

# The Message of Islam

*Abdelwahab Bouhdiba*

Islam has enormous potential as a faith, a system of thought, a group of institutions that are part of history. The extraordinary richness of Islamic culture is such that it can be described as a 'superculture'. Indeed, has it not left its mark permanently on extremely different societies and set its lasting seal on periods of time so long that there, too, an aspect of the 'Islamic miracle' may be discerned? The Islamic miracle is also the fact of having preserved the living message and carried it to the peasants of the Indian sub-continent as well as the bourgeois of Córdoba, of managing to get itself accepted equally by African tribes and Sassanid villages, and of being able to speak of the same principles for fourteen unbroken centuries.

That durability and universality are two characteristics the present-day world has the greatest need of, for today everything conspires to over-value the relative, emphasize the temporary and continually place human civilization in a position of episodic instability. The density of being, the weight of destiny, the scope of our historic responsibilities are less and less present in contemporary consciousness, and this is so even among Muslims themselves.

Never has humanity needed the Islamic message as much as now, and never has the world been so unreceptive to wisdom. The widespread use of a deceitful dialectic puts on the same footing any system of thought whatever, no matter what its foundation and background. Never have thought, values, ideals, standards been so distant from reality. The word 'ideology' which covers them has itself lost nearly all its meaning. As if all 'ideas' were equally provisional, equally suspect, equally subject to caveat. And thence comes the debate about 'authenticity and inauthenticity' that encumbers the thinking of our contemporaries. And, as the height of aberration, people rush to identify authentic with traditional and inauthentic with modern, or else the reverse.

Is it necessary to remind ourselves that the organizing strength of Islam does not come from the static quality of an imposed order, but from the permanence of a model that always remains to be re-created, based on both divine inspiration and the needs of the moment? Our existential experience is ceaselessly confronted with

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matter to be shaped, a structure to be dominated and controlled. So that medieval Islamic penal institutions are authentic, but neither more nor less so than the most modern court or tribunal in our countries. With the one proviso that both make sure that irreducible ideals of justice, freedom and dignity are upheld. The classical period's *shar'* is just as authentic as the penal system in present-day Muslim countries. The masterly writings of a Muslim or a Rāzī, a Mālik or an Ibn Taymiyya are just as authentic as the work of sheikh 'Abdū or sheikh Shaltūt.

Society has always been incomplete, not just today; in the end society is nothing but a desire to be moving forward. With varying fortunes every group that seeks to become part of the future remains in any case dependent on the relevance of its motivating ideals and the contingencies of the moment. Who would dream of denying that today's needs are original and new? But the needs of medieval times were just as new in relation to their period. We cannot hold back the course of history. We can shape it, harness it or let ourselves be carried passively forward by it; which in the end means the movement others have imposed on it. Peaceful or aggressive competition with other peoples is not a recent phenomenon. It too is as old as the world. In contrast to an Islam frozen in its medieval state, enclosed in the quite outmoded straitjacket of the manuals of times long past, we need to present a living Islam that is able to develop its own potential for any moment or circumstance and invent solutions that are as ever-new as life. Islam contains demands; it sets limits; it allocates norms. It knows that our honour as Muslim believers is to act with full responsibility, to work out our lives and shape from nothing our personal as well as group existence. The social efficacy of Islamic inspiration does not lie in the routine repetition of experience going back to such and such a generation. It flows from a wide and rich religious experience embodied in the fabric of social action, to which it imparts a meaning, which it illuminates, impregnates with its own ideals and impels onward, but at its own risk, into the future of history.

Contrary to simplistic visions, Islam is not a somewhat vague image of an ideal that is itself more or less inaccessible. Nor is it the delusional episode of mental or social misfits. It is neither a projection of unfulfilled fantasies, nor an escape into some tawdry imaginary world, nor a search for illusory achievements. It is not the process that compensates us for our collective failures. Nor is it 'the sigh of oppressed creatures'.

In Islam, faith, ethics and social practices are intimately linked. For faith permeates Muslims' thoughts and supports all their efforts. Islamic ethics provides the normative direction that provides the impulse for their personal lives, organizes their collective existence, governs their daily actions. However obscure and humble day-to-day matters may be, however serious and meritorious their outstanding actions, they are transformed by faith.

Because of the unity of their inspiration and despite their diversity, Islamic institutions have been perceived as a basic framework that is constantly being 'reproduced' without ever being strictly the same. They set out the coordinates by which believers always find themselves in the right place without being pushed back into obscure marginality. The characteristic of the Islamic institution is that of a 'framing institution'.

Geographical space has also been homogenized. So, too, have social space and

cultural space. This has given the circulation of goods, ideas and people a spur such that Islam is first of all not a fixed world but the mobility of people and things, institutions and ideas. This mobility has been able to change the course of the history of the peoples that have embraced Islam and has been the very basis for the creation of the various Islamic civilizations. They would seem enigmatic and strange if we did not take into account the fact that the Koran developed first the cult of effort, the art of vigilance and the 'passion' for innovation.

The importance of an Islamic orientation in the working of society cannot be restricted to the past. It is still happening before our eyes, with different results of course. It is wrong to think that Islam is a social relic or an underdeveloped form of our collective consciousness. Because it has taken our life seriously, it has become a permanent element of our social life. Should we be surprised that the 'fading away' of Islam, which has so often been predicted, has not come to pass? There is indeed a weakening and relative loss of efficacy, but its continual vitality may allow Muslim societies to expect something other than a survival charitably granted by today's great temporal powers.

The drama for today's Muslim peoples is still to live under the sign of disparity because there has not been an adequate analysis of the needs of their times. In order to be effective Muslims' current struggle for self-affirmation must be embodied in new systems of social practice inspired by faith but institutionally defined and sanctioned. Islam cannot be reduced to a mere value system. It is also a form of organization for life. It is the Islamic project for organizing society that we must tirelessly return to and translate into actions compatible with the enormous potential that the achievements of our times offer us. There is a social message of Islam that remains to be translated into a project for collective action for our times, or better still for our present generations.

This message is a message of fraternity, justice, effort, liberation. The golden rule in Islam is that our human action succeeds only if it is a continuation of divine creation. History is a permanent *kasb* that has its eternal archetype in the divine creative act. Not only is it legitimate but a duty to bring to God all our personal and collective actions. It is the royal road to self-realization as a Muslim. Being a Muslim is living in accordance with divine principles. Islamic happiness is the art of positioning ourselves in a perspective that is reciprocal to God's. Blessing is happiness. Organizing collective action in the Islamic community implies that work, production, interaction with others, intellectual as well as economic exchange, require the profound spiritualization of all our actions. We must spiritualize work, education, politics, the working of the body, the law, international relations, daily life. The sacred is coextensive with the whole of our existence. Through it our essence and existence are harmonized because each of them is thus directed towards self-realization. Active life is nothing without its close association with spiritual life. Here humanism, universalism and social life find their true meanings, which are all the same: complete integration into God's vision. Active yielding to God: 'He that surrenders himself to God and leads a righteous life stands on the firmest ground: to God shall all things return' (S. XXXI, v. 22).<sup>1</sup>

In the concrete organization of social life in Islam the human being is always the purpose. Through all our actions we are to express God and realize our personhood,

while knowing at the same time that the world is not an end in itself, neither is production an end in itself. But through work and action I come closer to God, though of course this effort of turning towards God is not static but the end of a long interior journey.

Our twofold error is to think we can get away without that interior journey and to wish to rely on our predecessors' journeys. We forget that in Islam more than any other religion, because there is no church or priest, any asceticism is individual and direct. To offer my action to God I must first make it sacred. There is no world of work on one hand and world of prayer on the other. My work is a prayer and my prayer is action. There is integration, complementarity and even fusion between individual action, collective effort and spirituality. The purpose is always communion between the individual and the *umma* through creative work and transforming prayer. To forget this is to turn one's back on a basic lesson of Islam.

The corresponding error, which is due to a lack of clear-sightedness as regards the demands of modern life, is hardly less serious or less frequent. The integration of the sacred into social life is so 'uncurrent' that we need – especially in Islamic countries – an extra effort to apprehend its real pitfalls. It is not enough to call for the restoration pure and simple of medieval institutions. They have served their time, and sociologically anachronism is fatal. We cannot solve today's problems by digging up recipes from past centuries, however effective and general they may have been in their day. We have to re-create them, refound them and even invent others to fit the requirements of today's world. We cannot copy any longer but must rather bring into being, based on intangible principles, a sociology of the sacred, a pedagogy of action borne by spontaneity.

We have to search the immediate horizon and focus on Islam as it tackles the difficulties of the present.<sup>2</sup> It is not a question here of anticipating but simply preparing the ground. For the social message of Islam that I have attempted to draw out is not a vague one. It is addressed to today's Muslims. And they are going through the most formidable crises they have ever known. Almost the whole of Islam is part of what is conventionally called the Third World. This means that it participates only chronologically in the great debates occupying our world. It means that it experiences dramatically its own separation from others, the world and even itself. If we do not wish to relegate the Islamic word to an event in the past – and thus out of date – we really need to give it back its essential topicality and through engagement with today's world broadcast its witness, which is so enriching for the whole of the present world community.

Our world demands that all unifying ideals should be fully accepted as positive factors for friendship between peoples. No one could try to exclude the Islamic faith from that. We need to proclaim that, if Islamic societies are sick, the faith of Muslims can and must help to find an effective remedy for them. Muslims suffer from ignorance, poverty, hunger, violence, oppression, infantilization. They are cut off from this world's true riches, they need more freedom, more justice, more democracy. They need to respect others and gain their respect. They need to control nature without letting themselves be controlled illusorily by the mechanization of industrial society. The magnificent, exhilarating triumphs of science and technology should be made to serve human beings and their values, and not the opposite!

To tackle their economic and social backwardness they need to make a new alliance with God and nature. To address the desire for justice they suffer because of the piteous state of their relations with their other brothers of all races, faiths and cultures, they need to reaffirm their profound internationalism and their calling to the universal. To deal with their alienation, they need to 'show' and 'demonstrate' their spiritual autonomy. This new alliance between human beings, nature and God is only a way of dialectizing their faith in today's world and bringing their perspective into alignment with their present.

The current spiritual vacuum is ill concealed by some people's fanaticism, other people's apathy and easy escalation. It is only by courageously updating the virtualities of the faith of the Koran that we can claim to represent God on earth, today's earth. 'Each one has a goal towards which he turns. But wherever you are, emulate one another in good works. God will bring you all before him. God has power over all things' (S. II, v. 148). That verse strikes a chord with all of us. It commands us at the very least to listen to the message of Islam.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

1. Mazigh translates: 'Whoever submits . . .'
2. This text is a revised version of the conclusion to volume II of the joint work: A. Bouhdiba (ed.) (1994) *Les différents aspects de la culture islamique: l'individu et la société en Islam*, Éditions de l'UNESCO. The themes explored in the volume are: Norms and values (1); A fragile balance: rights, responsibilities, freedom (2); Thinking ethics (3); Thinking society (4); The family foundations of the Islamic community (5); Educating people (6); A mission that is still a priority: the emancipation of women (7); Childhood and youth (8); The meaning of Islamic brotherhood (9); Thinking economics (10); Thinking politics (11); Dealing with deviance (12); Protecting minorities (13); Universal religion and relations between communities (14); Serving human rights (15); Living in the community (16); Conclusion (17).

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\*This bibliography is based on Abdou Filali-Ansary's book *Réformer l'Islam* and Souleymane Bachir Diagne's *100 mots pour dire l'islam*, with our warmest thanks (*Editor's note*).