

PROBLEMS OF THE UMMAH: ROLE OF ULAMA AND INTELLECTUALS

The world of Islam today is passing through a critical period of its history. We are confronted with many problems and find ourselves in a limbo, between aspirations and despair. We, therefore, need to locate the key problems the Muslim nation (Muslim Ummah) faces today and identify our duties.

If we are really sincere and determined to overcome the problems facing Muslims worldwide, we need cooperation between the different sectors of Muslim societies. What is particularly needed is teamwork and dialogue between the thinkers (Mufakkirs) and traditional religious scholars (Alims - in Arabic pl. Ulama) of Islam. While the Ulama are better versed in the permissibility or forbidden nature of a certain act, the Mufakkirs are advanced in the field of ideas even if they are not fully conversant with Islamic Laws (Shariah) and the minutiae of regulations concerning the various forms of worship. The Mufakkirs deeply contemplate the problems the Muslim Ummah faces today. Hence the Alims need the opinion of the thinkers. The thinkers, on the other hand, require the opinion of the Alims. Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, for instance, is not considered to be an Alim but a Mufakkir of Islam. He was a pioneering thinker of Islam. In a similar vein, Dr. Ali Shariati of Iran was a far greater thinker than many contemporary Alims. Syed Qutb, too, was a remarkable thinker of Islam.

He is considered a Mufakkir rather than an Alim. Likewise, Dr. Khurshid Ahmed of Pakistan, Dr. Hasan Zaman, and Dr. Syed Sajjad Husain of Bangladesh are Mufakkirs or thinkers. What we need is an interaction between such thinkers (Mufakkirs) with the traditional religious experts (Alims). The Alims will identify the limits of Islam that cannot be crossed in matters of permissibility

and prohibition (halal and haram). The Mufakkirs, on the other hand, will try to find solutions within these prescribed limits. At the same time, the Alims must realize that the Mufakkirs have thoroughly studied the outstanding problems plaguing the world today, in their various depths and dimensions. If a synthesis between the expertise of the scholars (Alims) and the ideas of the thinkers (Mufakkirs) can be attained, only then is it possible to arrive at a pragmatic and realistic solution to these problems. We, therefore, need close cooperation and collaboration between these two different and yet interdependent groups of people.

If we really want to serve the cause of Islam in a meaningful way in today's world, and respond effectively to the ills of our times, we must be aware of contemporary problems. The philosophical problems the earlier Muslim generations faced, notably the conflict between the Mutazilites and the Asharites, which continued for more than two centuries, are no longer relevant today. During the last century, we confronted the ideologies of socialism, capitalism, secularism, and the ideas of Darwin and Freud and these continue to be significant issues until today. Our seminaries (Madrasahs), however, continue to teach the philosophy of the Mutazilites and Asharites and other ancient philosophical issues. They do not teach philosophical issues of current significance. The old issues no longer pertain to the world we inhabit today. The literature on such topics can remain in the Madrasah libraries as reference books. Such topics should not be part of the contents of present-day Madrasah text books, which should engage contemporary issues, those burning philosophical questions and difficulties of the day mentioned above.

Today, a great deal of change has become apparent in the realm of politics. Parliamentary system has been introduced. The ballots are now being cast in secret. Issues such as those concerning the decentralization of power, federal structure of the government which shares powers with the autonomous units, the delegation of power to regional government, etc. have come to the forefront. These issues and concepts are completely new and therefore not discussed in the old books of Fiqh (books on law). The earlier Fiqh books do not contain any discussion, for instance, on the separation of state power from the judiciary, as this is also a new

concept. Previously the elite used to dominate politics and the public did not play an important role. The situation is quite different today. Today, with the strengthening of civil society, the people play a central role embodied in the elections even though the elite continue to play a significant role as well.

Likewise, a good deal of change has taken place in the economic arena. Earlier, concepts like Central Bank, Monetary Policy, Inflation, etc. were absent. If we are not adequately familiar with developments in this field, we shall not be able to arrive at the most judicious decisions. Against this backdrop, it is essential to attain knowledge of modern Economics and modern Political Science.

Here, we may cite the contributions of the eminent thinker (Mufakkir) Dr. Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman, who is associated with the International Islamic University, Malaysia and the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), USA. He has discussed in great detail the crisis prevalent in the Muslim World. The crisis today has become more critical than it was 10-15 years ago. In his book 'Crisis in the Muslim Mind', Dr. Abdul Hamid opined that a blind imitation of the West is not desirable from an Islamic perspective. This will also not be acceptable to the common Muslim. No nation can become great by emulating others in a wholesale fashion. Such a people cannot become a leading nation in the world.

One view is that we must follow the earlier generations of Muslims, imitate the way the Abbasids and the Umayyads solved their problems, the way jurists (Fuqaha) solved their problems some 200 years ago. Dr. Abdul Hamid argues that this is neither possible nor practical. Many changes have occurred in many spheres of life—in politics, economics, administration and communication—and the solution to today's shifting problems cannot be found in the practices of the earlier generations or opinions of the Fuqaha of bygone times. He suggests that we must devise fresh solutions to contemporary problems in the light of the Quran and Sunnah. We must identify the problems of the Muslim Ummah, evaluate the nature, depth and dimension of each crisis adequately, and then craft solutions while maintaining the centrality of Islamic precepts to our considerations. In designing these solutions, we must utilize our intellect and resort

to the methodology of Ijtihad. In his seminal book, Dr. Abdul Hamid terms this approach, which he deems to be the most adequate for tackling contemporary problems, the "Asala approach" or "the original approach."

I suggest that the ideas of Dr. Abdul Hamid merit serious consideration and implementation. He has underscored the importance of considering the specificities of time and place. With the passage of time, circumstances change, and circumstance or context, is a crucial factor in deciding matters of gravity. We should, therefore, try to find the ruling of the Quran and Sunnah on a particular problem or issue giving due importance to issues of time and space.

Dr. Abdul Hamid further stressed the importance of rewriting the social sciences in the light of Islam. The subject of reconceptualizing the social sciences did not make much headway and progress in the hands of the Muslims. We must develop the social sciences further, taking inspiration from Islamic principles. This requires a serious investment of time and labor on our part. The International Islamic University Malaysia has begun questioning the conventional premises of the social sciences. Other Islamic universities are also committed to revamping or restructuring social scientific thought and approaches.

Bangladesh, today, is facing numerous problems. One of the major problems we face is poverty. The alleviation of poverty is no easy task. Some think that we can ameliorate poverty by simply establishing Zakah. However, I feel that this problem is a complex one and requires a complex, multifaceted strategy. In my article 'Poverty Alleviation: Islamic Perspective', I have emphasized that we must simultaneously establish Zakah, restore endowment (Wakf), and regulate our monetary policy and banking system in a harmonious, well-coordinated manner with the objective of attaining overall economic development. Only such a polyphonic approach can help us combat poverty effectively in today's world.

Education comes next. This is one of the primary problems plaguing Bangladesh. We must craft an education policy in the light of the basic tenets of Islam. Since the existing educational curriculum fails to meet the requirements of Islam, it must be

recast. The Alims should play a constructive and meaningful role in the reform of education in the interest of the nation of Bangladesh. The first step they must take towards undertaking this project is carefully considering the work already done in this field by the International Islamic University in Malaysia, the International Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan, and the International Islamic University in Chittagong, Bangladesh. In these seats of learning, students are required to study specialized Islamic courses—notable among them are the Quran, Islamic Studies, Fiqh, Arabic Language, Islamic Economics etc. - along with other modern subjects. The students, thus, acquire a basic knowledge of Islam alongside knowledge of the subjects in their field of specialization. In this way, the existing curriculum is being gradually modified, refined, and restructured. The future curricula of the Muslim World may take shape following the above outline in due course. Therefore, we can consider the curriculum of the International Islamic University in Malaysia, the International Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan, and the International Islamic University in Chittagong, Bangladesh to constitute models for other institutions of higher education to follow.

The Madrasah (religious schools/ colleges of the sub-continent) education will carry great weight only if it plays a meaningful role in preparing people who can effectively administer contemporary civic institutions and the economy. Should we wish to make the Madrasah part of the mainstream general education, we must consider this matter of reforming Madrasah education carefully. The students now graduating from the Madrasahs are not capable of running either the economic sector or the administrative sector of a country successfully. These students have neither studied Business Administration nor Economics nor Political Science/ Government nor Public Administration. We can resolve this problem and improve the situation in the Alia Madrasah (one of the two types of Madrasahs in Bangladesh) by introducing three additional options/ degrees along with the existing four degrees (Kamils) at the graduation level. Out of the total sixteen years' curriculum, we can keep the first twelve years curriculum more or less intact and introduce new subjects into the course curriculum for the last four years (Fazil and Kamil courses). The existing degrees of Tafsir, Hadith, Fiqh and Adab

may remain. We have to introduce three-four more degrees at the Kamil level (15th and 16th year of study) notably Economics, Business Administration, and Public Administration. This means, in the first twelve years, students will acquire knowledge of Islam in the same way as before and in the later four years they will study contemporary subjects such as Economics or Business Administration or Public Administration to fulfill requirements for the Kamil degree. If we can conduct this project of revision successfully, the Madrasahs should become capable of producing persons skilled in knowledges of both worlds and hence better able to serve their country and the Muslim community.

The Qaumi Madrasahs (the Madrasahs that follow the Deobond regimen), in the same way, confer degrees on Fiqh, Hadith, Tafsir and Arabic Language, and the degree is called Dawra. We should introduce at least two more Dawras, notably Dawra-e-Iqtisad and Dawra-e-Business Administration. The course curriculum of the first twelve years here too may remain unchanged. The new Dawras would be added to the course content for the last four years only. If we are able to introduce these two new subjects in the curriculum of the Qaumi Madrasahs, these educational institutions will also produce eminent Alims who shall be simultaneously capable of fulfilling the general economic and administrative needs of the society. If we can make these changes, we shall be well on our way towards unifying the madrasah and the modern educational systems.

Another problem the Muslim Ummah is facing is that of extremism or radicalism. Islam propounds only one way, and that is certainly not the way of extremism, but that of the middle-path or the balanced way. Some twenty years following the death of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), the Khawarij emerged as a radical current among the earlier Muslims. Extremist in religious belief and political thinking, the Khawarij were rejected by the mainstream of the Ummah. Even today, there are religious groups that adopt extreme views on socio-political and religious issues. We must be very cautious about these extremist groups and make Muslims aware of their activities so that the Muslim Ummah may be protected from the negative effects of the extremist approach. Extremism thrives

when people become preoccupied with very small matters, minor and side issues, ignoring or neglecting the fundamental issues. Such a problem arises when we fail to derive lessons from history and do not possess sufficient knowledge and understanding of the Shariah and other related subjects. There is no doubt that the welfare of the Ummah lies in avoiding the extreme path. Extremism has led to the suffering of Muslims in different countries around the world.

The social condition of women is another key issue. Many eminent Alims and Islamic scholars have spoken about the rights of women. We can mention here the names of a few who have spoken with particular eloquence and insight on this issue, such as Prof. Dr. Yusuf Al Qaradawi, Dean of the Faculty of Shariah, Qatar University; Dr. Jamal A. Badwi, Chairman, Islamic Information Foundation, Canada; Sheikh Abdul Halim Abu Shuqqah, eminent leader of the Ikhwanul Muslimeen (the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt); Dr. Hasan Turabi, ideologue of the Sudanese Islamic Movement, to name only a few. They have argued that Muslims cannot advance unless women are given the honor and support due to them. It is not possible to make progress leaving behind half of the members of the society. They have therefore stressed the importance of involving women in an entire range of Islamic activities and ensuring that the various rights of women are practiced and protected. While women can clearly acquire a great deal of knowledge about Islam through attending mosques, some people continue to debate the rights of women to attend mosques. We should, therefore, try to understand and seriously consider the various problems faced by women today and the Alims should take an initiative in aiding women so that the latter can move forward.

Misinterpretation is another problem looming before us. Large numbers of translations of the Quran and Hadith compilation are available in the market today. Naturally people read them and many questions arise on different issues in the minds of these readers, who then become inclined to respond to these questions themselves even though these readers are not well versed in the underlying principles and methods of interpretation (Usul). Those who want to judiciously interpret the Quran and Hadith

must, therefore, acquire knowledge of the Usul al Fiqh. They have to read books on Usul al Fiqh that are accessible to the lay public. High-quality authentic books on the subject need to be translated in local languages from Arabic and circulated and publicized widely. The teachings of such books must be disseminated to all those who intend to study Islam from the original sources and cultivate the capacity of interpretation. Otherwise, individual efforts to interpret will create confusion within the polity, particularly by those who try to interpret by reading translations alone. The Alims need to pay attention to this matter and help disseminate the knowledge of Usul.

Likewise, we should also try to bring an end to the debate over democracy. We know that there is no place for dictatorship or autocracy or monarchy in Islam. The vast majority of Islamic parties and movements around the world are struggling for democratic rights today. They consider election as the most legitimate instrument to effect changes in government. They demand legal rights so that they can participate in the fruits of civic and political rights. If any restriction is imposed on the functioning of Islamic parties, they turn to the law and file petitions with the Court so that they are allowed to function as a legitimate and law abiding organization. During the days of unified Pakistan, one political party was banned. That party fought a long legal battle all the way up to the Supreme Court of Pakistan where it won its case. In other words, this Islamic party determinedly sought to secure its democratic right to function as a legal political party.

Islamic parties in different countries are trying to reform the government by participating in democratic elections. All eminent Islamic political scientists think that subject to the sovereignty of Allah, democracy constitutes an adequate method for establishing an Islamic state. The modern democratic process, in fact, can be understood to be an elaboration of the principles of Shura and Khilafah. What is the Khilafah? Khilafah means representation. It means a beneficial, consultative government of the people through representation of the Divine. We are all vicegerents (Khalifah) of Allah and must understand that when we talk of democracy, we mean government under the suzerainty of Allah

and through consultation with the people. What I am hinting at here is Islamic Democracy. This concept does not cohere completely with the model of Western democracy but the two do have common ground. If this concept is not clarified, some people are likely to provide opportunities for dictatorial parties to seize power. This will benefit the enemies of Islam. All the Alims of Pakistan supported Fatima Jinnah against the candidacy of Field Marshal Ayub Khan in the 1965 presidential elections on account of her promise to restore democracy.

Regrettably, some of us tend to have very short memories indeed and are now adopting extreme positions against the consensus of the Islamic scholars and lims of the past. Such a move will undoubtedly cause much harm in the long run.