

Ziauddin Sardar

The Erasure of Islam

Introduction By Gilad Atzmon

August 02, 2009 "Palestine Think Tank" -- After a decade of elaboration on Jewish ideology and identity I came to a conclusion that Jewish identity, politics and ideology can be grasped as different manifestations of 'self love'. The Zionist loves himself being strong and crude (Sabra), the Jewish leftist loves himself being a 'humanist' and 'tolerant', yet, for some reason, he prefers to operate in 'Jews only' cells (Bund, Jews for Palestine, Jews for Peace, Jews against Zionism, etc.). It took me some years to gather that Jewish ideology, politics and identity is not just surrender to self-affection, it is also driven by resentment towards others. It would be correct to argue for instance that the Zionist mantra could be interpreted as "love yourself as much as you hate your neighbour". Other forms of Jewish ideologies may be slightly lighter on hatred but, generally speaking, they all resemble one another in their positive tendency towards segregation.

Enlightenment that is there to praise 'freedom', 'liberty', 'reason' and 'liberal thought' is not very different from Jewish ideology once put into political practice. In reality, it is just another form of a self-centred supremacist method of separation between the 'chosen' (labelled as progressive) and the 'inferior' (labelled as reactionary).

Enlightenment is anthropocentric in its essence, for it regards humans as the 'universe's most important entity'. Those who follow enlightenment ideology are basically different breeds of self-lovers. We are basically referring to humans who love themselves for being rational and liberated. We are referring to humans who are convinced that they are at the core of the essence of our cosmos. Bearing that in mind, we may be entitled to regard the last two centuries of Western conflicts as futile

battles between different kinds of 'self lovers'.

Enlightenment was there to invent a dichotomy between the progressive (the enlightened) and the reactionary (the other). Enlightenment thinkers "worked hard to provide a rational justification for colonisation." Since it is the spirit of Enlightenment that happens to be the driving force behind neo-conservative thought, dogmatic interventionist secularism and ruthless technology, it would be intelligible to argue that if we want to save ourselves and our planet, we better be courageous enough to face our Enlightenment driven self-affectionate ideologies. It is the Enlightened who puts humanity at risk whether it is nuking other humans, whether it is carpet bombardment, whether it is mass killing in the name of collectivisation, whether it is our ecological disaster and global warming or even killing in the name of democracy or liberation. For some devastating reason, it is always an Enlightened ideology behind all these well orchestrated genocides and human-inflicted tsunamis.

The following article by Ziauddin Sardar is a philosophical attempt to identify the conflict between Islam and lethal Western ideology. Sardar is a leading British intellectual. Some regard him also as a leading Muslim critic of Islam. In the following paper Sardar successfully challenges the notion of the clash of civilizations from the perspective of the other. GA

The Erasure of Islam

By Ziauddin Sardar

August 02, 2009 -- -What Enlightenment? It may have been good for Europe, but for the rest of the world in general, and Islam in particular, the Enlightenment was a disaster. Despite their stand for freedom and liberty, reason and liberal thought, Enlightenment thinkers saw the non-West as irrational and inferior, morally decadent and fit only for colonisation. This legacy is not only with us but is positively thriving in the guise of neo-conservative thought, dogmatic secularism and scientism.

For key Enlightenment thinkers, such as Voltaire, de Montesquieu, Volney and Pascal, Europe occupied a special place: it was to be the destiny of humanity, construed as Western man. They worked hard to provide a rational justification for colonisation. They rationalised the medieval

images, anxieties and fear of Islam and its Prophet – so evident in the sections devoted to Muhammad in Pascal's *Pensées* – and presented them as evidence for the innate inferiority of Islam. They deliberately suppressed the Muslim contribution to science and learning and severed all intellectual links between Islam and Europe. Their Eurocentricism thus further locked Islam into an exclusive confrontation with the West, which continues to this day.

For thirteen and fourteenth century thinkers of Christendom, such as Roger Bacon and John Wycliff, Islam was simply a pagan, enemy Empire. To their credit, the Enlightenment thinkers saw Islam as a civilisation. But it was a civilisation grounded in a backward society and inferior political institutions and religious beliefs at its core. In *Mohammad and Fanaticism*, Voltaire denounced Islam in harsh and hostile terms. Later, in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, he was a little more restrained, but the judgement did not change. He still saw Islam as an embodiment of fanaticism, anti-humanism, irrationalism, and the violent will to power. But despite this, Muslims did have a few positive aspects. They could move towards greater tolerance thanks largely to Islam's loose sexual standards, which made it akin to a natural religion. While Jesus was good, Christians had become intolerant. But Muslims were tolerant despite their evil Prophet. Positive development in one case, negative in another. This is how Voltaire reconciled his deep seated prejudices about Islam and Muslims with reason.

For all their sabre-rattling against religion, Enlightenment thinkers saw Christianity as the standard of civilised behaviour and norm of all religion. In effect, they further naturalised the natural law theory of medieval Christianity which had always been vague in the sense of never precisely defined, yet also highly specific in being a universalising of Christian norms as the standard for human behaviour. Islam remained the antithesis to Christianity. Thus, in *Les Ruines*, Volney announced that “Mohammad succeeded in building a political and theological empire at the expense of those of Moses and Jesus' vicars.” Or, in the scene where he has an imam speaking about “the law of Mohammad”, “God has established Mohammad as his minister on earth; he has handed over the world to him to subdue with the sabre those who refuse to believe in his law.” Volney described Muhammad as the “apostle of a merciful God who preaches nothing but murder and carnage,” the spirit of intolerance and exclusiveness that “shocks every notion of justice”. While Christianity might be irrational, Volney declared that it was gentle and compassionate but Islam had a contempt for science – a truly bizarre claim since Volney himself, and all his fellow Enlightenment thinkers, learnt most of their science and philosophy from such names as al-Frabi, Ibn Sina and ibn Rushd.

While the Enlightenment may have been concerned with reason, its champions were not too

worried about truth when it came to Islam. They not only shamelessly plagiarised philosophy, science and learning from Islam, but the very hallmark of Enlightenment, liberal humanism, has its origins in Islam. It is based on the *adab* movement of classical Islam, which was concerned with the etiquette of being human. Islam developed a sophisticated system of teaching law and humanism that involved not just institutions such as the university, with its faculties of law, theology, medicine and natural philosophy, but also an elaborate method of instruction including work-study courses, a curriculum that included grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, medicine, and moral philosophy, and mechanisms for the formation of a humanist culture such as academic associations, literary circles, clubs and other coteries that sustain intellectuals and the literati. The *adab* literature and institutions were, in fact, what enlightenment was all about in Islam. One cannot have a revolt on behalf of reason in Islam because reason is central to its worldview: reason is the other side of revelation and the Qur'an presents both as "signs of God". A Muslim society cannot function without either. While Muslims can hardly be exonerated for the decline of reason and learning in Muslim civilisation, it was colonialism that as deliberate policy destroyed *adab* culture in Muslim societies.

But Enlightenment Europe swallowed the *adab* system, including textbooks, en masse. However, since it was a product of an inferior culture and civilisation its origins had to be shrouded. Thus, classical Arabic had to be replaced with another classical language, Latin. This was followed by a systematic expunging of all traces of the influence of Islamic thought on Europe. From the days of Voltaire right up to 1980, thanks largely to the efforts of Enlightenment scholars, it was a general western axiom that Islam had produced nothing of worth in philosophy, science and learning.

The Enlightenment legacy that Islam and Europe have nothing in common, that Islam is only a darker shadow of the West, that liberal secularism is the destiny of all human cultures, is much in evidence in our newspapers and television, literature and scholarship, as well as in our politics and foreign policies. It is the bedrock of Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" hypothesis, Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilisation" thesis, and the neo-conservative "Project for the New American Century". Voltaire's Bastards, to use the title of John Ralston Saul's brilliant 1992 book, are busy rationalizing torture, military interventions, and western supremacy, and demonising Islam and Muslims. The Enlightenment may have been big on reason but it was, as Saul shows so convincingly, bereft of both meaning and morality.

Forgive me if I don't stand up and salute the Enlightenment.

Ziauddin Sardar is the author of Balti Britain: A Journey Through the British Asian Experience

(Granta)

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Comments:

If you travel to Britain you will see fortresses that instruction booklets distributed for visitors will tell you the fortress has a "roman architecture (traces)". If you travel to Rome, you will see the "original" architectural structures and you know why the fortress in Britain was called having roman architectural designs in it.

Let's do this practice with Islam. Take the Islamic architectural designs and trends around the world and go to Arabia and try to find any "original" structure that remotely resembles them. You will find none. But go to Iran and you will find the "original" architectural structures from the ruins of Parthian (247 bc-224 ad) and Sassanian (245-651 ad) dynasties. Then why do we call it "Islamic" Architectures?

Find a museum with "Islamic Art" exhibition and pay particular attention to the national origin of the artists. You will find more than 80% of them have Iranian national origin. Then why do we call it "Islamic" Art? Do we have equivalents in Buddhist Art, Mormon Art? Why only Islam has art?

Some 1.4 billion moslems around the world face Mecca and pray five times a day. But virtually none of them know they are practicing the Iranian prayer a few thousand years older than Islam only in Arabic. Virtually none of them know Mecca was built by Iranians as a fire temple more than a thousand years before the advent of Islam, even inheriting the circular motion practiced today. Even Arabic music was written by Iranians for the golden ages of Islam. Why is it that no one in Islam knows these historical facts?

If a cursory look gives us these few examples taken away from the Iranians, you can imagine what Islam has soaked up from cultural giants like Egypt and Mesopotamia. Why is it then that the credit goes "Islam" and not the creators and contributors?

What gives Sardar the audacity to question "Enlightenment Europe" for 'shrouding the origin' of what they picked up from middle east "since it was a product of an inferior culture and civilisation" ? What happened to the cultural identity and civilizations of lands moslem Arabians conquered? Their language, music, spiritual value systems, costumes, religions, traditions, civilizations, honor and dignities... were all torched to the ground (save Iran) to the point that they have had no choice but

to even change their ethnic origin to Arabs. Islam does not recognize cultural identities of peoples outside of the domain of Islam. But Sardar believes "the very hallmark of Enlightenment, liberal humanism, has its origins in Islam". The arrogance and out of touchness of this moslem "leading British intellectual" is mind boggling.

What Atzmon describes in the prelude is also the shrouded arrogance of monotheism that subliminally is crushing the very idea that humans are capable of "creating" a spiritual value system without needing help from beyond the clouds. Monotheism's greatest crime was to kill internal deity of humans and taking the very idea of 'compassionate guide' out of human mind and heart and hide it behind the clouds and turning humans into soulless pieces of warm meat. And that is why monotheists have such an easy time justifying killing other humans.

kats | 08.03.09 - 4:57 pm | #

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Are you telling me that the so-called "Islamic" architecture in Andalusia (Islamic Spain) has its roots in Persia? Hmmm. That is interesting.

Mate, you remind of other people who have been posting rubbish about Islam disguised as knowledge & science. Just because you appear "scientific" in your reasoning does not qualify your argument as correct. It is like someone who is saying that if you heat copper to 120 degrees Celsius and multiply it with the cube root of *Phytopthera infestans* then the cosine of the tangential centripetal momentum of linear velocity will be inversely proportional to the quantum dynamics of potassium carbonate ethyl. For an ignorant person such a statement is science because of the jargon. But for a scientist it is pure rubbish. So, if you want to do science you better do your research and studies first.

Indeed Muslims have synthesised the cultures of previous civilisations & then they added their contributions. The end result was a gem that the West used to launch its Enlightenment. You need to remember that a tenet of Islam is universal brotherhood. The Quran is very explicit in that. There is the verse that states that God ordained humans to be tribes & peoples so that they can meet and know each other. Sharing knowledge for the benefit of mankind is paramount in Islam. Unless you are a Wahabi Bedouin (with all due respect to Bedouins) then the above is too complex to understand. Muslims are not Arabs. They are Persians, Arabs, Africans, Turks, Chinese, Uzbeks, Tajiks, etc. Arabic was simply the lingua franca of those great scientists, naturalists, philosophers, mathematicians,

poets & others. And their strength & prosperity were at their best when they were united by Islam. It is regrettable that the tolerance & open mindedness that permeated the works of those great achievers have been obliterated by the bastards who took over their lands. It started in mid Ottoman days & accelerated when Western colonisation completed its control.

If you do not have the knowledge in Islamic civilisation then please do not put forth rubbish & claim to be science or history. I look forward to hearing from you about how Copernicus developed models that were deeply rooted in the mathematics of Al Tusi & others. Hell, even Copernicus' drawings are almost identical to Al Tusi's. Great minds think alike or downright plagiarism?

Beirut | 08.03.09 - 6:16 pm | #

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We humans are nothing without "moral autonomy". Moral autonomy means humans have the right to convert/interpret facts to truths, independently. "Facts" have no meanings. They just are. "Truths" are human understanding/meanings of facts. A lie is a fact. 'Lying is bad (or ok or good) is a truth. Since facts are quantitatively and humans qualitatively changing, truths can also, both quantitatively and qualitatively, change. We don't have "absolute truth". But this change is in the exclusive entitlement and sole proprietorship of humans. That is what 'moral autonomy' means.

You cannot abuse humans if they insist on their right to moral autonomy. That is exactly why ideologies (-isms, religions, ...) are created as an instrument of abuse and control, and consequently they first and foremost target the abolishment of moral autonomy of individuals and cultures. 'Culture' is the collective and consented expression of moral autonomy of a particular community.

There has been two particular ethnic groups who historically have insisted on destroying cultural identity of their conquered communities with a vengeance, the Arabians and the Turks. The constitution in Turkey does not even recognize 'ethnic' identities of its citizens, the Ionians, the Lydians, the Greeks, the Armenians, the Kurds, ... , while the ethnic Turks constitutes only a few percent of the population, holed up in the military. While "insulting Turkishness" is illegal in Turkey, the non Arab Egyptians are terrified to even think about taking the word "Arab" off the name of their country. These are all expressions of denying individuals and communities of their 'moral autonomies'.

What about you Beirut. Are you in the liberty of accepting a non-islamic truth? If you are a moslem, most likely the answer is no, because Islam forbids you, as 'doubting' in Islam is a sin. If you and Sardar are disallowed by your belief system of accepting a non-Islamic truth, then why do you think you are in a civil discourse of scrutinizing facts to reveal a truth acceptable to every one? Why do you think "you" can tell the difference between "rubbish" and "science" if your criteria are not "yours" and you are just following the instruction book written by somebody else? What is the difference between a moslem scholar and an army foot soldier if both are disallowed of retreat by their commanding rulers.

If you know where the roots of Andalusian architecture are, just tell every one. If you do not, then you should not insinuate it comes from Arabia or Islam. But I can tell you where Andalusian musical and dance traditions come from. They were developed by Ziryab's music and dance school's students in Cordoba. Ziryab (789-857ad) was an Iranian (Persian or Kurd) polymath who introduced Iranian sehtar (literally 'three stringed'-Latin Chitarra, Greek Kithara, Arabic Qitara) which later by adding more strings to it developed into today's guitar. He also introduced Iranian and Mesopotamian dance techniques to his students that later on were mixed with gypsy influences to evolve into today's Spanish flamenco.

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Can you name one of "their contributions"? When Sardar names "al-Frabi, Ibn Sina, and ibn Rushd" the first two are Iranians and the third is Spaniard. Where is the Arabians' contribution? Why do you and Sardar think putting an 'Al' in front of Farabi and 'Ibn' in front of Sina and Rushd they become Islam's contributions?

Why do you think Arabians' 'synthesizing' other civilizations results in a "gem" but west's borrowing some from other civilizations is despicable? How could you a few lines later say: "Sharing knowledge for the benefit of mankind is paramount in Islam" and "a tenet of Islam is universal brotherhood"?

How could you say "Arabic was simply the lingua franca .." while Arabians pulled the tongues of their conquered subjects and cut them in public for the first one hundred years if the subjects could not speak Arabic. It is absurd to pretend that cultures with many thousands of years of more experienced sophistication volunteered to give up their highly trained languages in favor of a language with no recorded history in applied sociology, literature, or sciences.

//I look forward to hearing from you about how Copernicus developed models that were deeply rooted in the mathematics of Al Tusi & others. Hell, even Copernicus' drawings are almost identical to Al Tusi's. Great minds think alike or downright plagiarism?//

Instead of hearing from me, let's hear from Wikipedia:

///Al-Tusi or Tusi is the title of several Iranian scholars who were born in the town of Tus in Khorasan [province]. Some of the scholars with the al-Tusi title include:

- Ferdowsi [e] Tusi (935-1020), Persian poet
- Shaykh [e] Tusi or Abu Ja'far al-Tusi (995-1067), Islamic scholar
- Asadi [e] Tusi (d. 1072), Persian poet
- Nizam al-Mulk al-Tusi (1018-1092), Persian vizier
- Sharaf al-Dīn al-Tūsī or Sharafeddin Tusi (1135-1213), Persian mathematician
- Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī (1201-1274), Persian polymath///

Could you tell me what on earth these Iranian scholars from north eastern province of Khorasan have any thing to do with Islam and Arabians' "contributions" to science? Are you referring to the Arabic words in some of their names after few centuries of forced Arabic on them? Is this insatiable thirst for looting and misappropriations of non-Arabians' cultural heritage the "universal brotherhood" you are talking about? Is this not a clear sign that Arabians did not bring anything to the table?

//If you do not have the knowledge in Islamic civilisation then please do not put forth rubbish & claim to be science or history.//

Do you know, Beirut, that civilizations are built on cultures and ideologies (religions) do not built civilizations? That is why we do not have say 'communist civilization'.

Why is it that we do not have equivalent concepts of 'christian civilization', 'Buddhist civilization', 'jewish civilization', 'zoroasterian civilization', ..., but we have "Islamic Civilization"? Is it possibly because Arabians were the only ones who looted other civilizations' heritage and needed a brand name for their empire? Are they the only ones who have persistently kept their claims over others' belongings even to today?

The answer is no. Beirut, did you know the panturanian Turks claim the Tusi scholars were turks not Iranians? Do you know they are in the process of converting Rumi to a Turk because he died in Konya

in today's Turkey? Did you know they claim Sumerians were Turk who invented the wheel, and the Acropolis was built by Turks not the Athenians? Who do you think the so called zionists are? They are the monotheized mongoloid Turks who claim pyramids were built by them, not Egyptians, and Palestine have belonged to them since day one.

If you think these claims are "rubbish", I suggest "Islamic civilization" should be more careful on their claims too.

kats | 08.04.09 - 3:47 pm | <#>
