

Thinking About a Future Civilization of Islam

The Muslim *umma* can only have a vibrant, dynamic future if it can transcend the contingent challenges of our time. Muslim intellectuals have to turn their attention to such major problems as authority and rule, knowledge and values, power and morality, which are also the current issues of faith, writes **S Parvez Manzoor**.

THE present crisis of the Muslim *Ummah* is a crisis of ideas. The Muslim re-entry on the stage of history, it is commonly believed, is conditioned on Islam's ideational response to modernity rather than its emotional rebuttal of the West. Islam's revival or resurgence, though incumbent on the political assertion and activism of the *Umma* nonetheless cannot become a reality unless there is genuine renaissance of Islamic thought, is the pervasive sentiment today. The vanguard of the new civilisational army of Islam, it is also commissioned, must be a new kind of intellectual who could impart fresh vision to the Muslim's perennial truth and provide concrete guidelines for his legitimate civilisation-building enterprise. The road to the future bliss and civilisational glory of Islam, indeed its future *shari'a*, it is claimed, would pass through the academia of the knowledgeable rather than the precincts of the devout.

At the heart of such longings lie enshrined indomitable visions of hope and optimism. Given the right kind of political leadership and appropriate policies, the *Umma*, it is assumed, would regain its rightful place in the league of world communities. The faith of Islam and the Community of the True Believers would then live in happiness and harmony ever after. What is required of the individual believer is that he or she embarks on the civilisation-building enterprise with unmitigated vigour and sincerity. Everything else, it is taken for granted, will follow the reawakening of the collective ethos.

Infectious, exuberant and confident though this kind of utopian frenzy may be, it lacks analytical depth and temperamental congeniality to perceive and gauge the plight of religious

faith in an age of unbelief. Its main problem is that the image informing its optimistic reading of the future is essentially this-worldly. Faith in this perception is merely the civilisational and cultural mirror of the community. For faith to demonstrate its cogency, all it has to do is to generate a strong and thriving community. All the rest is dispensable, or at least, should remain confined to the sanctuary of private conscience.

Certainly, after centuries of spiritual recluse and political quietism, the thunderous return of the pragmatic sentiment in Islam cannot be reviled. Neither may any thinking Muslim dispute the primacy of the civilisational goal. Faith abstracted from history, it has been rightly pointed out, is nothing but an opiate. The hallucinatory diet of perverted sufism, one need dispute no further, has been sapping the vigour of the *Umma* whose primary mission is to forever crusade against inner and outer demons and perpetually execute the sacred obligation of *jihad* and *ijtihad*. Thus, the sooner the mystical trance comes to an end the better. Islam's reawakening cannot but be the re-birth of a universal civilisation.

Having admitted this, one still cannot survey the contemporary intellectual scene and not be overcome by a strong feeling of dismay. Though the reviling of the traditional '*ulama*' is for impetuous younger writers strictly *de rigueur*, it is the intellectual superficiality and spiritual poverty of the 'revivalist' literature that causes the sharpest pain in a sensitive Muslim heart. Even such an unabashed (erstwhile) champion of modernity as Fazlur Rahman cannot find any redeeming side to the modern revivalist's summary condemnation of all the traditionalist legacy. His comparison

of the qualitative performance of the traditional conservative and revivalist radical stress the fact that the poor intellectual performance of the latter is not fortuitous, 'for the founders of earlier movements were themselves products of the traditional education system. They were thoroughly trained *ulema* who had become dissatisfied with the status quo and who worked for a change. They were rooted in a tradition which, however stagnant it had become, was still rich and intellectually capable of cultivating a depth and dignity of personality. Once they revolted against tradition, therefore, they knew what they wanted to achieve, and what the stakes were'.

The revivalist, on the contrary, Fazlur Rahman contends with full justification, 'is generally *not* rooted in the tradition. He has had little traditional education and, in fact, does not know what the tradition is. Although Islam has no priesthood, it has persons who have specialised in Islamic jurisprudence and theology. The neo-fundamentalist, once he decided to get rid of traditional encumbrances, succeeded in getting rid of *all* tradition'. 'So far as Islamic learning is concerned', he adds, 'they are dilettantes: indeed, neo-fundamentalism is basically a function of laymen, many of whom are professionals — lawyers, doctors, engineers'. Finally, his admonishing voice notes that the revivalist assumption 'that Muslims can straighten out the practical world without serious intellectual effort, with the aid only of catchy slogans, is a dangerous mistake. Not only have neo-fundamentalists failed to seek new insights into Islam through broadening their intellectual horizons, they have even let go the richness of traditional learning'.

The revivalist intellectual, with his

insistent demands on institutional and societal solutions to contemporary problems, with the accent of his thought on pure contingency so to speak, thus runs the real and palpable risk not only of side-tracking his traditionalist legacy but also of compromising the primordial verity of the Islamic vision itself. No doubt, unless he makes genuine effort at the understanding and rediscovery of the original meaning of Islam, not until the revivalist's own vision of Islam can match in spiritual profundity and intellectual cogency earlier efforts like those of sufism and legalism, not till then can his designs for the future civilisation of Islam have any meaning. In order to establish his credentials as an Islamic thinker, the revivalist too

has to distill his image of Islam *qua* faith. For, even he must recognize that prior to any civilisational ethos and institutional policies, indeed prior to any *Umma* solidarity and *fard kifayah*, Islam is the ultimate ground of a believer's personal truth.

For the past few months, an honest self-reflection and soul-searching has been going on in the pages of *Inquiry* as to the true role of the Islamic intellectual, the nature of his calling and the urgency of the revival of radical Islamic thought. By now, perceptive readers may have surmised, some form of consensus has been achieved, namely that the Muslim intellectual has to be a committed individual rising above the petty vagaries of personal interests, that his

intellectual vision must have contemporary and future relevance, that his critical faculties must not be stifled by the arbitrary partitioning of human experience within the confinements of the so-called disciplines, that he must show boldness and humility to tackle some of the fundamental, but as yet unresolved, issues of the Islamic tradition and so forth. Having reached this agreement, it follows naturally that the future discussions should define the Muslim intellectual's agenda rather than re-traverse the same old terrain and harp about the desirability of fresh intellectual discourse in Islam!

Before any such attempt is made, however, a few preliminary points must be made in order to pre-empt any attendant misunderstanding. Though no coherent statement about the meaning of Islamic faith amidst the atheistic darkness of contemporary experience has been made available to our readers, it goes without saying that the questions of faith have always loomed large in all our discussions. To have expected anything else, of course, would have been illogical. Every branch of Islamic thought, if it is genuine and authentic, must issue from the tree of faith. Given the total dependence and involvement of Islamic thought on God, one may also add, every Islamic theme, no matter how mundane and 'secular' its appearance in other traditions, impinges on Islamic understanding of the nature of man's relationship with God. Despite the ostensible absence of the science of theology in Islam, it would be still true to maintain that every Islamic subject, whether public or private, humble or grand, religious or 'secular', is, in the final resort *theological* in essence. As all Islamic thought issues from the awesome awareness of God as the source of all knowledge, wisdom and meaning, and converges there as well, it is not accidental, then, that the following characterisation of our contemporary problems has a heavy theological ring. God after all cannot be banished to some well-defined sanctuary, be it in the realm of thought or action, in Islam. The God of Islam is not once-a-week sabbath deity, nor is he an inmate of some sacerdotal precinct.

The main problems facing the Muslim *Umma* today, which *ipso facto* are also the current issues of faith may now be summed up as follows:

Authority and Rule: Without doubt the question of authority still constitutes the most contentious issue in Islam. In fact, the whole of Islamic

She can laugh! But would Muslim intellectuals ensure that she continues to do so?



history moves under the shadow of authoritarian controversies. Given the politico-religious nature of the Muslim community, the pristine issue of authority invades the whole public sphere of Muslim life. It affects and determines the nature of all collective – 'political' as well as 'religious' – activities in a Muslim society. And yet the paradox is that over matters of faith none has the authority in Islam. Faith is deemed altogether personal and sacred to be regulated by any institutional authority. Nothing must stand between the Creator and a believing soul save its conscience, knowledge and reason, is the uncompromising Islamic stance. Such is Islam's reliance on the force of human intellect! The tragedy of Muslim history however is that such a sterling principle as that of the complete freedom of individual conscience was also demanded in the realm of the political. The result could not have been but 'anarchic'. All political authority, it need not be emphasised, is coercive. It may deign to accommodate, if at all, only very limited demands of individual conscience. Hence, the unhampered freedom of conscience, which is the logical concomitant of the acceptance of God as the ultimate moral authority of the universe, cannot be met by any system of rule.

Little wonder, then, that despite the prevalent myth of the identity of the religious and the political in Islam, the temper of the Muslim community has been apolitical through and through. And, again contrary to popular assumptions, it is as true of the Sunni community as that of Shi'ism and Sufism. If the Shi'i self-image is that of a party of moral-political dissent in the face of betrayed ideals, Sunnism too considers itself primarily as a social order, which though at times linked to the dominant political order of the day, nevertheless retained its autonomy in matters of faith. It too thus, has been disdainful of the political authority. And that goes for Sufism as well. Both historically and temperamentally, as is well known, Sufism was a piety of protest which sought a *modus vivendi* with the established political order by openly advocating the ethos of quietism. The *de facto* separation of faith and politics as well as perennial existence of the ethos of political dissent, quietism and disdain have so coloured the Muslim's perception of the political that political science is the most under-developed branch of Islamic thought. Breaking the impasse created by the absence of

a workable theory of politics and rule constitutes the most formidable challenge to the Muslim intellectual today (Cf our earlier reflections on this theme: *Poor Copies of Heaven's Originals*, *Inquiry*, June 1985).

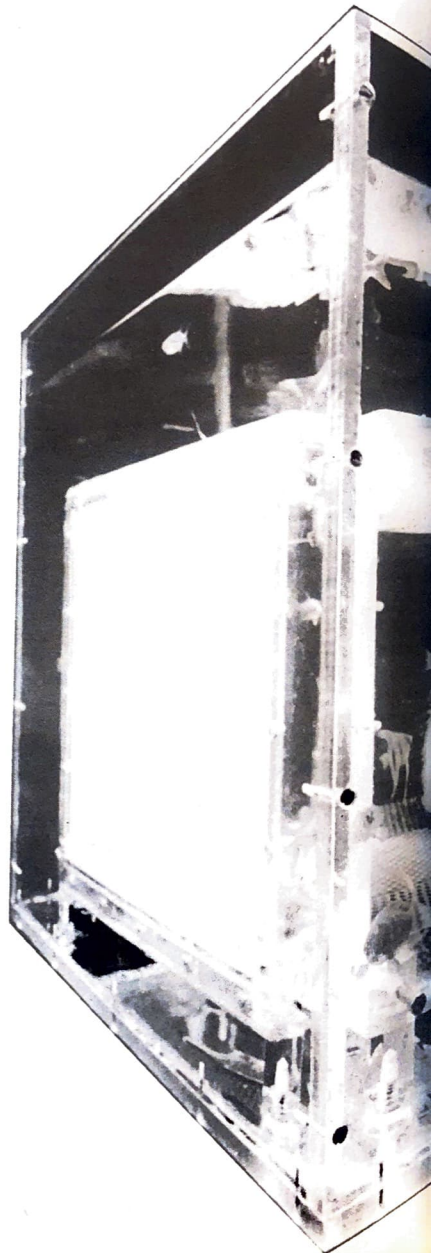
In actual history, the Muslim approach has crystallised around two, apparently divergent but not really incompatible, principles:

- a) authority resides with one infallible individual (*Imam*);
- b) the ultimate authority after the Prophet is invested in the collectivity of the Muslims (*Umma*). Infallibility (*'Isma*), the ultimate privilege and attribute of authority, thus, has been claimed for some members of the House of the Prophet by Shi'ism and for the entirety of Muslim community by Sunnism. In real life, however, the principle of infallibility, though supremely important from the religious point of view, could not be translated into any workable political theory. The most painful longing for an infallible source of guidance was that the Muslim *Umma*, in both of its main denominations, remained without any *de jure* political authority for nearly all of its history!

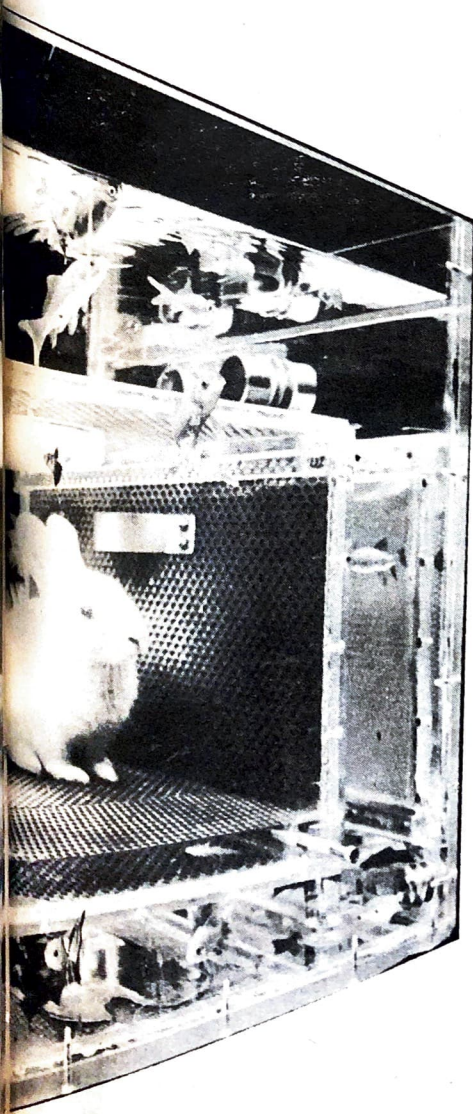
The Sunni stance, as everyone can see, was nothing but an *ex post facto* rationalisation of the status quo, indeed an admission of defeat expressed as the sentiment of hope! The mystical principle of sacred collectivity, that no matter what might happen the Community as a whole cannot err, however, embodies a profound religious insight. On that accounts, not only was it found emotionally very convincing, it also made the *Umma* totally immune and insensitive to its future political misfortunes. Rulers may come and rulers may go, the *Umma* not only goes on forever but it keeps on following the right path as well! Politically speaking, the enunciation of the infallibility of the sacred community was an extremely 'realistic' measure, yet it also proclaimed that the political was superfluous for the community's self-definition. Politics thus ceased to play any meaningful role in the ideational life of the majority community. The Shi'i allegiance to the authority of the infallible Imam did not find a chance to function as a political principle in actual history either. With the exception of the fourth caliph and first Imam, Ali ibn Talib (A), who alone was *Amir-al-Mu'minin*, none of the other Imams ever exercised political authority. Messianism which soon got hold of Shi'ism, of course, released the tension

between the metaphysical and the historical role of the community, but it also expelled all worldly politics out of the domain of sacred history – until its radical reformulations by Imam Khumayni, that is. With this, the reconciliation of Shi'i and Sunni political thought, present sectarian tension notwithstanding, has also become a real possibility.

The revivalist intellectual must seek guidance from the vassitude of the *Umma* and the wisdom and insights of its both major communities. Yet, in his vision of the future, politics will



Safe for the time being? Muslim intellectuals have to find Islamic answers to the questions of knowledge and values, of a science built on a sheer disregard for nature and other creations of God and of a technology intrinsically linked to war and consumerism. Either that or be ready to be manipulated, like a rabbit, by experimentors of the dominant paradigm



not be banished from the sacred history of the *Umma*. The Muslim may never despair of God's guidance, nor capitulate at the face of injustice. In the revivalist vision, all politics will be a quest for justice and a crusade for the establishment of a universal moral order. To delineate that vision in a cogent and practical design is the paramount task of the Muslim intellectual today.

Knowledge and Faith: The most fateful consequence of modernity undoubtedly, is the separation of knowledge and values. In fact, 'value-free' knowledge has become the norm of all epistemology today. It alone has the distinction of being *the* knowledge, based as it is on the only 'reliable' and 'objective' method of approaching everything knowable. Only it may claim the dignity of being 'scientific' and 'rational': everything else is metaphysics and superstition!

Knowledge bereft of faith has, of course, no meaning in Islam. In the confrontation of the Islamic concept of knowledge with that of the secularist modernity might lie the seed of, what might prove out to be, the bitterest metaphysical conflict in human history. In fact, mankind's salvation may depend on its renunciation of the Satanic notion of 'knowledge without values'. Monumentally onerous responsibilities thus lie on the shoulders of the Muslim intellectual, not only as an upholder of Islam's uncompromisable truth about the unity of knowledge and faith but also as the champion of all humanity against the onslaught of Satanic knowledge which is the true sovereign of the modern mind.

In his crusade against the Faustian conception of valueless knowledge, the Muslim intellectual now is likely to get support from unexpected Western quarters. In the face of the moral crisis of modern epistemology, some daring occidental thinkers have started claiming that all human knowledge is necessarily personal, partial and vested, and that conscious attempts be made to integrate current knowledge with positive human values. The cross-fertilisation of the Muslim tradition's claim to the unity of knowledge and faith and the Western critic's insistence that all knowledge have social relevance may engender a powerful new discipline. Here is another task worthy of the Muslim intellectual's *ijtihad* and one that will help him in his revivalist pursuits.

Islam's unnegotiable stance regarding the infallibility of the revelatory knowledge must also be reiterated

today in a more vigorous epistemological form than before. In view of the Western experience where advancements in scientific knowledge were adduced as refutations of the truth of the Christian scriptures, Muslims must assure that they do not fall into the same vicious trap. The conflict of science and faith, which let loose all the demons of scepticism in case of Christianity, so much so that today one hardly finds anyone willing to defend 'the literal truth' of the Bible, is not inevitable. In any case, it has no meaning and relevance in view of the fact that the Muslim claim of Qur'anic infallibility is always axiologically conceived and understood in Islam. In other words, revelatory knowledge is the source of all values and in this sense its truth always remains final, unnegotiable and irrefutable. Because of this certainty, a Muslim is under no compulsion to compare, let alone *verify* (!), stray 'factual' statements of the Holy Scripture on the basis of transitory and ever-changing factual world of science. Hence, the kind of exegesis which painstakingly labours to find spurious compatibility between scientific 'facts' and isolated Qur'anic statements is nothing but a failure of nerve and a weakness of faith on the part of the Muslim believer (Ziauddin Sardar's warning against the lure of what he calls 'Buccaillism' [*Between Two Masters: Inquiry*, August 1985] thus is extremely timely and must be heeded to).

Power and Morality: The demonstrably effortless ability of modern science and technology, notwithstanding its uncompromisingly secularist and amoral world-view and ethos, to generate endless power has plunged the man of faith in a new spiritual crisis. For the religious man the most inexorable and unfathomable mystery of modern science is its morally dubious nature. Besides threatening the totality of our human existence in a very real, cogent and impendent manner, it has also been able to convince us of its seemingly effortless ability to alleviate human suffering on a scale and magnitude hitherto unknown and certainly beyond the ability and even imagination of religiously constituted societies! For Muslims, its emergence not only occasioned the military rout of their armies, it also led to that collapse and devastation of Muslim societies from which these have still not recovered. Given the moral duplicity of occidental science and technology, it is not accidental then that Muslim intellectuals have faced this twin-headed monster in a most confused and erratic

fashion, loathing it as much as being seduced by its sombre beauty.

At first, Muslims conceived of western science and its embedded system of knowledge as a *substance*. The truth of western science was its efficacy in war and that truth, they believed erroneously, was a commodity to be acquired in the market-place of global politics by the age-old strategy of begging, borrowing and stealing (unfortunately, the same self-deceptive attitude prevails today with regard to what is disingenuously called technology transfer). A generation or two before our own, it started dawning upon Muslim thinkers that the inability of Muslim societies to imitate the West in military, industrial and scientific fields must be due to some deep-rooted 'cultural inertia' on our part. This 'insight' in fact was preferred as a rationale for the introduction of 'modernisation' policies, but which in fact accomplished nothing more noteworthy than some drastic and senseless westernisation of Muslim societies. With our own generation, the devastating nature of the spiritual and moral capitulation, which the Muslim mind is called in to accept in order to court the damsel of occidental science, has become fully transparent to all thinking Muslims. Whatever the desirability of modernisation, only a genuinely *Islamic* ethos of revival and reform can bring Muslim societies in alignment with modernity, seems to be the prevailing consensus today. The reconstruction of an Islamic body of knowledge, which would help the Muslim not only to probe the universe of Allah but also to restructure his own world, has become the most explosive intellectual issue of our day.

Again, no doubt due to the perplexity of the task before us, our thinkers have reacted to this challenge in a bewildered and confused manner, offering all sorts of 'solutions' from crassly pragmatic and defeatistic to ethereally idealistic and escapist. As a proper assessment of the 'Islamization' debate is beyond the scope of this essay and shall be attempted in a later issue of *Inquiry*, suffice it to point out at this stage that the issue cannot be meaningfully deliberated in an institutional vacuum. Thus this writer is substantially in agreement with the sentiments expressed by radical 'reformers' like Fazlur-Rahman — whose realistic temper and steadfast advocacy of the revival of Islamic intellectualism as a prerequisite for solving the excruciating problem of 'modernity' rules out all grandiose epistemological schemes — when he courageously

maintains that unless some solution to the reformation of Islamic education is forthcoming, 'it is futile even to raise the question of the Islamization of knowledge: it is the upholders of Islamic learning who have to bear the primary responsibility of Islamizing secular knowledge by their creative intellectual efforts'.

Other urgent intellectual issues, which may only be identified and listed within the limited scope of this essay, deserve equal probing and soul-searching from our thinkers. What, for instance, ought to be the proper Islamic position regarding the tenets of **Welfare and Progress** upon which the whole civilisational enterprise of the modern man rests? Clearly, the goal of willfully sustained economic 'development' has not issued from our own soil, nor can the lopsided elevation of material prosperity to the level of supreme civilisational *value* be easily reconciled with our own ideals. Nonetheless, we must ponder whether there is some room for materialism in the world-view of the Qur'an, which not only takes a very optimistic view of man's potentialities but does not accept the facile dichotomy of spirit and matter either. How, in other words, may the relationship of the tenets of 'prosperity' and the 'Pleasure of Allah' be understood today? How may the Islamic economic vision, in short, be delineated in our own age?

In an age of increasing globalism, ecumenism and 'inter-dependence' (though one must also admit that the dependence of some is the independence of others) as well as that of the abject impotence of the Muslim world, what is the functional as well ideological nature of the *Umma's* relationship to the rest of humanity? Bearing also in mind that a very sizeable number of Muslims live under 'non-Muslim rule', the Muslim intellectual can no longer shirk his responsibility of defining the universalism of Islam in contemporary terms. How may one visualize the perennial issue of universalism and particularism, of **Umma and Humanity**, in the light of contemporary relevance? Searching for the sterile formulations of the classical jurists, enunciated at the time of Muslim civilisational supremacy, may not be of much help today. Going back to the uncompromising universalism and humanism of the Qur'an and the sagacious practice of the Prophet seems to be the obvious response on the part of the Muslim intellectual, but 'when and in which manner', remain as yet unanswered.

Reflection on the antinomy — or

not — of **History and Meaning** must also become part of the Muslim intellectual's legitimately Islamic discipline. Is all knowledge about human society, as opposed to the natural world, perforce 'historical' knowledge? What is the Muslim response to the challenge of historical knowledge which seems to relativise all values? Does history supply all meaning to human experience or is the concept of *history* itself a human effort at the construction of *meaning*? What is the nature of the secularist modern society and how did it emerge out of history? How did it accomplish the — temporary — defeat of the Muslim civilisation? All sorts of questions heap up when one seriously reflects the contemporary Muslim situation. All of them need be incorporated in the agenda of the Muslim intellectual and given proper Islamic inquiry. No Muslim intellectual is sincere to his vocation if he does not enquire into the vicissitude of his *Umma* and cares nothing for its future.

In the end, returning to the seminal problem of knowledge: whether one proposes the 'Islamization' of secular, occidental, knowledge or holds that wholly autonomous disciplines will issue *sui generis* from a reinvigorated Islamic world view once it becomes enshrined in the collective ethos of a future civilisation, one must still recognize that all genuine *ijtihad* today must submit to the demand of Islamic conscience to elaborate the metaphysics of the Qur'an. This is the essence of the intellectual challenge facing us: nothing less than the re-construction of the entire edifice of Islamic metaphysics on the solid basis of the Qur'anic revelation but interpreted through authentic contemporary experience needs must be attempted today.

Delineating Islam's future *civilisational* vision also requisitions a new *theology*. Despite Muslim aversion to theology, as remarked before, all Islamic issues concern man-God relationship and thus are, in the final resort, incontrovertibly theological. So are also the problems of man's relation to man. Man, the individual soul, has been envisioned in the Islamic tradition primarily as the servant ('*Abd*) of God. Islam's self-image as a faith *par excellence* rests on that insight. Islam's future role as a universal moral order and civilisation requires that we accord equal attention and reflection to the role of Adam, the primordial spokesman of whole humanity, as the vicegerent (*khalifa*) of the Sublime Creator. ■