

We have to script our own destiny

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf is the Chairman of the Cordoba Initiative, an independent, non-partisan, inter-religious project that works with state and non-state actors to improve the relationship between Muslim world and the West. The author of "What's Right With Islam Is What's Right With America," (HarperCollins, 2005), is also founder of the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA) and Imam of Masjid al-Farah in New York City. In an exclusive interview with *Greater Kashmir Senior Correspondent Zulfikar Majid* during *Muslim Leaders of Tomorrow Global Conference in Doha*, he talks about crisis in Muslim world and the way to meet them.

• **Tell us something about yourself and the activities you are involved in?**

For the last 40-years of my life in United States, I've been involved in interfaith dialogue which is to help non-Muslims understand Islam. Over this period of time, we have built good relationships with non-Muslims, many of whom are interested in Islam. Even those who are practicing Christians and Jews want to have good relations with Muslims and to build cooperative relationships to address the problems of the day.

• **In the present world when Muslims are in crisis everywhere, what should be the role of religious leaders?**

Their role is important, as people have used the language of religion in everything. People use language of religion in politics, economics and many many issues. So religious leaders have to play a role in clarifying the role of religious ideas, which is taught in all of these issues.

• **Do you think religion and politics are two separate entities?**

Yes, they are. Religion is about our relationship to Allah and our relationship with other people. Politics is about governance. But of course there is a relationship between the two. In politics the idea of what religion tells us is whatever we do, we have to do it with right ethics. Religion speaks about right and wrong and has something to say about politics. Religion teaches us if you do politics, do it in a right way. Religion talks about the dignity of a human being, helping the poor. If you do politics, you have to make sure that you take care of poor people and protect people's religious freedom and this is where religion comes in politics.

• **Whom would you blame for the present crisis Muslims are facing from Iraq to Afghanistan and Kashmir to Gaza?**

The question is not who is to be blamed, the question is when do we start taking responsibility for our own destiny. We need to take responsibility for building our lives. You can blame everybody for what is happening to you. What Muslims need to do is to take ownership and to take responsibility for their own destiny. Why Malaysia, a small country is economically successful, why is Qatar and Dubai developing? Because current leadership in these countries are for development. They have vision and Muslim leaders in other parts of World need to understand it.

• **Image of a Muslim has been tarnished everywhere in the world. Who is responsible?**

If you let other people decide how you suppose to live, they will make a decision for you. You develop your own image for how you want to be.

• **What are the reasons for religious extremism?**

There are issues of injustice in the world and particularly in the Muslim world. When people

can't fix their problems, they begin to look at how they can try to fix it. And when you can't fix something peacefully, then you start looking at violent means.

• **Are Muslims and non-Muslims equally responsible for the present crisis in the world?**

Both have played a role. If you have a problem, you must take responsibility for its solution. If you allow people to take control of your life, they will take control of it. I don't believe in saying that yes, West has played a role. If you start taking responsibility, West will start looking at you differently.

• **What should be the short-term and long-term strategies of Muslim leaders to address the issues of Muslims?**

Most important is take responsibilities.

• **Responsibilities in what respect?**

In every respect. If you don't understand me, I can have two responsibilities. I've to explain the Islam to the non-Muslims. Islam stands for peace, harmony and co-existence.

• **Many people blame the development of suicidal bombers on dictatorships, lack of educational opportunity and repressive governments. How do we then explain the British Muslim bombers of 7/7 who were educated, professionals and born and raised in UK?**

It is because of something they are upset about. They could be upset because they couldn't be integrated in the society, because of the policies of the British government. Very often there is more than one cause why a person does something like this. One thing makes you angry this much and another thing adds to your anger. Two or three causes can combine and give you a feeling that you can become a fidayeen.

• **What should Muslims do to safeguard their identity? Some say that violence is justified as Muslims are being oppressed and they are fighting for their rights? Your views.**

To me we have redefined Islam differently than what our Prophet (PBUH) taught us. Islam what our Prophet (PBUH) taught us is you practice five pillars of Islam. Islam is pure and Allah has guaranteed to protect it. It isn't Islam, which is in crisis, but it is Muslims who are in crisis. We have to differentiate between Islam and Muslim. Islam is the religion of Allah and it is powerful, simple, beautiful and everybody who understands it, loves it.

• **Would you blame West for making the term Islamic terrorism?**

I blame Muslims. Time has come for us to take responsibilities of the way West looks at us. If you start looking at West and say they are responsible, you will never succeed.

• **When people of Gaza are being massacred, how can we convince them not to join extremist forces?**

We are killing our own children in Iraq and Afghanistan. Muslims are killing each other. In Pakistan who is killing whom? Why aren't we upset about it? We must be consistent. I'm not saying we shouldn't condemn the Israeli barbarism in Gaza. But why do we look and judge that differently. Is Muslim killing a Muslim more acceptable? We don't value our own lives, why should we think that others will value our lives. When American citizen is attacked, America will go and protect him. When Muslims kill Muslims in hundreds and thousands, how can we expect West to worry about Muslim life.

• **But it is US, which invaded Iraq, Afghanistan and created such situation there?**

They had a role in what they did in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yes, and it is wrong. But that doesn't make it right for Muslims to kill each other. Two wrongs never make a right.

• **What is essentially accomplished from MLT conferences? Has any thing tangible come from the previous conferences?**

Yes, we have grown and developed. We are developing a network of bright young people like you. For example something happens in America, and you want to know about it, you have developed personal relation in US with several MLTs. Similarly, if any MLT wants to know about happenings in Kashmir, you can be his best source. Then together we can work and solve the problems.

• **Your message for Muslim youth of today.**

Take responsibility of your destiny and for your future. Don't expect other people to do it for you. Rise up and do it.

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