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The Task of Islamic Studies Today

At first sight the question of *What is the task of Islamic Studies today?* might seem provocative. After all, is it not clear what the task of Islamic Studies should be? And has not that task been known always? Furthermore, has not the task of Islamic Studies always been clear to ‘ulama and to Islamic and Muslim experts and intellectuals?

Of course, it is good to follow up the question of *What is the task of Islamic studies today?* with these and many other questions and even with comments which reject the very idea of the need, possibility and necessity of examining the task of Islamic Studies today.

But, on the other than, there are those who wonder, and rightly so, not only about *What is the task of Islamic Studies today?*, but also about the task of Islamic Studies in recent years and decades in view of the ongoing and savage intra-Muslim slaughter and bloodshed.

Besides, how to define the task of Islamic studies in this time of broad confrontation between many Muslims and the West, or between the West and many Muslims?

All this suggests that there are many people within the Islamic and Muslim academic circles as well as outside the Islamic and Muslim academic "orbit" who would like to look at, examine, and define the task of Islamic Studies today. They are well aware that the question of the task of Islamic Studies today must be raised.



Let me say at the outset that I consider the disciplines of Islamic Studies (*'aqa'id, tafsir, hadith, fiqh...*) as having many tasks today in developing and raising awareness about the following values:

- a) peace
- b) sanctity
- c) morality
- d) knowledge about faith
- e) faith-rooted knowledge

Please allow me to say a few words about these values in the context of the important question of the task or tasks of Islamic Studies today.

I. Islamic Studies and the Project of Peace Building

For me today peace is one of the greatest values. That is why I am speaking first about the value of peace in the context of the task of Islamic studies. In this regard I think that there can be no true or authentic experience of the phenomenon of holy without peace. After all, God is Peace, too (*as-Salam*),¹ and He is also Holy (*al-Quddus*).²

I do not need to waste your time describing the conditions of today's world, especially among Muslims. The proportions of many war catastrophes taking place on a daily basis are well known to you. The role of Islamic Studies today must be redefined, first of all, with a view to establishing projects for spreading peace in the world in general and with regard to promoting peace in Muslim societies and among Muslim communities in particular.

The subjects of Islamic Studies such as the Qur'an interpretation, Hadith and the study of Islamic tradition in general must address the causes of intra-Muslim conflicts as well as the causes of abetting an all out conflict between Muslims and non-Muslim sections of humankind, above all with the West. Islamic Studies today must challenge resolutely the prevailing atmosphere of conflict.

Of course, while we are tackling these problems, we must not create even bigger ones. This means, among other things, that Muslim intellectuals and 'ulama must relax their attitude to the bygone eras of history. We Muslims benefit from studying history only when history is studied for the sake of peace in the present.

Of course, I am not naive and I do not think that some sort of general pacification of the concepts of Islamic Studies would solve all the conflicts in today's

¹ Qur'an, *al-Hashr*, 59:23.

² Qur'an, *al-Hashr*, 59:23.



world. But, I think that a peace-focused conceptualization of Islamic disciplines would help in mitigating the catastrophe in which a good part of the Muslim world finds itself.

If ideological interpretations of the Qur'an and Islam were dominant in the 19th and 20th centuries because many Muslims took the view that they should offer the ideological, liberating, awakening and anti-colonial theories on the basis of the very sources of Islam, today there is a widespread feeling about the need for rediscovering universal messages about God, man and the world in the sources of Islam, above all in the Qur'an and Hadith, and in a peaceful way. Perhaps it is clearer today than ever before that neither the Qur'an nor Hadith are texts of ideology, revolution and economy. Equally so, neither the Qur'an nor Hadith are constitutions or party programs.

In brief, the texts of the Qur'an and Hadith give news of God, world and man by way of awakening man's heart, intellect and his sense of faith, his sense of seeking to clarify those ultimate questions that human beings face. I think that the great themes of Islamic Studies today need to be universalized in that direction.

And those are the starting points from which Islamic Studies need to enter into dialogue with present-day currents in natural sciences, in the public opinion, and in democratic stirring in the world.

But, for Islamic Studies to become universalised in terms of affirming the values of peace, it is necessary to free Islamic Studies from ideology, politics and sectarian limitations.

Of course, only then can the teachings of Islamic Studies begin to radiate and promote peace. Only then will Islamic Studies begin once again to radiate with their holy inspirations and insights. The Qur'an itself advises us to follow from its rich contents above all that by which man can do what is beautiful and good (*al-ihsan*). The qur'anic passage *allađina yastami'una l-qawla fa yattabi'una ađsanahü* ("Those who hear advice [of the Qur'an] and follow the best thereof")³ teaches us to take from the Qur'an first and foremost that which brings peace, goodness, beauty and the a deep experience of the sacred. Therefore, the emphasis in our redefinition of Islamic Studies should be placed on universal teachings of the Qur'an and on the general message of the Qur'an, Hadith and Islam addressed to the whole of mankind and calling to peace.

When I say this, I have in mind the need for writing new spiritual commentaries of the Qur'an, new spiritual theological treatises, and a new biography of the Prophet, peace be upon him, from the perspective of peace and of the sacred. I

³ Qur'an, *al-Zumar*, 39:18.



consider this to be of far greater priority than to politically banalise the Qur'ân and Hadîth or make sectarian distortions of them.⁴

II. Islamic Studies and Awakening Awareness about Morality

I believe I am not alone in regarding the qur'ânic news of God as being primarily the source for deriving moral relevance and values. Of course, the Qur'ân is not a book of morals. It is God's revelation and as such it is the source of man's moral contemplation. Since he is a free being or a being that considers himself to be free, man is conditioned with morality. This means that man should not do everything he is capable of doing. Islamic Studies must promote this in a contemporary language which is understandable to today's generation.

Qur'ânic stories about the bygone peoples and generations are not stories about what those peoples believed so much as the stories about the repugnant and evil things they did. Thus, it is quite understandable that in every age Islamic Studies should derive moral principles for the life of Muslims from the sources of Islam, most notably from the Qur'ân.

Unfortunately, in Islamic Studies today we can easily detect application of immoral methodologies in interpreting Islamic sources. If interpreting the Qur'ân is used to justify daily politics, if preposterous interpretations of the Qur'ân serve to declare most of mankind as infidels, if the qur'ânic text is used to cast anathema on millions of Muslims, then in all these instances we can see the use of invalid methodologies for interpreting Islamic sources. In these cases the first value which is undermined is morality. At the end of that process faith in God becomes undermined.

In order to resist this tendency and to affirm morality in the methodology of Islamic Studies today, it is necessary to recall a number of important principles in the traditional interpretation of the Qur'ân:

First, one should never take a line or an *aya* of the Qur'ân and interpret it in isolation from the rest of the Qur'ân;

Second, one must never ascribe to a Qur'ânic verse a meaning which is exclusively in accordance with one's own pragmatic and transient aims and which arise out of politics, one's *madhab*, sect, etc.

⁴ French Islamologist Olivier Roy has warned against political banalisation of the Qur'ân and Islam because of the great damage it causes primarily to Muslims themselves and to their understanding of Islamic sources.



Third, one must not read into a qur'anic verse a meaning which is alien to the whole tradition of the Qur'ân commentaries within the whole of Islam as a faith, culture and civilization.

Unfortunately, today we can often see that the stated principles are being trampled down in many traditional Islamic universities. The hierarchy of knowledge and sources is undermined in an immoral way. Hadīth is often given preference over the Qur'ân. Sometimes one part of the Qur'ân is irreconcilably confronted with another part. Many among the present day 'ulama argue one part of the Qur'ân against the other, or they set one part of the corpus of Hadith against the whole of the Qur'ân.

It is tragic that the moral courage of the scholars and 'ulama is being lost in such quasi-methodological interpretations of the sources of Islam.

Today we can often witness the renowned 'ulama and professors at Islamic universities appearing on television or in the media as the harshest critics of their opponents, and as judges who are prepared to condemn them to death. This ugly phenomenon shows that it is necessary to urgently relax the discourse in Islamic Studies. Research results in Islamic Studies must bear the fruits of spiritual peace and tranquillity and spread moral values and faith in God as a joy, not as a tragedy and suffering. Today Islamic Studies need to make their contribution in stopping the descriptions and depictions of Islam as a terrifying religion.

Restoring moral sensibilities in the concepts and methodologies of Islamic Studies is a requirement of urgent importance. This restoration will enable students and professors of Islamic Studies to rediscover the most important priorities in reading and understanding Islamic sources, above all the Qur'ân.

Also, a renewed insistence on moral concepts as derived from the Qur'ân will give us an opportunity to reduce to a minimum the banalisation we can see in the so-called "scientific interpretation" of the Qur'ân and its message.⁵

III. Islamic Studies and the Question of Knowledge about Faith and Faith-Rooted Knowledge

At this point, please allow me to argue that faith in God in man and with man does not appear as a privilege, but as a great obligation, most of all as a moral obligation. In contrast to the world of minerals, the flora and fauna, man is always faced with a moral trust and a moral requirement to elevate himself, to be better, to be more noble.

⁵ I consider as highly important books and studies by Ziauddin Sardar in which he criticizes the so-called scientific interpretation of the Qur'ân. For further reference see his texts: *Do You Know? Reading Ziauddin Sardar on Islam, Science and Cultural Relations* (translated in to Bosnian as *O islamu, nauci i budućnosti*), CNS, Sarajevo, 2015.



Faith in God about which we read in the Qur'ān calls us precisely to that. Faith in God has always taken man by his hand leading him somewhere further, somewhere beyond the mere human sensuous nature.

Of course, there are many to whom it seems that faith places too many demands on man, that man cannot carry all that weight on his shoulders or that he can barely carry it.

That is where one can probably find reasons for the various qur'anic encouragements to man to be patient and to experience faith as a sublime duty. Of course, through the "call of faith" man does not annihilate or denigrate his being in those human circumstances of life which are common to man, minerals, the flora and fauna. On the contrary, by this "call of faith" man teaches himself – through a sublime knowledge about faith - to view his biological dimensions from the perspective of the horizons which spread out before man as multiple spiritual possibilities. That is why faith in God is an obligation, because man is an obligation unto himself, always and again. Today Islamic Studies should promote this principle rooted in the core knowledge about faith, as they did promote it at the time of their emergence, especially during their classical age.

When we speak about the need for Islamic Studies to promote a kind of knowledge about faith and a kind of religious knowledge and faith-rooted knowledge, I am thinking first and foremost about the conditions under which the present day man lives. This is the epoch of billions of machines, this is the epoch when the environment is besieged by technology and systems about which are undoubtedly man-made as man himself has established them.

But, despite everything, the basic characteristics of human nature and human being have not changed. Women continue to carry the fruit of their wombs for nine months, people continue to die, and we continue to live within the "border situations" that Karl Jaspers spoke about. The modern science has not removed death or sickness or earthquakes or floods, or tsunamis, or any one of the dozen or so axial themes about which all of the world religions speak, especially Islam. In a word, science has not turned man into an eternal being.

It is precisely from the field of faith and the faith-rooted knowledge that Islamic Studies today need to address those issues in a language which is clear to today's generation, to the media and to the means of communication. For, gadgets and technology have not spared us from loneliness and from our primordial moral dilemmas. Man continues to be confronted with the religious and moral task of searching for eternity. To that end God is offering us his hand.



At the end of my talk, please allow me to point out especially to several theses which I think should be included in the programs and methodologies of Islamic Studies, as well as in the teaching programs of madrasas and Islamic universities. I have summarized my theses into the following statements:

– Islam is not a privilege, but a moral obligation; it is a set of noble duties towards other human beings, women and men, towards life and the environment, towards God.

– One cannot enter into alliance with God against other people, other religions, faiths and other sides of the world.

– The man who comes to believe in God does not become God, but remains a human being, God’s slave and worshipper.

– Faith in God does not give man the right to take into his own hands God’s prerogatives of disposing with life and death of men and creatures.

– One should reach for the sacred as a means of attaining peace with God, people and nature.

– The sacred should not lead to violence or else it becomes the worst kind of evil.

– Muslims should stop reading the Qur’ān as if they were reciting charges against other Muslims, against Christians, Jews and other believers and unbelievers.

– Reconciling oneself with God should lead to reconciling oneself with other human beings and to a respect for other cultures and traditions.

– The Qur’an should be read as a Divine call to everyone to compete in doing good deeds.

– Muslims should initiate a critical reading of their history and it is necessary to stop inventing various exaggerations about their “golden age”

– Muslims should address their condition in their contemporaneity. They should do so out of contemporaneity and in a language of contemporaneity.

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