Desperately Seeking Paradise. Journeys of a Sceptical Muslim

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About the Author

Sardar was born in a Punjabi village in Pakistan but was raised in London. He dubs himself "an information scientist". He has been involved in many Islamic research projects and acted as a journalist and lecturer. He is the author of some forty books.

Chapter 1. Paradise Awakened

The book opens with 21 year old Sardar, after midnight, kipping down in a Glasgow mosque: "It is the norm that when all else fails, the mosque offers a place of refuge: material and spiritual, real or metaphorical" (1). He then explains what had led to this in the summer of 1972, namely a visit from two members of *Tablighi Jamaat* (*jamaat* means 'group'), a movement initiated by Maualana Muhammad Ilyas in 1926 among the Meos people of Northern India, a people whose Islam was heavily infused with Hindu practices. The demand that the fundamental rituals of Islam be strictly observed was so successful that Tablighi Jamaat gained followers and supporters from all over the Muslim world. Sardar progressively learns that Tablighis had "an inordinate talent for developing a whole host of technical terms to distinguish between phases of their repetitive procedures" (14).

He describes one of these visitors as "a walking example of an old adage: the soul of a Muslim is like a mosaic made up of the formulae of the Qur'an in which he breathes and lives" (3). This man introduces his companion who, he explains, had left his family and business in Pakistan to do *tabligh*, that is, traveling around Europe to urge Muslims to go to the mosque:

> the exact equivalent of the actions of those earnest young Mormons who spend two years tramping foreign streets, ringing doorbells and engaging the innocent unsuspecting in pre-prepared Socratic dialogues designed to corral the mind into acquiescence with their particular worldview (3).

These visitors remind Sardar of his religious duties as a Muslim. He is told that the performance of *salah* [the five daily prayers] is "the key to paradise". The five prayers are described at various points in the book:

1. *Fajr* (dawn prayer). During British Summer Time this meant rising before 4 a.m.
2. *Zuhr* (noon prayer). Sardar finds himself performing this in the pouring rain when with two Muslims obsessed with ritual rectitude. One of the Muslims even has a compass built into the prayer mat to ensure correct determination of the *qibla*, the direction towards Mecca (8).
3. *Asr* (afternoon prayer).
4. *Maghrib* (evening prayer).

During this home visit and later in a Plymouth house-mosque, Sardar is told that:

1. Many Muslims don't offer their prayers or perform their ablutions precisely enough.
2. He must "perform *dhikr* [ritual remembrance of God] frequently in order to purify the mind and inculcate a habit of remembering [his] Creator all the time" (4).
3. D*awa* is an obligation that is not limited to the *ulama* [religious scholars], but is binding on every Muslim, that is, the duty to call other Muslims to the right path; that *dawa* "is our route to paradise" (4). When Sardar protest that he is studying

for his final exams he is told that by doing *dawa* he can prepare himself for the Final Exam before Allah on the Day of Judgment.

4. He must propagate the *kalima* ("the word"), the Islamic Creed: "There is no God but Allah; and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

He finds himself leaving the house, 'volunteering' to do forty days of itinerant *dawa*, a budding *dai*, one who calls others to the right path. However, this *tabligh* experience quickly sours on Sardar. He discovers the essence of this approach treats religious observances as "a *quid pro quo* with the Almighty, one merely applied the ready-made formula and one could relax, confident in the assurance that paradise would be the outcome.." (12). But this approach was characterized with complacency towards the social ills of the world, especially in the Muslim world.

As Sardar, doing his *tabligh*, visits various Muslims he meets with interesting responses. A doctor has many objections to joining them for *tabligh*, asking them why they have come all the way to England to do the *tabligh* when there are about half a billion Muslims in India and Pakistan. Rejecting the doctor's argument that involvement in politics is necessary to address social injustices the Tablighi Jamaat members simplistically argue, "If Muslims were diligent about their prayers and remembered God and their place in the cosmos, there wouldn't be any injustice" (16).

A labourer they visit mischievously asks whether the Tablighi Jamaat members carry an imanometer around with them to measure whether his *iman* ("faith") is weak or strong. He then tells the story of a prostitute who, according to Muhammad, would enter paradise with all her sins forgiven, because she took water from a well and poured it into one of her shoes to give to a dog that was dying of thirst. His point being that even if he is neglectful in prayer, like the prostitute, an act he has done or will do might elicit forgiveness.

The Tablighi Jamaat leader tries to use a counter story from the life of Muhammad to insist on the importance of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, asking, "Surely, you would rather follow the Prophet than a prostitute?" But the labourer replies with Muhammad's saying that "Iman has over sixty or seventy branches. The most excellent of these is saying There is no God but Allah; and the lowest of them is the removal of excellent objects from the way of others." As a cleaner, therefore, the labourer insists his *iman* is solid.

Afterwards, the Tablighi Jamaat leader tells Sardar that he needs to spend much more time learning from them. But to Sardar "[it] seemed clear… that more time would simply mean more repetitions of exactly the same truncated pieties, the same six points." He comments, "I felt no nearer to paradise nor clearer in my ideas about paradise than when they had stormed my flat that fateful Sunday morning. All I had learned was that their formula could not be mine" (18).

Chapter 2. The Brotherhood of Salvation

Sardar has now become aware "that paradise was a motif deeply woven into culture and society, politics and art, Muslim and British", implying "a state of mind afflicted by an ongoing dissatisfaction with how things are, a dissident search for ways to make things better" (21).

Recalling his childhood, Sardar remembers suffering at school in Hackney from the "game" of "Paki bashing". He remarks, "Being and becoming a Muslim, shaping an identity, was a contested arena wherever I lived, in London or in a divided India 'back home'" (22). As a child he picked up English well and thus became an interpreter for his mother. He recalls evenings in his home devoted to *mushaira*, poetry recitals in Urdu and going to watch Indian movies, yet amalgamating – adding "bangers and mash and fish and chips to sag gosht and parathas, not noticing the joins" (23).

At school, as his own form of protest, Sardar established an Islamic Society, which brought him into contact with FOSIS, the Federation of Students Islamic Society in UK and Eire, a body formed in 1962 in Birmingham and composed of expatriate students from various Muslim countries pursuing higher degrees in Britain, plus "a string of indigenous and American hippies who, often after a long and arduous search, had arrived at Sufism and converted to Islam." Sardar himself was part of "the first few droplets of the coming tide: Muslims born of immigrant parents who had been born or brought up and educated in Britain and actually made it to higher education" (24).

FOSIS organized protests following certain events:

1. Nasser's execution of Sayyid Qutb of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1966.
2. The occupation of Palestine following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.
3. The 1969 Hindu-Muslim riots.

Sardar recalls the sense of brotherhood he shared with fellow Muslim students and how they even were involved together in arranging actual marriages. He explains how a niche for them to do this was creating when arranging marriages became problematic for Muslim women in Britain, given that they had been uprooted from stable environments in their homelands where they had been "interconnected over generations with entire villages or neighbourhoods" (26).

Many FOSIS members became returned to their countries to become leaders in industry, politics, administration or the academic world: "We were the future of the worldwide Muslim community, longing for its former glories to be revived" (27). Sardar speaks of visits from such notaries as Said Ramadan, former Secretary of the Muslim Brotherhood, Malcolm X and Muslim philosopher Malik Bennabi. Bennabi had a profound understanding of western culture and civilization and disagreed with the many Muslim scholars who blamed colonization for the demise of Islam. Rather, colonizibility, an inherent weakness in Muslim societies, was the real reason.

Sardar tells how the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt (founded in 1928 in Egypt as a youth club by Hassan al-Banna) and Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan (founded in August 1941 in Lahore by Maulana Sayyid Abulala Mawdudi) vied with each other to capture the souls of FOSIS members. He describes the visit of Mawdudi to Britain in 1969. Mawdudi argued:

> Even if you establish an Islamic state through armed revolution, it would not be possible to run the state and carry on its affairs in accordance with the Islamic way, for the simple reason that society and its different sections have not been properly prepared for the moral transformation that Islam wants. Armed revolution as a means to power is open to others as well – so there is a danger that Muslim countries will become ensnared in a vicious circle of revolutions and counter-revolutions and of conspiracies and counter-conspiracies. Moreover, to bring about armed revolution, you have to organize your movement on the pattern of secret societies. These have a

> temperament of their own. They admit to no dissent and disagreement. The voice of criticism is silenced; and free, fair and frank discussions become conspicuous by their absence. Another demand of the inner logic of secret societies is to permit workers to resort to deceit, lies, forgeries, frauds, bloodshed and many other things, which are forbidden in Islam. It is also in the nature of revolutions brought about by the bullet that they can be maintained only through the bullet. This produces a climate where a peaceful switch-over towards an Islamic order becomes virtually impossible (30).

As Sardar immersed himself in Mawdudi's writings he noted how Mawdudi viewed Islam as a total system touching every aspect of an individual's life, shaping the whole of society, especially emphasizing the importance of increasing personal piety, initially unaided by structural reform. Sardar found this portrayal of Islam as a total system "a touch utopian": "It was not evident to me that Islam, as we understood it, had all the necessary principles to tackle the dilemmas of the modern world" (31). Though Mawdudi chastened traditional scholars for losing touch with the modern world, he himself was guilty of the same deficiency:

> For him, the Shariah – Islamic Law – was a ready-made framework which could solve all problems. There was nothing in his thought that could provide us with a way of gaining a fresh understanding of the worldview of Islam. Could it really be the case that an old system of law that had not been in effective operation for an entire society for hundreds of years could just be taken off the shelf and dusted down and then provide answers for complex questions about governance, development, modernity, questions that were by no means settled and the subject of earnest debate even in modern developed societies? (31)

Sardar's greatest reservation about Mawdudi's thought concerned his views on women. He comments:

> …the Maulana seemed to have absolutely no understanding of the world I inhabited, let alone the world, outlook and attitudes of my mother and sister, nor of the diverse women of my acquaintance from schoolteachers, nurses, sundry officials and functionaries to classmates and fellow students. Despite all the string and sealing wax he uses to tie up his arguments, in such works as *Purdah* ("The Veil") and *The Status of Women*, the fact remained that he saw women as innately inferior, creatures who should be wrapped up in shrouds and confined within the four walls of a house because by their inherent nature they are a moral threat to the health of society! The more I read the more it became obvious that most of Mawdudi's opinions were uninformed, his reasoning rather shabby, and the utopia he had constructed just that: a non-place for non-people (32).

Many of the Jamaat members Sardar met were, in his estimation, profoundly ignorant, "in the deepest sense of the word", being dominated by a guru syndrome centered on Mawdudi (32).

Sardar reviews the origins of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt which became a political organization in 1936. Its founder, Al-Banna, treated the Qur'an and military jihad as two sides of the same coin. So members of the Brotherhood were required to supplement their traditional Islamic training with military training. Al-Banna in *What is Our Message?* insisted that the development of Islam involves five stages:

1. *Weakness*: "a group amongst the noble and respected class" is in "the servitude of a tyrant who is disobedient to Allah" (33).
2. *Leadership*: a leader emerges to challenge the rule of the tyrant.

3. *Confrontation*: between the forces of light and the forces of darkness.
4. *Adherence to truth*: "with patience, perseverance and tolerance in the face of disgrace" (33).
5. *Triumph*: Shariah is able to satisfy every need. Culture, in its various forms, is anarchy and must be rooted out from "every road, in every place of assembly and in every winter and summer pleasure resort" (33).

The intellectual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood was Sayyid Qutb, a close associate of Nobel Prize winner, Naguib Mahfouz and of Nasser. During two years of residence in the US in the late 1940s Qutb found Americans to be "primitive in the way he lusts after power, ignoring ideals and manners and principles" (33). Despite the plethora of churches, which he found hard to distinguish from places of entertainment, he found Americans completely lacking in spirituality.

During the mid-1940s the Muslim Brotherhood became more involved in violence. The assassination of the Egyptian Prime Minister, Mahmud Fahmi Nokrashi was followed by the killing of Hassan al-Banna by government agents. When America greeted this news with delight Qutb decisively linked himself with the Brotherhood.

In *Social Justice in Islam* Qutb argues for jihad as an instrument of securing social justice since social justice presupposes economic justice and "those with wealth and power do not give up their ill-gotten gains easily" (34). Qutb not only radicalized the entire Islamic movement in Egypt but also influenced Islam in the Indian Subcontinent and SE Asia. Then on Oct 26, 1954 a member of the Muslim Brotherhood tried to assassinate Nasser. Nasser responded by executing six conspirators and arresting over 1000 Brotherhood activists, including Qutb who was regularly tortured. Qutb's last book *Milestones* indicates that Qutb's

> experiences in Nasser's prison had made Qutb an angry and vengeful man, who had lost all perspective. The entire world, Qutb now declared, including all Muslim countries, was the abode of *jahiliyya* – absolute ignorance. The Muslim community no longer existed; it had disintegrated into darkness, unbelief and ignorance… Jihad was now all-out war between the Brotherhood and everyone else (35).

Qutb was hanged in 1966 and in 1981 members of the Muslim Brotherhood took their revenge by assassinating President Sadat. In those times Sardar remembers how with other members of FOSIS he changed the slogans of the Brotherhood:

> Allah is our objective.
> The messenger is our leader.
> The Qur'an is our law.
> Jihad is our way.
> Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope.

But Sardar began to develop reservations:

> …it was too much of a stretch of my imagination to see 'the Qur'an as our law' since law is a dynamic, changing institution and the Qur'an contains remarkably few legal injunctions. A book of eternal guidance, as the Qur'an describes itself, cannot be reduced down to a fixed set of laws (36).

Sardar also believed there were other ways to solve problems besides militaristic jihad, observing that Muhammad's 23 years as the Prophet only involved a few months of such jihad.

Sardar recalls how Brotherhood member, Said Ramadan, exposed for him the essential mentality of the Brotherhood: "the light of certainty and faith." An Israeli officer delighted one of Ramadan's friends when he told him that Israeli soldiers preferred not to risk attacking Brotherhood volunteers because their delusions about paradise awaiting them after death turned them into savage demons. Ramadan saw this certain faith as a "terrible weapon" but Sardar reflected:

> Only perfect people can have perfect, certain faith. And that was my problem with the members of the Brotherhood. They saw themselves as perfect; they were certain of everything. In short, they were ideologues: Islam, for them, was an ideology that allowed for no imperfections, no deviation, and, in the final analysis, no humanity. This is why I found so many of them so repugnant (38).

Chapter 3. A Tall Fruit-Bearing Tree

Sardar recalls his childhood, how his mother would spend half an hour each evening reading him verse after verse of the Qur'an so that by the time he was 14 he had the whole book in original Arabic. His mother frequently quote Muhammad Iqbal's words, that a person should read the Qur'an as if it was revealed to him or her personally.

Sardar notes that the precise Arabic word for "paradise", *firdous*, only occurs twice in the Qur'an:

> Verily, as for those who attain to faith and do righteous deeds – the gardens of paradise will be there to welcome them (18:107).
> [these are the heirs] who will inherit paradise; there they will abide (23:11).

However, the Qur'an also uses the metaphor of the garden a number of times to signify paradise, e.g.:

> A similitude of the Garden which is promised unto those who keep their duty [to Allah]: Underneath it rivers flow; its food is everlasting, and its shade; this is the reward of those who keep their duty (13:35).

His mother argued that the word rendered "shade", namely, *zill*, signified "protection", the very idea underlying the notion of shade. She also argued that the "food" must be sustenance needed for the inner self. Further, she maintained that the image of the garden being full of fountains signified fountains of knowledge.

His father told him that he needed two things to live the metaphor of shade: (1) a teacher, "like a tall and strong fruit-bearing tree, under whose protection you acquire the knowledge of classical disciplines" (45) and knowledge of the best way to learn; (2) "a few good and loyal friends to protect you" (46). With regard to the first point his father relates one of Al-Ghazali's stories about the Bedouin chief who returned lecture notes to Al-Ghazali quipping, "I thought you went to university to learn, not to take notes" (46). Al-Ghazali went back to university for another four years without taking any notes, just thinking to such good purpose that he became one of the leading scholars of the Islamic civilization.

Acting on his father's advice Sardar asked a Sudanese theologian, Jaffar Shaikh Idris, to be his mentor, learning from him traditional Islamic disciplines, "the writings of the masters of Islamic law, philosophy and exegesis" (47). He started an *usrah* ("family") group which met weekly, with Jaffar as the *Nageeb* ("leader"), a former philosophy student taught by Karl Popper. The group began by studying the Qur'an and Hadith, the collections complied by al-Bukhari, Muslim and Al-Baghawi. They studied Ibn

Ishaq's *The Life of Muhammad* and other histories of the 8th and 9th centuries, plus commentaries, classical jurists, philosophers, theologians and thinkers. Sardar was impressed by the gentleness and moderation of the classical scholars, e.g. the exceptionally polite Bukhari, pioneer of Hadith criticism, centering on the idea of *isnad*, or attestation. He tells of Bukhari's prodigious memory and the thoroughness with which he tried to identify authentic Hadith.

The School of Islamic Law founded by the Medinan scholar Imam Malik is reputed "to be the most rigid, extreme and uncompromising", yet Malik himself taught there was more than one way to practise Islam and encouraged people to see any source of knowledge they deemed appropriate. Indeed, Malik's disciple Imam Shafi'i was of the same stamp though, ironically, he was beated to death by zealous followers of Malik.

As Sardar studied under Jaffar he became more conscious that his "group of Islamist friends were short on two things: self-doubt and forgiveness. The first led many to see the world in black and white. The second sowed the seeds of discord among us" (52).

At one point *The Muslim* published a fatwa ("the unanimous verdict of the Pakistani ulema") that socialism is *kufr* ("unbelief") and that "any help rendered to a socialist is *haram*" ("forbidden"). Sardar explains that the word *kufr* literally means "obliterating, covering" or "concealing benefits received" or being "ungrateful to God". However, the term has come to signify "the enemy" and to separate "Us" from "Them". While Sardar accepted the premise that many socialists didn't believe in God he couldn't see how this justified treated them as the enemy nor why working with them should be forbidden. Indeed, Sardar himself lived his life as both a Muslim and a socialist, sharing their goals "of fighting poverty, structural injustices and the abuses of class and racism" (53). Yet other Muslims were pontificating that associating with or even condoning *kufr* was itself *kufr*. Sardar also found himself taking issue with an article in *The Muslim* which argued that "all the heads of all the countries of the world today, including the Muslim countries, are *kuffar* (unbelievers)" (54). Sardar asked, "By such standards who was there pure enough to consort with?" and observes, "People with absolute certainty have an absolute passion for not being forgiving" (54).

Sardar personally experienced this lack of forgiveness when he and the President of FOSIS co-authored a booklet, *The Guide*, which aroused ire among Muslims when it mistakenly, following what was written on shop signs, listed various butchers' shops as selling halal meat when they weren't. As a result he was barred from editing *The Muslim* and, with a bitter taste in his mouth, wondered, "If such rigour attached to such a little thing, what, I wondered, would the brothers make of my other imperfections?" (56).

Chapter 4. The Mysteries of Mysticism

The word *sufi* comes from the Arabic word *suf* or wool, describing the rough woolen clothing worn by early ascetic Sufis.

"Sufism is such an integral part of Islam that it would be difficult to find a Muslim family, almost anywhere in the world, that does not boast a fully blown mystic in its lineage" (57). Sufi mysticism is termed *tasawwuf* and although Sufism is often portrayed as a movement against obsession with Shariah, there are in fact many Sufi Orders that treat Shariah as essential to *tasawwuf*.

Famous Sufis

- Rabiah al-Basri (9th century): thought to be the first Sufi. She originated the doctrine of the "disinterested love of God" (58).
- Sahl ibn Abdullah (9th century): "Sufism is to eat little, to seek peace in God and to flee from the people."
- Samnun (9th century; Iraq), self-designated "the liar": "Sufism is that you should not possess anything nor should anything possess you."
- Mansur al-Hallaj (9th century; Persia) – "the most celebrated example of *fana* in Islamic history", said to have lived in a permanent state of ecstasy (59). He was accused of heresy for various statements:

    (1) I am He Whom I love, and He Whom I love is I.
    We are two spirits dwelling in one body.
    If you see me, you see Him;
    And if you see Him, you see us both.
    (2) I am the Truth (the statement for which he was martyred).

- Al-Junayd (10th century): "Sufism is that you should be with God without any attachment."
- Abul Hasayn an-Nuri (10th century): "Sufism is neither external [experience] nor knowledge, it is all virtue."
- Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (12th century; India)
- Fari ud-Din Attar (12th century; Persia) who wrote the *Conference of the Birds*.
- Imam Shadhili (13th century).
- Jalaluddin Rumi (13th century; Turkey), who wrote the *Masnavi*. He was the founder of the Mevlevi Order, the Whirling Dervishes.

Sufi beliefs

("There are as many definitions of Sufism as there are Sufi Orders" [59])

1. Sufis are on a mystical journey, *tariqah*, to God in paradise.
2. Intimacy with God is the purpose of creation.
3. It is possible to experience intimacy with God in this life, through the exercise of strict discipline.
4. The central experience is *fana*, "to be dissolved/annihilated". This "is the negation of the Self: negation of will, existence, self-consciousness and being; forsaken for union with God, assimilation into His will, His attributes and finally His being" (59).
5. The discipline which leads to *fana* is *zikr*, remembering God. Forms of *zikr*:
    a. Saying "Allah" loudly, "stretching the word as it is pronounced, and saying it with all the force of heart and throat" and saying *la ilaha illa Allah*, "there is no god except Allah" (59).
    b. Meditating on certain verses of the Qur'an, e.g. "He is with you wherever you are" (57:4); "Whichever way you turn there is the face of Allah" (2:115).

Sardar relates his meeting with the Sheikh and members of the Naqshbandi Sufi Order in Britain. He comments, "Muslim men indicate, almost unfailingly, their allegiance to schools of thought, organizations, groupings, factions, trends, ethnicities and cultures in their cultivation, by the nature and nurture of their facial hair… The Sufi beard, a

sign of piety, cleaves to chin and jowls but eschews the upper lip" (61-62). In his talk, the Sheikh said,

> *Tasawwuf* is the purity of progressing to Allah's Divine Presence, and its essence is to leave this materialistic life… *Tasawwuf* is not a particular type of worship, but is rather the attachment of the heart to Allah…
> There are three big snakes that harm human beings… Beware of them: to be intolerant and impatient with the people around you; to be dependent on something you cannot leave; and to be controlled by your ego… I am the collector of souls. I polish souls till the ego has evaporated…. There is too much information in the head of young seekers. You must empty your mind of all that you know. Only then can you begin the journey towards *tasawwuf* (62-64).

Sardar responds, "Wiping oneself clean of information and knowledge seems a perilous path, a giant leap into the void, even if the objective is a form of wisdom" (64).

However, Sardar did become a regular visitor to a Sufi Zawiya, a place for Sufi meditation and ritual. The members of the group called themselves *fuqar*a, "beggars". The leader of this group distinguished between the Mumin (true Muslim) and the modern Muslim: "The modern Muslim, we learned, has lost *ilm al-yaqin* (knowledge of certainty), which is based on the Unseen. In the modern Muslim, the whole confrontation with his own nature has been conveniently filed away in the pursuit of worldly pleasures" (67).

Sardar describes some of the ritual of the Sufi meeting, the night prayer (Isha), the singing by full initiates of the Greater *Wird*, the sacred and secret prayer of the Order (and occasionally the Lesser *Wird*) and a devotional song sung in praise of their Sheikh. He describes the fuqara standing up, forming a circle holding one another's hands and chanting *La ilaha illa'llah* ("There is no God but Allah), *La ilaha illa'llah, La ilaha illa'llah*. As the disciples danced they inhaled with each *La ilaha* and exhaled with *illa'llah*. The chanting began gently then gathered pace and the circle swayed with members throwing themselves backwards as they drew deep breaths for *La ilaha* and thrusting forwards as they expelled breath with *illa'llah*. This continued till all were in a state of total frenzy. Then they would utter *Allah* 66 times, bringing the exhausted group to serene calm.

Sardar notes how the leader became more intoxicated with his own power, coming to claim: "Allah has singled me out with sciences and secrets which only the unique man of Muhammad possesses" (68). He became the absolute master of the group, choosing husbands for female devotees, ordering male disciples to divorce their wives and regulating all aspects of their lives. Sardar's own brother was controlled by another Sufi Sheikh in precisely this way. Sardar observed that this guru syndrome was a familiar pattern, causing him to suspect "that there was something at the core of mysticism – all mysticism – that was deeply flawed" (69).

Sardar speaks of having his own mystical experience which made him unable to reject Sufism per se. He comments,

> My problem was a problem of forms, the forms in which Sufism today has been made into a business of Masters, mystery and obfuscations. I saw how Sheikh Nazim's Sufi path led my brother to economic ruin, neglect of his family and finally to total disillusionment: after following the Order for two decades, he left complaining that the Sheikh had totally taken over his life. Individual Sufis – the likes of Al-Hallaj and Al-Junayd – are one thing. But as a collective spiritual path, Sufism does not produce a

> viable and equitable social order. The tendency to degenerate into authoritarianism and become a cult of the Master is ever present. It could not be my route to paradise (84).

Chapter 5. The Cradle of Paradise

The 11th century philosopher and theologian, Al-Ghazali (Abu Hamid ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Tusi al-Ghazali), "the Proof of Islam", "the Renewer of the Religion", attacked Greek philosophy in his greatest treatise: *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. Al-Ghazali argued all efforts to prove or disprove religion were doomed to incoherence. He traveled extensively and wrote "what is undoubtedly the most influential work in Islamic history: *The Revival of Religious Sciences* (85).

Al-Ghazali maintained, "No one believes until he has doubted" (86). He distinguished between two categories of travel: *rihla* ("outward, physical travel, professionally undertaken for the sake of learning and discovery"; e.g. Ibn Jubayr and Ibn Battuta) and *safar* (involving "physical exertion as well as inner transformation, liberation and attainment", particularly the changes effected through "motion" – physical movement of the journey – and "mixing" – social interaction) [86-87]. He also distinguished four classes of traveler:

1. First class: searching knowledge that will eventually transform oneself and lead to paradise.
2. Second class: seeking self-improvement, e.g. going to Mecca.
3. Third class: seeking changes in material well-being and in one's ability to practise one's faith, e.g. Hejira of Muhammad and followers from Mecca to Medina.
4. Fourth class: escaping things harmful to the body or depreciating wealth. This type of travel is deemed to be non-permissible.

Sardar recounts his journeying in the Middle East, commencing in Tehran in 1974. His contact, Reza, believing revolution was imminent (as did most people at the grassroots level), had been secretly distributing speeches and tapes of Ayatollah Ruhullah al-Musavi al-Khomeini. Reza believed that eventually he would be arrested and tortured like many of his friends before him. Most believed the revolution would create a divine paradise on earth, but the reality reminded Sardar of the "Order of Assassins", who between the 11th-13th centuries had also dreamed of an earthly paradise. In both cases a charismatic religious leader provided direction and violence was the means of securing the goal.

The Shi'ite Assassins called themselves Nazaris. Reza maintained that the depiction of them as hashish-addicts was a derogatory Sunni stereotype. Sardar recalls how his own Sunni Islamic education ignored the Shias so that when he learnt about the various Islamic "Schools of Thought" the main Shia legal school, the Jafari jurisprudence, was completely omitted, as if it didn't even exist. Indeed, in most Sunni circles the Shia are "dark outsiders who denigrate the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and venerate Caliph Ali, the cousin of the Prophet, beyond his station, even suggesting that he – and not Prophet Muhammad – should have been the true recipient of God's revelation" (93).

The history of the Assassins is recounted. The founding Grand Master was Hasan al-Sabbah and he was succeeded by seven other Grand Masters until in 1256 the Mongols captured Alamut, Persia, and brought their rule to an end. The main activity of the assassins is said to have occurred within a 60 year period which, because of the havoc

they caused in the Sunni world, have led to the mythical exaggeration of the Assassins by Sunnis. The abstemiously pious and militant Hassan al-Sabbah was a close associate of the Ismaili, Nizar (hence Nizaris). When al-Sabbah settled in Alamut he found himself in conflict with the ruling Saljuqs. Along with other Ismailis he regarded ritual murder as both an act of defiance and an act of piety according to which the assassin himself had to be willing to give his life. He targeted two groups:

1. Princes, officers and ministers.
2. Religious leaders and scholars.

The method of assassination involved using a single weapon – a dagger, garotte or club, but never a missile or poison. The young assassins may have used hashish in their mystical ceremonies. But they were "highly educated, fluent in a number of languages, very patient and were excellent planners" and "needed nothing more than religious devotion to carry out their tasks" (99).

Sardar voiced to Reza his critique of Imams, that combining spiritual and political leadership in one man was bound to lead to trouble. Reza insisted that Imams are *masoum* – totally innocent – and incapable of doing wrong. Reza saw red when Sardar continued with his criticism, claiming that the twelfth Imam (the Shias believe "the Imams of the Household of the Prophet" are 12 in number) didn't die but went into occultation, to eventually reappear as the promised Mehdi, the end-time redeemer.

Chapter 6. Presidents and Peasants

Sardar is now in Baghdad, just a few kilometres from the site of ancient Babylon at the time when the President was Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and the Vice-President was Saddam Hussein. Sardar recalls that Caliph Abu Jafar al-Mansur, the second Abbasid caliph built Baghdad as the capital city of the Abbasid Empire. By the end of the 8th century Baghdad was the second largest city in the world (next to Constantinople) and was "a thriving world centre of commerce and learning. The Abbasids built libraries, colleges and hospitals as well as canals, dikes and reservoirs, and drained the swamps around the city thus freeing it of malaria" (106). In the 9th century Al-Mamun founded the famous Bait al-Hikma ("the House of Wisdom") and launched an unparalleled scientific and cultural revolution. Bait al-Hikma's first director, Hunayn ibn Ishaq, "translated the complete medical and philosophical works of Galen, the physics of Aristotle, and the Greek Old Testament" and his students "translated Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Ptolemy, Euclid, Pythagoras and the neo-Platonists into Arabic" (106). Baghdad is also famous for the discovery of algebra, at the beginning of the 8th century, the attempt to reconcile neo-Platonism and Islam (Al-Kindi), the production of a medical encyclopedia (Al-Razi) and Al-Ghazali.

Sardar asks what became of

> the Baghdad that taught Europe the distinction between civil society and barbarism, the difference between medicine and magic, and the importance of the experimental method; the Baghdad that trained the West in scholastic and philosophic method, drilled it in making surgical instruments, told it how to establish and run hospitals and provided it with the model of a university complete with curriculum and syllabus, terminology and administrative structure; the Baghdad that schooled Europe in the importance of biography, the novella, the history of cities and historical and textual criticism. In short, the Baghdad that gave Europe its most prized possession: liberal humanism (107).

In Baghdad Sardar learnt about the Ba'athists. The word *Ba'ath* means "to resurrect." Seeking to reverse the humiliations endured by Arabs the Ba'athists seek to take Arabs back to their roots, roots which predate Islam, so as to resurrect a united Arab nation, under the banner of socialism which transcends all phases of Arab history including Islam. The spiritual leader of Ba'athist ideology was Michel Aflaq who formulated his ideas in esoteric and Messianic terms. The three pillars of Ba'ath ideology are unity, freedom and socialism, deemed by Aflaq akin to the Christian Trinity. However, freedom of speech, publication and assembly belong to the state. Since the Ba'athists had no mass base they relied on assassination to achieve the power necessary to attain their goal. So the "history of Ba'ath parties in Iraq and Syria is a history of coups and counter-coups, assassinations and violence" (109).

From Baghdad Sardar travels to Aleppo, once a major centre of trade in the Muslim world, indeed, the trade centre for Europe. While in the bazaar he is forced to hide behind a steel door while a tank reduced a building to ruins. En route from Aleppo to Damascus his taxi is stopped by a military vehicle and he is forced to stand with his hands on top of his head. The soldiers, finding rifles in one man's suitcase, hit the man with the butt of a rifle and carry him off. Still en route he see the Syrian Ba'athists with a battalion of tanks about to wipe the city of Hamah, stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood, from the face of the globe.

It was only when Sardar reached Amman in Jordan that he was able to breathe normally again. He called on Baqa, the Palestinian refugee camp, just outside Amman that was established in 1968 when around 400,000 Palestinians fled from the West Bank after the Israeli occupation. Though he sees misery everywhere it is the determination on the face of the 70,000 refugees that impresses him. Sardar stops to ask a small boy what he wants to do when he grows up. The boy replies, "I want to fight for my homeland" which Sardar notes as "a warning of things to come" (118).

After next visiting a rich minister in Dubai who had three swimming pools all set at different temperatures he observes that the considerable distance he had traveled during his travels in the Middle East were as "nothing compared to the distance between the rulers and those who are ruled. The desire of ordinary Muslims to live in a state of justice and equity was always at odds with the elite vision of an ideal life" (121).

Chapter 7. Saving Mecca

Sardar's trip to "the source of civilization" had been "a ruined dream". However, Sardar was aware that throughout the Muslim world Muslims saw the way forward as involving the "recovery of the inner core of ideals, the values and spiritual ethos that created the Golden Age of Islam" (122). Indeed, all of Sardar's friends constantly talked about the coming "Islamic resurgence". Ironically, this hope was inspired by such material acquisitions as massive oil revenues. In 1969 OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Conference) was established by various Muslim states, being spearheaded by King Faisal of Saudi Arabia. Kings, heads of state and foreign ministers of Muslim countries now met regularly to seek ways of cooperating together.

In 1975 Sardar is visited by yet another two Muslims, this time "with only minimalist beards" (123). It was explained how in 1973 the entire city of Medina ("the city") had

been razed to the ground. Sardar was asked to work for the Hajj Research Centre in a bid to save Mecca from the same fate.

Sardar moved to Jeddah along with other hand-picked and dedicated Muslim intellectuals. Sardar describes the profound stirring of his emotions as he made his first visit to the Haramain, the sacred precincts at the heart of Mecca and stood before the Kaa'ba. Commenting on the significance of the Kaa'ba for Muslims he comments:

> … the Hajj is the apex of Muslim spiritual experience. Literally, the word hajj signifies an exertion. The Hajj is an effort, the great Effort… When they return to their homes the pilgrims will be known by the honorific of Hajji (male) or Hajjah (female) in recognition of their engagement with and experience of the completeness of a life of faith…. [Mecca] is the Beginning, the Present and Forever (128).

He further explains:

> During Dhu al-Hijjah, the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar when the Hajj takes place, the population of Mecca increases fourfold. Half a million local inhabitants play host to two million pilgrims from every corner of the Muslim world. The Hajj falls on the ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth days of this month and follows a routine established by Prophet Muhammad himself. The pilgrims are required to move from ritual point to ritual point by specified routes at specific times (129).

Sardar reports on his observation of pilgrims:

> I would watch as they, on entering the holy areas, prepared their minds for the transition from worldly thought and desires, a spiritual transformation accompanied by changing their everyday clothes for the pilgrim garb, ihram – two white, unsewn sheets of cloth – and acquired a state of grace. I would follow them to the Sacred Mosque, where they would perform the *tawaf* – walking seven times anticlockwise around the Kaa'ba, circumambulating in reality the fixed point that had always given meaning and direction to their lives. In this exultant moment men walked with their right shoulders bared to demonstrate their humility. Men and women walking alongside each other, no segregation, not in separate lines, mutually engaged in common activity, a quest and objective that was the same for everyone no matter who or what they were. After *tawaf* comes *sa'y*. In remembrance of the plight of Hagar, the wife of Prophet Abraham, the pilgrims run seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwah, just as she ran desperately seeking water in the desert before God showed her the well of Zamzam. Then, it is out of Mecca and to the hill town of Muna.
>
> The following day is the Day of Arafat, the supreme moment of the Hajj. The pilgrims leave early to cover the eight kilometers that separate Muna from the Plain of Arafat, arriving before midday. When the sun passes the meridian, the ritual of *wquf*, or standing, begins. At the mosque of Al-Namira, before Mount Arafat, the congregation of over two million prays as a single entity. Nothing in the world can match this spectacle; or surpass this experience… Here in this valley, the Magnificent, the Beneficent, the Merciful, will send down His forgiveness on those whom He will – and they will feel His presence. In this enormous mass of indistinguishable humanity, the pilgrim knows unity and the most profound moment of individuality and personal identity they can ever hope to achieve. This is the simple profundity of the Hajj, of Islam, of religion or indeed any form of human philosophy. In all of this crowd it is I, and my Lord; and the noblest hours of my life. Each says simply '*Labaik*', here I am, in the knowledge that each is individually heard, individually known, individually valuable, distinct and particular.
>
> Immediately after sunset, on the ninth of Dhu al-Hijjah begins the *nafrah*; the mass exodus of pilgrims from the valley of Arafat, towards Muzdalifah. Muzdalifah is an open plain sheltered by parched hills with sparse growth of thorn bushes. The pilgrims spend

> a night under the open sky of the Roofless Mosque, the Sacred Grove, *Al Mush'ar al-Haram*. On the morning of the tenth, the pilgrims return to spend three days in Muna. During this second stay in Muna, an animal is sacrificed and the ritual of 'Stoning the Devil' takes place. Three small pebbles are thrown at each of the three masonry pillars marking the different spots where the Devil tried to tempt Prophet Abraham; a gesture that symbolizes the pilgrims' intention to cast out the 'evil within'. Once these rites are performed the pilgrims conclude their Hajj by removing their *ihram* and cutting their hair (129-130).

Sardar recalls how the most formidable enemy of the Hajj Research Centre was the Bin Laden group. He notes that the Bin Laden family originally came from Hadramawt in Southern Yemen and that it had developed a special relationship with the Royal Family. The patriarch Mohammad bin Laden had established his business in the 1930s, especially building palaces and grand residential properties for the Saudi monarchs. Consequently, the Bin Laden group was given the sole contract not merely to renovate the Sacred Mosque in Mecca but to undertake all construction work of a religious nature in Saudi Arabia. Sardar laments how the Bin Laden group constantly demolished areas against the advice of the Centre.

Sardar himself performed five Hajjs. On the last occasion rather than walking everywhere he took the pilgrim bus, like the ordinary present-day pilgrim. He recalls how in the area where the Devils are stoned he was nearly crushed to death when a wave of pilgrims came toppling down. He speaks of coughing and choking on exhaust fumes and of being drenched with DDT from one of the numerous overhead helicopters. He recalls how when he was going round the Kaa'ba he "was constantly harassed, shooed and beaten with a long stick by the religious police inside the Sacred Mosque" (134). He also recalls the profound sense of revulsion that came over him when, looking out beyond the Kaa'ba he saw a brand-new palace overshadowing the Kaa'ba. Realising that the time has come for him to leave Mecca, he comments,

> I had made Hajj and now, here, this moment was anti-Hajj… What I witnessed was not merely a physical assault on cultural tradition. It was an ideological onslaught on its spiritual and philosophical richness" (134).

Chapter 8. Leaving Saudi Arabia

Sardar describes the long arduous process involved in obtaining an exit visa to leave Saudi Arabia. In requesting that his application he is met with the response "*Inshallah*" ("God willing"): "In the end the phrase merely implies that everything takes time because everything bears such an immense philosophical burden, too much almost for humankind to manage" (137).

He comments on the way in which Saudis have made waiting into an art form:

> *Choia* is undoubtedly the most common word, and gesture, in the Saudi idiom. It has something to do with the Bedouin notion of time. Throughout their history, it is said, the Bedouins had nothing and owned nothing; but they had plenty of time. They enjoyed hanging around, waiting, not rushing to do anything in particular. So, waiting has become an essential ingredient of all Saudi life… Saudis never give a precise time for anything. When someone says that *Inshallah, bukra*, he will visit you, he could possibly mean tomorrow, the day after, in a few days or sometime in the near future, or any time before eternity. Similarly, rendezvous times are never given in relation to hours or their divisions but in relation to prayer times, the five daily prayers describing arcs of time between and after. Bad Zuhr, after the midday prayer, could mean any time after midday and before sunset… (143-144).

Sardar also gives a potted summary of Wahhabism:

- The state creed of Saudi Arabia.
- A revivalist movement founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (b. 1703 in Najd).
    - Brought up in the strictest of the four Islamic schools, the Hanbali sect.
    - Called for a return to Qur'an and Sunnah.
    - Rejected various traditional practices:
        - Celebrating birthday of Muhammad.
        - Visiting graves and shrines of saints and divines.
- Developed by political scientist Ibn Taymiyya (13th century)
    - Sought to ban plurality of interpretations, seeing dissension among Muslims as their main weakness.
    - No place in Islam for theology and philosophy; only Qur'an and Sunnah.
    - The Qur'an must be interpreted literally.
- "The history and culture of Muslim civilization, in all its greatness, complexity and plurality, is totally irrelevant; indeed, it is rejected as deviancy and degeneration. Hardly surprising then that Saudis had no feelings for the cultural property and sacred topology of Mecca" (145).
- Outside the Islam of Wahhabism stand not only non-Muslims but all Muslims who have not given their allegiance to Wahhabism.
- The *dias* (preachers) of Wahhabism teach that any alliance with unbelievers is itself unbelief: "that one should not just refrain from associating or making friends with them, but should also shun their employment, advice, emulation, and try to avoid conviviality and affability towards them" (146).
- "The distinctive difference of women's position has to be emphasized at every juncture" (146). So while all Saudis dress ini crisply ironed white *toupes* and *jallabiyahs*, reflecting the sun, women must, by law, be covered from head to toe in black shrouds, absorbing all the heat. Only in the precincts of the Sacred Mosque is it required for the face of Muslim women to be uncovered.
- In 1979 the Sacred Mosque was flooded and the rebels who had forcibly occupied it were drowned, even though the chief scholar and the Mufti of Saudi Arabia, who ordered this action, expressed his total agreement with the thesis of the rebels, namely that a true Wahhabi state should not associated with unbelievers, not allow the "heresies" of the Shias to go unchallenged, not allow more than one interpretation of Islam, under any circumstances, forbid images of any kind, including television and film, and oppose the fetishism of money.

Sardar's assessment of Wahhabism is as follows:

> By radically denying the complexity and diversity of Islamic history, over time and vast areas of the world, and rejecting diverse, pluralistic interpretations of Islam, Wahhabism has stripped Islam of all its ethical and moral content and reduced it to an arid list of dos and don'ts. To insist that anything that cannot be found in a literal reading of the sources and lore of early Muslims is *kufr* – outside the domain of Islam – and to enforce this comprehensive vision with brute force and severe social pressure for complete conformity spells totalitarianism (149).

He also discerns that if everything is *a priori* given then the intellect, human intelligence, becomes "an irrelevant encumbrance since everything could be reduced to a simple comply/not comply formula derived from the thought of dead bearded men" (151). Further, the Wahhabi assumption that ethics and morality reached their

apex and, indeed, end point, with the Companions of the Prophet is a negation of "the very idea of evolution in human thought and morality" and thereby sets "Muslim civilization on a fixed course to perpetual decline" (151).

Chapter 9. The Heavenly Revolution
Following his return from Saudi Arabia Sardar became all the more determined to work for a genuine Islamic revival. He admits that, like other Muslims, he pinned his hopes on Iran. In 1972 Sardar was President of the London Islamic Circle. The young Muslims involved in this organization "rejected the Islamized Nationalist and Socialist paradise Qaddafi offered" (158), while making it clear the future direction of Islam was not in the direction of the West.

Sardar recalls dialogue with his friend Siddiqui. Sardar expressed his viewpoint that iw as not "possible to repair or restore the social order in Muslim societies" since these were typically beyond repair. Rather there was a "need to conceive and create alternative social and political orders, fundamentally different from the existing ones" (159). Sardar and Siddiqui agreed that to generate viable alternatives they needed to develop a greater knowledge of Islam.

Sardar was impressed with Siddiqui's distinction between the operational knowledge and non-operational knowledge of Muslims, the first being "one of western sciences – social, physical and technological – acquired either in the West or in western-type educational establishments" and the second being knowledge of Islam. Siddiqui claimed, "No operational and functional social order of Islam either exists in its entirety today or has existed in recent history" (159). Further, having realized "that the idea of State in Islam is fundamentally different from the idea of the modern nation-state" he recognized that it was now essential to develop a new Islamic political science. This led to the formation of the Muslim Institute for Research and Planning with Siddiqui as its first Director, generously funded by the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia.

Sardar traces developments in Iran, noting how by the close of the 1970s opposition against the political repression, economic inequality, American multinationals and the corruption of the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah had become widespread. The Shah responded with savage brutality, with the police massacring many hundreds of demonstrators in various protests. Meanwhile exiled Ayatollah Khomeini's international reputation was growing.

In the month of Muharram, when Shias commemorate the martyrdom of Iman Hussain, the grandson of Muhammad (massacred in the battle of Kerbala, 679), many millions of Iranians rose up against the government forcing the Shah to flee for good on 16 January 1979, with Ayatollah Khomeini returning, welcomed by millions of Iranians.

The world was now introduced to Islamic fundamentalism, with the word fundamentalism becoming the buzz-word. Sardar was sent to Iran by *Nature*, the British science journal, where he spoke with scientists, engineers, lecturers and philosophers, "all eager to build a new Islamic Iran on the basis of equity and justice" (164). In the streets people were shouting the slogan *Azaadi, Estegaal, Jomhouriyeh Islaami* (Freedom, Independence, Islamic Republic). "After so many failures, setbacks

and false starts, Muslims looked towards Iran as their first potential success story" (165).

Yet Sardar had his concerns. The overemphasis on the Shia nature of the revolution troubled him, with everyone he spoke with insisting the revolution was not merely Islamic but Shia. It was openly averred that Sunnis could not produce such a revolution. At this point Sardar found himself philosophically at odds with his friend Siddiqui. But Sardar's doubts about the revolution became serious when Iranian students occupied the American Embassy in Tehran, taking most of its staff hostage, though Siddiqui condoned this action. Though a Sunni himself he became obsessed with Shia political thought and, when Ayatollah Khomeini was declared to be *Vilayayt-I-Faqih*, the earthly shadow of the Twelfth Shia Imam who was in occultation, Siddiqui insisted he was not merely the absolute leader of the Iranian revolution but, indeed, of the entire Muslim world.

In his obsession Siddiqui was prepared to sanction the "elimination" of all Islamic leaders opposed to the Iranian revolution as counter-revolutionaries. Further, anyone who disagreed with him was now deemed to be a counter-revolutionary because of their implicit opposition to the "Islamic" revolution. Sardar retorted, "There is nothing Islamic about the Iranian revolution" and argued that to treat it as such is to make "the fatal mistake of treating Islam and the Muslim world as a monolithic whole, or, worse still, claiming divine rights for themselves". When he accused Siddiqui as being worse than Stalin by theorizing "justifications for turning Islamic revival into a single, all-purpose, uncompromising ideology" (168) he was told to get out and that if he ever came back Siddiqui would have his legs broken.

Sardar decided to go back to Iran in a last-ditch effort to convince himself that Siddiqui was totally wrong. When he arrived at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport on May 4 1980 he was roughly treated and found himself being accused of being a spy for not having a visa, though he explained he wasn't able to collect his visa the day before simply because the Iranian Embassy in London was under siege. When Sardar insisted he was not a spy he was head-butted by a bearded revolutionary guard, then hauled off to another building where he was further interrogated. When asked who had invited him to come to Iran he answered Dr. Ali Berzagar, the Deputy Minister of Higher Education, stating that the was a personal friend. His interrogator's expression then changed and he asked Sardar how long he had known him. He then demanded that Sardar tell him everything Berzagar had said to him. The interrogator was not interested in Sardar's answer demanding that he tell what Berzagar had said to him about the Iranian revolution and the students following the Imam. Sardar answered that Berzagar had not said anything about the Imam and had only expressed his confidence that the revolution "would infuse human values and the principles of Islam into Iranian science and technology policy" (174).

Sardar asked if he could ring Berzagar. He was allowed to do so but when he rang the home and received no reply from him or his other friend he was informed why they were not at home:

> Because they are all counter-revolutionaries. Ali Berzagar is not a minister any more. He has been charged with counter-revolutionary activities. He questioned the line of the Imam followed by the students and revolutionary guards. All your friends are trying to undermine our revolution. We will teach them all a good lesson" (174-175).

Gripped with terror Sardar now finds himself being threatened as a counter-revolutionary. As he sat alone in a windowless room he reflected:

> This revolution was not following the 'Road to Medina'. When the Prophet Muhammad returned to Mecca, after years of exile in Medina, he forgave all those who opposed his 'revolution'. In contrast, Ayatollah Khomeini went on a revenge spree (175).

The interrogator returned with a middle-ranking religious scholar, respectfully introduced by the interrogator as Hojjat-al-Islam, "the proof of Islam" (176). He finds himself now under fresh interrogation and facing fresh accusations. He is asked what he thinks about Bani Sadr and expresses his view that he is well qualified to be president of Iran and that he is Imam Khomeini's student, only to be told that Bani Sadr's days are numbered. He is forced to confess that he is opposed to a bloody revolution and that he does not like the Imam. He is told that he is a confused man and as such dangerous and that he must return to Britain, otherwise he would "end up providing support for the counter-revolutionary forces" (179). Back at the airport a full-bearded revolutionary guard vigourous kicked him and pressed a gun beneath his left earlobe, saying, "You, spy! Get on the plane", spinning him round, pushing him forward and marching him right up to the plane and staring at him with disgust as he boarded the plane.

Chapter 10. The *Inquiry* Years

Following Muhammad, Sardar compares the *ummah*, the international community of Muslims, to a human body and compares, in a manner reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 12, the way in which, "when one part is ill, the whole body suffers", here thinking of his recent distasteful experiences of Islam in Saudi Arabia and Iran.

In January 1984 Sardar was visited by yet another two bearded men, including an old FOSIS friend, Muhammad Iqbal Asaria. Acknowledging that the Iranian revolution had turned out to be a nightware and that "the Islamization show will lead us into a new cul-de-sac" he invited Sardar to be the editor of a new "intellectual monthly magazine devoted to systematic, critical thinking about Islam and the plight of the *umma*h." This was to be financed by a liberal Iranian wing. Sardar agreed provided he chose who wrote for the magazine and had nothing to do with the Iranians himself.

Soon afterwards Sardar is also invited to fly back to Jeddah by the Secretary-General of the World Muslim League (Rabita Alam Islami) to prepare a ten-year plan for the kind of work Rabita should be doing.

Sardar observes that the 1980s was characterized by a plethora of big Muslim conferences on every conceivable subject in every Muslim capital, but all connected by the buzz word "Islamization": "For Muslims the *ummah* was the focus and Islamization the programme" (194). He observes, "Each conference, no matter what the subject, resolved itself into an amorphous plaint about the state and fate of the *ummah*… All conferences signally failed to produce practical programmes for solving the malaise of the *ummah*" (193).

Sardar acknowledges the incomparable energy expended on defining and explaining the concept of the *ummah* by the American Palestinian scholar Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, a former governor of Galilee and a towering presence on the Islamic intellectual scene in the 1970s and 1980s. Al-Faruqi maintained that all members of the *ummah*, regardless of the ethnicities or particular communities they represent, are bound, by

their commitment to Islam, to a specific Islamic social order. He also "argued that the divisions within the *ummah*, particularly between Arab and Muslim communities, were created by the West" (195). He insisted that Islam, being a universal religion, was set unequivocally against nationalism and blamed Christian arabs such as Michel Aflaq, the founder of the Ba'ath Party, for being particularly responsible for spreading "the disease of Arab nationalism" (195).

In 1977 Sardar attended the First Conference on Muslim Education in Mecca. A number of Islamic scholars argued "that the essence of the conflict between Islam and the West was not merely historical and political but also metaphysical and spiritual" (196). They maintained that the ideas and concepts that controlled and directed all branches of knowledge in the liberal West were entirely antagonistic to the spirit of Islam:

> Natural sciences are conceived as antithetical to nature, which can be twisted and tortured in the name of progress. Islam, on the other hand, does not encourage confrontation between man and nature. It teaches man to be 'natural' and thus work in harmony with nature. Similarly, social sciences have grown in the West as disciplines which demand that man should not believe in any predetermined code for a society but accept the principle that society is a continually evolving and changing phenomenon. There is nothing permanent or unchanging about human nature. Thus, values go on changing. Islam teaches that moral values do not change; hence Truth, Goodness, Righteousness, Mercy are constant factors. A society may be 'primitive', 'traditional' or 'underdeveloped' in relation to the modern world, but could have a highly developed sense of values. So every sphere of secular knowledge is in conflict with Islamic assumptions and ideas (196).

At this conference Al-Faruqi presented his theory of salvation, arguing that the Muslim conflict was not with western civilization as such but "with the kind of personality and 'mind' it represents," (197) a secularist mind and personality found not only in the West but also in the *ummah* itself. Consequently, the only hope for the *ummah* lay in reforming the Islamic educational system, removing and abolishing for ever the bifurcation of Islamic education into an Islamic and secular system. Al-Faruqi presented the challenge of recasting "the whole legacy of human knowledge from the standpoint of Islam" which meant Islamizing the disciplines and producing university level textbooks.

Sardar personally challenged Al-Faruqi for producing a stillborn baby, in that his dualistic perception of knowledge (divided into secular and Islamic segments) presupposed and even, to some extent, accepted the very secularization he sought ultimately to eradicate. Further, Sardar challenged Al-Faruqi's view that there was no difference in Islamic thought between Truth and Knowledge. His argument was that if "God is Truth, then Truth cannot be many" (198) and that this necessarily means Knowledge is Truth. Sardar retorted that those who defined Knowledge ended up defining Truth and thus playing God. He also pointed out that suppression of Knowledge and censorship were inevitable consequences since there will always be Muslims who will suppress those Truths that they don't think serve the *ummah* well.

When Al-Faruqi reiterated his Islamization philosophy Sardar proposed that "it was not Islam that had to be made relevant to modern knowledge, but modern knowledge that had to be made relevant to Islam" (198).

When Al-Faruqi proceeded to treat the Islamization of disciplines in a naïve fashion, as if they were made in heaven and a priori given, Sardar pointed out that disciplines are rather "born within the matrix of a particular worldview and are always hierarchically subordinated to that worldview." For example, anthropology as a discipline is "a particular manifestation of how the western worldview perceives reality and how western civilization sees its problems." So anthropology was "developed specifically with the purpose of studying the Other, non-western, societies in order to manage and control them." Consquently, anthropology has "no real meaning for non-western societies." Therefore, "Muslims do not need to Islamize the disciplines, whatever that means; but to develop their own disciplines based on their own cultural context and geared to solving their own problems" (200).

Sardar pointed out to Al-Faruqi

> that different vehicles need different kinds of wheels. You can't land a plane on bicycle wheels. And a bullock cart won't function properly with tractor wheels. Civilizations are like vehicles. They need appropriate wheels – their own disciplines – to move forward. Islamizing disciplines already infused with a materialistic metaphysics and western, secularist ethics is tantamount to a cosmetic episteomological face-lift and nothing more. At best, it would perpetuate the dichotomy of secular and Islamic knowledge that you are so keen to transcend (200-201).

Sardar reports that two years after this, Al-Faruqi gathered Arab scholars and businessmen together in Lugarno, Switzerland. The gathering declared that "the evil in the system is located in the new universities of the Muslim world which have been adopted after the western model" and that this "'evil' can only be eradicated by undertaking a project for 'reshaping all the disciplines of modernity from an Islamic point of view'". Some Saudi businessmen provided $25 million to establish IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought (http://www.iiit.org/).

In 1982, Al-Faruqi published *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Workplan*. Sardar regards this as a mediocre work. He does commend this comment by Al-Faruqi:

> In the minds of people everywhere the Muslim world is the 'sick man' of the world; and the whole world is led to think that at the root of all these evils stands the religion of Islam. The fact that the *ummah* counts over a billion, that its territories are the vastest and richest, that its potential in human, material and geo-political resources is the greatest, and finally that its faith – Islam – is an integral, beneficial, world-affirming and realistic religion, makes the defeat, the humiliation and the misrepresentation of Muslims all the more intolerable (202).

However, he finds Al-Faruqi's project akin to a slot machine: "put in this or that coin, turn the handle, utter your pieties, and hey presto collect your Islamized winnings!" (203). Sardar found himself being shunned because of his vocal criticism of Islamization.

Sardar goes on to describe the team that worked with him on the magazine, *Inquiry*. It included Merryl Wyn Davies, a Welshwoman who at an earlier stage had rung Sardar to use him as a sounding board when she was considering converting to Islam. Sardar comments,

> As a Muslim, it is my duty to encourage people to convert. But my experiences with English and American converts to Sufism had given me a particular aversion to converts. Most of the converts I knew tended to be more Muslim than the Muslims

> themselves; each one seemed to have a strong puritanical and decidedly unsavoury trait" (206).

Sardar and fellow intellectuals dubbed themselves *Ijmalis* (*jml* connotes both beauty and wholeness). They agreed their emphasis was on "diverse ways of knowing as well as the interconnectedness of all things" (209). In particular:

> All forms of knowledge are interconnected and organically related by the ever-present spirit of Qur'anic revelation. Thus, Islam does not only make the pursuit of knowledge obligatory but also connects it with the unique Islamic notion of worship: *ilm*, the term for knowledge, is a form of *ibadah* (worship). So, the pursuit of scientific knowledge, social sciences and humanities are also forms of worship – and should be just as important for any Muslim society as daily prayer and fasting during the month of Ramadan. Indeed, without due emphasis to all varieties of knowledge, worship remains incomplete. But knowledge is not just connected to worship, it is also connected to every other Qur'anic value such as *khalifah* (the idea that people are trustees and stewards of the earth), *adl* (social justice), and *istislah* (public interest) (209-210).

Sardar recalls the shock experienced when on May 1986 an armed assailant, an Afro-American convert to Islam with a personal grudge, entered Al-Faruqi's residence in Pennsylvania, stabbed his wife and left her bleeding to death on the kitchen floor, then stabbed Al-Faruqi's pregnant daughter and then fatally stabbed Al-Faruqi himself (one daughter survived, having hidden in a closet). This all served to increase respect for Al-Faruqi's ideas concerning Islamization. Further, *Inquiry* was forced to come to an end when Sardar made critical remarks against Ja'far as-Sadiq, the sixth of the twelve Imams of the Shia, martyred in 765.

Chapter 11. The Laws of Heaven

In the 1980s Sardar observed that "across the Muslim world all future prospects were increasingly summed up in a single all-embracing ready-made off-the-shelf answer: Shariah" (216), the path shown in the Qur'an and through the Traditions of Muhammad.

This word literally connotes "the path or the road leading to water", though for Muslims it means "the path that leads to God and thus to paradise" (216). But he and his fellow "Ijmalis" rejected a great deal of the Shariah: "such as its oppressive treatment of women and minorities, its emphasis on extreme punishments, and its fixation with ossified jurisprudence" (217). They were particularly concerned with the way Shariah had come to symbolize Islam as such: "for many Muslims, Islam is the Shariah and the Shariah is Islam" (217).

Sardar speaks of this as a perversion of the basic principles of Islam. Rather, Shariah, as it exists today, and the spirit of Islam, are two very distinct things.

In 1985 Sardar went as an adviser on a World Muslim League mission to Pakistan, where he was welcomed by President Zia-ul-Haq. He spoke of how he was introducing Shariah in Pakistan, explaining, "It is the demand of the people. And I must bow to their wishes. Islam is a total system and it must be imposed on society in its totality" (219).

Sardar recalls how Zia-ul-Haq went on to describe in great detail how law-breakers would be lashed, thieves have their hands cut off 'humanely' and adulterers be

stoned. In the evening the President hosted a dinner in the honour of Sardar and his colleagues. At one point the President turned to Sardar and told him, with an amused expression, that in Sardar's book *Islamic Futures* he had described him as a deranged dictator, and then read from the offending passage.

In Islamabad Sardar spoke with Maulana Sami-ul-Haq, the principal of one of the oldest Deobandi seminaries in Pakistan. He related how his students came "to learn a pure vision of Islam", from a curriculum focusing on the Qur'an and the Shariah. He added, "We teach an undiluted, chaste version of the Shariah" (222), largely based on rote learning, memorization of the Qur'an, memorization of select portions of the *hadith* and of the legal opinions and rulings of 8th century, classical jurists.

He recoiled with horror when Sardar asked if they studied philosophy, insisting they taught pure Shariah, which also had no room for Sufi thought nor Shia thought, regarded as a deviation from Islam.

One of the students, in his twenties, told Sardar that Shias are not Muslim and do not belong in a truly Islamic republic. He was asked why, if he was a Muslim, he did not wear a beard. Sardar replied it was not necessary for a Muslim to wear a beard. The student retorted that this is required by the Sunnah and that anyone who does not follow the Sunnah is not a Muslim. Sardar answered, "So why aren't you riding a camel?" To the confused student Sardar explained, "It's Sunnah to ride a camel. The Prophet spent a great deal of his life on the back of a camel." The student pointed out that today we have cars and buses. Sardar pointed out that if there had been razor blades in Muhammad's day he might well have used one. Sardar then noted the student was wearing *surma*, black lining under the eyes. The student responded, "It is Sunnah." Sardar pointed out that it the applicant contains lead and could damage the student's eyes and poison him. When Sardar tried to explain that many things Muhammad did were a product of his times and not essential to Sunnah the student shouted angrily, "Who are you to say what is and what is not the Sunnah? You don't even have a beard" (224).

Sardar left, his mind filled with images of this "medieval perception of Divine Law", reflecting that:

> Far from being a 'seat of learning', *madrasah* Haqqania was a hatchery of hate. It was producing not men of education and learning, but narrow-minded bigots absolutely certain their way was the only right way. How long before they reach critical mass and start fighting with all who disagree with them...How long before they declare war on the Shia? How long before they turn Pakistan into their hellish version of paradise? The total lack of humour, the conspicuous absence of the joy of life so evident in the madrassah, convinced me the students had to be taken seriously (224).

Sardar recalls his conversation with Rustum, a barber in Rawalpindi. The conversation turned to Shariah. Rustum asked:

> What would I, a barber, do if the bearded ones became the masters of our society? What I want is a decent living, proper education for my children, a proper roof over my head. What their Shariah will give me is public floggings, beheadings, compulsory beards and lock my poor long-suffering wife and daughter behind purdah (228).

But the barber denied he was against Shariah, only that of the bearded ones:

> For their Shariah knows nothing of justice and mercy, forgiveness and generosity. In the name of Shariah, they want to ban everything. Cinema. Music. Television. It is this joyless Shariah that promotes fear and hatred that I am against (229).

Next, in Beijing, Sardar discovered that there are 60 million Muslims in China (with over 50 mosques in Beijing alone), that most Chinese Muslims spoke fluent Arabic and that the mainstream Muslims called themselves *gedimu*, a literal translation of Arabic *al qadim*, "the ancient." In China it is the Sunni Hanafi School of Law which is the oldest and most established Islamic tradition. So for most of the *gedimu* Shariah is of paramount importance. However, at the conference Sardar attended, it was the *menhuan* (Sufi orders) who rightly claimed to be largely responsible for preserving Chinese Islam during the Cultural Revolution.

Sardar provides a brief outline of the history of Islam in China and observes that most Chinese Muslims are of Hui nationality, many being descendants of merchants and scholars who first came from Arabia and Persia during the 9th and 10th centuries.

While in China a Chinese woman befriended him with intent that he ask her to marry him. When he realized this he told her he was already married. She responded, "But the Shariah allows Muslim men to take more than one wife" (237). He replied that he didn't believe that part of the Shariah. She was shocked, voicing her view that it was impossible to be a true Muslim without accepting the Shariah. He explained it was not necessary to believe every bit of the Shariah to be a Muslim. To her it seemed he only believed those bits that served his purpose. Sardar reflects:

> Most Muslims consider the Shariah to be divine. But there is nothing divine about the Shariah… The only thing that can legitimately be described as divine in Islam is the Qur'an. The Shariah is a human construction; an attempt to understand the divine will in a particular context – and that context happens to be eight-century Muslim society. We need to understand the Shariah in our own context; and reconstruct if from first principles (238).

As Sardar flew back to Islamabad from China he considered

> the intractable hold the Shariah had on the Muslim consciousness. Even the Chinese Muslim community, so isolated and cut off from the mainstream of the Muslim world, had an unbridled passion for the Shariah. It was the main vehicle of their Muslim identity; it is precisely what makes them – the Chinese Muslims as well as Muslims all over the world – different from all others (240-241).

A female Muslim pointed out to Sardar that the Shariah "was formulated by jurists, all of them male, during the Abbasid period (749-1258), a time in history well known for its sexism and misogyny" (242). In criminal justice the Shariah obviously has a male bias, for example, the notorious "two-for-one formula" in relation to testimonies. But the female Muslim observed that with respect to adultery the Qur'an privileges the testimony of the wife over that of the husband. For example, if a husband charges his wife with adultery and he cannot produce four witnesses to the act of penetration then he cannot serve as his own witness. The Qur'an permits the wife to testify on her own behalf and if she insists on her innocence then the husband has no further legal recourse. Yet, the classical jurists did not, on this basis, decide that men should testify in fours nor that a woman's word outranks that of the man's. She also pointed out that stoning to death is an aberrant law since the Qur'an does not sanction stoning to death for *any* crime.

However, any call to reform the Shariah is deemed to be an attack on Islam. She commented:

> To change the Shariah we have to stand up to powerfully entrenched clerics and interpretive communities who will put up a deafening roar against such exercise on the grounds that it is un-Islamic or even anti-Islamic (243).

She also observed that the Shariah and the veiling of women had "become the quintessential symbols of Shariah" and that "the veneration of symbols can keep people from thinking about what the symbols actually symbolize" (243).

Sardar became very depressed when he reread literature on Islamization, and frightening remarks made by Al-Faruqi that the Islamic state is totalistic, with Shariah covering every field and every action, including all activities in all times and places.

Parvez Manzoor helped Sardar to understand the significance of the term Shariah: "Muslim consciousness conceives of the Shariah in three complementary ways: as truth, method and history… Shariah perceives the world as *history* rather than *cosmos*, morality as an *event* rather than an *idea*, and faith as *acting* the Will of God rather than *knowing* His Essence" (245). The Shariah is "the ethics of action", demanding "doing right" rather than "being good". Consequently, the Shariah is morality and ethics rather than law, though the Muslim mind does not distinguish between ethics and law. However, in Islamic history law has become unethical and truth has become equated with method.

For almost 150 years after Muhammad's death, there was no Shariah, merely an "accumulated ensemble of the exercise of 'learning' and 'understanding'" (245), largely constituting personal, free and somewhat subjective knowledge. During the early Abbasid period there was the first act of objectification and reification when this accumulated knowledge was confused with history, with history becoming a substitute for religious inquiry and learning. A set of mechanisms, or disciplines, for understanding the Word of God followed, resulting, by the 13th century in the mechanism known as *fiqh*, "the jurisprudence of Islam", with the "method" of the Shariah now being indistinguishable from the "truth" of Islam.

Since this is "a theoretically founded mechanism for traditional authoritarianism" it is "[small] wonder that Islamic theology and law have developed little since then" (246). Manzoor also commented that

> Islamic fundamentalism is a modern heresy. It has no historical precedent; it is not based on a classical religious narrative or Muslim tradition. It is a recently concocted dogma. And what makes it modern is the notion of the State. There is no notion of a nation-state, based on geographical boundaries, in classical Islam as such (246-247).

But now the idea of "state" has become fundamental to the vision of Islam by Islamic fundamentalists, who all zealously pursue the ideal of an Islamic state. So:

> From a God-centered way of life and thought, of knowledge and action, Islam is thus transformed into a totalistic, totalitarian, theocratic world order that submits every human situation to the arbitration of the state. So society and state becomes one and politics disappear. Cultural and social spaces are totally homogenized, everything is bulldozed into monotonous uniformity, and that's why the end product so often mirrors fascism (247).

Dictators and tyrants all over the Muslim world love Shariah because it serves as an instrument for creating the totalitarian order.

Sardar now reached a firm conclusion: "Without reforming the Shariah, which actually amounts to reformulating Islam itself, a humane earthly paradise will always elude Muslim societies" (247).

Chapter 12. The Delights of Secularism

The idea that Islam needed a Reformation was pooh-poohed by Sardar's colleague Merryl Davies. She objected

> that arguments for an Islamic Reformation were based on a crude historic parallel: Islam was now it its fifteenth century, and this was exactly the point in Christianity's history when it underwent its Reformation. QED: Islam was due to be reformed (249).

As Sardar ponders possible parallels he maintains that while Europe needed reason this is not the case with Islam, which has always considered reason to be the equal and necessary partner of faith. However, he recognizes that the Islamic problem is not so much a matter of recognizing the importance of reason, but exercising it.

Sardar also observes that the Reformation saw the transfer of authority from Church to State, from Popes to princes and thus initiated the process of secularization:

> This began with the theological struggle for reform of religion, and it culminated in the secular state being seen as the only authority that could guarantee liberty of conscience and diversity of religious belief. The Reformation was the process by which the quest for liberty of conscience, the freedom to believe as personal faith and reason dictated, became the bedrock of all civil liberties. It began with Martin Luther's 'Here I stand. I can do no other,' and it culminated with Thomas Jefferson's resounding conclusion that the State can never settle matters of conscience for the citizen, too much blood having been squandered in the attempt, so Church and State must be forever sundered. Secularisation once begun remained a continuing and expanding transfer of power (250).

Sardar contends that secularism also has its own Muslim antecedents. While "it seems almost a contradiction to speak of Islamic secularism" it "has a strong presence in Islamic history" (251). So the Umayyad Empire, which arose only fifty years after Muhammad's death and the Abbasid Empire, conventionally dubbed the 'Golden Age', "were religious only in a symbolic sense. The Caliphs had no spiritual power; that rested largely with the religious scholars" (251). He also insists, "With the sole exception of the Fatimid Empire, which was based on Ismaili theology, the states that followed were even more secularized" (251).

In the 10th century the "Second Master" (after Aristotle), Al-Farabi wrote *On the Perfect State*, "the first serious attempt in Islam to harmonize Greek political thought with Islamic ideals", seeing the perfect state as "a universal, secular state" (252). Fellow Mutazilites (literally, "Separatists", e.g. Al-Kindi, Wasil bin Ata, Amir ibn Ubayad, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd), like Al-Farabi "denounced strict, Shariah-based faith and worked to transform Islam into a more humanistic religion" (252). The opposing Asharite school, founded by Abu Hasan al-Ashari and included Al-Ghazali, Fakhr al-Din Razi and Ibn Khaldun. It "rejected the idea that human reason alone can discern morality and argued that it was beyond human capability to understand the unique

nature and characteristics of God" (253). The 7th to 14th centuries centered around the gigantic struggle between the Mutazilites and the Asharites: "It was the clear-cut victory of the Asharites that sealed the fate of secular humanism in Islam; and hurled Muslim civilization on its present trajectory" (254).

Sardar confesses that during his twenties and thirties he was a firm supporter of the Asharite position. But he had a discussion with Iftikar Malik, an advocate for secularism. Sardar asked,

> What can secularism offer Islamic societies? Those who long for a secular paradise understand neither religion nor politics. Muhammad Iqbal was right when he said: "If religion is separated from politics you are left with the terror of Genghis Khan" (255).

Malik retorted that both Iqbal and Sardar were wrong: "Secularism is the only antidote to the vicious literalism, supported by a spiritless and meaningless ritualism that's taken hold of the Muslim mind" (255).

Malik advocated liberal secularism, recognizing that dogmatic secularism was also problematic, as evidenced by the Ba'athists in Syria and Iraq and authoritarian secularist parties such as the National Liberation Front in Algeria and the Constitutional Party in Tunisia.

Malik argued for secularism because, he believed, it "provided an umbrella for pluralism to flower, for dissent to be tolerated, for democracy to flourish in Muslim societies" (255-256).

This viewpoint vexed Sardar since he saw it as the very function of religion in general and of Islam, in particular, "to produce balanced individuals who can integrate the two – the rights of God and the rights of people." Also, against Malik he saw the opposite of religious fanaticism and chauvinism not as secularism but as religious tolerance and pluralism. In addition, he considered that secularism in Muslim societies had acted as a force for exclusion not inclusion, excluding all who distanced themselves from modernity, the vast majority of traditional Muslims. Consequently, secularism reduced traditional Islam to servant status.

Malik responded that he was not arguing for secularism at the expense of religion "but as a method for reinterpreting and revisiting religion itself" (256). But Sardar found it difficult to see how the idea of secularism could be separated from its European history. Malik countered by asking why there could be only one interpretation of secularism, especially as there had been earlier precedents in Muslim history and in Indian history. Malik expressed the hope that Muslim secularism in Turkey would be the wave of the future.

Some months after this Sardar was in Turkey to visit a professor of political science at a university only to be stopped by a tank with its gun leveled at his chest and being told no visitors were allowed. The next day, by pretending to be a student, he got to see the professor who had only recently been released from prison for "attacking the secular principles of the State" by "suggesting female students who wanted to wear the scarf – for religious or other reasons – should be allowed to do so" (259). The professor explained to Sardar, "A secular society does not provide its citizens with absolute freedom but confines it within the boundaries of its own absolutes. The scarf represents a symbolic violation of these absolutes" (259).

The professor saw Turkish secularism as "a product of our inferiority complex", not invented by Ataturk, as many supposed, but having its roots in the Ottoman Empire. It was following defeats at the hands of European powers in 1699 and 1718 that the intellectual superiority of western civilization became accepted with Westernization commencing in the Ottoman Palaces. Later, Ataturk presented secularism as a theology of salvation. The professor didn't see the Kemalist secular revolution as any different from say the Islamic Revolution in Iran:

> It's the standard pattern: a charismatic leader heads the initial movement; once his regime is established, demands for greater radicalism and purism culminate in a reign of terror and virtue where the leader is transformed into a demigod and becomes sole arbitrator of what's "revolutionary" and what "counter-revolutionary" (261).

So Ataturk, saying that to destroy him was to destroy Turkey, "set out to destroy the old system with the same zeal the Mullahs used to dismantle the Shah's state" (262). A period of terror and reform was followed by the "Thermidor" (1924-1949), "the period when revolutionary reforms are solidified and turned into permanent fixtures" (262), with Islamic activity and thought banned. "Turkish secularism, like its European counterpart, didn't allow Muslim institutions to function independently of the government" (262), but after WW2 many politicians succeeded in establishing middle and secondary schools known as "Imam Hatib" schools, re-introducing the teaching of the Qur'an and Islamic traditions, history, law and philosophy, alongside modern science and ideas. After the 1980 military coup graduates of such schools were allowed to enter universities for higher education.

When Sardar expressed his fear that graduates of such schools would turn out to be dogmatic fundamentalists, the professor insisted they were taught not traditional, but classical Islam and were at ease with the modern world.

Later Sardar spent time with a likeable Turk, a former mayor, whose veneration for Ataturk mirrored that most Muslims have for Muhammad. He described himself as a secular Muslim who often read the Qur'an but, at the end of the day, regarded Islam as the opposite of Western civilization.

In the late 1980s Sardar frequently visited the OIC's (Organisation of Islamic Conference) International Research Institute for Islamic History (IRIIH) in Istanbul. Sardar's appreciation for the Ottoman Empire grew, a dynasty that had held power for 600 years and which had no strategy for using force against its people:

> They never forcefully converted or Turkified people in the conquered lands. And it would be totally wrong to say naked imperialism or linguistic, cultural or religious assimilation was ever their policy (271).

Sardar reflects that Muslims typically associate the Ottomans with the "decline" of Muslim civilization and notes that the conventional view is "that the Ottoman Empire reached its peak around 1600 and spent the next 300 years dwindling" (272). This is a false perception, for "science and learning were very much alive in the Ottoman Empire right up to the end of the eighteenth century, when it shifted towards learning and assimilating European thought through translation and adaptations" (272). The director of IRIIH argued that by "dehumanizing the Ottomans, the Kemalists also dehumanized Turkey" and he contended that

> Islam taught Europe virtually all it knew about science, philosophy and education. Starting with the basics, Islam taught Europe how to reason, how to differentiate between civilization and barbarism, and to understand the basic features of a civil society. Islam trained Europe in scholastic and philosophic method, and bequeathed it its characteristic institutional forum of learning: the university. Europe acquired wholesale the organization, structure and even the terminology of the Muslim educational system. Not only did Islam introduce Europe to the experimental method and demonstrate the importance of empirical research, it even had the foresight to work out most of the mathematical theory necessary for Copernicus to launch "his" revolution! Islam showed Europe the distinction between medicine and magic, drilled it in making surgical instruments and explained how to establish and run hospitals. And the Ottomans played an important part in all this (272-273).

The director argued that if Kemalists seriously wanted to develop liberal humanism then they should look into their own history rather than imitating an imitation.

Sardar's friend Parvez Manzoor encouraged him to use *zulm*, the Islamic concept of injustice, as the category with which to examine secularism. *Zulm* has at least four layers of meaning:

1. To do wrong, to treat wrongfully, or to deal unjustly.
2. Withholding what is rightfully due to someone or something; to commit *zulm* against persons or things, even against truth and trust, is not to accord them what is their due.
3. By extension, it also covers such things as tyranny, perversion, distortion and ignorance.
4. The wrong the Self commits against itself.

Manzoor advocated using a concept of *zulm* that would "develop a discourse of liberation simultaneously Islamic and universal", it being urged that this would stop the West seeing Islam as its opposite and vice versa: "What we Muslims had to do was to expose the *zulm* intrinsic in the concept of secularism, and not treat it as though it were inherently evil" (276). However, since secularism and modernity are inseparable, Muslims need to develop "a modernity that is defined by our own categories and shaped by our own history and tradition" (277).

Chapter 13. The Satanic Verses

In 1988 Sardar read *The Satanic Verses* and as he turned the pages he felt his anger rise:

> Halfway through all became clear. It felt as though Rushdie had plundered everything I hold dear and despoiled the inner sanctum of my identity. Every word was directed at me and I took everything personally. This is how, I remember thinking, it must feel to be raped. By the time I arrived back home, I was transfixed with anger, fear and hatred (279).

Sardar wondered why he had been so deeply upset by *The Satanic Verses*. He didn't object to Rushdie interrogating and severely criticizing Islam, even in fiction, something Sardar felt he had been doing himself for most of his life:

> What I, and most Muslims, took exception to was Rushdie's deliberate attempt to rewrite the life of Prophet Muhammad in an exceptionally abusive and obscene way… In the novel, Rushdie uses the abusive term 'Mahound', coined in the Middle Ages in Christendom to describe the Prophet as a devil (279).

Sardar points out how Rushdie makes it abundantly clear that his character Mahound is Muhammad. He explains that the passages of *The Satanic Verses* that caused most offence to Muslims relate to the wives of the Prophet Muhammad. Rushdie inferred that Muhammad's 'harem' in Medina was little more than a brothel. It was patently clear that Rushdie's purpose was

> not simply to present a biography of the Prophet Muhammad in a distorted and fictionalized form, but to abuse, mock, malign, throw contempt and score ideological points. The blasphemies in the novel were not accidental; they were the essential reason that the novel was written (281).

Sardar points out,

> The life of the Prophet Muhammad is the source of Muslim identity. Muslims do not merely emulate his character and personality and follow his sayings and actions: it is the Prophet Muhammad who provides them with the ultimate reason for being a Muslim. The Prophet and his personality define Islam; and every Muslim relates to him directly and personally. That's why I felt that every word, every jibe, every obscenity in The Satanic Verses was directed at me – personally. There was no way, I knew, this would or could go unchallenged… Not surprisingly, immediately after the publication of the novel, pandemonium broke out in Muslim circles (281).

Sardar found himself perplexed as to how to respond. On February 14, 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini issue his fatwa against Rushdie, making Sardar "redundant as an intellectual. Implicit in the fatwa is the proposition that Muslim thinkers are too feeble to defend their own beliefs" (282).

Now Rushdie appealed to the secular absolute of freedom of expression and the Ayatollah to the absolutes of Islamic Law. Now, for Muslims, it was guilt by association, group culpability. Sardar recalls how painful it was to watch Rushdie's friend, feminist novelist Fay Weldon, on public TV deliver words like knives driven directly into him, as she ridiculed Muslims in hate-speak that boiled down to pure racism. Eventually, Sardar decided to write a response, with colleague Merryl Davies entitled *Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair*. He did this in against a disturbing background, having discovered that for Muslim youth in Bradford, Manchester and East London the fatwa had become a source of pride, giving them "a perverse and real sense of power and identity" (287). Sardar wanted "to show Muslim youth that this sense of power was nothing but a mirage" (287), since the Ayatollah's fatwa, being based on Muslim imperialism, could only generate temporary power.

Sardar makes some penetrating remarks about Rushdie as a postmodern author:

> While postmodernists claim to be relativists, there is nothing relative when it comes to such absolutes of secularism as total freedom of expression. With its stress on the purity of art and the autonomy of culture as a whole, postmodernism has turned secular humanism into a sacred theology. Here the God-centered religiosity of traditional religions is replaced by literature which occupies the conventional place of God (290).

Sardar observes that the postmodern

> quest is for perpetual, continuous and meaningless (since there are no truths to be discovered) doubt, which is the basic foundation of the postmodern creed. Such a quest has frightening implications for personal identity; it can only produce more and more personal anxiety and insecurity (290).

In this respect, Sardar notes, both Rushdie and the Ayatollah were on the same ground. While Sardar was prepared to argue that no physical harm should come to Rushdie he saw it as impossible to forgive him since, as Rushdie himself said in *The Satanic Verses*, our "forgiveness [would] make possible the deepest and sweetest corruption of all, namely the idea that he [has done] nothing wrong" (291). But next Sardar found it extremely difficult to get his book published, demonstrating that freedom of expression is a one-way street:

> In the world of western secularism, freedom of expression belongs to those with secular power, or access and opportunity within the secular structures of power. That's the problem with secularism. As the pre-eminent truth and doctrine of the West, it renders insignificant and makes invisible all that is outside its purview, all the possibilities and potentials outside its framework of power. Secularism masks the will to power; and like all authoritarian ideologies, it nurtures homicidal tendencies (292).

Chapter 14. Multiculturalism, Then and Now

Sardar reflects that the Rushdie affair had a profound impact on Muslims causing them to abandon secularism as a means of reforming Islam. British Muslims were overwhelmed and "affronted to the core of their being by the tirades of intolerance, prejudice and ignorance" they were exposed to. Sardar protests:

> The fatwa mentality was generally and readily accepted as the entirety of what Islam meant and was about, leaving no space for any other kind of Muslim identity or outlook (294).

Many shell-shocked Muslims made a "journey back to Islam, seeking a refuge of sanity in their original identity" (295).

Sardar is visited by someone active in the Malaysian Islamic Study Group, a constituent of FOSIS, who worked as private secretary for "Brother (Sudara) Anwar", that is, gifted orator and intellectual Anwar Ibrahim, then Minister of Education for Malaysia, having been accelerated to that position by Mahathir Muhammad. When Sardar had been general secretary of FOSIS Anwar Ibrahim led the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM).

Anwar Ibrahim was passionate about pluralism, appreciating the truths and values of other faiths, cultures and civilizations without feeling any threat to his own identity as a Muslim. At one time in conversation with Sardar he reflected on the main characteristic of Muslim Spain, which during its 800 years involved experiments in *convivencia*, "live and let live, a harmonious and enriching way of living together" (298). He wanted to generate a similar culture in Malaysia, an inclusive Islamic society. Sardar was enlisted by Anwar to travel regularly to Malaysia to run "intellectual discourses" and become involved in a wide range of Malaysian institutions.

Sardar was impressed with Malaysian scholar, Professor Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas, a man with a towering intellect, famous for his resolution of the controversy concerning the dating of the Terengganu Stone providing evidence as to when Islam arrived in Malaysia. As a Syed the Professor claimed direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad. He taught that justice was "putting a thing in its proper place" (302).

Sardar hoped that Malaysian society might develop in a manner recalling Muslim Spain and reflects on the history of the latter. In 711 Muslims first landed on the Rock of

Tariq, an island on the southern tip of Spain named after their commanding general, Tariq Bin Ziad. Within decades virtually the whole Iberian Peninsula was part of the *ummah*. He observes:

> Once their rule was established Muslims demonstrated a tolerance towards the Christian and Jewish population unmatched in history (303).

Christians were allowed to keep their churches and monasteries; the Jews their synagogues:

> Members of both communities retained their personal possessions and regulated their life according to their own laws. The Visigoth system of taxes, with its manifold burdens, was replaced by a single tax in lieu of having to perform military service. Moreover, this tax was on a sliding scaled according to the ability to pay and professional status; and women, children, monks, invalids, the sick and slaves were exempt. For the most part, slaves were set free. Many sources indicate that living conditions actually improved for the bulk of the population (304).

When, after 800 years, Muslims were banished from Spain: "Multiculturalism and the intellectual excitement it made possible were expunged in favour of purity of the blood and monolithic orthodoxy of worship" (304).

Sardar next reflects on the way Malaysia had "developed a rich multicultural patchwork under the auspices of Islam" in past centuries. He also observes how the contemporary multicultural mix bore the legacy of European colonialism – Chinese imported by the British to run the tin mines, Tamils to work the rubber plantations, Sikhs as policemen and guards. But, in the process, "Malays were marginalized, restricted to traditional agriculture, even prevented from operating rubber smallholdings" (305).

This colonial pattern led to racial strife, yet the Malay majority extended full citizenship rights to the Chinese and Indians, something the colonial powers had never deemed necessary.

Sardar reflects on the way Sufi mysticism has deeply influenced the type of Islam found in Malaysia, making it unique in the Muslim world, "while in no way making Malays less scrupulous or punctilious in their adherence to Islam" (306). He compares this with the profound influence of mysticism on Spanish Islam, with one of the greatest Islamic mystics, Muhammad ibn Arabi, being born in Murcia in 1165. He notes that St Thomas Aquinas, Dante and other European philosophers and writers learned Greek philosophy not from the Greeks but through the commentaries and additons of Ibn Rushd, the 12th century polymath. Ibn Tuyafl, Ibn Rushd's patron, through his philosophical novel *The Living Son of the Awake*, influenced sects such as the Quakers and provided the model for Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. He also pays tribute to Ibn Hazm and the Jewish scholar Maimonides, born in Cordoba in 1135, whom Muslims did not regard as a "Jewish" scholar. He observes that Spain's Islamic mysticism profoundly influenced Sephardic (Spanish) Jewish scholars, e.g. Bahya ibn-Pakuda and Solomon ben Judah Ibn Gabirol.

Then in 1991 Iraq invaded Kuwait, overwhelming Sardar with a deep presentiment. His colleague, Merryl, upon the fall of the Berlin Wall, asked, "Now the Evil Empire's crumbled to dust, who or what will take its place?" She answered, "It will be us, Islam will be the next bogey, the new 'Evil Empire'" (311). Sardar observes,

> The West, especially the military-industrial complex, still needs an evil Other to affirm its identity; to confirm its own Self and keep its political economy operating. It'll return to its original demon Other (311).

Meanwhile Saddam Hussein played the Muslim card, "rallying brainless Mullahs and politically inept critics of the West to conferences in Baghdad", while "the vast majority of Muslims knew Saddam was the acme of a modern tyrant" (311). Muslims lacked any global arena "in which to engage with and discuss, let alone resolve by our own efforts, the problems of the *ummah*" (312).

With the onset of the Gulf War there was a palpable increase of anti-West and anti-Saudi sentiments in Malaysia, with the honour of Islam "somehow at the heart of the war" (312). Ziauddin Sardar told Muslims that they were trapped between two evils – the megalomaniac Saddam Hussein and the medieval Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "where foreign workers were treated as slaves and dissent was rewarded by torture" (313). He counseled Muslims to side with Saudi Arabia as being the lesser of the two evils.

Shortly after Sardar flew to Jeddah having been told the Saudi government wanted to give him $5 million to establish whatever intellectual institution he wanted. However, a stipulation was made:

> Intellectuals should speak freely. But sometimes, just sometimes, they shouldn't say what they think. For the greater good, for the sake of the Muslim *ummah*, they ought to listen occasionally and pay attention to what the authorities have to say (315).

Sardar left Jeddah "wiser and poorer" (316).

After the Gulf War Sardar returned to Malaysia to continue his work there. Kuala Lumpur was transformed into a global, postmodern city and tradition was in retreat. The economy flourished. He heard Malays saying, "Things are shrinking; there's less and less space", which he initially understood as a reference to the lack of physical space in K.L. Then he realized:

> they were complaining about the loss of their own culture, which was rapidly disappearing without much trace. They were commenting on 'globalization' as cultural genocide of the world they were born into and all its remembered ways (319).

Seeking a place in Malaysia untouched by globalization Sardar traveled to the rainforests of Sarawak where he came into contact with Iban communities living in longhouses: "Both men and women go naked to their waists; men cover their loins with a strip of cotton, the women wear short skirts" (320). Sardar stayed in a longhouse occupied by 42 families. Then, at one point, he joined a crowd discovering, to his surprise, they had assembled before a television and video player to watch Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*. He wrily comments, "You can run from globalization; but you can't hide" (321).

Back in K.L. the political atmosphere turned foul. Mahathir Muhammad now saw Anwar Ibrahim as a major threat to his grip on power. Anwar had called for corporate responsibility and an end to corruption and complacency and, indeed, was the Cabinet Minister responsible for the Anti-Corruption Agency. After the economic collapse of 1997 the political differences between Mahathir and Anwar came out into the open: "a fight for the future and very soul of Malaysian society." Malays, especially rural Malays, find homosexuality particularly obnoxious and so Mahathir had a case

fabricated against Anwar over a two year period, charging him with sodomising an ersthwhile chauffeur, the day after Anwar refused to accept Mahathir's ultimatum to resign or be sacked. He was imprisoned and tortured. Meanwhile, on Anwar's advice Sardar had returned to London a few weeks before his arrest. Sardar concludes:

> Here was our 1492. We were being expelled from Spain. I kept on thinking about Ibn Hazm. No matter how open-minded and clever you are, he once said, authoritarianism always finds a way round. Pluralism and authoritarianism, Ibn Hazm asserted, are locked in eternal combat. A single megalomaniac can destroy a paradise it took decades or centuries to build. That's how Muslim Spain will be lost, Ibn Hazm had declared. And that's how Malaysia was dragged down. My friend and hero had fallen. The balanced individual who could constitute, nurture and build the paradise I sought so desperately was incarcerated. Maybe, I thought, paradise just does not want to be found (324).

Conclusion. Going Up, or Going Down?

Sardar reflects with his friends on what made Muslim Spain so successful for so long. Gulzar Haider ventured:

> The coalescing of interlocking features. There was ethnic pluralism, religious tolerance, an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and culture – from painting to poetry music to philosophy. And on one thought these things to be un- or anti-Islamic. And now we lack them all (327).

When Merryl proposed these features were still inherently possible in Islam another friend, shouting in frustration, asked,

> Which Islam? The Islam of the Flat Earth Society? The Islam of the religious scholars? The Islam of the Iranian revolutionaries? The Islam of Saudi Wahhabis? The Islam of the state-obsessed Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-e-Islami? The simpleton Islam of Tablighi Jamaat?" (327).

After outlining his views on how Islamic science might be developed the same friend retorts,

> Your idea of Islamic science has been hijacked by fundamentalists and mystics. The fundamentalists are looking for scientific miracles in the Qur'an. Everything from relativity, quantum mechanics, big bang theory to the entire field of embryology and much of modern geology has been 'discovered' in the Qur'an. They're experimenting on jinn in Pakistan! The mystics have reduced the discourse to a quest for numinous understanding of the Absolute. Everywhere, mystic cults have subordinated conjecture and hypothesis to supernatural experience. All is sacred; and knowledge has no social function. There's no correlation between what you envisioned and what actually happened (329).

This was the last meeting of the Ijmalis: "Our group dispersed in an atmosphere of despair, disillusion and dejection; and never met again" (332). Sardar next reflects, "On 11 September 2001, it became intolerably clear that Muslim civilization was being offered suicide, both as method and metaphor" (332). Commenting on terrorists he remarks:

> The terrorist in general, and the suicide bomber in particular, I remember thinking, are a special breed. They stand outside normality, beyond reason. They justify their rage and actions with perverse self-righteousness and twisted religious notions – utterances and pieties as impenetrable to me as they are to so many Muslims (334).

After watching TV broadcasts showing the video produced by a suicide bomber before blowing himself up and killing 12 others and injuring 52, Sardar meditates on the

Qur'anic portrayal of paradise as a delightful place of protection, the diametric opposite of hell. He laments the inability of contemporary Muslims to read metaphors and to even read: "the contemporary Muslim world is dominated by an array of mystical cults and an equally banal variety of literalism" (338):

> Most Muslims think of paradise as a piece of property one can purchase by accumulating the right amount of Islamic deeds: imposing outmoded concepts of the Shariah, banning all varieties of art, literature and culture, killing and being killed in the name of Islam. The accumulation of this supposed wealth has become an end in itself. So the Qur'anic vision of paradise has been turned into an earthly vision of hell: an enclave of bloodbath and bigotry, suppression and severity, censorship and castration (339).

Sardar concludes: "the Muslim paradise is not a place of arrival but a way of travelling. Just as we cannot stop living, we cannot stop searching for paradise" (339).

Years before Kalim Siddiqui had thrown Sardar out of the Iranian Muslim Institute telling him that he would have his legs broken if he dared return. After his death, Ghayasuddin Siddiqui took over as Director of the Muslim Institute and admitted to Sardar,

> We were wrong, terribly, terribly wrong. We've done incalculable damage to ourselves. Our literalist, fundamentalist and revolutionary interpretations were all based on exceptionally arrogant notions of truth and certainty (340).

At Siddiqui's invitation Sardar joined a circle of concerned Muslims to meet on a monthly basis to rethink and re-imagine Islam.

But the news continued to distress Sardar. He recalls reading about Hashem Aghajari, a history lecturer at Tehran University and a war veteran who had lost a leg in the Iran-Iraq war. Like Sardar he argued "that each generation of Muslims should reinterpret Islam for itself rather than blindly follow the Mullahs" (341). He was accused of blasphemy and sentenced to death. He also read how a Shariah court in Katsina, Nigeria had upheld the appeal of a Muslim woman, Safiyah Hsuaini, who had been convicted of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning. Yet as second Shariah court sentenced another Nigerian Muslim woman to death after she confessed to having a child while divorced.

The book concludes with Sardar again asked by two Muslim visitors to help them change Muslims: "I can do nothing but live by my metaphors. Paradise awaits" (343).