The Shape of the Coming Global Civil Society : Suggestions for a Possible Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

In a world in which the degree of interdependence and interconnection among nations, cultures and civilisations is ever-increasing, the necessity of creating efficient global institutions for managing global affairs has become more urgent than ever. However, what makes the task of constructing such competent institutions rather difficult is that interconnectivity and common concerns are not the only factors responsible for shaping the future of our societies; diversity in the form of plurality of value systems/belief systems also plays an important role in this respect. The problems we are facing with are exaggerated types of the age-old universal-particular or global-local dichotomy and the apparent incommensurability of rival paradigms.

To be able to create efficient global institutions, in this case a well-functioning global civil society, we ought to take into account diverse concerns and sensitivities of local communities and cultures. For Muslim countries to be able to contribute meaningfully to the construction of such a global civil society, a prior condition is the establishment of effective local models of civil society which are in tune with the sensitivities of these communities. Such models could play a significant role in educating and training members of the Muslim communities for full and constructive participation in shaping a desirable future global civil society. The introduction of such indigenous models of civil society is of particular significance at a time when Muslim societies, by and large, are suffering from acute forms of 'identity crisis' syndrome.

The aim of the present paper is to propose the outline of a dual-purpose model of civil society which could be adopted by Muslim societies and communities. This model, while would fulfil the usual standard functions of civil societies, would also prepare the ground for the participation of the societies which have adopted it in the creation of efficient global civil society.
Keywords*: globalization, civil society, Islamic Perspective, Identity Crisis*

Belief-ecosystems and Identity Crisis in the Muslim World

From a cultural point of view, human beings are, in the final analysis, what they believe and think. As such, it will not be too wide of the mark, for the sake of the arguments of the present paper, to identify the "identity", either of individuals or communities, with their belief systems or intentionalities. Belief systems are not fixed and rigid entities. On the contrary, like living organisms, they are constantly changing and evolving in response to the changing situations in the intellectual and physical environments surrounding them. We can somewhat loosely liken individual's belief-systems to Popper's world-2, and the intellectual and physical environments with which they interact to his world-3 and world-1 respectively (Popper, 1972, Ch. 4). Communities' belief-systems which can be regarded as collective belief-systems or collective intentionalities, on the other hand, are part of the world-3. We also use the term 'belief-ecosystems' to denote sets of communities' belief-systems which are somewhat related to each other. Belief-ecosystems, on their part, like natural-ecosystems are shaped by interaction between the entities which constitute them and the environment encompass them.

Islamic civilisation can be regarded as a geographically vast and historically old belief-ecosystem. Within the context of this belief-ecosystem one can discern many varied and diverse belief-systems. Each of these systems has taken shape in response to factors (internal and external) that have influenced the Islamic belief-ecosystem since its inception one and half millennia ago. The emergence of Shi'ism and Sunnism as well as other less comprehensive sects, the rise of various schools of thought and intellectual disciplines, e.g., mysticism (*Irfan*), philosophy, theology (*kalaam*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and the appearance of myriad forms of folk-cultures throughout the Islamic lands, can all be attributed to this process of identity-formation.

The responses of Muslims to the changes in their belief-ecosystem can be classified into three general categories, namely, revolutionary transformations and conversions of a gestalt-shift type, evolutionary adaptations and adjustments, and attempts to preserve the status quo.

These categories, either separately or simultaneously, can be traced in various historical periods in different parts of the Islamic world.

Belief-ecosystems, as remarked above, are constantly transforming under pressures from internal and external factors including social, economic, political, environmental, scientific, technological, and cultural. However, although changes in the belief-ecosystems are happening all the time, it is not the case that each of these changes constitutes an identity crisis. Identity crises are defined in terms of the threats perceived by the individuals or the communities in question, the threats which these individuals or communities consider to be detrimental to their existing belief systems. In other words, and to use a modern terminology, belief-ecosystems are of the type of complex systems known as 'robust yet fragile' (RYF). Such systems can tolerate many drastic changes and yet are vulnerable towards some particular changes that happen along their fault lines. Identity crisis is one of the major Achilles heels for belief-ecosystems (Doyle, et.al, 2005).

The Islamic belief-ecosystem has undergone various changes in its long history. However, none of those changes were regarded as constituting an identity crisis for this belief-ecosystem. External military invasions, internal political cataclysms, environmental catastrophes, and the like, did not create a widespread sense of identity crisis amongst the inhabitants of Islamic lands in the previous centuries. This, of course, does not mean that during that long period one could not find cases of individuals or small groups of people who have experienced such a crisis. What it means is that a large scale crisis of identity cannot be discerned in the earlier parts of the development of Islamic belief-ecosystem. It is only since the encounter of the Islamic societies with modern Western civilisation in the early nineteenth century that the symptoms of an acute and comprehensive identity crisis in the Islamic belief-ecosystem have become evident.

As a result of this encounter, among other things, a large number of new intellectual elements were (and still are being) introduced to the traditional belief systems which, in the past, were in a state of quasi-equilibrium within the Islamic belief-ecosystem. The intrusion of these new elements has disturbed the quasi-stability of the ecosystem. It has changed both the geometry and the dynamics of the traditional belief systems within the Islamic belief-ecosystem: the arrangements of the constituting parts of these belief systems and the ways of their interaction have undergone profound changes. In other words, the contact between Islamic societies and the West in modern times has put into motion a long and ongoing process of co-evolution (Kauffman 1995).

This ongoing process, so far, has resulted in many socio-economic and political upheavals. In Iran alone, during the twentieth century, and in the span of few decades, two major revolutions have taken place in direct response to the flow of new elements which penetrated the traditional fabric of the Iranian society (Koury and MacDonald (eds.), 1987). The phenomenon of change due to the interaction between new and old elements is, of course, not restricted to Iran. Throughout the Islamic lands, during the past one and a half centuries, many political regimes have been toppled, many new political parties and movements have appeared on the scene, countless many new institutions and new forms of life have come into being, and a large spectrum of new ideas have made their debut.

In a nutshell, the encounter with the West has given rise to the phenomenon of 'identity-crisis' which in turn has shaken the robust-yet-fragile complex system of Islamic belief-ecosystem to the core and has resulted in deep structural changes in the Muslim countries. A sure sign of the identity crisis is the appearance of soul-searching questions concerning the very fundamentals of the belief system. In the context of traditional Islamic societies, many questions which, prior to their encounter with the West, were simply taken for granted, gained a large degree of importance and urgency. People who used to take Islam as a perfect guide to life, were now forced to ask difficult

and painful questions such as: "Who is a Muslim?", "Are Muslims as the Holy Quran points out, really the chosen nation amongst all other nations?[1] ", "Is Islam capable of offering efficient solutions to the modern-day problems facing Islamic communities?", "Is Islam really the best religion superior to all other systems of belief?[2]", "Is the apparent weakness of Muslim communities in comparison to the Western societies a result of deep defects within the Islamic belief systems, or is it due to the defects in the approaches and attitudes of the Muslims?", "Is there such a thing as pure Islam?", "If so, then whose version of Islam is the genuine article?"

These questions and their ilk have been recurring themes in almost all Islamic societies since the early nineteenth century. In fact one can map out the history of Islamic societies in the past one and a half centuries according to the efforts on the part of Muslims to answer these questions.

Ikhwan-al-Muslimun in Egypt, Jimmat-al-Islami in Pakistan, both the Constitutional and the Islamic revolutions in Iran, Taliban in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and other countries, Islamic Intellectualism Movement in Iran, and many other socio-political phenomena in the Muslim lands are all examples of relentless efforts on the part of Muslims to provide answers to the above and many more serious and disturbing questions which have emerged in the Islamic Belief-ecosystem, all challenging the very foundations of this system.

Despite all these efforts, which have taken different shapes and forms, in the first decade of the twenty-first century these questions have still not found satisfactory solutions. This lack of success has further deepened an already deep crisis.

However, although no satisfactory solution so far has been found, and while any claim for a quick fix should be regarded as unrealistic, it is not the case that in the Islamic lands all is doom and gloom. A closer look at the history of Islamic communities in the past one and a half

centuries, would reveal that as a result of the process of co-evolution Muslim passed through various phases of intellectual maturation and sophistication, from disbelief and puzzlement in the early stages of their encounter with the West, to the state of suspension of disbelief, and from there to the phase of focusing on the problems and trying to get a clear understanding of the issues at hand. At present, it seems, at least in some parts of the Islamic lands, Muslims have entered the phase of critical assessment of the situation and are, at long last, proposing solutions which are more realistic and competent than ever. Those who are involved in this latest phase of activities have equipped themselves with a good level of theoretical knowledge necessary for a comprehensive appraisal of different alternatives and proposing new models.

During this latest period of change, a number of major epistemological points are gradually gaining credibility amongst ever increasing portions of Muslim population especially within the younger more educated generations. It is for example, gradually being accepted that the search for final solutions, magic wands, and panaceas which would resolve all the difficulties once and for all, is futile. The desire for building utopias on earth is gradually giving way to the more realistic approaches of piecemeal social engineering. Learning from one's own mistakes and from the mistakes and/or achievements of the others, Muslim or non-Muslim, is also gaining respect in many quarters in Islamic societies. Perhaps most important of all, people are slowly coming to terms with the fact that just one unique and absolutely valid interpretation of Islam is not within the reach of the mortal souls; and rival interpretations, which may all appear to be equally valid, could be entertained by various groups or individuals, though this sort of epistemological pluralism need not result in a rampant relativism.

Interestingly enough, in the course of this process of co-evolution, many factors which initially deemed to solely produce grave and undesirable consequences for the integrity of the Islamic belief systems, have shown also to be having beneficial effects in bringing

about changes towards further enrichment of these systems. Opening of the printing houses and publication of newspapers, the introduction of modern methods of education and the appearance of political parties were among such factors which made considerable impact on the outlook of the Muslims in the past one and a half centuries. In our times, factors like globalization, advances in communication technology and information explosion, and continued political crises such as the Arab-Israeli conflict are similarly exerting enormous pressures on the existing belief systems within the Islamic belief-ecosystem. Under such pressures, these belief systems should either adapt or face losing their appeal in the eyes of the faithful.

Identity Crisis in the Muslim World and the Role of Civil Societies
A Central argument of the present paper is that the discourse of the 'civil society' which has made a remarkable comeback in the West in recent years (Cohen & Arato 1992), and is gradually gaining grounds in the Islamic countries (Al-Azme 1993; Schwedler 1995; Norton 1995; Glasius et.al 2004), can play a significant role in not only resolving the identity crisis in the Muslim lands but also help Muslims to participate in the creation of effective global civil societies.

In the past few years, an impressively large number of papers and books on the subject of "civil society" have been published in various Islamic countries and several conferences and seminars have also been convened by universities, research centres, or governmental bodies in these countries, to discuss different aspects of this subject.

In a fashion more or less comparable to what has happened in the West, the notion of "civil society" has received a mixed reaction amongst Muslim intellectuals and/or scholars, statesmen and political activists. In the West, there are those who ardently advocate such an organisation. However, there are others who would voice concern about this model. Thus for example, whereas Ernest Gellner has praised it as an ideal whose reappearance should be heartily

welcomed (Gellner 1994), John Gray, who used to defend such a model, now argues that a more pluralistic approach, with some resemblance to the pluralism propounded by Alasdair MacIntyre (MacIntyre 1985, 1988), though not identical with it, should be developed (Gray 1995).

In the context of the Islamic belief-ecosystem too, there are those who argue that this notion is quite incompatible with Islamic views. Others claim that the only permissible model of civil society in Islam is the one introduced by the Prophet in Medina (Nadri Abyaneh 1997). And yet a third group are of the view that the notion of an "*Islamic* civil society" is a contradiction in terms since 'civil society' is ideology-neutral (Muhammadi 1996). Apart from the Muslim critics of the notion of 'civil society' there are also non-Muslim scholars (mostly orientalists) who would claim Islamic societies cannot (and historically have not been able to) produce a construct such as 'civil society'.

For my part, while I take issue with all the above positions, to establish my own argument, I need to impose a rather restrictive condition. The critical dialogue concerning the status of civil society within the boundaries of Islamic belief-ecosystem, could most successfully be held with those interlocutors who subscribe to some interpretations of Islam which would endorse and uphold the essential right of reason in pursuing real life problems.[3] I shall call these interpretations, the "rational" readings of Islam, for the want of a better word.

My argument is that it is possible to develop effective indigenous models of civil society by means of the resources provided by rational interpretations of Islam which could not only assist contemporary Muslim communities to overcome their 'identity crisis' but also help them to participate in the creation of effective global civil societies.

To briefly present my argument, let me begin by introducing a working definition of the notion of civil society based on the views of

Cohen and Arato (1992). I regard civil society as a sphere of social interaction between the state on the one hand and the economy on the other. This sphere, in its turn, is composed of the family, voluntary associations, social movements, and forms of public communication and self-mobilisation. Civil society, in this sense, is institutionalised and generalised through laws and rights. However, in this model, civil society is not identified with all of social life outside the administrative state and economic process in the narrow sense. Thus for example, according to this working definition, political organisations, political parties and parliaments, as well as organisations of production and distribution of goods, like firms, co-operatives and partnerships are not part of civil society per se. The political and economic role of civil society is not directly related to the control or conquest of political and/or economic power but to the generation of influence through the life of democratic associations and unconstrained discussions in the cultural public sphere.

The argument against compatibility of civil society with Islam has appeared in two distinct forms. On the one hand, there are those writers, usually Western orientalists, and occasionally their oriental followers, who following Max Weber (1958), would claim that contrary to the Western cities, the structure of Islamic societies has not been amenable to the emergence of civil societies. B.S. Turner, in a recent study, has thus summarised the two main features of this line of argument:

> "The first is to make a dichotomous contrast between the static history and structure of Islamic societies and the evolutionary character of occidental Christian culture ... The second ... is to provide a list of causes which explain the stationariness of Islamdom. The list typically includes the absence of private property, the general presence of slavery and the prominence of despotic government. ... These features ... can be summarised by the observation that oriental social formation possessed an overdeveloped state without an equivalent 'civil society'". (Turner 1984, p. 68)

However, as a number of researchers have shown, the above argument is based on an oversimplified picture of the life in Islamic societies and cities, from which many essential aspects are omitted. For example, it has been shown that in many Islamic cities, Muslim professional guilds and urban corporations had actually created embryonic civil societies. Louis Massignion, for instance, has observed that:

"There was not a single town ... from Central Asia to Mesopotamia, which did not have its *ayyarun* ... they ... seem to be more closely linked with the local bourgeoisie in support of a native prince, ... Sometimes the bourgeoisie relied on them in resisting the authorities ..., in the majority of towns which had no *charta* (police force), they formed an indispensable local militia, ... upon whom the *race* of the city relied." (Massignion 1935, p.962)

Bernard Lewis, in a more critical vein, having compared the similarities and the differences between the Muslim and the Western European urban grouping, has endorsed the independent nature, and social function of the Islamic guilds:

"Unlike the European guilds, which were basically a public service, recognised, privileged and administered by public authorities, seigniorial, municipal or Royal, the Islamic guild was a spontaneous development from below, created not in response to a state need, but to the social requirements of the labouring masses themselves." (Lewis 1937, pp. 35-36.)[4]

Apart from the Charta and the Islamic guild (sinf) a number of other institutions also emerged in the course the evolution of Islamic Civilisation. These institutions could be regarded as the precursors to the Modern institution of civil society. (--- 2004)

Whereas the orientalists have based their argument against the compatibility of the models of civil society and Islam on the so-called "stationariness of Islamdom", quite recently, some Muslim writers have argued against the thesis of compatibility from a doctrinal point of view. According to these writers, which by and large, advocate a traditional approach to Islam, civil society, is a product of the liberal philosophical tradition, and this tradition is inherently at odds with the Islamic ideas and ideals. S.Larijani, a lecturer in Qom seminary and a member of the influential Council of Guardians, is amongst the advocates of this view. In a recent paper entitled, "Religion and the Civil Society" he has spelled out the main argument of this group of writers in the following way:

> "In a nutshell, civil society and liberalism are twin brothers, and one of the main theses of liberalism, and therefore of the civil society, is the neutrality of the state. This is not consistent with pure Islamic doctrines unless one is so infatuated with liberalism that one does not care about such an inconsistency, and that is another matter.
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> Contrary to the views of a number of myopic intellectuals, liberalism is not only incompatible with the fundamentals of religious belief in general, and with Islamic thought in particular, but also poses grave philosophical problems for the individual. A necessary consequence of the liberal doctrine is that every immoral law, provided that it is endorsed by all and sundry, is then enactable and it is the duty of the state to pave the way for its implementation. This is because the state has no criterion for distinguishing wrong and right. Its only obligation is to safeguard the liberties. If people decided that abortion or homosexual life style should be allowed, then the state must follow suit and modify its laws to accommodate these demands. ...
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> Such ideas are not only untenable from an Islamic point of view, because among other things, Islam does not endorse moral pluralism, but are also faced with irresolvable philosophical difficulties." (Larijani 1997, 222)

A critical assessment of the arguments of the traditional Muslim writers takes us beyond the scope of the present paper. However, suffice it to say that the development of the models of civil society has not been a prerogative of the Liberal thinkers in its narrow sense. Hegel, Marx, as well as subsequent Socialist and Marxist writers have also made significant contributions in this field. (Keane 1988) Moreover, to equate *laissez-aller*, or unconstrained freedom, with Liberalism is to refute the actual history of ideas.

It seems the main objection of the traditionalist Muslim writers to the notion of civil society is that such a society, which they regard to be a product of Liberalism, would pave the way for moral and social decadence.[5] Though one could sympathies with such concerns, one should not, as some of these writers seem to have done, conflate permissiveness with moral pluralism. While the former could lead to moral impropriety, the latter basically involves divergent sub-moralities in relation to the same area of conduct. In other words, moral pluralism is not equal to moral relativism and 'anything goes' attitude in moral life. Liberal minded Muslim writers are among the foremost critics of moral relativism.[6]

In the past two decades, and after the demise of state-administered Socialism and the discrediting of fully-fledged free-market economy and rampant *laissez-faire*, many thinkers have striven to develop more refined models of civil society in which the rights and liberties of the individuals are reconciled with a partnership between the state and the society. In such models, great emphasis has been placed on the importance of morality as a method for conducting the affairs of the state and the individual[7].

Delicate philosophical distinctions aside, the model of civil society, alluded to above, with its strong moral component, would not only provide great assistance to the more 'rational' interpretations of Islam, but it should also prove to be attractive even to the traditionalist Muslim writers. In fact, the affinities between a civil society shaped

according to the above approaches and the more traditional interpretations of Islam do not end here. One can think of such a society as not just built on a Hobbessian kind of social contract, but as one which also benefits from a moral contract or a covenant.[8] A society built on social contract, as J. Sacks has observed, 'is maintained by an external force, the monopoly within the state of the justified use of coercive power. A covenant, by contrast, is maintained by an internalised sense of identity, kinship, loyalty, obligation, responsibility and reciprocity. Parties can disengage from a contract when it is no longer to their mutual benefit to continue. A covenant binds them even - perhaps especially, in difficult times. This is because a covenant is not predicated on interests, but instead on loyalty, fidelity, holding together even when things seem to be driving apart.' (Sacks 1997)

However, while this model of civil society might succeed in mitigating the opposition of more conservative and traditional Muslim writers, it may prompt the discontent of more critically-minded citizens of the Islamic communities. It might, for example, be argued against this approach to the civil society that to let the moral law to take precedence over the law of the land could lead to dangerous and undesirable consequences. It might also be argued that this model harbours a latent communitarianism which gives cause for concern to more liberal-minded Muslim intellectuals.

Despite these worries, it seems that a model of civil society in which morality takes a prominent place in regulating the relations between the individuals as well as the institutions can still be upheld in the face of the criticisms levelled against it. Thus for example, for those who are worried that the law of the land might be undermined, one can reiterate H.L.A Hart's argument that the law of the land is a set of fallible interpretations by mere mortals and as such is not only not sacred, but may not even be moral in an ideally desired sense. However, such a law has to be made as moral as possible. A new model of civil society which lays emphasis on the moral principles can facilitate this process. (Hart 1983, essay 2) The law-makers, in a

fashion which is not dissimilar to the way science approaches the notion of truth (Popper 1963), will be encouraged to constantly revise their laws in manners which strengthen the laws' moral elements.

As for the second objection, it can be argued that in the proposed model the emphasis is placed on moral norms which can be shared by all members of a diverse society. Such moral norms constitute a set of moral values and principles. This set, given human beings shared concerns, is of course, not an empty one. Moreover, since rampant value relativism is untenable, the common moral denominator of the society can be further expanded through dialogue and rational discussions. (Berlin 1998)

Within the framework of the proposed model of civil society, citizens can play an active role in producing better interpretation of the laws governing the conduct of the society. Critical debates and constructive discussions amongst the citizens and the authorities would pave the way to constantly producing new and better balanced laws and implementing them in more effective ways.

Civil society in the defined sense can also exert considerable influence with respect to a satisfactory resolution of the so-called identity crisis in the Islamic countries. The identity of an individual partly takes shape in his or her society.[9] However, the regimes and governments in many Islamic countries are despotic or non-democratic. In such countries there is very limited room for manoeuvre for the individual. As a result, the individuals' identity will not have enough chance to flourish and their potentials cannot be fully actualised. In a civil society strengthened with the notion of moral covenant, values like freedom, equity, solidarity, democracy, and the basic human rights can all be realised. Such a civil society can facilitate the constructive interaction between different elements of the belief systems and therefore, can assist to produce novel solutions to the so-called crisis of identity.

However, from among various interpretations of Islam within the Islamic belief-ecosystem only those which I called the 'rational' readings are most amenable towards the above model of civil society. Other interpretations like the fundamentalist or the traditionalist tend to be more exclusionist and insist upon drawing rigid boundaries between the "insiders" and the "outsiders". (--- 2006, pp.123-148) These interpretations are not only in danger of distorting the real message of Islam, which purports to be a universal religion, a world view for humanity at large, but also posing increasing threat to the stability of the Islamic societies. This is because modern Muslim societies are increasingly becoming pluralistic. In such societies, just one form of life cannot be imposed upon all the citizens.

Islamic Civil Societies and Global Civil Society

Now, granted that there is no incompatibility between the Islamic teachings, at least according to the more rational interpretation of Islam, and the notion of civil society, it can further be asked that whether the prospective civil society in an Islamic society is necessarily value neutral or can there be such a thing as *Islamic* civil society.

Traditionalists, as we have already seen, argue that *Islamic* civil society is a superfluous or an incongruent concept: We either have Islamic society or civil society. And since these two societies are based on two different ideologies, they cannot be reconciled. However, some secular Muslim writers also endorse the traditionalists view on this subject. The following quotation taken from a letter recently posted on the internet contains one such argument:

> *Islamic* civil society is an oxymoron. Civil society is a secular construct which either exists or does not exist. If we accept the idea of an *Islamic* civil society, then in principle we should also agree to the legitimacy of Christian, Hindu, and Jewish civil societies. But that would be tantamount to celebrating the exclusionist character of societies, an atavistic approach at best. (Iftikhar Ahmad 1997)

Indeed, in defence of the above argument, it can be argued that civil society, like the different forms of government and the various other institutions and social constructs which have evolved during the process of maturation of human civilisation, is, in a sense, an instrument and therefore, ideology and value neutral. It is a means to an end, and like all other means can be used properly or be misused. As such, apparently it does not make sense to talk of such a thing as an '*Islamic* Civil Society'.

The above argument though on the face of it may appear to be sound is nonetheless incomplete and as such can be even misleading. It is true that many (though not all- see below) of social constructs can be regarded as instruments or technologies. In this sense, they are ideology and value neutral. Technologies, machines or instruments are, by and large though not entirely, defined by their main *functions*. For example, cars, TV sets, parliaments, universities, etc. are all defined in terms of their specific functions, and in this sense are distinguished from each other according to their main functions. However, all those social constructs which are regarded as 'technologies' could also be considered with respect to their ends or *telos*. From this point of view, the social constructs would embody the values which the social actors through their collective intentionalities interject into them[10]. For example, in the UK all schools have their own specific 'ethos' and 'mottos' which serve, among other things, in distinguishing each from the rest, despite the fact that as educational institutes they all have similar functions. In this sense, all technologies, including the one which is called 'civil society' (in all its varieties and types) is value-laden. In fact, as the above quotation indicates, the objector regards 'civil society' as a '*secular* construct'. In other words he claims that this technology embodies the values of a secular world-view. But this means that contrary to the claim of the objector, 'civil society' in not value-free. All technologies, with regard to their *telos* are value-impregnated and in this sense, one can legitimately talk of an *Islamic* civil society. In a nutshell, an *Islamic* civil society is a kind of civil society which share the main *functions*

and *universal values* of other efficient models of civil society anywhere in the world while carry with it (some of) the values which belong to the *Islamic* value system. It may also have some extra (non-main) functions, added to it by its local users, which make the machine of civil society more efficient in particular local contexts.

Such models of civil society can operate in societies and communities whose members are pre-dominantly Muslims. Likewise, civil societies inspired and informed by Christian or Jewish or Hindu values can operate in communities whose dominant values systems are Christian or Jew or Hindu. In more pluralistic societies, models of civil society which embody shared values of the members of the society can be put into use.

The thesis of *Islamic* civil society, however, needs further clarification. For example, whose Islam is meant in such a society? Is there just one model of *Islamic* civil society or many? Apparently, we are facing with a dilemma here. To opt for the first horn of the dilemma would bring about the charges of narrow-mindedness. To go for the second horn however, would, presumably, amount to arbitrariness.

The above dilemma, despite its frightful horns, is not irresolvable. Earlier in the paper I pointed out that only some rational interpretations of Islam are amenable to the idea of civil society. It should also be born in mind that civil society as a social construct is open to the functions which the collective intentionality of its creators would assign to it. In the context of an Islamic society in which a rational interpretation of Islam is the dominant element of its belief eco-system, the citizens assign their desired functions to a model of civil society whose broad characteristics were briefly explained above. Such a construct bear the values which the members of this particular form of life assign to it. Some of these values are universal human values and some are more specific to the way of life and tradition of the society in question.

It must be emphasised that in an Islamic society in which a rational-critical interpretation of Islam is the dominant element of its belief ecosystem the citizens are open to interactions in a pluralist manner. They are not imprisoned in a particular way of life. On the contrary, for them the Islamic ideals and ideas act as regulative principles, in the Kantian sense, as ideal objectives. They combine their rational interpretations of these principles with their knowledge and experiences of modern time to create novel syntheses which would better assist them to conduct their personal and collective affairs.

One of such syntheses is a model of civil society along the lines briefly explained in this paper. Such a model, among other things, could help the "rational" interpretations of Islam to meet the challenges of identity crisis. The identity crisis, as pointed out above, is nothing but a serious threat to the very existence of the belief systems. In responding to this threat only those belief systems which are the fittest could survive. And the fittest systems are those which have the highest capacity for adaptability and coping with the rapidly changing situations.

It is a known fact in the natural ecosystems that those organisms which make the best use of the resources available within their own ecosystem stand a better chance of survival. By analogy, it can be argued that those belief systems which make the best use of the resources within their own belief ecosystems, i.e., their own "past traditions", will be in a more advantageous position to ward off the threats to their integrity. (Popper 1963)

Within the context of the Islamic ecosystem, there exist a strong tradition with a long history whose main characteristic has always been the great emphasis which it lays on such basic values as freedom, tolerance, equity, responsibility, love and respect for all manifestations of God on earth, i.e., all creatures small and large, animate or inanimate. One eminent representative of such values is Imam Ali (pbuh) whose views concerning these issues can be gleaned from his sermons, letters and maxims.[11]

It could be argued that in meeting the challenges facing Muslim communities in the third millennium, those rational interpretations of Islam which could manage to combine the best elements of their own past tradition with the most effective modern constructs such as a model of civil society more or less similar to what briefly described here, are better placed to weather the storm which is blowing over the Islamic lands.

Within the boundaries of a society which is based on such a combined approach, the ideal of siblinghood of humanity will be pursued. Such an ideal is an integral part of the Islamic belief eco-system. It can be found in the teachings of the Quran, the tradition of the Prophet (pbuh) and the wisdom of Imam Ali. In a famous letter to his governor in charge of Egypt, Malik Ashtar, Imam writes: "… people can be categorised in two groups: those who are your brothers in Islam, and those who share with you the bound of humanity … treat them with kindness and forgiveness in the same way you like the Almighty to treat you with kindness and forgiveness."

The same wisdom and ideal has been echoed by many great Muslim thinkers throughout the ages. For example, it was stated almost 700 hundred years ago by the great Persian poet and sage, Sa'di of Shiraz, whose words of wisdom grace the entrance to the Hall of Nations in New York:

> Of one Essence is the Human race;
> Thusly has Creation put the Base;
> One Limb impacted is sufficient,
> For all Others to feel the Mace.

This is an ideal, like truth, which we can strive towards. It is of course an operative ideal, not an unrealistic utopian dream. To move towards it the notions of responsibility, freedom, equity, and pluralism need to be disseminated. Fortunately, all these elements, which are part and parcel of a bona fide model of civil society, are also indigenous

ingredients of some of the traditions within the Islamic belief eco-system.

Such a model of civil society could hopefully help the Muslims to overcome the identity crisis they are facing with at present. But more than this since many of the values embedded in such a model are universal values which are easily identifiable by all people across the globe, it could also assist Muslims to make meaningful participation in the creation of international organisations, and in particular global civil societies, whose aim is, to promote peace, curb aggression, encourage social development, and foster prosperity. Of course, as Paul Kennedy (2006) has pointed out in the context of his discussion about creation of the United Nations, for every voice favouring global cooperation there will be another, warning against the erosion of national sovereignty or destruction of local values and traditions. It is in this context that a model of *Islamic* civil society which tries to reconcile Islamic sensitivities with universal values and concerns could prove its mettle.

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1 . "Ye are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in God...", The Holy Quran, Ch. III, verse 110.

2 . "The religion before God is Islam", (The Holy Quran, Ch. III, verse 19)

"If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, never will it be accepted of him; and in the hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost." (The Holy Quran, Ch. III, verse 85).

3 . The relation between reason and religion within the Islamic belief-ecosystem is a vexed and complicated one. Taking a cursory glance at the history of Islam, it can be seen that Muslims have adopted three different attitudes towards the use of reason and the rational approach. Some have regarded as a dangerous enemy for belief. Others have emphasised on the compatibility of reason and religion. And the third group have urged going beyond the realm of reason and into the realm of direct and immediate religious experience.

4 . Other researchers, emphasising the historical importance of these embryonic civil societies within the context of Islamic cities and Muslim communities, have gone further to show that while from a doctrinal point of view, there has been no restriction for the flourishing of civil society in the past Islamic communities, other historical and environmental factors have hampered their development. For one such recent defence of the notion of urban autonomy and civil society in Islamic cities, see, (Ebrahimi1994).

5 . Similar views can be found in the works of M.H.Mesbah, a professor of philosophy at Qom seminary, who is, by far, one of the most ardent proponents of this position. For a clear and concise statement of his position see his (2001, p. 8).

6 . For a critique of moral relativism in the shape of moral particularism see (--- 2007).

7 . For a Socialist version of such refined models of civil society see, John Keane (1988). J.L.Cohen & A.Arato, op.cit. have based their model of the views of Habermas. Karl Popper has tried to combine the aspirations of Liberalism with some of the ideals of Socialism, cf. his (1997). J.Shearmur in (1996), has discussed Popper's brand of Liberalism. For the significance of the moral component in Popper's thought, and the notion of morality as a method, see, A.--- (1998). Among the modern Liberal writers, Isaiah Berlin, too has tried to develop a version of Liberalism in which, the rights and liberties of the individual and the social responsibilities of the state could be reconciled. John Gray has called Berlin's model "Agonistic Liberalism" and has discussed it in his (1993 and 1994).

8 . Kant, too, was of the view that governments are obliged to keep their contract with their citizens, and this contract is moral not political. See, H.Reiss (ed) (1991).

9 . This of course should not be interpreted as implying a deterministic notion of identity. On the contrary, it can be argued that while external factors such as race, gender, language, geography, and history all play a role in shaping one's identity, the openness of the universe and the indeterminacy of the evolutionary process plus the role of man's free will would render deterministic and fatalistic models of identity untenable. cf. (Popper 1982, Popper and Eccles 1977).

10 . All human constructs could be divided into two general categories: those which are devised to respond to man's cognitive needs and those which are created to respond to human's non-cognitive needs. The former constitutes all our corroborated theories and as-yet un-falsified (though fallible) knowledge claims. To the latter belong all technologies, hard and soft, including a technology which is called 'civil society'. While the former category ought to be as free from the values of the inquirer as possible to better (i.e. more faithfully) represent the reality he/she wants to know about, for the latter category it is most desirable to carry the values cherished by the user of the technology in question. For a detailed discussion of this point see, (--- 2007b).

11 . Imam Ali's thoughts and sayings are partly collected in two main Arabic sources, namely, Nahj al-Balagha and Ghorar al-Hikam va Dorar al-Kalem. Imam's teachings have inspired, among others, Muslim mystics and Islamic mysticism. Many of the Muslim mystics trace the origin of the schools they belong to the views and ideas of Imam Ali and claim him as the original founder of their schools. See --- (2008). One of the best representatives of Islamic mystical thought is Jalal al-din Rumi. Many of his views can be usefully put into practice within the large project of responding to the identity crisis. See, The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi, edited and translated by R.A.Nicholson (1926).