whether they can live in peace and harmony despite these differences and vie one with the other in good deeds.

Thus Qur'an clearly accepts plurality of religions and ways of life and different laws and treats it as a challenge for humanity to live and coexist with tolerance towards each other and strengthen forces of peace and moral order. Values and moral order is much more basic than differences of faith and devotion. So Qur'an in no way adopts hostile attitude towards other religions.

It also exhorts its followers: "Abuse not those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest, exceeding the limits, they abuse Allah through ignorance. Thus to every people; have We made their deeds fair-seeming. (6:109)

In this verse Qur'an adopts very practical view towards other belief systems. It says one should not abuse those who worship other than Allah as they will also abuse Allah out of ignorance and thus it would lead to conflict or violence and spirit of coexistence will be destroyed. It then makes very important statement that for every people or community we have made their deeds fair-seeming i.e. every people think their way of belief and their way of living is best. Let everyone believe what they want to believe and all of you will ultimately return to Him and He will decide who was right and who was wrong.

This is very practical approach to maintain peace and promote coexistence in the world as world is plural and any belief system which exerts its superiority is bound to result in conflict. Each religion and religious belief system is unique. There may be outward differences but there is inward unity and it is this inward unity which is emphasized by the Qur'an on the basis that all religions have been brought by Allah's prophets and each people have their own law and their own road. According to ones hadith Allah has sent in all 1,24000 prophets and he has sent His prophet's to all nations (13:7).

It is interesting to note that on the basis of the verse 13:7 many Sufi saints in India maintained that Allah must have sent His prophet's to India too. How can he forget a great country like India? Thus they concluded that Ram and Krishna who are highly revered in India might have been guides sent by Allah to Hindus. Mazhar Jan-i-Janan, a great Sufi saint of Qadiriya silsila in 18th century India had cogently argued that Hindus are monotheists as according to Hindu Shashtra (scriptures) Ishwar (god) is *nirankar* and *nirgun* (i.e. without shape and without attributes) and according to Mazhar Jan-i-Janan it is highest form of *tawheed* (i.e. oneness of God) He also argues we should not take Hindus to be kafirs just because they worship idols.

He then argues that kafir is one who possesses no truth as pre-Islamic Arabs possessed none and refused to accept it when it was revealed to the Prophet (PBUH) and hence they were denounced as kafirs. But Hindus possess truth in the form of Bedas (Vedas) and Hindu scriptures do not prescribe idol worship. It is popular practice among Hindus who cannot conceive of abstract God and hence need idols to reach God who has no shape or attributes. Thus according to Mazhar Jan-i-Janan these idols are like Sheikh for Sufis who act as a guide to reach God.²

Thus it is very helpful attitude for living together and respecting each others faith on the basis of inner unity of all religions. There were other religious thinkers in India who promoted mutual understanding. The most important thinker was Dara Shikoh who studied Hindu religion through its original sources. Dara Shikoh was a Moghul prince appointed as successor to the throne of India by his illustrious father Shah Jahan but ultimately lost to Aurangzeb, his brother who defeated Dara Shikoh and became Emperor of India.

2. See *Mirza Jan-i-Janan ke Khutut* tr. From Persian into Urdu by Khaliq Anjm (Deli, 1989) pp-131. And also see pp- 131-34.

Dara Shikoh translated *The Upanishads* from Sanskrit into Persian and named it *Sirr-e-Akbar* (The Great Mystery). He argued in this Persian translation that Hindus are monotheists and he said after Qur'an he found concept of *tawheedi* in *Upanishads*. He maintains that the Qur'anic verses 56:77-79 refer to *Upanishads*. He feels certain that the hidden book (*kitab-i-maknun*) is a reference to this very ancient book.³ Dara's *Majma'ul Bahrayn* is a classical work of Islam's engagement with other religions in India.

In this book Dara Shikoh compares religious terminology of Islam with Hinduism and conclusively shows that difference is of language, not of actual ideas behind it. He often refers to Hindus as *muwahhidun-i-Hind* i.e. monotheists of India. He says that mootheists of India also believe in *qiyamat-i-kubra* (i.e. the Great Day of Judgment) and in Hindu scriptures it is referred to as *mahapralay*. According to Dara Shikoh; Hindus also believe in heaven and hell and that after residing in heaven and hell *mahapralay* will occur He also quotes verses from Qur'an like 72:9, 34:79, 68:39, 55:26-27 and 72:9 to prove his point.⁴

Dara Shikoh also compares the concept of *mukti* with the Sufi concept of *fana fi' Allah* i.e. annihilation in Allah as ultimate liberation and quotes the verse from Qur'an 72:9. He then throws detailed light on the concept of *mukti* (liberation) in Hindu religion and considers *brahmada* (the Universe) as the God. According to him *brahmada* in Islam is referred to as *Alam-i-Kubra* which manifestation of Allah.⁵

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3. See Introduction to Dara Shikoh's *Majma'ul Bahrayn* (Co-mingling of Two Oceans) by M.Mahfuz al-Haq (reprinted by The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1982), pp-13.
 4. See Asghar Ali Engineer "A Muslim View of Hinduism" presented at a seminar in Glasgow University, Scotland (to be published in a book soon).
 5. *Majma'ul Bahrayn* op.cit. pp-106-107 quoted in Asghar Ali Engineer *ibid*.

Thus there have been very positive efforts by some Muslim thinkers to engage with other religions. They upheld the Qur'anic spirit in this regard. While the Qur'an differs from Christians and Jews on certain crucial points, yet advises Muslims to engage with them in a manner which will promote understanding, not conflict. Thus Qur'an says, "And argue not with the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) except by what is best." And this verse further emphasizes commonness among these religions when it says, "We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our God and your God is One, and to Him we submit." (29:46)

Again emphasizing commonness between Islam and people of the book, Qur'an says, "O People of the Book, come to an equitable word between us and you, that we shall serve none but Allah and that we shall not associate aught with Him, and that some of us shall not take others for lords besides Allah: bear witness. But if they turn away, then say: Bear witness, we are Muslims.

The prophet wrote letters to Heraculeus in the year 6 A.H. (Bukhari 1:1) and similar letters were written to other potentates among whom was Muqauqis, the king of Egypt. According to Maulana Muhammad Ali, "In this verse the Jews and the Christians are called upon the basic principles of the faith of Islam. The reference in the sentence *some of us shall not take others for lords* is to the practice prevailing then among Jews and Christians, and at present among Muslims too, to take religious leaders as invested with Divine powers, which is more clearly enunciated in 9:31: 'They have taken their doctors of law and their monks for lords besides Allah (9:31)'.⁶

We find in Qur'an verse like 2:136 which states, "Say, we believe in Allah and (in) that which has been revealed to us, and (in) that which was revealed to Abraham, and Ishmael

6. *The Holy Qur'an* tr. By Maulana Muhammad Ali (Lahore, Pakistan 1973) pp-150, footnote 446.

and Issac and Jacob and the tribes, and (in) that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and (in) that which was given to the prophets from their Lord, we do not make any distinction between an of them and to Him do we submit." (2:136)

This is very significant verse which shows commonness between these faiths and respect in which Muslims should hold all these prophets and are told not to make any distinction between one prophet and the other. It is part of their belief and one must act accordingly. Those who show any distinction cannot be true Muslims.

However, there are verses in the Qur'an which some can cite to show differences from Jews and Muslims and Christians too. Thus there is verse in the Qur'an which states regarding Jews, "Thou wilt certainly find the most violent of people in enmity against the believers to be the Jews and the idolaters; and thou wilt find nearest in friendship to the believers to be those who say, We are Christians. That is because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not proud." (5:82)

Why Christians are described as friends and Jews as violent the reason is clearly explained. It is not because Jewish religion is more inimical to Islam and Christianity less so. Reason is more political struggle between Muslims and Jews. The Holy Prophet had tried his best to woo Jews when he migrated to Madina. He entered into a covenant with them and gave them full freedom to follow their own religion. He even prayed in the direction of Jerusalem. But Jews never took kindly to the Prophet nor to the Muslims.

They saw Prophet and Muslims as those who were dominating Madina over which they had hegemony so far. The Meccan Muhajirs also were expert traders and the Jews feared these migrants will capture their trade. The Jews also often acted as arbiters between Aus and Khazraj, the two main tribes of Madina.

The Jews violated the covenant and conspired with the *kuffar* (unbelievers) of Mecca who attacked Madina. As per the covenant the Jews should have cooperated with the Muslims in defending Madina. Instead they helped Meccan *kuffar* and thus earned enmity with Muslims. On the other hand Christians so far had cooperated with Muslims. The Negus of Abyssinia had given refuge to Muslim migrants to Ethiopia before they migrated to Madina. Also, when a Christian delegation from Najran met the Prophet (PBUH) led by Abdul Masih, he (Prophet) met them inside his mosque and Prophet treated them with respect and in friendly way.

The verse also refers to Christian priests and monks who are not proud and always engaged in worshipping God and so there was no question of any clash in political sense. So controversy with Jews and calling them violent in enmity is not on account of their religion but on account of their socio-economic and political clash with Muslims in Madina. The Jews of Madina never extended hand of friendship towards Muslims despite all sincere efforts prophet made for friendship with them.

At one level the Qur'an treats all human beings on equal plane whatever their creed or colour or nation or tribe. It considers all as equally honourable. Thus a verse in Qur'an declares, "And surely We have honored the children of Adam, and We carry them in the land and the sea, and We provide them with good things, and We have made them to excel highly most of those whom We have created." (17:70)

Here all human beings are equal. Qur'an also exhorts Muslims not to discriminate between people on any ground race, language, nation etc. All colours, languages and races are signs of God. Thus says the Qur'an "And of His signs is the creation of heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours." (30:22). Thus black colour is as much creation of Allah as white and Arabic as much as other languages. So no one should claim superiority over the other.

The Qur'an also takes very practical view that all human beings cannot believe in one religion or the other. They are bound to incline towards different faiths. It poses question to the prophet "If thy Lord had pleased, all those who are in the earth would have believed, all of them. Will thou then force them till they are believers?" (10:99). In another verse Qur'an puts the same thing little differently: May be thou will kill thyself with grief, sorrowing after them, if they believe not in this announcement." (18:6) Read these two above verses with "there is no compulsion in religion" (2:256) and Qur'anic approach in plurality of faiths becomes very clear.

The Qur'an nowhere intends that all should accept Islam. It is not practical at all. Thus only way is to ensure freedom of faith, on one hand, and, coexistence, harmoniously, on the other. The truth of this assertion we are discovering in the contemporary world. Plurality of faiths is on the increase due mainly to economic migrations from poorer underdeveloped to highly developed nations.

ISLAM AND WESTERN WORLD

At one time Europe and North America were mono-religious, mono cultural though Europe was multi-lingual. Today both Europe and north America have become multi-religious and they have developed theory of multi-culturalism as people of different religions and cultures are on the increase and they are substantial minorities in these regions now. The days of mono-religion are a history now.

Among others Muslims are the largest minority both in Europe and in North America. Naturally it leads to religious tensions. In European history there have been political clashes between Muslims and Christians. Crusades are part of European history and it is on account of these crusades that stereotype "sword in one hand and Qur'an in the other" persists in the European psyche even today. And thanks to the

ongoing conflict between USA and the Middle East, this conflict has still not been resolved.

If anything it is getting exacerbated in recent times and 9/11 attack has further intensified it. The extremists among Muslims resort to violence in response to violence by the West in Middle East and it has become a vicious circle. Strong prejudices have been created against Islam in this region. The Muslim extremists invoke slogan of jihad (wrongly of course) to commit violence in western countries and this strengthens the stereotype that Islam is religion of violence and war and does not want to co-exist with other religions, especially Christianity.

We have seen above how wrong this impression is. But this is very widespread impression throughout non-Muslim world. What happens in history cannot be ascribed to Islam. I have already discussed in detail elsewhere⁷ that what happens in history is empirical reality, not religious truth and that religious teachings should be compared with religious teachings and history of religion with history of another religion and not with teachings of that religion.

Islam always coexisted with Judaism and Christianity peacefully on religious plane though there were clashes between Muslims and Christians in medieval ages (and not between Islam and Christianity). These clashes were among the ruling classes and not among Muslim and Christian masses. The Western press projects clash of interests as clash of religions and on the other hand, the Muslim 'fundamentalists'⁸ too make it appear as religious clash.

7. See "Islam as Religion and Islam as History" in *Islam and Modern Age* vol. X. No.4 April 2007.

8. Here I am using 'fundamentalism' in the pejorative sense in which western media uses though in Islam fundamentalism has positive connotation.

There is no clash of civilizations either as Prof. Huntington⁹ would like us to believe. The main thesis of Huntington is fundamentally based on wars and clashes between Christian and Muslim rulers, and not on clash of religious teachings. Even in medieval ages there were no clashes of religion, mostly clashes of empires – Christian and Muslim. Both Jews and Christians held important posts in Muslim administrations. Jews and Christians always lived in peace in Muslim countries though they were persecuted in Europe and were forced to live in ghettos. They never faced such persecution in Islamic countries.

Ahmed M.H.Shboul observes in his paper “Arab Islamic Perceptions of Byzantine Religion and culture”, “Given the religio-political and military character of the rise of the Arab Islamic power, the sympathetic and tolerant attitude of Islam toward Christianity and Christians, and the actual history of the Arab-Byzantine military conflict, can one describe this conflict, during the period of the Arab conquest and after, as simply or even principally a religious conflict? It is my submission that such a description would be inaccurate and misleading.” He then quotes Norman Daniel ‘it is already to beg the question to speak of a religious war, before we have established that that is what it was.’”¹⁰

Mr. Ahmed further points out, referring to complex issues involved in Arab-Byzantine wars of conquest, “ It is also true that Arab-Byzantine sources speak of economic, political, and tribal factors in this conflict. In a real sense, early Arab Islamic sources seem to depict the war more as a conflict between ‘Arab and Byzantines’ rather than; between ‘Muslims and Christians’ – a fact that is also confirmed by Syriac sources. At

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9. Samuel P. Huntington *The Clash of Civilizations and The Remaking of World Order* (Penguin Books, 1996).
 10. See Jacques Waardenburg ed. *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions – A Historical Survey* (Oxford University Press, 1999) pp-125.

the practical level large numbers of Christian Arab warriors from Syria joined the Muslim armies against the Byzantines, while other Christians (and Samaritans) cooperated in several ways with the advancing Muslim Arabs.¹¹

Thus we see even in medieval ages the wars fought between Christians and Muslims were not of religious but political and ethnic nature in which Christian Arabs cooperated with Muslim Arabs. We need to change erroneous perceptions of these wars between Christians and Muslims. It will have far reaching consequences for contemporary nature of conflict. Islam as a religion engages tolerantly and meaningfully with other religions, especially Christianity and Judaism.

Today a large number of Muslims live in Europe and North America. A substantial number of Muslims live as minority in the world, mostly under democratic dispensations. Thus there is great change between medieval and contemporary reality. In medieval ages Muslim empire was spread in large parts of the world and most of the Muslims lived under Islamic dispensation though there were some Muslims living in minority as well during those days.

Thus whole fiqh literature developed then by the Muslim jurists had its own context. Firstly Muslims were in majority. Secondly Muslims were rulers and Muslim regimes were monarchical and non-democratic. Thus whole corpus of fiqh (jurisprudence) in respect of Muslim and non-Muslim minorities must be reviewed and new fiqh should be evolved which should fit into new context. The concepts of *darul harb* (domain of war) and *darul Islam* are totally outdated today.

The new fiqh has to be evolved keeping in mind democratic regime, on one hand, and on the other human rights and minority rights regimes, on the other. Our jurists

11. Quoted from Azdi *Futuh al-Sham*, pp-111 and 130 in "Arab Islamic perceptions of Byzantine Religion and Culture" pp-126.

should not mechanically repeat the opinion of medieval jurists who were working in very different context. They responded to various problems in the light of their own experience. We have to respond in the light of our own context.

The Quranic concept of *ahl dhimma* (people whose responsibility was on Muslim rulers for their safety) for the people of the book was very creative one and responsible one. For these services to protect them Qur'an suggested what is called *jizyah* (a levy for protection of the *dhimmis*). However, it does not hold any more. The very concept of *ahl dhimma* cannot be applied today in the changed context. The Qur'anic concept of *dhimmi* was contextual, not normative.

Today all minorities have been guaranteed equal political rights under the second generation of UNO charter of rights and international law. The new minority fiqh (jurisprudence) has to take this into account. Non-Muslim minorities are as much entitled to these rights as much as the Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries like European countries, North America, India and several other countries.

The minority regime also guarantees religious and cultural rights. Of course under Qur'anic concept of *ahl-dhimma* also religious and cultural rights were guaranteed but not political rights. Now even political rights also have to be guaranteed. At one level, minorities are accorded full citizenship and in addition cultural and religious rights. Thus new minority fiqh has to take all this into account and Muslim countries also should make these rights available to their Christian or Jewish or other minorities.

At one level they all should be treated as citizens with full political rights and also they should be given full religious and cultural rights. Unfortunately in some Muslim states non-Muslim minorities do not enjoy full citizenship rights and though they are free to practice their religion they are still treated as secondary citizens. And in some Muslim countries

they are not free to maintain their religious places or establish places of worship.

The Qur'an, on the other hand, wants all religious places to be equally protected and allowed to be flourished. It says, "Those who are driven from their homes without a just cause except that they say: Our Lord is Allah. And if Allah did not repel some people by others, cloisters, and churches, and synagogues, and mosques in which Allah's name is much remembered, would have been pulled down. And surely Allah will help him who helps Him. (22:40).

This the Qur'an guarantees perfect religious freedom not only of Muslims but of all other religions like Christianity and Judaism. Synagogues and churches should be protected along with the mosques. Minority rights must be guaranteed both when Muslims are a minority and when non-Muslims are in a minority. In medieval fiqh this spirit of Qur'anic injunction, clear as crystal, was lost more because of arrogance of power, than anything else.

In minority fiqh which I am suggesting this Qur'anic spirit needs to be revived. Large number of Muslims alive as minority today in this globalised world and in most of the countries of West they enjoy equal citizenship rights. Islam today is flourishing in secular democratic countries though in practice there are some problems also.

Secular democracy has its own impact on laws and belief systems which have evolved under secular democracy. Thus secular democracy in western countries is impacting on Islam too. There is interesting parallel with communism. Communism also developed authoritarian system in Soviet Union. People did not enjoy basic freedoms. But communism in Europe was greatly influenced by democratic west and some communists developed the concept of Euro-communism which was more open and respectful of other systems and democratic in nature.

There is, similarly great need for developing concept of Euro-Islam which will respect pluralism, multi-culturalism and will be open to other faiths and would respect other faiths. It will also adjust itself to western way of life though not necessarily accept it. There is also question of practicing Shari'ah law. Most of the Muslims insist on practicing Shari'ah law as they have inherited. This creates complex problems.

The hijab controversy has rocked many European countries including France and England. French government has banned hijab in educational institutions which itself goes against concept of multi-culturalism, but Muslims also have to re-think some of their practices. In U.K., for example a school teacher refused to take off her *niqab* (which covered her face and only two eyes peeping out) even inside the class room insisting it is her religious belief.

This is simply not true. The Qur'an nowhere requires women to cover their face. It only insists on lowering the gaze and dress modestly (see 24:31). No Islamic jurists have insisted on covering face. All agree that face and hands could be kept open. At the most it is cultural practice developed in highly feudalized society and is being forced on their women folk.

In minority fiqh a review of such cultural practices which are practiced under religious garb, there should be re-think on these issues. No one suggests that Muslim women should adopt western way of dressing (which men have readily adopted without any Shar'i problems), but that they should go for modest dressing which will not make their sexuality focus of attention.

However, traditional Muslims go by opinion of certain jurists rather than by the injunctions of the Qur'an. The *niqab* is not at all in keeping with the Qur'anic injunction nor has it anything to do with Islamic teachings on sexual conduct. It is part of culture in certain Arab countries like Saudi Arabia which is mechanically imitated by Muslims in other countries as they think Saudi Arabia is a model Islamic state.

Such behavior creates problems between westerners and migrant culture. Of course, Europe and other western countries of North America have accepted multi-culturalism, and even religious pluralism, yet if one insists one would not go for any compromise or give and take spirit, tensions will arise between two cultures. One should not violate basic principles but should work for give and take.

In medieval fiqh there are surely feudal cultural elements which do not suit modern democratic culture based on human rights and women's rights. The new fiqh, if based only on normative Qur'anic injunctions is developed it will go a great way in accommodating modern values and Muslim women will have much greater latitude. In western society basic freedoms play very crucial role and medieval culture, being feudal, limits role of basic freedoms in life and imposes authoritarian culture, calling it 'divine'.

However, Euro-Islam will have to come to terms with role of basic freedoms in western society and shall have to develop a new fiqh fit for democratic culture. As Qur'an requires Muslims to respect other religions, it also requires them to respect other cultures, if they do not violate core Islamic morality. The Muslim intellectuals will have to play creative role in non-Muslim societies for developing its new fiqh.

In Muslim countries traditional 'ulama have great influence and hence it is very difficult to bring about any change but in European countries conditions are different. No doubt traditional 'ulama are being imported to these countries also and they deliver their traditional sermons in the mosques. And many Muslims do get influenced by these sermons and want to practice traditional Shari'ah.

Traditional Islam appeals to them for another reason also. That reason is sense of alienation and this sense of alienation pulls them back to their traditional native culture. Also racial attacks further aggravate this sense of alienation and it becomes very difficult to bring about accommodation between

two different cultures. Of late political situation has also become quite hostile to Islam and Muslims.

Some Muslim youth are getting drawn to al-Qaeda network for very complex reasons and who are responsible for political policies towards Islamic world, particularly the Middle East. Today Islam is being equated with violence and fanaticism, thanks to these acts of violence.

The Qur'an lays great stress on wisdom so much so that it says, "And whoever is given wisdom, he indeed is given great good" (2:269) Why Muslims do not use wisdom to respond to the situation they are faced with. Responding with violence results in great loss of innocent lives and creates more hostility for them. You can match ability of western powers to use violence with bomb explosions here and there. It does no good at all. Instead if they use wisdom they can work to build favorable opinion in these countries and isolate the western rulers in the world opinion.

There are thousands of people in the western countries who oppose neo-imperialist wars by America. One must build on their support. By resorting to violence they earn media hostility too and in democratic era media make and unmake opinion. Wisdom lies using media sympathy through peaceful means. Thus there should be zero tolerance for violence. Wisdom lies in that.

The medieval Islamic fiqh lays more stress on jihad (through concept of jihad) jihad also got distorted in the medieval environs wherein things were decided by sword and there was no concept of rights of people. This fiqh should be rejected and new fiqh should lay stress on peace and human rights. Peace is very central to Islam. Salam (peace) is integral to Islam as it is Allah's name also.

Thus in new fiqh salam, rahmah, hikmah and 'adl (peace, compassion, wisdom and justice) should be central values. And these values as integral part of new fiqh should be taught in all madrasas. These are most fundamental Qur'anic values.

This will change entire image of Islam. It will be more humane and will command respect from its worst enemies. A new leadership should replace traditional ulama who will find difficult to develop new approach.

This might appear utopian to many but it is this Islam which will lead to honourable solution for our complex problems and will ensure peaceful coexistence in this war torn world due mainly to powerful American interests. But we should remember we strengthen American hands by responding through sporadic violence. Let us hope these ideas will generate response from new generation living in western countries.

※ Islam and Modern Age, August – September, 2007.

4

RELIGION AND SOCIETY: A NOTE ON DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIP*

What is religion? It is simple but difficult question to answer. What is generally considered to be religion may be mixture of many things – superstitions, customs, traditions, cultural practices and so on. What is received generally by a believer is often blend of all this. For a believer all this is integral part of religion. Any violation of any of this is considered as violation of religion itself.

Very few people understand what is core of religion and what exactly constitutes that core. Even sectarian divisions, result of different interpretations by religious scholars become divine. Religious scholars who are supposed to have better understanding of religion, are victims of such confusion. Not only that to them their own interpretation is 'true' religion, they also add various cultural and social adjuncts to their belief system. Such an approach creates various problems, particularly when it comes to bringing about much needed reforms.

For correct understanding of religion it is not enough to be theologian; it is also necessary to be a sociologist, historian and cultural anthropologist. Being mere theologian produces very constricted view of religion. Thus we need a holistic approach to religion. What cannot be changed is divinely revealed core which often consists of essence of religious doctrines.

It is true that many social, cultural and historical elements also creep in revealed scriptures or any other scripture. That makes theologians and religious scholars feel they are also

integral part of religion. No scripture comes into existence in social, cultural or historical vacuum. But that does not mean they become unalterable part of religion itself. Cultural milieu plays very important role in giving expression to religious teachings. In fact often cultural milieu in which a religion comes into existence often gives uniqueness to that religion.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad has made very apt observation that 'Din' is one but Shari'ahs differ from religion to religion. Shari'ahs differ mainly because of cultural differences as different religions come into existence in different cultural milieu. Language also plays an important role. Linguistic expressions are deeply influenced by culture. And as far as language is concerned one must know its usages when the scripture is revealed or written and its usage after it. This is very important for interpretative exercises.

Scriptural hermeneutics constitutes an important part of understanding and practice of religion and hermeneutical exercise very much depends on social and cultural influences of the time as well as of contemporary context. Social, cultural and historical elements greatly influence juridical exercises. Thus jurisprudence though a very important area of religion and religious practices, is no less product of socio-cultural milieu in which it comes into existence.

Once we understand historical and cultural dynamics of juridical exercises, it will be easier to accept changes under contemporary conditions. Agreed that it is highly debatable and sensitive area but nevertheless has to be understood as much sensitively which will reduce resistance to any necessary change. If one maintains that everything or all this constitutes integral part of religion society will run into serious obstacles for change.

Tremendous advancement of knowledge today has enabled us to develop proper critique of many so-called religious practices and go back to their historical and cultural roots. The entire corpus of Shari'ah has to be reviewed in this

light. Prof. Mujib, an eminent scholar from Jamia Millia Islamia had said in an international Islamic Conference in Delhi that Shari'ah laws are human approach to divine revelation. And when we say human approach it includes social, cultural and historical approach as a human being is a product of all these forces.

The revealed verses of the Qur'an were understood by eminent Islamic jurists in the light of their social and cultural values. Thus we can say that understanding of the Qur'an is culturally mediated. We see this in day today life also. Most of our theologians never tire of saying that Qur'an gives equal rights to both man and woman but in the same breath would justify all discriminatory practices in the society.

This is because Qur'anic pronouncements about gender equality are very clear and lucid. But our practices are influenced by our culture and society which do not admit of gender equality. The Shari'ah laws were also evolved by eminent jurists under the influence of their own cultural milieu. That is why there was no unanimity among these jurists on interpretation of various Qur'anic verses and acceptance of ahadith.

One can give numerous examples of this. The Qur'an nowhere mentions three divorces to be pronounced in one sitting. It was pre-Islamic practice among Arabs and was culturally acceptable by them. Though it was clearly banned by the Prophet (PBUH) it again became part of Shari'ah law due to cultural influence. Child marriage negates the principle of Qur'anic concept of contractual marriage requiring consent of woman to be married. But child marriage was culturally acceptable to jurists of that time. Hence while retaining child marriage in Shari'ah the jurists devised the institution of *khiyar-ul-bulugh* (option of puberty) according to which a girl married off in childhood could exercise option of accepting or rejecting *nikah* on reaching age of puberty. But all these became

part of religion for common believers with no possibility of change.

The modernists and rationalists who do not understand the differences between social, cultural and historical elements of religion and core teachings of religion, condemn religion wholesale on account of such practices which go against contemporary sensibilities. I must say here that as theologians exhibit narrow outlook and justify everything they consider part of received religion, rationalists too, often exhibit narrow outlook and condemn, in the name of reason, religion itself as superstitious. Both theologians and rationalists and social scientists have to deepen their understanding about religion.

It is also important to understand role of psychology in religious beliefs. A few rationalists who consider role of reason quite central in human life ignore the fact that this too is one sided approach to human beliefs and only appeals to few rationalists. This approach totally ignores the role of religion as far as masses are concerned. As reason plays central role for intellectuals, religion and belief systems play central role for masses of people.

More balanced approach would be integrating role of faith and reason in human life. Rationalists believe that faith is blind and leads to superstitions. Religious scholars and theologians believe that reason has no role in matters of faith. Such polarization has not helped much. While rationalists must acknowledge importance of faith, theologians and religious scholars have to understand significance of reason. Human beings cannot do without either. Thus choice is thus not reason or faith but both.

In fact neither theologians have been able to do without reason in developing their theologies nor have rationalists been able to dispense with faith in assigning central role to reason. Theologians would not have been able to develop corpus of their theologies or religious jurisprudence without using arguments and use of arguments imply role of reason.

All theological debates have harnessed their intellect. Even to deny role of reason needs use of reason and intellect.

Similarly no rationalist or empiricist can do without faith. Those who assign central role to reason also display their *faith* in reason. Even laws of science based on empirical observations imply *faith* in their predictions. Even Karl Popper, the great rationalist had to admit that prediction on the basis of empirical data observed over a long period of time has an element of faith. Thus we have observed for thousands of years that sun rises from east and can predict on that basis that tomorrow too it will rise from east and can be reasonable certain about this prediction. Yet, something can suddenly happen and sun may not rise from the east. Thus an element of uncertainty remains that one in millions of chances sun may not rise from the east and thus our prediction has an element of faith that it *will* rise from the east.

Similarly Bertrand Russell, another great rationalist of twentieth century acknowledges value of faith. He says that I evaluate most critically any action I intend to undertake and once convinced that it is the only right course, I act upon it with all passion of conviction. Bertrand Russell was great pacifist. He was totally against war and violence and he acted on this conviction with faith as intense as of any believer in religion.

Thus we see that both faith and reason play important part in our life. Faith is as important ingredient of human life as reason. Either should not be stretched to its extreme. Faith stretched to its extreme can turn into blind faith or worse into superstition. And reason, stretched to its extreme can result into skepticism and skepticism paralyses faculty of action. If we continue to raise questions as an skeptic we will never be able to act firmly. Firm action requires firm belief or faith in our own action.

Certainty is an important element of action. Reason should raise important and critical questions but should ultimately

lead us to certainty for action. When it leads to mere skepticism, it may turn us into mere cynic. Reason cannot create inner certainty and for inner peace state of inner certainty is needed. Here I would like to give example of Imam Ghazali from Islamic history.

Ghazzali was a great scholar of Islam as well as of philosophy. He passed through various phases in his life. He also turned atheist at one stage. He was an eminent scholar in his own right. He became principal of one of the most prestigious colleges in Baghdad teaching theology and *kalam* (Islamic dialectics). He was a restless soul in search of truth. He ultimately realized that philosophy and reason cannot give final answers and can hardly ensure inner peace. One can find inner peace only in faith. Faith and not intellect, can provide final answer.

Not that one should agree with Imam Ghazzali all the way but what is important here is to show intellect alone is not sufficient in human life. Spiritual experiences are also of great importance. As someone has said knowledge begins with questioning and ends in wonderment. It is this spiritual experience which ends in wonderment.

In fact spheres of intellect and that of spiritualism are separate but not contradictory. Rationalists assume that faith and spiritualism are anti-rational. It is not true. Genuine spiritual experiences are often extra-rational, not anti-rational. Science deals with empirical reality, reality which can be seen and observed. Since science deals with observable reality it works on valid observable proofs. It cannot accept claims which cannot be verified.

Faith deals with, on the other hand, with another dimension of truth which is beyond observation and is based on intuition, revelation and inner experiences. Buddha also had to spend years going through various spiritual experiences before he was enlightened. Could he find any answer through intellect he would not have gone through

years of torturous process. Thus what Buddha experienced and found answers in, was not through his intellect but through his spiritual experience. Thus it should be borne in mind that in human life both empirical and spiritual knowledge play important roles.

For understanding ultimate mystery intellect is not sufficient. The ultimate mystery can be comprehended only through inner spiritual experiences. And genuine spiritual experience can never result in blind faith. Blind faith is resorted to only by those who have neither sharp intellect capable of critical approach nor genuine spiritual experience. Such people believe in miracles and supernatural phenomenon as they cannot face life and its complex problems.

A great mind or a great spiritual personality would never encourage blind faith and miraculous solutions. Belief in miracles and supernatural solutions is often promoted by people who exploit common people's faith and make money. Common people need such miracles to overcome their own distress and difficult problems. One cannot throw away genuine spiritual experiences on this basis. Everywhere there are unscrupulous people ready to exploit others. We should expose such scandals rather than denouncing spiritual experiences themselves.

While emphasizing importance of spiritual experiences and significance of religion one cannot under any circumstances reduce importance of intellect and intellectual critiquing of various social and religious practices. A religion must satisfy both what is intellectual and what is spiritual. One should act on the maxim 'unto intellect what belongs to it and unto spiritual what belongs to it.'

Most of the religious priests, Mullahs and Pandits behave most unscrupulously and exploit people's faith in religion and promote blind faith for their own material benefits. Often priests themselves are of low intellectual capacity and genuinely believe in such miraculous practices and

supernatural interventions. In many cases they are imparted such beliefs during their priestly training.

Thus it is very complex socio-religious phenomenon. It is not easy to deal with it. We have widespread illiteracy and poverty. For poor and exploited religion is the only solace and provides inner peace in the vale of tears, as Marx very profoundly put it. Marx described religion as 'opium' not in a negative sense as communists believed. He described religion as opium rather as painkiller. Poor masses are ruthlessly exploited and live their life in misery which is often miserable. Religion for them acts, not as much of a spiritual need but acts as vehicle to temporarily overcome their misery. It gives them feeling that God will do ultimate justice and that God is with them. Religion also provides them a source of superstition so that they could live in make-believe world of their own.

Religion for higher classes serves different needs. For many it answers questions relating to nature and meaning of life. What is source of life and what is its ultimate meaning. Another question which often troubles mind is what after death? Will death mean end of life or does it continue after death. In Qur'an there is concept of *aakhirah* usually translated as 'life after death' Such concepts are more symbolic than substantial and have been differently interpreted. Day of Judgment, Paradise, Hell, all have meanings of their own and beliefs about them vary from person to person.

Obviously science may not accept such concepts and some rationalists may even ridicule them. But science also cannot provide answer to many mysteries of life, to ultimate meaning of life. It is not something to be empirically verified but yet of profound significance for human life. Even Buddha who tends to be rational deals with life after death and talks of *nirvana* and his death in Buddhist literature is described as *parinirvana*.

According to all religions life does not end with death. The Qur'an also deals with life after death though different Muslim sects interpret it in different ways. Whatever the beliefs for life

after death, life in this world is to be lived and for that intellect is very important instrument. One can enhance ones prosperity with acquisition of knowledge and make knowledge beneficial for progress and change. Thus to make life more meaningful in this world and more comfortable one needs help of intellect and knowledge. The life in this world is a continuous process of change. Changes are not only technological but also social and cultural. Our world is undergoing changes at much more rapid pace and globalization is bringing different cultures and knowledge system together. Connectivity in this globalised world is of utmost importance.

Thus to make life more meaningful changes in material, social and legal conditions must be accepted within framework of certain fundamental values. One cannot make life more meaningful in this era without accepting social and legal changes. Our forefathers evolved legal system within framework of their experiences in their times. Any opposition to changes in the name of religion cannot be justified.

Values like justice, equality, love, compassion, human dignity, truth, non-violence are immutable but laws based on these values have to constantly change in accordance with the changed times. Gender justice has acquired tremendous importance in our times. Gender role is fast changing and women issues cannot be dealt with in same old fashion. Women today are highly educated and playing increasing role in public life. Their role in social, cultural, legal, economic and even political life is acquiring greater and greater importance. Women empowerment is a must in our era.

The Qur'an had foreseen this and gave equal rights to them. Allah has created both men and women with equal dignity and made them each others companions. Thus according to Qur'an men and women enjoy equal rights in every sphere. But during medieval ages, this ideal could not have been accepted as the whole feudal environment made

women subservient to men and this was reflected in Shari'ah laws also, though our jurists could not ignore Qur'anic ideals completely and tried to find middle course. Thus they could not make them totally subservient to men as it would have been flagrant violation of Qur'anic spirit they did make laws to give them slightly inferior status.

All this has to change and Qur'anic spirit has to be restored in Shari'ah laws through suitable changes. One cannot refuse even meaningful change in the name of religion. Certain elements of religion are undoubtedly immutable but what is immutable should be carefully separated from what is mutable. It constitutes an important challenge for modern theologians.

Unfortunately the Islamic theological institutions are far from suitably equipped to perform this important task. They perpetrate *taqlid* (blind imitation) and contravenes the very spirit of Islam. Islam was very dynamic religion in its early era and became stagnant subsequently. We have to restore this dynamism of Islam once again and this could be done through creative synthesis of modern and traditional knowledge.

It is very unfortunate that our theological institutions are still teaching Greek sciences in the name of *maqulaat* (rational sciences). Our ancestors had liberally borrowed from Greek sciences and made study of rational sciences compulsory for students of theology. It was undoubtedly a bold step in those days. Today old Greek sciences should be completely replaced by modern sciences to make Islam a dynamic religion once again.

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WOMEN AND UNDERSTANDING OF QUR'AN*

Until recently it was monopoly of man to understand and interpret great scripture and make laws according to their own understanding and man's understanding was very much colored by patriarchal culture. Now it has been well-established fact that patriarchy has played very important role in understanding of scriptures. What was considered as 'divine' was also as much male-oriented. It appeared as if God spoke through man only and women were, at best secondary in divine scheme of things.

Also, man was subject and women object of divine knowledge. Man legislated through divine ordinances and women were required to follow the laws. They could not even understand, let alone intervene, nor could they mediate in any situation. And they served God only through man. Father and then husband had to be obeyed almost as God had to be obeyed. In Islamic tradition this is well represented through a hadith which says Prophet (PBUH) said that had *sajda* (prostration) been allowed for human being I would have ordered women to perform *sajda* before their husbands.

Thus a woman was required to follow and obey man either as father or husband or even as elder brother. The right to be marriage *wali* (marriage guardian) was invested in elder or younger brother if father or grandfather or uncle did not exist. Thus in shari'ah marriage could not be solemnized without a man guardian. Woman was always like to err and hence needed male guidance.

Patriarchy was so strong an influence that even Qur'an, whose primary project appears to accord equal status to women, failed to achieve this objective in society. We have shown elsewhere (*Islam and Modern Age*, January 2007) that in Qur'an entire discourse on women is right based and for men duty based and yet Muslim society completely reversed this and again entire discourse on women became duty based and that of men right based. That was the power of patriarchy. Though the Prophet (PBUH) even in his farewell address remembered women and exhorted his followers to treat women kindly.

He said in his farewell address regarding women as reported by Ibn Ishaq, "O people! It is true that you have certain rights with regard to your women *but they also have rights over you.* (emphasis supplied). Remember that you have taken them as your wives only under Allah's trust and with His permission. If they abide by your right then to them belongs the right to be fed and clothed in *kindness*. Do treat your women well and be kind to them for *they are your partners and committed helpers.* And it is your right that they do not make friends with anyone of whom you do not approve, as well as never to be unchaste." (emphasis supplied)

The words in italics show that they were by any standard revolutionary when they were uttered (more than 14 hundred years ago). The Prophet (PBUH) was extremely supportive of women's rights, their equality with men and their dignity as human being. What was the urgency for the Prophet (PBUH) to exhort men for women's rights in the farewell address? Because he knew women are ill-treated by men in the society and even Qur'anic exhortation is ignored and hence he reinforced Qur'anic exhortation for women's rights through his farewell address. He mentions about women's likely unchaste behaviour for historical reasons. In Arabia before Islam it was not very uncommon to have extra-marital relations. Marital bonds were not strong among many tribes,

especially outside Mecca and Islam laid great stress on chastity of women and strongly condemned extra marital relations and hence Prophet also emphasized that. It was in no way derogatory to women.

Now in contemporary world situation with regard to women is fast changing. Women are now not only well educated but also are becoming increasingly independent economically. They are not satisfied with traditional interpretation of Qur'an. Not only the Muslim women but also women from other faith traditions want to revisit their respective scriptures and reinterpret them from their perspective. All universities have also started women studies departments.

There are those women who are secular and reject role of religion in their lives but there are also women (majority of whom) want to abide by injunctions of their faith but are not at all satisfied by conventional understanding of their scriptures. This is much more so as far as Muslim women are concerned. They are convinced of truth and divinity of Qur'an and want to understand it from their viewpoint.

But important question is whether they need to be expert of Arabic language for understanding Qur'an? Some 'Ulama would insist yes, anyone who wants to interpret Qur'an must have mastery over Arabic language. Not only that they also must have thorough knowledge of hadith literature. They should also know, according to them, good knowledge of how those words used by the Qur'an, were used in *jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic) period. These are, according to the 'Ulama, essential condition for understanding of the Qur'an.

The tribe of 'Ulama know very well that generally Muslims do not fulfill these conditions and hence they would not dare understand Qur'an by themselves and will ever depend on them and Qur'anic understanding will remain their monopoly for ever. It was for this reason that 'Ulama

condemned anyone who translated Qur'an in any non-Arabic language.

Even great authority on Qur'an like Shah Waliyullah in 18th century was reprimanded and punished for translating Qur'an in Persian. But one must note that this is not Qur'anic position. Qur'an itself says it has been revealed in simple language so that people can understand it easily. Let us not forget that Qur'an was addressed to mostly illiterate people of Arab. It is well known fact that Arabs were never proud of learning but of knowledge of their lineage. They rather under-rated high degree of learning.

In Islamic history even learning of Islam, theology, philosophy, philology etc. was enriched by non-Arabs. Arabs hardly ever, took keen interest in higher learning. It is for this reason Qur'an maintained that it has been revealed so that it could be understood easily (*yessarnal Qur'an*) so that even an illiterate Arab can understand it. This was when Islam was confined to Arabia. But new problems arose when Islam spread fast among non-Arab peoples.

One reason why non-Arabs took such keen interest in acquiring higher learning in Islamic fiqh, theology and philosophy was because it was only in this area that they could excel Arabs, not in the field of Arabness. After all in early history of Islam Arabs were the ruling class and despite repeated exhortation against it in Qur'an and hadith, Arabs remained very proud of their ethnicity and they continued to look down upon non-Arabs as inferior.

The non-Arabs did not want to depend on Arabs for understanding of Qur'an and they began to specialize in the knowledge and philology of Arabic language and thus it became highly specialized field of learning. Today non-Arab Muslims far exceed Arab Muslims and for them understanding Qur'an remains very serious enterprise. Of late Qur'an began to be translated into various languages and now is available in all the world languages.

It also needs to be noted here that there is no concept of priesthood in Islam, much less any church authorized to interpret Qur'an and issue binding injunctions. And women were never debarred from understanding and interpreting Qur'an. In fact throughout history of Islam there have been prominent Qur'anic authorities as well as authorities on hadith among women. In fact according to recent research at Islamic Centre at Oxford University, there were more than 38,000 *muhaddithin* (narrators of hadith) among Muslim women and their biographies have been published in eight volumes.

Thus women always took keen interest and developed appreciable learning in Qur'anic studies. But these women mostly accepted well-known male authorities as their model of learning and rarely developed an independent and autonomous understanding of Qur'an from women's perspective. Their excellence in learning was derived, more often than not, on male authorities.

But all those women who want to draw inspiration from Qur'an are not expert in Arabic language and specially in classical Arabic. Even many Arab women whose mother tongue is Arabic, speak dialects and are not well versed in classical Qur'anic Arabic. What should they do? If they go to already well-established authorities, they are all traditional authorities and do not admit of any new understanding of the Qur'anic text.

What should these non-Arab women or those Arab women not well versed in Classical Qur'anic Arabic do? Should their understanding remain subjugated to traditional understanding? In that case not only that they will not be able to achieve their liberation from male-orientation of Qur'anic interpretation, but also would not be inspired by Qur'anic injunctions which they aspire to.

The only alternative is that they should understand Qur'an in translation in their mother tongue and try to make sense of Qur'an from feminist perspective in their own language.

understanding of the Qur'an reading it in their own language. One can be a good Qur'anic scholar by studying Qur'an in her/his own language, provided his study of Qur'an is thorough. I know people who do not know a word of Arabic and are yet able to quote appropriate verses of Qur'an on subjects of their interest.

Now the question is 1) of authenticity of translation and 2) viewpoint of translator. Both are important questions. As for authenticity of translation is concerned, there are some very authentic translations are available, especially in English and also in other languages. However, second question that of viewpoint is more crucial when it comes to feminist perspective.

It is not easy to find translations, which have been done in inclusive manner and with feminist perspective. Most of the translations have been done from male viewpoint and that is considered quite natural also. It is only after mid-twentieth century that some women scholars began to study and write on Qur'an from their own perspective. Some among them have been Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud from America, Ziba Mir-Hosseini from U.K., Asghar Ali Engineer from India and others.

They have written extensively on Qur'an and women's rights but none of them have translated Qur'an from feminist point of view. This has been done now by Laleh Bakhtiar of Iranian origin living in USA. Her translation is inclusive (of both the sexes) and has translated verses pertaining to women in a very gender sensitive manner. Her translation of verse 4:34, for example, is quite interesting.

She translates it as under:

Men are supporters (qawwam) of wives because God has given some of them an advantage over others (faddalna b'adahum 'ala ba'din) and because they spend of their wealth.

So ones (f)* who are in accord with morality *are* the ones (f) who are morally obligated, the ones (f) who guard the unseen of what God has kept safe. But those (f) whose resistance (*nushuz*) you fear, then admonish them (f), and abandon them (f) in their sleeping place then go away (from them (*wadribuhunna*)) (f) then go away from them (f); and if they (f) obey you, surely look not for any way against them (f)."

Here there are few key words like *qawwam*, *nushuz* and *wadribuhunna*. Those who translate from male point of view translate *qawwam* as manager and some have even translated it as authority during earlier periods. Laleh Bakhtiar translates it very differently as 'supporters'. This translation is sensitive to female sensibilities. Actually it is also in keeping with meaning of the word *qawwam* which also means to maintain, to support financially.

Another crucial word is *nushuz* which generally means to rise against, to rebel. If we go by Prophet's farewell address after his last *haji* (as reported by Ibn Ishaq) *nushuz* can also resisting husbands authority.

Thus if wife refuses to abide by husband's wishes or resists his wishes then he should persuade her and if not persuaded isolate her in sleeping place and even then if she persists in her resistance 'go away from her' i.e. leave her. Generally the word *wadribuhunna* has been translated as 'chastise her' which is offensive to modern female sensibilities.

Of course some people point out that actually *nushuz* means sexual misconduct quoting Prophet's (PBUH) last sermon and then maintain that chastisement is for sexual misconduct and hence justified as often husbands' would kill their spouse for such behaviour in Asian and African countries. But the Prophet (PBUH) is only advising chastisement (without injury) which is far more humane and sensitive to woman's feelings.

* f in brackets stands for female.

One Turkish scholar has rendered *wadribuhunna* as 'strike away' them i.e. divorce them if they persist in their *nushuz* (resistance, rebellion or misconduct). One more argument against chastisement is verse (2: 229) where it is said "keep them (wives) in good fellowship". If one has to keep them in good fellowship where is the question of beating them or chastising. And keeping wives in good fellowship recurs in the Qur'an number of times.

Of course one argument in favour of 'chastisement' could be the historical view of Qur'anic text. In seventh century Arabia one could, the argument goes, hardly expect otherwise. In those days wife beating was socially quite acceptable and Qur'an prescribed it only in extreme case of sexual misconduct (provided we mean by *nushuz* as sexual misconduct) and that too with advice not to injure them. More kindness to women could not be expected in seventh century Arabia.

But the counter argument could be when Qur'an accorded equal status to women (see 2:228 and 4:32) in seventh century which was equally unthinkable in 7th century Arabia, it could also prohibit wife beating which is quite undignified behaviour towards her. Well there could be arguments and counter arguments and much will depend on ones viewpoint whether it is feminist or not.

And today there are women experts who study Qur'an from feminist point of view and translate Qur'an in that perspective. Thus for those women who translate Qur'an into other languages expert knowledge of Arabic is highly necessary. But every woman who wants to know what Qur'an has to say about their rights, need not be expert in Arabic language. They can certainly select a translation which is more sensitive to their needs.

But there can be no two opinions about studying Qur'an on the part of those women who want to know their Qur'anic rights, whether they study Qur'an in Arabic language or in any other language.

Even those women whose mother tongue is Arabic, face a severe problem as far as 'Ulama are concerned. They maintain, as against Qur'an, that it is not easy to understand Qur'an even if one knows Arabic and they need to study *tafsir* (commentary and explanation) of Qur'anic text in order to understand it. But Qur'an itself maintains, as pointed out above that it has been made easy to understand as it has been revealed for common people and for their guidance. Also, there are two types of verses in Qur'an what are called *muhkamat* and *mutashabihat* i.e. those verses which are quite clear and understandable and those which are ambiguous and capable of more than one meaning. Only those who aim at mischief refer to *mutashabihat*.

All verses pertaining to women fall in the category of *muhkamat* and hence can be understood directly with no intervention by 'ulama. Moreover 'ulama themselves differ widely from each other in understanding those verses. Even there are unending controversies about which hadith should be used to understand a verse and which hadith is not relevant.

In view of these controversies why a common person with knowledge of Arabic should not try to understand the divine intention by studying Qur'an. Also, the benefit would be new perspectives could be developed in understanding the Qur'an in today's context and in today's milieu. Did 'ulama not tried to understand Qur'an in the light of their own experiences and in their own cultural milieu in early Islamic period? Is that understanding binding on us forever?

So far Qur'an was understood and commented upon only by men as women were not so highly educated in those days due to number of restrictions imposed on them during medieval ages. By then women had lost all rights and privileges accorded them by Qur'an and Prophet (PBUH). They are now retrieving that situation and more and more

women are going for higher studies, women studies and divine sciences.

These women today are in much better position to understand Qur'anic text and from their own sensitivities. The real merit of divine text like the Qur'an is that it can be understood and interpreted in multiple ways and one can choose best possible ways. And women too have every right to understand these verses in best possible ways as they can keeping their sensibilities in mind.

Qur'an was revealed to create a new society, society based on values like justice, compassion, truth and love, not simply on tradition. However, social traditions asserted again and values were subordinated to traditions. Qur'an itself was sought to be understood in the light of traditions rather than values. Values like justice, love and compassion went in favour of weaker sections of society and women certainly belonged to that weaker section.

Hence if Qur'anic values were given priority over tradition, women would have enjoyed best possible status in the society. Since men, so far in authority, did not permit women to enjoy Qur'anic status, today time has come when women can choose to bring these Qur'anic values to fore and assert these values in their understanding of the Qur'an. It is their right and no one can take this right away from them.

※ Islam and Modern Age, December, 2007.

QUR'AN, HADITH AND WOMEN*

What is position of women in Qur'an and hadith? It is, very interesting to compare what is stated in Qur'an about women and what do we find on women in hadith literature? And here I am not referring to ahadith from an other source but from what is known as *Sihah Sitta* (e. six most authentic sources of hadith). I wish our Ulama reflect on the contrast between how Qur'an treats women and how ahadith treat them. Much of woes of Muslim women will be over if we follow Qur'an rather than these ahadith.

Women lost in ahadith what they had gained through Qur'an. Today if world thinks Islam treats women in very unfair way it is because we follow hadiths rather than Qur'an as far as women are concerned. In pre-Islamic period women had lowest of low social status and Qur'an lifted them far above and our 'Ulama never tire of saying this. But within few decades of the revelation of the Qur'an women came down to their pre-Islamic status in a fiercely male dominated society. And this was accomplished through ahadith as a legitimizing factor.

Those who narrated these ahadith never thought for a moment how they contradict Qur'an as these ahadith served the social purpose very well. Qur'an provided ideals and values but society could not rise to that level and instead dragged Islam to its own level and ahadith served that interest best.

When Islam was confined to Arabian peninsula it was different but when it spread to far off places, parts of Roman

empire, Sasanid empire (Iran), Central Asia etc. these regions were very different in their culture, religious values and social ethos and it was quite natural for Islam to adapt to what these societies needed. Even Shari'ah, all jurists (*fuqaha'*) agree incorporated much of Arab '*adati*' (customary law).

It was not easy to avoid these cultural values and customary practices found in non-Arab societies when people of these regions embraced Islam. Position of women in these regions was no different from what it was in pre-Islamic Arabia and when one embraces a religion which originated outside that region he/she does not automatically caste away his/her own cultural values and social ethos.

Also, it is a well-known fact that Islam spread far and wide much quicker than Shari'ah laws were compiled in different schools. In fact various Shari'ah schools (*madahibi*) came into existence in different regions where Islam had spread. Even before the Arabs could grasp full significance of Islam and adjust their lives to new values and ideals, it had already spread to various parts of the world, right up to China. In fact Islam spread to these regions with lightening speed.

It is also interesting to note that various companions of the Prophet (PBUH) also had spread to these parts of the world and these companions in many cases married local women and adopted cultural values of the region and being companions of the Prophet (PBUH) they were also source of Islamic knowledge and those converted to Islam would flock to them for guidance and hence number of ahadith were narrated by these companions relying on their memory and understanding. Thus along with authenticity of ahadith sociology of ahadith also becomes equally important.

While Qur'an was compiled during Prophet's (PBUH) life time and when some deviations from standard recitation was noticed (on account mainly of tribal dialects) Hazrat Uthman had wisdom to compile standard copy and destroy all others

and thus Qur'an was saved from differences in the text. All other copies of the Qur'an were prepared from this copy.

Ahadith, on the other hand, were compiled two to three centuries after the death of the Holy Prophet and underwent much changes due to passage of time. Though there was chain of narrators and despite honesty and integrity of narrators, there was every possibility of change in text with different narrators with even differences in their understanding and cultural background. Unfortunately for ahadith honesty and integrity of narrators became the only criterion rather than its conformity with the Qur'anic approach, values and ideals.

Also, there were those who did not hesitate to produce a hadith to legitimize some action or requirement of someone powerful and influential. Thus while there never arose any differences about the Qur'anic text, there have been all sorts of differences about authenticity or otherwise of ahadith. In fact much problems could have been avoided if ahadith in such large numbers and in different compatis had not been accepted. For these very reasons the Prophet (PBUH) had discouraged from compiling these ahadith. But ahadith became socio-cultural and socio-religious needs in vastly different circumstances.

These needs were such that a doctrine was evolved that even if a hadith stands in contradiction of the Qur'an hadith will prevail. Many Shari'ah injunctions were developed on this basis. Then various questions arose whether hadith is *da'if* (weak), narrated by only one or by several narrators or its different variations or whether its narrators (*ravi*) were *da'if* (weak) and so on. The whole hadith literature is full of these controversies. Also different sects relied on different ahadith to legitimize their positions. In short many controversies originated due to excessive reliance on ahadith.

Much more so ahadith were used to lower women's status as Qur'anic ideals and values in respect of women could not be accepted by societies which treated women as subordinate to

men. Men in any case wanted to retain his superiority. He thought he was ruler over women and many Qur'anic verses were explained under the ethos of men's superiority. Most of the Qur'anic verses on women are not explained in the light of other Qur'anic verses (only reliable methodology to understand real intent of the Qur'an) but in the light of ahadith which degrade women.

I would like in this article to compare ahadith about women with Qur'anic verses and show how mutually contradictory these Qur'anic verses and ahadith are. Qur'an talks of equal dignity of men and women and even story of Adam and Hawwa is narrated in a way which does not blame Hawwa at all for eating the fruit of a tree which Adam was prohibited to go near to. Qur'an talks of creation of men and women from one *nafs* and hadith says Hawwa was created from rib of Adam. Qur'an says it is Adam who disobeyed his Lord and acted ignorantly Thus Qur'an says "And Adam disobeyed his Lord, and was disappointed" (20:121)

Also, the entire discourse in Qur'an on women is rights based but in Shari'ah, thanks to hadith literature, entire discourse is duty based for women and right based for men, something which one found during period of *jahiliyyah*. It was too hard for men to accept equal dignity for men and women in the feudal society within which Shari'ah rules were compiled.

Qur'an gives equal rights and equal dignity to both men and women but hadith literature is full of ahadith contradicting this Qur'anic approach. For example in Bukhari we find a hadith which stands in contradiction to the Qur'anic verse 33:35. The hadith is narrated thus:

"The Prophet (PBUH) urged the women to be generous with their gifts, for when he had glimpsed into the flames of Hell, he had noted the vast majority of people being tormented there were women. The women were outraged, and one of them instantly stood up and demanded to know why that was

so. 'Because,' he replied, 'you women grumble so much, and show ingratitude to your husbands! Even if the poor fellows spent all their lives doing things for you, you have only to be upset at the least of thing and you will say, 'I have never received any good from you!', At that the women began vigorously to pull off their rings, and throw them into Bilal's Cloak. (Bukhari 1.28, Abu Dawud 439).

See the content and tenor of this hadith. It is full of anti women attitude and women are supposed to be, in this hadith, ungrateful to their husbands. As against this see the Qur'anic verse 33:35 which says, "Surely the men who submit and women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obeying men and the obeying women, and the truthful men and truthful women, and the patient men and patient women, and the humble men and humble women, and the charitable men and the charitable women, and fasting men and fasting women, and the men who guard their chastity and the women who guard, and the men who remember Allah and women who remember – Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and mighty reward."

See how in this verse Qur'an treats men and women equally and talks of equal degree of forgiveness and equal reward. In the above hadith, on the other hand, more women than men are consigned to flames of Hell because they are ungrateful to their husbands. Qur'an no where requires women to be obedient to their husbands. It is husband who is exhorted to be kind to their wives (see 2:229) "keep them in good fellowship (*bi ma'ruf*) and let them go with kindness (*bi ihsanin*).

Also men and women are described each others garment (*libas*) (2:187). According to Qur'an men and women are each others *zawj* (one of the couple) thus indicating equal dignity and love and respect, not obedience or subordination. The Prophet (PBUH) never treated any of his wife as subordinate. He not only treated them with dignity, he often consulted

them in various matters and even followed their advice. In fact Umm Salma's advice to sacrifice animal at Hudaybiya proved very beneficial.

WOMAN HALF A WITNESS?

Let us examine one more hadith which apparently appears to be in conformity with Qur'anic provision but indeed it is not. We find it in Muslim. The hadith is narrated as under:

Prophet is reported to have said, 'I have seen none lacking in common sense and failing in religion but (at the same time) robbing the wisdom of the wise, besides you.' Upon this a woman remarked: 'What is wrong with or common sense and with religion?' He observed: 'You lack of common sense (in) that the evidence of two women is equal to that of one man, that is the proof of your lack of common sense. And you spend some nights (and days) in which you do not offer prayer and in the month of Ramadan during the menstrual days you do not observe fast; that is your failing in religion.' (Muslim 31)

This hadith has several flaws. Qur'an nowhere states that she is half witness, much less because of lack of common sense. And messenger of Allah will not say such things which degrade women whom he consulted in difficult times as pointed out above. Qur'an simply says that when you take loan, write it down and let two male witnesses be summoned as witnesses and if two men are not available let one man and two women bear witness so that if one forgets, other can remind. (2:282)

This verse no where says she lacks in common sense. She may have lacked in experience as in those days women did not indulge in financial transaction. Lack of experience cannot be equated with lack of common sense. Also, if women cannot offer prayers or fast during menstruation, how can it be construed as 'failing in religion'? It is state of disability, not lack of belief or commitment. Belief or religion has something

to do with ones heart and soul, not physical condition. Our Prophet (PBU) had high respect for women and for his wives. It is unthinkable that he would say such degrading things for women. He loved Khadija, Fatima and Ayesha so much. All these women were highly intelligent and great upholders of Islam. In fact they were more firm in their belief of Islam than many men. Entire Muslim world holds these women in high respect. In fact Islam gave such high status to women and guaranteed their rights when all over the world women had no rights at all. In fact it was this general demeaning attitude towards women which is reflected in these ahadith.

WOMEN RULERS AND LUCK ?

We find another hadith in Bukhari which is often quoted against women becoming rulers of countries or nations. In fact, Bukhari has reported three traditions connected with this episode, two of which were in the chapter on "Letter of the Prophet to Chosroe and Caesar". Abu Bakra's hadith is no. 4425. The preceding hadith, no. 4424, was reported from Ibn Abbas who said that "the Prophet of Allah sent Abdullah Ibn Huzaifa with his letter to Chosroe. When Chosroe read it he tore it. I believe said Bin Musayyab said: Then the Prophet prayed to Allah that he tear them up completely." The third hadith is No. 6639 reported by Bukhari in the chapter on "how the oath of Prophet was" and it goes: "When Ceaser dies there will be no Ceaser after him. When Chosroe dies there will be no Chosroe after him.

Bukhari (4425) reports from Abu Bakr ahthe following hadith: "Allah provided me with considerable benefit during the battle of the Camel with one word (or one statement). When news reached the Prophet (S.A.W.) that the Persians had appointed Chosroe's daughter as their ruler, he said: "A nation which placed its affairs in the hands of a woman shall never prosper!"

Now it is well known that Abu Bakra narrated this hadith after battle of Camel in which Hadrat Ayesha participated and the battle was aimed against Hadrat Ali. This hadith surfaces only with the narration of Abu Bakra who was aspiring for governorship of one of the provinces and wanted to please Hadrat Ali. Abu Bakra obviously had a purpose in narrating such a hadith.

It is quite contradictory to Qur'an in as much as Qur'an upholds leadership of Queen of Sheba (Bilquis) who over-rules the advice of her male advisors and makes peace with prophet Salman (Soloman). See verses 32 to 35 of Chapter 27. When Bilquis asks for opinion of all her male advisors whether we should fight or make peace with Sulaiman, they advise her to fight and not to surrender. But she over rules them and decides to make peace arguing "Surely kings when they enter a town, ruin it and make the noblest of its people to be low; and thus they do."

Thus we see that Qur'an upholds wisdom of a woman in not fighting and making peace with stronger ruler and saves the nation from ruin. But the hadith quoted above says just the opposite that if a woman becomes ruler it would prove ruinous for the nation. The hadith thus suggests that Prophet contradicts Allah's revelation which is not thinkable. The only conclusion in either the narrator had his own motive in narrating the hadith or could not at all understand what the Prophet said. I leave conclusion to the readers.

We find even more shocking ahadith ascribed to the Prophet regarding women. One such hadith found in Sahih Bukhari and narrated by Sahl ibn Sa'd which says "Evil omen was mentioned before the Prophet (PBUH). The Prophet (PBUH) said, "if there is evil omen in anything, it is in the house, the woman and the horse."

This hadith equates woman with house and horse. There cannot be any comparison between the three. Also both house and horse are extremely useful for human beings which

facilitate his/her living and traveling. House is from basic necessity for human beings and horse was needed in those for travel and were valued highly. They were used in wars as well as their movement was quite swift. Such thoughts are product of very low kind of mind unfortunately ascribed to a mind Allah had graced with highest kinds of thought. He had chosen him to be His Prophet, His messenger. One cannot think he would say such things.

There is one interesting hadith found in Bukhari and narrated by Ayesha. The hadith is like this: the things which annul the prayers were mentioned before me (Ayesha). They said, "prayer is annulled by a dog, a donkey and a woman (if they pass in front of the praying people)".

Ayesha said, "You have made us (i.e. women) dogs. I saw the Prophet (PBUH) praying while I used to lie in my bed between him and the Qiblah. Whenever I was in need of something, I would slip away, for I disliked to face him."

We can see how some narrators equated women with dogs and donkeys and Ayesha challenged them. It shows how men held women in low esteem and ascribed their despicable thoughts to the Prophet (PBU). Always there may not be women like Ayesha to challenge such low thoughts and hadith may be believed uncritically.

Similarly we find another hadith in Sahih Bukhari narrated by Osamah which is again totally contradictory to the Qur'an. The hadith says "And I advise you to take care of the women, for they are created from a rib and the most crooked portion of the rib is its upper part. If you try to straighten it, it will break, and if you leave it, it will remain crooked, so I urge you to take care of the women."

Very degrading to women, like similar such ahadith. It completely contradicts the Qur'an where there is no mention at all of Hawwa's creation from the rib of Adam. This hadith also has been created to prove inferiority of women. In all the verses on women in Qur'an there is not a single verse which

degrades women like this or proves her inferiority to men in any way.

This was prevailing social attitudes of men towards women which made them create such ahadith so that they could rule over them and women could not use Qur'an to claim equality with men. Qur'an was revealed to the prophet so that he could give equal dignity and status to women but society was not prepared for this in any case and sought to lower the status of women by producing such ahadith as they could not temper with the Qur'an they used another weapon to bring down status of women.

It is unfortunate that still our Ulama are not prepared to critically evaluate these anti-women ahadith. On the contrary they keep on quoting them to keep status of women lower in the society and under the thumb of women. It is precisely for this reason that non-Muslims think very adversely about Islam and how Islam has 'suppressed' dignity and status of women. Time has come for Muslim women to evaluate these ahadith critically and refute the fatwas Ulama issued on the basis of such ahadith. We need great scholars of Islam among the women who could take independent position. Where are such women?

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MAULANA AZAD AND HIS CONCEPT OF WAHDAT-E-DIN*

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's *Tarjuman- al-Qur'an* is considered an important milestone in modern commentaries on Qur'an. Maulana's approach to Qur'an was quite unique though modern yet not devoid of traditionalism. It is so difficult to achieve and this is Maulana's achievement. Even most traditionalist would find it difficult to find fault with Maulana's *tafsir* (commentary) and even most modern will find it difficult to disagree with his approach.

It is well known that the Maulana could not complete the commentary due to his political preoccupations but the portion he could complete (up to 22nd chapter) covers almost all important and relevant issues like approach of Qur'an to other religions, question of women's rights, certain references to Biblical issues about which there has been great controversies, story of *Ashab al-Kahaf* and so on. Maulana's approach to these issues, one can say with full confidence, most modern in as much as latest research on these issues is concerned. Maulana's writing on Dhu'l Qarnain is really a model of modern research on the subject and on this question Maulana has left nothing which modern scholars had not written until his time. In fact his research on Dhu'l Qarnain is a model to be followed by the commentators of the Qur'an.

However, we are not concerned here with these aspects of Maulana's work on *tafsir* (commentary) but his approach to other religions as per Qur'an's verses. Based on Qur'anic injunctions Maulana comes to form the concept of *Wahdat-e-din*

i.e. unity of religion. Not that this was unknown before as Shah Waliyullah too refers to the concept of unity of religion in his Hujjat-u-Allah al-Balighah. Many sufi saints like Nizamuddin Awliya and Mazhar Jan-i-Janan also refer to truth of other religions like Hinduism, particularly in Indian context.

However, Maulana's work on this is much more significant for number of reasons. His arguments are based not only on the verses of the Qur'an but also on his extensive knowledge of other religions like Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism and even Zorashtrianism. He very systematically argues both from Qur'anic perspective as well as on the basis of teachings of these religions and tries to validate the concept of *Wahdat-i-din*.

Maulana's contribution also becomes more important in view of the modern world and its problems. He was writing colonial India which was rocked by communal violence and in that background Maulana's concept became much more important. Those talking of two nations both from amongst Hindus as well as Muslims were emphasizing irreconcilability of two religions i.e. Hinduism and Islam. And Maulana refers to basic teachings of Islam and Hinduism and contradicts the approach of those who found two religions non-reconcilable. It was really great contribution for the cause of unity of Hindus and Muslims and common nationhood.

It is also important to note that the post-modern world is religiously plural and there is no country in the world which is not multi-cultural and religiously prelist. Earlier during medieval ages and even during modern period Europe and America were almost, if not entirely, mono-religious, mono-cultural and mono-lingual. But the entire scene changed in the period of post-modernity. Today entire world is multi-religious and multi cultural. The western social scientists in the west began to talk about pluralism and multi-culturalism only after migrations began to western countries from former colonies and west became multi-religious and multi-cultural.

Maulana had, as if foreseen the needs of the post-modern world and emphasized the significance of unity of religion. Maulana's further contribution is that while referring to unity of religion he does not ignore the differences between practices of various religions. Here Maulana assumes the role of what I call socio-theologian and maintains that though essence of all religions is same there are significant differences in Shari'ah of all religions.

He thus distinguishes between *din* and *shari'ah*. He defines *din* as belief in doctrine of one God, in angles, in day of judgment, in prophets and in revealed scriptures brought by the messengers of Allah. And he quotes from teachings of various religions to prove his point. Thus in the concept of *Wahdat-e-din* his emphasis is on metaphysical doctrines on one hand, and, on value-structures of religions, on the other. He finds similarities in these metaphysical doctrines as well as in value-structures.

But these religions were revealed or came into existence into different societies with different historical and socio-cultural backgrounds and hence the laws given by these religions could not be the same. Laws (*shari'ah*) very much based on customs, traditions and cultural practices though the basis will be justice. However, justice finds different expressions in different cultures. Laws of marriage, divorce, inheritance, properties and so on will very much be culture-specific. They cannot be universal, like values and certain metaphysical doctrines.

I think Maulana's insight into societies, their cultures and differing laws, is quite unique among commentators of Qur'an. Not many had this insight and that is why I tend to call him socio-theologian, rather than simply theologian. If one accepts this proposition that *din* and *shari'ah* are different many differences between followers of different religions can be eliminated.

I would also like to emphasize here that Qur'an also maintains that Allah has sent His prophets to different nations (qaums) with different shari'ahs. Thus while making this formulation Maulana is certainly not deviating from Qur'anic approach but is providing to his readers proper explanation based on understanding of different societies. Most of the commentators could not explain the causes of differences of shari'ah as they had not much understanding of societies. However, I must say Shah Waliyullah before Azad had remarkable understanding of Indian society of his time.

In today's conflict torn world many powerful vested interests are misusing religious differences for promoting conflict among followers of different religions. Such vested interests are found among all religious communities. They invoke certain doctrines of religion to emphasize differences and then based on these differences they promote conflict and even religious wars to serve their own political interests. It is therefore, all the more necessary to promote Maulana's understanding of unity of religion and causes of differences of shari'ah to wean away people from evil influence of such vested interests.

Apart from Maulana's concept of *wahdat-i-din* his contribution to the concept of *rububiyyah* (sustenance) is also very important and this concept, like the one of *wahdat-i-din* is also a great unifying concept. In fact the first volume of Maulana Azad is devoted to these two concepts – *rububiyyah* and *Wahdat-i-din* and both these concepts are based on universal aspects of religions.

Maulana finds the concept of *rububiyyah* in the first chapter of the Qur'an i.e. *surah Fatihah* in which Qur'an describes Allah as *Rabb-al-Alamin* i.e. sustainer of this universe and universe includes everything and everyone. Maulana's *tafsir* is most suitable for modern times and his concept of *rububiyyah* is no less. This concept also forges unity between followers of

different religions and is most suitable for our post-modern society.

Maulana also maintains that every period has its own thought system (*fikri nizam*) and this *nizam* influences the mind of the commentator.* No commentator can escape these influences and hence no commentary of the Qur'an could be treated as final and universal. Maulana's own *tafsir* has been greatly influenced by the period he lived in and hence his great emphasis on these two seminal concepts.

Maulana was also deeply involved in India's freedom struggle and for freedom movement to succeed and for India to become free Hindu-Muslim unity was very fundamental. He was repeatedly imprisoned by the British imperialists and his *tafsir* was also once completely destroyed. Thus Maulana knew importance of freedom for India and necessity for Hindu-Muslim unity.

In his Presidential Address at Ramgarh session of Indian National Congress 1923 Maulana said that "Today, if an angel were to descend from the heaven and declare from the top of the Qutab Minar, that India will get Swaraj within twenty-four hours, provided she relinquishes Hindu-Muslim unity, I will relinquish Swaraj rather than give up Hindu-Muslim unity. Delay in the attainment of Swaraj will be a loss to India, but if our unity is lost, it will be a loss for entire mankind".

Thus for Maulana universal brotherhood was very very fundamental and hence he gives so much importance to concepts of *wahdat-e-din* and *rububiyyah* (universal sustenance). Maulana rises above sectarian approach and adopts universal one as it was both his political need and also his philosophical outlook. But what is important is that Maulana does not base his arguments on extra-Qur'anic sources but purely on Qur'anic sources. He is not emphasizing this as his own outlook but develops his outlook from Qur'an itself. No one can fault Maulana's approach and call it his own and not Qur'anic.

For example this argument that each qaum (nation has its own shari'ah he quoted the Qur'anic verse "For every one of you We appointed a law and a way' (5:48). This very verse also refers to diversity of religions. Thus it says, "If Allah had pleased He would have made you a single people, but that He might try you in what He gave you. So vie one with the other in virtuous deeds." This verse also reflects Qur'anic position on several religions co-existing.

When Maulana argues about unity of religion, for some theologians there can be one problem. Maulana goes strictly by what Qur'an says about validity of all religions, and not what theologians of different religions maintain about teachings of their respective religions. The Qur'anic position is that all religions are one since Allah revealed them but the religious leaders of these religions corrupted original teachings and hence differences arose. Had they followed original teachings, these differences would not have been there. However, religious leaders of other communities would not agree with this view and maintain that their teachings as they are, are original teachings and they have not undergone any change.

Thus we find in the Qur'an – and Maulana quotes this verse, "Say: O People of the Book, you follow no good till you observe the Torah and the Gospel and that which is revealed to you from your Lord. And surely that which has been revealed to thee from thy Lord will make many of them increase in inordinacy (*tughyanan*) and disbelief: so grieve not for the disbelieving people".

Thus Maulana discusses this in his *Tarjuman al-Qur'an* under the title "*Qur'an ka perwan-e- mazahib se mutalibah* (Qur'an's demand from followers of religions) and goes on to say that Qur'an did not demand from followers of any religion to accept this new religion (i.e. Islam) but demands from every group (following any other religion) that they follow their respective religion in its original shape which has been distorted by them. If you did that (i.e. followed your religion

in its original shape you will find that it is Islam to which I am calling you.*

But the Qur'an also maintains that there are few in every religious group who follow their religion in its original spirit and thus are closer to teachings of the Qur'an. Thus Qur'an says in the next verse "Surely those who believe and those who are Jews and Sabeans and the Christians – whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good – they shall have no fear nor shall they grieve." (5:69)

Commenting on this verse (5:69) Maulana says that for this reason Qur'an has heartily welcomed the faith and actions of these virtuous people who were present in different faith traditions and who had not wasted the real spirit of their respective faiths. However, such people are indeed very few and most of them belong to overwhelming majority who have distorted the original spirit of their faiths.**

Some religious scholars like Douglas have objected to Maulana's approach that existing religions have distorted original teachings. But we can say in defence of Maulana that what he is saying is what Qur'an' says and it is not his own. He is writing commentary and explaining Qur'an's position. But what Maulana is emphasizing by way of his concept of unity of religion is highly helpful to the cause of human unity.

Also, one should fully comprehend Maulana's as well as Qur'anic position fully. Qur'an treats an issue at different levels and does not simply accept or reject something as things are highly complex. Thus Qur'an treats this matter yet at a different level when it states, "They (People of the Book) are not all alike. Of the people of the Book there is an upright party who recite Allah's messages in the night-time and they adore (Him). They believe in Allah and the Last Day, and they enjoin good and forbid evil and vie one with another in good

* See *Tarjuman al-Qur'an* ibid pp-416-17.

** op. cit p-418.

deeds. And those are among the righteous." "And whatever good they do, they will not be denied it. And Allah knows those who keep their duty." (3:112-114).

Thus essentially Qur'an is concerned with good deeds (enjoining good and forbidding evil) and Qur'an praises those who adhere to this course of goodness and maintaining ethical conduct without developing any vested interests. Since world is today multi-religious everywhere our main concern should be moral and ethical conduct and maintaining original spirit of our respective faiths.

Maulana emphasizes precisely this aspect in the first volume of his *Tarjuman al-Qur'an*. He takes the Qur'anic words *ma'ruf* and *munkar* and explains their meaning. He says *ma'ruf* means what is known and acceptable and hence it represents good and *munkar* means what is denied by the society i.e. evil and Qur'an, according to Maulana maintains that there may be so many differences in matters of beliefs and doctrines (*aoq'id*) but there are certain things on which there is complete unanimity of their being good and there are certain things about which there is complete unanimity for their being evil.*

Then giving example he says all agree that one should speak truth and that one should not resort to lies. There is also agreement that honesty and integrity is good and dishonesty bad. All of us also agree that we should serve our parents, be helpful to our neighbors, that we should take care of the poor and needy, to be helpful to the oppressed are among the good deeds for all human beings and to oppress and bad behavior are most undesirable. And all the religions in the world, all the parties and groups, whatever their differences on matters of faith and doctrines, are unanimous on this.*

Thus Azad ultimately advises his readers to avoid doctrinal differences and insist on ethical and moral behavior.

※ *Tarjuman al-Qur'an ibid.* p-420-21.

※ *op. cit.* p-421.

Our world would be very different if we did not fight on differences about our doctrines and instead concentrate on matters moral and ethical. In fact this is Qur'anic message also.

Thus Qur'an says, "And abuse not those whom they call upon besides Allah (i.e. worship others besides Allah) lest, exceeding the limits, they abuse Allah through ignorance. Thus to every people have We made their deeds fair-seeming; to their Lord is their return so He will inform them of what they did." (6:109)

This is very clear statement by Qur'an that do not abuse each other or try to prove each other's beliefs and doctrines wrong as Allah has made for each people their deeds fair-seeming to them i.e. every people think their doctrines and their deeds are best and hence do not quarrel about them and leave it to Allah who will decide on the Day of Judgment about their beliefs and deeds.

Thus Qur'an prefers coexistence to disputes about beliefs and rituals according to those beliefs and invites people to live in coexistence and leave their disputes to Allah. If human beings try to settle these doctrinal disputes their ego, their interests will come in their way and they will not be able to decide as every people would maintain only their doctrines are best.

Thus we see that at one level Qur'an says that Allah had sent only one truth through His messengers to different people but they distorted the truth and differences arose and hence if they follow original message there will exist no differences and by following their own original faith all differences will be resolved as truth is one and that is Islam (surrendering to the will of Allah).

Though this is the truth it can be contentious since all people would maintain we are following true religion and not distorted one and naturally would lead to serious differences and disputes. So at another level the Qur'an says that do not indulge in such disputations as it will result only in reviling

each other and nothing else. So it says We have made each people their own deeds fair-seeming or luring so best thing is to live in peace and harmony and leave it to Allah to decide about their deeds on the Day of Judgment.

This is what Maulana Azad also pleads for as in multi-religious societies this is the best solution. Let us cooperate with each other on what is good and jointly fight against what is evil. Maulana emphasized this approach in early 20th century when Hindus and Muslims were fighting and communal violence was breaking out everywhere. No one was ready to let people believe what they thought to be true doctrine and emphasized their religion's superiority.

Maulana Azad understood the real message of Qur'an during very difficult period and tried to explain it to Muslims this message of the Qur'an in simple Urdu. It is also Maulana's great contribution that he tried to translate in very simple Urdu so that common Muslims and even others (as Urdu was widely spoken and understood in entire north India during his time) so that mutual hatred could be reduced, if not completely eliminated.

Even today Muslims can greatly benefit from this message if they care to read it and take it to non-Muslim sisters and brothers.

× Islam and Modern Age, October. 2007.

× Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, *Tarjuman al-Qur'an* (Sahitya Academy, Delhi, 1980) vol.I, p-42.

INDIAN MUSLIMS AND RENAISSANCE*

It is often asked why Indian Muslims did not go through renaissance? By implication it is suggested Islam prevents any such possibility. I think it is quite simplistic assumption. Religion by itself neither obstructs nor helps the process of renaissance. To understand possibility of renaissance or otherwise one has to understand the complex processes at work in the society.

Europe experienced renaissance not because of Christianity but in severe opposition to Christianity. Once a society, through certain processes is ready for change, religion can no longer stop it. Religion can become pull to an extent but not all the way. If society is ready to change, religion may even become helpful to an extent but not otherwise. Certain social theorists ignore social processes and structural forces at work when they assume religion to be driving or impeding force.

Indian society is highly diverse even though Brahminical Hinduism has been a predominant force. It would also not be wholly true to maintain that non-Muslim India as a whole has already experienced renaissance. It is far from true. What is true is that Indian society itself is highly complex and has to be understood at different levels. Only a small section of Brahminical Hindu society has accepted modernity wholeheartedly. Rest of the society can still not be said to be modern and in the throes of renaissance.

In Europe it was emergence of bourgeois class that led the renaissance movement after 16th century. In fact one can say

Mughal India was far ahead of Europe in philosophy, fine arts, architecture and liberal outlook. Indians had far greater achievements in classical learning and sciences. It was left behind only after progress of science and technological achievements for variety of reasons, not to be discussed here.

In fact as far as Islamic world was concerned the Abbasid period from 9th up to early 13th century had already experienced sort of renaissance. Its achievements in the fields of philosophy, mathematics, classical arts and sciences were par excellence. This era produced great philosophers like Avicena, Averros (Arabic Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd) and others. Logarithm and Algebra were invented and great progress was made in chemistry and optics. In fact Europe was passing through dark ages when Abbasids were encouraging transfer of treasures of knowledge into Arabic from Greek, Persian and Sanskrit languages through Dar al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) established in Baghdad.

In fact the knowledge from Greece was transferred to Europe through Arabic translations and philosophers like Avicena and Averros were taught in some of the universities established in Europe. Thus it will be seen that Islam did not come in the way of tremendous progress made by Arab intellectuals in worldly sciences.

It is true that there was some resistance by orthodox 'ulama to dissemination of these sciences and especially to rational philosophy but it could not become a powerful impediment in the way of excellent achievements of these illustrious thinkers and scientists. Some of the theologians developed science of dialectics ('Ilm al-Kalam) but then there were two streams of knowledge existing side by side and orthodox stream could not overpower the rational one. Even today eminent thinkers and philosophers like Avicena, Averros, Ibn Hayyan and others are great names from that period.

Al-Ghazzali, it is true, is also a great name from amongst the theological thinkers of the orthodox stream but he himself had passed through various phases including the rational phase when he even became atheist. However, he felt that reason alone is inadequate to understand ultimate reality for which revelation, intuition and inner experiences are necessary.

Ghazzali had great debate with Averroes and wrote a book denouncing philosophy and called it *Tihafut al-Falasifa* (Perplexity of Philosophers) to which Averroes replied by writing *Tahafut Tahafut al-Falasifa* (i.e. Perplexity of Perplexity of Philosophers). This shows that opposition of orthodox Ulama could not impede progress of rational sciences in the Islamic world of that period.

However, decline of movement of renaissance began after fall of Abbasids in 13th century. This all the more shows that much depends on power and prosperity and sense of security in the society than on religion. If society is on decline such movements cannot flourish and if society is prospering and has grip over power such movements flourish. Thus it has much greater connection with society than with religion.

After decline of Abbasids whose centre of power and whom Toynbee, the renowned historian, calls 'universal state of Islam', a sense of insecurity gripped the Islamic world and many scholars have suggested that thereafter intellectual decline of Muslims began and orthodoxy took over. One of the Abbasid caliphs in the period of decline al-Mutavakkil, sided with the orthodox Ulama and severely persecuted rationalists. It would be interesting to note that it is the rationalists (Mua'tazila) who persecuted the orthodox in the beginning of the Abbasid period and the same dynastic period ended with the persecution of rationalists.

In Europe too, orthodoxy prevailed and kept its tight grip over Christians. A great struggle ensued against the Church only when a powerful bourgeois class appeared on the scene and became confident of its power and grip over the situation.

Europe, however, never looked back ever since and science and technology went from strength to strength and religion lost its centrality and grip over the minds of people of Europe.

In case of Muslims though some regional powers like Fatimids in Egypt Ottomans in Turkey and Mughuls in India and Safavids in Iran did emerge on the scene and these regions too had great achievements at their credit but they could not regain and continue their achievements what they had achieved during the Abbasid period. Their 'universal state' declined and could never look up again. The regional powers could not match the centrality of the Abbasid achievements. The theologians also felt insecure and closed the gates of *ijtihad* (creative interpretation).

Indian Muslims should not be treated as a monolithic bloc. They were highly stratified due to Indian caste system. Muslims in India except those who came from Iran and Central Asia, never shared power and remained a deprived lot. Indigenous Muslims were generally converts from amongst the dalits and OBCs and always remained poor, backward and illiterate.

Before we passed any judgment it is very necessary to understand the sociology of Indian Islam. Though the Muslims belonging to ruling class did merge with indigenous society and assimilated Indian culture and languages, they remained a distinct lot and called themselves *ashraf* (of noble decent) as against those converts from dalits and OBCs whom they described as *ajlaf* and *arzal* (of low decent and untouchables).

Ashraf never intermarried with *ajlaf* and *arzal*. These low caste Muslims themselves are divided in various professional castes called *biradaris*. Generally these *biradaris* also don't intermarry among themselves. A large number of Indian Muslims today come from these low caste *biradaris*. Its estimate is any body's guess. Recently the Sachar Committee Report gives their number as 41 per cent. But it is largely underestimated as many Muslims describe themselves as

belonging to higher castes of sheikh or syed. Anyway we can say that much higher percentage of Muslims belong to these low caste *biradaris*.

The decline and end of Mughul rule was another severe blow to Indian Muslims. They lost power and upper caste Muslims too felt greatly insecure and failure of 1857 mutiny (or war of independence as we prefer to call in India) was much greater blow to Muslims of ruling class. British power almost destroyed them as they had seized power from the Mughals and many Muslims had joined this war.

It was indeed a death blow to Muslims of ruling classes in India. Only a few zamindars who chose later to support the British rule could survive and regain their landed estates and influence with the British rulers. Also, it is a well known fact that Muslims were left far behind in the field of modern secular education as they feared alien western culture and education.

It was great foresight of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan that emphasized the importance of modern education and founded the first major institution of modern education for Muslims in Aligarh which was known as MAO college (Mahomedan Anglo-Oriental College). Here also mainly the children of Muslim zamindars and jagirdars (feudal lords) came for education though scholarships were available for some other Muslims also.

It is these scions of jagirdar families who became lawyers, doctors, engineers and other professionals and came to constitute Muslim middle class. This middle class was quite small in size as Muslim masses, mainly artisans and small peasants, had no access to modern education and had no incentive to opt for it and they remained, by and large confined to their hereditary professions.

These jagirdars and zamindars were also mostly from UP and Bihar, both being Muslim minority areas. Muslim majorities lived mainly in the Punjab and Bengal and this

jagirdar class in these two regions was very weak and bulk of the Muslims were poor and downtrodden. Now part of the Punjab and Bengal with Muslim majority are in Pakistan and Bangla Desh. Both these regions are still quite poor on the whole.

Sir Syed, himself a member of the Muslim nobility, was harbinger of Muslim renaissance in India. He not only promoted modern secular education he also founded Indian Scientific Society and translated various scientific works in Urdu for benefit of north Indian people. He also founded educational congress to popularize modern education among Muslims. He proposed many modern reforms and even advocated westernization to an extent.

He started a magazine called *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* (Refining the Morals) and advocated change of old cultural practices and introducing modern ways in different fields of life. He also disseminated through this magazine modern knowledge, science and technology. This magazine rendered yeoman service to Muslims in North India and introduced them to modernity. This magazine has been revived again a few years ago and is published from Aligarh Muslim University.

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was an institution himself and he created a band of scholars and followers who acquired eminence in different fields of scholarship. One of his followers and colleague Maulavi Mumtaz Ali Khan wrote a book *Huquq al-Niswan* who, through this book, pleaded cause of gender equality. This book, I can say, was beginning of Muslim feminism in India.

Justice Ameer Ali, a product of this movement, wrote several books of which *Spirit of Islam* became very popular. It was an attempt to see Islam and its teachings in the light of modernity. Another leading light of this movement was Maulavi Chriagh Ali who too advocated modern reforms in Muslim Personal Law and also wrote a tract on jihad and tried to show that the Qur'an; does not advocate war through this

concept but promotes goodness through maximum human endeavours.

Thus Sir Syed and his colleagues made efforts to bring about renaissance among Indian Muslims. However, its momentum could not be sustained through basic and fundamental changes in the society. In Europe renaissance movement went much further thanks to sustained social and scientific changes in the society. This did not become possible for various reasons in Indian sub-continent.

Main reason was political turmoil and politics of identity during late thirties and fourties of last century. The political controversies between Hindus and Muslims became serious obstacle in the process of social and attitudinal change. Identity politics leads, more often than not, to revivalist movements with emphasis on the past. These political developments ultimately led to division of the country in 1947 followed by communal carnage on both sides of the division.

Much of the progress achieved by Sir Syed and his colleagues was undone followed by communal upsurge. Many eminent intellectuals had begun to critically examine various past practices. Now their sons and daughters began to sing glories of the past and began to justify all past tradition. Communal politics is a complete antidote to progressive social change. Partition in fact proved to be double blow to the process of change.

In Pakistan, the newly created country, orthodox Islamists asserted themselves aggressively. Pakistan was declared to be an Islamic country immediately after the death of Muhammad Ali Jinnah who was architect of that country. Maulana Maududi, founder of the Jamat-e-Islami in India migrated to Pakistan in the same year and launched a movement for establishing an Islamic state.

Though Pakistan got a breather during presidency of Ayub Khan when moderate Islam prevailed but this era proved to be short lived and once again political turmoil took over and

Pakistan itself was divided and East Bengal emerged as Bangla Desh. Zulfekar Ali Bhutto who took over from military dictator Yahya Khan, though moderate Muslim and modernist, had to make serious compromises with Muslim orthodoxy. He declared Ahmadiyas as non-Muslims and began to enforce Shari'ah measures.

Finally Bhutto was hanged and Zia-ul-Haq declared Pakistan as an Islamic state and enforced shari'ah laws replacing secular laws. It was the darkest period Pakistan had to undergo thanks to political upheavals and western and American interests. United States used Zial-ul-Haq to pursue their political interests to defeat Soviet Union in Afghanistan and backed up Islamic militancy for which Pakistani society is paying heavy price even today.

Not only Musharraf but even presently elected democratic government will find it extremely difficult to bring about social change in Pakistan. Both Pakistani Military and Islamic militancy have struck deep roots in Pakistan and continued policies of America in the name of 'war against terrorism' will further prop up militancy and violence. Thus Pakistan is fated to live with violence and turmoil for quite sometime to come.

Because of these political upheavals the basic problems of society cannot engage attention of politicians. Poverty and illiteracy among vast number of masses in Pakistan is a serious problem. No renaissance movement can ever flourish in these social conditions. High levels of education and prosperity and sense of security are needed to promote intellectual movements in the society.

Let us not forget that Europe immensely benefited from colonial exploitation and transfer of wealth from colonized countries like India. Some economists even maintain that the industrial revolution in England was financed through transfer of wealth from India. Whether it is true or not, one thing is certain that colonizing countries achieved more economic and

political stability. Today their economies are self sufficient but not so until 2nd World War.

I am not reducing the significance of struggles which intellectuals waged in Europe to consolidate the gains of renaissance and progressive social change. I am only pointing out the benefits of colonial exploitation which accrued to certain European countries and how it aided the process of social change. One should not try to reduce importance of that process either.

Muslims in post-partition India faced worst situation compared to Muslims in Pakistan. The ruling class mainly feudals and middle class which, as pointed out before, mainly emerged from these feudal families almost entirely migrated to Pakistan and poor Muslims mainly artisans and small land holding peasantry was left in India. Thus educationally and economically Indian Muslims are far more backward today. This fact has also been very well brought out by the Sachar Committee Report submitted last year.

Due to economic and educational backwardness middle class among Muslims is very weak compared to Hindus, Sikhs and Jains and hence there is hardly any possibility of progressive social movements succeeding or striking roots. Muslims in India are also faced with security problems. Often communal violence breaks out further dealing economic blow to them. In several riots like the ones where Muslims had achieved economic prosperity like Meerut, Moradabad, Aligarh etc. Muslim businesses were ruined.

There are few trading communities in Gujarat like Bohras, Khojas and Memons who have achieved a measure of prosperity in post-independence India, were dealt severe economic blow in Gujarat communal carnage of 2002. Before that these communities had already suffered an economic setback in post-Babri riots of 1992-93. many families had fled to Southern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala etc.

Also, under communal onslaught of BJP even the secular governments dither in steadily pursuing policies of economic and educational uplift of Indian Muslims. Anytime the Congress or other government declares any intention (which may or may not be serious, BJP immediately raises the bogey of 'vote bank politics' and 'appeasement of minorities'. This has been going on for decades since independence.

I would also like to point out that cultural factor also plays important role in strengthening or weakening renaissance movement. Indian culture, though feudalism is dead and gone, is still feudal and feudal traditions play very important role among all communities of India. The caste system in India among Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists, is quite illustrative example of this.

Caste is becoming stronger both socially and politically and it seems it here to stay and even most progressive Hindus cannot escape from its vice-like grip. India has experienced economic and industrial revolution but culturally it is still under the influence of traditional culture. Muslims, as pointed out above, have not experienced benefits of economic revolution. It will be too much to expect any movement for progressive social change.

※ Islam and Modern Age, June. 2008.

THE BOHRAS IN SOUTH AND SOUTH EAST ASIA^{*}

The Bohras are a Shi'ah Isma'ili sect, which branched off from main Shi'ah community, known as twelver (Ithna Ashari) Shi'ahs around mid 2nd century of Islam (ninth century A.D.). All Shi'ah sects believe that the Holy Prophet had nominated his son-in-law Ali as his heir both in spiritual as well as political sense. However, the Sunni Muslims contest the Shi'ah claim that Ali was appointed as heir in political sense. However, most of the Sunnis accept Ali as Prophet's heir in spiritual sense, though not all.

The Sunnis maintain that after the death of the Prophet (PBUH) Muslims gathered in the Saqifa Banu Sa'idah and elected his father-in-law Abu Bakr, as political successor and was designated as first Khalifah (Caliph) literally meaning one who comes after. Ali was elected as fourth Khalifah in that order. Those who maintained Ali was designated as his heir by the Prophet were called Shi'an-e-Ali as the word Shi'ah in Arabic means partisan. Thus partisans or disciples and followers of Ali were known as Shi'ah.

The Shi'ahs also believe that *Ahl al-bayt* (i.e. people of house of the Prophet) are sacred persons and only progeny of Fatima (Prophet's daughter) and Ali could be legitimate political and spiritual successors until the day of judgement (*Qiyamah*). The Shi'ahs believe in the doctrine of Imamah as against the Sunni Muslims who believe in the doctrine of Khilafah. Khilafah is based on the principle of *bay'ah* (pledging

ones loyalty to a person to assume authority, an elective principle in a limited sense).

The Ithna Ashari Shi'ahs believe that Ali was the first imam after the Prophet whereas Isma'ilis believe that he was *wasi* (legatee) and not an Imam. According to the Isma'ilis the first imam was Ali's son Hasan whereas Hasan is second Imam according to twelver Shi'ahs. The split between Ithna Asharis and Isma'ilis took place on the question of succession to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (sixth Imam according to twelvers and 5th according to Isma'ilis).

The twelvers maintain that Imam Al-Sadiq was succeeded by his younger son Musa Kazim as his elder son Isma'il died during Imam Ja'far's life time. However, Isma'ilis maintain that though Isma'il died in Imam Ja'far's life time but he was succeeded by Muhammad, Isma'il's son. Thus according to the Isma'ilis Imam Isma'il succeeded Imam J'afar al-Sadiq and Isma'il in turn was succeeded by his son Muhammad.

It is interesting to note that most, though not all, Shi'ahs were non-Arabs and we can call them in terms of Toynbee's term external proletariat of Islam as the Khwarij (seceders) who were mostly Bedouin Arabs as internal proletariat of Islam.¹ The Isma'ilis too, to begin with, were mostly of Persian origin. All Top Isma'ili preachers (*da'is*) were of Persian origin though there were many Arabs also among their followers. However, both in case of twelver as well as Isma'ili Shi'ahs leadership or imamah remained with descendants of the Prophet i.e. they were of Arab origin.

Islam was a revolutionary movement which tried to usher in a new political culture based on values of equality and justice but soon Islamic regimes also developed same old political culture based on dynasties and maintained though coercion and use of power rather than consensus and

1. See Asghar Ali Engineer *The Bohras* (Bombay, 1993) PP-2.

participation. Dr. Taha Husain, a noted Egyptian scholar, pithily observes:

“...it became apparent that this new government too (the caliphal regime after the death of the Prophet) which was expected to be of a new type at last adopted the same old course and like other old types of governments it too had to be based on vested interests, power politics and a class system in which a small minority of a particular nationality uses as its instrument a vast majority of peoples of different nationalities.”²

Thus all though after the death of the Prophet (PBUH) we see disputes about succession between various ruling factions and some of which became reasons for coming into existence of new sects. The Isma’ili sect also came into existence as a result of dispute for succession to Imam J’afar al-Sadiq and once it assumed new sectarian identity, it developed a new set of doctrines to develop its own rationale of a new sect.

All Shi’ah sects were highly persecuted first by Umayyad rulers and then by Abbasids. Thus the Shi’ah sects particularly the twelvers and Isma’ilis had to develop a strategy for existence and hence they adopted what is called the doctrine of *taqiyyah* i.e. dissimulation. Most of the Shi’ahs tried to hide their real identity and pretended to be following Sunni *madhhab* (religion).

However, while the ordinary Isma’ilis practiced *taqiyya* the leaders went underground to avoid detection by the Abbasid rulers who were hunting for them everywhere. Most of the Isma’ili imams remained underground for a long period of time until Imam Abdullah al-Mahdi appeared and founded

2. Dr. Taha Husayn, *Al-fitnat al-Kubra*, Vol. II (Urdu tr. by Abdul Hamid Nu’mani, (Ajmal Press, Bombay, n.d), p-307) Eng. Tr. by the author.

the Fatimid Dynasty in 297/909 North Africa.³ The Shi'ah sects believe in appearance of Imam Mahdi who will fill this earth with justice while it is filled with oppression. The Isma'ilis claim that Imam Mahdi appeared in North Africa whose name was Abdullah and founded Fatimid dynasty which is drawn from the progeny of Ali and Fatima.

However, the twelver Shi'ahs believe that Imam Mahdi is still in seclusion and will appear one day when this earth is filled with oppression. They are still waiting for appearance of the Mahdi. Thus Ithna 'Ashris and Isma'ilis though they agree on appearance of Mahdi but differ on whether he appeared or not.

The Isma'ilis also differed significantly from Ithna 'Asharis about their organisational structure. The Ithna Asharis have Imam at the top but then no other hierarchical structure around him. In Imam's seclusion various *mujtahids* (who interpret and lay down the Shari'ah laws) deputise him. But the Isma'ilis, being an underground movement for quite sometime, developed a well-structured hierarchy with Imam at the top. The Imam is followed by 12 hujjahs (proofs) who in turn appoint number of *da'is* (summoners). There was whole network of these *da'is* actively inviting other Muslims to embrace Isma'ili faith. The *da'is* in turn were actively assisted by *ma'dhun* (direct assistant to da'I who is also permitted to summon to the faith) and *mukasir* (assistant to *ma'dhun* in convincing people for Isma'ili faith being the only right faith).

Thus this tight hierarchy functioned under the hidden leadership of imam of the time (Imam al-Zaman). It is also important to note that Isma'ilis succeeded in attracting well-known intellectuals of the Islamic world, as it appeared to be quite rational and liberal faith to many of them. Intellectuals like Ya'qub Sijistani, Hamidudin Kirmani, Mu'ayyad Shirazi

3. See Sumaiya A. Hamdani *Between Revolution and State – The Path to Fatimid Statehood* (The Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, 2006).

were da'is who actively worked for Fatimid Imams. It is claimed by Isma'ilis that even scholars and philosophers and intellectuals like Avicenna (Abu Sina), Ghazzali and others were also at one time Isma'ili da'is. However, it is very difficult to substantiate such claims.

The Shi'ah sects believe in what is called *ta'wil* i.e. hidden and real meaning of the Qur'anic verses. The Sunnis maintain that *ta'wil* i.e. real meaning of the Qur'an is known to Allah alone but the Shi'ah sects (both Twelvers as well as Isma'ilis) believe that besides Allah *ta'wil* is known to Imams through the Prophet and Ali. While Twelvers did not develop science of *ta'wil* systematically, Isma'ilis did.

The Isma'ili da'is explained each and every verse of the Qur'an, particularly those verses which fall under the category of what the Qur'an refers to as *mutashabihat* (i.e. those verses which are capable of more than one meaning). The Isma'ilis borrowed heavily from the then popular Greek philosophy and Greek sciences. The Isma'ili da'is wrote several treatises expounding their doctrines and their philosophy.

Their *magnum opus* is *Ras'il Ikhwan al-Safa* (The Epistles of Brethren of Purity). It is by any account an encyclopaedic work on Islam. However, there is great controversy about its authorship. Nevertheless the Isma'ilis claim that it was authored by one of their Imams in seclusion who is identified as Husayn al-Mastur i.e. Husayn the Hidden one. Whatever the truth of this claim, one cannot deny significance of this encyclopaedic work.

The Isma'ilis again faced a major schism at the time of 18th Imam Mustansir. His two sons Nizar and Must'ali claimed successionship to the Fatimid throne after the death of Imam Mustansir. Musta'li was supported by the ruling establishment and he succeeded Mustansir as the 19th Imam (for Bohras) and Fatimid ruler. Nizar was driven out and lost to Must'ali in a military confrontation.

The Bohra theologians claim that Imam Mustansir had nominated Musta'li as his successor as the next Imam and ruler. The Nizaris (also known as Isma'ilis or Agakhanis) reject this claim. Nizaris maintain that Nizar was the successor and Imamate continued in his progeny. Both Isma'ilis and Bohras are found throughout South Asia and South East Asia. Both interestingly are trading communities, particularly in South and South East Asia. And in South Asian Muslims these two Shi'ah Isma'ili communities are the only trading Muslim communities, besides Memons, who are Sunnis.

These trading communities are hardly interested in theological issues and elaborate hidden meaning of Qur'an developed by the *da'is* who were leading intellectuals of the day. The Khoja Agakhanis and Bohras today are an obedient lot to the priestly hierarchy developed by the Isma'ilis in medieval ages. It is interesting to note that Islam as such has no concept of priesthood, much less any priestly hierarchy. However, all Isma'ili sects, all of them, Agakhani Khojas, Druz of Lebanon and Bohras, which are surviving sects, developed priestly hierarchy.

The Bohras, who were themselves divided into several sub-sects like Sulaymanis, Aliyas and Dawoodis, have more elaborate priestly structure. The Dawoodis, the most major sect among all in South Asia, have retained the structured developed by the Isma'ilis, in their earliest time. The Aliyas too, a small sub-sect, numbering around 12000 are mainly based in Baroda, an industrial city in Gujarat. They are also basically a trading community.

THE ORIGIN OF BOHRAS IN INDIA

After declining of Fatimid Empire in Egypt, the seat of Fatimi Da'wah (Mission) was transferred to the Yemen where Fatimids could retain their political influence. Here It should be noted that when the Isma'ilis were ruling in Egypt their

empire was called Fatimid Empire but they kept separate identity of their religious establishment which they called Fatimi Da'wah i.e. Fatimid Mission. The reason for maintaining separate religious mission was that the majority population of Egypt was Sunni and they did not share their religious beliefs with their rulers.

Along with their Empire the Fatimid Mission also lost its value in Egypt and hence they thought it fit to transfer the Da'wah to the Yemen where they retained political power. The ruler of Yemen, Hurrah Malika Arwa', a woman of great wisdom and administrative skills, supported the Fatimid rule and retained her loyalty to Fatimi Imams and hence for this reason Fatimi Da'wah was also transferred to Yemen. It remained there for about 4 centuries and when the Fatimids lost power in Yemen after Turkish invasions, the Da'wah (mission) was transferred to India in sixteenth century.⁴

In fact the Mission had established its contacts with Indians right at the time of Imam Mustansir, the 18th Isma'ili Imam in 12th century A.D. Two Arab missionaries, Da'I Ahed and Da'I Abdulla came to Gujarat and succeeded in converting a large number of people to the Isma'ili faith. However it is very difficult to determine as to how many Hindus converted to the Must'alian Isma'ili faith on the hands of the two Da'is Abdullah and Ahmed. There are no documents available. Every thing is wrapped in myths. The whole account of conversion to the new faith is mythological account and not historical, in the books of Fatimi Da'wah in India.

However, what is certain is that those who converted were mostly from middle caste Hindus, the trading castes though some converted from upper caste Brahmins also as the surviving surnames like Travadi (Trivedi) etc. show. But

4. AAA Fyzee "A Chorological List of the Imams and Da'is of the Must'alian Isma'ilis, JBBRAS, 1934, x pp-11/12. See also *The Bohras* op.cit. pp-114.

instances of such upper caste conversions to Musta'lian faith are very rare. Also, one can only surprise as to what led the middle caste Hindus to embrace this faith.⁵

There is also a debate among scholars as to how the name 'Bohra' came into being. Most common consensus is that trading caste a section of which converted to the new faith is that the members of the trading caste were known as Vohras which itself has been drawn from *vehwarvu* (i.e. to trade) and *vehwar* (trade). In northern parts of India 'va' becomes 'ba' and thus vohra became Bohra.⁶

The Bohras kept on splitting and first major split took place in the early period of Bohra history i.e. in 15th century during the reign of Ahmed Shah, son of Muzaffar Shah. One Ja'far, who himself was an Indian covert to the Isma'ili faith, aspired to be deputy Da'I in India and when he couldn't get the office of deputy Da'I, he converted to Sunni Faith and took away with him large section of Shi'ah Bohras who were then known as Sunni Bohras.⁷ They ended to be rural cultivators as against city traders – Shi'ah Bohras.⁸

Thus in Gujarat we find both Shi'ah Isma'ili Bohras and Sunni Bohras. Sunni Bohras, some of them, are in trades too. But there is not much in common between the two except Gujarati language and traces of Gujarati culture. In religious sense Sunni Bohras are much closer to other Sunni Muslims

5. We find the official account of conversion in the book called *Mausam-e-Bahar* written by Shaikh Muhammad Ali Ibn Mulla Jiwabhai, Vol. III, (Bombay, nd.).

6. See *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, Vol. IX, Part II, Gujarat population, Muslims and Parsis, Bombay Government Central Press, 1899, p-24.

7. We find its account in *Akhbar ad-Du'atal-Akramin* (Progressive Publishers, Surat 1975) and also Mian Bhai Mulla Abdul Husain, *A Short Note on Daudi Boras*, (Gulzar-e-Daudi), Progressive Publications, Surat, 1920.

8. See *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, op.cit. p-24-25.

and have no priestly hierarchy. Also, they (Sunni Bohras) far outnumber the Dawoodis today. That shows a large chunk of Shi'ah Isma'ili Bohras converted to the Sunni faith as they had patronage of Sunni rulers while the Isma'ili Bohras were a persecuted lot.

The persecution of Shi'ah Bohras continued until the Moghal period and according to the Bohra accounts one of their Da'is, Sayyidna Qutbuddin was martyred by Aurangzeb, the then Moghul Governor of province of Gujarat, who later became Emperor of India. Though the Bohras originated in Gujarat and their mother tongue is Gujarati, many of them were forced to migrate out of Gujarat to various other parts of India.

Thus one finds Dawoodi Bohras in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, besides Gujarat and also in some trading centres like Calcutta (now called Kolkata), Hyderabad, Chennai (formerly called Madras), Bangalore and some other cities in the South like Cochin, Calicut etc. We will throw more light on this later.

The second major split among the Bohras took place in 16th Century during the period of Moghul Emperor Akbar. Their arose dispute between two aspirants for Da'iship i.e. Dawood bin Qutubshah and Sulayman. The Dawoodis maintain that Dawood bin Qutubshah was rightfully appointed as Da'i by his predecessor Dawood bin Ajabshah but Sulaymanis claim that it was Sulayman who succeeded as Da'I and his followers were known as Sulaymanis whereas those followed Dawood bin Qutubshah were known as Dawoodi Bohras.

Sulaymani had few followers among Indian but a large number went with him in the Yemen and most of the Bohras in India followed Dawood bin Qutubshah in India. The Dawoodis claim that the dispute went to Moghul Emperor Akbar and that Akbar ruled in favour of Dawood bin

Qutubshah. While the Sulaymanis refute this claim.⁹ Anyway the Dawoodis are the largest among Bohras in India. Thus in India we find three sub-sects of Bohras in today – Dawoodis, Sulaymanis and Aliyas. Sulaymanis are concentrated in Hyderabad where their deputy Da'I lives and Aliya Bohras live mainly in Baroda in Gujarat where their Chief Da'I lives.

The Dawoodi Bohras call their religious establishment as Fatimi Da'wah of which a Da'I is the head. All three sects of Bohras mentioned above do not differ substantively in religious beliefs and have same priestly hierarchy – Imam at the head but in seclusion and da'I al-Mutlaq (da'I who enjoys absolute power in the absence of Imam whose appearance is awaited) followed by *ma'dhun al-Da'wah*, next in hierarchy and followed by *mukasir al-Da'wah*.

However, this hierarchy is now more formal than real. During the active period of Da'wah in Arabia this hierarchy had definite functions. A mukasir used to convince Sunni Muslims and convert to the Isma'ili faith and ma'dhun used to usher him into da'wah by administering a pledge in Arabic called *mithaqi*. It was essentially an oath of secrecy, more political in content than religious though it was couched in religious terminology.

Finally a Da'I would then impart him the knowledge of Isa'ili faith in degrees graduating from ordinary believer to one who was taught the '*ilm al-haqiqah* i.e. knowledge of top-secret Isma'ili faith. Of course very few converts to Isma'ili faith could achieve this prestigious status. Also, a Da'I used to be in charge of an area and he headed the mission in that particular region.

Now Imam is believed to be in seclusion and only one da'I called da'I al-Mutlaq commands absolute authority throughout world wherever Dawoodi Bohras live. The Madhun and Mukasir have no specific function to perform as

9. See *The Bohras* o.cit.pp-116-117.

there is no longer any missionary activity. No one is any longer invited to convert to Dawoodi Bohra faith. Only in cases of marriage between a Dawoodi and non-Dawoodi, non-Dawoodi spouse is coerced into conversion. The Da'wah these days only protects the religious beliefs of the Faith.

As pointed out before, all Bohras converted in Gujarat and hence they remain linguistically and culturally rooted in Gujarati language and culture. Wherever Bohras are they speak Gujarati and follow Gujarati culture. In all the countries of South and South East Asia they speak Gujarati, even in Arab and Western countries they continue to cling to Gujarati language and Gujarati culture. Today Dawoodi Bohras are found, besides India, in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangla Desh, Dubai, Kuwait, Bahrain, the Yemen, Kenya, Tanzania and Mauritius, U.K., USA, Canada, France as far as West Asia, Africa and Western countries are concerned and in Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia as far as South East Asia is concerned. In all these countries mentioned above Dawoodi Bohras are migrants from India except in Yemen where there are some Dawoodis who are ethnic Arabs and their mother tongue is Arabic.

While the common Bohras speak Gujarati the clergy uses what is known as *Da'wat ni zaban* i.e. language which is mixture of Gujarati and Arabic and contains great deal of theological terms in Arabic. All sermons (*wa'z*) are delivered in this *Da'wat ni zaban* which is hardly followed by ordinary Bohras. All communications sent by Kothar (Bohra religious establishment) are also in this language. The clergy uses this language throughout the world, even in western countries like U.K., USA and Canada.

The Kothar, even when sending communication in English sprinkles it liberally with Arabic words. Recently, after the reform movement created a storm in the Dawoodi Bohra world, personality cult was greatly reinforced by the priestly hierarchy. The Da'i is generally addressed as *Saiyyidna* – an

Arabic term meaning 'our master' and all da'is historically were addressed by this honorific right up to 51st Da'I, father of the present incumbent who is 52nd in line.

However, since reform movement since 1970s created turmoil in the Dawoodi world, clergy issued instructions to address him as 'aqa mawla' i.e. our lord and our master, such honorific are generally used for Allah (*aqa* is Persian word and *mawla* is Arabic one). The ordinary Bohras are described as *mu'minin* and they are supposed to be slaves ('*abd*'). The earlier da'is never called their followers as '*abdi*' (slave). Now highly loaded terms are used for the da'i who is treated almost like a god on earth. Another term used is *Huzura'la* (in his august presence). Thus a deliberate attempt has been made by the present da'I to cultivate a culture of slavery and giving high priest a status, which even the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) never claimed. A glance at the website www.mu'iin.com is enough to establish this.

The Bohras, as pointed out above, are a mercantile community. But they do not undertake trade prohibited by Islam. It must be said that as far as Bohras (of all sects) are concerned, traditionally they have been meticulous followers of Islam and their book of jurisprudence is known as *Da'a'im al-Islam* which was written by Sayyidna Qadi al-Nu'man, who was the chief Qadi (judge) during the 14th Fatimi imam Imam Mu'iz. This is standard work of jurisprudence for all Isma'ilis. Though Isma'lis are Shi'as, their jurisprudence tends to be closer to the Maliki School of jurisprudence.

Thus the Bohra merchants do not deal in wines and liquors, cigarettes and other tobacco products (as against other Muslims tobacco is strictly prohibited among Bohras unlike other Muslims). They generally trade in hardware, glass, clothes, jewellery, gems, diamonds, paper, food grains, automobiles and automobile spare parts, ball bearings, arms, etc. which are Shari'ah permissible. Now some of them also deal in computer and computer technology. In South and

South East Asia they are generally in these businesses. At one time Bohras were universally known for honesty and fair trade practices. However, it is difficult to say this in today's world. Also, they are seldom involved in crimes, underworld activities and smuggling etc. even today. Also, they tend to be peace-loving community and do not generally take part in politics or support opposition parties. They try to buy their peace by generally supporting ruling party.

In India they were traditionally supporting the Indian National Congress and hardly ever they participated in freedom movement. They kept away from all such activities. And in post-independence period they supported the ruling party. However, now in India in the changed political conditions, they support the Hindu rightist party like the BJP wherever they come to power. Thus they have established cordial relations with the BJP rulers in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan where BJP is in power. It is known fact that the Bohra high priest donated liberally to the BJP kit in Gujarat to fight elections despite horrible carnage of Muslims in Gujarat in which the Bohras also suffered extensive damage in terms of life and property.

Also, since the intensification of reform movement among the Dawoodis, the Bohra high priest tried to develop cordial relations with Sunni Muslim 'Ulama as well as political leaders by generously donating to their organisations to buy their political support against the reformists. As one American political scientist Theodore Wright Jr. put it aptly, the Bohra priesthood manipulates democracy outside the community to frustrate the attempts for democracy inside the community.

The Bohras follow the same pattern of non-interference in politics in other countries also and maintain strict neutrality. They have maintained this pattern in South East Asian countries like Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia also apart from other Asian and African countries where they have had long presence.

RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNITY LIFE OF BOHRAS

The religious and social life of the Dawoodi Bohras is woven around masjid and Jamatkhana (community hall). All religious functions and even social ones are held in Masjid and Jamatkhana. They do not allow other Muslims in their mosque (with few exceptions of course). Jamatkhana is used for community dinners. It is interesting to note that unlike other Muslim communities – Shi'ahs or Sunnis – Bohras organise large number of community dinners. For them any pretext is good enough to organise such dinners.

The present da'I has increased number of such community dinners. Community dinner is organised on all first 10 days of Muharram to observe martyrdom of Imam Husain in Kerbala in Iraq. Then now all 30 days of Ramadan, the fasting month, community dinner is organised after *iftar* (breaking of fast). Earlier only on few occasions in Ramadan such dinners were organised. These dinners have been made obligatory for Bohras wherever they are including in countries other than India.

Also, the Bohras have to pay several taxes (generally seven) to the Bohra high priest. No Bohra can escape payment of these taxes. The Bohra da'I appoints his representative wherever there are more than a dozen families of Bohras in India or abroad. These representatives are known as '*amil*' (literally governor). These clergymen are trained in a Bohra seminary in Surat in Gujarat and are appointed through centrally controlled system. A whole religious bureaucracy has developed in the head office in Bombay which controls religious and social life of Bohras throughout the world.

These '*amils*' collect tithes from Bohras especially on 23rd of Ramadan and if anyone defaults, these taxes will be collected on the occasion of marriage and funeral. In centrally controlled Bohra community no marriage or funeral rites can be performed without the permission of priesthood. The local

priest's *raza* (permission) is needed to marry or to bury ones loved ones.

The entire system of payments has now been centrally computerised. As one politician put it in India the Bohra high priest is the most organised one among all Muslim sects. Undoubtedly it is very true. His 'amils are given a quota of fund in every city which he is supposed to collect and remit to the central fund of the priesthood. The local 'amil is often forced to coerce local Bohras to pay up.

Now to discipline recalcitrant Bohras the priesthood has started identity card system in three colours – green, yellow and red. One who pays all taxes demanded and is also quite obedient to the local priest is given green card, one who pays but not regularly and also raises questions of and on, is given yellow and one who is in arrears and is recalcitrant is given red card.

One who possesses green card faces no problems and can enter any Bohra mosque and jamatkhana or any mausoleum of Bohra saint. One with yellow card is also allowed but may face problems at times but one with red card is not invited to dinners and is treated with contempt. There is also system of social boycott, generally exercised by high priest or local priests against one who is suspected of reformist sympathies. One who is boycotted may have to separate from his wife and children or parents, if he does not apologise and submit unconditionally to the priesthood.

All reformists are barred from entering Bohra masjids and Jamatkhana and mausoleums. The community today is divided into orthodox and reformist Bohras and they are not permitted by the priesthood even to intermarry. If any intermarriage take place, the guilty would be immediately put under social boycott and face all consequences. Thousands of Bohra families have been thus divided and even

disintegrated.¹⁰ Thus there is great atmosphere of fear and terror in the community. Though a large number of Bohras have sympathy with the reformists, no one dares to express it publicly. They express their support only in strict privacy.

This atmosphere of fear and terror, surprisingly exists in other countries as well be they in South East Asia or Africa or western countries. Everywhere the Bohra priesthood has successfully established its firm grip. No one, be it in Singapore, America or England or Hong Kong, can express opinion in favour of reform movement, let alone meet or maintain any contact with reformist leaders. On doing so, her/his 'green card' will be taken away and he/she or his/her family will suffer.

Each Bohra, on reaching the age of puberty has to give what is called *mithaq* (oath of allegiance). Its text is originally in Arabic but has been translated in *lisan al-Da'wah* i.e. highly Arabicised Gujarati which hardly any Bohra understands. He/she simply keeps on saying 'yes' wherever needed. This oath of allegiance, originally devised by the Isma'ili Da 'is when the Isma'ili movement was underground. Those who converted to the Isma'ili movement had to agree to these rigorous conditions of loyalty to the imam. However, later it just became a mere tradition, a religious rite.

But when reform movement became strong in mid-seventies and the Bohra high priest feared losing grip over his flock, he began enforcing it literally once again. The *mithaq* which was taken in the name of imam, now is taken in favour of da'i. Earlier da'is never tempered with it and always took it in the name of imam. Here are few extracts from the text of the *mithaq*:

"...that he will love him who lives the Imams, and will be hostile to him who is hostile to the Imams, that he will

10. For further details see *The Bohras* op.cit. pp- 165 to 281.

sever his connection from their enemies, that he will show sincerity to God and His favourites (i.e. Imam), and that if he will break the covenant then the same thing will be imposed upon the breakers of the oath.

“And if the Imam of the time or his Dae'e call upon you to war against the enemy then you should make the war. You should help with your life and property. Any person transgressing those engagements of the Dae'e he is outside the pale of religion, whether he be great or small, whether he is a close relative or distant one. You shall not have any intercourse with him. You shall not correspond with him openly or secretly. You shall not do any act calculated to be friendly to him. And by no manner or means or pretence you shall see the enemy of the Dae'e. Enemy of the Dae'e is your enemy. Say yes.”¹¹

These conditions of the covenant are being literally imposed and reformists have been declared as enemy of the faith. The reformists, of course, have not challenged the basic tenets of Dawoodi Bohra faith. They adhere to these tenets like any other Dawoodi. But they have challenged the Da'i's authority to interfere with secular life of his followers, their business, their political rights, their educational activities, their right to marry and their right to run charitable activities. They also maintain that the da'I is bound to render accounts for the tithes collected and spend them on the welfare of the communities, not on himself and his family and extended family.

The Bohras all over the world are under obligation to follow the priesthood's dictates and dare not show any sign of dissidence. If they do so, it will be at their own peril unless they are ready to break off from community and all family ties.

11. Vide para 88 of THE JUDGEMENT IN SUIT NO. 941 OF 1971 IN THE High Court of Judicature of Bombay.

The Bohras have migrated to different countries especially of South and South East Asia in search of better trade prospects. The Bohras being basically a trading community look for better trading prospects and migrate to any such countries where they find better trading prospects. This since 19th century they migrated to East Africa, particularly Kenya and Tanzania which were also British colonial countries.

Similarly they migrated to Malaysia in South East Asia which was also a British ruled country. They were in Singapore too as then it was part of Malaysia. They preferred port cities in 19th century, as there are always better prospects of trade in port cities. In India too, many Bohras had migrated to Bombay from Gujarat when it was developed as a port city by the Britishers. Earlier they were in Surat in large numbers as during Moghul period it too was a port city. However, Surat port became dysfunctional when Bombay developed as a main port city.

In South East Asia they are in substantial numbers in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore but very few in Indonesia. In Thailand they are concentrated mainly in Bangkok which is a big trading centre. They are found in few other cities of Thailand also like in Chenmai. In Thailand some of them have married local Thai women converting them to the Bohra faith. These Thai women take part in all religious rituals in the Bohra mosques but without understanding anything as the Amil speaks only in Gujarati.

The Bohras are forbidden to marry non-Bohra women but when they do, they convert her to Bohra faith and is administered oath of allegiance at the time of conversion. Only after her conversion *nikah* (marriage ceremony) can be performed. A Bohra male or female cannot marry any other Sunni or twelver Shi'ah man or women also. They can marry only on condition of conversion. Besides *nikah* all other ceremonies pertaining to marriage are of Gujarati origin. These

ceremonies have less to do with Islam but more to do with Gujarati local culture to which the Bohras adhere.

The Bohras have constructed their own mosques in all the countries they have migrated with attached jamatkhana where community dinners are organised. Though they have to follow the local laws for registering the mosque, it is always dedicated to the Da'I instead of Allah, as in the case of other Muslims. Without dedicating the mosque to the Da'I it is considered soulless and offering prayer in it will not be acceptable to Allah, as if Allah needs Da'i's permission to accept prayer.

In Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia too they follow these practices, though they may not declare it publicly. In Sunnī countries like in Malaysia or West Asian countries, they practice *taqiyya* (dissimulation) as pointed out above. The Da'I, presently Sayyidna Muhammad Burhanuddin, keeps on visiting these countries and collect hefty sums of money by way of salam (personal offerings). Each Bohra has to invite him to his house for Bohras what is called *ziyafat* (Arabic for hospitality) and Da'i's men negotiate the amount for salam which is usually in several hundreds of thousands of local currency (dollar, Singapore dollar, Ringget, Baht etc.). On one visit he collects millions in local currency. Then that money is transferred to India or to some designated country. They engage expert financial expert as their advisors as to how to avoid paying taxes and how to transfer money from one country to another. Sayyidna Muhammad Burhanuddin was caught smuggling money from Tanzania and was externed from their by the Tanzanian Government. Once present da'i's uncle Ibrahim Zainuddin was caught with diamonds and other precious stones in his turban on 20th April 1957 trying to smuggle them from Sri Lanka. At another time Yusuf Najmuddin, brother of present da'i was caught smuggling Kenyan money on 17th March 1977 and once the present da'i

himself was caught and deported from Tanzania on 15th August 1968.

After such bad experiences they engaged financial experts to advise them how to manage their financial affairs. Since Bohras are trading community and make lot of money in profit, they either voluntarily or through coercion pay great deal of money to the priesthood. Theirs is one of the richest families in India. Also, in various countries they have invested lot of money in real estate in the names of different members of family.

In every country they have their jamaat which is fully controlled from the central religious establishment of the Da'I in India. In South and South East Asia the Bohras are very prosperous community in Sri Lanka where they mainly deal in precious stones, in Malaysia, Singapore and Pakistan. In Pakistan and Sri Lanka they have political connection and give money generously to politicians to buy peace for themselves. The priesthood maintains high-level political contacts in these countries. In India too the high priest has contacts right up to highest level of governance, besides bureaucracy and high officialdom.

Bohras are generally a closed community and quite centripetal in attitude. Centrifugal tendencies are highly dreaded. Outsiders think they are highly prosperous and well-disciplined community but it is not whole reality. There is lot of poverty among Bohras, especially in India but not so abroad. The discipline also is more coercive one and comes at a high price. There is no internal freedom and is centrally controlled. The reform movement mainly is aimed at ensuring freedom of individual and abolish collective slavery to priesthood.

10

ISLAM GLOBALIZATION AND CHALLENGES*

I

Much is being written these days on globalization and its effects as well as Islam and challenges of globalization. Yet much more is needed to be written to cover various aspects. Globalization has emerged as a major challenge for religions in general and Islam in particular. Before we deal with these challenges, we would like to throw light on the nature of globalization itself so that we can comprehend the challenge better.

I would like to assert here that globalization is nothing new. Right from known history there have been intercontinental migrations. Silk Route well known in history was also sort of globalizing process. Then colonization of Asian and African countries in 18th and 19th centuries was also a phase of globalization. These phases of globalizations had distinct features and the current phase of globalization has its own features. In order to understand nature of globalization in the current phase it is important to understand these distinct features. Then only can we understand nature of challenges, then and now.

The nature of globalization when trade was carried out through silk trade route was of non-dominant nature. The trade caravans started from China and passed through India, the Yemen by crossing the Indian Sea and from Yemen it proceeded towards Eastern part of Roman Empire after

crossing the desert called Rub'al Khali. This globalization also created certain challenges to Arabs which we would like to discuss.

Then the colonial powers of Europe colonized various Asian and African countries and this globalization was of very different nature from the one brought about by Silk Trade Route. Silk Route trade was participative, not dominating in nature. Each country participated in trade in their own way and contributed to trade. No country dominated over any other country. However, colonial globalization was of different nature altogether. The colonial powers dominated the colonized countries and deeply influenced the social fabric of the colonized country. It posed great challenges which we will discuss.

II

First we will throw light on challenges posed by Silk Route trade to Arab society in 5th and 6th century. It was this challenge posed by Silk Route trade which brought about birth of Islam. We would like to discuss this in some detail below.

The Silk Route trade also deeply impacted on social fabric of Meccan society in 6th century. The Meccan Arabs were expert guides for crossing the desert of Rub' al-Khali. No trade caravan could cross that formidable desert without their help. Thus the trade caravans wishing to reach Roman Empire had to cross this desert and these Arabs acted as expert guides. Mecca thus became a station on this international trade route and gradually a high centre of international trade and finance.

These Arab guides gradually became expert traders too and began to accumulate riches through profitable international trade.

Accumulation of riches deeply impacted tribal way of life and soon there occurred divide between rich and poor. A tribal society has no concept of private property except in

animals and personal weapons and consequently has no concept of poverty. But this transformation from a tribal to trading society brought about dynamics of social change of its own and while some traders became rich and others were consigned to lower levels of social structure. A tribal society has no concept of social hierarchy and believes in equality of all and even tribal chief is first among equals, nothing more.

But division between rich and poor changed the whole social fabric and poor members of tribe were no longer treated as equal and these poor were forced to labor for the rich, often were used for loading and unloading the camels carrying trading goods. Slavery also developed and slave trade also took place as slaves were needed in Roman Empire and rich Meccans also began to keep slaves.

The tribal ethics underwent drastic change. Since in tribal society there is no concept of poverty, there is no question of neglecting poor. But in newly emergent society not only poor came into existence but the rich began to neglect them thus violating tribal tradition. Thus a social malaise developed and social tensions between rich and poor emerged. The life style of the rich changed completely and the poor could not even meet their basic needs.

Muhammad (PBUH) was deeply disturbed by this social malaise and retired to cave of Hira to reflect over the situation. He began to receive revelation from Allah to guide him and the earliest chapters and verses dealt with this situation in Meccan society. These powerful verses strongly condemned accumulation of wealth (see verses 104, 107 and others). These verses exhorted the Meccan rich to take care of poor, needy, orphans and widows what we can term in modern political terminology as weaker sections of society.

The Qur'an also made justice (including distributive justice) as central to the Qur'anic ethics and attacked lavish life style of the rich. Thus Islam emerged as a strong political as well as spiritual movement in response to the impact of

'globalization' of its own time. That globalization too was favoring the rich and accentuating differences between rich and poor and Islam's sympathy was clearly with the poor and the neglected sections of society on its margin.

Other countries were not deeply impacted by this international trade as India, Yemen and region of Roman Empire was feudal where such differences had already existed. It was Meccan society, which was structurally very different and was in the process of developing such economic classes. Thus Islam was embraced by the youth who were desiring change (in all revolutionary movements youth play an important role), slaves, and other marginalized sections of society. Of course some rich traders too responded to it as they were also pained by marginalization of fellow tribals and wanted to bring about favorable change. Traders like Abubaker, Usman (who subsequently became political successors of the Prophet) embraced Islam readily and helped Islamic movement by generously donating their wealth for spread of the movement.

Thus it was that globalization brought about by this Silk Route trade between far off China and region of Roman Empire via India and Yemen. Islamic movement soon reached these countries – parts of China, Central Asia, India, Yemen and conquered Eastern Roman Empire and Sassanid Empire in a course of a century. But though Islam deeply impacted the spiritual life of these regions, it could not leave deeper impact on political and social structure in these countries. The feudal politics co-opted Islamic politics and Khilafat, the representative model of Islamic politics, soon turned into monarchical model of politics so aptly discussed by Maulana Abul a'ala Maududi, the founder of Jamat-e-Islami in India, in his book *Khilafat aur Mulukiyyat*.

Thus Islam, after it spread in non-Arab regions of the world with advanced feudal political structure lost its revolutionary political impact and a political movement

became an essentially other worldly spiritual movement. Thus social hierarchy prevails today in all Islamic countries though it is anathema to Islamic ethical as well as political teachings. Serious social and political inequalities prevail throughout Islamic world.

III

Thus seemingly innocuous trade between different countries in 6th century brought about a profound transformation in the region of Arabia which subsequently equally profoundly influenced whole of our world. Thus globalization can throw up entirely new social movements and political structures. The globalization of second wave was colonial globalization as pointed out before. This globalization also had great impact on social and political structures of the colonialized countries.

Most of the Islamic countries from Algeria to Indonesia came under direct or indirect influence of colonial countries like Britain, France and Italy etc. This phase of colonization seriously upset social structures and political outlooks. The colonized people were faced with the challenge of new culture and western political as well as moral philosophy. Now the challenge was not only cultural and political but also that of science and technological inventions.

By nineteenth century the European countries had developed far more superior technology and had made significant scientific discoveries. These discoveries had given great boost to rational and secular outlook, on one hand, and political philosophy of democracy, on the other. The colonized countries had not known these technologies and scientific discoveries and hence they developed inferiority complex. This colonization also led to developing a universal secular educational institutions thus creating an educated elite easily co-opted by the colonial country.

Thus colonized countries, in this second wave of globalization created deep divisions among colonized people – those educated and politically privileged and mass of poor people looked upon with contempt by the educated elite. The elite welcomed change, even westernization and religious elite and unlettered masses opposing it. Nevertheless colonial impact brought about democratic movements, administrative reforms, universal secular education and rational thinking. The colonial rule thus proved blessing in disguise to a limited extent. None of the colonized countries had democracy. They were governed by monarchies including India. While colonial rule amounted to slavery, it also left its imprint on almost all spheres of life.

Thus challenges of colonial rule were a mixed bag. The colonial rule did not allow people of colonized countries to take independent decisions, it arrested economic growth and they could not free elect their own representatives. But at the same time as an impact of colonial rule Islamic countries underwent beneficial changes in outlook and many reform movements were launched. Also movements to revive early Islam also came into being. In Egypt Muhammad Abduh, a great Islamic thinker, reinterpreted many provisions of Shari'ah and tried to reform Egyptian society. Many women writers took up the gauntlet and advocated reforms to improve the status of Muslim women.

Muhammad Abduh spent number of years in France and was highly impressed by level of education in that society and rational outlook of people of France. He started a magazine and named it *Urwat al-Wuthqa* along with Jamaluddin Afghani. Jamaluddin Afghani launched a pan-Islamic movement and tried to create unity among all Muslim countries to challenge western supremacy. Jamaluddin was active in political sphere while Muhammad Abduh, his disciple, preferred to work for dissemination of education among Muslims.

In Indian Islam too there was intellectual ferment and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan founded MAO College, which became university in 1920. He also launched a magazine and called it *tahzib al-Akhlaq* and advocated social and religious reform. He also tried to re-interpret Holy Qur'an by writing a new *tafsir* in the light of new development in the world of science and scientific discoveries. Interestingly enough Syed Hamid, the then Vice Chancellor of AMU revived *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* and it is continuing ever since.

Justice Amir Ali, Maulavi Chiragh Ali, Maulana Mumtaz Ali Khan and others also advocated reforms in Muslim law in keeping with the modern times and made seminal contributions in that field. Philosopher poet Mohammad Iqbal wrote *Reconstruction of Religious thought in Islam* and invited Muslim intelligentsia to re-think on many Islamic issues. There was conflict of views between the conservative 'Ulama and reform minded Muslim intellectuals.

Also during the colonial period Islam was reviled by the Christian clerics and many Muslim practices came under attack from British colonial masters. New laws and new judicial processes were introduced which again were mixed bag. Muslim countries were dominated at the gunpoint. These challenges thrown up by colonization were quite severe enough but also partially beneficial as they stirred our thinking and caused intellectual ferment.

However, while in non-Islamic countries like India colonial rule brought structural changes both in political as well as economic spheres in no Muslim country such basic structural transformation took place and as a result of this no Muslim countries could usher in either democratic or capitalist revolution. Both feudal politics and feudal economy could not be replaced. Some 'Ulama and Muslim intellectuals who talked of Islamic democracy and Islamic economy also did not succeed in bringing in any fundamental change in political or

economic sphere. It was nothing more than empty rhetoric. Thus there is complete stagnation in these countries.

IV

In this section we will deal with the third wave of globalization which we are faced with presently. The challenges thrown up by this phase of globalization are qualitatively very different and response to these challenges are also very different from the ones during colonial phase. There is no political colonization in this phase but economic colonization. No guns have been used to establish political domination as in colonial period but financial domination has been imposed through various means. Violence has been used in some inalcitrant countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, but not everywhere. Even in these countries direct political control has been avoided. We will shed more light on this little later.

Though globalization always results in connectivity (without which there is no question of globalization as the very term indicates), in this phase connectivity has very significant role to play through computer revolution. Whole world has been connected through e-net work, email and websites. This connectivity is being used by both who are supporters of globalization as well as those who vehemently oppose it.

'Ulama too are taking maximum benefit of this connectivity. They have set -up Islamic websites and websites of their Islamic institutions. Today all important Qur'anic commentaries and entire corpus of ahadith are available on these websites. Not only this these facilities have been used for making various arithmetic calculations about the Qur'anic words, verbs and sentences. Searching Qur'anic verses and ahadith has also become extremely easy. It has thus immensely benefited Islamic scholars. Thus this connectivity is an

important part of present phase of globalization and no one opposes it.

While this is positive side of globalization in this phase, its negative side is no less problematic. This phase of globalization has bulldozed all native cultures homogenizing them in one sweep through various media channels. Also, this homogenization is being promoted through gross commercialization of culture. This commercialization has bulldozed all religious, cultural and civilizational values too.

It is this bulldozing of cultural and civilizational values which has created strong reaction from traditional religious elite and has resulted in what is being termed as 'religious fundamentalism. This is a major challenge which has emerged during the current phase of globalization. As pointed out during before, colonial phase too saw this challenge but not on such massive scale. There was an attempt to impose western culture as superior culture during colonial phase but there was no such challenge at market place and means of communications were extremely limited and such homogenization could not have been possible as it is today during the current globalization and fast connectivity.

All T.V. channels and print media are at the service of those attempting the bulldozing. Also, unlike earlier colonial days, there is no coercive imposition which could be strongly resisted. In this phase it is attempt at popularization through commercial channels. The economic elite consider it their privilege to accept western culture. During colonial phase different colonial powers dominated various colonized countries though Britain was largest among them. In this phase one single country USA has established its domination in all spheres political, economic and cultural. American values have emerged as universal values.

Thus conservative religious elite are strongly resisting this attempt, though not very successfully as people of all communities want to have 'good things' of life. Islamic

countries themselves like Dubai and Kuwait have emerged as huge markets for these goods and special festivals are often organized by governments of these countries to promote sale of these goods.

Women's bodies have also been commercialized and one sees photographs of semi-naked women in every commercial advertisements evoking strong reaction from traditional elements. Thus Muslim women are subjected to more controls to protect their chastity. Men continue to enjoy all the freedom but women come under greater male control.

This globalization has also resulted in Huntingtonian theories like 'clash of civilizations' which are in the interest of American domination of Islamic world. And Islamic world is sought to be dominated on account of its treasures of oil and oil is needed to meet the requirements of energy for automobiles as well as industries. Without the oil wheels of western economy would grind to halt. Today American foreign policy in Middle East, is totally governed by oil politics.

America lends blind support to Israel and keeps on arming it to teeth as Israel is the only reliable ally in Middle East. It was in fact created with an eye on Arab oil. Many Arab rulers are also allies of America but rulers may be reliable but not the people of these countries. People continue to be anti-America. US lent total support to the Shah of Iran but people of Iran overthrew Shah's rule.

However, in case of Israel both rulers as well as people can be totally relied upon and hence its value as a most reliable ally in that oil rich region. Thus when Saddam Husain proved to be recalcitrant, theory of weapons of mass destruction was invented and Iraq was bulldozed. However Iraqi people too have proved to be more recalcitrant. Earlier Taliban regime was dethroned as it did not permit USA to lay down pipe lines to ferry Central Asian oil through its region.

The response to American violence has been equally violent by forces like Al-Qaida. Thus this reactive violence is resulting in loss of innocent lives and what is worse Islamic notions like Jihad are being invoked by Al-Qaida and other 'terrorist groups'. Such groups are multiplying in regions of South Asia too which has also emerged as volatile region.

However, this reactive violence is not desirable and is against Islamic values of compassion and wisdom. Wisdom is strongly emphasized by Qur'an and other measures which could be more effective in correcting American policies without loss of innocent human lives should be adopted. Because of this reactive violence powerful western media is reviling Islam though it is none of Islam's fault whose central value is peace. Peaceful, non-violent means would be much more effective and Muslims Ulama and intellectuals should join hands to evolve peaceful, non-violent means to respond to American violence in Islamic countries.

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11

RELIGION AND POVERTY*

I got an invitation from Union Theological Seminar, New York to participate in a seminar on 'Religion and Poverty' whose convener was Paul Knitter on the occasion of his installation as the Dean of the Seminary, a noted scholar in his field, yet very humble person with pleasant personality. I welcomed this opportunity to speak on this subject on which I had written a great deal in the past under the title *Liberation Theology in Islam*. The seminar was from 18 to 21 February.

The very first day we visited a union office to understand issues of poverty in USA. It was indeed moving to see so much poverty in the land of plenty. It was all along known that there is poverty in the USA but it was different thing to experience it in the field. We were taken to an office of association of restaurant workers. We were told more than 40,000 restaurant workers were rendered unemployed when the two trade towers collapsed on 9/11 in which about three thousand people were killed.

We could hardly imagine that such a huge work force was rendered unemployed on 9/11 as entire focus was on those killed and on politics of terror and foreign policy of USA. No one ever referred once to woes of these restaurant workers who lost their jobs and continue to suffer till today in various ways. No one was ready to employ them firstly because they were unionized and secondly because many of them had no documents required by immigration. For years they continued to suffer until they came together to form their own association

for their survival. We listened to the story of their suffering and survival and drew inspiration.

Many of these workers, as pointed out, are those who have migrated from other countries, some without valid documents. They are exploited most because of their legal vulnerability. It is for this reason that Qur'an considers *ibn al-sabil* (travelers, strangers) among the weak and on par with poor and needy and apportions a part of zakat (tithe) for this category. Thus a correct Islamic attitude can help this most vulnerable section in USA and other countries.

Same day the seminar began on 'Religion and Poverty. Resource persons from Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism took part in the debate. Speaking from Islamic viewpoint I spoke on Qur'an and its various verses deeply committed to eradication of poverty. Mecca, as I have pointed out in my writings on liberation theology, was passing through period of deep social malaise which disturbed Muhammad, the prophet of Islam (PBUH).

This social malaise was caused by extreme wealth on one side (from Meccan standards of those days), and extreme poverty, on the other. Interestingly, the Qur'an uses the word *miskeen* for poor and needy. Its root is *sakana* (he remained motionless) and a needy *miskeen* is one who is rendered immobilized due to state of helplessness. Thus Qur'an shows great sympathy with *masakeen*, the poor and needy.

In Mecca the rich traders were neglecting these sections of society including orphans and widows and there was no state structure to bring about proper distribution of wealth through taxation and no will, on the part of the rich merchants to set apart a part of their wealth to mitigate the misery of these suffering sections. Also, tribal norms were being destroyed by the greed of wealthy merchants.

The Prophet of Islam (PBUH) was seriously disturbed by this state of affairs in Mecca. He could not tolerate this acute suffering of the poor, needy and orphans and widows in that

international financial centre Mecca. He was extremely sensitive soul. He himself had suffered poverty in his childhood. He came from a respectable family of clan of Hashim but had very little means of survival. He was an orphan as his parents had died in his early childhood and was brought up by his grand father and then by his uncle.

It is important to note that Allah chose Muhammad (PBUH), a poor, an orphan, for the prophet-hood. He did not choose a wealth or influential person of Meccan society for spreading His Mission. That is why the rich merchants of Mecca held him in contempt that a poor orphan is claiming to be the prophet of Allah. They thought it is below their high position to submit to a poor orphan who hardly had means of survival.

The message of Allah was clear: poor has as much human dignity and capable of spreading Allah's mission as anyone. Allah does not necessarily choose wealthy and socially influential for His mission. Thus prophet-hood was destined for the poor and poverty is a social condition, not a permanent status. Muhammad (PBUH) also showed to the world how one can maintain ones dignity despite straitened economic condition. He never adopted 'high style' of life even when able to due to his changed condition in Madina.

Throughout Qur'an one finds Allah's sympathy with poor and needy and Qur'an even declares that Allah is on the side of the poor and needy, the weak (*mustad'ifin*) and it is these weaker sections of society who will be made leaders of this earth and would inherit it (see 28:5). Thus no one can have any doubt that Allah is on the side of the weak and the poor and certainly not on the side of powerful and arrogant described by Qur'an as *mustakbirun*.

Nimrod and Pharoah are examples of power and arrogance and they perish by their own deeds of oppression and exploitation. And are challenged by Allah's prophets Abraham and Moses both again come from weaker sections of

society. It is these prophet who liberate their nation from oppression (zulm). We all condemn to this day Nimrod and Pharaoh and salute Abraham and Moses.

Qur'an also condemns accumulation and hoarding of wealth which represents greed, not need. Qur'an upholds life based on need and condemns greed in different ways. Ideally Qur'an requires believers to retain only what is needed to fulfill basic needs and rest be given away in the way of Allah (2:219). Of course need is socially dynamic concept and may vary from time to time and place to place. What are basic needs in USA may not be necessarily so in India or African countries.

The American poor may possess car and car is not necessarily an indicator of prosperity as in India or other developing countries. Social needs of a particular society would determine the levels of need and greed. What the Qur'an condemns is greed and accumulation. In Mecca it came out with a concept of zakat as a charity but when a sort of state structure began to develop in Madina, it became an obligatory levy with a well defined *nisab* (slab). Though Qur'an did not fix any rate or slab but exhorted believers to give away what is surplus, Prophet (PBUH) took a practical attitude and required believers to take out at least two and half per cent of their wealth and income at the end of the year.

However, the Qur'an described the portions of zakat to be spent on the needy, the poor, orphans and widows, for release of prisoners, for travelers, for the indebted and for undefined category 'in the way of Allah (see 9:60). This verse on zakat embraces all weaker sections of society and is as much valid today as it was when revealed.

It is, however, very unfortunate that the so-called Islamic states give more importance to punishments than poverty reduction program of the Qur'an. Reason is very clear. Punishments help impose state's authority and protect the elite supporting the state while to undertake poverty reduction

program amounts to hurting the rich and powerful. Islam lays great emphasis on social justice and justice in all its forms.

The Prophet never showed any favor to the powerful and rich and rigorously tried to impose justice as required by the Qur'an. There are several verses in Qur'an emphasizing *qist* and *'adl* (justice and equity) like 49:9, 72:15, 5:42, 49:9, 60:9 and so on. However, all modern Islamic states have strayed far away from this Qur'anic ideal. The contemporary Islamic states are dominated by the powerful and rich and are oppressive and exploitative in nature and yet claim to be Islamic state by merely enforcing some Shari'at rules on punishment and personal laws.

In fact the Qur'an gives concept of a just social set up (irrespective of nature of state structure) and to implement the Qur'anic punishment without fully implementing its just social system itself is *zulm* (oppression). If social structures are unjust and there is poverty and suffering in the society, first priority would be enforcement of social, economic and legal justice and then anything else.

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was extremely sensitive to suffering humanity and especially to those who suffered from woes of poverty. He is reported to have said that it is more meritorious to feed a hungry soul than to pray whole night and that in the vicinity of hungry angles of mercy do not descend. He required Muslims to pay *fitrah* i.e. a portion of ones wealth to the poor on the occasion of Eid so that poor could also partake in the celebration of festival. It is not only the rich who have right to enjoy these celebrations.

The Prophet (PBUH) when setting up a society in Madina his whole emphasis was on equality between believers. When migrants came from Mecca to Madina he established a novel form of institution unheard of before called *mu'akhat* (i.e. brotherhood) between one immigrant and one helper from Madina who was well settled there. For the time one stands on ones on leg, helper would support him for his livelihood.

However, the immigrant was required to start earning his own livelihood. This created an atmosphere of cooperation.

It also helped create people self-supporting so that they do not become burden on others. Some immigrants were quite well to do in Mecca but as immigrant they were helpless in new situation. These immigrants soon began to earn their own livelihood through trade and other economic activities. The Prophet himself was an immigrant and many helpers (Ansar) considered it a great privilege to keep him and his family at their respective houses. But the Prophet declined and preferred to establish himself and soon he constructed his own quarters along with a mosque, which came to be known as Masjid al-Nabi – the mosque of the Prophet.

Also, the Prophet (PBUH) called leaders of all the religious groups and tribal chiefs to draw up a covenant to live in harmony with each other despite pursuing different religions – Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Paganism – and differing tribal traditions. It came to be known as Mithaq-i-Madina, a novel political document of its time. It was very close to the modern political ethos. In fact Prophet's Madina presents best model of religious pluralism which even the West came to adopt in later party of twentieth century.

Though there was no formal government Madina became the best governed city depending entirely on mutual cooperation and voluntary services including defense services. Formal state structure did not develop in Madina until much later in the Umayyad period. Even during the four Caliphs who succeeded the Prophet there was hardly proper state structure except some elements of it.

However, despite severe challenges and complex problems Madina was better governed city compared to capitals of powerful empires like Roman and Sassanid empires. There was great emphasis on social justice without heavy burden of taxation. It was spirit of social justice based on the concept of

equality and equal dignity for all human beings (17:70) that created a just social structure.

Though Abu Bakr, the first Caliph after the Prophet did not get much time to organize Madinese society due to his preoccupation with tribal revolt (war of *riddah*) Umar and Ali the 2nd and 4th Caliphs tried their best to create a just society. Umar used to say I will be responsible to Allah even if a dog died of hunger in my regime. He used to impose norms of governance very strictly. He chided his most competent general Khalid bin Walid when he came to know he had given a large amount of money to a poet because he liked his composition.

Ali, who was bravest general and a great scholar, orator and a poet, was very rigorous in dispensing with justice in keeping with the Qur'anic ideals and would not allow a single dirham to be spent from Bait al-Mal (state treasury) without justification. He chided his own brother Aquil when he wanted money from state treasury for himself. Ali would take from state treasury as much as he would give to his servant, not more, not less.

When an Arab woman demanded more from Ali than a non-Arab woman Ali said "By Allah I would not make any distinction between an Arab and Ajam (non-Arab)". It was because of such rigorous imposition of justice that Madina could avoid, at least for few years, the extremes of riches and poverty. But, one must admit, this did not last longer as when Caliphate was turned into monarchy by Mu'awiyah who nominated his son Yazid as his successor. All norms of social justice were thrown to winds and Caliphate turned into a dynastic empire and worst kind of oppression and exploitation began. Maulana Maududi in his book *Khilafat aur Mulukiyyat* has given vivid description of this change.

Here it is worthy of note that a society can remain just only if it is small in size and not obsessed with power. It is megalomania which leads to not only complex problems in the

society but also severe injustices, exploitation and subjugation of others. It is megalomania of western powers which resulted in colonialism and in contemporary world the wars and bloodshed by America.

The Christian community too led life according to the ideals of Bible but the whole character of Christianity changed once it was associated with Roman Empire. Thus political power and religious spirit cannot go together. Political power is based on coercion and religion on persuasion.

Thus if we want religion to be an important resource to fight poverty in contemporary society, it should never be associated with political power. I said in the seminar in Union theological Seminary if you want religion to be an important resource give training to your students that they should fight poverty by siding with the poor, not with rich and powerful in pursuit of political power. Our priests and religious preachers should be strongly committed to social justice which is real spirit of religion.

The liberation theology in Christianity developed in poor and exploited Latin America, not in powerful and affluent USA. The Catholic priests working among poor peasantry and urban poor in Latin America stood by the oppressed and exploited and developed liberation theology which powerful church hesitated to recognize. Many of these priests were killed by the powerful landlords. Supreme sacrifice is the real spirit of religion. Qur'an also says "You cannot attain to righteousness unless you give (in the way of Allah) what you love."

Thus real spirit of religion is giving, not receiving, sacrificing, not accumulating. Wherever religion gets associated with powers that be, it remains anything but religion. Then religion assumes the form of rituals completely devoid of spirit. The whole history of church during medieval ages and history of Islam through various empires beginning with Umayyad empire is powerful demonstration of this truth.

Separation of church and state is the right doctrine but it is observed more in breach than in practice. Religion must remain powerful critic of powers that be and should play subversive role for establishment. Political revolutions failed because ultimate logic of political revolution is to seize power from one set of elite for another set of elite without bringing any qualitative change.

Religious revolution, on the other hand, plays initially at least a different role to bring qualitative change in society by ushering in a just structure. However, soon it also gets associated with political power and its spirit is lost in the ocean of lust for power. All religious revolutions also lost their edge soon after they tried to change society. It is this dilemma which human beings have faced since the beginning of the known history.

In fact religion and poverty should never go together and religion should once again play a role of powerful critic of the established powers who thrive by accentuating unjust distribution of social resources. A truly religious society cannot be built by building grand temples, churches, mosques and gurdwaras but by building a simple and need-based social structure.

Poverty is opposite of material riches, not of simple need-based life style. The resources of our earth are limited and must be used with great sense of economy. The right word in Arabic for simple need-based life style is *faqr* which implies patience, constraint on desire and dignified but simple life style. The Prophet of Islam also said *faqr* is my pride (*al-faqr fakhri*).

However, today we see the so called religious personalities living in high style in grand buildings and maintaining an army of servants and subservient followers. A truly religious person should never be afraid of social critic and should never display his power and influence. He/she should be distinguished from others by simplicity, honesty and

transparence. One who gives in to greed and opulence can never be seen with the masses.

All great founders of religions are known for their simplest possible life style be it Buddha, Christ, Muhammad or Nanak. Also, Sufi saints like Baba Farid, Moinuddin Chishti or Nizamuddin Awliya always led life of *faqir* in true sense. Ali, the son in law of the Prophet often used to eat dry bread with salt and curd. Nizamuddin Awliya fasted during day and would break it with dry piece of bread. Yet they are so powerful that kings used to envy their popularity. They were powerful critics of power seeking monarchs.

Religion being powerful critic of the powerful must be on the side of the oppressed and exploited to fulfill its role in the society. Tagore in his *Geetanjali* rightly points out that if you are seeking God you will not find it in grand temples but in workers breaking stones in the heat and dust of May. Real miracle is not to produce things from no where as many charlatans do but to transform our society into a just cooperative than competitive society where all can have their needs fulfilled and live a rich spiritual life.

This of course cannot be realized as history has shown but until then religion should remain critic of oppression and exploitation and be seen always on the side of the weak. It should advocate moral, not political power. Its superiority lies in moral superiority and if religions perform this role there will be no conflict between religions but between exploiters. Religions fight among themselves because they become tools of exploiters.

ISLAM AND THE WEST: WHAT MUSLIMS SHOULD DO? *

Muslims and the West seem to be on collision course. I read every day in Urdu papers about the conspiracies the West hatches to attack and destroy Islam. Western countries do something or the other which offends Muslims and results in protests, street demonstrations and at times results even in violence. Huntington's book, '*Clash of Civilizations*', Rushdi's novel '*The Satanic Verses*' controversy, Taslima Nasreen's Autobiography received warm reception from European countries, Pope Benedict's statement about Islam, the Danish cartoons and now a member of the Netherlands's parliament making a film *Fitna* have all struck headlines. This new controversy has seized the Muslim world.

Some Muslims argue that West is enemy of Islam and keeps on attacking Islam and Muslims to serve its own agenda. Some even argue there is limit after all and how long Muslims can tolerate these attacks. They must act to stop this war against Islam. Many burn the flag of the country concerned or trample it underfoot, some give call for boycott of goods manufactured in that country and some even threaten to indulge in violence.

The ways our newspapers report, give an impression as if all in the West are hostile to Islam, and all Muslims are bent upon violent protests. But this is far from true. The Muslims should understand that all Westerners are not supporters of whatever some Westerners do, and Westerners should understand that all Muslims do not appreciate violent protests.

It is also not true that Western governments patronize anti-Islam cartoons, films or novels. Nor governments of Muslim countries can be held responsible for violent demonstrations.

The matter in fact is very complex, and intellectuals on both sides should understand these complex issues involved and make constant efforts to promote proper understanding and smoothen mutual relations. Unfortunately such serious attempts are not being made or even if made do not get proper projection in the media. I would like to make a few suggestions in this regard to be seriously considered.

First, we must mutually appreciate our cultural differences which are responsible for a great deal of misunderstandings between the West and the Islamic world. The West has by now a long tradition of secular democracy, freedom and human rights. The Islamic world is still not conversant with such concepts. It has not even ushered in to democracy; and there is no concept of secular democracy or human right in this part of the world.

Europe has undergone a long struggle against the Pope and the Church to win its right to criticize. The religion as propagated by the Church, the freedom of its press and certain other fundamental rights. There was a time when the church did not tolerate any criticism or deviation from its theology which had the status of divine injunction. Deviationists were severely punished. Even by death or by burning them at stake. Religious persecution had assumed serious proportions.

Since the West had won the rights against the Church after great sacrifices, it is not prepared to give them at any cost, and considers them almost, as sacred as the religious injunctions. It was because of this that philosophers like Bertrand Russell wrote a book like *Why I am not a Christian* and ridiculed in this book many doctrines propounded by the Church. Several books and articles were written attacking even Christianity and continue to be written even today. Recently a book has been published which questions even existence of Christ. The

author quotes several documents to prove that Christ never existed and what church preaches is mere mythology.

Whether such a state of affairs is desirable or not is a matter of values to which one subscribes. Today in the West, especially in Europe freedom, secularism and human rights have status of what religious doctrines had in the medieval age. And in democracy these rights have to be ensured without which democracy may lose its meaning. Now it can also take extreme forms e.g., right to ridicule, right to mock at authorities, and political cartoons often make a caricature on mock at the false claims of political authorities.

Political cartoons are frequently used to ridicule political leaders. Now the question is whether cartoons can be drawn to ridicule religious leaders or not, and if so, can one draw cartoons of founders of religions who are held in high esteem by their followers? It is of course a matter of ones perspective. Many would insist that it is sacrilegious to draw such cartoons and some would insist it is part of ones fundamental rights.

Salman Rushdi too insists on his right to ridicule religious authorities, and mocks at Gabriel and Prophet's (PBUH) wives. The West defended him saying it is part of his human rights or fundamental rights. Western culture as it has developed over the last one century, promotes even sacrilege as part of ones rights as people in the West insist sacrilege is the ultimate right in democratic culture.

It was for this reason that the West defends persons like Salman Rushdi, or Danish cartoonist who mocked at the Prophet and showed bombs in his turban. When Muslims protested more papers in European countries published these cartoons in support of the right of the cartoonist. This led to even more protests in Islamic world. Similarly Taslima Nasreen is perceived as one who is persecuted by Muslims and she is projected as a brave woman who must be accorded warm reception to appreciate her courage and fortitude.

When Muslims protest, the Western media dub it as act of "fundamentalism" and "religious fanaticism" and condemn it as unbecoming behaviour of enemies of media freedom. The West emphasizes on individual rights, and 'individual is at the centre of all rights'. There is no concept of collective rights in the Western culture. In democracy individual enjoys all the rights available in the constitution. Also, there is concept of separation of church and state which is quite central to secular democracy.

We would now throw light on what prevails in the Islamic world today and why there is such sense of confrontation between Western values and values prevalent in the Muslim world today. The West, instead of outright condemnation of these acts, must try to understand value system of the Islamic world. This value system is undoubtedly more feudal than democratic. Individual rights are subsumed in community rights. There is no concept of full-fledged human rights.

Religion is sacred and divine and above any criticism including all its social and cultural traditions. Love and respect for tradition are universal and beyond the pale of any criticism. Often vested interests exploit this situation to their advantage and put many practices not remotely religious, also beyond pale of criticism. Even governments, declaring themselves as Islamic, try to shun criticism.

Once you declare something as 'Islamic', it becomes so difficult to criticize it and all sorts of vested interests, particularly the rulers, pass off their mis-governance also as 'Islamic'. Add, to these, low levels of secular education, and the picture becomes complete. There is hardly any awareness among Muslim population of the real issues. Also there is no open society and democratic governance.

As there is no democratic governance, there is no concept of human rights. Any such concept is limited to a few intellectuals who cannot air their views publicly. In one International conference in Morocco a couple of years ago, I

met several Arab intellectuals who were highly critical of many traditional practices and autocratic governance in the Arab world. It gave me great pleasure.

II

ISLAMIC WORLD AND ITS VALUES

As is well known Islamic world is yet to go through democratic revolution and hence there is no concept of individual and fundamental rights. There are various reasons for this which needs another article to discuss. It is important for the Western world to understand and comprehend this vital difference between two cultures.

Religion and religious values are quite central to Islamic countries or for Muslims who are living in countries like India. Though India is constitutionally a secular democratic country it still lacks modern rational and secular outlook. Indian society too, despite political democracy, lacks what can be called 'social democracy'. Traditional religion has strong grip over the minds of the Indian people and much more so, in the case of the Muslims.

India at least has political democracy. Islamic world, by and large, does not have even that. In Islamic world traditional religion and religio-cultural values reign supreme. There is absolutely no rational intellectual tradition spread all over society. Even if there are a few intellectuals who care for rational approach, they are isolated and are hardly heard with respect. Often they have to pay heavy price for their intellectual conviction.

It should suffice to give two examples as to how such intellectuals have to suffer. One example is of Prof. Fazlur Rehman, a noted Islamic scholar who was also believer in Islam and Islamic values. However, he had different understanding of the nature and meaning of revelation (he

never denied revelation *per se*) and he also believed in rational approach to Islam. There was hue and cry when he published his ideas about the nature and meaning of revelation and he not only had to resign as director of an Islamic institution, he had to leave Pakistan and teach in Chicago University for rest of his life.

Another example is of Abu Zayd Nasr, an Egyptian scholar who had studied in al-Azhar, the renowned Islamic University in Cairo and also later taught there. He also expressed his ideas about revelation (*tanzil*) and its interpretation (*ta'wil*); which were not in accordance with traditional thinking. He was tried in a court of law for sacrilege and the court ruled that he was no more a Muslim and hence his married wife became *harami* (prohibited) for him. Both Zayd Abu Nasr and his wife escaped and found refuge in Holland, and he has been teaching there ever since.

Both Fazlur Rehman and Zayd Abu Nasr were respected scholars of Islam but did not subscribe to traditional views about revelation and paid heavily for their views. Both were believers and had profound knowledge of their religion but were not conformists and so had to pay a price. Their views were considered sacrilegious and deviationist. In this atmosphere of total lack of freedom even within the framework of religious beliefs, one can understand the reaction of Muslim theologians and politicians (who always want to be on the right side of 'Ulama) if persons like Rushdi or Taslima Nasreen or Danish cartoonist, express their views.

The Westerners must understand that the whole value system in Islamic world is very different from their own. In traditional Islamic societies religion and religious traditions are considered holy and beyond pale of criticism. Also vested interests exploit this for their own advantage. Often even mis-governance is projected as 'Islamic' and any criticism is banned.

Add to this lack of any democratic values and awareness of human rights and low levels of literacy and the picture is complete. Most of the Muslim countries are governed by autocrats who are completely insensitive to people's rights and any movement for human rights is crushed. It will take long time to usher in democratic values in Islamic world. Entire education system is to produce conforming minds.

However, there are intellectuals who are critical of this state of affairs. I met many of them in an international Islamic conference in Morocco a couple of years ago. It was highly refreshing to listen to them criticizing lack of democratic rights in Muslim countries and the disproportionate role-played by traditional 'Ulama. However, this is limited to a few intellectuals and even these intellectuals are unable to publicly criticize their governments, or even 'Ulama in their countries.

Also, let westerners know that religion and religious traditions are very much integral part of people's lives in Islamic world. These are not only sacred but lived traditions for them. The western perspective is very different. For them, except those who belong to Church, religion is far from sacred. It is democracy and freedom of thought that is sacred. It is part of human rights to mock at religion. Thus these are two different worlds. They must appreciate this world view of Muslims. If they have intimate knowledge of Muslim world and their religious traditions and cultural values probably there will be no such confrontation.

Also, those Muslims who have migrated from Muslim world and live in Western countries, carry these cultural values with them, are greatly disturbed when they see their religious traditions being insulted. The film *Fitna* made by a member of the parliament of Netherlands, is the result of such confrontation. Such people have hardly any intimate knowledge of Muslim societies, let alone of the Qur'an.

Some Westernized and secularized Muslims like Salman Rushdi, Hirsi Ali and others also take completely westernized

view and attack traditional Islamic values, and they are naturally lionized by western media and projected as great champions of human liberty and human rights. This has created an atmosphere of Islamophobia in Western countries. What is needed is dialogue between representatives of these two value systems – Western and Islamic – to end the atmosphere of confrontation.

Films like *Fitna* are not going to make things easy. They would lead to further intensification of confrontation. There are rightist elements in Western countries who want confrontation, not peace between the two value systems. Maker of the film, *Fitna*, is well known rightist politician. He could not be persuaded even by the Prime Minister of Netherlands not to make the film. He had definite rightist agenda.

WHAT MUSLIMS SHOULD DO?

As it is necessary for Westerners to appreciate Muslim cultural viewpoint, it is also necessary for Muslims to understand Western point of view and their respect for democratic values and human rights. While it is true that many Western scholars and media persons are rightist in their political agenda and attack Islam deliberately, there are many other who criticize Islam and Muslims as they feel many Muslim beliefs are undemocratic and anti-modern. They cannot understand why Salman Rushdi should be killed for his criticism or mockery of Islamic beliefs. It is his right to do so, especially in a Western country where the culture of democracy and human rights prevails.

Even while opposing views of Salman Rushdi, or Taslima Nasreen or Danish cartoonist, there is no need to get violent. Muslims must prove through our conduct that Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance and individual dignity. The

Qur'anic teaching is not to abuse others or insult others. The Qur'an requires Muslims even not to abuse others gods lest they should abuse Allah out of ignorance (6:109). Even if others attack out of ignorance we must be dignified in our opposition to their views of Islam.

Qur'an also says that even while debating with people of the Book, debate in the best possible manner. Thus Qur'an says, "And argue not with the people of the Book except by what is best save such of them as act unjustly." (29:46). Qur'an is saying all this when democratic culture or democratic rights were totally unknown. Even while disagreeing we must respect other's views. This is Qur'anic culture. Qur'anic culture is culture of tolerance. Tolerance is one of the best values of civilized people. Islam came to create a new human person. This human person is called *m'umin* by Qur'an and *mu'min* means believer – believer in best human values like justice, compassion, tolerance and wisdom.

As Muslims we must also reflect critically whether we seriously believe in these values. These values are so important that they represent Allah's names in Qur'an – Allah is just, compassionate and wise. If we believe in Allah we must believe in these values and if we worship Allah we must practise these values making them part of our lives. Then and then only we can call ourselves as believers!

Today Muslims are thought to be most intolerant and fanatic. Why? Should we not seriously reflect on this situation? All sorts of vested interests abound among us styling themselves as Muslims and leaders of Muslims. They often mislead us. Islam was torch bearer of *'ilm* (knowledge) and we have become torch bearers of ignorance. Our 'Ulama (it means those who know) represent ignorance rather than knowledge. They acquire nothing but traditional knowledge of Islam and are narrow minded, sectarian and totally ignorant of world they live in. They still believe that the Greek knowledge once

studied by their ancestors as final and even sacred. This is what is taught under *m'aqulat* (rational sciences) in *madrasas*.

It is we Muslims who have made persons like Salman Rushdi, Taslima Nasreen, Hirsi Ali and others as great heroes of the Western world. Had Muslims not protested violently and issued *fatwas* to kill them, they would have been unknown entities. This way we have brought nothing but disgrace for Islam and Muslims. Some Urdu papers use word *mal'un* and *mal'unah* (those accursed by Allah) even while giving news about them. When Muslim media behaves so irresponsibly how can we expect western media to behave with dignity? Disagreeing with their views does not mean invoking curses for them.

There are selfish political leaders who want to cash in all such opportunities for their political interests. These opportunistic leaders exploit innocent Muslim religious sentiments for promoting their own interests. We have become emotional instead of rational. We instantly sacrifice rationality on the altar of emotions. In Qur'an wisdom is the highest value and Qur'an says, those who are given wisdom have been given good in abundance.

Muslim intellectuals should also shed their fear and come out boldly for defence of Islamic values of tolerance and wisdom. If we really care for positive values of Islam we must oppose such opportunism as displayed by our politicians and ignorance and sectarianism displayed by so called 'Ulama. The Prophet (PBUH) said that best form of *jihad* is speaking truth on the face of tyrant ruler. Time has come to speak out truth in the face of those who exploit Islam for their selfish ends. They are not really defenders of Islam but defenders of their own interests.

Will we come out in defence of true Islam?

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MUSLIMS AND HIV AIDS*

Some people will be somewhat surprised what relation there could be between Muslims and this dreaded disease. Yet there was international conference on this subject in Johannesburg, South Africa from 25th to 30th November, 2007 in which more than 250 delegates, resource persons, activists and Ulama from all Muslim countries and Muslim minority countries participated. I was also invited there as a resource person to speak from Islamic point of view.

I was until then under the impression that Muslim countries in general and Muslims in particular are not victims of HIV/AIDS. But when I participated in this conference I realized that quite a few Muslims from different Muslim countries as well as non-Muslim countries were victims of this disease. Africa in particular has the largest number of victims and there are many Muslim majority countries among African countries.

It was this reason that number of agencies including Islamic Relief, UN and World Vision had supported this conference. I was quite impressed with number of participants, volunteers and number of sessions in which people participated with enthusiasm. What was more appreciable that many Muslim women participated and most of them were in hijab (head covering). Almost half the participants were women. And I was surprised when some Muslim women declared from the conference platform that they were HIV positive.

Every day in the morning first a plenary session took place and discussed various aspects of this disease and then participants will break into different groups each group consisting of ten persons to discuss things in depth and each group had some expert or experts either from religious or technical point of view. Many groups were headed by women and in general women participated actively in these groups. Also each group was given series of questions to discuss what was presented in plenary session.

Various groups formed were, for example religious leaders and stigma, causes, consequences and approaches, revealing ones status, stigma and violence, mandatory testing, HIV and rights, core values, adoption/fostering, marriage and testing, men and women's rights and roles, property and inheritance, female genital cutting and other traditions, life skills/education, the role of the media, reaching women, the role of faith, constraints and opportunities, vulnerable children, grieving and coping, treatment etc. I chose to be member of group headed by a women of Indian origin whose family had migrated to South Africa and she currently lives in Canada. Ms. Sabra Desai, a woman of very liberal and progressive ideas. The group mainly discussed women's roles. There were five more women of African origin.

Generally Muslims and Ulama in particularly adopt very negative attitude towards those suffering from HIV/AIDS thinking it is result of sinful life. They always attribute it to sex outside marriage be it pre-marital or extra-marital. In other words they think it is result of having multiple partners or result of homosexual relations. It is not always true. In fact HIV/AIDS can be contracted in variety of other ways – husband who is HIV positive infecting his wife who knows nothing about her husband's infection. And if women becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby, baby is also likely to get infected. Then how can one blame the mother and the child who became victims of man's HIV infection. In fact we were

taken to field visit in Johannesburg where we saw large number of innocent children living in special home. These children otherwise looking healthy and playing were not even aware what disease they are carrying. Their parents had died of HIV/AIDS. Thus it is wrong to carry negative attitude towards all HIV positive patients.

Also, even those who have contracted this disease as a result of sinful act like extra marital relation or drug injection can repent and in Qur'an Allah describes himself as Ghafur al-Rahim and Tawwab al-Rahim, i.e. One who is Pardoner and Merciful and Acceptor of repentance and Merciful. How then we human beings should can reject them with contempt. Such rejection is more cultural than religious. Religious attitude should be more value oriented than contempt oriented.

Social and cultural attitudes are misunderstood as religious even by Ulama. Also Muslims tend to see everything in terms of shari'ah laws. Shari'ah laws are for either state to implement or for Muslim organizations to decide. It is very different matter. But ordinary Muslims should not immediately develop negative attitude. Law will take its own course, if anyone has broken it and religion in its sense of fundamental values should take different course.

What are fundamental values of Islam as we find them in Qur'an? These values are 'adl (justice), ihsan (benevolence), rahmah (compassion) and hikmah (wisdom). These are also Allah's names: Allah is Just (Adil), Benevolent (Muhsin), Compassionate (Rahim) and Wise (Hakim).

Now let us take HIV positive patients and weigh our attitude towards them in the light of these Qur'anic values. Is negative attitude towards HIV positive just? Based on justice? Suppose someone contracted this disease due to non-sinful acts then justice will demand that we treat them with dignity due to any other person. But it would be unjust if we reject him/her just because he/she has HIV without knowing the full truth.

Similarly, if we do ihsan (benevolence to someone) to one who has such disease it would have very positive effect on her/him and we will win her/his heart forever. Allah is also Beneficent for all His servants and so his servants should also be benevolent to all His servants whatever status of their health. And if we treat someone with compassion despite being victim of such disease it will greatly help that person. And through acceptance of such person and preventing others from contracting this disease we will be acting as wise. Rejecting them may amount to spreading this disease further. Such person must be persuaded to adopt preventive measures like condoms so that wife/husband is not infected.

When I said this in plenary session many HIV/AIDS patients thanked me for my attitude in the light of Holy Qur'an which would be so helpful for them. In fact if one accepts such patient one can not only give him/her longer life but make him/her repentant if this disease has been contacted through sinful act. Rejection will only result in dejection and frustration and may worsen the situation of the patient.

There were quite a few eminent Ulama from different Islamic countries as these Ulama and Imams can play very positive role in spreading awareness among Muslims and hence making them understand real causes of HIV/AIDS would be extremely useful. A fatwa committee of these Ulama was constituted to discuss this problem in great details and finalise fatwas in this respect. I was also included in this committee from India.

There were two main issues before the committee of eminent ulama who came from Syria, Egypt, Libya, Qatar, Indonesia some other places. One issue was regarding condoms. Can use of condoms be permitted? The other issue was of use of zakat money, especially for non-Muslim poor patients suffering from HIV/AIDS?

Both the issues were hotly debated. Generally Ulama felt use of condoms cannot be permitted as it will encourage sinful

acts of adultery or fornication. They gave examples from western countries that condoms are freely distributed even among school children and condom machines are installed in public places like railway stations and universities. Thus condoms are responsible for spreading sinful life and hence cannot be permitted.

I explained to them no one is advocating that condoms be freely distributed as in the western countries. There is fundamental difference between our culture and western culture. Again it should be realized problem is of cultural nature. In Muslim countries social and cultural values are very different. No one would permit free distribution of condoms. Our attitudes towards sexual life are much more rigid and would make fundamental difference.

I also pleaded that condoms are means, not an end. Means can be misused and can also be used properly. If made proper use of, condoms can help prevent spread of HIV and if misused can help spread it. Here we are concerned with prevention of disease rather than its spread. If a husband has contracted HIV in some or the other way and does not use condom while going to his wife, will infect his wife and also probably the child she gives birth to. Our fatwa would never allow condoms to be freely distributed in schools and universities or through vending machines as in the western countries. But we will advocate its use with strict warning that moral values are primary and it should be used only in marital life, not otherwise.

The condom packets can also carry the warning as cigarette packets carry certain warnings of health hazard. However, certain people will always misuse it and that is for government or society to take care of in collective way. Condoms *per se* cannot be held responsible for it.

A question was also raised should doctors who are Muslims should advise people to use condoms or should they advise not to use them. It was pointed out that doctor is

concerned with physical health whereas Ulama and Muftis are concerned with spiritual and moral health. Doctor's duty is to prevent spread of physical disease and that alone should be his main concern. On the other hand, Ulama's main role is prevention of moral disease or moral corruption and they have to play their role effectively. A doctor should not, for sake of guarding morality, let disease spread to other innocent persons. This argument was finally accepted and it was decided that use of condoms could be permitted by Ulama subject to certain strict conditions and chemists should be allowed to sale condoms to married couples and a Muslim government could also allow its use in restricted way.

Another important issue was spending zakat money on non-Muslims suffering from HIV/AIDS as non-Muslim agencies often support Muslims suffering from this disease. Again stand was taken by Ulama except two among them that zakat cannot be given to non-Muslims. We maintained this stand is not Qur'anic nor is it in keeping with the Sunna. The verse on zakat in Qur'an (9:60) lays down that one portion of zakat be spent on what Qur'an calls *Mu'allafat al-Qulub* (for those non-Muslims whose hearts are to be won) and under this Prophet (PBUH) himself gave money to those Arabs who had not accepted Islam but were sympathetic to it.

Thus both Qur'an and sunnah support the concept of giving to non-Muslims. However, Qur'an itself does not use the word. 'Muslim poor' but only poor. Also, this verse provides for *riqabi* i.e. freeing prisoners, for *ibn al-sabil* i.e. travelers and *fi'sabil Allah* in the way of Allah. All these categories like freeing prisoners or for travelers and in the way of Allah are open to interpretation in favour of non-Muslim poor and needy for support. Thus this verse is so categorical that no one can maintain that non-Muslims cannot be entitled at all.

But still some Ulama said it should only be for Muslim poor and none else as there are so many needy among

Muslims. Some said that non-Muslims can be provided from general charity (*sadaqah*) but not from zakat. I said there is no separate category as *sadaqah* in Qur'an and for zakat Qur'an uses the word *sadaqah* and the verse (9:60) begins with the word *sadaqat*. Then one Egyptian 'alim quoted Imam Shafi'i that he is also of the opinion that a portion of zakat could be spent on non-Muslims. That finally clinched the issue and it was then unanimously decided that a portion of zakat could be spent on non-Muslim needy, which could include those suffering from HIV/AIDS.

Thus both fatwas for use of condom and for spending part of zakat money for non-Muslims were finalized and read out in plenary session. It was also decided that these two fatwas will be presented to other Ulama of Muslim countries and their opinion sought in their favour so that Muslims could advocate use of condoms for genuine and legitimate purpose (within married couples) and a portion of zakat to be spent on non-Muslim poor, especially HIV/AIDS patients in need of help. It was unanimously approved in plenary session also.

This conference on Islam and HIV/AIDS was also supported partly by non-Muslim fund and that also required that Muslims also spend their funds on non-Muslims be it from zakat or general charity in addition to zakat from rich Muslims. When we visited a home for HIV/AIDS we found many Muslim children in the home run by Christians. So Muslims should also contribute to such homes where non-Muslim victims of HIV/AIDS are given shelter.

Another issue which was discussed in our group no. 4 was, amongst others, female genital cutting or female circumcision. Generally it is maintained that it is part of sunnah. Since this group consisted of more women and three men (liberally inclined) it was not difficult to agree on maintaining that it is not part of Islamic teachings.

I explained that it is basically a tribal custom which originated in some African countries and since shafi'i school

also originated from Egypt (Imam Shafi'i lived in Egypt, he accepted some of local customs and traditions) he also provides for female circumcision. The tribals adopted female genital cutting for depriving women of sexual pleasure arguing that if their genitals are not cut, they may get corrupt before marriage. The Ismaili fiqh also originated in Egypt it also provides for female circumcision and in India only Bohras who are Isma'ilis practice it, not other Muslims.

Another male participant in discussion quoted Prophet's (PBUH) hadith that female genital should be cut gently. I said this hadith is not unanimously accepted and prophet of Islam was so much for gender equality that it is quite unlikely that he would require female genital to be circumcised. The hadith might be of later origin when female circumcision was introduced. Any way circumcision, female or male, is not obligatory in Qur'an but even male circumcision is called sunnah. Of course male circumcision is quite healthy and even reduces chances of HIV/AIDS where as injury caused due to female circumcision is likely to enhance chances of HIV/AIDS. Thus in any case while male circumcision is useful while female circumcision is against women's right to enjoy sexual pleasure like men.

The Indonesian participant who is of Shafi'i persuasion also supported my viewpoint and it was unanimously decided that female circumcision be opposed as part of anti HIV/AIDS campaign. This measure was recommended by group 4 to be part of conference declaration.

There also was discussion on women, discrimination and violence in our group. One Syrian participant pointed out that Qur'an permits beating of women in verse 4:34. I said it has been wrongly interpreted by mostly male theologians. The word *daraba* is used in Arabic language in several different ways and according to Imam Raghīb who compiled dictionary of Qur'an 13th century gives several meanings one of which is for male camel to go near female camel.

If we take *wadribuhunna* in verse 4:34 it would mean after they are persuaded (after their rebellion) go near them. Yet another meaning given by modern feminist interpreters of Qur'an is to strike away i.e. send them away. Also beating women is not in keeping with overall approach of Qur'an towards women's rights. Qur'an clearly declares equality of women's rights in verse 2:228) and verse 2:229 requires man to retain his wife with kindness.

If we read verse 4:34 in conjunction with verse 2:229 which requires wife to be treated with kindness how beating can be permitted. Beating is opposite of kindness and thus it is wrong to say Qur'an permits beating of wife. A Muslim women has equal dignity and must be treated by husband with dignity. However, wife beating, even honour killing is quite common in Islamic world.

Also women who contract HIV/AIDS are beaten up by their husbands and often deserted. This is un-Islamic especially when husbands themselves are often responsible for infecting their wives with HIV/AIDS. Thus we must campaign for women's rights and wife beating must not be considered as husbands' right. This aggravates HIV/AIDS infected women. An African woman who declared she is HIV positive also told the audience that she was having three children and her husband deserted her. She married again and man married her with full knowledge that she was HIV positive and yet deserted her after some time.

Thus such heart rending cases clearly show that men and women from Islamic world should be made aware of rights of women so that they do not maltreat women and do not consider them as their property as they do now. If they have rights on women, women also have rights on their husbands, as declared by the Qur'an in 2:228.

All the members of group 4 agreed with this viewpoint and the Syrian participant who had earlier pointed out that

Qur'an gives husbands right to beat also changed his view and agreed with this interpretation.

Thus the conference on Islam and HIV/AIDS opened new vistas for delegates who had come from all over the Islamic world and gave them programme to campaign for the rights of victims of HIV/AIDS and also dispelled the illusion that Muslim world is an exempt from this dreaded disease. The Islamic world is also facing this problem. It is different thing that it is difficult in these countries to obtain correct statistics. Due to cultural reasons and fear of ostracism often victims suppress information.

It is also true that incidence of HIV/AIDS is somewhat less in Islamic world for number of reasons. In Islamic world cases of sexual profligacy is rather limited and male circumcision also helps reduce chances of HIV/AIDS. But it should not be taken as cause for celebration as this disease is spreading in Islamic world too otherwise there would have been no need to organize this conference.

I am sure the conference served its purpose and would go a long way to increase awareness among Muslims and caution them to take protective measures and create appropriate funds for the help of HIV/AIDS patients. I must say Mr. William, a convert to Islam some 14 years ago in Netherlands, was the moving spirit of this conference and he took great pains to make it successful.

✧ Islam and Modern Age, January, 2008.