

What makes a 'Good City'? A Muslim Perspective

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Background: The Islamic Worldview

In any discussion, the essence of what makes that person or group tick, as it were, needs to be examined. This is the best way to obtain a rounded view. We therefore think it is apt to explore the Islamic worldview in these preliminary pages. Mohammed Kamal Hassan describes this worldview in the following words:

The Islamic Worldview is essentially a theistic and ethical worldview which contrasts sharply with the secularistic or atheistic alternatives. This worldview emanates from the fundamental belief that life and existence came into being as a result of the will, desire and design of the One and Only Creator. The Islamic conception of God has therefore to precede any discussions on the nature of the universe and man's relation to it.¹

If we were to unpack this, we could say that in the Islamic worldview, there is no bifurcation of the world. There is no duality. The Islamic *Weltanschauung* is based on the two primary sources of the Qur'an which Muslims believe to be the direct word of God and the Sunnah which incorporates the traditions concerning the life example of the Prophet Muhammad. However, the core of both is the principle of *Tawhid* which provides inspiration for all that there is in Islamic religious thought.

The *Weltanschauung* grapples with ultimate questions, universal and general decisions; it provides the spectacles through which one sees the world and seeks answers to issues of crucial importance. Ultimate questions of human beings usually focus around an idea of God, the Ultimate Reality, the Holy, the Sacred. Therefore, to explore the characteristics of a 'Good City', examining the *Weltanschauung* is appropriate if not necessary.

Islam could be described as profoundly *theocentric* and notoriously monotheistic. The understanding of monotheism here is asserted to go a length further perhaps than as seen in other statements on the same concept. God lies at

the centre of everything that a Muslim does and this sometimes creates seemingly unpleasant implications as we often see in interactions with 'others'. For example, the concepts/words Allah and Rabb [Lord], are noted to be found over 3700 times in the Holy Qur'an. These are in addition to the attributes of God which are referred to as *Asma ul-Husna* (The most Beautiful Names – see Qur'an: 2:255; 7:180 ; 17:110; 20:8; 59:22 – 24).

But the Qur'an is not only about God. It is also anthropocentric – that is, it is also about the human being. The human being is also found hovering around the centre. In fact, Toshihiko Izutsu correctly points out that:

Man, his nature, conduct, psychology, duties and destiny are, in fact, as much a central preoccupation of the Koranic (Sic) thought as the problem of God Himself...²

We need to understand that God (Allah) was known before Islam came to the scene in Arabia and even in so called 'primitive cultures' this Being was known. However, the pre-Islamic perception was quite different in many ways to the Qur'anic view. To the *Jahili* ('ignorant' pre-Islamic Arabs), the Ultimate Reality did not demand the kind of urgency, centrality and attention that the Qur'an requires. Of course, they knew Allah as the Lord of the House (The Ka'bah), the Creator of the Heavens and the earth, and the Cosmic Objects, the one who gives rain and gives life to the parched land (see Qur'an: 29:61-63).

However, their perception of Allah was like that which is found in most primal religions i.e. a deity who is so highly transcendent and removed from humans that intermediaries are needed to reach Him. This is the argument said to be raised by those who the Qur'an saw as worshiping idols (see Qur'an: 39:3; 21:51-54, 57-66). They even allowed Allah some measure of humanity for example thinking of Him to have Daughters (Qur'an: 16:57). The *Jahili* philosophy of worshiping Allah was a matter of expediency – when needed, when it came to the crunch (Qur'an: 35:42). His name was used in oaths and to justify their practice of female infanticide (Qur'an 6: 137). This was the Reality they fell on when in crucial need but they associated others with Him (16:53-55). The Qur'an criticises this attitude: that when in dire need they call on Allah and when relieved of their problem they revert to their old ways (see: 16: 53- 55; 89:15). Izutsu describes this ambivalent attitude to Allah as 'Temporary Monotheism'³. It is this that the Qur'an came to correct. It is because of these entrenched perceptions of Allah that the Makkans were immovable in their opposition to the Qur'anic image presented by Muhammad. They thought they knew Allah in absolute terms. After all, as they used to argue consistently, this had been inherited from their forefathers. They found the Qur'anic ideal of

God/Allah too radical to accept. It seemed he was very different from what they were used to. As one scholar points out:

God, according to the Qur'an is Absolutely Real (*al-Haqq*), while all the rest of the deities are false (*Batil*) nothing but mere names. He is not a projection of man's mind as Feuerbach tends to think, nor is He a product of resentment of those who have fallen short as Nietzsche thinks. He is neither an illusion of those who have remained infantile as Freud contends nor is He, as Marx conjectures, an opium of the masses, a consolation serving vested interests.⁴

al-Faruqi further explains:

At the core of religious experience in Islam stands God. ... The name of God, 'Allah', which simply means 'the God' occupies the central position in every Muslim's consciousness at all times. With the Muslim, God is indeed a sublime obsession.⁵

The nature of God is further explained in the short *Surah al-Ikhlās* (Qur'an 112) which also sets out in forceful but plain language His uniqueness. The Unity of God implies that there is virtually no distinct division of knowledge into Secular and Religious. There is technically no division of the world into: Spiritual and Material, Sacred and Profane, the other World and this World, 'Church' and State, 'God and Caesar'. God is the source, origin of everything and therefore He teaches man what he does not know (Qur'an: 96:5). Further, in the creation narratives in *al-Baqarah*, the angels testified that they knew nothing except that which Allah had taught them (Qur'an; 2:32).

The Quranic teaching of *Tawhid* and the explanation it offers on the concept of God and His attributes are meant to enable humans to break free from the shackles of ignorance and enduring custom and tradition which would not ensure eternal salvation. It is this teaching that the Qur'an offers humankind so that they are guided absolutely aright. It is this which makes the Qur'an state with absolute certainty about its efficacy in providing humans with ultimate guidance (Qur'an: 2:1-2). It is primarily because of this that the Qur'an is very critical of those who take other beings or things or even their own ego as objects of worship or as 'lords'. Further, those who merely cling to tradition/custom without opening themselves up to the truth and taking advantage of the opportunities laid down by Allah through the divine word are severely criticised in the Qur'an (see:2:170-171).

The concept of *Tawhid* also has implications for plural society. The argument is simply this: If God is the Ultimate source of all that is, the whole of the human race is one. All communities are one and should therefore work towards a harmonious and peaceful existence. It is only when we start thinking that we might probably be either more important or superior to others that we run the risk of creating antagonism. A good city needs to avoid this and understand that all its inhabitants are one under the same God who created us all for a purpose, to serve Him wholly. This is something the Islamic worldview affirms.

Other ingredients of the Islamic Worldview are:

- Divine Revelation is the ultimate source of guidance.
- However, reason, as a gift of God, is a crucial tool to understand what God expects of us. Hence, blind acceptance of ideas is not to be encouraged.
- Human Beings are to relate to each other in peace and harmony so that together they will be able to meet the expectation of God.
- Life is temporary, Death is certain and there is afterlife where, on the Day of Judgement, one will account for the period of life on earth.
- Religion must have Public Image not just to display spirituality for the sake of it, but to enable the individual and society as a whole to seek inspiration for day to day life.

All these combine to make the Muslim understanding of a 'Good City' perhaps different from other perspectives.

The Islamic City - The Classical Experience: Makkah

Beg, discussing the role of urbanization in the historical development of Islam asserts that:

As an historian, I believe that it was also the Urban setting or environment that aided the progress of Islam as a successful religion in the world. The personality of the Prophet and the twin cities of Makkah and Madinah led to the final victory of Islam above polytheism and ignorance (*jahiliyyah*).⁶

In this statement, Beg, who has written extensively on Islamic civilization makes an important point regarding the role of cities or urbanization in general and the fast development of Islam.

While some scholars in the past suggested that Islam was successful due to its warfare, the reality in history has been that people saw in Islam a 'civilizing force' in addition to its Spiritual benefits. Jomier for example puts it succinctly that: 'Islam supplied the creative element out of which arose a new civilization.'⁷

In fact many communities in Africa entered into Islam not because they were conquered, but because the religion offered them what they saw as great improvement in their lifestyle including principles of communal living.⁸

Returning to the city of Makkah in pre-Islamic Arabia, this was a well-known mercantile city, sitting at the junction on the caravan route between the Indian Ocean (and East Africa) and the Mediterranean region. The prosperity of Makkah and the popularity of its ancient sanctuary, the Ka'abah, led to what historians described as the attempt by Byzantines with their surrogate, the Abyssinians, led by Abrahah As- Sabah Al-Habashi, to invade Makkah and destroy the Ka'abah. The reason was primarily because the Ka'abah was attracting too many pilgrims and affecting the sanctuary in San'a, Yemen. It was during this period of attempted destruction of the Ka'abah that the Prophet Muhammad was born. The year is popularly known as the 'Year of the Elephant' because it was reported that Abrahah's army had elephants among them. The story of how this sanctuary (Ka'abah) and the city was saved is depicted in the commentaries of Muslim scholars in Qur'an 105.⁹

Hence, the birth of the prophet in the city of Makkah has been seen as significant in Islam. After all, this is the city which is the original site of the place God chose for Ismail (Ishmael) to be raised and for his father (Abraham) to rebuild the Ka'abah (see: Qur'an 14:37-41).¹⁰

Beg further points out that:

Islam was 'born' in a city. The nucleus of Islamic civilization in microcosm was formed in two 'towns' or 'cities' of Makkah and Madinah. It is therefore not surprising to find that Islamic community (Ummah) proliferated cities (*mudun*) in the Middle East and beyond since the first century Hijrah. It is, therefore, important for the Muslims to understand city- life in order to understand Islam and its civilization.¹¹

For G.E. von Grunebaum:

... classical antiquity could not separate civilization from city life. It was the cities which secured conquered territories for Hellenism. Islam, too, needed the city as a base, and it needed it as the only locale in which the

correct life as prescribed by the book of God and the Prophet's Tradition could be lived out to the full.¹²

In both statements, the scholars are making invaluable points. The city is not there merely for the sake of it. It is to be used as the platform: the basis, indeed, the foundation, to achieve a higher goal. In Islamic understanding, this higher goal will be 'to serve the rationale for the creation of the human being'- to serve God. Service to God, as we have seen in the discussion on the Islamic *Weltanschauung*, presupposes creation of a harmonious world order. Harmony with God must be anchored in harmony with all aspects of the natural order, other humans, animals, the environment etc. Hence, the city of Makkah and its environs has been declared by God Himself to be *Haram* - inviolable. Even in the days of all the pre-Islamic decadence and violence, the 'House of God (Ka'abah) situated in Makkah was sacred, safe and secure for all and no form of warfare, squabbling or quarrelling was permitted (see: Qu'ran 2:125-8; 3:96-97; 90:1-2; 95:3).

The fact that the city is a 'means to an end' is an important principle that the modern world could embrace and explore the possibility of attaining it. Muslims would see this as general harmony, security and both spiritual and material prosperity for all its inhabitants, no matter what the ethnic origin, creed or complexion of the skin. The city is not only for material development. As has been pointed out: in Islam the sacred and the profane go 'hand in hand' to produce a more rounded human being. If one part is either suppressed or denied there is an imbalance, and every imbalance is frowned upon if not forbidden. It is this same principle that has made Muslims often move out of their places of origin, to migrate to make Hijrah to another city or place where they could live out their lives in full as Muslims.

The Hijrah and Islamic City

The 'Hijrah' which perhaps is the most important event in the historical development of Islam shaped the new religion and gave the Muslims the proper label of a community (an Ummah). In Hitti's explanation:

The Hijrah, with which the Makkan period ended and the Madinese period began, proved a turning point in the life of Muhammad. Leaving the city of his birth as a despised prophet, he entered the city of his adoption as an honoured chief.¹³

Even though there were Hijrahs (migrations) from Makka to Abyssinia by the persecuted Muslims in 615 and 617 CE, the main one to Madinah has been etched in Islamic history as 'the Hijrah'. It was here, in Madinah, that the Prophet established a polity where the main theoretical ingredients of Islam were put into normal human practice in full. Madinah as a city has therefore become the example, the model, indeed the epitome in Islamic political thought in terms of statehood. Madinah, initially as a city state, provided the opportunity for Islam to implement the divine teachings in the Qur'an and in the Sunnah (exemplary tradition) of the prophet.

In Makkah, by 622 CE, the situation had become almost intolerable. The persecution had gone beyond all old tribal Arab hostilities. Muhammad and his people had to move on. The place that was renamed *Madinat un-Nabi* (the city of the Prophet) was originally called Yathrib. The new name perhaps identified the period as the opening of a new era. The principle of Hijrah has therefore been used in many contexts especially by Islamic movements to emphasise a transformation, a new development, a new beginning. Many Sufi orders have used this principle in order to move out of places considered inimical to proper spiritual growth. The Qur'an itself gives hints as to the necessity of Hijrah (see: Quran 4:89, 97-98. 8:72).

M. Y. Faruqi explains this further saying:

Whenever it was found impossible by any group of devout Muslims to worship Allah in totality and follow the way of Islam freely in all its aspects and dimensions, they performed Hijrah to a place where it was possible to accomplish this objective of their life.¹⁴

One gleans from this that living one's Islamic life to the full is so important that, by implication, if this is not possible then an alternative place has to be sought. This means that, to Islam, a city should endeavour to provide opportunities for living religious life to the full. At least there must be the fundamental freedoms to allow a person to live the basics of Muslim life. It is important to emphasise here that this does not, in any way, prejudice the lifestyle of other communities within the city.

In the Madinan context, the understanding and practice of Islam was easier for those who lived within the environment built by the prophet. His personal touch was important. To avoid that personal touch, that personal interpretation and actualization of the faith was tantamount to denying the whole message altogether. That is why the Qur'an makes reference to those who

had not made the Hijrah without tangible excuse as if they had separated from the prophet (see: Qur'an 8:72 - 75). However, since in Islam proper intention is the basis for deciding in which category an action is located, the making of Hijrah has to be purely for the sake of God and His messenger (see: Qur'an 4:100).¹⁵

The Hijrah episode in Islamic history relates to the modern concept of refugees. Muslims have had that experience from day one and so, by implication, a good city should receive such people with open arms, offer them security, help them develop so that they can make a positive contribution to the whole of society. (This might address modern society about asylum seekers who are often subjected to all forms of indignities). A good city protects the needy, the weak, the dispossessed, the oppressed and the suffering. The command to 'fight' on the side of the oppressed women and children and the weak could be understood to include providing asylum and caring for them (see Qur'an 4:74 - 76).

Analysing the place of Hijrah in Islamic Law, Muhammad Khalid Masud writes:

After the migration, all ties, including 'blood' relationships, were broken with both non-Muslims and Muslims who refused to migrate. Instead, a new bond of brotherhood (*mu'akhat*) between *muhajirs* (migrants) and *ansars* (inhabitants of Madina - generally supporters or local hosts) was established, which entitled them even to inherit from one another...¹⁶

A new era had dawned indeed. In the old Arab tribal custom, 'blood was thicker than water' and therefore anyone who was not related to you by blood and through the tribal affiliations was fair game. Now, a new ideology has replaced this ancient one. Faith is the central criterion. When this is literally translated onto the modern plane: a city should not and cannot only be made up of people of the same faith. But this is exactly where the Madinan paradigm is significant for Muslims today. Madinah was a *plural city*. There were significant numbers of Jewish and other tribes in Madinah who never accepted Islam. This is where the Charter of Madinah (also called: The Constitution of Madinah) comes in.

In addition to the *Mu'akhat*, there were other socio-political institutions that helped weld Madinah together as a city of people with core collective objectives.¹⁷

The constitution of Madinah:

...made it inclusive of the Jews of Madinah and the Christians of Najran, guaranteeing to them their identity and religious, social, and cultural institutions.¹⁸

By this constitution (Charter) the prophet was able to bring about a multi-religious order where Muslims, Jews and Christians lived in peace and harmony constitutionally, legally. He was able to weld the warring tribes together around the principles of 'faith', 'truth', 'mutual trust' and 'justice'. The al-Faruqis continue that the charter was:

...not a matter of tolerating the alien customs of food, dress or music, but the whole corpus of laws that governed the life of the non-Muslim religious community. The pluralism of the Islamic state was a pluralism of laws, an innovation unheard of elsewhere in the history of mankind.¹⁹

Even though Islam is founded upon the 'Unity of God, Tawhid,' this same principle gives room for others to set up their own system within the same environment. The authoritative, objective Truth that Muslims believe is upheld in Islam does not blind them to coerce people into submission. In the city, therefore, all its inhabitants enjoy comparable freedoms. We recognise the difficulty of some people carrying this principle into modern plural society where the situation is much more complex. However, no matter the complexity of the modern city, the core principles of Islam enshrined in both the Qur'an and Sunnah are elastic enough to take care of this. Therefore, in a modern city like Birmingham, a Muslim should not have a problem helping to create a united front with all its inhabitants, those of religious faith and those who profess none, in order to build a strong, morally principled and prosperous society.²⁰

Islamic Cities in History

Due to the basic principles outlined above, Islamic civilization throughout history has promoted urbanisation in human society giving rise to numerous famous cities around the world. All Islamic empires or dynasties whether they lived up to the name 'Islamic' or not, have always been known for one thing: the development of cities with special characteristics. Both the Umayyad and Abbasid empires tried to outdo each other in this. Madinah, the city *par excellence*, gave the impetus for this and hence in history there have been various approximations to this paradigm. Most of these were known for their promotion of learning and scholarship, great architectural designs, and general promotion

of the arts. The town planning in these places took into consideration the Islamic ethos and the mosque became the 'centre' where the life of inhabitants was focussed. Public facilities like baths, parks and gardens were carefully planned into these cities and great efforts were made to maintain these. Due to the obvious impossibility of enumerating all these great cities, a few examples will suffice here: Baghdad, Basrah, Kufa, Fustat, Qayrawan, Sankore, Timbuktu, Toubah, Qum, Shiraz, Samarra, Tabriz and Cordoba are some of the great Islamic cities which have given various communities opportunities to live in peace and harmony attempting to serve the rationale of their creation.

Al-Djazairi notes:

Baths dominated the Islamic urban and social landscape, and were found alongside numerous pools; frequent washing part of religious duty in the Muslim world from the 7th century onwards. The great cities of the east possessed conduits of running water; and everywhere could be found many pools and baths.²¹

Concerned with health and social issues, the planning and running of cities took into consideration what would promote the material, physical and spiritual growth of its inhabitants. With this, the youth, for example, had something to do with their free time and hence were not running around finding crimes to commit as we see in our contemporary society. In fact, the principles of Law and Order, based on the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, very often led to reduced crime in many of these cities.

In a Good City, all the inhabitants have a collective responsibility to make it work for the glory of God. Islam will say Amen to that.

Preliminary Notes

¹ See his: 'The Islamic World-view' in: Abdul Monir Yaacob & Ahmad Faiz Abdul Rahman (eds.) *Towards a Positive Islamic World-view: Malaysian and American Perceptions*. Kuala Lumpur, Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, IKIM, 1994. pp.11-33; Quotation p.12.

² See his: *God and man in the Koran: studies in the Humanities and social Relations*. Vol. 5; Tokyo, Keico Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964. p75.

³ See *God and Man in the Koran*, p102.

⁴ Wan Daud, Wan Mohd Nor, *The Concept of Knowledge in Islam*. London, New York: Mansell, 1989, p.11.

⁵ al-Faruqi, Ismail, R., *Islam and Other Faiths*. Ataulah Siddiqui (ed.); Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, & Herndon, International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1998, p. 9.

⁶ Beg, M.A.J: *Two Lectures* p. 24.

⁷ Jomier 'Islam' *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* New Ed. Vol. IV fasc. 63-64; p. 175.

⁸ See Arnold: *The Preaching of Islam* esp. chps. XI- XIII.

⁹ see also: Al-Mubarakpuri, S.: *The Sealed Nectar:- Ar-Raheequl-Makhtum, Biography of the Noble Prophet*, Riyadh etc, Darussalam, 2001, 104-7-Guillaume, A: *The Life of Muhammad- A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul-Allah*. Oxford etc, OUP, 1995 esp. passage 1.

¹⁰ see esp the commentary in the translation by Hilali and Khan.

¹¹ Beg, *Two Lectures on Islamic Civilization*. K.L., UM Press, 1982 (2nd Ed. 1983), p.25.

¹² Cited in Beg, *The Image of Islamic Civilization*. KL, UM Press, 1980, p.52.

¹³ Hitti, P. K: *History of the Arabs*, p.116.

¹⁴ Faruqi, M. Y: 'The Hijrah and its Normative Significance - A Glance in Historical Perspective' in: *Hamdard Islamicus*, vol.XII, No.4 Winter 1989, p.4.

¹⁵ See also the Hadith (Tradition) of the prophet in *An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith*. No.1.

¹⁶ Masud, Muhammad Khalid: 'The Obligation to migrate: the doctrine of hijra in Islamic Law' in Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori (eds): *Muslim Travellers - Pilgrimage, migration and the religious imagination*. London, Routledge, 1990, p.31.

¹⁷ See: Faruqi, M. Yusuf: 'Social and Political Practices at the Time of the Prophet (PBUH) - A Study of the Institutions of Arafah and Naqabah' in *Hamdard Islamicus*, vol.XII no.1 Spring, 1989 pp. 67-73. Also, Siddiqui, M. Y. M: *Organisation of Government Under the Prophet*, Delhi, 1987

¹⁸ al-Faruqi, I.R. and L-Faruqi, Lois Lamy: *The Cultural Atlas of Islam*, New York, Macmillan, 1986, pp. 84 - 85.

¹⁹ al-Faruqi and al-Faruqi, *Cultural Atlas* p. 138.

²⁰ For a good analysis of the Madinan Paradigm, see: al-Umari, Akram Diya: *Madinan Society at the Time of the Prophet vol.1 - Its Characteristics and Organization*, Translated by Huda Khattab, Herndon, Va, IIT, 1991.

²¹ al-Djazairi: *The Golden Age and Decline of Islamic Civilization*, Manchester: Bayt al-Hikmah Press, 2006 p101 see especially part 1.