Abu l-Hasan Ali al-Nadawi's Approach to Renewal and Reform (*Tajdīd wa Iṣlāh*)

Mohammed Farid Ali*

Our remarks are based on two works by Abu l-Hasan Ali Nadawi (d. 1999), a well known scholar of Arabic language, Islamic culture and *da'wah*. The first work is *Tārikh-i-Da'wat wa 'Azīmat*, originally written in Urdu then rendered into Arabic as "*Rijāl al-Fikr wa al-Da'wah fi al-Islām*" and into English as "*Saviours of the Islamic Spirit*". The second work is *Islam and the World: Rise and Decline of Muslims and its Effect on Mankind*. We shall briefly present Nadawi's theory of renewal, his approach to understanding the contributions of Islamic scholars, leaders, and Sufi shaykhs in this field, as well as his identification of the causes which have brought about the decline of Muslim civilisation.

Nadawi wrote that on one side Islam proclaims its completion and perfection as in the verse: "*This Day I have perfected your Religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion*" (*al-Mā'idah*, 5: 3). The reality though is that life is a never ending phenomenon. Its youthfulness is maintained by the continuous sprouting of new situations and challenges. The above verse and the nature of life are not in contradiction, but when understood together show that Islam and life are eternal travelling partners in renewal. Islam is not encapsulated within a specific time and place, nor stuck in historical relics as a moribund religion, but it is living perpetually providing guidance and solutions. It is not a mystic doctrine nor a philosophy, but a timeless program of "personal and social behaviour" which insists on the co-existence of physical and moral components within humans. This ensures Islam's ability to "strike a harmonious balance between the world of faith and the world of action", rather than being an obstacle to human development and science. Islam's flexible nature indicates that it reflects the order and artistry of Almighty Allah and is perfect. The Holy Qur'an says: "*(such is) the artistry of Allah, who disposes of all things in perfect order*" (*al-Naml*, 27: 88).

Since there will be no more prophets, revelations or religiously-guided nation (*ummah*) after Islam, the Muslims are the final universal nation. This logic requires them to stand with humanity at large at different times and places to face the coming transformations and challenges to rationality, thought, science, social norms and laws. To do so the Muslim *ummah* can fulfil its responsibility by means of two qualities – *jihād* and *ijtihād*. Nadawi explained that Muslim decline came about due to their weakness in these essential qualities. *Jihād* is the

inner struggle against “false deities” that could claim one’s spiritual allegiance, and against shallow desires that lure one away from “the fold of goodness and piety”. Once an individual benefits from *jihād*, he is morally obliged to perform *jihād* for the improvement of his fellow humans. *Jihād* on a societal level is essential. This is because maintaining goodness and piety as an individual often becomes impossible in an “ungodly environment”. The Qur’an describes such an environment as *fitnah*, meaning “calamity, sedition, treachery, sin, and seduction”. Opposition to what *jihād* strives for will never cease, which makes *jihād* an “eternal phase of human life”. The decline of Muslim civilisation is not due to imperfection in Islam, but to the weakness of Muslims abandoning upholding *jihād* in their lives. *Jihād* in this sense is an internal effort without which a Muslim leaves himself vulnerable to crises such as demoralisation, tyranny and injustice.

A further important point which Nadawi discussed is that *jihād* is not only mastering Islamic teachings, but it is also essential to comprehend the rationale and ways of “unbelief”. This will enable one to recognise “unbelief” in whatever guise it is manifested. ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab ^{radīyallāhu ‘anhu} said, “I fear that he who has been brought up in Islam and has no knowledge of the *jāhiliyyah* [pre-Islamic period of ignorance], may become an instrument of disintegrating Islam unknowingly.” One can protect oneself from danger only if one recognises that danger.

The second quality which can empower the Muslim Ummah to progress with revival and renewal is *ijtihad*. Nadawi defined *ijtihad* as the “ability to cope with the ever-changing pattern of life’s requirements”. This ‘ability to cope’ requires not only a deep understanding of Islamic jurisprudence and a profound insight into the essence of Islam, but also requires the *mujtahid* (one who operates *ijtihad*) to utilise the “treasures of nature” to serve Islam. This is better than utilising them materialistically to spread mischief in the world. *Ijtihad* in this sense will steer scientific and industrial progress towards the service of Islam and the well-being of humanity.

The shortcomings of Muslims leaders and practitioners in conducting *jihād* and *ijtihad* left them defenceless against ungodly beliefs and practices. Mentioning the Umayyads and ‘Abbasids, while excepting ‘Umar Ibn ‘Abd al-Azīz (d. 719 CE), Nadawi wrote that because they lacked these qualities, they could not “wear down the pagan attitudes and habits of their race”. In their case, lack of *jihād* produced caliphs who were not proficient in religious awareness. They addressed themselves to political and administrative matters while abandoning their religious duties. This created a rift between “the Church and State in the religio-political order of Islam”. If a religious need arose, they turned to ‘*ulamā*’ for advice and accepted only those opinions which suited them. While mentioning the decline of the Ottoman Turks, Nadawi highlighted their lagging behind in scientific and

industrial progress. Their failure was due to falling short both in *jihād* and *ijtihad*. They surrendered to the temptations of ease and luxury, deteriorated in their standards of morality, and became tyrannical rulers. Corruption and disloyalty amongst the provincial governors and army generals became a norm. Their greatest error was letting their minds become static and stagnant. Halide Edib observed in her work *Conflict of East and West in Turkey*:

As long as the world remained scholastic, [the] Moslem Religious Body did its duty admirably, and the Sulemanieh and Fatih Medressehs were the centres of learning and of whatever science there was ... But when the West broke the chains of scholasticism and created a new learning and science, the effects of which were to change the face of the world, the Moslem Religious Body failed badly in its educational function. The ‘*ulamā*’ took it for granted that human knowledge had not grown beyond what it was in the thirteenth century, and this attitude of mind persisted in their educational system down to the middle of the last century.

However, on the non-Muslim side, the medieval Christian Church had opposed the scientific study of the universe. After a bitter conflict they took a realistic attitude by incorporating scientific knowledge in their schools and universities while maintaining their theology and metaphysics. Nadawi highlighted that with the Ottomans it was quite different. Although not persecuting the study of the universe, they did not permit anything new to infiltrate their education system, which stagnated their knowledge institutions. Their submersion in politics spared them the time only to stick to Aristotle and reasoning on the basis of assumed knowledge, which seemed to them far easier than venturing into observation and analysis. Consequently, the *madrasahs* remained “what they were in the 13th century until the end of the last century”. Nadawi indicated that the Turks lagged so far behind in the industrial field that ship-building only started in the 16th century. The printing press, health services and defence studies were introduced only in the 17th century. In this manner Nadawi explained the decline of Muslims from Umayyads and ‘Abbasids to Ottomans and Mughuls. The decline was a projection of their weakness in *jihād* and *ijtihad*.

Returning to the study of civilisational renewal of the past, Nadawi held that it will only be beneficial if along with knowing its civilisational contributions, one investigates the specific challenges faced by each civilisation. A modern civilisation should not fall into a situation which proved detrimental to a previous civilisation. This is prohibited by Almighty Allah: “*Do not follow the vain desires of people who went wrong in times gone by—who misled many, and strayed themselves from the even Way*” (*al-Mā'idah*, 5: 77). Further, merely borrowing civilisational contributions from previous or parallel civilisations

without understanding their context or requirements might not work. Medicine for one sickness does not necessarily work for another. In both of his works Nadawi talked about practices and thoughts of the pre-Islamic era in great detail. Whenever these practices and thoughts resurfaced in Muslims after the advent of Islam, the Muslims experienced decline. His is an honest and self-critical appraisal of the Muslim past.

With his broad understanding of *jihād* and *ijtihād* Nadawi did not restrict renewal contributions by previous civilisations to be taken up only by jurists (*fuqahā'*), but he also treated Muslim rulers, scholars, and Sufis with equal care. Diverse people contribute in different ways to realise and implement Islam's message. As a civilisation may distance itself from Islam by using new innovations based on the return of pre-Islamic ignorance (*jāhiliyyah*), similarly a civilisation can become a proponent of Islam by developing new ideas based on the essence of Islam. This is the challenge for Muslims today.

Note

- * *Mohammed Farid Ali* is a Research Fellow at International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies, Malaysia.