

Religion, Liberation and Reforms

An Introduction to the Key Thoughts of Asghar Ali Engineer *

By

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“Islam, if it has to serve as a living faith, will have to emerge out of its medieval shell and conform to the facts of life today while at the same time serving as a transcendental truth and guide for future life. Islam is neither superstition nor mere legalism; practical rationalism and values are its basic constituents and it is these constituents which add greater significance to this living faith. In this sense Islam is not against modernism. If interpreted in this broad frame, Islam can serve not only as an effective instrument of social justice in our era but can also provide a moral corrective to the purposeless growth and tendency to treat consumption as an end itself. What is required for such an interpretation is courage of conviction and a strong sense of commitment to human values. If it is Allah’s Will, and His commands too, to create a healthy society here on earth by partaking of life, Muslims will have to take it as a serious project to build up such a society.”

Asghar Ali Engineer (b. 1939)

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Introduction

This essay is an attempt to highlight and discuss some of the key ideas and thought of Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer.¹ Today, he is one of the most accessible and widely read reformist thinkers of the contemporary Muslim world.² His views on issues of reform in the Muslim world is an important contribution towards the process of rethinking aspects of Muslim law, politics and culture that had suffered an impasse and dogmatic rigidity under the treatment of fundamentalist reassertions as found in many Muslim revivalist movements throughout the world.

As a reformist, Engineer's writings deconstruct some commonly-held ideas within the fundamentalist circles and provide an alternative and progressive vision for Muslims in the contemporary world. These vision and reforms need to be situated within his bigger framework on a reassessment of Muslim thought along what he termed as the 'liberative elements' that underpins Islam's founding moments. Along these liberative elements, rethinking on major issues surrounding Muslim thought needs to be done. In a crux, Engineer calls for distinction to be made between what is universal and particular, absolute and temporal, transcendental and cultural, ethical and corrupt, and divine and human.

¹ Asghar Ali Engineer was born on March 10, 1939 in Salumbar, Rajasthan, and hailed from a respectable family within the Daudi Bohra's priestly class. He received his D.Lit. from the Calcutta University in 1993 for his pioneering works on communalism and communal violence in India. As a social activist in pursuit of a more democratic and pluralistic vision of Islam, he founded two institutes – Institute of Islamic Studies (IIS) and Center for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS). Currently, he is the Director of IIS. Both institutes share a common website. (See <http://www.csss-islam.com/>). Engineer is also a leading figure in the formation of the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN); an organization that links various progressive Muslim groups with a common agenda of pursuing social justice and combating violence. (See <http://www.arf-asia.org/aman/>).

² By 'accessible', I mean (a) most of his writings are written in non-academic style; and (b) his writings are easily available on the internet. Many of these writings are compiled in the website of IIS (see <http://www.csss-islam.com/IIS/archive.php>). Other sites include a folder of articles created by Prof. Rahmat Tavakol from the Rutgers University (<http://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~rtavakol/engineer/>) and website of the Progressive Dawoodi Bohras (<http://www.dawoodi-bohras.com/index.htm>). Asghar Ali Engineer is also a frequent traveller, giving talks and lectures in various parts of the world, especially so in Asia. He had visited Indonesia on a couple of occasions. Indonesia carries translations of some of his works and widely referred to in Indonesian intellectual scene, especially on matters pertaining to Muslim liberation theology, gender and pluralism. In Singapore, his books can be found occasionally in some Muslim bookstores and a major bookstore, Kinokuniya. However, this writer was informed that his visits to Singapore were often low-key affairs due to written protests from certain segments of the Bohra community in the Republic. (The Bohra community in Singapore numbers around 600.) His visits to Malaysia was probably under the same circumstances given that there is suspicion of Shi'ite thought within certain Muslim groups in the predominantly Sunni Muslim country, although his books on gender are published and distributed in Malaysia.

Thus, this essay shall be divided into three parts. In the first part, I shall provide a brief background of Engineer's reform movement within the Bohra community.³ This background is essential in understanding the development and central concerns of Engineer's wider agenda of reform in the Muslim world.

In the second part, I shall examine Engineer's conception of religion as found in his seminal elaborations on a Muslim liberative theology. Engineer's conception of religion is an important area that explains the primary motivations of his struggles for reform.

In the third part, I shall discuss his conception of reforms in various aspects of Muslim law and socio-political thought. Three specific areas will be elaborated in this section: (1) the problem of fundamentalism, (2) the issue of secularism/pluralism, and (3) gender justice.

In the final part of this essay, I shall highlight some possible factors that impede the development of modernist ideas in local discourses on Islam. I shall then highlight how we can re-imagine Islam along what Engineer termed as 'engaged Islam'. In conclusion, the crucial role of intelligentsias in reforms will be briefly discussed.

As in any study of ideas and personalities, this essay shall not be viewed as a complete and comprehensive survey of Engineer's ideas and thought.⁴ Neither do I make any pretensions to provide an impassionate and 'objective' perspective under the aegis of a purely descriptive account of the development of an idea and personality. The fact that an idea is worthy of discussion indicates its relative importance within the framework of a particular discourse. In this context, I do believe that some of Engineer's ideas and thought can be instrumental in reinvigorating Muslims' discussions on Islam in the contemporary world. Yet, any ideas are situated within a particular context. There is a need to critically evaluate the relevance and

³ The Bohras are a sub-branch of the Shi'ite Ismaili sect, which are further divided along several sects, one of which is the Daudi Bohra, of which Engineer belongs to. Most of the Daudi Bohras reside in India. Today, there are an estimated 1.2 million Bohras around the world.

⁴ In particular, I had not delved into his elaborations on communal issues in India. I do admit, however, that the issue of communalism and communal conflicts in India constitute a significant part of his struggle for a more democratic intercultural relation in India. For further reading on this area, see Asghar Ali Engineer, *Lifting the Veil: Communal Violence and Communal Harmony in Contemporary India*. Hyderabad, India: Sangam Books, 1995. Also, Asghar Ali Engineer, *Communalism in India: A Historical and Empirical Study*. New Delhi, India: Vikas Publishing House, 1995.

importance of a particular idea proposed - a theme that I shall revisit in the concluding parts of this essay.

The Struggle for Reforms within the Bohra Community

The Right to Dissent

“Every writer,” writes Georg Lukacs, “is the son of the age...(Thus) it is very difficult for the writer really to free himself from the currents and fluctuations of his time, and within time, from those of his class.” Engineer, like any other writers and thinkers, can thus only be understood in the milieu and context he was in.⁵ As such, there is a need to throw some light upon the background of his reform struggle within the Daudi Bohra community, which he belonged to. This struggle has put Engineer in the forefront of the reformist movement ever since. He is now regarded as a leading figure amongst dissident Bohras who are challenging the monarchical religious establishment in their community.⁶

Engineer’s disdain towards what he saw as corrupt practices of the priestly group was developed early while his father was working within the establishment itself.⁷ However, it was only in the 1970s that he plunged into the reformist movement, which at that time was led by a Bohra dissident, Norman L. Contractor. Engineer, who was then a young and energetic journalist, played a significant role in the revolt that occurred in Udaipur.⁸ The revolt, which flared in 1972, was led by the Bohra Youth Association.⁹

⁵ This fact is acknowledged by Engineer himself when he wrote: “Every person understands things from a certain angle or from a specific and pronounced outlook.” (Engineer, *The Origin and Development of Islam*. Bombay, India: Orient Longman, 1987. p. 2)

⁶ The term ‘dissident’ and ‘reformer/reformist’ are used interchangeably in this essay. They are not meant to convey any preferred viewpoint.

⁷ His father, Sheikh Qurban Husain was an *amil* (local priest) and played an instrumental role in the formative years of Engineer’s life. Engineer received much of his early religious training from his father, who taught him Arabic language, Qur’anic *tafsir* (exegesis) and *ta’wil* (interpretations), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *hadith* (traditions and sayings of Prophet Muhammad). Engineer however, chose to pursue secular education later on and graduated with a degree in civil engineering. He then served in Bombay Municipal Corporation for 20 years.

⁸ For an interpretive account of the reformist movement and the Udaipur revolt, see Engineer, *The Bohras*. New Delhi, India: Vikas Publishing House, 1980.

⁹ The Bohra Youth Association was formed in 1971 and consisted of young professionals who were unhappy with the corrupt practices of the priestly group and the apparent lack of welfare for local Bohras. It had the backing and sympathies of the majority of Bohras in Udaipur. According to Engineer, “due to its sincere work, [the Bohra Youth Association] soon became a popular forum for all those who were against corrupt practices

According to Jonah Blank, amongst some major complaints by the dissidents today are: (1) use of *baraat* (excommunication) to enforce compliance with *Dawat* (central organization of the Bohra religious establishment) orders; (2) misuse of *Dawat* funds; and (3) monopolization of power by the *da'i*'s (head priest) family.¹⁰ However, Engineer's harshest and main criticism is directed towards the hegemony and power exercised by the *da'i*, which Engineer asserted, had also instituted practices that deviated from Islam.¹¹

(a) *The Hegemony of the Da'i in all Affairs*

One of the most distinct features of the Bohra sect that sets it apart from all other Muslim groups is the centrality and all-encompassing authority of the top clerics. According to Schimmel,

“The central concept of the Bohras is their firm faith in the *da'i*, who is called *Mulla ji Sabib* or *Sayyidna* and has the title His Holiness. He is regarded as the representative of God on earth and as such is infallible and immaculate, *ma'sum*.”¹²

Thus, the Bohra *da'i* exercises an unchallenged sway over the believers, a situation not found even amongst the authority of the *ulama* in the Sunni and Shi'a mainstream. Even within the Sufi tradition, the power a Sufi *shaykh* or *pir* exercised, only extends to the members of his *tariqa*. In the Bohra situation, the *da'i* exercises hegemonic control over the entire community, in spiritual and even economic and political affairs. As Blank wrote:

“In the Bohra faith, not even devout believers are permitted to explore esoteric texts without the guidance of a master specially sanctioned by the *dawat*, and permission to delve into the deepest secrets is limited to a small group of highly trained clerics. It is their unique access to *batin* knowledge – the true, inner meaning of the Qur'an, *ahadith*, and all scripture – that gives

and who desired more liberty to work for the betterment of the community.” (Engineer, *The Bohras*, ibid. p. 223)

¹⁰ Jonah Blank, *Mullabs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity among the Daudi Bohras*. Chicago, USA: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. p. 231.

¹¹ The present *da'i*, Syedna Muhammad Burhanuddin, assumed the throne from his father, Syedna Tahir Saifuddin, in 1965. He is the 52nd *da'i* in the chain that stretches to the 12th century CE from Yemen.

¹² Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent*. Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1980. p. 71.

both the *aga khan* [the Ismaili supreme leader or *imam*] and the Bohra *da'i* their fundamental spiritual hegemony over their respective communities.”¹³

The spiritual hegemony of the *da'i* also extends to the realm of practical, daily living. According to Engineer, students often ask Syedna or one of his *amils* [local priests appointed by the Syedna] to breathe on their pens before an examination, and “many Bohras, specially women, believe that certain diseases can be cured by drinking water from a bottle or a cup into which either the high priest or any other priest appointed by him has blown his breath.”¹⁴ On a similar note, such beliefs are not peculiar to the Bohras. Even in Sunni Islam, large segments of believers subscribe to what Frazer called “law of contagion”. Such beliefs, which anthropologists today ascribed to a manifestation of magical thinking, is a common phenomenon of what sociologists would equate to popular religion. Nevertheless, it is important to note that such practices are often times promoted, sanctioned and encouraged by the religious establishment. It is against such elements in popular religion that Engineer seeks to undermine through inculcating a rationalistic worldview. This rationalistic worldview, as opposed to an irrational and often superstitious one, will only be achievable if we adopt an intellectual approach to religion. Engineer noted that superstitious beliefs may exist even within the educated and economically well-offs. He attributed the prevalence of superstitious beliefs at that level to insecurity and tension due to unresolved problems or incurable disease and not because of intellectual incapability or lack of proper understanding. “Such people,” Engineer asserted, “often expect miracles – miraculous cure, miraculous solution for their problems, and miraculous way of becoming rich.”¹⁵ This situation may well explain why the largely literate and successful traders and businessmen of the Bohra community still seek the ‘miraculous blessings’ of the Syedna.

Many Bohras also sought the blessing of Syedna in matters of marriage, burial, pilgrimage, *zakat*, and even when purchasing property or naming a child. In fact, any *nikah* (solemnization of marriage) performed without the *da'i*'s permission is considered invalid and the subsequent progeny of such marriages are considered as illegitimate. Attempts to

¹³ Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, op. cit. p. 161.

¹⁴ Engineer, *The Bohras*, op. cit. p. 152.

¹⁵ Engineer, “Intellectual Approach to Islam” in *Islam and the Modern Age*. Mumbai, India: Institute of Islamic Studies, 2002.

carry out Bohra rites without the *da'i's* permission, as several reformists had tried to do, were met with harassment by the Syedna's functionaries.¹⁶ In the case of Amatalla Bai, the wife of a notable reformer, Ibrahim Bhai Adamji, her grave was exhumed the night after burial by Syedna's followers since the *da'i* had not given permission for her to be buried.¹⁷ It is thus not without justification for us to allude to the *da'i's* absolute power over the believers as a defining feature of the Bohra faith and unparalleled in all other sects in Islam. As admitted in a *dawat* publication, "No loyal Dawoodi Bohra undertakes an important business assignment or any other work of his *Deen* and *Dunya* [i.e., spiritual or worldly life] without taking the *Raza* or advice from the *Da'i al-Mutlaq*."¹⁸ Today, the widespread availability of the internet ensured that loyal believers will have access to the Syedna through emails and web portals set up by the *dawat*.¹⁹

In all, the theological basis of the *da'i's* supremacy in all affairs of the believers ensures that they are subservient to the *da'i's* dictates and commands. Membership to the Bohra community was not seen as a given – even if one is born in a Bohra family. Upon puberty, one is required to receive the *mithaq* (oath of allegiance), in order to be enrolled as a follower. This *mithaq* is to be repeated by the believer annually on the 18th of *Dhu'l-hijjah* [the 12th month of the Muslim calendar], during the feast of *Ghadir Khumm* in commemoration of Muhammad's investing of 'Ali as his successor [according to Shi'a belief].²⁰ Fundamental to the *mithaq*, and thus enrolment to the Bohra community, is the acceptance of the dominance and complete authority of the *da'i* in all areas of his or her life.²¹ According to Shibani Roy,

"Traditionally not taking 'mishaque' [i.e. *mithaq*] and not abiding by its rule was taken up as a cognizable offence and as a punishment such persons used to be killed and their property looted and distributed amongst the poor. Their wives were treated as divorced. In case they beg for a pardon then they are asked to perform 'nikah' before resuming the normal duties

¹⁶ Shibani Roy, *The Dawoodi Bohras: An Anthropological Perspective*. New Delhi, India: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1984. p. 44.

¹⁷ Engineer, *The Bohras*, op. cit. p. 295.

¹⁸ Maulana Kausar Niazi, *Heir to a Great Spiritual Heritage*. Mumbai, India: Department of Statistics and Information, Daudi Bohra Dawat, 1992. Cited in Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, op. cit. p. 172.

¹⁹ See <http://malumaat.com/jamaats.html>

²⁰ Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent*, op. cit. p. 71

²¹ Shaikh Tyebally A. Davoodbhoy, *In the Footsteps of a Glorious Tradition*. Mumbai, India: Department of Statistics and Information, Dawat-e-Hadiyah, 1990. Cited in Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, op. cit. p. 230.

of a husband. In case the person concerned neither asks for a pardon nor gives his property willingly he is excommunicated ('baraat'). His marriage and burial are not legalised."²²

It is against such control, which Engineer sees as "dictatorial", "authoritarian" and "against the democratic spirit of Islam" that he and fellow Bohra dissidents objected against.

(b) *Social Ostracism and Excommunication*

One of Engineer's main contentions with the Syedna is the use of *baraat* (social ostracism or excommunication) to compel believers into submitting to the Syedna's authority. When a person is issued with *baraat*, it essentially means that he or she will be socially ostracized and unable to participate in any ritual of the faith, community gatherings such as weddings and funeral, and barred from having casual contact with observant family or friends. Those who associate themselves with excommunicated individuals were themselves liable to *baraat*. Thus, *baraat* – or the fear of it – puts tremendous pressure upon practical and social life of the well-knitted Bohra community.²³

The consequences of *baraat* are severe, especially in family relations.²⁴ For example, those under *baraat* are unable to legitimize their daughters' marriages or perform their fathers' burial.²⁵ During the tumultuous period of the revolt in Udaipur in the early 70s, more than 200 couples were unable to get married because of the *dawat's* sanction and suspension of all religious observances in Udaipur. Eventually, more than a hundred of these couples were united by non-Bohra *qadi* imported from Mumbai in a joint ceremony arranged by the dissident leader, Norman Contractor.²⁶ Engineer had also narrated an incident where a husband was pressured to divorce his wife because the wife's family was under *baraat* for being sympathetic to the reform movement.²⁷ In the case of Mr. K (as he was identified in a

²² Roy, *The Dawoodi Bohras*, op. cit. p. 111.

²³ In his article, "The Wretched of the Bohra Community", Engineer narrated a dozen cases of persecutions and humiliations suffered by those who had incurred the wrath of Syedna. See Engineer, *The Bohras*, op. cit. p. 293-302.

²⁴ "Social boycott in a small and well-knit Bohra community, it should be noted, proves highly disastrous and results in total isolation (sometimes it results in financial ruin as well) of an individual or a whole family." (Engineer, *The Bohras*, ibid. p. 239)

²⁵ Blank, *Mullabs on the Mainframe*, op. cit. p. 180.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 243.

²⁷ Engineer, *The Bohras*, op. cit. p. 298.

case study), a prominent reformist Bohra from Ahmedabad, he was attacked by a mob of fanatic Bohras when he tried to enter a mosque for prayer.²⁸ He and his family members were also spat upon and humiliated whenever they walked along the streets of Ahmedabad.

In 1979, the Syedna issued a *firman* (religious edict) against bank interest and caused considerable adverse effect on the community. Many Bohras had to close down their bank accounts, withdraw their fixed deposits and for some, resigned from their jobs in the banks.²⁹ Those who failed to comply were, as noted above, threatened with *baraat*. Although the Syedna's sudden realizations that bank interest constitute *riba*' and thus prohibited by Islam, (a theological issue highly controversial and contentious even amongst the Sunni ulama), the *firman* may be seen within the ambit of a bigger fundamentalist revivalism sweeping throughout the Muslim world at that time. It is, however, interesting to note Engineer's observations on the issue. He wrote:

“[The Bohra Youth Association] founded an urban cooperative bank in 1972...This bank served the needs of a large number of needy Bohras. All this was in sharp contrast to the activities of the priestly establishment and its coterie which did nothing but extract money from the people. The high priest therefore, brought pressure on Ghulam Husain [the Youth leader] to dissolve the Bohra Youth Association and the Urban Cooperative Bank as well. When questioned, the high priest maintained that the Youth Association was established without his permission and that interest was forbidden in Islam and so banking too cannot be permitted. (It may be recalled that in Chandabhai Gulla case his father, the fifty-first *da'i* said that he both gave and took interest. Also, the priestly family had no hesitation in depositing money in banks and lending it on interest.) The motive here was to break the back of the Bohra Youth Association).”³⁰

In a more systematic attempt at controlling the Bohras, the Syedna effected the issuing of certificates of orthopraxy that indicate one's level of compliance to the *da'is* instructions. The certificates, or cards, are in the colours of green, yellow and red. As explained by Blank,

²⁸ Engineer, *The Muslim Communities of Gujarat: An Exploratory Study of Bohras, Khojas and Memons*. Delhi, India: Ajanta Publications, 1989. p. 98ff.

²⁹ Engineer, “The Reformists and the Bohra Priesthood” in *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*. New Delhi, India: Sterling Publishers, 2003. p. 175.

³⁰ Engineer, *The Bohras*, op. cit. p. 224.

“A green card indicates that the holder is in full compliance with the dictates of Syedna on all matters public and private... [A] yellow card indicates that the bearer is in basic compliance with the most important requirements of the faith, but deviates from normative practice in one or more particulars... The holder of a red card is still a legitimate member of the community, but a member who has strayed from Syedna’s direction in one or more major areas.”³¹

Theoretically, the cards are required in most ritual functions and activities as a symbol of orthopraxy.³² For obvious reasons, a dissident possesses no card – an indication that he or she is considered as outside the Bohra community and barred from mingling and participating with the community in all aspects of his social living. This, according to the dissidents, is yet another clear violation of human rights and against the democratic principles laid down in the Constitution of India. They often cited the Nathwani Commission report issued in 1979 which states in their concluding chapter that “there is a large-scale infringement of civil liberties and human rights of reformist Bohras at the hand of the priestly class and that those who fail to obey the orders of the Syedna and his *amil*s, even in purely secular matters, are subjected to *baraat*, resulting in complete social boycott, mental torture and frequent physical assaults.”³³

In addition, dissidents will typically contest any attempt to declare them as outside the fold of the Bohra community and that their challenge to Syedna’s authority does not negate them from being a Bohra nevertheless. As Engineer puts it:

“The reformers are not challenging any religious tenet, we believe in all the tenets of the Bohra faith. Our society is mainly against dictatorship and unaccountability toward the community. These are our main planks. We don’t even challenge the position of the *da’i*, it is

³¹ Blank, *Mullabs on the Mainframe*, op. cit. pp. 180-1.

³² It is noted, however, that the card system has created a certain hypocrisy as some may be compelled to adhere outwardly (such as keeping a beard, wearing a *topi* or *rida* etc.) while some may lie before the authority (either *dawat* officials or local *amil*s) to justify them receiving their certificates of orthopraxy. See Blank, *Mullabs on the Mainframe*, *ibid.* p. 183.

³³ The Nathwani Commission Report’s recommendations are republished as Appendix II in Engineer, *The Bohras*, op. cit. pp. 324-329. The Nathwani Commission was issued by Citizens for Democracy advocacy group. Some would criticize the validity of report as the sources of information came mostly from dissidents; the Syedna himself boycotted the Commission and dissuaded members of the Bohra community to co-operate or participate in the enquiry. See Blank, *Mullabs on the Mainframe*, op.cit. pp. 244-7. Blank, however, omitted reports of harassment and death threats directed at members of the board of inquiry, as well as those who showed support for the inquiry. Compare Engineer, *The Bohras*, op. cit. pp. 251ff.

fine for the *da'i* to be there, but he must govern according to the norms laid down for a *da'i*. Our complaint is that Syedna has strayed from these norms...I am trying to reform, not leave."³⁴

For playing an instrumental role in the Bohra reformist movement, engaging in open criticisms against the religious establishment, and refusal to accept absolute and unconditional subservience to Syedna's authority, Engineer has been under official ostracism since the 1970s. In fact, "any observant Bohra so much as speaking with him would face grave consequences".³⁵ Relations between Engineer (and the dissidents) and those loyal to the Syedna had been so bad that occasional violence occurred.³⁶ Engineer himself was attacked and badly beaten in Egypt in 1993. The most significant and latest incident was in February 13, 2000, where Engineer was hospitalized after being attacked by three Bohra men, after his plane landed in Mumbai from Indore. Syedna Muhammad Burhanuddin coincidentally was on the same flight, which was delayed half an hour, which on Engineer's account, was to suit the Syedna's own schedule. In addition, Engineer's house was broken into and his office ransacked.

(c) *Monopoly of Wealth and Nepotism*

A third major criticism leveled against Syedna's leadership and his religious establishment is on the misuse of community funds and the amassing of wealth by Syedna and his family members. One major example cited by the reformists is the case that occurred in early 20th century.

In 1917, it was alleged that the *da'i* (then Syedna Taher Saifuddin) purchased several parcels of real estates and properties in downtown Mumbai, using funds from the *gulla* (donation box) of a nearby Seth Chandabhai mausoleum. The sons of Sir Adamji Pirbhai then led a legal battle, claiming that *gulla* belongs to the community and cannot be spent by the *da'i*

³⁴ Personal interview, June 2, 1995. Cited in Blank, *Mullabs on the Mainframe*, ibid. p. 231.

³⁵ Blank, *Mullabs on the Mainframe*, ibid. p. 233.

³⁶ At the height of the reformist revolt in 1973, it was reported that the wives, sisters and mothers of reformist Udaipur men were beaten and molested in Galiakot. The attack apparently occurred in the presence of Syedna, who did nothing to stop the brutalities despite the women crying to him for help. See Engineer, *The Bohras*, op. cit. p. 226-8.

without the community's consent.³⁷ The Syedna's attorneys, on the other hand, argued that the *mithaq* and long-standing Bohra tradition gave the *da'i* absolute control over all aspects of believers' life. Eventually, the Court rejected the *da'i's* attorney's absolutist claims. However, following an appeal, the case was settled with a consent decree in 1921; the *da'i* was permitted to place another set of *gullas* at Bohra shrines with plaques advising donors that the money would be entirely at the disposal of Syedna.³⁸ The Court tussles proved to be costly. Eventually, the Syedna bought and moved into Pirbhai family's Malabar Hill mansion.³⁹ The financially ruined Pirbhai sons, and their prime supporters were excommunicated – a fate they suffered even before the Court hearings.

In another incident, the *da'i* and the reformist group had wrangled over Burhanpur's *Madrasa-i Hakimiya*. Then *da'i*, Syedna Abdullah Badruddin, was opposed to any form of Western education and had attempted to stop the *madrasah* from teaching secular subjects. The *Syedna* was also against any Bohras pursuing higher education and attempted to stop *Madrasah-i Hakimiya* from being converted to a high school. These created tensions with the *madrasah's* managing committee, and segments of the Bohra educated population. The Syedna had also prohibited the believers from donating or extending help to the financially-strapped school. By 1920s, many dissidents who opposed Syedna's decrees against secular education and his attempts to control *Madrasah-i Hakimiya* were excommunicated. Students and trustees of the *madrasah* were harassed. It finally led to a civil suit filed against the Syedna for refusing trustees and students of the *madrasah* entry into Syedi Hakimuddin *durgah* (mausoleum) in Burhanpur.⁴⁰

There were several other legal tussles between the priestly group and the reformist camp. Since the community's fund is seen to be totally at the disposal of the *da'i*, it is conceivable that the financing of these legal battles against the *da'i*, came from the community. It is also clear that the wealth amassed by the priestly group is continuously used to finance the ever-

³⁷ Sir Adamji Pirbhai was a Bohra business tycoon who rivaled the Syedna's influence after the priestly family's wealth and social influence declined following an internal power struggle. Sir Adamji served as the sheriff of Mumbai from 1897-1898.

³⁸ Blank, *Mullabs on the Mainframe*, *ibid.* p. 237.

³⁹ Roy, *The Dawoodi Bohras*, *op. cit.* p. 66.

⁴⁰ Engineer, *The Bohras*, *op. cit.* pp. 166-8.

efficient *dawat*, which further helps to strengthen and entrench the *da'i*'s hegemonic power and grip over the believers.

The Syedna's virtual control over all assets of the community and the lack of accountability became a contentious point ever since. According to Norman Contractor, a dissident leader prior to Engineer, "from the time of the forty-seventh *da'i* onward the members of the *da'i*'s family appear to have developed a lust for power and wealth."⁴¹ Earlier, Mian Bhai Mullah Abdul Husain, a reformist who challenged Syedna Abdullah Badruddin's refusal to allow secular education for the Bohras, had expressed concerns about the dynastic privileges of Syedna's extended family and the *da'i*'s own taste for "living luxuriously in palaces".⁴² A similar charge was made by Engineer who asserted that the Syedna "had explored all other sources to enrich himself and his family, and took all community resources under his control".⁴³ It is known that the structure of the *dawat*'s tax system is extensive; yet the amounts raised are only known within Syedna's inner circle.⁴⁴

In addition, it is clear that Syedna's family members monopolize the religious office – a fact acknowledged even by the sympathetic anthropologist, Jonah Blank. This monopoly practically gives the Syedna's extended family members access to clerical privileges such as lodgings, chauffeured vehicles, central kitchen and servants. It has also caused learned religious scholars to be unhappy, especially when they deemed themselves as better qualified than the *amils* chosen from within Syedna's family members. In the words of Engineer,

"Even the youngest child of Saiyyidna's family has acquired much more importance than the most learned and elderly members of the community who do not belong to this family. All the members of this family style themselves as princes and princesses and demand royal treatment from their followers. They take pride in calling themselves the members of a royal family. They expect people to kiss not only their hands but also their feet. Even the most learned and the eldest has to bow before the youngest and the least educated member of the

⁴¹ Norman L. Contractor, *The Dawoodi Bohras*. Pune: New Quest Books, 1980. p. 6. Cited in Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, op. cit. p. 240.

⁴² Mian Bhai Mullah Abdul Husain, *Gulzare Daudi for the Bohras of India*. Surat: Progressive Publications, 1920, r.1977. p. 65. Cited in Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, ibid., p. 238.

⁴³ Engineer, "The Reformists and the Bohra Priesthood" in *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*, op. cit. p. 171.

⁴⁴ For a summary of the taxes imposed on Bohras, compulsory or voluntary, see Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe*, op. cit. pp. 198-201.

“royal family”. Such a status was not enjoyed by the relatives of the *da’is* in the past. The *da’i* was undoubtedly highly revered but certainly not worshipped along with other members of his family. In the past even the humble members of the community not belonging to the family of a *da’i* could rise to the status of *da’i* as this office is not hereditary. But now it appears that it has become a monopoly of one family only.”⁴⁵

In view of the monopoly and arbitrariness of decisions exerted by the priestly group, the Central Board of Dawoodi Bohra Community, among other demands, called upon the *da’i* to (1) ensure that funds collected by way of religious tithes and donations be accounted for and spent for the needy and poor as prescribed by the Qur’an, and (2) create a democratic administrative set-up at the central and local level and that a constitution be drafted in which the rights and duties of the elected members vis-à-vis that of the *da’i*, be clearly defined.⁴⁶ As expected, the Board received no reply or acknowledgement on the memorandum. It thus proceeded to draft up a constitution along democratic patterns, which was ratified in the All-World Dawoodi Bohra Conference in 1977. The Conference itself saw several flare-ups between followers loyal to Syedna and the supporters of the reformist camp. It was an event that the priestly group tried to put a stop but failed.⁴⁷

Conclusion

From the above discussion above, we shall see that much of Engineer’s wider call for reforms in the Muslim world has its roots in what he saw as beliefs and practices that had deviated from the ethos and spirit of Islam, which he personally witnessed in the Bohra context. These deviations are fostered by a religious establishment that is bent upon maintaining their hegemonic power and influence over the masses. Furthermore, these hegemonic powers are used for protecting the interest of the establishment, and not for the general welfare of the community of believers.

One recurrent theme to be found in many of Engineer’s writings is on the subject of authoritarianism and dogmatism. These two are foremost factors that can hinder any

⁴⁵ Engineer, *The Bohras*, op. cit. p. 156.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 241. The Board was formed to act as a central organization for Bohra reformers. Engineer served as the Secretary-General in its early period.

⁴⁷ Ibid. pp. 245-251.

attempts at rethinking and reformulation of Muslim thought in matters pertaining to law, politics, economy and society in general. The former is to be found in religious establishments prone to protecting their status quo position and interests. The latter is to be found amongst the general believers who are under the sway of such religious establishments. Most of the time, it is a conflation and combination of the two – its manifestations to be found in present ritualistic orientation and revivalism of the fundamentalist type.

The subject of authoritarianism and dogmatism are, no doubt, festered by Engineer's experience as a reformist in the Bohra community. Yet, it is also a subject pertinent and relevant to the general Muslim world. The theme of authoritarianism and dogmatism is a major component in Engineer's conception of religion. It stood in direct contrast to a revolutionary spirit religion. This is where Engineer tries to develop a liberative theology that centers around values directed towards addressing common social concerns. It is also a theme we shall now turn our attention.

Conception of Religion

Towards a Liberative Theology

To properly situate Engineer's reform agenda, we need to first examine the conceptual basis of his understanding of religion. Engineer is acknowledged, in contemporary Muslim reformist circles, as an expounder of a liberative theology of Islam. However, one must note that aspects of liberative theology are not something new in the development of Islamic thought. One, for example, can find a similar emphasis in the works of reformist thinkers such as the Iranian Ali Shari'ati, South African Farid Esack and Egyptian Hassan Hanafi. Due to the nature of this study, we shall not elaborate on the nuances of each of these thinkers in their conception of liberative theology.⁴⁸ Suffice to say that they emerged primarily from the social and political context of Third World experience of

⁴⁸ One can however note that each of these thinkers mentioned adopted different methodological tools and emphasized diversified themes in their works. Farid Esack, for example, adopted a hermeneutical approach; Ali Shariati moved in the activist-cultural sphere; and Hassan Hanafi adopted the language of *turath* (heritage), political domination and globalization.

underdevelopment, authoritarianism, social strife and economic disparities. This, perhaps, is also a major commonality shared with the liberation theology of Latin America.

However, while Latin America produced a significant movement involving the masses, the pastoral community and the clergy group, the same cannot be attributed to the liberation theologians of the Muslim world.⁴⁹ Perhaps, the closest to what resembles a movement was when the Shah regime of Iran was overthrown by Iranians marching through the streets. The seeds of empowerment to stand up to the Shah's corruption and neglect of the masses were no doubt sown by Shari'ati's Shi'ite liberative theology.⁵⁰ However, the rise of Khomeini ensured that religion once again fell into the fold of status quo bent on protecting their newly-won power and seat of influence.

In South Africa, Farid Esack provided a theological basis for Muslims to participate in the anti-apartheid and anti-sexist movement.⁵¹ With the official demise of apartheid in 1994, the Call of Islam, an organization he helped to establish, had not created any significant movement of reform. Farid Esack himself left his hometown and has since devoted his life to the academic world and writing.

In Egypt, Hassan Hanafi's revolutionary project of *al-Yassar al-Islami* (Islamic Left) was short-lived.⁵² Though still residing and lecturing in Cairo, he was at times targeted by Muslim fundamentalist groups and some of his works were banned from circulation in Egypt.⁵³ Like Farid Esack, Hassan Hanafi has since devoted his life to scholarship and the academic world.

In the case of Engineer, the liberative theology proposed by him was probably useful as a tool in standing up to what he and other dissident Bohras view as a corrupt religious establishment in the Daudi Bohra community. Beyond that, his writings may create greater

⁴⁹ For a comprehensive overview of liberation theology in Latin American context, see Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973, r1988.

⁵⁰ See Ali Shari'ati, *What Is To Be Done: The Enlightened Thinkers and An Islamic Renaissance*. Houston, Texas: Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986; *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*. Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1986.

⁵¹ See Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression*. Oxford: Oneworld, 1997, r2002.

⁵² See Hassan Hanafi, *Islam in the Modern World*, 2 Vols. Heliopolis: Dar Kebaa Bookshop, 2000.

⁵³ Personal conversation. 14th March, 2004.

awareness amongst middle-class Muslim groups to look into problems of underdevelopment, poverty, illiteracy and gender equality. There is certainly no Muslim liberation theology movement in the form of what the world witnessed in Latin America. The Muslim masses are largely beholden to the traditional theology perpetuated by conservative religious clerics. Even the fundamentalist, who, like the proponents of a liberative theology, call for social change, tend to perpetuate traditional theology. For the fundamentalist, what is important is not how religion can be made relevant to the struggle of the masses. Rather, what is important for the fundamentalist is to seek ways in which religion can serve as slogans for their ideological preoccupation in trying to be more superior to the West. While liberation theology reflects upon concrete reality, raises critical consciousness and forms a transformative paradigm to struggle against all forms of dehumanization, fundamentalism creates a utopia, engages in endless rhetoric and dulls the minds of those beholden to its slogans by making them feel good and superior to the Other. That is why Engineer's liberative theology stood in direct opposition to fundamentalism, as we shall discuss in closer details below.

Aspects of Liberation Theology

In his book, *Islam and Liberation Theology*, Engineer maps out what he views as the liberative elements in Islam and how these can constitute a theology of liberation for Muslims. According to him, there are four aspects to be found in any liberation theology⁵⁴: (1) primary concern for the here and now of human life and only then on the hereafter; (2) does not support status quo which favours those who have as against those who do not; (3) plays partisan role in favour of the oppressed and dispossessed and provide these sections of the society with a powerful ideological weapon to fight against their oppressors; and (4) rejects singular polarity of historical determinism and believes in human freedom to shape their temporal destiny.

Engineer pointed out that liberation theology differs from traditional theology in two major aspects. Firstly, traditional theology "concerns itself exclusively with liberation in purely

⁵⁴ Engineer, "On Some Aspects of Liberation Theology in Islam" in *Islam and Liberation Theology: Essays on Liberative Elements in Islam*. New Delhi, India: Sterling Publishers, 1990. p. 1ff.

metaphysical sense and outside the process of history”. As an ally of religious establishment and theologians who are benefactors of status quo, traditional theological works “are full of metaphysical obfuscations and obscure issues”. This stood in contrast with liberation theology’s temporal-spatial emphasis on all of life’s concrete realities.

Secondly, traditional theology cannot provide the exploited masses with an ideological tool to change their unbearable conditions. Liberation theology, in contrast, allows religion to be an instrument of change for the people and acts as a *revolutionary praxis* – a term Engineer freely borrowed from Karl Marx.

Here, Engineer clearly defined the *dual function* of religion: religion can either be used as an instrument for social change or as a tool to justify status quo positions. As he elaborated,

“Religion, it must be remembered, is a powerful instrument and could be used either way – as an opium or as a revolutionary ideology. It becomes opium, as Marx puts it, only when it becomes ‘sigh of the oppressed’, the ‘heart of the heartless world’ and ‘spirit of spiritless situation’. Religion, however, is not always the sigh of the oppressed; it also becomes sword in their hands. It does not always act as opium to benumb the fighting vigour of the exploited; it also provides a powerful motivation to overthrow the status quo.”⁵⁵

Revolutionary Beginnings of Islam

To what extent does historical data supports the *revolutionary praxis* proposed by Engineer? According to Engineer, Muhammad’s mission is undeniably revolutionary in nature:

“Islam during the lifetime of the Prophet and a few decades thereafter, remained what can be called a revolutionary force. Any historian would bear it out that the Prophet, as the messenger of God, threw a powerful challenge to the rich traders of Mecca. These traders belonged to the leading tribe of Mecca called Quraysh. These rich traders were arrogant and drunk with power. They violated the tribal norms and completely disregarded the poor and needy. When the Prophet began to preach his divine message, it was the poor and oppressed

⁵⁵ Engineer, “Religion, Ideology and Liberation Theology – An Islamic point of View ” in Engineer (ed.), *Religion and Liberation*. Delhi, India: Ajanta Publications, 1989. p. 139.

of Mecca, including many slaves, who joined him. The Prophet himself was an orphan and came from a poor but a noble family of the tribe of Quraysh.”⁵⁶

It was this revolutionary beginning that Engineer wanted to bring forth as an important element in re-orientating our perception of what constitutes the essence of a religious movement. Engineer undertook to elaborate this aspect in his book *The Origin and Development of Islam*. Analyzing the growth and development of Islam in its concrete socio-economic surroundings, Engineer argued that it is not Muhammad’s teachings *per se* that was vehemently resisted by the Quraysh. Rather, it was the *implications* of his teachings that caused uneasiness, and eventually direct opposition from them. If Muhammad had not attacked the social and economic systems of the Arabs and was silent on differences between the rich and poor, exploitation of slaves by their masters, had not called upon the rich to distribute part of their wealth to the needy and orphans, perhaps he would have received less opposition from the nobles of Quraysh. In other words, the Meccans resisted his teachings because they understood the effects of his preaching upon their social and economic interest.⁵⁷

Putting it in the concrete terms, Muhammad’s struggle to establish Islam ought not to be divorced from his struggle to liberate society from oppressive elements of his time. The social scene of Arabia on the arrival of Islam was one filled with superstitions, suppression of women, illiteracy, commercial oligarchy driven by greed, slavery and many other oppressive conditions. Muhammad then

“...literally burst on the Meccan scene at the age of 40 to liberate his people as well as the whole of humanity...Liberation from ignorance, superstition, oppression, slavery, and injustice. Liberation to give dignity and freedom of thought and action. These are the noble ideals which not only provide inspiration to live but also encourage creativity and purposeful action.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Engineer, “On Some Aspects of Liberation Theology in Islam”. op. cit. pp. 2-3.

⁵⁷ Engineer, *The Origin and Development of Islam*. op. cit. pp. 42-3.

⁵⁸ Engineer, “Muhammad as Liberator” in *Islam and Liberation Theology: Essays on Liberative Elements in Islam*. op. cit. p. 30.

It is in this context that Engineer calls the founding moments of Islam as *revolutionary* and Muhammad as a *liberator*.⁵⁹ He wrote:

“Islam was a great liberating religion. It challenged the powerful establishment of rich Meccan traders and gave a great sense of dignity to the most oppressed of the system. The most marginalized sections of the Meccan society were black slaves, women and the poor (orphans and widows included). They had no rights in that society. Islam not only treated them as equal human beings, but also gave them a sense of dignity and proclaimed the most liberating doctrine of equal honour for all children of Adam. Thus, all the weaker sections of Meccan society – slaves, poor, women and the youth aspiring for change – rallied round the Messenger of Islam, as his doctrines were found to be most liberating of all for them.”⁶⁰

Implications

In bringing forth the idea of a liberative theology in Islam, Engineer calls upon Muslims to be socially engaged with the problems of their times. Just as Muhammad addressed the problems of his society and brought about revolutionary changes, so must Muslims address the problems of their time. The foundations of a revolutionary movement had been put in place during the founding moments of Islam. Muslims must reinstitute these within their present religious framework. The preferential option for the poor, orphans, the weak, the downtrodden, and the oppressed, must be made by Muslims who believe in the egalitarian spirit of Islam. In the language of the Qur’an, history is a witness of a constant struggle between the weak/oppressed (*mustad’ifin*) and the powerful/arrogant (*mustakbirin*). It is clear whom the Qur’an favours: “And We desired favour unto those who were oppressed in the earth, and to make them leaders and make them the inheritors.” (Q28:5)

In addition, pursuit of justice – especially to the weaker sections of society – must be made central to the religious praxis of a Muslim. As the Qur’an says: “Do justice; it is closest to piety.” (Q 5:8). Engineer reminded us also that

⁵⁹ Engineer’s use of the term ‘revolutionary religion’ and ‘liberator’ indicates an unmistakable influence from Latin America’s liberation theology. See Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1978.

⁶⁰ Engineer, “Values, Not Rituals, Are Essence of Religion”, in *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*. op. cit. p. 182.

“In order to achieve excellence, the Islamic theology must fight or wage *jihad* [Engineer meant as struggle] against all that perpetuates poverty...arrogance of power, negation of justice, oppression of the weak, suppression of legitimate aspirations of the common people, discrimination on grounds of colour, nationality or sex, concentration of wealth and political power...[and all other] oppressive socio-economic structures.”⁶¹

To do so, one must first re-examine the nature of our theology today. Theology, as Engineer noted, provides a powerful motivation for action upon this world. It thus needs to be divested of its present “ritualized, dogmatized and incomprehensibly metaphysical” form, which only seeks to serve the interest of powerful establishment and not the masses. Under powerful establishment, theology loses its revolutionary spirit in favour of status quo. “Theology today,” Engineer points out, “is mere bundle of soulless rituals as far as toiling and oppressed masses are concerned, and abstract intellectual and metaphysical or mystical exercises for the middle class elite. In both these forms it serves the cause of status quo.”⁶² And once theology cuts itself adrift from earthly matters, it will lose its relevance to the life of its believers. Therefore, it becomes a task for Muslims to develop a liberative theology that can once again become a soulful motivation for the oppressed to change their condition, a spiritual force to relate oneself meaningfully with, and to comprehend higher, spiritual aspects of reality. This is the task and function of a liberative theology.

The Emergence of Dogmatism

Even though Islam begins as a revolutionary force in society, it soon succumbed to dogmatism. “Dogma,” according to Engineer, “is an authoritative doctrine formulated by a church or a similar organization.” In addition,

“A dogma may not have universal acceptance when first formulated; it may even be challenged at the outset by various quarters. However, it finds acceptability over a period of time and, once accepted by a large body of people for various reasons, it acquires an aura of sanctity and cannot be challenged. At this stage any challenge would amount to heresy, and would attract persecution.”⁶³

⁶¹ Engineer, “On Some Aspects of Liberation Theology in Islam”. op. cit. pp. 7-8.

⁶² Engineer, “Religion, Ideology and Liberation Theology – An Islamic point of View”. op. cit. p. 142.

⁶³ Engineer, *Rethinking Issues in Islam*. Mumbai, India: Orient Longman, 1998. p. 1.

It is this codification of thought and fossilization of ideas in the form of dogmas that Engineer seeks to challenge. Engineer would see the emergence of dogmas as conditioned by two major factors: (1) the search for certainty, and (2) the need for sense of security.

According to Engineer, it is in human nature to want a sense of security and certainty. It is these two major factors that promotes or necessitates dogmas. When these are imbued with a sense of sacredness, a dogma will assume such importance to a believer. Thus, Engineer sees dogmas more as “a psychological requirement rather than a religious one”.⁶⁴ A dogma, regardless of how important it is to a believer, may or may not embody truth.

It is interesting to note that Engineer put in contrast two kinds of orientation. The first are those who are in need of certainty and sense of security. They are those who accept dogmas and are dogmatic about their beliefs. For such people, “thinking carries responsibility and creates uncertainty, whereas believing provides a soothing balm and gives a sense of security to the believer.”⁶⁵ They will thus hold on to dogmas in a rigid manner.

The second are those who are constantly in search of truth. This second type will never be satisfied with dogmas. They will instead question dogmas and prefer to remain in a perpetual state of uncertainty.⁶⁶

Yet, it is the first type that eventually tends to dominate religion and brings religion down to the unthinking level. The dogmatic orientation is naturally resistant to any change because “change induces in us a sense of uncertainty, and hence is dreaded.”⁶⁷

Religious Authoritarianism

Dogmatism may also be caused or perpetuated by religious authoritarianism. Engineer would see this authoritarianism as an external theological leadership that wishes to protect certain

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 3.

⁶⁵ Engineer, “Islam and Human Rights” in *Rethinking Issues in Islam*. p. 74.

⁶⁶ Engineer, *Rethinking Issues in Islam*. op. cit. p. 3.

⁶⁷ Engineer, “Islam and Ethical Values” in *Rethinking Issues in Islam*. p. 104.

interest. Yet, Engineer believes that religious authoritarianism is never justified in Islam. "Religion," he asserts, "cannot lead to religious authoritarianism." This is because "true religion makes one humane and humble, in the true service of God and His creatures." Thus, "a religious person depends more on his own spiritual powers, his own inner experience, than on any external authority."⁶⁸

On the contrary, religious authoritarianism "tends to sap one's inner strength and innate potential for growth". Correspondingly also, "religious dogmas destroy one's intellectual potential, one's powers of sublimation, besides making one totally dependent on the religious authority of others."⁶⁹

There is no doubt that Engineer's strong rejection of authoritarianism is conditioned by his experiences with the Bohra religious establishment. Nevertheless, it is also an issue that is pertinent within the larger Muslim world. A person beholden to an authoritarian regime in the religious realm is more likely to succumb to authoritarianism in the secular world too. This is an area where Engineer did not explore much. Much of Engineer's critique against authoritarianism is centered on power-holders who are bent upon justifying or protecting their group interest. If the masses are beholden to authoritarianism, it is because of their traditionalist orientation, low socio-economic status or false consciousness. The latter, i.e. false consciousness is again imputed to leaders (religious and secular) who either (1) distract the masses from real, concrete issues, or (2) manipulate their religious or traditionalist sentiments and socio-economic insecurities. Engineer is right in highlighting group interest as one major factor in the problem of authoritarianism. Yet, authoritarianism has also to do with an individual's psychological construct and character type. This important factor will explain why individuals who are supposedly of a higher socio-economic status, better educated and urban-oriented are also susceptible to authoritarian impositions from without. Thus, the authoritarian personality is as much a major contributor to the problem of authoritarianism as much as group interest.⁷⁰ This symbiotic relationship between

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 120.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 121.

⁷⁰ See, in particular, insights by social theorist and psychologist, Erich Fromm (*Escape From Freedom*. New York: Rinehart, 1958) and studies on authoritarian personality by Theodore Adorno *et. al.* (*The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper & Row, 1950).

authoritarianism from *within* and *without* was not given much attention in Engineer's critiques. It is also an issue that is of pedagogical importance in any project of liberation and reform.⁷¹

Conclusion

The above discussion reveals that Engineer holds a dynamic and revolutionary conception of religion. This conception of religion allows him to re-examine issues in the face of concrete realities and challenges posed by socio-economic systems and groups that tend to promote divisiveness along class, gender, colour, nationality and social status. This, for Engineer, runs contrary to the egalitarian spirit of Islam that speaks for the poor, weak, downtrodden, marginalized and oppressed segments in society. Engineer's sense of social justice is one informed by the ideals found in Muhammad's early struggles in Mecca and Medina. It is not far off if we were to also note here that Engineer may have seen his struggles against the Bohra religious establishment in the same fashion as he saw Muhammad's attempt to eradicate oppressive elements in 7th century Arabia.

Thus, theology plays an important role for Engineer's own conviction as a Muslim and his project of reform. He rejected the type of theology that divested itself from concrete human struggles. He saw such theology as an ally of powerful religious establishment that has an interest to guard and a turf to protect. Theology for him is not supposed to be a bundle of soulless rituals and metaphysical abstractions. Theology ought to be a powerful inner force that propels oneself to struggle against any elements that dehumanizes man's existence on earth. Theology and religion must be brought back to its revolutionary beginnings and not be allowed to be turned into a dogma that is to be forced upon the masses by an authoritarian power. Thus, theology reformulated in liberative values (such as truth, justice, equality, peace, progress, etc) can pave the way for greater reforms in society.

⁷¹ See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Continuum, r2004.

Conception of Reforms

Rethinking Issues in Islam

Why are reforms necessary? The answer to this question lies in the nature of our social existence. Engineer raises several basic propositions: Firstly, “no religion descends from heaven in a social vacuum...Every religion comes into existence in a given society with its values, its ethos, customs and traditions.”⁷² Secondly, the conditions of society change as humanity develops and advances materially and technologically. Thirdly, values may evolve as customs are replaced by new practices and traditions disappear or re-emerge in new forms. These sociological changes may create new tensions between the old and new in society. Any religion that fails to participate in the creative process of mediating such tensions will eventually lose its potency, relevance and dynamism that is crucial for its own survival. This is the basis of reformism.

Engineer believes that reformism is an integral process of any religious thought and movement. In line with his concept of the revolutionary beginnings of religions, Engineer points out that every religion begins as a reform movement in its initial phase; to the extent that “one can hardly think of any religion, which did not come with the mission of reforming a society in which it was born”. Accordingly, any religion consists of its “core teachings, as revealed to or founded by its founder” and “various social beliefs and traditions”. Over time, these social traditions “become an integral part of religion and corrupt its original teachings”. This then, becomes a basis for reform.⁷³

At the same time, the necessity of reform lies in the continuous nature of social change. For example, as Engineer pointed out, the proliferation of reformist movements in the 19th century amongst Muslim countries in Asian and African countries were due to the uprooting of traditional social setup by colonialist ventures. Reforms thus cannot be denied; it can only be managed. Engineer is fully aware that any attempts at reform may falter in more than one ways – a theme we will revisit later.

⁷² Engineer, “Sociological Approach to Islam” in *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*. op. cit. p. 191.

⁷³ Engineer, “Requirements of a Reform Movement” in *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*. op. cit. pp. 133-4.

Conception of Shari'ah

The most dominant issue in Engineer's project of reform is on the deconstruction and re-conceptualization of *shari'ah* laws. Any attempt at reform in the Muslim world must address this. According to Engineer, there are several misconceptions about *shari'ah* that needs to be corrected:

“It is often assumed by those not well versed in the origin and development of *shari'ah* that, firstly, it is *totally* divine and, secondly, it is immutable. Such a view is often aired in common discussions and encouraged by the conservative ‘Ulama. These facts are to the contrary. Firstly, *shari'ah* did not come into being all of a sudden; it went through a torturous process of evolution over the centuries; and, secondly, it never remained static, and hence immutable as commonly assumed. Even after it assumed a recognizable shape the jurists had to admit the principle of *ijtihad* (literally, exertion), i.e., creative interpretation and application of Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence) in the face of new circumstances.”⁷⁴

In addition, Engineer pointed out that “there was never any unanimity among jurists on the number of important legal matters which today are considered as immutable, as divine words in the Qur'an.”⁷⁵ In view of the differences amongst jurists on many legal matters, *shari'ah* cannot be viewed as divine in the same way as the Qur'an. *Shari'ah* constitutes human opinion and interpretation, which can never be absolute, perfect or divine in nature.

This basic understanding of *Shari'ah* is significant in addressing the rigidity, conservatism and dogmatism of the *ulama* group who would maintain that every ruling of past scholars are immutable and cannot be questioned, rethought and eventually reformulated according to the needs and context of present society. Engineer believes that Muslims need not be constrained by traditionalism. According to Engineer,

“*Shari'ah* laws evolved in response to various challenges and problems and must be viewed as such. They cannot be viewed in the abstract. In other words, *shari'ah* is a situational, not transcendental law and must be creatively applied in the changed circumstances.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*. Selangor: IBS Buku, 1992. p. 6.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 7.

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 9.

It is within this broad framework that Engineer sets out the task of reformulating *shari'ah* laws, especially those pertaining to gender relations. This is also a major difference (contention, even) between Engineer and the traditionalist and fundamentalist scholars. In fact, a primary indicator of one's orientation in Muslim religious thought lies in his or her conception of *shari'ah* laws.

Without trying to be essentialist in approach, a traditionalist is typically one who holds the *shari'ah* rulings of past scholars as definitive and complete.⁷⁷ In other words, a traditionalist does not believe that any aspects of *shari'ah* rulings made by past great scholars ought to be questioned or subjected to reformulations. With regards to traditionalism, Engineer opined that

“We should not be constrained by what our ancestors thought and did. To be constrained is not the Qur'anic way of approaching the truth. The Qur'an often criticizes those who reject Allah's message because their forefathers did not think that way [e.g. Q 11:62-3, 87; 21:54; 13:49; 23:68]. We should also escape from this rut and begin to think afresh in our own experiential context and in the light of the values and principles laid down by the Qur'an”⁷⁸

A fundamentalist, on the other hand, though accepts uncritically and unconditionally the closed corpus of traditional formulations of *shari'ah*, allows certain reformulations that suit their needs.⁷⁹ Ultimately, a fundamentalist's obsession is with the project of *islamization* that will eventually lead either to non-Muslims' acceptance of the superiority and dominance of Islam or in the establishment of an 'Islamic State'. This is where the rhetoric of '*shari'ah as immutable, divine law*' fits into the fundamentalists' religious schema. The fundamentalist *must* project *shari'ah* as 'divine and immutable' in order to sustain aspects of religiosity that can act as identity-markers (Muslim dressing, being most prominent preoccupation) in standing up

⁷⁷ The typologies presented are, sociologically-speaking, *ideal types* and ought to be seen as a necessary in delineating a particular phenomenon observed. These typologies are neither mutually exclusive nor comprehensive.

⁷⁸ Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*. Op. cit. p. 14.

⁷⁹ In economic activities, for example, a fundamentalist will accept unquestioningly the traditional conception of *riba* yet allows new and creative synthesis of modern economic principles with sprinklings of *shari'ah* concepts. (See Timur Kuran, *Islam and Mammon: The Economic Predicaments of Islamism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004.)

to the Other.⁸⁰ *Shari'ah* rulings (selective as it may be) that are projected as divine and immutable, thus serve to legitimize and sanction the fundamentalist's actions and ideological beliefs. A fundamentalist invariably sees himself or herself as a 'defender of religion', an 'executioner of God's Will', or simply a '*da'i* (proponent of faith)'; one fashions oneself as a 'spokesman of God' on earth – a self-proclaimed act that vested upon oneself a sense of mission and belonging to the ideological goals of fundamentalist movements around the world. These aspects (i.e. the connection between fundamentalist conceptions of *shari'ah* to their ideological goals) were not explored by Engineer.

Engineer, perhaps, saw fundamentalist thinking as a major obstacle in attempts to reform aspects of Muslim laws that were no longer in consonant with changes in modern life. Thus, in many of his writings, Engineer strongly rejected the fundamentalists' erroneous view of a 'divine and immutable *shari'ah*'. Alternatively, he presented sustainable arguments for the existence of evolutionary and diverse conceptions of *shari'ah*. Engineer's position on *shari'ah* is thus characteristic of, in contradistinction to traditionalism and fundamentalism, a modernist or progressive vision of Islam. As noted above, Engineer did not explore the fundamentalist's motivations for conceiving *shari'ah* as divine and immutable. He did, however, allude to the fact that certain regimes (in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, in particular) rode upon the religious sentiments of the masses to consolidate their own political positions through promoting certain fundamentalist views, such as necessity of *hudud* (penal law that includes cutting of hands for theft and stoning for adultery).

The Problem of Hermeneutics

One can observe that Engineer took a similar contextual approach to Qur'anic interpretations. The Qur'an, undoubtedly, is the primary source where all *shari'ah* laws are supposed to be derived from. Thus, the nature and issues surrounding how one interprets Qur'anic verses require considerable treatment. This is another major methodological distinction between a fundamentalist and a modernist. A fundamentalist is almost certainly

⁸⁰ This "mirror-image" syndrome (i.e. preoccupation with the Other and the need to define oneself in terms of the Other) has been noted by many observers. See, for example, Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. London: Hurst & Co., 2004.

prone to interpreting scripture in a literal manner. If, for example, the Qur'an speaks of "as to the thief, male or female, cut off his or her hands" (Q 5:38) and since the verse constitutes the immutable divine will, it must be implemented by Muslims at all cost.

In Engineer's hermeneutical scheme, there are three basic factors that one must take into consideration when reading a particular Qur'anic verse or text: (1) that there is a distinction between *normative* and *contextual* verses; (2) that every reader approaches a text with a particular worldview and *a priori* positions; and (3) every text exists in a social context and need to be understood as such.

For Engineer, the fact remains that the Qur'an was sent down in the concrete historical experience of the Arabs. It was then interpreted according to the social and intellectual context of a particular community. It thus becomes an imperative for Muslims to contextualize divine guidance in their present context and needs. Those who objected to any re-interpretation merely admit that the early jurists and theologians were free from any sociological influences. This constitutes a grave error and reflects naïve thinking. As Engineer commented:

"...though the source is divine (i.e. the Qur'an), its understanding is human. Also, it should be noted that one's understanding of the Qur'an will also be affected by one's own circumstances and one's own perception of reality. Though the *fuqaha* (i.e. the jurists) tried most sincerely to understand the Qur'anic injunctions, they could understand them only in the light of their own circumstances. The understanding of the divine word can and should change with one's circumstances. What is of essence in the Qur'an is divine guidance, principles and values."⁸¹

In the example of *hudud*, Engineer asserted that the élan of the Qur'an must be taken into account in interpreting verses pertaining to criminal punishment.⁸² Firstly, *hadd* (pl. *hudud*) semantically means "to prevent" (as in to stop or deter) or "limit" (as in a boundary that ought not to be transgressed). Thus, as a terminology, *hudud* carries the meaning of preventing or deterring a person from committing crime. Secondly, the normative injunction

⁸¹ Engineer, "Tashri' (Process of Law Making in Islam) in Islam" in *The Qur'an, Women and Modern Society*. New Delhi, India: Sterling Publishers, 1999. p. 19.

⁸² Engineer, "Islam and Punishment for Crimes" in *Rethinking Issues in Islam*. Op. cit. p. 97.

in the Qur'an is to establish justice. Seen from these perspectives, *hudud* ought to be understood in the Qur'anic spirit of enacting justice and deterring crime. With regards to “*qata'a yadin* (to cut off the hands)” in Q 5:38, Engineer is of the opinion that it ought to be interpreted metaphorically. Thus, as Arabic language itself would allow, “to cut” would mean to restrain or to abolish the conditions that will lead a person to commit theft. It will also mean that the Qur'anic expression of “cutting off the hands” may imply “destroying one's powers”, which, taken in the context of Engineer's liberative theology, will mean “taking measures [such as] restructuring the society in favour of the weaker sections”.⁸³

Therefore, the specific type of punishment may differ. “Punishments for crimes,” Engineer asserted, “cannot constitute the essence of religious teachings.”⁸⁴ The specific type of punishments mentioned by the verses on *hudud* (e.g. Q 5:38-9 on cutting of hands, and Q 24:2 on flogging for adultery) ought to be understood in the context of the society they were revealed in. Harsher punishments may suit the sensibilities of a tribal society of that time. Today, flogging and cutting off hands need not be applied if there are other effective means of serving justice and deterring crimes. The normative injunction of the Qur'an is to ensure that justice is served and the manner in which it is to be done will vary according to the sociological condition of a society.

Such hermeneutical approach adopted by Engineer is similar in his other treatments of issues such as the issue of *jizyah* (poll tax on non-Muslims), family planning, *riba'*, divorce, polygamy and law of inheritance. According to Engineer, one either accepts the interpretation of the past or tries to re-interpret scripture according to present context. The former is unacceptable because society change and was never static. The only option then is to accept rethinking and reformism as a necessary process of living Islam according to its dynamic values and vision. The normative spirit of the Qur'an must be upheld, but the contextual injunctions need to be reinterpreted according to the need and situation of a particular society. Only then can Islam be relevant and be a source of guidance for mankind.

⁸³ Engineer, “The Concept of Islamic Hudud” in *Islam and Liberation Theology*. Op. cit. p. 188.

⁸⁴ Engineer, “Islam and Punishment for Crimes”. Op. cit. p. 92.

Rethinking Issues

From the above, let us take a closer look at three major themes that Engineer addressed throughout his writings: (a) the problem of fundamentalism; (2) the issue of secularism/pluralism; and (3) gender justice.⁸⁵

a. The Problem of Fundamentalism

The rise of religious revivalism that the world saw for the last few decades are related to the issue of religious fundamentalism. Engineer is critical on the use of religion by religious fundamentalists. The nature of these “revivalisms” has been a subject that he often discussed.

In several of his writings on Muslim fundamentalism, Engineer made several pertinent observations. Firstly, he noted that fundamentalists are selective in their “Islamization” process. For example, fundamentalists tend to focus upon issues that do not constitute the essence of Islam. Issues such as penal code (i.e. cutting off hands for theft and flogging for adultery) seems to preoccupy fundamentalists’ conception of religion. Instead, crucial concepts that form the Islamic ethos, such as human camaraderie and equality, are rarely mentioned. Undoubtedly, such ethos can be subversive to the positions of the status quo and “would tend to change the direction of the present repressive and exploitative social structure towards a more just and equitable one.”⁸⁶ Thus, fundamentalists with a constituency to protect or an interest to pursue will not focus upon such ethos.

Secondly, fundamentalists tend to push aside socio-economic issues and divert people’s attention to trivial matters. Engineer quoted the example of Dr. Israr Ahmad, a hand-picked member of General Zia ul-Haque’s *Majlis-e-Shoora*, who raised that *pardah* and beard ought to

⁸⁵ The choice of highlighting these three areas is in view of its relation to the contextual need of local discourse on Islam. These themes also constitute some of the most urgent issues that need serious reflection and discussion within members of the local Muslim intelligentsias. Local Muslim intelligentsias have been grappling with the issues of fundamentalism and secularism in particular. Although gender issues do not pose much problems in this Republic (where Muslim women enjoy much freedom and access in employment and education especially), they nevertheless dictate the perceptions towards women amongst the local Muslim population.

⁸⁶ Engineer, *Islamic Fundamentalism in Islam and Liberation Theology*. Op. cit. p. 64.

be enforced as part of the general programme of 'Islamization' in Pakistan. Raising such issues eventually gave "rise to irrelevant, needless, and childish controversies".⁸⁷

Thus, it is clear that fundamentalism amongst the ruling class is merely using Islam as an instrument of legitimizing power.⁸⁸ Because of the monopoly of resources by the ruling elites, and the unequal development processes that creates further divisions in society along ethnic and class lines, the masses become stricken with anxiety. Religion thus, becomes an instrument of the *right* and the *left*, depending on whether they are fighting for or against the establishment. Anxiety, which is a breeding factor for fundamentalism, was also nurtured by the uprooting of individuals from rural areas, doing odd jobs or remaining unemployed in industrial towns.⁸⁹

It can also be seen that the fundamentalists' obsession with rituals and symbols reflect upon the use of religion as a political tool by the ruling elites to keep the masses away from their socio-economic conditions. Engineer was right to point out that religious revivalism in most Muslim countries (like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the Sudan) were state-sponsored. Since most Muslim countries are in Third World conditions and under subjugation of Western economic interest, the masses felt a certain revulsion towards (1) the incursions of Western lifestyles alien to them; (2) concentration of wealth and resources in the hands of the ruling elites; and (3) strong inflationary pressures due to wrong or corrupt development strategies. Thus, the ruling classes, sensing danger to political stability as well as proclivity of the masses for revival of conventional morality, resorted to sponsoring the *Da'wah* movement. According Engineer,

"The *Da'wah* movement emphasizes formal Islam and is highly ritualized. Its basic trust is performance of *salat* (prayer), *saum* (fasting during the holy month of Ramadan) and *haj* (performing pilgrimage). Undoubtedly these are obligatory duties in Islam but Islam is much more than this. Its value-system emphasizes equality, universal brotherhood and social justice and strongly condemns exploitation and oppression termed by the holy Qur'an as *zulm* which is a comprehensive word. However, the *Da'wah* movement does not emphasize these social aspects of Islam as these aspects would challenge the hegemony and the very

⁸⁷ Engineer, "The Politics of Islamization" in *Islam and Its Relevance to Our Age*. Selangor: Ikraq, 1987. p. 52.

⁸⁸ Engineer, "Islamic Fundamentalism" in *Islam and Liberation Theology*. Op. cit. p. 67.

⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 68.

exploitative practices the *Da'wah* movement has been created to divert people's attention from."⁹⁰

As a result, the masses' potentiality of challenging the repressive and oppressive elements in their society is diverted to petty and mundane issues. By implementing those aspects of *shari'ah* which do not pose any problems to the ruling class (such as *hudud* laws), the masses were made to believe that *shari'ah* has been implemented. Moral policing then takes center stage. This further entrenches state powers by legitimizing added control over the masses under the pretext of preventing evil and immorality.

Such critiques were no doubt, part of Engineer's challenge against the fundamentalist idea of an 'Islamic State'. Genealogically speaking, the idea of an 'Islamic State' is a novelty of Muslim fundamentalist thought. It is a new invention that emerged within the nation-state system, and acts as a challenge to Western dominance in the modern world. Syed Abu'l a'la Maududi, a journalist-turned-preacher of Indian descent, was an instrumental figure in giving expression to such fundamentalist idea. Maududi was also one of the leading ideologue, short to say an inspirational thinker, of fundamentalist movements worldwide. Engineer's critique of Maududi, thus is worth noting. According to Engineer,

"As far as the quality and depth of thinking is concerned, Maulana Maududi, compared to other great Muslim thinkers like Afghani, Muhammad 'Abduh, Kawakibi, Sir Syed and others, is no more than a mediocre. While these other thinkers, grappled with the concrete contemporary problems and suggested solutions in an assimilative spirit, Maududi wants to promote what bears deep medieval impress in the garb of Islam and wrapped in his fascinating rhetoric. Nowhere he comes near to grappling with the contemporary problems in all their complexities... One may go through thousands of pages of Maududi's writings but it would be futile to seek enlightenment in them. One will find that the Maulana repeats the arguments again and again with different emphasis and in different forms, of course. The entire burden of his arguments repeated *ad nauseum* is that Islam, as presented by the '*ulama* of the early Islamic period and the concepts formulated by them, ought to be accepted with complete involvement of one's heart and mind. He does not even bother to take their deep differences on many fundamental issues into account."⁹¹

⁹⁰ Engineer, "Socio-Economic Bases of Religious Revival Amongst Muslims" in *Islam and Liberation Theology*. Op. cit. p. 107.

⁹¹ Engineer, *The Islamic State*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1996. pp. 116-7.

Maududi's writings are, of course, significant in shaping many of the present 'taken-for-granted' ideas on matters pertaining to *shari'ah* and the religion. Amongst these are: (1) *shari'ah* – as codified by early *ulama* based on Qur'an and *sunnah* – is immutable and constitutes divine will; (2) one ought to establish God's rule (i.e. *shari'ah* as understood and interpreted by Maududi) on earth; (3) Islam is a comprehensive ideology and thus, (4) in need of state power to be enforced (i.e. by establishing an 'Islamic State').

In Engineer's terms, Maududi's conception of an 'Islamic State' is no less authoritarian, even fascistic, and will eventually erase any form of freedom and creative thinking. Maududi's conception of an 'Islamic State' is, in fact, nothing more than recourse to (selective) medieval *shari'ah* formulations which he saw as immutable and constitutes divine wisdom and will. Engineer further commented that "in Maududi's scheme of things, laws (i.e. *shari'ah* – the immutable divine will and wisdom) define the social structure rather than social structure determining the laws."⁹²

This point is an important departure between Engineer's thought and fundamentalist ideology. As noted earlier, Engineer tends to adopt a sociological approach in trying to understand how religion came to be understood and practiced in society. By positing that *shari'ah* laws are sociologically determined (taking into account the distinction made between contextual and normative aspects of Qur'anic injunctions), we need to reformulate aspects of *shari'ah* laws that are no longer relevant or in consonance with changes in society. It is this lack of sociological insights that led fundamentalists like Maududi to adopt naïve views on various social, political and economic issues in society. Engineer commented:

"In a backward society like Pakistan it is not very difficult to convince at least a section of people especially the petit-bourgeois which suffers most in a backward economy that all their ills are due to westernization and the only solution lies in re-introducing the Islamic teachings. They are made to believe that the present moral degeneration has come about as a result of materialism of the west and its corrupting influences. Introduce, rigorously of

⁹² Ibid. p. 123.

course, the Islamic teachings and impose the Islamic *shari'ab* and lo and behold all the evils have disappeared.”⁹³

Engineer then added:

“Maulana Maududi’s teachings are full of such naiveties. Although he has been acclaimed as the greatest thinker of Islam in Pakistan he totally lacks any sociological perspective. He does not believe in searching for the roots of moral degeneration and corruption in the present socio-economic base and iniquitous distribution of the economic resources. He thinks that human behaviour can be controlled by imposing *hudud allah* (i.e. the divine limits) and that the human character is autonomous and can be moulded in any desired direction without controlling or re-structuring the socio-economic base.”⁹⁴

Engineer’s critique of Maududi and fundamentalist thought is an important contribution to contemporary discussions on Islam. In many discussions on Islam today, fundamentalist thought had assumed such dominance and influence over many Muslims that they invariably hinders any attempts at addressing issues in concrete terms. How can one address issues concretely when, as Engineer rightly pointed out, fundamentalist thought revolves around rhetoric? If one were to dissect fundamentalist thought, the arguments put forward (despite its consummate skill and logic) are amazingly simple (simplistic?): (1) the entire world’s problems are due to Western (which is defined as atheistic, secular, decadent and immoral) influence. Thus, (2) Islam *is* the solution, since (3) Islam is *ad-Deen* (defined as comprehensive, total way of life); (4) the solution lies in implementing *shari'ab*, either by (5) establishing an ‘Islamic State’ (with the Qur’an and Sunnah as guiding constitution and learned *ulama* as leaders) or (6) *islamize* all aspects of life (i.e. knowledge, science, politics, economics, etc) through (7) *da'wah* and conversion.

The rhetoric of fundamentalism induces a sense of assurance of their worth as Muslims in a modern world that alienates and caused massive anxiety. This is where, as Engineer asserted, politicians exploit such sentiments to entrench and justify their positions. By implementing measures that seems to be for the ‘cause of Islam’ (such as implementing *hudud*, establishing ‘interest-free’ banks, establishing an Islamic university, enforcing public morality by setting

⁹³ Ibid. p. 154.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

up morality squads, etc) politicians appease the masses and consolidate/legitimate their position of power. In reality, their countries are still trapped in poverty, underdevelopment, corruption and exploitation – a pertinent observation and challenge brought up by Engineer against the fundamentalists.

b. The Issue of Secularism/Pluralism

The problem of fundamentalism naturally leads to the issue of secularism. Engineer's views on secularism are equally important in challenging some commonly-held views promoted by fundamentalist circles.

In his article, *Islam and Secularism*, Engineer undertook to debunk some commonly-held ideas amongst Islamists on the notion of secularism.⁹⁵ According to Engineer, fundamentalists' rejection of secularism seems to rest upon several assumptions. Amongst these are: (1) in a secular state, there is no place for divine laws; (2) secular laws (being man-made) stood in direct contrast to divine laws; (3) Islam admits no distinction between religion and politics; and (4) secular philosophies grants no space for believe in the hereafter, which Islam lays emphasis on.

Firstly, Engineer calls into question the use of the term 'Islamic state'. He wrote:

“It is important to note that there is a difference between an Islamic State and Islam being the State religion. In Islamic state, all laws must strictly conform to the Islamic *Shari'ah*, but if a country declares Islam as its religion, it means that Islam is preferred to all other religions and it enjoys more privileges in the country.”⁹⁶

However, as far as *shari'ah* laws are concerned, Engineer pointed out that they evolved and are not divine in the sense of being absolute. In other words, as discussed above, the corpus of *shari'ah* laws is human attempts at locating Divine Will. They are thus human constructs, which are conditioned by the context and experience they were in. As far as *shari'ah* is

⁹⁵ Engineer, “Islam and Secularism” in *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*. op. cit. pp. 38-49. For a fuller treatment of the development of the “Islamic State” concept, see Engineer, *The Islamic State*. Op. cit.

⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 39.

concerned, what is binding is the moral dimension and values underpinning it. If a secular state accepts the validity of *shari'ah* ethos such as compassion, justice, equality and non-violence, Muslims should have no problem reconciling their existence within the secular ambits.

Secondly, Engineer asserts, “the concept that religion and politics cannot be separated is more historical than theological”. The Qur’an “does not give any concept of a state; it only gives the concept of the society”. In addition, Engineer pointed out that “the Qur’an is concerned with morality rather than polity”.⁹⁷ The development of the concept of non-separation of religion and politics was due to the *ulama* and jurists’ concern that should they be separated, rulers would neglect fundamental moral values which are central to the Qur’an. Even then, there was no clear articulation of this non-separation concept. It was only distinctively articulated as a response to colonial imposition of their laws on Muslim lands.

Thirdly, Engineer argued that the concept of a state evolved only after the death of Muhammad. In the early Medinan society, “people were more concerned with day to day problems of marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc., for which the Qur’an and the Prophet were inerrant source of guidance.” Thus, “the people asked the Prophet for guidance and followed his pronouncements or the Qur’anic injunctions voluntarily.” What is important to note is that “there was no state machinery to enforce it” nor was there any police force or any regular military. In other words, the Medinan society during Muhammad’s time resembles little of what we would call a state with its separate judiciary, executive and administrative bodies. At the very most, there was the *Mithaq-e-Madina* (Covenant of Medina), which binds the different tribal groups in Medina under a common purpose. Yet, what is most important about this document is “that the Prophet did not compel the different tribes and idol worshippers to follow the Islamic law”. According to Engineer also, “the Covenant laid down certain principles which are valid even today in a secular state”.⁹⁸ The Covenant clearly spells out that all signatories of the agreement, including Jewish tribes of Medina, constitute a single community (*ummah*) and obligated to defend Medina from any external threats and attacks – a semblance of what we will now call a secular social contract.

⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 39.

⁹⁸ Ibid. pp. 40-1.

Thus, Engineer rejected any notion of an Islamic state and non-separation of religion and politics as theologically sanctioned. These are “human creation rather than divine revelation”.⁹⁹ And as human constructs, Muslims are not compelled to accept them as points of faith. Furthermore, since the concept of non-separation of religion and politics is a historical construct rather than theological in nature, one can accept living in a secular country as long as the state allows religious autonomy and does not involve in itself in the rejection of the religious space.

The issue of secularism is also linked to the nature of living in a plural society. One must note that a key feature of secular countries today is the acceptance of religious pluralism. Religious pluralism here is understood as (1) the legitimate right of existence and practice of diverse religious groups in a society; and (2) the state cannot dictate and interfere with the religious choice of an individual. It is, in a way, a direct contrast to Muslim fundamentalist thought that Islam ought to be enforced by state powers and citizens ought to conform to religious dictates as defined by the *ulama* who (in)forms the state.

To what extent then, according to Engineer’s assessment, does Islam, theologically, accept pluralism and reject the fundamentalist vision of a monolithic society?

In his article, *Islam and Pluralism*, Engineer argued that “If one goes by the Qur’anic pronouncements Islam not only accepts the legitimacy of religious pluralism but considers it quite central to its system of beliefs.”¹⁰⁰ Engineer appealed to several verses in relation to his arguments. Firstly, verse 5:48 states clearly that

“Unto every one of you We have appointed a (different) law and way of life. And if Allah had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but (He willed it otherwise) in order to test you by means of what He has given you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto Allah you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ.” (Q 5:48)

⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 48.

¹⁰⁰ Engineer, “Islam and Pluralism” in www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~rtavakol/engineer/plurals.htm.

According to Engineer, this is a “seminal statement in favour of religious and legal pluralism which Muslims, specially the Muslim regimes, have not considered seriously.” From this verse alone, Muslims can draw the lesson that (1) each religio-cultural community has its own right to exist and live according to its own laws (*shir'ah* or *shari'ah*) and way of life (*minhaj*); (2) God had intended for plurality (and not imposition of one law on all); (3) every community must compete in doing goodness; and (4) in matters that differ, one must leave it to God to decide, in the hereafter, who is right or wrong.

The notion that plurality and mutual pursuit of goodness is intended in God's creation is further corroborated in verses 30:22 and 2:148. Further, in verse 2:177, it is written that

“It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East and the West, but righteousness is the one who believes in Allah, and the Last Day, and the angels and the Book and the prophets, and gives away wealth out of love for Him to the near of kin and the orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to these who ask and to set slaves free and keeps up prayer and pays the poor rate; and the performers of their promise when they make a promise, and the patient in distress and affliction and in the time of conflict; and these are they who keep their duty.” (Q 2:177)

From this verse, Engineer explains that it “proves beyond any doubt that the real aim of the Qur'an is to produce an ideal human person who is virtuous, is sensitive to others' suffering and hence spends of his wealth on the needy, on setting slaves free, taking care of orphans, is true to his word and is patient in times of distress and conflict.” Such persons, then, are the “truly God-conscious (*muttaqun*) and keepers of their duty to Allah.” In addition, the verse “lends great support to the basic premise of religious pluralism by de-emphasising a particular way of prayer and extolling the importance of human conduct and sensitivity to others' suffering and one's own steadfastness in the face of calamities and afflictions.”¹⁰¹ The existence of pluralism is for humanity to “know one another”, i.e. to understand and learn from each other (Q 49:13).

It is important to note also that sectarianism is a concept alien to Islam. Engineer believes that Islam emphasizes broad humanitarian concerns through doing good deeds and not on

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

dogmas. The concept of good and evil transcends any particular religious grouping. Quoting verses 4:123 and 99:7, Engineer asserts that reward and punishment for good and evil is not related to one's religious faith or group. As against sectarianism, the Qur'an is also clear in its pronouncements on the unity of humankind. It mentions that the man was "created of a single soul" (Q 4:1) and that they descended from the same parents, i.e. Adam and Eve (Q 49:13). Explaining verse 2:213 also, Engineer wrote,

"This whole verse is suffused with the spirit of pluralism and freedom of belief and conscience. According to this verse entire mankind is one but different prophets in their given situations come with revealed scriptures to guide them or warn them and thus, depending on their specific situation, different ways of life emerge. But then people start differing from each other and envying one another instead of respecting each others specificity and this people get divided. That is not the purpose of divine guidance. Allah guides those who believe to the truth about which they differed."¹⁰²

With regards to freedom of conscience, a key concept that forms the basis of rejecting any attempt to enforce one's beliefs on others, Engineer quoted verses 2:256. The basis of freedom is also to be found in the Qur'an's exaltation of all children of Adam (i.e. human beings) as honourable (Q 17:70). As such, any inter-religious engagements ought to be done with decorum (29:46). Thus, no places of worship, be it Muslims' or non-Muslims', ought to be destroyed (Q 22:40) and one should not derogate the deities and beliefs of others (Q 6:109).

It is therefore theologically valid and sound that "Islam does not come in the way of promoting a pluralist civil society ensuring dignity and freedom of conscience to all".¹⁰³ This is a position that stood in contrast to fundamentalist thought that negates pluralism and seeks to impose a monolithic society based on one single law, i.e. *shari'ah* (as defined by them).

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

c. Gender Justice

One of the most important issues that occupy contemporary discourses on Islam is on gender justice. Engineer is one of the leading voices of modern Islam that advocates gender equality. According to him, there are several issues that we need to be aware of. Firstly, the Qur'an advocates gender equality in no uncertain terms. Secondly, despite the first, past scholars and theologians had devised opinions and laws that were in favour of men. Thirdly, we need to understand that past scholars and theologians did so because of contextual influences, i.e. their society was patriarchal in nature. This leads us to a fourth issue: on the need to reconstruct the laws pertaining to women in the light of Qur'anic ethos and present situations.

In his book *The Rights of Women in Islam*, Engineer discusses several Qur'anic verses which accords gender equality. The implications of this view are two-fold: firstly, one must accept the dignity of both sexes in equal measures. Secondly, one must see both sexes enjoying equal rights in social, economic and political spheres.¹⁰⁴

In the normative verses of the Qur'an, Engineer pointed out that both, men and women, are viewed as being of equal status. This is implied particularly in verse 4:1 which portrayed both sexes as having originated from the same entity and hence enjoys the same status. Furthermore, the verse also implies that both men and women are compliments to each other. As Engineer noted, there cannot be inequality when one compliments another.¹⁰⁵ It is important to note that the Qur'an does not subscribe to the biblical view that Eve was fashioned from the crooked rib of Adam and hence is of inferior status. Neither does the Qur'an speak of biological differences as a basis for unequal rights in the social sphere. As in verse 2:222, the Qur'an merely takes a practical position of prohibiting sexual intercourse with a woman in her menstruation; unlike Judaic law which demands seclusion and separation through a woman's menstrual period.

¹⁰⁴ Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*. Op. cit. p. 42.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 43.

As to religious status, the women are accorded as high a status as that of men. This is clearly implied in the following verse, which specifically finds a need to mention both genders:

“For Muslim men and women, - for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God’s praise, - for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward.” (Q 33:35)

Nevertheless, despite such verses, Engineer concedes that there are verses which accorded more rights to men than women in the social sphere. Such verses, according to Engineer, are contextual verses and ought to be seen as the Qur’an’s genius of situating itself to the social conditions of the Arabs in the era it was sent. In one such verse (Q 4:34), the Qur’an mentions that “men are maintainers of women as Allah has made some to excel others and as they spend out of their wealth (on women)”. Engineer highlighted from this verse that men only assumed *functional* superiority over women by virtue of the social functions that were performed by the two sexes at that time.¹⁰⁶ By virtue of their superior earning power and their spending of wealth on women, the Qur’an thus alludes to the statement of men as maintainers (*qanwam*) over women. Furthermore, Engineer pointed out that the verse simply states that men *are qanwam*, and not they *should be qawaam*. It would thus be a normative statement and not form a basis to argue for inherent superiority of men over women at all times.

A similar distinction between what is normative and what constitutes the contextual nature of Qur’anic injunctions apply to the issues of women witnesses and laws of inheritance. Muslim jurists of the past had deducted a general rule based on verse 2:282 that one male witness is equal to two female witnesses – thus, implying that women are inferior to men. However, one must note that verse 2:282 refers to financial matters. As women were generally inexperienced in financial matters due to the domination of men in trade and mercantile practices, the Qur’an spoke of the need for two females so that one can remind or correct the other when necessary. The normative aspect of the verse is in ensuring that all

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. P. 45

transactions must be equitable and just for all parties involved. Engineer also pointed out that in seven other verses pertaining to recording of evidence, there is no specific mention of two female witnesses as equivalent to one male witness.¹⁰⁷ Thus, verse 2:282 cannot be employed as a general ruling on law of evidence. In today's context where women are as much educated and involved in public life, there is no reason to employ the 'two female witness equivalent to one male witness' ruling. What is important is to ensure that all dealings are done fairly and with just as demanded by the Qur'anic ethos.

Similarly, the verse on inheritance needs to be viewed in its social context when it was revealed. In *faraid* (Muslim law of inheritance), it has been generally argued that a daughter gets half of what her other male siblings get. The verse in question is Q 4:11. However, one must not ignore that when the verse was revealed, it was a revolutionary principle since women were generally excluded from inheritance in pagan Arab society. The verse itself was revealed when the wife of the martyred S'ad bin Rabi' complained to the Prophet that the deceased's brother had appropriated all the wealth and left none to her and her two daughters. Thus, the verse was revealed to ensure that no female is to be excluded from inheritance.¹⁰⁸ Yet, since the social norm was that a man is supposed to spend on his family and that a woman can demand for maintenance from her husband, a greater portion of wealth has to be given to the male household members. The real intent of the verse is not to accord the superiority of male over female.

Engineer also appeals to the issue of polygamy. The verse 4:3 has often been used to justify the right of men to marry more than one wife. While Engineer concedes it is not wrong totally that the Qur'an gives provisions for polygamy, one must not take the verse as a blanket ruling to allow any form of polygamous marriage. With regards to verse 4:3, the context was on doing justice to orphans. It was also revealed immediately after the Battle of Uhud where many women were widowed or orphaned.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the Qur'an gave provision to marry widows and orphans up to four, provided justice is served to all the wives. Yet, the Qur'an also states that "you cannot do justice between wives, even though you wish it" (Q

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 64.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 73.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 102.

4:129). This implies that the Qur'an's intent is on monogamous marriage, although it gives provisions for polygamous marriages in exceptional situations. The ruling on polygamy is therefore contextual while monogamy is enjoined as normative to the Qur'anic ethos of gender equality in all aspects of life.¹¹⁰ "Thus," wrote Engineer, "looked at from whatever angle, polygamy is not a general permission for men to marry up to four wives in all circumstances as it was made out to be in male dominated medieval societies, and it is this received tradition which has acquired the status of a divine law for Muslims today."¹¹¹ The Prophet himself never advanced any argument pertaining to men's sexual needs with regards to allowing polygamy.¹¹²

Engineer also dealt with various other views on women such as (1) seclusion of women (i.e. restricting women to the confines of their homes); (2) women as heads of state; (3) triple divorce rulings; (4) women's right to divorce; (5) the role of guardians in contracting a marriage; (6) the imposition of the *purdah* (veil); as well as other similar issues. It will be too lengthy for us to deal with each of Engineer's treatments of such issues. Suffice to say that Engineer is consistent in asserting that none of these issues formed as closed corpus of *shari'ah*. They can and indeed ought to be rethought in the light of our present context.

In fact, Engineer feels that it is one of the most important tasks for Muslim intellectuals today to take up the issue of gender justice:

"Muslim intellectuals, activists and academics today need to realize that they have a great moral responsibility before them. They must play an active role in defending the rights of Muslims as a collective, but also the rights of individual Muslims within that collective. That is why for me the real test has always been how these intellectuals address the issue of women's rights in Islam. As long as they do not take this as a serious cause – perhaps the most serious cause of all – then they cannot be said to be committed intellectuals."¹¹³

Any discussions on gender justice, naturally, will be met with suspicion or outright condemnation from the fundamentalists. It is as though to talk of gender equality is to

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 156.

¹¹¹ Ibid. p. 104

¹¹² Ibid. p. 157.

¹¹³ Farish Noor (ed.), *New Voices of Islam*. Leiden: ISIM, 2002. p. 34.

display a “westernized” attitude and to try to fit Islam into modern conceptions of women. Engineer himself is aware of such accusations by the fundamentalists. Yet, he had shown that gender equality is well-pronounced in the Qur’an. With regards to the allegation that modernist Muslims are trying to re-interpret the Qur’an to their own ends, Engineer reminded us that no interpretation, however honest, can be free from the social influence one is in. This was what happened to jurists and theologians who, based on their sociological conditions, looked upon women as nothing more than instruments of perpetuating one’s progeny, bringing up children and providing pleasure for their husbands. Thus, they tend to uphold the superiority of men over women by appealing to verses in the Qur’an, which they interpreted as justifications for their point of views. Thus, Engineer rhetorically asks:

“If that was so then, will not our views be influenced by our own situation today? And if so, will it be wrong? If the classical view was formulated in the intellectual environment of the time, will it be wrong to imbibe modern values and ethos? Will it amount to violation of Islamic principles? Can one see principles and values as merely abstract notions transcending all the influences of one’s own intellectual environment?”¹¹⁴

It is clear that Engineer refuses to accept past rulings as binding on Muslims today, in view of the changed social context. He also points to the egalitarian spirit of the Qur’an on the issue of gender. In concrete terms, Engineer calls for a reform on aspects of Muslim law pertaining to women that had imbibed the prejudices of past societies and dubbed as unchanging and permanent by many Muslims today. It is indeed regrettable “that the theologians and *faqhs* (the jurists) are not ready to rethink women’s issues even today. Islam and its Prophet have provided the Muslims with a dynamic and revolutionary principle of *ijtihad* (creative interpretation) so that they can, in the true spirit of Islamic values, rethink many issues in view of the changed context.”¹¹⁵ The consequence of refusing to reform Muslim laws had brought severe consequences and injustices. One example is on the issue of triple divorce, which Engineer commented as such:

“It is true that the triple divorce which is exercised in the most arbitrary manner (thus totally defeating the Qur’anic intent and spirit) is the cause of misery of many a Muslim woman.

¹¹⁴ Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*. Op. cit. p. 3.

¹¹⁵ Engineer, *Problems of Muslim Women in India*. Bombay, India: Orient Longman, 1995. p. x.

Quite a few Muslim women who have been arbitrarily divorced will be found in every major city. The Muslim Women (Protection of rights on divorce) Bill has aggravated their plight as they cannot get any succour from the Wakf Boards who have no money. In many cases even the parents, let alone other relatives, are unable to support them. Often the *mehr* amount is a pittance – in some cases as little as Rs. 101 or 501. In many cases the divorcees have children too. They really find it very difficult to maintain themselves as well as their children. Although it is beyond the reach of many women to go to court, there are hundreds of cases pending in most of the district courts. This is a clear indication of the fact that a large number of women are suffering because of the arbitrary nature of *talaq-i-thalatha* (triple divorce, i.e., utterance of the word *talaq* thrice in one sitting). The divorced woman has no defense whatsoever.”¹¹⁶

For Muslim reformers, it is an imperative to thus fight against the patriarchal values and patriarchal structures to ensure that the male attitude towards women is not that of domination.

Obstacles to Reforms

Engineer, as shown above, has attempted to provide aspects of reform on a broad range of issues plaguing contemporary Muslim conceptions of religion and law. However, he acknowledged that reforms may not be readily acceptable in society. Many a times, the issues brought forth are ignored or subverted. Perhaps reflecting on his own experiences, he wrote:

“Any establishment has its own leaders who would do anything to resist change, either in the name of religion or in the name of age-old traditions. Those who advocate change are denounced as heretics, unbelievers, and innovators and violators of religious sanctity. The real issues involved are sought to be drowned in the sea of such accusations. They are never discussed or even touched.”¹¹⁷

The above quote is a classic statement of how attempts at reform may falter in more ways than expected. These, among others, are problems faced by any attempts at reformism. Engineer located these problems primarily with conservatism and vested interest. As he pointed out, reformers may provide arguments to legitimize changes but “leaders of

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p. xiii.

¹¹⁷ Engineer, “Requirements of a Reform Movement” in *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam*. op. cit. p. 133.

traditional religious and social setup” may resist them in order to “protect their own leadership”.¹¹⁸ This observation is in consonant with findings of several social scientists who argued that group interest and protection of one’s turf or sphere of power and influence, is one major factor in resistance to change.¹¹⁹ As Engineer noted out again, “Traditional intellectuals feel threatened with new emerging ones”. Thus, “in order to save their position, declare the reformer as ‘heretic’ and ‘innovator’ in the age-old tradition”.¹²⁰ In addition, this tendency towards protection of interest may be tempered with conservatism. Due to ignorance of new developments, traditional intellectuals tend to view changes with suspicion and tend to reject changes based on their old teachings.

What then are the implications for the reformer? Since a reformer is going against established norms, Engineer believes that he or she faced an uphill task, especially if it involves encroaching upon the power and influence of status quoist leadership. As he noted out, “established leadership is always more effective [in mobilizing] than the reformist leadership”.¹²¹ However, the reformer must not gauge his or her success “in terms of the number of followers”. Engineer noted out that “a reform movement generally does not appeal to the masses” because unlike intellectuals, who have the capacity to critically examine things, “masses just follow”.¹²²

Secondly, Engineer noted out that because of labeling and name-calling, much energy of the reformer is “wasted in defending himself, rather than working for change and reform”. Thus, a reformer needs to have “almost inexhaustible fund of patience” in order to succeed in his agenda of reform.¹²³

Thirdly, a reformer needs to be able to argue persuasively since he or she will be working against well-entrenched beliefs. It is important for the reformer to “have thorough

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p.136.

¹¹⁹ See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1985.

¹²⁰ Engineer, “Requirements of a Reform Movement”. op. cit. p. 137.

¹²¹ Ibid. p. 136.

¹²² Ibid. p. 138. This strange statement of Engineer seems to contradict his earlier conviction that a reformist movement need to stem from the masses and it is the masses that can call for change through their empowerment to critically evaluate things. (See Engineer, “Religion, Ideology, and Liberation Theology” in Engineer (ed.) *Religion and Liberation*. Op. cit. p. 138.)

¹²³ Engineer, “Requirements of a Reform Movement” op. cit. pp. 137-8.

knowledge of both, these beliefs and of what he wants to establish against". Thus, for a Muslim reformer, it is crucial to have a thorough knowledge of one's own religion, in particular the Scripture, and that of modern social and natural sciences.

Fourth, it is also important for religious reformers to "have firm conviction in one's own religion". This is significant since "a reformer is never against one's own religion, as often propagated by vested interests".¹²⁴ A reformer must then live by his convictions.

Fifth, Engineer pointed out that a reformer naturally "relies more on reason than on tradition" and "rejects tradition if it contradicts the former".¹²⁵ For Muslim reformers, they must critically evaluate a tradition and see if it is opposed to the spirit of the Qur'an or not. Engineer pointed out that it is an imperative that a reformer "will never accept something just because people have been believing in it".

Last but not least, the primary task of a reformer is "to distinguish the core teachings of a religion from the accretions of various social traditions, which lead to distortion of the former".¹²⁶ Using his understanding of what constitutes the core of religion, the reformer must prevent religion from exploitation, especially by those "men in the garb of religion". According to Engineer, "it is them who deliberately promote uncritical and blind faith so that they can exploit unsuspecting followers". Engineer's strong criticism of vested interest groups also extend to "those among such followers who know the truth but keep silent either out of fear or because they also benefit from such actions".¹²⁷ He then added that

"A person who knows religion in depth and has strong and genuine conviction in it, would never approve of either trends. He would struggle for change and a healthy reform, whatever the price. For him, higher meaning of life is more important than mere pleasure-seeking"¹²⁸

These constitute, for Engineer, some important requirements of a reformer. They are as important as the issues that a reformer may bring forward in a society.

¹²⁴ Ibid. pp. 139-40.

¹²⁵ Ibid. pp. 140-1.

¹²⁶ Ibid. pp. 134-5.

¹²⁷ Ibid. pp. 142-3.

¹²⁸ Ibid. p. 143.

Conclusion

As noted in the initial part of this essay, Engineer represents one of the most accessible reformist thinkers today. The clarity of language and vision represented throughout the writings of Engineer illustrate that any project of reform and reconstruction of Muslim thought need not be couched in a complex and technical language that have so often deter the interest of the general public.

However, one must not conclude that such a project ought to be done in a simplistic and reductionistic manner. The issues surrounding such project are necessarily complex, multilayered and deeply embedded in social processes that need a thorough analysis. Yet, Engineer had managed to overcome these difficulties. His analyses are well-grounded in research, his methodology sound, and his perspectives well-balanced.

This shows that much of the claims of certain segments within the local religious elites and leaders that the ideas of such Muslim scholars are ‘academic’ in nature and ‘not suited to general public and for public discussion’, are unfounded. This shows that the socialization of certain discourses amongst the masses lies more in the politics of interest than on the so-called ‘receptiveness’ of the general public. After all, Engineer’s writings are no more complex than the metaphysical juggleries and obscurantism of some purportedly ‘scholarly’ Muslim preachers.

Conclusion

Repositioning the Reformist Agenda

The discussion on Engineer’s thought as presented above does not represent the entire spectrum of reformist movements throughout the Muslim world. Engineer, though acknowledged as an important contemporary Muslim scholar in advocating reforms in society, has yet to receive wide appeal amongst local Muslim intelligentsias. Why is this so?

There may be many reasons. Here, I shall highlight three important factors for the lack of socialization of modernist ideas, not just Engineer's, amongst the local Muslim community.

Firstly, the manner in which religion is understood and practiced in a society has its roots in historical factors. In the Malay world, Islam was socialized amongst the masses in the midst of a feudal culture. The primary conception of religion within the feudal ideology is that of a magical, otherworldly, authoritarian and ritualistic orientation. The neglect of the social dimensions of religion is thus characteristic of a feudal ideology. The temporal is devalued for the bliss of salvation in the hereafter. Within such outlook, it is difficult for social concerns to take root as a part of religious piety in the life of a Muslim.

Secondly, for any socialization of ideas to take place, there must be agencies or institutions promoting it. If one were to observe, many of the local Muslim institutions are dominated by leaders who are either of (1) traditionalist orientation, (2) fundamentalist, or (3) ambivalent towards any discourses on Islam. As such, there is little evidence of a concerted effort by these agencies or institutions to expose the public to modernist discourses on Islam. Amongst the few who are exposed to modernist discourses themselves and are in a position to harness resources towards public education, efforts are largely restricted to occasional conferences and closed-door discussions targeting an elite pool of community leaders and academicians. Most importantly, there has been a considerable neglect towards exposing the youths to such discourses, let alone any viable programmes that can develop the youths' critical awareness of such issues.

Thirdly, the monopoly of religious elites upon local discourses on Islam. The lack of a vibrant intellectual culture and engagement, crucial for the development of modernist discourses, is largely due to the dominant presence of the religious elites in all areas of the Muslims' religious life. As in any social grouping, there are interests involved. The observable conservatism of the religious elite in allowing more space for alternative views may be due to the need to protect any attempts to undermine their influence and social position – a privilege that they enjoyed since their patronage by Malay rulers in the past. The traditional education received by many of the religious elites also caused them to be ill-equipped (and thus insecure) in engaging with some modernists who are comfortable in both the classical

sources as well as modern social sciences. Thus, any alternative views, let alone calls for reform, will be held in suspicion and if possible, silenced. For the general public, an effective control of maintaining hegemony and monopoly of ideas is by creating anxiety on the state of one's *iman* (faith) in relation to entertaining 'new ideas' or by creating outright fear such as being deviant and misguided (i.e. 'secular' or 'western' in thinking), devoid of *hidayah* (God's guidance) or worst, condemned to hellfire.

From Obscurantism to Socially-Engaged Islam

One of the most important lessons learnt from Engineer's discourses is that any reform agenda must not fail to address the issue of how religion is imagined in the social life of a believer. This is where Engineer has offered liberative theology as an alternative to conventional and traditional theology that, in view of confronting the problems of society can inspire Muslims to imbibe social responsibility as a defining feature of piety. According to Gutierrez, theology can serve three tasks: (1) as a spiritual search for *wisdom*, (2) as a *rational* and systematic understanding of the cosmos, and (3) as a *critical reflection* on human life.¹²⁹ While the first and the second types are well-developed in the Muslim mystical and scholastic traditions, the critical dimension of reflection upon human life is observably lacking. The third dimension of theology, if it is to be rooted in society, ought to involve itself in human problems. Gutierrez opined:

"Theology must be a critical reflection on humankind, on basic human principles. Only with this approach will theology be a serious discourse, aware of itself, in full possession of its conceptual elements...Understood in this way, theology has a necessary and permanent role in liberation from every form of religious alienation – which is often fostered by ecclesiastical institution when it impedes an authentic approach to the Word of God."¹³⁰

No doubt, this is the basic élan of Engineer's thought. It also leads to what Engineer termed as 'engaged Islam'.¹³¹ This conception of Islam stood in contrast to the traditional conception of Islam. Traditionalist Islam tends to oscillate towards obscurantism by

¹²⁹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988, pp. 3-12.

¹³⁰ Ibid. pp. 9,10.

¹³¹ Engineer, "Engaged Islam" in *Islam and Modern Age*. Bombay, India: Institute of Islamic Studies, June 2003.

discussing issues of otherworldly dimensions such as the mystical world of the Unseen (with the focus on *jinn*s and other spiritual beings), magical deeds, grave punishments, the sensuous indulgence of heaven, the chanceries and horrors of hell, as well as speculating on the coming end of the world and who shall go to heaven and hell. In contrast, engaged Islam is concerned with man's role in living up to his responsibility as a steward of God's creations on earth. The central concern of engaged Islam is Man and his life on earth. Unlike traditionalist Islam that focuses on rituals, engaged Islam attaches greater importance on values. It is values that form the essence of religion, not rituals or symbols.

Thus, engaged Islam opens up a possibility of re-imagining what it means to be a *mu'min* (God-conscious believer). Amongst these are: (1) strive continuously to remove suffering from earth; (2) devote oneself to fighting any form of injustices and oppression on earth, and help those who are victims of injustices; (3) be committed to peace on earth; (4) fight for truth; (5) stand up against gender injustices or exploitations; (6) fight against illiteracy; and (7) be committed to acquiring and spreading knowledge.¹³² In other words, a socially-engaged Muslim ought to play his role as agents of progressive and substantial change in society. Engineer wrote:

“...Muslims have to reflect deeply about and engage themselves in the serious project of changing society so as to be more progressive in keeping with Islamic values. A Muslim is, above all, believer in these values. Islam had conceived of emergence of a new man – a *mu'min* – who firmly believed in Islamic values and engaged himself in changing the world in accordance with those values.”¹³³

This is where the local intelligentsias, having accesses to resources and avenues to disseminate public information, can play the role of ensuring that critical engagement is not shunned but promoted at all levels. Too often critical engagements are shunned out of self-imposed fear of rousing negative emotions, especially if it involves issues deemed as sensitive or controversial. But it will be crucial for our intelligentsias to rethink the implications and assumptions involved. Amongst some intelligentsias, such fears are often disguised under the language of ‘being neutral’. It is erroneous, if not outright naïve, to suppose that neutrality is

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

possible. Every neutral position is a justification for maintaining status quo. Similarly, every 'controversy' involves agencies that deem it as such. It will be appropriate for us to probe to whom these issues are considered 'controversial' or 'sensitive'? To lack clarity in such issues is to deny democratic access to critical knowledge that is needed to move the masses towards social awareness of their role and responsibilities in society. Any effort to construct a progressive vision of society must involve the masses. It will not do to adopt an elitist approach to reform. Engineer himself spoke of the need to move away from elite-oriented development model as it invariably ends up in concentration of power and resources on the few.¹³⁴

At the same time, any substantive reform must imbibe the following: (1) knowledge and praxis, (2) development that is not elite-oriented nor amoral, (3) removal of any form of monopoly by any group, (4) the need to study religion in its sociological conditions and its critique to be attempted in the sociological context, (5) the need to be aware of the dual function of religion, (6) emphasis should be on values (such as justice, equality, peace, tolerance, pluralism, dignity and freedom), and not rituals, and (7) engaging in reformulations of archaic laws so as to re-establish the essence of religion and thus rendering it relevant to the contemporary age.

It is a task that is both arduous and complex. Any attempts at re-education of the Muslim public will face many obstacles. Anxieties will follow when one's comfort level is breached. Yet, it can be manageable once a viable alternative is presented for consideration.

¹³⁴ Engineer, *Religion and Liberation*. Op. cit. p. 138.

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