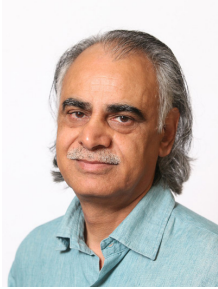# Interview Natalya Seitakhmetova with professor Ziauddin Sardar (London, UK)*

Ziauddin Sardar is a British-Pakistani scholar, award-winning writer, cultural critic and public intellectual who specializes in Muslim thought, the future of Islam, futurology and science and cultural relations. The author and editor of more than 50 books, Prospect magazine has named him as one of Britain's top 100 public intellectuals and The Independent newspaper calls him: "Britain's own Muslim polymath"..

Professor Ziauddin Sardar, you are a famous scientist, an intellectual of our time. Your name and your scientific authority are an ideal for us., a sample. Your thoughts on the essence and meaning of Islamic philosophy and the culture of Islamic thought are very important to us, your contemporaries. I would like to ask you a few questions. with your permission.

1. In your opinion, what is the value of Islamic philosophy for the modern world, for a person concerned with everyday problems?

The modern world requires us to engage with it critically. There is so much out there – for example, on social media, misrepresentations not just in the main stream media but also in the form of knowledge, nefarious ideologies, corruption, cronyism, uncontrolled corporate greed, the rise of conspiracy theories such as QAnon, and an increasing mistrust in science, and rationality – that needs critical examination by all self-respecting individual and communities. We need to question and analyse everything that is thrown at us; and Islamic philosophy provides us with the tools for asking relevant questions as well as provides a critical edge from an Islamic perspective and helps us negotiate some of the complex ethical and moral problems of our time. I don't believe that philosophy should be the privilege of a select few – contrary to the view of classical Muslim philosophers. Every Muslim needs to connect with our great heritage of Islamic philosophy – to know where they are coming from, to find their way out of the current dilemmas and paradoxes and to see where they are going. Without Islamic philosophy we are lost. Indeed, I would argue, that Muslim civilization was lost when it forgot philosophy and became obsessed with theology. We now need to learn that positively influencing the future is a moral need of our time – and Islamic philosophy is an essential component for fulfilling this imperative.

2. You are a supporter of traditionalism, but philosophy is a non-final process, should there be something unchangeable in it, not subject to time and the hustle and bustle of life. Martin Heidegger once spoke about the untimeliness of philosophy, and you, on the contrary, assert the timeliness of Islamic philosophy in your works. its enduring meaning.

We need to distinguish between traditionalism and tradition. I am not a supporter of traditionalism, but an advocate of critical tradition. Traditionalism is essentially ossified tradition; and like all 'isms' it is an ideology – an inversion of the truth. It is ahistoric; it abhors history and drains it of all humanity and human content. Islam, as a religion interpreted in the lives and thoughts of people

called Muslims, is not something that unfolded in history with all its human strengths and weaknesses, but is a utopia that exists outside time. Hence it has no notion of progress, moral development or human evolution. Moreover, traditionalism is monolithic. It does not recognise, understand or appreciate a contrary view. Those who express an alternative opinion are seen as apostates, collaborators or worse. And, finally, traditionalism is aggressively self-righteous; and insists on imposing its notion of righteousness on others. It legitimises intolerance and violence. It allows no opposition or contrary view. The tragedy of the Muslim world is that it is knee-deep in traditionalism.

Tradition, on the other hand, is dynamic, it changes and adjusts to the needs and requirement of changing times while retaining its core principles and values. Traditions remain traditions by reinventing themselves. Tradition provides an anchor for our heritage, identity and history, but it is also a forward-looking enterprise. It transforms itself by self-reflection, by critical engagement with the world, and by shaping and transforming the world. Tradition relates to history as a living cultural reality – not something to be put in a museum. Traditionalism is about preserving the status quo; critical tradition is about exploring future prospects while retaining our identities and heritage. Every culture has a dark side: traditionalism enhances this, while critical tradition exposes it and attempts to move forward with life enhancing aspects of the culture. This is what I mean by critical tradition.

That's where Islamic philosophy enters the equation. It transforms tradition into critical, self-reflective enterprise. That is why it is timeless; it has enduring value. It forces us to rethink Islam and what it means to be a Muslim in changing circumstances.

3. Postnormal times are a verdict or just reality. Is a person in Postnormal times postnormal? And if so, is he more metaphysical or more pragmatic?

Both. Postnormal times is, and as is increasingly becoming self-evident, reality. We can witness accelerating change, realign-

ments of power, and social and cultural upheaval in which events move and multiply in geometric fashion. We can see that our world is deeply inter-connected, thanks to the internet, tweeter, Facebook, twitter, and other social media, 24-hour news channels, where information and misinformation, real and fake news, spread across the globe in an instant. Where we are perpetually under surveillance.

But the world is more than just a network of vast networks, all interconnected and interdependent, it is also complex. Everything major issue we face, from fixing global financial problems to climate change, is complex. Complexity is a natural by-product of the fact that most of our problems have a global scale. And globalisation itself enhances complexity. Combine complexity with networks and you get positive feedback: things change rapidly and often simultaneously leading to chaos. And chaotic behaviour is all around us. So, yes, postnormal times is real – very real.

But it is also a verdict on what we have done and doing to ourselves. For example, we have ignored the warning – dating back to the 1960 – of impending climate crisis. We have allowed all types of technologies to be developed without asking the fundamental 'ought' question: just because something can be done does not mean that it ought to be done. It is a verdict on how globalisation has been weaponised. It is a verdict on the naked greed of capitalism and neoliberal economics which is destroying the planet. It is a verdict on how we are forced to run faster and faster, constantly out of breath. It's a verdict on the consequences of modernity. On the absolute relativity of truth ushered in by postmodernism. It a verdict on the western consumer lifestyle which has, and is, consuming the resources of Earth at an accelerating pace. It's a verdict on western culture which is determined to destroy all other cultures and turn everything into banal sameness. So, yes, postnormal times are also a verdict on how we find ourselves in an epoch of contradictions, complexity and chaos.

Is a person in postnormal times postnormal? Not necessarily. One can live quite

a 'normal' life without being aware of the postnormal condition of the world. And, of course, postnormal times do not have an equal impact in every corner of the world; although the postnormal-free space is shrinking. In some part of the world, where things have not changed much for decades, climate change has not arrived, and social media has not penetrated deeply, the awareness of postnormality will be limited. So, what makes a person postnormal? To 'be postnormal' one has to be aware that whatever one saw or thought as 'normal' is evaporating fast, old paradigms are dying, new ones have not emerged, and we are in an in-between transitional period; and that we need to find ways and means to navigate this period towards more sustainable, viable, human and equitable futures. Postnormal times is also a call to arms: prepare yourself, be aware of what is happening globally and locally, and think of radically new ways to be, and new ways to do and know.

4. How do you feel about classical philosophy? Your thoughts resemble the teachings of Socrates, because he destroyed the prevailing way of thinking, brought a new culture of thought. Actually, just like you. Aren't you afraid that you, too, may be accused of excessive striving for critical thought, for deconstructing habitual, empirical thinking, everyday, vain practice? Your critical Muslim is a person of a new reality, Postnormal times, he is creative, he is a person. But how to combine in it the pressure of the traditional culture of thought and the culture of thought of Postnormal times?

Islamic philosophy is in fact indebted to classical Greek philosophy. After all, al-Farabi was known as the Second Teacher, after Aristotle, who was the First Teacher. Ibn Rushd was known as the Great Commentator on Aristotle and Plato. The Brethren of Purity relied quite a lot on Neoplatonists. So classical philosophy is also a part of our heritage.

As for Socrates, I am not remotely like him. (By all accounts he was not a particularly amiably person. The best biography I have read of Socrates is *The Trial of Socrates* (Anchor Books, New York, 1989) by the noted American progressive journalist I F Stone. Stone presents him as pretty arrogant and mean individual!). The things we have in common is that we like to ask questions, and much like Socrates, I would like to see a culture of critical thought in Muslim societies.

However, I do believe that questioning or criticism cannot be perpetual. There is a limit to both; beyond the limit they become self-defeating and meaningless. I also like to question the questions themselves. Certain questions are not questions but a way of framing oppression. So, when is a question not a question? When the answer must be formed within a given, oppressive framework. When it is based on certain unquestionable assumptions and enforces certain prejudicial perceptions. When all the possible answers to the question lead to the inevitable conclusion: that the prejudices on which the question is based are correct.

I grow up and live in Britain, where for decades I have been fighting for multiculturalism, self-representation for Muslims, and Muslim participation in politics. The powers that be have systematically asked certain questions about and to Muslims. Consider, for example, the question: 'what are the consequences of increasing Muslim political identity?' This question frames 'Muslim political identity' – and by extension the Muslim community itself - as a 'problem'. This problem has 'consequences' which, by the very nature of the question, can only be bad. So, no matter how you answer the question, the assumption that Muslim community and its political identity is a 'problem' is confirmed. The question is also based on a few daft assumptions. First, the object 'Muslim political identity' is taken as known. Furthermore, what is known is that this identity is discrete, group specific and uniform. It is assumed to be unchangeable. And implicitly what is assumed to be known is feared. Hence, the British society has a problem with Muslims. Second, it assumes that 'Muslim political identity' is more problematic than say, black, feminist or gay political identity. This is simply not the case. As a marginalized community, Muslims are hardly a political

threat to Britain. They may demand their political rights but this is no more threatening than any other marginalized group asking for similar access to public space. Third, the question also assumes that 'Muslim political identity' is 'increasing' when in fact no such evidence exists.

Thus, to answer the question is to reinforce the widespread prejudices that Muslims are a 'problem' and their 'political identity' is a threat to Britain. Instead of leading us towards enlightenment, the question marginalizes Muslims even further. It is, in fact, an act of violence towards an already beleaguered community.

Asking the wrong questions can sometimes be fatal. A common question that has been raised in the past couple of decades goes like this: 'multiculturalism has failed so what can we put in its place?' By equating multiculturalism with failure, the question automatically consigns it to the history of bad ideas. In fact, multiculturalism is a great idea. What has failed is not multiculturalism, but the questions British society asked of multiculturalism. And hence the ways it sought to implement it. Another frequently, apparently innocent and well-meaning, asked question: 'how can we celebrate difference?'. Well, you can celebrate difference forever but it does not empower different communities. The relevant question is: 'how can we empower difference?' Yet, another frequently asked question: 'how can we represent minority cultures' instead of 'how can minority cultures represent themselves?' Multiculturalism was – is – all about power. By removing power from the equation, we turned multiculturalism into a hollow institution concerned largely with celebration of ethnic cultures and food. If we continue to ask the same questions, ones that ignore the question of power, no matter what we replace multiculturalism with, it will still lead to failure.

So, for me it not just important to ask questions – we have to ask the right questions. And we can only discover the right questions by interrogating the questions that are asked, by questioning the questions themselves. This becomes even more important in postnormal times where complex issues do not have simple answers. There is no point in asking: how are we going to resolve this contradiction? Because contradictions cannot be resolved. We need to ask: how do we transcend these contradictions and create a new synthesis.

Now, to criticism. In fact, we are in dire need of criticism; but as I said, criticism too has its limits. We need criticism because contemporary Muslim societies have an aversion to criticism. Many Muslims believe that 'their Islam', whatever variety it happens to be, is perfect and above criticism. They believe that all questions of importance have already have been answered by the great jurists of history. Muslims just have to believe and follow what the *ulama* tell them, without criticism and comment. Even if what they are being told is patently ridiculous, or clearly unjust and unethical, as long as it comes from a religious authority it is perfect and correct. But unless we are critical, that is have a critical consciousness, and asks relevant questions about our faith, we are little more than blind followers, sheep herded by obscurantist religious leaders. And, not infrequently, led into nefarious directions. This unfortunately is the condition of the Muslim ummah today, the nexus of our current predicaments.

Criticism has been central to Islam from its inception. The Qur'an says that belief cannot be forced and it describes those who follow faith blindly as 'cattle' unable to understand, see or hear. It repeatedly urges Muslims to think and reflect, observe and measure, travel and write, ask questions and criticise. The life of Prophet Muhammad reveals that he was constantly questioned by his companions, and engaged in constant dialogue and discussion. In later years, the scholarship that evolved around collecting the traditions and sayings of the Prophet was itself based on what today we would call peer-review. Indeed, it was this critical spirit that catalysed achievements in science, art and architecture, literature and music. These achievements happened because practitioners were at home debating and arguing, criticising and accepting criticism.

There are numerous reasons why this critical spirit is now harder to find. In the classi-

cal Islamic period, heterodoxy was often encouraged if not tolerated by the state, either openly or tacitly, which allowed contrarian views to be aired without fear of retribution. But in contemporary times, states often impose a particular theology on its people. In the classical period, the religious scholars actively engaged in *ijtihad*, debated with each other, and took criticism on board before stating their opinions. But over the centuries, religious scholars too developed an aversion to criticism and actively suppressed all dissent.

This lack of support for the right to critical thought, over the centuries, has allowed singular views of Islam to dominate and go unchallenged. As a consequence, Muslims stubbornly hold on to opinions – for example, about women, minorities, family law, crime and punishment and philosophy - that have long passed their 'sell by' date. These views have contributed to misogyny, bigoted, extremism, sectarianism and violence that plagues so many Muslim societies. Moreover, Muslims have been reduced to ciphers – incapable of generating new and original ideas.

Nowadays, our aversion to criticism stems from two basic elements of our outlook. First, we have an idealised notion of Islam. Not just that Islam is ideal and perfect but it also has answers to all human problems. Our sources are flawless, our classical jurists are faultless, our history is impeccable. We seem to be unconcerned about the fact that our sources are riddled with contradictions, the classical jurists got so many things seriously wrong, and that so much of our history, like all human histories, is full of violence and bigotry. Even the three out of four 'Rightly Guided Caliphs' were murdered! The blatant fact that we don't even know how to ask questions, let alone provide answers to complex contemporary problems seems to make no difference.

Second, we fear getting things wrong. We fear making mistakes in matter of faith and belief, which are seen as paramount. But to err is human and there is no defence, no security blanket that can insulate us against our natural condition – indeed creating such an insulating device is the most devastating er-

ror of all. Because we fear we may get things wrong, or do not know enough to make a decision, we never actually get to know. Instead, we accept as Islamic knowledge what we are told, what we were always told, even if the age-old interpretations and glosses are now superfluous, fossilised, obscurantist, and make no sense whatsoever in the complex realities of modern lives.

There are other ways of knowing and approaching the basic sources – which do not render all traditional knowledge irrelevant – but which can help us to appreciate and discern what is valuable and worthwhile from what is outmoded. We fear challenging authority because that delinks us from tradition. This is the most scurrilous position of all since it amounts to a lack of faith in the capacity of Islam to inspire us and provide contemporary solutions.

Now, critical thought is not about perpetual deconstructing, habitual, empirical thinking. The function of criticism, as far as I am concerned, is not just to analyse and deconstruct things, but also to enhance them, improve them, take them from where they are to a higher plane. This is the kind of criticism we undertake in the journal I edit, *Critical Muslim*. Now, it is important to make the distinction: we are not critical of Islam per se but we look at Islam critically. We aim to inculcate a mindset encouraged by the Qur'an when it urges us to think, reason and ask questions. Our accountability before God is individual; and we are personally and individually responsible for our thoughts as much as our actions. No authority can fulfil our responsibility on our behalf. On the Day of Judgement, we shall stand alone in front of Creator. Therefore, we must shoulder the responsibility of thinking about what it means to be a Muslim in postnormal times for ourselves.

The project is based on the premise that a more pluralist future for Islam depends on looking at its history, tradition, legacy, theology, societies and cultures, critically. Another aim is to transform the isolated individuals into a worldwide network, working to produce a modicum of critical thought that serves as a catalyst for positive change.

It should be evident that we do not recognise the authority of religious scholars at a loss with the modern world and too often giving respectability to prejudice, bigotry, xenophobia, and social and cultural malpractices. Neither do we understand 'Islam' as a set of pieties and taboos. We do not label Muslims, whether they define their identity religiously or culturally and regard themselves as pious, conservatives, traditionalist, secular, liberal, or socialists. Rather, we embrace the diversity of contemporary Islam in all its mindboggling complexity. However, we challenge all interpretations of Islam: traditionalist, modernist, fundamentalist and apologetic to develop new readings with the potential for social, cultural and political transformation of the Muslim world. For us Islam is a worldview, a way of critically engaging and shaping the world.

We are critical in the sense of being sceptical of received ideas. Knowledge is provisional and dependents on evidence. But we are also critical in another sense: we recognise that knowledge and its interpretation have a politics too. Critical Muslim is therefore equally critical of unchecked power and authority wherever it is coming from – Islam or the West. It is critical of the epistemological bias in our production of knowledge. It is critical of the desire of the leaders of larger nations to dominate smaller ones, and critical of the way in which global mass media represents peoples and cultures from outside. But *Critical Muslim* does not see Islam and the West as two fuming bulls in a china-shop. In postnormal times, we need to recognise that we are interconnected and interdependent in complex and contradictory ways. The function of our criticism is to produce a synthesise what is best in both.

5. Do you share the ways of philosophizing an Islamic person and a Western one? Are these different forms of reflection or different models of life?

They are different in the sense that Islamic philosophy is deeply rooted in the moral and ethical precepts of Islam. They are both rational enterprises but their worldviews and question they raise are somewhat different.

Western philosophy is essentially a secular enterprise, while Islamic philosophy is based on the worldview of the Qur'an. It is worth noting that ibn Rushd ends *The Incoherence of Incoherence*, his monumental defence of reason, by stating I know not – God knows best. Thus, while both western and Islamic philosophy are philosophy – that is exploration and study of nature, cause, or principle of reality, and knowledge based on logical deductions and reasoning, as well as systems of thought for promoting such study – they constitute different forms of reflection on what it means to be human and what is a model good life. That, of course, does not mean they cannot reach the same or similar conclusions! But, more importantly, while western philosophy can lead you to nihilism and fascism, Islamic philosophy cannot because it is ultimately based on hope in God's Grace, and the fundamental Islamic notion that we are all equal in front of God. To see the difference, look at Martin Heidegger 's work on Being and Time and Mulla Sadra's work on Being and Existence, which lead, as Mulla Sadra defines philosophy, to the polishing and perfection of the soul. Philosophy for Mulla Sadra is a transformative process that cures ignorance as well as sick soul and mind, and bring hope in the Grace of God – and does not lead to nihilism, anxiety and meaningless. Much of postmodern philosophy centres around meaningless; while Islamic philosophy is specifically about providing meaning. For Mulla Sadra, ibn Sina, al-Farabi and other classical philosophers, and in Islamic philosophy in general, sound philosophical knowledge, acquired from reflection and intellection, is identical to the metaphysical knowledge of the prophets – it is a prophetic practice and inheritance.

6. In your opinion, can Islamic philosophy meet the needs of a modern person living in a network maze, an inexhaustible world of information?

For sure. We have to negotiate this network maze, and the inexhaustible world of information through the ethical precepts of Islam and with knowledge and wisdom. That means we need to rekindle our inheritance of Islamic philosophy and make it an inte-

gral part of our lives and thought; it should be our main tools to ethically navigate our way out of this impasse, shape and work towards more positive, viable and sustainable futures for the planet and all humanity. But for that to happen, for 'Islamic philosophy to meet the needs of the modern person', we need to renovate Islamic philosophy to meet the challenges of postnormal times – a main one being how we cope with contradictions. A good example of how this can be done is provided by Ebrahim Moosa in his book, *Al-Ghazzali and the Poetics of Imagination* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Moosa suggests that al-Ghazzali did not reconcile contradictions between different systems of thought. Indeed, contradictions cannot be reconciled because they are logically opposed. Rather, Moosa shows, al-Ghazzali imagined new verities of knowledge where contradictory positions could be simultaneously maintained. We now need to go a step further: we need to produce new knowledge that enables us to transcend contradictions and produces new synthesis relevant to postnormal times. In Islamic philosophy, knowledge is a process. It is gained and progresses through making judicious judgements. Now judgement is an important term in Islamic thought: it involves analysis of a proposition to determine whether it is true and describes something that exists. Thus, judgement is intimately connected to existence, wisdom and how we live our lives. The challenge for Islamic philosophy now is to demonstrate how discerning judgments can be made in this contradictory, complex and chaotic world; how do we produce knowledge – and this is also the challenge for Islamic epistemology - that is both based on wise judgements and that simultaneously enables us to make wise judgements. If we can do that, then Islamic philosophy would not only be revived – come alive! – but would become an integral part of our lives.

7. Since the topic of your research is related to the future? Does humanity have it, or is there a separate future for each person? Are we all connected by a single fate, is our future at all fateful?

Individuals, of course, will have their own futures, just as humanity as a whole has potential futures. But in postnormal times, futures of individuals and humanity are connected. Individual actions determine the futures of whole humanity. Climate change, for example, will affect everyone; the whole human race will suffer the consequences of rising temperature and sea levels, perhaps some more than others. But we are not doomed to a single, determined fate. I have always pointed out that trends are not destiny; we can shape our destiny. It all depends on what we want, what we are looking for, what we cherish and what we are willing to do and change.

Indeed, the future is the best place to find whatever you are looking for. Why? Because you can't change the past. You can interpret it, rediscover it, draw lessons from it, but you can't change it. Neither can you change the present. Even though things change rapidly nowadays, in general change is not instantaneous; it takes time, even though it is shrinking. So, by the time the present has been changed, it is already the future. The future is the only arena where real change – positive or negative – is possible. But what we regard as positive or negative, the kind of change we envisage or desire, determines how we look at the future. The future is all things to all people.

If we are optimistic, we tend to see the future in bright colours. So, a typical optimistic future may look something like this. Technological developments will solve all our problems. Big Data and AI will rule the world and shape all knowledge and development. Genetic engineering will solve all our medical problems. Science would take giant leaps forward and we will have a Theory of Everything. Not in the too distant future, there will be Singularity, when computers, AI and human beings will merge and create a posthuman future. The optimists tend to be scientists and technocrats who work for corporations or the government. They also tend to come from the industrialised countries. One can say that they give us the western establishment view of the future. They see change in mainly quantitative terms, and these fu-

tures are envisioned and designed to stimulate demand for more and more technology, consumer goods, and desires.

The pessimists use the same methods as the optimists to reach diametrically opposite conclusions. Except they concentrate on the downside of technology and focus on destructive trends. People with pessimist inclinations tend to be social scientists, philosophers, artists and rather left wing. All pessimistic futures essentially boil down to the *Blade Runner or Terminator* scenario. Here, runaway technology produces a dark, dreary and dingy future. The world is controlled by a megalomaniac corporation, privacy has evaporated, and cyborgs police the streets.

In between the cheerleading optimists and banal pessimists, there is wide range of other perceptions of the future. There are idealists who wish for cleaner, greener futures and develop elaborate visions of utopian future worlds. They paint the future canvas with love, harmony and sustainability. Then, sit back and hope that the universe has the sense and the good will to transform their visions into future realities. This is where the leftover dreams of the 1960s meet postmodern pastiche. Although, it has to be said, that groups like Extinction Rebellion and climate change activists are now actively fighting for more positive futures.

Needless to say, I do not subscribe to any of these views of the future. I don't believe in 'the future' – there is no such thing. There are always futures; and, as I said, they are not a priori given. I see the duel between optimistic and pessimistic futurists as a confidence trick. It has little to do with the future and a great deal to do with business. Both optimistic and pessimistic futures are products that are sold either as developments in technology or cultural products (films, novels, television series) or both. This is why, even though prediction is a hazardous business– the chances of getting one's prediction in postnormal times are extremely hight - the business of prediction has spread like a global fire. But prediction is a way of foreclosing the future. No matter how sophisticated the techniques, they simply end up by projecting the (selected) past and the (often-privileged) present on to a linear future. Prediction and extrapolating from the (changing) present, is another name for colonising the future.

We therefore need to break away from the self-fulfilling prophecies of the optimistic and pessimistic modes of future gazing. The future needs to be opened up to pluralistic and democratic possibilities. This requires us Muslims – all of us: individuals and communities – to actively engage with the future, fight to decolonise it, and work to shape it with our own values and concerns. We have to emphasise and look at the future not as a commodity but as a domain of alternative potentials and options. This is where an active contemporary Islamic philosophy would be of immense help. We need to appreciate that an awareness of the future can empower us, open up possibilities where none existed before, and provide us with opportunities for shaping dynamic, thriving Islamic futures.