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Challenges for Muslims in the 21st Century

The title for this paper might suggest that it is concerned with external factors that affect the Muslim community world-wide. Certainly it could address issues such as, say, U.S. and British policy towards "recalcitrant" Islamic countries. Or there could be a discussion of the negative image that the media often portrays about Muslims. But, since I have spent a considerable amount of time with Muslims, many of whom are highly intelligent Islamists, I would like to discuss the internal dilemmas as I understand them.

Ideas are debated endlessly in any group of dedicated Islamists and there are themes I hear repeatedly. I will now present three scenarios that I think reflect on the debates going on within Islam. Two of them involve dialogue with Muslims. One involves an unfortunate scene, but I think it is a scene that exemplifies a particular problem that needs to be addressed.

Scenario I. I was at a restaurant table in Washington, D.C., with an Iraqi alim, an Iraqi engineer who was not a trained scholar but who was often asked to speak at Islamic events, and a Western-educated Khoja who was working on his Ph.D. in Islamic studies at McGill.

I was the only woman at our restaurant table, and for some reason the issue of women and work came up. The engineer, both a devout Muslim and a feminist, argued that Muslim women are kept back from full participation in all aspects of social life. But he wanted the issue settled on the basis of scripture, not just his own opinion. The alim said that the only thing a Muslim woman could not do was sit as a judge.

The Khoja said little but it was obvious that he had settled this issue for himself and that it simply did not really trouble him. Women

should be educated and, within the framework of Khoja society, women could have the freedom to be employed. Of course, for a Khoja this meant having a respectable professional job. All three of these men were Shi'ite Muslims, yet, each of them approached the issue of women's rights from a completely different perspective.

Scenario 2. I was sitting with a group of Iraqi exiles. Again, these were Shi'ites, people who would not dare to return to their homeland. They were all ardent Islamists but all believed in having permeable boundaries so that they could establish relations with other groups. They had all been followers of the Imam Baqir As-Sadr, the prominent scholar who was killed in 1980 by Saddam. In spite of their years in the U.S. and their success as engineers, they all expressed a desire to go back to Iraq when Saddam was overthrown to set up a new government - an Islamic government.

Scenario 3. About a year and a half ago I attended a wedding of an Afghan man and an Egyptian woman. For both it was a second marriage, and they simply wanted to have a party to which they could invite their many friends and colleagues. Aside from university people, they also invited everyone from their small mosque in Bloomington, Indiana. When I entered the building, I was surprised to be ushered into a room for the women. When it came time for the food to be served, the groom told me that room was only for women who believed they should be segregated from men but that I and the other Western women certainly did not have to be there. About that time, some musicians started playing music in the men's quarters. I stayed to listen and an Iranian man, a shop keeper who is well known in town and who loves M.E. music and dance, came to me to persuade me to dance along with his own daughters. Several of us began to do the traditional Iranian style folk dance and within a moment, an enraged man came in, insisted that the music stop and that the women return to the room which had been designated for them.

I would like to add that the president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) had, in welcoming guests, made a little speech saying that there would be music at the wedding and that this

was halal!

The first case involves at least three problems that intrigue me. Obviously, the first is the role of women in society. This, of course, is an issue that is hashed out all over the world and debated endlessly. But in Islamic circles this issue is very central to the whole idea of Muslim society because women's dress and appearance in public is the most visible marker of a society's or a group's view of their religious stance. Islamic reformers are often in disagreement about women's rights, but often they are at odds with the universal charter of human rights, stating that Islam has its own human rights system which is divinely ordained. The problem is that, first, it stresses the differences between the Muslim world and the West, thus placing additional strain on these relations. Second, from an internal point of view restricting women's education and role in society has been shown to hamper the development of society at large. Islamists who have fostered education and women's activities in the larger society, though, face severe criticism from many ulama and groups that prefer to see women restricted, thus causing another division within Islamic society - a division that has proven to be very destructive to any kind of harmony.

Another issue has to do with the role of the ulama in society. The ulama have traditionally been the people with a monopoly on religious learning. Many have spent years studying in the madrasas of the Middle East. They not only read but also memorized the legal opinions of scholars, the hadith, etc. They generally had no other profession but that of religious scholars.

The third issue we see here is what role society has in shaping ideas about the application of Islamic law.

Let us look at the table in Washington, D.C. again. The alim was a full-time man of the cloth. He gave sermons, led the Shi'ite rituals, counseled people and did the things that an alim does. The Iraqi engineer at the table was also regularly called upon to give sermons, but his education was not that of the madrasa. While certainly he had spent his youth learning the Quran and would have

had some education in traditional sciences, he was mostly influenced by contemporary scholars such as Baqir as-Sadr and Seyyed Hussayn Fadlallah. The Khoja was working on a Ph.D. studying about Islam - not really studying Islam. They are all living in North America.

Somewhat as a consequence of their different backgrounds, each approached the problem at hand - women's work - in a different manner. I say "somewhat" because I don't think that one's background automatically predetermines how you are going to view an issue. But in this case, there were three different approaches.

The alim lives the life of an itinerant preacher. I am in touch with him regularly. He is forever giving lectures in different cities in the U.S. and abroad. His was an arranged marriage to the daughter of a prestigious alim from Iran. She wears the abaya and attends an Islamic college in London where her father is one of the directors. She will be involved in educating other women and children. This alim has, in his mind, interpreted the scripture regarding women as liberally as he can. His wife is educated and she is not always in the home, but she is limited in where she can be and what she is doing with her time outside the home.

The engineer at the table is a friend of the alim's. His wife is getting an advanced degree in microbiology. She wears a modified hijab, and her husband even questions if this is necessary. But, he is not basing his opinion just on societal norms. He refers to scripture himself and to Seyyed Fadlallah in Lebanon, who has very liberal views on women.

The Khoja probably grapples with the matter least of all. The Khojas - even Twelver Shi'ite ones - have a closed system, though one with permeable boundaries. They also make taqlid - refer to the opinions of a grand ayatollah, one who has been selected by their leader - but are also keenly aware of the need to adjust to the societal norms of the places where they live. Scripture and the role of the ulama are only two ingredients in the decision-making process on a given topic. The demands and circumstances in the society are

also highly relevant.

I could easily have changed the actors at the table and had a very different sort of conversation. I could have added young men who would ardently listen to any alim and abide by his word if they were convinced that he was truly learned and had the qualifications to tell them what to do and think. But the case I am giving here shows that there are at least some younger people - devout Islamists - who are questioning the role of the ulama in determining how they should live and practice the laws of Islam. There is no consensus - at least among the Islamists I know - as to whether the power traditionally in the hands of the ulama should continue or whether the lay person can decide matters regarding the law himself.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the ulama losing some of this prestige? Of course, many would say that the ulama are the very people who have held back Islamic society. They are often blamed for the lack of progress in the Ottoman Empire and in Qajar Persia. Using these examples, it is easy to have a totally negative view of their role in society. On the other hand, they are the only people who can give their full attention to the entire body of Islamic learning. They are the ones who preserve the traditions and who can provide a somewhat unified force in the Islamic world. While they often - though not always - resist the winds of change - they also can be the very people who keep their feet firmly planted on the ground and refuse to let the winds of change alter the fundamentals of the Faith. I have seen some Protestant churches in America become very liberal. While they broaden the range of people who are welcome in the church, they often lose the grounding that they once had. They can no longer believe that scripture and their ministers present the unalterable word of God. Therefore, what Muslims intend to do about their ulama is something that I consider very fundamental to the future of Islam.

We will now turn to the next discussion: the group of Iraqis debating the future government of Iraq. The issue here is quite obvious: what to do about the government. Should it be Islamic and, if so, what form should it take? If not, then what other type of

government would be desirable for Muslims? Iran installed a form of an Islamic regime - one based on Shi'ite concepts - and the world has watched eagerly or nervously since then to see where else Islamic regimes would be installed.

What are the potential advantages and disadvantages to such a system of government? An Islamic government should be able to set a moral tone for the society. At its best it should be a force against the materialism that has so consumed the West. It should be able to use its legitimacy as a means of fighting drug and alcohol addiction, prostitution, and a casual sexual atmosphere.

What is the downside? Well, it was interesting to listen to Prime Minister Khatami speak last fall about the challenges Iran faces. After saying that Iran moved towards a more just society after the revolution, he said it now faced problems from elements inside the society that were resistant to reforms. He said, in effect, that Iran faces issues of individual human rights and needs to find ways to open up to the rest of the world. Certainly, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been problematic in terms of human rights issues. Saudi Arabia's take on Islam is very narrow indeed, and other Muslims who have divergent views of Islam are severely persecuted. And, of course, there is no room for other religious groups. I need not even mention their severe forms of punishment, which I simply see as an aberration, one that I find is repulsive to most Muslims. So, I will not discuss that here.

Since many Muslims look to Iran as a possible model of an Islamic government, I think it is a more important case to examine. While it is becoming increasingly open to divergent views, minority groups continue to suffer, the most notable example being members of the Baha'i Faith. The Baha'is are to Iran what the Ahmadis are to Pakistan.

Yet, the members of these religious communities are human beings, and, as such, have human rights. I know Iranians - even ulama and family of ulama - who feel very uncomfortable about the Baha'i situation and know that it is a difficult one to come to terms with.

So, the challenge for Muslims here is how to set up a government based on Islam that is also inclusive and guarantees individual human rights for all. The age of the dhimmi' status is over. The world won't accept that idea anymore. Mr. Khatemi knows this, obviously. He is now trying to develop a government and a society that is both Islamic and open. This is a challenge.

The case for the Iraqi Shi'ites is a particularly difficult one because they know they would have to share power with the Sunnis, whom the Shi'ites outnumber but not by that much. The question arises, therefore, on what basis they would form an Islamic regime? Ayatollah Khomeini elaborated on the Shi'ite concept of *wilayat al-faqih* to establish his government in Iran, but this would not be acceptable to the Sunni. So, here we see another challenge: that of the Shi'i/Sunni divide. Can it be overcome without the Shi'a feeling that they are giving up their beliefs and possibly their rituals in the process of being accommodating?

The final scenario is related to the other issues I have been referring to, but I would like to use this incident to address head-on another challenge I see facing Muslims in these times. The case I gave was of a wedding held in "Everytown" USA. We have a growing Islamic population in the West. Mosques are springing up all over the United States and Canada and are increasing in continental Europe and Great Britain. Each of these places has a unique Islamic history. However, the one thing they share in common is a multiplicity of peoples with different ethnicities, nationalities, and viewpoints about how Islam should be practiced in their new homelands. Muslims are becoming a permanent group of residents in all of these countries. It is not like the old days -30 years ago - when Muslims went to study or to work for a while with the plan to go back home. They now are establishing roots in the West.

There are actually two challenges posed by this scenario, then. The first one deals with relationship among Muslims themselves. The disagreement at the wedding was among Muslims. Issues of sexual segregation in mosques and elsewhere strongly

divide various communities. (Within one ethnic/national group one finds these divisions. Between groups there are many other obstacles to unity.) Resentment towards those who inflict their views on others festers in even a small community like this one. The question of music and dance at weddings is another hot topic.

The other issue raised by this scenario has to do with integration in the new community itself. In the United States, people who plan to stay in the country are expected to become United States citizens. Certainly their children will be considered as such. To become a U.S. citizen one has to take an oath of loyalty to the U.S. constitution. But, of course, becoming American is a bit more than that. There are shared values shaped by a Judeo-Christian heritage, as well as secular values. When Islamic and American values (or French or German or English values for that matter) clash openly, as they did at this wedding, the impression it leaves on the non-Muslim is extremely negative and fosters the all-too-easily aroused anti-Islamic sentiment that can be found in the West.

The other side of the coin, however, is how to maintain an Islamic identity with all that entails. How far can this accommodation go without it jeopardizing the basis of one's life?

Again, these are all issues that are being hotly debated. They generally have to do with the setting of boundaries. How open or closed a system is Islam going to be? How inclusive or exclusive will it be? How will scripture be interpreted and who will do the interpreting? Will scripture be the final word or will other factors such as the society's traditions or ideas generated in other parts of the world play a role in shaping decisions? Can an Islamic government guarantee the human rights of its citizens according to the standard of the United Nations charter or is this charter irreconcilable to Islam? Actually, in fairness, a broader question might be whether a government can actually work if based on any ideology, since the real world does not fit easily to the requirements of an ideology. I think it is exciting that we are living in a time when at least some of these issues are being addressed openly in various parts of the world. It is often in non-Muslim societies, though, that the most fruitful

debates among Muslims occur. In the U.S., for example, there are numerous conferences where Muslims - and sometimes non-Muslims - gather to hash out ideas in a peaceful fashion.

Perhaps the biggest contribution that Muslim intellectuals in the West can play is to help foster an atmosphere where leaders of various groups and persuasions can come together to express their views and hear those of others. While this is perhaps not an easy scenario to envision, it seems that it is critical in many parts of the Muslim world, including Pakistan.