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Beauty Versus Ugliness

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Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) established the doctrines that Allah is beautiful and loves beauty (Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 131), that He is good and accepts only that which is good (Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 1686), and that He loves to see the effects of His blessings and favours on people (Jami' al-Tirmidhi, Hadith No. 2963).

This implies that since Almighty Allah loves beauty, He created everything perfect and beautiful. Moreover, He also wants His servants to do so, that is, to love beauty, be beautiful and generate beauty through words, deeds, character, garments, general outward appearance, and the cultural and civilisational creations of theirs.

In doing so, however, people must subscribe to and apply only the highest heavenly standards of goodness and beauty, without

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contaminating them with the effects of their intrinsic inadequacies, myopia and whims. It is on account of this that Islam abhors ugliness with all its physical and metaphysical dimensions and features. It does so, for example, as much in evil speech, disposition and conduct, as in ungodly elements of culture, art and architecture.

Through the infinite realm of aesthetics, Muslims are bidden to maintain the established supreme standards of beauty on earth. Islamic aesthetics in behaviour, manners, thought, culture, art and architecture is only an extension of the created and revealed heavenly artistic order, deriving therefrom its strength and identity.

External beauty is the theophany of inner beauty, just as external ugliness is a manifestation of inner defects and ugliness. Beauty lies at the heart of existence. It is not simply a subjective state existing only “in the eye of the beholder”.

Beauty is meant to be universal and ever-present. The Arabic most common word for beauty is “jamal”. However, related to the same word are the words “ijmal”, “jumlah” and “jamala”, which mean, respectively, “generalisation, totality, and to gather or accumulate to excess”.

Islam establishes that beauty is a human right and life’s standard thing. It is a necessity for the soul as the air we breathe and the food and water we consume are for the body.

Beauty is the rule and, at the same time, symbol and quintessence of goodness. Ugliness, on the other hand, is an anomaly and exception. It is equivalent to evil. In Arabic, the word “qubh” means both ugliness and evil.

Beauty is additionally associated with reality and its undeniable existence, and ugliness with unreality and nonexistence. Indeed, the ugliest thing is the mere absence and perversion of Truth, and the imposition of the invented and deceitful substitutes.

It is only man who can create ugliness. He does so when he turns his back on Heaven and its guidance, and becomes unable to find

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the correct course forward.

Another word in Arabic for beauty is “husn” (“hasan” is beautiful and “hasuna” to be beautiful). The word’s various derivatives attest to the above-mentioned point of beauty’s righteousness, absoluteness and totality. Some of the most important concepts derived therefrom are goodness and excellence (*hasan*), virtue and good deed (*hasanah*), kindness and good outcome (*husna*), benevolence and merit (*ihsan*), to do good and excel (*ahsana*), benefactor and doer of good (*muhsin*).

It goes without saying that beauty, goodness and Truth are indivisible in Islam. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Qur’anic term “al-muhsinun”, which is normally translated as “the doers of good”, can also be translated as “those enmeshed in beauty”. Hence, such Qur’anic idioms as “Allah is with the doers of good (*al-muhsinin*)” (al-‘Ankabut, 69), and “Allah loves the doers of good (*al-muhsinin*)” (al-Baqarah, 195), could likewise be understood and translated as “Allah is with those enmeshed in beauty” and “Allah loves those enmeshed in beauty”, respectively.

Beauty originates from the highest plane of the transcendent Presence, descending upon and engulfing the hearts of its devotees and servants. It targets the heart because the heart is not only the seat of emotions and piety, but also of intelligent faculties. With the heart, people understand and intelligently appreciate things and experiences, including beauty. As an essentially spiritual thing, beauty is most attuned to the dispositions and competences of the human heart and soul.

The eyes signify no more than a lower level in the hierarchy of means and capacities for knowledge as well as Truth acquisition and appreciation. Thus, in connection with comprehending and following Truth, the Qur’an says that it is people’s hearts by which they reason and learn wisdom, on the basis of the inputs of their ears by which they hear – and by extension, their eyes by which they see. Then the Qur’an affirms what the root cause of inappropriate visions and the lack of wisdom is: “For indeed, it is

The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said: "Verily, Allah does not look at your appearance or wealth, but rather he looks at your hearts and actions" (Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 2564). Clearly, in Islam, on the whole, the forms and mere appearances are secondary to the spirit and substance of things, playing second fiddle to them. Form follows substance and Truth.

The goal of human life is to beautify the soul through goodness and virtue and to make it worthy of offering to God Who is the Beautiful. That is, the goal of human life is to be beautiful, live beautifully, return to the Beautiful, and be admitted into Paradise which is the highest representation of pleasure and beauty, the culmination of its bliss being beholding the Beauty of the Face of the most Beautiful and most Beloved.

Plato also said that beauty is the splendor of Truth.

The age of ugliness

Following the advent of modernity as a ubiquitous way of life and modernism as its philosophical wing, things dramatically forever changed. It was a time when, generally, all religious, moral and traditional principles and values were rejected (nihilism), when sensual self-indulgence became a norm (hedonism), when nothing as regards the ultimate Truth was considered either known or knowable (agnosticism), when man and his scientific and technological legacy became deified (humanism), when nature became desacralised and turned into a mere utility (naturalism), and when religion became secularised and God either humanised or relegated to the ambit of absurdism.

That was a time when beauty as a gift of God – to borrow Aristotle's term – was compromised, and when ugliness (the absence of true beauty), at once as a concept and sensory actuality, took over and started to reign supreme. Such was the case because once the spiritual, moral and intellectual mutinies came to pass,

Truth became defiled and forsaken by the modern man once and for all.

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What remained was the ubiquity and abyss of doubt, uncertainty and faithlessness, constituting anything but a conducive environment for breeding and enjoying authentic beauty. As John Ruskin, the leading English art critic of the Victorian era, said: “Nothing can be beautiful which is not true.”

One wonders if a person does not believe in God and has no connection with Heaven, what his understanding, source and criterion of beauty could be.

Indeed, one of the greatest offences against Divinity was committed when Protagoras, a Greek philosopher who lived around the 5th century BC, declared that “man is the measure of all things”. That precept denoted that people, rather than God or any revealed moral law, are the ultimate source of ontological significance and value. Protagoras is thus regarded as the first humanist.

However, humanism as a systematic philosophy or a belief system did not come to pass until the European Renaissance, a period between the 14th and 17th centuries. New humanism standards of beauty, which centred exclusively on man and his existential contexts, were then born.

The celebrated masterpieces of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Giovanni Bellini, and others, were not as much beautiful as they represented the watersheds and benchmarks in the cultural, plus ideological, transition from the Middle Ages to modernity. Such masterpieces were priceless, just as any other sacred symbols and objects are priceless. The mentioned polymaths are regarded as icons of Renaissance and, at the same time, “prophets” and harbingers of modernity.

Notwithstanding its many great contributions to the wellbeing of humankind, modernity – whose precursor was Renaissance- eventually destroyed authentic beauty. Nonetheless, in order to gratify the insatiable human thirst for beauty and the beautiful, modernity provided its own alternatives, especially in the

fields embodied unconsecrated worldviews and value systems, they, more often than not, served up either distorted and misleading versions of beauty, or diverse forms of outright insolent ugliness.

There is even a “cult of ugliness” which is associated with the arrival of modern art and its rejection of all classical beauty ideals and its embracing of ugliness, i.e., relative and subjective beauty. “Modern art’s impulse was to destroy beauty”, was a verdict of Barnett Newman, a leading American artist of the 20th century.

This “cult of ugliness”, according to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “has now also spread to the Islamic world, which knows many mosques that are in no way behind their Western counterparts in ugliness (a large number of horrendously ugly churches). They do not, however, represent Islamic art or thought but simply external influences.”

Cities and their architecture

As a result, our modern cities are ugly because they have been converted into concrete jungles. Their forms and functions provide evidence of man’s separation from nature – yet his very self – and his professed domination over it. Cities became the physical loci of all the crimes associated with unrestrained materialism, consumerism and hedonism as modernity’s foremost creeds.

In such milieus, there is less and less space – and tolerance – for traditional and religious forms of architecture and art. Cities became necropolises of traditions and man’s innate spiritual and moral innocence.

There is nothing left in the modern man with which he can genuinely beautify and regenerate his cities and the whole of his built environment. Everything he does, by and large, is superficial, hollow, short-term and boring. Concurrently, though, everything seems deceptively glossy and, of course, vainglorious, reflecting the character of the maker.

Man's life is increasingly becoming mechanised and programmed,
with little thinking and less emotions. Substance is as good as

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nonexistent. Beauty is a false glitter, and is only skin or surface-deep.

No wonder that at the core of the manifesto of modernist architecture reside such dogmas as, for instance, “less is more” (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe), “ornamentation is crime” (Adolf Loos), “the house is a machine for living in” (Le Corbusier), and “form follows fantasy” (the slogan of deconstructivism or new modern architecture, which was opposed to Louis Sullivan’s slogan “form follows function”).

Art

Our modern art is also essentially ugly because it is either rendered for its own sake, needing neither justification nor any particular end to serve, or it expresses but the personal feelings and visions of artists.

In the former scenario, art, inspired by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, upholds “the autonomy of aesthetic standards, setting them apart from considerations of morality, utility, or pleasure” (Encyclopedia Britannica). In the latter scenario, art is subjective, individual and eccentric. It is often associated with the creative and powerful rendering of personal confusion, skepticism, bohemianism and ambiguous abstraction.

Either way, art oscillates from one extreme to another, deviating from and betraying its fundamental purpose and mission. In that case, art emerges as a form of “ingenious, interesting and charming ugliness”. It is nihilistic and subversive.

For example, it is sometimes said about Pablo Picasso, one of the greatest artists of the 20th century, that he was just a big show-off most of whose work is inherently trivial. Each case represents a unique piece of autobiography. To understand Picasso’s works, one must regard them as “anecdotes or snapshots of a particular moment in his life” (Germaine Greer).

At best, excellent art excellently and ingeniously poses greatest life questions. Bad art does so poorly. And questions without answers

goes.

Popular culture

Furthermore, our modern everyday life activities and passions are impressed with the *elan vital* of ugliness because they are infused with the spirit of popular culture, which is an upshot of modernity and its sacrilegious philosophical penchant.

Popular culture was always linked with lower classes and poor education. Its rise could be traced back to the emergence of the distinct and somewhat influential middle class spawned by the Industrial Revolution as the first complete manifestation of modernity. Popular culture instantaneously became affordable and accessible.

Popular culture is often contrasted with the official or high culture of the upper class (aristocracy and nobility). It is likewise regarded as frivolous and “dumbed down”. Some yet perceive it as one-dimensional, consumerist, sensationalist, immoral and corrupt. It is perhaps best represented in the domains of such cultural products as arts, music, film, television, radio, literature, fashion, sports, advertising, print media and internet culture.

In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, relentless scientific discoveries and technological dynamics created in people a sense of perpetual expectation, hope and insatiability. People wanted more of everything, and that those things be always better, faster and brighter. There was so much in life to be experimented and enjoyed by everybody. Opportunities were limitless and on hand.

Life was not to be wasted on lethargy, traditionalism and religious conformity. It was to be lived to the fullest. Excessive and abstract intellectualism, as well as religiousness, were not welcomed either.

Suddenly, people felt about life as though they were kids in a candy store. It was as if the rising middle class was bent on taking matters into their own hands. The irony was that in terms of serving as authority and a point of reference, the intellectual and cultural elites now became treated by the masses in the same way as the

elites had treated the traditional and religious authorities. Things came full circle.

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The elites and their high culture became more and more bereft of influence and credibility. Due to their centuries-old inability to solve mankind's perennial ontological quandaries, and lead to the right path, the elites (including religious leaders) were perceived as inadequate, yet failures. The past and its traditions were ever more loathed and rebuffed.

The only solution was to live in the moment and for the self. As Friedrich Nietzsche put forth that in this world, we should live our lives to the full and get everything we can out of it. The only issue was how best to do that in "a godless, meaningless world". Beauty was only that which generated and enhanced people's hedonic and, to some extent, rational pleasures.

Consequently, pure philosophy, art and religion, as exclusive intellectual pursuits and potential behavioural compasses, were increasingly losing their sway and appeal in favour of the rapid advances of empirical science and technology. The latter was the source of every modernist legitimacy, including the questions of goodness and beauty, in that they were making everyone's life interesting and enjoyable.

Machines and gadgets were turned into objects of love and worship. As Bertrand Russel said: "Machines are worshipped because they are beautiful, and valued because they confer power." The same holds true insofar as all the other objects of people's biological needs and desires were concerned.

This explains, for example, why many people nowadays – especially youth – are addicted to, yet worship, their smart phones, allowing their gadgets to shape their lives. Rather than being in control, they found themselves controlled. As a result, smartphones became a symbol of popular culture and people's behavioural idiosyncrasy. Their ostensible trademarks are beauty, empowerment and relative affordability. They are windows to the world, self-determination and freedom.

Smartphones and the way people use them further stand for a microcosm of modernity's lack of spiritual and moral compass. It is

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obvious that people are both the culprits and victims of modern civilisation's spinning out of control, with popular culture being the arena of stars and main proceedings.

Popular culture soon developed into a prevalent and almost universally accepted phenomenon. It became part of the mainstream. High culture could not stem the tide of the former's growth and spread because the elites lived in ivory towers, even though, with respect to the actual value and substance, high culture fared no better than popular culture. In their own respective ways, they both personified and promoted untruth, uncertainty, nonconformity and loss of purpose and direction.

However, without right worldviews and proper orientations in life, those developments later proved detrimental for the whole of mankind and their planet earth. The results were out-and-out ugliness, repugnance and sin, which, in collaboration with other transgressions of the modern man, led to the destruction of personal moral values, the family institution, human relationships, and the harmony and order of nature.

The loss of beauty

Consequently, genuine beauty became all but extinct. It became a scarce luxury that could be enjoyed only by certain categories of people. It became most expensive. The global art market is estimated today to be \$64 billion worth (Gaby Del Valle).

Cultural and aesthetic junk was made available for the masses within the provinces of shopping centres, sports venues, mass media, literature, entertainment, fashion, dance, music, cinemas, cyber-culture and even education. The lowest of values were encouraged so long as there were happy takers (consumers), and the matters could be commercialised.

Everything was subjective and good enough, as beauty was "in the eye of the beholder". Beauty was banalised, trivialised and aimed principally for financial and other material gains. People were happy because they could express themselves and make their voices and

banal preferences heard. In terms of their vain and inconsequential life missions, the domain of popular culture proved an expedient

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medium for people's self-actualisation.

Ugliness thus was promoted in the name of beauty, backwardness and primitiveness in the name of progress and civilisation, ignorance in the name of knowledge and education, and wretchedness in the name of happiness. So much so that authentic beauty, both as an idea and palpable reality, was often openly despised and poked fun at. Chances are that it will soon join the grades of absolute Truth and virtue, which are neither deliberated, nor seriously pursued, by anybody.

Without a doubt, today's modern civilisation is predominantly junk. People own many things, but are in reality indigent. Living in the Information Age, they are educated, but ignorant, let alone wise. They talk so much to one another, but are bad communicators. They seem happy, but are discontented. They furthermore seem to be enjoying life, but are suffering.

Just as consuming much junk food destroys gradually our health and body, so does consuming junk components of culture and civilisation destroy our total being. It destroys our humanness.

This ubiquitous sentiment perhaps prompted Musa Ćazim Ćatić, a famous Bosnian poet of the early 20th century, to supplicate thus to God in one of his poems: "O God! Grant me a sense of beauty (and save me thereby)." ***

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