

OUR PREDICAMENT

Muzaffar Iqbal

Writing around the middle of the third Islamic century, the Cordovan Hadith master Abū ‘Abd Allāh b. Waḥḍāh al-Qurṭubī (199-286/815-899) recorded a statement of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (21-110/642-728), who said:

“If a man from amongst the Righteous Predecessors (*al-salaf*) were to be sent forth today, he would not recognize anything from Islam.” Then he put his hand on his cheek and added, “Except for the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*).” Then he said: “But by Allah, this does not apply to the person who—though he lives in these unfamiliar times and has never seen the Righteous Predecessors—recognizes the innovator calling to his innovation (*bid‘a*), and the follower of the world calling to his worldliness, but Allah protects him from all this and makes his heart love and aspire to those Righteous Predecessors, seeking their way, searching and trying to follow in their footsteps, and adhering to their path. Such is the person who will be recompensed with an immense and great reward. So be like him, by the permission of Allah.”

This sense of the decline of the quality of time can be traced back to the era of the Prophet himself, when the end of time seemed imminent to the Companions. Their heightened consciousness of the proximity of Doomsday, the Hour (*ṣā‘a*), was no doubt a direct result of the power of the Qur’ānic verses being revealed, their apocalyptic images striking the quaking hearts and awe-filled souls in the presence of the bearer of revelation himself, who continuously reminded them of the fast-approaching Hour. “The time of my appearance and the Hour are like these two fingers,” he once said. At another time, he told his Compan-

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ions: “If you knew what I know, you would laugh little and weep much.” He also told them of the inward decay that time entails by its very nature: “No time comes upon you but is followed by a worse.” And, speaking about the coming days, he said: “Islam began as a stranger and it will become once more a stranger.” He also spoke of the signs of the latter days, which continue to appear at an increasing pace.

This keen sense of the End, present in the hearts of the Companions, took an outward form when the Prophet (upon him blessings and peace) left this world and the Companions felt the disappearance of the light of prophecy so intensely that their hearts could hardly bear the weight. Traditional accounts of the events of that Monday, the twelfth of Rabi‘ I, in the eleventh year after Hijra, are filled with an immediate grief and shock, but discernible beneath that stupor—so vividly expressed by ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, who refused to accept the demise of the Prophet—is awareness of a deeper, permanent loss, which Umm Ayman was to articulate in her profound way when Abū Bakr and ‘Umar visited her after the death of the Prophet. When she wept and they sought to console her by reminding her that all humans die, she responded: “By Allah, I knew that the Messenger of Allah would die, that is not why I cry; rather I lament because the revelation from on high has ceased to come to us.” No doubt she knew that the revelation itself had been preserved for all time to come in the form of the Book; what she lamented was the disappearance of Divine guidance through the presence of a living human being on earth who could personify that guidance, purify the hearts, and radiate the earth with his being.

The Prophet’s departure from this world did not bring the End, but Muslims in their communities never ceased to anticipate it—although a certain dilution of its urgency made the religious experience of subsequent generations less intense, as can likewise be seen in the case of other religious traditions. This dimming consciousness of the ever-imminent Hour is mirrored in the dynamics built into the very nature of time itself. At one level, time travels in a linear fashion, instance by instance, moving toward the moment when it will be itself obliterated. In its forward motion, it carries all time past with it. Thus, what has happened in the past is present in the Present and what takes place today becomes part of tomorrow. The accumulated weight of time makes it heavy, a quality partly responsible for the dimming of greater consciousness, for it weighs down ordinary humans. Furthermore, the motion of time is not uniform; rather, as it comes closer to the End, it accelerates. Thus each passing day has less time in it: movements are shorter, months passing like weeks, weeks like days, days fleeting without pause for one’s intended actions to be performed between sunrise and sunset.

As if subconsciously aware of this loss but unable to respond properly, modern civilization has been obsessed with inventing gadgets aimed at allowing us to do things faster. Yet humanity has been outwitted by time in this race against time: no one has time anymore, and this despite all the “time-saving”

next-generation processors and supersonic planes we have devised. There is no space of escape from the cellular yokes to which millions of human beings are now tied, even in the remotest of deserts. The spiritual darkness of this postmodern age enfolds us so closely that one cannot even invoke Hans Christian Andersen's "emperor's new clothes" for the scales to fall from our eyes. This brand new world was already diagnosed at the beginning of the seventeenth century, by the Bard whose age straddled a disappearing world—this "unweeded garden", possessed by "things rank and gross in nature" was then just emerging and Shakespeare witnessed just the beginning of the replacement of the Kingdom of God with that of the Kingdom of Man (which would then become the kingdom of Machine)—yet he knew that the sacred has been disjointed from the world as never before. Hence the cry of his Hamlet in an impassioned moment of feigned madness: "The time is out of joint—O cursèd spite, That ever I was born to set it right!" One can now marvel at the optimism of the Bard, that then it seemed possible to actually set it right.

The four centuries that separate us from Shakespeare, although a mere wisp in broader, cosmic perspective, in fact mark a tremor that have shaken the center of human existence through catastrophic changes to modes of living. The periphery now is drawn into the vortex created by its fold, with each downward spiral ever-more rapidly coiling round and round. There is no geographical locus for this inner decay that gushes forth in all directions; one cannot retreat to the non-West to blame Western civilization (the concrete imagery of water and salt Toynbee found apt not too long ago no longer holds); all ancient civilizations have themselves crumbled under the weight and the velocity of this monstrosity which emerged in Europe and gave birth to our postmodern world made in the image of the Machine, the result of a Faustian pact.

Why, it may be asked, were those ancient civilizations—purportedly built on more solid metaphysical principles—unable to withstand this onslaught? Although various historical reasons can be rationally adduced, ultimately they prove logically circular; arguing from contingencies toward set conclusions in the manner of Bernard Lewis' "what went wrong". Yet the weight of history does not let us forget that France, Britain, and, to a lesser extent, Holland and Italy were able to conquer a very large part of the world partly due to the superior navigational techniques and weapons they invented by utilizing modern scientific discoveries. The rest recalls the principle Ibn Khaldūn articulated in the twenty-third section (*fāṣṭ*) of the second chapter of his insightful *Muqaddima*, "The Conquered Nations Readily Begin to Imitate the Conquerors—their Disposition; Dress, Occupations, and all other Traits and Customs":

The conquered is inherently cognizant of the superiority of the conqueror; and thus the conquered is not only physically subjugated, he is also mentally colonized, because he perceives the conqueror as superior or erroneously assumes that his own subservience to him is not due to [accidental] fact of defeat, but because of some extraordi-

nary perfection of the conqueror. If this erroneous assumption clings to his being, it turns into a firm belief. Such a person, then, adopts all manners of the conqueror and assimilates himself in him. This is blind imitation (*iqṭadāʿ*). Or, the person may possibly think that the superiority of the conqueror is not the result of his social solidarity (*ʿaṣbiyya*) or brute power (*quwwa baʿs*), but due to his customs and manners. This also would be an erroneous concept of superiority, and [the consequence] would be the same as in the former case. Therefore, the conquered are always found to assimilate themselves in the [culture of the] victor, in following their lifestyles, their manner of dress, mounts, and weapons, indeed, in everything. In this connection, one may compare how children constantly imitate their fathers. They do that only because they see perfection in them. One may also compare how almost everywhere people are dominated [in the matter of fashion] by the dress of the militia and the government forces, because they are ruled by them. This goes so far that if a nation dominated by another living in the neighborhood, even then the conquered nation readily assimilates itself in the conquering nation and imitates them. This is the case, at this time, in al-Andalus. The Spaniards are imitating the Galicians (*al-ummam al-Jilaliqa*) in their dress, their emblems, and most of their customs and conditions; they even engrave and paint Galician pictorial representations on the walls of their houses, and other public buildings! The intelligent observer will draw from this the conclusion that these are signs of enslavement (*ʿalāmāt al-istilāʿ*); and the Dominion is only of Allah (*wal-amr Lillāh*).

The new world order is now firmly entrenched and the kingdom of man so established stretches to all the reaches of the Earth—propagating lifestyles and passions that simply cannot be sustained by the resources of the planet now writhing in pain. When understood in this manner, one can easily dispense with battalions of experts (environmentalists, macroeconomists, ecologists, resource experts, geopolitical specialists, social justice advocates, public health experts, and so on) parading future scenarios rooted in solid empirical data (prices of oil, scarcity of water, unsustainable population growth, a growing gap between haves and have-nots, runaway climate change, biodiversity loss, an economy struggling with massive debt and unemployment levels, depleting natural resources, the end of cheap energy, and so forth), because they are unable to fathom the actual cause of the deep malaise faced by the entire human race. It is impossible for them to retract the fundamental force that drives this engine. Indeed, most of them are dealing only with the tertiary effects, and they only propose stop-gap solutions which have no relevance to the primary causes.

Likewise, analysts able to recognize the working of larger systems are merely aware that their intersections and mutual intensifications have reached such a proportion that individual remedies are ineffective. Virtually every living thing on the planet faces the impact of what happens elsewhere, and in turn, everything is contributing to the systemic forces at work. Yet, even this recognition

has seldom allowed these analysts to go beyond suggesting partial countermeasures; this is primarily so because these experts are themselves produced by the massive structures which perpetuate these forces. Their decisions and solutions buttress a sense of their own superiority despite all evidence to the contrary.

The Truth is rather unsettling: We no longer have problems that admit solutions; we now have a global human predicament integrated into the very ways that we live. To take one concrete example: twenty to twenty-five (or even more) million human beings wake up every morning in major cities like Tehran, Istanbul, Mumbai, Karachi, Dhaka, and Jakarta to the monotony of a daily routine filled with hours spent moving from one part of the city to another, in an environment filled with smog, smoke, noise, and several other kinds of pollutions. The shortsighted architects of our postmodern world construed it to run on fossil fuels (for whatever reasons of industry and commerce); the leadership of countries like Iran, Turkey, India, Pakistan, and Indonesia blindly followed what was wrought in London, Paris, New York, or Washington, DC, without even trying to devise alternatives. Now faced with the unsustainable use of fossil fuels (and price hikes), no one is able to extricate the domains of life from the basic material infrastructure that sustains it—and the ready solution, adding more thoroughfares to an already concrete-and-tar-filled cityscape, yields only more traffic on roads that become overcrowded the day they are opened! Yet transport is but one of the several issues now recognized as “global”.

In 1800, only 3 percent of the world’s population lived in cities, yet today some 3.2 billion human beings do so—a number that the UN forecasts will become 5 billion by 2030, namely, three-fifths of the global human population! This also means that by 2030, instead of one billion human beings (almost one-seventh of the world’s population) who now live in shanty towns, there will be 2 billion. These men, women, and children (most of them in Asia and Africa) will jostle against each other in overpopulated slums, in unsanitary conditions, fighting (living and dying with) malnutrition and the lack of the most basic needs (water, shelter, food).

When viewed from an Islamic perspective, most of these so-called “global” issues can be seen as directly arising from a loss of consciousness of our status as Vicegerents (*khulafāʾ*) on Earth—a core Qurʾānic concept linking the custodianship of the resources of the Earth to our existence on this planet at the very beginning of creation: *And when thy Lord said to the angels: “I am setting in the earth a viceroy.” They said: “What, wilt Thou set therein one who will do corruption there, and shed blood, while We proclaim Thy praise and call Thee Holy?” He said: “Surely, I know what you know not”* (Q 2:30).

Such fundamental diagnoses of our predicament are seldom articulated in non-Islamic discourse. But the main problem for the Islamic civilization is that when those who examine contemporary issues from within the Islamic tradition, their discourse remains theoretical, utterly disconnected from the ground realities which keep worsening under the impact of the tyrannical expansion

of profane postmodern lifestyles spreading throughout the traditional lands of Islam, even including the restructuring of life in the Makka and Madina, the holiest of all cities, which have now become unrecognizable as Islamic cities save the two sanctuaries. It is this accumulated darkness hovering even in lands where Muslims have traditionally lived for centuries that makes one wonder about the efficacy of articulating anything anymore. Solutions proposed remain bookish ventures; critique follows critique without gaining any traction.

It is obvious that Muslims will not blindly follow Western precedent in such matters as new marriage laws, but the same cannot be said about other (no less crucial) areas. Irreversible changes have already taken place in the production and consumption of food, education, transport, evolution of cities and city planning, destruction of the environment, and the like. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that if current trends continue, the Muslim world will lose all but the most basic elements of Islam and in a few generations, traditional Muslim lifestyles will be found nowhere on earth.

This doomsday scenario has no glimmer of hope save one: the promise built into the era just before the End of Time, the short reign of the Messiah foretold in the three monotheistic faiths. He would indeed set things right one last time. Since his coming is to be preceded by the tyranny of the Dajjāl (the Antichrist, in Christian tradition), can we say that we are already in that era, even though no one has been specifically labeled with his name? One can easily map the present human predicament to these prophecies even though such attempts remain somewhat uncertain because of the specific way in which prophecies describe the events preceding the moment when the “cup of God will be filled”. Yet, one can be sure that at no other time in human history were the signs so manifest as they are now, even though the End has always seemed imminent to God-fearing hearts. The signs endure for those who take heed.

wa’Ilāh al-musta‘ān, wa mā tawfiqī illā bi’Ilāh.



Wuddistān

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