

[Home](#) > [The Rights of Women in Islam](#) > [Part Four: Islam and Modernity](#) > [Islam and modernity 3](#) > The fundamental of ijihad:

Part Four: Islam and Modernity

The exigencies of the age:

In the introduction to “Man and his Future”¹ in which I investigated the subject of the greatness and then decay of the Muslims, I recognized that the causes of the decline of the Muslims could be examined under three headings: Islam, the Muslims, and external influences. In that introduction, one of the twenty seven topics which I thought required to be studied and examined with this very topic, and I promised to publish a short book with the title: ‘Islam and the Demands of the Age’, and I had already collected a good deal of notes for it.

In this series of articles, it is not possible to put all the subject matter that should be get forth in a book. I shall, however, explain matters to the extent that I may enlighten the minds of the respected readers on this matter.

The subject of religion and progress is one of those subjects which has been brought up in other religions much more than

It has been for us Muslim. Many of the world’s intellectuals have abandoned religion on because they thought that religion and progress were incompatible. They entertained the idea that having a religion entailed the discontinuance and stopping of, and struggling against, movement and change. In other words they considered religion to be fixedness, a monotony and solidification of existent forms and patterns.

Nehru, the late Prime minister of India, had anti-religious beliefs, and adhered to no tradition or religion. From his writings it transpires that the thing that he abhorred in religion was its dogmatic aspect and its quality of seeing everything in only one perspective.

In his later years, Nehru felt that something was missing and wanting both in his own self and in the universe, and that this vacuum or gap could not be bridged except by a spiritual force. Despite that feeling, he was afraid of being attached to religion, because of that very stagnancy and uni-

perceptiveness which, according, to him, was there in every religion.

An Indian journalist, a Mr. Karanjia (?), had an interview with Nehru towards the end of his life, and that was apparently the last occasion when Nehru gave expression to his view on general universal topics.

During that interview, Karanjia questioned him about Gandhi, and remarked that some intellectuals and progressivists believed that Gandhi, by his perceptive solutions and idealistic and spiritual methods, had weakened and shaken Nehru's original beliefs in scientific socialism.

In his reply, Nehru told him that it was necessary and good to benefit from spiritual and idealistic methods also, and that he had always believed in them as Gandhi had, and that at the time of speaking it was of great importance and all the more necessary to count on those means. The reason was that in the face of the spiritual vacuum of modern civilization it was necessary, more than before to look for spiritual and ideological answers.

Karanjia, afterwards, put some questions about Marxism and Nehru pointed out some of the shortcomings Marxism and again reverted to the way of spiritual solutions to problems. It was then that Karanjia asked Nehru whether the statements he had just made, with their references to moral and spiritual concepts, did not display a difference from the Jawaharlal Nehru of yesterday. All his statements pointed to the idea that Nehru in the ripening of his age, was in search of God.

Nehru agreed, and said that he had indeed changed and his insistence on the spiritual and moral values had not been without case and consideration. He pointed out that another matter was their created up, and that was how morality and idealism could be raised to a higher level. He again remarked that clearly religion existed for that purpose, but that religion had unfortunately degenerated because of its shortsightedness and its blind adherence to certain lifeless rites and rituals and to the performances of unchanging ceremonies. The outward form and the external shell of religion continued to exist while its spirit and real meaning had been lost.

Islam and the demands of the age:

Amongst all the traditions and religions, none has produced so much influence or as deep an impact on the different aspects of human life as Islam has done. In its procedures Islam is not content only with a series of acts of worship, recitations and incantations and a collection of moral exhortations, but it also deals with the fundamental directions that relationships between human beings should take, and the rights and duties of individuals in respect of each other in various situations, in the same way as it has explained the relations of men with God. So it is only natural that the question of suitability and harmony with the times should be given more attention with regard to Islam.

Incidentally many non-Muslims scholars' and writers have studied the social and the civil law of Islam and have spoken highly of Islamic laws as a progressive series of laws, and they have draw attention to

and commended the living character and enduring nature of this religion and its ability to adapt its laws to the advance of time.

Bernard Shaw, the great English liberal writer said:

“I have always had the greatest respect for the religion of Muhammad on account of its extraordinary quality of staying lively. In my opinion, Islam is the only religion which has the ability to harmonize and exert its control over differing circumstances and changing ways of life, and to confront the diversities of the centuries.”

“Thus I predict, and already the signs can be seen, that tomorrow the Faith of Muhammad will become quite accepted in Europe.”

“The theologians of the Middle Ages drew a dark picture of the religion of Muhammad, as a result of their ignorance and prejudices. Because of their malice and fanaticism, he seemed, in their eyes, to be against Christianity. I have read extensively about this man, this extraordinary man, and I have come to the conclusion not only that was he not against Christianity, but that he should he called the savior of mankind. I believe that if such a man as he was to be in charge of the present day world, he would manage to solve the problems and difficulties of the world in such a way that he would ensure the ideal peace and happiness of humanity.”²

Dr. Shibli Shumayyil, a Lebanese Arab, professes materialism. He translated the *Origin of the Species* of Darwin into Arabic for the first time together with the commentary of the German, Buchner, as an appendix, to serve as a weapon against religious beliefs, and he brought it within the reach of Arabic speaking people.

In spite of his being a materialist, he could not restrain himself from admiring and praising Islam and had no reservation about acknowledging its greatness. He always spoke highly of it as a living religion and of its ability to adapt to the times.

In the second volume of his ‘Philosophy of Evolution and Progress’ (*Falsafatu’n-nushu’ wa’l-irtiqa’*), which he published in Arabic, he wrote an article under the title “The Qur’an and Prosperity. (*al-Qur’an wa’1- umran*) in refutation of an article by a non-Muslim who had travelled in Islamic countries and had put the blame of the decline of the Muslim’s onto Islam.

Dr. Shibli Shumayyil diligently showed in this article that the cause of the decline of Muslims was their deviation from the social teachings of Islam and not Islam itself. He expressed his view that those sections of westerners, who attack Islam, either do not understand Islam or else has malicious motives and want to make people in the east cynical towards the laws and prescriptions which, anyway, have disappeared from among them, and thus fix the yoke of subservience around their necks.

In our own times, his question of whether Islam can adapt to the demands of the age, is very commonly

asked. I myself have come into contact with different classes of people and especially with those who are educated and well-travelled. I have found no other matter involved to such a degree in controversy.

Confused thinking:

They sometimes give their questions a philosophic tinge and say that everything in this world is subject to change. Nothing is immutable and fixed. Human society is not an exception to that rule, so how is it possible that a series of social laws can remain always unchanged.

If we attend only to the philosophic aspect of the question, the answer is evident. A thing which is always changing is at one time new and then becomes old. It grows and then decays. It progress and develops, just as the things of this world and its material composites. But the laws of nature are constant. The living organism, for example, has developed and is developing according to a, particular law and scientists have described this law of evolution: living organisms are themselves continually undergoing change and evolving. But what about the laws of change and evolution? Of course, the laws of change and evolution do not change and do not evolve, and we mean the laws themselves. It makes no difference whether the law in question is a natural law, or a derived or man-made law, because it is entirely possible for a derived or man-made law to be derived from nature and the order of things and for that which determines the direction evolution takes to be individuals or human social groups.

However, the questions that are put in connection with the adaptability or non-adaptability of Islam to the demands of the times do not only have a general or philosophic aspect. The question which is repeated more often than any other is that since laws are made according to needs and since a human being's social needs are not fixed and unchanging, social laws cannot be fixed and unchanging.

This one is a very good and valuable question. Incidentally one of the miraculous aspects of the sure religion of Islam, on account of which every intelligent and sagacious Muslim has a sense of pride and honor, is the fact that Islam will regard to unchanging needs of the individual or society envisages unchanging laws, but that in the case of temporary and changing needs it conceives of a changing attitude. We shall, with the help of Allah, comment on this to the extent that this series of articles permits.

What does time itself conform to?

However, we think it necessary to mention two things before we start discussing this matter. One of them is that most of those people who talk of progress, evolution and change in the present circumstances think that every change that takes place in social conditions, especially when it originates in the west should be counted as evolution and progress; and this is the most misleading idea that has taken hold of people today.

According to these people, because the amenities and conveniences of life change day by day, because the more perfect replaces the more defective and because knowledge and technology is in a state of

advancement, all the changes that take place in the life of men are a kind of progress and development, and should be welcomed. For it is the momentum of time, and like it or not, it is bound to have its way.

As a matter of fact, neither are all changes the direct result of knowledge and technology, nor is there any necessity or momentum at work. Although knowledge is in a state of progress, the capricious, rapacious nature of man is not idle. Knowledge and the intellect guide man towards perfection, and the capricious, gracious nature of man try to drag him towards decomposition and deviance. His capricious and rapacious nature is continually trying to turn knowledge into a tool for itself, and to make use of it for the attainment of its carnal and animal appetites.

Time has within it decomposition and deviance in the same way as it has within it progress and evolution. One should advance with the progress of time, but also struggle against decomposition and deviance of time. Both reform and reaction rise up against of time, with the difference that reform takes a stand against the corruption of time and reaction stands in the way of the progress of time. If we consider time and its changes as the final criteria of good and evil, then with what standard can we measure time itself and its changes? If everything has to adapt to time, to what is time to adapt? If man is helplessly dependent on time and its changes, what is the role of the activity, creativeness, and constructiveness of man's will?

Man steps aboard the vehicle of time while the vehicle is in motion. He should not neglect the steering and control of that vehicle even for a moment. Those who talk much about the changes of time and neglect to steer and control it have forgotten the role of the effectiveness of man, and are like the rider of a horse who has put himself under the control of the horse.

Adaptation or abrogation?

The second point which has to be mentioned here is that some people have solved the difficulty of Islam and the demands of the times by means of a very simple and easy formula. They say that Islam is an eternal religion and is adaptable to any age and any time. But we want to know how that adaptation is to be brought about and what that formula is. They reply: "Once we see that the temporal circumstances have changed, we forth with abolish the existing laws and establish other laws in their place."

The writer of the forty proposals has solved this difficulty in the same manner. He says that the worldly laws of religion should be supple and flexible and should be in harmony and conformity with the progress of knowledge, learning and the spread of civilization. And such mildness, flexibility and adaptability with the demands of time are not only against the lofty teachings of Islam, but are exactly in conformity with its spirit. (*Zan-e ruz*, no.90, p.75)

The said author writes before and after the above sentences that because the demands of the times undergo change, because every age demands new laws, and because the civil and social laws of Islam are in accord with the simple life of the Arabs of the jahiliyyah (pre-Islamic times), and are frequently the

actual customs and traditions of pre-Islamic Arabs and do not conform with the present age, it is necessary that other laws should be passed today in place of these laws.

People with such views should be asked how it is that if the meaning of the conformability of a law with the exigencies of a particular age is its capacity for abrogation, this law does not have that suppleness and flexibility; why is this law not conformable to a particular age.

This justification of the suppleness and adaptability of Islam to the times can be compared to a man who says that books and a library are the best source of pleasures in life. When he is asked to explain himself he says because any time he wants to enjoy himself a man can immediately sell the books and spend the money, thus acquired, on having a good time.

This author says that the teachings of Islam are of three kinds. The first kind are the principles of belief, such as belief in, *tawhid* (the Oneness of God), the Resurrection, etc The second kind consists of worship such as the preparation and performance of prayer, fasting, purification, cleanliness and the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), etc, and the third kind consists of the laws which are relevant to people's lives.

The first and the second kinds are a part of religion, and the things which the people should always observe are these very matters. But the third kind is not a part of religion. Because religion does not have anything to do with people's lives, and the Prophet did not bring these laws on the grounds that they were a part of religion and related to the obligations of the Message. But, since the Prophet was, the incidentally, the man in charge, he had to deal with these matters also. Otherwise, the function of religion is only to lead people to worship, prayer and fasting. What has religion go to do with the life of this world?

I cannot imagine that someone can live in an Islamic country and be so ignorant of the rationale of Islam?

Has the Qur'an not stated the purpose of sending the Prophets and Messengers? Has the Qur'an not most explicitly stated:

لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْمِيزَانَ لِيَقُومَ النَّاسُ بِالْقِسْطِ

“Indeed, we sent our messengers with the clear signs, and we sent down with them the Book and the Balance so that men might uphold justice....” (57:25)

The Qur'an mentions social justice as a fundamental aim of all Prophets.

If someone does not wish to act according to the Qur'an, why should he commit a bigger sin and denigrate Islam and the Qur'an? Most of the misfortunes that have befallen men these days are for this very reason that men have given up the unique support and backing of the very ethics and laws which are religion.

For about fifty years, we have been listening to the song that Islam is quite alright provided it is limited to the mosques and places of worship and does not concern itself with social matters. This song was composed beyond the borders of the Islamic countries, but has been broadcast in all of them. Let me explain this sentence in an easier language so that I can point out the real purpose of the original composers.

The real meaning, briefly, is that as long as Islam stands in the way of and holds back communism it should exist, but when it has an effect on and clashes with the interests of the west it should cease to exist. The prescribed worship of Islam, the view of westerners, should remain, so that when necessity arises people may be aroused against communism on the excuse of its being an atheistic, ungodly system.

However, the social laws must go, because they are the philosophy of life of Muslim people, and because of them Muslims have a feeling of independence and individuality in face of the people of the west, and become difficult to digest in the west's voracious appetite.

Unfortunately those who originated this idea are victims to a great misunderstanding. Firstly, it is now fourteen centuries since the Qur'an discredited those who said:

نُؤْمِنُ بِبَعْضٍ وَنُكْفِرُ بِبَعْضٍ

(..We believe in some of it and disbelieve in some... Qur'an)

It has announced that dividing up the prescriptions of Islam is unacceptable.

Secondly I think that the time has now come for Muslims to refuse to be taken in by these deceptions. The critical sense of the people has been more or less awakened, and gradually they will begin to discriminate between the appearance of progress and development which is the product of the power of human knowledge and thought on the one hand, and, and the appearance of corruption and decay on the other, irrespective of whether it originates in the west or not.

The people of Islamic countries have more than before realized the value of Islamic teachings and have appreciated what a unique, self-sufficient philosophy of life Islam and its prescriptions represent, and they will at no cost abandon it.

Muslims have realized that the propaganda campaign against Islamic laws is nothing but a colonial ruse.

Thirdly, those who initiated this idea should know that Islam, when in power, can confront any atheistic or non atheistic system and is able to govern a society with a philosophy of life, and it does not need confine itself to mosques and places of worship. If they wish Islam to be imprisoned in places of worship and thus clear the ground for western ways of thought, there is every likelihood of the ground being

cleared for other ideologies that are against the western way of thinking.

The fact that the West is today being attacked in some Islamic countries is the fruit of this very mistake.

Islam and Modernity 2

Man is not the only living creature who lives a gregarious life. Many animals, especially insects, have a social life. They follow series of fixed rule and a wise, disciplined mode of life. The principles of mutual help, division of labor, production and distribution, command and obedience, order and compliance are in force in their social groups.

Bees and some ants and termites have been favored with a civilization, discipline and organization which human beings, who consider themselves the noblest of creatures, would take years if not centuries to catch up with.

Their civilization, unlike human civilization, did not pass through eras such as the primitive jungle period, the Stone Age, the Iron Age and the nuclear age. They attained the same civilization and organization that they at present have on the day they were brought into existence on this earth, and no change has occurred in their condition. It is only the human being, whose life, according to the Qur'an:

وَأَخْلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ ضَعِيفًا

(..And the man was created weak... Qur'an 4:28)

begins from zero and moves forward without stop.

For animals, the exigencies of the times are always the same, and do not further disturb their lives. For them the desire for modernization and a love for what is new have no meaning. The new world and the old world do not exist. Science does not make new discoveries for them every day, and does not upset the pattern of their lives. Light and heavy technologies do not invade their market every day with new and better products. Why? Because they live by instinct and not by intellect.

Man on the other hand, is different. His social life is always subject to change and transformation. Every century the world changes for man. The secret of man's being the noblest of creatures also lies in this. Man is a fully-grown and mature son of nature. He is created with the state and the capacity of not having to stand in need of the direct guidance and protection of nature, nor of that mysterious power called instinct. He lives by intellect and not by instinct.

Nature has acknowledged human beings as being mature in mind and has left them as independent

beings and withdrawn its direct control from them. All that an animal can do according to instinct and under the influence of untransgressable natural laws, must be done by a human being with the power of the intellect, through knowledge and according to positive laws and the shari'ah which it is possible to disobey. The root-cause of all the corruption and waywardness perpetrated by human beings in the course of progress and development, of decline, degeneration, collapse and destruction also lies here.

Just as the roads of progress and development are open for human beings, so also are the roads of corruptions and deterioration not closed for them.

Human beings have been given the status of carrying upon their shoulders, in the words of the Qur'an, the burden of trust which the skies, the earth, and the mountains could not bear. In other words, human beings consented to live an independent life and accepted the responsibility of duty and laws. By that very account they cannot be immune from transgression, ignorance, self-aggrandizement and wrong doings.

In the same place where the Qur'an mentions the unique ability of human beings to bear the burden of trust and responsibility, it goes on, without a pause, to ascribe to them their tendency to be transgressors, and ignorant also.

These two possibilities in a human being, namely the possibility for development and the possibility for decline, cannot be separated from each other. A human being is neither like an animal that, within his collective life, does not move a step forwards nor a step backwards, neither moving to the right nor to the left. There is in human life sometimes a move forwards and sometimes a move backwards, and if there is movement and speed, there is also stopping and slowing-down. If there is progress and development, there is also decay. If there is justice and virtue there is also injustice, vice and degeneration. If there are manifestations of knowledge and the intellect, there are indications of ignorance and sensuality also.

There is always the possibility that the changes and new ideas and values that spring up in a particular period may be disadvantageous and injurious for mankind.

Rigid people and ignorant people:

One of the characteristics of human beings is their tendency to go to extremes. If a man has moderate views, he tries to separate changes of the first kind from changes of the second kind. He tries to move forward in time with the power of knowledge, initiative, endeavor and hard work. He tries to adapt himself to manifestations of progress and advance in his age, and simultaneously tries to cheek the mistaken directions taken in his times and refuses to conform to them.

However, it is unfortunately not always like this. There are two dangerous diseases that always threaten man in this connection. These are: the disease of inflexibility and conventionalism, and the disease of naivety and instability. The consequence of the former disease is stagnation, stopping, and keeping back

from advance and development, while the consequence of the latter disease is backsliding and taking the wrong direction.

A conventional, inflexible person hates everything that is new and accept nothing but the old, while the naive, unstable person counts every newly manifested thing as permissible in the name of a “necessity of the times” or modernity and progress. An inflexible person considers every new thing to be a corruption and a deviation, and the naive person counts each and every new thing as ‘civilization’ and an extension of knowledge and learning.

An inflexible person does not distinguish between the kernel and the shell, the means and the end. To him, religion has the responsibility of protecting ancient traditions. In his view, the Qur’an was revealed for the purpose of stopping the flow of time and nailing down the situation of the world exactly as it is.

In his view, the recitation of the last part of the Qur’an,³ writing with a red pen, using a traditional box, taking ones bath in a traditional bath house, eating with the hand, using oil-lamps for lighting, staying unlettered and uneducated should all be preserved as religious observances. A naïve progressivist on the other hand, wants to know even new fashion, and new idea that has started in the west, and promptly follows them and calls them modernization and requirements of the times.

Both the conventionalist and the naive progressivist agree in supposing that any situation obtaining in times gone by was a part of religious commandments and rites. The difference lies in this: the conventional person deduces the conclusion that those rites ought to be maintained and preserved, and the progressivist that religion is inextricably connected to the worship of the past, love of fixedness and stagnation.

In the recent past the problem of incompatibility between science and religion has been a subject of keen discussion and controversy among the people of the west. The idea of incompatibility between science and religion arose basically because of two reasons. One of them was that the church maintained that certain matters of old science and philosophy were religious matters, and should, from the religious point of view, be accepted as dogma and then scientific advances showed these ideas to be wrong. Besides that, it was also due to the fact that the sciences altogether altered and reformed the pattern of life.

Religious conservatives wanted to bring the outward material form of life under the rule of religion, just as they had done with philosophical matters, giving them a religious tinge. The naive and the ignorant also thought that this was the case, and imagined that religion viewed the material life of people as a having a particular form and pattern. And when the material form of life had to be changed according to the judgment of science, science proclaimed that religion had been abrogated.

The inflexibility of the first group together with the ignorance of the second brought about the illusory idea that science and religion were incompatible.

The story in the Qur'an

Islam is a religion which moves forward and carries forward. So as to remind Muslims that they should always be in a state of growth, development and evolution, but within the framework of Islam, the Qur'an compares the followers of Muhammad (s.a.w.a) to a seed that is sown in the ground. That seed grows forth in the form of a tiny tender leaf, and afterwards strengthens itself and stands erect on its stem. It passes through stages with such speed and strength that farmers are surprised and joyful over it. This is an example for that society towards which the Qur'an points. Development is one of those goals towards which the Qur'an directs. The Qur'an lays the foundation of a society which is continuously in a state of growth, extension, dilation and expansion.

Will Durant said that no religion has called its followers with such strength as Islam has done. The history of the advent of Islam shows how vigorous and strong Islam was in establishing society anew and making it progress.

It is against both inflexible conservatism and ignorant naivety. The danger which threatens Islam comes both from the region of the first group and from the region of the latter group. The conservatives, the inflexibly minded, and those who like to show that every old thing belongs to Islam, when, in fact, it may have no connection with the pure religion of Islam, have given the naive progressivists an excuse to count Islam against development in its true sense. On the other hand, the imitation, fashion-worshipping, and aping of the west, and the belief that the prosperity of eastern people lies in their being physically and spiritually, outwardly and inwardly, westernized, gives the naive people the idea that they should take on all of the customs, manners and traditions of the west, that the civil and social laws should all be made to conform to western laws. They make the conservative group look pessimistically at every thing new and consider it a danger for their religion, their independence and their national and social status.

In the middle of all this, it is Islam that can amend the mistake of both groups.

The attitude of the conservatives gives good cause for the assaults and attacks of the progressivists, and the stupidities of the progressivists make the conservatives all the more adamant. It is strange that the apparently civilized progressivists suppose that time cannot produce mistakes and errors. Do they think that the changes of time are brought about not by man but by some other being? Since when and from what date has mankind become entirely infallible and thus made the changes of time free from any error or mistake?

Just as man makes new discoveries in every age for the benefit of humanity under the influence of his scientific, moral, aesthetic and religious inclinations, so he is also under the influence of his egotism, ambition, sensuality and greed for wealth and exploitation. Just as man is successful in making new inventions and finding out better ways and means of living, he is also, from time to time liable to make errors and mistakes. Any how, the self-centered progressivist does not understand these words. He

always repeats his cliché that the world today is what it is.

What is even stranger is that these people think of the fundamentals of life in the same way they think of their shoes, hats and clothes. Just as shoes and hats are once new and then become worn out and have value when new and just out of the factory and must be purchased then, but must be cast away when they are old, so all the realities of the universe are like this. The idea of these naive progressivists in respect of the good and bad of a thing is nothing except its being new or old. According to them feudalism, that is to say, some powerful man unlawfully and forcibly calling himself a master, establishing himself comfortably while hundreds of hands work in order to feed that mouth, is bad, not in itself, but because it has now become out-dated and the world today does not accept it. Its time is no more, and now it is considered as obsolete. Naturally, at the beginning, when such a thing first appeared and was brand-new on the world market, it was good.

According to them, it is bad to exploit women because the world today no longer approves of it and does not tolerate it but yesterday, when the world did not acknowledge the right of inheritance for women did not accept their right of ownership and did not pay any heed to their opinion and views, that too was once new, and had then come newly into the market.

According to people like them, because this age is the space age and it is therefore impossible to abandon the airplane and ride a mule, to ignore electricity and light an oil lamp, to disregard large spinning mills and use a hand spinning wheel, to turn a blind eye on giant printing machine and write by hand, so also it is impossible to avoid dances, not to take part in bathing and picnic parties, not to get drunk and cavort around, not to play poker, not to wear skirts above the knees, because all these things are the phenomena belonging to the modern age. If these things are not done, it would mean a return to the age of mule-riding.

How many individuals have been ruined and what countless number of families has been wrecked by the phrase "the signs of the times".

They say it is the age of science, the era of the atom, the age of the satellite, and the epoch of rockets. Very well, we also thank Allah that we live in this age and time and in this epoch and era and wish that we may increasingly and in a better way take advantage and derive benefit from science and art. Notwithstanding that, a question arises — have all the other incentives and motivating factors become dried up except the fountain head of knowledge? Are all the phenomena of this century the result of nothing but scientific progress? Does science claim that the nature of the individual scientist has been completely subjugated, made obedient and humanized?

Science does not make such a claim for the individual scientist, and that is why a group of scientists and scholars can undertake research and make discoveries with the utmost purity and sincerity of purpose, while groups of power-hungry, ambitious and money-worshipping people employ the results of their scientific labor to attain their nefarious purposes. The loud complaint of science is always that it has

become the object of exploitation by man's unruly nature. The preoccupation and misfortune of our age is this very thing.

Science takes a step forward in the field of physics and discovers the laws of light, but a group of profiteers make the same discovery a means to make films with unforeseeably destructive results. The science of chemistry advances, and finds out how to make new compounds, whereupon some people begin to think how to profit from this advance and cook up a catastrophe for the human soul and call it heroin. Science finds its way to the heart of the atom, and harnesses its wonderful power, but before any plans for its use for the betterment of humanity could be made, the power-hungry men of the world manufactured bombs from it and then dropped them on innocent people.

When a celebration was held in honor of Einstein, the great scholar of the 20th century, he himself mounted the rostrum and said, "In whose honor are you going to hold this celebration — one whose talents have been the source for the preparation of the atom bomb?"

Einstein did not use his intellectual power for the preparation of a bomb, but the ambitions of another group did exploit his genius.

Heroin, the atom bomb, this or that kind of film can never be accepted just because they are "signs of the time". If the most perfect bomb were to be dropped by the most ingenious array of instruments by a model pilot on innocent people, the savagery of the act would not be lessened in the least.

Islam and modernity 3

The main argument of the people who say that in family duties we should follow western patterns is that time, and, with it, social values have changed, and the exigencies of the twentieth century demand that we follow them. Thus if we do not make our view regarding this point clear, our further discussions will be incomplete.

If we were to undertake a full and thorough discussion of this question, there would not be enough space in this series of articles, because many aspects need to be dealt with and examined. Some of them are philosophical, some to do with religious jurisprudence, and others moral and social. I hope to be able to discuss those points in detail in a book, *Islam and the Exigencies of the Modern Age*, which I intend to write. The preparatory notes are ready, and I shall examine the material in detail and present it before those interested.

At present, it will be enough to clarify two points:

Firstly, keeping up with the times is not as simple a matter as these ill-informed claimants imagine, and as they repeat with their clichés. With time, there is both progress and going astray. One should move forward according to the advance of time, but fight against being led astray by time. To discriminate

between the two one should look to see from which origins new phenomena and currents rise forth, and in what direction they flow. It must be determined from which of the drives and urges of man's existence they have sprung, and from which of his social groupings. Does the change arise from the higher, human drives of man; or from his lower, animal urges? Have men of knowledge and science and their selfless study brought about these changes; or have the indulgence status seeking and desire for wealth of the corrupt strata of society? These matters have been fully explained in the preceding two articles.

The secret of the dynamism and flexibility of Islamic law

Another matter which should be made clear is that Islamic thinkers believe that within Islam there is an enigmatic secret which enables this religion to adapt to and improve according to the advance of time. They believe that this religion is in harmony with the forward movement of time, with the development of learning, and with the changes that arise from such development. Now we must see what this secret is. In other words, we have to look into the "nuts and bolts" that went into the making of this religion and which have given it that quality of dynamism which has enabled it to remain in harmony with the changing circumstances arising from advances in knowledge and learning without needing to put aside any of its precepts, and without any contradiction arising among them. What is this enigma? This is the matter which will be explained in this article.

Some of my readers will be aware of what I myself, more than anybody else, am conscious of, that this subject has a technical and specialized aspect, and that it should only be discuss with specialists.

However, seeing that there are many pessimists among those who have inquired from us and among those people with whom we have come into contact who are concerned about this matter, and having understood that they are unaware that Islam has such a special quality, we will enter into this subject only to such an extent as to relieve the pessimists of the pessimism and to give others and example of dynamism within Islam.

The respected readers may consult the excellent book *Tanbihu'l-ummah* (A Warning for the People) compiled by the late Ayatullah Nai'ini⁴, and a very valuable article *Vilayat va za'amat* (Guardianship and Authority) by the great contemporary scholar Allamah Tabatabai⁵ which is published in the book *Maraja'iyat va ruhaniyyat* (The Ulama' and Reference to Religious Authority)⁶, to see that discussions of this kind of problem have not been ignored by the leading scholars of Islam. Both the books are in the Persian language.

There are number of factors which contribute to the secret of how the pure religion of Islam, with the fixed and unchanging laws that it has, can accommodate the development of civilization and culture, and can remain in conformity with the changing patterns of life, and we shall explain some of them.

Attention to essence and meaning as opposed to shape and form:

1. Islam has not meddled with the outward pattern and form of life, which is wholly dependent upon the standard of human knowledge. Islamic instructions are concerned with the spirit, meaning and aim of life and the best course that a man should adopt to attain that final aim. Knowledge neither alters the aim and spirit of life nor directs to a better, shorter and safer route to attain the aims of life. Knowledge always places in the power of man better and more perfect resources for attaining the aims of life and for traversing the route to reach an attain those aims.

Islam by keeping the aims under its own authority, and by giving over the forms, models and tools to the realm of knowledge and skill, has kept away from all conflict with the development of culture and civilization. Furthermore, by encouraging the factors which develop culture and civilization, that is, science, labor, piety, determination, courage and perseverance, Islam has itself guaranteed the fundamental practical ground plan for the development of civilization.

Islam has set up in along the path of mankind. On the one hand, these indicators point towards the right course and the right destination, and, on the other hand, they warn the dangerous signs of deviation and decline. All Islamic injunctions consist either of the first kind of indicators, or the caution signals of the second kind.

The ways and means of life in every age depend upon the level of information and knowledge of man. By force of time and circumstances, the more man's information and knowledge increases, the more the means of life are perfected, and the more they replace comparatively defective means.

In Islam, no one single means, and no one particular external or material form can be found that has an aspect of 'holiness' in it, so that a Muslim could consider himself constrained to retain that means or form for ever.

Islam did not specify that tailoring, weaving, agriculture, transport, war or any other activity should be carried out using such and such means, so that when that means became obsolete due to an advance in knowledge there could arise an antagonism and a conflict between science and the dictates of Islam.

Neither has Islam given any special instructions regarding shoes or clothes, or determined that a building should be made with stone or steel, or that particular kinds of apparatus should be manufactured and distributed.

This is one of the reasons why the job of conforming this religion to temporal progress has been easy.

A permanent law for a permanent requirement and a variable law for a varying requirement:

2. One of the other peculiarities of the Islamic religion which has much importance is that it has ordained

permanent laws for permanent human requirements, and has maintained a changing attitude towards varying requirements. Some requirements, which may be personal, individual, general or social, are unchanging and permanent. They are the same for ever. The discipline that human beings maintain in respect of their instinctive urges and the discipline that they establish for their society is, as a general rule, always the same.

I am conversant with the concept of ethical relativity and with the idea of the relativity of justice, and I am aware of the fact that there are people who uphold these ideas; therefore, I shall make known my point of view to these people.

Another section of human requirements comprise varying human needs which call for varying and non-permanent laws. Islam has kept in mind a variable position with respect to these varying needs, by means of linking the varying conditions with invariable and stable principles. These invariable principles create particular auxiliary laws for each changing condition.

I cannot expand upon this point any further in this article except that I shall try to clarify the point in the minds of my respected readers by means of a few examples.

وَأَعِدُّوا لَهُمْ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ مِنْ قُوَّةٍ

And prepare against them whatever force you can. (Qur'an.8:60)

i.e., 'O Muslim! Prepare force against the enemy to the furthest possible extent. Apart from this, in the traditions of the Prophet there is a series of commands which has been handed down, and which is collected together in Islamic law under the title of 'horse-racing and archery'. There are commands that you yourself and your sons should learn the arts of horse-riding and archery to a degree of complete proficiency, Horse-riding and archery were a section of the martial arts in those days. It is quite evident that the origin and the basis of the command about horse-riding and archery is the principle: *And prepare against them whatever force you can*. This means that the arrow, the sword, the spell, the bow, the mule and the horse are not fundamental in themselves in the eyes of Islam: the basic point is to be strong enough.

The thing that has real importance is that Muslims in every period of history and in every age should do their utmost to strengthen themselves with regard to military and defense forces against the enemy. The necessity of being proficient in archery and horsemanship is an expression in which to cloth the necessity of being powerful. In other words it is the practical or executive form of the latter. The necessity of strength against the enemy is a permanent law which originates from a permanent and constant necessity.

However, the requirement of proficiency in archery and horsemanship is a manifestation of a changing necessity linked to time and it changes according to the age and the times. With changes in the

conditions of civilization, other things such as the preparation of up-to-date weapons, and proficiency and specialization in their use, take the place of that necessity.

Another example: another social principle has been laid down in the Qur'an, which concerns the exchange of wealth. Islam acknowledges an individual's right of ownership. No doubt there are vast differences between what Islam permits in the name of ownership and what is going on in this regard in the capitalist world, but there is no occasion here to discuss these points. The essential condition of an individual's ownership is exchange.

Islam has laid down principles to do with exchange: one of which is:

وَلَا تَأْكُلُوا أَمْوَالَكُم بَيْنَكُم بِالْبَاطِلِ

Do not consume your wealth amongst yourselves in vain, (Qur'an, 2:188).

This means that the property and wealth which passes from one person to another, which leaves the possession of the producer and the person has the prior authority over it and falls to another person and then to a third person, should always be in return for lawful profit, which should accrue to the previous owner. The passing of wealth from hand to hand without a return that may be human valuable for the owner is prohibited. Islam does not consider ownership as an absolute right of control.

Besides that, it is made clear in the precepts of Islam that the sale and purchase of certain things, including blood and human excrement, is forbidden. Why is that so? For the simple reason that the blood of man or a sheep cannot be put to any useful purpose and cannot be considered a useful commodity and a part of human wealth. The root cause of the prohibition of blood and human excrement is the principle of: *Do not consume your wealth amongst yourselves in vain*; the prohibition of the sale and purchase of these particular things is not the fundamental. The basic thing is that exchange of only those things which are of any human use should take place. The forbidding of the exchange of things like blood and human feces is merely an example of the prohibition of futile exchanges of wealth. In other words, it is a mere practical expression for the basic principle laid down in the words: *Do not consume your wealth amongst yourselves in vain*. Moreover, if there is no occasion for exchange, no wealth can be appropriated from another in Vain and put to use.

This principle is invariable for all times and is based upon a general and constant human necessity but the fact that blood and human feces do not constitute wealth and are not exchangeable depends upon the times, the historical period, the level of civilization, the change in the conditions and advancement of knowledge, upon industry and the possibilities of right and profitable utilization of these things. These factors may bring about alterations in the law.

Another example: Amir al -mu'minin' Ali (a.s.) in the latter years of his life, did not dye his hair in spite of the fact that it has become white. His beard was white as well. Some person asked him whether the

Prophet had not given a command to dye white hair. He replied, “Yes, he did”. The man asked why, then, he did not dye his hair. ‘Ali replied that when the Prophet had given these instructions Muslims were few in number, and amongst them there was a number of old people who used to take part in the battles. When the enemy looked at the ranks of Muslim warriors and saw the white-haired old men, they worked up courage and became self-confident from the fact that their opponents were a lot of old men. The Prophet issued an order that old men should dye their hair so that the enemy should not realize that they were old. Then Ali told the man that the Prophet issued the order when the Muslims had been few in number and it had been necessary that a stratagem like that should be adopted. But in the time of ‘Ali, when Islam had spread throughout the land, it was no longer necessary to carry on these practices. Everybody was free to dye or not to dye his hair.

In the view of Ali (a.s.), the commandment of the Prophet that Muslims should dye their hair was not the basic principle. The object of the commandment was something else. This was, so to say, the outer form in which the basic and the fundamental law were clothed. The purpose was to prevent the enemy from being bold in spirit or full of hope.

Islam attaches importance both to the form, the external appearance and the outer “covering”, and also to the spirit, the inner meaning and the heart of the matter, but always seeks that the form and the outward appearance, the “covering” should agree with the spirit and inner meaning, the “heart”. It puts a shell round the kernel, and clothing on the body.

The question of change of script:

There is presently under discussion in our country the question of changing the script. This matter requires to be examined closely from the linguistic and literary angle of the Persian language, as well as from the perspective of Islamic principles. From the Islamic perspective this proposition can be dealt with in two ways, Firstly, it is to be seen whether Islam has some particular alphabet; whether it distinguishes between different alphabets; whether Islam considers our present alphabet, which is the Arabic alphabet, its own, and considers other alphabets like the Latin alphabet as foreign alphabets. It is certainly not so. In the eyes of Islam, which is a universal religion, all alphabets are equal.

The other aspect of the proposition concerns the result that the change of alphabet and script would have on Muslim society as regards its being merged into, absorbed and swallowed up by societies that are alien to it? What would be the result of severing the intimate ties of association of this nation with its cultural heritage which has, at any rate, written all its Islamic and scientific literature in this very alphabet for as long as fourteen centuries? Apart from that, the question arises as to who suggested this plan for changing the script, and who would enforce it? This is what needs to be investigated.

It does not matter what you wear, as long as you do not imitate slavishly:

People like me are sometimes confronted by questions that are asked in an attempt to belittle and ridicule. What does the shari’ah say about eating while standing? What about eating with cutlery? Is it

forbidden to put on a hat? Is the speaking of foreign language prohibited?

In reply to these questions I say that Islam did not issue, hard and fast orders regarding these matters. Islam did not lay down whether food should be taken with the hand or with a spoon. Islam has, however, directed that cleanliness be maintained. Regarding shoes hats and dress, Islam has not specifically mentioned any particular fashion. In the eyes of Islam the English, Japanese and Persian languages are each as good as the others.

However, Islam has said something else. It is forbidden to willfully destroy a particular speech form. It is forbidden to be intimidated by others. It is forbidden to imitate blindly. It is forbidden to be absorbed and swallowed up by others. It is forbidden to be bewitched by others, like a small animal mesmerized by a snake. It is forbidden to soak up the aberrations and misfortunes of others in the name of “moving with the times”. It is forbidden to believe that an Iranian must become bodily, spiritually, inwardly and outwardly a European. It is forbidden to spend a weekend in Europe and then pronounce everything in French accent.⁷

The question of “ahamm wa muhimm” (that which is more important and that which is significant)

3. Another aspect which provides Islam with the possibility of adapting to the requirements of the times is the rational aspect of this religion. Islam has given its followers to understand that all its commands arise from a series of supreme exigencies; and, what is more, Islam has established the degree of importance of these exigencies. This consideration has facilitated the task of knowing the reality of Islam in cases where diverse exigencies find themselves in conflict with each other. Islam has permitted that, in these circumstances those who are deeply acquainted with Islam should determine the degree of importance of the exigencies, and select the more pressing exigencies, always in accordance with the guidelines set down by Islam itself. The fuqaha' (jurisconsults) call this principle *ahamm wa muhimm* (lit. “that which is more important and that which is significant”). Here also I could give many examples, but I shall refrain from doing so.

Laws with the right of ‘veto’:

4. Another consideration which has given this religion the property of mobility and adaptability, and gives it eternal life, is that there is a series of principles and laws incorporated into this religion whose function is to control and harmonize the other laws. The fuqaha' call these rules *al-qawai'du 'l-hakimah* (governing principle) such as the principle of *'la haraj* (“no blame”) and *la darar*, (“no harm”)⁸ which has authority throughout *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). The purpose of this series of principles is to control and harmonize the other laws. In fact, Islam has acknowledged these principles as having the right of veto over all laws and precepts. This subject has an extensive history into which I cannot enter here.

The governing authority:

Besides what has already been mentioned, another series of “nuts and bolts” are also used in the structure of the pure religion of Islam which have endowed it with the property of perpetuity and its position as the last religion. The late Ayatullah Na’ini and ‘Allamah Tabatabai⁹ has, in this respect, laid great emphasis on the authority which Islam has conferred on a competent Islamic government.

The fundamental of ijtiḥad:

The Pakistani thinker, Iqbal, has said that *ijtiḥad*¹⁰ is the motive force of Islam. This is, no doubt right, but the main point is the ability of Islam to support *ijtiḥad*. If there were anything in the place of Islam, we would see how difficult the task of *ijtiḥad* would be. For then, the way to *ijtiḥad* would be blocked. The main point is the hidden secrets which have been employed in this amazing divine religion, so that in this way it has been given the property of harmonization with the advance of civilization.

Ibn Sina, in his book *ash-Shifa’*, sets forth the necessity of *ijtiḥad* on the same basis. He says that since temporal conditions change and new problems are continuously coming to the fore, and since on the other hand, the general principles of Islam are permanent and unchanging it is necessary that in every age and in every period there should be persons who have complete knowledge and acquaintance with Islamic matters, and who can be the answerers to the needs of Muslims with attention towards the new problems that come forward in every age.

In the supplement of the Constitutional Law of Iran such an anticipation has been made, that in every age a body of not less than, five *mujtahids* who are also “conversant with the requirements of the times”, shall watch over the laws which are passed. The intention of the writers of this clause was that persons who are neither ‘reactionary’ nor ‘ignorant progressivists’ who are neither against the advances of the era, nor subservient to or followers of others, should watch over the laws of the State.

The point which must be remembered is that *ijtiḥad*, as the word really signifies, means specialization and expertise in the science of Islamic affairs. It is not the kind of thing that every educational “drop-out” can claim merely on the basis of having spent a few days in one of the centres of Islamic learning.

In order to specialize in Islamic matters and to be competent to pronounce one’s own opinion, entire life-time, provided it is not short, is decidedly not too long. That, too with the condition that the person is endowed with the liking for it, a certain powerful genius and is finally completely graced with the favors of Allah.

Apart from specialization and *ijtiḥad*, certain persons can be recognized as authorities for their viewpoints and opinions who are at the pinnacle of piety, and knowledge and fear of God. The history of Islam can show persons who, with complete scientific and moral competence, used to tremble like willows when they intended to express their opinions.

I apologize to my worthy readers that the diversion in this topic has reached such a great length.

- [1.](#) Mutahhari, Murtada – *Insan va sarnavisht*. Qum. (Iran) 1385 A.H.
- [2.](#) Translated from the Persian, original untraced. (Tr.)
- [3.](#) A traditional part of an elementary Islamic education. (ed.)
- [4.](#) Muhammad Husayn ibn ‘Abd ar-Rahim an-Na’ini (1277/1860– 1355/1936) one of the great recent teachers of an-Najaf al-Ashraf. (Iraq).
- [5.](#) Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i (1321/1904–1402/1981) one of most renowned contemporary scholars of Islam, now living in Qum. Author of the great commentary on the Qur’an, *Al-Mizan*, and *Shi’ah dar Islam* (translated in English by Dr. Sayyid Husayn Nasr as *Shi’ite Islam*) he is a master of both the sciences of Divine Law and the intellectual sciences, metaphysics and ‘irfan.
- [6.](#) An anthology of articles published following the death of the great marja’-e taqlid Ayatullah Burujirdi (1380/1961).
- [7.](#) The actual text speaks of those who pronounce the Persian “r”(rather like a Scottish rolled “r”) as if it were “gh” (the French guttural “r”), which was an affectation of Europeanized Iranians (Tr.)
- [8.](#) The principle of *la haraj* (no blame) is applied when excessive difficulty would occur from the carrying out of an injunction in the shari’ah, and allows the person concerned not to carry it out. The principle of *la darar* (no harm) applies when the performance of an injunction would result in illness to the person concerned, and likewise allows him or her to abstain from performing it.
- [9.](#) For both these see note # 2 under Islam and modernity (3)
- [10.](#) *ijtihad* is the exercising of independent judgment in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The person who exercises *ijtihad* is called a *mujtahid*. By his knowledge of religious sciences and by virtue of his moral qualities, he has the right to give new opinions (*fatwa*) on matters pertaining to the shari’ah. A marked difference exists between Sunni Islam and Shi’ite Islam in the matters of *ijtihad*, since in the former the “gate of *ijtihad*” has been closed since the 3rd century A.H., while in the latter it is still open.

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