

# INVOKING *KAIROS*: REFLECTIONS ON ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE NEW WORLD

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## Abstract

The totalitarian ideology was pivoted on the hubris ridden ‘right to rule’ as a pretext for creating a new world order. Their social and political agendas actualised the Greek concept of *kairos* – a divinely ordained or opportune time to act. In the contemporary period, the notion of the new world order has been linked to the perceived threat which globalisation poses for human rights and the environment. My use of *kairos* in this essay is informed by the metaphysics of the Andalusian Sufi master, Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 ce), which asserts the constant self-disclosure of Divine consciousness within human history, culture and nature (Coates 2002:82-83). It is the sociological implications of Ibn Arabi’s ontology that gives us an invaluable insight for examining *kairos* in relation to the dialogic with Islam and Christianity, and its implications on world peace.

*“ Until Germany has exploded the entanglement of such Medusa-like beliefs ...it cannot hope for a future. ...Instead, all the light that language and reason still afford should be focused upon that ‘primal experience’ from whose barren gloom this mysticism of the death of the world crawls forth on its thousand unsightly conceptual feet.*

*Walter Benjamin  
Theories of German Fascism*

Walter Benjamin was writing the above prologue in response to the miasmatic spread of fascism throughout Europe and Asia in the first half of the twentieth century. Like other concerned thinkers of the time, Benjamin was appalled by the supplanting of civilised values for totalitarian worldviews which seemingly reaffirmed Nietzsche’s adage – “the death of God”. The preponderant fervour and ramifications of totalitarian regimes on the human species was cataclysmic. The kernel of totalitarian ideology as personified by Hitler,

Mussolini, Franco, Tojo, et al was pivoted on the hubris ridden 'right to rule' as a pretext for creating a new world order. Their social and political agendas actualised the Greek concept of *kairos* – a divinely ordained or opportune time to act. In the contemporary period, the notion of the new world order has been linked to the perceived threat which globalisation poses for human rights and the environment.

My use of *kairos* in this essay is informed by the metaphysics of the Andalusian Sufi master, Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 ce), which asserts the constant self-disclosure of Divine consciousness within human history, culture and nature (Coates 2002:82-83). It is the sociological implications of Ibn Arabi's ontology that gives us an invaluable insight for examining *kairos* in relation to the dialogic with Islam and Christianity, and its implications on world peace.

## **Emergence of the Contemporary Metaphysic**

It was the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus (540-480 bce) who posed the idea of existence as being in perpetual flux (*polemos*). Like the great Vedic and Taoist sages, Heraclitus also advocated an understanding into the nature of *logos*, which defined the underlying connectedness between all things and events. Similarly, the Sufi master Ibn Arabi in his influential metaphysic on the Unity of Being (*wahdat-ul-wujud*) further expanded on the Heraclitian flux by stating that the Divine in its desire to manifest itself in creation, discloses itself on microcosmic and macrocosmic levels. At the macrocosmic level, the Divine constantly reveals and conceals itself within the historic world process. For Ibn Arabi, each era, epoch, day and moment reaffirms the limitless creative potential of Divine self-disclosure (Coates 2002:83). As Coates notes, "God appears *in* the era, and He appears *as* the era" (Coates 2002:83)<sup>1</sup> Ibn Arabi's understanding of time is significant since "each era contains the possibility of its own zenith and aspiration"(Coates 2002:87). In this way, each moment contains the kernel of *kairos* – each moment becomes a means for apprehending the Divine in world events.

Nothing remains static; the world in its entirety ... transforms itself kaleidoscopically from moment to moment, and yet all these movements of self-development are the 'ascending' movements of the things toward the Absolute-One, precisely because they are the 'descending' self-expression of the Absolute-One (Smith 2004).

Let's now take aspects of Ibn Arabi's metaphysic and apply it to Islam/Christian relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and outline a few possible trajectories which this may take. Using Heidegger's terminology, the world has never embodied such a degree of 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit*), in the way diverse cultural and religious groups have been brought together by globalisation. While the past saw intermittent ideological and material exchanges between Muslims and Christians, such exchanges in the contemporary period are vital for creating global peace. Comprising between them over a third of the world's population, Islam and Christianity are poised in informing humankind through the global crisis. The American scholar Abdul Aziz Said argues that the scale and extent of the global crisis demands new forms of "creative imagination and reason" (Said: 2004). Here he goes on to postulate the idea of educating people in becoming global citizens, willing to replace nationalistic and cultural ties for more mutually affirming and universal ones (Said 2004:1). The global citizen recognises the importance of all religious and cultural traditions and emphasises human dignity. The kernel of Said's discourse mirrors Martin Buber's thesis of the I-Thou relationship (Buber 1972), which is characterised by reciprocity, cooperation, openness and "rediscovery of the boundary between self and other" (Carrol & Bowman 2000:230). It is because the Abrahamic religions assert that God is knowable that privileges the fostering of the knowledge of him. Certainly, the Sufi tradition of Islam posits the way of knowledge as an act of Divine realisation as noted in the *hadith qudsi*, "I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known so I created the world."

What such writers as Abul Aziz Said, Martin Buber, and John Dewey prescribe is the nurturing of authentic connections between global citizens as way of reaffirming our common humanity. Although violence and division has historically been promulgated by doctrinal religion, religion still bequeaths the promise of conferring a profound sense of humanity and universal wisdom. On this note, Friedrich Schleiermacher writes: "Religion is no kind of slavery, no kind of captivity...the beginning of faith" (Van de Meyer 2001:89). Here, I concur with Van de Meyer who divides religion according to its good and bad aspects. For him, good religion nurtures universal compassion, knowledge and respect, while bad religion promotes bigotry, obscurantism, and intolerance (Van de Meyer 2001:92).

The fact that the teachings of Islam and Christianity foreground universal principles and values, suitably positions them to develop a new kind of synthesis based on what Prince El-Hassan bin Talal of Jordan calls an "ethics of human solidarity" and interfaith as well as

intrafaith outreach” (2003:6). Certainly, from Quranic viewpoint, cultural diversity and its various religious expressions are part of the Divine plan.

O mankind! We created you from a single pair(pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you (Qur’an 49:13).

Cultural diversity, then, is both a way of finding human solidarity between communities of humans, as well as, as mediating divine creative disclosure within the human lifeworld. In this way, the Quranic injunction of inter-cultural harmony intimates the realisation of *oikoumene* – the earth as God’s household.

It is precisely this kind of shared human project which is presently being rediscovered between Muslims and Christians throughout the world. We find this kind of interfaith collaboration in Bosnia, Kosovo and Lebanon after the ravages of civil war. According to Rose Marie Berger (1999), Bosnia provides a poignant “spiritual laboratory”, for testing “peaceful co-existence of religions”, which Christian Moe refers to as the “Bosnian paradigm” (2003). Nowhere is the Bosnian paradigm more aptly portrayed than in efforts by the Franciscan Father Mijo Dzolan and Dr. Katica Nikolic who are endeavouring to construct the House of Peace – a centre for spiritual and psychological healing for all Bosnians. The forerunner of the House of Peace was in 1992 at Rama, where Father Dzolan had appealed to Muslims, Serbs and Croats to return to the valley. Bosnians from the three religions often prayed together at the basement of the Franciscan monastery during intense shelling and massacres in the surrounding countryside (Berger 1999:3). The appeal of the Bosnian paradigm as a workable blueprint of reconciliation between Muslims and Christians is that its moral vision transcends the boundaries of the Balkans and supports the need towards global peace-building.

### **Re-Enchanting the *Oikoumene***

Max Weber’s gloomy thesis on secularism referred to as the “disenchanted world” — a world characterised by a bureaucratic and soulless rationality, is a journey into social Armageddon and the consequences of global hubris. If unchecked, Weber’s disenchanted world paradigm poses a potential threat to Islamic and Christian teachings and values. For

Weber and the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, a symptom of the disenchanted world is the amelioration of cultural traditions resulting in mass social alienation and anomie. Using Weber's logic, modernism's triumvirate, of the global market science and technology, have sought to de-mystify the universe. Where for thousands of years, nature had been treated as a primordial source of the sacred reality for humankind, has under modernism's guise been reduced to a quantifiable object and as an expression of human dominance of the world.

For the perennialist, Sayyed Hossein Nasr, modernism's malaise is historically situated in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe when knowledge of the natural world was separated from theology, ushering in the Cartesian paradigm and its dependency on positivism (Nasr 1968). The fruits of this Cartesian model have been both insidious and cataclysmic. From a human rights perspective Cartesianism has divided human societies according to rational and non-rational (irrational) categories. As rationality became the gauge for measuring human knowledge and progress in the West, it assiduously judged non-Western cultures as being non-rational. Edward Said's concept of 'Orientalism' is the historic realisation of this logic which informed European understandings of 'oriental' peoples (Said 1978). The contagion of Orientalism tacitly informs Western understandings of the non-West; from the perpetual debt cycle which plagues the Third World, to refugees being denied asylum by affluent nations on the pretext of national security. Moreover, core features of secularism foster the Cartesian paradigm via the deployment of numerous distinctions which mock the conception of modern civil society as based on justice and equity.

Like the doomed Sisyphus whose prankish excesses evoked the Olympians' wrath, modernity has contravened the two sacred dictums of Greek lore — "Know thyself" (*gnosis auton*) and "Nothing in excess" (*sophrousene*). The failure of moderation has unleashed the terror of excess — excess in violence, in consumption, and the sybaritic worship of the individual. As John Carroll notes, "in a culture of excess the serious is denied" (2002:23). In this scenario, religion, the ancient bastion of cultural and mystical lore is increasingly becoming relegated to faddism and the whimsical.

The global human crisis demands "the necessity of a new paradigm", as proposed by Peter Young (1999), which contours our understanding of the world into "one absolute and all-inclusive reality" in which humankind has a central role to play. This must start with dis-privileging the excesses of Cartesianism from informing Western and non-Western societies, and restoring a view of the natural world as *oikoumene* – a sacred cosmos. This is nothing

less than re-enchanting the world. By this I mean a way of living the natural and human lifeworlds with *communitas*. *Communitas* means to be liberated from human limitations and outmoded models of thinking and acting which convey “a false conjecture of reality” according to Ibn Arabi. (Young 1999:5).

Presently, this new global *communitas* is being disclosed by inter-religious dialogue and co-operation, between Muslims and Christians, “locally rooted and globally connected” (Boehle 2002:3). It is because as Ibn Arabi claims that truth can “take on any form it wishes since a single essence gives rise to all the multiplicity of forms” (Young 1999:5), that makes globalisation an opportune and effective vehicle for addressing global peace-building. The multiplicity of globalisation allows for new kinds of synergies between various religious and non-religious organisations to co-operate. UNESCO’s world movement for inter-faith peace building between Muslims and Christians is pioneering this kind of synergy. “Only by joining forces, by creating synergies, by sharing new insights and traditional wisdom”(Boehle 2002:8), of Islam and Christianity can a spiritual ‘commons’ between these two great religions protect and preserve the *oikoumene*. According to Islam, the world has been created to be God’s place of worship. Therefore, it is incumbent on every believer to reprobate injustice and violence which threaten all human and non-human communities.

Ibn Arabi’s metaphysic on the multitudinous nature of existence, consigns us to our true relationship with history, as a continual unfolding of Divine self-disclosure, while at the same time an affirmation of the immutable mercy (*rahma*) of the Divine *–fons et origo* of creation. For Ibn Arabi, the notion of separate existence is both an illusion and the enemy of humankind, conveyed in nationalistic and fundamentalist ideologies. However, it is peace that is humankind’s primordial birthright, a legacy that is being painstakingly unveiled through innumerable global events and beings, all converging towards the realisation of *kairos*, where each moment contains the Divine desire to be known.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the hadith, “God is called time”. Humanity is also warned, “Revile not the era for I (God) am the era” See Coates (2002:83).