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Perennial Islam: A Quran Based Paradigm

Introductory Remarks:

Before attempting the task, I, in all humility, would like to uncover a long standing hidden assumption or semantic illusion that has shaped the Muslim mind throughout centuries past. This assumption is as follows: “The word, ‘Islam’ has only one definitive and incontrovertible meaning, and this definitive meaning is the one which my in-group professes.”

It is incontrovertible (for a Muslim) that the standard meaning of the word ‘Islam’ is the one used in the Quran. However, the human understanding of what God means by the word ‘Islam’ or any other Quranic word or expression is, I submit, a rather different case. Muslims must, indeed, accept the Quran as the ‘Word of God’ and Muhammad ﷺ as the ‘Messenger of God’, the cosmos as the ‘creation of God’, and God as the ‘only Self-Existent, Sovereign Lord of all that exists’. However the believer cannot help understanding or interpreting the exact meaning of the above expressions according to his/her own conceptual level and range of knowledge. Human understanding of the Quran is, at bottom, a matter of continual growth in the ongoing historical process. I submit this insight is crucially significant for understanding the issue concerned. The Muslim mind must accept that plural interpretations of Islam are, indeed, inevitable, and it is eminently desirable to accept this ‘de facto’ plurality as natural and permissible. However, the believer must ever strive for conceptual clarity and practice ‘loving tolerance’ of both internal

* “Peace be upon him” in Arabic

dissent and of other religious traditions.

Perennial Islam, as joyful submission to one Supreme Creator and acceptance of the Quran as the 'Word of God', revealed to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, is one thing; the surrender to a static shariah conceived as a perfect and total guide for the believer in every walk of life is quite another. To remain rooted in the perennial spiritual values of the Quran, as exemplified in the life and character of the historical Muhammad ﷺ, the 'Seal of the Prophets' is one thing; to hold that this implies that believers should actively strive to become 'carbon copies' of the Prophet's actions and life style is quite another. Rootedness in the basic Quranic values does not imply a mechanical and unreflective adherence to Quranic injunctions without making a distinction between 'intrinsic' values and 'instrumental' rules. Likewise, genuine reverence and love for the Prophet ﷺ does not imply uncritical acceptance of the many miracles or myths found in the popular versions of the Islamic faith, especially the dramatic detailed events and dialogues mentioned in the stories of the Prophet's ﷺ journey (*meraaaj*) to God's Throne. To deny such myths or miracles in no way diminishes his sublime spiritual status and his authentic mystical experiences or his amazing achievements as an historical figure.

Muslims generally believe that Prophet Muhammad ﷺ must have possessed supernatural powers on the ground that earlier prophets performed miracles. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ being the greatest, God must have endowed him with similar, if not greater, powers, so it is held to be the case. Muslims commonly cite the Quranic verse (54:1) as evidence that Prophet Muhammad ﷺ performed the miracle of splitting the moon (*shaqq ul Qamar*). Numerous saints and mystics of Islam are also credited with possessing extra-ordinary powers through Divine grace. Sufi tombs attract numerous devotees (both Muslim and others) who seek the intervention of the saints in securing various material benefits for themselves.

However, the Quran gives no warrant at all for accepting this traditional image of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Indeed, the Quran categorically denies that Prophet Muhammad ﷺ possessed supernatural powers with the sole exception of the gift of Divine revelation (*wahee*). In other words, the Quran is the only miracle which Prophet Muhammad ﷺ claimed to possess.¹

The process of Quranic revelation continued intermittently over a long

period of 23 years. It is incontrovertible that the revealed contents were closely related to the needs and situational requirements of the Prophet ﷺ and the nascent Muslim community and that the Divinely revealed texts were meant to teach and inculcate basic values and principles of conduct and also to address the then prevailing social, economic and political conditions of the region, apart from providing inner strength and consolation to the Prophet ﷺ and consoling him and the nascent Islamic community. It is also incontrovertible that the Prophet ﷺ could not but use his own discretion or personal judgment while interpreting and applying the revealed Quranic injunctions as also when a novel challenge or situation arose and no specific guidance was available in the Quran. We should also reflect on the fact that the Prophet ﷺ freely consulted his close and trusted companions and on a number of occasions he preferred their advice to his own initial judgment. After his passing away the second Caliph, Omar, introduced many changes and reforms in political, administrative and legal matters in view of the changed social and economic conditions of time and place. His innovative and rational approach to the polity dating back to the Prophet ﷺ himself even met with some honest and well meaning criticism, but Omar's sagacity and forceful personality prevailed. Unfortunately, the struggle for ascendancy among the warring tribes and human weaknesses of individuals and rulers conspired to dilute and then to extinguish the high idealism and ethical politics of the Prophet's ﷺ time. It is tragic that close companions of the Prophet ﷺ were ranged on different sides and even resorted to civil war to capture power. Barring a few exceptions Muslim society fell victim to the politics of violence in place of the politics of consultation and peaceful solution to situational challenges that are an integral part of the human condition as such. The tragic assassination of Husain, the Prophet's ﷺ grandson, on the field of Karbala in what is now part of modern Iraq was the tragic finale of the process of moral decay and reign of '*Realpolitik*' that displaced the earlier idealism of the Prophet's ﷺ time. ²

In the realm of thought and culture, however, Arab and Iranian Muslims inaugurated a magnificent break-through in the Islamic world. But it is an unfortunate paradox that this period of enlightenment lasting two centuries was hardly appreciated by the orthodox religious establishment of the larger Islamic world. Great thinkers, scientists, poets, mystics,

mathematicians, historians and geographers shone like stars on the till then barren cultural firmament of Damascus and Baghdad, but intellectual giants like Kindi (d. 873 CE), Faarabi (d. 950 CE), Ibn Sina (d. 1037 CE), Ibn Tufail (d. 1185 CE), Al-Beruni (d. 1048 CE), Ibn Rushd (d. 1198 CE) et al were hardly honored by their own contemporaries. Indeed, they lived in fear of being persecuted if not declared as heretics because of their creative and dynamic approach to the Quran and the dogmas of Islam. In their own eyes they were good Muslims but they were compelled to be secretive and circumspect in speech and in writing lest they attract the wrath of the orthodox religious leaders. On the other hand, the great Muslim theologians and jurists, such as Abu Hanifa (d. 767 CE), Maalik (d. 795 CE), Shaafai (d. 820 CE), Hambal (d. 855 CE) and Jaafar Saadiq (d. 765 CE) were greatly respected and celebrated. But even these religious leaders were, at times, persecuted by some Caliphs who had other ideas. In short, Islamic society never enjoyed the blessings of real freedom of inquiry and conscience and never mastered the democratic art of agreeing to differ. Indeed, if we in the modern era have come to admire the genius and magnificent contribution of Ibn Khaldun to Sociology and the Philosophy of history this is due to the objective research and humanist empathy of a large number of modern Western intellectuals. ³

Regard and Reverence for the Prophet ﷺ:

Millions and millions of Muslim believers will surely and rightly continue to venerate Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as the perfect exemplar for humanity. An ever swelling number of non-Muslims of eminence now also acknowledge the administrative, moral and spiritual genius of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as one of the super-architects and shapers of human destiny on the world scale. But the crucial question is what should be the concrete form, in the modern age, of a true Muslim's veneration for Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

In answer to the above crucial question I submit that true reverence and fidelity to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ consists in trying to make his basic values and objectives, rather than the details of the Prophet's ﷺ conduct, the pivot of our own lives and activities. The promotion of Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ basic values (even if this task today requires modifying his instructions ﷺ given in particular situations) is the real meaning of follow-

ing his example (*sunnah*) in an ever changing world. This is, precisely, what Khalifa Omar had done. The following considerations should help perplexed Muslim believers to realize this liberating truth.

First, development or growth takes place in different fields of human activity despite interruptions, retrogressions and reverses. This applies not only to factual knowledge but also to human ideals, values and institutions. Thus have arisen fresh interpretations of the good life. Universal human rights, rule by consent, peaceful transfer of power, tolerance of dissent, gender equality, equality of opportunity are some of the ideals that are the fresh characteristics of the modern age. Static norms of perfection cannot but arrest the natural movement of ideas and ideals. No particular stage of development can be said to be perfect.

It may be thought that for the committed Muslim, at least, the Quran is beyond the shadow of imperfection. But the crucial point is that the Quran has to be understood by human beings whose conceptual framework is bound to change with the passage of time. This framework will always remain subject to various imperfections or limitations. Thus, even if we concede the Quran, as the Word of God, to be perfect, its human understanding will always remain a matter of perfection aspired to rather than perfection achieved. Ceaseless growth towards perfection rather than perfection as such is all that man can hope for.

Second, a clear distinction should be made between basic values and instrumental rules. The Muslim segment of the human family will not advance forward, but move in ruts alone, if Muslims do not sift the instrumental prescriptions of the Prophet ﷺ from his basic goals and objectives. The making of this distinction between basic objectives and the means for realizing them should not be confused with the rather facile view that the end justifies the means.

Third, a clear distinction will also have to be made between matters of personal taste and matters of morality and spirituality. Real and honest commitment to the values of the Prophet ﷺ does not mean that the individual give up his inclinations and preferences in matters of taste.

Fourth, the reported sayings and doings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ are not sufficiently authentic despite the arduous efforts by dedicated and gifted Muslim researchers to separate the chaff from the grain. Though it is true that several Quranic texts are inexplicable or will remain vague

unless read in the light of reported sayings or doings of the Prophet ﷺ there is no justification for bracketing the Quran and the Hadees as equally authentic or binding. Respect for the latter does not mean unquestioning acceptance.

Keeping the above four considerations in mind should help us to realize that the real meaning of fidelity to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is not the literal imitation of his conduct but the honest and intelligent endeavor to translate the basic values of the Quran and hence of the Prophet ﷺ into practice in an ever changing human situation.

The Theory of Conceptual Evolution:

The need of the hour for Muslims is to pay sufficient heed to what may be called the phenomenon of 'conceptual evolution' - the growth of ideas and ideals as a part of the general spiritual, moral, and intellectual growth in the atmosphere of free and honest search for truth. Muslims do not apply the idea of growth to the ideas and ideals of Islam. The overwhelming majority of Muslims frown at the prospect of conceptual pluralism within the tradition, apart from the already accepted four schools of jurisprudence among the Sunnis and Jaafriya School among the Shia Muslims. Even the Shiite version of Islam, despite its long history of thousand years or more is permitted with a grudge rather than graceful acceptance due to old and deeply entrenched political and cultural factors. However, the march of the democratic ethos in the modern technological age irresistibly demands a mature and joyful acceptance of the inevitability of plural interpretations of all religious faiths, including Islam.

Muslims will have to learn to overcome their inner feeling of insecurity and the fear of disintegration of the Islamic tradition at the prospect of conceptual growth. Muslims must become willing upholders of the idea of tolerance of dissent and freedom of conscience, and boldly repudiate the traditional concept of apostasy (*irtedaad*) which (according to the great jurists) invites the death penalty. Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders must also get together to review and redefine the essential function and jurisdiction of religion (including their own) in a multi-religious world society fast turning into one global city. Thus alone will authentic faith become possible and Islamic ideals come really alive in the modern age.

The Quran and Prophet Muhammad ﷺ are the pivot of Islamic piety. But this should not lead to spiritual or cultural insularity in the mistaken belief that other traditions, both religious and secular, have nothing to offer Muslims. In fact, many Islamic values and ideals which born Muslims assimilate from their milieu and naturally take as exclusively Islamic are, in fact, common to all religions. The same misunderstanding prevails in other religious quarters.

Each religion is an organic blend of a metaphysical view regarding the origin and destiny of man in the universe and a pattern of holistic response to the mystery of existence. This holistic response enables the believer to face the trials and tribulations of life with fortitude and courage. Every religion succeeds pretty well in this regard, but none succeeds in penetrating into the inscrutable mystery of Being which continues to escape the metaphysical views or conceptual schemes different religions project to explain the origin and destiny of the universe.

These different world perspectives or conceptual pictures can be accepted and mentally enjoyed but not proved or disproved like scientific or logical truth claims. The different perspectives or conceptual pictures may be said to be different 'languages of the spirit' just as there are different natural languages all serving the same purpose. Every individual picks up the language of the spirit, along with the natural language spoken in his milieu. He must speak his own language of the spirit correctly to the best of his ability.

An agnostic or atheist who cannot find God or a spiritual basis of the universe even after honest and patient reflection also opts for a particular language of the spirit (though he may not realise this) and also for a particular value system. His honest existential response to the mystery of existence must also be respected, even though the religious believer may passionately wish the atheist's inner convictions had been different or that they may now change. In no case should human freedom and the dignity of the individual be diminished. And, finally, the authentic commitment to our own faith should not stop us from gladly picking up the pearls of the spirit embedded in other religious and cultural streams of the human family.

Religion and Human Life:

Religion, in some sense or other, has always been an integral part of the human story from the very beginning and this will remain so till the story ends whenever and whatever the end might be. What is new and peculiar to the modern age, however, is that different religions have become much better acquainted with each other's beliefs and values than ever before (though much more remains to be done in this regard). Several excellent studies now exist that describe, with accuracy and sympathy, the basic beliefs and values of different religions, without taking sides or trying to prove the exclusive truth of any particular creed or sect. These studies are not polemical but reconciliatory or 'eirenic'. The works of Huston Smith are, to my mind, an outstanding example of this approach to the study of world religions. These studies make it pretty evident that all religions project a basic metaphysical view of humankind as if it was the final truth about the ultimate Reality. The view includes a basic value system which in the course of time blossoms into a set of social customs, laws and a penal code. ⁴

Different societies over the course of time gradually arrive at diverse world views, basic values, social customs, art forms, spoken and written languages, methods of production, distribution, trade, social gradation and power structures to maintain stability and defend the society against external aggression. Though societies greatly differ in the above matters, all have a common core of faith – that the limitless variety in nature, the cycles of night and day and of the seasons, the mystery of life, birth and death are not accidental happenings but all controlled by one supreme Creator or Power that is, however, beyond human 'conceptualization'. The symbol of light and the practice of deep silence, meditation and prayer (directly to the Supreme Being or with the help of some sacred medium) are universal core features of all developed religions. Theologies and concrete moral and legal codes gradually grow around this spiritual core with the passage of time.

Religions differ only in how they 'conceptualize' the nature and workings of the Supreme Power, the identity of the charismatic founders of the tradition concerned, sacred sites and incidents of their life-story, the sacramental rites and the sacred symbols of the tradition. Considerable as these differences can be, they do not cancel the essential similarity of

a common core belief—every finite existent or event is dependent and fleeting but there is only one eternal and Supreme Self-Existent Being that is the Source of all that exists or happens.⁵

One may say that different organized religions are different cultural fruits that have evolved in social space-time on the stem of one basic and perennial idea or proto-faith—the world is not a chaos but a cosmos controlled by a Supreme Power (by whatever name He may be called) and that humankind's highest good and felicity lies in total submission or surrender to the Supreme Being, beyond our understanding. This common proto-faith underlies all the different organized religious traditions. Every child acquires it along with the rest of the beliefs and cultural symbols of the in-group to express and articulate his or her 'sense of the sacred', just as one acquires the 'ordinary' language, gestures, morals, social attitudes, musical and artistic sensibility, dress code of the group concerned.

To my mind, these differences do not contradict the core faith in one Supreme Being or diminish the status and dignity of individuals professing different faiths so long as the individual is truthful in thought, word and deed, in terms of one's tradition, provided the tradition does not violate a few universally accepted 'categorical imperatives' concerning cannibalism, murder, rape, fraud, hypocrisy, stealing, falsehood and the like. Several Quranic texts support this line of spiritual pluralism.⁶

It is also a matter of common experience that the simple goodness of the heart, truthfulness, honesty and compassion are found in individuals irrespective of what religion they may profess. The mere profession of any theological creed (be it Islam or otherwise) makes no difference to the inner life and spiritual state of the individual unless he actually develops integrity of character and a 'good heart'. Some are born with a 'good heart' just as some are born with lovely eyes or a good memory or some gift such as musical or poetical sensibility, or the capacity of sharp analytical reasoning. In general, spiritual development or excellence takes place when the impact of some truly pious or saintly person 'awakens' an ordinary human being (troubled by perplexity and groping in the dark) and the person finds an 'inner peace and wellness' welling from his depths, and making him an integrated and humane person at peace with the entire world. He passes through a sort of 'boundary experience' in the language of the profound German thinker of the 20th century, Karl

Jaspers, and this helps trigger the birth of an 'authentic human being'.⁷

What enables the mentor to 'awaken' a person from the 'slumber of the spirit'—a pervasive condition of self-alienation, perplexity and negativity—and brings him to the state of abiding peace and spiritual integration is, in the final analysis, the mentor's own elevated spiritual level rather than his intellectual prowess or professed religious or theological creed. This inner transformation of the spirit requires no declaration of joining any religious body and it also raises no expectations of receiving special treatment from God, guru or life in general. The 'awakened soul' tries to understand one's duties and to discharge them without any fear of punishment or expectation of reward. He may, or he may not like to accept the mentor's own professed world view or religious affiliation, if any.⁸

In the normal course of spiritual rebirth the 'awakened soul' accepts the moral or ethical code as defined by the tradition of his milieu. However, it may and usually does happen that some elements in the tradition create some inner dissonance and his inner being no longer echoes back an authentic approval of such elements. Obedience to such elements in the (venerated) moral heritage creates an existential conflict between a total commitment to the tradition and one's autonomous authentic conscience. In such a situation the spiritual learner may be tempted to take to 'apologetical' or defensive reasoning' in regard to those elements. However, case histories show that the really 'awakened souls' do not fall into this trap or the trap of reactive nihilism. They re-integrate their inner being in other ways, say, (a) honest admission of a spiritual antinomy but willing deference to the 'collective wisdom' of the mother tradition or of the Ultimate Authority (whatever this be) and they learn to live in inner peace with this existential perplexity; (b) genuine commitment to the tradition as a whole minus the objectionable elements concerned; (c) affirming complete spiritual autonomy combined with stress on 'good will', as such, without any concern for creed, dogma or 'transcendental' matters at all.

To my mind, all the above responses are valid, though none can be justified as the only valid or true response. Every individual should find his or her own existential truth as the gateway to the 'peace that passeth understanding'. What really counts is truthfulness rather than attainment of 'the' truth which lies with the Creator alone. Humans can only

strive to arrive but they never fully arrive. However, we can arrive into the haven of humility and we can respect all who seek the truth and we can travel together in mutual companionship on the long and unending road to God's truth. Indeed, this respect should be extended even to those who, for whatever reason, have grown totally alienated from God but do care for the good in general. This is the modern concept of tolerance at its best.⁹

There are some verses of the Quran, (3: 28, 118; 5: 51, quoted in Note 6 of Chapter 1, *Perennial Islam*) among others that exhort the Muslim believer not to trust and befriend the 'rejectors' or the enemies of God and the Prophet ﷺ, and to kill them 'wherever they are found'. Some critics of Islam have concluded, after coming across such verses, that the God of Islam and Judaism is the god of wrath and hatred, while the God of Christians is the god of love and compassion. Such a hasty inference is a clear over-simplification of complex matters.

The Quran is not a systematic book but an extended homily and its texts must be understood in the proper situational context rather than as general statements. The fact is that the general message and underlying 'thrust' of the Quran is that of human brotherhood and tolerance of plurality. The Quran contains repeated reminders to humankind not to quarrel with others since only God knows the whole truth and that He will inform and judge all creation on the Day of Judgment. The few Quranic texts that, avowedly, prohibit Muslim believers from befriend-ing or trusting the disbelievers were, manifestly, war-time regulations meant to apply to the Prophet's ﷺ contemporary Arab opponents who were desperately planning to kill the Prophet ﷺ and destroy the nascent movement.¹⁰

Likewise, the Quranic texts that describe the sufferings and tortures of hell and the pleasures and rewards are meant to motivate simple and unlettered folk whose limited understanding could hardly go beyond the physical level of reward and punishment. For others the Quran speaks in a different idiom—the highest reward for the faithful being the spiritual vision of the Creator, and their worst suffering the fear of losing nearness to or the pleasure of God. Indeed, the Sufi interpretation of the Quranic vision and piety is a remarkable contribution to the collective wisdom of the human family, along with the wisdom of ancient China, India and Greece.¹¹

What is Perennial Islam?

Every religious tradition does have some theological beliefs or ‘dogmas’ that cannot be proved rationally but are essential ingredients of faith. The Islamic dogma is that the Quran is the ‘Word of God’ just as the official Christian dogma is that Jesus is the ‘Son of God’. However, the moment one tries to determine the exact meaning of any dogma (including the Islamic dogma) all efforts break down. Let me explain how and why this happens.

The expanded Islamic belief is that (a) God communicated the Divine Word (fully formed Arabic sentences or verses to the angel Gabriel who revealed them to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as and when God willed; (b) God empowered the Prophet ﷺ to remember exactly the revealed text; (c) the Prophet ﷺ dictated the text to some reliable scribe/scribes who wrote down what they heard from the Prophet ﷺ on any available surface such as palm leaves, vellum, pieces of bark or of cloth; (d) these separate transcriptions were later collected and arranged under 114 ‘Surahs’ or chapters in the order that is still extant; (e) no portion of the text has been lost, corrupted or changed after the original revelation. This expanded belief is silent on the question whether the order of the chapters and the sequence of the verses within each chapter were also revealed to the Prophet ﷺ or whether he merely authorized it at his discretion. It is also a matter of dispute between the different Islamic sects or schools of thought as to when the very first full collection of all the 114 surahs came into physical existence, but it definitely existed in the time of the third Caliph, Usmaan, some 20 years after the passing away of the Prophet ﷺ.^{11a}

A close scrutiny of the five articles of the above Islamic belief about the Quran shows a radical difference between the first article and the remaining four. The first article refers to extra-human subjects or beings and their acts of which humans have no ordinary knowledge or clear ideas at all. The rest of the four articles, however, we can understand just as we understand ordinary statements concerning persons or things. This is the crucial difference between believing a dogma and believing an ordinary truth claim. A dogma, not only cannot be proved, it cannot be clearly understood or explained as we can understand and explain ordinary beliefs about ordinary matters. This crucial difference between belief and dogma is due to the fact that the words we use in ordinary

perceptual or conceptual discourse are all backed by experience, actual or possible, but when we use the same set of words in talk about God, angels, the devil, heaven or hell, the words which have a clear meaning, to begin with, become opaque and the source of insoluble perplexity. We, then, begin to grope and stumble in 'connotative darkness'. This is why the language of theology is condemned to be analogical or metaphorical and all perceptive theologians and religious thinkers accept this rider on all theological truth-claims.¹²

The above semantic difference between a dogma and an ordinary belief, thus, clearly implies that religious disputes involving or touching upon any religious dogma (no matter what the religion) are absolutely futile and pointless. We can argue, for instance, that Jesus was the fount of compassion and altruistic love, but we just can not prove that he was the 'Son of God'. Likewise, we can argue that the power and beauty of the Arabic Quran remains unmatched to date, but we just can not prove that the Quran is the 'Word of God'. Exactly identical remarks hold good of the dogmas of all other religious traditions. If this be accepted, the basic concept of 'argumentative religious conversion' or peaceful rational persuasion of the entire world to the one and only true religion/creed turns into a virtual illusion born out of ignorance of semantics and the ground realities of the human situation. What, then, should the ardent Christian or Muslim believer (burning with the duty to 'save' human-kind) do to be fully convinced that one is a 'true' believer fully dedicated to serving God.¹³

In all humility I say let such souls give up arguing and proving that Muhammad ﷺ is the last messenger of God or that the Quran is 'the Word of God', and take to implementing, in his/her own life, the basic spiritual and moral values of the Quran, as exemplified in the sublime life and character of the historical Muhammad ﷺ. Likewise, let Christian believers not stress converting others to the Church's Ontology of Christ, but to practice the love and compassion the historical Jesus preached and practiced in his life. It seems the Church has almost come to this position thanks to their most enlightened and creative religious leaders who are well exposed to the complexities of the human situation in the modern world. The same remarks apply to Buddhism, Hinduism and other religious traditions. The basic message of Buddha, not Buddhist ontology,

the basic message of the Gita, not Vedic cosmology or Hindutva, the basic message of Naanak, not Sikh orthodoxy, is what humanity needs. And when one reaches to the heart of all these messages one finds they are essentially the same expressed in different languages and in different human scenarios.

What, then, lies behind all the hatred and strife in the name of religion? It is the human ego and the will to power which makes us cling to the illusion that one's own language, conceptual imagery, sacramental rites are the only and exclusive paths to truth and salvation. In the final analysis, the paths are many but the goal is the same. One should follow the path whose call stirs one to the depths of his or her being, no matter what name or label it carries. What is supremely important is that one actively strives to reach the shore rather than just drift at the mercy of the waves. It is here that one realizes the importance of remaining attached to one's cultural roots whatever they might be. Hindu spirituality, at its best (as exemplified in the Gita, and in the life and doings of the saints and sages of modern Hinduism, such as Ramakrishna (d. 1886 CE), Tagore (d. 1941 CE), Maharishi Raman (d. 1990 CE), Gandhiji (d. 1948 CE), Bhagwan Daas (d. 1958 CE), Pandit Sundaralal (d. 1980 CE), Yogananda (d. 1952 CE), Mahesh Yogi (d. 2008 CE) and many others) always welcomed spiritual pluralism.¹⁴

The great Sufi saints and poets of the Islamic world, Jalaaluddin Rumi (d. 1273 CE), Fareed-uddeen Attaar (d. 1230 CE), Shaikh Saadi (d. 1292 CE), Nizamuddeen Auliya (d. 1325 CE), Baba Fareed Chishti (d. 1266 CE), Mian Meer (d. 1635 CE), Kabeer (d. 1518 CE), Sarmad (d. 1659 CE) and many others have done the same. And this path of spiritual pluralism, be it noted, is not any departure from, but the very implementation, of the spiritual and moral values of the Quran, though Islamic orthodoxy may have pursued the belief in exclusive salvation for Muslims. It seems, the belief in exclusive salvation is an easy short-cut to spiritual conceit or self-importance.¹⁵

Modern science and technology have turned the wide world into an Olympic village having inter-com facilities in every camp. The issue today is not which is the biggest and the best camp, but who performs best. Religious polemics is useless and pointless when it comes to matters of faith. The Christian creed of the Divinity of Jesus, the Islamic creed

of the Divinity of the Quran, the Hindu creed of the Divinity of the Atma, and the special *anthro-theistic* status of Rama and Krishna, are all matters of faith, not demonstrable truths. The human family today, therefore, must heed the life giving and liberating message of the inter-faith movement whose call comes simultaneously from both secular and spiritual platforms in the western world. I have no doubt that the goal of this remarkable movement is genuine peaceful co-existence of all faiths and that it has no secret agenda. Long live the spirit of inter-faith which is, precisely, the message of perennial Islam, according to my understanding of the Quran.¹⁶

The quintessence of Islam is belief or faith in one Supreme Creator of all that exists and the guidance provided by a long line of Divinely inspired messengers who appeared in history at all times and places, especially the guidance contained in the Quran which was 'revealed' to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ of Arabia, who is the 'seal of the prophets' and through whom the Creator completed the process of Divine guidance (*wahee*) as embodied in the corpus of the Arabic Quran. As already explained the Quran need not and should not be viewed as a systematic book or document. The Quranic corpus consists of approx. 6,700 linguistic units of very varying lengths, and the overwhelmingly major portion of these linguistic expressions or sentences glorify the Creator, affirm what is good and what is evil (in very general terms), and exhort, encourage, console, warn and give inner strength and stability to humankind to live the good life under the shadow of the inscrutable purpose and wisdom of Divine creation. Only a very small portion of the Quranic contents are prescriptive or mandatory in the concrete sense of being specific rules of conduct or categorical commands. All Muslims must, therefore, defer to such injunctions or imperatives in a manner that combines loyalty to basic values with freedom to modify instrumental rules in an ever changing human situation.¹⁷

It is, indeed, a pity and a matter of the utmost and urgent concern that Muslim society all over the world still remains perplexed and bewildered by the diverse challenges of the modern age. The deadlock and stagnation of Muslim society can not be overcome by Islamic apologetics, or the strategy of making ad hoc adjustments to situational demands, or the relatively more integrated schemes of reforming shariah radiating

from the sub-continent of erstwhile India, Egypt, Arabia or Iran. The scheme of the '*Islamization of Knowledge*' is a well intentioned but failed attempt to correct the one-sided 'scientism' and conceit of some Western thinkers.¹⁸

The message of Messianic hope that sustains some quarters of the Muslim community, and the waging of the 'holy war' (*jehaad*) by some other quarters against the 'Godless West' are even less calculated to overcome the spiritual predicament and stagnation of the Muslim world. The basic remedy lies in the democratic acceptance of the idea of conceptual growth in the tradition of perennial Islam. This should include free enquiry, spiritual pluralism, modern representative democracy and tolerance in its core thought and value system. In other words, the traditional ethos of mechanical and absolute conformity to 'the Book and the Example' must develop into the ethos of 'creative fidelity' to the 'Word of God' and the character of His messenger. Will this happen and when? Well, I hope and trust this century will prove to be the turning point in the history of the human family.

The Iranian Muslims, for all their great dynamism and courage are still at the threshold of the idea of the principled separation of religion from politics, while the Arab world is mired in great internal problems and the Palestine issue. Turkey which was the first secular Muslim state is facing strong winds of reversal as a consequence of the earlier authoritarian zeal of the great founder of modern Turkey. Indian Muslims are still reeling under the blow of shattered dreams due to the 'mirage' of Pakistan. The people of Pakistan too are paying a heavy price for what (in great humility) I might well call 'the sad abortion of liberal secularism' in the India of 1947.¹⁹

In view of the tremendous facilities of higher education and opportunities of inter-faith dialogue, Western European and American Muslims, to my mind, are perhaps best poised to initiate and promote fresh thinking on the theme of perennial Islam.