21st Century Islam: Global Challenges of Islamic Representation and Knowledge Acquisition

M. M. Muhammed, O. Khuzaima

Abstract—This research examined and outlined some of the challenges facing Islam and Muslims in the 21st century, considering global Islamic representation and knowledge acquisition as key objectives. It was observed that the Western media misrepresentation of Islam and the Western ethos embodied by the acquisition of western civilisation are major challenges faced by Islam and Muslims today. The problem of sectarianism, decline in the socio-economic power of Muslim communities and the archaic nature of the Islamic creed were recorded as major actors to the evolving global Islamic issues. It was therefore concluded that Islam is not the reason for these challenges, rather the action of some Muslims and non-Muslims were the contributing factors to the pandemics faced by Islam and Muslims. Some relevant recommendations were made to the Islamic world that could serve as effectual solutions to these lingering problems.

Keywords—Islam, challenges, Misrepresentation, twenty-first century.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE history of the global representation of Islam in the contemporary world has seen a drastic change as compared to the 17th to 18th century when the Islamic civilisation was at its peak. Islam and Muslims are now facing challenges from different dimensions, and as well, are being used as objects of media campaigns and social discrimination. Societies where Muslims are fairly low have perceived the media version of Islam; this has in turn facilitated the gross misrepresentation of Islam in the hearts and minds of numerous non-Muslims.

II. CHALLENGES

It is a necessity that the challenges are identified and outlined so that effective approaches to solving these problems could be proffered. Some of these challenges are outlined as follows:

A. Gross Misrepresentation

Indeed, Islam has continued to gain recognition globally and it is disturbing to say that this is not as a result of the widened scope of da'awah activities, but rather as a result of gross misrepresentation of the Islamic identity. Islam is being misconstrued as opposed to its tenets and true heritage, and is now being perceived as a religion that tolerates terror and brutality. This is as a result of the misconceptions that have been facilitated by some war-ridden sects that are envisioning a society ruled by Islam which is totally in contrast to the

Muhammed Mujitaba Muhammed is with the Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria (e-mail: mzakirdsp@gmail.com).

doctrines of Islam. While there are numerous sources of information that disseminate wrong perceptions of Islam and Muslims in the West, most scholars are of the view that the media are the major players of these acts. How Islam is being vituperated today in the Western media is highly disheartening. A Muslim with a beard travelling to Western countries is considered a threat and is easily placed on a watch list. Any Muslim who has travelled to Iraq or Afghanistan is seen as potential risk to the peace of world. It is exacerbating to point out that the Hollywood movie industry has vilified the identity of Islam and Muslims by showing Muslims characters as antagonists in their movies. Several American series now use Muslim identities as villains and actors of terror, thereby vilifying the Islamic identity in the hearts and minds of people who are ignorant of the religion of Islam. People chant the sacred statement "Allahu Akbar" when committing acts of terror in these movies, the same sacred statement used to glorify Allah during the Islamic acts of worship. In fact, a scene in a series released last year showed how an act of terror was nearly carried out during the Hajj pilgrimage where a non-Muslim dressed in the sacred Ihram attended the Jamrat session of the Hajj Ibadah. This explains that the nonchalance of Muslims paved way for acts of disrespect and indiscipline against the Islamic identity. These movies have abrasively spread false information about Islam and Muslims and now pose a great danger to Islam and Muslims around the globe. This is totally in contrast to the Islamic teachings and agenda, Islam teaches tolerance and perseverance, preaches good morals and as well promotes peace and unity. A report titled "Islamophobia: Issues, Challenges and Action" released in June 2004 by the UK Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia argues that systemic discrimination against Muslims and their recurrent negative portrayal has pushed UK Muslims to the very margins of society – a dangerous trend that threatens to alienate them [6].

B. Western Civilisation Vacuum

The foundational difference between the Islamic and Western civilization is that the former attempts to create the Kingdom of God on Earth while the latter is a bold attempt to establish a Kingdom of Man. In the former, limits of human action are framed by the boundaries established by Allah; in the latter, even the idea of limits is an anathema. In the former, the ultimate goal of this earthly life is to prepare for the hereafter; in the latter, the very concept of the hereafter is a dogma whose veracity is highly questionable. Various currents have now poised these diametrically opposed worldviews against each other at a scale never before witnessed; this has also created numerous challenges for Islam and Muslims.

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol:13, No:2, 2019

Other challenges faced by Islam and Muslims also stem from their encounter with modernity [2]. In Africa, a good number of Islamic scholars lack the literacy of Western civilisation and computer literacy, while some lack interest in the benefits of Western technology. A high percentage of Muslim scholars have not even perfected the command of English, thereby making it difficult to understand the scholarship that comes with Western civilisation. There is no doubt that the need to incorporate Western technology with Islamic teaching methodologies is a 21st century requisition. It is true that the Western ideology embodies the need to create a society built on the assumptions of man, but it is also necessity for Muslim scholars to understand this ethos in order to outline the diametric of both Islamic and Western civilisation.

C. Decline in Socio-Economic Developments

During the golden age of Islam, a time which represents the highest participation of Muslims in global developments in aspects of philosophy, science and technology; Islam welcomed a myriad number of converts, widespread across the globe. The fall of Andalus (modern day Spain) was the beginning of drastic declines in the Islamic civilisation. Since then, Islamic civilisation has remained static in major Muslims occupying societies of the world. Now, major Muslim communities who were previously independent of Western civilisation now have a high rate of dependence on the West. Muslims now live in an era of increased dependency on Western technology and must deal with the Western ethos and man-thought philosophical ideas attached to it. Chapra explained that the decline in Islamic civilisation was as a result of the decline in moral decadence, conflict and disunity among Muslims [7]. Ibn Khaldun also argued that civilisation is dependent not just on economic variables but also on the interrelation roles of moral, institutional, psychological, political, social and demographic factors through a process of circular causation extending over a long period of history [8].

D. The Obsoleteness of the Islamic Creed

It is important to note that the Islamic creed is still dependent of the view of the scholars of the early Islamic era. The revisions to capture the evolution of human psychology and philosophy and as well technological advancements are a few. There are limited deliberations on the permissibility of the employing Western technology in Islamic jurisprudence. Some scholars even loathe Western technology and over-dependence on the views of precedent scholars is a major factor affecting the Muslims of the computer era. Some of the scholarly injunctions were viewed based on the available technology centuries back and therefore need revision. A typical example is the injunctions surrounding the use of a borehole cannot be matched with that of the recycled water. Extra revisions will have to been made relative to their sources and obtainment processes. Indeed, the needs of the computer generation differ extensively from the needs of the abacus generation.

E. Sectarianism

One of the major factors bringing setbacks to the growth and development of Islamic communities is the denominationalism amongst Muslims. A Shiite Muslim refuses to regard a Sunni Muslim as a Muslim brother and vice versa. The numerosity of sects within the Islamic faith has paved the way for so many avant-garde practices that are unprecedented in the Islamic tradition. Islam is a religion of oneness and the foundation of its doctrines was built on the oneness of the Ummah. Today, on the contrary, Iran, which is one of the major nuclear powers in the world does not bid Saudi Arabia farewell because of sectary implications. The only news trending about Syria is captioned "The War within". The problem of sectarianism plunged the unity of the Islamic world and today scores of Muslims are reported dead on daily basis in Muslim Arab countries. Muslim countries are unable to assist each other because Muslims recognise their religious sectarianism first before humanity or the umbrella identity of Islam. If a Saudi Muslim meets an Iranian Muslim and the identity of Islam comes first before being a Saudi, then a good attribute, Islamic brotherhood, has been uninhibited and peace will prevail. But in the case where a Saudi Muslim sees an Iranian Muslim as a Shiite, then the Islamic identity hides and enmity prevails and would be the case vice versa. A prominent Emirati scholar of Islam who majored at Al Azhar University of Cairo and who goes by the name Aliyu-el-Jeffery once explained that humanity comes before religion and Muslims therefore need to inhibit a very high sense of humanity before colouring it with pristine characteristics of good morals. Another problem propelled by sectarianism is the variations in the exegesis of the Quran and Sunnah including the teachings surrounding Islamic monotheism. This indeed poses a great risk to the unity and tranquillity of the Muslim Ummah as far as sectary affiliations continue to make impacts in the beliefs and understanding of the foundational traditions of Islam. Most times, when a sect embraces and administers the teachings of a particular scholar and his school of thought, some sects would view it as an act of idolisation of a scholar, while some would label it as sentimental while drawing their own injunctions. This has adversely affected Islamic civilisation globally and its ramifications have since been bringing declines in the development of Islam and Muslims.

F. Challenges of Muslim Researchers

The biggest challenge for Muslim researchers, scientists, and scholars in this century is to define Islamic science, its scope and purpose, and describe its methodology, because it differs from the modern science, which is based on Western civilization and its culture and values. The biggest challenge for Muslim researchers in this century is to neutralise the influences of modern science because it is based on Western intellect and culture, and is one of the main causes of many problems in the Muslim world. In contrast, Islamic science is based on Islam, which presents a distinctive belief system, worldview and lifestyle, and concepts about God, present life, afterlife, culture, society, and community [3]. According to Nasr, "Islamic sciences in their essence can be understood only within the principles derived from the source of the

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol:13, No:2, 2019

revelation, which is the Quran, and outside of which any study of them would remain superficial and incomplete" [4]. In contrast, "Western science is an embodiment of Western ethos and has its foundation in Western intellectual culture" [1]. Let us take the field of psychology as an example to understand the role of a Muslim researcher in this discipline. Man-made theories in psychology from the Western point of view, which have been formulated to answer the basic questions about human nature, can lead us to wrong directions. Since scientists do not consider religion and human soul as influencing elements on the human psyche and only rely upon scientific methods to understand human nature, it is impossible for them to cover all aspects of human behaviour. However, a Muslim researcher knows the fact that Islam covers everything about human nature; therefore, he can integrate it accordingly. For example, he strongly emphasises the element of free will, which is ignored in Western theories, because they stress genetic and environment as significant controlling factors of life [5].

G. Arabic Tradition

Various historical currents of the past three centuries have produced an ummah (community) in the 21st century that lacks the basic means to tap the vast resources of its own tradition. More than two-thirds of contemporary Muslims do not speak Arabic and in lands where Arabic is still the language of daily use, its classical heritage has become inaccessible to a large majority. This is one of the most important impacts of the colonisation of the Muslim world and the disappearance of this lingua franca means that the new generation of Muslims will simply be illiterate with regard to the tremendous amount of scholarship produced before the colonisation [2]. The Islamic message was revealed in Arabic language, which arouses the need for the Muslim communities to acquire the Arabic language. The need for non-Arab communities to learn Arabic language is as important as it is for Arabs to also perfect the language. The Quran and Sunnah contain deep-rooted Arabic morphology which makes it necessary for scholars who deliver the Islamic message to be vast in their command and use of the Arabic language. If the language is interpreted wrongly, then the Islamic message would be wrongly delivered. Therefore, Muslims around the world need to acquire the skill sets needed to interpret the Quran and Sunnah to better understand the Islamic message.

III. CONCLUSION

Every year, leap year, decade and century comes with its set of challenges, and therefore Islam did not escape the contemporaneity of challenges. The challenges discussed in this research showed that these challenges were majorly due to the disunity or sectarianism amongst the Muslim Ummah. Islam teaches that the growth and development of Islam relies on the unity of its community and the truthfulness of faith. The problem of misrepresentation is solely a miscarriage of the Islamic identity by some miscreants who perceive the Islamic practise of other Muslims as infidelity. It can also be concluded that the western media has adversely contributed to

the misrepresentation of Islam in the eyes of the world. Therefore, the Islamic identity has been tainted; nevertheless, Muslims can make the true identity of Islam and its widespread acceptance to resurface in a crystallised identity so Muslims can cherish the peace of mind that comes with the practise of Islam.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Some recommendations have been made to combat the aforementioned challenges in order to solve the problems of Islamic misrepresentation and Knowledge acquisition, namely:

1. Muslims and representatives of Islam in the 21st century need to find ways to filter the true doctrines of Islam from adulterations and create preferences based on the Islamic foundation when making applications of Western civilisation.
2. Acts of terror and turmoil have been denounced in various portions of the glorious Quran and Sunnah. It is therefore, necessary that Islamic scholars embark on sensitising and emphasising these teachings to the communities of Muslims and non-Muslims.
3. The methods of inculcating the Islamic tenets have changed overtime and therefore there is an increased need for scholars to venture more into researches on the developing jurisprudence of Islam so as the meet the global demands of Islam and Muslims in jurisprudence.
4. There is a necessity for revision of some of the Islamic creeds to match up the ever-changing global civilisation.
5. Muslims in every part of world should recognise one another as Muslim brothers regardless of their sectary affiliations.
6. Muslim scholars are required to enlighten their students that sectarianism in Islam cannot be eradicated but should be shunned when the general interest of Islam is being addressed.
7. Muslims should conduct themselves as ambassadors of Islam in every corner of the world they find themselves and should be mindful of hate speech, even when they are tested.
8. A Muslim should represent the Islamic identity and should preach the Islamic tradition through speech and deed.
9. A Muslim researcher, regardless of discipline, is ultimately required to be adherent to the principles of Islam when conducting researches of designing methodologies to solve problems considering the intention to serve humanity and to gain the pleasure of Allah.
10. A Muslim researcher should be able to wisely integrate Islamic methods with secular knowledge to prevent misconceptions and misdirection for Muslims.
11. Contemporary Muslim scholars and researchers should frequently revisit the Islamic creed and incorporate the Islamic concepts and western media.
12. There is need for the establishment of a top council of world Muslim scholars where emerging jurisprudential

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol:13, No:2, 2019

issues peculiar to different Islamic communities can be deliberated in order to outline the strategies to Islamic development.

13. There is need for Muslims and scholars to intensify the segregation of wrongful proclamations on the identity of Muslims in the hearts and minds of the world.

14. Societies that are endowed with technological expertise need to support and educate other Muslim communities on the need to imbibe and incorporate Western civilisation with Islamic civilisation without intertwining the true teachings and traditions of Islam.

15. There is also a dire need to rekindle the necessity of seeking Arabic knowledge to foster the knowledge of interpretations and explanations of the true exegesis of Quran and Sunnah.

REFERENCES

[1] Ahmad, R. (1990). Islamic science: Its scope and purpose. *Journal of Islamic Science*, *6*(2), 26–27.

[2] Iqbal, M. (2003a). Islam and Muslims in the twenty-first century: Preliminary thoughts on a research agenda. *Islamic Studies*, *42*(3), 503–508.

[3] M. Talat (2017). "Muslim researchers in the twenty-first century: Challenges of the present time and their role", International Center for Chemical & Biological Sciences, Karachi.

[4] Nasr, S. H. (1983). *Science and civilization in Islam*. Lahore, Pakistan: Suhail Academy Lahore.

[5] Utz, A. (2011). *Psychology from the Islamic perspective*. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: International Islamic Publishing House.

[6] www.insted.co.uk/commission.html (Accessed on 10/01/2019).

[7] Umar M. Chapra, (2008) *Muslim Civilization*: *The Causes of Decline and the Need for Reform*. Leicestershire, UK: The Islamic Foundation.

[8] Ibn Khaldun, A.R. (1986). *Al Muqaddimah* (vol.1). (F. Rosental, Trans.) London, Routledge& Kegan Paul