CREATING A "VIRTUOUS SOCIETY" FOR THE MODERN AGE: THE RELIGIOUS ELITES AND THEIR OBLIGATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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The Muslim world has undergone a number of radical changes over the past few years, with its rising calls for reform, greater freedoms and the creation of democratic institutions, and its religious elites are responding to the new situation by playing an increasingly high-profile role in society.

Their new social role reflects a growing awareness of the contribution they are expected to make in serving their communities and trying to build a "virtuous society". Consequently, today they attach particular importance to issues such as reform, justice, equality, public rights and obligations, the development of sound Islamic attitudes and the promotion of the public interest.

It is no longer regarded as acceptable for the religious elites to limit their activities to issuing doctrinal rulings, fatwas and moral directives. They are now being called upon to play their part in infusing new life into

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religious thought, while adopting a critical approach to their heritage and endeavouring to create a new cultural ethos that will serve the interests of the Islamic societies of today.

For our part, it is vital for us to understand the true nature of our countries' elites – particularly the religious elites – since they hold the keys to society's progress and stability and have a major impact on our systems of government, ideas and beliefs.[1]

That is why this paper will focus on the role of the religious elites in creating a "virtuous society" for the modern age.

The definition of an elite

The word "elite" – "*nakhbah*" in Arabic – is in common use these days, alongside other terms such as "*muthaqqaf*" ("a cultured, erudite person") and "*tali'ah*" ("vanguard"). Although al Maududi generally used the word "*du'at*" ("those who invite") when writing in a religious context, Hasan al Banna[2] preferred "*nakhbah*".

The expression "religious elites" does not only apply to representatives of official religious institutions – such as imams of Religious Endowment Ministry mosques, *'ulama'* (scholars) attached to Grand Muftis' offices and professors of Shariah colleges. It is actually a much broader term that also includes imams of other prominent establishments, as well as religious leaders, preachers, religious political groups, recognized Shariah *'ulama'* in general and graduates of the religious departments of higher educational institutions.

The religious elite represents the "cream" of those who practise what the Qur'an describes as "wisdom and beautiful preaching" – i.e. the promotion of virtuous behaviour and right guidance through solid, realistic evidence and rational proofs conveyed in an attractive and elegant style.

1 Mohammed al Shaimi: *Al Nukhbah fi'l 'Alam al 'Arabi; Dirasah Wasfiyyah Naqdiyyah*. Al Hiwar al Mutamaddin, No. 3113. http://www.ahewar.org

2 Haitham Manna': *Al Nukhab amam al Tahaddiyat, Nuhudh al Lajnah al 'Arabiyyah li Huquqi'l Insan.* See above.

The concept of a "virtuous society"

Some modern writers are critical of the practice of specifically and exclusively associating the Islamic *Ummah* (Nation/Community) with "*khayriyyah*" – an Arabic word conveying the concepts of "benevolence", "virtue" or "charity" (as well as possible undertones of "choice" or "preference") – since they feel this demonstrates a failure to recognize the *Ummah*'s present social and political backwardness and decay, as well as a denial of its potential for improvement[1].

In this context the term *khayriyyah* gives the impression that the *Ummah* is "Divinely protected" from going astray and falling into error. However, it would really be more correct to regard this sense of the "inviolability of the *Ummah*" as a subjective concept that is not only historically unrealistic but also inconsistent with the original concept of *khayriyyah* in Islam, which includes connotations of embracing change and recognizing the appropriate situations in which it may occur: "And if you turn away, He will replace you with another people; they will not be the likes of you." *(Muhammad, verse 38)* and "[Paradise is not obtained] by your wishful thinking, nor by that of the People of the Scripture. Whoever does wrong will be requited for it. And he will not find besides Allah a protector or a helper." *(Al Nisa', verse 123)*.

The context of the latter verse's revelation is as follows: "Qatada said: 'The Believers and the People of the Scripture were vying with each other in mutual boasting and the People of the Scripture said: "Our Prophet came before your Prophet and our Scripture came before your Scripture, so we have a greater claim to Allah than you." The Believers replied: "Our Prophet is the Seal of the Prophets and our Scripture abrogates all the other Scriptures." This led to the Revelation: "[Paradise is not obtained] by your wishful thinking, nor by that of the People of the Scripture."'"[2]

Commenting on this verse, Sayyid Qutb wrote: "Some Muslims may

1 Ridwan Ziadeh: *Al Tahaddi al Hadhari amam al 'Alami'l Islami*. See http://www.almultaka.net/ShowMaqal

2 Al Tabari: *Jami' al Bayan fi Tafsiri'l Qur'an*, ed. Ahmed Shakir. Mu'assasat al Risalah, 1st impression, 2000, Part 9, p. 229.

have been misled into thinking that they are 'the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind' and that Allah is prepared to overlook certain of their actions...because they are Muslims. However, that verse was revealed to induce these people and those people to do [righteous] deeds, and righteous deeds alone. For all mankind will be weighed on the same scales."[1]

Rather than encouraging Muslims to learn from others, the concept of *khayriyyah* has led many of them to look upon non-Muslim nations with disdain and to regard the "other" as if it is the existential antithesis of goodness and virtue.

Consequently, the *Ummah* has become a "prisoner of itself" with a false sense of history so that it finds itself living "above the surface" of history rather than through it. The result has been to give the Islamic *Ummah* the status of a self-appointed second "Chosen People" living in a dream-world of splendid – and holy – isolation. It is this factor, more than any other, that has cut Muslims off from the rest of the world and aborted their global mission to mankind.

Khayriyyah is not a genetic attribute or an elitist creed, but a goal that Islamic society as a whole should be striving to achieve to the best of its ability. (Though of course, a belief in the superiority of their own faith is not unique to the *Ummah* but rather something that Muslims share with followers of most other faiths around the world.)

A "*khayri*" – or "virtuous" – society should be a civilized society which, in endeavouring to make "*istikhlaf*" (man's proper role as vicegerent on earth) a reality, seeks to serve mankind and promote the values of justice and virtue.

In this connection we should perhaps ask ourselves how it could be that, if our society is indeed "the best nation produced as an example for mankind", then why have so many peoples and nations overtaken us in the scientific, cultural, economic and social fields? And why have our Islamic

1 Sayyid Qutub: *Fi Dhilali'l Qur'an*, Dar Ihyaa' al Turathi'l 'Arabi, Beirut, 7th impression, 1971, part 2, p. 529.

societies in fact gone backwards so that they are no longer seen as the vanguard of civilization and the flag-bearers of the Divine Message?

The historian and sociologist Toby Huff poses the question: "Why has Arab science failed to produce any modern science? And why have we seen no new Arab Islamic scientific thought or achievements since the 13th century? This is bearing in mind that from the 8th century to the end of the 14th century Arab science was the most advanced in the world – indeed far ahead of anything in the West or China – and in every field of research including astronomy, chemistry, mathematics, medicine and optics."

Huff attributes the backwardness of Islamic civilization to ethnic causes, as well as the supremacy of the orthodox Sunni religious establishment and political despotism, combined with certain psychological and economic factors and a failure on the part of the Arabs' natural philosopher-scientists to develop and apply experimental methodology[1].

This could suggest that we need to re-evaluate Islam's history and heritage and produce a critique of Islamic societies which will enable us to identify the objective reasons behind the backwardness of Islamic society and take the appropriate steps towards the creation of our "virtuous Islamic society".

A "virtuous society" must fulfil the conditions of *khayriyyah*. This is something quite different from the "self-justifying self-righteousness" which sees the self as being "holier-than-thou" *per se*, so that no further efforts are required of it. While this bogus *khayriyyah* is a particularly striking feature of Jewish religious thought, it has also – to some extent – become part of our own religious elites' intellectual legacy.

A "virtuous society" is one in which its members co-operate and work together for the sake of righteousness and piety – a society that treats the weak with consideration and kindness and gives charity and support to the poor. It is an active, productive self-sufficient society with high moral

1 Ziadeh: *Al Tahaddi al Hadhari amam al 'Alami'l Islami*. See http://www.almultaka.net/ShowMaqal

standards based upon the sound principles of mercy, justice and freedom of thought, belief and conduct.

It is a society that acts as a witness to human societies everywhere, "in order that ye might be witnesses over the nations" *(Al Baqarah, verse 143)* – as a testimony of co-operation and obligation towards others, rather than as a privilege that marks it out as being different. An Islamic society "bears witness over itself" in precisely the same way as it "bears witness over other human societies". Therefore it is required to know the substance of what it is bearing witness to, and it can only do this through interaction with other communities and peoples, not through isolation or seeing itself as superior to them.

It is a self-critical society with a conscience: "And He is with you wheresoever ye may be. And Allah sees well all that ye do." *(Al Hadid, verse 4)*.

It is a society that recognizes the value of knowledge and the status of those endowed with it: "Those who truly fear Allah, among His servants, are those who have knowledge. For Allah is Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving." *(Fatir, verse 28)*.

It is a discerning society: "Say thou: 'This is my way; I do invite unto Allah – on evidence clear as the seeing with one's own eyes – I and whoever follows me. Glory be to Allah! And never will I join gods with Allah.'" *(Yusuf, verse 108)*.

It is also a society that strives earnestly to understand the truth through proofs and dialogue: "Say: 'Produce your proof if ye are truthful.'" *(Al Baqarah, verse 111)*.

It is also a society that does not suffer from a "Chosen People complex" and recognizes itself as a modest collection of human beings who seek to implement the moral and social implications of their faith upon earth: "If ye turn back [from the Path], He will substitute in your stead another people; then they would not be like you." *(Muhammad, verse 38)*.

It is a society that does not give excessive reverence to the Worthy Forebears and the supernatural myths associated with them. Instead,

it seeks to understand their experiences as human beings and their role in history: "There is, in their stories, instruction for men endued with understanding. This not a tale invented, but a confirmation of what went before it – a detailed exposition of all things and a Guide and a Mercy to those people who believe." *(Yusuf, verse 111)*.

A society with these qualities lives in the real world and faces up to its problems without looking at its old, ready-made preconceptions of it through rose-tinted spectacles. It endeavours to establish the teachings of Islam and apply them to its own social situation in an objective manner. In doing so, it extends its support to the poor and oppressed and stands firmly against the powerful, the influential, the despotic and the avariciously capitalistic. "The one amongst you who is weak is strong in my eyes, so that, if Allah so wills, I can restore his rights to him. And the one amongst you who is strong is weak in my eyes so that, if Allah so wills, I can wrest that right from him."[1]

Inspired by Islam's humanitarian message, this kind of society seeks to serve and benefit mankind and spread the Divine Goal of goodness and virtue to the entire human race.

A "virtuous society" is inclined towards harmony and unity rather than division and conflict; it is thus nearer to mercy and love than it is to cruelty and hatred. It is a society that treats people with courtesy and consideration, whatever their colour, race or religion, and respects their ideas, whatever form they may take. In doing so, it seeks to follow the path of wisdom and morality, whatever its source may be.

Khayriyyah and perfection

The concept of the perfect nature of the *Deen* (True Faith) – as in "This day have I perfected your religion" *(Al Ma'idah, verse 3)* – represents a common position firmly held by all Believers.

However, "perfection" in this context applies to scriptural revelation and does not mean the perfection of human thought or action, which by

1 Ibn Hisham: *Al Sirah al Nabawiyyah*, Part 4, p. 661. See http://www.muslm.net

their very nature are always subject to change. The Holy Scripture and the reality of man in his existence on earth are not one and the same thing. Though the two may sometimes seem to converge, at other times they may diverge further and further from each other. Even the Madinah community at the time of the Prophet (PBUH) was not a "perfect" community; rather, it was a community that was mostly virtuous and generally inclined towards goodness and good deeds.

However, some religious elites suffer from an arrogant sense of their own perfection which has led them to adopt an absolutist, dogmatic mentality. It is this kind of mindset that has produced the notion of the "*Firqah al Najiyah*" (the "Saved Sect") – a concept which has also been a feature of Judaism and Christianity in the past and has helped intensify and perpetuate strife within those two faiths, thereby weakening their value and impact from both a human and a spiritual point of view.

Instead of working for religious reform, unity, Right Guidance, justice and mercy, these arrogant religious elites have created "creedal ghettoes" populated by narrow-minded bigots who hate and resent the vast majority of mankind.

A true "virtuous society" does not see other human societies as being in conflict with it or as threats to its virtue. On the contrary, it regards them as "parallel models" vying with it in the performance of good deeds: "To each is a goal to which Allah turns him; then strive together, as in a race, towards all that is good. Wheresoever you are, Allah will bring you together. For Allah has power over all things" *(Al Baqarah, verse 148)*. In other words, competing to perform good deeds helps strengthen a sense of common humanity among Muslims, while raising their relations with other societies to a higher level.

True goodness does not come from giving blind preference to a particular race or creed, but from doing good in the way that Allah has ordained for the whole of His Creation, since the best of nations is the one that bestows the greatest benefits upon other nations.: "For the scum disappears like froth cast out, while that which is for the good of mankind remains on the earth. Thus does Allah set forth parables" *(Al Ra'd, verse 17)*.

Charitable work

Charitable work is one of the outward and visible signs of a "virtuous society" and reflects the ties which exist between members of a community as well as their sense of responsibility towards other people. A glance at *Global* magazine's[1] list of the hundred best non-government organizations (most of which are relief and aid organizations) will give us an idea about the state of charitable work around the world.

The list is headed by humanitarian organizations based in America (such as the Wikimedia Foundation, Partners in Health and PATH), Britain (including Oxfam), Switzerland (e.g. Care International and Doctors without Borders) and Denmark (such as the Danish Refugee Council)[2].

Arab and Islamic organizations come quite low down on the list. There are only three Arab organizations – Bahraini, Egyptian and Jordanian – which appear at 91st, 92nd and 96th respectively.

This situation does not reflect the reality of Islam's attitude to charitable work; indeed, Khadijah records that charity was the most striking aspect of the Prophet's moral character even before the start of his Prophetic Mission.[3]

If this was the case before his Mission even began, then how about after he received the Divine Revelation with its specific instructions in the Holy Qur'an to perform charitable acts? For example: "And feed, for the love of Allah, the indigent, the orphan and the captive, [saying:] 'We feed you for the sake of Allah alone: no reward do we desire from you, nor thanks'" *(Al Insan, verses 8-9)*, "It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be

1 Published in Geneva and New York. See number issued on 23/1/2012. http://theglobaljournal.net/article/view/585

2 See Adnan Hussain: *Khaira Ummatin fi Akher Qa'imat al Khair*, See http://www.elaph.com

3 Narrated by al Bukhari.

steadfast in prayer and practice regular charity" *(Al Baqarah, verse 177)*, "And those in whose wealth is a recognized right for the one who asks and the one who is deprived" *(Al Ma'arij, verses 24-25)*, "By no means shall ye attain righteousness unless ye give [freely] of that which ye love: and whatever ye give, of a truth Allah knoweth it well" *(Aal i 'Imran, verse 92)*, and "They ask thee what they should spend [in charity]. Say: 'The good that ye spend is for parents and kindred and orphans, and those in want, and for wayfarers. And whatever ye do that is good, Allah knoweth it well." *(Al Baqarah, verse 215)*.

The religious elites' obligations

"Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: they are the ones to attain felicity" *(Aal i 'Imran, verse 104)*.

The religious elites bear a heavier and wider range of responsibilities than other classes of elites (political, cultural, economic etc.). In the truest and deepest sense of the term, the religious elites represent the moral and intellectual ideal – an ideal that reflects a broad critical understanding of the religious heritage in all its social dimensions. They will in fact be remiss in their duties if they fail to tackle the demands of their societies and the age in which they live, or if they limit their role to the purely religious sphere. What they need to do is:

1 – Explain the tenets of the faith clearly and accurately and remove people's doubts and uncertainties about it, and

2 – Teach people the provisions of the Shariah in a way that attracts them to it.[1]

It is a common misconception that religious scholars are experts in everything including magic, the jinn, the interpretation of dreams and life on other planets.

1 Ali Al Mohsin: *Mas'uliyyat al 'Ulama'*. See http://www.almohsin.org

Al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar (Enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong)

One of the most important conditions of *khayriyyah* mentioned in the Qur'an is *al amr bi'l ma'ruf wa'l nahiy 'ani'l munkar* (enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong): "Ye are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah" *(Aal i 'Imran, verse 110)*.

In its broadest sense, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong is not limited to the religious or behavioural aspects of life but extends into the social, economic and political spheres. It also has a direct bearing on human rights and freedoms.

The word "*ma'ruf*" ("right", literally "known") is used to describe everything which people recognize, or "know", as being acceptable, desirable as a course of action and useful to people in that it serves their religious and worldly interests and helps them to progress and prosper.

An observer of the state of Islam today will see that the widely-held view of "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong" is defective, because it is commonly believed that it is to do with advice about the individual's religious behaviour rather than with collective social ideas and ethics in general.

The concept of "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong" has in fact taken on a broader social dimension in response to the development of human societies, so that today it also recognizes human rights as an important element of contemporary Islam. Slavery – to take one example – was accepted as "*ma'ruf*" in the old days, though in a modern context it is seen as "*munkar*" ("wrong") in every respect. A significant number of our religious scholars in former times recognized that rulings and fatwas needed to be tailored to suit changing times, places and circumstances; an instance of this is the interpretation of "*mu'allafatu qulubuhum*" ("hearts being reconciled") during 'Umar's Caliphate.

The extent of the huge changes that have taken place in our modern world has not yet been properly understood and this is reflected in the superficial nature of the fatwas which are being issued in some Islamic circles – extending from the prohibition of photography, the arts, the internet and satellite television to shallow interpretations of the legal system, psychology, sociology and theories of biological evolution.

Setting a good example

The religious elites need to practise what they preach: "O ye who believe! Why say ye that which ye do not? Grievously odious is it in the sight of Allah that ye say that which ye do not" *(Al Saff, verses 2-3)*.

A "virtuous society" comes into being when the *'ulama* practise *khayriyyah* in their daily lives, so that their theoretical knowledge becomes transformed into practical implementation and sets an example for others to follow: "Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern [of conduct] for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the Last Day and engages much in devotion to Allah" *(Al Ahzab, verse 21)*.

Limiting oneself to preaching and guidance without offering a "beautiful pattern [of conduct]" will not help society to develop and improve itself. Let us consider the case of al Hasan al Basri when he was approached by some slaves who asked him to request their owner to free them. His reply to them was: "Give me some time." A month went by; then he mounted the *minbar* (pulpit) and delivered a Friday *khutbah* (sermon) on the subject. A very large number of slaves were subsequently freed and came to him to express not only thanks but also reproach: thanks because he had urged his listeners to free them, and reproach because he had waited a whole month before doing so. In response al Basri said: "It was not for me to order people to free slaves when I did not do so myself. And I did not have enough money... so I waited until I had enough money, then I did so."[1]

1 See www.chahama.org/index.php

Renewal ("*tajdid*") and reform

According to a Hadith of the Prophet: "Verily Allah will send at the beginning of every century a person for this *Ummah* who will renew ("*yujaddid*") their religion." (Narrated by Abu Dawood.) In its deepest sense *tajdid* means a renewed approach to understanding and interpretation through developing the intellect's ability to examine the basics; in other words, it is something quite different from a mere mindless regurgitation of the scriptural texts. It also implies an understanding of the part played by historical circumstances and events in shaping the ideas of earlier generations, and an ability to review those ideas and consider their applicability to the world of today – bearing in mind that modern knowledge covers a much broader field than the one that was familiar to our ancestors.

If a *muthaqqaf* (an erudite, well educated person) does not acquire this "renewed" approach to his heritage, he will not be able for fulfil his role in society. An undigested regurgitation of the heritage creates a disconnect between the *muthaqqaf* and the reality of his society, hampers his intellectual development and obscures his awareness and understanding. Indeed, if he is unable to rid himself of the "baggage of the past" and understand the dialectical laws of historical development, he may even find himself becoming historically irrelevant.[1]

Unless we renew our approach and ways of thinking, we will never be able to apply our faith to the reality of our daily lives as human beings. Nor will we be able to reform our society and guide it along the path of virtue and *khayriyyah*.

On the other hand, if the *Ummah* renews its faith, it will be able to conduct its worldly affairs in the right and proper way. For there can be no *khayriyyah* without reform, and no reform without renewal.

1 Zaki al Alayuw: *Al Muthaqqaf baina'l Mujtama' wa'l Siyasah*. *Al Kalimah* magazine, No. 49, Autumn 2005 – 1426 AH.

Encouraging the application of interpretative judgement (*ijtihad*)

Ijtihad – or the application of interpretative judgement – offers an ideal means of training society to exercise its intellectual faculties and accept that different opinions may possibly be valid. Those who practise it will also be rewarded for doing so by Allah the Most High:

"If a judge judges and applies *ijtihad* and he is correct he will receive two rewards. And if he judges and applies *ijtihad* and he is wrong he will receive one reward."[1]

Mu'adh bin Jabal (may Allah be pleased with him) narrates that when the Prophet (PBUH) sent him to Yemen he asked him: "How will you judge?" He replied: "I shall judge according to what is in the Book of Allah." [The Prophet] said: "And if [the case] is not [mentioned] in the Book of Allah?" He replied: "Then [by applying] the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah." [The Prophet] said: "And if it is not in the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah?" He replied: "I shall apply my interpretative opinion to the best of my ability." Then the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: **"Praise be to Allah Who has granted the messenger of the Messenger of Allah [the way] that the Messenger of Allah finds satisfactory."**[2]

A close examination of the Prophet's questions "And if it is not in the Book of Allah?" and "And if it is not in the Sunnah of Allah?" will show that the Noble Prophet encouraged Mu'adh to look beyond the scriptural texts -which by their very nature are finite and do not cover every eventuality. In doing so, he (PBUH) showed that a *mujtahid* (person applying *ijtihad*) had no option but to apply his intellect when seeking solutions to the many problems that arise in Islamic societies.

Applying the intellect

The body of knowledge acquired by the religious elites has been gleaned from a wide range of sources. In addition to inherited lore

1 *Sahih Muslim* – Hadith No. 1716.

2 Narrated by Abu Dawood and al Tirmidhi.

transmitted from earlier generations, it also encompasses (or at least potentially encompasses!) the entire range of man's intellectual *ijtihad* – both past and future.

The *'ulama* need to put their minds to work and carry out critical studies of their intellectual heritage so that they can identify its positive and negative points. Only when they endorse the principle of freedom of thought and encourage intellectual, academic and scientific research in their societies will it be possible for Muslims to become "producers of knowledge".[1]

The importance of applying the intellect in the service of the Faith is stressed in the Holy Qur'an, when it says: "Say thou: 'This is my Way: I do invite unto Allah on evidence clear as the seeing with one's own eyes – I and whoever follows me. Glory be to Allah! And never will I join gods with Allah" *(Yusuf, verse 108)*.

This "evidence clear as the seeing with one's own eyes" is not restricted to the prophets. Rather, it is something which all Muslims should seek as a means of guiding them to right speech and right conduct.

Fiqh al awlawiyyat (the "jurisprudence of priorities")

The religious elites can only claim expertise in the *fiqh al awlawiyyat* (the "jurisprudence of priorities") required by society if they are properly versed in the Shariah and have a knowledge of the history of Shariah legislation and the development of the schools of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *kalam* (theology) and *tafsir* (exegesis), as well as a genuine understanding of the world around them. Only then will they be able to help reform their societies and avoid getting sidetracked by secondary and marginal issues such as a preoccupation with the Evil Eye, *hasad* (envy), magic, the interpretation of dreams, exorcism of the jinn, rules on covering the face and growing the beard etc. (Indeed, questions of this kind should not be allowed to dominate the discourse in societies suffering from much more serious problems such as oppression, despotism, inequality, the deprivation of human rights, vice, nepotism and corruption.)

1 Aziz Abdul Wahid: *Tajdid al Khitab al Dini Limadha*. See http://www.alnoor.se/article

Collective action

The *'ulama* cannot carry out their highly complex social responsibilities unless they operate within a collective, institutional framework. An "*ijtihad* institution" can make it possible for the religious elites to serve the *Ummah* and help create a "virtuous society", while at the same time protecting them from the dangers of sectarian or political conflicts.

The importance of collective action through mutual consultation is summed up in the Holy Qur'an's instruction to the Muslim community: "... and consult them in affairs [of moment]..." *(Aal i 'Imran, verse 159)* and in al Hasan's observation: "Whenever a people consult [each other] they will be guided to the most judicious course of action. After [consultation has taken place,] the Believers should implement its [conclusions], whether they apply to their religious or worldly affairs."[1]

Islam reinforces the spirit of collective responsibility. The Messenger (PBUH) said: **"Every one of you is a shepherd and every one of you is responsible for his flock."**[2] The Islamic view of responsibility sees man as being Allah's vicegerent and thus responsible for the earth and everything on it.

Islam's religious elites need to come together and agree on common solutions to the huge challenges facing their societies. They need to seek a "common word" to unite them in the context of "joint action" and a "common society"; these should be among their main goals and this requires them to eschew disputes and discord.[3]

Taking active steps to unite the *Ummah*

The *'ulama*'s functions should include acting as a unifying force and refusing to engage in conflict – on the basis of the Qur'anic instruction: "And hold fast, all together, by the Rope which Allah [stretches out for you],

1 Al Suyuti: *Al Dar al Manthur*, Dar al Fikr, Beirut, 1993, Part 2, p. 359. See http://islamport.com

2 Accepted by consensus.

3 Nasir al Umar: *Dawr al 'Ulama fi Qiyadati'l Ummah*. See http://almoslim.net

and be not divided among yourselves" *(Aal i 'Imran, verse 103)*. A similar point is also made by verse 92 of *Al Anbiya'*, which states: "Verily, this *Ummah* of yours is a single *Ummah*, and I am your Lord and Cherisher: therefore serve Me [and no other]."

The religious elites should be at the forefront of those calling for the unity and solidarity of the Islamic community, regardless of sect or ethnic origin. This view is reinforced by the Holy Qur'an when it says: "The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah – which We have sent by inspiration to thee – and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: namely, that ye should establish the religion and make no divisions therein" *(Al Shura, verse 13)*. On the same theme the Messenger (PBUH) said: **"The hand of Allah is with the Community"**[1] and **"A Muslim to a Muslim is like a building, [every] part of which reinforces the other."**[2]

An Islamic society is a "society of worship and action" which embodies "Thee do we worship and Thine aid do we seek" *(Al Fatiha, verse 5)* in the form of a devout community that seeks to play its part – with Allah's assistance – in contributing to the welfare of humanity upon earth.

Reconciliation between disputing parties

The religious elites should help bring about reconciliation between disputing parties, whether the causes of such disputes are sectarian, political or nationalistic. On this subject the Holy Qur'an states: "If two parties among the Believers fall into a quarrel, make ye peace between them: but if one of them transgresses beyond bounds against the other, then fight ye [all] against the one that transgresses until it complies with the command of Allah. But if it complies, then make peace between them with justice, and be fair; for Allah loves those who are fair" *(Al Hujurat, verse 9)*.

In dealing with internal disputes in their communities, the religious elites' first duty is to try to make peace. Their chances of success will be

1 Narrated by al Tirmidhi.

2 Accepted by consensus.

significantly greater if they take a broad-minded, tolerant approach, respect the "etiquette of disagreement" and refrain from condemning either side as unbelievers or criminals. The fighting referred to in the above verse is seen as a means of deterring the transgressors – regardless of their sect, religion or ethnicity – and should only be resorted to after all efforts at reconciliation have been exhausted.

Encouraging co-operation and mutual assistance

The *'ulama'* should encourage co-operation for the sake of righteousness and piety: "Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancour" *(Al Ma'idah, verse 3)*. On mutual assistance, the Qur'an states: "...and they give them preference over themselves, even though poverty was their [own lot].And those saved from the covetousness of their own souls, they are the ones that achieve prosperity" *(Al Hashr, verse 9)*.

Moreover, the Messenger (PBUH) said: **"He does not believe in me who goes to bed with his stomach full while his neighbour beside him is hungry and he is aware of it."**[1]

The Messenger (PBUH) also said: **"None of you will be a Believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself."**[2]

A "virtuous society" does not depend solely upon material things for its support. Rather, its strength and resolve come from its faith in Allah, Glory be to Him.

Dealing with moral delinquency in the community

The religious elites should become actively engaged in tackling the problems afflicting Islamic societies today such as violence, theft, illicit sex, bribery, fraud, and alcohol and drug abuse.

1 Narrated by al Hakim in his *Mustadrak*.

2 Narrated by al Bukhari and Muslim.

Giving honest and sincere advice to the *Ummah* and its leaders

This includes giving advice to the community and counselling those in positions of responsibility to act justly towards people. The Messenger (PBUH) said: **"Al din nasiha." ("The True Faith is advice.")** The people asked him: "[Advice] for whom, O Messenger of Allah?" He replied: **"For Allah, His angels, His Messenger, the leaders of the Muslims and their general public."**[1]

Listening to others and learning from them

"Those who listen to the Word and follow the best [meaning] in it: those are the ones whom Allah has guided, and those are the ones endued with understanding" *(Al Zumar, verse 18)*.

Justice and equity

"O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be [against] rich or poor. For Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts [of your hearts], lest ye swerve, and if ye distort [justice] or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do" (*Al Nisa', verse 135)*.

"Thus have We made you an Ummah justly balanced, that ye might be witnesses over the nations" *(Al Baqarah, verse 143)*.

Characteristics of the elites

Modern writers and thinkers have listed a number of characteristics that cultured, educated elites should enjoy if they are to be able to carry out their duties towards their societies. They include:

As well as a respected social position, an ability to take decisions, influence other people's behaviour and beliefs and promote desirable social values.

1 Narrated by Muslim in his *Sahih.*

The thinker Edward Said adds that a *muthaqqaf* should also be independent and not beholden to any power or authority. He should play an active part in public life, be free from party political or narrow ideological affiliations or bias and be committed to applying the values of justice and freedom to himself and to others. He should have a broad cultural background and an ability to address people at the appropriate level in a rational, aware manner, and he should promote his ideas and culture with the aim of making things better than they are at the present time. He must not hesitate to express his ideas clearly and frankly and he should be a fearless fighter against corruption and in defence of the oppressed.[1]

These features need to be present first and foremost in the religious elites, because it is their responsibility to play a leading role in creating a virtuous, civilized society.

A critique of the religious elites and their role in society

The problems arising from the relationship between the religious elite and society in Islam are broadly similar to those that affect relations between the *muthaqqaf* and society in general. The following observations are particularly relevant here:

A *muthaqqaf* tends to play a more prominent role in politics than he does in the social sphere. He is less inclined to be critical of social conditions and much more prone to criticize things in the political, cultural and religious fields.

Many members of the religious elites hold positions within the official ruling regimes. The main function of such people is to flatter the rulers or present them in a favourable light.

There is a tendency among religious elites not to see religion as a means of reconciling differences and promoting moderate positions that encourage co-operation and solidarity.

1 Mohammed al Shaimi: *Al Nakhbah fi'l 'Alam al 'Arabi; Dirasah Wasfiyyah Naqdiyyah*. Al Hiwar al Mutamaddin, No. 3113

Members of the religious elites tend not to be interested in Islam's views on human rights, democratic change and confronting tyranny. Instead, they see themselves as the "guardians" of their societies and claim to hold a monopoly on the truth. They also tend to focus on side-issues at the expense of the fundamentals.

They bear a significant degree of responsibility for sectarian wars and some of them exploit sectarian and tribal differences for political gain. That is why the Arab world today is the worst region in the world for discrimination against religious, ethnic, cultural and political minorities.[1]

The elite's claim to hold a monopoly on the truth or to hold the keys to salvation has had the effect of turning the population into a sort of reserve military force or a testing ground for ideological and revolutionary projects and ambitions. That is to say, people are being used as strategic tools to enable the elites to seize control of the state and society.

"Just like the rest of society, the elite has failed to 'free its mind' and approach matters in a rational manner. Consequently, knowledge has become limited to the few, rather than the mass of the people, and any knowledge which is not shared by the population as a whole becomes an instrument for political and social domination."[2]

"Traditional" ways of thinking result in an inability to deal with new developments and respond to the demands of the modern age.

Some people believe that the religious/intellectual elites are practising "doubly suicidal policies. Sometimes they turn a blind eye to real problems that the political elite wrongly sees (or claims to see) as non-existent, while at other times they use the media to swamp the general public with stories about religious (or non-religious) issues of secondary relevance such as the *hijab*, the evils of globalisation and Satanism, which are currently hot topics in the media and engage the public's attention."[3]

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1 Burhan Ghalioun: *Fi Mas'uliyyati'l Nakhab fi'l Hurubi'l Ta'ifiyyah*. al jazeera net 27th September. http://www.aljazeera.net

2 Sa'id Shabbar: *Fi Mafhumi'l Nakhbah…wa Dawri'l Wasit aw al Musadir al Thaqafi.* http://www.aljabriabed.net

3 Shakir al Nabulsi: *Hal Mushkilat al 'Arab fi Nakhabihimi'l Diniyyah wa'l Siyasiyyah?* http://al jarida.com

The religious elites have shown themselves to be incapable of putting their own houses in order. In fact, divisions between the different Muslim sects have grown wider and wider, while the prevailing religious discourse has helped intensify sectarian discord and political conflict.

The religious elites have failed to project an attractive, rational image of Islam or reduce the outside world's fears of Muslims.

While it is mainly the religious elites who are to blame for the failure to create a "virtuous society", every other section of society must also bear some share of the responsibility.

In conclusion, we can say that what we need today is an educated religious elite that is well versed in both religious and temporal knowledge and equally at home in Islamic culture and the human culture of the wider world. It must be aware of its role in the community and the need to co-operate with other elites in the task of building a civilized Islamic society (which of course requires the creation of a "virtuous society").

The creation of a "virtuous society" is a project that demands the combined efforts and talents of every individual member the Islamic *Ummah*. The religious elites cannot fulfil their obligations towards their communities unless their communities recognize them and the role they have to play. Instead of focusing on purely "religious" issues, they need to be active in the fight against corruption, political tyranny, social and moral delinquency and cultural backwardness.