

The Legitimacy of Self-Image

COMMENT

MUSLIMS are a historic community *par excellence*. Inspired by God and founded by the most exceptional personality in human history, we owe our existence to a historic vision. Consumed by the fire of our historic commitment, we once were the torch-bearers of humanity. Because of our inalienable historic consciousness, we survived as a community. Our unique history made us a unique *Umma*.

Today, after countless triumphs and tribulations, after many blessings and misfortunes, after numerous historical ups and downs, we are re-entering the arena of world's nations as a historic community. Even if the hand of destiny has effaced all traces of political unity from our present, the memory of our past still sustains our visions of the future. We are committed to fulfill our mission in history as the Muslim *Umma*. This is our challenge to history.

History, however, does not perpetuate itself. Even following a Divine scheme, history is still shaped by human mind, carved by human effort and created by human will. Indeed, without human resolve, history carries no meaning. The mole of historic communities does stop burrowing half-way. Nations, peoples, civilisations do not survive unless they will it. The *Umma* cannot live on historic memories alone. Its past memories must be informed by the images of the coming times, its historic visions be reclaimed by the designs of its future and its faith must withstand the test of time. The *Umma* must find cause and meaning in its present and future existence.

History may be the midwife of the *Umma*, it is not her mother. The *Umma's* *raison d'être* is not history but faith, its ultimate meaning not 'success in history' but submission to the Parahistorical Will, and its final destination not permanent nothingness in this world but eternal bliss in the Hereafter. More precious than all history, thus, is our metahistorical faith - the principal determinant of our *identity* and the ultimate basis of our commitment.

In the final analysis, our survival as the Islamic community is contingent upon our ability to maintain a cogent and gratifying self-image. Unless we are able to replenish the carrying vessel of our collective per-

sonality by the intellectual elixir of our faith, we run the risk of losing our capacity to recognise ourselves. A historic consciousness depleted of all power to perceive any viable future exhibits no will to survive.

For the past two hundred years, the self-image of Islam has come under heavy attack. All the ungodly forces of racial pride, religious fanaticism, intellectual arrogance and scientific imperialism have challenged the authenticity of our self-perception. The veracity of our conviction and the desirability of our commitment have been questioned with a force of logical arguments and illogical passions as never before.

What is more pitiable, emotional obduracy, intellectual recalcitrance and political defiance notwithstanding, outsiders have succeeded in tarnishing our self-image. It is the outsider's perception and prejudices that determine to a considerable extent the modern Muslim's view of himself. Unquestionably, he has lost the nerve to see himself reflected in the historic pond. The historic pond, for him, not only contains the murky water of betrayed ideals but it also flows out to the brackish ocean of fathomless nihilism, atheism and secularity. Caught in the cross currents of the murky past and brackish future, the 'fundamentalist' intellectual holds on to the straw of tradition, content to being drowned in the sea of history but hoping to find felicity in the ocean of meta-history.

Historically, the task of re-touching our self-portrait had been entrusted to our institutes of higher learning. In the picture-gallery of universal thought, theirs was the duty to make our image recognisable. Under foreign pressure, both material and ideational, however, we transformed the traditional college into the hybrid University. We now know that the latter acted as training centres for the disfigurement of our self-image. We have no option but to dismantle them all and start cultivating anew from authentic roots. The sooner we buttress our historic consciousness by a contemporary intellectual exposition of our value-commitment, the greater the chance for the survival of our identity.

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