

Addressing the Blighted Muslim Psyche in the Context of the Current World Crisis¹

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Introduction

We have been witnessing endless equivocation in response to the current world crisis that was brought on by the heinous attacks on the World Trade Centre, followed by the unconscionable bombing of Afghanistan, whose people have endured decades of war. What has not been forthcoming is a coherent and thoughtful response by South African Muslims to the impact of the unfolding world events on the Muslims psyche. This article attempts to focus on the terms upon which Muslims should respond to their blighted psychological and moral dispositions.

It is based on two assumptions. First, an admission that we are individually and collectively experiencing emptiness, conflicting emotions, stress, poor concentration and demotivation as a result of the confusion generated by world events, and second, that our responses to these psychological deficits are inadequate, conflicting and even harmful to our ability to retain communal cohesion and symmetry.

Defensiveness and 'turning up the heat and cant'

A number of general responses have been forthcoming from Muslims. These have been marked by narrow defensiveness, which I contend is bereft of a vision and methodology to assist ordinary Muslims in this time of doubt and cynicism.

Firstly, the overwhelming majority of Muslims, who have been trying to go about their daily lives in education, commerce, and sport and leisure, have been displaying what can be described as inward defensiveness. On the basis of personalising the invoked stereotype, which implicates most as undemocratic fundamentalists, ordinary Muslims may feel judged by their colleagues and peers.

While, the public discourse in the media, the office and the school has been one of support and even sympathy, Muslims may have come to doubt their colleagues' sincerity, and even the views of their fellow faith adherents. In the crude world of stereotyped identity projections, where an either / or logic rules roost, one is allowed only two choices: either to support the Taliban or the West, apparently with no place for complexity and doubt. Needless to say, in this climate Muslims have been experiencing difficulty in transacting normal and productive relations with others.

We have generally been mediating the ramifications of the world crisis in silence without a network of support and comfort. We have not created a space to articulate our fears and concerns. We may have become less confident, more guarded and even confused about our role and purpose in our everyday business and civic lives. Moreover, active participation in the broader unfolding of a productive South African citizenship has been placed on the backburner.

The second type of response has been coming from small but vociferous groups scattered throughout the country. They have been projecting an outward defensiveness. Armed with a set of conspiracy theories they have set out to defend what they perceive to be the slighted image of Islam. Asserting an oppositional logic, they have set about bashing the west and have come out in support of Bin Laden, the Taliban and their pre-modern, austere brand of Islamism. They have taken to the street, with simple slogans and bravado. Some have even signed up for jihad in Afghanistan.

Despite moments of 'radical' outpouring they mostly carry on with their daily activities, oblivious of the contradiction in their continuing commitments to 'western' consumption, judging from their designer labels and gelled hair. Their opposition remains at the level of rhetoric, demonstrating a disjuncture between words and actions.

In the face of confusion they have been turning up the 'heat and cant', where, instead of clarity, their reactions have caused confusion and disarray among ordinary Muslims. The Quran refers to this type of behaviour as imbued with 'fanaticism of ignorance'

(*hammiyyah-al-jahiliyyah*), in other words, where reaction in the face of extreme social turbulence is informed by emotionalism and sentiment. This position, while never popular, feeds a sense of demoralisation, and results in individuals and communities suffering lapses in confidence and moral conviction.

The third type of response has been forthcoming from the *ulama* and the pulpits. While a few imams have been contributing to the emotion-filled tirades of the second group, their responses have mostly been muted and unconfident. Their hesitance could be attributed to a realisation that emotional reaction on their part might lead to acts of indiscriminate violence by their young congregants.

Many imams, in responding to the perceived media onslaught on the image of Islam and its *raison d'être*, have been asserting Islam as a supreme worldview with answers to all the world's problems. While simplistic and unarticulated, this inverted triumphalism may be a natural psychological response: i.e. a re-assertion of one's basic commitments and convictions when the basis of one's faith seems to be undermined.

The consequences of defensiveness

Defensiveness has however not provided Muslims with an adequate basis for counselling or pastoral care, based as it is on denial of our shortcomings and fault lines. It denies us the conceptual space to raise important and honest questions about the goings-on in the world and our complicity in it. Our suffering is never acknowledged and the community, the family and the individual's pain is never spoken about or addressed directly.

The Quran refers to this type of community and individual suffering described above as the blaming soul (*nafs-al-lawwama*). My argument is that our individual and communal psychological dispositions are generally characterised by unacknowledged hurt and upheaval. This disposition has been long in the making – at least 14 years – marked by the start of the first intifadah in 1987, to the Gulf War in 1991, and the second Palestinian uprising in October 2000. During this period we also witnessed brutal mass killings in the civil war between the United Democratic Front and Inkatha, the Boipatong massacre

in 1993 and Third Force train and other killings. The mass genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia has entangled us in a psychosis of violence and death.

But, it has been the brutal killing of hundreds of innocent Palestinians over the last year, coupled with the killing of innocents in Afghanistan, which have produced among Muslims intense feelings of helplessness and despair. The spectre of Muslims dying has been visited upon us daily in our homes. We are watching images of violence and death on our television screens. We have become vicarious observers of human suffering. Helplessness is brought about by our inability to do anything concrete to alleviate this distant suffering.

This dissociation between what we see and our inability to act, a kind of ‘armchair suffering’, induces feelings of social impotence akin to sexual impotence, which often seem to carry social as well as individual consequences. Social impotence threatens our sense of humanity – disabling us from acting productively, producing latent influences that work subliminally on our individual and collective psyches.

Our defensiveness is borne out of a desire to retain a sense of dignity in the face of such helplessness. However, the denial about how we may be implicated by world events or affected by their impact prevents us from gaining a fresh perspective, making necessary distinctions and identifying an adequate approach to this onslaught on our psyche. Denial produces a more perplexing and intractable situation.

Moving beyond our defensiveness

In a verse that captures at once the general ethos of the Quran while directly addressing the ‘blaming soul’ Allah (SWT) declares:

Say: O my servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of God: for God forgives All sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful (Surah Zumar; Verse 53).

This verse points to the parameters of psychological and moral regeneration. It unequivocally declares Allah's mercy and forgiveness are available to those who have degenerated or followed a destructive path. Allah extends a hand of forgiveness to those who approach Him with humility and recompense.

We should translate the 'hand' Allah extends to us into an honest examination of our weaknesses and fault lines. We should provide spaces for communal conversations and interaction, and offer each other support and comfort in a non-judgemental manner. While turning down the 'heat and cant' is an immediate necessity, building a culture of conversation and confidence requires long-term moral commitment.

A counselling and pastoral approach involves a deeper struggle – *jihad-al-nafs* (struggle over self) – conceptualised as a long-term project, which involves nurturing and support. Cultivating respectful, non-judgemental conversations and relationships are crucial in building sophisticated and complex communities.

Performing our *'ibaadat* (acts of ritual worship) with renewed vigour and reflection is a starting point for connecting the inner self with the outer social self. We have to cultivate the type of moral capacity (*taklif*) that enables us to distinguish between misguided responses to crises which fuel disorientation, and responses that attempt to creatively mediate the nuances of everyday life.

Finally, our task is to establish wholesome practices (*amal-al-salihat*) and institutions that will teach our children to function with creativity in a complex, multicultural world. Muslims are challenged to establish productive patterns of co-existence and interdependence, in service of all, especially the poor, in South Africa. The inspirational poem below by Muhammad Iqbal, the Indian philosopher poet, points the way to such a dynamic and courageous existence:

I will reveal to you a point, bright as a pearl
That you may distinguish between the slave and the free!

The slave is by nature repetitive
His experiences are bereft of originality!
The free man is always busily creative,
His bowstring is vibrant with new melodies!
His nature abhors repetition;
His pain is not like the circle traced by a compass!
To the slave, time is a chain,
His lips speak only of Fate!
The courage of the free becomes a counsellor of Fate.
His is the hand that shapes the events! (Iqbal, 1938)

¹ This article was originally a sermon delivered at the Claremont Main Road Mosque, 26 October 2001.