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Aims & Scope

The Journal of Islamic Perspective is a peer reviewed publication of the Institute for Critical Social Theory, and aims to create a dialogue between intellectuals, thinkers and writers from the Islamic World and academics, intellectuals, thinkers and writers from other parts of the Globe. Issues in the context of Culture, Islamic Thoughts & Civilizations, and other relevant areas of social sciences, humanities and cultural studies are of interest and we hope to create a global platform to deepen and develop these issues in the frame of a Critical Perspective. Our motto is homo sum; humani nihil a me alienum puto. Contributions to Islamic Perspective do not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial board or the Center for Humanities and Sociological Studies. The mailing address of the journal is:

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Dialectics of Religious Fanaticism: A Sketch

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Abstract

In discussing the issue of whether religion is emancipatory or repressive, we enter into a long-standing debate, complete with its fundamentalists on both sides, as well as those who stand uncomfortably in the middle, living with the ambiguity of religion's history. The Frankfurt School, within which I ground my own critical theory of religion, is one of such schools of thought that takes a dialectical approach to religion (Byrd, 2020). In its brutal honesty, it identified, elevates, and reminds us of what G.W.F. Hegel called the "slaughterbench of history" – the criminal history of oppression, domination, genocide, rape, torture, colonialism, imperialism – which so often occurred, and continues to do so, in the name of religion and/or a divine being. It reminds us that all religious traditions have a criminal history to which they can neither deny, nor are they willing to fully admit. On the other hand, the Frankfurt School identifies, elevates, and reminds us of the emancipatory role religion has played in the history of mankind. The "totally other" than the horror and terror of what-is-the-case, has motivated many individuals, groups, and movements to transcend the conditions of their historical cages in efforts to create a society worthy of human dignity. Whether the particularities of faith are believable, provable, or ultimately real, they have in some cases brought about the emergence of better societies, or at minimum, have given the faithful a vision of what the world *ought* to look like, beyond unnecessary suffering, indignity, and debasement, which is the state of this-world. With their dialectical analysis of religion, the Frankfurt School, especially Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, and

Walter Benjamin, stands closer to Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel than to Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, or Sigmund Freud, the latter of which argued for abstract negations of religion, as opposed to a determinate negation (*Aufhaben*) (Byrd, 2020). But what about religious fanaticism? Are we not to think of religious fanaticism as always being negative, destructive, and obscurantist, especially in a world that is increasingly becoming more and more secularized? Would a dialectical approach to religious fanaticism also discover an "emancipatory" form of fanaticism? In this short essay, I will explore the contested nature of religious fanaticism and religious fanatics, in an attempt to answer these questions. In doing so, I will offer up a preliminary distinction between what we can conceive as an emancipatory form of fanaticism and a form of fanaticism that is aimed at domination. In an age wherein religion is by-in-large neutralized, i.e., a social phenomenon with very little social force, it is the emergence and "event" of the religious fanatic that draws our attention to the destructiveness and possible constructiveness of religion.

What follows is a mere sketch and should not be taken as a definitive analysis of fanaticism. There is a lot of work to do on the subject, especially in light of the way fanaticism is understood to be universally and inescapably negative within our modern conditions – an understanding that I think is deficient.

Key Words: Religious Fanaticism, Ego-Bound, Ego-Submissive, fanatic.

What is Fanaticism?

The world "fanaticism" is derived from the Latin word *fanum,* or "temple." "Fanaticus" in Latin means "of a temple," and that which is "inspired by a god." In the 16th century, it was deployed to denote a form of demon or god possession, which the individual loses their autonomy to an invading force, which has taken control over their mind and/or body. Within a secular context, wherein a demonic possession is no longer a legitimate claim, fanaticism is used to denote those who appear to be taken over by some mysterious force, leading to irrational actions that are determined by a level of confidence, resoluteness, and commitment that goes beyond the bounds of reason. Thus, the condition of being a "fanatic" renders an individual and/or group the ability and/or desire to step outside of normality of a given society, to transcend its civilizational values, ideals, and prohibitions, and to act in ways that would otherwise appear criminal, irrational, and destructive. The

fanatic cares little for convention, Indeed, adherence to social conventions is a mark of the non-virtuous from the fanatic's perspective, those who have yet to see the reality of what the fanatic sees clearly. As such, the fanatic, overcome by their utmost concern, separates himself from the conventional, as he attempts to actualize his goals.

Whereas the term "fanaticism" or "fanatic" was designed solely for the realm of the sacred in its early usage, in the secular 20th and now 21st century, it has been used to describe secular actors, or even followers of sports, who refer to themselves by the shortened version of the word, "fans." Indeed, fans of sports teams can appear to be possessed by the spirit of the contest, leading them to act in ways they would never do in a "non-fanatical" state. Recently, in the United States, the followers of the businessman-turned-politician, Donald J. Trump, would often referred to themselves as "fans" of the 45th President – a political cult-like "fanaticism" that betrays the collective neurosis associated with a population lulled into an automaton state by authoritarian populist politics (Freud, 1959). These "fanatics" of Trump, inspired by the dark charisma of their great leader, whom many believed was sent by God to deliver a retrotopian America, were willing to sacrifice their intellectual autonomy at the altar of Trump. They became fanatically devoted to a single political leader, even to the point of attacking their own Congress after their leader lost his 2020 bid for reelection. Although the devotees of Trump displayed nearly all of the same socio-psychological characteristics of religious fanatics (and some were), including the willingness to use violence for their cause, we will limit our argument to those fanatics that were explicitly religious. Thus, I will exclude from our discussion secular individuals, such as Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Pol Pot, Khmer Rouge, as well as other dictators, strongmen, reactionaries, revolutionaries, who would in a rigorous analysis of *secular* fanaticism be rightly described as "fanatics."

Rarely in today's society is a fanatic understood to be a positive for civilization. Reflexively, we regard the "fanatics" as being wholly out of sync with the modern world, which values tolerance, inclusivity, and free expression – all values not generally associated with the narcissism of fanatics. The term "fanatic" has moved from the Roman concept, "of the temple," to mean something much more sinister. According to André Haynal, Miklos Molnar, and Gérard de Puymège, and their book, *Fanaticism: A Historical and Psychoanalytical Study,* fanaticism is both a "state of mind" and "mode of behavior" (Haynal et al, 1983: 11). As for the state of mind, the modern religious fanatic is an individual who has a fundamentalist, and

therefore authoritarian, "belief attitude," and thus is determined by the "cognitive dissonance" of being exclusivist within an inclusive modernity (Habermas, 2003: 32). The modern condition, governed by religious pluralism, scientific knowledge, and universalism, impels those with a fundamentalist belief attitude to either repress their dissatisfied state, and live a life saturated by existential uneasiness (*Unbehagen*), or to overcome such uneasiness by dedicating themselves to imposing their beliefs on others, in an attempt to force universal conformity to their worldview, or to make those recalcitrant to their demands inanimate. The fanatical mentality, which appears to be driven by an all-possessing alien force, comes across to those around them as insanity, mental unbalance, and a detachment from reality. Psychoanalytically, the fanatic has channeled all their libidinous energies into a single issue, a single problem, a single desire, a single weltanschauung, which both motivates and directs their every move. Being wholly absorbed, the fanatic knows no mental vacations, no time off from the causes; they are socially, politically, and culturally myopic. As such, the fanatic is detached from what Freud calls "culture and civilization," or the generally accepted framework of social life with its rules, constraints, and limits. As Haynal, Molnar, and Puymège state,

> *The divergence of the behavior of the fanatic from that of a socially integrated man thus stands out as "abnormal." The fanatic entrenches himself behind the barriers of his own symbolic law: he is intolerant towards others, impervious to any idea but his own. He can thus be said to have an extremist, fixed, frenzied, even insane personality (Haynal, 1983: 11-12).*

As the fanatic is law-unto-themselves, they are bound only to their worldview and subject only to their own demands (Ibid.). One would think that the religious fanatic would have a wholly submissive attitude towards the normative dictates of the faith they ascribe to. However, the psyche of the fanatic is selectively individualized; while they may demand conformity to the faith from others, they exempt themselves from its strictures, as a "state of emergency" like mentality animates the legitimacy of their own actions that are not in conformity with the religious requirements they publicly espouse. The fanatic is thus predictable and unpredictable. One knows precisely what they want to see in the world from their unrelenting faith in their religion, while at any moment the means by which they attempt to bring those ends into existence are frenzied, often times irrational, and in violation of their faith requirements. Paradoxically, they are both driven by

heteronomic forces – the religion they espouse, and are fully autonomous, prepared to individually act against their religion in the name of their religion.

The modern religious fanatic is both authoritarian and possessed by a religious worldview that is anachronistic. Driven by visions of a future utopia (and sometimes retrotopia) and an obsession with purity, they reject the world-as-it-is, as somehow being hopelessly fallen or on the verge of collapsing into a dystopian nightmare of sin, debauchery, and unholiness. In their minds, they inhabit a world that is not worthy of their faith, not worthy of what they believe in, not worthy of the goodness of what their faith promises the world. Nevertheless, the religious fanatic feels impelled to continue to struggle to bring the envisioned world into fruition; they can do no other, as it would be a violation of their spiritual purity – a state of compromise that they had prior to their whole-hearted absorption into their fanatical worldview. Because their cognitive framework cannot find an exit from their "possession," their every action is interpreted by their fortified ego as somehow being in service to the cause, even if their actions lead to catastrophe. For the fanatic, catastrophe is not a sign of incompetence or weakness in strategy, etc. It does not lead the fanatic to rethink their beliefs and/or cause, but rather it is understood to be an important lesson from the Divine, a lesson that only the "chosen" are privileged to receive and understand. Their goal remains their obsessional neurosis. To abandon the goal, or to fail to realize the goal, is the wholesale destruction of their world, the reason for living, their sense of purpose. Without the obsessional neurosis and the interpretation of reality and orientation of action it provides, they die a psychic death. Fanatics will do anything to avoid the return to meaninglessness, nothingness, and hopelessness that was their life before the fanatical cause enlightened and recused them. As such, they will not entertain any countervailing forces, any heterodox ideas, and attempt to undermine their mission. Fanaticism, at its core, is the complete and total psychic and bodily commitment to bring about a transformative goal. Anything less than a fully obtained goal is a failure (but not realized as such), as it leaves the world as it is, fallen, broke, in error, and in a state of perpetual sin.

Dialectics of Fanaticism: John Brown

On the face of it, the modern religious fanatic looks to be a person deranged, detached from reality, and worthy of psychological treatment. They appear dangerous to good order, a threat to rationality, and a disturber of the peace. They seem all too easily ready to exact merciless violence on their enemies and/or

perceived enemies in the name of their cause of the Divine. However, taking a *messianic view of history*, we can see that fanaticism is a dialectical phenomenon. Much like religion itself, it is not wholly evil, bad, or to be avoided, but holds within itself the potential for the good (Adorno, 2005: 247). As such, I contend that fanaticism, like religion, is a phenomenon that remains conflicted within itself. Why?

Fanaticism is formal; it is a formal way-of-thinking about the world and a formal way-of-being in the world. As such, the particular content that populates the fanatic is delivered by the worldview, belief system, and ethical norms, which are not necessarily authoritarian, fundamentalist, or fanatic in-and-of-themselves. While all fanatics protest and fight against the world-as-it-is, they do not all agree on a vision of what the world should be. While they all seek to impose their worldview on the recalcitrant others, generally through coercion or force, some of those worldviews are inherently emancipatory while others are repressive by nature. Some of those worldviews call for greater freedoms for the greatest amount of people, while others call for the subjugation of peoples under an authoritarian ideology.

To illustrate my point, consider the radical anti-slavery abolitionist John Brown. John Brown is often described as being a "lunatic," mentally deranged, and a religious fanatic. While the first two descriptors are questionable, he was by definition the last: a *religious fanatic*. John Brown's total submersion into his Calvinist faith left no room for compromise with the brutal institution of American race slavery. Captain John Brown, as many called him, is best remembered for the Kansas "Potawatomie Creek Massacre" of May 24-25, 1856, wherein he and his sons murdered numerous pro-slavery "border ruffians," by dragging them out of their homes, shooting them dead, and then hacking them into pieces with broadswords – a gruesome act meant to send a message to pro-slavery America. Brown's willingness to (1) transgress American law against murder, and (2) violate the commandment against murder stipulated by his own faith, was rooted in his religious fanaticism, especially in his belief that he was acting in accordance with the will of God and God's predetermined plan (Poland, 2020). While some were appalled by his actions, especially in White society, including many other prominent non-violent abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, Brown was not condemned by those who were enslaved – the very people he was meant to liberate. To them, Brown was a man committed to Black emancipation, willing to endanger and sacrifice his own life and the life of his children for the freedom of enslaved

Africans, most of whom he did not know personally, but nevertheless referred them as his equals.[1] His fanaticism was emancipatory, because it took as its goal the ending of one of the cruelest of human institutions: American race-based slavery – a condition of bondage that was saturated by random violence, psychological terror, rape, beatings, forced human breeding, destruction and separation of families, and murder, let along the destruction of enslaved's African identity. Whereas others, claiming the same faith in the same God as John Brown, would condemn slavery, they would not do so in ways that would risk their own wellbeing, their fortune, or their future. It took the religious fanatic, not bound by the convention of his society, who was radically committed to the ideal of the *Imago Dei* – that all humans are created in the image of God, and therefore beloved by God – to fire the first shots in an event (1859's Raid on Harper's Ferry) that eventually led to the emancipation of the enslaved via the American Civil War.[2] In this sense, John Brown embodied the above definition of a fanatic; he was wholly possessed by the desire to transform the world-as-it-is; he was wholly possessed and driven by his faith in God and God's providence; fully committed to an ethical system that on the one hand forbid murder and praised "peace makers," but also afforded a "state of emergency," wherein the greater good could be pursued even though it temporarily violated his own religious faith's dictates against murder. John Brown, like all fanatics, wished to impose a worldview on the rest of the country, a worldview that took seriously that "All Men are Created Equal" – an Enlightenment worldview that he embodied in a much more "pure" or "authentic" *religious* way than the "enlightened" authors of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, many of whom owned slaves. Additionally, according to his biographers, Brown would not entertain any ideas that compromised with slavery, that compromised with the belief in the universality of the Imago Dei, or that compromised with the vision of a world wherein universal fraternity is realized (DeCaro, 2002). Indeed, compromise – the mark of the non-fanatic – is precisely what allowed the injustice of slavery to continue. "Popular Sovereignty," the "democratic" political ideal that brought the border ruffians and anti-slavery forces to Kansas, was itself an immoral compromise with evil, according to Brown. While maligned by many American historians as a crazed fanatic, it was his very fanaticism that allowed him to see slavery for what it was: an evil that could not be tolerated and an evil that drove him to his emancipatory praxis – actions that caused the victims of history, including their descendants, to remember John Brown as one of the most important Americans ever to live. It is these victims of history that remember John Brown's

fanaticism with appreciation, a remembrance that would not exist if not for his fanatical desire to rid the nation of its "peculiar institution."

As a critical theorist of religion, I have to ask what accounts for this dialect of fanaticism. If John Brown embodies the very qualities that are condemnable in many other religious fanatics, what makes his form of fanaticism a positive force in history (if we deem it so)? What precisely is different in his religious fanaticism as opposed to Jim Jones, Usama bin Laden, Joseph Kony, Fred Phelps, the Inquisition, the Crusaders, etc., and others whose religious zealotry has been wholly destructive? Such a distinction has to overcome the non-dialectical determination that all fanatics are a force for evil in the modern world.

Ego-Bound Fanaticism vs. Ego-Submissive Fanaticism

According to Haynal, Molnar, and Puymège, the study of fanaticism inherently requires a study of both psychology and ideology (Haynal, 1983: 6-7). The psychological makeup of the fanatic must be understood in conjunction with the ideology (in this case religious ideology) that the individual espouses, for they interpenetrate each other and form the way each fanatic materializes in the world. While the ideology provides the worldview and goals for the fanatic, the psychology determines the way in which the worldview and goals are brought into existence by the fanatic. Without an ideology, a fanatic is merely a rebel without a cause; without the psychology, the ideology is merely a worldview without praxis.

From the study of various religious fanatics in world history, there appears to be two distinct psychological types of fanaticism, both centering on the role and condition of the ego within the fanatic themselves. I call these two forms "ego-bound fanaticism" and "ego-submissive fanaticism." In the first, the ideology of the fanatic leaves the ego intact. In other words, the individual's ego remains the psychological driver of the fanatic, regulating the dictates of civilization and the passions, instincts, and drives (Freud, 1962b). Because the ego remains intact, fanatical beliefs are *willed-beliefs*, and the fanatical state of mind is a *willed state of mind* – it is a "belief attitude" that is *willed into being*, as opposed to a belief attitude that colonizes and therefore subsumes the will. The agent of the willing individual remains their strong ego, which continues to determine their beliefs and actions, even though it is thoroughly saturated by an ideology, which the ego identifies with itself. In this case, the fanatic retains control over themselves. However, they are not cynical; their fanaticism is not a means of mere

manipulation, wherein they do not believe in the content of their professed worldview, but rather functionalize it for personal gain or to advance their cause. Rather, they deeply believe in their professed worldview (in this case religious beliefs) and are committed to seeing their vision of a transformed world thoroughly materialized. Nevertheless, they are cognizant of the limitation of their own actions, no matter how painful that realization can be. John Brown, amidst his attack on Harper's Ferry in 1859, never doubted his core beliefs in the equality of man, even though he began to doubt the viability of his methods, plans, etc. The ego-bound fanatic is still capable of self-critique and self-reflexivity. They are not wholly impervious to the realities of the world, nor are they detached from reality, even though they may occasionally appear to be so. The harshness of reality outside of their envisioned ideal can always reach them, although it is often a struggle to penetrate through their zeal. In the end, the ego-bound fanatic *appears* to the outsider to be incapable of being reached by reason and persuasion, so strong is their commitment to their cause and so strong is their ideological myopia. However, they remain deeply entrenched within reality, for it is their comprehensive understanding of that reality, especially the horror and terror of that reality, that gives their state of mind and orientation of action its fanatical zeal.

The ego-bound fanatic is more typical in fanatical leaders, as opposed to followers. Ego-bound fanatic leaders are highly cognizant of what they are doing, how they appear to the outside world, and how their zealous appearance and behavior affects those around them. While they realize that their appearance seems "wild," "insane," and "reckless" to many others, they are fully engaged with the reality of the world and understand that they only appear as such because only they take reality – both as it is and as it should be – to its fullest seriousness. Here, the ego of the fanatic is fully "committed," to the goal, thus they appear "insane" or "possessed" to those within conventional society, as such commitments lead the ego-bound fanatic to actions that are not morally compromised like the hypocritical (and/or compromised) society within which they exist. The true believer, in this case, the true believer in African-American emancipation, made John Brown an outcast in a society that preached equality but practiced – or condoned – brutal enslavement. The consistency between his beliefs, both Calvinists and Abolitionist, allowed for no hypocrisy, not for himself or for those who fought with him. Within a hypocritical society, such consistency between theory and praxis appeared as "madness."

On the other hand, in ego-submissive fanaticism, the ego of the believer is wholly consumed by an all-pervasive ideology. This consumption is so thoroughly complete that there is no longer a distinction between ego and ideology. Ideology *is* the "Ich" of the individual; it has been wholly overcome by the ideology and remade in the image of the ideology, which is often malevolent. Just as a ventriloquist controls every move and sound of the puppet, so too is the submissive ego blindly controlled by the ideology and the ideological actors. As such, the ego-submissive individual becomes a willed automaton, alien to themselves and at the same time, singular within themselves. In this way, the ego-submissive form of fanaticism embodies the 16th century meaning of the word "fanaticus," which denotes some form of possession, wherein the autonomy of the individual is thoroughly eclipsed by an seemingly invading force. In this case, not a "demon," but rather an ideology, that directs all libidinal energy towards the goals of the ideology itself.

In the ego-submissive fanatic, the normal internal divisions and debates that are present in healthy egos evaporate, and as such the fanatic is rendered incapable of contravening himself. He has no defenses against the demands of the ideology. As fanatical ideologies are wholly convinced of their own infallibility, certainty replaces self-reflexivity and self-critique. In ego-submissive fanaticism, self-doubt becomes an impossibility, for the capacity for doubt – the task of the ego – dissolves from the psychic life of the fanatic. Absolute certainly replaces doubt, but it is a certainty not born of autonomous thought, reasoned debate, and reflection, but rather from the external authority of the heteronomous ideas, especially when such ideas emanate from a charismatic leader. While ego-bound fanaticism *appears* to some to be pathological, it is capable of rethinking itself, as the ego remains intact and in charge, whereas the ego-submissive fanaticism has dissolved the apparatus that would otherwise engage in such an activity. Even in defeat, the ego-annihilated individual remains blinded to their own limitations and failures. They cannot learn from their catastrophes. They cannot even fathom a catastrophe being a lesson from the divine, as the Abrahamic religions often claim catastrophes' are. The ideology cannot be wrong, for it to be wrong would be predicated on the possibly of discerning between it being right or wrong, which having subsumed the ego into the ideology, is no longer possible. The ego-submissive individual remains the vessel of ideology – not an empty vessel, but rather a vessel filled with heteronomic substance.

If we look into history, it is clear that the ego-annihilated fanatic is more common among followers of charismatic leaders then it is among charismatic leaders themselves (Weber, 1976: 245-252). Such followers tend to be less cognizant of their appearance and actions, as they've fallen under the spell of the fanatic leader. The inflated ego of the leader, often determined by malignant narcissism, is adopted as the followers own identity, in doing so they become psychologically "identical" with their leader. Their leader's will is their will. Their leader's desire is their desire. Their leader can do no wrong, nor can he be wrong. He is deified. Even in apparent defeat, he is believed to always have a plan, a plan that demonstrates his superior cunningness and his total control over any situation. Blindly, the devotees of such leaders are willing to follow them even into depth of hell, as redemption and salvation, whether it is spiritual or political, comes from following the charismatic leader without hesitation. For the leader's devotees, there is no future without the leader, just as there is no meaning or purpose without the leader.[3]

The ego-submissive fanatic, following his master, does not act autonomously, but rather is solely directed by the leader or those deputized by the leader, all sharing the same ideology. In this sense, the ideology of the leader, and the spellbinding charisma that they alone seem to possess, transforms the once-autonomous ego of the follower in a sycophant, replacing their psychic autonomy with psychic submission (Ibid.). Once the process of annihilation of the autonomous ego and its replacement with the submissive-ego is complete, ideological indoctrination is also complete, the fanatic is a mindless drone, waiting for the charismatic master to give them their marching orders, which they will blindly follow.

In the end, while both forms of fanaticism appear to be the same to those situated outside of the psychic geography of the fanatic, ego-submissive fanatics suffers from a form of mental-captivity, dependent on outside forces for their identity, commitments, and praxis, whereas the ego-bound fanatic suffers not from *captivity*; they are determined by their over-zealous *commitment,* and thus remain in control of themselves. Heteronomic captivity and autonomous commitment appear similar to the uninitiated in society, but in essence they are wholly differentiated.

Fanaticism from Above, Fanaticism from Below

The study of the psychology of fanaticism should not be divorced from the study of the ideologies that breed fanatics. Ideologies, such as liberalism, communism, fascism, Islamism, Christian nationalism, White supremacy, Jewish supremacy, are both inherently constructive and destructive. They both create – or attempt to create – new identities, worldviews, and societies out of the old identities, worldviews, and societies that proceeded them. They construct their own peculiar aesthetics; they construct their own institutions (political, economic, social, academic, etc.); they construct their own cultures and sub-cultures; ideologies produce their own form of arts, including literature, music, and visual arts; they produce their own systems of social relations; they produce their own sacred individuals, sacred spaces, scared time, etc. In the end, ideologies create comprehensive interpretations of reality and orientations of action that guide the faithful in their everyday lifeworld.

   As seen throughout history, in order for ideologies to affix themselves to the masses, they must initiate a comprehensive process of consolidating their newly created normative identity. In doing so, idealogues create "anti-identities," the wholly "others" who serve as the focal point of what the new society is not (Freud, 1962a: 61-62). In this sense, the presence of the "other" within the midst of a growing ideological consensus congeals the new society around their normative identity: the non-identical are the enemy within. This is often more acute when the non-identical are *nearly* identical to the dominant group, but in some "essential" way are different. This is what Freud calls the "narcissism of minor differences" (Ibid., 61). Understanding the nature of the near-but-essentially-different "enemy" within a dominant ideology helps us to understand the dialectical nature of all ideologies, as the "enemy" is the ideological other, the shadow (in a Jungian sense), the omnipresent reminder of non-pure state that the palingenetic ideology longs for. These "minor differences" can be the catalyst for the worst forms of destructive violence, as seen between Christians and Jews in Europe. Most ideologies see themselves as *constructive* forces within history. They wish to build a new and better society, one that addresses the inadequacies of the society from which they proceeded (or remain within). They are a force for good, a civilizing force that would bring about a world-as-it-ought-to-be. Nevertheless, in order to create such a world, the previous world – in all its fallenness – has to be destroyed. The "enemy," the identification of which is the essence of the political, must be clearly identified, and in order to purify the old world so that a new world can be born, the perceived impurities of the ideological enemy must be annihilated, a reality most poignantly

witnessed in the Shoah (Schmitt, 1996: 35). As Theodor W. Adorno wrote, "Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity is death" (Adorno, 1999: 361-362). Thus, ekpyrosis is a prerequisite for palingenesis. As such, ideologies that see themselves merely through a constructive lens are myopic, for ideologies contain within themselves both the potential for *construction* of a new social reality and the potential for destruction of the current. How the religious fanatics' own potential for destruction and construction is manifest depends on the ideology they adopt.

From our reading of religious history, it is clear that there are religious fanatics that commit themselves to the expansion of human emancipation and those that commit themselves to the continuance and expansion of human domination. Once such religious fanatic that fought, killed, and died for human freedom was Nat Turner, and enslaved African in the United States. For all intents and purposes, Nat Turner, who led the 1831 Southampton Insurrection in Virginia (sometimes referred to as Nat Turner's Rebellion) was wholly absorbed by a Biblical worldview, wherein all that he saw in the world was interpreted through holy scriptures (Aptheker, 2006). Illegally taught to read at a young age, Nat Turner became a preacher of the Gospel to other enslaved. He believed that God had anointed him to be a prophet of emancipation for those in bondage in Virginia. He was not motivated by humanistic thoughts of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, nor freedom, justice, and democracy as they were articulated by the Enlightenment. Rather, he was motivated by the Biblical stories of the prophets, God's punishment of the wicked, and the wars God instituted for the emancipation of his people. In August of 1831, starting with what he believed was a sign from God (a solar eclipse), Nat Turner and other slaves murdered approximately 55 to 65 white slave masters and their families, sparing none, not even the children (Ibid., 33-56). So deep was God's indictment of slavery, that Nat Turner and his companions understood themselves to be God's executions of the demonic and the wicked. While the legacy of Nat Turner has always be marred with questions about the legitimacy of killing innocent children, especially by white critics, he is primarily known by African-Americans as a freedom fighter – one who was inspired by God to destroy the evil institution of slavery and all who profit from it. His religious fanaticism, his singular and seemingly suicidal commitment to the emancipation of the enslaved of Virginia, still to this day causes many to see him as a "madman," someone who lost contact with reality and followed his madness into mass murder, leading eventually to his own execution on November 11th, 1831. However, seen from the perspective of the victims of slavery, such fanaticism was not madness, but

rather the highest degree of contact with the madness that was the institution of slavery. Turner did not suffer from a psychosis, rather he was the sanest person whilst living in an psychotic society steered by brutality, misery, torture, and barbarity. He was *maladjusted* to an insane society, and thus his rebelliousness.[4] In his case, the emancipatory dialectic within Christianity, brought to fruition upon the slave society of the American South through Nat Turner, struggled against the oppressive potential that Christianity harbors. Christianity, like all religious traditions and religious ideologies, is dialectical in nature; it struggles against itself because it is divided within its own nature. It is both an ideology that can be enlisted in the struggle for emancipation, as Nat Turner used the story of Moses and other prophets, or it can be used to brutally enforce social statics, as the slave masters did with their use of biblical verses that legitimated, justified, and sanctified slavery.[5] In doing so, his religious fanaticism, born out of scripture and the context of brutal slavery, wholly sided with Christianity's emancipatory potential against Christianity's domination potential in the most fanatical way. Impelled by the biblical narrative and the context of slavery, his fanaticism was equally a "state of mind" and a "mode of behavior," united in the aim of emancipating the enslaved (Haynal et al, 1983: 11). While the slave society, most particularly the slave master, overseers, and slave hunters, embodied Christianity's other dialectic: the pattern maintenance system, which would contribute to the reproduction of the status quo. As such, Turner's religious fanaticism was both destructive and constructive, as it sought to strike a deadly blow against the institution of slavery, while simultaneously constructing the conditions for freedom for himself and the others still enslaved.[6]

The philosopher Immanuel Kant, in his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason,* makes an important distinction about the divided and thus antagonistic nature of religion. In this schema, he argues that there are two forms of religion, one that *sharpens* the consciousness, making the conscious aware of what yet ought to be done, and another that *dulls* the consciousness, as when a mind is administered opium, making it numb to the world, including its injustices (Kant, 2010: 93). The first form of religion takes seriously the moral failing of the individual and/or society, while the second deadens the sensitivity to those same failings. The first motivates the individual and/or society to engage in transformative praxis, while the other serves the status quo. Likewise, religious fanatics can fits within those distinctive categories: there are those fanatics wherein religion has sharpened their consciousness towards the Golgotha nature of history, and seeks to transcend it, and the fanatic who seeks to use religion to maintain the Golgotha nature of history,

who oppress any who seek to transform it. Turner's religious preaching was meant to serve the status quo, but his bondage drove him to the emancipatory nature of Christianity – the desire to negate the status quo. While the emancipatory fanatic strives for human liberation and social dynamics, the other strives toward human hierarchy and attempts to preserve unjust social statics. While one side embraces the revolutionary nature of religion – religion as grand inquisitor of the world-as-it-is – the other strives to impose the counter-revolutionary nature of religion – religion as the enforcer of the world-as-it-is. While from below, the religious fanatic strives for *universal* goals – the just, peaceful, and reconciled society, privileging none above others, the other strives for *particularized* goals – the unjust, exploitative, and antagonistic society, which privileges the few over the many. In this sense, religious fanatics, just like religion itself, can be either authoritarian or revolutionary, emancipatory or oppressive. Likewise, fanaticism can be enlisted into the construction of a society determined by human flourishing, or it can be pressed into the service of human domination.

Conclusion

What distinguishes the fanatic from the non-fanatic is the *form* of their "state of mind" and "mode of behavior"; what distinguishes the fanatic as revolutionary or counter-revolutionary is the ideology they adopt. While their ideology provides the *content* of their fanaticism, their fanaticism itself is the way in which the ideology is brought to bear on the world. Being uncompromising with injustice, brutality, and barbarism may be justified via a religious tradition as being the only way to break through the iron cage of the status quo, and it may be condemned as illegitimate, and that the aggrieved must suffer their condition peacefully in a state of submission. On the other hand, religious fanaticism, especially in the post-secular condition, may be an irrational attempt to impose an authoritarian way-of-being-in-the-world upon a people who can no longer return to an age of faith, which is what we often see in fanatical religion's terrorist "events." Nevertheless, while fanatics of all persuasions must be handled with great care, as they are inherently Manichean, dichotomous, and myopic, it cannot be said that all religious fanatics are negative forces in history. Some, like John Brown and Nat Turner, as I've argued, may be the most rational individuals within an irrational society. Other fanatics, like the ego-submissive drones, who have lost their sense of the irrational and rational, and have fallen into a pathological form of fanaticism, are inherently dangerous to societies, not because they seek to attempt to overthrow an unjust status quo, but

because they can no longer distinguish the unjust society from the just society. Their autonomous reason has be replaced by heteronomic dominance, most often by the charismatic leader. Unlike the ego-bound fanatic, who maintains their autonomous ego, the ego-submissive fanatic can no more think for themselves or act for themselves; they are wholly absorbed into the leader: they are a pawn of his will. As such, what the leader says is "unjust" is unjust in their minds, even if such a society may privilege the very people who deem it to be unjust. Drone fanaticism, if we can call it that, is the fanaticism of the irrational mob. Emancipatory fanaticism is the fanaticism of the committed revolutionary.

Note

1. This is especially important if one believes that moral sins, such as murder, lead to eternal damnation. In this sense, John Brown and his sons were prepared to give the ultimate sacrifice even after death – an eternity in hell – for the emancipation of the enslaved, though this was not their personal belief.
2. 1 While the Civil War and the enactment of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution ended slavery and legal disenfranchisement of Americans of African descent, it did not end the horror and terror that African-Americans experienced within American "democracy." Such terror, caused by systemic racism, continues to saturate the American landscape. It would appear that not even a Civil War, with its estimated 750,000 deaths, was not enough to exorcise racism and white supremacy from the minds of White Americans.
3. 1 A good example of this was Magda Goebbels, the wife of the Nazi propaganda minister, Dr. Joseph Goebbels, who famously killed all six of her small children with cyanide in the Führerbunker in May of 1945 than to live without National Socialism and Hitler.
4. 1 This echoes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s December 18, 1963, speech at Western Michigan University, wherein he says that to be sane is to be maladjusted to an insane society.
5. 1 Ephesians 6:5-8: "Slaves, be obedient to your human masters with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ…" Also see Colossians 3:22024, 1 Timothy 6:1-2, and Titus 2:9-10.
6. 1 Being that Christianity is dialectical in nature, containing within itself both the possibility for emancipation and domination, it cannot be said that

Christians were "hypocritical" in their support for slavery, especially if St. Paul, arguably the most important *stifter* (initiator) or Christianity, condoned slavery and encouraged the enslaved to service their masters faithfully. What can be said is that their own self-interested caused them to privilege one side of Christianity's dialectical nature over the other. This is not hypocrisy, but it does suggest that self-interest and the desires of the individual, can causes the believer to disregard those aspects of the religious tradition that would eclipse, or at least call into question, the side of the dialectic they privilege

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Relocating the Iranian Strategy towards the Taliban in Afghanistan

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Abstract

In this article, the author has focused on the question of strategy by the Iranian architects towards Afghanistan. In other words, we are trying to ponder upon Iran's strategy vis-à-vis the emergent Taliban regime in Afghanistan and assess whether this position would be beneficial in terms of regional security as far as the peace in the West Asia is concerned. It is believed that most of the analyses on this issues has been crafted based on the paradigm of Pax-Americana without taking into consideration the comprehensive security needs of the people of this vast region. Based on this concern, the article argues that the strategy of Iran needs to be taken seriously and also understood as well as interpreted outside the conceptual frame of Euro-Atlantic perspectives which could be closer to what one might term as Pax-Iranica. In other words, the ushering of the Pax-Iranica would surely redefine the map of the region for centuries to come. Afghanistan and the rise of Taliban should not be solely analyzed in reference to the security concerns of EU and USA but we need to take the Iranian position as our point of departure and the strategies which might follow afterwards may transform the contours of global politics in a fundamental fashion. This is to argue that the

Iranian strategy needs to be studied in a careful fashion but here we have just touched upon one brief aspect of this colossal problematique.

Keywords: Strategy, Taliban, Strategic Consistency, Consistent Strategy, Iran

Introduction

The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan and the tacit approval of Iran have caused mayhem among many observers around the globe and even within Iran. Some have accused Iran of having secret relationship with Taliban without reflecting upon the connection of Taliban to intelligence communities in US and EU as well as England and Qatar (not mentioning Pakistan, Saudi Arabia or Turkey and UAE). This is to argue that the concept of *relationship* in reference to intelligence communities needs to be distinguished from politicized discourses and problematized as a conceptual tool in fathoming complex issues with long-standing geo-political as well as geo-cultural consequences. Having said this, then we need to refashion our understandings of the nature of the Iranian relationship with the current Taliban semi-establishment in Afghanistan and critically appraise the form, shape, structure, aim, scope, nature, and relevance of this *relationship* in reference to what might be termed as *civilizational security* of Iran (not solely as a nation-state but as one of the significant sources of super-cultures in Asia alongside of China, India and Russia) which might follow a *historical pattern of survival* that needs to be taken into consideration in any serious studies. But here we need to pose a fundamental question and that is who or what type of scholars could study the Iranian position based on this perspective? This is a good question and the short answer for this could be scholars who do not follow the Eurocentric or Euro-Atlantic logic of conceptualizing global-historical transformations. On the contrary, we need an *Iranian Perspective* which takes the *Civilizational Security* of Iran as his/her point of departure. But here we need to problematize the concept of *Iran* herself as this has been reduced into a modern entity which is tantamount to the *Westphalian State System*. Iran as a concept is equal to the myth of *Europe*. Europe as a mythological reality has been impregnated with multitude of ideas which unfolded itself along the course of human self-realization in what came to be associated with Europe as a community of various people and cultures today. (Jaspers, 1964) *Iran* as a concept plays the same role in the West Asia which is composed of thirty states and various cultures and languages today but this *dimension* of Iran has been diminished due to the rise of colonialism from *without* and nationalism from *within*-which has reduced

Iran into the concept of the *Persianate State*. When we used the term Europe we are not referring solely to Greek today but she encompasses all the nations and people and cultures of the European continent but the concept of Iran does not function as such today. Iran as a mythological concept (Miri, 2018) referred to a wider cultural reality prior to the rise of colonialism and nationalism.

In other words, when we talk about the *civilizational security of Iran* (Bowden, 2010. 7) this should not be understood in terms of current reduced form of the *Westphalian Order* (Caporaso, 2000. 1) where the state of Iran is imagined within. On the contrary, we need to have a deconstructive approach towards words, concepts and idioms in order to reconceptualize our present ordeal beyond the imposed Eurocentric and Euro-Atlantic categories. Surely this is not a simple project but if we are serious in refashioning the *Iranian Perspective* then it is a *necessary step* towards a correct direction. Thus the Iranian approach towards Afghanistan could be studied from a different angle which is neither based on the Euro-Atlantic perspective nor equates the concept of Iran with the current Westphalic system of categorization of *imagined communities*. (Andreson, 1983. 6-7)

Based on this introductory remarks then we can proceed and ponder upon the question of the Iranian Strategy in Afghanistan. Needless to argue that everyone is in need of "a strategy. Leaders of armies, major corporations, and political parties have long been expected to have strategies, but now no serious organization could imagine being without one" (Freedman, 2013. ix). But what does it mean to have a strategy? Freedman argues that having

> *"... a strategy suggests an ability to look up from the short term and the trivial to view the long term and the essential, to address causes rather than symptoms, to see woods rather than trees. Without a strategy, facing up to any problem or striving for any objective would be considered negligent. Certainly no military campaign, company investment, or government initiative is likely to receiving backing unless there is a strategy to evaluate. If a decision can be described as strategically significant, then it is obviously more important than decisions of a more routine nature. By extension, people making such decisions are more important than those only offer advice or are tasked with implementations" (2013. ix).*

Based on this note then there is no doubt that to have a strategy is of supreme significance in any organization or state. Thus it is a mistake to assume that Iran

does not have a strategy towards Afghanistan but the question is if this strategy has a consistency or it is based on *ad hoc* approach. In other words, does Iran have a *strategic consistency* towards Afghanistan? I think this is a very crucial question as Iran has more than nine hundreds of kilometers borders with Afghanistan and there are demographical overlappings between the two nations which could complicate the situation. In addition to these issues the two countries have a *common history* which makes them even closer than one could imagine. To make the case even more sensitive we have to add more than 3 million citizens of Afghanistan who are residing in Iran either legally or illegally.

In other words, Iran cannot afford to be indifferent to colossal changes which are occurring in neighboring Afghanistan at the present. But the question is or should be about the *strategy* of Iran and if that strategy is *consistent* in the long run. By *strategy* we refer to the definition as being concerned with ways to employ means to achieve ends. (Lykke, 1989. 3-8) Of course, it should be emphasized that the consistency of a strategy needs to be problematized and distinguished too. This is to argue that we need to clarify what it is meant by "consistent strategy" and how it is different from "strategic consistency".

A Conceptual Makeover

We can differentiate between the two concept of strategic consistency and consistent strategy. This distinction may assist us in conceptualizing the patterns of the Iranian involvement in Afghanistan, in particular, and even in the region of West Asia, in general. This is a question which we need to reflect upon in brief.

By **consistent strategy** we refer to clear strategy outlines what a state does in addition to what it does not do. But the choices that they make are all consistent with their strategy. Consistency within the country's operational objectives and its strategy is one of the most vital—and often the most thorny—undertaking.

But the definition of **strategic consistency** is a state strategy that remains fixed over time until the grand objective is achieved. In other words, strategic consistency is the change in magnitude and direction of a country's strategy at different points in time.

Strategic Consistency

In my opinion Iran has a *strategic consistency* towards Afghanistan but this should not be solely understood in short-terms. The relation between Iran and Afghanistan needs to be conceptualized in a longue durée frame of analysis as over a millennia their historical paths have been deeply intertwined and hence inseparable (and if there seems to be any separation that is due to the rise of colonial schemes in the West-Asian region). The Fall of Nader Shah 1747, the rise of the British Colonialism in the 19th century, the expansion of the Soviet Communism in the 20th century and the rise of American imperialism in the 21st century should be taken into consideration as parts of the territorial geopolitics of Iran in the "post-Heart Space" since 1857.

In order to understand the Iranian strategy in this post-Heart Space we need to have a historical view on how different Iranian strategists during distinct historical periods (of 19th, 20th and 21st centuries respectively) dealt with this *space* in the times of asymmetrical position vis-à-vis different global powers with insatiable thirst for expansionism. Having said this, it should be taken into consideration that if we are interested in appraising the consistency of the Iranian position in Afghanistan then we need to understand the overall approach of the Islamic Republic of Iran's position in the West Asia vis-à-vis the military presence of America. The Iranian architects of geopolitical strategies are of the opinion that the West Asia in its totality is a safer place without the presence of US military and intelligence. This is the cornerstone of the Iranian strategy in all regions of the West Asia, being Afghanistan as the post-Heart Space or Caucasia as a post-Turkmenchay Space. In other words, if we are about to assess the consistency of Iran's strategy then this point should be taken into consideration in all its forms and shapes in the vast regions of the West Asia which its geography looks different from Tehran's perspective than what the Euro-Atlantic architects have envisaged since the fall of Nader Shah in the 19th century.

Consistency of the Iranian Strategy and the Taliban Problematique

However the serious question is whether the Iranian position in West Asia vis-à-vis the United States of America leads automatically to a full recognition of the Taliban as the new force in shaping the possible future contours of the state in Afghanistan in the eyes of the Iranian architects of the West Asia geopolitics. It seems this is the

burning question that many have not been able to decipher and hence led to a deep misunderstanding by assuming that the Iranian politicians due to their adversary towards US have been fooled by the Talibans and their overt and covert allies.

I think this is an erroneous assumption and does not reflect the long-term Iranian position towards the "post-Heart Space". The Iranian strategists have realized that the presence of the American army poses a great civilizational threat towards the national interests of Iran but one cannot mechanically infer that therefore the Talibans are allies of the I.R. Iran. To infer from the Iranian adversary against America the proximity of Iran towards the Taliban is exactly where many scholars have gone wrong. What is the main reason for such a colossal misinterpretation? The concise answer for this question is the lack of vision as far as the Iranian perspective is concerned. Historically speaking, the colonial and imperial powers since the fall of Nader Shah have not been able to see the world from the positions of the others. On the contrary, the world has been construed in the past two centuries through the lens of colonial and neo-colonial global forces and this is what we term as Euro-Atlantic perspective which cannot envision the West Asia as a distinct point of departure.

If we envision the changes in Afghanistan through the Iranian perspective then the post-Heart Space could mean a possibility for the revival of intercivilizational interrelationships which have been suppressed during the reign of colonial and neo-colonial global designs. Here I think we need to refer to the position of China in the future geopolitical and geoeconomic assessments of the Iranian power elites. During the Colonial and Neo-Colonial world order (Uzoigw, 2019. 59), China has been construed in the Iranian imagination as a Far East country but the possibility of an Afghanistan without the US presence where there could be a direct line between Iran and China through "Wakhan Corridor" may transform the Chinese world as a Far East land into a neighboring country in the minds of the Iranian strategists. Of course, this could have many positive and negative consequences but for the moment, as Muslim Jurists hold, one can repel a greater risk by a lesser risk. If this dream could come through then China after two hundred years would become an Iranian neighbor again and this could have intercivilizational consequences at a global level, which surely would not go unnoticed in USA or EU.

In other words, if we are planning to assess the consistency of the Iranian strategy in the "post-Herat Space" (Miri, 2020. 30) then we should dissociate our minds from the dominant Euro-Atlantic frame of references and see the geopolitical transformations through an Iranian perspective which are surely different from

positions provided by Euro-Atlantic architects of geopolitics, who do not work through the Iranian concepts such as the *post-Herat Space*.

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Modernisation in Saudi Arabia:

Relationship between Religion, Culture, and Development

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Abstract

Scholars who argue that Muslim majority countries have failed to develop because of the Islamic Law or the Middle Eastern culture are carrying an approach of methodological individualism, which undermines their thesis. The case of Saudi Arabia makes it evident that what seemed like an influence of religion was merely the result of patrimonial relationships fostered by the Kingdom for decades in order to achieve legitimacy and power within the region. This paper argues that religion and culture have no significant impact on the process of development and modernisation hence, the attention should be refocused to the geo-politics and the role of the state, which essentially acts as a catalyst or impairs the process of development.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, development, culture, religion, modernisation, Islam

Introduction

Why does a country ranked among the top 20 GDPs in the world; categorised as 'Very High Human Development' in the HDI index; the third most-richest in the Muslim world suddenly feels the need to overhaul its economy? Why a country known not only as the birthplace of Islam but also, as an endorser of Wahhabism, a conservative brand of Islam, feels a sudden need to shift towards a moderate Islam? The graph below precisely exhibits the motivation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia behind the pressing need to change.
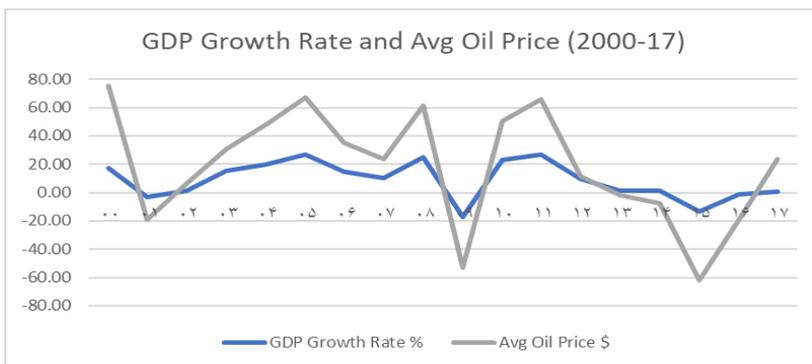
Saudi Arabia, a country so dependent on oil and gas that more than half of its GDP and staggering 85 percent of its export is related to it (OPEC, 2017). During the past two decades, every time the oil prices have plunged, the country has gone into a recession. Even though the Kingdom holds deep pockets, the capricious nature of the oil prices has worried those in authority. Hence the Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman, has announced a Vision 2030 that aims to diversify the economy from oil while modernising the country. What has confounded the analysts and external stakeholders is the fact that the Kingdom has decided to divorce several cultural values and practices that it held endearingly for decades, which brings up the question how can the current modernisation drive of Saudi Arabia be explained? Is there a relationship between religion, culture, and development?

Scholars and economists who think that Islam and the culture of Saudi Arabia is holding it back from modernising are carrying an approach of methodological individualism, which ignores the role of the state and the social relations, which affects the economic activities. The new modernisation drive of the Kingdom is an

embodiment of new social relations with new terms, which will allow the state to diversify its economy.

Theoretical Discussion

Religion and Culture Matter Thesis

Max Weber in the early-twentieth century argued that the secret of the capitalism lies in the work ethic of an individual, which is guided by his values and behaviours that in turn are dictated by the culture or the religion of the society. In his study, he found the Calvinist doctrines as exceptional in nature because they foster the capitalistic spirit among followers (Weber, 1930, p. xiii). Those who took inspiration from his ideas suggested that the inherent issues with Islam hinder the progress and development of its followers particularly in the Muslim majority regions where they are in-charge of the helm. Timur Kuran in his book 'The Long Divergence' (2011) presents the thesis that it was the Islamic Law that held back the Middle East from development by obstructing the process of capital accumulation (Kuran, 2011, p. 9). The Lack of a banking institution and stock market due to the inheritance and partnership laws further restricted the possibility of a permanent lived organizations. Though the investment in the Waqf system acted as a wealth shelter, it failed to produce the desired results for the merchants in the society because it reduced the possibility of redistribution of property rights, which was necessary for the development (Kuran, 2011, p. 11). Perhaps, this is the reason that the majority of the Muslim countries are over-represented in the Low Human Development category and under-represented in the remaining three categories of the Human Development Index (HDI) as seen in the table below.

HDI Category	Range	No. of Muslim Countries	Total Countries	Muslim Countries' Representation (%)	Status
Very High Human Development	1 - 51	6	51	11.76	under
High Human Development	52 - 105	15	55	27.27	under
Moderate Human Development	107 - 147	12	41	29.27	equal
Low Human Development	148 - 188	23	41	56.10	over
TOTAL		56	188	29.79	

Now apparently it seems that Kuran (2011) thesis of Islamic Law matters makes sense because let alone the Low Human Development Muslim countries, Saudi Arabia, the third-richest Muslim country in the HDI list with an overall ranking of 38th, seems to be struggling with the same issue particularly during the period when the oil prices are low. See Exhibit A for a complete list of Muslim-majority countries on the HDI. If it were not for the enormous wealth derived from the production and export of oil, the Kingdom may not have had its current state and might have shared the same fortune as some of the less-resourceful Middle Eastern and the North African countries. Despite being one of the top twenty GDPs in the world and among the 'very high human development' countries on the Human Development Index (HDI) Index, Saudi Arabia may be developed but it is not modernised from any definition – to be discussed below.

Counterargument

Scholars attempted to pin the inability of the state to modernise on the thesis that religion and culture matter (RCM) by considering religion an independent variable as it holds back the state through affecting the values and beliefs of individuals. Though this idea holds true to a certain extent that in addition to the strict legal system, many Muslims hold conservative values, which forbids investment or engagement in activities that are otherwise considered to be innocuous by the majority in the Western capitalist societies (Guiso, et al., 2006). However, the attempt of scholars to suggest that this is the only reason holding the Middle East or the majority of the Muslim countries back is an approach of methodological individualism, which carries multiple shortcomings. The first, it ignores the role of industrialisation and the state, and the second, it overlooks the social relations that inform economic relations, which eventually act as a catalyst or hamper the process of development (Tan, 2013, p. 74). Moreover, the proponents of RCM/ ILM thesis also read it in an ahistorical understanding of democracy and modernity. They completely ignore the diversity with which modernity was introduced in Europe as well as, in North America (Hunter, 2004, p. 9).

Obstacles to Modernisation

Now, the questions arise why did KSA not modernise earlier despite having billions in the treasury, which is intricately connected to why is there a need for modernisation when a country is already developed? Well, development is primarily

measured in terms of economic progress. Unless that development is translated into changes within the social system, it is of limited use (Corinna, 2010). Modernisation as 'characterised by the emergence of a rational-legal bureaucratic system based on meritocracy, accountability and clear and transparent rules applied impartially', denotes the progress of the social fabric (Tan, 2013, p. 66). Since the Kingdom lacks most of these characteristics, it is basically a patrimonial state, a reflection of pre-modern societies that were centred on opaque arbitrary rules leading to corruption hence it couldn't modernise earlier.

Unproductive Connections

So, the question arises that why did the Kingdom lack most of the characteristics of modernisation? One essential characteristic of rich-capitalist countries is its connection with the industrialist as they are not only the productive groups but also provide the necessary political support whereas, in the poor economies, the popular group is different from the productive group and the state is usually aligned with the former (Adelman, 1999). Saudi Arabia, despite being a rich country, has been in connection with several unproductive groups, for instance, the religious elites, the middle classes, and the Saudi Royal family. The following section will explore the role of each group in hampering the process of modernisation.

The Religious Elites

It was the Saudi state in the mid-twentieth century that collaborated with the religious elites to gain legitimacy and support the cold war. After the dissolution of the USSR, the focus switched towards countering Iran. Again, the clerics served as the necessary pillar in strengthening the state, and in return, they were given the authority of the collection and distribution of *Zakat*. It was up to their discretion to sponsor and assist any initiative(s). Conspicuously, with the involvement of money, comes the competition for the position. Saudi Arabia is no exception, in this regard because throughout the history, Muslim rulers have patronised *Ulama* through rewards and privileges for legitimacy and to act as intermediaries between the people and the monarch (Malik, 2012, p. 7). Zubaida (2011, p. 15) says that *Ulama* often acts as other politicians in patronising and controlling of resources; however, they have the benefit of employing their religious sanctions. In KSA, since the appointment of the *Ulamas* depended on the monarch, their autonomy was compromised to a certain extent. They would collude with the King to present

fatwas for absolutely every situation. The Western scholars have been unable to appreciate the exception of this aspect of the Islamic legal system. Similar to many other Muslim countries, the Islamic law became subject to state legislation rather than the exegesis of the *Ulama* (Sami, 2009, p. 84). Saudi clerics' response to modernity was of integralism i.e., 'based on the perception of traditional culture's superiority over exogenous ideas and as best suited to treat present ills' (Hunter, 2004, p. 25). The national curriculum was used to control the structure of consciousness and the basis of authority. Hence despite the development, economic rationality or lifestyle pluralism was never achieved, which is usually the case. Hence it was not the Islamic law but a classic case of patron-client relationship, which is known to undermine the development of the state (Tan, 2013, p. 68).

The Middle Class and the Royals

For decades, the Kingdom expanded the civil service to accommodate its citizens and gave them work opportunities in ARAMCO, the state-owned enterprise, to the extent that approximately 70 percent of the Saudi nationals i.e., 3 million people work in the public sector (CNN Money, 2016). In addition to this, the govt. provides subsidies to consumers across several sectors which include oil, gas, water, electricity, etc. The annual cost of these subsidies on the national treasury is around SAR 70 billion (US $18 billion) (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

With regards to the Royal family, the 'so-called' productive group, did not have the capacity to export and were involved in industries such as real estate, construction, retail trade, stock exchange, etc. Luciani (2005) cites another evidence of an unproductive connection, which fits perfectly in the case of Saudi Arabia i.e., the lack of global companies and the dominance of the State-owned enterprises (SOEs). Saudi Arabian Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), the only Saudi corporation present among the Global 500 companies list, is 70 percent owned by the State. Moreover, a brief analysis of the interest of the five most-richest people in the Kingdom shows that three of the five are directly related to the King and the remaining two have strong relations with the crown. Interestingly, none of these five are directly involved in the production of any goods or services, which could have been exported as it is a faster way of development. On the other hand, an overview of an equally strong economy, the Netherland's five richest people exhibits that four out of five tycoons are manufacturing something that can be exported. There have been several studies showing the significance of the process of industrialisation to development and modernisation in any given society. Basically,

the process gradually uproots traditional communities and leads to a functional rationalism and differentiation and individualisation of society (Tan, 2006, p. 68).

KSA Ranking	World Ranking	Billionaires	Net Worth $	Source
1	45.00	Al Waleed Bin Talal	18.7	Investments
2	150-200	Mohammad al Amoudi	8.1	oil, construction, diversified
3	450-500	Sultan bin Mohammed	3.8	dairy farms
4	750-800	Mohammad al Isa	2.6	Investments
5	850-900	Saleh Kamel	2.3	banking, healthcare
			36.0	

Dutch Ranking	World Ranking	Billionaires	Net Worth $	Source
1	95.00	Charlene de Carvalho-Heineken	13.4	Heineken
2	450-500	Frits Goldschmeding	3.9	HR Service
3	850-900	Dik Wessels	2.3	Construction/Engineering
4	900-950	Wijnand Pon	2.2	Import of automobiles and dairy
5	900-950	Hans Melchers	2.2	Chemicals, Investments
			24.0	

Consequences

As apparent from the above-mentioned cases that the goal of the state was the appeasement of certain social segments. Khan (1998) argues that the approach pf patronage is visible not only in the developing countries but also, among the early capitalist societies as it provides a very efficient mechanism of purchasing political support by accommodating and incorporating key groups. Since the economy was growing and the State was able to provide benefits, the citizens of the Kingdom never bothered about the absence of democracy, or its alliance with foreign powers in the Cold war. However, due to the capricious nature of the oil prices during the last few years, the Kingdom has not been able to sustain these relationships and is running into huge deficits. Hence the Vision 2030 has been introduced, which plans to diversify the economy from oil, but this task requires reassessing the old client-patron relationships not only with the *Ulama* but also with the extended members of the Royal family.

Overhaul of the Society

The Vision 2030 is a comprehensive plan that aims to strengthen the economy in the coming years; however, two particular components that have raised several eyebrows both within- and outside the Kingdom include the increased participation of women in the society and development of new avenues for entertainment. From lifting the ban on women driving and mixed-gender events to development of themed parks, cinemas, and clubs, the new vision plans to change the face of the country. The ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Kingdom observed strict laws in both matters for decades; however, it is maintaining a silence at the moment.

Economic Case for Reforms

The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz as-Sheikh, who in 2016 considered women driving as an act of evil, and Sheikh Saad Al-Hijri, a senior cleric and head of *fatwas* – legal opinions, who in early 2017 suggested that women only have 'quarter of brain', did not utter a word when the ban was lifted, why? The unemployment rate in the Kingdom for men alone is hovering at around 12.7 percent and out of the 10.8 million foreign workers in the country, at least one million of them are chauffeurs who earn a monthly average income of SAR 3,800 (US $1,000) and remit almost three-fifth of this income back home, which amounts

to roughly $7.2 billion (Independent, 2016) (CNN Money, 2017). By lifting the ban on women driving, the state hopes to reduce the flow of money outside the Kingdom and increase the spending on local goods and services. In addition to this, permitting women to drive will not only reduce the strain on the household income but also open doors for women to participate freely in the workforce, which at the moment is 14 percent – See exhibit B for the breakup (Financial Times, 2017). Moreover, it can be argued that the Kingdom is trying to take corrective measures by appointing three highly qualified and experienced women on top positions: Rania Nashar as the Chief Executive Officer of the Samba Financial Group, Latifa al-Sabhan as the Chief Financial Officer of Arab National Bank, and Sarah al-Suhaimi as the Chairperson of Stock Exchange (Tadawul). Such a step was unimaginable only a few years ago.

The Grand *Mufti* also gave a *fatwa* in 2016 that concerts and cinemas are immoral, and the ban will not be overturned anytime soon because these are the avenues of infiltration of atheistic and rotten ideas then why is there a sudden investment in cultural activities and in the development of entertainment avenues? The United Arab Emirates, a country much smaller in size than Saudi Arabia, hosts more than 14 million tourists every year. Though these visitors arrive from all over the world, Indians and Saudis account for more than a million tourists each. In fact, on average, 1.5 million Saudis head to Dubai and Abu Dhabi for entertainment and fun activities (Gulf News, 2016). The entertainment hungry citizens of the Kingdom are known to be the most-lavish spenders in the world. In 2014, they spent more than $22 billion out of which at least 10 percent was spent in the neighbouring countries (Emirates 247, 2016) (Knickmeyer, 2013). Even if the local tourists spend mere ten percent of this amount within the Kingdom, it will have a significant impact on the economy. According to the Vision 2030, the Kingdom hopes to increase household spending on cultural activities from 2.9 to 6 percent by 2022 (KSA, 2016, p. 25).

Inertia of the past Patrimonial Relationships

From the previous section, it is evident that the clerics have not been in favour of modernisation or westernisation, as they would like to call it. This begs the question that how does the monarchy finds it easy to override religious opposition to current reforms when previously it used those relationships to gain legitimacy? In the mid-twentieth century, when several Middle Eastern countries that were initially controlled by the liberal, left-wing elites, shifted towards New Religious Politics

groups, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stayed relatively stable and this was made possible through patrimonial relationships with *Ulama* (Keddi, 1998). Initially, the state was narrowly connected to the society and the source of its legitimacy lied in the religious support obtained against the cold war funded through the billions earned from oil trade. Over the years, the national narrative became strong enough as the state got connected to the middle classes and the elites, as well. As mentioned earlier, the middle class was kept close to the monarchy through the provision of job opportunities in state-owned corporations, social benefits, and subsidies. This allowed the state to ensure that no one particular group, particularly the clerics, is strong enough to cause trouble on its own. During the past decade, every time a cleric spoke against the state, he was either cut-off from the reward stream, or put into other forms of restrictions (Independent, 2017). Since monetary benefits were involved, the state always found a new *Ulama/qadi* to support its actions. Gradually, this strategy conditioned the clerics and also heralded that the patron had become strong beyond measures. This can also be witnessed from the recent purge of over 200 men on account of corruption, which includes Princes, former ministers, military personnel. The most striking aspect of it is the eleven Princes, which also include two of the richest people in Saudi Arabia. The State has allegedly asked them to relinquish their assets, and the rumour has it that most of them have agreed to a deal with the Crown Prince, Muhammad Bin Salman, who is the grand architect of the Vision 2030 (The Guardian, 2017). At the moment, the State has planned to undertake all activities such as clamping down on the corruption, reducing rent (see exhibit C & D) & destroying unproductive client-patron relationships, etc. to foster development perhaps because it has grasped the idea that modernisation will emerge only if it collaborates with the productive classes through market enhancing governance (Adelman, 1999). Such a plan can be very ambitious for a developing country but the KSA has the resources and instruments to modify its governance style overnight and spend money on implementation (Khan, 2009).

This brings to the last question, is a modern state necessary for modernisation? Well, Hunter (2004) argues that a modern state takes into account the majority's opinion and protects their will through rational institutions, which sounds a lot like democracy; however, to suggest that a modern state is essential for modernisation means supporting the democracy-first thesis. This argument in addition to being ahistorical, is abysmal because it considers democracy as an end as well as the means to an end. Ideally, everyone would want to live in a society where the public opinion is respected rather than under a tyrant but Saudi Arabia, despite being an

autocracy, ensured the development of the society without pursuing modernisation due to the above-mentioned reasons. It seems as long as the state reflects the major characteristics present in Hunter's definition, it is on the path for modernisation, and the imposition of the 'label' democracy is not essential; after all, democracy carries its own baggage (Chang, 2001).

Conclusion

To conclude, the new modernisation drive of Saudi Arabia is an effort to diversify the economy from its dependence on oil. Until now, the gold palaces, private jets, and the cold wars were all funded with the oil money, but the declining oil prices have sent the Kingdom into a shock. In order to diversify, Kingdom feels the need to break alliance with old stakeholders, which include *ulama* and kinships. The new priority is to collaborate with the productive class who will contribute towards the development. The scholars who argued for years that it is the Islamic Law (ILM) and the Middle Eastern culture (RCM), which obstructs the development can see the case of Saudi Arabia, and how within a span of a year, it has divorced old patrimonial relationships and adopted the idea of an adapted 'good governance' because it suits their purpose. This is an exceptional evidence to prove that the ILM/ RCM thesis pays inadequate emphasis on the geo-politics and role of the state. Hence it is essential to understand that Islam is not the problem; therefore, it can also not be the solution of development.

Since KSA is a monarchy, it is relatively easier for the crown to bring in transformational changes without taking major stakeholders into confidence as those who will resist will become an ostracised outcast. This strategy would have probably not worked in a democratic state because the losers would have had opportunities to mobilize resources against the government. For the people of Saudi Arabia, this can be a blessing in disguise that they are not living in a democratic state because if the crown prince manages to pull this Vision 2030 through, Saudi Arabia would become one of the strongest and richest states, in the world. However, if he fails, it might not only create a political turmoil but also, a social disruption. A possibility of severe social disruption and political crisis looms in case of failure because the country has reduced the subsidies and imposed taxes. Through these means, Saudi Arabia plans to save around SAR 361 billion (US $ 96 billion) by 2020. (SAR 209 billion via reduced subsidies and SAR 152 through new VAT, which got introduced in 2018).

Often when developmental plans fail, people who have been shocked socially and culturally because of confrontation with symbols of modernisation (or westernisation) end up rejecting the idea of modernity. Due to the change in economic and fiscal policies, the citizens of the Kingdom might feel that they have been bearing the strain of lavish lifestyles of the Royal Family by paying additional taxes. For the sake of people, the Kingdom has to ensure that Vision 2030 proves instrumental in improving the quality of lives of the people by providing them with material benefits and limiting the losses of the losers.

Appendices

Exhibit A: HDI List of Muslim-majority countries

MMC Rank	Country	HDI SCORE	Overall Rank HDI	HDI Group
1	Brunei	0.87	30	VHHD
2	Qatar	0.86	33	-
3	Saudi Arabia	0.85	38	-
4	United Arab Emirates	0.84	42	-
5	Bahrain	0.82	47	-
6	Kuwait	0.80	51	-
7	Oman	0.80	52	HHD
8	Kazakhstan	0.79	56	-
9	Malaysia	0.79	59	-
10	Iran	0.77	69	-
11	Turkey	0.77	71	-
12	Azerbaijan	0.76	78	-
13	Albania	0.76	75	-
14	Lebanon	0.76	76	-
15	Algeria	0.75	83	-
16	Jordan	0.74	86	-
17	Suriname	0.73	97	-
18	Tunisia	0.73	97	-
19	Libya	0.72	102	-
20	Uzbekistan	0.70	105	-
21	Maldives	0.70	105	-
22	Gabon	0.70	109	MHD
23	Turkmenistan	0.69	111	-
24	Egypt	0.69	111	-
25	Indonesia	0.69	113	-
26	Palestine	0.68	114	-

27	Kyrgyzstan	0.66	120	-
28	Iraq	0.65	121	-
29	Morocco	0.65	123	-
30	Guyana	0.64	127	-
31	Tajikistan	0.63	129	-
32	Bangladesh	0.58	139	-
33	Pakistan	0.55	147	-
34	Syria	0.54	149	LHD
35	Nigeria	0.53	152	-
36	Cameroon	0.52	153	-
37	Mauritania	0.51	157	-
38	Comoros	0.50	160	-
39	Senegal	0.49	162	-
40	Uganda	0.49	163	-
41	Sudan	0.49	165	-
42	Togo	0.49	166	-
43	Benin	0.49	167	-
44	Yemen	0.48	168	-
45	Afghanistan	0.48	169	-
46	Cote d'Ivoire	0.47	171	-
47	Djibouti	0.47	172	-
48	Gambia	0.45	173	-
49	Mali	0.44	175	-
50	Guinea-Bissau	0.42	178	-
51	Sierra Leone	0.42	179	-
52	Mozambique	0.42	181	-
53	Guinea	0.41	183	-
54	Burkina Faso	0.40	185	-
55	Chad	0.40	186	-
56	Niger	0.35	187	-

Exhibit B: Workforce Breakup

Men outnumber women in the Saudi workforce
People employed by gender and nationality

Source: (Financial Times, 2017)

Exhibit C: New Reform Plan

Strategy	Areas	Savings
Reduce Subsidies	Oil, Gas, Water, Electricity, etc.	SAR 209 Billion (US $56B)
Increase Taxes	Expat Levy (Exhibit D) Value Added Tax (VAT) implemented in Feb 2018; Excise Tax on harmful products only - 50 percent of soft drinks and 100 percent on energy drinks and tobacco	SAR 152 Billion (US $40B)

Source: (KSA, 2016, p. 44; p. 54)

Exhibit D: Expat Tax

	Dependents for Expats	No. of Expats equal to no. of Saudis in a company	Expats more than Saudi's In a Company
2017	SAR 100 per month in July onwards		
2018	SAR 200 per month in July ownards	300 per month in January ownards	400 per month in January ownards
2019	SAR 300 per month in July ownards	500 per month in January ownards	600 per month in January ownards
2020	SAR 400 per month in July ownards	700 per month in January ownards	800 per month in January ownards

Source: (KSA, p. 51)

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The Absent Center: Crisis in the Muslim World

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Abstract

This paper examines the question of disunity in the Muslim world through an existentialist and Islamicate lens. It focuses on the concept 'Ummah', which in Arabic implies a direction. As such, it argues that in the absence of a direction, a community faces an existential rather than merely a political crisis. In drawing on the observations of Paul Tillich on power and community, it argues that the root of the crisis in the Muslim world is the absence of a metaphysical and orienting metaphysical center. The paper goes on to link the absence of an existential orientation to the question of power wherein the absence of a center circumvents authentic and liberatory praxis.

Introduction

How are we to begin thinking about the question of unity and disunity? In particular, what is the nature of the agent - the Muslim *Ummah* - that experiences disunity in our secular world? This essay takes as its starting point, the Prophetic narration: "The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other *is that of a body*."

Furthermore, the word Ummah, in contrast to 'nation', has "no racial or territorial connotations". As Al-Barghouti explains, it stems from Amm which as a verb means "to head for, to quest, to lead, to guide, or to mean and intend" and as a noun it means "destination, purpose, pursuit, aim, goal and end" (Al-Barghouti 2008, 37). The Ummah, as a derivative from Amm means "*that body which follows*" whereas the one followed is called Imam. For Muslims, the Imam is ultimately the Qur'an in that it reveals to mankind the will of God. The quintessential revelation of the Qur'an is the sovereignty of God. Thus, the very essence of the Muslim Ummah - or any Ummah for that matter - is in its having a *direction*. For Muslims, it is an orientation emanating from the Qur'an. The etymological and Qur'anic definition of an Ummah indicates that the Muslim Ummah is not defined by numbers, for example the Qur'an states that "Surely Ibrahim was an Umma" but by its having "an image of themselves as a collective, and when this image is guiding them to do things in certain ways distinct from others" that conforms to the ideals revealed in the Qur'an.

Paul Tillich observes, "All structures of power are organized around a centre; they have a point toward which they aim, to which all their parts are related … The more organized a being is, the more its centeredness increases and it reaches its highest point" (Han 2020, 49) Tillich goes onto say: "This leads to the idea that it is not just that a social group has a centre - that much is obvious as otherwise it could never act - but that a social ground is also an organism, and that the power of a social group can be seen by analogy with the power of biological organisms. The more an organisms different elements are united around an acting centre, the more developed is that organism and the more power of being it has."

As Han points out, in the presence of a unifying and orienting center, power is enacted: "the power of living beings consists in continuing themselves beyond themselves, in occupying more space with themselves". In this essay, we will argue that the two fundamental constituents of power, and unity, are a (1) collective subjectivity that emanates from an orienting center and (2) a continuity of the collective self. The essay will examine the question of unity and disunity through a commentary on Tillich's observation. There are three elements in Tillich's schema that we will subsequently examine in relation to our present study: (1) a *being*, in our case, the Ummah; (2) a *center*, the metaphysical commitment of the Ummah and (3) its "*highest point*" which we interpret to be unity.

The argument of this essay is as follows: First, that the cause of disunity in the Muslim world is the absence of an *orienting* center. In particular, the absence of an

existential orientation, a metaphysics. Second, that in the absence of an orienting metaphysics, the collective consciousness of the Ummah is appropriated by colonial centers, hegemonic regimes of knowledge that follow the designs of a secular metaphysics. In section one, the essay addresses the underlying assumption that informs both arguments: The *political* orientation and political praxis of any collective is ultimately informed by its existential orientation (metaphysics) and existential praxis (authenticity). Finally, the essay's overall aim is to provide insight into the causes of our disunity by emphasizing that it is more than political, it is symptomatic of an existential crisis.

Center and Existential Orientation

It is necessary that we begin an inquiry about unity in the Muslim world with preliminary comments about man *qua* man or the "being" in question. The assumption is that the experience of unity does not occur within a disembodied cogito or the purely cognitive Muslim subject but a person that is always already in a situation. That situation is two-fold. The first, is *being-in-the-world* and the second is *being-with-others*. It is in our being-with-others that we conceptualize and/or experience the concept of unity as a collective experience.

Thus, we must begin with some remarks regarding the *ontological consciousness* that mediates our collective experience. In speaking of an ontology, we are referring to "the natural and essential properties and relations between all beings" which in turn informs a political ontology defined as "claims or assumptions that a particular approach to social [or by extension, political] enquiry makes about the natural of social [or political' reality - claims about what exists, what it looks like, what unites make it up and how these units interact with one another'.

What is meant by an "*centeredness*"? To understand centeredness requires that we first ask: *What is man*? Man is that being who can raise the question, "what is man?" He or she is, consequently, that being who can reflect on reality. What is called into question is man's *ontological status.* The being that can raise such questions is that same being who raises the question, "what is unity?" when he or she becomes aware of their disunity. Thus, in the same man has the capacity to make reality the object of reflection, makes disunity and its causes the object of reflection. Just as importantly, man is that *being* in a *situation.* That is to say, man is always already involved in a project of some sorts and invokes an orientation. In

putting the question 'what is man' in such terms should, already, draw our attention to the ways in which our historical concerns traverse our existential concerns.

The capacity - desire - to ask "whom am I - I who asks questions about Being" Gabriel Marcel notes is the ontological exigence that distinguishes man. It is a desire for an existential orientation to one's existential situation As Marcel explains, "I aspire to participate in this being, in this reality—and perhaps this aspiration is already a degree of participation, however rudimentary. (Marcel 1995, p. 15). He goes on to point out: "the [ontological] exigence is not reducible to some psychological state, mood, or attitude a person has; it is rather a movement of the human spirit that is inseparable from being human" (Keen 1984, p. 105). Central to our ontological exigence is participation and the experience of transcendence. The question of transcendence, in our pursuit of authenticity is thus inextricable: There is an order where the subject finds himself in the presence of something entirely beyond his grasp. I would add that if the word "transcendent" has any meaning it is here—it designates the absolute, unbridgeable chasm yawning between the subject and being, insofar as being evades every attempt to pin it down. (Marcel 1973, 193)

The desire for participation in transcendence is the point from which the need for metaphysical orientation emerges. The metaphysical, in our definition, being an orientation that informs *how* one is in the existential situation. It begins with reflection. The reflection on the questions on the *self* disclose the finitude of man. Thus, we are not, as Descartes suggested, drawn into the self but rather "a straining oneself towards something". The question of transcendence, in our pursuit of authenticity is thus inextricable: There is an order where the subject finds himself in the presence of something entirely beyond his grasp. I would add that if the word "transcendent" has any meaning it is here—it designates the absolute, unbridgeable chasm yawning between the subject and being, insofar as being evades every attempt to pin it down. (Marcel 1973, p. 193). Heidegger points out that "to exist, then means to exist either authentically or unauthentically". He goes on to explain the *content* of one's concrete existential commitment. us, the content of what one deems to be an authentic existential prospect depends on what man holds to be, "the invariable center of presence" (Schrag, 1971, p. 19). The critical takeaway here is that there is no political ontology without an underlying metaphysics that informs it the function of the center is in that it is existential, defining the "we" that coalesces around a center. It is also a form of power wherein the collective can extend itself into the world without absorbing the will of the Other.

"Where-to?" defines the *project* of man. The subject-object dichotomy isolates the subject as a disembodied and ahistorical ego wherein will is purely a potentiality, an abstraction that stands in and of itself. This, again, brings us back to the critical point that man is always already in a concrete situation and as such when we speak of a collective *will* it is always a will *to-do* something. The orientation and end of a will is determined by a metaphysical schema (the "where-from"). This means that the collective, in any given situation, maintains an *exteriority* or potential exteriority towards that situation. It is this exteriority that allows the collective to enter into the historical process. The critical point is that a project is aways *for* some sort of end, otherwise it cannot be a project by definition.

It is from this center, that the community extends itself, stepping into the historical process through authentic and centered-praxis. It is in this situation that man reflects on two questions: "*where-from*" and "*where-to*" The former is the question of metaphysics: what is the "invariable center of presence" and what is the structure of reality. To engage with such a question, man must overcome the comforts of non-thinking and *reflect* - our first imperative. The second, *Where-to*, being the basis for praxis. Therein lays the fundamental relationship between a metaphysical center and power. The former determines the power of a community through its self-referentiality, or mediation. As Byung-Chul Han points out, "Going-beyond-itself is the fundamental trait of power. But in doing so, the subject of power does not leave *itself* behind, nor does it lose *itself*. Going-beyond-itself is power's form of movement, while at the same time it is a 'going-together-with-itself' (Han, 42).

More so, it is the *metaphysics* of a community: the orienting center and background awareness through which know *how* we relate to the world. Eric Voeglin explains that conscious existence, "is an event within reality and man's conscious of being constituted by the reality of which it is conscious" (Hughes, 24). The state wherein man is conscious of and mediates that reality through their "center of invariable presence" is metaphysical thinking par excellence. Paul Tillich defines metaphysics as, "the analysis of those elements encountered in reality which belong to a general structure and make experience universally possible. Metaphysics is then the rational inquiry into the structure of being, its polarities and categories as they appear in man's encounter with reality."

Thus far, we have spoken as though man is born into a world of radically open and transparent possibilities. However, in much the same way that man is born *into* a world as a necessity, man is born into a communal world which bears its own

meaning. In particular, a world already seen as Sartre put and with its own metaphysical schema. The totalizing effect of a metaphysics should not elude is if and when our task is unity. As Heidegger explains, a metaphysics is not the mere purview of a metaphysician but the grounds of an age establishing the most basic "conceptual parameters and the ultimate standards of legitimacy for history's successive epochs" (Thomson 298). In turn, it is fundamentally a mode of existential orientation, that is, how we orient ourselves upon finding ourselves thrown into a world and its horizons. Metaphysics, phenomenally understood, orients us by furnishing answers to both the question what is *that* being and more importantly, what *is* Being, in other words, what is common to all beings and consequently, what is the highest Being and why - *transcendence (*Thomson 302). From such answers, we grasp the existential questions; "where-from?" and "where-to?" As such, and this point is critical for our investigation: Every political situation is grounded and delimited by a metaphysical horizon, the contours of which arbitrarily determine what is deemed possible or impossible. Praxis (where-to), be it in the name of conservation or opposition is always situated either within or in negation to the prevailing metaphysics (where-from). The critical point here is that subjectivity requires an orienting center, a metaphysics, from which it can enter the historical process as an actor rather than an object.

Tawhid and the Absent Center

Now, we can turn to the crisis in the Muslim world. Framed through the "where-from" and "where-to" question(s) we can already see why and how our crisis is an existential crisis. Muhammad Qutb explains, is a crisis of the *center.* As Alaisdar Macintyre points out, "the crisis of the self as a crisis in the tradition which has formed the self." Yusuf Shah Masud elaborates, "In the midst of such a crisis, the character of questions that are asked, and the questions that need answers to constitute a resolution, akin to "what is going on here?" or "how ought the narrative of these events be constructed?"[1] The crisis of the center is not exclusively a modern problem. For centuries tawhid as an orientation has transformed into an ossified and static body of knowledge, of *'ilm al-kalam.* The only concrete, or active dimensions of Muslim scholarship being *fiqh* and its applications. This, in turn, rendered tawhid as an existential orientation to be inadequate. Tawhid, which had served to provide the critical consciousness that grounded embodied Islam (*fiqh*) was displaced. Ali Shariati observes: "From the time when Islam turned from an 'ideological school' to 'cultural knowledge' and a 'collection of religious

sciences', it lost its ability and power for creating 'movement', 'commitment, 'responsibility' and 'social awareness' and it was held back from having any effect or influence upon the fate of human society. (Shariati 1994, 26)

More than a decade ago, Zbignew Brezinsk warned: We are witnessing the emergence of a new global political awakening[2]. Where do we stand today? The past decade revealed and bolded the contours of that consciousness all the clearer, especially in the global Muslim south. Steve Simon of the RAND Corporation, an intellectual bastion of Pax Americana of emergent global consciousness, emphatically stating that the: most hazardous is "umma-itis," the growing tendency for younger Muslims to believe they are part of an embattled supranational community — the umma — while deriding more local affiliations." He goes onto state:

> "Islam has always been a key to Muslim identity. But Muslims are now increasingly inclined to stress their religious identity over other affiliations, whether citizenship, tribe or class. This globalization of Muslim identity is helping to fuel a revival of a shared interest in which North Africans are more likely to identify with the struggles of Muslims in Central Asia and European Muslims with conflicts in the Middle East." [3]

Simon goes as far as to claim that the revival of Ummatic politics will inevitably lead to a clash of civilizations. Irrespective of where one stands on the 'clash of civilizations' thesis, there is no doubt that the growing sense of Muslimness and global solidarity among Muslims is problematic - to say the least - to the politics of neo-colonialism. The difference between Brezenski and Simon on the one hand, and domesticated Islamic movements on the other, is the extent to which the friend-enemy distinction is revealed and made manifest with maximal intensity, a matter of existential significance. As Carl Schmitt explains, the distinction "denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a *union* or separation, of an *association* or dissociation" (Kaminski 2021, 42). That is not to say, a distinction between Islam and the West but the emergent Islamic political consciousness on the one hand, and the global designs of empire on the other.

In the absence of an orienting center and concomitantly a friend-enemy distinction, the crisis takes on a new form. The emergent collective consciousness within the Ummah manifests itself in a form of Muslimness, which is to be distinguished from Islamicity. Han distinguishes between two forms of sameness, the first being an authentic *Selfsame* and the second a totalizing Same: "We can

only say 'the selfsame' if we think of difference. It is in the carrying out and settling of differences that the gathering nature of the selfsame comes to light". The selfsame "has a form, an inner collectedness that is due to its *difference* from the Other. The same, however, is formless. As it lacks dialectical tension, it leads to an indifferent collection, a sprawling mass of indistinguishability" (Han 2018, 3). Muslimness is an example of the *same* whereas Islamicity is *selfsame*.

The result of an emergent Muslimness without an orienting center is the crux of our crisis: The appropriation of Muslimness. As Sabet points out, the difference between non-crisis and crisis is embodied in the difference between what is self-referential and what is other-referential. The former refers to the state wherein our metaphysical center is mirrored in reality; our concepts justify a reality that emerges from our center. The other-referential refers to the state wherein Islamic concepts are used to justify endogenous realities of a world "already seem" - not of our own making, as is the case with the Muslim world today (Sabet, 2008, 1). As such, not only does a crisis circumvent action that emanates from our center but also facilitates the appropriation of the Ummah into endogenous existential prospects. In the absence of its own grounds - *tawhid* - the Muslim world is inevitably absorbed by other centers, namely, colonial hegemons. Power, properly understood, cannot be understood exclusively in the negative sense as violence. In the absence of metaphysical and orienting grounds, the collective cannot establish "an identity with the other, i.e., a continuity of self, by internalizing what is external to it". That, quintessentially, is the origin of disunity and basis for fragmentation.

The Qur'an encapsulates this groundlessness with the term *batil* which denotes "something's departure or brevity of its duration" in contradistinction to the groundedness and stability of *Haqq*, or Truth. *Batil* is characterized by *hawa* which in itself denotes "the idea of falling, and of emptiness" as in the case of the noun *hawiyyah* which literally means an abyss. This is the terms of our crisis (Abd al-Karim 2017, 70). The point here is that transcendence is not, in itself lost but replaced by more ephemeral grounds of transcendence. Man, after all, is drawn towards a center, a notational ground for meaning and action. What, then, are these grounds in the absence of tawhid-as-grounds?

A case in point is the spatial power of the nation-state, which as Han puts it, "manifest itself in the manner of gravitation, establishing an overall order by arranging dispersed forces into a form". As such, the nation-state does not perpetuate disunity purely through negative power but more insidiously through positive power: "it opens up a space which gives action a direction, i.e., a sense." In

other words, and here is the crux of our argument, disunity cannot be attributed to the violence inflicted on the Ummah by authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world or the symbolic elite of the nation-state but the elusive lure of the idea of the nation-state itself. Returning to Han, he cites the case of the cat and mouse to demonstrate the ways in which violence manifests itself in positive power: "The cat uses force to catch the mouse, to seize it, hold it in its claws and ultimately kill it. But while it is *playing* with it another factor is present. It lets it go, allows it to run about a little and even turn its back and during this time, the mouse is no longer subjected to force."

In understanding power as space-making, namely, through the hegemonic hold of the nation-state, we are better suited to understand the relationship between coloniality and our disunity. The nation-state is par excellence, a modality of colonial power. It is a modality of power in that it serves as a notational point of gravitation, absorbing a fragmented Ummah into a constellation of fragmented states. More importantly, is the transformative nature of the nation-state: it does not operate merely through the State's monopoly on violence but in the God-like capacity of the state to create new subjectivities. Now, as we have explained earlier, there is no political ontology without an underlying metaphysics that informs it. There is no nation-state without a secular metaphysics that informs it. In turn, the Muslim world is not merely bound by the tutelage of nation-states i.e., political hegemony but the metaphysical horizons of secularity creating a "situation in which dominant forms of representation and contestability frame and limit the terms in which the meaning of any social or cultural phenomena can be understood" What is lost in the spectre of the nation-state and in our state of disunity? Our exposition, thus far, has sought to furnish the grounds for answering this question. In particular, to insist that disunity is not only a political phenomena but an existential phenomena emanating from the absence of an orienting and metaphysical grounds. What is lost is the experience of transcendence, replaced by its surrogates such as the enchanted 'nation'.

Note

1.
   https://www.milestonesjournal.net/articles/2017/12/31/6wbflj38co2xwn8qd3m
   e7zltpaz6x9

2.   https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/16/opinion/16iht-
   YEbrzezinski.1.18730411.html

3.   https://www.rand.org/blog/2005/01/unavoidable-clash-of-islam-and-the-
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Constructionalism and Truth Validity of Concepts:
Some Notes on ʿAllameh Tabatabaʾi and Nelson Goodman

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Abstract

While much of the debate on conceptual knowledge in the thought of 'Allameh Tabatabai has focused on the ethical realm (and even public ethics), it seems that there are clear implications for the theory of truth validity and the way in which we make our conceptual world. What I propose in these notes is to suggest a productive dialogical relationship between his perspective and truth validity and world making in the thought of the modern analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman.

Keywords: Constructionalism, Human Nature, Truth Validity, Allameh Tabatabai, Nelson Goodman.

Truth Validity of Concepts: Some Notes on 'Allameh Tabatabai and Nelson Goodman

It is perhaps somewhat banal to state that our world is one in which from different fields peoples are investigating links, possibilities, connections, and inquiring into what it is that makes a field truly 'global'. This approach to the global also brings different traditions of philosophy into conversation. How does the world think and how does it converge on certain question about the nature of the world, the method that we use to investigate it, and indeed how we make our world. The rise of scholarly and pedagogical interest in more globalised forms of philosophy, putting different traditions in conversation with each other, and assuming that rationalisation, coherence and narration of the self are universal human pursuits, is a key feature of contemporary academic culture even if it has its detractors.[1] Specifically it is motivated by a cosmopolitan ethos of networks of exchange based on dialogue, overlapping reason and moral disagreement, as well as a desire to sustain and perpetuate a dialogue of rationalities and hermeneutics within a truly multicultural context.[2] Philosophy, understood within such a context, needs to be more than *philosophia* a particular Greek heritage of rationality that has informed the history of European philosophy [as you know of course, not just European philosophy – the Greek ancients need to be rescued from their modern European appropriation]; we ought not to assume that other traditions, especially where philosophical reasoning might be more oral than written [more of that than not – including in Europe itself – the oral and the written coexist, and the relation between the two is crucially at stake in philosophy] , represent wisdom traditions [which is what it started as of course in the West itself, and remained for a long time], not philosophy or even 'paraphilosophy' – after all metropolitan academia does not have departments of wisdom traditions or of 'paraphilosophy'.(Smith, 2016: 2-9)[3]

The move towards a global philosophy is therefore part of the attempt to decolonise knowledge and especially the humanities within the academy. One of the best cases for a properly global and cosmopolitan philosophy is made by the eminent philosopher and specialist of Indian philosophy, Jonardon Ganeri who argues that we are living in a new age of the re-emergence of competing reasons based on four observations. (Ganeri, 2016: 134-86)[4] First, cultural forms of reason predicated on lived experience and self-reflection are finding authentic voices – the very fact that Peter Adamson's well-known podcast is moving in this way and academic departments from institutions such as SOAS and Leiden are establishing

degree programmes in global philosophy suggests as much. It is very much about (re)discovery of philosophical ideas and allowing the space to engage on their own terms and present their own 'ways or forms of life'.[5] Second, academic philosophy – much like metropolitan academia accepting the post-colonial and multicultural critique – is becoming more polycentric and embracing plural and diverse forms of intellectual production. Third, colonial powers and epistemologies are being provincialized; Westerners are no longer accepted as privileged interlocutors in a global dialogue. Fourth, Anglophone philosophy in particular is becoming more self-reflective about its obligations to consider an international context and cognisant that its role is less a result of intellectual superiority and more a legacy of colonialism and empire; hence, it needs to facilitate space and open participation for all. What is thus needed is a new map of philosophy and a forms of pluralist realisms in the academic and even popular philosophical circles. Julian Baggini – perhaps one of our more prominent philosophy public intellectuals – has also reflected this turn in his recent work *How the World Thinks*. (Baggini, 2018) Of course, this does not mean that global philosophy should be motivated by white guilt and a compensatory inclusion nor should it be a vehicle for the dissemination of essentialised ethnic chauvinism. Nor is the call for global philosophy a manifesto for (cultural and epistemological) relativism: van Norden, Ganeri and others are very much committed to forms of realism and highly critical of relativism. Rather, as I hope to show, non-European traditions of philosophy, including Islamic ones, have something to offer by way of argument, thought experiment, hermeneutics, narrative, mimesis, and even poetics [wouldn't ontology be first of all?].[6] Global philosophy dislodges us from our parochial and highly specialised, perhaps trivial, concerns, and reorients us towards the notion that the true task of philosophy is to consider, debate, and keep alive the major, fundamental, urgent problems that we face as embodied and self-reflective beings, to examine attempts to make sense and even solve them, and then to evaluate the success of those possible solutions. (Maxwell, 2014: 11-46)

   With this in mind, I propose bringing two thinkers from the 20th century into conversation: one from the Shi'i seminary of Qum and the other from the Ivy League's 'seminary' of Harvard. Much of the debate on conceptual knowledge, and the epistemological and ontological division between the realm of the metaphysical or the 'real' (or realism – what he calls *riʾalizm* and what analytic philosophers usually call direct or naïve realism) and the conceptual realm of conceivables and *possibilia* posed merely in the mind, in the thought of ʿAllameh Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabaʾi (1903–1981) has focused on the ethical realm, it seems that

there are clear implications for the theory of truth validity and the way in which we make our conceptual world. Existing arguments suggest that the notion of conceptual knowledge (*idrakat-e i'tibari*) relate to elements of practical reason (*'aql-e 'amali*), the realm of the 'ought' (*bayad*) or of ethics, the space for the articulation of value (*arzesh*) that we call aesthetics, and the application of the 'ought' to public ethics that we call politics. More than this I suggest that we should see Tabatabaʾi's division of the sphere of the metaphysical and the conceptual as a broader methodology within metaphysics that has applications in ethics, aesthetics, and politics. What I propose in these notes is to suggest a productive dialogical relationship between his perspective and truth validity and world making in the thought of the modern analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman mainly through the notion of constructionalism. By this, I mean a system that uses and maps language and concepts onto objects without either any empiricist foundationalism or any desire to make philosophical an exact logical science of correspondences. Knowledge is based on some presystemic elements that Goodman famously called primitives but that the language in which a person records his or her experiences arises from his phenomenal reality and makes sense of his version of that world. In this sense, I would suggest that both Tabatabaʾi and Goodman are critiquing a very exact idea of the 'science' of metaphysics.

In what follows I will begin by presenting Tabatabaʾi's famous distinction between knowledge that is metaphysical and what is conceptual and suggest how his form of realism and constructionalism constitute a methodology of world-making. I will then read back into Goodman, his direct contemporary, and how his form of irrealism and constructionalism is not only a strong critique of logical positivism and forms of empiricism, and even a modification of types of pragmatism, that posits productive ways of seeing the world, a methodology that has been particularly successful in aesthetics.

The Metaphysical and the Conceptual

Tabatabaʾi's distinction between the metaphysical, the abode and epistemological sphere of real extra-mental entities, and the conceptual, what is conceivable and does not pertain to any reference in extra-mental reality needs to be located within a longer history of the metaphysics of terms and their correspondences in Islamic philosophy, semantics, and logic from the time of Ibn Sina, and especially the positions of Mulla Sadra Shirazi (d. 1636) and his followers such as Mulla Hadi Sabzawari (d. 1873). But even more than that is the context of his weaponization of philosophy as a 'realist' science of metaphysics against forms of scepticism and

especially dialectical materialism (that was the main intellectual challenge in post-World War Two Iran and Iraq and the wider region) and the postulation of a realm of the conceptual that provides a coherentist and adaptable approach to ethics, aesthetics, and politics.

Of course, Tabatabaʾi did not invent the notion of the *iʿtibari* which one already finds in the semantics and logic of Ibn Sina (d. 1037). And one could argue that the centrality of distinguishing the metaphysical versus the conceptual goes back to the work of Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi in the 12th century reception of Ibn Sina. What changes is the implications this has for how we might distinguish between the world as it is in its given metaphysical, mind-independent reality, and the versions of the world that we make through our conceptualisation, judgements, and suppositions.

One might point out that the term *iʿtibari* is used in a number of senses and as part of binary oppositions. The first with respect to contingent beings is where it is the opposite of *asil* or foundational. The second is the sense of mentally posited as opposed to metaphysically real or *haqiqi*. The third is the idea of the derivation or what arises from abstraction or the content of qualia. The fourth is the idea of a communicative notion that takes one from one metaphysical reality to another and links them. In particular, Tabatabaʾi has two senses of *iʿtibari*: one relates to something that is general and immutable, and the other that is specific and immutable. Similarly, while the notion of knowledge and perception are usually distinct, Tabatabaʾi uses that interchangeably.

It was the tradition of Mulla Sadra Shirazi (d. 1636), whose influence on Tabatabaʾi is extensive that was responsible for extending the conceptual distinction between existence and essence within contingent entities – or perhaps within the distinction between real entities and conceptual beings (*haqaʾiq wa-iʿtibarat*) expressed in the doctrine of the ontological primacy of existence (*asalat al-wujud*). Within contingents, the question there for him that arose was which one of the dyadic notions constituted the very act of being and reality of a thing. As his commentator Mulla Hadi Sabzawari (d. 1873) explained in his famous *Sharh-e manzuma*, existence is fundamentally real (*asil*) and essences are merely posited in the mind and ways in which one makes one's world and makes sense of and picks out entities that are merely apparent as intensities of existence.(Sabzawari, 1969: 43; Mohaghegh and Izutsu, 1983: 33) He then adduces six arguments for this position that stem from the fact that the distinction between mental and extra-mental existence, or indeed one might say of the metaphysical real from the conceptual as well as the unity of existence is only possible through this position.(Sabzawari,

1969: 44-46) [7] One point that he makes which Tabataba'i might not concur is that existence is the only source of value and suggests the derivation of an 'ought' from an 'is'; this is something Tabataba'i categorically rejects. The world that we make that is inhabited by different animals, vegetables, minerals, and aspects of nature with their distinct properties and characteristics arise from essences (*mahiyat*) that are conceptual and only in the mind. (Sabzawari, 1969: 72)[8] The very notion of the essence is a secondary intelligible (*ma'qul thani*), a concept that has not referent in extra-mental reality. Its features are present in extra-mental individuals that reflect a particular intensity of existence, but they are still made by the mind. . (Sabzawari, 1969: 128-130)[9] The mereology of the system stems from the distinction between form and matter (hylemorphism) as well as the Porphyryan predicables (genus, differentia, proprium and so forth); these are again produced by the mind, although they depend on their sources which are metaphysically real.(Sabzawari, 1969: 134-135)[10] The way in which we put together the essence from its parts is also something posited in the mind alone. (Sabzawari, 1969: 140)[11]

Tabataba'i's own take on the metaphysical composition of contingents and the question of the conceptual develops in his *Bidayat al-hikma*, completed in 1970, as well as his Treatise on Conceptuals (*Risalat al-i'tibariyat*) from 1930, as well as his polemic *Usul-e falsafah*, from the 1960s that are all elements of the way in which he weaponised philosophy for the new theology (*kalam-e jadid*) in response to skepticism and dialectical materialism. In *Bidayat al-hikma*, in his presentation of the ontological priority of existence, he begins with a statement of naïve realism: there is no doubt that there are real things in extra-mental reality that possess actual properties (*athar*) and are not mere figments of idealist imagination.(Tabataba'i, 2018) He provides some of the same arguments for why essences are conceptual (*i'tibari*) that one finds in Sabzawari, especially the notion of essences are the source of multiplicity and diversity in the world as it is made but cannot be meaningful unless they arise from intensities of existence.(Ibid: 14-15) He further states that there is also a realm of correspondence known as *nafs al-amr*, the thing in itself, or perhaps one can call is objective reality because it is neither dependent on subsistence in extra-mental or mental reality.(Ibid: 23-25) This is nevertheless and importantly real. Thus here in this text, we find the division of the metaphysical, or *haqa'iq*, into what has a referent in extra-mental reality and what has a referent in *nafs al-amr*. Alongside these two, we have a third notion *i'tibarat* that are mentally posited, conceptuals that do not correspond to referents in these two realms but remain as products of the human imagination. Essences in themselves are nothing and are indifferent to existence and non-existence.(Ibid: 61)

His mereology that arises is also clear. Parts and wholes – properties of essences that are individuated in existence in and of themselves are similarly modalities and hence neither existent nor non-existent; they are conceptual issues in the mind.(Ibid: 63-67)

These three modes are expressed in a number of his writings on the nature of the human and its perception that is socially embedded and embodied in matter. At its heart is the distinction between two types of cognitive content or *maʿna*, one relating to things that have corresponding referents in extra-mental reality and in objective reality, and those which do not. (Tabatabaʾi, 1992: 42–43) Of the latter, there are two kinds: one which constitute concepts abstracted from the qualia, and the other are pure concepts that are produced by the human imagination.

The earliest expression of Tabatabaʾi's notion of the sphere of conceptuals is his *Treatise on Conceptuals* (*Risala fiʾl-iʿtibariyat*) that he wrote in February 1930 – quite early in his career in Najaf. In it he makes it clear that within the distinction of metaphysical realities and conceptuals, most philosophers in the Islamic tradition focused on the former – and this is perhaps also a recognition that there is little by way of ethical, aesthetic and political thinking in their works unless there is an explicit mode of metaphysical derivation.(Tabatabaʾi,2007: 340) The realm of conception and possibility is one that needs to be expounded so that one can properly understand the (hierarchical relationship) between metaphysical and non-metaphysical realities and between metaphysics and other probabilistic sciences (or perhaps even the realm of the human and social sciences).(Ibid: 346) In particular, the realm of conceptual knowledge is something which is particular to humans insofar as they are a discerning species, social animals embedded within societies, and insofar as they are animal possessing language to communicate and make their world. (Ibid: 343–46, 356–57) One final point worth making is that he sees the conceptual as a way of bridging between two metaphysical realities and making sense of their correlation – which raises the question of whence conceptuals arise? (Ibid: 369) Here he proposes three origins: one is the soundness of human nature that is divinely mandated and which gives humans the will and volition that are central to all areas of human agency, the second is the social context and ways of worldmaking that derives from it, and the third is a derivation from the metaphysical in the form of the abstract notions of existence and other 'secondary intelligibles'. (Ibid: 347-50) The former in particular recalls, as we shall see, Goodman's notion of the primitives.

What are the consequences of this conception? The first and most singular is the idea that the majority of human experience and life does not constitute the metaphysical even the recognition of the simple reality of extra-mental existence, but in fact constitutes the discretionary, mutable realm of wilful and volitional human agency.(Ibid: 354) One apposite example that Tabatabaʾi raises is the issue of moral good and evil and indeed also of beauty and ugliness, issues in ethics and aesthetics; contrary to the majority tradition (such as ʿAllamah al-Hilli for whom moral truths are rationally discernable and metaphysically founded), as he himself acknowledges, these are conceptual aspects relating to human actuality and lived experience and not absolute metaphysical notions.(Ibid: 351-53) We see two further manifestations of this point in his Qurʾanic exegesis. In his commentary on Qurʾan 4.77, he notes that beauty and ugliness of the face or of the action of the human (the moral realm) are purely conceptual and dependent on the agency of the perceiver. Social norms and values are thus immutable on these issues and conceptually determined.[12] However, it is clear that implicit in this is also a notion of human nature or *fitra* that is primary. Another related example is his exegesis on Qurʾan 2.213 in which he argues that religious diversity and the contestation between peoples of different religious dispensations arises out of the conceptual ways in which they understand the values and the world.[13] The social reality of humans determines diversity and mutability of the religious dispensations. Two further results of this are the clear demarcation of the metaphysical from the conceptual, or the clear rejection of any derivation of an 'ought' from an 'is', as well as the creativity and multiplicity of the realm of the non-metaphysical for human agency and human worldmaking in the realm of becoming. In that sense, it opens up the possibilities of going beyond realism.

The most extensive discussion comes in book six of *Usul-e falsafeh*, in which Tabatabaʾi posits two forms of knowledge and two types of object. The first are metaphysically real (*idrakat-e haqiqi*) which pertain to the mind discernment of objects that exist in extra-mental reality and in objective truth (*nafs al-amr*). The latter are purely posited in the mind, conceivable objects and possibilities whose corresponding objects merely exist in mental existence (*wujud-e ẕihni*). In particular, he argues that the latter pertains to important areas of the socially embedded life of the human and serves to make the world of that person with judgements that are relevant especially to the ethical realm. These conceptual aspects further divide into what arises before socialisation and after socialisation of humans: even if a conceptual knowledge is not metaphysical, it may still be immutable as a value (just not absolute) and may be necessary with certain social

conventions, while other values may be mutable and wholly changeable. (Tabatabaʾi,1983: II, 200–17) Thus the ways in which we make our world and understand our animate and social lives can still be a firm foundation based on our nature for understanding the sphere of the non-metaphysical but they are in themselves not real. So to recap the theory: humans make and create their world using the epistemic resources at their disposal that arise from their embodiment and features of their humanity (such as being animated, being competitive and struggling in the Darwinian sense, being social and communal being, and being open to change, development, and becoming); they use concepts predicated on presuppositions which may have referents that are either metaphysically real and extra-mental or conceptual and purely posited in the mind; these concept can be of two types: ones that pick out essences in a general sense (and universals do not extra-mentally), and those that are specific to human agency, actions and features of humanity that are often historically contingents and mutable; these features especially when they relate to human agency derive from sense data but do not provide absolute propositions; finally, while these propositions do not provide absolute moral truth claims, they can be divided into two categories: the generally constitutive ones that are immutable and follow established social conventions and therefore still deserve to be followed, and the specific ones that relate to moral good and evil that arise from practical reason and may be mutable. Certain types of values in the moral sphere and in the way in which we make and understand the world may still be privileged: the importance of property, speech, the need for laws and normativity, and leadership, order and politics are examples of such. Now how does this critique of moral realism relate to his wider usage of the notion of metaphysical or direct realism.

Tabatabaʾi's Realism, the Concept of Human Nature, and Constructionalism

What does Tabatabaʾi mean by realism and metaphysics? This is articulated right at the beginning of *Usul-e falsafeh*. The totality of being comprises existent entities and things that present themselves – and we are very much part of that ontology of existents and appearances – and the key issue is how can we be certain of what is out there. We have to use our innate faculty of perception and analysis and then we find that there are actual entities that exist extra-mentally within the framework of causality and for which we can give an account and which we call metaphysical realities (*haqaʾiq*), and those things that pertain to the content of our minds that we consider to be conceptual entities (*iʿtibarat*) and illusory suppositions (with no

reference, namely *wahmiyat*). (Ibid: I, 37) The former class of entities lie within the scope of metaphysics and as for the latter they help to determine the other sciences because they depend on the supposition of types of existent produced by the imagination. (Ibid: I, 39) The remainder of the chapter that sets out metaphysics and the scope of philosophy then engages briefly in a polemic against scepticism (the denial that one can know objects external to oneself with any certainty and establish the truth validity of propositions relating to those objects) and against dialectical materialism (a social philosophy associated with Marxism predicate on the denial of the possibility of metaphysics to include the immaterial and the denial of it as one of the sciences; metaphysics is the study of the immutable and hence cannot be a science).(Ibid: I, 42-52) This schema broadly draws upon Ibn Sina and the need to construct accurate models for making sense of the ontology of the cosmos that incorporates both *sensibilia* and *intelligibilia*, material and immaterial, universal and particular (as one sees Ibn Sina articulate in *namat* IV and V of *al-Isharat waʾl-tanbihat* and in his logic, especially the *Isagoge* and *Categories*).

From this we gather that metaphysics is real and possible, our ability to know others is possible, and that the broader scope of the sciences reflects the fact that we ourselves are involved in the act of being and becoming, within the ontology of the cosmos. Realism is thus also a refutation of idealism (that there are no entities or indeed no entities discernable extrinsic to our minds) or types of solipsism. The main point is that his realism does not preclude a constructionalism especially in the non-metaphysical sphere, and it shows the essential nature of human life within its socialisation. Realism is that about understanding the true nature of the human and the non-absolute scope of the moral sphere and what lies between the realities of things as they present. The conflict and struggle of the human sphere and its changeable nature both constitute a key element of a realist approach to metaphysics.

Worldmaking, Irrealism, and Constructionalism in Goodman's thought

Nelson Goodman (1906–1998), the Harvard philosopher is known for a number of positions and influences in the post-World War Two period that have impacted the study of logic, aesthetics, and even pragmatism. His critique of induction and the 'grue-problem' is well known. But for our purposes, we shall examine his irrealism, his critique of empirical foundationalism, and his attack on the myth of the given. He posed a response to the logical positivists, although he saw his anti-

foundationalist approach to epistemology as a continuation of Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970); as he said in his dissertation which became *The Structure of Appearances*:

> *Carnap has made it clear that what we take as ground elements [for a constitutional system] is a matter of choice. They are not dignified as the atomic units from which others must be built; they simply constitute one possible starting point. [...] In choosing erlebs, Carnap is plainly seeking to approximate as closely as possible what he regards the original epistemological state [...] Yet whether it does so or not is no test of the system. [...] Hence [...] argument concerning whether the elements selected are really primitive in knowledge is extraneous to the major purpose of the system. (Goodman, 1990: 96-98)*

He was responding to his teacher, C.I. Lewis (1883–1964), whose position on empiricism as well as conceptual pragmatism insisted that the 'given' was indubitable for the possibility of experience. Judgements about qualia, about the sense units that we try to capture in experience, are judgements that fit within a coherent system and are not absolute; this is contructionalism:

> *The literal unverifiabilty of such quale-recognition is, nevertheless, in the last analysis beyond question. If I say the green presented by that grass now is the same as the green presented by it at a certain past moment, I cannot truly verify that statement because I cannot revive that past moment. The statement therefore constitutes an arbitrary and supreme decree. But a decree, simply because it is arbitrary, is not therefore necessarily haphazard. My quale-identifications are influenced; I do not feel equally inclined to identify the color presented by the grass now with the color presented by a cherry a moment ago, though such a decree if made would be equally supreme and unchallengeable on strict grounds. We are all much in the same position of absolute but sane monarchs; our pronouncements are law, but we use our heads in making them. (Ibid: 17)*

Constructionalism and irrealism is the claim that the world has versions and truth claims do conflict. (Goodman, 1978: 109–16) A parallel line of reasoning in Goodman's writings considers the notion that there are no worlds that the right versions answer to—or at the very least that such worlds are not necessary. The worlds are many and actual. (Goodman, 1984:31; 1978: 94) This is distinct from

naïve realism as well as Lewis' possible worlds metaphysics. The world versions are in themselves sufficient are available to us insofar as we are discerning. In effect, the versions ought to be treated as worlds. (Goodman, 1978: 4, 96; 1984: 30-33) Not that he collapses the distinction between versions and version: the former are vernacularised and particular features of making whereas the worlds are not particularised through specific words, utterances and languages. Now the question here might arise whether creating versions of the world collapses into relativism (and the same critique might have been posed to Tabatabaʾi's conceptuals); but Goodman seems to posit that worlds are made through recourse to correct versions – the false versions are the merely possible. Thus, there are constraints to worldmaking that arise from logical structures of language, coherence, simplicity and so forth. And they can be expression – in this sense, as was important for aesthetics, painting, the plastic arts and music as expressions as much as the language of words inscribed. It is not just metaphysics that makes the world but also ethics, aesthetics, arts, and literature. How we use expression and language can thus be used to reflect upon but also project and predict how humans behave and make their world. Language is, as it is for Tabatabaʾi, a central human endeavour in this and central to the human creative power of understanding.

Some Conclusions

While Goodman's metaphysics of irrealism is not entirely compatible with Tabatabaʾi's realism, it is clear that in terms of their methodology as well as their approach to the realms of the moral and the beautiful, they both espouse a constructionalism. In the former case, this has been applied primarily in the field of aesthetics, while for the latter it is focused on ethics and the wider contemporary debate pushing back on moral realism and virtue ethics towards a moral pragmatics that attempts to reform practical reason on issues that arise from our embodiment. Perhaps the most important point for both is a self-reflection on the actions of the agent and the philosopher himself: we are part of the cosmos and metaphysical reality into which we investigate but also our intervention, our perception makes that reality and insofar as that impinges on areas of human agency, produces versions more or less that map our world. Neither of these constitutes a relativism – and this is perhaps the most important point – because often anti-foundationalism in both metaphysics as well as beyond metaphysics is seen as lapsing into relativism, usually abhorred both by most analytic and Islamic philosophers past and present. It is perhaps at that level, the precision of ways of worldmaking and version production that is a required comparative study on how constructionalism can

propose a useful way forward for philosophy as a human, applied, experimental even, practice and way of life.

Note

1. One thinks, for example, of Jay Garfield and Bryan van Norden's initial opinion piece, 'If Philosophy won't diversity, let's call it what it really is', published in The Stone column of the New York Times blog on May 11, 2016, followed by Bryan van Norden's Taking Back Philosophy, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, and the consequent controversies beginning with Nicholas Tampio's helleno-centric critique, 'Not all things wise and good are philosophy', Aeon, September 13, 2016 available at http://aeon.co/ideas/not-all-things-wise-and-good-are-philosophy accessed 17 December 2017.
2. On cognitive elements of cosmopolitan reason, see Carol A. Breckenridge et al (eds), Cosmopolitanism, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002; Kwame Appiah, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers, London: Penguin, 2007; and Jonardon Ganeri, Identity as Reasoned Choice: The Reach and Resources of Public and Practical Reason, London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
3. Justin E. Smith, The Philosopher: A History in Six Types, Princeton, 2016, pp. 2–9. A good example of a scholar whose beginning point has been philosophia but, who has been engaged in the comparative study of science and philosophy (ancient Greece and China in particular) is Sir Geoffrey Lloyd in works such as '"Philosophy": What did the Greeks invent and is it relevant to China?' Extrême-orient, Extrême-occident 27 (2005), pp. 149–59.
4. Jonardon Ganeri, 'Why philosophy must go global: a manifesto', Confluences, 4 (2016), pp. 134–86. It might seem strange to consider our age to be one of reason and not irrationality given the post-truth nature of much of the public domain of reason – but see Julian Baggini, A Short History of Truth: Consolations for a Post-Truth World, London: Querus, 2017.
5. To an extent, one finds this even in the Eurocentric approach of Peter Sloterdijk in his Philosophical Temperaments: From Plato to Foucault, tr. Thomas Dunlap, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, and The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as Practice, tr. Karen Margolis, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
6. If pushed to enumerate these, I would point to the following (just from Avicenna): the proof for the existence of God by radical contingency, the suspended person thought experiment, the argument about the eternal now, and the allegory of the soul as a bird.
7. Sabzawari, Sharh-e manzuma, 44–46, trans. 33–37.
8. Sabzawari, Sharh-e manzuma, 72, trans. 73.
9. Sabzawari, Sharh-e manzuma, 128–30, trans. 140–44.

10.   Sabzawari, Sharh-e manzuma, 134–35, trans. 149–51.
11.   Sabzawari, Sharh-e manzuma, 140, trans. 156.
12.   Tabatabaʾi, al-Mizan fi tafsir al-Qurʾan, Qum: Manshurat Jamaʿat al-mudarrisin fiʾl-hawza al-ʿilmiya bi-Qum, n.d., 5: 10.
13.   Tabatabaʾi, Tafsir al-Mizan, 2: 113–16.

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Humour and COVID-19 in Lebanon

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Abstract

While keeping the concept of *maslaha* (public interest) as the fulcrum, this article highlights the shift between the sacred and the profane; the religious and the secular by looking into humour in the performing arts, both among secular and religious actors, as mainly associated with COVID-19 in Lebanon, but not exclusively limited to it. As case studies, 'Christian' comedians Charbel Khalil and animator Ralf Karam exemplify the former (the secular); and 'Sunni' Palestinians (involved in nationalist struggle) and the 'Shi'a' resistance movement Hizbullah, the latter (the religious).[1] Hizbullah utilizes cultural diplomacy as a strategic *maslaha* and cost effective tool for enhancing visibility, outreach, and for motivating its constituency to engage in cultural activities and 'pious entertainment' under the banner of resistance art. By investing in arts performances, exhibitions; scout and youth activities; student exchanges; summer camps, art workshops; puppet, music, dance, theatre, and comedy shows, etc., Hizbullah aims at building up mutual understanding and trust among, not only its constituency, but also among people having a different mind-set.

Key Words: Humour – joke/joking – Resistance Art – COVID-19 – black comedy – public interest (maslaha)

Introduction

1.1 Background on COVID-19 in Lebanon

On 6 April 2020, Henry Kissinger – former US Secretary of State, National Security Advisor, and Nobel Peace Laureate winner – cautioned, 'The world's democracies need to defend and sustain their Enlightenment values… A global retreat from balancing power with legitimacy will cause the social contract to disintegrate both domestically and internationally'. Kissinger called on the international community to do three things: 'First, shore up global resilience to infectious disease; Second, strive to heal the wounds to the world economy; Third, safeguard the principles of the liberal world order. ...The pandemic has prompted an anachronism, a revival of the walled city in an age when prosperity depends on global trade and movement of people'. Taking Kissinger's premonition into account, namely '[t]he reality is the world will never be the same after the coronavirus[2]The first cases of COVID-19 were detected in Lebanon after an Iranian flight carrying Lebanese pilgrims landed on 21 February 2020. This was followed by another COVID-19 infected plane from Italy.[3] More and more planes carried the deadly virus causing the first-wave spread. The Lebanese authorities were fully alarmed and took harsh measures in an attempt to curb the spread. In spite of the financial malaise Lebanon is facing, since 2 March 2020, all schools and universities were closed via a directive by the Minister of Education that urged online teaching. Since 19 March, the Lebanese State imposed draconian measures of a total lockdown: curfews, social distancing, banning of crowds, and limited cars on the streets by a rotation policy alternating between odd and even plate numbers. All sea, land, and air exits were completely closed, including the national airport[4]: almost a total lockdown, with a daily curfew from 7:00 pm to 5:00 am, even in the Holy month of Ramadan. Although at a later stage the Lebanese authorities relaxed their draconian measures a little bit, the lockdown continued in an intermittent way until the airport was gradually opened starting 1 July 2020.

As the numbers of COVID-19 infected people increased, the Lebanese government feared a second-wave spread. Thus, it resorted to repetitive closures and lockdowns that did not keep COVID-19 at bay. On the contrary, by December 2020 the number of infected people per day averaged 2000, in a country of six million.

2.1 Humour in Islam

Many talk shows, stand-up comedians, comedies, satires, theatrical plays, and performances poked fun at COVID-19 in Lebanon. Before discussing these, I would like to give a background on humour in Islam.

Stressing the dimensions of purpose, function, and structure, Schweizer argues that humour 'is not a stable, inert form of expression, but—more often than not—it flickers through multiple modes, even in one and the same joke, cartoon, or comedy performance' (Schweizer, 2020). He adds, 'Islamic rules that deem mockery, sarcasm, and even teasing to be an indication of moral failings (the 49th Qur'anic *surah* [*Al-Hujurat*], verse 11, as well as several Hadiths such as Abu Dawud, Book 43, 4972) have the force of moral idealism behind them' (Schweizer, 2020). In addition, verse (5: 57) admonishes the believers not to engage in idle mockery, and verse (6: 108) calls on the believers to abstain from insulting one another, and, by extension, God.

Notwithstanding these Qur'anic verses and *hadith*, Islamic traditions confirm that Prophet Muhammad had a good sense of humour. Al–'Abidi deconstructed canonical *hadith* texts in order to demonstrate that humour in Islam has the same high status as serious discourse; they are both on par. She argues that in addition to appearing somber and strict – both in ritual observances (*'ibadat*) and social transactions (*mu'amalat*) – Islam, as a religion, left ample room for humour, laughter, smiling, joy, fun, happiness, and joking. Al– 'Abidi stresses that humour was not against the sacred; rather, humour's profane dimension functions within religion's narrow confines and is concomitant and harmonious with it, by highlighting the tolerance and openness (*infitah*) of religion (Al– 'Abidi, 2010).

Concerning the uneasy relationship between religion and humour, Schweizer clarifies:

> *Why is it that humour cannot seem to leave religion alone? —the answer is: boundaries! Humour is (sometimes fatally) attracted to all kinds of symbolical, social, legal, behavioral, and literal boundaries. That is one reason humour ... zeroes in on ideological divisions [between Muslims and Christians; Sunnis and Shi'as] ... and gets involved again and again in the rules, axioms, prohibitions, distinctions, and doctrines of religion (Schweizer, 2020).*

Highlighting the shift between the sacred and the profane; the religious and the secular, this article gauges into humour in the performing arts, both among secular

and religious actors, as mainly associated with COVID-19 in Lebanon, but not exclusively limited to it. As case studies, comedian Charbel Khalil and animator Ralf Karam exemplify the former (the secular); and Hizbullah the latter (the religious).

II. The Sacred: Case Studies of Maslaha (Public Interest) and Humour

Notions of *maslaha* (public interest, human interest, common good) and 'the good–pious Muslim' are translated into ideas about authentic Islamic cultural heritage and pious art and entertainment (fun) within the normative, foundational domains of local customs, sound reason, sense of justice, social and community cohesion, and peace and order (Masud, 2000–01, 24–8; Masud, 2005, 107–8).

2.1 Political Satire: Palestinians and COVID–19[5]

On the 45th anniversary of the beginning of the Lebanese Civil war (13 April 1975 – 13 October 1990), an *Aljoumhouria* newspaper cartoon compared the Palestinians to the COVID–19 pandemic, thus indirectly blaming them for the 16–year Civil war[6] and its aftermath. The cartoon caused ripples of condemnations. Pierre Abi Saab – the assistant editor of Hizbullah's unofficial mouthpiece *al-Akhbar* daily newspaper, in his column entitled 'It is Palestine, you rats of Isolationism' – situated the caricature in the domain of hate speech that no one has *maslaha* in reviving, especially since Prophet Muhammad admonished its avoidance at all costs: '*Fitna* [discord] is slumbering; God damn [those] who wake it up'. Abi Saab claimed that this hate speech targets the collective memory, identity, and shared consciousness of the Arabs, namely, the Palestinian cause, which became a scapegoat to the 'isolationist discourse' that is attempting to write it off as a bygone. Abi Saab labelled the caricature as 'despicable and repulsive, demonizing the Palestinians', who according to him 'are facing a 72–year old systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing'. He debunked the 'naive narrative' that blames the Palestinians for igniting the Lebanese civil war because 'they wanted to occupy Lebanon and deport the Christians by boats to Canada' (Abi Saab, 2020). Abi Saab ended up his parodist repudiation by stressing the positive appeal of the common values of peace, national unity, and the rule of law, which are capable of erasing the traumatic experiences of fear, hate, and racism. In turn, Atallah Hanna – the Archbishop of Jerusalem's Greek Orthodox Church – asked the cartoonist to apologize wholeheartedly for his demeaning drawing, which 'stands against basic humanitarian values'. Archbishop Hanna pardoned the cartoonist: 'May the Lord

guide and redeem you for your unethical and politically–motivated mistake' (Abi Saab, 2020). In short, both Abi Saab and Hannah – along with many Palestinian religious and secular cadres – considered the cartoon unacceptable because it demeaned the raison d'être of Palestinian struggle and resistance against Israeli occupation, which is the main public interest (*maslaha*) of the Palestinian cause.

One could also frame the above debate under the notion of cultural relativism, namely, 'what is offensive for one person is not offensive for another' (Schweizer, 2020). In other words, 'to rule certain jokes out–of–bounds, to designate which joke is offensive and which is not, and to punish humorists for crossing certain lines is to make a category mistake, fundamentally misunderstanding the nature of humour, which consists in confounding certainty and fostering ambiguity' (Schweizer, 2020). We now move to address directly Hizbullah's ruling on making jokes related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 Barakat: sneezing jokes during COVID-19 pandemic

*Joking and COVID-19

Question: During the COVID-19 pandemic, as a joke, can someone sneeze in the face of another person? [7] In framing his answer, Barakat stresses the notion of *maslaha* (public interest).

Shaykh Akram Barakat – the director of the *Cultural Islamic Al-Ma'arif Association* – answered the pressuring question on the permissibility (*halal*) of joking and laughing/laughter. Barakat explained that the face of a believer is something holy in Shi'a Islam, as it reflects the kindness in his heart (*bushruhu fi wajhihi*, *wa husnuhu fi qalbihi*). This simply means that the believer in his intuitive–primordial nature has sort of an evangelical mission; when someone looks at him/her face, that person is relieved; rather than burdened. Thus, the believer in his innate, inborn nature likes to joke, as Shi'ite jurisprudence holds that: 'The humourous, joking nature of a believer is considered as a prayer when it is intended to relieve and inculcate joy in the heart of another person'. According to Shi'ite Traditions, Prophet Muhammad liked jokes and humour, and he used to joke even when he got old; and so, did Imam 'Ali. Nevertheless, this joking – that God willed to be a kind of joy to the human being – should not be a negative personal trait that leads to excessive joking, as moderation is the norm: 'Islam is the religion of the golden mean' (*al–Islam din al–wasat*) (2: 143) between excess (*ifrat*) and deficiency (*tafrit*). Thus, *ifrat* is something disliked in Shi'ite jurisprudence,

especially if it leads to indecency, debauchery, or (physical) harm; in that case, it becomes prohibited.[8]

Barakat stresses that the joking person should bear in mind two prohibitions. First, the initiator of joking should not lie to the other person, with the purpose of intentionally tricking the listener, in order to cause harm. Second, the initiator of joking should honour the harm principle (*la darar wa la dirar*) because this kind of joking could inflict bodily injury on others. Barakat adds, '*la dirar*' means that the [Muslim] believer must abide by the public order and not inflict harm on others, as infecting others with COVID-19 is a sensitive issue that might lead to making people severely sick or might even lead to death, which is equivalent to taking part in unintentional homicide (murder in the second degree). Therefore, people must take serious responsibility in exercising extreme caution (*ihtiyat wujubi*) in dealing with COVID-19 and its deadly repercussions.[9] In a similar vein, Shaykh 'Ali Da'mush, Deputy President of Hizbullah's Executive Council, equates infecting another person with COVID-19 with homicide: intentionally as murder in the first degree; and out of neglect as murder in the second degree.[10]

For further clarification, Barakat applies the aforementioned two prohibitions, bars to the COVID–19 pandemic. (1) If, as a Joke, someone lies and tricks another person by claiming that he does not have COVID–19 and mingles with him and infects him, thus causing harm. (2) If someone intentionally sneezes in the face of another person (even if intending it as a joke), then the consequence could be harmful, as the perpetrator of the joke (the sneezing person), might be asymptomatic – i.e. infected with COVID–19 but unaware of it – and thus can spread the virus without really knowing or intending to do so. In short, Barakat is unequivocal: prohibition on joking when it comes to COVID–19, as the percentage of harming another person is very high.

As Prophet Muhammad said: 'The pen/ink of a *'alim* is holier than the blood of a martyr (a fighter who fell in battle) {مداد حبر العالم أقدس من دم الشهيد}.

Muhammad Imadeddine Kawtharani – the deputy director of Hizbullah's Cultural Unit – affirmed that Hizbullah's cultural politics is based upon and legitimized by the Shi'ite jurisprudential concept of interest (*maslaha*). In outlining the jurisprudential mechanisms of choice (*mahasin-mafasid*), he argued that there is no conflict between Hizbullah's Islamic identity and its cultural productions since there is no big practical difference between the two. Kawtharani adds that Hizbullah bases itself on the following precept: what falls within the domain of the legally prohibited (*haram shar 'i*), Hizbullah endeavors to prevent from coming into being

or tries to abort it; what falls within the domain of the 'permitted' (*mubah*), Hizbullah does its best to find the most just implementation in conformity with its religious vision. Thus, according to Kawtharani, Hizbullah's cultural politics are based upon two basic principles which offer the movement a great margin of leeway in public performance and performativity: (1) keeping away the vices (*al-mafasid*) has precedent over advancing interests (*al-masalih*); (2) balancing between interests and vices in order to determine a person's actual duty.[11] As we will see below, Kawtharani was referring to a specific way of reasoning employed by Hizbullah in order to legitimize, among other things, cultural politics and such social practices.

2.3 Ways of reasoning in the sacred: The role of *maslaha* (public interest)

Since *maslaha* is used by both Sunnis and Shi'as to legitimize certain guidelines of behaviour or precepts of practice in "the jurisprudence of everyday life" (*fiqh al-hayat*)[12], it is beneficial to explain how this way of reasoning works. The jurisprudential concept of *maslaha* is a secondary source of Islamic law that refers to one of the maxims of Islamic jurisprudence (*qawa'id al-fiqh*), which states that the avoidance of vice is always preferable to any benefit that might accrue from the act, or 'the warding off of vices is preferable to obtaining interests' (*dar' al-mafasid muqaddam 'ala jalb al-masalih*) (Khamina'i, 2009; 2004); It is a balancing act: 'Everything that has negative effects and whose disadvantages [*mafasid*] more than (outweigh) its advantages [*masalih*] is considered prohibited.' (Fadlallah, 2009: 82). The late Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah (1935–2010) – the highest–ranking Shi'ite religious authority (*marja'*) in Lebanon and alleged Hizbullah's 'spiritual leader' in the 1980s – explained that when a person is confronted with two rulings that require the exercise of his reason, reason tells him that God has imposed on human beings rulings for the sake of *maslaha* (interest/advantage/virtue) and *mafsada* (disadvantage/vice/evil). In that case, what takes precedence is either the warding off of the grave disadvantage or the following of the most salient advantage. Thus, in accordance with the maxim discussed above, the ruling is carried out on the basis of waiving the less important injunction in favor of the more prominent one (Fadlallah, 2009: 82–83).[13]

Nasir argues that 'This is the basis of the whole concept of *Maslaha* which is defined as 'the procurement of benefit and the avoidance of injury [harm] within the spirit of the Shari'a, and sets concern for human welfare high above the logic of formal principles of deduction' (Nasir, 2002: 32). According to An-Na'im, '*maslaha* seems to be very similar to the English idea of "public policy" or "the policy of the law"…Al-Tawfi maintained that *maslaha* is decisive even over the

text of the law (*nass*) and *ijma'* (consensus) if the latter cannot be reconciled with regard for the general welfare insofar as the legal aspects of everyday life are concerned. In other words, except for matters relating to worship rituals and practices (*'ibadat*), al-Tawfi perceived of *maslaha* as paramount and capable of overruling [abrogating] the text of the Shari 'a' (An-Na 'im, 1990: 26).

It is important to note that in Shi'ite jurisprudence, *maslaha* can take precedence over primary sources of law, even the five pillars, if the context and circumstance require recourse to such an action, i.e. contextualization is very important.[14] For example, Imam Khomeini's 1988 religious edict (*fatwa*) stipulated that the *maslaha* of the Islamic order, or its agencies, gains priority over any other principle in social and political affairs, including prayer, pilgrimage and fasting (Khumayni, 2002: 170–171, 181–185).[15] In a similar vein, Ayatullah Fadlallah went to the extent of affirming that a religious ruling could be 'frozen' under pressing social circumstances. These social circumstances might relegate this ruling to a category of lower importance, so that it can be overridden by a ruling that has high priority or importance and takes precedence over it. Thus, the ruling remains in effect and binding, but it can be annulled under special circumstances, if necessity and public interest (*maslaha*) deem it to be so (Fadlallah, 2009: 83).

In interpreting the principles of jurisprudence, Shi'ite *'ulama* stretch the mandate of *maslaha*. They argue that, as there are immutable and mutable injunctions, there could very well be mutable (changeable) and immutable (unchangeable) *masalih*. Immutable injunctions have a fixed *maslaha*, which is not relegated to a specific time or place. However, in mutable injunctions, the *maslaha* changes according to time and place, which might explain why it is referred to as 'governance injunctions' (*al-ahkam al-wila'iyya*). To exemplify, the Prophetic injunctions that deal with revelation (*wahi*) are classified as immutable *masalih*, unless there is a conflict of priorities (*tazahum*)[16] with other important *prima facie* duties. Likewise, in interpreting the principles of jurisprudence in order to choose the actual injunction, the *'alim* applies the concept of *tazahum* between two injunctions: one dealing with a private good and the other dealing with a public good. The rule of thumb is that he chooses the public good over the private good or societal interest over personal interest, as he chooses the immutable *maslaha* over the mutable one (Mahmasani, 1961: 21–26, 138–143, 269–78; Khumayni, 2002: 170–75, 178–81). In general, Shi'ite religious scholars do not resort to the concept of *maslaha* in the presence of a primary source of law such as independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) (Mahmasani, 1961: 70–9; Khumayni, 2002: 179–81), but there are exceptions as Khumayni's 1988 religious edict (*fatwa*) illustrates.

Like *maslaha* humour is contextual and purpose-driven. Like water, humour takes the shape of its container.

> *Humour is a trickster found at the threshold, the boundary, the place of transition. And like a trickster, the nature of humour is shape–shifting, evasive, and unpredictable. On the one hand, humour aims to subvert and weaken existing boundaries, as evidenced in the countless jokes at the expense of tyrants, bureaucrats, and popes. The world's despots have forever feared the subversive sting of jokes and satires because it rattles (although it does not usually weaken) the foundations of power (Schweizer, 2020).*

It is worth noting that Hizbullah utilizes cultural diplomacy as a strategic *maslaha* and cost effective tool for enhancing visibility, outreach, and for motivating its constituency to engage in cultural activities and 'pious entertainment' under the banner of resistance art.[17] By investing in arts performances, exhibitions; scout and youth activities; student exchanges; summer camps, art workshops; puppet, music, dance, theatre, and comedy shows, etc., Hizbullah aims at building up mutual understanding and trust among, not only its constituency, but also among people having a different mind-set. (Cf. Castells: 2004; Lenczowski 2011).

Because of the importance of cultural politics and resistance art, Hizbullah has founded three institutional centres that deal with cultural productions and performance. These are headed by three leading shaykhs: Shaykh Akram Barakat, the director of the *Cultural Islamic Al-Ma ʿarif Association*; Shaykh ʿAli Daher, the director of Hizbullah's Cultural Unit and his deputy Muhammad Imadeddine Kawtharani; and Shaykh Shafiq Jaradi, the Rector of *Al-Ma ʿarif Al-Hikmiyya College*. The pre-COVID-19 examples[18] below from Hizbullah's revolutionary theatre illustrate this trend of opening-up to artistic practices.

2.4 Revolutionary Theatre: Military Satire and Black Comedy

Background: For the fourth year in a row, on 9 August 2019, the '*Wadi Hujeir*' Festival[19] resumed.[20] Significantly, *Wadi Hujeir* served as a symbolic milestone and a turning point in the 2006 July war between Hizbullah and the Israeli Defence Army (IDF), where the former had the upper hand and was able to destroy many *Merkava* Tanks.[21] The motto of the festival was the following: 'The Culture of Committed-Resistance Art; We Resist occupation, invasion, and aggression by Art; We resist from *Wadi Hujeir*'.

2.4.1 Military Satire: 'Chariot of God'

The last day of the *Wadi Hujeir* Festival, on 17 August 2019, witnessed an artistic evening celebrating revolutionary theatre. The 'Chariot of God' literarily refers to the name and connotation of the Merkava Tank, which was at the helm of the Israeli invasions, wars, and incursions in Lebanon. Muhammad Kawtharani – also the Director and President of the *Wadi Hujeir* Festival – clarifies that the Merkava is a legend of the Israelis, and, in the first place, Hizbullah was preparing a documentary on it. Therefore, Kawtharani used the text and adapted it to a 70-minute play for 'Revolutionary Theatre', which employs the Dostoyevsky touch of 'Crime and Punishment'.[22]

According to Kawtharani, revolutionary theatre of military satire is a genre that combines artistic expression and war/military might. As such, the theatrical play details the story of the military confrontation and warfare by illustrating, in a variety of ways, the 'war of minds'; or the war of cyber intelligence between Hizbullah and the IDF. For this purpose, 'Chariot of God' employs newly adapted special live military effects. Actors carrying guns and wearing IDF soldiers' uniforms were fighting the local Lebanese citizens who were wearing the traditional folklore attire. The artistic dimension of the work is that the infamous, sombre military battle was adapted in a live theatrical show manifesting an oxymoron and a pun. While the IDF regards the state-of-the-art Merkava Tank as a source of pride (*mafkhara*) due to its invincibility in battle, Hizbullah ridicules it as derision (*maskhara*). *Mafkhara* and *maskhara* illustrate the pun, as they are opposites and they rhyme; pride and derision exemplify the oxymoron, as they are antonyms. The show ends by Hizbullah fighters destroying a replica-in-miniature of a Merkava Tank. Not a real tank since the IDF bombarded all the tanks it left behind in *Wadi Hujeir* so that its sophisticated technology would not fall into the hands of Hizbullah.

The military satire of revolutionary theatre entitled the 'Chariot of God' exemplifies Hizbullah's resistance art because it demonstrates that the ill-equipped underdogs (Hizbullahis) could defeat the IDF – one of the strongest armies in the Middle East – in battle, if they are armed with their religious and symbolic capital. This implies that the Hizbullahis' reliance on their will power, vigilance, and religious stamina makes them believe that they are destined to fulfil their so-called "divine victory". This is in line with the Qur'anic verse (61:13): 'help from Allah and a speedy victory', meaning, 'For all striving in a righteous Cause we get Allah's help: and however much the odds against us may be, we are sure of victory with Allah's help', as Yusuf 'Ali explains (2006: 401). In addition to the physical

destruction of the tanks, the humorous aspect is embedded in the oxymoron and pun explained above. In popular culture, the word *maskhara* is derision that denotes contempt for, ridicule, mock, or scuff; and connotes humiliation in (military) defeat. While, *mafkhara* or pride refers to reaping the rewards of victory – both psychological and physical.

2.4.2 Black/Dark Comedy: 'Sawalif'

On 10 August 2019, the festival featured a theatrical work entitled 'Sawalif'[23] (sideburn'), which is a genre of "Black Comedy", an oxymoron in its own right. 'Dark comedy uses various targets that aren't usually joked about. It can be depression, poverty, war, or any number of other typically serious topics'. [24]

> *Dark comedy, black comedy or black humour is a sub-genre of comedy where commonly objectionable topics and events are used in a satirical, hilarious way. Black comedy is a comedic style that makes fun out of ordinarily taboo subjects. It is also referred to as dark comedy or dark humour. No matter what you call it, the goal is to amuse by presenting something shocking and unexpected. While it is typically used for mere shock value, it can also be used to provoke serious thought and discussion about subjects, people may not want to talk about otherwise, such as: murder, violence, death; political corruption; human sexuality; poverty, disease, famine; racial or sexual stereotypes; war and terrorism.*[25]

In this context, the colour black portrays the misery the Lebanese have suffered from incessant years of war, civil strife, and economic misery. However, there turns out to be a light at the end of the tunnel, when the war ends and scenes of reconciliation, solidarity, and national unity emerge. Therefore, the happy ending in the comedy in the genre of the Shakespearean 'As You like It', and here lays the oxymoron: the darkness versus the comedy. In the Lebanese context, darkness is associated with war, violence, and defeat; coupled with poverty, disease, famine, and political corruption. On the other hand, comedy is correlated with fun, laughter, and joking.

From theory to practice: In August 2019, *Eid al-Ghadir*, the holiest for the Shi'as, coincided with *Eid al-Adha* (Feast of Sacrifice). On this dual occasion, on the 26th and 27th, "Sawalif" was performed at the *Risalat Theatre* in the cultural centre of the *Ghubayri* district in Hizbullah's stronghold of the *Dahiya*, south of Beirut. As a tangible illustration of the theoretical account above, Kawtharani

commented on *Sawalif* by giving the raison d'être of this 'black comedy' form a Shi'ite jurisprudential perspective, or he simply situated it within Shi'ite Traditions. He dedicated a seven-minute address to the audience deconstructing the oxymoron, or the antithetical binary of 'sadness, and 'happiness'.

> *We do not seek negative amusement; idle pastime or play; futility; or frivolity (lahu); rather, we aspire for purposeful, committed (multazim) happiness in line with/ that is identified with the happiness of the martyrs. That is what Sawalif aims to portray; it is something unprecedented; not seen before. You are going to see a beautiful and a well-coordinated theatrical play of dark comedy, which will inculcate happiness in your hearts.*[26]

Thus, the laughter of the martyr is not a humorous laughter. Laughter from happiness or joy is not the same as humorous laughter. It seems Kawtharani is saying the Hizbullahis are not seeking humour but joy. As such, Hizbullahis despise purposeless, lowbrow humour but embrace gladness in self-sacrifice and struggle for the cause; and herein lays their *maslaha*.

Commentary

Western readers might not understand why Hizbullah considers these plays of revolutionary theatre as comedies in the first place. Based on the mocking destruction of tanks and the praise of a martyr's joy, readers might not feel like the discussion of the two plays made a convincing case about their comical aspects. Nevertheless, the following limitations ought to be addressed. As an opposite side to the dark comedy, Hizbullah likes to celebrate culture via communal weddings, which coincided with *Wadi Hujeir* Festivals. On 17 August 2019 – as an integral part of the events of the Festival of Tourism and Shopping in the *Biqa '*– Hizbullah organised its 21st Communal Wedding in the *Ba'albak al-Hirmel* district, under the auspices of Secretary General Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah. Thirty-one couples wedded under Hizbullah's banner, and each couple received an in-kind present from the Council of Developing of *Ba'albak al-Hirmel*. MP Ihab Hamadeh wished the couples success and rectitude. This happy occasion serves as a transition to discuss the profane aspects of humour.

III. Profane Aspects of Humour: the limitations of Joking in Lebanon

3.1 Charbel Khalil

Charbel Khalil writes his jokes from an academic perspective as he has an MA in the Art of Drama and Production from the College of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University. As he contends, he keeps updating his knowledge by constant reading on the history of comedy in the world and recent developments in the field, while trying to exercise constructive, 'cultural self-criticism', as an ethical barometer or yard stick.[27]

Charbel Khalil worked on the culture of jokes during the precarious times of civil war, Israeli occupation (1978-2000), and Syrian presence (1976-2005). Khalil concentrated on the era of the Syrian presence in the early 1990s, which he dubbed as 'the era of Syrian hegemony over the media and public sphere'.

According to Khalil, the joke is the most disseminated way of popular expression among people. He argued that the joke, or the concept of joking, is a critical–satirical outlet characterized as the weapon of the weak, the silent majority in 'cultural humanism' (*al-thaqafa al-insaniyya*). The joke is created and disseminated as a strong message of political and social protest (CF. Hizbullah's definition as a 'movement of political and social protest') in communities that are experiencing oppression, injustice, and suffering. In another talk show, Khalil labelled his comic works as 'Artistic Resistance' (*muqawama faniyya*) (Husseini, 2020).

For instance, the Egyptians joke a lot because they passed through many ordeals; likewise, the Tunisians and, especially the Lebanese. Across history, Lebanon has passed through many challenges, which although our ancestors and fathers bore the brunt of, they eventually passed it to us, to the current generation. That is why the joke is rampant (widespread, extensive) in Lebanese culture: 'it is a means to oppress the oppressor'. Thus, it is no wonder that more than 90 percent of the jokes originate in prison, and, in the Arab and Muslim World, a big portion of jokes appear in toilets, based on the popular culture dictum of 'giving the oppressive judge his duties' (*yuhasib al-qadi*).

The joke empowers the silent majority and gives it a podium, a pedestal to vent its anger and frustration at, not only via the social media, but also over traditional, well-established media such as the TV and theatrical performances. Khalil clarified

that he aims to say things as they are without any euphemism or embellishment, no matter how bleak the massage is. He stated that he decided to delve into the world of joking to make subaltern voices heard (Gramsci), to give 'the voice of those who have no voice' (Younis, 2020).

Khalil stressed that the power of the joke lies in its ability to belittle and demean the enemy: oppressive rulers, violent dictatorships, the government and those in power, and state–repression, thus, stripping them of their power, in a country where state repression has forced critical art forms to become underground. In addition to the prisons mentioned above, a popular culture joke illustrates this trend, namely, 'giving the oppressive judge his duties in the toilet (WC)'! For instance, when a person says that S/he is going to *yuhasib al-qadi*, this simply means doing so as a metaphor and euphemism by releasing pee or poop at the toilet!

COVID-19: the nail on the coffin of the Lebanese

The COVID-19 confinement or willed 'house arrest' – where around three billion people were living in a big prison– was the breading ground of jokes that were disseminated over the social media as a form of relieving the self from stress and anxiety. Self-videos are also forms of jokes. Thus, in order to kill time and out of boredom, people challenged each other to count how many lentils are available in a one-kilogram bag.

Episode/sketch: A mentally draining experience

Khalil has made a sketch-scenario to illustrate the difficulties the average Lebanese citizen is passing through in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic and the chronic corruption epidemic Lebanon is passing through, which resulted in a severe economic crisis and financial malaise; a total meltdown and default. (A similar theme is expressed by entrepreneur and animator Ralf Karam below).

> *A Lebanese citizen woke up one day and turned on his mobile, to be bombarded with SMS's: news on those (politicians and leaders) who have stolen the country and transferred their money abroad, while the average citizen is suffering to obtain bread and butter and making ends meet. He was fed up and oversaturated. Thus, he turned off his mobile and went to take a shower, which turned out to be impossible due to the lack of electricity, even the private generator failed to start.[28] As a result, he went in a bad mood to work. He tried to turn on his car, only to find out that the fuel indicator is on red. He remembered that gas stations are on strike, so there is no possibility to fill his car. This implies that the only way to go to work is on foot.*

Unfortunately, that turned out also to be an accomplishment, as street unrest prevented him from doing so: the demonstrators barricaded the roads, burned tires and garbage bins, and threw rocks at the security forces who tried to prevent them from venting their anger. Therefore, the Lebanese citizen had to take a longer road to reach his destination. On his way, he passed near a bank with the intention of withdrawing money from the ATM, only to find out that it had no cash! Finally, he arrived to work in an extremely bad mood. To his astonishment, he found out a notice specifying the days the employee needs to work from home and the days he has to physically report to work. It was totally the wrong day, as he had to work from home! He took all of this trouble for nothing, when he should have stayed at home in the first place. Helplessly and hopelessly, he repeated the drill to go back home. When he arrived at his residence, there was still no electricity, so he had to wait till it comes back. After a while, the electricity is turned on and he presses on the lift to go to his destination. He opened the door of the lift to find out an ugly creature in it. He asked, "Are you the new neighbour in the building?" The man answered, "I am nothing; but the COVID-19 virus and I have recently arrived to Lebanon." The Lebanese citizen went totally crazy ('bazooka'): he brutally attacked the COVID-19 and killed it, stating as a sign of self-affirmation against all the odds: "I don't take 'shit' from anyone, anymore."[29]

Charbel Khalil comments that the derived lesson from the above sketch-scenario is that because of the oppression and injustice the Lebanese citizen is living under, COVID-19 did not scare him; it just succumbed to him in line with the idiom: "when there is a will, there is always a way." What Khalil wanted to underscore is the will power, resilience, and steadfastness of the average Lebanese citizen in the face of all the calamities that are befalling her/him. (A similar theme is expressed by entrepreneur and animator Ralf Karam below).

3.2 Ralf Karam: 'The Life of a Lebanese in 1 Minute'[30]

Influenced by Charbel Khalil's aforementioned sketch-scenario and across the same existentialist lines, entrepreneur and animator Ralf Karam – founder of digital agency called BlackbirdDW that specializes in high-end animated content as well as interactive solutions – produced 'The Life of a Lebanese in 1 Minute'. Inspired by the 'Super Mario video game', on 16 April 2020, Karam launched his one-minute

animated video – which was making the Lebanese confined by COVID-19 lockdown to joke and grieve over the oxymoron of their collective imprisonment. In an interview with *Reuters* on 18 April 2020, Karam explained his project in a mixture of Arabic-English discourse:

> *So mainly because of what we have been through, recently in 2019, and the 17 October 'Revolution', closures, and the like, we reached a situation where the Lebanese were just living and trying to guess what the next crisis would be. The video was really positive. Many people felt that it portrayed them exactly, all the things that they have been going through for a year and a half (i.e., the financial woes of the Lebanese over the past 18 months). Thus, I think the video did really well.*

Below I endeavour to transcribe – in a non-academic way– the text of the animated video, conceding the difficulty of any English translation to capture the nuances and the connotative implications of the colloquial Lebanese Arabic used in it, let alone the poetic ambience and rhythmic effects (puns) of the stanzas:

- Watching simultaneously TV news on nine channels …

- No work … you are locked down, day and night (due to COVID-19 strenuous measures).

- Pacing the room and very bored; searching in his pockets, but finding no money, he tries to amuse himself and kill boredom.

- Hurry up! Go and fuel your car, as there are severe shortages (We see that all Tank stations are on strike; no fuel, so he walks).

- The economic situation in the country is very bad (we see heavy rain; lots of garbage, he has no umbrella; he jumps into a car's floating tire – which was earlier used by the demonstrators to block roads – and flies out of that mess, to find himself in dire straits ...

- Mountains of garbage; what a sight; you revolutionaries (demonstrators) …

- Shout … scream … in our country there are revolutionaries (We see that at Martyr's Square – where the emblematic symbol of the "Revolutionary First" hovers above the 'Phoenix' – he puts the wheel on fire; and using a microphone, he shouts at the top of his lungs: "Revolution").

- Go to the bank … stand and wait in line in order to get a handout (a small amount of your savings). Stay put until you get some money; no matter what happens. (We see that he succeeds and he jumps in joy for the small amount of money he got in Lebanese Lira {LL}, as foreign currency withdrawals are blocked).

- Hoard as much food supermarket items as possible, as everything is getting extremely expensive by the day (We see that there are severe food shortages, with many empty shelves at the supermarkets, where people are literally fighting to get their bread and butter with the few LL they have).

- When you go out to walk on the street, you are on your own (as people are infected with COVID-19 and you need to avoid them in order to survive).

- While getting out of the supermarket, he runs into an infected person, who sneezes in his face (Cf. Barakat's ruling). He catches COVID-19 and dies. (We see that he goes to Hell, literally "fried in fire", while he is still suffering from extensive debt). What an irony!

- Whatever you do, no matter where you go, there is always Hell; no Heaven; only Hell and fire; this is your destiny. (We see fire, fire, fire; lightening fire, and then a tombstone).

<div align="center">

GAME OVER

</div>

Commentary

Both Khalil and Karam support the dictum of 'scourge of evil laugh'. Their works exemplify the theatre of the absurd: absurdist drama or tragic comedy, replete with oxymora, which Hizbullah also referred to above. Both employ the oxymoron of "laughs and cries", which figures prominently in Beckett's[31] *Waiting for Godot* and Sartre's *The Wall*. While Charbel Khalil portrays active existentialism: self-affirmation and victory (affirmative confrontation; mood; mode) over COVID-19, Ralf Karam exemplifies passive existentialism 'I speak therefore I am', i.e., helplessness in a helpless world, where everyone is destined to die: Sartre's oxymoron of 'rewarded by death' and reaching despair. Malaise

Final word

To conclude and situate the debate within the shift between the sacred and the profane; the religious and the secular, one questions: since Charbel Khalil considers his comic works as 'Artistic Resistance' (*muqawama faniyya*), then, is not he indirectly advocating Hizbullah's resistance art, or is he simply using another framing in order to propagate his secular massage?

Although these views seem to bear a striking resemblance to Hizbullah's conception of 'Resistance Art', Khalil 'resists' by using different modes of confrontation. Whereas Hizbullah refuses to use any form of lowbrow art, including aggressive comedy, to target its critics or opponents, Khalil does not hesitate a single moment to do so since he believes that justice is retribution, thus, the response should match the offence. In other words, just as Hizbullah does not want others to encroach on its religious sensibilities, the Party refrains from reciprocating, even if its figureheads are targeted on a personal level, because its jurisprudential stipulations bar it from doing so. Thus, Hizbullah's 'prohibitions' operate like a double edged–sword, warding off offences aimed against the moral fibre of its constituency, while opening the door to some humorous transgressions.

Yet, Khalil conceded that he was heavily criticized and accused of offending religious sensibilities, although he said that he typically exercises 'constructive, cultural self–criticism'. Many lawsuits were filed against him, but none bore fruit or smeared his reputation nor diminished his enormous productivity of more than 24,000 sketches of comic work and writing in the past 27 years. As Khalil claims, the reason for this is that when he writes sketches and jokes, he gives due diligence and consideration to the "highest and noblest concepts of human virtues" (Younis, 2020, np). Thus, his work falls within the domain of 'purposeful art', and not 'art for the sake of art'. This seems to be another commonality between Khalil and Hizbullah, although each one defines and construes 'purposeful art' differently. Nevertheless, for both, humour is a socially constructed phenomenon. Therefore, Hizbullah does not consider "the widest possible spectrum of humorous expression an artistic, cultural, and social good" (Schweizer, 2020), rather only resistance art and its derivatives of purposeful-oriented art of artistic works and performances.

Note

1. 'Christian', 'Sunni', and Shi'a' are not used in a pejorative sense; rather, to orient the reader of the 'nominal' religious affiliation of the groups under study. This is important to mention in sectarian-confessional Lebanon, which officially recognizes 18 sects and has 15 religious courts to administer their personal status affairs (marriage, inheritance, divorce, custody of children, and death).

2. Henry A. Kissinger, "The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Forever Alter the World Order", *Wall Street Journal*, 3 April 2020, via https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-coronavirus-pandemic-will-forever-alter-the-world-order-11585953005 [Accessed 16 April 2020].

3. "Iranian, Italian Planes Land in Beirut amid Coronavirus Fears", (24 February 2020), via http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/269416.

4. Timour Azhari, "Lebanon will shut airport, restrict movement over coronavirus: Government had already banned flights from 11 coronavirus-hit countries including Iran, China and Italy", (16 March 2020), via https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/lebanon-shut-airport-restrict-movement-coronavirus-200316101635705.html [Accessed 22 March 2020].

5. *Aljoumhouria* (14 April) 2675: 24. Available from: www.aljoumhouria.com. [Accessed 16 April 2020].

6. What triggered the war was that Palestinian fighters (*fida'iyyin*) shot and killed a Phalange militia man in the Christian area of in East Beirut on their way to an event in the *Beddawi* camp near Tripoli, in north Lebanon. On their way back, the Phalange ambushed them in the *'Ayn al–Rimeneh* district, near Beirut, and shot everyone in the bus, killing seventeen and wounding thirty. http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/april/13/newsid_4439000/4439939.stm [Accessed 16 April 2020].

7. https://www.facebook.com/103583057837290/posts/134871528041776/; https://t.me/sirajalqaem [Accessed 22 March 2020].

8. https://www.facebook.com/103583057837290/posts/134871528041776/ [Accessed 22 March 2020].

9. Reiterated in the TV programme entitled "*Ma' al-Nas* [With the People]", *Al-Manar TV* (2 February 2021), 9:30 pm, local time: https://program.almanar.com.lb/program/5348; https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/153958. [Accessed 3 February 2021].

10. Al-Manar [21 February 2020], 7:30 pm News, https://almanar.com.lb

11. Personal interview, [18 July 2020].

12. CF. TV program: https://program.almanar.com.lb/program/867; https://program.almanar.com.lb/episode/135786. [Accessed 22 March 2020].

13. See the section entitled "Imposing injunctions between *masalih* and *mafasid*" (*fard al-ahkam bayna al-masalih*

14. *wa al-mafasid*). Personal interview, [4 August 2009].

15. There is no absolute prohibiting or sanctioning; rather, every case is contextualized and studied individually to see if it fits religiously sanctioned practices or not.

16. See also, *Kayhan* 13223 (16 *Jamadi al-Awwal* 1409/ 6 January 1989). Kayhan is an Iranian daily newspaper: http://kayhan.ir/ (Published in Farsi, Arabic and English)

17. In the maxims of Islamic jurisprudence (*qawa'id al-fiqh*), the maxim of 'mutual competition' (*tazahum*) states that 'in case of conflict of duties, then give priority to the most pressing duty over the least pressing duty, or the one deemed more important than the other' (*idha tazahamanna amran wajiban fa yajib taqdim al-aham 'ala al-muhim, wa al-mulih 'ala al-aqalu ilhahann*).

18. See the TV programme entitled "*Fann Qawim* [Resistance Art]*"*, (first episode), *Al-Manar TV* (28 February 2021): 8:30 – 9:30 pm, local time: https://program.almanar.com.lb/program/6437. [Accessed 1 March 2021].

19. ¹ As clearly mentioned in the abstract and introduction of this article, most of the examples deal with COVID-19 in Lebanon, but are not exclusively limited to the pandemic.

20. https://www.facebook.com/HujeirFestival/; www.hujeirfestival.com [defunct] [Accessed 22 March 2020].

21. Abd al-Rahman Jasim, (9 August 2019), "Jerusalem is our Eye and Heart" (meaning heart & soul) via: https://al-akhbar.com/Literature_Arts/274790 [Accessed 22 March 2020].

22. Sebastien Roblin, "Israel's Merkava Tank: The Best on the Planet?" *National Interest*, (17 October 2019). The *Merkava* is known as "The Chariot of God" because of its invincible structure and superiors manoeuvring power. https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/israrels-merkava-tank-best-planet-88601 [Accessed 22 March 2020].

23. https://al-akhbar.com/Literature_Arts/274790 [Accessed 22 March 2020].

24. https://www.facebook.com/HujeirFestival/videos/-مسرحية-سوالف-وصلت-عالضـاحية/٧١٦٠٦٤٦٤٥٥١٩٥١٩/ [Accessed 22 March 2020].

25. "Black comedy is aimed specifically at death, the darkest of all topics. I'll paraphrase a line from Richard Pryor to illustrate black comedy. 'Life is the ultimate joke. It don't care how famous you are, how much money you got, how many friends you got. You ain't gettin' out alive'." Mark Anater, "How is black comedy different from dark comedy?" (13 October 2018), via https://www.quora.com/How-is-black-comedy-different-from-dark-comedy [Accessed 22 March 2020].

26. Mike Bedard, "What is Black Comedy? Definition and Examples for Filmmakers" (3 May 2020), via https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-black-comedy-definition/ [Accessed 22 March 2020].

27. https://www.facebook.com/HujeirFestival/videos/-المهنـدس-محمـد-كـوثراني-مـدير-مهرجان-وادي-الحجير/٤٩٥٢٧٢٩٣١٠٣٢٢٤٢/ [Accessed 22 March 2020].

28. A famous stand-up comedian, political satirist, actor, writer, director, producer, and TV and movie playwright. Official website: https://charbelkhalil.com/ ;

https://www.facebook.com/charbelgkhalil/   ;
http://www.lebaneseactors.net/actor-412/Charbel-Khalil / [Accessed 22 March 2020].

29. In Lebanon, around 40 percent of the estimated $100 Billion public debt was wasted on subsidizing the National Electricity Company (EDL), which loses around $2 billion annually, and there is hardly any electricity produced. Private generators make up for the electricity shortages. In other words, the average Lebanese citizen pays two bills for the electricity. The same goes for water. Consumer products are on the rise, in a country that annually exports $2 billion and imports $20 billion on. Many factories and business became bankrupt, and many employees lost their jobs. Added to that are around two million refugees (Syrian, Palestinian, and Iraqi), who are draining the resources of Lebanon and its four million citizens. In short, before the 17 October 2019 demonstrations, the economic situation was already on the verge of collapse.

30. Cf. Beckett's Theatre of the absurd *Waiting for Godot* and J. P. Sartre's *The Wall*.

31. *Reuters*, 'Coronavirus lockdown inspires animation about deteriorating conditions   in   Lebanon',   (18   April   2020),   via:
https://english.alarabiya.net/en/coronavirus/2020/04/18/Coronavirus-lockdown-inspires-animation-about-deteriorating-conditions-in-Lebanon;
https://www.facebook.com/alarabiya.english/videos/678427722731540/;

32. Samuel Barclay Beckett (1906-1989) was an Irish novelist, playwright, theatre director, and poet, who lived in Paris for most of his adult life.

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Book Review

***Art of Islam, Language and Meaning: Commemorative Edition,* By Titus Burckhardt, Foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Introduction by Jean-Louis Michon, Translated by J. Peter Hobson, Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009, PP. 248, $32.95.**

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Art of Islam is a masterpiece and is considered to be the most in-depth study on the subject ever written. It was commissioned by the World of Islam Festival (London) and originally published in 1976;[1] in 2009 it was republished in a revised commemorative edition featuring over three hundred fifty color and black-and-white illustrations (two hundred eighty-five of which are new), and including a new introduction. Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984) was one of the most widely respected authorities on Islamic art as well as having a profound understanding of the Islamic tradition and its mystical dimension, Sufism.

In his foreword, the world-renowned Islamic philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) has called this classic book "the definitive work on Islamic art as far as the meaning and spiritual significance of this art are concerned" (p. viii). Elsewhere he has written that Burckhardt "had been the first person in the West to expound seriously the inner meaning of Islamic art."[2]

This work is organized into eight chapters: (1) Prologue: The Ka'ba; (2) The Birth of Islamic Art; (3) The Question of Images; (4) The Common Language of Islamic Art; (5) Art and Liturgy; (6) The Art of Sedentaries and Nomadic Art; (7) Synthesis; and (8) The City.

This volume brings the wide spectrum of art within the Islamic tradition to broader audiences. It also provides the spiritual keys to discern these forms and to

connect them to the metaphysical principles of the Islamic revelation, which is to see that its art forms are the earthly crystallization of Islam itself. To ask the question "What is Islam?" it would suffice to point to one of its remarkable art forms such as the Mosque of Córdoba, Ibn Tulun in Cairo, one of the *madrasahs* in Samarqand or the Taj Mahal. Hence what is considered to be the most outward manifestation of religion or civilization, such as art, correspondingly reflects its most inward dimension of that civilization. In Islam, the outward is known as *az-zahir* and the inward as *al-batin*, a perspective that views God as both transcendent and immanent, both of which are joined in the Divine Unity (*tawhid*). The birth of all sacred art, in fact, is associated with the exteriorization of that which is most inward in every sapiential tradition; therefore, there is an important connection between art and the mystical dimensions of all religions.

The Ka'ba, as the liturgical center of the Muslim world, is inextricably linked to the origin of the Abrahamic monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and demonstrates Islam's connection to all the monotheist religions. The notion of *center* and *origin* are presiding ideas, as they are "two aspects of one and the same spiritual reality, or again, one could say, the two fundamental options of every spirituality" (p. 1). The Koran explains that "Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian, but detached (*hanif*) and submitting (*muslim*)…" (3:67). Abraham was the apostle of pure and universal monotheism, which the Islamic tradition purposes to renew. The Ka'ba, although not a work of art as such, can be regarded as "proto-art" whose metaphysical dimension is linked to myth and revelation, therefore containing the embryo of the whole of Islamic art.

According to Burckhardt "The art of Islam … is abstract, and its forms are not derived directly from the Koran or from the sayings of the Prophet; they are seemingly without scriptural foundation, while undeniably possessing a profoundly Islamic character" (p. 7). He adds that "Art never creates *ex nihilo*. Its originality lies in the synthesis of pre-existing elements" (p. 18).

The prohibition of images in Islam is specifically associated with images of the Divine. As Islam is the renewal of Abrahamic monotheism, the Prophet Muhammad, as Abraham before him, opposes idolatrous polytheism. To produce images of the Divine is to perpetuate the error that associates the relative with the Absolute or the created with the Uncreated, reducing one level to another. The term *aniconism* is used to depict the art of Islam, which differs from iconoclasm. Burckhardt elaborates,

As for Islamic aniconism, two aspects in all are involved. On the one hand, it safeguards the primordial dignity of man, whose form, made "in the image of God", shall be neither imitated nor usurped by a work of art that is necessarily limited and one-sided; on the other hand, nothing capable of becoming an "idol", if only in a relative and quite provisional manner, must interpose between man and the invisible presence of God. What utterly outweighs everything else is the testimony that there is "no divinity save God"; this melts away every objectivization of the Divine before it is even able to come forth. (p. 32)

The immutable essences (*al-a'yan ath-thabitah*) of things, their archetypes, are not apprehended, as they are beyond form; however, they are reflected in the contemplative imagination of the believer. Everything that exists in the cosmic order, exists in this hierarchy, which manifests qualitatively and not quantitatively. Burckhardt states,

[T]he most profound link between Islamic art and the Koran … lies not in the form of the Koran but in its haqiqah, its formless essence, and more particularly in the notion of tawhid, unity or union, with its contemplative implications; Islamic art … is essentially the projection into the visual order of certain aspects or dimensions of Divine Unity. (p. 51)

Calligraphy is a widely used art form among Muslims. In weaving the horizontal and vertical movement of the script, change and becoming are juxtaposed with what is immutable. Burckhardt adds, "The vertical is therefore seen to unite in the sense that it affirms the one and only Essence, and the horizontal divides in the sense that it spreads out into multiplicity" (p. 54).

As human diversity is inexhaustible, so is the cosmic order, all of which is contained in the Divine Unity. It is reflected through harmony, which is expressed as "unity in multiplicity" (*al-wahdah fi'l-kathrah*) and "multiplicity in unity" (*al-kathrah fi'l-wahdah*). This interpenetration is the expression of one abiding in the other, yet all things ultimately return to the Divine Unity. Again, "Islam is the religion of return to the beginning, and … this return shows itself as a restoration of all things to unity" (p. 66). The central theme of the Islamic tradition is Divine Unity, which exists *a priori* everywhere and always. The decisive task for the human being is to realize the Divine Unity in him or herself and the cosmic order.

Worship is inseparable from beauty, as the *hadith* instructs: "God has inscribed beauty upon all things." Hence, "Sacred art … fulfills two mutually complementary functions: it radiates the beauty of the rite and, at the same time, protects it." (p. 88) From this perspective, a rite itself is sacred art. A pulpit, known in Arabic as a *minbar*, symbolizes the ladder of the worlds—these are the corporeal, the psychic, and the spiritual. There is a liturgical and artistic role of clothing in Islam. Burckhardt clarifies, "To veil the body is not to deny it, but to withdraw it like gold, into the domain of things concealed from the eyes of the crowd" (p. 105).

The significance of the carpet within Islamic spirituality is illuminated here,

> *It is the image of a state of existence or simply of existence as such; all forms or happenings are woven into it and appear unified in one and the same continuity. Meanwhile, what really unifies the carpet, namely the warp, appears only on the borders. The threads of the warp are like the Divine Qualities underlying all existence; to pull them out from the carpet would mean the dissolution of all its forms.*
> *(p. 119)*

Burckhardt maintains that art should be "typified by beauty" and dismisses contemporary discussions of functions by stating that "certain functions owe their existence to man's decadence" (p. 156). He adds, "The only beautiful work of art is the one which, in some way, reflects integral human nature whatever its incidental function" (p. 156). There is an important awareness of the ephemerality of all things in the cosmic order; for this reason, art always includes something provisional pertaining to it—"We shall surely make all that is upon it [the earth] barren dust" (Koran 18:8).

Burckhardt's work has stood the test of time and has demonstrated its enduring value to those wanting to understand the art of Islam. Because modern art has no parallels with Islamic art, or any sacred art, for that matter, it challenges the Western mindset and its Eurocentrism—its ability to appreciate art as understood in a theocentric civilization, where nothing stands outside the sacred. Art in this context contains something beyond its artistic form, something timeless and universal, as there is no "art for art's sake" in Islam or any other sacred art. The important connection between sacred art and contemplation has been forgotten and lost in the modern world. The Prophet defines *ihsan* as "serving [or worshiping] God as if you see Him, because if you do not see Him, He nonetheless sees you." It is in tracing beauty, whether in a form of art or in the cosmic order, back to the origin that we can realize that the metaphysical dimensions of aesthetics are a

doorway to the Divine. As the Prophet has expressed it, "God is beautiful and He loves beauty" (p. 224).

Note

1. Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, trans. J. Peter Hobson (London, UK: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976).
2. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* (Oxford, UK: Praeger, 2010), p. 236.