

NEW VOICES  
OF ISLAM



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**Farish A. Noor**

LEIDEN ISIM

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## FOREWORD

One of the most significant recent developments in the Muslim world is the emergence, across the globe, of a new type of religious thinker, collectively called Muslim intellectuals. The simplest (and most common) way to define Muslim intellectuals is by contrasting them with the ulama, on the one hand, and secular intellectuals, on the other. Like the latter, Muslim intellectuals address issues of importance to their societies and contribute to shaping public opinion by taking part in debates in the public sphere. Unlike their secular peers, however, they express in their writings a strong concern with Islam and commitment to the Muslim *umma*. As interpreters of Islamic teachings they engage with the social and political realities of contemporary society and with the philosophical and moral implications of modernity. Not only do they address entirely different questions from those typically dealt with by the ulama, their approach to the sacred texts and their methods of interpretation also tend to differ and be informed by modern currents in philosophy and hermeneutics. Modern Muslim intellectuals have generally been educated outside the traditional institutions of religious learning, but many of them have acquired a considerable command of classical Islamic scholarship as well. Some prominent Muslim intellectuals (such as Ali Bulaç in Turkey and Nurcholish Madjid in Indonesia) have in fact graduated from the academic institutions designed to train modern ulama, but they are exceptions. What distinguishes them from their fellow graduates and the ulama in general is the role they play in public debate, the sort of questions that they address, and their engagement in discourses outside the Islamic tradition.

Non-clerical religious thinkers are not an entirely new phenomenon, and it is not hard to point out precursors such as the Young Ottomans, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, H. O. S. Tjokroaminoto and many other reformist thinkers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Some of today's intellectuals would look even further back and point to Ibn Khaldun, Al-Biruni, Ibn Sina or Ibn Rushd as ancestors or examples to be emulated.) There is a widespread feeling, however, that the discourse of the present Muslim intellectuals, however different they may be from one another, is not just a continuation of that of earlier generations. Some authors speak, therefore, of 'the *new* Muslim intellectuals', although it is difficult to define unambiguously what exactly is new about them.

For one thing, the context in which the new Muslim intellectuals think and write is distinctly different from that of the earlier modernists, and the experiences through which their societies have passed—anti-colonial struggle, secular modernization, experiments in liberal, populist or socialist varieties of democ-

racy or at least mass mobilization, and the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s and 1980s—have inevitably marked the way they look at their societies, at the world, and at Islam. Mass literacy and mass education have created new mass audiences, which are not content with the discourse of the ulama and thus look towards Muslim intellectuals for ‘fresh’ ideas and answers to questions the ulama do not even know how to pose. The impact of global economic and cultural processes, moreover, is felt more strongly than ever before, obliging intellectuals to engage in the global discourses of human rights, democratization, pluralism, and civil society—be it in terms of universal values or of cultural imperialism and authenticity. Finally, many of the new Muslim intellectuals distinguish themselves from the earlier modernists and reformists by their greater appreciation of traditional Islamic learning, notably philosophy, theology and Sufism, as well as of local traditions.

Muslim intellectuals do not, of course, represent some common attitude in politics, cultural life, or more strictly religious matters. They have adopted widely different positions in crucial debates, and theirs is not a single discourse. Some were at times close to Islamic opposition movements, others to official thought, but because of their independent thinking both governments and Islamic movements have often mistrusted them. Their potentially large influence among the educated young generation has been an additional reason for mistrust—although thus far they have not acquired the same degree of religious legitimacy in the public eye as the ulama.

In April 2000, the ISIM brought together a number of prominent Muslim intellectuals from different parts of the Muslim world to meet at a three-day workshop and exchange ideas on what they themselves considered as the major challenges facing their societies or the Muslim world in general. The invited participants were deliberately chosen to represent not only diverse regional and cultural backgrounds but also a range of intellectual styles and concerns: from philosophically oriented conceptual thinkers and academics to popular educators and social activists. The encounter between these thinkers and activists—most of whom knew about many of the others but had, with a few exceptions, not met before—gave rise to stimulating exchanges and very lively discussions. Summaries of the talks and of the discussions following them are available on the ISIM website, and a report on the workshop will be published separately.

The interviews published here are another result of the same encounter. Farish Noor, one of the participants, interrogated his fellow participants on their work and their views on the position and responsibility of the Muslim intellectual, publishing several interviews on the internet and elsewhere. The ISIM proposed that Farish collect and update these interviews and publish them together.

Farish decided to complement the interviews he had conducted on the occasion of the workshop (with Asghar Ali Engineer, Ebrahim Moosa, Abdolkarim Soroush and Nurcholish Madjid) with two additional interviews with intellectuals and social activists who had also been invited to the workshop but had not been able to attend, Chandra Muzaffar and Abdullahi An-Na'im. Together, these six interviews offer an excellent overview of the intellectual and political challenges in which contemporary Muslim intellectuals are engaging—a welcomed reminder that more is going on in the Muslim world than the political radicalism on which media attention focuses almost exclusively.

MARTIN VAN BRUINESSEN (ISIM)



## INTRODUCTION

One of the aims of the 'Muslim Intellectuals and Modern Challenges' workshop organized by the ISIM in April 2000 was to create a space for lay Muslim activists and intellectuals to meet and openly discuss their work and ideas. The need for such a space becomes obvious if one reflects upon the painful realities of the Muslim world today, where Muslim thinkers, scholars and activists have been routinely hounded, persecuted and at times even liquidated for the sake of Realpolitik.

Many of those present were themselves intellectuals whose work has forced them into a life of exile. It is hardly surprising then that the themes of loss, exile and dislocation feature so prominently in some of their writings (An-Na'im, Moosa). The fate they share is a common one: branded heretics and outsiders in their own societies and apologists for Islam in the West, they straddle an ever-shifting and often precarious border between different worlds, making them liminal figures that are often on the cutting edge of both.

The modern Muslim intellectual is indeed, in most cases, a liminal figure. He or she appears on the horizon of a new Muslim society that is already experiencing the dislocating (and at times traumatic) process of change. Rapid modernization, urbanization, development and the variable factors unleashed by the process of globalization have disrupted traditional structures of government, modes of communication and patterns of thought the world over, and the Muslim world is not immune to these changes.

In many other parts of the world, these changes have opened the way for new thinkers—many of them lay practitioners of their faith—to come to the fore and to interrogate the foundational ideas and values of their respective traditions and religions. This holds true for many contemporary Hindu, Buddhist and Christian societies as it does for Islam.

Into this shifting and contested discursive terrain steps the Muslim intellectual, who is often the product of different educational and cultural systems. Versed in the mores and norms of the modern age as well as tradition, they try to bring about a symbiosis between the two (An-Na'im, Soroush, Moosa). Caught in the maelstrom of conflicting political forces, they are often drawn into political conflicts as well (Chandra, Madjid, Engineer).

As products of an age of change and flux, they are themselves the symptoms of a Muslim world that is currently experiencing the process of rupture and crisis. Their existence is proof that a brave new world is in the making: their very presence testifying to the fact that traditional structures and power relations of

the past have broken down and that new social spaces and constituencies are being created as we speak.

In the interviews, these intellectuals address the most pressing issues and concerns of their communities. Their concern is the question of Islam itself and all its attendant epiphenomena—culture, language, art, politics and society. By addressing such issues as women's rights, gender equality, Islamic law, history and culture, they invariably bring into question the totality of Islam as a discourse. It is clear that they understand the full weight and implications of the project they have undertaken. To interrogate these subjects unflinchingly brings them into conflict with other forces within their respective communities that wish to detain the flow of meaning of some of these key concepts, and to impose a state of epistemic arrest on Islamic discourse as a whole.

Yet the modern Muslim intellectual is one who insists on the importance of Islam for everyone. Islam is simply too vital to be left to a handful of key interpreters—be they the ulama or the state. By questioning and redefining these subjects, they engage in open discursive contestation with those forces that would prefer to keep the corpus of Islamic learning under lock and key, confined in exclusive domains reachable only by those who have passed the same tests of mutuality and association. The modern Muslim intellectual who attempts to bypass these rules of entry and discussion has, in a sense, short-circuited the traditional educational network and therefore opens up the discourse from within. He or she opens the way for Islam to become once again the religion of Muslims as a whole.

The reader will also note a number of similar features in this particular collection of interviews: Most of those interviewed have come from what was once regarded (by Western Orientalists and Muslims alike) as the 'periphery' of the Muslim world. The speakers themselves hail from countries like Iran, South Africa, Sudan, Indonesia, Malaysia and the United States (the latter only now being incorporated, however reluctantly, as part of the new Muslim diaspora). It is interesting to note that so much original and critical thinking is coming from the 'far-flung' corners of the Muslim world that until recently have been regarded as the final frontier of global Islam. That some of these thinkers have themselves taken residence in the West (Moosa, An-Na'im) would lend weight to the claim that the experience of dislocation and rupture is of fundamental importance to the development of a particular mind-set, opening the way for a sense of critical distance to develop.

All of these thinkers happen to occupy the middle ground between traditionalism and the modernist school of thought, yet none of them see this dichotomy in terms of oppositional dialectics which pit one against the other.

At home in both worlds, though not really accepted in either, they nonetheless aim to bridge the gap between the two in order to bring about a 'dialogue between civilizations' that goes beyond vacuous homilies and pleasantries so often bandied about in trendier circles today. Though committed to dialogue, these intellectuals happen to be acutely aware of the differences between East and West, modernity and Islam, as well as the very real power differentials upon which these distinctions are based. Their thoughts and writings are therefore aimed not only at bringing about an understanding between the two, but also at addressing the political realities that have kept both worlds apart (Chandra, Soroush, An-Na'im).

Thirdly, it has to be noted that none of these modern Muslim intellectuals have been afforded the luxury of a life of ease and comfort. Practically all of them (Soroush, Moosa, An-Na'im, Engineer, Chandra) have experienced the pain and hardship of persecution at the hands of the state and the pharisees within their own communities. In the case of some (Chandra), persecution has come in the form of incarceration, while in the case of others (An-Na'im, Moosa) a life of exile was the reward for having the courage to speak the truth to power. But despite these travails, the struggle beckons and they have pursued their goals regardless.

If we are to accept Edward Said's contention that the exile is the new global citizen of the post-modern world, then we could go a step further by claiming that within this post-modern world the modern Muslim intellectual is at the vanguard of pushing its boundaries even further. It is they who have forced both Muslim and Western society to look closer at themselves, to question some of their most basic assumptions and beliefs (as well as fears and prejudices). More so than any other grouping, Muslim intellectuals happen to be the most endangered constituency in this precarious world of shifting boundaries and orientations. That makes their work all the more important, and their contributions all the more valuable. And on that note, we would like to end this brief introduction and let them speak for themselves.

FARISH A. NOOR



# ‘Muslims Must Realize That There Is Nothing Magical about the Concept of Human Rights’

INTERVIEW WITH ABDULLAHI AN-NA‘IM

Professor Abdullahi An-Na‘im is the Charles Howard Chandler Professor of Law at the Emory University School of Law. Originally from Sudan, he was forced to leave his country under the most difficult of circumstances. After the execution of his close associate and teacher Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, he chose to continue his work abroad, where he has been an active campaigner for human rights in the Muslim world.<sup>1</sup> Over the years he has written extensively on the subject of reform of Muslim law and has been an active campaigner for the protection of human rights in Islamic societies (especially the rights of women), constitutionalism and democratization in general. He is also the author of *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, where he argues for a critical understanding of the *shari‘a* as a ‘historically conditioned interpretation of Islam’, and called for reinterpretations in the light of present-day realities. Here he speaks about the need for a reformation from within the traditional discourses of Islam and the need for a synergy between Islam and secularism.

*Farish:* In your book, *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, you spoke at length about the need for Muslims—ulama and laypersons alike—to seriously consider the need for a re-evaluation and reinterpretation of the *shari‘a*. In particular you were concerned to promote an Islamic approach and understanding to the thorny question of human rights and fundamental liberties. Why do you think

1. The reformist thinker Mahmoud Muhammad Taha was regarded as one of the leading intellectuals of Sudan and he led the movement for reform in his own country. As an Islamist scholar, well versed in matters related to Islamic law and governance, his critique of the government soon earned him the reputation of a dissident. In 1985 he was accused of apostasy and was executed. In the wake of Taha’s execution the movement he led was banned and many of the books he wrote were destroyed. Taha’s execution also prompted a number of Sudanese scholars and intellectuals like Abdullahi An-Na‘im to leave the country and go into exile abroad.

Islamic scholarship is still at this impasse? What prevents us from taking the question of human rights seriously, and why has the debate been so Byzantine in character?

*Abdullahi:* Part of the problem stems from the historical roots of the debate itself, and the geo-political circumstances that shape the parameters of the struggle as we see it today. The Muslim world and the ulama in particular have been unable and unwilling to embrace the debate for the simple reason that so much of it has been dominated by external actors and agents. From this perspective, there is the impression that this is a debate that has been hoisted on the Muslims against their will.

One cannot deny that there is some truth in this. After all, the issue of human rights really became politicized in the post-war era and it intensified during the Cold War in particular. What complicates matters even further is the fact that when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was first promulgated, it was done among the Western powers—many of which were not so keen to promote human rights in their own colonies. The rest of the world, and the Muslim world in particular, was still living under colonial rule. The proclamation of the UDHR by colonial powers and their continued domination and exploitation of the peoples of Africa and Asia is one of the ironies that remains with us till today.

But the point I wish to emphasize is that we cannot afford to abstain from this debate for our own purposes, and not simply as a response to Western agendas or priorities. We need human rights to protect ourselves against local and global forces of oppression because, like it or not, we are affected by their actions and omissions. The truth of the matter is that the Western model of the nation-state, with its expansive powers, has been ‘universalized’ through colonialism itself. It would therefore follow, in my view, that constitutional protections against the abuse of those powers should also be adopted by the formerly colonized peoples to protect themselves against the same sort of dangers of the nation-state. An obvious irony to note here is that the same élite who are protesting the Western origins of human rights are keen to control the nation-state and manipulate its powers to oppress their own people, despite the exclusively Western source of this form of political and social organization.

Once we choose to engage in the global human rights debate for our own purposes, we are in a position to challenge any aspect of it that fails to respond to our own concerns and priorities. For instance, we can assert our religious or cultural justification or foundation of these rights, instead of the ‘take it or leave it’ attitude of Western secular advocates of human rights. From a pragmatic point of view, the most serious objection to a purely secularist foundation

to the universality of human rights is its inability to inspire or motivate believers who happen to be the majority of the world population. If we take a broad overview of human history at large, it is clear that religion, and not secularism, has been more influential and effective in the process of shaping world events, building social and political institutions and altering the course of history itself.

*Farish:* But this is a highly controversial debate and there are many conservative leaders in the Muslim world who argue that the question of human rights does not arise at all simply because the very notion of human rights as it is understood today is a Eurocentric invention. Surely you are not saying that we should dispense with such universal standards of human rights altogether simply because of the narrow cultural perspective that is evident in their composition.

*Abdullahi:* Not at all. My objective is the realization of genuine universality of human rights, instead of presenting believers with a false choice between their own faith and commitment to these rights. There is nothing in the language of the UDHR and subsequent documents that precludes multiple religious as well as secular foundations of the legitimacy of human rights. The fact that the UDHR does expressly mention a divine or metaphysical source of these rights does not mean that Muslims or other believers cannot assert a religious justification of human rights for themselves. The key point here is that one cannot claim religious justification of human rights while rejecting the essence of the universality of these rights by insisting on discrimination on such grounds as sex, religion or belief. In other words, Muslims cannot claim that Islam respects and protects human rights while discriminating against women and non-Muslims.

The reason human rights advocates tend to avoid any religious (Islamic in our case) discourse about human rights is the perception that religion is necessarily parochial, exclusivist, sectarian and even irrational. In contrast, secularism is seen as a means of ensuring the possibility of a pluralistic society and political community that can still accommodate different religious, cultural and belief communities (including atheism). The key feature of secularism is its claim to be able to safeguard pluralism and difference by creating a political culture where all groups and competing interests are treated equally.

While these views of religion and secularism may be true of certain historical and current experience, the reverse can, and has in fact been, true of both of them. After all, different religious communities have co-existed in peace and solidarity in many parts of the world, despite flashes of violent conflict. In contrast, the most horrendous and systematic violations of human rights have been committed by Nazism and Soviet Marxist-Leninism, which were exclusively secular regimes.

Instead of false absolutist claims, I call for a synergy and interdependence of religion and secularism so that public policy can benefit from the moral guidance of religion, and pluralistic societies can enjoy peace and stability by regulating the relationship between religion and the state through secularism.

*Farish:* You are, in a sense, calling for a mutual understanding between the proponents of both camps in this case.

*Abdullahi:* That's right. For me the challenge is to somehow reconcile the claims of both religion and secularism. The question is how to make an understanding of human rights equally valid and legitimate from the perspectives of a wide variety of believers as well as non-believers all over the world. What needs to be done is to convince fervent secularists that those who believe in religion as a powerful foundation for morality have as much right to claim their human rights as others. Related to this is the need to convince those who believe in their respective religions that secularism is a practical and useful way of creating a working form of pluralism that accommodates difference without diminishing it. But this is not going to be easy, and it certainly will not happen without an internal reform of religious discourse and religious tradition as well. That is why I am calling for a synergy between Islam and secularism.

*Farish:* It is interesting that you take this approach of asking Muslims to work with and work through a culture of secularism in order to reach the protection of their basic human rights. Why do you think the concept of human rights in particular gets us—and the ulama in particular—into all kinds of complicated political problems and doctrinal clashes?

*Abdullahi:* Since you have mentioned the ulama a couple of times, let me say that the so-called ulama are one of the main obstacles in the face of the development and stability of Islamic societies everywhere. From an Islamic point of view, no body of persons or institution has a monopoly on valid and relevant understandings of Islam. In my view, Islamic discourse is radically 'democratic' precisely because no group of persons or institution has a monopoly on 'permissible discourse', or the authority to exclude dissident voices. Otherwise, what do we mean when we say that Islam is not premised on any form of institutionalized 'Church' or concede a special position for a so-called clergy? Like many other religious and ideological communities, Muslims have often failed to live up to this ideal, but that is reason for more concerted efforts in this regard, rather than a rationale for abandoning the effort.

That is precisely why I am calling for the Islamic legitimization of human rights in order to expand and sustain the widest possible 'space' for freedom of opinion and expression for all points of view as the only way Muslims can address all issues of fundamental and immediate concern.

Regarding human rights in particular, the real problem is that Muslim intellectuals and political leaders concede too much authority to the so-called ulama, who are incapable of appreciating the nature of human rights discourse, and why it is imperative for Islamic societies today. This abdication of moral and intellectual leadership by the more enlightened segments of our societies has created the false impression that human rights are intrinsically alien to us, to our culture, history and beliefs. In fact, the struggle for human rights has always existed in practically every major religious and cultural system in the world.

Human history is full of examples of communities and individuals struggling for their rights, often under extremely difficult and trying circumstances. For me, human rights basically imply a struggle for human dignity and self-determination. The struggle is one against all forms of structural and institutionalized oppression. There is nothing magical about the current formulation of human rights, as it is simply the expression of that ancient struggle for human dignity and social justice in the present situation of nation-states in their global context. Some Western governments, NGOs and donor agencies are wrong when they turn the concept of human rights into some kind of fetish—as if the mere mention of the term ‘human rights’ was the magic formula that will correct all the wrongs of a given society. But Muslim groups and governments are also wrong when they reject human rights per se, as if they were some magical thing that could somehow undermine the faith of Muslims or contaminate their religion.

*Farish:* We all know that Islam and Islamic discourse are, or should be, beyond the exclusive control of particular groupings and interested parties like the ulama. But the fact of the matter is that Islamic discourse, like the discourse of human rights, has come under the exclusive purview of groups with their own agendas. And these groups do not simply co-exist; they exist within highly stratified power structures and hierarchies and their relationship is often antagonistic. Power is at work here, as well as contestation. So how do we overcome these power differentials between various groups that try to dominate their respective fields of discourse and impose their will on others?

*Abdullahi:* Here we have to get involved in challenging those groups concerned. I am therefore challenging those who insist on an exclusively secular foundation of human rights, as well as those who claim the same for their own religion. In relation to Islam, the problem is that there are obvious conflicts between human rights standards and historical understandings of *shari‘a*, especially regarding the rights of women and non-Muslims. This is probably the main difficulty facing Islamic scholarship because of the common confusion between Islam, as a religion, and *shari‘a* as a human understanding of the

Qur'an and *sunna* of the Prophet. It is not possible to discuss this fundamental difficulty here, but I have explored possible Islamic ways out of this impasse in my book, *Toward an Islamic Reformation*.

*Farish*: There are obviously many progressive Muslim scholars, activists and political leaders who will support you on that point. But nonetheless the recent history of the Muslim world will show that Muslims have been reluctant when it comes to engaging in such global debates and the struggle to promote human rights in the Muslim world has been painfully slow in particular. Why is this?

*Abdullahi*: Human rights, as the term is defined today, can only be protected when there are certain crucial legal and political institutions at work. Partly due to our experiences with colonialism and post-colonial global trade and political relations, our countries and societies lack many of the necessary conditions for the effective protection of human rights. But we cannot continue to blame external forces and actors for our own problems. It is in fact because we still live with a 'colonized mentality' that we keep looking to the West to solve our problems. You need the basic fundamentals of democracy and democratic institutions to be in place at least—an open and democratic government that is genuinely representative, a working judiciary that is credible and independent, a security and law and order apparatus that is not politicized, etc. Without such institutions and political norms in place, it is hard to imagine human rights being promoted and protected by anyone. But while understanding the role of external forces and actors, we must rely on ourselves for realizing these conditions for ourselves. We in the developing world need to gradually diminish what I call 'human rights dependency'.

In the developed North we see that the protection of human rights is achieved through a dynamic interaction between the institutions of the state and civil society. This interaction ensures that the state is able to create a political climate where tolerance and pluralism can flourish and there can be the mutual respect for difference in society, and is an effective guarantor for the rights of all. But in the developing world many countries are in a state of flux and upheaval. The sad fact is that for millions of people in the world, there simply is no state apparatus that can protect their rights and fundamental liberties. Under these conditions, human rights are supposed to be protected by foreign agencies and transnational bodies like NGOs, donor or funding agencies, etc., instead of national governments responding to the demands of their own civil society.

*Farish*: Surely this leads us to a vicious circle. The more such societies depend on foreign agencies for the protection of their rights, the more they help to weaken their own states and deprive their local institutions of law and government of the credibility and influence they desperately need.

*Abdullahi:* That's right, unless this vicious chain is diminished and eventually broken through internal initiative and action. The fundamental struggle is political and economic, as well as religious and cultural. The state of human rights dependency is predicated on other forms of economic and political dependency. The governments of developing countries have lost their credibility and ability to govern partly because of severe economic and political inequalities in the global political and financial structures and processes that must be addressed and rectified in order to diminish the human rights dependency of the South on the North. But the main thrust for that global change has to come from the developing countries themselves, as the developed countries are unlikely to abandon their privileged position voluntarily, without a struggle.

What I am calling for is the return to a local tradition of knowledge and belief, which will help us understand the relevance and need for human rights from a local, indigenous perspective. What is needed is to diminish forms of intellectual and political dependency in order to have locally sustainable forms of protection of human rights and democracy. I am not being essentialist here; I am merely saying that all cultures and civilizations have developed these concerns that I talked about earlier. What needs to be done is to expand and develop these debates over human rights and democracy even further, starting from premises that we have forgotten and left behind ourselves. If, for instance, I want to talk about human rights, freedom of thought and rationality, why should I quote someone like Kant? Why can't I as a Muslim quote Ibn Rushd, who said and wrote the same thing hundreds of years before Kant? This for me is a better way for us in the Muslim world to revive the debate over human rights, individualism, rationality and freedom of thought and speech. And this is what I mean by breaking away from the human rights dependency which has, in the past at least, forced us to discuss the meaning of human rights in terms that are not necessarily local or our own.

*Farish:* On that note I have to push you one step further. Your critics may claim that you are offering an apology for regimes that have rejected the concept of human rights per se on the grounds that it is 'foreign' or 'alien'. We have all seen how so many governments and rulers in the Muslim world have rejected any form of constitutional or institutional reform on the grounds that such moves are un-Islamic and that they challenge the sanctity of Islam. They have also argued that the local understanding of politics does not leave any room for democracy or human rights. How would you counter such claims?

*Abdullahi:* I hope that readers can already see elements of my response to such a charge in what I said earlier. There are two important points that need to be addressed here. Firstly, the concept of human rights, for me at least, is not a question of authorship. We know that the concept of human rights did not

appear in the Western world until quite late, and even then it was (and still remains) a highly contested concept. So, this concept is not inherent to so-called Western culture as such, unless one also accepts that racism and colonialism (including post-colonial, capitalist imperialism) are also inherent to Western culture. But for me, human rights are of universal concern and are not confined to any specific people, culture, civilization or religion. This is why I reject claims that human rights standards are invariably and permanently bound with the historical experience of the West and that they carry the imprint of Western history and culture. But at the same time I also reject the claims of some Islamists who want to state that Islam 'invented' the concept of human rights and that Islam embodies it in its totality. That is not true either. Like I said earlier, the concept of human rights is universal in the sense that the struggle for human rights and dignity has been part of universal human history.

Secondly, I offer no compromise on the universality of human rights, as the immediate legal entitlements of all human beings, without discrimination on grounds of sex, religion, etc. The main issue I am raising is how to protect these rights in Islamic societies, without accepting any 'relativist' demands to reduce the scope or effectiveness of these protections. I must state that I am categorically against any attempt to reject human rights on the grounds of alleged cultural authenticity or specific understandings of religion. As I noted earlier, if those who reject human rights in the name of so-called Asian values or *shari'a* are genuine in their position, they should also reject the nation-state and its powers as Western inventions.

I have no problem with Muslims who reject certain outdated and narrowly Eurocentric conceptions of human rights if, in the process of doing so, they consciously and sincerely try to develop their own meaningful and practical norms and institutions for the universal protection of the rights, entitlements and freedoms of all. That would mean trying to revive the struggle for human rights from within the Islamic experience, via recourse to Islamic history, Islamic legal discourse and Islamic cultural norms. That would, in the end, help to create local systems and local understandings of human rights that are self-sustaining and understandable to millions of ordinary Muslims. But an all-out rejection of human rights on the grounds that they are un-Islamic, or are a move towards forms of oppression disguised in Islamist terms, would not only be a disservice to Islam, it would also be disastrous for the Muslim world at large.

*Farish:* Finally, I would like to end on a more personal note. Your work has evolved over the past fifteen years and this coincides with your time in exile in the West. Can you tell us how the experience of exile has changed your outlook on things and what this experience has taught you?

*Abdullahi*: I chose to go into exile after the execution of the scholar Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, who was my close friend and mentor in many ways. His being killed affected me deeply as it convinced me that the lack of free social and civic space in Sudan was becoming acute. There was no way that I and many others could continue working and developing the ideas of Taha under such circumstances.

But living in exile has also helped me to gain a critical distance from the situation in Sudan and my own work. I was, like many others, a product of the reformist movement that Taha and others had led. But at that time, and in the context of Sudanese politics, Taha's movement had a cohesion and certainty that was quite different. Mahmoud Taha proposed a radical project and methodology that was in many ways complete. His own approach to the question of secularism was quite different, and was a very critical one at that. But being abroad has allowed me to develop these ideas further and to rethink them as well. Thanks to this rupture and distance, I have been able to re-assess many of my own ideas and beliefs concerning secularism and other matters. I also tried to unpack the ideas of Taha and translate them in such a way that they would address other issues and other constituencies.

Being abroad meant that I was no longer part of a cohesive and insular group, but this also gave me the opportunity to redefine the parameters of the reformist project itself. Ironically perhaps, this would not have been possible without the dislocating experience of exile. That is why I now celebrate exile in my work. Exile, like heresy, can be creative.



# The Responsibilities of the Muslim Intellectual in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## INTERVIEW WITH ABDOLKARIM SOROUSH

Professor Abdolkarim Soroush is an Iranian philosopher and social scientist who is currently based at the Institute for Epistemological Research in Tehran, Iran.<sup>2</sup> A well-known scholar and Islamic intellectual in Iran and abroad, his writings have been widely disseminated both in print and via the internet. In Iran, he is seen as an advocate of institutional reform and a radical rethinking of the Islamist political project itself, while abroad he remains a source of inspiration to many Muslim intellectuals, students and activists who have been grappling with the question of Islam's relationship with modernity. Here he talks about the complex relationship between Islam and modernity and the role of Muslim intellectuals in contemporary Muslim societies.

*Farish:* The subject of this workshop has been the challenges faced by Muslim intellectuals and the societies they live in during the modern age. How does this theme fit into your own work? For years you have been seen as one of the most important thinkers in the Muslim world who is trying to encourage Muslims to engage with the Other and the challenges of modernity. Are we still facing the problem of recognizing modernity itself?

*Abdolkarim:* Well, first of all let us begin by establishing two important points. You speak of Islam and you speak of modernity as two separate themes or ideas, but we need to remind ourselves from the outset that the two of them are abstract concepts that are not and cannot be reduced to simple categories.

First of all we have the phenomenon of Islam. Muslim intellectuals still talk about Islam as if it were a simple, unified entity; a singular object. But in reality the history of Islam, like the history of other religions such as Christianity, is fundamentally a history of different interpretations. Throughout the development of Islam there have been different schools of thought and ideas, different approaches and interpretations of what Islam is and what it means. There is no

2. Presently Dr Soroush is a visiting fellow at Harvard University.

such thing as a ‘pure’ Islam, or an a-historical Islam that is outside the process of historical development. The actual lived experience of Islam has always been culturally and historically specific, and bound by the immediate circumstances of its location in time and space. If we were to take a snapshot of Islam as it is lived today, it would reveal a diversity of lived experiences which are all different, yet existing simultaneously. Religion, like all human phenomena, needs to be understood in this context. There is always a plurality of ‘Islams’ as there is a plurality of other human phenomena—this also happens to include modernity.

Modernity is not a unified phenomenon or idea either. Throughout history there have been many different schools of thought that envisaged different views and understandings of modernization and what the modern epoch meant. There is therefore a plurality of modernities as well. Like Islam, modernity has moved in many directions and has evolved with manifold consequences. Modern science has furnished us with new ways of looking at the world but it can be, and has been, used to entrench biases and prejudices that are also anti-modern and irrational. The holocaust and the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are examples of the modernist project gone wrong, but we cannot deny their fundamentally modern character. Modernity is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon with both good and bad characteristics and potentialities. It is therefore not a coherent unity. It is fundamentally contaminated by crisis and contingency as well as many paradoxes and contradictions. But all of this is quite natural in modern life.

*Farish:* But we in the Muslim world are not immune to these paradoxes and contradictions either, I suppose.

*Abdolkarim:* No, we are not. We Muslims need to recognize that we live in the modern world whether we like it or not. But the modern age in which we find ourselves is not a homogeneous one. The four pillars of modernity are modern concepts, conceptions, means and ends. These in turn shape the pluralistic and heterodox worldview of modern life. The plurality of modernities means that there exist many different ways through which people understand themselves in the world today. The modern age has given us modern conceptions, such as the conception of God, of Prophethood, etc. The modern age also furnishes us with modern ends, such as modern notions of happiness, meaning of life and so on.

Today, Muslims must accept that many of our beliefs and assumptions are also shaped and drawn by modern concepts and ideas related to history, geography, time and space. Political Islam, which we see on the rise in so many parts of the contemporary Muslim world, is itself a symptom of the modern age in

which we live. Even the idea of an Islamic state that has become the goal of so many Islamist movements is itself a modern concept that could not have come into being during the pre-modern era.

*Farish:* Talking about the contradictions and paradoxes of modernity and living in the modern age, how would you characterize the manifold attempts by various Islamist movements and governments in the present day that are trying to avoid the pitfalls of modernity by establishing some form of Islamic social or political order?

*Abdolkarim:* What you are talking about is the phenomenon of political Islam as seen in various parts of the world. As I said earlier, this itself is a modern phenomenon and is, in a sense, a product of the encounter between Islam and modernity. The fact that such Islamist movements and governments have come to power and are trying to reconstitute Islam in the world today is no surprise. This is partly because Muslims still have great difficulties in dealing with the legacy of modernity, which many of us feel is alien to our culture and values.

For at the heart of the project of modernity lies a healthy epistemological scepticism that leads us to the demystification of the human being. Modernity is characterized by the questioning of everything, of all that we once held dear and inviolable. It opens the way to plurality and diversity, but it can also be seen as a challenge to the worldview of the past.

*Farish:* How is this modern understanding of the world different from that of the old? And why is it seen as a threat by some?

*Abdolkarim:* We can understand this better when we look at specifics. Modernity in itself is not really a problem for the conservative Muslims among us. What becomes a problem is the effect that some modern ideas have on us. This becomes clear when we look at the discussion of modern concepts such as ‘secularism’ and ‘human rights’.

Now secularism is actually based on an understanding of rights. The whole secular culture of the modern age is predicated on the basis of individual rights—our right to speak, to think, to learn, to work, to act. This in turn leads to a new understanding of human subjectivity which is grounded on notions of free rational agency on the part of free individuals.

This may seem normal to you and me, but we must remember that the language of rights is completely different from the language of traditional religion which is based on the notion of duties instead. The language of *fiqh*, for instance, is a science of obligations; it is not a discourse of rights. Here then lies the crucial difference between the traditional way of life in the past and life in the present modern age. In the past, it was thought that one had a duty to be religious or ethical. The traditional notion of God in the past was almost a tyrannical one:

God for us was a supreme being who demanded our devotion and love at all costs. The traditional notion of God was a God of obligations and duties who was intolerant and demanding.

But now in the modern age we think it is our right to be religious and ethical; in fact, we demand the right to be religious and to express our religious beliefs. Our view of God has also changed for we now feel that it is our right to worship him and show our love to him freely. God, in the modern age, is understood as the God of rights who is closer to the individual believer. We see this approach being brought to the fore by Muslim groups living in the West who demand their right to express their religiosity which they conflate with their identity as minorities. Religion here has become part of the process of identity politics, which is a form of politics at home in the modern age. While we may be doing the same things and be engaged in similar activities, our way of looking at them has changed radically.

*Farish:* What does this difference of outlook entail? Why does it become a problem for so many Muslims in the contemporary world?

*Abdolkarim:* Well, ideas between the modern and traditional worlds sometimes experience a rupture. There are many cases where we simply cannot reconcile the ideas and values of the past with those of the present. The facts of modernity may not be explicable in terms of traditional values and worldviews. Some of them may even appear unpalatable and obnoxious to traditionalist thinkers and more traditionalist societies. When this happens, we experience a crisis. But we all live in the modern world now, and we cannot change that. Crisis is part and parcel of the times we live in, and the crisis of uncertainty is itself part of the modern experience. This merely confirms the fact that we have arrived at the modern age and that we have become part of it. There is no turning back for us.

*Farish:* When you say that some of us Muslims have a problem in dealing and living with modernity, you obviously have specific actors in mind. I presume you are speaking of the more conservative sections of the traditional ulama and other such religious functionaries in the Muslim world. Why is it that the ulama, who were once the great defenders of the integrity of Islam, have now become the biggest obstacle to dealing with modernity?

*Abdolkarim:* Well first of all we need to remember as you said the role played by the ulama in the past. It is true that they were the ones who rescued Islam when it was in a state of crisis. The efforts of the ulama to safeguard the discursive structure of Islam from both external attacks and internal disruption were the main factor that helped Islam retain its cohesiveness and coherence over the centuries.

But because of this we must understand that the religious mode of thinking in the past was necessarily a reactive and conservative one. The ulama may have

preserved the discursive coherence and unity of Islamic teachings, but they were also the ones who shut the doors of *ijtihad* and thus brought to an untimely end the tradition of critical thinking in Islam. Furthermore, the ulama, who were responsible for conserving much of Islamic thought, philosophy, law and history, have themselves grown increasingly conservative over the years. Unfortunately this trend of thinking has not changed very much. The traditional ulama have not adapted their line of thinking even after all the major social, political and economic upheavals in the modern Muslim world. That is why in Iran, for instance, we still live under the dominance of the mullahs and ulama.

Even a century after the Constitutional Revolution [of 1905] the mullahs and ulama of Iran are still speaking the same language of obligations and duties, and not the language of rights. When they speak of religion and religious matters it is clear that their worldview is rooted in the past and their conceptions of God, of religious devotion and faith, are all based on traditional notions of moral obligations to God. Sadly for us, most ulama remain conservative in their outlook and they are engaged in conservative hermeneutics. They spend their time in endless doctrinal disputes over matters of law and legal theory, but their response to the challenge of modernity remains a reactive one; one that is political rather than philosophical or rational. As such, the mullahs cannot address critically and intelligently the challenges of modernity.

*Farish:* What about the numerous attempts by conservative ulama and political leaders to reintroduce some form of neo-traditional Islamic polity in the modern age? We have witnessed, for instance, the revival of Sufism in political circles in many parts of the contemporary Muslim world where Muslim leaders and ulama have tried to construct political systems based on traditional notions of law, order and civil obedience and duties. Even the leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan claims that he receives visions in his dreams which are dutifully interpreted by his loyal followers.

*Abdolkarim:* Now we need to be very careful about these contemporary social experiments. We need to remember that Sufism also has in it a strong authoritarian strain which was manifested on many occasions in the past. Due to the lopsided development that we see in the Muslim world today, where states are given so much power at the expense of the people, any attempt to translate Sufism into politics will most likely lead to an authoritarian form of rule. The case of the *vilayet-i faqih* [rule of jurists] in Iran is a good example—it was a concept that originated from Sufi discourse.

In the past we have seen many attempts to do this as well, when Muslim rulers chose the discourse of Sufism as a discourse of legitimization for their regimes. It led to the emergence of authoritarian rulers who were regarded as

walis [spiritual leaders] instead. We will have to be very cautious about any attempt to translate traditional concepts of power, law, order or obligations in the context of present-day political realities.

*Farish:* If that is the case, then who are the ones who have to take up the challenge of modernity? Who should lead the process of engagement with the facts of modern life?

*Abdolkarim:* Here is where the modern Muslim intellectual comes to play his or her role. By the term 'modern Muslim intellectual' I am not referring to those whose attachment to Islam or modernity is merely nominal. These intellectuals are not the ones whose understanding of Islam is reduced to a few quotes or phrases. Nor are they the ones who think of modernity in terms of its axiological phenomena like consumerism or material development only. They are the ones who are well versed in both Islamic studies and in the understanding of modernity and its internal workings. The modern Muslim intellectual has to be one who understands the fundamental differences between Islam and modernity, and would therefore be able to bridge the gap between the two. But in order to do this he or she has to know how and why Islam and modernity are different, and where the differences actually lie. They cannot simply talk about differences in terms of dress, culture or behaviour—these are merely the symptoms of difference, but they do not constitute the actual epistemological difference itself.

Modern Muslim intellectuals are, in a sense, a hybrid species. They emerged in the liminal space between modern ideas and traditionalist thought. We have seen the emergence of such figures in many Muslim countries that have experienced the effects of colonization and the introduction of a plural economic and educational system. They have their feet planted in their local traditions as well as the broader world of the modern age. As such, they are comfortable in both, handicapped by neither. The modern Muslim intellectual is one who is not daunted by the task of delving into his or her religious knowledge for critical answers and solutions to the present. Such intellectuals are better able to do so because they are not the product of a traditional educational system which is narrow and rigid. They are not bound by traditional norms and rules of religious discursive activity, because they are not really part of that particular narrow tradition. Unlike the traditional ulama, who never go beyond the texts that they read, the modern intellectual will be able to read deeper into the text in a critical, imaginative manner.

*Farish:* But here it seems as if you are calling for a reading of both Islam and modernity which can be threatening to the representatives of both traditions. To talk about a critical and imaginative reading of Islam in the light of modern-

day realities sounds like challenging the dominance of the ulama and an invitation to *ijtihad*. You are not advocating a ‘free reading’ of religious and legal texts, or course.

*Abdolkarim*: Of course not. But what I am calling for is a critical reading of the corpus of Islamic texts and doctrine so that we can begin to break free from the dogmas of the past which may have been relevant at a certain stage in Islamic history, but no longer. This is not to say that the readings and interpretations of the past were not important or relevant. They were—but that is precisely the point. Their relevance lies in the past, in the pre-modern age, but not now.

*Farish*: What role does the Muslim intellectual play in the process of interrogating modernity in turn?

*Abdolkarim*: Here is where the modern Muslim intellectual has a role to play for the world community as a whole. As I said earlier, neither Islam nor modernity is monolithic, and both are open to question. The process of questioning has already begun in the case of the latter. As we have seen in recent decades, a critical questioning and reassessment of the claims of modernity has been done in the West. Thanks to the lessons of post-modern critical theory we all know that modernity is not innocent, nor is it culture-blind and as objective as it claims to be. But at least in the West modern Western intellectuals have begun to question this and they have developed a more critical attitude towards modernity as a phenomenon.

The modern Muslim intellectual stands to serve the needs of other communities as well when he or she begins to question and rethink the premises of both Islamic discourse and modern discourse simultaneously. He or she can also show to the non-Muslim world how complex Islam truly is, once he or she brings to the surface the internal dynamics of Islamic discourse that have been silenced or suppressed for so long. As a result our collective understanding of Islam will be broadened and enriched.

*Farish*: The way you pose the challenge gives one the impression that we in Muslim world have little choice at the present. It seems that if we are to break free from the stranglehold of both conservative and modern dogmas then there is a great need for some imaginative and critical thinking among Muslims today.

*Abdolkarim*: We do not have much choice at the moment. The Muslim world is caught between states and governments that are secular in orientation and ulama who are conservative in theirs. The duty and task of reform falls on the shoulders of the modern Muslim intellectual, who needs to retain a critical distance in between.



# 'We Need New Intellectual Tools for the Age We Live In'

## INTERVIEW WITH EBRAHIM MOOSA

Professor Ebrahim Moosa is currently based at the Department of Religious Studies, Stanford University.<sup>3</sup> Originally from South Africa, he was forced to relocate to the United States when the working conditions he faced in his own country badly deteriorated.<sup>4</sup> Over the years he has written extensively on the subject of Islamic thought and Muslim intellectuals in the modern world and is regarded as one of the leading experts on the developments within contemporary Islamic scholarship. His forthcoming book is entitled *Ghazali of Tus: The Poetics of Imagination*. In this interview, Ebrahim Moosa talks about the difficult role of the Muslim intellectual, Islamic hermeneutics and the need to extend the boundaries of Islamic discourse in the light of present-day realities.

*Farish:* You are mostly known for the work that you have done on contemporary Muslim thought and Muslim thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet despite the enormous changes that have taken place all over the Muslim world, we see that Muslim intellectual activity has arrived at an impasse. Muslim societies seem to be caught between the so-called 'Traditionalists' and 'Modernists' and the space of Islamic discourse itself seems to be split thanks to the policing of discursive frontiers between the two. How and why have we come to this?

*Ebrahim:* Well, part of the problem lies in the fact that the momentum of change and development among the Muslim reformers and modernists itself has died down. Over the years, we have seen how even the Islamic modernists

3. Since this interview was conducted, Ebrahim Moosa has moved to Duke University.
4. Ebrahim Moosa has in fact been the target of numerous attacks. On 13 July 1998 his home was bombed by unidentified assailants. It was widely believed that those responsible belonged to a Muslim vigilante group called People against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD), a self-appointed interest group that claimed to have the welfare of the public at heart but were really involved in trying to destabilize the Mandela government. Ebrahim spoke out against the violent methods used by this group, and as a result became one of their targets. He survived the attack, and later many of the members of this group were placed behind bars on charges of violence and the killing of innocent people.

have become sacralized and how the ideas of progressive Muslim thinkers and scholars have been turned into canonical bodies of thought that seem immovable and static.

That such a development has come to the fore today is not all that surprising when we look at how the modernist school of Islam first developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through people like Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and others. It must be remembered that these Muslim thinkers were themselves located between two traditions: Islamic conservatism and secular modernity. In their attempt to modernize and reform Islam, many of these reformist thinkers ended up internalizing the values of the modernist project. So it is hardly surprising for us to read how people like Al-Afghani, Abduh and Maudoodi were concerned about economic development, material progress and catching up with the Western world. But in the process, many of these modernist thinkers also ended up inheriting the prejudices and biases of the modern era. So much of their work and so many of their ideas are shaped by notions of modernity, enlightenment, rationality, and progress that were guided by the tradition of positivism. Because the Western modernist project was grounded on a colonial discourse, many of the Islamic modernists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also ended up internalizing and reproducing these prejudices. Their views towards folk beliefs, ancient traditions, the status of women, etc., were all shaped by this.

The Islamic modernists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were thus a hybrid constituency and they were liminal figures both in Western secular and conservative Islamic circles. The conservative ulama opposed them because they were seen as too 'Western-oriented' while the secular Westerners saw them as apologists for Islam. Today, those who want to defend the Islamic modernist project are at a loss over how to defend some of the ideas and positions held by these modernist thinkers. As a result, much of what they said and wrote has been taken at face value, and the impulse towards critical thinking and self-reflection has been sidelined.

*Farish:* It seems that according to you the development of Muslim thought has come to a virtual stand-still with different individuals and schools of thought taking up fixed subject-positions. How would you sum up the situation we see around us today?

*Ebrahim:* Like I said, we are now witnessing the strengthening of these internal boundaries within the space of Islamic discourse itself. In most Muslim countries today, we see the growing division between two specific camps: the Muslim modernizers who want to develop Islam into a modern, up-to-date and progressive way of life; and the Muslim conservatives who wish to maintain, if you like, the purity and sacred status of Islamic discourse by turning back to

authentic sources and an authentic way of life. The picture, we must remember, is not as simplistic as that: caught in between these two rival constituencies is an innumerable amount of other groupings, including Muslim intellectuals.

Due to the fact that nearly all of the Muslim countries in the world today were once colonized by the West, the project of modernization itself, which is seen as being 'Western' by the conservatives, has become problematic. In the face of rapid modernization, in many contemporary Muslim societies we see the emergence of counter-modern forces led by the spokesmen of religious communities. This is true of Islam as it is of other religions.

*Farish:* A reaction against modernity and the modernization process couched in terms of traditionalism or a search for cultural authenticity rooted in the past is, of course, not unique to the Muslim world. We can see the same happening in many other parts of the world from Africa to Asia, and this has been with us since the 1960s. But how would you characterize the specifically Islamic reaction against the state and the project of secular modernity? Where does it come from and what are its resources?

*Ebrahim:* Much of the reaction and resistance to the project of modernity and the modernizing impulses of the state is based on a discourse of authenticity which reduces Islam to positive signifiers and values. For those conservatives who pose Islam as the counterbalance to modernization and modernity itself, Islam has been endowed with all kinds of positive attributes which are denied to modernity. Islam is seen as compassionate, humane, civilized, etc., while the project of modernization is seen as secular, materialistic and even evil in some cases.

Now this sort of thinking only gets off the ground because so much of traditional Muslim thought today is couched in what I call a 'theology of empire' which dates back to the time when Islamic civilization was at its peak and when Muslim theologians, scholars and doctors of law viewed the world and their own status within it in dialectical terms. It was the theology of empire that created categories of radical outsiders and 'grey' categories like *munafiqin* [hypocrites]. The net result of this mode of thinking was the creation of an elaborate hate-machine where Muslims viewed outsiders as potential threats or enemies. The fact that this sort of thinking is still alive and well today is beyond doubt. Looking at the sort of propaganda that you get from Islamist movements in countries like Pakistan today, all we see is the obsession with Islam's supposed 'enemies' who are said to be everywhere. Recent catastrophes that have befallen Muslim communities in countries like Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya and others have been turned into collective tragedies by Muslim demagogues, so that they can mobilize more supporters behind them and serve reactionary ends instead.

This has created a paranoid, introverted and defensive school of thought among the Muslim conservatives worldwide.

The other feature of conservative thought at the present is that so much of it is static and incestuous. One of the saddest things about the development of Islam in recent times is that it has not developed at all intellectually. In many parts of the Muslim world today, Islamic thought has been left to traditional scholars and theologians who are trained in the school of conservative hermeneutics. As hermeneutists they dwell almost exclusively within the world of the book and the law, and not the realities of the world outside. The better they are at such conservative hermeneutics, the more they can make the Qur'an and the legal texts of Islam speak for them and their interests. Having a monopoly over such sacred legal texts also enhances their power and status even further, without necessarily improving the lot of ordinary Muslims elsewhere.

*Farish:* Where does the Muslim intellectual come into the picture? Obviously as intellectuals they are part of the élite system and the intelligentsia. The fact that they are Muslim intellectuals also means that they are rooted in the same cultural system that has been used by the traditionalists and conservatives as the base of their discursive strategies. If Muslim intellectuals cannot locate themselves at some Archimedean point that is radically outside the discourse, what can they do in the midst of all this?

*Ebrahim:* Well, it's true that we cannot and should not alienate ourselves from the constituency we are trying to address. But for a start they [Muslim intellectuals] can say something different. Rather than presenting the sorry state of the Muslim world today as a cause for a jihad against all things un-Islamic, we can argue that the present state of affairs can be turned around to empower us. Looking at the way in which Muslims have been persecuted all over the world today should encourage us to rethink our relations with others in radically different ways. We could, for example, occupy the moral high-ground and open the way for a new ethics of dialogue between cultures and religions. There are many other things that we can do, but few intellectuals are doing them.

*Farish:* Why have Muslim intellectuals not come to the fore then? Why have they allowed the space of Islamic discourse to be dominated either by secular or conservative reactionaries instead? What is stopping them from speaking out?

*Ebrahim:* Modern Muslim intellectuals in particular are faced with a serious problem today. In the past, many if not most of them have tended to side with the state. This was due to the fact that Muslim intellectuals have by and large been supporters and advocates of the modernization process and have often regarded the state as the primary agent responsible for modernizing society.

But Muslim intellectuals have also been called upon to give a defence of

Islam on rational terms. So how can they do it? If Muslim intellectuals continue to use the tools available to them, such as the discourse of modernity, development and progress, then they would be repeating the errors and contradictions of their intellectual predecessors. But Muslim intellectuals cannot accept the theology of empire or the discourses of authenticity offered by the conservatives either. They have to be honest with themselves and admit the fact that they are not the products of traditional schools of religious thought and education. They need not apologize for being educated in the West or for being more open to other cultures and worldviews.

Faced with the painful realities of the Muslim world, contemporary Muslim intellectuals have little choice but to reinvent new categories, ideas and formulae of their own. We need to invent new theoretical and discursive tools for the new age in which we find ourselves. Traditional theology as espoused by the conservative ulama cannot provide us with the solutions we need, for the simple reason that their way of looking at the world as a battleground between ‘good’ Muslims and ‘bad’ outsiders is both useless and morally repugnant to us.

*Farish:* So you are basically saying that if Islam and Muslim identity are to be defended today we need to find a way out of the trap of oppositional dialectics that continues to set us apart from the Other. The same concerns have been raised by many Western intellectuals—Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas and Julia Kristeva come to mind—who have argued that the West also needs to re-evaluate its understanding of itself and its relationship with the non-West. The bottom line is that our very notion of identity, along with the categories and hierarchies of differentiation that support it, needs to be radically questioned and reformulated.

*Ebrahim:* That’s right. The modern Muslim intellectual needs to serve his or her community by being openly critical of its shortcomings. He or she needs to open the way for Muslims to be able to see themselves and others better, and needs to facilitate the development of a new conception of the Other that endows the latter with integrity and respect. In short, the challenge that faces the contemporary Muslim intellectual is to find the means to help Muslims live in the real world of the present that is complex, heterodox and confounding. Being an intellectual also means that one bears a great moral burden: sometimes the truths that need to be said are painful and difficult to accept, but the true intellectual would be prepared to pay the price for speaking the truth to power under whatever circumstances.

*Farish:* It’s fine for us to say that critical thought is good and necessary, but we both know that in real life critical thought can also lead to lives being endangered. At the moment, independent Muslim intellectuals are in short supply and

they seem to be on an 'endangered species' list. You yourself happen to be one of them. What do you have to say about all those independent Muslim thinkers who have come to their untimely end?

*Ebrahim:* What you say is true. The persecution and hounding of independent Muslim intellectuals and scholars like Abdolkarim Soroush, Abdullahi An-Na'im and Nasr Abu-Zaid is going on all the time. In some cases, like that of Mahmoud Muhammad Taha of Sudan, the ending can be a tragic one as well.

But this is because for many conservatives and reactionary Muslims, any kind of critical thinking on Islam is seen as a threat to Islam itself. This shows just how far and deep the sort of theology of empire I have spoken about goes among conservative and reactionary circles. But this does not change the fact that much Muslim thought today is still predicated on religious metaphysics that dates from the time of the Muslim empires of the past. The disjunction between the present and the past is too painfully obvious for us to ignore. It is precisely because the Muslim world is in such a state of political, economic, cultural and intellectual crisis today that we need to think critically and come up with some new paradigms and solutions. We need to invent new intellectual tools for the difficult age in which we live.

# The Compatibility of Islam, Secularism and Modernity

## INTERVIEW WITH ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

Professor Asghar Ali Engineer is the Director of the Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS) which is based in Mumbai, India. A highly active campaigner on a number of social issues, he is seen as a spokesman for women's rights in Islam as well as minority concerns in the Indian Subcontinent. Thanks to his sustained efforts to represent the minority groups in his country, he has also been the target of numerous polemics and attacks by his detractors.<sup>5</sup> But he has continued his work despite the odds and is regarded by many as the embodiment of the scholar-activist and public intellectual. Here he addresses the issue of secularism and its relevance to contemporary Muslim society.

*Farish:* You are known in many parts of the Muslim world for a number of things: your work on women's rights in Islam, your struggle against religious intolerance and sectarianism, and your studies on secularism. You are seen as a Muslim modernist and you have often spoken about the compatibility of Islam and modern values. Can you tell us what you mean by that?

*Engineer:* What I mean is that there is no serious or insurmountable difficulty between Islam, as *deen* or a way of life, and the modern world in which we live. If you look at modern political ideologies and modern political morality today, you will find that many of the Qur'anic concepts of reason, justice, wisdom and benevolence are also there. So why is it so difficult for us to deal with modern political culture and morality? There is no reason why Muslims cannot and should not work with and within the structures and institutions of modern

5. It should be noted that Asghar Ali Engineer was a member of the Shi'a Bohra community in India. Over the years, however, his critical stance towards some of the traditional practices of the Bohra community and its leadership led to his being excommunicated from the community. Since then he has been the target of many polemics as well as physical attacks directed against him, his family and co-workers. Shortly before he attended the meeting in the Netherlands, he was attacked by thugs who were thought to be members of the Bohra community. His office was ransacked and considerable damage was done to the property.

politics. One can even say that much of what we recognize as Islamic values and principles is already there in the modern political culture around us.

There is nothing new about this either. Although today there are many Muslim groups that continue to demonize anything and everything that is modern on the grounds that it is un-Islamic, Muslim history is full of examples of Muslim thinkers and leaders who turned to the West and its modern way of life as an example for Muslims to emulate. Even when Jamaluddin al-Afghani went to Europe [in the 19<sup>th</sup> century], he claimed that he saw more Islamic practices in Europe than in the Muslim countries he knew. By this he meant the modern way of living and carrying out the affairs of state that he admired so, and from which he wanted Muslims to learn.

*Farish:* What about those who argue that Islam cannot accommodate or tolerate the ‘secular’ aspect of modernity? There are many Muslim thinkers in the world today who argue that as Muslims we cannot and should not accept any of the values which come under the general label of ‘secular’.

*Engineer:* Most of these people do not understand what is meant by secularism. Now if by that you mean a culture of rampant hedonism, wastefulness and idle vice, then of course we do not accept that. But you cannot reduce secularism to simply that, and such forms of decadence can exist even in a non-secular environment. If we look at the collapse of the Muslim empires in the past, for instance, we can apply a cultural critique in many of those cases and argue that these Muslim kingdoms were themselves corrupted from within by vices of all sorts, despite the fact that outwardly they conformed to Islamic notions of piety and good governance. Somehow we have to break away from this tendency to equate secularism with all that is bad and negative from the Islamic point of view. There is simply no essential link between the two and we cannot say that secularism is essentially un-Islamic or anti-Islamic in any fundamental way.

The process of secular development in other parts of the world has also broadened the worldview of human beings, liberated people from their prejudice and fears, and allowed for the creation of more open and plural societies. We cannot deny that we in the Muslim world have benefited from this. Who would argue that science has not taught us some valuable lessons about health, economics, the environment and governance? We cannot dispute the fact that rationalism—which was practised by generations of Muslim rationalist thinkers—has helped to deliver us from the days of superstition and wrongful understanding. Now we cannot say that all of that is bad or un-Islamic, can we?

For me, one of the most attractive and redeeming features of secularism is the emphasis that it places on pluralism and equal rights for all: equal rights for men and women, equal rights between the rich and the poor, equal rights

between all religious and cultural communities. So it is not at all difficult for us to see and understand why so many communities in the world today have opted to work within a secular system. This is even more important if you happen to be in a religious or cultural minority like the Muslims or Christians in India.

Now in India the Muslims constitute a minority of about 12 per cent. But even so they happen to be an important minority as they tend to be concentrated in certain areas and they tend to be found in certain fields of work. As such they are an identifiable constituency and this makes them very important to politicians and political parties. The political parties in India now realize that the Muslims represent a bloc vote and a united constituency that they need to have on their side. So many of the more progressive parties and movements in India have begun to court the Muslim vote. But for Muslim minority groups to gain a foothold in the political arena of the country, they need to work within a secular framework which at least respects and defends pluralism and diversity.

*Farish:* And how do the Muslims in India react to this? How should a religious minority operate within such a political environment? This is an important point to raise because there are so many Islamic movements and Islamic thinkers who talk about Islam and Muslim concerns from the point of view of a dominant constituency, despite the fact that Muslims happen to be in minority in many other parts of the world.

*Engineer:* The Indian Muslims realize that as a minority they need to think strategically. Obviously they cannot support any kind of religious movement or political party that works against them. So in the face of the threat represented by extremist Hindu chauvinists, the Muslims—like the Christians—now support secular political parties that promise to uphold and defend the principles of pluralism and democracy. In the Indian context, Muslim groups and parties have even formed instrumental coalitions with liberals, socialists and communists as part of a modern form of pragmatic politics. But this has a lot to do with their need to survive and their search for identity and a space to belong.

This was why Nehru was so important and popular for us, even till today. You see, Nehru was a great defender of the secular principles and values of constitutional democracy. He never wanted India to develop to be a religious state where only one religious community was dominant and able to impose its religious or cultural hegemony on others. For many Muslims and other religious minorities in India, he was their great defender. What is more, that episode in Indian history has taught us the importance and value of secularism as a philosophy for living. Today even the Indian mullahs and ulama have called on Muslims to work with other secular parties and movements in order to defend themselves against dominant religious parties like the BJP.

The Islamists in predominantly Muslim countries need to learn from this; they need to understand how the Other feels. Minorities always prefer to support and work with composite movements that can absorb and accept them. This is why the Chinese in your country, Malaysia, choose to work with the government which is perceived as secular. As for your Islamists in Malaysia, they must understand that this is how other minorities feel. It is natural for them to be scared and worried, even if their fears are baseless. As a Muslim in India, I find myself turning away from any Indian party that calls for Hindu dominance or promotes Hindu chauvinism as its ideology. How do you think non-Muslims feel when the situation is reversed and they confront Muslim groups that talk the same kind of exclusive language? It's only natural for them to react with fear. So we all need to be more understanding and accommodating.

*Farish:* It is interesting to hear you say that, for there are many Islamic movements in the world today that are calling for a more active, even militant approach of pushing the Muslim agenda worldwide. The resurgence of political Islam over the past few decades has been accompanied by a call for a more assertive expression of Islamic identity, sometimes couched in terms of a politics of purity or authenticity which draws clear distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims, the Muslim world and the rest.

*Engineer:* That is true, but it is not a reflection of present-day realities. On a global scale we can see that we Muslims are a minority in fact. We are not even the biggest religion in the world, so why do all these movements in so many Muslim countries talk about converting the world to Islam? This only makes non-Muslims fear Islam and fear Muslims even more. This kind of talk is not even Islamic by its nature—it is arrogant and self-defeating.

*Farish:* The other aspect of your work has been your sustained critique of predominant practices in the Muslim world that are based on traditions and customs which you argue are un-Islamic and culturally mediated. Some argue that your defence of secularism and secular values has also led you towards an internal critique of cultural practices that are alien to the true spirit of Islam. Can you elaborate a little further on this?

*Engineer:* My critique of certain traditions and practices among Muslims stems from a desire to distinguish between the fundamental teachings of Islam and the cultural practice of it, though both are closely related as we all know. Now we must remember that religion is a culturally mediated phenomenon. By this we are referring to the practice of religion, as opposed to the values or message of religion. This is true of Islam as it is of every other religion in the world. All religions have a universal message in them, but the universal message of

Islam has been reinterpreted and re-contextualized over the centuries thanks to the mode of transmission through which it is spread.

In many cases, the cultural mediation of Islam has led to the encroachment of new values, ideas, and practices that are not even Islamic, yet most of us think they are. For instance, take the example of Muslim marriages these days. Now in many Islamic countries Muslim women who get married are told that they need a wali or guardian to marry them off. Sometimes this can be very complicated and these poor women have to undergo all kinds of problems and difficulties when they want to marry somebody. But the holy Qur'an does not call for a wali for a woman to marry. The concept of the wali is a *shari'a* concept, which makes it a culturally mediated concept. It developed from a context and time when Muslims lived in patriarchal societies where men dominated everything. But why do we maintain such concepts now? Why do we still keep these practices alive? Now the whole world thinks that Islam is a man-made religion which caters to men's needs more than women's. But this is not true at all. Islam is so democratic, so just, fair and equal in its treatment of these issues that it allows women complete freedom to marry when they are mature enough to do so. In Islam, women are free to contract their own marriages.

These kinds of contradictions create the impression that Islam is such a rigid religion, while the truth is that Islam upholds the values of what we call today democratic governance. The problem is that the cultures of Muslim societies still do not reflect this democratic spirit of Islam. The cultural mediation of Islam, which led to the creation of an Arabized *shari'a* and Islamic culture, has eroded and disfigured the fundamentally democratic and egalitarian ethos of Islam.

*Farish:* How could we have reached such a state? If, as you say, the fundamentals of Islam are as clear cut as some of us may think, how is it that so much of what passes as popular Islam today has little to do with the fundamentals of Islam itself?

*Engineer:* Why is this so? I can only say that many people unfortunately do not want to be free. People—and this includes Muslim people—want to be led; they want to have some kind of mental refuge. But the danger is that this opens the way for all kinds of authoritarian leaders, be they mullahs or politicians, who then come to offer them miracle cures and empty promises for their troubles. In the end they become victims of their cultural practices.

But such cultural practices are bound to arise and become institutionalized with the passing of time. Time gives way to history and history in turn allows practices and customs to become normalized and entrenched. It is when these practices become enmeshed in the network of tradition that the problem aris-

es, hence the need for us to remind ourselves that our religion and practices are culturally mediated and historically bound all the time. It is because so much of our religion and culture has been abused and disfigured by culturally mediated demands that we need to revive it from within.

Holding fast to the message of our religion, we need to work towards a reform from within that will allow us to break from the cycle of abuse and exploitation of religion for sectarian ends or self-interest. One of the ways we can do this is by working within a modern, secular social and political culture which reminds us of our fundamental human rights and obligations, and which protects our interests as individuals and communities.

*Farish:* And where do Muslim intellectuals come in here? You yourself have been at the forefront of countless doctrinal disputes and political struggles in India, and it seems that the battle is a never ending one. What role are they meant to play in contemporary Muslim societies?

*Engineer:* Muslim intellectuals, activists and academics today need to realize that they have a great moral responsibility before them. They must play an active role in defending the rights of Muslims as a collective, but also the rights of individual Muslims within that collective. That is why for me the real test has always been how these intellectuals address the issue of women's rights in Islam. As long as they do not take this as a serious cause—perhaps the most serious cause of all—then they cannot be said to be committed intellectuals.

But many of our intellectuals are also not well versed in the Qur'an and *hadith*. There is the tendency to forget the need to base all our struggles on the holy Qur'an and what it says. We cannot confront oppressive governments or conservative mullahs without knowing the Qur'an ourselves, which is why I always tell these intellectuals that they need to understand the laws and philosophy of their own religion first. Only then can you call them 'Muslim' intellectuals in the true sense of the word.

# Democracy and the Universalism of Islam

INTERVIEW WITH NURCHOLISH MADJID

Professor Nurcholish Madjid is one of the main Islamic intellectual figures in Indonesia. During the 1960s and 1970s he played a vital role in the Indonesian Islamic Students Association. During the 1980s he was one of the leading Indonesian scholars who helped to define the place of Islam in the political arena of Indonesia at a time when the regime of President Suharto was caught between the resurgent forces of political Islam and the anti-Islamist camps within the Indonesian military and political élite. Working as both an Islamic scholar and an activist, he established the Paramadina movement in 1986 which was directed towards *da'wah* [missionary] activities and the further inculcation of Islamic values and principles among professionals and intellectuals in the country. Today he is known as one of the foremost liberal Muslim thinkers of the region. Here he talks about democracy, social reform and political Islam in Indonesia.

*Farish:* It is often said that the future of Islam lies in the East, where new schools of thought, social movements and political developments are taking place in the Muslim world. Many people look to countries in Asia and Southeast Asia in particular, and Indonesia is often cited as an example of 'progressive' Islam at work. What do you say to this?

*Nurcholish:* It has often been said that Indonesia is the biggest Muslim country in the world. If we look at the figures on paper then we can say that this is true. After all, Indonesia's population is more than 220 million and 80 per cent of the people are practising Muslims. So we are undoubtedly the biggest Muslim nation in the world at present.

But we cannot leave it at that alone. Figures and statistics do not tell us anything about how Islam is lived and experienced in any Muslim country. The numbers you see cannot give you an indication of the quality of lived Islam in Indonesia. There are many other discrepancies that the figures do not reflect. For instance, despite the overwhelmingly large number of Muslims in the country, Indonesia has one of the highest levels of corruption and abuse of power in the world. We have one of the highest levels of violence. For decades there was no freedom, no democracy in the country. Why? How? There is an obvious discrepancy here between appearance and reality. Indonesia may appear to be an Islamic country, but it has never been run and governed like one.

What we need to do, therefore, is separate the statistics from the realities of Islam as it is actually lived and practised by Muslims themselves. Here I am not only talking about the long tradition of syncretism and accommodation that Indonesia and the Malay world is famous for, but also the glaring inconsistencies between our public acceptance of Islam as part of our identity and the fact that in so many ways we have failed to practise what Islam set out to preach. We also need to focus on the different spheres of Islamic activity, ranging from the beliefs of the poor masses to the abuse of Islam for political ends on the part of the powerful élite. That too constitutes part of the diversity of Islam in the contemporary Muslim world.

*Farish:* It is odd that a country like Indonesia, which happens to be the biggest Muslim country in the world, has not been able to provide exemplary Muslim leadership. Why has this been the case? How did the governments of Sukarno and Suharto fail?

*Nurcholish:* Now Sukarno was an example of a Muslim leader who never really understood what Islamic governance meant. It is true that in the 1930s he was regarded by some as a Muslim leader because of his close relationship with Haji Omar Said Tjokroaminoto, founder of the Sarekat Islam. Sukarno was also said to have studied Islam while he was in exile on Flores, but this was at a time when he was reaching his political maturity and as such his understanding of Islam and modern politics remained limited because he himself was part of the traditional feudal Javanese political system. He internalized the values of feudalism as it was practised by the Javanese rulers of the past in his quest to become the Ratu Adil, or just ruler. So even after he came to power he never understood the notion of conflict of interest. He did not understand why it was wrong for him to give power, wealth and political connections to the people who were close to him like his relatives and his friends. Deep inside, he still believed that what he did was right; that what he was doing was to protect his family and friends the way a good father and friend would do under normal circumstances. But Sukarno never realized that the state was not a family business and that he could not run it that way. People kept telling him that he needed to change; the Muslims of Nahdlatul Ulama, Masyumi and Muhammadiyah begged him to govern in a more Islamic way. But Sukarno continued to live in his own world until he was toppled after the failed Communist coup in 1965.

During the Suharto era many of us in the Muslim movements and parties thought that things would change for the better, but we were disappointed. Many Islamic groups—like the Nahdlatul Ulama and its youth wing in particular—supported the army and Suharto because they thought that the rise of Suharto would mean an end to the Communist threat and the rise of political

Islam in the country. But Suharto kept to the path that Sukarno had created in many ways. He maintained the ban on the Masyumi party that Sukarno imposed. His close allies and generals like Ali Murtopo also worked hard to keep the Indonesian Muslims in their place. They made sure that Islam would never be able to rise again and that the Muslims' efforts to improve their economic and political conditions were obstructed. It was during the time of the Suharto government that the forces of political Islam were treated with the most suspicion and in many cases this even led to conflict, such as the troubles in Aceh. Suharto's decision to promote the more secular leaders of the army, many of whom were Chinese and Christian as well, only aggravated things further and made the relations between Muslims and Christians much worse during this time.

*Farish:* Despite the failure of the political leadership in the country, Indonesia has performed amazingly well in other areas like social development. It is also important to note that Indonesia experienced the resurgence of Islam from the 1970s to the 1990s despite, or perhaps because of, the state's antagonistic stance towards Islam in general. Of late, the country seems to have developed an increasingly active political culture of its own, despite the restrictions during the Suharto era. How did this come about?

*Nurcholish:* What you see in Indonesia today is the direct result of development that began in the 1960s. You see, in the 1960s Indonesia had its first generation of university and college graduates. When we were living under Dutch colonial rule there was no such thing as mass education on a national level, but after we achieved independence in 1945 one of the first things we did was to open universities and colleges all over the country.

The children who started their schooling then began to graduate in the 1960s. Suddenly the country was full of university graduates. There were millions of them, and they were anxious, young and looking for jobs. When they entered the various fields and professions they were still young, in their twenties. They were beginning to have families. They bought their own homes. So they were busy with practical concerns and they could not get politically involved as yet.

Then by the 1980s, the same people were much older, wiser and economically independent. They are now in their forties and they are not as naive as before. They have a keener understanding of politics, and they know how and why the country is in the state that it is in now. By the 1980s these Indonesians were also becoming more conscious and aware of their Islamic identity. The process of Islamization in Indonesia began at the same time as it took place in Malaysia. In both countries, a new generation of Muslims in their forties began

to call for changes in the way the country was governed. The Indonesian government under Suharto was forced to accept and to make the necessary changes. In the 1990s Suharto himself went on the *hajj* to Mecca and started to pray in public. These were cosmetic concessions that Suharto had to make to keep his popularity and credibility intact. But like Sukarno, Suharto made the same mistakes. He ruled in a feudal way, like a king, and the people resented him for it. In the end he was forced out of power in 1998.

*Farish:* How will Indonesians react to these new changes? What kind of political order will be put into place now that Suharto is gone? This is an important question because in many ways the world is looking at Indonesia today for an example of how a predominantly Muslim society can make the transition from authoritarian rule to popular democracy.

*Nurcholish:* We in Indonesia have never lived in a democracy. Although there were elections and such, there was never any real democracy under the Orde Baru [New Order] of Suharto. Now suddenly there are millions of people in the streets and they are told that they have democratic rights. Of course they do not know what to do. They have never been given a chance to make democratic demands before. This is true of many other Muslim societies today. In many parts of the Muslim world the people live under non-democratic systems. Muslims need to learn how to articulate their demands within a pluralist democratic space where one group needs to balance its demands with the needs of other groups and communities. But this is not going to be easy as they will have to adjust to new democratic practices with which they are not familiar and that have been denied to them for such a long time.

*Farish:* What kind of Islam will emerge in Indonesia as a result of this upheaval? Do you foresee religious tensions emerging in the future or will it lead to compromises and cooperation between the various Islamic and non-Islamic groups and movements in your society?

*Nurcholish:* Now what happens in the future is up to us. I have always said this to our people in Indonesia: 'If there is any hope for democracy in Indonesia, it lies with the Indonesian Muslims themselves.' I believe that the Indonesian Muslims want to work towards true democracy and freedom in the country. They want to see social justice, equity and fairness in all areas of governance, economics, the legal system and so on. But there are also groups that oppose the penetration of Islam into politics, secular movements that are anti-Muslim, and other Islamic movements that are militant in their approach. The presence of so many different competing groups makes the situation very difficult for us.

*Farish:* If that be the case, then some might argue that the growing numbers of Islamist movements and so many different schools of thought can only com-

plicate matters further. The sad fact is that in many cases we see today, diversity and pluralism in Muslim society is not something which is celebrated but rather becomes a cause of sectarian conflict and social strife instead. For a country like Indonesia which, as you have said, has hardly ever had the chance to develop as a pluralistic democracy, such diversity can be the cause of political crisis and instability.

*Nurcholish:* Yes, there is the potential for crisis, but that has always been there. The danger now is that the changes have come too fast and are too much for the people to bear. For me the way out of such a crisis lies in emphasizing the universalism of Islam, which is not only compatible with, but also works well within a democratic political system. Muslims need to remember that Islam is fundamentally universal in its outlook. This universalism lies at the heart of Islam as a religion and a system of values. The history and philosophy of Islam teaches us this as well. Here the figure of Nabi Ibrahim [Abraham] is important for us—Abraham is an example of the universal humanism that is inherent in Islam. He was neither a Jew nor a Christian, and certainly not a Muslim. But he is regarded as a prophet by all of us. Why? He is regarded as a Muslim prophet because he submitted to God. ‘Islam’ therefore means submission to God in the most universal sense. This submission to God is found at the heart of all religions. The universalism of Islam comes into being whenever there is this submission to God per se. We should not think of ‘Islam’ in terms of a name or label for a particular group of believers only. To be ‘Muslim’ should not be like belonging to a tribe or clan of some sort. Instead we should think of it as being of a certain spiritual disposition or state of mind; of a particular mode of Being.

I suppose what I am saying here is that we need to seek a new vocabulary and mode of politics which is universal and yet allows us to maintain our specific group and collective identities, and sense of difference as well. For me, Islam provides Muslims with the resources to do that. But they need to utilize the discourse of Islam in such a way that it does not alienate other groupings.

*Farish:* That sort of approach that you are speaking of is not all that popular these days. There are many Islamist movements that argue that Islam is more specific than that, and that Islam refers to only a particular religious system and a particular religious community. They would probably object to the sort of formulation that you are proposing on the grounds that it dilutes or obfuscates the specificity of Islam, which is precisely what they want to protect and project at the same time. While liberal Muslims intellectuals like yourself talk about the need to rearticulate a new reading of Islam that is universalist, open and accommodating, your opponents are talking about the need to reinforce the barriers between Islam and the Other, returning to a notion of a pure Islam that is essentialist and exclusivist.

*Nurcholish*: I realize of course that some of this might sound controversial to those who are more narrow and dogmatic in their view. But the facts speak against them. As I pointed out with the example of Abraham, much of what we regard as Islamic does in fact predate Islam itself; yet it has been brought into the corpus of Islamic thought, civilization and culture. This is because Islam has an accommodative character that we often overlook when we focus too much on ritual practice alone. But the fact is that Islam was and is able to accommodate differences—such as elements from the pre-Islamic past—because it is able to integrate Otherness within its register. Islam is not just ritual and politics—we must never forget the spiritual dimension, *tasawwuf*, that is so important in Islam.

It is here, in the spiritual domain of Islam, that the universal message of the religion is most apparent. That is why I and others like me emphasize the need for a spiritual approach and understanding to the problems and dilemmas that we face today. And by ‘spiritual’ I do not mean to suggest something otherworldly or abstract beyond practicality. By this I mean a whole new way of looking at ourselves, our identity and our relationship with the Other, which is no longer predicated on simplistic notions of differences in terms of culture, rituals and practice.

*Farish*: Where do you locate the Muslim intellectual in all this? Where do you place yourself and others like yourself in Indonesia today? There are many people in the world today who are looking at Indonesian scholars, activists and intellectuals like yourself and asking the question of what role you are playing in the socio-political dynamics of Indonesia.

*Nurcholish*: We are not in an easy position at the moment in Indonesia. It has never been easy to be an intellectual in the country and it is even more difficult and complicated these days. At present the country is going in many different directions and there are so many new tendencies. Some of the new movements that have emerged are very militant, exclusivist and even violent.<sup>6</sup> The intellectuals try their best to guide these movements and we try to guide the present

6. At the time of this interview there were already a number of increasingly militant *jihadi* and *mujahidin* movements on the rise in Indonesia. By mid-2000, the *jihadi* organization called Laskar Jihad made the headlines when it stormed the political capital of Jakarta, demanding that the government introduce an Islamic state and intervene in the sectarian conflict that was occurring in the Molucca islands. The Laskar proceeded to take the initiative and in the months that followed sent thousands of militia troops to the Moluccas in order to protect the Muslims who they claimed were the victims of attacks by Christians. This only aggravated matters more, leading to a further deterioration of Muslim-Christian relations on the island and throughout Indonesia in general.

leadership of the country, which is in the hands of Gus Dur (Abdurrahman Wahid) and the Nahdlatul Ulama-led coalition.

So far Gus Dur has made his share of mistakes. He raised the salaries of civil servants and politicians, including himself, at a time when such a move went against the people's aspirations. Many fear that the traditional Javanese neo-feudal character of Gus Dur will get the better of him, in the same way that it did with Sukarno and Suharto. They are worried that he will turn the office of President into a patronage-machine to deal out concessions and favours to his close friends and political allies like his predecessors did. His [Gus Dur's] own role in trying to resolve the conflict in Aceh, the Moluccas and other parts of the country is also unclear. But he is still the best and only choice for us. We intellectuals need to guide him and keep him open to alternatives. There is no guarantee that it will succeed, but if he fails and falls then we all fall with him. The whole country might go down as well. But we cannot give up.



# 'What the Muslim World Needs More Than Ever Is a Culture of Dignity'

INTERVIEW WITH CHANDRA MUZAFFAR

Dr Chandra Muzaffar is a Malaysian academic and human rights activist. He has taught at several Malaysian universities and was until recently the Director of the Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya. He is also the President of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), a Malaysian-based NGO that promotes an understanding of human dignity and social justice through religious discourse. In 1998 he was removed from his post at the University of Malaya for what were apparently political reasons. Shortly after that he made his transition to the world of politics and is now Vice President of the National Justice Party [Keadilan] of Malaysia. Here he talks about the role of religion in the politics of Southeast Asia and the prospects of developing a modernist and progressive framework for Islam in the contemporary Muslim world.

*Farish:* Southeast Asia is one of the most diverse, complex and dynamic parts of the world today. Up till the financial collapse of the so-called 'tiger economies' of Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia in 1997, the region witnessed double-digit annual economic growth and sociocultural transformation on a massive scale. Many foreign commentators have pointed to the obvious role played by foreign (i.e. Western) capital investment as a catalyst for growth in the region, but you have argued that this misses many other aspects of development in Asia. Would you care to comment further on that?

*Chandra:* Well, to begin with, we must remember that the societies of Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular are by and large still very attached to religion. Religion plays an important role in the daily lives of the people on a number of levels—from the ritualistic to the abstract. We cannot discount the role that has been played by religion as a force of change in Southeast Asia and we cannot explain the phenomenal growth and development there without looking at the role played by religion and religious discourse in the entire process. While the rapid development in Asia during the 1980s and 1990s was massive and unprecedented, we must not forget that there were other counter-vailing and stabilizing factors at work. It was during this time that we witnessed

the emergence of numerous NGOs and activist movements that were religiously-inspired and which helped to check the forces of rampant capitalist development in the region. These NGOs that dealt with issues like the environment, workers rights and gender equality, helped to provide an alternative interpretation of progressive Asian values that were at variance with the school of 'Asian values' as developed by staunch defenders of capitalism like Lee Kuan Yew and Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

*Farish:* But this, of course, does not mean that religion or religious discourse is homogenous. We all know that religion has also become a key point of contestation among the various political actors and agents themselves.

*Chandra:* I am not saying that religion is flat or static in any way. The South-east Asian experience has shown how all religions—Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity—have evolved and been taken up as tools for political mobilization. Of course there have been instances when religion has been used by the ruling élite as a means to legitimize and perpetuate their own interests, but there is also the other side of the picture. Two good examples come to mind.

The first would be the example of how Christian groups employed the discourse of Christianity and liberation theology in their struggle against the American-backed regime of President Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. During the early and mid-1980s we saw how Filipino church leaders, unionists, students and activists attempted to gain control of the discourse of Christianity and turn it into a tool of critique against the regime in power. The pacifist principles and philosophy of Christianity were used to blunt the war-machine of the Filipino army and to discredit Marcos's military campaign against his own people. The one image that remains with us is that of Filipino Catholic nuns who stood as human shields before the bayonets and guns of the Filipino soldiers and the students and human rights activists during the People's Power uprising of 1986. This helped to turn the tide of public opinion against the manifestly corrupt and brutal regime of Marcos, and in the end, even the Filipino soldiers stopped obeying their orders when they felt that what they were asked to do was against their conscience and their religious beliefs.

Another example that comes to mind is the use of Buddhist discourse as a critique of an oppressive military government by Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar/Burma. Here we saw how she had effectively managed to rob the ruling military élite of its credibility and legitimacy by levelling an essentially religious critique against them. By stressing the principles of non-violence that lie at the heart of Buddhism, Suu Kyi has managed to represent the regime as what it really is: a military dictatorship that has usurped power and which has systematically tried to block the democratic process in the country. But Suu Kyi was sen-

sitive to the fact that her people were—and remain—devoutly Buddhist in their religious beliefs and cultural outlook. She made it a point to frame and base her critique of the military establishment on terms that would be understandable and relevant to her people—and this happened to be Buddhism. Similar attempts to create a form of progressive Buddhist thought have been made in Thailand by the late Buddhist sage, Buddhadasa, and the lay Buddhist activist, Sulak Sivaraksa.

In all these cases we see how the use of religion has actually led to positive results when it is in the hands of progressive-minded leaders. The same scenario was repeated in Indonesia when Islamic movements and parties began to use Islam as a means to discredit the government of Suharto and thereby bring about his downfall. It was Islam that provided these students and activists with a locally rooted discourse of rights and entitlements which helped to discredit the ruling establishment in their country.

*Farish:* But religion, as we all know, is a double-edged discourse. You speak of the positive consequences when religion is used and promoted by progressives and liberals. But in the contemporary Muslim world today there is ample evidence of Islam being used and abused by conservative reactionaries and corrupted élites as well.

*Chandra:* That I do not deny. Islam has been both used and abused by many parties and sectarian groupings all over the Muslim world. The history of Islam is rife with examples of sectarian conflict among Muslims themselves and the recent history of the Muslim world shows that many a corrupt government was and is willing to play the Islamic card to keep itself in power.

We have seen so many Muslim leaders—Anwar Sadat of Egypt, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Zia ul Haq of Pakistan, Colonel Ghaddafi of Libya, and General Suharto of Indonesia—try to use Islam for their own ends. In some of these cases, the use of religion was quite cynical and exploitative. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, for instance, introduced the so-called Islamization programme of Pakistan only when it was clear that his government was losing its popular support and that the Islamic opposition was gaining ground in the country. After Zia took over during the coup of 1977, these Islamic laws were strengthened further, but only in order to divide the people of Pakistan by sowing the seeds of sectarian conflict among them. In no way did any of this help to create an Islamic society based on justice and equity. In other cases, Islam has been used to bolster the government's efforts towards capitalist development. The use of Islam as part of a capitalist work ethic by the government of Dr Mahathir in Malaysia is a case in point. Yet most of these attempts have failed because the governments themselves were proven to be inept, corrupt or oppressive.

*Farish:* What then are the conditions necessary for the creation of a progressive school of Islam? Is this even possible today?

*Chandra:* I certainly feel that it is possible for us to develop a modern, progressive, and accommodative school of Islam. There is ample evidence from the past that shows that this was the case before. Just look at certain periods of the Abassid, Umayyad and Uthmaniyyah [Ottoman] Caliphates or the Andalusian empire in Spain.

For this effort to succeed today, we need to address the pressing realities of the immediate present and not dwell in homesick nostalgia for the past. But for that to happen what we need most of all in the Muslim world is a political culture that shows through deeds—not words—that it values human dignity. To nourish human dignity, a democratic environment is essential. Thus far the struggle for democracy in the Muslim world has not gotten very far. There is hardly a Muslim country that can call itself truly democratic, and some, like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, have even openly stated that they are ideologically opposed to democracy on ostensibly Islamic grounds.

The problem is that none of these regimes can ever hope to justify their suspension of the democratic process indefinitely. First of all, by opposing the democratic process all they have done is lend weight to the Huntingtonian thesis that Islam is an oppressive and intolerant faith that is opposed to the popular will of the people. Secondly, what they fail to note is that Islam itself is fundamentally democratic in nature and that it opposes all forms of oppressive government. So some of these ostensibly Islamic governments may try to prevent the development of democracy in their own societies on Islamic grounds, but in the end it is Islam and the discourse of political Islam that will be used to dismantle their own repressive structures of power and dominance.

*Farish:* You claim that Islam has been used as a discourse of legitimization as well as delegitimization in many Muslim countries over the centuries. But despite the plastic nature of this discourse and the way that it lends itself to a critique of power and authoritarianism, the Muslim world remains largely undemocratic. Why hasn't democracy taken root in the Muslim world? What are the obstacles that stand in the way of creating a form of civil Islam?

*Chandra:* Why democracy has not taken root in most of the Muslim world is a complex issue. That many Muslim societies are mired in abject poverty is undoubtedly a factor. But then poverty has not stopped people from exercising their democratic rights. Witness the commitment of the Indian poor to democracy. The absence of an educated, socially conscious middle class in much of the Muslim world which can both articulate and defend democratic principles is also a bane. But the mere presence of a strong middle class or a highly literate

population does not guarantee democracy either. Singapore proves the point, where we see a large and well-endowed middle class who are nonetheless prepared to put up with all kinds of repression and state control as long as they are allowed to get on with their business interests and commercial activities.

Perhaps what is needed is an autonomous middle class, which is not a mere appendage of the state, a middle class whose professionals, its business people, its intellectuals can take positions on public policies without fear or favour. This does not exist in the Muslim world partly because of the overwhelming power and dominance of the ruling élite. The élite could be the military. In other instances it could be civilian rulers, or even a single individual who is in total control. Sometimes, the élite try to justify their control by delegitimizing democracy. Democracy, they argue, is a Western import and has no place in Muslim societies.

There are a number of cases where the ulama have provided 'religious' sanction to such erroneous views. This also constitutes an obstacle to the growth of democracy in the Muslim world. One should not be surprised that authoritarian rule is often rationalized in the name of Islam, for authoritarianism became integrated into Muslim state structures within 50 years of the Prophet's death. Since then, the *fiqh* [jurisprudential] tradition has been used to justify the dominant, sometimes oppressive, power of Muslim rulers.

*Farish:* Surely the Muslim world is not the only one to be blamed here? Much of your NGO work has been dedicated to highlighting the imbalances and injustice that has become normalized and institutionalized in international relations. What about the international dimension then?

*Chandra:* We also have to look at the problems of the Muslim world from a broader, macro perspective. It is right to consider the ills of the Muslim world from a global viewpoint. If democracy and human rights have not been respected in the Muslim world today, we cannot put all of the blame on Muslim governments and élites only. They are of course partly to blame as they have never allowed democracy to fully develop for fear of compromising their own short-term interests. But the rest of the world has played a part in this complex process. For instance, one needs to remember the role played by foreign multinationals—ranging from the powerful Western oil companies to Western donor agencies—in helping so many Muslim governments and military regimes oppress and subjugate their own people.

The record of human rights in so many Arab states is abysmal by any standards, but the West continues to deal with them as it is much easier to deal with an unpopular regime that will forever be beholden to its foreign benefactors. That is why Western governments and multinationals have never really tried to

push the democratic agenda in the Muslim world and the Arab world in particular. For whenever there has been a democratic system in any Muslim country—from the time of Mossadeq’s government in Iran to the rise of Islamic advocates in Algeria and Turkey—we have seen how the people began to condemn not only the corruption of their own élites, but also their craven collusion with the power centres of the West.

*Farish:* Judging by what you have said, it seems that the path towards democratic reform in the Muslim world is a hard and trying one indeed. If, as you said, the Muslim world is still under the heel of powerful domestic and foreign interests, how then can there ever be a new school of progressive Islamic thought in the world today? Has Islamic reform breathed its last and is there no alternative except for the radical fundamentalism of the likes of the Taliban?

*Chandra:* I certainly hope and pray that the struggle is not over. Indeed all the indicators seem to point to the fact that it isn’t. Globalization has both helped and hindered the process of reform and development in the Muslim world. What we call globalization today may well be in the service of vested interests in the more developed and prosperous North. This we cannot deny and everywhere we see evidence of this being the case—from ‘business English’ becoming the global lingua franca to the growing popularity of American consumerist culture, which has become a standard bearer of progress and development. But apart from that, globalization—which has broken down traditional patterns and structures of communications and movement—has also opened up new avenues for communication and cultural exchange. So thanks to the developments in modern transport and communication technologies, groups like Muslim intellectuals, Muslim feminist activists, Muslim students and social workers, have also been able to forge new cross-border alliances via new media such as the internet. This makes our struggle more complex, but it does not necessarily restrict us in any major way.

Today we see more and more progressive-minded Muslim writers, intellectuals and activists coming to the fore. Thanks to the breakdown of traditional modes and channels of contact and communication, new actors and agents for change have emerged. It is encouraging to note that there are so many Muslim women intellectuals, for instance, who are openly questioning the dogmatic interpretations of Islam as put forth by the ulama. But this does not mean that the struggle is over or that the game is won. There are strong reactionary elements that have come to the fore in the Muslim world—the Taliban being one of them—but their rise must be understood in the context of the intellectual and political bankruptcy of other regimes and political systems. Then there are the ostensibly Muslim states and governments that have tried to demonize the

Islamic opposition in their midst, in an attempt to curry favour with the West by playing up their fears of a global Islamic resurgence.

But in the end all of this boils down to the fact that Islam is a living reality for more than one billion Muslims the world over, and that for many of them Islam is still a point of reference for everything in their daily lives. The challenge that awaits the progressives is to harness this Islamic discourse and to recreate the conditions in which an open, tolerant and pluralistic society might emerge. The Muslim world needs intelligent and coherent solutions to real-life problems that affect ordinary Muslims today—poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, economic dependency, the culture of violence and gangsterism in politics, neo-feudal values and religious extremism. These are contemporary problems that need modern solutions, and the answer lies in part in the creation of a modern and progressive school of Islamic thought that is firmly rooted in the politics of the here-and-now, and which works through the democratic process. What the Muslim world needs more than ever is a living, vibrant culture of dignity consonant with one of the most vital concepts in the Qur'an: the status of the human being as *khalifatullah*, the vicegerent of God.









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