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## 'Man and the Future of Civilization' – A Rejoinder

*Khurshid Ahmad*

I am grateful to Sister Maryam Jameelah for her critical observations on my article 'Man and the Future of Civilization: An Islamic Perspective' (*Encounters*, 1:1, 1995). I hold Maryam Jameelah and her writings in great personal esteem and assure her that I have seriously reflected on her comments. *Inshā' Allāh* when I revise this article for publication in a collection of essays, I shall make certain modifications and additions to further clarify the points I have endeavoured to develop.

There are, however, a number of issues and criticisms that invite some discussion. At the very outset, let me confess that I fully agree with many of the essential observations of the learned critic but, in my own way, I have made the same points, yet she is accusing me of something which I have never believed or subscribed to. She rightly observes: 'Islam conceives of nature as a friend – not as an enemy – to man, so what need is there to conquer it?' But where have I suggested conquering nature? Rather, very early on in this article, I criticize the entire concept of conquest as diabolically 'Western' and 'Secular' and the root cause of the malaise. I state in very clear terms that 'humans and nature are not at war with each other: they are partners engaged in a common effort to achieve the divine mission' (p. 46, lines 3–4). Further on, I say: 'All resources, physical and otherwise, are in the nature of a trust in our hands. This means that we are not the masters, we are God's agents and our primary concern should be the fulfilment of the Will of the Lord' (p. 48, lines 12–14). Again in the same paragraph: 'This invites us to treat the whole creation not as foe, but as partner and friend, made to fulfil the same objectives' (p. 48, lines 19–20). My criticism of Western civilization, based on this very premise, is trenchant:

That the present order is characterized by injustice and exploitation has been proved beyond any shadow of a doubt. Islam suggests that the present order fails because it is based upon a wrong concept of human beings and their relationship with other humans, society, nature and the world (p. 46, lines 12–15).

Maryam Jameelah regards my analysis of modern Western civilization as 'superficial, stressing symptoms rather than basic causes'. Then she goes on to say that the real cause of the failure of Western civilization lies in its 'total rejection of absolute transcendental, spiritual, moral, social and aesthetic values'. She has every right to make her own assessment of any writing. My position is not different from hers. I have emphasized that the real cause lies in man's effort 'to interpret reality with the sole use of his reason and the knowledge yielded by his senses and experiences' and that 'he has jettisoned his link with tradition, with revealed truth, with the transcendent dimension, indeed with every form of guidance from beyond himself' (p. 39, para. 2). My criticism of the West underlines that the modern man's 'world-view lacks definitive criteria to help him judge between right and wrong', that 'his learning and experience fail to give him universal criterion to distinguish between good and bad', and that this has 'thrown him into a morass of relativism and nothing tangible and lasting remains as the basis of morality, individual and social'. In an attempt to point the way out of this crisis, I have submitted that salvation lies in the discovery of 'the word of God' – that 'informs them of their Creator, informs them of the purpose of their creation, informs them of their place as the "best of creation", provides them with guidance to lead a fulfilling and rewarding life, tells them of the Hereafter, teaches them the value of their fellow beings, makes everything else subservient to the criterion of truth and justice' (p. 43, last para.). I have also quoted *Sūra al-'Aşr* (al-Qur'ān 103: 1–3) as the best commentary on the causes of the failure of Western civilization as well as the basis for man's search for the alternative.

I have also been accused of crass materialism: 'Like so many materialistic reformers of this century, he supposes purely external changes in the political, socio-economic order will automatically result in the moral and spiritual improvement of man.' Nothing could be farther from what I have believed all along. This position is a total reversal of my position. In fact, this is exactly what I have criticized the West for in this very article. I said:

The methodology and strategy of change, as developed and practised in the contemporary West, has assumed that a radical transformation of humans can be brought about only by changing the environment and institutions. That is why emphasis has always been placed on external restructuring. *The failure of this method lies in ignoring people as its real focus – their beliefs, motives, values and commitments.* It has ignored the need to bring about change *within* men and women themselves and has *concentrated more on change in the outside world.* What is needed, however, is a total change – *within* people themselves *as well as in their socio-economic environment* (p. 44, para. 3).

I have clearly emphasized, in the same paragraph, that '*the starting point must be the hearts and souls of men and women, their perception of reality, and their own place and mission in life*'. A little later, I again stress the need for change '*within the hearts and souls of men and women – their attitudes, motivation, commitment, and their resolve to mobilize all that is within them and around them for the fulfilment of their objectives*' (p. 45, para. 3). That is why when I elaborate upon the Islamic alternative, I start with the revival of *imān* in *Tawhīd* and a deep commitment to Allah and our covenant with Him, and have tried to bring into sharp focus man's role as Allah's *Khalīfa*, vicegerent and deputy. My concept of harmony and equilibrium is diametrically different from that of secular reformers. What I am pleading for is: '*the integration of the material with the spiritual. This is the way advocated by Islam. It makes the whole domain of existence spiritual and religious. It stands for the harmonization of the human will with the Divine Will: this is how peace is achieved in human life. It is through peace with God that people attain peace in human order, and also peace with nature, outside as well as within them*' (p. 45, lines 31–4; p. 46, lines 1–2). The New World Order I am highlighting is not merely for this world – it is the one that establishes on earth the real Kingdom of God and, thus, leads to success here and salvation in the Hereafter.

I am surprised that I have also been accused of not mentioning the Hereafter. This is not correct. I have quoted the entire *Sūra al-Mā'ūn* (al-Qur'ān 107) and the critical issue it highlights which is the denial of the Day of Judgement and the relationship between wrongful behaviour whether relating to prayer or the eradication of hunger, with faith in *Ākhira* and the principle of accountability (p. 48). On page 43 (line 2 from bottom) there is a clear reference to the Hereafter. *Sūra al-'Aşr* also refers to 'distress', a clear reference to both distress in this world and the *Ākhira*. While revising the article, I shall further highlight this crucial aspect.

There are, however, one central, and a couple of peripheral issues raised by Maryam Jameelah that deserve further examination. She seems to be uncomfortable with presenting Islam as a movement for worldly change. Islam first and foremost is a covenant with Allah to completely surrender to His Will. It is a spiritual experience and a commitment to live in obedience to the Commands of Allah and His Prophet, *ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wasallam*. But the real question is how this submission to the Divine Will is to be realized: something on which man's success and salvation depend. Life on earth is in the nature of a test and a trial. Success in this world and in the *Ākhira* depends on fulfilling the Divine Will, not merely in one's individual life by cultivating *taqwā* but also by establishing a society and state that conforms to the

Commands of Allah and His Prophet, *ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wasallam*. Islam is not only a faith, it is also a *dīn* (complete way of life), a *da‘wa* (message and a mission) and a call for *Jihād* (all-out efforts to establish the supremacy of Allah’s Will in all domains of individual and collective life). Yes, the ideal is God’s good pleasure (*Marḍāt Allah*), and real success in the *Ākhira*, the eternal life, but that success – Paradise – can only be achieved by living in this world individually and collectively, both as individuals and as *Ummatan Wasaṭan* (the just and mid-most community) charged with the responsibility of establishing the *dīn* and making Allah’s Word supreme (*Iṭā’ Kalimat Allah al-‘Ulya*), of becoming Witnesses of Truth before Mankind (*Shuhadā’ ‘alā an-Nās*).

That is why I have very strong reservations about her claim that ‘the Islamic criterion for judging civilization is the degree of effective support it gives the individual on the path of eternal salvation – not its technological prowess. Paradise – not an earthly utopia – is the goal’. I cannot agree more that ‘effective support’ to the ‘individual on the path of eternal salvation’ is the primary concern, Paradise is the goal. But for that very purpose and goal it is essential that ‘support’ should come from the civil society and all its institutions. Family, economy, society, law, judiciary, state – all have a major role to play in providing this ‘effective support’, and facilitating the path to Paradise. Concern for these institutions and bringing them in harmony with and in the service of Islam is an integral part of the original Islamic paradigm. How can civilization offer this support if these civil institutions, the entire social matrix, does not represent and embody the Islamic ethos? That is why *al-amr bi’l-ma‘rūf wa al-nahy ‘ani al-munkar* (bidding what is Right and forbidding what is Wrong), resulting in the establishment of a new social order, constitutes the distinctive mark of Islamic civilization. To drive a wedge between the two is ‘post-colonial’ and not simultaneous concern with the two. She herself accepts there existed a ‘model’ or ‘ideal society’ during the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the *Khilāfa al-Rāshida*. The purpose of the movement for social change is to once again approximate towards that model. That is what Muslims have strived for throughout the 14 centuries of the post-*Khulafā’ al-Rāshidūn* period. What I have tried to highlight in this article is exactly what the Islamic paradigm is, as contained in the Qur’ān and as exemplified by the life and struggle of the Prophet (*ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wasallam*) and his Companions. This is what Imām Ḥusayn stood for immediately after the *Khilāfa al-Rāshida*. This is what Imām Abū Ḥanīfa supported in relation to the movement of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya. This has been the message of great Islamic reformers from Ibn Taymiyya to Shāh Waliullāh. There is no shadow of ‘post-colonialism’ in this emphasis on the

establishment of an Islamic social order, i.e. *Khilāfa ‘alā minhāj al-Khilāfa al-Rāshida*.

The very *Kalima* (there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His prophet), which builds our relationship with our Creator as our *Rabb and ilāh* and with Muḥammad (*ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wasallam*) as our Prophet, Guide and Leader, also relates Muslims to each other, welding them into one *Umma*. It was an integral part of the prophetic mission to, on the one hand, convey Allah’s Message to mankind, and on the other, to build an *Umma* consisting of those who accept this message. It was a part of his mission to establish the *dīn* (*iqāmat al-Dīn*) and strive for its supremacy throughout the length and breadth of human society. It is in the very nature of *īmān* that those who submit to the Will of the Creator, also strive to restructure all aspects of their individual and social life in accordance with the Guidance provided by Allah and His Prophet, *ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wasallam*. The Qur’ān and the *Sunna* provide guidance, not merely for personal piety and individual character-building on the foundations of *taqwā* or for *Ṣalat* (prayers), *Ṣawm* (fasting), *Ḥajj* (pilgrimage), *Zakāt* and *Infāq* (poor due and spending in the path of Allah), but also lay down clear laws, rules and regulations for family life, inheritance, civil and criminal law, economic and business relations and the conduct of the state and its institutions. Submission to Allah is not confined to the spiritual actions of the individual but rather covers the entire gamut of man’s life. That is why the ideal is beautifully expressed in the prayer:

Our Lord! Bless us with the Best in This World and the Best in the Hereafter and save us from the Torments of the Fire.

The Qur’ān categorically condemns Christian asceticism as *bid‘a*, an innovation as against what was originally enjoined upon them, i.e. seeking the pleasure of Allah (al-Qur’ān 57: 27). This has been contradistinguished by the true Islamic paradigm which describes the establishment of justice as one of the objectives of the *Risāla*:

Indeed We sent forth Our Messengers with clear messages (signs) and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, so that man may establish justice. And We sent down Iron in which there is great power, and many benefits for men, and so that God might establish who helps Him and His Messengers (believing in the) Unseen (al-Qur’ān 57: 25).

The Prophet, *ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wasallam*, illustrated beautifully this aspect of the Islamic paradigm when he said: ‘Every people have their

“religious asceticism” and the asceticism of my people (*Umma*) is the *Jihād* in the way of Allah’ (narrated by Ahmad). And this *Jihād* includes *Jihād bi’l-Nafs* (struggle for the purification of the soul) as well as *al-amr bi’l-Ma’rūf* (commanding what is right), *al-nahy ‘an al-munkar* (forbidding what is wrong) and *Jihād bi’l-Sayf* (struggle with the sword) wherever required.

The Qur’ān deals with the rise and fall of nations and lays down the twin principles of individual *Taqwā* and collective *Taqwā*. Those who base their society on *taqwā* and justice are promised well-being both here and in the Hereafter, and those who do not struggle against social wrong by remaining passive spectators of *fasād* (corruption and persecution) in society are held guilty of neglect and are doomed to be destroyed along with the evil-doers, despite their personal piety.

The Qur’ān says:

Had the people of the cities believed and been conscious of Us, We would indeed have opened up for them blessings from heaven and earth; but they cried lies, and so We seized them for what they had earned (al-Qur’ān 7: 96).

And, O my people (said Hud), ask forgiveness from your Lord, then turn towards Him in repentance; He will loosen the sky over you in abundance, and will increase you in strength unto your strength; and turn not away as sinners (al-Qur’ān 11: 52).

Had they established the Torah and the Gospel, and what has been sent down to them from their Lord, they would have partaken of all the blessings from above them and from beneath their feet (al-Qur’ān 5: 56).

Why were there not out of the generations that passed away before you, righteous men who would forbid others from causing corruption on the earth? And if such were there, they were only a few whom We had saved from those generations, or else the wrong-doers kept pursuing the ease and comfort which had been conferred upon them, thus losing themselves in sinfulness. And your Lord is not such as would wrongfully destroy human habitations while their inhabitants are righteous (al-Qur’ān 11: 116–17).

And guard against the mischief that will only bring punishment to the wrong-doers among you. Know well that Allah is severe in punishment (al-Qur’ān 8: 25).

Maryam Jameelah has rightly referred to Mawlānā Sayyid Abul A’lā Mawdūdī and his view that without recourse to Divine Guidance there is no way out for modern man. Reflecting on the above verses of the Qur’ān (11:

116–17), Sayyid Mawdūdī highlights the Qur’ānic view of the rise and fall of nations. He says:

... the Qur’ān points out the single common denominator of all those nations which met their doom in the past. All those nations had formerly been favoured with God’s blessings. But drunk with affluence, they resorted to mischief on earth. Their collective conscience was also completely vitiated. The result was that no righteous person was left among them to prevent them from committing evils. And if any such person did exist, their number was either too small, or their voice too feeble to prevent evils from predominating (*Towards Understanding the Qur’ān*, English version of *Tafhīm al-Qur’ān* translated and edited by Zafar Ishaq Ansari, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, Vol. IV, p. 138).

Emphasizing the message of the Qur’ān that emerges from this historical discussion, Sayyid Mawdūdī says:

... it is imperative that there should always be a good number of righteous people in every society; those who would invite people to righteousness and prevent them from evil. For God likes to see that there is righteousness in the world [emphasis mine]. And if God does tolerate the existence of evil in human society, He does so since the potential for righteousness continues to exist in that society. But such tolerance endures only as long as that potential remains. However, if the condition of a community deteriorates, rendering it altogether devoid of good people, or if the good people in that community become an insignificant minority, too weak to prevent it from proceeding along its evil ways, then God’s chastisement begins to loom large over it. That much can be said for sure. However, it is difficult to say with any precision when God’s chastisement will actually smite that community and destroy it (*Ibid.*, p. 139).

Explaining verse 25 of *Sūra al-Anfāl* quoted above, Mawdūdī<sup>1</sup> writes:

This refers to those widespread social evils whose baneful effects are not confined only to those addicted to them, but which effect even those who, although they might not be addicted to those sins, are a part of that society . . .

<sup>1</sup> Sayyid Mawdūdī has written extensively on the concept of *dīn*. See *Let Us Be Muslims; Towards Understanding Islam; Witnesses to Mankind; The Islamic Movement: Dynamics of Values, Power and Change*.

What God's directive seeks to impress upon people is that the reformatory mission of the Prophet (peace be on him) and the cause he was inviting people to was the source of life and well-being for them both individually and collectively. People should bear in mind that if they fail to participate wholeheartedly in the task to which they were invited and remain silent spectators to rampant evils, that would invite a scourge that would embrace all. It would afflict even those individuals who neither themselves committed evils nor were instrumental in spreading them and who might in fact have been righteous in their personal conduct (*Towards Understanding the Qur'an*, op. cit., Vol. III, pp. 146-7).

Personal piety and virtuous society represent two sides of the same coin. Similarly, Paradise in the *Ākhira* very much depends on our efforts in this world to seek *taqwā* in our individual lives as well as establishing a society based on *taqwā* and justice.

The Islamic paradigm captures all these dimensions simultaneously. I have made a humble effort to present the Islamic paradigm as it is found in the Qur'an and the *Sunna* and as it was exemplified in the golden period of Islam – the model of Madīna under the Prophet, *ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wasallam*, and under the *Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn*. My formulation may be weak or imperfect in certain respects, as any human effort could be, but my sources are the Qur'an and the *Sunna* and the example of the *Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn* and not post-colonial aberrations or the models of secular Western civilization. In fact my effort is to challenge secular Western civilization and present Islamic civilization as an alternative before mankind.

Before I conclude, let me also very briefly express my reservations about certain other observations of the learned critic. Technology does not mean modern technology only (which too has its acceptable and unacceptable elements, depending on their moral and social dimensions). There is no quarrel between Islam and technology *per se*, only those aspects and forms of technology that vitiate against its value-system are unacceptable. The fact is that every age and every civilization has had its own technology. The discovery of fire and of the wheel were just as great harbingers of technological revolutions as some of the technological developments of our own times, including splitting of the atom. Muslims too made tremendous contributions in the field of technology when they led the world. Such contributions were mostly in keeping with the values and ethos of their own culture. To ignore all the contributions that Muslims have made, and for that matter of all other peoples and civilizations, and suggest that 'the technological revolution is exclusively Western man's achievement' is a

gross mis-reading of history, or an exercise in reducing history to just the last four centuries. Such generalizations gloss over the fact that many later developments owe much to preceding innovations, even when they might have distorted, or even destroyed, earlier value perspectives.

I also fail to understand her abhorrence for 'conscious planning' and her claim that 'Islamic civilization developed naturally and spontaneously from its Divine source'. There is no denying the fact that all the major manifestations and achievements of Islamic civilization have had their roots in 'the Divine Sources'. But it is also a Law of God that without human effort, individual and collective, particularly organized effort towards mobilizing resources, nothing is achieved. *Laysa li'l-insāni illā mā sa'ā* (for man would not have except what he strives for) is a law set forth in the same Divine source. It is valid for moral as well as material pursuits. Yes, results finally depend on Divine grace but the process is conditioned by human effort. Even *Ṣalāt*, *Ṣawm* or *Ḥajj* do not materialize 'spontaneously'; it is only through human effort that they are achieved. Even mosques do not come into existence 'spontaneously'; they are built through human effort, and by resort to the technology of the time. There is a close relationship between technology and civilization and its values; but there is hardly any substance in this theory of 'spontaneity'. Planning does not necessarily mean 'centralized planning' of the Fascist or Communist type. After all, Prophet Yūsuf (peace be on him) also resorted to planning, drawing upon the seven years of abundance to cater for the seven lean years. The *Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn* faced the challenge of their times through strategic planning and organized effort. Imām Ibn al-Qayyim's discussion of *Sadd Bāb al-Dharī'a* and Shāh Walīullah's masterly exposition of *Irtifāqāt* relate to realms of planning and social change. Education and research, social development, military expeditions, all of them need planning and there is no reason why Muslims should make them *ḥarām* for themselves, in the hope of some spontaneous growth!

The learned critic, while approving of the Muslims' choices for democracy as 'right', has made a rather sweeping claim that democracy is an 'exclusively Western achievement foreign to any Muslim land in pre-colonial times'. If by democracy she means the secular democracy of the Westminster model or the US prototype, she is right. Muslims have never, and can never subscribe to the concept of the 'sovereignty of man' and 'humanistic liberalism' that go to provide the philosophic moorings of Western democracy. But democracy is not merely a contemporary philosophic doctrine. The concept also relates to certain operational aspects which are not an exclusive preserve of contemporary Western democracies.

The principles of rule of law, of separation of powers, of rulers' accountability, of governance through consultation, of checks on arbitrary power, of induction and removal of leadership by reference to the will of the people, and of freedom of opinion, expression and dissent are an integral part of an Islamic socio-political framework. Without disputing the fact that in certain periods of Muslim history many of these rules have been violated, it is also correct that these principles have always been accepted as the norm and the ideal, and deviations therefrom were disliked, criticized and fought against.

And who can claim that even Western democracies do not suffer from a number of contradictions and departures from their own norms and principles. I would, therefore, submit that perhaps a more qualified statement is needed to achieve a correct appraisal of the Islamic position as well as that of history, both past and present.

Finally, while thanking Maryam Jameelah once again for raising questions that have given me an opportunity to further reflect on my position and elaborate upon some of my submissions, may I also confirm that the article under discussion was not supposed to cover *all* possible questions relevant to the subject. It had a limited objective: to highlight the present predicament of man and civilization and to suggest *some* aspects of the Islamic alternative. As to the question 'who will undertake the alleged desired changes?' and with what qualifications, my submission is that all challenges in human history have been faced by people who commit themselves to certain ideals and strive for their achievement, individually and collectively. Such persons may be few or many. It is they who have changed the course of history, with Allah's leave. This is what the Muslims did under the leadership of the Prophet, *ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wasallam*. This is the mission which beckons men and women of goodwill today. The response should come primarily from the Islamic *Umma*. But the challenge is faced by all humans. There is no reason why people of goodwill from all parts of the world may not respond to this challenge. I have confidence in man and his future. And I prefer to err on the side of optimism and hope. *Lā Taqnaṭū min Raḥmat Allah* (Be never despondent of Allah's mercy) is what I believe in. *Da'wa* is the way to face the challenge. Therein lies the hope of a brighter morning.