

Islamic Culture: Basic Features and the Future Prospects

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Culture as defined by the Western scholars is the behaviour peculiar to a human being. Categorically it consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, traditions, codes, institutions, rituals, ceremonies, works of art and so on. Edward Burnett Tylor, A. L. Kroeber, Clyde Kluckhohn, Leslie A. White and others have studied culture in its totality. They have thought behaviour as the reflection of "ideas in the mind". Ruth Benedict has provided a provocative introduction to the understanding of anthropology in the United States, England and France. On this basis she has developed her own view of human cultures as "personality writ large".

The concept of culture in the holy Quran, is a total reflection of its world view. The fundamental beliefs of Islam, its human values are demonstrated through cultural works and institutions. In this paper we focus on the understanding of the basic features of Islamic culture. An analytical description of these features can be given as following:

1. Freedom

Islamic culture requires freedom of thought and action. The holy Qur'an declares:

Let there be no compulsion in religion: truth stands out clear from error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah has grasped the most trust worthy hand hold, that never breaks."¹

It is because the compulsion is incompatible with Islam. Religion depends upon faith and will and these would be meaningless if induced by force; truth and error have been so clearly shown up by the Mercy of Allah that there should be no doubt in the mind of any person of good will as to the fundamentals of faith: and Allah's protection is

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continuous, and his plan is always to lead the humanity from the depths of darkness into the clearest light.

One of the main objectives of Islam is to emancipate the mind from superstitions and uncertainties, the soul from sin and corruption, the conscience from oppression and fear, and ever the body from disorder and degeneration. This concept of freedom is based on the following principles:

First, man's conscience is subject to Allah only, to whom every man is directly responsible.

Secondly every human being is personally responsible for his deeds and he alone is entitled to reap the fruits of his work.

Thirdly, Allah has delegated to man the responsibility to decide for himself.

Fourthly, man is sufficiently provided with spiritual guidance and endowed with rational qualities that enable him to make responsible, and sound choices.

2. Order and Discipline

Islamic culture establishes order and discipline in the society. The holy Qur'an criticizes vehemently all kinds of disorder and mischief whether in belief, thought or in practice:

When is said to them: make not mischief on the earth", they say: "why, we only want to make peace. It is to be noted that much mischief is caused (sometimes unwilling) by people who think that they have a mission of peace. when they have not even a true perception of right and wrong. By their blind arrogance they depress the good and encourage the evil.

In chapter al- Aaraf, Allah forbids the pagans from doing any mischief or disorder on the earth and instructs to pray with fear and humility: Do not mischief on the earth after it has been set in order, but call on him with fear and longing (in your hearts) for the mercy of Allah is (always) near to those who do good.³

In the same chapter the Midianites were categorized as *mufsid* (mischievous) because they were corrupt in their business and commercial dealings. The prophet Shu'ayb told his people:

O my people! Worship Allah; you have no other god but Him. Now has come unto you a clear (sign) from your Lord! Give just measure and weight, nor withhold from the people the things that are their due; and do no mischief on the earth after it has been set in order: that will be best for you, if you have faith. And squat not on every road, breathing threats, hindering from the path of Allah those who believe in Him and seeking in it something crooked: but remember how you were little, and He gave you increase. And hold in your mind's eye what was the end of those who did mischief.⁴

The Midianites were in the path of a commercial high way of Asia, viz. that between two such opulent and highly organized nations as Egypt and Mesopotamian group comprising Assyria and Babylonia. Their besetting sins are thus characterized here:

1. giving short measure or weight, where as the strictest commercial probity is necessary for success,
2. a more general form of such fraud, depriving people of rightful dues,
3. producing mischief and disorder, where as peace and order had been established.
4. not content with upsetting settled life, taking to highway robbery, literally as well as,
5. metaphorically, in two sayings viz., cutting off people from access to the worship of Allah and abusing religion and piety for crooked purposes i.e. exploiting religion itself for their crooked ends, as when as a man builds houses of prayer out of unlawful gains or ostentatiously gives charity out of money which he has obtained by force or fraud etc.

After setting out this catalogue of besetting sins, Shu'ayb made two appeals to the past: (1) You began as an insignificant tribe, and by Allah's favour you increased and multiplied in numbers and resources; do you not then own a duty to Allah to fulfil his law? (2) What was the result in the case of those who fell into sin? Will you not take warning by this example?⁵

3. Peace and Harmony

Islamic culture is a true representative of peace and harmony. Peace and Islam are derived from the same root and may be considered

synonymous. One of Allah's names is Peace. The concluding words of the daily prayers of every Muslim are expression of peace. The greeting of the Muslims when they return to Allah is peace. The daily salutations among the Muslims are expressions of peace. The adjective 'Muslim' means, in a sense, peaceful. Heaven in Islam is the abode of peace.⁶ The individual who approaches religion through Islam can not fail to be at peace with Allah, with himself and with his fellow men. Taking all these values together, putting man in his proper place in the cosmos, and viewing life in the Islamic perspective, men of good faith and principles cannot fail to make this world a better world to regain human dignity, to achieve equality, to enjoy universal brotherhood and to build a lasting peace.

To appreciate how Islamic culture approaches the question of peace one has only to consider the following different connotations of Arabic root of the word Islam i.e. 'SLM' in the holy Qur'an itself:

1. Sound and without blemish (*musallamah*)⁷,
2. Safe from all kinds of physical and moral shortcomings and natural as well as accidental dangers,⁸
3. Peace and security,⁹
4. Peace and blessings,¹⁰
5. Source of peace and perfection, guardian and preserver of safety,¹¹
6. Sound heart (*qalb i saleem*)¹². The heart which is saved from sinful acts and remaining in its original form, is categorized as '*nafs mutmainnah*' (the soul incomplete rest and satisfaction) also. The chapter al-Fajr of the Qur'an narrates this soul as posted on the high rank of spirituality: *(To the righteous soul will be said:) O (you) soul, in complete rest and satisfaction! Come back you to your Lord -- well pleased (yourself), and well pleasing unto Him! enter you then, among My devotees ! yea, enter you My heaven !*"¹³ the righteous enter into their inheritance and receive their welcome with a title that suggests freedom from all pain, sorrow, doubt, struggle, disappointment. Passion, and ever further desire: at rest, in peace; and in a state of complete satisfaction.
7. Home of peace, paradise,¹⁴

8. Peace as against frivolity and any taint of ill; safety from suffering from vain or frivolous discourse, idle boasting, foolish flattery etc.¹⁵
9. Faith in all signs of Allah as against blind following or straying.¹⁶
10. Muslim means a witness of right for mankind as the Prophet (SAAS) is a witness and guide and exemplar,¹⁷
11. Faithfull, loyal and sincere as against conspirator and hypocrite,¹⁸
12. Muslim as against being a defaulter or criminal,¹⁹
13. Muslim as against arrogant,²⁰

4. Equality

Islamic culture promotes equality and vanishes all kinds of distinction and superiority, inferiority complex from the society. This equality is not to be misunderstood, however, as identicalness or stereotype. The holy Qur'an clarifies that all men are equal in the sight of Allah, but they are not necessarily identical. There are differences of abilities, potentials, ambitions, wealth, resources and so on. Yet some of these differences can by itself establish a status of superiority of one man or race to another. In the Qur'an, Allah says:

O Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you.²¹

This is addressed to all mankind and not only to the Muslims. It is understood that in a perfect world the two would be synonymous. As mankind is descended from one pair of parents, their tribes, races, and nations are convenient labels by which we may know certain differing characteristics. Before Allah they are all one and he gets most honour who is most righteous.

5. Knowledge and Scientific Awakening

Islamic culture has been the harbinger of knowledge, scientific advancement and technological awakening in the history. The holy Qur'an in

its first revelation advises the Prophet about it:

Read in the name of your Lord and Cherisher. Who created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood. Read, and your Lord is most bountiful He Who taught (the use of) the pen. Taught man that which he knew not!²²

The intellectual nature of man, his mind, intelligence or reasoning power, is called a blessing of Allah by the holy Qur'an. Islam emphasizes upon the acquisition of true knowledge based on clear proofs and indisputable evidence. The Qur'an is the first authority to enjoin zealous quest for knowledge through experience as well as experiment, meditation and observation. It is a Divine injunction incumbent upon every Muslim to seek knowledge in the broadest sense of the word and search for truth. The Qur'an incited the humanity to think of the universe.

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth in the attraction of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which Allah sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth - (here) indeed are signs for a people that wise.²³

Islam infact wants to free the human mind from the tight shackles and limits of tangibility. It wants to elevate the individual and empower him with self-confidence and Heavenly authority to expand the domain of his mind into all fields of thought-physical and metaphysical, scientific and philosophical intuitive and experimental, organic and otherwise.

Another point emphasized in the Qur'an is human reason which is a reflection of the intellect. When it is used in a healthy and balanced way it leads to *Tawhid* rather than to a denial of the Divine and can be misled only when the passions destroy its balance and obscure its vision. Reason, therefore, when not impeded by external obstacles does not lead to

rationalism in the modern sense of the word, that is, a negation of all principles transcending human reason, but becomes itself an instrument of unity and way of reaching the intelligible world. Likewise, Islamic art, instead of being 'rationalistic' as it might appear at first, leads the observer through the abstract symbols of geometry to the principles of unity which can be represented only 'negatively' and abstractly.²⁴

6. Dynamism

Islamic culture is dynamic. It is not rigid, static or stereotype. The holy Qur'an enjoins wisdom that provokes the mind and quickens the heart. In this wisdom there is stirring dynamism and there is moving force attested by historical evidence as well as by the Qur'an itself. Allah has said:

Had We sent down this Qur'an on a mountain, verily you would have seen it humble itself and cleave as under for fear of Allah. Such are the similitudes which We propound to men that they may reflect."²⁵

The holy verse under study means that the Qur'an originates life, quickens the soul, radiates the guiding light and moves the seemingly immobile objects.

The dynamism of Islam copes with the changes in all the situations. Islam is permanent but needs of Human beings are always changing. Islam through the institution of *ijtihad* enables Muslims to cope with the continuous human change. This is one of the many reasons for having different schools of thought in our intellectual history, each was influenced by the historical circumstances and responding in a diverse ways.

An Agenda for Future

In these circumstances when one thinks of an agenda for future he becomes confused and disappointed. We have already entered in the 21st century. Even then we encounter with fanaticism, emotionalism, superficialism, intolerance, arrogance, narrow mindness, provocativeness and so on at the core of Muslims intellectual's efforts. Slogans without home work, parties without following, projects without planning, jihad without intellectual efforts and otherwise arms and ammunitions are the salient features of Muslims today. From Jamaluddin Afgani to Muhammad Abduh,

from Maulana Maududi, Hasan al Banna, Syed Qutb, Malik Bennabi to Fazlur Rahman, Ismail Raji al Faruqi, S.H. Nasr, from Hasan Turabi, Naqib al-Attas, Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman, Nijatullah Siddiqui, F. R. Faridi, Abdul Haq Ansari to Ziauddin Sardar, Anwar Ibrahim, Fathi Osman, Mustafa al- Tahhan one may find a continuity in fresh Islamic thinking and always a revision in formulating an agenda for Islamic thought and culture. In view of this the following points of Islamic culture can be emphasised:

1. Human Dignity:

The intellectuals must concentrate on the fact that the human dignity is cornerstone of Islamic culture. The holy Quran declares:

We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam and borne them over land and sea, and provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life and favored them above most of our creation.²⁶

The word '*takrim*' connotes respect, honour and dignity to all the human beings irrespective of race, region, religion, culture and so on. The human dignity is comprehensive. It is global and universal. It is against human dignity to make a distinction between the two. The holy Qur'an when teaches to respect orphans, doesn't differentiate between Muslim and non-Muslim:

Nay nay ! But you honour not the orphans ! Nor do you encourage one another to feed the poor!²⁷

The Qur'an criticizes our selfish attitude and condemns our selective behaviour. Even at our own valuation, if we are favoured with superfluities, do we think of the fatherless children or the struggling poor? On the contrary, too many men are but ready to embezzle the helpless orphan inheritance. Dignity, therefore, should be secured for human beings in every respect spiritual, social, political, economic and cultural.

2. Dignity for Women

Muslim intellectuals have realized that women are deprived of their Islamic rights even in Islamic society also. It is not enough to recite the holy verse of the Qur'an and to quote Prophetic traditions in favour of women rights. Most of the Muslim 'ulama are of the opinion that Islam cares

religious women only in the family or with regard to the religious education. It is not so. Women equally share with men the social and political responsibilities and the Qur'an is very much clear about it:

The believers, men and women; are protectors one of other; they enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity and obey Allah and His Messenger. On them Allah pour His Mercy: for Allah is exalted in power, Wise.²⁸

Most of the scholars and Ēlama quote the Qur'anic chapter *al-Nisa* and confirm the gender superiority. To them men are by birth superior because they are declared as *qawwam*. The full text is translated below:

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means.²⁹

The word *qawwam infact* means one who stands firm in another's business, protects his interests and looks after his affairs or it may be, standing firm in his own business, managing affairs, with a steady purpose. For example Allah says:

O ye who believe! Stand out firmly yourselves as witness to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether to be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest you swere, and if you distort (justice) verily Allah is well acquainted with all that you do.³⁰

Men are the protectors of women and are given some more qualities and capabilities, chances to dominate and excellence to be in-charge of family life. It does not mean that any of the two is superior or inferior. Both the sexes are awarded extraordinary qualities as per their biological constructions and division of labour. Women have full rights and obligations as men have. Their dignity should be maintained and they should be provided equal opportunities in the policy making and in active participation in public

concerns. There should be no obstacle in the way of their progress, no pressure merely by social tradition and culture without any support from Qur'an and Sunnah. They should have their own likes and dislikes, their own choices according to their own discretion and convenience by their own free will and conviction. Taking in view the dignity and respect of women the holy Quran declares:

When you divorce women and they fulfil their term of (*iddat*), do not prevent them from marrying their (former) husbands if they mutually agree on equitable terms.³¹

The termination of a marriage bond is a most serious matter for family and social life. And every lawful device is approved which can equitably bring back those who have lived together, provided only there is mutual love and they can live on honourable terms with each other. If these conditions are fulfilled, it is not right for outsiders to prevent or hinder reunion. The word '*azl*' (prevention) is very important. This '*azl*' is banned not only in family life but in all walks of life.

3. Religious Tolerance

Muslim intellectual should realize that this is an era of national and universal pluralism. The leaders of Islamic movements while planning for Islamic revival and awakening have to consider seriously the requirements and challenges of a plural society. The non-believers and followers of the other religions should be treated not only kindly; they should be granted full rights in social and political spheres provided these are not against the text of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Muslim majorities have to enable non-Muslim citizens to participate in policy making and in shaping the destiny of the country if they are loyal and sincere to the nation. Contradictory to the human past, human societies in most of the world have quickly and increasingly become pluralistic, as a result of the transportation facilities all over the world, and different political and economic circumstances in different places on the globe. Muslims have to consider this changed situation and develop a fresh response based on Islamic justice. Demolition of Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, India on 6th Dec. 1992 can be

termed as the Hindu terrorism and at the same time the demolition of Budhdha monument in Bamyana, Afghanistan was also not justified in Islamic Shariah. In this regard the Holy Qur'an instructs as following:

If anyone transgresses the prohibition against you, transgress you likewise against him. But fear Allah, and know that Allah is with those who restrain themselves.³²

It is required that Muslims should restrain as much as possible. Force is a dangerous weapon. It may have to be used for self-defense but he must remember that self-restraint is pleasing in the eyes of Allah:

Nor can goodness and evil be equal. Repel (evil) with what is better: then will he between whom and you was hatred become as it were your friend and intimate.³³

Allah commands Muslim that he should repel or destroy evil with something which is far better, just as an antidote is better than poison. He should foil hatred with love. He should repel ignorance with knowledge, folly and wickedness with the friendly message of Revelation.

4. Continuation of the Universal Civilization

Contemporary civilization is an outcome of the continuous contributions of all the cultures and civilizations throughout the history. Each civilization has been an improved form of the previous one. Our Prophet has declared wisdom as a lost property of Muslims where ever they find it, they are most entitled to it. The classical Muslim scholars in the history benefitted from the Greek-Byzantine, Persian, Indian civilizations to the extent they thought proper. They constructively participated and made later their distinctive contribution to the universal civilization that dominated and led the world for centuries. Muslim intellectuals will express their differences and will work on the common grounds and for common interests.

In his *An Agenda or the 21th Century*' Rushwarth Kiddle writes, "Six vital items seem to emerge as the first intensity items-the high leverage issues (in former World Bank President, Robret McNamara's phrase) to which humanity devotes its full attention and its unstinting resources: 1) The threat of nuclear annihilation; 2) the danger of overpopulation; 3) the

degradation of the global environment; 4) the gap between the developing and industrial world; 5) the need for fundamental restructuring of educational systems; and 6) the breakdown in public and private morality. The list is not in order of priority, although the nuclear issue appears to rank first.”³⁴

With regard to the last issue, McNamara elaborates further in *Reinventing the Future*, “By the end of the century we should seek to increase awareness and sensitivity to the moral dimension of the behaviour, both of individuals and nations. We should stress the immorality of the rich consuming a disproportionate share of limited resources with adverse effects on other individuals and future generations and other nations. And we should stress the immorality of contributing to the degradation of the environment again with adverse effect on other individuals and nations and future generations. There is a moral dimension to each of these major subjects we have been discussing, but very rarely do you see in public debate a discussion on the morality of them.”³⁵ Barbara Tuchman, a prominent writer, characterizes the present an age of disruption and the greatest disruption is found in “the real deterioration of public morality”. Kiddler summarizes this point as follows: “The failure of public truth telling, the sale of political influence, the acceptance of illegality in stock market dealings ... such are topics that appear again and again in these interviews (that the book includes), sometimes prominently and sometimes subtly. For the social philosophers like Sissel Bak, morality is the issue for 21st Century. Because she sees trust as the vital missing ingredient in so many negotiations, she foresees a time when public officials will have to take 'moral principles' in order to develop the trust necessary for negotiating toward solutions.”³⁶

This moral insensitivity the most important issue of the contemporary civilization may be stopped through the promotion of Islamic ethics and morality in total and it is possible only when Muslim intellectuals initiate interfaith dialogue and participate in the growth of universal civilization.³⁷

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