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## Be Crazy with God . . .

*Bā Khudā Dīwāna Bāsh o Bā Muhammad Hoshiyār*  
*Be crazy with God, and be careful with Muhammad*

I have long known this Persian hemistich. Recently, while thinking about this essay, I discovered it had variants, with *Mustafā* (lit. Chosen; an epithet of the Prophet) or *Payambar* (Prophet) instead of *Muhammad*. In one form or another, the saying is several centuries old, perhaps a millennium. The earliest reference two kind Iranian scholars provided goes back to the book *Tamhīdāt* by ‘Ainul Quzat Hamadani, one of the martyrs of Sufism who was executed at Baghdad in 1132 and whose writings, according to the late Prof. Annemarie Schimmel, were very popular with the Chishti sufis of India. I have, however, no knowledge of the origins of this binary. The hemistich I have known most likely originated as a piece of prose, and only later someone altered into a line of verse. Was there ever a companion line? I don’t know. Only this one line was what I infrequently heard as I was growing up.

Most likely it was our Uncle Fareed who brought it up. He was the most well-read among the male elders in our extended family; he also had a gift of gab. I loved his visits and his winding comments on whatever took his fancy that day. He was wont to quote the above verse whenever the subject of the Ahmadi came up in his digressions. “*Bā Muhammad Hoshiyār*,” he would reiterate, underscoring his displeasure at the Ahmadi belief that there were several kinds of “prophets,” including the lesser kind that could come to mankind even after Muhammad, “the Final Prophet.”

Frequently I also came across the verse in books or articles relating the aftermath of the Khilafat Movement. Many would mention the notorious book *Rangīlā Rasūl* (The Libertine Prophet) and the assassination of its publisher Rajpal at the hands of a Muslim who couldn’t bear any insult to someone he so revered. The authors would quote the line as an admonition to remember: “Be careful with Muhammad.”

Needless to say, the verse made an appearance again in the months after Salman Rushdie’s novel, *The Satanic Verses*, hit the news. It was repeatedly quoted in Urdu columns and editorials that condemned the author and the book and supported the edict issued by Imam Khomeini. It made an appearance in English too. Shabbir Akhtar used its second half for the title of his book on the scandal, calling it *Be Careful with Muhammed* (1989).

What never came up in those writings or in Uncle Fareed’s digressions was the fact that the emphatic admonition in the second half, “Be careful with Muhammad,” was preceded by an equally forceful command: “Be crazy with God.” In fact, the two statements shared

a single imperative: *bāsh* (Be!). You might say, one balanced the other, having—as a cultural imperative—one and the same force.

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The idea of “being crazy with God” has been around for a long time, particularly among Sufis and poets in Muslims lands. South Asia is no exception. Here is an example of such “craziness” as narrated—admiringly—by the poet Mir Muhammad Taqi “Mir” (d. 1810) in his autobiography, *Zikr-e Mīr*:

[Once there was a severe drought in Moses’ time.] When people began to die, they came to him and said, “Moses, please tell God that it has not rained and that no creature alive can bear such extreme hardship.” ... Moses went up Mt. Sinai and made the petition. The divine response was: “There is a destitute man of confused speech lying in the ashes at a certain bath—his crazy words used to give me much pleasure. But for some days now he has not raised his head skyward and uttered those words. The coming down of rains depends on his loosening his tongue again.”

Moses immediately hurried to the bath, where he found the man—that Bearer of Love’s Burden—lying in the ashes, wrapped in a dark blanket. ... When their eyes met, the man asked, “What brings you, Moses, to this dunghill?” ... “There has been no rain,” Moses replied, “And no prayer seems to have any effect. All life is threatened. When I petitioned God, I was told that it was your falling silent that had caused the drought. Now winds wouldn’t bring clouds, nor would clouds shed any rain, until you speak again in the manner you did before.” . . . The man replied, “Moses, you don’t know that trickster. You have not given him your heart the way I have. ... His smallest gesture can totally confuse you. I never let him lead me down that path. On the other hand, I now risk becoming an infidel if I do not obey his prophet. For it is said: ‘Be crazy with God, but be careful with a prophet.’”

Then that Prisoner of Absolute Love ... turned his face heavenward, and spoke in his special manner: “O Embodiment of deceit! O Enemy of my heart’s peace! Till yesterday, the clouds, winds, and rain obeyed your command—now suddenly they have become *my* slaves? And it is I now who orders the clouds to gather, and the rain to fall? But then, you are always right, aren’t you? ... Come, come—stop your tricks. Take pity on your creatures.” He continued in that manner only a few moments when suddenly a strong wind brought piles of dark clouds, and a torrential rain started.

Another, more well-known story of that nature comes from Rumi (d. 1273), several centuries before Mir, in his great *Mathnawi*. It too involves Moses, the first lawgiver in the Abrahamic tradition of religions. Here is an abbreviated version:

Once, in his wanderings, Moses came upon a shepherd, and heard him saying: “Where are you God? I cry to be your servant so that I may mend your shoes and comb your hair. So that I may clean your clothes, rid them of lice, and bring you a bowl of milk to drink. So that I may press your tired feet when you lie down to rest, and look after you if you ever fall ill. If I only knew where you reside I would bring you milk and butter mornings and evenings, together with some cheese and bread.” ...

Hearing these words, Moses was horrified. “What blasphemy!” he thundered, “Is it any way to address God? Stuff your mouth with cotton. You think you are talking to one of your uncles? God is beyond any need, and no place or corporeal body bounds him. Do you realize your blasphemy could have enraged him? A woman might be pleased if you called her ‘Fatima,’ but address a man in that manner and you might get stabbed.”

The shepherd was devastated. “Moses,” he cried out, “you have sewed up my erring mouth. I now burn in shame.” Then, tearing off his clothes, he fled into the wilderness.

Immediately a revelation came to Moses: “Why did you separate my servant from me? I sent you to bring my creatures closer to me, not to distance them further. Do not create distances. I gave each creature its own nature, and its own way to communicate. What sounded evil to your ears was praiseworthy coming from his lips. You thought it was poison, but to me it was the sweetest honey.”

So what do the two stories teach? For one, they direct one’s attention to a God who created all creatures great and small, and whose favors were not exclusive to any particular cohort of human beings. But much more importantly, they instruct us to appreciate the mystery—the mystery of profound paradoxes, even contradictions—that perforce must surround any human conception of God. Remove that mystery, and there would not be ample scope for the incalculably diverse humanity to find its place and express its diversity in any scheme of things involving God. And if in the process of discovering his or her place the greater scheme of things, an individual human being appears to be imprudent—nay, impudent—vis-à-vis God, so be it.

Consider the story narrated about Rabi’ah of Basra (d.801), the first and foremost woman Sufi, who was one day seen in the streets carrying a burning brand in one hand and a jug of water in the other. When asked what she was up to, she replied, “I shall set fire to the delights of Paradise and pour water on the fires of Hell, so that human beings may love God for his sake, and not out of fear or greed.” More than a thousand years later, Ghalib (d. 1869) repeated the same sentiment to improve God’s scheme of things as found in the prevalent faith:

*Tā’at meñ tā rahe na May-o-Angbīñ kī Lāg*  
*Dozakh meñ le ke dāl do ko’ī Bihisht ko*  
Will someone please throw Paradise into Hell?

Obedience shouldn't be for wine and honey.

He also boldly corrected us about the meaning of Faith:

*wafādārī ba-shart-i ustawārī asl-i imāñ hai*  
*mare butkhāne meñ to ka'be meñ gāro birahman ko*  
Consistent fidelity is the core of Faith, and so  
If a Brahmin breathes his last in a temple, bury him at Ka'ba.

Altaf Husain Hali (d. 1914) lovingly tells a delightful anecdote concerning Ghalib. "One night the Mirza was lying on his cot in the open, looking up at a sky full of stars. Noticing their apparent disarray, he remarked, "Anything done willfully (*khudrā'ī se*) is often ungainly. Just look at the stars. They are scattered haphazardly. There is no design or pattern. But who can object? The King is His own Authority (*khud-mukhtār*)." A century or more later, Jaun Eliya (d. 2002) echoed the same, but more bitterly:

*Haasil-i-Kun hai ye Jahān-i-Kharāb*  
*Yahī mumkin thā itnī 'Ujlat meñ*  
You said "Be!" and the Wasteworld appeared.  
What else could such haste produce?

It is little recognized but among all Urdu poets, Iqbal (d. 1938) was the perhaps the most avid practitioner of the "Be crazy with God" sentiment. Apart from his famous "*Shikwa*" (Complaint)—it brought him severe denunciations when it was first published in 1909; available in a fine translation by Khushwant Singh (Oxford, 1981)—Iqbal has many other remarkable poems where he seemingly takes liberties with God, and acts, in his own words, like an "impudent slave" (*banda-i-gustākh*). Consider the many poems in which Satan appears as the major protagonist. The most elegant and eloquent of these is titled, "Gabriel and Satan" (*Jibrīl-o-Iblīs*), in which Satan, cast out from the heavens, still claims superiority over angels. Iqbal's Satan makes the claim by declaring that it was his blood that added color to Adam's otherwise monochromatic tale, and that it was he who set in motion the chain of events we now call History. Satan concludes by declaring that he continues to prick in God's side like a thorn, while Gabriel and other angels do nothing except endlessly repeat: "He is God. God is He."

*Maiñ khaṭaktā huñ dil-i-Yazdāñ meñ Kāñṭe kī tarah*  
*Tū faqat Allāh Hū, Allāh Hū, Allāh Hū*

In another Urdu poem titled "The Mullah and the Paradise" (*Mullā aur Bihisht*), Iqbal opens, "I was there and couldn't restrain myself // when God ordered the Mullah to Paradise;" he then goes on to point out how Paradise could not possibly suit the Mullah, for it was a place free of conflict and argumentation while the Mullah relished only discord and strife. The poem does not tell us God's final decision, but we can guess what Iqbal had in mind. Then there is a short Persian poem, conceived as an exchange between God and Man, which lays out in no uncertain terms the almost coequal creative role Iqbal conceives Man to play in God's world. He also gives Man the last word.

### God

I made the world from one dust and water;  
You turned it into endless separate nations.  
I gave dirt the strength of the purest steel;  
You forged it into swords, guns, and spears.  
You took your axe to the tree in the garden,  
And constructed a cage for the singing bird.

### Man

You created night; I made the lamp.  
You created clay, but I the bowl.  
You made deserts, mountains, and wild spaces;  
I filled them with gardens, orchards, and parks.  
It was I, who ground rocks into mirrors,  
And converted poisons into sweet elixirs.

Perhaps the most audacious of Iqbal's poems of that nature is a three-poem sequence, in which Vladimir Ilyich Lenin arrives, posthumously, before God. After briefly acknowledging the error of his disbelief while still alive and the truth of what he was finally faced with, Lenin asks God a question that had always bothered him on earth:<sup>1</sup>

Oh, of what mortal race art Thou the God?  
Those creatures formed of dust beneath these heavens?

He then explains his dilemma:

Europe's pale cheeks are Asia's pantheon,  
And Europe's pantheon her glittering metals.  
...  
In high-reared grace, in glory and grandeur,  
The towering Bank out-tops the cathedral roof.  
What they call commerce is a game of dice:  
For one, profit, for millions swooping death.

After more in the same vein, Lenin concludes:

Omnipotent, righteous, Thou; but bitter the hours,  
Bitter the labourer's chained hours in Thy world!  
When shall this galley of gold's dominion founder?  
Thy world Thy day of wrath, Lord, stands and waits.

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<sup>1</sup> All excerpts from this particular series of poems are from V. G. Kiernan's, *Poems from Iqbal* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 114–121. Kiernan, sadly, left out the "Angels' Song."

Apparently God had not been aware of all that had happened to His creation. But the angels had been, for they immediately sing out, unasked, and basically confirm Lenin's observations. At which, God commands them into action:

Rise, and from their slumber wake the poor ones of My world!  
Shake the walls and windows of the mansions of the great!  
Kindle with the fire of faith the slow blood of the slaves!  
Make the fearful sparrow bold to meet the falcon's hate!  
...  
Find the field whose harvest is no peasant's daily bread—  
Garner in the furnace every ripening ear of wheat.  
Banish from the house of God the mumbling priest whose prayers  
Like a veil creation from Creator separate!

God concludes by describing the new world as a place of deceptions (*kārgah-i-shīsha-garāñ*, lit. a glassmakers' workshop), for which the angels must prepare the Eastern poet—they must teach him the "Protocols of Madness" (*ādāb-i-junūñ*).

These poems by Iqbal are now seldom included in prescribed textbooks. Nor do his votaries among the Urdu journalists of Pakistan and India quote from these poems in their columns, not even when they enshrine Iqbal as "the Poet of the East." To my mind, these poems are now anathema not so much because they mention Lenin or Satan but because they assert that one could imagine a relationship with God that could be playful, soulful, or just plain confused—as long as it led to an ethical realization of the individual self vis-à-vis God and the Society.

A strange time has now come not only upon Iqbal's poetry but also on "Allah," who is now contested over the way brand names are disputed by business corporations. Not too long ago, some Muslims in Malaysia claimed an exclusive right over "Allah," and would not allow their Christian compatriots to use the word in their religious texts—even though the name predates Islam, and has long been used by Arabic-speaking Christians. Other Muslims in South Asia have demanded that the Almighty must be invoked by one name alone: "Allah." They consider it un-Islamic for any Muslim to place a loved-one in God's protection by bidding him or her, "*Khudā Hāfiz*." For them, only "*Allah Hāfiz*" would do. (We don't know what they might say to "*Rahmān Hāfiz*.") Some, one hears, denounce the use of the expression *Allah Miyān* by Urdu-speaking women and children, though the habit of adding *Miyān*—lit. Master, but also a term of endearment—developed over a few centuries only out of a sincere desire to use the "polite" verbal forms of Urdu with reference to God. According to these champions of God's singularity, even grammatically required linguistic plurality can amount to blasphemy. To them, *Allah dekhtā hai* (Allah sees) is Islamic, but *Allah Miyāñ dekhte haiñ* a grave sin. And then there are those votaries of "Allah" who cannot even wait for Him to act in His wisdom, who have usurped to themselves all powers to judge and punish, and whose ruthless self-righteousness brings horrific death to so many so frequently.

In this din it may be hard to remember that not too long ago Allah had 99 names, and of them only two invoked fear. The rest reminded humankind of its own better aspirations, such as Mercy, Justice, Generosity, and Kindness. In that time, it was also possible for many to follow the old dictum in its fullest sense: be “careful” with the Prophet, and be, or at least let others to be, “crazy” with God—to engage with Him in all His mystery—each in his or her separate, though ultimately meager, way. Even so, human imagination could soar and cast its net over God, ignoring angels as unworthy prey.

*dar dasht-i-junūn-i-man jibrīl zubūn saide*  
*yazdān ba-kamand āwur ai himmat-i-mardāna*  
In my crazy realm Gabriel is not worth the bother.  
Rise, Manly ambition; cast your net on God. (Iqbal)

Iqbal. Ghalib. Rumi. Are we not the richer for their managing to soar so high? Should we not make sure that others are able to do the same?

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