

The Adventure of Muslim Universality

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Though in hiding somewhere between Pakistan and Afghanistan, one of al-Qaeda's chief spokesmen was able to answer a series of questions from friends and foes around the world in April 2008. Submitted to Ayman al-Zawahiri through the Internet and responded to in the same fashion, these queries included many expostulating with Osama bin Laden's lieutenant about the indiscriminate violence resorted to by those fighting in the name of Islam. Typical was this condemnation of militant methods:

How do you reconcile the values of your medical training—to help people and prolong their lives—with the fact that you killed Anwar al-Sadat and that you shape the minds of bombers and suicide commandos?¹

1 “Selected questions and answers from Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri—part 2 released on: April 17, 2008,” *The Nefsa Foundation*

Zawahiri responded to his questioner in the following way:

During my medical studies, I learned that life is Allah's miracle and his gift. Thus, one must be careful to obey him. I have learned from surgery about how to save the body by amputating failing organs and removing cancers, and how to cure illness-inducing bacteria. Medicine, when practiced as a sacrifice to Allah and to help the oppressed, will grant the soul happiness and joy, which will never be experienced by those who have twisted it into a tool for greed, robbing others and exploiting their pain for their own benefit.²

This justification of violence illustrates the crucial role that the language of humanity plays in the narrative of militancy. Rather than being dedicated solely to the cause of Islam, in other words, militancy stakes claim to mankind itself as an ideal. Thus Zawahiri describes terrorism as a form of surgery whose aim is to save the human race from the cancers and other ailments that threaten its global body. Identified with medicine practised according to the Hippocratic Oath, this vision of militancy as a form of sacrifice for the sake of mankind is opposed to humanitarianism in its conventional and commercially organized forms, which Zawahiri argues are founded upon exploitation and profit. By representing the species as an individual, or rather by making the two interchangeable, Zawahiri treats it as a potential subject, one that requires the healing touch of jihad to speak in its own name.

(www.nefafoundation.org), p. 8.

2 *Ibid.*

Militant Islam's attempt to represent humanity as an historical actor comes to the fore in Ayman al-Zawahiri's response to another question put to him over the Internet:

Can you clear up the confusion that many Westerns [sic] have about technology—on one hand, you shun modern values, but on the other hand you accept modern Western technology such as the Internet?³

Hastening to brush aside any account of terrorism that would confine it to some contradiction between Muslim tradition and Western modernity, Zawahiri makes it clear that even the greatest enemies must share a common history and partake of each other's achievements as members of the same species. In other words he moves beyond the narratives of race or civilization from which the distinction of traditional and modern is often derived to focus on the human race as history's true subject:

This question is based on two false premises. The fact that I accept or shun a certain value is not based on whether it is ancient or modern. But I am opposed to polytheism; scorning the religion; establishing relations based on material benefit and achieving sensory pleasures; lying, deceiving; acting on self-interest; alcoholism; gambling; vices; taking over other people's countries and oppressing them; stealing the riches of others; double standards; immunity against being held accountable for crimes for which others will be punished; spreading killing, abuse, destruction, and the destruction of the environment and climate merely to master the land, rob, and plunder. Scientific knowledge is neither Eastern nor Western—it is the property of mankind which circulates among us equally in various times and places. The scientific progress of the West was

3 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

originally based on our riches, which they are still plundering to this day. Where is our stolen share? Secondly, the West tried to cover up its crimes against us and against the rest of mankind by priding itself in its scientific supremacy. Under the cover of this progress, they have attempted to convince occupied and weaker nations that they [the West] are superior to them, and more deserving to manage the world and to plunder its riches—and to demean other people. Neither the Muslims, nor anyone else, will be fooled by this trick any longer.⁴

Arguably the operative category of militant thinking, humanity brings Muslims and infidels together in such a way as to make possible relations of amity as well as enmity among them. I will be concerned here with the ambivalence that marks this relationship of would-be friends and foes, a quality evident in the passage from Zawahiri cited above. For at the same moment that he claims the achievements of his enemies as a properly human inheritance, Bin Laden's most eminent follower also suggests that some of the credit for amassing this legacy was stolen from Muslims and needs recovering. Now this kind of reasoning possesses a history going back to the nineteenth century, when Muslim reformers sought by such apologetics to explain as well as learn from the scientific and technological dominance of Europe's colonial powers. This they did by devaluing the categories of race and civilization as sites of European privilege, and bringing humanity to the fore as history's true subject. Islam therefore represented the species by refusing to differentiate between its various components.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 7-8.

Perhaps the first and certainly the most influential Muslim thinker to forge such a link between Islam and humanity was India's Sayyid Ahmad Khan, whose life was dedicated to modernizing his co-religionists largely by way of inculcating Western education among them. In a monumental effort of scriptural interpretation and exegesis, Khan contended that Islam, when cleansed of superstitious accretions, was both the most natural and the most universal of religions. This in the sense of being wholly in conformity with the laws of nature and so founded for the benefit of all mankind.⁵ Whatever the precedents and implications of this claim, extrapolated from writers like Gibbon and Carlyle as much as from any Muslim source, it is clear that Islam's universality was predicated upon its equivalence with nineteenth-century notions of nature and therefore with the human species, both of which stood outside the doctrinal sphere of religion to provide the criteria of its veracity.

Islam's conformity with nature conceived as law had to be repeatedly demonstrated so that it might be presented as the universal religion of mankind. One consequence of naturalizing religion in this way was to generalize its doctrinal vocabulary beyond the boundaries of Islam, so that it now became possible to think even of its central concepts as being universal to humanity. Of course Muslim thinkers in the past had sought prec-

5 See for instance Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Muqaddimah-e Tafsir-e Sir Sayyid*, Patna, Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, 1995.

edents and prognostications for Muhammad's revelation by linking it to religions pre-dating Islam, well beyond the monotheistic coterie this latter formed with Judaism and Christianity. While the Muslim doctrines discovered in Hinduism, Buddhism or Zoroastrianism might place all these religions within some universal history, there was no question about Islam representing its pinnacle. But the Victorian naturalization of religion meant that if Muslims could be said to have discovered the unity of mankind by way of Islam, or even to have developed this unity to its fullest potential, they could not claim to possess it exclusively or indeed forever. There was always the possibility that others might be able to lay claim to Islam itself, albeit under a different name, if Muslims were to abandon their duty to represent the human race.

In fact there were many instances from the last decades of the nineteenth century of prominent Muslim figures in India warning that unbelievers had come into possession of Islam's central concepts and categories. A good example of this is provided by the century's most popular Urdu text, an epic poem on the rise and fall of Islam by Sayyid Ahmad Khan's disciple Altaf Husayn Hali. First published in 1879, the *Musaddas dar Madd-o Jazr-e Islam* sings of the virtues that brought Muslims political power in times past and put them at the forefront of the arts and sciences. Hali then catalogues the decline of India's Muslims in particular and those of the world at large in practically every department of social life, attributing their decadence to the betrayal of Is-

lamic virtues. Chief among these was fidelity to nature, seen as providing both the form and the content of human knowledge as a set of universal laws. While Muslims might have forsaken such virtues, others, like Europe's Christians, but also the poet's Hindu neighbours, are said to have embraced them and thus moved past the Prophet's followers in representing humanity.

In order to make the argument that Islam's role has been taken over by the Christian West, Hali had to redefine the Muslim *ummah* or community in sociological terms. No longer a juridical or theological category defined by ritual authority and political practice, the *ummah* instead became a society that could never again be contained within legal categories, and one whose global character placed Islam outside the jurisdiction of any state. While the loss of political power, therefore, was seen in the poem as a sign of decline, its restoration did not serve as a condition for Muslim greatness, which was why Hali could take colonized populations like the Hindus as models of virtue.

Important about the new Muslim community is its elegiac character. And while this mournful vision of the *ummah* is often considered the consequence of colonial dispossession, I would like to argue for a more complex reading of the trope. For the narrative of Muslim decline pioneered by Hali is related to another common in Europe at the same time, though with a prehistory going

back to medieval times.⁶ This is the story of European decadence conceived not in political or juridical terms, exemplified by the fall of kingdoms and dynasties, but in the vision of exhausted civilizations and depleted races. Like the *ummah*, in other words, race and civilization are categories that may incorporate state power but continue to embody a people's greatness beyond its confines. As a consequence they have since the eighteenth century also been global categories, whose context is provided by other civilizations and races spread across the surface of the earth.

Like some of the narratives dealing with the decadence of races or civilizations, the story of Islam's decline was predicated upon the inability of its adherents to keep pace with their own universality. In making this case, of course, Hali was invoking an old literary model, in which the fall of kingdoms was attributed to the moral corruption of their rulers, itself a consequence of worldly success. More than the ancient kingdoms that had in the past provided such cautionary tales, it was the career of Christianity that offered Muslims warning about the perils of victory. Both Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Hali saw in Christianity's very success a sign of failure, as its religious spirit was eclipsed by Europe's material glory. It

6 In what follows I draw upon the analysis of European racial thinking in Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey, New York, Picador, 2003.

was not these gentlemen of the nineteenth century, however, but a writer from the twentieth who had the most to say on this issue. Acclaimed today as the spiritual father of Pakistan, Muhammad Iqbal argued that when Christian virtues were universalized in Europe to become secular values, they ended up perverting both religious and profane life there.

Taking warning from the history of Christianity, Iqbal thought that Muslims should reclaim their lost universality by purifying Islam of the corruption wrought by its worldly success, which for him included ridding it of what he called the stamp of Arabian imperialism. But to do so believers would have to learn from those who had carried Islam's own virtues forward. The many public figures who recommended such efforts of self-recovery often did so to draw attention to the virtues of Hindus or Christians and encourage Muslims to join them in some worthy enterprise.

Of course generalizing Islamic virtues beyond the Muslim community was an ambivalent process, since it could serve to promote cohabitation as much as competition with unbelievers. Two of Muhammad Iqbal's poems, probably the most popular Urdu compositions of the twentieth century, provide good examples of this. Among the many imitations of Hali's epic on the *ummah's* decline, and composed in the same metre as the *Musaddas*, this pair of laments is regularly recited on Pakistani radio and television, with the country's most

celebrated performers recording their own versions of it as a rite of passage. Published in 1909 and called *Shik-wah* or Complaint, the first work dares to accuse God of abandoning Muslims for unbelievers by showering upon them the good things of the earth and leaving the former with a merely imaginary world. This dereliction was all the more unjust given that Muslims had by means of great sacrifices freed men from slavery and spread the doctrine human equality among them. Iqbal pictures idols rejoicing at the sight of Muslims departing the world with Qurans tucked under their arms, thus providing us with one of the first posthumous descriptions of Islam, a vision standing apart from earlier apocalyptic narratives concerned with the coming of the messiah and the end of time. He even goes so far as to call God a woman dispensing favours now to her Muslim lover and now to his infidel rivals. Deploying the erotic vocabulary of the traditional lyric to great effect, Iqbal turns the stock figure of the rival for a mistress's affection into that of the strangers who would replace Muslims as God's elect and the spokesmen of their race.

A few years after the publication of this acclaimed and controversial work, Iqbal wrote the *Jawab-e Shik-wah* or Complaint's Answer, in which he blasphemously had God respond to the first poem, thus claiming for his composition the status of divine speech. In this heavenly monologue of 1913, Muslims are blamed for abandoning their duty to represent mankind not only by taking

leave of world-making activities like science and industry, but more importantly by forsaking the quest for freedom and equality to live upon past glories, described as the worship of so many idols. If infidels adopt the ways of Muslims, says the poem's divine interlocutor, then it is only right that they should receive the damsels and palaces promised believers. But Muslim decline is finally blamed on the modern age itself, likened to a fire that feeds on traditional communities, though its flames can purify religions as well as destroy them. To find a garden in the midst of modernity's fire Muslims must take charge of the stylus and tablet God resigns to them and write out their own destiny, forsaking Islam's dogmatic inheritance if they must as long as they remained loyal to the Prophet.

Muhammad Iqbal made it clear in this poem and elsewhere that the only thing keeping Muslims true to their religion's legacy was fidelity to the Prophet, who represented the historical origins of its universality. For in the apostle's claim to be God's final messenger Iqbal saw the emergence of humanity as an actor in its own right, one cut off from the leading strings of divine guidance and put in charge of its own destiny. The founding of Islam thus signalled the coming to maturity of the human race, with the Prophet renouncing divine authority to mankind in the same way that certain European writers thought Christ had done.⁷ Paradoxically it was the very

⁷ See, for instance, Mohammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, New Delhi, Kitab Bhavan, 1990, p. 126.

particularity of this origin that served as a link to Islam's lost universality, whose other virtues had all escaped the grasp of religion to be generalized across the human race. Once Islam had ceased to provide a conceptual matrix for mankind's unity, in other words, it could only represent the species by such fragmentary acts as fidelity to Muhammad. But this means that history had now replaced nature as the criterion of Muslim universality, something of which Iqbal was fully conscious, claiming that Islam set itself against the particularity of what he called nature's race-making work.⁸ So in an open letter to Jawaharlal Nehru in 1936 he had this to say:

The student of history knows very well that Islam was born at a time when the old principles of human unification, such as blood relationship and throne-culture, were failing. It, therefore, finds the principle of human unification not in the blood and bones but in the mind of man. Indeed its social message to mankind is: "Deracialise yourself or perish by internecine war." It is no exaggeration to say that Islam looks askance at nature's race-building plans and creates by means of its peculiar institutions, an outlook which would counteract the race-building forces of nature.⁹

History had of course been a major preoccupation among Muslim writers from the nineteenth century, and Hali devoted a whole section of his *Musaddas* to its writing, though he judged such texts by their fidelity to na-

8 For Iqbal's views on race see Javed Majeed, "Race and pan-Islam in Iqbal's thought," in Peter Robb (ed.), *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 304-26.

9 Iqbal, *Thoughts and Reflections*, p. 285.

ture, which was supposed to provide rational and objective criteria for historians. However for Iqbal history not only housed the origin of Islam's universality but formed the substance of its character as well, since he thought that the human race had to achieve self-consciousness by setting itself against nature. In this way the *ummah* abandoned its relations with race and civilization to join ranks with twentieth century ideologies, which meant that Islam was now set against liberalism or communism, whose politics of class conflict was to be rendered meaningless within its universal embrace. Yet this purely ideological foundation for human unity was by that very token remarkably vulnerable to attack, with Iqbal attributing Muslim conservatism, misplaced though it might be, to a glimmering recognition among the Prophet's followers that their religion and its universal mission was based upon nothing but a set of ideas:

Islam repudiates the race idea altogether and founds itself on the religious idea alone. Since Islam bases itself on the religious idea alone, a basis which is wholly spiritual and consequently far more ethereal than blood relationship, Muslim society is naturally much more sensitive to forces which it considers harmful to its integrity.¹⁰

The very strength of Islam's universality, therefore, was paradoxically also its weakness, necessitating what might be called a fanatical attachment to the religious idea insofar as it cannot be naturalized or taken for granted. Iqbal's

10 *Ibid.*, p. 248-9.

view of Islam here comes close to that of Hegel, who defined that religion's modernity precisely by its attachment to an abstract idea of universality. While Hegel paired Islam with the Enlightenment in his admiring criticism of its universal ideal, in our own times such an analysis has been directed more against twentieth century ideologies like communism, also regarded as the Enlightenment's twin. And so it is no accident that for Iqbal communism was Islam's greatest rival because it possessed a comparably universal mission. All of which only went to show that if the history of such ideas might be claimed by Islam, only the immense effort required to instantiate them could prevent the disintegration and theft of their universality.

Once Islamic concepts and categories are universalized in the language of humanity, moving outside the field of religious doctrine and practice, the Muslim community risks sinking into a particularity from which it must constantly be rescued. Lost within the universality of mankind, this community can only reclaim greatness by being faithful to the history of its founding. Even when this fidelity is so extensive as to determine the entirety of Muslim lives, as among fundamentalists for example, it still possesses a minimal character. For such all-encompassing forms of Islam continue to remain self-conscious minorities in the world beyond fundamentalism. But what allows loyalty to grasp at the universal is precisely its fragmentary character, whose devotion to the past is conceived as a practice of withdrawal from the inevitable partialities of the present. And the present of course belongs to de-

mocracy, where men jostle to represent the interests of the greatest number, and Islam's universality takes on a new countenance. Instead of embarking upon the futile task of representing the interests of all men, or even all Muslims, a number of thinkers following Iqbal argued that such political forms were appropriate to states alone. Since the species cannot be represented politically, it is only the absence and indeed the sacrifice of particular interests that might capture its unity.

Like Ayman al-Zawahiri's Hippocratic ideal, the kind of loyalty broached by Muhammad Iqbal is thus sacrificial in form, claiming to abandon the self-interest that defines politics by pointing to the disinterestedness of its practices. And so it is no longer the contested claim to some common interest that defines humanity, but rather its negation for a set of historical peculiarities that appear meaningless in the calculus of interests defining political representation. Islam has therefore come to represent mankind by sacrificing the very possibility of interest in the archaic demands it makes upon Muslims, for instance regarding forms of dress or comportment, whose antiquated provenance and incomprehensibility to modern minds only guarantee their impartial character. Such at least was the argument put forward by the Pakistani fundamentalist Abul Ala Mawdudi, who contended that the more resistant Muslim practices were to the rationality of political representation, the less likely would their misuse be in the politics of class or ethnic particularity. And if Mawdudi made neutrality and disinterest into

touchstones of the universal by focussing on a life lived for the sake of God alone, today's militants concentrate on death in God's way as the only kind of sacrifice capable of representing humanity.

Extraordinary about terrorist argumentation is the familiarity and even intimacy with which it approaches those seen as the enemies of Islam. So al-Qaeda's foes are considered to be people of the same kind as its friends, their supposed persecution of Muslims being reciprocated by the latter in procedures of mirroring that make it difficult to tell one from the other. Instead of dehumanizing their enemies, or even condemning them to subhuman status in the name of race or civilization, militants routinely aspire to compete with such foes in virtue as well as vice, something we have seen in Zawahiri's utterances quoted above. But without defining humanity by means of a hierarchy Osama bin Laden's acolytes are unable to establish any firm distinction between friends and enemies. So refusing to take responsibility for acts of violence by describing these as responses to infidel provocation does more than excuse such crimes. It serves to account for the dispersal of responsibility in a global arena where all are complicit in crimes against humanity, whether these are concerned with environmental degradation or genocide. Not accidentally the only act militants claim full responsibility for is the minimal yet excessive one of martyrdom. Sacrifice therefore becomes the only distinctive element in al-Qaeda's rhetoric, which otherwise shares everything with its foes.

Not the common virtues and vices of men, therefore, but the claim to martyrdom is what demonstrates Islam's universality in militant circles, though even such practices of sacrifice can be stolen from Muslims and so must be repeated in the most egregious of ways. And martyrdom is crucial because humanity cannot be represented in any positive fashion, lacking as it does a political or juridical form despite being invoked by lawyers and statesmen at every turn. As the supposed abnegation of all particularity and interest, sacrifice constitutes a kind of negative embodiment of the race. It provides in fact the most appropriate manifestation of this mysterious being, which exists without having become a subject in the global arena. But such an embodiment of the species is not peculiar to Muslim terrorists, and may be found in the sacrificial practices of many who dedicate themselves to humanitarian causes, from pacifists and environmentalists to those engaged in aid and relief work. Indeed the idea of sacrificing oneself for humanity has a long and explicitly Christian history, having become common sense in the story of Jesus as a martyr not for God's sake but that of mankind. Representing as they do the most excessive forms of sacrifice, militant acts of martyrdom may be said to have placed themselves at the vanguard of all such procedures of embodiment.