

## Islam and Social Change: A Theoretical Perspective

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Islam is a revealed religion. Allah has revealed it to His prophets at the different stages of history and finally to Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم). The Qur'an-Allah's Book-, the Sunnah- the Prophet's sayings; deeds and approvals- form the main source of Islamic knowledge. Together both are also regarded as sources of Islamic Shari'ah.<sup>1</sup>

Islam is basically a 'guidance' (*hidāyah*) to man for shaping his living righteously and prosperously.<sup>2</sup> Its objective is to establish the order of justice ('*adl*), welfare (*khayr*) and facilitate the growth of human civilization. The Qur'an states it as following:

لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ  
وَالْمِيزَانَ لِيَقُومَ النَّاسُ بِالْقِسْطِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا الْحَدِيدَ فِيهِ  
بَأْسٌ شَدِيدٌ وَمَنْفَعٌ لِلنَّاسِ وَلِيَعْلَمَ اللَّهُ مَنْ يَبْصُرُ وَرَسُولَهُ  
بِالْغَيْبِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ قَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ

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We sent aforetime Our messengers with Clear Signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance (of Right and Wrong) that men may stand forth in justice, and We sent down iron, in which is great might as well as many benefits for mankind.<sup>3</sup>

The Scriptural knowledge propounds Islam as a consistent system comprising *'aqāid* (beliefs), *ibadāt* (rituals or forms of worship to God), *mu'amalāt* (social dealings). All these ingredients form individual as well as collective behaviour-patterns of man. Socio-cultural ideology and ethics is determined by the principles of this all-comprehensive system of Islam.

Beliefs are spiritual-cum intellectual foundations of human behaviour in Islam. Belief in Allah—His uniqueness and the attributes of knowledge, power, wisdom, justice etc., signify His Absolutism and *tawhīd*. Belief in the angels, the true servants of their Lord, the Books which were sent to the prophets at different times including the last one—the Qur'ān, and in His messengers sent to guide mankind by explaining the Divine purpose of creation and the role and responsibility of His creatures. The prophethood awakens and activates this special sense of responsibility in human beings in its true form. Belief in *ākhirah* (Hereafter) characterises this mundane world as transitory and the Hereafter the real goal of life.

*Ibadāt* or forms of worship are the fundamental duties which a Muslim has to fulfill in his life. These are also called the rights of Allah (*haqūq al-Allah*). The believer is meant to worship Allah by offering *salāh* (prayer), paying *zakāh* (poor-due) keeping *saum* (fasting) during the month of Ramdan and perform *hajj* once in life provided the person is able to do it. Beliefs depict spiritual cum intellectual side of Islam while

*ibadāt* and *mu'amlāt* represent the practical side of it. All the three are deeply interrelated and none of them is in conflict with the other. On account of performing these fundamental duties (*ibadāt*) a Muslim develops a special trait of God-consciousness and responsibility in him and distinguishes himself from others. Like Beliefs these fundamental duties however, are the permanent elements of Islam both in content and form.

The third component of Islam is *mu'amlāt*—social dealings. They are also described as rights of the human beings (*haqūq al-ibād*). Here injunctions with regard to social matters of life find expression in an all-embracing way. Society is generally described as a phenomenon of interrelationships among its members, bearing the thought-value patterns in its fabric.<sup>4</sup> Its nature and evolution has been a major concern of many thinkers and scholars like Ibn Khaldun (b. 1332CE), Shah Wali-u Allah (1703-1762) Hegel (1770-1831), Mar (1818-1883) and Durkheim (1859-1917). They delved deep into the nature and function of society. Ibn Khaldun, the Tunisian Muslim thinker, discerns social phenomenon in the co-operation of individuals for meeting their immediate needs and development. To him it is of two types—bedouin and sedantry — and each, according to him is determined by its material activities.<sup>5</sup> Shah Wali-u Allah, the outstanding Indian Muslim scholar of pre-modern times, develops his general theory of society through his concept of *irtifaqāt* (civilizational stages). He enumerates four such *irtifaqāt* which promote society from one stage to the other, from bedouin to urban society and then to city-state and finally to internationalism.<sup>6</sup> Hegel, Marx and Durkheim, the renowned social thinkers of the west, stress the social nature of human needs which lead to the development of institutions. Marx believes that the history of society is the movement from slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism and finally communism.<sup>7</sup> Durkheim finds social fact in the solidarity of collective beliefs and

sentiments and solidarity of functional interdependence created by the division of labour in society:

Thus it is an historical law that mechanical solidarity, which first stands alone, or nearby so, progressively loses ground, and that organic solidarity gradually becomes preponderant of societies cannot but change.<sup>8</sup>

Society is, therefore, the institution that regulates practical activities and needs of an individual from micro to macro level. It conducts the dealings within the Muslim community—family and monetary affairs, affairs of fellow Muslims and state—and with non-Muslims both as individuals and communities. The Qur'an and the Sunnah state the guidance and rulings about the social matters either in general (*'ām*) or in specific (*Khāṣ*) paradigm. All these rulings, however, imply thier own *maṣlahah* (public interest). This forms the teleology of its social institutions and distinguishes it from that of the western social theories which tend to material extremism.<sup>9</sup>

It is in this perspective that Islam vis-a-vis social change can be understood. As already mentioned, Islam not only enlightens man intellectually but also provides the practical frame-work for his life and influences all the exigencies of society. Society, obviously, is susceptible to change. It goes on changing with the change of times. Changes occur in a society due to many factors. Sometimes external influences or interactions affect change. Indigenous scientific and technological developments resulting from man's use of ratio-empirical talents, do influence the social standards. It is illustrative from the European history where change from Christian dogmatism to Renaissance (of rational and scientific learning) and then to Industrial Revolution took place and all of them bear the great social significance. It were these changes which influenced the later develoments in the world in one way or other and led to the modern

socio-scientific order.<sup>10</sup> Islam comprehends change and responds to the issues and problems emerging out of this change in society. It never allows keeping the human resources dormant but activates them to confront the natural resources for the good of humanity. This spirit in man vis-a-vis his God-consciousness is referred to in the Qur'an as follows:

يٰۤاَيُّهَا الَّذِيْنَ ءَامَنُوْا اتَّقُوا اللّٰهَ وَابْتَغُوْا اِلَيْهِ الْوَسِيْلَةَ وَجَاهِدُوْا فِيْ سَبِيْلِهِ  
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَفْلِحُوْنَ

O You who believe! Remain conscious of God and seek to come close to Him, and strive hard in His cause, so that you may prosper.<sup>11</sup>

يٰۤاَيُّهَا الَّذِيْنَ ءَامَنُوْا ارْكَعُوْا وَاَسْجُدُوْا وَاَعْبُدُوْا  
رَبَّكُمْ وَاَفْعَلُوْا الْخَيْرَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَفْلِحُوْنَ  
وَجَاهِدُوْا فِيْ اللّٰهِ حَقَّ جِهَادِهِ ۗ هُوَ اجْتَبَاكُمْ وَمَا جَعَلَ  
عَلَيْكُمْ فِي الدِّيْنِ مِنْ حَرَجٍ ۗ قَلِيْلَةٌ اَيْبِكُمْ اِبْرٰهِيْمَ ۗ هُوَ سَمَّاكُمُ الْمُسْلِمِيْنَ

O you who believe! Bow down, prostrate yourselves and adore your Lord; and do good; that you may prosper. And strive in His cause as you ought to strive: it is He who has chosen you (to carry His message), and has imposed no difficulties on you in [anything that pertains] religion. [This is] the community [or creed] of your forefather Abraham.<sup>12</sup>

Such dynamism and adaptability to new ways of prosperity is, always, in harmony with the fundamental aspect of Islam, the framework of its permanent principles which ensures continuity in it. This dynamism of Islam is never at the cost of its fundamental aspects which lies in its permanent doctrines and the principle of continuity.

The text of the Qur'an and the Hadith do not treat all the issues facing an

individual being in concrete and specific manner yet many of them are comprehended by it without giving details and elaborations. It does not, however, mean that there is stagnation in Islamic order of society but it conforms to dynamism and progress in it by dint of the particular principle and methodology known as *ijtihād*. Allama Iqbal (1877-1938) rightly calls it 'the principle of movement in the structure of Islam.' His description of it, although precise deserves quotation:

◦ The ultimate basis of all life, as conceived by Islam, is eternal and reveals itself in variety and change. A society based on such a conception of Reality must reconcile in its life, the categories of permanence and change. It must possess eternal principles to regulate its collective life, for the eternal gives us a foothold in the world of perpetual change. But eternal principle when they are understood to exclude all possibilities of change which according to the Qur'an is one of the greatest 'signs of God', tend to immobilise what is essentially mobile in its nature. The failure of Europe in political and social sciences illustrates the former principle, the immobility of Islam during the last five hundred years illustrates the latter. What then is principle of movement in the structure of Islam? This is known as *ijtihād*.<sup>13</sup>

*Ijtihād* serves both as the principle and the methodology in the *Shari'ah* science of Islam. It literally means exertion of an effort on a matter that requires it. Technically it is understood as exertion of a *mujtahid* to his utmost to deduce the legal ruling on a particular issue from the evidence or indication found in the *Shari'ah* sources.<sup>14</sup> The *fuqaha* who have worked on it devised *qiyās*, *istihsān*, *istiṣhāb* and *maṣālah al mursalah* as the specific methods to implement this principle in practice.<sup>15</sup> The methods

are distinctive from the free opinion of some rationalists and from those who emphasise 'literalism' of the texts than their *ta'li* (rational) contents. With regard to the scope of the *Shari'ah* guidance Ibn Taymiyah (1263-1328) remarks:

And many of those who came afterwards and do not understand it properly seek legal basis from *ijma'* and *qiyās*. Whoever believes that *ijma'* has got an independent position in the *Shari'ah* his understanding of the Qur'an and the Sunnah is faulty. It is like saying that in most of the circumstances in which *qiyās* is resorted to, the texts of *Shari'ah* do not provide any guidance. This can be said by a person who does not know anything about the Book, the Sunnah and the matters for which they provide guidance. Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal said that there is no problematic situation which itself directly or its similitude, has not been discussed by the Companions of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم). When the new territories were conquered and Islam spread over there, every kind of situation arose and was met by the Companions in the light of the arguments from the Qur'an in the light of the arguments from the Qur'an and the Sunnah.<sup>16</sup>

Here it seems apt to mention the classical theory of *ijtihād* evolved by the Companions and the *'aimma-i madhab* during the early and medieval period of Islam. The theory illustrates the amenability and responsiveness of Islam to social change.

In his *khilāfah*, Abu Bakr's pronouncements of waging a war against the non-payees of *zakāh*, compilation of the Qur'an, burning the homosexuals to death by exercising *ijtihād* which also received the concensus (*ijma'*)<sup>17</sup>. 'Umar made the various decrees on the social matters of his time, which took into consideration both the *maṣālah* of the Shariah and the nature and temper of the society. He pronounced the

suspension of the share, given to non-Muslims, from *zakāh* and *sadqāt* to reconcile their hearts.<sup>18</sup> To him its *illah* is the weakness of the Islamic community and later on when the situation has changed the share for *mulafat al qalūb* got withdrawn. Similarly when during his *khilāfah* there spread a tough famine and the people suffered intensely to sustain themselves, ‘Umar declared the suspension of the amputation of a hand for the theft. When two slaves were brought before him who were reported to have committed theft and on enquiry they explained about their starvation under the custody of their master. On this, ‘Umar set them free and punished their master.<sup>19</sup> After the conquest of Syria by the Muslims the latter developed social relations with the Romans. As a result of it, Muslims tended towards marrying the *ahl al-kitab* Roman girls who were handsome. ‘Umar stopped this practice under this consideration that if it continued with the same pace it would certainly affect the marriages of the Arabian girls and thus give rise to a grave crisis in the society.<sup>20</sup>

The other two noteworthy pronouncements of ‘Umar are the stopping of the distribution of conquered land among the army and its handover to the state under the idea of the political expediency; and (the next is) the discontinuing of the share of *ghanimah* (booty) to the kin of the Prophet, (صلى الله عليه وسلم) on the ground that they ceased to hold this right soon after the death of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم).<sup>21</sup> Such decrees of ‘Umar received even the agreement of the Companions and responded well to the new changes of the society.

‘Uthman, ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib and ‘Aishah are reported to have given their pronouncements on the emerging issues. ‘Uthman states that the people should read the Qur’an according to Zayd’s way because he thought it most sound and likely to prevent the occurrence of disagreements.<sup>22</sup> Hazrat Ali’s decree to cut the hands of all the persons of the group involved in stealing, and burning as well as those who are overzealous

apostates which is the harshest punishment for the act in order to deter people from committing it.<sup>23</sup> ‘Āishah’s decree that the women would not be allowed to attend the mosque for congregational prayer which the Hadith of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) had allowed and ‘Aishah’s reversal of it is due to the spread of corruption. To her the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) would have done the same, had he been alive.<sup>24</sup>

*Aiamma-i-madhab* and their disciples developed the legal theory in a good deal and its amenibility and responsiveness to the new circumstances got amply worked out. *Qiyās* i.e. analogical reasoning became the common principle in the aimma’s fiqh to deduce rulings for the new situations. Abu Hanifa’s use of *istihsān* which is the abandonment of one legal ruling for another that is considered better or more appropriate to a given set of circumstances.<sup>25</sup> The doctrine is of wide scope and is also used by the followers of Abu Hanifah. Even Imam Malik recognizes its viability and it is also found in him in the form of his doctrine of *al-maṣālahā al mursalah*, consideration which is proper and harmonious with the objectives of the law-giver (*shāri’*) and secures a benefit or prevents a harm.<sup>26</sup> It sanctions the deduction of law on the basis of common good and social justice and seems a more comprehensive principle than *qiyās* that makes law sufficiently adaptive to deal with the unexpected issues of the society. Imam Malik and his disciples, however, applied it always in conformity with the *Shari’ah* purposes. Some of its examples from the Maliki fiqh are cited by the *fuqaha* as follows:

The administrator who is responsible for keeping law and order is allowed to use force on the suspected and accused persons in order to make him confess what he had committed. According to Malik there is *maṣlahah* that the vicious and undersirable persons are brought to justice by making them admit the offence committed by them secretly. On this point, however, the *fuqaha* of the other schools disagree with Malik since, under this ruling, there is always a

possibility that a person is liable to suffer chastisement without good reason, without having actually committed an offence. However, in case where the *masalah* is too dominant, the other *fuqaha* tend to accept. One such case relates to the attacking Muslims and advancing towards Muslim territory, enemy forces putting Muslims captive on the front with a view to deterring Muslims from attacking or defending themselves, since in that case, the Muslim captives would be the first victims. The *fuqaha* allow the Muslims to defend themselves and attack the enemy forces. This could result in some Muslims being killed. The *maslahah* is to protect the larger Muslim community and their territory *dār al- Islām* rather than some individual Muslims.<sup>27</sup>

Imam Shafī'i accepts *ijtihād* as a means of social adaptability yet he is very cautious in its exercise and application. He confines it to *qiyās* and to him it means only reasoning by analogical deduction. He criticises *ijtihād bi al ray* and *istihsan* under the consideration that they would be misused due to the influences of ones own desires.<sup>28</sup> Shafī'i however, develops a wide doctrine than *qiyās* known as *istishāb* (presumption of continuity). It is to presume continuation of the state of affairs until there is evidence to establish a change. He gives several examples of it in *Al-Umm*. One example, cited by him, is that a traveller can have ablution or drinking water which he doubts of being polluted with impurity (*najas*). The water is regarded pure unless there is evidence of its being *najas*.<sup>29</sup> Shafī'i here applies *istishāb* and leaves *qiyās* aside. Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal and his successor *fuqaha* also accept *ijtihād* and *ijma'* in *fiqh*. They also recognise Abu Hanfa's *istihsān* and Shafī'i's *istishāb* as useful socio-legal methodological principles.

It is this classical theory of *ijtihād* that facilitated the solutions of the issues and problems which the people faced in the changing society. It illustrates well the flexibility of Islamic social laws. To the degree the new changes and developments take

place, will the exploration of Islamic social methodology find its way. This is why the intellectual stagnation (blind *taqlīd*) which overpowered the Muslim world during the later medieval times, prevented their civilizational advancement upto modern times.<sup>31</sup> Whatsoever were the factors of this stagnation yet it is true that it left the Muslim societies in a chaotic situation and led them later to seek remedy in 'modernisation' and 'westernisation' and in other quarters 'reformist' and 'resurgent' attempts broke the ground to overcome the intellectual degeneration and backwardness.<sup>32</sup>

Recent social theory-building of Islam owes much to the 'reformist' thought of contemporary Muslim scholars.<sup>33</sup> Broadly it has two aspects. One is that Scriptural text (Revelation) is to be explained within the conventional parameters as devised in the classical theory of *ijtihād*. Second is that it is to be extended as well as reformed to meet the challenges posed by new sciences and developments of the west. The former makes them (Muslim scholars) to fix their foot-hold at the right place while the latter directs them to explore the ways of progress which will be of wide bearing and scope. It is within this perspective that some 'reformist' attempts were made by Muslim scholars in many quarters of the contemporary world. The main objective of their effort is to reform as well as reconstruct Islamic sciences of polity, economy, law, psychology, international relations etc. within the new exigencies. Training and researches in this direction are conducted by the institutes like International Institute of Islamic Thought, USA and its sister branches in India, Pakistan, Malaysia, and International Centre for Research in Islamic Economics, Jeddah, Islamic Foundation, London and Fiqh Academies of India, Jeddah and Egypt.<sup>34</sup> In some quarters the thrust is, however, on reforming the social structure through legislation of Shari'ah laws. Muslim assemblies and parliaments are considered as the viable institution to realise this objective. Earlier Allama Iqbal has proposed such attempts of 'reformation' and now the scholars like

Muhammad Hashim Kamali,<sup>36</sup> Javid Iqbal<sup>37</sup>, and Louy Safi<sup>38</sup> almost hold the similar views about the subject. They seek on the one hand, ways to explore the possibilities for the broader application of Islamic social and legal doctrines and , on the other , discourage to shun away the dependence on the western systems.

From the above discussion it can be drawn out that Islam is basically a spiritual and ethical guidance for man ensuring his perfect growth vis-a-vis the social development. Accommodating change and adapting to new situations, resulting from the influences of indigenous or external developments is explored through Islamic principle of *ijtihād*. It is the methodology of Islamic dynamism and movement which the classical *fuqaha* have elaborated efficaciously and extensively. Their devising of its doctrines like *qiyās*, *istihsān*, *istislāh*, *maṣālah al mursalah* etc. in their respective ways, to extract the solution for the emerging social problems. In this way ‘continuity’ of the permanent principles of Islam goes side by side with change. In the contemporary times though efforts have been made towards building Islamic social theories and sciences to cater to the new needs and changes of society yet they are more confined within academic circles and little head-way has been made regarding their practical application to test their efficacy and usefulness. In this direction serious attempts are needed to explore the scope of adaptability of Islamic social doctrines in a concrete and practical way.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See M.H. Kamali "Fiqh and Adaption to Social Reality," *The Muslim World*, Hartford, USA, vol. LXXXVI, No. 11, Jan. 1996, pp. 74-83.
2. See the Qur'an, 2:1-5
3. *Ibid*, al-Hadid, 25.
4. See R.H. Gilani, *The Reconstruction of Legal Thought in Islam*, Markazi Maktaba Islami, Delhi, 1982, pp. 129-130.
5. See Fida Muhammad "Ibn Khaldun's Theory of Social Change", *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, vol. 15, No.2, Washington D.C, pp. 30-31.
6. Shah Wali-u Allah, *Hujjat al-Allah al-Bālligha*, Maktaba Thanvi Deoband (UP), 1986. pp. 12-116.
7. Fida Muhammad, *op. cit*, pp. 33-36.
8. *Ibid*. p. 33.
9. See Maryam Jameela, *Islam Versus the West*, Markazi Maktaba, Delhi; Abdul Hamid Siddiqui, *Islam and the Remaking of Humanity*, Taj Company Delhi, 1982.
10. See, Marvin Perry, Myrna Chase and others *Western Civilization*, Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, 1989. See also Infra n. 32.
11. al-Quran, 5:35.
12. al-Quran, 22:77.
13. Allama M. Iqbal. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore, 1996, p.117.
14. See Tahaj al 'Alwani, "The Crises of Thought and Ijtihad", *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, USA, vol.10. No.2, 1993. pp. 236-237.
15. M.H. Kamali *op. cit*, p. 9.
16. Riaz ul-Hasan Gilani, *The Reconstruction of Legal Thought in Islam*, Delhi, 1982 p. 135.
17. See Taha Jabir Alwani, *Source Methodology in Islamic Jurisprudence*, The International Institute of Islamic Thought, Harden USA, pp. 13-14.
18. *Ibid*. pp. 16-17.
19. Sayyid Akbarabadi "Shariah in the Changing Times" (Urdu) in *al-Ma'ārif*, Lahore. Sept-Dec, 1996 and Jan-March, 1997. pp. 13-25.
20. *Ibid*.
21. *Ibid*.
22. Tah J. Alwani, *Op. cit*. pp. 17-18.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

24. M.H. Kamali *op. cit.* p.77.
25. Taha Jabir Alwani, *Ethics of Disagreement in Islam*, The International Institute of Islamic Thought, Washington. 1994, p. 140.
26. *Ibid* p. 141.
27. M.Y. Faruqi, "Early Fuqaha on the Development of Ijtihad" *Hamdard Islamicus*, Karachi, Pakistan Vol. XV No.3,1992, p. 12.
28. *Ibid* p. 13.
29. *Ibid* p. 15.
30. *Ibid* p. 16.
31. Allama Muhammad Iqbal, *op. cit.* pp. 118-120.
32. See John Obert Voll, *Islam Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, England, 1982.
33. See Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Legal Theories*, Cambridge University Press, UK. 1997, pp. 202. 254 and the *Touch of Midas*, (Science, Values and Environment in Islam and the West) edited by Ziauddin Sardar, Centre for Studies on Science, Aligarh, U.P.
34. These institutes and centres are of high academic standard and work in collaboration with the universities directly or indirectly. They have published a good number of books relating to the themes and issues of society, economy, law, psychology and natural sciences in the modern perspective. Moreover, their standard research journals like *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, (IIIT, USA), *Islamic Studies* (International Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad), *Journal of Objective Studies* (IOS, Delhi), *Bahath-u Nazar* (Fiqh Academy, Delhi) and *Tahqiqat-e Islami* (Aligarh) are being published quarterly to contribute to this resurgent trend effectively.
35. Allama M. Iqbal. *op. cit.*
36. Muhammad Hashim Kamali, "Issues in Legal Theory of Usul and Prospects for Reform", *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 40, No.1 2001. pp.
37. Javid Iqbal, "Democracy and the Modern Islamic State", *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (ed. John L. Espisito), Oxford University Press, 1983.
38. See. Louy Safi, "Towards a Unified Approach to the Shari'ah and Social Inference", *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, The International Institute of Islamic Thought, Washington, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1993.