

THE CHALLENGE
OF PLURALISM
AND THE MIDDLE
WAY OF ISLAM

JEREMY HENZELL-THOMAS

I

O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S E R I E S

THE ASSOCIATION OF MUSLIM SOCIAL SCIENTISTS (UK)

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES

I

THE CHALLENGE OF
PLURALISM AND THE
MIDDLE WAY OF ISLAM

JEREMY HENZELL-THOMAS



THE ASSOCIATION OF MUSLIM SOCIAL SCIENTISTS (UK)

© AMSS UK 2002

THE ASSOCIATION OF MUSLIM SOCIAL SCIENTISTS (UK)
P.O. BOX 126, RICHMOND, SURREY TW9 2UD, UK

*This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of the publishers.*

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1-56564-060-8 paperback

Printed in the United Kingdom
by Oxuniprint at the Oxford University Press

SERIES' EDITORS

DR. ANAS S. AL SHAIKH-ALI
SHIRAZ KHAN



O mankind! We have created you [all] out of a male and a female,
and have made you into nations and communities, so that you might come
to know each other. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is
the one who is most deeply conscious of Him.

(The Qur'an 49:13)

FOREWORD

In a world increasingly polarised by the events of September 11th Dr. Jeremy Henzell-Thomas presents a beautifully written, impassioned plea, appealing to the higher virtues of man to realise within himself, and the society around him, a spiritually deeper and more multiculturally aware social order.

On the level of individual existence man is simply a creature passing through a series of stages on the road to self-development. The nature and quality of this development will largely be governed by his interaction with those around him. As with individuals, so with nations and communities. As citizens of a largely interdependent world, it is imperative that we try to understand ourselves and the myriad of cultures around us, more so perhaps in today's volatile world than at any other period in human history.

Unfortunately, a gross lack of communication, understanding and multicultural awareness is daily stifling our natural sense of justice, peace and "fair play", and, in a climate of extreme volatility, loaded rhetoric and empty dialogue are only serving to fuel ever increasing flashpoints of conflict. In addition to this the parameters of debate increasingly seem to hinge upon a societal sense of "us" and "them" polluting our sense of citizenship. When the "them" are more often than not dwelling amongst us, as our neighbours, co-workers and friends we would do well to heed Dr. Jeremy's advice urging mankind to engage in real, meaningful dialogue. Empty debates between two positions only serve to give an illusion of dialogue, when what is required, rather, are truth seeking encounters as a means to reconciling opposites.

The author also points to the need for convergence, entirely possible in a truly pluralist society. Muslim participation in this process is critical as Pluralism is an ideal environment to project core Islamic values. There is a great need for active engagement by Muslims today

and they should rise to the challenge instead of retreating into isolation. An important area of convergence between the West (as typified by the Anglo-Saxon spirit) and Islam is that of the “middle way”, one of the most important guiding principles in English life. The ideals, principles and ethics of the “middle way” need to be revived to restore our sense of balance, beauty, harmony and justice. An appreciation of the “other” does not mean the flattening out of differences into a new pulp (of course no-one can be understood from all conceivable angles) but a celebration of diversity and multiculturalism.

The high principles and ethics embodied in the ideas put forward by the author, himself the traveller-linguist whose story he relates with much admiration in his short narrative, are a way forward. Openness and commitment rather than the exaggeration of differences is the essence of his message.

THE EDITORS
October, 2002

THE CHALLENGE OF PLURALISM AND THE MIDDLE WAY OF ISLAM¹

THERE WAS already, before the September 11th attacks, an urgent need to address the issue of religious pluralism in the wake of the UN World Conference on Racism in Durban, the summer riots in the north of England, the crisis surrounding the plight of asylum seekers and refugees, and the more general debate on diversity and multiculturalism which has been a prominent feature of political, social, and educational discourse in recent months.

I would like to start by challenging the dangerous doctrine of the clash of civilisations by finding common ground between the Anglo-Saxon spirit and Islamic values and virtues in the idea of the “middle way”. According to President ‘Alija ‘Ali Izetbegovic,² the source of this convergence is an Englishman, the thirteenth-century philosopher Roger Bacon.

His seventeenth-century namesake, Sir Francis Bacon, is, of course, well known as one of the fathers of the scientific revolution

¹ This paper integrates, revises and abridges material from the author’s Opening Plenary Address and his Concluding Remarks at the AMSS Third Annual Conference *Unity and Diversity: Islam, Muslims and the Challenge of Pluralism*, held at the Diplomatic Academy, Westminster University, London, 20–21 October, 2001.

² *Islam Between East and West* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1994), in particular “‘The Third Way’ Outside Islam,” pp.271–86, for a discussion on the resemblances between the Anglo-Saxon “middle way” and the “third way of Islam.” Cf. Abdal Hakim Murad, “British and Muslim,” *American Muslim Network*, no.7 (November 2001), based on a lecture given to a conference of British converts on September 17, 1997. Here, the convergence between “Islamic moderation and good sense with the English temper” is also highlighted.

in England, a champion of empiricism who held that we must purge the mind of prejudice, conditioning, false notions, and unanalysed authority – what he called the “Idols of the human mind” which distort and discolour the true nature of things – and rely instead on direct experience, perception, observation, and “true induction” as methods of gaining sound knowledge.³

It is ironic that the empiricism championed by Francis Bacon has been adopted as one of the key features of “Englishness” by opponents of multiculturalism, one of whom has recently argued: “multi-racialism can thrive only within the context of a common culture.”⁴

At first sight, such a view might seem to accord with the view of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, quoted by Bacon in support of his ideas, that the limitations of the human mind cause us to seek truth within the confines of our own “lesser worlds” rather than in the “greater or common world.” However, it is the grossest form of reductionism to equate the “lesser worlds” with the assumed “parochialism” represented by the imported cultures of immigrant ethnic minorities, and to equate the “greater common world” with a common nationalistic identity, as if the latter is any less parochial. There is a greater common world than the “common culture” of Englishness, whatever that may be, to which critics of multiculturalism say that all races in England must subscribe. The “greater common world” is greater too than the assumption of shared values in the self-referential rhetoric about preserving the “way of life” in the West. While many people of all faiths and cultures would agree that there are certain core values in Western civilisation which are worth defending, along with certain core values in other cultures, to suggest that there is some kind of monolithic “way of life” in the West is an illusion, and is an example of the very “fundamentalism” which is so often attributed to Islam.

The “greater common world” is greater even than the increasingly

³ See Francis Bacon’s “The Four Idols” (originally in *Novum Organum*) in *Plato’s Heirs: Classic Essays*, ed. James D. Lester (Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1996), pp.53–63.

⁴ Sir Richard Body, *England for the English* (London: New European Publications, 2001), p.181.

connected global community, which already transcends dwindling national boundaries. It is a world that Bacon associates with what he calls the *Ideals* of the Divine, not the *Idols* of the human mind. It is the inclusive world of our true nature (*fitra*) as fully human beings, and it can have countless cultural expressions:

And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the variations in your languages and colour. Verily in that are signs for those who know. (Qur'an 30:22).

There is a story from a classic of Islamic spirituality about four quarrelling travellers. It goes like this:

Four travellers – a Persian, a Turk, an Arab, and a Greek – were arguing about how best to spend a single coin, which was the only piece of money they had between them.

“I want to buy *angur*,” said the Persian.

“I prefer *üzüm*,” said the Turk.

“I want *‘inab*,” said the Arab.

“No!” said the Greek, “it is *estafil* that we should buy.”

At that moment another traveller passed by and said: “If you give me the coin, I will do my best to satisfy the desires of all of you.”

At first they were suspicious of him, believing that he intended to take the coin for himself, but eventually they decided to entrust it to him. He went to a fruit seller’s shop and bought four small bunches of grapes.

“This is *angur*,” said the Persian.

“But this is also what I call *üzüm*,” said the Turk.

“Thank you for bringing me *‘inab*,” said the Arab.

“This is none other than my *estafil*,” said the Greek.

The grapes were shared out amongst them, and it dawned on each of them that the disharmony between them was simply due to his poor understanding of the language of the others.⁵

Everybody is in a state of yearning, because there is an inner need existing in all of us, a basic urge to remember our original state of

⁵ Jalaluddin Rumi, *Mathnawi*, II, 368f ff.

unity, but we give it different names and have different ideas of what it may be. The traveller-linguist in the story represents the sage, the man or woman of spiritual insight, the one who is able to show the other travellers that what they all yearn for is actually the same thing, even though their word for it is different. Such a person is also the harmoniser and peacemaker, who is able to resolve the misunderstanding and strife that was developing between the travellers and fulfil all their needs with a single coin. The single coin is, of course, *tauhīd*, the divine unity, which is the ground of all diversity.

Returning to the theme of the “middle way,” it was the earlier Bacon, the thirteenth-century philosopher Roger Bacon, who, according to Izetbegovic, “set the entire structure of English philosophical thought on two separate foundations”: inward experience, which leads to spiritual insight, and observation and experimentation, which lead to true science. Bacon never attempted to reduce everything to either a scientific or a religious outlook, but sought to establish a balance between the two:

This aspect of Bacon’s genius is considered by most Englishmen as the most authentic expression of English thought and feeling; many even consider all subsequent English philosophy [and its influence on the whole Anglo-Saxon world] as nothing but the development of Bacon’s principles of thinking.⁶

President Izetbegovic then adds that there is “another important fact about Roger Bacon which has never been sufficiently studied and recognised: the father of English philosophy and science was a student of Arabic.” Indeed, he lectured at Oxford in Arab clothes. He was strongly influenced by Islamic thinkers, especially by Ibn Sīnā, and to this influence can be attributed the character of Bacon’s thought and, through him, the origin of the middle way as the single most important guiding principle in English life, encompassing many dimensions – political, social, moral, and spiritual. This stream of thought has at its heart the principle of balance: balance between reason, observation, and science, on the one hand, and faith, on the

⁶ Izetbegovic, *Islam Between East and West*, p.273.

other; balance between individual freedoms and rights, and wider responsibilities within society; balance between utilitarian morality, or pragmatism, and the highest ideals; and balance between a practical concern with the immanent condition of mankind and a hunger for transcendence.

At the heart of the concept of the middle way is the principle of fairness, the “fair play” so integral to the English conception of good character, and let us be clear about the origin of the English word “fair” because it shows again how closely this idea is connected to Islamic principles. The English word “fair” has two meanings: the first is “just, equitable, reasonable,” and the second is “beautiful.” But the meaning of its original Germanic root is “fitting,” that which is the right size, in the correct ratio or proportion. The range of meanings of this word “fair” reflect a truly Islamic concept, the idea that to be just is to “do what is beautiful” (*ihsān*), to act in accordance with our original nature (*fiṭra*), which God has shaped in “just proportions” (Qur’an 82:7) as a “fitting” reflection of divine order and harmony. Indeed, “*Everything have We created in due measure and proportion*” (Qur’an 54:49). So, a fair and just society is a beautiful society, and, in the words of a famous *ḥadīth*, “God is Beauty and delights in the beautiful.”

I do not wish to exaggerate the common ground that can be found in the Anglo-Saxon world and Islam, and we need to be clear about where the ways have parted. For one thing, it can easily be shown that the balance between the religious and the scientific outlooks inherited from Islam in Roger Bacon’s philosophy began to be seriously disturbed with the onset of the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century, and we know what has happened now: a profound and pervasive loss of the sense of the sacred in Western culture wrought by scientific materialism, or scientism.

We can see what was behind this too. By limiting science to experimentation, the original balance between inward experience and external observation, which was central to Bacon’s vision, was destroyed. The mind of Western man became externalised, focused only on observable and quantifiable realities. Inward experience, the source of a deeper science or wisdom, was no longer to be trusted; the capacity for contemplation, the source of spiritual insight, was

neglected, and the very idea of revelation, of a Book “*for those who believe in the Unseen*” (Qur’an 2:3), beyond the reach of human perception, was denied.

The displayed Book of Nature, too, was divested of its *significance*, in the sense that its beautiful and majestic signs (*āyāt*), symbols (*rumūz*), and similitudes (*amthāl*) – whether in the “far horizons” or within ourselves – were no longer seen as pointing beyond themselves to the existence of an infinite and merciful Creator who had invested everything with “due measure and proportion,” but only as phenomena referring to nothing outside their own self-sufficient laws and mechanisms.

That said, there is a special need at this time, in the midst of all the rhetoric about the clash of civilisations, to apply a corrective and issue a strong warning about the brutal consequences of exaggerating differences. More than ever, we need traveller-linguists who can translate from one “language” into another to bring to light the convergence of people’s deepest aspirations.

The most obvious expression of diversity is the underlying elemental polarity in the whole of creation, for, as the Qur’an says, “*everything have We created in pairs*” (51: 49), and “*We have created you [all] out of a male and a female ...*” (49:13). The dance of this polarity is the excitement we call “love,” for, “*... among His wonders is this: He creates for you mates out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you: in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who think!*” (Qur’an 30: 21).

In another sense, however, it could be said that the very duality and polarity underlying the fabric of the created universe is a handicap because it has given to mankind a chronically divided nature, a tendency to see reality in black and white, or left and right, in competing paradigms, and at its worst, a propensity to see the world in terms of us-and-them, of hostile and competing civilisations.

The tendency to dichotomise reality in this way appears, to some extent, to be inherent in the way the brain works, because if you were able to see simultaneously all the grey areas, all the possible contradictions to any position, every ambiguity, and every conceivable point of view, you would be paralysed, incapable of

any decisive action, or overwhelmed by confusion. There has to be some selection of input and output. We are rightly suspicious of the stereotype of the armchair philosopher hopelessly entangled in endless modifications of statements and counter-statements and never able to come to a conclusion.

I am reminded of the giant computer in Douglas Adams' *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* which spent six million years trying to calculate the answer to the question "What is the meaning of life, the universe and everything?" and finally came up with the answer "42," much to the understandable disappointment and frustration of those eagerly waiting for the answer.

I am also reminded of the peculiar case of the famous mnemonist recorded by the eminent Russian neuropsychologist Alexander Luria.⁷ The man in question could perform extraordinary feats of memory because his brain was able to translate words spontaneously and automatically into memorable images and patterns, yet he was incapable of understanding poetry, because the metaphorical language of poetry did not conform to the fixed associations and automatic routines in his own brain which enabled him to perform such feats of memory. A normal person is not thrown into confusion when, having read the words "April is the cruellest month ..." by T. S. Eliot, he reads "Oh, to be in England now that April's there ..." by Robert Browning, but our mnemonist would have been confused. To him, the word April could only have a fixed association or emotional connotation, and could only evoke an unchanging image or a particular colour. This gave his brain extraordinary computational power, but his comprehension was grossly disabled as a consequence. He could not *interpret* anything; his brain could only generate a single fixed meaning.

The normal human brain is different from a computer or that of an *idiot savant* – someone with an exceptional gift in one very specialized area, but often with major disabilities in others. I am always amused by that common visual joke about computers or robots whose circuits start burning and smoking, and which eventually explode, when they are given a logical contradiction or a paradox to process.

⁷ See A. R. Luria, *The Mind of a Mnemonist* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

To some extent, the tendency to debate, or engage in an adversarial argument, is ingrained in us because we inhabit a world of duality, and this tendency is reinforced by the gift of language, given to man alone by God, when He “*imparted unto Adam the names of all things*” (Qur’an 2:31). On one level this is the capacity for differentiating, separating, and defining things through the faculty of conceptual thought. On another level completely, “the letter”, as al-Niffarī, says, “is a veil” that separates us from unity precisely because it is a tool for manifesting and proliferating endless diversity and multiplicity.⁸

But, unlike computers, human beings have the means to reconcile opposites, to encompass creative paradox, to be comfortable with diversity and difference. That is because as well as being given the Names that enable us to differentiate, we are also endowed with *fiṭra*, that innate disposition which enables us to remember the unity of our primordial condition. And it is only through constant remembrance that we can purify our own hearts. In the words of the *ḥadīth qudsī*,⁹ “Neither the heavens nor the earth encompass me, but the heart of my faithful servant does encompass me.” It is only in the human heart that opposites can be reconciled, that diversity and unity co-exist.

True respect for diversity, so vital in today’s interdependent world, is predicated on real dialogue, on the development of a relationship based on mutual engagement and an encounter of commitments, not the mere exchange of clichés about the “celebration of diversity.” In her discussion of the challenge of religious diversity, in which she deftly balances her own Christian faith commitment with openness to authentic encounters with pilgrims from other religious traditions, Diana L. Eck, Director of the Pluralism Project, and Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University, highlights dialogue as the first principle of genuine pluralism:

Without dialogue and dialectic, the diversity of religious traditions, of cultures and ethnic groups, becomes an array of

⁸ *The Mawāqif and Mukhāṭabāt of Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abdī’l-Jabbār al-Niffarī*, translated and edited by A. J. Arberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p.111.

⁹ A saying reported by the Prophet Muhammad, but spoken by God in the first person.

isolated encampments, each with a different flag, meeting only occasionally for formalities or for battle. The swamis, monks, rabbis, and archbishops [and let us add sheikhs, ayatollahs, imams and mullahs to her list] may meet for an interfaith prayer breakfast, but without real dialogue they become simply icons of diversity, not instruments of relationship.¹⁰

Through dialogue, we also find a means to understand ourselves, our own faith and our culture, more deeply. “It is not a debate between two positions, but a truth-seeking encounter,” a process of mutual transformation which goes beyond understanding of the “other” to a new level of “mutual self-understanding” (ibid., p.198). As the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings upon him) said: “He who knows his own self, knows his Lord.” Dialogue and dialectic enhance not only the possibility of living together in harmony, but also deepen our understanding of our own faith and our own selves. By taking a “vibrant interest in what motivates ... other pilgrims, what orients them in the world, what nourishes their growth and gives rise to their most cherished values,” we also “risk the changes of heart and mind” which such encounters may inspire (ibid., p.199).

Religious pluralism is not merely the phenomenon of plurality or cosmopolitanism, it is, according to Eck’s definition, “*active engagement* [my italics] with plurality” (ibid., p.191). Given the repeated charge that the crisis facing the Muslim world today can be largely attributed to a lack of openness and a lack of engagement, it could justly be said that the challenge, at this moment of extraordinary opportunity for a new world order, is for Muslims to engage actively and creatively with the whole of mankind.

Now, many would say that it is understandable that there is a climate of revolt amongst many Muslims against what has been called the “trajectory of globalisation”¹¹ and an active resistance to the

¹⁰ *Encountering God* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p.198.

¹¹ It is important to realise that, as Paul Valley points out in an article in the *Independent* on 30 January 2002, the vast majority of anti-globalisation protesters are not “anarchists, revolutionary socialists and lovers of recreational violence,” but “environmentalists, human rights activists, trade unionists and aid agency campaigners” who are “not so much against globalisation as demanding globalisation of a different kind.”

cultural and political dominance that has accompanied it. Ali Mazrui has called this dominance the “hegemony of Eurocentric culture,”¹² characterised by economic stratification, military inequality, the disproportionate emphasis on European ideologies, the proliferation of Western-derived systems of education, and even the ubiquity of Western dress. We could add to this catalogue other impacts too, notably the spread of Western technology, consumerism, and mass entertainment.

Resistance to this hegemony has been even more sharply polarised in some quarters in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, to the extent that, in Britain for example, there is every prospect of increasing disaffection and alienation in some sections of the Muslim community which have become marginalized and disadvantaged by legal, economic, and structural inequalities, by Islamophobia in the press and within institutions, as much as by certain fixed attitudes in the community itself. The scapegoating of faith schools, as a means of “explaining” ethnic and religious tensions, without acknowledging deeper underlying causes, can only exacerbate the situation.

These difficulties cannot be solved by retreating into hostile isolation and exclusiveness. Never has there been a greater need for active engagement. According to Walid Saif, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Jordan, “preoccupation with protecting a threatened identity, as is the case among many Muslims, often leads to the definition of the collective “self” in terms of differences and contrasts.” The outcome of this defensive identity crisis is “enclosure and exclusion.” A truly secure Muslim is inclusive and appeals to common principles and values based on a universal conception of humanity. At the same time such a Muslim is able to use common resources to tackle common problems and to make a positive contribution to solving them for the well-being of humanity as a whole. Saif continues:

¹² “Civilisations Between Dominance and Dialogue: In Search of Balance,” a paper presented at a conference on *Dialogue Among Civilisations*, organised by Al-Khoei Foundation and the Cambridge International Studies Association (CISA), at the Centre of International Studies, University of Cambridge, 3 February, 2001. Professor Mazrui is Director, Institute for Global Studies, Binghamton, New York.

One cannot but notice that religious discourse has been lagging behind secular humanistic discourse on major issues of both international and local concern, such as human rights, democracy and political participation, social justice, women's rights and the environment. It seems we are often more concerned about defending and advocating our religious ideals, in opposition to the dominant secular tradition, than with drawing on and utilising our religious principles and values to produce practical initiatives to solve specific problems. Moral messages gain more credibility and communicate themselves more persuasively when they are put in the service of the people, without exclusion and without proselytism.¹³

The pluralistic religious approach therefore implies an active engagement with others and a search for understanding. It is not the passive acknowledgment of plurality, nor is it mere *tolerance*. Eck is surely right that as a style of living together "tolerance is too minimal an expectation." Indeed, it may be an "expression of privilege" for the majority, or even a "passive form of hostility," a kind of "shaky truce." Furthermore, "it does not require us to know anything new, it does not even entertain the fact that we might change in the process."¹⁴

Tolerance is nonetheless a starting-point in the development of a pluralistic society, and it is often upheld, along with empiricism, pragmatism, and the balance between individual liberty and the rule of law, as a characteristically English – and wider Anglo-Saxon – virtue. There may be some truth in this, and it is certainly the case that, despite the undeniable reality of unparalleled levels of institutional Islamophobia in Britain today,¹⁵ there are millions of ordinary

¹³ "Reflections on Muslim-Christian Dialogue: Core Values and Common Responsibilities," *Encounters, Journal of Inter-Cultural Perspectives*, vol.7, no.1 (March, 2001), p.93.

¹⁴ *Encountering God*, p.192.

¹⁵ In the UK the Media and Popular Culture Watch project at the *Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism* (FAIR) was set up to monitor specific incidences of Islamophobia in the media and entertainment industries. Its responses aim primarily to inform, educate and improve mutual understanding. At the same time, FAIR is actively involved through its other projects in challenging institutional religious

Britons who are essentially fair-minded, just and tolerant people, who do not want to live in a divided society. Often, they simply lack balanced information to enable them to make unprejudiced judgments. More often, they lack direct experience of other communities, which is always the most effective way of building bridges and fostering inter-cultural and inter-faith understanding.

It is important not to fall into the jingoistic trap of equating particular virtues with national identities. Fair play is not a monopoly of the English. It is an innate human virtue that has exemplars in every culture. The semantic field encompassed by the English word “fair,” which connects justice with the idea of proportion and beauty, has clear correspondences with the Arabic *‘adl*, whose root ʿ-D-L has the sense of proportion and symmetry as well as justice and equity. We need to look for such equivalences in order to discover the common underlying language represented by universal semantic fields. We must always come back to the single coin of the innate disposition of the human being, and not be tempted into invidious comparisons designed to promote particular communities at the expense of others.

Eck warns against the danger of confusing pluralism with relativism. While relativism presupposes a stance of openness, pluralism presupposes both openness and commitment. We need to be aware of the “cynical intellectual sleight of hand” through which “some critics have linked pluralism with a valueless relativism – an indiscriminating twilight in which ‘all cats are grey,’ all perspectives equally viable, and as a result, equally unconvincing.”¹⁶ This is a favourite ploy of those who seek to discredit pluralism by suggesting that it encourages a view of the world in which anything goes.

At the same time, we need to be careful that we do not *equate* nihilistic *relativism* with *relativity*, or every attempt to find *relationship*. In the same way, we need to distinguish between *absolutism* as an unbending frame of mind and the *absolute* and the immutable truths given to us through divine revelation. Such distinctions can be carried further to encompass the difference between *individualism*

discrimination, advising relevant agencies on how to tackle Islamophobic and Muslim-alienating trends in society, and projecting a more balanced and positive image of Islam and Muslims through constructive and proactive educational means.

¹⁶ *Encountering God*, p.193.

and *individuality*, between *libertinism* and *liberty*, between *communalism* and *community*, between *scientism* and true *science*, between *modernism* and *modernity*, and between *secularism* and *secularisation*.

It could be argued, of course, that the distinction between *secularism* and *secularisation* is not as clear-cut as that between the other terms in the above list, and that far from being a constructive process, *secularisation* is not even neutral. The terms are often used interchangeably even in the writings of clear-thinking scholars and commentators, and even when a distinction is made between them, it is often a relative distinction between negative terms. Al-Attas, for example, regards the “integral components” of secularisation as “the disenchantment of nature, the desacralization of politics, and the deconsecration of values.”¹⁷ He contends that this negative process differs from *secularism* only in that secularism is an ideology which projects “a closed worldview and an absolute set of values,” whereas secularisation is “a continuing and open-ended process in which values and worldviews are continually revised” – although always with the aim of further “liberating” mankind from religious control over his reason and language, and thus causing him to “evolve” from an allegedly “infantile” condition to a state of “maturity.”

The same argument could be applied to the distinction between *modernism* and *modernity* such that modernity also assumes a pejorative sense. This implicates it as a condition – if not an ideology – that supports the negative process of secularisation and associates it with what al-Attas describes as the “awareness on the part of secular man of the relativity of his own views and beliefs.”

As I have said, it is of the greatest importance to try to define with precision and clarity the conceptual nuances associated with these key terms (which usually hinge on the force of nominal suffixes such as -ism, -ity, -ation). However, it is not my purpose to pursue an unremittingly negative critique of Western civilisation, but to discuss how best to face the challenge of religious pluralism.

A way forward is actually indicated by Al-Attas’ own discussion of the term “secular.” The term, as he points out, comes from the

¹⁷ Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), p.18.

Latin *saeculum*, which means “this age” or “the present time,” and the concept “refers to the condition of the world at this particular time or period or age.” In early Christian texts it was used to refer to the temporal world – as opposed to the spiritual world – and it is clear how its emphasis on a particular time or period easily develops into what Al-Attas calls “the existential context of an ever-changing world in which there occurs the notion of relativity of human values” (ibid., p.16).

It is precisely by recognising and understanding the “condition of the world at this particular time” that we can meet the challenge of religious and cultural pluralism. This is not to give precedence to the temporal world (*saeculum*) over the spiritual world, nor to set one against the other, but to understand that human minds are conditioned differently in each age, and that tradition must be dynamically self-renewing and responsive to new conditions and new questions if it is to remain a living tradition. In other words, time, place and people cannot be ignored in the development of human understanding.

Jacques Barzun has said in his recent monumental survey of Western civilisation from 1500 to the present day, that “in the realm of ethics, the most blatant absurdity of the day is wrapped up in the bogey word *Relativism*. Its current misapplication is a serious error ... Nine out of ten times, the outcry against Relativism is mechanical ...”¹⁸ Barzun maintains that the term has become “a cliché that stands for the cause of every laxity,” and it would be easy to produce examples of past and present fulminations against relativism as the very ground of hedonism and self-indulgence, and a slippery slope of cunning justifications and satanic whisperings, taking us further and further away from the certainty of eternal truths and absolute values.

In George Orwell’s book *Animal Farm*, a satire on Communism, the animals, having expelled the farmer Jones, their oppressor, from their farm, make up the slogan: “Four legs good, two legs bad.” From the perspective of Barzun’s critique of the “mechanical outcry” against relativism, we might echo this slogan with another: “Absolutism

¹⁸ *From Dawn to Decadence. 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Civilisation* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), pp.760–61.

good, Relativism bad.” Yet it could be argued that both absolutism and relativism are limiting ideologies.

The problem here is that we need to distinguish between relativism and the root of the word, which gives us “relativity” and “relationship,” just as we need to distinguish between the closed worldview of secularism and the existence of contemporary conditions (*saeculum*). The usual charge against relativism is that the relativist denies that there is a fixed right or wrong, and that relativism and conscience are therefore diametrically opposed. However, as Diana Eck points out, “a thoughtful relativist is able to point out the many ways in which our cognitive and moral understandings are relative to our historical, cultural and ideological contexts” and, to that extent, the “thoughtful relativist” is a “close cousin” of the pluralist,¹⁹ someone who is able to “relate” to and engage with people of other communities and show how absolutism can give rise to bigotry and oppressive dogma.

Similarly, the qualities of *individuality* need not be conflated with the *individualism*, which gives man no point of reference beyond his own ego and the gratification of his own individual desires. The expression of individuality, which is nothing more than the realisation and expression of the personal uniqueness of each human being, is not in opposition to the needs of the community. Quite the contrary, in an age of increasingly sterile conformity, uniformity and standardisation, the contribution of creative individuals who are realising their individual potential has never been needed more as a means of enriching and revitalising communities. *Communalism* will always suspect the individual of individualism, but a living *community* will respect and nurture individuality as a valid expression of diversity while being able to balance individual needs and modes of expression with collective rights.

Pluralism is itself an ideal environment in which to project not narrow formalisms but core Islamic values, including the genuinely Islamic concept of human dignity. These core Islamic values are the same universal values that promote unity in the secular world – values such as seeking knowledge, equality, freedom, human rights, justice, and altruism. The principles of a new world order are embedded in the

¹⁹ *Encountering God*, p.194.

pluralistic vision of Islam and were embodied in the prototype of an Islamic society existing during the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings upon him) and in al-Andalus – a vision capable of reconciling the demands of diversity and unity in a humane framework.

Such a vision encompasses not only the openness that characterises living traditions, but also a strong commitment to a particular tradition and community. Eck argues that there is no such thing as a generic pluralist. There are pluralists from different faith communities, and even humanist pluralists, committed to their own tradition, but at the same time willing to encounter one another and respect each other's particularities. The task of a pluralist society, she says, is "to create the space and the means for the encounter of commitments, not to neutralize all commitment," for "unless all of us can encounter one another's conceptual, cultural, religious and spiritual expressions and understand them through dialogue, both critically and self-critically, we cannot begin to live with maturity and integrity in the world house" (*ibid.*, pp.195–96).

A view of pluralism which entails commitment as well as openness and respect for diversity is definitely not a syncretic view which tries to synthesize, fuse, or cobble together different traditions – including incompatible principles or beliefs – into a new system, such as Manichaeism, derived from the Zoroastrian, Buddhist, and Christian traditions. It is not "a global shopping mall where each individual puts together a basket of appealing religious ideas," flattening out differences and reducing every tradition to "the bland unity of the lowest common denominator" or "the nicest platitudes" (*ibid.*, p.196). Nor is it an attempt to make up an artificial language, to produce a kind of religious Esperanto, a common language made up from words and grammatical structures selected from some of the major world languages. Made-up languages of this kind never seem to work. Apparently, there are more people with an interest in Klingon, the made-up language developed from the Star Trek television series, than Esperanto, because Klingon is a language which dynamically and organically expresses the character of a particular group of people, even though they are completely fictional.

It might be said that a language like Esperanto is a worthy attempt to promote the "greater common world" of Heraclitus or Bacon, but

I think this is a profound misunderstanding. Unity cannot be artificially constructed and contrived in this way, because it contradicts the entirely natural multiplicity that is the very matrix of the entire universe. Unity is a state of being within ourselves that enables us to live with paradox, to reconcile opposites, to respect differences, to understand complementarity. It must be first and foremost a spiritual condition. “*Verily, never will Allah change the condition of people until they themselves change what is in their souls*” (Qur’an 13:11). This is change based on a spiritual perspective and the striving (*mujahada*) to master the lower self which must take precedence over a merely sociological or political view, for the relationship with God is the core of what it is to be a Muslim, and, indeed, an adherent of any religious faith.

In the wake of September 11th, 2001, and all the dangers which accompany a polarized us-and-them outlook on the world, the West should never forget one of the founding principles of its civilisation in the affirmation by Plato that philosophical dialectic, the testing process of critical enquiry through discussion and dialogue, is utterly distinct from and immeasurably superior to rhetoric, and this legacy has ultimately ensured that “in the contemporary usage of all modern European languages ... the word *rhetorical* is unfailingly pejorative.” It implies “manipulative abuse of linguistic resources for self-serving ends, usually in the political context ...”²⁰

At the same time, Muslims need to recall that one of the founding principles of Islamic civilisation was a dynamic spirit of open-minded enquiry, which Muslim scholars communicated to the Christian, Greek, and Jewish communities in their midst. As Muhammad Asad has so eloquently written:

[The Qur’an], through its insistence on consciousness and knowledge ... engendered among its followers a spirit of intellectual curiosity and independent inquiry, ultimately resulting in that splendid era of learning and scientific research which distinguished the world of Islam at the height of its vigour; and

²⁰ Robert Wardy, *Greek Thought: A Guide to Classical Knowledge*, ed. Jacques Brunschwig and Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), p.465.

the culture thus fostered by the Qur'an penetrated in countless ways and by-ways into the mind of medieval Europe and gave rise to that revival of Western culture which we call the Renaissance, and thus became in the course of time largely responsible for the birth of what is described as the "age of science": the age in which we are now living.²¹

It is stated in the Qur'an that Muslims are "*a community of the middle way*" (2:143), suggesting, according to Muhammad Asad, "a call to moderation in every aspect of life" and "a denial of the view that there is an inherent conflict between the spirit and the flesh" (ibid. p.30). A closed, exclusive, puritanical, hostile, and inward-looking version of Islam, which regards all non-Muslims as enemies and infidels and refuses to engage with the rest of humankind, corresponds with no period of greatness in Islam and will bring none. Let us remember the words of our beloved Prophet (peace and blessings upon him): "All God's creatures are His family; and he is the most beloved of God who does most good to God's creatures."

²¹ Muhammad Asad, Foreword to *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), p.i.

This paper is an impassioned plea, appealing to the higher virtues of man to realise within himself, and the society around him, a spiritually deeper and more multiculturally aware social order. In our largely inter-dependent, but increasingly volatile, world it is imperative that we not only understand ourselves but the myriad of cultures existing around us. The paper points to the the “middle way” as an important area of convergence between the West and Islam presenting with great vision the case that a revival of the ideals, principles and ethics of the “middle way” will restore mankind’s sense of balance, beauty, harmony and justice.

DR. JEREMY HENZELL-THOMAS is Director of Curriculum Development for the Book Foundation. He holds a PhD from the University of Lancaster for research into the psychology of learning. His current work for the Book Foundation entails the development of a curriculum synthesizing the best of modern education with traditional, universal Islamic principles. He is a member of the AMSS (UK) Executive Committee.

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES 1