

The Syndrome of the Pulpit

By

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*I*n the history of religion, the Pulpit had always been reserved for the chosen (or self-acclaimed) priestly few. The Pulpit is not simply an elevated podium in a House of Worship, but commands a psychological veneration to those who speak on it. Thus its symbolism warrants attention. From the Pulpit we hear the expositions of the Commandment, the formulations and articulations of the Law, the (super)commentaries of the Text, the reminder of the Hereafter; the pronouncement against those that have been condemned and the imaginative sensate promises for the pious in the next, alongside the impious' torments as divined for them.

When we speak of the syndrome of the Pulpit, we refer to the psychological dimension that it creates and projects. The Pulpit has its specific function in ceremonial congregation, but not necessarily a common purpose in its use. It could be the place to echo both the joy of celebration and/or the triumph of cerebation.

If an 'enlightened' custodian claims to be the saviour who could free men from the clutches of fear, then speaking from the Pulpit will not only elevate his status as the majesty of reason but also make him to be the guide for mankind.

Yet it is naïve to assume that all those ascending the Pulpit are enlightened. In some cases, the Pulpit is the pedestal to admonish men to strive better while in others it's a launchpad to sow the seeds of animosity, hatred and bigotry; not unlike the fascist's grandstage. The syndrome will prove fatal once its otherworldly traditionalism and chauvinistic exclusivism mutated into a poisonous anti-intellectualism and moral relativism, all sanctified in the name of piety.

In medieval times, the congregation might be moved by the very presence of the grandeur of the princely Pious since the feudal milieu enamoured it zealously. If Ibn Aqil, the famous Hanbalite scholar, once asked: “How can hearts be responsive to the preacher who saunters to the Pulpit in sumptuous garment, a courtesan of kings?”, then in contemporary context, it would be fair to ask further: “How can hearts be responsive to preachers who ascend the Pulpit but speak none of the living concern of the adherents, except to drum up their imagination on the abysses of hell and the chanceries of heaven? What more when the revered sight of the Pulpit is accentuated with the air of absolutism?”, thus rendering any questions, doubts or even clarifications as ever possible.

The Syndrome as a Psychological Dimension

Understanding the psychological effects of the Pulpit warrants us to make a symbolic interpretation and meaning of certain acts surrounding the subject. First, a Pulpit is never sanctified in a vacuum. It must have a devoted congregation who sat and diligently listened to The [De]Liberation. Their heads tilted upwards, and their hearts open up to receive the prescribed and the proscribed (although some others are in slumberland).

The decorum specifies that all must listen attentively and dissent has neither place nor avenue. Implicitly too, all must accept the pronouncement, for doubt means a departure from the grace of the congregation. The oral and aural effects are the hallmarks of the event. But an exchange of thought, the liberty of questioning and the registering of dissenting views are never part of its service. The finality of the [dis]course is made absolute since distinction could hardly be made between the views of absolutism and the Vision of the Absolute. As written text is uncommon in such oral/aural deliberation, countering the reference and rethinking of what had been deliberated is an arduous task, if not as something unthought-of.

Most importantly the syndrome, when stabilised does not require the Pulpit to function or be present physically. Its psychological domination can be resurrected and translated in other domains. In various discussions or dialogues, with its nomenclature as prime forums, symposiums, conferences and the likes, we see this syndrome at work, and

invariably, at its best. And worst, when it is garbed with intellectualistic cum holistic postures, the syndrome is at its multiplying incubation. The opening of the mind to question and explore are circumscribed, for these are deemed as subversions, only to be quarantined to the darkest pit of condemnation. When this happened, the syndrome surely has a deleterious effect on our immunity against corruption and despotism. Our sense of humanity is at its most vulnerable stage.

Indeed, the consequences of the psychological effects of the Pulpit are hardly explored – if not a taboo, or worse, a heresy. Here we are neither desacralising the function of the Pulpit nor leveling all the learned candidates who deliver upon it as belonging to one league. Our reason and morals demand that we should be concerned of the effects on the consciousness that the Pulpit could generate and incubate, regardless of the subjective intentions and proclamations of those who stand on it.

The way out to mitigate the negative effects of this syndrome is to properly diagnose the situation. A healthy mind, soberness of reason, stability of faith and the agility to accommodate are traits that all learned candidates should possess before ascending the Pulpit. In history, the anarchic mind has rampaged the Pulpit while the mediocre mind has sanctioned the dispensation of ignorance from it. The task of the noble mind then, as in the past and present, is to always remind us that those who ascend it must first have the will to descend their pride for truth. Still many of us failed in doing so or are simply uncomfortable to raise this fundamental question before the person ascending the Pulpit. This, in essence, is the syndrome of the Pulpit whereby legitimate questions are never posed for the sake of the congregation's bliss or fear of its wrath, perhaps even both.

The Pulpit in History and Future

In imperial Islam, history testified that worldly Princes has ascended it to uphold their royalty or to edict scanting attacks against their rivals, in as much as those enlightened has delivered the eloquence of the Message.

But it will be interesting to note that history also shows that The Beloved Messenger did not speak from the Pulpit (or created one) not unlike the biblical prophets or the masters of perennial wisdom. He was a Teacher who spoke and touched the heart of those around him from an earthly level and spoke on worldly matters. Although he delivered the Commandment, he was always ready to answer the questions posed; even doubts and dissents were entertained. Amidst these, he showed great compassion, patience and lovingness. These are the very traits that, if the syndrome of the Pulpit predominates, will never manifest.

It is apt to reflect upon the following maxim: “Prophets rule the minds and bodies of nobles and the crowd; kings rule the bodies of nobles and the crowd; the wise rule the minds of nobles, and the preacher rules the minds of the crowd.” In our time, the last statement dominates our religious life. Yet we may still hope for the enlightened rule of the mind, and so blessed we are. But never should we acquiesce to the rule of corruption and despotism, especially in the realm of ideas. As Ibn Rushd, the rationalist philosopher once said: “There is no tyranny on earth like the tyranny of priests.” Allowing tyrants of any sorts to ascend the Pulpit spells a disaster that no civilised community can afford; to guard against it is our duty and rights.

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