

# Islam and Muslim Societies

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### Issues/Discussion

#### Rethinking Islam Ziauddin Sardar

Serious rethinking within Islam is long overdue. Muslims have been comfortably relying, or rather falling back, on age-old interpretations for much too long. This is why we feel so painful in the contemporary world, so uncomfortable with modernity. Scholars and thinkers have been suggesting for well over a century that we need to make a serious attempt at *ijtihad*, at reasoned struggle and rethinking to reform Islam. At the beginning of the last century, Jamaluddin Afghani and Mohammad Abduh led the call for a new *ijtihad*; and along the way many notable intellectuals, academics and sages have added to this plea – not least Mohammad Iqbal, Malik bin Nabbi and Abdul Qadir Audah. Yet *ijtihad* is one thing Muslim societies have singularly failed to undertake. Why?

The why has acquired an added urgency after September 9/11. What the fateful events of that day reveal, more than anything else, is the distance we have travelled away from the spirit and import to Islam. Far from being a liberating force, a kinetic social, cultural and intellectual dynamics for equality, justice and humane values, Islam seems to have acquired a pathological strain. Indeed, it seems to me that we have internalized all those historic and contemporary western representations of Islam and Muslims that have been demonizing us for centuries. We now actually wear the garb, I have to confess, of the very demons that the west has been projecting on our collective personality.

But to blame the West, or a notion of instrumental modernity that is all but alien to us, would be a lazy option. True, the West and particularly America, has a great deal to answer for and Muslims are quick to point a finger at the injustices committed by American and European foreign Policies and hegemonic tendencies. However, that is only a part, and in my opinion not an insurmountable part, of the malaise. Hegemony is not always imposed. Sometimes, it is invited. The internal situation within Islam is an open invitation.

We have failed to respond to the summons to *Ijtihad* for some very profound reasons. Prime amongst these is the fact that the context of our sacred texts, the Quran and the examples of the Prophet Muhammad, our absolute frame of

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reference has been frozen in history. One can only have an interpretative relationship with a text even more so if the text is perceived to be eternal. But if the interpretative context of the text is never our context, not our own time, then its interpretation can hardly have any real meaning or significance for us as we are now. Historic interpretations constantly drag us back to history, to frozen and ossified context of long ago; worse, to perceived and romanticized contexts that have not even existed in history. This is why while Muslims have a strong emotional attachment to Islam, Islam per se as world view and system of ethics, has little or no direct relevance to their daily lives apart from the obvious concerns of rituals and worship. Ijtihad and fresh thinking have not been possible because there is no context within which they can actually take place.

The freezing of interpretation, the closure of the gates of Ijtihad, has a devastating effect on Muslim thought and action. In particular, it has produced what I can only describe as three metaphysical catastrophes; the elevation of the Shariah to the level of the Divine, with the consequent removal of agency from the believers, and the equation of Islam with the State. Let me elaborate.

Most Muslims consider the Shariah, commonly translated as Islamic law to be divine. Yet, there is nothing divine about the Shariah. The only thing that can legitimately be described as divine in Islam is the Quran. The Shariah is a human construction; an attempt to understand the divine will in a particular context. This is why the bulk of the Shariah actually consists of *fiqh* or jurisprudence, which is nothing more than legal opinion of classical jurists. The very term *fiqh* was not in vogue before the Abbasid period when it was actually formulated and codified. But when *fiqh* assumed its systematic legal form. It incorporated three vital aspects of Muslim society of the Abbasid period. At that juncture, Muslim history was in its expansionist phase, and *fiqh* incorporated the logic of Muslim imperialism of that time. The *fiqh* rulings on apostasy, for example, derive not from the Qur'an but from this logic. Moreover, the world was simple and could easily be divided into black and white; hence, the division of the world into *Dar al Islam* and *Dar al Harb*. Furthermore, as the framers of law were not by these stage managers of society, the law becomes merely theory which could not be modified-the framers of the law were unable to see where the faults lay and what aspect of the law needed fresh thinking and reformulation. Thus *fiqh* as we know it today. evolved on the basis of a division between those who were governing and set themselves apart from society and those who were framing the law; the epistemological assumptions of a golden phase of Muslim history also came into play. When we describe the Shariah as divine, we actually provide divine sanctions for the rulings of by-gone *fiqh*.

What this means in reality is that when Muslim countries apply or impose the Shariah- the demands of Muslims from Indonesia to Nigeria-the contradictions

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that were inherent in the formulation and evolution of fiqh come to the fore. That is why wherever the Shariah is imposed that is, fiqh legislation is applied, out of context from the time when it was formulated and out of step with ours - Muslim societies acquire a medieval feel. We can see that in Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and the Taliban Afghanistan, when narrow adherence to fiqh, to the dictates of this or that school of thought, whether it has any relevance to real world or not, becomes the norm, ossification sets in. The Shariah will solve all our problems is the common sentiment; and it becomes necessary for a group with vested interest in this notion of the Shariah to preserve its territory, the source of its power and prestige, at all costs. An outmoded body of law is thus equated with the Shariah, and criticism is shunned and outlawed by appealing to its divine nature.

The elevation of the Shariah to the divine level also means the believers themselves have no agency; since The Law is a priori given people themselves have nothing to do expect to follow it. Believers thus become passive receivers rather than active seekers of truth. In reality, the Shariah is nothing more than a set of principle, a framework of values that provide Muslim societies with guidance. But these sets of principles and values are not a static given but are dynamically derived within changing contexts. As such the Shariah is a problem-solving methodology rather than law (1) It requires the believers to exert themselves and constantly reinterpret the Quran and look at the life of the Prophet Muhammad with ever changing fresh eyes. Indeed, the Quran has to be reinterpreted from epoch to epoch which means the Shariah, and by extension Islam itself, has to be reformulated with changing context (2) The only thing that remains constant in Islam is the text of the Quran itself, its concepts providing the anchor for ever changing interpretations.

Islam is not so much a religion but an integrative worldview, that is to say, it integrates all aspects of reality by providing a moral perspective on every aspect of human endeavor. Islam does not have ready-made answer to all human problems; it provides a moral and just perspective within which Muslim must Endeavour to find answers to all human problems. But if every thing is a priori given in the shape of a divine Shariah, then Islam is reduced to a totalistic ideology, this is exactly what the Islamic movements in particularly Jumaat-e-Islami (both Pakistan and Indian varieties) and the Muslim Brotherhood have reduced Islam to. which brings me to the third metaphysical catastrophe. Place this ideology within a nation- state, with divinely attributed Shariah at its centre, and you have an Islamic state. All contemporary Islamic states, from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan to aspiring Pakistan, are based on this ridiculous assumption. But once Islam, as an ideology, becomes a programme of action of a vested group, it loses its humanity and becomes a battlefield where morality, reason and justice are readily sacrificed at the altar of

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emotions. Moreover, the step from a totalistic ideology to a totalitarian order where every human-situation is open to state-arbitration is a small one. The transformation of Islam into a state-based political ideology not only deprives it of its all moral and ethical content, it also debunks most of Muslim history as un-Islamic. Islamists rediscover a golden past, they do so only in order to disdain the present and mock the future. All we are left with is messianic chaos, as we saw so vividly in the Taliban regime, where all politics as the domain of action is paralyzed and meaningless pieties become the foundational truth of the state.

The totalitarian vision of Islam as a State thus transforms Muslim politics into a metaphysics in such an enterprise, every action can be justified as Islamic by the dictates of political expediency as we witnessed in revolutionary Iran.

The three metaphysical catastrophes are accentuated by an overall process of reduction that has become the norm in Muslim societies. The reductive process itself is also not new; but now it has reached such an absurd state that the very ideas that are supposed to take Muslim societies towards humane values now actually take them in the opposite direction. From the subtle beauty of perennial challenge to construct justice through mercy and compassion, we get mechanistic formulae fixated with the extremes repeated by people convinced they have no duty to think for themselves because all questions have been answered for them by the classical ulamas, far better men long dead. And because every thing carries the brand name of Islam, to question it, or argue against it, is tantamount to voting for sin.

The process of reduction started with the very notion of *alim* (scholar) itself just who is an alim; what makes him an authority? In early Islam, an alim was anyone who acquired ilm or knowledge, which was itself described in a broad sense. We can see that in the early classification of knowledge by such scholars as al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, ibn Sina, al-Ghazzali and ibn Khaldun. Indeed, both the definition of knowledge and its classification was a major intellectual activity in classical Islam (3). So all learned men, scientists as well as philosophers, scholars as well as theologians, constituted the ulama. But after the gates of Ijtihad were closed during the Abbasid era, ilm was reduced to religious knowledge and the ulama came to constitute only religious scholars.

Similarly, the idea of *ijma*, the central notion of communal life in Islam, has been reduced to the consensus of a select few, Ijma literally means consensus of the people. The concept dates back to the practice of prophet Muhammad himself as leader of the original polity of Muslims. When the prophet Muhammad wanted to reach a decision he would call the whole Muslim community, then admittedly not very large, to the mosque. A discussion would ensue; arguments for and against would be presented. Finally, the entire

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gathering would reach a consensus. Thus a democratic spirit was central to communal and political life in early Islam. But over time the clerics and religious scholars have removed the people from the equation and reduced *ijma* to the consensus of the religious scholars. Not surprisingly, authoritarianism, theocracy and despotism reigns supreme in the Muslim world. The political domain finds its model in what has become the accepted practice and *métier* of the authoritatively religious adepts, those who claim the monopoly of exposition of Islam. Obscurantist Mullahs, in the guise of the *ulama*, dominate Muslim societies and circumscribe them with fanaticism and absurdly reductive logic.

Numerous other concepts have gone through similar process of reduction. The concept of *ummah*, the global spiritual community of Muslims, has been reduced to the ideals of a nation-state; my country right or wrong has been transposed to read my *ummah* right or wrong. So even despots like Saddam Hussein are now defended on the basis of *ummah* consciousness and unity of the *ummah*, Jihad has now been reduced to the single meaning of Holy war. This translation is perverse not only because the concepts of spiritual, intellectual, and social components have been stripped away, but it has been reduced to war by any means, including terrorism. So anyone can now declare jihad on anyone, without any ethical or moral rhyme or reason. Nothing should be more perverted, or pathologically more distant from the initial meaning of

Jihad. Its other connotations, including personal struggle. Intellectual endeavor and social construction have all but evaporated. *Istislah* normally rendered as public interest and a major source of Islamic law, has but disappeared from Muslim consciousness. And *ijfihad*, as I have suggested, have now been reduced to little more than a pious desire.

But the violence performed to sacred Muslim concepts is insignificant compared to the reductive way the Quran and the sayings and examples of the prophet Muhammad. What the late Muslim scholar. Fazlur Rahman called the atomistic treatment of the Quran is now the norm. Anything and everything is justified by quoting individual bits of verses out of context (4). After the September 11 event for example, a number of Taliban supporters, including a few in Britain, justify their actions by quoting the following verse. "We will put terror into the hearts of the unbelievers. They serve other gods for whom no sanction has been revealed. Hell shall be their home" (3) 149, Yet the apparent meaning attributed to this verse could not be farther from the true spirit of the Quran. In this particular verse, the Quran is addressing Prophet Muhammad himself, It was revealed during the battle of Uhad, when the small and ill equipped army of the Prophet, faced a much larger and well-equipped enemy. He was concerned about the outcome of the battle. The Quran reassures him and promises the enemy will be terrified with the Prophets' unprofessional army. Seen in its context, it is not a general instruction to all Muslims; but a

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commentary on what was happening at that time. Similarly *hadith* are quoted to justify the most extremes of behavior. And the Prophets' own appearance, his beard and clothes, have been turned into a fetish; so now it is not just obligatory for a good Muslim to have a beard, but its length and shape must also conform to dictates! The Prophet has been reduced to signs and symbols, the spirit of his behavior the moral and ethical dimensions of his actions, his humility and compassion, the general principles he advocated have all been subsumed by the logic of absurd reduction.

The accumulative effect of the metaphysical catastrophes and endless reduction has transformed the cherished tenants of Islam into instruments of militant expediency and moral bankruptcy. For over two decades, I have been arguing that Muslim civilization is now so fragmented and shattered that we have to rebuild it, brick by brick (5), It is now obvious that Islam itself has to be rethought, idea by idea. We need to begin with the simple fact that Muslims have no monopoly on truth, on what is right, on what is good, on Justice nor the intellectual and that and moral reflexes that promote these necessities. Like the rest of humanity, we have to struggle to achieve them using our own sacred notions and concepts as tools for understanding and reshaping contemporary reality.

The Way to a fresh, contemporary appreciation of Islam requires confronting the metaphysical catastrophes and moving away from reduction to syntheses. Primarily, this requires Muslims, as individuals and communities, to reclaim agency; to insist on their right and duty, as believers and knowledgeable people to interpret and reinterpret the basic sources of Islam, to question what now goes under the general rubric of Shariah, to declare that much of fiqh is now dangerously obsolete, to stand up to the absurd notion of an Islam confined by a geographically bound state. We cannot, if we really value our faith, leave its exposition in the hands of under educated elites or religious scholars whose lack of comprehension of the contemporary world is usually matched only by their disdain and contempt for all its ideas and cultural product. Islam has been permitted to languish as the professional domain of people more familiar with the world of the eleventh century than the twenty first century we now inhabit. And we cannot allow this class to bury the noble of Ijtihad into frozen and distant history.

Ordinary Muslims around the world have concerns, questions and considerable moral dilemmas about the current state of affairs of Islam, must reclaim the basic concepts of Islam and reframe them in a broader context. Ijma must mean consensus of all citizens leading to participatory and accountable governance. Jihad must be understood in its complete spiritual meaning as the struggle for peace and justice as a live reality for all people everywhere. And the notion of the ummah must be refined so it becomes something more than mere

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reductive abstraction. As Anwar Ibrahim has argued, the ummah is not merely the community of all those who profess to be Muslims; rather it is a moral conception of how Muslims should become a community in relation to each other, other communities and the natural world. Which means ummah incorporates not just the Muslim, but justice seeking and oppressed people everywhere (6) In a sense, the movement towards synthesis is an advance towards the primary meaning and message of Islam as a moral and ethical way of looking and shaping the world, as a domain of peaceful civic culture, a participatory endeavour, and a holistic mode of knowing. being and doing.

If the events of September, 11 unleash the best intentions, the essential values of Islam as the phoenix would truly have risen from the ashes of twin towers.

- 1- For a more elaborate exposition of the Shariah as problem solving Methodology chapter 5 of Ziauddin Sardar, *Islamic futures. The Shape of Ideas to come*, Mansell London, 1985.
- 2- I first argued this in *The Future of Muslim Civilization*, Croom Helm. London, 1979, second edition, Mansell London, 1987.
- 3- See Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, Brill, Leiden, 1970.
- 4- Fazlur Rahman. *Major Themes of the Quran*, Biblioteca Islamica, Chicago, 1980.
- 5- Ziauddin Sardar, *The Future of Muslim Civilisation* op cit.
- 6- Anwar Ibrahim. *The Ummah and Tomorrow's World* Future 23 (3) 302-310 (April 1991)

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