
Islam, iconography and the Taliban

The Taliban destroyed the Buddha statues at Bamiyan in the name of Islam. By so doing they betrayed their woeful grasp of Islamic theology, argues **Mohamed Hashim Kamali***

Islam is often considered an iconoclastic religion in which the representation of living things, especially the human body, is prohibited. The stark monotheistic doctrine that there is no creator but God has been taken to mean that creating pictures and sculpture, even as decorative art, is idolatrous and is, therefore, incompatible with belief in a transcendent God. But this distorts the Islamic position. The Qur'an indeed prohibits idol worship (XIV: 35; XXII: 30) but it does not speak against representation as such. God, of course, may never be objectified; the believer knows God only by His attributes, which are expounded in the Qur'an. Ninety-nine such attributes, known as the Beautiful Names of God, have been identified and are frequently cited in prayer and religious sermons. Anthropomorphism and personification of God clearly defies the Qur'anic declaration that "there is nothing like Him (XLII: 11)." But the Islamic attitude to representations of other kinds is more nuanced.

The liturgy of Islam and its attitude to icons is linked with the Ka'bah (literally a cube). According to Muslim legend, the Ka'bah was first built in Mecca by Adam. Then it was destroyed by the flood, and was rebuilt by Abraham. It is the "House of God," around which the chorus of the heavenly spirits circulates. When the Prophet Mohamed conquered Mecca in 628 A.D, he went first to the Ka'bah and rode around it on a camel. The pagan Arabs had girdled the area with 360 idols, one for each day of the lunar year. Touching these idols with his riding stick, the Prophet overturned them one after another, while reciting the Qur'anic verse, "Truth has come; vanity has vanished; in truth vanity is evanescent (XVII: 33)." He was then handed the key to the Ka'bah and went in. The inner walls were adorned with paintings executed by a Byzantine artist on the order of the Ka'bah's pagan masters. The paintings portrayed scenes from the life of Abraham and certain idolatrous customs. There was also a portrait of the Holy Virgin and Child. Protecting the icon of the Holy Virgin with his hands, the Prophet ordered that all the others be effaced. (The icon of the Holy Virgin was later destroyed by fire).

The Ka'bah is the only sanctuary in Muslim dogma that can be compared to a temple. It is called the "House of God"(bayt Allah), paradoxical as this may seem to the idea of divine transcendence. Muslims face the Ka'bah when they offer their five daily prayers, yet the Qur'an makes it abundantly clear that God does not dwell in the Ka'bah, but in all places, as well as in the innermost soul and centre of man: "to God belongs the east and the west, and wherever you turn, there is the Face of God (II: 115)." The interior of the Ka'bah is bare; it contains only a curtain, which oral tradition calls the "curtain of divine mercy." (The Holy of Holies in the Temple at Jerusalem, likewise a divine "habitation," was in the shape of a cube, like the Ka'bah). If the Ka'bah was the holy centre and heart of Islam, the idols that inhabited

it impeded the remembrance of God. Hence the destruction of those idols, and by extension, the putting aside of every image likely to become an idol.

But recorded history knows of no other instance where the Prophet Mohamed destroyed the image or monument of another religion. The teachings of the Qur'an favour mutual respect and coexistence with other religions. According to the Qur'an, the Prophet Mohamed told the non-believers "Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion (CIX: 6)." In another verse, the Qur'an declares, "Let there be no compulsion in religion (II: 256)."

Idolatry is repugnant to the dogma of Islam, but it is wrong to extend the same logic to decorative art, which is appreciated for its beauty and perfection. God speaks of perfection and beauty in His own creation (XXXVIII: 88) and encourages believers to appreciate and enjoy the beauty and comfort of which they have a share in this life (VII: 32; XXIX: 77). According to a saying of the Prophet Mohamed, "God is Beautiful and He loves beauty." The Prophet also said in a hadith that "God has prescribed beauty upon everything," which means that every one should strive to discover and realise beauty. To underscore the message further, the Prophet said, "God loves it when a worker undertakes a work and he does it to perfection." Perfection is manifest in artistic beauty and in human endeavour that seeks to achieve excellence. The pursuit of excellence is highly recommended at all times and places, be it in the home, in the neighbourhood or the mosque; indeed everywhere.

Certainly, early Islam had figurative art. There were plenty of pictures in royal courts and palaces of kings, artists, musicians, and sometimes of Sufis and mystics. Persian, Turkish and Afghan decorative art on paper, wall paintings, carpets and ceramics included not only calligraphy but also representations of animals and humans, and scenes from tales and folk romance.

Figurative and pictorial representation is not repugnant to Islam. It is repugnant only when it is motivated by idolatry. Statues and sculptures of human body forms are still uncommon in the Muslim household and environment, and Muslims would normally not face them when they perform their religious rituals. But since every ritual prayer begins with a silent declaration of intent (niyya), in which the worshipper dedicates his act of worship solely to God, there is little room for confusion. One often sees figurative and pictorial arts objects on display in Muslim households for their ornamental value. They have been accepted by general custom.

Custom ('urf) is a recognised source of law and judgement in Shari'a. When the community at large accepts a practice that does not contradict any of the clear injunctions of the Shari'a, it becomes permissible. Some Muslim jurists have, in recent years, issued verdicts (fatwas) declaring photography permissible for this reason. This is because photography has now become a ubiquitous practice among Muslims everywhere. Nor are there objections to using images and representations for a useful purpose, such as presenting them as evidence in a judicial dispute. This logic also applies to the exhibition of such images in art galleries and museums. Such exhibitions have become an integral part of the common experience of Muslims and are thus accepted by general custom in almost all Muslim communities.

The Taliban regime of Afghanistan, which proclaims itself the champion of Islam, and proposes to destroy the historical statues and monuments of Afghanistan, misinterprets both Islam and the realities of Afghanistan. No one with a secure grasp of Islamic fundamentals can defend this fanaticism in Islam's name. Islam forbids the destruction of priceless national

wealth, as long as it is not conducive to idolatry. The statues of Buddha in Bamiyan and elsewhere have no living worshippers in Afghanistan; they have existed for over 1300 years and no one has heard of any Muslim becoming a Buddhist, or idol worshipper. Now the Taliban have destroyed historic monuments with the incredible claim that otherwise they could have enticed future generations of Muslims to idol worship.

Nor is that all. To protect the people's property and wealth is one of the five essential interests (al-daruriyyat al-khamsa) of Islam (alongside life, faith, intellect and family). To preserve, protect, and promote these values is a government's Islamic duty. Islam requires the Taliban to protect and preserve the national heritage and wealth of Afghanistan. Even if the relics in question are seen as Buddhist idols, Islam does not impose a duty to destroy them unless there is proof that they have been turned into an instrument of idolatry. My personal experience of having been brought up in Afghanistan tells me that idol worship is so remote from the mores of Afghans that the Taliban claim is specious beyond belief.

According to a hadith-cum-legal maxim of Islamic law, "acts are to be judged by their intentions." Another legal maxim proclaims, "human affairs are judged by their purposes." When the Prophet destroyed the idols of the Ka'bah it was for a specific purpose, which he made known at the time. Spurious claims, such as the one brought by the Taliban government, achieve nothing for Islam nor for the long-suffering people of Afghanistan.

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