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Timothy McVeigh of the 'Orient'

Timothy McVeigh and Osama bin Laden share common ground. The difference, if any, is that the terrorism of the former arises out of moral guilt whereas that of the latter stems from entrenched anger and a profound sense of being a helpless victim, real or otherwise.

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We should be conscious of the strength of our civilisation; we should not put the two civilisations on the same level...the liberty of the individual and the liberty of the peoples... are not the inheritance of other civilisations such as Islamic civilisation.

– Silvio Berlusconi,
Italian prime minister, following the
September 11 attacks.

Respect for bin Laden fucks US.

– Wall writing in Britain as shown on
BBC 2, October 14, 2001.

Think of the west and its demon – more imagined than real – Islam ‘naturally’ comes to one’s mind! It has indeed become integral to western hauntology, a quasi-science no less significant than science proper. And the western hauntology has, historically speaking, mobilised Islam to mean everything that it itself has always pretended not to be. Expel the demonic others from its cultural archive, the coherence of the west’s self begins to crumble. Berlusconi’s statement following September 11 – symbolic as it is of most western political establishments – is its eloquent testimony. Through a single, sweeping statement he not only seeks to assert the self-proclaimed superiority of western civilisation, he is simultaneously also manufacturing a radical, civilisational other in whose very denunciation lies the logic of its own glorification.

Consider the following. Ever since the tragic events of September 11, CNN and other western media outlets have been showing the photograph of a bearded, turbaned Osama bin Laden juxtaposed with that of George W Bush, clean-shaven and dressed in western attire. Evidently, the two photographs intend to portray the image of being ‘backward’ and ‘civilised’

respectively. In this production of binary difference, Mohammad Atta, an Egyptian national who plunged American Airlines flight 11 into the north tower of the World Trade Centre, is a total misfit. In appearance he is quite similar to Bush. He thus defies the orientalist categories based on violent hierarchy of dualist images. To be sure, this protean defiance discomforts and disturbs west’s image of itself. It therefore erases Atta wholesale from its media and foregrounds bin Laden therein.

The current vulgate of ‘rouge state’, quite in vogue during Bill Clinton’s regime, fits perfectly well within this dualist vocabulary. Novel though it apparently sounds, as a concept it is not entirely new. It is an elaboration – some might say a sophisticated one – of the century-old idea of oriental despotism. Whether employed against Fidel Castro of Cuba, Saddam Hussein of Iraq or Osama bin Laden, it seeks to fashion and mirror at once the ‘barbaric’ character of the non-western world on the one hand and the ‘enlightened’ nature of the western states on the other. The notion of an ‘enlightened’ state thus presupposes the idea of a ‘rouge’ state. And if there is none, it has got to be invented. Power is extremely scared of an oppositional void. It, therefore, always despises vacuum. In a unipolar world an unaccountable power like the US does it even more.

This is not to argue that Osama bin Laden is a creation entirely of America and his words and deeds are ‘natural’. However, it is equally misleading to singularly associate his acts with Islam that has otherwise multiple faces and myriad forms. Violence/terrorism, the necessary other of the ‘civilised’ west, definitely unfolds in a culture or religion but is it justified to say that it happens because of it? The readymade answer furnished by most western observers is a categorical

yes! No wonder, then, they explain violence in Sri Lanka in such crisp phrases as ‘Buddhism betrayed’. In the context of September 11, most explanations would read like ‘Islam enacted’. In either case, religion reigns as the only analytical term. Analyses not in line with this framework are simply incomprehensible.

In attempting to comprehend this incomprehensibility, one may ask a few unpleasantly real questions relating to violence in the hyperrealist west. When a powerful bomb goes off in Northern Ireland or London, is it an instance of Christianity betrayed or enacted? Is the separatist movement in Canada an example of religious clash between Catholics (in the Catholic-dominated Quebec) and Protestants (in the Protestant-dominated remainder of the nation)? Or was the Holocaust a war waged by the dominant Christians on the defenseless Jews? Was stigmatisation of the latter a ‘rational’ act divorced from religious underpinnings? More importantly, was the American-Vietnamese war a religious conflict between Buddhists-atheists and Christians?

Here the bombing of Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma in 1995 by Timothy McVeigh – described in US media as the worst instance of domestic terrorism in its history – is worth mentioning. Indisputably, it was an act of ghastly terrorism. But never did any western analyst call it a case of ‘religion betrayed’ or ‘enacted’. Neither was it attributed to a civilisational template that denies the liberty of individuals or people. It remained terrorism, pure and simple. However, the terrorism of September 11 is predominantly explained in terms of this or that Islamic factor. The striking convergence between McVeigh and bin Laden – astonishingly unnoticed by the mainstream media – is conveniently overlooked.

In an essay written from his prison cell, McVeigh dwelt upon the reasons that pushed him on the deadly path of terrorism. According to him, the cardinal principle of US policy, both at home and abroad, has been its ‘deep hypocrisy’. McVeigh’s observation cannot be easily dismissed. Let us not forget that he was a decorated US Army veteran of the Gulf War, in which he confessed to have lost his mortality. He writes:

The (US) administration claims that Iraq has used weapons in the past. We have all seen the pictures that show a Kurdish

woman and child frozen in death from the use of chemical weapons. But have you ever seen those photos juxtaposed next to pictures from Hiroshima or Nagasaki. I suggest that one study the histories of first world war, second world war and other "regional conflicts" that the US has been involved in to familiarise themselves with the use of "weapons of mass destruction". Remember Dresden? How about Hanoi? Tripoli? Baghdad? What about the big ones – Hiroshima and Nagasaki (At these two locations, the US killed at least 1,50,000 non-combatants – mostly women and children – in the blink of an eye. Thousands more took hours, days, weeks or months to die.)¹

He goes on:

Who are the true barbarians? Yet another example of this nation's (US's) blatant hypocrisy is revealed by the polls which suggest that this nation is greatly in favour of bombing Iraq...Do people think that government workers in Iraq are any less human than those killed in Oklahoma? Do they think that Iraqis do not have families who will grieve and mourn the loss of their loved ones? In this context, do people come to believe that the killing of foreigners is somehow different than the killing of Americans?

When a US plane or cruise missile is used to bring destruction to a foreign people this nation rewards the bombers with applause and praise. What a convenient way to absolve these killers of any responsibility for the destruction they leave in their wake.²

Compare these views of McVeigh with those of bin Laden. The choice of words may be different, the argument is strikingly similar. When Peter Arnett asked bin Laden why he declared jihad against the US, he said:

We declared jihad against the US government, because the US government is unjust, criminal and tyrannical. It has committed acts that are extremely unjust, hideous and criminal whether directly or through its support of the Israeli occupation of the Prophet's Night Travel Land (Palestine). And we believe that the US is directly responsible for those who were killed in Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq. The mention of the US reminds us before everything else of those innocent children who were dismembered, their heads and arms cut off in the recent explosion that took place in Qana (in Lebanon). The US government abandoned even humanitarian feelings by these hideous crimes.³

In the same interview, bin Laden elaborates further:

...(T)his collapse (of the USSR) has made the US more haughty and arrogant and it has started to look at itself as a Master of this world and established what it calls the new world order.... The US today as a result of the arrogant atmosphere has set up a double standard, calling whoever goes against its injustice a terrorist. It wants to occupy our countries, steal our resources... The US does not consider it terrorism when hundreds of thousands of our sons and brothers in Iraq died for lack of food or medicine.⁴

From the foregoing, it is more than evident that McVeigh and bin Laden share common ground. The only difference, if any, is that the terrorism of the former arises out of moral guilt whereas that of the latter stems from entrenched anger and a profound sense of being a helpless victim, real or otherwise. It, therefore, appears quite enigmatic why McVeigh's act is often described as an act of pure terrorism and that of bin Laden's as an alarming instance of 'Islamic peril', 'green menace', 'Muslim rage' or above all 'clash of civilisations'.

Seen in this context, September 11 does not mark the revolt of religion against freedom; it is instead a secular challenge decorated in a religious vocabulary, to invoke Walter Benjamin's illuminating phrase, to 'capitalism as religion'. True, the twin towers of New York, their phallic posture notwithstanding, were symbolic of liberal freedom and global commercial gusto. But millions across the world also felt hopelessly dwarfed in front of these sky-kissing towers. Those responsible for their destruction were not enemies of modernity but its outcasts. They were outraged at the 'deep hypocrisy' and 'double standard' of the US.

Many critics, including Noam Chomsky, have highlighted this double standard of the US by marshalling tons of evidence. One could perhaps supplement this line of criticism by contending that such double standard is in-built in the very matrix of the contemporary invisible empire presided over by the US. Empire survives not on the basis of sheer force alone but also because of its capacity to present force in the service of justice, peace, freedom and humanism. It is this logic that explains why the US first air-dropped sacks of food, visibly marked 'US' in English, for the poor Afghans

and later dropped bombs which obviously did not have any 'US' logo. It is this logic that also explains why just before the beginning of operation 'Enduring Freedom' Tony Blair, the British prime minister, so passionately spoke about the crying need to eradicate poverty from Africa and elsewhere. According to Hardt and Negri, authors of *Empire*, 'bellum justum' (just war) is one of the central concepts that sustains and bestows an ethical legitimacy on the present-day empire.⁵ One can clearly see it happening in the enchanting phrases the US has cleverly used to describe its active interventions in Afghanistan: 'infinite justice', 'enduring freedom'.

A word about the Taliban would be in order here. In a nutshell, it is a force gone berserk and out of tune with the surging aspirations of Muslim laity. As a former 'talib' (student: Taliban being popular) of a well known Deobandi madrasa of northern Bihar, I find its rhetoric grotesque and bizarre. In a signed pamphlet (published in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, September 15) Mullah Muhammad Omar, the self-proclaimed 'ameerul momenin; (leader of the faithful) and premier of the Taliban, urges Muslims to take up arms against America. According to Mullah Omar, it is a religiously obligatory act for every 'true' Muslim wishing to attain paradise. "Believe it, 'jannat', paradise, lies in the shadow of swords", exhorts he. As I was reading the pamphlet, the words of my maulanas (teachers) at the village madrasa began to echo. "Paradise lies beneath the feet of one's mother," they said to us students repeatedly. I wonder which madrasa Mullah Omar – 'servant of Islam' he calls himself, ironically – had his education from! Was it a madrasa or a training camp with teachers like Ernest Renan? Mullah Omar would be doing a great service to Islam if he sincerely heeded to the prophetic advice of Dipti Nazeer Ahmad, a great Islamic scholar of the 19th century, who urged Muslims to refrain from jihad and embark upon 'ijtihad', creative interpretation of Islam.^[6]

Notes

- 1 <http://www.kwtv.com/news/bombing/mcveigh-essay.htm>
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 <http://www.flinet.com/-politics/jihad/jihad.htm>
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 For details, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2000.