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Islam in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract: We are preparing to enter the twenty- first century not only physically but also intellectually. One may ask if it matters whether we enter the twentieth or twenty-first century. But if we reflect deeply we will realise that it does. We had entered the twentieth century a hundred years ago with revolutionary developments both in the world of politics as well as that of knowledge. The countries of Asia and Africa came under colonial rule during the nineteenth century and we entered the twentieth century as colonized countries. But colonial rule with all its shame, loot, exploitation and plunder also opened new horizons of knowledge. It jolted us out of the slumber of centuries. We were initiated into the world of science. Our attitudes towards everything changed forever. We also began to imbibe new values and democratic structures both in the social and political spheres. Our sense of humiliation and subjugation was compensated to some extent by entry into this new world of knowledge. We never looked back since then. However, progress was not linear. It never is.

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We are preparing to enter the twenty-first century not only physically but also intellectually. One may ask if it matters whether we enter the twentieth or twenty-first century. But if we reflect deeply we will realise that it does. We had entered the twentieth century a hundred years ago with revolutionary developments both in the world of politics as well as that of knowledge. The countries of Asia and Africa came under colonial rule during the nineteenth century and we entered the twentieth century as colonized countries.

But colonial rule with all its shame, loot, exploitation and plunder also opened new horizons of knowledge. It jolted us out of the slumber of centuries. We were initiated into the world of science. Our attitudes towards everything changed forever. We also began to imbibe new values and democratic structures both in the social and political spheres. Our sense of humiliation and subjugation was compensated to some extent by entry into this new world of knowledge. We never looked back since then. However, progress was not linear. It never is.

The developments in the world of Islam in their era were quite complex and interesting. The nineteenth century developments in the Islamic world assumed great importance because it is the

largest after the world of Christianity. There was yet another factor which invested the world of Islam with great importance. Before Western colonialism assumed a dominant position, it was the Islamic world which dominated the world. The Muslim empires were the greatest empires, dominating the whole world.

The nineteenth century, however, brought about a dramatic reversal, and the Islamic world came to be subjugated by the Western colonial powers. This created, as could be expected, highly adverse reactions among the Muslim intellectuals. But it was far from being uniform. The 'Ulma – the tribe of theologians – reacted most adversely. For it, Western systems and Western knowledge were totally alien and hence to be rejected. They naturally condemned all that was associated with the West very strongly. Another reason for their hostility to the West was that they (i.e., the 'Ulma) lost the dominant position. The Western judicial system almost sidelined them. Thus, they vehemently condemned it. But there were honorable exceptions among them too, e.g., theologians like Muhammad Abduh who lived for some time in the West (i.e., France). He welcomed Western science and rationality and issued refreshingly new fatwas.

However, the reaction of secular intellectuals was somewhat different. This was because most of them stood to benefit from colonial rule. Many of them welcomed the new changes. Also, it meant liberation from autocratic feudal rule. They were quick to imbibe democratic values. They launched struggles for liberation from colonial rule on the one hand, and from the authoritarian feudal set up, on the other. Thus, they adopted a rational approach and began to see Islam and its teachings in a new light. Sir Syed, a liberal intellectual from India, wrote a commentary on the Holy Qur'an with this new approach. Maulavi Mumtaz Ali Khan advocated sexual equality under the impact of new ideas about women and their personal dignity. Many more examples of this genre can be given. Thus, the Muslim world stepped into the twentieth century with a radically different mindset. Acceptance and rejection of rationality and scientific developments interacted in a complex social behaviour pattern. The Islamic world has gone through, like others, a continuous process of change ever since.

As stepping into the twentieth century ushered in a qualitative change in the social, cultural, political and economic life of the Islamic world, stepping into the twenty-first century will bring about even greater qualitative changes. The scientific developments on the threshold of the twentieth century were quite tantalising for those in Asia and Africa. These developments had given them a new worldview. The developments on the threshold of the Twenty-first century are no less signifi-

cant. The information highway has pushed the world to the edge of new breakthroughs. It is, however, unfortunate for the Asian and African countries that they have contributed very little to the fresh scientific developments. The West has been leading all the way.

The world of Islam is also facing a great dilemma on the eve of the twenty-first century. It is proud of professing the religion of Islam and its Islamic identity. It still cannot reconcile itself to the idea of Western superiority. For a variety of reasons not to be discussed here, the world of Islam has gone through several political and intellectual turmoils in the last hundred years but has still not stabilized. At the base of all these turmoils is the continuing Western domination. This Western domination is not only continuing but is also increasing. And this domination, to be sure, is on account of its scientific and technological superiority.

This technological domination also results in the political hegemony of the West. Thus, it remains a running sore for the Islamic world. This Western hegemony has also resulted in a deep division within the Islamic world. The Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia have allied themselves with the USA. The radical countries like Iran, Libya and Iraq are, on the other hand, in favour of a confrontation with the West. However, neither has made much headway. While the former are looked down upon by the Muslim masses as servile to the Western powers, the latter are seen as impotent though valiant in their efforts.

The USA has tried to crush radical Islamic countries ruthlessly. It did

what it could to crush the Islamic revolution in Iran though it did not succeed. Earlier, it tried to crush Libya under the leadership of Ghaddafi, again unsuccessfully. It is supporting Israel to the hilt to break the back of Palestinian radicalism. Thus, American hegemony and the helplessness of the Islamic world fuel the anti-Western feelings especially among the youth and a section of the clergy. They react to this situation rather aggressively and resort to violence. The Western media has coined a pejorative term for this from its own experiential context, i.e., fundamentalism. This term is now being used against militant Islam globally. Violence perpetrated by extremist Muslims is generally blamed on Islam. Thus, Islam has come to be projected as violent, and Muslims as 'fundamentalists' and fanatics. And to top it all, Prof. Huntington of Harvard has theorised that there is a clash between Western and Islamic civilization. It is very unfortunate that such academics also betray their ignorance by floating false theories and project a clash of political interests as 'clash of civilizations'. This has become such a deep prejudice in the West particularly in the USA, that any violent attack on any governmental or non-governmental organization is thought to have been perpetrated by militant Islamic groups. When there was a violent attack at Oklahoma by some extreme Christian sect, it was not only immediately blamed on Islamic extremists, but President Clinton himself appeared on T.V. to make a statement to that effect. However, it was later discovered that no Muslim organization was involved in it.

One has to deeply reflect as to why some Muslims are resorting to violence whenever they do so. Is it inherent in Islam or does their situation compel them to do so. It is also necessary to reflect whether only Muslims resort to violence or whether others also do so, whether it is inherent in human nature or only in Islam. Any human community or group, whatever religion it professes, pressed by circumstances, would react violently. The example of LTTE from Sri Lanka is worth considering. Many more examples can be given. It is not only in such circumstances that violence is resorted to; it is also resorted to by groups trying to maintain their supremacy such as in Bosnia. The violence perpetrated in Bosnia by Serbs defies all human logic.

This is, however, not to defend violence being perpetrated by some Muslim groups in different Muslim countries. What is happening in Algeria, Afghanistan, Egypt and other places cannot be condoned. However, a general condemnation will not do. Each situation will have to be understood in its specific context to be effectively dealt with. It is sociologically important to note that generally militant youths come from lower middle classes who suffer most due to unemployment, inflation and other forms of economic adversities. It is extreme forms of frustration which lead them to resort to violence. It is also significant to note that in most of the Islamic countries feudal authoritarianism still prevails. There is no democratic form of governance in these countries, be it Egypt, Algeria or Afghanistan. Democratic forms of protests are not available to the frustrated youth.

In Algeria, for example, much bloodshed could be avoided if the election results had been respected by the military authorities, and 'Muslim fundamentalists' who had won the elections had been given power. But that was not to be. Egypt is undergoing a serious economic crisis. Husni Mubarak is far from being democratic. There are high rates of unemployment. The ruling elite is seen to be utterly corrupt and devoid of all morality, and hence the existence of 'Islamic violence' which often takes extreme form. Violence has its own logic and becomes more brutal the more you resort to it. One can hardly expect moderation in violence.

The situation in Afghanistan has its own logic. The CIA played a prominent part in supplying arms and monetary resources to the Afghan 'mujahidin'. In their game to defeat the Soviet Union, the CIA armed these mujahidin to the hilt. And once the Soviet Union was defeated, the CIA completely disowned the mujahidin and began to depict them as terrorists. Now in Afghanistan, the Taliban rebels are being supported by Pakistan to serve its own ends. Iran, Saudi Arabia and USA, all have interests in Afghanistan because of its nearness to the Central Asian oil fields. Left to themselves, the Taliban would collapse in no time.

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, what is needed is the promotion of democracy in Islamic countries. But the dilemma is that the USA, which apparently never tires of talking about human rights, props up the most authoritarian regimes in the Islamic world. Be it the Saudi monarchy or the Gulf

Sbeikhs, all owe their existence and 'political stability' to American support. And in turn, as pointed out above, it stifles democratic protest and encourages violence. This, as part of a vicious circle, results in suppression of these groups, leading to blatant violation of human rights.

It is a known fact that it was the CIA which spurred Saddam Hussain of Iraq to invade Iran in the early eighties, resulting in a long drawn war between Iraq and Iran. The same Saddam later invaded Kuwait, and is now facing the wrath of the USA, and the USA refuses to lift sanctions to crush Saddam, causing intense suffering to the people of Iraq. Thousands of children are dying every year for want of nutrition and medicines. Thus, it will be seen that most of the problems and violent struggles in Islamic countries are due to the political interests of the USA in this region. And despite this, it is Islam which is blamed for violence. And Huntington, tongue-in-check, talks of a 'clash of Western and Islamic civilization,' and it is so readily accepted by the academia.

What are the most important issues in the Islamic countries on the eve of the twenty-first century? These are, priority-wise, 1) democracy; 2) human rights; 3) women's rights (though this can be considered as part of human rights, woman's rights in an Islamic context has its own specificity); 4) scientific outlook; 5) tolerance of other religions and thought systems, in other words freedom of conscience.

We will deal with these issues here from the Islamic perspective and see whether Islam is an obstacle in anyway

in realising these goals. The answer to this question depends on one's outlook or one's mindset rather than on Islam *per se*. The orthodox may have reservations about these goals, dubbing them 'western agenda'. Mr. Mahathir, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, even describes human rights as purely a Western concept, where the individual is at the centre, and quite unsuitable for Eastern countries, where community has central importance. The rulers of many other Islamic countries have supported this contention.

To me the crucial question is: is Islam by itself responsible for such an attitude or the ruling classes? I think it is the ruling classes, who enjoy immense privileges in the prevailing authoritarian structures in the Islamic countries, that are mainly responsible for the denial of human rights.

If Islam is responsible for the denial of individual rights because the community is at the centre, the Qur'an, which is source of moral and legal behaviour for Muslims, should state it clearly. But in the Qur'an it is the individual who is fully accountable for all good and bad deeds, and not the community or *ummah*. It is an individual who will be rewarded or punished, not the community. This concept is very central to the Qur'an. The Qur'an was revealed in a milieu in which tribal collectivism was breaking down and individualism was emerging on the social scene. In fact the Qur'an attacks the very notion of tribal collectivism and emphasises individual responsibility.

It is important to understand that the message of a scripture is always

interpreted in the given cultural and political milieu. No interpretation should be absolutised. The Torah, the Bible, the Gita and other religious scriptures have been differently interpreted by different people in their own sociocultural and political milieu. Vivekanand's and Gandhiji's understanding of Gita has been very different from that of orthodox brahmin priests over the centuries. The interpretation of the Bible by the liberation theologians of Latin America has been radically different from that of Western theologians. It is so because their social and political needs and sensibilities are very different.

The rulers and the ruling elite in the Muslim countries, particularly in the Middle East, still cling to a feudal social structure. The Saudi society is still semi-tribal. Their social and political sensibilities are very different. Their understanding of the Islamic scripture is naturally conditioned by their own needs, requirements and privileges. But the problem does not lie there. The problem is that they absolutise their understanding.

A human rights culture can evolve only in a democratic culture, and the democratic culture is conspicuous by its absence in the Islamic world today. To expect the Islamic countries to abide by human rights is to put the cart before the horse. To spread the human rights culture in these countries, it is necessary to create conditions for democratisation; and democratisation will come only with modernisation. There is an integral relationship between the two though not in a mechanical sense. The Saudi society, to be sure, has been con-

siderably modernised. Not only Jeddah, but the two holiest cities of Mecca and Madina also are highly modernised in terms of planning and city infrastructure. The very milieu of the cities of Mecca and Madina, if one ignores the mosque area, is that of a modern Western city. Also, consumerism is quite rampant.

But such changes at the base do not automatically result in superstructural changes by themselves without conscious intervention by democratic forces. The western countries led by the USA are interested in maintaining the political status quo, which is in their own interest.

Even then pressures are building up among the people although success may still be far off. The leader of the human rights movement in Saudi Arabia had to flee to the U.K. The Saudi monarchy is not only as yet unprepared for democracy, it is not even implementing the Qur'anic concept of *shura* (i.e., setting up a consultative council). Kuwait, on the other hand, has a limited democracy in which women cannot vote. Women were at the fore front of the liberation struggle at the time of the Iraqi invasion and were promised enfranchisement after the liberation, but the promise was not kept. The Kuwaiti women are still struggling for their enfranchisement.

But Islam *per se* is neither opposed to democracy nor human rights.

There are enough statements in the Qur'an which legitimise both democracy and human rights. It gives complete freedom to human beings to do good or bad, but holds him/her accountable for

what he/she does. This is the foundation of democracy and human rights. Some Muslim countries had refused to sign the Human Rights Declaration of the United Nations in 1948 (though other Muslim countries like Pakistan had readily signed it) on the grounds that it gives freedom to an individual for conversion to another religion. The leaders of these Muslim countries argued that a Muslim is not free to convert and, if he does, will be punished by death. There is no such statement in the Qur'an. It is the Muslim jurists who stipulated this, fearing sedition from the converted. The state was closely identified with Islam. The Qur'an, on the other hand, gives complete freedom ("There is no compulsion in religion" and "For you is your religion and for me is mine").

The Qur'an also lays great emphasis on social justice, human welfare, egalitarianism and condemns concentration of wealth. Though it does approve of entrepreneurship and initiative, it does not uphold the doctrine of market forces. But none of the "Islamic" countries has ever laid emphasis on these aspects of Islamic teachings. They have laid emphasis on the ritualistic aspects of the shari'ah. Distributive justice and human welfare which are quite primary in Qur'an is pushed to a secondary position or not regarded as worth implementing at all. In all "Islamic" countries there is high degree of concentration of wealth. Authoritarianism along with concentration of wealth is quite common in these countries. Nothing much seems to be changing in this regard even on the eve of the twenty-first century.

The Qur'an lays great emphasis on the dignity of the human person ("We are honoured children of Adam"). It is also the central doctrine of the charter of human rights. But this dignity can be ensured only in a democratic set up, where freedom of conscience is ensured. As already pointed out, in all those formally Islamic countries there is neither a democratic set up nor any respect for human dignity. Only Shari'ah formalism is stressed.

The Prophet of Islam had shown great respect for the rights of religious minorities and described them as '*dhimmis*' (i.e. those whose protection and well-being is the responsibility of Muslims). He is also reported to have said that He would accuse those before Allah on the Day of Judgment who did not look after the *dhimmis*. Through this *hadith* we can understand the profound concern the Prophet showed for the well-being of religious minorities. However, very few Muslim countries can boast of respecting the rights of religious minorities. In this respect Muslim countries are hardly better than other countries. Religious intolerance has become the order of the day in most of Muslim countries. As truly Islamic countries, they cannot boast of superiority over other countries. Religious tolerance has been accorded the highest priority in the Qur'anic teachings, but it is conspicuous by its absence in these countries. Most non-Muslims think Muslims to be quite intolerant. It is a matter for deep reflection for Muslims why there is such a gap between the Islamic doctrine and Muslim practice.

The record of Muslim countries in respect of women's rights is also very poor. Modern scholars have shown conclusively that the Qur'an accords equal status to both the sexes. Women have been given all those rights which men enjoy. Not only the right to property and the right to work has been given to them but also the right to education. The Prophet of Islam has made seeking of knowledge obligatory for both men and women. But what the Taliban rebels are doing in Afghanistan in the name of Islam is, to say the least, shameful. It brings disgrace not only to the Taliban but to Islam. They have not only put women in strict purdah but have also forcibly stopped them from working even as teachers and doctors. Of course what the Taliban rebels are doing reflects the backwardness and ignorance of these Afghan leaders who have had a very rigid and orthodox education in Pakistani *madrasas*.

The Qur'an makes no distinction between men and women in respect of their rights as human beings. It accords equal dignity to men and women. The Qur'an does not mention anywhere that women must cover their face; all it requires is that they dress in a dignified manner so as not to provoke sexual aggression, and this strict sexual conduct is imposed both on men as well as women. Unfortunately the medieval Islamic thinkers imposed more restrictions on women and made it appear a divine law. In fact, it was their own thinking. Thus, on the eve of the twenty-first century it is highly necessary that women's rights be given top priority in Muslim countries.

As pointed out before, in Kuwait women still cannot vote and in Saudi Arabia they cannot drive or go out unless accompanied by a close male relative. Such rules have nothing to do with Islam. Such restrictions were imposed by jurists in medieval ages in their own cultural context. These rules cannot be considered divine commandments. Women should be free to vote, free to hold political offices, free to carry on their own business and free to look after their own affairs autonomously. Women should not be debarred from any office. Early Islamic history tells us that women even took part in battles and fought with great bravery. The Qur'anic injunctions in respect of women's rights were far ahead of their time and in keeping with what is needed in this respect on the eve of the twenty-first century. However, the thinking of the ruling elites in Muslim countries is still located in the Middle Ages.

Muslim countries are developing a consumerist culture without any constraints of conscience. No Muslim country has ever hesitated to opt for liberalization and globalization. The Muslim clergy, always in the forefront curtailing women's rights in keeping with 'the shar'ah', never agitated against liberalization of economy, though it results in large scale unemployment, rising the prices and mass poverty on one hand, and spreads the consumerist culture and ostentatious living on the part of upper classes, on the other. This is in gross violation of the Prophet's pronouncements and practice. The Prophet had strongly denounced ostentatious living and even prohibited men from wearing silk and gold ornaments. The 'Ulama

in Muslim countries have become part of the ruling establishment and justify all this in the name of free enterprise and entrepreneurship. The Shari'ah has put severe restrictions on profiteering and hoarding and never allowed unrestricted market forces to operate. The Shari'ah doctrine clearly accords priority to welfare of the common people (*maslihah 'amma*) over free market forces. One is yet to hear protests from the orthodox 'ulama against free market operations, causing severe economic hardships to the common people though such free market operations are in gross violations of the Shari'ah laws.

The 'Ulma lose no time in protesting against laws which accord priority to human and women's rights, and even issue death fatwas against conscientious objectors but keep silence when Shari'ah laws are openly flouted by the ruling elite to usher in economic measures to their benefit. This shows how sincerely concerned these theological doctors are about the welfare of the common people. The Prophet was extremely sensitive to economic misery and poverty and exhorted Muslims to give away excess wealth to the needy and the poor. The wealth should not circulate among the rich, the Qu'ran says.

Thus, it is seen that it is highly necessary to re-think many issues in Islam on the eve of the twenty-first century. A radical change in Islamic thinking in keeping with the true Qur'anic spirit is highly necessary. New sensibilities must be respected and new challenges met. A new human rights culture and democratic ethos should evolve in the Islamic world.