بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيْمِ

The Islamic Ummah in Postmodernism

The advent of postmodernism coincided with the cultural and political crises of the 1960s and 1970s. Disillusionment with the failures of modernity – manifest in two World Wars, the rise of fascism, colonial and imperial violence (in the form of the Algerian and Vietnam wars), and class inequality – provided the impetus for postmodern critiques. Figures such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida challenged modernity's claims of linear progress, and the authority of reason, and instead focused on the relativity of truth and objectivity.

Postmodernism arose as a means of challenging the Universalist claims of the West, but in recent years it has been co-opted by certain schools of thought to undermine Islamic political movements. By emphasizing the constructed and "invented" nature of identities and traditions, postmodernism has been deployed to delegitimize Islam and its practices.

In his book, *Recalling the Caliphate,* Salman Sayyid notes that a common postmodern tactic has been to present Islamism (used here as a reference to the political aspect of Islam) as an inauthentic invention. rather than as a legitimate continuation of the Islamic tradition:

"Islamism is presented as being a discourse 'conjured' around a fantasy of an authentic essence (al-Azmeh, 1993: 7). That is, what the Islamists claim to be their discovery of 'real' Islam is nothing more than the fabrication of an Islamic tradition, which denies its diversity. According to this line of argument, cultural forms such as 'Islamic dress' or 'Islamic way of life' are recent inventions and not the recovery of sacral traditions (1993: 21). The effect of arguments like this is to try and discredit Islamist claims for being legitimate expressions of a Muslim desire for autonomy and deep decolonisation of the world."

This weaponization of postmodern thought was a reaction to Islam's failure to follow a secularizing trajectory. Salman Sayyid writes:

"As late as the last quarter of the twentieth century there was a confident expectation that Islam would dissipate as the global advance of Westernisation brought secularisation and modernisation in its wake. Not only has Islam failed to follow the trajectory pursued by variants of Christianity - namely confinement to the private sphere and depoliticization - but it has, in contrast, forcefully reasserted its public presence in the world. Mobilisations in the name of Islam have presented a series of challenges to the current world order that have taken the form of geopolitical, cultural and philosophical contestations."

This postmodern tactic of labelling political Islam as an "invented tradition" extends further into questioning the legitimacy of the term *Islam* itself as well as concepts related to the Islamic faith such as *Ummah*. By using a "metaphysics of suspicion" (as Salman Sayyid calls it), postmodern texts claim that Islam is too diverse and fragmentary to maintain coherency. Furthermore, the geographic, cultural, and political divisions amongst Muslims mean that the word *Ummah* loses any grounding as a signifier of a shared Muslim community.

It is important to understand what agenda these arguments are in service of. In his book, *Islam, Liberalism, and Ontology*, Professor Joseph J. Kaminski details the political implications of such postmodern texts:

"The rendering of Islam as an incoherent category ultimately subjects its meaning to the whims of hostile hegemonic actors and brute force. If Muslims have no unifying textual/theological referent to fall back upon, someone else undoubtedly will fill that gap for them. Under characterizations of Islam such as El Zein's, there is no reason why only Muslims have the privilege of defining what Islam is. Approaches such as El Zein's ultimately remove agency from Muslims—they are robbed of their ability to control how their own religious discourse is defined. The control of terms and meanings constitutive of a discursive tradition by actors situated outside of it - especially when those terms and meanings are ones that those within it would object to - is imperialism par excellence."

By rendering *Islam* as ambiguous, hegemonic actors such as Western governments and secular academics can impose their own interpretations. Muslims can be labelled externally as "extremists" and "moderates" and Islamic practices that are acceptable by these actors can be dictated.

Moreover, by casting *Ummah* as a mere discursive construct rather than a real, binding community, postmodern critiques undermine collective Muslim solidarity. By denying Muslims the ability to invoke *Ummah* as a legitimate concept, Muslims are left fragmented into isolated national or sectarian groups, weakening their ability to challenge Western hegemonic forces and articulate a unified political vision like that of the *Khilafah*.

The response of Muslims, of course, should be to deny others the ability to define their religion for them by re-engaging with their own tradition. In his paper, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,* Professor Talal Asad addresses Western academia's skepticism to the term "Islam" by suggesting that, in order to write about Islam:

"…one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith."

Islam, of course, is the Deen chosen for us by Allah (swt) and perfected with the Final Risaalah (Message) of the Prophet Muhammad (saw).

Allah (swt) said, ﴿ٱلْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتْمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِى وَرَضِيتُ لَكُمُ ٱلْإِسْلَٰمَ دِينًا﴾ **"This day, I have perfected your Deen for you, completed My Favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your Deen."** (TMQ Surah Al-Maidah 3)

And it is those who believe in Allah (swt) and His Messenger (saw) who are Muslim and are members of a single *Ummah.*

Allah (swt) said, ﴿إِنَّ هَٰذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُونِ﴾ **"Indeed, this Ummah of yours is one Ummah, and I am your Lord, so worship Me."** [TMQ Surah Al-Anbiya 92].

The Prophet (saw) stated, «بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ هَذَا كِتَابٌ مِنْ مُحَمَّدِ النَّبِيِّ ﷺ بَيْنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ مِنْ قُرَيْشٍ وَيَثْرِبَ وَمَنْ تَبِعَهُمْ فَلَحِقَ بِهِمْ وَجَاهَدَ مَعَهُمْ أَنَّهُمْ أُمَّةٌ وَاحِدَةٌ دُونَ النَّاسِ» **In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. This is a document from Muhammad, the Prophet (saw), between the Muslims and the believers from Quraysh and Yathrib, and those who followed them, joined them, and strived with them, that they are one Ummah, distinct from the rest of the people."** (Narrated by Al-Bayhaqi in Al-Sunan Al-Kubra).

And whilst recognizing the truth of Islam, and the existence of a single *Ummah,* the believers can strive towards fulfilling their collective obligations of sufficiency before Allah (swt), establishing a single *Imarah*, *Imamah* and *Khilafah* that rules by all that Allah (swt) has revealed.

Tamim al-Dari (ra) reported that during the time of Umar (ra), people began to compete in building tall structures. The Second Khaleedah Rashid, Umar (ra), said, «يَا مَعْشَرَ الْعُرَيْبِ، الْزَمُوا الْأَرْضَ، إِنَّهُ لاَ إِسْلاَمَ إِلاَّ بِجَمَاعَةٍ، وَلاَ جَمَاعَةَ إِلاَّ بِإِمَارَةٍ، وَلاَ إِمَارَةَ إِلاَّ بِطَاعَةٍ. فَمَنْ سَوَّدَهُ قَوْمُهُ عَلَى الْفِقْهِ كَانَ حَيَاةً لَهُ وَلَهُمْ، وَمَنْ سَوَّدَهُ قَوْمُهُ عَلَى غَيْرِ فِقْهٍ كَانَ هَلاَكًا لَهُ وَلَهُمْ» **O Arabs, stay grounded! There is no Islam without a single community, no single community without a single emirate, and no single emirate without obedience. If a people appoint someone with knowledge of Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) as their leader, it will be a source of life for him and for them. However, if they appoint someone without knowledge of Fiqh, it will lead to his ruin and theirs."** (Narrated by al-Darimi)

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