

Universality: The Global Arena for Change-oriented Action and Outreach

[THEME I]

The Concept of Universality

THE CLAIM has often been made by Orientalists and others, in both ancient times and modern, that Islam is not truly universal or capable of assimilating a variety of peoples and cultures. The principle arguments offered in favor of this view are that: (1) the Qur'an is in the Arabic language and can therefore be understood only by Arabs; (2) the Qur'an came as a response to specific situations and circumstances that were relevant to the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century CE; and (3) in his early days as a Prophet, the Messenger of God did not claim to be bringing a universal message. The verses on which this argument is based include *Sūrah al-An'ām*, 6:92, in which God tells the Prophet that the Qur'an has been revealed "...that you may warn the foremost of all cities and all who dwell around it..."; *Sūrah al-Zukhruf*, 43:44, "The [Qur'an] is indeed the message, for you [Muhammad] and for your people; and soon shall you [all] be brought to account," and *Sūrah al-Shu'arā'*, 26:214, "And warn [whomever you canst reach, beginning with] your kinfolk."

If those who make such arguments listened attentively to the Qur'an, however, they would find that it decisively refutes their claims. The Qur'an describes itself in numerous places as a universal revelation, and states clearly that the message of Muhammad is addressed to the entire world, not only to the tribe of Quraysh. Hence, at the earliest

opportunity following the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah in 6 AH/628 CE, the Prophet sent out letters to the rulers of neighboring lands, including Chosroes of Persia, the Byzantine emperor, King Najashi of Abyssinia, and Muqawqis of Egypt, inviting them to accept the Islamic message.

As for the association of this message with the Arabs in particular, Ibn Ashur explained this based on the fact that in the days of the prophets, the Arabs were set apart from other peoples by four key traits which had rarely, if ever, been combined in a single people: (1) good minds, (2) powerful memories, (3) a simple civilization and legislative code; and (4) relative isolation from other peoples of the world. These traits qualified the Arabs in particular to receive, understand, preserve and convey the message of Islam. Being closer than other peoples to pristine human nature, the Arabs were well suited to imbibe the moral teachings of Islam. Moreover, given the infrequency of conflicts between the Arabs and surrounding nations – most of their conflicts arising amongst themselves – they were in the best position to take the message of Islam to other communities.

It is thus apparent that in his call and his example, the Prophet of Islam constituted a continuation of the line of prophets from Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. This continuity is affirmed in the well-known hadith in which the Prophet likened himself to the final brick that was added to an edifice that had been built prior to his time but had been left incomplete. He stated, “To understand my relationship to the prophets before me, think of a man who built a house. The house he had built was beautiful and complete in every way with the exception of a spot where a brick was missing. People who came into the house would express their surprise, saying, ‘Why was this brick left out?’ I am that brick; I am the seal of the prophets.” *Sūrah Āl ‘Imrān*, 3:3-4 likewise affirms the continuity between the message given to Muhammad and that given to the prophets who preceded him, saying, “Step by step has He bestowed upon you from on high this divine writ, setting forth the truth which confirms whatever there still remains [of earlier revelations]: for it is He who has bestowed from on high the Torah and the Gospel aforetime, as a guidance unto mankind, and it is He who has bestowed [upon man] the standard by which to discern the true from the false...”

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Taha Jabir Alalwani summed up the universality of the Qur'anic discourse in four major features: (1) completeness, being the final revelation that had been bestowed from on high on the final prophet; (2) absoluteness, as opposed to its being limited to a particular place and time; (3) confirmation of previous messages from God; and (4) authority. The monotheistic dimension of this universality, which is based on the principle of the oneness of the entity we worship, unifies the Muslim community's goal and direction with respect to the issues of stewardship, societal progress and development, legislation, and underlying philosophy. The cohesion and strength of the Muslim community and its capacity for assimilation and integration are due to the freedom it gives its members in the areas of belief and religious practice, the protection it affords minorities and dissenters, and the honor and dignity it bestows on human beings as a whole. Those who adhere to the doctrine of monotheism have the ability to offer the world something that is missing from virtually all other methods, schools of thought and systems on earth. Hence, in Alalwani's view, in order to play the constructive role for which they were created, members of the Muslim community need only to rediscover and reactivate their commitment to change based on the divinely revealed message, and an awareness of themselves and their mission. The world stands in need of a Muslim community that is firmly established on a path of moderation and actively involved in others' lives, an all-inclusive mentality that welcomes all and has repudiated all forms of exclusive rhetoric, a government guided rightly by the Book of God; and laws that impose no undue hardship on anyone while at the same time prohibiting what is harmful.

[THEME 2]

Universality and Particularity in Contemporary Arab-Islamic Discourse

In addressing the problems that face the world, there are those who tend to stress universality at the expense of particularity, while others are prone to stress particularity even if it comes at the expense of

universality. Both of these tendencies are based on the assumption that there is an inherent incompatibility between universality on one hand, and particularity on the other, so that we can only affirm one of the two atop the ruins of the other. However, this assumption is a mistaken one, and the apparent conflict can be resolved by seeing things in terms of degrees and priorities based on existing conditions.

We spoke earlier about the concept of *ummah*, or religious community, as the historical, legal and political framework within which society's problems are to be addressed. Similarly, we discussed the concept of *marja'iyah*, or authoritative point of reference, as the Muslim Ummah's foundation and point of departure, or as its identity and cultural/civilizational particularity. We in addition treated the topic of universality as an expression of the Muslim community's task of communicating or witnessing to the Islamic message. In the view of Umar Ubaid Hasanah (born 1935), the challenge that faces contemporary Muslim thought is that of reconciling the demands of two types of 'universality': the universality that is an inseparable part of both Qur'anic discourse and Islamic culture and civilization, and the universality or 'humanism' being preached by secular circles, and which leads to the dissolution of all particularities. This latter version of universality, also known as 'globalization', seeks to obliterate all cultural and economic expressions and structures that deviate from and, thereby, threaten to undermine the dominant capitalistic worldview and system.

Strategic decision-making prerogatives on the global scene lie most definitively in the hands of the most developed nations, which will continue to exercise their full privileges without waiting for subordinate powers to develop. However, even weaker, less influential nations can contribute to the course of the world if they make good use of the resources at their disposal. How much more, then, should the Muslim community, which has a universal message to share, rise to the challenge of taking on the tasks for which it is so eminently qualified? Indeed, Islamic universalism with its background of openness and invitation embodies an all-inclusive philosophy that has proved itself capable of protecting the national identities of communities within its domain historically when faced with confrontations.

The quest to affirm identity, in Ghalioun's view, need not conflict

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with the formation of a global system. On the contrary, such a quest is one manifestation of such an order. For any legitimate global system that refuses to recognize particularity is one that rejects its responsibility toward others, and that insists rather on treating them as nothing but ‘raw materials’ for its own ends or, at best, as subordinates. The basic issue here is not simply one of belonging to a given order or accepting it as a unified entity but, rather, of ensuring the effectiveness of this order’s various parts or members; and the issue of effectiveness hinges on the type of participation made available to each subgroup and the roles it is allowed to play in the larger whole.

Malek Bennabi holds that the destiny of any human collectivity is determined in part by events and entities that lie beyond its geographical borders. Especially in the age we live in now, culture is determined and defined within a global context, since the sources from which a given culture derives its ideas and values, the issues it adopts, the provocations to which it responds, and the actions it takes, cannot possibly originate entirely on its own soil. Consequently, Muslim intellectuals have the obligation to look at things from the broadest possible human angle in order to understand their role and the role of their society and culture in the wider world. The role of Islam, in the view of al-Jabiri, is to provide an example of social harmony by drawing adherents from a variety of backgrounds and nationalities, and then transforming this human medley into a world community (Ummah) with a clear sense of identity. Achieving such an aim is no small task, of course. However, Islam has the capacity to imbue a society with an aura of its own. When it was at its peak, Arab-Islamic culture was a world civilization that was prepared to absorb all the cultures with which it came in contact.

The Muslim community’s duty toward itself and others can be conceptualized in terms of pairs of opposites whose dialectical relationship creates equilibrium between them. Examples of such dualities are given in the table on the following page.

At one end of the ideational spectrum we have a “globalism” stripped of any particularity or local point of reference, while at the other we have a “particularism” whose principle concern is to partition and divide into separate, mutually exclusive cultural and religious enclaves. While the first conceptualization promotes a kind of annexation and

subordination to a centralized capitalist authority, the second threatens to destroy the elements that give the Muslim community its unity and strength. Hence, they are both equally perilous.

Islam's comprehensive philosophy	Subcommunities' national identities
A divine command to seek unity	Partition and particularity
An international order	Affirmation of specific identities
Islamic as a non-regional religion	The Muslim world community as an entity with a sense of unique identity
A world civilization and culture open to the assimilation of variety	The heritage of an Arab-Islamic civilization and culture
Global media invasion on the levels of culture and ideology	Renewal, enrichment, defense, protection, particularity, identity

In centuries past, Islam showed itself capable of absorbing, within its geographical and human framework, all types of human civilization and culture and in so doing, it overcame the duality of East and West while at the same time providing a foundation for the understanding that Muhammad was the Seal of the Prophets and that Islam is the final divine message to humanity. Islamic teachings can be highlighted and clarified in different ways depending on the historical and social context. However, the truth and guidance brought through Islam embody higher principles and values with the capacity to unite rather than divide, and to accommodate a wide variety of social and cultural expressions within an overarching monotheistic framework.

Whoever has studied Islamic history will find that what the Muslims sought when entering lands was not worldly gain but, rather, to invite others to embrace a life based on a divine source that gives human existence meaning that cannot be found in material things alone. Given their balanced appreciation of the worldly and the sacred, Muslims

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were able to establish a new society with a united culture in which numerous and varied communities were integrated. This integration was only possible because the process by which it came about was one in which these communities themselves played a major part. The culture that the Arabs had brought with them from the Arabian Peninsula was not imposed on the peoples whose lands they entered. Rather, there emerged a new culture to which everyone contributed as supporters of a single cause without the Muslims imposing themselves in such a way that others felt themselves to have been overcome. It was not based on the exploitation and exhaustion of human and natural resources, and was not accompanied by subordination.

So, despite Islam's being 'the seal of the religions', it has nevertheless recognized the religions that preceded it and sought to foster cooperation with them. It was in this spirit that God declared in *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, 5:3, "...Today have I perfected your religious law for you, and have bestowed upon you the full measure of My blessings, and willed that self-surrender unto Me shall be your religion..." The principle of *tawhīd*, or the oneness of God, allows us to free ourselves from all the forms of oppression and subjugation exercised by tyrannical forces.

The resurrection of the fundamental concepts of ummah – world community – and universality in contemporary Arab and Islamic thought represents a qualitative shift in the methods of and perspectives on reform, renewal and change. No valid objection to either of these concepts may be made based on the need to preserve distinctive local identities, and this for two reasons. The first reason is that neither of these two concepts conflicts with the notions of self-reform and problem-solving, and the second is that if we aim for reform and change in any area of life, no good will come from retreating within ourselves. We must either rise to the challenge of taking part in the decisions that affect our lives, or accept the decisions being made on our behalf by those who wield the power to do so.