Muslim Reformist Thought in 21st Century and its Broad Themes: A Brief Study of 'Democratic Pluralism' in the light of A. Sachedina`s '*The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*'

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With the beginning of 2011, humanity entered its second decade of the third millennium (21st Century), but the world is still facing the new claims, issues and challenges and disquieting apprehensions. The intellectuals, both Muslims and Non-Muslims, in their own capacities, have contributed (in the recent past and present) and are contributing to various challenges and issues, agitating humanity on one hand, and having direct concern with the Muslim *Ummah*. Some of these challenges and issues include (such *–izations* as) Globalization, Liberalization, Democratization (including various themes such as the process of democratization in Muslim lands, its Islamic Heritage, Democratic Pluralism, and other related themes), Privatization, Secularization, and Religious Resurgence, and others.

Throughout the Muslim world, from Indonesia and Malaysia in Southeast Asia to Algeria and Morocco in North Africa, from Middle East to Central Asia, and from Europe to America, there has emerged a group of highly articulate and influential public intellectuals whose ideas are inspired by reformist/modernist[1] interpretations of Islam. The voices of these intellectuals or men of letters – for majority of them are professors, writers, essayists, gifted in the arts of letters and oratory – and their disposition is to be moderate and their political passions tamed and reasoned[2]. What these intellectuals, generally known as modernists/reformists, represent is a vision of Islam and its role in human polity that is radically different from that advocated by orthodoxy.

The Central Goal of the Reformist/ Modernist Muslim thinkers:-

The central goal that reformist/modernist thinkers have set for themselves is to reformulate and reinterpret popular notions of Islam in ways that are consistent with and supportive with the tenets of modern life. Moderate Muslim thinkers still struggle with the concept of modernity and the need to integrate the Muslim world. To them, notes an observer, a Muslim has to "coexist with modernity" – and, nowadays, with "post-modernity". To these thinkers, the emphasis on *asala* (authenticity) is only an attempt to ignore the conditions created by the Muslim world (*Hopwood*, 1998, 9; *Kamrava*, 2006, 15).

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From the final decades of 20th century, the Islamic political thought has become discourse that gained very high impetus, for many issues related to it – like the process of democratization, relationship between Islam and democracy, pluralism (religious, political, and democratic) – are hotly debated, discussed and defined throughout the Muslim world. It is clear, nonetheless, that reformist Muslim thought has found itself in a largely reactive mode, having to respond to predicaments and developments in whose appearance and consequences it has so far played no significant role. The central goal of the reformists is to make Islam relevant by articulating a jurisprudence that addresses contemporary - i.e. modern – concerns and issues. Islam is not the problem, they maintain, and neither is the modernity. The problem is with mutually exclusive interpretations of Islam and modernity. Such interpretations, they claim, are fundamentally wrong (*Kamrava,* 2006, 15).

Ijtihad: A Key to Reformist/Modernist Thought

The primary focus of the reformist/modernist intellectuals is the Qur`an, which is itself seen as a highly dynamic and progressive text. What is essential to a proper role understanding of Islam is not the letter of the text but instead the spirit of the Qur`an and the Prophetic traditions (*Ahadith*). They maintain that there is no single, valid interpretation of the Qur`an or the *hadith* (traditions of the Prophet). The key is *ijtihad* - (literally "effort") and is applied to those questions which are not covered by the Qur'an and Sunnah, - regarded, by many Muslim thinkers as the key to the implementation of God's will in any given time or place - and more specifically, original *ijtihad*. In the words of Fazlur Rehman (1919-1988), the formulation of an "adequate hermeneutical method" is "imperative" to a proper understanding of Islam (*Saeed,* 2004, 43; *Kamrava*, 2006, 16).

Generally speaking, every Muslim reformist thinker has a deep and abiding conviction of the need for continuous *ijtihad* based on changing and evolving circumstances. The position of Khurshid Ahmad (b. 1932), the Pakistani Islamic scholar, is typical of the overall reformist approach to *ijtihad*:

> "God has revealed only broad principles and has endowed man with the freedom to apply them in every age in the way suited to the spirit and conditions of that age. It is through the Ijtihad that people of every age try to implement and apply divine guidance to the problems of their times" (*Ahmad*, 1976, 43)

Virtually all Muslim reformers of the 20th century and of contemporary era show enthusiasm for the concept of *ijtihad,* Allama Iqbal, Khurshid Ahmad, Taha Jabir al 'Alwani and Altaf Gauhar, being few of them. Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), one of the major figures in

modern times, called for "the transfer of the power of Ijtihad from individual representatives of Schools to a Muslim legislative assembly". (Iqbal, [1934] 1968, 45, 83)

While as, in the context of modern world, the advocacy of Ijtihad is described by Altaf Gauhar in the following words:

> "In Islam power flows out of the framework of the Qur'an and from no other source. It is for Muslim Scholars to initiate Universal Ijtihad at all levels. The faith is fresh; it is the Muslim Mind which is befogged. The principles of Islam are Dynamic; it is our approach which has become static. Let there be fundamental rethinking to open avenues of exploration, innovation and creativity". (*Gauhar*, 1978, 307)

The emerging reformist discourse, relying heavily on the Qura'nic exegesis and hermeneutics, is dynamic; as the conclusion, to which M. Talbi reaches, are widely echoed by other reformist thinkers as well:

> "I must necessarily move in the same direction as that indicator ordains (in the Qur`an): continuous liberation, continuous moderation, continuous justice, in a form which brings me as close as possible – through acknowledging the situation I am in today – to which the Law-Giver intended." (*Nettler,* 2004, 233; *Kamrava,* 2006, 15)

Four Broad Themes of Muslim Reformist Thought: A Brief Overview

There are four broad themes that can be teased out of the emerging Muslim reformist discourse: (a) a deep and abiding conviction in Islam as a faith and as a system of belief; (b) democratic pluralism (or) Islam`s relation with democracy and human rights; (c) Islam`s relation with other great faiths (or) inter-faith Dialogue; and; (d) the phenomenon of modernity.

(a) The first theme running through Muslim reformist thought is its deep conviction in Islam as faith and system of belief. In its current manifestation, the discourse of reformist Muslim intellectuals does not seek to instrumentalise Islam for purposes of achieving modernity in a manner palatable to the masses at large. Islam is not a means to an end; it is an end in itself. It simply needs to be based re-thought and reformulated. The reformists` reliance on and endless references to the Qur`an bespeaks of the text`s cultural centrality to them (Taji-*Farouki* & *Nafi,* 2004, 20). Their engagement with it is not simply academic and intellectual: it is also profoundly personal and emotional. (*Kamrava,* 2006, 17)

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(b)   The second theme of the emerging Muslim reformist discourse in the 21st century CE is democratic pluralism. Pluralism, the reformist discourse`s proponents maintain, is a salient feature of the spirit of Qur`an as well as the *Shari`ah* and the *hadit.* What is necessary is a project of deconstruction whereby the barnacles of historical *Shari`ah* and *ijtihad* are removed and the true spirit of Islam is thus revealed. The writings of various scholars demonstrate a deep level of commitment to "civil liberties and democracy" through the *prism of Islam* (*Kamrava,* 2006, 17) and Abdulaziz Sachedina is one of the most important figure in this aspect. He argues, suffice to mention it here, that the religious pluralism – which means acknowledging the intrinsic redemptive value of competing religious traditions - calls for "active engagement" with the religious other not merely to tolerate, but to understand, and it can function as a "working paradigm" for a democratic, social pluralism, in which people of diverse faiths/religious backgrounds are willing to form a "community of global citizens"(*Sachedina,* 2001, 35); also the Qura`nic provisions about civil society allow a legitimate juridical judgment concerning inclusive political, civil and social participation" (*Sachedina,* 2001, 135) in the political community. He concludes with the argument that "without restoring the principle of coexistence", Muslims of the 21st century, living across the globe, will not be able to "recapture the spirit of early civil society" under the Prophet Muhammad (*Sachedina,* 2001, 139).

A similarly dynamic contextualization of Islamic law finds it equally supportive of broader notions of civil rights. Abdullahi Ahmad al-Na`im (b. 1946), a Sudanese Muslim thinker, for example, maintains that "an alternative formulation of Islamic public law which would eliminate ... limitations on human rights is both desirable and possible". (*An-Na`im,* 1996, 171; *Kamrava,* 2006, 18)

(c)   The third theme related to the reformist Islamic discourse is Islam`s relation with other faiths or inter faith dialogue. Over the last few decades, many prominent figures within the Islamic reformist movement have made significant theoretical as well as practical contributions to inter faith dialogue. For example, interfaith relations and dialogue form a major strand in the thought of Mohamed Talbi, who maintains that 'Islam`s built-in emphasis on pluralism fosters mutual respect and dialogue, including especially dialogue with other faiths'. (*Nettler*, 2004, 226; *Kamrava,* 2006, 18)

These important historical contributions have occurred parallel to a series of practical steps in the last three or four decades. Perhaps the most important step was taken in the 1981 adoption of the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, whose article XIII states:

> "Every person has the right to freedom of conscience and worship in accordance with his religious beliefs". (*Kamrava,* 2006, 19)

Similarly, article I (a) of the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, which was adopted at the 1990 meeting of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Cairo, declares:

> "All human beings form one family whose members are united by submission to God and descent from Adam. All men are equal in terms of basic human dignity and basic obligations and responsibilities, without any discrimination on the grounds of race, color, language, sex, religious belief, political affiliation, social status or other considerations. True faith is the guarantee of enhancing such dignity along the path to human perfection" (*Kamrava,* 2006, 19).

There have been other recent initiatives aimed at furthering interfaith dialogue between Islam and other religions, including numerous conferences on the subject, discussions of Muslim- Christian relations within the British Commonwealth in 2000, and the December 2001 drafting of an Arab Muslim-Christian Covenant in Cairo (*Goddard*, 2004, 310-11; *Kamrava,* 2006, 19).

(d) Concerning with interfaith dialogue and Islam`s relationship with democracy and human rights, the fourth important theme that underlines the reformist Islamic discourse is coming to grips with the phenomenon of modernity. The impulse of this theme is not simply to embrace modernity on distinctly Islamic terms but the approach is deeper, more subtle, that has been internalized by its articulations. In the words of Laith Kubba, it is the "intrinsic merits" of modernity that concern the reformist thinkers. In Faith & Modernity', he argues:

> "Aware of the Islamic civilization`s great and many contributions to the world, this approach [more deeper and subtle] seeks to take advantage of the best that humanity has to offer, precisely for the sake of pursuing such high Islamic ideals and virtues as truth, justice, charity, brotherhood, and peace". (*Kuba,* 2003, 103)

These theorists advocate a "paradigm shift" in Islamic thinking and "consider a 'weak' form of cultural relativism acceptable" (*Monshipouri,* 2002, 103; *Kamrava,* 2006, 19).

At the same time, no one advocates the wholesale adoption of "modernity" and all that it entails. What society needs is moderation and balance – balance

between a dynamic *fiqh* that nourishes the soul and makes humanity what it is, and a modernity that ensures progress and advancement. To cut a long story short, neither religion nor modernity can be ignored, for both are everlasting, and in the words of Mehran Kamrava:

> "Neither religion nor modernity can be ignored or eradicated, nor the striking of the synthesis between the two, while often resisted or greatly resented, is inevitable. All that is needed is the political will and the institutional means to make such inevitability a reality. Neither authoritarianism nor an empire`s 'war on terror' are everlasting; both religion and modernity are. The necessary ingredients for a synthesis between the two are all there. All that is needed is the right context". (*Kamrava*, 2006, 25)

Democratic Pluralism in the light of Abdulaziz Sachedina`s '*The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism':*

Pluralism in the context of religion suggests both diversity of interpretation of the foundational sources of that tradition and relativity implied in such plurality of hermeneutics. At this time, a number of Muslim scholars writing from traditional centers of Islamic learning in the Middle East are resisting the implications of pluralistic discourse on religion. There is a deep-seated fear of secularly inspired relativism about religious truth that, according to these scholars, belief in pluralism might destabilize the authority of revelation as well as the tradition that has determined the authenticity of its foundational sources and the praxis for the faith community. It is important to bear in mind that this traditional defensive discourse against pluralism has nothing to do with the recognition of peaceful interfaith relations as the cornerstone of contemporary pluralistic political and social order. In fact, the growing interest in minority jurisprudence (*fiqh al-aqaliyyat*) in a number of traditional centers indicates the acknowledgement, though not whole-hearted acceptance, of the reality of the modern world in which plurality of religious traditions has been recognized as a major principle of co-existence. However, this does not necessarily mean that pluralism has been acknowledged as an epistemic source of critical reassessment of Islamic theological and metaphysical notions for a new inclusive political theology.

Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina – the Frances Myers Ball (Chair) Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia, as a meticulous scholar, a devoted Muslim

and an intense student of the Qur`an – highlights (in his book) those parts of Holy Qur`an that emphasize (a) the dignity of the individual, freedom of conscience, and God`s love for all his creatures, People of the Book, and even people without a book; and (b) the guidance of Qur`an on reconciliation and forgiveness in the service of peacemaking. These teachings of Holy Qur`an are the very basis for reestablishing the basis for mutually respectful and democratic relationships among Muslims (themselves) and between Muslims and Non-Muslim world.

Consisting of 5 chapters, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. xii+175) tackles the most significant issues facing Muslims today. As Islam and Muslims enter the 21st century, it is necessary to re-open the doors of religious interpretation – to re-examine and correct false interpretations replace outdated laws and formulate new doctrines that respond to changing social contexts, argues Sachedina. Always using the Quran as a yardstick, he demonstrates how and why Islamic law came to reflect political and social influences, leading to regulations that violate the spirit and the letter of the Quran. He critically analyzes Muslim teachings on issues of pluralism, civil society, war and peace, violence and self-sacrifice, the status and role of non-Muslims, and capital punishment. He shows how the Qura'nic philosophy is democratic in its nature, but also completely pluralistic and universal. It examines Qura`nic exegetical materials in the light of modern debates among Muslims of different schools of thought and explores their implications for religious pluralism, freedom of conscience and religion, and the legal status of religious minorities in Islamic revelation (*Sachedina,* 2001, 15).

The 5 chapters (spawning over 136 pages, pp. 3-139) discussed in this work are: 1) The Search for Democratic Pluralism in Islam; 2) The People Are One Community; 3) Compete with One Another in Good Works; 4) Forgiveness Toward Humankind; and 5) Epilogue.

The teachings in the Qur'an that Sachedina explains in this book are essential in establishing the basis for mutually respectful and democratic relationships among Muslims, and between Muslims and the non-Muslim world. Democratic pluralism thrives on the ability of citizens to value each other and respect each other's dignity and human rights. In terms religious Muslims, Christians, and Jews can understand, democratic pluralism succeeds where citizens accept that the individual is created in the image of God and that all religions share membership in a loving relationship with God. This book can help Muslims reclaim their religion and set a path for themselves for the rest of the twenty-first century.

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In this work, the author – a meticulous scholar and a devoted Muslim and an intense student of the Qur`an - has highlighted those parts (verses & chapters) of Holy Qur`an that emphasize (a) the dignity of the individual, freedom of conscience, and God`s love for all his creatures, People of the Book, and even people without a book; and (b) the guidance of Qur`an on reconciliation and forgiveness in the service of peacemaking. These teachings of Holy Qur`an, as explained in this book, are essential in reestablishing the basis for mutually respectful and democratic relationships among Muslims and between Muslims and Non-Muslim world.

In this book Sachedina (being a theologian), approaches the issue of Islam-democracy relationship (or democratic pluralism) in a comprehensive way. He, relying basically on Qura'nic sources and eschewing other socially constructed discourses, shows how strongly advocated pluralism. For Dr. Muqtedar Khan (a political scientist), Sachedina`s book is not a "treatise in political theory" and he does not intend it as such. He himself envisages his work as "preventive diplomacy tool" for Muslims and non-Muslim politicians seeking to advance the cause of pluralism. One of the important limitations of this book is its treatment of pluralism and democracy as "stable, uncontested ideas enjoying widespread consensus"(Khan, 2008, 30).

This book, in a nutshell, is an analytical examination of Qura`nic ideas about pluralism and individual autonomy, narrative of the learned scholar, clearly exposing the aspects of democracy and how to apply them in modern times. It models an theological and personal courage that is necessary for building a new global civilization committed to the highest principles of democracy, human rights, and the sacred value of every human being on the planet, regardless of race or religion, language or sex, religious beliefs or political affiliation, social status or other considerations, and as Joseph V. Montville (in its Foreword, p. x) writes:

> "Whether one is a believer in any faith, or a practical agnostic, it should be apparent that there is enormous value in attempts to reaffirm for people who are believers of different faiths that they share basic, human values on which they can build, or rebuild, mutually respectful, peaceful relationships. This [book] is author`s [Dr. Abdulaziz Sachedina`s] gift to humanity".

The work also focuses on religious pluralism without actually distinguishing between religious and political pluralism. For example, while one can find in it excellent

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resources to argue for religious tolerance and equality of all from a purely Islamic standpoint, one cannot however justify the tolerance of competing political as capitalism and communism. As a theologian, Sachedina focuses on theological differences and offers a theological solution to religious differences, but he does not theological or a political solution to political differences. Regarding this point, raises the question: 'Can a political theorist treat Sachedina`s work as a resource to Islamic theory of political pluralism?' He answers this question in just a single word: "Possibly" (Khan, 2008, 30). Sachedina`s work is not only "path breaking" but also new paths and underscores the necessity for the full blown development of democratic theory, claims Muqtedar.

Conclusion:

By way of conclusion, it becomes clear that contemporary Muslim scholars have been increasingly grappling with democratic pluralism' – the second of the four major themes running through Muslim reformist/modernist thought in the 21st century, they have responded to it by proposing various inclusive models of religious diversity, models which affirm the presence of divine guidance in other faiths as well. Abdulaziz Sachedina`s '*The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism'*, in its real terms generated a ground-breaking debate among various intellectuals on democratic pluralism, a debate which is still developing in various contexts. They have also contributed to other themes, viz: a deep and abiding conviction in Islam as a faith and as a system of belief; Islam`s relation with other great faiths (or) inter-faith Dialogue; and; the phenomenon of modernity.

It also becomes clear that the central goal of the reformists is to make Islam relevant by articulating a jurisprudence that addresses contemporary/modern concerns and issues. For them, neither Islam nor modernity is the problem. The problem is with mutually exclusive interpretations of Islam and modernity, and such interpretations, are fundamentally wrong. The reformist/modernist thinkers use the concept of *Ijtihad* as a key.

The third important point that can be drawn out from the above discussion is that Dr. Sachedina`s book, an analytical examination of Qura`nic ideas about pluralism and individual autonomy, clearly exposes the aspects of democracy and how to apply them in modern times. It models a theological and personal courage that is necessary for building a new global civilization committed to the highest principles of democracy, human rights, and the sacred value of every human being on the planet, regardless of race or religion, language or sex, religious beliefs or political affiliation, social status or other

considerations. The book critically analyzes Muslim teachings on issues of pluralism, civil society, war and peace, violence and self-sacrifice, the status and role of non-Muslims, and capital punishment. He shows how the Qura'nic philosophy is democratic in its nature, but also completely pluralistic and universal.

End Notes:

1.   Intellectual Islam is one of the now-a-days commonly used four brands for Islam, the other three brands include Popular Islam, Political Islam, and Fundamentalist Islam, . It is divided into two broad and fluid strands – one classified as 'Conservative' or 'Neo-Traditionalist' and another as 'Reformist' or 'Modernist' Islam. For details see William Shepard, 'The Diversity of Islamic Thought: Toward a Typology', in Suha Taji-Farouki & Basheer M. Nafi, *Islamic Thought in Twentieth Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004) p. 63. These are the alternative designations offered by William Shepard and are also cited by Mehran Kamrava, 'Introduction: Reformist Islam in Comparative Perspective', in Mehran Kamrave (ed), *The New Voices of Islam: Reforming Politics and Modernity – A Reader* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 1-27 (esp. pp. 14&15). In this sense, in the following pages, the terms 'Reformist(s)' and 'Modernist(s)' are used interchangeably.

2.   For a list of personalities/thinkers of this group (and their writings), see John Cooper, Ronald Nettler, & Mohmed Mahmoud (Eds), *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1998); John L. Esposito & John O. Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Charles Kurzman, (Ed) *Liberal Islam – A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Mehran Kamrava, (Ed) *The New Voices of Islam: Reforming Politics and Modernity – A Reader* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006)

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