

CREATING A

# FUTURE ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION

*"very valuable"*

— Noam Chomsky



RASHID SHAZ

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Rashid Shaz

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## Preface

In 2004 when we conceived futureislam.com as a major civilizational project and vigorously pleaded for a fresh thinking on issues of Islamic import, we were a little hesitant to use the word civilization. The writings of an American establishment intellectual about the supposed clash of civilizations had created such a furore that at times it amounted to high jacking the very meta-narrative of our time. Those were the times when talking in terms of civilizational paradigm was considered a necessity to prove one's sophistication.

Paradigmatic thinking is not only deceptive, at times it may be even disastrous. We often build a paradigm; for it appears to be the only convenient way to think and philosophize. We humans who, always, or at least most of the time, employ language as a tool of thinking, for us it is natural to construct a paradigm or take a cue from the prevailing meta-narratives for clarity, cohesion and communication. Yet it should not serve as an excuse for being a prisoner to any single paradigm.

For me civilization then is not the only valid paradigm but a mere linguistic device which I have picked up to communicate more than what it does in the ordinary situations. My own readings of the Qur'an has taught me that we should not assign our thinking to words which have their own limitations despite the fact that they are constantly on the grow, nor should we be swayed by mere linguistic implications of the text. One possible way to overcome the limitations that language imposes on us is to use 'spatial atmosphere' as an extension of the language. Paradigms once brought to the level of perspectives can also serve as possible prisms to look at things in different shades. Instead, if we look at things

with a fixated gaze, as we often did in the past, we will only perceive the world on a perpetual course of a class struggle or find it engrossed in a beyond-the-repair clash of good and evil, or blame the failure of Enlightenment project on the barbarian other.

In employing the same terminologies that modern world is conversant in, yet unsubscribing to these concepts has been a great challenge to me. Writing about Islam in English, a language which became the language of the internet and came to a full bloom in the post-Christian West, has little inkling with the 'spatial atmosphere' of a divine book. No wonder then, if the terms like 'enlightenment', 'progress', 'development' or 'civilization' appear as hallowed and worn-out ideals. Authors on Islam in English often feel captivated by the very language that they put to their use. Instead of speaking *on* Islam in English they indulge in speaking their language. Such is the bane of language.

The call for a future Islamic civilization should not be seen as an exercise in re-establishing hegemony of the Muslim people or an attempt to turn the clock backward to the Abbasid Baghdad or the Moorish Spain. What we witnessed in Baghdad, Spain, Cairo, Istanbul or Delhi at various points of history was a rich culture no doubt in its own right, but it was not the essence of Islamic civilization, if we insist on using this term. A true Islamic civilization is neither eastern nor western, neither Arab, nor Chinese or Indian but an authentic amalgam of all believing nations, comprising all colours and races, an international brotherhood or sisterhood of submitters. In Islam there is no male and no female, no black and no white, no easterner and no westerner but only the awakened and the spiritually dead. And it is the duty of the awakened souls to bring the dead to life.

This book is intended to serve as a trumpet to the dead and a call for united action and not essentially to lay sole claim on Islam. Islam which means submission to one God is the religion of all the prophets from Abraham to Mohammed and many others before

them. We Muslims do not claim monopoly on submission although we are aware of our very unique position as upholders of the Last Revelation.

Envisioning a future Islamic civilization in which submitters of all hue or Muslims of various denominations and traditions join hands on *kalimatun siwa* or agree to work for common good is no easy task. It needs repositioning on our part, from being communitarian to prophetic. In essence, it requires not only recasting ourselves in a universal prophetic mode but also demands from us to find new meanings and implications of the Qur'anic terms. For example, in a capitalist world of free-market economy establishing Qur'anic justice would demand no less than redesigning the entire system. And in a globalized and highly inter-dependent world it would amount to refashioning the planet as a whole.

Written as they were as wake-up calls to all the inhabitants of this planet, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, these articles when they initially appeared as editorial pieces at *futureislam*, they attracted the attention of quite a good number of leading intellectuals of our time whose inputs have been a valuable source of inspiration to me. I have learnt from them, as also from my own readings of the text, that writing in defense of Islam serves no purpose. Truth needs no defense. Instead, we need to take shelter under the truth. This book then is no defense for Islam but an open invitation to all to devise an effective defense in the face of a crumbling capitalist civilization.

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New Delhi

Travelling back to historical times when sheer living was an adventure; nature was not used up and life was not a process of instant squeezing, needs a radical dismantling of our thought structure, which at the present is based on sociologism i.e. reduction of thought systems to the personal or group interest of the proponents. We need to create a new paradigm in which the stale worn-out concepts of the last three hundred years of philosophizing are effectively deprived of their defining powers. In short, we need to create new tools for new thinking.

## Calling for a New Civilization

The civilization we live in has already peaked and its steep decline is imminent. Call it western or Faustian civilization which in its present form has almost engulfed the entire globe, its technological prowess lay mainly in the invention of combustion engine and the discovery of fossil fuels. From the industrial revolution to the birth of corporate-capitalism and from the globalized world of internet and marvels of space exploration to the luxury of modern living, the story of western civilization is basically the story of mindless exploitation of gasoline. The Age of Oil has been, for most of us, an awe abounding time of technological wonders; it radically changed the way we lived, thought or felt. For the first time in human history, our planet supported some 6 billion people and yet there was abundance of food supplies, we travelled across the globe and even far beyond in space, lived a longer and painless life that the anti-biotic and painkillers could ensure and even believed that the solution to all our economic and civilizational ills was to pump out more and yet more oil.

Today when oil is trading at an all time high, a price simply unimaginable a few years ago, we have suddenly awakened to the fact; Lo! Ours is an oil-based civilization, without oil this civilization is doomed. And with the depletion of oil reserves and ever growing

demand, it does not need a lot of intelligence to conclude that the modern oil civilization as we know it is on a fast track to oblivion. This is not the end-time forecast of an apocalyptic cult but a natural corollary of reasoned thinking.

Let us take a close look. Each litre of bottled water before it reaches our table burns at least double the amount of oil; from its drilling, refining, packaging and transportation to far off places to the use of plastic bottles – again a petrochemical extract. In the US which consumes almost one fourth of the global oil production the situation is much grimmer. According to a 2002 estimate, each calorie of food produced in the US requires at least 10 calories of fossil fuels (Dale Allen Pfeiffer, “Eating Fossil Fuels” in *fromthewilderness.com*). Given the heavy dependence of modern food production and management on oil, from pesticides and agrochemicals to the farming tools like tractors and trailers to irrigation technology and finally to the storage and transportation, such figures are no exaggeration. In the Age of Oil it is a general norm that food stuff, despite being locally available, is imported from far off lands. Non-alcoholic beer proudly brewed and canned in Holland and Switzerland is consumed in the spiritual comforts of Makkah and Medina. What otherwise should be dubbed as bad planning or unmindful waste of natural resources is mistakenly termed as fruits of globalization.

Whatever we lay our hands on we find that it owes fossil fuels for its present shape. From automobiles to computers and from microchip to high-rise buildings, nothing could have been possible without oil. Take for example the case of microchip to visualise the enormous amount of energy consumed for this small piece of sophistication. According to the American Chemical Society journal *Environmental Science & Technology* (Dec 2002) production of a 32 MB DRAM consumes 3.5 pounds of fossil fuels in addition to 70.5 pounds of water. Joel Garreau explains:

... microchips are not made one by one. They are printed in a batch on a silicon wafer, say, four inches in diameter. Each time a layer of stuff is printed on this silicon wafer, the wafer must be treated so the stuff you've laid on will stay there. This process is achieved through the application of monumental quantities of energy. In effect, as each layer of the circuit is laid on, the whole wafer is "baked" at temperatures sometimes high enough to reach the outer limits of technology.

*(The Nine Nations of North America, p.276, 1981)*

Oil derived products such as plastics, synthetic fibres, synthetic rubber, nitrogen fertilisers and detergents have built a whole new world around us. Be it construction material, PVC's, electronics, furniture, photographic films, pipes, construction material or highly finished material for interior decoration, they are different forms of oil waste. Carpets, curtains, extra-light foams, transparent glasses, swim suits, water resistant clothing, or fine lingerie, you name any item and you will find it is just another form of polyester or synthetic fibre. Automobile industry is heavily dependent on synthetic rubber and acrylic fibre has substituted wool and cotton to provide clothing and shelter at such a large scale. And without detergent or industrial fertilizer our agriculture simply cannot feed more than 6 billion people. Oil is not simply energy that keeps our world on the go; petrochemical products are steeped deep in the making of modern civilization.

Then we have the internet, the biggest machine that the humans ever made. With billions of computers and peripherals scattered all over the world and ever growing server farms, the online virtual reality consumes enormous amounts of energy. Despite the fear that internet may collapse due to ever increasing number of users, there is a mad race to make almost everything available online. If you are not on the internet you simply do not exist, the maxim goes. Financial institutions, scientific labs, health care system,



entertainment industry and academia, all are heavily dependent on the internet. And contrary to the common perception, internet infrastructure consumes 9.4% of electricity demand in the U.S. and 5.3% of global demand according to a new research from Uclue.com. Given the standard of living in the developed world, J.H.Kunstler in his exciting book *The Long Emergency* estimates that cheap oil has given us equivalent of three hundred slaves per person. This serfdom however is no longer sustainable.

Depletion of oil then is the decline of oil civilization. Not long ago we discovered and employed petrochemicals to transform almost everything around us. The transformation was bewildering and instant. With the oil wells gone dry our transformation to post-carbon society will also be sudden and devastating. Imagine what will happen to us if the energy flow that we take for granted is put to hold just for a few days. The modern world will crumble. From food supplies to water and sanitation to intra-national institutions; the vanities of oil civilization will cease to exist. Unfortunately, that era is no science fiction; it's quite at hand now.

Oil, the blood of our civilization, is going dry. During the last hundred years or so from the time we discovered huge amounts of oil and built a civilization around it we have already exhausted about 50% of recoverable oil. With the rapid industrialisation in India, China and other developing nations the race is about who consumes the rest. The American and European experiments have displayed well that consuming more oil means more industrialisation, more production and hence more prosperity. If a nation of 300 million Americans consumes about one-fourth of the global energy share, imagine what future holds for the emerging Ch-india which together boast a population of more than two billion people. In the coming years nations will fight to monopolise or get their due share in whatever is left of oil. The pace of industrialization in south-east Asia will demand more oil, throwing the demand-supply mechanism out of gear. What the developed

nations have consumed in 70 years time, the adoption of American development models in Asia is bound to consume the remaining 50% in a much shorter span of time, say between 25 to 30 years. The future is frightening. Are we sleepwalking into a post-carbon era where a new dark age awaits us?

It took some 500 million years for nature to store sun energy in the form of oil. The one-time golden Age of Oil that effectively started during the 1930s will unfortunately come to a close in 2030s, if our calculations of the known oil reserves are true. Peak-oil theoreticians have long been telling us how soon we are going to hit the peak. As early as in the 1950s geophysicist M. K. Hubbert had rightly predicted that American oil production would peak in 1970s. Despite the seriousness of this issue the media played it down because new oil fields were still being discovered. But now the problem is twofold; not only we are going to touch the peak sometime very soon, the discovery of new oil or gas reserves has almost collapsed. The graph is frighteningly declining; 16 in 2000, 8 in 2001 and none in 2003 (J. H. Kunstler). There are many calculations about the peak. Some believe that the world oil production has already peaked in 2006, some point to the year 2008 as the peak year yet others believe that there are still a few more years left. Once we hit the peak, oil production will steadily decline unable to cope up with the rising global demand. Oil prices will steadily increase causing serious financial imbalance. Whether we have touched the peak or are going to touch it soon, what matters most is the remaining half of world's oil. How we manage it will determine the future of humanity. As competition for oil grows, I'm afraid, nations will find themselves locked in prolong battles that will end only with the end of oil. In 2006 when George W. Bush admitted in his state of the union address: 'America is addicted to oil' he was pointing to a horrific future that 'addicts' can inflict upon the people around receding oil wells in the Middle East. Insiders of oil industry as they are, Bush and Cheney know it well

what future holds for them without oil. Seen in this broader perspective, the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan can help us connect many dots. We are faced with a delicate question: who deserves to survive? With more than 4000 American lives lost in Iraq and some 29,000 seriously injured, unfortunately, the trading of blood for oil has already begun.

In 2005, I happened to be in Venice for the First World Conference on Future of Science and the topic of discussion that lasted many hours was future energy, more specifically hydrogen fuels. Using hydrogen for our engines can no doubt be alluring but it is far from being a substitute for cheap oil. The same is true of solar panels which cost more energy to create them than what they produce. Coal and natural gas are also diminishing and as long as we depended on them we were unable to conceive a civilization like this. At most they can sustain a 19<sup>th</sup> century world model without much of the blessings of the oil civilization. Nuclear energy too is no answer. If the entire world switches over to Uranium its peak can be reached much earlier than the year predicated, 2100. Above all, none of the energy generation sources are oil-free. Winds and waves no doubt are natural sources that we can turn to when no drop of oil is left but that will be a different time, altogether a different setting.

In the media galore of science f(a)iction the looming danger of a dark age is generally missed. In a new BBC4 series 'Visions of the Future' we hear some of the best minds in science talking about lab-grown human organs, 3D televisions, human-like robots and the possibility of teleportation. Michio Kaku even believes, and rightly so, that soon we will have the power to animate the inanimate, the power that rested so long with gods. One wonders if our scientists have some practical knowledge of the civilization that made it possible for them to carry on researches and thinking in the isolation of most sophisticated oil-powered labs. So far the common mantra, 'come on, by the time oil is over we will find something

new', has been a great failure, pushing us almost on the verge of a full-fledged oil-war. Kaku's approach to future energy has been evasive, though galactic in his own eyes. Once we exhaust the planet earth, Kaku tells us, we will look to other planets. He believes that some dead planets might be ready reservoirs of future fuels. To Kaku, our civilization is moving from earthly to planetary to galactic. And if that be the case there should be no point in worrying much about the future of life on this planet. Why should we think of a 'space-age Noah's Ark' on the moon, a library of human civilization in case of a cataclysmic event, as suggested by Jim Burke, a retired NASA expert?

Since Carl Sagan popularised science and brought astrophysics to our drawing rooms, there has been a general trend of talking about future in terms of science fiction. The common man cannot appreciate tough calculations or grim facts and the media finds only those items worthy of reporting that carry sufficient amount of awe and wonder. Look at the BBC4 recent programme about Vision of Future; we are assured of electricity from nuclear fusion rather than fission in just 15-20 years, nanobots for the battlefield, eradication of cancer, heart disease and other major killing diseases, perfecting and moulding of human body as per our will and above all, bringing aging to a complete stop. A very luring future indeed! Sagan himself always romanticised about billions and billions of galaxies, which he believed were full of life, sending electromagnetic signals to other planets. Sagan enriched our understanding about the cosmos like nobody else, nonetheless, by being too galactical he missed some of the very hard facts that surround each space mission of NASA – a huge amount of money, sometime amounting to a billion dollar or more and an enormous amount of oil. One wonders how our future mission will go to dead planets in search of energy – still a loud thinking though, when in the coming years nations will be fighting for each drop of oil and for their temporary survival. What about bio fuels? Yes, a theoretical possibility. But with the dipping of oil

levels when petrochemical fertilisers decline and so do the agricultural produce, we will be faced with this dilemma: to plough for what? food or fuel!

## Who high jacked our future?

Riding on the same world or propelling the same civilization will simply accelerate the process of our undoing. And this we have been doing for quite sometime. We live in a time about which there is a widespread feeling that it is already over; that something very essential has moved out from our being and we live as residue of a civilization past. What we call post-modern; ‘an incredulity towards meta-narrative’ – as described by Jean-Francois Lyotard or, ‘the situation the world finds itself in after the breakdown of Enlightenment project’ – as David Harvey puts it, rightly sums up our predicament. One wonders how we moderns who are very much alive on this planet, can live in post-modern times. But those aware of the civilizational impasse know it well that the more we confront a sense of loss and the possibility of an escape diminishing, the more we are struck by inexplicable feelings of an impending doom. Travelling back to historical times when sheer living was an adventure; nature was not used up and life was not a process of instant squeezing, needs a radical dismantling of our thought structure, which at the present is based on sociologism i.e. reduction of thought systems to the personal or group interest of the proponents. We need to create a new paradigm in which the stale worn-out concepts of the last three hundred years of philosophizing are effectively deprived of their defining powers. In short, we need to create new tools for new thinking.

Let me elaborate. The breakdown of Enlightenment narrative has not gone unnoticed. However, in our criticism of the post-modern we heavily relied on the concepts that had acquired some degree of respectability during the ‘enlightened chaos’ leading to major

upheavals in Europe and which had only one-dimensional fixed meaning. Take for example the term ‘civilization’ which still obfuscates a humane vision of the future misleading even our seasoned intellectuals to cast the global crisis in ‘us’ versus ‘them’ terms. Initially used by Victor Riqueti Mirabeau in *L’Ami des homes* in 1756, the word civilization was a critique of French absolutism. Gradually it took a life of its own as it developed into an ideology of domination during European expansion. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as European nations went out on a ‘civilizing mission’ they saw no value in other ‘inferior’ civilizations. Even seemingly objective historiographers like Arnold Toynbee whose *Study of History* has plagued the minds of many generations, was not spared from the evil effects of this imperial propaganda. Toynbee saw western civilization as a continuation of Roman Empire. While other civilizations were lying stagnant or got exhausted at lower ledges, according to Toynbee, western civilization had climbed up high and was still able to continue the climb despite its submission to ‘false idols’ like nationalism and the religious wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Shall this only civilization then move ahead to establish, rather forcibly, a ‘universal state’ that the other civilizations failed to achieve in the past? Probably yes. Toynbee’s intellectual totalitarianism is difficult to be missed: ‘The birth of a civilization is a catastrophe if it is a regression from a previously established church, while the breakdown of a civilization is not a catastrophe if it is the overture to a church’s birth’. One wonders if the apocalyptic politics of the neo-cons who are pushing the world to a final Armageddon should be taken as an incriminating evidence of the birth of a new church hitherto gone unnoticed though.

That we have brought the history to a close on our terms and that we are in the final stage of civilizational clash with the barbarian other, are notions born out of the false metaphor called ‘western civilization’. Can we ignore the fact that this time the barbarians other are not outside the city walls ready to attack, they are very

much a part of the civilization; now we have a Muslim minister in the UK, a Hindu governor in the US and a very strong contender for the White House from among the blacks. And, is it justified to conceive the western civilization exclusively in terms of British, French and German thought especially when each of them has a history of asserting its specific identity and even has gone to war against the others? What are those representative texts on which this civilization has built itself? Are the Muslim states in Europe like Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Turkey part of this civilization or they fall outside of it simply because of their allegiance to Islam? What about the Jews who authored some of the foundation texts like *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *The Selfish Gene* etc.? Is the western civilization a Judeo-Christian venture? Difficult to believe – given the long history of anti-Semitic activism in Europe. Nor can we conceive it as a mere post-Christian void as the proponents of the ‘Evil Empire’ who vehemently opposed it also shared the same civilizational milieu and their sacred text *Das Kapital* was produced in the very epicentre of the idea called ‘west’. Western civilization as we know it, then, is nothing but a capitalist prank to high jack a meta-narrative.

After high jacking the grand narratives of history, the capitalists then moved on to canonize some key concepts that were to serve as basic tools of our thinking. The meaning of ‘Progress’, ‘Development’, ‘Freedom’, ‘Democracy’, in addition to the misguided civilizational yardsticks like ‘free-market economy’, ‘gender equality’, ‘per capita income’, ‘gross domestic produce’ etc became one-dimensional and fixated. This enabled the capitalist cranks to envision a world of their choice without any significant opposition. The ‘captains of industry’ as they are generally referred to, a title which hides their exploitative acumen, Carnegie and Rockefeller, whom the US government committed huge tracks of land as collateral to build railroads, were actually acting on behalf of

the powerful Rothschilds in London. No doubt they meticulously built the infrastructure, but they also took effective measures to lay, inside our minds, a replica of their own thinking. Both of them created huge educational endowments that were to control the American university system and the direction of future researches. While scientific researches were to feed military-industry nexus, social sciences were employed to advance the grand American narrative. In fact, it was mainly through the coercive efforts of such endowments the capitalist vocabulary got canonised.

With the canonization of key civilizational concepts and the iron-fist grip of plutocracy on state apparatus the American model of development became the ultimate yardstick. The Cold War victory, emergence of a united Europe and the free-market reform of India and China made American narrative unstoppable. The artificial growth of economy and the rising standards of living that blinded us for almost half a century were mainly due to the burning of oil which we got at a price almost free. Employing more technology at our service and stretching production capacity to its full suited the capitalist who through acquisition of cheap oil had high jacked our civilization. Pumping out more oil guaranteed economic prosperity and ensured the growing coffers of the capitalist who controlled and commanded the oil civilization. But now when the oil wells are running dry and we are digging deeper and further deep the fear of a post-carbon age is so real that despite the scarcity of refineries no one is interested in establishing new refineries as they know that in the future there would be less oil to refine.

Where do we go from here? Probably no one knows. Mathew Simons, energy adviser to Bush once conceded that 'the situation is desperate'. In an interview with an online magazine *From the Wilderness* (Aug 2003) he called it 'world's biggest question' about which the politicians had no plan-B to fall back on. Universities and think-tanks should have a role in suggesting a way out from this impasse. But the capitalist iron-fist on academia has left very little



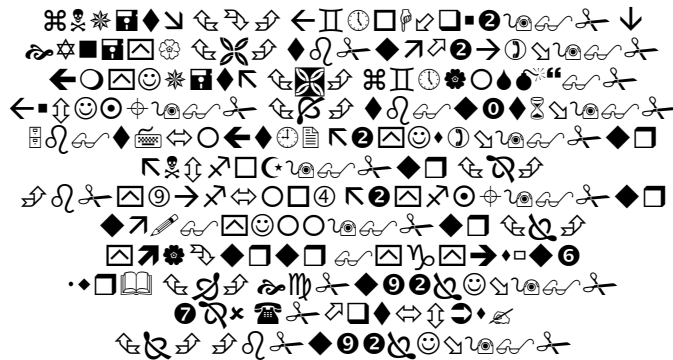
room for alternative or independent thinking. Universities do not encourage thinking anymore, they serve as training grounds for the corporate world. In a buzzing globalized technopolis – the way oil has transformed the world around us, civilization gurus need people to work on computers rather than allowing them to ‘waste’ their time and energy in philosophic reflection about future. The breakdown of academia and the emergence of knowledge industry in its place have created a whole lot of ‘toy-geniuses’ who can neither afford the luxury of thinking nor are they equipped with basic linguistic tools essential for such a task. Corporate oriented education has produced one-dimensional men whose motto is maximization of wealth. At their best, the toy-geniuses can talk of runaway greenhouse, carbon emission, and lack of clean water, organic food and sanitation. First they plundered natural resources, polluted our lands, rivers and springs and now they are out to provide us with safe drinking water, pesticide-free organic food and clean air. Even dissenters of western civilization, as the Environmentalists and the peace activists are seen, make a lot out of the lack of sanitation in some third world countries where alternative living is the norm. One wonders if civilization is all about flush-toilets.

### What shall we do now?

Whether we believe the advocates of peak-oil or find solace in the optimism expressed by industry leaders, it would be suicidal to keep the energy issue out of public debate. In his address to the Third OPEC International Seminar in 2006, Abdallah Jum’ah, President and CEO of Saudi Aramco, consoled the world that if his expectations about the industry are met, there can be a similar flow of oil at least for another 140 years. Jum’ah’s projections were mainly based on the premise of future technological wonders for discovering new oil fields, extracting the proven reserves to the last

drop and using non-conventional heavy oil resources. Jum'ah is not unaware of the environmental fallout out of processing heavy oil and deep-down extractions. Couched in a language that stands somewhere between rhetoric and corporate dream, Jum'ah's ambitious projections and his expectations from future technology escape tough calculations. The issue here is not which side of the debate we are on; whether we should panic or feel eased up. There are yet other urgent concerns and hard facts which I would like to incorporate in this discourse.

Of the twenty most significant oil producing countries which account for 95% of total proved reserves, twelve are home to the Islamic Ummah which together make some 67% of the total world oil reserves. As for the proved reserves of natural gas, Muslim countries have more than 50% of the global share, Iran and Qatar being the major reserves after Russia. And the fossil fuel is not all that we have been entrusted to. The Muslim nation, which accounts 57 strategically located countries on this planet and which now has a significant presence in the heartlands of other civilizations, has also been entrusted to the Last Revelation, the unadulterated message of God to humanity. The presence of such a vast amount of energy resources in the Muslim lands, especially in the *Jaziratul Arab*, is not without a divine plan. It is a very special bounty, an *amanah*, a trust in the hands of those assigned to lead humanity till End-time. The Qur'an reprimands us of the bounties of God and of the delicate balance:

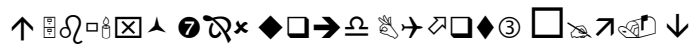




God – the most gracious. It is He who has taught the Quran. He created man, endowed him with power of expression. The Sun and the Moon follow courses computed; and the herbs and the trees both bow in adoration. And the Firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the balance, in order that you may not transgress balance. So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance.

(Qura'an, 55: 1-9)

The balance or *al-mizaaan* as the Qur'an calls it, is one of the most defining concepts in the Qur'anic. In the verses that follow we are reminded, oft and on, of the various bounties of God spread all across the planet, in the land and the sea, and also what awaits us in the hereafter. Amidst the most melodious refrain – 'which and which bounties of your Lord would you deny', we are commanded not to tamper with the balance. The world no doubt is made for us. But plundering its resources or depriving others of their rightful share would disturb man's happy relation with nature and with his own self. *Al-mizaaan* is more than a symbol of judicial justice. It is intended to preserve the delicate balance which governs the computed course of the Sun and the Moon and ensures the health of the phenomenal world, which according to the Qur'an is continuously on the grow –



Those who are mindful of 'the delicate balance' that amounts to help establish a just order and take care of the environmental delicacies are assured of a double reward. A harmonious living with nature turns this world itself into a heaven. Eventually, they emerge as a people of two heavens and much more –



As upholders of the Last Revelation and trustees of the fossil fuel we have a very unique obligation to God and mankind. Together with Islam and Oil, we hold the key to future. Should we disrupt the flow of oil the entire world would come to a stand still. We have already done a similar experiment when a few centuries ago, on the pretext of interpretative codification, we mistakenly severed our ties with the comforting message of God and thus leaving the entire world to grope in darkness. Consequently, the delicate balance or the *mizaan* between man and nature got tampered; bringing the world to almost a near collapse. Environmental imbalance, piling up of the toxic wastes, lack of organic food, clean air and water and worst of all, an ever widening gap between the haves and have-nots. Today, the individual is over-burdened and hard pressed under the tax-system and virtually there is no free space left. Whether we like it or not, we are forced to pay for the ill-conceived defence spending, in most cases for the victimization of the glory called Man. With the emergence of oil civilization, as oil got into wrong hands, Man's victimization by Man touched an all time high. Never before in history man had invented so sophisticated weapons to kill fellow humans and called it 'collateral damage'.

The oil civilization, as it developed in the West, has brought us to an unending woe. With the eventual triumph of plutocracy and the ever-rising tide of corporate capitalism, the process of doom has further accelerated. Should we pump out more oil to support this directionless civilization and perpetuate what man has made of man or, should we behave as more accountable trustees? Upholders of the Last Revelation as we claim to be, we Muslims have an obligation to future generations. Those who have yet to surface on this planet, they too have a right to inherit a healthy world. The unmindful burning of oil in the name of globalization is ethically, politically and rationally wrong. Does it make any sense for a packet of food to travel a thousand kilometres before it reaches our table or, for us to travel long hours to the place of work every day?

Mineral water claimed to be bottled from the springs of Himalaya is transported to Chennai and far beyond. Tea-leaves grown in Darjeeling are first exported to Britain from where they are re-exported across the world and also to the country of their origin. The UK and Holland are not the only countries who regularly indulge in exporting, and at the same time, importing to each other poultry and meat products. The list is endless. When the supermarket shelves boast of a single product from very many places, we call it the fruits of globalization, while in effect it is the burning of extra oil, a sheer madness.

## A New Civilization

Save oil alone which is far more a precious thing, a non-renewable source of energy, the prophet had commanded us even not to waste water long before 'save water' became a fashionable environmentalist's slogan. Before the oil wells run dry we must come out to persuade people for a sane living. We need to forge alliance with other faith communities who share our concern. It is time to be aggressively proactive, to convince the fellow humans that mad burning of oil and at such an ever-increasing pace, is simply suicidal. There is no other alternative but to change the way we live. A new civilization is the minimum to start with.

In a world where the obsolete capitalist model for development still holds sway, where nations are still competing to erect tallest building on this planet, the call for a New Civilization may initially fall on deaf ears. Recently, Kuwait has unveiled plans to build a 1001 meter high architectural *Alf-Lailah* and in Jeddah Prince Waleed is planning to build Burj Al-Meel or the Mile High Tower which is expected to cost \$ 10 billion. Burj Dubai, so far the tallest building on this planet which overtook Taipei 101 tower is now facing threat from another competitor who plans to build Al-Burj. As long as the capitalist notion of civilization remains valid and we

judge our progress by towers and toilets, it would be difficult to chart out the course of an alternative civilization.

The capitalist iron-fist on academia has left very little room for alternative or independent thinking. Universities do not encourage thinking anymore, they serve as training grounds for the corporate world. In a buzzing globalized technopolis – the way oil has transformed the world around us, civilization gurus need people to work on computers rather than allowing them to ‘waste’ their time and energy in philosophic reflection about future. The breakdown of academia and the emergence of knowledge industry in its place have created a whole lot of ‘toy-geniuses’ who can neither afford the luxury of thinking nor are they equipped with basic linguistic tools essential for such a task.

## Where is Enlightenment?

For the last three centuries the West has been living with an illusion of Enlightenment. Writing in 1784, when *Sapere Aude!* appeared to many as the most fashionable motto to celebrate reason triumphant, Kant was well aware that his was an Age of Enlightenment and not an 'Enlightened Age'. Enthused with the general optimism of the time as he was, he saw – in the alluring freedom under Frederick, obstacles to Enlightenment 'gradually diminishing', shekels of 'self-imposed immaturity' finally being broken and above all, a clear assurance for mankind to raise above barbarism. For Kant and other philosophes of his ilk Enlightenment was a meta-narrative where rational thinking was destined to produce a new civilizational utopia. Hence onward, in the succeeding centuries, the struggle to create an entirely Man-centred world intensified. Initially it appeared that a new alternative world was possible. The birth of democracy in the aftermath of French revolution, the discovery of more continents than those mentioned

in the Bible, the replacement of biblical static view of the earth-centred universe with a yet evolving view about the cosmos and above all, rapid inventions and industrialization empowered Man with an unflinching confidence in himself. This optimism however was short lived. The latter half of the nineteenth century was marred by scepticism of all kind; as deism finally evolved into atheism and intellectual landscape became ripe for such future isms as nihilism, structuralism and existentialism etc. With the horrors of two world wars and Nazi experimentations at Auschwitz, faith in Man's goodness further deteriorated. Today at the dawn of the 21st century when the Bush Administration has thrown upon us 'war on terror' as a new meta-narrative we are faced with an Enlightenment winter. Is a new dark age descending on us? Who is really turning the light off?

Enlightenment narrative as it evolved in Europe was inherently a flawed concept. By sending God to a perpetual exile Man had overburdened himself. As he rejected myths or accumulated wisdom he could only feel isolated, finding virtually nothing to hold on. In a universe where the Creator had left after creating it, as most of the first generation Enlightenment thinkers believed, it was too heavy a burden for man to find meaning. Despite so much credit to Enlightenment which created a whole new world around us and which radically altered western worldview for ever, here intellectual challenges always left a void. It was as if man was pitted against an infinite cosmos. Probably, it was too much for Man. Nietzsche toyed with the idea of a super man and by doing so he fell prey to the same age-old myth of a super-human messiah. Unlike the biblical messiah, Nietzsche's *Übermensch* was not to descend from the sky, it had to be created right here on this earth. But both the propositions made at least one thing clear; that man was no match for the enormity of the problem.

When Rene Descartes came up with the proclamation *cogito ergo sum*, 'I think, therefore I am' he was sounding a paradigm shift;



hence onward man rather than God had to be the focal point around which everything would revolve and human reason had to serve as the foundation of future knowledge. This coronation of man as the chief deity, once lauded as Enlightenment's major achievement, latter became its bane. As man became the locus of this new civilization human perception was now reduced to a mere cluster of 'a priori' and 'posteriori' leaving no room at all for any revelatory wisdom. Instead of an omnipotent God now everything had to centre on Man who was the ultimate yardstick. Thus the new religious sensibility was termed as Humanism and the new polity was canonised as democracy.

But Man was no fixed or standardised canon. Any polity built on him was doomed to be vulnerable. Democracy never delivered what it promised. It always remained fragile and shaky; at times justifying colonialism, genocide and even weapons of mass destruction and nuclear annihilation. Worse still, in a post-modern world which saw the meta-narratives virtually redundant thus leaving for us no valid myth to cling to, the very being in Man perished and the new barbarians were born. The death of God eventually led us to the death of Man. And it is against this background that the difference between democracy and fascism, traditionally taken as two opposite poles, faded. Democracy has often resulted in plutocracy, dynastic rule, military dictatorship and even fascism which in turn revert to democracy. In essence, aren't they all the celebration of man?

Instead of a life-giving futuristic attitude that the enlightenment was intended to shape, today we are confronted with a situation where man is not so much afraid of the supernatural but of his own destructive potential. Three centuries of our collective disaster ranging from colonialism to brute oil-wars of today, which 'civilised' nations have camouflaged as war on terror, clearly indicate that Auschwitz and Hiroshima were no aberrations but very logical corollary of our 'enlightened' intellectual outlook. Today with the arrival of post-modernism, anti-Enlightenment ideas of that German

giant, Fredrick Nietzsche – whose arch heir has been Derrida, is on the march again. Nietzsche – whose *Übermensch* plays a key role in his future utopia and who sympathised with the annihilation of the weak, was not only the Nazi regime's official philosopher and an intellectual powerhouse for Mussolini but still holds sway with post-modernists. Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze were inspired by Nietzsche's nihilistic philosophising about truth, morality and beauty. And their considerable success in altering the meaning of the text or at least making the meaning move out of the text and yet claiming that there is nothing outside of the text (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*) was the most devastating blows of all time. It had cast a shadow on the language itself, the very tool of our thinking and philosophising.

The Enlightened Age that Kant and many others believed would dawn one day as a result of their sole reliance of reason, never came to a full bloom. Instead, today we find people complaining of the tyranny of reason or 'logo-centrism', as Derrida puts it. Enlightenment's waywardness, rather its leap in the wrong direction has brought us to a complete mess. Deconstruction's vogue has left us not with any meaningful void but an utter confusion about values. Apparently Derrida may sound pleading for individual freedom when he says: 'general maxims – be they moral, constitutional, or legal – are intrinsically incapable of doing justice to the specificity of the individual case', but implications of such utterances create tremor in the very foundation of our common values and even legitimise, to some degree, political existentialism of the Bush Administration. If no set of moral conduct or constitutional norm is capable of doing justice and if one unethical political move can be as good as the other well considered moral action, aren't we legitimising everything from Auschwitz to Abu Gharib and to Guantanamo?

The inherent contradictions in western Enlightenment that have been active over the centuries have come to fruition in our age. Some perceive it as the dimming of the enlightenment or consider it

as a temporary eclipse. Yet those aware of the full magnitude of the mess that we are in; the ultimate triumph of plutocracy and of corporate capitalism, the end of individual choice in the madly globalising world, the media generated and controlled blindness, mindless exploitation of natural resources to the extent of threatening the future of our only earth, the looming danger of nuclear annihilation and at the top of all a complete absence of any effective leadership who can turn the ever rising tide, rightly conclude that a new Dark Age is fast descending on us.

The moral consensus in the modern West has come to a complete collapse. At one plane, we live in a world which can boast of longevity of life due to advances in medicine, mass transportation, space journeys, laser-guided weapons, unmanned planes, computers and the internet. But on the other plane, empty lives are asking more than ever before, 'what is the use?' Who has stolen our sweet world, they ask? There are plenty of New Age gurus and Kabala centres out to fix the problem. Then, we have a number of cults assuring us a safe exit to heaven. Many have already taken up their journeys and yet many others are still perplexed about their future. Are we on a fast-track to a culture of mass suicide?

Adorno and Horkheimer are only partially true when they complain that reason has become irrational. Given the enormity of the situation, probably it is too much to expect from poor reason alone. It is a mind-boggling situation when mind can behave only frantically. When people loose hope they look for short-cuts and magic wands. Superstition becomes the norm and unreason governs our actions. It is precisely this situation that today we find ourselves in. Let me rather elaborate.

## Unreason

The Enlightenment fathers intended to salvage us from what they perceived as 'self-imposed immaturity'. Man was supposed to take

his affairs into his own hands independent of a master, guru or clergy. This exercise in intellectual empowerment however has been a grand failure as we see today biologically grown-up men and women look for professional healers and snake-oil vendors. Modern snake-charmers style themselves as life-style gurus, be-happy consultants, parenting coaches, makeover guides, spiritual healers and mentors. They are the new *shuyukh* or spiritual seers of our Age of Unreason. They invade almost every aspect of our life telling us how to see, how to think, and even how to feel. From art of dressing to reading a book and from meeting a friend to casting a spell on your beloved, they claim to have a ready solution. They teach us the 'art of living'. Yes, for them, it is an art of living on our vulnerability as the New Age gurus have amassed huge wealth and this farce has now developed into a multi-billion industry. For example, in the US, Deepak Chopra's annual revenue crosses \$ 20 million and in the UK, the female feminist guru Gina Akers charges as much as £ 2,000 for a consultation. Then we have high profile Kabala centres with celebrities like Madonna, Elizabeth Taylor, Ashton Kutcher, Britney Spears and Demi Moore as their clients. They believe that Kabala water can cure diseases and wearing a Kabala bracelet can seal in all the positive energy and ward off negative vibes or the evil eye.

Hollywood stars alone are not to be blamed for their obsession with unreason. We have otherwise sophisticated policy maker and even heads of powerful governments who wait for the nod of their spiritual seers. Formers US President Ronald Reagan's reliance on astrology is well known. His official diaries were arranged and rearranged as per the advice of his astrologer. It is on record that at the time of Geneva summit in 1985 he asked his astrologer Joan Quigley to check the star-chart of Gorbachev to anticipate his likely behaviour. The Clintons too never felt shy of their frequent hooking up with self-help gurus. President Clinton's brainstorming sessions with Hollywood mystic Marianne Williamson and management

guru Anthony Robbins and Stephen Covey are no secret. Hillary was especially known for her heavy reliance on Jean Houston who styled herself as 'sacred psychologist'. Then we have Tony and Cherie Blair who underwent a re-birthing ritual in 2001 during a Mexican holiday. As they undertook a perfumed mud-bath smearing papaya and watermelons on each other they were expecting the birth of a 'new you' – a popular claim of the New Age healers. In India, the traditional abode of god-men, it is a routine that ridiculous beliefs become a matter of concern. Some years ago, the situation took an interesting turn when soothsayers suggested that outgoing Prime Minister Narasimha Rao vacate his official residence on 10th of June while it was supposed to be auspicious for the new prime minister to move in on the 6th. Superstition dictated that both of them share the same residence to avoid evil influence. Esoteric sciences that were rejected even in the Middle Ages by sensible individuals are now marketed as holistic, alternative, spiritual healing, re-birthing etc and there is no dearth of gullible individuals ever-willing to buy them.

When reason dims unreason takes over and that is the beginning of a catastrophe. Today anything goes in the name of New Age metaphysics; from occult to Wicca, from witchcraft to Satanism and from animism of all sorts to the debunked paganism of the ancient past. Can we ignore the historical fact that the Nazis were also a product of occult and unreason? They frequently held occult rituals at Wewelsburg castle – the centre of the knights of the SS, and believed in the supremacy of the Aryan race which according to their belief fled the Atlantis when the third moon crashed. They even launched a search for the Atlantis and the Holy Grail. Like Nazis of the past, the New Age healers are also tech-savvy and they can successfully mix myths with technology to create disasters. Shoko Asahara experimented his vision of salvation by introducing poisonous gas into a Tokyo subway and Marshal Applewhite, leader of the Heaven's Gate cult, was successful in sending a couple of

dozen of his followers to a trip on the Hale-Bopp comet. And very recently, President Bush's unfounded belief in his chosenness, as one who has been assigned to promote democracy and freedom, has resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of innocent lives in Iraq, Afghanistan and other places. Are we amidst a catastrophe or it is just the beginning? Carl Sagan has an insider's insight:

I have foreboding of an America in my children's or grand-children's time ... when awesome technological powers are in the hands of a very few, and no one representing the public interest can even grasp the issues; when the people have lost their ability to set their own agendas or knowledgeably question those in authority; when, clutching our crystals and nervously consulting our horoscopes, our critical faculties in decline, unable to distinguish between what feels good and what's true, we slide, almost without noticing, back into superstition and darkness'.

*(The Demon-Haunted Worlds)*

## Superstition

Unreason begets superstition. Not long before, in 1995, India which styles herself as the superpower in waiting was taken over by a wild frenzy of milk miracle. Sensible and educated individuals thronged to the nearby temple to witness the drinking of milk by clay idols. Rationalists and scientists had to debate long hours on electronic media to expose this farce. In Hyderabad, the cyber city of 21st century India, when there was a solar eclipse people were looking for safe confines. Pregnant women were tense and according to some newspaper reports (The Hindu), some grandmas even prevented them from scratching their bodies lest the new born develop scars.

That superstition is on the rise the world over can also be gauged by the increasing popularity of funny pages in the print media. Newspapers publish horoscope which has no religious or scientific rationale yet according to a 1984 Gallup Poll, 55 per cent of American teenagers believe in astrology. Officially, both Christianity and Judaism have an aversion to astrology. Moses Mamonides considered it 'a disease, not a science' and for Martin Luther 'astrology is framed by the devil'. Despite the Judo-Christian tradition's strong stance, astrological publications and gurus thrive on people's gullibility.

To ward off the effects of evil-eye there has come up a world-class industry in Istanbul which specialises in nicely made crystal amulets. The Evil-eye amulet has a global market as it is probably the most popular superstition. The Arabs call it 'ain' and in modern Europe and America a person who looks run down is generally taken as 'over looked', wished or ill-wished. In America it is not unusual to find someone who believes that breaking a mirror can bring bad luck or even death in a family. And it is no secret that American sailors still avoid whistling aboard ship lest it raise a whistling wind. They say: 'whistling girls and crowning hens/ always come to some bad ends'. Some of the superstitions that were successfully wrapped up sometime ago have made a come back. For example, Reform Judaism had put off long ago ancient practices such as having mezuzah at the door-post or breaking of glass at a wedding. The new generation of reform rabbis is not just reintroducing such practices they even justify them as another way of dealing with anxieties.

When it comes to number 13, the notion of a civilised West evaporates. In Florence, for example, houses between 12 and 14 bear 12 and a half and Italian national lottery purposely avoids number 13 in its tickets. In modern metropolis, high-rise buildings, especially hotels and hospitals, skip the 13th floor. Aeroplanes have no 13th aisles and some airports skip 13th gate. Some even believe

that having thirteen letters in one's name can be disastrous or at least a source of intriguing troubles. There are specialised gurus who tell us how to adjust the spelling of our names to avoid the evil effects of number 13.

## Tyranny

With the transformation of democracy into plutocracy, tyrants are back to business. In recent years, following the American occupation of Iraq, anti-war demonstrations in western capitals made at least one thing clear; that the ruling elite do not represent the will of the people. Recently, in Gujarat (India), the electoral victory of Modi despite international condemnation for his state orchestrated pogrom in 2002 has questioned the very efficacy of the system long held as a civilised means for political change. In the West there is a general feeling that the golden age of democracy is over and now elections are only a camouflage for a system that shrouds itself in secrecy. Today, there are some 700 US military bases across the globe and no one exactly knows what goes on in these camps and what the terms of agreements with the respective governments are in whose territory they are located. In countries that claim to be nuclear powers the citizens have no idea about the number of nuclear war heads in stock, nor do they have any information about biological and chemical weapons. In the wake of 9/11 many governments passed draconian laws, like US Patriot Act and UK Anti-Terrorism Act, which further strengthened the culture of secrecy. Things have come to such a pass that in 2006 the Congress appropriated funds for building concentration camps in the US.

In the US the slide from freedom to tyranny has not gone unnoticed. But neither the opposition nor the public opinion has any role in a system which displays an air of arrogance: truth be damned. This plutocratic culture allowed successive US Presidents to destroy what once was termed as the American Dream. Abraham



Lincoln, otherwise known for his democratising hype, significantly curtailed freedom of the press. Woodrow Wilson was tough on war critics and Roosevelt interned American citizens of Japanese origin. Bush almost wrapped up the Bill of Rights. Dick Cheney – whom the former CIA director Stansfield Turner labels as the ‘vice-president for torture’, solved the ethical dilemma of using torture once and for all. In the backdrop of the homophobic nature of torture at Abu Gharib prison, the New York Times reported:

This week, Vice President Dick Cheney proposed a novel solution for the moral and legal problems raised by the use of American soldiers to abuse prisoners and the practice of turning captives over to governments willing to act as proxies in doing the torturing. Mr. Cheney wants to make it legal for the Central Intelligence Agency to do this wet work.

(Editorial, October 26, 2005)

## The Siege-Mind

That religion is on the rise and God is back in fashion are only illusory if we look at what goes on behind this spiritual smokescreen. We still live in a spiritually barren wasteland where devil rather than God appears shaping our destiny yet the TV evangelists through their digital blitz; live telecast of beautifully arranged church rituals, impressive liturgy of Catholic masses and round the clock religious channels make us believe that the Age of Faith is back again. Televangelists like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and R. Albert Mohler even preach that the Bible is inerrant word of God. They are either unaware of biblical criticism of the last two hundred years or arrogantly ignore it. Some of them even claim to have achieved direct communication with God and assert that they can relieve us of our pain and suffering through their ‘holy solution’. Are they driving us back to an age when paying tithe was

the most effective way of getting rid of ancestral demons, curses and evil-spells?

It is no spiritual revival but the religious faddism and spiritual bankruptcy of the worst kind. Instead of the inspiring words of gospel, the neo-Christians of our time are interested in the Bible codes, dream interpretations, occult wisdom, aura and Nostradamus. Religious bookstores are full of such books that tell us how and when the author encountered demons or angels who were moving, not from left to right, but from bottom to top. Mind you, they are serious books meant for adults and not Harry Potter stories for children. Desperate junkies are even turning to the Bible as a book of alternative medicine. There is an ever-growing craze for esoteric solutions. All sorts of craps go in these books. Recently, I came across Mark Bubeck's *Spiritual Warfare Basics* – a harrowing and depressing guide for esoteric adventures that teaches people how to pray to God that He may search their sexual organs, blood, bones, hair, skin and even cells for demon activity. Such things may not have even a remote connection with the Bible but they have a ready market among the religiously inclined. People who could claim to have a vision of God might have diminished in the Muslim East but they are constantly on the rise in the modern West. Kathryn Riss is one of those poetic seers who claim to have received this song directly from 'the Lord':

If you feel too serious and kind of blue  
I've got a suggestion, just the thing for you!  
It's a little unconventional, but so much more fun,  
That you won't even mind when people think you're dumb!  
Just come to the party God is throwing right now,  
We can all lighten up and show the pagans how  
Christians have more fun and keep everyone guessing,  
Since the Holy Ghost sent us the Toronto Blessing!  
I used to think life was serious stuff  
I wouldn't dare cry, and I acted kind of tough

Until God's Spirit put laughter in my soul,  
Now the Holy Ghost's got me and I'm out of control!  
Now I'm just a party animal grazing at God's trough,  
I'm a Jesus Junkie, and I can't get enough!  
I'm an alcoholic for that great New Wine,  
'Cause the Holy Ghost is pouring, and I'm drinking all the time!

(Hank Hanegraaff, *Counterfeit Revival*,  
Dallas: Word Publishing, 1997, pp. 245-246)

Dare to question this siege-mind religiosity? Western culture today is a paradoxical mix of inquisitional mentality and unconcerned self-abstinence. Doubting almost everything so as to improve, or at least to know – once the hallmark of post-Enlightenment western mind – has been effectively eroded by the wind of faith blowing in the post-modern West which prefers to create its own reality. And the triumph of inquisitional mentality or neo-conservatives has played a vital role in creating an atmosphere of terror where thinking and rational arguments are effectively suppressed. In his State of the Union address 2006, George Bush appeared no less than inquisitional:

Tonight I ask you to pass legislation to prohibit the most egregious abuses of medical research: human cloning in all its forms, creating or implanting embryos for experiments, creating human-animal hybrids, and buying, selling, or patenting human embryos.

Such zealous pronouncements only make us feel as if we are back to the time when Christian Church condemned Galileo.

Those who oppose this inquisitional mind and advocate for a culture of techno-science and rational values are equally guilty of placing science to the position of deity. They are not against unreason as such; they are more for a thorough demystification of the mystery that man is. Theirs is a tall order; alleviating hereditary diseases by removing defective genes from sperm and eggs, solving social problems or even making breakthroughs in criminal

investigation by one's genetic code, assessing one's candidature for a suitable position on the basis of his genetic profile, or even getting some insight about hereafter through 'near-death' brain mapping and further possible explorations in neuro-science. Whether we will be able to create flawless supermen in the future remains to be seen but if the world is really four dimensional, as the exponents of Special Theory of Relativity claim, and the future already exists, we come to a closed circle. Not much can be done. Rather, nothing can be done. We come to a dead-end; back to the centuries old oppressive theological debate about freewill and determinism. This sort of irresponsible scientism cannot rescue us from the dark abyss that we have slipped into, nor Heidegger, Foucault or Derrida or postmodernism can shield us for long. Reason must be engaged and mystery should not be euphuism for troubled water, nor should meaning be suppressed or imposed. But this cannot be achieved unless we deconstruct the Enlightenment narrative.

As upholders of the Last Revelation and trustees of the fossil fuel we have a very unique obligation to God and mankind. Together with Islam and Oil, we hold the key to future. Should we disrupt the flow of oil the entire world would come to a stand still. Today, the individual is over-burdened and hard pressed under the tax-system and virtually there is no free space left. Whether we like it or not, we are forced to pay for the ill-conceived defence spending, in most cases for the victimization of the glory called Man. With the emergence of oil civilization, as oil got into wrong hands, Man's victimization by Man touched an all time high. Never before in history man had invented so sophisticated weapons to kill fellow humans and called it 'collateral damage'.

## Can Islam Rescue the West?

The sun has finally set in the West. It seems as if the Enlightenment is over. The long cherished western ideals of liberty, freedom and Human rights that illuminated our horizon once the West came to assume global leadership and monopolise intellectual heritage, are greatly threatened today in the very bastions of western civilization. As a concept and a civilization the West is in the process of dying. Long before Spengler cast his doubts about the future of Faustian civilization, the West has been on a slippery slope; the seeds of her undoing lay greatly in the Enlightenment itself. The Enlightenment had produced not only the Holocaust and the Gulag, as Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer have pointed out, it has also been responsible for a value-free secularity, a perpetual source of spiritual crisis and political conflicts. Some one third of Europe's population had perished in the Great Wars, yet the emergence of the New World of America had given us enough hope that the day was not far when humanity would achieve its ultimate utopia. Paine, Jefferson and Madison were seen as

upholders of prophetic ideals not only in the Humanistic Christian context but their words inspired people much beyond American borders. But as it turned out the great American Dream has turned out today into a howling nightmare for most of the inhabitants of this planet. The very presence of the caged-world of Guantanamo and secret detention facilities worldwide, and for so long, are indicative of the fact that the West as a concept is dead. This phenomenon we term as post-Western.

We Muslims had always had a love-hate relation with the West. Having been staunchly critical of the Western secularity we always looked at it as an epitome of sexual anarchy yet at the same time we lived in great awe of western technology and the Western social ideals of individual freedom and liberty. For the last many decades it has also been a place of refuge for many Islamists who were hounded by the oppressive regimes in their own homelands. Sarcastically dubbed sometimes as *Londonistan*, the West, no doubt, for many of us was an alternative world whose death should be mourned not by westerners alone but by all those who long to live under a free-sky.

Surprisingly enough, the death of the West has not created much of an uproar in the high echelons of western society. From Oswald Spengler to Samuel Huntington to Francis Fukuyama to David Colman and Patrick Buchanan there is a marked western slant that probably hinders an honest analysis of where the West has gone wrong. Including Spengler, who although does not look at other great civilizations as prelude to western civilization, they are in general, wary of other civilizational models and hence instead of coming up with any cure they end up with a mere frightening diagnosis or at best some vague murmurings about the end of history itself. For Fukuyama and other intellectuals of his ilk who share a linear view of history it is difficult to believe that nations other than western may have their own dreams and ideals. The eventual triumph of capitalist democracy does not necessarily mean

that other nations too long for this model or it is the ultimate destination of History. Western democracy might be one of the best models that humans have invented during the last few centuries, nevertheless, we have moved ahead of the democratic times and what we encounter today is a post-democratic era where democracy only means choosing from among divergent evils. In recent years, western streets have witnessed a fierce battle between popular democracy and coercive democracy, the former represented by anti-war protesters and the latter by war mongering ruling elite. Yet despite the utter helplessness that the individual experiences in coercive democracies if someone claims that 'we are now at a point where we cannot imagine a world substantially different from our own, in which there is no apparent or obvious way in which the future will represent a fundamental improvement over our current order' and even goes on to threaten us of 'the possibility that History itself might be at an end' (Fukuyama, 1992:5), we can only feel pity for this self-congratulating establishment intellectual.

It is not that History has come to a full circle but the fact is that the Faustian-American civilization is losing fast its edge. With the emergence of new economic power houses in Asia, it is very likely that in the coming days the world capital will be moving to Beijing and New Delhi. That great western catastrophe of 'treason to technics', of which Spengler had warned as early as in 1931, is taking place now. Though generally ignored by establishment intellectuals, Spengler sounds no less than prophetic:

The countless hands of the coloured races – at least as clever, and far less demanding – will shatter the economic organization of the whites at its foundation. The accustomed luxury of the white worker, in contrast to that of the coolie, will be his doom. The labour of the white is itself becoming superfluous.... The centre of gravity of production is steadily shifting away from them, especially given that even the coloured races' respect for the whites



came to an end with the [First] World War. This is the real and final basis of the unemployment that prevails in the white countries. It is no mere crisis, but the beginning of a catastrophe ...

(*Der Mensch und die Technik*, 1931: 86)

The situation however is much more frightening than what Spengler had envisaged. Let us briefly mention here some of the major constituents that make up what we generally term as 'the West' and which in my opinion is on the verge of extinction.

- a.) Christianity that once dominated the social, political and intellectual life of the West is considered today as an old-fashioned carry-over. Ever since Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) published his book *Das Wesen des Christentums* it became difficult for a dominant number of thinking people to believe in a testament that was familiar with only three continents and that presupposed a static view of the universe centred on earth. Today despite a vague linkage to the Christian past the general atmosphere in the West bears testimony to the fact that something very essential has moved out. Not only the Churches wear a deserted look but the very 'being' has moved out of their lives. This we uncomfortably term as post-Christian.
- b.) Next comes what the demographers would call 'depopulation of the West'. In 1960 people of European origin constituted some one-fourth of the global population which according to a UN projection will be reduced to one-tenth by the year 2050. The white race is on a steep decline and there are all indications that it is fading away. In his seminal polemical work *The Death of the West* Buchanan argues that while world population has almost doubled in last 40 years, the European people including the Australians, the Americans and Canadians have stopped producing and have begun to stagnate. If the trend goes on some '23

million Germans will have disappeared' thus reducing into 59 million from today's 82 million. In 2000, some 47 European nations, from Iceland to Russia, together constituted 728 million which is expected to come crashing to 600 million by the mid century. David Coleman is also of the opinion that by mid century 30 percent of Dutch, 24 percent of Germans and 36 percent Brits will be of foreign origin. Huntington has voiced a similar fear that by 2050 one-fourth of the US population will be Hispanic (Foreign Policy, 2004). Not only the ethnic composition of the West is changing but unassimilated minorities are redefining the entire gamut of values that once gave the West an identity and a name. Can the non-white population that is expected to dominate the US for example by mid century be truly representative Westerners? If so probably we have to redefine the traditional notion of the West. A reversal in population trend is highly unlikely not because of the social security that makes it irrelevant to invest in the children for old-age care but more because of the socio-economic factors that leave little room for raising a family. The contraceptive pills that they so proudly invented and propagated the world over during the last two-three generations have bounced back to them as the ultimate suicidal pill for the white race.

- c.) As stated earlier, democracy, the most strongly held belief of western civilization lies in tatters not simply because of the promulgation of US Patriot Act and the British Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act but more because of the control of mass media by a few mega corporations that orchestrate our perception and thinking; General Electric (NBC, CNBC, MSNBC), Disney (ABC), Time Warner (CNN) and Viacom (CBS). The complete control of mega corporations over the world system and their capitalist sister

concerns have made political leadership impotent for any future change. Free market of ideas that John Stuart Mill advocated for a healthy democratic society is not possible in a world where smaller and local newspapers have been swallowed by media tycoons. Even the publishing industry is brutally controlled by a few giants and chain of bookstores and it remains up to them to decide which book should be marked as best-seller. In a world of media blitz the individual is totally blind struggling to make sense what it means to live in a post-democratic era where proponents of Liberal Democracy, through their draconian measures, are out to destroy democracy in order to safeguard its future.

- d.) Technology and capital are moving to the third world countries at a speed never imagined before. New York stock exchange might still be the largest in turnover and Americans might still consume a whopping 700 billion year but these are illusory figures about American prosperity. If the Americans are not producing that much it simply amounts to selling their market to the Asians. The rise of India and China – mega-corporate's favourite destinations, is at the expense of the West and especially America which has no other alternative but to outsource even its service sectors to Asia. The internet is siphoning off white collar jobs from the West and the cheap technical labour is forcing major technical giants to set-up their next-generation industries in India and China. What this transformation of economy implies for the Smithian model of free-trade? If a country exports its productive capability and if services are outsourced at the other end of the phone for cheap skilled labour, what it would be trading in then, and for how long? With China alone US has a trade deficit of about \$ 125 billion and it is scoffing out some \$ 1.5 billion a day from its

national wealth to meet its outsourced expenditure. Economists have been raising an alarm that the US and so also the EU countries are on a fast track of becoming third world countries. If production and services are shifted to far off lands one wonders what people would be doing in Manhattan sky-scrappers and Chicago high-rise buildings? To quote Paul Roberts, 'by 2024 the US will be a has-been country'.

- e.) Like democracy, people are usually wary of expressing even little doubts about the future of capitalism. They believe that there is no viable alternative to capitalism especially when they see that the socialist system has collapsed, long-time socialists the world over have compromised to capitalist doctrines and despite much ho-ha of Islamic revival an alternative to modern day capitalism has yet to emerge in the world of Islam. But simply because everybody is doing some sort of capitalism does not mean that capitalism is not questionable and there is no threat to its future. In fact the major threat to capitalism is from capitalism itself which is simply unsustainable. When Marx was writing his critique of the capitalist system 'pure capital' had yet to be fully visible as those were not the days of corporate capitalism. Today, for the first time in human history corporate capitalism is defining who we are, how we should think and live on this planet. Soulless and pleasure-awry consumers as we have become, we humans are mere pawns in the hands of mega-corporations. Billionaire turned philanthropists who are setting up new trusts and foundations aim at controlling whatever little room is left for independent thinking. The more they accumulate wealth the more power they command. As mega-corporations have no home countries, it is beyond any Hugo Chavez or Ahmadi Nijad to confront it. Is really the monster of capitalism untameable? Apparently

yes, because there is no equally powerful competitor or alternative to it. But capitalism is self-destructive; it is like the creature that eats her own body for short-term survival. Built on the idea of producing more and yet more it cannot go on and on for a long time. Our planet has been stretching up and we cannot ignore indefinitely global warming, energy crisis, water crisis and all that has a direct bearing on ecological imbalance. I'm not sure of an alternative now, but I'm sure that capitalism in the present form is simply unsustainable.

This then is the story of a dying civilization. The modern West which, for almost two centuries, appeared to many of us as a 'light on the hill' was not created on any divine fiat but on centuries of accumulated wisdom that promised Man right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. Despite our fundamental differences with western ideologies we cannot afford simply watching this 'Eurobia' of ours – a home away from home, disappear.

The crisis of the western people, of the white race, is as much our concern as theirs. If the white race, or any other race for that matter, shrinks or gets annihilated, it will disturb the very equilibrium that sustains cosmic order. It is part of the divine scheme to raise nations and tribes, blacks and whites, males and females. And God has endowed each geographical entity with something very special. *Ummate wast* or the international Ummah as we Muslims claim to be, we are supposed to have a holistic approach to the issues that confront humanity today. If the western hemisphere sinks it will have dire consequences for us.

Can Islam rescue the West, then? To say yes would simply be an expression of one's dogmatic position given the plight of Muslims who are the prime target of war on terror and whose entire energy is being consumed in defending their psychological self. Secondly, Muslim ulema and intellectuals have traditionally been trained to think in the so called *dar* paradigm which saw the world always

divided into two opposing camps; the *darul-Islam* and the *darul-Kufr*. As most of them were also *Qadis* or held important positions in the government, they had little time to worry about what went beyond Islamic borders. Those were the days when living in isolation was possible, if not desirable. Those trained in the traditional paradigm of 'us' versus 'them' would certainly find it difficult to employ the Islamic mission for the general welfare of the western people. Yet I'm very optimistic as I see some very significant changes taking place for the first time in Muslim history. The rationale of conceding to the four established schools of *fiqh* as the given is openly being questioned and so the supposed sanctity of some of the past *fiqhi* judgements. The House of Islam is in the throes of an intellectual revolution.

Then there is a new generation of Muslim intellectuals born and bred in the west. Exposed to western discourses as they are, they feel a dire need to re-open scores of Islamic issues that are held for so long as sacrosanct. They may be guilty of working within the traditional *fiqhi* paradigm, nevertheless, they have produced some remarkable apologia in beautiful prose that serves as a bridge between the western and Islamic world. Theirs may not be the right kind of writings ensuring an over-all deliverance of the Western nations, yet I am sure they will pave the way for more serious engagement with Islam in future. What attracts the West in these writings is probably a clarion call to all Muslims to fully participate, rather integrate, in western societies as full-fledged western citizens. Both the proponents of integration and their Western friends believe in their naivety that injecting some fresh Islamic blood to western societies will redeem the West of its agonising boredom and tattered spirituality. In my opinion, this is too much to expect from a religious minority which as a nation has yet to realise its full ideological worth in a western setting. This mode of thinking is also flawed on two counts; it does not take into account the magnitude of western crises which are basically civilizizational and not merely

spiritual, secondly, assigning a purely spiritual role to Islam tantamounts to reducing the last prophetic mission into a set of mere ethical dogma. A civilization where things are falling apart; where God is pushed to the margin, where sex without children is projected as Man's ultimate freedom, where democracy has been made hostage by the wealthy few, where uncontrollable corporate greed for cheap third world labour has deprived millions of Western people of lucrative jobs and where doing corporate capitalism any further simply means the wholesale destruction of earth – one wonders how merely integrating a group of ethical Muslims to this dying civilization can change the course of events.

The crisis of the West is acute and needs immediate attention. The western people are realising fast that it is dangerous to ride on the same old world and many of them are desperate to get off. But there is no readily available alternative to the capitalist world system which the Muslim world itself has become an appendage to. The future depends not on Islamic evangelism, or any other evangelism for that matter, as many of us would like to believe, but on Islamic intellectualism, on our rediscovery of the great prophetic mission.

Unless we are aware of our unique position in history and are confident enough to devise a specific approach to the revelation suited to our specific situation, the way great masters of the past did for theirs, a return to the Qur'an will only be a farfetched reality. We certainly know more of the 21st century social reality than the great luminaries of the past.



## To be or not to be a European Muslim

The other day I came across Sandy Thom's *I wish I was a Punk Rocker with flowers in my hair* and I was awfully amazed by the amount of nostalgia that had engulfed the song: *'Ow I was born too late/ To a world which does not care'*. That sweet world – *When music really mattered and when radio was king/ When accountants didn't have control/ And the media couldn't buy your soul/ ... When pop stars still remained a myth/ And ignorance could still be bliss/ ... And the only way to stay in touch was a letter in the mail/... And the super info highway was still drifting out in space* – is alas no more.

We Muslims are not generally trained to appreciate western music nor do we usually feel that the problems of western Man can be our own yet Sandy's nostalgic cry of a sweet dying world deeply touched me. The invisible forces of globalization have demolished all the boundaries between the east and the west. Be it the materialist west or spiritual seers of the east they inhabit the same planet and hence share a common destiny. Today, the complete alienation of the individual, the emergence of directionless and ruthless capitalism, the much talked about ecological imbalance and the total media-engineered blindness that we suffer are not the specific problems of western man alone.

Muslim thinkers have so far shied away from any passionate involvement in the issues that confront the west today. Instead they have tried to create a world of their own, a sort of ivory tower, wherein we hear of Islamic music, Islamic economics and Islamic science etc. However, the last decade has witnessed a shift in our thinking. Partly owing to the implied smallness of the globe and partly due to the emergence of Muslim societies in the major capitals of the west, we feel, more than ever before, an urgency to speak out what we feel on issues of common concern. The Islamic ghettos that once we so effectively created by building mosques, establishing Islamic centres and Muslim schools have virtually become redundant. This has led some Muslim intellectuals to think of new alternatives. Isolation or ghetto living has been disastrous. It only helped our enemies create a web of suspicion around us. Should Muslims be integrated to the local societies and become German by culture and Muslim by faith, as one would argue? Or, is it ideologically possible to be a western Muslim?

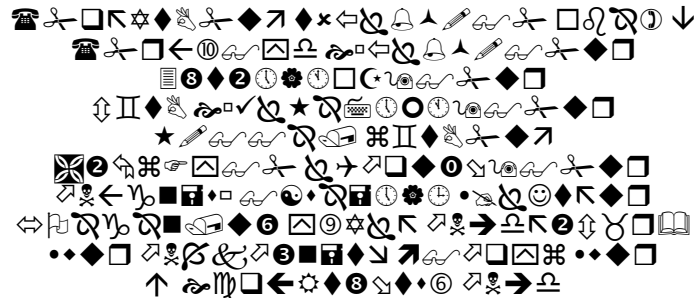
In recent years, some scholars have been vociferously advocating for an all-out integration of Muslims into western society. They argue that the attitude of seclusion has placed Muslims on the margins, leaving almost no role for them in socio-political arena. If they reinvent themselves as full-fledged citizens and play a proactive role they will emerge as spiritual powerhouses and the West too will be enriched by high morality of its Muslim citizens. Some would even urge us to go a step further, from integration to 'contribution', participating fully well in all schemes of nation building. They also argue that, as the West is a new home to Islam – a radically different setting, western Muslims must fashion a different identity from their eastern counterparts.

The craving for a western Muslim identity based on integration, however, has created some traumatic intellectual crises. For many Muslims living in the West, Islam and the West are not always reconcilable. The national interest of the country of their citizenship

often collides with greater interest of Islam. Recent western interventions in the Muslim world; the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, as also the unflinching American support to Israel, has only reinforced the belief that the West is antagonistic to Islam. Reconciling Islamic faith with western national interest then becomes an impossible proposition. If the unjust policies of the western governments often prompt their erstwhile diplomats, retired politicians and even army personnel to come out against their own governments, how can it be possible for Muslim citizens to bury their conscience, and for how long? In recent years, millions of people have been marching in the western streets against the unjust, inhuman and immoral policies of their governments. However, if the Muslims organize a similar protest it is not taken as a mark of their belief in democracy, instead they are looked at as potential terrorists who have yet to be adjusted to the local society. In short, the western Muslim finds himself in a perpetual fix; to be or not to be westernized, and a Muslim, one and at the same time.

Is Islam all about spirituality and morality that could be integrated into any system? Probably, the advocates of integration have purposely ignored some essential ingredients of Islamic ideology to avoid issues that are more sensitive. Let me elaborate. Muslims believe that by virtue of being upholders of the last revelation they are entrusted to calling people to good and forbidding them from wrong. And in their efforts to create a just system they are enjoined to seek active participation from all believing nations. A conglomerate of conscientious individuals as the future Islamic society is envisioned; it has neither to bear the mark of an Arab identity nor seeking to establish western hegemony. True, the venture of Islam began in an Arabian setting but Mohammed was not essentially an Arabian prophet nor is Islam's basic mould essentially Arabic. It was made plain and clear that the prophet had come to establish no new identity rather he was commanded to revive the religion of Abraham whom the

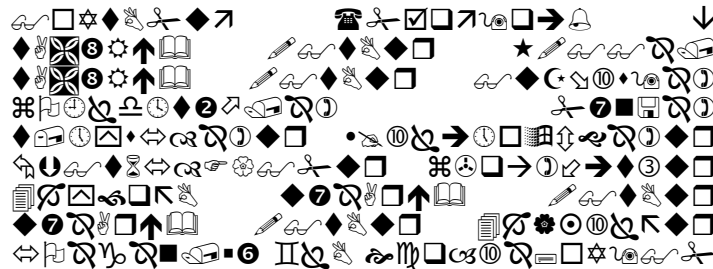
Qur'an depicts as a role model for submitters of all time to come. To be a Jew or a Christian (Muslims of the prophet's time) was not enough to assure one's success in the hereafter. Instead, the Qur'anic revelation linked salvation with true faith (*iman*) and good deeds (عمل صالح). No matter which religious fold the faithful belonged to, if he qualified the essentials, he was assured a share in the hereafter:

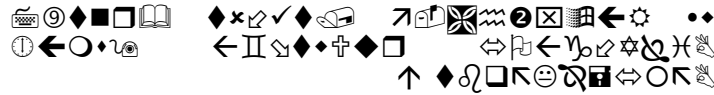


Those who believe and those of Jewry, and the Christians and the Sabians, whosoever believes in God and the hereafter and work righteousness – shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.

(Qur'an 2:62)

The Islamic social order is a healthy composition of varieties of faiths and ideologies singing in unison the glory of God, competing one another in righteousness. Ideologically, we Muslims are inheritors of a prophetic tradition that did not begin with Mohammed though it ended with him. As our faith incorporates all the prophets of all time and place it is natural that our society also bears a testimony to this great heritage:

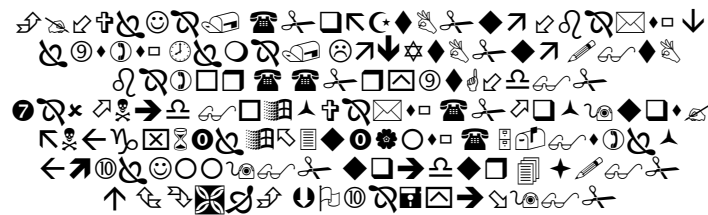




Say: We believe in God and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to all prophets from their Lord: we make no difference between one and another of them (لافرق بين احد منهم): and we submit to God.

(Qur'an 2:136)

Believing in all the prophets without any distinction or preference is a precondition to one's submission to God. For any possible deviation, the believers are thus scolded:



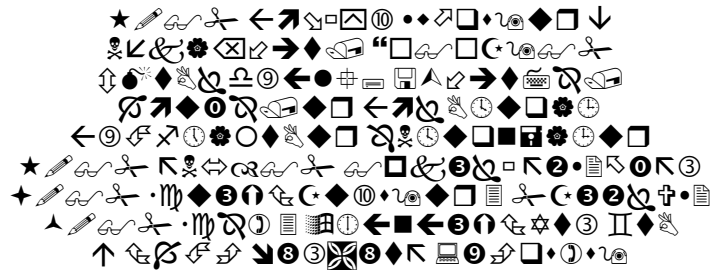
“So if they believe as ye believe, they are indeed on the right path; but if they turn back, it is they who are in schism....”

(Qur'an 2:137)

An ideal Islamic society must bear a trans-cultural identity wherein converges the essence of entire prophetic tradition. To this phenomenon the Qur'an terms as acquiring the colour of God, صبغة الله, which once was the hallmark of the Muslim community and which if revived to its full will make divergent faith communities feel at home in a Muslim society.

The Qur'an exhorts us to become *rabbani* and thus constitute a God-centred society which alone can guarantee an equal opportunity for all faith groups to flourish. There are recurring indications in the Qur'an that God wants us to forge a greater federation of faith communities. In *surah* Haj we are told of

monasteries, churches and synagogues, other than the mosques, as there too the name of God is commemorated in abundance:



Had God not checked one group of people by another, there would surely have been pulled down monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of God is commemorated in abundant measure....

(Qur'an, 22:40)

This then is a broad outline of Islam-for-all, a universal salvafic mission in which the followers of Muhammad have to play a pivotal role but the other faith groups too will not have the feeling of being left out. A mega project such as this cannot be executed in isolation or by ghetto mindset. Those who advocate for a life of seclusion by creating small Islamic ghettos have little understanding of the universal salvafic mission of Islam. The great *fuqaha* of the past who saw the world divided between the two opposing blocks of *darul-Kufr* and *darul-Islam* also missed this point. As for those who are exhorting us today to become a European Muslim or fully participate in schemes of nation-building and who, with all their good intentions, wish to create among us some Muslim Henry Kissingers or Jack Straws are no less ignorant of Islamic mission. Integrating to the western societies no doubt can send Muslims to the corridors of power and they can even prove themselves as better citizens than their Jewish or Christian counterparts, but there is no guarantee that their 'integration' or 'contribution' will also advance the salvafic mission of Islam. There are many nations and tribes on this planet working day in and out to foster their respective national interest. If Muslims are also absorbed in a similar projects, who will

take care of the broader interest of humanity? Integration can be a viable strategy to penetrate into western societies and it may even be a shortcut to taking control of major western capitals by democratic means, but the salvafic mission that we Muslims are entrusted to, is far lofty to forsake it for the sake of power.

I am no advocate for isolation or ghetto mindset. Yet I feel that a mad push for integration without laying out a proper intellectual foundation will take us nowhere. The Islamic faith, ingrained as it is on the Muslim psyche, tells us that we Muslims do not have a national or communitarian interest of our own. We are supposed to work for a just order in which all nations of the world may find solace. Working solely for British or American national interest will pit us against our own conscience. For us the entire humanity is one nation, the children of same God who has entrusted us to take care of them all. Without giving up this lofty mission it is not possible for us to become a pawn in the hands of any system that cares only for its own people bothering little how adversely its policies affect other nations.

The integrationists are basically swayed by the success story of the western Jewry. The Jews lived in the margins of history for so long that Diaspora (*galut*) became their national identity. But once they decided to forsake, or at least downplay, their Jewish identity and got integrated into the local societies they emerged as a power to reckon with. The Jewish experience however was not all about integration. The Jewish revival owes much to the eighteenth century discourse about the nature of religious and secular knowledge. Integration too had its own share but its adverse effects cannot be downplayed. Moses Mendelssohn who is seen as the intellectual father of Reformed Judaism championed a European identity for the Jews. No doubt, on the personal level, Mendelssohn's was a success story as he was appointed court philosopher by Frederick II, the King of Prussia. Nevertheless, integration had its own toll. Mendelssohn's entire progeny left the Jewish fold; his daughters,

Dorothea and Henrietta converted to Catholicism and his son, Abraham, induced his children to become Christians for he believed that 'it (Christianity) is the conviction of most well-bred human beings.' Forsaking Jewish identity in favour of a European one, no doubt, brought the Jewish nation at the helm of affairs; nonetheless, it also pitted Jews against their own redemption project. Today, despite so much power at their command, the Jewish nation is in a fix: the third temple is not feasible as a religious project.

There is much for us to learn from the Jewish experience. Without a proper theology of integration, Muslims will have apprehensions about this approach and the integrationists will be seen as mere apologists. What will distinguish a Muslim citizen from his/her non-Muslim counterparts if all of them equally work for the national interest of their country? To say that Muslim participation will add moral and spiritual elements in western society which badly needs them sounds not only apologetic but it amounts to reducing a great salvafic mission to morality. I believe that Muslims in the West, like other parts of the world, cannot play a positive role unless they rediscover the prophetic mission. Neither isolation nor integration or 'contribution' as Tariq Ramadan would put it, can ensure us the prestige attached to the mission of Muhammad. It is not Islam or Muslims that need to be integrated to the West but it should be the other way round. We need to integrate east and west, Europeans and Asians and other nations of the world to the comforting and salvafic mission of Islam. Muslims, no matter they live in the east or west, must present themselves as a salvafic nation who live for others and not for themselves. At this point of history when human freedom and liberty are at stake, when the individual is reeling under the tyranny of capitalism and when there is a widespread feeling that the world-system has gone out of hand, Muslims are duty bound to rescue all 6 billion human souls that inhabit the world today. This they can only do if they are able to recast prophetic Islam in modern setting; an Islam that is neither





## Reinventing the Muslim Mind

Ever since I read Elizabeth Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* and Peter D. Kramer's *Listening to Prozac* I wonder if Prozac, Ritalin, Zoloft and the like wonder drugs that help millions of people regain their self-esteem can also be employed in infusing a creative confidence in the Muslim mind. As Prozac or fluoxetine works as a neurotransmitter, it effectively increases the level of Serotonin in the brain, the low level of which is said to be the main cause of depression, anger and even suicide. Today some 28 million Americans, almost ten per cent of the total population, live on such psychotropic drugs. No wonder then if America is outperforming as a nation and if the Americans are known for their exuberance and arrogance.

Today the Muslims lack confidence not because the entire world is at war with them more so because they find their main source of

intellectual and spiritual inspirations locked on them. For so long they have been subject to misguided indoctrination about the potential of their brain that now they are aghast by any suggestion of applying their minds in matters religious. It is almost a matter of creed for them that the Elders have exhausted and perfected the process of thinking on all issues once and for all. This attitude has virtually suspended the entire corpus of revelation and has effectively locked the Ummah in the pre-Islamic mindset of



or ‘thus we found our forefathers doing it’, as the Qur’an aptly puts it.

Given the fragility of the Muslim mind, some of the great luminaries of Islam who devoted their entire life to reviving the Ummah eventually gave up. Abul Kalam Azad who started his career as a revivalist and who created furore in the early 20th century India by making public the blue-print of *hizbollah* – the party of God that were to alter the course of history – soon came to realize that nothing could be achieved with the traditional Muslim mind. In a letter to Muhiuddin Kasuri he declared: ‘the ulema are a hopeless lot. To believe that the traditional mind can still give way to regeneration is to believe against the laws of nature. We have no alternative but to ignore the rigid thinking altogether, focusing on the creation of a new mind which requires a radically different variety of literature and apprenticeship’. Muhammad Iqbal, one of the most prominent ideologues of modern Islam, was voicing a similar concern when he opined that after the termination of the khilafa and in the absence of a central controlling authority it was an opportune moment for ‘the birth of an international ideal’ which, in his opinion, ‘has been hitherto overshadowed or rather displaced by the Arabian imperialism of the earlier centuries of Islam’. He fully endorsed the attempt of Muslim liberals ‘to reinterpret the foundational legal principles, in the light of their own experience

and the altered conditions of modern life'. (Reconstruction, p.134). In a much similar vein, Jamaluddin Al-Afghani and his pupils, known for their penchant for *ijtihad* or rethinking, also called for giving the Muslim mind its due. In his famous treatise *Risalah Al-Tawhid*, Abdahu argued that, as the divine revelation was a guiding light for all generations, it was not fair to deprive the present generation of the right to interpret while allowing the past generations to have a monopoly of the same. In principle, the traditional mind was not averse to rereading the text. Nonetheless, it made it a precondition that all such rereading must conform to the understanding of the pious elders. It does not require a lot of intelligence to realise that a re-reading, even by a humble definition of the term, must produce a radically different understanding though.

The last few centuries have witnessed an upsurge of revivalist movements calling for a return to the Qur'an. But despite so much ho-ha if all our efforts ended up in merely creating an illusion of revival it was mainly because we failed to distinguish between the bare text of revelation and the exegetical literature that, in course of time, had built an impregnable fence around it. We in fact do not allow the present generation of believers to approach the text on their own. In the early twentieth century, in the wake of the termination of Khilafa, the revivalist movements laid special emphasis on understanding the text. In Egypt, Syed Qutub's *Fi Dhilal Al-Qur'an* and in the Indian sub-continent Maudoodi's *Tafheemul Al-Qur'an* and Islahi's *Tadabbur Al-Qur'an* became focus of Islamist's attention. These exegeses, accompanied by the party literature, had a great impact on the global Islamic movement. Written in elegant contemporary prose as it was, the new exegetical literature, however, failed to produce the desired result as in its approach to the text it remained prisoner of the classical understanding. Maudoodi took some thirty years to write his *Tafheem* and Islahi claimed to spend almost half a century to

complete his magnum opus *Tadabbur*, yet at the end of their magnificent intellectual journey they emerged as mere hanafites, the followers of the great jurist of the second century Hijra. If 30 or 50 years of systematic Qur'anic study failed to empower them to approach the text on their own for their own specific setting, such academic ventures howsoever impressive they may appear to be, can only be termed as intellectual luxury. It may be justified for a layman to call himself a Hanafite or a Shafeite solely relying on the understanding of an imam but for the scholars who devote their entire life to a systematic study of the text, clinging to the great masters of the past speaks of an ailing mindset. Unless we are aware of our unique position in history and are confident enough to devise a specific approach to the revelation suited to our specific situation, the way great masters of the past did for theirs, a return to the Qur'an will only be a farfetched reality. We certainly know more of the 21st century social reality than the great luminaries of the past. Seeking solace in the corpus of *fiqh* canonised in the Abbasid Baghdad will now serve no purpose. The classical *fuqaha* measured the journey by a *manzil*, i.e., the maximum distance that a caravan could travel in one go. Based on this measure they would tell us when to shorten the prayer. They never travelled in space jet nor did they ever confront a situation where owing to the internet chat rooms strange men and women could meet in privacy or where due to globalising effects classical terminologies such as *dar-ul-Islam* and *dar-ul-Kufr* would become redundant.

The call to return to the book of God that, in essence, was an invitation to the blind imitation of the pious elders of the past, failed to revive the Ummah. We often overlooked the fact that the pious elders, despite their extraordinary devotion to faith, were also humans like us and hence liable to err. Had we taken their theological and *fiqhi* compendiums as mere pioneering works in academia and not the last word on the topic, there would have always been a possibility of redressing their mistakes. Nevertheless,

partly owing to the intellectual anarchy caused by the weakening of the political system and partly due to the sense of sacredness associated with the early centuries of Islam, it was assumed that independent thinking was not everybody's prerogative. This attitude of looking at the past as canonised might have been helpful in curbing the intellectual anarchy of the time but later this in itself became a source of intellectual barrenness for all time to come. As times went by, the canonised past kept us haunting. Things came to such a pass that on any issue of potential controversy, our scholars claimed of achieving consensus sometime back in history and hence, they declared, the issue in question was no more open for discussion. In Qur'anic weltanschauung, the claim to achieve consensus once and for all is a false metaphor. If Muslim scholars of a particular period in history had achieved consensus on a specific issue it was their collective understanding of the revelation prompted by the societal demands of their time. Their decisions cannot be binding for us. We have to come forward with our own response to the revelation suited to our own temporal and spatial settings. This is exactly what God wants us to do:



Does God speak to the 21st century man? Does he speak to him directly or through the dead of the past? Is Qur'an a dead book for us that made sense only to some pious elders in the early centuries? Such questions have a direct bearing on any creative approach to the text. *Salaf* worship or the attitude of



(thus we found our forefathers doing) was instrumental in calling people to the worship of *Lat* and *Uzzah* – national idols of pre-Islamic Arabs. Today it is again out to convince us of the infallibility of the pious elders, holding us back from any direct access to the text lest it should be problematic. The new age idols are not the Lat

and *Uzzah* but those pious elders who, otherwise, have done great service to the faith in their own times. As the creative mind has not been in operation for quite long, there has been a continuous piling up of unresolved issues. Let me take a few examples to elaborate this point.

## The Palestine Question

For almost half a century Palestine has been a mega issue for the Ummah. The traditional Jewry believes that walking four cubic feet in the holy land of Canaan can ensure them a place in heaven. On the other, Muslims strongly feel that Palestine is their homeland not simply because they lived there for centuries but more so because, technically speaking, it is a *wakf* land and hence not negotiable. As both the parties in the conflict claim to have a rock-like stand, the 'holy' land has been turned into a butchering ground and there is no solution in sight. Those who are only emotionally involved with the Palestine problem, watching the conflict boiled out from a safe distance, can easily eulogise the valour and courage of Palestinian brothers and sisters, but ask the Palestinian mothers, sisters and daughters who lose their dear ones on a daily basis as how do they really feel. Recently, as a rethinking measure when we asked a number of scholars to come out with a possible solution, a dominant majority of them said that they foresee no solution at all. Shall we then let the things pass by watching them as insensitive and mute spectators?

The history of Islam is not only a history of great conquests; it is also a history of strategic retreats. If peace can be achieved through temporary retreats and if the interest of Islam can better be served by such measures, there is no point in insisting on a head on collision. The Prophet's strategic retreat in *hudaibia*, which the Qur'an terms a clear victory, is a clear signpost for all those who feel trapped in a blind alley. Today, unfortunately, the Ummah is

not in a position to take on the state of Israel, and the Muslim rulers, due to their own territorial and dynastic interests, are not willing to play a decisive role. Does it serve any purpose then that some unorganised, unarmed smaller groups just keep on feeding the struggle? Is the *wakf* land a holy cow for us? Or, given the enormous loss of human life we can reconsider the traditional *fiqhi* stand on the issue? I believe the least we can do is to activate our minds drawing on wisdom in the Qur'an.

## The Shia-Sunni Split

Among the many internal contradictions that Muslims have canonised in course of their history, the Shia-Sunni divide remains to be the most fatal and problematic. Initially a political dispute on succession, it took almost three centuries for both the sects to take a shape different from the other. Now the divide is generally seen as part of the divine scheme and hence unbridgeable. The development of Shia and Sunni Islam as distinct from the real Islam owes much to the heritage literature of polemical nature that though originated in the early second century took its distinctive ideological moorings in the 4th century hijra. Whereas the four great masters of *fiqh* have mainly shaped the Sunni Islam, the Shia Islam believes in the divine origin of their imams. The two forms of Islam that have pitched against each other since their inception draw their legitimacy not from the book of God or his prophet but from ordinary humans such as Abu Hanifa, Shafei and Jafer Al-Sadiq etc. who in their own time did render great service but due to our flawed perception of history have become some sort of idols for us. If Islam was perfected during the Prophet's time when the Qur'an was the only foundational document and Muslims fared well in the early era without pioneers of Shia or Sunni Islam, it is very much possible to



achieve that unison again provided we are willing to put aside the framers of Shia and Sunni Islam. So far history has been let free to determine the context and import of revelation. To know where we went wrong as also to rollback our deviations we need to give the revelation an upper hand. Rolling back of the Shia and Sunni Islam will not only redeem the Ummah of its perpetual malaise it will also usher in a big bang of ideas, a natural corollary of unadulterated Prophetic voice.

### *Aemmah Arba'*

#### or the Four Stumbling Blocks to Thinking

The framers of Sunni Islam have also uncannily divided it into at least four divergent, at times conflicting, schools of *fiqh*. The hay days of Muslim empire had often witnessed a pitched battle among divergent *fiqhi* factions. Ibn Batuta has recorded in great detail how the Shafeite and the Hambalite mobs had often collided in the streets of Baghdad. In fact the very canonisation of the four schools of *fiqh* in the 7th century hijra Egypt owe much to the *fiqhi* riots. The *fiqhi* division of Sunni Islam haunts us even today. In modern times, wherever the Muslims get an opportunity to establish an Islamic state it is difficult to resolve which *fiqhi* school should get the official status. In modern Pakistan, the internal feuds of various warring sects paved the way for secular elite to take control of the state apparatus. Recently, in the Taliban's Afghanistan where the narrow *Deobandi* version of the Hanafi School was the only valid religion, Muslims of other *fiqhi* persuasion lived almost a life of dhimmitude. The *fiqhi* divide is very deep, ingrained in the traditional Muslim psyche. It has the potential to jeopardise any future Islamic revival. To say that the future Islamic state shall be ruled by the majority *fiqh* is to ignore the sensitivity of the issue.

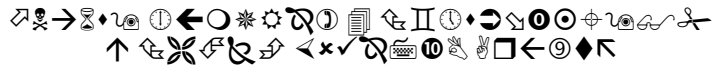
The *fiqhi* identity is based on the assumption that the specific *fiqhi* school alone epitomises the essence of Islam. How can a believer then forego his *fiqhi* identity simply for the convenience of a 'lesser Muslim' majority?

To achieve unity among our ranks as also to refurbish the broken fabric of Islam we urgently need to go back to the early era where Islam was conceivable without the four great *fuqaha*. In principle, the learned amongst us agree that the four *fuqaha* were not God-ordained. If Islam was available to the masses before their arrival on the scene, it is logical to conceive today the essence Islam, if not the codex, without them. This is a revolutionary idea and has the potential of putting to the track our centuries long ideological digressions. It has not been long when four simultaneous prayers plagued the holy Harem in Makkah, each *fiqhi* sect praying in isolation conforming to the *fiqhi* norms of a specific imam. It was left for the Najdi reformers of the early 20th century to wrap up simultaneous prayers and unite the Muslims under one prayer leader. If the Bedouin reformers of Najd, with their sheer political will, can undo a long established convention, why the 21st century reformers with amazing media at their command cannot rescue us from the *fiqhi* quagmire?

## Common Agenda & other Faith Communities

The early generation of Muslims were open to other faith communities and considered them as their natural ally. The Qur'an had approvingly called them as people of the book and at times even 'people of faith' while inviting them to accept the divine mission in toto:





The remnants of earlier prophetic traditions, despite their ideological dilution, were considered so close to neo-Muslims of the prophet's time that Qur'an sanctioned to have close social relations with them. Socialising with them was encouraged as their food was declared *halaal* and Muslim men were allowed to marry their women. The Qur'anic verses allowing social mixing with the people of the book still exist but they are no longer followed in practice owing to their virtual annulment by the *fuqaha* of the past. There has been a gradual shift in our perception of the other. Instead of considering the other faith communities as our allies, today we insist on condemning them as *kuffar*. We do not want to allow other faith communities to flourish right within the boundaries of an Islamic state. Contrary to this, in the hey day of Islamic *Dawah* when Islam was generally seen as a liberating mission and the progressive Islamic ideology was conquering the hearts and minds beyond the frontiers, the major cities of *dar-al-Islam* were not only the abodes of a sizable non-Muslim population, in many cities they even constituted majority, and their houses of worship were buzzing with the praise of God. Those were momentous times when we considered ourselves as the leader of all faith communities and sought their support for establishing a Godly society. This attitude however gradually changed during the Abbasid period partly due to the emergence of Arab *asabiyyah* – the new cohesive force, and partly due to the psychological impact of the crusades. The *fuqaha* of the time felt compelled to review their relations with 'the other'. What otherwise was a temporary measure to safeguard the empire, later came to be regarded as orthodox Islamic dictates for all time to come.

We also need to readjust the orthodox image of *shibh ahle kitab* – faith communities not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. Our scholars are not ignorant of the theological arguments put forward

by Al-Bairuni and Shahristani who advocated that Hindus of India, by virtue of their canon of faith, deserve to be treated as ‘people of the book’. If some God-conscious sects among the Hindus fulfil the criteria of *ahle kitab*; belief in God, in the hereafter, in His books and the prophets and an emphasis on doing good – there is no point in denying what God has decreed for them. As people of faith, they are our allies and should be warmly welcomed to join us in our prophetic struggle. Socialising with them, which includes dining with them and taking their women in marriage, is more in fulfilment of the Qur’anic decree rather than a practical necessity. But for all this to happen we need to have a critical look at the long established *fiqhi* tradition which has virtually made the Qur’anic injunctions redundant.

The *fiqhi* mind that blossomed to its full during the Abbasid era later became an antithesis of the mind itself as the process of thinking stopped and blind imitation of the past scholars became the norm. Hence onward all our efforts to revive the Ummah have, in effect, been an exercise in reviving a medieval outlook and setting. The upholders of the last revelation who were to lead the world till end time feel shy of the modern world and are struggling to recreate a medieval utopia to which they emotionally belong. A complete ban on the process of thinking has been disastrous. It has virtually turned some very basic and powerful institutions of Islam into mock-plays.

Let me elaborate. Friday sermons have played a key role in the collective life of Muslims from the very beginning. In non-Arab countries, which today contain the dominant majority of Muslims, our insistence on Arabic as official language of the sermon has reduced this lively institution into a mere ritual. Neither the speaker understands what he utters nor does the audience find any rationale for this orchestrated waste of time. In a modern mosque when the muezzin stands up before the pulpit calling the faithful to sermon and during the *adhan* he slightly turns towards the right and then

to the left, few realise that these actions have outlived their relevance. In the Prophet's Medina turning to the right and the left helped the message echo in different directions. Today, digital amplifiers more effectively do the same. With the growth of Medina into a township, we are told, when it was no longer convenient for the believers to gather immediately, especially those who lived in new settlements at a distance from the Prophet's mosque, Caliph Omer responded to this new situation by adding one more azan before the sermon allowing everybody enough time to get ready for Friday congregation. If caliph Omer can institute another azan to keep this institution in tune with the time and safeguard its efficacy, do we still need to turn to the right and the left during the azan when the amplifiers are well in use? And can we allow Friday sermons in local languages in places where neither the speaker nor the listener has an ear to appreciate this poetry in prose.

Yet another reflection of the frozen mindset can be seen in our insistence on visibility of the moon to determine a lunar month. For many amongst us it is a matter of creed. In a world where days and nights are measured in seconds and where we have comprehensive tables giving us the exact date and time of the visibility of moon, of the break of dawn and sunset with utmost precision, our insistence on traditional modes only speak of our unspoken belief that probably a medieval feel is necessary to live an authentic religious life. No better is the situation in the *salafi* world which otherwise is supposed to be the abode of pure, creative Islam. Every year, prior to *Eid-ul-Fitr*, the Saudi street witnesses an extraordinary display of heaps of wheat grains in small plastic bags. Devout Muslims consider it obligatory to pay off the *Eid* charity in grains as laid out by *Hambali fuqaha* of the past. In a consumer society, where baked bread is available even to the most poor, offering so little amount of wheat to the needy is more an embarrassment than charity. Such actions only enhance one's awkward feeling that to be a Muslim means to live emotionally in the medieval times.

Envisioning Islam in essentially a medieval garb has kept us far removed and for so long from the modern day realities that now our internal discourses show no inkling of the great global responsibility that we as the last Ummah were supposed to shoulder. The issues that we have been debating for centuries are communitarian in nature and bear little significance for the global community. While other nations are passionately involved in futuristic discourses such as future sources of energy, the possibility of hydrogen fuel, the future of stem cell research, the likely impact of DNA Revolution, ecological imbalance and the menace of globalization etc., we Muslims are still debating whether it is lawful to pronounce three *talaq* in one sitting, whether Muslim women are allowed to expose their face, whether there is a room for digital photography in Islam. Even today, some traditional circles are seriously involved in finding a *fiqhi* ratio legis for allowing the TV in Muslim homes. They argue that the image on a TV screen is not a photo but an image and hence be allowed. Irrespective of the seeming religiosity of these arguments, it is not difficult to conclude that the Muslim discourse does not resonate with their claimed status of being the Ummah of the last prophet, a mercy to all mankind. As Muslim discourse became a battleground for trivial polemics having no bearing on the world around us, it was natural for them to recede to the trashcan of history from the once celebrated position of world leadership. Those eager to make a new beginning must accept beforehand that the traditional mind will lead them to nowhere. A new Muslim mind is the minimum to start with. Without reactivating our brains we would even fall short of realising in full the nature and magnitude of our malaise. The Qur'anic exhortations to look, think, reflect and visualise (*unzur, tafakkur, ta'qqul* and *tadabbur*) can empower us with a confident and enlightened mind which may accede to the fact that the 21st century issues have not been settled by the *fuqaha* of the past and the eternal light of revelation can guide us the same way as it did the great *fuqaha* of the past.

We live in a time about which there is a widespread feeling that it is already over; that something very essential has moved out from our being and we live as residue of a civilization past. What we call post-modern; rightly sums up our predicament. One wonders how we moderns who are very much alive on this planet, can live in post-modern times. But those aware of the civilizational impasse know it well that the more we confront a sense of loss and the possibility of an escape diminishing, the more we are struck by inexplicable feelings of an impending doom.

## Tension in the Muslim Mind

We Muslims live with a paradox. If we are really the last chosen nation entrusted to lead the world till end time, why it is so that we are unable to arrest our own decline. Despite the fact that today the Muslim taken together constitute almost a two billion strong population and they are strategically located in energy-rich lands on which depends the future of the world, they are reduced to mere consumers. The new technology has revolutionised the way we live



and it is still forcing us to live differently, but we as a nation have almost no share in this process and hence have completely lost control of the happenings around us. The new inventions and the pace of scientific discoveries have confronted us with a host of mind boggling and disturbing questions. For example, what will be the social and ethical fall out of the DNA revolution? If human living on other planets becomes a reality, or if future researches point to arrest the process of aging thus increasing the longevity to a thousand years, how will it affect us? Or, imagine a future scenario where each individual will bear an identifying genetic code or possibly due to a microchip ingrained on him will find himself a prisoner of the tech-world. Can we or should we stop this technological menace? These and many other similar questions may have a bearing on our common future, but the Muslim nation is not in a position to take a decisive stand on any such issues. Unfortunately, those who shape the future agenda today are not among us.

Yet the Qur'an keeps mentioning that the global supremacy and domination is the hallmark of believers:



Those entrusted with world leadership are the people engaged in good deeds. They are, to use the Qur'anic term, the *ibad as-saleheen* per se. And as compared to the *abd saleh* who is destined to have leadership role, the *kafir* or rebel of God has to be on the margin. A terrible fate awaits him not only in the hereafter, in this world too he is reduced to a non-entity, the *saaghiroon*.

The *kafir*, due to his blind and uncreative opposition to the natural process eventually gets isolated. Devoid of a role in the policy-making, like the animal he lives only on material plane. *Kufr* and *Iman* are not cultural identities. In fact, they are two binary opposing worldviews. Whenever a prophet blows the trumpet of life, the otherwise barren land of spiritualism gets revived and a host

of submitters to God emerge from the long forgotten nations. However, when the same nation of submitters, in course of time, loses the zest for life and many among them take on a destructive course, they unknowingly engineer their own fall. Among the believing nations those who commit *kufur* or bid farewell to life affirming attitude, usually fail to realise that in their vainglory of false religiosity they have in fact walked away from the road to submission. The Qur'an tells us in great detail how the Jewish nation which once was entrusted with world leadership came to believe that that this privilege was their birth right. They failed to realise that this chosenness was due to their adherence to the Torah and not simply because they belonged to a particular nation.

Much like the Jews, we Muslims too have the delusion that despite our muddled religious outlook and the obvious shift in our worldview the world leadership is reserved for us and for ever. Nevertheless, the stark realities of life and the fact that for centuries we find ourselves on a slippery slope give us a very different and awkward feeling. Bridging the gap between our declared position and the manifest reality that surrounds us today is no easy proposition. This dichotomy has led some of our thinkers to believe that the world leadership or supremacy that the Qur'an declares a logical outcome of a life of faith has nothing to do with political or cultural domination in this world. Instead, as they argue, it amounts to excellence in the realm of spiritualism alone. The disparity between the promise and the reality has forced them to conclude that probably what the Qur'an promises is a sort of spiritual ecstasy in this world and salvation in the next. In their opinion, the material world is heaven for the non-believers and a prison house for the people of faith. Then there are other ultra-mystical sects among Muslims who believe that given the deplorable condition of the Muslim Ummah, a remedy is being worked out in providence where the assembly of *autad wa aqtab* -- the mythical seers of the spiritual realm, is likely to take a decision soon.

Such mythical, irrational and defeatist interpretations of the world around us have only added to our woes as they deliberately divert our attention from the root cause of our malaise. The mythical mind that has been in the making from the days of Abu Hamid Ghazali has not only been successfully postponing a creative debate on vital issues, it has also failed in creating a new theological paradigm to meet the demands of our time. Thus we are forced to live with this theological paradox: if we are the last Ummah chosen to lead the world till end time, why do we have this awkward feeling that the reign of history has slipped from our hands.

Let me elaborate. In Islam, faith without action is not acceptable. Here, faith and action, i.e., *iman* and *amal salih*, move hand in hand. Together they complement each other. In fact, a good deed is the logical outcome of sincere faith, an extension of the faith itself. Whereas as a sincere believer continuously testifies to his faith by his good deeds, the *munafiq* or hypocrite on the other hand, by his/her contradictory actions goes on negating what (s)he verbally declares. The early generation of Muslims were aware of the implications of faith and hence they saw for themselves a pro-active role in the universe. As upholders of the last revelation they were required to compete (فاستبقوا الخيرات), collaborate and take lead in acts of goodness. Then, *amal salih* was taken as an act of common good. As the Qur'an had projected its Prophet as the mercy unto all, it was quite logical that the good deeds emanating from followers of the prophet become a solace for the entire humanity.

Muslim scholars have generally confused *amal salih* with ritual worship. A close reading of the text, however, would clearly indicate that *amal salih* is much more than the ritual worship or obligatory prayers such as *salah* and *zakat* etc. It is rather an advanced though essential stage of faith:





Urging the faithful to get involved in *amal salih*, an act distinguished from the obligatory *salah* and *zakat*, clearly indicates that a life in faith goes a long way. If *amal salih* is so clearly other than the ritual worship, then what it is. The Qur'an tells us, oft and on, that all those who submit to Gad and do good deeds are people for whom a place is assured in the heaven:



And this assurance is not for Muslims alone. Even those who come from other faith communities such as the Jews, the Christians, the Sabians, they too, if committed to *amal salih*, deserve fair reward (أجرهم عند ربهم) and an assured amnesty from all kinds of worries in the hereafter (لا خوف عليهم ولا هم يحزنون). The *amal salih* is the only criterion of assured success both in this world and in the next for all faith communities, no matter what prophetic tradition they come from. No wonder then, if our loud proclamations of faith devoid of *amal salih* do not yield long awaited results.

The *amal salih*, as propounded in the Qur'an, is an all-inclusive term for general wellbeing in consonance with nature. It is a positive contribution of man to add his own goodness to the universe by delicately and thankfully availing the bounties of the natural world. From keeping the city clean for fellow citizens to inviting them to the worship of one Lord God, or inventing a cure for a deadly disease, each action comes within the purview of *amal salih*. Where as the believer due to his life-affirming and proactive attitude is always busy in making the world a better place to live in, the *kafir* is always hell bent on destroying the harmony of this phenomenal world. In the Qur'anic worldview, *kufir* is opposite to *amal salih*:



Those who lack a creative, proactive and life-affirming attitude or who are unable to contribute their own share of *amal salih* in the universal projects of common good or who do not think beyond their communitarian interests, such nations find themselves in close allegiance with *kufir*. Such nations find it difficult to sustain a leadership role. This is exactly what had earlier happened with the Jews (كونوا قردة خاسئين) and the same has plagued the House of Islam today.

The Qur'an exhorts the believers to think, reflect and make use of the brain to its fullest, yet for the last many centuries the Muslim nation has not been a substantial part of common wellbeing projects, save assuming a leadership role. The modern world appears to us a radically different place as compared to the past when the Ummah's hegemony went unchallenged. The large-scale deployment of modern gadgets, the mass transportation through jumbo jets, the invention of radio, TV, computer and the internet, have not only revolutionised our life, they have also brought knowledge and information within the easy reach of common man. Much has been written on the failure of anti-biotics and the unhealthy side effects of modern medicines, yet we cannot ignore the fact that over-all health sciences have greatly contributed in improving the condition of our life. There were many selfless people who devoted their entire life to scientific researches and who took great pains in carrying out successful inventions. We may not know their names or nationality but for their good deeds or *amal salih* they deserve appreciation from their Lord. It was due to their hard work that today, in the 21st century, we are in a position to breath in the cyber-world, a human extension of the majestic world of God. No doubt, such and the like projects of common good that appear today as purely western constructs owe much to the great masters of the Muslim East of the medieval age, but for the last many centuries

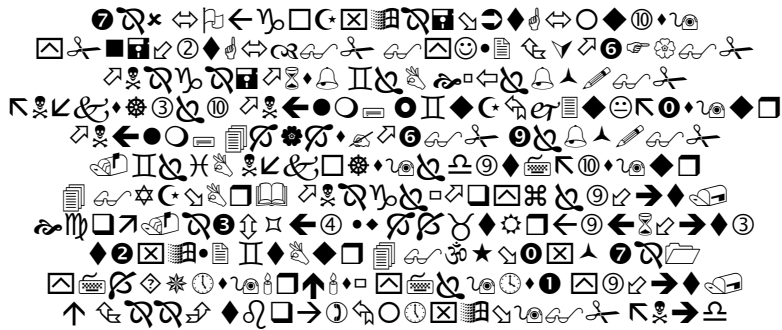
our share has been minimal. The orthodox Muslims even find it difficult to call such acts of common good as *amal salih*.

The closing of the Muslim mind did not come about in one day. Under the influence of *tasawuf*, as early as in the Abbasid Baghdad, Muslims had come to believe that an austere living and resignation were the essence of faith. The monastic living was in vogue that guaranteed the faithful multiple rewards for each mystical formula uttered thus leaving no room for the pain of thinking or pondering on the signs of God. As the emerging Sufi orders of the time were promising a short cut to salvation few would feel tempted to devote their life to the cause of common good. If uttering a particular formula or jumble of words could guarantee salvation, it was sheer waste of time and energy to reflect on the forces of nature or to decipher such forces for improving life on this earth. Although it is no secret that the Qur'an has great appreciation for all those people who reflect as to how the rain comes down from the sky and how the same rain produces from the same soil grains of different variety and colour. Astounded by the awe of God as they are, the Qur'an declares them as true scholars. But our decline was so steep that we even changed the definition of a scholar and all those who had nothing to do with reflecting on the signs of God in the natural world or had no interest in serious researches came to be regarded as scholars simply because they had named their high school certificate as *aalamiyat* and called their graduates as ulema, or scholars. Similarly, the concept of good deed or *amal salih* underwent a radical change. Instead of doing something really good we came to believe that uttering a mystically proven formula a hundred thousand times, or counting God's name on a sack of seeds, or leisurely turning one's finger on an impressive rosary of thousand beads were really the good deeds that could cause wonders in our life. Such pseudo good deeds were vehemently condemned by no less than a man of Caliph Omer's stature in the very early days of Islam. Nevertheless, the emergence of clergy in the Muslim

society who always had a soft corner for such spiritual vagaries and the social prominence accorded to religious seers made it difficult to shun this alien notion altogether. Once this change in our perception about the good deeds set in, its fall-out on the Muslim psych was disastrous. While other nations were busy in various projects of common good thereby maintaining their leading role on issues that concerned the world, we Muslims due to our abstinence from *amal salih* found ourselves isolated and marginalised. Even those amongst us who willy-nilly participated in such projects in their personal capacity had always had an uncomfortable feeling of guilt that probably they were not on the right course. As they lived with a guilty conscience and wore a split personality, they could hardly achieve excellence.

Whereas this mistaken notion about the common good or *amal salih* kept most of sincere Muslims engaged in futile mystical exercises, it compelled many rational minds to take refuge in secularism. The newly invented tools of *amal salih* needed no apprenticeship nor posed any physical or intellectual challenge for the practitioners of faith. More so, they successfully helped create an ivory tower for those religiously inclined people who sought a moratorium on disturbing questions. In our own time, the ever-growing popularity of Sufi Islam or religious passivity and the general acceptance of non-Qur'anic terminologies such as *chilla* (the forty-day religious frivolity), *gasht* (spiritual wanderings in group) etc. point to the fact that a dominant number of Muslims do not want to confront this vitally important question: why despite so much of religious assertion Muslims are no match for a leadership role. The Qur'anic promise of world leadership is clear and candid, though: 'Allah has promised to those amongst you who submit and do acts of goodness, that He will, of surety grant them in the land authority and power as He granted it to those before them'





The promise of *istikhlaf*, of worldly power, for the submitters who are committed to good deeds is obviously for this world and hence it cannot be postponed for the hereafter. The Qur’anic God is just; He even takes care of goodness worth an atom’s weight



Can we expect a just God to ignore the good deeds of other faith communities and instead keep us at the helm of affairs simply because we live under the delusion of being the ‘*khair ummah*’, the best of communities?

The early generation of Muslims were open to other faith communities and considered them as their natural ally. Socialising with them was encouraged as their food was declared halaal and



Muslim men were allowed to marry their women. The Qur'anic verses allowing social mixing with the people of the book still exist but they are no longer followed in practice owing to their virtual annulment by the fuqaha of the past. There has been a gradual shift in our perception of the other. Instead of considering the other faith communities as our allies, today we insist on condemning them as kuffar.

## The Case for a Reformed Islam

Some 1.6 billion people on this planet believe that by virtue of being the followers of the last prophet they have been entrusted to play a very special role in future history. This belief in their chosenness (*khair ummah*) is as much part of their faith as the belief in the oneness of God almighty, His messengers, the hereafter and the

divine agency of angels. This ideological stance of world leadership as opposed to the stark realities of real world where they find themselves in the web of global enmity and hatred have created a spilt personality among them. If we are really the *khair ummah* -- the chosen people to lead history till end time, why for centuries we find ourselves so much on the margins of history, they would ask.

That the Muslim community is in a state of perpetual decline and that something has gone awry in her centuries long journey are no novel contentions any more. However, so far Muslim intellectuals and reformers have been concentrating on mere reforming the Muslim society. Reforming or purging the historical Islam of alien elements has not been their focus of attention. They conveniently ignored the fact that historical Islam as it was transmitted to us through generations had absorbed varieties of individual perceptions and human interpretations. The canonization of the four schools of *fiqh* in Sunni Islam in the 9th century Hijra further muddled the Muslim mind. We took our intellectual digressions as the given, as if the four great *fuqaha* were part of the divine scheme, as Waliullah ad-Dehlawi would later come to argue in the 18th century. *Ijtihad*, an independent and fresh reading of the text, was accepted in principle but not to the extent of leading to founding a fifth school. In short, we were only allowed to think within the *fiqhi* paradigms of the four schools and that too without any critical appraisal of the intellectual premise on which these schools were founded. A truly fresh or independent reading of the text, it was supposed, demanded a *mujtahid mutlaq*, a repository of all-knowledge, an all-knowing legendary mind whom the later centuries had stopped producing, we were told. Bringing thus the Muslim mind to a complete halt was disastrous, a point that I shall later return to.

The modern day Islamic movements vociferously argue that returning to Islam will once again take the Muslim Ummah back to its glory. However, they fail to realise that the kind of ideological package that we are delivering to the beleaguered Ummah today in

the name of Islam is not the same that was once put forward by the holy prophet in the 6th century Arabia. I believe that the prophetic Islam in its pristine purity needs to be reconstructed before we embark on any Islamising mission.

The very fact that the Muslim Ummah is no single monolithic group and that there are many varied perceptions of Islam often in conflict with one another, is enough indication that reforming historical Islam has a religious ratio legis. Each group among Muslims draws its legitimacy from its claim that it alone has inherited the essence of true Islam and hence it alone has the sole right to salvation. According to this view that is held with varying intensity by almost all sects and religious groups, the other sects need to be reformed to bring them back to original Islam. But no group allows the same reformation within its own ranks lest it should end up in the dismantlement of the group itself.

Let us elaborate. For example, the *salafis* in principle, do not believe in *taqleed*, a blind following of the great *fuqaha* of the past. Instead, they encourage going back to the Qur'an and Sunnah. But their visions of the sunnah and search for it in historical material have made them prisoners of historical constructs. Which book can be more authentically helpful in reconstructing the spatial and temporal qualities of the prophet's time than the Qur'an itself? Any reading of the Qur'an in the light of historical reportage is bound to incorporate human misgivings. The *ahl-al-Hadith*, as they proudly call themselves, place extra-ordinary emphasis on the books of Hadith, which, by any honest assessment are history in a most authenticated form that humans can imagine yet not free from human error and by no count as pure and definite as the exact words of the Revelation. Purging historical Islam of the alien and human interpretative elements of the past would only be possible if we have the courage and insight to critically evaluate historical and interpretative writings in the light of the Qur'an and not the vice versa.

So far *Ijtihad* has been mainly confined to finding a correlation among the four conflicting schools of *fiqh*. We have been vaguely silent on the issue whether it is possible to imagine an Islamic living without the four great *fuqaha* of the past. If the great *fuqaha* were not God-ordained and if Islam was perfected long before their arrival on the scene, why do we fear that wrapping them up once and for all would dismantle our religious structure? Is really the *fiqhi* material of the past so essential and central to Islam? Is *fiqh* binding like the Qur'an and *uswah* of the prophet? Not so, if we ask the Qur'an which urges everybody to think, reflect and extract his own share of the guidance. The Qur'an, in its own words, is the *bayanul-lin-nas* or the *hudal-lil-muttaqeen* i.e. everyman's guide to salvation. Humans are free to formulate -- for convenience's sake-- a code of living for their own time and context but this should not attain sanctity for the later generations. In short, we should not associate any other book with the Book of God.

*Taqleed* or blind imitation can lead us to nowhere. It can only create an illusion of religiosity. The Israelites who were once chosen for world leadership found the reins of history slipping from their hands when they came to believe that their elders had extracted the essential guidance from the Torah and for them it was only to follow the Talmudic edicts. Without the Talmud it became impossible for them to think of a religious living. Things came to such a pass that the *fiqh* of Hillal and Shimmaei and the words of rabbi Akiva became inseparable parts of Judaism. Some even came to believe that rabbi Aikva knew more of the intent of the Torah than Moses himself. Such misplaced notions about the divine revelation that it has been exhausted in full by the elders and that there is nothing left for us to think place barriers right inside our minds.

The Israelites, despite their long tradition of erudite scholarship, were unable to reconnect themselves with the Torah; for they found the intent of the text heavily fenced and guarded by the Talmudic

writers. And as they held the Talmud as sacred as the text itself, the intellectual detours became simply unsurpassable for them. By bringing the mind to a complete halt they engineered their own doom. They lost their creativity and leadership. In the words of Qur'an they were soon reduced to the *qeradatun khaseein*, an aping nation with no self-confidence and self-respect. Any nation that ceases to offer a creative solution or, as the Qur'an puts it, solely relies on the wisdom of the dead –



is doomed to perish.

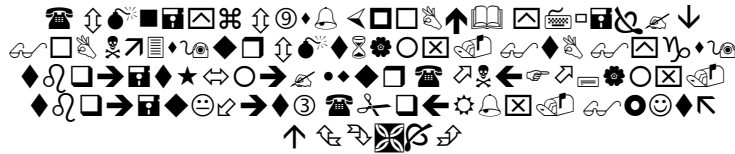
## Historical Islam vs. Reformed/ Pristine Islam

Historical Islam is a cultural construct. It is an amalgam of Islam plus many other elements. Attracted by the contemporary debates of their time, Muslim scholars deemed it necessary to readjust their visions of Islam. And they were not to be blamed for this. No religious philosophy operates in a vacuum. It has to address the contemporary mind and the milieu that has shaped it. It is for the later generations to distinguish between the message and the milieu. In the Abbasid Baghdad, the translation of Greek corpus of knowledge into Arabic dazzled the Muslim mind. The early religious communities and their scholars who were converted to Islam influenced the study of Islam with the methodology that they had previously mastered. Greek knowledge and Talmudic mode of enquiry influenced the development of *fiqhi* literature to a great extent. And the emergence of *Taswwuf* among Muslims owes much to Christian austerity that had a long history of abandoning the world and which had gathered romantic appeal in the materially well-off Muslim society of the time. Then there were personal

inclinations of some towering individuals that went into the shaping of many divergent versions of Islam in course of time. The many colours of historical Islam drew mainly from human interpretative material yet they all were considered legitimate as the interpreters of Islam had attained by then the status of religious authority. Each sect among Muslims soon created a set of books that not only distinguished them from the other groups but also controlled and governed their religious sensibilities. For example, the historical reportage about the prophet became key to Islamic understanding among the *ahl-al-Hadith* while among the Shiites no understanding of Islam was authentic unless it came down to them through the 'infallible' imams. And in the mainstream Sunni Islam it became almost impossible to conceive Islam without the corpus *fiqh*. Latter, with the arrival of religious organisations on the scene, the founder's writings became pivotal to Islamic understanding. The emergence of many humanly made Qur'ans parallel to the Book of God resulted into the fragmentation of one Ummah into many warring factions. Once the human Qur'ans came to play a key role in our religious life, it became almost impossible to undo the human misgivings that had cropped up in the writings of our ulema. From Shafei to our time, it has been an accepted convention to look at the message of God through humanly constructed prisms. When Abu Hamid Al-Ghazzali first published his books he was vehemently opposed by the ulema of the time. The protest was so strong that his books were burnt in public across the Muslim world. But gradually the opposition subsided and his views melted into the mainstream Muslim thinking. Today, the same Ghazzali is considered as the *hujjatul-Islam*, the touchstone of Islamic understanding. The proponents of historical Islam are very much like the passengers of a crowded train; initially they resist any new comer who enters the compartment, later, when he is somehow accommodated, he too joins the chorus of resistance. The mixing of

the divine with human intent is an on-going phenomenon in historical Islam.

Contrary to its historical counterpart, the pristine Islam believes that it is preserved and for ever in the pages of the Qur'an and it can be reconstructed in full at any point of time. The proponents of the pristine Islam look at the Qur'an as a contemporary document and a self-sufficient book of guidance. They believe that there is no harm in benefiting from the learned elders of the past but they should not be binding on us at all. They do not discard the heritage literature altogether yet they believe that the learned elders are not the final word. Glorifying our elders will do no good to us:



A frank and honest appraisal of the interpretative material on Islam, spanning some thirteen centuries, will be an epoch-making initiative. It will be like constructing anew the long forgotten dicta of Islam. We should not lose sight of the fact that it is basically the power of ideas that shape the destiny of a nation. Reconstructing the Qur'anic dicta for our time will radically change the uncreative mindset of the Ummah which considers the addition of copious footnotes to the old books as the peak of academic achievement.

The call for a re-evaluation of existing literature on Islam in a revelatory paradigm should not be taken as a mere academic move. Conventional academic movements can only add further shades to the existing colours of Islam. Reconstructing the pristine Islam would demand from us a willing mind and a receptive soul. That is to say, the modern day recipient has to be fully aware of the splendour of revelation and at the same time has to have the essential self-esteem and confidence that he, and no one else, is the addressee of this great message. Being human, no doubt, we have our own limitations. But despite all our failings God wants us to

uphold and comprehend His sublime message. He commands us, time and again, to apply our brains in getting to the divine intent. Each person has to make his own effort. This alone can pave the way for the re-opening of the Book that lies abandoned for centuries due to our excessive reliance on the Elders.

The Qur'an addresses the common man. It is a holy thread that directly connects man with God. The emergence of a church-like situation in Muslim society, the emergence of a clergy who claim the sole right to interpret God's intent is an alien notion that made its way in the Muslim thought during the Abbasid Empire. Pristine Islam does not believe in any religious hierarchy. God has not appointed anybody as His representative on this earth nor the prophet nominated any individual or specific group as his deputy. Instead, we Muslims believe that as upholders of the Last Revelation the Ummah as a whole has been assigned to carry on the prophetic mission. The prophet during his last moments purposely abstained from appointing any body as the leader of the Muslims lest it may give undue edge to a specific individual over the others. Yet despite this so clear anti-clergy ideological stance, the presence of an organised religious hierarchy among Muslims clearly indicates that something has struck at the very root of Islamic mission. Like the Catholic Church where one finds Pope, Bishop and Father we too have *Samahtu-sh-Shaikh*, *Fazilatu-sh-Shaikh* and among the Shiites a clerical order of *Aayatullah-al-Uzma*, *Aayatullah* and *Hujjatul-Islam* etc. The ulema of Islam no matter how different or heavenly they might appear to be, have not descended from the sky and hence their utterances should not go unchecked.

What could not be done in the past centuries can be achieved now. Let the sublime light of revelation shine our way!



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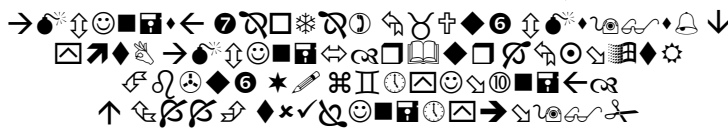
## Undoing the Church in Islam

In earlier times, Islam was marked by simplicity and spontaneity. When Abraham, the archetypal Muslim and the role model for all

submitters to come, was asked to submit (his will to God), he did it with utmost spontaneity; he said: ‘I submit to the Lord and Cherisher of the universe’ (Qur’an, 2:131).

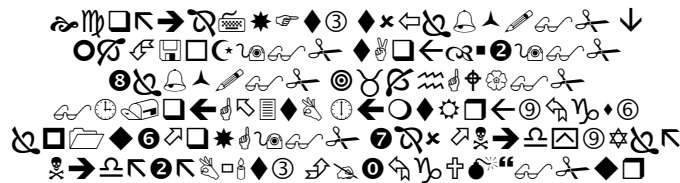


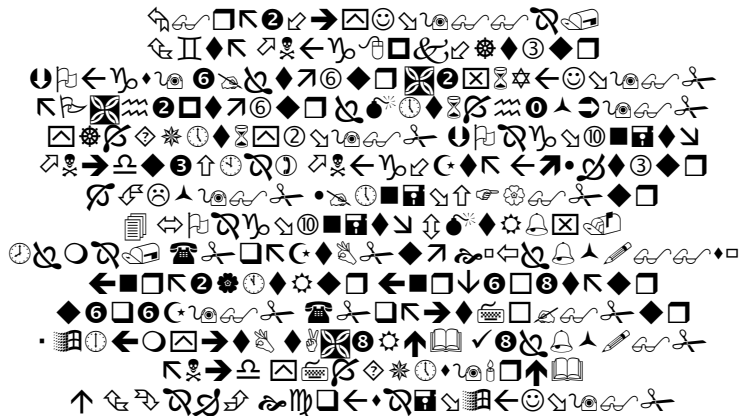
And similar was the case with the Queen of Sheba who wasted no time in accepting the truth once it became clear to her that Solomon was no ordinary king but a messenger of God. She made a simple confession: ‘O my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul, now I do submit, like Solomon, to the Lord of the universe (Qur’an, 27:44).



Submitting to God then was a simple affair till the organized religions arrived on the scene.

In the history of mankind religion has never been defeated by irreligion or atheism. Rather, its worst enemy has always been the organized or institutionalized religion. In the New Testament we find Jesus bitterly criticizing the Pharisees (Rabbis and Shauykh of Jesus’ time) for ignoring the most important things; justice, mercy and faith. The leaders of organized religion though they pretend to be, are in fact hypocrites who ‘strain out a gnat and swallow a camel’. Again, to quote Jesus: ‘they are like beautiful mausoleums full of dead men’s bones, and of foulness and corruption’ (Matthew, 24-27). And in the Qur’an we are told that one of the main objectives of the Meccan Prophet (*an-nabi al-ummi*) was to relieve mankind of the yoke of religious formalism: ‘from their heavy burdens and from the yokes that are upon them’ (Qur’an, 7:157).





Islam recognizes no church and authorizes no specific group of people to perform religious rites. Rather it empowers each individual to be his own Pope and his own intermediary to God. However, despite this very clear ideological stand, it is an unfortunate fact that gradually, in course of time, a church-like phenomenon stealthily cropped up in the body politic of Islam and a group of religious bandits, the ulema monopolized the right to interpret God’s words. This did not happen in one day. We need to pin-point the major digressions in our intellectual history, a point that I will later return to.

The first generation of Muslims looked at the Qur’an as a book of guidance for the commoner and the elite alike, *hudallil muttaqeen* or *bayanul-lin-nas*, to use the Qur’anic expressions. As for those issues that were not explicitly mentioned in the Book, it was not difficult for this generation of Muslims to reach an agreement given the basic Qur’anic guidelines to maintaining a balance between justice and mercy. These judgments, however, despite engaging the best minds of the time were not static or eternal truths that would deliver the same standard of justice even when the circumstances had completely changed. When Omer, the second caliph, felt compelled to modify some of the accepted norms that were in force during the tenure of Abu Bakr or even the Prophet himself, he was simply asserting that one should look into the spirit behind the

norm and not the norm itself. Omer made many radical changes to the norms (*sunan*) that his predecessors had set in. For example, he took a radically different stand on *moalleftatul quloob* – the financial help usually offered to pacify potential enemies or to win the heart of neo-converts. He also introduced major changes in the way booty was distributed and took a firm stand on the nature of the conquered lands. Yet he was sure that his measures were better suited to ensure justice in the changed situation.

In the early era of Islam when the caliph or their governors, before making a decision on the issue in question, considered it necessary to look into the accepted norms – or the *sunan* as they called it, they were mainly culling from the cumulative wisdom of generations. Justice was their main concern and given the basic Qur'anic guidelines it was always wise to draw on many minds to evaluate if the specific *sunan* or *maruf* still held promise of delivering justice. Employing one's mind then was also part of the accepted norm. Those engaged in this intellectual activity were held in high esteem. They were called *ahl-ar-ray*, men of sound opinion. However, drawing on the cumulative wisdom is one thing and the search for legitimacy is something else. Till the end of first century hijra to be an *ahl-ar-ray* was an honour, a social recognition that the individual's counsel can be trusted. But with the beginning of the second century, owing to the state patronage extended to the collectors of Hadith, the intellectual scene gradually changed. If the *sunan* can be looked into to draw on cumulative wisdom, they argued, the prophet's Hadith even if its chain of transmission is doubtful stands a better chance of enriching our understanding. By the end of the second century, advocates of this view who called themselves *ahl-al-Hadith* gained upper-hand. They dubbed the *ahl-ar-ray* as *ahl-al-hawa wal-bid'a*. This new trend to seek legitimacy in the Hadith literature for each and every action eventually culminated in the production of numerous books on Hadith, a better example of which was Musnad Ahmaed, a compendium of

some forty thousand Hadith. Abu Hanifa, who was one of the most towering figures among *ahl-ar-ray*, it is said, had come across only seventeen *Ahadith* and therefore he felt obliged to apply his own mind on the issues that confronted him.

The new quest for legitimacy beyond the Qur'an and in the historical material that filtered through individual perception of the narrators had a devastating impact on the Muslim mind. Now it was generally assumed that the key to the Qur'anic understanding lay in the historical material, the *aqwal-o-aasar*, that were preserved in numerous volumes and only the specialists were in a position to say something about it. The access to the Qur'an then, was effectively denied to the common man. Later, more stringent conditions were laid down for those willing to speak on 'religious' issues. Some declared that the memorization of at least some 300,000 *ahadith* was necessary to qualify one to issue religious edicts. Yet another group considered that mere committing the *al-Mabsoot* to memory was equally sufficient for qualifying a believer to be a mufti. As for the Qur'anic revelation, it was generally assumed that only those experts should approach the text who have a thorough knowledge of the Hadith corpus, of the historical context as well as sufficient insight into the *naasikh* and *mansookh* – the so called abrogated verses. In short, they came to believe that the Book of God was meant for the learned elite alone. According to Shafei it was only the prerogative of the learned elite, the *arrasikhoon fil ilm*. In his famous treatise *Al-Risalah* while arguing in support of *ijma* and the rationale behind it, he went to the extent of arguing that other than the scholars or the specialists the common man was under no obligation to be familiar with such issues.

The Qur'an as it was revealed on Mohammed is available to us, even today. But the religious leadership among Muslims, the hidden church, or the invisible Vatican does not allow us to engage with the revelation on our own. We are free to recite but not to interpret. Instead of solely relying on the revealed text, for centuries, we

Muslims have been continuously told that Islamic Law, the *Shariah*, draws from four main sources; the Qur'an, the Hadith, the *ijma* and the *qiyas*. By placing the Revelation at par with historical constructs and rational tools we made no ordinary mistake. While the revelation can assure us where to go, the analogical reasoning -- may we call it *istehsaan*, *istislaah* or *masaleh mursela*, based on a specific historical construct -- is bound to lead us in diametrically opposing directions. Yet there is no dearth of nice people who would believe that the *ijma* is a conclusive judgement for all time to come, and that the issue in question is sealed for ever. Some would even dare to place the *ijma* a level above the revelation. As the famed Hambli scholar Ibn Aqeel argues that the text despite being infallible can be abrogated by another verse. But, according to him, the same is not true with the *ijma*. Once it has taken place nothing can annul it. This mode of thinking that there are many issues on which a consensus has been reached and that they cannot be reopened for discussion, has put barriers right inside the Muslim mind. And as we are not supposed to make our own reading of the text, the sum total of our Qur'anic insight remains what our elders have drawn centuries ago and for their own social context. Being humans, as they were, for sure they have erred, but we are forced to carry their errors on our shoulders. For it is generally upheld that any departure from the conventional exegesis of the Qur'an, if not supported by any great masters of the past will fall under *tafseer bir-ray* and hence shall not be acceptable.

Can we muster enough courage then, to re-open the book of God? We live in a society that believes that the religious debate has come to a close, and for ever. There are people amongst us who sincerely believe that human mind is not capable any more of directly inferring guidance from the text and that the great *fuqaha* of the past have settled the issues once and for all. Some even have gone to the extent of believing that any verse of the Qur'an that does not go hand in hand with the opinions of the great masters is

either an inconclusive command or an abrogated one, as al-Karkhi the famous Hanafite *faqeeh* would make us believe. Then there is a widespread fallacy among Muslims that the emergence of the four orthodox schools of *fiqh* in Sunni Islam is a God ordained scheme and therefore it never occurs to us that we can conceive an Islamic living without them. Amidst the great masters of the past we often encounter a medieval feel as their *fiqh* was mainly a response to the Abbasid milieu and despite our clear-headedness that as compared to the corpus of *fiqh* the book of God can deliver us more, we are afraid of a fresh start. We are in fact afraid of the great intellectual revolution that a fresh reading of the text holds promise of.

Opening the book of God, yet again, will be an epoch-making event. It will change the very course of human history. No doubt, opening the book in the absence of the prophet has its own risks. But this is what God wants us to do as he is not going to send any other messenger. The book alone has to suffice in the absence of the prophet. The re-opening of the book involves some basic questions to be sorted out. Who should really command the sole authority to interpret God's word; the religious elite, the ulema, the learned members of the *fiqhi* assemblies, the supreme councils of ulema that enjoy state patronage or the ministries of Islamic and *waqf* affairs? Who is the legitimate spokesman of God on this earth? Can the Qur'an be studied in its own light and in contemporary milieu or it can only be studied in a chosen *fiqhi* paradigm? These questions deserve to be passionately debated before we embark on a re-opening.

Some eleven centuries have elapsed since the term *mazhab* in the given sense surfaced on the scene, at the end of the first century hijra. A derivative of *zahaba uazhebo*, initially it was meant to denote that a certain scholar of repute went this way or held that opinion. Then the term *mazhab*, that has split us today into many factions, was expressive of a mere methodology. And that was that. It was not in their wildest imagination that one day this academic



tool of analysis will result into such a deep division within the body politic of Islam and the future generations of Muslims will feel compelled to wear one of the *fiqhi* identities. Can there be a greater intellectual oppression than this that the people with sound mind and responsive heart feel compelled to align their understanding of the text with one of the great *fuqaha* of the past and take refuge in one of the *fiqhi* camps despite the fact that these *fiqhi* divisions are products of history and certainly not God-ordained by any stretch of the imagination. There were dozens of *fiqhi* schools and their masters who were lost in history. The four or five *mazahib* that survived mainly due to the state patronage accorded to them, have been in conflicting terms with one another since their inception. It remains yet to be decided who is *ahl-al-hawa* and who rightly deserves to be called *ahl-al-Hadith*, who is *ahl-al-adl* and who can rightly claim the mantle of *ahl-as-sunnah-wal-jama'ah*.

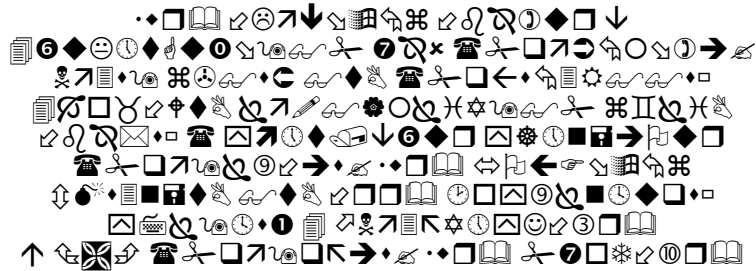
It is generally assumed that without the help of great *fuqaha* an Islamic living is unthinkable. Probably there is no greater fallacy than this under the sky that has kept the Muslim mind mesmerized for centuries. Be it the details involving obligatory prayers or who is liable to pay *zakat* or wherefrom one should embark on his journey for Haj, which of the issues our *fuqaha* have really sorted out? None. The fact is that in practical life despite being dubbed as the follower of a *mazhab* no body minutely follows his *faqeeh*. I have yet to come across a Hanafi who observes 40 *sunnah* of *salah* as laid down by Hanafi school or a Hambali who makes it a point to observe some 68 *sunnah* of *salah* as laid down by the Hambali *fuqaha*. The books of *fiqh* read like compendiums of differences on each single issue. There is virtually nothing on which the *fuqaha* can claim to have achieved consensus. But the general misconception that it is the *fiqh* that runs our religious machine has made us totally dependent on humans like ourselves. When a *faqeeh* or a *mufti* suggests to us to take out 40 buckets of water in order to clean a well of the foul smell of a dead dog or when a

hanafi *faqeeh* tells us to wash simply either corner of the cloth if it is dry and we do not know which part of the cloth got wet with urine, he does not say so under any heavenly guidance. Instead, he draws from the books of his masters or at times, though rarely, employs his own mind. The same mind that God has endowed with each one of us. There is no point then that instead of applying our own minds we solely rely on other humans like us. If the Shafei school provides us with a tall menu of permissible food and if the Hanafite has a relatively small list of the kind of meat that one should consume, it is a matter of personal preference influenced by spatio-temporal realities and has no divine origin whatsoever. The lawful and the prohibited are explicitly told in the Qur'an. Other than that, be it as how to shoo a wasp sitting right on our nose or how to deal with a small but irritating fly, we must fend for ourselves employing the best method suitable for our specific situations.

An effective re-opening of the book demands no less than the ending of the church-like situation in the Muslim society. As this invisible church, despite the elapse of some eleven centuries, has not manifested itself in any concrete single institution, it is beyond any Luther or Calvin to stand to this challenge. It needs no less than the charisma of the divine revelation to put an end to this vaguely felt and clandestinely organized institution. At most what we can do is to let the word of God speak for itself. We must convince every thinking mind amongst us that the methodology of Qur'anic understanding employed by our predecessors was most suited to their time. It was their way of being sure that justice is delivered and the Qur'anic intent is met. In a changed situation, unmindfully implementing the same may not meet the same standard of justice and at times can be counter-productive. When Omer, the second caliph, temporarily suspended the Qur'anic punishment of amputation of one's hand for theft, he was sure that this was the right measure to ensure justice in the days of famine. Similarly

when he discouraged Muslims to marry the women of *ahl-al-kitab* or when the latter *fuqaha* made it a point not to let Muslim men marry the women of *ahl-al-kitab* despite explicit Qur’anic sanction to do so, they were ensuring, in their own way, a social harmony where justice and peace reign supreme. Our historians also talk of Omerian stipulations that imposed on *ahl-adhdhimmah* (the non-Muslims) to wear *al-ghiar*, a long coat, so that they might be easily identified. They were not allowed horse riding or purchasing property or building churches in the Muslim lands. These stipulations were suited to their context. They may not produce the same social harmony in our radically changed world where reciprocity is the rule of diplomatic conduct.

Let us take some other examples. Taking a cue from the Qur’anic verse – ‘if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, three, or four...’



– when our *fuqaha* preferred to generalize this specific context for marrying up to four women at one and the same time probably they thought that making legitimate room for war widows was more in tune with achieving social justice. This situation may not last for ever. Then, in the Qur’an we encounter verses such as: ‘Had God willed He would have made you a single nation but it is His scheme to test you in what He has given you, so keep competing in goodness’





as we are not willing to absorb this psychological shock all our claims of re-opening will amount to putting further seal on it.

To redeem the Muslim mind from the traditional orthodox mould we need no less than breaking the mould itself. No ijtiḥād within the established fiqhī framework can bear fruits unless we change the rules of the game. So far orthodoxy has been closely guarding and controlling the ijtiḥād discourse. Within the established norms and as one of the four principles of fiqh, the very idea of ijtiḥād would be a non-starter. What is needed is not a mere ijtiḥād in the traditional sense of the term rather an ijtiḥād about the notion of ijtiḥād itself.

## Islam vs. Islamism

In the hey day of Islam when the last prophet of God lived amongst us it was highly unthinkable that anybody would claim to be an Islamist. To be a Muslim then was the ultimate in submission, the highest spiritual ladder that one can climb on. The great patriarch Abraham, the role model for all Muslims to come, was admirably given only this name. Then, Islam was more of an attitude than an identity.

Today we live in an age of Islamism. There are Muslims amongst us who pride themselves in being called as the Islamists. The emergence of this new sect among Muslims is a twentieth century phenomenon, nevertheless, it has its roots in the holier than thou attitude of the *fiqhi* mind of the bygone days. As opposed to Islam - the universal *deen* of God for all time, Islamism is a 20th century Muslim response to neo-colonialism. While Islam is a wide open gate for all those seeking solace, Islamism is generally seen as an ideology that can re-establish a Muslim hegemony. The appeal of Islamism is limited to the Muslims; the rest of the world perceives it as a threat. And while Islamism is still considered as a strong weapon in the hands of Muslims, the fact is that it has delivered little to the Muslims.

Let me explain. The modern day Islamist movements are either continuation or offspring of Islamic movements that came as a response to the termination of the Ottoman Caliphate. The

termination of the age-old institution had created havoc in the Muslim mind and the Muslim activists of that time were in favour of an ad hoc solution, to rebuild the fallen structure with a greater sense of urgency. And as they were in a hurry there was no time to deliberate as to why the Ottoman Caliphate had eventually crumbled. The Islamist organisations of various denominations sometimes despite their opposing and conflicting priorities were generally accepted as a good omen for the future of the Ummah. The Faith movement of Maulana Ilyas in India and the call for establishing an Islamic political system by Maudoodi in Pakistan and by Syed Qutub in Egypt, though contradictory in their strategy and priority, were conveniently looked at as movements leading to the same destination. The post-Khilafa movements and their thinkers also suffered from a systemic syndrome. It was unthinkable for them to perceive Islam without a political system, no matter how deviant or different this system had to be from the prophetic model. Today, despite a century of vigorous campaigning and fierce struggle we as an Ummah are no better. Worse still, the Islamist movement has not matured yet and we do not know where to go from here.

No doubt, as a nationalist movement Islamism has played a significant role in the past and it is still giving impetus to liberation struggles in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Iraq, to name a few. But if we look at them as prophetic movements, we will simply be mistaken. Islam and Islamism may appear to be overlapping, and at times they do, but in their essence they are two different ideologies altogether. Precisely speaking Islamism is a nationalist ideology that grew up among Muslims. At its best it speaks for Muslims alone. It had little in common with the prophetic Islam that ensures a better future for the entire humanity both in this world and in the hereafter.

Today the nationalist overtone of Islamism has overshadowed the true colour of Islam. At a point of history when Islam is being



demonized in the world media and every Muslim is taken as a potential terrorist it is not easy to distance ourselves from this ongoing civilization clash. It needs no less than the calibre of a prophet to fashion ourselves as upholders of a salvafic mission to all. Muslim nationalism, or Islamism as we call it, can only add fuel to the fire. Probably it is high time to put Islamism under strict scrutiny. We cannot ignore the fact that Islamism has created a depressing scenario in Muslim dominated countries such as Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt where the Islamist claimed the sole right to interpret God's commands. The Islamists were at war with their own nation. This large-scale bloodshed for a political change has cast serious doubts not only about their modus operandi but also about the nature of their Islamicness. In 1991, during the election campaign in Algeria, when Ali Benhaj stated that the legislative elections that he expected to win were 'the last in Algeria', he was claiming the sole right to interpret and implement Islam. This self-conceit of the modern day Islamists who otherwise appear to be democratic has its roots in the *fiqhi* milieu of the past, a point that I shall later return to.

The emergence of a self-righteous religious sect among Muslims is not a phenomenon for which only branded Islamists are to be blamed. In the Taliban's Afghanistan which had witnessed the revival of a good deal of the religious vocabulary of early Islam and where Mulla Omer had preferred to call himself as the *amir-ul-momenin*, there too, Muslims were forced to believe that the Hanafite *fiqh*, and that too as envisaged by the *Deobandi* sect, was the only true colour of Islam. For the non-*Deobandi* ulema and Muslims of other *fiqhi* schools this created a suffocating situation and they long prayed for the fall of the regime. The failure of modern day Islamists in establishing an Islamic political order lies mainly in our divided *fiqhi* vision of Islam. The Islamists, though tried hard to bridge the *fiqhi* division among Muslims, they did not realise that by creating so many organisation within the polity of

Islam they were paving the way for its further disintegration. For example, in Egypt alone the breaking away of many long time associates from the Ikhwan resulted in numerous fringe organisations. Soon the situation became chaotic as some of these fringe organisations accused the fellow Islamists of betrayal and even considered to spilling their blood lawful.

Today, Islam and the West may appear on a colliding course but the real threat to Islam and Muslims is from within. The American occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq is no less troubling but what is more worrisome is the fact that upholders of the last revelation are unable to put their own house in order, save rescuing the world from imperial machinations. We cannot lose sight of the fact that the Northern Alliance played a pivotal role in the fall of the Taliban and in Iraq due to the existing Shia-Sunni divide the occupation forces found it easy to prolong their stay there. The root cause of our malaise lies within us. It is the deep *fiqhi* division of the Ummah that has made it almost impossible for us to forge a united front in case of any external aggression. In our fourteen centuries long history if any one could defeat us it were only we.

As a Muslim nation our crisis is twofold. Our internal feuds have encouraged foreign nations to subjugate us and occupy our lands. But what is more alarming is the fact that the situation appears irredeemable as we are totally unaware of the malaise that afflicts us. Conceding that our *fiqhi* division is no new and none in the past could muster courage to uproot it, many of us believe that a return to pure Islam, bypassing the *fiqhi* schools may be normative but is not feasible. In fact for so long we have lived with the four conflicting schools of *fiqh* and for so long have we accepted them as legitimate expressions of Islam that any attempt at their rollback appears to us as the demolition of Islam itself.

Islam, the religion of patriarch Abraham, was refreshed in human memory by the last prophet Mohammad for all time to come. It was perfectly explained and documented in the Qur'an and had taken a

normative shape during the Prophet's own life time. In later centuries, the emergence of *fuqaha* and of *muhaddithoon* were a natural corollary to a prophetic movement that placed so much emphasis on knowledge but they cannot be considered as founding pillars of Islam whose interpretation of religion could hold the key for all time to come. Had Sultan Baibars (1260-1277 C.E.), the malik uz-zahir as he is generally called, not officially chosen the four warring schools of *fiqh* for state patronage, the four great imams whom we conceive today as given, would not have come down to us. It was mainly a political decision to quell the social unrest of riot torn Egypt that later resulted in the permanent division of the Ummah. Even the holy Harem in Makkah, the focal point of Islamic unity, for almost five centuries witnessed four simultaneous prayers as prescribed by the four great *fuqaha*. The restoration of a united prayer in the Makkah sanctuary was lately achieved by the Bedouin tribes of Najd under the political leadership of King Abdulaziz, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia. The deep *fiqhi* division of the Ummah which we consider today as given is not part and parcel of prophetic Islam. It only needs intellectual and political will to set the things right, and for ever. Imagine! for almost five centuries when the Muslims had to accept a divided prayer right in the holy Harem there was no dearth of sensible ulema amongst us who could feel that the *fiqhi* mind had brought us to a total ruin. Yet they lacked the intellectual courage and political will that was reserved for the salafi movement of the early twentieth century Arabia. If the Bedouin tribes of Najd by their sheer political will can uproot the centuries old deviation why not the modern day reformers can put an end to our centuries old *fiqhi* diaspora? To this Waliullah Ad-Dehlawi in his tract *Al-Asbab fi Bayan al-Ikhtilaf* has recounted an interesting episode:

(Abu Zar'aa says) One day I asked my mentor Sheikh Bilqini as to what stopped Sheikh Taqiuddin Subki from undertaking ijihad... In the beginning he was disinclined

to answer. At this I said that according to me it was due to the political positions that were earmarked for the jurists of the four schools. If anyone dared to go beyond the confines of *taqlid*, he would not get anything. He would be deprived of a position in the court. The common people would stop approaching him for edicts and brand him as an 'innovator' (*bida'ti*). (Abu Zar'a says that) hearing this Imam Bilqini smiled and agreed with me.

As long as our thinkers and ulema remain content with a mere smile about our intellectual diaspora there will be little hope for redress.

To my understanding, the message of Islam is constantly on the grow; as the human society evolves so does the intent of revelation. There are many verses in the Qur'an about human embryo which today we are in a better position to appreciate than our predecessors whose knowledge of medical sciences was scanty. I have no hesitation to say that the ideals of prophetic Islam have yet to manifest in full. This unfinished agenda has to be carried out by the followers of the last prophet.

## Wither Muslim Identity?

Some forty years ago when Wilfred Cantwell Smith laid his claim on Islam, a claim which Muslims believed to have long patented for themselves, few could realize that by claiming to be a Muslim he was igniting a major ideological debate in the religious hemisphere. Smith was no ordinary Christian. He was a great scholar aware of the entire spectrum of the theological debate in Islam about Muslim identity. And as he believed that the essence of Islamic teachings was submission to God, he felt, perhaps genuinely, that he too, being a devout Christian, was a Muslim per se. For Smith Islam was an attitude of submission and not an ideological badge to put on. Islam as espoused in Mohammedanism was not acceptable to him, nonetheless, it was not possible for him to say in Arabic *lastu bi Muslim*, i.e. to say I am not a submitter. A God-fearing man as he was, how would he dare say that he was not a submitter or a Muslim.

Smith's era was marked by a post-colonial impulse. Muslims around the world looked at Islam more as an ummatic identity than the universal salvific mission. Smith's claim on Islam therefore then received only a lukewarm response from the ulema of the time. Even his trusted pupil like Mushirul Haq who on many occasions deliberated on Smith's definition of Islam always tried to maintain a distance. As a student at the Temple University Mushirul Haq had had the opportunity to see Smith from close quarters and there is no doubt that he was deeply moved by his devotion and piety. But was Smith really a Muslim in the linguistic sense of the term? Clearing the air on this issue was not only a dangerous proposition,

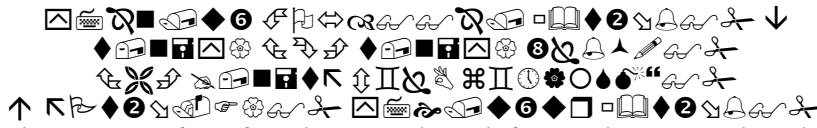
for Haq it was a theological dilemma too. By claiming to be a Muslim in Christian tradition, Smith had in fact re-ignited an age-old debate which Muslim theologians had spearheaded in the early centuries of Islam; what makes one a Muslim, faith or practice?

Measuring one's faith is always fraught with dangers and so any attempt at seeking its definition. Fiqhi or legal definition of religion can be as misleading and inconclusive as its apparently conflicting manifestations. Almost all the major religions, with the only exception of Islam, are known today with the names that were not originally assigned to them by their founders. Jesus never thought that one day his followers would be called Christians and his salvific mission will be termed as Christianity. The same is true with Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and other great religions. Most of these terms were coined by the outsiders and hence they do not reflect the essence of these religious traditions.

The early orientalist tried to make sense of Muslim religion in Christian parameters. Initially they called it Mohammedanism. It was quite lately when serious scholars of Islam in the West realized that Islam was no cult of Mohammed as it lay claim of being the continuation of the great Abrahamic tradition. Smith belongs to that enlightened era. He was rather surprised to know that the term Islam used in the Qur'an in a broader sense encompassing all kinds of submitters has been patented by the Muslim nation. Smith was also witness to a fierce battle in Pakistan between the Qadianis and mainstream Muslims over the same issue. In fact the anti-Qadiani movement had brought the entire identity issue to full focus. As recorded in Munir Commission Reports, the ulema were unable to provide a conclusive and mutually agreed definition of who was a Muslim. If Islam is an attitude and if one's Muslimness depends on his/ her submission to God, can Muslims be found outside the traditional House of Islam? This was a natural question that Smith and other serious students of Islam grappled with. For Smith claiming to be a Muslim might have been an intellectual chivalry,

but for us any redefinition of the term would certainly cause a paradigm shift.

Who is a Muslim, then? Is Islam a religious patent for the Muslim nation alone or can there be some other equally deserving claimants to this Abrahmic heritage? I think any attempt to provide a conclusive or authoritative answer to this highly complex issue will betray the nature of the question itself. Let me elaborate. The human mind employs language as a tool of thinking and perception. Man has a unique ability to name a phenomenon and this is what distinguishes him from other creatures. But the words as tools of thinking and expression have their own limitations, especially when the words are not dead words, they keep evolving. While on the other hand, for God language is a mere tool of communication. God can no doubt perfectly translate the sublime intent into a human language but then the language will bear divine stamp of perfection making little sense for the humans. To bridge the gap between the divine intent and the human language God does not humanize himself either. Rather, He wants us to appreciate the sublime intent in a humanly comprehensible language: 'Read! In the name of thy Lord whom you owe your existence.' Man is reminded time and again of his lowly origin yet he is encouraged to make his own reading of the text: 'Read! For thy Lord is bountiful'.

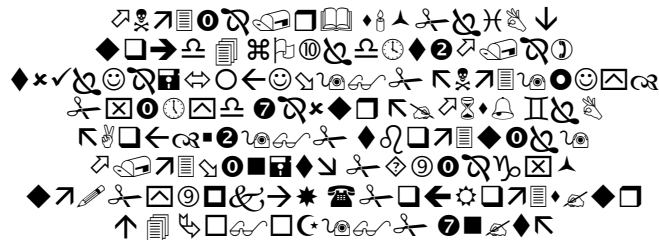


This motivated reading has to acknowledge at the outset that the Qur'an is no ordinary book and that no humanly comprehensible language can fully absorb the divine intent nor any exegete can lay a siege around its meaning. At most what Man can do is to appreciate the thrust of the intent thereby finding a direction for his spiritual journey. On the contrary, if one approaches the text as a legal draft inferring all possible dos and don'ts, it is very likely that he ends up without getting any wiser. The Israelites, we are told in the Qur'an,



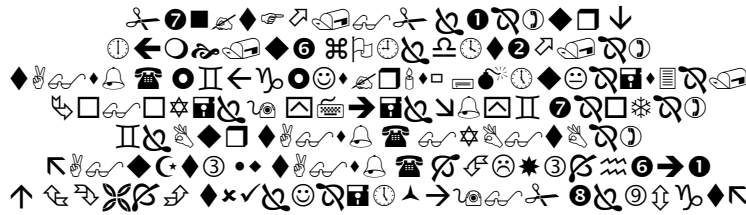
were asked to slaughter a calf. But instead of obeying the divine command instantly they raised many questions to narrow down their search for a calf. This approach to get to this much of precision is certainly against the hermeneutics of the divine text.

In the Qur'an, a *fiqhi* mind is at a loss to find no precise definition to the Muslim identity. Instead, God wants us to be a submitter per se, to be called as people of God (*rabbani*). Here the attitude itself is the identity. Claiming to be a Jewish or a Christian are no acceptable propositions. The faithful has to acquire the colour of God as this is the only valid identity: 'the colour of God and whose colour can be better than God's. It is He whom we worship.' (Al-Qur'an, 2:138). Schism and *Tawhid* do not go hand in hand. Submitters to God cannot be true in their claims unless they shed their respective group identity to form a universal brotherhood of *rabbani*, the people of God. The Qur'an keeps us reminding, oft and on, that Abraham and Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob or Moses and Jesus were neither Jews nor Christians. They all belonged to one group of submitters whom the act of submission had given an identity and a name:



The Qur'anic exhortations such as *كونوا ربانيين*, (be the people of God) and *صبغة الله* (take the colour of God) are enough indications that the Qur'an wants to create a universal society where small group identities are merged to create the universal identity of submission to one God. This universal brotherhood which the Qur'an terms as *Ummah Muslimah* is a broader term encompassing all the prophets and their true followers. The Abrahamic prayer, 'O my Lord raise from amongst us a nation of submitters does not

include those transgressors who otherwise may claim to be his offspring:



A redefinition of Muslim identity is no academic luxury for us. In fact on it depends our future. Today, in the twenty first century, when the patented Muslims find themselves on a slippery slope and when the so called revivalist movements appear to be a finished phenomenon, it is high time to do some serious soul searching. Imagine! Yesterday, we were the liberators, upholders of the last salvafic mission. Today, we are so helpless that we are unable to arrest our own decline. What has gone wrong with us? How did all this happen? Probably, it requires a lot of courage on our part to be truly self-critical and certainly no less than the bluntness of an idiot to speak it out. True, we claim to be the upholders of a universal mission but in reality we are no better than the Jews and Christians of the prophet's time. And like them we too, instead of calling people to God, work tirelessly to expand our social base, urging people to convert to our cultural identity. And if that be the case, I wonder, why we expect others to be attracted to such a purely communitarian project.

Unlike the communitarian Muslims of today, the first generation of Muslims were endowed with a universal vision. In their appearance they were like other Arabs of their time; speaking the same language, donning the same kind of dress and sporting a similar beard. But in their outlook they were citizens of an entirely different world working for a bias-free global society of submitters. Their appearance being the same, Islam had radically transformed them from within. For them accepting Muhammad as the prophet of God meant leaving behind the old world of clan-identity and for

that they needed no external face-lift. Despite their intellectual and spiritual transformation they were not required to dress differently or undergo a name change. In those days there was neither such notion as Islamic names nor any institutionalized process of conversion or specific formula for declaring one's faith as we know it today. Coming to Islam basically meant that the person had thrown his full weight in the camp of Muhammad and joined the prophetic struggle against all odds. Verbal declaration of faith or beautifully constructed rhetorical formulas had little relevance then, as faith was more a matter of deeds than words.

The early Muslims were also aware of the fact that as upholders of the Last Revelation they were entrusted with world leadership, however, this did not mean that the role of other faith communities was over. They in fact felt obliged to seek the other communities' willing participation and for that matter chart out a common program of action or *kalimatun siwa*, as the Qur'an calls it. However, owing to some political upheavals things started changing in Abbasid Baghdad. With the rise of the *mawalis*, the naturalized Arabs, on the social scenario and the domination of *ahle-kitab* and other groups in administrative services, some Arab tribes felt as if they were gradually being pushed to the margin. This was the time when many stories were fabricated and floated to weaken the pluralistic social fabric. The fabricated, never-happened incident about Banu Quraiza which tells that the prophet was so much against the Jews that he personally ordered and witnessed the annihilation of a 600 member strong Jewish tribe surfaced for the first time in this era only. During the same period we also hear people talking of Omerian stipulations about the people of the book possibly attributed to Caliph Omer, or some other Omer we are never sure which later came to characterize our attitude towards other faith communities. Traditions that establish the supremacy of the Quraish tribe and the call for establishing an Arab hegemony can also be better explained against this historical background when

Arabism or Arab *Asabiyah* rather than Islam came to dictate Muslim identity. From the universal brotherhood of submitters we shrank into Arab-Muslim identity as Islam became the ideology of the new fast emerging Arab Empire. Previously, it were the Muslims who came to serve Islamic mission, but with the establishment of the empire, it was Islam that had to serve the empire. Then, there were the crusaders who were locked in fierce battle with Muslim army for almost two hundred years. This certainly had to affect our perception of the Christian nation. And it did. As a result the entire Islamic discourse changed. The world appeared to us as divided between the abode of Islam and the abode of *kufr*. Travelling through and settling in *kufr*-land was considered abominable. This attitude eventually led to the closing of the Muslim mind. Closed in our own environs we knew very little what changes were taking place in other parts of the world. With the sudden rise of colonial powers when we finally woke up to the new reality, it was already too late.

For a restart we need to travel back, from cultural Islam to pure Islam. A re-evaluation of the entire corpus of exegetical writings on the various conflicting shapes and forms of Muslim identity is urgently needed. A humble beginning can be made with the following basic premises:

1. At the heart of Islamic mission lies the call to create a global society of submitters (*rabbānīn*). As the colour of God is the hallmark of the followers of Mohammed, they are expected to sing the glory of God in unison with the other faith communities. We should not lose sight of the fact that Mohammed is the converging point of the entire prophetic tradition as he came to establish no new Ummah but to revive the Abrahamic religion. The Qur'anic concept of *Ummah Muslimah* is a broader term which encompasses all the prophets of God and their true followers.

2. The concept of *wala'* and *bara'* as explained in the Qur'an is essentially to convey that the ideological realm is divided between the submitters and the rejecters. Nevertheless, this does not mean that submitters are not to be found outside the cultural House of Islam. Unlike other nations, Muslims are no cultural group nor are they supposed to grow in isolation.. The Arab culture that unfortunately in the course of their centuries long journey has transformed the followers of Mohammed, from the *Ummah Muslimah* into the *Ummah Mohammadiyah*, is not to be taken as the integral component of Islam.
3. Owing to the influence of exegetic literature the Muslim mind has been confused about some of the seemingly conflicting verses of the Qur'an that determine our attitude towards the people of the book. Usually our exegetes have employed suitable historical contexts to resolve these contradictions that appeared to them pointing to different directions. I strongly feel that studying a verse in isolation or in a given historical context is a flawed methodology. History, if allowed to supersede the Revelation, can only produce disasters. What is required is to reconsider all such seemingly conflicting verses in the general revelatory atmosphere of the Qur'an. My own study of such verses has made me believe that the followers of Mohammed, by virtue of being the upholders of last revelation, have a clear edge over other faith communities. They have to lead the prophetic struggle till end time. And as this global leadership in itself is a daunting task the policy making has to be well-guarded and at no cost should be allowed to get influenced or diluted by the 'other'. Despite their recognition as faith communities the people of the book

are not to be inducted in the inner circle or be allowed to affect our policy making:

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However, this does not mean that we have any grudge against them or consider their faith inferior:

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Having assigned to world leadership the Qur'an tells us what to expect from the other believing nations, who can be helpful and to what extent:

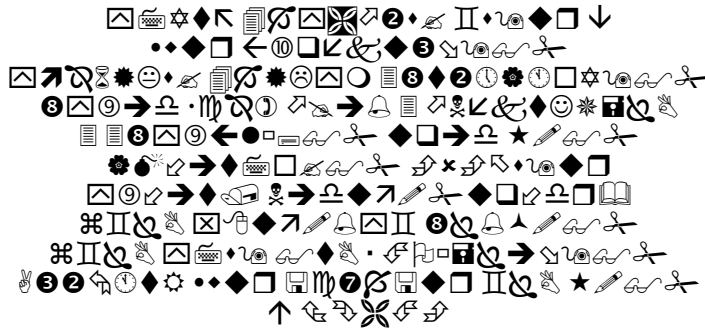
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But the Jews too are not to be ignored either:

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Given such clear Qur'anic guidelines there can be little doubt that the remnants of earlier prophetic communities are crucial for us. Based on *kalimatun siwa* we have to forge a working relation with them The members of the

faith communities have to be judged individually and on their own merit; for among them are also people who pay no heed to the divine guidance. Such rowdy elements should not be allowed to determine the direction of our joint struggle:



Be they the remnants of earlier prophetic traditions or the communitarian Muslims of today, what distinguishes them in the eyes of God is their faith (*iman*) and good deeds (*amal saleh*). No body is a born *kafir*. Like *iman*, *kufir* is also a worldview that can enslave any individual no matter which nation or culture he or she belongs to. In the Qur'an mention is made of the *kuffar* of *ahle kitab* who were desirous of clear evidence for their journey back to faith. 2. The journey from the realm of faith to the realm of *kufir* and vice versa is basically a change in one's worldview, a paradigm shift. It is a possibility open to every body and at all time. Whenever there would be any serious attempt to reconstitute the society of submitters, its addressee would not only be the Jew, or the Christians or the communitarian Muslims of today, rather, it will be open to submitters of all hues.

When the trumpet will be blown, all those who come forward to sing the glory of God in unison will be accepted as the valid member of the *Ummah Muslimah*. In the past, people who responded to this call and gathered around the prophet came from divergent believing and non-believing nations. Bilal of Ethiopia, Salman of Persia, Sohaib of Rome, the Muhajiroon of Makkah and

the Ansar tribes of Ythrab, all came together to share the new worldview that became the hallmark of their identity; the submission to one Lord God. This intellectual and spiritual revolution had transformed the remote village of Yathrab into al-Madinah al-Munawwarah, the City of Enlightenment. Today too, if the followers of Mohammed can rediscover what once made them Muslim per se, it is very likely that they find themselves, once again, amidst a new Enlightenment.

The Qur'an as it was revealed on Mohammed is available to us, even today. But the religious leadership among Muslims, the hidden church, or the invisible Vatican does not allow us to engage with the revelation on our own. We are free to recite but not to interpret.



## Not without an Intellectual Breakthrough

In historical parlance we know of ups and downs and of turning points. The two, however, may not be confused. While the former denotes a continuity of the status quo, the latter is indicative of a break away from the past. The recent victory of Hizbollah in 2006 *Harb Tammuz* though a positive development should not be seen as a turning point. Nor should we let this event hijack the intellectual discourse in the Muslim world.

That Hizbollah has astutely exposed, probably for the first time in recent history, the supposed invincibility of Israel and many in the Arab world are expressing their disgust for the long cherished Arab inaction, is no doubt indicative of the birth of new emotions. If a small militia of motivated individuals can confront the most sophisticated army, why the 56 Muslim states, with so much of

resources at their command, cannot take control of their own destiny. The analogy is simple though highly misleading.

Having been prisoners of rhetoric for so long, we prefer to live with fallacies. If every Muslim simply throws a bucket of water on Israel, so we are told, the Israeli state will be eradicated. This could be a marvellous poetic idea but it fails to enlighten us as why the Muslims have not been able to act it out. Emotionally charged rhetoric and worn out pompous terminologies that we are so fond of using have in fact made our intellectual discourse futile as they no longer refer to the real world but stem from an imaginary world of our own making.

Not only is the intellectual discourse in the Muslim world devoid of vital issues, in fact the entire Ummah today is living in a world of make believe. Let me explain. On the surface it appears as if the Muslim world is bubbling with zest of life, the rulers are sovereign in their policy-making and the religious life is in full swing. But a close look at the situation tells us an altogether different story. True, they have an army and a semblance of state apparatus, but they are merely to uphold that illusion, that pomp without power. The same is true of the religious hemisphere where a host of tarbush-clad ulema and *ghotra*-laden shauykh are ever willing to lay out minute details of ritual worship. But here too things are more theatrical than real. Many amongst them claim to be the *faqeeh-ul-asr* or the grand mufti, thereby creating an illusion that in this age they are the epitome of religious understanding while in reality if at all they can do anything they copiously quote from the wisdom of the dead. Be they religious scholars or the ruling elite, they live in a fake world, as characters of an orchestrated drama, as shadows of the real self.

As an Ummah our predicament is twofold; we are unable to see the things as they are, and secondly, we often take an ordinary event as a turning point. The high pitch of optimism during the recent Lebanon crisis would better explain this point. The recent 'victory'

of Hizbollah in Lebanon was a strange victory where the victor had no say in stipulating the conditions for a ceasefire. Hizbollah has been successful, no doubt, in maintaining her psychological and emotional self intact. Given the military prowess of Israel, this in itself is a great achievement. But calling it an outright victory is not only disastrous for our future, it also leaves many vital questions unanswered. Why despite our willingness to do everything possible we fail to confront the enemy on an equal technological footing. Why despite the abundance of human and material resources at our command today we have access to some crude and far less effective zirconium missiles and not a laser-guided precision bomb or an F-16 or a B-52 bomber. Resistance can create hurdles and it can even successfully bring down a mighty empire but it cannot build in its place an alternative system. A revival of the Ummah then certainly has to come from somewhere else.

### Removing the intellectual detours

The language of resistance can be no match for the language of mercy. At a point of history when the language of resistance has created some intellectual detour for us, an intellectual breakthrough leading to reconstructing the prophetic metaphor requires a critical look at our heritage literature spanning some thirteen centuries. As it has been the norm to look at the early centuries as our golden age, it became difficult to distinguish the pious elders from the rotten ones, the latter being known as fabricators. Once an alien thought stealthily made its way in early writings, it was unmindfully quoted by the later writers so much so that it became part and parcel of our intellectual self. Take for example the *Tafsir* literature which will simply cease to exist if we remove the folktales or the *Isra'iliyat* as we call it, and where one is never sure which historical context really served as prelude to the revelation. The same is true of the Hadith compendiums that were mainly compiled to drive the

fabricators away. Mysticism has a strong penchant for Christian monastic tradition and the much celebrated issues in Muslim theology such as free-will and determinism speak of Greek influences. And finally, the very transformation of Islamic polity into dynastic rule owes much to the local tribal ethos and the kingship pattern prevalent during the time. Needless to emphasise, the intellectual heritage of Islam is yet to be purged out of the alien notions that infiltrated in early years, more precisely during the second century of Islam.

The emergence of dynastic rule in Islam which dates back as early as the first century Hijra was not in consonance with the Qur'anic worldview yet it was generally tolerated to avoid the internal feuds that had gripped the early Muslim society after the murder of the third caliph. And after the failed attempt of Omer II who wanted to restore the prophetic model of governance it was assumed that political reformation may not yield positive results and hence Muslims should accept the status quo for the sake of unity and peace. From Omer II to the last Ottoman caliph, a period spanning some twelve centuries, an official version of Islam was mainly controlled by the political system. The shaikhul Islam or the chief religious authority played a key role in shaping the Muslim mind. History records many a great luminaries of Islam who in their own times were considered as great scholars but as they did not enjoy state patronage they were marginalised in their time and their great works did not survive. Out of some 50 great *fuqaha* of the first two centuries only four could survive and that too due to the canonization of the four schools of sunni Islam during the reign of Malik-az-zahir Sultan Bibars. We also hear of many collections of Hadith and many compendiums of authenticated traditions (*sahih*) that are no more available to us.

The official Islam however was no monolithic version as it had to cope with the changing political equations. We had the Umvi Islam against the Alwides' and also the Khawarij's who maintained an

equal distance from both of them. The Abbasid had their own version of Islam and so had the Fatmides of Egypt and those who founded the Spanish Khilafa away from the central control. As the ruling elite monopolised Islamic interpretation the un-official versions were to find a space only on the margins. Their exponents were either crushed by ruthless political power or they were to keep their mouths shut – a process that later came to be known as *taqyyia*, a well thought out philosophy of political pacifism. The exponents of official Islam maintained that accepting the *waliul-amr*, no matter even if he had acquired power by brute force, was in the greater interest of Islam and Muslims. Changing the political set-up by armed struggle was openly discouraged and the rebels were dubbed as *khawarij*. The official Islam thus came to be known as the *sabilul-momeneen*, enjoying the blessings of God. Controlling the interpretation of Islam and twisting it to their own agenda, the system left almost no room to reconstruct the original Qur’anic paradigm without dismantling the system itself. Today any attempt to reconstruct the Qur’anic paradigm once again or reinvent the language of mercy cannot be successful unless we have insight into the social and political history of the early two centuries that were instrumental in shaping Islam of the status quo.

### Alien influences on the Muslim mind

Have you ever thought that the *uloom sharei* or the religious sciences which Muslims regard today as the highest branch of knowledge have their roots not in the Qur’anic worldview alone and a number of other factors had a key role in their development? If the supposedly Islamic sciences are the sum total of knowledge why is it so that the upholders of *sharei* sciences fail to produce a better technology for our defense. As for those who devote themselves to exploring the signs of God the religious scholars look down upon them; for according to them they are involved in lesser sciences

often associated with some sort of secularity and irreligiosity. The contempt for non-*sharei* sciences drove many of our best minds away from explorations and inventions thereby reducing the entire Ummah into a group of consumers. The so-called religious sciences that comprise today an incomprehensible amount of *fiqhi* literature where revelatory intent is often lost in hair-splitting debates and where for centuries an open-ended discussion about the authenticity of transmitters remains unabated, one wonders whether they really serve any purpose. The first generation of Muslims had certainly no access to the compendiums of *fiqh* or the books of *rijal*, nor were they aware of exegetical manoeuvring, or dreamt of getting to the hidden meanings of the text. For them Qur'an was a book of guidance in plain and simple language. God had conveyed to them what He wanted to, leaving nothing for the clergy to interpret. The first generation of Muslims hardly knew of alien terminologies such as *fardh*, *wajib*, *nafil*, *sunnah*, *mubah*, *mustahab* etc. The Qur'an created a rational mind urging the faithful to reflect on the cosmic wonders. The natural world was declared a subject of study for all those seeking knowledge. And those astounded by the signs of God were called as real scholars. This was the original Qur'anic paradigm of knowledge and signposts for future revolution. Had the Muslim mind operated within this paradigm the study of natural sciences would certainly have come to us as a religious obligation. But unfortunately owing to the political instability and the infiltration of alien ideologies the Qur'anic worldview could not remain intact for long.

How it all happened needs serious investigation. The civil strife that had engulfed the entire world of Islam after the murder of the third Caliph was a congenial atmosphere for all those who wanted to dilute the divine message. From this period onward, we see the sudden emergence of a host of public entertaining intellectuals, the *qassas* and pseudo-scholars of prophetic traditions who wanted to change Islam from within. Such an attack was more dangerous than

the armed rebellions of the Bedouin tribes. Omer II was aware of the sensitivity of Hadith literature and hence he made a concerted effort to compile the authentic traditions to distinguish them from the fabricated ones. But the short span of Omer's rule did not allow him to accomplish this great intellectual project. The ideological infiltration through the backdoors of history continued and it was entirely on the individual scholars of the time to address this issue. Much has been written about how to distinguish the true traditions from the false ones, however, almost none of our great scholars has realised that the very development of *sharei* sciences owes much to the social milieu and are not product of a planned activity. This abrupt and unplanned development of knowledge in Islam later had a devastating impact on the Muslim mind. The division of knowledge into *sharei* and non-*sharei* sciences, or into Islamic and secular, not only created a social role for the clergy it also blocked the emergence of scientific and rational thinking among Muslims. It was a major paradigm shift, changing the direction of the Ummah forever.

A religion for all time and every place as Islam claims to be, nevertheless, it had to make its beginning in a tribal set-up. The early generations of Muslims were aware of the limitations of a tribal polity as they tirelessly worked to transform their political set-up to suit the demands of the divine message. In their efforts to broaden their socio-political horizon they did not hesitate to learn from the existing models. As the empire went on expanding, at times their own previously held positions came under scrutiny. Omer I is reported to have altered many a previously held decisions of the prophet's time. At times this resulted in a blatant moratorium of some of the *nass* explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. Suspension of the Qur'anic *hadd* of amputating one's hand for theft, or denying goodwill amount (*mu'allifatun quloob*) to the neo-converts, or confiscating conquered land in favour of the state are some of the well-known decisions of Omer I. When Omer I was taking a stance

different from the one stipulated in the text or when he was altering a prophetic precedent on a specific issue, he knew it well that sanctity is not for any specific judgement or a period of history, rather it is for the 'intent' and spirit of the message. This creative approach to the text made it possible for the early generation of Muslims to benefit from other existing models of statecraft. They would hardly reject anything simply because it had its roots in an alien civilization. Take for example the 'war of trench' on which depended the very survival of the Ummah. Digging a trench for the protection of the city was alien to the Arab mind. But they showed no reservation in accepting this Persian technique. As long as Muslims displayed a creative openness towards other nations and their collective heritage they greatly benefited from them. However, the early centuries of Islam had also witnessed a large-scale conversion of the Jewish and Christian ulema who had an established tradition of religious studies and who had brought along with them an entire methodology of religious interpretation. As long as the creative minds and great visionaries of Islam remained in command, the simplicity of Islamic interpretation was maintained. Omer I openly discouraged the birth of a *Mishnah* or compilation of any apocryphal material. However, in later years, especially in the days of *fitna* things changed drastically. And it was here that the things went wrong.

By the end of the first century Hijra, a new breed of Islamically oriented public entertainers known as the story-tellers (*qassas*), the transmitters of traditions (*huffaz*) and the popular preachers (*wae'z*) appeared on the scene. As days went by, memoirs of the prophet's time became a serious concern for historiographers. Initially, these memoirs had emotional and historical import but gradually they were also taken as sources for religious legislation. By the mid of the second century Hijra they were taken as a rather authentic expose of the Qur'anic intent. The early *qassas* and *huffaz*, in their efforts to recreate the prophetic era in detail, employed all available sources,



from the text to popular anecdotes, and from the authentic traditions to the less authentic reports. A proper methodology to this effect was underway as often the roles of *huffaz* and *qassas*, *mufassirun* and *mutasawwefin* overlapped. Mohammad bin Idris al-Shafei was the first scholar who through his methodical writings on *fiqh* paved the way for a future generation of specialists and it was mainly due to his efforts that Islamic interpretation became the monopoly of the learned few. Shahab Zahri who appears at the close of the first century as a towering personality was no legislator. It took almost another hundred years to look at simple memories of the prophet's time as sources of Shariah. The publication of *Al-Risalah* was a turning point in the intellectual history of Islam. Hence onward interpretation of Islam had to become monopoly of the clergy. The new clergy would not have claimed the sole right to interpret God's intent had the later scholars not conceived knowledge divided into two distinct categories, the *sharei* and non-*sharei* sciences, the former being the sole prerogative of the ulema. Thus began the Vaticanization of Islam. Lending credence to some susceptible reports the ulema of Islam even claimed to be the deputies of the prophet and repositories of all prophetic knowledge. The idea that some knowledge was Islamic and some non-Islamic or some was useful while the others had little utility was bone of contention in the Abbasid Baghdad when Greek logic and philosophy had created a stir in the intellectual capital of Islam. While this division helped curb the influence of Greek sciences, nevertheless, it also sent the rational thinking to a permanent exile outside the boundaries of *sharei* knowledge. Even a major portion of the Qur'an that urges Muslims to explore and take command of the natural world went beyond the scope of *sharei* sciences. The upholders of *sharei* knowledge or supposedly the super sciences were guilty of suspending a major part of the revelation as their focus lay on the verses of *ahkam* alone. This brought the Muslim

mind to a blind ally from where it has yet to be rescued despite the elapse of some twelve centuries.

In Islam the development of *sharei* sciences had an abrupt start. They were more products of a chaos than of a proper planning. The main reason for this intellectual anarchy was the political instability or the internal feuds that had plagued the Muslim world since Caliph Osman's murder. As the institution of khilafa had collapsed and a dynasty had taken control of the situation, the priority of the new rulers was to seek legitimacy for their governance rather than safeguarding Islamic ideology. The exponents of *sharei* sciences and the transmitters of prophetic traditions were willing to lend their support to the new dynasty. They would often relate that the prophet had asked to obey the ruler even if he was a tyrant. The system that sought legitimacy from the new emerging clergy was certainly not in a position to hold them in check.

By the mid of the second century the *huffaz* attained such a social prominence that an entire populace would come to greet them when they visited a town. Such honours of mammoth public receptions were not extended even to the rulers. Reminiscing the days of the prophet had an emotional appeal. It is said when these *huffaz* held their *majlis*, thousands of people joined them noting down each and every word they uttered. By the third century Hijra, Hadith emerged as the main discipline of knowledge and one's scholarship was judged by the number of traditions that one had committed to memory. Scholars of Hadith openly vied each other in claiming to have more *thulathi* (traditions with a chain of three transmitters) and *ruba'ei* (a chain of four transmitters) than anyone else had. Later, when compilation of knowledge became a norm and book writing came in vogue, number of volumes became the criterion of scholarship rather than the quality. A certain scholar claimed that he could write volumes after volumes just to enlighten the various shades of meaning in *bismillah*. While yet another scholar claimed that he could produce as much as seven camel loads just to explain

the dot of the letter *ba* of *bismillah*. What became important was the number of volumes one produced and not the quality of the content. Tabari, whose major writings have survived to our time, proudly tells that the thirty volumes of his *tafseer* are in fact a summery of the original that he wrote in 300 volumes. And Bukhari, who lists some more than 4000 traditions under various headings, claims that he has selected them out of 0.6 million traditions known to him. Abuzar'a is yet another example who is said to have memorised 0.7 million traditions. Today, we have neither access to the 300 volumes of Tabari nor have we any means to verify the tall claims of Bukhari and Abuzar'a. But the fact that the amount of writing was the criterion of judging one's scholarship can easily be discerned from even a cursory look at our heritage literature. Sayuti (849-911), the famous author of *Al-Itqan*, claims in his preface that his encyclopaedia of the Qur'an has incorporated everything thing on the topic and that he has extracted all useful material from all available sources. Extracting everything from the past masters and incorporating each available information without a proper evaluation was the norm of religious writing that can be seen from Tabari down to our time. The *ummahat-ul kutub*, or the heritage literature as we call it today, soon became a source of religious disputes. As critical evaluation of the past masters was not the norm, the ulema felt content on writing their commentary to justify their respective schools of thought. Soon writings on the margins or adding copious notes to a text itself became a criterion of scholarship. We have great scholars down the ages writing margins on the margins or further elaborating these explanatory notes. Then, we witness a reversal of the trend, great scholars preparing summaries of great works. Some of these summaries became so puzzling that a host of later scholars took the task of elaborating them further. This never-ending cycle went on and on because there was a general consensus, rather a mindless belief, among Muslims that the great masters of the past had perfected the

process of thinking for us and that we were too humble to engage with the revelation on our own.

The *sharei* sciences that abruptly began and chaotically developed have been the root cause of intellectual anarchy and internecine conflicts. Not only the very nomenclature of *ilm sharei* speaks of a flawed vision, the way these *sharei uloom* developed into major disciplines is greatly flawed. Let us briefly summarise:

1. Islamic sciences as we know them today as *tafseer wa ta'weel*, *jirh wa tadeel*, *rawayat wa dirayat*, *usool al-fiqh*, *mantiq wa falsafa*, *urooz wa balaghat* etc were not found in their present form during the prophet's time.
2. The political instability emanating from the murder of the third caliph and the internecine conflicts provided a congenial atmosphere for the popular preachers and storytellers. As the system drew its legitimacy from less authentic reportage, the *qassas* culture flourished. In this intellectually volatile situation it was easy for the pretenders and fabricators to get mixed with the genuine scholars. We should not lose sight of the fact that early centuries were not only the time when the pious elders lived amongst us; the same period is also notorious for fake ulema and fabricators.
3. The sudden emergence of *huffaz* on the social and intellectual scene was mainly due to the socio-political situation of the time. For the ruling elite *huffaz* (scholars of traditions) were more relevant than the *qurra* (scholars of the Qur'an) as they can put forward a supporting tradition from the vastly unknown amount of historic material. Later scholars who came under the delusion that historic material or reportage constituted the core of Islamic knowledge failed to notice the blatant political factors that surrounded its development.
4. The encyclopaedic collection of Hadith and their thematic listing -- as we find in *Bukhari*, or preserving the history of

first generation of Muslims as a model for future – as we find in *Mua'tta* of Malik, or laying down some basic principles to draw inference from the text – as we find in Abu Hanifa, or formulating a well thought out methodology to reach an agreeable consensus within the ambit of text and tradition – as we find in Shafei, all such efforts were the personal initiatives of these great scholars. They were not commanded by God to do so, nor can their individual efforts form as the intellectual basis of Islam. The great scholars or imams whose works have come down to us were not the only people involved in intellectual activity. History records many a great luminaries of Islam whose works were lost in course of time. But it never occurs to us that without them our knowledge of Islam is incomplete. Why do we believe then that the great masters of the past whose works have somehow come down to us are indispensable sources of Islamic knowledge and without them we cannot envision an authentic Islamic living?

5. The canonization of four *fiqhi* schools in sunni Islam and that of the imamate in sh'ie Islam which many of us have come to believe as God-ordained were in fact products of political situations of the time. Had Sultan Bibars (658-676 AH) not accorded state patronage to these four schools, the four imams and their followers would have met the same fate as the followers of Sufian Sauri and imam Auza'ei. In their time, Sauri and Auza'ei enjoyed mass following, probably more than any of the four, but now we find their names mentioned only in history books. Bibars' decision to accord official status to these four schools was basically to quell the internal feuds and it was his personal initiative. A sultan's whim should not let control our destiny.
6. The *uloom sharei* as we conceive them today is a false metaphor as they have no foundation whatsoever in the

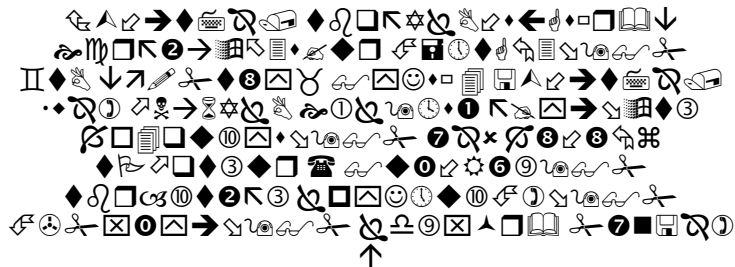
Qur'anic text. They in fact do not appear *sharei* if we put them under strict Qur'anic scrutiny. Intellectual blurredness of the past should not block our vision for the future.

7. The narrow conception of *ilm sharei* has been the main factor in driving the Muslims away from scientific knowledge. Those who remained involved in scientific investigations were not only viewed as satellites of alien civilizations they even themselves came to believe that instead of opting for the holy sciences they had chosen a branch of little salvafic value. As the exponents of *uloom sharei* claimed monopoly of Islamic understanding, it was difficult for a less pious scholar to challenge their pious whims in the light of revelation and reason.
8. The *sharei* scholars consider some 500 verses of the Qur'an as *ayat ahkam*, which according to them are the bedrock of *uloom sharei*. This fragmented approach to the text has virtually placed most part of the Qur'an outside the boundaries of *sharei* studies. Considering the verses of exploration and invention as not so essential for salvation was a fatal mistake on the part of the scholars of the time and hence it need not be held sacred by future generations.

These are some of the facts that point to our ideological dilution through the ages and which though have their roots in socio-political conditions of the time are now generally taken as the authentic face of orthodoxy. This ideological waywardness has been instrumental in changing our worldview -- from inquisitive to ritualistic, and in holding back a prospective movement for scientific exploration in Islam. It was mainly due to this ritualistic mindset that the social sciences which otherwise should have flourished as para-Qur'anic disciplines remain underdeveloped. Many a reformers in the past who had only some vague sense of our intellectual rottenness vociferously called for a return to the Qur'an. But so strong was the pressure of orthodoxy that even

those who tried hard to make a dent in traditional thinking or throw out the yoke of canonized *fiqh*, ended up only as extensions of their respective *fiqhi* schools. Today it is possible to have a fresh and independent reading of the Qur'an, more than ever before, as we no more have a central religious authority to guard the orthodoxy. In the past, it was possible for a *shaikhul Islam* to close down the *Darul Funoon* – a modern university in Ottoman Turkey, as in his opinion it fell outside the purview of *uloom sharei*. Today the yoke of traditional mind is not so oppressive.

The time for a new start has eventually arrived. But before we move ahead we need to think hard why we lived content with our self-orchestrated delusions about *uloom sharei*, and for so long. The Qur'an is an open invitation to think, ponder and reflect on the signs of God found everywhere in the natural world. Igniting the rational faculty is the first step of getting connected. Reason and revelation together constitute a perfect equilibrium, an organic whole. This is the essence of Qur'anic message which enjoins upon the believers to look at the entire book as one single whole. On the contrary, a fragmented approach to the text that picks up only some verses as the commanding verses (*ayate ahkam*) can often make us guilty of upholding half-truths, so explicitly condemned in the Qur'an:



As the development of knowledge, which has a direct bearing on our worldview, has been abrupt, unplanned and flawed we need to move through our heritage literature with utmost care and if

possible get rid of it as quickly as we can. This intellectual breakthrough alone can herald a new beginning and ensure us a return to the seat of authority and guidance.

The sharei scholars consider some 500 verses of the Qur'an as ayat ahkam, which according to them are the bedrock of uloom sharei. This fragmented approach to the text has virtually placed most part of the Qur'an outside the boundaries of sharei studies. Considering the verses of exploration and invention as not so essential for salvation was a fatal mistake on the part of the scholars of the time and hence it need not be held sacred by future generations.



## Rethinking Ijtihad

For too long we Muslims have been pinning all our hopes on the revival of ijtihad. There is a widespread feeling that ijtihad or the process of reinterpreting the canon text that was put on hold after the sack of Baghdad in 1258, if reinvigorated, can redeem the Ummah from the present impasse. Revival of ijtihad has been the rallying cry for the entire intellectual activity of the Ummah during the last three hundred years or so. From Waliullah of Delhi and his Arabian counterpart Mohammad bin Abdulwahab to Jamaluddun Afghani and his Egyptian disciples and then to Muhmmmed Iqbal, the list is impressive. Yet it is a fact that the door of ijtihad still remains closed and no major intellectual breakthrough is in sight.

Ijtihad is basically a *fiqhi* concept. The idea that a new ijtihad can redeem our ills is mainly due to our misgivings about the nature of the crisis which in essence is an intellectual one. So far we have been conveniently ignoring the fact that the traditional institution of ijtihad that we so vociferously call for to revive is, in reality, an extension of the same *fiqhi* closed mindset, as it demands any fresh thinking to be in conformity with the conclusions drawn by our predecessors.

Let us explain. Many centuries have elapsed since Wasil bin Ata, the great Mutazali, laid out a rationalist methodology wherein he placed three other pivots along with the revelation as the basic tools of intellectual enquiry. In Wasil's quest for truth revelation was not the ultimate authority rather it was one of the four pillars, the other three being Hadith (the reportage), *ijma* (consensus) and *qayas* (analogical reasoning). Ijtihad which falls under the broader category of *qayas* is in a way an essential component of the traditional worldview. If the new interpreters of Islam failed in the past in igniting a new thinking, it was mainly because they had taken the four pillars of *fiqh* as given and hence they never dared challenge this canon. The methodological ambiguities that they encountered were on two counts; firstly, traditions or extra information spanning on centuries of *fiqhi* canonization became an impregnable fence around the revelation, secondly, elevation of Hadith, *ijma* and *qayas* to the level of revelation created a hallow of sacredness around the *fiqhi* methodology which was basically a rationalist human construct of the time. As the four pillars of *fiqh* were viewed as given nobody ever bothered to challenge the basic principles on which the *fiqhi* mind rests. The orthodox Muslim mind, of which ijtihad is just a part, has been shaped over the centuries. Besides the four principles of *fiqh*, there were many other infusions to it from divergent sources.

It goes without saying that the traditional Islam is a mix of message and history. The universal message of Islam is still available

within the covers of the Qur'an. But the Qur'an is no longer the only source. Instead we have many compendiums of *fiqh*, writings of the mystics and volumes of exegetical writings that shape and control our vision of Islam. Ijtihad, as the traditional understanding goes, has to work within the confines of what has been canonized in course of history. No wonder then that the very idea of a *Mujtahid Mutlaq* (original interpreter) is so abhorring for the exponents of ijtihad.

The early history of Islam that we so proudly glorify as the age of Pious Elders (*salf saleheen*) was also marred by internecine conflicts, the *fitnah*. The War of Riddah, the murder of Othman, the battle of Jamal and of Siffin took place during the very first generation of Muslims. Those who founded the Ummid and Abbasid empires thereby altering the roots of Islamic polity lived also during the same canon period. Our historians have made us believe that despite the changing Muslim polity the dynasties were upholders of Islamic mission. They were afraid lest any critical evaluation of the early Muslim society should depict pure Islam as a short lived phenomenon. It was mainly for this reason that they projected the Ummids, the Abbasids, the Fatmides, the Mughals in India and the Ottoman Turks as the guardians of Islamic mission. This created serious methodological problems for Muslim historiographers as they considered it their religious obligation to depict the early Muslims as super-humans nay, rather angels. Had the Muslim historiographers done their job properly it would have been easier for us to realize that each generation of believers had its own strength and weakness and that the purpose of the prophetic mission was to create a society of humans and not of angels. The early Muslims whom we eulogize as pious elders were also humans like us. If we look at them as humans it may be possible for us to appreciate how they understood the divine intent for their own specific settings. Their shortcomings may not appear to us then as intellectual detours and we will be in a position to rectify their

mistakes in the light of revelation. In short, we can lay a similar claim on revelation as the early Muslims did. But unfortunately this is no longer possible for the orthodox mind as the history itself has been subject to canonization. Historical Islam that has given the Muslim orthodoxy a shape demands from us to accept along with the prophetic mission a full load of historical baggage. To accept the four caliphs as rightly guided, the four schools of *fiqh* as part of the divine scheme and among the Shias, the twelve or seven imams as divinely ordained are viewed as expressions of orthodoxy. Historiography has left little choice for us to readjust our vision of orthodoxy. One glaring example is the omission in our canonized history books of Abdullah bin Zubair's khilafa who ruled a major part of the Islamic empire almost a decade and who enjoyed much more political legitimacy than Abdul Malik, the Ummid caliph. Any rethinking within the orthodox ambit then can be fatal.

Wasil's four principles that were instrumental in shaping the orthodoxy had also a social context. Wasil was a known Mu'tazli, a rationalist per se – a typical product of an age when Greek philosophy and logic had created havoc in the Muslim mind. Hair-splitting theological debates about Muslim creed had given birth to many divergent sects; *marjaeiyyah*, *jabriyyah*, *qadriyyah*, *mutaezelah* etc. Even the Qur'an, the very epitome of revelation, was not spared from this discussion. Was the Qur'an 'created' words or 'eternal'? How the 'divine intent' gets transformed into a human language? What relation the 'word of God' has with logos as used in the Christian context? Such questions only hampered the supremacy of revelation over other sources of knowledge. In Wasil's weltanschauung one encounters, probably for the first time, a Muslim rationalist arguing that the truth can be ascertained not by the Qur'an alone, but equally so by Sunnah, *ijma* and *qiyas*. Very soon Wasil's four principles of ascertaining the truth came in vogue. So much so, when the great *fuqaha* started writing books on principles of jurisprudence they found the 'four principles' so

natural that they incorporated them as such, little realising that this rationalist methodology had placed revelation at par with other humanly derived sources. In Wasil's *weltanschauung* revelation had to make sense not on its own but under strict guidance of Sunnah, ijma and qayas. The 'four principles' that have been controlling the fiqhi discourse from day one are inherently problematic. Firstly, among the *fuqaha*, the Book of God is not the one definitive Qur'an that we find in every Muslim home today but it also includes variant readings which provide enough scope for exegetical manoeuvring. Secondly, Sunnah has been an ever-changing concept, a loosely defined term which sometimes also includes practices of the early Muslims. Thirdly, *ijma* is a false metaphor as no *ijma* has ever taken place on any single issue and it has been debatable among the scholars whether *ijma* of the past scholars can be taken as sacred. Fourthly, as for *qayas* which is a broader term for *istehsan*, *istislah*, *masaleh mursala* and under which also comes *ijtihad*, it has always been a bone of contention among *fuqaha* of conflicting schools. These then are the four principles of *fiqh* that have imprisoned the *fiqhi* mind for centuries.

In our intellectual history there were many instances when our reformers tried to break away from *ijma* and *qayas*. But the zaheri and the salafi schools despite their insistence on the text, their rejection of *ijma* and *qayas* and their distaste for the *fuqaha* could not make any significant headway. Their failure was partly due to their heavy reliance on historical reportage (Hadith) and partly due to the lack of courage to breakaway from the orthodox *fiqhi* mould. True, they abhorred the idea of following an Abu Hanifa or a Shafei but willingly submitted themselves to the reporters of *Sehah Sitta*. Probably they had the delusion that their reliance on the reportage of the prophetic era had made them closer to the true understanding of the text. But in the books of Hadith they also encountered traditions which appeared in direct contravention to the 'text' and which were deemed unfit for practice. For example, in

*Sahih Muslim* one encounters a reportage about *muta* and prayer tablets, both still being practiced by the Shias. Had the compilers of the traditions unwittingly given undue importance to the transmitters of these traditions, they quipped. Then there were other equally disturbing reports which by no counts could be considered practicable in any civilized society. For example, there were traditions telling us that if a person wants to allow a *ghair mahram* male an easy access to his home, he should ask his wife or his mother-in-law to allow him to have five sucks of her milk. This action, we were told, will convert him into a close relative thus enabling him to drop by into the house as a family member. Imam Ahmed and Imam Muslim have reported a similar incident about Abu Huzaifa. Once Abu Huzaifa's wife asked the prophet: O prophet of Allah! Salim is a regular visitor to our house. He is an adult and Abu Huzaifa does not like his frequent coming. To this the prophet is reported to have said: 'feed him your milk so as to enable him to enter your house with all ease.' It is also said that when Ayiasha wanted someone to frequent her house she would usually ask her sister Umme Kulsoom or any of her nieces to feed him five sucks.

Those who had taken the books of traditions at par with the revelation and their transmitters as Gabriel, it was not easy for them to reject such absurd traditions altogether. Despite their rejection of *ijma* and *qayas* the *Ahl-al-Hadith* movement could not make headway as it found itself trapped in the web of irreconcilable and conflicting traditions. Ibn Taymia, Ibn Hazm and lately Ibn Abdulwahab and Waliullah, all of them though rebelled against the traditional mindset, none of them was able to break the *fiqhi* mould. No doubt, they downplayed *fiqhi ijma* to some extent and strongly condemned *qayas* but dared not question interpretative role of the traditions. History, as it has come down to us through the transmitters of Hadith, remained a sacred zone for them. Believing in the history was essential if they were to follow in the footsteps of

the pious elders, the *salaf*. The salafi reformers in a way conveniently ignored the basic perplexing question: if being so faithful to the *salaf* was a precondition to faith, where was the room for any *ijtihad* then?

Breaking the *fiqhi* mould or making a dent on traditional thinking, in effect, is the first step to *ijtihad*. And if we are aware that the *fiqhi* mould is not God-ordained rather it is more a product of history, it may be easier for us to do so. The formative period of *fiqh* was an age when the Greek inquisitive methodology was in vogue. Intellectual centres in the Muslim lands were also exposed to Christian theological and ontological issues. The very debate about the supposed 'createdness of the Qur'an' was basically a by-product of Muslim response to the 'logos'. For the new converts to Islam it was natural to make sense of the new religion through their familiar terminologies and institutions. Later when the Islamic seminaries sprang up throughout the Muslim world and, the private ulema assumed the role of interpreters of Islam, it became customary for them to grant their students *ijazah*, much like *semikha* of the Jews. The emergence of clergy in Islam, to a great extent, owes to the Jewish rabbinic tradition where a *responsa (fatwa)* was seen as a divine intent. As the later day rulers, the *ulul amr*, were no longer in spiritual command, the masses had no other option but to turn to the private ulema for matters religious. This provided an encouraging atmosphere for many divergent and often conflicting pictures of Islam to emerge. Within less than two centuries we hear of people talking about the supposed 72 heretical sects in Islam. The situation became so chaotic that a commonly agreed definition of Islam became need of the hour. Abul Hassan al-Ash'ari who among many others tried to work out a synthesis of many prevailing trends successfully checked the onslaughts of the Mutazela movement. Nevertheless, Ash'arims which was purely a contextual response of the time, thank to the efforts of Gazzali (d.505 AH) and Razi (d.606 AH), gradually assumed so much prestige that the latter day ulema

took it almost as the Nicene Creed of Islam. In *Kitab al-Ibana un Usool ad-Deyanah* Ash'ari has specifically made mention of – along with the Book of God, the Sunnah of the Prophet, the precedents of his companions and the insights of the scholars of Hadith – Ahmed bin Hambal whom, as he tells us, God has given the true understanding of religion to guide the people and undo the innovations and schism. Ash'ari's reliance on Ibn Hambal makes at least one thing clear; that even the ulema of formative period who played a key role in shaping the *fiqhi* mould were averse to any critical evaluation of the great masters. The triumph of Ash'arism over Mutazelite and other shades of Islam was not because in it one found the pristine purity of prophetic message but simply because it got influential advocates like Ghazzali and Razi. As it happens in every battle of ideas, both Ash'ari and Ghazzali faced strong opposition in their own times; the former received condemnation from the pulpit of the mosques and latter's books were burnt across the world of Islam. But today Ash'ari is generally seen as the guardian of faith and Ghazzali is reverently called *Hujjatul Islam*.

Pure philosophy, other than the *Kalam*, was yet another element in shaping the orthodoxy. During the Abbasid era, a Lebanese Christian published an Arabic translation of Enneads that soon became a point of reference to prove one's intellectual sophistication. Historians have recorded that the book was held in such a high esteem as if it were another Qur'an. For almost four hundred years philosophy and *kalam* operated in two different spheres; the former was the domain of secular intellectuals while the latter was popular among the traditional ulema. However, in the latter centuries this dividing line got blurred as philosophy became the defender of faith as well as its destroyer. Philosophy which was on the margin of intellectual discourse during the time of Al-Kindi (d.870) and Al-Farabi (873-950) assumed the centre stage thanks to the efforts of Ibn Sina whose explanation of the 'first cause' accorded it some sort of legitimacy. Ibn Hazm (965-995) and



Ghazzali (1057-1111) successfully employed it to the service of faith. Ibn Rushd went a step further as he argued that as compared to others, the philosophers were more qualified to interpret the Qur'an.

No analysis of the traditional mould can be comprehensive without mentioning the mystics of Islam whose influence is enormous. To elaborate the point here we will mention just two names; Shahabuddin Suharwardi (1155-1191) and Ibn Arabi (1165-1240). The former was greatly influenced by Zoroaster, Plato and Ibn Rushd while the latter is known for a pluralist religious outlook. Mystical works such as *Quwatul Quloob*, *Ahyaul Uloom*, *Awareful Ma'arif* and *Masnawi Ma'nvi* played a key role in shaping the Muslim mind. Same as the writings of Ibn Taymia, Shawkani and Ibn Abdulwahab are considered today as effective tools for creating a salafi mind, or that of Maudoodi and Qutub taken as a vital source for an Islamist worldview, or the books of *fadhael* to shape naïve religious outlook of the Tablighis, much the same way, the traditional Muslim mould is a product of various conflicting trends throughout history.

To redeem the Muslim mind from the traditional orthodox mould we need no less than breaking the mould itself. No ijtiḥad within the established *fiqhi* framework can bear fruits unless we change the rules of the game. So far orthodoxy has been closely guarding and controlling the ijtiḥad discourse. Within the established norms and as one of the four principles of *fiqh*, the very idea of ijtiḥad would be a non-starter. What is needed is not a mere ijtiḥad in the traditional sense of the term rather an ijtiḥad about the notion of ijtiḥad itself.

So far Ijtihad has been mainly confined to finding a correlation among the four conflicting schools of *fiqh*. We have been vaguely silent on the issue whether it is possible to imagine an Islamic living without the four great *fuqaha* of the past. If the great fuqaha were not God-ordained and if Islam was perfected long before their arrival on the scene, why do we fear that wrapping them up once and for all would dismantle our religious structure? Is really the fiqhi material of the past so essential and central to Islam?

## Reinterpreting Islam

A post-era feeling has gripped the world of Islam. It appears to many of us that we are living in an age of agonizing boredom when history is wrapping itself up and when momentous events are not taking place any more. Our allurements of the past – when our history was at its zenith and when we enjoyed the Golden Age wherein the pious elders perfected the process of thinking, leaves almost no role for us in any future scheme of things. In short, the future history, as we conceive it today, is no more than an empty shell of a used cartridge.

We Muslims alone are not guilty of eulogizing the past, however, if the past has a deadening effect on us it is mainly because as compared to other nations we look at it as sacrosanct and not as a

process of enlightening experimentations. This I shall elaborate. Terminologies such as *ta'bein* and *tabe'ta'bein* that we once coined to express a historical phenomenon soon became a stumbling block in the very process of historical analysis. Such is the bane of terminologies. Instead of picking up the essence of a phenomenon at times they come to control our perception and thinking. Western historiographers usually classify different periods of their history as Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution etc. These words may represent the dominant mood of the time nonetheless they do not capture the sum total of the intellectual activity of a given period. Looking at history through these labels would amount to looking at the past essentially through someone else's eyes. In our times however terminologies are breaking apart. They are no more able to capture the essence of an age. For example, what we call today as post-modern is a highly complex phenomenon; a jumble of conflicting trends leading to unknown destinations. In a word, post-modernism is like pulling down the carpet from beneath the civilization. Take for example the long cherished ideals of chivalry, courage and manliness. Not long ago revolutionary leaders, spiritual seers, sportsmen and soldiers were seen as almost super human for their extraordinary valour and courage. But now the invention of wonder drugs and performance enhancing pills has robbed them of their romantic appeal. Technology has brought us to a complete mess. As compared to the world of crumbling values of a 'Waste Land' where a Proofrock may not express his love, today we are confronted with a cold-eyed world infested with divorced women and hook-ups. The post-modern self, as expressed in western street poetry, may celebrate the independence and autonomy of what it calls 'iPod Lone Rangers' but it can hardly mask the anxiety and boredom and the total confusion when it comes to relationships. I-Pod and cell-phones are no more symbols of individual freedom rather they have become the albatross of the directionless civilizational voyage.

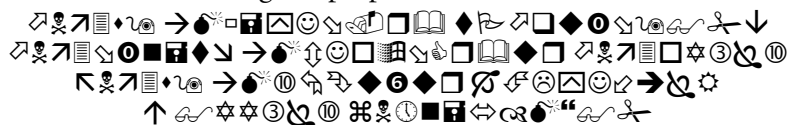
In the West, prefixing the word 'post' to anything meaningful, from post-Christianity to post-Modernism is a strange way of depriving a concept of its meaning. If the main events of history are over and we are born at the twilight of the last day, there is no way to enjoy life at its full. It is the residue of life that surrounds a post-modern self. A life devoid of natural flavour, as it has come down to us, turns the individual into a mere consumer where he hardly finds any meaning in life. The mad Monday, as they call it, keeps us chasing to get ready to do the same thing again and yet again. Doing a life that we do not want to do makes at least one thing clear; that it is too late to look for a meaningful living.

Unlike the West where post-era murmurings and End of history fears are a natural corollary of a directionless rush, in the Muslim world this feeling emanates from a wrong perception of history. In the hey day of Islamic empire when the great *fuqaha* and theologians were debating about the canons of Islamic faith, they thought it natural to turn to the early generation of scholars known for their knowledge of the prophetic time. In their search for a commonly acceptable version of the faith they heavily relied on the interpretative methodology of the elders. Had they relied solely on the revelation and the prophetic model (*uswah*), it would have been possible for the later generations to approach the text on their own. In that case they would have been a stepping stone for us and not a stumbling block. But the early centuries were also marked by political upheavals and intellectual disorder of an unprecedented magnitude that forced the ulema to lay down a commonly agreed charter of faith. خير القرون قرني ثم الذين يلونهم ثم الذين يلونهم only reinforced the belief that the first three generations hold key to Islamic interpretation. Few could realise then that this methodology had a direct bearing on the Jewish hermeneutical tradition which places *Tanaim*, *Amorim* and *Saborim*, the three Talmudic generations, at the helm of interpretative activities. And much like the Jews we too created an aura of sacredness around *sahaba*, *ta'bein* and *tab'a*

*ta'bein*. It was here that the seed of a church was sown in Islam which soon paved the way for a full-fledged Vaticanization of a simple faith.

Can a specific period in history be called sacred? If the first three generation of Muslims lived in sacred times (*khairul quroon*), as the tradition would like us to believe, what about the other prophets in history? Do they fall below, after the *tabein* and *tab'tabein*, in the chronological order? The idea of sacred times has a Christian connotation where Christ's presence on earth is seen as unfolding the word of God. To believe that a specific time is sacred is problematic on many counts. It gives undue importance to an entire generation for simply having lived in a specific period ignoring the fact that right within the prophetic period and inside the prophet's City of Enlightenment – save the second and third generations of Muslims – there also lived a host of hypocrites, polytheists and idolaters. We also know that a significant amount of intellectual activity in different parts of the early Islamic empire was carried out by those who were not happy with the new situation. Amidst *tabein* and *tab'tabein*, whom we so eulogise for their close proximity to the prophetic time, also lived fabricators of traditions and storytellers who were to influence the shape of Islam in the time to come.

In the Qur'anic *weltanschuuang*, the foundation of Islamic faith was well laid out during the prophet's time:



This vision of Islam was to serve as a model for all successive generations. The Siddiqi model of Islam might appear a little different from the Islam of prophet's time and the Omerian model may bear a different look from the Siddiqi model owing to the changing context, but they are a continuation of the same process. If caliph Omer had the right to overturn certain precedents of the prophet's and the Siddiqian periods – as he did on many occasions,

the future Muslims too will have the right to envision an Islam most suited to their own times. A message for all times and places as Islam claims itself to be, no specific generation can claim monopoly on the word of God. Our predecessors who tried their best to emulate the prophetic message had had their share of the revelation. It would be demeaning on our part to rely solely on their understanding of the revelation instead of partaking of the revelation itself.

The idea that interpretative activities have come to a stop and an orthodox version of faith has taken a shape for all time to come, essentially emanates from the long held confusion in Muslim mind which often mixes message with history. We must understand that historical Islam, as it has come down to us, is a transitional stage of the prophetic message that in future has to culminate in a divine thread bringing together submitters of all traditions, singing in unison the glory of one God. Orthodoxy by its very definitions relies on history and not on the simple message itself. For example, as opposed to the Shei Islam which does not consider the first three caliphs legitimate, Sunni Islam places the four caliphs at the centre of faith. The same is true of the four *fuqaha* who rose to prominence due to the socio-political conditions of the time. Accepting them as what they have been made into, or not, can hardly have a bearing on our faith. Then there are also a number of Hadith compendiums. Compiled in the fourth century, some of them have acquired the status of canon literature as they are devoutly called the *sehab sitta*. A produce of history as they are, their rejection should not cast a shadow on our faith. But doing so will make the entire structure of Sunni Islam crumble. The Shia Islam too rests on a similar canonization of history. The basic creed that differentiates it from Sunni Islam, such as the divine origin of Imamate where Ali and his progeny have a designated role, is quite a late development. As late as the middle of the third century Hijra when Bukhari and Muslim were collecting traditions, there were no

separate books for Shei and Sunni traditions. That is why we come across many essentially Shei traditions in Bukhari and Muslim. If we can do away with the misgivings of history and roll back historical Islam, this process will trigger the end of both Sunni and Shei Islam. Then alone we will be in a position to re-envision the prophetic message without any historical intervention.

It is the historical Islam that we have been upholding so proudly and for so long. Developed and perfected in history, as it were, it tells us that the pious elders have perfected the process of thinking, that history is not negotiable, and a critical look at the canon period is simply unthinkable. If the four great *fuqaha* of the past have really finalised a code of living for all time and if the so called canon period spanning on the first three generations is not negotiable, our encounter with the revelation can only be illusory, we will be struggling with the frozen words which spoke to our predecessors long back in history. For many centuries the Muslims have found themselves in a constant fix; on the one hand the Qur'an exhorts them to focus on the revelation



while on the other hand, historical Islam tells them that any encounter with the revelation pointing to a direction different from that of the pious elders is simply not acceptable.

To my understanding, the message of Islam is constantly on the grow; as the human society evolves so does the intent of revelation. There are many verses in the Qur'an about human embryo which today we are in a better position to appreciate than our predecessors whose knowledge of medical sciences was scanty. I have no hesitation to say that the ideals of prophetic Islam have yet to manifest in full. A global society embracing submitters of different hue based on the principles of liberty and justice for which prophets of God strove in different periods of history and which was given a final push by the prophet Muhammad himself is yet to be realised.



This unfinished agenda has to be carried out by the followers of the last prophet. This is to say that the changing models of Islam, from the essential or 'basic' to the Siddiqi and to the Omerian, will eventually culminate in the realisation of a full bloom prophetic model.

Such statements however should not delude us to believe that the future model of Islam will be an improvement upon the Siddiqi or Omerian model. Logistically, it may have an edge over the previous models but in essence it will be a logical continuation of the same process. Like their predecessors the future Muslims too will have their share in the prophetic mission. But for this to happen, the monopoly of the first three generations on the revelation must end. Instead of waiting for a messiah or a hidden imam, the present generation of Muslims must claim their share in the enlightening words of God. This alone can redeem us from the sheer emptiness and non-events that surround us today. As long as the Jewish and Christian nations celebrated their inactivity and waited for a messiah, they lived in an intellectual prison house of their own making. There was no role for them at the centre stage. But once they came out of the mythical world, they found a whole new vista open to them. It took a considerable amount of time on their part to realise what they were clinging to, and for so long, it was a false religiosity. Rabbinic Judaism and Pauline Christianity, as these nomenclatures suggest, are essentially human constructs of religious experiences. Without early scholars or the clergy they cannot be conceived. Rabbinic Judaism calls for building an impregnable fence around the Torah. On the contrary, the Qur'an wants to demolish all such fences that the clergy have ever built around it. In the Christian weltanschauung, walking out of the mythical world of a future redeemer simply means forsaking religion itself. This indeed has been a painful situation generally termed as post-Christianity. Walking out of the historical constructs of Islam however will not

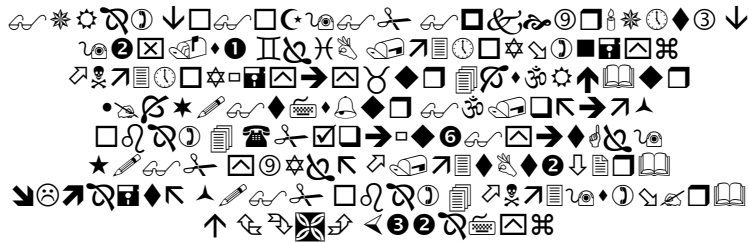
lead us to a similar chaos as in that case we will find ourselves amidst the enlightening, comforting words of God.

Historical Islam must give way to critical thinking if we are serious in reinvigorating our religious life. Revival of Islam in our time should not mean a return to the medieval feel that unfortunately many of us think as its logical outcome. This misconception has deprived us of our originality, turning the entire spectrum into a pastiche. We do but we do not. There lies around us a buzzing world of religious activities; mosques full of worshippers, annual Haj gathering ever on the rise, the holy Harems in Makkah and Medina are constantly on expansion, the jihadis are out to turn the world upside down and the pacifists are busy to take the message of God to every nook and corner, to recreate, yet again another utopia. But the outcome is frustrating, rather depressing. It appears as if it is a pastiche world where we are parodying the pious elders, unwittingly trying to recreate a medieval world in a modern setting. Take, for example, the Friday congregation which as a religious institution had played an instrumental role shaping the Ummah. Today when the Imam reads out an Arabic sermon from an old book composed during the Muslim rule and exhorts the believers to obey the just imam he not only sounds completely out of tune with the time he also makes us feel that we live in a pastiche world. An Islam based on secondary sources can only create pastiche. Our intellectual heritage spanning on some twelve hundred years or so is a pathetic reflection of this pastiche mindset where similar ideas are woven generation after generation in multi-volume compendiums. For many centuries our intellectual activity hovers around classical works and we rely solely on the medieval minds as we consider the formative period of historical Islam somehow sacred and a direct access to the Qur'an a blatant disrespect to the great masters of the past.

In principle, scholars of Islam agree that a direct access to the Qur'an, a fresh reading of the text, is very much desirable. Some of

them even call for a semi-autonomous reading of the text, i.e., a reading based on Hadith reportage. Their willingness to go beyond the orthodoxy is indicative of the fact that the ‘three-generation Islam’ is falling short of contemporary challenges. However, despite so much ho-ha about a fresh reading it is not easy for them to concede that a new reading may command us to take new positions on a host of issues. If the frozen words of God are allowed to speak yet again we would find ourselves amidst a new revolution; that same sublime feel when God had intervened in history through His prophetic agency.

A re-reading of the text will bring us face to face with the pristine purity of Islamic message. We will be in a position to conceive Islam without history, without the misgivings of the past generations. Today, our efforts at fresh reading are generally aborted by the traditional understanding which though in blatant violation of the Qur’anic intent has been held for so long that now it appears to be an auxiliary revelation. Take for example the Qur’anic verse:



If piety is the sole criteria what is the rationale of investing the leadership in the tribe of Quraish, as traditions would like us to believe: *الأئمة من القريش*. The Qur’an tells us time and again that for each individual is what he earns



and that man has no share in what he does not earn through his hard work



but the traditional understanding of Islam makes us believe that family lineage alone can be a sufficient ground for one’s supremacy.

An independent reader of the Qur'an is taken aback when finds that contrary to the Qur'anic statement –



– which clearly demonstrates that absence of a male progeny has left no room for any one to claim descent from the prophet, Muslims have found in the progeny of Ali the royal family of Islam. A re-reading of the text will help recover Islam from the blatant racialism that it acquired during the Fatmide rule as it will also clear the intellectual haze that has been continuously getting thicker with the passage of time.

A creative reading of the text in contemporary setting however cannot be totally risk-free. The journey both in time and space, from the seventh century Arabia to our globalized world, is no small challenge. It is like intermittently changing the gear, or continuously shuttling between the two worlds. We need a highly imaginative mind to properly adjust to the changing context and a responsive soul to appreciate the intent. Yet the result could be at times not easily swallowable. Take for example the issue of inheritance. In a traditional patriarchal society where woman was not supposed to shoulder any financial responsibility and where she was not seen as a breadwinner, it was more than justified that she inherits less than her brother. Today social structures have radically changed. In big cities, and especially in the West, woman is doing as much as her male counterparts. In most cases she leads an independent life, partakes entire financial responsibility and carries her own cross. Shall she still inherit less than her brother? Can we discriminate against her simply for being a female? If caliph Omer can suspend the Qur'anic *hadd* of amputating one's hand for theft in the days of famine and yet he can be held in high esteem as upholder of justice and guardian of Islamic faith, there is no reason

that we stick to the same patriarchal understanding of inheritance laws. Every text has only a relative meaning. A maximum meaning can only be discerned in the context. This is the predicament of language in which meaning is never absolute.

I understand that a jump from the prophet's Arabia to modern times is no easy task. There is enough probability that in our efforts to reach the divine intent we may err. But God Almighty, who certainly knows our limitations more than we do, exhorts us to accept this challenge. Do we dare say Him a 'No'?

As Muslims we have no inhibition to say it loud and clear that we are no other but true practitioners of Abrahamic religion. Christ is one of our beloved prophets. And if it so happens that one day he surfaces in Israel, we Muslims will be the first to welcome him. We will feel honoured to open on him the golden gate of the holy sanctuary. In fact it were we who restored the sanctity of the Temple Mount when our leader caliph Omer took over the city from Christian control

## A Muslim Initiative on Palestine

A Muslim initiative on Palestine is long overdue. So far, the Muslims have been mainly responding to the initiatives of the others. This has put them on a receiving end leaving little room for them to envision a future beyond the initiatives laid down by their opponents. Now after half a century of unmindful military adventures it has become clear to the thinking minds in Israel that a third world war is no solution to the Palestinian question. The Muslims too on the other hand realise that a mere armed struggle or suicide bombing hold no promise of delivering them from the present impasse. Both sides find themselves in a catch-22 situation.

First, a few words about the Jewish mind. The Jews once known for 'arrested development' are out today to push history towards apocalypse. They have long been waiting for the Messiah who, they believe, would restore to them the Kingdom Solomon and David. In their desperate search for a Messiah, many a Bar Kokhba and a Sabbatai Zevi have taken often them on a ride. Now the Christian evangelists are exploiting it to the full, pushing the Jews in dangerous directions, for a head on collision with history itself. Today, a Jewish-Christian alliance for the Final Redemption of Israel may appear to be a convenient proposition but the future historians will write that in their desperate push for apocalypse the Jewish nation had become a mere tool in the hands of misguided evangelists.

The Jewish-Christian alliance that is hell bent on accelerating the events leading to Armageddon is rooted in a flawed mythical thinking. While the Jews believe that the advent of the messiah will herald a new beginning for them, the Christian evangelists, on the other hand, view it essentially as a fulfilment of their own cherished scheme. According to this view, rebuilding of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem will culminate in the second coming of messiah. Evangelical Christians, in a way, are pushing the Jews towards Armageddon in which according to some folk-lore accounts almost two third of the Jewish population is destined to perish. This mythical thinking among the Jews and some sections of Christians and their allies has not only created unending woes in Palestine, it has also been instrumental, to a great extent, for American misadventures in the Middle East and other parts of the world.

Jewish empowerment in our time has been rather problematic. It is for the first time in their history when the Jews are enjoying political power in Palestine and are in a position to wield considerable amount of influence globally. Jerusalem is now very much under Jewish control. Yet the *halakaic* complexities have made it impossible for them to rebuild the long cherished Third

Temple. Not long ago, in 1948, the creation of the Jewish state was viewed as a miracle, a clear indication that God was on their side. In 1967 when the Israeli Army took over Jerusalem without any significant resistance the world Jewry looked at the six-day war as unfolding events of the Final Days. Yet during the so-called momentous days of God's great favour a third temple in Jerusalem could not be conceived. The Jewish Redemption is no political project. It is rather *halakaic*. The ordinary Jew however many not be allowed to concede to this fact.

As per *halakaic* rulings the present day Jews are 'ritually impure' and hence they are not allowed to step in the *kotel*, the Temple Mount. Any violation of this is punishable by death, *kareth*. To attain the ritual purity, they need the ablution of the ashes of a red heifer correctly administered by a Cohen. And neither a red heifer nor a qualified Cohen is available in our time. Supposing they somehow solve the riddle they would still need an Alter. Locating the alter in the Temple area is again problematic as the *halakaic* rulings about exact location of the Alter is very precise. It is said that at the time of building the second temple they had reliable witnesses. The prophets Haggai, Zephaniah and Malachi could testify to the exact spot. Today they do not have any such figure. If there is any hope it is realisable only when the prophet Elijah comes. The third temple even if it is built, will be a defunct institution as there is no Sanhedrin to choose a high priest. For a valid Sanhedrin, the council of 71 Rabbis, its members must be of Mosaic ordination, i.e., tracing an unbroken chain of transmission since Moses. This chain, they believe, remains broken since the year 358 C.E. owing to the persecutions Constantine imposed upon the Jews. Then there is the issue of ten lost tribes of Israel who are yet to be traced and make a come back.

Given the Jewish hankering for the Third Temple, this is a very depressing scenario. The secular Jews who hardly care for *halakaic* rulings are in no mood of wasting their time in waiting. In fact the



very creation of Israel owes to its initiative to the Zionist aspirations when a group of 'emancipated Jews' took the matter to their hands instead of passively wishing one another 'next year in Jerusalem'. However, they do not want to push the temple issue any further, as they fear it may open a Pandora's box of unending *halakaic* debates, pitting one Jewish sect against the other.

In the 19th century Eastern Europe when the Jewish leaders were calling for a return to Palestine they argued that since the messiah would come in the land of Canaan, the Jews were to assemble there to give the messiah a warm welcome. This little twist in Jewish thinking later paved the way for the creation of Israel. Creating a Jewish state has never been and is not a religious obligation for the Jews. Rather, it is against the *halakaic* rulings for the ordinary 'impure' Jews to venture on a divine project. The Zionists however left no stone unturned to make the world Jewry believe that the state of Israel was an integral part of their religious worldview. Today a fake Sanhedrin exists in Israel and attempts are underway to breed a red heifer. The Jews around the world are continuously told that the sole purpose of their life is to support the Israeli state in some way or the other.

The Zionists no doubt were successful in settling millions of Jews in Israel, nevertheless, some two-third of the world Jewry is still living outside the Israeli borders. In recent years, the Jewish immigration to Israel has waned and many of the young Jews are thinking of settling somewhere else. According to a survey published in [ynetnews.com](http://ynetnews.com), 33% of the young Jews (18-29 years) want to leave Israel. And the new generation of Jews living in America feels no emotional link with Israel. They are the 'cool Jews', as dubbed by the Jewish intellectuals. They are critical of the Israeli policies and find it difficult to side with the bunch of corrupt politicians, who, they blame, have hijacked the Jewish agenda. Inside Israel, the religious fervour that once was the hallmark of a nation experiencing its renaissance and who once believed –

following their victory in the six-day war, that God was once again out for their active support, that sublime feeling of sweet Godly touch is no longer part of the Jewish psyche.

Taking stock of the situation from the Jewish angle, the creation of the Israeli state has been a frustrating experience. In their enthusiasm to accelerate the process of history, the Zionists have rather unwittingly become a tool in the hands of Evangelical Christians who have pushed them for a head on collision with the Muslim people, their traditional ally who had provided the Jews a safe haven for many centuries, a fact widely acknowledged in Jewish sources. This artificial push to history has been disastrous for the Jewish nation. In their mad pursuit of Jewish glory they have become rather the apprentices of Swastika, as pointed by Erich Fried, the famous Jewish poet:

*You apprentices of the Swastika  
You fools and changelings of history  
Whose Star of David on you flags  
Turns even quicker  
Into that damned symbol with its four feet  
That you just do not want to see  
But whose path you are following today*

In a purely religious project of Jewish Redemption the secularised ruling elite find themselves at a loss. They do not know what to do next. In Israel, the young Jews have started questioning whether it serves any purpose to make Israel their home. When would the messiah come if he would come at all? At a recent Herzliya conference, a prominent Jewish thinker, Noble laureate Professor Israel Aumann frankly admitted that the state of Israel is facing today 'an existential threat', a phenomenon not so loudly termed as 'post-Zionism'.

Today the modern Jews are willing to have a critical look at the Jewish project of Final Redemption. They might be dubbed by the

extremists as ‘self-hating Jews’, nevertheless, their number is significantly on the rise.

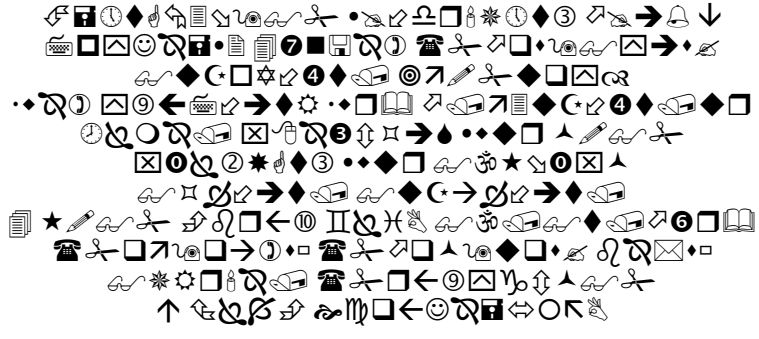
Now it is for the Muslim people to make conscious their Jewish brethren and sisters of the delusions that they have lived in for so long. As upholders of the last revelation, we Muslims have a religious obligation to rescue the nations trapped in the myths of their own making. However, a Muslim initiative cannot be effective unless we have a true insight into the apocalyptic vision of the Jewish mind and its real import. As Muslims we have no inhibition to say it loud and clear that we are no other but true practitioners of Abrahamic religion. Christ is one of our beloved prophets. And if it so happens that one day he surfaces in Israel, we Muslims will be the first to welcome him. We will feel honoured to open on him the golden gate of the holy sanctuary. In fact it were we who restored the sanctity of the Temple Mount when our leader caliph Omer took over the city from Christian control. Further, it was under the Turkish control, in the sixteenth century, when we traced the Western Wall and invited the Jews to join us in the worship of one God. The apocalyptic vision that assigns a key role to the second coming of messiah is not only prevalent among Christians, there are many Muslims who equally share this myth. Some popular traditions even lay out graphic details of how one day the messiah will descend from a heavenly cloud on a white dome in Damascus. Whether one likes such stories or not, the wisdom lies in letting the future unfold itself and in postponing the fighting till the messiah comes.

Of the Jews, the Qur’an tells us that among them are some noble souls who care for truth.



We should have no inhibition in inviting the God-fearing souls among the Jews for an honest and frank dialogue as stipulated in the Qur’an: ‘O ye who adhere to a divine book! Come to common

terms as between us and you; that we worship none but Allah, that we associate no partners with Him, that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah’.



Historical Islam must give way to critical thinking if we are serious in reinvigorating our religious life. Revival of Islam in our time should not mean a return to the medieval feel that unfortunately many of us think as its logical outcome. This misconception has deprived us of our originality, turning the entire spectrum into a pastiche.

## There would be a Tomorrow

The world we live in has not come up overnight. The last fourteen centuries have witnessed a gradual shift of the world capital; from the Prophet's Medina to Damascus, then to Baghdad, Istanbul, Amsterdam, London and eventually in our time it is the Washington DC that calls the shots. True, there are other seemingly powerful members of the Security Council that sometimes make some noises. The emergence of a Euro-land, the empowerment of the EU and the growth of Asian economies sometime give us the

feeling that there are other equally powerful players on the horizon. Then, there is another equally important fact that the major resources of energy so vital to keep the modern world going lie in the world of Islam. And as fifty per cent of the energy resources lie in just five countries, any planning for a future world would simply be inconceivable without them. Yet despite all the given odds it remains a fact that it is the Washington DC that controls the world today. In the post 9/11 world the American intervention, rather aggression, around the world and the bowing down of the world community to American dictates have further convinced us that any plan to change the world without proper recognition of the American might will simply be unrealistic.

A realistic view of the situation however does not mean that the present world order is irredeemable. History testifies to the fact that no power on earth has ever been invincible. What is required is to take a realistic account of the situation and formulate a counter strategy accordingly. Wishful thinking or romantic longings can add further woes to our predicament. More than four years have elapsed since the 9/11 incident that jolted the Muslim world more than the United States but unfortunately the Ummah has not been able to put forward a well-thought out work-plan for the future. True, the last four years have not been a cake-walk for the Americans too; the unexpected delay of American mission in Iraq, the ceremonial rather non-functional presidency of Karzai in Afghanistan, the rise of Islamist groups to power in Pakistan and Palestine and above all the growing public unrest against the Bush Administration inside the country have created some real obstacles. We even hear now of the future of the dollar at stake and there are public murmurings and televised programmes calling for the impeachment of Bush. Such furores are natural reactions to imperialist onslaughts. But all this should not enhance our delusion that the US is on a retreat and that the fall of Washington DC is now a matter of time.

Had there been no inbuilt mechanism of repair the American Empire might have collapsed under the heavy burden of her sins. But the growing criticism of the administration that it is guilty of misguiding the American public on the Iraq issue and the way many thinking people from the media, academia, politics and human rights groups have come in the open to protect their liberty and freedom have provided enough room to right the wrongs of the system. It is in fact this strength of American democracy that holds promise of giving it a fresh lease of life and thus enabling Washington DC to function as a world capital in the foreseeable future.

The fall of the Soviet Union had prompted some state-intellectuals in the US to single out Islam as a new threat to the future. This view that Islam was essentially and inherently anti-western was further enhanced by loud proclamations of some jihadi groups and Muslim organizations who after the defeat of the Red Army were swayed by romantic visions. They mistakenly believed that it were they who had inflicted not only a defeat on the Soviets but also engineered the dismantlement of the USSR. And if they could force the Soviets to leave Afghanistan, they argued, why they could not pull down the other super power, the US? In their enthusiasm they conveniently ignored the fact that apart from the human resource that the Muslim nation had provided to the Afghan jihad there were other equally important factors responsible for the demise of the Soviet Union. Mention should also be made of the mythical stories that were making rounds during the Afghan war. It was related that miracles were happening in the battle field; people even saw angles descending from the sky and the dead bodies of the martyrs were reported to have filled the air with fragrance. Such stories were helpful though in boosting the morale of the fighters, nonetheless, they inculcated in our youth a romantic outlook. Then, there were seemingly Islamic myths that had long made their way into the mainstream Muslim thinking. The Mahdi myth which

originated in the second century Hijra gradually became part of our popular belief system. Despite its foreign origin the Mahdi/ Messiah/ Mujaddid myth kept intervening in the emergence of a rational outlook among Muslims. On the very first morning of the 15th century Hijra when Juhaiman Al-Otaiba along with his followers seized the holy Harem in Makkah, he was a victim of this messianic thinking. The oft quoted tradition, which relates that in the beginning of each century God will send a *mujaddid* to set things right, has engineered many a catastrophic situation in our history. At a time when the Red Army was on the retreat and in the neighbouring Iran the Shiite world was witnessing an unprecedented revival under Khomeni who as a *wilayat-al-faqeeh* had claimed to paving the way for the hidden imam, a romantic view of the future was probably not much out of place. The jihad in Afghanistan had gathered Islamists from all corners of the world in the bordering districts of Pakistan. After the defeat of the Soviets the Islamists looked at themselves as conquerors, and instead of a rational analysis of the Afghan war, took refuge in the myth of their own making. Although there were enough indications that as believers they were still a fragmented lot least deserving of God's unconditional support. Yet they looked at themselves as a favoured nation. After the Taliban took hold of Kabul, the romantic thinking attained a high pitch by the use of pompous terminologies such as *amirul-momenin*. It appeared to many that under the leadership of Mullah Omer the modern world was witnessing a replica of the Prophet's Medina where Ansar and Muhajirun from around the world had gathered for a decisive battle against the global *kufr*. Neither the Muslim intellectuals seriously enquired where the post-Afghan Muslim mind was heading to nor the new Muhajirun and Ansar who now comprised the cream of Islamists from around the world were fully aware that they not only lacked the required planning to topple the global *kufr* they even lacked the essential insight into the nature of the *kufr* itself. The modern day *amirul*



*momeneen* and the people gathered around him were cultic in their thinking inspired by unfounded myths. Such people due to their mythical outlook no doubt had the potential to act out great disasters but could not produce a new dawn.

Many years have elapsed since the 9/11 but the Ummah has yet to recover from the Bar Kokhba syndrome. The story has it that the Jewish community, confronted with the tyranny of the Roman Empire found in Bar Kokhba an ambitious man, a promising messiah, despite the fact he was not a man of vision nor was he capable of leading a successful revolt against the mighty Romans. Yet it was the romantic longings of the Jews that gathered the entire Jewish community around him. Even a man like Rabbi Akiva known for his political acumen and religiosity endorsed him as a messiah. And as the messiah had arrived the Jewish world experienced an unprecedented amount of hope and optimism. It appeared as if the kingdom of Solomon and David was about to return. But soon the optimism vanished. The Bar Kokhba rebellion was crushed and a general atmosphere of gloom engulfed the Jewish nation for centuries to come. It was not very lately when we witnessed a similar situation in the Muslim world. From Palestine to Peshawar and from Indonesia to Morocco it was a sea of people passionately demonstrating in support of bin Laden. At times it appeared that the world of Islam had awakened and the unity in its ranks could now achieve the impossible. Mythical minds and romantic longings with no inkling of realism can only produce a Bar Kokhba, a Sabbetai Zevi, a Juhaiman al-Otaiba and a bin Laden.

### There would be a Tomorrow

The shifting of the world capital from the Prophet's Medina to the modern day Washington DC took almost fourteen centuries. However, for a reversal of the process we need not necessarily wait for an equal amount of time if we can pin-pointedly locate what

made the 7th century Arabia a world capital. Locating those factors or envisioning the pristine world view of Islam is crucial for our future. In our search for the pristine Islamic world view however if we rely too much on historical account we may be guilty of making the revelation subservient to history. In the past many of our thinkers have committed this mistake. The revelation, in my opinion, has to be understood anew in the temporal and spatial atmosphere of the Prophet's time as it emerges from the contents of the Qur'an. Last but not the least; we need to find out what keeps the Washington DC as the 21st century world capital despite her so blatant violations of justice. In short, without a proper understanding of the modern world we cannot reinstate ourselves yet again to the seat of authority and guidance. To begin with, we need to create a new Muslim mind. In the later centuries of Islam our approach to the divine revelation has been dogmatic rather than inquisitive. We have taken our faith as a set of rituals and many of the revelatory truths have become mere cliché due to their oft and unthoughtful repetition. Reshaping the Muslim mind, I believe, will give a new life to many of our lifeless dogmatic clichés. Let me briefly elaborate:

1. The Qur'an is a complete book and a definitive text. It is a book for all time. The Qur'an demands from us that we do not give up the habit of thinking and reflection. And it is the bare revelation that should be the focus of our attention. No historical or exegetic material should take hold of our imagination.
2. The followers of the last Prophet are upholders of an international mission. Islam as it has come down to us is the converging point of the entire prophetic tradition. Looking at Islam as exclusively the Mohammedan religion (*deen Muhammadi*) undermines the universality of the prophetic mission. It is the religion of Abraham (*Millate Ibraheem*) as

the Qur'an puts it and Mohammad is the benefactor of humanity and a Warner to all.

3. The Qur'an is in plain Arabic, *Arabie mubeen*. Despite the fact that it was revealed to an Arabian prophet in an Arabian setting, Arabism is not its essential component. Its application in the international arena will transcend all cultural, linguistic and regional barriers. The future Islamic society has to be built on piety and not on those fabricated traditions that institute the prophet's descendents at the centre stage of Muslim polity. No specific culture, colour or lineage should be taken as the natural colour of Islam.
4. As deputies of the last prophet Muslims are entrusted with global leadership till end-time. They must reorient themselves to work for the betterment of humanity in general and should not limit themselves to mere communitarian projects. For too long they have been living under the delusion that they are like any other nation. This attitude is in direct contravention to their Qur'anic status and has deprived the modern world of God-fearing Muslim leadership.
5. As upholders of the last revelation Muslims have a key role to play in future history. However, a global project of justice cannot be carried out in isolation nor Muslims are enjoined to do so. We need to gather around us all believing nations who can lend their support for a common programme, the *kalimatun siwa*. Opening up the doors for other faith communities will make it easier for us to achieve our objectives.
6. No single nation can claim a monopoly on salvation. It is a thorny issue on which we are asked to keep our mouths shut. The traditional *fiqhi* rulings that deny salvation outside the present day Muslim community and believe that the verses in the Qur'an contrary to this view are abrogated

cannot be taken as the final word. Such exclusivist opinions have been the real stumbling blocks in activating the other faith communities for Islamic ideals of justice.

7. Owing to some worn out cultural norms, today woman stands marginalised in the Muslim society. The code of decent dressing for women as enshrined in the Qur'an needs to be understood beyond any cultural straitjacket. Denying a social role to women is not only against the Qur'an and our own early history, it has virtually kept half of our human potential frozen for a long time. Given the enormity of its global agenda, if the Qur'an enjoins us to seek the cooperation of other faith communities how can we afford to keep the potential of our own women folk underutilised?
8. The Qur'an is a book in detail, *kitabam mufassila*, leaving no room for exegetical manoeuvring. Any reading of the text in a historical context, *asbab-an-nazool*, is not only akin to making the revelation subservient to history, it also obstructs in a fresh reading of the text for our own specific setting. God has fully conveyed what He wanted to. Does He need the human assistance of the exegetes to make His intent clear and comprehensible? An admonition to all – *bayanullinnas* – as the Qur'an is, it demands from us that we read it as an every day manual. This attitude alone has the potential of generating a revelation-based mass movement.
9. Islamic ideals of justice, equality and liberty can only materialise when each human being is realised to his/her fullest and virtually there is none else between God and man. Scholars of Islam should cease functioning as the clergy and the church-like situation that has stealthily crept into the polity of Islam must be weeded out. The Qur'an projects prophet Mohammad as the liberator of human mind from the shackles of *ahbar*, the priesthood, and hence

Muslims must shun all kinds of *self* worship. The new Muslim mind operating within the Qur'anic paradigm, however, has all the possibilities of committing mistakes. But the extraordinary emphasis that the Qur'an places on the use of one's brain leaves no other option for us.

These are some of the essential components of the new Muslim mind which I believe is crucial for a fresh start. I should also confess at the outset that not much is available in the traditional heritage literature that could be put to ready use. Hence there is no alternative to a re-reading of the text. In the past some Muslim thinkers and ulema had made concerted efforts to change the traditional mythical mind-set but they ended up in losing their own popularity and acceptability. Their works are now confined to library shelves as *tafarrudat* of great scholars. The new age reformers have to be cautious lest they, instead of initiating a creative reading of the Qur'an, should end up with producing yet another variety of *tafarrudat*. In short, the new movement despite its highly acclaimed intellectual pitch has to come out of the ivory towers of academia.

A full-fledged revelation based intellectual revolution requires engaging some best minds of our time who not only believe in the efficacy of the book of God and the *uswah* of the beloved prophet but at the same time possess a remarkable insight into the prevailing world order. During the last few years our writings on the issue have attracted a large number of people from across the globe and some three to four hundred thinkers and writers who equally share our concern have pledged their support to our cause.

Some well-meaning friends have suggested that establishing a university-like institution can be a ground breaking initiative yet some other well-wishers have pointed out that establishing a full-fledged academic institution solely for this project may absorb all our energy in administrative logistics. Before we finally decide for a revelation based modern university, we should also enquire as why any such efforts in the past did not bear fruits.

Lately, during the American bombing of Afghanistan when the Taliban's extraordinary courage proved no match for B-52 bombers, it became clear to many of us that unless our *madaris* and seminaries are able to invent something more effective than the B-52 we will be vulnerable to western onslaughts. Living in a world which has largely been shaped by the west and where the West has a marked technological edge over us there can be two possible ways to respond to this challenge: first, we compete with them on technological front or at least acquire readily available nuclear capabilities, second, we put up our ideological weapons where the military arsenals have failed us. The latter move, though it may appear far fetched, is closer to the prophetic strategy and has proved its efficacy many a time in the past. Islam, a salvafic possibility for all as it happens to be, if presented in the universal Qur'anic metaphor, will certainly find many takers in the top echelons of the western society. The sack of Baghdad in 1258 had cast such a gloom that it appeared as if the phenomenon called Islam was over once and for all. But soon Islam conquered the same enemies who held the banner of Islam high for many centuries to come. No wonder then, if today too, unveiling the universal message of Islam yields a similar result.

Given the enormity of the challenge a world class revelation based university can only be a minuscule of our thinking. We need to think hard and act with courage and confidence.

## Glossary

<i>aalim</i>	scholar
<i>aalamiyyat</i>	essential qualification in <i>dars nizami</i> , the curriculum of Islamic seminaries, to trust one's understanding of Islam
<i>adhan</i>	call to prayer
<i>Aemmah Arba'</i>	the four imams, founders of the four schools of fiqh in sunni Islam
<i>ahl-al-hawa wal-bid'a</i>	those who follow their whims and innovate the religion of their own choice
<i>ahadith</i>	sayings and doings of the prophet

<i>ahl-al-hawa</i>	a derogatory term for those who interpret the text to suit their selfish interests
<i>ahl-al-adl</i>	people of justice
<i>ahl-as-sunnah-wal-jama'ah</i>	mainstream Muslims who follow the established tradition
<i>ahl-al-Hadith</i>	a Muslim sect which takes traditions as key to Islamic understanding
<i>amir-ul-momenin</i>	chief of the believers, political authority
ansar	litt. supporters, a term lovingly given to people of Medina on whose invitation the prophet and his companions migrated to Medina
<i>asabiyyah</i>	bias, though generally seen as a positive virtue, a cohesive force
<i>ahle kitab</i>	'people of the book' a Quranic term of admiration for Jews, Christians and other remnants of earlier prophetic communities
<i>ahkam</i>	injunctions
autad wa aqtab	important personages of the sufi cosmology who are said to wield God-like powers to run the world
Alwides	tracing their origin to Ali or supporters of Ali
amal salih	good deeds
<i>Amanah</i>	trust, a thing or property committed to the trust of a person
<i>an-nabi al-ummi</i>	the prophet of Makkah, as the prophet is lovingly called in the Quran
<i>al-mizaan</i>	the Balance, symbolic of divine justice
<i>Alf-Lailah</i>	<i>litt. A Thousand &amp; One Nights</i> , the famous Arabian narrative known for its depiction of the world of splendour
<i>asbab-an-nazool</i>	circumstantial prelude to revelation
<i>al-ghiar</i>	a clock worn by non-Muslim citizens in a Muslim state
<i>ahl-adhdhimmah</i>	



	non-Muslims under state protection
ayat ahkam	Quranic verses related to clear legal injunctions
<i>Aayatullah-al-Uzma</i>	<i>Grand Ayatullah, supreme authority in Iran</i>
<i>Aayatullah</i>	a title of respect for shia scholars
<i>arrasikhoon fil ilm</i>	the knowledgeable
Banu Quraiza	A Jewish tribe who lived near Medina
<i>bayanul-lin-nas</i>	<i>a reference to the Quran, admonition to the people</i>
<i>bida'ti</i>	innovator, a derogatory term for those who introduces to Islam something alien
<i>Bukhari</i>	Ismaeil Al-Bukhari whose collection of the prophetic traditions is generally referred to as the <i>Bukhari</i>
<i>chilla</i>	<i>litt.</i> forty, evangelical sojourn often spanning on forty days. A very recent innovation that became a global phenomenon with the extra-ordinary growth of the Delhi based Tablighi Jama'at.
<i>dawah</i>	calling people to Islam
<i>deen</i>	way of living, life-style
<i>darul-Islam</i>	the abode of Islam or the Islamic state
<i>darul-Kufr</i>	the abode of kufr, lands not governed by the shariah
<i>deen Muhammadi</i>	conceiving Islam as religion of Muhammad instead of envisioning it as God-cantered deen, religion of all the prophets
<i>Deobandi</i>	a sub-sect in Hanafi Islam that considers interpretation of Islam by the Deoband seminary as final and binding
dhimmitude	an attitude of looking at the religious other with contempt
<i>Eid-ul-Fitr</i>	Muslim festival celebrated at the conclusion of Ramadhan, the month of fasting
<i>faqeeh-ul-asr</i>	the person who epitomises wisdom of his time
<i>fardh</i>	<i>obligatory, essential</i>
<i>Fazilatu-sh-Shaikh</i>	

	<i>a term of respect for religious scholars in the Arab world</i>
<i>Fatmides</i>	A Muslim dynasty that traces its legitimacy to its lineage with the daughter of the prophet
<i>fatwa</i>	Muslim equivalent of Jewish <i>responsa</i> , non-binding scholarly opinion about Islamic position on a given subject
<i>fuqaha</i>	<i>sing. faqeeh</i> , legists of Islam, a reference to the founding fathers of Muslim Jurisprudence
<i>fiqh</i>	jurisprudence
<i>fiqhi</i>	of fiqh, legal hair-splitting
<i>fitnah</i>	utter confusion, anarchy, state of civil war
<i>taqleed</i>	unmindful imitation, blind following of the pious elders
<i>gasht</i>	<i>litt.</i> wandering, visiting Muslim neighbourhood in small groups to enlighten them about Islam
<i>ghair mahram</i>	a person with whom marriage relations can be sought
ghotra	head-dress worn by Arabs
<i>hadd</i>	penal code
Hadith	traditions of the prophet
<i>Hizbollah</i>	<i>litt.</i> The Party of God
<i>Hijra</i>	<i>litt.</i> migration, name of the Muslim calendar that begins with the prophets migration to Medina
<i>Hudaibia</i>	the treaty of peace that the prophets signed with the Quraish of Makkah in 628 C.E.
<i>Hujjatul-Islam</i>	a title for religious scholars of repute
<i>Hanfite</i>	the followers of Hanafi school of jurisprudence who solely rely on Islam as understood by Abu Hanifa and his deciples
<i>halaal</i>	lawful
<i>Hambali</i>	or Hambalite, followers of Ahmad bin Hambal, the founder of one of the four schools of fiqh
<i>huffaz</i>	scholars of Hadith who claim to commit tens of thousands of traditions to their memories
<i>ijazah</i>	Muslim equivalent of Jewish <i>semikha</i> , certification, authorization to act as a religious scholar

<i>istehsaan</i>	Juristic preference, liberal interpretation
<i>istislaah</i>	juristic interpretation taking cognizance of greater public interest
<i>istikhlaf</i>	temporal or political authority
<i>ibad as-saleheen</i>	sing. <i>abd saleh</i> rightly guided, people of extra-ordinary virtue
<i>Ikhwan</i>	short form of Ikhwan al-Muslimoon, the Brotherhood of Egypt
<i>ilm sharei</i>	<i>pl. uloom sharei</i> , religious science
<i>Ijma</i>	consensus
<i>Iman</i>	faith, a beliers' worldview
<i>ijtihad</i>	rethinking, reading new meanings in the old text once the context has changed
<i>Israeliyat</i>	employing Jewish anecdotes, stories to enlighten a Quranic context
<i>jabriyyah</i>	believers in predetermination who deny free will. To them even God has no power as things are predetermined once and for all
<i>Jaziratul Arab</i>	Isles of Arabia, a term used by Arab geographers for the heart of Arabia, area bounded by the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf and the waters of Tigris and the Euphrates.
<i>ihadis</i>	warriors of faith
<i>jirh wa tadeel</i>	a highly complicated process of checking the authenticity of the transmitter of traditions
<i>khair ummah</i>	the chosen nation, a reference to the followers of the last prophet
<i>khairul quroon</i>	the best of all times
<i>kalimatun siwaen</i>	common agenda or terms of agreement
<i>kalam</i>	philosophy as it developed in theological traditions
<i>Khawarij</i>	a Muslim sect in early Islam who were opposed to both Ali and Ma'awiah during the civil war

<i>Khilafa</i>	Islamic system of governance based on <i>shura</i> (consensus)
<i>kitabam mufassila</i>	comprehensive book, a reference to the Qur'an
<i>kuffar</i>	rebels of God, rejecters of the Truth
<i>Lat</i>	tree-goddess in pre-Islamic Arabia
<i>maruf</i>	established norms in a society
<i>naasikh</i>	abrogater
<i>mansookh</i>	abrogated
<i>marjaeiyyah</i>	people who believe that faith is separate from action. The most extreme of them claim that one who says 'there is no god but God' is guaranteed a place in heaven no matter whatever he or she does
<i>mazhab</i>	denominations, school of fiqh
<i>Millate Ibraheem</i>	<i>nation of Abraham, a broader conglomeration of faith groups</i>
<i>mujtahid mutlaq</i>	a scholar of repute who is capable of his own reading of the text and thereby inferring fresh guidance from it
<i>Maulana</i>	<i>litt.</i> 'our lord', a term veneration for Muslim religious scholars
<i>Mulla</i>	religious scholar, sometimes also used as derogatory
<i>mawalis</i>	social system in early Islam which extended protection and patronage of Arabian tribes to those who were non-locals
<i>Mua'tta</i>	the earliest comprehensive collection of traditions by Imam Malik
<i>muta</i>	temporary marriage
<i>mutazali</i>	a derogatory term given to those who advocated for a rational thinking in early Islam
<i>mufassirun</i>	Quranic exegetes
<i>mutasawwefin</i>	mystics of Islam
<i>munafiq</i>	hypocrite
<i>mu'allifatun quloob</i>	

	favour extended to win the heart of new converts to Islam
<i>mantiq wa falsafa</i>	logic & philosophy
<i>manzil</i>	distance travelled by a caravan in one go or day
<i>mubah</i>	permissible
<i>mujaddid</i>	renovator of faith
<i>mustahab</i>	more than required
<i>muhajiroon</i>	litt. emigrants, a term for early Makkan Muslims who migrated to Medina for the sake of Islam
<i>nass</i>	explicit textual evidence
<i>nafil</i>	doing or praying extra to excel in piety
<i>qadriyyah</i>	believers in free will
<i>qayas</i>	analytical reasoning
<i>qeradatun khaseein</i>	aping nations, people devoid of originality and self-respect
<i>qassas</i>	story tellers, popular entertainers
<i>qadis</i>	judge in the Muslim court of law
<i>Quraish</i>	the priestly class in pre-Islamic Makkah
<i>qurra</i>	scholars of Quran
<i>rabbani</i>	God-oriented, worshipper of one God
<i>rawayat wa dirayat</i>	evaluating a tradition on the basis of the chain of transmitters and reason
<i>riddah</i>	apostacy
<i>ruba'ei</i>	a tradition with a chain of four transmitters
<i>salf saleheen</i>	pious elders of early Islam
<i>sabilul-momeneen</i>	mainstream Islam
<i>sahaba</i>	companions of the prophet
<i>Sahih Muslim</i>	one of the most authentic compendiums of Hadith named after its author
<i>Samahtu-sh-Shaikh</i>	

	most distinguished scholar, supreme authority on matters religious
<i>shuyukh</i>	spiritual seers
<i>salaf</i>	predecessors, infallible elders of the past
<i>salafis</i>	dominant sect in the Middle-East which claims to be the true inheritors of 'pious elders' of the past
<i>Sabians</i>	a faith community mentioned in the Qur'an
<i>Shafeite</i>	the followers of Shafei, founder of one of the four schools of fiqh in sunni Islam
<i>sharei uloom</i>	or <i>ilm sharei</i> , religious sciences
<i>shibh ahle kitab</i>	faith groups otherwise not mentioned in the Quran but displaying all the characteristics of 'people of the book'
<i>Shaikhul Islam</i>	chief religious authority in Muslim lands
<i>Shia</i>	a major sect in Islam that takes Ali and his progeny as pre-ordained leaders (imams) of Muslims
<i>Sunni</i>	mainstream Muslims who claim to go by the prophets sunnah and the norms established by the rightly guided caliphs and other disciples of the prophet
<i>sunnah</i>	established norms, especially those that can be traced back to the prophet Muhammad
<i>salah</i>	obligatory worship
<i>sehah sitta</i>	six most authentic compendiums of Hadith. However, there is no canon-like agreement about which six collections deserve to be called authentic. Some include Mua'tta while others insist on replacing it with less authentic Ibn Maja
<i>saaghiroon</i>	the non-Muslim ideological groups in an Islamic state who due to their differences with the dominant ideology are left on the margin and have no role in the policy making
<i>sunan</i>	compendiums of traditions
<i>Shariah</i>	Quranic mode of living
<i>Tablighis</i>	a group of Muslim evangelicals who preach Islamic pacifism
<i>talaq</i>	divorce

<i>tasawuf</i>	the mystical system that flourished during the decline days of Islam
<i>tafseer bir-ray</i>	interpreting the text out of context
<i>tafakkur</i>	thinking, reflection
<i>ta'aqqul</i>	using ones mind, rationalise,
<i>tadabbur</i>	systematic reasoning
<i>taqyyia</i>	hiding the real intent, a political philosophy of pacifism in Shei Islam
<i>tafseer</i>	Quranic exegesis
<i>tafseer wa ta'weel</i>	<i>Quranic Hermeneutics</i>
<i>tafarrudat</i>	original findings of a scholar that puts him at odd with others
<i>ta'bein</i>	second generation of Muslims who were privileged to see the prophets disciples, the sahaba
<i>tabe'ta'bein</i>	third generation of Muslims who had the privilege of living almost in the same milieu that the disciples of the prophet lived
<i>thulathi</i>	a tradition that comes down to the narrator with a chain of three transmitters
<i>Tarbush</i>	red round cap worn by Muslim ulema
<i>ulul amr</i>	political authority
<i>Ummah Muslima</i>	The nation of submitters, in the Quranic worldview it encompasses true followers of all the prophets, an umbrella organization of faith communities
<i>usool al-fiqh</i>	principles of Islamic Jurisprudence
<i>ulema</i>	<i>sing. aalim</i> , scholar
<i>ummahat-ul kutub</i>	great books of Muslim heritage that serve as source books on Islam such as Tabari's <i>Jami al-Bayan</i> , Ibn Asir's <i>Al-Kamil</i> etc
<i>ummate wast</i>	nation of the middle path, a balanced or just community, a reference to the followers of the prophet Muhammad

<i>unzur</i>	<i>the Quranic exhortation to see</i>
<i>Ummah Muhammadiyah</i>	The nation or the Cult of Mohammad; interestingly the term does not figure in the Quran which portrays Muslims as those belonging to the nation of Abraham
<i>uswah</i>	role-model
<i>uzzah</i>	a goddess tree worshiped by the Arabs in pre-Islamic times
<i>wala and bara</i>	a non-compromising political stance
<i>waliul-amr</i>	legitimate political authority
<i>wajib</i>	<i>obligatory, religiously binding</i>
<i>wakf</i>	a trust or an endowment
<i>wae'z</i>	public orators
<i>wilayat-al-faqeeha</i>	a very special religious office with extra-ordinary powers that khomainei chose for himself after the revolution
<i>zaheri school</i>	a literalist school of fiqh founded by Dawood Zaheri
<i>zakat</i>	wealth tax, an obligatory charity-system to help the needy – an article of faith among Muslims



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