CHAPTER 12
Islam, Justice, and Politics

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Chandra Muzaffar's focus on political activism in recent years has not slowed down the pace of his prolific scholarship. In addition to having published several books in Malay, he has written or edited a number of books and journal articles in English, including: Universalism of Islam (editor), Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia, Human Rights and the New World Order, Dominance of the West over the Rest (editor), Human Wrongs (editor), and Alternative Politics For Asia: A Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue (together with Sulak Sivaraksa).

In the following essay Chandra Muzaffar concentrates on the importance accorded to "justice" in the Qur'an, and on some of the main obstacles that justice currently faces in the Muslim world and in the rest of the globe. The essay originally appeared in: Chandra Muzaffar, Rights, Religion and Reform: Enhancing Human Dignity through Spiritual and Moral Transformation (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), pp 173–96.

The ubiquitous commandments in the Qur'an to act in accordance with justice create a positive obligation on Muslims to stand for social reform and the creation of just societies.
We sent afore time
Our apostles with Clear Signs
And sent down with them
The Book and the Balance
Of Right and Wrong, that men
May stand forth in Justice (57:25).

Justice is the real goal of religion. It was the mission of every prophet. It is the message of every scripture.

Justice in the Qur’an

The Holy Qur’an abounds with references to justice. Its importance is emphasized in a whole variety of human situations—in inter-personal relationships, within the family, within the community, in the interaction between communities and nations, in the interface between the human being and nature. There is justice to kith and kin, to the orphan, to the destitute, to the slave, to the wayfarer, to the needy. There is justice that is-humanly attainable. There is justice that is only divinely possible. In the words of an Islamic scholar:

The demand for providing justice at every level of society features very prominently in the Qur’an. At every level, be it personal or public, in dealing with friends or foes, Muslims and non-Muslims, both in words and deeds, the Muslims are urged to be fair and just. Justice is an integral part of the faith and upholding the principle of justice is not confined to the courtroom environment or to a set of formal injunctions but commands a high priority in the order of Islamic moral and spiritual values.

So central is justice to the Islamic value system that Muslims are reminded that it transcends an individual’s most precious bond—the bond to oneself. As the Qur’an puts it:

O ye believer! Stand out firmly For justice as witnesses To God, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor; For God can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (Of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline To do justice, verily God is well acquainted With all that you do (3:133).

If any further proof is needed of the singular significance of justice in Islam, it is provided by that well-known Qur’anic call, “Be just; that is Next to Piety” (5:8).

To find out what is actually meant by justice one has to probe a little the verses in which the term appears. From these verses, it seems that the Qur’an is concerned with different types of justice, including adjudicative justice, retributive justice, distributive justice, and, of course, divine justice. Calls to “judge fairly” would fall within the first category; punishment for certain kinds of wrongdoing would come within the second category; and God’s judgment in the hereafter would qualify for the fourth category.

Justice: our duty

The Qur’an not only gives us an indication of what justice is; it also emphasizes over and over again our responsibility as human beings to strive relentlessly for justice. We have already mentioned verses in the Qur’an which exhort us to “stand out firmly for justice” and to “be just.” In numerous other places too, it asks us to uphold justice. For instance, we are told that, “God doth command you To render back your Trusts To those to whom they are due. And when ye judge Between man and man That ye judge with justice” (4:58). In another verse we are advised, “When you speak (make sure that you speak) with justice” (6:152).

Upholding justice is undoubtedly one of the human being’s primary duties. It is a duty that he must perform as the bearer of God’s trust, as the viceregent of God, the Khalifah Allah.

To assist and guide the human being in the performance of this duty, God has revealed to him a message, an eternal message, which has been affirmed and reaffirmed through the ages, the quintessence of which is embodied in the Qur’an. It is through realization of the values and principles, the precepts and practices which constitute this message that the human being will fulfill his trusteeship as Khalifah Allah. It is by bringing the Qur’anic truth into fruition that justice will triumph.

The power and the potential to achieve this lies with all human beings—especially those who have accepted the Qur’anic truth. Every human being can, in order to bring about justice, “enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong [al-amr bil-ma‘ruuf wa-an-naml an al-munkar]” (3:104). And what is right and what is wrong is lucidly articulated in the Qur’an and reflected in the sunna, the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad.

Justice: knowing the Qur’an

But to discharge one’s responsibilities as a Khalifah Allah determined to join what is right and forbid what is wrong, one has to know the Qur’an and the sunna. To know the Qur’an in particular means to gain direct access to it, to read it, to understand it, to absorb it, to internalize its ideas and its ideals, as values and its vision. It must be emphasized over and over again that
understanding the Qur'an is a task that the individual must undertake on his own and not through someone else. For in Islam there is no intercessor. The relationship with God is direct. The word of God in its final form was made available to the whole of humanity through the last of God’s prophets. We may seek the guidance of those who are well versed in the Qur’an as we try to learn God’s Word, but the responsibility of understanding and applying it to our lives is our own. There is another reason why the study of the Qur’an is the individual’s own obligation. The Qur’an itself asks us to shoulder this responsibility. We are challenged to

Read! In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher who created—Created man, out of A (mere) clot of congealed blood. Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful—He Who taught (the use of) the Pen—Taught man that Which he knew not (96:1-5).

Though the Qur’an beseeches the human being to “read,” to “write,” to “know,” the vast majority of Muslims today have no direct knowledge of the Qur’an for the simple reason that illiteracy is rampant in the Muslim world. It is a sad reflection of the tragic state of affairs within the Ummah that the one religion which places greatest emphasis upon the acquisition of knowledge should have the largest number of illiterates as its followers! This is why our first and foremost challenge if we want to create a responsible Ummah committed to the transformation of the Qur’anic ideal of justice into reality is the total eradication of illiteracy within the Muslim world. Perhaps the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), with its vast material resources, could make this its primary objective—to be accomplished by the year 2010! If Muslim countries can spend so much on producing World-Cup-class football teams, surely they can do something about helping each and every male and female to read and understand the Qur’an.

This leads us to a second point. There are a lot of Muslims who are literate but do not know the Qur’an because they have memorized it in a language they do not understand. One should therefore learn Arabic, which is a praiseworthy thing to do, or, alternatively, study the Qur’an in one’s own native language so that one will at least comprehend its contents. After all, good translations of the Qur’an are available in almost every language used by people today.

Understanding the language of the Qur’an alone is not enough. One should try to empathize with the Qur’an as God’s eternal message, which means being able to distinguish what is fundamental in it from what is peripheral, what is universal from what is contextual. In other words, we must grasp the dynamic spirit of the Qur’an. There is no doubt that eternal values and principles demand new interpretations as they manifest themselves in new forms from epoch to epoch. For instance, if the underlying principle in the question of slavery—which the Qur’an alludes to in a number of places—is connected to the problem of control and domination of one individual, group, community, or nation by another, then the verses on slavery are still relevant to contemporary society, since the same phenomenon of control and domination persists in new forms to this day.

Our inability to interpret and understand the Qur’an at a more profound level has resulted in an obsession with superficialities. Instead of seeing the Qur’an and the sunna in a holistic manner, we have adopted a selective, sectarian approach which in itself is an injustice to God’s Revelation. This is why the Qur’an’s fundamental proclamation of justice and compassion is sometimes lost in a cacophony of trivialities. An example or two will illustrate this point.

When an Islamic government was established in a Muslim country that had just defeated a foreign aggressor after a long and bloody conflict, one of its first moves was to coerce Muslim women to wear the hijab in public. This was a country where there was no law and order, everything was in chaos, and contending factions were preparing for a civil war. From an Islamic point of view, there were a thousand and one other issues related to life and death which demanded urgent attention and action. But the superficial mind fascinated by form could only focus on the hijab.

Another Muslim government determined to Islamize society as quickly as possible decided that it would appoint “custodians of prayers” in all state institutions who would make sure that Muslims performed their prayers at the prescribed times. Since a Muslim is expected to pray of his own volition, this new edict made little sense. Besides, poverty, hunger, and disease were—and still are—rampant in that country. It is a country where there are about 15 million child laborers, living and working in the most inhuman conditions imaginable. Shouldn’t a just Islamic government regard the emancipation of these oppressed children as its cardinal goal?

The type of Islamization undertaken by many Muslim states convinces us that there should be a serious attempt to develop a better understanding of Islam and the Qur’an within the Ummah. Towards this end, there should be a gigantic transnational effort to translate into as many languages as possible the writings of illustrious Muslim thinkers and reformers. The main criterion should be whether the writings in question help to convey that sense of justice, that feeling of compassion which constitutes the kernel of Islam. On that basis, the works of Shah Waliullah, Muhammad Iqbal, Kalam Azad, Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Taleghani, Baqer Sadr, Fazlur Rahman, and Muhammed Natsir, among others, would be worth considering.
At the same time, since visual communication—rather than written communication—has a much more pervasive and penetrative impact in today’s world, we should make better use of both television and cinema to convey the real message of the Qur’an. Certain social themes could be developed from certain verses in the Qur’an, and sketches and stories could be constructed on the basis of these themes. For example, Sura 2:177 tells us what righteousness really means.5 Our compassion for the orphan, the needy, the wayfarer, and not just the act of turning our faces towards east or west, define our piety. There are elements in the Sura which could be harnessed for formulating some powerful visual images. The same could be said for Sura 90:10–20, which shows what it is to struggle up the “steep path,” and Sura 107:1–7, which exposes the hollowness of worshippers bereft of a sense of justice and compassion.6

Justice: the role of government

To organize a transnational translation program, and to utilize the electronic media effectively for Islamic education centered around justice and compassion, one needs both money and human power. If there was a government in the Muslim world committed to reformist Islam, it could take the lead. It should be a government that feels very strongly about the legitimacy of Qur’anic justice and has a good track record of protecting the dignity and welfare of its people. We emphasize the role of government in this because we know that without political power it will not be possible to put into practice the values and principles of justice contained in the Qur’an.

A government that wants to implement these values and principles will create space in society for individuals and groups seeking “to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong.” In fact, the Qur’an itself expects groups to come together for this purpose.7 As an aside, this shows that the Qur’an, through Sura 3:104, has, in fact, given real meaning to two of the three basic civil and political rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, namely, the freedom of expression and the freedom of association.

A just Islamic government will go further. It will ensure that citizens who are fighting for justice have easy access to both the written and electronic media. The media itself should be free of government control and should not be dominated by vested interests of whatever variety.

Again in consonance with Islamic values the government will protect and preserve the independence of the judiciary. It is significant that the inspiration for an independent judiciary comes from Qur’anic values about justice in a fair manner without being swayed by passions and prejudices.8

Those values as guidelines, the fourth caliph, Ali Ibn Abu Talib, exhorted his officials to ensure that the judiciary was, “above every kind of executive pressure or influence, fear or favor, intrigue or corruption.”9

Just as an independent judiciary is an important cornerstone of an upright and ethical administration, so is the concept of *shura* (consultation) fundamental to an Islamic political system. The Qur’an asks the Prophet a. the head of the Islamic state of Medina, “to consult them in the conduct of their affairs” (3:159). It also notes, “they manage their affairs by mutual consultation” (42:38). Both these verses suggest that people should have a say in shaping their own destiny. The process of decision making should be democratic.

While freedom of expression, the right of assembly, an unfettered media, an independent judiciary, and *shura* are political principles which reinforce the concept of justice in the Qur’an, there is yet another idea in the Holy Book that is relevant to government and yet permeates the whole of Islam, indeed the entirety of creation. As it should be obvious by now, God is at the very heart of the Islamic political system. In the loftiest metaphysical sense it is God that rules, that governs, that administers. God is the ultimate authority. God is the final repository of power.

What this means in concrete terms is that the power and authority of government is limited by the power and authority of God. No Islamic government—however great its popular support—can introduce legislation that challenges those values, principles, and laws that are part of God’s Revelation. For instance, an Islamic government cannot—whatever else it may do—legalize gambling or the consumption of liquor or adultery or bribery even if 100 percent of the electorate want these changes. It is thus that makes an Islamic government different from most other forms of government. It is a government that can make laws and devise policies but only within the framework established by God’s Word or what is described in Islamic jurisprudence as the *Sharia*.

The recognition of God’s authority over men and governments and the whole of creation is what Islam is all about. Islam is an affirmation of God’s majesty, His sovereignty, His power and His absolute Oneness in transcendence.”10 This Oneness in transcendence, or *tauhid*, is “the knowledge of Allah as the one and only divine sovereign Lord.”11

*Tauhid*, as faith and idea, is intimately linked to the quest for justice in politics and society. The Oneness of God is the creative, spiritual foundation for the oneness, the unity of the Muslim *Ummah*, and indeed, of the whole of humankind. It is a unity based on righteousness and piety. *Taufhid* recognizes that unity of humankind is possible only when there is
justice within the human family. Indeed it is only by striving for justice that ta'awidh, a spiritual idea, can be transformed into ta'awidh a living social reality.12

In the quest for a just, united society guided by ta'awidh, the worship of the one God, leaders have a particularly important role to play. Islamic political thought has always lauded leaders who submit totally to God and, in the process, cultivate the noble attributes of humility, of love for the people, and of compassion blended with a strong commitment to justice. It is only when leaders possess these qualities and work selflessly for the well being of ordinary men and women that justice will prevail and society will be at peace. This was the view of illustrious scholars like al-Farabi, Mawardi, al-Ghazali, and Ibn Khaldun.

The emphasis given by these and other scholars to the role of leaders in the creation of a just social order was influenced no doubt by the example of the noble Prophet. He offered a leadership model that was without precedent and is without parallel in the whole of human history. In the course of his life he performed a variety of formal and informal leadership roles— he was a herdsman and trader, a missionary and an orator, an organizer and a mobilizer, an administrator and a politician, a judge and a military commander, and of course both Prophet and Head of State—apart from being a good husband and a good father. This explains why in almost every field of human activity, the Prophet comes across as the Umman as a model of exemplary conduct.

The righteous caliphs such as Abu Bakr as-Siddiq, Omar ibn al-Khattab, and Ali ibn Abu Talib were also utterly selfless, totally sincere individuals with extraordinary leadership qualities. Once when there was a severe famine in a part of his empire, Omar decided that he would go without food until the “least of the least” of his subjects had something to eat. Like Omar, Ali was also a staunch defender of the poor and powerless. In a well-known letter to one of his governors he reminded him that,

“God listens to the voice of the oppressed and waylays the oppressor. It is the common man who is the strength of the State and of the Religion. It is he who fights the enemy. So live in close contact with the masses and be mindful of their welfare.”13

There were a number of rulers—after the period of the righteous caliphs—who also upheld Qur’anic justice and who, in certain respects, were paragons of virtue. The Ummayyad caliph, Omar Ibn-Abdul Aziz, was one such person. On the whole, these good rulers subjected themselves to the Shari'ah and limited the powers of the state. In this regard, it is important to emphasize that, contrary to the view expressed in certain circles,

the Shari'ah for most of Muslim history “functioned basically as a protective shield in defense of the rights and liberties of the citizen against arbitrary power.”14

Justice: the internal threat

Nonetheless, there is evidence to show that now and then Muslim rulers transgressed the Shari'ah and the basic tenets of the Qur’an and sunna. These transgressions took place whenever factional feuds developed as a result of succession conflicts. They also tended to occur when rulers became obsessed with wealth and luxury and began to lead decadent lives.

Factional feuds have a long history in Islam. Invariably, they were linked to the politics of power and position. In fact, factionalism began soon after the death of the Prophet. The followers of Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, felt that he should have been the rightful successor of the Prophet and never really accepted the leadership of the first three caliphs. The intrigues and manipulations which ensued resulted in open, bloody conflict. The followers of Ali became the Shi'a (a party or faction) and have remained a minority within the Muslim family—though they are the inheritors of a glorious tradition of struggle and sacrifice.

Shi'a bitterness against the majority who came to be known as the Sunnis reached its zenith when the Ummayyad ruler, Yazid, massacred Ali’s son, Husayn, and his small band of followers in the tragic battle of Karbala. According to one writer:

It [the massacre at Karbala] created an unbridgeable gulf between the Shiites and the Ummayyads and the Sunnis, despite the fact that the Sunnis themselves were horrified by the cruel desecration of ahl-Bait [the family of the Prophet].15

The Shi’a continued to challenge the Ummayyads and eventually defeated them. The rise of the Abbasids, led by a Shi’a, however, did not end the Shi’i-Sunni conflict. Though the Shi’a-Sunni divide remains the most serious cleavage within the Ummah—a cleavage that has been reduced somewhat in recent decades—there have also been other splits among Muslim groups at various points in history. Within the three most powerful empires at the latter period—the Safavids in Iran, the Mughals in India, and the Ottomans in West Asia, North Africa, and Europe—there were occasions when dissension and conflict threatened peace and stability. Sometimes these conflicts resulted in wanton discrimination against the followers of a particular group or sect. At other times, a ruler might choose to arbitrarily execute supporters of his rival.
While factionalism rooted in succession conflicts sapped, to some extent, the energies of Muslim empires of the past, a greater threat to the integrity of the religion came from the greed and corruption of the ruling classes. Very often, it was the love of luxury, the desire for grandeur that drove rulers to accumulate wealth through illegal and immoral means. Since institutional controls upon their power were minimal, they could, if they chose to, set aside the moral constraints imposed by the Sharia and acquire all the riches in the world with very little regard for ethical values and principles.

Here again, the tendency towards venality expressed itself early in Muslim history. From most accounts, Uthman, the third caliph, lacked the moral rectitude of his two predecessors and his immediate successor, Muawiyah, the founder of the Umayyad caliphate, was guilty of an opulent lifestyle. He allowed his cronies to acquire huge tracts of land at the expense of the public. Other Umayyad caliphs “used the Baitul-Mal [treasury] funds indiscriminately to favor their friends and relatives, manipulated grants of pensions and gave these to undeserving persons, and generally ignored the rules.”

In the empires that emerged after the Umayyad caliphate, there were also rulers who succumbed to the glitter of gold. Indeed, some of these empires—insofar as rectitude and decadence were concerned—appeared to conform to the pattern of rise and fall that Ibn Khaldun had observed in his study of society. In the initial stages when an empire is beginning to establish itself, the first few rulers always exude lofty moral values. They are simple, honest, and selfless. After the empire expands and grows prosperous, the later caliphs tend to become materialistic and develop a taste for luxury. Corruption sets in. The moral fiber of the ruling class weakens. Eventually, the empire disintegrates, declines, and disappears.

If we reflected upon both these diseases of the Muslim empires of the past in the light of factionalism and division on the one hand and corruption and decadence on the other hand, we would conclude that Muslim politics today are still not healthy. It is undeniable true that the Ummah is deeply divided and hopelessly disunited. Succession disputes may not be the root cause any more, but power is as vital a factor as ever. Often it is the desire to perpetuate one’s power whatever the costs and consequences that causes dissenion and conflict. Sometimes, it is the determination of a dissident group to acquire power by whatever means which is the problem. More likely than not, russels for power are linked to ideology. It is becoming increasingly clear that a “secular state versus Islamic opposition” is looming large on the horizon. And what exacerbates the situation is the active involvement of Western powers, bent on preserving their own interests, in these conflicts. Indeed, they have played a diabolical role for a long while now in keeping the Ummah divided so that it will remain perpetually weak and at their mercy.

In the midst of all this there are Muslim ruling elites who wallow in vulgar opulence and indulge in crude extravagance—helped no doubt by their oil wealth. Some of them have kept huge segments of their people poor and ignorant while they feed their fantasies with all that money can buy. There is not an iota of justice in these semi-feudal monarchies, which are almost always dependent upon Western military and political support for their survival.

**Justice: the global obstacle**

Disunity and decadence within the Muslim world have become issues of grave concern to thinking, feeling Muslims everywhere. For unlike the past, the Ummah today is confronted by a global system which is not only prejudiced against Muslims but whose interests and orientations are inimical to Islamic notions of human dignity and social justice. What this means, in other words, is that the world today has become a much more difficult place for Muslims to achieve their concept of justice. And by the “world today,” what we mean essentially is a whole system of political, economic, and cultural relationships which have grown out of the 200 years of Western domination of the planet. To put it in another way, it is the world as defined and determined by the West that challenges Islam and Muslims today.

Part of that challenge is the prejudice that exists within mainstream Western society against Islam and the Muslims. This, in itself, is a terrible injustice. Conditioned by the Muslim conquest of Europe, on the one hand, and Western subjugation of Muslim lands, on the other, and colored by the crusades, the politics of oil and imperialism, among other factors, prejudice against Islam is deeply embedded in the Western psyche. It continues to manifest itself through a variety of political and non-political events in contemporary society. “Islamic militancy,” “Islamic terrorism,” and “Islamic fundamentalism” are but the latest attempts to derogate and denigrate a community and a religion with which Western society has always been uncomfortable.

Fair-minded Western scholars and writers themselves have decried the pervasiveness and persistence of this negative attitude towards Islam and the Muslims. As the Irish writer Erskine Childers put it,

> With the exception of culturally liberated sociologists and social anthropologists, a relative handful of historians, and a small minority of contemporary religious and lay public commentators, a systematically biased outlook upon Islam has permeated the Western world.
The consequence of this has been a reluctance on the part of the West to try to understand some of the underlying causes of Muslim reaction to Western domination and control. That the Muslim reaction may in fact be a cry for justice, a plea for a more equitable relationship with the West, is something which has not occurred to most Western political and economic elites and media commentators.

It is very unlikely that a better understanding of the Muslim world will develop in the foreseeable future. For mainstream Western society and Islam are, in one sense, moving further and further away from one another. As the West renews its faith in its "secular worldview" through what it regards as the triumph of Western democracy, it has less and less tolerance for the religious outlook on life represented by Islam. Moreover, Islam makes no distinction between religion and politics, since the moral values and ideals of the religion are expected to inform one's political behavior. The West, with its own unique history of separation of church and state finds such an attitude unacceptable and even "medieval." In the words of a Western scholar who is generally critical of the West's treatment of Islam:

Modern, post-Enlightenment secular language and categories of thought distort understanding and judgement. The modern notion of religion as a system of personal belief makes an Islam that is comprehensive in scope, with religion integral to politics and society, "abnormal" insofar as it departs from an accepted "modern" norm, and nonsensical. Thus Islam becomes incomprehensible, irrational, extremist, threatening.9

There is another reason why it is going to become even more incomprehensible in the future. In many Muslim societies, as we have hinted, Islamic resurgence is getting stronger and stronger. As more and more Muslims become more and more Islamic, they will discover that on many fundamental issues pertaining not just to politics but also to economics, culture, education, health, the community, the family, and the environment, Islam and the post-Enlightenment secular West are diametrically opposed to one another. Muslims will then realize that unless they transform the secular world of the West, that vision of justice embodied in the Qur'an will never become a reality.

Besides, from whatever point of view, Islamic or non-Islamic, the present Western-led global system is so palpably unjust that any human being with even an atom of commitment to social justice would want to change it for the good of human beings everywhere. It is a system which concentrates political, military, economic, social, and cultural power in the hands of a privileged few located largely in the North. It is this concentration of power that enables those who manage the global system to wage wars, occupy foreign territories, impose economic sanctions, usurp natural resource perpetuate crippling debts, control information flows.

More specifically, within this global system, the poor South (which the home of the vast majority of the world's Muslims) had to "pay" rich North something like $132 billion in debt servicing in 1988. It has been estimated that 650,000 children die across the Third World each year because of debt repayments.10 It should also be noted that "in 1960, 20 percent of the world's people who live in the richest countries had 30 times the income of the poorest 20 percent—by 1995, 82 times as much income."11 What is even more distressing, the world's 225 richest people have a combined wealth of over $1 trillion, equating to the annual income of the poorest 47% of the world's people (2.5 billion). The three richest people have assets that exceed the combined GDP of the 48 least developed countries.12

These statistics are just the tip of the iceberg—and only the economic iceberg at that! If we examined the data on other structures—from resource control and technology to information and entertainment—we would be shocked that such severe inequities have been allowed to persist for so long at the global level. For Muslims, the colossal injustices of the global system constitute a clear violation of Qur'anic teachings. According to the distinguished Islamic scholar, the late Fazlur Rahman:

The economic disparities were most persistently criticized, because they were the most difficult to remedy and were at the heart of social discord.13 He also points out that:

The Qur'an's goal of an ethical, egalitarian social order is announced with a severe denunciation of the economic disequilibrium and social inequalities prevalent in contemporary commercial Meccan society.14 It is not just the stark inequalities within the global system that Muslims denounce. Many Muslims would argue that the system is unjust because it has caused tremendous pain and suffering to Muslims in particular. What is worse, it is a system which is neither willing nor capable of overcoming their pain and suffering. As proof, they will point to Bosnia-Herzegovina—the scene of thousands who were killed, raped, tortured—and remind us of the utter impotence of the UN and of those who manage the global system to stop the Serbian slaughter of the Muslim population.15 They will point to Iraq where, according to certain sources, 5,000 children were dying every month as a result of unjust economic sanctions (prior to the 2003 invasion), which should have been abrogated as soon as the Iraqi army
was forced out of Kuwait. They will point to Libya, where a few hundred innocent people have died as an indirect consequence of limited sanctions imposed by the US-led UN Security Council to punish Libya for its alleged involvement in the bombing of an American and a French airliner. And they will of course point to Palestine, where since 1948 thousands of Palestinians fighting to free their motherland from Zionist occupation have been brutally massacred by a regime that has the full support of the USA. As they look at each of these situations, Muslims are bound to ask, Why are we suffering so much? Why are we the victims of such horrific injustices? Is it because we are Muslims?

Some Muslims would highlight certain other recent episodes to show that they are undeniably the victims of injustice, or more specifically, of bias and discrimination. As a case in point, an Islamic party which was about to win the first ever general election in Algeria in 1992 was crushed mercilessly by the military, and yet the US and other Western governments and the Western media acquiesced in what amounted to an outrageous rape of democracy. In Sudan an independent-minded Islamic government came to power through a coup in 1989, and alarm bells have been ringing in every major Western capital ever since. In Iran the commitment to independence and autonomy, so fundamental to Islam, is still as strong as ever 27 years after the Islamic Revolution, and the US and some of its allies are worried. It is not surprising, therefore, that the US continues its campaign of vilification against Iran. Though this campaign abated somewhat as a result of the ascendancy of President Mohamed Khatami and the strengthening of the reformist trend within Iran (1997–2005), the country is still being projected through the mainstream Western media, as a terrorist state, spreading the ideology of fundamentalism to Muslim lands all over the world. Here again, as some Muslims reflect on each of these episodes they begin to wonder: has the phobia of Islam within the West reached a new, more dangerous level? Has Islam become the new ideological adversary of Western “market-democracy” now that the communist system has collapsed?

If we located the pain endured and the discrimination suffered by the various Muslim states and societies mentioned in this discussion within the larger context of an unjust global system, which has always exhibited bias and prejudice against Islam and the Muslims, it is only too obvious that the religion and its followers are going to be confronted by a formidable challenge in the twenty-first century. But it is important to remember, in this connection, that what is unfolding before our eyes is not a simple West versus Islam confrontation. There will always be Muslim states which the West will regard as its strategic allies. These states, in turn, for a variety of reasons, will choose to stick with the West. At the same time, there will also be non-Muslim states which will be the targets of dominant Western political and economic interests. And within this scenario, it is quite conceivable that Muslims must first get rid of their exclusiveness—both in their approach to Islam and their attitude towards problems facing the Ummah. Nonetheless, at the most fundamental ideological and political level there is no doubt at all that the centuries-old Western antagonism towards Islam, often latent, sometimes blatant, is beginning to intensify again.

Justice: the future challenge

In this situation, the choice before the Ummah is clear. If we are honest to our faith and committed to the goal of justice embodied in the Qur'an, we must, as we have suggested, seek to transform the world. But how will we transform the world when Muslims are only 21 percent of the world's population and are so badly divided among themselves?

Muslims must first get rid of their exclusiveness—both in the approach to Islam and in their attitude towards problems facing the Ummah. They must learn to present the essence of the Qur'an as a truly universal message meant for the whole of humanity. What this demands is a re-articulation with renewed vigor and vitality the central doctrine of the Qur'an and indeed of all divine Revelations since the beginning of time—namely the faith in the oneness of God (tawhid). Let us demonstrate that tawhid can emerge as the unifying worldview of the whole of humanity, of every community and every nation regardless of its religious affiliation.

As a unifying worldview, tawhid contains at least five important beliefs:

1. A belief in the common spiritual origin, mission, and destiny of the whole of humanity.
2. A belief in the organic unity of existence—of the immanent and the transcendent, of life and death, of this world and the hereafter, of man and nature, of individual and community, of man and woman, of the material and the spiritual.
3. A belief in the human being as God's vicegerent or trustee.
4. A belief that there are universal moral values and principles which are beneficial to the whole of humankind.
5. A belief that the human being, both at the individual and at the collective level, possesses universal rights and responsibilities, roles and relationships which help to nurture and nourish a holistic way of life.

These beliefs, as the essentials of an alternative tawhidic worldview, challenge the dominant secular, materialistic Western worldview. The Muslim.
who is conscious of tawhid as the foundation of Islam, would try to reconstruct life and society on the basis of these beliefs. In the process, as the famous philosopher Muhammad Iqbal noted decades ago, the Muslim "would alter the pattern of world politics." For the real "meaning and role of Islam lies in the inevitable march of history towards world unity." 23

But to convince people that world unity is possible through tawhid, we must be able to show how its values and principles can help overcome the injustices that confront humanity today. A worldview which cannot demonstrate in concrete, tangible terms its ability to deliver justice has little chance of emerging as an alternative to the present global system.

In this regard, it would be worthwhile to remind ourselves that it was Islam's proven ability to ensure justice that led to its phenomenal growth from the early seventh century onwards. Within 100 years of the Hijrah (the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Medina) it had spread eastwards to China and westwards to Spain. The expansion of Islam during that period was the most rapid ever accomplished by any faith or ideology in history. And the power behind it—if we may repeat—was justice in its most comprehensive Qur'anic sense.

Can the Qur'anic message of justice repeat its great historical feat? Can the universal values derived from the belief in the oneness of God re-emerge as guiding principles in humanity's quest for justice in the twenty-first century?

If the question of justice is linked to some of the severest challenges facing humankind today, we will begin to appreciate the relevance of the Qur'anic message of tawhid to our times.

First, at the most private, intimate level, is this message not relevant to the strengthening of male–female ties, to the restoration of the family as the basic unit of a harmonious society—especially when AIDS, promiscuity, homosexuality and drugs have desecrated inter-personal relationships and destroyed the moral fabric of many a community?

Second, is it not true that tawhid, demonstrated by the practices of the Prophet and some of the great caliphs, offers brilliant insights into ethnic relations? Is it not because of the Qur'anic exhortations on unity within the human family, and the living example of the Prophet, replicated by so many other rulers right through Muslim history, that Islamic civilization can proudly proclaim to the world that of all civilizations known to man, it has the best record on inter-community harmony? And, in a world where ethnic violence and racism have become more widespread and more virulent than ever before, does Islam not provide some real, workable solutions?

Third, is it not true that the prohibition on riba (usury), and the curbs on exploitation, corruption, accumulation of wealth, extravagance, wastage and hoarding and the emphasis on zakat (wealth tax), the equitable distribution of wealth, the reduction of disparities, the utilization of natural resources for the benefit of all, the provision of the basic needs of the poor, and the dignity of labor, serve to strengthen the sinews of a tawhidic economy or economie of unity—which is precisely what the world is crying out for today, given the wide chasm that divides North and South, rich and poor, strong and weak?

Fourth, is it not true that the Qur'anic teaching on tawhid regards nature "as an integral part of man's religious sharing in his earthly life" and as "the theophany which both veils and reveals God" and for that reason preserves and protects the integrity of the environment? If such an attitude towards the environment was a dominant element in the worldview of Western man in the last two centuries, wouldn't we have been spared such a colossal environmental crisis that today threatens the very survival of the human race?

Finally, if politics had as its overriding principle the service of humanity and not the tussle for power, it is certain that justice would have triumphed much more in both domestic and international affairs in the last few decades. And what can control the lust for power but a deep and abiding awareness of an authority higher than man, of a power greater than the human being? For if man does not submit to God, he surrenders to his own ego. It is to check that danger that the Qur'an, like all other Revelations before it, makes tawhid the single most important principle of life.

The struggle for justice in politics is the struggle to translate that principle into policy. Each and every one of us will have to participate in that struggle in our own way. And on the Day of Judgment, each and every one of us will have to testify on "how we stood forth in justice." 24