



BREAKING THE MONOLITH

ESSAYS, ARTICLES AND COLUMNS ON ISLAM, INDIA,
TERROR AND OTHER THINGS THAT ANNOY ME



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Ziauddin Sardar

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Introduction

The Things That Annoy Me

During my childhood in Britain, I was addicted to *Dr Who*. The good doctor's evil adversaries came in all varieties and disguises—from the Cybermen to Zygons, Sea Devils, Ice Warriors, the Yeti to the Master, who like Dr Who, was a Time Lord himself but with a thirst for universal conquest. But of all the monstrous evil-doers, the ones that scared the kids of my generation witless were the Daleks. In their tank-like mechanical armour shell, and a plumber's plunger for an eye, the Daleks travelled awkwardly through space and time conquering and subjugating anyone and anything that came their way. Indeed, in the great scheme of the universe, the Daleks had only one function, which they frequently announced in their metallic voice: 'Exterminate! Exterminate!'

The nightmares of my childhood, it seems to me, have come back to haunt me. The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have seen some horrific scenarios implode one after another. India and Pakistan, neighbours and brothers, have not only had three wars but have even made nuclear threats to each other. The terrorist atrocity of 11 September 2001 led to the invasion of Afghanistan, which was swiftly followed by the occupation of Iraq. Suicide bombings not just in war-torn countries but also in Pakistan, India and other places have become common place. Torture

has become endemic: who can forget the television pictures from Guantanamo Bay, or the picture postcards from Abu Ghraib prison, or fail to imagine the horror of extraordinary rendition, which involves abducting civilians from their homelands and then transporting them to a country where they can be freely tortured?

The 'War on Terror' has acquired a cosmic dimension and is not too far removed from the antics of the Daleks. If that wasn't enough we have to contend with the devastation of climate change. Extermination seems to be the order of the day.

The essays and articles collected here explore the Daleks-like powers out to terminate us. In their own way, they all look invincible but like the Daleks they have limited abilities and functions. They involve issues of terrorism and representation, American power and power of mass culture, and of monolithic thought in all its guises, from East and the West. And inevitably they deal with the loss of our innocence, mine and yours, of Islam and South Asia, and the failure of imagination we have suffered from the onslaught of global events. Needless to say, all this annoys me.

Ostensibly, the business of extermination seems to involve two forces. Both, apparently, have been at loggerhead with each other for a millennium. Indeed, some scholars have argued that to a significant extent, the history of the world can be seen as history of mutual hostilities and war between Islam and the West. Starting from the crusades to the fall of Constantinople and the siege of Vienna, to the colonisation of the Muslim societies in Asia and Africa and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, to the Iranian revolution and the wave of anti-west sentiments it generated in Muslim countries, right down to the 'War on Terror'—the relationship between Islam

and the West has been one of misunderstanding, mutual suspicion and open warfare. Johan Galtung, the Norwegian scholar of peace studies, has even argued that misunderstanding and mutual suspicion have locked Islam and the West in a cycle that generates benefit for one only at the expense of the other: when Islam is in the ascendance, as it was during the Medieval period, the West is in decline; when the West is in ascendance, Islam declines. When one of these mutually hostile civilisations occupies the centre of the international arena, the other is pushed out to the outer limits; and the centre always thrives at the expense and humiliation of the periphery.

But history can always be interpreted in more ways than one. What annoys me is the fact that the common ground between the two civilisations is often overlooked; and the Islamic roots of the western civilisation are never acknowledged. Quite simply, there would be no 'Europe' as we know it without Islam. The science and learning of Europe has its origins in the Muslim civilisation. Western liberalism and humanism, it will come as a surprise to many, has its origins in Islamic thought and philosophy. Virtually all of Greek thought came to Europe via the Muslim world. The Enlightenment was shaped as much by Ibn Sina and ibn Rushd as it was by Voltaire and his cronies—although the later gave it a more instrumental twist. Instead of seeing Islam and the West as diametrically opposed civilisations, we can equally well see them as two siblings of the same historic parents.

This however does not mean that we can ignore the stark reality of our present predicament. We cannot overlook a brutal fact: in the war on terror that shrouds the globe, the terrorists are Muslims. Hardly a day passes without Muslims being in the news. There is the spectre of al-Qaida and its savagery and

declared intentions to world domination. There are the Taliban and their barbarity. The suicide bomber fighting a ‘jihad’. The hostage taker trying to make a point about ‘infidels’ who are occupying his land. The mad Mullah hell-bent on seizing power and using all means to justify his ends. The nostalgic puritan demonstrating for a return to some imagined and romanticised past. The monarch executing his opponents in the name of ‘Islamic law’. The colonels and the generals legitimising their illegitimate political authority to create an ‘Islamic state’. And numerous despots and dictators perpetuating naked injustices, human rights abuses, and exploitation of their own people in the name of Islam. The picture of Islam that emerges from all this is a creed knee-deep in obscurantism and terrorism, decay and darkness, with violence and extremism as its two hallmarks—explored in Part One, *The Sphere of Islam*.

What annoys me is that these actions are never seen for what they are: power ploys of desperate men. No religion can condone or justify such actions let alone encourage them; to attribute them to Islam is simply disingenuous. To paint the entire Muslim world, teeming with 1.3 billion people, as ‘fundamentalist’, ‘fanatic’ and hell bent on aggression is the height of folly. This is similar to representing the entire Catholic world with the antics of the IRA—painting every Catholic with the IRA brush of violence and terrorism. It is a form of global dehumanisation.

What annoys me even more is that the actions of extremist Muslims not only belie but also enforce western misconceptions and prejudices about Islam. There is Islam as represented by journalists who have little time to comprehend its diversity and complexity and who are constantly working against deadlines. For them, the real story, indeed the whole story, is the latest atrocity, the current war, the coming elections

that the ‘fundamentalists’ and ‘extremists’ could win. A monolithic Islam of harems and bigotry, floggings and cruelty, oil and turmoil. Then there is Islam as written about and ‘analysed’ by that particular breed of western scholars—often called the ‘Orientalists’—who tamper their objectivity and draw inspiration from the prolonged hostilities of the Crusades and the stretched-out Christianity-Islam conflict that followed. The noble desire to civilise the savage Muslims appears to have survived the end of colonialism. This is the Islam of centuries old stereotypical images, of obscure and insane beliefs, myriad’s of irrational but exotic rituals, barbaric laws and of innate inferiority and backwardness. To this we must now add a new variety: the neo-liberal novelists and writers who see American free-market liberalism as the best is this best of all possible worlds—including the British contingency which I have dubbed the Blitcons—and who not only rejoice at the alleged triumph of the American way but wish to impose it, by force if necessary, on all Muslim societies. The Blitcons, and other forms of representation of Islam and Muslims, as well as the non-West, and how non-western thought is frequently written out of history, are explored in Part Two, *The Circumference of Representation*.

Yet, behind all this violence and paranoia, behind the Orientalists’ lore, behind the headlines, there is another universe. This is the world of real people, living real lives, struggling with real problems, dilemma and paradoxes, trying to make sense of it all. The world of ordinary Muslims practicing what they see as Islam in simplicity and elegance, in towns and cities, villages and rural areas; an Islam that has survived both indigenous oppression as well as external insult, injury and domination. This is the Islam of common people who draw their strength and aspirations from the traditions,

history and culture of their faith, Islam as it exists in the hearts of men and women.

But let's not get too romantic about all this. What annoys me about Islam as a whole is the fact that in its current, dominant form, it has way passed its 'sell by' date. It has been kept refrigerated for too long. And I say this as a believer! It seems to me that believers have become empty vessels, who accept anything that is poured into them by religious scholars in the name of Islam, without questions and without criticism. It seems to me that Islamic law, seen by many as divine, is totally out of sync with contemporary world: it was socially constructed during the ninth and tenth centuries and replicates the conditions of its formation wherever it is imposed. It seems to me that we need to rethink Islam from first principles; and rebuild the Muslim civilisation brick by brick. The world is now too complex, too interconnected, too globalised to be divided into black and white: 'the abode of Islam' and 'the abode of unbelief'. The suggestion that the goal of all 'true' Muslims is to build an 'Islamic state' is not only a dangerous fallacy but insulting to all those Muslims who live happily, say in India and Britain as minorities. All Islamic states of modern times—from Saudi Arabia to Iran—have been totalitarian enclaves. It seems to me, serious reforms within Islam are long overdue. And I touch of these issues in a number of essays in Part One.

The task of Islamic reform is a task largely for Muslims. And I think Muslims are now tackling this task seriously. However, it is no good looking for change and reform at what is conventionally seen as the centre of Islam—the Arab world. The work of reform is being done at the periphery—in Indonesia and Malaysia, Morocco and Turkey, where two-thirds of all the Muslims in the world actually live. The Muslims in

India could learn a great deal from the reform movements in these countries.

But reform needs space—intellectual and physical, cultural and economic. What annoys me more than anything else in the world is that the space to be different, to practice your own way of being, doing and knowing, to work out your own problems in your own way, is shrinking. The chief responsibility for this can be placed on the doors of America.

How America sees itself and how the world sees America has always been at odds. America sees itself as good and virtuous, an exemplary beacon to humanity. This is the Idea of America and Americans' idea of themselves. But the rest of the world sees a different America. We see a hyperpower that has amassed unprecedented power and influence. It is a hyperpower that earns its affluence, gains the abundance of its lifestyle, from its interconnections with the rest of the world. Its national interests are defined and pursued on a global scale. American life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is a doctrine of pre-emptive right to defend its interests by intervening anywhere and everywhere. The result is global fear and disquiet. Other people's life, liberty and pursuit of happiness is constrained by the juggernaut, dependent on what America chooses to know, or not know, about the rest of the world.

These are just some of the things about America that annoy me.

The US has just three percent of the world's population yet consumes over 30 percent of global resources. The three richest Americans have accumulated, by hook or crook, assets exceeding the combined GDP of the 48 least developed countries. What Americans spend on cosmetics—\$8 billion a year—is \$2 billion more than the annual total needed to provide basic education worldwide. Add what the US spends on pet

food alone and we can meet the basic health and nutrition requirements of all of the world's poor. The point is that this lifestyle is sustained at the expense of the rest of the world. As a hyperpower, commanding the greatest constellation of military, political, economic and cultural power ever assembled, America has structured the world to suit its own lifestyle and ends.

The US controls international institutions such as the World Bank, World Trade Organisation and IMF, thus denying democratic control over their own economic destinies to over two thirds of the world's population. It interprets 'trade liberalisation' to mean one-way, open excess for American multinationals and businesses. It has imposed massive tariffs on agricultural items such as rice, sugar and coffee, and constantly works to bring down commodity prices that are essential for the survival of many of the world's poorest countries. While Americans produce 25 per cent of the world's pollution, the US refused to sign the Kyoto Accords, denied the existence of climate change, which means you and me, and most of the developing countries, will have to suffer the devastating consequences of global warming.

Power is more than privileged status. And American power is a fact of life for every citizen of the globe. How Americans live at home effects the conditions and life chances of everyone else on the planet. Consider the fact that Americans spent \$110 billion a year on fast food. This complex system of mass production and merchandising of artificially enhanced convenience is the tip of an iceberg. The iceberg is the corporatization of the global future under American domination. The hamburger you buy over the counter is an integrated package that affects everything from how farmers

grow their crops to how much land is cleared for inefficient cows to ruminate to lifestyle choices in Ulan Bator.

American corporations are set to dominate global provision of healthcare, welfare, pensions, education, food and water. In other words, most people in the developing countries will soon be buying the basic necessities of life from American corporations. They spearhead the development of GM technology, research and development of gene therapies, and genetic medicine—the very building blocks of all life. Unfortunately, all these advances are patented for profit by corporations whose culture we know, from recent scandals at Enron, WorldCom and Xerox, is riddled with fraud, astonishing greed and criminally creative accounting. And as we know, they have even patented the neem tree. To advance opportunities for its corporations, America has consistently and repeatedly intervened in the internal affairs of nation after nation right across the globe.

US foreign policy operates solely in the interests of America. The US has abrogated the AMB treaty, redefined nuclear weapons protocols to contemplate tactical battlefield usage, and exempted its citizens from the new World Court for human rights. It has dragooned nations into a worldwide coalition against terror, yet only America's definition of terror, reified to a unitary 'evil' without reference to history, context or situation, rules.

While America affects the life of all peoples and nations, Americans themselves knows less, receives less news and information about the rest of the world than any comparable society. The US is open only for information that panders to the American mass market. Its constitutional provision for freedom of the press and expression do nothing to prevent self-censorship, as veteran news anchor Dan Rather admits.

The closed circle that is the American self-image makes peaceful, reasoned debate with America tantamount to armed assault. Never has a nation been so powerful and so insecure; so self confident yet so paranoid; so self centred as to believe its way is, in the words of Lincoln, the only last best hope for all mankind.

In the end, America offers us, all non-Americans, the option it proffered to the first nations, the Native Americans: be taught and inducted in the American way or vanish, be marginalised, become powerless and invisible. Native Americans had their own vision of democracy, environment, the good life and goodness. The United States took what it wanted from these resources, denied the provenance of its purloining and continues to patronise the impoverished remnants of the First Nations.

The 'War on Terror' is in fact a war between two extreme outlooks, each convinced that its way is the true way, each determined to destroy the other. The articles in Part Three, The Circle of Terror, attempt to highlight this.

As individuals we feel rather impotent in the face of this almighty clash. How does one resist when, as the omnipotent villains of *Star Trek*, the Borg, would say: 'Resistance is Futile'. The Borg, who look like monolithic cubes of technology, roam the universe 'assimilating' everything that moves, and many that don't. Like the Daleks, the Borg thrive on and perpetuate fear. When it comes to writing the obituary of our time, I wonder if anyone would notice just how much energy went into stimulating fear. More importantly, will anyone notice that our fears of irresistible forces have always been directed at the wrong thing?

Suppose everything worked out for the best. The terrorists disappeared. America became a benign power. What will

happen then? The truth is there will be new dragons to slay. Given human nature, lurking menaces will keep rumbling on. No matter what irresistible force we slay, what actually triumphs is fear and fragility itself. Instead of gaining strength from our victories at the end of the day, we will still fear all the difference that is just around the corner. Look at recent history. Even though Orwell's *1984* was way off mark, his story keeps on being rewritten. Communism failed, Berlin Wall came down, Armageddon did not come, but we are still under *The Siege* and mad terrorists are everywhere. There is an endless supply of bogymen not just on celluloid but in real life too. And in all cases, resistance is futile, the future is still waiting to consume us all.

Exactly what future? The future in which we are all manipulated, turned into cogs in someone else's evil plans of inhuman domination. It's the *Animal Farm* scenario, over and over again. So shouldn't we be afraid of the awful possibilities? For a moment, think about it another way. What have we been saved by? It annoys me that mobilising to end evil empires is just as much of a nightmare.

When it comes to irresistible forces all we have to offer is the valiant little guy. Or is it the angry young man of 1970s and 1980s Amitab Buchan films? No wonder this kind of thing gives fear and fragility strong word of mouth. According to the alarmists all we have to rely on is the rugged independence of odd ball eccentrics or the tough guy out for revenge who puts things right by beating the villains to pulp. No wonder resistance is futile when our only defence is fragility writ large.

But doesn't the little guy, the angry young men, eventually triumph? Well it's not quite as simple as that. And that's exactly the problem. The 'resistance is futile' mentality teaches us to fear forces that are neither real nor really as terrible as the

propaganda makes us believe. And the last best hope, the little guy we rely on to rescue us, is nothing more than a sucker, a neat patsy instantly available to succumb to the next bogeyman on the production line.

So what I want to resist is not what we are saved from but what we are saved by. When the little guy wins, he has to be afraid because he has neither control over nor conception of the forces he unleashes. He just wants revenge, or a comfortable life, with more comfort added in for good measure. That makes the little guy, the one we are all supposed to be, an idiot.

And romantic attachment to the simple virtues of this character makes nitwits of us all. Little people, living quiet, comfortable lives should be afraid. Being afraid does not deliver them into the evil machinations of megalomaniacs of every stripe and origin, al-Qaida or America, the terrorist out to kill the innocent or the corporation out to assimilate everything. No! It delivers them, unresisting, into the sofas of their simple pleasures, creature comforts and ever more convenient lifestyles: into the clutches of a world where there is little left to belong to, where everything is the same, where we are happy to be mindless consumers—the subject of Part Four: *The Parameters of Culture*. We become little people who are too busy worrying about some big bad bogey to notice we are ever more programmed, ever more identical in the choices we make. We get a freedom that is hardly distinguishable from assimilation into the hive mind of the Borg.

This brings me to what annoys me about India—the subject of Part Four: *The Tangents of South Asian Experience*. Don't let me start on this as I will never stop. (Notice, these are all essays and quite long too!) But it would suffice to say that I think India is being assimilated. For me, India was always the last place where difference would have all the space to be

different, which will stand against the tide of Americanise mass culture. Alas, India has been colonised, yet again. But this time, it is a self-imposed tyranny. India has embraced the global consumerism in the vain hope that this will transform it into a global ‘super power’.

The consumer society, the one where we are all supposed to have choice, freedom and independence, turns out to be the forceful march of the new century against which resistance has never been attempted. It is the force that really assimilates us. It occupies and controls the space we have defended. But it is not capable of question, cannot be examined and certainly is beyond being tinkered with. It is globalisation, stupid, do not ask questions. It’s free, it’s independent, so it must be good for you. The world we have built out of resistance is the very thing we need to resist. It’s the only thing politicians, academics, philosophers, and TV pundits, have no idea how to resist. Needless to say, the little guy doesn’t even have a clue.

So its about time we looked beyond resistance, futile or otherwise, and latched on to something stronger. What is stronger than resistance? How about dissent? The old dissenting spirit takes nothing as self-evident, but dedicates itself to learning and thinking through what we stand for as much as what we stand against. Resistance makes us pawns. Dissent is about self-control, the kind of self-control that enables us to exercise informed supervision of what we do and what can and is being done to us. This is what I have tried to bring out in various interviews—three of which appear in Part Six.

If there is an overall message in this book, and a purpose to my life, it is this: let us break the monolith, wherever it comes from. Resistance may be futile, especially resistance against the wrong thing. But dissent can keep the future open to all human premises and potential. There is no single way of being

human or doing anything of worth. Plurality in all forms, with all its complexities and ambiguities, is what really matters. That's why dissent in all forms is essential. Dissent is eternal vigilance that just might teach us how not to be afraid of difference, multiple possibilities of the future and how to concentrate our energies on building a better present.

You can do your part and start by doing me a favour. I like to ask all those young Indian men and women who work in call centres, mushrooming in global cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad, to stop calling me. Please delete my name and number from your systems. I am not interested in cheap loans, credit cards, free mobile phones or switching my gas and electricity suppliers. You annoy me no end.

Part One
The Sphere of Islam



The agony of a 21st-century Muslim

New Statesman

17th February 2003

It is not easy to be a Muslim. Believers like me live on the edge, constantly having to justify our very existence. As the French Moroccan novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun discovered, the situation became infinitely worse after the events of 11 September 2001. Having watched the spectacle unfold on television, his daughter declared that she did not want to be a Muslim: “Muslims are bad; they killed a lot of people.” The loving father explained that the attacks on America were the work of “fanatics” and “crazy people”. They did not represent Islam.

But what is Islam, the children ask. So Ben Jelloun here sets out to explain Islam to his children. “Once upon a time, very, very long ago,” he begins, “a little boy was born in Mecca.” He traces the life of the Prophet Muhammad, describing the tenets of Islam in a simple, graceful style. Adults often assume that children are incapable of grasping the complexity of life, an assumption that has led Ben Jelloun to keep things simple. In doing so, he evades the biggest problem of all, which is the self-delusion that we Muslims have turned into a fine art—the

reality that much of the agony of being a Muslim in the 21st century is self-inflicted.

Ben Jelloun's simplistic but compassionate interpretation of Islam is far removed from the Islam of the Taliban or the Revolutionary Guards in Iran. It is the Islam conventionally invoked by the liberal defenders of the faith, who believe that, as Muslims, it is their duty to present a more humane, tolerant Islam.

In truth, while humane representations of Islam ease our conscience, they do little to address the problems within Islam itself. The problem with all varieties of Islam as it is practised today, not as it is envisaged by liberals, is that it has lost its humanity. Our religion has become a monster that devours all that is most humane and open-minded. Instead of retreating to an imagined liberal utopia, we Muslims need to ask some tough questions about our faith. What, for example, makes so many pious Muslims such nasty and intolerant individuals? Why is it that every time a country enforces the shariah—the so-called Islamic law—it retreats into medieval barbarity? Why do Muslims still insist on treating women as though they were an inferior race, sent to earth only to deprave and spread corruption?

Not surprisingly, Ben Jelloun's children do not ask such questions. And the answers will not bring much comfort for any kind of Muslim, child or adult, liberal or otherwise.

It is easy to dismiss the followers of all the non-liberal verities of Islam as fanatics and fundamentalists. It is much harder and much more painful to see them as a natural product of what contemporary Islam has become. Their paranoia is located within Islam. All Muslims, no matter how liberal they perceive themselves to be, are in danger of becoming infected. For, at the very heart of Islam, there are four category mistakes of

catastrophic proportions. (By which I mean, Muslims have elevated what is clearly human to the category of the divine.) These have transformed Islam into an authoritarian creed.

Ben Jelloun alludes to the first without realising what he is saying. “The Muslims owe their Prophet Muhammad, God’s messenger, their worship and love,” he tells the little girl. In this unconscious slip, Ben Jelloun reveals how Muslims perceive the Prophet. He equates the Prophet with God, for in Islam only God can be worshipped. The Koran insists, and the Prophet himself emphasised, that Muhammad was only a man. What made him human was that he could make mistakes and he was a product of his own time. But in reality, Muslims have fetishised the Prophet so much that all his human qualities have evaporated; his time and context have been transformed into eternal time.

The measure of piety for Muslims is thus how closely one imitates the Prophet’s physical appearance: his beard, his clothes, the way he walked and brushed his teeth. Even the way the Prophet came to be described—his human qualities, his character, his struggles to shape a humane and just society in his particular epoch—was underplayed at the expense of superhuman attributes, such as his victories in battles against tremendous odds. All biographies of the Prophet, from the earliest, written by ibn Ishaq in the early eighth century, to those produced today, follow a standard formula. The story is told chronologically. We move from one battle to the next until we reach the conquest of Mecca and the death of the Prophet himself. But this is absurd; the battles of the Prophet occupied less than a month of the 63 years of his life on earth. The two most celebrated confrontations—the Battles of Badr (624) and Uhud (625)—were over within a day. The other main conflict, the Battle of Trenches, never took place. And apart from one

minor skirmish, no one fought during the conquest of Mecca. The Prophet simply entered the city with a large army, declared a general amnesty and forgave all his bitter enemies. Yet the standard biographies of the Prophet contain little other than fighting and conflict.

This is largely why Muslims cannot relate to the Prophet as a man struggling to do the right thing in exceptionally difficult circumstances. Instead, they relate to an abstract construction; they aim to imitate an impossible person devoid of all human attributes and virtues. In the words of the celebrated Muslim philosopher and poet Mohammad Iqbal, they want to be “superman”, or a Momin, the technical term for the perfect Muslim. The quest for this status, the absolute imitation of the Prophet in every eighth-century detail, then becomes a pathological end in itself. And all forms of violence and oppression are justified to achieve the end in the name of the Prophet.

The genius of the Prophet, as Barnaby Rogerson notes, was “to transform his own religious experience, which was by its very nature highly individual, and create from it something of relevance to a whole society”. It is the relevance of the Prophet’s example, the spirit, the ethics, the morality that shaped his outlook and behaviour that Muslims have discarded in favour of fetishising his personality and his times.

Rogerson aims to capture the spiritual and moral framework that guided the actions of the Prophet. It is an indication of the importance of his book that the Battles of Badr and Uhud are hardly mentioned. Rogerson concentrates on the Prophet’s character, and the texture of the period in which he lived. We can almost smell and feel the Arabia of the seventh century. The end product is more than enchanting: it is a closer representation of what Muslims really should be emulating.

The second category mistake concerns the shariah. Ben Jelloun tells his children that the shariah is not obligatory. The liberals can ignore it. But Asma Barlas has no such illusions. Women living in “Islamic states” do not have such luxuries. Most Muslims consider the shariah to be divine. Yet as Barlas shows, in reality there is hardly anything in the shariah that is based on the Koran and hence can be taken as divine. The Koran has remarkably few rules and regulations. Most of the Holy Book is devoted to elaborating the attributes of God and the virtues of reason. So where does the shariah come from?

The bulk of the shariah consists of the legal opinion of classical jurists. It was formulated in the Abbasid period, when Muslim history was in its expansionist phase. It incorporates the logic of Muslim imperialism of the eighth and ninth centuries. Hence the black-and-white division of the world into “the abode of Islam” and “the abode of war”—the ruling on apostasy which, contrary to the unequivocal declaration of the Koran that “there is no compulsion in religion”, equates apostasy with treason against the state. Or the dictate that says non-Muslims should be humiliated and cannot give evidence in a Muslim court.

It was largely men who formulated the shariah, says Barlas—good men, but firmly rooted in their time. It is not surprising that they were misogynistic. The shariah treats women and men unequally, particularly when it comes to criminal justice. By treating the testimony of women with what Barlas calls the “two-for-one formula”, the shariah promotes the view—contrary to everything that the Koran teaches—that a woman is only half a man. Being a product of male perceptions, the shariah cannot distinguish between adultery, fornication and rape. As a result, victims of rape and sexual abuse can find

themselves charged with a crime and sentenced to being stoned to death—an aberrant law, because the Koran does not sanction stoning to death for any crime whatsoever. Even though the Koran gives women's testimonies privilege over men's in the case of sexual offences, the shariah chooses to ignore them.

What this means in reality is that when Muslim countries apply or impose the shariah—the demand of Muslims from Algeria through Pakistan to Nigeria—the contradictions that were inherent in the formulation and evolution of this jurisprudence come to the fore. The shariah's obsession with extreme punishment generates extreme societies. That is why, wherever the shariah is imposed, Muslim societies acquire a medieval feel. We can see that in Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. But this is what even the moderate elements of the Islamic movement want. The alliance of Islamic parties that took over Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province recently may describe itself as “modernist”, but it is still ready to lock up women, flog thieves and stone adulterers in the name of divine justice.

The reason Muslims are so reluctant to reform the shariah, Barlas tells us in her brave and penetrating book, is that it underwrites male privilege. But it does something more: it keeps the interpretation of Islam firmly in the hands of a select group of bearded obscurantists. The Koran declares unequivocally that no one has any special privilege of interpretation. As a book of guidance, it is open to all. But Muslims have created a whole elite class of individuals who are the only ones with the right to interpret the Koran. In Shia Iran, they go under the obnoxious rubric of “clergy”; in the other, Sunni Muslim communities, they use the term “*ulama*”, or religious scholars. The repulsive notion that only the *ulama* and the clergy can interpret the Koran is the third category mistake.

The individual Muslim is thus denied agency. If the shariah is a given, and only a select few can reinterpret the Koran, then most believers have nothing to do except follow what we are told. Believers thus become passive receivers rather than active seekers of truth: that is why they can tolerate such injustice and inhumanity while imagining they are carving some piece of paradise for themselves. Even the liberals have to defer to the superior knowledge of the guardians of the faith for explanation of this or that verse of the Koran. The pressing ethical questions of contemporary science on issues such as human cloning and genetic engineering can be addressed only by the *ulama*, who, by and large, know nothing of science or contemporary society. Oppressed women have to turn to their religious oppressors for justice. The authoritarianism that has become so intrinsic to Islam is reflected in Muslim societies themselves. How can Muslims introduce democracy to their societies when there is no democracy within their religion?

And so, to the final category mistake. Everything about Islam, we Muslims believe, is eternal. Everything that the Prophet did is eternal. The shariah is eternal. The right of the *ulama* to reinterpret the Koran is eternal. Indeed, Islam itself is eternal. Thus, all human problems have been solved for all time. The most common slogan among Muslims of all varieties, in every part of the world, is that “Islam has all the answers”. This from a people who have forgotten how to ask questions!

What remains constant in Islam is the text of the Koran itself, its concepts providing the ethical anchor for ever-changing interpretations. Everything else is subject to change, including the reinterpretations of the Koran and life of the Prophet Muhammad. As far as the shariah is concerned, it neither works as law nor contains much that any sensible person can recognise as ethics. If the original formulators of the shariah

were to visit the 21st century, they would be appalled at the injustices their opinions are propagating.

Islam cannot survive as a static faith, buried in history. It was always meant to be a dynamic world-view, adjusting to change. In reality, the shariah is nothing more than a set of principles, a framework of values that provide Muslim societies with guidance. But these sets of principles and values are not givens; they are vigorously derived from within changing contexts. As such, the shariah is a problem-solving methodology rather than law. It requires individual believers and societies to exert themselves and to reinterpret the Koran and the life of the Prophet Muhammad.

If Ben Jelloun was really interested in explaining Islam to his children, he would have addressed the problems intrinsic to how Muslims perceive their faith. For it is his children, and mine, who will inherit the inhumanity of so much that goes under the rubric of Islam today.

Islam Explained Tahar Ben Jelloun, translated by Franklin Philip *The New Press*, 120pp, £9.95 ISBN 1565847814 The Prophet Muhammad: a biography Barnaby Rogerson *Little, Brown*, 240pp, £14.99 "Believing Women" in Islam: unreading patriarchal interpretations of the Koran Asma Barlas *University of Texas Press*, 272pp, £16.95 *pbk*

Can Islam change?

New Statesman

13th September 2004

Beslan and 9/11 are leading millions of Muslims to search their souls. Even clerics now question the harshest traditional laws and look for a more humane interpretation of their faith.

The Muslim world is changing. Three years after the atrocity of 9/11, it may be in the early stages of a reformation, albeit with a small “r”. From Morocco to Indonesia, people are trying to develop a more contemporary and humane interpretation of Islam, and some countries are undergoing major transformations.

Much of the attention is focused on reformulating the sharia, the centuries-old body of Islamic law deeply embedded in a medieval psychology. The sharia is state law in many Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan and the Sudan. For many conservative and radical Muslims, the sharia *is* Islam: it cannot be changed, and must be imposed in exactly the shape it was first formulated in the ninth century. Since 9/11, there has been a seismic shift in this perception. More and more Muslims now perceive Islamic law to be dangerously obsolete. And these include the ulema, the religious scholars and clerics,

who have a tremendous hold on the minds of the Muslim masses.

In India, for example, where the secular state allows Muslims to regulate their communal affairs according to their own law, the “triple *talaq*” is being changed. Triple *talaq* gives a man the absolute right to divorce his wife by uttering “I divorce thee” three times. He can do it by letter, telegram, telephone, fax, even by text message. Quite apart from denying women’s rights, the law has inherent absurdities. For example, as one critic has explained, “The moment a Muslim male utters ‘*talaq, talaq, talaq*’, his wife becomes unlawful to him, even if he has uttered those words under coercion, in a fit of rage or a drunken state, and regrets his utterance the very next moment.” The only way out is for the woman to marry someone else, consummate the marriage, get the second husband to divorce her and then remarry the first husband.

But in July, the All India Muslim Personal Law Board declared that triple *talaq* was wrong, promised to prepare a model marriage contract (which would require both husband and wife not to seek divorce without due legal process) and asked Muslim men to ensure that women get a share in agricultural property.

These may look like minor changes, but there are enormous implications to the board’s implicit admission that Islamic law is not immutable. Certainly, it has set defenders of the pure faith at the throats of members of Muslims for Secular Democracy (MSD), who are campaigning for root-and-branch reform. “Remain in your senses,” the conservative *Urdu Times* warned Javed Akhtar, the poet and Bollywood screenwriter who is MSD president. “The day is not far when you too will be counted among the infamous blasphemers such as Salman Rushdie.”

Yet in India, at least, the purists—both the conservatives and the more aggressive radicals—are on the retreat. Uzma Naheed, an activist for women’s rights and Personal Law Board member, says that even the religious scholars are changing. “It is not just that a person like me is invited to address large gatherings of the ulema in different parts of the country, where I am given a very patient and sincere hearing. It is what the ulema themselves have started saying in public meetings that is more significant.”

In Pakistan, however, the mullahs are still predominantly hardline and are locked in a virtual civil war with reformers. The contentious issue here is the Hudood Ordinance, which states the maximum punishments for adultery (stoning), false accusation of adultery (80 lashes of the whip), theft (cutting off the right hand), drinking alcohol (80 lashes) and apostasy (death). The ordinance was imposed on Pakistan in 1979 by the military ruler Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, under pressure from Islamic parties. It makes no distinction between rape and adultery; thus women who are raped often end up being whipped while the rapists are exonerated. Girls who have reached the age of puberty are treated as adults. Worse, women are not allowed to give evidence on their own behalf. Among the high-profile injustices was the case in 1983 of 15-year-old Jehan Mina, raped by an uncle and his son. She was sentenced to ten years in prison and 100 lashes, reduced to three years and 15 lashes in view of her age. In 1985, a blind maidservant, Safia Bibi, was sentenced to a similar punishment. In both cases, the girl’s pregnancy was used as proof that the sex act had been committed but the men were acquitted on the benefit of the doubt. Several women have been sentenced to death by stoning, the most recent being Zafran Bibi in Kohat in 2002, although that sentence was quickly overturned on appeal.

In the past three years, protests against the Hudood Ordinance, which was never popular, have reached a crescendo. The Joint Action Committee, a network of NGOs which has held a string of demonstrations across Pakistan, says that these “laws have not only given a bad name to our religion, but defamed Pakistan in the world”. Though he has often promised to repeal the laws, the country’s military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, always caves in under pressure from puritan Islamist parties. “No one can deny,” he told a recent meeting in Karachi, “that we have to adhere to the Koran and the example of the Prophet Muhammad. The question is of correct interpretation.” He wants the Council of Islamic Ideology to decide on the issue. And the mullahs who dominate it have never previously voted for justice and women’s rights.

However, they cannot be left out of the equation. For the vast majority of Muslims, changes to Islamic law have to be made within the boundaries of the Koran’s teachings if they are to be legitimate. Without the co-operation of the religious scholars, who bestow this legitimacy, the masses will not embrace change.

This is where Morocco has provided an essential lead. Its new Islamic family law, introduced in February, sweeps away centuries of bigotry and bias against women. It was produced with the full co-operation of religious scholars as well as the active participation of women.

Morocco retained much of the colonial legal system that France left behind, but, in family law, followed what is known locally as the Moudawana—the traditional Islamic rules on marriage, divorce, inheritance, polygamy and child custody. At first, King Mohammed VI had to abandon plans for change because, protesters claimed, he was trying to impose secular law and western culture on Morocco. In spring 2001, however,

he set up a commission, which included women and was given the specific task of coming up with fresh legislation based on the principles of Islam. Given enormous impetus by 9/11 and its aftermath, it produced a report that many see as a revolutionary document. The resulting family code establishes that women are equal partners in marriage and family life. It throws out the notion that the husband is head of the family and that women are mere underlings in need of guidance and protection. It raises the minimum age for women's marriage from 15 to 18, the same as for men.

The new Moudawana allows a woman to contract a marriage without the legal approval of a guardian. Verbal divorce has been outlawed: men now require prior authorisation from a court, and women have exactly the same rights. Women can claim alimony and can be granted custody of their children even if they remarry. Husbands and wives must share property acquired during the marriage. The old custom of favouring male heirs in the sharing of inherited land has also been dropped, making it possible for grandchildren on the daughter's side to inherit from their grandfather, just like grandchildren on the son's side. As for polygamy, it has been all but abolished. Men can take second wives only with the full consent of the first wife and only if they can prove, in a court of law, that they can treat them both with absolute justice—an impossible condition.

Every change in the law is justified—chapter and verse—from the Koran, and from the examples and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. And every change acquired the consent of the religious scholars. Even the Islamist political organisations have welcomed the change. The Party of Justice and Development described the law as “a pioneering reform” which is “in line with the prescriptions of Islam and with the aims of our religion”.

Elsewhere, the focus is not so much on Islamic law as on Islam as a whole. In a general election last March, the Malaysian prime minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, argued that Islam was almost totally associated with violence and extremism and needed to be formulated anew. He called his new concept “Islam Hadhari”, or progressive Islam. It was pitted against the “conservative Islam” of the main opposition party, the Islamic Pas. For the first time, the governing coalition won more than 90 per cent of federal parliamentary seats. Pas, and its version of Islam (full implementation of the sharia, without modification; a leading role in the state for religious scholars; and so on), were routed.

Badawi, who is a trained religious scholar, took the term “*hadhari*” from Ibn Khaldun, the 14th-century Muslim historian and founder of sociology. The term signifies urban civilisation; and Islam Hadhari emphasises economic development, civic life and cultural progress. When Muslims talk about Islam, says Abdullah Mohd Zain, a minister in the prime minister’s department, “there is always the tendency to link it to the past, to the Prophet’s time”. Islam Hadhari gives equal emphasis to the present and the future. “It emphasises wisdom, practicality and harmony,” says Zain. “It encourages moderation or a balanced approach to life. Yet it does not stray from the fundamentals of the Koran and the example and sayings of the Prophet.”

Islam Hadhari—fully explained in a 60-page document published by Badawi last month—emphasises the central role of knowledge in Islam; preaches hard work, honesty, good administration and efficiency; and appeals to Muslims to be “inclusive”, tolerant and outward-looking. It advocates that Muslims should attend secular and not religious schools. Committees have been set up to spread the message throughout

Malaysia, and mullahs have been instructed to preach it during Friday sermons.

Nik Abdul Aziz, the spiritual leader of Pas, dismisses Islam Hadhari as “nonsense”. But Muslim writers and thinkers, at an international conference in Kuala Lumpur in August, responded warmly. “It is certainly time,” said one participant, “to change gear and concentrate on the humanistic and progressive aspects of Islam.” As critics at the conference pointed out, however, Islam Hadhari stops short of changes to Islamic law. And Badawi himself is hardly a good advertisement for the concept. Government-controlled television and newspapers in Malaysia are full of crude propaganda. The repressive Internal Security Act, a legacy of British colonialism, is still in force. But Badawi’s image will improve following the release this month of the former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, who was framed on homosexuality charges for which he was sentenced to nine years in prison.

While Malaysia has a top-down model, Indonesia has opted for the bottom-up route. The reformist agenda is being promoted by Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the two largest and most influential Muslim organisations. Established at the dawn of the 20th century, they command between 60 and 80 million followers in mosques, schools and universities throughout Indonesia.

NU, essentially an organisation of religious scholars, is usually described as traditionalist, while Muhammadiyah, dominated by intellectuals, is seen as modernist. Since 9/11, however, the two organisations have acted, in some respects, as one. Both are committed to promoting civic society and reformulating sharia. They are campaigning jointly against corruption in public life and in favour of accountable, open

democracy. The newly formed Liberal Islam Network—intended to resist radical groups such as Laskar Jihad (Army of Jihad) and Jemaah Islamiyah, which was implicated in the October 2002 Bali bombings—follows a similar programme. Its membership consists largely of young Muslims.

All three organisations promote a model of Islamic reform that they call “deformalisation”. “The overemphasis on formality and symbolism has drained Islam of its ethical and humane dimension,” says Abdul Mukti, chairman of Muhammadiyah’s influential youth wing. “The first mission of deformalisation is to recover this missing dimension.” Its second mission, he says, is “to separate the sharia from political realms”. Islamic law, Mukti explains, cannot be imposed from the top—as it has been in Pakistan—but has to evolve from below. Indeed, the overwhelming view of scholars and thinkers I met recently in Indonesia—including teachers at a state religious university—was that the formal links between Islam and politics must be severed.

Both Malaysia’s Islam Hadhari and Indonesia’s deformalisation emphasise tolerance and pluralism, civic society and open democracy. Both are likely to spread. Malaysia is trying to export Islam Hadhari to Muslim communities in Thailand and the Philippines. Meanwhile, Morocco is trying to persuade Egypt, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates to adopt its model of family law.

Muslims worldwide are acknowledging the need for fundamental change in their perception of Islam. They are making conscious efforts to move away from medieval notions of Islamic law and to implement the vision of justice, equality and beauty that is rooted in the Koran. If such changes continue, the future will not repeat the recent past.

The struggle for Islam's soul

New Statesman

18th July 2005

Most Muslims abhor violence, yet the terrorists are a product of a specific mindset that has deep roots in Islamic history. If Muslims refuse to confront this, we will all be prey to more terror.

At about the time the bombs were going off in London, bulldozers were demolishing sacred historic sites in Mecca and, in Delhi, a group of women was demonstrating against an “inhuman” fatwa ordering a rape victim to renounce her husband. Three seemingly unconnected violent acts. But they weave a thread highlighting a question we Muslims just cannot ignore: why have we made Islam so violent?

Within hours of the London atrocity, Muslim groups throughout Britain condemned the bombing, declaring in unequivocal terms that such acts had nothing to do with Islam. “Religious precepts,” declared the Muslim Council of Britain, “cannot be used to justify such crimes, which are completely contrary to our teaching and practice.” The eminently sensible Imam Abdul Jalil Sajid, chairman of the Muslim Council for Religious and Racial Harmony UK, announced: “No school of Islam allows the targeting of civilians or the killing of

innocents. Indiscriminate, senseless and targeted killing has no justification in Islam.” The tenor of these statements is: these are the acts of pathologically mad people; Islam has nothing to do with it.

But Islam has everything to do with it. As Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, director of the Muslim Institute, points out: “The terrorists are using Islamic sources to justify their actions. How can one then say it has nothing to do with Islam?”

It is true that the vast majority of Muslims abhor violence and terrorism, and that the Koran and various schools of Islamic law forbid the killing of innocent civilians. It is true, as the vast majority of Muslims believe, that the main message of Islam is peace. Nevertheless, it is false to assume that the Koran or Islamic law cannot be used to justify barbaric acts. The terrorists are a product of a specific mindset that has deep roots in Islamic history. They are nourished by an Islamic tradition that is intrinsically inhuman and violent in its rhetoric, thought and practice. They are provided solace and spiritual comfort by scholars, who use the Koran and Islamic law to justify their actions and fan the hatred.

As a Muslim, I am deeply upset by the attacks, the more so now I know they were the work of British Muslims. But, as a Muslim, I also have a duty to recognise the Islamic nature of the problem that the terrorists have thrown up. They are acting in the name of my religion; it thus becomes my responsibility critically to examine the tradition that sustains them. The question of violence per se is not unique to Islam. All those who define themselves as the totality of a religion or an ideology have an innate tolerance for and tendency towards violence. It is the case in all religions and all ideologies down through every age. But this does not lessen the responsibility on Muslims in Britain, or around the world, to be judicious, to

examine themselves, their history and all it contains to redeem Islam from the pathology of this tradition. The terrorists place a unique burden on Muslims. To deny that they are a product of Islamic history and tradition is more than complacency. It is a denial of responsibility, a denial of what is really happening in our communities. It is a refusal to live in the real world.

The tradition that nourishes the mentality of the extremists has three inherent characteristics. First, 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. What happened in Mecca earlier this month illustrates this point well.

During the past 50 years the holy cities of Mecca and Medina have suffered incalculable violence. More than 300 historical sites have been levelled systematically. Only a few historic buildings remain in Mecca—and these are about to be demolished. “We are witnessing now the last few moments of the history of Mecca,” says Sami Angawi, a Saudi expert on the Islamic architecture of the Holy City. “Its layers of history are being bulldozed for a parking lot.” Angawi, who has fought to conserve the historic sites of the Holy City for more than 25 years, has no doubt what is largely to blame: Wahhabism, the dominant religious tradition of Saudi Arabia. The Wahhabis, he says, “have not allowed preservation of old buildings, especially those related to the Prophet”. Why? Because other Muslims will relate to the history of the Prophet, and they will then see him as a man living in a particular time and space that placed particular demands on him and forced him to act in particular ways. The Wahhabis want to universalise

and eternalise every act of the Prophet. For them, the context is not only irrelevant but dangerous. It has to be expunged.

What this means is that the time of the Prophet has to be constantly recreated, both in thought and action. It is perfect time, frozen and eternalised. Because it is perfect, it cannot be improved: it is the epitome of morality, incapable of growth.

Second, this ideal tradition 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. The latest *cause celebre* of Islamic law in India demonstrates what I mean.

Imrana Bibi, the 28-year-old wife of a poor rickshaw puller in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, was raped by her father-in-law. The religious scholars of Deoband, an influential seminary with Wahhabi tendencies, issued a fatwa: her marriage is nullified, her husband is forbidden to her for ever, she will have to separate for life from him and her five children. The All India Muslim Personal Law Board endorsed the “punishment”. When Imrana Bibi herself, along with women’s rights groups, complained about the double injustice, the clerics at Deoband declared: “She had a physical relationship with her father-in-law. It does not matter whether it was consensual or forced. She cannot live with her husband. Any Muslim who opposes our fatwa is not a true Muslim and is betraying Islam.”

So no complaint or opposition is allowed. A perfect tradition can only produce perfect fatwas. And those who are seen as betraying Islam can themselves become subjects of other perfect fatwas. As a tradition outside history, it does not recognise the diversity of Islam. The humanist or rationalist tradition of Islam, or the great mystical tradition, thus appear as a dangerous deviations. In Bangladesh the Wahhabis and Deobandis are terrorising and burning the mosques of the

Ahmadiyya sect, which does not see the Prophet Muhammad as the last Prophet, and insist that Ahmadis should be declared “non-Muslims”. In Pakistan the Sunnis are killing Shias because they do not see them as legitimate Muslims. Ditto in Iraq. In Algeria the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) openly declared that the entire “Algerian nation” was deviant and should be killed. As for Saudi Arabia, you cannot even take a commentary or translation of the Koran into the country that does not follow the prescribed line.

Notice also that this tradition has a very specific view of sin. A perfect tradition must lead to perfect Muslims, who do not and cannot commit sin. Those who commit sin—that is, disagree or deviate—cannot be Muslims. Those outside this tradition are sinners and have to be brought to the Straight Path. The victims of sin themselves become sinners who have to be punished.

Third, this tradition is aggressively self-righteous; and insists on imposing its notion of righteousness on others. It legitimises intolerance and violence by endlessly quoting the famous verse from the Koran that asks the believers “to do good and prevent evil deeds”. The Bali bombers justified their actions with this verse. The Islamic Defenders Front, based in Indonesia, frequently burns and destroys cafes, cinemas and discos—places it considers to be sites of immoral or immodest behaviour. The hated religious police in Saudi Arabia are on the streets every day imposing a “moral code” (mainly on women). In Pakistan, the religious scholars succeeded in banning mixed (male and female) marathons.

Just where does this tradition come from? Much has been said about the “modern” nature of this tendency. It has been argued, for example, that it is a recent phenomenon, a product

of “instrumental modernity”. This is plain nonsense. It can be traced right back to the formative phase of Islam.

The Prophet Muhammad was succeeded by four caliphs who are known as the “Rightly Guided” because of their close friendship and relationship with the Prophet. Muslims regard the period of their rule in idealised terms—as the best that human endeavour can achieve. However, this was also a period of dissent, wars and rebellions. Three of the four Rightly Guided caliphs were murdered. One particular set of rebels, responsible for the murder of Ali, the fourth caliph, was known as the Kharjites. The Kharjites were a puritan sect which believed that history had come to an end after the revelation made to the Last Prophet. From now on, there could not be any debate or compromise on any question: “The decision is God’s alone.” They were prone to extremist proclamations, denouncing Ali as well as Othman, the third caliph, and pronouncing everyone who did not agree with their point of view as infidel and outside the law.

The Kharjites developed a radically different interpretation of what it means to be a Muslim. To be a Muslim, they argued, is to be in a perfect state of soul. Someone in that state cannot commit a sin and engage in wrongdoing. Sin, therefore was a contradiction for a true Muslim—it nullified the believer and demonstrated that inwardly he was an apostate who had turned against Islam. Thus anyone who did any wrong was not really a Muslim. He could be put to death. Indeed, the Kharjites believed that all non-Kharjite Muslims were really apostates who were legitimate targets for violence.

Although the Kharjites were eventually suppressed, their thought has recurred in Islamic history with cyclic regularity. They led several rebellions during the Abbasid period (749–1258), which is conventionally seen as the Golden Age of

Islam. The influence of their thought can clearly be seen on Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328), the great-grandfather of Wahhabism, and one of the most influential political scientists of Islamic history. Kharjite thought is also evident in the ideas of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–87), the founder of the Wahhabi sect. It shaped the outlook of Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), chief ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood. Today we can see their clear influence not just on those who subscribe to the Bin Laden doctrine, groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun, but also on certain mainstream organisations.

Like their predecessors, the neo-Kharjites have no doubt that their identity is shaped by the best religion with the finest arrangements and precepts for all aspects of human existence; and there can be no deviation from the path. Those who do not agree are at best lesser Muslims and at worst legitimate targets for violence. In their rhetoric all is sacred, nothing secular and retribution is the paramount duty. “Since they have left humanity and history out of the equation,” says Dr Najah Kadhim, director of Islam21, a global network of Muslim intellectuals, “they have no conscience. No notion of guilt or remorse. Since the idea that they are perfect is part of their psychological make-up, they can do anything with impunity.” Injustice and violence are inbuilt in their thought and tradition, which, under certain circumstances, is transformed into undiluted fascism. We saw this most clearly in the case of the Taliban.

So it just won't do to say that these people are “not Muslims”, as the Muslim Council of Britain seems to suggest. We must acknowledge that the terrorists, and their neo-Kharjite tradition, are products of Islamic history. Only by recognising this brutal fact would we realise that the fight against terrorism

is also an internal Muslim struggle within Islam. Indeed, it is a struggle for the very soul of Islam.

In that struggle, all Muslims have to examine their words, deeds, motivations and interpretations of Islam. The traditional exegesis of the Koran—the traditional rhetoric used by gentle, bushy-bearded, kind old mullahs who wouldn't hurt a fly—nevertheless is formed from the same building blocks as that slippery slope on which pathological mindsets are created, where Islam is used to justify the unjustifiable. And it leads to equivocal arguments by which many defend or seek to explain the indefensible.

Yet this struggle, as Dr Siddiqui points out, “cannot be shaped on the lines of ‘the war on terror’”. The “war on terror” feeds the monster what it most desires: violent reaction to sustain the cycle of violence. “This is why Iraq has now become a breeding ground for the neo-Kharjite philosophy,” he argues.

The war on terror, in fact, cannot be a war at all. It has to be a reasoned engagement with the politics of tradition. If Islam has been construed as the problem, then Islam is also the essential ingredient in the solution.

“The best way to fight the Kharjite tradition is with the humanistic and rationalist traditions of Islam,” says Dr Kadhim. “This is how they were defeated in Islamic history. This is how we will defeat them now.” If Muslims do not take on the challenge, they cede the initiative to those who have misconceived the problem and accepted a military strategy that is no solution. And that will make us all prey to more violence.

Reformist Ideas and Muslim Intellectuals—The demands of the Real World

From *Today's Problems, Tomorrow's Solutions: Future Thoughts on the Structure of Muslim Society* edited by Abdullah Omar Naseef, Mansell, London, 1988.

All reformist work must start with recognition of the world as it is. We must see and understand the world as it exists and not as we would like it to be. Only when we appreciate the true dimensions of contemporary reality, can we contemplate reforms that will create the world we want.

Most Muslim scholars and professionals view the world not as it is but as a rosy-hued mirage which is largely a figment of their own minds. They cannot see that their disciplines are an arena of power politics, where objectivity and neutrality are rhetorical rationales for control, and integrity is simply another name for expedient self-interest. The world of intellectual disciplines, natural or social sciences, is not a world of dispassionate rationality, Platonic pursuit of truth or moral virtuosity. It is a world where ideational and ideological battles are fought and where thought and tradition are divided and demarcated for domination and control. In this game, the

Muslim scholar, scientist, economist is very much an outsider: unless he understands and appreciates this, his attempts to 'islamize' this or that discipline will not only fail to usher in any reforms, but can, indeed will, surrender even more intellectual territory to the ideational universe of western civilization.

There are three aspects of contemporary reality that ought to be appreciated by anybody engaged in islamization efforts or working on legal, social and economic reforms in Muslim society. The first aspect is the most obvious, and perhaps the most [painful. Muslim thought is completely marginalized in the modern world. As it has made no input into the philosophical and intellectual pool of contemporary knowledge, it should harbour no illusions that it will be accepted on equal terms by and allowed to participate in the global knowledge industry. The corollary of this is that Muslim people are also totally marginalized and, despite an illusion of independence, are dependent on the dominant civilization, an even more painful fact. That Muslim people will be allowed to determine their own destiny cannot be taken for granted in a world where the umma has a dependent status.

This aspect of contemporary reality has a direct bearing both on reform movements and the islamization debate. Any country wishing to introduce the Shariah will face systematic opposition from the industrialized countries, as was so obviously the case with Sudan. Any discipline that Muslim scholars may islamize, if it is of any significance and presents a threat to the dominant discipline, will be simply co-opted.

The second stark feature of our time is interconnection and interdependence. In the modern world everything is connected to everything else and is dependent upon developments in other spheres. Things do not exist in isolation; problems cannot be

removed as it were from this interconnected, interlocking reality and tackled in isolation. In such a world, it makes little sense, as Parvez Manzoor points out in his introduction, to establish the Shariah without introducing social, economic and educational reforms. Or as Muhammad Arif argues, introducing Islamic banking without doing anything about the unequal distribution of resources, would not solve much. Economics is intrinsically linked to land reform, which is linked to politics. And politics itself is linked to science, technology, medicine, social formation and so on. Reform or Islamization, therefore, cannot be undertaken in isolation. The enterprise can succeed only if it is systematically tackled on a number of different fronts, when disciplines are allowed to merge and cross-fertilize, when a new universe of disciplines, geared to the needs of the Muslim people and culture and subordinated to the world-view of Islam, emerges. The present disciplinary structure, as I have noted elsewhere, has evolved in the cultural and intellectual milieu of the western civilization—it is a direct response to its needs and world-view. Its boundaries are artificially maintained by the intellectual power and rigour that this civilization commands.

The third feature of our world is that diversity is the essence of survival. Contrary to Darwinian myth, it is not the fittest who survive, but those who use plurality of means. Monocultures dominate, isolate, alienate, decimate and finally bore themselves to death with uniformity. The analogy is most clearly demonstrated in agriculture: too heavy a reliance on a single crop ends in famine, monoculture has a limited future. But a multiplicity of crops produce abundance. Similarly, pluralistic societies have a higher chance of cultural survival and normally thrive.

What does this mean in terms of reform and islamization? It means that monolithic approaches to reform are doomed. The zeal of the righteous and the fanaticism of the revolutionary end in tyranny. All revolutions in history, even the one carried out in the name of Islam, end by replacing one tyranny with another. Iran is a shining example. Reform has to evolve, and be attempted, consistently and constantly, by a number of different means and methods. A reformist is not a revolutionary; he/she is not foolish enough to believe that the world can be put right by a single act of political violence. Changes can be brought about and reforms introduced only by the methodology of the Prophet: by consistent and planned work, step by step, allowing time for adjusting to change, taking stock of the changing situation, occasionally side-stepping for strategic reasons, with unshaking will and determination. Any other method is pure euphoria, a day dram of a card-carrying imbecile.

For islamization, the diversity of modern reality has a special significance. It means that if islamized disciplines become an appendage of western disciplines, they will be co-opted and swallowed up by the monolith. As such, they, like the dominant disciplines themselves, will have no real future. But if the islamized disciplines develop independently of western disciplines, they have a real chance of flourishing in themselves and genuinely enriching the western ones. On this basis, Islamic economics, supposedly the most islamized of contemporary disciplines, has nowhere to go!

Once we have moved into the world as it is, we can begin to shed the fallacies that have enveloped our thought and action. The prime illusion we must abandon is that we can solve our problems by borrowing from others, or tacking them in isolation, or that every Muslim country is an independent,

self-sufficient, self-reliant 'sovereign' state. It is the indigenous and the whole that is the key to our intellectual and physical survival in the modern world. Only when Muslim countries begin to see themselves as a civilization and start relying on their indigenous capabilities and intellectual heritage can the umma solve its pressing problems and present a viable challenge to the dominant civilizations. Contemporary reality demands that the Muslim umma, the many and varied nation-states, act a single, autonomous civilization. Only by presenting a civilization front can the umma halt the advance of western civilization at its boundaries and undertake meaningful reforms within it. An individual state seeking to adopt the Shariah would thereofre have the protection and support of the entire Muslim world. Isolationism is out—says the stark reality of our time. The same goes for parochialism and sectarianism.

Nothing has forced the Muslim world into subjugation and borrowed solutions more than parochialism and sectarianism. On the physical level, ethnic and sectarian identities have been overblown and turned into civil strife and national conflicts. Those who seek to assert their ethnic identity at the expense of unity are planting the seeds of their own destruction. Those who suppress or persecute ethnic minorities in the name of a national majority, are mortgaging their future. Ethnic diversity is a source of cultural strength for Muslim societies. The motto of our time, we can read out there in the real world, is live and let live.

Parochialism is a widespread feature of Muslim thought. Narrow adherence to *fiqh* (classical jurisprudence), to the dictates of this or that school of thought, whether it has any contemporary relevance or not, is one manifestation of this parochialism. The real world takes no account of the glories of bygone ages, rulings of historic times, outmoded thought

and ideas. Its message is simple: adapt or perish. Muslim people have been on the verge of physical, cultural and intellectual extinction simply because they have allowed parochialism and petty traditionalism to rule their minds. We must break free from the ghetto mentality.

This means thinking imaginatively, boldly and universally. Islam is a universal world-view: it transcends all cultural boundaries and is not limited and confined by a single parochial outlook. This is stating the obvious; but the significance of this truism is seldom appreciated. For example, if Islam is a universal world-view, an economic system based on its principle should also be universal. Islamic economics therefore is a universal economics, not Muslim economics. Thus western economics, which is based on a particular culture and parochial (Eurocentric) outlook, should be an appendage to it, and not vice versa. This means, further, that Islamic economics has to be based on its own axiomatic structure, and not be derivative of western economic thought and its institutional apparatus. However, to develop an entire economic structure from first principles is so formidable that no Muslim economist has had the courage to undertake the exercise. And what is true of economics is also true of other social sciences as well as science.

A universalist world-view, by its very nature, must be dynamic and constantly absorbing change. The real world is changing rapidly; indeed, it is changing at a rate unparalleled in history—the rate of change is itself changing! Under such circumstances, we cannot rely on static or pre-modernist formulations of the Shariah. Yet this is the spectacle that we are faced with: obscurantist rulings are dragged out from history as though they were eternal principles and forced into circumstances where they clearly do not belong. We must gain

a fresh insight into the Shariah based on the factors that confront us. (1)

Why is it that most Muslim scholars fail to understand the dynamics of the real world? Perhaps it has something to do with the traditional nature of their education. Possibly it has something to do with their westernized thought and outlook which militates against breaking free from the dominant civilization. It could even be that they do not want to see 'We found our fathers on a course and by their footsteps we are guided' (The Qur'an 43:22). Whatever the reason for the present state of Muslim scholars, the real world demands a totally new kind of thinker.

In a given period of history, a civilization is judged by its dominant thought, by the prevalent trends in its cultural life as expressed in politics and morality, science and technology, economics and business, arts and crafts. Intellectuals are the voice of this thought and the pulse of the prevalent trends; they are also their instigators, their critics and their bodyguards. A civilization, a country, a community, cannot exist without intellectuals and a constant stream of new ideas. They cannot exist without constant criticism and self-criticism, without those who formulate it and express it. They cannot exist without a body of devoted people whose sole concern in life is ideas and their significance. Indeed, a society without intellectuals is like a body without a head. And that precisely is the position of the contemporary Muslim world.

The Muslim world today is totally devoid of intellectuals. There are plenty of academics and bureaucrats, professionals and researchers, even a modicum of scientists and technologists—but intellectuals are conspicuous only by their total absence. This is partly because traditional societies, drawing their sustenance as they do from classical and historic

scholars, and anti-intellectual. Many of the dominant modes of thought in Muslim societies, like Sufism, are aggressively anti-intellectual. A society dominated by *taqlid* (blind imitation), both of its own past and western civilization, cannot tolerate intellectuals. The acute absence of intellectuals in Muslim societies is also explained by the fact that the few who do exist have let their constituency down: they are much more concerned with fashionable ideologies like Marxism, secularism, westernization than with the physical, intellectual and spiritual needs of the community.

But who are the intellectuals, anyway? And why are they important? A simple definition would be that an intellectual is someone who gets excited by ideas. In his classic study, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*, Syed Hussein Alatas defines ‘an “intellectual” as a person who is engaged in thinking about ideas and non-material problems using the faculty of reason’ (2). This is a somewhat misleading definition: for while an intellectual may or may not think directly about material problems, all his thought has a bearing on the material world. In defining the Muslim intellectual, we must first point out that we are not discussing a creature who inhabits western sociology where, over the last hundred years, his/her social meaning has shifted and changed a number of times. Neither are we talking in the French sense of the term where intellectuals are that section of the educated class which aspires to political power, either directly or by seeking the influence and companionship of the country’s political rulers.

Muslim intellectuals are interested in abstract ideas as well as specifics, the real world demands both. Unlike Socrates, they are not interested in ideas for ideas’ sake, they search for ideas that lead to reform; but like Socrates, they seek propagation of thought, criticism and a questioning attitude, a

goal for which they would eagerly lay down their lives. They move in a world not of total doubt and confusion, but within a world-view well defined by conceptual and ethical parameters. They seek not power but reforms. They do not have acquisitive and analytical minds only but also critical, imaginative and creative minds. They engage and transform.

Intellectuals are important because they do the work that other segments of society either do not know exist or are not equipped to handle, they tackle the problems which cannot be managed by specialists, academics and professionals. As Alatas points out, 'to lack intellectuals is to lack leadership in the following areas of thinking: (1) the posing of problems; (2) the definition of problems, (3) the analysis of problems; (4) the solutions of problems. Even the posing of problems is in itself an intellectual problem. A society without effective intellectuals will not be in a position to raise problems' (3)

Intellectuals are therefore the only group of people in a society who are capable of moving away from the narrow confines of specialism or professionalism to see problems in their holistic and real perspective. Alatas also points out that 'the area of intellectual activity cannot follow any demarcation laid down by any particular discipline' and is therefore transdisciplinary. Moreover, 'the intellectual attitude cannot be created by formal and discipline-orientated training in terms of syllabus and fixed number of years of study'; 'the object of the intellectual activity is always related to the wider context of life and thought, penetrating into fundamental values and commitments'; 'the intellectual pursuit is not a profession and therefore not subject to the sort of factors which determine the emergence and development of professions'; and 'the intellectual interest involves the past, the present and the future'. (4)

Intellectuals are the only group in any society which systematically and continuously, in sharp contrast to the specialist and the profession, try to see things in wider perspectives, in terms of their interrelations, interactions and totality. This is why intellectuals have always been at the forefront of new synthesis and thought. Most of the major changes and reforms in western civilization, for example, have been brought about by intellectuals. The Enlightenment, which laid the foundation of modern science and thought, was a purely intellectual movement. The intellectuals who conceived and perfected the Enlightenment, Montesquieu, Fontenelle, Diderot and Voltaire, are still widely read today and have a profound influence. The European Reformation too was the work of intellectuals. Without the thinking and writing of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, around whom people rallied in breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church, it is difficult to believe that the Reformation could have taken place. And what better evidence of the importance of intellectuals and their powerful influence can one give than by simply pointing out that the Soviet Union rules in the name of a single intellectual, Karl Marx, who spent most of his life in libraries and whose works over the past century have been studied by countless other intellectuals. In turn *Das Kapital* did not spring spontaneously from Marx's head; what he was doing in libraries across Europe was absorbing the thinking of many other intellectuals of previous generations. There is perhaps no more poignant example of how an intellectual who was influenced by other intellectuals finally reaches down even to the most remote peasant. All this simply by way of example.

In Muslim civilization the role of the intellectual is even more important, considering that the words read, ponder and reflect are some of the most oft repeated exhortations of the

Qur'an, itself 'the Noble Reading'. At its zenith, Muslim civilization was a civilization of intellectuals: names like al-Farabi, al-Kindi, al-Khwarizmi, al-Biruni, al-Razi, al-Masudi, Abdul Wafa, Omar Khayyam come so easily to mind because they dominated entire spans of centuries. And when Muslim civilization faced a crisis, and no one was capable of defining its nature, discovering its cause or assuming the responsibility of formulating a solution, it was rescued by a single intellectual: al-Ghazali. Indeed, without the intellectuals Muslim civilization in history is inconceivable. And, there cannot be a living, dynamic, thriving Muslim civilization of the future without a body of critical and creative intellectuals. At a time when the Muslim world is engulfed in parochialism and sectarianism, when imitation and blind following is the norm, when kindness and tolerance are under retreat everywhere, when the globe is culturally and intellectually dominated by jingoist and chauvinist western logic and social grammar, the umma needs its intellectuals as it has never needed them before.

Much of the desolation of the contemporary Muslim panorama is the result of the almost total absence of vigorously independent and devoted intellectuals. There are, however, indications that intellectuals who are true to the world-view of Islam are coming to the fore; but their number is below the critical mass for take-off. However, if the Islamic movement ideologues, who dominate the reformist scene and the islamization debate, could change a few of their character traits the number of genuine Muslim intellectuals would swell beyond the critical mass and they could begin to make their presence felt both in Muslim society and contemporary Muslim thought.

Three basic features of these ideologues suppress thought and hinder the emergence of the genuine intellectual. The first is their marked tendency to dominate and control: they feel

they have a monopoly on reason and judgement. This stems from their belief in their innate superiority and presumed righteousness; which itself is a result of a narrow-minded and blinkered outlook. Movement ideologues are shunned and avoided by many young thinkers and intellectuals because of their tendency to argue from authority and to dominate and control the activities of non-movement groups and societies.

A second and related trait is the guru mentality. This attitude reveals itself in the dictum that the mentor, the teacher or the spiritual leader, is always right, even when he is blatantly in error, and experience has shown him to be wrong. Even the Prophet, when it was pointed out to him that cross-pollination brings beneficial results, corrected himself. The guru mentality plays a great part in subverting critical and analytical faculties as well as the use of imagination. Many devotees would rather edit and translate poor works of the master than produce original scholarship of their own. And as the guru is beyond criticism, his mistakes and fallacious arguments are perpetually repeated.

The third, and related trait, of the movement ideologues, is their inability to take criticism. Most movement scholars regard criticism of their work in terms of personal attack; as a result they either isolate their critics or seek revenge. When faced with arguments, the stock responses are: 'How can I be wrong? I have been working on this problem for ten years'; or 'You are not an economist, or a specialist in the field; you do not know, I know'; or 'You are trying to discredit me and spread *fitna* (sedition, strife)'. Admitting error is a virtue, a strength, not a weakness; this is how knowledge is advanced. Entrenching oneself in an increasingly untenable and irrational position, and defending one's weakness as a matter of honour, is destructive both for the individual concerned and for the contemporary Muslim scholarly tradition. *Masasbh*, criticism,

and self-criticism, must become a cornerstone of Muslim intellectual endeavour.

In addition, the body of Muslim scholars have to modify a few of their characteristics, too. Prime among these is the over-the-top trust and reliance on expertise, Islamic or otherwise. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, in the contemporary scholarly and academic landscape, that is beyond the comprehension of a good intellectual. It is true that contemporary knowledge is so vast, and, in certain areas, so deep that it is beyond the capabilities of a single individual to master. But one does not have to understand all aspects of every discipline. Moreover, once the jargon, which is designed to mystify the outsiders, is stripped away one finds a methodology and a thought process which can be mastered by anyone who is determined to understand it. In this respect, the true intellectual is a polymath: his basic tool is a sharp mind and a transdisciplinary methodology which can lay bare any discipline, any subject, any segment of human knowledge. Quite often the best and most devastating criticism of issues within a discipline comes from intellectuals outside the discipline. Expertise is a shroud behind which professionals hide their shortcomings. The more shallow and intellectually shambolic the foundations of a discipline the more it is defended by a priesthood of experts. (5) 'You are not an expert, a scientist, an economist, a sociologist, a heart-specialist, and therefore you do not understand' is the last ditch defence of a poor professional.

Muslim scholars and ideologues, who aim to become true intellectuals, and participate in the genuine introduction of reforms and evolution of strategies for change need to penetrate the shell of disciplinary expertise. As I stated earlier, and as modern ecology teaches and western science is

rediscovering, nothing in nature behaves as an isolated system. Everything is connected to everything else: in the real world an all-pervasive principle of interconnectiveness is in operation. There is therefore no such thing as pure physics or economics devoid of social, political, cultural, environmental and spiritual concerns. As a purveyor of ideas, a true intellectual ought to have mastery of more than one discipline. And as Islam also permeates every sphere of life, we cannot allow Islamic studies to become the sole preserve of experts. By definition, a Muslim intellectual must appreciate and understand the major elements of the world-view, culture, history, and thought of Islam. But a self-respecting Muslim intellectual would go much further: he/she would aim to become a truly interdisciplinary scholar. (6)

And this brings me to the second reason why Muslim intellectuals have to break disciplinary boundaries. Contemporary Muslim thought is not about re-inventing the wheel; where there is a great deal to be discovered and rediscovered, from the perspective of Islam, there is an equal amount of knowledge that we can draw upon and synthesize with the world-view of Islam. But synthesis is not an easy task; it is not a question of mixing this with that. AS Parvez Manzoor has pointed out, synthesis is presented in the Hegelian scheme as conciliation of two antitheses. And this is exactly how both the Muslim and western civilizations have perceived each other in history: as two real and irreconcilable antitheses. 'Any facile amalgamation of two traditions requires knowledge of the real world. A strong dominant intellectual tradition cannot be synthesized with a weak, ineffectual one; it would simply be co-opted. Synthesis therefore is a hazardous exercise; at the very least it requires knowledge of more than one discipline. Many problems in the whole question of the

islamization of disciplines arise, as I have pointed out in *Islamic Futures: The Shape of Ideas to Come* and Merryl Wyn Davies has shown in *Knowing One Another: Shaping an Islamic Anthropology*, (8) from the fact that Muslim scholars try to cast disciplines based on western axioms and intellectual heritage in Islamic moulds. These problems arise mainly from their inability to synthesize for synthesis involves axiomatic analysis and examination and raising of fundamental questions. And only true synthesis can make proper use of existing knowledge and generate new ideas and pragmatic solutions.

All this requires the re-emergence, and in a way this is what I have been arguing for throughout this essay, or the classical polymath. Contemporary Muslim intellectuals must become the counterparts of the polymaths who shaped Muslim civilization at its zenith. Muslim civilization of the classical period was remarkable for the number of polymaths it produces. (9) The motives and driving force behind polymathy were not based on just a deep love and respect for knowledge but also on a paradigm which emphasized the interconnection between the sacred and the profane, physics and metaphysics, thought and reality, and pointed out that the material universe was not inferior to the spiritual, that both as manifestations of Allah's bounty and mercy, were the vast creation of God—from the mystic's ecstasy to the mother's love to the flight of an arrow, the circumference of the earth, the plague that destroys an entire nation, the sting of mosquito, the nature of madness, the beauty of justice, the metaphysical yearning of man—were all equally valid and could not be deprived of eternal values and human concern. Methodologies, deeply rooted in the conceptual and ethical parameters of Islam were the essence of enquiry. And classical polymaths were masters of methodology. It was this paradigm that the polymaths used

to synthesize the learning of earlier civilizations, transforming it totally—for synthesis always produces something entirely new which is like neither one nor the other of the original components—and integrating it completely with the world-view of Islam. Contemporary Muslim intellectuals have to rediscover this paradigm and develop into the kind of polymaths who can perform the great synthesis that is needed.

In a world that is shaped and controlled by another civilization, the real task facing the Muslim umma is the creation of an intellectual space which is a genuine embodiment of the world-view and culture of Islam. Without this intellectual space, reformist ideas and programmes will bear no fruit. Muslim civilization has a dire need of genuine intellectuals; unless Muslim societies cultivate the barren lands of today's intellectual vacuum, the umma's marginalized existence will be institutionalized. The real world offers us no choice but to start our homework immediately.

From *Today's Problems, Tomorrow's Solutions*, Abdullah Omar Naseef (ed.), Mansell Publishing Limited, 1988

Islam and Science: Beyond the Troubled Relationship

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At the end of the tenth century, a brilliant scientist left his home town of Basra to pursue an ambitious project in Egypt. He'd noticed how, seasonally, the river Nile flooded large parts of the delta. But in winter water levels fell so low cultivation was almost impossible. What, he thought, if the surplus flood water could be stored and used when most needed? He devised a scheme—'to regulate the Nile, so that the people could derive benefit at its ebb and flow.' His plan required building a three-way embankment dam near Aswan. He sent the proposal to the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim in Cairo. The Caliph was impressed; and issued a royal commission: come to Cairo and build the dam. The young scientist spent several months examining the site, working out the details of how to implement his plans, and it has to be said, spending the generous largesse of the Caliph. But there was a problem: the technology at his disposal was just not up to the task. He came to a sad conclusion: if it were possible to dam the Nile the ancient Egyptians would already have done so. Now, he faced a new problem: how to tell the Caliph? He devised his most

cunning plan—he pretended to be mad. The Caliph retired him to a small office near Al-Ahzar University.

The young scientist was ibn al-Haitham, known to the West as Alhazen. This pretend madman spent the next two decades in his laboratory in Cairo where he developed and refined the technique of experimental method; worked on spherical and parabolic mirrors, spherical aberration, the magnifying power of lenses and atmospheric refraction. He noted how rays of light originate in the object seen and not in the eye—as commonly believed by the Greeks—and correctly explained the apparent increase in size of the sun and the moon when near the horizon. He formulated the laws of reflection and refraction and proclaimed experiment and empirical investigation the foundation of all scientific work. According to George Sarton, Ibn Haitham is ‘one of the greatest students of optics of all times’ [1]. He wrote over 200 books on astronomy, mathematics, physics and philosophy. His greatest achievement, *Kitab al-Manazir*, translated into Latin in the late thirteenth century as the *Book of Optics*, was the first comprehensive treatment of the subject: it influenced Roger Bacon and Kepler and had a major impact on western science.

Over a thousand years later, when technology finally made an Aswan Dam possible, another brilliant scientist left his native city, Lahore, to implement his scientific plans. Already, he had a PhD from Cambridge, now he wanted to establish a research group in theoretical physics at Punjab University where he was professor of mathematics. But his dreams were frustrated: no official support, no tradition of postgraduate work, no colleagues to consult with, no journals, no funds to attend conferences. The nearest physicist was in Bombay- by now a city in another country. The head of his institution advised ‘forget about physics’ and offered him a choice of

jobs: bursar, warden of a hall of residence, or president of the football club. He chose the football club! Later, he wrote movingly of the tragic dilemma he faced: physics or Pakistan. Unhappily, he left Pakistan and returned to Cambridge [2].

His name was Abdus Salam. His passion for physics led him to work on particle symmetries, gauge theories and the two component theory of the neutrino. For his work on the theory of the unified weak and electromagnetic interaction between elementary particles he shared the 1979 Noble Prize for Physics with Steven Weinberg and Sheldon Glashow.

The eras of Salam and al-Haitham could not be more different. Al-Haitham flourished in a civilisation which valued scientific enterprise, Salam the product of a society where science was conspicuously absent. What happened in the thousand years separating these two Muslim physicists is a subject of intense study, conjecture and controversy. My purpose tonight is to explore these issues and suggest why conventional explanations are both unsatisfactory and totally fail to indicate potential remedies, the kind that would restore the enterprise of science in Muslim societies.

Two things can be stated with some certainty. One, science thrived during the classical period of Islam; two, science in Muslim society has suffered a drastic decline. The difficulties arise in trying to ascertain when the decline began and what the causes were. Historians of science offer different dates and varied reasons.

The most common stance is simply to blame Islam itself. There is something in the teachings of Islam, the argument goes, which does not allow science to take root in Muslim societies. This suggestion not only belies history but also the basic teachings of Islam which proclaims itself as an intrinsically rational worldview.

Both Salam and al-Haitham were inspired by the spirit of the Qur'an. Al-Haitham, wrote not only philosophical but also religious treatises. He made two Qur'anic verses, one stating believers should 'urge one another to truth' (103: 1) the other that truth claims should be tested (33: 8), the basis of his scientific work. He wrote: 'Truth is sought for its own sake... (But) finding the truth is difficult, and the road to it is rough'. Science, he suggested, should be based on 'severe criticism'; and the claims of scientists themselves should be put to critical tests. He continued:

'God has not preserved the scientist from error and has not safeguarded science from shortcomings and faults... A person, who studies scientific books with a view of knowing the truth, ought to turn himself into a hostile critic of everything that he studies . . . He should criticize it from every point of view and in all its aspects. And while thus engaged in criticism he should also be suspicious of himself and not allow himself to be easy-going and indulgent with regard to (the object of his criticism). If he takes this course, the truth will be revealed to him and the flaws . . . in the writings of his predecessors will stand out clearly'. [3]

Salam too repeatedly emphasised his work took its inspiration from the Qur'an. In his banquet speech at the Noble Prize ceremony, Salam quoted the verse: 'Do you see in the creation of the All-merciful any imperfection, Return your gaze, you see any fissure. Then Return your gaze, again and again. Your gaze, comes back to you dazzled, weary'. This, he suggested described the 'faith of all physicists; the deeper we seek, the more is our wonder excited, the more is the dazzlement for our gaze' [4].

Salam selected just one of around 800 verses in the Qur'an that invite the reader to think, reflect, examine and study the

material world and use reason as a 'sign' to understand nature. The most quoted reads:

'There are signs in the heavens and earth for those who believe: in the creation of you, in the creatures God scattered on earth, there are signs for the believers; there are signs for people of sure faith, in the alternation of night and day, in the rain God provides, sending it down from the sky and reviving the dead earth with it, and in the shifting of winds, there are signs for those who use their reason. (45:3–5).

The sayings of the Prophet Muhammad reinforce these teachings, emphasising understanding comes through scientific endeavour. 'An hours study of nature is better than a year's prayer', the Prophet declared. He directed his followers to 'listen to the words of the scientist and instil unto others the lessons of science'. In his time, China was considered a far off but scientifically advanced civilisation. So he urged his followers to 'go in quest of knowledge even to China'. And the Prophet made the essential distinction: the revealed Book, as well as his own teachings, were exhortations, an invitation to reason and study what exists and can be discovered—not scientific pronouncements in and of themselves.

The teachings of Islam are the same now as they were a thousand years ago. Islam was not a 'problem' then. It is not the 'problem' now. Islam was there when science flourished. Islam remained while science, learning, knowledge and creativity declined to their present parlous state. So what happened? Perhaps if we fixed a date, identified the tipping point, we could pinpoint what provoked the downward spiral.

But dating the decline has become controversial. J D Bernal argues the decline began in 'the eleventh century', after which 'the best days of Islamic science were over' [5]. So, for Bernal, the story of Islamic science is short and sharp. Colin Ronan is

a bit more generous. He places the ‘final stages’ of Islamic science as beginning in the twelfth century [6]. George Sarton shifts the boundary even further to the second half of the fourteenth century [7].

In his monumental survey of the history of science, Sarton assigns each half century to a dominant intellectual personality. So, in Sarton’s reckoning, Islamic science begins in the second half of the eighth century, ‘the time of Jabir ibn Hayan’ the father of chemistry. Before al-Haitham’s arrival, there was the time of al-Khwarizmi, the inventor of algebra; al-Razi, who infused medicine with clinical precision; al-Masudi, the geographer who produced a map of the world towards the end of the tenth century; and Abul Wafa, the astronomer and mathematician who produced accurate trigonometric tables.

Al-Haitham flourished during the tenth century, the time of al-Biruni, the polymath who measured the latitude and longitude of notable cities and wrote a detailed account of the cultures of *India*. He was followed by Omar Khayyam, the mathematician who solved equations of third degree and wrote poetry in his spare time.

From here on Western science begins its incursion—accolades have to be shared; three giants dominate each half century only one of whom represents Muslim civilisation. (Though one might add the Jewish representatives were scientists born and educated and engaged in Muslim societies, which enabled them to be a major conduit for the transmission of knowledge to Christendom) The first half of the twelfth century belongs to ibn Zuhr, who perfected surgical and post mortem techniques, he shares the spotlight with William of Conches and Abraham ibn Ezra. They are followed by the celebrated rationalist philosopher Ibn Rushd, Gerard of Cremona and Maimonides. The botanist ibn al-Baitar, whose

encyclopaedia of medicinal plants is regarded as one of the greatest botanical compilations, shares the first half of the thirteenth century with Robert Grossetesta and Jacob Anatol.

The age of Roger Bacon and Jacob ibn Tabbon is also the age of Qutb al-Din Shirazi, the Sufi astronomer who continued the work of al-Haitham and gave the first correct explanation of the formation of the rainbow. Next comes the age of Abu al-Fida, the astronomer and chronicler of human history who gave his name to a crater on the moon and shares his half-century with Levi ben Gerson and William of Occam. Finally we have the age of the historian and father of sociology, ibn Khaludun, second half of the fourteenth century, shared with Geoffrey Chaucer and Hasdai Crscus. (Criscus). For Sarton, the enterprise of Islamic science ends here.

Not so, says George Saliba, the historian of Islamic astronomy. He sees the fourteenth century not as an age of decline but a 'Golden Age' [8]. Saliba regards the time from Nasir al-Din Tusi (d.1274) to Ibn al-Shatir (d.1375), astronomers who worked at the Maraghah Observatory in northwest Iran as one of the most productive periods for theoretical astronomy. Indeed, Saliba suggests the Copernican revolution would have been impossible without the work carried out at Maraghah where the basic mathematical models of the heliocentric solar system, including the Tusi couple, were first developed. He shows in painstaking detail how Copernicus' models are not only identical to those of the Maraghah astronomers but they also replicate exactly the same notational mistakes.

And the boundaries of decline keep getting pushed further forward in time. A collection of new research by Jan Hogendijk and Abdelhamid Sabra, published in 2003 shows scientific activity in Muslim societies very much alive right to the end of the seventeenth century [9]. Even the Ottoman Empire,

most historians candidate for the era of endemic decline of Muslim civilisation, turns out to be a rather fruitful period. The massive project on the ‘scientific literature in the Ottoman period’, carried out under Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu in Istanbul suggests science was alive right up to the eighteenth century—when the emphasis shifted to learning and assimilating European sciences through translations and adaptations [10].

Exactly when the decline of Islamic science began is no abstruse academic question. It carries major implications. Placing it squarely in the early middle ages, historians of science, effectively, have sought to de-link Islamic science from modern science. If Islamic science was dead and gone by the fourteenth century, and, as David C Lindberg puts it ‘little was left by the fifteenth century’ [11] lack of any connection to the emergence of modern science becomes a self-evident truth. Modern science emerges as an autonomous, self-propelling enterprise of Western civilisation.

But the facts, as recent research has shown, are otherwise: there is a continuum between Islamic science and western science. Science in Islam is not just a ‘forerunner’, something strangely distinct and distant, from science today—but an integral part of modern science. If science progresses by accumulation, by building on the works of previous generations, standing on the shoulders of the giants, then modern science would be inconceivable without Islamic science.

Locating the decline firmly before the fifteenth century serves another purpose: it denies any connection to colonialism—a thorny issue thus safely ignored. Look as much as you like—and indeed, I have diligently for years—and discussion of colonialism is conspicuously absent from this discourse. Yet, colonialism more than any other factor, played a major part in the suppression and eventual disappearance of

science and learning from Muslim societies. Quite simply, the colonial encounter began with eager, voracious interest by western nations in the science and technology of Muslim civilisation; and a simultaneous insistence that all they found was decay and superstition. Once Islamic science was appropriated, colonial powers closed colleges and universities, banned research and outlawed the practice of indigenous science and medicine.

In the Maghrib, for example, the French not only banned the practice of Islamic medicine but made practitioners liable for capital punishment! In Indonesia, the Dutch closed Muslim institutions and prohibited Muslims enrolling in centres of higher learning right up to 1952. [12]

Historians of science pre-empt such considerations. Bernal suggests the eleventh century saw ‘a general political and economic decay of Islam in its original form’ which led to the absence of a ‘widely based and living environment’ for science. Matters were further aggravated by the Mongol invasion and the sacking of Baghdad in 1258. But the Mongol invasion compares poorly with what happened under colonialism. If you take all agency from a society, define and describe its science and learning as insignificant, irrelevant, and pre-modern, and deny all access to any form of intellectual endeavour, except that which produces servants of colonial administration, it is not surprising indigenous science disappears from that society.

The other form of pre-emption is the marginality thesis of Islamic science. It has been used by numerous colonial and Orientalist historians to suggest scientific activity in Muslim civilisation, to quote Abdelhamid Sabra,

‘had no significant impact on the social, economic, educational and religious institutions; that this activity remained

itself unaffected by these institutions, except when it was finally crushed by their antagonism or indifference; and that those who kept the Greek legacy alive in Islamic lands constituted a small group of scholars who had little to do with the spiritual life of the majority of Muslims, who made no important contributions to the main currents of Islamic intellectual life, and whose work and interests were marginal to the central concerns of Islamic society'. [13]

A natural product of this thesis is the implication most Muslim scientists, such as al-Haitham and al-Biruni, were in fact secularists. For example, Toby Huff suggests 'their work did not have an Islamic subscript attached to it, for it represented transcendent, transnational, transcultural accomplishments' [14]. Indeed, in as far as their work was hard science it naturally represented universal knowledge applicable to all cultures. The same is invariably said of the work of Isaac Newton—so long as one ignores the years of effort and study he spent obsessed with Biblical chronology.

When we speak of Muslim scientists in the classical era we are talking about men who lived before the age of secularism; the separation of the sacred and the profane was beyond their wildest imagination. They were all, even the most unorthodox, Muslims first and anything else second. The basis of their education was common to the doctors of science and the doctors of law and theology, and many, contributed in all these disciplines. The point is, by virtue of their education those who became scientists were grounded in the conceptual framework of Islamic ideas; it gave a distinctive character to their way of thinking, understanding, how they conceived of and presented the results of their study. There is a characteristic temper to their scholarship; we find it most often in the conclusions of their works. It is far more than mere convention

that the normal way to conclude any argument is the phrase ‘God Alone knows all.’ The phrase defines an approach to knowledge imbued with humility and a horror of arrogance. It betokens a healthy respect for the other side of the equation of learning—ignorance. It is a hallmark of the Islamic worldview, and a perpetual engine of the critical scientific outlook.

Not only were scientists of the classical era not hiding behind the mask of a value-free pursuit of knowledge, but like al-Haitham and Salam, insisted their inspiration came from Islam. And like al-Haitham and Salam, many were also humanists. As George Makdisi demonstrates so powerfully, humanism as we understand it began in Islam [15]. Indeed, their humanism was a product of their Islamic commitment. The Islamic subscript is everywhere: the pursuit of science for them is a form of worship, a religious injunction. To suggest Muslim scientists were social aberrations, covert secularists, is to project modernist obsessions onto history: a sort of post-defacto rationalisation.

A more elaborate theory of the decline of Islamic science focuses on internal disputes between rational and conservatives schools of thought, a dispute which took shape at the end of the 8th century, when seat of the Caliphate moved from Damascus to Baghdad—and when most of the greatest names in Islamic science were as yet unborn. Lindberg, for example, suggests Islamic science began to decline when

‘conservative religious forces made themselves increasingly felt. Sometimes it took the form of outright opposition (to science). More often, the effect was subtler—not the extinction of scientific activity but the alternation of its character, by the imposition of a very narrow definition of utility’. [16]

The conservative forces were led by a group of scholastic philosophers known as the Asharites. Pitted against them, goes the theory, was a group of rationalist philosophers known as the Mutazalites. The fate of Islamic science was sealed with the victory of Asharites over the Mutazalites. Here's how Ronan presents their encounter:

'Islam extols the value of revelation above all else. That is not to say that reason is discredited, far from it; the use of human intellect is prized as one of God's gifts, but it must be forever under the control of revelation. The Mutazalites, who emerged about 700, were aware of this; indeed, they set such store by reason that they said it could fathom even the deepest profundities of religious belief. On the other hand, the Asharites, whose views first appeared a couple of centuries later, condemned the over-zealous use of reason and its "adulteration" of religious dogma, and for nearly two centuries the rival schools wrangled with each other until during the twelfth century the Asharite arguments carried the day. There then developed the attitude of passive acceptance. This attitude was inevitably inimical to independent scientific thinking, as intellectual traditionalism won the day. Islam never separated religion and science into watertight compartments as we do now, and the torch of science had to be carried by others.' [17]

Some scholars go so far as pointing to one individual Asharite as the sole cause of the decline of Islamic science: the twelfth century writer and theologian, al-Ghazzali.

There are numerous problems with this flawed, simplistic analysis. If the division between rational and conservative were clear cut, then we'd expect an exact scientist of al-Haitham's calibre to be a Mutazalite. In fact, he was an Asharite, as were many other scientists. The truth is the Asharites were just as rationalist as the Mutazalites; the Mutazalites were just as

religious, or if you like conservative, as the Asharites; and both used philosophic methods, reason and logic, to argue their case.

The religious nature of Mutazalite thought is clear from Ibn Sina's (d. 1037) theory of human knowledge which, following al-Farabi (d. 950), transfers the Qur'anic scheme of revelation to Greek philosophy. In the Qur'an, the Creator addresses one man—the Prophet—through the agency of the archangel Gabriel; in ibn Sina's neo-Platonic scheme, the divine word is transmitted through reason and understanding to any, and every, person who cares to listen. The result is an amalgam of rationalism and Islamic ethics.

For Muslim scholars and scientists, who like ibn Sina, subscribed to the philosophy of Mutazalism, values are objective and good and evil are descriptive characteristics of reality no less 'there' in things than their other qualities such as shape and size. In this framework, all knowledge, including the knowledge of God, can be acquired by reason alone. Humanity has power to know as well as to act and is thus responsible for its just and unjust actions. What this philosophy entailed both in terms of the study of nature and shaping human behaviour was illustrated by ibn Tufayl (d. 1185) in his intellectual novel, *Life of Hayy*, published in the twelfth century. Hayy is a spontaneously generated human isolated on an island. Through his power of observation and the use of his intellect, he discovers general and particular facts about the structure of the material and spiritual universe, deduces the existence of God and develops a rationally satisfying theological system.

Contrary to the common misunderstanding, both schools agreed on the rational study of nature. They had to—the Qur'an dictated that it should be so. In his *al-Tamhid*, Abu Bakr al-Baqillani (d. 1013), the theologian credited with producing

the first systematic statement of Asharite doctrine, defines science as ‘the knowledge of the object, as it really is’. While reacting to the Mutazilite position on Greek philosophy, the Asharites conceded the need for objective and systematic study of nature. Indeed, this is why some of the greatest scientists in Islam, such as al-Biruni (d. 1048) and Fakhr al-Din Razi (d.1209), were supporters of Asharite theology.

The concern of both sides was the delineation of truth. As the Asharite al-Baruni declared, ‘do not shun the truth from whatever source it comes’. Al-Ghazzali went even further. He told his students: if scientific discourse

‘consisted of only that kind of material which cause you to have doubt about the beliefs instilled into you since childhood, so that you are stimulated towards study and research, then that would be a very satisfactory result. For doubt leads to truth. Whosoever has no doubts of any kind does not reflect, and who does not reflect cannot see clearly, and he who cannot see clearly remains in a state of blindness and in error’. [18]

So what constituted the dispute? It had two aspects. First, they disagreed on the best way to attain rational truth. For the Mutazalites general and universal questions came first and lead to experimental work. This is why Ibn Sina starts his *Cannons of Medicine*, which remained a standard text in the West till the eighteenth century, with a general discussion on the theory of drugs. But for the Asharites, universals came out of practical, experimental work; theories are formulated after discoveries. Al-Biruni begins his *Determination of the Coordinates of the Cities* by describing his experiments before drawing general theoretical conclusions.

Second, what are the limits to rational inquiry? For the Mutazalites there were no limits. The Asharites were concerned about instrumental rationality. When al-Ghazzali talks about

'blameworthy' knowledge, he is raising issues of a classical version of the Precautionary Principle. Should we make poisons simply because we can? Is a system of thought that has all the paraphernalia of a discipline necessarily good for society—the example he gave was astrology. Now, these issues are still with us today—and they have been debated by scientists and philosophers for centuries. Such discussion never thwarted the development of modern science. Why should we assume it did in the classical period of Islam civilization?

The victory of Asharite thought had nothing to do with the decline of Islamic science—on the contrary, both sides were eager to promote science and learning.

It is also worth noting neither the Mutazalites nor the Asharites regarded scientific method as the only means of rational inquiry. Most Muslim scientists tended to be polymaths—it seemed to be the general rule in the classical period. This is testimony to the homogeneity of the Islamic philosophy of science and its emphasis on synthesis, interdisciplinary investigations and multiplicity of methods. Even a strong believer in mathematical realism such as al-Biruni argued the method of inquiry was a function of the specific nature of investigation: different methods, all equally valid, were required to answer different types of questions. Al-Biruni himself had used several methods. In his treatise on mineralogy, he is the most exact of experimental scientists. But in the introduction to his ground-breaking study of India he declares 'to execute our project, it has not been possible to follow the geometric method'; he therefore resorts to comparative sociology. In his *Treatise Devoted to the Question of Shadows*, he differentiates between mathematical and philosophical methods. Methodological differences often generated debates and controversies. But to suggest such

disputes, or the victory of one over another, led to the decline of Islamic science is naïve.

We have to look elsewhere for the genuine causes of decline. Both as a faith and culture, Islam is a conceptual world view. Muslims are fond of describing Islam as a ‘total way of life’. What they mean is that the holistic worldview of Islam integrates all aspects of reality through a moral perspective. This perspective is provided by a framework of conceptual values within which Muslims endeavour to answer human problems. Concepts such as *ilm* (knowledge), *ijma* (consensus) and *istislah* (public interest) are the driving force of Muslim society. *Ilm*, the urge to know, or *ijtihad*, the quest for sustained reasoning, for example, were the central driving forces of classical Islam and produced a culture with science and rationality at its core.

The problem we seek to explain is how this central driving force sputtered to a halt. I would argue the decline of science in Muslim societies is a product of the systematic reduction in the meaning of the basic concepts of Islam. This process not only reduced Islam from a holistic worldview to a one-dimensional faith but also truncated the creativity of Muslim societies. If Muslim society is like a human body, an analogy once used by the Prophet Muhammad, then this process of reduction has taken the mind from the body. What is left is living and functioning—but without the brain. As a consequence, science and rationality have almost evaporated in contemporary Islamic culture.

Again there is a conventional explanation for this process. Studies endlessly refer to the point in time when ‘the gates of *ijtihad*’ were closed. But the use of *ijtihad*, or sustained reasoning, was never actually banned: as recent research has shown, the gates were never firmly closed—the shutters came

down only slowly. And the process was more complex than simply the pronouncement of a few religious scholars; their dictate was always disputed; the very idea was taken to task by every Muslim reform movement to emerge from that day to this.

So what is missing from the analysis? What prevents us detecting how and why the enterprise of Islamic science deserted Muslim society? I have argued for the intimate and constructive connection between Islam and science. But Islamic science did not only have a conceptual religious context, it also had a social context. Islamic science operated within a social, political, economic and institutional matrix. Science begat technology, and technology served a thriving economy. Wealth creation provided the resources to invest in the infrastructure of educational and research institutions—the universities, libraries, teaching hospitals, observatories and the like—that produced yet more scientists. And as every working scientist today knows, when the economy suffers, when economic enterprise declines, research and development budgets are cut, grants disappear, even whole departments are axed, standards drop and the brains drain away—to the new centres of economic power, if they can. History is not such a foreign country, after all.

In history, as now, science was integral to the development of society. In Muslim history it fed the growth of industries—studies of mineralogy, advances in chemistry, study of botany and hydraulics all had applications relevant to the productive capacity of society. An agricultural revolution, supported by the study of agronomy, hydrology and geological studies, raised living standards and created wealth. The legacy of these developments is still benefiting Spain today. The study of astronomy, development of compasses and observational

instruments, the study of geography and map making all promoted and facilitated long distance trade. Muslim civilization wherever it spread was a city building culture; architecture, city planning and land management, provision of clean water and sewage disposal all benefited from the application of science.

The great scientists of the classical era all contributed, directly or indirectly, to this social context. It was a context shaped by the institutions of Islam which ensured that science prospered and served society. One of the pillars of Islam is zakat, the annual payment required of all Muslims and dedicated to social purposes such as education, health provision and the eradication of poverty. Giving in charity is a religious injunction that created a social institution, called waqf, perpetual charitable endowments which again funded projects such as hospitals, universities and research establishments. And, of course, the state was a major sponsor, patron and consumer of science for a multitude of purposes from city building to the technology of warfare. Science never emerges in a vacuum; it always has a cultural context; it is fed and shaped by the conditions of its time and place.

If the Muslim World had not been such a vibrant, dominant, going concern in the fifteenth century, Europe would have had no need to subvert its power. What is termed the age of exploration was a deliberate strategy, diligently pursued by various European nations. It was designed to circumvent what they regarded as a Muslim stranglehold on their economy, a stranglehold that was maintained by Islamic science. Investment in exploration gave a new impetus to the development of science in Europe. And it generated the process termed colonialism.

Colonialism produced two outcomes in Muslim civilisation. First, it suppressed and displaced the scientific culture of Muslim society. It did this by introducing new systems of administration, law, education and economy all of which were designed to instil dependence, compliance and subservience to the colonial powers. The decline of Islamic science is one aspect of the general economic and political decay and deterioration of Muslim society that resulted.

Islam as a holistic way of life became mere rhetoric. Islamic education became a *cul de sac*, a one way ticket to marginality. What relevance could such education have when its concepts and principles had no practical meaning for how society operated? Nor was the 'modern' education offered by the colonial powers a path to success. The function of this education was to ensure that colonial subjects served the needs and vested interests of the colonial order. Western education ruled; but it taught the colonised to accept a distorted version of their own history as backward, their own science as irrelevant, their own medicine as nothing but mumbo jumbo. The colonised were pre-modern, their society, beliefs and ideas deficient and incapable of generating their own modernity and progress. The dismissal of Islamic science as 'real' science went hand in hand with the dismissal of the entire conceptual order of Islam as religion, culture and civilization.

Second, colonialism generated a further impulse for the conceptual reduction of Muslim civilization. Islam was reduced to a defensive enclave of resistance stubbornly holding on to the few remnants of authority left to indigenous control. Colonialism turned the problem of authenticity and authority, a problem of conceptual meaning, into the central debate for Muslims.

The debate started with the question: who is a scholar? Whose thought, research and opinion were worthy of social and cultural attention? Just who is an alim (scholar) and what makes him an authority? In classical Islam, an *alim* was anyone who acquired *ilm*, or knowledge, which was itself described in a broad sense. We can see this in the early classifications of knowledge by such scholars as al-Kindi, al-Farabi, ibn Sina, al-Ghazzali and ibn Khaldun. Indeed, both the definition of knowledge and its classification was a major intellectual activity in classical Islam. Knowledge meant everything from science and philosophy to art, literature and theology. So all learned men, scientists as well as philosophers, scholars as well as theologians, constituted the *ulama*. But as *ijtihad* became increasingly irrelevant, *ilm* was increasingly reduced to religious knowledge and the *ulama* came to constitute only

religious scholars. So, from an Islamic point of view, only the pursuit of religious knowledge came to be seen as important. Similarly, the idea of *ijma*, the central notion of communal life in Islam, has been reduced to the consensus of a select few. *Ijma* literally means consensus of the people. The concept dates back to the practice of Prophet Muhammad leader of the original polity of Muslims. When the Prophet Muhammad wanted to reach a decision, he would call the whole Muslim community—then, admittedly not very large—to the mosque. A discussion would ensue; arguments for and against would be presented. Finally, the entire gathering would reach a consensus. Thus, a democratic spirit was central to communal and political life in early Islam. But the notion of *ijma* also performed another function. It located authority in argument. If *ilm* was intended to spread all varieties of knowledge throughout society then the majority of citizens would be members of a learned community. The consensus of the

community would therefore be a learned consensus arrived on the basis of argument. But the process of reduction removed knowledgeable citizens from the equation—*ijma* was truncated to ‘the consensus of religious scholars’. Thus both democracy and the pursuit of knowledge as a whole were rendered irrelevant to Muslim culture.

Other key elements of the conceptual framework of Islam were similarly reduced. Jihad ceased to be intellectual struggle and cultural development and was abridged to warfare. *Istislah*, normally rendered as ‘public interest’ and a major source of Islamic law and an important impulse for science in the classical period, all but disappeared from Muslim consciousness. And *ijtihad* came to mean little more than a pious desire.

Thus, the question how Muslim societies can rediscover the spirit of scientific inquiry is not just a question of policy, or funding, or building prestigious institutions in the name of progress. Most importantly, it is about how the enterprise of science is made relevant and meaningful, internalised within the ethos and conceptual framework of Muslim societies. The decline of Islamic science was a product of combined forces that engineered a conceptual reduction in Muslim civilization. My proposition is clear: the decline can only be reversed by effecting a conceptual shift. Science will only take root in Muslim societies if they can reorient themselves: re-conceptualise Islam itself as a holistic enterprise. Science will flourish, paradoxical as this may seem to many of you, when Islam re-emerges as an integrative way of knowing, being and doing; when it reconstructs the open intellectual climate and cultural paradigms it once sustained.

When in 1980, I initiated the contemporary debate on Islamic science, first in the pages of *Nature* and then *New Scientist*, [19] I was not fully aware of the power of the reductive

concepts on Muslim societies. By ‘science’ I meant and understood an objective and systematic endeavour, much like the work of al-Haitham and Salam, which was motivated by Islamic injunctions on the virtues of reason and the pursuit of knowledge. I turned out to be totally wrong. The debate itself was reduced to two components.

The first derives from the fundamentalist idea all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, can be found in the Qur’an. This is another step in reduction of the concept of ilm—to not just religious knowledge but only that which can be found in the pages of the Qur’an. Backed by a lavishly funded Saudi project—‘Scientific Miracles in the Qur’an’—this tendency has sprouted a whole genre of apologetic literature (books, papers, journals) looking at the scientific content of the Qur’an. From relativity, quantum mechanics, big bang theory to the entire field of embryology and much of modern geology has been ‘discovered’ in the Qur’an. [20]

Meanwhile, ‘scientific’ experiments have been devised to discover what is mentioned in the Qur’an but not known to science—for example, the programme to harness the energy of the jinns enjoyed much support in the mid-nineties in Pakistan! This reductive fundamentalism now embraces Creationism and is generating a growing movement for ‘Intelligent Design’ in the Muslim world.

There is a profound irony here. Classical Muslims scientists, such as ibn Tufayl, whom I have already mentioned and ibn Nafis, who discovered the circulation of blood, leaned heavily towards evolution. The Qur’an insists Adam was the first Prophet and not the first man, it invites the reader to discover a rational explanation of how humanity came to be on this planet. Unfortunately, the fundamentalist version of ‘science’

is the most popular notion of 'Islamic science' in the Muslim world today.

The second component is best described as mystical fundamentalism. In this version, the consensus, the *ijma* of a knowledgeable community, is further reduced to a group of mystics with secret and sacred scientific knowledge. In this perspective, Islamic science becomes an ontological study of the nature of things. The material universe is studied as an integral and subordinate part of higher levels of existence, consciousness and modes of knowing. Thus, science is not a problem solving enterprise and socially objective inquiry; it is a mystical quest for understanding of the Absolute. In this universe, conjecture and hypothesis have no place; all inquiry must be subordinate to mystical experience. Even the history of Islamic science has been rewritten. Proponents of this position emphasise the occult, alchemy and astrology—at the expense of the vast amount of work in exact sciences—in an attempt to show Islamic science was largely 'sacred science'. In many academic circles, this mystical tendency has acquired a strong presence.

These two trends, the fundamentalist and the mystical, suggest that real science has almost evaporated from Muslim consciousness. In a recent survey *Nature* noted, 'today's Muslim states barely register on indices of research spending, patents and publications' [21]. And it concludes the situation is not just bad; it is set to get worse.

However, I think we need not be so pessimistic.

The solution to any problem begins with a diagnosis. My optimism is based on the fact that diagnosis has already begun. Increasingly, the realisation is growing that science is important not just for the prosperity of Muslim societies, not just for the purpose of economic development, or for misplaced political

vanity or notions of defence based on acquiring nuclear weapons—but that science matters because it is vital for the recovery and survival of Islam itself. Just as the spirit of Islam in history was defined by its scientific enterprise, so the future of Muslim societies will depend on their relationship to science and learning. This is the main message of the *Arab Human Development Report* of 2003. [22] This ground-breaking report on ‘Building a Knowledge Society’ frankly admits Muslims cannot merely continue to blame everything on colonialism and the West. Muslim states have failed, by their own Islamic standards, the challenge of independence. The report blames authoritarian thought, lack of autonomy in universities, the sorry state of libraries and laboratories, and under-funding in the Arab world.

Moreover, the report recognises the conceptual problems of interpretation and declares ‘time has come to proclaim those positive religious texts that cope with current realities’. In particular, it calls for ‘reviving *ijtihad*’ as the driving force for change. Indeed, it is now widely argued science can play an important role not just in re-establishing *ijtihad* but in making Islam whole again, reuniting reason once again with revelation. Thus, the revival of science and a reform agenda for Islam in Muslim society need to proceed hand in hand.

This is the course the Organization of Islamic Conference has set itself. It helps that the 57-member intergovernmental organization of Muslim states, recently elected Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, former President of the International Union for the History and Philosophy of Science, as its Secretary General. Ihsanoglu has initiated a process aiming to secure greater expenditure on R&D in Muslim countries over the coming decade.

In Atta ur Rahman, Pakistan's minister of higher education, Ihsanoglu has a like-minded soul for whom the status quo simply will not do. It is to be hoped they can make a formidable partnership, using not merely their key institutional positions but their conceptual insight on the nature of the problem to stimulate, nurture and promote genuine change, the kind that will initiate wide ranging reform.

Other signs of change can be detected in religious institutions. The Al-Azhar University in Cairo, one of the most influential institutions of the Muslim world, for example, has now opened up to science. Its history reflects the reductive course of Muslim society, abandoning science as it became merely a religious institution concentrating on theology. Now it is rebalancing its curricula, emphasising science as much as religion. Religious classes are making way for laboratories and courses on science.

No one should be in any doubt—Muslims have a deep emotional attachment to their scientific heritage. But contemporary Muslim society needs more than nostalgic pride in a long departed Golden Age. Instead of cherishing the ashes of a burnt out fire—they need to transmit its flame. Re-kindling the flame must mean more than simply eulogising a list of achievements. It has to focus on instilling the way of thinking, the critical consciousness and methodologies that made Islamic science possible; and it must make this way of thinking and knowing relevant to contemporary times.

As both al-Haitham and Salam discovered and knew so well—there are no quick fixes in science. There is no substitute for hard labour in the laboratory. Yet, they were sure of the source of their inspiration, used it to persist in their work, and never lost sight of how it encouraged them to be critical and innovative scientists. There is every reason to hope that

re-making such connections can reignite science in Muslim societies as a going concern for the future.

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Islam and Secularism

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I developed an aversion to secularism in my early twenties. During my university days, in the early seventies, I became the General Secretary of the Federation of Students Islamic Societies (FOSIS). Like most members of FOSIS, I was strongly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan. These organisations preached a simple message: Islam Good; Secularism Bad. So like other members of the 'Islamic movement', I came to think of Islam and secularism as two fuming bulls perpetually at loggerheads with each other.

It was only when I started to read Islam history that I realised things were not so black and white. Secularism, I discovered, was by no means alien to Islam. Not only does it have a strong presence in Islamic history, but secularism played an integral part in shaping classical Islamic thought. While it was never articulated as a clear and distinct separation of religion and political power, it has been frequently discussed and debated, in various disguise, by Muslim scholars and thinkers of all ages.

To my surprise, I learnt that religious states were an exception rather than a rule in Islamic history. The great

Umayyad and Abbassid empires (661–1258), which came into existence after what is called ‘the rule of the rightly guided Caliphs’, were based on personal and authoritarian rule. Their obeisance to religion was purely symbolic. At best, they were ‘semi-secular’ states. With the sole exception of the Fatimid state in Egypt and Syria (909–1171), the states which came into existence after this period were even more secularised. The Fatimid rulers were fanatical Isma’ili (a variation of Shia) but even they were unable to impose their faith on the state. Most of their population belonged to the Sunni faith; and, for practical reasons, they often separated affairs of the state from Isma’ili theological considerations.

The movement to separate religion from politics began early in Islamic history. In classical Islam, it was the rationalists, who tended largely to be philosophers but also included scientists, poets and administrators, who desired a respectable distance between religion and politics. Known as the Mutazilites—literary the Separatists—these thinkers were against strict, legalistic faith based solely on the notion of a Divine Law (the *Sharial*) and worked to transform Islam into a more humanistic religion. They argued that with reason alone one could know how to act morally; and by corollary, there was no necessity to combine religion and statecraft. The School emerged in the ninth century during the time of Al-Kindi, known as ‘The First Philosopher of the Arabs’, who is accredited as its founder. The Mutazalites boosted such philosophers of distinction as Al-Farabi, the tenth century author of *The Perfect State* (which argued for a republic ruled by philosophers) the eleventh century philosopher and polymath ibn Sina, and ibn Rushd, the twelfth century philosopher and rationalist.

The Mutazalites were pitted against the Asharites, founded by the tenth century theologian Al-Ashari. The Asharites

rejected the idea that human reason alone can discern morality and argued that it was beyond human capability to understand the unique nature and characteristic of God. The state, the Asharite argued, had an important part to play in shaping the morality of its citizens; hence religion and politics could not be separated. The Asharites School had the support of giants like Al-Ghazzali, the theologian author of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences in Islam*, who directly challenged the might of the Rationalists. He was supported by his contemporary, the mathematician and physicist Fakhr al-Din Razi; and the great fourteenth century historian and sociologist, ibn Khaldun.

To a very large extent, the history of Islam during the classical period, from seventh to fourteenth century, can be seen as one gigantic struggle between the Mutazalites and the Asharites. It was the clear-cut victory of the Asharites that ensured that Muslim societies tended to see religion and politics as two sides of the same coin. Muhammad Iqbal, the great twentieth century South Asian poet and philosopher, summed up this position when he declared that ‘if religion is separated from politics you are left with the terror of Ghangiz Khan’.

Iqbal was a mystic. I, on the other hand, after a long period of studying Islamic history and classical thought, emerged as a rationalist, a contemporary follower of the Mutazalite philosophy. And, as a rational sceptic, I wanted to know what was really bothering ordinary Muslims—as opposed to hard line followers of the Islamic movement—about secularism.

My travels in the Middle East soon clarified one aspect of the problem. Secularism in the Muslim world was associated with oppression and suppression of tradition and religious people. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood were brutally suppressed by the secular regime of Gamal Abdul Nasser; and its leaders tortured and executed. The Baathists regimes in Syria

and Iraq were even more vicious. Secularist political parties, such as the National Liberation Front in Algeria and the Constitutional Party in Tunisia, openly advocated anti-religious policies and persecuted anyone who identified with Islam.

Secularism in the Muslim world was always presented as an ideology in direct opposition to religion. As such, it became a force for exclusion rather than inclusion. Secularists not only denigrated religion but went out of their way to marginalise the vast majority of traditional Muslims both from politics and economic opportunity. The religious people I met during my journeys argued, not surprisingly, that secularism had reduced Islam to a servant status, there only to be manipulated by those who hold the vast majority and their religion in utter contempt.

There was another problem. Traditional Muslims often equated secularism with Europeanization. It was seen as a product of Europe, a product that retains its essential Eurocentric core. Under secularism, the European ideas of liberty and freedom become the only basis for the future of Muslim societies and cultures because they are seen as the only universal standard by which liberty and freedom are assessed and understood. Thus, to embrace secularism in its totality, I was repeatedly told, amounts to becoming an appendage of western civilisation: it involves giving up the Islamic notions of community where absolute freedom of the individual is restricted by public interest and concerns of the community, and certain moral principles which play an important part in shaping individual, social and cultural behaviour. Moreover, the distinct history of Islam is subsumed into the Universal River of secularist, western history. So, for traditional Muslim communities, standing up to secularism was seen as a necessity for cultural survival and for preserving certain cherished notions of Muslim identity.

My travels in Turkey provided numerous illustrations of these concerns. When, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Kamal Attaturk introduced secularist reforms in Turkey, he presented secularism as a superior ideology and pitted it against a perceived inferior religion. Islam, he declared, was a clear hindrance to progress and there should be no remnants of Islam in Turkey. The Ottoman Caliphate must be abolished; schools, colleges and universities must be Europeanised; traditional scholars must be humiliated; and European policies and administration must be introduced. Europe had to be imitated in minute detail, up and including how one dressed and behaved. So, Attaturk banned beards, turbans and the hijab, ordered everyone to wear European dress, and appointed the military as the guardians of Turkish secularism. He replaced Ottoman history based on religious community with a “national history” he hoped would replicate the history of the West. ‘There is only one civilisation’, he declared, the European civilisation. And a secularist society must ‘imitate it in all respects’.

Muslim attitude towards secularism began to change at the beginning of the nineties. The failure of the theocratic state in Iran, and the Islamic movements in general, led many Muslim scholars to rethink their position on secularism. Writers and thinkers in Iran, Pakistan and Turkey began to argue that secularism had a role to play in Muslim societies. But if Muslims were to accept secularism, both secularism and religion had to be reformulated. Conservative religion based on the notion of monolithic Truth and immutable Divine Law cannot tolerate secularism. But a notion of secularism that is equated with atheism, Europeanization and an absolute notion of freedom cannot be accommodated with religious societies either. An

acceptable notion of secularism had to be based on Islamic history and the teachings of Islam itself.

Throughout the nineties, the noted Indian Muslim reformer and campaigner Asghar Ali Engineer, for example, argued that both 'Islam and secularism have to be liberalised'. The Qur'an, Engineer suggested, provides support for 'liberal or non-theistic secularism'. Moreover, the Constitution developed by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina can also be used to shape a secularist society. Engineer pointed out that Indian Muslim scholars 'drew the inspiration for creating a composite secular nation in India from the Prophet's Convent in Medina'. Muslims in other countries can use the same religious basis for developing a 'liberal secular political dispensation'.

Other thinkers sought philosophical routes to Islamic secularism. For example, Abdolkarim Soroush, the well known Iranian philosopher and reformist, used the thought of classical Mutazalite thinkers to develop a philosophical argument. He argued that 'extra-religious concerns', such as democracy, human rights and pluralism, should take 'logical precedence' over 'intra-religious concerns', such as the role of religious scholars and notions of religious truths. This has been the case in much of Islamic history. Genuine theocracies, such as revolutionary Iran, where political power is in the hands of the religious scholars, and Saudi Arabia, where there is an alliance between the monarchy and religious scholars, Soroush suggested, are a modern aberration. Both the logic of Islamic history and the logic of a globalised world dictate that religious and political power should be totally separated within Islamic societies.

Many other thinkers and scholars now argue that Muslims should see secularism not as a theology of salvation, a la Attaruk, but as a pragmatic concern. During the nineties, I

had a long running argument with my friend Iftikar Malik, British Pakistani political scientist and historian, and author of *Islam and Modernity*. Both of us were concerned about the sharp increase in religious feuds and violence in Muslim societies. The only way to solve this problem, Malik argued, was to separate *huqooq Allah* (the rights of God) from *huqooq al ibad* (the rights of people). The rights of God should be left to the individual and his conscience; and the state should concern itself only with the rights of the people. In this context, secularism isn't so much the opposite of sacred as the anti thesis of chauvinism, ethnocentrism and fanaticism. A Muslim secularist wouldn't be disrespectful towards Islam—indeed, he or she may be a devout believer—but equally respectful to all religions, Malik suggested. And religious symbolism, such as the hijab, would be treated for what it is: a symbol. It will not be seen as a threat to the 'secular' nature of the state but as an exercise in the public expression of 'the rights of God'. 'So secularism comes not at the expense of religion but as a method for reinterpreting and revisiting religion itself', Malik declared.

Such arguments are now gaining ground in Muslim societies. Ironically, Muslim societies may be lead towards a reformulated secularism and a reformed Islam by Turkey—just as Malik has been predicting for so many years. Secularist Turkey has a bona fide Islamic government that is committed both to the principle of separation of religion and politics as well as bringing the ethics and morality of Islam into public affairs. Many in the Muslim world look towards Turkey as an ideal democratic, liberal, secular *and* Islamic state. If Turkey joins the European Union, its status as the model for other Muslim states to imitate will be confirmed. Thus, a new synthesis between Islam and secularism may yet emerge.

Three Cheers for Women Imams

Emel Magazine
May/June 2005

The heavens have been shaken. Imams, Mullahs, Sheikhs and the Ulama are hopping mad. A centuries old custom has been challenged. A woman has led a mix gender congregation for Friday prayers in New York. Whatever next? Women claiming the right to do ijihad!

The woman in question is Amina Wadud. I know her well. We first met in the early 1990s, when I was living in Malaysia and she was teaching at the International Islamic University (IIU) in Kuala Lumpur. There was an instant rapport between us. She was working on her book, *Women in the Qur'an*, and I was privileged enough to witness the evolution of her arguments and ideas. She became a close confidant of my friend Merryl Davies. Together, we would have endlessly long dinners discussing the intricacies of the Shariah, the problems of Qur'anic exegesis, and the sad plight of the ummah.

There are two things about Amina that no one can deny. First, she has deep knowledge of Islam. Second, she is a natural born rebel. The first got her the job at the notoriously conservative IIU. The second got her fired. The narrow-minded

bigots at IIU could not stomach her scholarship and opinions and basically drove her out of the university.

So, I was not too surprised to hear that Amina has now stood up to contest the domination of men in the mosque. Her argument is simple and compelling. There is nothing the Qur'an or the life of the Blessed Prophet that prevents women becoming Imams and leading the prayers. Indeed, the Prophet actually asked Umm Waraqah, who had collected the Qur'an, to lead the people in prayer where she lived. The Qur'an contains a number of examples that suggest that female spiritual leaders ought to actually be encouraged—as seen in the Quranic depiction of Mary and the Queen of Sheba.

How have the great leaders of this great ummah of ours reacted? To begin with there were the inevitable death threats. The planned prayer had to change its location a couple of times; and the members of the congregation had to be vetted. This suggests just how incapable Muslims have become of civic behaviour. Then there were the standard denunciations. Imams throughout the Muslim world stood up to defend their honour. On al-Jazeera television, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, described by his followers as 'moderate' and 'liberal', condemned Amina's actions.

The counter argument, if it can actually be elevated to a rational position, is that women cannot lead the prayers because of their menstrual cycle. As one enlightenment Imam put it, there is always the possibility of spillage during a prayer! Heavens will weep if a man gets the glimpse of a female Imam's behind and spots blood. And that behind is itself problematic. During prayer men should be focussing on the Divine; not on the mundane issue of a female's modesty. So instead of praying they can be led astray!

If this is the best our Imams and ulama can do then they are truly doomed.

The menstruation argument is self-defeating. If menstruation is a problem, then women can lead the prayers at all times except when they are menstruating. But who is to know when a woman is menstruating? And why should she make it into a public issue? Moreover, have our ulama not heard of tampons?

The men-will-be-corrupted argument is just as pernicious. As a man I find it exceptionally insulting. I mean if our brothers are so lacking in moral fibre that the mere sight of a woman covered from head to toe like an Egyptian mummy can lead them astray then there is something seriously wrong with them. Anyway, those susceptible to corruption need no excuse. They will be corrupted outside or inside the mosque, no matter who is leading the prayer—a man or a woman.

Amina Wadud is only the tip of the iceberg. Almost every Muslim community now has a leading female scholar of Islam determined to challenge every unjust custom, every oppressing tradition, perpetuated in the name of Islam. In most cases, they are much more qualified than their male counterparts. Morocco has the outspoken Fatima Mernissi, author of *Women and Islam* and numerous other books. Pakistan has the articulate Riffat Hassan who can often be seen debating and thrashing the male ulamas on television. She has just established an institute to rework the whole issue of women's rights in Islam. Egypt has the tireless Laila Ahmed author of *Women and Gender in Islam*. In Malaysia, few can stand up to the 'Sisters in Islam' who have successfully championed the reformulation of the Shariah. And so it goes on.

These women scholars are a great blessing from God. They demonstrate the vibrancy and enlightened nature of Islam. And they are set to multiply—exponentially. So the weak hearted

amongst us, who still cling on to insidious obscurantism and erroneous medieval certainties, should prepare to take cover.

I, on the other hand, look forward to being led by a female Imam. Not just on Friday. But every day.

My fatwa on the fanatics

The Observer

23rd September 2001

The magnitude of the terrorist attack on America has forced Muslims to take a critical look at themselves. Why have we repeatedly turned a blind eye to the evil within our societies? Why have we allowed the sacred terms of Islam, such as fatwa and jihad, to be hijacked by obscurantist, fanatic extremists?

Muslims are quick to note the double standards of America—its support for despotic regimes, its partiality towards Israel, and the covert operations that have undermined democratic movements in the Muslim world. But we seldom question our own double standards. For example, Muslims are proud that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the West. Evangelical Muslims, from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, happily spread their constricted interpretations of Islam. But Christian missionaries in Muslim countries are another matter. They have to be banned or imprisoned. Those who burn effigies of President Bush will be first in the queue for an American visa.

The psychotic young men, members of such extremist organisations as Al-Muhajiroun and 'Supporters of Sharia', shouting fascist obscenities outside the Pakistan Embassy, are enjoying the fruits of Western freedom of expression. Their

declared aim is to establish 'Islamic states'. But in any self-proclaimed Islamic state, they would be ruthlessly silenced.

This is not the first time concerned Muslims have raised such questions. But we have been forced to ignore them for two main reasons. In a world where it is always open season for prejudice and discrimination on Muslims and Islam, our main task has seemed to be to defend Islam.

The other reason concerns Ummah, the global Muslim community. We have to highlight, the argument goes, the despair and suffering of the Muslim people—their poverty and plight as refugees and the horror of war-torn societies.

So, all good and concerned Muslims are implicated in the unchecked rise of fanaticism in Muslim societies. We have given free reign to fascism within our midst, and failed to denounce fanatics who distort the most sacred concepts of our faith. We have been silent as they proclaim themselves martyrs, mangling beyond recognition the most sacred meaning of what it is to be a Muslim.

But the events of 11 September have freed us from any further obligation to this misapplied conscience. The insistence by the Muslim Council of Britain that the Islamic cause is best served by the Taliban handing over Osama bin Laden, is indicative of this shift.

The devotion with which so many Muslims, young and old, in Europe and America, are organising meetings and conferences to discuss how to unleash the best intentions, the essential values of Islam, from the rhetoric of jihad, hatred and insularity, is another.

But we have to go further. Muslims are in the best position to take the lead in the common cause against terrorism. The terrorists are among us, the Muslim communities of the world.

They are part of our body politic. And it is our duty to stand up against them.

We must also reclaim a more balanced view of Islamic terms like fatwa. A fatwa is simply a legal opinion based on religious reasoning. It is the opinion of one individual and is binding on only the person who gives it. But, since the Rushdie affair, it has come to be associated in the West solely with a death sentence. Now that Islam has become beset with the fatwa culture, it becomes necessary for moderate voices to issue their own fatwas.

So, let me take the first step. To Muslims everywhere I issue this fatwa: any Muslim involved in the planning, financing, training, recruiting, support or harbouring of those who commit acts of indiscriminate violence against persons or the apparatus or infrastructure of states is guilty of terror and no part of the Ummah. It is the duty of every Muslim to spare no effort in hunting down, apprehending and bringing such criminals to justice.

If you see something reprehensible, said the Prophet Muhammad then change it with your hand; if you are not capable of that then use your tongue (speak out against it); and if you are not capable of that then detest it in your heart.

The silent Muslim majority must now become vocal. The rest of the world could help by adopting a more balanced tone. The rhetoric that paints America as a personification of innocence and goodness, a god-like power that can do no wrong, not only undermines the new shift but threatens to foreclose all our futures.

Is Muslim civilisation set on a fixed course to decline?

New Statesman
14th June 2004

A uniquely lax notion of time has become integral to Wahhabism, the revivalist movement founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab that has become the state creed of Saudi Arabia. Abd al-Wahhab was born in 1703 in a small town in Najd, in the northern part of the kingdom, and brought up in the Hanbali sect, the most severe of the four schools of Islamic thought. Abd al-Wahhab advocated “the return to Koran and Sunnah” (the practice of the Prophet). His call was for a return to the purity and simple profundity of the origin of Islam. He rejected practices that had accreted and become permitted in traditional Islam, such as celebrating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad or visiting the graves and shrines of saints and divines.

Rather like the Reformation thinkers in European Christianity, Abd al-Wahhab set himself against the abuses by which religion pandered to the gullible masses, rather than educated or ministered to them. His reforming zeal sent many back to the elegant purity of Islam as a message of humility, unity, morality and ethics motivated by equality and justice. If

one needed a parallel, one could think of the elegant refinement and simplicity of Shaker furniture.

The contemporary Saudi creed owes as much, or possibly as little, to Abd al-Wahhab as it does to the 13th-century Muslim political scientist Ibn Taymiyya, who belongs in a long and heroic tradition of intellectual zealots. Ibn Taymiyya was concerned with the strength and survival of the Muslim community at a time when Islam, recovering from the onslaught of the Crusades, was under siege from the Mongols. He saw dissension among Muslims as their main weakness and sought to ban plurality of interpretations. Everything had to be found in the Koran and the Sunnah. The Koran had to be interpreted literally. When the Koran, for example, says God sits on His throne, He sits on His throne, period. No discussion can be entertained on the nature of the throne or its purpose. Nothing can be read metaphorically or symbolically.

I learned a great deal about modern Wahhabism from students at the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia. When I worked at a research centre at the King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah the late 1970s, we would hire these students by the hundred to help us with our surveys and studies. A few of them were Saudis, but most were from other parts of the Muslim world. Without exception, they were on scholarships and were guaranteed badly paid employment from the Saudi treasury on finishing their course. All were being trained as *dias*—preachers who would, on graduation, go out to Asia and Africa, as well as Europe and America, to do *dawa*: run mosques, madrasas and Islamic centres, teach and preach.

What did they learn? And what were they going to preach? From the *dias*, I discovered that in modern Wahhabism, there is only the constant present. There is no real past and there is no real notion of an alternative, different future. Their

perpetual present exists in the ontological shadow of the past—or rather, a specific, constructed period of early Islamic history, the days of the Prophet Muhammad. The history/culture of Muslim civilisation, in all its greatness, complexity and plurality, is totally irrelevant; indeed, it is rejected as deviancy and degeneration.

So it is hardly surprising that Saudis had no feelings for the cultural property and sacred topology of Mecca.

The students from the University of Medina were fiercely loyal, both to their Saudi mentors and to their particular school of thought. The Wahhabism they learned was manufactured on the basis of tribal loyalty—but the place of traditional tribal allegiance was now taken by Islam. Everyone outside this territory was, by definition, a hostile dweller in the domain of unbelief. Those who stood outside their domain were not limited to non-Muslims; it included all those Muslims who have not given allegiance to Wahhabism.

The ranks of unbelief were swollen by the Shias, the Sufis and followers of other Islamic schools of thought. In the minds of these *dias*, and in Saudi society itself, the demarcation between the interior and the exterior, with us or against us, insider or outsider, orthodox or heretic, is almost total.

The students would often tell me that any alliance with the unbelievers was itself unbelief; that one should not just refrain from associating or making friends with them, but should also shun their employment, their advice, or emulating them, and should try to avoid conviviality and affability towards them.

In Saudi Arabia, the expatriates are treated in this fashion, confined to their specific quarters according to their status. The maintenance of rigid, sharp divisions is evident also in the treatment of women. It is not just that women are totally marginalised in society as a whole. The distinctive difference

of the position of women has to be emphasised at every juncture.

All men in the kingdom dress in white—crisply ironed *toupes* and *jallabiyabs*. White is the natural colour for such an extreme climate: it reflects the sun and absorbs very little heat. Women have to be covered, from head to toe, by law, in black shrouds that absorb all the sun and all the heat. Women wear their shrouds *ninja* fashion, observing not traditional female Muslim dress or hijab, but the more extensive *niqab*, the head-covering that leaves only a narrow slit where the eyes are visible. The only place in Saudi Arabia where this refinement of dress is not seen is within the precincts of the Sacred Mosque itself, where the conventional Islamic precepts of female garb include the requirement for the face to be uncovered.

Initially, I dismissed the confessions of students from Medina as the ranting of overzealous young men. I also suspected my own observations of Saudi society. As someone brought up and educated in Britain, I thought, I was looking at the Saudis from a biased perspective.

And what about people such as my friends at the King Abdul Aziz University, Abdullah Naseef and Sami Angawi? I had not, and still have not, met more rounded, humane, compassionate or refined individuals. In the person of Naseef, the university president, the simple profundity of Islam that Wahhabism sought to recapture soars beyond any simplicities that could be termed fundamentalist. Both in his own lifestyle and the way he related to others, Naseef was a sublime minimalist. He oozed culture in a society that was totally devoid of art or culture; he radiated subtlety and finesse while surrounded by clumsiness and ugliness. He operated unfailingly with a gentle, peaceful tolerance, while all around him a harsh,

brutalising incivility and disdain were becoming the normal routine of Saudi life.

The true import of Saudi Wahhabism was brought home to me in November 1979. During that fateful month, a group of zealots occupied the Sacred Mosque in Mecca.

Under a pale scimitar moon, and among thousands of worshippers circling the Ka'aba, a group of Bedouins brought out sub-machine guns, rifles and revolvers concealed beneath their robes and fired into the air. They allowed most of the worshippers to leave the Sacred Mosque, then they bolted all 39 doors to the mosque from the inside. Their 27-seven-year-old leader, Mohammad al-Qahtani, proclaimed himself the "*mahdi*" (redeemer) who had come to purify Islam. The insurgents came largely from the Oteiba tribe, which included many European and American converts to Islam. They belonged to the al-Moshtarin sect and believed that a man had to buy his place in paradise by devoting all his goods and his life to religion.

They accused the Saudi state of co-operating with Christians, confirming the heresies of the Shias, promoting dissension by permitting more than one interpretation of Islam, introducing television and film into the kingdom, and instituting the fetish of money. Mecca was cut off from the rest of the world and the mosque surrounded by the army and the national guard, whose main function is to guard the royal family. But before the rebels could be (literally) flushed out of the mosque, they had to be sentenced formally to death. The task fell to Sheikh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, the chief scholar and the mufti of the kingdom.

Bin Baz was blind and I used to see him often at the Sacred Mosque. The spectacle was always the same. A young student, holding him by his left shoulder, would lead him around the

Ka'aba while hordes of admirers and devotees would try to kiss his right hand. The accusations of the rebels against the Saudi state were read out to bin Baz. He agreed totally with the thesis of the rebels. Yes, he said, a true Wahhabi state should not associate with the unbelievers. Yes, more than one interpretation of Islam should not be allowed under any circumstances. Yes, images of all kind were forbidden in Islam, including television and film. And, yes, money should not be fetishised.

The only thing Sheikh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz disagreed with was that these things actually happened in the Saudi kingdom. So the Sacred Mosque was flooded and the messianic rebels were drowned. It seemed to me that the puritan rebels were at least honest, truer representatives of Wahhabism—unlike the dishonest Wahhabite state.

By radically denying the complexity and diversity of Islamic history, over time and vast areas of the world, and rejecting diverse, pluralistic interpretations of Islam, Wahhabism has stripped the faith of all its ethical and moral content and reduced it to an arid list of dos and don'ts. To insist that anything that cannot be found in a literal reading of the sources and lore of early Muslims is *kufr*—outside the domain of Islam—and to enforce this comprehensive vision with brute force and/or severe social pressure for complete conformity spells totalitarianism.

In a totalitarian society, things move slowly and mysteriously. I was at the ministry of the interior waiting for an exit visa to leave Saudi Arabia. At around two o'clock, the time that offices usually close in Saudi Arabia, the *jawaizat* (visa section) window opened. A hand holding a file materialised through the window and flung the file in the air. A man waiting patiently in the shade jumped up, caught the file, opened it to take a brief

look and walked briskly out of the compound with a satisfied look. A few moments later the hand emerged again, and another file was flung in the air. Another man caught it and walked out. The process continued for several minutes.

Finally, the hand appeared once more, and Shaikh Abdullah, who was accompanying me because he had responsibility for arranging visas for university employees, jumped up from a squatting position and caught the file. He opened it and glanced at it. I looked at him anxiously. "Have I got the exit visa?"

"Well, not quite," Shaikh Abdullah replied. "You haven't got the visa, but the letter from Doktor Naseef has been honoured."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"I don't know. I have never faced this situation before. But I think you can leave the country tomorrow."

"As long as I can leave the country. That's all I want." I took the file from Shaikh Abdullah. There was a letter attached to my passport.

At that moment I had a strange thought. "Considering all files look the same, and the man behind the window did not indicate anyone or anything, how did you know which file to jump and catch?"

Shaikh Abdullah was irritated with the question. "I can't tell you everything. Now if you take this letter to the airport, you will find they will allow you to leave the country. "*Khalas*," he said, stroking his palms and fingers as though he was dusting his hands. "*Khalas*," he repeated. "It's over." Without waiting for a reply, Shaikh Abdullah jumped in his pick-up truck and drove off.

The following day was the first day of Ramadan. The city, indeed all of Saudi Arabia, stays up all night. During this blessed month a whole new inverted lifestyle emerges. The day becomes

night. Once the cannon is fired (actually there are 12 cannons fired in unison) to mark the end of *subur*, the city goes to sleep. *Subur* is the last light meal before the beginning of the fast, just before dawn. The streets are deserted; offices, shops and business establishments are closed, opening for only a few hours between ten and one. The city begins to show signs of life just before sunset.

By the time the cannons have been fired again, now to announce the *iftar*, the light meal that marks the end of the fast, the city becomes vibrant with excitement. The skyline is illuminated with a riot of colour, roads become jammed with bumper-to-bumper traffic, and streets and alleyways are crowded with people shopping for the following day. The offices and shops open again at around ten at night and will close only after two o'clock in the morning. Some restaurants and shops will still be doing brisk business right up to dawn.

It is truly astonishing how easily and speedily the Saudis adjust to change, to living by night and sleeping by day. The previous Ramadan, after the siege of Mecca, I had started thinking about permanence and change in Islam. I had started to write *The Future of Muslim Civilisation*. It was an attempt to articulate my own vision of what an Islamic society should and could be.

Nothing remains “contemporary” for ever, I argued. Islam has to be rearticulated, understood afresh, from epoch to epoch, according to the needs and requirements, the specific demands of geographical location and the circumstances of the time. What changes is our understanding of the constants. And as our understanding develops, Islam of one particular epoch may not bear much resemblance—except in devotional matters—to Islam of another epoch. Wahhabism, I had concluded, had

been employed to introduce two metaphysical catastrophes in Islam.

First, by closing the interpretations of our “absolute frame of reference”—the Koran and the life of the Prophet Muhammad—it had removed agency from believers. One could have only an interpretative relationship with a living, eternal text. Without that relationship of constant struggling to understand the text and find new meanings, Muslim societies were doomed to exist in suspended animation.

If everything was an *a priori* given, nothing new could really be accommodated. The intellect, human intelligence, became an irrelevant encumbrance, given that everything could be reduced to a simple comply/not comply formula derived from the thoughts of dead, bearded men.

Second, by assuming that ethics and morality reached their apex, indeed an end point, with the companions of the Prophet, Wahhabism, which became the basis of what later came to be known as “Islamism”, negated the very idea of evolution in human thought and morality. Indeed, it set Muslim civilisation on a fixed course to perpetual decline.

Waiting for Rain

New Scientist

15th December 2001

WILL THE fall of the Taliban mean anything for science in the Muslim world? After all, fundamentalism and science are strange bedfellows, as we've seen in the US with Creationism. And if so, do we dare for a hopeful answer this time to some of the questions I first asked twenty years ago in these pages—can Muslim scientists pick up the threads that were dropped 400 years ago? Can there really be an Islamic science?

Then and now, everyone in the Muslim world agrees that an essential component of any cultural revival within it has to be the recovery of the spirit and values of Islamic science. Muslim scholars are keen to make science an integral part of their culture. They are angry at lost opportunities and at the possibility of dropping the ball again. But they, like me, are very aware that the challenge facing them is huge.

Basically, the debate on Islamic science has been hijacked by fundamentalist mystics. As we can see from the Winter 2000 special issue on 'Islam and science' of the well regarded Pakistani journal *Islamic Studies*, for these people science does not mean science as it has existed in Muslim tradition and

history. Instead, it's some sort of esoteric experience based on of Islamic mysticism or Sufism. This mystical tendency has now established itself as a new academic orthodoxy: from Kuala Lumpur to Islamabad, this is what is being discussed and taught under the rubric of "Islamic science". But this didn't have to happen—and understanding in detail how it did may yet show a way forward.

The Islamic science debate captured Muslim imagination in the late 1970s. The emergence of OPEC power, the Iranian revolution, and a growing consciousness of cultural identity fuelled optimism in the Muslim world. There were encouraging signs in this period that Muslims wanted to reinvent their own science. This was discussed at conferences and seminars held everywhere from Riyadh to Rabat. One particular study, sponsored by the International Federation of Institutes of Advanced Studies in Stockholm (IFIAS), brought Muslim scientists and scholars from all over the world in a linked series of seminars held between 1980 and 1983. The IFIAS study, published as *The Touch of Midas: Science, Values and the Environment in Islam and the West* (Manchester University Press, 1984), concluded that the issues of science and values in Islam must be treated within a framework of concepts that shape the goals of a Muslim society.

Ten fundamental Islamic concepts were identified: *tawheed* (unity), *khalifah* (trusteeship), *ibadah* (worship), *ilm* (knowledge); and *halal* (praiseworthy) and *haram* (blameworthy), *adl* (justice) and *zulm* (tyranny), and *istislah* (public interest) and *dhiya* (waste). All intellectual and cultural activities in Islam are guided by an ethical framework. So the creation of an ethical framework for science was seen as the first step.

A system guided by these concepts and values, it was argued, embraces the nature of scientific enquiry in its totality,

integrating facts and values, and institutionalises a whole system of knowing that is based on accountability and social responsibility. The pursuit of scientific enquiry, the study suggested, should be seen in a Muslim society as a form of worship, promoting enquiry and thought, public interest and social justice.

This framework was widely debated and criticised in the Muslim world. At its core was the idea of science as systematic observation and experimentation, which allowed scientists to build models and theories that generate universal knowledge. Just like science in Islamic history, which is full of such examples. The 10th-century scholar *Ar-Razi*, also known as Rhazes, wrote detailed and highly accurate clinical observations that provided us with a universal model of smallpox. And the accurate observations and theories of Muslim astronomers in the 12th century helped launch a rigorous attack on the imperfections in Ptolemaic astronomy.

In the early 1990s, however, there was a definite shift away from this methodology into obscurantism. This was part of a general, sharp rise in the literalist mode of thought in the Muslim societies as well as a growing retreat into mysticism. The impact on Islamic science debate was devastating. There are two strands that mark out the changeover. First, it began to be argued that all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, can be found in the Koran. This thesis received a tremendous boost from the well-funded Saudi project, “Scientific Miracles in the Qur’an” project. The project involved both ‘empirical’ work, involving comparisons between those verses of the Koran that deal with astronomy and embryology with latest discoveries, and popularisation through conferences and seminars.

Relativity, quantum mechanics, big bang theory, embryology—practically everything was “discovered” in the Koran, spawning numerous apologists.

This highly toxic combination of religious literalism and “science” resembles the ideas of creationism in that it doesn’t just accept that version of science as true, but attacks anyone who criticises it. Unfortunately, this fundamentalist variety is now the most popular version of Islamic science.

The second strand in the shift of ideas is best described as mystical fundamentalism—Islamic science becoming the study of the ‘essence’ of things. The material universe is investigated as an integral and subordinate part of higher levels of existence, consciousness and modes of knowing. So science becomes not a problem-solving enterprise or objective enquiry, but a mystical quest to understand the Absolute. Conjecture and hypothesis have no real place: all enquiry must be subordinate to the mystical experience.

The Iranian scholar Syed Hossein Nasr is the leading figure in this movement. For Nasr and his students and followers, such as the Malaysian philosopher of science Osman Bakr and the American scholar William Chittick, all Muslim science is and was “sacred science”, a product of a particular mystical tradition that traces its roots to the neo-Platonists. In his historical works, Nasr has concentrated on areas such as the occult, alchemy and astrology—at the expense of vast amounts of research into exact sciences—in an attempt to show that historically Islamic science was largely “sacred science”.

Nasr’s rewriting of the Islamic history of science has been strongly refuted, not just by me and such highly regarded scholars as German-Turkish historian of science Faut Sagzin and Syrian historian of Islamic Science Ahmad al-Hassan, but

also by Western historians such as David King and Donald Hill. Sadly none of this has been enough to dispel the image.

Which is why I feel a strong sense of *déjà vu*. After saving Europe from itself by preserving and taking forward scientific basics from ancient Greece, which could so easily have been lost in the Dark Ages, science in Muslim civilisation can only ever be marginalised by obscurantist and mystical tendencies. Now we are seeing a rebirth of these tendencies, and dislodging them will take considerable courage and will. Ironically, and sadly, while quoting the scientific achievements of Muslim civilisation has almost become a cliché, a genuine revival of Islamic science now appears rather remote.

But still I dream of what might have happened if we had been able to develop Islamic science. Surely it could not have failed to help transform Muslim societies into knowledge-based societies? When the debate on this issue briefly came to the fore in Pakistan during the 1980s, it generated tremendous public discussion. It was widely recognised that any Islamic science worthy of the name must involve the citizens. That assumed an aware and well-informed public. But when it became clear that public interest and budgets spent on educating the people would actually lead to dramatic changes in Pakistan's science priorities (for example, away from an emphasis in nuclear research), the debate was officially suppressed.

The right kind of science would also have encouraged research that was fine-tuned to solve local problems. Diarrhoea and dysentery in Pakistan, flood control in Bangladesh and tackling schistosomiasis or bilharzia in Egypt and the Sudan would have replaced the international agenda that is blindly adopted in many Muslim countries.

Moreover, certain specifically “Muslim” problems would have become research priorities. Consider, for example, that almost three-quarters of all the political refugees in the world are Muslims. Centres of excellence devoted to the problems of refugees could have developed materials for quick and clean temporary housing, efficient and cheap ways of supplying emergency water, better techniques for providing basic healthcare and so on, ad infinitum.

Indigenous knowledge, too, would have received a tremendous boost. Muslim countries have a valuable, although largely untapped, reservoir of expertise in medicine, agriculture and husbanding natural resources. Islamic medicine and healthcare, for example, led the world for some eight centuries—before the 18th century, when research into and teaching of Islamic medicine was prohibited by the colonising powers.

Similarly, traditional agricultural and water management systems have proved highly effective and ecologically sound. For example, traditional chain wells, known as *karez* in Persian and *qanat* in Arabic, have been shown to be superior to modern irrigation schemes. These ingenious systems consist of one or more mother wells, drained through a network of tunnels. For centuries before the arrival of tubewells, the ecologically sound and the exceptionally durable *qanat* supplied most of the water for irrigation to villages and towns throughout the Middle East.

There are also big philosophical questions just waiting to be asked. What happens to modern science if its basic metaphysical assumptions about nature, time, the Universe, logic and the nature of humanity are replaced with those of Islam? If nature, for example, is seen not as a resource to be exploited but as a trust to be nursed and nourished? What would then replace vivisection as the basic methodology of

biology? Human values are considered not so much as external to science but as totally internal and integral part of science. How would that change science itself?

The truth is that it is only in the rewriting of the history of Islamic science that progress has been made. We now know much more, not just about the quality of Islamic science but about its staggering quantity. Recently, for example, we have learned that the mathematical models of 14th-century scientist ibn al-Shatir, and the work of astronomers at the famous observatory in Maragha, Azerbaijan, built in the 13th century by Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, laid the foundation for the Copernican revolution. The Maragha astronomers developed the Tusi couple and a theorem for the transformation of eccentric models into epicyclic ones. Copernicus not only used these two basic theorems to build his notion of heliocentricity, but also used them at exactly the same point in the model.

Thankfully, much of the new historic research has reached the textbooks. The best synthesis is Donald Hill's *Islamic Science and Engineering* (Edinburgh University Press, 1993), while a three-volume, concise *Encyclopaedia of the History of Arabic Science* edited by Roshdi Rashed (Routledge, 1996) is also available.

Great stuff, all of it. But still history, and not happening tomorrow—and certainly not today.

The Puritan Formula

Emel Magazine

September/October 2004

Just what is *your* problem? I am often forced to ask this question when the more puritanical members of our community start to impose their presumed moral superiority on me. They would start quoting the Qur'an and hadith—thereby revealing their fathomless ignorance—and insist that since Truth is on their side, they must be correct and innately cut above the rest of us.

The problem has four dimensions. According to my friend Nejatullah Siddiqui, who pioneered the idea of Islamic economics in the seventies, it can be stated as a simple puritan formula:

We are different.
We are superior.
We deserve to be supreme; and
We are destined to dominate.

These are dangerous illusions. More so when we use the Qur'an and hadith to justify them for then we end up not just deluding ourselves but also maligning the image of Islam. A

great deal of strife and violence both within and without the Muslim world stems from this perception.

Our faith does not make us different. The planet is full of faith communities all trying to make sense of this world and give some meaning to arid (postmodern) existence. Islam addresses itself to humanity; not just to Muslims. The Qur'an emphasises our common humanity—it does not suggest that Muslims are in any way different from other segments of humanity. Moreover, as Siddiqui points out, differences related to faith have to be placed in some sort of context; the role and rule of faith is not uniformly spread over our life. 'In trade and commerce, agriculture and transport, and in so many walks of life, all human beings need to interact irrespective of their faith'.

To suggest that Muslims are superior simply by virtue of their faith is not just blindly arrogant but downright nefarious. Belief *per se* does not confer anything on anybody.

If this was the case, than anyone who believes in anything can claim superiority; and racial bigots will have as much claim to their arguments as Muslim puritans.

Now, I know what some of you will say. What about that verse of the Qur'an? The one about 'you are the best community' because 'you enjoin right conduct' (3:110). Well, what about it? To begin with it refers to a particular community in history—the one shaped by the Prophet. But suppose it referred to all Muslims for all time. Then, you simply have to look around you. Are we the best community that ever graced this earth? Do we 'enjoin right conduct'? If the answer is an emphatic no, then we are left with two options. Either the Qur'an is wrong; or the interpretation placed on this verse by the self-righteous is wrong. I will opt for the latter. And I will raise one more question: would those who 'enjoin right conduct'

consider themselves to be superior by virtue of anything—including faith?

That brings me to world supremacy and domination. When we look at the Quranic quotations people conjure up to justify this supremacist jabber, we discover a few simple truths. They are all contextual and promise victory to Prophets and their followers under attack. They were revealed to boost the morale of besieged communities, and confirm that piety and power could go together. They promise victory and not disappearance of all other religions and their followers. By no stretch of imagination they provide an agenda for world domination.

The perception that Islam will one day dominate the world is a product of dangerously deluded minds. It negates everything that Islam stands for: freedom to reject faith, the rich diversity of our human community including the diversity of faiths, and rejection of power for power's sake.

The puritan formula is not simply a problem for the extremist members of our community. It has become a problem for us all. British Muslims are very quick—rightly—to jump on any member of the press who demonises Muslims or misrepresents Islam. But we also need to do something else. We need to see where they get their juicy quotations from. We need to hear what some of our brothers and sisters are *actually* saying. And we need to think how much of what they are saying is really embedded in our traditional discourse, in fiqh, and in mutterings of the leaders of the so-called 'Islamic movements'. And worry. And then do something about it.

The first and most obvious thing we can do is to join the rest of humanity. We are not different, superior or destined to dominate. We are nothing more than a fallible community struggling to make sense of our faith in a rapidly changing, complex, interconnected world. In a globalised world, says

Siddiqui, 'exclusiveness and the tendency to create our own separate space are out'. Muslims, puritans and others, need to wholeheartedly share 'God given space with all human beings on the basis of freedom, equality, mutual respect and human rights'. I couldn't agree more!

On the culture of martyrdom

New Statesman

28th November 2005

If suicide killing was a viable weapon of just war, then the Prophet Muhammad would have used it.

What are we to make of a semi-literate teaching assistant exhorting young British Muslims to commit suicide? Mohammad Sidique Khan, who blew himself up at Edgware Road in London on 7 July, has sent a message from the grave. In a video recorded just before his death, Khan calmly addresses his audience. “Muslims,” he says to the camera in a distinctly Yorkshire accent, “I strongly advise you to sacrifice this life for the hereafter.”

Blowing yourself up in the middle of a crowd is an act of ethics in the name of Allah, according to Khan. His head covered by a red-and-white checked keffiyeh, the uniform of choice for would-be suicide bombers, the 30-year-old murderer rants against British Muslim leaders. It is “a sin”, he announces, not to declare “jihad” on the west.

It is easy to dismiss Khan as an immature, self-deluded and dangerous imbecile. He saw himself as a hero in a Shakespearean tragedy and killed, and was killed, in playing out his fantasy. But where did Khan acquire his logic and

rhetoric? Did he learn all this simply from his patrons in al-Qaeda?

I think the initial draw, the impulse that drove Khan to the bosom of al-Qaeda, is to be found elsewhere. It lies in the sick culture that glorifies “martyrdom” and projects young suicide bombers as heroes. Al-Qaeda may have capitalised on this culture, but it has been intrinsic in certain segments of Muslim societies for at least two decades. Those who may be attracted to Khan’s message are fascinated not so much with what he says as with the heroic image that he portrays.

The origins of this culture lie in the Iranian revolution. Martyrdom has always been important for Shia Muslims, but the designation of “martyr” has conventionally been reserved for historic figures who fought for ethical goals through ethical means—and never harmed an innocent person. The revolution, as I discovered when I visited Iran immediately after Ayatollah Khomeini came to power, debased the currency of martyrdom. Martyrs were two a penny. Every town in the country, big or small, now has at least one “Martyrs’ Square”.

Then in the Eighties came the Iran-Iraq war. During the eight-year conflict Iran freely used teenage conscripts as cannon fodder. A whole generation of young people was sacrificed on the battlefield. All of them, naturally, became martyrs. And fountains of “blood”—actually coloured water—gushed forth in Martyrs’ Squares throughout Iran. I found the whole spectacle truly obscene.

The Iranian revolutionaries exported the culture of “martyrdom operations” first into Lebanon and then into Palestine. In Palestine there is now a thriving culture of celebrating suicide bombers as “martyrs”, expressed most extensively as poster art. Posters plastered all over Gaza and the West Bank depict suicide bombers in heroic modes.

This culture is embraced by people who ought to know better. The Egyptian scholar Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a frequent visitor to London, finds it difficult to condemn Palestinian suicide bombers. Various prominent members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Britain have condemned suicide bombing elsewhere but have supported its use in Palestine.

Their argument is simple. The sheer helplessness and despair of the Palestinians justify the use of the human body as a weapon. They have little else to fight with. And killing civilians in a bus or a restaurant is also considered OK—the Palestinians are only taking revenge for what is done to them.

I have four things to say to those who, however reluctantly, support suicide bombings in Palestine. One, if suicide killing was a viable weapon of a just war, however conceived, then the Prophet Muhammad himself would have used it. He had ample opportunity to do so. Two, a Muslim community cannot really be in a state of despair—however bad its situation. Indeed, despair in Islam is a cardinal sin. As classical Muslim scholars have repeatedly pointed out, despair signifies rejection of God's mercy and abandonment of hope. The very *raison d'être* of Islam is to provide hope. Three, suicide is also a cardinal sin in Islam. Life is the ultimate gift of God: nothing signifies ingratitude more than taking your own life—whatever the cause. According to Islam, suicide is one thing that God may never forgive. Four, taking one innocent life is, according to the Koran, like murdering all humanity. Indeed, even in a fully fledged state of war, killing innocent women and children is forbidden. You can fight only against those who fight against you on a battlefield.

The great and good scholars who support suicide bombings in Palestine know all this better than I do. Which makes their position even more perverse. They practise double standards:

it is OK there but not here. And they provide legitimacy for the likes of Khan to take an inductive leap—from Palestine to London to everywhere.

Khan, as many Muslim leaders in Britain have rightly pointed out, is an anomaly. But the only way to prevent recurrence of such incongruity is to stand up unambiguously against all suicide bombings everywhere—in Palestine as elsewhere. And to denounce, loudly and clearly, the vile culture of martyrdom. Suicide bombers are not heroes but murderers, pure and simple.

Cultivating the Soil

Emel Magazine

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Charity, they say, begins at home. So let me begin with myself. I am becoming unbearable. May be it is age. We all get a big grumpy as we get old. Receding hairline and those facial wrinkles you just can't hide even with the aid of most advance technology—even though 'I am worth it'—take their toll. And you get more and more hypersensitive.

But the thing that I am most sensitive about is the fact that everyone wants to put me into a box. 'What do you do?' people ask and expect a simple answer like 'I am an accountant, a doctor or a teacher'. I wish I was. To the next inevitable question, 'where are you from?', I always reply, 'Hackney'. And the instant rejoinder, 'But you look, so, so Pakistani!', never fails to disappointment me. What? I can't look like a Pakistani *and* come from Hackney *and* not have a cockney accent?

Muslims too want to put me into a box. 'Just what kind of Muslim are you?', I have been frequently asked. My answer: 'every kind'. But if you can't be labelled as a 'traditionalist', 'modernist', a member of this or that Jamaat, or simply beyond the pale, people get upset. Somewhere I have written that I am several things; yet none of them. I am Pakistani, British,

Muslim; I am a traditionalist, modernist and a postmodernist; I am scholar, writer, journalist, broadcaster, cultural critic, futurist and an intellectual to boot! I theorise, criticise and antagonise; and write about (almost) anything that takes my fancy. I want to be all these things at once—but am seldom seen as more than one thing. People are terrified of multiple identities; and suspicious of individuals who can be more than one thing with relative ease. They are uncomfortable with you if they cannot put you in box. And there is no box on this planet that seems to fit me!

But my plight is hardly unique. Most of us have multiple identities even if we don't realise or appreciate it. We may be British Muslims but underneath we are all distinctively different: Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Arab, Turkish, Malaysian, Indonesian—the list is quite long. And we are eager—and rightly so—to retain our original 'homeland' characteristics: to be true to ourselves and our genealogy. And Pakistanis, as we all know, are not just Pakistanis; they are Panjabis, Sindhis, Pathans, muhajirs and God knows what else. Even as 'Muslims' we are quite different. We could be Deobandi or Bralavi, Akhwan or Jamaat, inclined towards tabligh or active in politics, not to mention traditionalists, modernists, reformists, progressive or radical, and pro-this or anti-that.

If you think that these multiple identities are a recent phenomena, a product of our 'postmodern', 'globalised' world, think again. Muslims have always had multiple identities right from the days of the Prophet's hijra. Just look at the life of some one like al-Baruni, the tenth century polymath, or ibn Battuta, the fourteenth century globe trotter, and you will know what I mean. What is new is that our multiple identities have become problematic. Which brings me back to the box.

It is because we want to put everyone and everything—including, most crucially, Islam itself—in a box that problems arise. We think that our way of doing things is the best way, our way of being is the only way, and our Islam is the only true, narrow and straight path. If things do not fit in our small box then there is something profoundly wrong with them. Hence the perpetual and protracted conflict between all variety of Muslim groups.

I think we Muslims need to rediscover the art of generosity. We need to realise that Islam is much bigger than our own, inevitably blinkered, outlook, and amenable to multiple interpretations. We need to stop thinking about Islam as though it was some sort of desert where only one arid interpretation dominates.

Instead, we should think of Islam as a garden. Gardens, by the very fact that they are gardens, consist of a plethora of different plants. There are all variety of hardy perennials that flower year after year. Annuals and the biennials that have to be planted in season. Plants that provide various colours of foliage, or hedges and borders, or climb up fences, or play architectural roles. There are fruit trees, trees that provide fragrant and colourful flowers and trees that fix the soil and provide shade. There are the grasses so essential for the lawns. And what would a garden be without the proverbial birds and the bees? And those worms and insects that both enrich the soil and require some form of pest control. The thing about a garden is that all this truly monumental variety of life exists in symbiosis: nourishing each other and ensuring the overall survival of the garden. Of course, the garden has to be tended: the weeds have to be cleared, plants have to be pruned, we have to make sure that nothing grows—that is, no single interpretation becomes an overarching, totalitarian ideology—

so much that it ends up suffocating and endangering other plants. No for nothing is the garden the central metaphor of the Islamic paradise!

So, rejoice in manifold interpretations of Islam and in your multiple Selves. Be impossible. Be traditionalist or modern, Deobandi or Bravalvi, Sufi or Salafi—but, above all, be generous. Let others flourish as much as you would like to flourish yourself. Let the numerous interpretations of Islam, the vast variety of Muslim cultures, past, present and the future, exist in symbiosis as though Islam was a global garden.

As for me, I get sadistic pleasure out of terrifying people. And I do not have to do anything to achieve it. I just have to be myself.

Why Are Muslims So Boring?

Emel Magazine

November/December 2004

For the last 25 years, my wife has been doing semi-voluntary work at a special school near where we live. It is a small school for pupils with physical disability or delicate health needs who need a structured and particularly supportive learning environment.

Every year, the school holds a special assembly to celebrate the beginning of Ramadan. And every year, without fail, there is a common question: why are Muslims so boring?

The displays at the Ramadan assembly are copies of the Qur'an, a couple of prayer mats, and an odd poster. There is the standard, solemn recitation of the Qur'an. In contrast, the Dewali assembly is a riot of colour, costume, dance and music. Ditto for Chinese New Year. Not surprisingly, the pupils enjoy themselves thoroughly and, unlike the Ramadan event, look forward to them eagerly.

I sympathise with the children. We Muslims are not very good at expressing joy. We have reduced our religion to a set of rituals which we enact like robots at every occasion. When Muslims want to celebrate something, they go and offer some extra prayers! Indeed, there are some amongst us who have

even outlawed all sources of pleasure and delight. Every time some unfortunate sods in the Muslim world are lumbered with an 'Islamic government', music is declared to be haram, cinemas are closed, dance and theatre are banned, and art and imagination are outlawed. No wonder, the rest of the world finds Muslims somewhat lacking in humanity.

No society, whatever it holds to be true, can survive without culture in all its multiple manifestations. Prayer and rituals may make us pious and righteous, but it is cultural expression that really manifests our full humanity. To say that all we need is prayer and rituals is to diminish ourselves as human beings. As human beings, we have an innate need for cultural nourishment, an innate desire to express our most sublime thoughts, emotions and feelings. Moreover, we also need to be entertained, to feel good about ourselves, to be jolted about our shortcomings, and to communicate joy and contentment. But how we do this when we look down on all forms of cultural expression?

Consider, for example, the absurd suggestion that music is haram. If this were true, than God has ordained that we should ignore and suppress something that He, in His Wisdom, choose to give us in the first place: the beauty of sound. In other words, we are being asked to overlook one of our five vital senses, one-fifth of what makes us human. The suggestion also belies Islamic history whose tributaries and valleys were alive with the sound of music. Indeed, one of the most common musical instruments, the guitar, was invented in Muslim Spain. Not to mention the role played by music in Sufism, one of the major strands of Islamic thought, where music is used routinely for mystical elevation, for getting close to God.

Equally absurd is the suggestion that Islam outlaws images. Hence, cinema and television, painting and sculpture, and other forms of art that rely on images should be banned from Islamic

societies. Islam shuns idolatry. But to suggest Muslims are so stupid that they will start worshipping cinematic or sculpted images is genuinely dumbfounding. Those who insist that Muslims can exist without images in a world awash with images—where images are the dominant and most effective way of communicating messages, portraying people and societies, and displaying power and privilege—are inviting us to commit suicide.

We need to realise that culture is power. Indeed, culture is the most prominent source of power in the contemporary world. Look at the impact of Bollywood, not just in Britain, but all over the world. Note how Hollywood maintains the domination of American culture throughout the world; and note also how Hong Kong action films and Chinese art cinema are transforming Hollywood. Consider the impact of serious and popular European fiction on the globe. Think how art has been used in so many societies to highlight their shortcoming and express dissent. Notice how music and dance bring people together everywhere.

Culture is also a source of resistance. We can only resist the proliferation of the globalised mass culture of McDonald and Coca Cola variety with our own cultural products. But if we don't produce anything ourselves, if we shun all forms of art and architecture, film and fiction, dance and theatre, then we have nothing that could offer resistance. Except perhaps our victimhood in which we already wallow at every opportunity.

Finally, cultural expression can be a way of thanking God. When I listen to Quawwali or sitar, or watch the latest masterpiece of the Iranian cinema, or look at particularly uplifting work of art, or read an insightful novel, I cannot but exclaim: 'Alhumdulillah'. God, in His Infinite Mercy, has endowed us with so many wonderful ways to enlighten and

enrich ourselves. And so many diverse ways to 'see' His signs and feel His presence.

The suppression of cultural expression is a form of ungratefulness. It is the denial of God's grace and cultural bounty. This is why the most obnoxious Muslims you will meet are so diminished, so lacking in appreciation of culture, so constipated with their disgust and disdain of cultural expression.

At the end, we are so boring because we insist on being truncated human beings. And because we are so ungrateful to God.





Part Two
The Circumference of
Representation





The Qur'an: Lost in translation

New Statesman
9th August 2004

Translations of the Qur'an have long been a battleground. Ostensibly, the purpose of translating the most sacred text of Islam is to make it accessible to those without Arabic—Muslims and non-Muslims alike. But English translations of the Qur'an have frequently been used to subvert the text as well as its real message. The most obvious point to be made about any translation of the Qur'an (and the correct spelling is Qur'an, not Koran) is that, strictly speaking, it is not the Qur'an. Literally, "*qur'an*" means "reading", or that which should be read. It is an epic poetic text, meant to be read aloud, whose true import can be communicated only in the original. A translation is not that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men and women to tears and ecstasy. It is only an attempt to give the barest suggestion of the meaning of the Qur'an. This is why both classical and contemporary Muslim scholars and jurists agree that translations of the Qur'an cannot be read during daily prayers. Indeed, some scholars go so far as to argue that the Qur'an cannot be written down in letters other than the original Arabic characters.

It is not just the heightened language and poetic nature of the Qur'an that creates problems for translators. The Qur'an is not a book like any other. It cannot, for example, be compared with the Torah or the Bible, simply because it is not a book of narrative records of ancient peoples—although it does contain some stories of prophets and earlier nations. It is not a “linear” text with a chronological order or a “logical” beginning, middle and end. Its chapters can be very short or very long. It repeats stories in different chapters, often skips from one subject to another, and offers instruction on the same subject in different places. It has a specific lattice structure that connects every word and every verse with every other word and verse by rhythm, rhyme and meaning.

European thinkers have frequently used the special structure of the Qur'an to denigrate the Holy Book. The otherwise sensible Thomas Carlyle found the “Koran” to be “a wearisome confused jumble”, and declared that only “a sense of duty could carry any European through the Koran”. The 18th-century French philo-sopher and historian Constantin Volney described the Qur'an as “a tissue of vague, contradictory declamations, of ridiculous, dangerous precepts”. Given that most European translators have seen the Qur'an in this way, it is not surprising that their translations have left a great deal to be desired. Some have even gone so far as to say that the Qur'an lacks the necessary structure, logic and rationality to be thought of as a book at all.

The first direct translation of the Qur'an into English was by George Sale, in 1734; this, Sale said, provided clear evidence that the Qur'an was the work of several authors. Subsequent translators thought that the only way to make any sense of the Qur'an was to rearrange it into some sort of chronological order. The first translation to do so—by J M Rodwell, rector

of St Ethelburga, London—was published in 1861. A more thorough rearrangement was attempted by Richard Bell, a noted Scottish orientalist, whose translation, published in Edinburgh in four editions between 1937 and 1939, was entitled *The Qur'an, Translated, With a Critical Rearrangement of the Surahs*.

Playing havoc with the structure of the Qur'an, however, was not enough. Translators also used omission, distortion and mistranslation to subvert the message and meaning of the Holy Book. Consider, for example, the most widely available translation in English, by N J Dawood, the first edition of which was published by Penguin in 1956. This translation subverts the original in several ways. Often a single word is mistranslated in a verse to give it totally the opposite meaning. In 2:217, for example, we read: "idolatry is worse than carnage". The word translated as "idolatry" is "*fitna*", which actually means persecution or oppression. Dawood's translation conveys an impression that the Qur'an will put up with carnage but not idolatry. In fact, the Qur'an is making persecution and oppression a crime greater than murder. The extract should read: "oppression is more awesome than killing".

At other times, Dawood uses subtle mistranslation to give an undertow of violence to the language of the Qur'an. This is evident even in his translations of chapter titles. "*Az-Zumar*", which simply means "crowd", is translated as "The Hordes"; "*As-Saff*", which means "the ranks", is translated as "Battle Array". "*Al-Alaq*", which literally means "that which clings", and refers to the embryo as it attaches to the wall of the uterus, is translated as "Clots of Blood". Most Muslim translators simply call the chapter "The Clot". What is intended to convey the idea of birth, Dawood projects as the notion of death. Like previous orientalist translators, he also goes out of his way to suggest that the Qur'an is a sexist text. The Qur'an

demands that humanity serve God; in Dawood's translation, this injunction applies only to men. Spouses become virgins. Conjuring witches appear from nowhere. Thus, readers of Dawood's version—and most other popular translations of the Qur'an—have come away with the impression that the Holy Book sanctions violence or sexual oppression.

For those interested in getting to the heart of the holy text, the good news is that there is now a much more accurate translation available. Muhammad A S Abdel Haleem, professor of Islamic studies at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, has set out not only to translate the text faithfully, but also to make it accessible to ordinary English readers. He achieves this by offering a purely linguistic reading of the Qur'an. He transforms the Holy Book's complex grammar and structure into smooth, contemporary English mercifully free from archaisms, anachronisms and incoherence. The result is both accessible and compelling.

Abdel Haleem makes use of a simple but ingenious device to solve two critical problems. The Qur'an often addresses different parties—for example, the Prophet, or the Community of Believers, or the hostile Meccan tribe of the Quraysh—and switches from one to another in the same verse. Abdel Haleem inserts parentheses to make it clear who is speaking or whom is being addressed. He uses the same device to provide context: for example, when the Qur'an says "those who believed and emigrated", Abdel Haleem adds "[to Medina]". He also includes brief summaries at the beginning of each chapter, as well as judicious footnotes explaining geographical, historical and personal allusions.

Abdel Haleem's emphasis on context—the way that each verse connects with many others, and how the different parts of the Holy Book explain each other—makes this translation

a remarkable achievement. For the first time, readers of the Qur'an in translation are able to see that it is a commentary on the life of the Prophet Muhammad. It spans a period of 23 years; and to understand what is going on in any particular verse, you need to appreciate what is happening in the Prophet's life at the moment the verse was revealed. Moreover, to understand what the Qur'an says about a particular subject in one particular verse, you have to know what the Qur'an says about the same topic in different places.

This is why, as Abdel Haleem points out in the introduction, you cannot lift a single verse out of context and use it to argue a point or to show what the Qur'an has to say about something. To illustrate the point, he refers to the oft-quoted verse "Slay them wherever you find them" (2:191). This was taken out of context by Dawood, Haleem argues, and thus used to justify the claim that the Qur'an sanctions violence against non-Muslims; and, after 9/11, to rationalise the actions of extremists. In fact, the only situation in which the Qur'an sanctions violence is in self-defence. This particular verse has a context: the Muslims, performing pilgrimage in the sacred precinct in Mecca, were under attack and did not know whether they were permitted to retaliate. The verse permits them to fight back on this—but not necessarily any other—occasion.

Yet even a translation as good as this has limitations. Despite its originality, it is very much an orthodox reading of the Qur'an. The explanatory footnotes rely heavily on classical commentaries, particularly that of the late 12th-century scholar and theologian Fakhr al-Din al-Razi. And it does not inspire a sense of poetic beauty. But then, in a translation of a text as rich and complex as the Qur'an, you can't expect to have everything.

Of Monsters and Muslims

The Times

24th July 2004 (Books)

Three men 'wearing turbans' make a guest appearance towards the very end of Michel Houellebecq's *Platform*. The protagonist, Michael, is having an intimate dinner in a Bangkok restaurant with his lover, Valerie. Terrorists burst in and spray the whole restaurant with gun fire. Valerie dies instantly. The death of Valerie is a mere plot device so Houellebecq can elevate his protagonist beyond the prevalent vulgarity of his narrative and present him as a sensitive and humane person. So, why use Muslims to assassinate poor Valerie?

Platform is a novel about sex tourism and globalisation. It has nothing to do with Islam. Houellebecq could easily have used a gangster or even a road accident to mark Valerie's exit; and in the context of the novel these would have made much more sense. Instead, he uses terrorists to make a general point about Islam and Muslims. All terrorists, by definition, are Muslims; and all Muslims are as evil as each other. Quite apart from the fact that men in turbans are more likely to be Sikhs than Muslims, Michael is not sure who the terrorists are. They could be of 'Malay appearance', Palestinians, Arabs,

Pakistani—what’s the difference; they are all the same. But Michael is sure of one thing: he dearest wish, and by extension that of Houellebecq, is to see Islam disappear; and for as many Muslims as possible to be killed!

The original French edition of *Platform* was published two years before 9/11. Post 9/11, the venom directed towards Islam has gone exponential. Muslim terrorists are everywhere. In Gerald Seymour’s *The Unknown Soldier* (2004), the chase is on in the Empty Quarters of Saudi Arabia to find the subject of the title, a bestial Arab who belongs to a family of Al-Qaeda leaders. In Stella Rimington’s *At Risk* (2004) the hunt is on for Muslim terrorists determined to perform nefarious deeds in unsuspecting Britain. In Greed (2003), Chris Ryan’s has a group of ex-SAS types involved in robbing al-Qaeda. Everyone in this book is nasty; but the Arab nasties are a class of their own. Sallum, the Assassin chasing the robbers, is indescribably evil. He likes to cut off the hands of his victims and hang them around their necks. This is ‘the way of the Prophet’, he declares. ‘I should always act within the commandments laid down by the Prophet’!

In American thrillers, Islam is used as short hand for everything that is dangerous, violent and inhuman. American novels also use a predictable series of catchwords through which Muslim culture and Islam are presented in formulaic way. The most common are Jihad and the Mahdi, which grace the titles of over two dozen recent thrillers. In Ryan Inzana’s *Johnny Jihad* (2003), loosely based on American Taliban John Walker Lindh, we discover all people who convert to Islam are basically psychotic. The protagonist, John Sendel, is a teenage sadistic killer, who discovers Islam as a natural outlet for his unbridled violence. In Joel Rosenberg’s *The Last Jihad* (2003),

evil Iraqi terrorists not only destroy the cradle of civilisation, America, but bring the whole world down.

While the plot and characterisation in these novels is predictable, the covers tell us, in most cases, all we really need to know. A sinister looking figure in the shape of a mushroom cloud graces the cover of A J Quinnell's *The Mabdi* (1996). H Gerald Staub's *Jihad* (2001) has a partly silhouetted face of a vile looking Arab. Eric L Rosenman's *Total Jihad* (2003) has Jerusalem being torn asunder. So it goes on

Such representations of Islam and Muslims have a long and established history. Right from its inception, Islam was seen in the Europe as a problem. First, it was only a religious problem. What need was there for a new revelation to a Prophet from the Desert some six hundred years after the crucifixion and resurrection of God's own son? After the fall of Jerusalem, Europe found Islam at its borders and it became a political problem as well. Fiction has been frequently used to highlight the inalienable difference of a problematic Islam that is perceived as a constant and imminent threat to civilisation as we know it.

Throughout the middle Ages, popular literature tackled these problems by describing Islam in all the colours of evil. In the cycle of performance literature known as *chanson de geste*, for example, the Prophet Muhammad was given the Devil's synonym, Mahound. One of the oldest and most frequently performed *chanson* was *The Song of Roland*, which describes Muslims as blood thirsty pagans, whose only virtue was treachery and perverted sexuality.

These images were faithfully reproduced in colonial literature. From Phileas Fogg's journeys around the world in eight days to Tarzan's adventures in the jungle, from Flaubert, Byron, Coleridge, Haggard to Andre Gide and Albert Camus,

white heroes were constantly encountering inferior, violent and inhuman Muslims who failed to register on any respectable measure of civilisation, and over-sexed Muslim women and passive young boys whose only function in life seems to be the object of white man's fantasies. The Algerian society of Camus' *The Stranger* (1939) and Gide's *L'imoraliste*, for example, are anonymous and amorphous and always on the verge of unmitigated violence.

Colonial literature produced three predictable negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. First, Islam is inherently violent and barbaric, as personified by the Prophet Muhammad himself. Second, as a corollary, Muslims themselves are uncultured, sadistic, slothful and sex-crazed. And third, Muslim women, shrouded behind a veil, are totally passive, over-sexed and longing for the white men to come and deflower them.

Even serious fiction is drenched with these stereotypes. The all time classic is, of course, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a painstakingly engineered assault on the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Rushdie's Muhammad is a banal, frantic man obsessed with sex and scimitar. He presents Islam as a pathologically demented creed followed by ignorant, stupid and irrational people. In *The Satanic Verses*, the women who use the veil are portrayed as no better than prostitutes.

In less accomplished hands, the images of Muslims as unreasonable, violent and sexually deviant becomes all pervasive. In John Barth's postmodern novel, *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1992), historic and contemporary Morocco and Baghdad are presented as a land of hashish and sexual deviancy where women are displaying their 'muskmarine vulva' and 'copper-fleeced armpits' at every corner. Muslim women in this novel are nothing but sexual machines: the slave-girl Jayda, for example, is said to be able to 'fuck either human

sex in four principal languages and two dialects', and, 'at certain private exhibitions' has been mounted 'by a very large guard dog, a small but ardent donkey, and a particularly lascivious chimpanzee'. She can tell the future with her ability to read men's penises just as 'other folk read the Koran'. Not surprisingly she has 'the most prescient vagina in Islam'. Barth presents Islam as licentious, violent, oppressive and dark. Islamic law, the reader is told, is not a law with established procedures, concerned with justice and equity, but a kangaroo canon which demands that people should be 'halved with a scimitar' at a slightest excuse. Muslim women are merchandise to be bought and sold at the will of men. The religion revolves around rape and dishonour. So what white men need to do to Islam, its men and its women, is 'what men to do men who do to men as men do to women': bugger them all.

Barth followed the footsteps of Paul Bowles whose fiction, dark and sinister, is directed almost exclusively by a sense of the wretched Otherness of Islam—*The Sheltering Sky* (1949), reissued this summer as a Penguin Classic, being a supreme example. A string of writers followed Bowles to Morocco—Burroughs, Cecil Beaton, Joe Orton, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Stephen Tennant, to mention a just a few—for whom the dark shroud of Islam as experienced in Tangiers exerted a morbid fascination. Needless to say, Islam does not emerge as a rational, humane enterprise in their works.

In popular fiction, the stereotypical images of Islam and Muslims degenerate into undiluted racism. In general, there is a direct correlation between American foreign policy and villains of thrillers. So everyone from OPEC oil ministers, Colonel Gaddafi, Ayatollah Khomeini to Saddam Hussein have been portrayed as pure evil in contemporary thrillers.

In John Randall's *The Jihad Ultimatum* (1989), for example, a group of Iranian terrorists arrive in New York, armed with an atom bomb, generously supplied by Colonel Quaddafi of Libya, with the aim of frightening the US into submission. The leader of the group, Zaid Abu Khan (an amalgam of Arab and Pakistani name), is a bestial, evil killer who wonders throughout the book 'open-mouthed in rapture' uttering pious profanities. His second in command, Khalid Rahman, likes to rape members of his own group to keep them submissive. Rahman is so stupid that he thinks Khan personifies the Prophet Muhammad. The President of Iran is portrayed as a pre-historic weakling. When the US troops take Tehran, he is found sitting in his room, babbling and foaming at the mouth!

In *The Fist of God* (1994), Frederick Forsyth has Saddam Hussein about to launch an atomic bomb into orbit that would, at an appropriate time, re-enter the atmosphere and destroy the whole of United States! No need to wonder why an overwhelming majority of Americans are so convinced that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction!

In many of these thrillers, Muslims people and their countries are unashamedly described in racist terms. The Cairo of Phillip Caputo's *Horn of Africa* (1982), for example, is 'a fly plagued decaying mess', the language of its inhabitants is 'that demeaning invective for which Arabic seems to have been invented', and their creeds is 'the romantic worship of violence'. The Lebanon of Oriana Fallaci's *Inshallah* (1992) is dirty, rat infested, barbaric and intrinsically violent where suicide bombers are lurking in every nook and cranny—and everyone, but everyone, men, women, children and dogs are out to destroy western civilisation!

This is not to say that there are no sympathetic, understanding portraits of Islam in western fiction. Michael Crichton's *Eaters*

of the Dead (1976) is an engaging tenth century thriller, Anthony Burgess' Malayan trilogy (1991) is critical yet compassionate, and in *The House in Morocco* (2004), Rosalind Brackenbury paints an engaging portrait of Morocco.

Muslim writers are also beginning to tackle the issues. In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali paints a more rounded picture of the Bangladeshi Muslims in Britain. Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days* provides a loving, yet complex portrait of an Indian Muslim family. Aamer Hussein's *Turquoise* (2002), a collection of short stories, provides an intimate portrait of Pakistani Muslims struggling to make sense of their complex society. Muslims are not angels, but they are not devil's either—they are human being, warts and all.

But it is the racist portraits of Muslims in both popular and serious fiction that really stick in people's minds. And for Muslims they send out a loud and clear message.

Islam has been, is, and will forever be a violent and demented creed. Muslims are not a human community with all the strengths and weaknesses of a human community. As intrinsically inhuman and vicious people who follow a violent and sexually perverted Prophet, the Muslims have no right to exist.

Hardly surprising that Muslims the world over are so enraged.

Al-Jazeera 1: A voice of reason

New Statesman

9th September 2002

When I first came across al-Jazeera, in the home of an Arab friend, I could scarcely believe that here, on an Arab satellite channel, an Israeli representative was denouncing the Palestinians and presenting the viewpoint of his government. My first reaction was to ask my host if this channel was a member of the Arab States Broadcasting Union. It was not.

Arabs everywhere love al-Jazeera because of its willingness to criticise Arab regimes and present views that dissent from the official lines. It regularly touches on issues considered forbidden by Arab standards: sex, polygamy, corruption, the torture of prisoners, women's rights and Islamic fundamentalism. It treats its viewers with respect and intelligence. This makes it unique and, perhaps, the most valuable institution in the Arab world.

Yet al-Jazeera is not the product of well-thought-out, long-fostered plans, but an accident of history. The network owes its existence to a dispute between the BBC and the Rome-based, Saudi-owned Orbit Radio and Television Service. Eager to transpose the influence of BBC World Service Arabic radio

broadcasts—which attract an estimated 15 million listeners—to television screens, the foolhardy Beeb sought financial backing from the Saudis.

The new TV service would be the largest and most influential media force in the Arab world. But its initial success soon led to disputes over content and editorial independence. The Saudis accused the BBC of violating “orthodox Arab values” and abruptly withdrew their financial support, a mere 20 months after the deal had been signed. Enter the Amir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, who was eager to acquire the trappings of democracy and end censorship in his tiny state. He installed a trusted ally as managing director and hired most of the former BBC staff. Al-Jazeera began broadcasting in November 1996.

Since then, it has generated controversy and ecstasy in about equal measure. As El-Nawawy and Iskandar note, it has both reported on and championed the second Palestinian intifada since its inception in September 2000. It has consistently exposed and criticised Saddam Hussein’s brutalities in Iraq, Hosni Mubarak’s oppressive policies in Egypt and the autocratic transfer of power in Syria. It scored with exclusive footage of US strikes on Afghanistan. And, most notably, it provided Osama Bin Laden with a voice and allowed, for the first time, a declared enemy of the US to address Americans directly.

All this free speech, argue El-Nawawy and Iskandar, is leading to a major transformation in the Middle East. The values of the channel, its championing of democracy, civil liberties, freedom of expression, dissent and criticism, are having a profound influence on those 70 per cent of Arab satellite viewers hooked on al-Jazeera. In the process, the Arab world is being united, reconnected to its central nervous system, as never before.

I suspect this is little more than wishful thinking. The Arab malaise is too deeply rooted for a mere television station to herald a genuine transformation. The chat shows *Opposite Directions* and *More Than One Opinion*, which El-Nawawy and Iskandar use as evidence to support their argument, do not promote moderate views. Rather, they are designed to create controversy through clashes of extremes. Polarisation, as US satellite news channels amply demonstrate, generates voter apathy and inertia, and marginalises moderate voices interested in changing policy.

If this is the result where change is theoretically possible, what effect does the channel have in nations where engaging in the politics of change is theoretically and practically impossible? In truth, people watch al-Jazeera's gladiatorial confrontations of irreconcilables in their homes for entertainment—and then go out to spread conspiracy theories on the street. This is as evident in New York and London as it is in Cairo and Riyadh.

Surprisingly, El-Nawawy and Iskandar fail to mention one show that could have a constructive effect on minds in the Arab world. *Islamic Law and Life* is an interactive programme presented by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a well-known personality in Islamic circles and member of the radical Muslim Brotherhood. Each week, al-Qaradawi concentrates on a single topic within Islamic law, such as: Are Islam and democracy compatible? What is the position of non-Muslims in a Muslim society? And does Islam allow sex-change operations? After his initial deliberations, viewers call in to discuss or pose their questions.

Each week, al-Qaradawi surprises his audience with the humanity and pragmatism of his fatwas. It is all right for women not to wear *hijab* (headscarves), he declared recently, in certain

circumstances, particularly if they live in a secular country. It is essential for Muslims in the west, however, to participate fully in the political processes of the country where they live. Join political parties of all shades, he urged, because you are simply “not permitted to refrain from it”. How refreshingly different this is from the extremist pollution disseminated by the mullahs who grace television screens in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

While al-Jazeera has certainly dented the western monopoly on news and information, it has far to go before it can lead the Arab street towards enlightenment. Moreover, it is not clear whether it will actually survive for very long. Advertising revenues are exceptionally low; and many in Qatar are questioning whether the government should continue to lose roughly \$100m a year to sustain the network.

Nor is the channel as independent as El-Nawawy and Iskandar would have us believe. No Qatari political dissident opposing the monarchy has ever been interviewed on al-Jazeera. On more than a few occasions, the network has reduced its coverage of the intifada following American pressure on the Amir.

There are other concerns, too. How would the television network preserve its independence if, in the aftermath of Saudi Arabia’s refusal, Qatar is used by the US as a primary base to launch its attack on Iraq? More importantly, does anyone else, such as the US and British governments, actually watch al-Jazeera and take note of the views broadcast on it, and factor them in to their policy on Iraq, or on the Middle East in general?

Free speech is a wonderful thing, but it makes a difference only when someone listens, and when those who listen are not politically impotent.

Al-Jazeera 2: Sultans of spin?

New Statesman

22nd October 2001

Knives are out for the Arab world's one and only uncensored television station. The Qatar-based satellite station al-Jazeera is being demonised as the "voice of terrorism". Colin Powell, the United States secretary of state, describes it as "the most vitriolic, irresponsible" TV channel in the world. Condoleezza Rice, the US national security adviser, has asked American broadcasters not to show al-Jazeera's exclusive pictures from Afghanistan. Both George Bush and Tony Blair want it censored.

Apparently, Osama Bin Laden is sending coded messages through the video recordings he sends to al-Jazeera. What really rattles the leaders of the "free world" is that a "cave dweller", as Bush dubbed Bin Laden, can also be a sophisticated manipulator of the media. Bin Laden speaks directly and eloquently to his Arab audiences; in contrast, Blair's own broadcast on al-Jazeera, hesitant and often inarticulate, went down like a lead balloon in the Arab world.

Al-Jazeera was started in 1996 after a BBC Arabic-language satellite channel based in Saudi Arabia was closed down by the Saudis. The staff, all BBC-trained, went off wholesale to

the new station, which had received \$100m from the Emir of Qatar. In programmes such as *The Opposite Direction*, *More Than One Opinion* and *No Frontiers*, al-Jazeera broadcasts the kinds of discussion people in the Arab world used to have only behind closed doors.

It is the only station that provides a voice to Arab opposition parties, openly discusses democracy and human rights, and exposes abuses of power. Only on al-Jazeera can Arabs discover Israel's viewpoints and see Israeli politicians being grilled by hard-nosed professionals. And most of all, it is the only airspace where Islamic alternatives to the status quo, moderate as well as extremist, are critically examined.

Just how profoundly al-Jazeera has changed the Arab media landscape can be seen from the station's long-running battle with the Syrian authorities. On the death of the former president Hafez Assad, al-Jazeera provided wide-ranging coverage of the domestic and regional implications of his departure. In particular, the station aired the views of a number of important Arab commentators, all uniformly condemning the speedy amendment of the constitution to install Assad's son, Bashar.

In a typical incident, an independent member of parliament, Monzir Moussali, raised serious objections to the amendment. Viewers of Syrian national television did not see or hear Moussali's voice. Instead, they heard the Speaker first censuring Moussali and then telling the House that "the sinful part of the respected member's soul led him into error, and he has realised his mistake and repented". But al-Jazeera not only broadcast Moussali's objections, it also carried an extensive interview with him on its nightly news programme, *Today's Harvest*.

Al-Jazeera has had similar battles with the authorities in Libya, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. All four states have repeatedly threatened to withdraw their ambassadors from Qatar.

Recently, President Bashar al-Assad ordered the Syrian media to be “calm, logical and balanced” in their reporting, which must “respect the intelligence of the audience”. Other governments are contemplating relaxing their media laws as the audiences for local, censored channels dwindle to a handful of the party faithful.

Al-Jazeera has set an example for other satellite stations. The London-based al-Mustakillah Television has acquired a huge following, particularly in the Maghreb. Launched in 1999, al-Mustakillah devotes a great deal of its programming to issues of human rights, democracy and freedom of expression. *Shedding a Light on the Culture of Human Rights*, presented by Abdul Hussein Shaban, the president of the Arab Human Rights Organisation in the UK, is one of its most popular programmes.

When I appeared on its weekly 90-minute phone-in programme, *The Diplomat*, this month, the switchboards were jammed with calls from Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. According to *Le Monde*, when *The Diplomat* is on air, city streets across the Maghreb are as deserted as in a state of emergency or under a curfew.

While al-Jazeera is slick and ultra- professional, al-Mustakillah’s production values can only go up. However, both these stations are ushering in slow but definite change to societies in the Middle East.

President Bush should beware: any attempt to close or censor the most popular and free television station in the Arab world would prove a sure recipe for losing the hearts and minds of

Muslims. Indeed, it is this kind of strategic nonsense that confirms how little western leaders know about how the Arab world works.

Wouldn't it be ironic if the first collateral damage from Operation Enduring Freedom turned out to be the stirrings of a free press in the Arab world?

The Blitcon Supremacy

New Statesman

11th December 2006; extracted in the *Guardian* 9 December 2006

The names of contemporary literary giants have become international brands, instantly recognised symbols of literature and global influence. So, when they speak, the world listens. Increasingly, they speak not just through their fiction but also via opinion pages of newspapers, influential magazines, television chat shows and the proliferation of festivals around the world. Novelists are thus no longer just novelists—they are also global pundits offering their opinion on everything from art, life, and politics to civilisation as we know it.

What we are looking for from such literary pundits is clear: insight into the human condition. From the most adventitious conditions for betterment in human history, so far, we have generated terror, war and the proliferation of tensions grounded in mutual fears and hatreds across innumerable fissures. The human condition is unquestionably in need of help. But is it amenable to literary sound bites? Do literary pundits provide us with the best insight into our conundrums and serve as useful guides to the future? Just how are we to assess the punditry of the literary lion?

The British literary landscape is dominated by three literary pundits: Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie and Ian McEwan. All three have considered the central dilemma of our time: terror. Indeed, Amis has issued something of a manifesto on the subject he terms 'horrorism'. They are different writers with different styles but their approach, treatment of issues and opinions define a coherent position. They are the vanguard of British literary neoconservatives, or, if you like, the 'Blitcons'.

Blitcons come with a ready made nostrum for the human condition. They have a project and use their celebrity status to sat and advance a clear, global, political agenda. As literary lions they also have a licence: to be on the front pages of newspaper and covers of influential magazine anytime, anywhere. Their thoughts and opinions thus cover the globe with the speed of light and instantly shape the contours of our imagination.

For all their concern with the plight of a new post 9–11 century, the Blitcons are not offering a radical new outlook on the world. When carefully explored their writing stands within and revitalises tradition. They explore the present newness with antiquarian relish, upholding and representing ideas with deep roots in European consciousness and literature. By no means are they the first to realise fiction can have political clout; but they are first to appreciate the true global power of contemporary fiction, its ability to persuade most of us to focus our attention on a specific direction. As such, they mark a new departure for a new century; and provide a strong indication of things to come.

How conscious Blitcons are of their traditionalism maybe in question. But it is a question that must be posed to them, as one would to any pundit offering his opinion and influencing the course of public debate. Where are you coming from? And

where do you want to take us? The answers to these questions would indicate how they analyse and diagnose the problem and is the surest indicator of the specific remedy they are marketing.

The Blitcon project is based on three one-dimensional conceits. The first conceit is the absolute supremacy of western culture. This conviction is far from novel. For centuries, western fiction has promoted Orientalism, a particular way of representing the 'Orient' as violent and barbaric. Blitcons are heirs to a tradition dating from early modern times when exotic "Tales of the Seraglio" literature became popular with European readers. From William Beckford's oriental romance *The History of Caliph Vathek* (1786) to the works of Gustave Flaubert, Andre Gide and Albert Camus, a large and distinguished body of fiction has argued the superiority of the West and the inferiority of Islam.

Blitcon fiction is Orientalism for the 21st century. Invented as political Islam emerged as a serious global force, it has shifted the emphasis of Orientalism from the supremacy of the West to the supremacy of American ideas of freedom. This shift can be traced back to Alan Bloom, the influential author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, who argued that American culture was the best in this best of all possible worlds and had a special dispensation in knowing what was good. Bloom was a close friend of Saul Bellow. Bellow promoted Bloom's ideas in his fiction; his 1970 novel,

Mr Sammler's Planet, provides a good example. Set in 1960s New York, it is a denunciation of left-leaning counterculture filtered through the character of the aristocratic Mr Sammler, Bellow's alter-ego and a literary thinker in the old "Western civ" mould. The novel is laced with misogyny and disparagement of blacks, Arabs, the proletariat and

multiculturalism—the essential grace notes of Blitconism. By the time Bellow wrote his last novel, *Ravelstein*, in 2000, his views had become more overtly aligned with the political establishment—it includes lightly fictionalised and highly sympathetic portraits of Bloom and Paul Wolfowitz, former Bush administration apparatchik and neoconservative ideologue.

Bellow is the godfather of the Blitcon movement—his influence is clearly discernable in the fiction of Amis, Rushdie and McEwan. That leaders of contemporary fiction should defend the western canon of literature is no surprise. It is how and to what end they marshal their advocacy we should be interested in. Paradoxically, the Blitcons are defending the western canon by returning to the literary convention in which it began. Propagandist polemic in literary format to explain the seminal divide between us and them is where western literature began. The form known as *chanson de geste*, which flourished in the Middle Ages, shares its literary tropes generously with efforts of contemporary Blitcons. From magical realism through tangled nuanced portraits of complex motivation to outright polemic—where the canon began there go the Blitcons. And the source and object of the animus remains the same. Orientalism grew from the dynamic of Crusade literary outpourings. Blitcons return to the source.

Like Bellow, Amis is obsessed with the preservation of the cannon. His 2001 anthology of essays and reviews, *The War Against Cliché*, has rightly been described as “wall-to-wall white men”. Its argument: artistic talent is unequally distributed and not just between “the west and the rest”—even western culture is the preserve of an elite. Bemoaning the influence of Marxism, sociology and philosophy on literature, he repeatedly insists that “there is only one type of writing—that of talent”. But

who are the talented ones? Only those who are part of the western canon, which gets a whole section in the book: writers such as John Updike, Anthony Burgess, Gore Vidal and Vladimir Nabokov. Women (apart from Jane Austen) and non-western writers (apart from the Islam-hating V S Naipaul) need not apply.

If we are to read McEwan's beliefs and intensions through his fiction, western cannon is the very essence of humanity. His latest novel, *Saturday*, is sat on the day when around two million people marched in London to protest the imminent invasion of Iraq. Its neurosurgeon protagonist, Perowne, who is a 'professional reductionist'. He has the best of what western culture has to offer but lacks humanity because he cannot appreciate great literature. In order to cure him, his daughter, Daisy, spoon feeds Flaubert, Tolstoy and other pillars of the cannon. We are supposed to see this as a joke. But the joke evaporates as soon we realise that *Saturday* actually gives the cannon a mystical and mythical dimension: the poetry of Mathew Arnold not only serves as an antidote to brutish violence but literally saves the day at the end of the novel! As a corollary, we are forced to conclude, those who lack the cannon are incapable of being human.

The second Blitcon conceit is that Islam is the greatest threat to any idea of civilization. That's why they despise it. Rushdie's hatred of Islam is obvious in his novels *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses*. References to Islam in *Midnight's Children* can be read as deliberately insulting: even the most basic Islamic term, Allah, linguistically the monotheistic One God, comes in for a manufactured hammering: "Al-Lah has been named after a carved idol in a pagan shrine built round a giant meteorite". In *Shame*, Rushdie describes Islam as a mythology that cannot survive close examination, but in *The*

Satanic Verses it becomes an abomination. The novel imagines a rival life of the Prophet Muhammad, complete with historical details and every Orientalist stereotype imaginable. As the product of the paranoid delusions of a violent, sexually perverted businessman, *The Satanic Verses* suggests, Islam runs contrary to every decent value known to man. The message is reinforced in *Shalimar the Clown*. The protagonist of the novel, Shalimar, turns from a loveable clown and tight-rope walker into a fuming terrorist. But what motivates his fury? The sexual betrayal of his wife and the fanatical zeal of an 'Iron Mullah' who forces people to build mosques and shroud their women in burqas. In Rushdie's world, Muslims just cannot be human and a humane interpretation of Islam is a total impossibility.

The idea that religion and culture of Islam are a threat to civilisation as we know it is also the basis of Amis's "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta", a story first published in the *New Yorker* in April 2006. On his way to the Twin Towers, Muhammad Atta thinks of paradise: "Ah, yes, the virgins: six dozen of them—half a gross. He had read in a news magazine that 'virgins', in the holy book, was a mistranslation from the Aramaic. It should be 'raisins'. He idly wondered whether the quibble might have something to do with 'sultana', which meant (a) a small seedless raisin, and (b) the wife or a concubine of a sultan. Abdul-aziz, Marwan, Ziad, and the others: they would not be best pleased, on their arrival in the Garden, to find a little red packet of Sun-Maid Sultanas (Average Contents 72)."

The suggestion that a ridiculous mistranslation becomes the substance of a sacred text is a superannuated joke. Its purpose is to portray the Qur'an as absurd. So absurd it does not even motivate Atta, the man who has decided to sacrifice his life and murder so many others. But why would he hate America? Is it because of a sense of injustice? That would require some

serious feat of imagination. Instead, Amis suggests Atta became a jihadi simply because it was “the most charismatic idea of his generation”. But this jihadi is motivated solely by the characteristic flaw inculcated by Islam: hatred of women. In particular, a woman he once saw on a plane: a “swinishly luxurious” air hostess. The only thing Atta wants to do to this woman is to “hurt it”. And that’s why our highjacker is constipated! Just as for Rushdie Islam is so flawed that it cannot be interpreted humanely, Amis can’t engage with it on any level other than that of a (bad) joke.

The third Blitcon conceit is that American ideas of freedom and democracy are not only right but rightfully to be imposed on the rest of the world. The extent to which this conviction has become central to their thought can be traced by Salman Rushdie’s surprising progression, over the last 20 years, from political left to centre-right. Rushdie’s fiction is more nuanced than that of Amis or McEwan and he was an outspoken champion of multiculturalism during the 1980s. All that, however, changed when Ayatollah Khomeini, enraged at *The Satanic Verses*, issued a fatwa sentencing him to death in 1989. During that period, Rushdie divided the world into “the darkness of religion” and “the light of secularism”. When he moved to New York during the 1990s, the US became an embodiment of his shining secularism. In his columns for the *New York Times*, collected in *Step Across This Line* (2002), he denounced criticism of America as “appalling rubbish” and “sanctimonious moral relativism”.

The main two-part essay in *Step* argues that the US is a frontier civilisation. But at the beginning of the 21st century, the frontier has become the whole world and America can legitimately lay claim to any part of the globe. The irony that the disparity of power now permits the US to do to the world

what it did to the Native Americans is totally lost. In the defence of American liberties, Rushdie declares, “we must send our shadow warriors against their shadow warriors”.

As the frontier becomes global, the cosmic battle shifts from old evils to new, constructed evils. For Rushdie, the main adversary of a humane, enlightened and benevolent American Empire is the Evil of the Taliban, “the cruellest regime on earth”. He described the invasion of Afghanistan as “the cleansing of those stables by the United States”. Cruel they certainly are, but are we to believe that the Taliban would ever bring down a western civilisation led by the only hyperpower which possesses more firepower than all the Empires of history put together?

McEwan does not see the world in such Manichean terms. He often understates his case and his world, as portrayed in such novels as *Atonement* and *Endless Love*, tends to be unbearably complex. *Saturday* is subtle enough to give a dual warning both against interventionist and isolationist politics. But that doesn't stop McEwan from taking sides: to argue for peace, he declares, is to side with torture. The ipod generation, he suggests, has no idea about genocide and torture, mass graves, and the totalitarian states created by the Islamists. In the final analysis, the ‘religious nazis’ are going to bring the western civilisation crushing down!

Amis is much more direct. For him, pure evil is represented by Hamas and Hizbollah, the representatives of “Islamism”, which he told the Jewish Chronicle, is “vile and poisonous”, “preposterously disgusting”, a cult “so virulent, so irrational and so exterminatory” that it can only be compared to the Third Reich. No attempt is made to understand why our age has produced the likes of Hamas and Hizbollah: their emergence has nothing to do with Israeli or American policies,

or the politics and warfare of the last five decades. The trick is to present them as inexplicable, irrational cults divorced from geopolitics and reality.

This is what Amis does in “The Age of Horrorism”. Complete with quotes from Paul Berman and Bernard Lewis, the Blitcon American ideologues, it suggests that the religiously motivated murderous intent of suicide bombers is unique to Islam—a “maximum malevolence”. The connection, for Amis, is so self-evident it is its own explanation. Global history never needs to be consulted, while America’s infractions are glossed in a sentence: “extraordinary rendition, coercive psychological procedures, enhanced interrogation techniques, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, Haditha, Mahmudiya, two wars, and tens of thousands of dead bodies”. But this is nothing compared to the ideology of “an abattoir within a madhouse”, which is where Amis’ imagination runs wild.

Another exercise is beyond the reach of any of the Blitcons. There are exotic creatures they cannot imagine in their fictions and diatribes: the generality of Muslims, people who believe in something other than the Blitcons’ understanding of Islam, people who live humdrum lives on the streets of Bradford, Karachi or Jakarta. People far removed from the festering imagination of the Blitcon. Amis has never even met an ordinary Muslim in his life.

But I lie. He has met one. In “The Age of Horrorism”, Amis tells us that in Jerusalem he came face to face with the “maximum malevolence” of an Islamist, the gatekeeper at the Dome of the Rock. Amis writes that he wanted to enter the mosque in contravention of some “calendric prohibition”—there are none, actually—which led to a transformation in the gate keeper: “His expression, previously cordial and cold, became a mask; and the mask was saying that killing me, my

wife, and my children was something for which he now had warrant". By the simple observation of facial expression, Amis, was able to divine the entire plot. But might it not be that the humble gatekeeper had never before encountered such an obnoxious, arrogant and ignorant tourist?

Presumably, facial expressions explain Amis's claim that only one thing does not fit in multicultural Britain: Islam. How does this fit with the lives of the doctors, teachers, policemen, politicians, councillors, businessmen, entrepreneurs, bankers, stockbrokers, solicitors, barristers, academics, scientists and even other writers and novelists as well as postmen, bakers and candlestick makers who are British Muslims living ordinary lives and making their contributions to British life? Perhaps they should change their facial expressions, acquire a new set of teeth and smile a bit more in the face of the avalanche of Islamophobia they have to endure.

It is not only Muslims who cannot dissent from Blitcons' grand fictions. In *Saturday*, McEwan describes everything in the most minute, interminable and intrusive detail. Nothing escapes his notice, from meticulous research into the techniques and terminology of brain surgery to the choice of clothes in which to play a Saturday game of squash—except, that is, the political and social motivations that brought a cross-section of British society together to demonstrate against the war in Iraq—the *raison d'être* of his novel. The demonstration is there in the background as a menacing presence.

The real world is not a fiction. The ideology of mass murder has a history and a context in all its perversity and evil. But the wild imaginings of the Blitcons are not an appropriate guide to the eradication of this horror. Turned to this end, the manipulative power of literary imagination is nothing but spin. And such spin is simply hatred answering, mirroring and

matching hatred. Like minds reach across intervening swathes of the world and in their hatred embrace each other. That is all Blitcons actually tell us. But it is hardly enlightening for those of us desperate to find a sustainable path from destruction and slaughter.

Written out of history

New Statesman

8th November 2004

What constitutes a “great idea”? How do we measure the impact of an idea on history? Or, to adopt the blurb from Penguin’s Great Ideas series, how can we say which ideas have “changed the world” and “transformed the way we see ourselves—and each other”? Even the language presents problems. Who are “we”, and what “world” is this? People inhabit different worlds and have different histories. What is regarded as a great idea in one world may matter little in another.

For example, when Copernicus published *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* in 1543, the idea that the earth was at the centre of the universe was a religious dogma in Europe. Not surprisingly, Copernicus transformed the European world-view. However, in the Muslim world, where no one believed that the universe revolved around the earth, his ideas, far from being seen as revolutionary, were simply appreciated as an advance in mathematical analysis.

Similarly, Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of the “super ego”, or Sigmund Freud’s technique of psychoanalysis, were hardly news for the Muslim world. For centuries earlier, Sufi thought had grappled with the notion of the ego, while the scrutiny of

dreams was also well established. Moreover, thinkers in different cultures sometimes draw very different conclusions from the same premise. Descartes declared: “*Cogito ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am), but long before him, Buddha had proved the opposite just as convincingly: “I think, therefore I am not.”

In an age of globalisation in particular, it is important to distinguish truly transformative ideas from mundane, provincial ones. Many of the “great ideas” featured in Penguin’s exceptionally well-designed series are in fact decidedly commonplace. There is nothing great about Jonathan Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* or William Hazlitt’s *On the Pleasure of Hating*. Who wants to read the confused *Meditations* of the fatalist Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius when one can turn to *The Book of Mencius*, with its profound insights into righteousness, love, justice, fairness and the importance of ordinary people? Is the impact of Niccolo Machiavelli’s *The Prince* greater than one of the most influential political texts of Chinese civilisation, *The Analects of Confucius*, which insists that good influence is of greater value in politics than force or Machiavellian machinations? Why bother with Virginia Woolf’s suppressed middle-class angst when, in Sei Shonagon’s *The Pillow Book*, you can explore the complex aesthetic sensibilities of Japanese culture?

Tariq Ali describes the Penguin list as “parochial and philistine”. He is being generous. It is, in fact, a disingenuous attempt to maintain the hegemony of western mediocrity. Starting with Seneca and Aurelius, it moves in a straight line to Freud and George Orwell, suggesting a universality that is both pretentious and deceptive. Great ideas, this list screams, are the sole preserve of western—mostly English—thought; and it offers its linear genealogy as the proof of western superiority.

Very few people now believe, as Thomas Macaulay once wrote, that “a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia”. Certainly, Charles Murray is not one of them. His huge book *Human Accomplishment* places a great deal of emphasis on plurality. For Murray, “we” refers not just to the west, but also to the civilisations of China, India, Japan and Islam. And he has a much more objective way of measuring great ideas and their impact on history.

Murray’s basic tool is statistics. He painstakingly examines 163 historical surveys and encyclopaedias of the arts and sciences and compiles from them a list of the thinkers who have contributed most to achievement in these fields. Only if thinkers are mentioned in at least half of his sources does he regard them as important. A savvy statistician, he employs a number of tricks to avoid bias. For example, he ignores any entry on a thinker from the editor’s own country. What we end up with is a list of 4,002 significant figures in science, philosophy, literature, music and technology; these individuals are then subjected to more statistical analysis and rated for their achievement across cultures and time. To counter the accusation of Eurocentrism, Murray provides two types of list. The first concentrates on science and technology and features major figures in astronomy, biology, mathematics and medicine. The second separately covers Chinese, Japanese and western art; Arabic, Chinese, Indian, Japanese and western literature; and Chinese, Indian and western philosophy.

Not surprisingly, the leading names are western—Newton, Shakespeare and Michelangelo—yet the book does give a strong impression that non-western cultures have played some part in human accomplishment. In astronomy, for example, names such as Ibn Yunus and Ulugh-Beg sit alongside Galileo.

In physics, you find Alhazen as well as Albert Einstein. In philosophy and literature, names such as Shenhui, al-Mutanabbi and Kalidasa are seen as being on a par with Aristotle, Ovid and Goethe.

What Murray has done is extend the standard tool of citation analysis, commonly used in the natural and social sciences, into the arts and literature. There are two problems with such an endeavour. First, you need a decent spread of biographical literature on and from all civilisations and cultures to ensure that everyone is represented fairly. A quick look at Murray's sources reveals most of them to be western encyclopaedias and historical surveys. On Arabic literature, for example, he relies exclusively on orientalist sources. Thus, right from the start, his assessment is filtered through a western lens.

Second, there is the problem of constructed ignorance. Western scholarship ignores non-western achievements that do not fit with its assumption of superiority. In the history of science, for example, the monumental achievement of the 13th-century Muslim astronomer Nasir al-Din al-Tusi has been suppressed. Al-Tusi, who came very close to developing a theory of a heliocentric world, invented a mathematical device without which Copernicus could not have produced his "revolutions". Because western historians have knowingly ignored al-Tusi—he throws a spanner in the works that create the accepted picture of a pure western science—he does not figure in Murray's list.

So citation analysis provides an excellent example of the dictum "garbage in, garbage out". Despite Murray's mammoth effort, *Human Accomplishment* is intrinsically biased in favour of western thinkers. By his own admission, his list is dominated by dead white men. It also contains some bizarre anomalies. If the author is to be believed, Islam has produced neither

philosophy nor art. India, China and Islam have no medicine worthy of the name. Only western civilisation is capable of producing music. And citation analysis leads Murray to certain strange conclusions. Picasso, for example, is rated much higher than Raphael, Leonardo, Titian and Rembrandt. Arnold Schoenberg stands above Johannes Brahms, Frederic Chopin and Giuseppe Verdi.

Murray aims to do much more than simply produce a list of geniuses. He wants to provide a general overview of the historical conditions necessary for the arts and sciences to flourish. And he reaches two general conclusions: human accomplishment is fostered by “a culture in which the most talented people believe that life has a purpose and that the function of life is to fulfil that purpose”, and which “encourages the belief that individuals can act efficaciously as individuals”. So religion and individualism are two essential criteria for producing geniuses. But not any old religion. Murray examines Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam and early Christianity and finds them flawed. Only late Christianity, welded to Protestant ethics, will do. This is hardly news. Macro-historians from Herbert Spencer to Arnold Toynbee have beaten this drum. Nor is it surprising to learn that right-wing American Christians are using Murray’s work to argue for the superiority of their world-view.

So it all comes down to the purity of western thought. As John Hobson points out in his ground-breaking work *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation*, the west believes it has an “autonomous genealogy”: “a pristine west made it of its own accord as a result of its innate or superior virtues”. History is simply a tale of western virtue triumphing over the bad guys of the east. Yet the truth is otherwise. Far from being responsible for its own development, the west is a product of

eastern accomplishment. As Hobson shows, the east was largely responsible for creating and sustaining a global economy from the year 500 onwards. It also contributed to the rise of the west by pioneering many advanced “resource portfolios” of ideas, institutions and technologies.

Each major turning point in Europe’s development, he argues, was driven by assimilating eastern ideas and innovations. Printing was invented by Pi Sheng, who first set up a printing press in China in roughly 1040; the first movable metal-type press was invented in Korea in 1403, 50 years before Gutenberg made his. Liberal humanism and institutions of higher learning were imported from the Muslim world. The industrial revolution began not in Britain, but in China. And so it continues.

The west shaped its identity, Hobson demonstrates convincingly, by appropriating eastern achievements and then writing them out of history. History looks quite different when seen from China, Japan, India or Islam. In relative historical terms, Hobson concludes, the west is not all that significant. This is why the myth of western purity has to be preserved—and why we are bombarded with canons and with lists of great ideas, human accomplishment and classics, which all place the west at the centre of the known universe.

Hobson’s main accomplishment is to show that cultures do not exist, nor have they ever existed, in isolation. Cultures are shaped in relation to each other; and great ideas often emerge through synthesis and tension. Western culture is not pure, but has been impregnated and “contaminated” by the rest of the world.

The great books of western—or any—civilisation are a product of interactions with different cultures, and are full of contradictions. Truly great ideas and books that cross

boundaries and appeal to different and diverse cultures emphasise their own incoherence, advertise their incompleteness. They tell their readers that they are all about “our” world and “their” worlds; about “me”, “you” and “we”; about “us” and “them”.

The eastern canon: 20 books that everyone should read:

Farid ud-Din Attar *The Conference of the Birds*

Al-Baruni *India*

Confucius *The Analects*

Mohandas Gandhi *An Autobiography*

Abu Hamid al-Ghazali *Deliverance >From Error*

Muhammad Iqbal *The Secrets of the Self*

Kakuichi *The Tale of the Heike*

Kalidasa *The Recognition of Sakuntala*

Ibn Khaldun *An Introduction to History*

Lao Tzu *The Dao De Jing*

The Lotus Sutra

The Mahabharata

Mencius *The Book of Mencius*

Murasaki Shikibu *The Tale of Genji*

Jalaluddin Rumi *The Masnavi*

Ibn Rushd *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*

Sei Shonagon *The Pillow Book*

The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night

The Upanishads

Yoshida Kenko *Essays in Idleness*

Great Ideas series Various authors Penguin, £3.99 each *Human Accomplishment: the pursuit of excellence in the arts and sciences (800BC–1950)* Charles Murray HarperCollins US, 688pp, £17.99 *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* John M Hobson Cambridge University Press, 376pp, £17.99 (paperback)

The forgotten inheritance

New Statesman

7th April 2003

I listened to an interview with Pat Robertson, the American televangelist and founder of the Christian Coalition. The Prophet Muhammad, he said, “was an absolute wide-eyed fanatic. He was a robber and a brigand. And to say that these terrorists distort Islam . . . they’re carrying out Islam.”

Like most Muslims, I have become immune to such abuse. But I expected the interviewer, Sean Hannity, to challenge the good Reverend. Instead, he inquired: “Do you think it’s the majority of Muslims?” Robertson replied by calling Islam “a monumental scam”. This prompted Hannity to conclude: “It’s inevitable then that the world is going to be in conflict with Islam for many decades to come.”

The world, that is the western world, has been at war with Islam since its inception. The views of Robertson and Hannity have had common currency for more than 1,400 years. Western hatred of Islam, as both Richard Fletcher and Andrew Wheatcroft show in their new books, dates to the beginning of Islam. As early as 638, Wheatcroft notes, the Christian Patriarch of Jerusalem publicly called the Muslim Caliph’s presence in the city “an abomination”. In the early eighth

century, John of Damascus, an Arab monk, characterised Muslims as fanatical infidels. This image remains with us today. The protracted era, over 250 years, of the Crusades constructed the image of the violent “Saracen”, whose very existence was a threat to Christendom. With the emergence of the Ottoman empire, the Ottomans became, to use Wheatcroft’s words, “the *fons et origo* of all evil”. Colonialism sealed these images in concrete.

The cold war provided a brief respite, when the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union took over the role of conventional demon in western consciousness. Things returned to historic form with the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the “clash of civilisations” thesis first emerged and became the orthodoxy in Washington. After the events of 11 September 2001, the idea that Muslims were wild-eyed fanatics, determined on destroying civilisation as we know it, acquired the status of a self-evident truth.

Yet there is nothing inevitable in this pathological hatred of Islam. It was deliberately constructed and learnt over many centuries. Both Fletcher and Wheatcroft chart the centuries of scholarship, literature, art and popular culture during which the west nursed and nourished representations of Muslims as the embodiment of all that is evil and depraved, licentious and barbaric, ignorant and stupid, unclean and inferior, monstrous and ugly. In other words, western societies have been programmed to despise and hate Muslims. This is why, Wheatcroft suggests, these images are unquestioningly recycled in the western press and television, Hollywood films and the works of so-called experts on the Middle East. One only needs a trigger—such as a riot, or the Rushdie affair, or an act of terrorism—for this programme to reload and recycle the historic images of hatred.

There is a different way of looking at Muslims. Islam and the west, as Fletcher argues convincingly, have a distinguished history of collaboration and mutual respect. We traded with each other, shared the benefits of such technologies as papermaking, navigation, mining and surveying, and had enthralling debates on theology and philosophy. Both Fletcher and Wheatcroft hold up Islamic Spain, where Christians, Muslims and Jews lived in peaceful harmony for almost 800 years, as a model example. Much of this history, he asserts, has been overlooked in favour of the history of mutual rivalry and hatred.

So why do Muslims hate the west? How do we explain, for example, Pakistani textbooks employed in religious seminaries stating that western “infidels are cowards by nature”? Are the Crusades, colonialism and orientalism by themselves enough to explain such jingoism and hostility?

Both Fletcher and Wheatcroft look to Muslim theology for a more satisfying explanation. Fletcher claims that Islam has a single text, the Koran, in “its fixed and final form”, which provides little opportunity for divergence of opinion. He locates Muslim hatred of Christianity in the monolithic nature of the Koran. But not even the most literalist and narrow-minded interpretation of the Koran can justify such hatred. Any sacred text, fixed or otherwise, is open to a variety of interpretations; and the Koran has been interpreted in numerous ways—not just literally but also metaphorically and mystically, legally, and even in modernist and postmodern terms. Moreover, the Koran specifically sanctions respect for Christianity and Judaism as sister religions to Islam.

The explanation for the current anti-western paranoia in relation to Muslim societies is to be found not so much in Islamic theology as in a siege mentality. Muslims throughout

the world feel that their dignity and survival are under attack from the west. Muslim populations react not only to double standards, but are also concerned at how the west maintains unrepresentative and repressive regimes in power and then blames Muslims for not sharing the basic values of democracy. In the 19th century, just as parliamentary reform acts were inching Britain towards democracy, Egypt attempted to introduce comparable representative institutions, only to have them abolished by British colonial power. The despots today in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt are there largely because of the US.

There is another way of looking at the relationship between Islam and the west. Since both Fletcher and Wheatcroft are silent on this alternative history, let me spell it out. The west's hatred of Islam stems from, more than anything else, the denial of its true lineage. The western world as we understand it is a child of Islam. Without Islam, the west—however we conceive it today—would not exist. And, without the west, Islam is incomplete and cannot survive the future.

Fletcher tells us that Muslims spent the early centuries of Islam translating the Greek heritage. Europeans spent the 11th and 12th centuries translating the Arabic translations into Latin. But Muslims did more than simply preserve the Greek heritage and pass it on to its rightful owners, the west. They added and expanded it in numerous ways. Few of the great names of the European Middle Ages could read Greek; what they read was not Plato, but Latin commentaries on Plato by al-Farabi; not Aristotle, but the Latin translations of the commentaries of ibn Sina (Avicenna) on Aristotle; not the Neoplatonists, but the works of the Brethren of Purity, the tenth- and 11th-century philosophers of Basra and other Neoplatonist philosophers of the Muslim world. It is hardly surprising the Renaissance started

in the independent city states of Italy, cities whose long history of trading contact with Muslim lands provided familiarity with its sophistication and ready access to Arabic texts.

From the perspective of Islam, there is a double irony here. Not only did Islam introduce classical Greek civilisation to Europe, but also, without Islam, Europe would have been unable to manufacture its Greek roots. We Muslims have a right to be upset: not just that our intellectual endeavours were appropriated by Europe, but that the source was wrongly attributed.

For western civilisation is happy to trace its origins to Greece, a slave society owned and operated by and for narrow elites with a highly developed sense of their own exclusivity. The founding fathers of American democracy were obsessed with making references to ancient Greece in their debates. Their articulation of modern individual rights for a narrow white elite is riddled with appeals not only to a mythic Greece, but to Greek writers few of them had read.

There is more. Islam trained Europe in scholastic and philosophic method, and donated the model of its institutional forum of learning: the university. Europe acquired wholesale the organisation, structure and the very terminology of the Muslim education system. Islam showed Europe the distinction between medicine and magic, drilled it in making surgical instruments and told it how to establish and run hospitals. It gave Europe what it values most: liberal humanism. European liberal humanism has its origins in the *adab*—literally, the etiquette of being a human—movement of classical Islam. It is the suppression of this history that generates the most distrust of the west among Muslims.

To transcend our mutual hatred, we need to be true to our histories. We need to see Islam and the west as partner projects;

one cannot be conceived without the other. The west must jettison the fabricated history of its origins, embrace its Islamic roots, and acknowledge that Islam has played a key role in shaping its most cherished humanistic values. Muslims, on the other hand, need to appreciate that some of the best achievements of the west are founded on the humanistic values of Islam. Our mutual salvation lies in our shared, enlightened history and common humanity.

A New Year Resolution

Emel Magazine

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This year it is going to be different. I know I say that every year—but this year I am really going to stick to my New Year resolution. No, I will not be giving up smoking what my children describe as my ‘obnoxious cigars’. No, I will not foreswear my insatiable desire for puddings and Ambala sweets, even though the bulge around my waist has reached unsightly proportions. And no, will not be exercising. Watching cricket from my comfortable sofa is exercise enough, thank you! I am going to resolve on something I can actually fulfil. I will refuse to answer stupid questions.

Muslims, it seems to me, are fair game for daft questions. Do I go around with ‘I am a Muslim, ask me a dim question’ written on my forehead? It certainly feels as if I do. On Radio 4’s *Moral Maze* the other day, presenter Michael Buerk asked me ‘Is Islam compatible with democracy?’ This earnest inquiry followed two previous speakers, an admirable spokesperson from Islamic Commission of Human Rights and a right-wing pundit, both of whom had already made it clear that there was nothing inimical between Islam and democracy. ‘Why not?’ I

shot back. Buerk got shirty. As is my custom, I proceeded to annoy him further.

So, why did Buerk feel compelled to repeat the question again and again? Because both the assumption on which the question is based and the expected form of answer is that Islam, being so inalienably Other, can never be democratic. Therefore, no matter how many times one says 'there is nothing in Islam that outlaws democracy', the answer just does not register.

Many of the questions asked of Muslims are based on inherently unsavoury assumptions. They are of the 'have you stopped beating your wife?' variety. As every first year student of philosophy knows, this question has no real answer. If you answer 'No', you are a swine even if what you actually mean is that you have never beaten your wife. If you answer 'Yes', you are still a swine: because the answer suggests you used to beat her. The question frames the answer. And to answer the question is to accept the framework, question and all as well as the demonisation that goes with it.

Immediately after the horrific bombing of the British Consulate in Istanbul, Dennis MacShane gave British Muslims two choices. Frankly, I have never heard of Mr MacShane; but he is, I am reliably informed, the Europe Minister. In a speech to his Rotherham constituency, Mr MacShane declared British Muslims 'have to make a choice' between 'the democratic rule of law, like the British or American way' or 'the way of the terrorists'. The proposition is, of course, totally stupid and could only come from the mind of someone in need of urgent psychiatric help.

The underlying assumption in this 'choice' is that British Muslims actually support terrorism. To clearly and unequivocally say 'we want to follow the democratic way of Britain and America' actually amounts to an admission that

up to now we have been following ‘the way of the terrorist’. And, if we answer ‘we do not want to follow the British and American way’—because of its increasing injustices and exploitation around the world that are actually proliferating terrorism—we are doomed! Furthermore, the ‘choice’ does not permit us to suggest that the way America and Britain have behaved since the declaration of ‘war on terrorism’ is anything but ‘democratic’. Nor does it offer the possibility of declaring we prefer another model of democracy, something other than the American way where you need \$20 million to get a seat in the Senate or the Congress. The ‘choice’ actually enframes British Muslims as an inferior people incapable of distinguishing between terrorism and peaceful political engagement.

Well, I have decided not to put up with such monumental—not to say racist—stupidity. This year I am making a choice of my own. I am choosing democracy! And I am asking the Muslim community to galvanise itself for forthcoming elections. We have a substantial electoral presence in certain constituencies where we can swing the vote and make a difference. Witness the by-election in Brent East where the Muslim vote played an important part in overturning a 13,047 Labour majority and electing Sarah Teather, the Liberal candidate. It is time to do the same in other constituencies to ensure folks like Mr MacShane, the increasingly paranoid Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, and other members of this authoritarian Labour government, loose their seats.

The only way we are going to make a difference, and thereby require people to address the Muslim community with sensible questions, is to tackle them where it really hurts—at the ballot box. And, next time you are asked a stupid question, do what I do. Expose the sods as imbeciles and laugh at their foolishness.





Part Three
The Circle of Terror





The Fallout From 9/11

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The sheer magnitude of the terrorist attack on America has forced many Muslims to take a more critical look at themselves. Beyond reacting to the news there is a growing feeling that it is time to address those few knotty questions we have conveniently swept under the carpet. As a Muslim woman asked me in a Radio programme, why have we repeatedly turned a blind eye to the evil within our own societies? As Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, asked in an article written from prison, how ‘in the 21st century, the Muslim world could have produced a bin Ladin?’ Or, as many supporters of Anwar, whose only crime is standing up to the corruption and despotism of Mahathir Muhammad, Malaysia’s incumbent Prime Minister for the last two decades, are asking: why is the Muslim world so crammed with despots, theocrats, autocrats and dictators? Or, to put it another way: Why have Muslim societies failed so spectacularly to come to terms with modernity?

These are not new questions. I have raised them many times; for example, in my books *‘The Future of Muslim Civilisation’* (1979) and *‘Islamic Futures: The Shape of Ideas to Come’* (1985).

Other writers and scholars have asked the same questions. But after September 11, they have acquired a new poignancy and a much broader currency.

Conventionally, Muslims have blamed the ills of their own societies on outsiders. ‘The Americans’, ‘The West’, the CIA, ‘the Indians’, ‘the Zionists’, hatching yet another conspiracy; it is the anyone but us syndrome. Conspiracy theories are always based on half-truths; and there are some whole and half-truths in these assertions. On the whole, Muslims are quick to point out the double standards of America, both in its domestic rhetoric and foreign policy. They point to its support for despotic regimes, its partiality towards the Israelis, and a long series of covert operations that have undermined democratic movements in the Muslim world. The popular perception that Americans are ‘against us’ is amplified by a host of Hollywood movies depicting Islam and terrorism as synonymous. The recently released film, *Rules of Engagement*, for example, depicts Muslims as mindless terrorists whose only function is life is to kill ‘the infidel’ Americans, their allies, including civilians, and plunder their possessions. This message is repeated again and again in a string of films such as *True Lies*, *Executive Action* and *The Siege*—going right back to the sixties and *Khartoum*. But all this finger pointing does not address the internal malaise of Muslim societies. Now that the distinction between the fictional and real terrorists has all but dissolved, the anomalies and double standards of Muslim states themselves have come to fore with a vengeance.

For example, Muslims are proud to state that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the West. Evangelical Muslims, from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, run about happily spreading their constricted interpretations of Islam. But Christian missionaries in Muslim countries are another matter. They have to be

banned, outlawed or imprisoned. All those burning the effigies of President Bush and Prime Minister Blair in Pakistan will fight to be in the front of the queues for American and British visas. The psychotic young men, members of such extremist organisations as Al-Muhajiroun and 'Supporters of Shariah', shouting fascist obscenities outside the American Embassy in London, are enjoying the fruits of western freedom of expression. Their declared aim is to establish 'Islamic states'. But in any self-proclaimed Islamic state, they would literary get the chop. Indeed, as recent Islamic history shows, when these individuals get into power, their first action is to denounce democracy and then proceed to ruthlessly silence all dissent.

The Muslim voices of dissent, such as mine, have also suffered from self-censorship. We have tended to ignore the internal strife in Muslim societies for two main reasons. In a world where Muslims and Islam are fair game in open season for prejudice and discrimination, our main task, it is said, is to defend the integrity of Islam. How can one turn one's gaze to internal evil, when the West insists on talking of 'Crusades', lynch law reminiscent of Western movies, and all Muslims are demonised with equal fervour? When the only hyperpower, the US purports to be the dispenser of 'Infinite Justice,' a name we reserve exclusively for God alone? When innocent civilians turn out to be victims of American bombs and missiles with mundane regularity?

The other reason concerns the state of the *ummah*, the global Muslim community. We have to highlight, the argument goes, the despair and suffering of the Muslim people, the indignity and dehumanisation of monstrous poverty in an icncreasingly affluent world, and their plight as refugees escaping the horror of war torn societies. The fanatics who loudly proclaim and ardently wield the banner of Islam are just another horrendous

dimension of these problems. Anyway, they are a minority and we should pay attention to the needs of the majority.

These arguments have gripped us in an intractable stranglehold for a long time. We, the concerned Muslims with heavy burdens to bear, have made a profession of defending the usually indefensible. The ideal of unity and solidarity of the *ummah*, and the rhetoric of the West, has constrained us all, made apologists of us all.

So, all good and concerned Muslims are implicated in the unchecked rise of fanaticism in Muslim societies. We have given free reign to fascism within our midst, and failed to denounce the arrogance of fanatics who distort the most sacred concepts of our faith. We have been silent as they self proclaim themselves martyrs, mangling beyond recognition the most sacred meaning of what it is to be a Muslim. The *ummah* is our identity and Islam is all: this is the vantage point from which we judge the shortcomings of the rest of the world, never ourselves. This is our fatal flaw, our lack of humility—to be less careful and nice about judging ourselves by the standards set by Islam while we are quick as a flash to denounce anything or anyone that is not of the *ummah*.

But the events of September 11th have potentially freed concerned Muslims everywhere from any further obligation to this impossible contortion of misapplied conscience. It is a major shift. The speed and outright condemnation of the terrorist atrocity by Muslims throughout the world, including some of the greatest contemporary Muslim theologians and scholars is one indication of this. As the language of unequivocal condemnation used by such community organisations as Muslim Council of Britain and Islamic Centre in Lisbon, to denounced the fanatics, is another. The devotion with which so many Muslims, young and old alike, in Europe

and America, are organising meetings and conferences to discuss ways and means to unleash the best intensions, the essential values of Islam, from the rhetoric of daft fatwas and jihad, hatred and insularity, is yet another.

But Muslims have to go much further and take their position at the helm of the fight against terrorism. The main reason for this is the inescapable fact that the terrorists are amongst us, the Muslim communities of the world. For sure, they are the malignant antithesis of us, fashioned out of circumstances all too painfully familiar. Nevertheless, they are part of our body politick. And, it is our duty, more than anyone else, to stand up against them.

Consider, for example, the state of terrorism in Pakistan. Sectarian and terrorist violence has become endemic in Pakistan. In particular, two fanatical groups have spread terror throughout the country. Sepa-e-Shaba ('Soldiers of the Companion of the Prophet'), a group of Sunni puritans, has declared war on the Shia community of Pakistan. Shia killings are avenged by Sepa-e-Muhammad ('Soldiers of Muhammad'), a cluster of Shia militants. A favourite tactic of both groups is to roar up on a motorbike, unslung a kalashnikov and simply machine gun a mosque full of worshipers.

Then there is the warfare between the Deobandis and Brelevis, two obscurantist schools of thought that have been fighting each other for almost a century. Deobandis owe their allegiance to the academy established in Deoband, in the Uttar Pradesh (UP) province of India, in 1860s under the influence of the great Sufi reformer Shah Waliullah. The Brelevis emerged in the 1920's when their academy was established in Berali, also in UP; they are influenced by Indian, including Hindu, mysticism. The Deobandis accuse the Brelevis of *bida*, or introducing innovation in religion. The Brelevis simply regard

Deobandis as *kaffirs*—outside the circumference of Islam. Recently, the long-standing theological quarrel between the two groups has exploded into violence.

The Taliban have added to Pakistan's woes. A large segment of the Afghan population, running away from the oppression of the regime, is now living in Pakistan. This includes not just the two million refugees in squalid camps near Peshawar, northern Pakistan, but also millions of Afghans roaming the streets of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad looking for work. They have brought their ancient gun culture with them. The entire country is awash with weapons. There are an estimated one million guns in private hands. One can hire a gun to do a dirty deed just as one would rent a video. The Afghans have also brought the Taliban brand of narrow-minded, bigoted Islam, based on medieval Puritanism and hatred, with them.

The Taliban (the word means 'students') are a product of Madrassa Haqqania, and other seminaries in northern Pakistan. These seminaries supply the Taliban with their senior figures as well as the Kashmiri militants with their foot soldiers. It is also the backbone of Lashkar-e-Taiba (Army of Students), the fiercely militant outfit fighting against India in Kashmir. Many students take their 'jihad' to the streets of Pakistan.

All of these groups claim to be fighting to establish an 'Islamic state' in Pakistan. In every sense of the word, they have turned religion into a pathology. And while they are a minority, constituting less than six percent of the population, they entire nation has become their hostage. An exasperated President Musharraf recently told a gathering of Mullahs: 'What is so Islamic about our country when Sunnis and Shias, and now Deobandis and Brelevis, are killing each other so wantonly, when we are so devoid of a sense of brotherhood and tolerance, when there is no justice for the poor and destitute,

when our women are relegated to second-class citizenship? Who can blame the international community for calling us an irresponsible or failed or terrorist state when our religious leaders are quick to hurl outlandish threats? Who will invest in our country if it is constantly rocked by senseless religious strife and violence? Since no nation is an island, how can Pakistan survive in hostility to the global community?

The fight against terrorism is thus more than simply about bin Ladin and the Taliban. It is a struggle to save Pakistan itself. And, in a broader sense, it is a struggle to discover a more rational and humane understanding of what it means to be a Muslim in the 21st century.

President Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in October 1998, has so far handled the crisis well. First, he tried to consult as many segments of Pakistani society he possibly could, while he tried to articulate the revulsion felt by the vast majority of Pakistanis at the terror attacks on America. Second, he is positioning Pakistan where the vast majority want it to be standing: foursquare for justice, leading the way to a new Muslim social compact purged of depraved violence, brutality, hatred, intolerance and the sheer madness that parades itself in self proclaimed 'Islamic' garb. Third, he has neutralised, at least for the time being, the threat from the Pakistani army itself by sacking key Taliban supporters.

Beyond that, the fate of Musharraf depends on the length of the war. If attacks against Afghanistan continue for several weeks, or the ground assault gets bogged down, or the pictures of wounded and dead civilians begin to saturate our television screens, the hand of the extremists in the north will be strengthened. Nevertheless, Musharraf can take comfort from the fact that the businessmen, the professional classes, and rank and file Pakistanis disgusted by perpetual, mindless violence, are behind him.

In tackling the extremists, Musharraf would be greatly helped by the establishment of a broad ranging, representative government in Afghanistan. Pakistan is not going to accept a government led by the Northern Alliance, who are just as nefarious and notorious as the Taliban, under any circumstances. But a coalition of all the diverse groups, under a technocrat or even the ex-king Zahir Shah, would satisfy Pakistan and could produce a viable future for Afghanistan.

But a stable government in Afghanistan would not mean an end to fanatics and terrorists unless the madrassas in northern Pakistan, including the Deobandi

Madrassa Haqqania, are put out of commission. These madrassas are like the mother monster of Alien movies: their only function is to nurture and nourish a whole generation of young boys with the rhetoric of Otherness. The students of these madrassas are indoctrinated into hating all non-fundamentalist Muslims. For the sake of his own survival, as well as for the good of Pakistan, Musharraf should shut down these Madrassahs.

Pakistan was the first state in the modern world to be created 'for' and 'in the name of Islam'. Today, it has to be saved from those who in the name of Islam commit mass murder, spread mayhem and menace, and are hell bent on dragging Pakistan into the barbarity of a modern construct of medieval times. To get from where we are to anywhere better we need a real, and more broadly defined international coalition. A coalition in which the West makes space and demonstrates informed understanding of the substance of internal diversity and debate in the Muslim World so that moderate opinion can make itself heard and is recognised to be distinct and different from fanatic, militant fundamentalism. A healthier future for Pakistan and a humane prospect for Islam now depends on the silent majority's loud declaration: never again!

God Save America!

Resurgence
May/June 2003

Millions of people around the world hate America. The terrorist campaign against America in general, and the 9/11 atrocities in particular, are a product of this hatred.

The dreadful pictures of innocent Iraqis being tortured in Abu Ghraib prison have fuelled this hatred. But it is not just the Iraqis, or the Afghans, or the terrorists who hate America. Resentment against America is at an all time high in South Asia, Latin America and South Korea. In many parts of Europe, particularly in France and Germany, revulsion against America is now widespread. In Canada, America's closest neighbour, a junior minister captured the public's sentiment and sympathy, when she described President Bush as 'a moron'. In a world where everything seems to be relative and changing, hatred of America appears to be a universal sentiment and the only constant.

But why is America engendering such strong feelings? Are these feelings rational? I believe that these feelings against America are not simply a product of its foreign policy. Or the way it rides rough shot over the rest of the world. A stronger and deeper motivation for American hatred comes from the

fact that America has appropriated the traditional arguments for God. Whereas these arguments were conventionally used to justify the existence of God, people around the world now see them as providing American validation for American behaviour. There are four such arguments.

In the first, the cosmological argument for God, derived originally from Aristotle, God is described as the cause of everything. Instead of God, America has now become the cause of everything. The presence of the US is felt in every corner of the globe. Its foreign policies affect us all. Nothing seems to move without America's consent. Only America can resolve the conflict between Palestine and Israel; only America's intervention can lead to some sort of resolution between India and Pakistan over Kashmir; and only America can decide whether 'the world' should or should not attack Iraq. Without American ratification the Kyoto Treaty on carbon dioxide emission is not worth the paper it is written on. If American economy sneezes, the rest of the world catches an economic cold.

What this means is that America is no longer a conventional superpower. It is the first hyperpower in history: its military might is now greater than all the Empires of history put together; its reach is not only global, but it has firm control of all global institutions, such as the IMF and WTO; its culture has penetrated every minute segment of the globe. America has not only colonised the present, like previous empires—such as the Roman, British and Spanish empires—but, in a very real sense, the US has also colonised the future. The cosmological dominance of America extends to total consumption of all space and time—so America is now engaged in rewriting history, changing the very stuff of life, our genetic structure, shifting weather patterns, colonizing outer space,

indeed, transforming evolution itself, beyond recognition. Given its cosmological status, it is not surprising that its arrogance has a cosmological dimension too. Recall that the 'war against terrorism' was originally dubbed 'Operation Infinite Mercy'! Quite simply, the rest of the world resents the fact that at the global level America has become both the first cause and the sustaining cause of most things.

The second argument is ontological. The ontological argument for God's existence, attributed to St Anselm, goes something like this: God is the most perfect being, it is more perfect to exist than not exist, therefore, God exists. Ontological arguments infer that something exists because certain concepts are related in certain ways. Good and evil are related as opposite. So if evil exists there must also be good. America relates to the world through such ontological logic: because 'terrorists' are evil, America is good and virtuous. The 'Axis of Evil' out there implicitly positions US as the 'Axis of Good'. But this is not simply a binary opposition: the ontological element, the nature of American being, makes America *only* Good and virtuous. It is a small step then to assume that you are chosen both by God and History. How often have we heard American leaders proclaim that God is with them; or that History has called on America to act?

The ontological goodness of America is a cornerstone of its founding myths. America is a society of immigrants: what immigrants know is that the country they left behind, for economic, social or political reason, is a bad place. They escaped an unworthy place to start afresh and create a new society in a barren frontier, 'the last best hope of mankind' in Lincoln's famous phrase, and succeeded. They succeeded because right, virtue, God and History was on their side. The Founding Fathers incorporated the new state's right to

possession and appropriation of 'virgin land', its claims to righteousness, its self-image of total innocence, and its use of violence as a redemptive act of justice through which American civilisation is secured and advanced, as integral parts of the very idea of America. So America seems incapable of seeing anything bad in itself, its foreign policy, the behaviour of its corporations or its lifestyle. Even the recent scandals at Enron and Worldcam have not dented this self-belief. And despite the indignity involved in the last Presidential elections, American democracy is still seen as the pinnacle of human achievement.

Ontologically good folks need constant reaffirmation of their goodness. This is why America always needs a demon Other; indeed, it is incomplete without its constructed Other. The current demon is, of course, Islam. But America has constantly generated evil Others to justify its military interventions. If it is not the 'Evil Empire' of the Soviet Union, then it 'the Communists' in Korea or Vietnam, or the 'left wing revolutionaries' in Latin America. If it is not Iran or Iraq, then it is 'the axis of evil'. And, evil is always 'out there'; never 'in here' in the US.

The third argument is existential. Like God, America exists for, in and by itself. All global life must, willingly or unwillingly, pay total homage to the de facto existence of the US. For America, nothing matters except its own interests; the interests, needs, concerns, and desires of all nations, all people, indeed the planet itself, must be subservient to the interests of the US and the comfort and consumption of American lifestyle. This is why Americans are happy to consume most of the resources of the world, insist on exceptionally cheap petrol, and expect to be provided with an endless variety and diversity of cheap, processed food, because for them only their existence

matters. If Kyoto Treaty imposes too many constraints on US business, it must be ditched. If nuclear non-proliferation treaty interferes with the US strategic defence initiative, it must be ignored. If an international court might take action against US citizens, it must be subverted. If US farmers need subsidies than who cares about WTO rules and regulations that the US itself imposed on the world!

This hubris is demonstrated by the fact that while the rest of the world was attending the 2002 Earth Summit in Johannesburg, President George Bush was on holiday, playing golf, in Taxes. Yet, even from there he was able to veto one of the least contentious issues in the Summit: that safe drinking water and sanitation should be available to poor people of the world by 2015. The rest of the world, including all the European states, realised that dirty water and poor sanitation are the biggest killers in the world and were all too willing to sign the agreement. But America's belligerence led to the collapse of the agreement. Similarly, the rest of the world is willing to allow the poor countries to develop and use much need generic medicines for such disease as HIV/AIDS, cancer and cholera. But America, unwilling to save billions of life and reduced the profits of its pharmaceutical companies, vetoed the proposal at the WTO negotiations.

Thus, America sees itself as the world and the world as America. The domain of God is now the domain of America. Hardly surprising then that most of the God fearing people of this planet resent this claim.

The fourth and final argument is definitional. In religious thought, the power to define what is good and what is bad, what is virtue and what is not, lies solely in the hands of God. But in the contemporary world, America has become the defining power. America now defines what is 'free market',

'international law', 'human rights' and 'freedom of press'; and who is a 'fundamentalist', 'terrorist', or simply 'evil'. The rest of the world, including Europe, must accept these definitions and follow the American lead.

Moreover, the definitions depend on context and change when expediency demands. So the Shariah (the so-called 'Islamic law') is barbaric and inhuman in the Sudan which has a clear anti-American policy but humane and acceptable in Saudi Arabia which is fanatically pro-American. Not all 'terrorists' are terrorists: American ones, like Timothy McVeigh the Atlanta bomber, can be tried in American courts; but non-American terrorists have to be tried in specially established military courts. Similarly, the struggle of the Muslims in East Turkestan against China is a 'Human Rights issue', but the struggle of Chechen Muslims against Russia has nothing to do with human rights. Muslims happen to be in majority in both Chechnya and East Trukestan and are fighting for independence in both places. The much-vaunted universal precept of 'freedom of press' gets a similar treatment. When it comes to other countries, it is defined as a universal imperative. When freedom of the press ends up as criticism of America, it becomes a dangerous value. So the US went out of its way to stop Qatar-based Al-Jazeera, the only independent satellite television station in the Arab World, broadcasting from Afghanistan. It placed enormous pressure on Qatar to 'rein in' Al-Jazeera and eventually bombed its office in Kabul.

The definitional power of America has two other vital components. America is the story teller to the world: through Hollywood films and television shows, America presents a specific self-definition of itself as well as represents the rest of the world to the rest of the world. For the most part the stories it tells are either based on its own experiences, or, if

appropriated from other cultures, are given a specific American context. So the rest of the world also sees itself in American films and television as America sees them or the way it wants to project them. Thus, the foreigner in global American media, news as well as popular entertainment, is always a pastiche of hackneyed stereotypes because that's the way America thinks about the rest of the world. But, the stereotypical representation is not limited to Hollywood or the media; it is also an integral part of the knowledge industry. Other peoples and cultures are thus constantly pigeonholed—in newspapers, magazines, television, films, textbooks, learned journals and 'expert opinion'—and their identity and humanity are regularly compromised. This power to define others in terms of American perceptions and interests through representation often leads to the demonisation of entire groups of people. Consider, how all Arabs are seen as 'fundamentalists', all those who question the control of science by American corporations are projected as anti-science, or those who question American foreign policy are dismissed as 'morally bankrupt' or 'nihilist' or 'idiots'

What all this means is that America now behaves as though it was God. It has a God-like presence in the world, which is awash with American junk food and cultural junk, from McDonald's to Hollywood to pop music. The rest of the world, particularly the non-West, is getting physically and culturally impoverished daily. The places to be different—to be other than America—are shrinking rapidly. And double standards rule the day. No wonder hatred for America is spreading like a forest fire around the globe.

The real question is why abundant evidence fails to stir American public consciousness. Why despite all the evidence Americans refuse to question their lifestyle and refuse to accept

responsibility for how their corporations behave and their government operates in their name. Why does criticism fails to dent American policy, shape its public discussion, let alone prompt change. Why have, for example, the pictures from Abu Ghraib prison failed to stir the conscious of American public?

This is the real enigma Americans need to ponder—for their own, and everyone else's sake.

Occidentalism: Is That Why Hate Us?

New Statesman

4th October 2004

Pity the Orientals! The poor sods aren't even allowed to hate the west without being told how to conjure up their hatred, what its most important elements are, and against what it should be directed. Without western guidance, people with little history and even less intellectual capacity would have no idea why they hate—and should hate—the west, let alone understand the complex, pluralistic nature of western societies and culture. Such guidance, argue Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, has been provided by a long line of western luminaries: Wagner, Voltaire, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, the Romantics and the socialists, Hitler, the Russian Orthodox Church. And so occidentalism—“the dehumanising picture of the west painted by its enemies”—has its origins in the west itself. Radical jihadis, as well as anti-globalisation protesters, are really acting out a perverted western fantasy.

Buruma and Margalit acquired this insight after a visit to the grave of Karl Marx. At Highgate Cemetery, the intrepid professors learned that the rather well-off and secular German Jews were disliked by their poor, narrow-minded eastern counterparts. Eastern Jews saw German Jews as cold, arrogant,

materialist and mechanical. In a blinding flash of light, Buruma and Margalit realised that all the countless people out there who hate the west see it in similar terms, as “a machine-like society without a soul”. Eureka! Occidentalism was born.

It is easy to dismiss *Occidentalism* as a rather feeble attempt to develop a counterpart to orientalism, but that would be a mistake. We should all be concerned at the spread of anti-western feeling in the non-west. Anti-American and anti-western sentiments are not going to evaporate. Occidentalism seems poised to become the dominant discourse of the future. This means that attempts to theorise, understand and do something about it will become more common—and more necessary.

Herein lies the importance of *Occidentalism*. Yet Buruma and Margalit demand serious engagement not for what they actually say—which is slight, superficial and seriously flawed—but for what they do not say, and for what they imply. They do not, for example, tell us anything about the nature of the “west” that they want to defend. Where is it? What does it consist of? How does it differ from the “Europe” of the Enlightenment? And why should we actually want to defend it? Because it is intrinsically superior? Because its values are universal? Or because it is the dominant power and its definitions must be accepted by all peoples and cultures? It is implied that occidentalism is the antithesis of orientalism. But can we really equate the two things? The history of orientalism dates back a thousand years. How old is occidentalism? What is the relationship between these two structures of perceiving the Other?

These are essential questions; thus, Buruma and Margalit’s failure to address them suggests there is a serious problem with their project. And it is simply this: most western thinking

about non-western societies is totally bankrupt. The west has almost no ability to relate to and understand the non-west on its own terms. The best it can do is to engage in a form of navel-gazing: western man looks at himself, sees a superior being and, on this basis, tries to rationalise why others despise him.

Occidentalism is an excellent example of this. Subtitled “a short history of anti-westernism”, it actually provides a history of dissenting and fascist thought within the west. Non-western villains such as Islamist ideologues, Japanese nationalists and the Khmer Rouge are allowed no more than a walk-on role. And so, in the best orientalist tradition, the non-west is depicted as having no history and nothing to say. The authors even borrow their justification for writing the book from orientalism. Their aim is to defend the west from its enemies by seeking to understand them. Wasn’t this the purpose of orientalism, and the reason why classical anthropology emerged as a discipline? For Buruma and Margalit, occidentalism performs much the same function as orientalism: it is a means to control, contain and manage.

Buruma and Margalit tell us that the “venomous brew” of occidentalism consists of four main elements: hostility to the city; revulsion for the material life; abhorrence of the western mind; and hatred of the infidel. Occidentalists, we learn, do not actually hate the city per se, only “cities given to commerce and pleasure instead of religious worship”. As cities are ambiguous places that people—including fanatics—love and hate in equal measure, however, this is about as banal a rationale as it is possible to produce. Fanatics may be fanatics, but they are not stupid enough to think that it is possible for cities to be devoid of commerce and entertainment. Saint Augustine—and there is no non-western counterpart of this

arch-western fanatic—permitted commerce and righteous enjoyment in his “City of God”. Even Mecca is not without its pleasures.

In non-western civilisations, cities have always been a focus for ritual and symbolism; part of their purpose was to provide connections to communal and national history. Perhaps the reason many non-western people dislike cities is that these connections have been severed. Their cities, along with their history and cultural property, their traditional architecture and environmentally sound lifestyles, have been destroyed by the imposition of western urban planning. Fifty years of “development planning policies” have uprooted and destroyed communities, turned self-sufficient neighbourhoods into slums, and concentrated wealth into ever fewer hands.

Buruma and Margalit tell us that it was Voltaire who taught occidentalists that “commerce is tied to both freedom and imperialism”, but west-hating fanatics hardly need Voltaire to inform them of this. Having lived through colonialism, the non-west has experienced the connections between commerce and imperialism for itself. And it knows at first hand that most “free markets” are free only for a select few.

In any case, perhaps it is not hatred of material life that is the problem, but the kind of material life the west is imposing on the non-west. For decades, the west has engaged in “cultural terrorism”—described in the 1960s and 1970s as “Cocacolonisation” and, more recently, as “McDonaldisation”. In 1962, the Iranian philosopher Jalal Al-e Ahmad described the onslaught of western culture—films, television, fashion, pop music, architecture, consumer goods—as *Occidentosis: a plague from the west*. Everything we cherish, he suggested, is being made irrelevant; soon, our culture will be found only in

cemeteries and we will be reduced to “gatekeepers of graveyards”.

Occidentalists, Buruma and Margalit suggest, “believe that the west is guilty of the sin of rationalism, of being arrogant enough to think that reason is the faculty that enables humans to know everything there is to know”. But why would non-westerners need to learn about rationality from someone called Ivan Kireyevsky, of whom few people have even heard, when Muslims can learn about it from the Mutazalites, the classical rationalist philosophers who believed that reason itself was enough to know and develop everything, including morality and knowledge of God? The truth is almost exactly the opposite of what Buruma and Margalit claim: occidentalists do not despise “instrumental reason”; rather, they use it to justify their actions. Instrumental reason is their last resort. Moreover, their dislike of “democratic mediocrity” comes not from western supporters of Stalin, Mao and Hitler, but from Socrates and Plato. Occidentalists may not read Voltaire, but they certainly know their Greek philosophy from original sources.

It turns out that what these city-hating, anti-materialist, anti-rational occidentalists dislike most is “the selfish greed of capitalism, the moral emptiness of liberalism, the shallowness of American culture”. Well, if these are their only gripes, they have my support—along with that of millions within the west. Does that make us occidentalists? And does “the idea of the west” really come down to this?

Occidentalism, as constructed by Buruma and Margalit, cannot be equated with orientalism. Orientalism is a discourse—a coherent structure of knowledge through which the west has understood and represented the “Orient”, and through which the west produces self-confirming accounts of the non-west. Occidentalism is nothing more than a collection

of a few pet hates, most of which, as the authors themselves admit, are entirely justified, given the excesses of the west.

Moreover, orientalism is a discourse of power, with the strength of a dominant, globalised civilisation behind it. Occidentalism is the recourse of the powerless. Orientalism can be seen in films and television shows, read in novels and travel literature, heard on the radio and perused in newspapers and magazines throughout the western world. Occidentalism is limited to the fringe. Orientalism has a long history, dating back to the inception of Islam itself. Occidentalism, if Buruma and Margalit are to be believed, is a relatively recent phenomenon in the non-west, emerging only after the Second World War. Above all, orientalism is deeply embodied in western knowledge and disciplinary structure; it shaped disciplines such as anthropology and development studies, international relations and area studies, history and geography. There is not a single discipline in the world in which occidentalism plays an integral part.

The problem with *Occidentalism* is not just the limitation of Buruma and Margalit's scholarship: it is the problem of the west itself. The very tools the west uses to study the non-west—concepts, ideas, disciplines, methodologies—are deeply implicated in the exploitation of non-western cultures. They act as smokescreens that make the obvious invisible. That is why Buruma and Margalit can claim that occidentalists “favour crowds rather than the individual”, or that they have “organic minds”, without appearing to realise that these are classic orientalist assertions. They can state that “the direct enemy of the occidentalist, particularly revolutionary Islamists, is not always the west itself but Mr Science”—without acknowledging that by far the majority of prominent Islamists are scientists and technologists, as were the 9/11 bombers.

There is occidentalism out there. To understand its true nature, however, we need to understand non-western societies on their own terms, within their own histories and with their own concerns and concepts. Is this really too much to ask?

Inside the Mind of Bin Laden

New Statesman

9th January 2006

Muslims urgently need a better class of heroes. Why has the Islamic world not produced a Gandhi or a Mandela?

My New Year's resolution is to get inside the mind of Osama Bin Laden. Fortunately, I have an extraordinary friend who is ready to help. Bruce Lawrence is a jovial chap in the mould of Rhett Butler. He speaks fruity Urdu with a mid-American accent. He is also one of the world's leading experts on Islam, with a string of influential books to his name. He was the first to predict, in *Defenders of God* (first published in 1989), the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism as a global phenomenon. It is something we need to take seriously, I recall him saying, rather than dismiss as a mere anachronism. That was long before the world had heard of Bin Laden.

Now Bruce has produced a hefty tome on Bin Laden himself. *Messages to the World* (Verso, £10.99) painstakingly collects the interviews, speeches, threats, declarations and video messages of the planet's most wanted man.

And the first thing Bin Laden tells us about himself is that he is an extraordinary, sane and calculating person. Relic he may be. Stupid he is not.

One thing we cannot appreciate from reading Bin Laden in English is the magnetic pull of his eloquence. When I first heard the “Mujahid”, as he was then called, sitting just a few metres away from him at a conference in Peshawar, Pakistan, I was bowled over. Speaking in classical Arabic, generously enriched with quotations from classic texts and punctuated with poetry, Bin Laden hypnotised the gathering. When I recovered from the trance, what I remembered most was the overwhelming logic of his analysis.

On that occasion, he was speaking about the “Soviet Union’s despicable terrorism against children and innocents in Afghanistan”. Now he applies the same logic to the US—a tyrannical power that “has committed acts that are extremely unjust, hideous and criminal, whether directly or indirectly through its support for Israeli occupation” of Palestine. The US is incapable of listening and does not understand the language of peace; it understands only the language of power. The US terror can be fought only with terror. “If Ariel Sharon is a man of peace, then we are also men of peace.”

Bin Laden is a master at exposing America’s hypocrisy and double standards. In a letter posted on the internet, he addresses the US directly: “The freedom and democracy that you call for is for yourselves and for the white race only.” You develop and stockpile weapons of mass destruction yourself and prohibit others from doing so—“except to those you give consent, such as Israel”. You are the last ones to respect the resolutions and policies of international law. “You shamelessly ask for immunity for your own war criminals” while violating the human rights of “whom you censure”. And so on.

Most Muslims would not hesitate for a second, as would not, I imagine, most fair-minded non-Muslims, to accept these charges against the US. Neither would I. But agreement does

not necessarily mean support. To ensure the support of his audience, Bin Laden always balances his rhetoric against the US and the west with what is happening on the ground to Muslims. “How many innocent villages have been destroyed,” he asks in his 2001 Christmas Day message, “how many millions forced out into the freezing cold, those poor and innocent men, women and children who are now taking shelter in refugee camps in Pakistan while America launches a vicious campaign based on mere suspicion?”

All of this reveals a man who is genuinely troubled by the injustices that the west in general and the US in particular have visited on the developing world, and by what he sees as the interminable suffering of Muslim people. But when it comes to the question of what is to be done, Bin Laden’s sophistication evaporates. His desert and tribal roots are exposed. For him, power is simply the power of the gun. He has no notion of other sources of power, such as knowledge or culture. In the wastelands of Arabia, tribal resistance is always based on violence.

In the end, Bin Laden emerges, despite all his rhetoric, not as a son of Islam but the progeny of Arab tribalism. He sees everything in clannish terms. For him Islam is a simple monolithic creed, devoid of ethics or complexity, but totally infused with obnoxious Arab customs and practices. He takes this infertile creed a step further and reduces it to an ideology of vengeance. This instrumentalism is also the source of his unbridled anti-Semitism.

All this makes Bin Laden more and not less important, argues Bruce Lawrence, which is why it is vital for us to understand him and know where he is coming from. He still hypnotises and commands attention from a wide range of the Muslim population—from those easily impressed by classical Arabic,

those who find his logic impeccable, those incensed by American brutalities, those who see Muslims as perpetual victims. Worse, his legend is sure to continue after his death.

His existence raises an important question for Muslims: why has the Islamic world not produced a Mahatma Gandhi or a Nelson Mandela? As Bruce notes, the most urgent need for Muslims is a better class of heroes—heroes who can “find a better way not only to liberate their homelands but also to forge a brighter future for those liberated”.

The Cosmic 'War on Terror'

New Statesman
1st March 2004

Our ancestors were mad. They thought war was a jolly good idea. It was a natural, divinely appointed order—a wholesome way of bringing out the best in people, preventing economic stagnation and promoting science and innovation. War was the ideal instrument for spreading the gospel and carrying forward the torch of civilisation; no wonder philosophers and poets extolled its virtues. According to Hegel, it is only through war that societies can escape “the corruption of perpetual peace”. Machiavelli advised princes to have no other aim “but war and its organisation and discipline”. It was not just the prospect of victory that attracted such figures but the activity itself, because it was thought that, by mobilising men’s deepest resources for love, compassion, courage and self-sacrifice, wars brought out the best in individuals and communities.

Now that we are grown up, we think otherwise. Our horror of war, argues Anthony Stevens, is a 20th-century phenomenon. The bloodiest century in human history has taught us that wars also release our inherent capacities for hatred and xenophobia, brutality and sadism, destruction and

revenge. Today, war and terrorism present the most formidable threat to the continued existence of our civilisation and our planet. War has become a “cosmic dilemma”.

So how do we eliminate war? Conventional thinking does not offer much help. Theoreticians of war can be divided roughly into two groups: those who regard humanity as essentially rational but prone to aggression, cruelty and warfare; and those who consider man to be basically irrational, aggressive and prone to violence. Either way, belligerence is seen as intrinsic to human nature. Peace-loving, pacifist guys like me always finish last.

Stevens suggests we look elsewhere—to evolutionary psychology. Ostensibly, evolutionary psychology confirms the madness of our forefathers. It sees war as an “archetypal phenomenon”. In other words, belligerence is a behavioural trait found in all human communities, irrespective of race, culture or historical epoch. Evolution, it transpires, has hard-wired us to be aggressive.

However, while evolution has equipped us with an innate capacity and insatiable appetite for war, it has also furnished us with an intrinsic capability for peace. Throughout history, cycles of war have been followed by peace. War has been with us since the beginning of time, but so has peace. This is the simple, but brilliant, twist in Stevens’s argument: peace is as much an evolutionary impulse as war and is therefore also an archetypal phenomenon. We are hard-wired for peace as much as for killing.

Women in particular have evolutionary impulses for creating and sustaining life. Thus, the best way to temper the aggression of a man is to provide him with the love of a good woman. The further removed a man is from adoring women, the more belligerent he becomes. But you need to choose your women

carefully. Avoid the likes of Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Margaret Thatcher, all of whom somehow bypassed evolution and happily marched us off to war.

Wars become state policies in societies where community has broken down, inequalities are rampant and love has become an elusive commodity. In such societies, eliminating the causes of war is not a viable solution. Men have an unfortunate knack of finding causes for waging war—as the Bush administration demonstrated so well in launching its campaign in Iraq. Archetypes are not the product of blind instincts; they are often rationalised as necessities.

Walter Laqueur provides a good example of this. For him, war is a one-way street. Muslims, who are divinely prone to violence and hatred, have launched a war against innocent and lovable America. Terrorists, who have been supported and given sanctuary by Europe in general and Britain in particular, are psychologically disturbed people, hell-bent on destroying the beacon of western civilisation. Today, it's the jihadis and al-Qaeda. Tomorrow, it will be India and central Asia. After that, it could be the “international brigade”, a hotchpotch of the extreme right wing, the new left and the anti-globalisation mob. It is a matter of necessity for the US to defend itself and take the war to the terrorists.

Stevens would suggest that Laqueur, with his obnoxious moral superiority, is no less mad than our forefathers. The “war on terror” is a war that the US cannot win. It is a metaphysical war—like the wars on crime, drugs or poverty. One cannot bomb, defeat and annihilate an abstract noun. Proper wars end in victory when the enemy state surrenders. Terrorists do not constitute a state; they do not surrender. They withdraw to fight another day. Combating terrorism requires us to contain

our archetypal aggression and realise that the only way to defeat terrorism, as the history of warfare shows, is through political process.

Terrorism, Philip Heymann tells us, is almost always the tactic of the voiceless and powerless. Actions designed to restrain terrorism, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, actually increase resentment and make terrorists even more determined. Assassinating terrorist leaders may weaken their organisations temporarily, but by creating martyrs, it will also help recruitment. Every belligerent act by the US fuels terrorism. The experience of Israel carries lessons for us all. The use of the word “war” in our dealings with terrorism actually undermines our efforts, Heymann suggests.

But are we, the inhabitants of industrial democracies, so morally superior to terrorists, who kill innocent people? In the west, the tragedy of 11 September 2001 has been portrayed primarily in terms of the dark forces of Islamic global terrorism attacking the shining symbols of US capitalism. And yet, on that same fateful day, 23,000 people died of hunger. Each was as individual as the 3,000 who died in the twin towers. Why, asks Ted Honderich, is it that we find this reminder somehow tasteless?

The two categories of death do not exist for us in the same way. Deaths by famine and hunger—which often come about directly as a consequence of western (and particularly American) economic and foreign policies—are invisible to us. But deaths caused by terrorists are all too visible. We see inequalities as entrenched, but violence as a matter of choice. A suicide bomber can walk away. Moreover, inequalities are not seen as things we can change; we see them as the natural state of order. Terrorism, on the other hand, represents a state of disorder. Inequalities are a product of the law, but violence

is illegal. Yet both categories of deaths exist in the same real way. To treat only one as real is morally perverted.

To have any hope of understanding terrorism, Honderich argues, we must adopt a broader perspective. We have to look beyond the capacity of America to tap into its infinite reservoirs of innocence and moral superiority—demonstrated so well by Laqueur. Those who find terrorism repulsive need to ask serious questions.

Honderich, regarded as one of the foremost moral philosophers of the left, defines terrorism as political violence that injures, violates or destroys people or things, with a political and social intention. He begins his forensic analysis by citing some painful statistics. People born in Sierra Leone, for example, have an average life expectancy of 38 years. People born in the US and UK can expect to live to the age of 77. On average, therefore, people in Sierra Leone die before what is regarded as early middle age in Britain and America. Is it too much to say, Honderich asks, that this is also a product of terrorism?

The pain and the painful shortness of the lives of people in certain developing countries relate directly to our having the means to live in a very different way—a means acquired through political violence and monstrous injustice. Our insistence on upholding a lifestyle that condemns others to wretchedness is also an act of terrorism. Indeed, the distinction we make between wretchedness and terrorism is based solely on convenience. Wretchedness is something for other people; so we can safely ignore it. Terrorism is something that is happening to us; so we are quick to condemn it. We are always ready to pass moral judgement on terrorists but never on ourselves, or on our governments that perpetuate the wretchedness.

There is also the question of state terrorism. The United States, Honderich argues, practises state terrorism through its military interventions and through the diffuse and impersonal global economic forces that it controls. America has played a leading role in eliminating any distinction between combatants and non-combatants by legitimising the deliberate massacre of civilians. The nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the sustained aggression of the Vietnam war, illustrate how the US uses its terror-inducing weapons of destruction. More recently, it has developed weapons designed specifically to target civilians.

In *A War on Terror*, Paul Rogers cites the example of “area impact munitions” (AIMs) such as cluster bombs. Intended to cause destruction over the greatest area, these are used against “soft” targets such as trucks, camps and people. A typical cluster bomb is actually a canister that dispenses roughly 150 “bomblets”, each of which detonates and spreads up to 2,000 high-velocity fragments of shrapnel, the whole bomb shredding anything or anyone within a couple of acres. Use of AIMs, especially from high altitude, is virtually certain to cause civilian casualties. How is this different from suicide bombers targeting innocent civilians? Terrorists and soldiers alike, Stevens suggests, are able to perpetrate horrendous acts of carnage only by dissociating their minds from the consequences of their actions.

Rogers sees American culture as one in which market fundamentalism and military power have combined to form a single world-view. The US functions as a war economy. Much of its scientific research is geared to “defence” and the development of new and terrifying weapons. The “war on terror” has provided a much-needed boost to the US economy, after the downturn in the stock market that followed the end

of the dotcom boom. American interventions have as their aim the economic exploitation of targeted nations. By allowing more than 200 state-owned companies in Iraq to be privatised and sold to American corporations, the US has ensured that it will take huge sums of money out of that country, leaving Iraqis with little control over their infrastructure.

And the American public feasts continually on the spectacle of war. During the first Gulf war, Stevens points out, 100,000 people died on one side and 213 on the other. Such odds enable the great democratic public in the west to experience war on its television screens from the comfort of its homes without fear of retaliation. Never before had so many people been able to indulge in the ancient satisfaction of warfare at so little personal cost.

Except that now the terrorists are retaliating. Ted Honderich argues this response is legitimate both legally and morally. We must distinguish between violence aimed at securing the distribution of food which will make it possible for children to live, and state terrorism aimed at defending the aggression and lifestyles of a particular group. Terrorism can be directed towards undeniably good ends: the ANC campaign against apartheid in South Africa was an example. In a world where most of humanity is voiceless, it is sometimes justifiable to respond to state terrorism with violence. Those who engage in “terrorism for humanity” are right to respond to the charge that they do wrong with the retort that we do wrong as well. We may abhor terrorism, but it is more important that we change our ways than that the terrorists change theirs, because we do greater damage.

All of which leaves pacifists like me as marginalised as ever. Clearly, evolution and morality have no use for conscientious objectors.

Terrorism for Humanity: inquiries in political philosophy
Ted Honderich *Pluto*, 232pp, £15.99 ISBN 0745321348
The Roots of War and Terror Anthony Stevens *Continuum*, 264pp,
£12.99
A War on Terror: Afghanistan and after Paul Rogers
Pluto, 210pp, £12.99
No End to War: terrorism in the 21st
century Walter Laqueur *Continuum*, 278pp, £16.99
Terrorism,
Freedom and Security: a common-sense strategy for a
democratic society Philip B Heymann *MIT Press*, 210pp,
£16.95.

Beyond Jihad and Crusade

The Independent

5 August 2005

Christians and Muslims have been at loggerheads for centuries. It's time, says Bill Musk, to leave the crusader mentality behind. Both faiths have a common ancestor in Abraham and believe in one God even if that God is perceived in different ways. Surely, the two cousins should be able to kiss and make up; and express some delight in this relationship.

Historically, Christians and Muslims may be cousins, but there has always been a problem with the kissing bit. Muslims can marry their cousins, and often do, as well as kiss them. Christians, on the other hand, find the idea of kissing, let alone marrying, their cousins, rather inappropriate. These different attitudes towards cousins have theological counterparts.

Western aversion to having a healthy relationship with one's cousins is reflected in Christianity's attitude towards Islam. A recent letter in that foggy organ of Middle England, *The Spectator*, sums it all up: 'Islam specifically denies that Jesus Christ is the Son of God...so any true Christian must believe that Islam is profoundly wrong and that its growth in this country, or indeed anywhere in the world, is a bad thing'.

Muslims, on the other hand, have a somewhat different approach to their cousins in faith. Islam contains within itself recognition of Christianity and its legitimacy: Muslims accept the virgin birth of Jesus and regard him as a true Prophet, and they accept the Bible as one of the Books of God. Hence Muslims have never had any real problem kissing their Christian cousins.

Mask wants Christianity to return this ecumenical courtesy. The Christian view of Muslims as simply 'rejecting' the Jesus of the Bible, he argues, has to be abandoned.

Conventionally, Christians have seen Muhammad was the founder of Islam. By definition, he established a post-Christian religion. Islam is therefore open to the charge of being deliberately anti-Christian due to the Qur'an's alleged critique and rejection of several key doctrines of Christian belief—Trinity, the incarnation, the crucifixion, and humankind's need for redemption. As such, Christians see Islam as a backward step from a revelation of the grace of God to a religion of law and prophecy.

To get out of this impasse, Mask suggests, Christians have to readjust their focus. They must differentiate between Islam as an organised religion and *Islam* delineated by the Qur'an. The concept of *Islam* in the Qur'an is one of personal, active faith expressed through obedience to God. In this sense, *Islam* existed long before the arrival of Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad himself is a prophet in the Biblical sense and should be recognised as part of the same tradition. Western, Christian understanding of Islam has no basis in the Qur'an or in Muhammad's self-awareness. Both the Qur'an and Muhammad's concern is with *Islam* rather than the law-based religion that has come to be known as Islam. It is this realisation that will move the two sides closer to each other.

Conventional Islam, as institutionalised and organised religion, is too obsessed with the 'oughts' of its system and leaves no space for seeing beyond the list of dos and don'ts. But *Islam* as a faith expressed in terms of active belief and ongoing trust in God is quite akin to Christian faith. The appropriate comparison is not between Jesus and Muhammad, but between Jesus and the Qur'an.

It is this comparison that shows us close parallels between the two faiths: both see God as omnipotent, who creates, is one, rules, reveals, loves, judges, and forgives.

Both offer weekly communal prayers and venerate Jerusalem. Migration has played an important role in both faiths—Hijra, the migration of Muhammad from Mecca to Median, in Islam and Exodus in Christianity. Both faiths have struggled with, and manifested, truth and power in their respective histories in similar ways. In short, Muslims have been trying to answer the call of Jesus.

But it takes two to kiss. Musk argues that Muslims have a great deal to learn from Christian understanding of Jesus. How theologies develop and find expression, he rightly suggests, is as much about the realities of power or clan loyalty or cultural difference as about the knowledge of God. Power has played an important part in shaping Islamic theology. It is evident in gender relations, how Islam looks at the world and in the position of religious scholars in Muslim society. Obsession with an unchanging law and the Islamist vision of a single Islamic state for all Muslims—indeed the entire globe—have transformed Islam from faith to a dangerous ideology.

Muslims need to return to faith as described in the early part of the Qur'an. It is the verses revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, which have a considerable connection with the Bible that Muslims must now pay attention to. They

need to see that the Arab identity of their faith now outweighs its embrace of other cultures and languages. This Arab chauvinism, with its obsession with a particular type of dress, tribal customs, and arid, archaic outlook has to be transcended.

Kissing Cousins? is not a particularly original book. Much of what Mask has to say has been said before more eloquently and without the need of elaborated diagrams. But it is the strange personality of Mask himself that makes this book fascinating. He is an evangelical Anglican priest, the kind of person who ought to be dead against any rapprochement between the two great faiths. But he sees danger in the missionary outlook of both faiths. The notion of 'dawa' in Islam and 'mission' in Christianity, he suggests, not only generate tension, leading to competition, but could become a civilisational fault-line in the first part of the 21st century. At times he seems to want much more than the two cousins to kiss. There is a positive invitation to share the marital bed!

But this sharing is not on the basis of total equality. Mask wants Christian to change their attitudes towards Muslims so that they, in turn, may move towards Jesus. His evangelical outlook sometimes transcends his objectivity, for example, when he absurdly compares the Islamic notion of knowledge, so deeply rooted in rationality, with the Christian concept of Original Sin. A sense of superiority is also evident in his discussion of the Messiah. Moreover, while he uses serious intellectual sources for Christianity, his Muslim sources, apart from the classical ones, are largely cheap propaganda pamphlets and known anti-Islamic tracts.

Nevertheless, *Kissing Cousins?* offers both Christians and Muslims a great deal to chew over. Meanwhile, I am still waiting for a decent proposal from one of my Christian cousins.

Kissing Cousins? Christians and Muslims Face to Face by Bill Musk
Monarch Books, £10.99, 480pp.

Muslim victims, black widows and martyrs

The Independent on Sunday
12th September 2004

The atrocious violence in Beslan has a particular significance for Muslims. The terrorists tortured the children of School No 1, by denying them food and water for almost three days, and then shot them in cold blood as they tried to escape. For me, these actions confirm that radical Muslims have lost all vestiges of humanity.

Islamists, liberal Muslims everywhere must acknowledge, are now amongst the most dehumanised people on the planet. Drained of all humanity, they can kill anyone and everyone without remorse or sorrow, including other Muslims, in the name of Islam. The bomb blast at the entrance of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta on Thursday, the perpetrators knew well, would largely kill other Muslims including women and children.

So, for their own well being as well as the security of the world, mainstream Muslims must double their efforts to contain this minority of dehumanised fanatics. Their actions have to be condemned outright—no ifs and buts. They have to be denied the support of marginalised and aggrieved members of

our communities. Their interpretation of Islam has to be exposed as the sham that it is.

However, the problem for Muslims is not just the radical groups amongst them. It is also the policies and rhetoric of the global powers—the very oxygen that sustains and nurtures the radicals.

What are we, the liberals, suppose to say when the radicals ask: where were the bleeding hearts of the West when the Russian army was killing tens of thousands of Chechen children, raping Chechen women en masse and perpetuating unspeakable horrors on the Chechen people? Where was ‘the world that condemns the operations in Beslan’ as inhuman when Chechnya was being bombed back to the Stone Age? How many commentators and pundits stood up to protest when Chechnya faced total, scorched earth warfare that made no distinction between civilians and combatants, the very war that has produced the horrendous spectre of ‘black widows’? Why were the cries for help from the Chechens dismissed as babblings of uncivilised bandits, prone to Islamist tendencies? Where was western humanitarianism when Washington and London left Yeltsin and Putin to slaughter the innocent and dismissed Chechnya as a remote Caucasian region of little consequence that no one understood?

We, the moderate Muslims who crave a more humane, pluralistic and rational practice and understanding of our faith, have no answers to these questions. But we know this much: our efforts to contain the radical minority within us will come to naught as long as the powerful nations of the world continue to produce more Muslim victims.

We live in an interconnected world. The empire always strikes back—whether it is the Russian or the American empire. America used the Afghan rebels to fight its ideological war

against the Soviet Union and then left a ruined nation to fester in poverty, lawlessness and despair once it had played its bit part in global realpolitik. The radical Jihadis of Afghanistan provided al-Qaida with its foundations. The analogy with Chechnya is compelling. Decades of war, poverty and despair in a country where human rights violations are the norm, disappearances an everyday occurrence, became a recruiting banner for the misguided prepared to pervert religion to justify the naked barbarism of revenge.

Beslan is an awful indication of what the inhuman future could bring. Putin's declaration of the right to strike at terrorists wherever they are is no different from the premise on which Bush went to war in Iraq. Bush has no mandate, no grounds and no inclination to challenge Putin. Just as he has no mandate, grounds or inclination but only endorsement for the analogous policies of Ariel Sharon. Those who are appropriately chilled by the idea of a policy of pre-emptive strikes in the hand of Putin should now wake up to the inescapable reality. Putin's strongest justification is the policy and manifesto of George W Bush. To tackle the one we have to pray for the defeat of the author of the policy of pre-emption. If Bush wins the next election, he will declare open season on Iran. That will be a cue for the Iranian Shias to put on their white garbs of martyrdom. The world will resemble Baghdad's Sadr city—and Iraq war would have truly come home to roost.

There is another, more effective way to fight terrorism. Give Chechnya the independence it deserves. Chechnya is a totally different nation from Russia; it has never been and can never be a part of Russia. Another Muslim state adjacent to Russia would not make much difference; Russia already shares its border with other Muslim states, such as Kazakhstan. Leave Iraq to the Iraqis. Again this is not insurmountable—America

can withdraw its troops with honour and restore genuine democracy to Iraq. It will also be brave thing to do. Create a viable Palestinian state. Rebuild Afghanistan. In other words, fulfil the numerous promises made to the long suffering people of Palestine and Afghanistan. Stop propping up the despots and tyrants of the Muslim world, such as the Saudi monarchy and Egypt's Mubarak. Despots are bad for everyone—including the West. And support moderate Muslims throughout the world to rethink and reform Islam as a progressive, pluralistic faith.

Most Muslims saw the events of 9/11 as a wake up call. Since then numerous groups have emerged with the specific goal to contain radical Islam and build civic societies in their countries. Consider, for example, Indonesia which is at the forefront of the war on terror. After 9/11, a Liberal Islam Network was established specifically to counter-balance and resist radical Muslim groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah, which has been implicated in the bombing of Australian embassy in Jakarta. Mainstream organisations, such as traditionalists Nahdatul Ulama, a network of religious scholars, and modernist Muhamadiyah, have put their differences aside and mobilised their combined membership of over 80 million to establish open democracy and civic society in Indonesia.

In Malaysia, the government has initiated a wide-ranging programme called 'Islam Hadhari' (progressive Islam) which redefines Islam's role in politics, economics and society and aims to showcase what a Muslim country can do in terms of modernity and social development. In numerous other countries, from Morocco to Turkey, modernists and traditionalists, NGO's and governments, are joining hands to rethink what Islam means in the 21st century and how they can pull the carpet from under the feet of the radicals. The activism, the concern with reform, the spirit of enlightened and rational

change that I have seen in my recent travels in the Muslim world are unprecedented in recent Islamic history.

But such monumental efforts—and they are truly monumental—can only bear fruit if global powers cease creating more Muslim victims, more ‘black widows’, more revenge seeking suicide bombers and potential martyrs. The perpetual use of military power as the sole means of addressing complex issues can only lead to increasing instability and insecurity. The creation of peaceful political space to produce peaceful engagement and hope is, and will remain, the only true antidote to terrorism.

The party of the martyrs

New Statesman
28th April 2003

Baghdad is suddenly like pre-revolution Tehran: the Shia mosques have become the focus of dissent. After Friday prayers, protesters pour into the city, chanting anti-American slogans, demanding “Islamic government”. Throughout Iraq, there are demonstrations and marches. De-votees are making the pilgrimage, banned for decades by Saddam Hussein, to the holy city of Karbala.

Moreover, a leading liberal cleric, Abdul Majid al-Khoei, exiled in London for several years, has been murdered. Is this an indication of long-submerged factionalism? A mob supposedly forced Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani to leave Najaf for issuing a pro-American fatwa (though both the fatwa and the departure were subsequently denied). Armed militia of another group, led by the young militant Moqtada Sadr, are patrolling the streets of Baghdad and preparing for a revolution.

Who are these Shias? What do they believe? And what do they actually want?

Shia Muslims share all the fundamental beliefs of Sunni Muslims—such as belief in one Omnipotent God, the Prophethood of Muhammad, the day of judgement and life

after death. As many exasperated Iraqis point out, the Shia and Sunni distinctions mean little to ordinary people. But they have been significant for western powers, both in the past and in this war. In the 1920s, when Britain was trying to engineer a compliant Iraq, Gertrude Bell, a member of the British administration, found the Shias “grimly devout”, “violent and intractable”, “fanatical and conservative”. As the Shias were in a majority in Iraq, democracy would be out of the question. The problem was solved by supplying a Sunni monarch.

Iraq is a complex country created by British imperialism. Britain always rather liked countries where it could identify divisions, manipulate them and present its imposed order as the only hope of stable rule. We may have reached just such a moment in the advance of a new imperium. But what we are witnessing on the streets is a strong indication that Iraqis know and remember their own history much better than the US expected. It is also proof of the basic truth of Muslim existence. In a crisis, Iraqi Shias, like all Muslims, turn to the mosque as the hub of civic society, as the sole institution that has the moral authority, when all else fails, to provide some semblance of organisation.

Shia means the party of Ali. The figure of Ali is central to the Shia faith. Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad (he married the Prophet’s daughter Fatima), is considered by Sunni Muslims to be the last of the four “Rightly Guided Caliphs”. But for Shias, Ali is almost as important as the Prophet Muhammad himself.

The Prophet Muhammad left it for his followers to decide who should succeed him as the ruler of the Muslim community. Immediately after his death in 632, his closest companion, Abu Bakr, was unanimously elected as the First Rightly Guided Caliph (632–634). He selected Omar as his successor, and

Omar (634–644) got the approval of the community. But Omar, instead of nominating a successor, established an electoral council of seven companions of the Prophet. Not without considerable difficulty, they chose Uthman as the Third Caliph (644–656).

Throughout this period, a strong and vocal minority argued that Ali should have been the First Caliph and that the caliphate should thenceforth pass to direct descendants of the Prophet through Ali and Fatima. Ali finally succeeded to the caliphate after the murder of Uthman. But he was opposed by the formidable figure of Aisha, wife of the Prophet, who accused him of being lax in bringing Uthman's killers to justice. The dispute led to the Battle of Camel in 656: Aisha's forces were defeated; she apologised to Ali and retired from public life. But the incident spread bitterness towards Ali's rule.

A few years later, in 661, Ali was murdered. The Muslim community split into three distinct groups. The majority argued that the rulers should be elected on the basis of consultation and consensus. A minority favoured hereditary rule of the Prophet's family. And an even smaller, secular-minded minority, with political ambition and military might, simply wanted to usurp authority. This last group won, and Muawiya, who had been governor of Syria for two decades, declared himself to be "the first king in Islam". There would be more caliphs but none of them, in the view of devout Muslims, would be "rightly guided".

The "democrats", essentially the forerunners of today's Sunnis, threw in the towel. Those who supported hereditary rule gathered around Ali's sons, Hasan and Husayn. Hasan, who agreed not to pursue his claim to the caliphate and accepted a pension, died soon afterwards, allegedly poisoned; Husayn was persuaded to put his claim to the caliphate on

hold until the death of Muawiya. But when Muawiya died, he was succeeded by his son Yazid; Husayn rebelled immediately. In the Battle of Karbala (680), Husayn, his family and his small band of followers were all massacred by Yazid's army. Yazid was then able to establish the hereditary Umayyad dynasty.

But the tragedy of Karbala also led to the formation of the Shia sect. The central, and the most distinctive, institution of Shia Islam is the imamate. The Imam, belonging to the Prophet's family, is regarded as not only the legitimate leader of the Muslim community, with both spiritual and political leadership in his hands, but also as being totally innocent and incapable of error. Ali was declared the First Imam, followed by his sons, Imams Hasan and Husayn. But the lineage of Prophet Muhammad became extinct in 873 when the 12th and last Shia imam, Al-Askari, who had no brother, disappeared within days of inheriting the title at the tender age of four. The Shias refused to accept that he had died, and developed the theory of occultation. The 12th Imam is said to be "in hiding" and will return at the end of time.

There are many divisions even within Shi'ism itself. But the majority of Shias in Iraq and Iran are Ithna'asheri or "Twelvers", the followers of the 12 Imams. As a persecuted minority within Islam, the Shias developed a highly organised and structured religion—unlike the Sunnis, who totally reject any notion of an organised clergy. Spiritual power passed to religious scholars, *mujtabids*, from whose ranks emerge ayatollahs, pre-eminent leaders capable of making authoritative interpretation in religious matters, and therefore capable of wielding enormous social and political influence and power.

But Shi'ism is distinguished not only by its veneration of Ali but also by its emphasis on martyrdom and suffering. Most

of the Shia Imams were murdered. A great deal of importance is thus placed on their deaths, particularly the deaths of Ali and Husayn. The tragedy of Karbala is commemorated every year on the tenth of the Islamic month of Muharram, the anniversary of Husayn's death. Through a period of ten days, wailing imams whip the congregation into a frenzy of tears and chest-beating. In the streets, ritual flagellation, involving knives, swords and chains, is performed by groups of marching men. All this has given the Shias their fearsome reputation among western observers.

The Americans should heed the warnings. The Shias look like an easy scapegoat for outbreaks of anarchy and unrest. But although Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator, not even he could abolish politics or political consciousness among Iraqi Shias. The Shias, a minority within Islam, have survived more than a millen-nium of persecution; their very inception was based on martyrdom and opposition to secular power, backed by military muscle.

And differences in theology and practice may distinguish the Iraqi Shias but they do not disconnect them from the rest of the Muslim community. Indeed, the structure of Shi'ism enabled it to be more adaptive in the face of modernity than Sunnism.

Debate among Shia intellectuals on contemporary problems and issues is highly influential and widely read among all Muslims. In the light of the Iranian experience, virtually all reformists reject theocracy as having any relevance to modernity. Progressive Shia scholars, such as the Iranian academic Abdul Karim Soroush and Ayatollah Sayyid Fadhil Milani of Iraq, argue that Islamic law needs to be reformed to incorporate modern notions of human (including women's) rights. Similarly, the role and power of religious scholars is

being questioned. And the place, form and nature of democracy in a self-determining, independent Muslim nation is now a topic of much concern to Iranian Shia reformers and dissidents, just as it is to Iraqi Shia exiles.

Confronted with the anti-American rage of the Iraqi Shias, President George W Bush has fallen back on inanity. “Isn’t freedom wonderful,” he said, suggesting that events in Iraq represent a merely temporary exuberance, a phase that will soon pass—making way for US plans to award contracts to American corporations, to establish long-term military bases in Iraq, and to impose the compliant kind of government that it understands.

Bush was nearer the mark when he added that “a basic instinct of man is to be free”. Shia or Sunni Iraqis are not lacking in such instincts. Bush’s problem is the likelihood that the Iraqi vision of freedom—freedom from misery, impoverishment and dependency—will lead to a kind of democracy he simply does not recognise. If that vision relies heavily on Islam it is neither certain that Iraq will become another Iran nor necessary that it do so. As Shia thinkers have made clear, other options are abundantly available.

The message from the streets of Baghdad and other cities is that Iraqis are determined not to be caught in a replay of their history—a replay for which all the pieces are in place. Instead of being bemused, affronted, frightened by stereotypes labelled Shia, we should help all Iraqis to attain the kind of freedom they choose for themselves.

Humans and Muslims

Emel Magazine
June/July 2004

How was it for you? How did you feel when you saw those dreadful pictures from Abu Ghraib prison?

I can tell you exactly how I felt. What I thought when I saw the anonymous hooded man standing on a box, wires dangling from his stretched arms, as though he was being crucified. When my eyes encountered the sight of US Private Lynndie England pulling a naked, semi-conscious prisoner with a dog leash. When I gazed at an image of a human pyramid of naked prisoners being Lorded over by grinning Americans. These people are not anonymous. They are *me*. I am every one of these individuals being tormented in these photographs. Their humiliation, their degradation, their torture, their suffering is my humiliation, my degradation, my torture and my suffering.

I feel like that not simply because I am a human being; but also because I am a Muslim. As a Muslim I have a special connection to these victims, personified by the notion of the *ummah*. The prisoners of Abu Ghraib are not just my brothers and sisters. They are an integral part of me—the very essence of my being. The believers, the Prophet said, are like a human

body: when one part hurts, the entire body suffers. This is the true meaning of *ummab*: this is why I don't just identify with these prisoners; I see them as myself.

There is one photograph in the portfolio of 'Iraq Abuse Scandal' that is truly iconic. A naked prisoner, his hands behind his head, his legs crossed, his back arched, stands in front a prison door. He is being sat upon by a vicious dog. The dog handler is urging the beast to attack. Another guard has yet another dog on leash. Everything is moving and you cannot see anyone's face, not even of the attacking dog. But the prisoner is motionless; you can read the terror on his face. But you can read something else: he is the only true human being in the photograph.

For me, that's what it is all about. All the conflicts we Muslims are now involved in are about preserving our humanity. The prisoner in the photograph has retained his humanity and is therefore victorious. In contrast, the grinning young American men and women in Abu Ghraib photographs, who think it is fun to torture people in the name of freedom and democracy, are hardly human. They come from a system that has almost lost its humanity. The basic feature of the American prison system, populated largely by blacks and Latinos, is to systematically dehumanise the inmates. The American military is one of the most dehumanised machines to disgrace our planet. The neo-conservative fundamentalists who run the White House do not see the vast majority of Muslims as human communities. In their worldview, any one they perceive to be against them is by definition evil and hence not quite human.

So it is hardly surprising that they do not regard the Iraqi as human beings—that's why they don't even bother to count the Iraqi dead. The West in general, and America in particular,

has always seen the Muslims as less than human. That's what Orientalism was all about. And that's why the tortures inflicted on the inmates of Abu Ghraib prison were tailor made. As Seymour Hersh reported in the *New Yorker*, Americans used the services of an old Orientalist to devise tortures that were particularly humiliating to Muslims and specially designed to dehumanise them in their own eyes.

The tragedy is that some Muslims have internalised this representation. By becoming a caricature of Orientalist representation they too have lost their humanity.

So, what did I feel about the beheading of Nick Berg, who by all accounts was an innocent idealist young American? What did I think when the psychopaths who executed him shouted 'Allah O' Akbar'? That was *me* too! Every one of those involved in this barbarity are also part of my being. Their inhumanity has a direct bearing on my humanity. Their representation of Islam and actions in the name of Islam concerns me as much as American brutalities in Iraq. And they too are part of the *ummah* and delineate its meaning: the cancer in one part of the body kills the whole body.

If we can only resist inhumanity with inhumanity than there is nothing really worth fighting for. If Muslim behaviour is as brutal and dehumanised as those of the Americans, than what is the difference? And once someone has degenerated to the level of the wild beast, does it matter whether he is a Muslim or not?

We are human beings before we are Muslims. But there is a difference between being simply a human being and being a Muslim. A human can, and sometime does, forget that he or she is human. A Muslim on the other hand has to constantly remember that he or she, as a servant of God, is always and only a human. To keep this idea foremost in our mind, we are

always praying, fasting and dispensing our hard earned cash in charity. The spirit of Islam is expressed through our humanity and by demonstrating what it means to be human. This is what the Prophet has taught me. What has the Prophet taught you?

Hope and Resistance

Emel Magazine

November/December 2003

It's that time of the year when we Muslims pay extra attention to spiritual matters and devote much more time to prayer and reading the Qur'an. But contemplation during Ramadan need not be focused only on spiritual concerns. It is also the time to think of others, less fortunate, than ourselves; and a time for introspection and self-criticism.

So when you open your fast in relative comfort, think of our long suffering brothers and sisters in Iraq. Most of them will spend Ramadan without basic amenities such as electricity and water and in a total state of insecurity. From the perspective of the people of Iraq, one form of home grown oppression has been replaced by another—the new global tyranny of the United States.

Iraq provides us with an excellent example of the current state of Muslim plight. Internally, the Muslim world seems to be imploding with obscurantism and strife, rage and violence, and impotence and hopelessness. Externally, we are under severe pressure from an arrogant hyperpower hell-bent on pursuing its own selfish interests and rendering everything in its self-image.

Under Saddam Hussein, Iraq became an utterly indefensible entity—unspeakably brutal, totally divorced from global realities, a personal fiefdom of a clan and a barbaric family, and isolated even from the rest of the unsavoury Arab world. Of course, colonialism and western power politics played an important role in creating this vicious state. But we can't lay all the blames on others and history.

Saddam Hussain was, and remains, a product of our own culture. While much more brutal, he is not that much different from all the other despots in the Arab world.

We need to ask why Muslim societies are so prone to despotisms and dictatorships, still so deeply anchored in feudalism and tribalism. Are we getting the leaders we deserve? Why is routine torture so prevalent in Muslim countries? Why are basic human rights, including the rights of women, so starkly missing from Islamic societies? What role we have played and are playing in our own destruction?

These are uncomfortable questions. We do everything to try and avoid them. As I know from my own experience, we would much rather wallow in nostalgia, recount the glories of our 'Golden Age', and insist on how Islam provides an answer to everything, than take an objective and critical look at our own shortcomings. But unless we deal with these questions honestly, with an open mind, we can do nothing about the other side of the equation: the new aggressive brand of American imperialism.

It is important to appreciate how significantly the character of the US has transformed under the Bush administration. The rejection of the Kyoto Protocol, the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty, the Comprehensive (Nuclear) Test Ban treaty, and the opposition to the creation of the International Criminal Court as well as the STAR wars initiative, which puts nuclear

weapons into space, provide a good indication of this. But the real direction of American foreign policy was made clear even before Bush came to power in the famous Neo-Conservative Manifesto, *The Project for a New American Century*. Written by some of the same people who are now in power—including Vice-President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld—it is, not to put too finer point on it, a rationally thought out plan for world domination.

Against this background, it becomes quite irrelevant whether Iraq did or did not have weapons of mass destruction. The decision to invade Iraq had been made a long time ago, September 11 notwithstanding. The US already had a very clear view of how the world had to change to protect and promote America's interest, and Iraq was the first critical step. The war on Iraq, no matter what Tony Blair may claim, had entirely selfish reasons: oil and the extension of America's military outreach. The fact that Iraq was judged to be in possession of significant stocks of chemical and biological weapons which might find their way in the hands of al Qaeda and other nefarious groups was only a minor item on the agenda.

The question we need to address regarding our own Prime Minister is not whether he did or did not embellish the infamous weapons of mass destruction dossier. Although even on this issue, the Hutton Inquiry, in the best traditions of British Parliamentary inquiries, will not provide us with any clear answers. The question we need to ask is this: why does Blair so passionately think that promoting American political hegemony and economic and cultural interests around the globe are beneficial for Britain?

But Blair is only a minor figure in all this. America would have invaded Iraq even without Britain. Resisting this kind of determination is not going to be easy for Muslims. Certainly,

we cannot resist American imperialism through rage and hate and empty slogans about Islam's inherent superiority. Equally, we can do little without taking at least a few steps towards putting our own house in order.

Ramadan, above everything else, is about hope. Hope in the Mercy and the Grace of God. Once, Baghdad was the centre of Islamic culture, of science and philosophy, art and literature, a beacon of human progress. Let us hope and pray, during this blessed month of Ramadan, that one day soon Baghdad plays that role again. But let us also work out a sane strategy—indeed a 'Project'—to take us from here to there. As the Beloved Prophet said, trust in Allah, but do tie you camel!



Part Four
The Parameters of Culture





Multiculturalism is dead, Long Live Multiculturalism

New Statesman
1st August 2005

Multiculturalism has received a serious battering in recent years. Trevor Phillips, the hyperventilating chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, has consistently argued that it cannot work because it leads to cultural differences being emphasised at the expense of cohesion. Others, such as the *Independent* columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, have even written its obituary. In the wake of the London terrorist attacks, the dissenting voices seem about to become still more pronounced. What, then, is the way forward?

In *Multicultural Politics*, Tariq Modood argues that multiculturalism should not be written off because of a few setbacks. Multiculturalism works—and the proof that it does is right before us. Britain today is far less racist than it used to be; black Britons have made significant strides; and an educated, participatory Asian middle class has emerged that is changing the social fabric of the country. British Asian films such as *Bend It Like Beckham* and television shows such as *The Kumars at No 42* have transformed our image at home

and abroad. All this, says Modood, must be counted in multiculturalism's favour.

None the less, Modood stops short of painting a uniformly rosy picture. There is, he says, a significant caveat in the success story of British multiculturalism. British Asians, despite their many achievements, continue to suffer from a largely unacknowledged form of racism. This is not the "biological racism" usually directed at blacks. Rather, it is a new-style "cultural racism", focusing on language, religion, family structures, dress and cuisine. Such traits define what it means to be "Asian" and are used to explain why British Asians—and in particular British Muslims—are alien, backward and undesirable. The problem has arisen, according to Modood, because we have imported from the United States an overly simplistic model of race relations, one based on a black/white dualism. This model is in no way adequate to represent the complex realities of contemporary Britain.

So how does Modood propose to remedy this situation? Liberalism is not the answer, because its emphasis on individualism suggests that ethnicity and culture are matters of choice, whereas in fact many of us are not in a position to choose how we live. We also need to get beyond secularism, in particular the dogmatic, fundamentalist secularism typified by the *Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee, which Modood claims is incompatible with multiculturalism. What is needed is an aggressive assertion of ethnicity. Members of minorities have the right, as equal citizens, to assimilate with the dominant culture in the public domain while insisting that their differences be recognised and tolerated in the private sphere. And they have a right to public support and funding, as well as appropriate educational and cultural policies, for maintaining their differences. Instead of lumping peoples together as

“Asians”, we should make the effort to differentiate between groups: Pakistanis are not the same as Bangladeshis, and there are considerable cultural differences between Sindhi Pakistanis and Mirpuri Pakistanis.

Modood’s thesis, while full of original insights, is not without problems. His emphasis on ethnicity, for example, is troubling. The word has its roots in America, where all those other than European immigrants are classified as “ethnic”. Ethnicity connotes, more than anything else, primordially constituted Otherness in relation to non-ethnics, the Europeans, who are the true Americans. It is the polite term for a racial hierarchy within American society. White people of European origin are never ethnic: they are Italian-Americans, or Irish-Americans, or German-Americans. The non-Europeans (Chinese, Asians, blacks) are always ethnic. Hyphenated Americans amble through the corridors of power; ethnics occupy lowlier positions. The term is inherently racist.

Overemphasis on ethnicity is also a prescription for fragmentation. If each individual has an immutable right of attachment to a distinct ethnicity, many problems of difference become insurmountable. Worse still, those who are not members of a distinct ethnic group then feel obliged to manufacture identities in order to assert their distinctness. Ethnicity fuels an insatiable desire for difference; it leads to dissatisfaction, frustration and animosity. In the US, new ethnicities are manufactured virtually every day.

Modood’s distinction between conventional “biological” racism and new-style “cultural” racism is also flawed. Western racism has always been cultural racism. It can be traced back to the theory of “natural law” advanced by theologians such as St Thomas Aquinas. Natural law defined as being right and righteous those things which conformed with laws created by

God. It became difficult to conceive that a non-Christian life could be natural. Crucially, however, this idea made no reference to skin colour. It was how people lived, worshipped and acted that was important.

Colour as a marker of difference appeared only with the development of chattel slavery in the New World. In the US, it was central to the development of physical anthropology, a field whose *raison d'être* was to provide the intellectual justification for slavery. Colour-coded caste systems, incorporating blacks and Indians, also developed in Latin America at this time. But even with such colour markers, it was still essentially differences in behaviour that were being graded. The truth is that you cannot distinguish between one type of racism and another. Cultural racism is pernicious to everyone, including blacks; and to denigrate someone's colour is to denigrate their culture in all its complexity.

Another flaw in Modood's argument is that he overlooks the importance of global politics in multiculturalism. In a globalised world, as Michael Keith demonstrates in *After the Cosmopolitan?*, the idea that any person belongs to a single, unchanging culture is untenable. Critics of multiculturalism must face a stark reality: multiculturalism is demographically inevitable. It has become the driving force of our cities, the lifeblood of innovation and the engine of economic growth. The world is becoming one giant metropolis with seven billion inhabitants. All cultural change, and hence multiculturalism, must be seen in this context.

Globalisation, according to Keith, is producing a new kind of multiculturalism whose hallmark is "iteration"—the notion that ethnic specificity and cultural difference are invariably and constantly changing. We cannot understand this new multiculturalism, argues Keith, by using the language of the

old. The complex realities of tomorrow's Britain demand that we ditch categories such as "black and white", "Asian and Muslim", "ethnicity" and "difference". It makes no sense to ascribe ethnicity to a group, when conventionally defined similarities and differences are dissolving. The language of belonging, exile and diaspora has also become irrelevant in the face of this new pluralism, where "home" is everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Indeed, Keith suggests that we need to understand the word "immigrant" in a different way. According to official statistics, the population of London increased by almost a million between 1991 and 2001. But who are these new immigrants? Asians, blacks, refugees? The large proportion are in fact Canadians, Americans, Australians and South Africans, followed by Lithuanians, Muscovites and refugees from international traumas in the Balkans and the Horn of Africa. So what does the term "immigrant" mean now? What are the implications for conventional race relations, with their binary opposition between "black and minority ethnic" and the "white" communities?

The new multiculturalism is challenging conventional wisdom and familiar hierarchies. It can transform a term of abuse—"black" or "Banglatown", for instance—into a badge of honour. It is directly connected to international politics, and is continually being moulded into new formations. What happens in Chechnya and Iraq has consequences on the streets of London. Indeed, the street is literally "where it's at", and is where we must look for an understanding of how multiculturalism is transforming Britain.

So, multiculturalism is dead! Long live multiculturalism!

Multicultural Politics: racism, ethnicity and Muslims in Britain Tariq Modood Edinburgh University Press, 272pp, £45 (hbk)/£16.99

248 *Breaking the Monolith*

(pbk) ISBN 0748621725 *After the Cosmopolitan?: multicultural cities and the future of racism* Michael Keith Routledge, 232pp, £65 (hbk)/£21.99 (pbk).

Hatred: The next Holocaust

The New Statesman

5th December 2005

It's a bitterly cold night and the centre of Dortmund is deserted. On weekdays, says our taxi driver, everything closes by ten o'clock. It is not easy to find a place to eat. Eventually, he drops us at the Cava restaurant in Lindemannstrabe. Just one couple punctuate the ultra-chic of this postmodern bistro. We sit near them and order our food. Dortmund, Germany is the first port of call on my journey through the industrial heartland of northern Europe. After the terrorist attacks in London and the riots in the French suburbs, I want to assess the racial divide, the fear and the loathing that permeate so much of our European continent.

Christoph Simmons is an insurance broker in his forties; his girlfriend, Baneta Lisiecka, is a Polish immigrant. They invite us to join them for a night out in their "green metropolis". We drive in Christoph's sports car to Limette, "the only pub in Dortmund open till 6am". Dortmund is a multicultural city integrated into the global economy, explains Christoph; this former mining town is now a thriving base for high-tech research. "Our immigrant communities are well integrated," he says. Greeks, Italians, Spaniards, Poles live in proverbial

perfect harmony with Germans. There is only one problem: the Turks—“they don’t integrate”. Baneta thinks they are “mostly criminals” and she is afraid of them. Christoph also says: “They are conservative; their women cover their heads. The Koran tells them to murder Christians.” Has he ever met a Turk, I ask. “No,” he says. “They stick together and never come into our pubs.” I talk to other people in Limette. Jasmine, a Catholic from Corsica, sums up the overall feeling. “I don’t like Turks. I don’t know why. I just don’t like them.”

And yet I discover that these open manifestations of racism do not seem to be reciprocated by German Turks. At the Orhan Narghile Grill Cafe, in the Turkish part of Dortmund, I meet Suniye Ozdemir, a single mother born in Germany. “I don’t know,” she says with genuine amazement, “why the Germans hate us so much. I don’t know why they are scared of the Turkish people. Maybe they’re jealous. May-be they’re afraid we will steal their jobs.” She introduces me to a group of girls from the Helmholtz Grammar School. Aged between 16 and 18, these girls are confident and articulate, and they speak good English. They want to become professionals and to succeed. Gulsum, who wears a hijab, says they experience racism every day—at school from their teachers, on the bus, on the streets. Her friend, who does not wear a hijab, says: “We were born in Germany and we are Germans. We stick together for protection, to avoid hostility.”

Throughout my journey, from Germany to the Netherlands, onwards to Belgium and finally into France—the object of much recent attention—I meet people all too ready to describe Muslims in the colours of darkness. Islamophobia is not a British disease: it is a common, if diverse, European phenomenon. It is the singular rock against which the tide of European liberalism crashes.

There are common themes but also subtle differences in the way each nation's history influences its people's present attitude to immigrant communities. Much of this is rooted in the various colonial histories. Germany came late to nationalism and colonialism, and caught a bad case of both. In the 1880s it scrambled briefly and brutally for colonies to prove its importance as a nation. The roots of its ethnic problems lie deeper, however, in its history and cultural psyche. Many of the erstwhile principalities and tiny statelets that formed Germany were part of Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire, a unity forged under siege and in reaction to the perceived threat of Muslim civilisation. The Germans embraced the Crusades with great vigour: the first, infamously, commenced at home with pogroms against the Jews. The crusading motif is as important to the German self-image as it ever was; the hatred of 'Turks I heard was often expressed in crusading language—even if couched in liberal terms.

Germany's present ethnic-minority population is the legacy of its wartime military alliance with Turkey. Under the *gastarbeiter* ("guest worker") policy, the Turks were good enough to be imported en masse to rebuild war-torn Germany but not good enough to be given German nationality. They existed outside the ambit of German identity. It was the continuation of racial purity in another form. Now that they are issued with national identity cards, now that Germany has liberalised, is the concept of what it is to be German, I wondered, still a matter of *ein Volk*—one people, the Nazi notion of racial purity?

"I am afraid it is," says Wolfram Richter, professor of economics at the University of Dortmund. There are many factors why the Turks are hated, Richter says. He cites social factors such as Turks shopping only in Turkish shops, cultural

factors such as their women covering themselves, language problems such as the older generation of Turks still not speaking German. They are seen as disloyal. Then there is the “Anatolia bride syndrome”: German Turks tend to go back to Anatolia to get married and bring their wives to Germany. But the overall factor in the fear and loathing of Turks, Richter says, is old-fashioned racism. “I am afraid we have not learned from our history. My main fear is that what we did to Jews we may now do to Muslims. The next holocaust would be against Muslims.”

Across the border into the Netherlands and to Eindhoven, a lively cultural city with a young population, where fear of Muslims is equally evident. There are fewer than 5,000 Muslims in Eindhoven and they are all hidden away in the Woensel district. But try to get a taxi driver to take you there. Kim de Peuyssenaecce, our driver, is adamant: “It’s a dangerous area where you could get killed,” she says. She has a Moroccan boyfriend, whose picture she displays on her mobile phone, yet she dismisses Moroccans as “mostly criminals” who are “ruining our country”. She drops us in front of a Moroccan bar next to the new, clinically structured red-light district, a kind of John Lewis-meets-porn. Inside the Safrak Bar and Cafe, the atmosphere is thick with smoke. Old men sit playing backgammon, chequers and dominoes. “We are not part of the Dutch community,” says the bar owner, a tall, aggressive Moroccan who does not want to give his name. “They don’t treat us with respect and dignity. They think we’re separate. So we are separate.”

That the Dutch see Muslims as a separate community is not all that surprising. Holland has a brutal colonial history just as long as Britain’s, and the jewel in its crown was the most populous Muslim nation on earth: Indonesia. The Islamist

insurgency in Aceh is a legacy of the people's long war with the Dutch, a war the colonisers never won and never ended. Slavery and compulsory labour on Dutch plantations underpinned a strict system of separating the rulers from those they ruled. The Dutch were interested in categorising and neatly arranging the Otherness of those they ruled, the better to maintain their separateness and dependence. Colonial policy now reverberates at home.

In another part of Eindhoven we meet Jamal Tushi, an IT consultant in his thirties. "They treat us like colonial subjects," he says. "For them, all Muslims are terrorists." Tushi was born and bred in Eindhoven and speaks perfect Dutch, yet finds it hard to get work. "If you are a young Moroccan, forget the idea of getting a job," he says. During job interviews, the much-acclaimed Dutch liberalism evaporates. "They want to know what kind of Muslim you are. Do you pray? Do you go to the mosque?"

Dutch liberalism was meant only for the Dutch. Today it extends to prostitution and drugs, but not to Muslim immigrants. It's like the "ethical policy" Holland developed for its colonies. The policy was about Dutch superiority; it had little to do with the reality of life for the people they ruled, and made little difference to their condition. The colonies served the metropolis, regardless of how they were spoken of and discussed. The language of ethics was always about the colonising "Us" and not the colonised "Them", just as all discussion about multiculturalism in Holland is at base about what kind of country "We" are, now that we have let "Them" in. Inclusion, then or now, was not the point. Dutch liberalism is about how good and open "We" are—not an open negotiation about what liberalism means to and for minority communities.

We take the train to Antwerp. Belgium is an interesting case of multiculturalism, split as it is between the Dutch/Flemish-speaking Flemings and French-speaking Walloons. There is also a religious divide, between Catholics and Protestants. In 1994 a revised constitution introduced devolution in an attempt to tackle the long-standing division between the communities, recognising three provinces and language groups. However, dealing with its own fractures of multiculturalism does not mean opening up to immigrant minority communities.

In downtown Antwerp we come across Noor Huda and her friend Fatimah Zanuti. Huda, in her early twenties, is a medical technician at a hospital in the city. “Multiculturalism in Belgium is meant for the Belgians,” she says. “We are not considered Belgian.” Huda was born in Antwerp, as were her parents. “But being a third-generation Belgian is not relevant. We are still colonial subjects.” Racism and hatred of Muslims are so endemic in Belgium, she says, that “you have to constantly guard what you say. We are always afraid to speak our mind. You do not have the right to say what you want to say.”

The barriers in Belgium, as elsewhere in Europe, are born of colonial history and attitudes. And Belgium has one of the most vicious and inhuman of all colonial histories. Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and its picture of Kurtz in his stockade surrounded by severed heads is based on reality, not the allegory or metaphor of fiction. In Belgian colonies such as the Congo, the natives were a problem—and the problem was that they were not working hard enough, not producing enough rubber for the metropolis. So armed police would invade villages, round up women and children, imprison them, and murder groups of them until the required amount of rubber had been delivered by the men.

Armed police are much in evidence at the police station in Lange Nieuwstraat. An officer wastes no time in pointing out that Muslims are a problem. “It’s a one-way street,” he says. “We are waiting for them to come towards us the way they should and we want them to.” But should you not also be moving towards them, I ask. “No,” he replies without hesitation. “We are not a problem. Islam is the problem. Anything is possible where Islam is concerned.” He expects a riot to take place, sooner or later.

A riot, or rather a series of riots, did take place in Lille, the last stop on our journey. A northern industrial town in France, Lille experienced some of the worst of the recent unrest. Emmanuel Peronne, a fashion designer from the suburb of Roubaix, has no doubt what caused the riots. “It’s economic injustice and inequalities that successive generations of Moroccan and Algerian Muslims have suffered in employment, housing and educational opportunities, as well as downright racism at the hands of French society,” he says. “They have no means to survive. It is all about survival.” Roubaix, scene of the most violent uprising, is a dilapidated holding area. “They call us *immigres*,” says an angry halal butcher. “But we were born here. We have no standing in the ideals of ‘*liberte, egalite, fraternite*’.”

Indeed. The ethos of the French revolution was never meant to be pluralistic. Its essential proposition was based on totalitarian uniformity—the scourge it unleashed as the ideological underpinning of modernity and European nationalism. It was also the bedrock of French colonialism, which created parallel universes: the superior French and the inferior others. Assimilation into Frenchness and indirect rule over difference were the twin tracks of French colonialism. So, officially, because France recognises only Frenchness, it

claims to be colour-blind and non-racist, yet it is both highly racist and attuned to a colour bar.

In Lille as much as in Paris and elsewhere in France, there is a neat parallel that demonstrates the continuity of the colonial ethic. In North Africa, where most of the French immigrants come from, the medinas, ancient cities with a Muslim culture, were encircled in their separateness. The medinas were seen as chaotic, confused and not fit for modernity—the physical representation of what the French thought of the medinas' inhabitants and their culture. Around these old indigestible cores were built modern cities on the French model, where the colonisers lived and from which they dominated. Today, Lille has its own traditional core, a bounded city whose limits are jealously guarded. Around this inviolate core circle the depressing *banlieues*: modern slums of the grey, inhospitable and inhuman hutches built to house the indigestible population of migrant workers. The rationale of the colony is neatly reversed and brought home to the metropolis. It is a metaphor for all that has not changed.

Throughout our journey, we were surprised at how openly prejudiced people were against Muslims. Each country has its own extreme-right party, led by figures such as Jean-Marie Le Pen in France or Pim Fortuyn, who was assassinated in Holland in 2002. In Belgium, the draconian right is represented by the Vlaams Blok, a Flemish nationalist party founded in 1977. Philippe Van der Sande, its spokesman in Antwerp, declares that “immigrants do not adapt. They don't want to learn the language. They are not interested in our culture but just winning easy money.” Well, we would expect him to say that. Yet the people we spoke to were ordinary citizens who saw themselves as liberals and enlightened individuals.

European liberalism today may be a consequence of decolonisation. But it seems more like a denial of uncomfortable, unanalysed traits than a genuine overcoming of the past. Europe is post-colonial but ambivalent. Even among individuals with more relaxed attitudes to interracial relationships, racism is unashamed and upfront. In practice, now as in the past, such relationships make little difference because they require subordination of the partner who is from an ethnic minority. Indeed, they can work to increase the sense of superiority and separation. It means less emphasis on race, but more on culture as the quintessential dividing line.

Everywhere I went, the thought that the nation might change in the process of accommodating its minorities was conspicuous by its absence. Minorities are fine as menial workers, a subordinate class. It is when minorities seek to be upwardly mobile, to live the modern liberal dispensation in their own, distinctive way as self-assured, equal members of the national debate—and that was the desire of all the young Muslims I met—that the problems start and latent prejudice comes to the fore.

The central mosque in Lille is located in the Wazemmes area. It is a rather unremarkable structure: three houses seem to have been knocked together and a dwarf dome and minaret added rather crudely. The mosque also serves as the first Muslim school in France. It is named after Averroes, the great 12th-century Spanish rationalist philosopher and humanist. It is a pity that Europe appropriated his rationalism, but jettisoned his pluralistic humanism. Ibn Rushd, to use his Muslim name, would demand that the established order that calls itself honourable and ethical, liberal and tolerant, offer an appropriate explanation to those whom it continues to discriminate against, dehumanise and demean.

Self-assessment, warts and all

New Statesman
15th July 2002

The Arabs have been given a serious mauling by the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The latest in its highly acclaimed series of reports focuses on the 22 countries of the Arab League. If the Arab Human Development Report 2002 is to be believed, the region is firmly stuck in the Dark Ages.

On every measurable human index, the Arabs fail to get a pass grade. They are among the most illiterate and least-free people in the world. Arab states are incapable of managing their development, and their economies are nearing the brink of collapse. Political freedom is conspicuous by its total absence. Thanks to censorship and political suppression, the Arabs are the least connected to information technology—few own computers and fewer still use the internet. Arab women are the most oppressed and their participation in politics and economics remains the lowest on the planet.

So, what else is new? Something quite profound and important, as it turns out. This scathing study is a work of self-assessment by a distinguished panel of Arab intellectuals and experts. Appropriately chaired by a woman, the formidable Rima Khalaf Hunaidi, former deputy prime minister of Jordan,

the panel included people such as Antoine Zahlan, the well-known expert on science and technology in the Middle East, Mervat Badawi of the Arab Fund and Nader Fergany, a leading development expert.

Even more important, they place the blame for these problems squarely on Arab states themselves. They make short shrift of the scapegoat theories so common in Arab self-justification.

The authors acknowledge that Israeli occupation of Arab lands has stunted Arab development “in every conceivable way”. But they move on quickly to assert that the Palestinian issue has been turned into a wide-ranging excuse for distorting the development agenda, retarding political development and suppressing freedoms of thought and action.

The overwhelming burden of this report concerns three “deficits” that keep the Arabs trapped in their own malaise: freedom, gender and knowledge. The only notion of governance that Arab rulers seem to entertain is ruthless oppression. The state takes every opportunity to marginalise political participation and undermine civil society.

The Arabs have turned gender bias into a major ideology. In some oil-rich states, women are treated as objects of contempt; half the women in the Arab world can’t read or write. Death during childbirth is double that of Latin America, four times that of east Asia.

Investments in science and technology are unheard of. There is a ridiculous overemphasis on religion, but the historic tradition of religion prompting creative thinking is as dead as the dodo.

The report contains the usual UNDP-type recommendations: seek economic growth, create full employment, build human capabilities—conventional development rubbish. Its real

import lies in challenging the Arabs to address basic issues directly. But the diagnosis of an absence of a genuine Arab body politic begs the questions of how, where and when, reform can take place.

And what of the western powers? Are they not most comfortable with authoritarian regimes and the cheap oil they guarantee? Still, if such self-critical reflection takes a foothold in the Arab world, we will all have real reasons for hope.

Foreigners in Saudi Arabia: Club Sandwiches, Car Bombs and Catharsis

Du December/January 2002/03 121–123

When I was first invited to come and work in Saudi Arabia, I felt as though I had won the lottery. It was the height of the oil-boom years in the late seventies, and I was going to join the newly established Hajj Research Centre at the King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah. Saudi Arabia is, after all, the land of the two holiest cities of Islam: Mecca, the prime focus of every Muslim during daily prayers, the site of the Sacred Mosque with the Holy Kaaba—the ‘House of Allah’—and the goal of hajj, the pilgrimage that every Muslim must undertake at least once in his or her lifetime; and Medina, the city where the Prophet Muhammad laid the foundations of the Muslim civilisation. The emotional content of the words ‘Mecca’ and ‘Medina’ on a young Muslim looking for his first job cannot be measured on any human scale. I thought I was going to an Islamic paradise.

When Muslim expatriates first arrive in Saudi Arabia, they go straight to Mecca and Medina. While walking in the streets of Mecca, praying in the Sacred Mosque, going round and round the Kaaba, and travelling from Mecca to Medina to spend a few days in ‘the company of the Prophet’, they confirm

that Saudi Arabia is indeed a special place: a place where outsiders, even pilgrims and devout Muslims, are not welcome. Far from the vision of Qur'anic beauty that they bring with them, the expatriates discover that Mecca and Medina are in fact hideously ugly cities. Far from being gracious and generous, most of their inhabitants are greedy and reserved. Far from being hospitable and humble, many Saudis are excruciatingly arrogant and spiteful. Not surprisingly, this comes as somewhat of a shock: but even bigger shocks are yet to come.

Most Muslims, whatever 'School of Thought' they subscribe to, or sectarian branch they belong to, know one thing about Islam: Islam insists on absolute equality, all men and women, rich and poor, whatever their colour or creed, are equal in the sight of God. 'There is no superiority', as the Prophet Muhammad said in the sermon delivered on his Farewell Pilgrimage, 'of an Arab over a non-Arab'. In Saudi Arabia, the expatriate discovers, the Saudis are superior to everybody; and the scale of superiority moves, in careful graduation, from Arabs to non-Arabs, taking race and wealth into full consideration.

We called it the 'Saudi sandwich'—in fact, a large, multi-layered club sandwich. The top layers of the sandwich is occupied by the Royal family, the rulers of a quasi-totalitarian dynastic state based on the absolute supremacy of a single clan, the Al Saud. Right next to the Royal family, and often quite indistinguishable from them, are the wealthy families such as Bin Ladins, Bughshans, Al-Shaikhs and the Al-Turkis—all of whom are often related to the Royal family through marriage or connected to it through some convoluted way involving business deals, loyalty oaths and other tribal rituals. At the bottom layer of the sandwich we find the poor Bedouin Saudis, and the even poorer Yemenis who want to be Saudis. Most of

these work as *farashs*, being caretakers, gate-keepers and tea makers.

Between the two layers of 'Saudi bread' are the expatriates, also arranged in strict hierarchal order. At the top, just underneath the privileged Saudi families, are the Americans, commanding the highest salaries and perks. Underneath the Americans, came an assortment of Europeans: British, Germans, French, Swiss and Scandinavians. During my stay in the Kingdom, and right till the end of the eighties, when Saudi Arabia was still a rich country, the western expatriates enjoyed a luxurious, carefree lifestyle. They came for money, sunshine and the renowned whiskey-driven (illegal) parties—and got the lot. In the specially built expatriate compounds, lavish 'dos', where smuggled alcohol was aplenty and European nurses always in attendance, were a common sight. There were regular trips to the desert to party all night under the stars. As a British expatriate, I was able to attend a few of these parties and well remember their happy colonial atmosphere. 'Are you married or do you work in Saudi Arabia?' was a frequent question people jokingly asked.

What the American and Europeans seldom noticed was that the non-white foreigners had a totally different status and lifestyle in the Kingdom. In the Saudi sandwich, the Egyptians and the Palestinians were placed well beneath the western expatriates. They were superior to Pakistani, Indians and Bangladeshis because they spoke Arabic, which also enabled them to get close to the Saudis and become their leading functionaries. On the whole, the Subcontinental expatriates performed menial office jobs. Beneath expatriates from the Subcontinent came all the rest of the varied hired help: the Filipinos, contracted either as labourers or as maids; the South Koreans who built most of the road networks and were

confined to their special quarters; and the *takrunis*, or blacks, Africans mainly from Ethiopia, Somalia and the Sudan, who came for pilgrimage and stayed, often illegally.

The Saudi treatment of foreigners has both a religious and a racist dimension. White expatriates were looked up to while black African immigrants are openly despised. It is a common sight in Mecca to see Saudis emerging from the Sacred Mosque after prayer, worry beads in hand, cursing the *takruni* men and women, covered head to toe in a black *abaya* in scorching heat, who beg just outside. A Saudi in position of authority will talk to his Indian and Pakistani staff with disdain; but will show due respect and decorum to a westerner. There is also the distinction between ordinary whites and white converts to Islam. White converts have a slightly higher status because they prove the superiority of Islam. In contrast, the Asian foreigners who are not Muslim are openly despised. It is not an uncommon sight to see a Hindu Indian or a Christian Filipino harassed into converting. And many a Saudi patriarch considers a Filipino maid—foreign, non-Muslim, woman—to be fair game for everything from beatings to sex.

So non-European expatriates, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, learn very quickly that xenophobia and racism are intrinsic to the Saudi brand of ultra-orthodox conservatism. This xenophobia is actually enshrined in the legal framework of the Kingdom. The labour laws, for example, define the foreigner as intrinsically untrustworthy and someone to be watched at all time. Before an expatriate can enter Saudi Arabia, he or she has to be tied to a *vakeel*, ostensibly a representative, someone who would look after their interests in the kingdom but also watch over them and control their movements. The work visa is actually issued to the employer, who is often the *vakeel* of the expatriate. The foreigner cannot leave or enter the country

without the permission of the *vakeel*; or indeed, move within the Kingdom without the consent of the *vakeel*.

In my case this was King Abdul Aziz University, an institution with a modicum of rules and regulations, which provided some safeguard for its employees. But in many cases the *vakeel* is a small firm, or worse an individual businessman. In such circumstances, the relationship between a *vakeel* and his employer is essentially that of a master and a slave. Not just that the *vakeel* has total control over his foreign employee, but the expatriate has virtually no rights. The *vakeel* can, and often does, exploit the foreign worker in every possible way. And there is no higher authority of appeal to: the utterance of the Saudi *vakeel* is sacrosanct; the word of the expatriate is by definition unreliable and unworthy of attention.

Throughout my five year stint in Saudi Arabia, and during many trips to the Kingdom since then, I have seen and heard stories of exploitation that defy all notions of humanity. I have seen grown men cry and grovel before their *vakeels* simply to be allowed to go and see their families back home after years of service. I have known a Bangladeshi men who died in an accident in a cement factory, was unceremoniously buried within hours of his death, while his wife, confined alone to her house, waited for weeks for her husband to return—the *vakeel* did not deem it necessary to inform her of the tragedy let alone provide some compensation. I have witnessed Saudis scolding, abusing, and beating their Asian workers as though they were slaves. Which, in fact, in the minds of many Saudis, they are!

The western foreigners were, on the whole, oblivious to all this. They had real (western type) contracts with real money and real respect. But after the Gulf War, when the Saudi love affair with America began to turn sour, the European expatriate lifestyle began to wither away. Suddenly, Saudi Arabia ceased

to be a rich country. The Gulf War cost the Kingdom an estimated \$100 billion, the tab paid to the US. The average per capita income fell, from its peak in 1981 of around \$30,000 to less than \$6000. The Saudis reacted by venting their anger at the bottom layer of the sandwich: one million Yemeni workers were expelled, half a million Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi employees were summarily dismissed from their job and rudely deported. But this did not stop unemployment, particularly amongst young Saudis, from rising sharply to around 30 percent.

Towards the mid-nineties, western foreigners began to be treated like the non-western expatriates: with contempt and open hostility.

During a recent visit to the Kingdom, I found many of my western expatriate friends living in abject fear. The overindulgent atmosphere around the expatriate compound, so prevalent during the seventies and eighties, has given way to a shroud of dull sombreness. Jolly parties and rowdy trips to the desert have disappeared; even the family picnic is nowhere to be seen. Many have abandoned the old compounds, which tend to be without private parking, in the centre of Jeddah and Riyadh and moved into purpose built sites on the outskirts of the cities. No one goes out at night. And even during the day, a white face generates abuse and scorn from the passers by. I was horrified to see a group of Saudi youth throwing stones at a couple of European women shopping in the more affluent part of Jeddah as though they were leading some kind of intifada.

When people do go out, they prefer to take a taxi rather than drive. In a country where shopping is the only entertainment, most western shops are conspicuously empty.

'Danger lurks everywhere', a friend who has been living in Saudi Arabia for the last thirty years told me. 'Our phones are

tapped; our movements are monitored. And we have become the target of bomb attacks'. The bombing campaign started in 1998 but it was a series of explosions in Riyadh and the eastern city of Al Khobar between November 2000 and March 2001 that proved a turning point. The authorities blamed—as is their want—the westerners themselves. Or, more specifically, the blame was laid squarely on a 'bootlegging war' between rivals groups of expatriates involved in illicit production of alcohol. Five British and a Canadian were arrested; tortured as a matter of routine, and their confessions were broadcast on state television.

Yet, the bombings continued. And the terrified westerners have received no help from the police. Indeed, the police now does to western expatriates what it had always done to the émigrés from the Indian Subcontinent and the illegal workers from Africa: it locks them up first and asks questions later. 'I don't know', my friend confessed, 'whether we are more afraid of the young terrorists or the police. They are determined to deny the existence of the domestic terrorists. If we report anything to the police, we are likely to be locked up ourselves and forced to confess'.

So the western expatriates are constantly on the look out for bombs. In the bins, in the streets, in the shops, and most of all: under cars. Cars are checked routinely and thoroughly when it becomes necessary to drive. A US embassy circular issued privately to American citizens spells it out: 'A through inspection of your vehicle, both interior and exterior, is strongly advised. Inspection should include use of flash-light to search underneath the car and checking under the hood and in the trunk. Know you car well'.

Islam is all about knowing yourself as a human being. 'We have created you male and female, and have made you nations

and tribes so that you may know one another', says the Qur'an (49:13). The Saudis recite the Qur'an *ad nauseam* but its spirit and spiritual contents seldom touches their emotional cords. In their excessive zeal to be guardians of their brand of hyper-orthodox Islam, they have forgotten how to be human. When I first went to Saudi Arabia I thought I will discover a new level of humanity, a new, unparalleled appreciation of the dignity of difference. Instead, I encountered the type of xenophobia that I had only read about in history books. I realised then that the days of the Kingdom are numbered. I know now, after witnessing the Kingdom's treatment of foreigners, that the Saudi state is on the verge of implosion.

Nothing left to belong to

New Statesman

25th February 2002

We are in the middle of an identity crisis, not just in Britain but throughout the world. Most of us do not know who or what we really are. Some have impossibly romanticised notions of what they should be: they cling to an imagined “heritage”, subscribe to the preservation of an unchanging “tradition”, and are ready to kill and be killed to save some “essence” of idealised identity. Others have abandoned the very idea of a fixed identity: they change their identity with as much ease as they change their jacket.

Identity is being contested everywhere. Britain puzzles over whether to become more American or more European. For much of the 20th century, American identity was shaped in opposition to a “communist bloc”. Since the end of the cold war, the United States has cast eagerly around for new enemies, such as bankrupt and starving North Korea, or “the Chinese menace”. This explains why, after 11 September, Americans so readily accepted President Bush’s declaration of a new and unending “war” on terrorism. The collapse of the Soviet Union has produced a plethora of artificial, feuding identities, pitting Azerbaijanis against Armenians, Chechens against Russians,

Kazakhs of one kind against Kazakhs of another. The Balkans has just gone through one of the most brutal balkanisations of identities in all its history. In the Muslim world, traditionalists and modernists have been engaged in battles over what constitutes true Islamic identity for decades. And the very idea of being “white” has now become so problematic that “whiteness” is studied as an academic discipline in its own right.

To “know thyself”, as Socrates put it, is both a fundamental human urge and a basic question in philosophy. Having some idea of who or what we are helps us to determine how we ought to live and conduct our daily affairs. A little self-knowledge also provides us with a little coherence in our metaphysical and moral outlook. But in a rapidly globalising world, all those things that provided us with a sense of confidence in ourselves—nation states with homogenous populations, well-established local communities, allegiance to history and tradition—are being challenged.

The sources of our identity have been made meaningless. England is no longer the sole preserve of “the English”. The history and tradition that are associated with “Englishness”—the empire, the House of Lords, fox-hunting, the national anthem—either have disappeared or are under threat. They mean nothing to the vast majority of new English who now live in England. And Englishness is threatened, too, by the emergence of a new European identity, which is itself an amalgam of countless other cultural identities.

While the foundations of identity are cracking everywhere, the shifting context adds another layer of perplexity. Identity is a label, a tool kit, a compass bearing. It permits us not only to find ourselves, but to discern similarity and/or difference in everyone else. When the foundations of our identity crack we

lose not only the sense of who we are, but a sense of how we connect to all other identities. All labels become confusing, multiple and problematic.

Think of the common label “black”. It has no global connotation; there is no universal black identity. Being black has different meanings in different places. In New York, being black is a mark of difference from the whites, the Italians, the Irish, the Hispanics. It is also a symbol of being cool. In Nigeria, it is not important whether you are black or white but whether you are Yoruba rather than Hausa; the only way you can be cool is to be totally westernised. In Jeddah, nothing is cool, and what really matters is not whether you are black or brown but whether you are a member of the royal family. In Cape Town, to be black is, almost by definition, to be confused: once excluded, now technically empowered, blacks are still marginalised by a society that created and continues to operate a system of practical exclusion.

It is not just our racial, religious and national identities that are under question. What does it mean, for example, to be a “mother” in a world where *in vitro* fertilisation and surrogate motherhood are becoming common? What happens to conventional ideas of parenthood in the case of the French baby “constructed” from the egg of a 62-year-old woman, with the help of sperm from her brother, and “incubated” in a surrogate mother? What does it mean to be a “wife” in a homosexual marriage? Or “old”, when you have rebuilt your 65-year-old body through plastic surgery and look like a young starlet?

Identity, then, has become a perilous notion. It is multiple and ever-changing. And the most fundamental change is this: all those other categories through which we in the west defined and measured ourselves—the “evil Orientals”, the “fanatical

Muslims”, the “inferior races of the colonies”, the immigrants, the refugees, the gypsies—are now an integral part of ourselves. It is not just that “they” are “here” but their ideas, concepts, lifestyles, food, clothes now play a central part in shaping “us” and “our society”. We thus have no yardstick to measure our difference and define ourselves.

People have to ask themselves: how much of the Other is actually located within me? The quest for identity is essentially an attempt to answer this frightening question. And it is the fear of the answer that transforms, in the words of Amin Maalouf, the Lebanese-French novelist, “a perfectly permissible aspiration”—to form a secure identity—into “an instrument of war”. This transformation occurs through three basic associations.

The first of these is the conventional association of identity with power and territory. America, for example, began as a new world empty of a meaningful past and ready for migrants who would build an identity based on power over a new territory. But it was only hyphenated Americans—Italian-Americans, German-Americans, Polish-Americans, Irish-Americans—who were offered the American dream of inclusion and opportunity; only hyphenated Americans have ever made it to the White House. Other Americans—blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans—are “ethnics”; outsiders who are regarded as problematic and different. Asians, too, are ethnics. Japanese Americans were the only people interned as “enemies within” during the Second World War; it was unthinkable that any such action should be taken against German-Americans or Italian-Americans.

For the British, hierarchies of race and class, derived from power over territory in an empire that spanned the world, are crucial. The British identity is based on an assumption of

authority that makes the world a familiar place, a proper theatre in which to continue being British. It allows the British to be simultaneously xenophobic, internationalist and parochial: the sort of people who go on Spanish holidays to eat fish and chips and drink warm bitter. It produced a class that took a peculiar kind of internationalism for granted: the “old India hands”, the “Africa men and women”, all urbane cosmopolitans who knew Johnny Foreigner better than they knew themselves.

The problem with identity as power and control over territory is what happens when power wanes. Johnny Foreigner is now within; the ethnics are demanding the American dream. Power has been debunked, denounced and vilified. Does all that identifies the self go down the plughole with it? How can we be comfortable with accepting as part of our identity people previously regarded as villains? Which leads us to the second association: in order to exclude the unsavoury foreigners, we have to anchor our identity in romanticised history and frozen tradition.

Collective identity is based on the selective processes of memory. British identity was the acknowledgement of a common past. But history is a deliberate human creation, itself another wilful act of power, artificially constructed to support an artificial identity. Europe engineered a cultural identity based on a common descent from the supposed traditions of ancient Greece and Rome and 2,000 years of Christianity. In the textbooks, British history always began with the arrival of the Romans, and thus submerged, barbarised and differentiated itself from Celtic history. Celt and Welsh are words whose linguistic roots (the one Greek, the other Saxon) mean “stranger”. Yet Britain, as its new history, written in the age of devolution, records, does not have a shared past but a record of continuous contest and conflict. Britain is the creation of

dominance by kings and barons and upwardly mobile yeomen who practised colonialism at home and who, after perfecting the technique, moved abroad. Significantly, Ulstermen marching with fife and drum regard themselves as more British than the British. As they so often tell us, the marching season, with its demonstration of dominance, is the very essence of their culture.

It really is quite astonishing how much of Britishness and, by association, Englishness is based on fabricated history. Consider the whole notion of Anglo-Saxon Britain, and the importance of Anglo-Saxon history and literature at the older English universities. But the Anglo-Saxon heritage is a very minor part of British history and it is designed to bury what is really a European identity. The British have not been ruled by the Anglo-Saxons for nearly a millennium. The Norman kings—who hardly ever spent time in Britain, who spoke French rather than English, and who were most concerned with dominating Europe from their French possessions—were followed by the Welsh Tudors and Scots Stuarts, and then by a succession of imported Dutch and German monarchs.

History always seeks ancient roots, the better to justify its innovations. Ancient Anglo-Saxon liberties were purposely invented on a number of occasions, notably by Oliver Cromwell, who insisted that those liberties rested on property-owning. The pomp and ceremony of the British monarchy were a late-Victorian invention. The royal family as the model, normative family and ideal for a nation was a post-Edwardian invention; Victoria's son Edward was hardly a model husband and father.

The notions of race and class are intrinsic to the self-definition of the English. As despairing Tories demonstrated in the 2001 election campaign, without the idea of race, there

is little left for English identity to hold on to. As recently as 1940, George Orwell could state that “when you come back to England from any foreign country, you have immediately the sensation of breathing different air”. Identity as difference is less easy to define in a world awash with globalisation, whose most notable feature is rampant Americanisation. Where is the British sandwich? McDonald’s, Starbucks, pizza parlours, doner kebab, chicken tikka masala, the rise of ciabatta and the *pret a manger* syndrome have transmuted the air that Orwell breathed into wafts of everyone else’s fragrant confections. “How shall we eat tonight?”—meaning shall we eat Chinese, Indian, Italian, Vietnamese or whatever?—is a very English question, one not asked in Italy, Greece, France or Spain.

And the constant need to choose has become a very basic element of being British. Do we embrace the global Americanisation of the high street, the merchandised model of individualism, the free-market identity of buying into who you want to be in terms of dress, sex and politics? Or do we follow the European model of capitalism, with its emphasis on collective social welfare and high-quality public services?

So we arrive at the third association: the negotiation of identity between the alternate poles of desire and death. As the American scholar Cornel West has suggested, we construct our identities from the building blocks of our basic desires: desire for recognition, quest for visibility, the sense of being acknowledged, a deep desire for association. We long to belong. All these desires are expressed by symbols—pomp and ceremony, marches, festivals, national monuments and anthems, cricket and football teams, and so on. But in a world where symbols are all we are, all we have, holding on to these symbols becomes a matter of life and death. It is for the glorification of these symbols that the bloody tale of national

history is written and enacted in the campaigns of nationalists everywhere around the world.

Identity not only invokes the desire to be different, it also summons the desire to express similarity. Indeed, there can be no difference without similarity. But similarity is always seen as the opposite pole to difference, as the appeal of making everyone the same. It is often posed as “our” similarity against “their” difference. Once, the doctrine of similarity was the underlying principle of the communist ethos: now it has become essential to the internationalist-libertarian-individualist doctrine that underpins globalisation. “Workers of the world unite” has been replaced by “liberal capitalism is the only way”. Such championing of similarity can become war on those who fight to maintain their difference. Similarity in such contests becomes an ethos to die for.

If we are to come to terms with our contemporary crisis of identity, we need to transcend simplicities. We can celebrate difference, but we do not need to demonise it. We can desire similarity, but not homogeneity. We can value traditions and customs but, if they do not adapt, they become instruments of oppression. Identity has historic anchors but it is not fixed to a limited, unchanging set of traditional signs and historic symbols. Identity is not what we buy, or what we choose, or what we impose on others; rather, it is something from which we learn how to live, discover what is worth buying, and appreciate what it is to be different.

We need to recover our confidence in identity as the product of various and diverse traditions. We need to move away from the politics of contested identities that heighten artificial differences and towards acceptance of the plasticity and possibilities of identities that focus on our common humanity.

Living identity, as opposed to the fossilised to-die-for variety, is in constant flux. It is an ever-changing balance, the balance of similarities and differences as a way of locating what it is that makes life worth living, and what connects us with the rest of the changing world. The challenge is to change and yet remain the same.

Same Again...

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Something that is of concern to me is 'sameness'. We have become more monolithic and this is a problem. The things that cause stress, the things that we never pay attention to, the things that are part of our subconscious, the things that are moving our lives, the things that dominant our lives—all of these things have been remade in the image of a single civilisation. The power of the West has not been power in terms of economic might, in terms of military might, in terms of technology, in terms of science. The power of the West—and the only power that really matters these days—is the power to define. It is the West that has defined what it is to be a human being, what it is to be free, what it is to be civil society, what it is to be a city, what it is to have knowledge and what knowledge is. Given the fact that all the definitions come from a single culture, it is not surprising that the world begins to resemble that single culture. Wherever you go, you find the same culture. Have you noticed how every single airport looks like every other airport? Go to the duty free shops and they are

selling the same cigarettes, they are selling the same perfume, same radios, same CDs. Why? Because there's only one kind of technology that builds airports and that technology builds airports the way they are built. That's why all airports look exactly the same.

Similarly, cities are beginning to look more and more the same. You can go from one end of the world to another and you will discover that the cities don't change very much. Suppose you went to the sacred city of Makkah which is sacred to 1.2 billion Muslims. It is the city that the Prophet Muhammad walked on. It is a city with great history, great cultural property. It is a history with incredible geology and landscape. What does an average pilgrim—who has to go to pilgrimage like most Muslims must go on pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in their life—when he or she arrives in Makkah discover? He or she discovers that Makkah looks like Houston. Alternately, he or she can go to Houston and discover that Houston looks like Makkah. Because cities, in terms of the way they are thought and built, the way they are structured, now come from the same perception of what it is to be human.

What is of concern to me is that the West's conventional power is now being appropriated by the United States of America. Where once the West defined how things should be, it is now only the United States defining how things should be. In this context, it becomes a matter of expediency and commodification. So the definitions change according to the dictates of politics and markets. For example, take Islamic Law: it is supposedly anti-human rights in Sudan because Sudan has a very aggressive, anti-American foreign policy; but the same law in Saudi Arabia, which has a very aggressive pro-American foreign policy, suddenly becomes humane. Almost everything is defined in purely expedient terms—in terms of what is

expedient and useful for America—and almost everything must be commodified in American terms. That is why, wherever we go, we find the same commodities: because whatever cannot be commodified cannot be found in the shopping malls or airports.

We can't get away from this sameness and we can't get away from this American sameness. Some years ago I found myself in the city of Kuala Lumpur where most of my Malay friends kept complaining that the city was shrinking. I couldn't understand why they were saying that. As far as I could see, the city was getting bigger, at least bigger in size. I could see that the city was getting slower because there were more and more cars and no one seemed to be going anywhere. Everybody was driving these very fast cars which were capable of speeds of 120 miles per hour although not in the streets of Kuala Lumpur. If you could drive at 10 miles per hour, that was a major success. It took me some time to discover that what they meant when they said the city was shrinking, was that the cultural space within the city was shrinking. All those things that they identified with as Malay cultures were disappearing and being replaced by 'identi-kit' American things. It seemed that someone had bought a job lot of architect plans from an American city and the whole city looked like any American city. Everybody was building those condos in exactly the same design. Then the shopping malls arrived and they started selling the same things you find in any other place. Conventional businesses were destroyed and standard American-style products flooded in. Local programming on television started to disappear. It used to be 70% or 80% and then it comprised only 5% of programming. Almost everything on television including the advertisements is from America.

So I challenged my journalist friends to tell me if there was anywhere in the world where I could get away from this sameness and where there was no influence of it. They suggested the deepest rainforests of Borneo as a place to go to get away from all this. This is what I did, travelling with friends. So after travelling by plane, four wheel drive and boat, we finally arrived at a long house where 42 families lived, perched on a mountain. We were greeted with exceptional warmth and gave them biscuits—typical white men stuff—which were then divided into 42 parts and placed outside the 42 rooms in which the families lived. It was pitch dark and we were walking in the dark. In the morning, they made soap and grew chillis and all sorts of wonderful things. For three days it was heaven. I thought I had discovered utopia in this long house.

After three days, the head man with whom I had become very friendly asked me how long I planned to stay. So I said I might stay a couple of weeks. He looked exceptionally depressed. I suggested that we could leave tomorrow if there was a problem. So he said that if I allowed them to be themselves to some extent, then I could stay as long as I liked. I asked, 'what do you mean?' He said 'this may be the middle of the jungle in Borneo but we actually have electricity'. He explained that they had a generator. So they turned on the generator and the whole house flooded with light. In the light, I saw many things that I hadn't seen before because it was perpetually dark. All the families came out and sat in the middle of the long house and we talked for 20 minutes or a half hour until someone asked if they could watch television. They rolled the television out and we watched CNN for a while, then MTV and then Channel [V] which came out of India. After about an hour, the head man said, 'this is not working at all. We want to watch a film.' Apparently, a man would come up the river in a

boat and would rent them videos. I was invited to watch one of several videos with them. So I sat back and we all watched *Terminator*.

You simply can't get away from this sameness. It's not just the outskirts of Borneo. Have you looked how many Americans and American type folks people the universe? Look at space, the final frontier—Star Trek—almost everybody there comes from the American Academy of How to be Wonderfully White. All the villains are almost always from European history. The Klingons are basically Saracens. In *Voyager*, for example, you have the Borg who assimilate everything and are technological. These are the Japanese. According to these representations of space and the future, the universe is populated by white Americans and villains who are hell bent on destroying Americans, such as in the film, *Independence Day*. Every single film you watch, you see weird aliens. When these American-type guys go to the outer universe, they never meet a Ghandi or a Mandela. Outer space, like the space of this planet, reflects the paranoia of American and Western civilisation and is full of sameness. This suggests to me a failure of imagination.

I would like to put to you a proposition: the universe we have created, this universe of sameness, is not worth living in. Surely there must be other lives we can create and surely there are other universes we can imagine.

Let me conclude with a story which is found in the books of school children in Pakistan. In the story a man is walking. He is walking by a wall and the wall collapses on the man and he dies. The town folk are very upset and want to punish someone. They go to their king and explain what has happened to him. The king says 'find the man who built the wall'. So they find this poor guy who built the wall and the king says, 'hang him for killing an innocent man'. So the wall builder

says 'It is not my fault that the wall fell down. When I was making the wall, the cement had too much water in it. Because the cement was so thin, I couldn't make a strong wall. So it's not my fault at all.' So the king says to find the cement maker and hang him. So they go and find the cement mixer and before he's about to be hanged, he says 'It is not my fault that the cement was thin. While I was mixing the cement, this very fat man was walking around whistling. His whistling distracted me and I accidentally put too much water into the cement. It's the fault of that fat man.' So the king says to find the fat man and hang him. So they find the fat guy and he happens to be very fat. The gallows have the same crafting as the wall. So when the fat man goes to the gallows, they collapse. So the king asks what kind of weight the gallows can hold. They calculate that what's left of the gallows will hold a very thin man. The king says to find a very thin man and hang him. They find a poor starving man, catch him and hang him.

This story basically says that you deserve the leaders you get. Why should we blame Bush? Why should we blame Blair? Why should we blame Howard? It is our fault, we put them there. Essentially, the crunch comes back to us and that at the end of the day, the responsibility for change lies with us.

The other proposition I would like to put to you is that everything needs to be changed. If everything is the same, in the image of a single civilisation and increasingly in the image of a single culture, then clearly we need to change everything. And I mean everything: the economic system, the structure of power, how we define knowledge, how disciplines are shaped. These are all fabricated, artificial constructions—all of it has to change.

In the contemporary postmodern world everything is connected to everything else. So you, as an individual, are not

an individual but a node of power in a web of human relationships. If you understood that, then you have the power to change everything you want to change. We are perpetually brought to the edge of chaos. Things are moving so fast, there's no time to adjust. There are many feedback loops and the thing to know about feedback is that things build up very quickly. If you knew you were a node in a network in which there's feedback, you can take society to the edge of chaos and maybe transform it. One of the best examples of that is the anti-globalisation demonstration in Seattle and another is the Truckers' Strike in London which I spent some time analysing. The truckers wanted petrol prices to go down and the government told them that nothing could be done. So the truckers went on strike. They had no leader but they worked as a network with mobile phones and the internet. They started their strike at one refinery and blockaded that. When the country started to use a second refinery, they moved very quickly and blockaded that too. Everybody panicked and started buying more and more petrol, queues were getting longer and the feedback loop continued. There was no leader for the government to demonise and within 10 days they brought the country to a halt. I do believe that if they had not stepped back then, there would have been a major crisis in Britain. So individuals do have power but they have to realise how that power can be used. As long as individuals think they are just an atom, the problem remains. They need to think they are part of a network.

In conversation with Rachel Kohn and others

RK: I would have thought the universality of airport technology has at least done one thing for us. It's made flight, or at least

landing, safer. You've got to concede that some uniformity has been pretty good for the world. In fact, it wouldn't have been taken up quite so quickly had it not been so successful.

ZS: I think you are confusing standards with sameness. Yes, we do need standards. Things have to be done to certain standards and standards are, in some cases, universal and they have to be followed to maintain quality and safety. But standards and sameness are quite different things. You can build airports to the same standards but they don't have to look the same or sell the same consumer products.

The new technologies—information technology, biotechnology—that's where the major risks lie. Just imagine, for example, the way capital moves now. In a second, you can have billions of dollars going from one bank to another bank. Every time I want to transfer some cash, my bank takes four weeks. Why is it that in an electronic age, the banks always take so long but markets can move capital very fast? Conventionally, of course, in a market situation, decisions were made by real human beings but now computers are programmed to buy and sell and things can go out of sync very quickly. That's why we've had so many near meltdown situations in the last 10 to 15 years.

There are incredible risks in genetic engineering—I don't have to go into that. These are very complex things. We are redefining what it means to be human. We are redefining what is death. We are redefining the body. We are redefining what is birth, a human baby. Recently, in London, a mother had a baby for her son. That is mind-boggling complexity—the ethical dimensions. The risks of that are quite incredible.

RK: The extreme end of things is always bizarre but let me ask you about the uniformity that you have been positing. I

find it fascinating that this uniformity can be found precisely at the time when something like postmodernism is the prevalent philosophy. That is, diversity and the idea that there is no single truth of way of going about anything can be found precisely at the same time as the spread of uniformity. I can't help seeing tons of diversity in this uniform West.

ZS: If you were to visit a shopping mall—say a shopping mall in Singapore, a shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur, a shopping mall in Karachi, a shopping mall in San Jose—you will discover they are built in more or less the same way and almost all the shops are the same. They sell more or less the same items. In some cases, you get a little nod to the local culture. Even though there can be nods to localness, the sameness is still there. All modern cities are built on a grid. Islamabad is a wonderful place built across hills. They wanted to build Islamabad as a modern city. They cut down the top of the mountains and put a grid in and a number of big streets. It looks like any other city. That's exactly what they have done to the holy cities of Makkah and Medina. They removed the geological space and flattened it—this has a great history and sacred nature—and just put straight roads in. It is the same performed sameness that is part of the perception of the way we look: there's something wrong with the way we are looking. We seem to be looking in the same way, in the same direction. We never look in a different way. We never imagine other ways of building cities, other ways of planning, other ways of doing things.

What is apparent diversity? I had an Indian meal in Melbourne. The food tasted exactly like international Indian food should because that's how international Indian food tastes wherever you go. It's almost like McDonalds. It's made for a particular kind of International palate. This kind of sameness

runs very deep in contemporary society. People who are bubbling with diversity and want to see diversity everywhere actually see diversity everywhere because that's what they want to see. When I was coming back from Kuching—that trip in Borneo—the first shop I saw in Kuching was The Body Shop. So I stopped and went in. In this Body Shop, I bought the very soap that was being made by my hosts in the long house 300 miles down the street. Now it was in a little green bottle with Body Shop written on it. Let me say that this is a traditional recipe handed down generations. Nothing is sacred and everything has been commodified including people's traditional knowledge. In India, they've taken out patents on the Neem Tree, patents on curry, most rices have already been patented. I think Basmati rice is the only rice that is left. There is a megadrive for sameness. If you focus on sameness, you see how pervasive and deep it is.

RK: I don't want to. I'll get deeply depressed. I was really touched by the scene of the electrified long house in Borneo. It sort of says to me that even deep in the jungle people will realise their dreams. If it is to have the lights on watching Terminator they are going to get it somehow.

ZS: But that is my very point—total failure of imagination. Even in the tribal imagination, we have instilled the desire that the best they can do is to watch the *Terminator*.

RK: Maybe it's a lot better than what they were going to do.

ZS: How do you know?

RK: Well that's the question—'how do we know?' Do we romanticise people in the bush, people in the jungle, people out there who we hope are going to be preserving something sacred for us that we've lost. I mean isn't that an imposition?

ZS: No. It's a question they must be able to define for themselves. It's one of the things about space I was talking about. One of the things that is missing, I think, is the cultural space, the space for self-definition. Cultures that are genuinely different from the West—in other words, are not the West—can have a self-definition of their own. Because they cannot do that, we end up with the kind of situation I described. There is no cultural space which belongs to different cultures. Almost all cultural spaces have been occupied. A good example is to compare the Raj with what is happening today. During the Raj, the average Indian would only come in contact with the British if he was involved in some administration. But when he came into his own house, it was his own culture. Nothing inside was remotely related to British ideas, culture, worldview or what have you. Nowadays you can't do that. American culture is out in the street, American foreign policy may be supporting the dictator that is ruling you and when you go inside your own house American culture is everywhere on television, the programs, in music, the internet and all the technological paraphernalia that is there. There is no place to escape from this culture. We are reduced to zero size of cultural difference and that is very serious.

RK: Now let's throw it out to the audience. You must have questions.

Q-male1: You were talking about cultural space and how America is perpetuating this sameness all around the world. When America does recede, there's going to be a huge vacuum of cultural space. Do you see any way of stopping another America emerging in this big vacuum of cultural space open to the rest of the world?

ZS: I don't think there will be a cultural space. Nature abhors a vacuum. Wherever America retreats, local cultures will take over. Just because I am saying American culture pervades and there's sameness doesn't mean that there is no resistance to American culture. The resistance to American culture is also all pervasive. Wherever you go people are trying to resist American culture in their own way. In fact, that is my challenge to folks like you as well—to go out and resist and change everything. Once America retreats, there will be lots of opportunities for local cultures to flower and maybe we will get some local cultures that will become strong enough to have a global impact.

Q-male2: So you don't think another nation will step into America's place and it will be the same cycle over again?

ZS: Not really. No. I don't think there are other powers that are the hyperpower equivalent of America. There's China, there's India, but these are not real hyperpowers either in cultural terms or military terms or technological terms. So they do not have the ability to 'take over' or replace America in that sense.

Q-male2: How long will it take for the American sameness to recede?

ZS: That depends on what we decide to do. I don't know. I am not into prediction.

Q-male2: We're living in a fool's paradise here.

ZS: Absolutely. If America lasted 200 years, I'd be astonished. I would probably think 20 or 30 years provided we are not complacent. There has to be genuine resistance.

Q-male3: You gave one example of changes we might be able to make and that was in political terms. Are there any other examples you might give us that might be in a different sphere other than a political sphere or do you think that the changes you foresee need to be primarily in the political sphere?

ZS: On the contrary, I see changes throughout all spheres of life. For example, take history. Take, for example, Australian history which is essentially the history of the white man who arrived and basically built a nation. There is another totally different perspective on Australian history, the perspective of the Australian Aborigines. Why don't we have histories totally written from the perspective of the Australian Aborigines? So many histories need to be written. The whole idea that humanity is essentially the history of western civilisation from Greek downwards—that other civilisations and cultures are regarded as small tributaries that come into this great universal history of Western civilisation—needs to be challenged very seriously. We need to write other histories from other perspectives.

Also, the whole notion of discourse—to a large extent, part of the reason we do things the way we do things is based on how we study nature. The disciplines are structured and emerge in a particular cultural milieu. They reflect the concerns of that culture. For example, anthropology exists essentially to 'anthropologise' the other, to control and maintain them. Over the past 20 to 30 years, anthropologists have tried to refine their discipline and change it so that its historic roots are severed. That doesn't actually undermine the argument I am making which is that certain disciplines have certain functions and they evolve for that function and if we are going to change the world, we will need to evolve different disciplines that are

geared towards the sort of change we desire. I am talking about all pervasive change, not just changing politics.

Q-male4: What you are calling American culture, what you are calling Western culture, seems to me to have been the compilation of human culture throughout history. The Arabs contributed the script, the Chinese contributed the gun powder, the Greek and the Romans and the various other cultures contributed along the way. What has been built from that broad base of humanity is now focused in America or on American culture. American itself is probably the principle example of everyone coming together from all over the world, bringing their contributions and we find the result is American culture. I see it as the pinnacle of the world's cultures being concentrated. What you have been describing in Borneo and elsewhere is the options that people have taken up to follow that culture. We may deplore various aspects of it. At the end of the day, are you, first of all, denying the amalgamation of all the cultures that have ever existed on this planet forming and contributing to this Western culture and are you denying the right of the people all over the world to join into that culture and be part of that culture even if, at this stage, it is more of a following than a contribution?

ZS: Absolutely. I am denying it absolutely and utterly. I am denying it with every element of my human existence. You have just summed up the problem that I am representing. Here you have the white man who comes along and says 'we are the pinnacle of human history'. Essentially, we, as white people, personify what it is to be human. There is no other truth. Our history is the history, the history of Western civilisation. That is the most obnoxious thing I can think of in terms of thought. This can only come from people who have no understanding

of Islamic history, people who have no idea of the greatness of Chinese civilisation, people who have not even bothered to learn about what makes the Aboriginal person tick. It's that kind of cultural arrogance—it's not even arrogance, it's almost a God-like thing—that I think is a problem, that is creating sameness, that is creating the unjust world that we live in. This is the world that causes me distress because of its deep structural injustice. I invite everyone to—I know I asked you to change everything—before you do anything else, to attack this thought.

RK: I find it very hard to think of American or North America as uniform and same. Going through the countries from side to side, one encounters so much difference, so many different points of view and cultures and languages. Indeed when you were talking about the speed of change, I was thinking about London and the East End and California and how California is virtually a Spanish speaking, almost a country of its own. That is, one almost imagines it breaking off from American because of its diversity and having attracted so many people that are not white, English speaking people. I wonder to what extent that magnet which seems to be the West—people are still coming to the West, people are still coming as refugees to the West—whether that does change the West. I think everyone here over 50 would look around and say 'this isn't the place I grew up in' and indeed we seem to be confronting so many waves of change in a single life. That uniformity and sameness that you talk about is hard for me to actually accept because in my own life, I have seen so much change.

ZS: The more things change, the more things stay the same. Power seems to be aggregating in fewer and fewer hands. This was the situation during the colonial period where few empires

ruled the vast majority of the world. Now we have those empires shrunk to a single empire, the great empire of the United States. In a sense, nothing has changed from the perspective of the victim. You look at it from the perspective of a nice Canadian woman who drives about in the streets in the United States. I am not saying that the United States is a monolithic entity. That is not my point. The United States is a human society and like all human societies has all shades of opinion and diversity and so forth. At the same time, there is an overarching ideology of sameness that creates the American worldview. We need to not just question that ideology we need to confront that ideology to some extent. To a very large extent, that confrontation is already beginning in America. Many Americans are aware of what is happening in their own societies. The disparity of wealth in the United States is incredible and something like 30% of American population living in the inner city lives on less than US\$8 a day ... You have unjust structures in America itself so even America's got to question what's going on. I think Americans are questioning what is going on. The peace movement was just as big in the United States as it was in Europe.

Things Traditional

From The A to Z of Postmodern Life, Vision, London, 2002

Tradition has almost become a term of abuse. It is most often associated with romantics, Luddites and chauvinists who want to keep us chained to the past. The very mention of tradition sends shivers of terror through all those who carry modernist and postmodernist heads on their shoulders.

Both modernity and postmodernism are responsible for much of the bad press that tradition and traditional societies have received.

Modernity sees traditional societies as backward, 'living in the past'. The essential principles of tradition are the cause of backwardness, just as it is in their nature to be incapable of change. Therefore the tradition of traditional societies is a major hurdle towards development and 'modernisation'. The classic texts of development all argue that tradition must be abandoned, indeed suppressed where necessary, if 'backward' societies of the 'Third World' are to develop and 'catch up with the West'.

And, in the name of development and progress, traditional cultures have been uprooted, displaced, suppressed and annihilated.

Postmodernism simply considers tradition to be dangerous; it is often associated with ‘essentialism’—that is, harking back to some puritan notion of good society that may nor may not have existed in history.

There is some truth in the postmodern assertion that traditions can be essentialist. But this traditional essentialism is itself a product of postmodern times where nothing seems to have any meaning and everything changes rapidly and perpetually. In such circumstances, it is natural for people to hold on to those things that give meaning to their lives and provide them with some unchanging sense of identity.

Traditions become essentialist in two ways. The first emerges with a self-awareness of belonging to a tradition and trying to live by it. Here a few features of the tradition are identified and insisted upon. The St. Andrew’s society of Kuala Lumpur, for example, has identified Scottish country dancing as the essential element of Scottish tradition. To attend the St. Andrew’s Annual Ball as a true Scot you have to be able to demonstrate your proficiency at the dances and veneration for the mindset of the world according to Andy Stewart. For Muslim minorities in Europe, to give another example, the female head scarf has become cardinal element of Muslim tradition. So practices which were voluntary and came naturally in the past now become acts of conscious awareness.

This sort of assertion of tradition can, of course, be seen in reverse—as a loss of tradition, a decline of confidence in one’s culture and tradition. One becomes conscious of one’s breathing only when it becomes difficult. As traditional societies begin to fear the onslaught of modernity and postmodernism, and associated loss of tradition in their own lifetime or their children’s, they begin to flaunt their traditions

more openly and aggressively. Tradition becomes the marker of one's threatened selfhood in a mass society.

The second way to make tradition essentialist is to transform it into nationalist politics. Here 'the nation' becomes synonymous with 'authentic tradition' and political expediency shapes the contents of both. It is this form of essentialist tradition—often referred to as fundamentalism—that has produced so much violence and conflict in recent times. What is fundamental about Islamic fundamentalism, for example, is that a romantic notion of Islamic tradition is essential to its vision of the state. State and tradition are fused into a single identity. Similarly, the Hindu fundamentalists, who have just narrowly won the election in India, equate romanticised Hindu tradition with being an Indian. There is no place for other traditions and cultures, including other traditions within Hinduism, in their 'Hindustan' (the indigenous name for India).

But essentialist tradition is not tradition; it is traditionalism. Traditionalism is an ideology; and, like all ideologies, it has fixed contours and functions solely to secure a slice of political power.

Traditions, on the other hand, are dynamic; they are constantly reinventing themselves and adjusting to change. Indeed, a tradition that does not change ceases to be a tradition. But traditions change in a specific way. They change within their own parameters, at their own speed, and towards their chosen direction. There is good reason for this. If traditions were to vacate the space they occupy they would cease to be meaningful. When tradition is cherished and celebrated the entire content of what is lauded can be changed. Such change is then meaningful because it is integrated and enveloped by the continuing sense of identity that tradition provides. Furthermore change can be evaluated process, a sifting of good,

better, best as well as under no circumstances, an adaptation that operates according to the values the veneration of tradition has maintained intact.

In Britain we have a good example of a very strong tradition—a tradition that has reinvented itself a number of times without losing its basic ingredients. A tradition that has playfully used the notion of authenticity to relocate itself and, in the process, rediscovered its genuine self. I am referring to the tradition of Indian restaurants.

We have a long tradition of ‘eating Indian’ in Britain. There is at least one Indian restaurant in every high street. The tradition derives from the historic British craving for curries and empire. When, around 1605, Sir Thomas Roe sought permission from the Mughal Emperor, Jahangir, to trade in India he wanted to import a whole range of curries to Britain. Over the years, curry has become something of a fetish on these isles.

When Indian restaurants first emerged in significant numbers, during the fifties and sixties, they were firmly set in a colonial tradition. Even their names suggested their colonial status—‘Indian Curry House’, ‘Cox Bazaar’ and ‘Maharajah’. These names were designed to rekindle fond memories of the empire that had recently been lost. But they also suggested that the Indian restaurants, and the curries they served, were firmly at the bottom of the league.

Moreover, colonial tradition meant that Indian restaurants were a monolithic entity: all restaurants serving food from the subcontinent of India were Indian restaurants. ‘Eating Indian’ meant eating anything that could lay a loose claim to be from the Subcontinent. Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan; Punjabi, Mughal and South Indian; vegetarian and non-vegetarian—everything was ‘Indian’, and everything was

a 'curry'. And curry is what the lads had when the pubs closed and they were looking for somewhere to vomit their intoxication. For almost half a century, the Indian restaurants put up with the most uncouth, uncivil and ignorant behaviour from their white patrons.

Then the reinvention of tradition began. The tandoor—the clay oven used for making nan and roti—was dragged from the Subcontinent and proudly displaced in the high streets of Britain. Real Indian restaurants did not serve curry but food cooked in a tandoor. The names changed too. Tandoori restaurants had names like 'Taj Mahal', 'Agra' and 'The Red Fort'. These invoked images of the rich history and tradition of Indian civilisation. The names were a reclamation of history that had been masked by British pretensions to possession of empire.

But rescuing the tradition of Indian restaurants from colonial moorings was not enough. They had to be placed within their own diverse traditions of the Subcontinent. In the next phase of reinventing tradition, a new dimension was added. Varieties of Indian ethnicities were emphasised and the karahi, the Urdu/Hindi word for wok, became the symbol of authenticity. Authentic Indian restaurants not only cooked their food in a karahi they also served it in a small karahi as a demonstration that genuine authenticity was being brought to the table! The names changed once again to reveal not only infusion of new ethnicities but also a certain self-confidence that invites Indians to eat Indian complete with their families (grandmothers and grandchildren welcomed): 'Lahore Karahi', 'Ravi Kebab House', and 'Bombay Brassiere'.

Next, the reinvented tradition had to be relocated on a different plane. To achieve this a totally daring invention had to be made. Today, all authentic Indian restaurants boast balti

cuisine. Indeed, balti cuisine has become so popular that many supermarkets now sell their own brand of ready made balti dishes. But there is no such thing as balti cuisine; there never has been. A balti is a receptacle, a pitcher, a vessel, a pail of the kind once used by Jack and Jill to fetch water. In India it is put to numerous uses. It can be used to carry water for washing, taking a bath and may even be used to flush the old fashioned squatting lavatory. The roles and uses of the balti are as numerous and as diverse as Indian civilisation itself. But one thing the balti has never been used for is to cook food. Maybe because it is too deep, too wide, too rough and too undisciplined for the preparation of such a varied and sophisticated cuisine.

The selling of balti as a renovated traditional and authentic 'Indian' has been an effective method for the Indian restaurant to relocate itself to a more august station. It has also been a symbol of resistance. When the Indian restaurants were associated with colonial tradition, they resisted by simply exploiting the ignorance of the white patrons. Curry you want; curry you get: the same curry was served with different labels. So someone eating rogan gosht, chicken masala or prawn curry was eating exactly the same thing with different bits of meat! (Well, if you can't tell the difference between a curry and a bhindi, and in any case if you are going to smother the flavour with tons of chillies in the mistaken belief that all Indian food must be very, very hot, and drown it with gallons of beer, you deserve what you get!) By the time the balti arrived, Indian restaurants had reinvented themselves as sophisticated purveyors of traditional Indian cuisine. So the humble balti was used to give a more elite representation to Indian restaurants enabling balti cuisine to sit among the cordon bleu pots of western postmodern civilisation.

In reinventing their own tradition, through both conscious and unconscious processes, Indian restaurants have achieved several feats that demonstrate the qualities of life enhancing tradition. They have demonstrated that traditions change and transform and even adjust to market demands. It is clear that in the transformation of the balti's role, balti itself played no active part. In its native land it still does all those many things that it has done for centuries, but in its new incarnation it has become a pot that competes in the marketplace to satisfy the increasing need for innovative hype and authenticity. They have also, in arriving at their latest culturally legitimate state, performed a genuinely authentic miracle: they have cosmopolitanised and humanised a very parochial and sanitised people, the British. And quite apart from the getting rid of the flock wallpaper, they have discovered their true selves. Today, restaurants from the Indian subcontinent have changed their names to indicate certain authenticity of expression, a certain earthiness, a self-confidence of having arrived. The names now incorporated Urdu/Indian words: 'Jalabi Junction', 'Café Laziz' and 'Karahi Master'. The cooking area in many of these restaurants, whether upmarket or more humble, is part of the dinning experience, providing traditional assurance not just of freshly cooked food but also bringing back the direct and tactile relationship between the hand that cooks and the hand that eats.

What is true of Indian restaurants in Britain is true of traditional cultures everywhere. The trouble is outside observers, those who witness or even participate in the transformation, seldom appreciate the subtlety as change. So far as British society is concerned it has just become more familiar with the lexicon of Indian food as it was and always will be. The trouble with traditions as a force of change, the

essential mechanism that permits meaningful change, is that they are invisible to the outsider.

Therefore, observers can go on maintaining their modern or postmodern distaste for tradition irrespective of the counter evidence before their very eyes. The contemporary world does provide opportunity for tradition to go on being what tradition has always been, an adaptive force. The problem is that no amount of adaptation, however much it strengthens traditional societies, actually frees them from the yoke of being marginal, misunderstood and misrepresented. It does nothing to dethrone the concept 'Tradition' as an *idée fixe* of western society.

There is an unholy triple alliance between traditionalism, modernity and postmodernism. They all have a vested interest in laying claim to what actually constitutes tradition and how it should and should not operate. True, each holds a different view of the meaning and content of tradition. But they are unanimous in one single absolute: tradition is fixed, immutable. Their answers are to deprive it of its power; abolish it; or mock, deride and demean it as the implacable enemy. The triple alliance is a potent, collaborative force; each party knows exactly what it wants: control. The control they have and would continue to wield is bad for all concerned, as the record of their activities here, there and everywhere amply demonstrates.

So the time has come to find a new, humane ally. To make common cause with the real face of tradition. The last best hope for a sane future is to lay hold of what traditional societies have—the adaptive ability to change and remain themselves. This includes all the aspects of British traditional society, the things that have been submerged in the drive for modernity and postmodernism. The only effective antidote to ethnic cleansing, for that is exactly what suppression of tradition amounts to (and the triple alliance are all ethnic cleansers in

their own way) is to embrace traditional pluralism. Traditional pluralism is the frightening premise that there is more than one, sustainable, sensible, humane and decent way to resolve any problem; and that most of these problems can be solved within traditions. Traditional pluralism is a mark of common respect we are called on to pay to each tradition in a world full of diverse traditions; it is the basic idea that we might just know what is best for ourselves. It is the notion that inventiveness, ingenuity, enterprise and commonsense are integral to all traditions; and that every tradition, if given the opportunity, resources, tolerance and freedom, can adopt to change and solve its own problems. In other words, all have the ability to solve their own problems themselves within their own traditions in ways that they find satisfactory. So employing the traditional society option is a new way of arriving at participatory democracy in a most liberal fashion.

The option for traditional pluralism is no instant panacea. It is a complex struggle to unpack all we have been force fed for centuries. It replaces the trek to become an anonymous cog in a reliable system with the need to discover who we are. It means the willingness to select things that are meaningful and be accountable for the meanings they are capable of bearing, warts and all, while we strive to employ what is valuable in our identity as the means to transform ourselves into something better. Traditional pluralism puts us all on the spot, facing the same problems but with different equipment and circumstances in which to find our own solutions.

Cultural homicide, ayoh!

New Internationalist

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It has been my misfortune to arrive in various places around the world only to be engulfed in local crisis. I am no stranger to war, rumours of war, *coup d'état* and various natural disasters. But never before had I stepped off a plane to be confronted with cultural homicide.

Changi Airport is globalisation run riot, an impersonal consumerist cornucopia of designer labels. It is also dedicated to being the world's premier transport hub. From here you can go anywhere ushered along by the ubiquitous Singapore Girl. Whenever I arrive in the building, I leave as rapidly as possible, hoping for a talkative ride into Singapore city centre, courtesy of a local taxi driver.

And that is how the full scale of the culture crisis overwhelmed me. I was spared the usual inquisition that introduces conversation—where are you from, how's the economy there, how long are you staying, what do you think of Singapore. Enough to say I was down from Kuala Lumpur for the weekend to invoke a deluge of angst. 'Ah, no need sorry for my Singlish lah. You boleh Singlish, ah? Very bad, ah. Prime Minister say Singlish cannot, ah. So now what, ayoh?' A

few rapid-fire inquiries on my part and the full enormity hit me, as surely as if I'd been in Delhi the fateful day the British took over. Phua Chu Kang was to take English lessons! The End.

Let me elaborate. *Phua Chu Kang* is the highest rated show on Singapore television. It is a locally produced sitcom about a loveable, rascally private building contractor, the said Phua Chu Kang. In the rich mix that is Singapore, Phua Chu Kang is played by local superstar Gurmit Singh, a born again Christian Sikh who is married to a Chinese. His greatest comedy creation is a know-all operator who knows nothing and botches everything. The comedy emerges from the delicious observation of everyday, indigenous life expressed in the full tropical profusion of the native dialect. Phua Chu Kang, like most Singaporeans, speaks only Singlish. Singlish is the exotic lingua franca nurtured from English by way of Chinese, Malay and various Indian Subcontinental accretions. It is as rich, encrusted and lush a dialect as the road bridges across the highway from Changi Airport. These concrete structures are completely enveloped by green vines intermingled with brightly flowering bougainvillea. They look like natural phenomenon, outgrowths of the earth.

Singlish is authentic local repossession. It is an indigenous cultural form that has dug its roots deep into the fabric of imperialism, the force that created the artificial nation state of Singapore and its ethnic mix. But, Singapore now has globalised visions of future riches. The most successful of the Asian tiger economies, it is the Switzerland of the region. It is an attainment oriented, high achieving paternalist autocracy. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong always strikes me as man at home with Singlish. But that is not the kind of place his Singapore is

destined to be. To globalise one must Americanise and Singapore is Americanising with a vengeance.

Prior to my arrival, Goh made a speech denouncing Phua Chu Kang for polluting the airways with his native patois. Singlish was diverting the youth of the nation from their mission to succeed. It was no random outburst. Nothing in Singapore is random. In precise terms this attack on Phua Chu Kang defines the meaning of globalisation. Globalisation is cultural homicide writ large, and television is the mirror wherein the future is displayed.

Success means inculcating globalised manners, mores and values, as seen on TV. Consequently, internalising global identity means eradicating what comes naturally. Singapore culture must be ersatz, like all the renovated shop houses around the downtown marina. These elegant buildings, in colonial fusion style, have been lovingly renovated to service global yuppiedom. They house French, Spanish, Mexican, Mediterranean, any nationality except Asian, franchise restaurants. Here tourists and upwardly mobile local entrepreneurs indulge in fine wining and dining to the strains of the latest pop classics. Local architecture is just a quaint backdrop.

When you globalise everything what you get is Singapore. When you want to know what Singapore is about you watch SBC, the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, local purveyor of television. Once upon a time SBC was modelled on the BBC, who even seconded staff to train Singaporeans in public service broadcasting. But that is not the kind of animal globalisation is. SBC has become a mutli-channelled hydra, its main outlet provides 24 hour entertainment driven programming, mainly consisting of imported American series. It also runs its own CNN clone news channel. In Singapore it

is easier to find out who is dating whom in Hollywood than anywhere in the world, except perhaps Hollywood.

Being Singapore, the change of direction is deliberate, planned and purposeful. The objective: to be a regional broadcasting hub, a production centre selling regionally, thinking and looking globally, synergistically intermeshing the entire communications revolution experience, IT savvy, hot wired into mass global popular culture. And that is why Phua Chu Kang must learn to talk proper English, or at least a mid Pacific variant.

The moral of this tale is rather simple. If the richest, most highly educated, nationalist country in the developing world will willingly sacrifice its cultural identity, the last, best bastion of its individuality, to globalization—we can be sure the pandemic has already happened.

Globalization, is now sold as the best chance for economic uplift of the excluded masses of the world's poor. It marches forward by stripping them of all that civilizes them in their own tradition, history and cultural expression. Imperialism produced mongrelisation. Given independence and time, mongralisation could and does generate indigenous creativity and revitalisation, the Phua Chu Kang effect. But to be successful gobalized economic empowerment requires something quite different. It needs naked entry into mass popular culture manufactured in America, recycled and parodied by pale imitation everywhere. Indeed, The End—of civilization as the peoples of the world have known it, lived it and cherished its richness and diversity.

Like a scavenger seeking nourishment, I ingested Singaporean television in the hope of finding a glimmer of a cure, only to get larger doses of disease. I found the locally made documentaries on 'disappearing Asia', designed in

imitation for sale to such outlets as Discovery Channel. They had recruited Lea Silonga, Filipina star of the hit musical *Saigon*, to front disparaging, patronising looks at quaint exotica. The programmes out did classic Victorian lady travellers. Indeed, the commentary sounded as if it could have been written by a Victorian lady traveller, titillated but less than amused at what old Asia once was, and should not be allowed to remain. The victims have become the perpetrators. That is what globalization means.

Globalization is about information. The lifeblood of the future economy is instant access, instant comprehension of global information. What this flood of information says is money makes the world go around. To get money requires hooking on to trade, identifying markets. Simply put, it means replicating as swiftly as possible the places where money is centred, derived from, value added to: those G7 giants.

The port of entry into the new global dispensation is the media. Television is IT, the acme of information technology. Television shows the market what is marketable. It disseminates the style, generates and popularises by constant repetition the merchandising opportunities. It makes global popular culture the only reality. Every home has a TV, every home becomes a portal on the superhighway to a globalised, homogenised world full of Singapores. Literally, one teleports direct to the new dispensation. The youth of the world are the sacrificial lambs offered up in this slaughter of cultural identity.

Youth is a diminishing resource everywhere except in the non-west. While the civilizations of China, India and Islam support young populations with average ages between 20 and 25, the population of Europe and North America is ageing. The average age in the west is fast approaching 50. The baby boom of the post war years reshaped marketing and advertising

to create a youth oriented consumer culture afraid of ageing. Now, postmodern consumerism takes on a global focus to meet the demographics of the 21st century. The increasing spending power of East and South East Asian youth is the lodestar of globalised marketing techniques and multinational merchandising concerns. An advertisement for the Hong Kong Bank says it all: 'There are 3 billion people in Asia. Half of them are under 25. Consider it a growing market'.

This 'growing market' is being targeted in a specific way. Through television, advertising, movies and pop music they are force-fed a total lifestyle package. What matters is the look, the affectation, the cool; and each of these abstractions can be translated into a merchandising equivalent available at a nearby shopping mall. What in the West operates as a culture of narcissism finds embodiment in Asia as hero worship. The heroes are the pop stars, the movie stars, the TV stars, the sports stars, who rule the global stage mirrored on your TV screen. The audience is positively brainwashed to talk, act, think and live as their heroes do.

Star power is not Asian. It is Madonna, Britney, Brad and Mel, Ronan and Micheal, Manchester United and Agassi. The stars and the worldview marketed with and by them are hyped and hyper ventilated. They are the tools of the global economics of TV.

The Hollywood television factories make their money in the American market. The content of their programmes is driven by the internal dictates of Americana and its predilections. From its beginning American television has been a marketing device pure and simple. It is organised and operated to serve the tastes and interests of commercial sponsors and advertisers.

What Hollywood makes in the global marketplace is profit. It sells costly, high production value, glossy programmes for discounted prices to the television networks of the world. If it costs Singapore, or Malaysia \$100,000 to buy an episode of *X Files*, they are getting a product that cost \$5 million to make. The cost of bought in programming is internationally regulated—the poorer the country the less they pay. So it is impossible for Third World countries to produce local programmes with such production values. Locally produced programmes look poor in comparison to imports and seldom attract advertising.

While the global economics of TV are compelling, they are not the full story. What is seen on TV takes on an educational meaning; it is the substance of which global success is made. So the children of the elite in newly emerging economies in Asia buy into and act out the lifestyle of the rich and dominant in the West. The studied disaffection of urban youth culture in the West produces the epidemic of *lepak* in Malaysia. *Lepak* are young people who spend their days hanging out in shopping malls, affecting the style and perhaps being bored out of their skulls.

But acquiring the look, the clothes, even the video and cassettes that comprise global popular culture is not a straightforward transmission of purchasing power into the pocket of multinationals. Asia is counterfeit country, home of the genuine imitation 100 per cent fake. The street markets in every city and town are awash with clothes, bags, sun glasses, watches, electrical and electronic goods, music tapes, videos and computer software cloned, pirated and all locally reproduced. For a pittance, young Asians can emulate their heroes while simultaneously stimulating local enterprise. The WTO hates it, Asian governments must promise to exterminate

it—but the black economy is proof positive that resistance is not futile.

Globalization is a disease. But it just may be the kind of virus that requires the patient to get worse before they can recover. However much television pushes the youth of Asia to venerate global icons, super megastars, one fact remains. The biggest audience is always for local shows. Cheap and cheerful Singaporean, or Malaysian, or Indonesian, or Thai programmes may be. *Friends*, *ER* or *Star Trek* they are not. But Hollywood stars don't speak Singlish, or Malay or Urdu. No matter how young people try, such icons do not and cannot look or know or experience what makes young Asians tick. Eventually, we all want to look in a mirror and see ourselves.

Maybe Phua Chu Kang is right after all. His catchphrase, 'best in Singapore', is proved by the ratings war, he is king of the comedy. So beyond the global noise of the information super highway, perhaps we should be listening for the siren song of local heroes calling us to a new departure. Perhaps local routes in developing countries can lead us back to the place we belong: a self made world, rich and various. Prime Minister Goh, please take note.

Part Five
The Tangent of South Asian
Experience



Coming Home: Sex, Lies and all the 'I's in India

Delivered as the first Sadat Hassan Manto Lecture at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Dehli, 4th September 1996, under the auspices of Centre for the Study of Developing Societies; published in *Futures*, vol. 29, no.10 December 1997

The nation states of India and Pakistan cannot cope with the ethnic diversity and cultural complexity of South Asia. To rise above the ethnic divide and communal strife, the nation states of the region must come together as a civilisation. Through an analysis of the work of the great Urdu short stories writer, Sadat Hassan Manto, this article explores various avenues through which the fragmented nation states of the Subcontinent can heal their divided Selves and provide a genuine civilisational home for the people of India.

This paper was presented as the first Sadat Hassan Manto Lecture at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Dehli on September 4th, 1996. The lectures, held in the memory of the great Urdu short story writer, are organised by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and deal with ethnic conflict and violence. Ziauddin Sardar is a consulting editor of *Futures* and visiting professor of science policy at the

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It is raining outside. Inside his home, Randhir, motionless next to his new bride, feeling lonely and isolated, thinks of another rainy night. Equally lonely and depressed, he had asked a mountain girl, seeking refuge from rain under a tamarind tree, to come shelter in his house. He offered her a fresh change of clothes. And was overwhelmed with desire for her. But what attracted Randhir to the mountain girl? Her beauty? Her elegant simplicity? It was her smell: the compelling odour that emanated from her, drew him towards her, united him to her, reached out to the depths of his soul, stirred the most profound emotions. It was both a becoming and a quest. *That bu.*

The ‘*Bu*’—‘Smell’—is undoubtedly the most controversial and the most intense short story in the oeuvre of Saadat Hassan Manto. It has received both lavish praise and condemnation: it has been described as a masterpiece and has been a subject of an obscenity trial; it has been attacked as pornography and presented as *the* model for imitation for all aspiring Urdu short story writers. Devastatingly precise and written in the simplest of prose, *Bu* is concerned largely with Randhir’s feelings, his inner and outer quest for rediscovery of the smell of the Mountain girl: the smell that led to his fathomless experience of ecstasy and unity. He cannot duplicate this experience with his college educated bride. He found the smell of her perfume and henna sour and unwholesome: ‘sad, colourless, without vitality’—no counterpart to his experience on that rainy night. The Anglo-Indian prostitutes he visited before his marriage produced trembling of his knees—that’s all. But the dirt and sweat of the mountain girl was another story.

The stark sexual imagery of *Bu* distracts from its real essence. The obvious presence of the Hindu metaphors—where females

are identified with the earth, the males with wondering clouds, the rain with sexual encounters and the smell with sexual pleasure—also cover the story in purdah. Both the imagery and the metaphors of *Bu* have ensured that it is seen and interpreted almost exclusively in sexual terms. Thus, Leslie Felmingg suggests that Manto is essentially writing about the nature of sexual experience:

In portraying Rhandir's experience with the Ghatan as being more moving than that with either the prostitutes or his new bride, Manto suggests that the sexual relationship, at its most fundamental level, stripped of the artifice of both commercial transaction and socially acceptable commitment, is an intensely moving experience, perhaps the most profound human experience. Moreover, as the imagery used to describe Rhandir's experience with the Ghatan suggests, it is also ultimately a mystical experience.... In short, the point in this story is that the sexual relationship, in its essence, is the most profound human experience, one that partakes of mystical, even cosmic, elements. (1)

But this is only a surface reading of *Bu* for *Bu* has as much to do with sex as *Animal Farm* has to do with pigs, donkeys and chickens.

The Scent of Authenticity

In Manto's stories mountain girls serve a particular function. There are a number of stories with mountain girls, such as *Mausam ki shararat* ('The naughtiness of the season'), *Lalten* ('Lantern'), *Namukmal tabrir* ('Unfinished writing') and others which have appeared in his various anthologies, that essentially tell the same story. A young traveller meets a young mountain girl and feels an intense attraction towards her; but for one reason or other, the relationship remains unfulfilled. In contrast

to Manto's urban women, who tend to be old, passive, dependent and victims, the mountain girls are young, dynamic, independent, full of life and live in nature. However, while they live with nature, they are not pure: in the Indian context, they could hardly be said to be 'pure' if they are willing to contemplate an encounter with a 'traveller'. Manto's mountain girls do not represent a mystical sexual transport, they are cultural authenticity. Just as cultural authenticity addresses the deepest hopes and desires of a people and articulates ways and means by which these hopes and desires can be realised, so Manto's mountain girls awaken the innermost longing of world wary 'travellers'. Manto was not entertaining some romanticised, fixed and unchanging notion of the past—he is as far removed from the European notion of pure, idolised nature lovers as possible. So his mountain girls, as the representatives of cultural authenticity, are more than simple products of the soil: they are dynamic, independent, confident about themselves and their environment, willing to engage with outsiders, make mistakes and are thus fully human. They have innocence, but not some absolute kind of purity; they have recognisable ('brown') contours, but not eternally fixed masks of beauty; they are assimilated in their environment but totally free; they are playful but live meaningful lives.

And this is what they pass on to the 'travellers' they encounter. But the 'travellers' are not just any old travellers: they are young, confused and unsure of their destination: they are India. Randhir is India. And what he discovers in his encounter with the mountain girl is cultural authenticity: what he actually experiences is not sexual ecstasy but meaning. The *Bu* of the mountain girl is a smell that was generated without 'external effort', that Randhir recognised and 'understood' 'even though he could not analyse it'. Hence Randhir's experience is

transformed into a search: a quest for meaning, for cultural authenticity.

Whereas the mountain girl represents cultural authenticity, the bride personifies ossified tradition. In describing the bride, Manto deliberately uses all the terms that we find in the standard criticism of ossified tradition: lifeless, decaying, dying...Like ossified tradition, the smell of bride's henna is taken for granted: it does not have the 'sensation of having been smelt', it simply goes 'into his nose by itself and reached its proper level'. Once ossified, tradition becomes meaningless. Randhir's existence with his wife is devoid of all meaning; just as fossilized, life-denying tradition has become meaningless for the vast majority of Indians.

And what about those 'Anglo-Indian prostitutes'? It is worth noting that Manto gives a particular 'Anglo' character to the 'fair' prostitutes: they represent young India's flirtations with western ideologies—nationalism, modernity, secularism, fascism. Just as the prostitutes generate a sense of momentary excitement in Randhir, so western ideologies have produced a thrill, a quiver of expectation for India. But the end product in both cases is the same—the encounter is guilt-ridden and physically, emotionally and financially destructive.

Like Randhir, India cannot find peace. Having experienced meaning, both now search constantly and restlessly, beyond the fading aroma of henna and petrified tradition, beyond the seduction of Anglo-Indian prostitutes and western ideologies, for the life-enhancing odour of the mountain girl: the aroma of genuine Self.

And this is where violence—psychological, domestic, ethnic and national—enters the equation.

In Manto's universe, violence is often the result of a distorted self that is either generated by meaninglessness or

leads to total loss of meaning. Trapped in a meaningless marriage, Randhir himself could easily be transformed into the characters in other Manto stories, men leading meaningless lives who perform meaningless violence on others either to get away from their boredom or to give some sort of contorted expression to their distorted selves. In '*Khuni thuk*' ('Bloody spit') for example, a completely callous rich individual kicks a hard-working coolie to death. Moreover, to prove he is superior to the honest collie, he bribes the judge and is acquitted of his murder. In '*Taqat ka Imtahan*' ('Test of strength'), two idle youths seek amusement by betting on the ability of a starving labourer to carry a very heavy beam for them. The labourer dies in the attempt: but no one is moved, only the pavement is soiled by his blood. In '*Tamasha*', the 1919 massacre of Jallianwal Bagh in Amritsar is depicted as a product of the distorted British self. The very name of the story suggests that the violence that is taking place is as meaningless as a Madari's tamasha one sees in the bazaar. But here the Madari, British imperialism, has a particularly distorted and superior notion of himself: a notion that is amply brought out by presenting the massacre through the innocent eyes of an infant. Even when violence is sought for meaningful purposes, Manto argues, it is an insane proposition. The hero of '*Inqilab pasand*' ('The revolutionary'), a young student, who is slowly transformed from a witty individual to a revolutionary thinker, ends up in a lunatic asylum. India needs to change, Manto seems to be saying, but bloody revolution is not the way: violence is *the* route to all round alienation.

The India of '*Inqilab pasand*' and '*Tamasha*', as seen and experienced by Manto, was a civilisation. A civilisation under siege from British imperialism. A civilisation caught between cultural authenticity, that it was rapidly losing, and ossified

tradition that was not only becoming the norm but perpetuating and heightening all forms of oppression and violence—particularly towards women. A civilisation that, as Manto saw so clearly, was tearing itself apart with the emergence of new forms of violence that he could only chronicle but not comprehend. Nevertheless, for Manto ‘India’ signified a civilisation; and the quest for India’s true Self was a quest for the realisation of its civilisational values in the contemporary world.

A civilisation—any civilisation—is an embodiment of its total spiritual and material cultures. It is a product of open, and to some extent, self-perpetuating interchanges between cultures and individuals and values and norms that are inherent in its basic constituents. Behind each civilisation, there is a vision that glues it together into a coherent unit, motivates it towards its higher goals and promotes the search for the resolution of its specific problems and needs. For India, this vision was always a vision of spiritual plurality: it could not be otherwise for the Subcontinent boasts more religions, local cultures and languages than any other region in the world. Thus, India had always been a pluralistic civilisation where a number of different religious and local cultures—‘Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Issai’ in the words of the famous song—fused together to produce a thriving, dynamic entity that is perhaps unique in world history.

Manto’s angst, and the cause of his insecurity about his identity, was India’s coming fall from grace. In all the ethnic riots and the communal violence he witnessed, he could see the civilisational base of India evaporating before his eyes. He had grown up in a confident environment in which he had no reason to question his Indian/Muslim identity; not even repeated academic failure could shake his confidence. But the

emergence of Hindu nationalism, which in turn gave birth to Muslim nationalism, began to change that. Manto witnessed the appearance of a new kind of Indian, one he could not comprehend, but whose exploits he chronicles with all their savagery in his partition stories: the portrayal of Ishar Singh who goes on a six-day spree of murder and looting and ends up raping a dead woman after killing six members of her family in '*Thanda gosht*' ('Cold meat'); an old Muslim's search for his daughter who is finally discovered almost dead but even in her near-death state her lifeless hand has become accustomed to opening her shalwar in '*Khol Do*' ('Open up'); and the violence depicted in various stories in the collections *Nimrod ki Khudai* ('The God-like power of Nimrod') and '*Khali botelen, khali dibbe*' ('Empty bottles, empty cans') suggests the depth of barbarity into which Manto's homeland was sinking. India's civilisational identity was evaporating fast leaving behind artificially created 'national' and 'ethnic' identities that knew nothing but hostility and inhumanity.

The new identities were created by a stress on definition, a new self-conscious awareness of what it is to be Hindu that must be justified by reassessment of what constitute the salient values of Hindu culture. The self-conscious search must generate points of distinction and difference to substantiate that any special identity exists. The very process of looking for points of separation must submerge and deny other, equally valid and authentic cultural concepts that stress openness, tolerance, interaction and inter-communication. What is falsely constructed is a walled fortress of cultural identity where once a semi-permeable membrane served to keep boundaries malleable, adaptable and the culture it enclosed nourished and alive. Behind the newly built walls all aspects of culture and history must be dragooned into an acceptable martial array—

identity becomes something that is no longer self evident and accepted but a perception of self that must be protected and defended, it seamlessly reconstitutes itself as a battleground, with hierarchically ordered ranks of official arbiters of what is authentic and what is not. Such self consciousness is subtle, and not so subtle, reordering; not an affirmation of all that is old, original and enduring but a wholesale departure from history through the enforced act of personal redefinition. But the self definition it insists on to shape a new identity becomes the antithesis of continuity, the very essence of neurotic obsession. Manto's own insecurities about what and who he was were an internalised manifestation of India's lack of self-confidence about its own self-perception. The end of the Raj did not return India to its original status: that of a world civilisation. It brought India down to the station of a nation-state at par with other modern nations states such as Kenya, Bolivia and Hungary. The reductive violence that India performed on itself was bound to be reflected in the breakdown of civilisational synthesis among and between religions and communities, cultures and customs, friends and neighbours.

Manto saw violence as a necessary product of a distorted Self. This is why, for him, the end of the Raj was not a cause for celebration: he never talked of 'independence' but of 'partition'—of breakdown of a civilisation into mutually hostile and warring nation states. His deep hatred for nationalism, and the meaningless violence it generates and perpetuates, is well illustrated in '*Tay wal ka kutha*' (The dog of Tay wal). In the mountains of Tay wal, two armies face each other, entrenched not just in their military positions but also their nationalisms. These two 'nationalities' are the tributaries of the same river as is made clear by the fact that both armies are humming and singing the same Urdu and

Punjabi poetry. But their encounter in the battlefield is meaningless—neither side understand what they are doing there or why they should be there. Into this no man’s land of banal violence wanders a stray dog. But is it an Indian or a Pakistani dog? As a perceptive soldier remarks, ‘now the dogs too will have to be either Hindustani or Pakistani’. Both sides look at the dog’s identity with suspicion. Each side feeds it and then fires at it forcing the poor animal into a quandary where it doesn’t know where to turn. The dog is eventually shot in a pointless act of violence. But each side tries to find significance by interpreting the act in its own terms:

‘The poor fellow has died a noble death’, Subaidar Himat Khan mumbled sympathetically. Jamadar Harnam Singh gripped the hot muzzle of his gun in his hand and said, ‘He’s died the death of a dog’. (2)

And that’s the point: significance cannot be wrenched out of futility. The killing of the dog in ‘*Tay wal ka kutba*’ is as meaningless as the murder of the coolie in ‘*Khuni thuk*’ or the killing of the labourer in ‘*Taqat ka Imtihan*’. The difference is that acts of individual violence are now replaced by the violence of the armed forces of nation states. Whether individual, communal or acts of the collective state, Manto tries to show, violence is meaningless, a product of distorted self-perceptions.

But it is not just nationalism that distorts India’s Self. Manto saw that other forms of imported ideology were equally detrimental to India’s civilisational identity. Despite the fact that he was courted by the ‘progressive writers’ all his life, he never joined their ranks—a rebuke that was revenged when, later in his life, his work was mercilessly attacked by them. The humorous story, ‘*Tariqi pasand*’ (‘The progressive’), reflects

what Manto thought of those who are easily impressed by 'progressive' western ideas. Juginder Singh, a devout husband and a short story writer, likes to describe himself as 'progressive'. But 'what is *this* "progressive"?' his wife asks him:

With a slight movement of his turbaned head, Jaginder Singh said, 'Progressive...one can't understand the word right away. A 'progressive' is a person who believes in progress. It's a Persian word. In English such a person is called 'radical'. Writers who promote progress are referred to as 'progressive writers'. At present there are only three or four progressive writers in India, and I am one of them'. (3)

The portrait of Juginder Singh is more than a representation of so-called progressive writers in India during the thirties and forties—it is a composite portrait of all Indians enamoured with modernity and captivated by the West. Hence:

Juginder Singh always made a conscious effort to express his ideas in English; it was a habit now for him to constantly use English word. Indeed, they had become part of his personality. He would go out of his way to use words, sentences and expressions that he noted in the works of famous English novelists. Some fifty per cent of his conversation consisted of English words and sentences selected from books written in English. Aflatoon was referred to as Plato now; Aristoo was Aristotle and Dr Sigmund Freud, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were often quoted. (4)

We are consciously presented with shift in self-perception. Despite his appearance and long beard (which plays an important part in the story), Juginder Singh has ceased to be an Indian. In so far as language shapes thought, he has moved out of the mental frame of Indian concepts and categories. The transformation of 'Aflatoon' and 'Aristoo' to Plato and

Aristotle is particularly significant. Although they refer to the same individual, Aflatoon is not Plato: Aflatoon reflects the Indian understanding of the Greek philosopher; Plato is how Europe saw the same philosopher. The two perceptions are not just different, they are based on different histories, and reflect different values, different ethical and practical potentialities: Juginder Singh's rejection of Aflatoon amounts to a rejection of his own history, the learning and knowledge of his own civilisation, understanding and appreciation of his own culture—hence a negation of his own identity. The embrace of Plato is the grip of Western civilisation; thus Juginder Singh is a prototype modernist.

Like most modernists, Juginder Singh is eager to assert his new (distorted) identity, to seek reaffirmation from others who are deemed worthy of appreciating his stature. He thus regularly invites celebrated writers to spend a few days as his guest. His search for notable guests leads him to Harendarnath Tirpathi, 'a poet as well as writer of stories' who is 'immensely popular'. The main cause of Tirpathi's popularity is that he is '*awara*': a displaced person who moves from place to place. But Tirpathi's *awara* nature is as much terrestrial as it is mental: as a popular writer Tirpathi inhabits landscapes that are clearly outside the purview of Indian civilisation. Perhaps he has learned his craft, Juginder Singh's wife thinks aloud, 'from an Englishman'.

That Tirpathi is even more of a progressive than Juginder Singh is made obvious in the first encounter of two writers: Tirpathi's 'thick, black beard' is 'at least twenty times longer' than that of Juginder Singh—which itself is not short by any means! During the first few days of his stay, Tirpathi listens to the stories of Juginder Singh. Then, he starts reading his own stories to Juginder Singh: and he reads, and reads, and reads. Now, while there is no overt violence in '*Tariqi pasand*', it is

infect a story of sadistic violence—despite its humorous overtones. This violence is generated by Tirpathi's absolute obsession with himself and how he totally takes over Juginder Singh's life. He comes not to visit, but to stay. And he does not come alone; he shifts his whole family to Juginder Singh's house. So, one day, when Tirpathi had finished reading his latest story, about the sexual relationship between a man and a woman, Juginder was heart broken to realise that for twenty-one days he has sleeping, curled up under the same blanket, with this huge, long-bearded fellow, instead of being with his wife. The thought overwhelmed him and burnt him from the inside. 'What kind of guest is this', he agonised, 'who has become a parasite, who won't budge from here...and his wife and daughter, I had almost forgotten, the whole family has shifted here without thinking of me, without realising that a poor clerk like me, with a meagre pay of fifty rupees a month, cannot support them for long. I would be pulverised. How much longer can I afford to entertain them? And then there are his stories, unending—after all I am only human, not a steel trunk, I cannot listen to his stories every day...and how dreadful that I have not slept with my wife in all this time...'(5)

'*Tariqi pasand*' ends with the entrapment of Juginder Singh: all his attempts to get rid of Tirpathi are thwarted; and Tirpathi's presence effectively renders him impotent by practically denying his conjugal relationship with his wife. He is eternally enmeshed listening to never-ending stories of Tirpathi, he cannot return to his own home or restore his home life to himself.

Manto saw the western 'isms' popular in India—progressivism, modernism, nationalism, secularism, fascism—in terms of the character of Tirpathi. We invite them because we are impressed by them and because through them we seek to confirm our distorted identity. They come with their entire

cultural baggage. And once they arrive they never leave; they perpetuate themselves with endless productions of new fashions, new trends, new stories.

The 'isms' present us with a linear projection: progressives tends to be modernists who lean towards nationalism who insist on secularism as the only ideology for nation building—and secular nationalism sometimes leads to fascism. Of course, not all progressives follow this linear course; not all nationalists become fascists; but the path is there and there are always those who will, consciously or unconsciously, take it. Manto was shocked, as I am, to notice how many in India chose to follow this path.

Violence of the Distorted Self

Hindu self-perception changed in the quagmire of colonialism. While Britain discovered its racial Self in the Raj, many Indians intellectuals sought cures for their colonially engineered inferiority complex in Germany. While the British tutored their coming generations of colonial administrators in Plato's philosophy, Homer's epics and escapades of Alexander the Great, Indian intellectuals schooled themselves with Max Mueller's ideas of the superiority of the Aryan race and sought audience with a certain Adolf Hitler. The Hindu who was forced to inject the images of himself from the colonial folklore as 'inherently untruthful', 'effeminate' and 'lacking moral courage', sought relief by a reactionary search to establish a macho version of himself. However, identities do not emerge from thin air—they have to be consciously constructed. Moreover, identities, specially distorted ones, needs sustenance from history and provisions within contemporary culture to survive and thrive. This is where lies, as an instrument of social engineering, enters Indian history.

As Purushottam Agarwal observes, ‘the theoretical construct and the historical narrative of communal nationalism follows the method of secular nationalism. It creates its own historical narratives in order to prove the perennial existence of the putative nation and the inevitability of this nation acquiring the modern form of a nation state’(6). For the chauvinist Hindu Self to exist a new nationalist history for India had to be constructed. Before and during the Raj, both Muslim and the Hindus were perceived as indigenous to Indian civilisation. Hindu nationalism sought to portray the Muslims as ‘Outsiders’, as the demonic Other who usurped Hindu destiny. Thus the mass uprising of 1857 against the British became a conspiracy to re-establish Muslim rule in India (my childhood heroine, the Rani of Jansi, obviously died in vain!). For many Hindu nationalists, British rule was not an aberration but as ‘blissful’ as that of Ram; indeed, Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850–1885), wrote in a poem, it was an act of liberation for Hindus oppressed and suppressed for centuries by Muslims. And, ‘such writers as Vishnu Krishna Chiplunkar (1850–1882), Pratapnarayan Misra (1856–1894) and Swami Shradhdhananda (1857–1926) could construct a history of Hindu society in which social evils such as sati, child marriage, purdah and the caste system were read as survival mechanisms, reactions to Muslim lechery’ (7). By the end of the first world war, liberal, progressive writers had joined Hindu nationalist literatis in describing India as distinctively Hindu and Muslims as fundamentally alien.

By the time Manto turned twenty, in 1933, Hindu fascism had become quite a fashion in India. Fascist movements, emulating the fascists of Europe, were active throughout the Subcontinent. The leaders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), or National Volunteers, were openly advocating

that Hindus should follow the example of the Nazis: treat the Muslims just as the Nazis were treating the Jews (8). Communal riots were a common occurrence. There was a movement amongst the literatis to expunge the Urdu heritage from Hindi. Manto was appalled by it. ‘This war between Hindi and Urdu’, he wrote, ‘no matter how hard I try, I just cannot fathom it’ (9). Reluctantly, Manto began to accept the reality of Hindu chauvinism; like Jinnah and other leaders of the Muslim League, he realised that behind the benign ranks of Hindu nationalism there lurked another troop formation, one whose objective was the realisation of Hindu chauvinism. In a famous speech to the students of Jogeshwari College in Bombay in 1944, he announced: “If you are not familiar with the time period we are passing through, read my stories. If you cannot bear these stories, that means this is an unbearable time. The evils in me are those of the era” (10). In ‘*Naya qanun*’ (‘New law’), published in 1937, Manto puts his feelings about Indian politics in the mouth of his protagonist, Ustad Mangoo, a socially aware but impatient and simple-minded tangawalla. The India Act of 1935 has just become law and Ustad Mangoo is out in his tanga to see what visible changes the new law has ushered in. When he fails to notice any change, Mangoo becomes frustrated and picks a fight with a British soldier. Despite the new law, the soldier freely throws abuse at Mangoo and the police treat him as they always treated the natives. ‘*Naya qanun*’ is about change—or rather lack of change in India. ‘The Congress wants to free India’, Mangoo says. ‘I say that they can struggle all they want, for a thousand years, and not much will be achieved. The biggest achievement will be that the British will leave...but Hindustan will remain enslaved’. Mangoo asks: ‘why the Hindus and Muslims are always fighting each other?’. Because, he answers, ‘a holy man cast a curse upon the people. I have

been told by my elders that Emperor Akbar once upset a learned sage who cursed him. “Go”, the sage said, “there will always be strife in your Hindustan” (11). In an interesting historical twist, Manto traces the origins of Hindu-Muslim discord to Akbar, who is acknowledged as the most accommodating and tolerant of all Mughal kings, thus providing a counter-point to the Hindu extremism he saw all around him. His way of coming to terms with it was to satirise it. In contrast, Jinnah and Muslim League sought to contain and, if possible, to eradicate it. As Ayesha Jalal has argued and shown so convincingly, Jinnah’s strategy to combat the rise and rise of Hindu nationalism, and Hindu fascism, was to **threaten** separation of Hindus and Muslims: it was only a bargaining device in Muslim League’s confrontation with the Congress (12). The actual partition of India was not the product of this bargaining device but the result of the direct influence that Hindu chauvinism exercised on the Congress—the Muslim League was totally outmanoeuvred. Jinnah is often portrayed as an arid, uncompromising and sinister man in the historical narratives of partition—as for example in Richard Attenborough’s public relation job for India, *Gandhi*. In reality, Jinnah was as much a victim of Hindu chauvinism as Manto who was driven out of Bombay, under threats of death, and forced to migrate in January 1948 to Lahore.

The physical and ethnic partition of India were prerequisites for the full flowering of Hindu chauvinism. An ideology that ‘celebrates aggression and violence, declares war against other communities, and scorns all legal and democratic norms’ (13) needs identifiable enemies both within and without to flourish. Partition was a necessity if the project of modern Hindutva was to continue. It provided those concerned both with acquiring power and keeping and managing power with a readily

available instrument whereby the cultural logic of ‘them’ and ‘us’, ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, the ‘native majority’ and the ‘ethnic minority Other’, could be played out to its full potential.

The discourse of ‘Othering’, the political project of creating sharply defined Outsiders who can be easily painted with all colours black, is based essentially on three elements: a yardstick by which the Others are measured; a conceptual language by which the Others are described; and fool hearted Others who—consciously or unconsciously—accept the process of demonising and then play the assigned roles of the new dynamic: the pincer movement of corresponding reactionary non-encounter (14). Once the category of Other is in place there are only non-encounters between representatives of artificially constructed identities: ‘real’ people in all their complexity cease to exist, one deals with character notes that are defined as abstraction, irrespective of the living, breathing individual one happens to meet.

Western civilisation used a linear projection of history, starting from Greece and ending today with *pax Americana*, as its yardstick to measure all other cultures. All history, in western perception, is western history: history of all non-western cultures are mere tributaries which flow into the Grand History of Secularism at the apex of which sits the white Anglo-Saxon male who today is the WASP who symbolises the potency of American power. Just as the WASP is unrepresentative, an actual minority within American society and history, so the linear notion of history is an historically fabricated idea, unrepresentative of the emergence and development of the West. The self ascribed essentials of character, lifestyle and belief, however unrepresentative they may be of actual practice today or in history, become the norm by which Other cultures are measured, censured and demonised, and must inevitably

be found wanting. The irreducible problem of the Other is they are not 'us'. Once virulent self description becomes the norm it must include description of the Other, a description which stands before and in front of all individuality or community, as the first and last truth that can never be denied or overthrown, for at base, the Other is legitimately and decidedly not 'us', but someone seeking to be his or herself. As problematic as the philosophical conundrum of the chicken and egg, it is impossible to say whether it is the creation of a new sense of self identity which creates the Other in all its boundary defining utility, or the presence of those perceived as Other that stirs the self conscious Self description industry into headlong search for a newly constructed identity. What is obvious is that neither can exist without their Other, the darker shadow that throws into high relief what is valued, best and admired about the Self that has been devised. What does the Othering do for the Other? As the excluded and marginalised in a power equation they always come off second best. But by the very term of the equation they have one thing to hold on to, effectively powerless they may be but they know precisely and exactly that they sacre the hell out of the dominant society, they are assured of the frightening capacity on every opportunity, from every manifestation of culture. To be Othered is not fair, just or equitable—but it does have its frisson, its air of intoxicating machismo—'they have all that and they are still afraid of little old us?' The practice and rhetoric of Othering leave no room for dialogue, it is a logic too rationalistic and formulaic to permit exchange of meaningful opinion, it constructs as the only questions real matters that are not of overriding significance, yet which cannot be denied or disowned in their totality, as the only valid topics for debate—the rest must be silence. So what resort do those who

are Othered upon have? They embrace their militant, frightening, menace as a bolster to their pride, they become as neurotically delusional as everyone else—and sometimes they learn to play the power game on exactly the same terms as the dominant society.

Islam stubbornly refuses to be a part of the Grand History of Secularism—indeed, it claimed and projected itself as World History, in other words, as a rival, the very means by which it entered into western consciousness (15). Hindu chauvinism has closely followed this route. Just as Islam has been projected by Europe as a hostile creed at war with the West since the days of the Crusades, so too the Hindu right has structured Indian history on the myth of a continuous, thousand year-old Muslim hostilities against the Hindus. What began in the West is reinforced through the pervasive culture of the West, which affect India as much as any part of the globe. It is the justification built over a millennia in the relations between Islam and the West which add weight to the new process of Othering Islam in India. It is an ironic reflection that five hundred years on Hindu chauvinism is indeed completing da Gama's task for him: a prime objective of the European search for a direct route to the Indies was to acquire new allies in the contest with Islam, to outmanoeuvre the rival who could never be one of 'us'. It is certainly the case that Hindu chauvinist conceptions of the 'Muslim threat' in India cannot be delinked from the global media barrage of justifactory material that equates the word Muslim with terrorist and Islam as the source of unrelenting incitement to terror tactics. Every technique of this western media industry can be found reiterated in the Indian media, not by co-incidence but by design, the design enforced by the adaptation of national Self description and the Othering process it gives birth and is heir to.

The western fixed scale of measurement, secularism, is replaced in Hinduvta discourse by an equally rigid, and totally fabricated, notion of Ram. Secularism creates an authoritarian structure by placing itself above all other ideologies; it presents itself as an arch ideology that provides the framework within which all other ideologies can exist. Truth thus becomes secular Truth: other notions of truth must prostrate themselves in front of secular absolutes. Secular man thus not only knows the Truth, he actually owns it. The new Ram of Hinduvta politics is a similar linear construction: devoid totally of multi-layered complexity and richness of traditional concept of Ram, the newly constructed deity now appears as a flat, singular projection that allows for no deviation, no alternative visions, no compromises. The tender and tolerant Ram of traditional Hindu religiosity, the figure that inhabits the memories of traditional Hindus, is replaced with a intolerant, violent Ram hell-bent on war against Muslims (16). This Secularist Ram now defines Truth solely in terms of his attitudes to the Other: he is the yardstick by which one determines who is an insider and who an outsider in the Indian Nation. But this Ram has not only been secularised ; he has also been commodified: those who know Ram, know the Truth, also own the Truth: Ram is a property, a corporation that can take over the 'disputed sites' of the outsiders. Just as secularism is totally disdainful of all religion, so too Hindu chauvinism is quite contemptuous of Hindu religiosity. This is a direct result, argues Purushottam Agrawal, of the 'cultural inferiority complex suffered by the colonial literati. This literati was anxious to replace traditional religiosity (of which it was disdainful) with a muscular "national" religion capable of embodying the aggressiveness latent in their sense of political and cultural inferiority as a colonised people. Thus popular religiosity became a recurring

object of disdain in the writings of Dayanand Saraswati, and in a more subliminal fashion, in the writings of Savarkar and Golwalkar' (17)

But popular religiosity, the Ram of the traditional Hindu memory, cannot be banished totally:

In a television report on the riots in Kanpur in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, an illiterate woman narrated her nightmarish experience, in a story which is a painful manifestation of unsullied faith. She had given shelter to her frightened neighbours in her own house, when some rioters approached her and asked her to prove her Hindu credentials by uttering the slogan 'Jai Shri Ram' (Victory to Lord Ram). She refused. As she put it later, how could the name of Ram sanctify a murderous assault? The woman was simply differentiating (without articulating in so many words) between Ram as a name given to an idea that permeates the universe and Ram as a name being used to legitimise the politics of murder. This is then the distinction that Hindu communalism consciously seeks to eliminate... (18)

Before partition, the communalist favourite slogan was 'Vande Matram' (Hail, mother country). After partition, the slogan change to 'Jai Sri Ram' (Victory to Ram). But the new Ram needed a new language which in describing the Outsiders could actually construct reality according to the new vision of civil society as a terrain for civil war. Here too Hindu chauvinism found a ready made instrument from the western cannons: the language of orientalism. The Hindu nationalist discourse has totally internalised both the language and the perceptions of Orientalism. Muslims are typically represented in the literature of Hindu right, as well as in the Indian press and media in general, as violent, intolerant, criminally inclined and sexually depraved—a direct echo of all the orientalist travel

literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Just as colonial visitors and administrators saw the Muslims of the Middle East, and their counterparts still see today, as teeming masses, proliferating and multiplying like rabbits, so too Hindu nationalists project Muslims as polygamous lot, with huge families, multiplying at an exponential rate. When mosques are destroyed they become 'disputed structures' but when temples are destroyed they remain temples; Muslims defending their mosques or their lives and property are 'out looking for blood' but those who perpetuate and participate in chauvinistic terror are simply 'kar sevaks' (religious workers) or 'ram bhaks' (devotees of Ram); Muslim migrants from Bangladesh become 'infiltraters' but Hindu migrants are simply 'refugees'.

This kind of pathological orientalisering is not the sole province of Hindu nationalist right. It has now become a common perception of Indian intelligentsia and middle classes—a direct reflection of the deeply ingrained prejudices that are etched out in the subconsciousness of western middle classes and intellectuals: a perception that resurfaces periodically as we witnessed during the Rushdie affair and the Gulf War (19). The notion that Muslims are some sort of violent, social deviants, prone to spontaneous violence is now taken for granted: 'it has become one of the unspoken assumption of the news framework' (20). Examine almost any report of communal violence in the Indian press and witness the whole array of the orientalist lore in action. Consider, for example, the terrible riot in Bhagalpur in October-November 1989.

A thousand people were killed. Nine hundred of these were Muslims. According to the recent Sinha-Hasan report on the Bhagalpur riots, 'hordes of Hindus, the number approaching thousands, attacked the localities and villages of Muslim

inhabitants, but nobody was arrested while in the process of attacking an area'. And during the subsequent searches and arrests 'reminiscent of the searches in occupied Europe by the Nazis', it was the responsible and respectable members of the Muslim community who were neither involved in political nor in any ideological or religious fanaticism who were subjected to the fascist methods of torture...'. Yet, during the entire period of Bhagalpur riots, there was an established bias against Muslims in almost all the newspapers. The reports pointed to the Muslims as instigating the riots; claimed the Hindus were tolerant, while Muslims were aggressive; and spotted a fictitious Pakistani hand in the disturbances. In fact, the myth of equal losses by both communities could have been easily shattered by even a cursory visit to the camps. (21)

Indeed, it now seems that Hindu chauvinism has finally claimed most of the Hindu middle class as its mantle. The notion of 'the highest Good as a life of endless devotion to the nation state, and the religious devotion to and celebration of the nation as valorous community', writes Dilip Simeon, is now uncritically accepted by most Indians. 'Homogeneity, a monolithic culture, uniformity (and uniforms) in civil society' are notions that are embraced by 'even those who laid claim to a liberal heritage' (22). The language of Hindu nationalism is quite in evidence in the press, television, films and judiciary—every Indian institution seems to be singing the same tune. If we are to believe *The Times of India*, for example, little Hindu communalism is not much more than a backlash against the activities of Muslims. According to Girilal Jain, the national daily's ex-editor, only Hindus can form the basis of Indian Nation and nationalism; Hindu secularism is wonderfully tolerant towards other religious beliefs; and 'Hindutva' is mass movement originating from subaltern depths (so it is all right

to kill and mutilate Muslims, destroy their property, go on rampant mass killings of adivasis and harijans, organise mass rapes—for this is what the good people of India want!). That celebrated champion of western humanism, and pathological hater of Muslims, V S Naipaul, naturally sees all this violence and savagery as a positive development: he just cannot get himself to describe Hindu chauvinism as fascism or to refer to the Barbari masjid with its proper name but vexes lyrical about ‘resurgent’ Hinduism (24). These messages reverberate on television. The most recent rendering of *Ramayana* (shown in Britain on BBC), for example, brings the sacred epic text in to the service of chauvinism: it is presented as discourse on the necessity of defending national and racial (Aryan) purity and as a narrative where illuminated patriarchy rescues an romanticised community from a debased present. The hagiographic biography of the militant Hindu nationalist, V D Savarkar, broadcast on Doordarshan, the state run television station, on 28th May 1992, conveniently forgets to mention that he was actually accused of, and was certainly the main conspirator, in the murder of Gandhi. And we can read the same message on the big screen. In films like Mani Ratnam’s *Roja*, Islam is portrayed as intrinsically violent, and Muslims as inherently unpatriotic. *Roja* is about the kidnapping of a newly married man by the Kashmiri separatists. In the film’s key sequence, the Indian flag is set ablaze by the separatist angered at Indian governments refusal to negotiate with them. While the leader of the separatists offers his prayers, the protagonist leaps on the flag, his hands tied behind his back, in a valorous attempt to extinguish the flames that threaten the ultimate symbol of the Nation. The praying separatist is deliberately inter-cut with our hero’s attempt to save the flag in a clear attempt to show that Islam is incontestably against the

principles of Indian nationalism and Muslims demonstrably alien to Indian nationhood. In such an atmosphere, it is easy to fix the origins of riots, all riots, upon Muslims and hence justify the course of Hindu nationalistic violence. 'There is thus', note Charu Gupta and Mukul Sharma, 'a common construction of riots as a case of Muslim aggression and Hindu counter-aggression' (25).

Whereas films like *Roja* both express and provide a rationale for chauvinistic Hindu violence and nationalism, Indian judiciary—that bedrock of Indian secularism and impartiality—protects those who translate this vision into programmes of terror:

In recent years the high organs of the judiciary (with some noteworthy exceptions) have shown themselves to be increasingly pusillanimous in the face of criminal provocation of fascistic movements—witness the retreats of the Supreme Court over the Babri Masjid both in 1990 and 1992, as well as its demonstrable incapacity to punish those politicians and state officials who defied its order to protect the mosque. Moreover, political authority has shown itself to be partisan in the administration of justice: those guilty of the (anti-Sikh) pogroms of 1984 still receive protection; and no action has been taken against Bal Thackeray, the man who openly boasts of his responsibility for the violence in Bombay and tells the international press that Indian Muslims will be treated like the Jews were in Nazi Germany. (26)

Forget action! Instead read how mild-mannered, sophisticated and refined Thackeray really is in *The Times of India* whose pages he graces more than frequently. Or find out how Thackeray makes his favourite meals in the pages of society magazines, discover what he thinks of his favourite cricketers in sports periodicals or which actors he adores in

film reviews. We shouldn't call this guy a fascist—V S Naipaul would remind us: he is a pop star.

In *'Tariqi pasand'*, it was only Juginder Singh's household that was trapped by the invited Tirpathi and his extrinsic ideas. Western ideas behave like western imperialists: as Ustd Mangu declares in *'Naya qunan'*, 'they came to borrow fire, now they've become the masters of the house'. In modern India, the whole nation is entrapped—dare one say enraptured—by an imported ideology that came, like Tirpathi, to stay, and has now become the master of the Indian house. It has generated endless new stories, and refashioned old ones, to keep the traditional inhabitants of India away from their homes and conjugal beds.

The process of Othering is completed when the perceived enemy actually accepts, and begins to behave according to, the chauvinist projections. In other words, the categories of demonisation are internalised by the subject community. Stereotypes and caricatures assume realistic proportions; and those who are projected as outsiders begin to perceive themselves as outsiders. The Sikhs provide us with a good example of this process in action. In the sixties and seventies they were considered to be the bulwark of Hinduism. But in the eighties the perception grew that the state was systematically denying justice to the Sikhs; the Sikh demonstrations, in the early eighties, many of them quite peaceful, were not seen as legitimate action on the part of a grieved minority. On the contrary, the polity as well as the press and the media began to demonise the Sikhs just as they demonised the Muslims during the destruction of the Babri Masjid (27) and the 1993 riots in Bombay. The Sikh agitation transformed into communal violence: it was not surprising that if the Sikhs are going to be described as a violent, treacherous minority that they actually started moving within the

orientalising projections. Worse: no community in India stood up for the Sikhs, demonstrated with them, thus reinforcing the belief that the entire Indian nation-state saw them as Outsiders. Sikhs communal movement thus acquired secessionist tones and soon became separatist. Both succession and violence becomes legitimate in the eyes of those who are described as 'Outsiders' and who see the nation-state treating them as such (28). We can see the same process in operation in the case of the Kashmiri militants: the origins of the demand for an independent Kashmir are to be found not in Srinagar but in the conceptualisation of a Ram that is intrinsically anti-Muslim, a nation-state that has legitimised violence against its own people, and an orientalising language that denies the Kashmiris their basic humanity.

Basic humanity: this is what Hinduism loses when it is transformed into Hindu nationalism. And in its turn, this is what Hindu chauvinism denies all Others who inhabit the Subcontinent. An 'India' that is solely for the 'Hindu nation', a nation-state of Hindu *sarkar* where non-Hindu people 'entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu nation', or can 'stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges...not even citizen's rights', to use the words of M S Golwalkar, is not India (29). Such an entity has never existed in history. Indeed, it is an impossible entity that cannot exist: there are too many 'cultural nations' in India for it to be the sole domain of a single distorted self-perception. Such a construction cannot accommodate all the 'I's—the cultural identities, the religious outlooks, the ethnic customs, the myriad's of traditions—that constitute India.

Hindu nationalism, it seems reasonably clear, is a prescription for the balkanisation of India. If Hindus are a 'nation' so are

all the other cultures of India. And they can fight for their 'nationhood' just as violently, and self-righteously, as the dominant group. As Dipankar Gupta notes, 'once such an option to nation statehood has become universally available, both ideologically and pragmatically, there is no holding a good, cultural logic down' and other cultures within the Indian state 'will inevitably force their way out of the unitary structure by delving deep into their respective ascriptive consciousness' (30).

We need to see communal violence in terms of a cyclical process that eventually returns and consumes the perpetrator. Its origins can be firmly located in the distorted self-perception of a community. The contorted Self is often the product of an externally induced inferiority complex that leads both to lack of confidence in the authentic Self as well as the construction of a new Self that is designed to undermine extrinsic demonising. If the newly constructed and distorted Self is to have any meaning, a fabricated historic narrative has to be created in which to locate its being; this narrative then becomes the yardstick by which the distorted Self is defined and all Others are measured. But this historical narrative not only defines the distorted Self of the community, it defines a linear Truth: a Truth that is owned by the community that it defines. History, tradition and culture thus cease to be based on common experience but are transformed into a system for concealing conflicts and oppressions—a system that operates by deploying a rhetoric of hatred and destruction. Often our use of terms to describe the violence of the distorted Self itself legitimises this violence. If we describe violence between two communities as ethnic violence then we unwittingly ascribe the roles of insiders and outsiders to each community. For ethnicity 'connotes, above all else, the signification of the

primordially constituted “Other” as an “outsider” (31) The term has its roots in the ‘North American provenance where, apart from White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs), all other communities—Greek, Irish, Catholics, Germans, Jews, Hispanics and so on, have traditionally been, and continue to be, considered as ‘ethnics’. The WASPs alone are the true insiders, the bed-rock of American mainstream culture’. Thus, when we describe communal violence in India as ‘ethnic violence’ we concede that all minorities are outsiders and Hindu chauvinism is the only true culture of India. The language of demonisation eventually forces the demonised to accept their role as the Outsider. A new distorted Self is thus produced that repeats the cycle. Communal violence therefore is often the violence of the distorted Selves.

The Deranged Come Home!

A distorted Self is a false Self; a Self that is located in a territory that does not and cannot provide the comforts of home; an *awara* Self that is displaced and wanders aimlessly, like a vagrant, from place to place. For the cycle of communal violence in India to end, the distorted and displaced Selves of all the cultures of the Subcontinent must come home. But where is home; and how do we get there?

This is precisely the question that the inmates of a lunatic asylum in Lahore ask in ‘*Toba Tek Singh*’, one of Manto’s last stories. It’s couple of years after partition and the governments of India and Pakistan have agreed to exchange the inmates of their lunatic asylums: the Muslim lunatics from India are to be sent to Pakistan and Hindu and Sikh lunatics from Pakistan are to be transferred to India. The news of the exchange produces interesting reactions from the inmates of the Lahore

asylum. 'What is this Pakistan?' one asks. 'A place in India where they manufacture razors', another replies. A Sikh lunatic asks another Sikh, 'Sardarji, why are we being sent to Hindustan? We can't even speak their language?'. When two Anglo-Indian inmates hear that the British have given freedom to India they are devastated. They organise secret meetings to discuss their status in the asylum: will the European ward be retained? Will they continue to get English breakfast? Or will they be forced to eat bloody Indian chappati instead of bread? All the inmates are confused: 'they could not figure out whether they were in Pakistan or India, and if they were in Pakistan, then how was it possible that only a short while ago they had been in India when they had not moved from the asylum at all?'. No one was more baffled than Bishan Singh, 'a harmless man' who was known amongst the officials and inmates as 'Toba Tek Singh' because he said he was from a place called Toba Tek Singh, where he owned land, and because he constantly uttered long strings of nonsensical words which sometimes ended with 'and Toba Tek Singh'. He didn't want to go to India or Pakistan; he wanted to go home to Toba Tek Singh. So he asked one of his inmates, who believed he was God, about the location of Toba Tek Singh. The man replied, laughing: 'It is neither in Pakistan nor Hindustan. Because I haven't yet issued orders where it should be'. So Bishan Singh pleaded with this 'God' to give orders so that the question of Toba Tek Singh could be settled. But the man refused. And Bishan Singh thought that if the man had been a Sikh God instead of a Muslim one, he would have helped him find his home. The inmates were loaded on a lorry and taken to the check-point to be transferred. But when Bishan Singh's turn came to cross the border he refused to move. The officials pleaded with him saying, 'Toba Tek Singh is in Hindustan

now—and if it is not there yet, we'll send it there immediately'. But Bishan Singh would not budge; and because he was totally harmless he was not forced and allowed to stand in his place while the transfer continued. Then, at dawn:

a piercing cry was emitted by Bishan Singh who had been quite and unmoving all this time. Several officers and guards ran towards him; they saw that the man who, for fifteen years, had stood on his legs day and night, now lay on the ground, prostrate. Beyond a wired fence on one side of him was Hindustan and beyond a wired fence on the other was Pakistan. In the middle, on a stretch of land which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh. (32)

Bishan Singh had come home.

Toba Tek Singh is not a place: it is a state of grace. What Bishan Singh seeks is 'toba', the common Urdu word for forgiveness, but which in its deeper Islamic connotations means return to the original (guiltless) Self. The cure for Bishan Singh's insanity, the recovery of his distorted Self, cannot be found within the boundaries of nation states, connected together with chains of animosity, and declaring their manhood in the language of nuclear bombs. In a rather subtle way, Manto suggests that the Subcontinent itself is like the lunatic asylum in Lahore: he cleverly goes through all the standard Subcontinental types and reveals their madness to be symptomatic of their particular obsessions. The cure for our collective insanity, the recovery of the Self, lies in that no man's land which has been abandoned in the mad pursuit of Nationhood. Home is that in-between territory where all the myriad's of cultures of the Subcontinent co-exist in a state of grace, at ease with their authentic Selves, with all the richness of their diversity intact and in full bloom. Home is the civilisation of India.

There is an alternative India waiting to be recovered by all the religions and cultural communities of the Subcontinent, just as there is an alternative dynamic of coexistence waiting dustily in the wings to be brought to bear upon contemporary problems. There are indigenous conceptions of community, religious and ideological plurality, social diversity, of mediation and conciliation that have nothing to learn and much to teach the imported creeds of nation state and secularism. The attraction of the nation state and secularism is the allure of power, but the power they possess is malignant, a cancer whose progressive debilitating effects can be seen by careful analysis of the fragmenting social fabric of western society. Gorged on power, consumed by greed, afraid of everyone and trusting in nothing, not even their ability to spin delusional fantasies to give meaningful form to their own lives, this is the postmodern dispensation of the West. It can be purchased by anyone, the price is to accept the necessity of the supremacy of the secular nation state as an ideology, and as that ideology which has been defined by the West. The journey home to the civilisational reconstruction of India is something quite different.

It must be a journey that embraces the kaleidoscopic plurality, heterogeneity, inclusive diversity of India and genuinely celebrates difference. All these things existed in the Indian past, they developed rationale, a practice, even a reformatory insurgency which could become new traditions at specific moments in history. What has been lost, overlaid, obscured and obliterated is our own knowledge of these things. Not only the future but the past is being made into a foreign country, a country where we were are not at home. We need scholarship, and sincere effort to reach back and learn from the past, not to idealise it but to see it in its modes of living

and living imperfections so that we can see our way to a different understanding of the present and our future potential. It is not chauvinism, the desire to admire uncritically, but informed critical sensibility and sensitivity that must be our guide. The crucial difference is that chauvinists can never admit to the enormity of past errors. But to build a better future we must be able to see, acknowledge and learn from those errors if we are to accept how fallible we are in contemporary times and thus acquire the courage to opt for an alternative, to change. How we change can never be a return to the past. It can only be a conceptual continuity in tune with our past, one that draws sustenance from the totality of the ideas present in the past, which included the means of sustainable tolerance and operative plurality that denied no one community its identity but did not make narrow identity the be all and end all of who and what we are.

The religious and cultural communities of the Subcontinent need to see themselves not as 'nations' but as constituents of a world civilisation: with common histories, similar cultures and hence a common destiny. The reconstruction of India as a world civilisation must be the work of all its cultures and peoples, only such an inclusive endeavour can recover the authentic practice of plurality which was our past. Our alternative must be a leap of faith, founded in confessional consciousness, commitment to the values, ethics and beliefs we each cherish for we will find each of our traditions has not stinted in providing us with the imperatives to do justice, love mercy and walk in humility before our Creator. A confessional identity in a rabidly secular vessel is a nonsense that can only do violence to our sanity and sense of equilibrium. But different faiths can live together only when we have the good sense to follow the clearly enunciated dictates of justice, insight and

mutual understanding that are their finest, most spiritual endowments of conscientious commitment, a dispensation incomprehensible to the secular mind. The common, shared love of home, of the places that make the world meaningful and provide our continuity with the ancestors who went before us, bind us together into the world civilisation of India that we must recreate, revitalise and give alternative expression to. The traditions of all the peoples of the Subcontinent must come alive, be given contemporary meaning beyond the empty and inappropriate ideologies of nation state and secularism. A civilisation thrives not on borrowed ideas and ideologies but on what it generates internally from the very fabric of its own vision: we thus have to relearn to see the world through the concepts and ideas that are our own. We have to learn where, in constructive tension with the rest of the world that is and will be, these ideas can take us. The past will not answer our contemporary difficulties but informed by its concepts, values and enduring significance we can make a worthwhile attempts to shape authentic futures for ourselves. A return to cultural authenticity would be a step forward to reconstructing India as a civilisation. Coming home is not easy: to reconstruct a fragmented civilisation is a daunting task. But the scent of Randhir's mountain girl and the short stories of Manto have left a long trail for all of us to follow on our return journey home.

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On Serpents, Inevitability and the South Asian Imagination

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The devastatingly beautiful Esme is innocent. But in Yashar Kemal's brilliant novel, 'To Crush The Serpent', she is accused of collaborating with her former suitor in the murder of her husband, Halil (1). Everyone knows that Esme is guilty; and the villagers, led by Halil's family, are ebullient about revenge. Esme must be killed. Again and again, Halil's old and embittered mother urges his brothers to save the family's honour. But no one could aim a weapon at such a beautiful woman; such a marvel of God's handiwork. So Halil's soul refuses to rest; it comes back as a ghost to haunt the village; the ghost becomes a communal dream urging everyone to avenge his blood so that his soul could be released, so he could rest in peace. The task is finally placed on the shoulders of Hassan, Esme's son. Much of the novel is concerned about the state of Hassan's mind: how the boy grows up with his 'responsibility', how he repeatedly tries to seek solace in the outside modern world, and how finally he is overpowered by it.

The tragic narrative of 'To Crush the Serpent'—and it is of Greek proportion in that it is both predictable and inevitable—parallels the tragedy of the Indian subcontinent. Like young

Hassan, South Asia is trapped between an oppressive historic tradition and an active, instrumental modernity. And like Kemal's protagonist, it does not know which way to turn: all roads to the future, it appears, pass through the valley of death. And like Hassan's beautiful and innocent mother, the Indian Subcontinent is in the imminent danger of being killed by its own progeny.

If both Pakistan and India now appear to be in political and social turmoil, immersed in ethnic strife and violence, with balkanisation on the horizon, it is not because the ideals of the founding fathers were at fault but largely because the ideas that they were working with, were applied to the wrong group of people. In Pakistan, the notions of the worldview of Islam were married to the modernist idea of a nation state and the creation of an 'Islamic state' was heralded. The tragedy of Pakistan is the contradiction inherent in the juxtaposition of an uncompromisingly universal worldview with the modern, secular notion of instrumental nationalism. India took a much faster root: the 'secularism' and 'socialism' that its founders, particularly Jawaharlal Nehru, embraced was as alien to the vast majority of devout Hindus and Muslims in India, as was the notion of an ideological 'Islamic state' for the Muslims of Pakistan. This vision of importing parliamentary democracy based on first-past-the-post electoral system from England, and turning India into a federation with a strong central government, placed conflict in the womb of the newly created, ethnically plural, nation: it was unwittingly designed to increase and inflame ethnic conflicts. Neither the traditional Hindu nor Muslim societies has any notion of a secular law—imitative legal systems in both countries ensured that conflict between tradition and secular modernism was written into the national equation right from the start.

State and Identity

The western concept of state has its origins in the city-states of Greece. The modern western state is a direct descendant of the Socratic theory of a 'just state'. For Socrates, and the Greek philosophers who followed him, an ideal state is organised into three types of citizens. First, there were the common people, artisans and merchants, who provide the material wealth for the state's existence. Next, is the military who have the responsibility of protecting the state and keeping internal law and order. Finally, there is the class of rulers and guardians, who govern and legislate. To ensure the stability of the state, the three orders are kept separate. To make everyone feel content with his role in society, the 'rule of and by the people', or democracy, was introduced. However, in the Greek states, the 'people' and the 'citizens' were synonymous: democracy for Greeks implied a strictly oligarchic form of government. The 'people' were the free-born inhabitants of the state, who were rarely more than one-tenth of the total population. The majority, for whom democracy had little meaning, were the serfs and slaves who actually oiled the wheels of the state—the working class in Marxist terms.

The modern nation-state contains all the trappings of its Greek counterpart. Both India and Pakistan have adopted the model well. India is a genuine Greek 'democracy' in that it has limited power to less than the ten percent of its people—indeed some would argue, a single family—for the vast majority of its people, democracy has as much meaning as the barbarian non-citizens of the Greek states. The ideology of the Indian nation-state is popped up by the army. It is commonly assumed that the Indian army has played no role in politics; this assertion is correct in that the Indian army has not directly taken power. However, the army has been quick to act whenever the ruling

oligarchy or the state ideology have been threatened. How else could one justify the endless rounds of wars with Pakistan?

In Pakistan, the military has actually become an integral part of the ruling oligarchy. The founding fathers envisaged the Muslims of India as a 'separate nation'. In the early period of Pakistani history, this 'nation' was said to embrace the 'ideology of Islam'. Later, the 'ideology of Islam' became synonymous with the 'ideology of Pakistan'. In either case, this ideology was not seen as a system of ideas and concepts, but as a catalogue of do's and don'ts whose only binding force was emotion. However, with Pakistan standing for Islam, it was only natural for some people to confuse national emotions with Islamic sentiments. Almost every Pakistani leader has used 'Pakistan's ideology' as an excuse to transform Pakistan into an oligarchic, instrumental nation-state.

Thus, as constructed and devised in the fateful closing years of the fifties, the modern nation-states of India and Pakistan ensure their survival by producing a three-tier society—originally envisaged by the Greek philosophers. Within this framework, subcontinent politics has come to mean the appropriation of scarce resources by a ruling oligarchy and isolation and marginalisation of the vast majority from the centres of power. In between, is the buffer zone of priestly classes which function as the guardians of custom and tradition. When Tatu Vanhanen suggests that 'politics is for us a species-specific form of struggle' and the 'simple and disgusting' rationale for the nepotism and corruption of the South Asian politics is that 'we are bound to struggle for survival for the same reason as all forms of life', he is not, as he mistakenly thinks, offering an explanation for politics—he is 'describing' how politics is conceived in the West (2). Like the founding fathers of South Asian nation states, Vanhanen accepts the

underlying secular assumption for politics and the existence of the nation state: assumptions which naturally lead him to offer a chilling social Darwinian explanation of ethnic conflict, nepotism and the dominant, and accepted practice of politics.

It seems to me that the socio-biological theory of kin selection provides a satisfactory explanation for the origins of the behavioral predisposition. Because the struggle for existence, according to the contemporary Darwinian theory of evolution, ultimately concerns the survivals of our genes, those who tended to favour kin over non-kin were more successful than those who did not discriminate between kin and non-kin. (3)

This ‘behavioral predisposition to nepotism’, argues Vanhanen, provides the ‘ultimate evolutionary explanation for the ubiquity of ethnic conflicts’. Thus, the problems of India, and by a natural corollary, Pakistan, are all connected to the ‘extreme heterogeneity of its society’. Vanhanen’s solution is to do away with ‘heterogeneity’: ‘Biological nature of ethnic conflicts led me to conclude that biological amalgamation of different ethnic groups would be the most effective way to solve these problems permanently’. This aim is to be achieved by ‘political engineering’.

Vanhanen provides a good illustration of the banality and the poverty of secularistic thinking. Early leaders of South Asia were influenced by Á Western experts like Vanhanen; they too sought the amalgamation of different ethnic group and the instrument of ‘political engineering’ they relied on was called nationalism. The formation of a modern national identity was to be aided by such factors—as Daniel Lerner (4) amongst so many others informed the leadership of the new states—as urbanisation and media participation. Urbanisation, in fact, eroded the social and material foundations that existed

in the Subcontinent, and that had even survived the onslaught of British colonialism, for the harmonious existence of plural identities. In semi-literate societies of India and Pakistan, cinema, rather than writing, became the instrument for the creation of a national identity. Cinema is the first language of the rural and urban masses eager, indeed avidly hungry, to make themselves socially visible. Both Indian and Pakistani films have placed the images of the people as a nation at the lowest common level, simultaneously elevating and degrading the people. Thus the national identity forced by the cinema became a product of song and dance, fetish loyalty to custom, ritualistic humiliation of women, glorification of western norms and fashion. Ironically, all attempts at forging national identities actually produced a whole range of identity crisis.

Both India and Pakistan are imagined states. Indian and Pakistani nationalism is an artefact; a fabrication that is treated and enforced as though a part of the natural universe. In fact, it is little more than a contingency created by historical circumstances at best, and a virulent implant at worst. Even though it is considered to be a necessity and repeatedly justified through history and tradition, and presented as eternal and immutable, it is actually a product of the total failure of creative imagination. However, the imagined and forever 'emerging' national identities suppressed and destroyed what is essential for traditional and ethnic societies to survive: a sense of community. The concept of nation-state imagines that a community exist, that it has fixed boundaries; it does not see community as an aspiration to strive for, to be constantly worked at, a permanent state of becoming. When India and Pakistan became nations they ceased to be communities—and therein lies the essence of the South Asian turmoil.

The Subcontinent resembles the village of young Hassan: restless, insecure, suppressed by false tradition, haunted by the ghosts of murdered patriarchs, victimising the innocent, forever locked in ancient blood-feuds. There are no communities in the village called Indian Subcontinent, only victims and those who victimise.

By far the most pathetic victim in the historic drama that is unfolding itself in South Asia is the idea of tradition. Much blood has been spilled both in the defence as well as demolition of tradition. Both Muslim and Hindu societies are traditional societies: without their respective traditions they have no past, no identity and therefore cannot be conceived as historic societies. But what worth is a tradition that has lost its humanity?

The construction of religious 'tradition' always involves a selection from the past: who makes this selection and for what reason are the necessary questions one has to answer regarding all tradition. Both the Hindu and Muslim traditions have been forged by a particular class of people for their own ends. In the case of Hinduism, upper caste or Brahmanical beliefs and rituals have come to constitute the core of the tradition. In the case of Islam, this tradition has been formed by the ulama—religious scholars—to maintain their power and control over a territory called 'fiqh' or jurisprudence. Apart from their theological base, there is hardly anything between the two traditions to differentiate them. The 'Sanskritization' of Hindu tradition parallels the narrow, 'fiqhi' legalisation of Islamic tradition. Both traditions are static and false: in 'To Crush the Serpent', this tradition is personified by Halil whose murder is placed on the shoulders of Esme, his beautiful wife.

Esme is South Asia. And like the vast majority of Indians and Pakistanis, she is not just beautiful, but also virtuous,

dedicated and selfless. But how did Esme come to be married to Halil, the personification of perverted tradition? As we later discover in the novel, Esme was abducted from her father's house by Halil and his henchmen. He tried to rape her by binding her hands and feet—but she fought back. Eventually, Halil achieved his ends by drugging her with an opium sherbet. When Esme came to and realised what had befallen her, she was seized with vertigo and started to vomit. She was bleeding too. Her shame was more than she could bear. Halil fetched a doctor who stopped her bleeding. Then he took her to his house, summoned an Imam who married them before God. That very same day the civil ceremony was performed. (5)

Esme then has been doubly victimised. She has been violated and married by force; and she has been wrongly accused of the murder of the man who performed the deed. The parallels between the perversion of tradition and Esme's tragedy are uncanny. Like Esme, the entire Subcontinent has been abducted by an elitest group of religious clergy; and who, like Esme, have been duped against their will and better judgement into taking the reformulated tradition to be the real thing. And like Esme they have been married to this falsely constructed tradition: they defend it selflessly and virtuously.

Both Hindu and Islamic fundamentalism are a product of the false tradition as promoted by the religious classes. As Achin Vaniak tells us, 'since independence the most important social force behind the rise of Hindu fundamentalism and Hindu nationalism has been the intermediate castes'. But are they motivated by lack of economic opportunity and exploitation? 'Hindu fundamentalism', Vaniak shows, 'is not a reaction to economic failure. On the contrary, it is the consciously chosen cultural expression of a social force which has enhanced its authority and which is upwardly mobile on the economic and

political fronts'(6). One can say the same about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan. It is the political and economic success that the ulama, and religious parties like Jamaat-e-Islami, have enjoyed in the history of Pakistan that has led to the emergence of a mindless Islamic fundamentalism—where a return to an idealised, utopian (and as such, historically non-existent) Islamic state suppose to be a panacea for all contemporary ills. However, it is the ruralization of both Hindu and Islamic fundamentalism that has become a major factor in shaping the future of South Asia. It is unquestioning loyalty of the rural and urban poor to 'religious tradition' that has given urgency to the fundamentalist demands for a theocratic state—a demand that was originally conceived by economically and politically upwardly mobile religious elite.

Like the two varieties of fundamentalism, the notion of an utopian 'Islamic state' and the idea of an India ruled by Brahmin clergy are also the creation of a false tradition—it is false not only in terms of its history and true Self, it is also false in that it is an amalgam of Western secularist notions of power and territory and a static view of tradition—and are deliberately and consciously based on an artificially created consciousness. 'Who is it that's left his father's blood unavenged, forced him to haunt the world till doomsday, to burn in Hell forever?', Hassan imagines his father's ghost interrogating him. 'How can you live without honour? Like a beast? Feeding on the hand that murdered your father?' How can, the Hindu fundamentalists asks the simple followers of tradition, you allow a mosque to exist where Lord Khrisna once resided? How can you allow freedom to your women, the religious authorities demand, in clear violation of the Prophet's examples? In both cases the moral dictates of a humane history

is transformed into a tradition that leaves the human out of the social and political equation. Like Hassan, the ordinary believer is trapped in a 'circle of fire'—a circle of 'tall flames, the height of five men atop of each other' that is growing smaller and smaller.

One of the most frightening consequences of the emergence of Hindu and Islamic fundamentalism, as well as the idealisation of an instrumental nation state, is possible clash between the two ideologies. India and Pakistan have fought three wars already—another one cannot be written off in the near future. Another round of military engagement between the two country can be justified by a number of reasons: the desire for new territory on the part of India determined to become a regional superpower, an effort on the part of India to reflect attention from an ever increasing spiral of internal problems—a strategy much favoured by the late Mrs Indra Gandhi, Pakistan's insistence on recovering the lost territory of Kashmir, and Pakistan's support of the Sikh movement fighting for the creation of Khalistan, the perceived independent Sikh state. But the real essence of mutual, and dare one say perpetual, hostility between India and Pakistan is to be found in the distorted self-perception of the respective societies. All Muslims were, some where in the past, actually hindus; or, at best, hybrid hindu having one parent who was hindu. The Muslim hatred of hindus is actually the hatred of what they have rejected in their personal, genealogical history. The hindu hatred of Muslims is a direct result of this betrayal—a betrayal reinforced by the partition of India and creation of Pakistan. The hatred of two 'nations' towards each other is infect the inferiority complex of their own self projected on each other. Each country has constructed the character of the other out of its own inner material. This is why the hatred andX

antagonism is so deep: India and Pakistan despise each other for what they recognise in each other to be an integral part of their own Self.

Ideology and Imitation

That Self has been constantly battered and repeatedly shattered by transformation of tradition, religion, national identity, 'modernity', even democracy, into instruments of oppression; or to put it another way, all that matters to people of South Asia has been turned into ideologies: ideologies to be fought over and defended at all cost. Pakistan is said to be an ideological state. The ruling Congress Party was—at least until quite recently—ideologically socialist. 'Islam is our ideology' goes a popular slogan. The preservation of the unity of the nation state called India is an ideological struggles. Conservatives and traditionalists are ideologues. Communists and leftists—the few who are left after the fall of the Soviet Union—are forever 'unmasking' and 'exposing' ideology. What this means is that a specific logic and grammar is applied to all issues, problems and social and intellectual concerns right across the political spectrum.

Ideology, of course, like 'nations', are a western, secular construction. As originally conceived by the French philosopher Destutt de Tracy, ideology was meant to denote a 'science of ideas' which revealed one's biases and prejudices. De Tracy believed only in sense perception and was an empiricist. Thus ideology for him was a kind of secular religion. The concept soon gained currency signifying not a science of ideas but a set of beliefs, ideas, values and emotions. Marx and Mannheim gave the concept their individual colour. In Marx's hand, ideology became associated with the vested

interests of a ruling class or the aspirations of a petty bourgeoisie. Mannheim used the term to represent all thought distorted by passion to conserve the status quo or restore the past. In the context of Indian subcontinent, ideology has a more specific meaning. It involves the sanctification of a particular territory by appeal to some sacred notion (religion, tradition, secularism, modernity) followed by the declaration that this territory will be defended at all costs. The territory in question is either plucked out-of-context from history or borrowed from Western thought or intellectual tradition. The whole exercise produces two byproducts. It, leads to an inversion of reality—the territory that is being defended and sanctified is either irrelevant to contemporary situation or an artificially created myth—and unleashes a process of imitation and emotional and political freebooting.

The ideologisation of religion and tradition, nation and identity, modernity and secularism, has trapped the South Asian imagination in an imitative mould. Imitation has become the sine qua non of Indian and Pakistani society. As artificial creations, both states are based on borrowed ideas: either from the West or from some dim and distant history whose only significance is its total irrelevance. Of course, a certain amount of imitation is to be found in all societies, indeed it is even necessary; that is, after all, one way we learn. But imitation has acquired a sacred status in the South Asian imagination: ‘taqlid’, or imitation, is a major—nay, the only—source of law and behaviour in Indian and Pakistani Islam. And imitation of the West, is a spiritual necessity for secularists of both Right and Left. The question is: where is all this imitation and mimicry going to end? Where does it leave the South Asian imagination? If imitation is the norm, what hope is there for improvement? The perpetual and ceaseless imitation has shattered the South

Asian society into a wilderness of mirrors and created the identity crisis of which fundamentalism is but one symptom.

Like Hassan, the people of the Subcontinent are haunted by the twin-headed serpent of ideologies—religious, traditional, secular, western—and imitation. It is perpetually on their tail. It resides where imagination used to be; it is a constant source of physical sorrow and distress of the mind:

A serpent was chasing him all the time, asleep, awake, a huge rattlesnake was on his track. He could not shake it off. It crossed his path on the mountain, among the crags, crept up to the top of the pinetrees after him, followed him into the very room he slept, made him scream out in anguish in the night. (7)

Unless this serpent is crushed, and imagination released from its stranglehold, South Asia would not have a future worthy of its history and status.

But I am not using imagination in the postmodern sense—unrestrained, uncontrolled, and an end into itself (8). That would not only be self-defeating but would amount to yet another exercise in imitation! I am arguing for the liberation of the imagination that is anchored in the true Self of the Subcontinent and that moves, from infinity to infinity, within the matrix of its sacred territory and tradition. This imagination is stronger than reason: it is the key that releases ‘tradition’ from its bondage to time, separates tyrannical, suffocating history from living history and recomposes the shattered Self by promoting confidence in one’s identity. Only this imagination can furnish an authentic bond between individuals and communities that inhabit South Asia and carry them beyond the selfish confines of recent history and artificially created tradition and identity into mutual solidarity.

The future survival of South Asia is dependent on its ability to move forward to its true Self, to release the imaginative energies that lie buried deep in its subconscious Self. Such a leap of imagination would, for example, require South Asia to return to autonomous traditional communities—religious and ethnic—that it always was and always will be. It would require seeing that fundamentalism is an attempt at an assertion of identity, a cry—on part of the rural and urban poor—for a return to the principles of community. It would require acceptance of the fact that a totalistic moral order like Islam can easily be secularised into a totalitarian world order (9). It would require an acknowledgement that Indian secularity, to use Vanaik's word 'does not favour the development of a progressively non-religious state'. And that overcoming the mutual hatred of India and Pakistan requires transcending recent history.

The rediscovery of the South Asian Self and the release of its creative imagination does not mean a return to tradition of history, but a forward journey towards a tradition of humanity and wisdom that draws lessons from history and forges new identities as it evolves and matures. In 'To Crush the Serpent', this living history, this life-enhancing tradition, is personified by neglected village wise man, 'Old Dursan'. He is as old as can be: 'so old that he can hardly walk', his neck so 'deeply furrowed that bits of straw and chaff stuck in the folds of skin'. His eyes may be failing but he can see with unusual sharpness. He loves Esme and weeps at her victimization. And he has the imagination and wisdom to stand against the community. 'Your mother', he tells Hassan, 'is a beautiful woman. I've lived all these years and never came across such beauty as hers. And when a person is so beautiful, and what's

more, sweet and kind as an angel, people can't bear it and won't rest until they've killed off this beautiful thing'.

In Islam, that tradition of humanity and liberalism is to be found in the pre-Abbaid period, before the construction of an obscurantist jurisprudence as an immovable object between its sacred texts and its rank and file believers. In Hinduism, it is found in flexible religious sects which constituted the polymorphousness of what is designated 'classical Hinduism'. It is the imagination that resides in the 'classical' domain that needs to be freed from the subjugation to ideology and imitation. Like the invisible man, this inner subconscious force, this sublime imagination of the original Islamic and Hindu tradition, has to be clothed in images before it can become visible and its beauty, like that of Esme, can be recognised and appreciated.

Esme has a strange effect on her son, Hassan. He loves her and cannot live without her; yet he fears her—it's a fear of what may happen to her through his own hands: 'Near his mother, he was seized with terror, trembling of all his limbs, beside himself. Far from her he was bereft of life, utterly drained.' The enlightened intellectuals and thinkers of South Asia have a similar relationship with their countries. They fear the linearly projected future; and they are terrorised by perverted tradition and imitative ideologies. In India, as Vanaik tell us, 'there are powerful objective forces at work promoting Hindu nationalism; political parties are inevitably tempted to pander to it and consciously adopt it as part of their ideological appeal.' In Pakistan, similar forces are taking the country towards a fundamentalist stance: a return to obscurantist jurisprudence and a state ruled, directly or indirectly, by narrow minded religious scholars and 'ideological councils'. Democracy in both states is a superannuated joke; and fragile at that. Both

states are being pulled in different directions by different ethnic minorities: India could easily divide into Khalistan, Nagaland, Kashmir and other smaller states; Pakistan is forever on the verge of disintegrating into separate homelands for Sindis, Punjabis and Pathans. Yet, no intellectual, no thinker, either from Pakistan or India, worth its salt can turn away from this turmoil and disintegration: that would amount to abandoning life, deserting the future. Yet, like Hassan, they—we—do not know which way to turn.

The conclusion of 'To Crush the Serpent' is inevitable. Yet, it also reveals the failure of imagination of its luminous author. Hassan's will is crushed by the villagers—for whom it has become a matter of faith to continuously and constantly remind him to avenge the murder of his father—and the constant presence of Halil's ghost in his mind. One day he calmly aims a gun at Esme, as she lights the earth-oven in the yard, shoots, and watches her fall in the burning oven. For the first time Hassan notices that the 'orange flowers smelled so good in the spring'. Yashar Kemal can liberate his protagonist from the bondage of a patently false tradition only by killing the beautiful, the innocent, the virtuous. This is the natural outcome of the secularist imagination.

The task before the concerned and enlightened intellectuals and thinkers of the South Asia is to save the future by crushing the two-headed serpent of ideologies and imitation but without killing Esme—the source of their identity and the abode of their terrestrial journey. To explain what South Asian nationalism is and how it works: to destroy the illusion that sustains it. To demonstrate that tradition is a human product—and renovate it with this self-knowledge. And to take the first step towards the imaginative endeavors needed to save the South Asian future: come together.

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Qawwali

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This world, the old Sufi mystics used to teach, is a mirage. There is a higher Reality that exists by its own essence. The purpose of existence is to love the higher Reality more than this mundane world of illusions. Like the (oblivious?) selfless moth immolating itself in the candle flame, Sufis direct their passion towards ‘fana’, or the annihilation of self in the higher Reality of the One. In the particular form of Sufi devotional music practised in the Indian subcontinent, Qawwali, the function of the performance is to enable the self annihilation of the listener.

In recent times western audiences have been alerted to Qawwali through the work of one of its great exponents: Nusrat Fatah Ali Khan. How Nusrat became a chic cult in the West is, however, only part of my tale. Appropriately, since our subject is Qawwali, mine is a story of annihilation, involving considerable self immolation. It is the amazing adventure of the one Qawwali most people in the western world are likely to have heard: Nusrat’s ‘*Dum mustt qualander*’, or ‘*Mustt Mustt*’ for short. The story of ‘*Mustt Mustt*’, how it came about, how it

evolved, changed and transmogrified, is a revealing narrative of our postmodern times.

To set the scene, I must begin at the beginning, with the origins of Qawwali, a compendium of the Indian Subcontinent's musical traditions, itself. Its invention is attributed to Amir Khusrau, an immensely colourful and influential character in Indian music and literature. A court poet of Ala-ad-Din Muhammad Khilji, Sultan of Delhi (1296–1316), Khusrau is credited as the first Urdu poet in history. Sufi tradition also credits him with introducing such musical instruments as sitar and tabla to the Subcontinent. There is an apocryphal account of how in a spate of invention he cut the *pakhavaja* (a drum with twin striking surfaces) in half, thus creating the two small drums of the tabla, one to be played by the right hand the other by the left of the drummer. Khusrau also innovated new vocal forms, as well as *rags* and *tals*.

Rags are central to Indian music, yet they have no counterpart in western musical theory. Loosely, *rag* is equivalent to melody, which in Indian classical music exists in free rhythmic form. The concept of *rag* is that certain characteristic patterns of notes evoke heightened states of emotion. Each *rag* can be described according to its ascending and descending lines (which may involve turns) as well as its characteristic melodic figures. Indian melody can also be presented in its metric form, its tempo governed by the *tal*, a particular time measure. *Tal* is a cycle with both quantitative and qualitative aspects: the quantitative concern the duration of a cycle measured in terms of time units or beats which can be slow, medium or fast; the qualitative concern the distribution of stresses or accents within the cycle at different levels of intensity. In a *raga*, a composed piece, the character is derived from the specific deployment of the *rag* and *tal*. There are over two hundred extent *rags*, each

a melodic basis for composition and improvisation, each performed at a different time of day or season to enhance particular emotions.

Qawwali is a fusion of the emotive power of Indian music with the emotional content of Sufi mystical poetry. The work of poets such as the Arab Sufi ibn Arabi or Turkish mystic Jalaluddin Rumi, is difficult to fathom for rationalist minds. In a society where one has to 'freak out' or 'drop out' to pursue mystical leanings, the idea of infinite emotion that is both unbridled passion and controlled, purposeful, spiritual endeavour is difficult to grasp. For Sufis, poetry is not just a vehicle, it is a transport of direct mystical experience. It represents and perpetuates the legacy of Sufi saints and teachers. This is why Sufi poetry provides such a vast range of aesthetic expression for mystical love, often utilising stylised imagery of human love as a metaphor for the manifestation of spiritual passion:

O wondrous amorous teasing, o wondrous beguiling
 O wondrous tilted cap, o wondrous tormentor
 In the spasm of being killed my eyes beheld your face:
 O wondrous benevolence, o wondrous guidance and protection.

Amir Khusrau wanted to combine the passion of Sufi poetry with the heightened emotions of a *rag*. However, since Sufi poetry often incorporated a verse from the Qur'an or a saying of the Prophet Muhammad, it was important that the texts remained intact and their meaning was not distorted. A tricky situation to which Khusrau provided an ingenious solution. He was also the originator of the *tarana* style of vocal music, a type of singing in fast tempo using syllables. To an ordinary listener, the syllables appear meaningless but when they are pieced together they form recognisable Persian words with

mystical symbolism. Khusrau introduced a few syllables of *tarana* to add balance to the *rag* in which the piece was composed (called *shudh kalyan*) and Qawwali was born.

The word Qawwali itself is derived from the Arabic word Qaulah, meaning to speak or give an opinion. As an artistic form, it is strong on opinion: the Urdu or Persian couplets, that form the invocation and mystical text of the Qawwali, are all important. This distinguishes Qawwali from a classical *raga* where music has primacy over text. The *tals* used in Qawwali are also distinct, being of a type seldom used in classical music. But the real difference between Qawwali and all other musical idioms of the Indian Subcontinent is its specific mystical function and context of use. Qawwali is designed to perform three specific functions: generate spiritual arousal, convey the mystical message of the poetry and react to the listeners' diverse and changing spiritual requirements.

Sufis consider a rhythmic framework and an emphatic stress pattern or pulse, reflecting the heartbeat, to be essential for stirring the soul. The reoccurring beat suggests the continuous repetition of God's name and guides the Sufi towards ecstasy. The rhythmic framework itself is characterised by two techniques. The first is handclapping; the second is a particular drumming technique that uses mainly open-hand or flat-hand strokes. With the downbeat of the drum, the listener's head moves in silent repetition of God's name; indeed, the drum beat alone may cause ecstasy. By the time the Sufi utters the word '*Allahu*', that is, 'God Is', he is already on the way to another realm. It is said that the thirteenth century mystic Sheikh Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki was so overwhelmed by ecstasy that he died while listening to Qawwali. Many Sufi saints, like the Indian mystic Sheikh Nizamuddin Chishti, have

been known to go into a deep trance during Qawwali and remain oblivious to the world for days on end.

So, Qawwali is basically a form of mystical worship. Subcontinental Sufis often describe it as *zikr*, remembrance of Allah, which is the basic pillar of Sufism. Therefore, the music must serve to clarify the text, both acoustically, by making it clearly audible, and structurally, by placing emphasis on the salient formal features of the poem. Acoustic clarification of the text is sought by volume, singing at a high dynamic level, often with strong and exaggerated enunciation of consonants. Group singing reinforces the solo voice; the solo performer picks out the pertinent units of text that are repeated by the group.

As a form of spiritual communication, Qawwali is not a one-way exercise; singer and musicians must themselves react to the listeners, respond to their changing requirements, adjust their performance to their audience's state of being and ecstasy. The interaction requires the Qawwali to isolate both musical and textual units and repeat them as necessary, amplifying or cutting short any unit of the text, rearranging or even omitting an element, going forward, backwards or proceeding in an infinite loop. Or, it may require the creation of additional musical units as setting for portions of text that may need to be inserted out of the blue! I have heard the same poem presented in two minutes and performed for over two hours. The audience and musicians are mutual participants locked in a mystical encounter. The listeners' ecstasy can impose a particular structure upon the music and take the musicians for an unplanned ride.

This incredibly versatile and rich musical tradition has been sustained since the time of Amir Khusrau by the Sufi communities of the Indian subcontinent in the *mahfil-e-sama*,

or the 'Assembly for Listening'. Through the act of listening—*sama*—the Sufi seeks to activate his personal link with his living spiritual guide, with saints departed, with Ali, fourth Caliph of Islam who was the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, with Prophet Muhammad himself and ultimately with God. By opening himself to the Qawwali, the listener means to transcend his mundane, materialist and conscious existence by kindling the spiritual flame of mystical love. Once ecstasy has been reached, the goal of both Qawwali and the listener is to sustain the intensity of the experience and, well, go *Mustt, Mustt*, or totally loose oneself in the love of God.

One cannot have a more profound or vivid Qawwali experience than at a *urs*—the commemoration of a noted saint's own final union with God, held at the saint's shrine on the anniversary of his death. Throughout the Indian Subcontinent, shrines continue to be the centres for mystical teaching and tradition, and therefore prime focii for Qawwalis. At any time of the year one can find an *urs* in progress somewhere on the Subcontinent. I have attended Qawwali *mahfils* in Lahore and Pakpattan, two important centres of *urs* in Pakistan. But the *urs* to beat all *urs*, where the Qawwali reaches unparalleled heights, is the *urs* of the great saint Nizamuddin Auliya and of his favourite disciple, Amir Khusrau himself, that takes place in Delhi.

The Qawwals, the performers of Qawwalis, not surprisingly, tend to be both the followers of the Sufi path as well as highly versatile musicians. The ideal voice for a Qawwal is considered to be loud and full, a voice with life and strength, rather than one that is melodious or modulated. As Qawwals have to project their voice in huge assemblies that gather at shrines, they tend, like operatic tenors, to be rather large. Enter the subject of our story: the late Nusrat Fatah Ali Khan.

Nusrat was not just a big man with a big voice; he was big in every way. And as befits big men, he is shrouded in myths and legends, much like Amir Khusrau and Sufi Saints of yesteryear. The popular story of Nusrat's life that circulates in towns and villages of Pakistan is an enchanting narrative of dreams, remote viewing, and mystical encounters. These begin at the beginning: with his name itself. Apparently, his original name was Parvez, meaning 'conqueror', 'lucky', 'happy', a common enough and perfectly acceptable designation amongst Muslims of the Subcontinent. Yet, one day a mystic by the name of Pir Ghulam Ghaus Samadani came to see Nusrat's father, Ustad Fateh Ali Khan, himself a noted Qawwal. Our hero entered the room and when his father introduced him as 'Parvez'. Samadani was startled and enraged. 'Change his name at once', he thundered. 'Do you know who was Parvez? He was the king of Persia who tore up the letter sent to him by Prophet Muhammad. This name does not augur well for a boy destined to be a global Qawwal. It should not be the name of someone who will sing the rosary of Allah'. There and then, the fat boy's name was changed to Nusrat.

The word 'Nusrat' means 'God's grace' and 'success with His help'. So the young Qawwal was only too conscious of his prospects. On the way to his global triumph he is said to have performed several musical miracles. Take, for instance, the occasion when he was called upon to accompany the Indian classical singer Pandit Dina Nath on the tabla. The good Pandit had declared himself disappointed by all the tabla players in Pakistan—none of them could keep sufficient tempo to enable him to express himself fully. But the youthful Nusrat and his nimble fingers did such a brilliant job that the Pundit had to declare 'I am defeated. Nusrat is highly talented'.

It was at the Amir Khusrau Festival in Islamabad in 1975, marking the poet's 700th Anniversary, that Nusrat performed his breakthrough musical miracle. All the great Qawwali singers of Pakistan were invited to the Festival, which was broadcast live on radio. However, Nusrat, as yet an unrecognised Qawwal, was the last to be invited. So, by the time he and his party arrived the other Qawwals had already picked all the more popular poems and songs of Amir Khusrau for their own performances. It seemed there was nothing left from the Khusrau heritage for Nusrat. But the up-and-coming artist astonished them all by singing a rare and hardly ever performed poem:

Mein to pia sey nainan mila aayi rey
Par nari ganwari kahey so kahey
Mien to pia sey nainan mila aayi rey

I am not thirsty, I have met my beloved
Whatever the ignorant girls of my village might say
I am not thirsty, I have met my beloved.

After that, Nusrat went on to perform one of Amir Khusrau's most difficult compositions in a particular style of Qawwali known as the Qaul Qalbana. Divided into five tals, Qaul Qalbana is only attempted by the most accomplished artists, those confident in their total mastery of their art. This was Nusrat's way of telling the other Qawwals and everyone listening not only that he had arrived but also that he was on his way to higher places.

So far our tale has been of the world of tradition, Sufi tradition that continues to circulate and whirl around its own concerns. Clearly, Nusrat was established, so much within his proper ambit that his own life took on the form and character of popular Sufi narratives, replete as they are with the little

miracles of daily life. But we live in one world, and eventually even the unworldly are tracked to their assemblies and whirled by centripetal forces onto the global stage. And so it was that Nusrat was propelled on a trajectory no other Qawwal had ever taken, or even dreamed might exist: to the recording studio of Peter Gabriel.

Gabriel is the unquestioned doyen of world music, the eclectic genre of chic that merchandises the illusion we are real aesthetes, full members of a pluralist global culture. The great achievement of World of Music, Arts and Dance (WOMAD) and 'RealWorld', the organisation and record label founded by Gabriel, has been to purloin, appropriate and commodify traditional genres of music from distant corners of the world and thereby make fortunes for recording companies, but few if any of the traditional musicians involved. The world, as the Sufis say, is a mirage, a distorted flickering image of reality. Or as a western poet once noted: the world is too much with us, late and soon, getting and spending. I merely note that what world music commodifies is the lure of other worldliness, in easy, though contextually incomprehensible form. For the West, spirituality, mystical power is the continuing domain of non-western, natural man. The three fifths of the world who remain bereft of the worldly goods of modernity have only ethereal consolation in other worldliness to warm their hands and stir their mess of porridge by, it has become a natural order in quite a different sense of the word.

World music summons an assembly of listening for the global mirage based on the assumption that by being fascinated by what we do not understand we actually belong to one world. It is a delusion, because it lacks exactly those defining criteria that make Qawwali: mutual endeavour for a common higher

purpose. Yet, if world music fails to transport us beyond the dynamics of the mundane natural order, at least it sounds nice.

And so it was that Nusrat was drawn to participate in that most bizarrely eclectic and truly postmodern exercise of adding a Qawwali to the sound track of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. What better accompaniment to the deconstruction of Christology could there be than decontextualising another spiritual tradition? Postmodernism is nothing, if not the vehicle to transport us all beyond the meaningful content of grand narratives of belief. In the studio, goes the story, Nusrat performed a number of ragas and Gabriel kept on recording the recital. Then Nusrat did something unusual. He sang the tunes of Darbari ragas in higher tones, rather than his characteristic falsetto. Gabriel liked it and it ended up on the track of the film.

When the recording was complete Gabriel said: 'I wish you could do something with western musical instruments.' Again the postmodern refrain, the quest for fulfillment by losing all meaning in hybrid fusion form. Decontextualised, uprooted and free floating postmodernism would have us absorbed in genuine meaningless pastiche. Nusrat started to hum and play on his harmonium in an absent minded way. After a little while, he rendered the scale:

sa re sa: ni sa pa ni ma pama ni ga re ga.

Nusrat immediately realised the significance of what he had done. Peter Gabriel so liked what he heard he proceeded immediately to record it. Thus was born Nusrat Fatah Ali Khan's masterpiece, '*Musst Muss!*' When cinema audiences heard the intriguing sounds of Qawwali they asked for more. They too wanted to go '*Musst Muss!*', and lose themselves in

dreams of postmodern inclusiveness. Nusrat became a must on radio and in record shops far and wide.

Irony is a special delight of postmodernism. The first incarnation of '*Musst Mustt*', was released on the Real World label. Although guitar and other western instruments are there, the Qawwali is sung in the traditional way largely to the accompaniment of tabla. The text is a mixture of Urdu and Punjabi and its *subject* is Caliph Ali:

Dum Mustt Qualander, Mustt Mustt
 My remembrance moment by moment
 Ali in my every breath

The text is not all together original. Rather, it's a variation on the old Punjabi Qawwali '*Dama dum mustt Qualadar*' which I have heard many a fakir sing in the streets of the Pakistani province of Sindh. As Qawwali, '*Musst, Mustt*' exists within the traditional orbit of improvisation, with a new element added out of the blue. It includes some enchanting *tarana*, Nusrat presents the whole performance as a showcase of virtuosity and talent. A passive assembly for listening among the uninitiated can be transported by fascination without commitment, yet it works within the terms of a committed assembly for listening.

The opening words of the Qawwali are very significant. The word 'Dum' has the double meaning of 'life' and 'breath'. 'Mustt' is the state of being lost to this world, or being located in another realm, or intoxicated in the love of God. Qualander is a mystic. So, collectively 'Dum Mustt Qualander, Mustt Mustt' signifies a mystic lost to this life and breathing the very love of God. The Qawwali is both an expression of mystical experience as well as an invitation to abandon worldly life and adopt the mystical way, the way of the Qualander. The nod

towards western music and tastes is quite marginal, as a global recording phenomenon this Qawwali speaks its own language as it ever has.

And now our story takes another turn, ascending cadence becomes descending. The infinite loop of improvisation cuts short, backtracks, goes forward, amplifies and lays its stress on something quite unexpected. It is the responsibility of the Qawwal to react to the listeners. Nusrat himself now proceeds to produce two further versions of *Mustt, Mustt*. In its second incarnation, the Massive Attack Remix, Nusrat seeks to engage with that assembly for listening that is his new western audience. As all Qawwals must he searches for a means to keep in step with the spiritual capacity of his audience. So at the second turning of this story he brings instrumental music to the fore and renders the text, the words that are anyway incomprehensible to his listeners, secondary. Some of the conventional Qawwali vocal features disappear altogether. But, for all that, the *subject* of the Qawwali is still Ali, a refrain simple enough to be repeated emphatically and picked out by the most untrained ear.

The third turning of our tale describes a loop back to the ground on which Qawwali was first born. 'Musst, Musst' returns home, this time to know its birthplace as it has become. In its third incarnation it is released largely for audiences in the Indian subcontinent. It is the function of the Qawwal to attend to the changed spiritual requirements of the assembly for listening, a Subcontinental audience that can both understand and know the tradition and engage with path presented. So what is one to make of Musst Musst mark three, released in the Subcontinent under the title 'Mastt Qalander'? To what realm does it transport? It is a fast paced affair with Nusrat joined by female vocalists. The synthesised music drowns everything and

all is lost in funky *tal*. Although Ali is still there, he is no longer the subject of the song. What was meant to be listened to in devotion and ecstatic contemplation now becomes disco dancing music—ecstasy of quite another kind.

It was at this point, with just three versions in hand that I determined to make ‘Musst Musst’ a subject of a diatribe on the awful assaults of global postmodern popular culture on my heritage. My assembly for listening was to be, appropriately enough, in Delhi. Listen to this anti-progression, this heedless descent into meaninglessness, I began. I played the three incarnations only to become aware of a certain lack of reaction in my audience. Were they not concerned at how our tradition was being debased by the pernicious influences from the West? They had news for me. Never mind three versions, now there are four: “but you chaps living in the West would have no idea about that,” they noted. Feeling like some innocent abroad I listened as they brought me up to date.

The fourth incarnation of ‘*Mustt Mustt*’ appears in the Indian film, ‘Mohra’. Here the original subject disappears totally and becomes an *object*: an object of material and sexual desire. The lyrics are changed slightly so the original idea of losing oneself in the love of God evaporates and objectified sex comes into play:

‘Tu Cheese Bari Hay, Mustt Mustt’.

The word ‘cheese’ translates as ‘things’, ‘commodities’ and ‘material’. In the original version the word ‘bari’ refers to higher Saints. Here, wordplay is used to connote the idea that a purely sexual object of love can also be divine and you can get ‘high’ on material things too! The changed spiritual requirements could not be more explicit. This is a world turned upside down, but, as my audience in Delhi clearly pointed out the turning

was a home grown revolution. There was more to come. You should get yourself a copy of the new compendium edition, I was told with a certain impish glee by my audience that had now become my teachers. They sent me in search of the appropriately named, 'The New Massacre' version of 'Mustt, Mustt' by Boota and Master G. Here, a number of different versions of the Qawwali—including the original and the Indian film version—are brought together in a postmodern blend. But instead of *tarana*, we have Rap. The entire amalgam is defined by absolute meaninglessness. The *object* now becomes a pure extravaganza, a fusion of sounds that is 'with it', a commodity that is only a commodity.

Like a moth, irresistibly drawn to the flame, I followed the path of Mustt Mustt to the final immolation, the *coup d'grace*. It was delivered during the 1996 Cricket World Cup. Where once the Subcontinent had spiritual passion it now has unbridled devotion for cricket, and, incidentally, leads the world in betting syndicates that corrupt that erstwhile gentlemanly path as well. The sponsors of the game broadcast a special advertisement on numerous satellite channels throughout Asia and selected countries in Europe. The advertisement features a group of young children playing cricket in a Pakistani village. On the sound track 'Mustt Mustt' is just about audible. It's a joyous occasion with much colour and excitement around the game. Then a child hits the ball, which flies towards the sky, spins as if catching fire and revolves into the symbol for 'Coke'. The soundtrack swells with the unmistakable sound of 'Mustt Mustt' at full volume. What became a commodity now promotes another commodity, one with rather imperial tendencies. Nusrat Fatah Ali Khan's crowning achievement, the Qawwali that brought him the accolade of 'Shahen-Shah-e-Qawwali', the King of Kings of Qawwali, is finally drained

of all its original meaning. Its real essence, intoxication in the love of God, is reduced to the desire for Coke: 'the *real* thing'.

I remember asking Nusrat, shortly after Musst Mustt took, whether it was a good idea to westernize the Qawwali. 'I cherish the tradition of classical music more than my life', he said. 'I consider its protection and preservation as my spiritual duty. As an experiment I do not mind the use of western musical instruments. But it will be great injustice to introduce any change in classical music. I use western musical instruments because I believe that you can dress up a pretty child in any clothes and it will stay pretty. But the more important thing is that the child should not get injured while putting on those clothes'.

In the case of 'Mastt, Mastt', the clothes did much more than injure the child. Innocence, as the Sufis are quick to point out, is not barrier to annihilation. But the story of 'Mastt, Mastt' has a strong moral. We live on one planet, in multiple worlds, we are different assemblies of listeners for we have not yet the wit to learn how to communicate across and through our differences. I am that traveller that returns to tell we have more problems than we know. There is not only one postmodernism out there. There is not merely one global popular culture that proliferates the meaningless mundane cause of pure commodity—the world is busy building many and different postmodernisms, we are all rushing headlong to meet each other on the common ground of nothingness. The flames are dying out all over the world.

The Ambassador from India

From *Autopia: Cars and Culture*, Peter Wollen and Joe Kerr (eds.),
Reaktion Books, London, 2002

I

It is all some years ago now, but I have never quite recovered from my first arrival in Delhi. My family originally came to India in the baggage train of conquerors. I had no intention of repeating the impertinence. I, a Pakistani born British Muslim, conceived of myself as an ambassador of amity. My visit had dual purpose: I was to reacquaint myself with a world sundered from me, but ever part of who I am; I would establish the possibilities of collaboration across false divisions. The conception was impeccable; the execution turned into a cruel parody—a comic relief scene taken from some old Indian film with me in the standard Johnnie Walker role. The actor, screen name indeed taken from a whiskey bottle, always played the seeming idiot, his inept antics were laughable, only slowly did they reveal he had the surest grasp of what was actually happening.

I put the blame for the debacle that became my arrival squarely on the Ambassador, India's most venerable and loved car. Based on the Morris Oxford, the Amby, as it is

affectionately known, is inescapable: it is the first and most distinctive mode of transport any visitor to India has encountered since independence. It is still the first landmark you meet as you come out of the Delhi airport. You track down the taxi booth, purchase your chitty to ride, and exit the building to be greeted by the awaiting swarm of Ambassador taxis: liveried in black and yellow, smugly lining the road, rounded, plump, instantly demanding to be personified.

It was from this point the high blown sentiment of my imagination and the actual scene began to diverge. A small, spindly young man approached me with brisk dispatch. He grabbed the proffered chitty, fluttering hopefully in my hand, and motioned me to my chariot. I picked up my hand luggage and turned. Chariot? Ambassador? No, an aged moth eaten rust bucket, a demented rabid bee in visible terminal decline greeted my eyes. When the driver opened the boot to stow my suitcase I glimpsed the road through numerous holes in the floor. As if sensitive to my gaze, the driver shooed me towards the rear door, opened it gingerly on creaking hinges, and I was motioned to take my seat.

Even a near death Ambassador is a surprise to the uninitiated. It stands high on its wheelbase and has plenty of headroom. One does not collapse in the middle, semi squat and then contort at a perilous angle to inveigle oneself sideways into an Ambassador. One addresses the vehicle directly, making a subtle bow as if to say 'namaste,' and, having suitably greeted one's conveyance, steps forward in this mildly stooped position. The seat is a generous space, amply provided with legroom. One settles back in an Ambassador, even if the upholstery is threadbare and rancid, scourged with who knows what disease. One sits in an Ambassador, regally. One is ensconced, like some plenipotentiary potentate, not a ten a penny tourist. One

has a vantage point, a position, one must cast one's gaze upon the surrounding scene.

I anticipated my arrival into the fabled city of my dreams—Delhi! The driver rather sheepishly took his position at the wheel. There was a momentary pause, no doubt for silent prayer. Then, with greater determination than his frail frame promised, he turned the ignition key. Nothing! Enconced potentates of plenipotentary nature do not panic. The key turned once more. Nothing! Several further turns of the key, followed by equal amounts of nothing, accompanied by various sighs of sundry order, and the driver turned to look at me. He shrugged. I raised my eyebrows. He made calming movements with his hand and leapt out of the vehicle. I saw him disappear beneath the bonnet.

A small crowd of potential sage advice and mechanical expertise clustered around him. I realised my arrival was becoming a spectacle. The driver returned to the steering wheel for another determined turn of the key. Nothing! I thought it would be proper to show some concern for his plight. I extended my hand to the door handle and froze, caught in his vicious, malevolent glare. Clearly my function was to remain exactly where I was: the fact that the taxi was not going anywhere was not my concern. With a disdainful motion to stay still, the driver half exited and began to push the car. He was joined in his exertions by the gaggle of advisors. We moved six inches, it is amazing how heavy a rust bucket can be.

It suddenly struck me everything was happening in silence, with implicit understanding. There was no shouting, cursing or general rhubarb of disconsolate banter. Everyone had an appointed role, in an appointed order of things to be done, and everyone got on with their task. More people arrived, a swift backward glance assured me half the assembled company

of drivers were on the case. All the doors of the taxi were now open, heavers and pushers strategically positioned at each, some gave me looks of acknowledgement and seemed to sigh consolation. There was a general quickening in the assembled mass and definite motion ensued. The motion was forward but neither

determined nor sufficient to engage any mechanical response.

The company stood, gazed at each other. There was a collective shaking of heads. Someone motioned for the remaining drivers to assemble, the situation was serious, all hands were needed. I looked behind me to see three long lines of eager bodies ready to push, others positioned themselves at the open doors, perhaps to prevent my escape. They looked at me, with discernible interest and a touch of pity. There was a general murmur: *'Ek, do, teen'* ('One, two, three'). And we began to move. We lurched and seemed to attain wheel revolution in an instant, after a modicum of momentum was attained we continued to move, we were hurtling over the immense flat expanse, huffs and puffs were getting audible, some feet were half jogging to keep pace with our volition. The engine clicked and came to life. Lithely, the driver jumped into the moving vehicle and we were off.

We overtook a cart pulled by oxen. I was delighted, overjoyed even. I could hear a clucking sound. No, not the engine I assured myself. We described a sweeping bend and were about to meet a larger way, the main highway into the city. Instead of slowing down we seemed to be accelerating. The clucking sound accompanied the driver's vigorous attempts to break, except there were no breaks. I took a long anxious breath, what traffic there was parted to clear our path. I held my breath as we progressed. I cast eager looks ahead searching for glimpses of the city of my dreams. Thinking of the monuments to come I

exhaled slowly. And so did the Ambassador. Winding down from fever pitch, to a stately trundle it spluttered onto the side of the road and ground to a point of finality in the nothingness where all things end.

The driver slumped forward over the wheel. What words could there be? A long moment later he simply got out of the car and stood by the side of the highway casting longing looks back towards the airport. We were alone. Afternoon shadows were lengthening into dusk. Time passed us by, though nothing else did. An hour later the phut phut of a motorised trishaw broke the silence. The driver ran into the middle of the road and bodily insisted the trishaw stop. A simple conversation between the drivers, then I was ushered from my Ambassador. The chitty now fluttered like Chamberlain's paper of appeasement as it was handed on to the trishaw driver. Clinging desperately to my luggage I made my incongruous, decidedly humble entry into Delhi. I consoled myself with the thought I was definitively not arriving as my ancestors did.

II

The Ambassador is as Indian as Gandhi, the Mahatma that is. Its image, like that of the Tata truck, has come to symbolise Indian independence and modernity. Manufactured by Hindustan Motors at their Calcutta factory since 1942, it enjoyed a virtual monopoly of Indian potholes and overcrowded roads for much of the Cold-war period. It has proved to be enduring, sturdy, long suffering and resilient. It wears its capabilities lightly and therefore is ever ready to surprise. It can be adapted for endless uses, and yet always carries itself with a certain grace, even in the most unfortunate of circumstances. It is robust, having much to endure and

surmount, yet it always appears ample and compliant rather than muscular. Strength the Ambassador has in abundance, but it is not hard bodied, making a peacock display of its powerful attributes for idle curiosity or self-aggrandisement.

But the Ambassador is not just an Indian icon; for me it is India itself. To begin with it is ubiquitous. Wherever I went the Ambassador was there too. No segment of India can be India without the presence of the Amby and its diesel infested fumes. It is more than a cherished part of the national imagination. Since every mechanic of any ilk, every taxi driver can take it apart and put it together again blindfolded it is integral to the Indian subconscious. The Ambassador is also a metaphor for India in a much deeper sense. Like India, the Ambassador is tradition, self-confident and self-assured tradition. It is tempting to read tradition merely in its look and feel of a motor vehicle of a bygone era, a most mistaken thought. The Amby has undergone several 'modernisations'. Its traditional authenticity is in remaining timeless and therefore able to show the folly of time as mere surface change for the sake of change. The vehicle has no need to court fashion, merely increased replication to meet, most adequately as it does, practical need. As the ubiquitous tradition of motorised conveyance, the Ambassador is tradition in another sense: it is autochthonous, home grown, built out of the landed resources and enterprise of India. In its conception the Ambassador is stately, staid, defying categories, a classless conveyance for all and sundry—yet effortlessly able to denote subtle distinctions of rank, privilege and pedigree. One reads status in an Ambassador and its occupants as surely as one judges, with a practiced eye, the status of any person one meets for the tell-tale signs of who they are, where they belong in the pecking order.

In rural areas, for example, the white Amby stands for officialdom. All varieties of local bureaucrats—from magistrates to tax collectors and members of the internal security service—have regulation white Ambassadors, in the way the Army has khaki jeeps. Even today, in large parts of the Indian countryside, the ‘authority’ of a white car with a flashing red light evokes curiosity and eagerness among villagers to catch a glimpse of the ‘Burra Sahib’ inside. Different cities have embraced different incarnations of the Ambassador. In Calcutta, no other car can be a taxi. Widespread, affordable, they are part of the everyday life of Calcuttans. The social dynamics of the city itself are reflected in the Ambassador. In the sixties, the taxi drivers in Calcutta tended to be Sikhs, who spoke Bengali. They had internalised the city’s etiquette of decorum in public behaviour. They engaged in conversation with their passengers and expected to be treated in return with civility. By the nineties, other ethnic groups had entered the trade, there was no longer any guarantee of finding a Bengali speaker driving one’s taxi. The new generation was younger and brasher, their driving skills less polished and their attitudes towards their passengers tended towards disinterested insolence. Calcuttans read this as both a decline in the moral fibre of the their city and disrespect for the legacy of the Ambassador.

When the Ambassador is not epitomising the driver or the passenger, it is the occasion. The roominess of the Ambassador makes it an ideal car for ceremonies. Almost every wedding is graced by its presence. After the wedding ceremony, the bride often leaves her parents’ house in an Ambassador. The car is bedecked in wedding finery, like the bride herself. The other traffic will give way to the cortege with indulgence, while people crane their necks to catch a glimpse of the bride. For

that day, with its garlands and tinsel, the Ambassador is more than just a car: as the replacement of the old palanquins it is the bearer of tradition.

The Ambassador is not simply 'out there' in the real world but also 'up there' on the silver screen. Indian filmmakers have readily embraced the known characteristics of the Ambassador to structure and turn their plot lines. In his famous Calcutta trilogy (*Pratidwandi*, *Simabaddha* and *Jana Aranya*), Satyajit Ray used the interior of the Ambassador to make social comment as well as to observe the lives of the rich segment of the city. Ray presents the Ambassador as a symbol of wealth, respectability and comfort: its occupants are always affluent industrialists and officers of private companies. But in populist Bollywood films, as opposed to art house movies, the person sitting in the rear of an Ambassador is likely to be a corrupt politician. Jeeps are reserved solely for the police; the villains drive flashy foreign cars; where else would you expect to encounter a corrupt politician except in his white Ambassador? In the 1992 film *Roja*, for example, there is a famous scene where a top-ranking Minister meets with the heroine Roja. It ends with the Minister driving off in his white Ambassador. Implicitly the car conveys an obvious meaning: his promise to help Roja is going to be betrayed.

The film I remember most, because it so intrigued me, is Ritwik Ghatak's *Ajantrik* ('Lifeless'). The protagonist of this 1957 Bengali film, Bimal, is a ne'er do well tribal taxi-driver besotted with his battered taxi, an ancient Chevrolet he calls 'Joggodal' (literally 'burden'). Bimal sees Joggodal as a living person: he talks to her constantly, asks if she is thirsty, and dresses up as a bridegroom to have his picture taken with her.

He is surrounded by more enterprising taxi drivers, all with Ambassadors, personified by the Sikh who always teases him

about his 'old pile of scrap'. Bimal, is touchy about criticism of Joggodal and refuses to trade it for a new Ambassador. He has confidence both in his abilities as a master mechanic and above all in the car never letting him down. Three notions of technology are pitted against each other in the film: imported outmoded technology, domestic technology and greedy capitalism and rampant development in the shape of bulldozers. We see technology driven change—in the arrival of electric telegraph wires and trains—sowing discord amongst the people of Bimal's tribe. As Bimal struggles with Joggodal, the other taxi drivers with their Ambassadors are always in the background counter-pointing the dependent nature of Bimal's relationship with his old Chevrolet. When Bimal finds himself attracted to a woman, Joggodal throws jealous tantrums and nearly kills the human object of Bimal's love. In the end, Bimal sells the car for scrap to a rich merchant and watches as it is dismantled piece-by-piece and carted away.

For me, an imported Chevrolet remains a powerful symbol of the primrose path to the global dilemma of inappropriate technology, quite different to the indigenous inhabitant, the Ambassador. Yet to foreign eyes, the Ambassador as India's answer to modernity may appear both quaint and exotic. There is nothing quaint about a conveyance that is so eminently practical, so suited and fitted for service under almost any circumstance. How can something so mundane, so common be exotic? Like all attempts to apply these false ideas to India, the Ambassador shows the paucity of imagination the labels 'quaint' and 'exotic' betray. The words feed the misunderstanding of those who cannot live without a fabled India, finding the real one far too competent, capable and unconcerned with the approval of foreigners.

An Ambassador, like India, is fitted for its own existence according to its own perceptions and gets on with the work. The Ambassador takes to the road and jostles with bullock cart, trishaw, bicycle, scooter, bus and foul fume belching lorry or camel drawn truck. It is never out of place and does not displace any other form of transport it encounters.

III

My visit led me to confront various foreign ideas about India, just as my progress around the country encountered the effects of colonial imposition. In Cochin, I visited the grave of Vasco da Gama, to ensure he was really dead and buried. Consulting a map revealed I could trace the footprints of European arrival by following the major trunk road along the Western Ghats. From da Gama's end in Cochin to Calicut (now reverted to its original name of Khazikhode) where he first landed, then on to Goa, the administrative centre of the Portuguese Empire of India he helped to establish. So I took to the open road hiring my own Ambassador with driver. This time I requested an inspection and a test drive before confirming my travel arrangements.

Early the following morning we set off. This was an immediate mistake. It was morning rush hour in Cochin and we had to negotiate the town centre before hitting the open road. I began to apprehend how people come up with words like quaint and exotic. It derives from not understanding the order of events in an endless sea of movement, not grasping the basic principles behind what looks for all the world like chaos and disorder. Every form of conveyance was on the road, every road user a rajah disdainful of all other travellers. Jostle does not do justice, cheek by jowl is too distant from

the reality. And all on roads bent and twisted with age, pockmarked and wrinkled by years under sun, rain and heat.

My seat was up front beside the driver, the better to converse and learn more about where I was going. Before I could utter my first question I was struck dumb by pure fright! To enjoy the morning air, and take in my full ration of various belching exhaust fumes, I had the window rolled down with my arm perched half out of the vehicle. As we overtook a cumbersome, heavy-laden cart operating under push power, we pitched into a major crater in the road. Gyrating left and right with engine gunning and exuding power, we lurched sideways to meet a lorry making its own determined path directly towards us. The merest hint of a touch on the steering wheel was all the acknowledgement this confrontation warranted. We breezed past each other, an infinitesimal distance between carrying my body and severed arm on different trajectories. Nothing stirred, nothing was said, all was under control.

Only I felt the need to turn, first in disbelief to the driver, a centre of complete calm, then in angry wonderment to glower at the retreating lorry. On all the lorries one sees in India, the high board behind the drivers cab is vividly painted. St Sebastian martyred by numerous arrows is very popular, as are basic crucifixion scenes. I well remember one depicting the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed for the cup, symbol of his forthcoming trials, to pass from him. One often saw Durga, the awesome goddess who rides on the back of a tiger, or Lakshmi, goddess of good fortune who is wisdom-bestowing, the entrance to transcendental life. Was I hallucinating, or did the lorry that so nearly dismembered me portray a crescent moon and minaret dominated by the horse that bore the Prophet Mohammad on his *miraj*, his night journey up to heaven? If

not, why is that particular image still burned into my mind's eye?

I closed my eyes. When I looked again it was with enlightenment, everything made perfect sense. Three days we were on the road to Goa, largely a single lane motorway, as contorted as the streets of Cochin. It was now evident, with startling clarity, I was borne along within the very essence of Indian modernity. I was conveyed through diverse encounters that characterise the nature of Indian modernity to confront an overwhelming question.

The Ambassador personifies India, this much I had already apprehended. Enlightened understanding revealed roads, travel, connection and their appropriate conveyance have always been, time without end in India. But time comes in different phases. The Ambassador was consciously designed to serve modern independent India. Its purpose was to fare forward. Time itself is accumulation, the medium in which accretions are added to what is. The effect is contemporaneous coexistence of everything. All stages and ages are represented, colonial as well as the ancient. Yet subtly, all is reworked, everything is represented but not everything survives, for there is subtraction as well as accretion. The process of time is accommodation, not always easy or felicitous, fitted to the particular character of India itself. What results is living tradition that always fares forwards. The most common sign on the roads of India is "Horn please"—it appears on the rear of every lorry, every bus, every mode of public transport. Living tradition, like every motorist in India, does not need to look behind, the rear view mirror is a redundant piece of equipment. The past, what is behind, is also ever present, when it needs attention it can speak for itself. A polite honk of the horn, or any other variety of utterance a horn is capable of, is sufficient

to alert any driver to the presence and needs of another road user.

Living tradition is not static it fares forward in a specific way. For long periods the road to Goa was devoid of traffic. But whenever a dot appeared on the horizon the driver would shuffle in his seat, bestir the Ambassador and together they would go hell for leather at maximum speed to catch up with whatever vehicle dared to be ahead of us. Tradition contains the competitive instinct, a self-conscious drive to prove its virility and potency. It is not a simple race for sheer delight in the chase. All other vehicles exist to be overtaken. Confidence coupled with competitiveness breeds boundless conviction of invincibility. Only this can account for the invariable requirement of waiting to overtake until one has reached a blind corner. Faring forward requires neither looking back or beyond, living tradition is everywhere, whatever the circumstances there can only be the appointed destination.

Living tradition can fare forward exuberantly, even recklessly, because it operates within visible, prudential restraints. On every road of Indian amble, stand, or sedately sit, the mobilised speed breakers. Where craters, potholes and cracks are challenges, obstructions to progress, hazards to normal usage, mobilised speed breakers are constraints that keep living tradition channelled and mindful of itself. What are mobilised speed breakers? The cow, mother of India, she who cannot be collided with, who has total freedom while all else must accommodate her pleasure in the operation of their existence. This universally accepted principle of restraint determines how India fares forward. It provides perspective on the various incarnations of technology that appear in India. Over time, this ever-present operative system of constraint reveals the inner character of technology, its fitness to serve, permitting

the selection process, the addition and subtraction, to shape and mould them into domesticated form. You can see how this operated in history, the bullock cart is supremely adapted ancient technology. Modernity was much more of a challenge, coming after the dislocation of colonial disruption, increasing the pace and scale of technological impact. It found its answer in the Ambassador, not chic, not flashy, not the most efficient of vehicles, but home made, sustainable and enduring, cheap and available: domesticable, domesticated and domiciled in India. The Ambassador is testimony that prudential restraints work. Confidence in the efficacy of the system obviously explains why, although ideally every car in India has breaks, no driver ever feels the need to employ them.

Borne within modern Indian identity, my trusty Ambassador, I arrived in Old Goa. There stand three magnificent, majestic churches, a selection of cloisters and other imposing European buildings all clustered around a square dwarfed by an enormous outspreading boa tree. The buildings are alive only with tourists. It is not that nothing else remains of any phase of colonialism, here or elsewhere in India. Colonial accretions, fitting, unfitting and yet to be resolved are everywhere. Indian modernity, like the Ambassador, has evolved to transcend colonialism. Indian modernity is a mode of transportation, a means of faring forward, it has fared well and self sufficiently in its most fitting incarnation, the Ambassador. Among the vestiges of foreign power the cows roam freely. As I contemplated this pleasing scene there was a general hubbub as a Maruti made a high speed dash that caused everyone, including the cows, to scuttle to the side of the road.

IV

For forty years Indian modernity underpinned political independence. The national love affair with the Ambassador flourished. In 1983 the Maruti arrived, more modern looking, the product of a partnership between the Indian government and the Suzuki corporation of Japan. Maruti cars proved an instant hit with the burgeoning middle class, it has become the vehicle of choice for yuppies. Statistics, however, are deceptive. Today, the Amby commands only 5% of India's car market, compared to Maruti's 80% share. But Ambassadors continue to be more visible, and more common on the roads because vast numbers remain in existence and operation. They continue to give resilient service long after more expensive and younger breeds have gone to the eternal scrap yard, defeated by the adventure that is the roads of India. So long as the Ambassador remains on the road technology will be subject to Indian modernity rather than driven who knows where by rampant technological imperatives.

What Our Left Hand is For

New Statesman

5th February 2007

In all the space and time devoted to Big Brother furore, a fundamental question has been overlooked. It was asked by Danielle Lloyd: ‘they eat with their hands in India don’t they—or is that China? You don’t know where their hands have been’. Many of you see this as a racist jibe. I see it as a natural inquiry.

Most white Britons, I suspect, have no idea what we Indians get up to with our hands. For us, the public and private use of hands can have rather esoteric meaning. Consider, for example, what the Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty did when she first met the uncouth Jade Goody in the Big Brother house. She didn’t wave her hands about and shout something utterly meaningless like ‘Hi’. Instead, she brought both of her hands together up to her chest, palms touching, and bowed elegantly. *Namaste!* The gesture says I love and respect you, I greet the place where you and I are one, I rise above our differences. Now, I ask you, can hands communicate anything more profound?

Of course, we Indians also use our hands to eat. But Danille’s confusion between Indians and Chinese is not unusual. Britain

seems to have an interminable problem about defining 'Indians'. We have been located in as far off places as Americas ('Red Indians') and Indonesia ('Dutch Indians'). Nowadays all Indians in Britain are seen as 'Asians' and Pakistani and Bangladeshi restaurants are described as Indian. *Hobson-Jobson*, the Bible of Anglo-Indian terms, says a whole book can be written on the use and abuse of the word Indian. Indeed, quite a few have been written since *Hobson-Jobson* was first published in 1903. So let us not be too harsh on the poor denizens of Big Brother.

It is not strictly correct to say Indians eat with their hands. In fact, we eat only with our right hand. It's a process that requires more grace and skill than holding a knife and fork. To see what I mean try breaking a piece of nan or chapatti, scooping some generic curry with it and placing the whole thing in your mouth without making a mess. You will also appreciate something else: you are forced to give total attention to the food at hand. Moreover, it's a much more sensual experience that adds touch to sight, smell and taste. It's thoroughly ecological; and breaks all social boundaries. That's why the human family has always eaten with its fingers throughout history. Knives and forks were introduced for people who didn't realise that they had to wash their hands before eating. Cutlery also emerged to establish class distinction—and to place one culture above all others. So now we look down on the most natural, human, healthy and enjoyable way of eating.

However, no self-respecting Indian will ever eat with his or her left hand because that hand is left for another equally natural function. It is used for washing the anal region after defecation. If eating with right hand is a sophisticated skill, than washing one's evacuations with the left is a high art. The first thing to realise is that we Indians, unlike most of you, do not use paper. As a civilisation we predate the invention of the toilet roll and

hence use the most natural of all materials—water. The second thing to understand is that water has to be carried to the right region. This task is performed by a special implement, totally Indian in its origins and development, called *lota*. It looks like a tea pot and is usually made of stainless steel, aluminium or plastic, but never ceramic.

Now, you can't wash yourself the Indian way if you are sitting comfortably on the throne. You have to squat. Imagine the dexterity required for you to balance yourself while squatting, holding the *lota* in your right hand, pouring the right amount of water in the right area, and cleaning yourself with the left hand. I don't recommend the procedure for uninitiated or faint-hearted non-Indians. But it does make the difference between us and white Britons crystal clear. You may occasionally be able to eat like us using your fingers, but by God, you can never shit like us.

So, I hope, Danielle, Jade and the rest of you, in and out of Big Brother house, working class chavs and middle class snots, can see that we do a lot more with our hands than just eat. You can appreciate why Yoga comes so naturally to us. But above all, you now understand why it is not a good idea to shake an Indian by the left hand. You know exactly where it has been.



Part Six
Interviews



The Beginning of Knowledge

Joan Bakewell talks with writer Ziauddin Sardar

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*T*oday, I discuss his beliefs with someone who born a Muslim, has for some thirty years been in the search of a form of Islam that could take his religion forward into a more consensual, reasoned future. Ziauddin Sardar was born in Pakistan but brought up in Hackney, where he was educated. He's a writer, lecturer, intellectual, whose continuing fascination with the history and philosophy of his faith has taken him to Iran, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Malaysia and many parts of Britain. He's the author of some forty books, and a regular contributor to the *New Statesman*. Early this year, he published his autobiography, *'Desperately Seeking Paradise'*, whose whimsical title indicates a lightness of touch, and an engaging journalistic approach to matters which indeed, he takes very seriously. Zia—explain your surname, Sardar—it has an English link.

It does, it means 'leader'. Believe it or not my grandfather actually fought on behalf of the Raj and his original name was Dorani. After he fought many battles—I think he fought in the Boxer Rebellion, and he also fought in Burma—it was decided that he should be knighted. But in the early '20s you couldn't actually knight an Indian subject. So he was given a substitute honour. So instead of 'Sir' he was called 'Sardar'.

So our surname became ‘Sardar’. In fact what happened was that the family split in two. There was one part of the family not very happy with the idea of calling themselves ‘Sardar’, especially an honour given, because the grandfather was in their mind a traitor. And the rest of the family kind of identified with Britain. So I come from the part of the family that identifies with, with Britain, and we are called ‘Sardar’.

(Laughs). Now you were born in Pakistan. You came to London when you were eight and you were taught your faith by your mother, who taught you the Quran. And she didn't simply recite it with you, but she analysed it with you. Can you explain that first, important education?

I think it is important to realise that most Muslims learn the Quran from their mothers, and if the mothers are not original Arabic speaking, they don't take what they are teaching for granted. So they themselves are learning in the process if you like. So what my mother was doing by trying to answer my questions, she was also trying to learn herself in a sense. So it was a mutually learning process. What would happen is that she will read the words of the Quran in Arabic, and I will be asked to repeat it, so that I can memorise some of it, which most Muslims do. And after that, then I will ask ‘What does it mean?’ So she will then look into commentaries and then tell me what the particular words meant. And therefore we kind of engaged in a dialogue. I mean it was not something that was limited to when she was teaching me the Quran. I mean the dialogue continued. And in many times, it spilt into various different things. It spilt to for example, Indian films, because we saw lots of Indian films and she will point out ‘Well y'know, that particular thing we were discussing, maybe that is one of the significance that you can see in the film.’

How is the Quran different from the Bible?

Well it is a radically different book. To begin with it, it's not like a conventional book that has a beginning and a middle and an end. Many people describe it as a epic poem, but it's more like a symphony where each note has a specific place. And it's not a very big book like the Bible. It's a comparatively short book. And that's why it is easy to memorise. It has a rhythm and a rhyme, and it's a book that argues with itself as well. Now essentially the Quran is a book of guidance. But it is interesting to note that almost one third of the Quran is devoted to actually extolling the virtues of reason, of thinking, of studying nature, of seeking knowledge, self reflection, inner reflection.

Now is it the final truth? Is the Quran the end now of all knowledge?

No. The Quran is not the end of all knowledge, the Quran is the beginning of all knowledge. The Quran is the Word of God. Most Muslims accept that the Quran is the Word of God. Now that is a definition of a Muslim. If you do not accept that the Quran is the Word of God, then you are not a Muslim. I mean, and that's where it begins. But what the Quran does, it provides an ethical perspective, an ethical and moral perspective on life, on universe, on everything, and including of course knowledge. So it's the beginning of knowledge, it's not the end of knowledge.

But is it capable of many interpretations?

Absolutely. I mean you can only have an interpreted relationship with the text. And if you, if you think the text is eternal, then that interpretative relationship goes on and on. So it's a text full of metaphors, parables, and all varieties of, if you like, complex interpretation.

And does it live in your life daily? Do you find yourself returning to it and perhaps finding new insights?

Absolutely. I think not just me—most Muslims do that regularly. I mean the problem I think is that Muslims nowadays do that almost kind of on autopilot.

But what about you?

Yeah. Now for me it is different. I think because I'm a writer and when one is writing one is constantly thinking what one is writing about. So when I go to the Quran, I'm looking for a new thing anyway in a sense. So I try to look at the verses in a totally different way each time I go back to them. And I also of course look at them in translation. My Arabic is not very good, and it is commonly said that the language of the Quran is Arabic. But actually the language of the Quran is the language of the Quran—they are a finite number of words that are used in the Quran and we know what these words, words mean. So what I do is, I struggle with these words through translation, so there's that much more effort. And I think by doing that, one comes across new meanings and new insights.

Now it was your mother who taught you what the concept of 'paradise' was in the Quran. Can you explain it to me?

Well I mean most people think that paradise is a fixed place, y'know...

Gardens, rivers...

.... gardens and rivers of milk and honey and, and so on, and so forth...

Beautiful women...

Beautiful women. Of course this whole idea of paradise with beautiful women—this is a very kind of male-oriented interpretation of paradise. One could argue, well what would the half of humanity who are women get in paradise? It's probably not worth going to paradise for them if all it is full of good, beautiful women.

Well how has it arisen?

I mean it, part of it is Muslim folklore, part of it is Orientalist interpretation. I mean this interesting thing—that each man is going to get 72 virgins—I find that quite kind of incredible. I think it does have some root in some kind of Muslim folklore. But I mean the first time I actually heard about it was when all these suicide bombers supposed to be committing suicide because they're going to have 72 hours. But no...

But that's a tremendous slur on people's...

A It is—absolutely. The Muslim paradise is very, very sophisticated. I think it is important to appreciate that the Islamic concept of God is very, very different from the Christian or Jewish concept of God, and therefore our notion of paradise is also radically different. Essentially in Islam, God is beyond description. He cannot be imagined by human mind at all. Nothing we can do, and nothing we can associate with him can actually give us even an inkling of the entity of God. So the only way we can understand God is through his attributes. And in Islam there are 99 attributes. Like He is the beautiful, He is the beginning, He is the first and He is the last, He is the merciful, He is beneficent, and so on and so forth. So only through His attributes we can actually appreciate God. And similarly with paradise—only through attributes we can really appreciate what paradise is. So paradise is all about metaphor,

it's all about parable. When we talk about a paradise as full of milk and honey, what do we associate with honey ... with sweetness, y'know, with health, with elegance and we associate gardens with peace. So that's why we think of paradise in terms of peace and as elegant, a place...

You are from the Sunni tradition. Do you feel very separate from the Shia tradition? Is it a very alien thing to you?

This is a very interesting question. The answer is yes and no. There are certain things in the Shia tradition that I would not subscribe to at all. For example, they have this notion of Imam essentially the Imams are come from the family of the Prophet. And they are supposed to be 'masoom' meaning 'innocent'.

Are they descendants?

They're descendants of the Prophet. They're supposed to be 'masoom' or innocent, and I cannot believe that a human being ...

So the Sunnis don't acknowledge that?

No. I cannot believe that a man can be totally and utterly innocent and above sin or above a mystic. It's this kind of very fundamental difference. However Shias are very much part of the Islamic community. I do not feel separate from them at all. In fact I have many, many Shia friends, and I think I mentioned that in the book—that I did not know they were Shia. It's only after the Iranian Revolution that I learned that some of them were Shia. And some of them are very, very close to me.

So they would share with you this concept of God that you describe?

Oh absolutely. Absolutely.

And, and the same attitude to Mohammed?

Absolutely. The same attitude to the Prophet.

And what role does he have in your belief?

Well the Prophet is the receiver of revelation. Actually the revelation is a commentary on his life. So the Quran was revealed over a twenty three year period, and basically what is happening is that the actions and daily activities and the struggles that the Prophet is engaged in, the Quran is commenting on them. So therefore Quran has a context. You cannot just take any verse as some Muslims are prone to do and just interpret in any way whatsoever. For me the life of the Prophet is very, very important. I try to imbibe some of his attributes and characteristics. Now most Muslims want to model themselves almost exactly on him. So he had a beard—so they want to have a beard. But you may have noticed that I do not have a beard. But I do not regard the physical characteristics of the Prophet as something that we have to kind of follow or emulate. But there are certain characteristics of the Prophet which I think are universal. For example his sense of generosity, which was incredibly absolute, y’know...very deep. His notion of forgiveness. I mean for example he was persecuted for decades, his followers were tortured, he was driven out of Mecca. When he returns to Mecca having fought two battles with the Meccans, he asked them ‘What shall I do with you now?’ And they replied ‘We expect well and we think of you well.’ And he says ‘This day there’ll be no retribution—you are all forgiven.’ And ‘We are like brothers’. I mean that is an incredible notion of kind of generosity and forgiveness which I think is essential for Muslims to actually imbibe.

Now you have been on a search and your book is about a search, and in 1972 you tell how two men knocked on your door. You were then a young man. And they were the Tablighi Jamaat

Tablighi Jamaat yes.

...and they were recruiting you really for a particular wing of Islam, and off you went with them. So you exposed yourself quite early to a particular sect, presumably. Because I know that eventually you gave up on them. In fact, you gave up on them quite soon.

Yeah

But what did they teach you that, that endures?

I think they taught me the whole idea that the quest for paradise is a worthy quest. And it's not just a quest for something that is Utopian, something that is beyond life, but it's also a quest that is very much real and is part of this life as well, in the sense that we need to create a paradise on this earth as well.

So that's quite political.

That's very political and this is why I'm a very political animal and I think most Muslims tend to be very political. The important thing about Islam is that Islam has a very strong sense of justice. I mean again if you go back to the Quran, it keeps repeatedly asking the believers to do justice? And by justice it meant social justice, and distributive justice. You need to treat people with equality, with respect, with dignity. Their rights have to be respected. So I have a very strong notion of justice, which makes me political, and I think that's what makes most Muslims political.

You explored Sufism. That's a very mystical and strange ... is it a sect, is it a...

...Well no ...

...a *wing*?

Sufism is not so much a sect. Sufism is as far as I'm concerned an integral part of Islam. I mean the Prophet himself used to meditate. In fact the first revelation came in the Cave of Hira, in the Mountains of Hira, not too far from Mecca, where he was spending the night meditating.

So do you meditate?

No I don't meditate as such. I...

Did you try?

What I did do when I joined a Sufi group is to do what is known as 'zikr'—'remembrance of Allah'. Now different Sufi groups will have different ways of doing 'zikr', or remembrance of Allah. I joined a particular group which basically consisted of white, middle class English converts. Some of them came from California, but some of them came from Hampstead. And essentially what they were looking for was a new high. And they were, in my opinion they were genuine Sufis, and they did take me into a trip, their way of doing 'zikr' was actually to form a circle and every night and recite 'Allah Hoo' which is just the name, to recite the names of God, and dance. Now that was quite ... I mean it did get me high, but I did think that there were some serious problems. In fact I actually went out and looked for real Sufism and I am sure real Sufism exists out there. What concerns me about mysticism—and it's not just Sufism, I think all kinds of mysticism—is this idea of relationship between the disciple and the master. I just am not willing to enter in any relationship where I cannot question. And I think that negates the basic world-view of the Quran. If

you look at the Quran, the Quran is full of questions from beginning to end and it insisted that believers ask questions. The Quran is not about blind faith. It insists that believers keep asking questions continuously, because even if they have asked a question and received the answer, the answer may actually change, so they have to ask that question again.

Now this is where you parted company. You went of course to Mecca, and you spent a lot of time in Saudi Arabia. And the form of Islam there is Wahhabism, and you feel that, that serves Islam badly, don't you? What was your experience of Wahhabism?

Anybody who goes to Saudi Arabia can actually experience it, and when I actually went to live in Saudi Arabia, that was mid-'70s, what you notice is that everybody is wearing white, right? It's very, very hot, right? The walls are whitewashed people are wearing white tops. The only colour, other colour you saw was that women had to wear black veils by law. Now the moment this hits you, you know there's something very peculiar about this society. First of all there are no shades of grey in terms of colour, and then the only colour is imposition—an unjust imposition on women. Now the black is the worst thing to actually wear in that kind of climate, because y'know black absorbs all the heat. So immediately you see there's some notion of injustice that is deeply ingrained in this society.

Well it raises the whole relationship of Islam and its attitude to women which is complicated, because in many ways it seems very modern. That marriage is a contract and divorce can be available to both, and that it's not a kind of sacrament. On the other hand, y'know, there is a sense that its view of women is as secondary and subservient and so on, which of course to the West is rather shocking. And presumably from the way you speak, shocked you.

It shocked me as well! (Laughs). It is worth pointing out that all the ideas of relationship between men and women are essentially based on a single verse of the Quran, which is a very famous verse, known as the ‘modesty verse’. There the Quran asked the believers, the believing men and the believing women to lower their gazes and guard their modesty. Now the way this has been interpreted, and as many feminist Muslim scholars—and there’s a whole, growing body of Muslim feminists as scholars now—have pointed out, the male part has been conveniently forgotten, so modesty only applies to women. And the idea that, that women should lower their gaze and guard their modesty has been transformed that they should be covered in a veil, and locked up inside the house.

But what’s your view of this in your life? I mean do you observe these different attit...

Well my wife doesn’t cover her hair, my daughter doesn’t wear a veil either. Both of them work.

Let me just finish with Wahhabism, because you saw it at first hand. What disenchanted you about it?

You asked earlier on does knowledge end with the Quran, and I said ‘No, knowledge begins with the Quran’. Now as far as the Wahhabis are concerned, in fact knowledge ends with the Quran and also morality ends in 8th century Arabia. So all the contextual things of the life of the Prophet, they have adapted. There’s no notion of time, that in fact morality can evolve as well. There’s no notion of multiple interpretation—there’s only one Puritan faith, right, and only one notion of truth.

And this is the, this is the faith that Osama Bin Laden follows?

This is the faith not just of Osama Bin Laden, but many people who basically claim to be fighting for Islam and are engaging in terrorism—most of them tend to be Wahhabis.

Now you continue your pursuit of I'm not quite sure what you're seeking really. But a sort of enlightened Islam. You rejoice in the Iranian Revolution in 1979, because as you say in your book, it 'crystallised the zeitgeist'—that's a great phrase. Why, what did you hope for? What did you hope the Iranian Revolution would bring?

Well, this takes me back to my kind of strong feeling for justice. And I thought the Iranian Revolution will actually be in a sense a socialist revolution in a sense—it will y'know distribute wealth, I mean part of the problem with the Shah was, the Shah was accumulating wealth in fewer and fewer hands. If you pay more respect to the traditional sector of society, it'll provide equal opportunity for men and women, and most important, it will be a knowledge-based revolution in the sense that there'll be mass education available to all, there'll be progress in science and technology and research and so on and so forth.

What did you find when you got there?

Well I found (laughs) it was totally the opposite! So most of my kind of idealistic notions of revolution were stopped in their tracks, if you like. Now what am I seeking constantly? I am seeking interpretation of Islam that is at once relevant and contemporary. And true to the teachings of Islam, that's what I am seeking. And that to me is ultimately the paradise. It is not a fixed paradise—it's a paradise that we constantly struggle to shape. Because what we are trying to understand is to implement the notion of justice, the notion of beauty, the notion

of thought and learning, the notion of dissent that we learn from Islamic ethics. And that requires constant struggle.

Let's stay with the Iranian Revolution for the time being, because that instituted the Shariab—the Shariab which is the codified law of Islam, as the law of the State. Now this is a crucial development in the modern world, that there are now increasingly Islamic countries who follow the Shariab. This presents problems because the religious law imposes, well severe penalties for one thing, and stoning for adultery in some countries. What problem does that present for you?

Well, again the idea of the Shariab is frozen in history. In Islam, Shariab is not just Islamic law—it is also ethics and morality. Now if you freeze law in history, then which is also ethics and morality, then you have also frozen your ethics and morality in history. For me it seemed that not just Islamic law was frozen in history, but it was also de-humanised. Because the social construction aspect of Islamic law is not just totally absent, but actually suppressed. So most Muslims believe that the Shariab is divine, but in fact a great deal of the Shariab—I would say something like ninety-five percent of it—is socially constructed in history. In other words, we had these believers who were struggling to implement their own notions of paradise, right? And by trying to do that, they were shedding law at the same time. But for them it was a dynamic exercise, and for us it has become a very ossified and a fixed and a static exercise. And that's why I think it's so problematic.

Can the Shariab be updated?

Absolutely. It's not a question of Shariab being updated. It's a question of Shariab being re-interpreted, for us to kind of come up with the new ideas of what the relevance of Islam in contemporary life is all about, and hence shape a law that is

more up to date and more contemporary. In that sense, yes—Sharia can be updated. And it has been updated in history and it is being updated now as well.

You, in your search, you've come to admire the form of Islam practised in Malaysia most particularly. What is it, the virtue of that, that you so admire?

Well I think openness and its liberal nature. Malaysia is a very multi-cultural society. It's not a perfect society by any means. I mean I have a kind of love/hate relationship. In fact I have another book on Malaysia called 'The Consumption of Kuala Lumpur', which describes my life in Kuala Lumpur. But essentially South East Asian Islam, it seems to me is much more open, much more liberal and the idea of plurality is central to it, so in a sense you could have multiple interpretations. But even there the Wahhabi influence is very, very strong, so there is that struggle going on between if you like an open multi-interpretative Islam and a fixed notion of Islam.

And where within that picture does the tolerance of non-Islamic religions come?

Well in a sense, Islam is very ecumenical. Islam recognises that it doesn't have a monopoly of truth. Truth has been revealed to other faiths as well, so specifically for example Jews and Christians are people of the book. And if you look at the life of the Prophet, he's shown that the respect and reverence he has shown to Judaism and Christianity is clearly evident. I mean I'm reminded of a particular anecdote in the life of Omar, the second Caliph, who after the fall of Jerusalem went to Jerusalem, and the patriarch showed him around the city, and they were visiting the Church of the Resurrection and the time for prayer came. And the patriarch said to Omar

‘Why don’t you pray here?’ And Omar said ‘No. If I pray here, my followers may want to follow my example and they may want to turn and build a mosque here.’ So he left the church and prayed outside, to make sure that nothing happened to the church after his death. Now that notion of kind of respect and dignity that exists in Islamic history should be appreciated. It’s not just Christians and Jews, but Muslims believe that every nation, every community has had a Prophet and has some notion of truth.

You came up against a variety of intolerances when Salman Rushdie published ‘The Satanic Verses’. You yourself were appalled by the book, but then you were appalled by everyone’s reaction to it. So can you explain your part in that, and how you experienced it?

I read ‘Satanic Verses’ on a flight—and this is so vividly etched in my mind, because it was a flight from Kuala Lumpur to London. And they’re long thirteen, fourteen hour flights. And I actually like Salman Rushdie, because I had read ‘Midnight’s Children’ and I was very impressed by that. So I started reading it, quite innocently, and as I carried on reading in fact I kind of started shaking and then eventually when I got to the, if you like, sacrilegious bits I became quite, quite frozen. It had an absolutely stunning impact on me. I think in the book I say I felt as though I was kind of raped—my inner sanctum was, was violated. For a very simple reason—that everything I hold dear was systematically abused, and mocked and described in a pretty horrific way. I mean what Rushdie had done is to take the life of the Prophet, which as I pointed out earlier on, is a model for Muslim behaviour, and systematically deconstruct it in a very abusive way. So you take the scenes for example, where he’s talking about the Prophet’s wife. Now he gives them exactly the same physical descriptions, the same physical

attributes, the names are the same—almost everything's the same. But of course they are prostitutes and they're described in derogatory terms. And if you see that being done systematically, I think it is impossible for a believing Muslim not to be affected by it. And it's a very deliberate, consciously painstakingly taken y'know exercise.

Did you feel he had the right to write it?

That is a very interesting question. I mean I'm willing to forgive him for actually writing it, in a sense. I'm very strongly in favour of writing as an exercise and reading. I mean the first words that were revealed to the Prophet was, the first word that was revealed to the Prophet is 'read'. So reading and writing are very, very important for Muslims as a whole. And in Islamic history books are fought with books. And in fact my response was "it is a book that has attacked us, and we therefore must attack it back with a book." Which is in fact exactly what I tried to do—to fight book with books.

But you didn't want to see it burned?

No, no. I think ...

Or the fatwa?

Oh certainly I did not want the fatwa. I think in a sense I was probably, after Rushdie I was the second person to be most upset by the fatwa. Because what the fatwa did, the fatwa told me as a Muslim intellectual that I was not capable of defending the Islamic position. Indeed I was not even capable of performing my social right of standing up on behalf of the Muslim and saying 'No. We can fight this book with another book.' So I thought that made me redundant, so I was very, very upset by the fatwa as well.

And did you feel that the whole incident crystallised something about the ongoing tensions that have evolved recently?

Yeah. Absolutely, absolutely. I think it's become very much a battle of extremes. On one side we have this liberal secularist form of fundamentalism and extremism which can only paint religion in general and Muslims in particular with the colours of evil. And on the other...

Well where do we find that?

Let me give you a more recent example the case of a Dutch film maker who made this film Submission. If the film was saying that here is one particular Muslim woman who has been treated badly and we should sympathise with her, I will have no problem with it. But the film is saying 'you know that all Muslim women are systematically abused and degraded, degraded by their husbands, by their uncles, by their fathers and Islam is evil. And this how Islam treats women.' It's a very extremist representation of Islam and therefore it generated an extremist response. In a sense, I want to move away from extremism of all kinds. And to do that one needs a cultured liberalist space where these things can be discussed openly. Nobody will say that the plight of the Muslim women does not need attention, that Islamic law regarding women needs to be reformed, changed—there is no question about it. But it has to be done within the parameters of Islam.

Are your ideas evolving?

Oh, my ideas are constantly evolving. I think as, I think as a believer, you can't be static. I have to say, I mean I must confess openly that I am constantly on the boundaries of doubt. And I think believers who say that their faith is so strong that they cannot doubt there's something wrong. My own faith goes up

and down like a yoyo, so I'm constantly questioning myself and through that questioning I hope I am evolving in a sense. So my understanding of Islam has certainly transformed in the last 30 years and each kind of step in the journey, I've learned something new. Unfortunately most of the things I've learnt I think I've learned that I, we need to discard them (laughing) and move forward to something new!

'The West', Islam and What it Means to be Human

Tony Fry interviews Ziauddin Sardar for Design,
Philosophy, Politics e-zine N1/07

(Summer 2007)

Tony Fry: Western culture (in its plurality) has mostly managed to forget, or even conceal, its debt to the learning, science, technology and creative arts of those other cultures which enabled its advancement. Just to take one example: it's often cited that the mathematical foundation of computing can be traced back to a paper on binary notation by Leibniz in 1679. The fact that the idea emanated from China gets overlooked. Leibniz corresponded for five years with Fr Joachim Bouvet, a Jesuit missionary in China, who pointed out that the hexagrams of the I Ching were based on such a notation method. Likewise, attainments in mathematics credited to European thinkers between the 16th and 18th centuries have been shown to have been developed by Arab and Islamic mathematicians three or four centuries earlier. What do you think the consequences are, if any, of such forgetting for both the culture that forgets and the culture that is forgotten?

Ziauddin Sardar: This forgetting is not accidental. It is deliberate. Its main function is to deny that non-western

cultures have played any part in shaping modernity and the world we live in. So they can be treated as people with no history and no present; and hence not much of a future.

This constructed amnesia also has a number of subsidiary functions. First, by delinking science and learning of other civilizations with modern science and learning, western science is represented as a self-evident truth: something that emerges as an autonomous, self-propelling enterprise of western civilisation. Science thus becomes an exclusive domain of western civilisation; which, by corollary, becomes the most objective, rational and superior civilisation of all. But more: western civilisation becomes a goal, a future, that all other civilisations seek. So, the construction, by definition, relegates all other cultures and civilisations as inferior, always living in the past of the west, and never really able to catch up.

Second, it denies any connection to colonialism and what it did to subject people. Colonialism more than any other factor, played a major part in the suppression and eventual disappearance of science and learning from other cultures. Colonial encounter began by appropriating the knowledge and learning of other cultures and ended by eradicating this knowledge and learning from history. It did that both by physical elimination—destroying and closing down institutions of learning, banning certain types of indigenous knowledge, killing off local thinkers and scholars—and by rewriting History as the history of western civilisation into which all minor histories of other civilisation are subsumed.

TF: So, what about the case of Islamic science?

ZS: The colonial suppression of Islamic science began in the Enlightenment in the 18th century. By the end of the 19th century, Islamic science was totally suppressed, and its mention

in the history of science was limited to describing it as a conveyor belt, which preserved the Greek legacy and passed it on to its rightful owner, the western civilisation. This state of affairs existed right till 1960. Even leftwing historians, such as J D Bernal, promoted this myth. The true achievements in science and learning of Muslim civilisation started to come to the fore towards the end of 1970s.

TF: How do you view the consequences of this?

ZS: This deliberate engineering of forgetting has had devastating consequences for both sides. It dehumanised the west: notions of supremacy and exclusive rationality, and ideas that attribute modernity solely to the west are, in my opinion, symptoms of dehumanisation. The forgotten cultures have been delinked from their own history and suffered serious consequences. For Muslims, for example, the colonial suppression of Islamic science led to the displacement of scientific culture from Muslim society. It did this by introducing new systems of administration, law, education and economy all of which were designed to instil dependence, compliance and subservience to the colonial powers. The decline of Islamic science is one aspect of the general economic and political decay and deterioration of Muslim society that resulted. Moreover, this forgetting led to the transformation of Islam from a holistic way of life to mere rhetoric. Islamic education became a cul de sac, a one way ticket to marginality. It also led to the conceptual reduction of Muslim civilisation. By which I mean concepts that shaped and gave direction to Muslim societies became divorced from the actual daily lives of Muslims—leading to the kind of intellectual impasse that we find in Muslim societies today.

TF: The ‘human’ plays a big part in design: human-computer interaction; human-centred design; human-centred technology; human factors, etc. While instrumentalised and very reductive, this notion of the human trades on an assumed universalism. Likewise, international politics, the politics of the powerful, assumes ‘the human’ as the same—this thinking is of course enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights and obviously is directly connected to the Commission for Equalities and Human Rights with which you are associated. Yet as you know, there are culturally diverse ways in which the human is defined (not least by indigenous cultures). Certainly, from Aristotle onward, the western notion of the human was of ‘man’ as a ‘political and social animal’ whereas, as I understand it, in traditional Islamic culture, the idea was that the human was essentially a religious being. How do you regard this distinction, especially in terms of your critique of sameness—does your critique extend to the human?

ZS: I do not regard ‘the human’ either as ‘the’ or as a priori given. I have consistently argued that there is more than one way to be human. The western way of being human is one amongst many. Similarly, the Islamic way of being human is also one amongst many. The Australian aboriginal way of being human is also another way of being human. I see each culture as a complete universe with its own way of knowing, being and doing—and hence, its own way of being human. The greatest challenge of the 21st C is to conserve different ways of being human—or to open up possibilities for multiple futures where multiple ways of being human can survive and thrive.

The western notion that there is only one way to be human has colonial roots. In this sense, colonialism is very much alive and thriving. The classic definition comes from Sir William

Johnson, English settler in North America: it was necessary, he thought, to 'civilise the savages before they can be converted to Christianity' and 'in order to make them Christians, they must first be made Men.' In other words, only if they could become humans like us could we really control and manage them.

Exactly the same strategy was followed by Lord Macaulay in India, when in his famous Minutes on Education he declared that Indians had to be turned into English men all but in colour! And consider Captain Cook, arriving on Botany Bay, in 1769, with instructions in his back pocket to make treaties with the native inhabitants. But in the Aboriginal ways of being he could see nothing that 'made them men'. What he saw were 'feral creatures'. These feral creatures 'have no ...', he wrote, where you can fill in the gap with anything you want to. So Australia came to be devoid of human beings: it was 'terra nullis'. Empty land. It took Australia 200 years to recognise the Aborigines as human beings.

TF: I would suggest even this recognition is a misrecognition. What does not get seen is that 200 years of the dehumanisation of vast numbers of Aboriginal people has created a situation where the crucial question never gets asked: 'how can the dehumanised become human again?' Equally, while there is a rhetorical acknowledgement of humanity, this does not translate into equal human rights.

ZS: Agreed. The real question is: how can the dehumanised become human again and get all the rights that are due to them as equals. As far as I can see, the Aborigines are still not entitled to their basic human rights. But these rights have to be seen from their perspective: given the deep connection they have to their land, I would argue, that without making this

connection they cannot become fully human again. Their human rights include their right to their land. But of course, the way human rights discourse is structured at the moment, it does not include right to land. So we need to go beyond the conventional notion of human rights to enable to adequately fight the dehumanisation of the Aborigines.

TF: The conventional notion being the UN Declaration of Human Rights?

ZS: Yes. My problem with the UN Declaration of Human Rights is this intrinsic limitation: the definition of what it means to be human is only in western terms. I, for example, do not limit human rights to simply such matters as not to be tortured, denied political freedom including freedom of expression, but I also see the right to food, shelter, basic education, and good health as just as important human rights. And I also see communal or group rights as part of human rights—because many ways of being human are communal. I also see association with land as part of human rights because in certain cultures dislocation with ancestral land can lead to loss of dignity and basic humanity. So I think the UN Declaration of Human Rights is only the beginning. We have a long way to go before all ways of being humans can secure all the rights they need to be the kind of humans they want to be. I am hoping that the newly established Commission for Equalities and Human Rights in Britain would embrace such a complex notion of plurality.

I think the real challenge that we face is not just to appreciate difference and diversity—for this is now old hat; even corporations now realise that diversity is good for business! We need to go further and create space for difference to exist as difference—for such great ideas as Law and Ethics in Islam, Tao and Hindu Logic to flourish—and for difference to

demonstrate the difference in human behaviour. And this space has to be physical, spiritual, historical as well as intellectual—where all other ways of being human can exist and thrive.

TF: I think there is another needed qualifier to this challenge—‘being human cannot survive and thrive unless there is equally a recognition of an interdependence with the non-human’. We cannot not be anthropocentric but, in difference, this can be conceptually and structurally acknowledged.

ZS: I agree with this also. But your qualifier is based on the western notion of being human which takes the environment—or the non-human—out of the equation. I would argue that non-western ways of being human incorporate the notion that the human is an integral part of the environment and cannot really be fully human without it. Going back to the Aborigines: they cannot be fully human without their land. In Islamic thought, the human is a trustee—the technical term is ‘khalifa’—of God. As a trustee, the human is responsible for the trust that God has place on their shoulders: the earth, the environment, the physical abode of our terrestrial journey; without care and enhancement of this abode the human cannot be fully human; the Muslims have to look after the trust to be a khalifa of God—and hence be qualified as humans.

TF: I would argue that human rights, community and sustainment all need to be far better understood as part of the same imperative and agenda. We only survive and have a torerable life by dint of each other.

ZS: I think all three terms need to be rethought. As I have already argued, the human rights discourse is too limited and too Eurocentric. It needs to be broadened out to include the notion of community—my human rights are denied if I am

separated from my community—my integral Self. And what good are all my political rights and right to self-expression, etc when my environment cannot sustain me and when I cannot feed, clothe or shelter myself? I think the three terms are interconnected and should be seen as three aspects of the same thing: human dignity. The emphasis should be on an ethical life that does not undermine people's humanity and dignity.

TF: While in total agreement on difference, I also believe there is equally an imperative to be able to define and present that 'commonality in difference' that can negate conflict. This is a very different notion to 'one worldism'.

ZS: I think we should not make a fetish of our difference. We tend to define our identities in terms of our difference, by constructing an Other through which we measure ourselves. A transmodern way of defining identity would be to look for a common ground, or shared values. I am a Muslim not simply because I am different from all others, but equally important, because I share a range of values with others. I am different and not different. The transmodern way focuses equally on both sides of the equation.

TF: Staying with the issue of 'sameness', which in large part is a consequence of the design/modernity nexus (re-badged and de-idealised as globalisation), but linking it to your concern with 'futures', how would you formulate a policy for 'design for difference' that does not simply fold back into 'commodity, brand and market difference'?

ZS: You can't do this in the current, and dominant, framework of modernity. Modernity commodifies everything because that's what it is designed to do. But more: it relegates everything that is not western, and hence modern, into inferior positions. You

need a totally new framework that takes you beyond and above modernity.

The idea of transmodernity, I think, can provide this new framework. Not to be confused with postmodernity—which is simply a continuation of the culture of western imperialism, a linear projection that privileges secular liberalism rather than modernity. Both modernity and postmodernism are anti-tradition—which, to me, means they are also anti non-western cultures because tradition not only plays an important part in non-western cultures but in many cases it is their life-blood. Transmodernity goes beyond modernity and postmodernism: it transcends both and takes us—trans—i.e. into another state of being. Thus, unlike postmodernism, transmodernism is not a linear projection. We can best understand it with the aid of chaos theory. In all complex systems—societies, civilisations, eco-systems etc.—many independent variables are interacting with each other in great many ways.

Transmodernism is the transfer of modernity and postmodernism from the edge of chaos into a new order of society. As such, transmoderism and tradition are not two opposing worldviews but a new synthesis of both. Traditional societies use their ability to change and become transmodern while remaining the same! Both sides of the equation are important here: change has to be made and accommodated; but the fundamental tenets of tradition, the sources of its identity and sacredness, remain the same. So we may define a transmodern future as a synthesis between life enhancing tradition—that is amenable to change and transition—and new forms of modernities that are shaped and articulated by traditional cultures themselves.

Transmodernity is a worldview. I cannot give specific examples of transmodernity in action at the moment. What I

can is that transmodernity has a different take on culture (which is seen as a flexible base to expand tradition, to make place for newness and domesticate the unfamiliar, and as a method for changing without losing one's sense of identity and connectedness to the past) and tradition (which is seen as dynamic and changing while remaining the same). I see transmodernity as an outlook on policy, something that guides and shapes policy in various aspects of our lives.

This is what good design should aim to achieve: to synthesise multiple notions of traditions and new forms of modernities, to transform them into life enhancing experiences, and hence to lay the foundations of transmodern futures. But let us not be too idealist: if the market can be used as a catalyst in this process, I have no problem with that.

TF: One of the key recognitions of design philosophy is the significance of 'ontological design'—taken at its most straightforward, this mean that while we humans design a world of objects and things in which we dwell, these objects and things in turn design us. It could perhaps be argued that secular society, at least secular society with a weak ethical foundation, has little defence in the turning of what is becoming a vicious circle of defuturing. Do you see religion and the Islamic faith in particular, as a counterforce to this situation?

ZS: I think it is a truism to say that design designs us! Because most design is undertaken within the framework of arid, one-dimensional modernity, it has produced an arid, one-dimensional world which has in turn turned us all into arid, one-dimensional beings. That's where sameness comes from. And that's where most of the conflicts emerge. If you value tradition and religious ideals, but your environment and everything that surrounds you is not only secular but actually

makes fun of your tradition and values, then you have a right to be upset. I think design is as much to blame as say political disputes and fundamentalism for most of the conflicts in the world today. So the future ends up being defutured in two ways. It ends up just like the present—but more of the same. And it ends up insane and conflict-ridden where sustainability and sensibility are vanquished. I don't see one particular faith or culture as the counterforce. I think we need a plethora of ways of resistance involving all cultures.

TF: Design is something, in all its difference, which in many ways is very visible. Yet its true significance remains almost totally unrecognised. The world of human construction, in all its aspects, is a world of design. Design is human agency giving/given direction (and misdirection): it futures and defutures. While bridging the arts and science, design does not fold into either; it is what it is in itself. There are two basic problems in getting design recognised and taken as seriously as it should be (one of the major aims of Design Philosophy Politics): the design community mostly talks to itself about the design process and designed objects (rather than about the agency of design in and on the world); and, with the part exception of architecture, almost all other disciplinary fields of inquiry—sociology, cultural studies, history, economics, futures studies, etc—either ignore design or trivialise it (eg design just appearing as style). Reflecting on your own work—which is impressively prolific, including your numerous books—can you find design in any way latently present? And, do you have any ideas of how non-designers can be attracted to engaging with design?

ZS: It is not just the design community that talks to itself . This is common to all disciplines and professions. I think for

design to be taken seriously, its connection with futures has to be made explicit and emphasised again and again. I mean, design is about life and death: it can enhance our future survival or it can suffocate us with sameness and modern banality. I think it is the responsibility of the design community to get this message across. And perhaps they can do this by joining hands with the futures community. It is also worth pointing out that design is innate to most disciplines: the way they are structured, the way they are taught, the way they develop and progress. Design may be invisible in sociology, for example, but it is intrinsically there. But sociologists are never going to acknowledge this. It is up to the design community to show that this is the case.

Design has been a conscious element in my own work. There are some of my books where design plays an overt part: this is the case with my 'Introducing' titles—such as *Introducing Chaos*, *Introducing Cultural Studies*, *Introducing Science*—which are structured in terms of design and heavily illustrated. But design is implicit in my work in a number of other ways.

A number of my books have been conceived as twins: so *The Future of Muslim Civilisation*, one of my first books, is a twin of *Islamic Futures: The Shape of Ideas to Come*. They deal with the same subject but in a totally different way. Similarly, *The Touch of Midas* is a twin of *The Revenge of Athena*, both deal with science but from quite different perspectives.

Some of my books are designed as a running critique that originates in one book but concludes in another. So *Distorted Imagination*, which is a critique of Rushdie affair and postmodernism, leads naturally to *Postmodernism and the Other*, which is a full onslaught on postmodernism as western imperialism. Similarly, *Science, Technology and Development in the Muslim World*, my first book, leads naturally to *Explorations in*

Islamic Science: the argument begins with the assertion that (western) science has failed to take root in Muslim society and concludes with the suggestion that a particular formulation of Islamic science may be the answer.

My semi-autobiographical work, which begins with *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, is designed to reveal my multiple selves. In DSP, I reveal and explore my Muslim identity. In later books, I will explore my Asian identities, my intellectual selves, and so on.

Then, design is present in my work in another, totally different way: all my work is consciously, deliberately and sometimes elaborately designed to undermine the west, enhance the non-west, and lay some sort of foundation for a post-west epoch where other ways of being human are possible!

TF: In an interview with Ehsan Masood you concluded by talking about your own future and ended up saying you hoped by your activity of planting seeds to turn the 'world into a garden.' Were you talking literally or metaphorically, and either way, what is the nature of the future being evoked here—surely not a bucolic idyll?

ZS: Both! I was being literal and metaphorical. But I was definitely not invoking a bucolic idyll. The sentiment actually comes from a saying of Prophet Muhammad. If you know the world is about to end, he said, and if you have a seed to plant, then plant it. I think the metaphor of the garden incorporates a number of things I care for, apart for the Islamic notion of heaven that I discuss at great length in *Desperately Seeking Paradise*.

Gardens, by the very fact that they are gardens, consist of a plethora of different plants. Gardens are pluralistic by nature. There are all variety of hardy perennials that flower year after

year. There are the annuals and the biennials that have to be planted in season. There are plants that provide various colours of foliage, or hedges and borders, or climb up fences, or play architectural roles. There are fruit trees, trees that provide fragrant and colourful flowers and trees that fix the soil and provide shade. There are the grasses so essential for the lawns. And what would a garden be without the proverbial birds and the bees? And those worms and insects that both enrich the soil and require some form of pest control. The thing about a garden is that all this truly monumental variety of life exists in symbiosis: nourishing each other and ensuring the overall survival of the garden. I like to see this as a kind of transmodern existence where every entity is being true to itself.

But this is not a bucolic idyll. First of all, a garden need not be located in some remote rural area; it can exist in a urban setting as well. Then, of course, a garden has to be tended: the weeds have to be cleared, plants have to be pruned, we have to make sure that nothing grows so much that it ends up suffocating and endangering other plants. A garden exists as a garden because it is tended—otherwise it can simply turn into a jungle. Gardens are also visionary things—the great Islamic gardens, like the Shalimar gardens in Lahore, represent a vision of beauty and future.

So, I desire a future where all the vast and varied ways of being human, all the plethora of different cultures, past, present and future, exist in symbiosis as though the globe was a well-tended garden. In essence, it is a vision of a globe of pluralistic identities, each identity with its own multiple selves!

I think one thing is imperative in this vision: we need to abandon the idea that a single truth can be imposed on a plural globe. Just as a garden does not function on the basis of a single species, so the single Truth of western civilisation as

well as creeds and ideologies that are based on exclusivist notions of truth and seek redemption by imposing this truth on all others, cannot lead us to viable, sustainable future. Both America and the great monotheistic religions of the world must transcend their historic goal of claiming exclusivist notions of Truth just as science must learn to see itself as only one—and not the—manifestation of reality. The Platonic idea that truth is same for everyone has no place in my future garden of humanities. This notion of truth sets up false oppositions. If all truth is the same for everyone at all times, then if I am right, you must be wrong. And, if I really care for truth, I must convert you to my view. I tend to agree with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who says we must move forward from the old recipe that 'truth is supremely important, and therefore all persons must live by a single truth' to the new formula that 'truth is supremely important, and therefore every man and women must be allowed to live according to how they see the truth'. Ultimately, my notion of pluralistic identities comes down to how we all see the truth differently, according to our historic experiences and perspectives, and how we all live the truth in our lives, as individuals and communities, in our uniquely different and cultural ways of being human.

Muslim societies must discover a contemporary meaning of Islam

Ziauddin Sardar talks to Hasan Suroor

The Hindu

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Even those who understand Muslim sensitivities feel the Muslim reaction to the cartoons of Prophet Muhammed has been excessive and is likely to reinforce the perception of the community as intolerant and too prickly.

The Muslim response has indeed been rather excessive. Threats and burning down embassies only further enforces the image of Muslims as violent and uncivilised people. I think this is a symptom of a larger problem: we do not know how to react to instrumental modernity on its own terms. The cartoons are not about freedom of expression; they are all about naked use of power and demonisation. They are not just maligning the Prophet; they are saying that he was intrinsically violent, that the creed he preached is violent, and hence all those who follow him are violent. In other words, Muslims are inherently violent and evil. No culture or people can tolerate such a level of demonisation. Last time, Europe demonised a people to this extent we ended up with the Holocaust. As far as I am concerned, these cartoons are a reflection of racism and Islamophobia that is now running rampant in Europe. It will

not stop here. So we need a more considered response; something that demonstrates Muslims are not totally powerless. That means we need to rethink and reformulate Islam as a contemporary worldview. This does not mean we need to change or modify our religious notions; but it does mean that we need to use Islamic ideas and concepts to reformulate Islam as an outlook that goes beyond instrumental modernity and fashionable postmodernism.

There is a lot of talk again of a “clash of civilisations” in the wake of the cartoons controversy. How close are we to it?

To have a ‘clash of civilisations’ you need at least two civilisations. When Gandhi was asked what he thought of western civilisation, he said ‘it is a good idea’. The ‘West’ can hardly be described as a ‘civilisation’—civilised societies do not go out of their way to demean and denigrate the values and cultures of other societies. ‘Islam’ is a string of fragmented nation-states, largely ruled by despots. Even if Islam and the West have been clashing in history, there is no reason for us to accept the blunders of history as an inevitable course for the future. The two cultures can coexist with mutual trust and respect; and thrive together. The common ground between the two is far greater than their differences. The religious traditions of the two civilisations have a common origin in the Abrahamic traditions—both Islam and Christianity trace their lineage to the Prophet Abraham. Western liberalism and humanism, it will come as a surprise to many, has its origins in Islamic thought and philosophy. Virtually all of Greek thought came to Europe *via* the Muslim world. Instead of seeing Islam and the West as two opponents, we can equally well see them as two siblings of the same historic parents. But there are people out there, on both sides, who are hell-bent on a clash. Indeed, it seems to

be becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy. Sensible people everywhere need to stand up to this madness.

Why do you think Muslims are perceived the way they are—rigid, intolerant, quick to take offence? Or is there a tendency to demonise the community?

Both. A segment of our community is intolerant and rigid. But not all Muslims should be seen in this light. One of the strongest features of contemporary Islam is its truly mind-boggling diversity. But it is true to say that most Muslims have developed a victimhood mentality—something they need to transcend. The tendency to demonise the Muslim community has reached a frightening level in Europe.

Recently, I travelled through Germany, Belgium, Holland, and France looking at perceptions of Muslims in these countries. I was appalled to discover the extent of fear and loathing against the Muslims. There is little doubt in my mind that fascism is making a come back in Europe.

I think that rigidity and narrow mindedness of certain quarters amongst Muslims in Europe is fuelling the rise of extreme right wing extremism. So European Muslims have a great burden on their shoulders—they need to develop a dynamic European Islam, underpinning European Muslim identities, as an urgent social and cultural project. Now, minorities have always played a great role in shaping Islam and giving it a sense of direction. The idea of *hijra*—or migration that leads to the formation of a Diaspora—is central to Islam. Our calendar itself starts with the *hijra* of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina. And when the Prophet arrived in Medina, the Muslims were a minority. Moreover, throughout Muslim history, minorities have played a major part in transforming the centre. It was the scholars and thinkers of the periphery, such as Samarkand and Bukhara, who informed

and changed the classical period. Think of the immense contribution of Moorish Spain—clearly a minority in relation to the rest of the then Muslim world—in building the Muslim civilisation. So being a minority is not necessarily an impediment to developing a civilisational project. I think European Muslims are well placed to undertake this project and, through their efforts, change the rest of the Muslim world itself. This is the thesis I presented in my recent BBC film, *Battle for Islam*.

Is there a genuine gulf of understanding between Islam and the West in the sense of their respective understanding of individual freedoms, free speech, and the role of religion in society?

Islam has no problem with individual freedoms or free speech. The ‘gulf’ between Islam and the West is the gulf of domination: western societies do not know how to handle difference and how to provide space for difference to exist as difference. The West posits this ‘gulf’ in terms of its liberal humanist values. But the West took these values from Islam in the first place. If Europe was true to its origins, and if it had any integrity and self-respect, it would acknowledge that it learnt how to reason, what is the difference between civilisation and barbarism, and what are the basic features of a civil society from Islam. It was thinkers like ibn Sina, ibn Rushd, ibn Khaldun, and al-Baruni who introduced humanism to Europe. Indeed, without these and other Muslim thinkers, Europe—as a civilised idea—is inconceivable. So there is nothing in humanism *per se* that is European or anti Islamic. But Europe’s unique role was the construction of liberal humanism as an arch ideology, as a grand narrative, into which all other narratives must be assimilated. It is this dimension of European humanism that has created a gulf not just between Islam and the West, but the West and the rest of humanity. The West

must understand that freedom can be defined in a number of different ways; just as there are different ways to be modern. The world does not consist of one society, but a plethora of societies, each has the right to define itself and shape its destiny with its own notions and categories.

How do Muslims get out of the “bind” in which they find themselves, partly as a result of their own conduct and partly because of anti-Muslim prejudice?

I think the best way to do that is for Muslim societies to discover a contemporary meaning and significance of Islam. Indeed, in my opinion, serious rethinking within Islam is long overdue. Muslims have been comfortably relying, or rather falling back, on age-old interpretations for much too long. This is why we feel so painful in the contemporary world, so uncomfortable with modernity. Scholars and thinkers have been suggesting for well over a century that we need to make a serious attempt at *ijihad*, at reasoned struggle and rethinking, to reform Islam. Reform, in my opinion, is long overdue. It is time we made serious attempts to rethink Islam in contemporary terms.

Epilogue



A Garden of Possibilities

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I close my eyes and think of a future world. A visionary world, thirty, forty years from today. A world not of new humanity but a plethora of old and new humanities. A world where more than one of way of being human is not only the norm but is considered essential for the very survival of our species. This is the world as a garden.

Gardens, by the very fact that they are gardens, consist of a plethora of different plants. There are all variety of hurdy perennials that flower year after year. There are the annuals and the biennials that have to be planted in season. There are plants that provide various colours of foliage, or hedges and borders, or climb up fences, or play architectural roles. There are fruit trees, trees that provide fragrant and colourful flowers and trees that fix the soil and provide shade. There are the grasses so essential for the lawns. And what would a garden be without the proverbial birds and the bees? And those worms and insects that both enrich the soil and require some form of pest control. The thing about a garden is that all this truly monumental variety of life exists in symbiosis: nourishing each other and ensuring the overall survival of the garden. Of

course, the garden has to be tended: the weeds have to be cleared, plants have to be pruned, we have to make sure that nothing grows so much that it ends up suffocating and endangering other plants.

So, I desire a future where all the vast and varied ways of being human, all the plethora of different cultures, past, present and the future, exists in symbiosis as though the globe was a well-tended garden. In essence, it is a vision of a globe of pluralistic identities. But the kind of identities I seek, or rather envision, has little to do with identity as we have conventionally understood the term.

Philosophically, the concept of identity, as Amartya Sen has pointed out, is based on two basic assumptions. First, the presumption that we must have a single—or at least principal and dominant—identity. Second, the supposition that we discover our identity. The first assumption is plainly wrong: not only do we exist with multiple identities but often invoke different identities in different contexts. So: ‘the same person can be of Indian origin, a Muslim, a French citizen, a US resident, a woman, a poet, a vegetarian, an anthropologist, a university professor, a Christian, an angler, and an avid believer in extra-terrestrial life and of the propensity of alien creatures to ride around the universe in smartly designed UFOs. Each of these collectives, to all of which this person belongs, gives him or her a particular identity, which are variously important in different contexts’ (1). The second assumption is just as erroneous. We discover our identity, the argument goes, from the community we belong to: it is through the relationships within a community that we discover our identity. This argument suggests that we have no role in choosing our identities. But even though the constraints of community and traditions are always there, reason and choice too have a role to play. The

point is not that we can chose any identity at random; but 'whether we do have choices over alternative identities or combination of identities, and perhaps more importantly, substantial freedom on what priority to give to the various identities that we may simultaneously have' (2).

It is because we have a problem with pluralistic identities that we are in the midst of a global epidemic of identity crisis. Most of us do not know who or what we really are. Some of us have impossibly romanticised notions of what we should be. We desperately cling on to an imagined 'heritage', subscribe to the preservation of an unchanging 'tradition', and are ready to kill and be killed to save some 'essence' of our idealised identity. Many of us have altogether abandoned the very idea of a having a fixed identity: we change our identities with as much ease as we change our jackets. All of us are suffering from a disease that is slowly but surely eating us from the inside.

The symptoms are everywhere. In Northern Ireland, men in balaclavas are not just 'scum', they think of themselves as either Ireland's or Ulster's 'finest' and will unite in violence for the sake of the difference. Britain seems perpetually in limbo not knowing whether to become more American or more European. For much of the 20th century, American identity, and its foreign policy, was shaped in opposition to a 'communist bloc'. In a post-Cold war world, America has to create imaginary villains ('Muslim terrorists', rouge states such as bankrupt and starving 'North Korea', 'the Chinese menace') in an inane attempt to resolve its predicament of self-identity. The collapse of the Soviet Union has produced a plethora of new artificial, national feuding identities, pitting Azerbaijanis against Armenians, Chechnyans against Russians, Kazakhstanis of one kind against Kazakhstanis of another. The Balkans has just gone through one of the most brutal

balkanisation of identities in all its history. In the Muslim world, traditionalists and modernists have been engaged in battles over what constitutes true Islamic identity for decades (3). The very idea of being 'White' has now become so problematic that 'Whiteness' is studied as an academic discipline in its own right.

In short, identity is being contested everywhere. That is why the politics of identity has become one of the dominant themes of postmodern time.

To 'know thyself', as Socrates put it, is both a fundamental human urge and a basic question in philosophy. Having some idea of who or what we are helps us to determine how we ought to live and conduct our daily affairs. A little self-knowledge also provides us with a little coherence in our metaphysical and moral outlooks. But in a rapidly globalising world, it is almost impossible to have even a modicum of self-knowledge. All those things that provided us with a sense of confidence in ourselves—such as nation states with homogenous populations, well-established local communities, unquestioned allegiance to history and unchanging tradition—have evaporated. The sources of our identity have been rendered meaningless.

Consider, for example, the territory called 'England'. It is not the sole preserve of 'the English' anymore: the population now is much more heterogeneous, with 'Englishness' (however, it is defined) as only one segment in a multi-ethnic society. Moreover, the history and tradition that are associated with this 'Englishness'—the Empire, House of Lords, fox hunting, the national anthem—are either questionable or meaningless to the vast majority of new-English who now live in England. Worse: this Englishness becomes quite insignificant when it is seen in relation to a new European identity which itself is an

amalgam of countless other cultural identities. Not surprisingly, 'the English' feel threatened.

While the concrete foundations of identity are cracking away everywhere, the shifting context adds another layer of perplexity. Identity is a label, a toolkit, a compass bearing. It permits us to find not only ourselves but discern similarity and/or difference in everyone else. When the foundations of our identity crack we lose not only the sense of who we are but essential elements of how we connect to all other identities. All labels become confusing, multiple and problematic.

Think of the rather common label: 'black'. It has no global connotation; there is no universal black identity. Being black has different meaning and significance in different places. In New York, being black is a mark of difference in contrast to the whites, the Italian, the Irish, the Hispanics and a symbol of being cool. In Nigeria, it is not important whether you are black or white but whether you are Yoruba rather than Hausa; and the only way you can be cool is to be totally westernised. In Jeddah, nothing is cool, and what really matters is not whether you are black or brown but whether you are a member of the royal family. In Cape Town, to be black is, almost by definition, to be confused: once excluded, now technically empowered, a dominant group in the rainbow, but still practically marginalised by the history that created and continues to operate practical exclusion. So, from the perspective of identity, context redefines meaning and we end up not talking about the same colour at all.

In addition, the very notions and ideas we use to describe our identities are changing radically. What does it mean, for example, to be a 'mother' in a world where in vitro fertilisation and surrogate motherhood is rapidly becoming common? What happens to conventional ideas of parenthood in the case of

the French baby ‘constructed’ from the egg of a 62-year-old woman, sperm from her brother, and ‘incubated’ in a surrogate mother? What does it mean to be a ‘wife’ in a homosexual marriage? Or ‘old’ when you have rebuilt a 65-year-old body through plastic surgery and look like a young starlet?

Thus, identity has become a perilous notion. It is not, if it ever was, monolithic and static; but multiple and ever changing. And the most fundamental change is this: all those other categories through which we in the West defined and measured ourselves—the ‘evil Orientals’, the ‘fanatic Muslims’, the ‘inferior races of the colonies’, the immigrants, the refugees, the gypsies—are now an integral part of ourselves. It is not just that they are ‘here’ but their ideas, concepts, lifestyles, food, clothes now play a central part in shaping ‘us’ and ‘our society’. We thus have no yardstick to measure our difference and define ourselves.

Descartes could say with some confidence, ‘I think, therefore I am’ because his thought had already defined the Other, the darker side of himself, through which he could confirm his own civilised and thoughtful existence. Today, our thought has to be directed toward a more frightening question: how much of the Other is actually located within me? The quest for identity is essentially an attempt to answer this question. And it is the fear of the answer that transforms, in the words of Amin Maalouf, the Lebanese-French novelist, ‘a perfectly permissible aspiration’ into ‘an instrument of war’ (4). This transformation occurs through some basic associations.

The first of these is the conventional association of identity with power and territory. Identity always conferred power, defined the essential character distinctive to its own territory, and familiarised people with the proper means of domesticity, living comfortably within the homeland. But an all powerful

identity is like an all-powerful tree in the garden: it sucks the life out of all other plants. When power is skewed in this manner, it is not possible to exist in symbiosis. Take the case of America, which began as a declaration of identity: a new world emptied of meaningful past and ready for migrants who would build an identity based on the power of a new territory. But the very definition of American identity provided power and privilege for those who were conceived as the insiders. The term 'ethnicity' has its roots in the American provenance where, apart from the European immigrants, all other immigrants are defined as ethnics. As Dipankar Gupta notes, ethnicity 'connotes, above all else, the signification of the primordially constituted "Other" as an "*outsider*"' (5). The distinction is between hyphenated Americans—Italian, German, Polish, Irish, Russian—and ethnicity. American identity offers the hyphenated Americans the ideal American Dream of inclusion and opportunity. Thus, only hyphenated Americans have ever made it to the White House.

But ethnicity is very different: blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans are ethnics, problematic and different kinds of Americans. Ethnics make excellent domestic servants, a significantly different thing from domesticity. Ethnicity is the politically correct term for race, for a hierarchy within American identity and for the power of definition that is exclusive to white America. Asian too are ethnics. Chinese Americans had their identity neatly stereotyped in the works of Mark Twain and Bret Harte. Japanese Americans were the only people interned as real 'enemies within' during the Second World War, an unthinkable reaction to German, Italian or any other quisling state Americans.

In British identity, power and territory are expressed in hierarchies of race and class. It is a little too glib to argue that

British identity had the luxury of seeing race as external, the definition of difference beyond its shores. But the exercise of power that created an Empire on which the sun never set, a notion of class that defined and shaped modernity and was not a stranger anywhere in the world, are essential attributes of what it is to be British (6). Without it the British could not be simultaneously xenophobic, internationalist and parochial: the sort of people who go on Spanish holidays to eat fish and chips and drink warm bitter ale. British identity is based on an assumption of authority that makes the world a familiar place, a proper theatre in which to continue being British. It also produced its own internationalist perspective: Britain has had its share of 'old India hands', 'Africa men and women'—urbane, cosmopolitans who know Johnny Foreigners better than they know themselves.

The problem with identity as power and control over territory is what happens when power wanes. Johnny Foreigner is now within, ethnics are demanding the American Dream. Power has been debunked, denounced and vilified. Does all that that identifies the Self go down the plughole with it? How can we be comfortable with accepting the identity of villains? Which leads us to the second association: to exclude the unsavoury foreigners from our identity we have to anchor it in romanticised history and frozen tradition.

Collective identity is based on the selective processes of memory. Let me illustrate how this process works, and how the creation of identity can lead to conflict, by dwelling on the notion of British identity. British identity was (is?) the acknowledgement of a common past. Sharing and having been shaped by this common past is what makes the British different from all other identities. The trouble is history is a deliberate human creation, itself another wilful act of power, artificially

constructed to support an artificial identity. Europe engineered a cultural identity based on a common descent from the supposed traditions of ancient Greece and Rome and two thousand years of Christianity. British history books always began with the arrival of the Romans. So British history begins by submerging, barbarising and differentiating itself from Celtic history. Celt and Welsh are words whose linguistic roots, one Greek the other Saxon, mean stranger. The history of Britain, as written in the age of devolution, records not a common shared past but continuous contest and conflict within British isles. Whatever Britain is, it is the creation of dominance by kings and barons and upwardly mobile yeoman who practiced colonialism at home, and after perfecting the technique, moved abroad.

It was Oliver Cromwell who noted that Britain had its 'Indians' at home in what he called the 'dark corners of Britain.' He referred, of course, to the residual Celtic corners. It makes perfect sense that Margaret Thatcher, whom I always regarded as Oliver Cromwell in drag, should propose the solution to the Ulster problem as relocating Catholics to Ireland. It was Cromwell's policy: if they will not reform, be educated and submit, then they have no place within the identity, history and society that is Britain. That no one seriously proposes sending the Union Jack waving Ulstermen back to where they came from, or removing the Union from them, itself suggests a strong allegiance to a constructed history, the history of irreconcilable difference. As Orangemen so often say, marching with fife and drum to intimidate and demonstrate their dominance is their culture. In an age of the politics of identity, culture has its rights. But how far can you defend the rights of a culture whose only reason for being is to retain dominance?

It really is quite dumbfounding how much of Britishness, and by association Englishness, is based on fabricated history. Consider the whole notion of Anglo-Saxon Britain. Winston Churchill and Rudyard Kipling were devotees of Anglo Saxon history for a reason. It enabled them to avoid how genuinely European British history has always been. Norman kings hardly ever spent time in Britain, spoke French rather than English, and were most concerned with dominating Europe from their French possessions. Of course, the Saxon bit of the Anglo Saxon has its own problems. After the Welsh Tudors, and Scots Stuarts, a brief quasi native interlude, German monarchs were bussed in to reign over Britishness that was to be marked by Englishness alone, and that wanted nothing to do with Europe.

The selectivity of historic memory is part of its inventiveness. History always seeks ancient roots, the better to justify its innovations. Ancient Anglo Saxon liberties were purposefully invented on a number of occasions to fashion the Mother of Parliaments. This foundational institution was not a true popular democratic institution until 1929, the first election based on universal adult suffrage. The statue of Oliver Cromwell quite properly stands outside Parliament. His insistence that ancient Anglo Saxon liberties rested on property owning was the novel twist that secured class hierarchy, made the Restoration of monarchy easy, and enabled manufactured history to continue its work. The pomp and ceremony of the British monarchy was a late Victorian invention. The Royal Family as the model for the normative family, an ideal for a nation, is a post Edwardian invention, Victoria's son Edward hardly being a suitable candidate for model husband and father. And so it goes on.

Thus, the notions of race and class are intrinsic to the self-definition of the English. Without the idea of race there is

little left for English identity to hold on to: only being a disadvantaged minority within Britain, the complete inversion of received history. What works well for youthful addicts of street culture does not suit the aspirations of new English identity, and that's why the appeal to the barricades, sending them back, locking them up has to be made.

As recently as 1940, George Orwell could state that 'when you come back to England from any foreign country, you have immediately the sensation of breathing different air'. Identity as difference is less easy to define in a world already awash with globalisation whose most notable feature is rampant Americanisation. Where is the British sandwich? Surely that defined the difference of being here. But McDonalds, Starbucks, pizza parlours, doner kebab, chicken tikka marsala, the rise of ciabatta and the *pret a manger* syndrome have transmuted the familiar air of England in wafts of everyone else's fragrant confections.

These culinary metaphors have become basic to redefining British identity. The new culinary repertoire are not so much a smorgasbord as alternative choices. Does Britain embrace the global Americanisation of the high street, the merchandised model of individualism, the free market identity of buying into who you want to be in terms of dress, sex and politics? Or is Britain as European as ciabatta and its passion for fine wine? Are the British the kind of people who opt for a common European history of struggle for public ownership and secure, quality public services? In facing that choice, Britain has to discover how and in what way the spiced diversity of real curry, as opposed to an invented dish to suit only white tastes, fits into the feast of identities. And, these questions are not just rhetorical: they have a real import in terms of policy. Should Britain align itself with America or look more towards Europe

is a question that dominates British politics—some would even argue that it is tearing the nation apart.

Much the same can be said about other problematic identities. Like Britain, Islam too has used selective memory in shaping an identity for itself that is posed against a demonised West. And, just like the Muslims, fundamentalist Hindus too have constructed a romanticised past to shape a Nationalist Hindu identity (7). In both cases, the fabrication of monolithic identities has led to conflict and death. The desire to be pure, unpolluted and authentic often leads to construction of identities that are totalitarian in the content and destructive in their nature.

So we arrive at the third association: the negotiation of identity between the alternate poles of desire and death. As American scholar Cornel West has suggested, we construct our identities from the building blocks of our basic desires: desire for recognition, quest for visibility, the sense of being acknowledged, a deep desire for association (8). It is longing to belong. All these desires are expressed by symbols—pomp and ceremony, marches, festivals, national monuments and anthems, cricket and football teams, etc. But in a world where symbols are all we are, all we have, holding on to these symbols becomes a matter of life and death. It is for the glorification of these symbols that the bloody tale of national history is written and enacted in nationalists' campaigns everywhere around the world.

Identity not only invokes the desire to be different, it also summons the desire to express similarity. Indeed, there can be no difference without similarity. But similarity is always seen as the opposite pole of difference, as appeals to making everyone the same. It is often posed as 'our' similarity against 'their' difference. Once the doctrine of similarity was the

underlying principle of the communist ethos, now it has become essential to the internationalist-libertarian-individualist doctrine that underpins globalisation. 'Workers of the World Unite' has been replaced by 'Liberal Capitalism is the Only Way'. Such championing of similarity can become war on those who fight to maintain their difference. Similarity in such contests becomes an ethos to die for.

In coming to terms with the contemporary crisis of identity, we need to transcend certain apparent contradictions. To reject the demonisation of difference does not require the abandonment of difference. The desire for similarity is not the same thing as the aspiration for homogeneity. Traditions and customs that do not change cease to be traditions and customs and are transformed into instruments of oppression. Identity has historic anchors but is not fixed to a limited, unchanging set of traditional signs and historic symbols. Identity is not what we buy, or what we choose, or what we impose on others; rather, it is something from which we learn how to live, discover what is worth buying, and appreciate what it is to be different. Just as the flora and fauna in a garden learns to live with each other.

What we need is to recover our confidence in identity as the product of various and diverse traditions. We need to recognise that any identity is the means to synthesise similarity through difference and to see difference as discrete means of expressing basic similarity. We need to move away from the politics of contested identities that heighten artificial differences towards acceptance of the plasticity and possibilities of identities that focus on our common humanity. Living identity, as opposed to the fossilised to die for variety, is always in a constant flux. It is an ever changing balance, the balance of similarities and differences as a way of locating what it is that makes life worth

living and what connects us with the rest of the changing world. The challenge of shaping Other futures is to transcend difference and thereby enable it to fulfil its real purpose—to provide variety and diversity in a world that cannot exist with it.

This then is my vision of the future. A world of variety and diversity where we are at ease with our identity, know our Selves, and through knowing ourselves come to see beauty and goodness in Others who are not like us. A fragrant world with all the colour and multiplicity of a garden.

But, of course, it is more than possible that instead of moving towards my garden of identities, we could go forward to a totally different future. An alternative scenario is reflected in the title of Francis Fukuyama's book: *Our Posthuman Future* (9). Here, human identity per se evaporates and genetic engineering, cloning and neuropharmacology lead us to a future of identities manufactured in the laboratory. Eugenics will ensure that we are all much stronger, smarter and resistant to disease and death. Xeno-transplants will guarantee replacement parts for our failing bits of biology. Scientists would isolate biochemicals in an egg and transfer them directly to the skin cell—doing away with the idea and need of the human embryo altogether. So, our sense of ourselves, and how we interact as social and cultural beings, will be fundamentally altered. Identity will acquire a new meaning—or rather meaninglessness as we will all be fashioned in a homogeneous way by standardized technology. There are obvious problems with this scenario. As soon as biotechnology solves one problems, it creates a myriad of others. As Fukuyama acknowledges, it could at best lead to a new class of people—those who could afford the technology—and create a whole new underclass of ordinary mortals; at worse it could lead to a *Brave New World* that Aldous Huxley warned us about. My point is that a post

human, bio-technology based future is simply a continuation of the Enlightenment project of progress through instrumental science. One source of Truth, and one Civilisation, continues in its trajectory—the human garden becomes an embodiment of a single, all-powerful identity.

There is another scenario that is worth considering. Globalisation may continue on its present course unimpeded for the next two or three decades (10). That would not only mean that the world is dominated and controlled by a single nation—for globalisation is only another name for Americanisation—but also the cultural space for difference would be totally eroded. In other words, the world will be awash with a single culture and its products, and difference as such would cease to exist. Diversity as we know it would disappear and cultures trying to retain some semblance of identity and originality would be in perpetual conflict with America. Puritanism and fundamentalism would stalk the earth on one hand, and America's arrogance will take cosmological proportion on the other. This scenario too leads us to a desolate panorama with a single identity.

To undermine these two undesirable scenarios, we need to abandon the idea that a single truth can be imposed on a plural globe. Just as a garden does not function on the basis of a single species, so the single Truth of western civilisation as well as creeds and ideologies that are based on exclusivist notions of truth and seek redemption by imposing this truth on all others, cannot lead us to viable, sustainable future. Both America and the great monotheistic religions of the world must transcend their historic goal of claiming exclusivist notions of Truth just as science must learn to see itself as only one—and not *the*—manifestation of reality. The Platonic idea that truth is same for everyone has no place in my future garden of

humanities. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argues in *The Dignity of Difference* (11) this notion of truth sets up false oppositions. If all truth is the same for everyone at all times, then if I am right, you must be wrong. And, if I really care for truth, I must convert you to my view. We must move forward from the old recipe that 'truth is supremely important, and therefore all persons must live by a single truth' to the new formula that 'truth is supremely important, and therefore every man and women must be allowed to live according to how they see the truth'. Ultimately, my notion of pluralistic identities comes down to how we all see the truth differently, according to our historic experiences and perspectives, and how we all live the truth in our lives, as individuals and communities, in our uniquely different and cultural ways of being human.

So, I open my eyes and go out to transform the world as I find it into the future world that I desire. A world where more than one of way of being human is not only the norm but is considered essential for the very survival of our species. This is the world as a garden. And you and I, and all of us, urgently need to cultivate our future garden of humanities.

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