



What is Enlightenment?

An Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

This essay draws on Immanuel Kant's concept of enlightenment as an escape from self-imposed ignorance and argues that a similar concept of enlightenment can be understood within the Muslim context as escape from self-imposed *jahiliyyah*, which is understood as fear to exercise reason publicly. The article advocates for *ijtihad*, is critical of *Taqlid*, and invokes Islamic sources to invest confidence in contemporary use of reason for interpreting Islam.

Return of Jahiliyyah

قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ بَصَائِرُ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ

An Enlightenment has come to you from your Lord (Quran 6:104).

For nearly a millennium and a half, Muslims have understood Islam as a human condition that is antithetical to *jahiliyyah* (ignorance). Most historical and religious accounts of Islam begin with a discussion of the state of ignorance in Arabia and often use it as a benchmark to underscore the civilizing influence of Islam on the barbaric Arabs of pre-Islamic Arabia. The great Islamic civilization that was produced with the explosion of knowledge in the fields of philosophy, science, sociology, medicine, and mathematics still remains a central influence on Islamic identity and an example of the indubitable truth of Islam and its transformative potential. In the same vein, the rationality of Islamic beliefs and Islamic socio-political order remains a major theme in the discourses of Islamic intellectuals, scholars, and preachers. The point I seek to make is simple: Muslims have always understood Islam as enlightenment, the path that rescued humanity from ignorance,

irrationality, and superstitions and catapulted human society towards the apex of civilization, towards the realization of a perfect community based on divine principles.

The present Ummah can hardly be described as a perfect community or as one that is organized around divine principles. It clearly lacks enlightenment. This is not to deny the presence of many enlightened individuals and even movements, but the overall condition of the global Muslim community can hardly be described as worthy of emulation (see Abu Sulayman). Indeed, modern revivalist thinkers of Islam are conceptualizing the present age as an age of *jabiliyyah*. Here ignorance is defined as the absence of Islam as the central fountain from which society derives its organizational principles (see Khan 2001a, 2001b). In order to understand the fundamental causes behind this state of decay, we need to understand what *enlightenment* is and how it relates to the vigor of societies. We need to learn to recognize the conditions that indicate the presence or absence of enlightenment in society and to elaborate, for popular consumption, why Islamization is enlightenment.

Kant's Conception of Enlightenment

In order to elucidate the meaning of the term "enlightenment," I wish to turn to a famous essay by Immanuel Kant, originally published in *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in December 1784, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" In this essay Kant, one of the great philosophers of European enlightenment, defines enlightenment as "Man's emergence from a self-imposed immaturity." An enlightened man for Kant was "one who had the courage to use his own understanding." In Islamic terms, this means one is competent to do one's own *ijtihad* (independent thinking). Kant was seeking to liberate human reason from the shackles of stagnant religious traditions that had deprived humanity of the freedom to use reason. He lamented the fact that, due to indolence and cowardice, a great proportion of humanity remained in a state of immaturity and subcontracted their thinking and faculties of judgment to others. For Kant, immaturity was the inability of an individual to rely on one's own understanding. Kant argued further that society could come out of such a state only if "people had the courage and freedom to use reason publicly in all matters."

The significance of Kant's analysis and prescriptions for modern Muslims is enormous. The present Ummah exists in a state of unparalleled immaturity. Not only has the capacity to think independently and freely nearly disappeared, it has become illegitimate. Attempts to institutionalize and democratize the spirit of *ijtihad* inspire fear among the masses and incite anger, resentment, and opposition from the *Ulema*. The *Ulema*, by generating discourses that have instilled a fear of reason and independent thought, have rendered the Islamic Ummah incapable of relying on its own judgment. The Ummah seems to know only one way – *Taqlid* (imitation).¹ The present Muslim world attempts to either ape the West or ape the past (a glorified and nebulous golden age). Sadly, we fail to realize that even to be good at imitation requires creativity and initiative. The condition of immaturity or *jabiliyyah* has become so widespread that the *Ulema*, too, have become immature, have ceased to rely on their own rational faculties, and have surrendered the cardinal function of "judgment/reasoning" to the scholarship and religious judgement of a canonized and sacralized privileged elite from

¹ On what is *Taqlid* [the blind imitation of *madhabib*], often seen as an antithetical view to the *ijtihadi* view, see Ahmed: 42-47.

the second and third centuries of Islam. True religious scholarship has been reduced to memorization and recycling of medieval opinions and methodologies. New scholars are appreciated as long as they are seen as revivers of the past, and those who seek to reform or institute new practices are immediately viewed with suspicion. We remain a civilization that is petrified to think, following those who refuse to think. In the absence of new, invigorating thought, widespread immaturity prevails (see Ahmed; Nyazee; Khan 1999b; Fadl).

From Taqlid to Ijtihad

The twentieth century has proved to be more fortunate for the Ummah. More and more Muslims have mustered the courage to rely on their own reason and have sought to re-understand Islam and make it more relevant and meaningful to contemporary life. The impact of their *ijtihad* is unprecedented. Global movements for the revival of Islam have mushroomed and the power and vitality of Islamic principles and ideas have galvanized Muslims everywhere (see Mawdudi; Khan 1999a: 161-73; Rahman: 212-54). Nevertheless, the shadow of immaturity or *jabiliyyah* continues to dog even the most vibrant of Islamic movements. It is my fear that we may lose the momentum that independent thought spawned by thinkers like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Muhammad Abduh, Fazlur Rahman and Malik Bennabi, Syed Nursi and Ali Bulac, Abdolkarim Soroush, Javed Ghamdi, and Tariq Ramadan and many others have provided. This fear stems from my perception that independent thinking still remains spectacular but episodic, revolutionary but rare. We need independent thinking to become routine. The followers of some of these great thinkers have not emulated their leaders' spirit of *ijtihad* and movements that have sprung from some of their ideas have once again institutionalized *Taqlid*.

In this discussion I am clearly departing from the traditional Islamic understanding of the term *jabiliyyah*. I am referring to the refusal of Muslims in general to rely on their own judgment and reasoning as *Jabiliyyah*. *Taqlid without reflection is jabiliyyah, immaturity, and lack of enlightenment*. I would like to point out how the concept of *jabiliyyah* itself has evolved. From the Quran, we can glean that *jabiliyyah* means the ignorance of the all powerful, merciful, and omniscient God. Ignorance in the Quran is defined basically as ignorance of God, God's nature and attributes, and God's expectations of humanity (46:23, 6:108, 33:33, 9:97). Subsequently, in the discourses of Islamic scholars, the term *jabiliyyah* slowly evolved to mean ignorance of Islamic principles and ignorance of what it takes to be a good Muslim.

This understanding still dominates traditional discourses. Recent endeavors at *ijtihad* by the pioneers of contemporary Islamic revival have redefined *jabiliyyah* as absence of Islamic governance. This understanding of *jabiliyyah* is largely due to the political polemics of Maulana Maududi (from the Indian sub-continent) and Syed Qutb (Egypt). Unfortunately, their followers, too, remain in a state of *jabiliyyah*, for they have fallen into the habit of imitating their new demigods and sacrificed their own capacity, right, and duty to think. This is clearly evident in the immature and often violent manner in which they respond to any disagreement or criticism of these new masters (see Khan 2014: 75-86). These reactions are very similar to the reactions of the traditional *Ulema* and their followers to any attempt at approaching the Islamic heritage from a critical perspective. This is another manifestation that the Muslim Ummah exists in a state of self-imposed *jabiliyyah*. How does one escape this

stifling and stultifying condition? How do we move from immaturity to enlightenment? How do we spark what Kant calls an age of enlightenment, a precursor to the enlightened society?

An Islamic Perspective of Enlightenment

It is important that we first understand enlightenment and its Islamic nature. The Quran describes the human being as the best of creations, and this claim is premised on the human ability to reason (95:4).

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيمٍ

We have indeed created man in the best of molds (Quran 95:4)

The Quran does not invite blind followers; it demands and exhorts us to reflect and use our reason to read God's signs in nature, history, and text (12:109). In all its presentations, the Quran presents evidence and proofs and, indeed, demands arguments and proofs from those who disbelieve its message. There is no suggestion or expectation in the Quran that the human being ceases to be the best of creations and becomes an ape (reversing evolution!). The Quran does not ask believers to surrender their reasoning capacity, the very faculty on which it is relying for the cognition of God. It is reason, not ritual, which connects humanity with the divine, and this theme is the central essence of the Quran. Until the guardians of Islam and Muslims, their intellectuals, and their *Ulema* realize and emphasize this at every opportunity, the Muslim community will remain immature.

Once a man came to Umm Ayesha, the wife of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), and asked her to describe to him the character of the late Prophet of Islam (Imam Muslim). Ayesha's reply was at once succinct and deeply profound. She said, Have you not read the Quran? The Prophet's character was the embodiment of the Quran itself. This tradition is very well known and often invoked in the praise of the Prophet and to invite Muslims to imitate the Prophet. Unfortunately, very little substantive analysis of what Ayesha meant is available in contemporary popular discourses. The tradition is used to inspire awe in the Prophet and to generate deep respect for his persona, but little else. There is rarely any effort made at advancing the meaning of this equation in terms of the Prophet's qualities and the Quran's character. The Quran, besides other things, is also the best *tafseer* (exegesis) of itself. The Quran describes itself, as the bearer of the truth and most importantly as *Furqan*:

تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي نَزَّلَ الْفُرْقَانَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ لِيَكُونَ لِلْعَالَمِينَ نَذِيرًا

Blessed is He Who hath revealed unto His slave the Criterion (of right and wrong), that he may be a warner to the peoples (Quran 25.1)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِن تَتَّقُوا اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ فُرْقَانًا وَيُكَفِّرْ عَنْكُمْ سَيِّئَاتِكُمْ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ ذُو الْفَضْلِ الْعَظِيمِ

O ye who believe! if ye fear Allah, He will grant you a criterion (to judge between right and wrong), remove from you (all) evil (that may afflict) you, and forgive you: for Allah is the Lord of grace unbounded. (Quran 8.29)

Furqan means "criterion for judgment" or "capacity to discern." It also means to differentiate between the right and wrong, and between justice and injustice. This understanding of the Quran implies that the Prophet's personality, which is the prototype

for a Muslim, is the embodiment of the capacity to judge. If this is what Ayesha meant, then it means that to be like the Prophet is to have *Furqan*, which is to be capable of discernment.

One of the enduring myths of Islamic beliefs is the extreme glorification of early Muslims. Muslim scholars, searching for authority (necessary in the absence of reason) to support their interpretations of Islam created a hierarchy of interpretive privilege in Islam. The veracity of a particular opinion depends upon the personality and reputation of the person with whom it corresponds. The Prophet is on the top of the pyramid, followed by his companions, then come the companions of the companions, followed by the classical scholars. While the status of the Prophet is indubitable, the rest of the pyramid weighs upon the reason of subsequent generations of Muslims to the point that today, even to disagree with a companion or with one of the classical scholars leads to calls for excommunication (*takfir*) and even endangers life itself. Islamic scholars have subtly propagated the myth that early Muslims are far superior in intellect and virtue than later Muslims no matter what the issue is and, therefore, contemporary understandings and interpretations must defer to past understandings and interpretations (see Kamali; Fadl).

Such a hierarchy cannot be derived from the Quran without prejudicial interpretation of Quranic phrases like “Are they equal, those who know and those who do not” (39:9). This creative interpretation with selective references to the *ahadith* (traditions) has created a prison from which Muslim thinking finds it impossible to escape. The opinions of early jurists, which even for them were contingent on time and place, have today become the default for divine law. Human opinions are treated as if they were the very words of God and often there is no differences between the opinions of say Imam Al-Shafi (a prominent medieval jurist) and laws of Allah. To challenge the eminent jurist’s opinions or even to subject them to a critical analysis is interpreted as an assault on Islam and Allah’s divine Shariah. This has led to an incredibly tragic state of things, where to think is tantamount to not only launching an un-Islamic project but an anti-Islamic one. Thinking has been rendered illegitimate because it necessarily threatens the hegemony of past opinions (see Khan 1999b).

There are many traditions of the Prophet wherein he has praised Muslims who would come later. In one such remarkable tradition, the Prophet describes later Muslims as his brothers, who are even closer to him than his companions (Imam Muslim: CI 482). It is not really possible to definitively argue from the sources that the understanding of Islam of later Muslims will be inferior to that of early Muslims. However, Muslim eschatology argues that there will be general moral decay in society as we approach doomsday, but these arguments serve a debilitating purpose. Consider the paradox: if our objective is to revive Islamic society and emulate the moral excellence of early Muslims, then we must at least be their equals to replicate their efforts. Indeed, we have to be better than them for they improved themselves with the help of the Prophet and we have to do it without his direct personal guidance.

The other alternative is to surrender to the inertia of history and let things be. Why bother to emulate those who are inimitable. If things are destined to get progressively worse as we approach doomsday, then why even raise the call for revival? It would be destined to fail. Indeed the general lethargy in the global Muslim community suggests that such a tacit condition has already materialized. But when some Muslims look at other non-Muslim

societies and remark, like Muhammad Abduh did upon visiting the West, that “I see Islam without Muslims,” we realize that indeed for some people it is still possible to produce Islamic values in real life. The reality of this is extremely disturbing. First, we concede that perhaps humanity is degenerating and cannot aspire to equal those who lived centuries ago. And then we find that some people are able to emulate the past Islamic glory even without the explicit assistance of Islamic sources. These conditions simultaneously suggest that nothing is wrong with humanity itself; it is only Muslims who are declining.

How, if at all, can Muslims as a community come out of this inertia of immaturity and inspire an age of enlightenment? I think that the route to this noble end is through a collective emergence from this self-imposed *jahiliyyah*. This task requires major changes in the outlook of Muslim intellectuals as well as Muslims in general. Our self-imposed immaturity does not stem from a complete disregard for reason; on the contrary, it stems from a lack of self-confidence. We need to encourage the use of reason, which we refuse to do so even when freedom is available to us. We also need confidence in our inherent capacity to understand, interpret, and apply Islam in our context. Our problem is not the lack of freedom to use reason, but the lack of freedom to use Islamic texts directly. We have to come out from the feeling of inferiority towards the Muslims of the past, take our destinies in our hands and chart our own straight path.

Muslim intellectuals and scholars must stop acting as if they are defenders and guardians of Islam. This position inevitably leads to the conservativeness of thought. The responsibility of defending and safeguarding Islam is Allah’s responsibility and he has said so clearly. It is this fear that Islam will be diluted, misinterpreted, and distorted by contemporary Muslims who are inherently inferior that must be discarded. Muslims must stop performing God’s task of safeguarding his message and start performing the human task of understanding and acting upon this message. Muslim scholars and intellectuals need to change the psyche of the masses by focusing attention not on *what Islam is* but on *what Muslims do*. The artifact of separating Islam from Muslims allows Muslims to have the best religion with the worst followers. The only way to escape this is to deconstruct the myth of the essential Islam and argue that Islam is what Muslims do and shift the burden of manifesting Islam on to human actions and away from sacred, un-implemented texts. We have to realize that Islamic civilization, in its totality, inclusive of its best and its worst, is also a *tafseer* (exegesis) of the Quran. Therefore it is not enough to glorify ideas confined to text. They are meaningless until they are realized in this *duniya* (world).

Conclusion

The Muslim community must be made to realize that our generations, the communities after the advent of Prophet Muhammad, the Seal of Prophecy, are the best of all generations. Never has God ever trusted a people without a prophet. There are going to be no more new messengers or messages from the All-Mighty. We are for the first time on our own. We have the revelation and so did past communities. But they all needed Prophets to guide them.

Even the great *Sahabah* (companions of Prophet Muhammad) lived life as pagans and in ignorance before Prophet Muhammad came to them as a guide and messenger. But the present Muslim Ummah is the only Ummah that Allah has trusted to act on its own. The only difference is that, unlike the messages of earlier prophets, Allah has promised to

safeguard his revelations to Prophet Muhammad. We have to live up to God's expectations. And we cannot do that until we become capable of acting on our own judgment, until we are strong and courageous enough to understand and apply his message in our times. Maturity and enlightenment at one level means simply living in our times. We have to escape the prisons of past authorities and past achievements and focus on our task at hand.² Very simply, we must grow up and take responsibility. Be enlightened and act mature. To achieve this noble end we need to encourage in every possible manner, the confidence that we are capable of understanding and realizing the *maqasid* (purpose) of Islam and foster a culture of tolerance for those who have the courage to think.³

Any grandiose project towards the development of democracy and pluralism, or towards the respect of freedom – freedom to believe and freedom to chart one's own destiny – will not gain any foothold in the Islamic World until the condition of self-imposed immaturity is alleviated (see Khan 2001c). Until individual Muslims and their intellectuals and scholars can dare to pass judgment on the present, and view their heritage from a critical perspective without allowing the past to prejudice them, until then freedom of thought and action – a constitutive element of Islamic society – will remain beyond our grasp.

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² For an example on how American Muslims are struggling to achieve this, see Khan 2004: 84-116.

³ To understand the *Maqasid approach* to Islam by first understanding the very objectives of the divine message before articulating the principles and laws of Islam, see Al-Raysuni; Masud.

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