

# OUR NATION-CAN WE GROW TOGETHER?

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## Introductory Remarks

Global transformation of the world of humanity in our age forces us to ask fundamental questions as to the basis of our living together. Like all types of fundamental questions, the question “Can we grow together?” refers us to twilight of basic condition of humanity on this earth. Moreover, this fundamental question sheds some light on the essence of the expression “our nation” in negative manner (*via negativa*). This is because, like every great beginnings, the beginning or zero point of the formation of a nation remains always in the dark. For that reason, nations find their beginnings or zero points, not in descriptive (scientific) history, but in mythologies. Accordingly, the fundamental question “Can we grow together?” is not a scientific question.

Rather, it invites us to rethink on the mystery of living together as a nation. Even if the beginning of each nation remains in the darkness and hence reveals itself by means of mythologies, the fundamental question “Can we grow together?” reflects not a romantic or nostalgic desire for the unity of a nation. On the contrary, it expresses transition of human thought from the world of mythology to the horizon of philosophy, from *mythos* to *logos*. Therefore, like all types of fundamental questions, the question “Can we grow together?” is a universal, transcendental, holistic, and hence philosophical question.

The universal and philosophical nature of this question determines a vantage point for our responding to the call of what is questioned. Upon a short consideration, we can easily recognise the question “Can we grow together?” invites us not for a *terra incognita* (unknown lands) in another world; rather it calls forth to meditate upon where we have already been standing. It requires us to reflect upon ‘that’ which has already been supporting our humanity. Said philosophically, it attracts our attentions to that which is very close to us. Paradoxically enough, what is very close to us is also very far and strange to us. This is because, in order to see and grasp something, we need to have an appropriate ‘distance’ between the things to be seen and grasped and, ourselves.

However, we should be aware of a fact at the outset: Even though fundamental questions are always universal, theoretical, and philosophical, their answers are always partial, perspectival, and tentative. In other words, our response to the call of this type of universal and theoretical question represents basically our finite human experiences. Every human experience is the experience of negation in the sense it can be surpassed and revisable by new experiences.

In view of this reflection, my following presentation will merely represent my own finite, surpassed and revisable experiences on the meaning of the fundamental question “Can we grow together?” Now I will try to meditate upon this question within three different fields, which are interconnected to each other, respectively: Philosophy of city, Abrahamic monotheism, and social ethics. And as a Muslim, I will keep asking the following question in my mind: What is the relevance of Islamic thought to these fields in a contemporary world?

## **Philosophy of City as the Condition of “Heterogeneity of Anonymity”<sup>1</sup> of a Society**

City is a medium or place where the mystery of our growing (living) together proves itself in its’ enigmatic way. As a living or dynamic process, the event of city escapes from all types of static theoretical constructions which aim at explaining it in its totality. Said philosophically, city is not ‘a thing’ to be determined in its permanent identity. When we consider a city, we always grasp its nature from ever-changing perspectives. Hence, the most enigmatic aspect of the reality of a city is its perpetual resistance to our schema of reality, which we try to apply to it.

This nature of city forces us to re-think on the meaning of the fundamental question “Can we grow together?” If we respond to this question in such a way as to create an overall schema of reality applied on a city (or society), then we will encounter with the resisting power of the reality of city. In this context, history of philosophy and politics provides us with some basic insights. One of the fundamental questions which classical philosophers and political thinkers asked themselves was of the possibility of discovering a pre-determined schema of reality which can order human life within the world of city. Socrates, Old Plato and Aristotle thought that city is a medium of forming a common language. As Socratic dialogues indicate, mutual conversation or dialogue establishes the dynamic basis of city. Therefore, mutual dependence or dialogue constitutes the ethical nature of city. Ethics, then, is not solely a matter of learning pre-determined principles of morality in a traditional society. Rather, it is a matter of discovering what is right and wrong in a given situation.

Moral principles help us see what is to be seen in an ethical situation. Accordingly, classical Greek thinkers teach us there can be no pre-determined overall answer (schema of reality) for the fundamental question “Can we grow together?” This is because constructing an overall schema of reality (answer) can be a metaphysical endeavor, which presupposes a changeless world of reality. However, human world is constantly changing and hence doesn’t provide metaphysical schemas with a free space for their application. In addition, from our present condition, we can clearly see construction of an overall schema of reality for a city would be unifying all types of differences and hegemonic or totalitarian.

At this level, we can better analyze the difference between the positions of Muslim Peripatetic (Aristotelian) philosophers (e.g. Farabi, Avicenna, and Ibn Tufayl) and Mawlana Jalaladdin regarding the philosophy of city. Muslim Peripatetic philosophers approached religion as a political language for establishing a unity (order) in a city. This is because symbolic nature of religious language is more appropriate and functional for guiding ordinary people than abstract and metaphysical language of philosophy. Metaphysical language of philosophy aims at discovering pre-determined schema of universal reality. Hence, basic role of religious language is to guide the people of city according to universal truth of philosophy. Even if religious symbols can differ among the cities or political communities, they play the same role of being a means of application of universal philosophical truth within particular cities.

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow this term from Stephen Schneck who uses it in order to differentiate “city” as the place of “heterogeneity of anonymity” from village and state-society as the places of “homogeneity, orthodoxy and smothering familiarity”. See, Stephen Schneck, “City and Village” in *Urbanization and Values*, John Kromkowski and George F. McLean, eds. [http://www.crvp.org/book/Series01/I-5/chapter\\_xv.htm](http://www.crvp.org/book/Series01/I-5/chapter_xv.htm) (8.8.2007).

It becomes clear Muslim Peripatetic philosophers attributed a kind of flexibility to religion as political language of city. However, since they based their philosophy of city on their metaphysical schema of reality, they created a great tension between their changeless truth-claims and dynamic open-ended character of city. This is another way of saying their philosophy lost the flexibility of engaging in a dialogue with Islamic cities. For that reason, Ibn Tufayl sends his fictional character “Hayy b. Yaqzan” to an isolated island at the end of his philosophical novel. This represents a dramatic exile of philosophy of city, which claims to be the highest intellectual language of city. The exile of Peripatetic philosophy of city from Islamic cities teaches us the fundamental question “Can we grow together?” cannot be solved by constructing an overall picture of reality to be applied on a city.

In contrast to Muslim Peripatetic philosophers, the position of great mystic Mawlana Jalaladdin regarding the philosophy of city is summarized within well-known invitation attributed to him: “Whoever you may be, come”. We must ask: where does Mawlana invite us to? Obviously, his constant emphasis on divine and human love tells us something. However, if we think he invites us to participate in the eternal reality of God, we must ask again: does Mawlana invite us to a city? Or outside of city, as Plato invites us to outside of the cave (city) to contemplate eternal truth? Well, when we connect his great tolerance for infidel, pagan, and fire-worshipper in his invitation with his emphasis on human love as the revelation of divine love, we can realize he invites us to contribute for living and growing together in peace and harmony. In other words, he invites us to pay attention to the essence of city as the condition of heterogeneity of anonymity of a society. Mawlana’s notion of divine and human love appears to be a philosophy of social space and ethics of dwelling. In other words, his famous call “whoever you may be, come” invites us to provide human individuals with a free space regardless who they are and to be keeper of ethics of dwelling, living, and growing together.

### **Abrahamic Monotheism as an Infinite Space for Dialogue between One God and Human Individuals**

History of religions, specifically of Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) is characterized by an irony as follows: Even though they offer visions of peace, yet especially the Abrahamic traditions have often been embroiled in war.<sup>2</sup> This irony refers us basically to the disagreement between general intentions and actions of these traditions. In our global age, these traditions are losing their normative power; and the classical interpretive models which were developed within them appear to be insufficient in understanding global transformation of humanity and in offering solutions for the new problems which global transformation poses before us.

In view of this critical situation, we should raise the following questions: How are we supposed to understand Abrahamic monotheism and values? Does Abraham offer his monotheism as a definite interpretive model (monological conceptual structure) for understanding God and universe? Or is monotheism for Abraham basically an infinite space opened up for dialogue between God and human beings? Put briefly, is it (Abraham’s monotheism) a hermeneutical expression, which reflects dialogical (historical, existential, finite) relation between God and human beings?

Well, since I don’t have sufficient knowledge of Judaism and Christianity, I will attempt to approach these questions again with reference to Islamic thought. The main purpose of

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Peachey (ed.), *Abrahamic Faiths, Ethnicity, and Ethnic Conflicts*, [http://www.crvp.org/book/Series01/I-7/part\\_ii.htm](http://www.crvp.org/book/Series01/I-7/part_ii.htm) (8.8.2007)

classical interpretive models in Islamic theological tradition has been to uncover the basic intention (maqṣad) of God. For that reason, we can characterize them as “author-based interpretive models”, to use language of modern hermeneutics. The most problematic aspect of them was their forgetting to include “audience or reader” into themselves as part of the meaning they present.

Within author-based interpretive models, classical Muslim thought has understood “monotheism” as the pure submission of human being to one God (Allah). Obviously this way of understanding was in accordance with Aristotelian schema of active and passive. Aristotle’s God (as well as Farabi’s and Avicenna’s God) was pure activity on the one pole; on the other pole was remaining matter or world as potentiality to be actualized by God. Even if Muslim Sufis have emphasized personal religious experience in the remembrance (dhikr) of God, they still stood very close to Aristotelian schema of activity and potentiality. In their eyes, monotheism should be a descriptive notion for the oneness of God. In other words, they appear to neglect the participation and contribution of ever-distinct human individuals in the development of meaning of monotheism.

We find ourselves at the threshold of metaphysics of monotheism if we take basically transcendence of one God into consideration, and forget our historical-dialogical relation with Him. The problem with classical interpretive tradition of Islam was to focus on the word ‘transcendence’ with reference to God and hence to stand basically within the field of metaphysics of monotheism. Within this way of thought, ‘localization’ has always been a problem. Yet if we will release the notion “monotheism” from the domain of metaphysics so as to re-situate it in its original dialogical medium, we are supposed to re-establish dialectical relation between transcendence and localization within the meaning of monotheism.

In this way, the notion “monotheism” becomes an infinite space opened up for historical, existential, and personal relationship between human individuals and God. In this way, the word “monotheism” turns out to be a hermeneutical expression, which reflects every person’s unique and social relation with God within itself. Said differently, when we grasp the notion “monotheism” as the relationship of one God with infinite plurality and heterogeneity of cities, then we can start discovering the potentiality of Abrahamic values for our modern societies.

As a 15<sup>th</sup> century peasant claims, “Die Stadtluft macht frei!” (The city air makes us free!).<sup>3</sup> The basic character of a modern city is, its providing individuals with a free space or medium so they can have their freedom for personal creativity and responsibility. In the same way, the monotheism of Abraham is a form of philosophy, which aims at opening a leeway or free medium for individuals before God and other human beings so each individual gains both his/her freedom and responsibility before others. Otherwise, the dialectical relation between transcendence (universal) and localization (particular) within monotheistic belief is collapsed; and exile or transcendence becomes the only path to be followed.

I believe the value of Abraham for our modern societies lies in his personal struggle for monotheism as the dialectical relation between transcendence and localization. His leaving his father’s home, kindred, and country shows us the absence of localization is the absence of freedom and responsibility in a given place. His exile from his homeland signifies the exile of

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<sup>3</sup> Schneek, “City and Village” [http://www.crvp.org/book/Series01/I-5/chapter\\_xv.htm](http://www.crvp.org/book/Series01/I-5/chapter_xv.htm) (8.8.2007)

great values from his society. In this sense, the absence of localization is devaluation of all great values in a society.

### **Dialogical Character of Social Ethics**

It seems the most concrete response to the fundamental question “Can we grow together?” can be given within the field of social ethics. However, the field of social ethics has a number of difficulties to be approached. One of them is related to the basis of social ethics. Modernity and specifically post-modernity are said to undermine traditional basis of ethics. This means traditional moral principles are deprived of their cosmological, metaphysical, and epistemological foundation. This situation affected religious ethics by shaking their normative power on modern societies. Secular ethics cannot be said to base them on convincing valid principles for all cities. Therefore, the field of social ethics has many voices coming from different perspectives.

From one vantage point, one can see this pluralistic and conflicting appearance of social ethics as chaotic and even anarchic. And one can look for a form of solution for transition of society from *chaos* to *cosmos*. Nevertheless, one should be careful in analyzing traditional basis of moral principles and chaotic and conflicting situation of modern social ethics. At this point, I will put forward a brief analysis of traditional apprehension of ethics in Islam. I hope this can help us understand better the possibilities, which the chaotic situation of our social ethics offers.

Qur’an always attracts human attention to the point God knows everything open or hidden in the universe including human intention and action. The emphasis of Qur’an on human ethics always includes a sort of temporality in the sense God knows the intentions and actions of human beings as they are intending and acting. Accordingly, the most significant point of Qur’anic ethics is its emphasis on temporality of human moral action. Human beings intend and make decision for good or bad action only within temporal situations. Their horizon of seeing what is right and wrong has always been conditioned by their awareness of their temporal situations. This limited and finite apprehension of human beings concerning their moral situation makes God’s knowing human intentions and actions as they are intending and acting more significant. According to Qur’anic ethics, God is not merely an observer or knower from distance; rather human awareness of God’s knowing his finite temporal situation can affect his decision for better moral action. Moreover due to this awareness, human being can ask God’s help to see better what is right and wrong for his case. This means God can provide human beings with a better ethical awareness within temporal moral situations.

Unfortunately, classical Muslim theologians transposed the problem of ethical awareness within temporal situations to the problem of pre-determination of moral knowledge by God. Hence they questioned the possibility of basing all types of moral principles on the eternity of Divine knowledge by disregarding ‘temporality’ as the essence of moral awareness. Their discussion of moral knowledge at the metaphysical level shows clearly they transported the problem of ethics to a plane, which is essentially amoral. Their attribution, a priority to moral knowledge with respect to ethical intention and action poses for us the following question: Is it possible to discuss universality of moral knowledge by separating it from our temporal, limited, surpassed and revisable moral awareness?

I think, the pluralistic and conflicting appearance of social ethics in modern cities offers us to see the possibility of grasping temporality of moral awareness afresh. Reduction of the

problem of social ethics to discovery of predetermined moral knowledge presupposes our granting a privilege to one form of interpretive model or epistemological method. This is a way of transporting morality to the level of epistemology and metaphysics, which are essentially amoral. This situation forces us to discuss the problem of morality always within temporal moral situations. In other words, the problem of social ethics is not basically a problem of universally valid knowledge, but rather a problem of dialogical relations within a society. I believe, only within these dialogical relations, can religious awareness of morality make a better contribution to the meaning of the fundamental question "Can we grow together?"

As a conclusion, the mystery of our living together and the possibility of our growing together in peace and harmony reveal themselves not in terms of constructing an overall picture of reality to be applied on a city; or interpreting Abrahamic monotheism and values as a unifying interpretive system to be imposed on heterogeneity of anonymity of a society; or basing social ethics on a privileged epistemological method; but in terms of providing human individuals with free space for their having freedom and responsibility before God and other human beings. This will help us preserve pluralistic nature of our modern cities as well as our awareness of dialogical character of social ethics.