

# Interreligious Insight

## July 2005 Edition

### Defining Without Confining: reflections on a prophetic usage of sacred space.

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#### INTRODUCTION

In this article I intend to show that, in traditional Islamic consciousness, to *define* the space of the sacred (the mosque, the *qibla*, etc.) does not *confine* the sacred (wherever ye turn there is the face of God), and thus that the space of the sacred cannot be subject to what we might call 'religious nationalism'. The sacred is both transcendent and immanent, combining both poles of *tanzīh* (incomparability), and *tashbīh* (similarity). At the heart of the sacred lies the paradox that its divine essence is absolutely unknowable; but there is nothing that does not, in its own way, manifest the sacred.

In the first part, I will show how a particularly significant act of the Prophet with regard to the use of the sacred space of his own mosque in Medina serves as an eloquent commentary on Qur'anic verses which explicitly uphold the authenticity and dignity of the religious Other, and how the principle embodied in this act helps to resolve the apparent contradiction between the inclusivist verses and the exclusivist ones. A true universalism is seen to exist on the supra-theological plane, where forms (dogmas, rites) are transcended, not subverted.

In the second part, I hope to demonstrate the strong connection between the demise of this inclusivist orientation towards the sacred and the rise of political extremism in Islam. For Islam to be abused as the pretext for extremism or even terrorism it had first to be reduced from a religion or way of life to an ideology; and before it could be reduced to an ideology it had to be desacralised.

#### SYMBOLIC ACTION OF THE PROPHET

The incident with which I begin is reported in nearly all the primary sources on the Prophet's life, and there is no dispute about its historical veracity.<sup>1</sup> In the ninth year after the Hijra (631), a prominent Christian delegation from Najrān, an important centre of Christianity in the Yemen, came to engage the Prophet in theological debate in Medina. The main point of contention was the nature of Christ: was he one of the messengers of God or the unique Son of God? What is of importance for our purposes is not the disagreements voiced, but the fact that when these Christians requested to leave the city to perform their liturgy, the Prophet invited them to accomplish their rites in his own mosque. According to Ibn Ishaq, who gives the standard account of this remarkable event, the Christians in question were Malaki, that is, they performed the Byzantine Christian rites. This means that they were enacting the Eucharistic rites which incorporated the fully-developed trinitarian theology of the Orthodox councils, emphasising the definitive creed of the divine sonship of Christ – doctrines explicitly criticised in the Qur'an. Nonetheless, the Prophet allowed the Christians to accomplish their mass and their rites in his own mosque. One observes here a perfect example of how disagreement on the plane of dogma can co-

exist with a deep respect on the superior plane of religious devotion, that is, on the plane of sacred space, which is the exclusive property of no one religion.

This act of the Prophet should not be seen in isolation but as one in a series of such symbolic acts which, more powerfully than words, indicate the sanctity of the religions that preceded Islam. Another such act was the protection by the Prophet of the icon of the Virgin and Child in the Ka'ba. He instructed all idols within the holy house to be destroyed, but, according to at least two early historians, Waqidi and Azraqi, he himself protected this icon, not allowing it to be destroyed.<sup>2</sup> Also of relevance here is the charter, said to be sealed by the prophet himself, granting protection to the monastery of St Catherine in Sinai. The charter states that wherever monks or hermits are to be found:

on any mountain, hill, village, or other habitable place, on the sea or in the deserts or in any convent, church or house of prayer, I shall be watching over them as their protector, with all my soul, together with all my umma; because they [the monks and hermits] are a part of my own people, and part of those protected by me.<sup>3</sup>

Also, most significantly, the charter makes it incumbent on the Muslims not only to protect the monks, but also, in regard to Christians generally, to “consolidate their worship at Church”.

Even if the historicity of these last two acts is questioned, the well-attested invitation by the Prophet to the Najrani Christians to pray in his mosque is disputed by none in the tradition, and this lends considerable plausibility to the Prophet's charter and to his protection of the icon. In like manner, the well documented acts of tolerance by Muslims in relation to believers of different religious traditions make up an impressive record of religious tolerance at a time when standards of such tolerance were lamentable.<sup>4</sup> This record of tolerance must be seen as firmly rooted in the prophetic Sunna, which in turn derives from and is a commentary upon, a particularly strong Qur'anic insistence on the rights of all believers, irrespective of their religious denomination.

#### ONE RELIGION, DIFFERENT RITES

It is important at this point to cite some of the key verses of the Qur'an which clearly reveal the illogicality and vanity of religious chauvinism. Salvation is the consummation, through grace, of a fundamental spiritual orientation; it is not the automatic reward granted for belonging to one community rather than another.

Perhaps the most important of all the proof-texts for upholding this claim is:

Truly those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans – whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds – surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve. (II: 62).<sup>5</sup>

Muhammad Asad, one of the most highly respected translators of the Qur'an, asserts that the word *Islam* itself would have been understood by the hearers of the word at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an in terms of its universal, and not communal, meaning. In other words, the religion bestowed upon the Prophet Muhammad was the very same religion which was bestowed upon his predecessors:

He hath ordained for you of religion that which He commended unto Noah, and that which We reveal to thee [Muhammad], and that which We commended unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying: Establish the religion, and be not divided therein ... (XLII: 13)

The essence of religion is one and the same, but its forms vary. The reason for this diversity is succinctly given in this verse:

For each We have appointed from you a Law and a Way. Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But that He might try you by that which He hath given you [He hath made you as you are]. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will inform you of that wherein ye differed. (V: 48)

The import of this verse is confirmed by this one:

Unto each community We have given sacred rites (*mansakan*) which they are to perform; so let them not dispute with thee about the matter, but summon them unto thy Lord. (XXII: 67)

On the one hand, there are different rites revealed for different religions; but on the other, there is no difference in the essence of the prophetic message. Muslims are told in the Qur'an in various places not to "distinguish between" any of God's messengers.

And yet, the Qur'an also contains severe condemnations of such doctrines as the sonship of Christ and other deviations of the People of the Book. It is thus not surprising that upholders of the exoteric viewpoint refer to verse 3:85, as superseding earlier ones such as 2:62, which appears to promise salvation to Christians Jews and Sabians:

And whoso seeketh a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the Hereafter. (III: 85)

Now whereas this last sentence is understood, from a theological point of view, as upholding the exclusive validity of Islam, defined as the religion revealed to God's last Prophet, it can also be seen as confirming the intrinsic validity of all the revelations brought by all the prophets mentioned in the previous verse, 3:84, prophets such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus, etc. One thus finds in the Qur'anic discourse both censure of the errors of the religious Other and affirmation of the essence of the revelations granted to the Other – both theological differentiation and a supra-theological unification.

## RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM AS *SHIRK*

This exegetical interpretation is not given on the basis of mere speculation; rather, it is strongly corroborated and justified by the Prophet's action in his mosque in Medina. Thus we see the Prophet disagreeing with certain aspects of Christian belief even while affirming their fundamental orientation towards the sacred essence of their faith which infinitely transcends the relativities of conceptual belief and formal rites. That which unites the believers is greater than that which divides them; infinitely greater, one might say, for: *Our god and your god is one God*. It is this self-same God that is invoked in churches and synagogues as well as in mosques.

On this view of the sacred, divine guidance was restricted to no one community: being transcendent in its supra-manifest essence, the scope of its self-manifestation is perforce universal. The attempt to nationalise or appropriate the sacred is excluded in the very measure that its essence is conceived as transcendent. Religious nationalism, then, should be seen as a form of *shirk*, the reduction of the Absolute to the level of relative forms. On this level, *tawhīd* strictly implies religious universality, which is clearly stressed in the following verses:

For every community (*umma*) there is a Messenger. (X: 47)

Verily We sent Messengers before thee; among them are those about whom We have told thee, and those about whom We have not told thee. (XL: 78)

Naught is said unto thee [Muhammad] but what was said unto the Messengers before thee. (XLI: 43)

The Qur'an is categorical in its rejection of religious nationalism. If we look, for example, at the Qur'anic riposte that follows the exclusivist claims of the People of the Book:

And they say: None entereth paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian. These are their own desires. Say: Bring your proof if ye are truthful.

Nay, but whosoever submitteth his purpose to God, and he is virtuous, his reward is with his Lord. No fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve. (II: 111-112)

The reply given to the claim of the Jews and the Christians comes as a concrete rebuttal not just of a particular chauvinistic claim, but of that whole style of discourse. The verse does not contradict the exclusivist claims of the Jews and the Christians with an exclusivism of its own, that is, with a claim that only "Muslims", in the narrow sense, go to Paradise. On the contrary, salvation is universalised: paradisaic reward is promised those who have submitted wholeheartedly to God and are intrinsically virtuous. Faithful submission and virtue – these are the two indispensable human requisites for salvation, together with the foundation and consummation of both, namely the mercy of God. Thus, the verse does not respond to exclusivist or nationalistic claims by making an equally illogical exclusivist claim of its own: it is the submission of one's being to God and the consequent practice of virtue that is salvific.

The logic of the Qur'anic verses clearly indicates that one form of religious prejudice, or chauvinism, is not to be replaced with another form of the same, but with an objective, unprejudiced recognition of the inexorable and universal law of divine justice. This universal law is expressed with the utmost clarity in the following two verses from the Sūra al-Nisā':

And whoso doeth good works, whether male or female, and is a believer, such will enter paradise, and will not be wronged the dint of a date-stone.

Who is better in religion than he who submitteth his purpose to God, while being virtuous, and following the religious community of Abraham the unswervingly devout? ... (IV: 124-125)

In these four verses, taken together as a whole (IV: 122-125), the divine "promise" of salvation is starkly contrasted with confessional "desires": on the one hand, there is an objective and universal criterion of wholehearted submission to God, and, on the other, a subjective and particularistic criterion of formal attachment to a specific community.

## CONTRASTING SUFISM & SALAFISM

Sacred space on earth is a symbol of metaphysical reality, beyond the formalisms of theology. Such sacred space as monasteries, churches and synagogues are all places wherein God's name is invoked. Now this traditional conception of the sacred led inevitably to the sanctity of all human life: to kill one soul is to kill all humanity, as the Qur'an asserts. This legal assertion of the inviolability of each human soul dovetails with the spiritual vision of the soul as itself constituting the temple of God, the true locus of worship: it is not sacrificed meat or blood that reaches God, the Qur'an says, but "your piety" (22:37). Such a conception of the universality of the sacred underlay Sufism, which came to dominate the whole of inner life in Islam from the third Islamic

century onwards, and it also deeply affected juristic and theological dimensions of traditional Islam.

While it was not only the Sufis who came to manifest this spiritual inclusivism, it is true that those most steeped in Sufism were the ones most sensitive to the sanctity of human life. Further, it is becoming increasingly obvious, to most intelligent observers of the Muslim world, that those most inclined to violence are members of deviant offshoots of various shades of Salafism – those very groups most hostile both to Sufism and to many of the values held most sacred within the spiritual tradition of Islam.<sup>6</sup>

Now one key component of the Salafi mentality is precisely a disfigurement or sundering of the sacred. Within this mentality, the sacredness of religion was doubly reduced: the dimension of transcendent remoteness, of *tanzīh* was stressed to the exclusion of that of intimate proximity, immanence or *tashbīh*; and the sacredness of other traditions was ignored if not denied.

The chief enemy of the Salafis was *shirk*, as they reformulated it, their wrath being directed against all forms of sanctity – of the sacred as manifested in persons, art, architecture, and so on. Such vehement opposition to the spiritual values of the tradition means a desacralisation of religion at its core; and this, inevitably, goes hand in hand with a rejection of the sacredness of other traditions. The political vilification of the religious Other is all the more easily accomplished in a climate where the integrity of the sacred within one's own tradition has already been undermined.

#### AFGHANI & THE REDUCTION OF ISLAM TO TERRITORY

Earlier we saw how the Qur'anic conception of the umma was expandable, encompassing all believers whatever their religion. By contrast, the Salafī conception of the umma was rigidly tied to the *dār al-Islām*. One of the definitive moments in the rise of the Salafi movement, and the decline of the sacred within modernist Islam, was the effort of Jamal al-Din Afghani, founding father one might say of Salafi reformism, to portray Islam as an essentially “territorial” entity. His pan-Islamism was an ideological construct that mimicked the nationalist ideologies guiding the burgeoning nation-states of Europe in their imperialist assault on *Dār al-Islām*. In Afghani's response, Islam as a religion became subordinated to the needs of a territorially defined entity, one which was in competition with other similarly defined entities. Afghani's cynical view of Islam is well known, thanks to the researches of Nikki Keddie,<sup>7</sup> and the distant results of this cynicism are painfully apparent today. He and his followers managed to persuade large numbers of politically influential Muslims that the need to modernise and catch up with the West was predicated on the transformation of the *Dār al-Islām*; and that part of this transformation required the reconceptualising of the *Dār al-Islām*. In the words of Professor Schleifer, this meant reducing it from an essentially juridical category determining legal relations between Muslims and non-Muslims “to a territorial conception of Islam equivalent to modern western nationalism”.<sup>8</sup>

Henceforth, Islam was conceived as the means to an end – the territorially defined political *umma*. This replaced the traditional sense of the *umma* being a supra-territorial category embracing the community of Muslims, with the universal Qur'anic resonances of this community, extending to all believers and to all of humanity. The *umma* defined, but did not confine. In the new Salafī conception, Islam was one value among others to be used for the consolidation of a territorial entity. This inversion of priorities can be grasped in hindsight as the first step on a slippery slope that has led to the perversions of our times: Islam, far from governing the actions of the terrorists, is distorted beyond recognition by their palpably ideological intentions.

The violence being perpetrated today in the name of Islamic formalism is the result of a long process of desacralisation within the tradition. This formalism – the denial of the sacred, transcending at the same time as infusing religious forms – is another aspect of the *shirk* we referred to earlier as religious nationalism. Those who have resorted to violence in the name of the form of Islam can only do so on the prior basis of having already reduced its sacred essence to a religious form. Such a reduction impoverishes all forms; for, deprived of the vivifying sap of their sacred roots, forms either wither away or else collapse in on themselves in violent self-destruction. Enter the suicide bomber.

## REVERENCE FOR UNIVERSAL SACREDNESS

My argument so far has been to point out the connection between insensitivity to the sacred within one's own tradition and the absence of respect towards the religious Other. By way of conclusion, I would like to refer to the converse of this tragic picture: the positive relationship between a sense of the sacred in one's own tradition and the veneration of the religious Other. To take just one of many figures who can be said to epitomise this relationship, let us have a glance at the nineteenth century Sufi master and leader of the Algerian resistance to French colonialism, the Emir Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri.

After he was defeated and in exile in Damascus, the Emir spent his time praying and teaching. Civil war broke out between the Druzes and the Christians in Lebanon, in 1860, and when the Emir heard that there were signs of an impending attack on the Christians of Damascus, he wrote letters to all the Druze shaykhs, requesting them not to “make offensive movements against a place with the inhabitants of which you have never before been at enmity”.

The Emir's letters proved to be of no avail. When the Druzes were approaching the Christian quarters of the city, the Emir confronted them, urging them to observe the rules of religion and of human justice.

“What,” they shouted, “you, the great slayer of Christians, are you come out to prevent us from slaying them in our turn? Away!”

“If I slew the Christians,” he shouted in reply, “it was ever in accordance with our law – the Christians who had declared war against me, and were arrayed in arms against our faith.”<sup>9</sup>

This had no effect upon the mob. In the end, the Emir and his small band of followers sought out the terrified Christians, giving them refuge, first in his own home, and then, as the numbers grew, in the citadel. It is estimated that no less than fifteen thousand Christians were saved by the Emir in this action; and it is important to note that in this number were included all the ambassadors and consuls of the European powers. As Churchill prosaically puts it:

All the representatives of the Christian powers then residing in Damascus, without one single exception, had owed their lives to him. Strange and unparalleled destiny! An Arab had thrown his guardian aegis over the outraged majesty of Europe. A descendant of the Prophet had sheltered and protected the Spouse of Christ.<sup>10</sup>

The Emir was exceptional but by no means unique. One can multiply such examples of chivalric heroes combining the highest expression of ethical ideals with the deepest assimilation of the sacred, and cite such figures as Imam Shamil of Dagestan, Omar Mukhtar in Libya, the Mahdi in Sudan, Osman dan Fodio in Nigeria. But what we have said should suffice to make the point: the universal spirit proper to the Qur'anic discourse did not remain a dead letter. It enlivened and deepened the sense of the sacred which dominated the lives of traditional Muslims keen to integrate all of the dimensions of the Prophet's Sunna, and not just its formal aspects. Since it is

the Sufis who have most deeply cultivated the sense of the sacred in Islam, and are the custodians of this universal dimension of Islam – transcending and embracing Islam itself – to militate against the Sufis is to violate the very heart and soul of Islam as a living spiritual tradition, and to render it susceptible to the worst kind of ideological distortions.

The Qur'an describes itself as a guardian or protector (*muhaymin*) in relation to all previous revelations. At a time when violent exclusivism rather than universal inclusivism seems to characterise Islam, it has never been more important to revive the sense of the sacred within the tradition; and to show that reverence for the sacred within other traditions is deeply rooted in the Qur'anic revelation itself, and is an integral part of the Sunna of the Prophet. Reverence for the sacred, wherever it is to be found, is reverence for the signs (*āyāt*) which reveal something of the divine mystery:

We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in their own souls until it be clear to them that He is the Truth. (XLI: 53)

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A. Guillaume (Tr.) *The Life of Muhammad – A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford, 1968), pp.270-277; see also Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Cambridge, 1984), pp.324-325.

<sup>2</sup> As cited by Lings, p.300. It is also said that another painting, probably depicting Abraham, was not destroyed.

<sup>3</sup> As viewed by this writer at St. Catherine's monastery, Sinai.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Thomas Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam* (London, 1935).

<sup>5</sup> The identity of the Sabeans is somewhat contested in the sources, but those 'Sabeans' with whom the Muslims came into contact historically constituted a community centred in Harrān, which claimed to trace its origin back to the Prophet Enoch (in Islamic terms, Idrīs), 'who is also regarded in the Islamic world as the founder of the sciences of the heavens and of philosophy, and who is identified by some with Hermes Trismegistus. The Sabaeans possessed a remarkable knowledge of astronomy, astrology and mathematics; their doctrines were in many respects similar to those of the Pythagoreans.' S.H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 31. See also J.D. McAuliffe, 'Exegetical Identification of the Sābi'ūn', in *The Muslim World*, vol. 72, 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Although many excellent scholars have taken pains to point out that Salafism must not be equated with violence, *grosso modo*, it is nonetheless undeniable that Salafism provided the soil within which these violent offshoots could sprout and flourish. See, for example: John Esposito, *Unholy War in Islam*; Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam*; Khalid Abou El-Fadl, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*; Algar, *Wahhabism*; see also Vincenzo Olivetti, *Terror's Source*; and the fine collection of essays edited by Joseph Lumbard, *Islam, Fundamentalism and the Betrayal of Tradition*.

<sup>7</sup> "It is clear that wherever it becomes established, this religion tried to stifle the sciences and it was marvellously served in its designs by despotism." (Reply to Renan, translated by N. Keddie in *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din 'al-Afghani'* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968), 183, 187.

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<sup>8</sup> S.A. Schleifer, 'Jihad: Modernist Apologists, Modern Apologetics', in *Islamic Quarterly*, vol. 28, no.1, 1984, pp.38-39.

<sup>9</sup> Churchill, *The Life of Abdel Kader* (London, 1867), p.314.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.318.