



Trajectories

Alternative futures for Muslims: challenges to linear and cyclical macrohistory

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Available online 22 August 2005

When the future of Muslims is discussed [4], whether by mullah, political leader, or believer, most tend to resort to the historical memory of the time of the rightly guided caliphs, when the Prophet's principles of moral leadership and *shura* (deep consultation with the believers) were practiced.

It is this past—a living prophet with a geographically bounded state—that remains the vision of the future for many Muslims. In this sense, one can paradoxically argue that Christians were more fortunate that Jesus did not succeed (during his time) in creating a Christian state [1]. The fact that a utopian Christian state never existed allowed room for ideas of future state systems, a notion of progress, and a movement toward a better future. Of course, the religious dimension of this has become the search for the savior—the return of Christ. But by and large, it has been capital coupled with technology in the context of freedom of the individual that has been the driving force in the West.

For Muslims, the past attainment of a perfect or near perfect Islamic state and society may not have been the blessing it is often assumed to have been. Social and political 'progress' has focused on returning to the ideal-perfect era. As well, social and technological innovations have become limited as many Muslims have tended to make the fundamental error of 'misplaced concretism'. That is, the details of the earlier epoch are re-engineered—the strong warrior male leader, the *hijab* for women, the battle of good and evil, tribal politics, and other particulars of 7th century life. This period is taken out of history and decontextualized. Instead of focusing on a productive future, concrete dimensions of the past are re-imagined. They are brought back and used as tools for social

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¹ I would like to thank Bob Adams, Lewis Grow and Ivana Milojevic for extensive comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

control, particularly against the most vulnerable. Traditionally this memory of an idealized past was used for nation-building, but now it is used as part of the larger quest to create a modern Khalifate—an integrated empire [5].

1. Divided Islam, divided world

While the first future is driven by the desire to return to tradition, the next plausible future is based on the playing out of various contradictions—these include civilization and nation, and civilizations [6] in conflict.

The first tension is between Islam as a civilization and Islam within the nation-state; that is, one cannot have, by definition, an Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Islam must be free of all national shackles. It is this contradiction that worries leaders throughout the Islamic world—in a true Islamic Khalifate they would no longer have power. This is the same fear that American leaders have of the United Nations. Super-ordinate power is a threat to local power, even if it is more appropriate for economies of scale, policy implementation, the environmental challenges facing the planet, and for global peace keeping.

Can a ‘Pan-Islam’ be created, or will the tensions between civilization and nation-state always exist? Or is it possible that there is a way out of this dichotomy? The last scenario at the conclusion of this essay, that of the virtuous spiral, explores a way out.

The second tension is between Islam as a civilization in conflict (and for many historical periods in harmony) with the Judea-Christian world. By most measures, the Islamic world falls short on most economic and social indicators [7]. Yet, Muslims and Westerners offer very different explanations for these shortfalls. From the Western perspective, the Islamic world has failed to modernize, secularize, and innovate. Nations are like individuals, and Muslims have not followed the dictates of Adam Smith et al. The Islamic response, however, is focused less on internal issues and more on external ones—principally, how the West has intervened in the Islamic world’s natural development. From this perspective, colonialism has created an economic and social straitjacket, reducing the pathways possible, often with violent results. Thus, the grand and often polemical calls for justice from the Islamic world. But the shadow dimension of this broad definition of justice (the righting of endless historical structural wrongs) is conspiracy. In the minds of some, there are always malevolent actors from evil civilizations at play. For many, this is what explains the decline of Muslims. Not just amoral economic patterns but actors actively plotting the decline of Islam (since it represents the fundamental threat to the Western world, similar to communism in the 20th century). And there are collaborators within as well—the overly westernized Muslims, women and corrupt leaders (and the less than true believers).

The future of Islam cannot be divorced from that of the rest of the world. If the world remains unfair in Islamic eyes—war on Iraq but not on other violators of human rights, on other despots in Russia or China as examples—then the sense of injustice and powerlessness remain. Moreover, as C. Inayatullah of the Council of Social Sciences in Pakistan argues, this injustice serves as a vehicle to unite Muslims.

With the assumption that the current world order based on culture of conflict, violence and war persist, Muslims will act within it and respond to its violent

aspects with greater violence. [In this future], Muslims will become more fundamentalist and develop greater unity among them to face the rest of the world and fight their battle under the banner of orthodox Islam [the past-based future] [8].

This second alternative future does not bode well for Muslims or the rest of the world. It too ends up focusing on the past—idealized perfection and historical injustices on one side, and blindness to cultural hegemony on the other.

2. The linear ascent

The third potential course for Islam is the linear trajectory. Islam, with fits and convolutions, and minor reversals, will follow the Western trajectory. After all, Muslims like Christians and Jews are the children of Abraham. Islam's temporal future is predictable. Muslims will emerge from the medieval era and enter a modernist one. At the level of the nation-state, Turkey or Malaysia serve as models of the likely future. Of course, there will be Iranian-style backslides, but eventually the power of the ayatollahs will diminish. This is the American vision—that Jeffersonian democracy along with its invisible hand will triumph, individual human rights will be recognized as universal, and all cultures will eventually discover what is authentically good for them. The European version is similar, but based more on enforceable global institutional regulatory regimes.

The Islamic world will thus leave its medieval paradigm behind and join the European enlightenment (or create its own similar version). Just as the West went from ancient to classical to feudal to modern and now is entering a period of unlimited choice and the boundary-lessness of postmodernism (challenging stable notions of truth, nature, reality and self through robotics, genetics, space travel, feminism, multiculturalism), the Islamic world will also leave the feudal and enter the modern. The current crises, seen from a long-term macroview, are minor reactions to this predestined trajectory [9].

However, seen with far less of a grand vision, the march into a linear shared global future continues to have major setbacks. First is despotism within the Islamic world, with regular arrests of dissidents. Second are the global processed and events implicated with the events of 9/11. Third has been the continued violence in Palestine/Israel [10]. Fourth, are the divisions of class and gender, and the urban patterns of poverty, alienation and disempowerment found in the Islamic world. Fifth is definitional power. Who owns the means of knowledge, the right to define, is at the heart of the battle within Islam, and indeed, the world. And it remains the West, particularly the USA, that is the defining agent

Thus, the linear trajectory is far more difficult when there can be only one 'king of the hill'.

A fourth future is the replacement of not only the King of the Hill but the verticality implied in this metaphor. Instead of linearity, the shape of the future may be a virtuous spiral.

3. A virtuous spiral?

This recovery of the past in the context of future-oriented progress—the virtuous spiral—becomes the final scenario. This future is the most hopeful for Islam and the rest of the world. In this alternative trajectory, after a brief foray into postmodernism—endless consumer choices but no ground of reality—a new global ethics may emerge. This is a soft, multicultural Islam engaged in dialogue with the West and East Asia, confident of its dignity, creating an alternative science like that imagined by leaders such as Anwar Ibrahim [2]. Many of Islam's ideas—environmental protection, concern for poverty, Islamic economics, Islamic science (far less cruel to animals, focused on research on the issues of poor and the needy, not just on the issues of the rich) will become part of the global agenda.

Islam's spiritual history, far less challenged by modernity—coming after the West's entry into it—will be far less problematic (secularism will no longer be the benchmark of the good society) and will help in the creation of a post-postmodern era, a post-scarcity, spiritually balanced society with deep sustainability [11]. This is progress with history, an alternative modernity that offers multiple trajectories leading to sustainable development. To create this future a creative minority is needed. The current hijacking of Islam is the shadow response to the paucity of a creative minority. The creative minority offers a new image of the future and practices it. Groups in the USA (Progressive Muslims) and in the UK are working on this and, hopefully, this can become part of a reformed Islam. Indeed, this was a desired image of the future at an international meeting of Muslim scholars [12].

Five points were fundamental [3]:

An alternative economics to world capitalism

Cooperation between the genders based on dignity and fairness

Self-reliant ecological communities

Use of advanced technologies to link these communities

A world governance system that is fair, just, representational and guided by wise leadership

This virtuous spiral model, using aspects of the past to invent an alternative future, is something to be aspired to. The pivotal here, as Zia Sardar argues, is that a reformed Islam can not only transform Muslim society and Islamic thought, it can also provide a genuine alternative to the dominant mode of doing things globally [13].

4. A dream?

Can Muslims create a new future? Do they have a choice? Can a creative minority envision it? If not, I fear a civilizational, national and local bloodbath which will only create calls for more justice, Israel–Palestine writ large on the world. While many Muslims hope that demography is destiny (and some in the West fear this) [14]—Muslim birthrates continue upwards, with some forecasters even predicting that a majority of US Marines

will be Muslim by the end of this century [15]—numbers without qualitative change only lead to even grander decline.

I dream of the virtuous spiral vision of the future. Transformed Muslims and a transformed West, beyond the uni- and the multi- to a transcultural. This future is certainly not probable, but it is still possible [16]. And while it is a dream for now, is there really any choice?

References

- [1] See A. El-Affendi, *Who Needs an Islamic State*, Grey Seal Books, London, 1991. p. 37.
- [2] See special issue of *Futures*. A. Ibrahim, *The Ummah and Tomorrow's World Futures*, 23(3)302–310; Also see: A. Ibrahim, *The Asian Renaissance*, Time Books, Singapore, 1996.
- [3] S. Inayatullah, *Leaders envision the future of the Islamic Ummah*, *World Futures Studies Federation Bulletin* 1996, Coverage; See S. Inayatullah, *Futures visions of Southeast Asia: some early warning signals*, *Futures* 27 (6) (1995) 681–688.
- [4] Here seeing the world within the lens of Islam, that is, Islam is eternal and thus not open to discussion on its future, but Muslims, their faith, their behavior, can be analysed, openly discussed.
- [5] In this, both neo-conservatives and the majority of Muslims focus on Empire. The former imagines a USA empire, while Muslims imagine an Islamic empire.
- [6] This piece is fraught with the problems of essentialism: civilizations, nations, and even terms such as Muslims and Christians can be problematic. Identity is not merely given but made in context: whether an archetypal 'civilizational context', or a local identity context (one gains an identity through interaction with another). However, civilizations too can challenge post-structural constructivism, asserting that identity is given and notions of choice privilege certain epistemological perspectives. Finally civilizations are lived; defining them freezes them.
- [7] UNDP Human Development Indicators (created by the Pakistani muslim Mahbub al Haq) is the best report on this, <http://hdr.undp.org/>
- [8] Email, April 5, 2004. 'Dr Inayatullah' uinayat@apollo.net.pk
- [9] For more on this, see 'Islamic Responses to Emerging Scientific, Technological and Epistemological Transformations', *Social Epistemologies* 10(3/4) (1996) 331–349; and earlier in *Islamic Thought and Scientific Creativity* 6(2) (1995) 47–68. Also: 'Global Transformations', *Development* 40(2) (1997) 31–37.
- [10] Justified or not justified (Kashmir, Chechnya).
- [11] See www.islamicconcern.com/fatwas.asp for a site on Islam and vegetarianism.
- [12] Organization of Islamic Conference, www.oic-oci.org/
- [13] Email, April 2, 2004. Ziauddin Sardar ziauddin.sardar@btoopenworld.com. See S. Inayatullah, G. Boxwell, *Islam, postmodernism and other futures: a Zia Sardar reader*, Polity Press, London, 2003.
- [14] Recent headlines of Welsh actor, John Rhys-Davies, fearing that the demographic rise of Muslims will lead to a catastrophe for Western civilization, are indicators of much more to come. However, a voice of sanity has prevailed in this discussion. In response to Rhy-Davies comments of Muslim growth in Holland, were the comments Chief executive of the All Wales Ethnic Minority Association (Awema) Naz Malik. He said: 'I do not know why he has said these things. If 50 per cent of people in Holland under 18 are Muslims in 16 years time, so what? In Britain the fastest growing race is mixed race, people of dual heritage. It is a cause for great celebration that our cultures are mixed'. We live in a global society—we celebrate what is good in cultures and challenge what is bad in civilisations, http://icwales.icnetwork.co.uk/0100news/0200wales/content_objectid=13830081_method=full_siteid=50082_page=1_headline=-Welsh-star-in-race-row-name_page.html. Accessed August 5, 2004. But this appears to be a lone voice. For a site taking a strong anti-multiculturalism view, see http://www.grecoreport.com/lord_of_the_rings_actor_decries.htm
- [15] Ayeda Husain Naqvi writes in 'The Rise of the Muslim Marine' (*NewsLine*, July 1996, 75–77) that while hate crimes against Muslims rise all over the world, surprisingly the US military is one of the safest places to be a Muslim. Indeed, Qasem Ali Uda forecasts that in 20 years, 25% of all US marines will be Muslim.

Given the incredible influence that former military personnel have on US policies (i.e. a look at Who's Who in America shows that military background and law school education are the two common denominators on the resumes of America's most influential people), inclusion is the wisest policy. The data is far from certain though. Todd Johnson, in his article, 'Religious Projections for the next 200 Years' along with scenarios titled 'non-religious growth' and Asians opt for secularization while certainly having one scenario as 'Muslim revival'. Indeed, with postmodernism on the rise, individuals could choose alternative identities, being far less focused on the traditional, like father, like son. i.e. religion becomes one choice among many. (http://www.wnrf.org/cms/print_next200.shtml).

- [16] For an excellent articulation of this, see Johan Galtung, Globalization for Peace and Development, www.transcend.org, August 2004.