The Missing of Moral Entity in Modern Civilization: Values and Social Aspects

Ahmad Munawar Ismail, Wan Kamal Mujani, Wan Mohd. Hirwani Wan Hussain and Noor Inayah Ya’akub

ABSTRACT

Modernity and the modernization process are generally accepted as favourable phenomena. While on one side of the coin we see how modernity has greatly benefited mankind in areas of science, technology and economics, the other side of the coin – the costs of modernization – has often been intentionally left unnoticed or put within footnotes as inconvenient afterthoughts. One such thorny issue that has been the source of debate between pro-modernists and anti-modernists is the effect modernization has on the values and social aspects of society. Modernity and morality are deemed to be separate concerns; one can exist without the other, or, as some believe, in place of the other. The dilemma – modernity without morality, or morality without modernity – is one that can be answered through a scrutiny of the values themselves that are held by modern societies. This research note is an attempt to compare and contrast the conventional Western approach to ethics, values and social concepts, to those that are suggested by Islam through the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Through this exercise, we will find that where Western values have failed to avoid the dogmatic and polarizing nature of the modernity vs. morality debate, Islam has stepped up as a wholesome and balanced approach for modern civilization. This paper is divided into two main parts: i) In ‘An Assessment of Western Values’, we will see the concept of ‘Western values’ closely examined to identify its characteristics e.g. ‘individualism’ and proceed to recognize its gaps and shortcomings as a balancing mechanism; ii) ‘Moral Entities in Islam’ will then ensue to offer ‘Islamic values’ as a viable framework for modern societies to adopt as an all-round guide to balance modernity and morality. This research is an important step towards formulating a workable morality model that takes into consideration the detriment modernization has on values and social aspects and how to avoid such a problem.

Key words: Missing, moral entity, modern civilization, values and social

Introduction

The transition of society from an agrarian and feudalistic existence to one with a capitalistic slant has been the defining theme of contemporary civilization studies. The study of modern society is incomplete without a thorough investigation of the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th century. The event has been consistently interpreted as being the turning point in man’s adoption of capitalism and its trappings, and by extension, modernity. Anthony Giddens (1998) in his seminal work, ‘Making Sense of Modernity’ has defined ‘modern society’ as such: i) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation, by human intervention; ii) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; iii) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. Clearly, the cornerstone of Gidden’s rumination on modernity and modern society is the participation of humanity’s active intervention in transforming his environment to fulfil his economic needs and wants. Parallel to modernity, the Industrial Revolution, and subsequently the Great Depression, has enabled the Capitalist economic system to flourish, especially in Western countries. By the late 20th century, it was almost conventional wisdom that Capitalism, and its many hybrid forms (e.g. ‘welfare capitalism’ and ‘mixed capitalism’), is the ‘natural state’ of an economy (Friedman, 1980).

When juxtaposed against modernity as a sense or idea that the present is simply different from the past after experiencing social and cultural changes (for better or worse), capitalism and consumer society poses fundamental challenges never before seen in agrarian zeitgeists. Chief among these challenges is the departure

Corresponding Author: Wan Kamal Mujani, Institute of West Asian Studies (IKRAB), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia
E-mail: inamal@yahoo.com; Tel: +603-89214696; Fax: +60389213452
of society from values and ethics that have been the defining feature of previous eras. The era of modernity has also been characterised socially by the ‘loss of certainty, and the realization that certainty can never be established, once and for all’ (Delanty, 2007). This ‘loss of certainty’ and departure from a moral society have often been overlooked, intentionally or otherwise, by proponents of unabashed modernization and capitalism. Anti-consumerism and anti-modernism movements have balanced the pro-modernists by warning of the impacts unbounded modernity and consumerism brings upon a moral society. The permeation of capitalism into the fabric of society, however, has made it difficult for individuals to question the ‘morality of modernity’.

In the face of modern civilization and consumer culture, society has been reckless in its pursuit of economic power to enable mass consumption of potentially unnecessary products and goods. Ethics and values often have been compromised in the wake of these pursuits. Furthermore, social status and peer recognition are increasingly defined by the economic power of the individual instead of other less worldly benchmarks. This situation is made worse by the apparent absence of moral entities worthy of anchoring the state of constant change society is currently experiencing.

A total rejection of modernity is impractical and virtually impossible. Modernity needs to be embraced within an acceptable framework and worldview. This paper posits that Islam, as a ritualistic religion and way of living, offers such a framework. Islam has been the most influential religious force affecting the economic lives of the world’s citizens (Mings and Marlin, 2000). For more than fourteen centuries, Islam has offered an alternative value system that is arguably more compatible with modernization than other pre-existing value systems. How does the Islamic value system different from Western value systems? What are the impacts of modernity on Muslims and Muslim countries? What moral entities does the Islamic framework offer in view of modernization? This paper is an attempt to answer those questions, and more, with the primary objective of offering an alternative value system that may be adopted by a society, Islamic or otherwise.

An Assessment of Western Values:

According to Mazrui (1997), ‘Westerners tend to think of Islamic societies as backward-looking, oppressed by religion, and in humanely governed, comparing them to their own enlightened, secular democracies.’ But the cultural distance between the West and Islam is much narrower than conventionally assumed. Islam is not just a religion, and certainly not just a fundamentalist political movement. It is a civilization and a way of life that, although varying from one Muslim country to another, is bound together by a common spirit far more humane than assumed by the West. The West, on their part, always failed to recognize the failings on their own societies to live up to their supposed liberalism.

Western societies have often dismissed Islamic or, in certain cases, ‘Asian values’ to be incompatible with more liberal notions of ‘human rights’ and ‘democracy’ (Robison, 1996). Moreover, aspects of Islamic culture that Westerners regard as medieval may have prevailed in their own culture until fairly recently (Mazrui, 1997). In the end, the question is what path leads to the highest quality of life of the average citizen, while avoiding the worst abuses. The path of the West does not provide all the answers; Islamic values deserve serious consideration.

Individualism and Secularism in Western Values:

A prominent feature of the Western value system is the rise of ‘autonomous individuals’ as a dominant and acceptable concept, a concept which, as is often argued, is radically opposed to the concept of the ‘responsible person’ with societal responsibilities. Individualism as a concept focuses on the ‘moral worth of the individual’ that promotes the individual to strive for independence and self-reliance while resisting external interference towards the pursuit of one’s self-interests whether by society, family, or institutions (Vickers, 1977). Brown (1993) asserts that ‘an individualist enters into society to further his or her own interests, or at least demands the right to serve his or her own interests, without taking the interests of society into consideration. The individualist does not lend credence to any philosophy that requires the sacrifice of the self-interest of the individual for any higher social causes’.

The strife for individual-centric goals, especially within capitalist economies, is often at odds with the ideals of collectivism; that is, a concept where from birth onwards, individuals are integrated into strong cohesive groups with similar value systems and objectives (Agassi, 1960). Religions and religious organisations have long been the bedrock of collectivism. Adherents are born and bred into a group with a common shared destiny and guide to go about their way of living. Their innate values and ethics are based not on the individual perception of good and evil, but rather the consensual understanding of the values inherent in their religions based on sacred texts and opinions of religious leaders. It follows that individualism has been anathema to the allegedly monotonous and static understanding of society that Islam poses. Islam’s firmly rooted belief in the divinity of moral values and ethics contradicts individualism’s conviction in the individual’s ability to interpret his role in societal life and therefore conduct himself in an appropriate manner.
Criticism of Western Values:

There have been great supporters of Western values as being the ‘supreme values’ that should be held by mankind. ‘The great ideas of the West - rationalism, self-criticism, the disinterested search for truth, separation of church and state, rule of law, equality before the law, freedom of conscience thought and expression, human rights, liberal democracy... remain the best and perhaps only means for all people, no matter what race or creed, to reach their full potential and live in freedom’ (Ibn Warraq, 2007). Critics of Western values, however, are quick to point out the hypocrisy of Western societies in practising their evident understanding of ‘superior values’. Glass (2007), for instance, mentions of ‘examples (French colonial genocide in Algeria, British neglect of Kenyan concentration camps, CIA torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay) of Western values in practise’. His tone of sarcasm has not gone unnoticed.

The West’s history of imposing its culture upon others, even when it directly contradicts the social traditions of the local subjects, has been the cause of many bloody conflicts. The West often deems itself as superior to other societies, and a significant baggage of this notion is the idea of the ‘individual’ reigning supreme over the ‘society’ (Mohamad and Ishihara, 1996). The Western value system has failed in its attempt to harmonize the individual and the society (made difficult by scarce resources and Capitalist economies), and the significant resultant of that is the social issues prevalent in their societies. Modern societies should implement the ‘three dimensions of living together: humility, respect and self-criticism’ in forming a ‘dialogue’ with other cultures rather than ‘discord’. Unfortunately, it is a typical facet of Western modern societies to have conflicts between the self-interest and group interests (Ramadan, 2007).

Tariq Ramadan (2007) goes on to state that he did ‘not know universal values that are specifically Western. I know shared common universal values coming from different traditions’. He appealed for a humble attitude in the face of historical evidence that cultures are not as different as the media and popular perception often paint them. Tariq Ramadan comes to a conclusion that the notion of a clash between Western values and Islamic values, popularized by the theory of Clash of Civilizations by the political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, is nothing more than ‘the West’s refusal to believe in the improbable but not impossible harmonic co-existence of modernity and morality’.

The matter of social status in individualistic and secular societies is also a point of contention in the critique of Western values. People in individualistic cultures emphasize their successes and achievements in their jobs or private wealth, in line with the advent of Capitalism post-Industrial Revolution (Brown, 1993). The strive to accumulate material wealth and the societal recognition of such wealth bring with them the association of goods with social status. Values and ethics, especially those which correspond with group responsibilities, take the backseat as they struggle to compete in the battle against materialism and consumerism in such societies.

The Values Divide:

Modernization of society and technology has witnessed the rapid transformation of mores and values in the West over the last several decades. Islamic countries, which are now experiencing many of the same changes, may well follow suit (Mazrui, 1997). Premarital sex, for example, was strongly disapproved of in the West until after World War II. This is an indication of Christianity as being at the roots of Western values and morale codes. There were laws against sex outside marriage even if some of them were rarely enforced (Robison, 1996). Homosexual acts between males were a crime in Great Britain until the 1960s. Now such acts between consenting adults, male or female, are legal in much of the West, although they remain illegal in most other countries. Half the Western world, in fact, would say that laws against homosexual sex are a violation of gays’ and lesbians’ human rights (Mazrui, 1997). This comparison between the ‘near past West’ and the ‘modern West’ has prompted many leaders from Islamic countries to remark that Islamic and almost by extension, Asian values, are indeed universal values adopted by both the Eastern and Western bloc, but which the West has departed from over the years (Mohamad & Ishihara, 1996).

Middle class Muslims living in predominantly Islamic countries, unfortunately, have not been spared from this flight from morality. The very nature of modernity, with its consistent shifts of what is acceptable and what is not has resulted in a fluid interpretation of values and norms. Current Muslim generations, especially the youths, have rebelled against their forefather values and instead prefer to mimic the so-called Western value systems that they deem to be more compatible with modern society. Realising the polemic of Westernisation amongst Muslims and even non-Muslims who have long adhered to strong and ethical values amidst modernization, there is a burgeoning necessity to seek solutions to address this problem. Where Western values, or as argued by Ramadan (2010), western ‘non-values’, have failed, Islam has become a beacon that shines through the smokescreen of materialism and individualism. We shall now look into how Islam as a way of life surfaces the moral entities that can arguably become anchors to modern life in terms of values and social aspects.
Moral Entities in Islam – Answers to Society’s Struggle Against Diminishing Values:

It is the opinion of the writers that ‘morality’ and ‘modernity’ are completely separate areas of study in the shrewd sense that one can exist without the other. A common fallacy in modern thinking is the intentional dichotomy between the two concepts: this, indeed, is the cursory definition of ‘secularism’ within the orbit of any discussion relating to values and social aspects. As much as it is a rare instance that harmony and coexistence of the seemingly disparate concepts could occur, it is however, not impossible.

This paper posits that Islam stands alone in being a religion (and by extension, a collectivist consciousness) that has uncorrupted and unchanged sources from an unbroken line since the past 1400 years. Islamic literature is filled with injunctions about the importance of an education based on ethics and proper ends. Individual responsibility, when it comes to communicating, learning and teaching is central to the Islamic message. Muslims are expected to be ‘witnesses to their message before people’, which carries with it the responsibility to behave and act in certain ways deemed acceptable to God, preventing cheating and corruption, and respecting the environment (Ramadan, 2010). Integrity in economic production and consumption are paramount to a Muslim’s way of life. In light of modernization, Islam has managed to provide a guide to balancing the necessity of adapting to societal changes yet firmly rooting oneself to traditional mores and customs. A morality model worth emulating is objective morality based on sound and tested principles, and not one that transforms itself across time, geographical boundaries, or even individual whims and desires.

We shall now examine the moral entities present in Islamic education and practise than can be applied as answers to the absence of such moral entities from the values and ethics as well as social aspects. The focus will be on two such moral entities: i) Balance mechanism between self-interest (individualism) and environment; and ii) Social aspects of morality in Islam.

The Islamic Value System: Balance Mechanism between Self-interest and the Environment:

Islamic values have been successfully shaped by the amalgamation of Quranic teachings, Sunnah (tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the subsequent precedents of Islamic jurists. The motive force in Islamic ethics is the notion that every human being is called to ‘command the good and forbid the evil’ in all spheres of life. According to Idris (1999) ‘moral values, such as honesty, trustworthiness, justice and chastity, are originally innate values which Allah planted in the hearts of mankind; then He sent His messengers with a system of life in accord with this innate disposition to affirm it’. This opinion can be affirmed by the following verse: ‘So set your face toward the religion, as one by nature upright; the instinctive (religion) which Allah has created in mankind. There is no altering (the laws) of Allah’s creation. That is the right religion but most people do not know’ (Quran, 30:30).

A usurpation of these ‘innate values’ have occurred by the prevalent materialism present in Western societies, especially societies that practise the Capitalist economic system that ‘reduces religion to a matter of individual preference (and) deprives society of a socially agreed upon filter mechanism which is needed to create a harmony between individual self-interest and social interest’ (Davis, 2004).

Moral Consumerism and Consumption:

Walt Whitman Rostow’s ‘take-off’ economic model indicates that a traditional society’s modernization process ends when it reaches the ‘Age of Mass Consumption’. The preoccupation with the purchase of goods - consumerism - has taken centre stage in the lives of many individuals of modern societies. One of the unfortunate defining characteristics of modern civilization is a society that neglects its impoverished and downtrodden people while preferring material wealth and consumer goods over a holistic and felicitous approach to living (Tuser, 2010).

It is a popular adage that at the core of unrestrained consumerism is vanity; Islam, however, is a religion that promotes humility over vanity and moderation over excess. Islam provides a unique response to this rampant facet of modern economic life. Its approach to consumerism manifests itself in the balancing mechanism referred to as Zuhud (asceticism). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) once said: ‘The worldly comforts are not for me. I am like a traveller, who takes a rest under a tree in the shade and then goes on his way’.

There are many texts in the Quran that encourages the practise of Zuhud as a moderation method for consumption. A constant feature in these verses is also the reminder of the Afterlife wherein joy is believed to be eternal. These are a couple of the verses such as ‘Whatever is with you, will be exhausted, and whatever with Allah (of good deeds) will remain’ (Quran, 16:96) and ‘Know that the life of this world is only play and amusement, pomp and mutual boasting among you, and rivalry in respect of wealth and children, as the likeness of vegetation after rain, thereof the growth is pleasing to the tiller; afterwards it dries up and you see it turning yellow; then it becomes straw. But in the Hereafter (there is) a severe torment (for the disbelievers, evil-doers),
and (there is) Forgiveness from Allah and (His) Good Pleasure (for the believers, good-doers), whereas the life of this world is only a deceiving enjoyment’ (Quran, 57:20).

It is a common misunderstanding that Zuhud promotes a complete refusal to partake in worldly affairs and consumption; this is untrue, as refuted by Ali ibn Abi Talib (r.a.) who said: ‘Asceticism is not that you should not own anything, but that nothing should own you’. An element of moral consumerism is the removal of instant gratification which is then replaced with a higher and moral purpose for consumption; in the case of Islam, the moral purpose is God consciousness (Khabbaz, 2005).

Another essential component of moral consumption is the characteristics of the goods consumed. Islam has provided a guide for its followers on the importance of goods to be permissible (Halal) and not forbidden (Haram). Qaradawi (1997) points out that even in the matter of consumption of dubious (Shubhah) goods, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has given a guideline as reported by Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Daud, Ibn Majah and Darimi, as follows: ‘What is Halal is clear. And what is Haram is also clear. And in between those two is a dubious area in which many people do not know about. So whoever distanced himself from it, he has acquitted himself (from blame). And those who fall into it, he has fallen into a state of Haram’.

The Islamic economic system ensures that the rich must give up a part of their possessions to the poor and deserving in order for the receivers to meet a wide range of social responsibilities. This concept known as Zakat is both an economic and moral-religious obligation for faithful Muslims. It is mentioned in the Quran (2:177): ‘It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East or West; but it is righteousness to believe in God and the Last Day and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the freeing of captives; to be steadfast in prayers, and practice regular charity; to fulfill the contracts which you made; and to be firm and patient in pain and adversity and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God-conscious’.

We see from the verse that the basic recipe to righteousness is; Iman (faith) in the heart that leads one to spend in the way of God, fulfillment of one’s religious obligations, good conduct with others, patience and truthful speech. When contrasted against the materialistic and individualistic characteristics of Western societies and values, it is apparent that Islam is balanced and takes into consideration the obligations towards God and the society; it can even be argued that one fulfills his obligations to God through commitment to his surroundings.

Industrial Development and the Environment:

Rapid and uninformed industrialization as propagated by capitalist economies have resulted in the pollution of nature and the environment. Many of the world’s industrialized countries are sacrificing their environment to please their capitalist economies. Such policies, or the lack thereof, has brought upon the world short-term economic benefits while doing detrimental (and often, irreversible) damage to these countries. There is a necessity to balance economic growth and simultaneously control pollution; without the latter, the price to pay may be high due to the losses of valuable natural resources due to excessive water and air pollution (Haluzan, 2011). It is an irony that though industrialization is often touted as progress, the detriment of our surroundings due to it has made us question the role of mankind as protector and preserver of nature (Al-Balagh Foundation, 2011).

It is worthwhile to note, however, that Islam is not anti-industrial development or against progress - in fact, it is highly encouraged as can be seen in the following verse: ‘Alif. Lam. Ra. This is a book which we have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], that you might bring mankind out of darkness into the light by the permission of their Lord - to the path of the Exalted in Might, the Praiseworthy’ (Quran, 14:1).

Whilst it is the responsibility of Muslims to ‘bring mankind out of darkness’, protecting the natural and social environment still reigns as ‘among the most important Islamic goals of existence, and explaining the sign of its care and concern with human welfare and natural protection, as well as its adherence to the life system, man’s well-being and his continuous existence’ (Al-Balagh Foundation, 2011). This is because the well-being of man’s species and the living and nonliving things around him, like earth, water and air depends on its protection from pollution and destruction.

According to Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shaykh Ali Gomaa in an interview with Hoda Baraka (2011), ‘in the Islamic worldview, acting as Allah’s deputies on earth means that we bear the responsibility of both conserving the environment and developing it, since almighty Allah has subjugated the world to serve us, and make us content. What subjugation means is that mankind has the right to enjoy the blessings of the earth and its resources. However, keeping in mind the Islamic worldview, we have no right to benefit from these blessings by exploiting that of others or future generations. We stand as masters over the environment, accountable by Allah the almighty and rewarded or punished accordingly. If we take good care of the environment, we will be rewarded with goodness, but if we abuse the environment and leave it to ruin, we will meet a frightful end’.

The opinion of Shaykh Ali Gomaa is supported by the following verse: ‘Those who break their covenant with God after it has been confirmed, who sever the bonds that God has commanded to be joined, who spread
corruption on the earth --those are the losers’ (Quran, 2:27). The Islamic perspective on environmental preservation amidst industrial development has been revolutionary in that it offers a balanced and wholesome worldview. This is in sharp contrast with the irresponsible doctrines of unbounded capitalism and consumerism ubiquitous in modern civilization.

Objective Human Rights:

Though the Universal declaration of Human Rights is termed ‘Universal’, Rifaat Hassan asserts that ‘it was articulated along the lines of historical trends of the Western world during the last three centuries, and a certain philosophical anthropology of individualistic humanism which helped justify them’. The basic assumptions underlying the Declaration were: i) of a universal human nature common to all the peoples, ii) of the dignity of the individual, and iii) of a democratic social order. While Western countries have continued to champion Western values and the virtues of human rights, the reality of human rights in practise by the Western countries fall far from what is being preached. The United States of America, for instance, is infamous as ‘the only country in the world - other than the collapsed state of Somalia - that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child’ (Brody, 1999). Brody goes on to state that ‘In July 1998, Human Rights Watch produced an extensive study of police brutality in 14 cities across the United States. The solid 440-page report addressed difficulties in holding abusive police officers accountable’. Other examples of violation of human rights by the West include the ‘French colonial genocide in Algeria, British neglect of Kenyan concentration camps, CIA torture of prisoners in Abu Ghrabi and Guantanamo Bay’ (Glass, 2007).

The term ‘human rights’ have been bandied around by the secular West as an integral part of both political and popular discourse. There have been assumptions by many advocates of Western human rights that human rights can exist only within a secular context and not within the framework of religion. While the Western approach to human rights and values is littered with various charters, resolutions, and declarations, when we speak of human rights in Islam, ‘We really mean that these rights have been granted by God; they have not been granted by any king or by any legislative assembly’ (Mawdudi, 1976). The fluid nature of Western human rights means they can be formulated and withdrawn with equal ease; they can even openly violate them as they please and come up with a justification in response to criticisms. This has openly been the practise of dictators and unjust rulers since time immemorial (Mazrui, 1997).

Islamic human rights as inspired by the Quran and Sunnah, however, have come from an unbroken and unquestioned tradition of submission to God. A chief characteristic in Islamic history is in the consistent and customary adherence to human rights - indeed, any violation of the rights of others is deemed as violation of one’s obligations to God (Ramadan, 2007). Islam aims to establish by is principles a legal framework and a code of ethics for an ideal society with the balance to protect the rights of the individual and the rights of the society collectively. One way to achieve this is by providing the essential necessities that ensure for the individuals their full rights without damage to public goods. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) assures us of the basic necessities and rights of life when he said: ‘Whosoever wakes up in the morning feeling that he is secure in his community, free from ailment and diseases in his body, and has enough provision for a day, it is a if he owns the entire world’.

Every Muslim or administrators who claim themselves to be Muslims have to accept, recognize and enforce human rights. If they fail to enforce them, and start denying the rights that have been guaranteed by God or make amendments and changes in them, or practically violate them while paying lip-service to them (as is often the case with Western modern societies), the verdict of the Holy Quran for such governments is clear and unequivocal (Mawdudi, 1976). ‘The verdict’ as espoused by Mawdudi refers to the following verse: ‘Those who do not judge by what God has sent down are the disbelievers (Kafirun)’ (Quran, 5:44). The following verse also proclaims: ‘They are the wrong-doers (Zalimun) (Quran, 5:45), while a third verse in the same chapter says: ‘They are the evil-livers (Fasiqun)’ (Quran, 5:47). In other words, if the temporal authorities regard their own words and decisions to be right and those given by God as wrong, they are disbelievers. If on the other hand they regard God’s commands as right but wittingly reject them and enforce their own decisions against God’s, then they are the ‘mischief-makers’ and the wrong-doers. The missing component in the human rights equation of modern civilization is ultimately this: human rights cannot be guaranteed merely from the seasonal convictions of select individuals, but the timeless and universal sovereignty of divine message.

Social Aspects of Morality in Islam:

According to Ali (2011) in ‘Moral System of Islam’, ‘Since the dawn of Islam, it has successfully managed to lay down some universal fundamental rights for humanity as a whole that have to be observed and respected under all circumstances. To achieve these rights, Islam provides not only legal safeguards, but also a very effective moral system. Thus, whatever leads to the welfare of the individual or the society is morally good in Islam and whatever is injurious is morally bad’. Capitalism as a cornerstone of most modern societies has failed
to provide individuals the comfort and serenity of collective consciousness. Societal and peer pressure have made the hold on ethics and values to become lose, and in effect, replaced them with worldly and materialistic measures of success.

Guide for the Individual - Community Living:

According to Ali in ‘Moral Systems in Islam’, ‘The teachings of Islam concerning social responsibilities are based on kindness and consideration of others. Since a broad injunction to be kind is likely to be ignored in specific situations, Islam lays emphasis on specific acts of kindness and defines the responsibilities and rights within various relationships. In a widening circle of relationships, then, our first obligation is to our immediate family - parents, spouse, and children - and then to other relatives, neighbours, friends and acquaintances, orphans and widows, the needy of the community, our fellow Muslims, all fellow human beings, and animals’. As we have seen, individualism as practised by modern society within the capitalist framework has given birth to a lack of communal cohesiveness.

This matter is made worse by the hectic and unbalanced lifestyle of urban centres and employees who are desperate to strive for material gains. Community life important as a social support system to the individuals living in the community; in other words, a person with a strong sense of community spirit and contributes to it benefits by having a support system to encourage good values and ethics. Failed communities have often led community members, especially the youths, to commit appalling and immoral member social vices such as drinking and drug addiction (Pappas, 2010). While the West laments the deplorable state of community living and the apparent lack of community spirit, Islam had provided a guide to living with neighbours in the following verse: ‘Worship Allah and join none with Him (in worship); and do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, Al-Masakin (the poor), the neighbour who is near of kin, the neighbour who is a stranger, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (you meet), and those (slaves) whom your right hands possess’ (Quran, 4:36).

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has on countless occasions stressed the importance of neighbourly compassion. Ibn ‘Umar and ‘Aishah (May Allah be pleased with them) reported: Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, ‘Jibril kept recommending treating neighbours with kindness until I thought he would assign a share of inheritance’. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was asked about a certain woman who prayed and fasted more than was obligatory upon her, and gave generously in charity, but unfortunately, she did not refrain from speaking harshly to her neighbours. He described her as being one of the people of Hell who would be punished for this. In the same saying, he was asked about another woman who fulfilled only her obligatory duties and gave very little in charity, however her neighbours were safe from her harsh tongue and she offended no one. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) described her as among the people of Paradise (Stacey, 2008). It is a natural conclusion upon studies of the Quran and Sunnah that the religion of Islam places great emphasis on the solidarity of neighbourhoods and the wider community. This is an important moral entity seemingly absent from Western values championing individualism and materialism.

Social Status in Islam:

Social status is the honour or prestige attached to one’s position in society. In modern times, social status is often ascribed in one or both of these two ways: i) Status earned by a person’s own achievements; or ii) Status bestowed due to inheritance. Social stratification in modern society is highly associated with the interactions of wealth, prestige, and power. A high status in society compounds the benefits an individual can gain compared to his peers - some examples are access to better education, health services, and housing. This in turn helps propagate the vicious cycle of class struggle - the wealthy have access to more opportunities to create more wealth, whereas the poor are left to fend for themselves (Tough, 2007). A report by the National Health Services of Greater Glasgow and Clyde on ‘Social Class and Discrimination’ showed that ‘poor people in particular think that class… greatly affects the way they are seen’. It goes on to say that ‘In the last 25 years, the number of people in the top two social classes has doubled in Glasgow… while (lower class) people are dependent on sickness or unemployment benefits or low paid work. This has led to growing inequality’. People’s experience of class and poverty can lead to their views not being heard, being left out when decisions are being made, isolation and humiliation. The discriminative nature of capitalist economy has made matters worse by disproportionately rewarding those who have excelled in exploiting resources for their own gains.

Islam does not make any discrimination of individuals along material, racial, gender or any other shallow lines. For centuries, Islam has had to fight against the allegation that it promotes the superiority of the Arab race over other races of Muslims. While it is true that the Quran and effectively Islam was first revealed to a Prophet who heralds from the Arabian peninsula, a verse from the Quran (49:13) assures us that the accusation is untrue: ‘O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has al-Taqwa (i.e., is one of the Muttaqun or pious]. Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware’.
Mawdudi (1948) on the subject of ‘Equality of Mankind’ mentions that ‘The progeny of this couple (Adam and Eve) were initially a single group with one religion and the same language. But as their numbers gradually increased, they spread all over the earth and, as a natural result of their diversification and growth, were divided into various tribes and nationalities. All these differences exist in the world of reality and Islam does not seek to ignore them’. He goes to qualify ‘But it disapproves of the prejudices which have arisen among mankind because of these differences in race, colour, language and nationality’. Islam makes clear to all men that they have come from the same parents and are therefore brothers and equal as human beings. Islam seeks to equalize all of mankind, with the exception of one quality - the God consciousness i.e. Taqwa, which is the prerequisite of God’s consent on an individual’s life and afterlife.

Concept of Leadership:

The recent past has witnessed the public downfall of leaders from almost every area of modern endeavour - business, politics, communities, and sports. These leaders often have showcased a few symptoms that would have been apparent to acute observers of leadership in practise. They include: i) Lack of focus; ii) Poor communication, especially with subordinates; iii) Risk aversion; iv) Ethical issues; and v) Poor self-management (Sanborn, 2009). These failures of leadership were not exclusive to Western modern societies as it was apparent that even Islamic countries, especially in the Middle East, were in crisis mode. According to Atta ur-Rahman, coordinator-general of the Organization of Islamic Conference Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation, ‘Apart from Turkey, Iran and Malaysia, the rest have been lagging behind. In many Islamic countries, there is no real democracy. When there is, it is a shame. There are strong feudal systems and a serious crisis in leadership’.

Modern leadership models have stressed upon the importance of material achievements and the leaders egocentric cling onto power. Islam’s suggestion is to review leadership not as a position of power, but rather as a position of responsibility from which the leader is ultimately responsible and answerable to God. Islam and Islamic history has provided contemporary civilization guides on how to mould effective and moral leadership models. A distinctive characteristic of Islamic leadership according to the Quran is the divinity of leadership positions as ordained by God. While Western modern societies witness the situation where individuals clamour against each other to attain positions of authority, the Quran (6:165) is clear that God has pre-destined the persons who will be in positions of authority: ‘And He has made you vicegerents in the world, and exalted some of you above others in rank, so that He might try you with His gifts. Indeed your Lord is Most Swift in punishment, and yet He is Most Forgiving, Most Merciful’.

This is further stressed in the following verse: ‘Is it they who apportion the mercy of thy Lord? It is We Who apportions to them their livelihood in this world; and We also raise some of them above others in rank; so that some of them may take the others into their service. But the mercy of your Lord is better than all the wealth that they may amass’ (Quran, 43:32).

A God-fearing leader who is aware of the temporary nature of life will take the necessary steps to appease God and follow in the prophetic traditions of leadership. He resents corruption or any abuse of power, as he is aware that his position of authority is present only due to the mercy of God. Islam also demands that a leader must heed the followers’ needs. It is necessary to develop a consensual understanding of the group makeup so as to be able to understand the issues and problems facing the group at any particular junction of progress (Beekun, 2006). In a Hadith reported by Abu Maryam al-Azdi, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: ‘If Allah puts anyone in the position of authority over the Muslims’ affairs and he secludes himself (from them), not fulfilling their needs, wants, and poverty, Allah will keep Himself away from him, not fulfilling his need, want, and poverty’.

A sense of empathy as demonstrated by the Prophet (peace be upon him), however, has been conspicuously absent from many modern Muslim leaders. A current apt example would be former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak whose recent ouster by mass protest was a global headline for many weeks. He was infamous among Egyptians to have been ‘corrupt, (with) a bunch of them controlling the economy’ and put in place ‘no laws, and thousands imprisoned without trial’ (Cohen, 2011). Mubarak’s regime ruled over the people of Egypt for over thirty years with no semblance to the Islamic traditions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) or the Quran. This is an important lesson to be taken by current Muslim leaders so that the continued progress and success of their societies can be affirmed.

Conclusion:

Recognizing that modern civilization is devoid of any noteworthy moral entities to anchor it is the first step towards progressing to the goal of Islamic ends and values. The two broad moral entities that have been put forth here are: i) Balance mechanism between self-interest (individualism) and environment; and ii) Social aspects of morality in Islam. It is critical that Islam is the moderating force between polarizing sides of the
debate about values and social aspects in modern societies e.g. individualism vs. collectivism, environmentalism vs. industrial development, consumerism vs. anti-consumerism. Indeed, only a worldview that is absent of selfish human intervention is worthy of balancing the complex relationship between modernity and morality. Islam is not anti-modernity; yet it is not supportive of modernity which completely dismisses morality as an important component of development. Muslims and even non-Muslims should adhere to values and social concepts that are propagated in the Quran as they are the only fulfilling moral entities to affix to modern civilization.

References

Quran al-Karim.