

Religious Values in Plural Society

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Chandra Muzaffar



Introduction

What should be the role of religious values in a plural society? Before we attempt to answer this question, we should perhaps reflect on the role of religion in contemporary society. It is important to reflect upon the role of religion in a contemporary society because there has been a religious resurgence of sorts in various parts of the world in the last thirty or forty years. This is a phenomenon which has made an impact upon all of us. We will discover that there is a growing interest of religion in countries as diverse as the United States of America, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia and Pakistan.

What is the impact of religious resurgence upon relations between different communities in multi-religious societies? Why is it that when religious resurgence occurs – when an individual, a group or a community becomes more religious in a conventional sense of the term – invariably, a certain distance develops between that group or individual and the rest of the non-Muslim, non-Christian, or non-Hindu community? Why does that happen? Why do these religious resurgences create a chasm between one community and another? Why is it, that sometimes, when religious resurgence occurs, tensions occur between followers of different religions? Why is it that in the midst of religious resurgence, we have witnessed conflicts and sometimes even violence? What explains this? Why is this happening? Why is it that when there is a revival of interest in religion, as it happens in a number of societies, there are schisms that developed within a particular community between those who are religious or see themselves religious and others who they see as less religious? Why do schisms of this sort developed? What explains this? These are very important questions for us to ponder over.

Look at the evidence we have before us. Perhaps, the most outstanding example of a country where religious resurgence has led to all the things that I had mentioned is India. The rise of Hindu nationalism has led to a certain distance between quite a lot of Hindus on the one hand, and the non-Hindus, who are a minority in India – Christians, Muslims and others. It has also led to divisions within the Hindu community in India. This is one example of a very recent phenomenon of religious resurgence in India, in the name of Hinduism.

Let us look at Pakistan, another example of a country where there has been an Islamisation of sorts over the last four or five decades, that is, governments and individuals trying to reassert the Islamic identity. Look at the consequences; the impact upon Christians and Hindus who are miniscule in numbers in Pakistan. They have been sidelined and marginalised. Look at its impact upon the Muslim community in Pakistan itself – the gap that has developed between Muslims who will see themselves as ‘Islamic’ and those who are seen as ‘non-Islamic’, even though they are Muslims.

Look at what is happening in a country like Sri Lanka, where there has been a certain degree of politicisation of Buddhism. Buddhist monks are taking on political positions and this has led to antagonisms in Sri Lanka.

Look at what has been happening in a country like Israel. The distortion of Judaism has led to a situation where you have a very aggressive type of Zionism – militant, virulent and violent

– marginalising segments of the Jewish population, including the Muslims, Christians and others who were part of Palestine and Israel.

Reflect on what is happening in the United States of America, where there has been a growth of the conservative Christian Right. The Christian Right, as it has been described, is narrow in its thinking, militant in some aspects, against abortions, against doctors who perform abortions and so on. They possess a certain worldview that is very antagonistic towards Muslims, and committed to a certain vision of the role of Christianity in the 21st century.

In other words, the evidence that we have seems to suggest that religious resurgence has not been helpful in many multi-religious societies. That is the empirical evidence before us. How does one explain this? Why is this so? What are the reasons which explain the somewhat negative impact of religious resurgence, whether it is in the name of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity or Islam? There are perhaps a variety of reasons. I shall highlight seven possible reasons why this is happening.



Seven Possible Factors

1. Exclusivist Religious Identity

When a person becomes religious in the contemporary world, more than in the past, the person attaches himself or herself to the forms, rituals and symbols which signify his or her religious identity. This invariably happens and is understandable: One attaches oneself to a certain religious identity as a mark of one's religious devotion, of one's profound attachment to faith as one sees it. When we attach ourselves to the symbols, forms, rituals and practices of a particular religion, we will distance ourselves somewhat from others who do not belong to that religion.

This, again, is understandable, because rituals, symbols, forms and practices belong to particular religions and are thus exclusive. People in other faiths would not be able to share those rituals, symbols, forms and so on. They are always exclusive. Because of this exclusive dimension in every religion, people who become religious tend to develop an exclusive outlook. This is happening much more today than in the past. And this, I think, is one of the factors that have contributed to the chasm that I mentioned between people of one religion and people who do not belong to that religion. It happens because what is emphasised in the name of one's religious identity is the exclusive dimension of religion.

2. Role of Religious Elites

The emphasis on the exclusive dimension of religion in the name of one's religious identity is linked to a second factor: the people who teach religion, that is, the people who are responsible for perpetuating a religious tradition as well as those who are protectors of a religious identity. These are the *ulama'* in the case of Islam, priests in the case of Christianity or Hinduism, and so on and so forth. They give emphasis to the exclusive aspects of religion because it enhances their power and status.

This, again, is something which should not surprise us: if one is a protector of a particular religion or tradition and that tradition expresses itself via symbols, rituals, practices and such, one would want to look after one's turf and would want to ensure that that turf is maintained. Thus, this becomes the way by which one perpetuates one's religious territory, that is, by guarding one's turf jealously and protecting that turf at all cost. In other words, religious elites, whoever they may be, contribute towards the perpetuation of a particularistic, exclusive tradition, as it has happened right through the centuries, but more so in the last couple of centuries.

3. Role of Politicians

A third reason, which is perhaps much more contemporary than the first two reasons, are the politicians. Politicians cannot resist the temptation of manipulating religion, in an exclusive sense; that is, by highlighting the symbols and forms of religion and those aspects of religion which highlight the religion's exclusive identity.

Politicians invariably try to exploit the people's sentiments for political purposes so that they can enhance their power and perhaps expand their constituency (to win votes). This has happened over and over again in history. Look at the examples from India. There is a term which is used to describe this: the **religious vote bank**. Political parties in India and other countries, such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and to some extent, Indonesia, had exploited sentiments of these sorts. Politicians invariably do such things for political gains.

4. Type of Development

What is the fourth factor that we should take into account that contributes to this situation where religion is seen through very exclusive lenses? Because religion is such a potent force and it has got so much emotional pull behind it, we will find that when religion does not play a particular role in society as a result of changes that are taking place, there is a vacuum that develops within the individual and the community. To be more specific, the sort of development which the whole world has been witnessing in the last few decades is a type of development which does not pay attention to that very potent force in the human being and in the human community. It does not pay attention to the spiritual dimension of our existence. It is a development that is concerned largely with materialism and with consumerism.

As a result of such development process, a certain alienation or vacuum develops. This explains why people try to fill that vacuum by clinging on to religious symbols and forms. It has happened in cities in various parts of the world. People sometimes wonder why is it that in the midst of modernisation, progress and development, we have people returning to age-old religion. One of the reasons is perhaps the nature of development itself – a development which is not only irreligious, but a development which negates the spiritual self. Because it negates the spiritual self, the human being feels the need to go back to religion and fill the vacuum. So this may yet be another factor, especially in certain developed societies.

5. Global Culture

A fifth factor which may be contributing to the phenomenon that we are witnessing is perhaps related to the nature of a global culture that has emerged in the last few decades. Here, we are referring to a homogenising global culture. The homogenising global culture – a global

culture which erodes local cultures, indigenous lifestyles and value systems – made people feel frightened. Maybe this is one of the reasons why Muslim women, for instance, in the West, have taken to the *hijab* [veil] as a way of reasserting their own identity. In the midst of challenge and onslaught from outside, one reasserts the importance of the *hijab*.

It is a very significant point to note that the grandmothers of the older generation, in any part of the world, were not yet attached to the *hijab* because the challenge of a globalised culture was not that real in the past. In other words, they were comfortable in their own cultures; they dressed modestly, they preserved their identity, and they did not feel the need to express their identity in a particular manner. Today, that need is very great because of the onslaught of this global culture that threatens the indigenous local identities. So this may yet be another factor why people cling on to certain aspects of religion.

6. Political Hegemony

A sixth factor which may explain this process of emphasising certain aspects of religion is related to global political hegemony. For a few decades now, we have been exposed to a certain type of Washington-helmed global hegemony. This global hegemony did not begin with September 11. It has been there for some decades. When we have a situation where there is a global hegemony (that is, a global *hegemon* which is dominating the world, ruling the world and sometimes conquering other people's lands, taking away their resources, marginalising them, killing them, maiming them, and torturing them), people react. As part of that reaction, they reassert their identity. And the most powerful conduit for expressing their identity is, of course, religion.

Let us, for example, look at Afghanistan. I am not referring to Afghanistan today, but Afghanistan in the past. Afghanistan and its politics were, for a long while, very secular. In fact, Afghanistan had communist rulers for a while who had very little time for religion. And then, of course, we saw the Soviet invasions of Afghanistan in 1980s. They took over the country and they threatened the integrity of Afghan society. It was after the Soviet invasions and occupations that the Mujahideen movement developed. In other words, Afghans returned to their religion as a way of protecting themselves against Soviet invasions and occupations. The Americans, as you know, backed the Mujahideen at that time. They were totally behind the Mujahideen against the Soviet Union because that was the time of the Cold war between these two superpowers.

It is a pity that the Americans do not seem to understand that what is happening today in Iraq is not very different. Iraq was also a very secular society at one time, under the Baathist, which was very secular in many ways. But today, we have a religious resurgence in Iraq. Iraqis are reacting because of occupation; their land has been taken over and their resources have been stolen. They are returning to religion as a way of protecting themselves.

Another example is Palestine. If we observe at the initial period of the Palestinian liberation struggle, it was actually quite secular. The al-Fatah was secular. The Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), in the earlier stages, was secular. But after the occupation of the West Bank in Gaza in 1967, the situation changed. Religious groups emerged, and in the last 15 to 20 years, religious groups like the Islamic Jihad and Hamas have become more popular than some of the secular groups. Again, when people feel threatened, when their territories are occupied, when their integrity and identity are challenged, they would return to religion. This is yet another factor that has contributed to the phenomenon that we described earlier.

7. Poverty and Despair

The seventh and final factor that explains what we are witnessing today is related to poverty: a feeling of hopelessness, helplessness and despair. Such feelings, driven by poverty, contribute to the reassertion of religious identity. In other words, when we have a situation of mass poverty (to be more specific, abject abysmal poverty), when there is a great deal of suffering, when there is a feeling that nothing much can be done, when we feel that we have lost our faith in secular beliefs and ideologies, and when we do not believe in the State's systems anymore, we turn to what we believe is the ideal. For the Muslims, that ideal has been, is, and will always be Islam. Thus, we have seen a situation where people turned to Islam and say, "Look, this is where the solution lies. It is the panacea that will cure all ills."

This is one of the reasons why, in Pakistan, for instance, we will find a certain radical type of Islamic resurgence in very poor areas. These are individuals who joined movements to proclaim religion as the panacea to the world's entire problem and reassert an attachment to an exclusive dimension of religion. It is not confined to Islam or to Muslims. It is also true, to some extent, in India. If you look at Hindu revivalism, the masses that support Hindu revivalism are actually very poor. They joined huge demonstrations and they demonstrated on behalf of certain rituals and saints – like the Barbari movement which sought to demolish the Barbari mosque, and later, a movement to ensure that the mosque is not rebuilt. These are people who come from the downtrodden, the disadvantaged, or the deprived in societies. Therefore, this is yet another factor that contributes towards religious resurgence, whether Islamic, Hindu, Christian, or others.

Seven Possible Solutions

I have discussed the various reasons which contribute towards religious resurgence and a certain type of attachment to religion. I had stated earlier that this is not healthy because this sort of attachment to religion – one that tends to emphasise the divisions and dichotomies in society, separates people, and creates a chasm – does not contribute towards bridge-building in plural societies or multi-religious societies. Thus, the questions that we have to ask ourselves are: Is there a way out? Is it possible to overcome this? In my opinion, it is possible to overcome the challenges posited earlier.

1. Overcome Poverty

First, it is important to pay attention to issues such as poverty. We must develop our society. In other words, in order to overcome the challenge posed by a very narrow approach to religion, we do not just look at religion *per se*. We have to look at society in total. And one of the things we have to attend to is on the question of poverty or social mobility (such as providing jobs and making people feel that they have a future). This is very important.

This is the reason why, if we look at multi-religious countries like Malaysia and Singapore, we will find that religious extremism of the types observed in Pakistan or India, is under control. Part of the reason is because Malaysia and Singapore are more developed societies. You have

checked poverty effectively in this country (Singapore). Malaysia has also done very well in reducing *absolute poverty*, that is, high percentage of population living below the poverty line. And there is a sense of hope, as far as a broad mass of society is concerned. This is a very important factor.

2. *End Hegemony and Dominance*

Second, it is important to work towards the end of hegemony and dominance. If we want to check religious extremism, we cannot perpetuate hegemony and dominance (for example, by annexing other people's territory, marginalising others, having military bases all over the place, and humiliating the weak and the vulnerable). We cannot do all those things and then expect religious extremism to go away. Therefore, we have to bring hegemony and dominance to an end. This is something that is very important.

Let us reflect on a couple of things. Those who are so concerned about religious extremism and why this is happening, should ask: Why is it that before the occupation of Iraq, there were no terrorist cells in Iraq? Iraq did not breed terrorists for a simple reason: They have no reason to indulge in terrorism, or violence. And if you look at Palestine, we forget that before the second *Intifada* which began in September 2000, there were no suicide bombers in Palestine. It is a phenomenon that started after the second *Intifada*. The first *Intifada* in 1987 was the *Intifada* of the stone-throwing children. In the second *Intifada*, people become very desperate because of occupation and because of Ariel Sharon's policies; this is reaction to it.

In other words, we have to end occupation and hegemony if we want to check religious extremism. There is no other simple way of doing it. We cannot advise people, yet perpetuate hegemony, and somehow hope extremism will go away; it will not.

3. *Protection and Preservation of Indigenous Cultures and Identities*

Third, it is very important to protect and preserve indigenous cultures and identities. In addition, religion, which shapes cultures and identities, has to be protected too. In the midst of globalisation and homogenisation of culture, we have to protect indigenous cultures and identities so that people feel secure, safe and comfortable; it is culture that provides comfort and succours individuals and communities.

One country which is trying to protect its cultures, communities and religion is Iran. Iran gives a lot of emphasis to her own identity. For example, her films and music are attempts to protect the nation's integrity. Iranian films have done very well internationally; they won prestigious awards because these are films that reflect what matters to ordinary people in Iran, that is, their sense of being, their sense of integrity, and their calms.

4. *Balanced Development*

Fourth, it is also very important to have a type of development that is more balanced, not just a type of consumerist, materialistic development that has taken over the world. We need a more balanced approach to development through curbing a rapacious type of consumerism. We must make human beings feel that there are other dimensions to living.

This is why 15 years ago, the United Nations itself, through the United Nations development programme, introduced the notion of **human development**: a development that centres on the human being as opposed to the materialistic, capitalistic type of development which had become very pervasive. Thus, we have to rethink our development processes. We have to look at the premises of development itself.

5. Curbing Exploitations of Religion

At the same time, there is a fifth factor: We must look at ways and means of curbing the exploitation of religious sentiments in politics. Can it be done? We know that politicians are very powerful people. Yet, it can be done and has been done. The country which proved that you can curb religious communalism through the vote (that is, through the ballot box) was India.

The Indian masses, during the general elections of 2004, voted overwhelmingly against a ruling coalition that propagated the type of Hindu nationalism that we discussed earlier. They were rejecting that sort of Hindu nationalism although it had brought a certain degree of development to the upper echelons of Indian society. Everyone thought that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party which led India would do very well in the elections. Yet, BJP failed to retain its power. Why? Because the Indian masses, the vast majority of them Hindus, were not prepared to tolerate this particular approach to religion, among other factors. This is, undoubtedly, one example which shows that through the ballot box, civil society, ordinary citizens, or voters, can express revulsion against the exploitation of religious sentiments in politics for the purposes of power.

6. Re-education of Religious Elites

Sixth, we can also develop various measures to re-educate our religious elites and make them more open, inclusive, and universal in their thinking. This is something that should be done and this applies to all religious elites from all the different religious communities because all of them have this problem of narrow interpretations or somewhat bigoted thinking when it comes to critical issues facing humankind.

Therefore, re-education of the religious elites is another important aspect that we ought to pay attention to.

7. Promoting a Universal Approach to Religion

And most important of all, perhaps what we need is an attempt to develop a deeper and profound understanding of religion itself. It involves a transformation of our understanding of religion.

In other words, we have to move from an exclusive notion of religion to a more inclusive vision of religion, from a parochial understanding of religion to a universal understanding of religion, and from a particularistic understanding of religion to a more enlightened understanding of religion. Perhaps, these are what we need to address the problems mentioned earlier.



The Present Challenges

I have discussed what is possible and what can be done. Some of these things, as noted in my earlier remarks, are being done. I have talked about the achievements in certain areas – poverty alleviations, the concept of human development, and about resisting hegemony and occupation that is currently happening. All of these are being done now; but it is not enough. We have to do much more to bring about the changes that we were talking about.

In particular, there are two areas that we have to attend to: (1) the reshaping of attitudes and outlooks associated with religious elites, and (2) the reshaping of our understanding and awareness of religion itself. These are major challenges; simply because of the situation we are in.

Shrinking World

The world has become much smaller and we have become more inter-dependent on one another. Globalisation and all that it implies has made borders and boundaries irrelevant. Communities everywhere are becoming more and more heterogeneous and no longer homogenous. We cannot run away from this reality. These are the challenges that confront us; this is the irreversible historical trait.

We cannot wish away what is happening by saying, for instance, “It does not matter; we will be able to stop them.” We simply cannot. This is because globalisation is driven, to some extent, by technological imperatives. And whenever changes are driven by technological imperatives, they have their own dynamism and momentum. We would not be able to stop this. In other words, this is an ongoing process: The world is shrinking and people are forced to live with others and trying to understand the others. Whether we like it or not, this is going to be our reality. Within our nation-states, and at the global level, this is our challenge.

Rising Religious Consciousness

At the same time, something else is happening that I had alluded to at the beginning: All over the world, people are becoming more and more conscious of religion. Thus, we see these two processes: On the one hand, the world is getting smaller (borders and boundaries are becoming irrelevant) and at the same time, people are becoming more conscious of religion, that is, people are returning to religion or what someone once described as ‘the return of the Sacred’.

For example, let us look at the United States’ recent elections. The conservative Christians (the so called Christian Right) played a very big role in the re-election of President Bush. Look us look at Europe too: A secularised continent in many aspects (Western Europe, in particular) but religion is still an important issue. An example is the debate over whether God should be included in the European Union Constitution and whether Christianity should be mentioned. Of course, in the end, they decided not to make special mention of Christianity; but nonetheless, it was a very big debate in Europe.

There is yet another example: Can Turkey join the European Union? This question is related to religion, to some extent: "Is Europe Christian, even if it is Christian only in the cultural sense? Can Europe also accommodate a huge Muslim country with a population of 70 million? Will it change the character and the identity of Europe?"

In other words, religion has become a very important issue all over the world. In the non-Western world, religion has always been important. We have never given up on religion. It has always been important in Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist countries. Religion has always been very significant. So religion is with us and will continue to stay and play a role. We cannot run away from this. The question is: How does one confront these issues and the challenges posed?

Conclusion: Confronting the Challenges

I think it is very important, given the challenges we face, for us to understand in depth the role of religion in the shrinking world. We have to understand that there are values embodied in religion that are important for this shrinking world. If the world is shrinking, if we are becoming more and more inter-dependent, and if we have to live with the Other, there are certain negative elements in human behaviour that should be curbed and checked. To be more precise, we have to check our greed and our acquisitiveness. Otherwise, there is no other way by which we can survive.

Transformative Effects of Religion

In a shrinking world where resources are finite, we have to learn how to curb our greed, acquisitiveness and selfishness. And the most powerful force in human history for checking those vices and negative traits in us has always been religion. You cannot do it through secular philosophies. Secular philosophies will not be able to help you because secular philosophies – whether it is liberalism, Marxism, or whatever – do not have that power of a transcendent truth to be able to curb certain tendencies in human being. Being human beings, we will always try to adjust situations to our own interest. But when a truth has got a transcendent root, this curbing of interest can be done. When we say, "I must give, I must share, I must care, I must think of the other human being", (and we say this as an absolute truth and believe it in the depth of our heart as a deep conviction), it will be able to transform our entire personality. That is the sort of transformation that only religion can bring about.

For example, let us look at the transformation underwent by the great Buddhist emperor, Asoka, after the battle of Kalinga. That transformation is only possible because he attached himself to religious truth. Let us look also at the great transformation that the early Arab community underwent under the guidance of the Prophet (may peace be upon him). Because it was a powerful transcendent truth, they changed their lifestyles and their value systems; they desisted from doing things which was so innate and so deeply entrenched in their culture. They jettisoned and abandoned those practices, and transformed. Observe also, at some of the attitudes of the Christian saints in the medieval period. The transformation that someone like Ignatius Loyola underwent is because of his attaching himself to the supreme truth. We need such transformations again in our century and in our time.

Checking greed, selfishness and acquisitiveness cannot be done through secular ideologies. One ideology tried and it failed miserably: Marxism. Marxism tried to create the 'new man'. This was the term the Marxists used to refer to a different human being who would be selfless, capable of sacrifice, and able to share and to give. They wanted a totally different sort of human being because, as we know it, Marxism is based upon the notion of sharing, equity and redistribution. But it did not work. Why? Because it did not have a transcendent power behind it; thus, it failed.

The Power of Restraint

In addition, we need religious values for yet another reason: In this shrinking world where we have become so dependent upon each other, it is important to exercise restraint. When it comes to consumption, we will tell ourselves, "Look, this is all that one will consume; not as an individual *per se*, but as a nation, and as a people." We will also say, "Look, these are my limits." Thus, we recognise the limits and the boundaries; which is what restraint is all about. Restraint is so important, whether it is in economics, consumption, politics and power, or in culture. In inter-personal relations, restraint is very important.

Restraint is a value that comes from religion. It does not come from a secular philosophy. Let us examine secularism, which, by the way, has got many positive elements to it. However, we cannot run away from the fact that secularism, linked to the European Enlightenment, has negative elements. The European Enlightenment gave birth to some great ideas; amongst them the idea of freedom, that is, freedom revolving around the individual. Now, if we pursue that idea (freedom of the individual), our right to do what we want, our right to enjoy, our right to seek pleasure, and if that becomes our credo that drives us, this planet of ours will not survive. In other words, humankind as a whole will meet a collective death. That is why we need restraint, control, and impulse-checking. Thus, we need to be moderate and to be balanced. Again, these are values that emerge from religion.

In religion, 'equilibrium' is a very important concept. We will find this concept in Islam, that is, the notion of the middle nation: "Thus, We made of you a people of the middle nation as an example for others" (*Surah Al-Baqarah* 2:143). This is something that you will also find in Confucianism: The notion of the Golden Mean. This notion of balance of equilibrium is also found in Taoism, Buddhism and in all the great traditions. In other words, what we are saying is: Do not just attach yourself to the Enlightenment or the values that the Enlightenment gave birth to, as far as the 21st century is concerned. It has served its purpose. It has brought about some great changes in human history. Now, we have to go *beyond* the Enlightenment. We have to reconnect with fundamental religious truths." That is our challenge.

Universal Dimension of Religion

At the same time, there is something else that we have to do. We have to understand the universal dimension of our religion. I had mentioned earlier that there is an exclusive aspect of religion. But there is also the universal dimension of religion. The universal dimension of religion is very powerful.

In the 21st century, in a shrinking world, in a world where borders and boundaries are becoming irrelevant, it is the universal dimension of religion that must be at the forefront. We cannot survive if we become parochial, particularistic and exclusive in our thinking. I had said this for a

number of times already: the universal dimension is vital.

All religions have their dimensions. But let me comment about the Islamic approach to universalism that, in my opinion, is something that we have to try to understand. In some ways, this Islamic approach to universalism is perhaps the key to understanding universalism in the 21st century. Why is it the key? Because Islam combines two fundamental truths in its notion of universalism: (a) Islam accepts particular identities, and (b) it accepts diversity.

Accepting Diversities

Islam accepts the fact that people are different and that they are being created different. We have different communities and cultures. Thus, diversity is not a problem for Islam. If Islam can accept diversity in the animal kingdom, and the Qur'an talks about it, it can accept diversity within the human family. In fact, diversity is celebrated in Islam: "We made you into nations and tribes, so that you would know one another" (*Surah al-Hujurat* 49:13). Our differences are tests: Allah made us different as a test, so that we would strive to do good to one another (*Surah al-Ma'idah* 5:48). So, diversity is not a problem for us. We do not encourage a parochial attitude and a chauvinistic attitude. We accept diversity.

Recognising Unity

However, beyond diversity is unity. This is the second fundamental truth: Diversity and identity, but unity at the same time. By 'unity', we mean unity of the human family, of the whole of creation, and of the entire cosmos. Islam talks about that sort of unity. It is a very profound notion of unity.

That is what we need in the 21st century: We have to preserve our identities as mentioned because identities give us that comfort. But at the same time, we have to understand that we are part of a bigger family. We have to balance both these elements and fundamental truths: The truth that belongs to us as a group, and the truth that belongs to all of us as one human family.

For us, Islam provides guidelines that, I think, are very important. We have to convey to the whole of humankind this important message, that is, balancing what is particular and what is universal. And in the process of discovering our common humanity, differences are a part of our common humanity. Our similarities are also part of our common humanity. The unity of the whole human family underscores our common humanity but our differences also underscore our common humanity because these differences make us human. That is the challenge before religion in the 21st century. The question is, are we prepared to embrace the challenge?





SCHOLAR'S PROFILE



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