

# I

## THE UGLY MODERN AND THE MODERN UGLY: RECLAIMING THE BEAUTIFUL IN ISLAM

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Around the middle of March 2002, Saudi newspapers reported an incident that took place in Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad's birthplace, that should have caused a public outcry, investigations, and prosecutions. Instead, nothing happened, and the incident is now all but forgotten. According to the official count, at least fourteen young girls burned to death or were asphyxiated by smoke when an accidental fire engulfed their public school. Parents who arrived at the scene described a horrific scene in which the doors of the school were locked from the outside, and the Saudi religious police, known as the *mutawwa'un*, forcibly prevented girls from escaping the burning school and also prevented firemen from entering the school to save the girls, by beating some of the girls and several of the civil defense personnel. According to the statements of parents, firemen, and the regular police forces present on the scene, the *mutawwa'un* would not allow the girls to escape or be saved because they were not properly covered, and the *mutawwa'un* did not want physical contact to take place between the girls and the civil defense forces. The governmental institution that is responsible for administering the *mutawwa'un* (known as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice)<sup>1</sup> denied beating any of the girls or civil defense workers, and also denied locking the gates of the school and trapping the girls inside. But witnesses told Saudi newspapers that the *mutawwa'un* yelled at the police and firemen to stay back, and beat several firemen, as they commanded the girls to go back into the burning building and retrieve their veils (known as *'abaya* and *niqab* in Saudi Arabia) before they might be allowed to leave the school. Several parents told journalists that they saw at least three girls being beaten with sticks and kicked when they attempted to argue with the *mutawwa'un*. Several girls did obey the

*mutawwa'un*, and returned to the school in order to retrieve their veils, only to be found dead later.<sup>2</sup>

In recent times, Muslim societies have been plagued by many events that have struck the world as offensive and even shocking. This has reached the extent that, from Europe and the United States to Japan, China, and Russia, one finds that Islamic culture has become associated with harshness and cruelty in the popular. When one interacts with people from different parts of the world, one consistently finds that the image of Islam is not that of a humanistic or humane religion. In fact, for many non-Muslims around the world, Islam has come to represent a draconian tradition that exhibits little compassion or mercy towards human beings. From this perspective, the event described above ought not give us pause; it simply becomes yet another inhumane incident in the history of modern Islam that borders on the incomprehensible and insane. Placed in the context of many other morally offensive events, such as *The Satanic Verses* and the death sentence against Salman Rushdie, the stoning and imprisoning of rape victims in Pakistan and Nigeria, the treatment of women by the Taliban, the destruction of the Buddha statues in Afghanistan, the sexual violation of domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, the excommunication of writers in Egypt, and the killing of civilians in terrorist attacks, this event seems to be just another chapter in a long Muslim saga of ugliness. This saga of ugliness has forced Muslims who are embarrassed and offended by this legacy to adopt apologetic rhetorical arguments that do not necessarily carry much persuasive weight. One of the most common arguments repeated by Muslim apologists is that it is unfair to confuse the religion of Islam with the deeds of its followers. The fact that the followers commit egregious behavior in the name of the religion does not in itself mean that the religion commands or sanctions such behavior. A similar, often repeated argument is that one must distinguish Islamic religious doctrines from the cultural practices of Muslims, the implication being that it is culture and not religion that is the culprit responsible for immoral behavior. Another more subtle argument, but one that surreptitiously betrays the same feelings of discomfort and embarrassment, is simply to remind the world that only a very small percentage of the Muslim world is Arab. Although this is factually correct, Muslims would not have been keen about reminding the world of this fact if the behavior of Arabs or their image was honorable. It is exactly because Arabs suffer from a troubled image in today's world that many Muslims feel the need to distance Islam from the Arab identity or Arab culture.

I call these arguments unpersuasive not because they are inaccurate – in fact, all the defensive points mentioned above are logical or factually correct. Nonetheless, I call them unpersuasive because they fail to take account of a variety of counter veiling arguments and problems. For instance, they ignore the role of history in understanding the present, and they also ignore the fact that it is not always possible to separate with surgical accuracy a system of belief from the social practices that have grown around it. Specifically, these arguments fail

to take account of the role of human subjectivities in determining and acting upon doctrine. For example, it is true that Arabs constitute twenty percent of the sum total of Muslims in the world today. But it must be remembered that the very racial category of Arab was socially constructed and re-invented in different periods and places of the world. In certain times and places, whoever spoke Arabic eventually became an Arab, or, at least, came to be perceived as an Arab. The very classification of an Arab was the product of a dynamic and creative socio-linguistic process. The Arabic language, itself, demonstrated a remarkable ability to spread to new nations, and, eventually, to Arabize them. Consider, for instance, the complaint of the Bishop of Cordoba, Alvaro, in ninth-century Spain. He states,

Many of my coreligionists read verses and fairy tales of the Arabs, study the works of Muhammedan philosophers and theologians not in order to refute them but to learn to express themselves properly in the Arab language more correctly and more elegantly. Who among them studied the Gospels, and Prophets and Apostles? Alas! All talented Christian young men know only the language and literature of the Arabs, read and assiduously study the Arab books... If somebody speaks of Christian books they contemptuously answer that they deserve no attention whatever (*quasi vilissima contemntes*). Woe! The Christians have forgotten their own language, and there is hardly one among a thousand to be found who can write to a friend a decent greeting letter in Latin. But there is a numberless multitude who express themselves most elegantly in Arabic, and make poetry in this language with more beauty and more art than the Arabs themselves.<sup>3</sup>

One notices that, at least for conquered Spain, the relation between Arab and Muslim is far more fluid. According to Alvaro, young men were eager to learn the language of the Islamic culture of Andalus because in that age the Arab was not considered a symbol of reactionism or barbarity. One doubts that a Muslim living back then would have had much incentive to differentiate between Arabs and Islam. Even in countries, such as Persia and India, that preserved their native languages after the Islamic invasions, scholars continued to write most books on theology and law in Arabic.<sup>4</sup> Alvaro's statement is significant in another respect; it reminds us of the shifting fortunes of the reputation of Muslims in the world. There is no doubt that Islam and Europe have had a long and unpleasant tradition of mutual vilification and demonization, but these processes of the past were materially different from the present.<sup>5</sup> In my view, the Western attempts to vilify Islam in the past were inspired by fear and respect, and Western perceptions of Muslims were not based on any realistic understanding of Muslim socio-political circumstances. Most of the vilifications were nothing more than the anxieties, fears, and aspirations of Westerners projected onto the dominant force at the time without any foundation in reality. At the intellectual,

commercial, and scientific levels, one finds that Westerners borrowed heavily from Muslim social and legal thought and scientific inventiveness. By contrast, today, whatever bigotry exists against Muslims, it is based in the unfortunate socio-political realities experienced by Muslims, which the West perceives, generalizes, and exaggerates, and which then become the basis for stereotypes. Today's prejudices against Muslims are not based on fear and respect, but on the worst and most cruel type of bigotry, and that is the type that is displayed against those whom the West dominates and controls. Pre-modern bigotry was directed at Muslims, as the masters of the world. Today's bigotry is directed at those who are seen to be at the bottom of the human hierarchy – people who politically and socially live in a dependent and bonded status, like that of slaves.

Hate and bigotry are often based on what social psychologists have called the binary impulse in human beings – the primitive and vulgar tendency to define the world in terms of “us versus them.” This binary impulse first attempts to find an “us,” and then associates that “us” with all that is good and virtuous. At the same time, “them” becomes associated with all that is counter to the “us,” and therefore, the “other” is presumed to be not good, and even evil. What disrupts and challenges this simplistic primitive paradigm is “social need.” Although human societies gravitate towards this binary instinct, the need for interaction and cooperation between different societies and nations acts as a force often inducing human societies to define themselves a way that does not exclude the “other.” With a sufficient amount of overlapping interests, interactions, and conscientiousness, the paradigm could shift from an “us versus them” to an “us–us” perspective.<sup>6</sup> In the pre-modern age, although there is clear evidence of a strong binary impulse pervading both the Muslim and Western worlds, given the scientific and intellectual achievements of Muslims, Christian and Jewish bigotry towards Muslims had to be tempered by the element of need. Both Jews and Christians could not help but be influenced by Muslim intellectual products, and this made the dynamics with Islam complex and multi-faceted.<sup>7</sup> In the modern age, however, the binary perspective of Muslims is no longer one that is undertaken from a position of strength: the relative self-sufficiency of the West is matched by the economic dependency of the Muslim world. Muslim nations are underdeveloped and economically and political dependent, and in the contemporary age there is little that Muslim cultures are able to contribute to the West, other than the Muslim faith.<sup>8</sup> But offensive incidents, such as those mentioned above, greatly impact upon the way that this faith is understood in the West, and further feed into binary constructs *vis-à-vis* Islam and Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Put simply, such incidents of stark ugliness lead many to believe that the Islamic tradition and civilization is fundamentally at odds with the Judeo-Christian tradition, and that a civilizational showdown or confrontation between Islam and the West is inevitable.<sup>10</sup>

My point in this article is not to examine the “Clash of Civilizations” thesis, and I am also not interested in assessing the reasons for the Western bias and

prejudice against Islam or Muslims. I am interested, however, in exploring what might be called the vulgarization of contemporary Islam.<sup>11</sup> By “vulgarization” I mean the recurrence of events that seem to shock the conscience of human beings or to be contrary to what most people would identify as moral and beautiful. As noted above, Islam in the modern age has become associated with violence, harshness, and cruelty, and although mercy and compassion are core values in Islamic theology, these are not the values that most people identify with Islam. As argued below, Islam in the modern age has become plagued by an arid intellectual climate and a lack of critical and creative approaches, which has greatly hampered the development of a humanistic moral orientation. In my view, in order for an intellectual tradition to develop morally, and to vigorously confront renewed moral challenges, a rich and critical intellectual discourse is necessary. But the contemporary Islamic world has been intellectually impoverished, and so there have been far too few influential philosophical or critical intellectual movements emerging from the Muslim world in the modern age. As I argue later, even the most puritan and literalist movements within contemporary Islam have remained largely reactive and intellectually dependent.

#### BEARING WITNESS TO VULGARITY IN THE AGE OF MODERNITY

The incident recounted above regarding the schoolgirls and religious police in Mecca ought to give all Muslims a long conscientious pause. If the event did in fact take place as witnesses alleged that it did, then, in my view, it ought to mark a point for Muslims to rethink much of their experience in the contemporary age. This incident symbolizes not only the abysmal condition of women within certain theological orientations in Islam, but also the gross misuse of the doctrines and traditions of Islamic law in the contemporary age. At the most basic level, even if one assumes that Islamic law does command strict adherence to rules of seclusion and veiling, the necessity of preserving human life would trump any such rule.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the Qur’an, itself, clearly states that whatever rules of seclusion might have been commanded, at one time or another, for women, had one justification and one justification only, and that is the safeguarding of women from molestation or harm.<sup>13</sup> The death of these girls was contrary to the very *raison d’être* and every possible rational basis for the laws of seclusion. One even wonders, if the preservation of the life of these girls had any value whatsoever to the Saudi religious police, why this police did not do something as simple as unlocking the gates of the burning schools, and then withdrawing all the men from the area so that the girls could escape to safety without being seen by men. If the religious police were sufficiently concerned, they could have even removed their own head gear (known as the *ghutra*) and placed it on the heads of the escaping girls, thus allowing them to survive.<sup>14</sup> The point, however, is not the Saudi religious police’s lack of creative problem solving, or their abnormal obsession with the seductive power of women, or

even their callous disregard for the value of human life, especially the lives of women. The point is that this event symbolizes a truly troubling level of moral degeneration in the collective life of contemporary Islam. This incident follows in the wake of a series of events, all of which are symptomatic of something gone awfully wrong in our Muslim system of belief. These events have ranged from the highly visible and infamous such as the 9/11 suicide mass slaughter of mostly non-Muslims, to less visible and lesser-known incidents. For instance, a lesser-known, but equally horrific, incident involved the beheading of a Syrian citizen, 'Abd al-Karim al-Naqshabandi, on December 13, 1996, for allegedly practicing witchcraft against his Saudi employer, Prince Salman bin Sa'ud bin 'Abd al-'Aziz, a nephew of King Fahd. The primary evidence warranting the execution of al-Naqshabandi was an amulet, with Qur'anic verses inscribed on it, found in his desk drawer at work. According to al-Naqshabandi, the amulet was given to him by his mother in Syria, in the belief that it would ward off envy and evil spirits. The Saudi government, however, considered the possession of the amulet and some books on Sufism allegedly found in the defendant's home to be grievous acts of heresy (*a'mal bid'iyya wa shirkiyya*) that warranted nothing less than death.<sup>15</sup>

The consistent commission of repulsive acts of injustice by people who believe that they are acting in the name of Islam must give all Muslims serious pause. From the perspective of a believing Muslim, I must worry about God's covenant with the Muslim people, especially that the Qur'an is full of warnings to Muslims that if they fail to establish justice and bear witness to the truth, God owes us, Muslims, nothing, and is bound to replace us with another people who are more capable of honoring God through establishing justice on this earth.<sup>16</sup> The covenant identified in the Qur'an and given to Muslims is not an entitlement. The Qur'an consistently emphasizes that the covenant given to Muslims is contingent, and that the failure to do it justice will lead God to abandon those once entrusted with the Divine covenant to their own vices and the consequences of their evil deeds.<sup>17</sup> Looking at the sheer amount of ugliness perpetuated in the past twenty years in Islam's name, only the most deluded or self-absorbed Muslim would remain unconcerned. In this context, it is important to note that tragic incidents, such as the murder of al-Naqshabandi, or the 9/11 terrorist attacks, cannot safely always be attributed to an aberrational fanaticism that can be considered marginal and unrepresentative. From a sociological perspective, the commission of violently repulsive acts is often the byproduct of ongoing social malignancies that fester for a long time before manifesting in publicly visible acts. It is risky, and quite foolish, to wave away socially and politically pathological behavior as marginal corruptions in society. Put rather bluntly, people do not just wake up one day and decide to commit an act of terrorism, or decide to kill a person for practicing witchcraft; rather, such acts are preceded by social dynamics that desensitize and deconstruct society's sense of moral virtue and ethics. Especially, as far as theological constructs are

concerned, the commission of and social responses to acts of cruelty typically undergo a long process of indoctrination and acculturation that both facilitate the commission of such acts and mute or mitigate the sense of social outrage upon the commission of offensive behavior. Much of this process of indoctrination and acculturation can be gleaned from the relatively apathetic and muted Muslim responses to the commission of socially and politically abusive acts. Furthermore, a probing and conscientious Muslim ought to be concerned at the evidence of the emergence of a consistent pattern and practice of such abusive conduct. When one finds that Islam is repeatedly and consistently being exploited to justify immoral behavior, this must be considered as a pattern of practice that ought to give Muslims cause for serious concern. This is all the more so because, in many ways, it is history that sets the future in motion. Each abusive act committed in the name of Islam becomes a historical precedent, and each precedent could carry normative weight, and therefore influence the meaning of Islam in the future. Even when one is considering Divinely revealed values, such values acquire meaning only within evolving and shifting contexts. Functioning within different and particularized contexts, interpretive communities coalesce around revealed injunctions and values, and then endow them with meaning. Put differently, there is a socio-historical enterprise formed of various participants that partake in the generation of meaning. The participants in these various socio-historical enterprises are known as interpretive communities – groups of people who share common hermeneutical methodologies, linguistic skills, and epistemological values and coalesce around a particular set of texts and determine the meaning and import of these texts. The determinations of the participants in a socio-historical enterprise become precedents that help set the meaning, and practical applications, of a text, even if the text is sacred, such as the Qur'an. Therefore, when we speak about the meaning of Islam today, we are really talking about the product of cumulative enterprises that have generated communities of interpretation through a long span of history.<sup>18</sup>

In my view, it is imperative for Muslim intellectuals to engage the various precedents set in the name of Islam, and to negotiate the meaning of their religion. Shirking away from this responsibility, or dealing with it in an irresponsible apologetic fashion, would be tantamount to the abandonment of Islam, and a violation of the solemn obligation to promote what is good in life, and reject what is wrong. As Muslims, we are well aware of the Islamic obligation placed upon every Muslim man and woman to enjoin the good and forbid the evil (*al-amr bi'l ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'ann al-munkar*).<sup>19</sup> In fact, according to the Qur'an, the merit of the Muslim nation is hinged on its discharging of this obligation of bearing witness, on God's behalf, to goodness and justice.<sup>20</sup> Naturally, testifying to the injustice committed by non-Muslims against Muslims is infinitely easier than testifying to the injustice committed by Muslims, whether it be against fellow Muslims or non-Muslims. This is why the Qur'an explicitly

commands Muslims to bear witness for truth and justice, even if the testimony is against themselves or against loved ones. Furthermore, the Qur'an specifically identifies such truthful testimony against self-interest as testimony rendered on God's behalf.<sup>21</sup> In my view, truthful testimony is rendered on God's behalf because silence in the face of a wrong committed in the name of Islam is a form of suborning the corruption of the religion. Considered from this perspective, the worst injustice, and the one most worthy of Muslim outrage, is that committed by Muslims, in Islam's name, because that is more deprecating to God and God's religion than any supposed heresy or legal infraction. It is out of concern for the sanctity of their own religion that one would imagine that Muslims would be the most boisterous and vigilant in protesting injustices committed in Islam's name, whether against Muslims or non-Muslims. But in the atmosphere of rampant apologetics and defensiveness that plagues Muslim cultures, one finds that it is exactly this type of thinking that is conspicuously absent from current Muslim activism and intellectual discourses.

When it comes to the issue of self-critical appraisals, Muslim discourses, for the most part, remain captive to the post-colonial experience. These discourses are politicized and polarized to the extent that a Muslim intellectual who takes a critical approach to the Islamic tradition often feels that he is stepping into a minefield. It is difficult for a contemporary Muslim scholar to take a critical position on such matters as Islam and violence or Islam and women without becoming the subject of suspicion, and even accusations as to his or her loyalties and commitments. In addition, it has become a rather powerful rhetorical device to contend that the West is perpetuating false universalisms, and to accuse Muslim critics of being deluded into accepting these universalisms as a God-given truth. These Muslim critics, it is claimed, then project the West's truth onto the Islamic tradition, as if what the West sees as true and good must necessarily be so, and therefore must be adopted by all Muslims.<sup>22</sup> Most often, this type of accusation is leveled against Muslim critics with feminist agendas, but also it has been utilized rather widely against Muslim intellectuals calling for self-critical re-evaluations post-9/11. It is a powerful rhetorical device because the user of such a device is positioning himself or herself as the guardian of integrity and authenticity, while positioning his or her opponents as gullible and even simple-minded.<sup>23</sup> In addition, as an extension of the relativism argument, it is often argued that it is immaterial whether the West, or anyone else in the world, is offended or shocked by the legal and social practices of Muslims. Islam, it is argued, has its own set of standards for justice and righteousness, and it is of no consequence if those standards happen to be inconsistent with the moral sensitivities of non-Muslims. This argument was repeated often in the context of justifying and defending the Salman Rushdie affair, the destruction of the Buddha statues in Afghanistan, and the treatment of women by the Taliban. On face value, this argument is attractive because it seems to affirm a sense of Islamic autonomy and authentic uniqueness that is arguably consistent with the

notion that God is sovereign and that the Divine law is not in any way contingent upon the whim of human beings.<sup>24</sup>

The issue of, what is now commonly described as, cultural relativism versus universalism is very complex, and this is not the place to delve into it. I will note only that this whole discourse becomes rather incoherent unless one clearly identifies what specific value is being identified as relative or universal. Unless one is explicit and specific about the particular value that is claimed to be unique, this whole discourse stops making any sense. In addition, Islam itself, like all religions, is founded on certain universals such as mercy, justice, compassion, and dignity.<sup>25</sup> The Qur'an itself consistently uses terminology that presupposes the existence of universal values, and presumes such values to be recognizable by human beings universally. Much of the Qur'anic discourse on values such as justice, mercy, truth, kindness, and generosity would make little sense if one rejected the existence of universal values.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, claims of ontological truth, whether based on reason or revelation, are not anathema to Islam.<sup>27</sup> From an Islamic perspective, Muslims are not forbidden, and in my opinion are even encouraged, to search for moral universals that could serve as shared and common goals with humanity at large.<sup>28</sup> This seems to me to be an essential characteristic of a universal religion that is addressed to humanity at large, and not to an exclusive cultural or social group. The Qur'an insists that it is the bearer of a message to all humankind, and not to a particular tribe or race.<sup>29</sup> If this is so, Muslims cannot afford to claim that they are not concerned with how the rest of the world sees and evaluates their actions. A universal religion must be accessible and accountable to others so that it can remain pertinent to humanity at large. A universal religion that is neither accessible nor accountable to humanity at large becomes like a private and closed club with bylaws and practices that make sense only to its members.

It seems to me that commentators who respond to shocking incidents such as those mentioned above, by engaging in a knee-jerk reaction of protesting false Western universals, and rejecting introspective self-critical approaches, play well into the hands of a siege mentality that seems to pervade much of contemporary Muslim thought. If critical approaches to the tradition will be consistently dismissed as Western influenced, or as a form of Westoxification,<sup>30</sup> it is difficult to imagine how Muslims will be able to emerge out of what might be described as a state of intellectual dissonance, and into a more constructive engagement with modernity. By "intellectual dissonance," I mean a state of social and cultural schizophrenia in which Muslims experience simultaneously the challenge of modernity, a severe alienation, and evasiveness towards the Islamic intellectual experience, and, at the same time, a symbolic identification and an idealization of that experience.<sup>31</sup> While we suffer this state of intellectual dissonance, there is the very real risk that in our defensive effort to expunge the moral universals of the West, Muslims will also end up dismissing the moral universals of Islam itself. For instance, when contemporary Muslim scholars rise

to emphasize the numerous moral and humanistic aspects of the Islamic tradition, and they are accused by their fellow Muslims of seeking to appease the West, the real danger is that in this highly polarized and politicized climate much of what is authentically Islamic and genuinely beautiful will be lost or forgotten for a long period to come. This, in turn, points to a basic and very serious fallacy, and that is the tendency, usually exhibited by religious fundamentalists and ideological purists, to presume that moral values have a pure lineage that can be precisely identified as Western or non-Western. Whether Muslims or not, purists tend to classify particular values as squarely Judeo-Christian while others are Islamic. It is as if values have a genealogy that can be clearly and precisely ascertained, which then can be utilized in classifying what properly belongs to the West and what belongs to Islam. But the origin and lineage of values are as much of a socio-historical construct as are claims about racial genealogical purity. Considering the numerous cultural interactions and intellectual transmissions between the Muslim world and Europe, it is highly likely that every significant Western value has a measure of Muslim blood in it.<sup>32</sup> This is not merely a matter of acknowledging the Muslim contribution to Western thought. Rather, if we recognize the mixed lineage of ideas, a simple and straightforward taxonomy of moral values and civilizations, and what civilizations are supposed to stand for, becomes much more problematic. As for racial categories, one ought to recognize that civilizational categories are artificial political constructs that do not necessarily fit comfortably with socio-historical realities, and that many moral values do not carry a manufacturer's label or an owner's tag.

Confronted by extreme acts of ugliness, there is no alternative for a Muslim who is interested in reclaiming the moral authority of Islam but to confront the quintessential questions of: Is this Islam? Can this be Islam? And, should this be Islam? It is far too easy for contemporary Muslims to avoid taking responsibility for the extreme acts of ugliness committed by zealots in our midst, and instead cast all the blame upon Western imperialism and colonialism. It is far too easy to engage in the morally evasive strategy of complaining about false universals, and to blame everything and everyone else, but refuse a confrontation with one's own conscience. With every major human tragedy committed in the name of Islam, I think that it is imperative for every Muslim to put aside, for a while, the various intellectual methods by which responsibility is projected, transferred, diluted, and distributed, and to engage in a conscientious pause. In this pause, a Muslim ought to critically evaluate the prevailing systems of belief within Islam, and reflect upon the ways that these systems of belief might have contributed to, legitimated, or in any way facilitated the tragedy. In my view, this is the only way for a Muslim to honor human life, dignify God's creation, and uphold the integrity of the Islamic religion.

If one engages in this conscientious and self-reflective pause, I believe that one would realize that a supremacist and puritanical orientation in

contemporary Islam shoulders the primary responsibility for the vast majority of extreme acts of ugliness that are witnessed today in the Islamic world. In my view, Muslims must come to terms with, and reclaim their religion from a supremacist puritanism that has been born of a siege mentality – a mentality that this supremacist puritanical orientation continues to perpetuate as the primary mode of responding to the challenge of modernity. Importantly, this orientation is dismissive of all universal moral norms or innate ethical values, regardless of the identity of their origins or foundations. In this orientation, the prime and nearly singular concern is power and its symbols. Somehow, all other values, traditions, and normativities are made subservient. As argued below, this orientation, which I will call Salafabism, was, and remains, uninterested in critical historical inquiry. It has responded to the challenge of modernity by escaping to the secure haven of the text, but it has treated rational moral insight as fundamentally corrupting of the purity of the Islamic message. As a result, it has ended up undermining the integrity and viability of the Islamic texts and, in the process, it has arrested and stunted the development of Islamic normative ethical thinking.

#### THE SIEGE MENTALITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF SUPREMACIST PURITANISM

The real challenge that confronts Muslim intellectuals today is that political interests have come to dominate public discourses to the point that moral investigations and thinking have become marginalized in modern Islam. In the age of post-colonialism, Muslims have become largely pre-occupied with the attempt to remedy a collective feeling of powerlessness and a frustrating sense of political defeat, often by engaging in highly sensationalistic acts of power symbolism. The normative imperatives and intellectual subtleties of the Islamic moral tradition are not treated with the analytic and critical rigor that the Islamic tradition rightly deserves, but are rendered subservient to political expedience and symbolic displays of power. Elsewhere, I have described this contemporary doctrinal dynamic as the predominance of the theology of power in modern Islam, and it is this theology that is a direct contributor to the emergence of highly radicalized Islamic groups, such as the Taliban or al-Qaeda, and the desensitization and transference with which Muslims confront extreme acts of ugliness.<sup>33</sup> Far from being authentic expressions of inherited Islamic paradigms, or a natural outgrowth of the classical tradition, these groups, and their impulsive and reactive modes of thinking, are a byproduct of colonialism and modernity. These highly dissonant and defensive modes of thinking are disassociated from the Islamic civilizational experience with all its richness and diversity, and they invariably end up reducing Islam to a single dynamic – the dynamic of power. They tend to define Islam as an ideology of nationalistic defiance to the “other” – a rather vulgar form of obstructionism to the

hegemony of the Western world.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, instead of Islam being a moral vision given to humanity, it becomes constructed into the antithesis of the West. In the world constructed by puritan modes of thinking and their groups, there is no Islam; there is only opposition to the West. This type of Islam that the puritan orientations offer is akin to a perpetual state of emergency where expedience trumps principle, and illegitimate means are consistently justified by invoking higher ends. In essence, what prevails is an aggravated siege mentality that suspends the moral principles of the religion in pursuit of the vindications of political power, and the symbolic displays of domination as well.<sup>35</sup> In this siege mentality, there is no room for analytical or critical thought, and there is no room for seriously engaging the Islamic intellectual heritage. There is only room for bombastic dogma, and for a stark functionalism that ultimately impoverishes the Islamic heritage. One of the most salient characteristics of this orientation is a rabidly aggressive form of patriarchy that responds to feelings of political and social defeatism by engaging in symbolic displays of power that are systematically degrading of women. In my view, for example, the girls that died in Mecca were the direct victims of the sense of frustration and disempowerment felt by puritan men over the humiliations experienced in Afghanistan and Palestine. Of course, this is one of those associations that are virtually impossible to prove empirically, but, in my experience in studying puritan orientations in modern Islam, I find that women are not targeted and degraded simply because of textual commitments or determinations.<sup>36</sup> Rather, there is a certain undeniable vehemence and angst in the treatment of women, as if the more women are made to suffer, the more the political future of Islam is made secure. Puritan orientations do not hesitate to treat all theological arguments aimed at honoring women, by augmenting their autonomy and social mobility, as if a part of the Western conspiracy was designed to destroy Islam. This is also manifested in the puritans' tendency to look at Muslim women as a consistent source of danger, and vulnerability for Islam, and to go as far as branding women as the main source of social corruption and evil.<sup>37</sup>

Although it would be rather disingenuous to suggest that demeaning attitudes towards women were invented or exclusively adopted only by modern puritan orientations, it is important to understand the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the current puritan challenge in this specific historical juncture of Islamic history. What makes the puritan challenge today particularly compelling and singularly threatening to the humanistic tradition in Islam is the deconstruction of the institutions of religious authority in the age of modernity. Historically, these institutions played the primary role in undermining and marginalizing the supremacist and puritanical movements of the past. In addition, not only does the primacy of apologetic intellectual orientations within contemporary Islam not bode well for the ability of Muslims to overcome these supremacist and puritanical movements, but, even more, such apologetics are the main undercurrent feeding into such movements. The apologetic orientation

consisted of an effort by a large number of commentators to defend and salvage the Islamic system of belief and tradition from the onslaught of orientalism, Westernization, and modernity by simultaneously emphasizing both the compatibility and also the supremacy of Islam. Apologists responded to the intellectual challenges of modernity by adopting pietistic fictions about the Islamic traditions, but such fictions eschewed any critical evaluation of Islamic doctrines, and celebrated the presumed perfection of Islam.<sup>38</sup> A common heuristic device of apologetics was to argue that any meritorious or worthwhile modern institutions were first invented and realized by Muslims. Therefore, according to the apologists, Islam liberated women, created a democracy, endorsed pluralism, protected human rights, and guaranteed social security long before these institutions ever existed in the West. Nonetheless, these concepts were not asserted out of critical understanding or genuine ideological commitment, but primarily as a means of resisting the deconstructive effects of modernity, affirming self-worth, and attaining a measure of emotional empowerment. The main effect of apologetics, however, was to contribute to a sense of intellectual self-sufficiency that often descended into moral arrogance. To the extent that apologetics were habit forming, they produced a culture that eschewed self-critical and introspective insight, and embraced the projection of blame and a fantasy-like level of confidence and arrogance. Effectively, apologists got into the habit of paying homage to the presumed superiority of the Islamic tradition, but marginalized the Islamic intellectual heritage in everyday life. While apologists revered Islam in the abstract, they failed to engage the Islamic tradition as a dynamic and viable living tradition. To a large extent, apologists turned Islam into an untouchable, but also entirely ineffective, beauty queen, simply to be admired and showcased as a symbol, but not to be critically engaged in its full nuance and complexity.<sup>39</sup> In many ways, apologists ended up reproducing the legacy of orientalism – a legacy of which they were very critical. Orientalists dealt with the Islamic tradition as a static and, perhaps, even mummified heritage that is represented by a set of self-contained intellectual paradigms, and that is incapable of adapting to the demands of modernity without becoming thoroughly deconstructed and collapsing into itself. In essence, orientalist, who worked in the service of colonialism, paid nothing more than lip service to Islam, but otherwise negated the practical value of Islamic culture. The most typical strategy was for orientalist to insist that the Islamic tradition, while generally decent, lacked essential features necessary for rational modernization. As such, it is not so much that orientalist deprecated Islam, as a religion, rather, they cast serious doubts on the ability of what might be called “active” or “dynamic” Islam to deal with rational modernity.<sup>40</sup> Ironically, Muslim apologists ended up with the same basic construct. They paid lip service to the Islamic tradition, by, among other things, insisting that not only was Islam compatible with modernity, but, in fact, it had already achieved “rational modernization” fourteen hundred years ago. Effectively, apologists

treated the Islamic tradition as if it was fossilized at the time of the Prophet and the Rightly Guided Companions, and, thus, rendered this tradition non-dynamic and un-living.<sup>41</sup>

Not only was the practice of apologetics unhelpful in dealing with the challenges of modernity, but also it significantly contributed to the sense of intellectual dissonance felt in many parts of the Muslim world. The problems posed by this response to modernity were only aggravated by the fact that Islam was, and continues to this day, to live through a major paradigm shift the likes of which it had not experienced in the past. There is a profound vacuum in religious authority, where it is not clear who speaks for the religion and how. Traditionally, the institutions of Islamic law were de-centralized, and Islamic epistemology tolerated and even celebrated differences of opinions and a variety of schools of thought. Islamic law was not state centered or state generated, but was developed by judges and jurists through a slow, creative, indeterminate, and dialectical process, somewhat similar to the common law system.<sup>42</sup> Classical Islam did develop semi-autonomous institutions of law and theology that trained and qualified jurists, who then provided a class of individuals who authoritatively spoke for, and most often disagreed about, the Divine law. The institutions of religion and law were supported by a complex system of private endowments (*awqaf*), which enabled Muslim scholars to generate a remarkably rich intellectual tradition.<sup>43</sup> The guardians of this were the *fuqaha*, whose legitimacy to a large extent rested in their semi-independence from the political system, which was already fairly de-centralized, and in their dual function of representing the interests of the state to the laity and the interests of the laity to the state.<sup>44</sup> Importantly, however, much of this drastically changed in the modern age. The traditional institutions that once sustained the juristic discourse have all but vanished. Furthermore, the normative categories and moral foundations that once mapped out Islamic law and theology have disintegrated, leaving an unsettling epistemological vacuum. Colonialism formally dismantled the traditional institutions of civil society, and Muslims witnessed the emergence of highly centralized and despotic, and often corrupt, governments that nationalized the institutions of religious learning and brought the *awqaf* under state control. This contributed to the undermining of the mediating role of jurists in Muslim societies.<sup>45</sup> The fact that nearly all charitable religious endowments became state controlled entities, and that Muslim jurists in most Muslim nations became salaried state employees, de-legitimated the traditional clergy and effectively transformed them into what may be called “court priests.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, Western cultural symbols, modes of production, and normative social values aggressively penetrated the Muslim world, seriously challenging inherited normative categories and practices, and adding to a profound sense of socio-cultural alienation and dissonance.

Most Muslim nations experienced the wholesale borrowing of civil law concepts. Instead of the dialectical and indeterminate methodology of

traditional Islamic jurisprudence, Muslim nations opted for more centralized, determinative, and often code based systems of law.<sup>47</sup> These developments only contributed to the power of the state, which had become extremely meddlesome, and which was now capable of a level of centralization that was inconceivable just two centuries ago. Even Muslim modernists who attempted to reform Islamic jurisprudence were heavily influenced by the civil law system, and thus sought to resist the indeterminate fluidity of Islamic law and increase its unitary and centralized character. Not only were the concepts of law heavily influenced by the European legal tradition, but even the ideologies of resistance employed by Muslims were laden with Third World notions of national liberation and self determination. For instance, modern nationalistic thought exercised a greater influence on the resistance ideologies of Muslim and Arab national liberation movements than anything in the Islamic tradition. The Islamic tradition was re-constructed to fit Third World nationalistic ideologies of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, rather than the other way around.

The disintegration of the traditional institutions of Islamic learning and authority meant a descent into a condition of virtual anarchy, particularly with respect to the mechanisms of defining Islamic authenticity. It was not so much that no one could authoritatively speak for Islam, but that virtually every Muslim was suddenly considered to possess the requisite qualifications to become a representative and spokesperson for the Islamic tradition, and even *Shari'ah* law.<sup>48</sup> This was primarily because the standards were set so low that a person who had a modest degree of knowledge of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet was considered sufficiently qualified to authoritatively represent the *Shari'ah*, even if such a person was not familiar with the precedents and discourses of the interpretive communities of the past.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, persons, mostly engineers, medical doctors, and physical scientists, who were primarily self-taught and whose knowledge of Islamic text and history was quite superficial were able to position themselves as authorities on Islamic law and theology. Islamic law and theology became the extracurricular hobby of pamphlet readers and writers. As such, Islamic intellectual culture witnessed an unprecedented level of deterioration, as self-proclaimed and self-taught experts reduced the Islamic heritage to the least common denominator, which often amounted to engaging in crass generalizations about the nature of Islam, and the nature of the non-Muslim "other."<sup>50</sup> Clinging to vulgar apologetics, the point of the self-proclaimed experts was to increase the Islamic tradition's mass appeal by transforming it into a vehicle for displays of power symbolisms. These power symbolisms were motivated by the desire to overcome a pervasive sense of powerlessness and to express resistance to Western hegemony in the contemporary age, as well as a means of voicing national aspirations for political, social, and cultural independence. The irony, however, was that these self-proclaimed experts, being primarily medical doctors, engineers, or computer scientists, were trained only in Western scientific methods and according to Western invented

educational curricula, and therefore, methodologically and epistemologically, they were effectively a part of Western culture. Although defiant and rebellious, in every way, they were the children of the West, despite the power symbolisms of resistance in which they engaged.<sup>51</sup> Most significantly, as they searched Islam for black-and-white and definitive answers to all their socio-political problems, these Muslim activists superimposed the logic of empirical precision and the determinism of Western scientific methods upon the Islamic intellectual, and particularly the juristic, tradition.<sup>52</sup>

With the deconstruction of the traditional institutions of religious authority emerged organizations such as the Jihad, Tanzim, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban, who were influenced by the resistance paradigms of national liberation and anti-colonialist ideologies, but who also anchored themselves in a religious orientation that is distinctively puritan, supremacist, and thoroughly opportunistic in nature. This theology is the byproduct of the emergence and eventual primacy of a synchronistic orientation that unites Wahhabism and Salafism in modern Islam. Puritan orientations, such as Wahhabism, imagine that God's perfection and immutability are fully attainable by human beings in this lifetime. It is as if God's perfection had been deposited in the Divine law, and by giving effect to this law, it is possible to create a social order that mirrors the Divine Truth. But by associating themselves with the Supreme Being in this fashion, puritan groups are able to claim a self-righteous perfectionism that easily slips into a pretense of supremacy. The existence of this puritan orientation in Islam is hardly surprising. All religious systems have suffered at one time or another from absolutist extremism, and Islam is not an exception. Within the first century of Islam, religious extremists known as the Khawarij (literally, the secessionists) slaughtered a large number of Muslims and non-Muslims, and were even responsible for the assassination of the Prophet's cousin and Companion the Caliph 'Ali b. Abi Talib. The descendants of the Khawarij exist today in Oman and Algeria, but after centuries of bloodshed, they have become moderates, if not pacifists. Other than the Khawarij, there were other extremists such as the Qaramitah and Assassins, whose terror became the *raison d'être* for their very existence, and who earned unmitigated infamy in the writings of Muslim historians, theologians, and jurists. Again, after centuries of bloodshed, these two groups learned moderation, and they continue to exist in small numbers in North Africa and Iraq. The essential lesson taught by Islamic history is that extremist groups, such as those mentioned above and others, are ejected from the mainstream of Islam; they are marginalized, and they eventually come to be treated as a heretical aberration from the Islamic message. The problem, however, as noted earlier, is that the traditional institutions of Islam that historically acted to marginalize extremist creeds no longer exist. This is what makes this period of Islamic history far more troublesome than any other, and this is also what makes modern puritan orientations far more threatening to the integrity of the morality and values of Islam than any of the previous extremist

movements. Extreme acts of ugliness today represent the culmination of a process that has been in the making for the past two centuries. In the same fashion, the culmination of Salafism, Wahhabism, apologetics, and Islamic nationalisms has become a synchronism that could be called Salafabism.

#### WAHHABIS, SALAFIS, AND SALAFABIS

The story of modern puritanical Islam must start with the Saudi movement known as Wahhabism. It is impossible to quantify the exact amount of influence that Wahhabism has had on modern Muslim thinking. However, it is notable that Islamist groups, such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda, that have achieved a degree of international infamy, usually, have been heavily influenced by Wahhabi thought. Particularly on the issue of women, Wahhabis tend to espouse some of the most patriarchal and exclusionary orientations within contemporary Islam. Furthermore, in countries that have attempted to implement Islamic law, one notices that such efforts at implementation tend to be heavily influenced by Wahhabi paradigms and systems of thought. This is so, even in countries that are predominately Hanafi, such as Pakistan, or predominately Maliki, such as Nigeria. Finally, many of the theological paradigms of Wahhabism, such as anti-rationalism, the rejection of the doctrine of intercession, the reliance on isolated *hadith* in the deduction of laws, the prohibition of music, or the mechanics of prayer have become part of the pervasive system of belief adopted by a wide variety of Sunni Islamic movements. One even finds that the pedantic doctrines adopted by Wahhabis, such as whether it is permissible to use prayer beads, whether one may wipe one's neck during the ablutions before prayer, or whether women may attend funeral services, have become widespread in various parts of the Muslim world. Part of what accounts for the Wahhabi influence in the Muslim world is Saudi Arabia's unique position as the guardian of the two holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Through the regulation of orthodoxy at pilgrimage, Wahhabis have an opportunity to influence the way Islam is practiced around the world. In addition, Wahhabism is supported by the substantial financial resources of the Saudi government.

The foundations of Wahhabi theology were set into place by the eighteenth-century evangelist Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1206/1792). With a puritanical zeal, 'Abd al-Wahhab sought to rid Islam of all the corruptions that he believed had crept into the religion – corruptions that included mysticism, including the doctrine of intercession, and rationalism. Wahhabism resisted the indeterminacy of the modern age by escaping to a strict literalism in which the text became the sole source of legitimacy. Wahhabism exhibited extreme hostility to all forms of intellectualism, mysticism, and any sectarianism within Islam, considering all of these to be corrupt innovations that had crept into the religion because of un-Islamic influences. The Wahhabi creed also considered any form of moral thought that was not entirely dependent on the text as a form

of self-idolatry, and treated humanistic fields of knowledge, especially philosophy, as “the sciences of the devil.”<sup>53</sup> According to the Wahhabi creed, it was imperative to return to a presumed pristine, simple, and straightforward Islam, which was believed to be entirely reclaimable by a literal implementation of the commands and precedents of the Prophet, and by a strict adherence to correct ritual practice. Wahhabism also rejected any attempt to interpret the Divine law from a historical, contextual perspective, and, in fact, treated the vast majority of Islamic history as a corruption or aberration from the true and authentic Islam.<sup>54</sup> The dialectical and indeterminate hermeneutics of the classical jurisprudential tradition were considered corruptions of the purity of the faith and law. Furthermore, Wahhabism became very intolerant of the long-established Islamic practice of considering a variety of schools of thought to be equally orthodox, and attempted to narrow considerably the range of issues upon which Muslims may legitimately disagree. Orthodoxy was narrowly defined, and ‘Abd al-Wahhab, himself, was fond of creating long lists of beliefs and acts that he considered hypocritical and the adoption or commission of which would immediately render a Muslim an unbeliever.<sup>55</sup> ‘Abd al-Wahhab had a near obsessive concern with the doctrine of *shirk* (associating partners with God). For him, a practicing Muslim could commit particular acts that would expose the impurity of his belief in God and Islam. Such acts, according to ‘Abd al-Wahhab, betray a willingness to engage in *shirk*, and thus would result in taking a person out of the fold of Islam. In his writings, he consistently emphasized that there is no middle of the road for a Muslim – either a Muslim was a true believer or not, and if a Muslim was not a true believer ‘Abd al-Wahhab had no qualms about declaring a Muslim to be an infidel and treating him or her as such.<sup>56</sup> But other than the practice of *takfir* (accusing Muslims of heresy and of being infidels), perhaps the most stultifying, and even deadly, characteristic of Wahhabism was its hostility to any human practice that would excite the imagination or bolster creativity. According to the Wahhabis, only frivolous people would be fond of the arts, such as music or poetry. In fact, according to them, any act that excites the imagination or augments individual creativity constitutes a step towards *kufir* (becoming an infidel) because it is bound to lead to heretical thoughts.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, even poetry written in praise of the Prophet is reprehensible if it indulges in exaggerations and excessive imagery.<sup>58</sup>

‘Abd al-Wahhab was rabidly hostile towards non-Muslims as well, insisting that a Muslim should adopt none of the customs of non-Muslims, and should not befriend them either. He argued that it was entirely immaterial what a non-Muslim might think about Muslim practices, and in fact it was a sign of spiritual weakness to care about whether non-Muslims were impressed by Muslim behavior or not.<sup>59</sup> Effectively, ‘Abd al-Wahhab espoused a self-sufficient and closed system of belief that has no reason to engage or interact with the other, except from a position of dominance. Rather tellingly, ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s orientation does not

materially differ from the approach adopted by later Muslim groups concerning the irrelevance of universal moral values to the Islamic mission. This insularism and moral isolationism, clearly manifested in the writings of 'Abd al-Wahhab, was powerfully reproduced by ideologues of subsequent Islamic movements.<sup>60</sup> However, 'Abd al-Wahhab's primary concern was not with non-Muslims, but with purportedly corrupt Muslims, among which he included the Ottoman Turks. In this sense, as in later puritan movements, there was a strong political and nationalistic component to 'Abd al-Wahhab's thought. He described the Turks as the moral equivalents of the Mongols who invaded Muslim territories and then converted to Islam in name only. Therefore, the Ottoman Turks were treated as the primary enemy of Islam because, according to 'Abd al-Wahhab, they exercised a corrupting influence upon the religion.<sup>61</sup> Importantly, 'Abd al-Wahhab argued that Muslims who engage in acts of *shirk* must be fought and killed, and interpreted precedents set by the first Rightly Guided Caliph, Abu Bakr, in support of the argument that although people might hold themselves as Muslims, they could, and should, be killed as hypocrites.<sup>62</sup> In addition, 'Abd al-Wahhab, and his followers, engaged in rhetorical tirades against prominent medieval and contemporaneous jurists who they considered heretical, and even ordered the execution or assassination of a large number of jurists with whom they disagreed.<sup>63</sup> According to 'Abd al-Wahhab, and his followers, the juristic tradition, save a few jurists such as Ibn Taymiyya whom they held in high esteem, was largely corrupt, and deference to the well-established schools of jurisprudential thought or even to contemporaneous jurists was an act of heresy.<sup>64</sup> Among the medieval jurists that the Wahhabis explicitly condemned as *kuffar* (infidels) were prominent scholars such as Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606/1210), Abu Sa'ïd al-Baydawi (d. 710/1310), Abu Hayyan al-Gharnati (d. 745/1344), al-Khazin (d. 741/1341), Muhammad al-Balkhi (d. 830/1426), Shihab al-Din al-Qastalani (d. 923/1517), Abu Sa'ud al-'Imadi, (d. 982/1574), and many others. The characteristic common to these jurists was that, as far as textual interpretation was concerned, they were not strict literalists. In addition, some of these scholars were suspected of harboring Shi'i sympathies, or had integrated rationalist methods of analysis into their interpretive approaches.<sup>65</sup>

Given the dismissive attitude of the Wahhabis towards Islamic history and law, the movement came under severe criticism from a considerable number of contemporaneous scholars, most notably 'Abd al-Wahhab's own brother, Sulayman, and reportedly his father as well.<sup>66</sup> The main criticism leveled against 'Abd al-Wahhab and his followers was that they exhibited very little regard for Islamic history, historical monuments, the Islamic intellectual tradition, or the sanctity of Muslim life.<sup>67</sup> 'Abd al-Wahhab's brother, as well as other critics, claimed that 'Abd al-Wahhab, himself, was an ill-educated, intolerant man, who was ignorantly and arrogantly dismissive of any thoughts or individuals that disagreed with him.<sup>68</sup> Sulayman complained that, except among the most extreme and fringe fanatical elements, his brother's views were without