JALLAL GANJEII: A MUSLIM VOICE FOR PEACE

Review: on the writings of Ayatollah Jallal Gangeii
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"This has nothing to do with Islam. Islam is a religion of peace." Since the events of September 11th, 2001, and through the subsequent atrocities and the unimaginable sectarian horrors of Iraq, these words have been spoken again and again by Muslims who are appalled at what is being done in their name. But most Westerners, who have little or no knowledge of Islam, find it difficult to assess what is being said. Are those who disown violence simply offering an idealised version of their faith (like the Christians who say that the slaughter of the Crusades 'has nothing to do with Christianity'), or is there a truth here that it the outsider is failing to grasp?

The writings of Ayatollah Jallal Ganjeii can help us Westerners to see what is meant when Muslims refuse to be identified with fanatical violence. Speaking from the heart of one of the major Islamic traditions, and as one learned in that tradition, he has an authority that more casual commentators lack. But more importantly, he offers an argument against fanatical violence from within Islam itself. And that is what the world, at this moment, needs to hear.

The West has its own arguments in the case, arguments based on liberal concepts of democracy and rights. Valid though they are, they have little leverage in a cultural world that is not their own; and most Westerners obscurely sense that discrepancy. It is little use lambasting a regime like that in Iran with arguments from the England of 1688 or the American War of Independence; the cultural difference, the shift in assumptions, is simply too great. Very quickly the exchange between the West and Islam becomes a dialogue of the deaf. Ayatollah Ganjeii offers what the contemporary world desperately needs: a properly Islamic argument against the violence that claims to represent Islam. In the end, it is only such an argument that will carry authority with the billion-plus Muslims of the world.

What comes first? The hierarchy of values

At the centre of Ganjeii's case is the recognition that, within any religion, some values and obligations take precedence over others. If you disrupt that order,

then not only do you give too much emphasis to some elements and neglect others, but the entire structure is subtly corrupted.

There are plenty of examples of that from within the Christian tradition. For example: if observing the 'Lord's Day' becomes your overriding religious concern, then you may well construct a version of Christianity in which sensitivity to human need and the celebration of life are squeezed out in favour of a grim, Puritanical legalism. Believers who make that kind of mistake have—wilfully or out of self-deception—lost the wood for the trees in a particularly destructive way.

Ganjeii points out that the present rulers of Iran and their fanatical adherents have made a mistake of that kind. They take the overriding obligation of a Muslim society to be the establishment and defence of the Islamic state, and of its political power. This ceases to be a political act: it becomes the highest religious duty. As a necessary consequence, all the other obligations of faith are subordinated to that end, and become little more than means to that end. Religion becomes a political project. What began as faith, relating humanity to God, ends by being ideology.

The effect of placing political obligation above everything else is that all other obligations of faith—prayer, study, almsgiving—become, at least in the eyes of the state, merely instrumental. They become a way of asserting and sustaining a particular political structure. The act of martyrdom becomes, not an act of faithfulness toward God, but an act of violence against humanity. We begin to use the means that God has given us to grow closer to Him as resources for our own game, a game played increasingly murderously against our fellow human beings.

Islamic authenticity

Ganjeii accurately diagnoses this first move in the logic of political fanaticism. But the corruption does not end there. He goes on to show how the Iranian regime and its adherents justify the politicisation of faith through the presentation of a false version of the Islamic tradition.

This tradition has (and this may surprise many Westerners) a long and rich tradition of political reflection. Within that tradition, words like 'justice' have a serious weight and resonance. But for the Iranian regime, these words have become tools in the political game, verbal tokens in the struggle for the supremacy of the state. Consequently, 'justice' comes to mean the use of the

legal system against the enemies of the state. What is 'just' comes to be, by definition, what serves the prevailing ideological power.

This strategy of re-definition was, of course, used only too often in other places in the twentieth century. If Islamic states needed instruction in making this move, they had only to look at the modern history of (among others) Germany and Russia, both nations within the Christian tradition. But this is not the kind of pedigree that any politician readily appeals to. In any case, the Iranian regime has an obvious interest in appealing to an Islamic inheritance, not a Western one; and so justification needs to be found within the political past of Islam.

Ganjeii points out that the regime seeks to do this firstly, by appealing to a mistaken interpretation of early Islam, and secondly, by ignoring the complexity of the subsequent tradition. In that way it can assert a simplistic interpretation of political and legal concepts such as justice, whilst at the same time appearing to make them unquestionable for all faithful Muslims. What is essentially an instrumental reading of these concepts, designed to serve the needs of a contemporary political hierarchy, is made to appear a timeless and divinely-sanctioned truth.

The strategy is to transplant what is a modern political concept—the 'Islamic Republic'—into the early history of Islam. The relationship between Khomeini and the people of modern Iran is taken to be the same as the relationship between the early Imams of the first and second centuries and the peoples of that time. The essential implausibility of this is covered by a rhetoric of faithful correspondence. It is rather as though the British monarchy of the 21st century were to be justified by an appeal to the politics of Anglo-Saxon England. A whole history and a rich complexification of political tradition are erased through mere assertion.

The damage done by crudifying and ignoring the wealth of Islamic polity across the centuries is not only at the expense of less well-informed Muslims. It also reinforces the perception, only too common in the non-Muslim world, that Islam has no tradition of political reflection and practice, and that words like 'justice' have no meaning within the Islamic world. Part of the error of recent Western policy toward the Muslim world has been based on exactly this perception: that words like 'freedom' and 'justice' have no currency there, that they are 'our' words and therefore ours to impose on those who (benightedly) have no knowledge of them.

Faith and state

Ganjeii points up the most dangerous example of this falsely-authentic disregard of tradition when he discusses the relation between religious belief and the state. He suggests that there has been, throughout the history of Islamic communities, a struggle to preserve a proper understanding of this relationship. On the one hand, there are those who believe that, though an Islamic state should maintain the context for an active observance of Islam, it should not compel such observance. Those who take that view reflect the Prophet's insistence that in religion there is no compulsion. On the other hand, there are those who have been tempted to see the duty of the Islamic state as compulsion: political power may be used to compel observance of what is, after all, the will of God for human beings. It is not difficult to see on which side of this argument the current Iranian regime stands.

Again, this is not simply an argument for Muslims. The same issue has arisen on a number of occasions in the Christian West. Certain of Calvin's followers clearly believed in compulsion (even though compelling the already-damned to be virtuous could do them no good). The civil law of those Catholic states that disallow abortion and divorce continues to reflect the wish to compel. One might, even, define theocracy as the politics of such divinely-grounded coercion. Certainly there is nothing especially Islamic about it.

Ganjeii produces an argument against the coercive state from within his understanding of Islam. Whereas the West might make the point in terms of rights and democratic freedoms, Ganjeii simply points out that such compulsion negates the very religion that it appears to serve. The service that God looks for from humanity is a free service. He wishes those who respond to Him in love and obedience to do so freely: Nothing else has any worth. So to compel conformity to a religious edict is to destroy the value of what is done even before it is done. The prayer of someone flogged into a mosque is not a true prayer.

The political model

Ganjeii develops a similar distinction around the issue of jihad and martyrdom. He points out, first, how complex these concepts are in the history of Islam, and how much they are hedged around by conditions, such as a general obligation to do good rather than evil and a strict expectation of beneficial outcomes. In particular, he emphasises the distance between a genuinely sacrificial death in defence of others, and murder. Because these are complex issues, and need

to be reassessed in the context of each political situation in which they may be applied, martyrdom and jihad cannot be invoked as duties in a facile or automatic way, as though they were simple and self-defining. They can only be brought to bear on a specific situation after long reflection by those in a position to weigh their justification in relation to the depth of the Islamic tradition and the context of a particular set of problems.

That requires leadership, and leadership of a particular kind—informed, reflective, and able to see all aspects of the situation. Such a leadership would need to speak from a deep engagement with Islam as the justice and mercy of God. But given the perversion of the tradition that is involved in the Iranian state, this leadership is not available. Something else must take its place. In order to bring about the unquestioning obedience that is required, the state itself must usurp the position of religious leadership and proclaim the justification of such acts.

This, Ganjeii argues, has been the role of the Islamic Republic, and is the reason why it has a position of centrality in the politics of the modern Islamic world. It provides a model for and declares the justification of a particular path of political action. But the real credentials of the Islamic Republic are political, not religious. What makes it an authoritative model for Islamic fundamentalism everywhere is simply its power: for the first time a Muslim state is able to confront the historic colonialist powers on terms of something like equality. For many candidates for ‘martyrdom’ (the would-be suicide bombers) this authority is enough. But what has taken place is a short-circuiting of the true process of judgement as understood within Islam. True religious judgement and authority have been displaced by a state that arrogates to itself a right that it does not possess, whose real authority is simply that of political power.

A basis for understanding?

As one reads what Ganjeii has written, a common thread begins to emerge in his analysis of the Iranian situation, and it reveals something rather poorly understood in the West. He makes it clear that the Islamic Republic and the policies and violence that it supports do not, despite its claims, represent any true continuity with the fullness of Islamic tradition. But at the same time he is able, in a subtle and historically perceptive way, to show how the present state of affairs has come about; he does not respond to it by simply asserting, in a blind fashion, that “this has nothing to do with Islam.” On the contrary: he is

able to show how a state motivated by the common driving force of politics, the wish to acquire and exercise power over its people and others, has made use of Islamic forms whilst neglecting the substance. A kind of usurpation has taken place, in which versions of Islamic history, politics, and religious authority are made to serve—not God, but the interests of a particular regime. At the same time, an Islamic world desperate for leadership and for a credible focus of power after centuries of colonial humiliation provides a fertile ground for the recruitment of activists.

How does this help in approaching current problems? It makes it clear that the actions of the Islamic Republic and fundamentalist terrorists are not an inevitable consequence of Islam. The tradition does not force people to act in this way as some kind of inevitable duty. On the contrary: such actions, to the extent that they are ever justified, are hedged around in the tradition by caveats and qualifications. Further: the main tendency of Islamic reflection on human social and political arrangements runs in a quite different direction, and is concerned with the establishment of secure societies in which God can be properly honoured.

Ganjeii's achievement is that he shows us a way out of the despondency of inevitable conflict. As we read him, the Westerner can begin to see that, though there are important differences between the Islamic tradition and our own, and though there is much that is bound to cause difficulty and friction, this is not a faith that we are, in some historically deterministic way, bound inevitably to fight. There are understandings here that are close to our own, and that can become part of a common human world. Such a world will never be without conflict—that is the human condition—but it need not be the clash of irreconcilables that the extremists of East and West predict, and for which they appear to have a murderous appetite.

Ganjeii refines and makes subtle what is often crude and distorted in Western debate. In doing so, he offers a basis for discussion and understanding. Once each side sees that the other is not starting from a demonic and evil motivation, but from a parallel version of our common humanity, then hope can begin to dawn.