As Cornel West (2004) contends, in his widely read work *Democracy Matters*, the search of Muslims for a modern Islamic identity is geared toward countering the uprootedness and restlessness of the Western version of modernity. The Islamic response to certain aspects of modernity, in West’s contention, is not dissimilar to Christian, Judaic, tribalistic, or any other form of fundamentalism. He further asserts that religious traditions are here to stay, thus the only recourse we have is to support prophetic voices that embrace democratic universals within them to de-Westernize democracy. “Western-style democracies—themselves in need of repair—are but one member of the family of democracy” (West, 2004, p. 138).

Likewise, Khaled Abou El-Fadl (2004) believes that democracy and Islam are defined by the underlying moral values embedded in them, and attitudinal commitments of adherents to those values. Such moral values, he asserts, are more relevant in discussing universalism in Islam than how those values and commitments have been applied. Analyzing Islamic thought through the prism of universals, Abou El-Fadl believes, will make fair-minded people see that Islam is rich with both interpretive and practicable democratic concepts. Democracy in this Islamic frame of reference is an “ethical good,” and the pursuit of this good serves the purpose of God on earth.

In particular, human beings, as God’s vicegerents, are responsible for making the world more just. By assigning equal political rights to all adults, democracy expresses that special status of human beings in God’s creation and enables them to discharge that responsibility.

(Abou El-Fadl, 2004, p. 6)

In an attempt to validate the importance of universal communication ethics for democracy anywhere, especially in the Middle East, “Islamic Reform for Democracy and Global Peace” focuses on answering the question: Are there universalizable Islamic ethics that are applicable to communication theory? The answer is a resounding, “yes, a great deal,” yet much complexity is wrapped in this simplistic answer. As in any other religion, there is formidable tension in Islam between the revealed scriptures as they are, in a textual sense, and the interpretations of those scriptures as understood and practiced in contextual terms. Islam is unique in that it has two distinct sets of codes revealed in *Quran* that may seem contradictory in first glance. One set was revealed in Mecca, before Prophet Mohamed migrated to Medina, where the other set was revealed.
The contention of this author is that the Meccan set of texts is universal, ahistorical and transcendent, while the Medinese set of texts is particular, historical and limited to the needs and dictates of certain socio-cultural realities, mainly those of the seventh century. This contention is based on the ideas of the Sudanese Muslim reformer Ustadh (revered teacher) Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, who was executed in Sudan in 1985 for his stance against the imposition of an extreme interpretation and enactment of Sharia laws. The story of this remarkable thinker’s execution will be succinctly narrated later as a case representing the ethical dilemma of the Muslim world, present in the conflict between particularisms and universalisms within Islam.

The distinction between the universal Meccan texts and the particular Medinese ones has huge implications for global communication ethics theory and practice. These implications do not concern only Muslim media professionals, but they also ought to concern all global communicators who are concerned with Islam and the prospects of democracy in the Muslim World. By extension, this includes journalists, who care about truth-telling with regard to any subject or event related to Islam and Muslim realities around the globe.

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF ISLAM**

Prophet Mohamed was born in the year 570 in Mecca, at the time the commercial and religious center of the Hijaz region of the Arabian Peninsula. He grew up as an orphan, supported by his uncle, Abu Talib. By the age of 25, he married Khadija, a powerful merchantwoman, who was 15 years his senior. She proposed to marry him after he faithfully worked for her, proving his honesty, knowledge, and good judgment. Prior to receiving revelation, Prophet Mohamed used to go to a cave in Mount Hirra, in the outskirts of Mecca for contemplation and worship based on the Abrahamic tradition. One day he came shaking to Khadija, his wife, reporting that he has received revelation from God through the archangel Gabriel. The revelation was a command asking him to recite the word of God and to acknowledge Him as the all-knowing creator of man. Khadija comforted him, and with the help and counsel of Waraqa bin Nawfal, her Christian cousin, consoled and reassured him of his communion with God and his chosen-ness. The revelations stopped for three years, during which Prophet Mohamed was deeply distressed. When they resumed three years later, he confidently began to preach Islam.

His first follower was Khadija, followed by his 10 year old cousin Ali bin Abi Talib. A few others followed, including his close friend Abu Bakr and his adopted son Zaid. The circle of Muslims grew, but it remained a tiny minority because of the fierce opposition by the elite, whose commercial interests were largely dependent on Mecca’s position as a pagan religious center. The Kaaba, the cubic structure around which Muslims perform Hajj and Omra today, at the heart of Mecca, was the main house where idols were placed and worshiped. This also meant that it was the main trade and communication center in the region. Quranic revelations kept coming, forbidding the worship of idols and calling for the Oneness of God. This meant threatening the power and interests of the elites. Therefore, the opposition to Islam grew fierce. Muslims were intensely persecuted until Prophet Mohamed instructed his followers to migrate to Abyssinia and to Medina.

The migration, Hijra in Arabic, of Prophet Mohamed himself, accompanied by Abu Bakr, to Medina, 320 kilometers from Mecca, in the year 622, marked the beginning of the vast spread of Islam in the Arab Peninsula and later in the rest of the world. What triggered the Prophet’s migration was learning that the Meccans plotted to assassinate him, which was a clear indication that paganism and Islam could not coexist in Mecca side by side.

Medina at the time had a significant Jewish population. Therefore, monotheism and relative enlightenment were not foreign to its population. This may explain their welcoming
reception of Prophet Mohamed and Islam. Another reason, among others, may also be that the Quran, Islam and its followers, united Medina and gave it a huge ideological and rhetorical edge against Mecca, its envied commercial and religious competitor. Thousands of Medinese joined the new faith.

Meccans did not leave them alone, however, even after they migrated. They attempted to invade Medina several times, but their attempts failed. Then both parties signed the truce of Hudaybia, a place near Mecca. The truce obliged the Meccans and the Muslims and their allied tribes not to attack each other, and to allow freedom of allegiance of any tribe or individual to join any of the two parties. After a brief period of peace, the Meccans breached the terms of the truce by providing arms and other logistical support for an allied tribe, which fought a tribe allied to Medina. This gave Muslims a strong cause to respond. Ten years after Hijra, Muslims conquered Mecca. Idols were destroyed, and the Kaaba was declared the House of God, to which millions of Muslims flock for pilgrimage every year to the present day. Except for some skirmishes in one of the four fronts from which Mecca was sieged, the conquest was bloodless, because Muslims were under strict orders from the Prophet not to fight unless attacked. Entering Meccan in victory, however, did not change its political status; rather it confirmed its religious status. Medina became the seat of Islamic government since the Prophet Mohamed’s migration to it, and continued as such after the conquest of Mecca. Thus, Prophet Mohamed, and later his caliphs, formed from Medina a new polity that expanded to include all of Arabia and beyond.

Henceforth, Islam entered the world scene as a major global worldview and powerful international actor shortly after the revelation of Quran in the seventh century. Only 11 years after the death of the Prophet Mohamed, Muslims conquered Egypt and ended Roman occupation of this important incubator of the global hybridization of cultures. The defeat and retreat of Romans, therefore, was the beginning of a hitherto expanding influence of Islam and Muslims on the global stage. Defeating the Roman Empire took place only 24 years after Prophet Mohamed’s migration to Medina.

According to an executive summary by the Pew Center (2011), the current Muslim population is above 1.6 billion, comprising about 23 percent of the current world population of 7 billion. The Muslim population in 2030 is expected to be 2.2 billion, which will be about 27 percent of the projected world population of 83 billion. This reality alone requires Muslims, and non-Muslims alike, to understand the dynamics and demands of our time, especially with regard to how Islam ought to be interpreted, embraced, and practiced within a global culture continuously seeking universality in the quest for peace.

PARTICULARITIES OF THE FIRST (MEDINESE) MESSAGE OF ISLAM

Before Islam, slavery was common in the Arab Peninsula. A man could marry as many women as he could afford. As was the case in many parts of the world, women were treated as property. Tribes raided each other for dominion and treasure. Wars between them could take 40 years or more, as true of the Dahis and Ghabraa war, triggered by a dispute about a reward in a horse race.

A common practice in the Arab Peninsula before Islam, especially among the poor sectors of society, was burying infant girls alive. This form of infanticide was practiced out of fear of disgrace, should girls be kidnapped and enslaved by the enemy. Fear of starvation was also another significant factor, since women were unproductive consumers in a poor and primitive society. The laws of survival, in a harsh and hostile desert environment, produced this unimaginable
cruelty. Thus, far from enjoying equal rights with men, women lacked the most basic and elementary of all rights, namely the right to live. Women who survived were treated as mere means, with no purpose in life other than serving and pleasing men.

Therefore, it is understandable that the universal values of individual freedom, equality, and justice, abundantly clear in Meccan verses of Quran, were shunned. The social context described above, within which those verses were revealed, was not up to par with them. But a call for them had to be made before a harsher, more contextually appropriate, set of texts was justified. God’s mercifulness and infinite wisdom dictate no punishment without a cause. When Meccans refused to accept the verses calling for deep universal values, those verses were repealed and the Medinese Quran started to gradually replace them as a source of harsher legislation. The body of Islamic codes developed in Medina and later by Muslim jurists constitutes what is called “Sharia,” and what Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha calls the First Message of Islam. The justification for calling it the “First” Message of Islam is that, while it was revealed after the Meccan texts, it was “first” in terms of actual application at a communal level (in the new polity of Medina). It was the basis of legislation for the “first” Muslim state, marking the entrance of Islam as a new ideological and political force that continues to reorder global realities since.

The First Message of Islam was more realistic and more appropriate to the time. It shook tremendously the social foundations of power and the economic structure of Arabia. It prohibited female infanticide promptly, thus asserting women’s right to life. A man was allowed to marry only up to four women, instead of an unlimited number of them. Unlike anywhere else in the world at the time, women were accorded rights to own and inherit property. They were allowed to testify in court for the first time. Even though a woman’s testimony was half that of a man, in the sense that two women were required to form a single testimony equal to that of one man; still, allowing them to testify at all was a radical shift.

Thus, addressing itself to the appalling state of affairs of the seventh century Arabia, Sharia could not have uplifted women to the degree of equating them with men in one stroke. That would have been impossible and unwise because the social context was unprepared to accept it. That is not to say that women were inherently inferior. Rather, their inferiority was a product of a lack of maturity of character, which, at the time, could only be gained through experience in earning livelihoods and in wars, which were domains of men, who, unlike women, were physiologically fit for them (The Republican Brothers, 1979).

What most Muslims, and non-Muslims alike, need to understand is that, far from being all of Islam, Sharia, in the form of Medinese texts, or the First Message of Islam, was meant to be only a transitional stage. It constitutes one level of Islamic text, tailored for a certain context, and intended to serve the needs of a certain stage of development of the Muslim society. It was not universal. It addressed only the particularities of the Muslim society of the time. It did not embrace the universals contained in the Meccan texts. Actually, it abrogated them.

Still, the first Islamic polity, based on the particularity of the Medinese texts, was a great revolution that radically transformed the way of life in the Arabian Peninsula and, later on, in other parts of the world. It did a great deal to ameliorate the terrible conditions under which men, women and children were living. As mentioned earlier, it strictly prohibited female infanticide. It instituted compulsory alms-giving, taking from the economically well-off to help the poor and needy share in the wealth of the community. It enjoined the Prophet to counsel with believers (even if it left him fully free as to whether to accept or reject their counsel). As shown earlier, it also improved the lot of women in comparison with the conditions under which they lived before the advent of Islam.

Indeed, the First Message of Islam, while somewhat communitarian, is neither universal nor democratic. Furthermore, owing to the particularities of the historical context, it discriminated
between people on the basis of religion, gender, and social origin. The universal values embedded in the Meccan texts were strongly shunned by the social and political forces that mattered at the time.

Abrogating the Meccan texts, however, was a mere postponement, not a final repeal, according to Mahmoud Mohamed Taha (1967). The revival of those repealed Meccan verses, representing the ideals of Islam, had to wait until humanity had reached a stage of development capable of accepting them, ushering in a new phase in history, conducive to the exercise of freedom and equality in their fullest sense.

**ISLAMIC UNIVERSALS: THE SECOND (MECCAN) MESSAGE**

Proclaim: This is the truth from your Lord. Whoever wills, let him believe, and whoever wills, let him disbelieve.

(Quran, 18:29)

You shall invite to the path of your Lord with wisdom and kind enlightenment, and debate with them in the best possible manner. Your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path, and He knows best who are the guided ones.

(Quran, 16:125)

These two Meccan verses of the Quran, among a myriad others, represent the universals embedded in the Second Message of Islam. The first one speaks about truth as ordained from God. Yet, it does provide for free will in believing or disbelieving in Islam as Truth. No traces of compulsion—abundant in Medinese verses, ordaining *Jihad* in its crudest form—are present in this Meccan verse. The receivers of the message are free to accept or reject Islam, or even believing in God altogether.

The second verse stresses the importance of wisdom, enlightenment, debate and decent mannerisms of speech on the part of believers when arguing for what they believe. Decent debate, encouraged by the verse, in itself is a strong indicator that unbelievers are not to be coerced into believing, for debate is always between opposing views. Even doubt about God’s very existence is not excluded from debate content and mannerisms in Islam. This is especially clear when the first verse is read with the second one. Unbelievers, in the roots of Islam, therefore, are not only tolerated and peacefully accommodated, but are also encouraged to engage in debate. The second verse further tells the Prophet and Muslims that only God knows those who stray from the right path and those who will ultimately be guided to it, not any earthly authority, including that of the prophet of Islam. It instructs Muslims to convey the message of Islam with peace and wisdom, and then leave people alone. They are free, and the Lord knows how to best guide them because He knows their conscience best.

These verses, and many other Meccan verses, provide for freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, and freedom of expression. They encourage “debate,” which, by definition, recognizes difference in opinion and in faith. Many other verses stress individual responsibility before God for any deed, good or bad, regardless of gender, race, or faith. Thus, comes the argument that Meccan texts are universal.

In describing the Muslim quest for a modern identity that accommodates Islamic principles, such as the ones described above, Cornel West, states:

Democracy Matters must confront this Islamic identity crisis critically and sympathetically. In other words, there can be no democracy in the Islamic world without a recasting of Islamic
identity. This new modern identity that fuses Islam and democracy has not even been glimpsed by most westerners. So it behooves us to proceed in a self-critical and open manner … Just as there is a long Judeo-Christian tradition, there is a long Judeo-Islamic tradition. The role of Islamic figures in the history of Judaic and Christian thought is immense … .These energies provide a hope for new democratic possibilities.

(West, 2004, pp. 132–133)

This description of the predicament of Islam captures the true meaning of Jihad. Islamic communities and individuals around the globe nowadays brim with infinite “energies” and “possibilities” opening them up to the rest of the world like never before. The concept of a “good community” is at the heart of the Muslim quest for a modern identity, because only in a good community can an individual be dignified, free, and equal. Being dignified, free, and equal requires observation of these values in one’s own life and in society at large. This is the real Jihad facing any Muslim today.

Jihad in Arabic means “struggle.” However, the West is mostly familiar with only the lower layer of it, which is armed struggle against non-Muslims who actively seek the destruction of Muslims. Another higher layer of the meaning of Jihad is deeper, universal, more transcendent, and most relevant to our times. But it has not been explained well by Muslims to non-Muslims. The prophet of Islam, distinguished between two types of Jihad, one greater and one minor. The greatest Jihad is not against ulterior enemies. It is against evil within oneself. It is in seeking freedom, justice, and exercising self-control and self-discipline to be a free, fair, humble, yet dignified individual. In one instance, Prophet Mohamed says, “The best Jihad is a word of truth in the face of an unfair ruler.” In another, and while returning from a war, he said, “We just came from minor Jihad to the greater Jihad.” These notions clearly signify how important it is in Islam for an individual to engage in self-control and in causes for justice and exposing injustice.

These universal values, essential for a deep democracy, receive immense moral legitimacy from the Meccan phase of Islam. As discussed earlier, Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha (1987) calls the Meccan phase the Second Message of Islam, even though it was revealed earlier than the First Message, which was revealed in Medina after Hijra. The justification for this distinction is that, for thirteen years, the universal values of Islam were preached in Mecca but they did not take root, because they were foreign to the context and meant for a time to come. Jihad in its military sense and other elements of Sharia, which were sanctioned in Medina were more suited to that time. Thus, calling the laws marking the victory of Islam in Medina, where the first Islamic state was established, the First Message of Islam, even though they were revealed after Hijra from Mecca, seemed more logical to Taha (1987). The Second Message of Islam, based on the universal Meccan texts, according to Taha still awaits application.

Accordingly, the Muslim World is in limbo. At the conceptual and perceptual level it has not gotten out of the grip of the First Message of Islam. But in practical terms, the advanced socio-cultural realities of today make the application of this level of Islam impossible. This is so because Sharia, the First Message, is incompatible not only with modernity but also with the essence of Islam itself as revealed in the universal values embedded in the Meccan texts. Sharia, in this sense, was the crust of Islam, not its core, the Second Message of Islam.

ISLAM AND THE DICTATES OF UNIVERSALISM

The main Jihad of a Muslim today, as can be deduced from the arguments above, ought to be working freely, but guided by principles and a moral compass compatible with universal values, toward creating an equitable world community. This struggle takes place in a world of
abundance, in a world of elites consumed by consumerism, fragmented by greed, and indulged in instant gratification, while billions are suffering. Such a world is not sustainable and it cannot produce a responsible, truly free and dignified individual—the ultimate goal of Islam, for which the Quran itself is a means not an end. According to this approach, a consumerist culture that commoditizes women’s bodies in advertising and other types of media content is only different from enslavement in degree (because it objectifies an individual and makes a worthy life a means to another entity’s profit-making schemes).

A good community in Islam is one where individual freedom is in full service of communal justice and equality. A dignified, happy, and absolutely free individual, is always well attuned with society and the universe, and is the end of all human endeavors. Hence, an individual should not be a means to any other end, or be used as such.

Islamic reformism provides an epistemology in which absolute individual freedom does not conflict with communal equality and justice.

Absolute individual freedom, in this sense, is not autonomous indirection (the I-am-free-to-do-anything-I-like notion prevalent in the West). Rather, it is an organic component of the exercise of equality and justice in community. The free expression of self will be limited only by the individual’s inability to exercise it without stepping on the rights of others in justice and equality. The relationship between the good individual and the good community, in essence, is symbiotic, where equality and justice are enriched by individual freedom (and vice versa). Consequently, Islam provides for making the organization of the community a vehicle for the exercise of boundless individual freedom as long as the community’s interests and values are guarded and enriched.

This equilibrium, derived from the concept of Tawhid (monotheism and universal harmony), renders individual worship of Allah (God) as meaningless if its fruits are not reaped by community in deeds of stewardship, fairness, truth-telling, kindness, charity, mercy, and other forms of selflessness (Taha, 1987, p. 84). Tawhid, according to Sufism (mystical Islam, to which most Islamic reformists trace the origins of their ideas) is also unity and harmony between all parts of the universe. Tawhid signifies a purpose that drives the cause of liberation of all humankind from bondage and servitude to multiple varieties of idols (Siddiqi, 2007). In this scheme of thought, commercial brand names and shopping malls, the altars of consumerism, could be seen as such idols.

The concept Tawhid clearly implies the existence of a common ground between the Islamic reformist ethic and the Judeo-Christian heritage from which Western ethics paradigms have driven major concepts and elucidations. To understand the common universality embedded in these traditions, Cornet West (2004) pointedly invites western scholars and readers to visit the writings of reformist Muslim scholars, like Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, Fatima Mernissi, Khalid Abou El-Fadl and others.

A good Islamic community, according to Taha (1987), prepares the individual to be a good worshiper by setting a healthy environment in which an individual would enjoy communion with God and with the universe. In the definition of Taha, absolute individual freedom is freedom from fear of death and freedom from need. To him, death is only a transition from one state of being to another. And the needs of the individual are well met in the good community as he or she contributes to its welfare. In his understanding, Tawhid means that the whole universe has one source. It emanated from God, and to God it shall return. But we, as elements in the universe, shall return as individuals, not as groups. This implies the centrality of the individual and individual freedom and responsibility in Islamic discourse. Happy is the individual who returns to God as a fair, good, free, and charitable individual, emulating Him, who is Fair, Free, Good, and Charitable. In this sense, the individual is a vicegerent of God on Earth, responsible for making the world more just (Abou El-Fadl 2004, p. 6). Communal justice, hence, is the incubator of absolute individual freedom.
Absolute individual freedom, as Taha (1967) articulated it means that a person may think as he wills, may say what he or she thinks, and may do what he or she says, provided that the consequences of what he or she says or does are for the good of all beings, humans and otherwise. This stage of absolute individual freedom is preceded by the stage of limited individual freedom within a given society. Limited freedom, according to Taha (1967), entails that a person may think as he or she wills, may say what he or she thinks, and may do what he or she says, provided that he or she must not infringe upon the freedom of others. If he or she does, a constitutional law would deal with the infringements, based on the precepts of Islam providing for the protection of society (lest freedom degenerate into anarchy). A constitutional law deals with any infringement upon the freedom of others. The Second Message of Islam, thus, provides for reconciling the individual’s need for absolute individual freedom with society’s need for justice (The Republican Brothers, 1980).

These original precepts of a reformist Islamic ethic would trace their roots in the transcendent Quranic verses revealed in Mecca. The transient verses of Medina include lower jihad verses. They also include verses that make men guardians of women, as explained earlier. In the spirit of the Mecca verses, freedom is only a hint of Itlaq, the Absolute, the infinitude of Allah. It is diffused on earth in portions suitable to our capacity to appreciate and practice responsibly. Therefore, the limitations of the codes dictated by the necessities of the seventh century are not fundamental. They were transient. The essence of freedom is the absolute. Limitation is only a transitional requirement related to the development of the individual within a community, and the dictates of the socio-cultural phase through which a community is passing.

Every individual, according to this view of Islamic universalism, has the right to a productive life and to freedom regardless of religion, race, or sex. The individual in such a system of thought is capable of limitless development. He or she pursues, through a healthy community, absoluteness in communion with Allah, in His absolute Oneness, and openness, in a constant quest for perfection. “The goal of the worshiper in Islam is to achieve the perfection of God, and the perfection of God is infinite” (Taha, 1987, p. 84).

Therefore, there is no final destination to be reached. The worshiper in this way is one who is free from all bondage. He or she is one who diligently strives to be free by striving to achieve the qualities of God, the Just, the Beneficent, and the Merciful. To this effect Prophet Mohammed said, “Embody the qualities of God, for my Lord is on the straight path.”

What prevents us from discharging the responsibilities leading to absolute individual freedom is ignorance and selfishness. The ignorantly selfish may seek interest in things that are inconsistent with the interest of the community, whereas the intelligently selfless does not see his or her interest in incongruence with the interest of others. “One does not become a believer unless he wishes for his brother what he would wish for himself,” Prophet Mohamed says.
In confronting these verses head on, Taha showed more intellectual honesty than all the Islamic scholars, community leaders, and world statesmen who think that they have solved the problem by flatly declaring Islam to be a religion of peace [without interpretive sufficiency].

(George Packer, 2006)

Ustadh Mahmoud Mohammed Taha, founder of The Republican Brothers, the reformist Islamic group, was executed in Sudan on January 18, 1985 by an Islamist military regime. He was reported by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (January 19, 1985) to have been smiling when the hood covering his face was removed for a few seconds just before he was hanged. His followers, the Republicans, men and women alike, consequently, endured tremendous emotional torture, physical displacements, alienation, humiliation and unspeakable pain. The single exhibit before the judge who convicted Taha was a leaflet! (The entire text of the leaflet will be provided later.) In announcing his decision to boycott the proceedings of the court, Taha improvised a strong statement, which was translated by An-Na’im (1987) as follows:

I have repeatedly declared my view that the September 1983 so-called Islamic laws violate Islam itself. Moreover, these laws have distorted Islamic Shari’a and projected it in a repugnant way. Furthermore, these laws were enacted and utilized by the government to terrorize the Sudanese people and humiliate them into submission. These laws also threaten the national unity of the country by discriminating against the non-Muslim segment of our society.

This is my objection to these laws at the theoretical level. As at the practical level, the judges enforcing these laws lack the necessary professional qualifications. They have also failed morally when they placed themselves under the control of the executive authority, which used them to violate people’s rights, to humiliate political opponents, and to insult intellect and intellectuals. For all these reasons, I am not prepared to cooperate with any court that had betrayed the independence of the judiciary and allowed itself to be a tool in the hand of the government to humiliate our people, insult thinkers and free thought, and persecute political opponents.

(An-Na’im, 1987, p. 14)

The leaflet “This, or, the Flood,” was issued in protest against the enactment of Sharia laws in Sudan. It was the only exhibit presented by the prosecution as evidence of sedition in the trial against Taha and four of his associates. Taha was executed within less than a month of the day of the issue of the leaflet, which was on Charismas Day in 1984. The four associates were spared after being coerced into a humiliating recantation session, which was broadcast on national TV and radio!

Issuing and distributing the leaflet on Christmas had its own symbolic significance because the timing was deliberate. It was meant to extend a hand by the Republicans, from within the ranks of Islam, to the persecuted Christian minority. The leaflet is certainly a very good representation of what Taha and the Republicans stood for. Here is a translated version of it:

In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful Either This or, the Flood

And guard against a turmoil that will not befall the unfair ones alone, and know that God is severe in punishment.

(*Quran*, Chapter 8, verse 25)

We, the Republicans, have dedicated our lives to the promotion of two honorable objectives namely, Islam and the Sudan. To this end, we have propagated Islam at the scientific level as capable of
resolving the problems of modern life. We have also sought to safeguard the superior moral values and original ethics conferred by God upon this people (the Sudanese), thereby making them the appropriate transmitter of Islam to the whole of modern humanity, which has neither salvation nor dignity except through this religion (Islam).

The September 1983 laws (that is, the series of enactments purporting to impose Shari’a law in the Sudan) have distorted Islam in the eyes of intelligent members of our people and in the eyes of the world, and degraded the reputation of our country. These laws violate Shari’a and violate religion itself. They permit, for example, the amputation of the hand of one who steals public property, although according to Shari’a the appropriate penalty is the discretionary punishment ta’zir and not the specific (hadd) penalty for theft, because of the doubt (shubha) inherent in the participation of the accused in the ownership of such (public) property. These unfair laws have added imprisonment and fine to the specified (hadd) penalties in contravention of the provisions of Shari’a and their rationale. They have also humiliated and insulted the people (of this country) who have seen nothing of these laws except the sword and the whip, although they are a people worthy of all due respect and reverence. Moreover, the enforcement of the specified penalties (hudud) and (qassas) presupposes a degree of individual education and social justice which are lacking today.

These laws have jeopardized the unity of the country and divided the people in the North and South (of the country) by provoking religious sensitivity, which is one of the fundamental factors that have aggravated the Southern problem (that is, conflict and civil war in the non-Muslim Southern part of the country). It is futile for anyone to claim that a Christian person is not adversely affected by the implementation of Shari’a. A Muslim under Shari’a is the guardian of a non-Muslim in accordance with the “verse of the sword” and the “verse of Jiziah” (respectively calling the people to use arms to spread Islam, and for the imposition of a humiliating poll tax on the subjugated Christians and Jews- (verse 5 and 29 of Chapter 9 of the Quran). They do not have equal rights. It is not enough for a citizen today merely to enjoy freedom of worship. He is entitled to the full rights of a citizen in total equality with other citizens. The rights of the Southern citizens in their country are not provided for in Shari’a but rather in Islam at the level of fundamental Quranic revelation that is the level of Sunnah [The Second Message of Islam]. We therefore, call for the following:

1. The repeal of the September 1983 Laws because they distort Islam, humiliate the people, and jeopardize national unity.

2. The halting of bloodshed in the South and the implementation of a peaceful political solution instead of a military solution (to the civil war in the Southern part of the country). This is the national duty of the government as well as the armed southerners. There must be the brave admission that the South has a genuine problem and the serious attempt to resolve it.

3. We call for the provision of full opportunities for the enlightenment and education of this (Sudanese) people so as to revive Islam at the level of Sunnah (the fundamental Quran). Our time calls for (The Second Message) not Shari’a (The First Message). The prophet, peace upon him, said “Islam started as a stranger, and it shall return as a stranger in the same way it started … Blessed are the strangers … They (his companions) said “who are the strangers, oh, Messenger of God.” He replied, “Those who revive my Sunnah after it has been abandoned.”

This level of Islamic revival shall achieve pride and dignity for the people. In this level, too lies the systematic solution for the Southern problem as well as the Northern problem (that is, socioeconomic and political problems of the Northern part of the country). Religious fanaticism and backward religious ideology can achieve nothing for this (Sudanese) people except upheaval and civil war.

Here is our genuine and honest advice. We offer it on the occasion of the Christmas and Independence Day (December 25 and January 1), and may God expedite its acceptance and save the country from upheaval and preserve its independence, unity and security.

December 25, 1984 The Republican Brothers
2 Rabi Al-Thani 1405 A.H. Omdurman
Shortly after the execution of Taha for “apostasy and sedition,” with this leaflet being the only evidence of “the crime,” trade unions and some political organizations rallied the public and led successful campaigns against violent Islamic fundamentalism. The outpouring of support for change resulted in a full-fledged uprising that, in turn, resulted in the overthrow of the fanatic dictatorship on April 6, 1985. A transitional, one-year, military government took over, with the mandate to prepare the country for free and fair elections. One year later, there was an elected civilian government ruling the country. Republicans jubilantly started to regroup and collect their shattered lives. Most were professionals: doctors, university professors, lawyers, teachers, diplomats, and college students. Many had a sense that their days with persecution and misery were over, but not for long. In less than four years, fanaticism returned. The elected government was overthrown, again, by a military coup, this time with vengeance and an ultra-extra dose of fanaticism and rage. The totalitarian junta, steered by civilian fanatic Islamic ideologues, ruled with an iron fist, and the result was all sorts of cultural, structural and direct violence (Galtung, 1990).

It was under the watchful eye, support and protection of President Omer Hassan Al-Bashir, leader of the coup, that Osama Bin Laden found refuge and sanctuary in Sudan before leaving for Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. Since then, Islamic fundamentalists have wreaked havoc in Sudan and in other areas in the Middle East and North Africa. They have used communication media skillfully and became a major international player. Without a doubt, now they have a lion’s share in coloring international politics, especially in the Middle East, as they continue to put the rest of the world on a seemingly continuous reactive mode. This is why tackling this issue from global ethics and peace communication perspectives is an urgent imperative.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL COMMUNICATION ETHICS THEORY**

Islam, as a frame of reference, means different things to different Muslims and non-Muslims in the Middle East and beyond. Many recent examples demonstrate the ethical dilemmas facing Muslims today. For instance, a few months ago, Turki Al-Hammad, a “Saudi liberal” was arrested for having tweeted messages urging Muslims to rethink some long held Islamic views. His arrest invoked an intense debate on Twitter, the most powerful medium of public discourse today in Saudi Arabia. The two ends of the debate were reformists (practicing and non-practicing Muslims) on the one hand, and literalist extremists on the other. The reformists strongly object to narrow interpretations of Islam, arguing that universal values of freedom, justice, equality, and peace for all, regardless of faith, ethnicity, gender, and other forms of difference are the essence of Islam.

The literalists, on the other hand, think women are subservient to men and all non-Muslims are doomed unless saved by converting to Islam, voluntarily or by compulsion.

This is the background against which media messages are formed and consumed in the Muslim world. Like any other part of the of our current fast globalizing world, the Middle East brims with dynamisms of thought and conflicting ethical frames of reference that defy stereotypical perceptions of it.

While old modes of oppression may seem to be in control in most of the Middle East, reformists, in fact, are gaining huge support from the youth, the corner stone of the Arab Spring. The fact that Muslim fundamentalists are more organized and that they were able to gain political ground should not be mistaken for a sustainable grip on power. The real sustainable change rests in the power of media discourse being formed and daringly presented by reformists and the youths who are beginning to organize in order to be able to preserve the transformation (for which they, and the older generation of reformists, are so courageously and diligently sacrificing
lives and treasure). Advancing the universal values inherent in Islam seems a strong way out of ethical dilemmas, and the mayhem and confusion festered by extremist Muslims.

According to the Islamic reformist media ethics theory, embedded in the Second Message of Islam, the dignity of one individual is not subservient to the freedom of speech of another. Freedom of speech is not an end in and of itself. Speech that injures human dignity is not an expression of true freedom at all, because without preserving human dignity, we fail the test of being human, let alone being free. Accordingly, any journalist ought to use his/her faculty of observation, reason, consciousness, reflection, insight, understanding and wisdom, realizing that these are the Amanah (trust) of God in the human conscience. They must not be used to injure a human soul for the sake of self-promotion or selling news as if it is just another commodity. A journalist must not ignore God’s purpose in creating this universe and various forms of life (Siddiqi, 2007). Thus, one implication of Tawhid is not to superhumanize those in power or those idolized as superstars of all kinds (Mowlana, 1989). The genuine practice of Tawhid also requires from a journalist to engage in Jihad against systems of thought and structures based on racism, tribalism, and social superiority (Siddiqi, 2007).

Another guiding Islamic principle, which should be revisited and refined through a reformist perspective, is amar bi al-Maruf wa nahi an al-munkar (calling for good and denouncing evil). While this notion asks all individuals and communal entities to publicly engage in calling for good and in denouncing evil, it becomes even more of a moral duty of a journalist to do so. A reformist Islamic approach would make this concept a tool for public debates about good and evil, in the frame of which a journalist can function as an agent of social change. Unfortunately, the erroneous understanding and present practice of amar bi al-Maruf wa nahi an al-munkar in some Muslim countries made it a political tool of coercion in the hands of governments (rather than a tool for energizing debates about good and evil in the public sphere).

Historically, Islam used channels of public communications, including mosques, to effectively mobilize public opinion and persuade individuals to work for the collective good though the pursuit of individual goodness. But in today’s Muslim world not only have these media become ineffective in serving their originally prescribed role, but also many of them are actually being used as tools of destruction. Moreover, in today’s highly individualistic and materialist global society, most of the press in the Muslim world seems to play the opposite role of amar bi Munkar wa nahi an al Maruf (calling for evil and denouncing good) by siding with the powerful and abandoning the powerless. Most forms and channels of mass media today are more in line with government and corporate stakeholders. They are more interested in conflict, contention, disorder, and scandal than in justice, peace, stability, and moral attunement (Siddiqi, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Islamic universals, as discussed in this chapter, are congruent with modernity in any progressive society, where the application of democratic principles ought to lead to social equality and justice. This kind of society, where people are secured against poverty, coercion and social discrimination is, however, only a partial answer to the crisis of modernity. This is because what essentially bedevils the individual person’s life today is not lack of material things alone. It is fear, both acquired in a lifetime and inherited from animal and human ancestors. The construction of a good, fair and just society alleviates man’s acquired fear. But inherited fear cannot be conquered without connecting to the source of all being, to the Absolute. Both levels of fear cannot be addressed unless it becomes clear that evil is contingent and transient, whereas good
is fundamental and permanent. This kind of knowledge is a precondition for achieving absolute individual freedom, the only worthy product of a good society, and the essence of Islam.

Universal Islamic media ethics, based on this vision, would help us refrain from sensationalism, stemming from the underlying principles that favor economic expediency and maximizing gain. Islam condemns such a utilitarian perspective of life because the wellbeing of the individual is a major building block of societal wellbeing. A decision of a journalist to cover a story, fairly, truthfully and candidly would not, in such an Islamic perspective, be in conflict with engaging in the coverage kindly and compassionately, bearing the community’s interests in mind. A host in a talk show, who responds to callers from such a perspective, would not capitalize on sensationalism to draw audiences to his/her show for ratings’ sake!

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this chapter was published as “Islamic Universals and Implications for Global Communication Ethics” in The Journal of International Communication, 23(1), 2017, pp. 36–52.

2. This leaflet is in the public domain, without copyright.

REFERENCES


