

Pluralism and Multiculturalism: an Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

This article attempts to reconceptualize the theories of pluralism, ethnicity and multiculturalism by analyzing the present predicament of Muslims and their mode of organization. However, this cannot be done in isolation from the normative theory, which is grounded in the Islamic sources and worldview. It provides an analytical insight into the interface of unity and diversity and limitation of achieving a harmonious relationship between them in the modern western societies. Ideals of the western social theory are critiqued through the Islamic ideals to conceptualize alternative way of socio-political organization.

For you, your religion and for me, mine. (Holy Qur'an 109:6)

The enlightenment project assumed that the answers to all questions relating to the universe, society, and human nature could be expressed in a single, universal, and rational frame of discourse. In keeping with the legacy of the Enlightenment, western social scientists, in the first half of the twentieth century, regarded modernization as a universal, homogenising process and held it as a universal solvent. During the 1950s and 60s modernization theory confidently asserted that all questions of economic, political and social backwardness would be resolved by progress towards integration in a world economic system defined by the western model. Daniel Lerner argued that the non-western world could save itself by adapting to the paradigm of modernization.¹ However, this euphoria dissipated in the wake of developments that took place in the West as well

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as in the Third World from the 1970s onwards. Sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists became increasingly aware of the world-wide resurgence of ethnic consciousness and the changing demographic character of many western countries as a result of extensive international Emigration. The recognition of the existence of extensive ethnic diversities within modern nation-states is manifested in the growing popularity of the terms pluralism, multiculturalism and ethnicity.

Three significant dimensions of pluralism in the contemporary context may be noted. First, most nation-states in the western world as well as in Asia and Africa are increasingly being viewed, not as culturally homogeneous, but as ethnically diverse and pluralistic in character. Secondly, the question of the integration of ethnic minorities into the cultural mainstream of the majority population is seen as problematic and contentious. Thirdly, it is widely recognized that pluralism and multiculturalism not only characterize most nation-states of the modern world but also entail a set of moral premises and value-orientations, namely, peaceful co-existence, tolerance, and respect for human and community rights.

Plural societies may be defined as those that contain multiple ethnic groups within a shared economy and a centralized political system.³ The post-war period witnessed an unprecedented wave of migrations across countries and continents. These migrations, which are continuing apace, have brought about a growing multiplicity of religions, languages and cultural traditions within and across national boundaries and have challenged the notion of homogeneous national cultures. Most countries in Europe and North America, as well as in Asia and Africa, may now be characterised as plural. Great Britain, for example, is now projected as a plural, multicultural and polyethnic state. Wales, Scotland, Ireland and England scrupulously maintain their separate identities. The case of North America is more or less the same. American Bureau of Census projections in the United States indicate that the proportion of non-Whites in the US will increase to almost half (47 per cent) by the year 2050. In seven of the ten largest cities in the US, people of African, Latin American, Caribbean and Asian backgrounds constituted more than half of the population in 1990. In a speech delivered at the University of California in June 1997, President Bill Clinton described the United States as a multi-racial society.³ Australia has officially declared itself multicultural. France has become a multicultural society despite the official policy of assimilation and integration. Fourteen million French citizens –nearly a

quarter of the country's population have at least one immigrant parent or grand-parent. Many western countries have witnessed the resurgence of indigenous cultures in recent years. In France, for example, the revival of indigenous cultures is marked by the proliferation of Breton-language schools, the rising popularity of Celtic music, the boom of regional tourism, the growing cult of local cuisine and the spread of provincial festivals. The cultural assertiveness on the part of Spain's Basque minority has become increasingly violent in recent years.

This paper does not seek to establish, in an apologetic vein, the compatibility between the Islamic ethos and the modern spirit of pluralism and multiculturalism. Furthermore, I do not propose to argue, superficially and dogmatically, that "Islamic pluralism" is far superior to contemporary western pluralism. Rather, the paper is based on the following two premises.

(i) Some of the past societies and civilizations made a serious attempt to come to terms with the vexing issue of cultural diversity and sought to resolve it, not through forced assimilation and homogenization, but in terms of the principles of tolerance, peaceful co-existence and respect for human and community rights. I have suggested that some useful lessons can be drawn, for the benefit of contemporary multicultural societies, from certain fruitful experiments in harmonious living and multicultural co-existence that were carried out in such societies.

(ii) I have tried to show that the prototype or model of Islamic society that existed during the time of Prophet Muhammad and the four caliphs sought to reconcile the conflicting demands of diversity and unity in a humane and democratic framework. This pristine model of Islamic society has inspired and sustained generations of Muslim scholars, sages, reformers and revolutionaries across the world. I have argued that this model has much to offer to contemporary plural and multicultural societies.

The Interface of Diversity and Unity

A comparative study of history affords us four important insights into the dynamics of human society and civilization. First, history bears testimony to the extensive interaction and exchange of ideas, values, technology, social institutions and cultural patterns among societies and civilizations. Secondly, most societies and civilizations have sought to preserve their unity and solidarity by forcibly assimilating the ethnic minorities into the mainstream culture. Thirdly, in the wake of imperial conquests in the

ancient and medieval periods and the colonial expansion of recent times, the vanquished people were either enslaved or driven out of their ancestral lands or simply massacred. Fourthly, despite the over-bearing pressure of assimilation, ethnic minorities have by and large preserved and maintained their distinctive identities and cultural traditions. In other words, ethnic consciousness and identities cannot be suppressed for too long.

The assimilationist and homogenizing tendency has been all too evident in the ancient, medieval and even modern periods. I will cite certain examples and illustrations, particularly from western history, in support of this observation. A particularly dismal illustration of western intolerance is provided by the history of the Iberian peninsula. Muslims, who ruled over Spain for over seven centuries and made it the pride of the western world in the Middle Ages, were relentlessly persecuted and finally hounded out of the country by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492. They were given the choice to either convert to Christianity or to leave the country. Most of them preferred migration to forced conversion. Many of them perished in the long and arduous journey to North Africa. Mosques, schools, colleges and hospices were vandalised and razed to the ground. A number of mosques, including the famed mosque of Cordoba, were converted into churches and cathedrals.

Many western countries contain sizeable ethnic minorities: the Flemish in Belgium, Catalans and Basques in Spain, the Quebecois and the aborigines in Canada, the indigenous Sami people in the Scandinavian countries, the French and Italians in Switzerland. In most cases, these ethnic minorities were involuntarily assimilated into the culture of the dominant national groups, by means of conquest or colonization. European conquest in the New World resulted in the enslavement and even decimation of whole native populations. The number of native Americans at the time of the European conquest is estimated to have been between two and five million. In the four centuries following this contact, the native population was reduced to 250,000 due to forced migration and deportation, enslavement and genocide. They were exposed to diseases introduced by the European settlers —small pox, measles, influenza, typhus, diphtheria —against which they had no immunity.

The Muslims of Central Asia faced persecution and oppression over a long period, first at the hands of the Czars and then under the Soviet regime. In the 17th century, Czar Alexi Mikhailovich banned conversion to Islam and prescribed severe punishment for those who embraced Islam. The Tatar

Muslims of Poland were bitterly persecuted by the Czarist regime. Kazakhstan was occupied by Russia in 1730. Kazakhstan has a rich soil and vast fodder lands which led to migration and settlement of large numbers of Russians. By 1914 almost half of the population of Kazakhstan was Russian. On the eve of the Russian Revolution in 1917, Kazakh Muslims were estimated to number about four million. In 1929, their lands were confiscated by the communist rulers, as a result of which one million Kazakh Muslims died of hunger. Thousands of Kazakhs were massacred on the orders of Stalin, leading to a massive decimation of the Kazakh population. Stalin tried to eradicate the presence of Islam in the former Soviet Union by closing down mosques, madaris, and Sufi hospices, by proscribing the observance of religious rituals, and by banning the use of Arabic and replacing it by the Latin script and then the Cyrillic script. There were 26,000 mosques in the Soviet Union in 1917. This number was reduced to just 400 by 1985.³

In Ethiopia, Muslims were persecuted by the monophysite Christians. During the nineteenth century, Emperor Yohannis razed mosques and the Muslims of Gondar were given the choice to either embrace Christianity or to leave the dominions of the emperor.

The most horrifying manifestation of intolerance and barbarism in recent years was witnessed in Nazi Germany. Jews, Gypsies and Slavs were stigmatised and demonised and subjected to every kind of humiliation. The Jews were eliminated from public life, from the armed forces, and from state education. Ultimately, six million of them were ruthlessly massacred. During the Second World War, most of the Tatar Muslim intelligentsia was exterminated by the Nazis.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Muslims, Christians and Jews lived together in peace and harmony, thanks to the tolerant and benevolent rule of the Ottoman emperors, for over 500 years. This happy phase of pluralism and peaceful co-existence was brought to a tragic end in 1992. The famous bridge at Mostar, which was built in 1566 by the Turkish emperor Suleyman the Magnificent and which linked the different ethnic quarters of the city, was destroyed by the Serb and Croat militia. Thousands of Muslims were brutally massacred and forced to leave their homes. This horrifying genocide was ironically described as ethnic cleansing.⁴ The tragedy of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the wake of the break-up of Yugoslavia exposed the hypocrisy of the western powers and undermined the credibility of international agencies and organizations, including the

United Nations. The second phase of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo once again brought into relief the dismal record of the West in respect of tolerance and human rights.

The assimilationist model of political or national integration takes the nation-state as its ideal and holds that no polity or nation can maintain stability and solidarity unless its members share a common, homogeneous national culture, including common moral and religious values, cultural practices and a common language. Undoubtedly, a culturally homogeneous society has its advantages and strengths. It facilitates a sense of community and solidarity, makes inter-personal communication easier and can mobilise the loyalties of its members with ease. However, it also has a tendency to become closed, intolerant, averse to change, claustrophobic and oppressive, and to discourage differences and dissent.⁵

The concept of "nation" in Europe was born in the aftermath of the French Revolution. It made cultural homogeneity a necessary pre-requisite of the nation-state. When the state was exported to the non-western world, the cultural assumptions of the nation-state followed in its wake. However, in the culturally heterogeneous societies of today this model of the nation-state is not applicable.⁶

The experience of most countries in the western world, as elsewhere, shows that assimilation has been a failure in the long run. For example, despite the pressure of homogenization and assimilation, the Jews have scrupulously maintained their religious and cultural identity. In Central Asia, even during the heyday of communism, the Azeris, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Turkomans, Uzbeks and Kirghiz assiduously preserved their ethnic identity. They fought against the Russians for centuries to maintain their separate identity. The Caucasians (the Chechens, Inguish, Daghestanis and Tartars), despite their physical affinity with the Russians, have always defined their separate identity on the basis of religion and culture.⁷ In the 1980s, the Bulgarian government promulgated a decree, forcing all minorities, including Muslims, to Bulgarize family names. The move did not succeed and resulted in the migration of over three hundred thousand Bulgarian Muslims to Turkey. As a nation of immigrants, the United States has long insisted on the "swift assimilation of aliens" and the ideal of the "melting pot". However, from the 1960s onwards, the assertion of ethnic identity by the African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, the indigenous people and Asian Americans has put a question mark on the ideal of assimilation. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan have

characteristically remarked that "the point about the melting pot is that it did not happen."⁸ Since the French Revolution, the immigrants in France have been expected to forsake their culture, language and identity in favor of a homogeneous and typically French way of life. The model of integration worked fairly well in absorbing Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Polish immigrants earlier in the century. But it has failed in the case of Arab, African and Asian immigrants who began entering France in large numbers in the post-War period. "Today integration is a total failure", says Jean-Francois Cope, mayor of Meaux, 54 kilometres south-east of Paris, which counts 29 different ethnic groups among its 50,000 residents.

Limitations and Problems of Plural Societies

The emergence of multiculturalism as a social and political reality can be traced to the 1970s. Multiculturalism is essentially a contemporary response to the fact of cultural diversity, which is conspicuous not only across countries and continents but also within the nation-state. It is worthwhile to draw a distinction between multiculturalism and multi-culturalism. Multiculturalism connotes the fact that a given society or country is composed of many diverse ethnic groups who have their own values, ethos and cultural traditions. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, refers to a political and social philosophy based on a positive and normative response to the fact of cultural diversity. A heterogeneous country may respond to the fact of cultural diversity in either of two ways. It may perceive cultural diversity as a hindrance to national unity and may thus impose cultural uniformity and homogenization on its people, as is the case with China. Or it may look upon cultural diversity as a source of its creative potential and strength and accordingly may value and cherish it. Multiculturalism holds that cultural homogeneity is not a pre-requisite for national unity and solidarity.⁹ According to Parekh, multiculturalism is characterised by three salient features.

(i) Human beings are culturally embedded in the sense that they grow up and live within a culturally structured world and organise their lives and social relations in terms of a culturally derived system of meaning and significance.

(ii) Different cultures represent different systems of meaning and visions of the good life. One's way of life is likely to be richer if one also enjoys access to others, if one has an attitude of openness towards other cultures. Openness and access to other cultures expands one's moral and intellectual horizon.

(iii) Every culture is internally plural and reflects a continuing conversation between its different traditions and strands of thought. A culture grows out of interactions with other cultures. Its identity is plural, fluid and open.¹⁰

Undoubtedly, plural and multicultural societies have provided a better and humane alternative to societies founded on forced uniformity and homogenization. They symbolise a valuable and worthwhile experiment in peaceful and harmonious co-existence among people belonging to different ethnic groups. The protagonists of multiculturalism tend to draw a rather idealised picture of multicultural societies and gloss over their inherent limitations and shortcomings. My own view is that most contemporary multicultural societies are passing through a phase of transition and are therefore faced with a number of serious problems.

A basic ingredient of a good and humane society is equality and belief in the brotherhood of mankind. Unfortunately, many multicultural societies have not freed themselves from the shackles of ethnocentrism, racism and anti-Semitism. Till the 1960s the white majority in the United States denied the African Americans the right to vote. Until recently, Canada did not extend citizenship rights to its Native American population. By and large, the perception and experience of ethnic minorities about the success, effectiveness and viability of multicultural societies is at best ambivalent and at worst negative.

Contemporary multicultural societies are subject to the widespread and pervasive influence of the processes of migration, urbanization and globalization. International immigration has been responsible for a radical redistribution of the world's population. Over the past ten years, more than 80 percent of population growth in Greece and Austria and more than 40 percent in Canada and Australia has come from international immigrations. Currently, there are over 20 million legal immigrants in Western Europe along with an estimated 20 million illegal immigrants. Every year, more than one million legal immigrants and a substantial number of illegal immigrants enter the United States. International immigration has given rise to two inter-related problems. On the one hand, it has engendered tensions and conflicts between the migrants and the host society. The members of the host society feel that their cherished values, traditions, ethos, and social institutions are being threatened by the influx of migrants. On the other hand, the integration of immigrants in the host society has become increasingly problematic. Most immigrants live in segregated ethnic enclaves in the poorer quarters of cities where poverty, unemployment, crime, juvenile delinquency and drug trafficking abound.

In France, for example, the rate of unemployment among North African immigrants is 40 percent compared to 11 percent among youths of French descent. Faced with such formidable problems and living in the midst of a people whose behavior is a mixture of resentment, mistrust, anger and hostility, the immigrants experience alienation, despair and loneliness. The problem is compounded in the case of the descendants of immigrants born and brought up in western countries. The second generation of immigrants lives in a kind of a cultural no man's land between the host country that is reluctant to accept them and the homeland of their parents which is physically and emotionally distant from them.

Most western societies have experienced social disorganization, dislocation, and fragmentation in the lives of individuals as well as in social institutions. This is particularly reflected in the institutions of marriage and family. The exaggerated ethic of individualism and unfettered freedom have undermined these institutions. A survey of marriage in more than thirty European countries has found that living together without formally getting married is becoming increasingly common in all European countries. In Sweden, for example, more than 25 per cent of all couples are living together without marriage. About half of the babies in Sweden are born to unwed mothers. In the United Kingdom, one in every three births is outside the fold of marriage. The cult of individualism and unrestricted freedom has seriously undermined the stability of marriage in western countries. In recent years, the US and most of the European countries have experienced a dramatic increase in the divorce rate. It is estimated that in the US nearly half of all marriages end in divorce. In the UK and France, over one-third of all marriages result in divorce. Nearly half of Swedish marriages end in divorce. It is estimated that in the next 25 years, if the present trend continues, approximately 40 percent of marriages in the United States and Europe will end in divorce. An alarming consequence of the disintegration of the family is the dramatic rise in the number of lone-parent families. In 1993, the number of lone-parent families in the UK was estimated to be over a million, or 20 per cent of all households. There are neighbourhoods in Britain where two-thirds of homes with children lack fathers. In the US, 25 per cent of all families are lone-parent families. The consequences of family breakdown, divorce, and living in lone-parent families are particularly disastrous for children. Throughout the world, the lack of fathers is a key factor in the impoverishment of children. Evidence suggests that children from lone-parent families do not perform as well in

school as children from two-parent families and that they often have behavioral and psychological problems. In addition, they tend to become victims of delinquency and drug addiction. A widespread concern is being voiced in western society about the increase in violence perpetrated within the family, which is mostly directed at wives and children. An eminent British sociologist, Anthony Giddens, says in exasperation: "The home is in fact the most dangerous place in modern society."¹¹

In the industrialized countries of the West, the relatively stagnant birth rates and rising life expectancy have brought about a significant increase in the proportion of elderly people. In spite of social security, better standards of living and improved health care facilities, the problems of the elderly continue to cause concern. The acceleration in international migrations has added to the gravity of the problem. The exaggerated ethic of individualism and freedom, the mindless pursuit of material prosperity, the unprecedented spurt in spatial mobility, and the disintegration of family, neighborhood and community have contributed to the plight of the elderly. Many elderly people in the western countries live alone or in old age homes. Many have a lonely life and are often faced with depression and despair.

More than a century ago, the German sociologist Ferdinand Toennies observed that the move from the countryside to the city was accompanied by the breakdown of stable forms of community. He argued that the process of urbanization transformed the character of social interaction: it shifted intimate and stable relationships between friends and neighbors to impersonal relationships of organizations and associations. In other words, city life engendered a greater sense of individuality, detachment, and atomization. The phenomenal expansion of cities and the unprecedented pace of technological change in the western world has further reinforced urban anonymity and individualism. A strange and disturbing manifestation of this phenomenon is the tendency in some parts of the western world towards what may be characterised as social isolationism. In the United States, for example, there has been a growing tendency to isolate oneself from neighbors. In several parts of the country, clusters of private communities have come up within cities. Currently, more than 32 million people in the US live under the regulations of home-owners' associations with private amenities and services such as security, recreation centers, and even schools. Paradoxically, the increasing use of the internet has led, on the one hand, to a remarkable compression of time and space

and, on the other, has engendered a tendency towards social isolationism.

The ethos of globalization has been largely derived from the dominant values of American society such as the glorification of freedom and individualism, the compulsive pursuit of material prosperity, and consumerism. The high rate of economic development in Western countries has resulted in substantial leisure time as well as disposable income. In the absence of an ethic of moral accountability, consumerism is the inevitable option in an affluent society. The world-wide diffusion of American pop culture is represented by fast food restaurants which are mushrooming across the world, by the global popularity of T-shirts, sneakers, baggy jeans, baseball caps, and Hollywood films and television soaps. McDonald's, a multi-national corporation based in Oak Brooke, Illinois, has 18400 restaurants in over a hundred countries. McDonald's restaurants are opening at the rate of six a day around the world. Entertainment around the world is dominated by American movie corporations and American-made products. The seven US-based movie and television giants, Disney, Warner Brothers, MGM-UA, Sony, Paramount, and 20th Century Fox, monopolize the world's entertainment industry. Even in small and poor countries, illegally copied videos of Hollywood's latest blockbusters are freely available.

The powerful Western media project western products, cultural symbols, and images, such as MTV, McDonald's, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Barbie dolls, Coca-Cola, Levi jeans, Mickey Mouse, as global ones, purportedly aimed at global audiences. The promotion of western culture in the guise of global culture sends out the subtle message, especially to the younger generation in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, that the value system and cultural patterns of the West are superior and preferable to those of the non-Western world. This cultural invasion, effected through the world-wide network of satellite communications and American-made video films, poses a serious threat to the value systems, cultural traditions, and ethnic identities of the Third World. It has engendered value conflict, disorientation, and ambivalence in traditional societies, particularly in the younger generation.

Some scholars have spoken of globalizing patterns of illness and morbidity. There seems to be a convergence towards similar patterns of morbidity and mortality throughout the globe, with the growing incidence of cardiovascular diseases and cancer. Across the world, globalization has encouraged and promoted a certain lifestyle marked by sedentary

occupations, smoking, use of alcohol, consumption of high-cholesterol foods, colas and junk foods, and lack of exercise. The high-tech promotion of colas and junk food, which supply empty calories with no nutritional value, leads to the accumulation of saturated fats, cholesterol, and salt in the body. This results in obesity and puts people at greater risk of cardiovascular diseases.¹² Globalizing pressures emanating from the increased pace of life, working in large organisations and living in huge, impersonal urban milieus have significantly contributed to increased levels of stress. There is growing evidence to the effect that stress makes one more vulnerable to immunologically-related illnesses. Stress has a critical bearing on the onset and course of a variety of illnesses, including coronary heart disease, diabetes, skin diseases, a decrease in digestive and eliminative processes, and respiratory ailments.

One of the significant features of our globalizing era is the unprecedented rate and scale of change. A faster pace of life creates problems of adaptation, adjustment, coping and stress. Technological and social changes are taking place so rapidly that most people find it difficult to adapt to them. It is bringing about a dizzying disorientation among them. More and more people in western societies now feel that their lives are rushed all the time. The fast pace of life has brought about what is described as the chronic fatigue syndrome.

As a result of the fast pace of life, people are becoming progressively desensitized to the importance of continuity and wholeness in their lives. Unable to cope with the accelerated pace of life, many people find short cuts to happiness through steroids, psychotropic drugs, sex, live-in relationships, and virtual sex on the Internet. The power of speed undermines the value of those experiences that require time and slowness to develop: psychological maturity, genuine love and sympathy, patience, creativity, self-actualization, self-sacrifice, insight, the building of meaningful and lasting human relationships, the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility, and the cultivation of moral values.

The Islamic Model of Society

Every society rests on a set of premises or presuppositions relating to human nature, the universe, ultimate reality, the structure and source of knowledge and the guiding principles of behavior. These premises, relating to ontology, epistemology and ethics, constitute a society's ethos or world-view. The Islamic model of society is guided and inspired by certain fundamental principles which are outlined in the following.

Tawhid: Tawhid refers to the oneness, omnipotence and supremacy of God. In the Islamic view, God is transcendent, but not like an external despot, high in the skies, who is unconcerned about the fate of man. He, as the Qur'an says, is closer to man than the artery of his neck. He is the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful. He is not a parochial or racial deity like Jehovah, but the Lord of the universe and of all mankind. He is not an enigmatic entity with an ambiguous status, like the Father in the Christian Trinity. He is the one and only God, who "begetteth not, nor is He begotten; and there is none like unto Him", as the Qur'an (112 : 3-4) says. He is beyond the finitude and imperfections of human or other tangible forms.

In the Islamic view, the relationship between God and man is direct and personal. Unlike other religious systems, Islam does not recognize any priestly class, which has exclusive access to sacred knowledge and which mediates between God and man. God Almighty, in all His mercy and love for mankind, is approachable and accessible in equal measure to every individual and to all sections of humanity, without any external mediation.

Universalism: Islam is not a racial or parochial religion, confined to a particular people or to a given period of history. It is universal in its message, appeal and scope. Islamic civilization encompasses people of varied racial and ethnic stocks, who speak a variety of languages and dialects and live under divergent ecological and social conditions. However, the pervasiveness of the Islamic tradition cuts across and transcends the diversity and heterogeneity of Muslim populations. The tenets, rituals, moral precepts, and institutions of Islamic civilization have moulded the otherwise divergent Muslim peoples into a universal community or ummah.

The universalism of the Islamic faith is reflected in its view of the universality of divine revelation as well as in its relationship with other religious traditions. According to the Islamic belief, prophets and messengers have been sent by God to people in all parts of the world (Qur'an 16:36). Since their essential teachings were the same, Muslims are required to respect and believe in all of them.

As a universal faith and civilization, Islam possesses not only inner strength and resilience but also substantial openness, dynamism and flexibility. In the course of its onward march, Islamic civilization has incorporated several regional traits and traditions into its matrix. Thus, in all parts of the Islamic world one can notice a richly textured synthesis of

the Great tradition of Islam and the local, regional traditions. However, it is the Great tradition of Islam which dominates the cultural landscape of the Islamic world and which binds the Muslim people together.

Historicity: The unbroken continuity of the Islamic tradition, in ideas, beliefs, institutional structure and behavior patterns, is remarkable and unparalleled in the religious and cultural history of mankind. This continuity was ensured through the planned and systematic preservation of the original teachings of Islam and their faithful transmission from generation to generation.

Unlike other religious leaders, Prophet Muhammad lived in the full light of history. His Companions took great care to collect, preserve and transmit a remarkably wide range of information about his message, precepts, behaviour and even personal habits. The preservation of the original teachings of Islam through a planned process of memorization and writing had far-reaching consequences for the continuity as well as the world-wide diffusion of the Islamic faith.

Rationalism: Islam views man as essentially a rational being. The Qur'an repeatedly urges man to exercise his rational and imaginative faculties and to ponder over the mysteries of nature, historical events and the complexities of the human psyche. The Qur'an invites mankind to reaffirm its primordial covenant with God, not through blind faith or the dead weight of tradition, but through observation and reflection. Islam repudiated the irrational beliefs and superstitions of pagan Arabs and substituted for them a rational system of beliefs, ideas, rituals and cultural patterns.

Humanism: The idea of the divine as well as the conception of human nature in Islam is permeated by a deep humanistic ethos. God is the absolute epitome of kindness and mercy towards mankind and man is His vicegerent. He has been endowed by God with freedom and moral choice. Though man is expected to submit himself to the will of God and is accountable to Him for his actions, this obligation does not stretch beyond his capacity.

The Islamic Shariah follows the path of ease and convenience, and not one of hardship and inconvenience for people. The Prophet's own life exemplifies humanism of the highest order.

A significant dimension of the Islamic ethos is its remarkable tolerance of other religions and cultural traditions. This cardinal principle is enshrined in the Qur'anic verse "There is no compulsion in religion" (2 : 256).

Holism: The Islamic faith is characterized by a holistic orientation as well as balance and moderation. Its comprehensive and all-pervasive ethos covers all spheres of human life, both temporal and spiritual. Unlike Christianity, Islam makes no differentiation between what is God's and what is Caesar's, between the external world and the inner world. It does not posit a rigid duality between the sacred and the profane. The Islamic faith avoids the extremes of renunciation and self-abnegation, on the one hand, and excessive self-indulgence, on the other. It underscores the value of balance and moderation.

The Islamic tenet of moral accountability is of special importance. As the vicegerent of God on earth, man is accountable to Him for all his deeds. Though the world and all its bounties have been created for man, he is required to utilize the God-given resources judiciously and with moderation. The principle of moral accountability provides a corrective to the wasteful consumption of resources.

Human Nature in Islamic Perspective

According to the Islamic view, man is not the product of a blind process of evolution. Rather, he has been created by God with a purpose. All men have descended from Adam, and are therefore equal before Him. All humans are born innocent, untainted by original sin or guilt. Man is born with a primordial nature. The Prophet is reported to have said: "There is not a new born who is not born in a state of nature. His parents make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian."

Man has been endowed with a reasoning faculty, self-consciousness, and moral choice. He has been created in the best of moulds and given dominion over all that is in the universe. According to the Islamic view, human nature is characterized by a certain duality or polarity. On the one hand, the human has been created from clay, a lowly substance (Qur'an 23:12; 32:7). On the other, God has breathed His soul into him (Qur'an 15:29). In addition, man has been given the freedom to exercise a choice between good and evil (Qur'an 76:3; 90:8-10). Thus, man has two kinds of potentialities: sublime and divine-like, on the one hand, and base and demonic, on the other.¹³ Man tends to be impatient and greedy (Qur'an 70:19). The Prophet is reported to have said that if the son of Adam happens to possess two valleys filled with wealth, he would still crave for a third. Likewise, man has a tendency to be ungrateful, niggardly, and contentious. He is prone to injustice and sometimes tends to make his desire

into god (Qur'an 45:23). This dual nature of man is illustrated in the story of Abel and Cain (Qur'an 5:27-31).

Islamic Egalitarianism

It cannot be gainsaid that a good society should be based on the principles of equality and brotherhood of mankind. Among all world religions Islam has the distinction of having clearly enunciated the ideals of human equality and brotherhood and having translated them into reality. The Qur'an says: "Mankind was one single community, and God sent unto them Messengers" (2:213). In his last sermon, the Prophet declared in explicit terms: "O people! Verily your Lord is One, and your father is one. All of you (were) created from Adam and Adam was created from dust. Beware! An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor is a non-Arab superior to an Arab. A dark-skinned man has no superiority over a white-skinned man, nor is a white-skinned man superior to an Arab, except in respect of fear of God" (Hamidullah, 1983:362).¹⁴

A significant aspect of Islamic egalitarianism is reflected in the humane treatment of slaves and their emancipation under the Islamic dispensation. During the early years of the Islamic era, slaves were obtained in the wake of legitimate and defensive wars. The institution of slavery, which was rampant in pre-Islamic Arabia, was temporarily continued with a view to providing shelter and succour to prisoners of war. The Prophet exhorted Muslims to deal with slaves in the most humane manner and to treat them like one's own family in respect of food, dress and education. He sought the gradual and ultimate eradication of the institution of slavery. The Qur'an says that liberating a slave is the best form of charity (90:11). The Prophet declared that the liberation of a slave ensures one's deliverance from hell-fire. A large number of slaves were set free by the Prophet as well as the Companions. Abd al-Rahman al-Awfi, for example, purchased thirty thousand slaves and set them free.

According to Islamic law, a freed slave and a free-born are equal in status. The Prophet got his cousin Zaynab married to his freed slave Zayd ibn Haritha. Islamic law stipulates that a slave has the right to purchase his freedom by paying some compensation to his master. It is remarkable that thousands of eminent scholars and sages rose from the ranks of freed slaves and their descendants.¹⁵

A significant dimension of Islamic egalitarianism is enshrined in the Islamic view of knowledge. The Prophet declared that the acquisition of

knowledge is an obligation on every believer. He said that, "wisdom is (like) the lost animal of a believer; wherever he finds it, he catches hold of it." The Prophet exhorted his followers to carry the torch of knowledge and learning far and wide and warned against concealing or withholding it. Islam opened the portals of knowledge to all and sundry: men and women, rich and poor, king and slave. It declared learning and piety to be the sole criteria of honor and nobility. In India, inequality was institutionalised through the caste system. The caste system upholds the inborn superiority of the priestly class of Brahmans, who are believed to be the guardians and custodians of sacred knowledge. Hinduism denies access to sacred knowledge to lower castes as well as women. In contrast, every Muslim has equal and unrestricted access to religious knowledge. There is no distinction or discrimination, in this or any other respect, between an Arab and a non-Arab, rich and poor, men and women.

Franz Rosenthal has perceptively observed that Islam's lasting and invaluable gift to mankind is that it made the hidden treasures of knowledge available and accessible to all sections of society. Islam's refreshingly open, dynamic and egalitarian approach to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge brought about revolutionary consequences not only for Islamic civilization but for humanity as a whole. The intellectual revolution ushered in under the aegis of Islamic civilization played a key role in the making of western civilization and the modern world.¹⁶

Islam's characteristically open and dynamic attitude towards the acquisition and pursuit of knowledge is exemplified in the efflorescence of science and technology in the Islamic world. A movement for the internationalization of science through the translations of scientific and philosophical works from India, Greece, Persia and Egypt was initiated during the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur (754-775). In the Academy of Science (*Bayt al-Hikmah*), set up by the Abbasid caliph al-Mamun in Baghdad in 832, a number of Indian works on medicine, astronomy, mathematics, astrology and philosophy were translated from Sanskrit into Arabic. The caliph Harun al-Rashid, who was a great patron of learning and scholarship, invited Hindu scholars to his court and commissioned them to translate Sanskrit works into Arabic. One of them was appointed as Director of Hospitals in Baghdad and another served as a personal physician to the royal family. Muhammad Musa al-Khwarizmi (d. 863), a renowned mathematician who invented algebra, expounded the Indian system of reckoning in his works.

The scientists and scholars who participated in the ambitious project of translating the classical scientific and philosophical heritage into Arabic included not only Muslims but also Jews, Christians, Magians, Sabaeans and Hindus. One of the most prolific translators, Hunayn ibn Ishaq or Johannitus (d. 877), was a Christian. He was appointed by the caliph al-Mamun as the head of Dar al-Hikmah or the Academy of Science. He also served as a personal physician to the caliph al-Mutawakkil. Yuhanna ibn Masaway (d. 857), another famous translator, was a Christian. Jurji ibn Bakhtishu (d. 830), who was employed as a court physician by the caliph al-Mansur, was also a Christian. Other eminent translators, such as Qusta ibn Luqa (d. 912) and Abu Bishr Matta (d. 940) professed the Christian faith. Ibn Maymun or Maimionides (d. 1204) was a Spanish Jew. Ali ibn Abbas al-Majusi (d. 994), an eminent scientist and translator, was a Magian. Thabit ibn Qurra (d. 901), a translator and scientist of repute, was a Sabaean from Harran.

The central importance of these translations is indicated by the fact that some of the most significant works of Greek science have been preserved only in their Arabic translations, while the original manuscripts have been lost. Thus, the seven volumes of Galen's Anatomy are extant only in the form of its Arabic translation by Hunayn ibn Ishaq. Roger Bacon, writing in 1292, acknowledged that almost all of Aristotle's works were available only in Arabic. In the introduction to his *Philosophae*, he observed that, without Arabic, Greek knowledge would have never reached the Europeans. It is noteworthy that some of the eminent European scholars and scientists who played a leading role in the flowering of the European Renaissance had studied under Muslim scientists at the universities of Cordoba and Cairo.

Society and State during the early Islamic period

In the Islamic perspective, society is not a self-regulating system nor does it have an independent reality of its own. Rather, it is viewed as a purposive creation, brought into being and regulated by God in accordance with divinely-ordained principles. Society, like the rest of nature, has not been created without meaning or purpose; it has been created by God for man's welfare and betterment. Since man has been endowed with the faculties of reasoning, self-consciousness and moral choice, he is expected to take advantage of God's bounties in keeping with the moral framework enshrined in the Islamic Shariah. Thus the Islamic view of society allows

ample scope for human intervention.¹⁷

Islam takes cognizance of cultural and ethnic diversities and views them as divinely ordained (Qur'an 30:22; 49:13). One can clearly discern a certain dialectic of plurality and universality in the Islamic tradition. Thus the Qur'an says that prophets have been sent to all parts of the world in all ages and that, notwithstanding the variations in time, space and the cultural context, their teachings were characterised by a fundamental unity and universality. Consequently, Muslims are required to believe in all the prophets and in all revealed scriptures. The Islamic tradition eschews xenophobia as well as solipsism. It has an open attitude towards other cultures and civilizations. This was exemplified in the life of the Prophet himself. He occasionally donned Roman and Persian attire and advised the use of Indian medicines. In the famous Battle of the Ditch, when Salman the Persian suggested the digging of a wide ditch, a Persian war strategy, around the city of Madinah, the Prophet readily accepted the idea. The Qur'an sets forth the principles of tolerance and peaceful co-existence in an explicit and unequivocal manner. It says, "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256), and, "for you, your religion and for me, mine" (109:6).

The principles of tolerance, peaceful co-existence and respect for human rights did not remain just pious hopes in the Islamic tradition; they were translated into reality by the Prophet and his Companions, especially the four caliphs. When the Prophet set up a city-state at Madinah, he drew up its constitution, which was committed to writing at his instance. This constitution included two significant passages: first, Muslims will have their religion, and the Jews will be entitled to their religion; secondly, the Jews will constitute a community with the Muslims. This covenant was extended, at a later date, to the Christians of Najran and the pagan Arabs. Thus the Pax Islamica included not only the Muslims but also the Jews, Christians and the pagan Arabs, and guaranteed to them religious, cultural, and judicial autonomy. In fact the Islamic state assumed responsibility for the maintenance and even defence of Jewish, Christian and pagan identities. The charter of rights and assurances issued to the Christian population of Najran by the Prophet included the following passage:

An assurance is hereby extended, on behalf of God and the Prophet, to the people of Najran, that their lives, religion, lands and wealth will be protected. No change in their existing conditions will be effected. Their rights will not be violated. Their commercial caravans and delegations will be protected.

No cardinal will be dismissed from his position, nor will an ascetic be denied a right to his way of life. The custodians of churches will face no interference in respect of their functions. The Christians will not be obliged to pay the tithe tax, nor will the Muslim army enter their areas.

The protection of minority rights under the Islamic dispensation has no parallel in the annals of history. The Prophet exhorted his followers to scrupulously protect the legitimate rights and privileges of the dhimmis (non-Muslim subjects of the Islamic state). He is reported to have said: "Whosoever oppresses any dhimmi, I shall be his prosecutor on the Day of Judgement." The attitude and behaviour of the Prophet towards non-Muslims exhibited remarkable tolerance, understanding and magnanimity. Some Jewish families lived in his neighbourhood in Madinah. If one of their children fell sick, he would visit the sick child. If their funeral passed through the streets of Madinah and the Prophet was around, he would stand up as a mark of respect for the deceased.

This attitude of tolerance and sympathy was continued by the four caliphs and the Companions. When Khalid ibn Walid made a treaty with the Christian population following the conquest of Hira during the caliphate of Abu Bakr, he gave the following written assurance to them:

And I have guaranteed the right that if an old person becomes incapable of working or has suffered a mishap or after having been rich has become poor so much so that his co-religionists start giving him alms, his jizya will be remitted. He and his children shall receive maintenance allowance from the public treasury as long as they live in our country.

It is remarkable that the occupation of Syria by the Muslim army during the caliphate of Abu Bakr met with no resistance from the local Christian population, who welcomed the Muslim soldiers not as invaders but as liberators. During the caliphate of Umar, some Muslims usurped a piece of land belonging to a Jew and constructed a mosque on the site. When the Caliph got to know about it he ordered the demolition of the mosque and the restoration of the land to the Jew.¹⁸ Caliph Umar used to consult non-Muslims in military and administrative matters. During the caliphate of Ali, the Muslim-occupied territories of the Byzantine empire faced internal strife. Emperor Constantine II sent a secret message to the Christian population in the Islamic state, urging them to rise in revolt against Islamic

rule and assuring them of his military support. The Christians, however, spurned the offer, saying: "These enemies of our religion are preferable to you."

The Islamic state guaranteed not only the safety of the lives and honour of the dhimmis and the protection of their religious beliefs and rituals but also the protection and maintenance of their personal laws, institutions and endowments.¹⁹ When Amr ibn al-As, a distinguished Companion of the Prophet, conquered Egypt, he allowed the properties and endowments attached to Christian churches to remain with the Christian custodians. The caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz sent a circular to his governors, which stated: "Pay attention to the conditions of the dhimmis and treat them with kindness. If any of them reaches old age and has no means of livelihood, you should take care of him. If he has contractual brethren, ask them to look after him. Apply retaliation if any body commits torts against him." An Umayyad caliph had appropriated a church to enlarge the Great Mosque at Damascus. Later, when the Christians lodged a complaint in this matter with Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, he ordered the demolition of the appropriated part of the mosque for restoration to the Christians. But the Christians asked for monetary compensation and the matter was amicably settled.

The dhimmis were entitled to preserve and maintain their places of worship and to construct new ones. In some cases, the expenses for the maintenance and repair of their places of worship were met from the public treasury (*Bayt al-Mal*). Similarly, the salaries of rabbis and priests were often paid from the state treasury. Non-Muslims living in the Islamic state are entitled to certain rights and privileges which are not available to Muslims. For example, they are allowed to take and give interest, which is forbidden to Muslims. All Muslims are obliged to take part in a war in the event of an external aggression, which is not binding on non-Muslims. In lieu of this exemption, they are required to pay the *jizya*. During the time of the Prophet, the *jizya* was about ten dirham annually, which amounted to the expenses of an average family for ten days. Women, old persons and children are exempted from the payment of *jizya*.

In some cases, when the religious rights of the dhimmis were violated by a ruler, the ulama and the qadis took the initiative in rectifying the situation. During the caliphate of al-Hadi in the second century AH, Ali ibn Sulayman was the governor of Egypt. For unknown reasons, he ordered the demolition of some Christian churches. When Musa ibn Isa succeeded him,

he approached the ulama in this matter. Layth ibn Sa'ad, who was the doyen of the ulama of his times, decreed that all the demolished churches should be reconstructed at state expense. The governor readily complied with this decree. The grand mosque of Damascus had a church in its vicinity. The caliph Muawiyah requested the Christian community to forego their right over the church in lieu of some compensation, so that the church premises could be included in the mosque. The Christians refused. The caliph did not press the matter.

Following the end of the period of the four caliphs, Muslim rulers began to deviate from the principles of governance as laid down in the Islamic Shariah. Nevertheless, the state and society set up by the Prophet and consolidated by the caliphs and the Companions continued to serve as a beacon for successive generations of Muslims. By and large, Muslim rulers and governments have exhibited remarkable tolerance and magnanimity towards non-Muslims living in the Islamic state. After the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the Christians had prohibited the Jews from entering or living in the city. It was only after the Muslim occupation of Jerusalem that the Jews came to live in the city. When the Jews were evicted from Spain in 1492, they took shelter in Muslim lands. In Turkey, they were welcomed by the mayor of Istanbul. It is significant to note that, in Spain, Jewish communities who speak Ladino (Judaean-Spanish) survive only in the eastern Mediterranean lands which were part of the Ottoman empire. Under Ottoman rule the cherished principle of tolerance was institutionalised through the millet system where administrative control was exercised through legally constituted religious communities, notably the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Christians and the Rabbanite Jews. The state did not demand conversion or cultural conformity from the ethnic and religious minorities.

Ethnicity and Community

The term ethnicity has become increasingly popular in the social sciences since the 1960s, following the end of western colonialism and the emergence of new nation-states. The large scale immigration of people from Asia and Africa to western Europe and North America during the second half of the 20th century and the question of their integration in the host society contributed to the increasing use of the term in the social sciences. Postmodernism has also added to the wide currency of the term in contemporary academic discourse.²⁰ Ethnicity connotes the positive

consciousness of belonging to a group. Factors such as religion, culture and language constitute the key components and markers of ethnicity.²¹ Ethnicity is closely linked to the concept of community. In sociological literature, a community is defined in terms of the relationship among people who share certain cultural characteristics and who live in a given area. The community serves a number of vital social, cultural and psychological functions, including the following:

(i) Humans have a basic need for forming meaningful bonds with each other. This need is actualised through the community. The community fosters human co-operation, the sharing of joys and sorrows and brotherhood.

(ii) The community promotes a sense of belonging, rootedness and identity among its individual members. It serves as an anchorage in the face of life's inevitable uncertainties, anxieties and frustrations.

(iii) Both good and evil are embedded in the structure of human nature. The community tames and neutralises man's aggressive impulses and angularities and facilitates the unfolding of his benign potential.

(iv) The community serves as an effective agency for the inculcation of moral values and for the transmission of a society's cultural and moral heritage through the process of socialization.

(v) The community contributes to the maintenance of the social order by fostering compliance with socially approved norms and values and by discouraging deviance.

Ethnicity and Globalization

In many respects, globalization is a paradoxical phenomenon. It engenders, on the one hand, uniformity and homogenization and, on the other, facilitates the reinvention and revival of ethnic identity, thanks to international immigrations, the growing networks among diasporic communities, and the rapid strides in information and communications technology.²² International tourism has also contributed to the revival of indigenos cultures and ethnic identities. Thus the residents of Brittany, a province of France, are in the forefront of a vibrant revival of Breton culture. International tourism has played an important role in this revival and resurgence. More than ten million tourists are visiting Brittany every year. In August this year Breizh Television began broadcasting in Breton as France's first regional channel. The Kurds are spread over a vast territorial area covering Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Armenia. In addition, there is a

sizeable diaspora of Kurdish expatriates in Europe and North America, particularly in France and Germany. The number of Kurds in the Middle East is currently estimated to be 20 to 25 million. Through local television networks, audio and video cassettes, telephones and newspapers the Kurds have created and maintained a world-wide network for the preservation of their ethnic identity and the furtherance of their political aspirations. Thus, ethnic identities are becoming trans-regional and trans-national.

Modern information technology has played an important role in Islamic revival and resurgence.²³ Since the 1970's audiocassettes have become an important and highly effective means of communication in the Islamic world. During the 1970's the speeches of the Iranian scholar Ali Shariati were recorded at Mashhad University and other centres of higher learning and were clandestinely distributed in Iran as well as other countries. The taped discourses and messages of Imam Khomeini were widely circulated and disseminated in mosques, seminaries, shrines, community centers, colleges and universities. All this ultimately paved the way for the Iranian Revolution of 1979.²⁴ The wide circulation of audiocassettes on Islamic discourses and Uzbek nationalism significantly contributed to the independence of Uzbekistan from the former Soviet Union. For many years the taped sermons and discourses of the Egyptian scholar and savant Shaykh Umar Abd al-Rahman have been widely distributed in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Ethnicity and Community in Islamic Perspective

In the Islamic tradition, community (ummah, millat) has four connotations:

- (i) The over-arching group of mankind, to which all human beings belong (Qur'an 2:213; 21:92).
- (ii) The ethnic or primordial community, defined in terms of shared descent and territory, which is to be found in all societies (Qur'an 18:20; 2:120; 7:88). The Qur'an says: "God has established relationships of lineage and marriage" (25:54). It further says: "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into groups and tribes, that ye may know each other" (49:13).
- (iii) A political or contractual community. When the Prophet set up a city-state at Madinah, he described its population, which was composed of Muslims, Jews and Christians, as a composite millat or political community.

(iv) The global community of believers which, unlike (ii) and (iii), is trans-regional, trans-ethnic, and trans-historical.

The basic premises which go into the making of the global community of believers are the oneness of God, unity, equality and brotherhood of all Muslims, and compassion. The Prophet eloquently described the distinctive character of the global Islamic community in the following words: "You will recognise the believers by their mutual compassion, love and sympathy. They are like one organism: if any of its parts is ill, the whole organism suffers from sleeplessness and fever. Whosoever fulfils the needs of his brother, God will fulfil his needs. Whoever delivers his brother from a discomfort, God will deliver him from the discomforts of the Day of Judgement." One of the most remarkable achievements of the Islamic faith lies in moulding people of diverse ethnic backgrounds into a unified community.

Undoubtedly, ethnicity plays an important role in social solidarity, in the inculcation of norms and values, and in providing a sense of belonging and anchorage to the individual. At the same time, it can be a source of social conflict and tension. Ethnicity, like other social processes and mechanisms, reflects the polarity and paradox of human nature. It is a Janus-faced phenomenon, having benign as well as dysfunctional implications and consequences.²⁵ In the Hadith literature, the negative and socially disruptive connotations and consequences of ethnicity are described as *asabiyyah*. The Prophet was asked about the definition of *asabiyyah*. He said that it is helping one's own people in a manner that is morally wrong. He then said: he who invites people towards *asabiyyah* is not one of us; he who fights for it is not one of us; he who dies for the sake of it is not one of us. One day a scuffle took place between a Migrant (*muhajir*) and a Helper (*ansari*). Both called out to their respective groups for help. When the Prophet heard about this incident, he expressed displeasure over it and remarked: why do you raise slogans like those of the age of ignorance (*jahiliyyah*)? Give them up; they stink. A Companion asked the Prophet whether loving one's own people was also a part of *asabiyyah*, to which he replied in the negative and added: *asabiyyah* is helping one's community in matters of injustice and oppression.

The renowned philosopher and sociologist Ibn Khaldun (d.1406), in his celebrated work the *Muqaddimah*²⁶ has dwelt at considerable length on the social significance and functions of *asabiyyah* and its bearing on political processes, especially on the establishment of political power. However,

while he takes a largely instrumentalist view of ethnicity, he fails to take cognizance of the negative and dysfunctional connotations and consequences of *asabiyyah*.²⁷

One of the remarkable achievements of Islamic civilization is that it recognised the bonds of primordiality and at the same time made them subservient to an over-arching Islamic identity. Thus it gave a new identity to disparate ethnic formations, as in Central Asia, Afghanistan and China. The Chinese Muslims, for example, who are otherwise known as Hui, Uighur, Kazakh etc, have increasingly become conscious of their over-arching Islamic identity. One of the significant dimensions of ethnicity is what may be described as the politics of ethnicity. Western colonial powers have often manipulated ethnicity for the purpose of political exploitation and for suppressing the Islamic identity of Muslim people. In 1982, the Muslims comprised 75 per cent of the total population of Albania. The communist regime tried to suppress the Islamic identity of Muslims and played up their ethnic identities. The Muslims of Albania were identified in terms of ethnic affiliation –as Gheg-Tosk– rather than as Muslims. Recently, during the Kosovo crisis, they were projected by the western media as ethnic Albanians, rather than as Muslims.

A striking illustration of the clever manipulation of ethnicity and the construction of a dubious ethnic identity for political purposes was provided by the French colonial administration in Morocco. The colonial regime in Morocco sought to play up the ethnic differences between the Arabs and Berbers and tried to construct and project the Berber identity as distinct from the Arab-Muslim identity. In actual fact, the ethnic categorisations of Berber and Arab in Morocco are often situational and overlapping. In 1930, The colonial government issued the infamous Berber Proclamation in Morocco, which excluded the Berber regions from the jurisdiction of Islamic law courts. The Berbers were forbidden to learn Arabic in schools. The move was clearly aimed at creating dissension and turmoil in Moroccan society. The Proclamation set off widespread protests in Morocco as well as in the Islamic world.²⁸

Ethnic Nationalism

In many countries ethnicity as been closely inter-twined with nationalism. In Israel, nationalism is inseparable from the Jewish religion and culture. In Thailand, national identity is defined in terms of the triumvirate of Buddhism, monarchy and nation. A few years ago, the Serbs sought to

create a Greater Serbia where people would be of a single ethnicity, spoke a single language and shared the same religion. In the Islamic world, ethnic nationalism is represented by Arab nationalism, which is based on a common Arabic language, common descent and shared history and cultural traditions. The first Arab nationalist conference was held in Paris in 1913. In subsequent years Arab nationalism was advocated by Jamal Abd el Nasser in Egypt, the Ba'th Party in Iraq and Colonel Qadhdhafi in Libya. Arab nationalism suffered a grave setback when Syria, Libya and Algeria sided with Iran in the Iran-Iraq war in 1980-88. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the military alliance between Saudi Arabia and the United States betrayed the deep fissures in the ranks of Arab states and exposed the fragile edifice of Arab nationalism. From an Islamic perspective, ethnic nationalism suffers from the following shortcomings.

(i) In a sense, ethnic nationalism and *asabiyyah* are analogous. Since ethnicity is a two-faced phenomenon with positive as well as negative functions and consequences, it needs to be tempered with balance, justice and fairness. Ethnic nationalism upholds assimilation and tends to fall down the slippery path of intolerance and aggressiveness. Ernest Gellner has perceptively observed that nationalism has not been so sweetly reasonable or so rationally symmetrical. This has particularly been the case with ethnic nationalism. The history of ethnic nationalism is replete with intolerance, aggression, discrimination, oppression and genocide.

(ii) Patriotism in the sense of emotional attachment to one's country is natural and therefore rational. However, when patriotism feeds on hatred and mistrust of outsiders and becomes xenophobic and intolerant it ceases to be rational. Islam is not against patriotism, provided it is not in conflict with the cherished principles of the equality and brotherhood of mankind, justice, fairness and compassion. However, the Islamic ethos is opposed to sectarian, aggressive and chauvinistic nationalism.

(iii) Western colonial powers have played a treacherous role in the Islamic world through the manipulation and exploitation of ethnic loyalties for the furtherance of their economic and political interests. This fact has been amply documented.

(iv) As far as Arab nationalism is concerned, the Arabs are no longer a cohesive ethnic group. There are significant political, economic, sectarian, factional and ethnic divisions among them, which prevent them from emerging as an effective political block or even as an international pressure group.

Muslims in Multicultural Societies

Plural and multicultural societies across Europe, North America, Asia and Australia share certain characteristics in common. At the same time, there are significant variations among them in respect of the degree of openness, tolerance and flexibility. Accordingly, the status and problems of Muslims living in multicultural societies differ from country to country. However, one may speak, on the one hand, of a commonly shared set of problems and challenges faced by Muslims in plural and multicultural societies and, on the other, of specific problems faced by them in the context of particular countries.

Muslims living in non-Islamic multicultural societies, particularly in Europe and North America, have to bear the brunt of an atmosphere which is suffused with what has come to be known as Islamophobia: a pervasive fear of and hostility towards Islam and Muslims. Islamophobia in the western world is partly a legacy of the Crusades, a hang-over of centuries of vilification of Prophet Muhammad and demonization of Muslims, and a rather pathological response to the reality of Islamic resurgence.²⁹ In the late 1970s, following the Iranian Revolution, many western governments identified a major threat to western economic and political interests from what was described as "Islamic fundamentalism". At the same time, leaders of the former Soviet Union began to perceive and portray Islamic resurgence in Central Asia as a threat to the Russian state.³⁰ The term "Islamic fundamentalism", which has been widely popularized by the western media, is obfuscating and pejorative. It reflects and perpetuates western prejudices and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims and thereby causes misunderstanding and mistrust between Muslims and non-Muslims.³¹

The integration of immigrant people, especially Muslims, in western societies has become a vexing and highly controversial issue in recent years. Three dimensions of the issue are noteworthy. First, though most western countries have become much more open and sensitive to the existence of substantial numbers of immigrants, they still find it difficult to embrace the reality of multiculturalism with an open heart. Feelings of mistrust, xenophobia and racism still seem to have a tenacious hold over the minds of many people in western countries. Secondly, many immigrants tend to keep themselves aloof from the local culture, which reinforces the mistrust and stereotypes of the host society. The local people in Germany and Austria, for example, complain that many Turkish immigrants show

no inclination to learn the German language or to participate in local events. Thirdly, due to a variety of reasons, most immigrants live in segregated ethnic enclaves or ghettos. These ethnic clusters serve both positive and negative functions. On the one hand, they heighten ethnic identity and social solidarity among the immigrants. On the other, this ghettoization alienates the immigrant population from the host society and produces misunderstanding and mistrust between them. In several western countries, such as Germany, France and Switzerland, Muslim immigrants lead a rather isolated and fragmented life. This problem is compounded by the existence of ethnic, regional and linguistic divisions among the immigrant Muslims. In Geneva, for example, where Muslims number over 20,000, there is little interaction among them as members of a trans-ethnic Islamic community. The interaction is mainly along national, regional and linguistic lines.

Like the general population, Muslims living in western countries are exposed to the pervasive atmosphere of secularization. The ubiquitous secularization process is at work in school and college, neighbourhood, recreation centers and the work place. In all western countries religion has been relegated to the private sphere. Many Muslim immigrants, especially those of the younger generation born and brought up in western countries, tend to experience religion only during important festivals at birth, marriage and death.³² Muslims living in western countries are influenced, in varying degrees, by the value system and cultural ethos of western societies, including individualism, unfettered freedom, materialism, consumerism and sexual permissiveness. In addition, They are exposed to the popular culture of globalization, including rap and hip-hop music and cult figures such as Madonna and Michael Jackson.

These influences are imbibed through the media, the educational system and the peer group. The younger generation of Muslims born and brought up in Western societies is exposed to two conflicting cultural environments: a broadly Islamic one at home and a secularized, individualized and globalized one outside. This cultural conflict produces confusion, ambivalence and alienation in the youth. They are placed in an unenviable position in the sense that they are neither fully accepted by the host society nor can they identify themselves fully with the culture and ethos of their parents. This problem is particularly acute in the case of Muslim girls. The issue of wearing the headscarf (*hijab*) by Muslim girls in public schools has generated a good deal of debate and controversy and has

brought the question of the integration of immigrant Muslims in western societies into sharp focus. In 1994 the Education Minister of France banned the wearing of the headscarf by Muslim girls in school. This led to angry protests by Muslim parents and students. The controversy was highlighted and abetted by the French media. Serge July, the editor of *Liberation*, commented on the issue in the following words: "behind the scarf is the question of immigration; behind immigration is the debate over integration; and behind integration is the question of laicitee."³³ It is significant to note that French schools allow Catholic girls to wear the cross and Jewish girls to wear the kipa. Jewish students are allowed to miss Saturday classes to observe the Sabbath. Similar concessions are denied to Muslim students. Ironically, the French government heavily subsidizes private Roman Catholic schools, but refuses to grant funds to Jewish and Muslim schools.

Muslim girls studying in public schools have to not only sit with boys but are also required to go for picnics, camps, swimming and gym classes in mixed groups. The problem is compounded in the case of girls who are brought up in traditional Muslim families in Asia and Africa and are married to boys born and brought up in western societies. Their adjustment to an alien cultural environment and a westernised family often becomes problematic. The tensions and frictions born out of such situations some times lead to marital breakdown.

In many western countries the day-to-day problems faced by Muslims include the lack of facilities for the slaughter of animals according to the Islamic method, difficulties in obtaining halal food, problems in getting days off on Islamic feasts such as *Id al-Fitr*, space for prayer in the work place, and difficulties in getting a large space for the Friday prayer.

In some western countries, the policies of the state are unfair and discriminatory. In Britain, for example, thousands of Anglican, Catholic and Jewish religious schools are funded by the state but, until recently, such facilities were denied to Muslim schools. According to British law, blasphemy against Christianity is an offence. This provision, however, is not applicable to Islam or other religions. This is clearly discriminatory and contrary to the principle of equality which is a cardinal feature of the British legal system.

However, things are slowly changing for the better as a result of the growing recognition of the salience of multiculturalism and the concerted efforts of Muslims across the world.

Notes

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