# 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.

The term, 'modernity', however, must not be equated with 'Westernism'. In fact, the confusion of modernity with imitative 'Westernism' has led to the coining of the expression, 'post-modernism' and the several critiques of western modernism. I, therefore, chose for the present work the title 'call of modernity' in place of 'challenge of modernity'. The eastern and southern segment of humanity should learn from the fallacies and follies of the west, but not fail to acknowledge and appreciate the considerable elements of value in western culture.

To date only a small portion, namely the developed world has imbibed modernity, as defined above. The developing world and the undeveloped world are at various stages on the path to modernization. The process, to my mind, is irreversible, though we are free to retain or not to retain a due sense of proportion in our responses to the challenges of life. The advocates of extreme views, whether of the left or the right variety, may win a few battles here or there, but the war of minds and attitudes will be won by those who think and act freely, clearly, courageously and consistently and stand committed to spirit-centered humanism and inter-faith spirituality.

Inter-faith spirituality is another basic component of modernity in the sphere of religion or religious faith. The pre-modern view was that only one religion or 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 modernity in the religious sphere makes the substance of religious faith as well as the choice of symbols and rituals optional rather than mandatory for attaining success and salvation.

Modernity implies that authenticity of faith and righteous conduct, rather than any particular creed or conceptual formulation is what matters for attaining salvation. The inner transition of the individual from mandatory religious monism to permissive religious pluralism and even to neutral secular humanism (for some exceptionally 'tough minded souls' as termed by the American sage and thinker, William James) is the crucial mark of modernity. Modernity, by itself, does not imply accepting or rejecting Theism or Atheism.

The Islamic paradigm, which I authentically accept and the concepts and values of modernity do not clash, provided we interpret the Quranic texts in the light of modern semantic analysis. This approach lays stress on the functions rather than the literal grammatical meaning of any verbal communication system. I have argued and illustrated this crucial point in considerable detail while giving extensive quotations from Quranic texts in my work, Living the Quran in Our Times. Evidently, Islamic orthodoxy followed a different interpretation of Quranic texts and projected a different paradigm of Islam. However, several great Muslim thinkers, sages, mystics and poets in the classical creative period of Muslin history, explicitly or implicitly, stated views, same or similar to my own authentic Islamic paradigm.

Ibn Sina, Ibn Zakarriya Razi, al-Beruni, Ibn Rushd, Jalal uddin Rumi, Ibn Khaldun and Sadruddin Shirazi (Mulla Sadr) are a few illustrious creative minds who had the clarity and courage to dissent from the dominant climate of ideas in medieval times. The dominant orthodox sections in medieval times sidelined these creative spirits. Many of them were even persecuted by those in power. Thanks to modern Western scholarship, at its best, those dubbed as heretics by a large number of Muslims in medieval times are being admired and venerated today as great intellectuals, sages, scientists and spiritual leaders cutting across different religious traditions.

Muslims today should distinguish the timeless primary verities and intrinsic values of Islam: faith in one supreme Creator, Day of Final Judgment, ultimate supremacy of good over evil, the establishment of universal justice, truthfulness, compassion, self-knowledge, respect for life, rational altruism, the exemplary and sublime character of the Holy prophet, and so on-- from the secondary instrumental rules every religion prescribes for realizing the primary values. Making this distinction and applying it consistently to different problems and issues, as when they arise, is far more important for both success and salvation than unreflective and unconditional adherence to instrumental rules of conduct prescribed in the past when conditions were different and our knowledge of the 'facts of life' was much less than now.

I have thoroughly analyzed and discussed these complex issues in the long introductory chapter of my work, Quest for Islam, revised edition, 2010, and also in Living the Quran in Our Times. For the convenience of readers of my other essays on related themes in the volumes, The Call of Modernity and Islam, and Essays on Cultural Pluralism, this chapter has been reproduced, in full, as an appendix to The Call of Modernity.

My paper, What is Modernity? was intensively discussed by the distinguished participants at the seminar on Modernity at Shimla and was much applauded. If I were to re-write it now my language, perhaps, would be much simpler and free from academic jargon found in some places in the original paper. But the general thrust would have been the same. I have, therefore, not attempted to polish it any further.