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An Intellectual Approach to Religion

In the western world, the words “Islam” and “Muslim” have become nearly synonymous with “terrorism” and “extremism.” At a time when most of the world is experiencing rapid globalization, there is also a magnificent culture war brewing. Although many Muslims have been able to balance Islam with the demands of daily life, certain segments of Muslim society have adopted an extremist and uncompromising version of Islam. This interpretation of Islam allows for unjust violence and oppression. In this paper, I aim to show that practicing Islam without using one’s intellectual capabilities is inadequate. The only way to counter extremism in today’s world is by balancing devotion to Islam with human intelligence. Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, who lived more than 1300 years ago, emphasized this intellectual approach to religion. Jafar understood that a dogmatic and inflexible approach to religion unchecked by reason can be disastrous. Jafar’s criteria for acceptable Hadith, willingness to engage in philosophical debates, and unique teaching style show the importance of intellect and reason in practicing Islam.

Jafar’s prominent lineage automatically gave him an unparalleled familiarity with and knowledge of Islam. For one, he was a descendant of the Prophet, and may actually have lived in the Prophet’s very household. His paternal grandfather, Ali ibn Husayn, was known as *al-Sajjad*, or “The Prostrator” for his passionate dedication to prayer. Jafar’s maternal grandfather, Qasim ibn Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr, was one of the most well-respected Hadith authorities of his time. And perhaps most importantly, Muhammad al-Baqir, Jafar’s father, established a university and recruited a tremendous base of followers which Jafar inherited once he became the Imam. Thus,

Jafar's religious authority and knowledge is not surprising when one considers the impact that living in the midst of such religious devotion and scholarly discourse had on Jafar from a very young age.

Despite the accomplishments of his forefathers, Jafar himself made many remarkable contributions to Islam. The first to be discussed is his substantial impact on Hadith literature. In both Sunni and Shiite accounts, Jafar is one of the most widely cited transmitters of Hadith (10th century theologian Shaykh al-Mufid writes that Jafar is reported to have transmitted Hadith from over 4,000 people). In fact, Jafar was one of the first people to initiate the practice of formally recording Hadith. "Write [our traditions] and communicate your knowledge to your brothers [the imamites]; at the time of your death, leave your books to your sons, for the time of calamities will fall upon those men who have no other companions but their books."¹ However, it is Jafar's insistence on the reliability of any recorded Hadith which speaks most about his intellectual approach to religion. Jafar asserted that "[The hadith which is] contrary to the Quran (Islamic scripture) should be rejected, whatever other evidence might support it."² This is a crucial statement; Jafar essentially "establish[ed] the criterion for testing hadith, one which came to be regarded as the most important principle to observe in judging traditions."³ This is important because Hadith transmission is not an exact science—for the first few decades after the death of the Prophet, Hadith were transmitted via word of mouth through chains of people. Consequently, today one can find thousands of Hadith which have been falsely attributed to Prophet Muhammad. Jafar understood that the Prophet, to whom the Quran was revealed, would never utter words contradictory to the spirit of the Quran. His foresight is remarkable when one

¹ Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad A. *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*. Albany: State University of New York P, 1994. p. 26.

² Haywood, John A. "Ja'Far Ibn Muhammad." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2008. 2 May 2008 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9043231/Jafar-ibn-Muhammad>>.

³ Jafri Ch. 11.

considers how extensively false Hadith are abused today to justify acts by extremists. For example, here is an oft-cited Hadith:

Bukhari narrates that the Prophet addressed a group of women in a mosque with the following words: “I have not seen any one more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious, sensible man could be led astray by some of you.”⁴

Hadiths like these are used by organizations such as the Taliban to repress women by physical and psychological abuse, denying education, and many other forms of oppression. It is mind-boggling to learn that this Hadith is not only widely circulated but also widely accepted. It is clear that the Prophet would never say such words—the Quran was revolutionary in placing men and women on the same moral level. Imam Jafar al-Sadiq’s criteria for acceptable Hadith would correctly eliminate this Hadith from the literature, and thus undermine efforts by extremists to abuse religion. Before acting blindly in the name of religion, it is important to consider whether Islam really would condone certain actions. Jafar recognized very early on that without employing reason, religious devotion can be harmful.

Besides his work in theology, Jafar was also a brilliant philosopher. Jafar’s time was one in which questions of Kalam (theological disputation) were passionately debated upon. Kalam “touched on related issues such as whether God could be seen in the hereafter...the nature and limits of faith, whether hellfire and paradise were everlasting, and the nature and limits of God's knowledge, will and power.”⁵ Rather than merely accepting the Quran and Hadith at face value, Jafar and his contemporaries engaged in intellectual debates about theological matters. Open

⁴ Haddad, Gibril F. "Women's Intelligence Hadith Again." Living Islam. 10 Feb. 2008. 26 June 2008 <http://www.livingislam.org/k/wiha_e.html>.

⁵ El-Affendi, Abdelwahab. "Islamic Theology." Islamic Philosophy Online. 1998. Muslim Philosophy. 8 May 2008 <<http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ip/rep/H009.htm>>.

debate and dialogue is important because it fosters better understanding of religion and also prevents people from developing isolated and extremist views. Conversely, a lack of discussion and dialogue creates a distorted understanding of Islam and thus generates extremist views. Among the scholars engaging in theological disputation, the Hanbalis were largely absent. The Hanbali school of law strictly prohibits any discussion on philosophy.⁶ Not surprisingly, many followers of the Hanbali school today, especially of the Wahhabi sect, harbor extremist views. Wahhabis are criticized for their hardliner stance on different interpretations of Islam—for example, they consider Shiites to be apostates. An extremist version of this philosophy is perfectly summed up in a 2006 audiotape by Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. “‘Sunnis, wake up, pay attention and prepare to confront the poisons of the Shiite snakes,’ Zarqawi said. ‘Forget about those advocating the end of sectarianism...’”⁷ This restrictive interpretation of Islam has created a cultish atmosphere in which any diversity of opinion is not accepted. Jafar, on the other hand, loved to engage in philosophical debates.” Jafar embraced diversity through his pluralistic view of religion. Only by similarly engaging in debate and dialogue can we understand each other’s differences and counter extremism.

Lastly, Jafar’s teaching style is a testament to his intellectual approach to religion. It is no secret that Jafar was one of the most knowledgeable men of his time—he taught a reported 3200 students, including scholars such as Abu Hanifa, Malik ibn Anas, Wasil ibn A'ta', and Jabir ibn Hayyan. Yet what may be less known is his emphasis on independent thinking. Jafar is credited with establishing the specialization of Islamic sciences. As mentioned above, the students he taught were among the leading scholars of his time. He noticed their aptitude for certain fields—and encouraged them to specialize within their strengths. More importantly, however, Jafar

⁶ Al-Bayhaqi, Imam. Allah's Names and Attributes. Trans. Gibril F. Haddad. Vol. 4. Islamic Supreme Council of America, 1999.

wanted his students to develop their own intellectual capabilities. Dr. Algar, one of the leading scholars of Shiism today, emphasizes this point by saying that Jafar “demanded of his followers that they also engage in mental exertion in order to clarify the law.”⁸ Jafar is quoted as saying that “It is our concern (the imams) to put forward the principles. And it is your task to extract from them the branches.”⁹ Jafar’s teachings 1300 years ago set a precedent for independent thinking and intellectual vitality in religious matters. It is absolutely crucial that we pursue knowledge and develop our intellectual abilities if we want to follow the way of the Imam. Not only will this help us understand Islam the way it was meant to be revealed, but the pursuit of knowledge will also allow us to counter indoctrination and extremism.

The Islamic world today is going through a testing time. For various reasons, extremist ideology has crept into mainstream rhetoric. Islam is being used to justify acts of violence and oppression. Thus, it is vital that we employ reason when practicing Islam. A brief look at Imam Jafar al-Sadiq’s life shows that to him, Islam and reason were inseparable. By establishing a criteria for Hadith, Jafar al-Sadiq eliminated nonsensical sayings attributed to the Prophet. By debating with his contemporaries, he allowed room for open discussion and questioning of religion. And by encouraging his students to extrapolate laws based on his teachings, Jafar al-Sadiq clearly signaled that Muslims must be able to reason independently at all times.

As can be seen, Jafar was a monumental figure in classical Islamic history. Yet his life should serve as a guide for Muslims today. We should not be narrow-minded in our practice of Islam. It is important to use our intellect and reason—this is the only way to counter extremism in Muslim society.

⁸ Algar, October 16, 2001.

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