

ISLAM AND CULTURE OF LIFE

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1. Introduction

Islam provides a harmonious balance in the life of human beings by putting together the worldly life and spiritual life side by side. This world has been meant for man and everything in it has been made subservient to him. Life in Islam is viewed into one whole life – a life of complete submission to God¹ in order to earn His pleasure with the hope of Divine Reward. A human person has to live his/her life on earth within the limits ordained by God with the realization that at the end, one would be judged according to the manner he/she uses the period of the short sojourn. God should occupy the central position in the thought and actions of human beings. “Nothing is the life of this world but play and amusement. But best is the Home in the Hereafter, for those who are righteous. Will you not then understand?”² This concept develops the spiritual and moral life of a human person and seeks to refine every fiber of individual’s aspect of life and one’s social environment with the healthiest and noblest moral standard.

2. Dignity of Humanity

Islam advocates numerous peace-building values supported by *Qur’an* and *Hadith*³ and expects Muslims to live by them. One of these values is

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¹Islam means submission or surrender to the will of God and a Muslim is the one who has surrendered his will to God.

²The Holy Qur’an, Surat Al-An’am 6:32. The Qur’anic verses are taken from *The Holy Qur’an* (English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary), revised and edited by the Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA.

³Hadith means “a saying,” which technically also means, Tradition, records of what Muhammad did or enjoined, or was done in his presence and not forbidden by him.

expressed in the *Qur'an*: “O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for *Allah*, as witness to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety and fear *Allah*. For *Allah* is well-acquainted with all that you do.”⁴

God made man the best of creations giving him special gifts and privileges not bestowed to other creations. He has created him essentially as a rational being and given the power to distinguish right from wrong and to understand the reality and the purpose of his existence. “It is He [*Allah*], who hath made you the inheritors of the earth: He hath raised you in ranks, some above others: that He may try you in the gifts He hath given you: for the Lord is quick in punishment yet He is indeed Oft forgiving, most Merciful.”⁵ Forcing man to follow the right path makes him a puppet, which is inconsistent with the gift of free will. That is why nobody is compelled to accept Islam against his will. “Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error...”⁶

3. *Jihad*

President George Bush declared a crusade against Osama bin Laden soon after the attack on the World Trade Centre and the pentagon on 11 September 2001. *Al Qaeda* chief Osama bin Laden has made *Jihad* (Holy War) a powerful weapon which can mesmerize Muslim youth to sacrifice their lives for a war of righteousness, the struggle against tyranny. The *Jihadis* believe that they cannot be defeated, and that, in the long run, the war will be won; in the short run, however, death will bring martyrdom and paradise. There are two kinds of *Jihad*: (i) The *Jihad al Akbar* (the greater *jihad*), which is the war against the enemy within, and (ii) The *Jihad al Asghar* (the lesser *jihad*) that is fought on the battlefield.

Jihad never exclusively meant a holy war; it could have been a social, political, economic campaign as well. It was a fight against inequality, social injustice and discrimination. But today *Jihad* has but one dimension – a violent struggle. Now there are hundreds of Islamic fundamentalists who are willing to kill and be killed for Allah. An important reason is the promise that the gates of Paradise are under the shadows of the swords. So blinded is the commitment of a *Jihadi* to the

⁴*Surat Al-Maida* 5:8.

⁵*Surat Al-An'am* 6:165.

⁶*Surat Al-Baqarah* 2:256.

cause that those confronted with them are engaged, sooner or later, in a loosing battle. In this regard there is no much difference between a dyed-in-the-wool product of a remote *Madrassa*,⁷ intent on his purpose of establishing the Empire of faith, or a Western-clad graduate from a Western university campus, modern in appearances, but equally single-minded in determination as his counterpart from the *Madrassa*.

The *Jihadi* is the same person, whether he comes from an ill-equipped *Madrassa* or an affluent university, whether he comes from the poverty of the Orient or from the plenty of the West. He celebrates death in the service of Islam and believes firmly that death in the service of the only cause worth serving is a one-way ticket to heaven. Islam is his religion and his nation; it transcends boundaries, ethnicities, colour, creed and race. He rejects secularism and any social order other than that which is defined and promoted by Islam.

4. Madrasa Training

An eight-year old Muslim, apart from attending the regular (secular) school, goes to the *Madrassa* by the side of the mosque for Islamic education after changing from the school uniform into Muslim dress. Virtually every mosque has a *Madrassa* attached to it, where the students learn the *Qur'an* and Arabic even during the vacation time. The girls are all in burqa, the boys in a long dress and white Islamic cap. The children are conditioned to the *Madrassa* system due to the psychology of copying because they see their brothers and sisters and other children coming. In *madarsas*, the children learn Arabic language, Islamic history, jurisprudence, the procedures to offering *namaaz* and performing various prayers. They follow the philosophy of Khilafa movement that sought to present a single Muslim community (*Ummah*) around the world, without any national barrier. The students are brainwashed to such an extent that they think that others persecute Muslims all over the world. Hence, it is among the *Madrassa* trained youngsters that terrorist groups are likely to search for recruits.

⁷*Madrassa* is a school, often associated with a mosque, in which the religious subjects of Islam are studied in the traditional manner.

5. Fundamentalists

Personally, an Islamic fundamentalist asks himself if he loves *Allah* more than his own life? Spiritually, he asks whether or not he is willing to sacrifice himself in *Allah's* cause against the *Shaytan's* power and the infidel's military forces? Politically, all the nations of the world are divided into two warring camps. The nations under Islamic rule are termed, the Land of Peace (*Dar al-Islam*)⁸ while the remaining nations are called the land of War (*Dar al-Harb*).⁹ Hence, a *Jihadi* joyfully takes up the sword to kill and be killed in *Allah's* cause, anticipating his entrance into the gates of heavenly Paradise. Thus, martyrdom is the only assured path to Paradise.

The global *jihad* movement has largely become a “web-directed” phenomenon, which is not yet properly censured or monitored. The possibility of the pneumonic plague be made into biological weapon if a small supply of the virus could be acquired, and such a possibility is not ruled out. It is high time to go after the root cause of the *jihadist* problem, namely the fundamentalist *mullahs*¹⁰ and the Islamist preachers who hide behind a façade of being religious the seeds of hatred and violence among young Muslims. The peace-loving innocent mainstream Muslims should be freed from the clutches of these *mullahs* and fundamentalists.

6. Glasnost and Perestroika

It is the need of the hour to block the terrorist attacks of the *Jihadis* by an authentic Islamic reformation. For that the traditional and outdated system of training given in the Muslim seminaries should undergo a *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Such seminaries are the haven for thorough brainwashing to produce religious fanatics. Although terrorism finds some historical precedents in a few heretical Islamic sects, Islam as such does not teach Muslims to kill innocent people in the name of religion or any political agenda. When moderate Muslims remain silent, extremists speak for all. It is high time for the silent and moderate Muslim majority to rise to the

⁸*Dar-al-Islam* means the abode of Islam; it is a country where Islamic Law is in force, or at least where the edicts of Islam are promulgated.

⁹*Dar-al-Harb* stands for the abode of war; it is a country belonging to the infidels, which has not yet been brought under the rule of Islam.

¹⁰*Mullah* is a Persian form used for the Arabic *Maulavi*, a learned man, a scholar.

occasion and save Islam from the clutches of extremists. Moderate Muslims must fight against all forms of prejudice, hatred intolerance and terrorism within Muslim ranks and advocate peace and harmony for which Islam stands. The Muslim moderates should realize the *Qur'anic* mandate that Muslims are a people of moderation and justice. "Thus have We made of you an *ummah* (community) justly balanced. That you might be witnesses over the nations, and the messenger a witness over yourselves; and We appoint the *Qibla*¹¹ to which thou wast used, only to test those who followed the messenger from those who would turn on their heels (from the Faith). Indeed, it was a momentous (change), except to those guided by *Allah*. And never would *Allah* make your faith of no effect. For *Allah* is to all people most surely full of Kindness, most Merciful."¹² The *Qur'an*, the *Hadith*, and other Islamic traditional sources provide plenty of evidence to support the conviction that Islam is a religion of peace and justice, and that non-violent practices are well rooted in the religion.

7. Suicide Terrorism

The strategic logic of Suicide Terrorism is "dying to win." All suicide attacks are committed for a secular, strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from those territories which suicide bombers view as their homeland. The terrorists use religion as an effective recruiting tactic in serving a broader strategic goal. For the militarily disadvantaged, the suicide terror is the most effective tactical option. In other words, the militarily less privileged countries will change their strategy as and when they will become equipped with most modern weapons like warplanes, missiles, etc. The principle of altruism inspires many a suicide bomber, because they die not because they see death as desirable in itself, but in the name of a more abundant life for all. But there is a major difference between a suicide bomber and a martyr. A martyr lays down his/her life for justice and peace for all without killing anybody or doing any harm to anyone. Unfortunately, the suicide bomber takes others life as well over which he/she has no right. They ignore the principle, "End does not justify the means!"

¹¹*Qibla* is the direction to which a Muslim faces for the performance of ritual prayer; it means facing the *Ka'ba* in Mecca.

¹²Surat al-Baqara 2:143.

8. Martyrdom and Suicide

In a country under occupation suicide bomb is the most favoured tactical option. A true Muslim can become a martyr but cannot court a martyr's death deliberately. The *Qur'an* strictly forbids suicide, as it is one of the serious sins. Although suicide is banned, the *Qur'an* does endorse violence during war. Over a year ago, the Qatar-based Sheikh Yusuf-al-Qardawi, one of the famous clerics of the Muslim world, issued a *fatwa*¹³ legitimizing suicide bombings in extreme conditions. Muslim scholars think that an individual can become a martyr and attain Paradise if he dies fighting for a just cause. According to the teachings of the *Qur'an*, war must not be waged against the enemy but only against the aggressors.

The Muslim community today finds itself engaged in a profound struggle at this crucial moment of history, cut off from the past, faced with a present that is characterized by tyranny, poverty, and humiliation, with no viable or desirable prospects for weaving its own future. Democracy in Islam is a mere ideology, which has not taken deep root in the Islamic world because the religious and cultural foundations are inadequate to attain this goal. Today's challenge for Muslims lies in the propagation of the original ideas of Islam and a willingness to take advantage of the healthy and positive achievements of the West.

The culture of life in Islam basically rests with the Muslim moderates who, mostly, remain silent and passive. When the moderates remain silent, the extremists speak aloud, as if representing the entire Islamic world, which eventually results in the fact that the balanced views of the moderates are never heard at all.

It is high time that the Muslims become aware of the atrocities and injustices done by Muslims against their own brother Muslims either in their own country or in other Muslim countries. Muslims are supposed to stand for justice in all circumstances. It is evident from the following verse of the *Qur'an*: "And come not nigh to the orphan's property, except to improve it, until he attains the age of full strength; give measure and weight with (full) justice; no burden do We place on any soul, but that which it can bear; whenever you speak, speak justly, even if a near relative is concerned; and fulfill the covenant of *Allah*; thus doth He command

¹³*Fatwa* is a religious or judicial verdict pronounced by the Khalifah or by a Mufti (one who gives a legal decision based on Islamic law), or Qazi.

you, that you may remember.”¹⁴ In this regard a Muslim must set aside the inferior *Jihad* (holy war) and embark up on the superior *Jihad* which is the inner struggle for godliness.

The present world of Islam is the product of centuries of interactions with other religions, sometimes hostile and at other times cordial. In the course of centuries Islam was looked upon by people of other faiths as a very conservative and closed one without sufficient scope for reform and renewal. Hence, the original focus given by *Qur'an* for a culture of life has become very bleak.

9. Mistake of Literally Interpreting the *Qur'an*

The *Qur'an* is primarily a book of religious and moral principles and exhortations. The legal teachings of the *Qur'an* are very much liberal but the interpreters of the law made it very rigid and restrictive. For example, the *Qur'an* gives women a fully pledged personality by granting the same rights over man as man has over his wife. Unlimited polygamy was strictly regulated and the number of wives was limited to four, with the condition that if a husband feared that he could not do justice among several wives, he must marry only one woman. A general principle was added to this that “you shall never be able to do justice among wives no matter how desirous you are.”¹⁵ The overall logical consequence of these pronouncements is a banning of polygamy under normal circumstances. The later interpreters of law, however, did not safeguard the spirit of the law and interpreted it literally defeating the very purpose of the law. Same is the case with the controversial triple *talaq*.¹⁶

10. Conclusion

Islam is a religion of peace and a culture of life when correctly understood and rightly interpreted, maintaining the spirit of the *Qur'an* and the authentic teachings of the Prophet Muhammad in not succumbing to the temptations of exploiting the religion for political power, economic gain and other vested interests. A radical and profound reformation based on

¹⁴*Surat-al-An'am* 6:152.

¹⁵*Surat-an-Nisaa* 4: 3,128.

¹⁶*Talaq* is the sentence of divorce by triple *Talaq*. This is interpreted according to Shari'a as valid. At the same time, this is diametrically opposed to the very spirit of the *Qur'an*.

sound principles of ethics and morality expounded in the Holy *Qur'an*, the Sacred Scripture of Muslims, is called for remedying the present confusion prevalent in the Muslim world. The present frustration, humiliation, despair, and the consequent terrorism that creates much anxiety, agony and fear the world over, is a clarion call to the scholars and religious leaders of Islam to join hands to embark upon a noble venture of reviving the spiritual and moral values of Islam and, thus, to substantiate the fact that Islam is a culture of life and not death.