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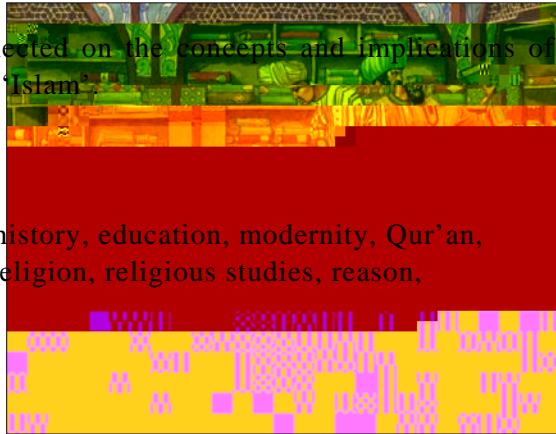
**Keynote Address at ‘Intellectual Traditions in Islam’ Seminar
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Abstract

One of the major features of the Address for the seminar, Aziz Esmail reflected on the concepts and implications of the terms ‘intellectual life,’ ‘tradition’ and ‘Islam’.

Keywords

Islam, intellect, intellectual life, tradition, history, education, modernity, Qur’an, monotheism, fundamentalism, ideologies, religion, religious studies, reason, Enlightenment.



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Probing The ‘Intellect’

This particular seminar in Cambridge is being held at a time in history — I mean the history not just of the Muslim world but of mankind as a whole — at which each of the concepts that are reflected in its title are in question. Take, first of all, the concept of ‘intellectual life’. A great question mark looms over the very concepts of ‘the intellectual’ and ‘intellectual life’ today. What is the place of the intellectual in society? Is he an ideologue — a proponent or supporter of the prevailing or dominant thought, or is his role that of a critic? Is it a role which calls one to question the assumptions of the age? Are the corridors of power the proper place for an intellectual? Is that the place where he should take up his lodgings? Or does he belong, like the prophets of the Old Testament, beyond the walls of the city, where he calls out from the wilderness, from outside the dominant, prevailing powers and forms of thought?

There is an old saying, which you might remember, that a prophet is never honoured in his own country. In that saying, there is a statement about the distance of intellectual thought from the centre. But if this is so, if the role of the critic is to interrogate, to challenge what the Germans call the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age, to open new horizons, new possibilities of thinking and feeling, of being and acting, how is one, then, to understand the responsibility of the intellectual to society? These are questions about the place of the intellectual in culture and in society. There are similar questions which concern the mind of the individual. What is the place of the life of the mind within the personality? What is its relationship to feeling? What is its relationship to character? What is its relationship to faith? What role does intellectual life have in the development of personal identity and character? What re



(words about which I have a series of other questions)? These are some of the vexing and uncertain issues that surround the very concept of tradition. Beyond them there lies a more fundamental question. And that question, which is a contemporary one, is not only about which traditions to call one's own, but about the likelihood of any traditions surviving at all in a world which is changing rapidly under one's very eyes. In a sense, one might ask: what is the future of the past? What future does the past have in a world which is changing so fast — a world saturated with the instantaneous culture of global communication? What role does history have here? And if there is no past, if the past has no future, what is one to think about the present and the future?

Subjective Time

Now, let me clarify what I mean by this. I am not talking about public or objective time here, but what we might call subjective time. For objectively, there is always a yesterday, a today and a tomorrow. There is the time of the clock; but there is also, in the life of a society, what we might call historical time — the mode of time in which one is related to, and bears a kinship with, one's ancestors and with the inheritance of an age, a legacy which one carries forward into the future. And this is true not only of society, but also of the individual, because the individual has a life history. The importance of life history, not so much in the public, observable form, but in its subjective mode, becomes especially pronounced at certain critical junctures in life, for instance, old age as well as youth. Where old age is blessed with wisdom, one looks back at the course of one's life as the only course that it could have taken, with the feeling that it was as it ought to have been. One finds a new relationship with one's parents, free of the wish that they should have been different. More generally, one might cherish, at this stage, the sense of a connection with bygone ages, a kinship with history and with distant forefathers which is at the same time a relationship that is to come. For the passing generation gives its lifeblood, part of its soul, to the generation which is yet to come. In this way one closes, as it were, the circle of life history.

Youth is another stage in the life history where the same negotiation, a very difficult, delicate negotiation, between what has gone on in one's life and what is to come, occurs. And what is particularly important at such a time is the relationship of the individual life history to the traditions that are outside it — in a word, to culture. The young man's or woman's relationship to traditions is one of either dependence or defiance. Youth has two opposite yearnings: a yearning to be told what to do and a yearning to tell whoever tells him what to do, to get lost. You will notice that I am using slightly milder language than may be heard in practice. What, however constitutes dependency? What is involved here are not only issues to do with family. They also appertain to the whole question of education, of schooling and the place of the school, as an institution, in society.



Models of Education

There are two models of the school, located at opposite ends of a spectrum. One is that of a military camp; the other of a playing field. The school which is based on the model of a military camp is the sort of school to which most of us gathered here probably went. This is not unlike the model of the public school in England, although the public school has its own grim kind of playfulness. This particular model of education treats with the utmost seriousness the maxim that the child is the father of the man. What it proposes is that the child must be more adult than the adult himself, that he must bend before the objective imperatives of learning. He must learn to make of his life a sustained devotion to duty, a consistent obedience to objective rules. The other type of school, which is the contrary model of education, takes seriously, perhaps too seriously, the adage that 'all work and no play make Jack a dull boy'. Modern liberal theories of education carry this maxim very far indeed, to the point where what it really means is 'all play and no work make Jack a smart boy'. Its central premise is that discipline is something to be avoided at all costs. Now, this is the trend of education which shuns traditions altogether so as to give the child the privilege, as it claims, of 'finding himself,' of creating his own knowledge, of forming his own opinions, in the absence of external discipline or constraint. We in our time have been so conditioned, so accustomed to notice the defects of the formal model of education, now widely considered 'oppressive,' that we are as yet little aware of the grave deficiencies of that model which places all its emphasis on the self rather than on society. It should become obvious, when we ponder on this problem, that education is only a microcosm of the culture of the society at large. The model of education I am criticising leads to what I might call the tyranny of self-absorption. And one often finds among people who come from that particular regime of education a longing, a yearning for a-froavoidelongirste onn is uppog todo, in hso wol(.g)TJ0 -1.2787 TD)1n2 Tw8 TjTT8 81 favoid



In the modern world this relationship has altered. It altered about three centuries ago with the Industrial Revolution when the unit of work shifted from the family home, the farm and the shop to the factory. Traditionally, the shop was a family-orientated affair. It was in a way an extension of the community. But the factory is not an extension of the community, and modern work has proceeded from this point onwards on a separate track from activities in a family, and in a community. Thus, it is very common nowadays to hear people say, 'I find my social satisfaction outside work and not in work itself.' Accordingly, the types of self-expression available in each sector of life differ widely among themselves. This development has many sources, all of which are characteristic of modern history. They include the automatisation and rationalisation of work which went hand in hand with the rise of modern commerce and industry. The twin consequences of this was a differentiation of society into distinct sectors, and a corresponding differentiation of the individual personality into a multiplicity of roles.

As a result of these historical changes, the ethos of modern work is strictly apart from opportunities for self-expression now available in the secular Western world only in the cinema, the concert hall, the theatre, or else in pubs or cafés. But these institutions too — institutions like the theatre and the concert hall — are less communal than was true in the past. One may recall, for instance, the fact that chamber music was largely played in homes and not in concert halls; or that the opera was an event where people came to meet and talk. If you look at copies of *The Times* in England for example, from the last century, you will occasionally find in them complaints about opera singing which was so noisy as to make it impossible for the audience to talk to one another, and so enjoy themselves. Today, however all such activities have become markedly impersonal, rather than communal.

Education and the Inroads of Modernity

In the Third World, two tendencies or trends may be found. On the one side, there is a greater prevalence of forms of art and recreation which are communal or social. There are, for instance, the rousing and rumbustious forms of music like *qawwali* performances, which are fundamentally communal, and where the social, the spiritual and the artistic seem to go together. Another religiopolitical form of self-expression is nowadays to be found in activities centred on the mosque, religious schools or *madrasas*, and theological colleges. Some of these institutions are taking over a large amount of the functions of culture and communal solidarity in Muslim societies. This is a phenomenon which demands some explanation.

One of the reasons for this trend has to do with the inroads of modernity, which causes the alienation provoking the search, in turn, for social forms embodying what are seen as moral spiritual values. There is also, of course, the problem of education. In the West at least there is a wide availability of opportunities not only for education but for education to be followed by work — opportunities, in other words, for the acquisition of skills and a chance to exercise those skills. When education is denied altogether, or having been acquired appears irrelevant or fruitless, when one is denied what competence one has and



the sense of belonging that comes when that competence is exercised, then there is an enormous sense of anomie and moral vacuum among the young people affected by this trend. I think what is happening in the Islamic world is but a variant of what is happening in the Third World at large, in African and Asian countries, though not necessarily as much, perhaps, in the Far East.

The Rise of Totalistic Ideologies

One of the problems of modern history has been the rise of totalistic ideologies. In the Muslim world, the only major ideology which for a time seemed to be capable of mobilising the society, and in particular its youth, was nationalism, which was usually combined with a degree of real or ostensible socialism. These ideologies were seldom successful in ensuring social justice and solidarity, and hence were succeeded by a period of gathering disillusionment. There is, therefore, a hiatus in these societies: a hiatus in meaning, a crisis of meaning. It has often been said that the rise of 'fundamentalism,' or what is called 'Islamic fundamentalism' in these countries is best explained by politics. But beneath the political problem, there lies the cultural problem. One must, therefore, look at culture, and not just at the political issue in order to understand the matter fully. For regardless of whether an ideology is religious or secular, it is intended to relate the self to society and to a picture of the cosmos at large. Ideologies represent the human need for a unifying doctrine — something that will tell people, firstly, what the world is like; secondly, what man's place in the world is; and thirdly, what the principles governing human actions or conduct in the world are to be. Ideology is thus a total phenomenon. It answers several of those great questions that Kant asked about the order of things, such as 'What is man?', 'What is my place in the world?', and above all, 'What shall I do?' This last question, it will be noticed, is that of ethics.

Within ideologies, there is a distinction to be made between what the psychoanalyst Eric H. Erikson once called, respectively, 'totalism' and 'wholeness'. 'Wholeness' may be defined, negatively, as an absence of disconnection or fragmentation. It represents a sense that one is connected to the universe; that one is connected to fellow human beings; and that within oneself, the various parts are interconnected, giving a unity to the personality. 'Totalism', which in some respects is preferable to the term 'fundamentalism', denotes a unifying system of thought which spells out everything, dictates everything, and makes, moreover, a very sharp distinction between its own world and other worlds, between what is deemed to belong inside and to lie outside its own sphere. Totalism insists that what belongs outside must not be let in, and what belongs to itself must not, at any cost, be left out. This rigid separation of the inside and the outside is a dichotomy found in all totalising ideologies. It is present in the West's image of Islam as antithetical to everything for which Western civilisation stands, and it is equally present in the absolutist definition of Islam, which opposes itself entirely to the culture of modernity.

It is important to realise that this totalistic definition of Islam is a modern one. Although it invokes history, it is not itself historic.



culture, was a composite phenomenon. It was a product of many cultural influences, a river





which then is the word that gives access to the figure of Jesus. In the case of Islam, of course, the primacy of the Word is wholly central.

Textualising the Universe



to be sent down from God as a proof of the prophethood of Muhammad. However, it resolutely repudiates the expectation of such a miracle, and refers instead to the signs of God in the natural universe and in human history. There is thus a certain distancing from magic and miracle, and a rationalisation which corresponds to the transformation of social structure brought about by the preaching of the Prophet. In Greek culture, philosophy emerged with Plato and Aristotle as the preferred pathway to truth. The ideal of reason had the same pre-eminence in ancient Greek society that God-fearing piety has in the



the Roman Catholic Church. The reaction to what was seen as the history of religious oppression and obscurantism came from several quarters. There was the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment, but earlier on there had been the Reformation launched by Martin Luther. It was, I think, one of the most important events in human history when Luther translated the Bible into the vernacular. For it gave to the ordinary man access to the scripture which had previously been monopolised by the clergy. Finally, the rise of the nation state was also crucial in all these developments, because the nation state broke the unity of Christendom, just as in the present century the abolition of the Sunni *khilafa* in 1924 by Kemal Atatürk and the formation of the Arab states with the retreat of the British and Fren



Gestalt, a whole bigger than the sum of the parts. In earlier cultures, community came first and individuals second; individuals drew their lifeblood, as it were, from society. But in the contemporary world, society is seen as the product of individual decisions to band