The Basic Components of the Paradigm

- Since Islam is the creation of God, it is perfect. Therefore, it cannot be reformed nor does it need reforming in the sense of improving or altering its basic truth. It follows that when God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad the ideal temporal existence, that community, too, was by definition perfect and immutable.

- By this righteous logic, in Islam the only legitimate change is change that results in the moral betterment of the Muslim community (the umma).

- The legitimacy of change in Muslim life must always be measured by its conformity to God’s law, the Prophet’s sunna (actions and habitual practices of Muhammad), and by the degree to which it is believed to direct the community back to that perfect model of existence created by the Prophet.

- In this connection, it should be noted that for the faithful Muslim the ideal existence—Muhammad’s original community—has already happened, it has been revealed, it is real, it is continually reaffirmed by symbol, metaphor, and ideology; and it is considered to be of an infinitely higher order than any man-made realm since it came from God.

- This premise yields two propositions concerning the idea of reform in Islam: a) Ideally, Muslim reform will always entail a process of purifying Islam of the human misunderstanding that results from mortal society’s inability to be perfect and of trying to restore Islam to the pure state in which Muhammad left it. It is a spiritual obligation of every Muslim to strive toward this end. b) The only legitimate change in the Muslim polity is that which results in the moral betterment of the community.

- This mentality explains the fundamental religious nature of reform, revolution, and rebellion in Muslim societies throughout Islamic history, down to the present.

- This attitude also explains why Islamic reform is always drawn to the past, both in response to moral traditions and as a way of legitimizing what appear to be innovations. To the true-believing, conservative Muslim nothing in the present or future could possibly ever be as good as that exquisite society created by Muhammad under God’s guidance and fixed forever as an ideal model by the Prophet’s death. But each generation interprets the past through the prism of its current circumstances, perceptions, needs, and ideologies. In this connection, it can be argued that received, pious representations of Muhammad’s perfect society will always be unstable or inconsistent because religious expression, particularly that encompassing politic matters, is ideological, and ideology, over time, is in constant flux, changing to fit the historical moment of its use.

- Therefore, the true object of Islamic reform or revolution cannot be the creation of a wholly new, original society, especially a secular one—that would be profane; it must have as its purpose the re-establishment of the Prophet’s ideal community. The problem lies in the fact that a mortal society of True Believers, however pious, is incapable of literally recreating what was originally a creation of God. But, the umma, its individual members and in its collective form, must constantly struggle to do so as commanded by God. (This is the origin and original meaning of the Islamic concept of jihad, i.e. internal spiritual struggle.)