Open and Relational Theology and its Social and Political Implications: Perspectives from Progressive Islam

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Let me start with outlining my basic premises. Our worldview shapes how we conceptualise the Divine (and vice versa). How we conceptualise the Divine, in turn, shapes our ethico-moral compass and our values. Our ethico-moral compass and our values shape our attitudes and views on how social and political life should be organised.

Not unlike in other major world religious traditions and Christianity in particular, the Islamic worldview is based on the idea of a partnership between the Divine as the source of awe inspiring Majesty, Beauty and Goodness and humanity. Furthermore, humanity has been tasked with a special ethical responsibility to embody and enact these God like values and attributes at both the level of individuals and societies seeking to create conditions that contribute to flourishing and well-being of all of God's creation.

My other point of self-positioning is that I have been for nearly two decades now, a theoretician and vocal proponent of progressive Muslim thought /progressive Islam. The most significant delineating features of this approach to the Islamic tradition can be summarised as follows:

A subscription to a panentheistic concept of the Divine and a form of Islamic open-relational/process theology

emphasis on creative, critical and innovative thought based on epistemological openness and methodological fluidity,

rationalist and contextualist approaches to Islamic theology and ethics,

form of political governance based on principles of constitutional democracy

form of Islamic liberation theology,

affirmation of conceptual compatibility of the Islamic normative tradition with that of modern human rights era declarations such as the UDHR.

affirmation of religious pluralism (Duderija 2011; Duderija 2017)

As I have argued elsewhere (Duderija 2017) these major characteristics of what constitutes progressive Islamic worldview also constitute its most important normative imperatives. The concept of the normative imperative for the proponents of progressive Muslim thought refers to certain theological, moral, and ethical principles that ought to guide principled actions of those who believe in the Islamic message and which are considered to be in accordance with the foundational Islamic textual sources. Importantly, however, these normative imperatives are considered to be applicable to all humanity since they are premised on the belief in pre-theoretical and pre-conventional concepts of truth and justice that do not presuppose faith. In the context of Islam as a religious tradition, this translates itself in the idea of Islam being an ethico-religious worldview whose anchoring value is the idea of 'ethics of responsibility' in which humans as God's partners have the responsibility to act justly and fight for justice even if it is against their own self-interests.

This idea is conveyed eloquently by one of the leading progressive Muslim thinkers, Khaled Abou El Fadl (2014, 116–117), who states that "[t]he religious conscience should be invoked in all situations that could create a greater

sanctity and understanding of the sacred nature of human life". In other words, the normative imperative is an affirmative obligation of the idea that "the religious conscience must be thoroughly engaged with everything that elevates human beings from ugliness to goodness" (Sachedina, 2008, 89). Sachedina (2008), another leading progressive Muslim scholar, uses the terminology of 'ethical necessity' which more or less corresponds to what is termed a 'normative imperative' in this paper. For Sachedina, ethical necessity is "an action that is rationally required (*wujub 'aqlı*) because it is based on moral norms that follow from human nature which not only serve as the underlying framework for natural law but also Islamic natural law" (Sachedina, 2008, p. 89) if approached from the standpoint of rational theological ethics to which progressive Muslim thought subscribes.

 In philosophical terms, the idea of the normative imperative is premised on the presupposition that, contrary to much of the western contemporary liberal ethico-political theory, it is possible to make a philosophically coherent argument that human beings have real moral duties (MacDonald, 2012). As a result, it is possible to deliberate and ultimately form a judgment about the truth of different moral and ethical claims on the basis of one's commitment to ethics of responsibility and humility, and hence legitimacy of diversity. However, this process of deliberation about truth and justice is dialogical in nature and considers diversity of perspectives as integral to it. Hence, the above-described concept of the normative imperative is not tantamount to the belief in crude moral absolutism and accompanying fundamentalist and totalitarian approaches to truth, the politics of truth, and its socio-political ramifications. This is because progressive Muslim thought gives due consideration to the idea that these moral and ethical ways of acting

take different forms and shapes in different socio-cultural and historical contexts, and that they are ,in principle, subject to evolution and ever better but never fully exhaustible approximations of Divine attributes of Majesty (jalal) and Beauty(jamal). Unfortunately, with a very few notable exceptions, particular conceptualisation of jalal and jamal in the Islamic intellectual tradition have endorsed a concept of the Divine that sanctions patriarchy, political tyranny or have offered theological justifications for a concept of an all-powerful and all-loving God that cannot be reconciled with the persistence of evil at the hands of human beings or the occurrence of natural disasters. Prof. Oord has written extensively on this issue from a Christian theology perspective but his critique of mainstream Christian theology on the nature of God's Love and God's Omnipotence in many crucial ways, also applies equally to that of the mainstream Islamic theology in relation to the same. Similar criticism of mainstream Islamic theology we can find professor Khourshide's Theology of Mercy .

As evident from the nature of these delineating features of progressive Islam, for the proponents of progressive Muslim thought, there is an organic and symbiotic link between the political and the hermeneutic. This has given rise to the notion of what can be termed 'social hermeneutics', which can be described as a highly participatory political endeavor enabling progressive Muslim scholar-activists to seek socio-political change within a faith-based framework. For these actors, being engaged in social hermeneutics implies that religious knowledge can act as a basis for social transformation, revolution, and collective political activism. Progressive Muslim social hermeneutics, in part, is also employed to argue for the emergence of religiously persuasive discourse on issues such as gender justice/equality,

human rights, freedom of religion and democracy, the establishment of a vibrant public sphere, and increased transparency and accountability of political structures and institutions, especially in Muslim-majority contexts. Importantly, unlike the vast majority of conservative forms of political Islam, progressive Islam is cosmopolitan in outlook, embraces constitutional democracy and contemporary ideas on human rights, gender equality, and vibrant civil society.

It is noteworthy that many proponents of progressive Muslim thought are women. It is they in particular who are dislodging the epistemic privilege enjoyed by traditionally educated, exclusively male religious scholars and clergy. In this context, they play a major role in the process of shifting the locus of authority and normativity in Islamic discourses. With the focus on gender equality, and particularly the reform of traditional jurisprudence (fiqh) pertaining to Muslim family law being one of the pillars of both their scholarship and their activism, progressive Muslim scholars subscribe to the idea, stemming from feminist discourses, that the personal is political, thus bringing issues of gender and the Muslim juristic tradition in general to the forefront of Muslim politics.

Given all of this, progressive Muslim thought with its panentheistic concept of the Divine has wide raging socio-political implications not only in Muslim majority contexts but also globally. Its worldview is premised on the imperative of adopting a creative and critical approach to knowledge by means of epistemological and methodological openness; the possibility of epistemological, moral, and ethical progress; the imperative of the gender just and non-patriarchal interpretations of Islam as examples of rediscovering the ethical in Islamic law; the utmost concern for the rights of all, especially those

on the margins and the vulnerable, non-monopolization of religious truth and a contextualist approach to the normative fountainheads grounded in a concept of an open-relational God rooted in justice, goodness, mercy, and beauty. Progressive Muslims firmly believe that the Islamic tradition (*turath*), if approached and conceptualized in harmony with these imperatives, has the necessary intellectual resources to turn them into a tangible and concrete reality. This process, of course, will be long and arduous, but the journey and the desired destination, I am convinced, will be very worthwhile, especially since the imperatives of progressive Islam are premised on the idea of a uniquely Muslim contribution to broader universal discourses on many pressing socio-political and ethical conundrums facing humanity today. As such integrating these imperatives self-consciously in the Islamic tradition will, hopefully, lead to the recognition of the Islamic tradition as an important and constructive contributor to these very discourses.

In the final analysis, it is imperative for us to recognise that our concept of God has important implications — not only for what kind of abstract theological beliefs we might hold, but also what kind of *ethical values* we should abide by. And these ethical values form the very backbone of the kind of societal and political norms and ideals we consider normative for human life.

Thank you

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