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‘The Best of Times’ and ‘The Worst of Times’: Human Agency and Human Rights in Islamic Societies

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Introduction

The premise of this article is that there are good reasons for ‘pragmatic optimism’ about human rights in all Islamic societies, precisely because they are experiencing multiple and profound crises of unprecedented scale and magnitude. In my view, this is a source of hope for possibilities of positive transformation in all aspects of life, including the human rights field. I am not, of course, suggesting that the present multiple crises are *as such* the basis of hope or causes of transformation. Rather, my claim is that these crises are effectively challenging and transforming deeply entrenched assumptions about Islam and Muslims, undermining traditional social institutions and political structures, within Islamic societies, and their relationships to other societies. These crises are opening new opportunities for creative human agency, which is the ability of people to take control of their own lives and realize their own objectives, thereby becoming the source and cause of transformation I mean. That is, the ‘best of times’ *can* therefore materialize out of the ‘worst of times’ through the human agency of persons, acting individually, collectively or institutionally. But outcomes are contingent upon what Muslims and others make of these opportunities, hence the qualification of my optimism as pragmatic, drawing on realistic prospects in the real world to inspire appropriate action, rather than simply assuming that respect for human rights will necessarily improve as a matter of course.

In fact, it seems to me, except for natural disasters and the like which operate at a different level, nothing happens in human relationships, whether good or bad, except through the agency of some person or groups acting or failing to act. But the human agency of all of us, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, is inherently interactive with that of other people, its outcomes are contingent on what else is happening in the world around us. So, to emphasize, the role of Muslims in fully contributing to the global joint-venture of protecting and promoting human rights at home and abroad includes their collaboration with others in that regard. Since human rights are by definition universal in concept and application as the equal rights of all human beings everywhere, all societies must also take this paradigm equally seriously. The same crises that are prompting the human agency of Muslims are also relevant to other societies, thereby creating a more conducive environment for global collaboration in this field.

Before turning to elaborate on this premise and subject, I will give a brief explanation of my perceived connection between Islam and human rights that will hopefully introduce the rationale of my focus on the human agency of Muslims themselves. But first, to anticipate what may appear like a logically prior question of why this focus on Islam or Islamic societies in the first place, my answer is that because I am a Muslim scholar and advocate of human rights. Such inquiry is, in

my view, legitimate, indeed necessary, for all scholars and/or advocates of human rights, each regarding his or her own religion or ideology. The cross-cultural dialogue that can promote consensus around the concept and content of human rights as universal standards requires each of us to play our role in relation to our own societies. It is only by critically examining the status of human rights within our own religious and cultural traditions that we can demand of others to do the same regarding their traditions.¹

Moreover, one should be concerned about human rights in Islamic societies in general in view of the fact that Muslims are estimated at 19.6% of the total world population,² living in every continent and region, and constituting the clear majority of the population in 44 states, a quarter of the total membership of the United Nations. That is, they represent too large a proportion of the field to be overlooked by any systematic study or monitoring of the status of human rights around the world.

But does this assume too strong a connection between religion and human rights in general, whereby Muslims (and other believers) are expected to act as such in relation to human rights? Asserting the relevance and importance of the question does not explain *how* can one speak of 'Islam' as the religion of this large and tremendously diverse group, on the one hand, and of human rights, whether as a set of moral or ethical norms or part of international law, as a presumably secular legal system, on the other. In other words, what does my suggested relationship between Islam and human rights mean in practice?

In my view, the question can be meaningful only when it is about Muslims not Islam, Christians, not Christianity, Hindus not Hinduism, and so forth, because it would then be the same general question of how do human beings everywhere negotiate the relationships between their religious beliefs and human rights. That is, the question is always about people's understanding and practice of their religion, not the religion itself as an abstract notion, and about human rights as a living and evolving body of principles and rule, not as a theoretical concept. Whether regarding religion or human rights, reference to states, countries or international organizations like the United Nations is really to people who control the state apparatus, inhabit a country or work through international institutions. Whether institutions and organizations are religious, political or diplomatic, the question about their relationship to human rights is always about how people negotiate power, justice, and pragmatic self-interest, at home and abroad. Such negotiations always take place in specific historical contexts, and in

¹ See, generally, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, editor, *Human Rights in Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Quest for Consensus*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

² CIA, *The World Fact Book*, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/xx.html>; select World (viewed July 30 2004).

response to the particular experiences of believers and unbelievers living together. Each religion or ideology is relevant to those who believe in it, but only in the specific meaning and context of their daily lives and not in an abstract, de-contextualized sense.

This contextual framing of the issue is necessary for focusing on Muslims as human beings and societies in their internal and external relationships like all other people and societies. But since the question here is about what difference does being Muslim or Islamic make to the status of human rights in general or specific time and place, I am thus concerned here with the Islamic traditions (in the plural, to indicate its diversity) as well as with the humanity of Muslims. In other words, unless I am claiming that all religions and philosophies have the same relationship to human rights, the implication of the subject of this article is that there is something distinctive about being Muslim, as opposed to being Christian, Hindu, Marxist or Buddhist in that regard.

However, I am not suggesting that all Muslims understand and practice Islam in the exact identical way, and share the same understanding and attitudes about human rights from that perspective. That diversity testifies to the impact of contextual and historical factors in theological or legal development of the Islamic traditions, being Muslim or Islamic did not in fact have the same meaning in different places or over time. In fact, I argue that it is logically impossible for that to ever be the case. The reality and permanence of difference among all human beings, Muslims and non-Muslim alike, is expressly affirmed in the Qur'an in, for example, Chapter 10 verse 93;³ Chapter 11 verses 118-119;⁴ Chapter 32 verse 25;⁵ and Chapter 45 verse 17.⁶ That is one reason why the protection of such human rights like freedom of belief, opinion and expression, is imperative from an Islamic point of view in order to protect the rights of Muslims to be believers in their own way, without risks to life and livelihood.⁷ In other words, without the existence of the right to disbelieve, there is no possibility of any genuine belief, including religious belief.

Granted such protection of freedom of religion and belief for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, the question remains how to reconcile religious belief with

³ "...certainly thy Lord will judge between them as to the divisions amongst them on the Day of Judgment".

⁴ "If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind One People, but they will not cease to dispute..."

⁵ "Verily, thy Lord will judge between them on the Day of Judgment, in the matters wherein they differ".

⁶ "...Verily, thy Lord will judge between them on the Day of Judgment as to those matters in which they differed".

⁷ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, "Islamic Foundations of Religious Human Rights," in John Witte, Jr., and Johan D. van der Vyver, editors, *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspectives: Religious Perspectives*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1996, pp. 337-359.

human rights doctrine. In relation to Islam in particular, the fact that specific verses in the Qur'an are taken to authorize or require certain actions, regarding the rights of women or non-Muslims, for instance, does not explain why some Muslims choose to act on one understanding of such verses, while others act or fail to act on a different understanding, or have a different relationship to the text altogether. My response to this question is that such choices are the product of the human agency of believers, not the inherent, sole or eternal meaning or necessary implications of Islam as such, independent of all material conditions under which Muslims live and interact with others. From this perspective, the attitudes and practice of Muslims in these matters can change in favor of the equal human rights of women and non-Muslims through internal debate within present Islamic societies.

In practice, the manner in which Muslims are likely to interact with human rights will be conditioned by such factors as what other societies are doing about the same issues, and the orientation, motivation or objectives of various actors on all sides. For instance, Muslims' responses are likely to be affected by whether they perceive that they are required to 'prove' their allegiance to the human rights paradigm while others are not expected or required to do so. Muslims are more likely to resist commitment to these rights when they are presented as being alone in struggling with the principle, while the commitment of other cultural or religious traditions is taken for granted. Another set of factors that can influence positions has to do with power relations and institutions: how inclusive is the international law that is supposed to provide the legal framework for human rights? Does it sufficiently respect the sovereignty of Muslims, with due regard for their concerns about security and development? That is, are all peoples, including Muslims, genuine *subjects* of international law, or merely its 'object', whereby international law is defined and applied by powerful Western countries to control other peoples and exploit their resources, as happened during the colonial period? How do the realities of power relations operate within the United Nations and other international organizations? In view of these concerns about historical exclusion and present hegemony, about reciprocal treatment and mutual hostility or suspicion, how and by whom is the information about the attitudes and practice of various societies regarding human rights collected and assessed?

The Worse of Times and the Best of Times

I have equally strongly condemned, from the start, both the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the unilateral military retaliation by the United States.⁸

⁸ See, for example, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, "Upholding International Legality against Islamic and American *Jihad*," in Ken Booth and Tim Dunne, *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order*. Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 162-171.

But I also believe that the more damaging in the long term is the grossly disproportionate aggressive foreign policy of the United States ever since, especially its ‘failed colonization of Iraq’ since March 2003. That occupation, in my view, has been a colonial venture because colonialism, by definition, is the usurpation of the sovereignty of a people by military conquest without legal justification. This reckless and unaccountable invasion and occupation was neither justified by self-defense principles nor authorized by the Security Council of the United Nations. As such, the failed colonization of Iraq constitutes a fundamental repudiation of the very basis of international legality and regression to the lawlessness of ‘might is right’ of the colonial era. In other words, I am not only condemning this action as illegal and immoral, but also see it as a negation of the *possibility* of the rule of law in international relations – there is no international law when powerful nations appropriate to themselves the right to invade and occupy other countries for whatever reasons they deem fit, without even a national debate of the legality of such action. Living in the United States during the period leading up to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, and closely following the ‘decision-making process’ at the time, I am convinced that the question of the legality of invasion as a matter of international law was not even discussed.

The fact that the United States was joined by Britain, the previous colonial power of Iraq after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire by the end of the First World War, confirms the colonial nature of the occupation, rather than confer legality on an inherently illegal act. Also, the participation of other countries mainly in response to bribes or coercion by the United States only expands the membership of the criminal conspiracy. After all, it was at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 that a gang of Western powers agreed to partition African regions among themselves.⁹ By the same token of which that criminal conspiracy did not make colonialism legal by any definition of ‘international law’ that Africans can accept, the illegal and utterly counter-productive invasion of Iraq since March 2003 represents a regression to 19th century colonialism at the dawn of the 21st century.

But that was only part of the global foreign policy of the United States that seriously undermined international legality and human rights throughout the

⁹ At that ‘diplomatic conference’ of November 1884-February 1885 Western powers with so-called ‘interests in Africa’ (Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, The Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and the United States) agreed on matters of trade and transport in the Congo region, and procedures to claim new coastal areas in Africa. In effect, the conference initiated a rush to grab as much colonies as possible, until the whole continent was colonized over the following twenty years, except Ethiopia.

world. As former President Jimmy Carter of the United States described it on the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks:

We have ignored or condoned abuses in nations that support our anti-terrorism effort, while detaining American citizens as 'enemy combatants,' incarcerating them secretly and indefinitely without their being charged with any crime or having the right to legal counsel. This policy has been condemned by the federal courts, but the Justice Department seems adamant, and the issue is still in doubt. Several hundred captured Taliban soldiers remain imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay under the same circumstances, with the defense secretary declaring that they would not be released even if they were someday tried and found to be innocent. These actions are similar to those of abusive regimes that historically have been condemned by American presidents.¹⁰

At the same time, however, there were many positive developments, like the massive protests by citizens of the United States, United Kingdom and their allies like Spain and Italy, against the invasion of Iraq even before it started, and the subsequent official national inquiries that proved the fallacy of the reasons given for the war. But the most significant fact, it seems to me, is that the United States and Britain had to resort to the same United Nations they had by-passed in the rush to war in order to negotiate vacating the dubious position of being 'occupying powers' and returning sovereignty to a native Iraqi government by the end of June 2004, without achieving any of the declared objectives of the invasion. Thus, the neo-colonial ambitions of these two countries were defeated by a combination of protest by their own citizens and other European citizens, wide-spread international condemnation and armed resistance by Iraqis. It may still take a long time for peace, stability and democratic development to be realized in Iraq, but it is now categorically clear that international legality and cooperation are the only viable way forward in that regard. Colonialism and its pretentious claim to 'democratize Iraq', in this instance, have been effectively and conclusively repudiated thereby giving the whole of humanity a positive outcome from a negative initiative. But regression is possible, hence the need for even stronger emphasis on the protection of and respect for human rights to enable people everywhere to pre-empt such reckless adventures in the future and hold their perpetrators accountable.

On the other side of the coin, however, we Muslims have so far failed to respond effectively enough to the responsibilities of sovereignty. Since colonialism is initially a consequence of the weakness of colonized societies,

¹⁰ *Washington Post*, of September 5, 2002, at p. A31:

though it also contributes to that over time, its effective and sustainable termination requires enhancing the genuine sovereignty and independence of formerly colonized societies. After all, freedom is always earned, never granted, and is sustained through constant vigilance to safeguard it.

A critical part of that process in the present global context is to confront terrorism within our own societies, as it is ultimately a challenge to our human decency and responsibility for what we do, or is done on our behalf or in our name, with our approval or acquiescence. Terrorism could not exist or thrive as it does at present if we have not somehow supported or encouraged it, at least by our indifference to the broader phenomenon of political violence and its underlying causes. The degree of our individual and collective responsibility and failure vary according to our locations and what we can do in combating the culture of violence and lawless retaliation in our own societies, but each should look for his or her share, and what we can do about it. Too much of our effort is squandered in futile apologia for Islam as a religion, or our societies as oppressed and marginalized.

It is commonly said that the term 'terrorism' is too relative to be defined clearly, that one man's terrorism is another man's freedom fighter. I think that this is an apologetic fallacy: terrorism can simply be defined as the use of indiscriminate and arbitrary violence in pursuit of political objectives, without being concerned for the safety of innocent by-standers. My definition of the term does not make any distinction between so-called state and non-state or private actors. If the officials of any state use violence in this manner, they do not deserve any protection or special allowance because of their affiliation with a state. While this definition, including its application to state-actors, is theoretically clear and coherent, the difficulty may be in employing it consistently in all cases, regardless of our sympathies with the cause in which terrorist acts are committed. Moreover, the ability of perpetrators to use terrorist acts, and the willingness of the wider population to tolerate such behavior, indicates an underlying disregard for the safety and well-being of others.

Confronting terrorism would therefore include combating this underlying culture of political violence, as well as the immediate causes and consequences of the use of arbitrary and indiscriminate violence in furtherance of political ends, whatever they may be or however we may feel about them. In the final analysis, I am completely convinced that no cause is worth advancing through terrorism. For Islamic societies in particular, I believe that we must repudiate any alleged religious rationale for political violence and terrorism, which is the subject of conflicting views in the historical Islamic traditions.¹¹ As I am suggesting in

¹¹ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, "Islamic Ambivalence to Political Violence: Islamic Law and International Terrorism," *German Yearbook of International Law*, vol. 31, 1988, pp. 307-336.

relation to human rights, Muslims must exercise their human agency in choosing peaceful co-existence and mediation of conflict over the arbitrary and indiscriminate use of violence to achieve political objectives.

Despite the 'worst of times' scenario outlined above, this is also the 'best of times' for a positive engagement of international legality and peaceful co-existence. Among the many lessons and insights that can be drawn by all societies from the atrocities of September 11 is what I call our shared human vulnerability - the recognition that all human beings everywhere are vulnerable to arbitrary violence. The conceit of any of us, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, in thinking that we are not as vulnerable as everybody else is really part of the problem because it makes us less sensitive to the suffering of others. The more we appreciate our shared, universal, human vulnerability, in all its different and varied forms and manifestations, the more we can respond to the challenge of terrorism and all other forms of political violence, whoever the perpetrator happens to be, as well as to poverty, disease and other evils in general. The same insight of shared human vulnerability also emphasizes the urgency of protecting the human rights of all people, everywhere, as any of us can be a victim or perpetrator of violations.

But this multifaceted, universally shared vulnerability of human beings everywhere can be really counter-productive when it is manipulated to grant governments excessive powers 'to protect us,' as has happened in the United States with the so-called Patriot Act of 2001. It is not even possible to know or predict how many people will be affected by official abuse of power under this pretext because of the secrecy and lack of accountability for these powers in the name of combating terrorism. What is ironic is that limitations of human resources and time constraints are bound to undermine the efficacy of this approach to national security, however extensive and powerful the apparatus may have become. Sooner or later, normal human complacency will creep in, opening new possibilities for terrorists to strike again. The contradictory and self-defeating nature of this illusion of security, without any regard to the requirements of justice, are so obvious that it is hard to believe that intelligent, rational people are doing this for the alleged declared objectives.

Another lesson of September 11 in my view is the futility of lawless unilateral retaliation at the presumed source of harm, without addressing the underlying causes that prompt the perpetrators, or which they take as justifying their actions, and persuade others to condone or facilitate violence in any given situation. It is true that a hardcore group of religious/ideological extremists like those who perpetrated the terrorist attacks of September 11, or national chauvinists like those who are driving the militaristic American response, will probably harbor aggressive designs, whatever others may do or fail to do. But it is also clear that such hardcore elements cannot act on their aggressive designs

without the support, or at least acquiescence, of a much larger number of people who can be persuaded to withhold their support and cooperation with the hardcore few, if the grievances or concerns of that wider constituency are addressed. Neither the terrorist attacks nor the American retaliation could have happened without the support of a wider constituency on each side, a much wider circle of complicity for having justified, condoned or facilitated those acts of violence. This complicity includes justifying or condoning the specific action in question, permitting the continuation of injustices that seem to motivate the actors, or failing to ensure the establishment of a credible system of accountability according to due process of the law.

Any appropriate response to violence or other danger must therefore be firmly grounded in a clear and profound appreciation of the multifaceted, universally shared vulnerability of all human beings everywhere, instead of the illusion that any of us can escape it by fortifications, pre-emptive or retaliatory violence, accumulation of wealth or exploitation of others. This point is dramatically made by the crude methods in which the atrocities of September 11 were perpetrated in the heartland of the most powerful and prosperous nation in the world today. An appreciation of the full range of our shared vulnerability as human beings everywhere will indicate different modes of response to various sources of violence and danger. But the most effective and sustainable response must include addressing the underlying grievances that drive people to the desperation of terrorism, because some will always resort to that response as long as the injustice persists.

The preceding remarks emphasize both the opportunities and risks of the present global environment, and particularly that we must do our part in order to be able to demand the same of others. It is not possible to elaborate further on these complex issues here, but my underlying premise of pragmatic optimism is that, given the realities of the world as it is, what can each one of us do to improve on the situation. Without in the least being naïve or simplistic about those realities, the question for me is how can we all take our own initiatives and pursue our own agenda, instead of helplessly lamenting injustice, poverty or human rights violations. I will now turn to further reflections about Islam and human rights in particular in light of the earlier clarification of the relevance and importance of this connection today.

Islam and Human Rights

To be clear on the point, in raising this question I am not suggesting that Islam is either fully supportive or inherently antagonistic to human rights. Rather, as indicated earlier, the relationship is open to engagement and transformation precisely because it is contingent on an interactive web of internal and external factors and forces. Like other major religious and cultural traditions, Islam

provides a basis for upholding human rights and dignity through its own account of what it means to be human. But these dimensions of the Islamic traditions (in the plural) should be seen as open to critical reflection and reformulation among the believers themselves, because of the inherent and permanent diversity of the tradition itself. There are not only similarities as well as variations in perceptions and practices of human rights and dignity among Muslims and Islamic societies, but also possibilities of change in relevant attitudes and practices. By the same token, however, outcomes can either be positive or negative from a human rights perspective.

The human rights framework is commonly perceived to be a universal secular vision of what it means to be human, and a call for the urgency and necessity of protecting the innate rights of all human beings everywhere in the world. The mistaken view that this perception of human rights has nothing to do with the Islamic traditions, if not actually being contrary to them, is largely due to the fact that the present articulation of the human rights framework arose out of the experiences of Western societies. To suggest that human rights are 'Western' is a contradiction in terms, because that means they cannot be universal, which is their essential quality as the equal rights of all human beings. That is, these rights have to belong to all cultural and religious, including Islamic, traditions if they are to be human rights at all. Moreover, these rights are needed by Muslims for protection against abuses and excesses of the powers of the state that gave rise to Western articulations of these rights. Since the same model of European territorial-state has become 'universalized' through colonialism, and remains the dominant form of political organization throughout the world, the human rights framework that has evolved in response to that reality is now equally relevant everywhere.

However, while I believe that this view 'ought' to be generally accepted and acted upon as one of the main foundations of the universality of human rights, it is also clear that this is not the case at present. A common objection in my experience is how can the human rights framework claim to be universally valid and applicable without taking into account the permanent and profound cultural and religious diversity of human societies around the world. But to me the question is how can we Muslims, together with all other societies, make this happen, instead of complaining that it is not done by others for us. My own approach would therefore emphasize a proactive *process* for promoting consensus around the concept and content of human rights through the human agency of all actors, rather than expect it to emerge on its own. In relation to the subject of this article in particular, the process also includes 'negotiating' the complex and contingent relationship between Islam and human rights, as it plays out in each social context. I have attempted to elaborate a specific methodology from an Islamic perspective, especially in *Toward an Islamic Reformation* (1990), but

would also consider any alternative approach that can effectively address the following parameters of that process of negotiation.

First, some elements of the historical Islamic traditions, like other major religious traditions, are not readily consistent with the key human rights principle of non-discrimination, especially regarding the rights of women and non-Muslims. This difficulty is compounded by the common perception that these aspects of what is known as *Shari`ah* are inviolable because they are divinely ordained. This apparent incompatibility is emphasized by a perception of the human rights framework as necessarily and exclusively based on a secular universal vision of humanity.

At the same time, this tension must be mediated because it is critical for the binding force and practical efficacy of human rights everywhere, and not only in Islamic societies, as noted earlier. With Muslims constituting a fifth of the total world population, excluding them from the universal validity and application of human rights would really undermine them everywhere. Since there is no reliable international mechanism for enforcing human rights standards against the will of national governments, human rights advocates need to motivate the general populations of territorial states to pressure their own government to ratify and enforce human rights treaties. The way this is done in various social, cultural and religious settings is relevant to what can happen in other societies.

In Islamic societies, efforts to legitimize and effectuate human rights through social movements need to include effective responses to counter arguments that governments are likely to use in resisting such pressures which limit and constrain their own powers. The allegation that human rights are an anti-Islamic Western imposition is a clear example of this sort of pretext, used by ruling elite to escape responsibility for violating the rights of Muslims as well as non-Muslims. In other words, to mobilize public opinion and motivate civil society organizations in their own societies, human rights scholars and advocates in Islamic societies must understand how to transform the relationship between these rights and local cultures, political context, economic factors, and so forth. This process calls for the sort of questioning of deeply entrenched assumptions about Islam and Muslims, and challenging of social institutions and uprooting of political structures that is now facilitated by the current global environment as suggested at the beginning of this article.

For instance, I believe that the dichotomy between the religious and secular is often exaggerated to suggest an inherent incompatibility of the two, though they are in fact interdependent. For example, Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the literal and final word of God, and *Sunnah* (traditions of the Prophet) is the second divinely inspired source of Islam. But both sources have no meaning and relevance in the daily lives of believers and their communities except through human understanding and behavior. The Qur'an was revealed in

Arabic, which is a human language that evolved in its own specific historical context, and many verses of the Qur'an were addressing specific situations in the daily lives of early Muslims at that time (610 to 632 CE) in their local context of western Arabia. *Sunnah* also had to respond to the immediate concerns arising in that context, in addition to broader matters. Thus, human agency was integral to the process of revelation, interpretation and daily practice from the very beginning of Islam, initially of the Prophet, and subsequently generations of Muslims who adhered to the Qur'an and *Sunnah* according to their own understanding in their respective historical context and daily experiences.

It is therefore clear that a sharp distinction between the religious and secular is misleading. Religious precepts necessarily respond to the secular concerns, and have practical relevance only through their acceptance and application by the believers in their daily lives. In other words, religious doctrine is necessarily implicated in the secular, and the secular is perceived by believers to be regulated by religious doctrine. This does not mean that there is no transcendental dimension to Islam for believers. Rather, it is simply to say that the practical relevance and utility of the social order of Islam are contingent upon human understanding and practice, which testifies to its ability to provide for the practical needs of its adherents. This point is critical for the theological basis of the relationship between Islam and human rights today.

In conclusion, these are the best of times and the worst of times for Muslims, with infinite possibilities in either direction, dependent on the way we all use or abuse our human agency. These are the worst of times as we continue to be the object of imperial aggression and neo-colonization, suffering with other peoples around the world the worst violations of our individual and collective human rights at the hands of our own governments and through the excesses of global capitalism. They are also the best of times because the present crises enable us to transcend the limitations of our traditional assumptions about Islam and Muslims, to challenge and transform our social and political institutions. The possibilities of human agency are infinite, and the rest is up to all of us, everywhere, and whatever our religious, ideological and/cultural affiliations may be.