

## ISLAM AND CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL CHALLENGES

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### Abstract:

The present article is both an analysis of the ethical theory which is inherent in Islamic teachings a meditation on how current attitudes in the living tradition of Islamic thought must be adapted to meet the needs of contemporary challenges. To achieve the first goal, the author begins with an analysis of the ethical teachings of the Qur'an. He then seeks to analyze these teachings using the conceptual distinction 'teleological vs. deontological' which is so important in western ethical theory, coming to the conclusion that from the Islamic perspective, "human action gets ethical acceptability if it is carried out '*khalisatan li-wajh allah*' or 'for the sake of God.' Hence, Islam so beautifully reconciles the teleological standard with deontological standard."

In the second part of the paper the author presents guidelines for the future of Islamic ethical thought. These include the necessity of emphasizing the universal spirit of Islam, which is clearly present in the Qur'an but which is often underemphasized in the Islamic tradition; the need for an ethical interpretation of *jihad*; and the need to distinguish foundational Islamic principles from aspects of the tradition which are based on particular cultural circumstances. Additionally, the author emphasizes that the liberal and humanistic outlook which he sees to be necessary for the future of Islamic ethics has always been present in the tradition of Islamic mystical poetry.

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Giving many examples of this poetry, he argues that the mystical tradition must again come to the forefront. If this and his other recommendations are carried out, Islam will be able to achieve its potential to play a key role in global civilization and in developing a much needed “*common morality for the global age.*”

**Key Terms:** Islam, ethics, teleology, deontology, universal spirit, jihad, mystical poetry, global civilization

#### **A. GENERAL INTRODUCTION:**

The Qur’an is literally the Word of God, the final and most complete message of Allah to humanity. Together with the *sunnah* of the Prophet, the Qur’an is the spring from which the spiritual and *ethical* teachings of Islam flow. The two, in conjunction, also constitute the legal and jurisprudential foundation of Islam as also of the *ummah* across time and space.

The Qur’an is the basic source of Islamic world-view, value-system and standards of justification. It is essentially a religious book and not a text on technical philosophical questions. However, the implications of the thousands of the verses of the Holy Qur’an fructify into some of the most important philosophical themes. The central problems to which the Qur’an refers pertain to the nature of Ultimate Reality, the individual soul, the world, good and evil, free will and life after death. The Qur’an also throws light on such matters as appearance and reality, existence and attributes, human origin and destiny, truth and error, space and time, permanence and change, eternity or immortality, etc.

The ontological account of the Qur’an postulates *Allah* to be the Ultimate Being. God as described by the Qur’an is the Eternal and Absolute Reality. He is the First and the Last, the Seen and the Unseen. He is beyond the limitations of space and time. However, He is also Immanent in the soul of man as well as in natural order. He is the Originator, Creator, Evolver, Shaper, Beautiful, Sustainer, Master and Lord of the Universe. The primal origin of the Universe is from God and to Him everything is to return. He began the process of creation and adds to it as and when He pleases. His decisions are executed in no time

for there is nothing to oppose His Will. He has power over all things and to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on the earth. Wheresoever we turn, there is His presence, for He is all-pervading.

God has not created the world for idle sport. It is created with a purpose and according to a plan. The world is thoroughly teleological. This thoroughly teleological orientation or direction of the universe indicates the value-orientation or value-dimension of man. Man is the deputy (*khalifah*) of God on the earth and His co-worker. He has been blessed with freedom of will and powers of discrimination and reasoning and faculties of understanding. Accordingly, He has been clearly directed in the Qur'an to do what is *virtuous* and to abstain from what is *vicious*. Those invested with power and wisdom have been asked to direct others to do what is *good* and prevent them from doing anything *evil*.

The ethical values prescribed by the Qur'an are, in view of the same, thoroughly theocentric. A Muslim must be loving, kind, co-operative, gracious, generous, compassionate, honest, helpful, sympathetic etc. for the sake of God and his creations, especially human beings. His behaviour should be directed by the *love* of God or controlled by the *fear* of God. He will be rewarded with paradisaal bliss or sent to hellfire on the Day of Judgment in accordance with his submission or insubordination to the Will of God.

The Qur'an emphasizes the respect and dignity of man. God's relation to man is very intimate. He created humankind from the Single Self. The whole of humankind is one family, because it is the progeny of a single pair, Adam and Eve. In reality, man is the highest (*ashraf*) of all that is created, for Allah has created him in the most beautiful of all moulds (*aḥsan al-taqwīm*). He is born with the divine spirit breathed into him. The prime aim of man, therefore, is a progressive achievement of all divine attributes and all intrinsic values. God encompasses and cherishes humankind and He is always near to man—nearer than his jugular vein (*al-ḥabl al-warid*). God likes and recognizes the service of humanity as the best service. He wishes that if man wants to achieve proximity to God, he should love and serve human beings.

**(B) ETHICS IN ISLAM:**

Ethics, like other Islamic sciences, takes its origin from the Holy Qur'an. The Qur'an lays down the foundation of a religious system on purely ethical principles; hence, there is not much to distinguish between Islam as such and Islamic ethics. The sacred Book is full of such injunctions, which highlight that ethical principles are the secret essence of Islam. Kindness to parents, forgiveness to those who err, piety, equity, just dealing, compassion, restraint of lust, nobility, modesty etc., all find proper mention in the Holy Qur'an.<sup>1</sup>

Now the question arises as to what kind of ethical philosophy is incorporated into the Qur'anic discourse. The search for a criterion of what qualifies an action, individual or collective, to be good, has been a long drawn-out one. While for most religious world-views, the good is simply what is commanded by God. The modern secular-rationalist Western philosophers have proposed various standards or criteria of qualifying human actions and practices. The most celebrated debate, in this regard, has been carried out between Kantian deontologism and British teleologism.

The deontological standard of justification was espoused by Indian, Roman Catholic and Islamic Religious world-views and value-systems. Kant is the foremost representative of the deontological principle in the modern European secular-rationalist framework. According to the deontologists, the rightness of an action depends on whether it accords with a *rule* irrespective of consequences. Actions cannot and need not be justified on grounds of their good or bad consequences for the human individual or society. A moral action is right as a matter of principle. It is right or wrong in itself. The consideration of consequence is of secondary importance in our moral commitments. The moral imperatives are unconditional and unqualified. They are essentially innocent of consequences.

The teleological or consequentialist standard of justification, on the contrary, was championed by some of the most distinguished Western philosophers from ancient Aristotle to modern David Hume. Its barest version was formulated by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century British utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill. In direct contrast to deontologists, the teleological approach advocates that the rightness of

an action depends upon its *consequences*. Actions are to be judged good or bad, right or wrong etc. solely on the basis of their consequences. For example, the British utilitarians would argue that an action is right, if, in given circumstances, it contributes to the maximization of human pleasure and minimization of human suffering. An action is to be judged right according to whether its consequences do more than any alternative action to increase the net balance of pleasure over pain.

Besides deontological and teleological approaches, various classical, medieval and modern ethical philosophers have forwarded other standards of justification. Keeping this in view, let us see how Islam tackles the problem of ethics in the contemporary scenario and therefore strongly emphasizes its inherent element of *ijtihad* (a reinterpretation of Islamic concepts according to the need of the time).

The phenomenon of religious exclusivism is understandable and explainable. All religions have originated from exclusivistic interpretations and appropriations. All religions have claimed monopoly on truth. For example, the Jews' superiority complex in terms of being the chosen people of God; the Hindus' consideration that the Vedas are the prime source of Absolute Truth and the Buddhists' belief that only the teachings of Buddha can lead to liberation of humanity from suffering. The classical Christians have authentically believed that only they are destined to be eschatologically saved. Similarly, the classical Muslims (with exception) have also displayed a powerful exclusivistic outlook and monopolistic ethos.

However, it can be firmly argued that this exclusivistic philosophical outlook and monopolistic spiritual ethos of Muslims is not categorically supported by the Qur'anic verses or reinforced by the *Sunnah* of the Prophet. The exclusivists have been citing and tangentially interpreting the Qur'anic verses and traditions of the Prophet with a view to bolster up their frozen attitudes and responses. However, scores of Qur'anic verses and traditions of the Prophet are equally amenable to a non-exclusivistic and non-fundamentalistic interpretation. Such an interpretation will be in accord with contemporary concerns and imperatives of the world society.

The Islamic world-view and value system have been adjusting to overwhelming challenges. Muslim philosophers such as al-Kindi, al-

Farâbî, Ibn Sînâ and Ibn Rushd have successfully accomplished a reconciliation between Greek rationalism and the Qur'anic creationistic ontocosmology. The Sufis have projected a universalistic vision and version of Islam. Islamic culture has its own solid tradition of liberalism and inclusivism. The Persian, Turkish, Urdu and other Sufi poets have generated an ethos of liberalism and humanism. For instance, Shâh Wali Allah of India opted for cultural and legal pluralism in the eighteenth century. Sayed Jamal Al-Din Afghani, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Abdhu, Sayed Ameer Ali, Sir Muhammad Iqbal and many more tried to reconcile Islam with modern European science.

### ***(C) THE FUTURE COURSE OF ACTION***

We need to take the following main steps with a view to orienting an ethical framework of Islam for the emerging global society and see that what and how Islam can offer its moral perspective to regenerate the quest for good life maintaining the dignity and prosperity of man in the contemporary world of ethical crises:

- 1. Universal Spirit of Islam**
- 2. Ethical Justification of *Jihâd***
- 3. Reunderstanding Islam**
- 4. Sufi Version of Islam**
- 5. Islamic Morality in the Twenty-first Century**

Let us briefly discuss these steps one by one:

#### **1. The Universal Spirit of Islam:**

The Qur'anic vision and mission is universal. We need to reinterpret Islam in keeping with the imperatives of world peace, global coexistence, pluralism and tolerance. We need to iron out differences and underscore or focus on similarities between various religions. Numerous Qur'anic verses can be cited in support of religious pluralism. Let us examine what the Qur'an says:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (Not that ye may

despise each other). Verily, the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you.<sup>2</sup>

At another place, the Qur'an further asserts that diversity is a part of the Divine intention and it has a fine purpose in creation:

If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made humankind one people: but they will not cease to dispute, except those on whom thy Lord hath bestowed His Mercy: And for this did He create them (humankind).<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, other than a general endorsement of human diversity or universality, the Qur'an also accepted the more specific notion of plurality of religious beliefs and laws. Although the Qur'an clearly claims that Islam is a Divine Religion (*dîn*) and entailing belief in the authenticity of Prophet Muhammad as the last messenger in a long line of acknowledged Abrahamic prophets, it does not completely exclude the possibility that there might be other paths to salvation. Additionally, it must be noted that according to the Islamic teachings *Allah* (God), the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad are also for the entire humankind and not for just one section of people.<sup>4</sup>

In reality, diversity as the fundamental feature of creation, as indicated by the Holy Qur'an in the above-mentioned verses, actually remained undeveloped in Islamic theology for various reasons. However, when we look at the historical circumstances as well as the Islamic civilizational march we clearly find instances where the followers of the Prophet of Islam, possessing authority or otherwise, had been following the teachings of the Holy Qur'an by treating all human beings justly. They trod the path of love, good will and tolerance. They intuitively incorporated the crucial teachings of Islam in their lives and stood for pluralistic ethos.

The Qur'an insists on God's unfettered discretion to accept in His Mercy whomsoever He wishes. The Qur'an recognizes the legitimate multiplicity of religious convictions and laws. In one such verse, for

example, the Qur'an states:

To each of you God has prescribed a Law and a Way. If God would have willed, He would have made you a single people. But Gods' purpose is to test you in what He has given each of you, so strive in the pursuit of virtue, and know that you will all return to God (in the Hereafter), and He will resolve all the matters in which you disagree.<sup>5</sup>

In the same manner the Holy Qur'an further states that it is possible for non-Muslims to attain blessing and salvation if they believe in God, follow the right path and do good:

Those who believe, those who follow Jewish scriptures, the Sabians, the Christians, and any who believe in God and the Final Day, and do good, all shall have their reward with their Lord and they will not come to fear or grief.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the Qur'an confirms that all the Books and all the Prophets sent before Prophet Mohammad were just and it is obligatory for the Muslims to keep faith (*imân*) in them.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, presently we need to underline the Universalist vision and ethos of Islam.

Islam, if studied and judged without any bias or prejudice, can justifiably claim to have launched and practiced a fine ethico-political system with a universal message of human rights and freedom more than fourteen centuries ago, in which all the contradictions and inconsistencies of man-made political systems could easily be resolved at both the theoretical and practical levels.

## **2. Ethical Justification of *Jihâd*:**

The most striking and challenging issue projected and interpreted against morality and tolerance in Islam is *jihâd* (generally translated as 'holy war'). *Jihâd*, in Islamic tradition, does not mean "holy war" as



portrayed and misunderstood by the Western or other biased quarters of mass-media. It is often wrongly associated with the idea of a ‘holy war’ that is undertaken in the name of God against the unbelievers. In this way, *jihād* is often equated with the most indecent images of religious intolerance: “Its translation into ‘holy war’ combined with the erroneous notion of Islam prevalent in the West as the ‘religion of the sword’, has helped to eclipse its inner and spiritual significance and to distort its connotation.”<sup>8</sup>

Let us understand the etymological meaning of the word ‘*jihād*’. The Arabic term *jihād*, usually translated in European languages as ‘holy war’, rather on the basis of its legal or technical usage in Islam than on its wider or more universal meaning in the Qur’an and *Hadith*, is derived from the root ‘*jhd*’, whose real meaning is ‘to strive’ or ‘to exert oneself’<sup>9</sup> (towards what is good and to avoid what is evil). As the Qur’an says: “To those who perform *jihād* for Us, we shall certainly guide them in our ways, and God surely is with the doers of good”.<sup>10</sup>

Not only the Western people or other non-Muslims misunderstand the spirit and connotation of *jihād*, some sections of the Muslims in modern times too failed to understand the spiritual significance of *jihād* and indulged in its wrong interpretation, in the process, distorting the true spirit of this great pillar of Islam:

Nor has the appearance upon the stage of history during the last century, and specially during the past few years, of an array of mostly ‘fundamentalist’ or revolutionary movements within the Islamic world which often oppose each other and use the term *jihād* or one of its derivative forms, helped to make known the full import of its traditional meaning, which alone is of concern to us here. Instead, recent distortions and even total reversal of the meaning of *jihād* as understood over the ages by Muslims have made it more difficult than ever before to gain insight into this key religious and spiritual concept.<sup>11</sup>

In Islamic value-system, *jihād* simply means ‘to strive hard or struggle in pursuit of a “just” cause’. According to the Prophet of

Islam, the highest form of *jihād* is the struggle waged to purify oneself from the evils of the heart. It is an internal battle against man's endless desires which overwhelm his pursuit of honesty, love and goodness. The Prophet of Islam has demonstrated as well as explained the full meaning and application of the term "*jihād*" - as he had a quality of combativeness, of always being actively engaged in combat against all that negated the 'Truth' and disrupted harmony. '*Jihād*', *externally* meant fighting military, political and social wars against injustice, oppression and suppression; it is the war which the Prophet named the "little holy war" (*al-jihād al-aḡghar*). Again, on the other hand, he forcefully stressed that *inwardly* this combativeness meant a continuous war against the self (*nafs*) as well as against all that in man tends towards the negation of God and His Will; this is the "great holy war" (*al-jihād al-akbar*). The Prophets' proclamation, on returning from one of the early wars, "you have returned from the lesser *jihād* to the greater *jihād*"<sup>12</sup> clearly indicates the spiritual significance of *jihād* according to which a man must purify himself and perform good actions to establish equilibrium between his being and his society so that he may be able to fulfill the goals and responsibilities of worldly affairs and then enter into the spiritual or intuitive affairs. Thus, it is difficult for modern man to understand the positive symbolism of war as projected by the Prophet. Islam tries actively to establish harmony both inwardly and outwardly and does not, in any way, permit the destabilization or destruction of peace, goodwill and harmony. However, it intends to promote the quality of combativeness with a view to fighting and overcoming all such forces as tend to destroy the mission of peace, love, harmony and goodwill:

It is difficult for modern man to understand the positive symbolism of war thanks to modern technology which has made war total and its instruments the very embodiment of what is ugly and evil. Men therefore think that the role of religion is only in preserving some kind of precarious peace. This, of course, is true, but not in the superficial sense that is usually meant. If religion is to be an integral part of life it must try to establish peace in the most profound sense, namely to establish equilibrium between all the existing

forces that surround man and to overcome all the forces that tend to destroy this equilibrium. No religion has sought to establish peace in this sense more than Islam. It is precisely in such a context that war can have a positive meaning as the activity to establish harmony both inwardly and outwardly and it is in this sense that Islam has stressed the positive aspect of combativeness.<sup>13</sup>

In the Qur'an it is mentioned that Muslims may fight those who fight them, but at the same time it also insists that Muslims may not transgress: "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God does not love transgressors".<sup>14</sup> What we want to point out here is that the Qur'anic text repeatedly emphasizes that the followers of Islam must exercise restraint, demonstrate ethical principles and should not in any way (through words and practices) transgress the limits:

There is the law of equality. If then anyone transgresses the prohibition against you, transgress ye likewise against him. But fear God and know that God is with those who restraint themselves.<sup>15</sup>

### **3. Re-understanding Islam**

There is a great need of reunderstanding and reconstruction of Islamic concepts according to the need of the age, as every era has its own situational requirements and methodological challenges. A traditional Muslim honestly thinks Islam to be an organic whole demanding complete adherence to its percepts in all their details. However, contemporary secular approach limits the role of religion to moral and spiritual matters. The social, political, economic, institutional and legal matters are left free to be sorted out by means of democratic consensus. Religion is deemed to be cultivation of a personal relationship between God and man. Thus, there is a tension between the totalistic interpretation of religion and the modern secularist approach. An honest effort must be done to resolve the same. The traditional totalistic version of Islam needs to be examined within the contemporary methodological perspective. The Muslims need to appreciate that the totalistic version of Islam, or for that matter, of any religion, arises out of methodological field-confusion.

When we are not clear about different segments of a cultural gestalt and jumble them up, our confusions are worse confounded. Accordingly, the nuclear core of Islam needs to be separated from the historical, geographical and cultural conditions of the Islamic world. We also need to bring out the sociological or situational determination of historical Islam. The Muslims need to grasp that we trap ourselves in an inexhaustible puzzlement if religion is sought to be assigned the essentially secular functions of economic development, political management, and distributive justice or matters pertaining to day to day administration.

Islamic Pluralism is not a new idea drummed up in the West and offered as helpful cure for Muslim rage. It is a longstanding reality. The Muslim thought comprises of a spectrum of religious interpretations. If, at one end of the continuum, we find the fanatical creed of *wahhabism*, crude and arbitrary, more an Arab-supremacist state ideology than a religious sect, at the other end we find the enlightened traditions of Sufism. They stress not only on intra-Islamic dialogue, separation of spiritual from clerical authority, and teaching in the vernacular, but also on respect for all believers, whether Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, or others. Sufis emphasize, above all, their commitment to mutual civility, interaction and cooperation among believers regardless of denominational, sectarian or religious affiliations.

Islam is that which is in harmony with reality. Islam is not an identity or membership club; it is a *ěâl*, the state of being of one who is surrendered to truth. As such it must embody purity and flexibility, responsibility and humility, justice, love and mercy. Therefore, Islam is the religion of the universe, the submission of nature itself, of the *'âlamîn*, the worlds. "*We need, today, a Merciful and comprehensive Islam that does not divide, but unites,*" and, in fact, Islam has both the necessary and sufficient spiritual catholicity to guide humanity to universal brotherhood and intercultural fellowship.

From an Islamic perspective, we can join arms with all people of faith, *mu'minîn*. Rumi says, "While beliefs vary from place to place, faith is essentially the same." According to him, if we look at the vital ideas and values of the major civilizations, in most cases, we find that

they are based on the idea of a correspondence between the human realm and a spiritual realm. Christianity expresses it in terms of man being created in the image of God. Islam acknowledges that the human being is the *khalifah*, the representative and caretaker of the human realm on the earth.

We need to apply the deepest wisdom of Islam to contemporary problems. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) and Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) forcefully tried to work on such lines. They emphasized that resolution of contemporary problems ought to be preceded by purification of heart, transformation of self and edification of soul. There is much practical wisdom that has been marginalized and discredited by modernists, as well as by literalists and fundamentalists. This wisdom needs to be rediscovered and reappropriated with a view to resolving of the apparently irresolvable social, political and economic problems faced by contemporary society. Therefore, the Islamic modernists suggest that for the proper development in various human endeavours religion, philosophy and science must jointly be reappropriated.

Presently, one of the foremost tasks of *ijtihad* is to demarcate the respective spheres of operation of science and religion. The followers of Islam need to appreciate that exercising religious authority in areas where natural and social causation reigns supreme will be suicidal both for religion and science. It is and has to be our choice to be wholly religious or wholly scientific or accommodate the conflicting claims of both science and religion proportionate to our personality requirements. However, it serves no one's purpose not to demarcate their respective spheres of operation. What is most crucial for Muslims of the globe is to appreciate the paradigmatic incommensurability between religion and science. They are logically poles apart. Scientific beliefs are verifiable or amenable to rational adjudication. Religious faith is essentially rooted in the mystery of the cosmos and therefore, amenable only to existential appropriation or misappropriation. This logical and methodological incommensurability between religion and science can have crucial implications; one can be deeply religious with or without being scientifically sophisticated or one can be highly scientific with or

without being religiously oriented. There is or ought to be no mutual love or hate between religion and science. Such a methodological clarity is crucial for Muslim appropriation of both Islam and experimental science. Such clarity can be instrumental in dissolving Muslim aversion to scientific research and modernity.

#### 4. Sufi Version of Islam

Sufism or Islamic mysticism (*tağawwuf* or *'irfân*) has been one of the prime forces orienting Muslims to moral values and preaching and practicing the real Islamic spirit based on love of God and service to humanity. Throughout centuries, Sufis have traveled and settled across Asia, Africa and Europe and other parts of the world. They have lived with or co-existed with Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians and Pagans. They have been at peace with all of them. Millions of non-Muslims were converted to Islam by them through peaceful persuasion. These men of God mingled with all of them irrespective of caste, creed, gender, race, culture and other geographical divisions. Of course, there were pseudo-Sufis as well. But, we have not been able to weed out pseudos from any field of human endeavour to date.

In fact, the Sufi values and norms were horizontal and liberal. Ideological dogmatism of any variety was anathematic to them. Their anti-establishmentarianism, their non-reductionism and their non-fundamentalism are the values which fostered humanistic attitudes of mutuality, interdependence and tolerance. Sufis generated a liberal and humanistic outlook in times when ideological regimentation was the order of the day. Islamic scholars and Sufi-poets worked for promoting the status and dignity of man through their deep love, sympathy, service and respect. In the words of poet-philosopher of the East- *Allamah* Iqbal, "The status of man is higher than Heavens; the essence of civilization is the respect of man."<sup>16</sup> Similarly the great Persian Sufi-poet *Mawlânâ Jalâl al-Dîn Rîmî*, in his well-known *Dîwân-i Shams-i Tabrîz*, too emphasizes the importance of the individual man by saying:

کزدام و دد ملولم و انسانم آرزوست

“I am tired of the devil and the beast; I desire man”.

The Sufis were great God lovers and humanists. Most of the Persian Sufis were acknowledged and accomplished poets as well. They understood the human condition with great sympathy and empathy. They understood that the human condition is characterized by vast and deep sufferings. Their religious invocations and poetic outpourings served as soothing balms to hundreds of millions of people across the centuries. Their hospices virtually became therapeutic clinics to suffering humanity. Love and dignity of man were the central theme of these great Sufi poets. We would prefer here to give some examples of the great Sufi-poet-philosophers which they mostly imbibed from the Islamic *weltanschauung*:<sup>17</sup>

1. According to Sa'adi service of man is, in reality, service to God. Therefore, this service to humankind and other created beings becomes the true worship to *Allah*. In this regard he says:

طریقت بجز خدمت خلق نیست      به تسبیح و سجاده و دلق نیست  
 خواهی که خدای بر تو بخشد      با خلق خدای کن نکوئ

‘Spirituality is naught but service to mankind  
 It is not rosary, carpet or place of worship and sacred  
 garment.’

‘If you want God to pardon you  
 Be good towards humanity.’

2. The renowned Persian Sufi-poet Ēafīī Shīrāzī carried out the same mission of the love and service to humanity. He did not find any difference between the *Ka'bah* and a *butkhāne* (place of idol worship) when he says:

در عشق خانقاه و خرابات شرط نیست      هر جا که هست پر تو روے حبیب است  
 در خراباتِ مغان نورِ خدایِ بینم      وین عجیب بین که چه نورِ زکجا می بینم

‘In the realm of Love, the monastery and the tavern are immaterial,

Wheresoever ye turn there is the splendor of the countenance of the Beloved.

In the tavern I do find the light of the Lord

How strange! What light and where do I find it.’

3. A similar approach was adopted by another great Persian Sufi poet, Mawlânâ Rîmî, who categorically spelled out that the love-oriented world is drastically different from all other worlds based on various ideologies. The true lovers of humanity and *tawĕid* have their own religion and *millah* that belongs to *Allah* only. He says:

ملتِ عشق از همه دین ها جداست      عاشقان را مذهب و ملت خداست

‘The religion of love is different from all religions

The religion of the lovers is God.’

According to the mystics the whole cosmos is the manifestation of the supreme Beauty and the purpose of creativity is to unfold the secrets of that Ultimate Beauty. Consequently God has created ‘Love’ in man to establish the immortal relationship between him and God. Therefore, ‘Love’ is the ultimate cause of the universe and ‘man’ is the center of it. Again, ‘the whole universe is the result of the manifestation of God’s attributes whereas ‘man’s existence is a creation of God’s essence’. Man’s ‘heart’ as mentioned before, became the seat of love through which man realizes God within his own subjective self and enjoys the Beauty and secrets of the Creator, the Beloved. In this way the ‘respect of heart’ entails the ‘respect of God’ because He resides there. Rumi endorses this view by saying that:

دل بدست آور که حج اکبر است      از هزاران کعبه يك دل بهتر است

‘Winning over a heart is far better than a pilgrimage to the *Ka’bah*,

A Single heart is superior to thousands of *ka’bahs*.’



4. Such a vision has become the chief source of Iqbal's mission of universal brotherhood which is also based on the universal ideals such as freedom, peace, justice, equality, compassion, mutual understanding, religious tolerance and co-existence. Iqbal says:<sup>18</sup>

آدمیت احترام آدمی با خبر شو از مقام آدمی

'Humanity signifies respect for man;  
 Beware of the high status of man.'

Iqbal points out that 'love' establishes the relationship between man and God. 'Love' is also in search of 'man' and it also emphasizes that the greatest service in the world is the service to humanity which leads one to the service to God. In reality, God has unfolded His qualities and mysteries through 'man'. Iqbal mentions:

عشق اندر جستجو افتاد و آدم حاصل است جلوه او آشکار از پرده آب و گل است

'Adam is the fruit of the perennial struggle of love,  
 The splendour of God is manifest through the veil of  
 human existence'

Emphasizing upon the ideals of life like equality and justice, Iqbal points out that according to the Qur'an the status of a servant and a master is one and the same. All the human beings are equal and consequently deserve equal treatment. He says in his *Rumuz-i-Bekhuri*:

پیش قران بنده و مولا یکی است بوریا و مسند دیبا یکی است

'The slave and the master, according to the Qur'an,  
 are equal,  
 Matting and silken brocade too are equal.'<sup>19</sup>

Iqbal does not allow anybody to spell an evil-word against any one whether unbeliever (*kafir*) or believer (*mu'min*), for all human beings are the creation of God:

حرف بد را بر لب آوردن خطا است کافر و مومن همه خلق خداست

'The utterance of an evil-word is a grave sin,  
 For the believers and unbelievers all are the creation  
 of God.'<sup>20</sup>

Iqbal proceeds one step forward by pointing out that human existence possesses such a great value and significance that even God is in search for 'man'. Iqbal says in his *Payām-i-Mashriq*:<sup>21</sup>

گدائی جلوہ رفتی بر سر طور      کہ جاں تو ز خود نامحرمی هست  
 قدم در جستجوی آدمی زن      خدا ہم در تلاش آدمی هست

'O the seeker of Divine splendour,  
 You proceeded to the heights of *Tīr* (Mount *Sinai*)  
 Your soul is actually unfamiliar with itself,  
 Launch yourself in the quest for man,  
 For God Himself is in the search of man'.

Such a doctrine of love for humankind brought out by Persian Sufi-poets like Sana'ī, 'Aḥḥār, Rīmī, Sa'dī, Ēafī, and others as well as Indian-Persian poets like Bu Ali, Khusru, Urfī, Faizi, Naziri, Zuhuri, Talib, Kalim, Dara Shikoh, Ghani Kashmiri, Nasir Ali, Bedil, Ghalib, Iqbal and others became the framework of the philosophy of *humanism* and *universal brotherhood* which is desperately required in face of contemporary global ethical crisis.

Moreover, along with other cultural traditions, the Islamic cultural tradition is going through a great crisis in the face of great scientific and technological challenges and opportunities which have entirely transformed the global society. The muslim response to these challenges has been what is widely termed as a fundamentalist reassertion of Islamic identity. Islamic fundamentalism has been riding on high horse at various points of time and the contemporary world has been largely castigating Muslims as fundamentalist reactionaries and the promoters of terrorism and violence, whereas Islam means 'peace' and 'mercy' and it invites us to the Garden, to the civilization of Paradise. True Islam is a state of being, a sensibility that has a portal to Allah's *raḥmah* (Mercy). According to the Qur'an, those who seek to strike against people who never took arms against them are truly the companions of the Fire, not the companions of the Garden (*Al-Qur'an*, 5:36, 54).

Sufism is often referred to as the mystical dimension of Islam; it is also described as a teaching of ethical and spiritual ideals, which has

been historically embodied in lineages of teachers who held prominent positions in Muslim societies. The Truth of human relationship to the Divine, that mutual and reciprocal love, is a truth that can never become obsolete not subordinated to lesser truth. No human social order can be complete or adequate if it loses the Divine center. If we recognize and agree with this Truth, we must now work our way back from this oneness, encountering all the difficult questions of human life, but carrying with us the humbleness, the servant-hood, the patience, and the mercy which is the evidence of our remembrance to God. What Islam has to offer, at its best, is a deep and clear metaphysical truth that places the Divine Oneness at the very centre of consciousness.

Sufism or *tagāwwuf*, with many regional differences, was for a long time dominant in the Islamic world. Today as well Sufism is still stronger than fundamentalism or any version of Islam. Wherever Sufism plays a role, the unity of all religions is on the docket. In this sense Sufism and fundamentalism are diametrically opposed to each other. The fundamentalists put up fences, dividing walls, they separate, preferably with an Iron curtain. On the contrary, the Sufi seeks to tear down everything that divides. In fact, Sufi version and interpretation of Islam can serve as one of the most important principles as well as policies with a view to achieving interpersonal love, intercultural understanding and global peace. In fact, Sufis advanced their radiant doctrine of *ḡulĕ-i kull* i.e. “*peace with all and peace for all.*”

The fundamentalist response of Muslims has always been powerfully opposed by the wide-spread Sufi perspective on or interpretation of Islam. The Sufis have been at peace with all peoples of different faiths. These men of God mingled with all of them irrespective of caste, creed, gender, race and culture. They were undoubtedly great humanists. They understood the human condition with great sympathy and empathy. Their religious invocations and poetic outpourings served as soothing medicines to millions of people throughout the ages. Their hospices and monasteries virtually became therapeutic clinics to suffering humanity. The Sufi values and norms were horizontal and liberal. They were devoid of ideological

dogmatism and religious fanaticism. In fact, the prime aim before the great Sufis remained focused on God-realisation, self-realisation, tolerance, pluralism, peace, love and togetherness.

Most importantly, Sufis do not advance a new theoretical construction with regard to what is ultimately Real. They underline the need for a radical reorientation of self. The self needs to transcend from submergence into the phenomenal substancelessness to recognition of its essential identity with the trans-phenomenal Absolute. This recognition of the integrality of self to the Supreme Consciousness or Absolute Reality leads to celebration of Supreme Joy and Supreme Love emanating from such a Unitarian vision. The joy of understanding and the joy of enlightenment born out of such a vision orientate us to an appropriation of humanist values such as inter-religious or spiritual fellowship, compassion, love, universal brotherhood etc. This vision has been most powerfully, most brilliantly, most authentically and most beautifully embodied, preserved and intimated in and through Persian poetry. The countless Persian poetic geniuses deserve our abiding aesthetic appreciation and spiritual gratitude for intimating to us such a universal vision, a vision to be appropriated through life-blood and devotion.

### **5. Role of Islamic Morality in the Twenty-first Century**

The positive role for Islam, apart from providing spiritual orientation and moral inspiration, can be set on institutional lines as well. The Qur'anic vision and mission is not only global, it is in tune with the imperatives of universal evolution. In keeping with the letter and spirit of the Qur'an, Muslims will have to strive not only for the emergence of a global mindset but also guide the contemporary civilisational march by addressing to the most crucial problems of peace, justice and freedom across the globe. The Holy Book always instructed the believers to remain vigilant over their undue wishes, exercise tolerant and just behaviour and promote goodwill and peace among human beings. The Qur'an ordains that God does not forbid Muslims from making peace with those who do not 'fight' with them. However, God does prohibit from making peace with those who have expelled Muslims from their homes, done injustice to them and continue to persecute them.<sup>22</sup> At

another place, the Qur'an categorically exhorted Muslims for making peace, promoting goodwill and trusting in God.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the Holy Book asks Muslims not to reject even unbelievers' proposals for peace with Muslims and reminds them that God is sufficient for everything and if the unbelievers withdraw from them and refuse to fight them and instead send them guarantees of peace, then Muslims must know that God has not given them a license to fight the unbelievers.<sup>24</sup> The Qur'an not only warns Muslims for any kind of transgression against non-Muslims or unbelievers, but also instructs them to remain conscious about their rights and duties among themselves. It categorically states that God does not guide those who do wrong and transgress.<sup>25</sup> The Qur'an further emphatically states:

...If a man kills a believer intentionally, his recompense is Hell, to abide therein (for ever): and the wrath and the curse of God are upon him, and a dreadful penalty is prepared for him.<sup>26</sup>

The Qur'an has expressly taught us that killing of an innocent person amounts to the killing of the whole of mankind and saving the life of one innocent person tantamount to the saving of the entire human world. Thus, God sent the prophets with clear signs to guide human beings so that they could not transgress the limits and commit excesses on God's land. The Qur'an says:

... If anyone slew a person—unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land—it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people. Then although there came to them Our Apostles with Clear Signs, yet, even after that, many of them continued to commit excesses in the land.<sup>27</sup>

No doubt, historically, the Islamic civilization displayed a remarkable ability for adjustment and reconciliation. It set great examples of good will, justice and tolerance. Its unique ethical philosophy is grounded in the love and well-being of humanism. The Islamic civilization germinated or generated a humanistic tradition and a humanitarian ethos of exceptional depth and sophistication. The Islamic world-view and value-system are also rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. It borrowed from Greek philosophy as well and its

mystical doctrines and practices are also deeply impacted by Jewish, Christian and Indian traditions. It is also a fact that in return Islam inspired these cultures and traditions. Unfortunately, however, the modern puritans are displaying great misunderstanding of the spirit of the Qur'an and are shutting off the doors for a universal, tolerant and judicious interpretation of the Islamic *Weltanschauung*. As mentioned before, the Qur'an is not a Holy Scripture for the Muslims only, it is undoubtedly a beacon of light for the whole of humankind.<sup>28</sup> Allah is the Creator and Sustainer of the whole of mankind<sup>29</sup> and the Prophet of Islam has been sent as Mercy to all the realms of being.<sup>30</sup>

The entire focus of the Islamic teachings, including the Prophetic behaviour and the practices of his faithful companions, Imams and Sufi-poets and philosophers, powerfully oriented Muslims to universal human brotherhood and service to mankind with love and care. In this regard *Allamah* Iqbal has rightly remarked:

فطرت مسلم سراپا شفقت است در جهان دست و زبانش رحمت است

The nature of the Muslim through and through is loving-kindness;

With both hand and tongue he strives to be a mercy in the world.<sup>31</sup>

Now that we are living through the emergence of a global society, we need to develop a global perspective. Scientific research and technological advancement have impelled and necessitated the emergence of a global society. Presently, we are living in a global village. The imperatives of an emerging global society demand a new holistic paradigm or framework of understanding, interpretation, formulation, adjustment and articulation. The classical, medieval and modern vertical frameworks need to be synthesized into a horizontal framework celebrating the best of Eastern and Western values and linking the deepest and most profound insights and intimations of religion and science. Such a horizontal framework must stress convergence in place of conflict, complementarity in place of competition and compassion in place of domination. It should address itself to the evolution and inculcation of a global ethics, a global structure of thought and action. The future of human civilization is hedged on the evolution and inculcation of a global mindset.

As space and communication technologies are accelerating the process of globalization, they are also posing unprecedented challenges as we settle into twenty-first century. The greatest challenge to contemporary civilization comes from its technological and commercial globalization and large-scale prevalence of pre-global attitudes, conceptual constructs and approaches of understanding and interpretation. The gulf between the emergence of a technological and commercial global society and the non-emergence of a global consciousness is fraught with grave dangers to the very continuance of human civilization. Thus, the global society is now turning its vital attention towards working out of "*a common morality for the global age.*"<sup>32</sup>

Thus, an examination of the moral tradition of a civilization can reveal to us whether to be optimistic or pessimistic about its future. However, the blessing or burden of sustaining a moral tradition, more especially of underscoring the Qur'anic message of good will, tolerance, justice and openness to others falls squarely on the shoulders of the contemporary Muslim interpreters of the text and tradition. It is high time that Muslim exegetes and interpreters intimate to their non-Muslim brethren that Islam, of all religions, exhorts man to inculcate in himself the capacity for mutual love, understanding, good-will, justice and tolerance. Islam does not merely preach human rights and moral values but inspires its believers to respect human rights and abide by moral values, irrespective of personal consequences or socio-political implications. If Muslims of all denominations understand this message of the Holy Book and practices of the Holy Prophet, they will not only be rendering great service to mankind but also earning the good-pleasure of *Allah* and the blessings of the Prophet of Islam. Such ethical behaviour not only plays a great socio-political role across the so-called civilisational clash of world-society, its spiritual blessings can also be hardly overemphasized. Happily and fortunately the Islamic world-view and value-system are pre-eminently capacious and resilient enough to withstand the pressures of contemporary global society and offer it a judicious set of beliefs and values with a view to resolving of the multidimensional and multiplex problems of our times.

**(D) CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Muslims, by and large, have not been bothered about any urge for imposing a theoretical construction on Islam. They have not indulged in any account or analysis with a view to bringing out a standard of justification or otherwise of human actions across the spectrum.

However, the Qur'an has brought out the relevance or tenability of both the teleological and deontological standards of justification. An action is to be judged both by its consequences and by its deontic significance. The Qur'an lays emphasis on the good and bad consequences of any action as determining its ethical acceptability and unacceptability. It brings out that man may think something to be 'good' and it may really turn out to be 'bad' for him and on the other hand, he may think something to be 'bad' for himself and it may turn out to be 'good' for him.<sup>33</sup> Then, Islam lays greatest emphasis not on worldly good but on the eschatological good. It promises paradisaal bliss for *righteous* people and hellfire for *vicious* ones. The Islamic teleology is basically eschatological. However, it also emphasizes on the deontological standard of justification as well. Hazrat Imam Ali's emphasis on worshipping God because "*He is worshipable*" is a categorical confirmation of the deontological standard eleven hundred years before Kant spelt it out with such intense ethical conviction. However, an action, according to Islam is not to be carried out just for the sake of duty but for the sake of God. God's command to do or not to do something, constitutes man's duty. So, human action gets ethical acceptability if it is carried out '*khaligatan li-wajh Allāh*' or 'for the sake of God.' Hence, Islam so beautifully reconciles the teleological standard with the deontological standard. Thus, Islamic ethics is theocentric. It makes God the centre of ethical activities. Therefore, by making God the cynosure of the human world, Islam offers the highest, the most transcendental and the most immanent principle as the Ultimate Standard of ethical justification. This spiritual approach to human ethical concerns make Islamic standard of ethical justification the most catholic and the most universal criterion within which framework the resolution of social, political and economic challenges can be clearly understood and successfully accomplished.



In fact, such a holistic world-view of Islam can help the global society to initiate a discourse on positive lines with other great religions of the world for securing peace, goodwill, tolerance, harmony and the fundamental rights of the world's citizens. Therefore, during the current tumultuous and terror-shaken scenario, there is great need to appreciate the Islamic spirit, its cultural legacy and value-system. A truly global dialogue from the Islamic perspective can help in bringing goodwill, tolerance, respect for the universal human rights and world peace. No doubt, Islam has such great ideals and moral standards to offer with a view to solving of the moral crises of the global human society.

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2. *Al-Qur'an*, 49: 13.
3. *Al-Qur'an*, 11: 118-9; 10: 99.
4. See *al-Qur'an*, 1:2; 17:9, 30:58 and 21:17.
5. *Al-Qur'an*, 5: 51.
6. *Al-Qur'an*, 5: 69 and 72.
7. *Al-Qur'an*, 2: 4.
8. Nasr, S. H., *Traditional Islam in Modern World*, (KPI, London, 1987), p.28.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.
10. *Al-Qur'an*, 29: 69.
11. Nasr, S. H., *Traditional Islam in Modern World*, *op.cit.*, p.28.
12. Cf. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in Modern World*, *op.cit.*, p.27.
13. Nasr, S. H., *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, *op.cit.*, p. 73.
14. *Al-Qur'an*, 2: 190.
15. *Al-Qur'an*, 2: 194.
16. *Diwan-i-Iqbal Lahori*, (Iqbal's Persian Collection), Intisharat-i-Pagah, Tehran, Iran (1st ed. 1361 Shamsi), p.346.
17. Cf. Latif Hussain Kazmi, "Humanist Vision of Iqbal" in A.D. Safavi's *Humanism and Universal Brotherhood in Persian Literature* (Institute of Persian Research, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 2007), pp.53-62.
18. *Diwan-i-Iqbal Lahori*, *op.cit.*, p.418.
19. *Ibid.*, p.142.

20. *Ibid.*, p.418.
21. *Ibid.*, p.107, (trans. Shaikh Akbar Ali, *Iqbal: His Poetry and Message*, M/s Mohammad Nawab Din, Lahore, 1932, p. 279).
22. *Al-Qur'an*, 60: 8, 9.
23. *Al-Qur'an*, 8: 61, and also see Imam Ali's *Nahaj al-Balaghah*, [(English Tr.), Ansarian Publication, Qum, Iran, 1981], Letters Nos.12, 14, 27, and 53).
24. *Al-Qur'an*, 4: 90.
25. *Al-Qur'an*, 61: 5, 7.
26. *Al-Qur'an*, 4: 93.
27. *Al-Qur'an*, 5: 35.
28. *Al-Qur'an*, 30: 58 and 17: 9.
29. *Al-Qur'an*, I: 2 ("Praise be to God, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds").
30. *Al-Qur'an*, 21: 107 ("We sent thee (Muhammad) not, but as a Mercy for all Creatures") and (see also 17: 105; 33: 45 and 46; IV: 79, 7: 158; 34: 28: "We have not sent thee, but as a universal (Messenger) to men giving them Glad tidings, and warning them (against sin), but most men understand not").
31. *Diwan-i-Iqbal Lahori*, *op.cit.*, p.155 (tr.A.J.Arberry).
32. A Seminar on topic "*A Common Morality for the Global Age*" was organized by the *Centre for Law, Philosophy and Culture* of the Catholic University of America, Washington D.C. in March 27-30, 2008, in which the author had participated.
33. See *Al-Qur'an*, 2:216, 24:11, 3:180.

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