

Religious Perceptions of Desirable Societies:
Islamic Perspectives Responses

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I am very pleased to be here to help launch this important phase of the explorations by the United Nations University into the role the major religions might play in helping shape coherent visions of viable futures for a pluralistic but interdependent world. This meeting is concerned specifically with the Islamic perception of that role. In that connection, let me say that I wish to speak to you here today not only as the Rector of the United Nations University, but also as a fellow Muslim deeply concerned about the potential insights our faith might be able to offer humankind's search for a more just and harmonious tomorrow.

In recent years, there have been a number of efforts at interreligious collaboration on questions of peace and development. But they have been largely directed towards finding common ground for co-operation in the increasingly fragmented situation of today's world. While these efforts certainly are to be commended, the limitations of this approach have already become quite visible. This project reflects a different approach. It is predicated on the assumption that there is an apparent resurgence and intensification of religious faith in all societies in one form or another. The articulation of possible visions of desirable societies that would be consonant with the rich diversity of cultural value systems that are rooted in the world's major religions may help us understand the different future perspectives that impel the major religions to become political actors in the emerging world. The variety of these perceptions, and their compatibility or incompatibility, may help us identify some of the problems ahead in the area of peaceful and creative co-existence and mutual tolerance.

This resurgence of faith is perhaps nowhere so manifest as in today's Islamic world, where we see, in its many faces across a vast expanse of the globe, powerful impulses for self-renewal of the cultures of Islam. We would, in fact, all do well to recognize the extremely varied social, economic, political, ecological, and historical conditions that are embodied in the rubric of Islamic civilization itself. Thus it is probably more important to recognize our differences than our common grounds - both interreligiously and intrareligiously - in organizing the search we are attempting. If religion is to play a role in helping humanity's entry into the 21st century, before it

destroys itself, then we must find ways to convert renewed religious intensities into actions relevant to our pluralistic age.

The upsurge in religious feeling, I believe, is due in large part to the pace and scale of rapid and profound social and cultural change that permeates our daily existence. The pain of unprecedented change has left many of us bewildered, and old moral certitudes have fallen by the wayside.

The change is due to a number of elements that are rapidly converging at this moment in history. There are the advances in science and technology altering the shape and texture of societies and their institutions. There are the vast migrations of hundreds of millions of people, from countryside to city, from nation to nation, from continent to continent, who are cut adrift from their traditional cultural moorings. There are swiftly changing values and ways of life. The weak and the powerless no longer accept poverty and injustice passively - and their outraged voices threaten and disturb those who would maintain the status quo. When injustice becomes unbearable, violence is unleashed.

All of this uncertainty and newness has led to a yearning for some greater certitude to guide us in learning to deal with change. There seems to be a growing realization that answers at the materialistic level alone, at which present-day political leaders and decision-makers of various ideologies look for solutions, are essentially leading us up a dead-end street.

We are witnessing, I believe, a breakthrough in the sense of the sacred, however one's own religious roots might define sacred. And here, I think, it is so important to recognize that the relevant questions to be asked might not be the same for each religion - indeed within religions. The history of Islamic civilization is a tale of a multiplicity of responses to the challenges of the time; it may well be that there is no one single answer to the challenge of the modern world from Islam.

We should also remember that, as history shows us, all religions have had great difficulties in accommodating social change. This disjunction between religion and history is an intimate part of the human experience. Life on earth is eternally different from what religion would like it to be. It is within that tension that human life assumes its significance or that man - in trying to walk the straight path - assumes his freedom and his responsibility.

Some of the religious renewal we see turns out to be a blind hearkening back to a reactionary fundamentalism. Other efforts are too narrow and rigid. Even those who escape these pitfalls are not sure they are on the right path in search of a new awareness of the moral dimensions of our problems as well as their solutions.

In a setting such as this, a number of new ethical challenges are posed:

- How are we going to manage to live in some measure of harmony and civility on a planet that will number six billion people by the close of this century and ten billion before the middle of the next century? What will this do to our societies - already so sorely afflicted with unemployment, hunger and poverty? We are faced with concerns on a scale that escape the religious precepts and ethical norms by which humankind has lived over the centuries. Against the scale and structural character of much of today's poverty, charity is simply not enough.

- How do we face the staggering challenge of creating one billion new jobs to satisfy the job market of the year 2000? What contribution could the major religions, Islam included, make in helping to rethink the relationship between faith and work? Can religion help us fashion a new equation for work, culture, leisure and learning?

- What are our environmental responsibilities to future generations weighted against our short-term needs? There are basic ethical choices demanded here - what are the rights of our children or of our neighbours up or downstream?

- Where do we strike the proper ethical balance between the rights of the individual and his obligations to the larger community?

- What is the balance between the needs for growth and development and the demand for equity? Between personal needs and the need for common survival?

- In an age in which machines are coming to regulate and control so many aspects of our daily lives, how do we foster growth of societies that are not totally depersonalized and that offer space for freedom? Put more broadly, there is the question of governance - governance of our inevitably pluralistic world, governance of the desirable societies envisioned by the revitalized religious inputs with which this project is concerned.

These are some of the profound ethical choices that confront the upsurge in religious feeling in all our societies today. Our project hopes to bring out possible responses to these choices from various religions. The purpose of this meeting is to try to design how, through a series of studies, we might bring out the specific contribution Islam could offer.

Cutting across the many faces of Islam that we know today is our recognition that it is a religion of personal responsibility. Truth is not just a cognitive matter, it is not passive - truth is only true when it is acted upon. From this flow many important social implications in the role Islam could have to play.

Any attempt to organize the world's religions in a co-operative diagnosis of the world's ills is fraught with disconcerting issues. One important one, of course, is the question of tolerance. But there are other compelling issues including the need to reconcile religious values and worldly goals, the

relationship between religion and modernization, and the danger of reactionary or escapist tendencies.

Like all processes of rejuvenation, this resurgence manifests itself both in backward-looking and forward-looking directions. It can deny neither its historical roots, nor its continuing commitments and aspirations. We hope that by asking these questions we may be able to contribute to the forward thrust of this process of spiritual resurgence.

The questions most pertinent for each religion can be identified only by looking at the specific contemporary context in which each religion lives. Every major religion has wrestled and is continuing to do so with its own problems. Therefore, in focussing on each of these religions we will have to ask ourselves: What are the relevant questions that may help bring out the response we are looking for?

In this group, which consists primarily of Muslim scholars and thinkers, I venture to ask some of these questions. There, of course, may be others, that are deemed more relevant and I hope this meeting might bring them out.

The first broad question: Why has there been no revival of science and technology after the attainment of independence in any of the Islamic societies? Is it possible to think of a revitalization of Islamic civilization without coming to grips with the age-old encounter between faith and scientific reasoning? Can we avoid considering the decline of scientific reasoning in Islam as resulting from the prevalence of the legalistic approach to life?

This line of questioning leads to a further question: Are the concepts of industrial society and Islamic culture mutually compatible? In the face of the unprecedented problems faced by humankind, will it be possible for a revitalized Islamic civilization to reconcile the imperatives of its faith and the legalistic injunctions of Islam in ways that might provide important contributions to the solution of these problems?

The unprecedented character, scale and depth of the social and cultural changes that are taking place, and the rapidity of these changes, will put a premium on the capacity of all religions to discover how to define the meaning of these changes and to interpret their significance in relation to the basic tenets of each religion. What then would be the crucial factors that affect the capacity for continuous reinterpretation that will be required if these religions are to address these problems in a manner relevant to our times?

Specifically in the case of Islam, should we or should we not reconsider the place of ijtihad in the process of moral reasoning as part of our search for proper responses to new and unprecedented social situations?

A second general question: How are faith, tawheed, religious law and the spiritual symbolism of Sufism to be related to other facets of human life, collectively as well as individually? In such a value configuration, which

elements can be considered Islamic, and which not? What constitutes the boundaries between them? What then are Islamic values and Islamic norms in such a situation?

A third question: How should Islam, as a system of faith and belief, interact with other religions and belief systems - as well as with modern ideologies? Should Islam act as an alternative to all of them - or, instead, should it seek new areas of understanding which could form a common contribution shared collectively with other religions for the benefit of the human race in general now or in the future? If the latter is the only possible answer in an increasingly interdependent world, then what will be the implications for what might be called "institutionalized Islam" - as manifest in the group of ulamas, conventional 'Islamic scientific disciplines', along with the orthodox world view itself? What might constitute the 'new orthodoxy of Islam'?

Islamic communities everywhere in the world have tried - and still keep trying - to give at least partial answers to these 'long-range questions'. Partial and limited answers, such as particular forms of relationships between Islamic faith and state power are already being advanced. They need not be seen, in any way, as complete or final answers. But they deserve continuous monitoring and examination. They turn on fundamental questions about the variety of modes of governance and their political, economic and social institutions in our visions of desirable societies. Particular patterns of interaction between Islamic legalism and indigenous cultures have taken place. These all merit our careful and meticulous study. Perhaps most deserving of our attention should be the efforts to formulate an 'Islamic' concept of the human person, which has been tried in separate locations and diversified manners, throughout Islamic history.

It is our hope at the United Nations University that this specific effort at elucidating Islamic perceptions of desirable societies might contribute to the rethinking of the future of Islamic civilization through evolving reflections on how the enormous challenges now confronting humanity might be responded to in ways that are consonant with both Islamic norms and Islamic experience. We hope that these reflections will not only be legalistic or normative, but will take into account the variety of historical experiences of the many Islamic communities in the world, be they majority or minority groups. In that light, it will be incumbent upon us also to reflect on the kind of Islamic studies that we will have to develop within our own societies.

We will also want to reflect on the problems of co-existence and tolerance, not only between Islam and other religions, but within the variety of Islamic cultures as well, at what appear to be higher levels of religious intensity. This will force us to consider the varieties of historical experience of Islam in Black Africa, in the Arab world, as well as the Turko/Persian/Afghan cultures, in South Asia, and in the Southeast Asian Islamic communities. There is further to be considered the experience of Islamic minorities, as well as the lessons that we might draw from the

experience of sectarian communities in Islam and from the Muslim minorities in non-Islamic countries.

We hope this planning session will help us identify basic questions which must be addressed if we are to retain our hopes that Islam, in all its many manifestations, can help us in our quest for a better world in ways that are consonant with its basic tenets.

Speaking now in more general terms, this project is seeking to explore the ways in which religion could respond to the challenges now confronting us. We, at the United Nations University, wish to pose a number of questions to leading thinkers of the major religions. We begin the task within the Christian and Islamic framework; we are planning to include Buddhism, Hinduism and possibly other religions in the future.

It is absolutely essential to the success of this undertaking that it be recognized that we are not interested in so-called concrete answers to the problems we have raised. We are not in search of any technocratic fix or social engineering. To be asking for concrete solutions would be asking the wrong questions: it is terribly important that we define the right questions to be asked - it is perhaps the main purpose of this meeting.

We will be asking you to respond to these questions from within the precepts of the faith. While man is essentially a future-oriented animal, it is true, in Islam as elsewhere, that we are also defined by our own history and our own aspirations. The cast that moulds the basic values of our cultures presets, to a certain extent, the manner in which we perceive and decide our future options. Our flexibility in dealing with the future hinges on the extent to which we are either: 1) prisoners of our past; or 2) creative inheritors of it and thereby capable of continuously reinterpreting our cultures to meet the challenges of the late twentieth century. We look to you as creative thinkers, to guide us in planning this study.

We hope that this process of reflection within the world of Islamic scholarship, that is now going on, will help in the building of appropriate response to the major challenges the world faces today - responses that are consonant within faiths and across faiths. Above all, we are seeking responses relevant to the survival and growth of the human community in pluralistic and peaceful co-existence. That is basically why we have assembled here today. Thank you all for agreeing to participate in such an important task.

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