

ISLAM: JUSTICE AND POLITICS

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1. Introduction

We sent aforetime
Our apostles with Clear Signs
And sent down with them
The Book and the Balance
Of Right and Wrong, that men
May stand forth in Justice. (Sura 57:25)

Justice is the real goal of religion. It was the mission of every Prophet. It is the message of every Scripture.

2. Justice in the Quran

The holy Quran abounds with references to justice. Its importance is emphasised in a whole variety of human situations - in inter-personal relationships, within the family, within the community, in the interaction between communities and nations, in the interface between the human being and nature.¹ There is justice to kith and kin, to the orphan, to the destitute, to the slave, to the wayfarer, to the needy.² There is justice that is humanly attainable. There is justice which is only divinely possible.³

In the words of an Islamic scholar, "The demand for providing justice at every level of society features very prominently in the Quran. At every level, be it personal or public, in dealing with friends or foes, Muslims and non-Muslims, both in words and deeds, the Muslims are urged to be fair and just. Justice is an integral part of the faith and upholding the principle of justice is not confined to the courtroom environment or to a set of formal injunctions

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¹See for instance Sura IV 58, 65, 105, 135; Sura VII 29; & Sura IVII 25. A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an Translation & Commentary* (Maryland, United States: Amana Corp., 1993).

²Sura II:177

³See "Resurrection as a Manifestation of Divine Wisdom & Justice," *Al-Tawhid* Vol IX No. 2, November 1991 - January 1992 (Tehran, Iran).

but commands a high priority in the order of Islamic moral and spiritual values."⁴

So central is justice to the Islamic value-system, that Muslims are reminded that it transcends an individual's most precious bond - the bond to oneself. As the Quran puts it,

O ye believe! Stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to God, even as against yourselves, or your parents; Or your kin, and whether It be (against) rich or poor; For God can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (Of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye Distort (justice) or decline To do justice, verily God is well acquainted With all that you do.⁵

If any further proof is needed of the singular significance of justice in Islam it is provided by that well-known Quranic call,

"Be just; that is Next to Piety."⁶

To find out what is actually meant by justice one has to probe a little the verses in which the term appears. From these verses, it seems that the Quran is concerned with different types of justice, including adjudicative justice, retributive justice, distributive justice and of course, divine justice. Calls to "judge fairly" would fall within the first category; punishments for certain kinds of wrongdoing would come within the second category; the practice of *Zakat* and rules on inheritance would belong to the third category; and God's judgement in the Hereafter would qualify for the fourth category.

3. Justice: Our Duty

The Quran not only gives us an indication of what justice is; it also emphasises over and over again our responsibility as human beings to strive relentlessly for justice. We have already mentioned verses in the Quran which exhort us to "stand out firmly for justice" and to "be just." In numerous other places too, it asks us to uphold justice. For instance, we are

⁴Muhammad Hashim Kamali, "The Limits of Power in an Islamic State," *Islamic Studies Quarterly Journal* vol. 28 no. 4, Winter 1989 (Islamabad, Pakistan: Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University) 329.

⁵Sura IV:135.

⁶Sura V:8.

told that, "God doth command you To render back your Trusts To those to whom they are due And when ye judge Between man and man That ye judge with justice."⁷ In another verse we are advised: "When you speak (make sure that you speak) with justice."⁸

Upholding justice is undoubtedly one of the human being's primary duties. It is a duty that he must perform as the bearer of God's trust, as the vicegerent of God, the Khalifah Allah.

To assist and guide the human being in the performance of this duty, God has revealed to him a message, an eternal message, which has been affirmed and reaffirmed through the ages, a message, the quintessence of which is embodied in the Quran. It is through realisation of the values and principles, the precepts and practices which constitute this message that the human being will fulfil his trusteeship as Khalifah Allah. It is by bringing the Quranic truth into fruition that justice will triumph.

The power and the potential to achieve this lies with all human beings - especially those who have accepted the Quranic truth. Every human being can, in order to bring about justice, "enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong," "*al-amr bil-ma'ruf wan-nahi an al-munkar*."⁹

And what is right and what is wrong is lucidly articulated in the Quran and reflected in the *Sunnah* the words and deeds of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.).

4. Justice: Knowing the Quran

But to discharge one's responsibilities as a Khalifah Allah determined to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, one has to know the Quran and the *Sunnah*. To know the Quran in particular means to gain direct access to it, to read it, to understand it, to absorb it, to internalise its ideas and its ideals, its values and its vision. It must be emphasised over and over again that understanding the Quran is a task that the individual must undertake on his own and not through someone else. For in Islam there is no intercessor. The relationship with God is direct. The word of God in its final form was

⁷Sura IV:58.

⁸Sura VI:152.

⁹Sura III:104.

made available to the whole of humanity through the last of God's prophets. We may seek the guidance of those who are well-versed in the Quran as we try to learn God's Word but the responsibility of understanding and applying it to our lives is our own. There is another reason why the study of the Quran is the individual's own obligation. The Quran itself asks us to shoulder this responsibility. We are challenged to

Read! In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher who created - Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful - He Who taught (the use of) the Pen - Taught man that Which he knew not.¹⁰

Though the Quran beseeches the human being to "read," to "write," to "know," the vast majority of Muslims on earth today, have no direct knowledge of the Quran for the simple reason that illiteracy is rampant in the Muslim world.¹¹ It is a sad reflection of the tragic state of affairs within the *ummah* that the one religion which places greatest emphasis upon the acquisition of knowledge should have the largest number of illiterates as its followers! This is why our first and foremost challenge if we want to create a responsible *ummah* committed to the transformation of the Quranic ideal of justice into reality is the total eradication of illiteracy within the Muslim world. Perhaps the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) with its vast material resources could make this its primary objective - to be accomplished by the year 2010! If Muslim countries can spend so much on producing World Cup class football teams, surely they can do something about helping each and every male and female to read and understand the Quran.

This leads us to a second point. There are a lot of Muslims who are literate but do not know the Quran because they have memorised it in a language they do not understand. One should therefore learn Arabic which is a praiseworthy thing to do or, alternatively, study the Quran in one's own native language so that one will at least comprehend its contents. After all, good translations of the Quran are available in almost every language used by people today.

¹⁰Sura XCVI:1-5.

¹¹Based upon figures culled from various sources including *Human Development Report 1991 & Human Development Report 1992* (United Nations Development Programme, Oxford University Press), it is estimated that about 65 per cent of the *ummah* can neither read nor write.

Understanding the language of the Quran alone is not enough. One should try to empathise with the Quran as God's eternal message which means being able to distinguish what is fundamental in it from what is peripheral, what is universal from what is contextual. In other words, we must grasp the dynamic spirit of the Quran. There is no doubt that eternal values and principles demand new interpretations as they manifest themselves in new forms from epoch to epoch. For instance, if the underlying principle in the question of slavery which the Quran alludes to in a number of places is connected to the problem of control and domination of one individual, group, community or nation by another, then the verses on slavery are still relevant to contemporary society since the same phenomenon of control and domination persists in new forms to this day.¹²

Our inability to interpret and understand the Quran at a more profound level has resulted in an obsession with superficialities. Instead of seeing the Quran and the *Sunnah* in a holistic manner, we have adopted a selective, sectarian approach which in itself is an injustice to God's revelation. This is why the Quran's fundamental proclamation of justice and compassion is sometimes lost in a cacophony of trivialities. An example or two will illustrate this point.

When an Islamic government was established in a Muslim country which had just defeated a foreign aggressor after a long and bloody conflict, one of its first moves was to coerce Muslim women to wear the *hijab* in public. This was a country where there was no law and order, everything was in chaos and contending factions were preparing for a civil war. From an Islamic point of view, there were a thousand and one other issues related to life and death which demanded urgent attention and action. But the superficial mind fascinated by form could only focus upon the *hijab*.

Another Muslim government determined to Islamicise society as quickly as possible decided that it would appoint "custodians of prayers" in all state institutions who would make sure that Muslims performed their

¹²An outstanding thinker and reformer who has done a lot of re-interpretation of this sort is Ali Shariati, one of the Iranian martyrs of the middle and late seventies. See for instance his *Sociology of Islam* (Berkeley, United States: Mizan Press, 1979); *Marxism & Other Western Fallacies* (Berkeley, United States: Mizan Press, 1980); & *What is to be Done* (Houston, Texas, United States: The Institute for Research & Islamic Studies, 1986).

prayers at the prescribed times. Since a Muslim is expected to pray of his own volition, this new edict made little sense. Besides, poverty, hunger and disease were - and still are - rampant in that country. It is a country where there are about 15 million child labourers, living and working in the most inhuman conditions imaginable. Shouldn't a just Islamic government regard the emancipation of these oppressed children as its cardinal goal?

The type of Islamisation undertaken by many Muslim states convinces us that there should be a serious attempt to develop a better understanding of Islam and the Quran within the *umma*. Towards this end, there should be a gigantic transnational effort to translate into as many languages as possible the writings of illustrious Muslim thinkers and reformers. The main criterion should be whether the writings in question help to convey that sense of justice, that feeling of compassion which constitutes the kernel of Islam. On that basis, the works of Shah Walliyullah, Muhammad Iqbal, Kalam Azad, Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Taleghani, Baqer Sadr, Fazlur Rahman and Muhammad Natsir, amongst others, would be worth considering.¹³

At the same time, since visual communication - rather than written communication - has a much more pervasive and penetrative impact in today's world we should make better use of both television and cinema to convey the real message of the Quran. Certain social themes could be developed from certain verses in the Quran and sketches and stories could be constructed on the basis of these themes. For example, Sura II: 177 tells us what righteousness really means.¹⁴ Our compassion for the orphan, the

¹³It is a pity that there isn't a single reader in English (or perhaps in any other language) which brings together the writings of all these individuals. A couple of the names mentioned appear in Suroosh Irfani, *Revolutionary Islam in Iran* (London: Zed Books, 1983) which traces the evolution of Islamic thought from Jamaluddin al-Afghani to Iqbal & Shariati.

¹⁴The relevant Sura in full reads as follows:-

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces
Towards East or West, but it is righteousness -
To believe in God and the Last Day and the Angels
And the Book and the Messengers
To spend of your substance, out of love for Him,
For your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer,
For those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves;
To be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity;
To fulfill the contracts which ye have made

needy, the wayfarer, and not just the act of turning our faces toward East or West, defines our piety. There are elements in the Sura which could be harnessed for formulating some powerful visual images. The same could be said for Sura XC 10-20, which shows what it is to struggle up the "steep path" and Sura CVII 1-7, which exposes the hollowness of worshippers bereft of a sense of justice and compassion.¹⁵

5. Justice: The Role of Government

To organise a transnational translation programme and to utilise the electronic media effectively for Islamic education centred on justice and compassion one needs both money and human power. If there was a government in the Muslim world committed to reformist Islam, it could take the lead. It should be a government which feels very strongly about the legitimacy of Quranic justice and has a good track record of protecting the dignity and welfare of its people. We emphasise the role of government in

And to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity
 And throughout all periods of panic
 Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing (Sura II:177)

¹⁵The relevant part of the Sura reads as follows:-

And shown him the two highways
 But he hath made no haste on the path that is steep
 And what will explain to thee the path that is steep?
 (It is) freeing the bondman or the giving of food
 In a day of privation to the orphan
 With claims of relationship or to the indigent
 (Down) in the dust then will he be
 Of those who believe and enjoin patience, (constancy, and self-restraint), and
 enjoin
 Deeds of kindness and compassion, such are the companions
 of the Right Hand; But those who reject
 Our signs, they are the (unhappy) companions
 of the Left Hand; On them will be Fire
 Vaulted over (all round) (Sura XC 10-20)

The relevant Sura in full reads as follows:-

Seest thou one who denies the Judgement
 (To come)? Then such is the (man) who repulses the orphan
 (With harshness) And encourages not the feeding of the indigent
 So woe to the worshippers who are neglectful of their Prayers
 Those who (want but) to be seen (of men) , but refuse (to supply)
 (Even) neighbourly needs (Sura CVII 1-7).

this because we know that without political power it will not be possible to put into practice the values and principles of justice contained in the Quran.

A government which wants to implement these values and principles will create space in society for individuals and groups seeking "to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong". In fact, the Quran itself expects groups to come together for this purpose.¹⁶ As an aside, this shows that the Quran through Sura III: 104 has, in fact, given real meaning to two of the three basic civil and political rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, namely, the freedom of expression and the freedom of association.

A just Islamic government will go further. It will ensure that citizens who are fighting for justice have easy access to both the written and electronic media. The media itself should be free of government control and should not be dominated by vested interests of whatever variety.

Again in consonance with Islamic values the government will protect and preserve the independence of the Judiciary. It is significant that the inspiration for an independent Judiciary comes from Quranic values about judging in a fair manner without being swayed by passions and prejudices.¹⁷ Using those values as guidelines, the fourth Caliph, Ali ibn-Abu Talib exhorted his officials to ensure that the judiciary was "above every kind of executive pressure or influence, fear or favour, intrigue or corruption."¹⁸

Just as an independent Judiciary is an important cornerstone of an upright and ethical administration, so is the concept of *Shura* (Consultation) fundamental to an Islamic political system. The Quran asks the Prophet as the head of the Islamic State of Medina, "To consult them in the conduct of their affairs."¹⁹ It also notes, "They manage their affairs by mutual consultation."²⁰ Both these verses suggest that people should have a say in

¹⁶Sura III:104; Also Sura III:110 & Sura IX:71.

¹⁷Sura IV:58; also Sura XXXVIII:26.

¹⁸Imam Ali, *A Selection from Nahjul Balagha* (Houston, Texas, United States: Free Islamic Literatures Incorporated, 1978) 15.

¹⁹Sura III:159.

²⁰Sura XLII:38. See also Abulala Maududi, *The Islamic Law & Constitution* (Lahore, Pakistan: Islamic Publications) for a general discussion on the political and constitutional principles of Islam.

shaping their own destiny. The process of decision-making should be democratic.

While the freedom of expression, the right of assembly, an unfettered media, an independent judiciary and *Shura* are political principles which reinforce the concept of justice in the Quran, there is yet another idea in the holy Book which is relevant to government and yet permeates the whole of Islam, indeed the entirety of creation. As it should be obvious by now, God is at the very heart of the Islamic political system. In the loftiest metaphysical sense it is God that rules, that governs, that administers. God is the ultimate authority. God is the final repository of power.

What this means in concrete terms is that the power and authority of government is limited by the power and authority of God. No Islamic government - however great its popular support - can introduce legislation which challenges those values, principles and laws that are part of God's revelation. For instance, an Islamic government cannot - whatever else it may do - legalise gambling or the consumption of liquor or adultery or bribery even if a hundred per cent of the electorate want these changes. It is this that makes an Islamic government different from most other forms of government. It is a government which can make laws and devise policies but only within the framework established by God's Word or what is described in Islamic jurisprudence as the *Shariah*.

The recognition of God's authority over men and governments and the whole of creation is what Islam is all about. Islam is an affirmation of God's majesty, His sovereignty, His power and His absolute Oneness in transcendence.²¹ This Oneness in transcendence or *Tawhid* is "the knowledge of Allah (God) as the one and only divine sovereign Lord."²²

Tawhid, as faith and idea, is intimately linked to the quest for justice in politics and society. The Oneness of God is the creative, spiritual foundation for the oneness, the unity of the Muslim *ummah*, and indeed, of the whole of humankind. It is a unity based upon righteousness and piety. *Tawhid* recognises that unity of humankind is possible only when there is justice within the human family. Indeed, it is only by striving for justice that

²¹Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *Islam: Faith & Practice* (Ontario, Canada: The Open Press, 1989) 25.

²²Ayoub 25.

Tawhid, a spiritual idea, can be transformed into Tawhid a living social reality.²³

In the quest for a just, united society guided by Tawhid, the worship of the one God, leaders have a particularly important role to play. Islamic political thought has always lauded leaders who submit totally to God and, in the process, cultivate the noble attributes of humility, of love for the people, and of compassion blended with a strong commitment to justice. It is only when leaders possess these qualities and work selflessly for the well-being of ordinary men and women, that justice will prevail and society will be at peace. This was the view of illustrious scholars like Al-Farabi, Mawardi, Al-Ghazzali and Ibn Khaldun.²⁴

The emphasis given by these and other scholars to the role of leaders in the creation of a just social order was influenced no doubt by the example of the noble Prophet. He offered a leadership model that was without precedent and is without parallel in the whole of human history. In the course of his life he performed a variety of formal and informal leadership roles—he was a herdsman and trader, a missionary and an orator, an organiser and a mobiliser, an administrator and a politician, a judge and a military commander, and of course both Prophet and Head of State—apart from being a good husband and a good father. This explains why in almost every field of human activity, the Prophet comes across to the Ummah as a model of exemplary conduct.

The righteous Caliphs like Abu Bakr as-Siddiq, Omar Ibn Khatab and Ali Ibn Abu Talib were also utterly selfless, totally sincere individuals with extraordinary leadership qualities. Once when there was a severe famine in a part of his empire, Omar decided that he would go without food until the "least of the least" of his subjects had something to eat.²⁵ Like Omar, Ali was also a staunch defender of the poor and powerless. In a well-known

²³For a comprehensive study of the worldview of Tawhid see Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari, *Fundamentals of Islamic Thought* (Berkeley, United States: Mizan Press, 1985).

²⁴The views of some of these thinkers can be found in H.K. Sherwani, *Studies in Muslim Thought & Administration* (Lahore, Pakistan: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1970).

²⁵For an interesting discussion on Omar Ibn Khatab's policies especially his economic reforms, see Irfan Mahmud Ra'ana, *Economic System Under Umar The Great* (Lahore, Pakistan: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1977).

letter to one of his governors he reminded him that "God listens to the voice of the oppressed and waylays the oppressor. It is the common man who is the strength of the State and of the Religion. It is he who fights the enemy. So live in close contact with the masses and be mindful of their welfare."²⁶

There were a number of Rulers—after the period of the righteous Caliphs—who also upheld Quranic justice and who, in certain respects, were paragons of virtue. The Umayyad Caliph, Umar Ibn-Abdul Aziz was one such person. On the whole, these good Rulers subjected themselves to the Shariah and limited the powers of the State. In this regard, it is important to emphasise that contrary to the view expressed in certain circles, the Shariah for the most part of Muslim history, "functioned basically as a protective shield in defence of the rights and liberties of the citizen against arbitrary power."²⁷

6. Justice: The Internal Threats

Nonetheless there is evidence to show that now and then Muslim Rulers transgressed the *Shariah* and the basic tenets of the Quran and Sunnah. These transgressions took place whenever factional feuds developed as a result of succession conflicts. They also tended to occur when Rulers became obsessed with wealth and luxury and began to lead decadent lives.

Factional feuds have a long history in Islam. Invariably, they were linked to the politics of power and position. In fact, factionalism began soon after the death of the Prophet. The followers of Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law felt that he should have been the rightful successor to the Prophet and never really accepted the leadership of the first three Caliphs. The intrigues and manipulations which ensued resulted in open, bloody conflict.²⁸ The followers of Ali became the Shi'a (a party or faction) and have remained a minority within the Muslim family—though they are the inheritors of a glorious tradition of struggle and sacrifice.

²⁶*Concept of Islamic State* (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1979) 33.

²⁷Kamali 326.

²⁸Rafiq Zakaria, *The Struggle Within Islam* (Penguin Books, 1988) especially chapter 3 for details. The conflict referred to would be the battles at Kufa (Iraq) & Siffin (Syria) which Caliph Ali was forced into at the beginning of his rule.

Shi'a bitterness against the majority who came to be known as the Sunnis reached its zenith when the Umayyad Ruler, Yazid, massacred Ali's son, Husayn, and his small band of followers in the tragic battle of Karbala. According to one writer, "It [the massacre at Karbala] created an unbridgeable gulf between the Shiites and the Umayyads and the Sunnis, despite the fact that the Sunnis themselves were horrified by the cruel desecration of al-Bait (the family of the Prophet)."²⁹ The Shiites continued to challenge the Umayyads and eventually defeated them. The rise of the Abbasids, led by a Shiite, however, did not end the Shi'a-Sunni conflict.

Though the Shi'a-Sunni divide remains the most serious cleavage within the *ummah* - a cleavage which has been reduced somewhat in recent decades - there have also been other splits among Muslims groups at various points in history. Within the three most powerful empires of the latter period - the Safavids in Iran, the Mughals in India and the Ottomans in West Asia, North Africa and Europe - there were occasions when dissension and conflict threatened peace and stability. Sometimes these conflicts resulted in wanton discrimination against the followers of a particular group or sect. At other times, a Ruler might choose to arbitrarily execute supporters of his rival.

While factionalism rooted in succession conflicts sapped, to some extent, the energies of Muslim empires of the past, a greater threat to the integrity of the religion came from the greed and corruption of the ruling class. Very often, it was the love of luxury, the desire for grandeur that drove rulers to accumulate wealth through illegal and immoral means. Since institutional controls upon their power were minimal, they could, if they chose to, set aside the moral constraints imposed by the Shariah and acquire all the riches in the world with very little regard for ethical values and principles.

Here again, the tendency towards venality expressed itself early in Muslim history. From most accounts, Uthman, the third Caliph, lacked the moral rectitude of his two predecessors and his immediate successor.³⁰ Muawiyya, the founder of the Umayyad Caliphate, was guilty of an opulent lifestyle. He allowed his cronies to acquire huge tracts of land at the expense of the public. Other Umayyad Caliphs "used the *Bait-ul-Mal* (treasury) funds indiscriminately to favour their friends and relatives, manipulated grants of

²⁹Zakaria 66.

³⁰Zakaria, especially 54-55.

pensions and gave these to undeserving persons, and generally ignored the rules."³¹

In the empires that emerged after the Umayyad Caliphate, there were also rulers who succumbed to the glitter of gold. Indeed, some of these empires—insofar as rectitude and decadence were concerned—appeared to conform to the pattern of rise and fall that Ibn Khaldun had observed in his study of society. In the initial stages when an empire is beginning to establish itself the first few rulers always evince lofty moral values. They are simple, honest and selfless. After the empire expands and grows prosperous the later Caliphs tend to become materialistic and develop a taste for luxury. Corruption sets in. The moral fibre of the ruling class weakens. Eventually, the empire disintegrates, declines and disappears.³²

If we reflected upon both these diseases of the Muslim empires of the past in the light of factionalism and division on the one hand and corruption and decadence, on the other hand—we would conclude that Muslim polities today are still not healthy. It is undeniably true that the *ummah* is deeply divided and hopelessly disunited. Succession disputes may not be the root cause any more but power is as vital a factor as ever. Often it is the desire to perpetuate one's power whatever the costs and consequences which causes dissension and conflict. Sometimes, it is the determination of a dissident group to acquire power by whatever means which is the problem. More likely than not, tussles for power are linked to ideology. It is becoming increasingly clear that a "secular state versus Islamic opposition" is looming large on the horizon. And what exacerbates the situation is the active involvement of Western powers, bent on preserving their own interests, in these conflicts. Indeed, they have played a diabolical role for a long while now in keeping the *ummah* divided so that it will remain perpetually weak and at their mercy.

In the midst of all this there are Muslim ruling elite who, wallow in vulgar opulence and indulge in crude extravagance, helped no doubt by their oil wealth. Some of them have kept huge segments of their people poor and ignorant while they feed their fantasies with all that money can buy. There is not an iota of justice in these semi-feudal monarchies which are almost

³¹Zakaria 70.

³²Filsafat Ibn Khaldun, ed. Charles Issawi and trans. Ali Munawar (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1964) especially chapter 6.

always dependent upon Western military and political support for their survival.

7. Justice: The Global Obstacle

Disunity and decadence within the Muslim world have become issues of grave concern to thinking, feeling Muslims everywhere. For unlike the past, the *ummah* today is confronted by a global system which is not only prejudiced towards Muslims but whose interests and orientations are inimical to Islamic notions of human dignity and social justice. What this means, in other words, is that the world today has become a much more difficult place for Muslims to achieve their concept of justice. And by the "world today," what we mean essentially is a whole system of political, economic and cultural relationships which have grown out of the two hundred years of Western domination of the planet. To put it in another way, it is the world as defined and determined by the West which challenges Islam and Muslims today.

Part of that challenge is the prejudice that exists within mainstream Western society against Islam and the Muslims. This, in itself, is a terrible injustice. Conditioned by the Muslim conquest of Europe, on the one hand, and Western subjugation of Muslim lands, on the other, and coloured by the crusades, the politics of oil and imperialism, among other factors, Western prejudice is deeply embedded in the Western psyche. It continues to manifest itself through a variety of political and non-political events in contemporary society. "Islamic militancy," "Islamic terrorism" and "Islamic fundamentalism" are but the latest attempts to derogate and denigrate a community and a religion with which Western society has always been uncomfortable.

Fair-minded Western scholars and writers themselves have decried the pervasiveness and persistence of this negative attitude towards Islam and the Muslims. As the Irish writer Erskine Childers put it, "With the exception of culturally liberated sociologists and social anthropologists, a relative handful of historians, and a small minority of contemporary religious and lay public commentators, a systematically biased outlook upon Islam has permeated the Western world."³³

³³Erskine Childers, "Amnesia & Antagonism," *Mimeograph* (1992) 1.

The consequence of this has been a reluctance on the part of the West to try to understand some of the underlying causes of Muslim reaction to Western domination and control. That the Muslim reaction may in fact be a cry for justice, a plea for a more equitable relationship with the West is something which has not occurred to most Western political and economic elite and media commentators.

It is very unlikely that a better understanding of the Muslim world will develop in the foreseeable future. For mainstream Western society and Islam are, in one sense, moving further and further away from one another. As the West renews its faith in its "secular worldview" through what it regards as the triumph of Western democracy, it has less and less tolerance for the religious outlook on life represented by Islam. Moreover, Islam makes no distinction between religion and politics since the moral values and ideals of the religion are expected to inform one's political behaviour. The West, with its own unique history of separation of Church and State finds such an attitude unacceptable and even "medieval." In the words of a Western scholar who is generally critical of the West's treatment of Islam, "Modern, post-Enlightenment secular language and categories of thought distort understanding and judgement. The modern notion of religion as a system of personal belief makes an Islam that is comprehensive in scope, with religion integral to politics and society, "abnormal" insofar as it departs from an accepted "modern" norm, and nonsensical. Thus Islam becomes incomprehensible, irrational, extremist, threatening."³⁴

There is another reason why it is going to become even more incomprehensible in the future. In many Muslim societies, as we have hinted, Islamic resurgence is getting stronger and stronger. As more and more Muslims become more and more Islamic, they will discover that on many fundamental issues pertaining to not just politics but also economics, culture, education, health, the community, the family and the environment, Islam and the post—Enlightenment secular West are diametrically different from another. Muslims will then realise that unless they transform the secular world of the West that vision of justice embodied in the Quran will never become a reality.

³⁴John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (Oxford University Press, 1992) 198.

Besides, from whatever point of view, Islamic or non-Islamic, the present Western-led global system is so palpably unjust that any human being with even an atom of commitment to social justice would want to change it for the good of human beings everywhere. It is a system which concentrates political, military, economic, social and cultural power in the hands of a privileged few located largely in the North. It is this concentration of power which enables those who manage the global system to wage wars, occupy foreign territories, impose economic sanctions, usurp natural resources, perpetuate crippling debts, control information flows.

More specifically, within this global system, the poor South (which is the home of the vast majority of the world's Muslims) had to "pay" the rich North something like 132 billion in debt servicing in 1988. It has been estimated that 650,000 children die across the 'Third World' each year because of debt payments.³⁵ It should also be noted that "in 1960 the 20% of the world's people who live in the richest countries had 30 times the income of the poorest 20%—by 1995 82 times as much income."³⁶ What is even more distressing, "the world's 225 richest people have a combined wealth of over 1 trillion, equal to the annual income of the poorest 47% of the world's people (2.5 billion). The three richest people have assets that exceed the combined GDP of the 48 least developed countries."³⁷

These statistics are just the tip of the iceberg—and only the economic iceberg at that! If we examined the data on other structures—from resource control and technology to information and entertainment—we would be shocked that such severe iniquities have been allowed to persist for so long at the global level. For Muslims the colossal injustices of the global system constitute a clear violation of Quranic teachings. According to the distinguished Islamic scholar, the late Fazlur Rahman, "The economic disparities were most persistently criticised, because they were the most difficult to remedy and were at the heart of social discord..."³⁸ He also points

³⁵Chandra Muzaffar, *Human Rights & The New World Order* (Penang: Just World Trust, 1993) 20.

³⁶United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) *Human Development Report 1998* (New York, UNDP 1998) 29.

³⁷UNDP 1998 30.

³⁸Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Quran* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980) 38.

out that, "The Quran's goal of an ethical, egalitarian social order is announced with a severe denunciation of the economic disequilibrium and social inequalities prevalent in contemporary commercial Meccan society."³⁹

It is not just the stark inequalities within the global system which Muslims denounce. Many Muslims would argue that the system is unjust because it has caused tremendous pain and suffering to Muslims in particular. What is worse, it is a system which is neither willing nor capable of overcoming their pain and suffering. As proof, they will point to Bosnia-Herzegovina - the tens of thousands who were killed, raped, tortured - and remind us of the utter impotence of the UN and of those who manage the global system in stopping the Serbian slaughter of the Muslim population.⁴⁰ They will point to Iraq where, according to certain sources, 5,000 children are dying every month as a result of unjust economic sanctions which should have been abrogated as soon as the Iraqi army was forced out of Kuwait.⁴¹ They will point to Libya where a few hundred innocent people have died as an indirect consequence of limited sanctions imposed by the US-led UN Security Council to punish Libya for its alleged involvement in the bombing of an American and a French airliner. And they will of course point to Palestine where since 1948 thousands of Palestinians fighting to free their motherland from Zionist occupation have been brutally massacred by a regime which has the full support of the US. As they look at each of these situations, Muslims are bound to ask: Why are we suffering so much? Why are we the victims of such horrific injustices? Is it because we are Muslims?

Some Muslims would highlight certain other recent episodes to show that they are undeniably the victims of injustice, or more specifically, of bias and discrimination. As a case in point, an Islamic party which was about to win the first ever general election in Algeria in 1991 was crushed mercilessly by the military and yet the US and other Western governments and the Western media acquiesced with what amounted to an outrageous rape of democracy. In Sudan, an independent-minded Islamic government came to power through a coup in 1989 and alarm-bells have been ringing in every major Western capital since then. In Iran, the commitment to independence and autonomy, so fundamental to Islam is still as strong as ever 21 years after

³⁹Rahman 38.

⁴⁰Muzaffar chapter 9.

⁴¹See *The New Straits Times* 12 April 2000

the Islamic Revolution and the US and some of its allies are worried. It is not surprising therefore that the US continues its campaign of vilification against Iran. Though this campaign has abated somewhat as a result of the ascendancy of President Mohammad Khatami and the strengthening of the reformist trend within Iran, the country is still being projected, through the mainstream Western media, as a terrorist state spreading the ideology of fundamentalism to Muslim lands all over the world. Here again, as some Muslims reflect on each of these episodes they begin to wonder: Has the phobia of Islam within the West reached a new, more dangerous level? Has Islam become the new ideological adversary of Western "market-democracy," now that the communist system has collapsed?

If we located the pain endured and the discrimination suffered by the various Muslim states and societies mentioned in this discussion within the larger context of an unjust global system which has always exhibited bias and prejudice against Islam and the Muslims, it is only too obvious that the religion and its followers are going to be confronted by a formidable challenge in the 21st century. But it is important to remember, in this connection, that what is unfolding before our eyes is not a simple West versus Islam confrontation. There will always be Muslim states which the West will regard as its strategic allies. These states, in turn, for a variety of reasons will choose to stick to the West. At the same time, there will also be non-Muslim states which will be the targets of dominant western political and economic interests. And within this scenario, it is quite conceivable that there will be some Western states, or rather states from the North, which will be less hostile towards the *ummah*. Nonetheless, at the most fundamental ideological and political level there is no doubt at all that the centuries-old western antagonism towards Islam, often latent, sometimes blatant, is beginning to intensify again.⁴²

8. Justice: The Future Challenge

In this situation, the choice before the *ummah* is clear. If we are honest to our faith and committed to the goal of justice embodied in the Quran, we must, as we have suggested, seek to transform the world. But how will we

⁴²See Chandra Muzaffar, "Malaysia, Islam & the New World Order," Copenhagen Discussion Papers (Center for East & Southeast Asia Studies, University of Copenhagen, October 1992).

transform the world when Muslims are only 21 per cent of the world's population and are so badly divided among themselves?

Muslims must first get rid of their exclusiveness - both in their approach to Islam and their attitude towards problems facing the *ummah*. They must learn to present the essence of the Quran as a truly universal message meant for the whole of humanity.⁴³ What this demands is re-articulating with renewed vigour and vitality the central doctrine of the Quran and indeed of all divine revelations since the beginning of time, namely, the faith in the oneness of God (*Tawhid*). Let us demonstrate that *Tawhid* can emerge as the unifying worldview of the whole of humanity, of every community and every nation regardless of its religious affiliation.

As a unifying worldview, *Tawhid* contains at least five important beliefs:

- i) A belief in the common spiritual origin, mission and destiny of the whole of humanity
- ii) A belief in the organic unity of existence of the immanent and the transcendent, of life and death, of this world and the Hereafter, of man and nature, of individual and community, of man and woman, of the material and the spiritual
- iii) A belief in the human being as God's vicegerent or trustee
- iv) A belief that there are universal moral values and principles which are beneficial to the whole of humankind
- v) A belief that the human being, both at the individual and at the collective level, possesses universal rights and responsibilities, roles and relationships which help to nurture and nourish a holistic way of life.

These beliefs, as the essentials of an alternative *Tawhidic* worldview challenge the dominant secular, materialistic Western worldview. The Muslim, who is conscious of *Tawhid* as the foundation of Islam, would try to reconstruct life and society on the basis of these beliefs. In the process, as the famous philosopher Muhammad Iqbal noted decades ago, the Muslim "would

⁴³The same idea is discussed in Roger Garaudy, "The Balance Sheet of Western Philosophy," *Mimeograph* n.d., n.p.

alter the pattern of world politics." For the real "meaning and role of Islam lies in the inevitable march of history towards world unity."⁴⁴

But to convince people that world unity is possible through *Tawhid*, we must be able to show how its values and principles can help overcome the injustices that confront humanity today. A worldview which cannot demonstrate in concrete, tangible terms its ability to deliver justice has little chance of emerging as an alternative to the present global system.

In this regard, it would be worthwhile to remind ourselves that it was Islam's proven ability to ensure justice that led to its phenomenal growth from the early seventh century onwards. Within a hundred years of the Hegira it had spread eastwards to China and westwards to Spain. The expansion of Islam during that period was the most rapid ever accomplished by any faith or ideology in history. And the power behind it - if we may repeat - was justice in its most comprehensive Quranic sense.

Can the Quranic message of justice repeat its great historical feat? Can the universal values derived from the belief in the oneness of God re-emerge as guiding principles in humanity's quest for justice in the 21st century?

If the question of justice is linked to some of the severest challenges facing humankind today, we will begin to appreciate the relevance of the Quranic message of *Tawhid* to our times

First, at the most private, intimate level, isn't this message relevant to the strengthening of male-female ties, to the restoration of the family as the basic unit of a harmonious society, especially when AIDS, promiscuity, homosexuality and drugs have desecrated inter-personal relationships and destroyed the moral fabric of many a community?

Second, isn't it true that *Tawhid*, demonstrated by the practices of the Prophet and some of the great Caliphs, offers brilliant insights into ethnic relations? Isn't it because of the Quranic exhortations on unity within the human family, and the living examples of the Prophet, replicated by so many other Rulers right through Muslim history, that Islamic civilisation can proudly proclaim to the world that of all civilisations known to Man, it has the best record on inter-community harmony? And, in a world where ethnic

⁴⁴Quoted in Suroosh Irfani, "The Return of History," *Dawn* (Pakistan) Friday, 4 January 1991.

violence and racism have become more widespread and more virulent than ever before, doesn't Islam provide some real, workable solutions.⁴⁵

Third, isn't it true that the prohibition on *riba*, and the curbs upon exploitation, corruption, accumulation of wealth, extravagance, wastage and hoarding and the emphasis on *zakat*, the equitable distribution of wealth, the reduction of disparities, the utilisation of natural resources for the benefit of all, the provision of the basic needs of the poor, and the dignity of labour, serve to strengthen the sinews of a *Tawhidic* economy or economy of unity, which is precisely what the world is crying out for today, given the wide chasm that divides North and South, rich and poor, strong and weak.⁴⁶

Fourth, isn't it true that the Quranic teaching on *Tawhid* regards nature "as an integral part of man's religious sharing in his earthly life" and as "the theophany which both veils and reveals God" and for that reason preserves and protects the integrity of the environment?⁴⁷ If such an attitude towards the environment was a dominant element in the worldview of Western man in the last two centuries, wouldn't we have been spared such a colossal environmental crisis which today threatens the very survival of the human race?

Finally, if politics had, as its overriding principle, the service of humanity and not the tussle for power, it is certain that justice would have triumphed much more in both domestic and international affairs in the last few decades. And what can control the lust for power but a deep and abiding awareness of an authority higher than man, of a power greater than the human being? For if man does not submit to God, he surrenders to his own ego. It is to check that danger that the Quran, like all other revelations before it, makes *Tawhid* the single most important principle of life.

The struggle for justice in politics is the struggle to translate that principle into policy. Each and every one of us will have to participate in that struggle in our own way. And on the Day of Judgement each and everyone of us will have to testify on 'how we stood forth in justice.'⁴⁸

⁴⁵The role of Islam in reducing racial consciousness is discussed in Arnold Toynbee, *Civilisation on Trial* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948).

⁴⁶This is discussed by Taleghani in Muhammad Baqer Sadr & Ayatullah Sayyid Mahmud Taleghani, *Islamic Economics Contemporary Ulama Perspectives* especially chapter 4 (Kuala Lumpur: Iqra, 1991).

⁴⁷See Sayyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam & the Environmental Crisis," Mimeograph 29 n.d., n.p.; 28.

⁴⁸The phrase "stood forth in justice" is taken from Sura 57:25.