

# **The Islamic Renaissance Fellowship**

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## **- I -**

The starting point of the Islamic Renaissance Fellowship (IRF), as well as its pivotal idea, is the “deputized human” on earth. In the allegory of creation, almighty God, in His divine wisdom, made the human to be His “khalifa,” literally successor or vice regent on earth. In Islam as a strict monotheistic religion, this is the highest honor bestowed upon any creature, indeed. And in order to affirm that honor, God ordered the angels to prostrate themselves to Adam, where prostration is never performed except to God alone.

Thus, Adam was created from the earthen clay to signify his affinity with the earth, and as God breathed life into Adam, He instilled in him awareness, passion, conscience, and will. Then God “taught him the names of all things,” a figurative expression referring to equipping him with the keys to knowledge: mind, passion and rationality. In turn, the earth was created as a most unique planet among the millions of heavenly bodies: having temperate environment; surrounded by oceans; festooned with rivers, lakes, valleys and high rising mountains that are laden with treasures and minerals; and populated by a most fecund animal and plant kingdoms. All what is on earth is indeed capable of satisfying all human needs, and more.

In this context, Islam came to guide the deputized human toward establishing a just society that enables humans to perform righteous deeds for the optimum utilization of the earth, without molesting or ruining it. The Qur’an contains numerous verses that associate “belief with performing constructive deeds” (Ieeman wa al-amal essalih.” Thus, Islam, is the means for guidance, and not a goal in itself.

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Prophet Muhammad understood that fact very well, as he endeavored to establish on this earth, in Medina, a society that provided humans with splendor and dignity; and he instituted the values required for such a society, which revolved around equality, where all Muslims are “like the teeth of a comb,” with no one above the law. The prophet himself applied tort law upon himself, like anybody else. Each and every one had equal rights and obligations, be they black or white, men or women, rich or poor. The established system of law and order ensured peace and security, dispelled hostility and discord, and precluded the need for neither police nor prisons; and the “zakah,” which was instituted as an obligatory contribution of 2.5% by the rich and able to provide for the poor and the needy, created a most cohesive social welfare system. That Medina society was truly an “Islam for

humans,” consistent with the grand design of making humans God’s deputies (khulaf’a) to inherit the earth.

In such a society, there was no need to promulgate a separate Magna Carta or a Human Rights document, for human rights as we now know them existed as the prevalent ethos permeating every aspect of social life. Once more, the Medina’s “Islam for the benefit of humans” was a practical example of how humans can fulfill the promise of being the inheritors of the earth, and actually live in a cohesive society organized around equality, justice, compassion, fellowship and an environmentally-friendly sufficiency.

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However, that ideal Medina society did not last but a quarter of a century: ten years with the prophet, two years under the first Caliph, Abou Bakr, and ten years under the second Caliph, Omar who preferred to be called “Guardian of the Believers” (Ameeral-Mu’mineen), instead of Caliph. The dagger thrust in him in an assassination attempt seemed to have also dealt a mortal blow to the entire Medina society, particularly with the deviation of the third Caliph, Othman, from the firmly established principles and ideals affirmed by his two predecessors. The feuds, hostilities and mutinous attacks that followed led to the horrendous assassination of Caliph Othman while he was reading the Qur’an, and the chopping of his wife’s fingers as she tried to deflect the assassins’ blows. A cruel civil war soon ensued, where in the “Battle of the Camel,” Muslims surrounding the howdah of the Honorable Aisha were directing their swords and arrows against the other Muslims in order to defend it; and in the Siffain battle, Muslims were fighting each other. The assassination of the fourth Caliph, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, while he was trying to reestablish that ideal “Islamic society for the benefit of humans,” brought an end to that era at year 40 AH (After Hegira, the year marking the beginning of the Islamic calendar in 660 AD). In that year, Muawiya Ibn Abi Sufyan established the Umayyad dynasty, a despotic Caliphate rule, not in the least dissimilar to the worst of the Roman and the Persian empires: authoritarian, tyrannical and hereditary. It was from then on that the hitherto established “Islam for the benefit of humans” was subverted to an “Islam for the Sultan” with the establishment of that hereditary Caliphate institution that lasted until Mustafa Kamal Ataturk terminated it in 1924.

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There were many reasons for that setback. In addition to the subversion of the Medina principles mentioned above, millions of the entrenched elements in the societies through which Islam rapidly expanded not only endorsed the new religion due to its simplicity and tolerance, but also occupied the highest ranks in its academic circles, and assumed leading scholarly roles in most all religious areas including interpretation of the Qur’an, Arabic literature, “fiqh,” (Islamic jurisprudence) and “hadeeth,” (collection and documentation of the sayings of the prophet). But most of those scholars unwittingly introduced into their scholarships ideas and understandings from their civilizations, thus distancing Islam from its simplicity and authentic spirit, and resulted in the rise of numerous factions,

divisions and congregations, some of which were goaded and further fragmented by the inclusion of warped translations of some Greek philosophies in the Abbasid period. There were also some malicious efforts to adulterate Islam itself.

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In the course of the centuries that followed, a traditional “Islam for the Sultan” body of knowledge was accumulating until it became throughout the years a petrified and hardened reality, resulting in what is now called “Islam al-Sunna wal gama’a,” meaning the unanimously agreed upon traditional, or “salafi,” Islamic jurisprudence, beliefs, creed and doctrine, that everybody must follow and no one dare to depart from or improve upon. The “salafi” Imams and scholars who devised that literature were sanctified and their thoughts were reified as a sacred text until the early Islamic renaissance movement by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and his students in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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The Islamic renaissance movement was not able to do away with that petrified thought, however, mainly because the reformers were bogged down by the assaults of European colonialism, which imposed itself on the Muslim world, and tried to weaken it and to enfeeble the Arabic language. Thus, the Islamic reform efforts by Al-Afghani and his colleagues were sapped and deflected by their concentration on fighting the menacing colonialism, and that left the arena to the entrenched “salafi” figures and their archaic institutions to not only overshadow the budding renaissance movement, but to also monopolize religious activities and claim to be the only ones representing Islam. On the other hand, the intelligentsia in Islamic societies did not contribute much to the Islamic renaissance efforts, as many of them were not versed in Islamic thought or jurisprudence, and some committed themselves to socialistic or nationalistic orientations which they propagated from their academic pulpits or media platforms, especially when they were appointed as functionaries by the state.

It was therefore incumbent upon The Islamic Renaissance Fellowship to carry out the Islamic renaissance mission, and to reorient and reorganize current Islamic thought and practice. Thus, in 1946, the founder of the IRF, Mr. Gamal Al-Banna, issued the book titled “A New Democracy,” in which he dedicated a section to “A New Understanding of Religion” that was mainly critical of the Muslim Brothers and their supporters, who were then at the peak their strength. He implored them in that section to not concentrate mainly on dogmatic slogans, but rather to focus on the “Islam for Humans” themes and ideas which he formulated. That central theme of “Islam for Humans” continued since then, lasting for sixty years in a state of formulation and reformulation until it became full fledged in the year 2000 with the issuing of the book “Nahw Fiqh Jadeed,” or Toward a New Islamic Jurisprudence.

The first step was to highlight the pivotal principle of “Islam for humans” as inheritors of the earth, and to provide ample supporting evidence of that central principle from the Qur’an; and then to show that the prophet actually applied these principles in the Medina society in the short time it lasted under him, as well as under the first two Caliphs Abou Bakr and Omar. Every effort was exerted to clarify by supporting evidence that the Medina society was in fact based on equality and justice, and provided the individual with utmost safety and security.

Afterwards, it was shown how the “Islam for humans” Medina society ended 40 years after its establishment, when Muawiya Ibn Abi Sufyan established his despotic, authoritarian and hereditary rule, which he misleadingly called an Islamic Caliphate, as mentioned above.

The goal of the Islamic Renaissance Fellowship is to return to the principles of the Medina society, particularly that it considers the modern age to be conducive to the re-establishment of such a society through the reconstruction of Islamic knowledge and information along the lines of “Islam for humans,” instead of the hitherto prevalent “Islam for the Sultan.” In order to pave the way toward that goal, the IRF issued a number of books that explain the bases for the new reconstruction and the principles underlying it.

These books include more than thirty volumes dealing with such aspects as politics, women, freedom of belief and freedom of expression, prevalent Islamic movements, prevalent Islamic Creed, “Tafseer,” or interpretation, and “Hadeeth,” or the sayings of the prophet.

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The principles of the “Islam for humans” endorsed by the IRF, as gleaned from the Qur’an, are as follows:

- (1) The goal of Islam is to enable the “deputized humankind” to inherit the earth. As such, Islam is not a goal in itself, but rather the means to attain that goal.
- (2) Equality of rights and obligations among all peoples, without exceptions, is the societal foundation of the “deputized human,” the inheritor of the earth.
- (3) The human mind and the knowledge it is capable of providing is what differentiates humans from all other creatures, and the explanation why God asked the angels to prostrate themselves to Adam. The mind with its intellect is therefore the foundation of religious thinking, such that nothing is beyond its grasp save the nature of God and the hereafter. It follows that scientific knowledge and information must permeate all aspects of society.

- (4) The direct return to the actual text of the Qur'an as the book for human guidance in its totality, and eschewing the archaic interpretations including its so called "reasons of revelation" for certain verses, or the abrogation of some Qur'anic verses by subsequent revelations (naskh). The impact of the Qur'an is actualized by direct intimacy with its text, and its wording contains the power of guidance.
- (5) The "Sunna," or the sayings of the prophet, must be adjusted to and adjudged by the Qur'an, and not the other way around; and it should never have the same weight as the Qur'an. Understanding
- (6) The main foundations of Islamic thought and action must be wisdom, acumen, compassion and understanding, as stated repeatedly in the Qur'an.
- (7) The "zakah" must be considered for what it is, as an obligatory pillar of Islam; and its collection must be organized to become the basis of a viable "social welfare and insurance" system.
- (8) Considering "shari'a" edicts and laws dealing with *worldly matters*, whether revealed in the Qur'an or instituted by the "Sunna," to have been thus revealed or instituted mainly for their justice and benefit functionality. They must therefore be continuously changed, adjusted or aligned to the prevailing social changes and developments in order that they retain their functionality, as what Caliph Omar did very early in Islamic life.
- (9) Rejecting the inviolability of the "salafi" texts and deemphasizing their significance in as much as they endeavor to impose bygone thought on current conditions. We simply cannot live our present through their archaic thoughts and texts.
- (10) Doing away with the untenable notion that Islam must underlie and govern all aspects of human endeavors and thoughts, or must restrict or inhibit any field of knowledge such as philosophy, science, technology or the arts. Each one of these fields of knowledge has its own logic and methodology, and must never be considered antithetical or adverse to Islam.
- (11) Freedom of speech, thought and of belief are absolute; and the relationship between religions must be predicated upon peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.
- (12) Granting women equality with men, and rejecting the "salafi" texts that assign inferior status to them, as most of these texts are based on fabricated and unreliable sayings of the prophet (hadeeth).