

Review Essay

Of Prophets, Pagans and the Middle East¹

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The term “postmodernity” perhaps owes its very popularity to the fact that it is notoriously difficult to define. It often means all things to all people, and by its very orientation, is critical of any attempts to offer blanket definitions. Nevertheless, we may discern three broad orientations that define postmodernity:

1. It involves an “incredulity toward metanarratives.”² In other words, it repudiates the modernist view that individual actions can be explained through universal laws.
2. It focuses on the crisis of representation.³ In other words, it is critical of the power vested in any subjectivity to represent the reality of another.
3. It problematizes the issue of subject and author.⁴ For example, it would question the claim made by this journal that it is a more ‘official’ interpreter of Islamic thought than some others: a claim this journal may seek to advance on the basis of its institutional power.

This somewhat arbitrary set of attributes associated with postmodernity may seem quite innocuous at first reading. But postmodernity (or its now emerging normative arm, postmodernism) is evidently much more than that, as its adherents and critics have pointed out. It has been associated with a lot of other phenomena. For instance, in the economic realm, we have the notion of post-Fordism, a situation where the precepts of mass production are being overturned. Based on computer-aided manufacture, a rapidly heterogenizing consumer demand, and the emergence of newer forms of commerce (such as Ecommerce over the internet), a new industrial paradigm is emerging.⁵ At the same time, we have the phenomenon of *post-nationalism*, where the sovereignty of nations is being threatened by the emergence of supranational forms of governance such as multinational corporations and the WTO.⁶ However, the issue that

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Professor Haq's book seeks to explore is the phenomenon of *post-enlightenment*, where the notion of the maturation of human reason is subjected to savage and debilitating critique. In its epistemological orientation, postmodernism thus presumes to challenge the basis of all reason.

The death of authority, subjectivity and representation, these are tall claims. The main reasons that postmodernity has gained currency in the West is perhaps because of its ability to speak to the condition of marginalized subjectivities that are on the receiving end of authority. For example, the power of the church or the nation state, when deployed hegemonically, has the effect of delegitimizing a variety of alternative and minority positions. By destabilizing this order, postmodernity opens up spaces in which these marginalized groups can find a voice. One immediately sees potential here for the deployment of postmodern principles by Muslims, especially in areas where the Islamic perspective is under-represented. By destabilizing hegemonic symbols (for example, by destabilizing the easy conflation of "religion" with "Christianity" in the West), Muslims can carve out valuable counter-hegemonic spaces to establish the legitimacy (or at least the equal-ness) of their position vis-a-vis the dominant position. On the other hand, for a religious philosophy that is so rooted in ontological fixity (for example, of the concept of *Tawheed*, or the unity of God), the postmodern position of moral ambivalence can represent a very grave challenge.

Therefore, an examination of the intersection between postmodernism and Islam is a very valuable exercise. Particularly so in light of the fact that earlier examinations of this intersection have failed to live up to their promise.⁷ In such an academic drought, Professor Jalalul Haq's essay titled *Post-Modernity, Paganism and Islam* is a very welcome addition. Professor Haq offers a trenchant critique of postmodernism (though it is not his primary motive in the essay). In order to contextualize his book, I would preface my discussion of its contents by laying out the various ways in which other (secular) critics of postmodernism have dealt with it.

Postmodernism has scarcely gone uncriticized. While it is true that it has enjoyed unprecedented support from a variety of constituencies (disproportionately, academics!), there have been several subjectivities that have savaged it for various reasons. For one, marginalized groups in the Third World, who had used essentialized categories such as the "nation" to achieve decolonization, are suspicious of a western ideology that presumes

to announce the death of the very institutions that it has finally gained control of. Moreover, they are skeptical of postmodernism's intentions; on the one hand, it announces itself (in the metropolitan context) as the advocacy of local interests in opposition to global universalisms. But on the other, it suspiciously comes across to the third world as a new essentialism, as a new colonialism.⁸ As R. Radhakrishnan points out in an essay, "The valence of postmodernism cannot be decided upon without reference to the accountability of postmodernism to the rest of the world. For postmodernism to have any kind of meaningful travel across the world, it has to present itself to the world as a finite ideology based on specific interests and not as a value-free and ideologically free form of knowledge or human condition."⁹ Similar scathing critiques have been launched at postmodernism from the Marxist perspective¹⁰, which excoriates postmodernism for its repudiation of values and its promotion of theoretical inaction instead of engaged class struggle and public mobilization.

We may therefore posit the following critiques of *postmodernism*:

1. Most postmodern/poststructuralist thought results from an extremely self-referential view of the West, which is then packaged to the world as a universal viewpoint; to that extent, it obscures the intimate and often violent dialogue that is taking place between western and non-western economies on a variety of contested terrains, such as modernity, industrialization, and ways of knowing.
2. The tendency of the postmodernist/poststructuralist viewpoints to be overoccupied by practices of representation often leads to the ignoring of the vital and physicalistic nature of phenomena (for example, postmodernist/poststructuralist views of events such as war tend to view it more as a representational issue rather than an act of extreme violence and destruction).
3. Situated as it is in the context of a late capitalist society, postmodern/poststructuralist thought discards categories that have outlived their utility from a western standpoint (e.g. nationalism). In so doing, it primarily denies agency to those subjectivities that may not be able to afford the luxury of denying these categories.
4. Postmodernist/poststructuralist thought, despite its critique of logocentrism, derives most of its theories from the articulation of dualistic, binary oppositions. To that end, it privileges this logocentric thought over all else, including systems of knowing that may not be logocentric or dual in character.

5. Postmodernism's assertions sound far too glib to represent any serious reality. Notice for example the assertion by Foucault and Deleuze that "representation is dead."¹¹ While it may be possible for the western scholar to issue a "grand obituary notice regarding the death of representation and narrative voice¹²", the Third World scholar still has to acknowledge that "the subaltern cannot speak"¹³ and that the duty of representation is not something one can afford to discard with a flourish.

Professor Haq has also been critical of postmodernism in his book, but his critique is centered around the issue of moral decay that is produced by postmodernism. He sees postmodernism as a threat to the notion of ethics and morality. To the extent that the success of the postmodern agenda is predicated upon a freedom from the normative bonds of ethical decision-making, postmodernism can only succeed by positioning itself as a religion. It does so by entering through the back door, the area where the notions of philosophy and religion intersect, the area inhabited by mysticism. It then proceeds to destabilize reason, god and the very concept of man, leading to a sense of unbridled nihilism.

Although the book is titled *Post-Modernity, Paganism and Islam*, Professor Haq has not positioned his essay either as an analysis of Islam or paganism, but focuses on postmodernism, with paganism and Islam as a subject. And while he is critical of postmodernity, he does not intend to present his book as mere critique. In his own words, this book is an attempt to place postmodernism "in its philosophico-cultural context, and through it learn about the philosophical economy of our current history" (viii).¹⁴ The aim of his book may be set out in the following set of polemical propositions, which he lays out in its preface (v-viii):

1. Postmodernism is the new religion of the West.
2. Postmodernism is not anti-modernism. It does not repudiate modernist concepts, but rather destabilizes them, and deprives them of their force.
3. In a similar process, we have seen that the so-called mystical traditions in religion have attempted to do the same to religions. Through the doctrines of transcendence and negativity, they situate themselves in the gray area between philosophy and religion. In effect, they advance a "pagan" concept of religion.
4. So in a theological context, we have a binary between prophetic monotheism (represented by Islam)¹⁵ and pagan mysticism.
5. Professor Haq positions postmodernism as the cultural logic of paganism, and as the epistemological context of all those impulses that challenge the prophetic and critical consciousness.

Having set out his agenda with admirable transparency, Professor Haq launches into his exegesis, which involves a formidable close-reading of the works of some of the "prophets" of postmodernism, particularly Derrida and Foucault. He meticulously links their ideas to two of their philosophical predecessors, Nietzsche and Heidegger. He also demonstrates his familiarity with some of the "lesser" postmodernists, such as Baudrillard, Kristeva, Irigaray and Lyotard.¹⁶

Professor Haq positions the modern self as having been, at heart, a revolutionary self (12). The philosophical underpinning of this revolution was enlightenment, or in Kantian terms, "the maturation of human reason" (13). Of course, this grand vision of enlightenment as a liberator of humanity was vociferously attacked by Foucault (and Derrida), who represented it as little more than an illusion. The motive of these "philosophers of excess" (21) was really to destabilize all moral action, to replace "opposition" with "difference" (28). Unlike reason, which pursues Love (of Logos or God) through a never-ending search for *realization*, postmodernism replaces this unrealisability with a nihilism that inhibits all action (54).

Professor Haq then proceeds to describe postmodernism as the "celebration of unreason" (57). While it was this very discourse of reason that created man, the death of this reasoning man, the *homo dialecticus* is not, unfortunately, going to lead to the birth of an overman (as the modernists dreamed), but rather, a madman (the philosopher, in the post-modern fashion) (134).

Professor Haq now reminds us that given the ambitious brief that post-modernism has given itself, he is justified in referring to it as a religion. "Far from being a simple academic critique of logocentric discourses or textualities or grand narratives, it covered under its ambit the issues of ethics and politics of culture and civility and of the life and world, of life-world in general" (139).

Once the postmodernists killed God, the death of man was bound to follow. What we are left with is the celebration of mere physicality, either through the enactment of polysexuality (220) or the celebration of athletic prowess as godliness (228-9). And ultimately, postmodernists attempt to mix-and-match the philosophical and the prophetic (the Greek and the Jew), through the strange metaphor of "the Jewgreek and the Greekjew, a metaphor of merger, or resolution of contradictions. The Greek and the Jew, the Hellenic and the Hebraic, the philosophical and the prophetic, the

factors of opposition which crave for a happy balance though without ever attaining it" (404). This attempt to mix the polar opposites is what the Professor ends the book with, in a tone of withering irony: "Heidegger was a Greek and also a Jew, and so was Foucault too as the philosopher of sodomy and the absence of God. Derrida, Levinas, Lyotard: the Greekjews met Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault, the Jewgreeks. Greekjews meet the Jewgreeks. The extremes always meet."¹⁷ (486)

Professor Haq's book works at several levels. First of all, by demonstrating an impressive familiarity with the work of the postmodernists, he makes his case difficult to dismiss off-hand. Secondly, he juxtaposes a variety of quotes by the postmodernists which implicate their case as bordering on the puerile (My personal favorites were a quote by Baudrillard on the epigraph (iv), where he characterizes the present as a "post-orgy state of affairs" and one by Foucault which celebrates suicide as the ultimate pleasure (222). Finally, Professor Haq's ability to discuss the debilitating consequences of the postmodernist position leaves us with an ineffable sense of despair at the world according to them.

However, what lets down the book is its extremely polemical style. Professor Haq seems in no mood to discuss either the emancipatory possibilities of the postmodern agenda, or the horrifying excesses of modernity that led us into the postmodern scenario in the first place. In the end, he is in danger of appearing to be a gatekeeper of modernity, with its failed promise of the conquest of nature through progress, of ignorance through Cartesian reason, or the economy through capitalism. He does not appear interested in investing his critique of postmodernity or his espousal of the holy grail of enlightenment with any sense of contingency.

Also, Professor Haq takes his critique too far, sometimes making his exegesis sound more like a "conspiracy theory". For example, in the preface, he links postmodernism to a variety of strands including "irrationalism, political conservatism, ecologism, homosexuality etc." (viii). The linkage between these four 'isms' is breezily assumed, as are their postmodern roots. To that end, this link, especially between postmodernism and political conservatism, is egregious enough to alienate the neutral reader, and risks pushing Professor Haq's argument into the zone of the self-fulfilling polemic. Finally, one is not clear why Islam should be the legitimate holder of the mantle of the "prophetic" faith. It appears that any Judeo-Christian faith could be positioned as a prophetic response to the pagan excesses of modernism. To that end, his title appears a trifle

disingenuous.

These are minor quibbles, though. The book itself is a magnificent treatise on postmodernity, which is accessible even to non-philosophers who do not possess a deep understanding of philosophical terminology. If the postmodern agenda intends to cross the Rubicon into the realm of hegemony, it will have to pass through the gates of Professor Haq's critique.

Notes

1. This review essay uses Dr. Jalalul Haq's book *Post-Modernity, Paganism and Islam* (New Delhi, India: Minerva Press, 2000) as a point of departure to engage in a broader discussion about postmodernity. I would like to thank the participants of the seminar on Postmodernism and Islam conducted by the Association of Muslim Social Scientists in Herndon, VA on June 3, 2000 for their valuable comments, which clarified several issues for me. I express special gratitude to Sr. Deonna Kelli for her assistance.
2. This term, one of the more celebrated quasi-definitions of postmodernity, comes from Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (English translation: Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.
3. For an exposition of the same, see Marta Cal's and Linda Smircich (1999), 'Past Postmodernism? Reflections and Tentative Directions', *Academy of Management Review*, 24(4): pp. 649-651.
4. The author is seen as "embedded in a social context, and in relationship to others (Cal's and Smircich, p. 653). Michel Foucault referred to such an author as an "author-function" (Foucault, M (1977). 'What is an Author?'. In D. F. Bouchard (Ed.) *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* by Michel Foucault: (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 113-138.
5. For a pathbreaking analysis of post Fordism, see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989).
6. See Peter Dicken, *Global Shift* (3rd Edition) (New York: The Guilford Press, 1998). Dicken, for example, reports that the total sales of Ford Motor Corporation exceed the gross national product of several nations like Norway and Saudi Arabia. Bill Gates, the CEO of Microsoft, is personally worth more than many nations. Also, the WTO now has the power to enforce its law on nations, making it the first supra-national organization to have complete power in that regard. The World Bank and the IMF now dictate foreign policy to most of the Third World despite an extraordinarily abysmal track record.
7. For example, Akbar S. Ahmed's *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London: Penguin Books, 1992) is hampered by a superficial understanding of post modernism and a tautological acceptance of the "essence" of Islam.

8. As Radhakrishnan points out, postmodernism sounds suspiciously like canonical anthropology in the way it fixes the third world subject: "if canonical anthropology's message to pre-modern societies was 'I think therefore you are', postmodern orthodoxy takes the form of 'I think therefore I am not. You are "I am not". (R. Radhakrishnan (1994). 'Postmodernism and the rest of the world', *Organization*, 1(2), p. 309.
9. Radhakrishnan, p. 331
10. For example, see Ellen Meiskins Wood and John Bellamy Foster, *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997).
11. Foucault, Michel and Gilles Deleuze 1977. A conversation. In Foucault, M., *Language, Counter-memory, practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press). pp. 205-217.
12. Radhakrishnan, 1994: 312.
13. Spivak, G. C. 1991. "Can the subaltern speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), p. 308.
14. In all future references to Professor Haq's book in the rest of this essay, I shall use just the page numbers in parentheses.
15. Professor Haq is mystifyingly reluctant to use the term Islam in a book that has Islam in his title. Indeed, there are hardly any direct references to Islam in the entire book. When they do come, they are either disguised (for example, in the preface, where he coyly refers to it in the context of "a common Abrahamic legacy, of which the Arabian prophet claimed to be a late (and last) inheritor" (vi)), or juxtaposed carefully with reference to other religions (once, when Islam is described in Muhammad's definition as the "people of the middle [*Ummat-I-wast*]" (18), it is immediately linked to Buddhism, which has a similar position). I could not fully understand this reluctance, but I personally have no problem in submitting to his authorial privilege (a decidedly un-postmodern act!) to represent his subject as he wishes.
16. His uniform disdain for these philosophers, which bubbles (barely) below the surface of his narrative, borders on the amusing. One gets the impression that Professor Haq is a microbiologist examining a piece of refuse, his commitment to scientific inquiry struggling to overcome his evident distaste!
17. The tone reminded me of the final scene in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, where the humans face the pigs, and it is difficult to say which is which.