

THE CIRCLE OF  
TRADITION AND PROGRESS:  
THE INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY

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THE CIRCLE OF TRADITION AND PROGRESS: THE INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY

Not being a founding member of the Halaqa, my journey to this group is by way of discovery. When Br. Rashid Ghanoushi shared with me the concerns and the ideals of the pioneers, I could only confirm they looked like echoes of my own restless yearnings. To me the Halaqa represents, not merely a collection of individuals, but a convergence of souls in search for a better future for mankind.

What lies at the root of the crisis of our times is not a failure of technology, but of ideology. We have learned to fly in the skies like birds, and swim in the seas like fishes, but we have not yet learned to live on poor earth as good human beings. All our efforts are directed at controlling nature and controlling others but we are unable to control ourselves.

This predicament of mankind agitates the mind and confounds the soul. It prompts us to critically review and re-examine the premises on which the dominant paradigm of thought and culture rests. What has gone wrong and where? How can the house of humanity be set in order? How can human society be cleared of hatred, war, tension and crime? How can we arrive at an arrangement that eliminates exploitation and make humans live like a sharing and caring family? How can science and wealth be made to become our servants and not masters? How can we save ourselves from destruction at the hands of weapons of our own making? Is future going to bring peace, happiness and well being for ALL human beings in ALL parts of the world or would it just be paving the way for some kind of a monumental disaster?

These have been the questions that haunted me from my early youth and continue to stare us even today. But reflection on these questions and search for their answers proved to be an unmixed blessing. It was through a tortuous journey of review and reappraisal, of mind-searching and soul-searching, of abdicating a lot whose glamour overwhelmed me in my early youth and discarding some of the intellectual and cultural baggage that I had inherited from my own tradition, that a new opening offered itself. It was a real discovery and looked like a new beginning. It was a NEW beginning because I had found it afresh and after a lot of personal groping and wandering; otherwise there was hardly anything new about it. It is the path to which all the prophets and representatives of the Lord have invited men and women from the moment the human innings began on the earth.

The path of those whom You have favoured. With whom You are not angry, nor who are lost.  
(The Quran, 1: 6-7)

Born in an upper middle class highly educated and well-off family, with strong religious moorings, I was brought up in the lap of the religious and cultural traditions of Islam in the Pakistan-Indian context. Education opened up the windows of western thought and civilisation. Secularism, nationalism and socialism were the new influences that were capturing the imagination of youth of my generation. 'Tradition' and 'Progress' seemed to be worlds apart; nay, tradition looked like shackles to progress. Gradually, even somewhat imperceptibly, young men and women of my generation began to drift away from the tradition in search of their elusive rendezvous with progress. The period of wandering was

not long but it was agonising. It also proved to be a watershed and a turning point in my life. Traditional religion did not satisfy my intellectual cravings and cultural ambitions. New ideologies moved me towards social goals but were tearing me asunder from my roots, alienating me from my culture and history and drifting me towards a spiritual vacuum. It was a period of search with agony, of hope with bitterness, of movement without direction. It was during this period that along with Rousseau, Mills, Marx, Lenin, Russell and Joad I was able to have access to the works of Iqbal, Mawdudi and Asad. With a fresh look I rediscovered the relevance of tradition that was no longer fetters to progress. I was able to work for a social vision that did not cut me from my roots. Prayer and progress were no longer anti-thetical; they became part of a matrix, strengthening and enriching each other. This was an illuminating discovery, all the more dear and rewarding as I had discovered it myself. The conflict that was tearing my soul asunder was no longer there. Instead I had the vision of a future that inspired me to devote my life in the service of my Creator. I was engaged in a multi-dimensional effort to seek what is good and avoid what is evil. I was now committed to live not only for myself but for the good of the Ummah and the entire fraternity of humankind.

Looking back on the fifty years of post-discovery, my heart is filled with gratitude to Allah Who enabled me to negotiate that decisive turn. These fifty years have been years of thought and reflection, of strife and struggle, of facing challenges and developing responses, of crisis and confrontation, of advances and retreats, of success and reversals. But they have never been years of regret or renunciation. I have enjoyed these eventful encounters as aspects of life in the service of truth, justice and obedience. I have always been confident of light beyond the tunnel. While present is struggle, future is lit with a hope of peace Justice and progress.

Twentieth century began in the shadow of global domination by the Western colonial regimes and almost total eclipse of the Muslim political power. While the relative share of the Third world (almost fifty per cent being Muslim world) in the total world manufacturing output in 1750 was 73 per cent as against Europe's and USA's share of 23.2% and 0.01%, by 1900 the share of Europe and America was 62% and 23.6% respectively as against that of the Third worlds'11%.<sup>1</sup> In 1800 Europe occupied or controlled 35 per cent of the land surface of the world, by 1914 its control had extended to 84 percent of the world. As we approach the end of the 20th century the position has radically changed in certain key respects, although the distribution of income, wealth and power remains arbitrary and grossly inequitable. There are now fifty-six independent Muslim states with some 900 million Muslims living in them and another 400 million living as over 80 Muslim communities in countries having non-Muslim majority. There is also significant Islamic presence in Europe and Americas. There is also a strong wave of Islamic resurgence all over the world, characterised by Muslim peoples' rediscovery of their religious, ideological and cultural identity and efforts to reorganise their societies in accordance with their own ideals, values and principles. They are trying to seek self-reliance, which must not be confused with isolationism or autarky. This represents a serious effort to create a new social order, domestically as well as globally. Our vision of the future is pluralistic and not hegemonistic, for anyone. It is the sovereign right of a people to choose and live in accordance with their religion, culture and ideology. While respect for

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<sup>1</sup> Kennedy, P (1987) *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, Random House, New York, PP 149.

universal human rights, freedom of international trade and movement, and encouragement of cross-cultural and cross- territorial interaction constitute genuine global imperatives, every country and every people have a right to fashion their own affairs according to their own lights. Peace and justice can be ensured only if the world order respects these norms and there exist equal opportunities for all not only to co-exist but to live positively respecting each other, but according to their own ideals and values.

That brings me to the challenges that in my view confront human beings at the advent of the 21st century and the new millennium.

First and foremost is the question of human beings' need for spiritual fulfilment, along with material welfare. Ours is the only age when powerful ideologies and global civilisations have ignored the spiritual, moral and religious dimensions and concentrated predominantly on material progress. These experiments have produced a thoroughly lop-sided world, awash with material affluence and technological splendour yet torn from within with moral contradictions, social conflicts and political and economic tensions. Knowledge is no longer operating in the framework of wisdom and prudence. Obsession with means has made us lose sight of the ends. We are lost in a maze of lifestyles but the very meaning of life is lost in this explosion of glamour. There is poverty in the midst of plenty, hunger and starvation in the midst of affluence, deprivation and destitution despite reaching the skies and transforming the landscapes. Health and happiness remain elusive despite all the marvels of medical sciences. War and destruction have been the fate of humanity despite all elopements with peace and progress. The twentieth century has witnessed annihilation of some over 100 million human beings in two world wars and over two hundred regional and local wars - a human toll higher than the combined loss of life in all the wars of pre-twentieth century history. It is not merely poverty that is on the increase and which has become the most devastating force of life-destruction, even wealth and opulence have turned into menacing monsters. Haves and have-nots both are in the grip of disaffection, frustration and disillusionment. Individual and society both are caught in the throes of crisis. Crime and family breakdown, drug and vandalism, injustice and exploitation have devastated the peace and tranquillity of life and society on the surface of the earth.

### **T. S. Elliot laments**

All our knowledge brings us nearer to ignorance  
 Where is the life we have lost in living  
 Where is the knowledge we have lost in information  
 The cycles of heavens in twenty centuries  
 Have brought us farther than God, nearer to the dust

This is the human predicament at the close of the twentieth century, the high watermark is man's search for progress!

Richard Nixon, in his last book *Beyond Peace*, graphically describes the true state of affairs of the richest nation of the world:

"When President Bush left office on January 20, 1993, the national debt was over \$4 trillion (yet) the vicious circle of poverty has become worse for millions, despite the billions spent to alleviate it.

"There is a growing sense that the social contract essential to a free society has begun to unravel. Since the 1960's, the violent crime rate has increased more than 560 per cent. Illegitimate births have increased more than 400 per cent. The divorce rate has quadrupled. The percentage of children living in single family homes has tripled. One child in eight lives on welfare, more than triple the percentage in 1960. The suicide rate among teenagers has more than doubled. Every day, 160,000 students stay home from school out of fear of violence. Drug use continues to escalate, and America's inner cities still suffer the ravages inflicted by over two million cocaine addicts. The average American watches nearly fifty hours of television a week, a 25 percent increase since 1960, and ten hours more than the average work week. What he sees is mind-numbing, idiotic, violent and sexually explicit. A 1991 survey revealed that adults believe television has the greatest influence on children's values - more than parents, teachers, and religious leaders combined. What many commentators now join in calling a crisis of the spirit has affected all classes in American society."<sup>2</sup>

Nixon's advice therefore is "ultimately, the American people must look to religion, the family, and themselves as the driving forces for spiritual renewal."<sup>3</sup>

It is only by re-commitment to God, the Creator, by re-affirming the human station of Istikhlaf, vicegerency and stewardship, and by integrating the spiritual and the moral with the material and the mundane that peace and tranquillity can be restored to human life and society and mankind saved from its mad rush to self-destruction.

Second is the need for the re-consolidation of the institution of family. Family is a divinely inspired institution and the real cradle for civilisation. The world is a much poorer place because of the breakdown of marriage and family in modern times. All religions and moral systems regard it as the pivot for a happy and balanced society. All that weakens the family is destined to destroy society and humanity. The future very much would depend on re-discovery of family and all that strengthens it.

Third is the question of justice amongst human beings at all levels. Along with the rule of law and dispensation of justice, the central issue is that of equitable distribution of income and wealth at personal, regional and global levels. Today the position is that, according to the latest UN Development Report, 22 rich countries of the world with less than 20 % of world population control and enjoy 87% of world GDP, while the poorest 20% have only 1.1% of the world GDP. Only three richest billionaires own wealth greater than the combined GDP of 48 poorer countries. Gruesome inequalities exist at all levels, global, regional and personal and throughout this century wealth has been transferred from the poor countries, regions, and persons to the richer countries, regions and persons. Over 2 billion people live on less than \$2 a day and some one billion on \$1 or less. Even the richest countries of the world have

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<sup>2</sup> Nixon, R (1994) *Beyond Peace*, Random House, New York, PP 177-178

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, PP 237

large segments of population languishing below poverty line - between 8 - 14% in the OECD countries. Economic inequalities and exploitation effect the entire fabric of human life, economic, social, educational, political and cultural. That is not all. Almost the entire human population is, directly or indirectly caught in the grip of debt slavery. Rich or poor, individuals or nations all are victims of this servitude. Third world countries owe over \$2.2 trillion to the rich countries and banks in the western world. According to one estimate they are paying back in the form of interest and debt repayment \$11 against every \$1 they receive in the name of economic aid from the west. It is the poor countries of the world that are now financing the rich via this reverse flow of money and resources. Even the richest country of the world, the USA, is burdened with over \$4 trillion of domestic debt and \$1.3 trillion of external debt. It has become the fate of every human being to be born in debt, to live in debt, and to die in debt.

Another menacing aspect of world economy is that a fiduciary financial world has been super imposed on the physical economy with the result that now major expansion is taking place in this fiduciary financial balloon without any real, what to say of proportionate expansion in the physical assets and the production of goods and services to meet the physical needs of the people. The volume of financial derivatives exceeds \$200 trillion in a world whose combined physical GDP is only around \$30 trillion. Trade in financial derivatives (foreign exchange) is FIFTY times the daily physical turnover of international trade in goods and services. That is how new legions of billionaires are being created without increase in value added production.

Unbridled liberalism and unmanaged globalisation in a world that lacks appropriate financial architecture and effective equitable and accountable power-sharing political arrangements are paving the way for new colonial regimes, having command over novel instruments of financial de-stabilisation and economic and political hegemony. This economic and social crisis constitutes one of the most menacing challenges of our time. The threat of a global crash is real and imminent and not merely a figment of imagination.

The Fifth major issue relates to the rights of the individual, men and women, and of communities, political, religious and cultural. Threats to democratic processes and institutions from within and without pose another gruesome challenge. We are living in a very unequal world. Despotic regimes preside over the destinies of large masses of humanity. Lip service to human rights, fundamental freedoms and respect for religious, ethnic and other differences is galore but the real ground situation is bitter, bad and even devastating. This phenomenon is universal, not withstanding quantitative differences. Arbitrary use of power is a reality not merely at the domestic level but also internationally. Hegemonistic big power interferences, scandalous manipulations and outright use of sanctions and 'carrot-and-stick tactics' in world affairs are no longer the exception, they are increasing to menacing proportions. Muslims are at the receiving end of repression and discrimination in most of the places: Palestine, Kashmir, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovnia, Philippines, Patani, Chechnya, Dagestan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Algeria, Tunis, you name them. While respect for human rights is a genuine human concern, use of human rights for selective political ends is as great a crime as their violation by domestic or outside forces. It is unjust and unaccountable use of power by the powerful and dominant that poses a major threat to human society and world peace, today and tomorrow.

Sixthly, there is the crisis of the 'nation state', a concept that has acted as a sheet-anchor for the making and unmaking of political arrangements ever since the treaty of Westphalia (1648). This age-old arrangement is becoming obsolete with the emergence of some 200 nation states and hundreds more in the queue on the one hand, and the rise of regional integration, powerful economic and political groupings and search for new concepts and arrangements that go beyond the national frontiers. The explosion of ethnic, communal, linguistic, and racial feuds and rivalries and political re-demarcations to respond to them and other tensions and imperatives are posing fundamental questions about the rational basis on which human society could be organised to ensure justice and participation for all. Unless exclusivism gives way to genuine pluralism and narrow nationalism is replaced by an overarching system that accommodates multiplicity of races, cultures, religions and nationalities peace and tranquillity in human society may remain a distant hope.

Finally there is a specific challenge that relates to Islam and the global movement of Islamic resurgence. Instead of seeing these developments in their historic perspective and as efforts that can ultimately enrich the total matrix of human civilisations, certain sections in the West are engaged in a systematic campaign aiming at the demonisation of Islam and Muslims. What was jihad in Afghanistan as long as the mujahids were fighting the Russian aggression, has conveniently become terrorism and fundamentalism, once the Berlin wall crumbled and the Soviet empire collapsed. The end of cold war has been turned into a breathing space for paddling a new war, and not merely a war of words, against Islam. If unchecked this has the potential to degenerate into a virtual clash of civilisations. While America has been the greatest beneficiary of jihad in Afghanistan and has, as a result of the disappearance of Soviet Russia, become the only super power, some forces within its and European leaderships and media are trying to drive the world towards a new confrontation. They are finding easy partners in some rulers and vested interests in the Muslim world, who do not enjoy the confidence and respect of their own masses and whose hold on power depends on domestic use of instruments of oppression and collaboration and support from these external forces who share with them the economic resources that belong to the people, the Muslim ummah. This is the context in which some sections are trying to project Islam and Islamic revival as threat to the West. Muslims are being accused to extremism, fundamentalism, intolerance, terrorism, violence, bigotry and what not. This climate of Islamophobia is being created as a smokescreen to unleash some kind of a new crusade against the world of Islam. Nothing would be more unfortunate for mankind than the success of this vicious game. It gives hope that the horizon is not all dark and dismal. There are some silver linings as well. There is an increasing awareness in a number of intellectuals, social workers, business leaders and even in some political and diplomatic luminaries that Islam and Islamic revival are not necessarily to be looked upon as threat and a negative force. There is no reason to treat Muslims as rivals: there is a potential that all well meaning persons in Islam and the west become partners in a common struggle for the good of humanity if they are prepared to understand each other with greater openness, compassion and empathy. The era of dialogue can bring to an end the age of anger, hatred and confrontations. The time has come to move to this new plank in global inter-action. The intellectuals, particularly the men of faith, can play a strategic role in bringing humanity nearer this goal. They can even be the catalysts. It is in the context of these challenges of our time and the need for dialogue and empathy that I regard the efforts of the Halaqa as

important. I am not worried about humble beginnings. All great movements had only humble beginnings. Its only the small steps that go to make up a long march. What is important is beginning in the RIGHT DIRECTION. And that gravitates me to the efforts of the Halaqa.

The Halaqa must gear up to play a vital role in enabling mankind, particularly the religious communities of Islam, Christianity and Judaism - the three members of the Abrahmic family - to develop positive, constructive and innovative responses to these challenges. I am convinced that battles in the future are destined to be the battles of ideas. It is only through influencing and re-fashioning the vision of human beings that fundamental problems and tensions can be resolved. Communication would be the key to peace and progress. Dialogue is the answer to prejudice, ignorance and hatred. Tolerance is the recipe for human amity and well being. And tolerance is not a passive retreat; it is a positive concept and a ladder to mutuality and co-existence and a stepping stone to co-operation.

If the leaders of thought belonging to these communities are successful in shedding off their inertia and apathy and join hands to actively promote dialogue and discussion on vital issues that confront mankind, using this as a launching pad for building bridges, promoting joint ventures and initiating community oriented experiments, I am sure they can demonstrate to the world how major challenges of our time can be successfully met by drawing upon the rich resources of faith and faith communities. New trails can be blazed and new chapters can be written in the history of mankind through these efforts. This is not a mere dream, although even such a dream is pleasant. Many of such dreams have been translated into reality in the past. This can be seen in the lives and achievements of the prophets' (peace be upon them). This is the most illuminating lesson from the episodes of history. And if history is not a guide for the future: it is not worth the paper it is written on.

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