

Living in Time: Muslims and the Modern Time-Crunch

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In today's frantic world, many of us have a vague longing for a simpler life; more time for ourselves and the people we love. Of all the challenges that modernity presents to a religious person -- secularism, empiricism, individualism, scientific-rationalism, or the notion of progress -- none is as immanently debilitating as the subtle slicing up of our time. An old Arab saying goes, "Time is like a sword, if you don't cut it, it cuts you." Working eight to ten hours a day, seduced by the latest cannot-be-missed television or internet broadcast, pursued by cell-phones and text-messages wherever we go, and with our pulses pounding from high doses of sugar and caffeine; the sword of modern time is flaying us alive.

Philosophers have long realized that time is not immutable. Orthodox Muslim theology (Asharism) expounded a notion of time as a succession of distinct, created (and vanishing) moments. As one writer summarizes the doctrine, "In every instant, God is creating the world anew; there are no intermediate causes. God can be thought of as continually creating the universe from nothing ... Of itself, creation is discontinuous; it appears continuous to us only because of God's compassionate consistency."^[1] In other words, it is only God who is al-Qayyum, the Self-Subsistent; and it is only by His merciful gift of qayyumiyya, sustainment, that He allows us to construct the idea of linear time: "He is the One who rendered the sun radiant, and the moon a light, and He designed its phases that you may learn to count the years and to calculate. Allah did not create all this except for a specific purpose" (Qur'an, 10:5). Thus between the eternal, absolute time (dahr) in the hands of God and the perishing moment of human time (waqt), Allah allows us to mark linear time (zaman) as a merciful stabilization for our lives in this world.^[2] This sort of constructed time is not a purpose in and of itself, only a means to an end; and repeatedly Allah urges us to not place our hopes in it, not to depend on it. Indeed, the End of Time is as near to us as our deaths, itself immanent in each moment.

Modernity's "time-crunch" is further evidence of the inherently subjective, created nature of time. To put it simply, time is speeding up. This acceleration is perhaps the best way of getting a handle on modernity and how it affects the lives of ordinary Muslims around the world today. According to one UC Berkeley Professor, modern man has everywhere been engaged in a "passionate search for the assessment of modernity's foundations which are thought to rest in its typical sense of experiencing temporality."^[3] Acceleration best defines this particular temporality of the modern: "Modernity does not give us space for stagnation or relaxation," says a Norwegian professor: "The basic principle of modernity is dynamization. And this dynamization consists of three forms of acceleration that move each other forward: technical acceleration, social acceleration, and the acceleration of the life tempo."^[4]

The theorists of modernity do not seem to agree as to what actually causes this acceleration. Some ascribe it to money: "Money symbolizes the availability of merchandise and services. And by this it affects people's temporal consciousness & money is essentially an accelerator of social processes," says Jeff Kintzelé, who believes Benjamin Franklin's adage, "Time is money," should actually be reversed to say, "Money is [or controls] time."^[5] Another writer targets new

forms of media, which become "'time-machines' establish[ing] us within a kind of impatience," a blur of mini-reports and sound-bites that leads to the "compression of time."^[6] One might also target modern means of communication and travel which compress space. Actually meant to save us time, such technology speeds up time by keeping our words and bodies hurtling through space, depriving us of the moments-in-between needed for solitary contemplation or real social presence.

But it would be narcissistic to assume that we, by our self-indulgent manipulations of the material world, actually control the flow of time. "The sons of Adam inveigh against Time (dahr), but I am Time, and in My hand are the night and the day."^[7] Muslims should not be surprised by modernity's acceleration of time. The Holy Prophet Muhammad warned that towards the End to Time, "Time will become short, knowledge will decrease, tribulations will appear, stinginess will become common and turmoil [killing] will increase." He is also reported as saying, "The Last Hour will not come before time contracts, a year being like a month, a month like a week, a week like a day, a day like an hour, and an hour like the kindling of a fire."^[8] The acceleration of time is thus a Divine affair. While Muslims have largely distanced themselves from precise Doomsday predictions in comparison to their Christian counterparts, we would not be presumptuous in noticing that the idea of time acceleration is a striking similarity between the observations of the Prophet Muhammad 1400 years ago and today's theorists of modernity.

It is understandable why many "traditional" religions (those who were founded before modern times) have come to view modernity as an anathema. Muslims, however, need not feel alienated by modernity, even if the technological and social processes associated with modernity originated in non-Muslim lands. If the acceleration of time is indeed one the key conditions of modernity, it is surely God, not humans, who controls this time. The Muslim scholarly tradition contains frequent reference to the enlightened scholar or saint as being the "son of his time" (ibn waqtihi) who moves in step with his age. The true servant of God in this time must walk with the people of his time like the saints of any other time.

This embrace of the moment cannot be a nonchalant loitering on the bank of time's river. Muslims are not nineteenth-century Western romantics distancing themselves from reality through passionate objectification, as in Thoreau's celebrated adage, "Time is but the stream I go fishing in." Not only are we fishing for an entirely different eternity than was Thoreau (the Eternal, Active Being of God rather than simple duration), we are seeking our quarry by diving headlong into the flow of Time. Our plunge into time is defined by the practice of remembrance (dhikr), a wholesale abandoning of the self to recapture moments of eternity. Dhikr is thus beyond time. It recollects the eternal moment of each human soul's covenant with God. The paradox is that we must seek in time for something that is out of time. After all, this un-layering of the self through dhikr takes time!

- [1] Bowering, Gerhard "The Concept of Time in Islam." Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 141.1 (March, 1997): 59-60
- [2] Bowering, Gerhard "The Concept of Time in Islam." Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 141.1 (March, 1997): 61-62.
- [3] Palti, Ellias J. "Time, modernity and time irreversibility," Philosophy and Social Criticism 23.5 (1997): 27.
- [4] Rose, Hartmut "Modernity means acceleration," Interview with Lorenz Khazaleh, for Cultural Complexity in the new Norway. www.culcom.uio.no/aktivitet/timeandmodernity/rosa-eng.html
- [5] Kintzelé, Jeff. "Man, Money, and Time. Logic of Credit: Logic of Modernity?" Design Issues (1988).
- [6] Agacinski, Sylviane. Time Passing: Modernity and Nostalgia (translated by Jody Gladding) New York: Columbia University Press (2003): 168-169.
- [7] Hadith Qudsi on the authority of Abu Hurayra, reported in Bukhari.
- [8] Such hadith and related variations are reported by Abu Huraira, Anas b. Malik and others and are found in Bukhari, Muslim and Tirmidhi.