

Kevin James - *Alt-Radical Islam: A Critical Ontology*

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This is a narrative, to be sure, for those who are certain of the unseen intensities that shape law, aim, and intention. Laws coalesce around intuition then reason, so to regard the fruits of sense and thought as mindless lose sight of the root and branch of arboreal knowledge; the differential relations of mathemes precede the language of algorithms. Similarly, the dualism inherent in habitual practices of religion lack traction for a critical ontology of thought to subsume the metastasizing oncology of tribalism and violence that threaten our world. So unlike Radical Muslims who kill innocents for a past that never was and a future never to pass, Alt-Radical Muslims serve the sanctity of life that each moment exercises its universal power. In contrast to alt-right facts that weld world view to fantasy, sober drunkards imbibe the endless draught of Absolute Being's non-identity to itself, an open totality of the differences in kind that originate and recreate the worlds of law, aim and intention.

Hence this excursion seeks to deterritorialize Islam via its natural disposition to discern the true from the false. The problem, however, proceeds from scriptures that are rarely read to fathom the relations between mathematical laws, aim, and intention. We approach them instead with a host of needs, desires and presuppositions we bring to it. To unearth its secrets therefore demands an inquisitor rather than an apologist to properly confront their many paradoxes and inconsistencies. Only after we cabin the supernatural in the Quran can we reterritorialize it as a Cern idea collider rather than a reliquary dangling from our necks. Only then can we clear the epochal character of Prophetic speech as not so much a content colored by its embedded and embodied being, but as emblematic of an embedded and embodied being's access to recognition and expression through modality and modularity.

I begin by framing my radical introspection as a Muslim FDNY responder against the events of 9/11. From there I wander between epiphany and doubt, all in the shadow of radical finitude that render teleological goals meaningless. Indeed, it was in nihilism that I recognized an old foe in the FQXi theme, of alienated mindless laws little different from an arbitrary supreme lawmaker. I haven't figured out my ending yet, and doubt I should or even could in a meaningful way for your story. I am indebted to Muhammad Asad's translation and commentary on the Quran, Prophetic traditions (hadith), and numerous profound thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Mahmoud Taha.

The Event

Two decades ago I would have found this year's FQXi theme of little or no interest. The questions implicated by the presupposition of mindless mechanical laws and the subtle nuances of aim and intention would have been lost on me. Habit and culture drove me to do more, rise higher in the New York City Fire Department, earn more money, and accumulate more things to connote status and brilliance.

My goal oriented esteem claimed a stake in passing the nation's first 'fire-safe' cigarette law in New York State along with procuring the first FDNY Muslim chaplain, come hell or high water. Then there was the short lived K-9 accelerant detection unit and incorporating the first Muslim fraternal organization in the Department. Above all there was Allah and the firm belief that the Quran held all the answers that I would ever need, answers that would be revealed to me at the appropriate time just as the Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad in stages step by step.

Then 9/11 occurred, which forced me to question the presuppositions I brought to the Quran and sayings of the Prophet, as well as the emotional drive for self-identity. But the need to belong soon transitioned to a quest for meaning under the most severe radical introspection. Self-actualization - bracketing and flattening the world with each breath - meant journeying over and over again to the center of the moment, of seeing past the surface effects dancing on time's event horizon in the virtual amalgam of memory and imagination. For the Quran to say all things are perishing save His face implies a transcendental face that washes, witnesses, and changes all the time.

The Façade of Self-Identity

On the other hand, the façade of intersectional self-identities use building blocks handed down by societal norms. The Quran encompassed this notion as the comfort of illusion passed down generation to generation that obliged me to question and learn to think for myself. In the neuroscience of predictive processing and the brains modularity, it became clear that whether by apperception, misperception, or perlocution, Prophet Muhammad communicated with a part of the mind he experienced as the presence of God.

Fidelity to the Prophet now meant striving for primordial vision rather than imitating his manner or mouthing his words. Just as Prophet Muhammad supplicated to be shown things as they are, seeing through the eyes of the Prophet demanded making ablution in the waters of forgetfulness. Distinct from the political Islam articulated towards the end of Muhammad's life, this was and will be the phenomenal Islam that of necessity begins and ends in the individual.

After all, was this not what the Quran and Prophet called for? In a narrative related by Abu Harair, Muhammad asserted that all children are born with a natural disposition (*fitrah*) of Islam, but his parents covert him to Judaism, Christianity, or Magianism. This in large degree was what drew me to Islam in the first place, as a clearing where our prelinguistic selves used Bayesian odds to sort and synthesize truth from falsehood prior to social imprinting. This idea comported with Quranic text that repeatedly characterized Islam as a religion of truth, called for believers to question what was handed down by previous generations, and described the performative qualities of Muslims who prefigured Muhammad.

Guideposts

Yet in mockery of Quranic appeals to question the empty naming of inherited norms, critical thought abdicated the throne of reason to political Islam's five pillars of fear, oppression, rigidity, coercion and elitism. But I found guidance from Ibn Haytham, who was one of the progenitors of the scientific method as an outgrowth to his devotion to Islam. Then there was Mahmoud Taha, the Sudanese Sufi who sacrificed his life for a more humane approach to a Quran tempered by the dialectics of time, place, and cultural underpinnings.

Tellingly, Taha read Karl Marx and Friedrich Hegel, while Marx and Hegel in turn found inspiration in Rumi's expression of the spirit's alienation from absolute being. It mattered not to me whether such alienation flowed from theocracy divorcing its citizenry from perceptual faith or from a schizoid capitalism that alienated workers from their modes of producing fetishized commodities at the altar of free markets. The overriding question became how do we instead enshrine Islam as a faculty of questioning, understanding, empiricism, selection, and testing across all borders?

Notably, my faith in Muhammad's sincerity and humanity waned little during this period. But I took him at his word that he knew he was only a mortal human being who was uncertain what would become of him one day to the next, no less than at the end of time. I also knew that the God he intoned within the socio-political milieu of his age could never be my God, which comported with the Quran repeatedly asserting that Allah was indefinable. For when I bore witness to "no God but Allah" I instantiated a God particular to Muhammad's phenomenal experience. But as the dialectic of language presupposed an absolute universal grounded in the Prophet's particular intention, "no God but Allah" merely privileged my own personal concept of God, filling an already overcrowded idol temple rather than probe the entropy of awareness.

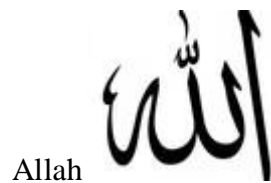
Just as the Higgs-Boson particle is not God and Muhammad was but a man, both testify to our utmost reverence towards the unknown. Just as the Cern Hadron Collider yields profound insights into physics by smashing atoms, the Quran reveals its secrets when contemporary understandings confront conflicted verses disclosed at different times and circumstances.

I then saw that the corollary to the unlettered Prophet who could neither read nor write lay in the men and women who heard, recorded, and compiled the Quran. Out of intellectual honesty I could no longer ignore that all meaning, power, and effect in the Quran were amplified by diverse perspectives such as class, lineage, and gender.

The Field of Intensity between the Alif and the Lam

Given the Prophet's illiteracy, I also found ground to speculate how the calligraphy for Allah called to him, how he intuited Allah in the most fundamental, visceral way. Before he donned the self-imposed mantle of Prophet, statesman, and legislator, the Quran and his sayings reveal a profound thinker who grappled with the questions that perplexed philosophers and scientists throughout the ages.

In light of his inability to read or write, I imagined Prophet Muhammad achieved greater facility in accessing the pre-linguistic ‘other’ of his self during periods of isolated introspection. If he indeed gained his greatest insights from the plane of immanence during those wee morning hours when his mind was sharpest, an alternative to magical thinking would be that the Prophet encountered Allah as relational, wherein neuroscience modularity suggests he processed a parallax view of his self as God’s presence.



Allah by itself indicates the essence of this relation to the extent that the always solitary Alif signifies the finite intellect confronted by the repetition of Lam as eternal, which ends with Ha, ostensibly for He as a simulacral Allah. What’s more, the seemingly random muqatta’at – those various combinations of Arabic phonemes that introduce select surahs – offer another example in so far as they indicate the Prophet’s pre-individual impressions of differential increments of intensity.

Tellingly, Alif-Lam-Mim, the most frequent formulation of muqatta’at, also prefaces the second and longest surah, The Cow. Given that it contains some of Islam’s most important duties and strictures, at least consider that Prophet Muhammad associated the subliminal relationships between the intellect, the eternal, and the open-ended letter Mim (م), which at first blush appears to be the precursor of the question mark.

What’s more, given that he was marginalized as an orphan, who else better than the Prophet to question the fundamental social fabric of Meccan society handed down by his forbears. Comparable the stream of consciousness James Joyce enacted in *Ulysses* during the course of a day, the Quran reflects many modes of Muhammad’s expressivity that reflect the historical events and occasions of revelation that inspired him over the course of two decades. It was only after I worked through the surface effects of hagiography to discern the existential-agnostic undercurrents of the Prophet’s thought that I recognized the Quran’s assemblage of empiricism, reflection, and projection.

Quranic Assemblage

Then there are the numerous lexemic gaps that, whether by design or chance, act as mirrors for the reader/interpreter to interpolate what they bring to the Quran. In this sense the Quran represents the ultimate machinic assemblage; a living document that inspired the openness to change in Mahmoud Taha as well as the venom in Osama Bin Laden that brought razed the twin towers. Here the phonemes that adorns the beginning of certain surahs but not others assumed the shape of singular intensities from which sense and meaning emerge.

All the while you see the Prophet's nomadic war machine struggling to survive and practice their faith freely, then transition to a military state apparatus that not only consolidated their gains but expanded their influence through force and conquest. Thus in the early Medinan verses you hear no compulsion in religion, while in later verses the Quran calls on believers to slay the unbelievers wherever they are found. If only figuratively, the Quran's compilers no doubt took a page from Critias of Athens' *Sisyphus* who inscribed fear of supernatural being into a tool for social control of the masses. By contrast, Attar's *Simorgh* attests to the equivocal voices of univocal being, where the chattering birds flying in formation cast the pixilated, amorphous shadow of the being they sought on the ground below.

Swimming in the Paradise of Immanence

At base, the Quran represents the epitome of assemblage in revealing itself by stages via the events suffered by its human interlocutor blow by blow. The earlier Meccan verses reflect Muhammad's minoritarian voice that culminated in his fleeing to Medina for dear life. His role first as mediator then as leader and commander-in-chief in Medina heralded his Majoritarian voice of command and obedience. Concomitantly, the nomadic war machine oriented towards survival and self defense morphed into a state military apparatus of force and conquest. The sobriquet Seal of the Prophets transmutes to a madness of prophecy, in seeing things as they are in the breathing, moving image animated by flattening and bracketing the world in perpetuity.

Before the Prophet politicized Islam as a religion toward the end of his life, he articulated Islam as Fitrah, the birthright of the middle way for human being to discern truth from falsehood. Hence the Islam that originates and finishes as something strange can only begin and end in the individual. Here, the Quran's Tawhid of Say He is Allah, the One, merges with strangest thought of Gilles Deleuze's Univocity, if it can be thought at all.

Given the raging inferno of borders and identity politics that threaten a new dark age, why not build on Islam's alchemy to incubate rather than incinerates a critical ontology of thought? Notably, Prophet Muhammad encouraged followers to seek knowledge from cradle to grave, and gave preference to the knowledge of others rooted in experience. Was it not this attitude that helped lead Europe out of the Dark Ages to Enlightenment?

For until we can step outside of ourselves and experience the self-awareness of the 'other' of our self, we remain captives within the gravitational pull of solipsism. So long as we lack the capacity to enact our highest values by serving humanity; until we cherish the genesis of differences between us as jewels lighting the night sky; and up to when we bathe in the River Styx to see through the eyes of the Prophets and swim in the Paradise of immanence where the past is gone and the future is now, we give artifacts of the mind a life of their own be they expressed as law, aim, and intention; religion, teleology, and God's will.

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