

Theoretical Perspectives on Islam and Communication

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Abstract: This article problematizes Western biases and practices in the current system and structure of mass communication as they relate to the Islamic world. It calls for the need of a professional association of Muslim journalists that aims to set ethical criteria for news reporting, protect the rights of individual local journalists, and promote education and training of young people who represent a major source of human resources for Islamic culture and civilization. The article then discusses five cardinal concepts of the Islamic worldview that could serve as the fundamental principles of communication ethics for such a network of Muslim journalists: (1) *tawhid*, (2) *amr bi al-ma'ruf wa nahy'an al munkar*, (3) *ummah*, (4) *taqwa*, and (5) *amanat*. By and large, Muslim societies have not responded positively to communication ethics coming from outside their own culture. Nor in the post-colonial Muslim world has the communication system acquired from the West gained a broad popular base. Throughout the Islamic history, information has been not a commodity but a moral imperative. From an Islamic perspective, therefore, this article concludes that linguistic and political vocabularies and concepts, now at the center of global politics, both celebrate the arrival of a new communication age and hold the key to ultimate information control. [China Media Research. 2007; 3(4): 23-33]

Keywords: *Amanat*, *amr bi al-ma'ruf wa nahy'an al munkar*, communication ethics, Islam, propaganda, propagation, social communication, *taqwa*, *tawhid*, *ummah*

Introduction

A number of studies on international communication over the last several decades reveal two essential characteristics. One is the ethnocentric orientation of mass communication systems of the highly developed and industrialized nations, and the second is the "asymmetric" circulation of information in the world. These two characteristics dominate the world mass media system and indeed are responsible for uneven treatment of events, imbalances in news and information, and also the unequal distribution of power in the world system.

It is precisely here that a need for professional code of ethics among Muslim journalists around the world seems imperative, and their creation of a network of professional world associations both timely and inevitable. The fact that until now there have been almost no such associations at the international level illustrates the low priority given to information and news among and between the Islamic countries. It also indicates a century-long inattention to the lack of growth in media organizations which is, in part, a consequence of decades of repression, colonialism, and government control.

From the Islamic Revolution in Iran to the occupation of Afghanistan by the former Soviet Union, from the Persian Gulf War to the American invasion of Iraq, the last two decades have witnessed profound and worldwide revolutionary movements of an Islamic nature as well as systematic and continuous conflicts which have embraced Muslim lands. The developments in the Islamic world not only have been reported during this period with a good deal of bias, distortion, and

ethnocentrism by non-Muslim media but also the great portion of what has been reported has been provided mainly by the Western media and journalists.

Research shows that 99 percent of world events do not come to the attention of readers simply because they are eliminated and considered as unimportant or irrelevant by the media. The Islamic world, in particular, has been on the receiving end of a good share of this *modus operandi*. For example, consider six levels of the so-called common selections of news in mass communication: (1) sources of production of information and news; (2) journalists and correspondents; (3) central offices of news agencies; (4) local newspapers and editorial offices; (5) mass media editors, and finally (6) recipients, meaning readers or viewers. It has been reported empirically that 98 percent of news and information is eliminated in the second through the sixth levels with 92 percent elimination from the second through the fifth, not to mention the elimination resulting from the process of selectivity on the part of readers and viewers. This Darwinian law of selectivity, once translated and applied to events and developments in the Islamic world (which constitutes one-fourth of the world's population), can indeed have enormous impact on individual and collective perceptions about Islam and its followers. The crucial question is not how strongly the control is exercised but, instead, by whom, under what conditions, and for what purpose.

A Call for a World Organization of Muslim Journalists

A cursory look at the list of existing media and journalist associations around the world quickly shows

how the media are organized and mobilized on the basis of nationality, regionalism, ethnicity, and even religious premises and are among the most active nongovernmental organizations around the world. Yet, remarkably, today, there are no professional associations of Islamic journalists which can set professional and ethical criteria for news reporting, protect the rights of individual Muslim journalists, and promote education and training of young men and women who represent a major source of human resources for Islamic culture and civilization.

Why is it important for Islamic journalists to have a network of associations binding their professional mission? The answer lies in the very core of Islamic political culture, for Islam is not only a religion but also a total way of life for millions of people around the world. Unlike other major cultural systems, Islam transcends geographical as well as racial and ethnic boundaries and strives for universality of human kind. In short, the socio-cultural elements inherent in and among the Islamic community, *ummah*, provide a common ground and outline a necessity for the type of news reporting that is vital to understanding events in the world community. Such a network of Muslim journalist and media associations and professional organizations also can play an important role as vanguards and promoters of professional aims within the existing systems of international organizations. A network of professional associations, thus, not only can enhance the exchange of information among and between various geographical areas known as the Islamic world but also can stimulate the ongoing mobilization of journalists and their common interests.

What should be the tenets underlying the formation and the mobilization of such networks of associations? It must be recalled that news values in the Islamic world differ considerably from the general news values in the non-Islamic world and, more specifically, the West. For example, take the concept of so-called “hard news” common in the Western media with its “five Ws” syndrome of “what, when, where, why, and who” which is promoted as universal. The real problem is that the recipient of such five Ws news never is allowed to conceive of news as a whole but only in fragments because the structure of the whole is at odds with what is considered “hard facts.” The priorities given to news values in the West, such as human interests, proximity, novelty, consequence, and prominence, are totally different from those valued in Islamic contexts.

For example, the notion of proximity in the Western media primarily is a geographical as well as spatial concept. To apply this concept, in its orthodox sense, to the Islamic world would eliminate news coming from distant places such as Indonesia, China, Africa, or Latin America when the media and its audiences are located somewhere in the United States or

the Middle East. Proximity in an Islamic context is neither geographical nor spatial but rather cultural—that is to say, events of the Islamic community of *ummah* are and must be relevant to the entire Muslim world regardless of nationalities and countries. The factors of human interest or prominence are by themselves not adequate justification for reporting of news in the Islamic context. News and information for the *ummah* are social commodities and not cultural industries.

One of the disadvantages arising from Western reporting of the contemporary Islamic world is that news of both cooperative and conflict-filled natures are treated not in an Islamic context but in the generic journalistic culture over decades in Europe and the United States. Thus, a major result is incomplete presentation, if not actual and chronic misrepresentation, of events in the Islamic world as they occur. This reductive refinement of the concept of information and news has been a gradual process extending over several decades and, indeed, has been responsible for a good deal of misperceptions and even bias. This, in itself, has provided a kind of journalistic “fundamentalism,” which claims universalism, under which such issues as “Islamic fundamentalism” are unfairly lumped.

In a changing and volatile world—where values and ideas are constantly in transition and where internal and external events of nations are becoming more unpredictable leading to profound political, economic, and cultural transformation—Muslim journalists around the globe must define their own informational and cultural territories as well as their own professional and ethical standards. One of the weaknesses in the world of Islamic media is the fact that there is a low level of participation of either individuals or associations in regional and international gatherings and conferences. Correspondingly, the power of the West—that is to say, the European and American journalists and media—resides in the fact that they are systematic and constant participants in a variety of international conferences, symposia, seminars, as well as international and regional organizations. It is through this process of participation as well as professional acculturation that individuals can hope to contribute to the process of decision-making as well as learn how to influence the agenda of international organizations.

This is well illustrated by an example from the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991. During this international political crises, journalists and correspondents from the major Islamic countries opposing the intervention of the United States and the coalition forces not only were not allowed to be part of the news pool or to cover the countries involved in the war but also the stream of information coming from the war front was controlled and manipulated either by the governments involved or the Western news sources. The existence of a strong professional association of Muslim

journalists would have made a definite difference in that it could have exerted pressure collectively to obtain at least part of the privileges extended to other groups and have voiced their grievances on professional and institutional levels for all the world to hear. Additionally, on the “home front,” the existence of such Islamic professional journalistic associations could give proper recognition to the coverage of such events as the annual *hajj* (pilgrimage) as a major religio-political and socio-cultural occurrence to counteract its trivialization through non-Muslim media channels.

An underlying premise of such a network of professional associations is the Islamic world view which considers news and information as a process of distribution of knowledge. In short, from the Islamic perspective, mass media organizations as well as their personnel are engaged in a delicate stage centering around both the production and distribution of knowledge. This is because facts by themselves do not have meaning in Islam but, once placed in a proper Islamic social structure, constitute information leading to knowledge.

A number of concepts comprising the world view of Islam could be the information and social basis of such a network of journalists. They include among others the concept of *tawhid* (unity of God), the concept of *ilm* (knowledge), the meaning of *taqwa* (fear of God), the process of *adl* (justice), the notion of *ijma* (consensus), *shura* (consultation), the doctrine of *amanat* (public interest), and last but not least the *ummah* (the larger Islamic community).

Definition of Terms

A social system is a process of interaction of individuals within a larger unit called society, which exhibits the property that Ibn Khaldun, an Islamic thinker, called solidarity (*assabieh*), a term also employed later by Durkheim in his works. A social system is not the value itself, but a system of values and actions of individuals which are associated in terms of symbolic meaning. On the other hand, values are instruments of maintaining the cultural integrity and cohesion of society, serving to legitimize the modes of more concrete actions (Kroeber & Parsons, 1958). Here, we are concerned with the question of cultural systems and how they interact with problems of conceptualization, theorization, and practices of information and communication. What impact do cultural settings have on the studies of communication? What communication theories and practices do they foster?

The Islamic world consists of a vast and diverse geo-political area stretching from Indonesia and the Pacific Ocean in the east to Morocco and the Atlantic coast in the west, from central Asia and the Himalayas in the north to the southern African nations and the

Indian Ocean. As one of the major religions of the world, Islam encompasses one quarter of the world’s population—over a billion people. From the death of the Prophet (SAAS) (572-632 A.D.) and the period of the first four Caliphs (632-661 A.D.), to the end of World War I and the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the Islamic community has been a major world power. In the context of decolonization and increasing numbers of sovereign nation-states, the Islamic world politically, economically, and often culturally began to integrate into the existing sphere of the Western-dominated modern world system. The contacts between the Islamic world and the West in the 19th and 20th centuries increased the absorption of many Islamic countries into quasi-secular political entities ranging from hereditary monarchies to modern Western and/or military style republics. This also resulted in pronounced conflicts between modern secularism and the Islamic tradition of *al shari’a*, the canonical law of Islam.

In order to understand the current journalism practices in the Islamic world and to assess its future directions, it is necessary to examine a number of the fundamental principles upon which the Islamic communication framework has been built, and how the Islamic societies have come under constraints as a result of global political, economic, and cultural developments over the last century. The central foci of analysis will be on the fundamental principles of Islamic ethical methods in communication and on the objectives and aims of social communication. I use the term *social communication* here in its broader sense to include all kinds of communication, including journalism and mass communication, in an Islamic context. This understanding should help clarify the function of some of the modern institutions of communication in contemporary Islamic societies.

A distinction should be made between the Islamic term of social communication or *tabligh* (propagation) and the general concepts of communication, journalism, propaganda, and agitation commonly used in contemporary literature. The word *communication* comes from the Latin *communico*, meaning “share,” and it is essentially a social process referring to the act of imparting, conveying, or exchanging ideas, knowledge, or information. It is a process of access or means of access between two or more persons or places. Also implicit and explicit in this definition is a notion of some degree of trust, without which communication cannot take place. In its reductive approach (mathematical, technical, and some scientific analysis), communication is associated with the concept of information linking the process with chance events and various possible outcomes. This “atomic” view gives emphasis to quantitative and linear aspects of the process and not to its cultural and cognitive meanings (e.g., Cherry, 1961; Kirschenmann, 1970; Shannon &

Weaver, 1961; Wiener, 1961, 1967). Journalism, as defined in the West, is the collection, writing, editing, and publishing of news or news articles, opinions, and commentaries through newspapers, magazines, broadcasting, and other modern media.

The term *propaganda* is a Western concept and was used for the first time by a committee of Cardinals (founded in 1622 by Pope Gregory) of the Roman Catholic Church having the care and oversight of foreign missions. Propaganda comes from the Latin word *propagare* and originally meant propagating the gospel and establishing the Church in non-Christian countries. The contemporary usage of the term *propaganda* in its political, sociological, and commercial contexts, however, dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. Since World War I, its definition has evolved to connote an instrument of persuasion and manipulation of individuals and collective behavior in national and international scenes (e.g., Lasswell, Lerner & Speier, 1980).¹

Thus, according to French sociologist Jacques Ellul (1965), “propaganda is a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its action of a mass of individuals psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization” (p. 61). In a somewhat similar fashion, Harold D. Lasswell (1942) has defined propaganda as “the manipulation of symbols as a means of influencing attitudes on controversial matters” (p. 106). This follows the common definition of propaganda as spreading ideology, doctrine, or ideas, and of agitation as an instrument for arousing people to spontaneous action. The Communist position on propaganda and agitation differs methodologically from that of Lasswell. As defined by Vladimir I. Lenin (1935-1939), “A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; an agitator presents only one or a few ideas, but he presents them to a mass of people” (p. 85).

Note that contemporary propagandists, therefore, do not need to be believers in an ideology or a doctrine. Here propagandists are people in the service of the State, the party, the political or commercial campaign, or any other organization that is ready to use their expertise. Propagandists are technicians, bureaucrats, and specialists who may eventually come to despise the ideology itself.

Propagation, on the other hand, is dissemination and diffusion of some principle, belief, or practice. The Islamic word for propagation, *tabligh*, means the increase or spread of a belief by natural reproduction; it is an extension in space and time. It is the action of branching out. Social communication, journalism, and *tabligh* in an Islamic context have an ethical boundary and a set of guiding principles. In a broader sense, *tabligh* is a theory of communication and ethics. This

theory of communication and global community integration is well stated by Ibn Khaldun (1967) in *The Muqaddimah (An Introduction to History)*. Here he cites “truthful propagation” (*tabligh*) and group cohesion (*assabieh*) as two fundamental factors in the rise of world powers as States and large communities (Ibn Khaldun, 1336/1957, pp. 301-316, 1967, pp. 123-127). Thus journalism as a production, gathering, and dissemination of information, news, and opinion is an extension of *tabligh* in its broadest sense.

Communication and Ethics: Their Boundaries and Frontiers

A study of social communication in Islamic society in the early days and certainly before the rise of the modern nation-state system has a unique element to it (Mutahhari, 1361/1982, 1977). This was because it was rooted in oral and social traditions and the notion of *ummah* or greater Islamic community. Also the geographical entities now called Islamic countries were not heavily influenced by Western methods, conducts, and regimes in conflict with the major tenets of Islam. With the exception of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is founded on the Islamic notion of the state, the remaining Islamic countries have state systems which are a mixture of the modern and traditional monarchial or republican systems. Thus their legal and ethical codes are heavily influenced by non-Islamic frames of reference. In many current analyses, great confusion arises from the failure to make a distinction between a nation-state and an Islamic state. It should be emphasized that while the nation-state is a *political* state, the Islamic state is a *muttagi* or religio-political and “God fearing” community or state. The ecological terrain of social communication in an Islamic community emphasizes intrapersonal/interpersonal communication over impersonal types, social communication over atomistic communication, and intercultural communication over nationalism.

Moving from the process of social communication to the definition of ethics, it must be emphasized that the boundaries of the study called “ethics” vary from culture to culture. For the purpose of the present study, a method of ethics is defined to mean any rational procedure by which we determine what an individual human being as a person and as a member of a community ought to do as a “right” action by voluntary means. By using the word *individual* as a member of community, this definition does not make a distinction between ethics and politics. From an Islamic perspective, the study and conduct of politics cannot be separated from the methods of ethics; the need is to determine what ought to be and not to analyze what merely is. Consequently, the conception of ethics here essentially deals with the Islamic perceptions of conduct as an inquiry into the nature the unity of God, humankind, and

nature, and the method of attaining it (Mutahhari, 1985).

Since the Enlightenment, the West gradually divorced religion from secular life. Ethical conduct of the everyday life was left to an individual's conscience as long as such actions did not conflict with the perceived public morality. In Islam, this separation of the religious from the secular sphere did not materialize, and, if attempts were made by the late modernizers to do this, the process was never completed. Thus, throughout the Islamic societies not only did religion encompass a person wholly but also it shaped the conduct of the individuals in general through application of Islamic socio-religious ethics. In short, whereas modern ethics in the West became predominately social in nature, in Islamic societies that power remained social as well as religious. As the Quran says: "The noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the best of you in conduct" (49:13). In the Islamic tradition, the word *adab* means discipline of the mind or every praiseworthy conduct by which a person is excelled.

Until the 19th century Islamic canonical law, *al shari'a*, provided the main, if not the complete, legal underpinnings of social and economic conduct in Muslim societies. The intimate contact between Islam and modern Western industrial countries, coupled with the process of colonization of substantial parts of Asia and Africa, introduced a number of Western standards and values to these societies. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, and with the introduction of modern means of communication, transportation, and technologies, the fields of civil and commercial transactions proved particularly prominent for change and new methods of conduct.

The first foothold of European law, criminal and commercial, in the Islamic countries (particularly in the Ottoman empire) was advanced as a result of the systems of Capitulations, which ensured that the European citizens residing in the Middle East and a large part of Africa would not be governed by the Islamic laws and conduct of ethics but by their own laws and traditions. Furthermore, the reform movements such as the Tanzimat in the Ottoman (1839-1876) and the Constitutional reform in Iran (1906-1911) were indeed direct translations of French and other European codes which tended to establish secularism and injected the kinds of rules of conduct that were particularly European. In Egypt that process, from 1875 onward, went even further in the adaptation of European laws in such fields as commerce and maritime, and included the enactment of civil codes which were basically modeled on French laws and contained only a few provisions drawn from *shari'a*.

For example, in the fields of journalism and media practices, many Islamic countries adopted the concepts, norms, and legal codes of the West without considering

the broader notion of laws and ethics in Islam. It should be remembered that the body of Islamic laws and ethics are classified according to a scale of values: obligatory (*vajeb*), recommended (*mostahab*), permitted (*mobah*), disapproved (*makroh*), and prohibited (*haram*). There is unanimity among the various schools of Islamic jurisprudence in such matters as prohibited and obligatory categories and the differences are usually regarding the disapproved or undesirable and recommended categories. This is the difference of degree, which is called *ikhhtlaf*, and not the difference of categories or extremes, which are referred to as *ifragh*. The existence of a unanimous standard is unique to Islamic jurisprudence. The Western study of law and ethics does not fulfill these conditions.

Communication and Ethical Thinking and Practices in Islamic Societies

The current ethical thinking and practices in Islamic societies, especially as they might relate to community, communication, and social interactions, are usually based on two different but important dimensions:

1. Normative religious ethics as explained in the primary source of Islam, the Quran and the traditions (*al-sunna*) of the Prophet and the *Imams*.
2. Normative secular ethics ranging from Greek tradition of popular Platoism, to the Persian tradition of giving advice to sultans and wazirs about government and politics, to the more contemporary ethical frameworks introduced by the West through "modernization," "development," "industrialization," and "secular humanism."

In the first category, the study of ethical principles in the religious tradition dates back to the eighth and ninth centuries during which two lines of argument were developed: the rationalist, those who subscribed to rational opinion, *ra'y*, argued that where there is no clear guidance from the Quran or tradition, the Islamic judges and lawyers might make their own rational judgments on moral and ethical questions. The traditionalist insisted that ethical and moral judgments can be based only on the Quran and tradition. This led to major debates among the various groups, which are well-known in the study of the Mu'tazilites, the Asharis, the Shafi'is, and the Hanbalis, who took different positions on the questions of ethics in classical Islam.

In addition to these varied schools of thought, there is also a strong tradition in the mainstream of Islamic philosophy. This is seen mainly as the contribution of Islamic philosophers on *akhlag* (character) in the works of such philosophers as Farabi (870-950), Ibn Sina or Avicenna (980-1037), and Ibn Rushd or Averroes (1126-98), all of whom have contributed significantly to our knowledge about the sources of mystical as well as Sufi and Hellenic traditions in the classical Islamic

system of ethics.

It was Ibn Khaldun, the father of sociology, however, who theorized about communication as a social institution which grew according to the need of the community. Social communication in terms of *tabligh* provided, for a vast number of people from diverse races, languages, and histories, a common forum for participation in a shared culture which was Islam. According to Ibn Khaldun, the states, governments, and political systems of wide power and large authority have their origin in religious principles based either on prophethood and propagation or on a truthful *tabligh* carried out by *khatibis* (orators/communicators) (Ibn Khaldun, 1336/1957, pp. 310-316, 1967, pp. 125-127). Ibn Khaldun was one of the first thinkers to point out that communication based on ethics is the web of human society and that the flow of such communication determines the direction and the pace of dynamic social development. To him, combinations of the *assabieh* feelings and social communication approach provided a more dynamic view of organizational behavior than can be readily derived from the more conventional concepts of states, of hierarchical position, and of role, which usually had been used in the discussion of politics, government, and large social organization. He thus concluded that propagation cannot materialize without group feeling. The relationship of social communication and Islam, therefore, emerges from the very nature of these two institutions. One is the source of society's values; the other propagates, disseminates, and maintains the value system of society, the *ummah* or community.

In the Islamic tradition of epistemology, the sustained discussion on ethics in Islam has been discussed in the *kalam* literature, the theologian's discussion and debate on the sources of right. Following is an outline of a number of fundamental Islamic concepts that have been the basis of Islamic communication ethics and sense of community, and should be at the heart of any journalistic ethics and duties of Muslim journalists. These concepts are the sources of much of the contemporary social, political, and economic debates in the Muslim world, especially in regard to normative secular ethics and in relation to the influences and values coming from the West and the non-Islamic traditions.

The Theory of *Tawhid*

The first and most fundamental outlook regarding man and universe in Islam is the theory of *tawhid*, which implies the unity, coherence, and harmony between all parts of the universe. Thus, one of the most basic ethical pillars of the Islamic world is born: the existence of purpose in the creation, and the liberation and freedom of humankind from bondage and servitude to multiple varieties of non-Gods. It stands for the

necessity of exclusive servitude to God, and it negates any communication and messages, intellectual, cultural, economic, or political, that subjugates humankind to creatures. The principle of *tawhid* also negates any right of sovereignty and guardianship of anyone over human society except God. Society can be expected to be free from all deviations and excesses only when the affairs of society are delegated by a Power Transcendental to an individual or a council of rulers, with a power commensurate with responsibilities within the Islamic legal framework.

Thus, all man-made laws and ethical codes that arrogate judgment to themselves, or to any authority or institution other than in obedience or enforcement of "Allah's Own Judgment," are void. Therefore, all man-made laws, communication contents, mass media, and public forums that attempt to put restraints upon Allah's sovereignty must be void. The concept of *tawhid*, if exercised, provides the principal guide in drawing the boundaries of political, social, and cultural legitimation by a given communication system. The content of *tabligh* must not be in the direction to create and perpetuate political, social, economic, and cultural idols; nor are they allowed under this principle to promote the cult of personality.

Under the principle of *tawhid*, another fundamental ethical consideration in *tabligh* becomes clear: the destruction of thought structures based on dualism, racialism, tribalism, and familial superiority. The function of communication order in Islamic society, according to the principle, is to break idols, to break the dependence on the outsiders, and to set the *ummah* or community in motion toward the future. Thus, one of the important functions of *tabligh* is to destroy myths. In our contemporary world, these myths may include "power," "progress," and "modernization." Personalities as they represent these must not be superhumanized and superdefined. One of these dualism, according to this principle, is the secular notion of the separation of religion and politics.

The principle of *tawhid* also requires the absence of any economic, political, intellectual, or other centers, including the media, in which power can be amassed. The freedom of expression, assembly, and that of the media of communication do not have meaning when there is no social accountability on the part of the individual and institutions. The fight against the cult of personality and that of any social institutions associated with it is the fight against the communication system which attempts to propagate it.

Additional consideration under the ethical framework of *tawhid* is to campaign against the material foundations of dualism. Since among the characteristics of dualism is a desire for superiority through wealth, the content of journalism and social communication must not stress the value of wealth over spiritual growth and

elimination of dividing lines and forms.

The Doctrine of Responsibility, Guidance, and Action

A second principle guiding the ethical boundaries of *tabligh* in Islam is the doctrine of *amr bi al-ma'ruf wa nahy'an al munkar* or "commanding to the right and prohibiting from the wrong." Implicit and explicit in this principle is the notion of individual and group responsibility for preparing the succeeding generation to accept the Islamic precepts and make use of them. Muslims have the responsibility of guiding one another, and each generation has the responsibility of guiding the next. The Quranic verse explains this: "Call people to the path of your Lord with wisdom and mild exhortation. Reason with them in the most courteous manner. Your Lord best knows those who stray from His path and best knows those who are rightly guided" (16:125). This points out the responsibilities of Muslims in guiding each other, especially those individuals and institutions who are charged with the responsibilities of leadership and propagation of Islamic ideals. This includes all the institutions of social communication such as the press, radio, television, and cinema, as well as the individual citizens of each community.

Thus, a special concept of social responsibility theory is designed around the ethical doctrine of "commanding to the right and prohibiting from the wrong." This concept has taken on an extra dimension of its own in the Islamic communities and societies through history since Islam as an all-inclusive systematic religion is an interrelated set of ideas and realities covering the entire area of human notion and action, beliefs and practices, thought, word, and deed. This is particularly important in light of the fact that Islam is not only a set of theological propositions, as are many other religions, but is also a set of comprehensive legal frameworks that govern every action of the individual in society and in the world at large.

For example, on the social and collective level, the doctrine has been practiced systematically in the mosque in the Islamic societies. The mosque as a major channel of social and public communication has always been a pivot of spiritual and cultural movements since the days of the Prophet. It has fulfilled not only the role of purification of the soul but also the acquisition of knowledge and public affairs information. Mosques and major universities existed side by side or within one another for many years in Egypt, Iran, Spain, and many parts of central Asia and other Islamic areas. In fact, many mosques were the centers of higher education in the Islamic tradition. Today, in a number of Islamic societies, the systems of "mass communication" have been well integrated within the classical and traditional systems of social communication of the mosque, especially the Friday prayers (Mowlana, 1979, 1985).²

The result has been a high level of organization and mobilization, making the process of political, cultural, economic, and military participation extremely effective.

It is here that the concept of martyrdom (*shahadat*) in Islam and the concept of Holy Struggle (*jihad*) may only be understood if the doctrine of enjoying good and forbidding evil outlined here is properly appreciated. The term *Islam* is derived from the Arabic root *salama*, meaning surrender and peace or peaceful submission to the Will of Allah. Thus, the concept of martyrdom, like all other Islamic concepts, is fully related to the concept of *tawhid*, or the absolute unity of God, humankind, and universe. In this sense, under the social responsibility theory of "commanding to the right and prohibiting from the wrong," the concept of *jihad* is no exception. Thus, from an Islamic perspective and ethical framework, martyrdom and struggle cannot be explained purely in terms of intercession and mediation; they should be understood within the framework of the principle of causality and not solely as spiritual mediation. In short, according to Islam, there is no martyrdom without struggle and *tabligh* in the course of Allah.

The Concept of Community

A third fundamental concept in determining the nature and boundaries of *tabligh* and that of social ethics, particularly as it might relate to the political life of the individual and Islamic society, is *ummah* or community. The concept of *ummah* transcends national borders and political boundaries. Islamic community transcends the notion of the modern nation-state system: an Islamic community is a religio-economic concept and is only present when it is nourished and governed by Islam. The notion of community in Islam makes no sharp distinction between public and private; therefore, what is required of the community at large is likewise required of every individual member. Accordingly, the *ummah* must be exemplary, setting the highest standards of performance and the reference point for others. It must avoid excesses and extravagances, be steadfast and consistent, know what to accept and what to reject, have principles, and, at the same time, remain adaptable to the changing aspect of human life.

Under the concept of *ummah*, race is not accepted as a foundation of the state. Values follow piety and the social system of Islam is based on equity, justice, and ownership of the people. There is no individual or class of individuals to dominate, exploit, or corrupt the state. Intercultural and international communication (the emphasis here is on nationality and not the nation-state) are the necessary ingredients of Islamic *ummah*. The Quran says: ". . . We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in

the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you” (Sura 49, 13).

In the Islamic *ummah*, the sovereignty of the “state” belongs to God, and not to the ruler nor even to the people themselves. The ruler or leaders are only acting executives chosen by the people to serve them according to the Law of Islam and the concept of *tawhid*. Every citizen in the Islamic “state” is required to offer his best advice on common matters and must be entitled to do so. Thus, consultative methods in politics are not only recognized but are a moral and ethical duty of the people and the ruler. Furthermore, man, according to Islam, possesses liberty and free will, so that by intervening in the operation of the norms of society, and by manipulating them creatively in accordance with the Quran and tradition, he may plan and lay foundations for a better future for both the individual and society.

Under the *ummah*, Islam has a new concept of community. One of the most important aspects of *ummah* is that Islam does not differentiate between the individuals as members of its community. Race, ethnicity, tribalism, nationalism, have no place to distinguish one member of the community from the rest. Nationalities, cultural differences, and geographical factors are recognized, but domination based on nationality is rejected. It is the individual and its relations to the community that is valued; however, this relationship alone is not the sole purpose in itself, both the individual and society must make their relationship clear to God: Are the individuals in society against God or under God? *Ummah*, as a social organization, emphasizes communality and collectivity based on Islamic tenets and not inter-individualism. The social contract, which becomes the basis of *ummah*, is not based on free will of undefined choice but subject to higher norms: the will of Allah. Communal cohesion is based on divine rights and not on natural rights. The term theocracy, often cited in the West, thus, cannot apply to the Islamic community since the notion of church as an institution is foreign to Islam, which as a religion combines both spiritual and temporal powers. It is an ideology possessing no centralized body, yet its monotheism implies a single global order advocating the universality of moral principles. The *ummah* is beyond the nation-state in that the notion of community in Islam cannot be compared to the stage series of societal development found in Western community histories—principally that of an independent and an incorporated “political community” or “military community.”

Modernization movements in Islamic societies over the last 100 years failed in part because they were unable to elaborate a coherent doctrine based on the unity of spiritual and temporal powers, the interconnection of what is known as civil society and the state. Islamic “reformism,” despite its idealistic

unity, failed to take into account the multidimensional aspects of the society, which was the *ummah*. Instead, its political culture, its mode of mobilization, and its administrative framework became ingrained in the concept of the modern nation-state system and its bureaucracy. Attempts were made to shift the models but not the dominant paradigm, which stood in contrast to the meaning of the *ummah* (Chay, 1990; Mattelart, 1990; Mowlana & Wilson, 1990; Said, 1978; Schiller, 1990; Shari-ati, 1980; Smythe, 1981; Tran, 1987; Walker, 1984).

It is in this political, spiritual, and ethical framework that journalism must play a pervasive role in preservation and maintenance of the unity of the Islamic community. Thus, communication on both interpersonal and social levels becomes both basic and vital to the functioning of the *ummah*, for it sustains and encourages the integral and harmonious relationship between God, the individual, and society.

The Principle of *Taqwa*

A fourth principle outlined here to explain the ethical framework of journalism in Islamic societies is the concept of *taqwa* or, roughly translated, piety. In Islamic societies, *taqwa* is commonly used in reference to individual “fear of God” and the ability to guard oneself against the unethical forces which might surrender the environment; however, the concept of *taqwa* goes beyond this common notion of piety. It is the individual, spiritual, moral, ethical, and psychological capacity to raise oneself to that higher level, which makes a person almost immune from the excessive material desires of the world, elevating the individual to a higher level of prophetic self-consciousness.

The assumption is that human beings possess in their nature a set of divine elements which are other than the material constituents that exist in animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Human beings are endowed with innate greatness and dignity. Recognizing that freedom of choice is a condition for the fulfillment of obligation, the person is held responsible to perform his or her obligations within the Islamic framework of ethics. In short, it is recognized that human beings perform some of their actions only under the influence of a series of ethical emotions rather than with an intention of gaining a benefit or of repelling a harm. Thus, as a virtue and as an important element in the ethical framework of Islamic communication both on the individual and community levels, *taqwa* should be the underpinning ingredient in almost every action of a Muslim.

For example, fasting is an institution which has been practiced by different peoples in different times and places. In modern times, fasting has taken the two extreme forms of either ritualism and hunger strikes or

dieting. Islamic fasting, however, is different in the sense that if it does not emanate from and lead to *taqwa*, it cannot be regarded as fasting. The Quran says: "O, you believers and faithful, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you in order that you may develop *taqwa* (piety)" (2:183). On the leadership level of the *ummah* and community, it is the high level of *taqwa* that must be valued and counted the most. Technical knowledge, managerial ability, scientific know-how, communication skills, etc., if not associated with *taqwa*, cannot and should not be the sole criteria for promotion in an Islamic context. In the Islamic tradition, the conduct of politics and journalism is associated with *taqwa* and those who do not possess a degree of *taqwa* have faced the crisis of legitimacy.

The Meaning of Amanat

The fifth and final principle outlined in this article is the concept of *Amanat*. The term *Amanat* signifies great responsibility which the Almighty God has imposed on the human being for his or her deeds in this world. The most relevant view of this concept as it may apply to the conduct of the press and the media is that *Amanat* refers to Divine Vicegerency for which human beings alone are fit, and none else can share this honor with him. The Holy Quran says: "Surely, we offered the *Amanat* into the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they refused to hear it and were afraid of it, and man took it up. Verily, he (human beings) was unjust, and ignorant" (xxxiii: 72).

Thus, human beings fitness for Divine Vicegerance is lower, conditioned by the fact that he or she must practice the lofty code morality which brings him or her to the supreme being. Of all the created beings, human beings are certainly the best and noblest (Ashraf-ul-makhlughat). Here, it may be noted that rights and obligations are interdependent. Serving the public interest, therefore, becomes one of the principal ethical duties of the media.

Amanat means obligatory duties (faraiz). One aspect of *amanat* is that it can only be given to one who has the capability and power to shoulder the burden of its responsibilities and fulfill the commandments of Allah. Thus, in Islam, real progress of moral and not just material, for the latter refers to the transitory things of life. The liberty in Islam has quite a different meaning from that understood in the West. It is neither a prerogative nor an absolute right of the individual.

Conclusion

An attempt to evaluate the Islamic implications of our knowledge of the dynamics of communication ecology has been made here. A number of concepts have been introduced and examined in order to understand the phenomenon of communication and ethics in an Islamic context. It was shown that Muslim

thinkers and philosophers throughout history not only recognized the importance of communication and ethics in determining the cultural profile of the Islamic civilization but also regarded the propitious equilibrium of spatial and temporal biases in Islam as an established fact. Over the last century, however, and especially during the last four decades, a dualism and contradiction have been created within the Islamic countries as a result of the introduction of the secular nationalist framework and the accompanying new concepts and methods of communication and ethics. A crisis of legitimacy has been created as a result of a conflict between the "official culture" of the ruling elites, which in many cases now represents and promotes Western influence, and the "traditional Islamic culture" of the masses rooted in centuries of religio-political and socio-ethical experience.

Nowhere is this communication and ethical conflict better illustrated than in the structure and use of the means of communication at the disposal of both cultures. The overwhelming evidence suggests that Muslim societies have, by and large, not responded positively to modern communication ethics coming from outside their own culture; nor in the post-colonial Muslim world has the political and communication system acquired from the West gained a broad popular base. On the contrary, such political and communication systems have become increasingly authoritarian, dictatorial, and military. Thus, as stated earlier, in Muslim societies today there exist two competing and mutually exclusive ethical methods and frameworks: the imported political culture of the ruling classes, and the indigenous political culture of the Muslim masses.

A look at the pre-modernist reform movements of the 18th and 19th centuries, which swept over a large part of the Muslim world, might offer some lessons. These movements were generated from the heart of the Islamic world itself and were directed toward correcting social evils and raising the moral standards of the community. Such movements appealed to the Muslims to awaken and liberate themselves from Western economic, political, military, and cultural domination, and to carry out the necessary internal reforms that would make for ethical and moral regeneration and strength. It would be a mistake to consider these movements as being primarily the result of Western influence on the Muslim world. All of these movements, without exception, emphasized a return to the tradition and ethics of Islam.³ The current movements in the Islamic world are simply a continuation of the pre-modernist movements which tried to resolve contradictions created by exogenous forces.

Here, the central question is not one of economics but of culture, ethics, and *tabligh*. It is in this context that contemporary movements in the Islamic lands must be studied and understood. The question which Muslims

have to answer, therefore, is how best to devise structural changes and institutional setups that would help to maintain the precious communication and ethical balance which has been traditionally part of the Islamic civilization.

As I have outlined elsewhere, the crucial question for the Islamic societies is whether the emerging global information communication community is a moral and ethical community or just another stage in the unfolding pictures of the transformation in which the West is the center and the Islamic world the periphery. Throughout Islamic history, especially in the early centuries, information was not a commodity but a moral and ethical imperative. Thus, through an Islamic perspective, it seems that linguistic and political vocabularies and concepts, now at the center of global politics, both celebrate the arrival of a new communication age and hold the key to ultimate information control.

Notes:

1. See Harold D. Lasswell, Daniel Lerner, and Hans Speier (1980) who edited *Propaganda and Communication in World History*. Three volumes were published by the University of Hawai'i Press. The first volume deals with "The Symbolic Instrument in Early Times," while the second volume concerns the "Emergence of Public Opinion in the West." The third volume deals with the contemporary world situation.
2. For a review of global information and international communication, see Mowlana (1986, 1988).
3. See *Sahifeh Noor: Majmoe Rahnemood ha'i Imam Khomeini, 18 Volumes (1361-1365)*. For a comparative view of journalism and media ethics, see Cooper, with Christians, Plude, and White (1989), Schlesinger and Mowlana (1993), Mowlana (1994, 1996), Christians, Ferre, and Fackler (1993), and Merrill (1997).

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