

WHEN THE BAREFOOT SHEPHERDS OUTVIE EACH OTHER IN THE
CONSTRUCTION OF TALL BUILDINGS

Muzaffar Iqbal

Those who last visited the House of Allah (*bayt Allāh*) in Makka before 1980 may find the following first-hand account of a recent pilgrim unbelievable:

Just returned from ‘Umra, *al-ḥamdu li’Ilāh*. I wanted to combine the blessings of Ramadan with those of pilgrimage, but without doubt, this was the most difficult exercise I have ever done—even harder than the Hajj two years ago. It was absolute chaos in Makka. The noise of heavy machines breaking mountains to construct five-star hotels all around the Haram, the jostling crowds busy shopping on the roads leading to the House, the streets thronging with people—one could not move without pushing others out of the way. And when you finally enter the Haram, you see seventy-year-old men immersed in the small screens of their cell phones, their eyes glued to digital images. The new site of the Zam-zam well, now moved to the wall of the open courtyard to the right of the shrine of Ibrāhīm, upon him peace, presented a scene similar to food distribution chaos in a famine-struck country.

There was no sign of serenity anywhere in the House: the corridors were full of noise, the maddening pace of construction, the overhanging cranes, the site of the new Clock Tower, the food courts outside the hotels which now surround the Haram with all their profanity... how can one concentrate on worshipping the Lord of the House? And they are planning to increase this crowd to 5 million! It was the 25th night of Ramadan, we had barely finished the long supplication after the *tarāwīḥ* prayer completing the recitation of the Qur’ān, I knew it was time to close the external eyes and open the eyes of the heart—when suddenly the sky over the Haram was filled with a laser show projected from the Clock Tower! I wish I could scream...the sky was lit up with lasers in all directions, arresting over two million human beings with their dangling beams. Their faces lifted up to the sky, the worshippers gathered in the

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Haram from all over the world were now mesmerized by the synthetic lights which swirled and danced and twisted and formed and reformed various shapes, as if mocking the believers with a brazenness no one could have imagined even a decade ago.

Now that profanity has reached the most sacred place on earth (the inviolable House, the Sanctified Precinct), and the rapid appearance of Signs makes it abundantly clear that a certain threshold has been crossed regarding the temporal flux hurling forth with such violence that even the inattentive are left wondering as the world crumbles around them, the question incessantly being asked by those who can feel the Hour as if it were just around the corner is: What is to be done at this eleventh hour?

To be sure, this is not the first time this question is being asked. The Companions themselves, “the best of all people” as the Prophet called them, were the first to sense the proximity of the Hour as the light of prophecy, which had provided a certain solace to their hearts, was lifted from among them. They felt an unmistakable sign and an unbearable anguish. Some time after the demise of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, Abū Bakr said to ‘Umar, Allah be pleased with them both, “Take us to Umm Ayman so that we can visit her.” Upon seeing them, Umm Ayman—whom the Prophet called “my mother after my own mother; the rest of my family” (Ibn Kathīr, *Sīra* 4:643; al-Qārī, *Sharḥ al-shifā’* 1:172; al-Maqrīzī, *Imtā’ al-asmā’* 6:340)—wept. They said to her, “Why do you cry? What Allah has for His Prophet is better.” She replied, “I know that what Allah has for His Prophet is better, but I am crying because the revelation coming down from the sky has ceased.” As they heard this, both Abū Bakr and ‘Umar wept with her (Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, Janā’iz, dhikr wafātih wa dafnīh ṣallā Allāh ‘alayh wa sallam).

The Prophet himself had repeatedly warned the Companions that the Hour is drawing near. Among the various Prophetic Hadiths about the signs of the Last Hour is the one with which Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī (d. 261/875) begins “The Book of Belief” (*Kitāb al-īmān*), the first book of his *Ṣaḥīḥ*. It was narrated to Imam Muslim through two chains of transmission, both going back to the eminent Follower (*Tābi‘ī*) Yaḥya b. Ya‘mar (d. 119 or 120/737 or 738) from the tribe of Layth—the narrator of many Hadiths from several Companions including Yāsir b. ‘Ammār, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, Abū Hurayra, Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī, Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī, Ibn ‘Abbās, and ‘Ā’isha, Allah be well-pleased with them all. The narration begins as follows:

The first man in Basra to expound on *qadr* (Divine Decree) was Ma‘bad al-Juhani. I set out for Hajj or ‘Umra with Ḥumayd b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ḥimyarī. I said to him: Should it so happen that we come in contact with one of the Companions of the Messenger of Allah, upon him blessings and peace, we should ask him of what is discussed regarding *qadr*. It so happened that we came across ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar as he was entering the Mosque. My companion and I surrounded him, one of us from the

right, the other from the left. As I expected my companion would allow me to speak, I said: "O Abū Abd al-Rahmān! there have appeared in our land some people who recite the Qurʾān and pursue knowledge. Having mentioned [some of] their affairs, [I said]: They claim that there is no such thing as *qadr* and matters are not preordained. He said: When you happen to meet such people tell them that I have nothing to do with them and they have nothing to do with me. And verily 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar swore by Him [and said]: 'If any one of them [who does not believe in *qadr*] possessed as much gold as [the size of Mount Uḥud and he gave it [in the path of Allah], it would not be accepted by Allah unless he affirmed his belief in *qadr*. He then related: My father, 'Umar b. al-Khattāb, narrated to me:

One day when we were with the Messenger of Allah, upon him blessings and peace, a man with very white clothes and very black hair came up to us. No mark of travel was visible on him, yet none of us recognized him. Sitting down before the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, leaning his knees against his, and placing his hands on his thighs, he said, "Tell me about *Islām*, O Muḥammad."

The Messenger of Allah, upon him blessings and peace, said: "*Islām* is that you bear witness that there is no god but Allah and that Muḥammad is the Messenger of Allah, perform the ritual prayer, pay the *zakāt*, fast during Ramadan, and make the pilgrimage to the House if you are able."

He said: "You have spoken the truth."

We were surprised at his questioning him but then confirming his answer. He then said, "Now tell me about *Imān*."

He said: "That you believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and that you have faith in the Divine Decree (*qadr*), both its good and its evil."

Saying, "You have spoken the truth," he said, "Now tell me what is *Iḥsān*."

He replied: "That you should worship Allah as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, surely He sees you."

He asked: "Now tell me about the Hour."

He replied: "The one being asked has no better knowledge of that than the one asking."

[The man] said: "Then tell me about its portents."

He said: "The slave girl will give birth to her mistress, and you will see the barefoot, naked, destitute shepherds vying with each other in building."

Then the man went away. After I had waited for a long time, the Prophet said to me, "Do you know who the questioner was, O 'Umar?"

I said: "Allah and His Messenger know best."

He said: "He was Jibrīl. He came to teach you your religion."

(Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Imān, maʿrifat al-imān
wal-Islām, wal-qadr wa ʿālamat al-sāʿa)

Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, may Allah be pleased with her, narrates: “[Once] the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, got up from his sleep with a flushed face and said, ‘There is no god but Allah, woe unto the Arabs, the great evil is approaching them. Today a gap has been opened in the wall of Ya’jūj and Ma’jūj like this,’ making a circle with his thumb and index finger. When it was asked, ‘Will we be destroyed even though there are righteous among us?’ the Prophet said, ‘Yes, when evil abounds’” (Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Fitan wa ash-rāt al-sā‘a, iqtirāb al-fitn wa tafḥ radm Ya’jūj wa Ma’jūj; Bukhārī, *Aḥādith al-anbiyā’*, qisṣa Ya’jūj wa Ma’jūj). Imam Nawawī explains the hadith to mean that when evil abounds, general destruction ensues, despite the presence of the righteous (*Sharḥ Muslim*). Mullā ‘Alī Qārī says, “It is like the fire that, when once ignited, devours the dry and the wet, pure and impure, and does not differentiate between a believer and disbeliever, adversary and hypocrite” (*Mirqāt al-maṣāṭih*).

No doubt, this custom of the Creator (*Sunnat Allāh*) remains operative today, just as it has throughout human history, for His Sunna does not change (Q 17:77). In previous eras, the impact of transgressions and consequent repercussions were limited, but now the fate of humanity is bound together; whatever happens in one corner of the globe affects the whole world. At another level, this is plainly visible in the geographical spread of profane technologies that have reordered the entire rhythm of life across the world through the proliferation of poorly designed goods made from equally poor materials which now flood global consumer markets. Millions of such goods are transported in containers plying the oceans in numbers which were unimaginable even a decade ago. The rising levels of consumption and waste are simply unsustainable, but all the hue and cry about environmental degradation and unsustainability has been drowned by marketing techniques forced into people’s homes through technologies which invade all aspects of daily life. People wake up to the circuit-generated noise of digital clocks, force their bodies out of their beds, scrub chemicals on their faces, walk into their gadgets-filled kitchens, eat genetically modified food, and rush out to a daily routine governed by quick-charge cell phones from which there is no respite. No one is alone anymore; there is no sense of the whole person, only fragmented lives consumed in a maddening rush. Everyday, masses of humanity drive on freeways which seem like parking lots. They arrive at offices and shopping malls which are artificially-controlled to produce micro-environments and spend the better part of their lives in such places on a daily basis—never accomplishing what they wanted to—and, exhausted, rush back to their homes for an artificial repose dominated by machines, only to restart the same cycle the next day.

The pervasive reach of modern technology is a one-way street; no amount of scientific data against any unsound device, no amount of statistical evidence against unhealthy practices related to use of certain technologies, no critique of the resultant lifestyles, and no words of wisdom have the power to arrest

this demonic growth. The eagerness with which the so-called developing countries of the world are embracing technology-dependent lifestyles, originally a product of modern Western civilization, proves not only the power of these fiendish inventions, but also the glittering and captivating force of an historical anomaly—the modern Western civilization. There has been no civilization in the entire course of human history that can be compared to it. This civilization is a product of such a deep fissure in the innate human disposition, the Divinely imparted *fiṭra*, that Satan himself must be astonished at what has been wrought. The aberration is so pervasive and its cancerous spread so rapid that the decay is not even measurable. What was looked upon with a certain degree of surprise during the 1960s and 1970s by the generation of men and women born around the turn of the twentieth century (perhaps the most devastating century of human history thus far) has simply become a matter of routine in the twenty-first century; the revolt against God in so many realms is no more surprising; it has become the norm, even the criterion. What is now surprising is the opposite: the remaining but fast-dwindling voices clinging to a vision of life rooted in the Divine through a conscious submission to His everlasting guidance.

That things have gone so far and so quickly is but a natural outcome of what was sowed in a certain corner of the earth five centuries ago during the Renaissance, which is something of a misnomer because the Renaissance man was twice-fallen: once from Paradise and then from the earth, which was thereafter filled with unprecedented profanity. This second Fall inevitably yielded our post-modern age, for the revolt against God (establishing a Kingdom of Man on earth through numerous competing currents in Western civilization) could not but result in the rapid folding of time itself—the heralding of the promised eleventh hour which, in turn, is the beginning of the End, as foretold in Scriptures.

The question, therefore, is no longer of halting or even temporarily arresting the dissemination of the hegemonic patterns of life spreading throughout the world; the question now is how to protect oneself from the general inversion of the entire moral order, which is a direct result of the transmutation of the sacred. The Prophetic wisdom tells us that the wheat and the chaff are bound to be crushed together; there is no Ark of safety from this universal deluge. Thus understood, one is bound to be impacted by the destructive ripples. The only solace—and this is no small mercy—is the Divine promise of the Hereafter.

Yet, one cannot but remain active and in constant and persistent opposition to the demonic forces which now surround us from all sides and which have already destroyed the most sacred and fundamental beliefs of humanity in so many parts of the earth through tearing apart ancient civilizations—a rupture that keeps increasing. To remain on guard at this eleventh hour is to dutifully do one's daily work with an ever-increasing and ever-more piercing awareness of the approaching Hour. This consciousness is spiritually strengthening and

it also allows one to remain steadfast in one's toiling, for those who toil at the eleventh hour have been promised reward corresponding to the nature of their age. This has been foretold by Prophets 'Īsā and Muhammad, Allah Most High bless them both and grant them peace. The words of these two final Messengers—sent by God to warn humanity and give glad tidings—as He closed the Prophetic cycle, provide a sure and confirmed path to those who seek assurance and succor.

Talking to his disciples on a certain day, 'Īsā, upon him peace, said, "But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first" (Matthew xix: 30). He then taught them through a parable:

For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that was a householder, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers a payment of one *denario* for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing in the marketplace idle; to them he said, Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hours, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he said unto them, Why stand ye here idle all day long? They said unto him, "Because no man hath hired us. He said unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard. And when evening came, the lord of the vineyard said unto his steward, "Call the laborers, and pay them their hire, beginning with the last and ending with the first. And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they received, every man, a *denario*. And when the first came, they expected that they would receive more, but they only likewise received, each man a *denario*. And when they received it, they murmured against the householder, saying, "These last have spent but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he answered and said to one of them, "Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a *denario*? Take up that which is thine, and go thy way; it is my will to give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Or is thine eye evil, because I am good? Thus will last be first, and the first last." (Matthew xx: 1-16)

Martin Lings explains this enigmatic parable:

If we suppose, to throw light on the question, that there are two spiritual men more or less equally gifted, and that one of them is condemned to die the next day, whereas no such sentence hands over the other, it is not difficult to see that the condemned man is in ideal circumstances for realizing, immediately and profoundly, a total commitment to the things of the Afterlife, and that he thereby has a certain priority over the other man. Not that we now living are in ourselves any more condemned than our ancestors were; but in their day the macrocosm itself was not under sentence of imminent

‘death’, as now it is; and this imminence engenders a climate which is potentially favourable to other worldliness, and which can be made to serve spiritual ends as it were by refraction from macrocosm to microcosm. The climate of the eleventh hour can also be favourable to spiritual fruition and fulfillment in the same incalculable and mysterious way. (*The Eleventh Hour*, p. 11)

The Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, said:

Your life in comparison to the lifespan of the previous nations is like the period between [the time] of the ‘aṣr (afternoon) prayer and sunset... Your similitude and that of the People of the two Books is like a man who hired laborers and said to them: “Who will work for me until mid-day for one *qirāṭ* each?” So the Jews worked until mid-day for one *qirāṭ* each. Then the man said: “Who will work for me from mid-day until the ‘aṣr prayer for one *qirāṭ* each?” The Christians worked from mid-day until the ‘aṣr prayer for one *qirāṭ* each. Then the man said: “Who will work for me from the ‘aṣr prayer until the *maghrib* (sunset) prayer for two *qirāṭ* each?” And that, in truth, is all of you. Truly you have double the wages. The Jews and the Christians became angry and said: “We did more labor but received less wages!” [Allah] said: “Have I decreased you in what was rightly yours?” They said, “No.” Then He said: “This is My blessing, which I give to whom I wish.”

(Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Ijāra, ijāra ilā niṣf al-naḥār; al-Tawḥīd, qawl Allāh ta‘ālā qul fa’tū bil-tawratī fatlūhā)

During a particularly turbulent time in Muslim history, some people went to Anas b. Mālik, Allah be well-pleased with him, the last of the Companions then living (he died in Basra in 93/712 aged 103), and complained about the oppression they were suffering at the hand of the Umayyad governor al-Ḥajjāj (d. 94/714). He said, “Persevere until you meet your Lord, for no time comes upon you but the time following it is worse than it. I heard this from your Prophet” (Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Fitan, lā ya’tī zamān ill-alladhī ba‘dah sharru minhu). In his commentary on the hadith, Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (773–852/1371–1449) cites the sayings of Companions and Followers—‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd and al-Ḥasan al-Baṣarī among them—who likewise mention the ever-decreasing quality of time. The former said, “No day comes to you except that it is worse than yesterday”. He also said, “Yesterday was better than today and today is better than tomorrow, and this is so until the establishment of the Hour” (Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*). As to how we know that this is, indeed, the case, that the time is “out of joint” despite all apparent progress, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Baṭṭāl (d. 449/1057) provides insight in his explanation of the Prophetic hadith quoted above: “Such knowledge cannot be gained through personal opinion; it is but through revelation” (*Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* 10:15). This epistemic correction suffices for those who believe in the superiority of revelatory knowledge over

all other forms of knowledge, but is considered mere “dogma” by those who do not believe. Yet such conclusions could not be reached even by deliberating the sum total of human knowledge, for the quantification of quality is an absurdity in itself.

It is likely the reign of quantity, the obsession of the modern world, which has so obliterated any sense of quality from certain points of view—such that to speak of especially spiritual quality may seem utterly meaningless. Yet one must insist on the supremacy of quality over quantity, for without the former nothing of value remains, just overwhelming and disjointed data, the basis of countless studies which perpetually make inaccurate forecasts and lead humanity from one blind alley into another. To talk about regression, instead of progress, may seem a pessimistic way of looking at the half-empty glass, but realism demands that one see the hourglass for what it is and not be overwhelmed by the abundance of falsehood. Even those who have blindly submitted to the reign of quantity and the authority of profane sciences cannot ignore the chaos and destruction spreading around them; their fault lies in not taking it as a sign of the times and merely considering it a tragedy of some scale or another, the result of some wrong planning or human fault, without realizing that these are not merely rotten apples on an otherwise sound tree. The tree itself is diseased, beyond the remedy of spraying chemicals on its leaves.

The spiritual blindness of the time being what it is, those who live with the consciousness that something has irrecoverably left their lives when they awake each morning can find no solace in a rational discourse with those who do not experience this. The distinction between the concept of this loss and its lived experience is fundamental in this case—like trying to describe the taste of a fruit to someone who has never heard of it.

The tall buildings erected next to the inviolable and the Sanctified House of God, the vying in greed and competition, the waste of billions of dollars of oil money (which is ultimately a public trust), the eager purchase of the most deadly weapons, and the blind submission to technology so widespread in the Muslim world are all fulfillments of prophecies foretold. While this does not absolve those who are making these enormous blunders, it nevertheless enables one to gain a certain spiritual stoicism, a quality of the heart, which makes it a little easier to carry the burden for one more day—one day at a time, until one returns to the Lord, hoping to be among the company of those to whom it will be said: *Return to your Lord, well-pleased and pleasing* (Q 89:28).

Wa-Ilāh al-Musta‘ān, wa mā tarwīqī illā bi-Ilāh.

Wuddistān

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