

The Cultural Problems of the Ummah: The Responsibility of the Muslim Intellectuals

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Pen is a weapon when the need calls for laying the foundation of a new culture.

- Mao Tse-Tung

The Muslim ummah today is passing through the most critical period of its history. They are now divided into some fifty or more nation-states and the Super Empire is planning to divide them further. Muslims are humiliated. They are deceived, defeated, massacred, and proselytized. They are victims of oppression, aggression and injustice. The Muslim community now is being identified and stereotyped as bloodthirsty terrorists, fundamentalists and uncivilized. Muslims are being exploited and their resources plundered. Economically they are backward, largely depending on western technology. Muslims are now being identified as sick man of the world. They still depend on western armament to defend their borders. The large numbers of the members of the ummah are illiterate.

How did a people who once led the world in science, technology, and military skill, and were trustees of God's ultimate revelation, fall into such an abject state? The refusal to critically analyze the massive legacy of intellectual scholarships and customs that have been passed down is the crux of the problem. Muslims have intellectually paralyzed themselves by making the great body of thought they inherited into a kind of intellectual hoard, a safe haven of ideas that must not be disturbed and where necessary are walled out to protect from critical investigation and analysis. The greatest crisis affecting Muslims today is a crisis of thought, a refusal to think critically about what Islam really demands. The rejection of reason in favor of traditions and conventions has incapacitated the community. Muslims must therefore critically examine, review and evaluate conventional Muslim thought and practices.

The question is: What is the most important reason that is responsible for the current state of affairs of the Muslim World. There may be many reasons, but what are the major reasons? What are the reasons we should address on a priority basis? Here in this article, I shall concentrate on some of the key reasons affecting the destiny of the Muslim ummah.

One of the important problems for the current state of affairs of the Muslim community is its failure in identifying the core cultural issues and giving undue emphasis on the marginal issues.

It is important that Muslims always re-examine their customs and traditions to distinguish those that are and are not fundamental to religion. Those opinions and practices which are considered non-essential and injurious for the health of the community and progress of Islam should and must be given up. Accommodations should be made for those who choose not to follow a particular practice when such a practice is within permissible limits. We should not and must not unnecessarily create cultural complexity by branding optional practices as obligatory, for that could become unnecessary burden. We must not surrender to rules and beliefs only vaguely linked to Islam.

Muslims must also be careful not to insist on the fundamentality of something that may not be so, for when this is done, it creates unnecessary barrier and the truth becomes obscure. Muslims should not neglect a religious fundamental, at the same time they should be on guard not to drive people from the religion by insisting something that is not required by Islam as Islamic. This is most important for when we claim that something is demanded by the religion without clear proof, we are in fact associating with God that which is not of God, and in truth we invent a lie against God.

Al Quran states: Say: Have you considered what provision God has sent down for you, and how you made some of it haram (unlawful) and halal (lawful)? Say: Has God indeed permitted you, or do you *invent a lie concerning God?* [10: 59].

In another verse Al Quran states: And say not, for any false thing your tongues put forth: "This is halal (lawful) and this is haram (unlawful)," so that you *invent a lie against God* [16: 116].

Another important problem affecting the destiny of the ummah is its failure in understanding what is bidah (innovation) and what is not. In this connection eminent Islamic scholar Prof. Dr. Yusuf Al Qaradawi, Dean of the Faculty of Shariah and Islamic Studies, Qatar University pointed out: "It is wrong to think that Islam stands against anything new or invented classifying it under the name of bidah. In fact, bidah is what is invented in matters of a purely religious nature, such as creed and worship and their branches; while the changing matters of life such as norms, traditions, customs and administrative, social, cultural and political practices are not to be regarded at all as bidah" [Prof. Dr. Yusuf Al Qaradawi, *Priorities of the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase*, Awakening Publications, U. K., 2000, pp158-159].

The tendency on the part of some Muslims to equate religion with local culture cause adopt behaviors and views that are not religiously necessary and in some cases alien to the ever lasting principles of Islam. I can briefly narrate here the story of an Afghan couple who went to Saudi Arabia to perform hajj. When the Jeddah Immigration Officials as a matter of identifying the passport holder asked the lady to uncover her face covered by nikab, her husband objected to it and then followed the instruction saying in his country if someone would have asked his wife for such compliance, such officials would have to cross a sword before demanding such

compliance, but he would follow Immigration Officials instruction since he has come to perform hajj. Such attitudes and practices do not represent Islam but peculiar practices of Afghan tribal culture. What is however needed is the real application of the principles of Islam as against local customs and ancestral traditions and traditional prejudice.

Another important problem of the Muslim community is its failure to assimilate positive local cultural elements. The prevailing cultural mentality has created obstacles to progress of the ummah. When Muslims were superpowers as during Umayyad and Abbasid periods, they had a pluralistic attitude and always ready to accept new cultural elements. Western colonization has created in the mind of the ummah a defeated mentality. They now doubt everything new. This has created barriers to social transformation and change.

Arabs and Muslim culture and tradition are deeply intertwined. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) was an Arab. The Quran, was revealed to him in Arabic, the only language that he and the people surrounding him knew. In Prophet Muhammad's day, Arabic language was restricted to the Arabian Peninsula, and the term Arab referred to a person who lived there. But as the united tribes of the Arabian Peninsula conquered Syria, the Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq to create the Muslim East, and North Africa and Spain to form the Muslim West, they brought the Arabic language and Islam with them. Most of the people in these countries who adopted Islam also adopted Arabic. While there were a few exceptions, like the Berbers in Morocco and Algeria, the other peoples of the region took Arabic names, married Arabs, and, in short, became what is commonly identified as Arab. By contrast, when Islam spread beyond the boundaries of North Africa and Iraq, people became Muslims without adopting Arab language and identity. Persia became Muslim but preserved its language, literature, culture and tradition. Turkic peoples kept their lifestyle, culture and languages; Afghan theirs. Sub-Saharan Africans who became Muslims also typically maintained their own languages and traditions. Further in Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh, and as far away as the Philippines, Islam reached many people without transforming them into Arabs either.

When a Muslim society moves forward and makes progress, it absorb, it assimilates new elements which is not in conflict with the core principles of Islam and Muslim identity. When the society declines, it excludes, creates walls and barriers and rejects new elements.

Muslims should not uphold or create cultural barriers where none exist. This is one of the most important implications of the Quran's prohibition of associating man made constructs with God, for when this is done truth is covered and religious thought and practice are unnecessarily constrained.

Another most important problem confronting the ummah is the prevailing mentality that the new generation has nothing to add to what the predecessors, the earlier

generations in the golden era have done, old is gold. Whereas in the Farewell Pilgrimage Prophet Muhammad said: “All those who listen to me shall pass on my words to others and those to others again; and *may the last ones understand my words better than those who listen to me directly*” [Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan, Muhammad: Seal of the Prophets, Dhaka, Bangladesh, September 2002, p 345]. Therefore there is no question of undermining the intellectual competence of the current generation.

Islam is the solution is a unifying slogan, it, nonetheless, remains an empty slogan. Muslims however need to work intelligently, constructively and cooperatively to bring about reform in their countries and the whole world.

The largely held view that ijma of the golden era is binding on the succeeding generations has created problems in the area of muamalat (day to day activities and dealings – social affairs) because the situation has changed to a large extent that demands newer solutions. We have to distinguish between Muslim practices and ideas that are essential to Islam and those that are time or place bound adaptations or interpretations. Those ijmas that deal with muamalat need to be thoroughly scrutinized.

Accepting ijma (consensus of the earlier generations) that deals with muamalat (day to day activities and dealings – social affairs) in today’s situation without question is taqlid, blind imitation or the blind acceptance of juridical precedent. Some scholars think: “Each Muslim must submit to God alone and take the responsibility for his own life. Anything else was *idolatrous* and a perversion of Islam, turning it into a lifeless observance of a set rules” [Karen Armstrong, The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism, The Random House Publishing Group, New York, 2000. p 254]. Erudite Islamic scholar Moulana Abul Kalam Azad also is of the view that blind imitation tantamount to idolatry. To quote Moulana Azad: “Taqlid or taking everything on trust unquestioningly, thus barring from every side the exercise of common-sense and straightforward reasoning, and freely opening the door to every form of vagary in thought and action, proceeding from the exploiters of religion. Indeed this tendency in religion assumed in due course such a hideous aspect, that it impelled the ignorant masses to hail, some of them as *demi-gods and even peers to God Himself in practice*” (emphasis added) [Moulana Abul Kalam Azad, The Tarjuman Al-Quran, English rendering by Syed Abdul Latif, Kitab Bhavan, New Delhi – 110002, 1990, Vol. 3, p 91]. Prof. Dr. Tariq Ramadan puts it: “Muslims do not consider the Messenger of Islam as mediator between God and people. Each individual is invited to address God directly ... he often insisted on each believer’s responsibility in his or her dialogue and relationship with the One” [Tariq Ramadan, In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007, pp ix-x]. Eminent Islamic scholar of Egypt Shaykh Muhammad Abduh in his monumental commentary of the Quran Tafsir al-Manar noted down: “On Judgment Day God will not ask us about how others understood the Quran. He will ask us about our own position” [Shaykh Muhammad Abduh, Tafsir al-Manar quoted in Murad Hofmann’s Islam & Quran: An Introduction, amana publications, 10710 Tucker Street, Beltsville, Maryland, 2007AC, p 177].

Identifying tradition as sacrosanct is the most common means by which man-made policies, which may or may not have been appropriate in a particular historical and cultural context, become associated with religion and universalized; and as such, sometimes preference is given to tradition even though revelation does not endorse the practice.

In the Islamic seminaries, madrassas, generation after generation, Muslims student are instructed in the revival of Traditionalist orthodoxy, emphasizing static, literalist interpretation of the Quran. We must not however turn our backs to the contemporary social reality.

It needs to be realized that with the exception of the Quran and authentic and well established Traditions of the Prophet (Prophets are directly guided by God through revelations), every other single source of Islamic law was the result of human, not divine, effort. The early scholars understood this and were constantly adapting to contemporary situations, and the law itself was continually reinterpreted as and when necessary. None of the legal decisions made by any of the madhab, schools of law were binding on individual Muslims. In fact, until the modern period, it was common for the believers to switch their allegiance from one school to another at their pleasure, and there was nothing expressly prohibiting a Muslim from accepting Hanafi doctrine on some issues and Maliki doctrine on others.

In any modern Islamic society we have to blend the traditional values of the shariah with the contemporary social reality, principles of democracy and human rights through a comprehensive reform methodology if we are to make progress.

Another vital problem confronting the ummah is the thinking that the door of ijtiḥad is closed although there is no proof or evidence of it in the revealed Text and the Traditions in support of this proposition. No one has the right to close the doors of ijtiḥad which were opened by the Prophet Muhammad for the whole ummah.

The static thinking that Muslims can face any problem without intellectual exercise of ijtiḥad so long the Quran and sunnah are in their hand is a wishful thinking. By thinking in this line they have failed to relate the revealed Text with real world and lost the ability to actualize the faith.

Rescuing the religion from centuries of burdensome accretion is widely seen by the contemporary Muslim intellectuals and thinkers as most vital. If we shrink from this intellectual exercise we simply surrender to convention, we play the role of yes man or woman in the face of Muslim traditions. Muslims must remember that their self-surrender is to God, not to community, organization and establishment or to the dogma of any particular culture.

Islam requires self-surrender to God alone, even if this puts him or her at odds with the Muslim establishment of particular country or time. We must not blindly

surrender to Muslim beliefs and customs which have no basis in the Texts of the Quran and authentic and well established Traditions of the Prophet.

What may suit a given society in a given stage of history may prove quite unsuitable for another. Things new in a certain historical period may become old in another one. Indeed all previous intellectual exercises are limited to a certain place with a certain history.

We have to exercise *ijtihad* in order to draw nearer to what is truer. Every generation has a right to understand the revelation in its own way, even if it differs from that of previous generations. The door of *ijtihad* should remain open rather than be restricted to a particular generation, person, or age. Our ancestors were wonderful in applying religion to their life but the complexity of modern life is beyond our ancestors' imagination. Applying shariah rulings to modern life requires that they be built on the realities of modern life for the old rulings cannot provide solution to the problem in the present situation prevailing in the Muslim World.

The ummah reached its present deplorable state only after its member's discontinued intellectual exercise. Islam does not require the Muslims shield the ignorant, but to instruct and enlighten them. Our vision must not be cloudy and we must not loose the sight of truth. We must understand the current social reality and combine the experience past and present so that we can intelligently chart future course and only then *ijtihad* will provide the way out of the current morass.

Another major cultural problem facing the ummah is its failure to be critical although we can debate anything and everything except the essence (*dhat*) of God, as eminent Islamic scholar Prof. Dr. Ismail Rajhi al-Faruqi puts it: "The only thing which Islam has said is not within the capacity of the human mind to question is the essence (*dhat*) of God" [Prof. Dr. Ismail Rajhi al-Faruqi, *Why Islam?* in Riza Mohammad and Dilwar Hussain ed. *Islam: The Way of Revival*, Revival Publications, Markfield, U. K., 2003, p 45].

Islam is the religion of rational and critical mind. The greatest thing in the world is to be able to see things from two perspectives, two sides of the subject – listen to the other side. It is more important to be able to see different sides. Agree to disagree has to be an accepted principle of social discourse. However dissent is rarely appreciated by the members of the ummah because unity for the sake of unity is much more cherished than truth.

We must not stop from critically probing and examining and challenging the suspect, doubtful and controversial practices and dogmas for otherwise we could persist in jahili cultural practices. A religious justification for a practice is not enough to prove it essential to the faith; the evidence, premises and inferences built need to be critically examined, and counter-evidence, counter-arguments and counter-considerations need to be measured and weighed.

Muslim need to examine what Islam demands on different issues hitherto considered a taboo in the society. If there is a room within the religion to make accommodation then we must shun the existing practice that is misleading millions of Muslims away from their religion. The use of cap during prayer is one such practice which keeping away many males from mosque. We must discontinue this nonessential practice if we are to make mosque the intellectual nucleus of the community.

U lil amr min kum - follow your leaders or those in authority - has become a sort of subservient surrender and taqlid, blind following of the leaders in every respect. This should not be the case. Muslims should always remain open to arguments.

In some cases divine sanction to interpretations is at most vague and indirect support in the Textual sources. It needs an intellectual environment that promotes dialogue and free speech and that doesn't shy away from controversy, others perspectives need to be heard. Intellectual freedom implies the right to question, to openly scrutinize, to critically examine and evaluate.

A critical and thorough re-examination of traditional Muslim thought and practice is most vital, not only to distinguish the truly essential in religion but also to better understand the interpretations of past scholars that may not be essential but nevertheless legitimate and perhaps appropriate today. The goal should not be to filter out the strictly essential and then completely discard all the rest, but to build on the past efforts. The better grasp Muslims have of the thought processes of the past scholars, the better they will be able to measure how much room there is for interpretation and adaptation.

But who is going to perform this in-depth analysis of traditional Muslim thought. Some Muslims are not only very resistant to questioning established religious views but they display definite uneasiness with and sometimes a disdain for rational deliberation on religious proposition. Some other people prefer to follow conjecture, their desire or tradition of their forefathers while the Quran emphasizes critical reasoning that exposes falsehood and illuminates truth.

Al Quran states: When it is said to them, 'Follow what God revealed', they say, '*We follow that wherein we found our fathers.*' What! Even though their fathers were devoid of wisdom and guidance [2: 170].

Rigorous analysis must be part of Islamic culture. Keeping silent is tantamount to being an accomplice; it is betraying God, His Prophet and all the Believers

Reading fifty years or so old literature and reading no contemporary literature, and therefore remaining ignorant of contemporary development, is another major problem facing the ummah. Readers are studying only one set of sectarian literature and not giving ear to others view.

The most important reason that the contemporary cultural workers are poorly equipped and not well trained is that they are not up-to-date of the latest developments in the field of knowledge. They are not aware about the most recent ijihad, whatever little research is being done by the eminent Muslim scholars in various fields throughout the world. The cultural leadership is mostly happy with the past heritage. Self-glorification for the past achievement and success has blinded Muslim leadership to the need to examine their history in a critical and analytical manner with a view to exploring the points of weakness. In actual fact the Muslim legacy is not adequate enough to provide solutions of our contemporary crisis. Cultural and intellectual leadership still measure themselves by the past models and ignore time and distinctive features, and yet expect identical results. The right perspective and perception needs to be invoked. In this way, a fair interaction with the past can be made instead of vainly trying to revive it. The study materials for the workers of the cultural movements do not empower them with sufficient knowledge and ideas for meeting the changing needs of the age. The cultural workers, the cadres of the cultural movement, are forced to read substandard books as rightly pointed out by Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy, Professor of Physics, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan. He said: "In fact many individuals make huge profits by producing substandard and badly written books filled with conceptual, pedagogical, and printing mistakes". Shoddy books are included in the compulsory study materials of the workers of the cultural movement for the financial benefit in terms of royalty of the so-called elite writers of the movement. Consequently cultural workers have lost sight of the comprehensive totality of the Quran and thus losing the opportunity to relate to reality and control the inevitable changes in time and circumstances as the Quran behooves Islamic cultural workers to do. The Muslim intellectual leadership rather is now behaving in a way that circumstance dictates their thinking. Muslim leadership is not the master of the circumstance rather circumstances dictate them.

Books in Bangladesh are now being written by such persons who have no authority on the subject they are dwelling on. It so happens that someone reads a book on certain subject published outside Bangladesh and then he rewrites the same book, adds here and there and produces a book in his name. Then another person reads this locally produced book and again rewrites it, adds here and there and thus produces a new book in his name, so on and so forth. Thus second and third rate substandard books are being produced.

The readers will never get from such plagiarized books the spirit and flavor of the original books. Such books are likely to misguide the readers and will in no way play positive and meaningful role for the onward march and progress of the ummah, the Muslim community. Some of the books are below standard; these are likely to raise unnecessary debate and will only confuse the readers.

Interested readers who want to study this point further may read 'Islamic Movement: An Overview' and 'Quality Work: How Important It Is', available at www.shahfoundationbd.org.

Another pivotal problem confronting the Muslim community is rigid and inflexible attitude of the cultural workers when other easy options are available. In fact such attitudes only create obstacles in our day to day life and further complicates social environment. Creating such hindrances is against the very spirit of Islam for Al Quran states: God intends for you ease, He does not want to make things difficult for you [2:185]. Al Quran in another verse states: God wishes to lighten your burdens for man was created weak [4:28]. Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: Facilitate matters to people and do not make things difficult [Authenticated by all authorities. Quoted in Prof. Dr. Yusuf Al Qaradawi's book Islamic Awakening between Rejection and Extremism, I. I. I. T., Herdon, Virginia, U. S. A., 1995, p 26]. Al Quran further states: He ... has not laid upon you in religion any hardship [22: 78]. We must therefore concentrate more on avoiding the listed forbidden (haram) practices for what is not forbidden (haram) is permissible (halal) [Prof. Dr. Yusuf Al Qaradawi, The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam, American Trust Publications, Indianapolis, U. S. A., p 14]. God in His Infinite Mercy and Wisdom has listed only those that are forbidden (haram) and we must not unnecessarily poke and raise questions whether something is forbidden (haram) when not listed as forbidden (haram) and make our lifestyle, culture and society difficult. We must not create unnecessary burden on man for God created man weak.

The failure to develop filter to screen the munkar (evil) elements of predominant culture is another pivotal problem of the Muslim community. Such filter may include a long list but emphasis should be given on tawheed and shirk. Shah Waliullah puts it: Islam was not determined to extirpate fully the jahiliyyah Arab culture and civilization. It is not after demolishing each and everything. Rather, it opted for the middle way by way of reforming, adapting, restoring and reconstructing the existing order. The Prophet reformed such Arab social practices which were injurious to morals, health and faith. Yet he retained noble traditions and introduced, keeping in mind the changing needs, new practices, rites and rituals and deeds [Shah Waliullah, Hujjatullah al-Balaghah 1, 124-125 quoted in Muhammad Yasin Mazhar Siddiqi's The Prophet Muhammad: A Role Model for Muslim Minorities, Islamic Foundation, Markfield, U. K., 2006, p 173].

One of the first duties is to purge customs and traditions, and moral and social codes from destructive impurities and useless bits and pieces, in order to clear the way for the lively and life-promoting factors to come in. This purification is not possible except with a new thinking that can destroy the system inherited from the stage of decline and in turn assist in the search for a new system, that is, reform and renewal.

I shall narrate here one of my personal experience. Sixteen months back one of my cousin died of cancer at a hospital in capital Dhaka. We carried the dead body to our village home at Katiadi, Kishoregonj approximately 100 kilometer north of Dhaka for burial. We took with us cloths necessary for the burial. But surprisingly, at the village home another cousin asked where the cloth of the deceased's wife is. I pointed out that our brother has passed away not his wife and there is no need for

cloth for our sister-in-law. But my cousin insisted that she must take a bath and wear white shari, a long cloth.

The communication technology has made great stride. We are now using verses of the Quran as ring-tone in the mobile phones which is always abruptly disconnected in the middle of the recitation while receiving mobile phones. How far this is acceptable? Should we allow such practice or should we discontinue such cultural practice. We need to screen past cultural practices and new additions to our culture. We must remain ever vigilant to preserve the purity of our culture.

Another foremost problem confronting the ummah is the intolerant attitude of the cultural workers to accept others ideas and views. Any unnecessarily hostile and unfriendly stance is bound to mar the intellectual environment and greatly impair the stride and advancement of the ummah. I shall narrate here an example which will establish the intellectual hollowness of our writers. On 18 February 2005 Bangladesh newspaper the Naya Diganta published my article 'Muslim Society: Reasons for Backwardness'. In fact the article was a translated version of my article in English published sometimes in 2004 in The New Nation, The Bangladesh Observer and monthly the Shaurav. Writer N. N (actual name withheld) responded to my article in Naya Diganta saying that my views '*contradict with shariah*' for the simple reason that I do not see eye to eye with her on the question of using nikab and for my opinion that wife on modest dress can receive male guest of husband provided she has the permission of husband although in support of my opinion I quoted Prof. Dr. Yusuf Al Qaradawi, eminent jurist and ideologue of Sudanese Islamic Movement Dr. Hasan Turabi and opinion of Imam Malik in addition to Hadiths from Bukhari and Muslim. Such sweeping comment is intellectual terrorism and in no way serve the purpose of Islam rather creates hurdle and obstruction on the onward march and progress of the Muslim community. Such intellectual terrorism is as terrifying as physical terrorism. Interested readers may read my article available at www.shahfoundationbd.org

It so happens that enthusiastic Muslims fail in their evaluation of the problems around them. They often think that what they lack at the present is nuclear bombs, missiles, tanks and guns to help them to fight against the unjust powers. Here, their conscience is erring (by this I don't mean that we do not need sophisticated weaponry to defend our rights against intruders) because they find themselves in a world wherein they are helpless. Their diagnosis of the problem is incorrect. What they really lack is ideas. We should constantly emphasize that the deep-rooted crisis of the Muslim World has never been a consequence of its lack of means, but of ideas. Unless the Muslim World clearly realizes this fact, the malady of the Muslims will remain incurable, and it will be forever lagging behind the advance world. We have to realize that ummah's existing crisis of thought can be solved only by restructuring its cultural model and reordering its priorities. *

* The article has earlier been presented at the moot of Bangla Shahittay Kendraa, Kanchan, Rupgonj on 07. 12. 2007.

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