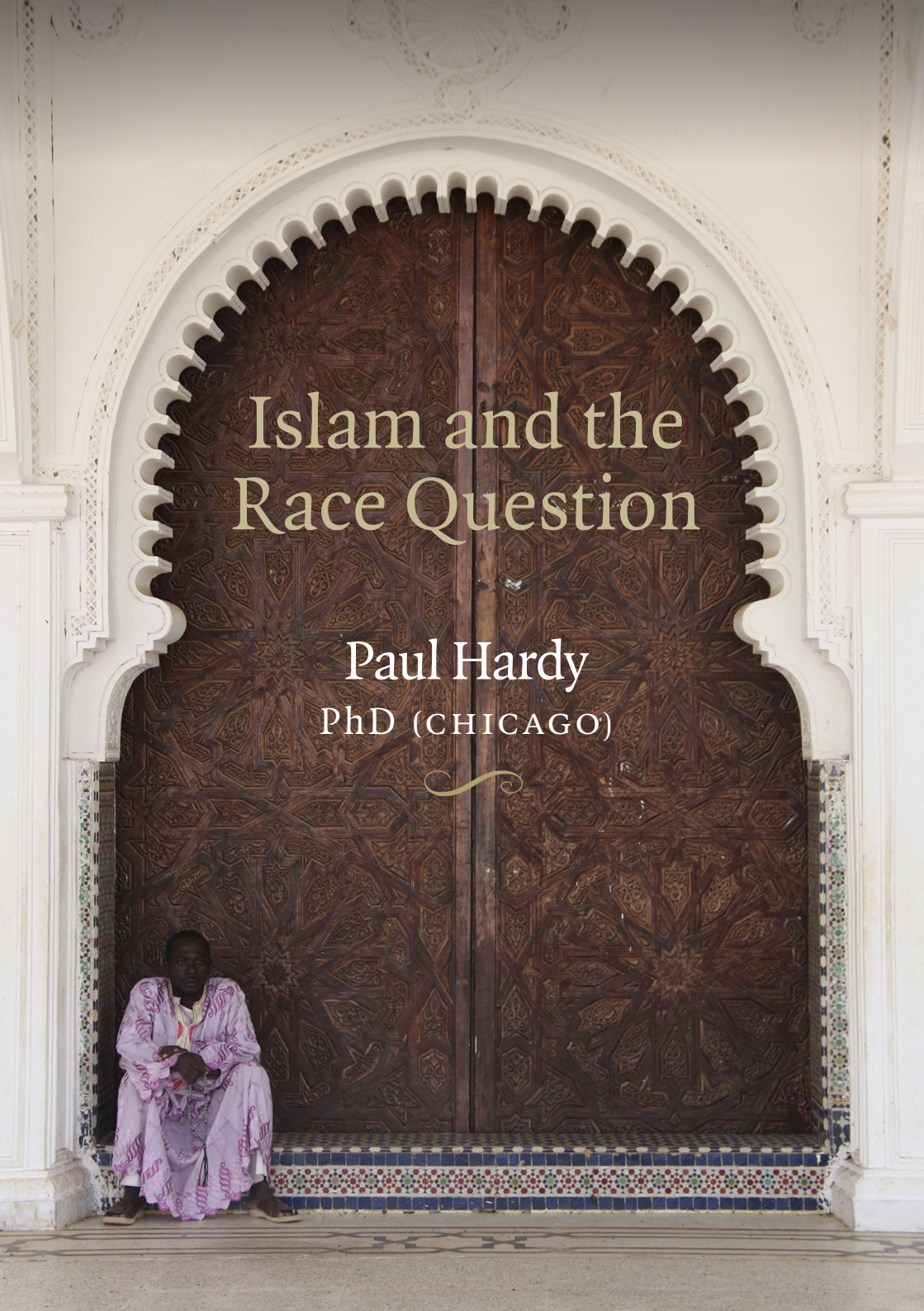

Islam and the Race Question

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THE RACIALIZED DISCOURSE prevalent in our own era has over the centuries proven alien to the societies which developed under the inspiration of Islam. Even more alien to those societies has been the tendency found in the West to articulate personal identity almost entirely in racial terms. For in racialized nations like the United States, Europe, South Africa or the Caribbean, appearance or physical attributes, such as hair, skin and bone structure, have been more consequential, more starkly invested with social significance, than anything else such as family, wealth, culture, education or personal achievement.

It goes without saying that this investing of bodily marks with so high a degree of significance is sociogenic in origin and not phylogenic. To think otherwise would be to place racism beyond the possibility of eradication. It is a historical accident, not a necessity of nature, that produces racist perceptions, actions and discourse. Some historians say that the concept of race did not enter European consciousness until the fifteen century. But certainly, by the midpoint of 'the nineteenth century Benjamin Disraeli could declare that 'all is race.' That is, the basic human condition—and thus economic, political, scientific and cultural positions—are taken to be determined by race. So by the twentieth century, Cromer and Balfour, the most highly-esteemed of British colonial administrators, took it as a matter of course that Europeans and the English in particular, were the master race. All others were 'subject races'.

The contrast with societies that grew up under the influence of Islam is considerable. Although Islamic society was multi-racial from the beginning, in none of the regions where the religion became dominant did the concept of race enter Muslim consciousness. In fact, Arabic

had no word at this time which would correspond to the semantic range covered by the English word 'race.' The word that is sometimes translated as 'race' in versions of Classical Arabic texts is *jins* or 'genus.' *Jins* is a classificatory term taken over from Aristotelian science and is used regularly in Islamic law, for example, to define the value of commodities. For example, the eleventh-century Transoxanian jurist Abū Bakr al-Sarakhsī, who writes:

> The free and the slave are of one genus. As far as his origin is concerned, the human being is free. Slavery intervenes as an accident [...] So slavery does not bring about a change in genus.[1]

1 Abū Bakr al-Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-Mabsūṭ* (Beirut, 1398/1978), XII, 83-84.

In the fifteenth century, as racist ideology emerged in the West, the Muslim Ottoman empire was also coming on the scene. 'Racism', however, could not have formed part of its legitimating apparatus. It formed no part of the Ottoman Muslim legacy.

Of course, social differentiation did and does exist amongst Muslim peoples. This cannot be denied. In the tribal society in which Islam was born there existed differences in social status between the various tribes. Moreover, the societies of the Roman, Persian and Indian worlds where Islam planted its roots were highly articulated in terms of occupational differentiation. But while we find instances of discriminatory exclusion founded on a people's social standing, this did not take on a predominantly racial character.

THE EGALITARIAN CONSCIOUSNESS OF ISLAM

Wherever Islam put down roots Muslims grew to believe that discriminatory exclusion based on race was fundamentally alien to the spirit of their faith. This is understandable, given that there is almost a logical connection between affirming the oneness of God and upholding the equality of human beings before Him. We read, for example, in Islam's sacred book, the Qur'an: 'O Humankind! We have created you from male and female and have made you into peoples [*shuʿūb*] and tribes [*qabā'il*] that you may know one another; truly, the noblest [*akram*] among you before God are the most pious [*atqā*] among yourselves; indeed, is God the All-knowing, the All-seeing.' (49:13) This verse was revealed immediately after the triumphant entry of the Prophet (on him be God's blessing and peace) into Mecca. After a declaration of immunity from reprisal offered to the tribes of Mecca that had fought against him, the Prophet requested Bilāl the Abyssinian to call the people to prayer. A group of three new Muslims saw this. One of them remarked how happy he was that his parents were not present to see such a disgusting sight. Another one, Ḥārith ibn Hishām, found it remarkable that the Blessed

Prophet could find no-one other than a black to call the Muslims to prayer. Yet another, Abū Sufyān, abstained from making any adverse comment lest God send a revelation to Muhammad to deal with what he said. The sources record that God did indeed send the angel of revelation, Gabriel, to inform the Prophet of the discussion that had just taken place. The Prophet asked the three men about their conversation and they confirmed to the Prophet exactly what Gabriel had told him. This verse of the Qur'an was subsequently revealed because these three Arab men were discriminating between themselves and Bilāl, an African. God revealed this verse to proclaim that the only criterion He uses to judge between believers is that of piety, a virtue which Bilāl possessed and the three men did not.[2]

Qur'an 49:13 has played a central role in Muslim discourse on the race question. Despite the circumstances of its revelation there are interpretations which suggest that it refers to tribalism and not to race as such. This is because of the reference it makes to tribes, or *qabā'il*. Admittedly, because race calls upon kinship, this may seem a distinction without a difference. In any case, on this reading the word translated as peoples (*shuᶜūb*) will mean 'tribal confederacy' inasmuch as the singular form *shaᶜb* signifies 'a collecting' or 'separating' and thus by extension came to denote genealogical units that resulted from the branching-off of earlier units. Earlier commentators like Sufyān al-Thawrī (d.777) state that 'The *shuᶜūb* are like the tribes Tamīm and Bakr and the *qabā'il* are subtribes.' Ṭabarī (d.923), the great lawyer and historian, accordingly glosses this verse as follows:

> We have caused you to be related in genealogy. Some of you are related to others remotely [...] When it says 'That you may come to know each other' it means 'That you may know each other with respect

2 Abū ᶜAbd Allāh al-Qurṭubī, *Jāmiᶜ aḥkām al-Qur'ān* (Cairo, 1387/1967), XVI, 341; cf. A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad, a translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford, 1955), 774.

> to genealogy [...] not because you have any superiority to others in that respect nor any nearness which will bring you closer to God, but because *The most distinguished amongst you is the most pious amongst yourselves.*[3]

On this interpretation the Qur'an seems to legitimate people formulating personal identity through the mediation of institutional resources of recognition and authorization. That is, it pronounces as legitimate an identity that locates each person in a given social grouping. Hence the words 'That you may come to know each other' are taken to be a condemnation of ignorance of family lines without which a lawful life in Islam would be impossible, since if people ignored their genealogies, they would be unable to distribute inheritance or avoid marriage within the forbidden degrees.

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3 Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiᶜ al-bayān ᶜan ta'wīl āi al-Qur'ān* (Cairo, 1373/1954), II, 138ff.

Furthermore it appears that the Blessed Prophet did affirm the benefit of genealogical knowledge when he said: 'Know concerning your genealogies that by which you may make your ties of blood kinship close; for close ties of kinship are a cause of love amongst family.'[4] But the stated motivation for mutual knowledge here is love. After all, the Blessed Prophet had announced, 'The believers, in their love, mutual kindness, and close ties, are like one body; when any part complains, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever'.[5] Hence it does not seem too much to interpret the phrase in Qur'an: 'That you may come to know each other' as advancing mutual knowledge as a motivating force for mutual love. Knowledge of one's particular ties of kinship would be only one means of accomplishing this, given that the entire human race descends from a common ancestor. The latter idea harmonises with the Prophet's address in his farewell pilgrimage to which we will turn in a moment.

Giving ground to a more universalising interpretation of Qur'an 39:13 are glosses like that of al-Qushayrī (d.1071), which stress the idea that 'The *shuᶜūb* are those the origins of whose genealogy [*nasab*] are unknown like the Indians and the Iranians and the Turks.'[6] This reading emphasises the relevance for some commentators of Qur'an 39:13 to racism. For example, Abu'l-Futūḥ al-Rāzī, the eleventh century commentator on the Qur'an in Persian, wrote: 'The *shuᶜūb* are those whose relations are not described in terms of a person but in terms of a city [*shahr*] or land [*zamīn*]. Tribes are those which describe their relations in terms of ancestors [*pedarān*].'[7] When he comes to the verse 'And their Lord has hearkened unto them, I will not suffer the pious deed performed by anyone amongst you, either male or female, to be lost. The one of you is of

4 Tirmidhī, Birr, 49.
5 Muslim, Birr, 67.
6 Quoted in Qurṭubī, XVI, 344.
7 Abu'l-Futūḥ al-Rāzī, *Rawḥal-jinān* (Tehran, 1383/1963-64), X, 261

the other' (3:195) he glosses it as follows: 'All men are one in respect to their innate nature in my sight' as Muhammad—peace be upon him, said— 'People are like the teeth of a comb' that is, in respect to their innate natures.'[8]

If someone is a person of distinction, then, it is not because of race or genealogy. After all, a bad man may be wealthy and have prominent forebears and a good one may be poor and quite obscure in origin. Yet for all that he can be a human being of outstanding moral character. Commenting on 49:13 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1210) says: 'People are equal insofar as they are irreligious and impious.' What makes them different is the content of their moral character.[9]

Rāzī goes on to comment that when the verse proclaims 'We have created you from male and female', the preferred interpretation is that all humankind are descended from Adam and Eve. Hence we have no reason to boast because of our social standing, since we are sons and daughters of the same man and woman. Another interpretation is that human beings constitute one race because all human beings are offspring of one male and female.

The sentiments of the Qur'an are echoed in the proclamation of the Blessed Prophet during his farewell pilgrimage:

> Oh humankind, your Lord is one and your ancestors are one. You are from Adam and Adam was from dust. Behold, neither the Arab has superiority to the non-Arab, nor the red to the black nor the black to the red except by virtue of piety [*taqwā*]. *Truly the most distinguished amongst you is the most pious* (49:13).[10]

The Prophet here makes the logical connection between monotheism and race of which I spoke earlier. Moreover his language here is similar

8 Abu'l-Futūḥ al-Rāzī, *Rawḥ al-jinān*, III, 136.
9 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Cairo, 1933), XXVIII, 136.
10 Qurṭubī, XVI, 342.

to that of a tradition transmitted on the authority of Abū Mūsā where the Prophet—on whom be peace—says: 'An Arab is no better than a non-Arab. Conversely, a non-Arab is no better than an Arab. A red-raced man is not better than a black one except in piety. Humanity are all Adam's children and Adam was created out of clay.'[11] The Prophet's language also shows that when it comes to discrimination, he has in mind not simply tribalism but also that type of differential exclusion that invests bodily marks with social significance. For the 'black' and the 'red' are usually taken to mean the Arabs and the Persians respectively, that is, those who relate their personal identity to a tribal grouping and those who relate it to a place or nation.

Rāzī ends his reflections on verse 49:13 with a story illustrative of the way he understands the Qur'an at this point. He writes:

> I heard that one of the nobles in Central Asia [Khurāsān] was with respect to his genealogy the closest of people to ʿAlī—on him be peace—[the fourth Caliph of Islam] but he was corrupt morally [*fāsiq*]. There was a black former slave [*mawlā*] who was pre-eminent both for his learning [ʿ*ilm*] and practice [of Islam] [ʿ*amal*]. The people [of the locale] liked to seek [the shaykh's] blessing. It came to pass that one day he set out to the mosque and the people followed him. The nobleman, in a state of obvious inebriation, came upon him. The people pushed the nobleman out of the way [of the shaykh]. But the nobleman overtook them and grabbing the shaykh's arm, cried: 'O Black one [...] infidel and son of an infidel! I am a son of the Messenger of God. Humble yourself and show some respect!' [...] The people beat the nobleman. But the shaykh said: 'No! This is to be tolerated from him for the sake of his ancestor. Beating him is to be reckoned according to his sin. However, O nobleman, I am white within but black without. People behold the whiteness of my heart behind the

11 Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad* (Cairo, 1313), V, 411.

> blackness of my face [...] I have taken the path of your father and you have taken the path of my father. People see me in the path of your father and see you in the path of my father. They deem me a son of your father and you, a son of my father.[12]

This story is in a real way illustrative of the exact importance Muslims throughout the ages have placed upon race in their daily lives.

Yet this was the spirit of Islam that the Prophet Muhammad taught, as we see from the tradition found in Bayhaqī. This relates that when some disagreement occurred between Abū Dharr and Bilāl, the former said to the latter: 'You son of a black woman!' The Messenger of God—on him be blessing and peace—was displeased by Abū Dharr's comment and he rebuked him by saying: 'That is too much, Abū Dharr! He who has a white mother has no advantage which makes him better than the son of a black mother.' The Prophet's rebuke deeply affected Abū Dharr and he

12 Rāzī, loc. cit.

immediately threw himself to the ground, swearing that he would not raise it until Bilāl had put his foot upon his head.[13]

DOES ISLAMIC MONOTHEISM FACILITATE THE ARTICULATION OF RACISM?

Still, one may wonder how far the proposed logical connection between monotheism and egalitarianism works as an antidote to racist beliefs. Does Islam offer a conceptual barrier to them, or facilitate their articulation? Recently, efforts have been made to dismantle the impediments to tolerance in our increasingly global age. The hope behind these efforts is that with a better grasp of the roots of intolerance we will be better able to establish a genuinely ecumenical framework for living with our differences. Into this effort one must place Regina Schwartz, who argues that 'through the dissemination of the Bible in Western culture, its narratives have become the foundation of a prevailing understanding of ethnic, religious, and national identity as defined negatively; over against others. We are 'us' because we are not 'them', Israel is not Egypt.'[14]

The well-known Egyptologist Jan Assmann has also argued that monotheism has been the single most important impediment to cross-cultural translation, communication and understanding, and, for this reason, the single most influential source of negativity and intolerance. According to Assmann, it is only with monotheism that we encounter the phenomenon of a 'counter-religion', by which he means a religious formation that posits a distinction between true and false religion. Before the emergence of monotheism, the boundaries between polytheistic cults were in principle open. Translatability is readily grounded in a general function attributed to divinities whose work in nature shows a correspondence. 'The polytheistic religions overcame the primitive eth-

13 Aḥmad al-Bayhaqī, *Shuʿab al-īmān* (Beirut, 2008), no. 4772.

14 Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago, 1997), x.

nocentrism of tribal religions by distinguishing several deities by name, shape and function,' Assmann writes, 'the names are of course different [...] But the functions are strikingly similar' [so that] 'the sun god of one religion is easily equated to the sun god of another religion.' In contrast, monotheism, because revealed and not grounded in nature, erects a rigid boundary between true religion and everything else. 'Whereas polytheism [...] rendered different cultures mutually transparent and compatible, the new counter-religion blocked inter-cultural translatability. False gods cannot be translated.'[15]

Schwartz's and Assmann's understanding is grounded in what they take to be a pluralism demanded by today's increasing global consciousness. For them, racial conflicts are generated through cultural and religious differences, the unwillingness to see the other as oneself. The other is just like oneself. His or her strangeness is simply a function of a different vocabulary. Strangeness comprises a different set of names that can always be translated. This seems to work when we are speaking of the abstract entities divine names signify: the natural functions of divinities. But then the individuality of the divinities seems exhaustible in the plethora of generalities we use in describing those functions. The reason why the ancient pagan gods enjoy the inter-substitutability of which Assmann speaks is that they were perceived as manifestations of rather general traits.

But it would seem that what people find most repugnant about racism is its easy generalisations about others, as though people of a certain race were inter-substitutable or as if one member of a given race were replaceable by another. Yet persons are irreplaceable like nothing is, like nothing else can be. The American philosopher Stanley Cavell notes this in his observation that the pre-Civil War American slaveowner did not

15 Jan Asmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge MA: 1997).

deny the humanity of his slave.[16] When he took a slave as concubine he did not think that he had embraced bestiality. He did not go to such lengths to convert his horses to Christianity or to prevent their getting wind of it. 'It could be said,' Cavell writes, 'that what he denies is that the slave is other [...] to his one.' That is, he denies that the slave has his own (i.e., the slave owner's) sense of being singular and unique. But when Qur'an 39:13 enjoins us to know one another as members of different races it is not as instances of a set of general racial characteristics. It enjoins us to know each other as the unique, irreplaceable individuals that we are. This is why I have argued for the logical connexion of Islamic monotheism and egalitarianism. For in the uniqueness of the Creator we find the model of the uniquness of the human individual.

Here, cultural critic Slavoj Žižek's reflections are helpful. He suggests that since every language, by definition, contains a space open to what

16 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 376.

eludes our grasp where words fail, we effectively understand a foreign culture when we are able to identify that language's points of failure when we are able to apprehend its blind spots. Hence, we should not focus on the peculiarity of a people's customs, but endeavour to encircle that which eludes the grasp of the people themselves, the point at which the Other is in itself dislocated. 'I understand the Other,' Žižek writes, 'when I become aware of how the very problem that was bothering me [...] is already bothering the Other itself'.[17] For intercultural understanding, then, demands that we go to those places where each of one of us becomes an enigma to him- or herself. For in the 'we' of community there always inheres a strangeness, a space inside us where group identity fails and eludes the grasp of institutionally or religiously created solidarities.

It is this strangeness to which the Prophet Muhammad alluded when he said: 'Islam began as something strange and shall again become strange. Blessed be those who are strange.'[18] Someone asked: 'In what way are they strange, O Messenger of God?' In one narration the Prophet replied: 'Just as one says of a man that he is strange vis-à-vis a certain tribe.' Islam at its most ideal level, then, must be strange to an identity mediated by institutional resources of recognition. For this is like the identity of tribal membership, which is opposed to the ethic of singularity which the Prophet taught. The idea that 'We are "us" because we are not "them"', therefore, is foreign to Islam. Solidarity amongst groups created on the basis of racial, tribal or even religious identity in Arabic is called *ʿAṣabiyya*. But of the latter the Prophet said: 'He is not one of us who calls for *ʿAṣabiyya*, or who fights for *ʿAṣabiyya* or who dies for *ʿAṣabiyya*.'[19]

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17 Slavoj Žižek, *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p.50.
18 Muslim, Imān, 232
19 Abū Dāūd, Adab, 113.