

# The Revision Series

Islam and the Challenge of the Twenty First Century

## The Renewal of Religious Discourse

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To my father and mother who brought me into this world and whose benevolence come only second to God.

I dedicate this book to them in recognition of their kindness and their grace as well as their suffering which was due to the long and severe trials I have had to endure.

## **Introduction**

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate

The religion of Islam is comprised of both a divine message and a human community. As a message it pertains to the divine revelation, or more precisely to that heavenly guidance which is embodied in the holy Book, the Qur'an, and the example of His Prophet, the Sunna of Muhammad (pbuh), whereas as a nation, it pertains to that human community which is guided by that message and is charged with implementing its injunctions, adopting it as a way of life on earth and spreading its light in the four corners of the world. Indeed, this nation is also the one charged with setting into concrete and putting into practice the divine directives and principles of the Book, applying them in the real world.

Based on this, it is will enough in Islam that the religion be great, it is also crucial that the nation which embodies its message be great; for only in this way can it be a worthy image of the greatness of that religion and only in this way can it be in a position to leave on others the kind of impression desired by this religion.

The nascent nation of Islam which developed around the Prophet (pbuh) and among which we find the most important Companions was certainly such a great community and constituted one of the most shining mirrors of that great message that is Islam and a most vivid example of conformity and compliance to the norms set by the glorious Prophet, Muhammad, peace and blessings of God be upon him, who is the human paradigm par excellence of that supreme message.

This great illustration has been manifested repeatedly across the last fourteen centuries, a time during which the Islamic nation has witnesses both prosperity and adversity and both failure and victory. Indeed, each time the Islamic nation had to go through a tribulation or was visited by a calamity, it soon stood on its feet again and regained its composure, and thus God has always foreordained to it men who would ward off the arrows of its enemies and triumph over the disappointments and letdowns of defeat.

Today, however, now that we are at the cusp of the third millennium and after this long chequered history, the Islamic nation is at an important cross-road: it is showing signs of failure, disunity and weakness rarely witnessed before such that many parts of its body are under the claws of the American war machine and the dogtooth of the Jewish wolf. In Iraq,

the American occupier controls all the country's resources, and he also controls the future of many peoples in the region: Palestine, after the Affliction of 1948 and 1967, has just witnessed a third one; a Wall of Racial Divide, which swerves and turns inside its lands like a serpent, and which has just about swallowed whatever has been left of Palestinian land, thus turning the dream of the Palestinian state into a mirage. The rest of the Muslim world is not much different and this does not augur well for the Islamic nation as a whole. Many Muslim countries have fallen prey to the expansionist plans of foreign powers that have simply trampled on their territorial integrity, and are constantly meddling in their internal affairs. Whenever that has occurred, whole regions of the Muslim world have had their maps rearranged according to America's interests and in a fashion which ensures that the state of Israel enjoys full control over all of the countries of the region. Those Muslim countries that are not directly under the thumb of America or Israel have actually fallen prey to a different enemy. Here the damage is not due to foreign invasion or interference, but due to poverty, ignorance and backwardness of unprecedented proportions. So much so that we now hear, much to our chagrin, Moshe Ya'alon, the Lieutenant General of the Israeli army declares gloatingly: "The Arab world does not exist anymore... We no longer speak of an Arab world...all we witness are different players each one of them looking to secure its own interest" (*Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 28/12/2003).

This bleak picture of the state of the Islamic nation brings back to mind the memory of the Crusader's invasion of the Muslim lands and their occupation of Syria and Jerusalem, it also reminds one of the rampant legions of the Mongols who too plundered the Muslim lands and the most harrowing events which saw the fall of Baghdad, the capital of the caliphate at the time. Commenting on those momentous days, the historian Ibn Kathir wrote: "Beside the crushing defeat, people were visited by cataclysm, pandemic diseases, extermination, much abuse and the plague, all at the same time." Indeed, bleak picture brings to mind also the sad memories of the British, French and Italian colonisations which the Muslim world fell victim to about two centuries ago, and it reminds one of the fall of the Ottoman caliphate. Yet, what is most striking about this situation is not so much the danger it represents to the territorial integrity of the Muslim world; this situation conceals a more pernicious danger: the loss of Islamic identity. For the war today is not just over lands and resources, it is about captivating other peoples' minds and their ideas.

Faced with all these new challenges, the Islamic nation appears like a ship buffeted by storm and struggling to safety. Distressed and in panic, it looks to its left and to its right in

the hope of finding a way out of its predicament. At times, it appears adrift like a wagon disconnected from the rest of the train. There is no doubt; the Islamic nation is keen to find those who can guide it again to safety and away from the perils of the open seas. Indeed, more than ever before, the Islamic nation is need of those who can renew its religious discourse and civilisation and bring them back to life after this long slumber, and take it out of the morass in which it now finds itself in.

Thus, the question now is who is going to save the Islamic nation from the danger list?

In reply, we say, the saviour of the Islamic nation may be just one individual or a group of people, and it may be a sincere ruler or a devout scholar or all of these categories of people altogether. What really matters is that whoever that saviour and whatever form he may take, he will not descend upon us from the sky nor will he come to us from another planet; for those most suited to guide the Islamic nation through the most dangerous and congested waters to safety are none other than its own sincere and devoted sons, and its own dedicated and committed scholars. Yes, it is they who are charged with the mission of moving all the stumbling blocks from its track of recovery, a mission they would surely fulfil as long as they succeed in diagnosing the source of its impairment and sickness, and put their finger exactly on the problem facing the nation.

It is true that the Islamic nation boast of the most valuable revelation and the greatest manifestations of the Truth, no one can deny that, but this unparalleled quality is not by itself enough for it to surmount its present challenges and crisis, for camels too may carry loads of water on their backs but that fact alone if that's all they do, does nothing to quench their thirst in the desert. Indeed, they would need to avail themselves to that water otherwise it is of no use, and they would die. So understand from this that the source of our predicament and the nature of our present challenge do not stem from paucity in material and intellectual resources and tradition, but from paucity in intellectual acumen. The Islamic nation suffers from a scarcity of people who are endowed with the intellect that can delve into the depth of its heritage, are skilled to understand it, and are well equipped to revive it. Put differently, the real affliction of our nation resides in our inability to understand our selves, our religion and the life around us, to the extent that there is an obvious disorder in our behaviour and our action. It is no surprise therefore that anyone who has sincerely reflected upon the challenges of the Islamic nation and has earnestly endeavoured to bring about the renewal of Islam, has found himself obliged to start with two fundamental steps:

1. Ridding the mind of the source of misunderstanding and inculcating instead clairvoyance and perceptiveness in matters of religion. This is to ensure that our notion of Islam is fraught with neither the spiritual dangers of zealotry and extremism nor spiritual carelessness and moral laxity: Islam stands for moderation and a sound understanding of Islam is by definition moderate.

2. Attending to the disorder in the behaviour and at the level of action by encouraging our Islamic and Arabic nation to rely on good insight and abide by the path of moderation in their implementation of religion. This step ensures that Muslims hover around the benefits of religion (*masalih al-din*), striving to secure them wherever they may be, and entice them to shun personal and worldly benefits of all kinds.

It is clear to the keen observer that the Islamic nation is engaged in a battle for its own survival, and it is, therefore, incumbent on the sincere members of this community to have full grasp of the reality which surrounds them. They must, if they are to take stock of their context, give priority to those aspects of the religion which are intact and exert themselves to safeguard them, while at the same pursue those aspects which have been undermined with wisdom and longanimity.

To assist the youth in its march towards achieving the goal of saving the nation, guide its action and raise its awareness of the perils that are endangering the survival of the nation of Islam, and to also carry my duty towards my religion, my nation and my country, I have written this book which I have entitled 'The Renewal of Religious Discourse'. It represents the summary of my long experience in the domain of religion and in life in general, and it consists mainly of the conclusions I have reached after long years in the service of Islam, with which God has honoured me ever since my youth and until the age of fifty, twenty three years of which I had spent in jail. These years were long enough to allow me to experiment with a lot of ideas and test many of them to a nicety. I have found in the end that we are in need of a comprehensive overhaul in our vision and understanding of religion. We are indeed called to develop a methodology which encourages renewal and reform but is fully entrenched in the immutable values of Islam to ensure that the endeavour is at the service of Islam alone and nothing else. That is to say, we are in need of a renewal that does not clash with the Sharia of Islam, but is in keeping with it; a renewal that does not collide with reality but is engaged with it in a positive dynamic, to the extent that this engagement leads to the betterment of this reality, making it amenable to the demands of Islam.

We have indeed seen the earliest glimmerings of such a vision in ‘The Initiative against Violence’ (*Mubaadarat Waqf Al-‘Unf*), which was launched by the Consultative Committee of Egypt’s Islamic Group (al-Gama‘ah al-Islamiyyah) about seven years ago (1998), and which has led to very positive outcome. We praise God for that and we hope to see it achieve even a great deal more for the wellbeing, the safety and welfare of society.

But our aim in this book goes beyond the scope of the aforementioned initiative. What I propose is to develop a more comprehensive methodology, and to set into concrete a fully-fledged vision which is useful for Islam, the nation, the Muslim countries and notably the Islamic movement and its numerous adepts who long to see Islam a reality that is lived. I aim to arrive at this by adhering to a strict renewal which is totally in keeping with our religion, so that Islam will be its motto, its garment and mainstay. The renewal that we aim for is that which brings energy to our world, elevates our lives, and enables our religion to regain its vitality and radiance, after many of its landmarks have been destroyed or forsaken.

The proponents of the renewal that we are advocating say:

Yes, to the renewal of religious discourse, and no, to the destruction of the edifice religion. Yes, to the renewal of religious discourse, and no, to the annulment of the Islamic Sharia. Yes, to the renewal of religious discourse, and no, to the effacement of our identity and the elimination of the landmarks of our civilisation. Yes, to the renewal of religious discourse, and no, to interference in our internal affairs and to any project which aims at changing our culture.

I also want to make it clear that this book should in no way be seen as an enticement for self-flagellation or collective mourning over the majesty of days gone by, nor is it an invitation to indulge in grief over the present tragedies. Rather, the ultimate of the book has always been to paint a radiant picture of the future, one in which the stature of our religion and our nation will be far greater, and the safety of our countries will be far better.

I also wanted through the ideas and conceptions contained in the book to convey to those who call others to Islam how to strike the right balance between our religious obligations towards God and the demands of the context in which we find they find themselves in, so that they neither relinquish their obligations under the pressures of their circumstances nor do they ignore these by trying desperately to implement an obligation.

Some readers might argue there are issues the book does not tackle. I do not dispute that at all. So it needs to be made clear from the outset that I do not claim to have exhausted all of the issues that relate to Islam today. I have indeed limited myself to tackling those issues that I have perceived as urgent and most pertinent; I was also keen not to make this a very long *expose*. I did however delivered a general exposition on most of the issues that are close to the heart of the Muslim thinkers and to Muslim youth in particular, as well as all those who have a deep attachment to Islam and its blessed journey among us. As a matter of fact, I have seen to it that the topics discussed in this book address some of the ailments and impairments which have befallen our nation in general and our Islamic movement in particular, and I have applied myself to cure these with the most agile and noble ways so as not to hurt anyone's feeling or defame anyone who belong to the People of Islam, particularly those who have devoted their lives for its furtherance. You will therefore that I have paid due respect to all the scholars of Islam, for instance, regardless of whether I have agreed with them or not. All praise be to God, I have not used my pen to insult, spite or slight anyone; such vileness is neither a trait of Islam nor is it a characteristic of manliness. My guide in this has been the hadith: "*Whoever conceals the faults of another Muslim, God will conceal his on the Day of Judgement*" (Related by Muslim, Bukhari, Tarmidhi, Abu Dawud, and Ahmed), and another rule which the Prophet (pbuh) has set in the hadith: "*Any amount of water that exceeds the equivalent of two ollas [usually between 200 and 300 litres] will not become sullied even if some impurity falls into it*" (Related by Tarmidhi, Nisa'iyy, Abu Dawud, Ibn Maaja and Ahmed and deemed sound by al-Albani).

Though the material that this book is generally dealing with is deep and complicated, I have written it in a very simple style, in order that the reader finds it easy to read. To that end, I have throughout the book given the clearest of possible illustration to remove ambiguity and unnecessary difficulty.

I am hopeful that many Muslims, particularly among the youth, will find in this book answers to various vexing questions, God willing. Indeed, it is possible that some youth will find in this very concise and easy to read book, answers to questions that have occupied their minds for several years.

I have written this book with the aim of making a contribution, albeit modest, towards the debate surrounding the renewal of religion in our age. Although, I do not claim to be one of the reformers (*mujaddids*) of Islam, I still aspire to be rally round them, and march under their banner.

I should also emphasise that I have written this book in defence of the Sharia of Islam, which is today targeted from all quarters and by various enemies. I have written this book in defence of *“the nation of Islam over which many salivate and covet as if it were the last food morsel left in the tureen”* (Related by Muslim, Abu Dawud, and Ahmed). I have written this book in the hope that it would bring Muslims closer to one another, and hence unify their ranks so that they are able to come together and help one another achieve the good for our religion and our country...I have written it as an act of piety that would bring me closer to God, I have written it for His sake, while also hoping that it would earn me His satisfaction and His paradise...Indeed, I pray that this book act as a prayer on my behalf so that God may count me among the righteous people and make me one of those who are both guided and guiding, and those who gain at least a portion of His address: *“ And We made from among them leaders guiding by Our command when they were patient and [when] they were certain of Our signs”* (32:24)... I certainly have written this book to accomplish the duty of conveying knowledge, upholding the trust, and giving advice which we are asked to observe in our religion. I have written this book out of care and fervour for Islam and Muslims and in the hope that it would guide people to God, and that it would give true insight to the preachers and the religious community leaders, especially those among them who enjoin what is right, and forbid what is wrong and believe in God.

I pray that God accepts; He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing, and that He forgives me any mistake, failure or oversight I may have done. It is human to make errors, and only God is perfect. I beseech all of the readers who will find this book has been useful to them to include me and my family in their prayers. Recall that each time you do pray for another, the angel upon hearing your prayers will utter, ‘Amen’, and will say: *“you have been granted the same”* (Related by Muslim, Abu Dawud, and Ahmed), and finally I say, all praise is due to God, the Lord of the worlds.

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Najeh Ibrahim Abdullah

# The Renewal of Religious Discourse

Its Significance and Signification

## Preface

During the course of their lifelong journey, human beings are often in dire need to make a stop at various stations to assess what ground they have covered and how they have covered it, consider where they are at, and what their next move would be. In light of this assessments, and the benefit of hindsight, they might, for instance, decide to reorder their priorities, and look into their own actions so far in order to address shortcomings and whatever else has been found wanting.

Indeed, the smart builder is the one who each time he erects a unit of a structure, steps back to take another hard-nosed look at his building to mend the areas which appear out of kilter or unstable, and keeps at it until it reaches perfection. The journey of a Muslim towards His Maker should not be any different: he also needs to stop at various stations along the way in order that he may evaluate his means, reset his compass, and dust off the lamps which illuminate his path. It is evident that these convenient stopovers can be very worthwhile indeed; as each one of them then becomes a milestone for regeneration and a station from which to travel slowly but surely towards the straight path.

Given that religious discourse is the means by which the religious preachers and the people connect and communicate with one another, and given that people are not all of the same degree of rationality and intellectuality, and given also the fact that we live in an era of rapid change and sudden fluctuations, it would not be farfetched to suggest that attending to this discourse is of the utmost importance, and at the heart of our challenges. We certainly need to recognise that this discourse is at the most vulnerable state that it has ever been, take urgent steps to renew it, and see to it that it is constantly improved upon in such manner that it reflects the changes that are taking place in the world, and uses a language that people can understand. For it is only in this way that it can play the role it has been assigned, and that consists of guiding the people and showing the way to the truth using the most efficient and most compelling discourse, following the Qur'anic verse: *“And We did not send any messenger except [speaking] in the language of his people to state clearly for them, and God sends astray [thereby] whom He wills and guides whom He wills. And He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise”* (14:4).

Recently, the issue of renewal concerning religious discourse has been the object of much controversy and the source of many disputes between those who are overly excited about such an intellectual project, and those who vehemently oppose it, not to mention others who fall anywhere between these antipode positions. Since the issue of renewal of religious

discourse has spurred such a debate, I have dedicated the book entirely to it, hoping that it would shed more light on the topic.

Thus, the book is divided into two major parts. I have entitled the first part ‘The Significance of Renewal of Religious Discourse’ and I have included in it several preliminaries, which are crucial to the discussion of such renewal. Through these preliminaries I have highlighted the material conditions which have contributed to making the launch of such a renewal an inevitable necessity, and I have also underscored the natural tributaries which represent its major sources of support. Following that, I have endeavoured to set apart the immutable and the mutable elements in so far as the renewal of religious discourse is concerned, in order to ensure that the renewal sought after follows clear and discernible milestones. Here are some of the key ideas argued in this first part:

**a.** Renewal of religious discourse should not entail altering the landmarks of religion. Rather, it is an invitation to those endowed with reason from among the callers to Islam to reconsider some of their notions regarding Islamic law, and to rethink their ordering of the priorities of religion

**b.** The renewal of religious discourse should seek to anchor its principles in Islam, while taking in consideration the factor of time and change, and the impact that such a change has on people’s needs and perceptions.

**c.** The renewal of religious discourse should uphold values and shun relativism: ethics from the standpoint of Islam represent absolute values which do not lend themselves to modification and perversion

**d.** Any steps taken to overcome the climate of intellectual stagnation which now prevails in the jihadi movement and in the field of Islamic jurisprudence are bound to benefit Islam and the Islamic nation.

**e.** The task of renewing religious discourse ought to be confined to the scholars and assiduousness (*mujtahids*) of the Islamic nation, as well as those who possess intellectual acumen, valued opinions and are known for their love of Islam, and their concern for the wellbeing of their community.

The second part of the book, I have titled ‘the signification of the renewal of religious discourse’. In it, I have endeavoured to put forward a proposal which consists of outlining my conception of such discourse. I have argued in that part of the book that religious discourse should be in keeping with the requirements of our present context, but that whole

fulfilling these requirements, it should get distracted and lose sight of the immutable values and principles of religion, thus ensuring that the religious identity of the Islamic nation are maintained and protected. The following represent some of the main ideas argued in this second part:

**a.** One of the salient features of the religious discourse that we seek is that it avoids excluding and disqualifying the ‘other’, and it shuns absolute enmity in its dealings with others. Instead it promotes communication and dialogue in conformity with the universality of Islam

**b.** Religious discourse should strive to give a social dimension to worship and bring the latter closer to social sphere in that such a connection promises to rouse the Islamic nation to positive action, and that in turn will spur on its march towards progress

**c.** Religious discourse should not succumb to binaries like religion and secularism, or tradition and modernity and treat these pairs as if they were dichotomies. It should, therefore, engage in the debate over pressing issues like democracy and women’s freedom away from that climate of polarity.

**d.** Religious discourse has to provide those who call people to God with the general directives and guidance that enable them to improve the language of their preachments and the means of communication they use when they engage with their audience.

**e.** God has endowed women with qualities and traits which are peculiar to them. Any attempt to make them carbon copies of men is akin to holding them in contempt and humiliating them. It is definitely not a way of elevating their status as some imagine.

**f.** Women are to stay at home; this is the original position. However, they are permitted to leave their homes to carry their social responsibilities, such as working in the domain of teaching or nursing, or they may do so for their personal needs, like pursuing an education or perform some other tasks.

In conclusion of that second part, I have put forwards some general recommendations and prerequisites which I deemed necessary for religious discourse to acquire if it is going to have on people the desired effects and achieve the success we want it to have.

This then is a modest contribution towards the renewal of contemporary religious discourse; it is by no means an exhaustive study. Indeed, the issue is so great it requires more than one book to contain it. I have however applied myself to enriching the debate on the topic, and I sincerely hope that I have by way of this modest book added a new brick towards the construction of that structure, which I am sure, requires still the contributions of many more sincere scholars.

Now is the time, dear brother, to delve into the ideas this book contains and plumb their depth yourself. I hope that in the end you will come out with a comprehensive and sound conception of the issue pertaining to the renewal of religious discourse.

# **Religious Discourse**

The Significance of its Renewal

Renewal of religious discourse has certainly become one of the most pressing issues among the people all over the world. This preoccupation with the topic has markedly increased after the events of 9/11 [2001], which some have described as a watershed moment in international relations, marking, notably, a new confrontation between Islam and the West. No one doubts that the attacks have managed to drive a significant wedge between Muslims and the people of the West and altered their relationship for decades to come.

The 9/11 events were both a critical turning point and a revelatory moment as well. So momentous were the events of 9/11, it led the famous American historian, Paul Kennedy, to describe them as the events which have truly heralded the twenty first century. Also, these events, which saw the demolition of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, have redefined the dynamics of international relations: America had announced to the world, loud and clear, almost immediately after the attacks: “You are either with us or against us”. In this highly charged climate, Muslims have found themselves in a critically precarious situation and having to face grave and colossal challenges: they have had to take decision concerning a whole range of issues quickly and decisively. Willy-nilly Muslims found themselves caught in a confrontation with America and its allies, and this was of course not only a confrontation they did not call for themselves, it was totally unequal and beyond their capabilities. Apart from the military retaliation which ensued, the 9/11 events unleashed the most insidious attacks on Muslims: there was a deliberate attempt to tarnish Islam in order to uproot it from their consciousness, and do away with all its values, beliefs, foundations and principles, and whatever else is left of its laws and Sharia rulings. It was indeed a revelatory moment... it was like a bolting lightning, which blinded people for a while. No sooner have they regained their sight, Muslims started to rush in every direction to get out of the predicament they have found themselves in; they were baffled because this time the target was Islam itself, and its palpitating body was aimed at from every corner. And so ‘others’ began to see it as a religion of terror and violence: they thought that it enticed its followers to kill and destroy! While this campaign was puffing full steam, America had begun work on the project of transforming the Muslim mentality through cultural and educational interference. Through this transformation, America was hoping to contain the next generations of Muslim and make them amenable to its plans. The best example for such interference is the demands that the American administration had put on the table to their Pakistani counterpart. The following is sample of those demands:

1. The need to reform the curricula related to the teaching of Islam at all levels of education, and to focus on certain principles while ignoring jihad
2. The need to emphasise on ritual and private worship and avoid the promotion of the political and social dimension of Islam
3. The need to reduce the contact hours for the teaching of Islam by 20%
4. The need to remove the topic of Kashmir from the syllabi of history

Now this open information which is obtainable from publicly available sources, you can rest assured that what has not been announced is even graver and far more serious.

It is in circumstances like these and in a climate that was fraught with tension and difficulty that the debate about religious discourse and the need to renew it emerged to the surface again. Those engaged in such debates saw this as an opportunity to put order in the house of Islam, remove whatever defects has befallen it, and restore whatever section of its structure got damaged. This call for renewal soon spread across the Muslim world and a flurry of publications, articles and studies devoted to the field invaded the scene, thus becoming the number one issue not only in the intellectual, and religious circles, but even among the commoners.

We consider it our duty, as authors who write for the benefit of the Islamic movement, which is now entering the phase of the twenty first century, to devote a section of the book to the significance of the renewal of religious discourse. We embark on this endeavour being fully aware of the efforts and of the contributions made to the debate by others before us, for it is imperative to benefit from these. But while we express our gratitude towards such endeavours and indeed owe much to them, we sincerely hope that our book would not be a mere replica of ideas already produced in the domain, but a real contribution to this thorny issue.

## Some Necessary Introductory Remarks

### First Introductory Remark

*Do we really need to renew religious discourse?*

Before we answer this question, it may be suitable to first determine what is actually meant by religious discourse first, and then what is meant by the process of renewal.

Discourse here pertains to the sum of ideas, principles, values and strategies that are adopted by a people of a certain tendency. Thus what is meant by religious discourse relates to the body of creed and principles that Islam embodies. We may also say that what is meant by it, relates to the sum of the means and strategies that Islam adopts to convey its concepts or that religious discourse relates to the sum of ideas, worldviews, and conceptions about certain issues. Indeed, religious discourse may ultimately pertain to all of those things at once.

Based on the above, it is clear that the ‘renewal’ that we are advocating here is not that renewal which purports to change and alter the immutable landmarks of religion; rather it is meant to be an invitation to those who are endowed with intellect from among our preachers who call people to Islam in order that they may revalue the level of their understanding of the Qur’an and their observance of the Revealed Law of God, and to reassess their priorities. This reassessment as Muhammad al-Ghazali, may God have mercy on him, stated is of utmost importance. He said: “The reassessment of our religious thought has now become a vital necessity, and by this I do not mean renegading on the fundamental beliefs of Islam or the immutable laws of its Sharia, God forbid! Such an undertaking would only lead to apostasy: we should make a distinction between re-assessing and renegading” (Quoted from Muhammad Abdul-Majid Zeydan, *Majallat Minbar al-Islam*). This is precisely the renewal that we seek and aspire to: a renewal that focusses on the means and the exercise of diligence (*ijtihad*) in the area of substantive law, which centres on the issue of public welfare and custom, and not a renewal that aims at the fundamentals of religion and its pillars. This issue relates to the topic of the mutable and the immutable in religious discourse, and we shall, God willing, discuss it in details further below.

For the moment, let us go back to the question we asked at the beginning of this section, namely whether we are indeed in need of renewing religious discourse. For a start, it is worth reiterating that Islam constantly exhorts us to constantly assess our thoughts, visions and the means we deploy to achieve our ends; it commands us to choose from these those

which are closer to the good in order that we may maintain our course, nay to progress towards the better, and to give up anything that proves to be a hamper to felicity or erroneous.

Now, the Prophet (pbuh) has proclaimed an important truth, when he has said: “*Surely, God will send for this Umma at the advent of every one hundred years a person (or persons) who will renew for it its religion*” (Related by Abu Dawud on the authority of Abu Hurayra, and was deemed sound by al-Albani). It is clear from the tenor of the hadith that the renewal in question is not that which destroys religion or one that professes to invent a new religion, every one hundred years; God forbid! Most certainly the hadith refers to the removal of the passions which over time prevail on the intellects, and to the diffusion of the darkness which gradually comes to reign over the minds; indeed it alludes to the restoration of the true understanding of religion among the people and to that regeneration that propels religion forward. No doubt, anyone familiar with the careers with the great *mujaddids* of Islam is able to recognise that renewal which the Prophet (pbuh) referred to and is able to understand what it denotes. In what follows, I will attempt to depict a portrait of two great *mujaddids*, focussing on those aspects which are related to the context of our discussion, and those which will explain further our conception of renewal.

### **Ibn Taymiyya**

The imam and *mujaddid* Ibn Taymiyya- may God have mercy on him- appeared on the scene at a time when Islamic jurisprudence had ossified so much that the scholars of the time could not rid themselves of the shackles of imitation (*taqlid*), and the chauvinistic attachment to the ideas and legal opinions of their schools. In addition to this, he certainly appeared during a period which saw the spread of many devious ideas and heresies such as Batinism, monism and pantheism, and an absence of true religious understanding, in climate marked by increasing accretions, sectarianism and schisms. It is in this challenging context that Ibn Taymiyya was able to restore to the field of jurisprudence its vivacity, infusing its arteries with new blood. Using his right to perform *ijtihad*, he arrived at ideas and solutions that hitherto were not known to his society. Though he clearly shown the deepest respect to the four imams of the sunni legal schools and to all the imams who are known for their rectitude and competence, this did not prevent him from pursuing *ijtihad* which regulated by the norms of the Sharia. Hence he spared no effort in lying bare the devious ideas and sects that had penetrated Islam over the years though Islam never professed them. This he

diligently pursued until he died, but by that time he had been able to shake the stagnant waters that overcame his peers and made as a result enormous contributions to Islamic jurisprudence, enabling it to advance to greener pastures, and he had also been able to rid the mentality of his society of the scourge of mythic thinking and the tyranny of formal logic, imbuing it instead with the love for the experimental method in science.

### **Muhammad Ibn Abdul-Wahhab**

The imam and *mujaddid* Muhammad Ibn Abdul-Wahhab- may God have mercy on him- appeared on the scene at a time when the true landmarks and strong pillars of Islam began to wane and fade behind the thick fog of devious forms of worship and propitiations, such as the worship of stones, and trees and the belief in their efficacy, as well as, the solicitation of the succour of the dead and the spread of pagan practices which Islam had fought, though this time they returned under the guise of Islam itself. In this gloomy atmosphere, the sheikh had devoted his life to explaining to people the bases and principles of true Islam, and to fighting all the manifestation of polytheism which had spread in the Arabian Peninsula at the time, until he was able to lead back the people to the pristine sources of Islam. So resounding was his call, it had awakened the people from their deep slumber, and after they had been staggering for years, they were now walking firmly on the straight path.

But here we are again, and history repeats itself: the atmosphere of gloom looms large again, and stagnation has set in one more time. Today like before, there exists nowadays a yawning gap between people's interpretation of religion and its true meaning and understanding, so much that we are today also in need of someone to throw a big rock in the stagnant water in order to shake it as the *mujaddids* of the past did, and propel religion to a position, which allows it to convey its message to the people.

Now some people might be in doubt about the need for renewal, and thus argue that the call for such an undertaking had appeared only in the aftermath of the 9/11 events, and was launched initially by the United States and other western countries, and that in addition to this, those who now take it upon themselves to propagate this project and lay the intellectual basis for it, are only opportunists who only jumped on the bandwagon for they used to be among the avowed enemies of Islam not long before. We agree that these misgivings about the trustworthiness of some of the protagonists of renewal are all genuine. No one can deny for instance that the call for renewal were first made after the 9/11 events and that it been initiated in American and Western circles at the beginning. However, as we said earlier, the

9/11 events had also a revelatory dimension particularly in so far as it brought into relief our own contemporary predicament and has put us before serious and colossal challenges at the same time. From then on, it was obvious that our need to renew the religious discourse was dire, notwithstanding the fact that the sincere scholars, *mujtahids* and jurists of every generation of Muslims have the right, nay are under obligation to bring in their own insights and experiences to this debate in a way that permits them to enrich those texts of the Sharia and be enriched by them as well. It is definitely not fitting for us to stop while the wheel of time continues to turn, and the people of other nations around us are constantly moving. It is suicidal to stop in circumstances like these, and that is precisely why the need to have a hard talk amongst ourselves and make a blunt self-assessment of where we are at, and the need to take an innovative stand, which is regulated by the norms of Sharia, vis-à-vis the prevailing ideas and strategies is indeed a pressing one. Understand that this need had always been there, but it was latent and dormant: the 9/11 events only served as a trigger which brought it from the state of potentiality to reality, making it thus a pivotal question which tops all the priorities.

Indeed, the need for self-appraisal, for re-assessment and renewal beckon to us from every direction; if we chose to block our ears and ignore them, we will certainly be overtaken by events and will drop by the wayside kicking ourselves for the opportunities missed, but then of course it would be too late. That the need for renewal emerged after the 9/11 events, is of no consequence and should not bother us: wisdom is the lost property of the believer; wherever he finds it, he should avail himself to it, and leave by it; what ought to matter to us more than anything else is the fact that we need to renew our religious discourse. As to the objection that many have jumped on the bandwagon of renewal and have quickly moved to propagate it and lay the intellectual basis for it while they were known as avowed enemies of Islam before, that is a fact which is commonplace and obvious to everyone. Indeed, we may say that this is the very reason we feel compelled to put forward our views on the matter. Because in our view, it is the sons of the Islamic movements who are, more than anybody else, worthy of espousing such a project, and preventing the opportunists - the radical secularists and the remnants of the communists- from hijacking the renewal project, and then using as an alibi to undermine religion, and the bases of Islam, only to implement in their stead the principles of disbelief and polytheism and making them prevail over the hearts and minds of the Muslims.

It is high time those who call people to Islam realise that the context in which we make our appeal for renewal of religious discourse is, whether we like it or not, not unlike a bustling

market where people compete with one another to promote their goods and make a quick sale. We must be under no illusion therefore that if we do not quickly move to make inroads into these markets and sell our high quality products, it will then be left to others to invade the market place and they will find it then easy to flog their unsalable goods as if they were hot cakes. We have, unfortunately, already begun to see this sort of dubious merchandise being sold here and there; so let us move swiftly, otherwise a day will come when either we will not find a spot where we can exhibit our own goods or we will find that they simply cannot be sold because the market will have developed the taste for other things and people's desires will have been already perverted. If we allow that to happen, we shall have no one else to blame but ourselves.

Let us join hands to lay the intellectual foundation of this vision, let us provide Muslims all over with the kind of religious discourse that is regulated by the faultless Sharia.

## **Second Introductory Remark**

### *The Tributaries of Religious Discourse*

It is very normal and indeed expected that the religious discourse which is the object of our renewal to have tributaries or arteries which support it and nourish it. There are, however, among those engaged in renewal that clearly have ill intentions and so the religious discourse they envisage to promote is one that is cut off from its natural and original tributaries: they prefer instead to anchor this discourse in the useless remains of human thought. As such the religious discourse that these people promote ends up being a monstrosity that has nothing to do with Islam, except in name. It appears that the proponents of this school of thought can no longer stand their own civilisation, and so they are reluctant to show any interest in its past, which is after all not only an intrinsic part of our contemporary culture, civilisation and self-understanding, but of our future aspirations as well. In short, those who adhere to this school want to give their back to their past, but little do they realise that by this doing, they are actually marching forward with eyes closed.

If that is the case, it is imperative that the tributaries in which this religious discourse will flow, be emanating themselves from the bases and pillars of this religion, even while it takes into consideration the changing times and the changing needs of people. Let us now elaborate on this.

## **The First Tributary: The Qur'an and the Sunnah**

The Qur'an and the Sunnah ought to constitute the well-spring of this religious discourse, and the guidepost indicating its directions; and how! The very lives of the Muslims revolve around these two great axes, and it is indeed here that reside the fundamentals of the religious, intellectual, and cultural existence of Muslims. The Qur'an is the eternal speech of God, revealed to His messenger Muhammad (pbuh), the infallible, who has defied the Arabs, known for their excellent eloquence, to produce the like of it even if they were to each other helpers. Indeed, God has pledged to protect this Qur'an and safeguard it, and so He has solemnly declared: "*It is We who sent down the Qur'an and indeed, We will be its guardian*" (15:9); He has also made it easy on the tongue and easy to grasp to those who apply themselves, and declared: "*And We have certainly made the Qur'an easy for remembrance, so is there any who will remember?*" (54:17).

Equally, the Qur'an contains many and diverse rulings, which we can divide into three categories (Abdul-Karim Zeydan, *Al-Wajeez Fi Usul al-Fiqh*, p, 158 and thereafter):

1. Rulings which pertain to the articles of faith, such as faith in God, His Angels, His Books, His Messengers and the Last Day. These types of rulings are of the domain of 'the science of Unicity' (*Ilm al-Tawheed*).
2. Rulings which pertain to the disciplining of the evil-commanding self and its improvement, and these are ethical rulings which are of the domain of ethics.
3. Ruling which pertain to the statements made or the actions carried out by those who are morally accountable (*al-mukallafoon*). These are the object of 'discernment', a task to which both the science of jurisprudence (fiqh ) and legal theory (usul al-fiqh) devote themselves, as they strive to define these statements and actions and find solutions for it. This category of rulings is divided further into two subcategories
  - a. Rulings which pertain to rituals, and that include, for instance, the performance of prayers, and fasting. Here the rulings aim at regulating the relations of the individual and his Lord
  - b. Rulings which are distinct from the domain of rituals and devotional practices, and which pertain to a domain our jurists have commonly called 'civil transactions' (*al-mu'aamalaat*). The rulings in this instance aim at regulating the relations between an individual and another, or between an individual and the community, or between a section of the community with another, and these generally pertain to various aspects of Islamic law, such

as family law, financial law, the judiciary, testimony, oaths, and the rulings related to criminal law and their punishments, to name but a few.

Now the Qur'an, which is the everlasting constitution of the Muslims and is their eternal light on the path, contains the elucidation to all of the Sharia rulings: God- may He be exalted- says: "*And We have sent down to you the Book as clarification for all things*" (16:89), and also "*We have not neglected in the Register a thing. Then unto their Lord they will be gathered*" (6:38). These Sharia rulings of the Qur'an are conveyed to us following two modes of expression:

1. The first one consists of mentioning the bases and the universal principles of the law in a concise manner. Because the Sharia represents a law which is useful for all the ages of human history, it is only normal that its language in relation to rulings and principles of the law be brief. Indeed, rather than encumbering us with the practical details of the law, the Sharia, in consideration of the contextual differences that may exist between one period of history and the next it did not, has left these details to be worked out by us in light of its general principles and comprehensive proofs.
2. Contrary to the previous mode, this one pertains to the detailed rulings of the Sharia, of which there are in fact only a few in the Qur'an. Those rulings which relate, for instance, to inheritance, legal punishments, and divorce belong to this type of mode of expression.

It is through the combination of these two modes of conveying the law that the Sharia was able reconcile its finite and specific injunctions with the infinite events and ever-changing circumstances across history. This has indeed endowed it with an unparalleled flexibility, making it valid for all times. Those who argue for the separation between religion and the social sphere on the basis that the texts of the Sharia are specific and finite, whereas human life and history are constantly changing and evolving, and then move on to question how the finite could be resorted to legislate for infinity are being utterly incoherent and their argument only betrays their ignorance about the Sharia, including its rulings, its bases, and its universal ethical principles.

As for the Sunnah, it represents all the sayings, the actions of the Prophet (pbuh), including those of others which he did not disapprove of (Abdul-Karim Zeydan, *Al-Wajeez Fi Usul al-Fiqh*, p, 165). These are in turn, according to Islamic legal theory, divided into three categories: 1) those which have a legal import 2) those which do not have a direct legal import, but comes under customary law 3) those which are indiscretion measures suited for

a culturally specific environment (Refer to al-Shawkani's *Irshaad al-Fuhul* for a detailed discussion of this point).

Now, the Qur'an insists on the role of the Prophet (pbuh), making obedience to him an obligation. God- may He be exalted- says: "*O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to God and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day*" (4:59), and elsewhere God the Most High, also says: "*But no, by your Lord, they will not [truly] believe until they make you, [O Muhammad], judge concerning that over which they dispute among themselves and then find within themselves no discomfort from what you have judged and submit in [full, willing] submission*" (4:65). In addition to Qur'anic verses like these and others like them which indicate to the fact that it is incumbent upon Muslims to obey the Messenger (pbuh), there are also a number of hadiths, and all the consensus of the scholars who have unanimously agreed that following the rulings which are conveyed in the Sunnah is an obligation. Indeed, the Prophet (pbuh) has said: "*Not before long, there appear among you a man who, while reclining on a raised throne, will ascribe to me a saying and he will say 'Between me and you is the Book of God; whatever it deems halal, we shall regard as such, and whatever it deems haram, we shall regard as such'. And I say to you: [beware], for whatever the Messenger- upon whom be peace and the blessings of God- has deemed haram carries the same force as that which God has deemed haram*" (Related by Tarmidhi, Ibn Maja, and Ahmed, and was made sound by al-Albani). Indeed, the Sunnah embodies the meaning of the Qur'an: it represents a detailed exposition on its statements which are concise; it elucidates its opaque passages and elaborates on those which are marked by brevity. This fact is attested to by the Qur'anic verse in which God the Almighty says: "*And We revealed to you the message that you may make clear to the people what was sent down to them*" (16:44). Such is the level of inter-relatedness and intimacy between the Qur'an and the Sunnah, there is hardly a command in the latter which is not indicated to implicitly or at least tacitly in the former (Al—Shatibi, *Al-Muwaafaqaat*, pp, 396-8).

Furthermore, God has out of His mercy foreordained to this Sunna of the Prophet (pbuh) legions of some of the greatest scholars who devoted their entire lives in service of the hadith of the Messenger: through diligent and arduous work, they were able to sift through its massive edifice and separated the weak hadith from the sound; they examined the lives of the transmitters and checked on their rectitude through the science of 'impugment and validation' (*al-jarh wa al-ta'deel*), and they had initiated for the sake of the Sunnah all kinds of other sciences. The Islamic nation has always been full of gratitude to these

scholars and has received their efforts most favourable. Now since the tremendous efforts of the scholars of the hadith had been crowned with success- to the extent that the Islamic community had been for centuries now in a position to distinguish between the weak and sound narration of the Prophet (pbuh)- it is inadmissible to suggest that to be able to renew our religious discourse we need to bypass all of the exegesis of the Qur'an interpreters, and thousands of hadith and go directly to the Qur'an, on the basis that the Sunnah and Qur'anic commentary are fraught with forgeries and prefabricated hadiths. This claim is devious and dangerous at the same time; it aims at devaluing the Qur'an by stripping it of its content, in that the Sunnah is, in reality, the ideal interpreter of and commentator on the Qur'an. Indeed, as the Qur'an was being revealed to the Messenger, throughout his prophetic career, he (pbuh) would explain it to his Companions and would disclose to them until they were fully cognisant of its intent and meaning. If it was not for that, how would any one of us know what is meant by "And uphold your prayers" (2: 110), if it were not for the Sunnah? This verse is a good illustration of the conciseness of the Qur'anic discourse alluded to above, and one for which the Sunnah has provided the details: the Prophet (pbuh) has certainly said: "*Perform your prayers in the way you see me pray*" (Related by Bukhari on the authority of Malik Ibn al-Huwayrith – may God be pleased with him). On the authority of Hassan Ibn 'Atiyya, al-Awazai related that "As the angel Gabriel revealed the Qur'an to the Messenger, upon whom be peace and the blessings of God, he also would instruct him in the sunna appropriate to explain that portion of the revelation". It is clear from all this that any call for the abandoning of the Sunnah is dangerous, even if those who propose this scheme try to conceal it under the guise of renewal and as part of their attempt to arrive at an unmediated understanding of the Qur'an. This sort of claim has been severely condemned by al-Shatibi (*Al-Muwafaqaat*, Vol. 4, p, 401) who stated:

"To confine the sources of religion to the Qur'an is the opinion of a worthless people who have deviated from the path of the Sunnah; by assuming that the Qur'an contained the explanation of every matter they have put aside the rulings of the Sunnah, and have found themselves as a consequence of this enterprise obliged to abandon the majority, and to interpret the Qur'an in ways that are not in keeping with what God has revealed. It has been reported that one day a woman from the tribe of Beni Asad came to the Companion Ibn Masud and then asked him: 'I have been told that you had cursed both the tattooer and the person who ingrain their skin with tattoo, but I have hardly come across anything that bares out what you have mentioned, anywhere in the Qur'an'. To which Ibn Masud replied, 'have you not come across the verse: *And whatever the Messenger has given you - take; and what*

*he has forbidden you - refrain from*” (Related by Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Dawud, Ibn Maja, and Ahmed). Similarly, Umar Ibn al-Khattab said: “There will come a day, when you will come across a people who will want to cause controversy on the basis of the ambiguous passages of the Qur’an; you will need argue with them with the hadith to defeat them, because the people of the Sunnah are the most knowledgeable when it comes to the Book of God”. So the Qur’an and the Sunnah are definitely the two most central tributaries of religious discourse. We could have also in this context mention other important sources like consensus (*ijmaa’*) and analogy, but we preferred not dwell on these, because they too ultimately stem from the Qur’an and the Sunnah

### **The Second Tributary: Considering the Changing Nature of People’s Needs**

The Sharia was revealed but with the purpose of maximising the benefit and the social welfare of the people, precluding evil as far as possible, and accommodating people’s needs and all that relieve them from hardship in this world. Again al-Shatibi- May God have mercy on him- stated: “All that the Sharia aims for revolves around the protection of these objectives and benefits, and these are no more than three categories: 1) essential 2) complementary 3) desirable (*Al-Muwafaqaat*, Vol. 2, p, 324). Based on this division of the objectives of the Sharia, the scholars of Islamic legal theory have put forward further elaborations. We will now mention these briefly.

As for the essential objectives, they pertain to those which are absolutely necessary to secure the benefits of religion and life in this world. So fundamental are these objectives, if any of them is abandoned, the affairs of this world would be compromised, not to say corrupted and thus leading to a catastrophe in both this world and the next. These objectives according to the scholars are: faith, life, lineage, property and intellect.

The complementary objectives are sought in so far as they seek to further promote the essential benefits and to remove the kind of hardship which hinders the realisation of such benefits. Though these are not critical for the maintaining of normal order as are the essential objectives, disregarding them may be detrimental to the community as a whole. These objectives pertain to devotional acts, customs, civil transactions and criminal law <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> With regards to the essential benefits, the Sharia has, for instance, taken some measures in order to ensure that these are protected: it has prescribed the performance of the prayers, the collection of the religious tax, pilgrimage and so forth, while at the same time it has prescribed the punishment of apostasy to protect faith, just retribution to protect life, and against fornication, it has encouraged marriage in order to protect life.

The third category of these objectives pertain to the desirable, and so in this instance the Sharia aims to attain the perfection in the customs and conduct of people and the avoidance of that which the wise people associate with rash and unpleasant behaviour. These are the definition of these three categories of objectives in very brief terms, and the scholars of Islam have certainly continued to enrich these with their addendums and appendixes throughout the history of Islamic law.

To come to our topic now, we should then highlight that today, as we embark on the project of renewing religious discourse, it is absolutely crucial to take in consideration the benefits of the people and to be aware that these benefits of theirs are constantly changing. We need to do that in order to spare people unnecessary hardship and severity, and because alleviating their difficulty is after all a fundamental objective of the Islamic Sharia. We cannot just sit back in face of the overwhelming change that is taking place before, leaving it to others to cater for the changing needs of the people, providing them with solutions that are outside the framework of the illustrious Sharia. Indeed, if we were to take a closer look at how the various Messengers and Prophets called people to God we would find that while there was so much in common between them, they also went about things in different ways. They, for instance, definitely converge in their call to worship the One God and their insistence on His Unicity. To that effect, God- may He be glorified- has said: *“And indeed, within every community have We raised up an apostle [entrusted with this message]: “Worship God, and shun the powers of evil!”*(16:36). To that end, every Prophet has called his people to the eternal Truth, following the verse: *“Worship God; you have no deity other than Him”* (23:32). But then apart from emphasising the unicity of God, the message of each of these Prophets took into consideration the particular needs of the people and their circumstances, and so emphasis was also put on the ills of the society in which these Prophets preached. And so the Prophet Hud (pbuh), for instance, was especially concerned by the level despotism and transgression prevalent among his society. In the Qur’an we read: *“And the tribe of ‘Ad gave the lie to [one of God’s] message-bearers when their brother Hud said unto them: “Will you not be conscious of God? Behold, I am an apostle [sent by Him] to you, [and therefore] worthy of your trust: be, then, conscious of God, and pay heed unto me!”* (26:123-26). As for Lot (pbuh), he was concerned with the spread of lewdness among his people, and so concerning his message, we read in the Qur’an: *“And remember Lot, when he said unto his people: “Will you commit abominations such as none in all the world has ever done before you? Verily, with lust you approach men instead of*

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women: nay, but you are people given to excesses!"<sup>2</sup> (7:80-81). We have another example of the particularity of the Messengers in the case of Shu'ayb (pbuh), who was most concerned with the issue of cheating in the market place, which during his time had reached dangerous proportions. Concerning him we read in the Qur'an: "And unto the people of Madyan [We sent] their brother Shu'ayb. He said: "O my people!

*Worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him. Clear evidence of the truth has now come unto you from your Sustainer. Give, therefore, full measure and weight [in all your dealings], and do not deprive people of what is rightfully theirs; and do not spread corruption on earth after it has been so well ordered: [all] this is for your own good, if you would but believe* (7:85-86). These and other examples remind us that what we ought to concentrate on the changing needs of the people that evolve with the passing of every day and age: religious discourse should remain static and rigid, and being completely oblivious to the startling changes occurring around us. All we need to worry about as we attend to these changes is that whatever legal solutions we promulgate and whatever we choose to renew do not step outside the bounds of the Sharia or contravenes it.

### **The third Tributary: Resolving Issues for which there no Textual Basis**

One of the most important qualities of the Sharia has to be its ability to be flexible, for indeed, it is this flexibility which has made it valid for all ages, regardless of the evolution and change that may occur in the course of human history. To address the challenge which reside in the finite nature of the Sharia texts on the hand, and the infinity of change on the other, the Sharia has put forward certain methods and mechanism to surmount it. Some of these relate to the universal ethical principles, which we have already alluded to. These, you recall, purport to act as general rules and appear in the form of comprehensive proof for the most part, and are only rarely elaborate. As we discuss the nature of the renewal that we seek for religious discourse, we need to highlight with regards to this point, that the All-Wise Law-Giver has actually left to human beings enough room to manoeuvre as they try to legislate and promulgate substantive laws so long as their endeavours are in keeping with the tenets of the Sharia and its main objectives. However, this issue has been a subject of abuse and immoderate views: some have vehemently opposed the idea that humans should

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<sup>2</sup> Among the people of Lot homosexuality and lewdness spread in an unprecedented fashion, and bearing this in mind, it was unconceivable that the Prophet would ignore such an abominable scourge and instead focus on despotism and injustice. Lot (pbuh) saw fit in that instance to give priority to addressing the foremost important plight that his society was facing, and avoided raising the issues which were only going to distract his society from facing the main problem

have any say in matters pertaining to Islamic law, while others have taken that freedom in interpretation to such extreme that it breached the norms, allowing people to legislate after a manner that is only proper to God- may He be glorified. We think there is a way of delineating the borders of this room of manoeuvre, as it were so that it is possible to overcome the extremes that the protagonists over this debate have fallen into. We will do this on the basis of three different tools and methods:

### 1. **Unattested Public Interest** (*Maslaha Mursala*)

These are the public interest or social benefits for which there is no proof attesting to their validity or invalidity. Scholars like Abu Hamed al-Ghazali, however, has insisted that certain conditions need to be satisfied before they could be made into law: 1) they need to be of clear-cut certainty 2) they need to be a vital necessity 3) they need to have universal importance 4) that they do not clash with an immutable fundament of the Sharia. Unattested public interests and benefits are often resorted to in the context of local administration, civil statutes, the university and the like.

### 2. **The Discretion of the Ruler**

These pertain to the prerogatives that the Law-Giver has given to the Muslim ruler, such that he is free, for instance, not to follow a sound legal opinion, if he deems that another is more agreeable with a benefit which he deems lawful<sup>3</sup>. We have a clear example of this in the decision that the Prophet (pbuh) took regarding the Ka'ba: rather than destroying it and building it anew in strict accordance with architecture of the Prophet Ibrahim, he (pbuh) preferred to leave it as it was, for fear that a change like during a period when Islam had barely emerged might cause unwarranted confusion among the people<sup>4</sup>.

### 3. **The Codification of the Sharia**

This consists in systematising the Sharia into a body of law with its various statutes and articles such that it becomes easy to refer to it whenever it is required, ensuring all the while

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<sup>3</sup> In the case of civil law, this can be seen when the court decide to abide by certain legal opinions instead of others, it deems unhelpful to the case. In the case of divorce for instance, the court may choose to consider that the husband's pronouncement of divorce three times in one instant amount to only one, if it finds it is necessary for the stability and well-being of the family.

<sup>4</sup> Related by Muslim, Tarmidhi, Nisai, and Ahmed, on the authority of Aisha- may God be pleased with her

that this codification abides by a particular school of jurisprudence or legal opinion so that it stands as a homogenous system for the judges<sup>5</sup>.

Hence, the above mechanisms represent the tools which the Sharia has provided and allowed humanity to have recourse to when they need to legislate in areas for which no clear texts is available. religious discourse, which is about to embark on facing up to the challenge of rapid change which people increasingly encounter in their daily lives, can most certainly rely on these tools and mechanisms that we have just proposed as tributaries to the project of the renewal of religious discourse, and this will save religious discourse from falling into inertia at a time when change and transformation at an astonishing rate are taking place around us day after day.

By citing the aforementioned tools and mechanisms, we also hope that we have drawn attention to the greatness of this Sharia, which has long given human beings this free space that allows them to organise their lives and their worldly activities according to principles which are adequate to the age in which they happen to live, without this having to result in a transgression to the bounds of the Sharia, and a departure from the shade of its guidance in its wide and open spaces. Indeed, all the good of the world resides in moving to its lush and abundant shade: never has the Sharia been upheld except for the realisation of the benefits of this world and the next in the most orderly fashion. And there is also no doubt that the Sharia was revealed with the aim of freeing human beings from the grip of their passions in order that they may stand as morally accountable individuals and as true servants before their Lord. It is certainly after this manner that safety, the good life, and the boons of the afterlife can all be achieved together. Indeed, this blessed Sharia is infallible, just like the Prophet (pbuh) who brought it is, and so is this nation over the matters in which it has reached consensus<sup>6</sup>. It is not by accident that the Sharia has freed up an area, which the jurists call the ‘zone of condonation’. This was rather a deliberate way of encouraging the legal minds of the nation and its experts to endeavour to find solutions to legal problems in light of its universal principles and that which is beneficial to nations and societies. This ‘zone’ is actually the one that the Prophet (pbuh) referred to when he said: “[O people!] *That which God has decreed halal is certainly halal and that which God has decreed as haram is certainly haram, anything about which I have remained silent consider as*

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<sup>5</sup> Please see the detailed discussion on this issue in “ *Laysa Kullu Tashree‘in Bashariyy Baatilan*”, *Kitab Fatwa Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya Fi Qitaal al-Tataar Diraasah wa Tahleel*

<sup>6</sup> Please refer to al-Shatibi’s *Muwaafaqaat*, Vol. 2, p, 351 and after).

*tolerated. So accept gracefully God's condonation, for God never forgets a thing, and then he recited: 'And never is your Lord forgetful' (19:64)*<sup>7</sup>.

Also this 'zone of condonation' is the exact equivalent of the zone of 'no textual basis', and it may be the one referred to by that great hadith, the worth of which was estimated by some of the scholars of Islamic legal theory. In that hadith the Prophet is reported to have said: "*Verily, God has made incumbent upon us certain obligations; do not abandon them, and He has delineated for us bounds; do not trespass them. Equally, He has prescribed prohibitions; do not contravene them, and He has kept silent over certain issues out of mercy towards you, not owing to oversight, so do not fuss over them*"<sup>8</sup>. This is because the clear texts of the Sharia usually deal with the universal principles and rulings and do not delve into the particulars except in few particular cases, which do not lend themselves to alteration and change, and that is in itself a great good for humanity, because these immutable aspects of the Sharia pertain to constant norms both in the universe and in the human self. The scholars were spot on when they said that the Sharia is unequivocal in matters that do not lend themselves to change and elliptical in those that do, nay it may even observe total silence regarding these. Know that those matters where the Sharia is silent, is the domain of the specialists who are to legislate in this 'zone of no textual basis', with the condition that their human legislation does not clash with the universal objectives of the Sharia, and that they aim at realising an essential public interest. Thus, the 'zone of condonation' in Islamic law which gives to the specialists a great deal of leeway to legislate makes the Islamic Sharia exceedingly more flexible than the previously revealed laws, not to mention the positive law systems that came after it. With His wisdom, God has imbued the Islamic Sharia with a component of immutability and everlastingness and a component of flexibility and change at the same time. Regarding this truth, al-Qaradawi has aptly asserted: [The Sharia] is immutable when it comes to the objectives and the attainment of the ultimate ends of things and it is flexible concerning the means and methods by which

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<sup>7</sup> *Al-Mustadrak 'ala al-Sahihayn*, on the authority of Abu al-Dardaa'. Al-Haythami said in his *Majama' al-Zawaa'id* that it was related by al-Bazzar and al-Tabarani in his *al-Kabeer*, and that it is sound and transmitted by trustworthy transmitters

<sup>8</sup> In his *Fath al-Bari*, al-'Asqalani said: this hadith has been derived from a hadith which Abu Tha'laba attributed to the Prophet. It has a witness in the hadith of Salman, derived by Tarmidhi, and another in the hadith of Ibn Abbas, derived by Abu Dawud. Also Muslim has derived from a source in Bukhari through Thabit to Anas who said: 'We were warned in the Qur'an not to ask the Prophet- upon him be peace and the blessings of God - about every matter, and so we used to relish those moments when a witty Bedouin would come along to ask him questions while we listened' and then he mentioned the hadith. Also, in the account concerning al-La'aan from the hadith of Ibn Umar, it has been reported: 'The Prophet- upon him be peace and the blessings of God - disliked punctilious questioning and reproved them.'

these are achieved, and that entails that one should be steadfast when it comes to the fundamentals and the universal objectives, and flexible with regards to the branches of the law and its particulars. It entails that one should be steadfast in matters of faith and ethics, but accommodating and compliant in matters that pertain to worldly and scientific matters”<sup>9</sup>

The universe certainly contains aspects that are immutable and others that are changing, and the sphere of humanity is no different. When society embraces Islam, it is not only enacting its immutable ends, universal aims, and fundamentals, it is also enacting the flexibility of its means and methods, through its branches and its particulars. Again al-Qaradawi has expressed the matter most poignantly when he said: “By holding fast to the immutable aspect of religion, Muslim society is immune from the danger of extinction and conflagration which befell other human societies, or the spectre of disintegrating into various small societies, which are in conflict but give the impression they are united. By holding to the immutable aspect of religion, we ensure that our laws are stable and predictable, such that we can build relations based on mutual trust and carry our civil transactions on the basis of strong pillars and foundations that are not liable to crumble under the effects of human desire in one swoop, and by observing flexibility our society would be in an ideal position to adapt itself and adapt its relations in accordance with the changes that occur in life but without losing its characteristics and the vital elements of its identity”.

### **Third Introductory Remark**

#### *The Mutable and the Immutable in Religious Discourse*

When we discuss the issue of renewing religious discourse, we should bear in mind that the scope of the operation is never to include the bases of the faith, because if we did that it would only be detrimental to Islam as a whole, diluting its signification and its content. Rather, the renewal of religious discourse that we seek is that which distinguishes between those aspects of the religion which are constant and those which are amenable to change. Once that distinction is made, only then we are in a position to subject the mutable components to renewal and change according to the transformations which are occurring around us. As for the immutable components, they are none other than the pillars upon which Islam is based: they are permanent and not prone to erosion regardless of the

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<sup>9</sup> Al-Qaradawi, *Al-'Ilmaniyya wa l' Islam*

transformations and the changes that occur over time. It is clear that a successful renewal cannot take place before this distinction between mutable and immutable has been made. Indeed, “should this renewal of religious discourse turn into a Trojan horse that people use to transform Islam into an open and unattended space where people come and do whatever experiment they like, as if it had no sacred boundaries, sacrificing its immutable foundations at the altar of political correctness and for fear of upsetting others, then this renewal would turn out to be yet another source of danger to the much sought after religious discourse, and a source of inhibition whenever calls for its renewal and modernising are made”<sup>10</sup>

The Worship of God alone, without associating partners to Him, for instance, constitutes one of the immutable aspects of religion that no one has the right to fiddle with; one Prophet after another have been sent only to establish this most fundamental truth: the unicity of God in the lives of the people. God- may He be exalted- says: *And We certainly sent into every nation a messenger, [saying], "Worship God and avoid the evil transgressions."* (16:36). So whatever Islam has forbidden, for instance, at the beginning of the Prophetic career of Muhammad (pbuh) in the areas of ritual and religious representation in order to block the means of polytheism, cannot be revoked or deemed permissible today under the pretext that we have moved away from those early days polytheism and idol worship. Furthermore, the source of legal rulings in Muslim society is one of those immutable elements which do not lend themselves to change or alteration, because it is a known of religion that the Sharia is regarded as the most fundamental and principle source of the law. God Almighty has said: *“And judge, [O Muhammad], between them by what God has revealed”* (5:49) and also, *“But no, by your Lord, they will not [truly] believe until they make you, [O Muhammad], judge concerning that over which they dispute among themselves and then find within themselves no discomfort from what you have judged and submit in [full, willing] submission”* (4:65). It is undeniable that Islam by virtue of its comprehensiveness and realistic approach to things, represents a way of life to Muslim society, owing to the fact that it boast of concepts and principles that Muslims follow to organise their political, economic, social and cultural lives to name but a few. As a comprehensive religion, Islam has left the details of these areas of life to be worked out by the people of *ijtihad*, and those endowed with intellects, in a manner that is suited to the times in which they live, and in accordance with the framework of the Sharia. Hence the principle upon which Muslims build their lives and their societies is not amenable to change

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<sup>10</sup> Muhammad Abdul-Fodil al-Qawsa, “*Mahaadheer wa Muntalaqaat*” in *Al-Khitab al-Deeniyy*, Al-Ahram, 25/7/2003

but the form that the application of this immutable aspect of the religion may take, is indeed the object of renewal. It is after this manner that the people who are qualified to perform *ijtihad* are able to anchor their legal solutions in the universal ethical principles which Islam has called for without being encumbered, or being ill at ease, or left behind by the ongoing movement of life.

The case of consultation in Islam illustrates well the point we have just made. We read, for instance, in the Qur'an, "... and they conduct their affairs by mutual consultation" (42:38), and also, "... and consult them in affairs of moment" (3:159), but having made this command, the religion of Islam has left it to humanity to work out the details and the means of applying this principle on the ground according to the conditions prevailing in their historical context. The process of consultation in the past, for example, used to be quite simple, requiring only the existence of a body of influential people from among the scholarly, political, and military class known as 'the people of bounding authority' (*ahl al-hall wa l' aqd*) to act as a consultative committee for the Muslim ruler; however, today, in order to realise such an important principle in society, it has become necessary to create other mechanisms, like the parliament, and other civil institutions to bolster the process of decision-making. Indeed, in many instances, these institutions themselves may play a leading role in the process of mutual consultation. All of this leads us to conclude that the system which governs Muslim society today, both the ruling class and the public, is a system which is Islamic from the viewpoint of the Sharia: what is immutable is the principle of mutual consultation; this cannot be changed or altered, but the shape and form this Islamic system takes as it puts in place this principle of consultation, that will obviously be subject to social change and to the needs of society, and so in light of these, it may follow a parliamentary system, a presidential system, one which is between these two, or any other system that caters for the needs of society as has been identified by the people of *ijtihad* and the legal experts who have long deliberated on public interest. What matters in the end, is that these systems, different as they may appear, all derive their governance from the Sharia.<sup>11</sup>

While we are at it, it is worth highlighting an issue, which has often been a source of much confusion in recent times, and make it clear once and for all that the state in Islam should not be a religious state, because Islam does recognise any government system based on theocracy.

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<sup>11</sup> Kamal Abu al-Majd, *Hiwaar la Muwaajaha*, Maktabat al-Usra, p, 133)

Also, the religious discourse that we seek and aspire to has to insist on grounding ethics on true knowledge and shun relativism, because ethics according to the Islamic worldview are based on absolute values which are not amenable to change and transformation. Lying, for instance, which Islam forbid and denounced, cannot be deemed by people at some of our history, permissible on the basis of change and transformation. The same applies to fornication, which Islam has very clearly reprovved in the Qur'an. God Almighty says: "*And do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse. Indeed, it is ever an immorality and is evil as a way*" (17:32); so how is it that anyone can come today and advance that we can permit such an act or those actions which precede the act itself, under the pretext of change and the evolution of society? We obviously cannot accept that.

Undeniably, ethical relativism and the thesis which purport that our ethics evolve over time constitute some the most deadly cancerous diseases threatening the health of society, and thus any society that has succumbed to this scourge will suffer a certain ethical ruin. Just look at what happened to Europe after it had come under the sway of Darwinism, whose theory of biological evolution soon found its way to every other domain, including most importantly the domain of ethics. Once evolutionary ethics were propagated in western society, people there lost virtually all of their ethical moorings and became lost, despite achieving elsewhere great scientific advancements that no other human society has reached in history. We clearly do not want a repeat of that in our societies; for we do not condone the dismemberment of the social networks and the connective tissue of our society nor do we support the weakening of the bond between its members.

Also, we should not make a link between the revolution in information technology and the world of the internet, and ethical relativism; that is certainly a disingenuous argument that has neither rational nor legal basis in Islamic law.

We should, in addition to this, and since we are discussing the mutable and the immutable in religious discourse, tackle the issue of fatwa. It is evident that fatwa changes according to time and place, as was argued by Ibn al-Qiyam in *his I'laam al-Muwaqqi'een*. Indeed, fatwa requires the fulfilment of two conditions: a) knowledge of the Sharia b) knowledge about the context to which the fatwa applies.

There is no doubt that the context itself is subject to change, in the same way that time itself evolves. As such many fatwas, and whatever rulings they contained, which were issued in particular historical conditions can no longer obtain in subsequent periods. Not long ago in fact, during the French colonisation of the Maghreb, the scholars of the region had issues a

fatwa which ruled that it was haram to take up French citizenship, because it was estimated that such an undertaking posed a great threat to Islamic identity and landed support to the project of Gallicisation which colonial France was pursuing in the countries of the region. However, now that the situation has totally changed and this threat has dissipated, that fatwa has become null and void. And that is precisely what al-Shafi‘i had done when he settled in Egypt: he had no qualms changing his stance regarding fatwas which were related to the Iraqi environment where he had lived previously.

We nonetheless maintain that in light of the context in which we live and in light of the tremendous wave of enmity towards Islam, only the scholars are ideally suited to distinguish between the fatwas which are subject to change and those which are constant and are related to the fundamentals and roots of religion. This is because the issue of renewal when it comes to religious discourse is of utmost importance, and we would not like our fervour for this project to give rise to a disfigured discourse, which has no Islamic character and bears no resemblance to Islam, except in name.

Let us recall that the Qur’an and the Sunnah have reached us through generations and that the immutable rulings which they both embody were not revealed only to regulate the lives of the early Muslims but they were meant to endure and extend to all humanity across the ages, until End Times. Nor was the exemplary life of the Prophet (pbuh) meant to be a mere chapter of human history, to be forgotten and eroded by time. Nay, his blessed life is guidance and a light until the Last Day, for God- may He be exalted- has said: *“There has certainly been for you in the Messenger of Allah an excellent pattern for anyone whose hope is in God and the Last Day and [who] remembers God often”* (33:21).

Hence, the Sharia has been able to combine steadfastness and flexibility in the face of change and transformation: it insisted on steadfastness in order that the landmarks of religion remain constant and Islam maintains its characteristics, but it equally put emphasis on flexibility in order that whatever is amenable to change and evolution evolves in a fashion which is adapted to the new situations that arise from time to time. It is this compliant quality, which has in the end enabled the Islamic Sharia to keep its vigour and pertinence; for this Sharia is indeed a miracle of God- may He be exalted- who makes everything perfect.

#### **Fourth Introductory Remark**

##### ***The Essential Criteria***

The need to renew religious discourse is an undeniable fact, but who among the Muslims is apt to carry such a project? What are his essential traits and credentials, and how do we find him? This question needs to be addressed by us, because what we are in need of is not the ranting of someone who holds grudges against Islam or the hysteria of some charlatan, but the wisdom of the erudite and the moderation of the believers<sup>12</sup>. In order to ensure that this aspiration is realised, it became obvious to us that we needed to put forward certain standards and a certain number of criteria that have to be fulfilled for religious discourse to undergo the desired renewal; the last thing that we want is for this discourse to be desacralised and turned into heap of trash that anyone can trample on. The following are the criteria that we seek to implement for this purpose.

1. It is of utmost importance that the need for renewing religious discourse emanates from the Islamic nation; it should not be dictated by some external force. When America calls on Muslim to renew their religious discourse, we are not just to follow suit and repeat Amen after its demands. In circumstances like these, we ought to be listening to our own nation, taking our cues from the reality which confronts it every day. It is only when we ourselves establish that we are in need of religious renewal that we should rush to implement it, relying on God. Otherwise, whatever is said here and there should be just discarded. Recall that if the demand for the renewal of religious discourse, has emerged in the wake of the events of 9/11, the events themselves were no more than a trigger for something latent in us and they did no more than revealing something which was concealed within us, by bringing it from the state of potentiality to the state of reality. Indeed, the events themselves have become for us an opportunity to reflect on what happened and what went wrong, and what we would need to do to move forward towards a brighter future.
2. The renewal of religious discourse should be to the advantage of Islam and the Islamic nation and not their enemies. Thus, our endeavour to bypass the stagnation which has prevailed over the Islamic movement and has ossified Islamic jurisprudence is a necessary one, which should be ultimately for the benefit of Islam and the Islamic nation. Equally, our endeavours on purifying the Islamic creed from all the accretions, which have sullied its pristine principles, can only be beneficial to Islam. However, we are vehemently opposed, as any true Muslims is, to

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<sup>12</sup> *Faruq Juweyda, Al-Ahram, 25/7/2003*

those renewal projects which only aim at advancing the agendas of the enemies of Islam whose sole purpose is to divest this nation of its intellectual and cultural traits, and before that, its belief and legal systems. Chief among the conceptions of renewal that we reject are the following:

- a. To reinterpret the Qur'an in line of a post-modern approach which will the words of a language to lose all of their semantic, syntactic and rhetorical moorings, to the extent that their meaning becomes unstable, allowing everyone to understand a word or a sentence as they wish. Following this approach, the coherent discourse of the Qur'an is turned on its head to become wordplay
- b. The separation of religion from the state, any from society, and the adoption of secularism as a total system of life
- c. The argument that the Qur'an is finite and limited, whereas the events of human history are infinite. The Qur'an is seen as too finite to rule over and regulate the infinite change occurring in time.
- d. The claim that the Sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh), should be discarded, on the basis that all of the corpus of hadith, to the exception of ten hadiths, is forged, and that we should also annul the legal schools of law, and rely only on the Qur'an if we want to derive genuine Islamic rulings
- e. The claim that religious institutions, like al-Azhar and its affiliates like the High Commission for Islamic Affairs, ought to be abolished and be replaced by a civil authority which is going to be in charge of issuing fatwa, instead of the *ulema*.
- f. The claim that the article which states that "Islam is the religion of the state" needs to be abolished from the Egyptian constitution
- g. Ridding the libraries of the country of the old lexicons, and setting them to fire in order that it may become possible for the proponents of such an idea to promote a totally different language instead
- h. The claim that religious education- and by that mean Islam naturally- breeds terrorism and that it should be therefore removed from the curricula

Are these nonsensical proposals, we wonder, for the benefit of Islam, or are they really part of a conspiracy whose plot is designed to dispossess the nation of Islam of its identity, and deprive it of its civilisation so that it becomes an easy prey for the avid colonial powers? Do these proposals constitute an endeavour to renew religious discourse or are they an attempt

to abolish religion completely from the life of people, and a way of making permissible that which God has forbidden, under the guise of renewal?

Let any one of you who is seriously committed to realise the hopes and aspirations of his nation, embark on this duty while making sure that their initiatives are within the bounds of the Sharia and are committed to its injunctions while acting in its wide horizons.

3. Those engaged in the project of renewal of religious discourse should be form among the *ulema* of Islam, and its jurists and thinkers. Although there is no such a thing as ‘the men of religion’ in Islam, yet it has put forth conditions and standards for those who want to exercise *ijtihad* and deal with the texts of the Sharia. This it has done so to avoid the sort of confusion and mix-up which is likely to occur if the matter was left open to every tom, dick and harry. It is, indeed, the scholars who are ideally positioned to determine which of the areas of the religious discourse are in need of renewal and evolution and which are the ones that do not. This is an obvious fact which we should not have to argue about: Just like matters and changes which pertain to medicine is clearly the domain of the medical experts and not others, so the discussion of matters which pertain to Islam and religious renewal are of the domain of the scholars of Islam and the sincere among the thinkers. To our surprise, however, and to the surprise of many others, the project of renewing religious discourse, it appears, have been handed to the enemies of Islam and its detractors, who neither have any knowledge of Islam nor have any aptitude to deal with the texts of the Sharia. These people, by taking the liberty to talk about Islam and its legal rulings as they have, bring to mind the hadith of the Prophet (pbuh) who has said concerning them: “ *God does not seize knowledge [as you would seize the property of one another] but by seizing the souls of the scholars. So scare will be knowledge then that people will take as their leaders ignorant persons who when consulted will give their verdict without knowledge. So, they will go astray and will lead the people astray*”<sup>13</sup>. Hence, we insist that the mission of renewing religious discourse is one which should be conferred to the Ulema of this nation, and to its mujtahids and to its intellectuals who are known for their integrity and love for Islam and are resolute in their pursuit of the benefits and interests of their nation. As to those who want to jump on the bandwagon of change but who are in reality

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<sup>13</sup> Related by Bukhari, Muslim, Tarmidhi, Ibn Maja and Ahmed in his Musnad, on the authority of Abdullah Bin Umar Ibn al-‘As- may God be pleased with them

hostile to Islam, who want to use the pretext of religious renewal to undermine the bases of the religion of Islam; this type of reformers and renewals we reject completely and absolutely.

So let us make our position clear on this issue and say loud and clear:

Yes to the renewal of religious discourse, and no to undermining Islam.

Yes to the renewal of religious discourse, and no to the abolition of the Sharia.

Yes to the renewal of religious discourse, and no to the demise of our identity and the eclipse of the landmarks of our civilisation.

Yes to the renewal of religious discourse, so long as it is led by our trustworthy and steadfast scholars.

Yes to the renewal of religious discourse, and no to foreign interference in the affairs of our governments and the conspiracies which aim to change culture and our educational program.

This section of the book has contained some essential preliminaries, which we have put forth as standards that we are required to abide by in dealing with this thorny issue. They are aimed at blocking the road to the opportunists who may want to jump on the bandwagon of change only to attack Islam, and God Almighty is the ultimate source of our succour, in Him we trust, for He has power over all things.

**Religious Discourse**  
The Signification of its Renewal

\*\* This second part of the book is a modest attempt at depicting in broad terms the characteristics and meaning of a religious discourse which takes in consideration both the essential fundamentals of religion and the ever changing nature of people's needs as well as the context in which they live.

To begin with, we need most of all to remove all the accretions that have been added to this religion, and return to the pristine sources of Islam in order that we may gain true understanding of our faith and what it entails. Contrary to what some people believe, it is not Islam which hinders the progress of Muslim societies, but rather the inadequate understanding of it: history has clearly shown that the progress which the Islamic civilisation was able to achieve was realised under the aegis of Islam and its guidance, and not without it. Indeed, Islam has never stood in opposition to intellectual curiosity, and never do we witness in the history of Islam the existence of a body that initiates witch hunts against the intellectuals as was the case in the West. The reason why such things did not take place in Islamic history is due simply to the fact that Islam is the only religion which directly addresses human reason and intellect, and urges its addressees to explore the four corners of the world and establish therein methods of research and innovation. History and the Qur'an demonstrate that it is not Islam which is the obstacle to progress, but the failure to gain a proper understanding of this religion and its principles and fundamentals.

Also, it is worth highlighting that the renewal of religious discourse should not be based on the exclusion of the 'other' and disqualifying him. By the 'other' we are referring to the West, in particular, to its civilisation with all its manifestations, be they political, cultural, social, economic, and technological and so forth. In its history, Islam has neither taken the position of opposing other civilisation, nor has it blindly accepted them or surrendered to them. What is clear, however, is that it has never condoned the rejection of human endeavour and innovation, particularly when these are beneficial to Islam and do not clash with its immutable principles, on the basis that it is foreign knowledge. Thus, while we do in fact refuse to accept everything that comes from the West, and while we also reject the argument which says that we have no choice but to accept western civilisation in *toto*, on the basis that our material and technological position are too weak, we have no time for those who want to prevent us from benefitting from western civilisation, under the pretext that it contains within it concealed evils that the naked eye cannot detect. So we refuse the position of total acceptance and surrender to the West, just as we also refuse the position of total rejection of the West, and this position of ours is supported by our historical reality:

when Muslims first set foot in Persian and Byzantine lands during the earliest conquests, they were confronted by civilisations which had their own practices and characteristics, the likes of which they had never seen before. Having found themselves in this unusual situation, their position vis-à-vis these civilisations was of sifting through them in order to take from them what they deemed useful and not in conflict with Islam and its principles, and cast aside that which they found wanting in that regard. They, for instance, borrowed from these civilisations their administrative practices and some of their systems of governance, while they abstained from borrowing their social and economic practices. It is following this interaction that we begin to witness the implementation of the divan and the vizier system in Islamic governance, and the rise of provincial governments and the minting of Islamic currency, and so on and so forth. In addition to this, the Muslim mind has applied itself to evolving many of the forms of those foreign civilisations, such that they become commensurable with Islam, while other forms and practices were invented *ab initio*. In the end, however, that whole exercise has resulted in the fusion of all these intellectual interactions in a single entity called the Islamic civilisation as we know it. While Muslims engaged in that intellectual enterprise, they have neither lost their characteristics nor have they distorted their identities. This is exactly what we aspire to achieve today in our interaction with western civilisation: we want to put ourselves in a position which enables us to borrow from it that which is for our benefit and does not collide with our religion, and to toss away that which is harmful for us, following the spirit of moderation highlighted in the Qur'an: "And we have made you a community of the middle path" (2:143). In the same vein, religious discourse has to adopt a clear stance vis-à-vis dialogue with the West: Islam does not forbid dialogue with the 'other'; on the contrary it prefers it and calls for it. Islam did not come to evolve in isolation; rather it has come to be integrated with its surroundings, and our dealings with the others should be grounded in this universality of Islam. In fact Islam has invited its followers to reach out to others and regarded such practice very highly. In the Qur'an, God- may He be exalted- says: *O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. Indeed, God is Knowing and Acquainted*" (49:13). This dialogue that we seek with the West, however, needs to meet certain criteria. Among these we would like to cite the following:

1. The West has to recognise our religious, cultural, and ethical characteristics, and it has to also avoid using with us the kind of patronising discourse that aims at

assimilating us to an intellectual and ethical worldview, with which we largely disagree

2. The dialogue that we aspire should aim to arrive at a formula of coexistence that is suitable to both civilisation and conducive to peaceful relations between them. We do not support the kind of dialogue in which the West has a predominating influence: the hegemony of the West over our civilisation in this regard would be incompatible with genuine dialogue and would in fact be reminiscent of a colonial mentality which is wont to see the world from its own lenses and considers itself as master of the whole planet.
3. Both the peoples of Islam and their governments should work hand in hand to change the image of Islam, often associated with violence and terror in the West, and do all they can to promote the true meaning of our religion. We need to remind ourselves that on many occasions good moral behaviour and a basic show of respect and decency towards others have been enough to attract many people to Islam in Africa, Asia and even Europe.

These were criteria we felt were necessary to put forward as we discuss the issue of dialogue with the West, hoping that they will act as deterrents against the forces of immoderation of one sort or another.

Also, it is worth highlighting that the new religious discourse we aspire to, should not adopt the theory of conspiracy against Islam as its premise. Conspiracy theories are to be shunned by this discourse whether in its analysis of the events of our past or contemporary history. It is true that there are forces acting in this world: the world is never rid of forces that conspire, plot and devise pernicious plans, and as such there are always individuals and societies which are looking to secure their own interests and their survival, even if at the detriment of others if need be. In politics such behaviour is well-known and is regarded as part of the norms. Now our religious discourse should reflect that reality in no ambiguous terms, exhibiting awareness of the norms that regulate the activities of the universe and our worldly existence, but this discourse should not at the same time make conspiracy theories as the cornerstone of its analysis of all the events around us, as if it were the only explanation behind everything that occurs in our life. Most importantly, religious discourse should not turn into a medium through which we absolve ourselves from idleness, the failure to decipher the world around us, backwardness and from lack of resolve in the face

of enmity. Indeed, the religious discourse that we seek is not one which encourages the fabrication of victimhood as a way to exonerate ourselves from all responsibility and blame for the state of our religion, civilisation and nation. Conspiracy theory is certainly one of the most serious impediment to the emancipation of Arabic and Islamic thought, and of the most important obstacles to its ability to face up to the challenges before it. It is interesting to note, however, that in reality this theory appears to be stripping everyone who subscribe to it of his will, except the enemies of Islam who do seem to give it any credence. How can we continue to understand all of what goes on in international affairs as if it were a mere conspiracy? Would it not be wiser to look at these from the vantage point of strategic interests, which are sometimes in conflict and sometimes in accord, and which require in all cases short term and long term planning to be realised? Moreover, it is typical of those who subscribe to such a theory to always appeal to extraneous factors to explain our own misfortunes, and to always ignore our strategic blunders, though it should have clear to all those who are sincerely concerned about the state of our nation, that our present plight is not so much due to the power of our enemies but to our weakness and to the fact that we have fallen behind following our departure from the true faith and from Islam. It is sad and at once ironic that the tree of the conspiracy theory, whose evil fruits have now been consumed by an important section of Muslim youth, has actually thrived mostly among the nationalist Islamic movements, or at least their great majority, though they comprise of the most sincere and most devoted people to their nation. Such was the preponderance of this destructive theory among them, it has prevented the youth from making an objective analysis of the events that were occurring around them, and from making a precise diagnosis of the ills that were hindering them from overcoming their difficulties.

They have maintained, for instance, that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was a conspiracy planned by America to ensnare Iraq into the war, even though everyone knows that that was not the case. Equally, they have continued to argue that the assassination of Sheikh Dhahabi by *Jamaa'at al-Takfeer* was a conspiracy had orchestrated by the government to get rid of them both, even though all those who were directly or indirectly involved in this affair know that that is simply not true. Others have long claimed that the War of October was a mere theatrical farce between Sadat, Israel and America in order to prepare the ground for the Peace Accord, in spite of the fact that every person endowed with insight knows that the war in question represents one of the most significant wars that Muslims have conducted in the modern era, and one that has indeed restored the pride of the Arabs and Muslims. In the same vein, some have affirmed that the late president Sadat was

assassinated as a result of a plot concocted by America and the CIA<sup>14</sup>, and finally and most recently, they have maintained that the attacks of 9/11 were a conspiracy designed by none other than the MOSSAD in order to pitch America against the Muslim world, and that is also not conform to reality.

Ahjaar Ruq'at al-Shatranj, a book that was popular among the youth of the Islamic movement in the sixties and the seventies of the last century, is undeniably one of the works that had one of the most lasting impact on the Arab mind, and one that most inculcated the notion of conspiracy in it, to the point of causing it to be dysfunctional. There was also 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion', which Muslim youth also read so avidly. Many among them have regarded the arguments of this book as axiomatic truths, though in reality, it has nothing to do with facts or historical reality: the book is simply prefabrication as has been attested by many intellectuals and historians of integrity<sup>15</sup>.

The most straightforward proof that the book in question is a hoax is certainly the way its authors presented themselves: they have had no issue ascribing to themselves the trait of contemptibleness and vileness among other ignoble traits, while purporting to represent at the same the elite among the men of religion in Judaism. Can anyone in his right mind accept that these Jews would ascribe to themselves all of these villainies, bearing in mind that they are the ones who throughout their history have relentlessly proclaimed they are God's chosen people, His children, and His beloved, as attested by the verse: "...*the Jews and the Christians say, "We are the children of God and His beloved"* (5:18)

Granted that people of any religion would most plausibly be keen to ascribe to themselves the most noble traits of character, to the extent that they would be inclined to ascribe to themselves even those virtues which they lack, how can we accept that the elders of Zion would use the most injurious language, a language that righteous people would find so repellent, against themselves? Islamic thought in general and most particularly Arabic thought will not be able to stand on its feet again and regain its strength, unless they rid

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<sup>14</sup> This affirmation does not tally with many facts on the ground. Please refer to *Nahr al-Dhikrayaat* for further details)

<sup>15</sup> Among the scholars who rejected the authenticity of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion is Dr Abdul-Wahal al-Musayri, one of the most thorough researchers on Jewish history. It is rather ironic that these protocols were not written in Hebrew, the language of the Torah and the Talmud. Even by having a cursory look at them, it would not be difficult to find in it major contradictions: the Jews are presented as the ones responsible for all kinds of wrongs, but by the same token they are presented as victims. Moreover, these protocols contain all kinds of insults directed at the Jews themselves. It is inconceivable that men of religion- whatever that religion might be- could have directed the most maleficent insults to their coreligionists, and then-as if that was not enough- taken the further step of documenting them for the record.

themselves of the spectre of conspiracy theories. I am convinced as ever that conspiracies, even while they may exist, do not constitute the axis around which the world revolves, and are the only factor behind the happenings which take place in it. Beyond all these conspiracies, there is first the will of God, and then the will of the peoples and nations, which often clash as they pursue their interests. As such, when a nation or a people lacks ambition or is deprived of will, it would not be surprising that it would find itself unfit to keep up with the events, to the point where it sees the world moving in a direction which is contrary to its interests. It would be better for peoples and nations who find themselves in this sort of situations to blame themselves for their fate than use the alibi of the conspiracy.

Hence, it behoves the new religious discourse to endeavour to inculcate in the Muslim mind the culture of reflection in the universe and its laws of evolution, which are incidentally divided into two categories:

### **1. The Law of Negative Evolution**

This is referred to by God, in the Qur'an, as He-may He be exalted- says: "*That is because God would not change a favour which He had bestowed upon a people until they change what is within themselves*" (8:53). What this divine law means is that it is not befitting of God- may He be glorified- to change the condition of a people, willing for them hardship after ease, or defame after honour, or decline after rise and progress, in a haphazard way: these changes follow from the actions of the people and they are His chastisement for their having opted for the path of sins instead of obedience and for transgressing and colliding with His norms instead of taking them in consideration and acting in concert with them.

### **2. The Law of Positive Evolution**

This is referred to by God, in the Qur'an, as He-may He be exalted- says: "*Indeed, God will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves*" (13:11). This verse conveys that the right course of action to take to cure the nation of its diseases and maladies consists in bringing Muslims back to square one, urging them to look hard in themselves, engage with reality, and rather than resting on their laurels, regain the initiative, to restore to this nation its glory. How I wish the proponents of the conspiracy theory had refrained from being at variance with the law of negative evolution, and had stepped forward and used their failure as a watershed moment for self-assessment and an

opportunity for improvement, when it became clear to them they misdiagnosed the ills of the nation and its plight. Sadly, however, they reversed their field and put the blame on the enemy instead, and by so doing they have also been at variance with the law of positive change: they have missed on the opportunity of clasping on the causes of progress and the very means which would have assisted the Islamic nation to get out of the morass it had found itself in. In light of all of this, it is incumbent that this religious discourse that we are proposing be able to carry the most delicate cosmetic surgery on the Arabic and Islamic reason in order to address all of the serious disfigurements it had suffered, for decades, under the hands of this conspiracy theory.

Also, those preachers who call to God should take inspiration from the spirit of the glorious Qur'an particularly in the way it has shed light upon the defeat of the Muslims in the Battle of Uhud and their ill-fortune at the beginning of the Battle of Hunayn. With regards to Uhud, the Qur'an did not make mention of the conspiracy of Quraysh, namely how they proceeded to encircle the Muslim army, but it made mention of the debacle of the lancers who did not abide by the instructions given to them by the Prophet (pbuh), affirming that their disobedience was the reason behind the defeat that Muslims suffered on that occasion. Indeed, to that effect, it was revealed in the Qur'an: *Why [is it that] when a [single] disaster struck you [on the day of Uhud], although you had struck [the enemy in the battle of Badr] with one twice as great, you said, "From where is this?" Say, "It is from yourselves"* (3:165). There is certainly a great lesson in this to all those who devote themselves for the cause of Islam and call people to it: it shows to them how to make an objective assessment of events and remind them that the laws of God which govern the universe are meant to neither accord nor seek favours from anyone. God- may he be exalted- says: *"Paradise is not [obtained] by your wishful thinking nor by that of the People of the Scripture. Whoever does a wrong will be recompensed for it..."* (4:123).

This should lead anyone to think that through this argument, we are asking those who preach for Islam to take a whip and relentlessly lash at the masses. We, like many others, would not stand for that. But we implore them to refrain from resorting to conspiracy theories in their analysis of the events occurring around us. Let us now enter into that Qur'anic atmosphere as it relates the reason behind the reversals that Muslims experienced at the beginning of the Battle of Hunayn. It says: *"...and on the day of Hunayn, when your great number pleased you, but it did not avail you at all, and the earth was confining for you with its vastness; then you turned back, fleeing"* (9:25). Certainly, the Qur'an did not make mention of any conspiracy designed by the disbelievers nor did it refer to their prior

knowledge of the ambush that was well-planned by the Muslim army. But it focussed on the principle reason behind the reversal and expressed it in no equivocal terms. Based on this, we should all be in no doubt that we shall never progress, and we shall never bring victory to our nation so long as we continue to disseminate this destructive theory among the coming generations of young people, and raise them with it.<sup>16</sup>

So, the religious discourse that we aspire to, is certainly one that shuns the method of ‘self-flagellation’ just as it shuns the mentality in which conspiracy looms large. We have no doubt that abundant good has been allotted to the nation of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) from eternity and that God will continue to bestow this favour until the Last Day. There is a sense in which ‘self-flagellation’ becomes akin to ‘self-delusion’ with conspiracy theories, in that both preach hopelessness, despair, and despondency, albeit through different ways. The first one is a sort of self-destructive criticism, and the second is a sort of abolition of all our volition, nay the abolition of all volitions in in the world, except that of the CIA, the MOSSAD and International Zionism. We reiterate that this view of things is not sound: if it were true, the Arabs and Egypt in particular would not have been victorious in October, 1973, in a war that resulted in the death of nearly ten thousand Israeli soldiers, nor would we have witnessed the ongoing Palestinian uprising which lead to Israeli casualties three times higher than those Israel had suffered when it confronted three Arab states in the 1967 war, and nor would we have witnessed many other things in the globe that neither the Israelis nor the Americans were particularly happy with.

Let the preachers to Islam and the educators of our youth know that there are no gains to be made in ‘self-flagellation’; on the contrary, it impedes the seeker to God. I dare say that it may even turn a person’s good deeds into bad ones, and ultimately turning him against himself, his nation, and his country, by presenting in them before his eyes as if they were an aggregate of evil and wickedness.

Following this, the religious discourse that we seek has to cultivate among the members of this nation the spirit of constructive self-criticism, and inculcate among its youth the art of self-appraisal, for that is essential to correcting one’s direction and steering the nation away from the trials it is going through.

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<sup>16</sup> Some people have a strong psychological penchant for conspiracy theories and are thus very inclined to believe that these are the real actors behind every great event, including those that pertain to their private lives: whether it is a family problem they have encountered, or a problem at work or in their studies, they tend to quickly resort to conspiracy theories to explain it and justify it, and this sort of complex is well-known in psychology

Also, our religious discourse nowadays has to endeavour to give a social dimension to worship and link it with the social sphere, in that such a connection is bound to have a great effect on the Islamic nation and would certainly lead it to get on with the challenge of progress. Indeed, one of the defects which has long affected us and imposed itself on our way of being, is the confining of worship and devotional acts to the mosque and the Sufi lodge, when that was not the case in the beginning: this situation is a consequence of the secularist thesis which has always attempted to cast Islam and its systems in an ecclesiastic and priestly mould. In compliance with this vision, Islam is meant to retreat to the mosque as Christianity had retreated to the church. But this will not do, for Islam is a complete way of life, it is not a mere set of rituals. Hence, it is wrong to assume that worship in Islam is that which pertains to the relation of the individual and his Lord and confine it to those rituals which the believer perform in the mosque or in a corner of his house. Rather, the meaning of worship that the scholars of Islam have taught us goes far beyond that: "it is an index to all the things that God love and meet his pleasure, be they statements, or actions, both manifest and hidden. Worship, in other words, and according to another definition, is tantamount to Islam. Hence, just as Muslim is conscious of his Lord in the mosque, he is also conscious of Him-may He be exalted- in all of the other aspects of his life, because he knows that his Creator observes all of his actions, the outer ones and the inner ones alike, and he strives to earn his pleasure, and has made that his intention in all of his undertakings. Moreover, as a Muslim, he knows full well that the perseverance and the efforts made towards the realisation of that goal are not in vain, but will be added to his good deeds. In short, the concept of worship in Islam encompasses all the spheres of human life: a Muslim is in fact performing acts of worship even while he is doing business, or looking after his farm, or factory or doing his job, so long as he carries those activities in the name of His Lord and with the intention of earning His pleasure.

Not long after we have lost this conception of worship, when the scope of worship became confined to the mosque and the Sufi lodge, we have begun to witness the spread of bribery and financial embezzlement, and laziness and nonchalance became the norm among the people and the prevailing attitude towards life. As a consequence of these social plights, we stagnated while other nations advanced and continued their march forward realising development and progress. It is imperative today, particularly that we are making all kinds of efforts to achieve high averages of economic growth, to re-establish the link between worship and our worldly affairs, in order that the employee behind his desk, the worker behind his machine, the farmer in his field, and the teacher in his class all feel they are

engaged in acts of worship and devotion to God- may He be exalted- and so that they all regain that awareness that He is watching them while they are performing those duties, rewarding them with good deeds when they do well and wrong deeds when they underperform. It is only when we instil this change of attitude that we can look forward to ridding our society of the levels of corruption and the other negative factors which are hindering our development, and it is only when we adopt this attitude and through advancement, the establishment of a civilisation on earth and the realisation of respectable averages of economic growth, that society with all its classes, will begin to feel that they are truly moving together towards God.

Religious discourse should also attend to the binary thinking and the dualism which now prevails in our cultural and intellectual life, and set it as one of its priorities. Indeed, this prevailing attitude has often been the source of many controversies, which continue to cause a great deal of noise and consume much of our time and effort to no avail. Chief among these dualities is, for instance, the issue of ‘authenticity vs modernity’, about which the protagonists have been at loggerheads for a while now. Around this argument, there are those who argue that we should sever all our ties with our heritage, and erect in its place a new way of life, called modernity. They also claim that we should be careful of the forces which are preaching a return to the past, with all its manifestations and modes of living. However, by advancing such a claim, they only want to alarm people about the past, embellishing in their eyes the notion of cutting our relation with our heritage, and defaming those who call people to Islam at the same time.

In our view there is no real problem there and we know of no one who has actually called for a return to the past, with all its historical manifestations and forms. We maintain that we should live our lives according to the time in which we live, and that we should take advantage of all the tools and means that human reason has been able to produce, and which play a vital role in his securing his comfort and welfare. We also maintain that we should further develop and benefit from the most recent ideas that human reason added to the field of human thought and culture so long as these are in conflict with the immutable values of our faith. This acceptance of the other cultures and thought, does not, however, entail the rejection of our past and the refusal to walk on its trodden path. Indeed, a nation without a past is a nation that has neither a present nor a future: our past is a constitutive part of our consciousness and forms an essential element of our culture and thought, particularly for us Muslims. In our case the past occupies a great importance: it contains our immense legal heritage, our unparalleled scientific contributions in various fields of knowledge, religious

and rational, worldly and other-worldly. It also contains the blessed biography of the Prophet (pbuh), and the history of Islam after him, with all its ups and downs, and these indeed are full of wisdoms and lessons that can be referred to in order to ensure that we are on track in our current direction. We should not also forget that our past runs deep into history, as it actually begins with Adam (pbuh) and travels through the lives of all the subsequent Prophets and Messengers. Hence, in spite of the various divine laws which were revealed over time, the Islamic nation is one and indivisible, because it is united around the unity of the divine principle. Besides, why should we be required to sever our ties with our heritage and Islamic past, while Europe had no trouble taking inspiration from its Greco-Latin heritage for the establishment of its project of modernity, though that heritage is pagan through and through? And moreover, why should it be just as who are required to do so and not the other civilisations that have succeeded one another in our countries before the advent of Islam?

We insist that the present does not preclude the past, just as the past does not preclude the present; indeed, both the present and the past are instrumental for building a bright future, free from all intellectual and cognitive distortions.

Another dualism that was thrust upon us surreptitiously is ‘religion vs the world’, as if people have no other choice but to opt for either the former or the latter. Often in this debate, the proponents of the former argue that religion essentially disdains the world, and preaches the ascetic life in the caves and withdrawal from its constant hustle and bustle. What made this devious understanding of religion prevail is primarily due to a gross misinterpretation of the concept of asceticism (*zuhd*) in Islam, which some lazy and negative forces have helped spread in Muslim society. In reality, however, Islam does not pitch its followers in continuous battle against the world; it does not say to them “steer clear from it, it is an accursed devil”. On the contrary, we find in the Qur’an verses that clearly urge human beings to explore the world and to seek his bounties. For instance, God- may He be exalted- says: “*It is He who made the earth tame for you - so walk among its slopes and eat of His provision - and to Him is the resurrection*” (67:15). The Qur’an also urges mankind to use their intellect in order to extract material energy and making it subservient to their needs: it says: “*Eat from the good things with which We have provided you*” (7:160) and also, “*And We have certainly established you upon the earth*” (7:10), and “*And We taught him the fashioning of coats of armour to protect you from your [enemy in] battle. So will you then be grateful?*” (21:80). It is clear from the above that Islam does not have a condescending view of our worldly-life here on earth and does not ignore the world of

matter, as can be attested by centuries of Islamic civilisation. Was not this Islamic civilisation the one which Europe had to have recourse to, when it sought to lay the ground for the experimental method, which later became one of the major pillars of the project of modernity? In his 'Modern Trends in Islam', Hamilton Gibb states: "I believe it is now common knowledge that the experiments and detailed observations carried out by Muslims have made a tangible contribution towards the advancement of scientific knowledge, for it is through these practices that the experimental method had reached Europe during the Middle-Ages". It is worth mentioning also that despite what they achieved in terms of material progress, Muslims were not enthralled with their advances to the point of severing their relationship with God; they have neither abandoned His path, which He has chosen for them, nor His worship, His guidance and the spiritual realm. Also, the knowledge they were able to harness have not gone to their heads, enticing them to do evil or launch the kind of materialism which is preponderant in the West today, and nor have they been so infatuated with their breakthroughs that they moved away from their ethics on the basis that they now have joined the progressive elite.<sup>17</sup>

So the renunciation of the world in Islam (zuhd) has nothing to do with monasticism. This sort of renunciation has been reproved in the Qur'an. It says: "...and a monasticism, which they innovated; We did not prescribe it for them" (57:27). True renunciation is achieved by the believer, when he is able to hold the world in his hand without allowing it to enter his heart, which means that he is able, even while he is engaged in establishing his civilizational project, not to be overcome by its lures to the extent that it makes him forget his Creator and his final abode and sway him towards injustice. It is from this angle that we should understand the Qur'anic verses and Prophetic hadiths that condemn the love of this world and warn against to it. In other words it is crucial that the relation between this world and the next be balanced: if one dimension dominates the other we lose the correct perspective on things. So, let's be weary of the charms of this world as our predecessors have been, and let's, at the same time, explore this universe, discover its secrets and make it subservient to our needs. Also, let's shake off this laziness and this lassitude, which now prevail among us: our religion is a religion of action, and that which is essential for the performance of an obligation is itself an obligation, for indeed "God loves to see the traces of His bounty on his servants"<sup>18</sup>. We should remember that while great figures like Abu Bakr, Umar Ibn al-

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<sup>17</sup> Please refer to Muhammad Qutb, *Minhaaj al-Tarbiyya fi l'Islam*, p. 97 and onwards

<sup>18</sup> Related by Tarmidhi, and Ahmed in his Musnad, on the authority of Umar Bin Shu'ayb, going back to his grandfather through his father. According to al-Arnawut, the hadith is sound and its transmitters trustworthy.

Khattab, and Umar Ibn Abdul-Aziz were some of the great renunciants that Islam has known, they nonetheless controlled half the planet. Can anyone not recognise the renunciation of this world by Abdul-Rahman Ibn 'Awf- May God be pleased with him- despite the fact that he was very well-off? Indeed, true renunciation of this world and true asceticism resides in the heart, and not in the actions that one does. Actions pertain to the establishment of human civilisation on earth, and there are no contradictions here between the actions of the heart and the actions of the limbs, as it were, because they act in tandem towards achieving our goal and so in that sense we may say that they complement each other.

Democracy is also a compelling issue and one which requires from us a new approach. We should make it clear from the beginning that we are not supposed to accept all that is produced by western intellectuality in this regard, without questioning it and subjecting it to further scrutiny: we are not to be dealt with as if we were an immature person, wandering about aimlessly and waiting to be guided by others. It is quite the opposite: as an Islamic nation, it is demanded of us- by virtue of the Sharia and by reason- that we sometimes stop in order to reflect, deliberate and discuss issues, and then adopt without trepidation those measures which are deemed in keeping with our religion, tossing away without regret those which are not. Once we analyse and deconstruct it, we find that democracy as a concept and a method is both in harmony and in conflict with Islam<sup>19</sup>. The following highlights where Islam and democracy are in harmony:

1. Both reject the centralisation of power, promoting instead a system of governance based on civil institutions, and the separation of powers between the judiciary and the executive. They also both recognise freedom of expression as an inviolable right. In the case of Islam this system of governance is enshrined in the principle of governance, as attested by the Qur'anic verses: “ And consult with them” (3:159) ,and “ And they conduct their affairs by mutual consultation” (42: 38); though it is worth noting that in the case of Islam, ‘consultation’ is mentioned as a general principle: it is left to human beings to work out the details of applying it, in accordance with the socio-historical contexts in which they find themselves.

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<sup>19</sup> The areas over which Islam and democracy converge and diverge have been mentioned very briefly here. Please refer to Usama Hafez's and Asim Abdul-Madjid's *Al-Hakimiyya Fi l'Islam* for more details

## 2. They both emphasise liberty, justice and equality

3. The rejection of theocracy as a system of governance. Here it is worth noting that while western democracies reject this type of political system based on their very bitter experience<sup>20</sup>, Islam has never recognised nor experienced such a system because there is no room in it for a priestly class to begin with<sup>21</sup>. Islam has always envisaged a system of governance based on a social contract between the ruler and the ruled, and this clearly shows that it does stand for religious states.
4. The promotion of beneficial innovation and creativity and the fight against the suppression of free thinking. Islam certainly shares this position with western democracies so long as these are not in conflict with the immutable values of Islam and its fundamentals.
5. Recognising and defending human rights, and making them the cornerstone for the development of any society.

We now may proceed to show where they differ:

1. In Western democracy, it is the people who are the source of authority and law, whereas according to Islam, it is the Sharia which is the source of the law, in society, and is thus considered as the legal framework of the system. The Islamic Sharia, with all of its general principles, detailed rulings and universal ethical principles, represents therefore the law which governs Muslim society as a whole: it would not be befitting of a nation that aspires to erect a civilisation based on the Message it was sent, to be a society that has no definitive identity and character. Indeed, the sum of laws that govern a society is in the end but a reflection of its values and specificities, and we, as an Islamic nation, have a set of principles and laws which are proper to us.
2. Western democracies have taken the freedom of the individual to such extremes that it has become detrimental to ethics and values: all kinds of vileness and wickedness

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<sup>20</sup> we are especially referring here to those periods when the Church had full control over the temporal realm through its authority over the kings and princes of the Middle-Ages.

<sup>21</sup> the *ulema* and the *mujtahids* in Muslim society do not represent a special class nor are they part of the ruling system. Indeed, it was sufficient for one to fulfil the conditions of *ijtihad*, for instance, to be counted among the *ulema*, and his source of income was secured by fulfilling an ordinary occupation outside the state apparatus

were allowed on the basis that they promoted individual liberty, and that they did not constitute a breach of public order. Although Islam has full respect for the Adamic dimension of the individual, and his personal freedom, it does not recognise this freedom as absolute: it is subjected to the laws and the ethical values of Islam. In other words, Islam does not recognise that human beings can do whatever they want whenever they want, in the name of civil liberties. For if that was to occur, society would simply crumble and lose all of its ethical moorings, as is now already the case in western societies, which have granted excessive freedom to the individual, instead of subjecting it to a modicum of ethical standards.

3. It is also worth noting that while western democracies observe a discourse which insists on the need to protect people's freedom of speech and their right to decide their system of governance, all of which is politically correct, these same democracies adopt a discourse which is haughty and colonial when they speak of or address other, particularly the Arabo-Islamic peoples. In these contexts, western democracies are content to use their great material power to dominate others, often under the guise of globalisation, and not any globalisation, but one which is fraught with racist theories, like 'the clash of civilisations' and 'the end of history'. In opposition to this, in dealing with other nations and peoples, Islamic civilisation gives the utmost consideration to the ethical dimension of things. Indeed, even when this civilisation was at the peak, it did not look at others arrogantly and contemptuously; on the contrary, it said to them "whatever is considered a right for us, you may also consider as your right and whatever is considered as an obligation for us, is considered an obligation for you".
4. Anything in western democracies can become law, even a falsity, so long as it is able to attract the backing of the majority of the people. Take for instance, homosexuality, which, despite its despicability, has been supported by the majority in the House of Commons in Britain, and has thus become a reality which is recognised by law, to the extent that is now legal for a man to marry another. How can Islam ever accept such a situation?

In addition to this, we must not forget that western democracies suffer from a number of problems, which are commonly known to those who promote such a political system. It is not unusual, for instance, that people, may under pressure and due to some unforeseen

factors, elect people who end up bringing misery and destruction to society and not only their own, but to the neighbouring societies and countries as well. It was western democracy after all which brought Hitler to power, a man who was responsible for one of the biggest human tragedies of the twentieth century<sup>22</sup>. Recall also that the West, which considers itself as the birthplace of democracy, was in tatters upon hearing that the win of Hayder, a man known for his rightwing extremist ideas, in the Austrian election was in the offing. Even before his win was sealed, America and many European capitals wasted no time in expressing their menaces and threats against Austria in the event Hayder was appointed vice-chancellor. Similarly, Europe was going through all sorts of tension and fear when Jean-Marie Le Pen, another rightwing extremist, was able to get to the second round of the French presidential elections to face the current president of France, Chirac.

In light of this we may conclude by saying that western democracy as it stands today faces enormous challenges, to the extent that relying only on the voice of the people to choose who should run the country, may lead to difficult situations and to outcomes like the ones alluded to above.

This has been very brief summary of the areas of convergence and divergence between Islam and democracy, which we have cited here to set the record straight and alert the reader to the intellectual and cultural specificities which are ours in this debate and which we ought to defend and protect by using our right to investigate, and discuss, and to accept and reject.

Another issue which has taken many by storm and continues to make the headlines to this day is none other than the issue of woman. Indeed, religious discourse, if it wants to be responsible, must assist women in regaining their rights and their dignity, and strive to remove them from the shopwindows where they exhibited naked for the passers-by. That is because women are potentially our mothers, our sisters and our wives.

Sadly, in the name of liberty and emancipation, women were enslaved in the most abdominal fashion: they were driven to the market place of white-slave trafficking, where people sell their bodies and souls and were given no choice: if they should, by some miracle, escape from all sorts of slave trading, it would almost be impossible for them to escape the relentless fashion campaigns and the constant enticement for rebellion, which consists in making her think and feel that she is continuously oppressed. To make matters worse, women and human society at large, is then led to believe that all of these wrongs and

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<sup>22</sup> Hitler launched a world war which led to the death of approximately sixteen million people.

injustices committed against women are due to the religion of Islam. What every person concerned about the welfare of women should know, is that Islam is actually the religion which gave women their rights and defended their Adamic character and their dignity. Before Islam appeared, women were still regarded as a commodity that could be sold and bought, very often, be buried alive after birth because of their gender, and would be forced to marry without them having a say in the matter. Indeed, prior to Islam, women used to be counted among the inheritance of their deceased husbands as if they were some kind of material asset or goods; they did not have the right to inherit and used to face the most shocking forms of injustice. However, this situation changed with the advent of Islam; it elevated their status, reinstated their rights, and dignity. Notice with me what the Prophet (pbuh) has said about them in his Last Sermon: ‘ Be God-conscious when you deal with your wives and recall that they were married off to you, after you took a pledge before God that you would look after them, and do not forget that it is by the mention of His name that intercourse with them has been made permissible to you<sup>23</sup>’. The Prophet (pbuh) has also said: “The best among you is the one who is most kind to his household, and I am the most kind among you towards them”<sup>24</sup>. Islam then has certainly given respect to women, ensuring they occupied their rightful place in society by reinstating their rights. It has, for instance, banished their interment: God- May He be exalted- says: “*And when the girl [who was] buried alive is asked, For what sin she was killed*” (81:8-9). It has given then the right to inherit, at a time when this was completely denied to them: God- May He be exalted- says: “*God instructs you concerning your children: for the male, what is equal to the share of two females. But if there are [only] daughters, two or more, for them is two thirds of one's estate. And if there is only one, for her is half*” (4:11). Among other rights which Islam has obtained for women is to ensure that their expenditure and cost of living are guaranteed by their guardians. When a woman resides in her father’s house, it is he who shoulders that responsibility, and as soon as she is married and moves to live with her husband, it is he who takes care of those costs. Moreover, Islam has given to young women the right to give her opinion in matters concerning marriage. Thus in one instance the Prophet (pbuh) has said: ““A previously married woman cannot be married until her order is sought while a

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<sup>23</sup> This is part of a long hadith related y Muslim, and Ibn Maja, on the authority of Jabir- may God be pleased with him

<sup>24</sup> Related by al-Tarmidhi on the authority of Aisha- may God be pleased with her, and also related by Ibn Maja on the authority of Ibn Abbas- may God be pleased with him. This hadith has been deemed sound by al-Albani.

virgin cannot be married until her permission is sought. They said: How does she give permission? He (pbuh) said: If she remains silent."<sup>25</sup>

Even when we examine the issue of polygamy, we realise that before Islam men could marry as many women as they liked, but gradually this practice was restrained, and the Qur'an commanded that the number of wives a man could marry at any one time be restricted to four, and has put some conditions on this limited polygamy. It says, for instance: "... *And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one...*" (4:3).

We still need to shed light on two issues which are closely associated to any discussion on women:

### **1. Equality**

Equality is one of those issues which are a bone of contention whenever matters regarding women are under discussion. In reality, however, any talk of equality is valid, it seems, only when it is to do with equals. Now can any rational person uphold that men and women are meant to be equal in everything and every aspect? To begin with, men are biologically very different from women, and that difference itself already prepares them to play different roles in the project of human civilisation. Indeed, it is following this distinction that the Sharia has seen to it that they be charged with different responsibilities and obligations: while men are, for instance, reminded of the importance of prayers and fasting, women are addressed at length about matters concerning menstruation and childbirth. Equally, we find that while Islam has made jihad and defending the borders of Islam an obligation for men, it has exempted women from such a task. In the same vein, Islam has made incumbent upon men to cover the expenditures and cost of living of their wives and children, but it has not made that obligatory for women. But they also have equal responsibilities in relation to other moral obligation. For instance, they are equally called to have true faith and worship God

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<sup>25</sup> Related by Bukhari and Muslim, on the authority of Abu Hurayra- may God be pleased with him

alone, and they are equally asked to maintain those acts of worship which require inner devotion.<sup>26</sup>

We have no other choice but to recognise that God – may He be glorified- has bestowed on women characteristics and qualities which are peculiar to them, and that any attempt to make them a carbon copy of their male counterpart is tantamount to lacking her respect and dishonouring her rather than elevating her status, as some would have us believe.

## **2. Freedom of Movement**

The other issue which is often a point of contention where women are concerned is related to their freedom of movement, namely whether they are meant to stay home and abide in their residence or not. We should make it clear from the outset that the original position vis-à-vis this issue tilts towards the former, in conformity with God Almighty's command: "And abide in your houses and do not display yourselves as [was] the display of the former times of ignorance" (33:33). But it is permissible for women to leave their houses to respond to the needs of society or for her personal needs. Indeed, women may be required by society to occupy a variety of positions and fields such as medicine, education, and nursing to name but a few. In these instances, they are in their right to leave home to participate in the advancement of society, just like the earliest Muslim women participated in the first Islamic conquests alongside the Prophet (pbuh). Then, it was not uncommon for women to attend to the wounded, to prepare food for the fighters and carry water to the frontlines. Al-Rabi' Bint Ma'udh said: " We used to be part of the conquests of the Prophet (pbuh); we would take water to the fighters, attend to their needs, and bring back with us the wounded to Medina"<sup>27</sup>.

Also, Umm 'Atiyya related: "I have participated alongside the Prophet (pbuh) in seven different conquests. I would stay at the rear and prepare their meals as well as attend to the wounded and the sick"<sup>28</sup>. There women, during that early period of Islam, who went even further: they would take up a swords and join the fighting and defend the Prophet (pbuh), as

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<sup>26</sup> God Almighty says: Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer - We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter] according to the best of what they used to do" (16:97), and He also says: "And their Lord responded to them, "Never will I allow to be lost the work of [any] worker among you, whether male or female; you are of one another" (3:195)

<sup>27</sup> Related by Bukhari, and Ahmed in his Musnad

<sup>28</sup> Related by Muslim, Ibn Maja, and Ahmed in his Musnad

was the case of Nasiba Bint Ka‘b al-Ansariyya whose defence of the Prophet (pbuh) in the Battle of Uhud was a rare feat.

Beside fulfilling these social roles, women may indeed feel the need to leave their houses for personal reasons: pursuing studies and seeking employment to attend to their needs and the needs of their children for example, fall into this category of needs and Islam has permitted that. Only this permission needs to abide by certain standards of the Sharia: women in those instances need to wear the hijab to ensure that their activity outside the house does not end up being a major disturbance and a curse on society, not to mention the women themselves. Above all, Muslim women should always remember that rearing children and preparing a generation of good Muslims who are able to bring major contribution to their society and make it stronger and more developed, is the noblest of all duties. For indeed, no sooner had interest in this duty began to wane, we started to witness the spread of some debilitating social ills in our societies. Only mothers are the first and foremost person able to inculcate their children with all the basics that a good education requires. So let us make sure we do not overlook this most valuable aspect of women: motherhood is the most honourable title that God has bestowed on women.

This has been a very cursory look at women and the rights that Islam has granted to them. This is unique to Islam: not only has it restituted the rights of which they were deprived, it has also succeeded in protecting them as a pearl in a shell, so that no usurper or abuser could trample on them. Let it made clear that any wrong to which women are subjected, Islam rejects it and repudiates it, because their rights have been stated in no uncertain terms.

Religious discourse is called upon today to put forth the major outline of its vision so that those preach Islam and call people to God may develop a more compelling way of addressing people and improve their means of communication with the masses. It is necessary that these educators not be evolving in a closed and narrow sphere, for in the long run people would be fed up with them and as a result they would fail in their mission. No sincere Muslim would like to see things heading towards that direction. So, we should ameliorate the discourse with which we preach and also think about addressing new topics and bringing them to the attention of the masses. In the following section, and always in the context of renewing religious discourse, we put forward a brief proposal which aims at improving the language with which we deliver our preaching and the content of this preaching.

Those who call people to God and to Islam must focus on instilling faith in the hearts of people and give priority to that rather than ritual obligations. Once, they have achieved that goal, they should then turn their focus on those ritual obligations and leave aside the mention of the supererogatory devotional acts, and following that emphasis should be placed on avoiding the destructive and major sins rather than on the minor sins and infractions. In short, our preachers and educators must learn the jurisprudence of priorities in matters of religion (*fiqh al-awlawiyyat*). The first person who has taught the Islamic nation this discipline is the Prophet (pbuh) as is attested in a hadith narrated by Abu Hurayra- may God be pleased with him- who said: “ The Prophet, upon whom be peace and blessings, was asked, ‘which action is most valuable in the sight of God?. He said: ‘faith in God and His Prophet. And then he was asked: ‘what would come next?’. He said: ‘Jihad for the sake of God’. And then it was said: ‘then what?’ to which he replied: “A pilgrimage accepted by God”<sup>29</sup>. Similarly in another hadith, Ibn Mas‘ud narrated: “I said: O Messenger of God, which action is most loved by God- may He be exalted- ? He said: ‘the performance of prayers on time’. Then I said: what then. He said: ‘devotion to one’s parents’. And then I said: ‘what comes next?’ to which he replied: Jihad for the sake of God”<sup>30</sup>. These are just a couple hadiths to highlight for you how the Prophet prioritised the benefits. In another hadith of the Prophet (pbuh), Ibn Massud – may God be please with him- narrated: “I asked the Messenger of God- Peace and blessings be upon him- ‘which of the sins is the greatest in the sight of God?’. He said: ‘To associate partners to God’. I said: ‘That is indeed a great sin. Which one would be next?’. He said: ‘To kill your offspring for fear that his share of food may decrease yours. I again asked: ‘Which one would be next?’, and he said: ‘To commit adultery with the spouse of your neighbour.”<sup>31</sup> In this instance, we are shown how the Prophet ordered harm and evil according to priorities.

Another thing that the preachers may be encouraged to do in their role as educators is to highlight to their audiences the gravity of sinning and teach them to cherish the blessings granted to them by God, for if these gain the same magnitude in a person’s heart, that person will certainly be on the straight path. Cherishing God’s blessings consists of not belittling them or taking them for granted; it is to remind oneself that these blessings emanate solely from the God’s benevolence, and to thank Him for it with one’s heart, tongue and limbs. As for highlighting the gravity of sin, which consists of fearing God

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<sup>29</sup> Related by Bukhari

<sup>30</sup> Related by Bukhari, Muslim, and Tarmidhi

<sup>31</sup> Related by Bukhari, Muslim, Tarmidhi, Nisai, Abu Dawud, and Ahmed in his Musnad

before committing any sin, however small that may be, and if sin is committed, it consists of rushing to ask God for His forgiveness and repentance.

Another issue which the preachers of Islam should pay attention to is address people in accordance to what is customarily known among them in order to avoid controversy and those situations which lead to the questioning of God's or the Prophet's statements. They should know, for instance, that in some situation it would be laudable to opt for that which is simply permissible rather than for that which is ideal, if it is established that the former is, for instance, more suitable in overcoming differences among the people and uniting them. Indeed, the Prophet (pbuh) has said: "O Aisha! If it were not for the fact that your people are new to this faith, I would have demolished the Ka'ba completely and erected it anew with two more entrances, one on the eastern side and the other on the western one, and I would have also added to these six ells of stones. That is because Quraysh has limited these to where they built the Ka'ba" (*Related by Muslim*).

Our preachers should also know that it is permissible to not reveal everything that one knows to be true when the situation requires it. Such a restraint may sometimes be necessary for social cohesion, whereas the spread of ideas the meaning and intent of which people have no way of understanding may actually lead to the contrary, however true they may be. It is actually for this reason that Imam Ahmed loathed talking to people about the divine names and His attributes and about the 'ambiguous' in the Qur'an. To that effect, the great Imam, Ali Ibn Abu Talib would say: "*Address people according to their level of knowledge! Do you want the statements of God and His Messenger [to be constantly] questioned?*"<sup>32</sup> .Also our preachers and those who call people to Islam should charge people with duties that they can support and not with those which exceed their abilities. They have, for example, to teach them love of God before teaching them their obligations vis-à-vis the Sharia, and this means that Islamic education ought to start with belief and faith in the One God. We need to clarify that by faith here, we are not simply referring to abidance to the formal dogmas of the creed, but to sincerity of worship towards God, to His love, to reliance on Him alone, to being true with Him, to repentance to Him, to being conscious of Him in all of our affairs, and to all sorts of spiritual dimensions like these. Some of the preachers to Islam think that belief in the one God is confined to the observance of the articles of faith whose rulings are no different than the Sharia rulings, and that is a great problem, because there are in fact many who, although they know these articles of faith by heart, are found

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<sup>32</sup> Related by Muslim

wanting when it comes to the simplest experiences of true faith, which resides after all in the heart and not in reason. Hence, our preachers and those who call people to Islam must know that the heart is the foundation and the root of all good: if it is sound, so is the rest of the body and so are the rest of the actions, but if it is corrupt, the rest of the body and our actions will also be corrupt.<sup>33</sup>

They need to understand that both our outer actions and inner actions are important, and that although these dimensions of Islam do in fact depend on each other in the preservation of the faith, it still remains that the goodness of the heart is the one which is originally sought. It is not befitting of those who call people to Islam to take upon themselves the task of excommunicating the masses, charging them with disbelief. Rather, their mission consists of providing guidance and bringing back those who have erred back to the true path and to the fold of Islam. For God after all is not going to see how many people we have excommunicated from Islam, but He is going to ask us on how many people we have called to Islam and how many we have guided to the Truth, felicity and the straight path.

Those who call people to Islam should know that truth is already bitter. So let them not add more bitterness to it, by being harsh or stern in disposition. Instead of adopting such attitude, they should sweeten this truth with the best honey they can put their hands on, and by that I mean, the best of virtues and manners. Inviting people to Islam requires that we present Islam to people in the best garments, and by that I refer to impeccable morality and noble character: preachers should in no way sell their religion to anyone in exchange of gaining their favours or some other worldly benefit. Their example in this should be Hassan al-Basri, who upon realising that people were in need of his knowledge, made sure that he renounced all of their worldly pleasures, and in that way he earned the respect and love of all the people. Indeed, they should apply themselves to the teachings of that great hadith, which says: “Renounce this world and God would love you, and renounce that which people hold on to, and they would love you”<sup>34</sup>, and learn from it that whoever from among the preachers to God covets the worldly pleasures will be loathed and detested by the people, and neither his message nor his preachment will be heard by them.

It imperative that those who preach Islam do not ill-represent it; they should realise that the pulpit they are now occupying stands for the pulpit of the Prophet (pbuh), hence, they ought

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<sup>33</sup> Related by Bukhari, Muslim, and Ibn Maja, on the authority of al-Nu‘man Ibn Bashir- may God be pleased with him: “Remember, there is in the body a clot of blood; if it is in a good state, all the body will be good, and if it is in a bad state, all the body will be bad. That clot is the heart”

<sup>34</sup> Related by Ibn Maja, on the authority of Sahl Bin Sa‘d – may God be pleased with him-, and it was deemed sound by al-Albani

to spread the good news which attracts people to religion instead of spreading distressing news which perturb people and repel them away from it, and they ought to make things easy instead of making them cumbersome. Indeed, they should show kindness to all mankind; they should be like that tree, which gives back fruits to the people each time they throw stones at it. They are not to come down to the level of the insolent and the idiotic: it is high time, they realise that as callers for Islam, they are inevitably going to be insulted, attacked, calumnised and maligned. This is a pattern that God has foreordained for the Prophets and those who are their heirs. Did not Moses beseech God, saying: “O God, I implore you to spare me the slander of the people”?

Our preachers should also reflect deeply on the words uttered by that great storehouse of wisdom, the mother of the believers, Aisha – may God be pleased with her- when [she was asked by an Iraqi to produce her copy of the Qur’an so that he may arrange his according to it]. She said:

“What harm will there be to you whichever part you read first? The first to be revealed was a sura of the Mufasssal in which the Garden and the Fire is mentioned. When many people joined Islam, then the halal and haram were revealed. If the first thing to be revealed had been, 'Do not drink wine,' people would have said, 'We will never give up wine.' If it had been revealed, 'Do not fornicate,' they would have said, 'We will never give up fornication.' When I was still a young girl who played, it was revealed to Muhammad - peace and blessings of God be upon him him-, in Mecca: "*In fact the Hour is their promised appointment and the Hour is more disastrous and bitter!*" (54:46); Surat al-Baqara and Surat an-Nisa’ were revealed while I was with him.' Then she produced the copy of the Qur'an for him and dictated to him the order of the suras”(related by Bukhari: 4707).

Before hammering people with matters of halal and haram, asking them to give accounts thereof, those who call people to Islam ought to purify people of the stains which sully their hearts and cure them of the ailments which are making ravages therein. People are desperately in need of faith and certitude and our preachers should focus on making sure that people’s hearts are filled with these: Sharia rulings are of no use if they descend on a heart that is sick. Under those circumstances, these may only make matters worse, leading that person to haughtiness, and slackness vis-à-vis the Sharia, as he may then use his intellectual acumen to produce fallacious justifications to sidestep his religious obligations. Thus we have no choice but to abide by that golden rule of thumb, which states “first and foremost, the purification of the heart”.

Religious doctrines constitute the bases of Islam, ethics are its anchor, and the Sharia forms its practical dimension. Certainly, all of the obligations of the Sharia and all of its proscriptions are to be enjoined, but we insist that calling people to the Truth and convincing them of it, requires that we carefully consider our priorities: we must ascertain which of these obligations and proscriptions need to be upheld first and as a matter of urgency, and which of these may be differed. One of the biggest problems, which beset the Islamic movement nowadays, is, undeniably, the sheer tactlessness of some of the preachers to Islam: they are in the habit of leaping from the books of Islamic law to the pulpits of the call to Islam, without even pausing for a moment to acquaint themselves with the reality in which people live, and familiarise themselves with their real problems, their sorrows and their aspirations<sup>35</sup>.

We, therefore, need to bring some order to our course of action, abide by the gradual approach in self-transformation, and we also have to get closer to the reality of the people in order to offer proper guidance. In the past, the rightly guided caliph, Umar Ibn Abdul-Aziz said: “I desist from making it incumbent upon people to implement all the truth at once, for fear that they in turn might desist from Islam at once”, in spite of the fact that he was at the peak of his might, and power. But if that was the case with such a caliph, how much more is he, whose position is much weaker, in need to observe patience and incremental change in his preaching? Should he not be the primary recipient of those words of wisdom and the first one to act by them?

Let us recall that graduality is among the divine norms in the universe, and that human nature has been foreordained in conformity with it. It is imperative, therefore, that those who call people to Islam consider this fact as they endeavour to lead their societies towards change. If any of the preachers ignore this norm, he is bound to fail and come back from his mission empty handed: this norm means that everything in the universe is pleading with those who call people to Islam to observe graduality in their effort to bring reform to their society.

Let us assess people in light of both their good deeds and their evil deeds, and as we do that, we should perhaps consider their good deeds before their evil ones; should their good deeds outweigh, we would deem that person good and vice versa.

O you who call people to God! Why do you always look at the empty glass before looking at the glass half-full! Why do you not choose to fill the part which is empty, in silence and

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<sup>35</sup> *Hiwaar la Muwaajaha*

with wisdom! Actions are louder than words, so let us ‘be firm steadfast and balanced’ as the Prophet (pbuh) has once advised. If acting firmly has proven to be difficult during the days of the *salaf*, it would, no doubt, be even harder and rarer to achieve these days, but we should not worry, because we can always aim for our goals in a balanced way, and that is the advice that we ought to give to the people<sup>36</sup>. The preachers and those who call people to Islam ought to diligently apply themselves to that great legal maxim, which says that: “*Any amount of water that exceeds the equivalent of two ollas [usually between 200 and 300 litres] will not become sullied even if some impurity falls into it*”<sup>37</sup>.

If not even that amount of water is sullied, how can the river in which many devoted their lives for Islam be sullied by slip or a stumble they made here or there? Can these mistakes really make light weight of the mountains of good deeds of the sincere scholars and callers to God? Look at the example of Hatib Ibn Abi Balta‘a- may God be pleased with him- who divulged the secrets of the Prophet (pbuh), informing the disbelievers that he (pbuh) was about to raid them<sup>38</sup>. Did that evil deed obliterate his act of Hijra and his participation in the Battle of Uhud? Certainly not! Also after Uthman Ibn ‘Affan had equipped the army of al-‘Usra, the Prophet (pbuh) gave him a badge of honour, declaring: “Othman will have no accounts to give for any wrong he commit after today”<sup>39</sup>. Last and not least of all we have the example of Moses (pbuh) who had thrown the tablets and began to drag his brother from his head and beard, and his brother was also a Prophet! But Moses’ had also of course done great deeds: he had faced up to the Pharaoh and had endured very patiently the challenge of guiding and leading the people of Israel. Major feats like these had earned a very special and lofty place in the sight of God, and that had dwarfed his slip with his brother.

The Prophet (pbuh) did inherit neither a single dinar nor a dirham, but he inherited a Sharia which can be proclaimed among the people, a knowledge that can be spread and a wisdom that can be diffused. All those who are calling people to Islam have to be aware that they are occupying the pulpit where the Prophet (pbuh) once stood, and they are delivering a heavenly message on his behalf. They, therefore, need to be careful not to mar the lustre of this noble place with their passions or their dubieties. Nor are they, in a moment of ecstasy,

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<sup>36</sup> The Prophet (pbuh) has said: “Be firm, steadfast, and balanced: know that your actions alone will not be a cause for your entry into Paradise and that the most beloved actions to God are those that are done continuously and persistently, even if they be few” Related by Bukhari and Muslim, on the authority of Aisha- may God be pleased with her

<sup>37</sup> Related by Tarmidhi, Nisai, Abu Dawud, Ibn Maaja and Ahmed, and it was deemed sound by al-Albani.

<sup>38</sup> The hadith concerning this event is related by Bukhari, Muslim, Tarmidhi, Abu Dawud, and Ahmed in his Musnad

<sup>39</sup> Related by Tarmidhi, on the authority of Abd al-Rahman Ibn Samura- may God be pleased with him

get excited about some worldly gain only to lose the high rank which God has ennobled with. Indeed, they are to steer clear from that which is in conflict with the guidance of the Prophet (pbuh) even if the opposite course would have earned them the accolades of a great deal of people, because in their case striving to earn the pleasure of God ought to come first. Clearly, those who call people to Islam must avoid all suspicious activity, and they must not only save their religion but also their honour and reputation, for once someone's reputation is tarnished, it is extremely hard to restore it, and yet people would not lend an ear to the sermons and preachments of one who has not an impeccable reputation.

People who call others to Islam must also do their utmost to avoid smearing individuals or organisations while they are going about their mission. They are to apply themselves to offering constructive criticism and engage in ad hominem. They are to acknowledge the positive qualities of others rather than focus on their shortcomings; that is the wise way of turning things around and encouraging people to listen to what they have to say. That is indeed the approach of the wise Qur'an, which spoke highly of the People of Israel, reminding them of their past glory, and softening their hearts before it issued to them the command to enter Jerusalem. To that effect, God- may He be exalted- has said: And [mention, O Muhammad], when Moses said to his people, "*O my people, remember the favour of God upon you when He appointed among you prophets and made you possessors and gave you that which He had not given anyone among the worlds*" (5:20). This is the part in which the Almighty extols their qualities. And then, He- may He be glorified- has said: "*O my people, enter the Holy Land which God has assigned to you and do not turn back [from fighting in God's cause] and [thus] become losers*" (5:21).

Those who call people to Islam need to abide by that beautiful wisdom: "Light a candle instead of cursing darkness", because doing so would be far more effective and beneficial. They are to teach people how to juggle religious obligations and the demands of the world, such that they neither relinquish those obligation as a result of the pressures of daily life nor do they ignore this world which after all the theatre of their legal obligations.

Those who call people to Islam must know that preaching is a zakat whose amount is determined by the improvement of listeners' character. Al-Ghazali said: "He whose assets' worth do not exceed the amount fixed for zakat, is exempted from paying it". All of those who preach for Islam must know then that they are spending in this cause from their own pockets; how are they to do it if their pockets are empty, or indeed have a hole in them? They must know that they are giving water from their own container, and should ask

themselves, how are we to do this if our container is empty, or worse still, if it is filled with a poisonous liquid?

Those who call people to Islam must also remember that the devil has two ways of dealing with the wrongdoer: he comes to him before he commits the evil act to make it attractive in his eyes, and then he comes to him after the offence had been committed to cause to despair from God's mercy. As for those who call people to Islam, they should in turn have two ways of dealing with the wrongdoer: they should first warn him against committing evil before he does, and they should make sure that the doors of true repentance remain open for him after he had committed that sin. Indeed, the devil has a presentiment about the penchant of the self. If he senses that it is inclined towards negligence he infiltrates it from that side, but if he senses that it inclined towards radicalism that is where he would infiltrate it from. Those who call people to Islam should also have a sense of the self and its inclinations so that they are able also to infiltrate it, whether that self is negligent or taken to excess, from the position of the middle path and moderation.

Also those who call people to God must commit themselves to educating people rather than unveiling their shortcomings, they should promote ease rather than difficulty, they should instil love of God in the hearts before instilling fear, and they should kindle faith and disclose its secrets before hammering people with their obligations. They should learn not to burn their bridges and spit in wells to which they might return on day to fetch a pale of water to drink.

Calling people to God does not consist of putting your full line up of the proofs of the Sharia rulings, nor does it consists of a confrontation or dispute between you and the people. It is not defeating people and silencing them with cogent arguments and conclusive evidence, nor does it consist of assailing them with proofs. Nay, calling people to God is much more than that and far more important than that; I dare say it has nothing to do with that. Calling people to God is about inculcating love of God and religion in the hearts; indeed it is about softening the hearts so they may be receptive to the Truth. Disputes and wrangling on the other hand is the source of all evil for they are conducive to rivalry and enmity, and make people refractory.

Also those who call people to God should not expect anything material or otherwise, in return for their actions: they are to experience with their hearts and their limbs the words that all the Prophets uttered when they said: *“And O my people, I ask not of you for it any wealth. My reward is not but from God”* (11:29).

Also those who call people to God should be fully conscious of time and should prioritise their obligations accordingly. They are to also pass on that knowledge to others, for it is important that a Muslim be the son of his time. Indeed, for every cycle there is a ritual which is specific to it, and an action as well as an obligation which comes before others in order of priority and importance. Thus, we may safely say that if the enemy were to attack the Abode of Islam, our most important obligation would reside in fighting back the aggressor and liberating the Islamic land, however, if doubts and confusion were to become widespread, the most important obligation would be to debunk these doubts and rid Islam of any fallacies to clear its name. Indeed, if the last ten days of Ramadan were to dawn us today, it would be most appropriate to engage in *zikr* and *tahajjud*, but if Ramadan were to begin now, fasting would be the obligation. Also if we are graced with His benevolence, the obligation would be to give thanks, and whenever lewdness becomes widespread, the obligation would be to implement hisba in accordance with the right principles. And if people were to abandon Islam and religion, then the most important obligation would be to call them back to Islam and the straight path.

Finally those who call people to God need to know that people's hearts are in the hands of God, and that they, as preachers, only act as 'outer' causes, in that God guides whomsoever He wants to His light, through causes and without apparent causes and contrary to causes: Abu Lahab was led to misguidance and he disbelieved, although he was the uncle of the Prophet (pbuh); however, Salman al-Farisi became a believer, in spite of the fact that he came from Persia