Time to redefine the ummah

By Javed Jabbar

Islam

Dawn 16/9/07

AS THE world goes deeper into new violence and volatility and Muslim societies struggle to find new ways out of a pervasive disempowerment, definitions of terms and interpretations of words become more than academic, semantic exercises. How these are understood and perceived directly shape attitudes, and in most cases, motivate actions.

When particular words and terms are portrayed in a specific way and when this portrayal is popularized through textbooks in schools and colleges, through the mass media, through mosques and through public discourse and discussions, even incorrect, distorted and misleading representations become accepted as the actual meaning of certain phrases.

Some words are better conveyed when seen in context. For example, with reference to "conservatism" and "moderation", it may be accurate to say: The conservatives in Islam have custody of the mosques while the moderates have custody of their own drawing rooms. It is only when this situation is reversed that we will move closer to true Islam.

Definitions of terms like "fundamentalism", "terrorism" and "jihad" are important. Several significant clarifications about these terms have already been made in the columns of this newspaper, and elsewhere by other writers. The clarifications have helped correct distortions historically perpetuated through the false "Orientalism" of the West, and more recently, post-9/11 through the mass media.

In this brief comment, it is intended to reflect on only three terms: "Muslim ummah", "enlightened moderation" and "secularism".

Human beings exist on two basic planes: the spiritual and the physical. Seen as people who share the irreducible articles of faith in Islam, the term "Muslim ummah" correctly describes the spiritual affinity that all Muslims feel. However, when the same term is applied to the physical dimension of visible reality, the commonality of the Kaaba as well as the mosque, for all Muslims, from Mauritania to Malaysia is disrupted by the differences and variety on the physical plane.

While being Muslim, and accepting the Holy Quraan as the word of Allah and respecting the finality of the Prophet (peace be upon him), the Muslim ummah is, in real terms, completely heterogeneous and divided on the basis of geography, ethnicity, cultural practices, languages, political systems, political viewpoints and economic systems.

Before the Muslim ummah can project itself in credible terms externally to the non-Muslim world, the Muslim world itself needs to recognize all the implications of enormous diversity.

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interesting formulation. It is useful in focussing public attention on the need to resist the continued attempts by extremism to hijack Islam. However, in this context the word "moderation" is redundant. Enlightenment is the only condition for which there should be no moderation.

Moderation is also an inadequate term. As a description of the virtues of balance and reasonableness, moderation is appropriate. But it is not comprehensively descriptive of the ideal condition we should aspire for.

In many respects, moderation is a virtue. Yet in some crucial respects, it can be another word for weakness, for vulnerability to coercion. The partial limitations of the concept of "moderation" are best evident when we remember that resistance to extremism and violence cannot be, and must never be: "moderate". On yet another level, the limitations become obvious if we switch the sequence to read: "moderate enlightenment."

Before enlightenment, there are several stages to accomplish. From raw data and

facts, to processed information to refined knowledge to mellow wisdom. Each of these stages requires meticulous attention to details; intellectual discipline; open-mindedness to new information and knowledge and to fresh experience; above all, the presence of a passion to pursue new learning. Ultimately, enlightenment comes from the fusion of mind and spirit to produce insight and humility. As enlightenment without limitation is the most preferable route to ethical actions and to practising the essence of Islam, the term "immoderate enlightenment" may be a more appropriate formulation.

One of the most important definitions needs to deal with the nature of any state in which Muslims are in a majority, with the kind of political system that they should adopt. This aspect concerns the formulation that sets up an Islamic state as the antithesis of a secular state. Islam and secularism are defined in major discourse, for example in Pakistan, and specially in the Urdu press, as being completely separate and diametrically opposite to each other. The word "secularism" is translated in Urdu media as "atheism" or "Godlessness" which are entirely incorrect representations.

Secularism means that religion and state function separately. It does not mean a denial of the sanctity of religion as is misinterpreted in religious-political, and in Urdu media discourse. Secularism means that all religions are to be respected by the State. On September 11, 1947, Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah presented his

eastern, is perfect. Evolution and change are perpetual.

The Misaaq-i-Madina or the "constitution of Madina" in the era of the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) can be seen as a definition of how a Muslim-dominated state could also be a secular state. In references to the rights of the Jews of Yathrib/Madina, authoritative interpretations point out that this charter placed a minority like Jews as being part of the ummah.

Allama Mohammad Iqbal in his lectures titled: "Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam" said: "All that is secular is deeply sacred at the roots of its being".

The Holy Quraan defines the inclusive, secular character of Islam by which the beliefs, actions and practical deeds of all believers are given an equal and equitable status.

Verse 62 of Surah 2 — Al Baqarah states:

"Those who believe (in the Quraan), and those who follow the jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians — any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve." (from the translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali).

The antithetical formulation of an Islamic state and a secular state is conceptually flawed. It distorts the direction of the debate which shapes the political development of Muslim nations.

At present there are at least seven different kinds of states in the Muslim ummah:

a) Hereditary monarchies without elections (Saudi Arabia); b) One-party dominated democracies (Egypt); c) Multi-party democracies with military domination (Pakistan); d) Authoritarian systems or partial democracies (Central Asian republics); e) Multi-party democracies with civilian supremacy (Malaysia, Bangladesh, Indonesia); f) Multi-party democracies with religious councils wielding veto powers (Iran); g) Secular democracies (Turkey).

Such a wide diversity of political systems wholly or partially explains the inability of the Organization of the Islamic Conference to go beyond lip service to act purposefully in applying collective force for the resolution of the crises facing the ummah.

Before attempting to restructure the OIC, Muslim states should initiate internal restructuring to make their political systems more participative, to bring their governance closer to the original democratic core of Islam.

Turkey is possibly the only dominantly Muslim country that has categorically adopted secularism as its basic political system. Yet in some respects, Turkey has gone to excessive and unreasonable lengths in the name of secularism such as by its own ban on hijabs. Even now, the military retains an ultimate veto power that is not in keeping with pure secularism.

There are some African countries, and some North African/Arab countries (Algeria) that may also come close to some aspects of Turkey.

Of all the 50 plus members of the ummah, only two or three states show the capacity to combine their predominantly Muslim identity with truly Islamic values such as democracy, pluralism, respect for minorities, regular

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Yet even when the more destructive differences between Muslim sects are reduced or eliminated, heterogeneity and variety will always be the features of diversity in the Muslim ummah.

Thus, the term "Muslim ummah" implies a comprehensive similarity and unity which, in actual fact, does not exist — and is unlikely to, in the foreseeable future. To stress the heterogeneity of the Muslim ummah is to be realistic, not to be nihilistic. We should acknowledge diversity and use it to our advantage. We should not attempt to ignore intrinsic differences and pretend that a similarity exists where there is no similarity. Acceptance of diversity can energize the power of versatility. Denial of diversity can stultify and suppress capacity. The fraternity and unity of the Muslim ummah should be seen as desirable but distant stars — even as we keep our feet firmly on the ground and reach for the skies above.

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Secularism means that religion and state function separately. It does not mean a denial of the sanctity of religion as is misinterpreted in religious-political, and in Urdu media discourse. Secularism means that all religions are to be respected by the State. On September 11, 1947, Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah presented his secular vision for a Pakistan in which Muslims would always be the vast majority but where non-Muslims would be equal citizens, a Pakistan that would not be a theocratic state.

A state can be secular and at the same time be guided by the principles of Islam, as well as actually practise them. Whereas a state may claim to be Islamic and yet be quite un-Islamic in principle and in practice. Any state that prefixes its name with a reference to religion creates instant and insurmountable hurdles for itself because of the presence of differing schools of thought within a single religion, competitive clergies and futile attempts to recreate a past by applying interpretations made several hundred years ago in conditions vastly different from the 21st century.

Whereas a secular state can take the most positive facets of a religion without being shackled by the chains of dogma, of ritualistic thinking, and ritualistic practices.

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Of all the 50 plus members of the ummah, only two or three states show the capacity to combine their predominantly Muslim identity with truly Islamic values such as democracy, pluralism, respect for minorities, regularity of elections, peaceful transfer of power on a non-hereditary basis. Two of these states are Turkey and Malaysia, with some reservations — for example, the suppression of Muslim Kurds in Turkey, the use of a draconian Internal Security Act in Malaysia. Both countries are either overtly secular or quasi-secular. Is their relatively fast development and their progressive modernity due to their being secular or quasi-secular? Or, in other words, because both are more truly Islamic in practice than "religious" or theocratic states?

To answer this question, there is a need for *ijtehaad* on this subject, through candid, tolerant debate in the Muslim ummah to reflect on the synergy between Islam and secularism: to galvanize a new level of participation and dynamism in the effort to shape a new kind of state and political system for the Muslim ummah.

The writer is a former senator and federal minister.