

Lecture 5:

The Quran

Review

- Discussed key events that brought Muhammad and Muslims to power
- Examined the implications of Islam on traditional social structures of Arabia

Aim of Lecture:

To discuss Islam as a 'practical religion' and the Quran as a source of metaphysical and worldly guidance

Hudabiyah

- A difficult political move for Muhammad
- Muslims felt they were in the right
- Seemed to have broad popular sympathy
- Quraysh where mean in their terms
- E.g., would not let Muhammad sign as 'the prophet of God'
- But the manoeuvre led to the final defeat of the Quraysh

Victory Sura

- “A seed that puts forth its shoot, and strengthens it, and it grows stout and rises straight upon its stalk, pleasing the sowers, that through them God may enrage the unbelievers”
- Sura relates patience with strength
- The retreat at Hudabiyah planted the seeds for eventual victory

Political context of Islam

- Christ: straightforward religious message taking shape in contra-distinction to an imperial power structure
- Christ creating new religion – not new society
- Muhammad: not operating in established political context
- Creating new religious *and* political order
- Message articulated in distinctly *practical* terms
- Steeped in traditional tribal codes and expectations
- Addresses day to day needs
- Practicality and compromise at heart of Islam
- Events of Hudabiyah and the Satanic verses reflect this

Practicality of Islam

- Mecca suras: focus is belief and message of Allah
- Medina suras: focus is how to live good Muslim life
- How to live in accordance with God's wishes
- Similar to Judaism: both emphasise practice and conduct
- Jews: 'practicing' - observe the religious laws prescribed by the Torah
- Muslim: 'surrender' to the will of God and a Godly life

Belief

- One's idea or conception of God is personal
- Question of who God is/what God thinks not central concern in Islam
- Issue for theology – i.e., individual contemplation
- Historically no orthodoxy in Islam and Judaism
- No religious wars over doctrinal or theological differences
- Intolerance in certain corners of Muslim and Jewish world today over belief and doctrine is historically unusual

Quranic emphasis on doing

- Cannot simply profess belief
- Must translate belief into action - doing the right thing
- Islam from beginning concerned with a righteous society
- Focused on practical needs: feeding the poor and sheltering the orphaned
- To struggle and strive: one of most common words in Quran
- One must strive to translate belief into action
- Arabic word for strive *Jihad*

Jihad

- Heavy connotations in English
- Poorly translated as holy war – esp. by radical Muslims
- Translation potentially inaccurate in several ways.
- Jahada: root form of Jihad
- Translates to strive or struggle
- Usually in transitive rather than verb form
- Transitive verbs are ‘with’ verbs
- Examples: correspond with, compete with, deal with
- Jahada can be translated as ‘to struggle with’

Importance of translation

Verse 142 Sura 3

Translation 1: Saheeh International (Saudi)

“Do you think that you will enter Paradise while God has not yet made evident those of you who fight in His cause?”

Translation 2: Abdel Halim (SOAS)

“Did you think you would enter the Garden without God first proving which of you would struggle for His cause?”

Struggle vs. Fight

- Struggle resonates with Western tradition
- We struggle with a problem
- Jesus struggled with the devil
- To 'fight' a very different message
- We fight for a cause
- Quran could use other words – e.g. harb, qatal, ma'araka
- Armstrong: struggle is commitment:
- “a duty...to commit themselves to a struggle on all fronts – moral, spiritual and political – to create a just and decent society, where the poor and vulnerable are not exploited, in the way that God had intended man to live” (page 168).

Islam not abstract

- Aim not to adjudicate on interpretation
- Point: the Quran is about two things:
- Existence of God
- Expectations of God
- Quran implores Muslims to act
- Must practice Islam in everyday activities
- Islam abstract about God
- Not abstract about what it means to be good, just, righteous and equitable

الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ

- The 'straight path'
- Quran provides a path for those that submit
- Path one must walk
- Rest of lecture:
- Focus is on 5 examples of how Quran asks Muslims to walk the path

5 pillars of Islam

Key practices for Muslims participating in umma

1. Declaration of faith (shahada)
2. Prayer (salat)
3. Alms (zakat)
4. Fasting (sume)
5. Pilgrimage (Haj)

Declaration

- Made by Muslims when they convert and in daily prayer
- ‘There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger’
- Not just a declaration but a testimony
- Testimony is a burden
- Witnessing burdens with the duty to testify
- If we witness we have an obligation to testify to the truth we see
- Testimony burdens us with the obligations inherent in witnessing

Prayer

- Muslims pray 5 times a day
- A moderate discipline not a crushing burden
- Prayer in Christianity: personal and individual
- Prayer in Judaism: communal and ritualistic
- Prayer in Islam: reminder of one's submission

A reminder

- Prayer reminds Muslims of what Quraysh forgot
- Life is in God's hands – not our own
- Prayer: acknowledging and surrendering to this situation
- Rabb al-alamin (in the fatah) – a name of God
- Sustainer of worlds and creation
- Muslims submit that that which sustains life
- Muslims are in debt for the life they have

Alms

- Prayer and shahada: reinforce Muslim's debt
- Muslims submit because they recognise that their life is not their own
- How do we pay off that debt?
- Taking care of the umma
- A means of acknowledging and acting upon our debt

Hypocrisy

- Quran very critical of hypocrisy
- Saying one believes is not enough
- Must be burdened with the knowledge and act accordingly
- “Some people say ‘we believe in God and the last day’ when really they do not believe. They seek to deceive God and the believers but they only deceive themselves, though they do not realize it” sura 2 verse 8

A community in the middle

- Alms not just about acting on belief
- Also about maintaining a balance
- Alms encourages moderation by giving what you have to those in need
- Cleanses Muslims of material attachment
- Alms promotes self-restraint
- “Whatever we do and whatever we seek can be purified by moderation” (Sardar p.112)

Significance of moderation and self-restraint

- Sura 79: Anyone who has [transgressed and] preferred the present life, Hell will be home, for anyone who feared the meeting with his lord and *restrained himself from base desires*, Paradise will be home
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- Sura 38: God tells David “Do not follow *your desires*, lest they divert you from God’s path’
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- Hadith (saying of the prophet): The attachment to this world is the source for every wrong. Beware how *the one who is attached to this world has loved what God dislikes*. What wrong can be a greater crime than this?

Fasting

- Similar themes: purification via self-denial and dis-attachment from material pleasures
- Also theme of *struggle*
- Fast takes place during Ramadan
- Commemorates Hijra
- The struggle with Quraysh and to find a new home
- Ramadan emphasizes struggle
- Symbolizes effort required to be a Muslim

Pilgrimage

- Anyone who is capable should travel to Mecca once in their lifetime
- Themes: struggle (hajj is another word for effort), purification and submission
- Also unique : emphasis on community and equality among Muslims
- Reminds Muslims of Islam's past
- Symbolises the future and the final gathering before God
- Gives Muslim a sense of being an individual within a global community.
- A community in which all are equal before God

Ritual

- Pilgrims all dressed alike
- Attempt to eradicate all symbols of caste and , status
- Pilgrims walk alongside one another
- Attempt to minimize distinctions of race, language and ethnicity should disappear

Symbolism

- There are things more important than trappings of society and convention
- Not about dissolving oneself in larger collective
- About one's personal and individual presence before God
- “In this sea of humanity, before God, each individual is known in their uniqueness, just as each will ultimately be judged and charged with responsibility only for their individual actions and intentions’ (Sardar, p.144)

Here I am

- Most often repeated statement by pilgrims
- Repeats the opening words by Abraham when God first called his name
- A statement of individuality
- One's existence is predicated on a summons from outside the self

Islam and Cogito

- In Enlightenment philosophy the 'I' is predicated upon our own self
- Descarte's Cogito – 'I think therefore I am'
- In Islam the 'I' is not predicated upon our self but on others
- Other people, beings, forces and (for believers) God
- Hajj reminds pilgrims how their humanity is owed to others
- In responding to its call we awaken to our individuality and our responsibility

Take Home Ten