

## The Future of Islam: Tie up Your Camel

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From Dan to Beersheba, the millennial ferment is everywhere. Apocalyptic scenarios notwithstanding, the dawn of the next millennium is anticipated with a sense of great elation.

Save the dialectical curiosity for the so-called Y2K syndrome, the calendar devised by Pope Gregory the Great stirs no such emotions in the Muslim world. They follow a different calendar, Hijra, known after the celebrated migration of the Prophet from Makkah to Madinah. But Muslims did have their due share of millennial sentiments: some four hundred years ago, in medieval Egypt, Imam as-Suyuti had to write a book, *Al-Kashf 'an Mujawazat hadhihi al-Ummah al-Alf*, to allay fears of the perplexed masses. He argued that the end of the first millennium was not the end of history for the Muslim community.

Are then Muslims the only fugitives from this festival a la mode? Going by the great abundance of systems of reckoning - Hebrew, Ethiopic, Persian, Mayan, Julian, Coptic, Baha'i, Chinese, Hindu - with their solar and lunar features, the millennial dichotomy is not unique to Muslims.

Beyond religious iconography of the millennium lies the chef d'oeuvre of the Western civilization: Bronowski's "ascent of man" in its full glory. Here is the conflux of natural human faculties for restructuring social order and free flowering of the intellect. Slowly but steadily, it continues to metamorphose into an unwavering commitment to human dignity, liberty, and justice. This predilection for human prosperity in both mind and body is undoubtedly a crowning achievement, though often criticized as selfish with a Western bias.

But the caravan of history presents the spectacle of the ancient past of Western civilization with an equally peerless record of monstrous permanence: the horrors committed by the Crusaders, atrocities of feudal lords, anti-intellectual heresies by the Church, brutality of the Spanish Inquisition, desecration of the feminine, the ordeal of colonialism, and the plunder of Nature, among others. In more recent times - evil in the gestalt of Shoah; the dehu-

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manizing gulag; the two World Wars - all cast a dark shadow on the moral culpability of this civilization.

Thus, the millennial Mardi Gras is tainted with both the Faustian and the Promethean elements. But, with a difference: there is no turning back from the swelling frontiers of human freedom. Each advancing moment is a solemn promise towards the evolution of a humane global culture. With Alvin Toffler's portentous "Third Wave" no longer a distant future, potential for human progress is evident in the imagined world. It certainly negates Winston Churchill's cynical view of scientific passage when he said that Stone Age might return "on the gleaming wings of science."

With such melodramatic acts being played in the cosmic theatre, where are the Muslims? Are they actors? Or mere spectators? Does the possession of a different calendar bestow upon them an immunity from the march of civilization?

From Dante's *Divine Comedy* to Huntington's Islamophobic "clash of civilizations" history is replete with strained relations between Islam and the West. The paradox of the Islam-West nexus, however, is the Western ingenuity in starting the engine of Renaissance. This it did by imbibing a greater part of the Greek intellectual heritage through the medium of Latin translations of the Arabic manuscripts. At the same time, Orientalism served the ulterior motives of the colonizers: the "other" was manufactured. Or, as Edward Said calls it, the feminization of the "other" was accomplished with much fanfare.

No vindication of the fabricated "other" is desirable. But pointless it is for Muslims to write endless critiques of Orientalism without producing even an iota of an equivalent matrix of ideas. While the West is armed to teeth in comprehending the Muslim ethos, where is the Muslim scholarship that can lay claim on an essential perception of the Western ideological shifts? Where is the Muslim critique of modernity, postmodernism, structuralism, globalization...ad infinitum?

During the declining moments of colonialism, the great Algerian savant Malek Bennabi and the Pakistani philosopher-poet Muhammad Iqbal did succeed in igniting a passionate quest for Muslim self-identity.

However, all that intellectual fervor seems to have failed in transforming Muslims into a cohesive polity in world affairs. Lately, there are signs of a scholastic resurgence as illustrated by attempts towards a re-definition of Muslim epistemology. Of note is the ongoing work on the so-called "Islamization" of knowledge. On the fringe lies a half-baked venture for developing an Islamic rendition of science. But a closer look reveals their cliquish premise as opposed to a universal paradigm. This secluded existence of the Muslim world is reminiscent of the times when it shunned the doors of reasoned de-

bate and degenerated into a carapace of its own making.

Today's Muslim world is portrayed by no lesser an intellectual impassivity. Take the Internet, the dynamo of the next Renaissance. None of the Muslim majority languages has any stake in running this huge knowledge machine, unlike the French who are fighting an uphill battle to prevent English from laying a siege to the Francophone world. Likewise, conspicuous is the Muslim absence from history's biggest scientific endeavor, the Human Genome Project.

If language is a gateway to cognitive growth then much of the knowledge in the future would belong to the English language. As an unwitting surrogate of globalization on the Internet, it is comparable to Arabic as the lingua franca during the heyday of the "Civilization of the Book" though it has retreated to much smaller borders. Today, for instance, Azerbaijan, a Muslim majority country, is mired in a thick soup of Cyrillic, Arabic, and Latin alphabet. Turkey, Indonesia, Brunei, and Malaysia have already abandoned the Arabic script. Discounting the arguments on the wired and the unwired vis a vis prospects for economic development, it is significant that whatever little access to Internet is there is subjected to censorship and police surveillance, as in Malaysia and some other countries.

Muslim world, a rich mosaic of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity is certainly awaiting a transformation in tune with the universal teachings of Islam. For them, variations on the theme of modernity and the social metamorphosis brought about by advancing technology remain the daunting challenges. Earlier attempts for the unification of the community - exemplified by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) - have met with failure, except for scoring a few diplomatic niceties. Perhaps Muslim immigrants in the West, inadvertent beneficiaries of the globalization process, may ultimately become the catalysts for a major ideological transition. A recourse to historical justice may provide some comfort in Muslim nostalgia for the glorious past but the future demands a different mindset. It summons our ability for innovation. It is here that this new breed of Muslims may make a difference in the life of the community.

One is reminded that Islam is not intrinsically opposed to the ideals of justice, equality, and human dignity. The message of Islam is normative, deriving its strength from two cardinal principles: the finality of religion and the finality of prophethood. It is this transcendency that prompts Ernest Gellner to call Islam as "the last religion." It is a folly to assume that technological sophistication or economic prosperity has weakened the religious belief.

Moving away from the ivory tower we face the grim reality of the Muslim world: mass illiteracy; want of basic hygiene and primary health facilities; poverty; lack of fundamental liberties of religion and speech; and little protec-

tion from state persecution. Basic human rights in much of the Muslim world remain hostage to those whose ascendancy to power has little or dubious legitimacy. The revolution in Iran raised the hopes of dispossessed and disadvantaged masses towards an Islamic revival. Two decades later, we see it deteriorated in strength and fallen victim to internal sectarian strife. Malaysia declared a ban on Shi'a teachings a couple of years ago and detained several people for long periods without trial under the Draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) for propagating the faith. Such stifling of the Muslim dissent is often touted as a defence of the "Asian values" - a highly deceptive instrument of political oppression. Perpetuation of despotic rulers, such as Mahathir in Malaysia, is achieved through a systematic corruption of the civil, judicial and the police departments. The invertebrate state-controlled media serve the self-fulfilling prophecy while anti-Semitic slander with sham retractions is not uncommon for sleazy political gains. Greedy multinationals and the Western corridors of power are clearly reprehensible for propping up these client regimes as their economic and political mercenaries.

Given the intellectual bondage and political and economic subservience of the Muslim world to the West, prospects for the future, either programmed or desired, remain gloomy. There seems to be an inexplicable fatalism that continues to envelope the Ummah - the global Muslim community. It has ceased moving from opinion to knowledge. And employing knowledge for social evolution. In the footsteps of the Prophetic Tradition - beside trust in the Divine mercy - are not Muslims required to tie up their camel?

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