



Can Utopian Thinking Help Us Today?

Utopia and Love

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I will let you into a secret. During my student days I was an avid reader – I read almost everything I could get my hands on. As I was particularly interested in science and the future, I explored these subjects extensively. Naturally, I wanted to find out what Muslim authors had to say about the subject. While one could pick up an odd book or article on “Islam and Science” they were intellectually feeble; and there was absolutely nothing which discussed Islam in a futuristic framework. At first I was quite frustrated by this lack of material on topics of specific interest to me. But then I decided to fill the gap single-handedly. I set myself the task of writing 12 books, which I thought would constitute an *oeuvre* on these important subjects by the time I celebrated by 35th birthday.

This was my personal utopia. Initially, I spent a great deal of time dreaming about it. I would lay in a hammock in my flat in Jeddah, where I worked after leaving university, smoking a cigar and contemplating the impact my books would have on the world at large. Slowly I began to write. I wrote my first book; and then the second; and then the third... I am not quite 35 yet and there is still some way to go.

But something strange happened as time went on. I became obsessed with my utopia: it took me over. All my energy went into realising it. It transformed into a beautiful woman I loved; and her love became overpowering, all-embracing. It completely took me over: I was not in control of myself; my utopia was in control of me. The blueprint I developed to realise my utopia became an instrument of oppression; initially, its im-

pact was limited to myself, but then it engulfed my family and those who are dear to me. While I relentlessly pursued my utopia, I was not aware of the damage, indeed serious fatalities, I was causing all around me.

Only recently I have become aware of the damage that the pursuit of my personal utopia has caused: the beautiful woman I loved has turned out to be a mirage. This realisation has come in two parts. First came this message from my subconscious: somewhere between your utopian goal and its pursuit lies a very powerful human force – your ego. Despite the fact that my utopia was based on very noble sentiments, my ego played a very large part in its creation. And the actual pursuit of my utopic vision, I confess, eventually turned into one big ego trip.

The second realisation follows from the first. The utopia itself and its consistent pursuit, transforms one's personality. It makes you numb to your surroundings, you become resentful of everything and everyone that gets between you and your noble goal, and as your utopia recedes from your grasp, your actions become more and more desparate. The beautiful woman turns out to be a sore lover and her pursuit becomes a destructive, not to mention boring and banal exercise.

After leaving university, almost ten years ago, I started my intellectual and emotional life as a utopian. I had a vision and, I believed, the necessary intellectual apparatus and stamina to realise it. Even though my utopian goals were limited, their pursuit has transformed me totally – and I am not sure that I am an altogether better person for that.

Just imagine what could happen to those who pursue much grander utopias? Almost every utopian dream, every non-man's land vision, no matter how humanistic, how moral and how desirable, in reality almost always ends up as a nightmare. The utopian vision of the 18th century enlightened philo-

sophers have created the alienating science and technology that we have today. The classless utopia of Marx and Lenin led to the brutality of Stalin. There may always be something inherent in the utopias themselves which is dehumanising; but I believe it is also the process, the methodology by which men seek to realise them, that inevitably transforms them into other people's hells. It is the equivalent of my ego that is the destroying factor.

All this does not mean that utopias themselves are not necessary or undesirable. What would life be without a beautiful woman to love? We need utopias to inspire us to higher goals, to reach out to the sky and touch it. But I believe that utopias which are not grounded in an absolute frame of reference and pursued within a divinely inspired methodology are doomed. Despite all its power, our intellect and imagination are not good enough to conceive a perfect and just world with all its multidimensional complexities. Only an all-powerful, omnipotent Being can conceive such a utopia: and only He can provide the ethical and moral guidelines by which it can be realised.

A Muslim therefore, is not so much a utopian but more of an idealist. His utopia has already been worked out in history: it needs only to be understood in its contemporary and futuristic sense. The methodology for realising this utopia is also there – it too needs to be given a contemporary shape. A Muslim futurist, therefore, is an idealist who seeks to rebuild the civilisation whose foundations were first laid by the Prophet Mohammad when he migrated from Makkah and established a social and political order in Medina. He seeks to do that in a framework of eternal values and concepts as they are to be found in the Qur'an and as they were given a practical shape by the Prophet. It is an idealism without boundries, perpetual in its sacrifices, ongoing in its quest.