THE ISLAMIC WORLD

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SOCIAL CHANGE

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The Muslim part of the modern world has seen numerous experiments in social change, some more successful than others. The overall balance sheet beginning with anti-colonial struggles, to experiments with nationalism, socialism, liberal capitalism and Islamism reveal mixed outcomes and a chary prognosis. Religious fervor, often utilized as means to mobilize the multitudes, has proven to be as productive as well as destructive. It will be helpful to keep this background in mind when trying to grasp twenty-first century Muslim concerns about social change. What we encounter is the vertiginous intersection of culture, politics, economic power or its absence, with historical memory producing different configurations that coalesce in ethics.

Militant forces claiming to rid post-colonial Muslim societies from catastrophic misrule in the shape of coup d'états and despotisms, grinding poverty, and economic underdevelopment are also responsible for silencing sober voices of integrity, reconstruction and progress. It takes extraordinary courage to confront menacing forces, especially when entire nations and their peoples have become the expendable playgrounds for neo-imperialist occupation and exploitation, amply aided by compradores or indigenous elites. Social change faces both insurmountable internal and external challenges.

Some might view such a judgment to be unnecessarily alarmist. Yet, revitalization and renewal of Muslim societies can only be realized through a radical improvement in people's material conditions. While it remains uncertain whether optimal economic conditions inspire large social visions or vice versa, what we do know is that societies need both vision and growth. Yet, we also know that communities in crisis often find opportunities for creative solutions within the very maelstrom of chaos. Thus it was no surprise that energetic social movements emerged in the twentieth century in both Muslim majority as well as minority contexts from Egypt to Indonesia, and from India to South Africa. In the latter half of the twentieth century, mass global migrations also opened up new spaces and possibilities for the practice and renewal of Muslim thought. Muslim communities in the New World – the USA, Canada and South America, as well as Europe and Australia – offer opportunities but also challenges to imagine Islam as a tradition of practice in very creative ways.

Identity without culture

Throughout much of the twentieth century several major to medium-sized Muslim social movements evolved in an effort to reinvigorate Muslim religious thought. They all labored under the idealist vision that something deep within the human soul can create something new irrespective of material challenges. Influential among these were the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Jamāʿat-i Islāmī in Pakistan and the Muḥammadiyya in Indonesia. There were also intellectuals like Bediüzzaman Said Nursi in Turkey, from Iran ʿAlī Sharīʿatī and the Ayatollah Khomeni, the latter as architect of the Islamic revolution, Sayyid Quṭb in Egypt, Malik Bennabi in Algeria/France and many others also made significant contributions. And towards the close of the twentieth century the Afghan Mujāhidūn in Afghanistan were succeeded by the militant Taliban/Al Qaeda alliance that had all the trappings of a global movement located within a nation-state.

For several generations of Muslims, a cacophony of voices inspired both young and old to reassert their Muslim identity within a strict religious ethos yet they were culturally as rootless as dandelion spores. While commitment to these religiously austere social movements fueled the passion to attain political success, in practice success was often less apparent than failures. Excessive religious zeal was often mistaken for commitment. Whether in Egypt or Pakistan, Iran or Indonesia the results were disturbingly similar: fellow Muslims upbraided their co-religionists in "show-trials" targeting academics, bringing blasphemy charges against dissenting individuals, launching witch-hunts, fostering violence against political foes, perpetrating intimidation and communal conflict with neighbors irrespective of whether they were Christian, Jewish or Hindu in a variety of Muslim majority as well as minority contexts. Cumulatively, these scenes paint a dismal picture of Muslims worldwide: images that are as confusing as they are demoralizing to a broad spectrum of adherents. The result is that Westerners as well as Muslims living in non-Western and Western contexts are petrified as the gradations of violence and counter-violence flourish, too often at the expense of innocent civilians.

Simultaneously, Muslim middle classes serve as a weathervane of the poisoned mood. They are increasingly aware of the grotesque injustice that their co-religionists experience at the hands of intrusive Western powers, and in particular at the hands of American and European military powers. Aside from the physical assault on Muslims resulting in countless deaths, even secular-minded Muslims are outraged by the ghastly media misrepresentations of Islam demonizing their culture, history and achievements. Now even elite Muslims have lost perspective and balance. The result is the rapid consumption of conspiracy theories that feature Muslim victimhood and innocence. Victimhood replaces sound strategy and the fury of the multitude is directed not only at Westerners but also at Muslim leaders, institutions and individuals who do not acquiesce to this distorted mindset are not spared. Such fears and paranoia have been validated by the invasion of Iraq and Western double standards regarding nuclear weapons policies that punish Iran but reward Israel. While angry Muslims manage to contain their unhappiness to the level of peaceful protest, a sizeable minority have also opted for destructive remedies such as violence.

To trace the emerging realities of the Muslim world to cataclysmic events such as the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, is

analytically unsound. To reduce the roots of the conflict to a simplistic contest between Muslim civilization pitted against Western Christian civilization is lazy analysis. The Western stand-off against some Muslim states as well as non-state actors remains shrouded in complexity: history and power lurk behind these developments. One would have to take into account the consequences of the historical record of relations between various power blocs over the past three centuries that play out today. It is crucial to recall that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the map of the Muslim world underwent massive changes physically and psychically. The rise of Western powers through imperialism and colonial conquest irreversibly transformed the Muslim world, often in unanticipated ways.

Traditions in the making

Whether the decline of Muslim political fortunes was due to internal or external factors pales in significance to the fact that for nearly two centuries, new narratives and ways of life have been grafted onto the Muslim world through developments brought about by Western power. The juggernaut of modernity and industrialization followed by the information age have accelerated the ambitions of liberal capitalism and democracy with a transformative impact on the traditional Muslim world. If the thumb-nail sketch offered here is contested, few could argue that for the better part of two centuries a host of Muslim societies have been trying to come to grips with the outcomes of modernity in its various guises and shapes.

Since then, many Muslim societies have since been in search of a psychic space in which they could harmonize their inherited traditions with the flood of modern ones arriving on their shores. The operative words have been reform and renewal. Imagine the Islamic tradition to be a piece of cloth that contains many different strands and fibers given the multiple manifestations of Islam. Over time, the fabric of tradition that held together patterns of existence, practices, beliefs and rituals was worn and torn in many places. In trying to repair the fabric of tradition by way of invisible mending modern reformers hoped to suture new fibers into the tradition.

In the aftermath of decolonization some Muslims believed that the solution to their problems was to capture political power and to establish an Islamic state. Power, they hoped could transform their own societies as well as others. A different option was proposed by pietist groups such as the Tablīghī Jamāʿat, a global intra-Muslim evangelizing group: if one pursued a pious lifestyle with total reliance on divine providence, then, and only then, could human affairs and the material conditions of the Muslims would change dramatically (see Masud 2000). Another perspective claimed that the recovery of Muslim self-respect in the global community could occur only if education became a priority and when skilled cadres could address all the needs of Muslim society from economics to religion, as suggested by Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898) in India, Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) in Egypt and many others. Ultra radical groups, like Al Qaeda and their antecedents, maintained that it was only through the annihilation and defeat of the Western "Christian" enemy that Muslims could ever gain peace and self-respect. Each one of these manifestations is observable in the contemporary Muslim world.

Imagined history

A prominent school of thought linked to the puritan Salafīs, but also an attitude prevalent among modernists, revivalists and even traditionalists of different stripes, promises to reconnect contemporary Muslim societies with their glorious past. They have one precondition: our understanding of Islam must be completely stripped of all its historical and cultural accretions; all past interpretations and elaborations are to be eschewed. The credo of this group is to return to the Qur'ān, and for some, to engage with a sliver of the authentic prophetic tradition, that will incredulously lead to the recovery of a "true" Islam. Devoid, as it is, of a sense of history and culture, it might be preferable to say that these reformers have their own restrictive view of both. Failing to view Islam as a religious tradition that forcefully expressed itself within the context of history produces insuppressible phantoms and harmful distortions. If the Muslim historical tradition teaches one thing, it is that over the centuries many Muslim thinkers were realists who rarely disowned history but assessed the Muslim intellectual tradition with the constraints of history.

In the very first revelation, Muslims are told to observe and understand the universe around them. The first message that the Prophet Muḥammad received involved the word *iqra'*, "Recite," and Muḥammad asks the angel, "What must I recite?" to which the angel responds again with "Recite." One interpretation of "recite" is that Muḥammad must tell and retell the story of humanity. He must re-examine life around him and with a particular urgency call for the renewal of humanity. Gabriel by implication instructs all Muslims to "re-cite" the stories of human experiences from the past, not as a series of random arbitrary events, but as a search for ultimate reality in the warp and woof of life in Arabia and beyond.

The Prophet Muḥammad was not only instructed to "recite" in the name of his Lord who created everything and who created all human beings from a lump of congealed blood (Qur'ān 96). In fact, he was instantly reminded that he was being addressed by the God of knowledge and history. God teaches and speaks to humanity within the rhythms of human history, not outside history. History is an important part of the knowledge of the Muslim revelation. For that reason the calls of those who invite one to disavow history sound discordant to the ears of informed Muslims.

From the very beginning, Islam as a practice and imaginary was ensconced in an Arabic-speaking culture. Within the context of this culture and language, Muslim discourses drew on the practices prevalent in Mecca and Medina and later, beyond their confines. The Arabian crucible in itself offers incontrovertible proof that as a religious phenomenon Islam was inextricably intertwined with the cultures it contacted. The founding experience of the first Muslim communities is inconceivable without the concreteness of its Arabicity: cultural habitat, geography, language, practices, stereotypes and rhythms. Muḥammad never advocated the dissolution of Arabian culture, rather he attempted to raise the moral bar of his native culture. Side by side with the egalitarian message that there was no superiority of Arab over non-Arab, he also advocated affection for his people as Arabs and esteem for the prestige of their tongue as the language of paradise. One can speculate that were Islam revealed in North America, it would take shape within the rhythms of North American culture and the English language, and if it were revealed in Africa, it would take the shape of African culture with Swahili or other African rhythms.

Unable to come to grips with the historical nature of religious practice, its uncertainties, differences and changes, many Muslim apologists are in the habit of disowning culture. Their aggrieved parody calls on observers to make a distinction between "Islam" in its absolute perfection as against "Muslims" as the epitome of imperfection. This rhetorical move is intended to suggest that the actions of Muslims are not necessarily representative of "Islam" as if "Islam" can be perceived outside human experience. It sounds benign were the goal to show the gap between normative prescription and everyday practice. But often the rhetoric is invoked to deny the discursive and constructed nature and diversity of practices and prescriptions. Of course this rhetoric is invoked when Muslims in good conscience cannot justify the acts perpetrated by their fellow religionists, whether it be the treatment of women or acts of terror. When pressed, apologists will point to texts as representatives of "pure" Islam, unsullied by history and human interpretation but not to a "thing" called Islam. They forget that the philosopher Immanuel Kant too was unable to convincingly show the "thing" to exist in conditions unlimited by time and space. The phenomenon known as "Islam" is always embodied within specific historical and cultural realities. The Qur'ān and the prophetic tradition in their fullness, save for allegories, are always anchored in very concrete spaces and times.

Interpretation

One example will suffice. When Muslims are instructed in the Qur'ān to perform ablutions involving washing their faces and hands "up to" the elbows, wiping their heads, they differ among themselves whether the next step in the ritual involved *wiping* the feet that was more grammatically sound, or whether they should *wash* their feet. A seemingly straightforward instruction is tied up to human understandings of grammar, language and history. So, followers of the Ja'farī Shī'ī creed understand the commandment to mean wiping the feet, drawing on Qur'anic and prophetic authority. Most of the schools affiliated to the Sunnī creed claim the commandment is to wash the feet, drawing on other *ḥadīth* sources as authority and invoking consensus as the grounds for their practice. Another animated interpretative controversy centers around the fine grammatical point whether the elbow is inclusive in the instruction to wash the hands "up to" the elbows. Thus, even the most literal statements of the Qur'ān are mediated by human experience, which we call interpretation.

Muslims not only do what they perceive "Islam" instructs them but they are also compelled by a range of factors that confirm their variant modes of being. Islam can be defined largely by what Muslims make of it, attribute to it, and call it, the Canadian scholar, W. C. Smith (1959) suggested some time ago. The flawed sundering between "Islam" and "Muslims" does carry echoes of the culture of responsibility rooted in Muslim teachings. This makes the ornery split even less attractive, since it serves as a rhetorical escape route from responsibility by blaming "Muslims" for all wrongs, and cynically saving an abstract "Islam" for everything that goes right. "Islam" is at best a discursive tradition; in other words it is largely about debates as to what is knowledge or its opposite, what is valid or invalid or authoritative or optional. Knowledge, too, is not abstract but a practice. Consequently, there can be as many "islams" with a small "i," and many Muslims with differences in terms of their practices and their understandings, since each person or Muslim community

appropriates the discursive tradition differently. "Islam" is embodied in the lives of "Muslims" and despite their differences, one can point to Islam in the pulsating bodies of Muslims and their footprints on the past. And as fallible humans, they do good things just as they are susceptible to doing ugly things: even when they perpetrate the latter, they remain Muslims, albeit "bad" Muslims if one feels obliged to classify people and their acts.

Sharīʿa and time

The God of the Qurʾān often speaks concretely drawing on local cultures and local experiences while eschewing abstract thinking. "We do not send a messenger unless he speaks in the language of his people," observes Qurʾān 14:4. There are many ways that people express their commitment to the Creator in the form of an amalgam of normative practices and values which Muslims call *sharīʿa*. Literally *sharīʿa* means "the trodden path." Muslims understand that Moses had a *sharīʿa*, just as Jesus and countless other prophets had an equivalent of the *sharīʿa* as moral point of reference.

The questions of law and values are as troubling for modern-day Muslims as they were for believers in the past. It is agreed that people express their loyalty and commitment to God through certain communitarian and individual practices, by way of habits, beliefs, norms and values that were advanced by the respective messengers and prophets. That is what Muslims understand as a *sharīʿa*. In fact, when a community consecrates specific practices these become normative and part of the community's tradition. The Indian thinker Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1763) felt obliged to share with his readers what appeared to be his struggles with changing times and inherited moral and legal practices. Walī Allāh, who is held in high esteem by traditionalists and modernists alike, in his widely acclaimed book *The Conclusive Proof of God* courageously grapples with the question of cultural specificity, origins of the law and the evolution of the community with respect to *sharīʿa*.

Pondering the sociology of law and government Walī Allāh argues that one of the challenges that a prophet faces is to share his teachings with communities that differ greatly in their practices and predispositions. If the prophet's message reaches a range of communities, then ideally the *sharīʿa* should include the practices that are common to all of them. But the realist in Walī Allāh makes him recognize that prophets and their missions are not orderly and regulated processes: they cannot like bureaucrats regulate the unfolding of their communities for they start off with a nucleus of followers which increases over generations. Hence, prophets, in order to give coherence to their nascent community, use the law of their own community or ethnic group as the reference point for their normative values. Over time these norms become the hegemonic law, *sharīʿa*, for all subsequent people who join his community of faith and practice.

Showing awareness that the culturally specific practices of peoples who later join the community of faith may be at odds with the habits and legal culture of the founding community that served as a template for the *sharīʿa*, Walī Allāh issues a crucial but highly subtle caution. Followers of the prophetic teachings at the inception followed the law, he explains, for two chief reasons: first, they witnessed and attested to the original tradition, and secondly, because they were organically attached to these practices in their daily lives. In other words, these founding customs, practices

and norms optimally worked for the early communities because of the natural fit these customs had with their environment. Later followers of this prophet adhered to the law and some of the normative practices of the founding community out of sheer loyalty to the early founders of the tradition and to demonstrate that they belonged to the original community. They did so, even though the law may have been at odds with their own practices and values. At this point Walī Allāh observes:

> There is nothing more perfect and convenient than the prophet giving consideration to the custom of his people to whom he had been dispatched in matters related to religious symbols, penalties and matters related to the civilizing process. Neither should later followers be coerced, instead they should receive overall compassionate consideration. For the early followers adhere to those norms (shir'a) by virtue of the testimony of their hearts since it accords with their customs, while the later followers adhere to it due to a desire to follow the example of the leaders of the community and rulers: this is a natural phenomenon for every nation in every age, ancient or modern.
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> (2005: I, 338)

Of course this eighteenth-century Indian thinker is provocative and suggestive. He does not advocate the radical position of abandoning those practices of the law that conflict with contemporary culture and temporality but he does advocate contextual flexibility. At the same time, Walī Allāh also said that the duty of the leader was to enforce the law the way it was given. As a true reformer, and thanks to his candid musings, he does leave us a great deal to think about.

Some of the difficult issues that modern Muslims confront include questions of political order, justice, human rights, gender equality, the treatment of the "other," and questions of economic justice and the environment. Modern Muslims have inherited an ethical and juridical legacy that was construed in a world very different from the one that they experience today. A thoroughgoing engagement of Islamic teachings from the vantage point of modern knowledge, traditions and practices is still at its very nascent stage. Muslim scholars and communities have a primary responsibility to begin to reinterpret and understand the inherited tradition in the light of new realities, an invitation made by the poet-philosopher Muḥammad Iqbāl in the early part of the twentieth century. Iqbāl (1960: 97) was blunt in his assessment stating that "concepts of theological systems, draped in the terminology of practically dead metaphysics" will be of little help to those who espouse a "different intellectual background." "Equipped with penetrative thought and fresh experience," Iqbāl (1960: 179) continued, "the world of Islam should courageously proceed to the work of reconstruction." In addition to the intellectual and social reconstruction that Iqbāl envisaged, he also fostered a worldview in which the ultimate reality was spiritual.

Muslim jurists in the past had labored hard to adapt norms that were formulated in the crucible of the Arabian context to meet the needs of the new societies to which Islam had spread. An examination of Muslim laws and their ethical practices reveal how later jurists interpreted the culturally specific Qur'anic and prophetic provisions and transplanted these to new Persian, Indian, east Asian and African contexts. In each of these applications, there was continuity with the original tradition as well as a great deal of discontinuity and mutation, both necessitated by geographic and

temporal changes. The history of Muslim law and ethics offers a rich archive of insights on how Muslims realigned history and revelation to find the norm of God in new cultural contexts.

Note that in a major departure from how the intellectual tradition functioned previously, modern Muslims rely on the Qur'ān almost exclusively, ignoring insights derived from prophetic reports and almost devoid of discursive reasoning and history. Take for example the attitude of lay as well as educated Muslims who believe it to be obligatory to follow the Qur'anic prescription regarding women, notions of female modesty, marriage and repudiation practices, rules of inheritance and testimony because these have been revealed. Few recognize that these time-sensitive directives were aimed at seventh-century Arabian society in very specific historical and geographic realities. Many modern Muslims feel wracked by guilt if they do not adhere to these commandments, and would find it incredulous if they were told that medieval Muslim jurists never followed the Qur'anic dicta exclusively: they always blended it with *ḥadīth* reports, general social practices and customs in order to generate a realistic and socially viable teaching.

As the Algerian thinker Malik Bennabi (1991:10) observed several decades ago, the modern Muslim social and religious imaginary has not yet come to terms with the new bio-historical synthesis that modern humans have experienced. This is the world of science and empirical rationality that transforms our notions of self, history, nature and the cosmos. This also alters our understanding of what it is to be human. The presumption encoded in the modern social imaginary differs in significant ways with the social imaginary of past epochs, especially the social imaginary construed by select narratives of the Qur'ān and the prophetic practices of seventh-century Arabia. Islam's intervention in the seventh century on behalf of women's role and status was, by all accounts, a liberatory perspective. The same recipe might not have the same impact in the twentieth-first century.

The teaching that women use their ornamental neck scarves to cover their bosoms (Qur'ān 24:31) should be viewed as one attempt in an Arabian milieu to inculcate a new social imaginary about the body and public decorum. Under different conditions prescriptions might vary. Thus, instead of pursuing the fruitless question as to whether rules derived from a different social horizon are still applicable today or offer apologetic rationalizations in order to buffer certain anachronistic practices, one might do well by exploring the viability, affinity and fit of such practices to a modern social imaginary. So classical Muslim juridical ethics designate men as the economic provider for women. But in an economic and social system where women's participation in the workforce is unrestricted, women themselves become autonomous economic agents rendering the teaching to be redundant.

One way of addressing the dilemma that many practicing Muslims experience regarding the rules affecting women would be to compare it to the practice of slavery. By most modern Muslim accounts slavery is excised from the modern Muslim imaginary because it clashes with a new sensibility of freedom while bearing in mind that it was perfectly acceptable in another epoch. The Qur'ān never advocated the abolition of slavery as an institution nor did the Prophet obligate it. However, there were strong hints that slavery was not the best of human conditions. The Qur'ān advocated the freeing of slaves as an act of expiation for various violations in rituals while the Prophet Muḥammad also proclaimed that it was better to free a slave than

keep someone in bondage. Muslim political leaders like the caliph ʿUmar (r. 634–44) and later Muslim thinkers gradually narrowed down the prospects of slavery. ʿUmar held that if a slave woman had borne a child from a slave master, she could no longer be sold in slavery. Even though the momentum to abolish slavery in modern times came from the West, very few Muslims would wish to install slavery again as a provision sanctioned by the Qurʾān as an option. Similarly, Islamic teachings advocating differential treatment of women in the law can follow the reasoning of abrogation and change advanced in the example of slavery: in other words, a practice sanctioned by the tradition does not foreclose the possibilities of abrogating it or seeking other remedies that fulfill a higher principle or value.

There are also examples of differences between modern and traditional interpretations in the area of criminal law. Muslim criminal law sets out a hierarchical order in the case of murder with guidelines to deal with an offender (see Qurʾān 2:187–8). In the case of injury or murder, the offender can either be executed, or be forgiven, or the offender's family may be required to pay compensation to the victim's family. In the medieval interpretation of the law there was also a hierarchical order that determined the kind of punishment for murder. For example, if a free man killed a slave, he could not be executed for the murder. Instead, he only had to compensate the victim's family. If a believer killed an unbeliever, then the unbeliever's family could not demand the execution of the believer but had to accept monetary compensation, according to most Sunnī schools of law, except for the Ḥanafī school. This differential method of determining punishment offends a twentieth-first century Muslims' sense of justice. A modern sense of justice does not tolerate discrimination between male and female, slave and freeman, and believer and unbeliever.

At least two motifs in the Qurʾān encourage one to pursue different attitudes to interpretation, moving away from literalism and towards an approach that is sensitive to changes in time and space as well as in reaching for higher values. For example, in Chapter 39, known as *sūrat al-zumar*, verses 17–18, say: "Give good tidings to those of my servants who listen to the word and follow the best part of it. Those are the people whom God had guided and those are the people of insight." This verse empowers the reader or listener of the Qurʾān. One is urged to discriminate between the different registers of meaning in the message: to choose the most beautiful (*aḥsan*) or intellectually more perfect message in any given situation. The interpreter of the revealed message must be able to separate between what is historically contingent and what is eternal, and decide what is meaningful and what is just. For individuals who can put their discretion to its best use and who are able to understand the nuances of the revelation, there is a promise of further divine guidance. Whether Muslims recite the book of God or the book of nature, they have a responsibility to interpret what they recite. There is also the burden to understand the cumulative meaning of the message rather than grasp piecemeal instructions. A Muslim sentiment is "Show understanding in your learning; do not parrot learning." Ibn ʿAsākir, the historian, wrote: "The learned endeavor to understand; the foolish endeavor to quote only" (Al-Muttaqī al-Hindī 1986).

In a chapter of the Qurʾān known as "The Bee" one passage (16:68–9) invites the listener or the reader to reflect on the allegory that stirs imaginative interpretation. The Lord of humankind, the Qurʾān says, inspired the bee to make a habitat in every mountain, tree, and terrace. Then the Lord instructed the bee to walk humbly in His

path, taking whatever it needs from all the fruits and all the flowers. Then out of the belly of the bee comes a liquid that we know as honey. But the Qur'ān describes it as a "beverage of many hues," claiming that it contains a "remedy for humanity." In the allegory the bee is not only remembered for its industriousness but also for taking nectar from a variety of sources to produce something new. The bee becomes an allegory for a toiling humanity that finds remedy in newness and creativity. Here humans are encouraged to take learning from multiple sources and produce a whole new edifice that is unparalleled. No wonder the Messenger of Islam noted that knowledge was the lost treasure of the believer and that wherever he or she found it, believers were the most deserving of it. In one fell swoop the allegory of the bee renders redundant the age-old debate about Muslim antipathy for "foreign sciences" and for being obsessed with only "insider knowledge" namely knowledge discovered and produced by people adhering to Islam. While Muslims in later centuries might have developed allergies to outsider knowledge as a valid source of learning, early Muslim intellectuals harbored no such compunctions. Knowledge of Indian, Chinese and Arabian provenance was healthily integrated into Muslim life and practice.

In order for Islam to flourish as a civilizational project it requires labor and energy. The Qur'ān (9:20) promises: "Those who strive in Our path, We will open up for them multiple ways." Clearly, intellectual effort (*ijtihād*) that produces new knowledge must of necessity result in fresh inspiration and diversity, an approach that was once vibrant in Muslim societies but seems to have run shipwreck in the twentieth century. Muslims, both laypersons and religious authorities, seem perplexed and resistant to new changes and are also estranged by the dynamism evident in the past.

For example, in his novel *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie re-tells the poignant story of the struggle of the Prophet Muḥammad in his attempts to convince and negotiate with a Meccan elite hostile to his prophetic call. Rushdie's unfortunate way of telling the story perhaps offended more people than the moral of the story itself. However, we know that for centuries the Muslim tradition endorsed the satanic verses incident as a true occurrence. It was only after the fourteenth century when some Muslim commentators began to argue that that story was concocted (see Ahmad 1998).

The story centers on the recitation of the Prophet Muḥammad of a portion of revelation that gave his Meccan interlocutors the impression that he was endorsing their idols. "Those were the high flying cranes whose intercession is sought," he chanted. On hearing this, his Meccan foes understood the innuendo as his endorsement of their idols. Some time later the Prophet announced that the revelation was not an angelic inspiration, but a satanic one. The story is poignant. It revealed the Prophet's struggle with the different impulses within his soul – his unyielding care and enthusiasm for the Meccan clans to accept Islam. Should he like a good trader yield to the impulse to negotiate with the Meccans by considering a portion of their beliefs and gradually integrate them into Islam? Or, must he act decisively like a prophet in this instance and cherish the uncompromising monotheism of his message over a gradualist strategy? The satanic verses incident suggests that in a moment of human weakness he succumbed to the trader instinct but his subjectivity was quickly straightened by divine intervention. The event only enhanced the Prophet in the eyes of his opponents and hardly anyone assailed his credibility because of it.

By contrast, for many modern Muslims unaccustomed to a complex understanding of revelation, the very acknowledgment of the event was sacrilege. It is the lack of

complexity that renders modern Muslim thought so sterile. In fact, Iqbāl (1960: 154) insightfully wrote that an act inspired by the infinite complexity of life becomes spiritual; when it is bereft of this complexity, it is profane. Railing against God about the state of Muslims in his *Complaint and Answer*, Iqbāl ends his poem with an answer from God, who invites Muslims to commit themselves to the way of Muḥammad. Muḥammad's way, in Iqbāl's view (1960: 126), allows one to achieve full self-consciousness, come to terms with complexity and to rely on human resources. Creativity inspired by human experience, nature and history were the ingredients for a vibrant civilization. Iqbāl's hope was that if Muslims realized their commitment they could be in charge of their own destiny. He wrote:

> With reason as your shield and the sword of love in your hand.
> Servant of God! The leadership of the world is at your command.
> The cry "Allah-u-Akbar", destroys all except God, it is a fire.
> If you are true Muslims, your destiny is to grasp what you aspire.
> If you break not faith with Muḥammad, we shall always be with you;
> What is this miserable world? To write the world's history, pen and tablet we offer you.

> (Iqbāl 1981: 96)

Note

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