

Oh, [Muslim] Believers: Be Just, That is Always Closer to True Piety

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I ON MUSLIMS AND GLOBAL JUSTICE

JEAN-MARC COICAUD (JMC): *One of your most well-known books is titled *Muslims and Global Justice*.¹ Why did you focus on the theme of Muslims and global justice?*

ABDULLAHI AHMED AN-NA‘IM (AN): The mandate of the Quran to all Muslims is to always be truthful and do justice. For instance, verse 8 of [chapter 5](#) of the Quran can in part be translated as follows: “Oh, [Muslim] Believers . . . be faithful to God, witness to the Truth. Do not be dissuaded from doing Justice because of the injustice perpetrated by others. Be Just, that is always closer to true piety.” Drawing on this dominant theme in the Quran, I take this focus on Muslims and global justice in the book you mention here for two main reasons.

First, as a matter of principle for me, the theme of justice required putting the human person at the core of the inquiry. As a Muslim myself, I am exercising my agency, my responsibility, to contribute to defining and to realizing global justice. Of course, the fact that Christians and people affiliated with any other religion or belief do or do not identify as believers is not something that I am addressing. For me, as a Muslim, and I believe for all Muslims who wish to identify as such, being Muslim is integral to our worldview and core identity. That is why I approach global justice in this instance from my perspective of being a Muslim.

Second, and from a pragmatic strategic perspective, my focus on Muslims as people should enable all concerned to locate the issues for Muslims and their communities in their particular historical context. This focus on

¹ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na‘im, *Muslims and Global Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

Muslims and their communities in context is crucial for facilitating possibilities of change or reform in their beliefs and policies regarding issues of global justice. A focus on "Islam and Global Justice," for instance, is disempowering to Muslims and other concerned actors because it frames issues in terms of "this is Islam, take or leave it!" Faced with that stark choice, I know that as a Muslim I will choose Islam over whatever else is presented as an alternative. In contrast, when the issues are seen as about the attitudes and practices of Muslims as people in their respective historical context, then the way is open to exploring ideas and strategies for better understanding and transforming negative aspects of the beliefs and policies of Muslims regarding global justice.

Two further points should be noted here. The first point is that this approach is not limited to Muslims, but should equally apply to all people of every religious, cultural, or ideological persuasion, in their respective contexts. The second point is that the possibility of and responsibility for change and transformation is primarily for the people concerned, Muslims in my case, but other peoples also have an important role to play in facilitating and reinforcing what the people do in their context and for their religion or belief in their communities. For global justice in particular, the more all societies around the world collaborate in establishing and promoting fair and effective norms, institutions, and mechanisms for mediating disputes, keeping the peace, and promoting economic and social development, the more will Muslims (and others) be encouraged to reflect critically on their own values and behavior in support of such shared commitment to global justice.

JMC: The starting point of the book is a very personal starting point and also a starting point which has to do with the specific condition of Islam and how people in Islam identify with the religion.

AN: Yes, it is, because of what I said in the preceding answer about the reasons for my focus on Muslims and their human agency for change. I am therefore raising the challenge to myself to begin with, then to my communities of Muslims and non-Muslims who share the values and vision I am presenting in this book, and to humanity at large. In my view, none of the identities human beings have is exclusive or unique. Since Muslims everywhere, like other human beings near and far, share fundamental concerns with other human communities, their identities overlap, interact, and adjust to other identities.

Moreover, there is such diversity among Muslims and their communities that it is grossly misleading to assume that they are all the same even regarding what it means to be Muslim. It is particularly misleading to identify Islam as Arab or Middle Eastern, because Arabs make up only about 12 percent of the

total world Muslim population. There are more Muslims, or as many Muslims, in Sub-Saharan Africa (I am from Sudan) as there are Muslims in the Middle East. India and Pakistan have the second and third largest Muslim populations in the world (estimates vary about which is second to Indonesia). So, what it means to be Muslim depends on self-understanding and contextual experience of highly diverse populations across vast regions of the world. Islam began in Arabia in the seventh century, but has spread and adapted to preexisting belief systems and cultures around the world, from Senegal, to Indonesia, to Uzbekistan, Central Asia, to West China.

JMC: You started the conversation with the idea that in the Islamic world there is a stronger sense of identification between believers and the religion than is the case in Christianity. How would you explain this phenomenon?

AN: I would not presume to evaluate how strongly Christians, or any other religious community, identify with their religion. I should also avoid thinking of Christianity as European or so-called Western, or, to distinguish European Christianity from African or Asian Christianity. Historical and cultural factors in each region influence perceptions and experience. For instance, to what extent has what we now call Western Christianity been shaped or influenced by European Enlightenment or modernity, and how far has that in turn influenced African and Asian Christianity? What I can and wish to affirm from my perspective as a Muslim, having grown up and lived most of my life in Sudan, is that my identity as a Muslim is central to my commitments and obligations to global justice.

JMC: This is why it is important for you to think about global justice on the basis of this strong sense of identification with the religion?

AN: Yes, most certainly for myself, but by the same token, I should not presume to speak for anyone else without their permission and delegation. As a matter of self-determination, I should neither speak for others nor concede their claim to speak for me without my person and delegation. From this perspective, it must be the human agent, the human subject, who defines global justice and participates in realizing it. Whatever that person is, however she or he chooses to identify, her or his understanding of global justice and how to realize it is integral to that purpose.

Integral to this approach is also exploring possibilities of interreligious and cross-cultural solidarity and alliance-building. While each human being is entitled to participate in defining and realizing global justice, none of us is capable of achieving and sustaining that conception alone. We must all therefore engage in strategic and inclusive collaboration with others in

realizing shared visions and commitments to global justice. In view of emphasis on human agency and self-determination, persuasion and consensus-building are the only necessary means for collaboration in achieving and sustaining global justice.

JMC: In your work you say that one of the basic purposes and meanings of your research in general as well as in the context of global justice has been to try to reconcile the fact that you are a Muslim with your commitment to peaceful international relations and the protection of universal human rights. You seem to say that somehow this reconciliation is a bit challenging. Why is this the case and what are the main difficulties with trying to reconcile the two?

AN: Yes, the reconciliation I seek is challenging, but should be familiar to Muslims because Islam itself succeeded in spreading and laying roots across the world since the seventh century because Muslims struggled to reconcile the precepts of their religion with the norms and institutions of preexisting local religion and culture. Peaceful international relations and the protection of universal human rights happen to be the features of our present value systems as Muslims, which we must strive to reconcile with the precepts of our Islam. In doing so, we would be on the true path of Islamic traditions through fourteen centuries of intellectual, theological, and ethnical history. That history is reaffirmed by the remarkable diversity of Muslim societies and communities, from West Africa to West China to Southeast Asia. Muslims of today must adapt better to global interdependence by reexamining the relevance and authority of Sharia in their lives if they are to reclaim that glorious historical influence.

Part of the challenge is to heal the profound trauma of European colonialism and neocolonial hegemony on the consciousness of Muslims, locally, regionally, and globally. One of the challenges I am responding to in my *Muslims and Global Justice* book is why and how to strive for peaceful relations with former colonial powers and current neocolonial powers. We sometimes strike at our neighbors out of frustration for not being able to strike at a more powerful and distant nemesis. The response I propose in the [first chapter](#) of *Muslims and Global Justice* (pp. 60–64) is that Muslims must abide by their own principled commitment to peaceful international relations, and not out of nativity or weakness.

I should also add here that all human societies should feel the challenge of the requirements of achieving peaceful relations and protection of human rights because those humane objectives are counter to deep socialization into perceptions of the need for violence against other societies and domination and exploitation of other human beings. All human societies have to struggle

with their challenges in this regard in their own ways because that is the only way that can achieve sustainable positive outcomes. For Muslims, one part of that challenge is what Sharia means today, and how it affects Muslims' lives socially, politically, legally, and otherwise. In other words, because there is a highly developed jurisprudential and theological tradition that Muslims strongly identify with, they have to understand what that means in the post-colonial globalized world that we live in today. That is how I define one distinctive aspect of the challenge for Muslims, namely, Sharia, peaceful relations, and human rights, without suggesting that this is the only challenge to Muslims everywhere in the exact same way. The reality of some challenge is true of every society on its own terms. My responsibility as a Muslim is to seek reconciling interpretations of Sharia with principles of peaceful international relations and protection of human rights as a critical part of the challenge facing Muslims in general.

JMC: Based on what you are saying, it seems that there is a double challenge. On the one hand, there is the legacy of colonization, and on the other hand, there is also the need to somehow find bridges and commonalities between Sharia and the field of international law, which is essentially a Western field.

AN: Yes, that is true. But, for international law to be truly international, it has to cease to be Western and to become global. For human rights to be truly universal, they have to be reconceived as global not only as Western, and I think that that is part of the challenge. The discourse of human rights in Western societies tends to assume that these are rights which we – we being people of the West that is – or international law define, is something that we have invented and everybody else has to conform to.

My question is: Given the historical experience that yes there was colonialism, that yes international law has been developed by European nations, what do the rest of us, everyone else in the world, have to say about this? Sharia, by the way, does have a dimension of international relations to it, but it is a premodern notion of international relations and it was not founded on the state or the so-called nation-states and intergovernmental relations as we have them under international law. So, how do we retain a sense of authenticity and authority of Sharia in relation to what international law must be today? So, there is no question of going back, there is no question of sort of unwinding the historic experience. The question is: Here we are in the twenty-first century; we are Muslims, but we are also many other things. Being Muslims does not exhaust who we are, although it is critical to our self-understanding.

II DE-COLONIZING THE MIND

JMC: I want us to discuss the legacy of colonization. Why do you think that, to this day, it is such a defining element of the Muslim identity?

AN: Not only of Muslims but also of other Africans and Asians; all former colonies are struggling with their colonial legacies, though the colonial experiences of Muslims and other colonized communities were different. French colonization of Muslim West Africa was very different from British colonization of Muslim East Africa, and the same was true of the Dutch in Indonesia and the British in the Indian sub-continent. For Muslims throughout Africa and Asia the struggle is coping with their postcolonial condition, which persisted everywhere, despite the physical departure of colonial administrators and armies. The struggle then is with what colonial powers left behind, in the hearts and minds of the colonized, which could not be expunged overnight on the eve of political independence. I think this is one of the challenges that we face, that we have not really achieved decolonization until we cease to think in postcolonial terms and engage in deliberate and systematic decolonization of our hearts and minds, beyond mere political independence.

This is the phase we can see in the so-called Arab Spring, and we see it in many other parts of the world, in Eastern Europe, when people come to exercise responsibility for their lives and stop blaming other actors and assume their obligations as the primary actors in their own lives. Part of the challenge of the colonial is that it has created a global reality integrating so-called nation-states, a European concept and institution, imposed through colonialism, though this concept and institution has not evolved from organic experience of the colonized people as it has evolved out of the experiences of European societies. The decolonization of our hearts and minds does not mean that we have to negate and erase this internationalization of European concepts and institutions. Instead, the challenge is to really take the initiative in asserting our own voice and experience in the political stability and economic development of our societies. As I see it, the primary challenge is to accept the ways colonization has shaped the global economy, politics, security, and otherwise, but that does not mean conceding our own interests and concerns for the benefit of former colonial powers.

JMC: In relation to the idea of postcolonialism as still being part of a colonized mind and of a colonized heart, it is interesting that you say that in your view the Arab Spring was part of this decolonization process. Also, based on what you are

saying, it seems that the idea of having a decolonized mind is about stopping to feel and to act as a victim and really becoming a full-fledged agent, right?

AN: Precisely, that is exactly my point. In doing so, fortunately, we do not have to do it alone. I do not accept the notion of clash of civilizations, which is a simplistic and negative self-fulfilling prophecy. I like to think of various human experiences around the world as part of the same human civilization and in that regard I do not see any problem in benefiting from the experience of any society, whether they are Western or Eastern, whatever they are. I benefit from the experiences of other societies, and build on their achievements while still asserting my own sense of who I am.

Therefore, in our struggles, whether in the Arab Spring or in Eastern Europe or anywhere else, we are not alone but we have to accept the primary responsibility. That is why I was heartened by the Arab Spring because here are populations who are saying “enough is enough, we refuse to submit to authoritarian dictatorial rule and we are willing to take the risk and accept responsibility.” Still the international community can help in that process but it should not attempt to take over, or seek to negate the human agency of the local actors. The fact that liberation movements in the Arab world and elsewhere tend to stagnate, sometimes regress, is only to be expected. As I see it, “regression is always part of progression”; no society anywhere at any phase in human history has achieved constant, irreversible development forward. We should therefore integrate setbacks and delays in the grand design of our social movements and political mobilization.

JMC: *In relation to the importance of decolonizing heart and mind, you seem to think that a decolonized mind and heart would be an open one – one secure enough about itself to embrace others and plurality and diversity. Then the question is: If a decolonized mind – both for the former colonized and the colonizer – is an open mind and an open heart, what are the conditions to make this happen and how does one nurture these conditions?*

AN: Yes, I very much like your reading. That is exactly what I mean, that it is a question of being self-confident, without being defensive or apologetic, or claiming some sort of exceptionalism. Since in every human society people tend to think of themselves and their community as exceptional, it is not really helpful to rely on such claims. Instead, we should focus on being who we are and being confident about who we are, and to think of how do we engage the other globally? It is true that when people feel under attack, they tend to entrench and become conservative and defensive, but we can counter that primordial impulse by identifying as part of a global community, under rule of

law, international law, and human rights, in order to feel secure enough to come out of the shell.

Now, what are the conditions for this to happen, you are rightly asking. To me, indispensable requirements include strong and accessible global normative and institutional resources. The UN Charter, the experiences of the various specialized agencies of the United Nations, in health, development, human rights, the global presence of the United Nations, all these are tremendous resources that can be truly global and not just Western, and for that reason I take tremendous pride and confidence in the weight of the United Nations. Establishing and sustaining such resources require consistent commitment and investment of effort and material support, but the need for that will be on high intensive scale in the initial stages, and decline over time.

This is not to say that we should not expect any problems, because everything human will have problems. In any case we cannot succeed without something like the United Nations, and since we do have the United Nations now, we should work with it instead of trying to do without it. For me, it is a global community coming together in development, in technology, in the environment, in human rights; there are all these possibilities of collaboration. The normative and institutional resources we already have in these and other fields make it possible for a Muslim to come out and say, "when I engage, I am not engaging my former colonial masters, I am engaging my fellow human beings, and our collective international community at large." And that is why I think it is now possible, more than ever before, to truly decolonize because we have the resources, the international experience, and institutional presence that makes it possible.

JMC: You are suggesting from a philosophical and human point of view that unless one is at peace with oneself, it is very difficult to be at peace with others?

AN: Yes, and I think that it is dialectical. The extent to which I am at peace with myself will facilitate my being at peace with others, which will come back to help me to be more at peace with myself. If I may come back to the point about Islam, for me as a Muslim, Islam is the resource for my coming to peace within myself and through that I can engage, but it is not going to be the same understanding of Islam that prevailed a thousand years ago. For me, that is why the challenge for Muslims, myself and others, is to understand Islam in today's context, not to be dreaming about something romantic and hypothetical of what it might have been otherwise. We live in the world. Islam is part of who we are; it does not exhaust who we are, but it can be a positive resource or it can be a negative force and that is how I deal with the issues.

III SHARIA AND NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

JMC: *Earlier, you talked about the normative and institutional resources that we should call upon as a way to bring about a decolonized mind and a decolonized world. So, how do you see the role that Sharia can play in this perspective?*

AN: The first point I start with is to affirm and emphasize that Sharia is a human understanding of Islam, and does not exhaust Islam itself. Sharia is never the totality of Islam and it is never Islam as such. Since it is a human interpretation of Islam, it can change through being reinterpreted. Sharia is not an end in itself; in fact Islam is not an end in itself. Islam is a means to the end of liberating and fulfilling our humanity. It is the means of liberation for the human person who believes in this religion to be at peace and to exercise and to pursue justice.

As a human understanding of Islam, Sharia must be interpreted and practiced in an historical context, and not in the abstract. So the crisis in this connection is that Muslims of today tend to think of precolonial, premodern interpretations of Sharia as immutable. I think that is a mistake because, being the outcome of human interpretation, Sharia cannot be immutable, and must instead respond to the challenges that face Muslims at any time and at any place. The value of Sharia is not in its immutability but in its adaptability, in its ability to interact with and to be transformed by the experience of Muslims. Insisting on the immutability of Sharia is the source of the tension we see between that rigid, premodern conception of some aspects of Sharia and modern international law and human rights norms. There is no problem with that so long as we understand that Sharia was then responding to the needs of its communities, and Sharia today has to respond to our very different needs in a globally integrated world. So, the problem is not with Sharia; it is with Muslims' refusal to recognize the contextual understanding of Sharia.

JMC: *What you said about Islam and Sharia, that it is a tool to achieve inner peace and peace with others, tends to be common to all religion. Would not you say so? Also, for those in the West who do not know what Sharia is, what would be a good translation of the term "Sharia"?*

AN: Actually, the term Islamic law is misleading because it represents Sharia as a code of law, but I think of Sharia more as a normative system. So, Sharia is the normative system of Islam, which is different from state law; it is different from positive law. As I have explained in my book, *Islam and the Secular*

State,² enacting Sharia as the positive law of the state changes its nature from being the normative system of Islam to being the political will of the elites controlling the state. Enactment as positive law also deprives Muslims of the freedom to choose among competing views of Muslim scholars, and forces Muslims who live in a so-called nation-state to follow views they may not accept as valid from a religious point of view. A Sunni Muslim may be forced to live by Shi'i norms in Iran, and a Shi'i Muslim may be forced by Sunni norms in Saudi Arabia, although both may regard the doctrine followed by the state where they live as invalid.

So, for me the value of Sharia is in its community-based practice, not in the coercive enforcement by the state. The state is a political institution that is designed to serve particular functions like keeping law and order, providing essential services to citizens, and regulating external trade and other relations. State institutions and officials are neither qualified nor competent to regulate the religious life of believers in their communities. The mistaken belief of Muslims that Sharia can be enforced by the European model of a centralized, bureaucratic, nation-state, imposed by colonial administrations derives from our defensiveness and contradictory feelings about colonial administration. We seek political independence from colonial powers, but when the colonial administrators leave, we continue to follow their models of administration of justice and rule of law. Perceptions of being under siege also cause us to cling to a false hope that we can somehow resurrect Sharia out of the past to "save" us from our present political strife and economic collapse. Instead of chasing the mirage of an Islamic state to enforce Sharia, Muslims should be seeking promoting national consensus and genuine economic development.

JMC: How do you explain that conservatism and an understanding of Sharia on the basis of the past is so prevalent today and that your progressive view, your focus on adaptability rather than on immutability, is not really very often part of the contemporary culture of the Muslim world?

AN: I have two responses to propose here. First, if we consider what the vast majority of Muslims around the world *actually do*, as opposed to what a tiny minority of "Islamists" say, I believe that I am part of that vast majority more than Islamists claim to be. It is commonly accepted that the global population of Muslims is estimated at 1.6 billion, who constitute the dominant majority of the population in some forty-three countries (www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/). All Muslim-majority countries are

² Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

members of the United Nations and contribute to all the activities of the UN and other international organizations in the promotion and protection of human rights, etc. These countries have been fully active partners in combating international terrorism, and maintaining international peace and security. In my view, there is no rational or scientific way of distinguishing Muslim majority countries from any other group of countries regarding peaceful relations and protection of human rights. They determine and implement their domestic and international relations by the same factors and practices used by all other postcolonial countries. Only four or five out of the total of forty-three Muslim majority countries may be regarded as exception to the general rule I am describing here because they may also engage in sponsoring terrorism, and that is likely to be due to legacies of European colonialism, like the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan, rather than being inspired by traditional notions of Jihad. Of course, much more can be said in clarifying all these claims, but I believe they are largely true. My point here is simply that what I am saying in my writings, public lectures, and briefly discussed in this conversation, is in fact consistent with what the vast majority of Muslims around the world are actually doing domestically and in their regional and international relations.

Second, it is also true, however, that the majority of Muslims I am referring to above are “the silent majority,” who do not engage in public discourse to explain or defend their policies and practice regarding peaceful relations and human rights from an Islamic perspective. It seems to me that this has to do with the siege mentality and diminished self-confidence I mentioned earlier. If I am confident in my own beliefs and comfortable with who I am, I would not feel the need to prove to others my religious piety or fidelity to Islam. Conversely, diminished self-confidence may lead me to seek the approval of my peers and fear of the stigma of infidelity to immutable Sharia.

JMC: I agree with you, and this is not something specific to Islam. Very often a sense of psychological insecurity creates all kinds of problems and leads to war. So the question is: In the context of Islam, how do we engineer a sense of self-confidence, a sense of inner security in people, in political culture, so that a sense of openness prevails?

AN: When you ask: “how do we engineer?” I wonder who is the “we” in this question. To me, the “we” must be Muslims in internal discourse about Islam and Sharia from a theological perspective because intervention by non-Muslims will probably lead to rejection of whatever strategy is proposed as neocolonial. This is particularly true in the postcolonial context and how the insecurities Muslims feel about continued neocolonial hegemony.

What external actors can and should do is to enhance normative and institutional resources for the rule of law in international relations and protection of human rights. These are the resources we need to invest in. The more we show that these are global resources and inclusive of all of humanity and not just Western, the more Muslims will have confidence in these institutions and resources and will work with them. In my work I emphasize the need for absolute fidelity and compliance with international law, especially from the more powerful states. Greater damage is done to the credibility of international law when it is violated by powerful states than when it is violated by weaker states. The more developed parts of the world, the so-called Global North, comply with international law, the more Muslims will have confidence in this system and be inclined to abide by it. But when they see international law being opportunistically manipulated, ignored with impunity, or used by developed countries as a tool of power rather than an administrator of justice, then Muslims will have no interest in compliance and may even resort to open rejection. A globally inclusive "we" should try to create conditions for Muslims and other peoples to trust international institutions, invest in the rule of law, and engage in relationships in good faith, openness, and self-confidence.

IV INNER-DISDISCOURSE AND CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE

JMC: It seems that one of the underlying arguments that you make throughout your work is that what is key is to pursue what is right without being self-righteous, to pursue what is right while being open and not self-righteous in one way or another. In your work you call for reimagining global justice in the context of revisiting and renewing the sense of dialogue not only between the West and the Muslim world, for instance, but also within each of these poles, within the West and within the Muslim world. I understand you to believe that the need of dialogue is much greater within each of the poles, within the West, within Islam, than in fact between Islam and the West.

AN: Absolutely, yes. To me the key question is about two processes: internal discourse and cross-cultural dialogue. I think that we have to engage our own tradition for a critical understanding of what it should be today as opposed to what it may have meant in the past; and through that internal transformation and internal discourse, we create common ground with other cultures. Then we can engage in cross-cultural dialogue to build consensus around the central values of justice, peace, and human rights.

It is a dialectical process. The more we transform internally, the more we have common ground to engage in dialogue, gaining confidence from that dialogue, giving back to internal transformation, and I see the two processes as reinforcing each other. Therefore, other societies, such as Western countries or states, should support the right of Muslims to engage in internal discourse and cross-cultural dialogue, without attempting to dictate the outcomes of discourse and dialogue. In other words, we support each other in engaging our respective internal transformations but not our patronizing attitudes, like the so-called civilizing mission of European colonialism. Instead of the Western attempts to require non-Western states to earn admission with Western criteria, the process should be about persuasion for consensus-building around values of global justice and human rights.

JMC: In essence, you are telling us that perhaps more important than cross-cultural dialogue is the dialogue within ourselves. Unless we see ourselves honestly, unless we come to terms with ourselves, we are not going to be able to come to terms with others. So, in a fundamental way, reconciliation with the other begins with reconciliation with oneself.

AN: Absolutely, because where else will acceptance of the other come from? One of my heroes is Mahatma Gandhi and the way that he really brought the sense of responsibility for our lives by living our values, when he said “be the change you wish to make in the world.” Whether or not this is an accurate record of what Gandhi said, the meaning is clear and consistent with Gandhi’s philosophy and approach to life. So, if I want to have justice I must be just myself; if I want to have peace I must be at peace with myself. I believe this to be the message of Islam and other religions, too; namely, that dialogue is the way to anchor change within the human person and then from there into the community through collaboration and trust. Otherwise we have claims of absolute values on the one side contesting claims of absolute values of the other side, with no way for mediating such conflict of values. But when you have willingness to engage in self-criticism on both sides, the possibility of dialogue becomes more realistic.

JMC: Your argument about global justice is, to a certain extent, a spiritual argument: let us work on inner peace to find external peace. But, the world in which we live is anything but spiritual. It is a world of consumption and so on. So how do we go about this spiritual dimension, which is key, I agree with you, in order to achieve global peace in a world which is less and less spiritual?

AN: The world is what we make it and what we see in it. The outcome is not a given, and therefore the question of perception and understanding is critical. It is all in the eyes of the beholder. To me as a Muslim spirituality is everywhere, and I may fail to see it but it never ceases to be there. If I may go back to something you said about religion and spirituality, I think that the object of all religions is spirituality, but all religions get hijacked by power. So institutionalized religion is a distortion of what the essence of the religion is about. Ironically, whether it is Jesus Christ or Mohammad, they were spiritual revolutionaries in their communities and led exemplary personal lives. As soon as their communities became viable entities, the politics of the day hijacked the religious values into a power game.

Therefore, the challenge for each believer is to recapture and recover the essence of the spirituality of his or her religion, in my case Islam. It is only then that Islam can have the difference it intended to have in my mind and in my life. If you think of the first generations of Muslims who transformed themselves and their primitive, violent communities of Arabia into a global community of justice, knowledge, and spirituality, that was a narrative of self-transformation before it became transformation of the social and political environment and of the world around them. That is what we need to replicate. To me the tradition is not about imitation of the past. Instead it is about reenacting the original conviction and transformative vision of the founding communities.

V ACTIVIST SCHOLARSHIP AND GLOBAL PUBLIC POLICY

JMC: In your work you seem to be interested in applying philosophy to concrete situations, as a way to improve the world. If this is the case, what kind of institutions should we have in order to ensure that spirituality, the quest for inner peace as a way to achieve peace in general that it entails, is nurtured and taken seriously?

AN: I do not believe in scholarship for scholarship's sake, or in the possibility of neutrality on public policy and social justice concerns. Failing to take a position is a position in favor of the *status quo*. I believe that scholarship is such a gift and a privilege that we must render it in the service of justice and peace and a good life for everybody. Therefore, it is always about my responsibility out of my conviction on human rights and global justice. The agency of the person to me is critical. We keep complaining about international institutions like the United Nations as being ineffective or being paralyzed by the power

dynamics, as if to say: given the world as it is, what can we do about it? With such a stance nothing will change.

To me scholarship is not just an endless prognosis of the problem but it is a setting up of an agenda for action. If, for example, we have deadlock in the Security Council, which paralyzes it from being able to act in protection of international peace and security and protection of human rights, this is to be expected. This is the nature of power politics. Then, what is the responsibility of us as citizens of our states? At this point I am a citizen of the United States. I think the most effective power in changing the policy of the United States are the citizens of the United States. Therefore, if the citizens of the United States fail to keep their state on the path of justice and human rights, then foreign policy will fail. Conversely, every failure of US foreign policy, at the Security Council or elsewhere, is a failure of the citizens of the United States to exercise their democratic responsibility of holding their government accountable not only for its domestic policy but also for its foreign policy. The institutions we have are valuable. They are not perfect and we should constantly engage in them in understanding what they are and what is wrong with them, but the question is to what end? Is the object to discredit the United Nations or to make it more effective and more sustainable as a global actor? That role is for every single human person. It is not only for governments to promote global justice. That is for the people of the world, acting through their states.

JMC: The UN was based on ideals, values, and dreams, and the challenge is to make sure that the way the UN is being institutionalized does not betray these ideals, values, and dreams. This is also true for democracy. What you are telling us is that, ultimately, those responsible for the fate of institutions – whether they rise or fail – are individuals. But very often individuals are busy with their lives, with trying to survive and so on, so that they do not really invest much in the quality of their institution. Against this background, how can we address this situation?

AN: I think that we should recognize that yes, we are busy with our lives, but what should we be busy about? Take for example democracy. Sometimes we hear that we need to develop before we can be democratic. My position is that we need democracy in order to develop, but that requires a proactive, dynamic view of democracy. When I say democracy, I mean the rule of law as critical for development, for peace, for protection of the environment. I am concerned with such issues because they are about the very survival of human beings and human society. We should engage in self-governance with accountability and transparency because it is our livelihood, because it is our security, not simply fashionable ideals that are at stake.

So the problem is not that people are busy, the question is what are they busy about. Do we have a sense of ends and means? Do we have a sense of priorities? Yes, I do need to do this, that, and the other but, ultimately, I need to be well informed, engaged, and proactive. In the so-called now-established democracies – France, Britain, the United States, Germany, any of these countries – it took a long time to build democratic institutions. Fortunately, we in the developing world today do not have to take as long because we can build on their experiences.

This reflects what I said earlier on borrowing and being open, so we can build faster, but still there are no short-cuts. We have to build our institutions, we have to stand up for our rights, and we have to exercise our responsibilities in order to realize these values. It is true that, ultimately, governments vote at the United Nations for our states, but how are those governments authorized to vote for the people? I think in democratic states, the voting at the UN is more representative of the will of the people, while in despotic states it is not. This is why we need to take our freedom into our own hands, so that our government acts for us and when it acts at the United Nations it acts in our interests and not in the interests of ruling elites who manipulate the process.

JMC: Yes, but eventually the ultimate product of a more democratic world, for instance in the Muslim world, would not mean that the regimes would look like Western democracies. I guess it would be a hybrid in cultural and political terms.

AN: Precisely. I think that the questions of constitutionalism, democracy, human rights, all of these values and institutions have to be rooted in local culture. You cannot transplant democracy or the rule of law, because both must be homegrown. But, in being homegrown, these norms and institutions can benefit from the experience of other societies. In my book *African Constitutionalism and the Role of Islam*³ my argument is that constitutionalism for African societies must be African. What that means is not that it has nothing to do with constitutionalism anywhere else in the world, but that it is legitimized, justified, and motivating for the peoples of Africa when they see it as their own and not something that is imposed on them from the outside.

³ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *African Constitutionalism and the Role of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

VI SHARIA AND DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

JMC: In the context of this democratization and development that you call for, what kind of a resource is Sharia? In specific ways, how can it be helpful?

AN: I think that the notions of accountability and transparency which are critical to democratization can clearly be rooted in Sharia. The fact that Muslims can never abdicate responsibility, that we are always responsible for our actions, that God knows all that we do and all that we fail to do, and will always hold us accountable, these beliefs and values can be cited to ground democratic principles in Islamic cultures. The ideals of fairness, of earning an honest living, of moderation in lifestyle, not to be consumption oriented, the requirements of simplicity of lifestyle, of sharing wealth and resources, all of these are Sharia values that are supportive of democratization and development among Muslims today.

The point I am emphasizing here is that there are in fact tremendous resources for accountability, responsibility, transparency, and honesty within the corpus of Sharia, and have been since the seventh century. So, for example, corruption – when officials are accepting bribes and giving favors or kickbacks –, that is a fundamental breach of Sharia and yet those aspects of Sharia are never highlighted by ruling elites because that is against their selfish interests. They talk about punishments, they talk about limiting the rights of women, in order to distract from their own failures to comply with Sharia. The ruling elites of Muslim-majority countries are therefore facing the following challenge: Are they conforming with Sharia when they oppress their citizens, kill peaceful demonstrators, or engage in corruption? All of this is clearly against Sharia, so why is Sharia invoked when it is convenient and disregarded when it is not?

JMC: What is their answer?

AN: The question has not been put to ruling elites effectively. What the leaders do is to distract their populations from the real issues. Let me put forward a very controversial point. I think that in the Middle East region Israel is not the problem. The problem is the corruption, the incompetence, the lack of responsibility and democracy of Arab rulers throughout the region. Israel has become a convenient excuse and distraction. So for decades, since Abdel Nasir in 1950s' Egypt, Baath regimes in Iraq and Syria, monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, and other rulers throughout the region keep invoking the Israel–Palestine conflict as a distraction from their failure to deliver on their promise of independence and development and self-

determination. Other distractions include the conflict over Kashmir for Pakistan, and the Western Sahara for Morocco, and the conflict with South Sudan for Sudanese regimes.

The answer, as I see it, is for the peoples of the region to refuse to be distracted, and challenge the deceit and hypocrisy of their ruling elites, to turn the Palestinian cause as a challenge for development and democratization, instead of a convenient distraction and a way to escape responsibility by blaming others. It is first and foremost the peoples of the region who have to take matters into their hands because their ruling elites will never relinquish power voluntarily or permit genuine democratization and development. To be clear on this point, I am not contesting the seriousness of the struggle of Palestinians for justice and self-determination, but I am condemning Arab regimes for using Israel as a distraction from their own failures and corruption.

JMC: In this context, the importance you give to the notion of responsibility is, I think, very much connected to the equally important notion, for you, of shared vulnerability. The way you envision responsibility as connected with shared vulnerability is a way for you to move people away from victim identity and victim mentality, is this correct?

AN: Yes, the idea of shared vulnerability is that as human beings we are vulnerable to the same kinds of dangers and risks of disease, poverty, and violence. These are shared vulnerabilities which should give us a common ground to act toward securing ourselves as a global humanity against these vulnerabilities. One of these vulnerabilities could be psychological, a vulnerability toward abdication of responsibility. If you think of public health, for example, of contagious disease, there are many things that we can do for ourselves without calling on the international community to do this, that, or the other. We know that there are many things which are harmful to health and yet we continue to do them, which is what I call a psychological vulnerability toward escaping responsibility. The response should be to confront ourselves with our responsibility by doing what we ourselves can do before asking others to do it for us.

JMC: Your understanding of the connection between responsibility and vulnerability is interesting. In English there is a difference between being tough and being strong. I myself believe that strength is based on recognizing and embracing vulnerabilities and then growing from them and allowing a sense of responsibility to flourish; while being tough is denying vulnerabilities, which is a false sense of strength, and in fact, very often, rejecting a sense of responsibility. It is telling that at the very core of responsibility and

empowerment is the recognition, even the embracing of vulnerabilities not only as an individual but also as humanity.

AN: Exactly. I see that as being local as well as global. There is a phrase I use in *Muslims and Global Justice* about acting locally and thinking globally, but also thinking globally and acting locally. It works both ways. We have to have a global view of things while acting locally, and we also have to have a local understanding and act globally. I see vulnerability as an immediate situation that I can do something about, whether through local action or global action in coordination and solidarity with others. In agreement with your sense of vulnerability as something between tough and strong, I see violence as weakness and peaceful resistance as strength.

JMC: Absolutely. I often say that in every terrorist there is a terrorized person, so the key is to move beyond being terrorized so that one does not feel the need to exercise terror and violence.

AN: If the violent person thinks that his violence demonstrates strength, it is the obligation of the rest of us to confront with evidence to the contrary, to help see how violence is in fact weakness. That is why the question of responsibility is so critical. It is our responsibility to prevent violent actors from achieving their objectives, or attracting favorable attention of young people or the media. It is also our responsibility to show that being just and humane takes more courage than being violent and aggressive. It takes more courage and more strength to be peaceful than to be violent. If on the scale of human values one wants to be strong, one should be peaceful and just, not violent and oppressive.

I think these are some of the challenges that we have to confront each other with within our own communities. For me as a Muslim from Sudan, the fact that we in Northern Sudan have not confronted our own racism, our own violence, our own oppression of other people of the same country are the reasons why we are ending up with a divided country. I take full responsibility as a Muslim from Northern Sudan for my failure in making unity attractive for people of the South. It is not that they made the mistake of choosing secession as their road to self-determination; it is my mistake of failing to make unity with justice and equal citizenship realistic enough for them to want to remain in a united Sudan. If they had no reason to break away they would not have elected to break away. So that is the way I put it: What is my responsibility, what is my failure, and what can I do to fulfill my obligation and recover from my failure? It is never too late to recover, though not in different ways. Both North and South Sudan are facing the same challenges of peaceful relations,

development, democratization, and protection of human rights, and both countries must respond to those challenges in their own context.

JMC: So what you are saying is that political bullies are bullies out of fear. This leads to the next question: How do we find ways to manage fear so that political bullies cease to be structured by fear and to project violence out of fear?

AN: I would not make it easy for them by saying that “we understand you are a bully because you are afraid, and you are not really responsible.” I may understand that to be true, but I would not allow them to escape their share of responsibility. I must put an end to aggression and violations of human rights, and I must stand firm in rejecting violence and injustice. My understanding of the psychology of violence is that it is out of weakness and fear, that violence can be unleashed but my action will be to resist violence immediately. So anything I can do to help the violent person to come to terms with his own fear is in the manner of my response, but not at the expense of acting decisively. For me, human rights are to be respected here and now. Understanding what are the root causes of their violation is part of the process of protecting those rights, but it is not a reason for postponing their immediate realization.

JMC: We should not excuse the behavior of political bullies. While understanding them we should also make it a point to stop them?

AN: Yes, and part of stopping them is understanding where they are coming from, as we take decisive action to stop and prevent them from bullying others. The relevance of understanding is a factor in my strategies of resistance, but I do not concede violence or postpone resisting it out of understanding of the fear of the violent person. It is simply an understanding of the strategy of effective and sustainable response.

JMC: Finally, you recently published What Is an American Muslim? Embracing Faith and Citizenship.⁴ How do the key ideas in the book help us to think better in the context of the recent debates and controversies in the United States over immigration policies and terrorism?

AN: In this book I call on my fellow American Muslims to join all citizens of the United States in contributing to defining our national identity, to draw on its benefits and participate in the obligations of our equally shared citizenship of the country. Instead of passively waiting to be assimilated in the dominant

⁴ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *What Is an American Muslim? Embracing Faith and Citizenship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

preexisting so-called national identity, or expecting others to save us from the loss of our religious and other identities, American Muslims should proactively engage in the formation and transformation of the national identity of the country. Since key aspects of what is commonly called the national identity of the country have significantly changed and continue to change and evolve, American Muslims have the right and obligation to contribute to these processes. As I illustrate in [chapter 2](#) of this book, by briefly discussing the experiences of Catholic, Jewish, and Mormon communities, American Muslims are not the first or only religious community to face prejudice and exclusion in the United States. In the rest of the book I also highlight ways in which American Muslims can draw upon the experiences of those and other communities in affirming equal citizenship without surrendering their distinctive identities. I am also calling on my fellow American Muslims not to think of themselves as a “minority” in the country because that is not true even if we define ourselves in exclusively religious terms, in view of the significant diversity of religious belief and practice among American Muslims. In contrast, it is both factually true and strategically useful for American Muslims to appreciate and cultivate the many ways in which we share with the rest of the population of the United States our political, cultural, educational, employment, and other formations of identity. Yet, if we think of ourselves as a minority, we will be treated by others as if that is true. Even if we are perceived and treated by others as a minority, we can still exercise our human agency to break away from such negative characterization and stereotyping.

In my view, the dialectic ideas and strategies for negotiating the relationship between religious (racial, ethnic, cultural, etc.) identity and citizenship I applied to the case of American Muslims in this book can be useful for other American communities, and be adapted to other similar situations around the world. The key factor in such deliberations and responses to marginalization and exclusion is the assertion of the agency of the human subject to participate in the process of self-liberation. Just to be clear on this point, there is no role for violence in the proposed strategies, simply because it tends to serve the interests of dominant privileged elites at the expense of marginalized communities. At the same time, the proposed strategies should empower marginalized communities to advance their peaceful demands for social justice and individual freedom.

Finally, it may be relevant to note here that I am currently writing a book manuscript under the working title: “Decolonizing Human Rights: From State-Centric Legality to People-Centered Practice.” The core thesis of this manuscript is that the human rights paradigm has been colonized by liberal

values and institutions, to the exclusion of serious consideration of the cultural values and institutions of the rest of humanity, thereby repudiating the universality of human rights. As a consequence of this liberal perspective, sovereign states are supposed to be the sole bearers of human rights obligations and exclusive protectors of those rights within their own territories. Paradoxically, this means that national courts and institutions can only protect the civil rights of citizens and resident aliens, and not the rights of human beings as such. To break out of this deadlock, I am calling for local cultural transformation to uphold human rights values through political mobilization. In other words, there is a positive role for the state to play, but that role should be founded on local cultural values and monitored through grassroots political mobilization.

More specifically, the proposed people-centered practice does not delay or prevent the protection of human rights by states simply because there is no protection of human rights (as the rights of the human as such) by any state anywhere in the world. Whatever rights are protected by any state are the rights of citizens and lawful residents, not the rights of the human being regardless of such conditions of membership or qualification. In other words, the book manuscript I am writing proposes a possibility of protection of the rights of the human being as such, instead of waiting in vain for protection of the rights of the human by the state. Whatever the perceived limitations of the rights of the human as such in local practice, they are to be redressed through cultural transformation and political mobilization, instead of expectations of the illusory promise of legal remedies.

JMC: As a way to end our conversation, a last question: What is your advice to young scholars starting to work in the field of justice?

AN: My primary suggestion to the young generation of Muslims everywhere is to assume immediate responsibility for change in their own communities, while benefiting from the incremental nature of social evolution. On the first count, I would recall the point I made earlier about human agency and responsibility. Nothing happens without the agency of human beings, and whatever is negative about what is happening, it is people who can change it for the better. On the second count, young people should not despair because of the apparent magnitude of the problems facing their societies and immediate communities. Positive change begins with where we are, what we already do, by planning and acting to enhance what is good and redress what is negative. In the final analysis, only we can honor or shame ourselves by our action or failure to act, regardless of what others think of us.