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RECONSTRUCTING THEOLOGY IN ISLAM

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Can theology be reconstructed, some may ask. Yes of course it can be. If the Qur'an can be interpreted and reinterpreted by a human agency, why can't theology be reconstructed. Theology, after all, is human handiwork based on divine sources like the Qur'an, hadith and history or historical circumstances. Theology is not and cannot be unalterable. It can and should change with time and place. Much changes have taken place in Islamic theology also with place and time.

A religion, philosophers say, can be divided into four categories: 1) ritual system (i.e. prayers, fasting etc.); 2) institutional system i.e. zakat, other institutions of management or governance etc.; 3) thought system (religion and religious institutions imbibe much from the thought system prevailing is the area which in turn is influenced by the culture of the area and hence there is nothing sacred about it. May be the prevailing thoughts in the area are selectively appropriated but nevertheless thought system is shaped by human agency in the given circumstances. Religious theology too is deeply influenced by the given circumstances.

Finally and fourthly there is value system of a religion. In fact this value system is most fundamental and unalterable. The fundamental Islamic values are truth (haq), justice ('adl), equality (musawah), doing good to others (ihaan), compassion (rahmah) and wisdom (hikmah). In fact it is these values which made Islam attractive to large number of people and they embraced it unhesitatingly. These values are most modern but in Islamic world it is these values which have been marginalized.

It is thought system of Islam and the theological system emerged from it. Theological system is quite complex one and includes many aspects of religion including some aspects of Shari'ah as much as related to 'ibadaat and also some aspects of mu'amlaat (inter action and inter-relation with people).

The question arises why is it necessary to reconstruct theological system of Islam? Islamic world today is going through transition from traditional to modern society and many complex problems are arising and our clergy is not undergoing any changes as they stick to stagnant thought system of Islam and issues fatwas accordingly. The Prophet (PBUH) had incorporated the principle of ijtihad to impart dynamism to the thought system of Islam but this principle itself was soon relegated to background by those who were threatened by change.

In every religion, let us remember, there develops a class of people who benefit by developing rigid dogmas and unalterable beliefs which may be even alien to the religious values. These dogmas and beliefs protect the vested interests of that class of people. The Prophet (PBUH), therefore, de-emphasized hadith (here we are mainly referring to hadith pertaining to mu'amlaat, not 'ibadaat) as hadith were more relevant to the circumstances then prevailing.

He wanted Islamic thought to remain dynamic and hence asked people to resort to ijtihad whenever confronted with any new problem in their life. Even our fuquha (jurists) like Imam

Abu Hanifah, Imam Shafi'I etc. resorted to qiyas and ijtihad when faced with new problems in far off places like Kufa and Egypt. A religion would remain ever alive and relevant only if it remains alive to the changing circumstances.

Even Hazrat Umar within a few years of death of the Prophet (PBUH) introduced many changes in Islamic law like enforcing triple divorce again (which was abolished by the Prophet as unjust to women), suspended punishment of cutting off hands for theft (in view of famine), introduced punishment for drinking i.e. 80 lashes though not mentioned in Qur'an and not found in sunnah (as instances of drinking were increasing) and tried to put a ceiling on mahr (but could not as a woman challenged it saying a woman knows Qur'an more than I do) and so on.

Hazrat Umar made all these changes as circumstances had changed with a few years of the Prophet's (PBUH) death. Thus message is very clear. As far as punishments or thought system or theology is concerned, it much depends on circumstances and social needs and people's problems. Religion or theology should not be a burden but a facilitating agency in people's life.

A story narrated by Buddha illustrates it well. A person who was going to his village found a stream of water in his way which he found it difficult to cross. He was carrying a log of wood which was floating over water. He rode it and crossed the stream. He thought it is very useful and put it on his head and would not put it away. It became a burden for him and yet he was carrying it. Dogmas, beliefs, customs and traditions should not become burden for us. They should be facilitating agency to make our lives easy and purposeful. That is why the Qur'an says repeatedly that its teachings are not burden for you but something which you can follow easily.

When things become a burden it makes life difficult. It losses its relevance and people do it either because they do not understand its relevance or because they have to live in a society and would be alienated from it, if they do not do it. It no longer remains heartwarming and soul stirring. Customs and traditions which are cultural rather than religious, overwhelms us and become more important than core teachings of religion itself.

It is true cultural practices add to richness of our life but then these practices should not become restrictive coming in our ways of meaningful change. Also, thought system is derived from material technology scientific progress through observations of universe and its phenomenon. For example the dogma that earth is at the centre of the universe and that sun goes round the earth had nothing to do with religion and was result of Ptolmean astronomy, it became part of Islamic thought system and theology and until recently was held almost sacred. This was challenged long ago by Copernicus model of universe and it was on that basis that Galileo observed that earth goes round the sun and Church which also made 'sun goes round the earth' a religious dogma persecuted him and asked him to recant.

When Russia landed its satellite on moon in late fifties, a maulavi who was friend of my father (also a mawlavi) said 'these satanic forces will never succeed in interfering with Allah's universe and will meet with utter failure." Such are the attitudes of our so called maulavis and maulanas. Our madrasas also teach Ptolmean's astronomy and still hold those old dogmas as sacred. For them nothing has changed in the field of science.

Qur'an itself rejects miracles. When the *kuffar* (unbelievers) of Mecca demanded miracle to accept Prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH), it said its only miracle is Qur'an. Bring another Qur'an if you can and they were indeed unable to bring one and felt quite frustrated. It is important to note that Qur'an does not have any statement as to earth being at the centre of the universe and sun going round the earth (Bible also does not contain any such statement) and yet both Muslim and Christian clergy developed such a dogma and held it sacred.

Much of our beliefs, as already pointed out, comes from our socio-cultural milieu, not from observations or scientific progress. And if scientific progress proves otherwise it is vehemently rejected as interference in God's work. The Qur'an, on the other hand stresses observation how Allah has created this universe (*kaifa kholeqat*)? It is an open invitation to observe and deeply reflect on Allah's creation. This is how science has developed and progressed.

Stephen Hawking, the great scientist of our time, talks of what he calls 'scientific determinism' in his recent book *The Grand Design* (Sept. 7th 2010) which means nature's laws do not change by praying to Allah and hence there is no question of any law being broken to perform miracles. Still we talk of miracle of moon being split. The Qur'an has made clear statement that you will not find change in Allah's law (*wa lan tajeda li sunnatillahi ta bdila*)

As our understanding of the Qur'an depends on our socio-cultural milieu we still try to understand Qur'an as our ancestors did and that is why we tend to quote commentaries (tafasir) of Tabari, Ibn Kasshaf, Ibn Kathir and so on to understand Qur'an even today. It is different thing to refer to these commentaries for historical reasons and quite different to take them to understand Qur'an itself. Their understanding was determined by their socio-cultural milieu which cannot be binding on us.

Same thing happens when it comes to women issues. There are so many verses in Qur'an pertaining to women and their empowerment but our reading of Qur'an still derives meanings which relegate women to subordination to men and she becomes less than man in all our commentaries except in some which were written by modern commentators in 19th and 20th centuries like Maulawi Mumtaz Ali Khan, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Mualana Abul Kalam Azad etc. who understood these verses about women in the changed social milieu and maintained that women enjoy equal rights and Maulavi Mumtaz Ali maintained women enjoy more privileges than man in Qur'an.
Our inherited theology is so backward that Islam is charged with anti-women, anti-human rights laws though Qur'an has been in forefront of empowerment of women and respect for human rights, if we are prepared to re construct our theology. Today women's rights and human rights are so central and yet many of us, under the influence of conservative clergy, consider them as of western origin and hence anti-Islam. The fact is that Islam is clearly a precursor in these fields and yet, due to feudalization of Islam for centuries, these central values of Islam – equal dignity of all children of Adam – was lost.

Here it is important to note that our understanding of Qur'an very much depends on our socio-cultural and socio-political background and hence with change of time we have to make creative changes in our theology. A stagnant society leads to stagnant theology and a changing society naturally opts for a dynamic theology. In other words, theology must conform to our socio-cultural and socio-political needs.

We are still so backward that even today many Muslims even refuse to donate blood thinking it is un-Islamic. Organ donations like eyes, heart, liver etc. is even more difficult. One maulana wrote a series of article a few years ago in an Urdu daily from Mumbai arguing the organ donation amounts to *muthla*. (cutting and disfiguring the dead body and hence disrespecting it. He also argued that since each organ will have to account for its deeds on the Day of Judgment, removing these organs from dead body is prohibited. The body must be buried with all its organs intact.

This mawlana also keeps on writing that Islam is not against science! Such superficial knowledge of science and Islam is quite dangerous. When this mawlana who is quite influential in India and is also member of fiqh academy, India which is a leading body, was writing all this an international conference of ulama in Kaula Lumpur was deliberating on the issue of organ transplantation and came to the conclusion that the doctrine of darurah (necessity) could be invoked to allow transplantation.

The Qur'an, according to these ulama allows even eating of pork to save life due to hunger (but one should not eat to rebel against God) and hence if there is danger of loosing life one can allow transplantation of organ or donation of ones organ. In fact there was no need to invoke doctrine of darurah as saving human life itself is a noble deed and Qur'an says that killing one innocent person amounts to killing whole humanity and saving one human life amounts to saving whole humanity.

Also, still our ulama insist that renouncing Islam deserves punishment of death! How can it be in conformity with the Qur'anic values? Death punishment prescribed in those days by the Islamic jurists was for sedition and not for renouncing Islam. Those Muslims who renounced Islam and adopted Christianity or Judaism were likely to harm Islamic state by conspiring with anti-Islamic forces.

Thus one has to make distinction between renouncing a religion and sedition. Sedition even today is punished with death. Renouncing religion, on the other hand, is a matter of ones freedom of conscience and freedom of conscience is to be respected, not to be punished. No coercion can be used to make someone adhere to the faith. It is contradiction in terms. Maulana Aslam Jaipuri has written a book *Qatl-e-Murtad* (i.e. Death Punishment for Renouncing Islam) on this subject and has convincingly argued that it is wrong to punish someone with death for renouncing Islam. He particularly quotes a verse from Qur'an i.e. 4:37 which makes it very clear that it is only Allah who will not pardon them and will punish them. There is no such punishment in Qur'an. It is only for Allah to punish such a person, not for any human agency.

Recently two cases happened on in Malaysia and one in Afghanistan. In both cases they renounced Islam and they were punished with death by the courts of these two countries. It was only after international pressure that their lives were saved. Such cases become embarrassment for Islam and Muslims. The media which is already anti-Islam plays up such cases and brings bad name to Islam. Any religion can be followed sincerely only through ones heart and soul and coercion in such matters is counter-productive. What is the use keeping someone Muslim under threat of death? Such persons will be a burden for Islam.

There is urgent need to bring about changes in our theological approach. There is more urgent need in ultra-conservative countries like Saudi Arabia to bring about changes in their theological approach. In that country women cannot even drive in the name of tradition. A

woman is not allowed even to travel alone, even if she is able to. Of course if there is fear of attack on women, one can take preventive measures like sending someone with her to protect her but if there is no such fear, one need not restrict her movements needlessly,

This also reflects on Saudi society that after years of practicing Islam they have not been able to improve character of Muslim men that if a woman goes alone she would be molested. Such restriction on women is resulting in sharp contradictions in the Saudi society. Modern education is spreading among women on one hand, and, such medieval theological practices are causing resentment among Saudi women. Some women are now openly defying these restrictions.

Today some women are even heading governments and important multi-national companies and international financial institutions and Islamic theology still maintains, misreading Qur'anic intentions that a woman is half witness and that she cannot head a state and if she does, it will bring great disaster. Despite these two women Benazir Bhutto and Hasina Wajed were Prime Ministers of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Did it bring more disaster under Zia-ul-Haq or under Benazir Bhutto? Or under Idris and Zia in Bangladesh or under Hasina Wajed.

Obviously the hadith to this effect that if a woman becomes head of a state it will result in a disaster is a fabricated one as shown by Fatima Mersini in her book *Veil and Male Ego*. This hadith according to her research was fabricated 30 years after the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to please Ali who had to fight A'isha in the battle of Jamal and she has done her research under the guidance of chief mufti of Morocco.

And even if the hadith were true it has to be seen in certain context and one cannot ignore the context without distorting its meaning. New theologies have to keep the context in mind if it has to serve the purpose. Ijtihad is also meant to make context more relevant. There is much in the Qur'an also which is contextual and there are verses which are called mansukh i.e. cancelled in application though very much part of Qur'an in historical sense.

Classical theology is important but only in historical sense to show how our predecessors understood Qur'an and hadith and how, in their own circumstances constructed their theology. In fact classical theology can be a source of inspiration for many of us in the sense that how the great classical theologians worked hard to construct their theology. What is wrong is to treat these theologies as immutable and infallible. It was great human endeavour and must be treated as such

What is problem for us Muslims is that whatever written and produced in the name of Islam during earlier ages becomes divine and infallible. Then every sect of Islam has its own theology and each sect treats it as immutable and divine. In fact instead of sect wise, if there were theologies time and place wise, it would be more relevant and interesting. For example there could be Islamic theology for Africa, Asia and Europe. The cultures of these continents and conditions of these areas is so different that they deserve to have their own theologies.

In some parts of Africa and Asia the socio-economic conditions are just like those of Mecca during the Prophet's time and Meccan verses of Qur'an are highly relevant for them. Thus what I call contextual theology can serve better purpose in any case. While all old issues are not totally irrelevant new issues are also emerging fast and must be taken note of. What is needed is modern 'ilmal-kalam to construct new theology.

Today ecological issues also have become quite central for existence of human race on earth and one needs environmental theology as well. There is much in Qur'an and hadith which can help us construct this environmental theology. Similarly though Qur'an, especially in Meccan surahs has strongly condemned accumulation of wealth and shows deep concern for poor and weaker sections of society, our Islamic theologies hardly show much concern for poverty and for weaker sections of society. This can be reflected in Asian and African theologies. It is high time we develop such theology.