

The Muslim Ummah in South Africa – Perspectives of its Past and Future.

Address on 9 April 1997 at the launch of the Directory of Muslim Institutions and Mosques in South Africa.

Chief Justice Ismail Mahomed (RA)

The Society for the promotion of Arabic and Mr. Murshid Davids have rendered a significant public service in publishing what is a much needed directory of Muslim Institutions and Mosques in South Africa. It is very manifestly and impressive and well researched contribution, which sets out in meticulous detail, the identity, the location, and the objectives of a vast and formidable network of some 455 Mosques, 408 Educational Institutions and 465 Social Agencies in this country, all involved substantially in the protection and advancement of the faith of Islam. That faith has for more than 14 centuries, and with oscillating degrees of intensity and drama, impacted fundamentally on the course and direction of all civilisation and generated crucial perceptions and beliefs concerning the origins and purposes of the universe itself and the proper role of human existence in the infinite of the Cosmos which is at the same time awesome in its vastness, and majestic in its mystery.

The sheer size and quantity of the institutions enumerated in the book, covering the remotest recesses of this country is indeed formidable. But even more crucial is the story behind it. It is an impressive story about the deep commitment, the spiritual reservoirs, the emotional energies and the material generosity of a small minority of citizens constituting less than 2% of the population of the country who have sought to sustain the deepest aspirations of their faith, over a period of more than 300 years, through their own autonomous resources originally generated by the perspiration of Muslim slaves imported in the Cape, indentured labourers sweltering on the sugar cane fields of Natal and small traders and hawkers, struggling for their very right to be South African in the hostile settlements of the northern provinces.

It is indeed a story, which in crucial respects, brings glory to the human spirit. But it is also a story of deep conflict and trauma for a minority which sought persistently to assert the universality of its faith against in an environment ideologically, legislatively and politically hostile to that assertion.

According to the Holy Qur'an we are all the children of God, said Muslims. The prophet of Islam said it loudly, eloquently and irreversibly: no race is superior or inferior to another. All humans are entitled to equal dignity. Race or colour is an irrelevant, indeed a heretical criterion for the determination of our choices. No! said the official ideology, sanctioned by the law. Race and colour must determine your most crucial structures of living. Who you marry, where you can live, what work you can do, where you can work, which schools you can send your children to, which Universities you can attend, where your national places of worship can effectively be reestablished, what role you can play in the political, social and economic institutions of the country, what hotels you can visit, which sportsfield you can play on, must all be determined by your race or colour. You have no choices in the matter. We have

determined those choices for you and will punish you with the sanction of the criminal and civil law if you transgress the choices we have made for you.

This conflict between the precepts of an old and passionate faith and a parochial and obstinate ideology, was a source of deep trauma for large numbers of Muslims. It generated anger in most, a sense of impotence and sullen acquiescence in others, and a mobilization of great reservoirs of courage on the part of the more gifted. In most instances the essential fidelity of the faith was expressed through protest in various degrees of intensity – intellectual protest against the irrationality of compulsory segregation based on race and colour; motional protest against the humiliation which it inflicted on its victims; economic protest against the impediments it created on our development; and theological protest against the alienation which it generated and the cruelty with which it subverted real love among the children of God.

This culture of unremitting protest was a perfectly legitimate, indeed Islamically imperative response, to a secular menace. Its theological justification rests on the very foundations of Islamic philosophy, its understanding of God, and its vision of humans as vicegerents of God in a material world. What happens in the secular world is very much the business of Islam, and secular injustice is therefore an issue of central concern for Muslims as it must be for all men and women concerned with human condition. As the philosopher Muhammad Iqbal said in his lectures on the “Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam”:

“The ultimate reality, according to the Qur’an, is spiritual, and its life consists of temporal activity. The spirit finds its opportunities in the natural, the material, the secular. All that is secular is therefore sacred in the roots of its being... There is no such thing as a profane world. All this immensity of matter constitutes a scope for self-realization of spirit. All is holy ground. As the Prophet so beautifully puts it ‘*The whole of earth is a mosque*’. The State according to Islam is only an effort to realize the spiritual in a human organization”.

(The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam published by Oxford University Press 1934, page 147)

Iqbal indeed articulates the classical Islamic position based on the proper identity and functions of humans in the material world.

The culture of protest, which therefore sustained the Muslim ethos for so long in the country, expressed a manifestly coherent religious need. It helped also, during critical periods, to conscientize many Muslims in their beliefs; to compel them to confront the consequences of their faith in the environment in which they found themselves; to give focus and sting to the depth of their conflict with the heretic and the profane; to elevate for some the content of their spirituality in adversity, and to maintain their faith and courage, at a time when the objective external environment could easily have and some cases did provoke a menacing and mixed combination of empty despair, epileptic frustration, and demeaning opportunism.

But at the beginning of this momentous decade in our country the tide began manifestly to turn in favour of the previous victims of racial injustice in our land and a

New Constitution now guarantees not only religious freedom but the fundamental human rights which men and women of colour were denied in the land of their birth for so long. The culture of protest which so adequately – at times even magnificently – sustained so many Muslims before, cannot alone in these circumstances effectively continue that role, significantly.

What does this mean for progressive religious thinkers and for progressive Muslims? Does it mean that they should now seek to withdraw from the crucible of human conflict and endeavour and retreat inwardly into the domestic recesses of their souls through an exclusive pre-occupation with formal prayer and ritualistic perfection alone?

The answer must be in the negative on several grounds.

Firstly it is theologically an impermissible approach for Muslims. Prayer is indeed central to the faith of every believer. It is an expression of man's inner yearning for a response to the otherwise awesome silence of the universe. It is a channel of communication with the Divine; an opportunity to discover your own worth and place in the life of the Universe; a share in the vision of the infinite; a maturation of your own spirituality; a discipline effectively to cultivate humility, dignity, patience and fortitude. Congregationally and in ritual unison it multiplies the emotions of the worshippers, binding them in a visible unity with their brothers and sisters in divine cohesion.

But it is crucial for the continued spiritual evolution of the believer that he or she should not withdraw from a life of action and struggle, by world-renunciation and a private retreat into sterile and defeating negativism. To do so, would in Islamic philosophy, constitute a surrender of their majestic functions as God's vicegerents on Earth. It would be a failure to comprehend the Islamic view of what it is to be human. It is an exalted sanctity. It includes a dimension of divinity, which must express itself in our trusteeship of His bounties on Earth. This is, in terms of Islamic theology, a heavy Trust which the human species has accepted from God and for precisely this reason every man and woman is a committed being, with the capacity to exercise his or her will, and the consequential responsibility for the actions which flow from that exercise. As Ali Shariati says in his work on the "Sociology of Islam":

“He does not perceive the his perfection as lying in the creation of a private relationship with God, to the exclusion of men; it is rather, in struggle for the perfection of the human race, in enduring hardship, hunger, deprivation and torment for the sake of the liberty, livelihood and well being of men, in the furnace of intellectual and social struggle that he attains piety, perfection and closeness to God.”

(Lectures by Ali Shariati on the Sociology of Islam: Translated by HAMID ALGAR from Persian page 123)

Shariati must be right. The progressive and Muslim ideal is for humans to be co-workers with God in the creative and unfinished evolution of the Universe. Withdrawal from a culture of relentless protest may be permissible, pragmatic, and arguably a justifiable option for Muslims in this country now. What is neither

justifiable nor permissible is a withdrawal from a continuing and creative struggle to structure a new future based on love for and justice towards all the children of God in this land of intoxicating beauty and outrageous cruelty, which it had been our destiny to reconstruct and develop their spiritual reservoirs and their intellectual and philosophical horizons to focus on the centrality of this truth. A refusal to confront that challenge will otherwise doom them to stagnation and decay, interrupted only by dangerously obsessive fissures within themselves and destructive intolerance towards dissent from others who do not share their perceptions in the pursuit of truth and nobility. These fissures are often catalysed by issues very peripheral to the centrality of the faith, but they are awesome in their power to engender disaffection.

It is perfectly true that the new Constitution has manifestly and visibly repudiated the racist ideology which brought so much pain and cruelty to its victims and which engendered for so long the culture of protest which helped to sustain its victims. The law has repealed apartheid. But it has not repealed and cannot by the ferocity of its eloquence, abolish the consequences of apartheid for its victims and their children born and yet to be born; any more than the abolition of slavery in the United States has abolished all the consequences of slavery for so many of its children still living under grossly unequal conditions of existence.

The pain and shame of our past will live with us and haunt us for many many years to come in the visibly outrageous disparities in living standards between black and white; in the pitiful urban slums and rural hovels co-existing with opulence for others; in the shameful legacy of perverted and deprived educational facilities taunted by some of the finest colleges of excellence for others; in the indefensible contrast between affluent incomes for some and massive unemployment for others; in obscene differences in health standards, and infantile mortality rates; in landlessness for millions and abundance of property for the few; in the menacing anger and dangerous expectations which these truths so widely engender; and in the inestimable and awesome price which the wayward destiny of humankind in our country must pay for these horrors by the emotional alienation of man from man and brother from sister.

We can respond to these truths in different ways. The first is simply to shrug our shoulders; to deny responsibility for these existence; to say our “turn” has now come and to seek compensation for the real injustice of the past, by imbibing the intoxicants of a consumerist culture which offers to some, expensive trinkets in allure, which we are invited to display as symbols of wealth and power, but which irreversibly divert our spiritual and intellectual growth. This is a danger to which many have succumbed. It must vigorously and strenuously be resisted.

The second way of responding to the existence of continuing effects of the disparities and injustices I have described, is to see them as an opportunity for Muslims, and for all persons of integrity and spirit, to become alive, relevant, energetic and renewed in seeking to build a better tomorrow, based not on the heresy of separateness or apartness but the immeasurably stronger opposite of oneness or TAUHID. Apartness generates alienation. It catalysis negative and destructive emotions. It breeds ignorance. It aggravates insecurity. It nurtures suspicion. It protects ignorance. It aggravates intolerance towards dissent. TAUHID releases LOVE. LOVE sustains a passionate caring for the condition of other humans, whatever be their beliefs; it strengthens the moral fibre of society, upon which our ultimate security must be

premised. That was a truth richly manifest from the traditions of the prophet of Islam. It is a truth shared by prophets and noble men and women throughout the ages – from Moses and Jesus and Buddha’ in ancient times, to Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa and Nelson Mandela in this century.

Muslims and other men and women who love this country are legitimately entitled to the security of their homes, their properties, and their families, from the awesome brutality of the menacing levels of crime which stalk this nation. But whatever be the need for immediate and effective logistical measures, ultimately that security must rest on the restoration of the moral fibre of a sadly fractured society groaning from the weight of its tragic but not unconquerable past.

I have said that an active role in the dissemination of social justice is a duty. Every man is his brother’s keeper. That is certainly true. But it is also infinitely more than that. It’s pursuit makes the giver of the goodness more taller in the giving, more nobler in the execution, more richer in the enjoyment, - warmer, softer, kinder, more mature and free. The act of giving is its own reward – an ostensible act of altruism paradoxically bringing for the giver a gift immeasurably enriching for himself. It permits the enjoyment of heaven in blissfully incremental pursuit. It brings the giver closer to God in a profoundly active and intimate sense.

This simple but profound truth is central to the faith of Islam and to every other enduring faith. It has energized good and simple men and women to reach celestial leaps of fulfilment. It liberates, it empowers. It releases for us all the energy and optimism which we need to confront a potentially exciting future for our country. It gives expression to the mystic restlessness of Iqbal’s challenging poetry when he says:

“The pith of life is contained in action,
To delight in creation is the law of life.
Arise and create a new world!
Wrap thyself in flames, be an Abraham!
To comply with this world which does not favour thy
purpose is to fling away thy buckler in the field of battle.
The man of strong character who is master of himself
Will find fortune complaisant.
He will try the hazard of war with Heaven,
He will dig up the foundations of the Universe
And cast its atoms into a new mould...
By his own strength he will produce
A new world which will do his pleasure.”
(Iqbal: The Secrets of the Self, lines 1019-1030; 1033
following from page 103)