

# Islam, Postmodernism and Other Futures: The Contribution of Zia Sardar

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*Ziauddin Sardar is one of the most original and prolific Muslim writers in Britain today. He has tackled subjects ranging from cyber space to Mecca; Chaos Theory to Islamic Law. His originality lies in the way that he places all subjects within a unique Islamic framework. He argues that there are many ways of knowing, and this framework is a filter through which he examines the relationships between east and west, old and new, science and society – and between the past and the future. He consistently argues for the non-west – seeing even Postmodernism as another form of westernisation. For Sardar, the non-west has its own, vital, global role in the present as well as in the many alternative futures that lie before us.*

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### *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. But he later related that:

*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 some one'. 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 some one much older. Someone with a beard," one of them said. "Perhaps, even with an arching back", added another.<sup>1</sup>*

Indeed, Sardar has shaped and led the renaissance in Islamic intellectual thought, the project of rescuing Islamic epistemology from traditionalists, modernists, secularists, postmodernists and political opportunists alike. The urgency of this rescue is especially felt both in the West and in the Islamic world since the events of September 11, 2001. Through Sardar's writings, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the causes that created the context for September 11 as well as the solutions for global transformation. Argues Sardar, the real costs of closing the doors of *ijtihad*, at reasoned struggle and rethinking have now put Islamic civilization in a foundational crisis. To meet the challenge of this crisis, there must be critique from within, not just the standard critique of the West.

Sardar argues that 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 Shariah must be seen in its historical context and not

elevated to the Divine (it is only the Quran, which is divine) - the Shariah must be seen as interpretive, 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 September 11th, and play a role in creating a global *ummah* - "a community of justice-seeking and oppressed people everywhere," not just Muslims. 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 the Muslim civilization from its long decline as well as the subjugation to, and assimilation in, the West.

### *Islam as Difference*

Sardar believes that 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 do's 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 varieties 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 only of the classical scholars.

Sardar argues in *The Future of Muslim Civilisation*<sup>2</sup> that 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 Prophet 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>3</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 legalists school; yet it incorporates them both. Still, there is nothing in Sardar's theoretical position that either could take issue with - 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 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. And 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.

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>4</sup>

### *Postmodernism as Imperialism*

In late 1989, Ziauddin Sardar climbed aboard a flight from Kuala Lumpur to London; and buried himself into 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>5</sup>

There was, of course, more to come. On February 14th 1989, 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."<sup>6</sup>

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>7</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 civilization 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. 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 civilizational 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.

This world is, however, 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 the *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>8</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, the South Asian nations, for example, are "imaginary states sustained by an illusionary national identity." This constructed identity "has replaced the sense of community" and endangered a "permanent sense of crisis" that is fuelled by "turning religion, tradition, and nationalism into ideologies which promote inversions of reality and fabricate conflict." Islamic fundamentalism is a similar imaginary construction which has no

historical precedence; it is based on certain essentialist readings of history and inappropriately 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.

Sardar does not consider postmodernism to have much staying power, though. 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>9</sup>*

Beyond postmodernism is a multi-civilisational 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.

### ***Futures as Pluralistic Spaces***

To create pluralistic places, we must begin with critique. And while Sardar’s critique is often brutal - calling 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 has always been to undermine privilege and hence open up the future to other possibilities. Long before Huntington suggested that we are heading towards a “clash of civilisation,” Sardar, and many futurists before him, including Johan

Galtung, Madhi Elmandjra, and 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>10</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 in finding their own way according to their own worldviews and visions. Thus, the future will be multi-civilisational.

But this future will not be a future of conflict. 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 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, 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>11</sup> In epistemological terms, the West is projected as a particular way of knowing and as a specific Truth. Even postmodernism, which relativises Truth, actually claims liberal bourgeoisie Truth to be the grand arbitrator of all truths! So the West works as a defining category. Sardar's goal is to simultaneously 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 on it. Sardar compares the "colonisation" of cyberspace with the myth of 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 warn and 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 cultured categorisations of the West? Sardar suggests that we should see cyberspace not as 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 relationship, with self, gender and community.

In his contribution to the Unesco project on the futures of cultures, Sardar differentiates between various futures.<sup>12</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, postmodern culture of style, of simulcra, of the commodification of self and spirit, of the consumption of the soul, and the cannibalization of the Other. More important than the suffocating past and the fragmented present (e.g. the Singaporization 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 a non-Western science, 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.

### *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>13</sup>

The future of Islam - and Sardar's own project which he has constantly emphasised is a multigenerational enterprise - depends much on how tradition and authenticity work themselves out in context of postmodern times. As Sardar suggests himself, the Muslim civilization 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 disks and expert systems, the Qur'an can again return to the individual. Thus Sardar believes that these new technologies will result in the decentralization 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 themselves they need to find a new role for themselves in the emerging order of *ilm*. The response from the *ulema* has been Talibanization - not a critical recasting of technology through desired Islamic futures - the fear of the future.

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>14</sup> Traditions change within their own parameters because if they were to vacate their position a meaningless vacuum will 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."

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. His interpretation 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. 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>15</sup>

Many contradictory positions have been invoked in debates with/about Sardar, 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 discourses to be contested; and even though Sardar has complained that mystics and fundamentalist of all varieties have hijacked the discourses he has initiated, he would readily concede that discourses are refined, and enlightened progress made, only through contention.

In Sardar's work a paradigm of alternative futures stands before us. It not only articulates but also shows that a positive future 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 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 commonsense 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>16</sup>*

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

## Notes

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6. Ibid.
7. Malise Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Wrath of Islam*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1990; revised edition, p186.

8. Sardar with Merryl Wyn Davies and Ashis Nandy, *Barbaric Others: A Manifesto on Western Racism*, Pluto Press, London, 1993; Westview Press, Boulder Colorado, 1993, p3.
9. "When the Pendulum Comes to Rest" in Sheila M. Moorcroft (Editor), *Visions for the 21st Century*, Adamantine Press, London, 1992, p101.
10. *Distorted Imagination*, op cit., p276.
11. Interview with Jamie King, Mute, March 1998; <<http://www.metamute.com>>
12. "Asian Cultures: Between Programmed and Desired Futures," in Eleonora Masini and Yogesh Atal (Editors), *The Futures of Asian Cultures*, Unesco, Bangkok, 1993; and Unesco, *The Futures of Cultures*, Unesco, Paris, 1994.
13. Personal interview via e-mail!
14. "Currying Favour With Tradition" *The Herald* (Glasgow) 29 April 1998. p27.
15. "What makes a university Islamic?" in Sardar (editor) *How We Know: Ilm and the Revival of Knowledge*, Grey Seal, London, 1991.
16. "Currying Favour With Tradition," op cit.

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