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## **Important Notes**

The first six articles of this Special Issue were contributed by the Group of Researchers of professional bodies such as architects, planners, surveyors and others. Therefore, their writings differed from the normal social sciences literature. The rest of the articles were contributed by those who are specialized in Islamic Social Sciences area.

## Mind the Gap: *Khilafah fil-Arḍ* as an Islamic Sustainable Human Development Paradigm

Norbani Ismail\*

### Abstract

This paper explores the interdisciplinary approach of bridging the secular understanding of United Nation’s Sustainable Human Development (UN SDGs) with the Islamic perspective of *Tawhīd*. This paper showcases the duality between the physical and the metaphysical understanding of sustainable human development for Muslim societies: employing the concept of *Khilāfah* as an act to progress societal development, while answering Islamic duties as a vicegerent of God. In many instances, Muslim women are internalizing the concept of *Khilāfah* as an emancipatory tool of reclamation against the normative understanding of agency as understood in liberal feminist politics. Filling the gap of the secularistic UN’s SDGs require a re-reading of world history, and urges the deconstruction of what sustainable human development ought to be for Muslim societies.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development, *khilāfah*, *amānah*, modernity, *maṣlahah*.

### Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) has declared 17 Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) that enjoined its members to focus on the economic, social and environment in which it hopes to erase poverty, increase freedom and peace, and gender equality.<sup>1</sup> Its 15 years plan aims at placing the common agenda and actions to achieve the desired goals for sustainable development; the goals takes into consideration ‘the different national realities, capacities, and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities’. The UN understands the cultural and socio-economic and political complexity of its members and promises that it must “foster inter-cultural understanding, tolerance, mutual respect and an ethic of global citizenship and shared responsibility... acknowledge[s] the natural and cultural diversity of the world and recognize[s] that all cultures and civilizations can contribute

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development.”<sup>1</sup> Human development is characterised with the ability of persons to achieve the highest potentials in life through accessible opportunities and choices such as education, health and economy.<sup>2</sup> Islam views each individual in the society as morally responsible and valuable – one who is both cognizant of their relationship with the Creator, and one who internalizes the Divine Will in their (wordly) lives. It is imperative for an individual to understand their position as a *Khalīfāh* (vicegerent of God) on Earth – their purpose of creation in this world is to serve the Divine Will. In many Muslim societies, the display of spirituality or faith is seen as the core value of the individual’s religious life in this world. In this context, the SDGs failed to address the crux of these societal norms: how spirituality and faith can be employed as a sustainable human development goal. The Islamic tradition stresses spirituality and resiliency as a necessary human capital to carry the social and moral responsibilities to ensure a sustainable and prosperous society.

This paper attempts to understand the power of personal piety in empowering a person to actively engage in the spiritual realm as much as the worldly dimension for a meaningful and purposeful life. Personal piety is understood not only as devotional acts that help formation of close proximity with the Creator, but also as a motivating tool to be an active member of the society. Personal piety then can be understood in a positive proposition: it inspires one to behave in the highest moral standard, with the ultimate goal as seeking the pleasure of the Creator. Therefore, personal piety is the result of exercising the human free will – a morality that is acted based on one’s personal choice and freedom.

This paper uses qualitative research study where it consults and analyses Islamic sources and contemporary literatures that discuss the Western feminist ideas on agency. The two sources are pertinent to the paper as it seeks to understand the agentive tools in both Islamic tradition and in the Western secular ideology which eventually makes case for Islamic agentive of *Khilāfah*. This paper does not focus on studying feminist ideologies or politics. Rather, it seeks to highlight the empowering Islamic agentive tool against the backdrop of agency as

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

<sup>2</sup> <http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev>

understood in liberal feminist politics. This helps to showcase that personal piety, or faith-based spirituality as encouraged by Islam, are indeed emancipating tools for sustainable human development.

This paper seeks to explore: 1) the contribution of Islamic belief system towards a sustainable social-moral human development; 2) how Islamic spirituality encourages a Muslim to actively engage with their community; and 3) how the understanding of *Tawhīd* can be understood as a social-moral empowering agency in engaging both the individual's internal spirituality and external community.

This paper contends that Islam has an empowering agentive spiritual-moral tool that is inspired from its core belief system of *Tawhīd*. *Tawhīd* imbues that a person forms a connection with the Creator, but the relationship is satisfied only when the good relationship is formed with His other creations, and the universe. *Khilāfah fil-ard* - vicegerency of God on Earth— is embedded in the belief system of *Tawhīd*, and each individual Muslim has to carry out this moral-spiritual and social obligation. A complete embracing of being a vicegerent of God promotes one's understanding towards one's socio-moral obligation with regard to building a morally upright society - an imperative dimension in sustainable human development.

### **Placing Religion and Spirituality as Sustainable Human Development in the Globalized World**

The world is increasingly becoming smaller due to globalization. Transferring of ideas, ideologies, technologies and knowledge seems easy, fast and endless. As aforementioned, Muslims find that despite the positive contribution that globalization brings to the world, religion and spirituality are missing from most global human development plans. One may argue that traditional religiosity still persists in the United States, but many European and North American countries have adopted a complete secularization of political, economic and social development plans.<sup>1</sup> On the opposite of the spectrum, countries like China and North Korea have adopted different political beliefs, devoid of any organized religion. Yet, many Muslim countries, with the exception of Tunisia and

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<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Fuller, (2017), "Secular Spirituality", *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism* Edited by Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook, <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199988457.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199988457-e-35>

Turkey, have placed the religion of Islam in a greater position, both in the personal and public life. Nevertheless, Muslim societies, just like any society, have to face the challenges of secularization because it "... is not only confined to the Western world, and their experience of it and their attitude towards it is most instructive for Muslims".<sup>1</sup> Secularization, regardless of its degree, has permeated the Muslim societies as well. There is a disagreement to what extent Malaysia, a country that constitutionally declares that Islam is the religion of the Federation, is a secular country, even though there is no proof to claim that it is free from secularization.

The Western secular ideologies such as liberalism, capitalism,<sup>2</sup> and post-modernism have permeated and shaped the ways the rest of the world perceives its religion, culture and spirituality. Religion and spirituality have been positioned, at best at the marginal personal place, if not, completely abandoned. Spirituality that is free from religious connotations is widely promoted. In the Western intellectual and religious history, science had always been the powerful epistemological tool to discover and determine man's existence and his purposes of this worldly life. In ensuring that man makes a progress forward the way he deems fit for his existence and goals, he is supposed to abandon the unnecessary baggage which includes his spirituality and religion. Nevertheless, secular spirituality has managed to make its presence in Western secular societies, not due to religious awakening, but due to the utilitarian nature of the spirituality to fill the voids created by the contemporary living. For instance, contemporary neuroscientist Sam Harris advocates for intimacy with one's consciousness. As an atheist, he believes that human beings do not need organized spirituality which supposedly is shackled by metaphysical experience. His idea of spirituality is the outcome of the mind-based meditation and drugs that help one to achieve spiritual insights.<sup>3</sup> Secular spirituality came as a

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<sup>1</sup> Syed Naquib Al-Attas,(1993), *Islam and Secularism*, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, p.15; Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995, pp. 23-24, <https://ibnughony.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/prolegomena-to-the-metaphysics-of-islam-syed-muhammad-naquib-al-attas.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/05/1012733811/capitalism-neoliberalism-america-ideology> (accessed 6/7/2021)

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Nour, (2016) "Book Review: Waking Up: Searching for Spirituality Without Religion", June DOI:10.1192/pb.bp.115.053090 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305174607\\_Book\\_Review\\_Waking\\_Up\\_Searching\\_for\\_Spirituality\\_Without\\_Religion](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305174607_Book_Review_Waking_Up_Searching_for_Spirituality_Without_Religion)

“...symptomatic of the experiential impoverishment of modern people. Modern institutionalised life has become so predictable that any experience that touches the individual is called spiritual”.<sup>1</sup>

Secular spirituality seeks to find meanings that are detached from religion. Generally, it avoids dealing with the fundamentals such as the origin of life, or life and death; it seeks to emphasize “a pragmatic vision of the practices of every tradition of wisdom, be it religious or philosophical; they are submitted to the test of personal experience and, as far as possible, to that of scientific inquiry of their individual and collective effects”.<sup>2</sup> Secular spirituality also seeks to discover meanings and purposes of life through ways that human can experience, and what the empirical methods can discover. Western secular psychology has borrowed the wisdoms and the spiritual elements from ancient Eastern traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Hinduism to promote happiness and health.<sup>3</sup> For instant mindfulness, a state of mind that is aware of the present, which is cultivated through meditation, is a part of contemplative science in positive psychology that is believed to have various benefits to an individual. However, to fit within the scientific methods of inquiry and within the secular life, meditation and mindfulness trainings have been stripped from any traditional, cultural, religious, or esoterical meanings.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the recognition that the faith-based spirituality may influence one’s mental health has managed to gain traction among the Western practitioners albeit slowly.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cornel W du Toit, (2006), “Secular Spirituality Versus Secular Dualism: Towards Postsecular Holism as Model for a Natural Theology”, HTS 62(4), p.1253 <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8956/6279488522c113eae1532cdbaebd4a6e74eb.pdf>; Jacobs, Anne., (2013), ‘Spirituality: history and contemporary developments – An evaluation’, Koers – Bulletin for Christian Scholarship 78(1), Art. No. 445, p. 8 <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/koers/v78n1/02.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Vincenzo M. B. Giorgino (2020) “Secular Spirituality”, *The Sage Encyclopaedia of Sociology of Religion*, (eds.) Adam Possamai And Anthony J. Blasi, London Sage

<sup>3</sup> Zohair Abdul-Rahman, (2017), *Islamic Spirituality and Mental Well-Being*, Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research  
file:///C:/Users/Desktop/Documents/SAP%202021/Islamic-Spirituality-and-Mental-Well-Being-revised.pdf

<sup>4</sup> David S. Black, (2011) “A Brief Definition of Mindfulness” Mindful Research Guide, <http://www.mindfulexperience.org> ; Daphne M. Davis, and Jeffrey A. Hayes,(2012) “What are the benefits of mindfulness?”, *Monitor on psychology* • July/August, p. 68 <https://www.apa.org/education-career/ce/mindfulness-benefits.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Zohair Abdul-Rahman, *Islamic Spirituality and Mental Well-Being*, Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, 2017, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/islamic-spirituality-and-mental-well-being>

Throughout Islamic history, Muslim scholars argued that civilizational development and physical progress were never detached from the religio-spiritual realm. Islamic principles and teachings are the foundation of Islamic spirituality; it serves to elucidate the purpose of an individual's life and existence. Islamic spirituality is the 'spiritualization of human nature' where man's consciousness, which is cultivated by religion, promotes the individual "to transcend his animal nature, or reach or acquire what—for want of a better expression— may be called a higher kind of life, a life that is, as the Qurān puts it: *khayrun wa abqā*, better and eternal".<sup>1</sup>

Islamic spirituality traces its roots from the Qur'ān and the Prophet's life. It is formed on the basis of love; the love of a slave to the Creator and in return, God would love His slave. Seyyed Hossein Nasr captures the essence of Islamic spirituality in the following:

"The essence of Islamic spirituality, then, is the realization of Unity, as expressed in the Quran, on the basis of the prophetic model and with the aid of the Prophet. The goal of this spirituality is to become embellished by the Divine Qualities through attainment of those virtues which were possessed in their perfection by the Prophet and with the aid of methods and the grace which issue from him and the Quranic Revelation. The spiritual life is based at once upon the reverential fear of God and obedience to His Will, love of God to which the Quran refers in the verse, "He loves them and they love Him" (Qur'an:5: 54), and knowledge of God which is the ultimate goal of creation. Islamic spirituality is a love always colored and conditioned by knowledge and based on an obedience already practiced and contained in living according to the Divine Law, which embodies God's concrete will for Muslims".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Allahbakhsh K. Brohi, (1987), "The Spiritual Dimension of Prayers", Islamic Spirituality (ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 68 <http://traditionalhikma.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Islamic-Spirituality-Foundations-edited-by-Seyyed-Hossein-Nasr.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Spiritual Dimension of Prayers", Islamic Spirituality (ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, pp. 24-25. <http://traditionalhikma.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Islamic-Spirituality-Foundations-edited-by-Seyyed-Hossein-Nasr.pdf>

Islamic spirituality is essential to the life of a Muslim. It does not only concern the spiritual health of an individual, but also one's relationship with other fellow human beings and God's other creations. A spiritually healthy individual must possess a healthy soul. The 12<sup>th</sup> century theologian and philosopher Imam al-Ghazālī (d.1111 CE) expounded that a healthy soul determines the spiritual, bodily and mental health of an individual. "Spirituality is having a good connection with Allah which is manifested through right actions for the purpose of developing and sustaining holistic well-being of the self—physical, psychological and intellectual well-being; mankind—progeny and living harmoniously together; animals and the environment."<sup>1</sup> Spirituality ought to be demonstrated through carrying out responsibilities and the commands of God as a servant and *Khilāfah* on Earth. Performing the basic duties of a Muslim such as the obligatory prayers, fasting, *Zakāh*, Hajj, and other virtuous actions and deeds are the means to achieve spirituality. In addition, one's spirituality is also exhibited through the high moral characters and conducts.<sup>2</sup> Spirituality promotes not only close proximity with Allah, but also an active social participation with other fellow human beings and the surroundings. "A spiritual person is a person who strives to strengthen his/her faith, intellect, and physical health so that s/he can be a good agent of sustainable holistic development"<sup>3</sup> Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), the 20<sup>th</sup> century Indo-Pakistani Muslim philosopher elucidates "the spiritual and the temporal are not two distinct domains, and the nature of an act, however secular in its import, is determined by the attitude of the mind with which the agent does it."<sup>4</sup>

Hamka (d. 1981), the 20<sup>th</sup> century Indonesian reformist scholar argued for a similar notion of spirituality as the worldly aspects of a spiritual person's life such as acquiring wealth, family life, having psychological and physical health, and one's respectful standing in a society are the important means to achieve the ultimate success in the Hereafter.<sup>5</sup> Hamka's stance on spirituality indicates the continuous emphasis that Muslim scholars have put on its centrality to the life of Muslims and their civilization. Islamic spirituality is

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<sup>1</sup> Wan Mazwati, Wan Yusoff, Spirituality through Humanitarian Fieldwork. In A. R. Moten (Ed.) Spirituality and sustainability: Experiences of International Islamic University Malaysia, pp. 231-242. Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press. 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, Dodo Press, 2009, p. 181. <http://www.archipress.org/docs/pdf/iqbalreconstruction.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Salihin, "Pemikiran Tasawuf Hamka dan Relevansinya Bagi Kehidupan Modern", MA Thesis, Institute Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN), Program Studi Filsafat Agama, Bengkulu, 2016, p. 73. <http://repository.iainbengkulu.ac.id/43/1/SALIHIN.pdf>

strongly connected with the agency of being a *Khilāfah* from which a Muslim understands the obligations to serve God and to participate in civilization building and development. This illustrates an individual's indispensable relationship with the Creator, and the universe. A spiritual individual dedicates his life to serve and attain the pleasure of God, but that is insufficient should he neglects his roles in building the world he lives. Thus, spirituality comes with the social obligation in which one needs to build the world they are a part of as it is necessitated by Islam's moral obligation.

Based on a study focusing on spirituality and women's entrepreneurship in Malaysia, women participants self-reported that "religious rituals such as performing prayer, fasting, and charity are deemed as ways and forms to be practiced so as to enhance their relationship with God. However, the majority of participants agreed that spirituality cannot be expressed by means of practicing mere religious rituals alone, but rather extends even deeper. Spirituality embodies and encompasses the manner in which one's life, the attitude, behaviour and how would one relate to others, including one's own families, friends and workmates".<sup>1</sup>

Spirituality in Islam connotes consciousness of religious obligations that forms close relationship with the Creator. It also nurtures active purposeful engagement with the worldly life. It can be a mechanism to promote sustainable human development because it seeks to balance the life of a person in achieving happiness both in this world and in the Hereafter.

The spiritual vacuum in the UNs' SDGs has attracted attention from the Muslim community worldwide. Muhammad Kamal Hassan, the former International Islamic University of Malaysia's (IIUM) rector (1999-2006), points out the need for Muslims to respond to the spiritual void as it is "not explicitly addressed in this major UN project... The new paradigm of sustainable development has to be based on the spiritual worldview. As charity should begin at home, the Muslim countries should be the first to undertake the comprehensive and holistic reset of the development paradigm."<sup>2</sup> This encapsulates the importance

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<sup>1</sup> Fadila Grine, Djafri Fares, Achour Meguellati, "Islamic spirituality and entrepreneurship: A case study of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia", *The Journal of Happiness & Well-Being*, 3(1), 41-56, 2015, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> M. Kamal Hassan, Spirituality and Sustainability Towards Education For Sustainable Development, Speech presented at Webinar on Higher Education Institutions Leadership Towards ESD, on 15 March 2021, Organised by IIUM and AKEPT, 2021, p. 1.  
<https://www.iium.edu.my/media/67477/SPIRITUALITY%20TOWARDS%20ESD%20MARCH%202021.pdf>

of addressing spirituality as part of sustainable human development paradigm for Muslim society.

### ***Khilāfah* as the Foundation for Sustainable Human Development**

#### **a) Towards an Inclusive Society: Decolonizing the Sustainable Human Development Paradigm**

The need for rethinking the best approach to social and human development requires a paradigm shift to imagine a better, feasible direction. It requires the realization that changes that are taking place in the world today demands a different outlook and responses, so the practical diagnoses and cures are prescribed to the predicament. The cognizance for owning the right to define Muslim's understanding towards development that fits its socio-moral and Islamic values can be understood within the contemporary critical cultural theory of Decolonization. Decolonization can be defined as "the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved."<sup>1</sup> It argues that the colonial powers have left the colonies for more than half a century or longer; the natives have yet to completely remove the colonial cultural and thinking influences over the educational, political and socio-economic structures. According to Bhambra et. al, decolonization has two main dimensions:

“[f]irst, it is a way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism as its empirical and discursive objects of study; it re-situates these phenomena as key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view. Second, it purports to offer alternative ways of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis. And yet, within these broad contours, ‘decolonising’ remains a contested term, consisting of a heterogeneity of viewpoints, approaches, political projects and normative concerns. This multiplicity of perspectives should not be surprising given the various

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<sup>1</sup> <https://literariness.org/2017/10/04/decolonization/>

historical and political sites of decolonisation that span both the globe and 500 years of history”.<sup>1</sup>

Thus it is evident from the decolonization project that it seeks to expand viewpoints that take into consideration of “...plurality of perspectives, worldviews, ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies in which scholarly enquiry and political praxis might take place...that seek to eschew the particularity of Eurocentrism through the construction of a new universality”.<sup>2</sup> According to the decolonization project, Muslims too may explore their perspectives and outlooks in developing their notions of human development in which Eurocentrism has overlooked.

Relying on the secular Western theories and knowledge to solve the socio-economic and political concerns in the Muslim world without any synthesis is a matter of credible concern. Even though “not all of the Western science and technology are necessarily objectionable to religion; but this does not mean we uncritically accept the scientific and philosophical theories ... without first understanding their implications and testing their validity of the values that accompany the theories”.<sup>3</sup> Human societies of the world are so complex and distinctive with their cultural and demographic characteristics. It is argued that “one social science that can work for all humanity...violates just about everything we know in the sociology of knowledge. It’s inconsistent with the experience of cross-cultural encounter. ...this epistemology provides an alibi for Eurocentrism.”<sup>4</sup> The gist of the decolonization project assumes that Eurocentrism and the Western knowledge are no longer sustainable to be the prevalent and dominating values that dictate the cultural and knowledge norms to the rest of the world. Colonialism halted many social norms and knowledge that Muslim civilizations had already constructed. Therefore, decolonization is an act for Muslims to reclaim their rights to self-determine the future of

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<sup>1</sup> Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, (2018), “Introduction: Decolonising the University?”, *Decolonising the University*, (eds.) Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, London: Pluto Press, p. 2. <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/0b692853-23af-49ad-83a9-6844dca1dc1d/1004145.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Raewyn Connell (2018), “Decolonizing Sociology” *Contemporary Sociology* 47, 4, pp. 404. <https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/attach/journals/jul18featureconnell.pdf>

Islam, culture and knowledge – a form of defiance against the colonial structures that incapacitated their rights.

Muslims have a rich legacy of knowledge, tradition, values and history that can facilitate them to fashion their own notion of human development. The period between the 9th and the 13th century marked as the Golden Age of Islam; Muslims produced and proliferated knowledge, philosophy, sciences, and made significant contributions in the socioeconomic and political development. The pursuit of excellence in civilizational success was not seen as a mundane quest; Muslims understood that this very pursuit not only benefited their society but also answered their spiritual fulfilment as vicegerents of God. This striking historical period showcased the holistic approach of Muslims at the time regarding sustainable development that mirrored in both the physical and metaphysical world.<sup>1</sup> Throughout history, Muslim scholars have argued for a holistic development that included spirituality as a pertinent quality. For instant, the 14th century Muslim sociologist Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) viewed that economic growth and development can be achieved through ‘education, health care moral and spiritual wellbeing’, and that he perceived the “rise and fall of civilizations is dependent not only on economic growth but also on moral, institutional, psychological, political, social and demographic factors”. Negligence of any of these factors – especially moral – would bring the destruction and inhibition to the development.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed Essa with Othman Ali, (2012), *Studies in Islamic Civilization the Muslim Contribution To The Renaissance*, USA: IIIT, 2012, p. 4. [https://iiit.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/books-in-brief\\_studies\\_in\\_islamic\\_civilizations.pdf](https://iiit.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/books-in-brief_studies_in_islamic_civilizations.pdf)  
; Ahmed Renima, Habib Tiliouine, Richard J. Estes; (2016), “The Islamic Golden Age: A Story of the Triumph of the Islamic Civilization”, *The State of Social Progress of Islamic Societies*, (eds. Habib Tiliouine & Richard J. Estes), Springer International Publishing, pp. 24-45.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/300077166\\_The\\_Islamic\\_Golden\\_Age\\_A\\_Story\\_of\\_the\\_Triumph\\_of\\_the\\_Islamic\\_Civilization](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/300077166_The_Islamic_Golden_Age_A_Story_of_the_Triumph_of_the_Islamic_Civilization)

<sup>2</sup> Mohammad Tahir Sabit Haji Mohammad, (2010), “Principles Of Sustainable Development In Ibn Khaldun’s Economic Thought”, *Malaysian Journal of Real Estate*, Volume 5, Number 1, pp. 11-12.  
<https://www.utm.my/intrest/files/2013/08/PRINCIPLES-OF-SUSTAINABLE-DEVELOPMENT-IN-IBN-Khalduns-Economic-Thought.pdf>

## **b) Understanding Human Agency: A Comparative Perspective – Islam and Liberal Feminist Politics**

In addition to the aforementioned socio-cultural and intellectual circumstances that open up for Muslims to invent knowledge and sciences, Muslims may also draw the inspiration from Islamic teachings for guidance in human development. Islam provides a guidance for all aspects of their life in this world and the Hereafter. A Muslim ought to understand both worlds are important to their existence: the former is understood to be a place to cultivate best actions and behaviours in the temporary life, and the latter is a place of reward and a permanent life. The construction of the Divine Will and the responsibility of man in this world is inspired from the concept of *Tawhīd*. This is because God is the centre of man and his existence. The 20<sup>th</sup> century American Muslim philosopher Ismail Raji’ al-Faruqi has expounded that “[a]t the core of the Islamic religious experience, therefore, stands God who is unique and whose Will is imperative and guide for all men’s lives”.<sup>1</sup> A man’s life in this world is focused around God, His commands and His will that He imposes upon His creations. It conceptualizes how man perceives his relationship with his Creator. God in the Muslim consciousness is not only the metaphysical God, but the Absolute, the First and the End. *Tawhīd*, Islam’s belief system, informs and reforms man’s consciousness in which he materializes the Divine Will in this world to attain the pleasure of God.

Furthermore, 20<sup>th</sup> century Japanese philosopher Toshihiko Izutsu argued Islam enunciates the notion of man’s existence and his being. Man is made to be aware of his existence and his Creator through ‘the consciousness of creatureliness’, and ‘the Qur’an urges the Muslims to be constantly conscious of their creatureliness’.<sup>2</sup> The absence of this imperative cognizance would only lead man to transgression of ‘presumptuousness’ in which he deceives himself through improper behaviours for a human (*tughyān*), and he falsely feels self-sufficient

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<sup>1</sup> Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, (1992), *Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life*, USA: IIIT p. 4. [https://www.muslimlibrary.com/dl/books/English\\_AI\\_Tawhid\\_Its\\_Implication\\_for\\_Thought\\_and\\_Life.pdf](https://www.muslimlibrary.com/dl/books/English_AI_Tawhid_Its_Implication_for_Thought_and_Life.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, (1964), *God and Man in the Qur’an: Semantics of the Qur’anic Weltanschauung*, PJ Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, p. 130.

(*istighnā*). Thus, a Muslim who is in complete touch with his own creatureliness, discerns his position in this world vis-a-vis his Creator.<sup>1</sup>

The Qur'an has used the term '*khalīfah*' (pl. *khalāif*, *khulafā*) in many instances (2:30; 6:165; 7:129; 35:39; 38:26). The classical, medieval, and the contemporary Muslims scholars have interpreted the term '*khalīfah*' into two connotations: the political term and spiritual-moral term. Imām al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) was considered the first Muslim scholar to attribute *khalīfah* as one who assumes a political leadership in the community. The spiritual-moral *khalīfah* is more inclusive to all mankind, and has qualities of a rational being, thus understands his true nature (*fiṭrah*); and to fulfil the trust (*amānah*) of taking care of the nature, and to avoid doing '*fasād*' (mischief) on Earth. Sayyid Qutb (d.1966) describes that God has a high regard of His *khalīfah* and prescribes to it a prominent role among His other creations.<sup>2</sup> Far from acting like a God, a *khalīfah* connotes carrying the spiritual-moral duties to serve the Divine Will, and trust (*amānah*) that God has given to mankind, and a total submission to the boundaries set up by God and His Laws.

The Qur'an constructs man's understanding of the Divine Will: he is created with a purpose as God announces "I created *jinn* and mankind only to worship Me" (Qur'an: 51:56). Thus, an individual is abreast that his highest mission in this world is to worship God. The Qur'an articulates that God's wills for an individual is not only to worship Him, but also to be His *Khilāfah* on Earth (Qur'an: 2:30). Despite the objection from the ever-obedient angels, which God rebuts by affirming His Infinite knowledge, He has favoured man, over His other creations, to be His *Khilāfah* on Earth. Man, unlike the angels, has the ability to violate the Divine Will; he also has the moral power to choose to fulfil the Divine Will. As the appointed *Khilāfah* on Earth, man's moral power indicates his freedom, not coercion, to perform the Divine Will because "[t]he trust, or divine will, which no heaven-and-earth can realize is the moral laws which demands freedom from the agent".<sup>3</sup> The Qur'anic

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> University of Florida Digital Collection.

<https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/AA/00/05/70/66/00001/nzaki-Thesis.pdf>, pp. 14-30; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, (2001). *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, Chicago: ABC International Group, p. 27. <http://traditionalhikma.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Islam-and-the-Plight-of-Modern-Man.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Al-Faruqi, Tawhid, p. 5.

concept of *Khilāfah* on Earth also denotes submission to God through conscious and willing acts; it does “not entail loss of freedom [to submit or not to submit] for him, since freedom in fact means to act as his [innate] nature demands.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the natural inclination of submission to God’s commands and attaining His pleasure, an individual still needs to exercise the moral agency of choice, (i.e. to submit to God or not to because he chooses to). An individual innately has the capacity and ability to act and think freely, and yet the decisions made are within one’s own responsibility.

The Western secular notion on agency may be best understood from the perspective of Feminist studies. The UN’s 1995 Beijing Declaration of Women Rights was made to relay for support from global societies to acknowledge that women must be empowered for a society to thrive. “Gender disparities are among the most entrenched forms of inequality everywhere. Because these disadvantages affect half of the world, gender inequality is one of the greatest barriers to human development”.<sup>2</sup> Various stakeholders, *‘ulamas*, scholars, and women groups have debated and discussed on the meaning of empowerment, and ways to empower women. There were various assumptions and conclusions made on the matter based on different political leanings and religious persuasions. Studies and research that were done both by Western and Muslim scholars pointed to the purported internal problems that required Muslim societies to admit the poor socio-cultural condition of Muslim women to be improved. Generally, women in Muslim societies were perceived as lagging in comparison to their counterparts in the Western hemisphere. Muslim women had limited access to education. Their literacy rate was comparatively lower in comparison with women outside of the Muslim world; their social, economic and political roles were incapacitated due to lack of access to education. The intricate multifaceted issues faced by Muslim women were largely reduced to the problem with the Islamic tradition and culture.<sup>3</sup> It was argued that

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Pedro Conceição, (2019), *Human Development Report 2019: Beyond Income, Beyond Averages, Beyond Today: Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st Century*, NY: United Nations Development Programme, p. 12 <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Aysha A. Hidayatullah, *Feminist Edges of the Qur’an*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 39-41.

Muslim women were shackled by the rope of patriarchal practices which were presumed as deeply rooted in Islam. Thus, it was also concluded, that the only way to empower Muslim women was to free them from the bondage of Islamic tradition and patriarchal norms.<sup>1</sup>

It is a common argument and theme in the Western liberal feminist literatures and writings that women have not been in an unequal status compared to that of men: marginalized and oppressed by men, religion and culture, and any effort to empower women necessitated undoing these very structures that subjugated them. Islam was not the only religion that was held accountable for the oppression of women. Like Islam, Christianity was also blamed for suppressing women and their rights since women “are taught to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others and, in doing so, they disappear into the background. In male-dominated societies women are socialised to accept negative images attributed to them by others (weak, passive, submissive or evil and wild...) and internalise this in the form of a negative self-perception which detracts from the possibility of having a meaningful life”<sup>2</sup>. One way of freeing from the oppression of any religion, including Islam, and its authoritative powers like the clerics, who typically are men, is by owning the authority to the text and its interpretations. Thus, it is not uncommon in the feminist hermeneutic study to assume some “interpretations which pretend to be neutral (mere transposition of the Qur’anic message) are actually conditioned by the previous ideology of its interpreters. Every interpreter enters the interpretive process with their own subjectivity and baggage, i.e. with previous understanding on the questions treated by the text, concepts and prejudices”<sup>3</sup>.

Agency is freeing oneself from any bond that inhibits oneself to think and act that helps to create a life the way one deems fit. The Western understanding of agency is embedded with the connotation of power struggle: the freedom from any power that controls or obstructs oneself from acquiring the freedom. It also denotes the subordination of

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<sup>1</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Yolanda Dreyer, (2010), “Women’s spirituality and feminist theology: A hermeneutic of suspicion applied to ‘patriarchal marriage’”, December, *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 67(3):52-57 DOI:[10.4102/hts.v67i3.1104](https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i3.1104)

<sup>3</sup> Adújar, Ndeye, “Feminist Readings of the Qur’an: Social, Political, and Religious Implications.” *Muslima Theology: The Voices of Muslim Women Theologians*, edited by Ednan Aslan et al., Peter Lang AG, Frankfurt Am Main, pp. 59–80. JSTOR, 2013, p. 67 [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4f10.7](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2t4f10.7). Accessed 2 Aug. 2021

oneself to the other powerful party which eliminates the power of the subordinated, and total surrendering of the power and authority to the subordinator. Agency is acquired after one regains the control over one's freedom to act and to decide. The ability to act and decide freely from any control or power shows determination, resilience and conviction of a person for wanting freedom. The United Nations Development Programme describes agency as the following:

“An agent is someone who acts and brings about change. Agency can advance one's own well-being, but it can also further the well-being of others. People may thus volunteer for causes that do not advance their own well-being, such as protecting the rights or improving the conditions of vulnerable groups or conserving ecosystems, landmarks or historical monuments. People may put themselves in gruelling situations, working to promote causes they believe in at the cost of their own health or security. They are exercising their agency. Human agency thus advances any goals that are important to individuals—for themselves, for their communities or for other entities.”<sup>1</sup>

From this, one can conclude that agency signifies 1) transformation and 2) a power shift from the oppressed condition to the liberated condition.

An American sociologist Saba Mahmood (d. 2018) argues for deconstructing the idea that political agency should not be used as a standard emancipatory tool for liberation. According to Mahmood, “the concept of agency should be delinked from the goals of the progressive politics, a tethering that has often led to the incarceration of the notion of agency within the trope of resistance against oppressive and dominating operations of power.”<sup>2</sup> Agency, as understood from the liberal political perspective, is not easy to be applied as the parameter in studying Muslim women and their agency. This is because Muslim women may acquire the agency not necessarily through the traditional power struggle as understood in the liberal political framework. Muslim women may acquire agency by way of freely deciding to act upon performing religious obligations and commandments on their own. Far from freeing themselves from Islam, many Muslim women perceive the religion as a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/chapter3.pdf>, p. 87

<sup>2</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 34.

motivating factor to carry out moral and spiritual obligations. Here, the Muslim woman is not only a contributor to the physical development of society, but also invests in the metaphysical as a vicegerent of God on Earth. Their decision to acquire personal piety through devotional acts that are recommended by Islamic teachings must be understood within the context of acquiring agency. Muslim women who freely choose to enact religious obligations and Islamic praxis never felt oppressed by Islam. Therefore, in this situation, it is problematic to apply the notion of agency as deliberated by liberal politics in the context of Islam.

Any attempt to understand agency from the Islamic perspective and comparing it with agency in Western liberal politics requires re-reading of the history of Western imperialism in the Muslim world. The notion of the empowered and liberated Muslim women were embedded with Western biases and prejudices towards Islam and its culture. Edward Said argued that colonizers had the power to create knowledge, concepts and categories and taught them to the non-Europeans from the perspective of the colonizers in which he considered as ‘a method of control and oppression’. He further reiterated that if the “core epistemological assumptions regarding culture, class, subjectivity, history, and knowledge remained colonized, then postcolonialism demanded the ‘decolonization of representation’ itself”.<sup>1</sup>

By focusing on *Khilāfah* as a form of agency (i.e the ability to act and decide based on the values of Islamic teachings), there is a better place for Islam and its values to play in one’s life beyond articulation of a personal faith. A Muslim who is conscious about the *Khilāfah*’s responsibilities ought to “1) observe his worship, moral, ethical and spiritual aspects, 2) to manage materials, build civilization and observe the cultural aspects, 3) perform *Da’wah*, *Ta’ruf* and civilizational interaction, 4) and pursue ‘*Ilm*, knowledge and science.”<sup>2</sup>

*Khilāfah* as an agency perceives an action, a decision, or a thought are interconnected to freedom and choice that an individual makes. The Qur’an (15: 28-29) describes that man is created with two essential nature: the body (*jasād*), and the soul (*rūh*). Man’s earthly biological

<sup>1</sup> Michael Collins, (2016), “Decolonization”, The Encyclopedia of Empire, p. 13. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781118455074.wbeoe360>

<sup>2</sup> Berghout, Abdelaziz, (2017), “Introduction to Worldview: Islamic Perspective”, The Islamic Worldview: Selected Essays, (ed. Md. Yousuf Ali): Kuala Lumpur: IIIT, p. 17.

body, which was originally from clay-mud nature, requires sustaining such as water and food for growth. Moreover, according to Muslim scholars like al-Ghazali (d. 1111), as physical being, man has animalistic inclinations and desires that serve his physical and biological needs. Man has to use his moral agency to struggle to control these inclinations because “if [they] are not properly control[ed] and discipline[d], [they] will drag man down to his earthly lower nature, to the extent, that he can be worse than animal [Qur’an: 7: 179].”<sup>1</sup> Man’s higher heavenly nature, in which the Qur’an relates that God has breathed in His Soul to (Qur’an: 15: 29), is what differentiates him from other creations. Man’s soul is his reality (*ḥaqīqah al-Insān*), the health of his soul is demonstrated through his conducts.<sup>2</sup> As a moral creature, man is expected to deal with his dual nature constantly. He is in a constant contest between his heavenly inclinations and his earthly nature. Understanding his nature and potentials is an execution of his moral *Khilāfah* power. Unlike the political agency that insinuates a wrestle with the power that subjugates oneself like the liberal politics subscribes to, the Islamic moral *Khilāfah* agency predicates a pursuit and strives against one’s own unguided desires and inclinations. Unlike the agency in liberal politics that promotes freeing oneself from enslavement of other fellow human beings, culture or tradition, Islamic moral agency nurtures freeing from one’s own desire to disobey God and His commands, which eventually does serve one’s well-being and happiness in this world and the Hereafter. The total submission and service to God also means the individual has liberated from any exploitation from other human beings, or any worldly powers and control. God is Self-Sufficient (*ghaniyy*) (Qur’an: 35:15) and does not benefit from an individual’s actions or inactions. Thus, the internalization of moral agency would only benefit the individual.

The aforementioned paragraphs have made the case for *Khilāfah* as a powerful spiritual and moral agency that demands fulfilling one’s obligations towards the Creator that cannot be taken lightly. It makes the strong case for an empowering tool for sustainable human development

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<sup>1</sup> Abdul Latif Abdul Razak, (2017), “Man in the Qur’an and the Sunnah”, *The Islamic Worldview: Selected Essays* (ed. Md Yousuf Ali), Kuala Lumpur: IIIT/IIUM, 2017, pp. 252-253.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 254-255.

as aspired by the United Nations' SDGs framework. An individual who holds on a solid notion of *Khilāfah* would not only be spiritually resilient but also has the constant motivation to be an active member of the society. *Khilāfah* as a moral agency will enable appreciation of many meaningful works that Muslims – including Muslim women – have done as part of fulfilling their religious obligations.

### **Conclusion**

Muslims may use the concept of *Khilāfah* as an emancipatory tool to advance for sustainable human development. It helps the Muslims to act and plan for a holistic paradigm of development that is inspired from the teachings of Islam. *Khilāfah* urges a Muslim to focus on being spiritually resilient, and also very cognizant about the responsibilities to build for a better society. *Khilāfah* reminds an individual that the proximity with God requires an active participation in this worldly life in a meaningful way; God's pleasure and the rewards for submitting to and internalizing of His Will are the ultimate goals of being His servant.

Muslims must understand the multifaceted needs and articulate them based on their worldview so they will live according to the expectations of their faith. Unfiltered borrowing and duplicating solutions and responses that are alien to their spiritual-moral, socio-political milieus may lead only to more problems than solving them. Furthermore, Muslims must advocate their specific needs without relying on others to do so for them. Reclaiming their rights to provide antidotes to their unique issues is not unusual because globally, there is a cultural and intellectual awareness that acknowledges each society has the right to prescribe the solutions to their problems. The global decolonization project has opened up spaces and opportunities for the global societies to re-evaluate that one-solution-fits-for-all is no longer relevant. Muslim advocates and right groups may want to work closely with the United Nations to inform that spirituality is central to Muslims and their socio-economic and political developments. Placing spirituality and religion in these aspects of their society does not mean that Muslims will compromise with universal values such as justice, equality and freedom. Mainstreaming the societal Muslims' needs based on their faith and spirituality will help them to own their narratives, and showcase that Islam can also contribute to world progress and development.

Placing spirituality and religion in the contemporary living, including Islam, is a challenging task because they are considered, in the secularized world, as matters of personal preference that should be kept privately. Seeking to position these two aspects in the public life confronts two uphill fronts: the Western societies and government have been secular that religions are put at the marginal place; and the atheist non-theistic yet anti-religious governments that believe religions are the enemies of the people and the states. Prominent conservative Christian scholar Robert P George (b. 1955) has highlighted the challenges that Western social liberalism has posed to religious life. He argues that the liberals “are [the] slaves to a faith-based “secularist orthodoxy” of “feminism, multiculturalism, gay liberationism and lifestyle liberalism.”<sup>1</sup>

Though he may have arguments that seem alien to Muslim values, George had correctly pointed the difficulty of religious adherents in applying their religious life in public. The reconstruction of the discourse on socio-cultural economic and political development in non-Western societies, including Muslim societies, require dismantling the universal representations and structures that are imbued with the Western values and worldview. It necessitates the acknowledgement that Western societies are not the only ones that are “capable of achieving a universal consciousness, and to dismiss non-Western knowledge as particularistic and, thus, unable to achieve universality.”<sup>2</sup> It is imperative to understand the superficiality of what Western imperialism has done to knowledge and scholarship because it was “able to construct a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people around the world”.<sup>3</sup>

However, Muslims must not lose hope in finding partners from communities of faith from all over the world who, just like Muslims, believe in the empowering roles the spirituality and religions may bring to the world. The basis for this argument is the Qur’an (3: 64) implies that despite different principles of beliefs that Muslims have, the verse does not prevent them from cooperating with others in imparting the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/20/magazine/20george-t.html>

<sup>2</sup> Grosfuguel Ramon, “Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality”, *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1(1), 2011, pp. 5-7. <https://dialoglobal.com/texts/grosfuguel/Grosfuguel-Decolonizing-Pol-Econ-andPostcolonial.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

shared values such as peace, equality and respect (including those of practicing religion). As active members of the community in the globalizing world who perceive religions and spirituality as positive influence in society in many ways, uniting with others in one voice to promote spirituality and its place in the contemporary life will communicate the meaning of the spirituality to the global society.

The past several decades have demonstrated that there was lack of democratization of knowledge and social science. Social science knowledge and theories, were produced, constructed and disseminated by certain group of people who had very unique background and experiences. Knowledge and theories were made to be the mainstream, and then exported and applied to the new different contexts that previously seemed alien. For instance, it is argued that Western Feminist theology that emerged in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in North America focused on gender issues, domestic violence, and was very critical towards Christian religious community. It demanded for more women's official leadership roles in the church; it sought to dismantling the patriarchal character of Christian tradition, and to reclaim women's agency.<sup>1</sup> What is evident from the quest of the Feminist theologians is the notion that each community, religious or non-religious have needs specific to their contexts and values. Therefore, Muslims too should use this opportunity to come out with knowledge and sciences that help to solve their concerns and conditions that are distinctively theirs. Muslims' understanding of *Khilāfah* requires them to place attaining God's pleasure as the ultimate reason of their existence, thus relying on knowledge and sciences that devoid of this element will only lead them to unfulfilling life.

There is a legitimate concern about how the Muslim society, with its multi-cultural and language background may develop and apply one social-moral paradigm that is viable not only to its community but also for people outside of it. In advancing Muslim's idea on sustainable human development, they can learn some of the approaches of Western feminist groups as they managed to transfer their ideas across continents, cultures and values. Globalization has shown that a community with knowledge and confidence may develop its own remedies for its

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<sup>1</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, and Sheila Briggs, (2011), "Introduction" The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology, (eds. Sheila Briggs and Mary McClintock Fulkerson) <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199273881.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199273881-e-1>

problems and issues. The Western feminist theology was constructed by women advocates who believe that they must champion their causes using their own beliefs, principles and values. The ability and the relative success to transfer feminist theological ideas beyond the initial social-cultural milieu indicates the merit of these ideas be applied into new contexts. However, that does not happen by happenstance. Rather, it was due to visionary and futuristic planning. The liberal feminist theology was encouraged to include the marginalized and the ‘oppressed’ social groups and structures such as ‘of gender, race, sexual orientation, and the constraints of ethnicity and class’ to position their cause at the global contexts.<sup>1</sup> Muslims too need to construct the paradigm for human development that are holistic and inclusive, that reflects their spiritual endeavour, and their Islamic values as *Khilāfah* on Earth, as part of their contribution in the globalized world.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

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