

February 26, 2009

Thursday



Title: [Culture Vs. Reality: the Need to Take Personal Responsibility](#)

DVD title: Preserving the Essence of the Dīn of Islam:
Affirm a Sufic Islamic Culture over Foreign Values

I began to speak last night about the conflict in Islamic culture versus Islamic reality in the world we live in today. There are many ways you can look at it. One way is we can look at ourselves as being the Rip Van Winkles of Islam. We wake up and find, [though] we have been practicing this ancient values-laden form of Islam, we realize that we have also been infected. We look around and are still able to see how the virus is spread. The question comes: who is it that is able to really revivify Islam and remove from it the negative cultural influences and recapture or affirm the imperatives that make it a viable alternative to the deceptions, greed, and lies of the world we live in today.

The question is who is it who is able to create positive change? That's one way of saying what I want to say, and what are the foundations for it? How do you preserve the essence of the *dīn* of Islam and the essence of Tasawwuf in the world which we are living in today. When I think about this, it has relevancy for us more than something socio-philosophical. When I think about it, I realize that the answers are fairly obvious. To make adjustments in the world we live in today; to maintain the foundation of the principles of Islam and the overriding spiritual culture of Islam versus a national culture or ethnic culture requires that we affirm certain things, which are (I don't want to say alien), but which are not the foundation of Western culture.

While it is to some degree true [that] we can get people to talk about clashes of civilizations and the incompatibility between Islam and Western thought, what it will take to de-politicize Islam and move it both into the modern world requirements—that is, to sustain Islamic faith and belief and culture amidst the global post-modern culture—really requires us as individuals to reaffirm the very basic fabrics of Islam, the power of faith and the sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, the sense of a trust in Allah Swt over the trust in the values of the external, physical world. [It is to] put our trust in and rely on our spiritual fulfillment. After all, it's what brought most of us to this path, which was something that was not fully a rejection of the society we were a part of, nor fully an acceptance of it. But [it was] a sense that there was something that transcended it, and that there was some kind of transformational possibility in a human being. We were not, as individuals, at the height of our capability: our spiritual knowledge and capability, or our human capability; consequently, we sought something different—most of us.

For our children, it was trying to transfer that sense of spiritual honesty and inquiry to them, because they were born into this community's cultural form; yet, at the same time, they, too have to live in the world around us and the world we are part of. Hopefully, we wanted to ignite the embers in them the understanding that there must something transformational. The cultural change that has to take place, irrespective of the human being's national or ethnic culture (human beings tend to have difficulty in changing), what is necessary to affirm—not just to individuals but to Islamic society as a whole, because we are Muslims, and because we are Sufis, and because we have studied enough and understood enough, and there is enough extant truth that somehow has survived amidst all these distortions—is this transcending Islamic culture has something to offer to the world which we are living in.

Who is it that can make the changes in the culture of Islam beyond the individual basis, in the world of the Taliban, in the world of the distorted Al Qaidas, in the world of the Wahabis and Salafis, the world of the Hizbul Tahrir mentalities that have popped up here and there around the world, and have exerted their influence on masses of individuals? Really, I think the answer lies in the people who feel they have a sacred mission to fulfill, not one of creating an “Islamic state” or “Islamic world,” but rather a sacred personal mission to understand their own relationship with Allah Swt; to have a sense of meaningfulness in their lives, a sense of satisfaction in their lives that they find is traced through their essential Islamic culture in the form of derivatives of *rahmāt* and *rahīm*, of compassion and mercy, of patience and perseverance, of love and forgiveness, and of justice and of truth. [The answer lies in] people who have the ability to participate consciously and purposefully in an attempt to unify their societies, create equity and equitable relationships, affirm the equality of men and women, affirm the divinity of Allah and the Divine purpose of all of His creatures and His creation, by whatever name they call themselves.

It is by the strength of that kind of faith, *iman*, that one finds the ability to resist greed and to resist the desire for power; resist the sense of oppression, to affirm one’s sacrifice of their own personal interest for the sake of the collective goals, and to resist the allurements of Western society, or what some might call the Western invasion, which in its culture, is a culture of control and subordination, persuading people to adopt alien concepts and habits. Like the missionaries dressing the naked women at the turn of the century in Africa, because they felt they were poor, ignorant people who didn’t even understand the value of clothing. Or the people who said you have to take off your *hijab*

because you are not modern. The imposition of foreign ideology and patterns is called *farangi*: the aliens who have come.

Those of you who like [the tv show] Deep Space 9 will appreciate the Farangi. Whoever wrote that knew what they were writing. They were distorted beings with big ears who could hear better than anyone else, and they had these razor sharp teeth and were business men. All they wanted to do was work for profit. Their religion was profit. The Farangis are Westerners in eastern society.

On one hand, you look for a kind of coherence and continuity in a spiritual cultural identity. On the other hand, you look and see that part of it has become weakened by this cultural invasion of the *farangi*. The question comes, how do you rejuvenate, yet at the same time have continuity and coherence? How do you identify what the capacity for that kind of rejuvenation is, and what abilities are left? How do you take the foundation of Islam, Qur'an and Hadith, and the values of Islam and Asma' al Husna and use them to rejuvenate the essence of the *dīn* across generations of deterioration, for the purpose of fulfilling one's role in the world—the purpose for which Allah created us, the *amanat*, and at the same time, for the purpose of assisting others in this world to find contentment and fulfillment. It seems this can only be done by fully understanding the significance of Islam, the meaning of its different aspects, its different faces and capabilities, and to participate in renewing the culture, relying on one's own capabilities and potential, and to look and see where there has been cross-cultural success.

Recently, it has been pointed out politically by the new President of the US, this kind of renewal and revivification, which has been initiated by the virtual collapse of the economic

stability of the country, begins with the individual. Whether I talk about the revivification of Islam, or about stemming the entropy and overcoming the tendency for that kind of dissolution in our own community, or about each one of us as individuals trying to re-acclurate ourselves to the essence of what comes to us as Islam and Sufism is all the same story and requires the same thing. That is why you can make statements like, “Acting locally (meaning personally) is acting globally (meaning communally).”

We only have, at the most, two generations in our life to accomplish this. The first generation is one of being absent while present physically. The fourth generation, if we happen to live that long, is one of being absent, though being present physically. There is a lot that can be accomplished in a short period of time. One is to be very familiar with the experiences of previous generations of people who lived meaningful and successful spiritual lives—in our case, Islamic lives; hence, the importance of studying things like the Hikam and Isqat al Tadbīr of Iskandari, and other texts like that: Imam al Ghazālī’s Duties of Brotherhood, Sulami’s Futuwwah. They are viable texts and still talk to today. That is one thing.

[Another that can be accomplished in a short period of time] is to look and see where there has been intercultural and cross-cultural success: where have people not only survived with one another, but thrived with one another. Certainly this country has been, for the most part, one of the examples of that. How to transfer that understanding generation to generation is a real issue of cultural and spiritual survival. In that, we have not necessarily done terribly well. Yet I see among young Muslims today a great desire to understand Islam. They ask how to live in the modern world. Among the young people we saw in Washington at the recent conference, there are a lot of them who have

serious desire. They are making their way in this world. They are well-educated, doctors, lawyers, social scientists. Some are in business, a lot in IT. They are trying to do the best they can do. They are studying Arabic, *‘aqīda*, Hadith, and these things. They are trying to look in the right place, but they don’t necessarily have it balanced right. Most of them have no idea how to look internally. Those who do have the methods of looking internally, well, I don’t need to hold a mirror up. You can ask yourselves how well you do that.

If we violate the pact with Allah Swt that we are supposed to carry these names, these qualities, these attributes, values and principles into our lives... if we don’t see [the Qur’an] as an historical text or request, but one that takes place in the present.... I was speaking the other day about when Allah says, “Remember this. Remember that. Remember when I gave the teaching to Musa (as). Remember this.” He’s addressing us as if we were there, present. So this cultural renewal or revival is what is needed; not some kind of social development, sustainable development only. This revival has an essential difference from the Western model, the renaissance industrial revolution model, or technological / scientific revolution. Because Muslims tend to understand that, it’s why they are fearful, and find the Western model undesirable. They are afraid of that model. A Muslim sees, inherent in that model, the destruction of Islamic society and culture. It’s not as practical and resonant with the Islamic mentality and environment.

Yet, at the same time, it’s necessary that people in the Muslim world, just like it is necessary for us in our organization, to be fully informed and to be fully capable of dealing with the science and technology of the day and age we are living in. In order to carry the teachings of Islam into the modern world, we have to have facility with the

technology of today. We have to be aware of the role that science and technology plays. In Muslim world and culture, we are fully aware that we are not going to create paradise on earth. At the same time, we also as Muslims realize that attaining material wealth is not our supreme goal. Allah puts human beings at the center of *dunya*, that is to say, all this creation is created for human beings. Human beings and this creation are not created as an end in itself, but only as a means to some greater place where we are part of a larger reality. We are placed here only for the purpose of achieving certain levels of piety and knowledge against the backdrop of those Shaytanic forces which would distort and turn us away—sharpening the knife against the stone.

For us as Muslims, as individuals, for us as people who would like to revivify or bring Islam into a revived state of relevance in the world today, we have to affirm that our material needs and our material wants are not separate from our spiritual needs and wants. There are certain principles that are alien to Islam that cause people's reaction to the *farangi*. For example, as Muslims we strive for this [particular quality]; and some of us now have to reaffirm it and re-strive for it because we have been tainted by society and the way we were brought up. For example, a prime quality of a successful Muslim is restraint and moderation. Some of us, and I include myself, have found this difficult to deal with in our lives. This whole idea of a kind of cultural renaissance is one of liberating human beings from being servants of the false idols—political, social, economic, or even sometimes intellectual idols—that have been raised up as the gods of the more Western culture.

We view this universe differently. A person who has really understood Islam, who is really practicing Tasawwuf, views the universe through their *iman* and service, and

through their *ikhlas*/sincerity, and through their trust in a higher power. [Such a person] sees that Allah Swt is manifest throughout the universe, from the most distant solar systems and galaxies to the most minute subatomic particles that make up our own physical being. By virtue of our *iman*, we have a sense of belonging to the whole universe—not belonging to a nation, not to just one culture, not belonging to one national identity. We see how that has been undermined in the world today, in the Muslim cultures.

The homeland of a Muslim is their faith. The ultimate refuge is Allah. Of course there are lesser homelands and lesser affiliations and identities. We all belong to nations, linguistic groups. But we have to remind Muslims that Islam teaches that a Muslim's sense of belonging is not limited to those smaller circles of identity. Allah has given us the Hajj and Umrah to remind us of that, just as one example. As human beings, we have certain kinds of inherent instincts and insight/*basīra*. Some of those instincts tie us to the earth. Survival instincts, limbic brain instincts tie us to time and space. Then there is the realm of time in eternity, in the *ghaib*, the unseen world. Compared with the light of Allah Swt, the everlastingness of Allah Swt, a Muslim should see their life as a fleeting, flicker of light in an eternity of light, and therefore treat their time on earth differently than the need to subdue the earth and the people of the earth, and oppress others, and put their permanent imprint on some piece of land or some name or place.

Allah Swt also tells us that there are times to defend those smaller circles because you have to live somewhere, practice your faith somewhere, and be free to sustain your life. These are all imperatives. Anyone who disturbs that, you can resist that disturbance, but not to lose sight of what the ultimate goal and purpose is. It is in this life and the afterlife

that we find this balance. With Allah Swt and all of His creatures, there is this point – counterpoint: life and death, Allah and the creatures, a flicker of light in everlasting light. There is no doubt that we lose sight of this and we all have a great attachment to our physical frame and life. We prefer to be locked up in this room because we don't know what's outside. The journey we are really on is a journey of strengthening our *iman* and moving from darkness to light, which Prophet Mohammed gave many, many examples of in his life and Hadith.

Many of us prefer to stay spiritual adolescents in a journey that is asking us to be a spiritually mature being. Many of us prefer to have just the local experience in a creation that is asking us to have a broader or non-local experience, if you want to call it that in quantum terms. Many of us prefer to see what we want to see, but Allah tells us we have to try to witness Him, feel that eternal reality of the Divine presence, and also to recognize the Shaytan, and to witness the harsh realities of life, like death. So you have to contemplate the hereafter, and develop some sense of humility; therefore, it is important that life is important. When life ceases to be important, people have given up God. That's a whole other aspect of this series of talks.

When you have given up Allah, you have given up the purpose of life; therefore, thousands upon thousands can be killed and there is no reflection on it. There is no *taqwa*/fear. It's only because there are these beginnings and endings, restrictions and tensions that we can make progress. It's the only way in which our souls can be transformed. It's the only way in which societies can be transformed. So we have to reconsider our relationship with one another, with our environment, with our cultural identity, national identity, linguistic identity, and our attitude toward time and space. Consequently these

experiences will change our motives and our goals in this world. Perhaps, [they will] even allow us in some small way to renew or affirm an essential Islamic and Sufic culture the world can benefit from, by de-emphasizing the values of the *farangi*.

I think that takes us to a discussion on time; and I'll leave it for another time. I hope you understand my point. It is not just a philosophical point. We are all inheritors of a very great legacy. We all see the hypocrisy or ignorance around us. We see there is a possibility for change, and a need for change. How are we going to remember the context for that change? Are we going to bring non-resonant foreign values into the system again and again and again, thinking that somehow we are going to change the will of Allah to be resonant with the will of man? Or are we going to try to affirm the values that we, ourselves, chose that were, at one point in our lives, very enticing to us and very promising to us, and operate by those values? [Will we] trust that those values will create at least a modicum of harmony and balance in the world we live in, or at the very least, form a strong foundation for our personal and communal internal consistency, and consequently be resistant to these distortions?

We can use the metaphor of the immune system, and see that the body of Islam is diseased; therefore, if one part is diseased then the whole part is diseased. When we look at the body of humanity, it is diseased, Islamic or not. We can look at Darfur or China or Haiti or anywhere, without respect to the overt religion or belief system, humanity is diseased. How do we stimulate the immune system? We stimulate the immune system by these transcendent values, which are at the core of Islam. For us as Muslims and Sufis, we have the means and the necessity. We have even a small cultural reality called our community. We have a larger reality that we deal in, in the world of Islam today. If

we don't take personal responsibility with our own faith and our practices, then we can't turn to our children or grandchildren, or the children of those we love, or our nephews and nieces and have any confidence that they are going to be able to survive in the world; let alone that the belief system and values will survive with them. *Asalaamu aleikum.*