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FINAL PAPER

"The Islam Industry in the West: Democracy, Human Rights,
and the Civilizational Project for the Muslim World"

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Abstract

Whenever one speaks on the subject of Islam in the West post-9/11, one faces a new hegemonic reality. There was of course prejudice or ignorance about Islam prior to 9/11. But the parameters of the debate have shifted. It has become much more acceptable to be blatantly ignorant about, and prejudiced against Islam after 9/11. We have witnessed a climate of tolerance for intolerance when it comes to Arabs and Muslims. There was now space for people to articulate their open bigotry against Muslims in popular and academic discourse. Indeed, the US government, mainstream media, and the prevailing intellectual culture set an unashamedly Islamophobic tone, and society tended to follow. The debates and discussions on Islam in the contemporary United States contain some peculiar characteristics. Islam – in Western public and intellectual discourse – is not like any other religion in several ways. The various reductionist and essentialist approaches to Islam outlined in this presentation which tend to be convenient mechanisms to avoid serious political analysis and engaging a deeper historical understanding of the Islamicate world, are the leading cause of much of the shallowness and quackery coming from the contemporary Islam industry in the US. This paper will provide an updated account of Edward Said's classic critique of Western approaches to Islam found in his work *Orientalism*. It will use the insights of postcolonial and critical theory, as well as progressive political

sociological approaches, to deconstruct and dissect neo-orientalist trends found within mainstream – and even liberal-left – approaches to Islam today.

1. Introduction

The first section of this paper critiques the immediate (post-September 11th 2001) and broader ideological context of the global human rights and democracy project and its possible function as a Trojan horse for recolonization. It raises the question of a cultural imperialism that may mask the emergence of the idealized *homo aeconomicus* and asks if the simplistic translation of the democracy and human rights discourse into the language of Islam is not really a substitute for genuine dialogue that can only occur between equals and when one acknowledges the not insubstantial differences both in historicity and cosmovisions of the human rights project and Islam.

The second section deals with the challenge for critically engaged Muslims to develop an ethic that transcends the immediate needs of the political expedience that utilizes 'moderate' Islam as the 'flavour of the month' for the current ascending tendency or for political control over ordinary people. It argues the need for Muslim intellectuals to seek greater critical engagement with the emerging social movements and to find more authentic appreciations of human rights and democracy based on this engagement.

2. The Current Context of the Islam, Democracy & Human Rights Discourse

The importance of both the personal and ideological context for and of critical scholarship has been widely acknowledged in post-colonial discourse, cultural studies, feminist studies and in liberation theology.* For me, the question is "What is my context as a critically engaged Muslim?" Where is my authenticity located when I uncritically embrace the intellectual and political constructs and urgencies of others as my own and desperately seek to re-define a fourteen thousand year old tradition – albeit an ever-changing one – in the face of external demands? (Even if these demands were generated by a complex array of factors wherein that tradition is not entirely innocent.)

As for my personal context, the questions of pluralism, gender justice, human rights, democracy etc, have for long been ones that I have been engaged with and with a sense of principled urgency that has its origins in a rather different context than the current dominant one. My own engagement, as well as those of many others, with work around global economic justice, militarism and war, gender justice, and HIV/AIDS, affirms a sense that Muslims can be part of a vision larger than obscurantist fundamentalism. It is, ironically, precisely this location of my own intellectual activity within a principled vision of a just world that makes me so profoundly suspicious of the dominant urgency to re-think Islam in 'contemporary terms'.

We are witnessing – and participating in - an intense and even ruthless battle for the soul of Islam; a ruthlessness that often escapes many of us who are keen to nurture and imagine a faith that is peaceful and compatible with the values of dignity, democracy and human rights. For many non-Muslim Westerners who are driven by conservative ideological imperatives, Islam and Muslims have become the ultimate other. Many liberals, on the other hand, move from the assumption that "global harmonies remain elusive because of cultural conflicts". Hence, the desperation to nudge Islam and Muslims into a more 'moderate' corner, to transform the Muslim other into a Muslim version of the accommodating and 'peaceful' self without in any way raising critical questions about that western self and the economic system that fuels the need for compliant subjects throughout the Empire.

Muslims too, are conflicted about their relationship with both "outsiders" as well as to the tradition of Islam and its ideals. The tensions of be-ing in a world wherein the vast majority of Muslims feel trapped between the demands imposed on them in their existences as subjects of the Empire on the one hand, and the violent convulsions of a quasi-fascist-like Islamically invoked response by some of their co-religionists on the other, are palpable. At every step of our encounter with our non-Muslim neighbours, colleagues, students and immigration officers those of us – committed or nominal Muslim, confessional or cultural - living or working in the

West, have to justify our existences, our faith, our human-ness and our non-violent intentions.

Declarations that Muslim societies must be democratised are fairly easy and there is no shortage of publications that argue against the idea that Muslim societies or Islam are inherently opposed to democracy or that Islam is compatible with democracy.[i] The questions really are what does democracy really mean, what does the cover of democracy really hide, and what are the actual political reasons for the "democracy deficit" in the first place?

Islam, like every other religious tradition, is the product of both its heritage – itself the synthesis of ideas, beliefs and the concrete lived experience of the earlier Muslims and the way that heritage is interpreted by every generation. 'Generations' though is not a disaggregated, disembowelled, classless social category. It is thus impossible to speak about an Islamic response our age as if "our age" is valueless or interest-free. When we thus approach the theme of *Toward a Contemporary Islamic Response*," we must ask "for what and in whose interest?" There is nothing neutral about this quest. The origins of the dominant urgency to re-articulate Islam in ways acceptable to the Empire must be interrogated if we are to come up with anything beyond adhoc accommodationist responses meant to placate the Empire or to smooth our existences or advancement in the belly of the beast.

As I was writing this paper, I continued to find myself overwhelmed by the lingering shadow of the tragic events of 9/11 and its aftermath. I am someone whose own ancestry is from the global South, who has worked in the area of Islam and socio-economic justice, and, notwithstanding my own commitment to working with those living and dying with poverty and disease, it is not the reality of millions of deaths in particular in the South and millions more dying that forms the backdrop to my thoughts on some of the challenges facing Islamic thinking… My thoughts, instead, are shaped by a compulsion to ensure that all our theological questions and responses, all searches for an Islamic response must be engaged through the prisms of the wounded Empire and premised on the culprit and his community's - contrition. Democracy and accountability, human rights and

gender justice … the urgency for all of these are palpable and the impression that it is all part of an attempt to humanize the barbarian is inescapable.

I am not suggesting that these are issues that have not been dealt with in Islamic scholarship before 11th of September 2001. I am concerned that the teacher with a formidable cane had sent all of us into a corner after one of our classmates sullied his new book or did something unspeakable in his coffee cup. Discerning a lack of complete and unqualified remorse – even some rejoicing – the entire class is now subjected to collective punishment. And so, all of us now have to write a thousand times, "I shall behave – I shall be democratic – I shall respect human rights – I shall be peaceful." As it is, the class – Muslim societies - is a "remedial one" for "slow learners" and we are on probation. (Some of my classmates have successfully escaped into a much smaller but "real" class next door). Meanwhile, many of the other kids are dying around me. In the case much of the Two-Third World, quite literally. We are living in a world where more than one 1.5 billion live on less than one dollar a half, where the gap between the lowest 20% and the top 20% of the word's population has increased from a ratio of 1:30 in 1960 to 1:174 in 1997. Yet, my major project is to get into the good books of the teacher; to present myself as worthy of his acceptance, as different from the barbarian who did what he did.

Besides the immediate reality of the children dying around me, there are, of course, other realities around me including coercion, the irony of violence being used to impose a language of peace, the larger context of education and schooling which pretends to be ideology-less. Neither the elite nor the aspirant elites of our generation, so desperate to 'succeed' within the system, have ever been too interested to engage the works of thinkers such as Paul Goodman, Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich. Too tantalizing is the promise of entry into the domain of the establishment, which is subject to turning a blind eye to its inherent injustice, the demand for uniformity, the reduction of human beings to empty vessels to be moulded to serve a particular kind of society with particular economic needs, the transformation of *insan* in to *homo aeconomicus.*

Both traditional – particularly those aligned to the power structures of Muslim states - as well as modern Islamic scholarship are under enormous pressure to ensure that the dominant Islamic response that emerges is one that fits into the immediate demands of the teacher. Just a few days after 9/11, the *National Post* newspaper had a story titled "Globalization Is So Yesterday". The immediate demands of the teacher had nothing to do with hunger, poverty, exploitation, socio-economic justice, HIV/AIDS and affordable treatment. Instead we were compelled to deal with madrassahs, Wahabism, the clash of civilizations, terrorism, Islam as peace…

In many ways, scholarly elites are represented by the student who is desperate to outdo his fellow students in appeasing the teacher. For these students threats are unnecessary; the promise of acceptance by the teacher and the concomitant material advantages are sufficient incentives. Despite the protestations of benign objectives of advancing education and learning, the teacher is there as part of larger project – a project that is politically unwise to interrogate; in an authoritarian system any moment spending "valuable" time on challenging teachers means losing marks … it is "unscholarly, it lacks intellectual depth, does not have the *sang froid* of true scholarship"…

As with the learners, the teacher is also not a disembowelled human being. He comes from the city and it is a village school. There are larger civilizational and ideological issues at stake, including understandings of development and its price, culture, the commodity value attached to people and land and the supremacy of supposedly rationalist forms of thinking. The issue of the teacher's sullied cup represents only the sharper edge of the frustration, anger and agenda, the rise and march of the Reconstituted Empire. The larger context of this is globalization for which we require the intellectual courage and political will to also historicize and unravel its implications when we consider issues of human rights and democracy in relation to Islam today.

3. The Wider Context of Human Rights and its Function as Trojan Horse of Recolonization

Can one really speak of the political participation of the social majorities of the Muslim world when their voices are de-legitimized by asking them to speak a discursive language of rights that may not be something that resonates with their cosmovision?

Human rights are only two hundred years old. The ideology and the institutional arrangements of human rights were born after unprecedented forms of social and personal deprivation took root among the "developed" peoples of the world. The regime of the nation-state fusing nationalism and statehood, was constructed at this same time, to keep the social order in a society exposed to forces of the modern market reducing the human condition to that of *homo aeconomicus.*

Tawhid (the unicity of God), and the establishment of *Tawhidi* society, (one recognizing the indivisibility of humankind) and other religious and cultural ideals are quite obviously irrelevant, ineffective or even counter-productive for societies designed towards economic development or 'progress'. In order to even begin to articulate their resistance to the economization of their lives, the social majorities have been compelled to comply with the categories of Western liberalism and "rights" and "social contract" codifications before they will be heard. While still using it to struggle against power abuses of imperialism and the state, they are drawing upon their own cultural and religious resources for moral insights needed to overcome their contemporary ills, and in order to regenerate their commons.

The dilemma I am raising isn't an absolute cultural relativist position but rather one of how does one escape from a human rights monoculture and engage communities in ways that take stock of their cosmovisions. The issue is two fold: First how does one speak of ethics within one's own tradition in the context of human rights. This is an issue of cultural affirmation. Second, what is the nature of the individual in the liberal rights discourse and what are its problems. Both of these have to be addressed in the context of Islam.

Authentic dialogue is about entering the other's world while holding on to yours, with the willingness to be transformed. It isn't a space of trade where deals are

struck. One cannot speak of genuine political participation, integrity of communities, etc. unless one can reach some kind of consensus on a shared system of ethics. The context of power wherein the current drive for such conversation is driven by the Empire's agenda makes it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to have any kind of authentic conversation that holds within it an openness to mutual transformation.

3. Shifting the Context for Re-Thinking Islam

An Islamic response is invariably the product of intra-Muslim conversation as well as an inter-penetration of discourses. For reasons outlined above, I want to move away from a dominant hegemonic discourse on rights and democracy and open other avenues for engagement that will lead to a more profound interrogation of our tradition and, hopefully, a more humane Islamic response to the challenges facing Muslims and others today.

The global village is not a village for the real villagers of the globe. Never before have there been so many "have-nots" in the world. If we were in a "global village", they would be visible to all. But they are hidden from the view of the defenders of the "global village". They are the under-pariahs, kept out of sight, hidden in three-quarters of the Two-Thirds World. The experience of globalization is a profoundly disempowering experience for the impoverished and marginalized, the social majorities.

Proclamations of "thinking globally" or of 'universality' do not automatically make one's discourses global or universal – as always, the crucial question is "Whose universe?" "Who benefit from this particular 'universe' and who lose out?" Uninterrogated global thinking is essentially located in a kind of Orientalist scholarship that was used in the service of power for the sake of colonialist and neo-colonialist expansion. It embodies one of the central features of the Orientalist presumption that the observer is able to "objectively" and dispassionately observe, analyse and provide solutions to lesser cultures and peoples. These "solutions" will be mass-produced and applied universally, no matter how great the toll taken on the livelihood, cultures, and social relations of the locals.

Its harshest manifestations are in the IMF prescriptions for developing countries regarding financial austerity and their domestic economic policy, as well as in the "free trade" agreements (more properly called "investors' rights agreements"), now codified by the WTO, that force the countries of the South to further prostrate themselves before the North and its domination and resource extraction. What is most insidious about this entire project is how the social majorities are given prescriptions about what is good for them by the social minorities.[ii] What occurs here is that the social majorities are viewed as inert populations with a limited perspective that need to be mapped as populations and later moulded into docile and useful global citizens. In the material realm this implies two things for the social majorities: First, a feeling of being overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of the global problems from the depletion of the ozone layer to the war on Iraq. Second, a feeling of constant inadequacy that one doesn't really have any answers and at best one can put a blind trust in one's so called representatives, whether the government or the international institutions or even the human rights lawyer to provide the solutions.

This is hardly empowering since the daily experiences and innovative struggles of the social majorities are dismissed under the broad rubric of the term "the masses" or the "*ammah al-nas*". This when done by the human rights activist, the local Marxists or the `ulama, essentially mirrors the discourse of the Empire.

The insidiousness of the Empire lies not so much in its naked repression but its ability to prescribe the good life for the vast social majorities. Whether that promise of the good life is a valid one is highly dubious. The more serious problem, however, concerns the denial of any agency to those directly affected by the prescriptions. Even if the progressive Muslim or the strident human rights activist takes over the reigns of power tomorrow, that will not solve the problem. The root of the problem lies in a historical moment in the West, the supremacy of rationalist forms of thinking, through which the world can be broken up into its constituent parts, observed and solutions prescribed and secondly, in the reduction of persons – carriers of the spirit of God to *homo aeconomicus*. It is the inbuilt arrogance in the very structure of contemporary power that is the problem and

that co-opts even the best of us; it is the representation of social majorities by intellectuals/ activists/ government officials who will 'articulate' their suffering in conference halls of academia, the boardrooms of the World Bank and international summits where the landless peasant, the woman with HIV and the worker are rendered speechless. They have not been schooled in the ways of power i.e., haven't been to schools, can't speak English, do not know how to debate, haven't read important books on economics, theology etc. So what can they possibly know?

This is not an argument for anti-intellectualism nor a suggestion that there should not be a global vision. What I oppose is an abstract identification with uninterrogated buzz words, global solutions that are hammered out in the corridors of the Empire of which not only armies, but often the academy is the vanguard - and are exported wholesale into the lives of social majorities, the classifying of social majorities as people who don't know what's good for them and thereby taking away the most significant of their weapons i.e., their ability to speak from their lived experience, to make their own mistakes and to learn from them.

This is especially important in the context of the human rights discourse almost smacking of cultural imperialism in the way it is deployed to invade countries and subjugate people. If this context is not unpacked we effectively become the prefects employed by the teacher to help keep an "eye on the class" while he goes off and works his second and more lucrative job elsewhere – a job as bulldozer of the cultural and religious values of my parents to make way for Wal-Mart, Haliburton and KFC even as I drink from his poisoned chalice in the name of education. I am not saying that there can be no cross-cultural conversation. All I am saying is that we have to guard against shallow translations in the name of dialogue. When we fail to do so then we are mere paid agents and emissaries of accommodationism unto our communities. The Islam that emerges from such a function will necessarily reflect our games of accommodation. Thus we see the emergence of *fatwas* arguing that the basic message of the Qur'an is really the same as the USA constitution. "So, democracy is what you would like to have on

the menu today? Excellent, we do have it; more than what you have ever had before and even better than any other restaurant's in the whole wide world." There is no critical or ethical interrogation of the text, of the one placing the order, nor of the origins of the appetite. What makes us all that different from the Empire anyway which really is to use Ashis Nandy's term, 'an intimate enemy', seemingly out there but really inside?

4. Challenges for the Critically Engaged Muslim Intellectual

There are a number of challenges for the critically engaged Muslim intellectual who continues to identify with Islam and who derives her or his inspiration from it. I will address these in the context of an Islamic appreciation of human rights and democracy. First, to live in fidelity to this heritage; Second, to speak the truth to power; Third, to re-interpret the Islamic heritage in terms of the primary urgencies of today.

4.1 To attempt to live in fidelity to the Islamic heritage.

In some ways this seems like an impossible task; it is certainly one that cannot be measured because heritage is not fossilized but ever mutating. The suggestion is in fact that one lives with a loyalty to a partner, Islam, and commits oneself to be in a faithful relationship with it in a manner that both gives and takes for one's own growth. The believers whom we seek to transform are entitled to know whether we are really insiders or outsiders masquerading as insiders. When Muslims intellectuals do not feel a genuine affinity with Islam nor try to live in fidelity to it then this faith is reduced to a utilitarian tool to transform others, "those Muslims" out there. This is somewhat akin to learning Arabic or Pushto in the US Army and then not wearing a uniform in order to blend in with the natives; the language is a learned one or an inherited one but the message is one of and for the Empire. We merely become paid interlocutors and translators. There may be periods of tension, even alienation, and even divorce between the engaged Muslim intellectual and Islam. However, if we are seeking to be a part of transforming our faith communities in ways that also nurture democracy and human rights, then a pre-condition for this is transparency.

4.2 Speaking Truth to Power

Speaking truth to power being both a path and an objective for a Muslim's life and being a witness as a returnee to God have implications beyond the here and the now. Viewing ourselves as returnees to God enable us to take a more long term of appreciation of things wherein optimism and pessimism or expediency are not the great variable, but constancy in God. Yet, it is a constancy that does not lead to the appropriation of God by fundamentalism because certainty is seen as only belonging to God.

In the current context there are three primary audiences that need to be addressed as we struggle to speak our truths to power; the conversation with all three takes place simultaneously and each informs the other:

a) The personal self b) the Muslim community and c) the Empire

4.2.1 Engaging the Self

I have spoken about the need for the intellectual to be self-critical and of his or her context. It is the relentless self-critique that enables the scholar to be true to the ideals of a just society in a way that also prevents his or co-optation by those who have their own agendas or the expansion of the Empire as their primary reason for wanting to engage Islam.

4.2.2 Engaging the Empire

The Empire needs to be engaged about the way it deals with Islam, a fourteen hundred year old faith, as a cheap restaurant that caters to all needs and tastes. The Empire enters with is allies, flaunts its wallet and muscles, and demands "Jihad" on the menu when that suits its very power driven palates. And Muslims are expected to deliver - as we indeed did in the jihad against communism in Afghanistan. After a few years, they shift gears and demand "peace" on the menu – as all dominant Empires demand of their subjects, never of themselves. And now the dutiful restauranteurs are expected to nod, smile and go around proclaiming that "Islam means peace." Islam is far more complex than this and as a self-respecting Muslim - or a restaurateur with integrity – the Muslim intellectual can respond by saying, "I am awfully sorry, but you may be in the wrong restaurant."

It goes without saying that the Empire is also more complex than this and in whatever ways that we engage with it, for our sakes and for that of our future vision, we must always recognize the intrinsic humanity of the those who comprise the Empire. When we fail to do this, then the methods with which we decide on engaging the Empire can so easily reflect its own violence and lack of humanity. We cannot become the evil that we abhor.

4.2.3 Engaging the Ummah

Like all individuals and societies Muslims are never powerless in the absolute sense. In relation to the Empire we may be having less power but others have less in relation to us in the various ways in which this us-ness is defined. The appropriation of the human rights and democracy discourse by the Empire does not mean that Muslims can dismiss these; indeed, hiding its own unwillingness to confront the lack of these behind the guise of protecting Muslim society from the Empire. Hassan Hanafi has described the dual nature of this challenge as "confronting imperialism outside and resisting oppression within". For Muslims, the challenge is that of the Mafia banging on the door of their restaurant while the restauranteur is employing slave labour to run it – The restauranteur may have less power in relation to the Mafia at his door but this does not exonerate him from his replication of patterns of exploitation and injustice with those who may share his religious identity but who have less power than him. The questions thus are: How does one challenge the Mafia in ways that simultaneously address the absence of the values underpinning democracy and human rights in Muslim society? How do we ensure the victory of an alternative vision in the wake of the inevitable decline of the Empire? (So much of Muslim invective directed at the Empire does not stem from a principled abhorrence of imperialism but because we – Muslim men – are not the ones running the Empire.)

When we welcome the voices in the United States of America saying that "dissent is patriotic" then we need to understand that the same applies to our own societies where very often our most courageous intellectuals, journalists, and activists are quickly silenced for speaking truth to power. How we deal with our internal "others" are really the only truthful measure of what our values are really all about – all else would merely be minorities or the less-powerful posturing for a better position at the banquet of the self-same Mafia banging on the door.

4.3. Re-interpreting the Islamic heritage in terms of the primary urgencies.

There is nothing "traditional" about religious traditions; Regardless of the fervor with which believers cling to notions of tradition – it is constantly being shaped and re-shaped. While I may refuse to participate in the shaping of my faith in response to the demands of the Empire, as a believer, I am never freed from the responsibility of shaping it. For me the question is in response to whose demands do I re-think the meaning and implications of my faith?

As a critically engaged Muslim activist, I consciously locate my own work among the marginalized, not as a sociological category but as a real in-context condition. Acknowledging that it is always a question of "less-power-ness" rather than powerlesness, this social location of the progressive thinker does not become a question of identifying with "Black persons" or "women" *per se* but with specific communities in these groups who are being marginalized. While I can be in solidarity with the Muslim male who is being racially or religiously profiled at airports, I can also be in solidarity with the marginalized Christian who lives in the same Muslim country that he comes from.

This principled solidarity is related to my notion of prophetic Islam where Islam is a state of submission in its ever changing forms for communities and individuals rather than normative Islam; i.e., as a sociological label which enables one to claim virtue or victimhood regardless of how one relates to the paradigm of "less-power-ness". The engagement of Islamic tradition with actual contexts of injustice rather than with sociological or national communities leads to a principled or prophetic solidarity rather than the expedient or situational ethics that dominate current Muslim public discourse.

5. Towards a Progressive Islamic Response

Anouar Majid in his *Unveiling Tradition - Post Colonial Islam in a Polycentric World* traces the ideas of secularism to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, as products of Enlightenment thought and classical liberal philosophy that called for the re-calibration of human morality in ways that attempted to exclude traditional religious commitments. The emergence of natural rights that were later articulated as human rights were forged as a part of the liberal discourse where the individual was constructed as a bundle of rights and the new society was seen as an arithmetic sum of individual aims. This in many ways may have been an

important development. However, Majid seems to suggest that this entire process was deeply imbedded within capitalism where an ideology of infinite progress, profit and private property was buttressed by liberalism. With colonialism these ideas were exported to Asia and Africa to create conditions that are conducive to capital. Majid argues that most Third World post colonial theorists, despite pointing out that colonialism was a rupture in traditional societies, have been unable to come to grips with colonialism transforming itself into neo-colonialism. The export of Enlightenment ideas of liberalism and secularism has been under-interrogated in a number of post colonial countries and somehow their links to rogue capital have not been taken seriously. Instead, he argues, we still think in terms of western dichotomies of religion versus reason, tradition versus modernity, regressive versus progressive etc. These crude binaries tend to reduce religion and reconstruct it through the eyes of the Empire where the reality of religion as a living culture fraught with debate and dissent undergoes an erasure.

Majid calls for a re-theorisation by the 'natives' of the discourse of the 'Empire', where ideas such as secularism, liberalism, nation-state, individual rights, etc. are looked at through different eyes; this time through the eyes of the post-colonial. This process of understanding these ideas as historically contextual to the West and not universal will liberate us from being forced to think in these categories. Instead we can now begin the process of re-imagining a polycentric world by liberating suppressed progressive traditions within our own cultures and religions. For progressive Islam, he argues, to provide a genuine alternative, it needs to stop configuring itself in western categories but instead unearth progressive practices within the tradition itself. This, according to him, is not merely a strategic way of countering both the Empire and religious absolutists but the only genuine pluralistic alternative to capital's attempt at McDonaldisation of society.

Critically engaged Muslim thinkers and activists have less to do with linguistic hegemony of the West, the essence of the Arab identity or even Islam as national identity. We aren't so much demanding an Islamic revivalism as a socio-cultural or spiritual fight against the West. Our concerns relate far more directly to global structures of oppression, whether economic, gender, sexual, etc. and ensuring that the oppressed are once again active agents of history. This fight for us involves the

centrality of God, the imagining of humankind as *al-nas* – a carrier of the spirit of God and an appreciation of Islam as a liberatory discourse.

Here we are not merely attempting to break the monopoly of the West in the production of the discourses of modernity. We are also attempting to reclaim modernist discourses of feminism, socio-economic justice and restating them in Islamic terms. We are simultaneously engaged in the task of articulating interpretative traditions within Islam that embody these values, thus challenging the notion that modernity is distinctly a Western project.

Our goals embody a diversity of liberation projects that include those of new social movements such as the rights of indigenous communities and sexual minorities. We are not really concerned about re-establishing the primacy of Islam as a shield against what some of the Islamists considered 'western moral corruption'. On the contrary we are engaged in the task of finding common ground with other liberatory social movements spawned by modernity and recognizing the emancipatory potential of other religions. Ours is not so much an Islamic universe but a pluriverse of liberatory discourses (Islam being one of them) in cross-cultural conversation with each other forming alliances that fight oppression anywhere.

Ours is a cross-cultural conversation in progress and the voices of western Muslims with their distinctive histories have as much place in it as those of Muslims from the south. What we have here is emblematic of a global Islam where we may share a faith but have dissimilar cultural contexts. What binds us together is neither geogaphy nor history but more a belief in the trans-historical and trans-geographic liberatory potential of our faith.

Critically engaged Muslim intellectuals demand not an imposition of western analytic categories but instead a dialogue. We ask for the abandonment of a positivist epistemology both within Islam and outside that sustains a conception of understanding as discovering the objective and final truth. Instead we believe understanding is the result of a dialogue between two horizons of meaning neither of which can claim a monopoly over truth. Here the demand is for a willingness to risk oneself into a transformative process in which the status of the self and other are constantly renegotiated. We believe in the inexhaustibility of meaning of texts and challenge the possibility of an objectively valid interpretation.

At the same time, as Muslims, we ought to be attentive to the radical inequality between the partners to the conversation and are conscious of the political, cultural and economic – and radically unequal - conditions that shape the terms of the dialogue. The pluriverse we therefore imagine is not of culturally isolated factions but an ongoing dialogue for radical social change that will create the conditions for genuine dialogue.