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## The Wahhabi who Loved Beauty

### Kerim Fenari

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**Spending three years in the desert heat of Saudi Arabia** was for me a time of Ultimate Enlightenment, which raised the veil from the Umma's most enigmatic and closely-guarded secret. Access to the Ka'ba is relatively straightforward when compared to the challenge of grasping this secret, namely, the hidden, Manichean division in today's Muslim world, which is not between secularisation and Islam - a relatively straightforward tension - but between normative Islam and the heresy which is its latter-day simulacrum. As I came to realise, understanding this schism is the key to grasping everything that is wrong with the Muslim nation today.

Saudi Arabia has undoubted virtues. Its crude but generally effective erasure of vice from public spaces is praiseworthy and deserves our respect. Once, returning to London, I took my small child into the Fleet Street church of St Dunstan's, to escape from the February rain. Inside, however, we were confronted with an exhibition of giant terracotta bas-reliefs depicting the Disciples of Christ, all nude and grimacing, their grotesquely deformed pudenda projecting into the nave. We hurriedly exited into the rain; and I silently prayed for a long life for King Fahd, who, despite all that may be said, is not ashamed before the world to suppress the perversions of the age, and to drive them deep underground where they belong.

The King deserves our prayers, too, for his patronage of several mosque projects: not the extensions to the Great Sanctuaries of Makka and Madina, which were accomplished by teams of mediocrities; but the smaller mosques of Quba and Qiblatayn in Madina, and the astonishingly beautiful Miqat of Dhu'l-Hulayfa, the oasis-like structure just south of the Holy Prophet's city where pilgrims from the north bathe, pray, and don their Ihram; a truly noble setting for the primordially beautiful and dignified rites of our religion.

Yet it cannot be said that the modern Saudi soul is attuned to beauty. Buildings surviving from before the 20th century are uniformly impressive; more recent structures are exhibitions of the worst of Third World kitsch. And people's homes are lurid and garishly decorated with shocking pink carpets and fluffed-up Ziegfeld Follies furniture, all illuminated by fluorescent tubes or mock-Bourbon chandeliers.

To those who have come to Islam, as I did, out of a love for Islamic art and the art of Islamic living, this collapse of the age-old Muslim aesthetic is puzzling. The usual explanation is the obvious supply-side account, which describes how the invasion of Muslim suqs in the 19th century by cheap European manufactured goods destroyed the crafts and the artisanal classes which for centuries had cultivated beauty. The Islamic guilds which presided over the production of artefacts which are absent from modern Muslim homes but which are the prized possessions of Western museums had been training grounds not only for technique, but for spiritual excellence, taking as their motto the hadith: 'Allah is beautiful, and He loves beauty'. The ihsan here advocated is an intuitive gift. Guild masters would train their apprentices for seven years in religious practices as well as in the mechanics of crafting carpets, lamps or ceramics. Every guild was either part of a Sufi tariqa, or functioned as a tariqa in its own right. Manual work was hence turned into a method of dhikr; every instant at the potter's wheel, or the rugmaker's frame, would be occupied with the mention of God and His Prophet. The

production of beauty was seen as evidence of the craftsman's inner repose and detachment; faults were the consequence of faults in the soul.

The Industrial Revolution swept most of this away; and ironically the Muslim crafts now survive largely thanks to the Western demand. Nowadays, 'ethnic' artifacts, from costly Afghan rugs down to humble brass candlesticks sold at Oxfam, are mainly attractive to people who do not share the worldview which made their beauty possible.

Saudi Arabia, because it has the money to demolish and rebuild and import, has been ravaged more deeply than most Muslim countries in this regard. Most Moroccans are too poor to pull down their stone houses and replace them with cement imitations of Western models; but the Saudis have been unrestrained. Almost all of Makka and Madina, and a good part of Jeddah, has been uncomprehendingly bulldozed and replaced with concrete carbuncles, faced in ghastly variegated marble.

Standing in the ruins of a formerly exquisite Saudi city, one realises that the 'decline of the guilds' explanation does not go far enough. Offered the choice between beautiful and ugly Western imports, the Saudis seem invariably to choose what is ugly. They reject their own music, but do not listen to Mozart instead, but to Michael Jackson and other exhalations of the damned degeneracy of America. They throw out traditional Arab or Ottoman furniture, and replace it with mock "Louis Farouk" vulgarity so extreme that it is produced in Europe largely for export. One can imagine the truckers and removal men in Italy or Spain averting their eyes from their awful loads, thankfully putting them on ships bound only for distant Arabian ports.

While living in Saudi Arabia, I had an acquaintance who was troubled by all of this. He was an American convert from a middle-class background who had a scholarship to study at the 'Umm al-Qura Islamic University' in Makka. Although he is today the least likely of men to read Q-News <http://www.aapi.co.uk/qnews>, I will preserve his anonymity by calling him Jalal.

Jalal loved Islamic art, and the great lyrical productions of Sufi poetry. He had come to the religion not through reading Mawdudi, or Muhammad Qutb - for their complex-ridden resentfulness would have repelled a person of his culture and sensitivity - but through travelling in tribal Muslim areas, where he breathed that precious and liberating air which one can only describe as the Islamic spirit. Not the boy-scout bonhomie of the liberal Ikhwan, or the nervous guilt of the Tabligh, but authentic, unpolluted Islam, as shaped and lived for countless generations by joyfully untroubled lovers of Allah.

Jalal's fate, however, was to don a gas-mask supplied by the Wahhabi sect, which cut him off from the liberating oxygen of normative Islam and slowly asphyxiated him with fumes of human making. At the university, his open-mindedness made him heedless of our counsels about choosing company that would open his heart to the love of his Lord, rather than close it in recriminations and self-exaltation. And this was his undoing.

I never learned the name of the man who converted him to Wahhabism. But one can deduce his character, and the expression on his face, and his body-language, without difficulty. As months passed, and Jalal the Arabic student fell under the spell of the shouting sermoniser he insisted on hearing, a shadow crept over his features. Formerly a frequent visitor to Madina, he went less often, troubled by Wahhabi polemic against paying too much attention to God's messengers. His confidence that the sacred could be discerned in nature, in saints and in beauty began to waver, a process that clearly agonised him. At times, when we spoke, he would return for a while to his old self, and

talk enthusiastically about architecture, of textiles, of the sacred geography of Muslim cities. But then a cloud would come over his face, and he would almost shudder, as his programming once again took him over, and he parroted the shallow slogans of Wahhabism. I thought, once, of the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Jalal was being possessed.

Prior to my years in Saudi Arabia, I had been puzzled by the vehemence of the traditional ulema's hostility to Wahhabism. Wahhabism, I felt sure, was no more than an overheated Hanbalism, with a naive Bedouin literalism in speaking of a delineated and anthropomorphic God.

Watching the shadows gather around Jalal, however, convinced me that something more ominous, even infernal, was at work. Wahhabism seemed to be not simply or even primarily a package of ideas; it was an existential condition. It breathed an intensity, a dark radioactivity which could, on prolonged exposure, make me physically weak, or sick. After one intense session with a Wahhabi, whose blindness had veiled from him my own orientation, I had to detoxify myself by taking a long walk, breathing deeply, and repeating thousands of prayers upon the Holy Prophet.

I once met a Ugandan who lamented the decline of Islam in his country, and laid the blame very bitterly at the Wahhabis' door. Before they came, he said, Islam had been spreading fast, largely through the public and joyful celebrations of Mawlid. Singing with passion and rhythm is the key to the African soul, he told me; and yet the Wahhabis, well-funded and with deadly zeal in their eyes, slowly turned off the taps to the Mawlid, until the entire community became disconsolate, forced awkwardly into a dry type of religion that failed to speak to their condition. With the Muslims browbeaten by an organised anti-tariqa and anti-Mawlid sect, the Christian missionaries, with their Africanised hymns, suddenly found the going much easier.

Back in Makka, Jalal's condition was getting worse. He began to stand very close in front of me, fingering my lapels as he spoke. In this I recognised a symptom of a very advanced case of Wahhabism. When I spoke to him of beauty, or art, or literature, or holiness, his face now blazed with an amused and self-righteous contempt. All that was bid'a. A mosque could be made of concrete, carpeted with lime-green rugs, and illuminated with multicoloured fluorescent strips, and it was just as good a space for prayer as a medieval structure erected by great craftsmen. Jalal's room at the university, which he shared with three others, was slowly stripped of anything "ethnically" Muslim - small rugs from Kashmir, rosewater sprinklers, and, of course, his ebony prayer beads. His life was stripped down, sterilised, irradiated with ultraviolet light from the harshest end of the religious spectrum. His reading habits withered, as he realised that the great sacred poets of Islam: Rumi, Sana'i, Shabistari and the rest, were all Sufis, and that the soil of Wahhabism had been as sterile for literature as it had been for all the other arts of Islam.

I watched this transformation with pain. I had hoped, as had others, that he would someday combine his cultural sensitivities with his Islamic knowledge to become a major Muslim leader back in America, speaking two languages with fluency. His destiny, however, lay through the Wahhabi desert. And in the end, he died of thirst.

He suffered a kind of spiritual heart-attack. His attempt to change his spiritual makeup finally collapsed, as I should have anticipated. A crisis which must have tortured him almost beyond endurance brought about his sudden departure from the university, and from the country. He renounced Islam, and encountered and married a Chinese girl. He

now practices a form of Nishiren Buddhism which no doubt helps to satisfy, as Wahhabism never could, his craving for contemplation and beauty.

Jalal's case was extreme, but I fear it is not unique. The spread of Wahhabism, fostered by the general disequilibrium of the age, is rapid, and is contaminating many thousands of souls that might otherwise, with proper exposure to traditional ulama and an attachment to a spiritual director, have found the tranquillity and serenity of authentic Islam. While I know that everything is by Allah's decree, I blame myself for Jalal's apostasy. I should have taken him to visit the saints, and the true gatherings of divine love that discreetly flourish in Saudi Arabia, which could have inoculated him against the virus which led to his death. But he represents, in extreme form, the whole story of the Umma's contemporary crisis. Our lack of recognition of, of insistence upon, beauty, as the traditional accompaniment to the Muslim life, indicates the absence of beauty in our souls, and the distance from our Maker that ensues from the decline of tradition and from the diabolically-contrived spread of heresy and disharmony.

Thankfully, the Umma is still filled with saints, Sufis, and great craftsmen. Economic backwardness has in this respect been a great preservative. Having travelled the world, I know that amid no other community may one find such glories of spirituality and human excellence. All the more reason to defend tradition against this new plague, which denatures and impoverishes Islam precisely at the moment in history when the West, shattered by the decline of its own religion, could begin to see it as an appealing and desperately-needed alternative.

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