

Cultural Dimensions

INTRODUCTION

Today, religious worldviews have been studied from many different angles and different perspectives. Academic disciplines such as religious studies, scriptural studies, theology, sociology, psychology and anthropology have shed much light on the various religions of the world and the different impacts they have had on humans individually and collectively. Different perspectives have analysed the human religious propensity. Some have reduced the religious to sociological, psychological or neurological phenomena, which serves to give certain insight yet ultimately explains it away. Academic disciplines long dominated by secular perspectives, such as sociology and psychology, have contributed tremendous understanding into the nature of religion yet so often reject the reality to which it points (Ammerman 2002; Bailey 2001; Dawes 2003; Ensign 2002; McIntire 2007; Smith 2001; Segal 1994). The binaries “faith and reason”, “rational and irrational” and even “science and religion”, when applied in the popular mind to religion versus non-religion, often reflect false dichotomies that reduce the religion of thoughtful adherents to something even they would reject. This chapter seeks to explain (describe) an Islamic worldview, using insights gained from many different disciplines, yet will not explain it away. It seeks to enrich an understanding of an Islamic worldview as it probes it in a number of different dimensions.

The framework used in this chapter is based largely on the pioneering work of Ninian Smart (Smart 1983). Rather than approaching worldviews from a theological or philosophical perspective, he focused on matters such as myths, stories, teaching, rituals and more. He recognized certain common structures or parallels in various religious and even secular worldviews. His approach to the study of religious and secular worldviews reveals that while humans can be so vastly different in what they believe and do, there are nonetheless striking similarities in the way in which their beliefs and actions are framed. He believed that all worldviews have similar structures—myths, teachings and rituals—even if the content of those structures is different, and in some cases radically different. The content of these structures is often given particular shape by the culture in which the worldviews are embedded. A great insight can be gained by examining how beliefs and behaviours are given certain shape by the contexts in which they emerge. Smart termed his approach a cultural dimensions approach.

Some time ago, Max Weber famously stated that reason and science would lead to a disenchantment of the world (Weber 2004). When reason and science are implemented, he believed, much of religion will become implausible. Belief in God or gods, Divine miracles and sacred stories will no longer be believable. Scientific discoveries, and largely those of evolutionary science, will hold as untenable much of what sacred scriptures convey. Weber and others believed the sky had become empty. Weber feared, however, that with the disenchantment of the world, humans would confront an “iron cage”, a world of rationalization, dehumanization and bureaucratic efficiency (Weber 2010).

While rationalism and bureaucracy have certainly overtaken our lives, it is not clear that the world has become disenchanted. Peter Berger speaks of a re-enchantment of the world, and sociologists now recognize that the secularization theory that predicted the demise of religion failed to materialize. Religion has seen a resurgence in many parts of the world, and a surprising resilience in places like China and Russia where it faced some of its severest persecutions in the twentieth century (Garrard and Garrard 2007; Aikman 2003; Huntington 2011; Armstrong 2001). The twenty-first century will become a global public square of many worldviews, religious and secular, where understanding and dialogue become essential.

Not only has there been a resurgence of interest in religion but also in sacred stories and myths. This has become no less apparent than in

the very areas that were to dispel them—science and reason (Veneziano 2004; Feyerabend 1975). Myths, whether religious or secular, are those larger metanarratives that attempt to give meaning to human existence in all its complexities within the cosmos that is mysterious and also complex. They are created by or revealed to humans as stories or Divine stories to assist in placing or orienting humans in the larger universe. These myths are as prevalent today as in the past but have taken different shapes in the present. Even science and reason have their own myths about the universe, how it came to be and the place of humans within it, stories that are embraced in faith by adherents of these worldviews (Hawking and Mlodinow 2012; Weinberg 1994).

From our myths and sacred stories come teachings and doctrines. Here too we see them emerge from various worldviews, both religious and secular, each with powerful, systematic responses to answer questions that arise from these myths and stories, attempts to give greater articulation and depth to that which is often enigmatic. Teachings and doctrines come to express and articulate a greater mystery that is embraced in faith. They become dogmatic when little or no room is given for further or alternative explanations.

Ethical principles and moral behaviours are predicated upon worldviews. That which is deemed right living or a life worth living varies from age to age and culture to culture, but also from one worldview to another. Ethical principles from various worldviews may have a lot in common with each other, but they are nonetheless grounded in and emerge from particular worldviews and given expression in particular cultural contexts (Kim et al. 2009). Cultural misunderstandings and even clashes often result from different interpretations of an ethical principle held in common.

Symbols and rituals are aspects of all worldviews. While many of them are generally associated with religious worldviews, they have their counterparts in secular worldviews where they are equally important and equally strong. Symbols and rituals can have long histories, with many surviving for generations if not centuries. Yet new symbols and rituals can also emerge and exist side by side or even supplant former ones. Symbols and rituals need to be both dynamic and resilient in order to have staying power. Empty rituals result in a loss of meaning, importance and power, and can quickly lead to a lack of interest and participation by adherents.

Worldview stories, teachings, symbols and rituals require communal and social support to give them legitimacy and importance. Humans

are social people and do things in common. While solitary adherence to certain cultural dimensions of worldview beliefs is not uncommon, they gain greater cogency when held in common. In the past, rural and urban societies, even entire nations, embraced one particular worldview, and its stories, teachings and rituals were mutually reinforced (Taylor 2007). Dissent was discouraged if not aggressively eliminated by means of shunning, excommunication and even death. But in our modern diversified urban societies, communities of support become smaller and exposure to numerous worldviews becomes greater, increasing the opportunity for a diversity of viewpoints and behaviours. As such, what was once deemed acceptable and obligatory now becomes optional and a matter of choice for adherents.

Nonetheless, whether required or optional, adherents often require more than social or communal support to lend legitimacy to their beliefs, values and behaviours. They require some kind of further intimate experience that reinforces in them the validity of what they embrace. These experiential encounters are focused more on generating extraordinary feelings of joy and enthusiasm, or even exuberance and ecstasy, than creating rational support for beliefs, values and behaviours (Durkheim 2008).

This chapter focuses on a framework that highlights cultural aspects that shape and influence worldview thoughts and actions. It will highlight stories and sacred texts, teachings, rituals, symbols, social and communal supports systems and experiential encounters that come to give shape to an Islamic worldview. What emerges will not be prescriptive of Islam as much as it will be descriptive of one particular understanding of it: a cultural dimensions perspective.

SACRED TEXTS, NARRATIVES AND STORIES

Storytelling formed an important aspect of ancient cultures. It provided an opportunity to transmit from one generation to another how one ought to conceive of one's place in the universe, what beliefs and values would sustain a people, and what behaviours and action would ensure survival if not prosperity. Storytelling is still prominent among oral cultures today. Some ancient stories that have been written down which reveal the beliefs and values of ancient peoples have little connection to peoples existing today. These include many of the ancient Near East stories (Pritchard 2008). Other stories belonging to ancient peoples still

hold great importance and continue to define the world for many today. These include the Biblical stories of ancient Israel. They form sacred texts embraced by certain religious groups and still hold very powerful sway today. New stories of the universe and the place of humans within it also emerge today, with some gaining in strength and popularity (Rue 2000; Chaisson 2006).

Stories in this context form two kinds. The first are metanarratives, and these form an important aspect of traditional religious worldviews such as Christianity and Islam, but also secular worldviews such as Secular Humanism or Capitalism. The second are smaller stories within the larger metanarratives; individual stories that are found in sacred scriptures, for example, such as the Bible or the Qur'an. These can be creation stories, healing stories or redemptive stories that form part of a larger grounding metanarrative.

Those who embraced a secular worldview have begun to discount the stories of the Monotheistic worldviews that have been very powerful in the Western world and beyond. Many regard the stories of Judeo-Christianity as fables, as myths told to children, which then need to be abandoned as they mature in their thinking. Not only are these stories rejected but also those of most ancient cultures, stories that served to explain the mysteries of the universe but can no longer be adhered to in the light of the rational and scientific era in which we live today. This does not mean, however, that stories of our place in the universe do not emerge anew. They do, but they now emerge from new worldview perspectives. Scientism, for example, has a grand narrative advocating a scientific view of the universe, one that speaks almost exclusively in cosmological, physical and biological terms (Hawking 1998; Dawkins 1996). A story within this metanarrative is that of the Big Bang. Those who embrace Scientism recount, with considerable confidence, the evolutionary story of how the world came into being. Although it is based on rather solid empirical evidence, it becomes a story or a myth when it attempts to explain mysteries of the universe that go beyond what science can confidently proclaim. Why we are here and for what grander cosmological purposes we exist are questions beyond the realm of science.

Spiritual worldviews speak less about how we came into being and more about why we are here, why suffering continues to exist in the world and what may come after this life. Most of the stories embraced by these worldviews emerged in a pre-scientific world, yet may not

find themselves at odds with more scientific explanations. They simply focus on issues scientific stories fail to address. Stories of how to avoid suffering and how to seek healing or liberation in this life are the central focus of worldviews such as Buddhism and Hinduism. These stories have been recorded in sacred texts that serve as primary sources for these worldviews.

Muslims living in a modern, democratic and secular society are confronted by numerous sources that give shape to their worldview and address some of the life's perplexing questions. The Qur'an serves as their primary sacred text in responding to these. It recounts a larger metanarrative: why humans are here and how they are to live a life in obedience to the will of God. But that story and that text were compiled centuries ago. It also does not address every issue of life. Other narratives or stories supplement the sacred stories to give a deeper, broader and even fuller perspective. At times, they serve to shed more light on sacred documents and what emerges from them. The questions facing scholars and believers alike are how to interpret these sacred though ancient stories in the light of the modern context in which we live. Can they come alive in a new way for Muslims today? Can our modern context shed new light on them? Hermeneutics and the questions it raises cannot escape Islamic scholars and believers alike.

The Qur'an is regarded as a sacred text and is believed by Muslims to be the revealed Word of God. It is highly esteemed and accorded great respect and reverence, often given a most prominent place in the home. Muslims also believe that the Qur'an protects them from evil, in that reading it and embracing its ways lead them to live fruitful and obedient lives. In fact, reading the Qur'an is one of the primary prayers or duties in Islam. Often emphasizing the moral significance of an event, it serves as a book of guidance to humans so they can live in accordance with the will of God.

The Qur'an was verbally revealed to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel over an extended period of time, beginning in 610 and ending in 632 in the year he died. These revelations were written in Arabic and without error as dictated by Muhammad to his followers. The Qur'an includes summaries of or alternative interpretations of important stories found also in the Jewish and Christian sacred texts, underscoring a certain affinity with these two worldview traditions. The Qur'an is the larger story of God's ways with humans revealed through specific events up to the time of Muhammad.

Muslims see the Qur'an as the primary source of Islam that gives shape to their lives. What is written in the Qur'an was closely connected to the tangible life experiences of those who first heard it. The Qur'an addresses the religious, ethical, social and economic issues of the time in which it was revealed. It revealed how humans can overcome the morass in which they often find themselves and live more morally upright and productive lives. Yet, it is equally instructive for today, occupying a significant place in the lives of Muslims and serving as their most reliable guide. It reveals guiding principles that serve to give guidance and direction to an Islamic way of life. It is instructive in encouraging Muslims in their beliefs, prayers and ethical behaviour, and how to deal justly with others.

The Qur'an is read during prayers and at other times. Reading it is also considered an act of personal devotion and as such can be read any-time. The Qur'an is also read for study purposes, either individually or in groups, to acquire a greater understanding of that which is contained in it. There are also many different ways to read the Qur'an. A traditional way of reading the Qur'an in Arabic requires certain articulation and pronunciation, and this is taught through institutions linked to the *Diyanet* that are specialized in Qur'anic reading techniques. Those who do not know Arabic and must rely on its translations can nonetheless engage with it at a more existential level to internalize its meaning and benefit from it.

The Qur'an is a sacred text but it is also one that must be interpreted, as all texts must be interpreted. The culture and context in which it and other texts are read shapes how it is interpreted. No text, sacred or otherwise, can forgo interpretation. As such, a historical critical method is invaluable. It can shed considerable light on the manner in which instructions contained in the Qur'an are to be interpreted and implemented and how they have varied from culture to culture and context to context. No one interpretation can be assumed to fit for all times and places. For example, some insist that the Qur'an should serve as a source of law (*Sharia Law*) and that it should be implemented in countries with a Muslim majority. Others, however, disagree and interpret the Qur'anic injunction on this matter differently. Most Muslims in Turkey, for example, feel that *Sharia Law* has no place there because it is a secular and democratic country. Nonetheless, what is clear is that the Qur'an speaks to many issues in life, whether these emerge from legal, economic, ethical, moral or religious spheres of life. The question as always is how all of this should be understood.

Today, Muslims gain knowledge about the Qur'an and all that it conveys from various sources. These include family, schools, mosques, institutions of Qur'an linked to the *Diyanet*, radio, television, newspapers and the Internet. In the previous centuries, Muslim scholars were the primary interpreters of the Qur'an and others relied on their work. These scholars approached the Qur'an from two different perspectives. Some approached the Qur'an from a theological perspective (*kelam*) and focused primarily on creeds or thematic tenets of Islamic beliefs. The concern here was to develop a kind of systematic theology, one concerned with how to believe in God and what to believe about God. Other scholars read the Qur'an from a jurisprudence perspective (*fiqh/fikih*), one that concerns aspects of life that go beyond a belief in God and what to believe about God. This perspective focused on how to apply the principles of the Qur'an to daily life, including prayers, fasting, relating to others, ethical issues and more—in effect, how to live as a Muslim. Different scholarly thoughts and ideas have emerged over the centuries as a result of these two different approaches to the Qur'an. These diverse thoughts and ideas also needed to be put into language understood by ordinary people. This is the role played by the *ilmihal*, a form of (catechetical) instruction that assisted people in better understanding the Qur'an.

The Qur'an had a direct relation to the events of the times in which it was revealed. Those who first heard its messages could easily link them to the issues of the day, with little to no misunderstanding. For example, orphan girls were often sexually abused at the time of the Prophet Muhammad and Qur'anic verses pointing specifically to this abuse were well understood (*Nisa* 4:3). Usury was a big problem at that time and the Qur'an sought to eradicate it (*Baqara* 2:275). Polytheism (*şirk koşmak*) was also rampant and numerous verses stated clearly how it conflicted with the Qur'anic notion of the oneness of God.

For subsequent generations, however, understanding and interpreting the Qur'an became an increasing challenge. Initially, the companions of Muhammad (*sahabe*) conveyed the historical context and meaning of the Qur'an, and this was of great assistance to the listening audience. But understanding and interpreting the Qur'an soon became an activity for experts. Theologians (*kelam*) focused on clarifying the pillars of faith while Islamic law specialists (*fikih*) focused on adjusting the content of Qur'anic verses to the real language of life. Some scholars focused on textual interpretation while some others focused on subject matter. In

addition, scholarly, historical and linguistic contexts, as well as customs and traditions, all of which served as sources for scholars, now needed to be taken into account. But they also introduced diverse interpretations.

Contemporary Muslim scholars seek new ways to communicate with the Qur'an for new situations pose new challenges and require new interpretations. As a result, the debate has been ongoing as to which aspects of the Qur'an should be highlighted. The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad to address people of the day and seek solutions to their problems. Classic era Muslim scholars focused the content of the Qur'an on three categories—obligations (*zaruriyyat*), essentials (*haciyyat*) and complements (*tahsiniyyat*)—in addressing the issues of their day (Shaati d. 1388). Contemporary Islamic scholars need to focus Qur'anic interpretations on addressing the needs of people today, seeking solutions to their challenging problems. Ethical and ecological issues, human exploitation and cruelty, the violation of human rights and incessant warfare need to be addressed today, and the Qur'an can be an inspirational source for solving such issues.

Solutions to current problems will require more than just Qur'anic interpretations, however contemporary they might be. While Muslims regard the Qur'an as their primary sacred text, they also recognize other authoritative sources that serve as narratives in better understanding the world and how to live well in it. The sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad are one such source. In the Muslim tradition, these are presented as collections of *Hadith*, which are sayings, deeds and approvals of the prophet. There are also booklets that are simpler and more understandable; the “40 *Hadith*” comes first among these. A number of Muslim scholars have compiled such selected *Hadith* collections that are readily available. Other lesser sources include the history of the prophets, biographies of mystics, stories rich in religious and ethical motifs, wisdom sayings, poems and proverbs. Even the mythical *A Thousand and One Nights* (Arabian Nights), a collection of stories compiled during the Islamic Golden Age, is used as a source to shed light on understanding the mysteries of human life.

The stories, novels, poems, music and theatre are innately and uniquely human. Today, people often nourish their lives through such works of art, whether these are secular or more specifically religious. Artistic works have an affinity with religion since they also seek to increase understanding and sensitivity and nourish the human spirit. If art is a creative process, it reflects God's creativity in humans. That

creativity is a component of their role as caliph of the world. Art can, therefore, enhance human spirituality, and knowledge gained through art can shed light on new ways of understanding the Qur'an (Selçuk 2015).

The process of Secularism has played a large role in redefining the role of religion in the Islamic world, especially in modern, secular and democratic countries such as Turkey (Esposito and Tamimi 2000; Berkes 1999). In the previous centuries, Islam dominated all walks of life, private and public. Today, because of the impact of Secularism, much of Islam has been relegated to the private sphere. Public sector areas such as law, politics, government and science have become secularized and less influenced by religious institutions. But Secularism (*laicism*) is also a worldview. Simply replacing one dominant worldview (Islam) for another (Secularism) is not necessarily an advance for Turkey, or any other country. The current sociopolitical situation has given Muslim scholars new challenges and quests regarding the nature, purpose and function of religion in contemporary human life. As a result, new approaches to theology (*kelam*) and *fiqh* have surfaced. Secularism has, oddly, enabled the essence and core values of Islam to come to the foreground. This has transformed the way people, and especially those with higher levels of education, comprehend religion. Secularism has, ironically, played a role in renewing religious thought and reminds us that a secular system (*laïcité*), more so than Secularism (*laicism*), would provide a new place in a plural secular Turkish society for a renewed Islam as it would for other worldview perspectives, religious or secular. A question that remains is: What shape an Islamic metanarrative would take in a plural secular society that does not silence religious voices but creates a place for them in the public square to come to expression? How would its stories assist in creating a society that is open and free for all?

TEACHINGS, DOCTRINES

Teachings and doctrines flow from the stories, narratives and sacred texts individuals and groups of individuals embrace. These involve notions and ideas regarding the beginnings of the universe, the earth and humans, but they also speak of the purpose of life, the way we should live and how we should treat one another. They emerge from stories in sacred scriptures and such teachings may become doctrines of the faith. Islam is defined by many of these. But the teachings and doctrines of Islam,

while grounded in the Qur'an, are also enriched by insights from other sources.

The primary or most central teachings of Islam concern two very important but simple beliefs. Muslims are to believe in God and they are to lead a good life. The main and well-known Pillars of Islam, which contain duties faithful Muslims are to embrace and perform, are important but they flow from the two more central and prior teachings. What one is to believe about God and how one is to lead a good life is assisted by the Pillars of Islam (*Baqara* 2/183; *Ankebut* 29/45; *Maareej* 70/24-25). But the Pillars do not exhaust what it means to lead a good life. It is clear that not all Muslims are able to fulfil all of the five duties, yet all Muslims are able to lead a good life by being just, merciful, righteous, kind, loving, forgiving and more. These are primarily what the Qur'an instructs Muslims to be and do. All the other teachings of Islam are to be understood in that spirit.

The first important teaching of Islam focuses on the existence and oneness of God. This central teaching and belief includes the notion that all goodness and beauty has its source in God. God creates and constantly sustains the cosmos through the laws of the universe. God provides for every living being on the earth and His love is infinite. Further, God responds to the prayers of people. That is why prayers are so important; they are tangible evidence of worship of and reverence for God. Prayers give Muslims opportunity to express gratitude for what they have received in their daily lives and to interact with God; this communication is highly regarded and valuable. Muslims are also purified through prayers, for they become peaceful, spiritually at ease and feel the love and support of God at all times.

The second central teaching of Islam comes as an instruction to lead a good life, and hence focuses on what is called the "good deeds".

As for anyone - be it man or woman - who does righteous deeds, and is a believer - him shall We most certainly cause to live a good life; and most certainly shall We grant unto such as these their reward in accordance with the best that they ever did. (*Nabl* 16/97)

Good deeds are those that are the most appropriate regardless of the situation with which one is confronted. Doing good deeds gives meaning to the lives of people. They cannot be prescribed nor fixed, for the unique

nature of each situation determines what particular deeds are called for in each specific case. Because the history of humanity is also the history of change, good deeds vary from one context to another and can vary in form and practice. A Muslim's duty is to act in the most appropriate or virtuous manner in each situation in which they find themselves. When they accomplish this, they are also motivated to seek new ways in other areas of life. Only through increasing knowledge and understanding, can one adopt a balanced, reasonable and beneficial outlook. Through their accomplishments, people can enhance their good deeds since appropriate attitudes become discernable when reflecting on human thoughts and actions. The approach to discerning good deeds in Islam is intended to be practical, flexible and realistic and applies to every area of life: religious activity, ethics, science, politics, economy, law, leisure and more.

These two primary teachings give rise to many supplementary or accompanying teachings intended to assist Muslims in their faith in God and in leading a good life. One of those involves a belief in the prophets. Why is faith in ancient prophets who lived in times so different to us so important, and how does what they did connect to leading a good life?

Behold, We have inspired thee [O prophet] just as We inspired Noah and all the prophets after him - as We inspired Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants, including Jesus and Job, and Jonah, and Aaron, and Solomon; and as We vouchsafed unto David a book of Divine wisdom. (*Nisâ* 4/163)

God sends messages to certain special persons (prophets) so they can convey them to others. These messages not only state that God exists but they also tell stories about what it means to lead a good life under many different and trying circumstances. These messages revealed to prophets constitute the sacred texts. Muhammad was the last prophet and the Qur'an the final message. Muslims believe and respect all prophets for their life stories set good examples for them.

The Apostle, and the believers with him, believe in what has been bestowed upon him from on high by his Sustainer: they all believe in God, and His angels, and His revelations, and His apostles, making no distinction between any of His apostles.... (*Baqara* 2/285)

Prophecy helps people better understand what they may already have intuited or reasoned; it confirms for them what is right and proper. It

serves to support and guide their actions and at times reminds them of values that may have fallen into neglect.

A second supplementary or accompanying teaching that assists Muslims in their belief in God and how to lead a good life concerns the belief in life beyond this life and is formulated as “faith in the next life”. This teaching of Islam gives Muslims hope that death will not triumph but it also reminds them of their responsibilities in this life. It speaks of the next life but its focus is really on this life. It reminds Muslims that they are to lead a good life, and will be called to account for what they do in that regard. Leading a good life has meaning.

He who has created death as well as life, so that He might put you to a test [and thus show] which of you is best in conduct.... (*Mulk* 67/2)

Time spent on this earth engaged creatively, fruitfully and wisely has inherent meaning.

The above teachings find their primary source in the Qur'an. It is here that Muslims find their most important guidance and direction in their belief in God and in leading a good life. The life of Prophet Muhammad also occupies a central place in the life of Muslims. He was intimately involved in the revelatory process, internalized its messages and implemented them in his life. The Qur'an specifically refers to him as a role model, and hence an important source for Muslims. He is one who led a good life, and the manner in which he understood how to lead a good life is significant and instructive for Muslims.

Understanding and interpreting the teachings of Islam are not confined only to the life of Muhammad. While Muhammad's life is a source for Muslims, they are encouraged to develop their own interpretations and understandings of Islamic teachings. Muslim theologians and philosophers, past and present, interpret the teachings of Islam in the context of their social, historical and cultural background. As such, approaches to Islam in general and the teachings of the Qur'an, in particular, must always be open to new interpretations for people come to the texts with new questions that arise from new or different social, historical and cultural contexts. Individuals are to be given latitude to interpret for themselves what the Qur'an is saying to them in their particular circumstance. Further, since the Qur'an was also communicated verbally, verbal communication is open to a variety of inferences. The meaning of certain words or phrases might not always be clear. Muslim thinkers regard

the Qur'an as a comprehensive verbal source and interpret it in accordance with their own knowledge, interest and experience. Science and reason can assist Muslims here, becoming yet another source for interpreting Islamic teachings. A multifaceted approach becomes helpful and beneficial.

As such, yet another source for interpreting the teaching of the Qur'an is the intellectual engagement of the individual believer with the text. The Qur'an must undergo interpretation—this cannot be avoided. This also strongly suggests that interpretations will vary according to historical context and cultural situation. The text will be defined and redefined as individuals and groups of individuals interact with it. Some clear examples stand out. One is the reference in the Qur'an to the cutting off of hands for theft (*Ma'ida* 5/38-39). While some are and have been inclined to interpret this teaching in a literal manner—the actual physical cutting off of the hands—others interpret the teaching as “cutting” any future means to steal or “cutting” them off from continuing to commit such crimes. Yet others interpret the verse as not cutting off hands physically, but as a punishment that can take the form of imprisonment or fines. Another example is stoning to death as a punishment for committing adultery. This specific teaching is not in the Qur'an. The Qur'an itself speaks only of lashings (*Nur* 24/2), and even this punishment is not advocated today in modern Turkey, even if it might occur elsewhere in the world. As with all ancient and authoritative texts, not only is interpretation required, it also varies.

That is why another important approach or source for interpreting the teachings of the Qur'an is intellectual exchange and dialogue. Jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Muslim theology (*kelam*), philosophy and mysticism (Sufism) have emerged within the Islamic tradition. Islamic teachings have been shaped and elucidated with assistance from scientific and intellectual endeavours. Interpreting the Qur'an will necessarily involve a great deal of subjectivity, which leads one to conclude that religious teachings will always be open to new meanings and interpretations. Therefore, the teachings of Islam should continually be re-evaluated in the light of new human understandings and discoveries. Subject titles of Islamic teachings need not change but interpreting and understanding the teachings are always open to change. For example, in Islamic thought, God is understood to be the Supreme Being, one who is above all creatures. Questions such as “what is the nature of God” and “how can one communicate with God” are not, however, explicitly addressed

nor defined, leading to rather diverse views. Faith in God is an indisputable Islamic teaching. The essence, character or nature of God will, however, remain an open discussion, leading to different perceptions and interpretations. Some feel that the first generations of Muslims understood the character of God in a different fashion than modern Islamic theologians and philosophers (*kelam*). As such, studies in these areas are important in helping Muslims understand Islamic teachings. Many scholars have contributed to a deeper understanding of these teaching and how to live in conformity with them. Some of the more prominent ones are Abu Hanifa, Imam Shafi, Maturidi, Al-Farabi, IbnSina, IbnRusd, IbnMiskeveyh, QadiAbdulcabbar, Mevlana, YunusEmre, IbnArabi, Muhammad İkbāl, Fazlurrahman, Muhammad Arkoun and Cabiri.

Islamic teachings are conveyed to adherents in a number of places. At an early age, young people are taught them at home, school and mosque. At a later age, people can learn of Islamic teachings through the Internet, social media, communities and foundations. Further study can be made of Islamic teachings at Divinity Schools. Each of these has considerable influence on how the teachings of Islam are conveyed and interpreted. Religious education taught at schools is based on a curriculum set by the Ministry of National Education (Erdem 2008). It prepares and implements a curriculum focused on religious culture and ethical principles where students learn the basics concepts of Islam. Religious Affairs Administration, on the other hand, deals with issues such as faith, prayers and ethics.

Children experience a different learning process at home where they are influenced by parents. The socio-economic and educational background of parents will influence the quality of teaching children will receive. Children raised in households where daily prayers are performed are likely to link religiosity to ritual observance. Religious leaders (imam) in mosques give sermons (*khutbah*) at Friday noon prayers. In these sermons, the basic principles of religion are taught. Qur'anic verses *Hadiths* and interpretations of Muslim thinkers are brought to the fore, and direction and guidance are given to the members of the community. Issues of concern and daily events are also addressed.

Tradition, culture and context influence individual understandings of Islamic teachings, in content if not in concept. Religion is about individuals who are constantly changing. As individuals deepen their general understanding and experience of life, they are prone to interpret religious teachings in different ways. For example, children are initially

taught about God's loving, merciful and protective qualities, and only later may come to discover God's righteous anger concerning injustices. Fundamental religious values are subject to new interpretations and perceptions. Teachings that have direct historical and cultural significance may undergo a change in a more direct way in new contexts. For example, the term "People of the Book" and its implications have virtually disappeared today in a context where there are many who are not Muslim. In its place today is the notion of all citizens having equal rights.

At times, cultural practices can be confused with religious teachings. A particular cultural practice can gain religious importance yet be at odds with original teachings of the Qur'an. Putting religious and cultural practices in their proper perspectives is not always easy. Though highlighting or articulating values and principles conveyed in the Qur'an should take precedence, cultural values can often become predominant. For example, cultural practices such as wrapping graves with pieces of cloth, or kissing and touching gravestones, are at odds with the teachings of Islam. Yet, people seem not to be deterred in following these cultural practices.

Though the Qur'an is central to Muslim understandings the teachings that emanate from it require interpretation. Those interpretations are influenced, shaped and impacted by the culture and context in which they are read and studied, even as they influence, shape and impact that culture. Dynamically engaging with the text will lead to more clearly distinguishing between principles contained in the teachings and the cultural traditions in which they are often understood. With the assistance of additional sources, the teachings of the Qur'an can be better explicated. Additional sources as well as assessments of cultural traditions and contexts raise numerous questions in regard to the relationship between text and interpretation. A careful balance needs to be maintained for deconstructionist perspectives can easily sway one to argue that it is all about interpretation. This will inevitably result in an unfortunate power struggle to give prominence to particular interpretations.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

The question of what it means to live a good life is one that has perplexed humans throughout the ages. It is also an ethical question. It is grounded in one's worldview. Discerning a good life, or even a life that is worth living, cannot be done in isolation from the metanarratives

we embrace, and the stories, myths and sacred texts that influence and give shape to our worldview. Ethics and ethical principles are linked to worldviews.

Ethical principles such as justice, equality, dignity and respect for others are common to all of the humanity. They are constitutive of the human and to becoming human. But they are given content if not context by our place in the world, and hence by our views of the world. Our views of the world are, in turn, linked to the stories, myths and sacred texts that have influenced and shaped our perceptions.

Ethical principles embraced by secular worldviews are grounded in secular perceptions of the place of humans in the world. These principles and their implications are predicated upon humans as the highest authority in the chain of being. These ethical principles emerge from the development of human consciousness, which according to Philosophical Naturalism or Materialism occurred through biological evolutionary processes. In human sociocultural development, ethical principles became necessary for human survival, both individually and collectively. Today, those ethical principles are also fundamental to human survival but even more so to human flourishing. Not surprisingly, principles such as dignity, equality and sacredness of the human become particularly poignant in the light of some contemporary social issues focusing on human rights and gender rights. Nonetheless, the outcomes of those principles are predicated upon the secular worldviews embraced which have an exclusive focus on life in the here and now. Whether those principles are interpreted or enacted individually or communally depends on the degree to which people who embrace a secular worldview see themselves communally connected and communally responsible.

Spiritual worldviews link ethical principles to something beyond the human. While humans must necessarily work out the implications of ethical principles in the contexts in which they find themselves, these principles are nonetheless linked to something more or greater that unifies all humans. In that sense, those who embrace a spiritual worldview will see that ethical principles necessarily draw them together communally, and the sense of community may now be expanded to also include all living things not just humans.

Muslims are mandated to be good persons, to lead a good and virtuous life. Ethical principles guide and direct the thoughts and actions of Muslims, whether individually or collectively. These principles may correspond with those of other traditions, religious or secular, but they remain

grounded in the Qur'an. Nonetheless, in Islam also principles require interpretation and implementation, and here assistance may be garnered from other sources.

The Qur'an supports some practices and attitudes that lead to living a good life while discouraging others, which lends support to the notion that ethical principles and values are crucial. Leading a good life is connected to principles such as justice, dignity, equality, truthfulness, moderation, sincerity, humility and kindness. These are values common to humanity, and they originate in human spirituality, conscience or mind. According to Islam, ethical values are innate to the human, and common wisdom and conscience converge to establish common ethical principles. As can be inferred from the Qur'an, humans have the capacity for discerning right and wrong and each person must individually determine their behaviour based on the principles they embrace. These principles are supported both in the Qur'an and in the life practices of Muhammad. Ethical principles were stressed in the life of Muhammad, whom the Qur'an regards as a role model for Muslims. Muslims respect the ethical principles contained in the Qur'an and practiced by Muhammad.

Humans have the capacity to lead a good life—to act ethically and to live morally upright lives. But they do not always do so, and this causes no end of strife, hardship and turmoil in their lives, individually and collectively. We are all well aware of conflict and discord among Muslims themselves as well as between Muslims and non-Muslims because ethical principles are not followed or are applied in the harshest manner. Such actions lead to anything but the good life.

Though ethical principles are innate, they nonetheless require internalization through educational training, intellectual support and interactive experiences. The first social institution in which ethical principles are internalized is the family. Family plays a major role in one's early life. Adults, especially parents, become role models for children who often imitate them. The home and the school should support each other in this process. Consistent behaviour and attitudes of administrators and teachers help students internalize ethical principles. Social circles of friends, acquaintances and colleagues, intellectual, artistic and scientific discoveries, and various forms of media can all play a role in internalizing ethical principles.

Yet, a question remains regarding the nature of the good life. What does it mean for Muslims in general? What does it mean for Muslims

in Turkey in particular? What does it mean for the different genders, particularly women? What does it mean to live a good life in a modern, democratic and secular nation, especially where numerous lifestyles are on display? What does it mean in terms of a Western lifestyle, which is viewed by many as being progressive? These are not easy questions and pose a huge challenge for Muslims, as well as for those from other religious perspectives, whose ways of life have been moulded by centuries of tradition and hence tend towards a more conservative lifestyle.

Nonetheless, religions remain one of the most influential features in human life and along with it the ethical principles they advocate. Muslims experience the prominent aspects of their religion intensively including its ethical principles. But the secularization process has also impacted and curtailed the influence of Islam on society. In Turkey, this is particularly the case as it moved ever closer to a Western way of life. Nonetheless, Islamic values have been persistently felt in numerous areas of life. Even when surrounded by democratic and secular principles, Muslims give importance to ethical principles emanating from Islam. In Muslim communities, it is not possible to separate religious values from all spheres of life. As a result, in secular societies where Muslims dominate, the ethical values emphasized by Islam are still at play, and their impact in many areas of society is still clearly visible. This may stem largely from the fact that ethical values are closely linked to human rights and freedoms, and many of these rights and freedoms are grounded in religious worldviews. While secular social, economic and political structures and their values may dominate the public square, their influence on individual or collective thought and behaviour can never be total. Muslims find ways in their daily interactions with others to be guided by Islamic principles and values.

The matter of Islamic ethical principles shaping or influencing public policy, however, is a difficult and controversial matter. The extent of the influence varies in regard to country and culture. Public policy is determined by political choices made in any particular country, and by the kind of society people individually and collectively desire. In a secular and plural society, public policy should be determined democratically, with no one worldview perspective silencing others. Neither the principles of Secularism, Islam nor any other worldview perspective should be explicitly mandated in a modern, democratic and secular society such as Turkey.

Nonetheless, the majority cultural and worldview perspectives will undoubtedly play a role in the development of public policy but this

should not be done at the expense of minorities. In regard to Islamic ethical principles, this should not be of great concern for they correspond with the ethical principles of humanity. Public policy should not restrict individual freedom, including the freedom to be guided by one's ethical principles, as long as that freedom does not impede or impinge on the freedom of others. Some applications of Islamic principles concerning religious law may be at odds with secular principles. Muslims in Turkey, in general, have been guarded in imposing their religious beliefs and moral values on others, for freedom of expression is also one of their ethical principles.

But as with any society, public policy has to do with determining the good life that is desired in the public realm. Not everyone will agree what this might be, yet in a democratic society, public discussions on these matters are warranted. Citizens who embrace particular ethical principles and values, be these Islamic, Christian, secular or atheistic, may give public expression to them in a democratic society. That Turkey, with its majority Muslim population, seeks to be free and open, speaks to the ethical values that dominate in that country, even if it is always a challenge to ensure that these values are not eroded by powerful political forces seeking to undermine them.

RITUALS AND SYMBOLS

Rituals and symbols are important aspects of human life. Only humans among all other creatures create rituals and symbols to give deeper expression to what is important to them. Rituals and symbols in and of themselves are not where their importance lies, however; it is what they represent or that to which they point that is most crucial. Here their power can be limitless, and history has clearly revealed this.

Rituals and symbols can also lose their significance. They can become empty, meaningless and lose value. When they do so interest in them is lost, their importance wanes, or participation in them or embrace of them is neglected. Sometimes new rituals and symbols will emerge, especially if the reality to which they point remains dynamic in the lives of adherents. Every worldview has its own rituals and symbols, and they engage individuals as they strengthen their beliefs, values and ways of life.

Rituals and symbols that emerge from secular worldviews are similar in nature to those of religious worldviews even if they are different in form and structure. Secular rituals such as parades on national holidays,

for example, heighten nationalistic loyalty, devotion and sometimes even fervour for one's country. A nation can become of utmost importance and significance, in a sense deified, and something for which people willingly sacrifice their lives, as is the case of Nationalism. Yet some citizens may regard a nation's concerns, priorities and actions as objectionable or offensive. Then, nationalistic rituals such as parades for them become similarly meaningless, objectionable or offensive, and lose their significance. In a similar vein, a flag is a symbol of a nation and may evoke pride and respect if the nation is highly regarded, to the extent that it may be prominently displayed and even worn with great pride. But others may be self-conscious or shamed by a nation's past history or actions, and the symbol will lose its meaning and significance.

Rituals and symbols are also common to spiritual worldviews and serve similar functions. Some parallel those of traditional Monotheistic worldviews. Rituals such as prayers, candle lighting and gatherings assemble adherents into closer communion with each other and the object of devotion or adoration. These rituals are as common to Wiccan as they are to Indigenous worldviews, even if the reference points are considerably different. Such is the case also with symbols. The ancient Wiccan tripartite symbol, the *triquetra* or *triqueta*, which was later appropriated by Celtic Christians who infused it with a different meaning, has now been re-appropriated for modern day Wiccans. Here again, both rituals and symbols point not to themselves but beyond to what is essential in the particular spiritual worldview.

Rituals and symbols are also common to Islam. But here again, they point to something deeper. Three of the most important Islamic rituals are daily prayers, fasting and pilgrimages. Three of the most important symbols in Islam are the mosque, minaret and *Kaaba*. Here too religious rituals and symbols point not to themselves but beyond to essential elements within Islam.

Rituals shape the worldview and lifestyle of Muslims. They regulate life. They assist Muslims in keeping their worldview dynamic. Rituals assist believers in maintaining and sustaining a morally upright life and in shaping their ethical identities. They create feelings of togetherness, unity and cooperation. They strengthen membership in a community and affiliation with a long-standing tradition. In short, rituals enhance and deepen both the religious and spiritual lives of people. Their purpose is to enrich the two central components of Islam: belief in God and leading a good life.

Rituals strengthen communication with God and assist individuals in making sense of their world. According to Islamic belief, everything in the world belongs to God and this awareness is renewed for Muslims through daily, weekly and annual rituals. Regular rituals such as daily prayers not only create renewed awareness of the presence of God but also enrich one's spiritual perspective—towards fellow humans, other living creatures, life in general and affairs of this world. Through rituals, Muslims renew and restore their spiritual selves: their attitudes, behaviours and the richness of their lives (*Ankebut* 29/45).

Muslims are encouraged to pray. The Qur'an gives directives to pray as much as five times a day, to plan one's day around communication with God, to always be connected to God and to give priority to God. Through prayer, a believer has a chance to feel close to God, to be spiritually purified and feel spiritually at peace. Through prayer, a Divine presence and power is felt; the love, blessing and grace of God is experienced. Muslims pray to God for support in leading obedient, responsible and fruitful lives. Prayers motivate Muslims to be gracious, thankful, caring and loving.

Praying is generally done facing Mecca, the spiritual heartland of Islam. Praying can be done in a mosque but it can also be done anywhere and anytime. Obligatory daily prayers are formal, held at particular times, follow a certain pattern and are done collectively and in unison. Friday prayers, the most important of the week, are obligatory for men though optional for women. During Friday prayers, sermons are also heard to encourage Muslims to lead faithful lives. But prayers can also be informal, individual, spontaneous and done anywhere. Prayers after meals, for example, are prayers of thanksgiving and do not need to follow any set pattern.

In the highly complex lives we live in a modern secular world, however, praying five times a day at set intervals becomes increasingly difficult and may not be practical or possible for everyone. Daily schedules are often determined for us rather than by us. But here Islam is flexible rather than rigid for it is not the number of times one engages in prayer that is most important, but the actual taking of time to pray whenever one is able. This is an important change of emphasis for it places the onus not on fulfilling a daily obligation in a mechanical way, as if a scorecard is being kept. It indicates that when one prays, one must be sincere in being connected to God. The obligation to pray five times a day is a reminder not to be negligent in staying connected to God, from the

moment we rise to the moment we sleep, even when meeting that obligation becomes difficult.

Fasting is also an important ritual for Muslims. It is training for self-control, an exercise to prepare one for the real difficulties of life. Fasting entails refraining from food and drink but it is also much more. It is a time for spiritual discipline, reflection and purification, a time to reassess values and behaviours, and an opportunity to resist enslavement to habits. But here again, fasting is not possible for everyone. Not participating in a fast does not make one less of a Muslim.

Ramadan is the most important fast for Islam, lasting for an entire month. It changes the order and routine of an entire year for its annual dates are not fixed due to the Islamic lunar calendar. The Ramadan fast introduces a whole new perspective by diverting attention away from worldly matters and focusing instead on worship, devotion, charity and empathy towards one's fellow humans. Fasting lasts from dawn to sunset. Then, an evening celebration of food and drink (*iftar*) is held to end each daily fast, and these are often social gatherings of family and friends. At the end of Ramadan, an even bigger celebration of food and drink takes place.

Another important ritual for Muslims is the *hajj*, a once in a lifetime obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca for all able-bodied Muslims who have the means to do so. Not everyone is able to participate in a *hajj*. In that sense, it is less an obligation and more so an opportunity strongly encouraged by the Qur'an for the spiritual experience that can be gained from it. The various rituals performed during this pilgrimage, including seven counterclockwise marches around the *Kaaba*, are re-enactments of past historical events that serve to enhance spiritual devotion and worship. They are also intended to create equality, unity and solidarity among participants, for all worshippers are from a variety of different cultures, traditions and social positions. It is a life-changing experience for participants. Studies indicate that a *hajj* experience increases accord between Muslims worldwide, encourages greater acceptance of female education and employment and leads to peace and harmony among adherents of other religions (Clingsmith et al. 2008). Malcolm X, the famous American civil rights activist, participated in a *hajj* in the 1960s and had a life-changing experience. Witnessing a gathering of people of all colours and races from around the world walking in peace and harmony led him to feel that America needs to better understand Islam for it could erase his society's race problems (Malcolm and Haley 1999).

There are other rituals or ceremonies that are important but considered less so in terms of enhancing spiritual devotion and piety. These include naming ceremonies, circumcisions, weddings and funerals. Wedding ceremonies tend to be less religious and more cultural. Funerals are, however, events where people link more closely with their Islamic beliefs. Verses of the Qur'an are read eloquently and elucidated, to console the sorrowful. Harmony is also created through condolences offered. Food is brought and shared with neighbours and relatives, to create a sense of shared community in joy and in sorrow.

As in other societies, secular rituals are also important for Muslims. National holidays are celebrated with excitement and vigour. Numerous activities are organized, poems appealing to national feelings are read and discussions are held. Turkish national history is brought to mind once again and national feelings are celebrated. Such celebrations are not viewed adversely for Muslims recognize that these secular rituals can influence their worldview in a positive manner. They share the same national feelings with other citizens regardless of the religion to which they belong. Connecting with others provides a wider perspective and reminds everyone that as a nation they are one big family.

Symbols in Islam developed over time, arose from some cultural expressions and from the imaginations of fervent followers. The colour green has become symbolic, decorating many mosques, incorporated in numerous national flags, and sometimes used in elaborate bindings of the Qur'an. The star and the crescent have also become symbolic of Islam and are also incorporated in national flags. The Turkish national flag has become a sacred symbol. It not only contains the star and crescent but is a unique symbol of Turkish independence. It may not be abused in any manner. The call to prayer (*azan*) is yet another significant symbol. It reveals that there are Muslims living in the neighbourhood. The call to prayer evokes the spiritual world of Muslims, giving them peace, serenity and security. Quotations written on fountain stones and grave stones also remind Muslims of God. Mausoleums of wise and great spiritual men, as well as minarets, are also important tangible symbols of Islam. The latter in particular suggest devout feeling rising heavenward, like hands reaching out and praying to God.

Perhaps one of the most controversial symbols in Islam today is the *hijab*, and with it the *burqa*, *chador* and *niqab*. As mentioned previously, feminists decry it as a symbol of oppression and patriarchy, and feel it has no place and is out of place in a modern Western society. They call for its ban,

and their efforts have been successful in countries such as France. The *hijab* was also banned in Turkey for many years for it was seen as an ostentatious religious symbol for a country that had become purposefully and distinctly Western and secular. But the law was rescinded recently in 2013, to give freedom of expression to those who desired to wear it as a symbol of devotion. Strangely enough, Turkey's first ban on clothing was aimed at the *fez*, a short conical red felt hat long worn in Turkey since Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II made it official national attire in 1826. Atatürk banned the *fez* through the Hat Law of 1925, but did not concern himself with banning the *hijab*. He felt that as people became more enlightened, they would quickly abandon it. This did not happen and in the 1970s and 1980s, the matter became quite politically controversial, and the *hijab* was banned. Removing the ban in 2013 created an equal amount of controversy.

The Qur'an does not specify any form of head covering or dress. It simply says "Let them (women) draw their head coverings over their bosoms" (*Nur* 24/31). The Qur'an also speaks only of dressing modestly (*A'raf* 7/26). Various head coverings or even full body coverings are cultural expressions of the injunction to dress in a way that is not suggestive, as so much of Western fashion has become, and applies equally today to men as well as women. Some women choose to wear coverings as expressions of faith and devotion, but doing so remains an individual choice. Some see coverings as symbols of liberation and even empowerment, especially in regard to interactions with people who are then forced to focus more on what women say than the way in which they look. But the wearing of the *hijab*, for example, should always be a personal choice and a personal decision; not expected, not coerced and not a representation of greater or lesser form of piety.

SOCIAL AND COMMUNAL

Humans are social and communal beings—they need others. A community serves to lend support to one's worldview so one's communal affiliation and social activities become important. Communal and social activities also vary among age groups. The challenge of living in a secular and diverse society is that one's communal and social connections and engagements can also become diverse—one does not always interact or associate with similar minded people.

As in the other communities, Turkish people also come together at various times for religious and social reasons. In many cases, both are

involved. Friday prayers and religious holidays are clear examples where both are involved. Muslims gather together in the mosques on Fridays and on religious holidays to pray but they also have an opportunity to socialize. In the mosques, greetings and good wishes are exchanged, and excitement and happiness are shared. Weddings and circumcisions also have both religious and social purposes, with families and friends participating in these ceremonies. Funerals are also both a religious and a social occasion, though the gathering is more sombre. But through Qur'an readings and support for the family of the deceased, sorrow is shared, pain is eased and community is deepened. In Turkey, the birth of Muhammad is celebrated in the "holy birth week". Discussions, conferences and symposiums take place throughout the week, as a way to encourage people to enhance their knowledge and understanding of Prophet Muhammad.

The month of Ramadan provides for Muslims many opportunities for social interactions where worldviews are also strengthened. Adherents gather daily in the mosque for prayers. They break their fast every evening in the community at the same dinner table, whether with immediate family, extended family or others. Breaking the fast together enhances unity and solidarity of Muslims and is often organized by the wealthier members in the community.

People also gather for other occasions that generate community and as such serve to strengthen one's worldview. These occasions may be family gatherings, birthday parties, graduations, ceremonies commemorating important persons, foundation and association meetings, and municipality and non-governmental gatherings and events. Numerous foundations and non-governmental organizations organize cultural and religious events. In each of these gatherings, Islam is invoked in one manner or another, with individuals sharing their points of view. Such occasions not only promote community but also shape and influence religious perceptions.

Every religious, cultural and social event influences the individual. Gatherings in which Islamic teachings or points of view surface in ways that go beyond ritual devotion serve to enhance an Islamic worldview. Social events often raise awareness about pressing issues and encourage individuals and groups of individuals to reassess their views and opinions, assisting them in making connections between Islam as a *vision of life* and a *way of life*. They become one more building block in shaping and influencing an Islamic worldview.

The modern era entices people to be more individualistic, and Muslims are increasingly impacted by this phenomenon. They too are inclined to adopt a secular lifestyle and easily act and behave in an individualistic fashion, engaging in religious practices that have become more individualistic. Perhaps the intellectual classes are most impacted and vulnerable here. They tend toward a more individual experience of their religion, for their tendency to take a critical approach to Islam—an examination of Islam in all its breadth and depth from a variety of perspectives—is generally frowned upon. Yet, the importance of a religious community structure has not escaped them. That structure has often been the mosque.

Mosques have taken on many different roles and functions, and they do so with greater or lesser degrees of success. They are, first and foremost, places of worship. Since devotion to God is central to Islam, places of worship become the focal points where Muslims as a community can collectively pray. Daily prayer times and Friday prayers have become the most prominent activities in most mosques. While daily prayer times are frequented sporadically, Friday prayer times see many mosques teeming with worshippers. Such occurs also during Ramadan. Today, both Muslims and non-Muslims equate the mosque primarily with Islamic worship.

A mosque is, however, much more than a place of prayer. It is also a community centre, an operational base where Muslims come together to build a healthier society. Socialization takes place both before and after daily prayers but most importantly and especially after Friday prayers. Here, the Muslim community comes together as a community to build their community in a variety of ways that communities often do: extending personal greetings, sharing news and information, care and concern for others, supporting young and old alike, meeting special needs, strengthening relationships, welcoming new members, networking and more. It is also a place of celebration, of special community or family events or activities. Perhaps less so today but in other times and places weddings and funerals were held in mosques, as Muhammad advised his companions. Mosques have also been used to host travellers, strangers and overnight guests.

Mosques are places for meetings and deliberations. Muhammad often gathered his companions in the mosque to discuss important matters. This still takes place today, though perhaps less in certain contexts and locations. Nonetheless, mosques serve these purposes for where better would Muslims gather to resolve issues confronting them, whether these are of a social, communal, political, legal or religious nature. They

would serve as a springboard for bringing issues important to a religious subgroup to a larger society.

Mosques are also important centres of learning. Young children receive an education in the teachings and values of Islam including that of the Qur'an. In former times but also in other places in the world, literacy is taught to adults in the mosque. Mosques are also centres of intellectual engagements, where learned men and women discuss and debate issues of a wide variety.

In all of this, it can be seen that mosques serve an important social function in generating and strengthening community which in turn shapes, influences and supports an Islamic worldview. The exact nature and extent of that worldview will be predicated on the particular characteristics of the mosque with which one is affiliated. In Turkey, where mosques are administered by a secular state, a more moderate, controlled and worshipped-centred Islam may characterize them. Some feel, however, that mosques no longer serve their intended purposes. In some regions of the world, whether in countries where Muslims are in the majority or to which large numbers of them have immigrated, mosques may serve as ethnic enclaves, hotbeds for political activity, structures segregating one Muslim group from another, ghettos of mainstream isolation or even places where *Sharia Law* is enacted. Further, to the extent they also fail to engage younger and older alike in ways that sustain and support them in their own worldview journey, they become less relevant to people in a modern, individualistic and dynamically changing secular society, where tantalizing attractions easily distract people from other perhaps more worthy pursuits. Mosques, as well as churches, then become places of worship for those declining few still inclined to pray, and monuments to former days when religion occupied a more central and dominant place in society.

CONCLUSION

A worldview is seldom if ever shaped in isolation for humans are social creatures that are influenced by a variety of factors that in turn weigh heavily on what we individually and collectively think and do. Our social and cultural location largely determines, though not exclusively, many of the beliefs and values we embrace. In more traditional societies, where beliefs and values could be circumscribed and prescribed more readily, one's worldview differed little from those around. Today, in our modern

and global societies, beliefs and values are still shaped by cultural circumstances, but they are impacted by a variety of thought patterns much more heterogeneous in nature. A plethora of seductive voices and alluring behaviours impinges on us daily, vying for attention, devotion and allegiance. The shaping of a *vision of life* and a *way of life* undergoes a vital and momentous journey woven through the complexities and intricacies of modern life.

As such, various narratives and metanarratives, each with its stories to tell characterizing and defining the realities in which we live, impact it. But an Islamic worldview begins and ends with a metanarrative grounded in the Qur'an, a revealed source trusted in its scope, breadth and depth to give a reliable picture of the nature of reality in which we live that will lead to peace, joy and happiness. But that source, revealed in more ancient and traditional cultures, requires translation and interpretation. While the principles contained in the ancient stories are enduring, the context in which they were revealed is considerably different from today. As such, other sources can shed light on how to understand the Qur'an in a modern, democratic and secular context. An Islamic worldview recognizes that comprehending the nature of reality and the place of humans in it is a rather complex matter that requires careful discernment.

From the larger Islamic metanarrative comes teachings that are instructive for all aspects of life. These teaching are sourced in the Qur'an, taught to young and old alike, and are the means to living as a good person. But these teachings, products of centuries of discussion and debate, refining and explication nonetheless require further interpretation to meet the exigencies of today. How to be a good person in a particular context requires not only knowledge of the principles taught but also knowledge of the context in which those principles will be applied, even as those contexts themselves face dramatic changes. An Islamic worldview must engage with worldviews vastly different from its own if it seeks to remain dynamic.

This is particularly relevant when it concerns ethics, when the question of living as a good person is raised. Knowing what it means to live as a good person requires considerable discernment of the ethical principles contained in the Qur'an. Knowing how to apply those principles in a modern context is made all the more challenging, if not difficult, in a very complex modern society. The principle of equality between the genders, for example, is well known, yet can become highly contested

when traditional and modern ways of life confront each other. In a modern, democratic and secular society highly influenced by Western styles of life, traditional teachings and ethical principles require continual assessment. An Islamic worldview recognizes that it needs to remain dynamically engaged with the culture in which it finds itself, even if that culture clashes with more traditional Islamic visions and ways of life.

All worldviews, religious or secular, have certain rituals and symbols that point to the core of their beliefs and values. Islam is recognized as having rituals that are quite set and distinct, particularly the obligatory daily prayers. But a highly differentiated, modern and secular society often makes it difficult to perform these rituals as mandated by the Qur'an. It also places a creative opportunity before Muslims—is it possible to connect with God through means other than ritual prayers? If ritual prayers are a means to a particular end, can the means be changed to achieve the same end? An Islamic worldview recognizes that while the modern, secular world creates burdens for adherents, it also places unique challenges and opportunities before them, giving the creative human new and dynamic ways to enhance connections with God and live a good life.

An Islamic *vision of life* and *way of life* is difficult to sustain in isolation: It requires communal support and nourishment. Such is generated in and around family and mosque community activities and involvements. But social connections in a highly individualistic, diverse and modern society are not likely to be limited to these but will reach far beyond them. Social support networks generated around academic learning communities, for example, can have great impact in giving new shape to one's *vision of life* and *way of life*, especially when those communities focus on giving greater knowledge and illumination to what it means to be Muslim: how to connect with God and how to be a good person. This may generate new understandings and initiatives, some of which may be at odds with more traditional *visions of life* and *ways of life*.

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