

# Morality in Public Life: The Challenge before Religion

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I am honored – and deeply humbled – to be invited by the Association of Muslim Social Scientists to deliver the Ismail al-Faruqi Memorial Lecture this evening.

Professor Ismail al-Faruqi was undoubtedly one of the most accomplished and one of the most illustrious thinkers that the Muslim world has produced in recent decades. His writings, which span a whole spectrum of social concerns, have contributed immensely to a better understanding of *tawhid*, Islamic culture, and interfaith dialogue among both Muslims and non-Muslims. As a committed intellectual who translated ideas into action, the late Professor al-Faruqi was an honest and principled voice in the struggle for a just world. It was because of his own integrity that he regarded morality in public life as fundamental to social justice.

Muslims, more than perhaps most people, should be able to appreciate the importance of morality in public life. And yet most states established in the name of Islam have failed miserably to uphold the basic standards of public morality. What explains this huge paradox? How can we bridge this yawning chasm between the ideals of which we are conscious and the realities that confront us? How will globalization help or hinder our efforts to imbue public life with moral values and principles?

## **Example**

If Muslims should have no difficulty in empathizing with the idea of morality in public life, it is partly because Prophet Muhammad is the only

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prophet in history who established a state guided by moral values derived from religion. Through his own example as a ruler and an administrator, he laid down the axioms and precepts of governance.<sup>1</sup> He demonstrated, through his exemplary leadership, how a person entrusted with high office should conduct himself in the public arena.

The Prophet's lofty standards inspired the four Righteous Caliphs and his other Companions to adhere to the virtues he cherished in public life. A commitment to justice, a profound sense of fairness, a devotion to the cause of the poor, a readiness to seek the views of the people, and the ability to select upright and capable individuals to manage the affairs of the state were some of the attributes of leadership associated with such caliphs as `Umar ibn al-Khattab and `Ali ibn Abi Talib. As caliph, `Ali put it in his famous epistle to Malik Ashtar, whom he had just appointed Governor of Egypt:

... the richest treasure that you may covet should be the treasure of good deeds ... Maintain justice in administration and impose it on your own self and seek the consent of the people, for the discontent of the masses sterilizes the contentment of the privileged few and the discontent of the few loses itself in the contentment of the many ... So live in close contact with the masses and be mindful of their welfare.<sup>2</sup>

`Ali also cautioned the governor to observe rectitude in his conduct, especially in matters related to integrity and probity. He advised him:

Make it a rule of your conduct never to give even a small piece of land to any of your relations. That will prevent them from causing harm to the interests of others and save you from courting the disapprobation of both God and man. Deal justice squarely, regardless of the fact whether one is a relation or not. If any of your relations or companions violates the law, mete out the punishment prescribed by law, however painful it might be to you personally, for it will be all to the good of the state.<sup>3</sup>

Even after the period of the Righteous Caliphs, there were rulers who displayed superlative qualities of statesmanship in promoting the public good. The Umayyad ruler `Umar ibn `Abd al-`Aziz and the liberator of Jerusalem, Salah al-Din al-Ayubi, would be just two such examples. While `Umar's passion for justice, especially in relation to the poor and down-trodden, was legendary, Salah al-Din's magnanimity toward his opponents has been etched in gold in the annals of history.

### *Rulers*

It is because the righteous conduct of those vested with power and authority is so central to Muslim civilization that almost every illustrious

Muslim philosopher of antiquity – from al-Farabi and al-Mawardi to al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun – has given so much significance to the role of the ruler in setting the moral tone and tenor of society.<sup>4</sup> Al-Ghazali, for instance, took the view that it is only through his virtues, and not through his power or wealth, that a ruler would be able to create a truly Islamic society.

The emphasis given to virtuous rulers in Islamic thought, and the examples of honest and upright rulers themselves, should not obscure from us the other side of Muslim history: The presence of countless caliphs and sultans who violated every moral code in their conduct of the affairs of state. They not only abused power and indulged in corrupt practices; many of them were utterly ruthless and incredibly cruel. In a sense, the contemptuous disregard for public morality began with Yazid, who succeeded Mu`awiyah, who in turn usurped the power of the caliphate in the wake of the assassination of `Ali, the last of the four Righteous Caliphs. It is said that Yazid was “a philanderer [who] defied every tenet of the Islamic faith. His short rule was marked by an ugly exhibition of greed and misuse of power.”<sup>5</sup>

There are many Yazids in the contemporary Muslim world. Even as they proclaim their determination to return to the pristine glory of the Qur’an and the Sunnah (the way of the Prophet), they transgress the most rudimentary moral principles of the religion. The “Islamic” states that they claim to have established are often devoid of any semblance of allegiance to the values of justice and compassion, which lie at the heart of the Shari’ah.

## Ten Questions

We shall try to show how contemporary Islamic states, in general, have deviated from the accepted norms of morality in public life. We shall do this through an overview of different states, such as Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Iran, and Afghanistan, without going into any detail. To give a structure to our analysis, we shall evaluate governance in these states by asking ten questions that are related, in one way or another, to some of the cardinal moral positions on leadership, government, and authority embodied in the Qur’an and the Sunnah.

One: Have Islamic states made sincere efforts to alleviate poverty and improve the lot of the downtrodden?<sup>6</sup>

Two: Have Islamic states sought to curb opulence and ostentation among their elites?

Three: Does any Islamic state show any promise of reducing the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots”?”<sup>7</sup>

Four: Have Islamic governments made a serious attempt to check the abuse of power and eradicate elite-level corruption?<sup>8</sup>

Five: How many Islamic governments are prepared to investigate and expose sexual misdemeanors among the elites themselves, without any pressure from the people or from other quarters?

Six: How many Islamic states uphold the rule of law and respect the independence of the judiciary?<sup>9</sup>

Seven: Do contemporary Islamic governments observe the canons of public accountability?

Eight: Do Islamic governments make it a practice to consult their citizens on the laws, policies, and programs meant for them?<sup>10</sup>

Nine: Do Islamic governments regard it as their cardinal duty to protect and preserve the freedom and responsibility of the human being to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong?<sup>11</sup>

Ten: Are there Islamic states that are totally committed to protecting and enhancing the rights of non-Muslims on the basis of the principle that we are all human beings?<sup>12</sup>

### *Poverty and Opulence*

If, for a start, we reflect on the record of certain Islamic states in the eradication of poverty, we would be grossly disappointed. Afghanistan and Sudan, for instance, are among the poorest countries in the world. Though their inability to combat poverty effectively in the last 2 or 3 decades is understandable – Afghanistan was a victim of external aggression and foreign occupation and was later embroiled in a civil war, while Sudan continues to face an armed rebellion in the south – it appears that both countries have chosen to accord greater importance to proving their Islamic credentials than to attending to some of the basic needs of their people. For the [former] ruling Taliban in Afghanistan, ensuring that the poor are fed, clothed, and housed is not a priority when compared to enforcing an ultra-conservative, even an un-Islamic, dress code upon women.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the elite in Khartoum is more deeply enmeshed in factional feuds than in addressing the problem of health care for the poor in the vast rural hinterland.

Of course there are Islamic states that have succeeded in reducing absolute poverty, improving the life expectancy of the people, and raising the standard of education. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, among other such states, have chalked up these achievements largely because of their massive petroleum wealth. But even some of these countries, given their economic prosperity, could have done much more to better the lives of their people.<sup>14</sup>

Besides, the elite in almost all of these oil-rich states, supposedly based upon the Shari'ah, are distinguished by their opulent lifestyles and their ostentatious display of wealth.<sup>15</sup> Luxurious palaces at home and lavish shopping sprees abroad have earned them the unsavory reputation of "decadent Arab shaykhs." It is because so much of the oil wealth, which by right should belong to the people, is controlled by an elite that the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is so stark in countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain.

### *Corruption and Sex*

Just as ruling elites in a number of Islamic states are not inclined toward redistributing wealth in an equitable manner, so are they reluctant to fight corruption and the abuse of power, especially within the upper echelons of society. Allegations of corruption on the part of influential wielders of power in both rich and poor Islamic states have been circulating for a long time.<sup>16</sup> Even elements within the religious elite stratum of the Islamic Republic of Iran – it has been suggested – are not averse to dipping their hands into the public coffers.

To these allegations of corruption, one should add the lurid tales of sexual escapades involving the elites of certain Islamic states.<sup>17</sup> True or not, there have been very few instances of highly placed Saudi or Kuwaiti public personalities, alleged to have committed some sexual wrongdoing, being prosecuted in a court of law. On the other hand, one often comes across cases of some ordinary citizen or some foreign worker in these and other states being stoned to death for adultery or being subjected to some other form of punishment for some sexual crime or other.

### *Law and Judiciary*

An even more significant illustration of the lack of genuine commitment to moral standards in public life would be the general Islamic elite's attitude toward the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. If justice and

equality for all, without discrimination, is one of the cornerstones of the concept of the rule of law, then there is perhaps not a single Islamic state today that fulfills this criterion. It is not just institutionalized discrimination against women and non-Muslim minorities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Sudan, and Iran that makes a mockery of the rule of law; it is the manner in which the law is often applied to protect elite interests that is equally disturbing. Needless to say, one of the main reasons why this happens is because the judiciary, whose independence is a cherished canon of Islamic jurisprudence, is invariably under the thumb of the ruling elite.

### *Accountability and Participation*

It follows from this that very few Islamic governments are accountable to the people. Even the most elementary expression of accountability, namely, ruling with the consent of the people – consent obtained through democratic elections – is alien to most governments that call themselves Islamic. Sometimes, a religious elite imposes its rule upon the masses as a consequence of a civil war, as in the case of Afghanistan. True to form, the Taliban has erected a harsh, dogmatic, and authoritarian system of governance that denies the people any say in the affairs of the nation.<sup>18</sup> It is this system that it defends in the name of “a pure and pristine” Islam.

Most other Islamic states also do not encourage free and active political participation on the part of the citizenry. Saudi Arabia, for instance, is run by a family and buttressed by an appointed advisory council (the Majlis). Kuwait also is helmed by a royal family, with a Parliament elected by male voters only serving as its prop. A family dynasty is in power in Bahrain, as is also the case with Qatar.

It is perhaps only Iran that allows some space and scope for popular participation in the political process. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has, on a regular basis and in the most trying circumstances, held parliamentary and local elections. However, the people’s ability to shape their destiny is severely hampered by an individual and an institution that sit at the apex of the system. The supreme spiritual leader exercises direct or indirect authority over the judiciary, the executive, and even Parliament. The armed forces are under his command. There is also a Council of Guardians, the *vilayat-e-faqih*, comprising leading Islamic jurists who are entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring that state legislation, policies, and even crucial appointments are in line with Islam – as interpreted by the council. The power that the council and the supreme leader wield curbs and

curtails the will of the people, as is becoming even more obvious now in the aftermath of the recent presidential election.<sup>19</sup> Though the reform-minded Mohamed Khatami secured 77 percent of the popular vote, he has been hindered and impeded at every turn and corner from implementing certain policies, which would ensure that the state is more accountable and that the people have greater political and social freedom, by a religious elite bent on perpetuating its grip over the levers of power.

### *Good and Evil*

Clerical power, in that sense, is a repudiation of the freedom of the human being to “enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong” of his/her own volition as an individual or through cooperation with other human beings. This right – nay responsibility – that is embodied in the Holy Qur’an is part and parcel of that larger trust that the human being is expected to fulfill as vicegerent – a trust he/she had agreed to bear at the time of creation. It is ironic that it is in Islamic states, which have vowed to uphold the Qur’an and the Sunnah, that the human being’s responsibility to truth and justice, embodied in a pledge to Allah, should be usurped by the religious elite!

It is not just in Iran that there is this usurpation of the human being’s role and responsibility. The Taliban, who have appointed public officials to ensure that good prevails and evil is eradicated in matters of personal morality, have been even more doctrinaire in their interpretation of Islamic rules and regulations. Indeed, in every state where religious elites are preponderantly powerful, they have become the custodians of morality, arrogating to themselves the sole privilege of interpreting the divine truth and thereby denying the individual the right to consciously understand, absorb, articulate, and disseminate values pertaining to what is good and beautiful in life.<sup>20</sup>

### *Non-Muslims*

Because they have established a monopoly over the truth, the religious elites’ interpretation of each and every aspect of governance, insofar as it is linked to theology, is accepted as sacrosanct. Thus, in Afghanistan, the aborted attempt to distinguish the Hindu minority from the Muslim majority by requiring its members to carry yellow stickers in their pockets was regarded in certain Muslim circles outside that country as an Islamically correct injunction.<sup>21</sup> Though this may be an extreme example of religious bigotry, Islamic governments elsewhere also have not been as accom-

modative of non-Muslims as the religion demands. In Sudan, for instance, an underlying antagonism toward Christians and animists, engendered by the Islamic revivalism of the last 30 years or so, has exacerbated intercommunity relations. In Saudi Arabia, the “religious other” is the invisible other whose right to practice and profess his/her faith is circumscribed by various dogmatic prohibitions imposed by the elite.

What explains all of this? Why is it that on a whole spectrum of moral concerns, from the failure to accord priority to poverty eradication to the inability to ensure that justice is done to non-Muslim minorities, Islamic states have not been able to meet the standards set by the religion itself? To put it differently, why isn't morality in public life one of the outstanding hallmarks of Islamic elites?

### *Self-interest*

There is no doubt at all that narrow self-interest is one of the major reasons for the moral malaise of Islamic elites. If ostentation bolsters one's ego, why should one be modest or humble? If corruption benefits one's family, why should one be honest? If ruling with an iron hand is going to help perpetuate one's power, why should one observe public accountability and encourage popular participation?

It is perhaps a little difficult to accept that self-interest defined in such a myopic manner could be so pronounced among elites presiding over an Islamic state. And yet we should not be surprised. Right through history, in Islamic as in non-Islamic societies, individuals and groups speaking and acting on behalf of religion have been known to pursue their own selfish interests at the expense of the well-being of the larger community. In Muslim history, the pragmatic Mu`awiyah was perhaps the first ruler who was more inclined toward the selfish pursuit of his own interests rather than selfless service toward the poor and powerless.

### *Repression*

Islamic elites, who are inordinately self-centered, it should be clearly understood, are as capable of resorting to the most ruthless and repressive methods of preserving and perpetuating their power as any of their non-Islamic counterparts. There are many instances of dissidents in Islamic states demanding accountability of the ruling elites being jailed, tortured, exiled, and even assassinated.<sup>22</sup> It is a tragic commentary on the parlous state of affairs in Islamic societies that peaceful attempts to ensure that the gov-



ernment adheres to ethical principles are crushed mercilessly by the very people who profess to uphold morality in public life. The continuous use of strong-arm tactics to destroy dissent and to obliterate legitimate opposition to the ruling elites is one of the factors responsible for the failure of Islamic states to emerge as beacons of lofty moral conduct.

As a result of the elimination of those seeking to make the ruling elite morally responsible and upright, the environment that has developed in a number of Islamic states makes it easier for governments to ignore or downplay fundamental moral concerns. It is an environment where there is no independent media to expose the elites' opulence, no civil society organizations to reveal the corruption of the powerful, no autonomous judiciary to ensure that the executive upholds the rule of law. In fact, most of the time, as we have alluded to obliquely, there are not even opposition political parties to keep the government on its toes. Parliament, when it exists, is sometimes so effete that even its presence goes unnoticed. When there are neither formal institutions nor informal forces in society to check the abuse of power, it is quite conceivable that the elites will not be compelled to ensure that moral standards are upheld.

### *Culture*

It is not just the social milieu that is incapable of challenging Islamic elites to maintain a degree of moral uprightness. The elites know that the political culture prevailing in many of their societies allows them to perpetuate their power without giving due consideration to the moral dimension of governance. The neofeudal culture, one of unquestioning loyalty to authority expressed through the apparatus of the modern state, encourages the ruled to accept the dictates of the ruler.<sup>23</sup> It is a culture that is rooted in the feudal ethos that developed within Muslim civilization after the four Righteous Caliphs. For long centuries in almost every Muslim empire, rulers were regarded as sacrosanct, as infallible, and as the "shadow of God on Earth." Sultans and caliphs themselves sought assiduously to cultivate this feudal idea of kingship. Though there were principles in the Shari'ah that placed rulers within the ambit of the law, in reality they were more often than not above the law. To question them or to examine their conduct was an unforgivable act of sacrilege.

This feudal concept of the ruler and of the relationship between ruler and ruled continues to exercise tremendous influence upon the Muslim mind. Even in states that claim to be based upon the Qur'an and Sunnah,

such as Saudi Arabia, rulers expect their people to be unquestioningly loyal to them. And the majority of the populace, in turn, are not inclined, culturally or psychologically, to subject their rulers to scrutiny. Since a ruler will not be questioned about his moral misdeeds, at least not by a significant segment of society, there is no compulsion for him to rectify his mistakes.

One can go further and argue that in so-called Islamic states, where religious elites are integral to the power structure, this neofeudal culture of uncritical acceptance of authority may even be stronger. This is because traditional Islamic scholarship, on the whole (with the exception of some subordinate trends), emphasizes unquestioning obedience to religious elites and slavish adherence to their edicts. In a situation where religion legitimizes political power, it reinforces the culture of unquestioning loyalty to authority.

As an aside, it should be noted that in spite of the prevalence of this culture, the Iranian masses have revolted against rigid clerical strictures. In the first and only state established through an Islamic revolution in modern history, there is a popular challenge to the authority of the clerical elite in power. It is, in a sense, a challenge to the very notion of unquestioning loyalty to both religious and political elites. This is the larger significance of the movement for reform and freedom in Iran today to the Muslim world as a whole.

### *Approach to Morality*

Apart from political culture, the environment, political repression, and self-interest, the Islamic elites' understanding of and approach to morality also has contributed to the present situation – a situation where ethical standards in public life are found wanting. While these elites are aware that poverty, corruption, the absence of accountability, and antipathy toward “the religious other” are legitimate issues that should be addressed, they do not regard them as central to morality in public life. As we have hinted, women's attire and other preoccupations of theirs, such as gender interaction, sexual norms, the prohibition of liquor, *hudud* (Islamic criminal law), and the status of the *murtadd* (apostate) are far more important to them in defining Islamic morality and identity. This is why every time an Islamic state is instituted, it is these aspects of the religion that are projected as the most urgent and immediate items on the agenda.

Why is this? Why do Islamic states appear to adopt a tunnel vision of morality? There are perhaps a variety of explanations. We shall highlight a few of them.

**TAQL ID.** One, the colonization of the Muslim world by the West created a situation whereby Muslims lost control over various spheres of life. They could not apply the moral principles contained in the Shari'ah about politics and economics, for instance, to their societies, since the colonial power in question was in command of those areas.<sup>24</sup> It was only in relation to rules and regulations pertaining to the individual, intergender relations, and the family that Muslims had some say. They clung to these in the hope that Islam, as a faith linked to laws and precepts rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, would be able to withstand the colonial onslaught.

In the postcolonial era, the Islamic elites, seeing themselves as the inheritors and defenders of the Islamic tradition, have chosen to give prominence to those rules and regulations, prescriptions and prohibitions, connected to the individual and family as they express themselves in *fiqh* (rules and directives that constitute Islamic jurisprudence). Thus female attire, relations between the sexes, the consumption of liquor, and other similar concerns that are essential aspects of personal morality have become very important to the Islamic elites.

At this point, one would be justified in asking: Why didn't the post-colonial religious elites operating in a different environment from their colonial predecessors try to develop a contemporary Islamic jurisprudence in such areas as the economy or public administration, instead of merely preserving a tradition? One explanation is their tendency to just imitate, to regurgitate the past. This is the *taqlidi* attitude that has dominated *fiqh* for centuries, ever since western colonialism and perhaps even before that, in the aftermath of the Mongol invasions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that destroyed the great centuries of Islamic learning from Bukhara to Baghdad. It has been suggested that this traumatic experience for the Muslim world gave rise to a timid, conservative outlook that, *inter alia*, manifested itself in the fear of innovation and creativity in various spheres, including law and jurisprudence.<sup>25</sup>

It explains why contemporary Islamic jurists have failed to reinterpret the spirit of the Qur'an and the Sunnah with the aim of developing an all-encompassing vision of morality. Consequently, they are obsessed "with the formalistic application of the penal law ..."<sup>26</sup> This approach evoked strong criticism from the distinguished Egyptian scholar, the late Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali, more than 50 years ago. He observed that "when Muslims recently awakened and resolved to return to Islam in their laws and beliefs, they started their search for the truth at the wrong end, seeking to restore the branches (*al-furu*) before the principals (*al-usul*)."

Al-Ghazali was of the view that

... so long as the evils of despotism and economic disparities between the ruling rich and the masses persist in the Arabian Peninsula, and so long as people are struggling to assure their sheer existence, there can be no talk of the application of Islam or the Shari'ah in these lands ...<sup>27</sup>

A formalistic and mechanistic approach to Islam and its laws, which sidelines the fundamental challenges facing Muslims, and is itself a product of *taqlid*, is therefore one of the root causes of that narrow, limited view of morality prevalent in a number of so-called Islamic states.

**IDENTITY.** Two, *taqlid* is also partly responsible for the preoccupation with the protection of what is perceived as Islamic identity. Here again, western colonial rule challenged the identity of the Muslim by erecting an infrastructure of power that repudiated the values and institutions that were the quintessence of Islamic civilization. Western secular education, in particular, played a major role in the transformation of the Muslim's outlook and orientation. Because the very worldview of the community had undergone such a drastic change, Islamic revivalists in the colonial period felt that preserving religious identity was vital to their struggle. However, given the *taqlidi* approach to Islam, they interpreted identity in a somewhat superficial manner. This is why, after independence, states claiming to be rooted in the Shari'ah have sought to emphasize those elements of Islamic identity that make them different and distinctive from the other. It is as if by asserting one's uniqueness one is proclaiming one's arrival to all and sundry. Thus forms and symbols, rather than the essence and substance, of the religion have become overly important for the champions of an Islamic state. The *hijab* for women and, to a lesser degree, skull-caps and beards for men are today the defining symbols of Islamic identity.<sup>28</sup>

Women, in particular, are perceived as the defenders of the religion's identity and tradition. For women, more than men, help to preserve what is distinctive in a certain culture or religion. Witness, for instance, how women in many postcolonial Asian societies, whether Muslim or not, continue to use their own traditional attire even when doing office work in the cities, while their menfolk don western clothes. Since identity is linked to values and values are at the core of morality, women are expected to play a special role in upholding the moral code of the community. Hence the pre-occupation among Islamic elites with protecting and safeguarding female morality.

The relationship between identity and morality is, of course, far more complex than what religious elites have made it out to be. A particular dress-form may reflect modesty, a highly cherished virtue in Islam, but attire alone does not prove that a person is modest. Modesty, like other character traits, evinces itself through actual deeds. By the same token, it is not a woman's attire, but her conduct that determines whether she is morally upright or not.<sup>29</sup>

**POWER** Three, the Islamic elites' perception of morality has also been shaped to some extent by the question of power.<sup>30</sup> As with the issues of *taqlid* and identity, it was colonialism that deprived Muslim rulers and societies of their legitimate power and authority. In reestablishing their place in the world after independence, some Muslim groups, specifically Islamic elites and jurists, have chosen to fall back upon laws that, in their thinking, best illustrate the religion's strength and might. This is perhaps why *hudud* has become so important in defining an Islamic state. It is seen as a measure of Islam's ability to exercise authority, to command obedience, to prosecute, and to punish. The same mentality is reflected in the interpretation of the law on *murtadd*. For most Islamic states today, an apostate should be put to death. Islam, they opine, can protect its moral integrity only by imposing capital punishment on those who leave the faith.<sup>31</sup>

If the moral ballast of Islam is dependent upon its power to punish, then these Islamic states have done a terrible disservice to the religion's concept of morality. Islamic morality, as we have indicated, is not only all-embracing; it has to be brought to fruition through the conscious cultivation of time-tested virtues.

In this regard, is the emphasis upon power and punishment in relation to morality a reflection of the desire to dominate, especially after one has been dominated for long centuries? Likewise, is there a germ of truth in the assertion of certain feminists that restrictions imposed upon women ostensibly to safeguard their moral integrity are nothing more than a devious strategy designed by male elites to control and dominate them?

The notion of morality subscribed to by most Islamic states, it is obvious, has been influenced to a considerable degree by the colonial experience. *Taqlid*, the assertion of identity, and the projection of power are connected in one way or another with the trauma of colonial dominance. Consequently, a vision of morality with a strong commitment to social justice and the public good has been reduced to rules revolving around individual behavior, proper sexual conduct, and the penal code.

How can we break out from this mold of thinking about Islam and morality? How can we recapture the all-encompassing morality of the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and the righteous caliphs to which we referred at the beginning of this paper?

In order to answer these questions, we shall focus upon one, the changes that should be wrought to the overall environment that will facilitate the transformation that we seek and two, the new attitudes and approaches that should be adopted vis-à-vis religion so that it will emerge as the foundation of a collective moral ethic.

*Environment.* From our analysis, it is only too apparent that the rule of law, an independent judiciary, an effective and functioning Parliament, and an efficient and professional bureaucracy, among other institutions that will ensure public accountability, are the essential prerequisites for strengthening morality in the public arena. At the same time, the media should be free of executive control and the influence of big business; political parties should enjoy space and scope to put across their views; and civil society organizations should have access to both the public and the government to enable them to act as interlocutors on behalf of a range of social concerns. Only if these channels are available would the citizen be in a position to check the excesses of the elite and hold the state responsible for its misdeeds.

What this means is that ethical conduct in the public arena is possible when accountability is institutionalized and when there is a political and social environment that allows and encourages the citizen to interrogate elite power. This requires democratic reform. The mere proclamation of an Islamic state, as our study has shown, will not lead to morality in public life. On the contrary, it may even become a camouflage of sorts, concealing the need for genuine change, since a pious platitude can sometimes delude people into believing that public morality already exists. A moral ideal, however appealing, it should be remembered, is no substitute for real change.

Seen in this light, the struggle in Iran today for democratic reform led by President Mohamed Khatami is an eye-opener for states founded in the name of Islam and for the Muslim world in general.<sup>32</sup> It is because the Islamic state of Iran has failed to adhere to the rule of law and uphold public accountability that the people are demanding freedom and democracy. The Iranian experience shows us that in the struggle to create a moral social order, which is one of Islam's lauded aims, democratic reforms should take precedence over the enforcement of some strict code of sexual morality or of punitive laws that create in people a fear of the religious elite rather than a love of God.

Of course, the structures of democratic accountability that the Iranian reformers intend to build will be guided by an Islamic worldview, by Islamic values and principles. The reform they aspire to achieve would be carried out within the framework of Islam. But for Islam to play a meaningful role in the transformation of society, there will have to be a major metamorphosis within the religion itself.

**REORIENTATION** The *taqlid*-conditioned notion of morality will have to yield to a concept of ethics that articulates in crystal-clear terms the Islamic commitment to justice, compassion, freedom, and equality. Caring for the disadvantaged and the dispossessed, restructuring economic and social relations so that they are more egalitarian, nurturing honesty and integrity as norms of private and public behavior, ensuring that public officials and corporate figures are responsible and responsive to the people's needs and aspirations, and encouraging the citizenry to challenge authority would be as crucial and as critical to Islamic morality as observing modesty and restraint in intergender relations. Such a view of morality, there is no need to emphasize, would be a true embodiment of the spirit of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

For this understanding of morality to emerge as a dominant trend, Muslims everywhere will have to reorientate their thinking on Islam. They should develop greater empathy with the universal and perennial moral principles in the Qur'an. The Sunnah then would be seen as the expression of these principles in the life of the Prophet. The Shari'ah also would be viewed in a different light – as it should be viewed. For the Shari'ah, as Ibn Qayyim describes it, is:

all justice, kindness, common good, and wisdom. Any rule that departs from justice to injustice ... or departs from common good (*maslahah*) to harm (*mafsadah*) ... is not part of Shari'ah, even if it is arrived at by literal interpretation.<sup>33</sup>

This perspective on the Shari'ah should, in turn, be the basis for approaching *fiqh* – discarding what is no longer relevant and antithetical to the Shari'ah and the spirit of the Qur'an and Sunnah while retaining what is still useful and valid.

Is it possible to arrive at such an understanding of Islam and morality today? Will globalization help, or will it hinder, the process?

Before we look at globalization in relation to Islam and morality, let us acknowledge that a universal, inclusive, and accommodative approach to the religion and its ethical dimensions is not new. Today as in the past, there are individuals and groups, even after the colonial epoch, who refuse to confine Islamic morality to certain elements of individual behavior. In fact,

there are scores of intellectuals and even religious elites in a number of Muslim-majority societies who are averse to the idea of an Islamic state precisely because of its tendency to provide a narrow interpretation of law and morality, and of such issues as the rights of women and non-Muslim citizenship.<sup>34</sup> The question is: Will the community of Muslims who espouse a more all-encompassing vision of Islamic morality grow and expand under the impact of globalization?

**GLOBALIZATION.** It must be admitted that globalization could undermine some of the prevailing notions of individual mores, of intergender relations, and of sexual morality that Muslims, in general, hold dear. For those of us who advocate a more all-embracing morality, these aspects of personal behavior still would be important. It should be clear from our paper that it is a preoccupation with them, to the exclusion of other major moral concerns, at which we take umbrage.

Seen from that perspective, globalization, which involves a massive transfer of tastes and lifestyles from the centers of power in the West to the non-western (including the Muslim) world, could result in drastic changes in individual behavioral patterns. In concrete terms, more Muslims may begin consuming liquor or young Muslim couples may choose to live together without getting married. Similarly, the legitimization and normalization of a gay and lesbian culture within conspicuous pockets of the West may encourage Muslims to adopt a similar lifestyle. This may prompt individuals to experiment with same-sex unions. If globalization leads to this, it would upset the balance that the proponents of change seek to maintain, between personal morality and a more holistic morality as conceived by Islam.

In yet another sense, globalization could have a negative impact upon the Muslim mind. There are computer Websites that adopt an ultraconservative position against women's rights and intergender interaction, repudiating what Islam itself permits. The Internet also has become a channel for the propagation of bigoted attitudes directed against non-Muslims. Needless to say, this goes against the teachings of a religion whose accommodation of the other is, as we have seen, one of its moral axioms.

But the Internet also brings to the fore the positive side of globalization. Through Websites that argue that the eradication of poverty, the elimination of corruption, the strengthening of public accountability, the legitimization of dissent, and the recognition of the rights of non-Muslims are more fundamental to an ethical Islamic society than *hudud*, the computer revolution has helped to broaden Muslim perspectives.<sup>35</sup> The conventional view of what constitutes an Islamic state, which we have examined in some detail



in this paper, has been subjected to intense scrutiny through Internet discussions and debates. To get an idea of how the Internet has facilitated a vigorous reassessment of certain retrogressive stances on issues that are central to the all-embracing morality we propound, one just has to look at Websites for Muslim women. Apparently there are over 100,000 sites for them, some of which:

endeavor to break misconceptions about Muslim women. For instance, [www.jannah.org](http://www.jannah.org) says: 'Misinformation about Muslim women proliferates in the world today among non-Muslims and Muslims. We hope that instead of falling into the typical stereotypes and cultural innovations, the information here will pique your interest and help you to understand the true stance Islam takes on gender issues and the role of women.'<sup>36</sup>

What is significant about accessing the Internet for information on women, morality, and Islam is that a Muslim, as an individual, on her own selects and digests information, communicates with other Internet users, forms opinions, and perhaps conveys them to yet others. In the process, she circumvents that entire structure of information and knowledge associated with religious elites that has, for ages, enabled them to preach and propagate in a mechanical manner what is prohibited and what is permitted in *fiqh* to the Muslim masses. Equally important, learning about Islam for the Internet user becomes a personal journey of trying to understand the truth, of connecting with the religion's eternal and universal values, of linking up with its great heritage. And often it is a voyage of discovery that one undertakes of one's own volition, through communion with others in a manner that is refreshingly egalitarian.

Since the computer as a medium of communication is so pivotal to globalization, one can perhaps say that globalization can also be a liberating force in our quest to develop a more holistic morality in public life. But whether it frees the mind or stultifies the soul, a great deal will depend upon the individual. As even more dramatic developments take place in the field of information and communication technologies in the future, the question of whether one acquires or rejects spiritual values, develops a moral or an amoral outlook on life, to a great extent will lie within the purview of the individual. This is not to deny that the market and state, school and family, and other social institutions will continue to shape our choices – and our destinies.

The possibility of greater individual autonomy in matters pertaining to religion and morality should not frighten us, for Islam is a religion that, on

the vital question of faith and belief, has endowed the individual with freedom of choice. And in the practice of religion, in setting one's moral compass, the individual does not go through any intercessor. This direct link to Allah through the eternal Qur'an elevates the individual to the loftiest plane of existence.

This is why the individuality of the Muslim will always be different from the individualism born of the European Enlightenment, for it is an individual who has an unchanging, immutable center – Allah – and a lucidly defined circumference – the Qur'an and the Sunnah. It is this center and this circumference that will determine the moral values and principles that will guide the individual in the private realm as well as the public sphere in whatever society and in whatever epoch.

## **Postscript**

Reaffirming our commitment to that center and that circumference as the fulcrum and the foundation of morality in public life has become even more critical today, in the wake of the terrible tragedy of September 11. It is a tragedy that has brought to the fore two vital principles of public morality: One, a person should never separate means from ends in the pursuit of one's cause. Two, only if there is justice would it be possible to ensure that moral standards are maintained in public life.

Whatever their goals and whatever their motives, the terrorists who killed thousands of innocent people at the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, consciously, deliberately, and willfully chose to separate means from ends. It should be emphasized again and again that massacring civilians – men and women who are non-combatants – is a heinous crime in the eyes of Islam. It is a dastardly deed that has been condemned by every leading Muslim theologian in the world. The September 11 carnage has denigrated Muslims and demeaned Islam. At the same time, it has shown us how dangerous it is to pursue one's goals, however noble they may be, through means that are ignoble. The entire moral edifice of one's cause collapses under the weight of cruel barbarism and wicked expediency.

Nonetheless, the underlying anger, outrage, and despair that prompted the terrorists to launch assaults against the WTC and the Pentagon are the result of deeply felt grievances shared by millions and millions of Arabs and Muslims the world over. The suppression and subjugation of the Palestinians, who for decades have been struggling for an independent and

sovereign state, and the deaths of more than half a million Iraqi children as a direct or indirect consequence of economic sanctions, have created a huge reservoir of frustration and even hatred in the Middle East against the United States, whose hegemonic power is perceived as one of the main causes of the sorrow and suffering of the people.

In fact, American hegemony over global politics, the global economy, and global culture is viewed as one of the most formidable obstacles in humanity's quest for a just world. It is partly because of the type of unjust global system that has evolved in recent decades, with the United States at its helm, that 1.5 billion people live on less than one dollar a day; that 3 of the world's richest men earn more than the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 48 of the world's Least Developed Countries (LDCs); that the gap between the top 20 percent and the bottom 20 percent of the planet's population has widened from a ratio of 1:30 in 1960 to 1:74 in 1997.

There must be the will and the determination to transform this unjust global system into a just and peaceful world. Otherwise, desperate, angry, and vicious elements on the fringes of society will have no compunction about resorting to acts of violence and terrorism to achieve their notion of justice. September 11, in that sense, was perhaps a rude wake-up call.

Will we now be awake and alert to the plea for justice from the dispossessed and the disenfranchised, the poor and the powerless, or will we once again continue to sink and slumber into complacency? Will the tragedy of September 11 jolt us into building a new future for the whole of humanity, or will we remain trapped in the morass of the present, wallowing in the politics of power, violence, and destruction? The ancient Chinese used to say that a tragedy is also an opportunity. Let us resolve here and now that out of the debris of death we shall bring forth the light of life. Let us pledge that we shall bequeath to the unborn generation of tomorrow a just, new world.

## Notes

1. One of the most outstanding works on the Prophet and his leadership is Muhammad Husein Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. Ismail al-Faruqi (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 1993).
2. See "Muslim Conduct of State" in *Concept of Islamic State* (London: Islamic Council of Europe, 1979), 32-33.
3. *Ibid.*, 4.
4. For some of their writings, see Nurcholis Majid, ed., *Khazanah Intelektual Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Ikraq 1992).

5. Rafiq Zakaria, *The Struggle within Islam* (India: Penguin Books, 1989), 65.
6. The Qur'anic commitment toward ameliorating the condition of the poor is analyzed in Asghar Ali Engineer, *Islam and Its Relevance to Our Age* (Bombay: Institute of Islamic Studies, 1984).
7. The importance of justice and the equitable distribution of wealth in Islam are highlighted in Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980).
8. For some reflections on the Islamic position against corruption, see Aliran, *Corruption* (Penang, Malaysia: Aliran, 1981).
9. Islam's contribution to the rule of law and other aspects of democracy and human rights is analyzed in C. G. Weeramantary, *International Human Rights: Some Islamic Perspectives* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Moors' Islamic Cultural Home, 1986). (monograph)
10. The underlying Islamic principle of consultation is examined in Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing Sdn. Bhd.), especially page 41.
11. This is a Qur'anic injunction. See *The Holy Qur'an Text and Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1994), *Sura Al-i Imran*: 104. It is analyzed in my "Islam: Justice and Politics," in *Rights, Religion, & Reform* (London: Curzon Press). Forthcoming.
12. For some reflections on this, see H. Munawir Sjadzali, *Ijtihad Kemanusiaan* (Jakarta: Penerbit Paramadina 1997). See "Inside Afghanistan: Behind the Veil," *BBC News*, 27 June 2001, for the oppression suffered by Afghan women.
13. This point is made in the *United Nations Development Program's Human Development Report 1998* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 20. The report also carries a Human Development Index (HDI) ranking, which again shows that countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia could have fared better with the right priorities.
14. For an example, see "Saudis Dig Deep into Diplomatic Bag To House Prince's Expanding Family," *The Guardian*, 10 September 1994.
15. For stories on this, see <http://saudhouse.virtualave.net/article49.html>.
16. Ibid.
17. A number of newspaper articles have discussed Taliban authoritarianism. See, for instance, Christopher Kremmer, "A Nation under the Bloody Fetters of the Taliban," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 May 1998.
18. For an analysis of the implications of Khatami's victory in the June 2001 presidential election, see Dilip Hiro, "Moderation Has Last Say in Iran," *Sun* (Kuala Lumpur), 13 June 2001.
19. For an exposition of this and other ideas, see Ali Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980).
20. The background to this issue is elaborated in "Taliban Ask Local Hindus To Carry Yellow Stickers," *AFP*, 22 May 2001.

21. See, for instance, "Islamic Nasiha Invites Crackdown," *Impact International* (October 1994). The article refers to the situation in Saudi Arabia.
22. This concept is analyzed in my *Protector? A Study of Leader-Led Relationship in Malay Society* (Penang, Malaysia: Aliran, 1979).
23. See also my "Continuity and Change in Malay Ideas of the Melakan Period," in *Melaka: The Transformation of a Malay Capital (1400-1980)*, ed. K. S. Sandhu and P. Wheatley (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983).
24. See Malek Bennabi, *Islam in History and Society*, trans. Asma Rashid (Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing 1991).
25. See *Mohammed Iqbal, The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Delhi: Kitab Publishing House, 1974) for this particular interpretation of the roots of Islamic conservatism.
26. See Muddathir 'Abd al-Rahim, *The Development of Fiqh in the Modern Muslim World* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Understanding [IKIM], 1996), 55. The quote is actually a reference to Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali's view.
27. *Ibid.*, 55-56.
28. For a discussion of this in the Malaysian context, see my *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Fajar Bakti, 1987).
29. See my "Female Attire, Morality, & Reform" in *Challenges and Choices in Malaysian Politics and Society* (Penang, Malaysia: Aliran, 1989).
30. There is some reference to this mentality in Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, *Islam Rediscovered* (New Delhi: Goodword Books, 2001).
31. Their position is rebutted effectively in Kamali, *Freedom of Expression*, especially 85-102.
32. For a deeper understanding of the struggle, see Farhad Khosrokhavar, "New Social Movements in Iran," *ISIM Newsletter* (July 2001); also "From Revolution to Reform," *Impact International* 30, no. 3 (March 2000).
33. Quoted in Muhammad Khalid Masud, *Shatibi's Philosophy of Islamic Law* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2000).
34. One of the best examples of this thinking would be Nurcholis Madjid, *Islam, Kemandirian, dan keIndonesiaan* (Bandung, Indonesia: Mizan 1984).
35. Web sites such as [www.Islamonline.com](http://www.Islamonline.com) and [www.islam21.net](http://www.islam21.net) are among some of the examples of Web sites with a more holistic, progressive approach to Islam.
36. See "New Access via the Net," *The STAR* (Kuala Lumpur), 5 September 2001.