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# Introduction: The *Other* Futurist

Sohail Inayatullah and Gail Boxwell

## I. The Project

In late 1980, Ziauddin Sardar was invited to Ottawa by a group of Canadian Muslim scientists and professionals. The Canadian group was eager to meet the author of *The Future of Muslim Civilisation*; a writer who had put Islam on the covers of two of the most prestigious science journals in the world – *New Scientist* and *Nature*. So Sardar duly arrived at Ottawa airport:

To my surprise there was no one to meet me. I waited for about half an hour and then rang the contact number. I was told that the whole group was there in force to greet me; and the members of the group were described in some detail. I spotted them relatively easily and introduced myself. But I was brushed aside with the remark: 'Please excuse us, we are looking for someone.' So I presented myself again. This time the gathering became a little irritated. 'You don't appear to understand,' they said. 'We are waiting for an important writer from London. We seem to have lost him; we will talk to you later.' Standing in front of them, I announced: 'But I am *here*. You are waiting for *me*.' 'Are *you* Ziauddin Sardar?' one of them asked. 'Yes.' 'Are *you* the author of *The Future of Muslim Civilisation*?' 'Yes.' There was a weighty silence. 'You are clearly disappointed,' I said. 'No! No!' they said in unison. 'We expected someone much older. Someone with a beard,' one of them said. 'Perhaps, even with an arching back,' added another.<sup>1</sup>

More than any other scholar of our time, Sardar has shaped and led the renaissance in Islamic intellectual thought, the project of rescuing Islamic epistemology from tyrants and traditionalists, modernists and secularists, postmodernists and political opportunists. The urgency of this rescue is especially felt both in the west and in the Islamic world since the events of 11 September 2001. Through Sardar's writings, we can gain a deeper understanding of the causes that created the context for 11 September as well as the solutions for global transformation.<sup>2</sup> From the Muslim perspective, Sardar has argued, the real costs of closing the doors of *ijtihad*, the

reasoned struggle and rethinking that are central to the worldview of Islam, have now put Islamic civilisation in a foundational crisis. To meet the challenge of this crisis, there must be critique within Islam, not just the standard critique of the west. As Sardar writes:

What the fateful events of that day reveal, more than anything else, is the distance we have travelled away from the spirit and import of Islam. Far from being a liberating force, a kinetic social, cultural and intellectual dynamic for equality, justice and humane values, Islam seems to have acquired a pathological strain. Indeed, it seems to me that we have internalised all those historic and contemporary western representations of Islam and Muslims that have been demonising us for centuries. We now actually wear the garb, I have to confess, of the very demons that the west has been projecting on our collective personality.<sup>3</sup>

To weed out this strain, three steps must be taken: 1. Islam must be seen as an ethical framework, as a way of knowing, doing and believing and not as a state; 2. the Shari'ah, or 'Islamic law', must be seen in its historical context and not elevated to the Divine (it is only the Qur'an that has a divine status in Islam) – the Shari'ah must be seen as interpretive methodology for solving contemporary problems; and 3. Muslims must become active seekers of truth and not passive recipients. If these steps are taken, Islam can rise from the ashes of 9/11, and play a role in creating a global ummah – 'a community of justice-seeking and oppressed people everywhere' not just of Muslims.<sup>4</sup> Thus, a new future can be created.

Creating an alternative future for Islam is part of the unique contribution of Sardar. But he is also the first to explore the role and impact of modern science and technology in the Muslim world; the first to discuss the importance of information and communication technologies for Muslim societies; the first – and so far the only one – to produce a modern classification for Islam; amongst the first to argue that postmodernism – so eagerly embraced by multiculturalists and intellectuals in the non-west – was not so much a new force of liberation but a new form of imperialism; and amongst the first to warn that the future is rapidly being colonised. He is credited with starting a number of new discourses in Islamic thought: he is considered a champion of the discourses of Islamic futures and Islamic science and a spirited critic of the discourse of 'Islamisation of knowledge'. All of these are different strands of the same project:

to rescue Muslim civilisation from its long decline as well as its subjugation by, and assimilation into, the west. Sardar's project thus has two main components. Parvez Manzoor hints at both:

The main contribution of his thought has been the contemporisation of the Muslim predicament in terms of intellectual approach. Islam is not merely a *religious* culture, Sardar's reasoning implies, it is also a *scientific* one. Modern Muslims need not, as has been their wont, discuss their plight in medieval, scholastic terminology concentrating only on the moral and metaphysical malaise of modern civilisation. No, Sardar shows, Muslim concerns for more immediate and concrete issues that stem from the encroachment of their culture by the two most potent instruments of change, contemporary science and technology, require ... Muslim intellectuals to produce an Islamically motivated critique of contemporary thought. Since Islam, for a Muslim is the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong – in terms of thought as well as action – modernism is amenable to Islamic thought as an indigenous intellectual and moral problem. Rather than harmonising Islamic thought with Western norms and values, Sardar reverses the normal perspective and scrutinises all modern scientific culture through the discriminatory eye of a Muslim. The result is not only a powerful criticism of the epistemology of modern science, but an almost total absence of apology – the bane of westernised Muslim intellectual. There is no trace of naïve and even pathetic acceptance of alien norms and institutions by justifying them as 'Islamic', but the ultimate Islamic imperative of *Amr bi'l-Ma'ruf wa al-Nahl al-Munkar*, constructed here as the acceptance of everything good and rejection of everything evil, comes to the fore.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Sardar's project aims both to contemporarise Islam as a living, dynamic, thriving civilisation and to critique the west 'through the discriminatory eye of a Muslim'. He sees these enterprises as two sides of the same coin, essential to the survival of Muslims. However, the contemporisation of Islam, in the civilisational sense, is something that happens not in the present but in the future. Sardar argues for a constructive approach: Muslim civilisation, he insists, has to be rebuilt, brick by brick, with the basic notions, categories and concepts of Islam, as the civilisation of the future. But, of course, there has to be a viable future, as an open, pluralistic space, in the

first place. Thus, first we must save the future from the colonisation of the west – not just for Islam but for all other civilisations and cultures of the non-west. The west here, and this is crucial, should be seen both as a historical worldview and as a practice. The worldview is based on the codes that construct the west's relationship with the Other, and the practice is the specific national and institutional associations that implement these relationships. The west is not considered in racial or ethnic terms, indeed, an Asian nation can be western in many ways, as Sardar hints in his book, *The Consumption of Kuala Lumpur*.<sup>6</sup>

Given the scope and complexity of his scholarship, Sardar is not easy to locate either in disciplinary terms, or in the spectrum of contemporary scholarship. Sardar consciously models himself on al-Baruni, the eleventh-century Muslim scholar and polymath, who wrote a classical text on India, measured the specific gravity of many metals and precious stones, determined the co-ordinates of several important cities, and wrote a mammoth history of the world, the *Chronology of Ancient Nations*. 'Like al-Baruni,' Sardar writes, 'I do not believe in disciplinary boundaries. Indeed, disciplines – all disciplines – are artificial social constructions.'<sup>7</sup>

Sardar writes that he has numerous identities. While a committed Muslim, he is totally pluralistic. While orthodox himself, he is out of orthodoxy. While living in the west, he is not of the west. While recognised as an academic, he has not become trapped by the feudal hierarchy of academia. While he uses the postmodern techniques of deconstruction, he is not a postmodernist. But despite all this, Sardar does place himself into a particular location: his is the argumentative and demanding voice from the margins, always deliberately on the periphery, that plays havoc with the centre. In this sense, Sardar has placed himself as the *Other* – the dialectical opposite of the dominant mode of thought and action, whether in the west or internally within Islam. He is always on the side of the marginalised and the oppressed, always arguing for distributive justice, always trying to decentre the centre, always a card-carrying radical. Moreover, Sardar argues for a certain variety of tradition, so he can be described, along with the Indian intellectual and futurist, Ashis Nandy, as a critical traditionalist. Like Nandy, he does not accept tradition blindly but argues that traditions are constantly reinvented and renovated.<sup>8</sup> While acknowledging that traditional structures did manage to maintain decent lifestyles, he rejects the notion that they should be accepted simply because they are historical. The future of the non-

west in general, and of Islam in particular, lies in going forward with history, by changing yet remaining the same, by transforming history into life-enhancing tradition.

We cannot see Sardar's work as merely intellectual, appropriate only for the few in universities, or as internal criticism of Islam relevant only to Muslims. Rather, the words and visions, the arguments and critical edge, he brings to his writings, are a necessary part of his project to transform Islam and the west both from within and without.

## II. Islam as Difference

In late 1987, Ziauddin Sardar was in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, running a major conference entitled 'Dawa and Development: The Future Perspective'. Makkah is, of course, the holiest city of Islam: it is the home of the Sacred Mosque which houses the Kaaba. The Kaaba is a cuboid structure, draped in black cloth, which is the prime focus for Muslims everywhere. When Muslims perform their daily prayers, they face the Kaaba. When they perform the hajj, or the Umra, the lesser pilgrimage, the worshippers walk seven times round the Kaaba. As a special privilege and concession to the thousand or so scholars and intellectuals attending the Conference, the authorities in Makkah opened the doors of the Kaaba to allow the participants to go inside the sacred structure. Sardar was puzzled: the Kaaba was a site, a sign of direction so as to create unity among Muslims everywhere. Why go inside the Kaaba? This was taking the call for unity and direction literally, without understanding the deeper meaning of the representational drama taking place. In any case, would not the sense of direction be lost *within* the Kaaba? While Sardar arranged for the participants to go inside the Kaaba, he refused to go inside himself. For him, what was important was the paradigm of Islam, the contouring reality, the larger frame of reference that provided a sense of direction and commitment, rather than any particular spatial significance.

And this is the significance of Islam for Sardar. Islam provides direction, the way ahead. It is a worldview, a vision of a just and equitable society and civilisation, a holistic culture, an invitation to thought for discovering the way out of the current crisis of modernity and postmodernism. To reduce it to a simplistic cookbook, a recipe for dos and don'ts, is a category mistake. Islam has gone through a process of reduction which has removed its

'insulating layers' one by one, he has argued. This process started early in Islamic history when Muslim lawyers codified Islamic law and reduced Islam to a 'cult of *fiqh*', or jurisprudence. The legalistic rulings of the classical Imams were space and time bound; they were concerned with solving the problems of their own time and, despite their best attempt to state the Qur'anic truth as they saw it, incorporated the prejudices and preoccupations of their own time. As a result some of the key concepts of Islam were stripped of their wider significance: *ijma* (consensus), which means consensus of the people, came to imply the consensus of the learned scholars; *ilm*, which signifies all variety of knowledge, came to signify only religious knowledge; and *ijtihad*, the reasoned struggle that all Muslims are required to engage in to interpret and understand the text of the Qur'an, first became the responsibility of the select few and then the privilege of only the classical scholars.<sup>9</sup>

For Sardar, as he argues in *The Future of Muslim Civilisation*,<sup>10</sup> Islam has to be reinterpreted for every epoch. And, unlike most Muslim revivalists, Sardar does not believe that the 'Medina State', established by the Prophet Muhammad, has to be imitated in every detail; only its spirit, and the underlying values have enduring significance. It is Sardar's contention that 'the norms which the Companions of the Prophets set themselves were the best possible in their own conditions', but that 'at least in theory it is possible, now or in the future, to create a society that achieves a realisation of Islamic values greater than that achieved by the Companions of the Prophet'. As a review in *Futures* noted, 'there are Muslims to whom this will seem little short of blasphemy, but Sardar contends that, subject to certain divine injunctions, the community should be guided by the spirit of Islam and not by uncritical observance of precedents which changing conditions have made irrelevant'.<sup>11</sup>

The reinterpretation of Islam from epoch to epoch presents contemporary Muslims with a stark challenge: to reconstruct the Muslim civilisation anew, ever more urgent with the rise of Wahhabism.<sup>12</sup> But this reconstruction cannot be based on a simplistic reductionist model; it has to be based on a futures vision of Islam, the future has to be seen through the message of the Prophet Muhammad, and Islam has to be realised holistically. So, what is the basis for the reconstruction of the Muslim civilisation? Sardar suggests that a set of ten fundamental Islamic concepts should be used to guide this reconstruction; collectively, these concepts also furnish us with a futures vision of an Islamic society. Islam, he writes, is

a religion, culture, tradition and civilisation all at once; but to see it as any one of these single components is to miss the whole picture. Islam is best appreciated as a worldview: as a way of looking at and shaping the world; as a system of knowing, being and doing. The literal meaning of Islam is submission and peace. To be a Muslim is to submit voluntarily to the will of One, All Knowing, All Powerful, Merciful and Beneficent God and to seek peace on the basis of this submission. This peace is sought within a parameter of objective and eternal concepts and values that are furnished by the Qur'an and the Sunnah (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad) and that shape the worldview of Islam. The fundamental concept of the Islamic worldview is *tawheed*, which is normally translated as 'the Unity of God', but which by extension also signifies the unity of humankind and the unity of people and nature. Within this all-embracing framework of unity the creation is a trust from God, and men and women – who are equal in the sight of God whatever their colour or creed – are *khalifa* or trustees of God. Humankind is responsible for this trust, and each individual will be held accountable for his or her action in the *akhira* (the Hereafter). The responsibilities of the trusteeship are fulfilled on the basis of two other fundamental Islamic concepts: *ilm* (distributive knowledge) and *adl* (social justice). The thought and actions of the *khalifa* are based not on blind faith but on knowledge; and the sole function of all the ideas and activities of the trustee are to promote all-round justice. Both *ilm* and *adl* are sought on the basis of *ijma* (consensus), *shura* (consultation and participation) and *istislah* (public interest). Within this framework, all ways of knowing, being and doing are *halal* (praiseworthy); outside this ethical circumference, where there is danger, lies the *haram* (blameworthy) territory. The challenge for any Muslim people is to map out the *halal* territory most suitable for their historic epoch. The individuals who voluntarily accept the challenge and undertake to work for this goal, on the basis of the above conceptual and value matrix, are bound together in a community, the *ummah*.<sup>13</sup>

Sardar's position is as far from the ahistorical Sufi or mystical version of Islam as it is from the reductive and simplistic interpretation of the legalist school; yet it incorporates them both. The Sufis might argue that the experience of Allah is much more crucial; that is, civilisational revitalisation cannot begin without internal

transformation. Still, there is nothing in Sardar's theoretical position that either could take issue with – yet it is located in a totally different universe. Sardar desires Islam to move forward as a civilisation based on participatory governance and social justice, and as a knowledge-based society committed to the worship of God and the creation of technical, scientific, and philosophical knowledge that can improve the human condition not just of individuals and the ummah, the community of believers, but of humanity as a whole. While his vision is distinctively Islamic, it is also intrinsically humanistic. Moreover, it opens up everything to question – state, nation, capitalism, science, the whole gamut of modernity has to be re-examined in the light of this conceptual vision and rejected or renovated within the more humane, Islamic framework. This is why, Sardar has suggested, the process of reconstruction will be painful and piecemeal. As it incorporates philosophical, cultural, scientific and economic aspects, it will require intellectual courage and boldness. It is a multigenerational process which will continue well into the next century; and it will have, as it already has, its setbacks and its successes.

Sardar has not been content simply to argue for and articulate a positive vision of Islam and shape a conceptual methodology for its realisation. He has actively and systematically used this methodology to delineate Islamic alternatives, as in *Islamic Futures: The Shape of Ideas to Come*.<sup>14</sup> And in *Explorations in Islamic Science*,<sup>15</sup> Sardar uses the framework to ask questions that we do not normally ask of science: What is its relationship with civilisation and worldview, with poverty and powerlessness, public interest and social sense of direction, lack of education in Muslim nations, and so on? The goal is to shape a science that does not make distinctions between values and objective reality and between self and nature. In Sardar's words: 'What we are concerned with are the universal values of Islam that emphasise justice, unity of thought and ideas, a holistic approach to the study of nature and social relevance of intellectual and scientific endeavour. In this framework, fragmentation, meaningless and endless reduction and appropriation of god-like powers or monopoly of truth and marginalisation and suppression of other forms of knowledge are shunned.'<sup>16</sup> A science that takes the Qur'an's call to gain *ilm* seriously, that pursues knowledge to reduce human suffering, to elevate men and women to the sublime – that is both a spiritual quest and an objective enterprise. While Islamic science retains such criteria as testability and repeatability, both its contents

and its methods would be different. It would, for example, seek alternatives to vivisection, emphasise synthesis rather than perpetual reduction, respect and upgrade traditional techniques and ways of knowing, and would be at the centre of national or societal development and not merely an excuse for military adventurism. Sardar is at pains to point out that the function of the exercise is not simply to be different from or better than western science, but the project must be deeper, touching the roots of our evolutionary history and creating a more humane, participatory, just future.

The difference between Sardar's notion of Islamic science and the dominant mode of doing science is well illustrated with the case of medicine. In his essay 'Science and Health: Medicine and Metaphysics', which appeared in his edited book, *The Revenge of Athena: Science, Exploitation and the Third World*,<sup>17</sup> Sardar points out that Islamic medicine was a highly sophisticated enterprise that was kept alive, for over 800 years, by continuous research. It is the basis of medicine in the west where its basic texts, such as ibn Sina's *Canons of Medicine*, and tools and techniques were adopted and used. However, it was deliberately and brutally suppressed by colonial powers. As a result, it now appears as an antiquated system that cannot cope with the demands of the modern world. But its emphasis on the total personality of the patient, its emphasis on the psychological root of some physical problems, its integration of lifestyle with health, as well as many of its remedies and techniques, are just as valid today as they ever were.

Sardar locates health and medicine in lifestyle. Lifestyles lead to numerous diseases such as cancer and heart attacks. At the same time, lifestyle can also reactivate old diseases; sexual behaviour, for example, can change the epidemiology of a disease. AIDS was possibly endemic to Africa but only as a mild childhood disease. However, when it was linked to a homosexual lifestyle and imported back it became a deadly disease. Lifestyle then has a major impact both on health and disease, making them issues of worldview. Modern medicine springs out of western civilisation, where technique is more important than an ecology of self and environment. Instead of changing one's eating patterns or not using harmful chemicals, what we have are newer and newer methods that simply export the problem elsewhere; a problem located in worldview and lifestyle is solved by technology. Instead of changing oneself, one changes one's physical nature (as with plastic surgery) and now even one's genetic structure: 'Reductive methodology epistemologically

removes society from medicine.' Central to the modern medical worldview is control over the metaphors, modes and means of medicine. Instead of focusing on health, the current system focuses on disease; instead of promoting other ways to health, traditional and indigenous forms of medicine are ridiculed, and finally non-western techniques of health, as well systems of healthcare, are often declared illegal. Pregnancy, for example, is seen as an illness needing medical care instead of a natural phenomenon; death is seen as a pathology instead of a natural product of life. At issue is control and power. Islamic medicine transferred power to the patient and itself functioned as a catalyst. This is why, even today, it is the non-western medical systems that cope with the health issues in rural and remote parts of the non-western countries. The solution to the current crisis in health and medicine, Sardar argues, is to relegitimise traditional medical systems, to standardise them and to upgrade them with further research: 'With appropriate resources and research base, Islamic medicine would not only be more than a match for western medicine, it may actually rescue humankind from a system of medicine and metaphysics determined to pursue a suicidal path.'<sup>18</sup> Medicine is a clear example, then, of Islamic science. Sophisticated medical systems, developed over centuries, were forced by colonialism and modernity into a cul-de-sac and replaced by foreign and new professionalised local elites. Asking about the future of medicine then must begin with asking what is the framework for medicine, what are the values that inform it, what is the political history of that discourse, who benefits from it and who loses in each particular discourse? These questions become vehicles for inquiry, for undoing reductive epistemological structures.

### III. Postmodernism as Imperialism

In late 1989, Ziauddin Sardar climbed aboard a flight from Kuala Lumpur to London and buried himself in a fat literary novel.

As I read *The Satanic Verses*, I remember, I began to quiver; then, as I turned page after page, I began to shake; by the time I finished the novel, I had been frozen rigid. For the first time in my life, I realised what it must feel like to be raped. I felt as though Salman Rushdie had plundered everything that I hold dear and despoiled the inner sanctum of my identity.<sup>19</sup>

There was, of course, more to come. On 14 February 1989, St Valentine's Day, Ayatollah Khomeini issued his notorious fatwa against Rushdie.

I will always remember the date not because of its association with love but its connection with death. The fatwa compounded my agony. It not only brought a death sentence for Rushdie but it also made me redundant as an intellectual for implicit in the fatwa was the declaration that Muslim thinkers are too feeble to defend their own beliefs. The mayhem that followed echoed the Malay proverb which says that when two elephants fight it is the grass in-between which gets trampled. All those who felt violated by Rushdie and rejected the Ayatollah's stance must have felt like the grass in-between.

For Sardar, both Rushdie and the Ayatollah are products of post-modernism where the distinction between image and reality, the authentic and the aberration, life and death have evaporated – all is desperate, panic is the norm, and everything can be justified by reference to secular and religious absolutes. Sardar's response to Rushdie came from deep within Islamic traditions: though post-modernism is credited with the notion of books talking to books, throughout the history of Muslim civilisation books have been talking to each other loudly and distinctively. The most celebrated case of books talking to books involves the *Incoherence of Philosophers* in which al-Ghazzali (d.1111) deconstructs philosophy and shows it to be just so much hot air. In *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, ibn Rushd (d.1198) deconstructs al-Ghazzali and mounts a truly monumental defence of philosophy – the debate continued for centuries. Thus, Sardar responded with *Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair* (written with his colleague and friend Meryll Wyn Davies).<sup>20</sup> In a fair and just world, just as many people would have read and bought *Distorted Imagination* as *The Satanic Verses* – but as Sardar shows, freedom of expression has meaning only in a civilisational context: western civilisation has relegated all freedoms to itself; for Others freedom of expression is only a chimera. However, the counter-challenge of *Distorted Imagination* did not go unnoticed. Malise Ruthven, who aggressively defended Rushdie in his book *A Satanic Affair*, was forced to concede:

After a year's reflection ... I believe that the most effective Muslim response to the book has been, not the struggle in the street, but the reply to Rushdie from Muslim intellectuals like Ziauddin Sardar ... As Muslims educated in Britain, they have responded to Rushdie's challenge in a sophisticated language that cannot be idly dismissed; western, secular-minded intellectuals must respond in turn to their challenge.<sup>21</sup>

The Rushdie affair also marks a turning point in Sardar's preoccupations. His concern with postmodernism and the west increases: the struggle now, he asserts, is 'over a territory which is the last refuge of my humanity'. Each civilisation must draw a line in the sand clearly marking the point beyond which the battle for survival loses all meaning. For when postmodernism relativises history it does so at the expense of the non-west in a conscious or unconscious attempt to write the non-west out of history. Why should the fatigue of the west, of calls for the end of the real, for replacing the real with simulcra, for dislodging all truth claims, be the fuel to burn Islam? While Sardar uses poststructural discourses that have created a discourse within which the objective has become problematic, he does not allow postmodernity to vanquish Islam. In Sardar's words, 'the challenge of being a Muslim today is the responsibility to harness a controlled explosion, one that will clear the premises of all the detritus without damaging the foundations that would bring down the House of Islam'. While others relinquish all grand narratives, all claims to generalised truth, all claims to divine moments in history, all claims to meaning systems which clarify the purpose of self, nature, and future, Sardar believes that the basis of Islam should not be deconstructed. This would be lunacy, it would be civilisational suicide. This was exactly Rushdie's mistake, the irreverent deconstruction of what is of fundamental value to at least a billion people on the planet.

Much of Sardar's work is highly critical of postmodernism, arguing that it merely continues the western trajectory that started with colonialism and expanded to occupy the minds of non-western individuals and societies. In *Postmodernism and the Other*,<sup>22</sup> Sardar demonstrates the imperialistic nature of postmodern culture. Sardar dissects a host of cultural products, from art, films, videos, music, philosophy to architecture, shopping malls and consumer lifestyles, to show that postmodernism produces not plurality but a deeper and more frightening hegemony of a single culture. It operates a subtle

revisionism to create an illusion of inclusion while further marginalising the reality of the non-west and confounding its aspirations. Lusty polemics of the changing nature of knowledge and a whole variety of appropriated artefacts and ethnic goods and styles may dazzle the minds of western intellectuals, but they have severe consequences for the non-west. Along with postmodernism, secularism, individualism and absolute moral relativism stand tall and proud, offering to include the Other, but the price of admission is history, truth, and the authentic, struggled-for self; the price of admission is the context, the individual sacrifices of Muslim women and men, since the vision of Islam is now trivialised, ahistoricised, and consigned to the dustbin of history. The task for Muslims in particular (and the non-west in general), is to stand firm, rescue the basis of Islam (or their own civilisational framework) and use it as a guiding principle to discern how one should act in a frighteningly changing world, in a world of simulcra, clones, cyborgs, Hollywood and Madison Avenue.

However, this world is as much a product of postmodernism as it is of modernity and traditionalism. Both modernity and traditionalism have had a single impact on Muslim society: imitation. In traditionalism, it is *taqlid*, the technical Islamic legal term for imitation, of the classical jurists. Under modernity, it is the imitation of the west and all things western. Both ideologies stifle imagination and the search for original and authentic solutions. Sardar considers Islamic fundamentalism to be a product of the 'triple alliance' between traditionalism, modernity and postmodernism. It is worth noting that in Sardar's thought, traditionalism works in a similar way to colonialism: it is the creation and occupation of an imaginary space that provides control. Colonialism created 'the great lie, the greatest lie, about the nature of the West and about the nature of Others'.<sup>23</sup> This imaginary, Orientalist construction was then used to subjugate the people of the non-west. Nationalism, for example, creates an imaginary identity that then becomes an instrument of power. So, South Asian nations, for example, are 'imaginary states sustained by an illusionary national identity'. This constructed identity 'has replaced the sense of community' and engendered a 'permanent sense of crisis' that is fuelled by 'turning religion, tradition, and nationalism into ideologies which promote inversions of reality and fabricate conflict'.<sup>24</sup> Islamic fundamentalism is a similar imaginary construction which has no historical precedent; it is based on certain essentialist readings of history and inappropri-

ately imported modernist ideas that are then projected back onto that history. For example, the idea of a nation-state, particularly a religious state circumscribed by geographical boundaries, is a total anathema to Islam: Islam is unequivocally universal and rejects all notions of nationalism. It recognises 'nations and tribes' as an identity category but strongly rejects the idea that ethnic or geographic identity should be bound up with a geographical 'nation-state'. But this is precisely what Islamic fundamentalism has done. What is fundamental about Islamic fundamentalism is that the nation-state is fundamental to its vision. So, in this way, traditionalism incorporates and assimilates the categories of modernity, even though they may be contrary to its own worldview; hence, traditionalism becomes a by-product of modernity. And since the utopian quest of an Islamic state has proved so illusive, and its realisation so authoritarian and despotic, the whole exercise has generated a state of panic. Panic politics is fundamental to Islamic fundamentalism, where distinction between the real and the imaginary, fabricated history and true tradition, has been lost. In this sense, Islamic fundamentalism is a by-product of postmodernism. Collectively, the 'triple alliance' can only do violence to the tradition, history and pluralistic outlook of Islam. A positive future requires 'killing the two-headed serpent of ideologies and imitation; and unleashing the creative imagination that is anchored to the Self' of the Muslim and South Asian communities.

Sardar does not consider postmodernism to have much staying power. In the history of ideas, it would probably be nothing more than a glitch. Postmodernism, he writes,

is the desert where people are prospecting for a new form of existence, as the remaining vestiges of modernity crumble to dust all around them. This prospecting, the shaping of a future book of our modes of social and cultural existence, will, necessarily, lead to considerable strife and conflict. But beyond this conflict, one can envision and work for the emergence of a saner, safer, society.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond postmodernism is a multicivilisational world, a world of pluralistic spaces where the civilisation of Islam, India and China, as well as numerous other cultures, rediscover their traditions and their own modes of knowing, being and doing.

#### IV. Futures as Pluralistic Spaces

To create pluralistic places, we must begin with critique. And while Sardar's critique is often brutal – for example, he called Pakistani scientists 'Suzuki taxi drivers' (meaning they do not create knowledge but merely blindly implement large industrial science projects) at a 1995 Conference on Science in the Islamic Polity in the 21st Century – his goal is always to undermine privilege and hence open up the future to other possibilities. Long before Huntington suggested that we are heading towards a 'clash of civilisations', Sardar, and many futurists before him, including Johan Galtung, Madhi Elmandjra, Ashis Nandy, had argued that the future belongs to a number of different civilisations. 'Civilization as we know it', Sardar wrote,

has always meant Western civilization. Civilized behaviour and products of civilization have been measured by the yardsticks of the West. Europe, and now North America, has always contemplated itself as the focus of the world, the axis of civilization, the goal of history, the end product of human destiny. But other people can accept Europe as 'the civilization' or manifest destiny only at the expense of their historical and cultural lives.<sup>26</sup>

There are different ways to live and different ways to realise the great human values that are the common heritage of humanity: justice, freedom, equity, fair dealing and cultural authenticity. 'The Western way, the secularist way, is not the only way – those who think so still live in the nineteenth century.' Different civilisations will insist on finding their own way according to their own worldviews and visions. Thus, the future will be multicivilisational.

But this future will not be a future of conflict even if trends since September 11 veer us in that direction. It will be a future of difference, of multiplicity or plurality of space. Of course, the great hurdle towards this future is the west whose primal fear is the fear of real difference. For Sardar, the west is not simply a geographical or cultural or civilisational category; it is also a worldview and a conceptual and epistemological category and as such a collective mode of domination. As culture and civilisation, the west makes its presence felt everywhere, no geographical space is without its impact, its consumer and cultural products create desire everywhere and seduce everyone. As a concept, Sardar has argued, the west is a tool of analysis that gives us certain representations of history, good

and virtuous life and Other people and societies. In other words, the concept of the west is a yardstick by which we measure all societies, including European and American ones, and judge Other people and their cultures. Western history, in this conceptual representation, is Universal History in which histories of all Other cultures and civilisations merge, like so many tributaries: thus the function of all Other cultures and civilisations was actually to produce the west, the apex of civilisation.<sup>27</sup> In epistemological terms, the west is projected as a particular way of knowing and as a specific truth. Even post-modernism, which relativises truth, actually claims liberal bourgeois truth to be the grand arbitrator of all truths! So the west works as a defining category. Sardar's goal is simultaneously to resist and disengage from the defining power of the west and to create intellectual and cultural space for the non-west by encouraging non-western cultures and societies to describe themselves with their own categories and concepts and hence actualise their own vision of the future. His own work on Islam and reconstruction of Muslim civilisation is a part of this endeavour. But he believes that Islam itself, indeed any non-western civilisation or culture on its own, cannot stand the onslaught of the west. The non-west must join hands in a collective effort to dethrone the naked emperor.

In his attempts to resist, undermine and dethrone the west, Sardar often frames his answers and solutions with non-western categories and metaphors. This can be illustrated with a discussion of cyberspace. While the information-age hype is broadcast throughout the world as the inevitable future, Sardar has proposed that cyberspace is in fact a new imaginary space that the west is colonising in the traditional fashion – by projecting its darker side onto it.<sup>28</sup> Sardar compares the 'colonisation' of cyberspace with the myth of the American frontier and with the practices of colonial companies such as the East India Company, and finds frightening parallels. However, Sardar's aim here is not to frighten but to galvanise the non-west into action. The question arises: Are there other ways of looking at cyberspace? How can the non-west engage constructively with cyberspace and free the network from the cultural categorisations of the west? Sardar suggests that we should see cyberspace not as a frontier but as a projection of our Inner Self. So, cyberspace becomes Us; and the question now becomes: What do we want ourselves to be? The question of cyberspace becomes the question of which future – an atomistic Western future or an alternative future based on a transformed relationship with self, gender and community.

In his contribution to the Unesco project on the futures of cultures, Sardar differentiates between various futures.<sup>29</sup> He argues that Asia stands between programmed futures, prepackaged futures, and authentically creative futures; and outlines the tension between the future as a priori given and the futures we might desire. The future we are given is the extension of the present – of ossified traditionalism and fundamentalism, of modernist nation states and instrumentalist rationality, of postmodern culture, of style, of simulcra, of the commodification of self and spirit, of the consumption of the soul, and the cannibalisation of the Other. More important than the suffocating past and the fragmented present (fossilised alternatives and the ‘Singaporisation’ of Asia) that the non-west lives under, are desired futures. For Sardar these must be systematically planned and created. In his preferred future, Sardar stresses cultural autonomy, the creation of non-western sciences, and seeing the self not through the eyes of the Other but through Asian paradigms, through more authentic historical cultural categories. To survive, Asian cultures must embrace and transform their histories, otherwise their future will become even more diminished than it is now.

#### V. The Prognosis

To be a Muslim nowadays is to live perpetually on the edge, to be constantly bruised and bloodied from the harsh existence at the margins, to be exhausted by the screams of pain and agony that no one seems to hear. We, the Muslims, live in a world that is not of our own making, that has systematically marginalised our physical, intellectual and psychological space, that has occupied our minds and our bodies by brute force – even though sometimes this force comes in the guise of scholarship and literary fiction. We walk around with a 400-year historical baggage of decline and colonisation; we think with terms, and talk about institutions, that have been fossilised in history; we walk around with split personalities hiding our real Self from the world outside and pretending to be scientists, technologists or social scientists, wearing the symbols of modernity on our chest; we speak a philosophical and ethical language that the dominant ideology does not understand. We have been developed to death, modernised to extinction, Leninised into oblivion, and now we are being written out of history by postmodernism. Criticism and self-

criticism is the only tool we have to fight back; and excellence in thought and action our only guarantee of success.<sup>30</sup>

This is particularly so when we consider that for Sardar *ilm*, distributive knowledge, is the main driving force of Islamic culture. In 'Paper, Printing and Compact Discs: The Making and Unmaking of Islamic Culture',<sup>31</sup> Sardar defines *ilm* as knowledge as well as the communication of knowledge; it is the accumulation of knowledge as well as access to knowledge; it is data, information, knowledge and wisdom all rolled into one. Excellence is central to such an all embracing notion of knowledge. And it was the desire for knowledge in this multidimensional form that led to the growth of Islam; this desire to know transformed Islam from its desert origins to a world civilisation. Thus the history of Islam, Sardar asserts, can be understood best as a history of the Muslim understandings of *ilm* and the actualisation of this understanding in society and culture. The Islamic focus on the words and text, for example on the *hadith*, or sayings of the Muhammad, led to revolutionary developments in the transmission and management of spiritual information: 'The methodology of *hadith* collection, criticism and transmission involved not only textual analysis but biographical analysis of narrators, chronological accuracy, linguistic and geographic parameters as well as authentication of oral and written records.'<sup>32</sup> With the manufacture of paper in the eighth century, *ilm* became a truly distributive process – the Muslims developed a formidable publishing industry and knowledge became cheap and accessible. However, with the emergence of printing technology in the fourteenth century the situation reversed. The *ulema*, the religious scholars, feared that the proliferation of written texts would undermine their authority and control and prevented the emergence of printing in the Muslim world for over three hundred years. This stopped creative thought, and centralised authority in a few hands. From being an open-ended culture, Muslim culture became closed and narrow, concerned only with jurisprudence – legal judgements of a few scholars – and not with the communication and distribution of knowledge. A barrier between the texts of Islam, the Qur'an and Muslims had been created.

The future of Islam – and Sardar's own project, which he has constantly emphasised is a multigenerational enterprise – depends greatly on how tradition and authenticity work themselves out in the context of postmodern times. As Sardar suggests himself, Muslim

civilisation is now in the midst of a third revolution. New information technologies, with their distributive and decentralised networks, have the greatest potential to transform Islam. By creating new data banks, by placing the classical learning on a CD-ROM, by providing access to the Qur'an and all the literature that surrounds it, the new storage and retrieval technologies take the power to interpret the Qur'an from the sole hands of the clergy. The learning necessary for the interpretation of the Qur'an thus becomes available to each individual, thus allowing non-experts to understand Islamic texts and jurisprudence. Through compact discs and expert systems, the Qur'an can again return to the individual. Thus Sardar believes that these new technologies will result in the decentralisation of the power of the religious clergy and the creation or return of the initial knowledge and communication-based culture of Islam. The role then of the clergy as knowledge banks is being increasingly challenged, thereby potentially ushering an explosion of creativity. Unlike previous eras where paper and printing had limited circulation and could be controlled, the *ulema* are now no longer in a position to challenge new paths of communication and dissemination; instead, to survive they need to find a new role for themselves in the emerging order of *ilm*. The response from the *ulema* has been 'Talibanisation' – not a critical recasting of technology through desired Islamic futures, but the fear of the future itself.

Traditions are different from traditionalism, an ideology that seeks power and territory. Traditions, on the other hand,

are dynamic; they are constantly reinventing themselves and adjusting to change. Indeed, a tradition that does not change ceases to be a tradition. But traditions change in a specific way. They change within their own parameters, at their own speed, and towards their chosen direction.<sup>33</sup>

Traditions change within their own parameters because if they were to vacate their position a meaningless vacuum would be created. Traditions thus seek meaningful change within an integrated, enveloped and continuing sense of identity. Change within tradition is thus an 'evaluated process, a sifting of good, better, best as well as under no circumstances, an adaptation that operates according to the values the veneration of tradition has maintained intact'.

The notion of tradition as a dynamic process leads us to Sardar's understanding of authenticity. He sees authenticity not as a return

to something that is fixed in history but as a set of dynamic axioms. Authenticity is that conceptual and ethical matrix that gives a society, a culture, its distinctive worldview and temper. Thus, authenticity is not a question of 're-instituting puritanism in all its stark determinism' but more a form of becoming – it is not an end process but a goal-orientated direction that provides unabashed confidence in one's history and tradition: 'the pride that dares to walk its talk'. Nothing terrifies the west more, Sardar has written, than 'the unapologetic Other with the competence and the confidence to accommodate the contemporary world and amend it in ways undreamed of and unconsidered by the hosts of modernity and post-modernism'.<sup>34</sup> In sharp contrast to many modernists and secularists who believe that there is something culturally lacking in Muslim, Chinese, Indian and Africans cultures that keeps them in chains and underdeveloped, Sardar believes that cultural authenticity actually contains the seeds for the regeneration of these societies. But for this regeneration to occur, both tradition and culture must be seen in their dynamic forms.

Sardar's vision of the future may not be to the taste of many thinkers. In particular, his interpretation of Islam has been widely contested. He has been criticised by traditionalists, mystics and modernists alike. There is the criticism that he is overtly rationalist; that beyond words is the experience of God. Systems of thought must try to map out these divine experiences. For others, Sardar is too liberal in that he does not take a literalist view of the Qur'an and human history, seeing Islam not as a fixed structure but as a guideline, a vision, a calling – 'a matrix of permissible structures'. Finally, for many, his work is far too critical, in the negative sense of the word; instead of building bridges with nascent research institutes, Sardar is quick to attack them, as, for example, he does in his essay on the nature of an Islamic university.<sup>35</sup> All these positions have been invoked, for example, in the discourse of Islamic science: the mystical tendency has argued for an Islamic science concerned only with the sacred (also meaning secret) knowledge; the traditionalists see Islamic science as an ontological category and are concerned largely with the 'scientific facts' in the Qur'an; and the fundamental modernists reject the whole notion, arguing that science is pure, objective and universally valid. But it is in the nature of discourse to be contested; and even though Sardar has complained that the discourse he has initiated has been hijacked by mystics and fundamentalists of every variety,<sup>36</sup> he would readily concede that discourse is refined, and enlightened progress made, only through contention.

Visions too are, and have to be, contested. In Islam, the perfect vision is traditionally associated with heaven. As Sardar tells us in his lovely essay 'The Paradise I seek',<sup>37</sup> 'the paradise of the Qur'an is not so much an abode of pleasure but an abode of eternal bliss and sublime innocence'. At the centre of the Qur'anic metaphor of heaven is the garden. While so many have become transfixed by the details of the description, for Sardar, the image of heaven is about the limitation of the senses. 'What appears at first to be straight literalism is in fact used to illustrate the limitation of language and demonstrate the ineffability of the world to come.' Sardar suggests that the Qur'anic vision of heaven does not reside only in paradise; it can be used to envision the future of Muslim civilisation here and now. This has been his effort and along the way, as with other Muslims, one realises that the garden metaphor is also about environmentalism (long before environmentalism was fashionable), about stewardship, about the symbiotic relationships between one's own culture and Other cultures. Images of hell give warnings and force one to struggle against technologies of mass destruction, of eugenics, vivisection and other such horrors. Ultimately, the vision of paradise is there to help us build better worlds and to give warnings of what can happen if we fail. The reward is innocence and peace.

By now, the argument that Sardar's work is unique in modern Muslim and world scholarship should be obvious; and, thus, the purpose of this book. We have tried to bring some of his insightful writings into one volume. As well, there is a reasonably full working bibliography of Sardar's work for those who would like to pursue his thought at greater length.

In Sardar's work a paradigm of alternative futures stands before us. It not only articulates a positive future but also shows that one is possible. Just as Islam is a summons to critical reflection, Sardar's books and essays can be seen as an invitation to reasoned thought and action, as an incentive to question the will to power, and as a manifesto to embrace traditional pluralism. Traditional pluralism, as Sardar notes,

is the frightening premise that there is more than one, sustainable, sensible, humane and decent way to resolve any problem; and that most of these problems can be solved within traditions. Traditional pluralism is a mark of common respect we are called on to pay to each tradition in a world full of diverse traditions; it is the basic idea that we might just know what is best for ourselves.

It is the notion that inventiveness, ingenuity, enterprise and common sense are integral to all traditions; and that every tradition, if given the opportunity, resources, tolerance and freedom, can adapt to change and solve its own problems. In other words, all have the ability to solve their own problems themselves within their own traditions in ways that they find satisfactory. So employing the traditional society option is a new way of arriving at participatory democracy in a most liberal fashion.<sup>38</sup>

We are thus summoned to unpack what we – all of us – have been force-fed for centuries and to begin the long trek forward to sanity and peace.

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