

## Reflection

# The Challenge of Islam in the 21st Century

*Akbar S. Ahmed*

It is a great honor for me to be invited to give the key note address to this very distinguished body. I would like to express my gratitude to the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) and in particular to its distinguished president, my friend Mumtaz Ahmad. The convention is of special significance this year since we are honoring the memory of the great scholar and original thinker, Isma'il al-Faruqi. Twenty years ago he persuaded me to write a small book for his Islamization of knowledge series called *Towards Islamic Anthropology* published by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) shortly before his tragic death. On hearing of his death in Pakistan, I wrote the following lines which appeared in the daily national newspaper *Dawn* and in my book *Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society*

### *On the death of Ismail Faruqi*

there are many ways  
to kill an Arab  
  
you can shoot them down  
in public places  
or torture  
them to insanity  
in closed rooms  
and call them terrorists  
  
you can surround their villages—  
making sure their women and children  
are inside—

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and use machine guns  
 until no one moves  
 and call the villages  
 Sabra and Shatilia  
 you can even enter  
 their safe university homes in the USA  
 with long, serrated—Rambo—knives,  
 pass the books written by the victim  
 pass the symbols of honor,  
 and stab until death occurs,  
 for good measure stab the family too  
 and call it the act of a black burglar.  
 as I said  
 there are many ways  
 to kill an Arab.  
 the problem is  
 ideas of freedom and revenge  
 do not die so easily,  
 they live on in these deaths—  
 and we call them martyrs

The work of Professor Ismail Faruqi is a good starting point for my talk on the challenge of Islam in the 21st century. Let me now state that as a Muslim I cannot predict what is to come in this century; only God knows the future. But as a social scientist it is my calling and my challenge to examine the world around me and comment meaningfully upon it. My talk is divided into four sections: the first, points out why it is important for the United States to understand Islam; the second, discusses Muslim leadership; the third, refers to the debate about democracy and justice; and finally, the fourth offers some suggestions for the future and attempts to make a synthesis of the issues mentioned in the first three sections.

## Why Is It Important for the United States to Understand Islam?

Americans are a great people for crystal ball gazing. If all of us on the planet were to become American, the Earth would be more like a shopping mall than a village in the 21st century. Certainly, those civilizations that have a major, universal or global contribution to make in education, health, and family issues will best “sell” or make an impact in the 21st century. Islam’s

inherent sense of compassion, justice, and piety make it a front runner, that is, if it is led by leaders who understand this global challenge.

We thus suggest the premise that Islam will be a major force and factor in this century. Not only is Islam's population growing dramatically and its states—at least one for the time being—in possession of nuclear bombs, but also its presence in the West is now firmly established. Muslims are making an impact in economics, politics, and social life in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the former country, one of its greatest heroes of the 20th century is a Muslim, Muhammad Ali; in the latter, Muslims are members of the House of Lords and the House of Commons. There is even a Muslim knight, Sir Anwar Pervey.

Only a century ago a Muslim traveler came to the West and went back to his homeland and said, "In the West I saw Islam but no Muslims; in my own land I see Muslims but no Islam." In interesting ways American society echoes Muhammad Abduh. I find the interest in the universe, the emphasis on knowledge, the egalitarian spirit and the openness to outsiders, the wish to stand up and fight for principles, the desire to establish justice—which many Americans will recognize as their ideal social virtues—to be Islamic virtues also. There is an interesting correspondence in the way the two look at the world.

Many American scholars—with some honorable exceptions like Seyyed Hossein Nasr—have singularly failed to understand Islam. On the eve of the Iranian revolution, which overthrew the Shah, US experts were predicting the fading out of Islam. Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama have resorted to stereotyping Islam to suit their theories. Often Islam is notoriously equated with the European Nazis.

All too often the American media projects Muslims as fanatics and terrorists, reinforcing the stereotypes of the academics. This is especially true of many big-budget Hollywood films, for example, *True Lies*, *Executive Decision*, and *The Siege*. In turn, many in the Muslim world are encouraged to point to the United States as the leading 'enemy of Islam' and make Americans the object of their criticism.

It is imperative for the United States to understand Islam. Not only because America is the sole, global super-power and what it does has an impact on the Muslim world, but because such understanding would be in its own best interests. About seven million of its citizens are Muslims and their number is growing. In addition, American Muslims have a global view of the Muslim world and can have a positive role to play in shaping



it. For the first time in history Islam is making an impact on American culture and politics. Both candidates of the 2000 Presidential Election cite Islam as one of the three great religions of their country. Mosques and Islamic centers are springing up and are visible. When I returned to Princeton after two decades, I noticed an impressive golden dome on Route 1 South, just outside Princeton. I discovered a busy Islamic center attracting three to four hundred people every Friday for prayer.

Islam is also important to the United States in conducting foreign policy. According to its foreign affairs experts, of the nine 'pivotal' states on which American foreign policy rests, five are Muslim—Algeria, Turkey, Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia. On the other hand, besides Cuba and North Korea, America's list of "terrorist" states is a list of Muslim nations. The most important reason why the United States should come to understand Islam is that it is in a position to interact with the Islamic world neutrally and fairly. It does not have the cultural and imperial baggage that Muslims often associate with European powers.

Muslim society in America is complex and not easily defined. It consists of three broad groups: the Afro-American community, which has increasingly moved to mainstream Islam; the Arab immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa; and South Asians. These groups often exist parallel to each other but are increasingly interacting. This interaction itself contains fascinating anthropological insights into contemporary American society. Studying Islam enables us to better understand important aspects of the 21st century.

To understand the directions Muslims will take in this century it is imperative to understand the kind of Muslim leaders that are emerging. They will determine not only the directions of their societies but the interaction with their non-Muslim neighbors.

## Muslim Leaders

Muslim nations face a crisis of leadership, which affects both them and their relationship with other countries. In a Muslim society the leader should embody both political and moral authority. Yet some of the best-known global thinkers who comment on Islam, like Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama, have failed to identify the importance of Muslim leadership. Superficially, there is a bewildering range of leadership types—kings, military dictators, imams and mullahs, democrats, and, as in the

Taliban in Afghanistan, young and inexperienced tribal men—running Muslim countries.

Let us identify four broad, simplified categories. The first is the cleric ruler such as in Iran. With the global media explosion from the 1980s onwards, through organs like CNN and the BBC, images of this category became the image of the Muslim cleric, indeed of Islam itself—a dark, scowling, evil-looking, bearded figure in black robes. The image neatly fit Hollywood ideas and popular cartoons of the wicked wizard.

Iran remains a one-off example, scholars have argued, largely because of its Shi'a culture and tradition. Whenever given a choice through the polls, the people have rejected the religious parties in countries like Pakistan. The Jamat- i-Islami, perhaps the party best organized and having the most coherent and sophisticated view of the modern world, has never had more than a few members in parliament. The answer to this mystery is simple. Islam does not encourage priesthood; there is no one between a Muslim and Allah.

But what about the Taliban in Afghanistan and their guest from Saudi Arabia, Osama bin Laden, who is accused of masterminding the bombing of the American embassies in Africa in 1998? These warriors of Islam face serious cultural and political problems. Not only must they deal with the injustices of their rulers, some of whom enjoy support in the West, but they must also face the distortions of western cultural invasion through images and stereotypes of Islam. Coupling this with what they see as the indifference of the West to their brethren in Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya and Kosovo, causes them to focus on the West as the enemy. From this perception to actively opposing the West as a form of jihad or religious war is one short step.

While the often westernized nationalist leaders of the postindependence period sought to hold on to the state and consolidate it, the new leaders hope to destroy it as a legacy of the West and then recreate it in an Islamic mold. The former sought survival in a transitional world; the latter demand purity in an impure one.

The second category of Muslim ruler consists of military rulers and monarchies. Of the former, General Zia in Pakistan used Islam; Saddam did not until the Gulf war. Of the latter, the Saudis identify with Islam; the Shah of Iran did not. In many countries in this category, the already existing tribal structures provide the bare bones of state structure. Thus the dominant tribal clan of the last century simply became the royal rulers, senior admin-



istrators, and entrepreneurs of this one. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are examples of this. Even military dictators like the late Assad and Saddam Hussein rely on tribal politics and only trust their own sect or tribal clan.

Although many Muslim kings and military dictators have been seen in the new century, their numbers will dwindle. Neither has sanction in Islam itself and the populist leaders ceaselessly challenge them from inside their societies.

The third category of Muslim ruler is the democratic one, which includes countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey, and Bangladesh. Governments in this category are 'democratic' and elections are held, although there is a history of lapsing back to martial law in times of crisis. Stories of corruption, vote rigging, mismanagement and evidence of the collapse of law and order create a general disillusionment with this type of ruler. Such Muslim leaders skillfully exploit the fears of the West regarding Muslim fundamentalists. Their argument is simple: "We are all that stands between you and your worst nightmare, that is, Muslim fanatics—the dreaded 'fundamentalists' of the media—in power with itchy Islamic fingers on the trigger." Aware of the nuclear ambitions of many Muslim countries, this image taps into a genuine concern of the West.

The democratic category needs to be developed and strengthened for the future. It reflects the Islamic spirit of egalitarianism, the need for tolerance in pluralist societies (again reflecting Islam), and larger global trends. In spite of the present faulty interpretation of democracy and the running of the nation-state, this is the most viable category for our times.

The fourth, rather unsuccessful, category is that of the socialist/communist leader, modeled on Stalin and the Soviet experience, whose appeal lies mainly in a rhetoric of care for the poor. Brutal dictators with little hint of Islamic compassion and justice have ruled in this category through the secret police. Since the end of the Cold War, this category has little backing or appeal.

But we must be cautious with our categories. Pakistan illustrates that one country can at different times fall into different categories: under Jinnah, it was democratic; under Ayub, a military dictatorship; under Zia, Islamic; and under Musharraf, well, it is too early to tell. Each category presents problems for the future.

There is another category that we have not mentioned yet, that of the scholars, the intellectuals, and writers. Muhammad Iqbal in South Asia or Fazal Rahman and Ismail Faruqi in America are good examples.

Unfortunately, this category has not developed in the Muslim society and its absence creates a continued imbalance.

Two questions then arise: What is going on in the Muslim world? and Do we have an explanation or a key to unlock it?

Perhaps Ibn Khaldun can give us a hint. Ibn Khaldun spoke of *asabiyah* or 'social cohesion,' as binding groups together through a common language, culture and code of behavior. *Adl* or 'justice' is presupposed in *asabiyah*. *Asabiyah* is what traditional societies possess, and what is broken down in urbanized society over time. Ibn Khaldun made the famous suggestion that rural and tribal peoples come down from the mountains to urban areas and after three generations, after absorbing the manners and values of urban life, lose their special quality of social cohesion and become effete and, therefore, vulnerable to new invasion from the hills. This cyclical, if over-simplified pattern continued for centuries up to the advent of European colonialism. Even the disruptive force of European imperialism over the last two centuries did not entirely break this cycle.

Only after independence from the European colonial powers after World War II was Ibn Khaldun's cycle seriously affected. The regenerative energy is now drying up at the source. Urbanization, demographic changes, a population explosion, migrations abroad, and perhaps most significantly, new and often alien ideas and images, at once seductive and repellent, and all instantly communicated from the organs of the modern, secular state of the West through instant communication, are contributing to social breakdown.

The recent dramatic growth in population has favored populist Muslim leadership with its power base in the tribal and rural areas, and strengthened it against the cities with their ideas of liberalism, modernity, and secularism. This is partly because many modern states simply fail to provide even the most basic amenities, and people become susceptible to radical ideas. Reports of the corruption and mismanagement of the rulers further alienate ordinary people. To cope with these bewildering changes, ordinary folk fall back on traditional thinking.

*Madrassahs* or religious schools have become popular again after a postindependence period when the emphasis seemed to be on westernized schools. They have begun to flourish since the 1960s. The typical ethos of the *madrassah* reflects the political agenda of Hamas in Palestine and the Taliban in Afghanistan: Islam as a vehicle for all-encompassing change,



and Islam as a challenge not only to the corrupt local elite, but to the entire New World Order.

These *madrassahs* laid the foundations for the populist and militant Islamic leadership that emerged in the 1990s. Coming mostly from lower middleclass backgrounds, speaking the local language, with traditional dress and long beards, the students of the religious schools became the Taliban warriors who went on to conquer Afghanistan.

With all their zeal for Islam, their integrity compared to previous corrupt officials and their burning desire to impose their vision on society, the Taliban violated two basic tenets of Islam in a manner calculated to cause offence to many Muslims in and outside the country. First, their harshness against women contrasts with the gentleness and kindness of the Prophet of Islam (peace and blessings be upon him) toward women. His famous saying that "heaven is under the feet of the mother" sums up the traditional attitude of Islam to women. Second, the Taliban's harshness toward minority groups, the non-Pathans, is also against the spirit of Islam, which encourages tolerance. The minorities of Afghanistan are also Muslims, but many non-Pathans have been discriminated against and mistreated, thus suggesting ethnic discrimination.

Although Taliban-style leadership is new in the sense that it emerged in opposition to the more westernized leaders in power after World War II, the division in Muslim leadership goes back to the nineteenth century. In 1857, after the great uprisings in India against British rule, two rival models of leadership emerged. Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan, who created the Aligarh University on the model of Oxbridge, was a loyal servant of the Raj and wished to synthesize Islam with western modernity; whereas the founders of the *madrassah* at Deoband near Delhi, fought the British during the uprisings and their influential schools created a network throughout India that now influence groups like the Taliban. The schism in Muslim leadership is thus rooted in the indigenous response to modernity and the threatening presence of western imperialism.

If Osama bin Laden symbolizes one extreme, at the other stands Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan who died in 1948. He symbolizes our third category, the democratic ruler. He believed in human rights and the rights of women and minorities. As a lawyer he upheld constitutional rule.

In Britain, Sheikh Omar Bakri's *Khilafah*, the journal of the Hizb al-Tahrir movement, which supports Osama, has attacked Jinnah calling him



a *kafir* or 'nonbeliever' which to a Muslim, is the greatest of all insults. Jinnah was accused of being an enemy of Allah and the Prophet because he supported women, Christians and Hindus, and advocated democracy.

Osama, bearded, in his traditional Muslim clothes, and speaking in Arabic of jihad; and Jinnah, clean-shaven, with his Savile Row suit, English accent, and Lincoln's Inn legal education—here, neatly, we have the two extreme poles of political Islam in direct opposition. The question is, which model will prevail in the next century?

One of these two models will provide leadership for the more than one billion Muslims into the millennium. Ironically, through his missile strikes on Sudan and Afghanistan, President Bill Clinton has elevated Osama from one of the many obscure 'freedom fighters,' as the United States called these people in the 1980s during their battle with the Soviet Union, into an international figure. Osama may appear a sinister fanatic to the West, but to the Muslim world, in the *favalas*, bazaars, and villages, he is a hero for taking on the 'Great Satan.' Those who speak of dialogue and moderation are suddenly under immense pressure to keep quiet and lie low.

President Clinton and his Secretary of State Madeleine Albright have predicted that the events of August 1998 were a foretaste of things to come; that this is the way that the wars of the future will be fought. They may be right, but the response of the Muslim world will depend on whether the Osama model prevails or that of Jinnah.

## Justice and Democracy

But do Muslims still want democracy, which Jinnah stood for? If so, why do they distribute sweetmeats as an expression of joy when democracy collapses and the military takes over (as in Pakistan in October 1999)? Why are there so few tears shed for democracy? Does this mean the rejection of Jinnah and what he symbolized?

The answers are provided by an anthropological perspective of society contained in the belief of ordinary Muslim people—the villagers at the mercy of state officialdom, the dwellers of the shanty towns in the huge unmanageable cities with their corrupt administrations—that whoever gives them *adl* (justice) in or out of uniform or robes is the best ruler.

For while Muslims are a truly egalitarian people—the example of the lines at prayer when a king may be standing next to a street vendor shoulder to shoulder is not just a stereotype—the answer is that *adl*, not democracy, is central to Islam. It defines relations between individuals and the

state. Too often scholars and journalists miss this aspect of Muslim politics and culture while talking of vague concepts such as 'fundamentalism' which raise more questions than they provide answers.

While the West values democracy as the central feature of its society and politics, Islam places the highest emphasis on the concept of *adl*. *Adl* is important because it is a divine attribute enshrined in the Qur'an. The ruler must respect the idea and practice of *adl*. If the ruler does not, he or she (as in Pakistan and Bangladesh) can be legitimately removed and legitimately criticized.

The symbol engraved on the throne of the Mughal emperor in Delhi was that of the scales of justice. It could have been an imperial lion or a sword as in other dynasties, but the Mughal emperor chose to see himself in terms of representing *adl*. When *adl* is missing from society Muslims are agitated into action. Too many Muslim societies have seen democracy impose tyranny on them. In the West, a society without democracy is seen as tyranny; in Islam, a society without justice amounts to tyranny. This is why in the 21st century the only political system that can be legitimate, viable, and resilient will be a democracy strongly based in genuine *adl* in Muslim lands where people can vote their leaders in and out and hold them accountable. For this to be realized the understanding of this key concept of Islam is important as the first step.

## Conclusion

At the outset I said social scientists should avoid predictions. But in my book *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise*, written almost a decade ago, I made a prediction. I noted the time had come for the shift in the discussions about Islam and the West from conflict to consensus, from confrontation to dialogue, from recrimination to understanding. In this exercise I mentioned the emergence of a new generation of scholars like John Esposito. We note that the debate has already shifted, as is evident in the important work being done by Esposito, Mumtaz Ahmed, Sulayman Nyang, and others.

I would like to end by making some suggestions for the consideration of this distinguished gathering:

First, we need to move beyond the defensive posture that Muslim social scientists have often adopted. This has sometimes led us into confrontations in which the social sciences themselves became an extension of the debate between Islam and the world. I prefer the relaxed professional confidence



rooted in faith as exemplified by Ibn Khaldun or al-Beruni. Indeed, almost two decades ago I wrote an article on al-Beruni for the Royal Anthropological Institute's journal entitled *Al Beruni, The First Anthropologist* which created a controversy in the discipline. I had argued that anthropology, far from being a European colonial creation, was rooted in Islam. The Qur'an teaches us to look at societies, peoples, and groups around us and to wonder at and understand them, and through them reflect upon the greatness of God who created everyone and everything. Al-Beruni's work on India, *Kitab al-Hind*, written centuries before European experts studied Indian villages in the 20th century, still remains a masterpiece. Indeed, some of the best known Indian writers like Nirad Chaudhri refer to al-Beruni whenever they want to discuss ancient India. So Muslim social scientists need to link up to their own great masters and learn from them, rather than fall into the trap of defense.

Second, I suggest that we encourage the interaction of serious ethnographic/social sciences with the wider media. For instance, we need to link academic output in this field with popular media such as television. Let me give you my own example. Princeton University is backing a project I have proposed: a four-part television series on Muslims in America. On the invitation of our distinguished brother Ahmed Totonji, I visited IIIT and discussed the project with senior colleagues and received warm encouragement.

Third, I suggest that as Muslim social scientists we identify serious Muslim thought in philosophy and social sciences and bring it to the consciousness of a wider audience. In this way we can show that we have other leaders than those in the categories I mentioned earlier. For instance, take my hero Ibn Khaldun. Beyond his great achievement he is a hero that can be honored today because his life echoes our own time, honored one day, dishonored the next. We need to have a series of conferences on his work and thought. We need to popularize his work for the younger generation. This will also challenge the image of Islam as a religion that engenders violence and extremism. Here we have one of the greatest social scientists of history who acts as a bridge between many civilizations. For example, I know that Ernest Gellner, who was one of the world's leading social scientists, considered Ibn Khaldun his particular hero. To those working in what was Ibn Khaldun's homeground, the Maghrib, like Clifford Geertz and Lawrence Rosen, he is an inspiration.

Fourth, I would also like to suggest that medals and prizes be instituted by this organization for the work of social scientists, particularly the young. This will bring them recognition and encouragement. We can identify some young social scientists who have done excellent work like Faizan Haq, Ejaz Akram, and Deonna Kelli Swaine. An Ibn Khaldun or a Faruqi medal could be a start.

Let me conclude: In the short term, the prospects for a harmonious relationship between Islam and the West look uncertain, even pessimistic. In the longer term, a great deal depends on whether those who encourage dialogue and understanding will succeed or not. The academic studying Islam thus has a global role in and challenge for the 21st century. Your own role as scholars in the West therefore becomes crucial. You have a duty to bring understanding between Muslims and the West. To the immigrants it is a double duty: to your old societies and to your new one.

The common problems in our shrinking world need to be identified: drug and alcohol abuse; divorce; teenage violence; racial and ethnic prejudice; problems of the aged and the poor; a growing sense of anarchy in cities; rampant materialism; sexual debasement of women and children; the depletion of natural resources; and universal ecological concerns. On all these issues Islam takes a strong and enlightened position. This is real Islamic jihad, and if it is properly harnessed and understood it can provide fresh impetus to tackle these universal problems.

Muslims also face a central challenge which is internal. They need to rebuild an idea of Islam which includes justice, integrity, tolerance, coupled with the quest for knowledge—the classic Islamic civilization, not just the insistence on the rituals; not just the five pillars of Islam, but the entire building and architecture of Islam. I leave you with this architectural metaphor which contains the challenge of Islam in the 21st century.