

THE HUMANIST
IMPERATIVE IN
SOUTH AFRICA

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The Humanist Imperative in South Africa

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THE SPIRIT OF ISLAMIC HUMANISM

Ebrahim Moosa

Whether an image is a reflection of reality or the fabrication of a hostile media, there is widespread agreement that worldwide the image of Islam and Muslims is taking a horrific beating. It is, of course, risky to speak glibly and anecdotally about complex empirical realities in Muslim societies that are not easily decipherable. Whatever the causes of the anger unleashed by people who identify with Islam individually or collectively, it is true that most right-thinking people in the Muslim world and beyond are alarmed at the dehumanisation of Muslims. Even though a very small minority of Muslims perpetrates violence, yet a community exceeding 1.2 billion people is implicated by the blowback of Muslim terrorist activities.

If Muslims are so concerned about their image, sceptics and outsiders will immediately ask, what are they doing about it? There lies the rub. Suicide bombings occur not only in New York, Washington, London and Madrid, but also target the business districts of Istanbul, Karachi, and Kabul, all Muslim majority cities. The American military invasions of Iraq, Afghanistan and intense US military strikes in

regions of Pakistan and Yemen all inflame Muslim sentiment. But these descriptions not only speak of a stand-off between foreign governments and groups of people; they also signify that something deeply troubling is fermenting within Muslim societies. Solutions to these intractable problems are in short supply since the diagnoses are often hastily made and are flawed.

One flawed diagnosis was made by al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden who thought they could undermine American security by attacking the US homeland. Equally flawed was the decision after 11 September 2001 by President George W. Bush to invade Afghanistan in a fit of imperial hubris in order to apprehend the criminals responsible for 9/11. That invasion soon morphed into a civilising mission via nation-building in Afghanistan of saving Afghan women from the Taliban. And once the filament of logic used to justify the invasion of Iraq withered that exercise in imperial hubris also turned into a civilising mission. For those of us who still remember colonial times the Euro-American military adventures in the Middle East and South Asia sounded all too familiar. Not only are these costly imperial adventures being paid in blood, treasure, opportunities and catastrophe for everyone concerned especially for the Afghans and Iraqis, but it also stirs anger and resentment throughout the Muslim world and perpetuates the cycle of hatred and mistrust.

South Africa, too, has had its fair share of horrific religiously-inspired violence perpetrated by people identified as Muslims who were linked to the vigilante group People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) that sowed mayhem and destruction in the city of Cape Town in the late 1990s. Thankfully deliberate prosecutions and sensible leadership managed to break the back of these criminal networks that masqueraded in the colours of religion. Yet, these few bad apples also managed to undermine the positive image of South African Muslims who rendered extraordinary public service and leadership in all walks of life. From leadership in government, the judiciary and business, to the arenas of healthcare and sports, South Africans of Muslim heritage have demonstrated their contribution as citizens and a people of faith in a complex and diverse country.

In many ways South Africa is both an exception and a role model. Muslim minorities in Europe, North America and elsewhere are envious of the extent to which Muslims in South Africa have integrated into national life. These overseas groups might want to study the experiences of South African Islam where efforts in faith, citizenship and service to humanity are orchestrated effortlessly and seamlessly. In part, this shining legacy of Islam is owed to the struggle of Muslim South Africans alongside people of different faiths and other convictions during the dark days of apartheid. Those struggles taught everyone the crucial lesson that we share a common humanity that transcends race, religion and ethnicity. In that struggle triumphalist and exclusivist theologies of Islam were abandoned in favour of more egalitarian and inclusivist Muslim theologies. If the South African story of Islam was shared on a larger global forum there could be something edificatory for all who are interested.

The global scene

On a global scale Muslim communities were caught in a bind of bad choices. Some Muslims resorted to violence and militancy directed at Western governments who aid a wide range of Muslim political leaders and elites, many of whom are kleptocracies, dictatorships and authoritarian rulers. The best interests of their societies and people are often furthest from their minds. The many militant and terrorist adversaries of these foreign-backed Muslim elites are determined to harm the interests of the 'far enemy', namely the Western powers, in a nihilistic fashion irrespective of the human cost of their destructive actions. In a bizarre and craven manner Muslim terrorists who attack both the 'near enemy,' namely the bad rulers, and the 'far enemy', enjoy some credibility in the 'Muslim street' so to speak. Wanton violence is far from being a solution and only perpetuates the nihilistic syndrome. When violence becomes an end in itself then we are already well past nihilism. In many places where entire communities are caught up in this violent syndrome I also question whether faith has not already been replaced by its opposite and something more sinister.

At the other end of the spectrum are the romantic peaceniks. Somewhat benign and perhaps equally misguided they imagine that by merely talking peace, without taking decisive action, the world and its genuine trouble spots will be magically transformed into some idyllic havens. Clearly this option ought to be more attractive than violence. But if peace talks, interfaith dialogues and non-violent campaigns become ends in themselves without a deliberate agenda for transformation they also become dangerous pathways. How? When dialogue becomes a commodity for consumption with no higher ends at stake, then a good thing, too, can become harmful. Often such superfluous acts breed scepticism about dialogue and undermine opportunities when conversation and exchange might genuinely be available. Well-intentioned thoughts in themselves enjoy no immunity from being delusional. Such intentions must be accompanied by a genuine will to change and make the world a better place in order to be meaningful. In the absence of a genuine will to change, peaceful processes can make us stare down the same nihilistic abyss as the perpetrators of violence do to their adversaries. That will to change via peaceful protest was demonstrated in the uprisings of the Spring of 2011 beginning in Tunisia, followed by developments in Egypt, Bahrain and Libya. These are promising beginnings that should be encouraged to flower into self-sustaining democracies.

Meaningful analyses proposing humane solutions and action to our existential dilemmas are the best guarantors of meaningful change. One crucial aspect of change requires that we ensure that governance at a global level delivers optimal justice to all societies. An international order bereft of justice is nothing short of a jungle where strong predatory states prey on weaker ones. In the international order too much emphasis is placed on the threat of force in the service of narrowly defined interests while very little energy is invested in persuasion. In the post cold-war global order, and especially after the end of the bipolar world with the collapse of the Soviet Union, liberal-capitalism has gone on a rampage. This state of affairs has inaugurated an enormous imbalance in power and has caused serious distortions to our global political, economic and cultural orders. If left unchecked, we can be sure

that the resultant anger will afflict more than just the powerful; it will also overwhelm the weak and the poor. A Qur'anic passage warns of such possibilities: "Beware of an affliction that will not be restricted to the evil-mongers among you alone" (Qur'an 8:25). Neo-liberal globalisation might have its attractions but it has also bequeathed some alarming catastrophes and ticking bombs: from impending environmental degradation, the run-away gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' within and between nations, and the skewed consumption of global resources for the benefit of the powerful to a lack of care for fellow humans in foreign and alien places.

Islamic humanism

What kind of resources does Islam as a tradition offer in order to heal the human spirit? Islam once played a major role in the intellectual tradition known as humanism. Muslim thinkers shared knowledge traditions with their Jewish and Christian counterparts in the Middle Ages. Muslim scholars acted as curators of the rational traditions of the Greeks in the form of philosophy and logic for a considerable time. Islam at its best also ushered in a cosmopolitan order where Muslim Arabs and non-Arabs, Jews, Christians and a host of other religious groups flourished. Muslim humanism energised Islamdom's philosophical and theological traditions for the better. Yet, more exclusivist and triumphalist theologies also reduced the capaciousness of Islam's humanistic tradition. This narrowing of the intake of the humanistic spirit also undermined the theological possibilities of creating a world shared with 'others' so that sectarian and group interests displaced the caring for humans qua humans. Furthermore, the Islamic humanistic tradition was also unable to reign in the imperial reflex of Muslim politics and ethics.

In the face of a hegemonic Muslim theology the humanistic tradition of Muslim theology provides an opportunity to critique the former. To foster critique in such a narrowing world is critical. The lack of self-critique among the mainstream of Muslim religious thinkers today and Muslim intelligentsia generally is deeply troubling. How alien would such a passive stance have sounded to the ears of humanist Muslim thinkers of the past who did possess a critical voice and directed it freely at insiders and outsiders alike? It is with breathtaking force that the humanist poet Abu al-Ala al-Ma'arri (d. 1057) could parody the self-righteous religious scholars of his day for their double standards.

They recite their sacred books, although [the fact informs me]
That these are fiction from first to last
O Reason, thou [alone] speakest the truth. Then perish the fools
Who forged the [religious] traditions or interpreted them!
A rabbi is no heretic among his disciples,
If he sets a high price on stories which he invented
He only desired to marry women
And amass riches by his lies.
Softly! Thou has been deceived, honest man as thou art,
By a cunning knave who preaches to the women.
Amongst you in the morning he says that wine is forbidden, but
He makes a point of drinking it himself in the evening.

Ma`arri and many other Muslim humanist thinkers and philosophers kept alive the flame of critique and introspection. They left a legacy that others could follow and occasionally drawing on their ideas help to shift the mainstream Muslim theological paradigm in the right direction but often not far enough.

A modern exemplar

A modern exemplar of such refreshing Muslim humanism is Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958), a leading religious scholar and statesman of modern India (Henderson *et al* 1988). Born in Mecca to a father of Indian heritage, Azad was a child prodigy and an erudite man of letters who was trained as a traditional Muslim theologian. A master stylist in Urdu, Azad spent his early years as a journalist and as an editor of widely read learned magazines. He joined the nationalist movement for liberation from colonialism and spent a good part of his life in British India's jails alongside figures like Mahatma Gandhi and India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. At independence Azad became India's first minister of education and the foremost exemplar of humanistic Islamic values in a culturally and religiously diverse India. Azad derived his humanistic inspiration both from the Qur'an, on which he wrote a commentary and from the oral tradition going back to the Prophet Muhammad.

It was Azad who made Indian Muslim audiences in the early part of the twentieth century aware of the humanism at the heart of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Steeped in the oldest of Islamdom's humanistic tradition, namely literature, since he had an unusual mastery of three languages Persian, Arabic and Urdu, Azad grasped the essential spirit underlying our humanity. Through literature, especially his love for poetry Azad explored the manifold vistas that beckon our common humanity (Azad 1983). This talent he put to great use in order to leaven his theology for application in a culturally pluralistic India. With an intellectual apparatus honed by literature, Azad could appreciate both the particulars of Islamic theology and its universalism. Therefore, he firmly believed that Islam's teachings could not differentiate between human beings purely on the grounds of religion. In a united India, Azad believed, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis and Christians could all live amicably with each other. Given this humanistic vision, he was also an implacable foe of the division of the subcontinent into two religious homelands: a Muslim homeland called Pakistan and a Hindu homeland called India. While Azad was aware of the darkness of the human soul as it spilled out in religiously inspired violence on the subcontinent before the partition of his homeland, he was optimistic in his faith in human beings and human nature. He never gave up on humanity's ability to transcend limitations.

I stumbled upon Azad's particular reading of an inclusive theology while reading an essay on Azad in a collection called *Aging Lantern (Purane Chiragh)* written by Azad's much younger contemporary Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi (d. 1999). Nadvi was an influential scholar of a traditional stripe who headed a society called *Message to Humanity* attached to his influential seminary in the Indian city of Lucknow called the Nadwatul Ulama. In his essay Nadvi reminisced on a speech delivered by Azad that he had attended in which India's leading Muslim statesman talked about human

equality. To demonstrate that Islam's highest authority and teachings supported human equality and friendship among all of humanity, Azad cited a benediction that the Prophet Muhammad made during his nightly vigils and after his daily prayers.

Nadvi himself seemed surprised by the proof-text Azad uncovered, just as I, too, was pleasantly surprised by my discovery. The proof-text was a tradition found in the canonical collection of the ninth century compiler of prophetic sayings, Abu Dawud al-Sijistani. For most Sunni Muslims this book is an authentic representation of the body of knowledge of Islam's Prophet. I was also reminded of how often communities read their treasured collections in ways that obscure material offering liberating insights. But it took someone with Azad's acumen and insight to retrieve from the Muslim archive a liberating insight that impressed Nadvi and continues to delight Azad's readers today.

The report Azad recovered was a benediction the Prophet Muhammad repeatedly made at the end of his formal worship five times a day: "... Oh God, our Lord and the Lord of all things, I testify that you exclusively are the Lord," he said. This was later followed by: "... Our Lord and the Lord of all things, I testify that all of humanity are brethren [family] ...". For Azad this benediction captured the spirit of an Islamic humanism. All of humanity is a single family, a fact to which the Prophet of Islam testified repeatedly, is a beacon to those followers of Islam who are committed to Muhammad's teachings with integrity. Armed with such teachings, Azad never wavered in his commitment to Islam, or in his service to all of humanity. But it is surprising how this benediction has fallen out of the benediction practices of contemporary Muslims especially at a time when such an inclusivism was needed for Muslim societies. Even within progressive Muslim circles in South Africa and beyond, this benediction is absent from the regular liturgy.

But there are other benedictions of the Prophet Muhammad that circulate within Muslim communities that speak to the human spirit across time and place and require greater attention to their meaning and implications. In a humanity broken as ours, where the emphasis is purely on the external we often neglect the darkness that overcomes the conscience and the soul. The Prophet Muhammad taught humanity to be aware of such darkening possibilities and therefore urged us frequently to reflect on the state of the soul and human conscience. Among my favourite benedictions are the following:

O God, grant my soul piety
And my conscience purity
No one can rival You in purifying it
You are the Guardian of my soul
And the Master of my conscience

Oh God, I seek refuge in You and ask you to guard me:
From knowledge that does not profit
From a heart that does not tremble
From an ego that is never sated, and
From a supplication that is never granted. (al-Nisaburi *et al* 1995)

A medieval exemplar

The exemplar par excellence who persistently excavated the ethical dimensions of Islam's teachings was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), a towering figure in the Muslim tradition (Moosa 2005). Clearly Ghazali saw the value of the humanistic tradition and subtly incorporated it in his writings. There are some parallels between our condition and that of Ghazali's while there is a great deal that separates us. Like him we are better at knowing what we do not want, than fully knowing what we do want. What we do know is that we desire and seek a paradigmatic shift and that we search after emergent knowledge, both of which will facilitate transitions to alternative futures. While the awaited paradigmatic transition in its messianic calling is as yet barely discernable, we have a hunch in which direction we wish to go. What we do know is that dominant paradigms within the world system that continue to reproduce themselves have to be contested and countered with alternative ways of knowledge and knowing, as well as models of society-building and models of living.

During his time Ghazali asked what kind of subjectivity was required and capable of creating new knowledge for the myriads of challenges in his society. That subjectivity could potentially have several possibilities and iterations. Ghazali cultivated a subjectivity of a self in a unique relationship with the divine, nature and society. To cultivate the self was the goal of the paradigmatic transitions and emergent knowledge that he sought. Happily the notion of the self he aspired to could not be construed as an egotistical one, but one that was related to tradition, revelation, knowledge and society.

As Muslims explore ways to energise their knowledge traditions, in addition to being critical, robust and cutting-edge, they will have to take into account the kind of subjectivity that a shifting paradigmatic tradition aspires to produce. Prudence requires that Muslims look at their own past while concurrently exploring experiences and resources of knowledge in other cultures and traditions. It requires forging partnerships in order to form alternative societies. As De Sousa Santos so poignantly reminds us, the future has dramatically become a personal question for us, one of life and death (De Sousa Santos 1995:345). "The past is a metonymy of all that we were and were not," he says. "And the past that never was demands a special reflection on the conditions that prevented it from ever being. The more suppressed, the more present. The emergent subjectivity is so radically contemporary with itself that, by dealing with the past as if it were present, it even gains an anachronistic dimension" (De Sousa Santos 1995:345). In a most astute observation he adds: "The past is, however, made present, not as a ready-made solution, as in reactionary subjectivity, but rather as a creative problem susceptible of opening up new possibilities" (De Sousa Santos 1995:345).

The critical work that any theological project seeking a paradigmatic change has to undertake is to de-familiarise, interrogate and question the canonical tradition, and literally de-construct it. But it will have to be different from certain strands of postmodernism that only deconstruct, as if deconstruction were an end in itself. Together with De Sousa Santos, we must insist that it is only in an archaeology

where the past becomes present; in other words, it is only in an encounter with the historical that a paradigmatic transition can engage in a radical critique of the politics of the possible, without yielding to an impossible politics (De Sousa Santos 1995:491).

Ghazali found inspiration in poesis and ethos and the creativity of being in the threshold position or the border areas. In one of his important writings he spoke of the advantage of being in the threshold position, the in-between space called a *dihliz* in Arabic. As a theologian Ghazali could care less for the finery of philosophy but valued its insights. Despite his interest in philosophy he also realised a certain debt to poetry. What he found refreshing in poetry was its ability to disclose impossibilities or apparent impossibilities. Poetry held together heterogeneous knowledge: knowledge of the ends of human life, knowledge of the soul. While philosophers were disdainful of the occasional vulgarity of poetics – the ability to be creative and form something new out of the old – Ghazali understood better than some of his contemporaries, the value of this mode of discourse. And, he put it to effective use in order to mediate complex notions of truth located in the essential diversity (heterogeneity) of knowledge. For this reason he had little hesitation in mixing different grammars of thought in order to persuade and cajole his audiences. Therefore, his narrative could simultaneously sustain divine interventions in nature through miracles and also admit to the role of reason and a radical conception of order in nature – one that was primarily based on empirical observation but not on necessary causation. Thus, different kinds of discourses could co-exist within a paradigm without contradiction and paradox but one that was sufficiently capacious to accommodate different knowledge systems.

Ghazali also understood that knowledge must be emancipatory. True knowledge paved the way to the ethical in Ghazali's view. Knowledge paved the way to salvation in the afterlife and offered the fulcrum of earthly emancipation. The emancipated subject was one who was truly liberated from all material dependencies. However, an emancipated subject did not behave like a pseudo-divinity on earth who perpetrates genocide and the destruction of knowledge, two notorious crimes often perpetrated by humans in spiritual and mental bondage.

Ghazali was also an adventurer and an explorer in his thinking. He realised that all the answers to life's complex realities did not reside in a single culture, intellectual tradition or historical epoch. For that reason, he ventured outside the mainline currents, raiding archives of knowledge in order to see how he could reinforce the positive aspects of the traditions that he had inherited and invent other interpretations. Not only did he de-familiarise the canonical tradition, but he also supplemented it and re-familiarised it, adding a new gloss, in order to make the lustre and vibrancy of tradition more pronounced. This reconstructionist approach to tradition resonates well with those whose intellectual temper is predisposed to critical thinking and the intellectual renewal of tradition, just as many formalists would be offended as too presumptuous a claim to make.

Ghazali, in my view, tried to configure why so many Muslim thinkers like him in the past effortlessly engaged with an assortment of knowledge and ideas stemming from different origins without their labour and personas being rejected by tradition. He successfully adapted knowledge according to the needs of his own subjectivity. In other words, knowledge to him was intimately related to the needs of the self and his subjectivity and therefore he did not allow any verdict of authority to veto his quest.

The contemporary relevance of Ghazali to Muslim thought lies precisely in his critical engagement with tradition, but more specifically, the way in which he modified, adjusted, re-calibrated, amended and supplemented the intellectual tradition. Unlike many contemporaries who either uncritically romanticise tradition or in an apocalyptic spasm take refuge in it, he took critical thought seriously. It was important for him, just as it is for us, to critically engage with the canonical tradition, a process that culminated in radical questioning of the canonical tradition.

The Muslim intellectual tradition is not static, nor is it inert. It has its own rhythms of continuity and discontinuity by always re-calibrating itself to the imperatives of ethical, moral and spiritual integrity. For if we do not wish to see the ethical imagination lapse into a censorious puritanism that hurtles toward self-destruction, nor degenerate into nostalgic lamentation, then the ethical must be taken seriously not only in its discursive guise, but also in its poetic manifestation. What impresses and captivates any reader of the Muslim efforts in the South African liberation struggle, or of Azad's labours in British and post-independence India and Ghazali's work in the eleventh century, is how impressively each recovered poiesis – inventive making and creating – by disseminating into the reading and interpretation of texts broadly conceived, the extravagant heterogeneity of knowledge.

Where others hesitated to bring art and aesthetics to the study of ethics, Azad and Ghazali unapologetically brought the power of literature and poetry to the study of the ethical. The purest of art resides in the heart – the receptacle of subjectivity. Subjectivity here means the capacity of the soul or self to submit to all ethical possibilities, with the aid of a variety of disciplines and practices that empowered it.

If Islamdom has any hope of renewing its tradition in its manifold manifestations today then it is crucial to re-read the classical figures like Ghazali. It will be equally important to examine the way Muslim communities around the world, South Africa being only one example, deal with challenges with a modicum of success. In colonial and post-colonial India, we do well to recall, Abul Kalam Azad constructed a Muslim political theology that made diversity and the integrity of all human beings the foundation of his faith and his faith in humanity.

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