

## ***Comment***

# **Constructing the Civilizational Pillars of Islam**

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It is well known that Muslims believe in the five pillars of Islam i.e. (1) *Tawhid* (Unity of Allah), (2) Prayer, (3) Fasting, (4) *Hajj* (pilgrimage) and (5) *Zakat* (alms or tithe). There is complete unity among Muslims on these pillars of Islam though some sects add two more pillars in addition to these five. But five are accepted by all. It would be seen that all these pillars are theological and form part of what is called in *Shari'ah* '*ibadat*' (i.e. relating to acts of theological piety).

These pillars have inspired Muslims for centuries and they have practiced them regularly. They may have differed in details but never in principles behind them. They as '*ibadat*' have their own meaning and significance and spiritual content. However, there are other this worldly aspects to which religion does provide guidance for proper and meaningful life. These, as against '*ibadat*' or other worldly aspects, we can call civilizational aspects. Islam is not a religion of renunciation. It wants its followers to take this worldly life seriously and relate it to other worldly life. It is balance between the two. Even the *sufis* who, in some cases practiced sort of renunciation, were aware of this and hence most of them used to marry and raise family.

Thus we need pillars which can guide us for successful worldly life in the light of Qur'anic teachings and Prophet's *Sunna*. It would enable Muslims to connect more purposefully with this worldly life and its continuity in the other. Of course for centuries Muslims have related only to the five theological pillars indicated above. The life then was simpler and more localized. Today, in the globalised world, life is far more complex and worldly success is measured only in terms of growth of income. It is far more competitive and complex than before.

In such a situation it can be very useful, if we establish, like theological, five civilizational pillars dealing with this worldly life. I

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suggest they can be called five civilizational pillars of Islam corresponding to five theological pillars. The theological pillars dealing with '*ibadat*' have enriched spiritual life for centuries, these civilizational pillars would help enrich our civilizational life and make Islam a religion which could contribute immensely to modern human civilization.

The Islamic values are well known so it is not that we are going to do something entirely new. However, in view of contemporary world and breath taking developments it is going through, we want to seriously reflect on Qur'anic teachings and extract few values to enable Muslims to contribute richly to modern civilization.

Thanks to media controlled by powerful interests, Islam is being seen as terrorist menace to the world and Muslims as perpetrators of such barbaric acts. In view of highly complex situation and extremists on loose and attacks taking place everyday, the perception that Islam is a religion of violence gets repeatedly reinforced. The clever media does not report what western powers that be, have been doing. West is projected as peaceful, democratic and champion of freedom.

Islam, in contrast, emerges as denier of freedom, undemocratic, feudal and suppressor of human and particularly, women's rights. The average reader cannot be blamed if he/she equates Islam as such. Also, those ulama who condemn terrorist attacks or suicide bombing do not get highlighted and are cursorily mentioned. There is no serious debate about these issues in the media. The terrorist attacks, on the other hand, attract banner headlines as number of people are killed and maimed.

Muslims have not made any serious attempt to establish media of their own. One can name only *al-Jazeera* which also has controlling share of Qatar Government and is subject to political pressure. The Muslim world needs a powerful media which can become an authentic spokesperson for the Muslim world initiating various debates about real spirit of Islam. It should be both print as well as electronic.

Also, we need new breed of ulama who do not depend too much on traditional sources but, equipped with modern expert knowledge, exercise their own minds reflecting on teachings of Qur'an and very carefully sifted sources of *Sunna*. Various traditions (*ahadith*) and other sources like commentaries on Qur'an written by earlier generations have become main sources for understanding Islam.

We need new unencumbered approach to the Qur'an and authentic *Sunna*. The traditional ulama are in no way ready to work for fresh approach. Also, year after year, new ulama come out of traditional madrasas which rely upon all these traditional sources. We need madrasas which equip ulama with modern social sciences and develop skills for political understanding of socio-economic problems and

complex issues of globalised polity. Thus they will be able to free themselves from their traditional encumbered approach which keeps them in blind alley of tradition. The very spirit of Qur'an is thus missed.

Construction of these five civilizational pillars with detailed reasoning behind these constructions can go a long way in this direction. Islam cannot be liberated from traditional clutches without these modern skills which our ulama totally lack. When House of Wisdom established by Abbasids transferred Greek philosophical sources into Arabic and they became popular among Muslim intellectuals, not only philosophers like Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd and others integrated them with Islamic sources but ulama too enthusiastically participated in the process and developed, *Ilam al-Kalam* (dialectics) and debated several issues.

Rejection of knowledge, however, different from Islamic knowledge, does not help and is like burying ones head in sand when stand storm invades. Knowledge is light be it pure white or of rainbow colors. Coming out from ignorance, as Qur'an puts it, is emerging from darkness to light. The word '*ilm*', without any qualification, is, the key word in Qur'an. It was '*ilm*' which liberated Arabs from all that was dark; from darkness of evil as well as darkness of ignorance.

It is interesting to note, as Dr. Iqbal has very aptly observed, Qur'an adopts inductive as against Greek philosophy's deductive approach. Greek deductive approach leads only from known to known, not to unknown knowledge. Induction, on the other hand, is based on extensive observation of external nature and leads to new knowledge. The whole foundation of modern science, as France Beckon observed, is inductive approach. Today our extensive knowledge about the universe is based on astronomical observations.

The Muslim scientists of the Abbasid, and later ages, developed mathematics and astronomy to new heights and learnt from whatever sources they could learn from be it Indian or Greek or any other. It is knowledge unbounded which brings about great revolutions. Europe, as long as it was bound by Church traditions and encyclicals, remained in darkness and could not progress. But once it broke those chains and liberated itself new knowledge liberated it. Europe, as is well known, benefited from the Arabs whom, H.G.Wells, a noted historian, describes as foster fathers of modern knowledge.

We have to learn much from our history to develop all potential sources of our knowledge and liberate Islam and Muslims from all irrelevant controversies about traditions, and adopt fresh direct approach reflecting deeply on Qur'an and extracting new sources of knowledge through its divine pronouncement. Otherwise the traditions and needless

controversies will continue to drag us backward as it has been happening for few centuries now.

Now let us try to construct, in the light of Qur'an and direct reflections on its teachings, the five pillars of civilization. Let us, to begin with, understand what civilization is. Civilization is both material as well as spiritual product of social, cultural and economic interactions among human beings which are fundamentally creative. It can include every thing from intellectual, spiritual to material creations.

It takes centuries of endeavours for a civilization to come into existence. Each civilization may have its own unique character. It may be different from other but certainly not hostile to other. Civilization is nothing if not creative. Thus the civilization, which Islam gave birth to, has its own characteristics and has its own grandeur and glory. Islamic civilization's grandeur has often been reflected in its grand architecture and concepts of social values.

### **The first pillar: unity**

No civilization can achieve its glory without certain key values without which humanity cannot flourish. These values form pillars of a civilization and give it pulse of life. Islamic values have been enshrined in the Qur'an and are greatest gift to humanity. The first theological pillar, faith in the unity of God, can be transformed civilizationally as unity of humankind. Thus first civilizational pillar of Islam would be unity of entire humanity irrespective of beliefs, language, ethnic, or tribal origin or race.

This is clearly stated in the Qur'an. Thus, if we accept this as the first civilizational pillar of Islam, Islam can play a vital role in bringing universal unity and building beautiful bridges across religious tradition. This pillar also reflects unity and integrity of creation. Allah has created diversity (5:48) not for any discrimination but for testing whether we can live in peace and excel each other in good deeds. Thus the whole creative spirit of the Qur'an leads to unity of entire humanity (unity should not mean abolishing identities, identities are important for human beings for a sense of belonging). Hence the importance of this first civilizational pillar of Islam.

### **The second pillar: justice**

Now we come to the second civilizational pillar 'justice' called '*adl*' by Qur'an. '*Adl*' implies balance between extremes, a kind of middle path which leads to better harmony and co-existence. Qur'an considers justice as very fundamental to establish a good society with stability and peace. All acts of violence we witness in history as well as in modern and

contemporary society is due to unjust behaviour of the powerful individual or nations or coercion exercised by certain classes, groups or communities.

The Prophet of Islam, passionately loved justice even before he became messenger of Allah. He had formed, before his prophethood, an organization known in Islamic history as *Hilf al-Fudul* i.e. organization of the meritorious which was meant to ensure justice. This organization was brought into existence by the Prophet when a Yemeni merchant complained that his dues are not being paid by certain powerful individuals. The Prophet is reported to have said that ‘I would prefer justice over 100 red camels’ (which is considered as most precious variety of camels).

It is very unfortunate that over period of time when powerful dynastic empires came into existence justice went into oblivion and repression and coercion became the norm. Even today in the Islamic world justice goes by default and those who do not agree with the rulers or ruling classes face severe repression. During early period of Umayyad rule there were many companions of the Prophet like Abudhar Ghaffari, Said bin Musayyab and many others who refuse to submit to rulers if they were unjust or indulged in coercion. Qur’an strongly condemns *zulm* (injustice, coercion, unjust use of force) and these companions upheld the Qur’anic ideals.

However, when there were no more such individuals and companions and *zulm* became common at the hands of rulers, the Qur’anic ideal of justice in practice was lost forever. Now, in the modern world, when dynastic rule is on decline and human dignity and rights are order of the day, Muslims should re-establish the Qur’anic ideal of justice and make it second civilizational pillar of Islam. It will be a great contribution and will enrich Islamic civilization. Justice is a very comprehensive term it includes justice to poor and needy, gender justice, justice for religious, ethnic, racial and linguistic minorities and in early *khilfat* period there are shining examples of such justice.

### **The third pillar: peace**

The third pillar for an enlightened universal civilization is peace. Peace is no less fundamental to Islam than justice. In fact justice and peace are integral to each other. Some may debate whether peace follows justice or peace first and justice later. It may depend on concrete situation, but one thing remains certain justice and peace are integral to each other.

Even if at times peace is given priority, it cannot be stabilized without justice. However, it should also be borne in mind that Islam does not in any sense sloganise either justice or peace. It wants to create

concrete conditions so that justice may be realized and peace can be stabilized. Qur'an, first of all, ensures that all human beings are treated with equal dignity and should be accorded equal rights.

The relevant pronouncements of the Qur'an are in verses 17:70 and 49:13. These pronouncements were unthinkable in those days. Thus unless we transcend beyond tribal, racial and ethnic bonds to create a concept of universal human dignity, we cannot create peace and stability in this world. If this universal dignity is accepted and rights accorded to all, irrespective of any primordial identity, one cannot but have peace in the world. However, Muslims in history did not adhere to these ideal civilizational values of Islam and were often divided along these lines. That is the logic of power, not of civilization. If one examines the modern scene all the violence has been taking place because of lack of practice of these civilizational values. Each race, each linguistic group, each religious group wants to dominate over others and violate their rights and dignity with impunity and do not hesitate to attack other people or nations.

Terrorist violence, most dreaded and highly condemnable instrument of revenge, is also reaction to such rape of others rights and launching attacks on others. Powerful countries violate, without any hesitation, their own constitutional ideals to realize ambitions of their ruling classes. After all our progress to modernity or post-modernity, we have failed to honor others rights and dignity and in certain cases invited wrath of those people.

The terrorists in the Islamic world neither represent Islam nor Muslims in any sense of the word. They represent their own rage, anger and feeling of revenge, the evils strictly condemned by Qur'an. A believer, if he at all is serious about his faith (*iman*) must fight against these evils and cultivate virtues of forgiveness, *taqwa* (restrained, responsible and value-based behaviour). Only such behaviour can lead to justice and peace and Muslims should become harbinger of peace in the modern world, if at all they care for seriousness of their faith. The five theological pillars of Islam which are spiritual in nature also demand the quality behaviour – promoting *ma'ruf* (what is civilizational acceptable) and resisting *munkar* (what is civilizational destructive).

### **The fourth pillar – freedom of conscience**

The fourth pillar of Islam would be freedom of conscience. Qur'an has very succinctly stated this in four words 'There is no compulsion in religion' (2:256). Its brevity is also emphasis of its intensity. No one can practice one's faith without genuine freedom of faith. Nothing can be practiced, in all sincerity, without such genuine freedom. It is right to

freely choose which makes one responsible too. Freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin.

Unfortunately like other teachings of the Qur'an, concept of freedom was also totally lost in feudal age. The authorities denied freedom and began to impose their own interpretations coercively and duty (*fard*) became more fundamental than free choice. One cannot expect monarchs and sultans to allow free choice to their subjects. Now time has come in democratic culture to realize the Qur'anic concept of freedom of choice. Unfortunately it is feudal set up even today, in most of the Muslim countries, which deny freedom to their own people and gives the impression as if it is Islam which is responsible for denial of freedom.

The rulers may have their own compulsions but it is duty of Muslim intellectuals to come forward and create a culture of freedom not only in the Islamic world but also in the world in general. Freedom is even keel of any civilization. Islam had made seeking of knowledge compulsory for believers and knowledge cannot have any meaning without the concept of freedom. Knowledge and freedom go together. Today knowledge is exploding on global scale and freedom is pillar of strength for quality knowledge.

### **The fifth pillar: compassion**

The fifth pillar is compassion. Compassion is the one of the greatest attributes of Allah. He is Compassionate and Merciful. The Prophet has been described in the Qur'an as 'mercy of the worlds (*rahmat al-'alamin*)'. Compassion creates inalienable relationship between men and women. It is a relationship both of suffering and sharing. Modern humans need it all the more.

Globalization stands today on achieving success and material gain. More wealth you gain more successful and respectful you become. It is ruthless competition. No civilization can survive if it is based on such criteria of success. It inevitably leads to domination not of individual over other individual but of one nation over others. It is only sharing and caring and innate spiritual qualities which make human being worthy of herself/himself and compassion is nothing but sharing and caring together and putting ones innate spiritual qualities at the service of all. Compassion has become rarest of rare quality in the modern world and lack of compassion destabilizes any civilization. One of the instruments devised by Qur'an for realizing this is '*zakat*' which is included in five theological pillars. Thus compassion corresponds to this theological pillar of Islam. However, I must say compassion cannot be

limited to sharing of wealth but it is intimate relationship of suffering and joy in every respect.

Thus the five civilizational pillars of Islam are equality, justice, peace, freedom of conscience and compassion. These pillars can make Islam the greatest civilizational force in the world.