

## **“Like the Scum of a Torrent”: When Exactly Will Muslims Fit This Prophetic Metaphor?**

The hadith compilations are filled with the Prophet’s prophecies and predictions about the future, be it the future state of Muslims, the outcomes of battles, the signs of the end times, and so on. If Muslims are uncertain as to how and when some of these may come to pass, there is little doubt that, somehow, someday, they will certainly do so. Muslims’ confidence in the latter scenario stems from their unflinching belief in Muhammad as God’s messenger.

The *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, one of six authentic Sunni hadith collections, contains a hadith in which the Prophet predicts that one day Muslims, as a group, will be so weak and insignificant that other nations (*umam*) will compete to snatch them, just like feeding animals (*akalah*) challenge one another over their feed (*qaṣ‘ah*; lit.: large bowl). He insists that this will not be due to the Muslims’ smaller numbers, because their numbers will be huge; rather, they will be as worthless as “the scum of a torrent” (*ghuthā’ al-sayl*), which is unworthy of being kept for any future use and thus deserves to be removed and discarded. At this time, the hadith continues, non-Muslims will have not one iota of fear and apprehension (*mahāba*) of Muslims, but the latter will have already resigned themselves to their own feebleness (*wahn*) and thus be gripped with fear of non-Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Few Clarifications**

This hadith is not found in *Al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim*, which leads me to understand that some people suspect its veracity. However, it is also recorded in *Musnad Imām Aḥmad ibn Hanbal*. Although it does not specifically use the word *Muslims*, it does categorically employ several second-person plural pronouns, thereby indicating that the Prophet was addressing a group of his Companions (and Muslims at large). One of those in the audience had asked “will

that be due to our fewer numbers?” So to me, the Prophet was clearly prophesying about the state of Muslims.

Finally, admitting that contemporary Muslims are diverse – they face differing sociopolitical and economic circumstances, they live in various regions, and they may or may not share many common values other than general Islamic ones – this editorial will not discriminate among them, for the hadith also speaks of them in general terms. Thus this editorial considers all of them as *Muslims*, as those who profess belief in Islam and in Muhammad’s message, regardless of their actions or non-actions. On the other hand, whenever I use *non-Muslims*, I only mean some of them.

## A Few Questions

Was the Prophet speaking about Muslims who would live a few decades later, a few centuries later, a few millennia later, or just before the end of time? Scholars and pious Muslims may find examples in history to buttress their claims regarding any of these opinions, at least, immediately before and at any time after the Mongols destroyed Baghdad in 1258.

Certainly, some pre-modern scholars like Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) and Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762) were convinced – and acted like – the prophesy had already been fulfilled. Their solutions were for Muslims to return wholeheartedly to “proper” Islamic practices and to rid Islam of innovations.<sup>2</sup> Their modern counterparts Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), and Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), all of whom were witnessing colonialism’s devastating impact, would also be convinced that the Prophet’s prediction had come to pass. For their part, they held that reversing the deplorable condition in which the contemporaneous Muslims were living would depend on how Muslims in general could salvage Islam’s purest parts from the crippling superstitions, innovations, and blind imitation that had corrupted it over time. They preached that Muslims should adopt modernity’s useful portions to counter the imbalance between themselves and non-Muslims. These men also proclaimed global Muslim unity to be the crucial component for retrieving their dignity and past glory.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary Muslim scholars, as well as mosque imams, have continued to echo these sentiments to varying degrees. They have many examples to use in this regard. The manner and gusto with which the United States and its assembled coalition of nations invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the rapidity of and the ease with which the Taliban and Saddam Hussein (irrespective of their religiosity or lack thereof) and their armies were crushed,

and the ensuing subjugation and suffering of their people, make it even harder to refute the proposition that Muslims today are “like the scum of a torrent.” This is still the case, whether contemporary analysts and pundits or the Prophet said it. Even though it may seem politically incorrect to express this fact in such a manner, it does not make it any easier to refute.

One may also see this feeling of worthlessness and disarray among Muslims when some of them encourage or support non-Muslim attacks on their co-religionists. And when Muslim minority populations are being attacked, it is most likely that those who seek to stop such attacks, probably on humanitarian grounds, are non-Muslims. On the other hand, we watch Muslims sabotage and fight fellow Muslims, quite often at an instigation and encouragement of non-Muslims. And sadly, at one time or another all Muslims are likely to rely on non-Muslim actors (i.e., Washington, Moscow, Peking, and the European Union) to help them or dictate the terms for ending hostilities.

Far from being a conspiracy theory, consider the role of these non-Muslim nations in the ongoing intra-Muslim wars in Egypt, Syria, and Afghanistan. Even though the situations there were brought about by their respective ruling regimes, which may or may not care about Islam and Muslims, they still represent the Muslim majorities who will suffer the brunt of the negative consequences. In the end, such situations make it harder to deny that Muslims, collectively, today are “like the scum of a torrent.”

In the midst of these Muslim populations are extremist groups and individuals who terrorize the innocent, claiming that they are fighting for Islam. They hold Muslim populations captive with their indiscriminate operations, thereby providing excuses for despotic leaders and powerful non-Muslims to tighten their grip and impose punishing policies. For example, after 9/11, many poor African and South Asian Muslims have found it harder to receive money from relatives in the West, and thousands of the latter have to endure delays and invasive searches at airports. I personally have experienced multiple episodes on this score. All of this, despite being couched as security precautions affecting “all” travelers, makes it harder to argue the inaccuracy of Muslims being “like the scum of a torrent.”

Another question to ponder is: Did Muhammad make this prophecy so that Muslims would take heed and change their habits that are described as “love for the world and a loathing for death” (*ḥubb al-dunyā wa karāhīyat al-mawt*) and possibly reverse this impending weakness? Scholars and mosque imams would like us to believe that this hadith accurately describes Muslims today. Imams especially hammer on this phrase like a mantra as the sole reason for the community’s weakness. They implore their listeners to change their

attitudes without fully considering the magnitude of the problems and the consequences and modalities of their proposals. For instance, would anything change in regard to the Muslims' standing in the international military, political, and economic arenas if they were to follow the imams' instructions to the letter? And, would all Muslims have to change at once, or just some of them, for their fate to be reversed? This is what I mean by the imams not "fully considering the magnitude of the problems and the consequences and modalities of their proposals." The problems and their solutions are far more nuanced than they would have us believe.

But I do not mean to suggest that their proposals are wrong, for an individual and collective change of attitude as a prerequisite for engendering a better situation is a core Islamic principle: "God does not change the condition of a people unless they change what is in themselves" (Q. 13:11).<sup>4</sup> But the question is, with a population of nearly 1.5 billion very diverse individuals, how realistic is a complete or even a partial change in attitude? At what point will this change be enough to effect a noticeable change of fate? Only God can truly answer these questions.

So what can today's Muslims do to restore their collective dignity and regain some clout and respect in the world? Based on this Islamic principle, it seems that they have only one option: to make a serious effort to try and change themselves on both the individual and the collective levels. I believe this is what the imams really mean. They always refer to the Muslims' moral and social decadence, urging them to refrain from their sins and repent sincerely so that God will shower His blessings and mercy upon them by changing their situation (*taqwā* and its consequences for individuals are always explained). On this score, if some of them honestly inculcate the discipline of *taqwā*, they would be assured of God's favor. This, in turn, would translate into favor for the entire Muslim community.

On this score, if some of them honestly inculcate the discipline of *taqwā*, they would be assured of God's favor which would in turn translate into favor for the entire Muslim community. In this case, it is up to God, to determine when individual efforts are sufficient enough to merit change in fate (and He has promised that in a number of verses) (Q. 65:2-5). Realistically, although, God may choose to punish a whole community for the acts of a few (Qur'an rejects that: Q. 6:164, 17:15, 35:18, 39:7, and 53:38), I do not believe that this global community's current weakness has a lot to do with individual sinful acts. Today, Muslims have no way of ascertaining whether this is a fact or not, other than by inferring that from some historical cases reported in the Qur'an. In fact, the majority of Muslims are kind and pious. So on what basis should

all Muslims, including the pious majority, be condemned to a state of weakness for the sins of a few?

However, it is also conceivable that since their weakness may largely and arguably be attributed to the actions and inactions of their political leaders, any honest and conscious attempt on their part to change the community's fate may yield some fruits. Although this is conceivable, at this stage it would be naïve to be optimistic, given what many would see as a perfect applicability of the above mantra to their political leaders. In other words, due to their perceived or real vulnerability, I do not see these leaders doing anything to bring about the restoration of the Muslims' reputation and lost glory. If they are not truly powerless, which they are, then they are indifferently blasé.

These Muslim leaders are smart and selfish enough to realize that any policies that would help Muslims become vital and respected international actors may also upset some of their powerful allies, who may see such policies as threatening. They are hardly prepared to destabilize their non-Muslim relations and jeopardize their current positions by thinking about what is in the best interests of the community, the true essence of "love for the world and a loathing for death." As a result, one can argue that today's Muslims are "like the scum of a torrent." Some Muslims may choose to reject this thesis and discussion because it portrays Muslims negatively or because it is not found in *Al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim*. But no truly dispassionate analysis can disprove the obvious fact that Muslims are now "like the scum of a torrent," for they are anything but strong and worthy of respect.

## This Issue

We open this issue with Md. Mahmudul Hasan's "Islam's Encounter with English and Ismail al-Faruqi's Concept of Islamic English: A Postcolonial Reading." Hasan introduces the reader to "Islamic English," a concept al-Faruqi proposed to rectify what he considered a serious anomaly in the transliteration and translation of Muslim names and Islamic theological terms. This is especially the case with English, as the dominant practice shows no loyalty to the original term's meaning within its original context, but only to the norms of the target language. And thus the semantic associations and religious connotations of these names and terms are lost.

"Islamic Revivalism in the Arab World and Its Dialogue with the West: The *Homo Culturus* Perspective," by Tunisian sociologist Mahmoud Dhaouadi, underlines two features of transformation in the Arab world since the late 1960s. First, the region's religious transformation or *ṣaḥwah* (awakening)

has been a general and overwhelming phenomenon. Second, the great tension between the western and the Islamic worlds, particularly after 9/11, constitutes a sort of change in their mutual relationship. Dhaouadi argues that these tensions could be reduced and minimized if linguistic and cultural ties were to be improved.

Mamunur Rashid and M. Kabir Hassan's "Market Values of Islamic Banks and Ethical Identity" examines the ethical identity of Islamic banks in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and the Arab Gulf region. The authors employ eight distinctive dimensions to explore the differences between ideal and communicated ethical conduct via the selected banks' annual reports. Their findings reveal an immediate need to develop ethical identity disclosure requirements.

This issue closes with Bakare Adewale Muteeu's "The Unified World Order: The Exposition of Open World Peace Paradigms." Wale seeks to explain Islam from the viewpoint of technological determinism in an attempt to offset the diverging global inequalities for its "sociopolitical economy" existence, as well as the stabilization of the interconnected world. Based upon the unifying view of micro-Islamics, the meaning of Islam and its globalizing perspectives are deciphered on a built micro-religious platform. Finally, he studies the Open World Peace (OWP) paradigm, from which the fluidity of open globalization is derived as a future causal phenomenon for bridging (or contracting) the gaps between nations and people.

I hope that our readers will find these papers not only thought-provoking and stimulating, but also sources of inspiration and motivation for their own research.

## Endnotes

1. Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd, Kitāb al-Malāhim* 31, Bāb 5, Ḥadīth 4297, (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2010), 648-49.
2. For more, see John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998).
3. For more, see *ibid.* as well as John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito, *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007).
4. Qur'an 8:53 speaks of a possible change from good to bad due to people's deeds.

Zakyy Ibrahim, Editor  
Comparative Religion Department  
California State University, Fullerton, CA  
zibrahim@fullerton.edu