

"MOHAMMAD IS THE LAST MESSENGER":¹

Introducing Islam's Age of Reason!

What does "the last" mean?

There were a few occasions in my life when I had the fortune² of being able to read the *Qur'an* "cover to cover" in one sitting, that is, over a concentrated two- or three-day period when my reading session would be virtually uninterrupted except for tending to life's barest necessities. Reading in this fashion allows one to appreciate a fairly long and wholesome text differently from the way one appreciates it when one reads it intermittently, or in pieces. For example, during one such reading session I got to "view" the countless "heaven and hell" or "reward and punishment" clauses or *ayahs* dispersed throughout the *Qur'an* from a purely "educational" or "guidance" perspective, or in other words, as simply being a highly commendable and sophisticated psychological tool aimed at guiding and exhorting human beings to do good and to avoid doing evil. Needless to say, this "sophisticated" or "mature" appreciation of those *ayahs* is not commensurate with the natural or immediate image they evoke in the reader when they are encountered *in loci*. Rather, when they are read, or are heard in pieces, these statements more often than not evoke fear among the faithful, or enticing images of bodily pleasure and bliss, exactly, I want to say, as they are probably meant to, and no more. But once one looks at the larger picture, evocative images of scorching fires and virginal maidens immediately subside and give way to the calmer purview of a rationalist Pavlovian psychology.

It is against the background of this comparison between a *narrow* view and a *broad* view that I once read the repeated references to Mohammad being the last prophet. But let me first explain how

¹ In Arabic, indifferently, the last /the seal of the prophets/messengers.

² One such fortunate event was when I was "hosted" in an Israeli prison cell for three months during the first Gulf War.

these references can be and often are interpreted on a narrow view: simply, one can understand that to mean -besides the obvious conclusion that no prophet will come after him- that Mohammad's is the last or final word. In its turn, what this can be taken to mean is that, whatever was said by or is attributed to earlier prophets can now be supplanted or adjusted by what Mohammad has to say -*his is the final word*. Perhaps the point should be emphasized here that the really relevant context for this "message" is the Abrahamic tradition -i.e., Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the context of this tradition, the implications of such a conclusion are far-reaching: while on the one hand Muslims who take this view can regard the followers of other "Abrahamic religions" with a measured sense of understanding and tolerance (they are not idol-worshippers, for example, but "people of *the Book*"), on the other hand they cannot regard the articles of their religions as having equal divine weight to that which their own religion has.

Of course, I am not arguing that such "narrow" views or readings are exclusive to Islam or are one-directional only. An analogously patronizing sentiment of "understanding" or "tolerance" can also run in the opposite direction, expressed for example by how some Jews might look upon Christians, or by how both Jews and Christians might look upon Muslims: in both cases the "new" religious manifestations or initiatives can be viewed as well-intentioned but misguided or faulty, or are at any rate as being inferior.

Indeed, analogous but directionally opposite arguments can be made "to show" respectively why "earlier" or "later" revelations or words of God carry more divine weight: the "later" religion may simply be argued to be an errant splinter group (Dante's *Divine Comedy* situates Mohammad in the *Inferno*, splitting his chest open with his hands, in effect conveying the message to the visiting Virgil that he was placed there because of having caused a split in the human body of the faithful). Likewise, the "earlier" religion may be argued to have been misinterpreted or misconceived (according to the *Qur'an*, Jesus Christ was never crucified, though it *seemed* that way), thus making a later revelation a more reliable source for verifying the divine truth. In other words, depending on one's departure point, different arguments can generate opposite results, "proving"

in effect that it is either the earlier or the later version of the “Abrahamic Faith” or of the “Abrahamic religions” which is true, or truer. Therefore, returning to our ‘Mohammad is the last Prophet’ hypothesis, “on a narrow view” this can easily be taken to mean, and in effect it was and is taken by the average Muslim to mean that the phenomenon of Muhammad is *the* genuine instantiation of God’s religion, rendering all “older versions” (i.e., Judaism and Christianity) to all intents and purposes simply *obsolete*.

Let us now try to imagine how two parties, at a primary level, each being perceived respectively by the other as “an errant splinter group” or as “an obsolete religion”, might interact with one another: one could surmise that, in the absence of compelling practical reasons for them to do otherwise, the two parties (e.g. Christians and Muslims) will *at worst*, especially when the metaphysical looms large in their calculus, fight one another, as indeed they often have done in the past. *At best*, surely, in the absence of compelling practical reasons for them to do otherwise, and *informed by one set of guiding rules or the other*, they can determine to live by a cautious “live and let live” policy -which is how they seem to be coping so far with one another today.

Of course, as we can bear witness to in the case of Muslims and the Jewish State, compelling political reasons from outside the realm of religion or metaphysics can ignite conflict, which in turn can inflame religious fervor, which can feed into the original combustion, sustaining and even inflaming it further. We will return to this case below. Meantime, let us address the following two questions regarding the “primary model” we described: Can we rest assured that these two parties can continue to live that way, i.e., in accordance with the “live and let live” policy or in a state of peace? And, looking further beneath the surface in order to understand the underlying mechanics, what are the “guiding rules” informing such a policy?

Let me attend to the latter question first: I suggest that whereas for the Christian West these “guiding rules” might include the principles of democracy and pluralism, which common wisdom has it grew out of the Enlightenment in Europe, and which seem today to have be-

come an all-pervading culture, in the Muslim East it is the rule of what might be called “tolerant paternalism”- a system of “multiplicity within an overarching unity”, or what in Islam’s history might more specifically have been known as the “*millet* or *dhimmi* system”, - which has arguably evolved or “expanded”, in contemporary terms, into a general form of *toleration* for “the other”: during Islam’s long history, different minorities were “tolerated” to live under an overarching Islamic rule, be it under certain conditions, including the payment of special taxes, in each case enjoying an internal autonomy to run their own affairs.³ The point being further argued now is that the Muslim East seems to have “extended”, as it were, the principle of “toleration of the other *within*” so as to make it apply to the other “*without*” (excepting, of course, situations where there is a declared foreign aggression). So, if it is arguably Enlightenment’s democracy or pluralism that informs the “live and let live” policy of the West, it is arguably this extended form of toleration (tolerant paternalism) that informs the same policy as viewed from the East. It is probably safe to assume that it is under these respectively different guiding rules, or something similar to them or of their nature, that the Christian West and the Muslim East have come to acknowledge each other’s *de facto* “occupancy” of the world in *separate* spaces. This “minimalist” or cautionary arrangement of coexistence between the “two worlds” would then so far seem to be *the best* between two parties which, *defined in terms of a narrow view* of their respective religious backgrounds, would typically view each other as being either errant or obsolete, and would otherwise therefore essentially be in a state of war against each other, whether dormant or active.

Under these circumstances and in these conditions, *all other things being equal*, it would not seem to be either necessary or indeed morally preferable, for one party to seek to reformulate these underlying rules of “minimalist” coexistence by trying to make the other party adopt its own guiding rules for the “live and let live” policy, citing its own guiding rules (e.g., electoral democracy) as being more civilizational or culturally advanced. Of course, there is nothing to

³ See for example the excellent treatment of this subject by Mark Cohen, **Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews In the Middle Ages** (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1994, where a comparison is made between the treatment by Christians and Moslems of Jews.

prevent this or that party from espousing their principles and values *on other grounds* –such as their worthy moral nature, for example. But, if the principle of pluralism among cultures (live and let live policy) can be sustained by different culture-specific values, it would go against the value of liberalism itself if one culture sought to impose its own values on others, thus replacing in the process the value-system which had kept the peace between them so far.

However, it may be one thing to be talking about past practices, and another to be talking about the future in a radically changing world. In other words, if this minimalism in coexistence has worked as a best option during various periods in the past, there is no guarantee that it will continue to avail itself, even simply as one of several options, as we enter the globalized 21st century. For example, if the principles of democracy and pluralism are essentially an Enlightenment product, and if, as perhaps most enunciated in John Locke or Immanuel Kant, the key to the Enlightenment's philosophy is the individual -whether as a free rational being or as a depository of human rights, such as the right to freedom or to private property possession- then new challenges immediately impose themselves as soon as the political system founded on these principles begins to have to cope with "the other", not as a *separate* world occupying a different space, nor just as a "foreign" individual living within its own space, but as *an entire "community" living and growing within its own body-politic*. It is in this sense that questions are being raised in different European countries today concerning immigrant communities, especially communities, like the Muslim one, which come with entirely different religio-cultural habits and beliefs. Though the image may not be sensitive, yet one could look upon such communities as organisms or units which have come to nest themselves inside a host. The fundamental question here is, To what extent can the political system in question accept a situation where an individual can melt into the background of his or her community, so that the basic social unit in the picture becomes the community rather than the individual, and so that government institutions begin to act towards those individuals using (altogether foreign) community standards?⁴ Arguably, in the "Muslim East" this problem would not

⁴ Crista datz-Winter, a judge in a Frankfurt family court, ruled late March 2007 against expediting a divorce plea brought by a Muslim wife against her Moroccan husband, quoting a Qur'anic verse which she said gives

have arisen, or would not arise in the same sort of way, simply because of the underlying culture (and accompanying rules) of toleration towards communities of which we spoke earlier.⁵ But this is not to say that this underlying culture of toleration solves all problems. *Its* drawback is its lack of support of individual human rights, including individual freedoms, as manifested in a myriad of ways recently brought to public attention through the UN Human Development Report.⁶ If it was possible for a system of tolerant paternalism to suppress or just ignore individual rights in a single world, or in one which is closed off from neighboring democratic worlds, it is impossible to do this in an increasingly globalized, and digitally connected world, where individuals living in a totalitarian system can compare themselves on a daily basis with their counterparts in democracies. In short, if an individual-based pluralism approach will eventually need in our new world to contend with what one might legitimately describe as a community right or simply a socio-cultural “imperative”, a community-based pluralism approach runs the opposite risk of conflicting with and having to address what one might legitimately try to defend as individual rights. Stated simply, the world paradigm seems to be shifting. It is no longer possible to continue to expect to attain a state of peace within one’s own community on the basis of either one or another of two mutually exclusive guiding ground-rules.

Clearly, we are not simply speaking “academically”, as it is were, about hypothetical or possible worlds. On the contrary, we are speaking about two overall systems (democracies and tolerant totalitarianisms) which are having actually to cope with precisely these problems: a Europe which is searching for optimal means to deal with growing Muslim immigrant communities, and a Muslim East which is having to deal with ever-increasing human-rights aware-

a Moslem husband both right to use corporal punishment against a disobedient wife, and superiority over the wife. This ruling created a major storm in Germany’s papers at the time, reinforcing the debate concerning the limits of tolerating foreign customs among immigrant communities. Many Moslem leaders in Germany also spoke against the ruling -see De **Spiegel Online International**, March 29, 2007.

⁵ Historically, and to various extents in different Muslim countries even today, minority communities are allowed to run their own legal courts in matters appertaining to their cultural traditions, habits and religious beliefs.

⁶ The First United Nations Human Development Report On the Arab World, 2004, underlined three major “deficiencies” as it called them -that of freedom, that of women empowerment, and that of knowledge.

ness and democracy movements. Moreover, as we speak about those two worlds, we cannot but be cognizant of how the Jewish-Muslim point of friction being played out in the Middle East is both affecting and being affected by the unfolding Muslim-Christian point of friction which we just described.

We now come to a major juncture in our discourse: clearly, to return to the first of the two questions we posed earlier, namely, about whether we can expect the present “live and let live” *status quo* to continue, we now begin to see, from having addressed the question about the underlying “guiding rules” in the two worlds, that political developments are beginning to cause a paradigm shift, threatening to destabilize the existing “state of peace” in Christian-Muslim relations. And now, as we try to look into the future, to see how best to cope with the shift in the world paradigm which we described, we clearly need to “expand” our purview further, in particular to incorporate into our model the existing “state of war” in Muslim-Jewish relations.

Here, there are two fundamental points which need to be recognized: first, the common genetic code in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, while in one respect making the *convivencia* between them theoretically feasible, in another respect it makes friction between them potentially more combustible than between any of them and other religions or codes of belief not sharing the same genetic code: Shintuists can happily adopt Buddhism, as each one of these two religions addresses an entirely separate world, and there are no real bones to pick in the relationship between either of these two religions (or a multitude of others) and the so-called Semitic religions. In contrast, Muslims and Jews contest Abraham’s tomb between them precisely because he is the shared focal point of the two religions. Jews and Christians contest whether Jesus was the Messiah. It is simply an unfortunate fact that common ancestry happens to be a good breeding ground for discord! Second, it is important to realize that, *contrary to prevalent perceptions*, and in a way that compels us to see world-divisions anew, it is not the case by any means that Israel’s is a European-style democracy (therefore assured of continued Western political support *vis-a-vis* the Arab world). Going by our earlier definitions of underlying ground-rules,

we can immediately discover that Israel's ground-rules for coexistence with or toleration for "the other" are more akin to Islam's (that "we" as a predominant nation are open-minded enough to acknowledge "your" existence within our body-politic, and to dispense to you all the rights you may need as an individual or a community to live a civilized life) than to the West (that each individual, *by virtue of that individuality*, is a natural depository of rights). Being a self-defined *Jewish State* Israel is not, alas for its *Ashkenazi* population, an Enlightenment product.

I wish to underline the fact that this point about Israel is not being made polemically or even as a value-judgment: as we look into the future in order to determine how best to prescribe a state of peace in the Jewish/Christian/Muslim triad (or what one might call "the Abrahamic World"), we need to address the realities. It would be misconceived for instance to bank on a continuing political alliance between Israel and the West on the assumption of shared cultural or Enlightenment values- shared, that is, to the exclusion of the Muslim world. The litmus test anyway of whether Israel is an Enlightenment product is whether it is prepared (even if just in principle) to extend equal rights, including the application of the Knesset Law of return, to all Palestinians. It is well-known by now that one strong argument used by Israeli leaders in support of a two-state solution is precisely in order to prevent that possibility. Indeed, a major call today which Israel's Arab citizens, concerned about their status and rights, are making is for Israel to declare itself to be *a State for all its citizens* (rather than a Jewish State). Therefore, the political tapestry before us is more complex. If the Jewish State shares some values with Western countries, it certainly shares others with the Muslim world where it is now geographically situated.

In his most recent work Charles Taylor (a communitarian rather than an individualist in persuasion) describes the genealogy of the coming of age of secularism in the modern world.⁷ But we are also aware of an unprecedented resurgence of religious fervor in various parts of the world among the followers of the three Semitic religions - a fervor which, by the genetic nature of these religions, pits any

⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Belknap-Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. and London) 2007.

one of them into direct friction with the other. It is not being claimed here that, *a la* Karl Schmitt for example, politics after all is religion by other means.⁸ But it is undeniable that, for whatever reason or reasons such fervor is being inflamed in different parts of the world, it both feeds into as well as gets affected by politics. For example, electoral considerations in the United States make it imperative for policy makers to express support for the State of Israel on *Christian* grounds, given the swelling numbers of the “Christian Right”, for whom Israel constitutes a necessary historical phase in the divine plan for the Second Coming. In its turn, this (and similar) “pro-Jewish” Christian manifestations immediately translate into an anti-Christian Islamism, which then feeds into, for example, inflammatory Iranian public speech denouncing U.S. efforts at preventing Iran from developing its nuclear power. The interactive, ever-speeding, ever-growing spiral of discord seems to assume a life of its own, instantiating itself in countless places and events, ostensibly disconnected, but sinisterly exhibiting the same pattern, from random shooting inside the main mosque in Hebron, to random shooting inside a religious Jewish school in Jerusalem, running through such “isolated” or at any rate separate incidents as the murder of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam, the sexual sadism in Abu Ghreib, or the engraving of swastikas on synagogues in a European town. Indeed, it is unfortunately almost safe to dismiss by now those theories which pronounced the death of God in politics, and predicted the beginning of a secular era prompted merely by the search for material well-being.

Which takes us to the last point I wish to make: whether or not the political dimension of, say, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is the exclusive determinant of its outcome, clearly its combative religious dimension is in a constant position to undermine the positive efforts to reach that outcome. In other words, while it may be argued that once a political solution is found to this conflict then religious discord will also disappear, it is still the case that such discord can at the very least hamper the efforts to reach that solution. Further-

⁸ Died in 1985, K. Schmitt continues to be viewed as a right-wing, Hobbesian landmark in the history of political thought. See, for example, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. George D. Schwab, trans. (MIT Press, 1985)(University of Chicago Press; University of Chicago edition, 2004 with an Introduction by Tracy B. Strong. Original publication: 1922, 2nd edn. 1934.

more, this discord happens to be spread out and interwoven throughout the Abrahamic world, stretching from the United States to Afghanistan, leading us to conclude that it needs to be addressed at a fundamental level if a political "state of peace" is to reign in this world. But as we focus our attention on possible future scenarios we have to be cognizant of three operating factors: first, the failing mechanics which hitherto sustained the "live and let live policy" between the Muslim East and the Christian West -what we called the "ground rules"- brought about by increasing border perforations; second, the ongoing conflict between the Jewish State and the Muslim world, taking on an increasingly religious dimension, and spilling out into the Christian West; and, third, the misperception of what has hitherto been seen almost as a "natural divide" between the Judeo-Christian and the Muslim Worlds (with accompanying theories about incongruous civilizations, etc.), and reflecting an underlying commonality and a "basic values" alliance between Israel and the West, guaranteeing a parallel political alliance. This "perspective" needs to be replaced, it was argued, by one which takes in the essential fact that the world we are dealing with primarily is the Abrahamic world.

So interwoven are the religious and political threads running through the political tapestry before us, these three factors tell us, and so deadlocked in existing or evolving conflict, that we are compelled to think anew about how best to bring about a state of peace in the Abrahamic world. For, truth be again told, it is the common genetic code in this world that stands to aggravate whatever practical or worldly disputes countries might find themselves having amongst themselves.

I wish now, in conclusion, to propose a justified prescription for bringing about and maintaining a state of peace in the Abrahamic world, made up of the following main points:

- 1: Since it is by now becoming clear that the underlying guiding rules for the existing state of peace in Europe, and between Europe and Muslim countries can no longer sustain that state, an adjustment to those rules seems to be necessary. It is suggested that such an adjustment would incorporate the *millet* or *dhimmi* system

to apply to minorities in the Western world, just as these apply in the Muslim world to non-Muslim communities. Muslims in Europe who wish to remain Muslim but wish to be treated as individual citizens should be allowed to do so, while those wishing to live by the rules of their own community should be allowed to do so under the *dhimmi* system. Likewise, in a kind of “exchange of values”, Muslim governments should be required to incorporate into their legal systems and to guarantee the fundamental positive human rights of individuals, as these were first adopted in the United Nations in 1948, and expanded thereafter. The idea here is that, given border perforation between Muslim East and Christian West, an analogous “systems perforation” should also take place to maintain the state of peace.

2: A conscious effort by political, religious and public opinion leaders should be made to substitute a *broad* for a *narrow* reading and understanding of the three Semitic religions. The first and most important step in this direction is to educate the public that these are not three different religions, but three instantiations or manifestations of the same religion, namely, the Abrahamic faith. This requires the adoption of an attitude whereby the elder comes to welcome the younger as a legitimate addition to the family, while the younger show the respect due to the elder, and refrain from making as though to usurp its place!

3: Furthermore, a broad reading of the article of faith that Moham-mad is the seal of the prophets, from a Muslim perspective, should ideally be, simply but significantly, that, upon the Prophet’s death, and from that moment onwards, and until the end of human history, “*Reason will have to make do instead of Revelation*” ! In other words, rather than subscribe to the narrow view of what this article might mean, such as, for example, that one should suspend one’s rational capacities at the limit ostensibly delineated by the revealed experience and diction, one should instead understand the article to mean one should give full reign to one’s rational capacities to understand, interpret and apply this experience and diction in such a way as to best suit one’s evolving concerns and interests. To recall a point made at the beginning of this essay, I submit this personal “reading” of the ***Qur’an***, as one which can be appreciated or even

shared if one tries to “take in” the whole picture rather than discrete pieces of it, just as one comes to interpret the significance of the pleasure/pain *ayahs*: Mohammad being the last messenger to be sent by God to the world, we are exhorted to realize, means that with the completion of this era, humankind has reached the age of maturity -that we have passed on from the era of Revelations to the era of Reason. We are no longer children or adolescents, in need of constant physical divine interventions to guide us in the right path. I imagine God speaking to us through his Prophet, saying, in effect, “Now you’re on your own. From now on, you have to rely on yourselves”.

4: The emphasis on the role of Reason in this context, whether from the perspective of Islam or from that of the other two aspects of the Abrahamic faith, helps in two important ways: first, because If Revelation (the experience and diction) can be likened to computer “hardware”, or is in some sense “fixed” as (historical) infrastructure, Reason can be likened to “software”, or lends itself to being constantly updated. Phrased differently, while Revelation might be interpreted as a monopolistic world-view, Reason is simply a methodology. Instead of dictating what is right, Reason admits, through intelligent public discourse, of compromise. And compromise, we know by experience, is that art which is best fitted for a “live and let live” policy. So it is Reason also that is best suited to help us render the broad rather than the narrow view of our respective religious heritages.

But the second important point to note about Reason is that it, too, is a product of the Enlightenment. Indeed, if it were possible to define just two major values generated by the Enlightenment, these would be Freedom and Reason. And it is Reason, expressed partly through the art of compromise, and the accompanying capacity to interpret matters broadly rather than narrowly, that is most urgently called upon in such Christian populations as those which constitute a third of the Lockean (“land of the free”) world of the United States -as it is indeed called upon, if from a different source, in the world of Islam.

In conclusion, the changing paradigm-shift which we witness occurring in the (Muslim/Christian/Jewish) world as a result of both so-called "globalization" (digitization, border-perforation, community-migrations, etc.) as well as "religion-ization" (inward-looking religious beliefs increasingly impacting political developments) compels us to re-consider the heuristic value of the traditional division between the Judeo-Christian and Muslim worlds, as against the increasingly more relevant framework of a single Abrahamic World. In this new context, the overriding imperative for Western, Muslim and Jewish political, religious, legal and public opinion leaders is to proactively begin to readjust the underlying rules of engagement between the different parts of this Abrahamic world, by drawing on a broad understanding of their respective traditions, and re-designing the basis for mutual toleration. Only through such a radical shift can we look forward to attaining and preserving a state of peace.