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Jahiliyya: States of Ignorance and Sites of Temptation in Secular Europe

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Jahiliyya is an Arabic word designating a world or condition that falls outside the scope of Islam. According to one Muslim writer living in the UK, "There are few concepts in the Muslim psyche that paint an image as vivid and forceful as the era of The Jahiliyya, the Period of Great Ignorance that preceded the advent of Islam" (Janmohamed 2004).¹ *Jahiliyya* is an historical time, a place, a social condition, a set of relationships, a way of being, a state of mind.² It bears a complex relationship to the empty time, measured spaces, and autonomous subjects of secular modernity. Scholars who have directly considered the concept of *jahiliyya* tend to focus on one aspect or context of its usage, such as the Quran, medieval Islamic scholarship, or modern ideological works, setting aside other aspects. But for diasporic Muslims, these various layers of significance and diverse usage can occur simultaneously and can be interwoven in complex ways to shape a sense of otherness. How might the spaces and places of *jahiliyya* map onto the modern secular world and what can such mappings tell us about how diasporic Muslims experience themselves as

¹ Janmohamed is author of the memoir *Love in a Headscarf*.

² Related words commonly used across several languages include *jahili* and *jahil* (ignorant, ignorant person) and *jahl* ("foolishness").

Muslims, as national citizens, and as members of other sorts of communities in this world?

Philosopher Akeel Bilgrami redraws the boundaries between a modern self and its other by proposing that Islamic reformists who assert that western secularism is a manifestation of *jahiliyya* should be understood, not as upholders of an archaic traditionalism at odds with the West, but as one of several instances of dissent from various religious and humanist perspectives in both Europe and the colonized world that have emerged since the seventeenth century to challenge claims to universal rationality associated with the scientific revolution and the disenchantment of the world (Bilgrami 2014:297).³ By arguing that Muslim characterizations of the secular world as *jahiliyya* are a modern form of critique, Bilgrami recognizes that Muslims are full participants in conversations that envision alternative modernities in which secularism does not necessarily entail disenchantment.

But Bilgrami's argument is not intended to address the range of Muslim perspectives on *jahiliyya* and the problem of otherness. For some Muslims *jahiliyya* may well be a signifier of dissent against the commodification of the world, or it may be the foundation of an illiberal or radical political agenda against a secular or non-

³ As Charles Taylor has argued, the way our modern secular age treats the world as an inert mass is not the inevitable result of a universally valid mode of rationality (Taylor 2007). Rather, it is the product of a specific historical moment when the Protestant religious establishment aligned itself with forces that aimed to manipulate the world for profit. Given the particularity of this orientation, despite its universalizing and exclusionary claims to rationality, it is still possible to imagine and inhabit a rational world imbued with value, regardless of whether the source of that value is grounded in something called "religion," humanity, *gaia*, or other source.

Islamic world. For other Muslims, especially those growing up in places like New York or London, the idea of *jahiliyya* may be used to reject a kind of enchantment of the world associated with the cultural practices of one's ancestors and even one's parents in order to more fully belong to a professional, educated social world. Yet others identify states of *jahiliyya* within themselves as part of an ethical project to become better Muslims or better human beings. These layers intertwine and inform each other and interact with concepts of self that have their roots in Enlightenment and Protestant Christian assumptions about the self and the world. How Muslims living as minorities use the idea of *jahiliyya* can be taken as clues to their experience of themselves and the world around them, providing some of the ontological and epistemological foundations of identity and otherness.

Here, I would like to foreground how *jahiliyya* marks otherness vis-à-vis the fully Muslim in one way or another, whether through separation from God or social separation. I argue that this idea of otherness does not necessarily separate Muslim from non-Muslim or an Islamic society from a secular society. In contrast to terms such as *ummah* (community), which distinguishes Muslim from non-Muslim community, or *kafir* (infidel, unbeliever), which is used to denounce those who refuse to believe, *jahiliyya* does not divide the world into East and West or even create a clear divide between Muslims and non-Muslims. Yet *jahiliyya* is manifest in a variety of ways in the modern world that point to alternative experiences of space, temporality, knowledge, self, and the other that cannot be mapped directly onto the empty spaces, homogeneous time and the universalized rationality of secular modernity. To create a mapping of *jahiliyya* in the modern world, I trace

expressions of *jahiliyya* in utterances of Muslims of South Asian background living in the US and the UK, including Salman Rushdie's articulations of otherness and *jahiliyya* in his infamous novel *Satanic Verses*.

Interpreting *Jahiliyya* in Islamic History: Passion and Ignorance vs. Cosmopolitanism and Rationality

Jahiliyya has always been used in several distinct but related and often overlapping ways, and traces of this history can still be seen in diasporic usage. In the Qur'an and Islamic traditions, the term was used to distinguish the temperaments and other attributes of pre-Islamic tribal Arabs from the disciplined piety of Muslims. In local usage across the Islamic world, *jahil* means "ignorant person" and has been used as a marker of social status, education, and maturity within Muslim communities, sometimes in ways that can be detached from a direct association with Islam.

The word *jahiliyyah* appears four times in the Quran.⁴ Though the word is generally used to mean a state of ignorance across languages such as Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu, Islamic scholars Ignaz Goldziher and Toshihiko Izutsu argued that this gloss does not capture the Qur'anic meaning. Izutsu pointed out that in the Qur'an,

⁴ The four verses in which it appears (with various English translations) are:

- (3:154) Then, following misery, He sent down upon you a feeling of security, a slumber overcoming a party among you, while another party cared only for themselves, thinking false thoughts about God, thoughts fit for *jahiliyya* (the *Age of Idolatry*).
- (5:50) Do they truly desire the law of *jahiliyya* (*paganism*)? But who is fairer than God in judgment for a people firm of faith?
- (33:33) Remain in your homes, and do not display your adornments, as was the case with the earlier *Jahiliyya* (*Age of Barbarism*).
- (48:26) For the unbelievers had planted in their hearts a zealotry, the zealotry of *jahiliyya* (*lawlessness*).

as in pre-Islamic literature, *jahl* usually stands opposed, not to *`ilm* (knowledge), but to *hilm*, which Izutsu glosses as “the moral reasonableness of a civilized man, including such characteristics as forbearance, patience, clemency, and freedom from blind passion” (Izutsu 1966:28). *Jahl* referred to “the implacable, reckless temper of the pagan Arabs” (Izutsu 1966:28). The state of *jahiliyya* in the Qur’an is thus a complex of personality traits associated with a tribal orientation involving blind passion, arrogance, and lust for women, an orientation that inspired violence and blood feuds. The Muslim, by contrast, submitted to a higher law.

Though Izutsu downplayed *jahiliyya* as ignorance, the idea of uncontrolled passions and ignorance are closely intertwined. The fourteenth century historian of philosophy Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406 CE) addressed and elaborated the contrast between a tribal orientation associated with *jahiliyya* and a civilized temperament, which he associated with the cosmopolitan Muslim. In his usage, ignorance and passionate intemperance are closely associated and are at the core of human nature. According to Ibn Khaldun, "A human is an essentially ignorant being [*jahil*] who acquires knowledge," Ibn Khaldun (1968, vol. 2: 887).⁵ Ibn Khaldun identified a continuum between pre-Islamic or tribal Arabs and Muslim, urban elites with the implication that this orientation still existed and stood in tension with the ideal characteristics of the Muslim. Islam was thus conceived as fostering the

⁵ According to Brinkley Messick, Ibn Khaldun was summarizing an earlier philosophical tradition which presumed that human nature is grounded in a condition of ignorance (Messick :643).

development of a more “civilized” kind of person (Ibn Khaldun 1989).⁶ He used the term *assabiyyah* to describe the bond of cohesion in a social group. *Assabiyyah*, manifest as strong loyalties and passions, decreases as knowledge increases, civilization advances, and the size of social groups increases. As tribal *asabiyyah* declines, a more cosmopolitan social orientation takes its place. Tribal *asabiyyah* was associated with *jahiliyya*, and cosmopolitanism with Islam.

Though Goldziher and Isutsu downplayed “ignorance” as a gloss of *jahl* in pre-Islamic and Quranic usage in favor of passionate excess associated with tribalism, the sense of *jahiliyya* as ignorance has been and continues to be an important aspect of its use across the Muslim world. Brinkley Messick has shown how Muslim jurists and scholars such as the 11th century al-Juwayni divided society into 2 categories, the ‘*ulama*’ (scholars, those with knowledge) and the *juhhal* (ignorant people, plural of *jahil*) and elaborated the characteristics that distinguished these categories (Messick 1988:642).⁷ According to Messick, the noted early nineteenth century Yemeni scholar/jurist Muhammad al-Shawkani (1969:39-40) stated that “rural people who reportedly did not carry out such Islamic ‘pillars’ as prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage...have the legal/moral status of people of the pre-Islamic age of ignorance, known as *al-jahiliyya* (from the word

⁶ “In the works of medieval philosophers like Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Khaldun, the expansive conception of the righteous Islamic umma is often contrasted with more narrow communities of sentiment. The latter are described as being based on “mere” ties of blood or language, and are designated with the term ‘*asabiyya*’ (Brykczynski 2005 cites Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 20-25)

⁷ Basing his research on both ethnographic fieldwork and historical sources, Messick was asking the Gramscian question of how an elite ideology and the Islamic textual tradition constituted the implicit worldview of ordinary people in a late twentieth century Yemeni village (Messick 1988:639).

jahil). They were beyond the reach of both the state and the faith, and thus of shari`a" (Messick 1988:648). Imagined spatially, the tendrils of the Islamically enlightened state extended through rural spaces of *jahiliyya* but did not transform them.

South Asian Muslims articulate a similar distinction between a Muslim elite and those who are lower status and ignorant, though it plays out in somewhat different terms in this postcolonial environment, where the links among Islamic scholarly knowledge, the law and administration of the state, and the social elite were ruptured by the colonization of India.⁸ Nevertheless, this everyday use of the concept *jahil* remains. In both South Asia and Yemen, "*jahil*" is used to characterize children, who are in some respects wild or animal-like, lacking maturity and discernment. Similarly, rural people and those who don't understand the proper practice of Islam are considered *jahil*. Thus, when in the 1970's, I was doing fieldwork in Lahore, Pakistan, in the company of an educated young woman, we found that many of the women we were talking with in her neighborhood did not know the 5 pillars of Islam. My friend characterized these women as *jahil*. By this she meant, not that they were disbelievers, but that they were simply ignorant and uneducated.

Though living in an urban neighborhood, they retained the ignorance associated with their village background. They also carried out practices that from her perspective were not properly Islamic, such as being afraid of the evil eye and wearing amulets, because of what, from the perspective of the `ulama, could be

⁸ Some of the effects of this rupture can be seen in Maududi's reinterpretation of *Jahiliyya*, as I discuss below.

called a “quasi-childlike condition of ignorance” (Messick 1988: 647). These are practices that have been a focus of reform and debate in South Asia since the decay and fall of the Mughal Empire, when Muslim scholarly elites responded to this crisis of authority and challenge to Islam with efforts to strip Islam of foreign influences and local corruptions.

***Jahiliyya* and Secular Virtues**

“*Jahiliyya*” and “*jahil*” do not always separate Muslims from non-Muslims. In some settings calling someone *jahil* may actually be separated from orientations to Islam altogether and refer instead to a lack of modern knowledge associated with secular science. This seems to be the case for diasporic Pakistanis living in the US with whom I spoke about *jahiliyya*. The state of *jahiliyya* refers to specific practices associated with the illiterate and gullible but does not include those who are non-Muslim and educated. This distinction reproduces a form of social order that had been maintained even during colonial rule in South Asia, when the British replaced Muslims at the top of the system. According to one young man of Pakistani background, the British colonizers may have been oppressive (*zalim*), but they were not *jahil*. He emphasized that Americans are also not *jahii*. Yet most Americans are entirely ignorant of Islam. In this usage, those who are *jahil* are ignorant of worldly knowledge.

Yet a framework for distinguishing the educated and the ignorant can be carried over from Islamic to secular knowledge in ways that often blur a distinction between them. In a case from secular Turkey, anthropologist Stale Knudsen has

noted in his ethnographic studies of the fishing industry a pervasive distinction that is made between the educated elite with scientific knowledge of the modern fishing industry and those who are uneducated, rural or lower class, and are viewed as less “rational.” In such cases, knowledge (*ilm*) is associated with cosmopolitanism, in contrast with the local perspective and loyalties of the “ignorant” or *cahil*. Though a reflection of modern Turkey’s secular separation of education from Islam, this distinction between knowledge and ignorance is not far from its use within the Islamic tradition. Turkish fishermen closely associate Islamic and scientific/practical knowledge, as in this quotation from a Black Sea fisherman: “As the most *cahil* may emerge from among the educated, there may emerge from those who cannot read at all real alims that can see the truth.” Knudsen explains: “While this saying was originally a critique directed against the religious scholars...the fishers use the very same proverb to shatter the authority of the secular scientists” (Knudsen :223).

Another context in which *jahiliyya* does not mark a divide between secular and Islamic values is the arena of Muslim women arguing for women’s rights, drawing an analogy between violence against women and the treatment of women in pre-Islamic Arabia. UK writer Shelina Janmohamed wrote: “Of the horrors of the Jahiliyyah that Islam eradicated, some of the most salient are about women. Women had little control over their lives. They could not control property. In fact, wives themselves were treated as chattel and were inherited by their sons when their husbands died. Worse, young girls would be buried alive by their fathers, to prevent shame falling on the men. In fact, the latter tradition was so abhorrent to

the nascent Islam that it is even mentioned in the Quran with disgust” (Janmohamed 2010). Janmohamed, stating explicitly that she used the term *jahiliyya* only after careful consideration, applied it to events in Saudi Arabia and India.: “a Saudi tribal court ruling that a women’s marriage could be forcibly broken against her will but in line with her family’s wishes. In India, a Muslim woman raped by her father-in-law was forcibly divorced from her husband because the judge ruled that... the rape nullified the marriage.” She also highlighted a case in Turkey where a father buried his daughter alive as particularly evocative of the Quranic characterization of *Jahiliyya*. She asserted that the Muslim world needs a wake-up call. In this case, Janmohamed is locating today’s *jahiliyya* squarely in the Muslim world. She does point out that women are treated badly in all societies, citing a World Health Organization report as evidence for these atrocities. But this cite explicitly aligns her concerns with those of the World Health Organization and, by extension secular governmental order. Her criticisms of the treatment of women echo those of secular feminist organizations.

These examples gives us a clue about why *jahiliyya* is not usually used to mark off an absolute boundary between the Muslim and the *jahil* and why “ignorance” and the other aspects of *jahiliyya*’s meaning—excess, lack of control, and passion—cannot be separated, despite Goldziher and Izutsu’s emphasis on the latter in their analyses of the Qur’an. Secular education, like Islam, teaches restraint and rationality. Islam is associated with emotional discipline, knowledge, and cosmopolitanism. The close association of Islam with cosmopolitanism and

education suggests a continuity between the educated Muslim's identity as an educated person and as a Muslim.

From this perspective, *jahiliyya* is a state of ignorance and marks social status and a lack of both secular and Islamic education. This marker of distinction carries into diasporic settings to designate social status among Muslims and to delimit what is properly Islamic. A well-educated young American man of Pakistani background reflected with me about *jahiliyya* as he had heard it used in his family in terms that linked illiteracy, *jahiliyya* and some practices associated with shrines and Sufism:

The knowledge is there, but you haven't acquired it. You are either less of a Muslim or less of a person. It's typically used in derogatory contexts. So you have the people who are considered *jahil*, who go and frequent these *pirs* who know nothing about religion. They're pretty much soothsayers. They're considered to be wise men. They work some type of modest miracle for them, and people begin to believe in them. And others call these unholy holy men "*jahil insan*" [ignorant person].

He then described a case of this he had seen on TV, an exposé of a *pir* who was writing amulets (*tawiz*): "he was writing down things that looked like Arabic but was really just scribbles." This story emphasized the link between ignorance, the inability to read and write, and unIslamic practices.

In this usage, what he regarded as foolish practices at shrines or things his grandmother does are *jahil*. *Jahiliyya* does not distinguish the Muslim from the non-Muslim but rather designates a form of ignorance that unselfconsciously retains a kind of enchantment of the world associated with magic and superstition. His

perspective embraces scientific methods and an understanding of Islam that is consistent with that of his educated parents and the diasporic Pakistani community they belong to. For the educated Muslim, *jahiliyya* marks off a world of modern rationality shared by Muslims and non-Muslims of a certain cosmopolitan orientation.

Jahiliyya as a Political Condition

Just as many Americans in the early twentieth century feared that Catholics could never be fully American because of their loyalty to the Pope in Rome, some in Europe and North America today fear that Muslims will never fully integrate because they consider the West unIslamic: a place like pre-Islamic Arabia, where ignorance, idolatry, lawlessness, and excess prevailed.⁹ Unfortunately, this politically fraught interpretation of *jahiliyya* as a barrier to full integration reinforces an image of the Muslim as threatening other who cannot live in a secular society without seeking to undermine it.

The idea that *jahiliyya* should be used to characterize the non-Islamic, even anti-Islamic nature of the secular West and of secular governments in Muslim-majority countries is one that became popular among several politically influential Muslim writers born at the beginning of the 20th century. They recast the concept of *jahiliyya* in their efforts to resist colonialism and what they viewed as corrupt postcolonial politics. These activists included the Indian founder of the Jamaat-i-Islami, Abul Ala Maududi (1903-1979); the Palestinian founder of Hizb ut-Tahrir, Taqiuddin al-Nabhani (1909-1977); Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood founder Hasan

⁹ Thanks to Thiel Sunier for pointing out this parallel.

al-Banna (1906-1949); and Egyptian author and Islamic theorist Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Their writings and the movements they founded have become the ideological inspiration for Islamic revivalism and activism in a variety of forms, including efforts to recreate an Islamic state as a way of protecting Muslims from the corruptions of *jahiliyya*.¹⁰

All of these thinkers saw *jahiliyya* as a contemporary condition: according to Muslim brotherhood founder Hasan al-Banna, for example, Muslims would be living in *jahiliyya* if they failed to follow God's orders, even if they fulfill the requirements of the five pillars" (AbuKhalil 1994).¹¹

For Abul Ala Maududi, many aspects of Islamic tradition itself fell into the condition of *jahiliyya*. Like many Muslims at that time, Maududi grew up under colonial rule in India and was profoundly affected by the loss of Muslim sovereignty and the imposition of foreign rule and education. He attributed the loss of Muslim power to the decay of Islam since the time of the rightly-guided caliphs. Unlike most Muslim scholars, he rejected centuries of Islamic tradition as deviations associated with *jahiliyya*, viewing the whole of Islamic history as a "getting together of Islam and un-Islam in the same body politic" (Maududi 1972:27). He wrote approvingly of the medieval Islamic scholar ibn Taymiyyah, who had experienced the imposition of foreign rule on Damascus by the Mongols. Though the Mongols were Muslim, ibn Taymiyyah had denounced them as *jahili* because they maintained their non-Islamic

¹⁰ Hizb ut-Tahrir's focus, for example, has been the reestablishment of the Caliphate as a way of combatting the *jahiliyya* that makes it impossible for Muslims to fully immerse themselves in Shariat (Azad 2015).

¹¹ Abu Khalil cites Hasan al-Banna's *Majmu`at Ras'il al-'Imam-i-sh-Shahid Hasan al-Banna* (The Collection of Letters by the Martyr Imam Hasan al-Banna (Beirut Dar al-Andaluz 1965, p. 142).

legal system and symbols of power instead of Sharia (Kepel 1985:194-196).

Maududi saw a parallel in his time, as he watched the Muslim leaders of Pakistan established a secular government based on a foreign model.

Maududi saw himself and others as renewers of Islam (*mujaddid*) and set about to establish a true Islamic government by founding the Islamic political party Jamaat-i-Islami in India, and then becoming a major political force in postcolonial Pakistan as the head of the Jamaat-i-Islami. He set out to reconstruct Islam by turning to the Qur'an and Sunnah as a guide for all aspects of life and government. Though the Jamaat-i-Islami also functioned as a political party within a government based on a British model, he viewed it as the only properly Islamic organization in South Asia because of its aim to establish Sharia as the basis for a viable government, thereby replacing *jahiliyya* with Sharia. Maududi saw his project as "a binary battle between Islam and *jahiliyat* (the 'other' of Islam)" (Irfan Ahmad 2009: 50). He did point out that some Westerners believe in God, at least intellectually, though they "unconsciously behave as atheists and materialists in practical life" because of the power of materialism as a system (Maududi 1963:7). His approach to purifying Islam effectively intensified efforts among Muslims themselves to draw a sharp boundary between Islam and forms of "un-Islam" or "ignorance" (*jahiliyya*) that claimed to be Islamic.¹² Though Maududi's usage posits a sharp boundary between Islam and un-Islam, this boundary does not reproduce the divide between East and

¹² One of the most dramatic and successful of these boundary-drawing efforts was Maududi's campaigns to have Ahmadis legally defined as non-Muslim in Pakistan, which he began in 1953 with his role in inciting anti-Ahmadi riots in Lahore. Ahmadis were legally defined as non-Muslim in 1974, and subsequent legislation has made it illegal for Ahmadis to carry out any activities that would make them appear to be Muslims.

West that characterized Orientalist thought. Instead, it divided Muslims from others who also considered themselves Muslim.

Having himself received a western style education and explicitly rejecting the “materialist” system of the West, Maududi’s understanding of *jahiliyya* certainly fits with Bilgrami’s emphasis on resistance to disenchantment. His vociferous efforts to reject most of the Islamic traditions associated with the Sunni ulama, including the 4 major schools of fiqh, sects such as the Shia and Ahmadis, and Sufism, can be seen as efforts to create a modern, rational Muslim subject.

Most recent literature on *jahiliyya* has focused on its use by Sayyid Qutb, whose writings have been credited with being one of the major inspirations for various forms of Salafist Islam and have influenced the terms of current debate among Muslims.¹³ Qutb’s usage had intellectual roots in Maududi’s work.¹⁴ For each of them, *jahiliyya* is used to describe a state of moral corruption and materialism instead of a particular stage in history.

Sayyid Qutb also saw the battle against *jahiliyya* as a core political project. According to Ellen McLarney, the reinvigoration of the concept of *jahiliyya* came out of the Egyptian cultural renaissance of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century (al-Nahda), which was a revival of Islamic learning, rationalism, humanism, and literature: “there is an added sense of an awakened Islam having a dimension of

¹³ See, for example, Cheema 2008; Khatab 2006; Rubenstein 2010; Shepard 2003, which focus directly on Qutb’s concept of *jahiliyya*, as well as broader analyses of Qutb’s work and influence such as Euben; Kepel; Haddad; and McLarney.

¹⁴ Qutb also attributed his use of the word *jahiliyya* to the Indian Deobandi scholar Abul Hassan Ali Nadwi (Euben 2009:108).

enlightenment that is the cure for all jahiliyya.”¹⁵ Qutb started out as a secular-oriented writer and became an influential educator in the Egyptian government in the 1940’s. He became disillusioned with western secularism during a 2-year stay in the United States, a stay which played an important role in shaping his understanding of *jahiliyya*. When he returned to Egypt, he wrote a book on his impressions of the US, which he considered “primitive” and shocking. He considered Americans as a people “numb to faith” and joined the Muslim Brotherhood on his return to Egypt.¹⁶ Defining *jahiliyya* as “One man’s lordship over another” (Qutb Milestones : 26), he was emphatic that any situation in which human judgment and authority replace those of God is *jahiliyya*,¹⁷ though in contrast to Maududi, he was remarkably vague about precisely how God’s authority would yield a specific form of government. Qutb called for an organized movement based only on submission to God to battle against this *jahili* system (Qutb Milestones :26). Most of Qutb’s writings were composed in prison, and his focus on *jahiliyya* as the opposite of Islam became sharper over time, to the point that he came to see that there was virtually no more Islam in the world, even among Muslims, a position

¹⁵ Ellen McLarney, personal communication, 3-19-2015.

¹⁶ He had been close to Nasser, whom he had thought would work with the Muslim Brotherhood to establish an Islamic government following Nasser’s 1952 coup. But when Nasser’s anti-Brotherhood secular nationalist orientation became clear, Qutb participated in an assassination plot and spent most of the rest of his life in prison before being executed in 1966.

¹⁷ The principle of "no governance except that of God" is borrowed from sura Yusuf, ayat "Verily governance (al-hukm) only rests with God." According to AbuKhalil, this slogan was used by the Kharijites in their wars against the caliphate of 'Ali (AbuKhalil 1994: 679-80).

similar to Maududi's and Nadwi's (Shepard 2003:534). According to Shepard, only Qutb's last writings are characterized by an extreme dichotomization of Islam and *jahiliyya* and "the idea that *jahiliyya* has become so omnipresent that Islam no longer 'exists.' It is also only in these writings that *jahiliyya* becomes a central category of Qutb's thinking, a forceful symbol that pulls the various strands of this thinking together" (Shepard 2003:534). In his book *Milestones*, which he wrote in prison during the 1960's, Qutb felt that *Jahiliyya* now controls the world as a living and active organization (Qutb 26), a powerful force that contaminates all Muslims. Drawing the parallels between the time of the Prophet and today, he wrote:

We are also surrounded by *Jahiliyya* today, which is of the same nature as it was during the first period of Islam, perhaps a little deeper. Our whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws is *Jahiliyya*, even to the extent that what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy and Islamic thought are also constructs of *Jahiliyya* (Qutb :6).

This orientation, shared by Maududi and Qutb, located *jahiliyya* within the individual as well as the political environment.

The idea of Muslims of the modern world being steeped in a state of *jahiliyya* also served as the foundation for Taqiuddin al-Nabhani's agenda of reestablishing Islam's lost Caliphate through the founding of the transnational organization Hizb ut-Tahrir. Nabhani had been associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, but felt it was too accommodating to Western civilization. He argued that only when the Caliphate is restored would it be possible for Muslims to overcome the process of

degeneration. Hizb ut-Tahrir has been very influential among diasporic Muslims and has been perceived as a particular threat by secular governments in places such as Britain, though, as Hasan Azad has argued, members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Britain advocate peaceful means for achieving the political goal of reinstating the Caliphate, thereby transforming spaces of *jahiliyya* into sites where Muslims can develop properly.¹⁸

The effects of an overarching concern with purifying or perfecting Islam can clearly be seen in Pakistan's current political climate, as Naveeda Khan has described (Khan 2012). *Jahil* has become an epithet that is no longer applied only to the uneducated and unsophisticated. A prominent recent example occurred among guests on a television news talk show who were debating the international bestseller *I am Malala*.¹⁹ The accusation of *jahil* erupted during an intense dispute focused on the position in Pakistan of Ahmadis, who have been legally declared non-Muslim, thanks to Maududi's political pressure beginning in the 1950's. When Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy, a physics professor at Qaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, objected to the assertions of two other well-known guests Orya Maqbool and Ansar Abbasi that Malala's book was offensive toward Islam by pointing out that Maqbool had misquoted Malala's statements about Ahmadis and about Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Abbasi called Professor Hoodbhoy a "*jahil*" for supporting Malala. (blogs.tribune.com.pk...Oct 30, 2013). In response, Hoodbhoy walked off the show.

¹⁸ See Hasan Azad for an examination of the accommodations that HT members living in diasporic settings have made between this political agenda and their educational efforts to shape diasporic subjectivity .

¹⁹ This book was written by a young Pashtun woman who had been shot by fellow villagers for defending girls' right to an education.

As evidenced by posted comments, some of the the Pakistani public found “*jahil*” especially jarring in this context, since Dr. Hoodbhoy is a highly educated man and well-respected scholar. “*Jahil*” would more typically be used to dismiss the opinions of an uneducated person whose opinions are considered “traditional” or unmodern. But in this case, it was used to assert the limits of a specific interpretation of Islam that has gained political influence in Pakistan.

One of the effects of both Maududi and Qutb’s rejection of Islamic traditions, the ulama steeped in those traditions, and sufi leaders, has been divisive controversies and bitter splits among Muslims, often framed in terms of *jahiliyya*. They set the stage for accusations of *jahiliyya*, distinguishing Muslims, not in terms of level of education from the perspective of an intellectual elite, but by rejecting even Islamic scholarly tradition itself as *jahiliyya*. These splits have carried over into diasporic communities. A young imam of Bangladeshi background in New York, who was trained abroad as a Deobandi scholar before returning to the US, expressed to me his concern about the appeal of Maududi’s writings in his Bengali-American community. He felt that Maududi’s orientation fosters rigid boundaries, creating arguments and disputes within the Muslim community, dividing it rather than bringing it together by criticizing others with the label Jahili, as Maududi had done.

The fluidity of the boundary between secularity and salafism is reflected in the comments of a young Muslim scholar who grew up in the UK and is closely involved with Muslims of a range of orientations in London. He laid out the politics of Jahiliyya as he saw it:

Salafis/Wahhabis in the UK tend to use the term a lot, as I'm sure you're aware, to refer to their own 'past' before they 'came to Islam'. Also, they will often refer to other, non-practicing Muslims as *jahil*. For example, someone who is basically 'not practicing' their religion is considered a *jahil* - which, in this case, is relatively innocuous; whereas people of other Islamic inclinations - such as Sufis - are called *murtad*, that is, people who have left Islam/apostated - which is a much more damning state to be in. And then there are the ubiquitous *bidi*'s: the people of innovation (*bid'a*), which is a category that virtually everyone who is not a Salafi/Wahabbi can fall under.²⁰

For Salafis/Wahhabis, *jahiliyya/jahil* can thus be seen within an economy of *takfir*-related terms: *jahiliyya* does not produce a sharp boundary between self and other, as accusations of apostasy and deviation do.

Community boundary maintenance associated with the concept of Jahiliyya can be seen at a salafi-oriented mosque in North Carolina which I have visited and which some Muslims commented to me was unfriendly to outsiders. As reported by Jamillah Karim, an Imam at this predominantly African American mosque drew on the concept of *jahiliyya* in a sermon with respect to the practice of giving advice to others (*nasiha*): "Some people look down upon those who give *nasiha*: 'Who does he think he is? Who does she think that she is?' Do we want to remain in Jahiliyya? If we get rid of the best among us, what are we left with? Trash" (3-31-00, quoted by Jamillah Karim 2000). As Karim pointed out, this was a mosque where the predominant style of women's dress was Arab-style *hijab* but some women wear the

²⁰ Personal communication.

very different, indigenous African American style of modest dress, which is common in other African American mosque communities. This is an instance of an effort to reform Islamic practice, with Arab-style dress representing pure Islam. In this case, a state of Jahiliyya can only be avoided by adopting a narrowly defined “pure Islam” that defines most African American Muslims as *jahil*.

Jahiliyya, the Diasporic Self, and Secularism

While the approaches of Maududi, Qutb, and other reformist thinkers have given rise to significant, even world-transforming, political activity, their focus on the individual Muslim’s orientation to Islam as a crucial foundation of a true Islamic society has also been associated with an emphasis on subject formation as an ethical project, which has been influential among many moderate Muslims. Qutb offered guidelines for this ethical project, describing the psychological states produced as the individual wrestles with *jahiliyya*:

When he stepped into the circle of Islam he would start a new life, separating himself completely from his past life under ignorance of the divine law. He would look upon the deeds during his life of ignorance with mistrust and fear with a feeling that these were impure and could not be tolerated in Islam!

With this feeling, he would turn toward Islam for new guidance; and if at any time temptations overpowered him, or the old habits attracted him, or if he became lax in carrying out the injunctions of Islam, he would become restless with a sense of guilt and would feel the need to purify himself of what had

happened, and would turn to the Qur'an to mold himself according to its guidance.

Thus there would be a break between the Muslim's present Islam and his past *Jahiliyya*, and this after a well thought out decision, as a result of which all his relationships with *Jahiliyya* would be cut off and he would be joined completely to Islam (Milestones 5-).

Both Qutb's writings and Maududi's place considerable emphasis on the individual's need to overcome inner *jahiliyya* through education. They have served as the inspiration for organizations such as the Pakistan-based al-Huda, founded by Farhad Hashmi (who was involved with the Jamaat-i-Islami before establishing al-Huda). Al-Huda offers online courses focused on teaching women to read and interpret the Quran for themselves. Muslim women in the US and Europe as well as in Pakistan take this course. Women I met in New York who were involved in the course speak of struggling with *jahiliyya* in all areas of their lives. I found their descriptions quite similar to what I have observed among self-consciously pious Muslim women of Turkish and South Asian backgrounds in both Germany and North Carolina. Based on their research among diasporic Arab and Turkish women who are associated with Islamic organizations and involved in efforts to practice a "pure Islam," Jeanette Jouili in France and Schirin Amir-Moazami in Germany noted that the women they worked with articulated quite similar concerns and orientations. To quote one of Jouili and Amir-Moazami's summaries of these women's orientation: "They considered committing themselves to the study of their religion a

basic means of cultivating their faith in order to effectively transform their lives. Islamic knowledge should immerse the believer in a permanent atmosphere filled with divine presence, which the women experience as mostly nonexistent in secularized societies” (Jouili and :621). They also think in terms of Jahiliyya: “The bad state of the *umma*, denounced by reformists, was a result of the “*ignorance*” of the Muslim populations, a condition captured by the Islamically connoted term *jahiliyya*. In this perspective, the dissemination of a “pure” Islam, detached from all traditional deviations, can re-establish the glorious state of past Muslim civilizations” (Jouili : 626) Like Qutb and Maududi, they find *Jahiliyya* in the world around them and within themselves, though they do not conclude that they must cut themselves entirely from secular society and, in fact, seek knowledge from all sources: “To search knowledge, “even if it is in China” (a reference to the sayings of the Prophet, often taken up by the interviewees) proves to be one of the central elements in their life” (Jouili : 628).

Some might say, if the Prophet Muhammad is understood to be the ideal embodiment of Islam (submission to God) as the Perfect Man (*insan-i-kamal*), then the extent to which one finds oneself or another to be *jahil*, in a state of *jahiliyya*, is the distance one is from being fully Muslim, no matter what one’s understanding of the ideal Muslim is.

Salman Rushdie’s Jahilia

Given Salman Rushdie’s notoriety in the Muslim world, it is perhaps surprising that in *Satanic Verses*, Rushdie has offered a rich depiction of *jahiliyya*. Ayatolla

Khomeini's 1989 fatwa calling for the assassination of Salman Rushdie has made it difficult for scholars and critics to consider his book *Satanic Verses* in terms other than a clash between free speech and blasphemy/Muslim sensibilities. As Rushdie himself has said, it is a shame that Muslim immigrants have focused so little on his insights into the migrant condition.²¹ Considering the novel through the lens of *jahiliyya*, what shape does this *jahiliyya* take in Rushdie's imaginings of diasporic space?

The novel dwells on experiences of otherness understood, like *jahiliyya*, as a condition of being, an inner state, and a place. The novel's two central characters fall abruptly into a diasporic condition by plummeting from an exploding plane onto London. They manifest their otherness in dramatic ways. Chamcha, who manages the diasporic condition by seeking to blend in, erupts bodily into the satanic form of a goat. Gibreel Farishta captures the disorientation of the immigrant experience through his immersion in a world of dreams and his central role as the angel Gabriel in a dream of "Jahilia," a city that is transparently Mecca during the early days of the Prophet's struggle against polytheism.

By calling the city that intrudes into Gibreel Farishta's dreams "Jahilia" instead of a variant of "Mecca," Rushdie makes the problem of *jahiliyya* a central

²¹ Akeel Bilgrami has urged readers "to awaken to the novel's significance for one's own goals as ordinary non-fundamentalist Muslims" rather than simply dismissing it as offensive and expressed regret that the *fatwah* prevented ordinary Muslims from recognizing Rushdie's sympathy for the condition of devout but non-fundamentalist Muslims (2014b: 269), though not suggesting that "Muslims will or should agree with Rushdie in his wholesale religious skepticism or his ideas about how the religious impulse is better gratified in our world by art and literature than by orthodox religion" (Bilgrami 2014b: 272).

element of the novel. The most controversial elements of the book, especially his depiction of the Prophet's temptation to compromise with the polytheists by uttering the "Satanic verses," are set in Jahilia.²² Jahilia is a city of corruption, excess, and violence. It is depicted as a place when the monotheism of Abraham has been supplanted by tribalism and a profusion of local deities.

Rushdie brings himself and his own position as a migrant in a foreign land into the dream of Jahilia by giving a significant role to his namesake "Salman the Persian" (one of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad), stressing his foreignness and giving him the role of scribe who slightly alters the words of revelation to test his suspicion that Mahound's inspiration was not always directly from God. Similarly, Rushdie in his role as scribe alters and recasts the role and reputation of Salman the Persian. He draws parallels between England and Jahilia: Rushdie's "Mahound" (also the name used by medieval Christian writers to vilify the Prophet) is a businessman, and Rushdie mentions Mahound's first wife's business savvy. Details such as these emphasize the parallels between the characteristics of

²² According to some early Islamic traditions that were later discredited, the "Satanic verses" were uttered by the Prophet Muhammad when he mistook the words of Satan for those of God. He was later corrected by the Angel Gabriel. The relevant passage of the Quran is Chapter 53, verses 19-23: "So have you considered al-Lat and al-'Uzza? And Manat, the third - the other one? Is the male for you and for Him the female? That, then, is an unjust division. They are not but [mere] names you have named them - you and your forefathers - for which Allah has sent down no authority. They follow not except assumption and what [their] souls desire, and there has already come to them from their Lord guidance." (Sahih International translation, <http://quran.com/53#0>). "When Muhammad reached the end of this verse, Satan cast into his mind two verses praising the deities and according them a place in his doctrine: 'Indeed, they are as high-flying cranes! And, indeed, their intercession (with God) is hoped for!'" (Ahmed 1998:69). Shahab Ahmed suggests that this incident was commonly known among early Muslims.

this mythical place and Thatcher's England, where several of the novel's chapters are set. The worlds of India and even of England are not disenchanting, but teeming with miracles, to the extent that Gibreel says of the English train he rides to London, "Gibreel paid a visit to the toilet and here, too, a small series of prohibitions and instructions gladdened his heart. By the time the conductor arrived with the authority of his crescent-cutting ticket-punch, Gibreel had been somewhat soothed by these manifestations of law, and began to perk up and invent rationalizations" (Rushdie :196).

Like Qutb and Maududi, Rushdie sees *jahiliyya* as a human condition that pervades all spaces ranging across England, India, and even Mecca during the time of the Prophet. They, too, treated all of Islamic tradition with skepticism, yet were not rejected as disloyal to Islam (though many did question the delegitimation of tradition). In contrast to Qutb and Maududi, Rushdie rejects the rules and over-reliance on authority that he sees as characteristic of the fundamentalist impulse. Rushdie is against absolutism, fundamentalism, critical of all the rules that fill the later chapters of the Quran. For Rushdie, these are also aspects of *jahiliyya*.

Yet he does not simply reject Islam in favor of secularism. For Rushdie, God is present in his absence. Teetering on the edge of disenchantment—exemplified by a magic lamp with a gun in it and other images that play with the undecidability of truth—Rushdie excoriates fundamentalisms and illusions of perfection by emphasizes the power of love and human connections—a sufi element, perhaps the sort of spirituality that Charles Taylor poses as an alternative to disenchantment. In an interview in 1989, the year after the publication of the novel, Rushdie suggested

that, "The Satanic Verses is not, in my view, an antireligious novel. It is, however, an attempt to write about migration, its stresses and transformations, from the point of view of migrants from the Indian subcontinent to Britain" (ref). Rushdie has explicitly identified himself with a character in his novel *Midnight's Children* who loses his faith: "I, too, possess the same God-shaped hole. Unable to accept the unarguable absolutes of religion, I have tried to fill up the hole with literature" He seeks "the truth of the tale, the imagination, and of the heart" and does not see *Satanic Verses* as an anti-religious novel (Rushdie 1989). I agree with Sara Suleri that Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* is a deeply Islamic book. According to Sulari, "Rushdie performs an act of curious faith: his text chooses disloyalty in order to dramatize its continuing obsession with the metaphors Islam makes available to a postcolonial sensibility....[It] perversely demands to be read as a gesture of wrenching loyalty, suggesting that blasphemy can only be articulated only within the compass of belief" (Suleri 2005: 191). The novel thus does not stand on the side of the disenchanting world of modern secularism characterized by Bilgrami and Charles Taylor.

Conclusion

Based on its occurrence in the Quran, *jahiliyya* in its broadest sense could be taken to mean the absence of Islam (submission to God), to put very concisely Maududi's and Qutb's use of the term. Broadening this interpretation further and we could suggest that, from the perspective of being Muslim, *jahiliyya* is a manifestation of otherness. It can be used to point to the disenchantment of the modern world associated with the rise of a specific orientation to science and

secularism associated with British imperialism and capitalism, as Akeel Bilgrami has suggested. Maududi and Qutb may well have seen *jahiliyya* in such terms. But many diasporic Muslims continue to see *jahiliyya* as a world of superstition and excess associated with the Islam of their parents, an Islam that continues to be contaminated with ignorance and superstition. They have embraced the idea that “Islam is not a culture” as a way of integrating more smoothly their lives as Muslims with their secular lives in Europe and North America, rejecting much of traditional Islam as *jahiliyya*. Finally, we have Rushdie’s depiction of *jahiliyya*, perhaps the most articulate of all. Rushdie presents a constant tension between a disenchanted world measured by market values and one that is teeming with miraculous events and temptations. *Jahiliyya* encompasses both.

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