

Understanding Islam: Perils and Prospects

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Part I

What Islam is Not

Mimetic Warfare and the Perils of Liberal Islam

Modernist and secularist Muslims have launched an attack against traditionalist Islam that is perverting popular perceptions and U.S. policies toward Islam and Muslims in America and throughout the world. Their strategy is to wage undercover mimetic warfare, a form of psy-ops or psychological operations, by manipulating words or phrases as mimes or symbols in order subliminally to subvert or control the thought of the opponent, or to sway public opinion by distorting the opponent's position.

A guerrilla war has been raging among both Muslims and non-Muslims and between the two groups over whether liberal Muslims are the good guys and conservative Muslims are the bad guys, or vice versa. Is there such a thing as a moderate, progressive, or liberal Islam? Or is the very concept of such a hyphenated Islam subversive of everything Islamic?

Nobody should object to being defined as a moderate, unless this is a codeword for "progressive" or "liberal" by secularist standards. Similarly, no one should object to be considered a conservative as long as this is a codeword for "traditionalist" in the sense of respecting the

centuries of *ijtihad* or critical thought by the greatest minds in the world dedicated to preserving the purity of divine revelation.

The most important criterion for dealing with all the loaded terminology that infects discussion by or about Muslims is whether the writers are adopting the American modernist baggage of philosophical relativism. Modernism, in all of its various disguises, is the worship of the secular world by denying the purposefulness and sacredness of what Allah has created. It is the attempt to de-sacralize reality. Such modernism is dangerous not only because it constitutes an attack on Islam but because it denies the very purpose of America's founding and the purpose of all divine revelation throughout the ages.

The most erudite presentation I have encountered of the modernist mentality is the lead article, entitled "What is Liberal Islam: the Sources of Enlightened Muslim Thought," by Abdou Filali-Ansary in the April 2003 issue of the prestigious *Journal of Democracy*. This was delivered as the keynote address on September 25th, 2002, at a conference on "Liberal Islam," sponsored by the influential think-tank, The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and by the International Forum for Democratic Studies.

This was part of a ground-surge of interest in the stated U.S. Administration's goal to "democratize" the world on behalf of "freedom." An insider-leader of this movement is the new chief drafter of the American-sponsored, new Iraqi constitution, Noah Feldman, now famous for his book *After Jihad: America and the Struggle for Islamic Democracy*. As a renowned Jewish scholar specializing on Islamic law, his self-appointed mission is to bring a "secular, moderate position" responding to "an appetite for institutions that respect religion but do not see it as the answer to society's problems." Enough said.

Perhaps the most extremist among the self-styled Muslim liberals is Pervez Hoodbhoy, a professor of physics at the Quaid-e-Azam

University in Pakistan and author of the book, straight out of 19th-century British imperialism, entitled *Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality*. As explained in my article, “How Muslims are Losing their Way,” published in the January-February, 2003, issue of *The American Muslim* (www.theamericanmuslim.org), Dr. Hoodbhoy makes the grievous error of religious relativism when he implies that any religion consists of its adherents’ actions, and that therefore Islam does not exist. He writes, referring to 9/11: “For nearly four months now, leaders of the Muslim community in the United States, and even President Bush, have routinely asserted that Islam is a religion of peace that was hijacked by fanatics on September 11th. These two assertions are simply untrue. First, Islam – like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or any other religion is not about peace. Nor is it about war. Every religion is about absolute belief in its own superiority and the divine right to impose its version of truth upon others. ... There is no ‘true Islam’.”

Another more moderate extremist says the same thing with a twist. In his article, “Islam: Faith or Religion,” in the October 2002 issue of *The Minaret*, one of Islam’s leading young intellectuals, Dr. Muhammad Alibhai, demonizes religion by distinguishing it from faith. He praises the nature of faith as internal and subjective. He says that it is linked therefore to thought, emotion, conscience, motivation, and the inherent dignity of the person. In contrast, he defines religion as a collective project that seeks to regulate both thought and action. He asserts that religion treats opinions and beliefs as though they were conduct or actions and attempts to control them by imposing collectively subjective norms of conformity.

As suggested in my subsequent critique, entitled “How Modern Muslims are Going Astray,” in the *Minaret* issue of 2003: “This dichotomy seems to compare the best of faith with the worst of religion and therefore to declare them mutually incompatible. This is the equivalent of creating two straw men, the good guy and the bad guy, in

order to launch a mimetic war with a preordained outcome. ... Separating private from public life is grossly un-Islamic, as well as un-American, because it inevitably causes individual persons and the entire community to become corrupt and oppressive.”

This penchant for ideological predestination or loading the dice was well described on July 1, 2003, by Abdul-Malik al-Irlandee (from Ireland) in a riposte to an otherwise well thought-out contribution by the civil rights lawyer, Kamran, in the listserve of the National Association of Muslim Lawyers (NamNet@yahoo.com). In reference to their discussion of American policy on democratizing Iraq, the Irish lawyer writes: “One is left with the impression that moderates are basically those who come to the 'right' conclusions and conservatives are those who come to 'wrong' conclusions. Most disturbingly, in the minds of most non-Muslim readers of the article and perhaps in your own and that of other so-called 'progressive' Muslims, it is most likely assumed that conservatives are those who take the agreed upon sacred sources (the Qur'an and Sunnah) literally and as understood by the best and most knowledgeable Muslims, while the moderates are those who only take vague moral values which can then be magically transformed to match with the legal and ethical worldview of any 'progressive person' whether they even believe in Allah (*swt*) and the hereafter or not.”

Dr. Ansary seems to agree with Dr. Hoodbhoy and Dr. Muhammad Alibhai and to fit the picture painted by Abdul-Malik al-Irlandee, but on a more philosophical plane. As a self-described Muslim moderate or modernizing liberal, Dr. Ansary divides Muslims into two groups, the first being "liberal," "reformist," or "modernizing," and the second being "traditional," "fundamentalist," and "radical." The criterion he uses for distinguishing the two is epistemology or the approach to knowledge.

From my experience with self-proclaimed liberal Muslims, or at least with the extremists among them, the liberal group questions the

accessibility or even the existence of absolute truth. Speakers at well-known Muslim conferences on democracy have represented this position by insisting that Muslims stop talking about the "sovereignty of God" or even of *tawhid* as the coherence of diversity in the universe deriving from the Oneness of God. The basic tenet of the liberal Muslim is that the human mind creates truth and that it does not exist independently of man.

In American jurisprudence, this is known as positivism, which denies the possibility of moral constraints on the content of law. This epitome of secular fundamentalism, which has destroyed every civilization in which it has taken root, has reigned supreme for more than a century in America thanks in part to the leadership of Harvard Law School, the main building of which is named after America's greatest utilitarian guru, John Austin. We see it now in the neo-conservative movement of the past decade in foreign policy.

This liberal or modernizing mindset contrasts, according to Dr. Ansary's deprecatory account, with the traditional or fundamentalist mindset which is mired in what he calls "the pre-modern epistemology." This, he says, is not so much literalist, which is the most common American definition of fundamentalism, as it is absolutist in the sense of its insistence that the purpose of the human mind is to seek absolute truth, whether through divine revelation (*wahy*) or natural law (the *sunnatu Allahi*). He quite rightly condemns those who insist that they possess this absolute truth. Such radical extremism, which has become especially common during the past century, would deny the purpose of the search for knowledge required in the *maqsud* known as *haqq al 'ilm* in the *maqasid al shari'ah* developed over the centuries through the process of *istislah*.

Liberal Islam, in its oxymoranic manifestation, denies the validity of the search for truth. This is the hallmark of relativism. It is the basis of the concept that all religions are equal, and that their essential equality

consists in their inability to know truth or to apply what they purport to know in practical action (as in Iraq). This is almost the same as saying that religion, all religion, is irrelevant at best, and that the modern Muslim must advance beyond the pre-modern mindset into the world of militant secularism. In effect, this argument is a call for secular fundamentalism as the permanent enemy of traditional wisdom and a call for a permanent clash of civilizations until so-called enlightened Islam can be assimilated into the victory of Pax America.

Dr. Ansary asserts on page 26 that, "The sacred texts do not provide a comprehensive and systematic body of laws." His conclusion is that modern Muslims must "keep their distance from any ideological attitude in which the development of systematic Muslim legal thought is understood as a simple explication of an 'archetype' or 'blueprint' itself deemed to be co-eternal with the last message of God."

This conclusion can be justified in response to ideological extremists who exploit a manmade blueprint and claim that it comes from God. The danger of this modernist attitude, however, is that it may reduce Islamic law to nothing but situational ethics in addressing practical answers to current problems. He declares on page 27 that Islamic law "belongs therefore to the realm of facts that can be 'situated,' not to the realm of principles and norms as such." His concept of the *shari'ah* or Islamic law resembles the positivist law that is currently causing the perversion and collapse of everything that makes up the traditionalist vision of America as a moral leader of the world.

By denying the essence of classical American thought and the identical essence of classical Islamic thought the modernist advocates of "liberal Islam" or "progressive Islam" are opposing the revival of the best of Islam and the best of America. They are laying the groundwork for an ideological Armageddon between the forces of a newly paganized America and the rest of the world, which can result only in the worldwide collapse of all civilization.

Part II

What Islam Is

The Legacy of the Prophet and the Prospects for Human Rights

The Legacy of Love, Truth, and Justice

The legacy of the Prophet Muhammad is the revival of the essence of all religion. He revitalized personal awareness and loving awe of God, which Muslims call *taqwa*, and a resulting commitment to truth and justice. These two pillars of Islam and of every world religion reinforce each other. The neglect of either one can result in extremism. Without love and mercy, the pursuit of justice can result in cruelty and oppression. And without the love of justice, one's love of God is powerless in the world.

The two basic philosophical principles of Islam are known as *tawhid* and *mizan*. *Tawhid* refers to the concept that everything in the universe is interrelated with everything else in a coherent whole, and that this unity is the inevitable result of the Oneness of the Ultimate, the Creator of all, whom the Muslims refer to as Allah and the Christians call God.

The second philosophical principle, known as *mizan*, comes from the first one. *Mizan* means balance. Since God created the universe as a balanced whole, a task of every human is to help perfect this balance by avoiding extremism. When one over-emphasizes any one moral virtue or goal in life, one automatically becomes an extremist by neglecting the others.

A framework for maintaining balance in life is provided by Islamic law and is its very purpose. This framework is a hierarchical system of human responsibilities and rights. For example, one has a responsibility to defend one's family and community, and one has an equal responsibility to respect individual human life. Those who kill innocents in the alleged defense of their community clearly have lost balance. This violates the design of Allah. It is extremist and therefore immoral.

The indignities of miserable poverty and cruel oppression can produce alienation, desperation, and extremism. Unfortunately, Muslims have suffered more than their share of both these causes and effects in the world, but this is no excuse for the resulting extremism. Regardless of how understandable it might be, extremism and the resulting violence is immoral.

Extremism does not have to result from indignities, but it will unless there is a source and framework for hope. The source must be spiritual, based on *taqwa*. The framework must be a coherent body of human responsibilities and rights, based on a mutually reinforcing combination of divine guidance through revelation, *wahy*, and natural law, which Muslims call the *sunnatu Allahi* or signs of divine order in the universe. Without this intellectual framework, people wander in an intellectual void, and this, in turn, can produce a spiritual malaise.

Over the long run, the most productive initiative by the still largely silent majority of Muslims in marginalizing Muslim extremists is to fill the intellectual and spiritual void that serves as an ocean in which the extremists can swim. This initiative can provide the favorable environment needed for Muslims to ally with like-minded Christians and Jews in order to show that classical Islam and classical America are similar, even though many people do not understand or live up to the ideals common to both.

Teaching and emphasizing that the founders of America and the great scholars of Islam shared the same vision is the best way to convince the extremists that their confrontational approach to the “other” is not necessary. Recognizing this commonality of purpose in life is the only way to overcome the threat mentality of those who are obsessed with conspiracy theories and think only about their own survival. Promoting an opportunity mentality of hope is the only way to convince the extremists that only those can truly prosper over the long run who can transcend their own self-centered interests in order to join with those who are no longer merely the “other” but now are members of a single pluralist community.

The Framework of Justice

Justice is another word for the Will or Design of God. It is also considered to be another term for the body of Islamic normative law. These norms or general principles, according to Islamic thought, provide the intellectual framework to understand and address all of reality.

For the scholar, the best short introduction to this framework of Islamic thought may be found in the monograph, “*Usul al Fiqh al Islami: Source Methodology in Islamic Jurisprudence*,” by Shaykh Taha Jabir al ‘Alwani, who for more than fifteen years has been President of the Fiqh Council of North America, a member of the OIC Islamic Fiqh Academy in Jeddah, and a founding member of the Council of the Muslim World League in Makkah. This monograph, published by The International Institute of Islamic Thought in Herndon, Virginia, in 1990 is a summation of his doctoral dissertation in 1972 at Al Azhar University in Egypt.

In order to fill the intellectual void both in the Muslim global community and in the minds of some brain-washed Muslim intellectuals, Muslims need to emphasize the universal Islamic principles, known as the *maqasid al shari’ah*, which spell out precisely the human rights that some

skeptics have asserted do not exist in Islam. These *maqasid*, following the methodology instituted by the Prophet Muhammad and perfected in the architectonics pioneered six centuries ago by the master of the art, Al-Shatibi, are considered to consist of seven responsibilities, the practice of which actualize the corresponding human rights.

The first one, known as *haqq al din*, provides the framework for the next six in the form of respect for a transcendent source of truth to guide human thought and action. God instructs us in the Qur'an, *wa tamaat kalimatu Rabika sidqan wa 'adlan*, "and the word of your Lord is perfected in truth and justice." Recognition of this absolute source of truth and of the responsibility to apply it in practice are needed to counter the temptations toward relativism and the resulting chaos, injustice, and tyranny that may result from de-sacralization of public life.

Each of these seven universal principles is essential to understand the next and succeeding ones. The first three operational principles, necessary to sustain existence, begin with *haqq al nafs* or *haqq al ruh*, which is the duty to respect the human person. The *ruh* or spirit of every person was created by God before or outside of the creation of the physical universe, is constantly in the presence of God, and, according to the Prophet Muhammad, *salla Allahu 'alayhi wa salam*, is made in the image of God. This is the basis of the intimate relationship between God and the human person as expressed in the Qur'anic *ayah*, "We are closer to him than is his own jugular vein."

This is also the basis of the prayer offered by the Prophet and by countless generations of Muslims for more than a thousand years: *Allahumma, inna asaluka hubbaka wa hubba man yuhibbuka wa hubba kulli 'amali yuqaribuni ila hubika*, "O Allah! I ask You for Your love and for the love of those who love You. Grant that I may love every action that will bring me closer to Your love."

At the secondary level of this principle, known as *hajjiyat* or requirements, lies the duty to respect life, *haqq al haya*. This provides guidelines in the third-order *tahsinniyat* for what in modern parlance is called the doctrine of just war.

The next principle, *haqq al nasl*, is the duty to respect the nuclear family and the community at every level all the way to the community of humankind as an important expression of the person. This principle teaches that the sovereignty of the person, subject to the ultimate sovereignty of God, comes prior to and is superior to any alleged sovereignty of the secular invention known as the State.

This principle teaches also that a community at the level of the nation, which shares a common sense of the past, common values in the present, and common hopes for the future, such as the Palestinians, Kurds, Chechens, Kashmiris, the Uighur in China, and the Anzanians in the Sudan, has legal existence and therefore legal rights in international law. This is the opposite of the Western international law created by past empires, which is based on the simple principle of “might makes right.”

The third principle is *haqq al mal*, which is the duty to respect the rights of private property in the means of production. This requires respect for institutions that broaden access to capital ownership as a universal human right and as an essential means to sustain respect for the human person and human community. This principle requires the perfection of existing institutions, especially those that maintain a monopoly of access to credit, in order to remove the barriers to universal property ownership so that wealth will be distributed through the production process rather than by stealing from the rich by forced redistribution to the poor. Such redistribution can never have more than a marginal effect in reducing the gap between the inordinately rich and the miserably poor, because the owners in a defective financial system need not and never will give up their economic and political power.

The next three universal principles in Islamic law concern primarily what we might call the quality of life. The first is *haqq al hurriya*, which requires respect for self-determination of both persons and communities through political freedom, including the concept that economic democracy is a precondition for the political democracy of representative government.

The secondary principles required to give meaning to the parent principle and carry it out in practice are *khilafa*, the ultimate responsibility of both the ruled and the ruler to God; *shura*, the responsiveness of the rulers to the ruled, which must be institutionalized in order to be meaningful; *ijma*, the duty of the opinion leaders to reach consensus on specific policy issues in order to participate in the process of *shura*; and an independent judiciary.

The second of these last three *maqasid* is *haqq al karama* or respect for human dignity. The two most important *hajjiyat* for individual human dignity are religious freedom and gender equity. In traditional Islamic thought, freedom and equality are not ultimate ends but essential means to pursue the higher purposes inherent in the divine design of the Creator for every person.

The last universal or essential purpose at the root of Islamic jurisprudence, which can be sustained only by observance of the first six principles and also is essential to each of them, is *haqq al 'ilm* or respect for knowledge. Its second-order principles are freedom of thought, press, and assembly so that all persons can fulfill their purpose to seek knowledge wherever they can find it.

This framework for human rights is at the very core of Islam as a religion. Fortunately, this paradigm of law in its broadest sense of moral theology is now being revived by what still is a minority of courageous Muslims determined to fill the intellectual gap that has weakened the Muslim *umma* for more than six hundred years, so that a spiritual renaissance in all faiths can transform the world.