

# MUSLIM SOCIETY AND MODERN CHANGE

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## I

Change is an essential element in life. The Holy Quran mentions change of different phenomena of nature as signs of God<sup>[1]</sup> and actually these changes make the life worthwhile. Islam has completed 14 hundred years of its history and has recently entered the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Islamic history, perhaps more than the history of any other culture of the world, surmounts the events of change in the intellectual and social life of the Muslims. Islam is the perfect revealed religion and its followers are apt to adapt all the changes; all such changes have been incorporated and amalgamated in the Islamic culture in such a way that those have enriched the Islamic history and given it a new ardour. From the second century of Hijrah the Muslims began adapting of Greek thoughts which reached them in the form of translated works of the Greeks into Arabic, but in a few centuries later Greek thought became integral part of the Islamic culture. The Islamic history has witnessed many intellectual movements; the movements of the Khariites, the Mutazila, the A'asharites and many more. There was the episode of the belief of Khalq-e-Quran and finally there was the fall down of the Caliphate center at Baghdad by the Mongol in 1258 A.C. but the Muslim' culture went on developing and flourishing in many parts of the world. One of the main factors of the eternity of Muslim society is its adaptability to changing events and this adaptability is concerned with all spheres of life including new laws and new orientations. Allama Iqbal has captioned this quality of Islamic faith as 'the principle of movement in the structure of Islam' which is the heading of his 6th lecture in the book 'The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam' and this chapter actually deals with the idea of Ijtihad.<sup>[2]</sup> Change is very important in the perspective of cultural sociology but this change should not give way to deviation from the basic principles of Islam. It is the idea of Ijtihad which gives the guidelines to the Muslims to adapt new trends of society so that the onward march and the progress of the individual and the society is not blocked. In a very learned article, under the caption of 'Reform

of the Muslim society' which was translated and published in the January, 1927 issue of 'The Islamic Culture Hyderabad Deccan, late Turkish thinker Prince Saeed Haleem Pasha (d.1921) had laid down the guidelines of the East and West contacts. He was of the opinion that the Muslim Society should adapt the scientific advancement of the developed countries but the culture of Islam is so developed that it should not be overwhelmed by the Western culture. Let me quote here the opening paragraph of his article; this paragraph shows joy and grief of the writer because the awakening of the Muslims rejoiced him whereas their blind imitations of the West grieved him:

“It is with infinite satisfaction that I see, in my own days, the Muslim peoples waking from their torpor and aspiring to throw off the foreign yoke. That means that they have understood, at last, that the duty of every Muslim, a duty sacred above all is to have liberty and that without it there can be neither happiness nor real progress. I must confess, however, that my satisfaction is not unmixed, since I observe that the great majority of representatives of the Muslim intellectual classes are intent only on endowing their countries with hardly disguised copies of Western institutions; and think that they can only compass their revival by adapting the principles and concepts of the Indo-Aryan world. This state of mind in the Muslim “intelligentia” distresses me, because it shows that they no longer perceive that Islam, When teaching us to worship the One God, at the same time endowed us with a complete set of moral and social principles proceeding from belief on the Divine Unity; that those principles are imposed on us by that belief; and that all Muslim societies have been engendered by them and have lived by them. -It would seem then that our intellectual elite are no longer able to assure themselves with full conviction, that Islam is the human religion par excellence: religion in its highest and completest form; that it is civilization itself in the most perfect sense; and that, consequently, there can be no social salvation, as there can be no eternal salvation. outside it. They apparently forget that, if, for the Christian world, all roads lead to ROME, for the Muslim world all roads lead to Mekka. In other words, each of these two worlds is called to follow a different direction and destiny, to play a different part in the general evolution of humanity. The difference between the ideales, conceptions, aspirations, needs and means of the Christian world and those of the Muslim world is, without the slightest doubt, as great as that

which exists between the beliefs, moral and social concepts, general mentality and origin of Christendom on the one hand and Islam on the other. How could it be otherwise when the former spring from the latter?

It is therefore flagrant error to believe that institutions with which the Christian world has provided itself as suited to its needs, political or social in the last analysis the two merge into one can ever suit us, whatever modifications of detail we may make in them. The two worlds are in fact so essentially unlike that by no effort can they be brought to share the same concept of individual and collective life.

I can only ascribe the distortion of Muslim mentality above mentioned, which looks for the regeneration of Muslim society as a result of its assimilation to Western society, to the unfortunate influence of the foreign domination endured by peoples who accept the Prophet's Law a domination which has played the part of an intellectual dissolvent among them. I propose to dispel the errors with which that mentality is laden, and to prove that, from the moral and social point of view, the Islamic world has no reason to envy the West; that, on the contrary, it is Christendom which must go to the school of Islam in those respects. The best way to enlighten minds upon this question of supreme importance is to state in plain terms what has been the social work of Islam. This reminder will convince my compatriots and co-religionists that the Reform of Islam should consist simply in Muslims learning to understand better, and apply better, the teachings of their sublime religion."<sup>[3]</sup>

And this 'the keen-sighted writer' as Iqbal described him in his "Reconstruction"<sup>[4]</sup> ends his article with the following observations:

"In conclusion I must add that Muslim "intellectuals," when they think themselves obliged to imitate the West and seek inspiration in its principles, show that most of them at any rate have formed a false ideal and one most ill-adapted to the task before them. They fail altogether to see that their sole aim I might even say, the sole justification for their existence is to represent Islamic principles in all their truth and in their full perfection, and to serve them to the utmost of their power. They fail to see that they should, therefore, draw their inspiration only from the purest, the most lofty spirit and the best traditions of Islam, so that they may guide themselves and not

have to be guided by others, may set an example instead of following the example of others. Only on that condition can Muslim men of intellect participate in the general task of human progress, and play worthily the leading part which belongs of right to Islam. Any other line of conduct on their part must condemn the Muslim world to live under the tutelage of foreign powers indefinitely, therefore in a perpetual state of subjection” and inferiority, which would essentially corrupt it and make it subject to the domination of the peoples of the West for ever.

If the task of modern Muslim thinkers is so far from easy it is glorious. It calls, indeed, for much of perseverance, self-denial, courage and above all, faith a faith that never wavers in the cause of E Al-Islam; a faith, ardent and absolute, which shall arm our men of intellect, become our champions, with all the, confidence in themselves which they must have in order to perform their heavy task, It calls for high moral qualities; without which Muslim thinkers can claim no right to exist at all.”<sup>[5]</sup>

After the Industrial Revolution of Europe the European imperialist, forces were successful in subjugating many countries particularly in the Asian and African continents and these countries had to adapt Western ways of life willy nilly. Among the subjugated nations the Muslim countries are paramount. A few Muslim thinkers no doubt adapted the Western ways but the others continued advising their countrymen to have a balanced attitude towards the Western technology and culture. In the context of the Indo Pakistan sub-continent, Sayyid Ahmed Khan, Sayyid Amir Ali and Iqbal seem to be most important in view of their contribution to Islamic thought and also by virtue of their interest in Western culture versus Islam. But Sayyid Ahmed Khan favoured to absorb the Western culture whereas Sayyid Amir Ali and Allama Iqbal wanted adaptation of Western knowledge but as far as the culture is concerned in their opinion the Islamic culture should prevail in the lives of the Muslims and they did not favour to imitate unnecessary and outward peculiarities of Western culture which have split the life in many parts and particularly this culture adheres to secularism which bifurcates the religion and politics i.e. church and State have their different functions.

When we look at the contemporary philosophical scene the philosophies of fundamentalism, modernism and existentialism permit and most of the Muslim philosophers follow the position of Sayyid Amir Ali and Allama

Iqbal e.g. Sayyid Qutd and Muhammad al-Bshi among the modern Arab philosophers who have the same attitude to the West. Sayyid Qutd is very critical of the Western civilization and has argued in his many works that the Muslim can solve their religion and not with the aid of the Western thought. Muhammad al-Bahi in his arguments follows Sayyid Qutd and so is the case of other Arab Muslim philosophers like Dr. Taha Hussain, Ali Adbur Razid, Khaliq d. Muhammad Khalid and Abbas Mehmud-ul Addad. They may be followers of and philosophical current but all of them agreed that a Muslim society can adapt modern changes of life within the framework of Islam, adapt new ways of life and can solve them in the thgil of it.<sup>[6]</sup>

Positivism and socialism have emerged to be the new trends of international importance and those have influenced the modern Muslim society also. Positivism favours application of of scientific ways and new modes in the philosophical, moral and social problems of man and as Shidli Shummayyil (b. 1917) writes in his works positivism shuld not be ignored by Muslim society; rather the Muslims should take lead in it. But many contemporary thinkers have a westernized brerednisite to positivism wish the orthodox Muslims would not favoured.

Socialism has been catching the interest of many Muslim thinkers and philosophers but the Muslims who have supported this system of life they have actually favoured the economic teachings of the Islamic faith otherwise Marxist socialism in any form did not have harmony with any religion; thus Prof. Majid Fakhry ends his work “History of Islamic Philosophy” (second edition 1983) with the following remarks:

“In conclusion, we might note that the struggle between fundamentalists, humanists, positivists, and socialists continues to dominate the intellectual scene today. The role of religion, as illustrated both by the advent of the Khomayni movement in Iraq, or the recrudescence of Wahhabism in Sa’sdi Arabia, continues to be decisive in shaping intellectual or political attitudes. Most of these movements, although thoroughly- conditioned by contemporary Western ideologies or methodologies, can be shown to have some relation to the perennial task of philosophical analysis or rational enquiry, initiated by the first genuine philosopher of Islam in the ninth century, Al-Kindi,<sup>[7]</sup> with whose name this history is fittingly closed.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Leaving aside the transcendental discussions which were enunciated by the Muslim philosophers from Al-Kindi to the philosophers of our times, on the empirical side, all agree that Muslim society should accept the changes of all times and should assimilate new trends in the more perspective way so that the society may not be termed as unadjustable to the new modes of life, The general work of Roland Robertson on sociology under the caption of “Meaning and Change”, due to these reasons, begins like this:

“In recent years there have been a number of significant and much discussed attempts by social theorists to generalize about a perceived crisis in two major aspects of modern societies. The first of these is pivoted upon the problematic nature of the relationship between received culture and the operation of social institutions; while the second has to do with modes of individual existence. In the first case the problem is seen as residing in the decline in the authoritativeness and legitimacy of received culture, in the second case the problem inheres in questions concerning styles of relating to society and modern life in general. We can thus spew in two phrases of there being great concern, on the one hand with cultural authority on, the other hand, with personal identity. Even more briefly we can speak of there being a perceived problem of meaning. The problematic, nature of meaning has been presumably rendered thus through certain changes in the fairly recent history of the relevant societies.”<sup>[9]</sup>

A Western orientalist has remarked on this point as under:

“The Islamic religious structure, true to its egalitarian principles and conscience, had never countenanced any form of external organization of any kind of hierarchy. Although it recognized Ijma, consensus of the doctors, as a valid source of the doctrine, there was neither council nor Shura to promulgate its decisions. The volitional element that runs through all the pre-Ottoman religious institutions, and that made their efficacy dependent on their appeal to the will rather than on careful regulation of duties and powers, was naturally at its strongest in this sphere. To ‘broaden down from precedent to precedent’ was characteristic of Islamic usage long before the birth of the British constitution. Each forward step was secured by tacit assent on the part of those who were most qualified to expression opinion, and from whom the rank and file took their cue. No one was prevented from

opposing and trying to gain support for his opposition, but within a generation or two, controversy on the point at issue would die out”.<sup>[10]</sup>

It is actually the principle of movement or Ijtihad which keeps the ‘Muslim society in harmony with new trends of life within the broad frame work of the Islamic teachings. In his famous lecture on this topic Allama Iqbal highlights the new challenges to Islam ( see the last lines of his lecture) in which he refers to the imperialistic designs of the West, the signs, of awakening of the world of Islam particularly the collective Ijtihad of the Turks, like this:

“Equipped with penetrative thought and fresh experiences, the world of Islam should courageously proceed to the work of reconstruction before them. This work of reconstruction, however, has a far more serious aspect than mere adjustment in modern conditions of life. The Great European War bringing in its wake the awakening of Turkey the element of stability in the world of Islam as a French writer has recently described her, and the new economic experiment tried in the neighborhood of Muslim Asia, must open our eyes to the inner meaning and destiny of Islam. Humanity needs three things to-day a spiritual interpretation of the universe, spiritual emancipation of the individual, and basic principles of a universal import directing the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis. Modern Europe has, no doubt, built idealistic systems on these lines, but experience shows that truth revealed through pure reason is incapable of bringing that fire of living conviction which personal revelation alone can bring. This is the reason why pure thought has so little influenced men, while religion has always elevated individuals, and transformed whole societies. The idealism of Europe never became a living factor on her life and the result is a perverted ego seeking itself through mutually intolerant democracies whose sole function is to exploit the poor on the interest of the rich. Believe me, Europe to-day is the greatest hindrance in the way of man’s ethical advancement. The Muslim on the other hand, is in possession of these ultimate ideas on the basis of a revelation, which, speaking from the inmost depths of life, internalizes its own apparent externality. With him the spiritual basis of life is a matter of conviction for which even the last enlightened man among us can easily lay down his life; and in view of the basic idea of Islam that there can be no further revelation binding on man, we ought to be spiritually one of the most

emancipated peoples on earth. Early Muslims emerging out of the spiritual slavery of pre-Islamic Asia were not in a position to realize the true significance of this basic idea. Let the Muslim of to-day appreciate his position, reconstruct his social life in the light of ultimate principles, and evolve, out of the hitherto partially revealed purposes of Islam, that spiritual democracy which is the ultimate aim of Islam.<sup>»[11]</sup>

### **THUS THE MUSLIM SOCIETY CAN ACCEPT ALL THE CHALLENGES OF THE MODERN CHANGES**

However this question is very important for the Muslim Society scattered in the world to ponder over the effects of adaptation of modern technology and the preservation of the entity of the Muslim culture on the same time i.e. not to accept the bad effects of the Western culture and also to visualize the industrialization and urbanization processes in the Muslim countries alike. The principle of movements in Islam i.e. Ijtihad will go on meeting such challenges if the Muslim Ulema and intelligentsia do not cease to think. Let us pray that God should bless us all with the courage to respond to the modern changes in the befitting manners.

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[1] ) 164: ii

[2] The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam (edition 1965, Lahore, pages 146 to 180).

[3] The Quarterly Islamic Culture, Hyderabad Deccan (pages 111 and 112).

[4] The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam (6 lectures, page-156).

[5] The Quarterly Islamic Culture (pages 134 and 135).

[6] A History of Islamic Philosophy, New York, 1983 (2nd edition) (pages 348-367).

[7] Al-Kindi lived in 3rd Century Al-Hijra/9<sup>th</sup> Century A. C.

[8] A History of Islamic Philosophy (page 367).

<sup>[9]</sup> Meaning and Change, Roland Robertson, Oxford 1978 (page -3).

<sup>[10]</sup> Quoted in the Quarterly Iqbal Review, Karachi, October, 1962 (article by Dr. S.M. Yusuf).

<sup>[11]</sup> 'The Reconstruction of Religion Thought in Islam (Lecture-6, ending line' pages 178 to 180).