

The Reformation of Muslim Thought: is Javed Ghamidi's Al-Mawrid the Answer?

Last week, I had the privilege of attending Pakistani scholar Javed Ghamidi's Q&A event in Orlando, FL. Many Muslim "moderates" see his organization, Al-Mawrid as a lighthouse in these Muslim Dark Ages. I have prepared an analysis of the event and my humble opinion regarding Mr. Ghamidi's approach to Islamic Thought. Let me begin by stating other scholars should take note of this gentleman's pleasant demeanor. Mr. Ghamidi is as humble and lighthearted as he is a powerhouse of Islamic knowledge. A local masjid boycott and armed guards at the event served as stark reminders of the times. Thankfully, the session proceeded without incident. This is an open letter and will be shared with Al-Mawrid and the event organizers. I have cited my father, Dr. Shabbir Ahmed's works in this essay for supportive position. He is a non-sectarian reformist scholar and exponent of the Quran based in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

- **Ijtihad vs. Taqlid:** Mr. Ghamidi is a staunch proponent of *ijtihad* (independent thought). Ascribing to no traditional school of thought himself, he denounces blind following of traditional interpretations. He identified the role of the *Ulema* (scholars) as educated interpreters, not Messengers or final authorities. He criticized the majority of Muslims who often fall for false traditions masquerading as Islam. He stated emphatically that without debate, progress is stifled and sects are created.
- **Qurancentric not "Quranist":** It is obvious that Mr. Ghamidi upholds the Quran as the primary source of guidance, whereas many scholars who claim to do so allow false traditions to becloud Quranic teachings. He made it clear however, that contrary to misconceptions he respects all hadith that are in line with the Quran.
- **Reformation:** Mr. Ghamidi believes a Reformation of Muslim Thought is needed, not a Reformation of Islam. The Quran is indeed versatile enough for all times.
- **Reason and Science:** Mr. Ghamidi chided Muslims for placing undue emphasis on recitation, repetition, and rote memorization of the Quran at the expense of understanding and application. He is also a strong supporter of the Sciences provided that ethics are respected. He remarked that God's changeless Divine Laws underpin all Science and indiscriminately reward seeking minds, Muslim or non-Muslim alike.
- **Human Rights:** Mr. Ghamidi opposes many oppressive interpretations and false traditions that allow for blasphemy and apostasy laws and human rights violations committed under the name of Islam.
- **Arts and Aesthetics:** Mr. Ghamidi cited aesthetic sense as God's gift to mankind and considers clean expression of the Arts permissible by the Quran.
- **Superstitions and Trivial Pursuits:** "The more enlightened the people, the less jinn are seen in the village", quote of the night by Mr. Ghamidi. Though he gently censured the audience for trivial preoccupations, the beard and nail polish questions trickled in throughout the night. He identified the beard as a *cultural practice* of the Prophet (S) and even His enemies, and hence, not an Islamic requirement.
- **Predestination:** Mr. Ghamidi asserted that though one can not control all factors in life, as creatures of Free Will, we are fully answerable for our actions. Further expanding on this concept, I would add that "Taqdeer" and "Qadr", often mistranslated as "predestination", actually mean "potential" or "power" in the original Quranic Arabic (see footnote 1). For example, see 25:2: "He is the One Who creates all things in precise design and gives them the potential (taqdeer) to become what they are meant to be."
- **Pluralism:** Mr. Ghamidi believes in equal rights and responsibilities for non-Muslims in a Muslim country. Furthermore, he stated rightfully that charity should be given on basis of need, not religion. (I would like to point out that the Quran remarkably refers to non-Muslims as "Brothers in Deen", provided they fulfill simple conditions in a Muslim state (please see my brief essay in footnote 2). He also denounced the division of the world into *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb* as a toxic, non-Quranic innovation.
- **Decline and Fall:** Mr. Ghamidi cited two causes for the current state of Muslims: 1) lack of scientific endeavors and

2) decline in ethics. With due respect, I consider these two side effects rather than root causes of our Decline and Fall, which I propose are: 1) *Human Rights Violations*, which every destroyed nation mentioned in the Quran met its fate for (see footnote 3) and 2) *Blind Following* of false, oppressive traditions under the name of Islam. These missteps have Muslims suffering under the Divine Law of Failure for the past 500 years.

- **The “Pillars” of Islam:** Mr. Ghamidi mentioned in passing that the “pillars” concept is not from the Quran, though its five components (Shahada, Salat, Zakat, Hajj, Abstinence) are *certainly* important. I would agree with him on this. I must also ask the Reader: is the undue traditional emphasis on these five concepts not the cause of Muslims ignoring the equally important Quranic values of Reason, Justice, forbidding evil and enjoining good, Jihad (internal/external), etc.? Is the entire Quran not the Pillar of Islam? Why bother even to understand the Quran if we can carry out 5 rituals and wash our hands of this obligation?
- **Gender Equity:** Mr. Ghamidi expressed progressive views regarding women’s rights. However, I must respectfully disagree with his understanding that the Quran allows for polygamy if a society chooses to enact it (though he did state the default should be monogamy). In fact, the Quran restricts polygamy only to times of societal upheaval when the well-being of widows and orphans is at risk:

4:3: If you fear (that the society) shall not be able to do justice with orphans, in order to accommodate widows and orphans, men of sound finances and character shall be encouraged to marry these widows; two, three, and four (4:127). If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly, then you must not take additional wives, and may continue with what you already have (4:129). This will prevent injustice and financial hardship (see footnote 1).

(Note: these were the conditions in which the Prophet (S) and Companions took on multiple wives, when many Muslim men had been slain and there was a need to accommodate their widows and orphans.)

- **Scope and Purpose of Islam:** Mr. Ghamidi correctly pointed out that “spirituality” is a generic concept rather than Islamic and that the aim of the Quran is to positively develop the *nafs* (personality). He cited the traditional definition of *tazkiya-un-nafs* as “self-purification” and that the purpose of Islam and mission of its Messengers was to purify individuals. I would like to offer an alternative understanding. *Tazkiya* comes from the word *zaku*, meaning “to purify” or “growth”. Hence, *tazkiya-un-nafs* can be understood as “growth of the self” or “self-actualization” (just as *zakat* [also from *zaku*] circulates wealth to allow all individuals to self-actualize). The Purpose of Islam is *not simply to purify individuals*, but to create a society of Justice, Human Rights, Ethics, Equal Opportunity, and a Moral Code, in which every individual can self-actualize to their full potential. Deen is not defined as religion, but as a *way of life and governance*. Is it any wonder that every single Messenger was opposed so mightily by decadent rulers, the corrupt elite, and the priesthood (see footnote 3)? Their mission extended far beyond the personal level and shook the pillars of corrupt societies, and is well expressed here:

7:157: ...(The Messenger) enjoins upon them the Right, and forbids them the Wrong. He declares Lawful all good things, and declares Unlawful only the unclean things. He relieves people from the burdens they carried. He *breaks the shackles* that they used to wear, (of mental and physical slavery), and brings them from darkness to Light.

I understand that many colleagues will recoil at a Quranic understanding seeming to promote an “Islamic State”. But, note two points:

1) Current “Islamic” Republics and extremist groups are not following Quranic Islam, but rather an “Islam No. 2” beclouded by false, intolerant, oppressive traditions. That is why a Reformation of Muslim Thought is the need of the hour.

2) Living in a Western Republic, you do not have to do much to realize Islamic values at different levels: personal, societal, or governmental. Has the Light of Deen not been spreading imperceptibly throughout the world since the time of Adam as promised in the Quran?

9:32: They seek to extinguish Allah's Light by their utterances (61:8). But Allah will not allow this to pass, for He has Willed to spread His Light in all its fullness even though the rejecters may detest it. He it is Who has sent His Messenger with Guidance and the True Deen (The System of Life), that He may cause it to prevail over all religions and systems of life.

Hence, we Muslims should not consider Western democracies as totally un-Islamic. Actually, these republics uphold Quranic principles such as freedom of religion and expression (2:256), equality before the law (4:135), presumption of innocence (49:6), gender equity (4:32, 33:35), social safety nets (9:60), rule of law (33:60), and strong ethics (70:21-70:33) better than our homelands. People naturally gravitate toward places that uphold Quranic values, just as the Prophet (S) moved to Medina from Mecca during the oppressive early years of His mission. (Certainly, there are shortcomings in the West in morality and foreign policy we should try to correct with our freedom of expression and voting rights.) As Mr. Ghamidi pointed out, God's Divine Laws are changeless and will reward any who align with them, regardless of labels. Let the Reformation of Muslim Thought take hold right here: in a free, ethical society.

In conclusion, in an age when Islam is considered a system of blind following, superstitions, and human rights violations such as blasphemy laws, stoning, sex slavery, child marriage, and obliteration of the Arts, most Muslim organizations (even American-based) are either defensive about or even justifying these atrocious traditions. In contrast, Javed Ghamidi's *Al-Mawrid* is brave enough to stand for Quran-based Human Rights and Reason. Let us return to the question at hand: is *Al-Mawrid* the Answer to the Reformation of Muslim Thought? In my educated opinion, it should be a part of it. We will continue to do our part. Please do your part and also support *Al-Mawrid* to your capacity.

Note: I have offered my humble, educated observations as a Student of the Quran. Feedback is welcome.

References (all searchable for free download on the internet):

1. The Quran as it Explains Itself, Quran translation by Dr. Shabbir Ahmed.
2. "The Quran Calls for Coexistence not Clash", *Malaysian Insider*, by Fawad Ahmed
3. A History of Prophets, by Dr. Shabbir Ahmed