Introduction

A sociological and critical historical survey of the human condition from primitive times to the present age shows that the human family has developed from very primitive and crude proto-human levels of consciousness or awareness to the present stage of development in every dimension of human life. The term 'modernity', as used in the context of this work, means the underlying basic beliefs, values, attitudes and world outlook that began to take shape and crystallize in Western Europe from the 15th century onwards and attained fairly stable and identifiable contours by the closing years of the 19th century. This set of beliefs, values and attitudes is, of course, still undergoing internal changes due to ever growing human knowledge of nature, clearer insights into the human condition and cumulative human experience based on trial and error. As of today modernity, means possessing an open critical mind that demands appropriate evidence or justification before accepting any truth-claim as true or false, unconditional respect for the human person, irrespective of race, region, religion, caste or gender, equality of status, human rights, and opportunity, free enquiry based on deductive reasoning and scientific investigation and verification, tolerance of disagreement, and the sharing and transfer of political power through peaceful means as pre-conditions of human welfare and universal peace.

Modernity in the sphere of religious faith also implies accepting and appreciating inter-faith spirituality. The pre-modern view was that only one faith led to salvation, or, in other words, only those who spoke one particular language of the spirit or practiced one particular set of sacred rituals could reach the highest level of felicity or salvation. This approach or view may be called the belief in exclusive salvation.

But cultural pluralism makes the substance of religious faith as well as the choice of symbols and rituals optional rather than mandatory for attaining success and salvation.

Cultural pluralism lays primary stress upon authenticity of faith and righteous conduct, rather than any particular creed or conceptual formulation as a factor of salvation. The inner transition of the individual from mandatory religious monism to permissive religious pluralism and even to neutral secular humanism is the crucial mark of modernity. Modernity, by itself, does not give any mandate to accept, or reject but only to respect all authentic beliefs, provided they do not violate a set of human rights.

The Islamic paradigm, which I have projected in my work, *Living the Quran in Our Times*, on the basis of semantic analysis of Quranic texts, does not clash with the concept of religious pluralism. Evidently, Islamic orthodoxy has followed a different interpretation of Quranic texts and projected a different paradigm of Islam. However, several great Muslim thinkers, scientists, sages, poets and mystics in the creative classical period of Islamic history (explicitly or implicitly) differed from the orthodox position. Unfortunately the dominant orthodox sections in medieval times completely sidelined these creative spirits, many of whom were even persecuted by those in power. Thanks to modern Western scholarship, at its best, those dubbed as heretics in medieval times are being admired and venerated today as great intellectuals and spiritual leaders cutting across different religions.

Religious sensibility today (in all religious groups) distinguishes the timeless primary verities and intrinsic values of their cherished religion or faith: faith in one supreme Creator, the supremacy of Divine justice or cosmic law of karma, ultimate supremacy of good over evil, the establishment of justice, and the values of truthfulness, compassion, self-knowledge, respect for life, rational altruism and so on: from the secondary temporal instrumental rules for realizing the above primary verities and values. Cultural pluralism affirms that this distinction and its consistent application to human society are far more important for both success and salvation than unreflective and unconditional

adherence to instrumental rules found in different religious traditions. I have thoroughly analyzed and discussed these complex issues in my introductory keynote chapter in the *Quest for Islam*.

For the convenience of readers of my collected essays in two volumes The Call of Modernity and Islam, and Essays on Cultural Pluralism, this chapter has been reproduced, in full, in *The Call of Modernity.*