

Reclaiming the Center

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"Your hearts were hardened and became as rocks,
or worse than rocks, with hardness.
For indeed there are rocks out of which rivers gush forth,
and indeed there are rocks which split asunder
so that water flows from them.
And indeed there are rocks which fall down for fear of God.
And God is not unaware of what you do!"
Qur'an, 2 (Al-Baqarah):74

"Let us anatomize them, see what breeds about their hearts.
Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?"
Shakespeare (King Lear, III.vi.77)

Amid the din of voices that has risen up in the wake of the "September 11th attacks" and the "War against Terrorism", there is emerging the sense of a voice that has been lost, a voice that needs to be asserted from amid the cacophony of voices, a voice which arises from "the Center within" and which needs to occupy "the Center without," a voice whose message of compassionate wisdom is more important for us to hear, now, than ever before, above the shrill crossfire of rhetoric that seeks to drown it - a voice, in short, that demands to be heard. In this time of strife, this voice speaks of the existence of a Center that is a sanctuary, a place of peace and stillness, an abode of vision and light.

Looking out from this Center, one perceives with both compassion and sorrow the blinding emotions that fuel flames of hatred and misunderstanding on both sides of the current conflict, leaving in their wake a charnel-house of wanton destruction. It takes an infernal ingenuity to utilize pen-knives or box-cutters to commandeer a plane full of living souls and slam it callously into an occupied office building, and (though a stern response to this evil provocation was no doubt warranted), it takes a cruel insensitivity to "collaterally damage" or displace millions of innocent civilians in the pursuit of "enduring freedom," while arguing that the ends justify the means. By demonizing the enemy, we risk dehumanizing ourselves.

The human mind inclines to simplification and there is within each of us a tendency that invites us to view the current conflict in reductive terms - but we must resist this tendency. The war that is being waged is not a "jihad" between Islam and the West (as one side would have you believe) nor a mission of "infinite justice" (the hubristic tag first selected by the Americans for their military operations - before it was pointed out to the U.S. administration that the appellation would be offensive to the Muslim allies, who regard Allah alone as infinitely just) or "enduring freedom" between the forces of Freedom and Terrorism (as would the other). Instead, the war is better understood as a violent manifestation of the conflict between two reductive mind-sets: secular dogmatism and religious dogmatism - sometimes termed Modernity and Fundamentalism, respectively. It is instructive to consider these viewpoints in relation to the evolution of pre-modern societies.

In this post-modern world, traditional (pre-modern) societies are an anachronism. They are constructed on the basis of a hierarchical order: the Sacerdotium (the spiritual kingdom, or the “kingdom within”, which corresponds to the “Center within” referred to earlier) has dominion over the Regnum (the worldly kingdom, temporal realm of “Caesar”), which in turn has dominion over the Commons (the vassals or subjects; the ruled). In this schema, it is essential for the Temporal Power of Might to be wedded to the Spiritual Authority of Right, for it is only through this union that Justice (a manifestation of Order) will prevail. This schema, premised on an essentially religiously-inspired world-view, can only operate either within a closed society with a commonly accepted religious tradition, or within a civil society premised on metaphysical principles of religious pluralism. Closed societies, however, through the processes of modernization (particularly advances in technology and communication), have given way to globalization, and modern societies open into each other at a pace that is often faster than their ability to accommodate the challenges of diversity. This diversity has not been easy for traditional societies to accommodate, particularly where modernization has been accompanied by a secular ethos.

As societies become secularized, religion becomes privatized, and this creates certain problems. Religions - which are not merely faiths but “ways of life” - will necessarily tend to resist secularization, which is premised on the notion of the privatization of religion. In Islam, for example, there is no opposition between *din* (“Faith” or the sacred dimension) and *dunya* (“World” or the secular dimension). The World cannot elude the sacred embrace of the Divine, which informs it and which it is privileged to represent. However, modernist notions of secular space have tended to compartmentalize and institutionalize, falsely reducing the sacred to “Church” and the secular to “State”. Secular ideologies may notionally approve of constitutions founded on divine trust, and may even provide for freedom of religion, but human governance within secularism excludes divine or religious interference. As such, secular ideologies - which are a hallmark of modernity - operate on the basis of a clear separation between Church and State, forcing religions to privatize, and barring their involvement in matters of human governance. By so doing, they deprive religions of a necessary public dimension in matters such as economic justice, social equity, the regulation of morality, environmental responsibility, and questions of peace and security. To the extent that secular societies make room for private religious expression, particularly through democratic participation in a “civil society” whereby religiously-influenced personal views can be given expression through the ballot box, the likelihood of confrontation between religion and secularism can be minimized. But where such expression is stifled, religion tends to become radicalized and its reaction to secularism takes the form of religious dogmatism, or fundamentalism.

The radicalization of Islam, in certain of its expressions, needs to be understood in this context. There is inherent within the very nature of any religious expression the danger of two reductive tendencies: of excessive formalism and of non-pluralistic exclusivism. These tendencies are heightened when the particular religion feels itself to be under attack. Islamic fundamentalism, in terms of its modern expression (a pre-modern expression also exists, as for instance in the literalism of the Kharijites who opposed Ali ibn Abi Talib’s concession to the rebels at Siffin to arbitrate - a concession which offended the Kharijites’ literalist reading of the Qur’an in which Allah alone could act as judge) can therefore be understood as a reaction to Islam’s confrontation with the forces of modernity. The modern-day Taliban are one among many expressions of this reaction, which goes back in history to at least the early 1700s and the foundations of Wahhabism. With the ascendancy of Western civilization, Islam was confronted by the powerful forces of modernity: the technological, capitalistic and secularist transformations

of society, which brought in their wake a transformation of personal and social values. Many of these values, which are individualistic and fragmentary, are offensive to traditional Muslims: corporate greed, mindless consumerism, concupiscence, the culture of “sex, drugs and rock and roll”, the deterioration of the environment, the dismantling of traditional families, and the general privatization of values. In short, many traditional Muslims have felt threatened by the implications of modernization (though, clearly, the modernist ethos that embraces these seductive values of “the flesh, the world and the devil,” has permeated the Muslim world - as has been made all too evident by recent events). As Muslim societies have globalized, they have become more porous, less impervious to the seductive and pervasive influences of Western culture. Left alone to determine their own response to the forces of modernity, Muslim societies in all likelihood would have had fewer incentives to radicalize. But the interference of Western foreign policy in the affairs of the Muslim world has in many instances undermined the efforts of Muslim modernists to attempt an integration between modernization and traditional Muslim values, and has in fact stoked the fires of fundamentalism.

The widespread bitterness (particularly among Muslims) against certain Western governments must be understood in the context of their foreign policies: the European exploitation of Egypt for economic interests at the time of the creation of the Suez Canal, the subsequent British military occupation of Egypt, and its interference in Egyptian elections on several occasions; British and American policies during the last century, of intervention in the internal affairs of Iran, largely for strategic and economic reasons, which contributed significantly to the polarization within Iranian society; the double-standard of American silence against then ally Saddam Hussein while he was using chemical weapons against the Kurds in Iraq, contrasted with American intervention when its oil interests were affected in Kuwait (the U.S. government characterized its intervention in Kuwait in morally righteous terms, but no such moral indignation prompted its intervention to prevent genocidal atrocities in Rwanda or Bosnia, where American economic interests were not threatened); the forced economic embargo against Iraq, which has merely punished an innocent civilian population by producing over one million deaths and no dislodgment of their tyrannical dictator; the support of non-democratic or unpopular modern-day governments such as those in Egypt and Saudi Arabia; the imposition by Western powers upon Palestinians of the State of Israel and the preferential treatment of that regime by the U.S. government, even in the face of Israel’s condemnation by the United Nations for its oppressive treatment of Palestinians and its contravention of international law; and the disregard for the plight of post-Soviet Afghanistan, following American intervention through the arming of the mujahedeen. In the words of one commentator: “When the United States supports autocratic rulers, its proud assertion of democratic values has at best a hollow ring” (Karen Armstrong). None of this is intended to suggest that all “undemocratic” regimes are bad, nor that the “East” is devoid of blame in producing or tolerating “evil” regimes. The point to be emphasized is merely that certain Western foreign policies (as well as the economic and cultural exploitation of the “developing world” by the forces of corporatism and globalization) have played a significant role in engendering resentment among large numbers of Muslims.

Caught between the frustrating effects of heavy-handed and cynical Western foreign policies, and the tyranny of autocratic governments that muzzle calls for a civil society and for democratic change, many Muslim societies have found the doors of dissent open only within the masjids (mosques) and madrasas (seminaries). In many instances, these environments have become receptive to the proselytizing influence of radical groups, which have reverted to reductive readings of the Qur’an, ahadith and Sunna to support their radicalism. Here, it is important to clarify that much that is done in the name of radical Islam is impeachable by more centrist

interpretations of the religion. The Holy Prophet of Islam admonished: "The time is near in which nothing will remain of Islam but its name, and of the Qur'an but its mere appearance, and the mosques of Muslims will be destitute of knowledge and worship; and the learned men will be the worst people under the heavens; and contention and strife will issue from them, and it will return upon themselves". Not every act that is touted as Islamic is true to the spirit of Islam - even if it emanates from the mouths of those who have long beards and wear pious robes crowned with turbans. (To digress briefly, it is as dangerous for non-Muslims to "profile" Muslims as "terrorists" simply because they have Muslim features, names, attire or lifestyles, as it is for Muslims to reduce faith to emblems of affiliation. The backlash against Muslims in America in the aftermath of the September attacks on the basis of their badges of identity is as myopic as fundamentalism's emphasis on the same external indicia as an indicator of faith. It is this myopic mentality that is unable to look beyond these indicia to perceive underlying nuances, and therefore reduces the conflict to simplistic slogans that conform to the confuted "clash of civilizations" thesis).

It is important, now more than ever, for Muslims to reclaim the Center by articulating the true spirit of their religion. To begin, it is necessary to debunk certain views and images of Islam that are commonly held in the West: the "religion of the sword", the intolerance of other religions, the barbarism of Islamic law, and its oppression of women. These views and images are to some extent a product of a distorted "orientalist" mind-set reinforced by radical elements within Islam.

It is instructive to remember certain facts: the total world population of Muslims is over one billion; of these only about one-fifth are Arab; the largest Muslim states (Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India) are not in the Middle East. Islam is not a monolith; it embraces a wide cultural diversity as well as diverse modes of religious expression. It was once the dominant civilization in the world, creating a bridge between the Ancient world and the Modern West. It has produced some of the greatest rulers, scientists and artists in the history of human civilization. Its influence has largely spread without the compulsion of violence ("there is no compulsion in religion" is a cardinal Qur'anic principle; Q: 2:256), and, with few exceptions, it has a humane record for religious tolerance and pluralism, protecting minorities throughout its history, extending its protection even to those outside the Abrahamic faiths.

The image of the Muslim warrior is particularly in vogue in the modern-day context of radical Islam, but much of the image-making derives from Western views of Muslims dating back to at least the time of the Crusades. It is true that the Holy Prophet of Islam engaged in battles, but it is a historical distortion to represent this compassionate Messenger as a military aggressor. The battles that were fought were undertaken as part of the preservation of the Muslim community in the desperate time of its initial establishment, and the Holy Prophet's preference for mediation and compromise was well-known even within his own lifetime.

The notion of jihad is much misunderstood. Contrary to Western misperceptions, jihad is not one of the Pillars of Islam. In a hadith well-known to Muslims, the Holy Prophet commented after the Battle of Badr: "We have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad" (al-jihad al-akbar), signifying the true sense of jihad as spiritual struggle. "If one considers that the end of a just war is true peace, one will understand the function of the "holy war" (jihad) of the soul: the interior "war" is simply the abolition of another war, that which the earthly passions wage against the immortal soul or pure intellect" (Titus Burckhardt). The notion of "holy war" must thus be understood as "the constant inner war against all that veils man from the Truth and destroys his inner equilibrium" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr). It is the physical, moral, intellectual and spiritual effort

to embody sanctity within oneself and to manifest the sense of the sacred within society. This requires the Muslim to be politically committed to create a just and decent society, and to “struggle in the way of God” to achieve that end. However, violence is inimical to the ethos of Islam, and therefore interpreters of the Qur’anic invitation to jihad have generally been careful to stress that this concept is not intended to sanction aggression. The motive of jihad cannot be anger or any other wanton passion (in a famous episode Ali ibn Abi Talib stopped himself from delivering a lethal blow to his opponent after the opponent had spat at him, because the blow would have been tainted by his anger). Jihad in this sense must be understood as the “sacrilization of combat” (Abdullah Schleifer).

Another misunderstood notion is that of the martyr or shahid. The term shahid is related to the word shahadah. The latter term signifies the Muslim “testament” and is related to the Qur’anic episode in which each human soul, before gaining entry into the world, is asked to bear witness that God is their Lord (Q: 7:172). That testament is inscribed upon the tablet of our primordial nature, or fitra, and each Muslim, or believer, bears witness to it again in the form of the shahadah or Testament of Divine Unity: la ilaha illallah (“There is no deity if not the Supreme Deity”). The term shahid therefore denotes “one who carries this witnessing to a human summit” (Gai Eaton). In the current climate of suicide bombers being recruited by politicized Muslim militants to become martyrs, with the promise of a sensual paradise (understood by the recruits in literal terms, no doubt, rather than in terms of its spiritual symbolism), one has to be careful to distinguish between the martyrdom that represents a “noble death” for the cause of ennobling what is sacred within us all, and that which represents a delusion manipulated by the cynicism of skillful and ruthless political militants. In this connection it is instructive to remember the famous hadith, “The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr”.

Contrary to its fundamentalist expressions, which have received inordinate coverage in the dominant Western media, Islam is a strongly pluralistic religion. Islam itself is conceived of as an expression of the din al-fitra or primordial religion inscribed within the hearts of all men (note the hadith: “Every child is born in the fitra; it is his parents who make of him a Jew or a Christian or a Parsee”), and the Qur’an speaks of mankind as a primordial community or ummah (Q: 2:213) prior to the advent of divine revelations through the different prophets. Each message is an expression of a pre-existing heavenly tablet, the “Mother of Scripture” (Q: 13:39). Religious diversity is acknowledged as an intentional part of God’s design (Q: 5:48). Islam is seen as one among many revelations, the particularity of each of which is accepted (Q: 10:47), and whose messengers are not necessarily limited to those of the Abrahamic faith (Q: 40:78). Salvation too is viewed in pluralistic terms. Thus the Qur’an promises salvation to “whoso believes in God and the Last Day and does righteous deeds” (Q: 2:62), a formula that is not exclusivist but depends only upon faith in spiritual verities and their realization through virtue.

The Qur’an’s social reforms are motivated by a goal of an ethical, egalitarian social order, with strong prescriptions for the protection and welfare of the economically disadvantaged and the politically vulnerable. Muslim laws, as derived from the Qur’an, are best understood in the context of the distinction between the “spirit” and the “letter” of the law. Writers such as Fazlur Rahman have therefore advocated that the Qur’an should be regarded as the “religious source of the law” instead of strictly as “a lawbook”. Its prescriptions for social order and human governance have to be contextualized in a socio-historical background, from which (utilizing the gift of the supra-rational divinely-guided Intellect) the ratio legis or universal principle can be derived. (Spiritual hermeneutics are a delicate matter, especially within Islam which views the Qur’an as the inviolable and sacred word of God. Intellection, in the divinely-inspired, supra-

rational and metaphysical sense, is the interior pole of Revelation. Adamic man, who has been “taught the names of all things” can, by the grace of God and the guidance of spiritual authority, divine the inner sense or spirit of all texts, whether the Self, the Universe or the Scripture.) According to this interpretation, it is not the specific changes relevant to a particular time and place which are of universal application, but the underlying spirit or principle impelling the specific change. It is the spirit of Islam, contained in the centrality of the shahadah and the doctrine of tawhid (“The Doctrine of Divine Unity”: Reality is the integration of transcendence and immanence), that gives rise to its ethos of compassion, subordinating the horizontal social concerns of the Qur’an to the vertical principles that motivate them. Viewed thus, the changes instituted by the Holy Prophet of Islam within the largely barbaric tribal world of seventh century Arabia (the pre-Islamic world of jahiliyah: the time of ignorance) were radical, and the principles that prompted those changes - not necessarily their specific expression - remain relevant today. It is in this context that the Qur’anic treatment of women is best understood.

One of the principal stereotypes of Islam is that of the veiled woman. The veil has come to be understood among Westerners and among many oppressed Muslim women as an emblem of their oppression. But the Qur’an introduced the hijab as a protocol for the nobility and modesty of the Holy Prophet’s wives (Q: 33:53), not as a custom of seclusion - a foreign practice, which was later adopted by Muslim societies. “Veiling and seclusion had as their original intent the protection, honor, and distinction of women” (John L. Esposito). And it is important to remember that modesty is enjoined in the Qur’an on men and women alike (Q: 24:30,31). Despite its current pejorative connotations, veiling was never intended as a condescension towards women, a fact that is recognized by many Muslim women today, who freely choose to wear the veil. “Thus many of the Muslim women who first took the veil saw it as a symbol of power and influence, not as a badge of male oppression... Today when some Muslim women resume their traditional dress, it is not always because they have been brainwashed by a chauvinist religion, but because they find that a return to their own cultural roots is profoundly satisfying. It is often a rejection of the Western imperialist attitude which claims to understand their traditions better than they do themselves” (Karen Armstrong).

Qur’anic passages are often cited as evidence of Islam’s unfairness towards women (for example, “men are a degree higher” than women, a woman’s testimony is worth half that of a man, and women can only inherit one-half of the inheritance of her male sibling); and fundamentalist Muslim societies have relied upon literalist readings of scriptural texts to sanction the control of women. Here, again, one needs to consider the original context of the scripture in order to decipher the intent. Men and women are considered to be created from a “single soul”, and are equal before God in terms of their spiritual responsibilities (Q: 4:124, 40:40). Men are not considered inherently superior to women, though the Qur’an recognizes the privileges of men over women, in general, in terms of wealth or power, for example (Q: 4:34), but these privileges are to be understood in the context of their concomitant responsibilities. However, the differences in gender are not overlooked in favor of the modernist tendency to treat men and women as equal. The Qur’anic view instead stresses the complementarity of gender diversity, without suggesting any inherent inequality between the genders, despite distorted interpretations to the contrary. The genders are differentiated functionally, and though these functions would translate into traditional roles within traditionally structured societies, the scripture is not in its spirit so rigid as to strait-jacket men and women into inflexible roles. Women are recognized as nurturers and are respected for their role (“Paradise lies at the feet of the mothers”, said the Holy Prophet), and men as providers and protectors. It is well recognized that Islam greatly improved the lot of women and enhanced their status in the predominantly

male-dominated Arabian society of the seventh century. In a society which practiced female infanticide and treated women as a sub-species, like slaves, without any legal rights, the reforms that the Holy Prophet introduced were remarkable: the establishment of the legal status of women, the conferring upon them of property and inheritance rights, marriage and dowry rights, and, more than these, the creation of a respect for women and the corresponding responsibilities of men and social institutions towards them. These reforms were in some respects not offered Western women until the nineteenth century, and were truly extraordinary in the context of seventh century Arabia.

It is true that some modern-day societies have chosen, in the name of Islam, to ignore the spirit of these reforms and have reverted to oppressive, even barbaric, interpretations of the scripture in order to regulate women. But their interpretations, formalistic and heartless, do not represent for the vast majority of Muslims the true spirit of Islam. It is dangerous therefore to judge Muslims on the basis of media images that project this marginal, albeit dominant, impression of Islam.

Islam is best judged by what lies at its Center. This Center is metaphorically described in the Qur'an and hadith traditions as the Heart, the sanctuary of the Divine Spirit within Man. Of this Heart it is said by the Holy Prophet in a hadith qudsi (a sacred or divinely-inspired utterance): "My heaven cannot contain Me, nor can My earth, but the Heart of the true believer can contain Me". This is the "Center within", the microcosm, which is in fact the locus of Compassion, both radiating and reintegrating, Rahman and Rahim. From this central vantage point, to which all things are radially connected, a sense of Justice and Order emerges, and in its bosom lies a sanctuary of Peace. From the Eye of the Heart, all things are seen in a sacred light, and Man is ennobled as a creature of divine purpose: as the Divine Trustee, under the Qur'anic doctrine of Amanah (Q: 33:72), the steward of creation, the vicegerant of God, accountable to God, his Origin and his Destination. The aim of Islam is to live in this Center: the inner Equilibrium of "the Center within," and the outer Order of "the Center without." This is the true spirit of the message of the Noble Qur'an - indeed of the scriptures of all the great religious traditions.

How far then have we strayed from this Center! The Qur'an speaks of "diseased" and "hardened" hearts. "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" Metaphysically, creation is a process of solidification, imposing over our hearts a "veil of heedlessness". Yet the cosmic veil is not opaque, but metaphysically transparent to Transcendence. By opening ourselves to Transcendence, we sacrilize ourselves and, by so doing, we sacrilize the world. Reductionism is the denial of Transcendence. The calcification of secular dogmatism and religious dogmatism is a disease that rusts hearts, making them forgetful of the tender compassion (the "gushing river") that lies at their Center. Cut off from this Center, there is no sense of Order, and therefore no hope of Justice; without Justice, of Security; and without Security, of Peace. Those who have the privileges of power or wealth need to use their privileges responsibly, redistributing power and wealth in the name of Compassion and Justice. Those who are confronted with diversity need to recognize the unifying Center through which diverse expressions of Truth can be sublimated. By reclaiming the Center within each of us, these goals can be achieved. This is the promise that lies at the heart of all traditional religions, a promise we each have a mission to honor within ourselves.