REJECTING *SHIRK* AND PROMOTING *TAWḤID?*
A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE MOTIVATION AND OBJECTIVE OF THE ICONOCLASTS IN BAMIYAN (2001) AND TIMBUKTU (2012)

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis critically examines the main motivation and objective given by Islamic puritans to justify the destruction of sites of memory in Bamiyan (2001) and Timbuktu (2012). It sets out to answer the following question: did Islamic iconoclasm in Bamiyan and Timbuktu achieve its avowed aim of doing away with *shirk* (polytheism or idolatry) and promoting *tawḥīd* (Allah's oneness)? The main method used for this investigation is phenomenology of religion. It is complemented by other methodologies such as the historical critical method, Qur'anic exegesis and post-colonial theory. After a scrutiny of the available data on iconoclastic acts carried out in Bamiyan (2001) and Timbuktu (2012), the thesis places these two episodes in a broader framework by comparing them to other major instances of Islamic iconoclasm. This comparison brings to light some of the common features present in the particular cases under consideration. A number of conclusions are then drawn, notably the fact that the motivation and objective of the iconoclasts are not always as clear as they would want us to believe, and, most importantly, that the puritans' iconoclastic project is a contradiction in terms because their *idol-breaking* actually resulted into *idol-making*, consequently defeating the whole purpose of their venture.

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INTRODUCTION

In all monotheistic traditions, the prohibition against idolatry is given first priority. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the first commandment reads: 'I am the Lord your God … You shall have no other gods before me' (Exodus 20: 2-3). In the Islamic tradition, the Qur'an clearly states that *shirk*, which can be rendered as 'ascribing partners to Allah,' 'polytheism' or 'idolatry,' is an unforgivable sin (*Surah an-Nisa*: 116). Far from being mere rhetoric, the prohibition against idolatry in monotheistic traditions has practical consequences. These include the aversion towards any form of representation of the divine and the abhorrence of the veneration/worship of anyone or anything other than the ultimate being (YHWH, God or Allah). The refutation of idolatry consequently entails the affirmation of the radical transcendence of the one and only legitimate object of worship and the endeavour to circumscribe a sacrosanct realm for it. Indeed, 'The ban on idolatry is an attempt to dictate exclusivity, to map the unique territory of the one God' (Halbertal & Margalit 1992: 5). In monotheistic traditions, the construction of *selfhood* and *otherhood* takes place around this essential tenet. As Jan Assmann rightly points out in his treatise on the development of monotheism, the notions of 'paganism' and 'idolatry' belong to such constructions of otherness (Assmann 1997: 2). Just as anything falling out of the bounds of one's civilization tends to be labelled 'barbarian,' so too anything religiously alien tends to be labelled 'pagan' or 'idolatrous.'

In history, this ideological stance has led to the destruction of various sites of memory because the veneration associated with them was deemed incompatible with the 'true' and 'pure' monotheistic faith of the perpetrators of these annihilations. These destructions are usually undertaken without regard for the people whose cultural memory is thus sullied. The

thinking underlying this wanton destruction is well echoed by Kaufmann: "whatever God is believed to command must be obeyed, no matter how cruel or destructive to those other humans (…) we regard as God's enemies." Besides, "The power, faithfulness and majesty of God, when it can be invoked in support of one's political or military cause, or one's way of life, is among the strongest motivations known to humankind." (Kaufmann 1998: 64-65)

Far from being a bygone reality, the destruction of sites of memory on the grounds of the fight against idolatry continues to mar the cultural heritage of different peoples in different parts of the world. For instance, sites of memory, both religious and non-religious, are a priority target of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), currently causing havoc in those two countries. In Iraq, the 11th century Imam Dur Shrine in Salahuddin, the tomb of the prophet Jonah in Mossul, and a number of Christian churches and Shiite mosques in territories conquered by ISIS are among some of the latest sites to fall prey to the frenzy of alleged defenders of monotheism against the evils of idolatry. In Syria, after conquering the ancient Christian town of Maaloula in September 2013, the puritan movement *Jabhat al-Nusra* vandalized the ancient Christian monastery there, notably destroying icons. Still in Syria, the need to protect Shiite shrines from Sunni puritans was invoked by the Lebanon-based *Hezbollah* to justify its involvement in the Syrian conflict. Further examples include the destruction of the mausoleum of Saïda Manouba in Tunis and a number of other mausoleums in Tunisia, in the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring; and the ongoing destructions of vestiges of the Ottoman period in Mecca by Wahhabi puritans. Egyptian sites of memory such as the pyramids and the sphinx have equally been threatened.

In this dissertation two cases of iconoclastic acts, seemingly inspired by a deep-seated sense of fidelity to the one God and a corresponding entrenched abhorrence for anything idolatrous, are examined. These are the obliteration of the giant Buddha statues of Bamiyan (2001) and the levelling of Sufi shrines in Timbuktu (2012). The choice of these two cases is based both on their similarities and dissimilarities. On the one hand, both Bamiyan and Timbuktu were cultural, commercial and religious crossroads during their respective golden ages. The melting pot that inevitably ensues from such a situation was epitomised by the sites that came under attack in both places. On the other hand, while the sites that came under attack in Timbuktu were Muslim, that which came under attack in Bamiyan was not Muslim. In the former, we are dealing with a case of intra-Muslim squabble about orthodoxy and orthopraxis, while in the latter it is an instance of Islam's self-definition in the face of other traditions, in this case Buddhism.

The main question this dissertation sets out to answer can be laid down as follows: **Did Islamic iconoclasm in Bamiyan and Timbuktu achieve its avowed aim of doing away with *shirk* and promoting *tawḥīd*?** This question calls for the exploration of the deeper meaning of the iconoclastic acts carried out in Bamiyan (2001) and Timbuktu (2012) by Muslim puritans.

The method used to carry out this investigation is phenomenology[1] of religion. Phenomenology of religion imposed itself in the course of the 20th century as one of the major approaches to the study of religion. Cox (2006) contends that

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[1] The term phenomenology is a portmanteau from the Greek *phainomenon* (that which appears) and *logos* (discourse). It was first used by J. H. Lambert, a mathematician and philosopher of Swiss-German origin. He employs it in the fourth part of his *Neues Organon* published in 1764 and defines it as the 'doctrine of appearances.'

> Phenomenology of religion defines the methodology that is uniquely associated with religious studies as a distinct discipline studying "religion" itself, as opposed, for example, to studying sociology as it is applied to religion or psychology as it is applied to religion. Phenomenologists study religion in and of itself and not as an epiphenomenon of other more primary subjects (Cox 2006: 3).

Even though this statement points to phenomenology as a most suitable methodology for the study of religion, it is worth noting that phenomenology, both as a method and a discipline in its own right, does not originate from the field of religious studies. Indeed, phenomenology is an inductive qualitative research method which has its roots in the philosophical tradition of idealism, which emerged in late 18th century Germany, with philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). Immanuel Kant makes a distinction between transcendence and immanence. Transcendence is of the order of the 'noumena,' or things as they are in themselves, while immanence falls within the scope of 'phenomena,' or things as they appear to us. He suggests that phenomena are knowable while 'noumena' fall beyond the grasp of human understanding. As used in this essay, the words 'noumena' and 'phenomena' are understood following the Kantian distinction.

However, the philosopher who gave the phenomenological movement the particular twist with which it is present in the phenomenology of religion is, without doubt, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl's thinking mainly developed as an attempt to go beyond the reductionist tendencies of positivist epistemology, which overlooked the impact of human subjectivity on the process of acquiring knowledge. Positivism is customarily associated with the French philosopher Auguste Compte (1798-1857). One of the main claims of positivism is that the only valid knowledge is scientific knowledge, based on positive verification. Positivists view metaphysical claims as pseudoscientific. The positivists had overemphasized the dichotomy subject-object and made 'pure objectivity' their leitmotiv. Husserl's endeavour consisted in trying to solve the epistemological conundrum that stemmed from this dichotomy.

The analytic principles laid down by Husserl have had a great influence on the phenomenology of religion. These basic principles are: 'bracketing' or *epoché*, the 'eidetic[2] reduction', and 'empathy'. Husserl uses the *epoché* to 'suspend' judgments that may distort the understanding of the phenomena under scrutiny. Phenomenologists of religion bracket their own faith presuppositions in order to enter empathetically into the experiences of the believers whose faith manifestations they study. This empathy is the prerequisite for an in-depth understanding of these experiences. Also, in Husserl's phenomenology, the essence of the phenomena 'appears' to the perceiver; in the phenomenology of religion, the essence or core of the religion manifests itself through specific socio-historical data. A typology of these data is then established and the essential structures and meanings analysed in order to provide in-depth understanding of the phenomena.

The raw material of the phenomenologist of religion consists of the various manifestations of the religious experiences of the believer. These experiences find expression in language. Consequently, the phenomenologist of religion focuses on language. Indeed, as Douglas Allen contends, we do not have direct access to others' religious experiences; rather 'we always have expressions of others as they try to describe their experiences and religious realities' (Allen 2005: 184). Studying Islamic iconoclasm in Bamiyan and Timbuktu using a phenomenological approach will therefore entail, amidst other things, looking at the statements made by the iconoclasts to justify their actions. It is from these statements that their avowed motivation and objective will be extracted before scrutiny.

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[2] Eidetic comes from the Greek *eidos* meaning 'essence.'

Faithful to the phenomenological approach to the study of religion, our exploration seeks to present the socio-historical data available on Muslim iconoclasm in Bamiyan and Timbuktu. As much as possible, this is done without pre-judging in any way, rather accepting it as a given prior to any in-depth discussion. This is in compliance with the basic phenomenological principle of bracketing or *epoché*. Husserl describes this stance as the 'natural attitude' or 'natural standpoint':

> I find continually present and standing over against me the one spatio-temporal fact-world to which I myself belong, as do all other men found in it and related in the same way to it. This 'fact-world', as the world already tells us, I find to *be out there,* and also *take it just as it gives itself to me as something that exists out there* (Husserl, 1931: 106).

Once the historical data has been gathered, the next step will be what Husserl regards as 'variation in imagination.' It consists in comparing the phenomenon under scrutiny with other, related but different phenomena. Here, some notable instances of iconoclasm in Muslim history are examined. This process is supposed to lead to a deeper understanding of Islamic iconoclasm in its complexity, with particular cases but at the same time 'universal' structures. This exploration will help put in place the necessary elements to provide a plausible answer to the basic question of the dissertation, namely whether or not iconoclastic acts carried out by Muslim puritans in Bamiyan and Timbuktu achieved the avowed aim of eschewing s*hirk* and promoting *tawḥīd*.

Various other methodologies are brought along to complement the phenomenological approach. Thematic exegesis aids to unearth the meaning of key Qur'anic concepts such as s*hirk* and *tawḥīd* and the Qur'an's teaching on figurative representations. Relevant insights from postcolonial theory are utilised in the analysis of the way in which a conquering power might try to eliminate references to the indigenous past in order to re-imagine that past from

the conqueror's perspective. In effect, the puritans' enterprise could reek of efforts at domination, betraying religious ethnocentrism, and disrespect for alternative views, as well as disdain for a people's cultural memory. The historical-critical method, in its diachronic and synchronic perspectives, is used to scrutinise some of the sources used for this venture.

This thesis is sub-divided into three main chapters preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. In the first chapter, the socio-historical data pertaining to Islamic iconoclasm in Bamiyan (2001) and Timbuktu (2012) is examined, with a specific endeavour to unearth the motivation and objective of the iconoclasts, extant in the language they use to justify their actions. In the second chapter, following the Husserlian precept of variation of imagination, the motivation and objective present in Timbuktu and Bamiyan are compared to those extant in other socio-historical instances of Islamic iconoclasm, notably the purification of the Kaʻba (ca. 630), the iconoclastic edict of Yazid II (721), the relation of Islam to the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy, and, finally, the attack on Mecca and the *ḥajj* carried out by the alliance formed by the Wahhabi and the house of al-Saud in 1803. Based on the preceding arguments, the third chapter states the answer to the basic question of the thesis.

CHAPTER ONE

ISLAMIC ICONOCLASM IN BAMIYAN (2001) AND TIMBUKTU (2012)

I. The Obliteration of the Giant Buddha Statues of Bamiyan (2001)

I.1 Bamiyan

The Bamiyan valley is situated in the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan, 143 miles northwest of Kabul. Bamiyan became an important Buddhist centre in the second century C.E. and attained its apogee as a high place of Buddhism in the eighth century, numbering close to a thousand monks disseminated in 10 monasteries, and attracting tens of thousands of pilgrims. The development of Bamiyan as a religious complex went hand in hand with its growth as a commercial hub (Morgan 2012: 45). In effect, Bamiyan was 'an important *serai* or resting place for camel caravans on the ancient Silk Route, which linked the Roman Empire with Central Asia, China and India' (Rashid 2010: 68). Furthermore, due to its position on the ancient Silk Route, Bamiyan became a cultural melting pot, a meeting place between East and West. Archaeological findings have indeed unveiled a unique blend of Greek, Turkish, Persian, Chinese and Indian influence in this valley. Moreover, still owing to its strategic position on an important trade route, Bamiyan was a regular target for regional powers seeking to extend their sphere of influence. It consequently fell under the authority of various emperors at different times, depending on how regional power games played out. Throughout its spell under these different sovereigns, Bamiyan retained its role as the high place of Indian Buddhism. Rashid (2010: 68) cites a Chinese monk, by name Hui-Chao, who visited Bamiyan in 827 C.E., mentioning in his correspondence that the King of Bamiyan was still a Buddhist. It is only in the eleventh century that Muslim rule was established in the

Bamiyan valley by the Ghaznavids.[3] Nonetheless, even under the authority of Muslim leaders, Bamiyan retained its fame as a Buddhist centre, and the effective supplanting of Buddhism by Islam only occurred as a gradual process, that culminated in the quasi disappearance of Buddhist practice after the thirteenth century in the Bamiyan valley. Current inhabitants of Bamiyan are the Hazāra, a Persian-speaking people equally found in Iran and Pakistan. In their large majority, the Hazāra follow Twelver shi'a Islam or *Imamiyyah*.[4] Thanks to its rich cultural landscape as well as its invaluable artistic and archaeological remains, the valley of Bamiyan was inscribed on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2004.

I.2 The Giant Buddha Statues

Among the many vestiges of the Buddhist culture that shone from Bamiyan, many centuries ago, there were cells of monks and two giant Buddha statues carved out of the sandstone cliffs of the Hindu Kush Mountains. These statues depict standing Buddhas, dressed in robes. The local Hazāra named the statues *Salsal* ('light shines through the universe') and *Shamama* ('Queen Mother'). *Salsal*, the taller (180 feet) of the two statues, was built between 591 and 644 C.E.; while *Shamama*, the smaller (121 feet) statue, was carved between 544 and 595. These giant statues bore witness to the distinctive cultural blend that characterised Bamiyan, as they displayed features of Greco-Buddhist artistry. They were notably dressed in Hellenic-style robes.

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[3] The Ghaznavid dynasty was a Muslim dynasty of Turkish origin which covered parts of present day Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. They governed this area for close to two centuries (c. 977-1187). See "Ghaznawids." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2013. Reference. 11 October 2013 <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ghaznawids-COM_0234>

[4] This is the largest branch of Shi'a Islam. The term '*Twelver*' is used in reference to the belief of the adherents in twelve divinely ordained leaders, the twelve imams. The last of these, known as Muhammad al-Mahdi, lives in occultation and will return in eschatological times as the promised *Mahdi,* to rule the world and rid it of evil in preparation for the Day of Judgement.

The circumstances surrounding the construction of the statues are unclear. However, they were the epitomes of the Buddhist culture that flourished in Bamiyan. Considering the stature of these statues and the technical knowhow available at the time, their construction should have required a lot of resources as alluded to by Morgan (2012: 10) when she states that

> the construction of the Buddhas and other developments in the Buddhist complex at Bamiyan seem to coincide with the hegemony of a regional power known as the 'Western Turks', a multi-ethnic confederation of essentially nomadic tribes which brought a degree of stability (and economic prosperity) to central Asia, including Bamiyan, from the sixth century on.

Accordingly, besides being the expression of Buddhist religious fervour, the construction of the Buddhas equally constituted a display of wealth and power.

I.3 Destruction

Prior to their obliteration in 2001, the Bamiyan Buddhas were already faceless above chin level. This could be an indication of earlier iconoclastic acts. This might have happened during any of the numerous attacks the Buddhist institutions in Bamiyan suffered in history, even before the advent of Islam in the Bamiyan valley. In the fifth or early sixth century, the Hephtalite ruler Mihirikula, raided Bamiyan. Wink (1992: 754) suggests that these attacks could be explained by the fact that Mihirikula had shaivite[5] leanings and was opposed to Buddhism. Likewise, in the ninth century, the Saffarid ruler Yaqub ibn Layth (r. 867-879) looted the Buddhist institutions in Bamiyan. He notably destroyed the Buddhist temple and took whatever statues were found in it to Baghdad. Moreover the city of Bamiyan was annihilated in 1221 by the Mongol emperor, Genghis Khan (ca. 1162-1227) in retaliation for the killing of his grandson Mütügen during the siege of Bamiyan.[6] The statues were however spared. Even under the Ghaznavid ruler Mahmud of Ghazna –otherwise known as Mahmud

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[5] Shaivism (literally 'associated with Shiva') is a sect of Hinduism, which reveres the god Shiva as the Supreme Being.
[6] See Sayed Askar Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan, A Historical, Cultural, Economic and Political Study* (London: Curzon Press, 1998).

the 'idol-breaker' because of his iconoclastic tendencies– the Bamiyan Buddhas, which were then popularly known as *Surkh-but* (red idol) and *Khink-but* (gray idol), were spared.

From the 13th century to their demolition by the Taliban regime in 2001, the statues have suffered from natural degradation and neglect. They have equally sustained attacks such as those that followed the orders given by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1618-1707) to his army to shoot off the legs of one of the Buddhas, or again attempts by Nadir Shah (d. 1747)[7] to destroy them. Nevertheless these damages have never been significant enough so as to threaten the very existence of the statues, as was the case in 2001.

The destruction of the giant statues in March 2001 was carried out over a period of approximately three weeks, following an edict published by the council of the *ulema* (religious scholars) of Afghanistan. In an interview contained in the documentary *The Giant Buddhas* (2005), by the Swiss filmmaker and producer Christian Frei, one of the local eyewitnesses describes the destruction process:

> [T]he Taliban initially attempted to hack away at the Buddha and the frescoes adorning the niches. And then … they attacked the statues with tanks, grenades and anti-aircraft missiles… the Taliban placed large quantities of mines, grenades and bombs at the feet and shoulders of the statues and ignited the whole lot. The torso of the giant figure, however, remained intact. Only after around twenty days of senseless attacks at the beginning of March 2001, were specialists flown in to blow up the two giant Buddhas professionally.[8]

Empty caverns now stand on the flank of the Hindu Kush Mountains where the statues once stood.

I.4 Motivation and Objective
a) Religion
The overt religious identity of the Taliban regime would suggest that the motives and objectives governing their actions are primarily religious in nature. The Taliban (from the

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[7] Nadir was Shah of Iran from 1736 to 1747.
[8] This documentary is available online at http://tinyurl.com/frei-buddha

Arabic *tālibān*, meaning 'students') are indeed members of a religio-political movement founded in 1994 in Pakistan by Mullah Mohammed Omar. Its ideology is a mixture of Islamic fundamentalism and Pashtun nationalism. In effect, the Taliban are ethnic Pashtun in their vast majority. From 1996 to 2001, the Taliban ruled over Afghanistan which they renamed the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.' They were ousted from power by an international coalition led by the USA in 2001, following the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York. Afghanistan was indeed perceived as the safe haven from which the plot was masterminded. Ossama Bin Laden (d. 2011), leader of al-Qaeda, the organisation that claimed the attacks, was a *protégé* of Mullah Mohammed Omar.

Today, the Taliban mainly exist as an insurgency, operating in Afghanistan and North-West Pakistan. The Taliban are adepts of a strict interpretation of Islamic law, tainted with Pashtun nationalism. Most of their leadership was trained in Pakistani *madrasas* run by an Islamic puritanical reform movement known as the Deobandi. The Deobandi teach, among other things, that a Muslim's primary loyalty is to his or her faith (Elias 2007: 21). Furthermore, at its foundation in 1994, one of the avowed aims of the Taliban movement was to "enforce Sharia law and defend the integrity and Islamic character of Afghanistan" (Rashid 2010: 22). As such the religious beliefs of the Taliban would normally play a preponderant role in the process of decision-making. However, drawing a conclusion based on the Taliban's identity would be far-fetched. In effect, concluding that the motive and objective of the iconoclastic acts carried out in Bamiyan were religious, based on the overt religious identity of the Taliban regime, would suggest a pre-determinism that is not necessarily corroborated by facts. To conclude that the motives and objectives for the obliteration of the Bamiyan statues were religious, there would consequently have to be something more than just the Taliban's

identity on the table. This something extra could be contained in the declarations made by the Taliban to justify the destructions.

The demolition of the statues was preceded by the passing of an edict in Pashtu on February 26, 2001, pertaining to the destruction of statues and non-Islamic shrines on Afghan territory. A translation of the edict reads as follows:

> **Edict issued by the Islamic State of Afghanistan, in Kandahar on the 12th of Rabiul-Awwal 1421 (February 26, 2001):** On the basis of consultations between the religious leaders of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, religious judgments of the ulema and rulings of the Supreme Court of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, all statues and non-Islamic shrines located in different parts of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan must be destroyed. These statues have been and remain shrines of unbelievers and these unbelievers continue to worship and respect them. God Almighty is the only real shrine [*tāghūt*][9] and all fake idols should be destroyed. Therefore, the supreme leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has ordered all the representatives of the Ministry of Promotion of Virtue and Suppression of Vice and the Ministries of Information to destroy all the statues. As ordered by the ulema and the Supreme Court of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan all the statues must be destroyed so that no one can worship or respect them in the future (cited by Flood 2002: 655).

This edict depicts the destruction of the giant Buddha statues, completed by March 26, 2001, as an Islamic act, that is to say a deed that finds its ultimate validation in the precepts of Islam. The basic tenet of Islam invoked here is that of *tawhīd*, according to which "there is no divinity but God". As stated by this edict, the statues and all non-Islamic shrines found in different parts of Afghanistan breach this basic precept of Islam by paving the way for s*hirk*, made manifest as idolatry and polytheism. The objective for the destruction is thus to restore orthodox belief and to make sure that "no one can worship or respect them [the statues]" in the future.

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[9] In the Quran, *tāghūt* refers to either idols or idol shrines.

In order to make the point clear that the actions of the Taliban regime were grounded in Islamic precepts, Mullah Mohammed Omar, head of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, defended this edict and the subsequent destructions by putting the rhetorical question: "I ask Afghans and the world's Muslims to use their sound wisdom .... do you prefer to be a smasher of idols or a seller of idols?" (Elias 2007: 18). This statement was made in reaction to offers of pecuniary compensation in exchange for the preservation of the statues. Indeed, among the many international efforts geared at dissuading the Taliban regime from going ahead with the planned destructions, there was one which seems to have particularly infuriated the Taliban regime. This was financial aid in return for the safeguarding of the giant statues. This offer came from Sri Lanka, India, Japan and Switzerland. Mullah Mohammed Omar's rhetorical question is a direct reference to this offer. The Mullah's attitude echoes a similar one displayed by the eleventh century iconoclast Mahmud of Ghazna or Mahmud the "idol-breaker", who reportedly refused a huge payment in exchange for the preservation of a Hindu image in analogous terms.[10] Mahmud is indeed reported to have raided Somnath in 1025 and looted its temple. The Brahmans tried to offer large sums of money in exchange for the preservation of a precious metal anthropomorphic icon. However Mahmud allegedly rejected the offer, not relishing the idea that he should be remembered as a broker of idols rather than a breaker of idols. Whether or not Mullah Omar was aware of this precedent is unclear. This notwithstanding, by echoing Mahmud of Ghazna's stance, Mullah Omar placed himself in the lineage of the great Muslim leaders who had championed the cause of Islam in the Indian sub-continent by having an uncompromising attitude toward what they perceived as *shirk*.

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[10] See Flood (2002: 650); Muhammad Nazim, *The Life and Times of Sultān Maḥmūd of Ghazna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931).

This religious motivation is further enforced by the Shi'a-Sunni squabble at stake. In effect, the Hazāra, who were *de facto* custodians of the statues, constitute a Shi'a pocket in an otherwise Sunni Afghanistan. The Hazāra adopted the Buddhas and took pride in them. They became symbols of the Hazāra people.[11] Part of the reason for the destruction could thus have been to punish the 'heretic' Hazāra (Morgan 2012: 19). The Hazāra, notably through the organisation *Hizb-i Wahdat*, were equally political opponents of the Taliban, offering stern resistance against their authority over Bamiyan and its vicinity.

The religious motivation and objective behind the destruction of the giant Buddha statues is further stressed by Elias (2007) based on his analysis of the debate in Pakistani and Afghan media at the time of the destruction, which were, in his opinion, very much at odds with what was being said in international media. Elias argues that

> [t]he Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas must be seen within the context of Muslim historical memory in which intolerance of idols can easily, if erroneously, be seen as woven into mores of proper Muslim behaviour, and iconoclasm - if not always viewed as laudable- is never a popularly condemnable act (Elias 2007: 16).

As plausible as this argument may sound, it nonetheless betrays essentialist tropes, making it sound as if the Taliban regime was practically programmed to carry out these iconoclastic acts. The main thrust of Elias' argument for a religious motive lies however elsewhere. It has to do with the timeline leading to the destruction of the statues. This timeline corresponds, in the Islamic lunar calendar, to the time of the celebration of *eid al-adha* or feast of the sacrifice (of Abraham), and the *ḥajj*. When celebrating *eid al-adha*, Muslims commemorate Abraham's readiness to go as far as sacrificing his son Ishmael in obedience to the will of God. This

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[11] 'As one Hazara man stated, 'We loved our Buddhas very much.' Although they did not worship the Buddhas, he noted how the Taliban celebrated and taunted them, 'We have killed your gods.' (David Zucchino, 'The Last Days of Bamian's Buddhas: Afghanistan – Villagers detail how the Taliban forced them to risk their lives in destroying the ancient statues', Los Angeles Times, 24 February 2002, accessed online)

serves as a reminder for them to be ready to sacrifice what they hold dear, should God ask it of them. Abraham is equally remembered in the Islamic tradition for having destroyed the idols of his father. In this light, Elias contends that

> Mullah Umar's choice of occasion can hardly be considered accidental, since the other major act for which Abraham is remembered is his decision to break from the idolatry of his father and ancestors, an obvious precedent on which the Taliban modelled their decision to right the wrongs of their forefathers in Afghanistan and destroy idols that they openly acknowledged were part of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic heritage (Elias 2007: 20).

Following this logic, the actions of the Taliban regime could thus be perceived as a re-enactment of the Abrahamic precedent. Echoing Abraham's sacrifice, the Taliban were ready to sacrifice the lives of Afghan children dying of famine and disease, partly because of international sanctions, rather than give in to those who, like Philippe de Montebello, the director of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, had offered to pay money in exchange for the preservation of the statues, and even their transfer out of Afghanistan (Elias 2007: 26). They thus stood as heirs to Abraham, walking in the footsteps of Muhammad, championing the cause of monotheism.

Nonetheless, Elias' argument seems far-fetched. He bases his analysis on the debates extant in Pakistani and Afghan media during the process of destruction of the statues and makes inferences based on the time of the year at which the destructions were carried out. There are however no elements, not even in the declarations made by the Taliban, indicating that the destructions were intended to take place during the feast of *eid al-adha*. If anything, any later interpretation seeking to tie down the destructions to the feast would have been a mere effort at reaping political benefits through propaganda. In effect there are indications that, more than anything else, this religious rhetoric was principally a façade shielding an otherwise

politically motivated decision from a regime that was increasingly isolated on the international scene.

b) Politics

The Taliban established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on September 27, 1996. Owing to their rigid interpretation of Islamic Law and their pronounced Pashtun nationalism, they got involved in a number of Human Rights violations. They equally offered a safe haven to leaders of terror-related groups such as al-Qaeda. All these triggered the hostility of many countries toward the Taliban regime. In fact, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan got diplomatic recognition from three nations only, namely Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates. The rule of the Taliban over Afghanistan went from 1996 to 2001, the year of the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas.

The first move made by a Taliban toward the destruction of the statues occurred in 1998. This attempt was made by the Taliban commander of the Bamiyan region. He was nonetheless dissuaded by Mullah Omar. In fact, the regime indicated that it was not going to launch an assault on the vestiges of Afghan past. To this effect, in July 1999, the Taliban minister of culture issued a number of directives in which the regime made clear its intent to protect and preserve legacies of the past, specifically identifying the giant Buddha statues of Bamiyan among these. They were to be safeguarded and were not perceived as idols since there were no Buddhists present in Afghanistan to 'worship' them. Their economic importance for the country was put to the fore as part of the justification for their preservation: "The government considers the Bamiyan statues as an example of a potential major source of income for Afghanistan from international visitors. The Taliban states that Bamiyan shall not be destroyed but protected" (Harding 2001). The later change in the Taliban's stance seems to

have been triggered by a number of factors –mainly political in nature– linked to their dealings with other nations.

Indeed the destruction of the statues occurred at the peak of rising tensions between the Taliban regime and the UN. The UN had strengthened the sanctions targeting the Taliban regime. Through Resolution 1333 passed by the UN Security Council on 19 January 2001, the UN imposed severe sanctions on the Taliban, the toughest of which involved a complete arms ban and the freezing of financial assets. In the documentary *The Giant Buddhas*, Taisir Alluni, a journalist from the Arabic language broadcaster Al-Jazeera, who had witnessed the destruction first-hand, argues that the destruction was understood by the Taliban as a way of 'spitting in the face of a world … that was more interested in stone sculptures than the thousands of Afghan children who were facing starvation in the winter of 2000/2001. The West had made no attempt to understand the Islamic world in its full, rich complexity, and this was the payback' (Cited by Morgan 2012: 3). In this light, the destruction of the giant Buddha statues stands as an act of defiance in the context of a power struggle between the Taliban regime and the international community represented by the UN. Among other things, the Taliban equally passed laws that seriously hampered the capacity of UN aid agencies to operate in the country.

As things stand therefore, the Taliban pursued a political agenda and the destruction of the statues would thus have occurred in the context of a standoff with the 'West.' There are however reasons to think that it was a combination of both religious and political factors that paved the way for the destruction of the statues.

c) A Politico-Religious Agenda

There is no contradiction in pursuing a double objective, political and religious. This appears to be what the Taliban did. The religious justification they gave served their political agenda, while their political agenda re-enforced their commitment to their religious agenda. Political and religious motives thus intermingled to lead to the destruction of the giant Buddha statues. A good illustration of this intermingling is perceivable in the war by proxy between Saudi Arabia and Iran on Afghan soil, based on the Sunni-Shi'a rivalry, and the struggle for hegemony in regional politics.

The Shi'a-Sunni sectarian enmity within Afghanistan opposed the Sunni Pashtuns and the Shi'a Hazāras. This enmity saw Iran and Saudi Arabia offer support to opposing sides in inter-Afghan tensions, to foster their respective political and religious agendas. The Saudi offered support to Afghan radical Sunni groups, mostly Pashtun, particularly those of them who fought Shiism and promoted Wahhabism, the version of Islam mostly practiced in Saudi Arabia. On its part, Iran backed Afghan Shi'a, mainly Hazāras, and all "Persian-speaking ethnic groups who were resisting Pashtun domination" (Rashid 2010: 199-200). Iran was notably instrumental in bringing together the different Hazāra factions under the banner of a single party, called *Hizb-e-Wahadat*. From a religious standpoint, each side tried to promote its version of Islam; while regarding politics, it was a struggle for regional influence in Central Asia. In this context, the Taliban perceived the destruction of the two colossal Buddha statues as punishment enacted against the Hazāra who had offered fierce resistance to the Taliban regime's attempts to control Central Afghanistan (Rashid 2010: 218), as much as it was an assertion of victory over Shi'a heretics. At the peak of the ethnic and sectarian divisions that plagued Afghanistan in the late 1990s, the Taliban went as far as using famine as a weapon of war against the 'heretic' Hazāras.

As such, there is no single factor, be it religious, political or other, that can stand on its own to explain the motivation and objective behind the destruction of the giant Buddha statues of Bamiyan by the Taliban. Rather a complex blend of factors, predominantly political and religious, accounts more accurately for this destruction by doing justice to the facts available. We shall return to this in the course of our discussion. Let us, in the meantime, focus our attention on our second case study: the levelling of Sufi shrines in Timbuktu (Mali) in 2012.

II. The Levelling of Sufi Shrines in Timbuktu (2012)

II.1 Timbuktu

The religious history of Timbuktu (or *Tin-Buktu* in Tamasheq[12]) cannot be dissociated from its wider social, economic and political history. The main primary sources for this history are two chronicles written in the mid-17th century, namely *Tarikh al-fattash*,[13] and *Tarikh al-Sudan* by Abd' Al-Sa'dī (1594-1655/6).[14] According to these and other sources, Timbuktu began in the 12th century as a seasonal settlement for Massufa nomads in search of grazing land and water for their camels. The Massufa are a sub-group of the Sanhaja (nomads of the Western Sahara) who had originally migrated to North Africa from the South of what is present-day Saudi Arabia. It is from this group that sprung forth the militant Islamic movement that would give rise to the Almoravid dynasty (1040-1147).

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[12] Tamasheq is the language of the Tuareg.
[13] There is no consensus on the author of *Tarikh al-fattash*. Long thought to have been written by Mahmud Kati, attention has progressively drifted toward his grandson, Ibn al-Mukhtar (d. 1593). Due to accusations of forgery stemming from a number of errors contained in *Tarikh al-fattash*, it is a less reliable source for the history of Timbuktu compared to *Tarikh al-Sudan*.
[14] Henceforth, TF will stand for *Tarikh al-fattash*, while TS will stand for *Tarikh al-Sudan*.

The choice of Timbuktu as a settlement could be explained by its closeness to the Niger River, an invaluable source of water in an otherwise desert region. This river was equally a means of transportation for goods from tropical parts of Africa, by boat. These two means of transportation –camels and boats– constitute the main reason why Al-Saʿdī described Timbuktu as "the meeting place of caravans and boats" (*TS*, 29). The nomads' belongings and supplies were kept in a camp and the slave girl who watched over them was called *Buktu*, as a consequence of which the location was given the name Timbuktu, meaning 'the place of Buktu' in Tamasheq. This settlement soon evolved into a crossroads, attracting merchants, pastoralists, as well as scholars. The basic trading commodities were gold, salt, slaves, and books (*TS*, 29). Accordingly, Timbuktu developed into an essential commercial hub of the trans-Saharan Trade Routes, linking Sub-Saharan Africa to North Africa, Europe and parts of Asia. It had a mixed population, with the main groups being nomadic Tuaregs, Soninke merchants and scholars, pastoralist Fulani, Songhai, and Arabs.

During the first two centuries of its existence, Timbuktu was self-governed (Saad 1983: 11). However, from about 1325 to 1433, the city was part of the empire of Mali. Notable during this time is the construction of the *Jingere-Ber* (the Great Mosque)[15], overseen by the Andalusian scholar and poet Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Sahili (1290-1346), at the request of Mansa Kankou Musa (c. 1280 - c. 1337), the then emperor of Mali, after a pilgrimage to Mecca. The construction of this mosque was completed in 1328. A second mosque was completed during the same period in the Sankore quarter, north of the city, with funding from a wealthy Kel Tamasheq lady. The courtyard of the Sankore mosque was tailored to fit the dimensions of the Kaʿba's. The construction of a third mosque, south of the Sankore, was

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[15] This is a translation of the Songhay term *Jingere-ber*, by which the mosque at the SW corner of the city is known. The Arabic text has: *masjid al-jāmiʿ*-the 'congregational mosque'.

completed by 1440. It was named after its first Imam, known as Sidi Yahya al-Tadallisi (d. 1461).[16] The vicinity of these mosques became a dwelling place for scholars, leading to the development of a great tradition of learning in Timbuktu. The learning centres that developed around *Jingere-Ber*, Sidi Yahya and Sankore formed together what has gone down in history as the Sankore University. During the Golden Age of Timbuktu (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), this university was made up of approximately 180 *madrasas* for a total of 25 000 students. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana and champion of African unity, declared in a speech given at the University of Ghana in 1961 that 'If the University of Sankore (…) had survived the ravages of foreign invasions, the academic and cultural history of Africa might have been different from what it is today.' (Nkrumah 1962: 7-8)

Thanks to these learning centres, religion and scholarship constitute the main distinguishing traits of Timbuktu in history. This truth is encapsulated in a fifteenth century Tuareg saying: "*Salt comes from the north, gold from the south, and silver from the country of the white man, but the word of God and the treasures of wisdom are only to be found in Timbuktu.*" The importance of scholarship was so much so that books or manuscripts were the most prized items. In effect, according to Leo Africanus, who visited Timbuktu in 1506, books were the single most profitable trade item in the city.[17] In *Tarikh al-fattash*, the author recounts an instance when the king purchased a dictionary at a price worth two horses (*TF*, 281). Hunwick (2008: 45) notes that "purchasing books was a source of prestige and a socially accepted way of displaying wealth, and scholars and kings alike would acquire books during their travels or from merchants coming from the north who would bring books for sale."

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[16] The descendants of Sidi Yahya have served as imams for this mosque for five centuries to this day.
[17] Leo Africanus, *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things Therein Contained*, vol. 3, edited by Robert Brown, English translation by John Pory in 1600 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 825.

The medium of scholarship as well as commerce was Arabic. Arabic script was notably used to write African languages, leading to the emergence of the famous *ajami* manuscripts, covering all fields of scholarship. For this reason and more, Hunwick (2008: 41) suggests that

> Arabic can fairly be described as 'the Latin of Africa,' for it played a role in Africa south of the Maghreb and Egypt over the past millennium comparable with that of Latin in Europe in the medieval era. Just as the spread of Latin went hand in hand with the spread of Christianity, and as many Europeans also adopted the script of the Latin language to write their own native languages, so some Africans used the Arabic script to write their native languages.

Even though the same can scarcely be stated regarding parts of Africa that were not under Arab-Muslim influence, the role played by Arabic in championing a literacy culture on the continent is unquestionable. In this light, Timbuktu epitomizes the Islamization of Africa and the Africanization of Islam (Hunwick 2008: 52). One aspect of life in Timbuktu which expressed this integration of Islamic and local cultures was the absence of segregation of women as this was contrary to the local customs. This will be a major bone of contention between the leaders of Timbuktu and the Fulani state of Hamdallahi in Masina, in the nineteenth century, when the latter launched their *jihad*.

Still thanks to these learning centres, Islam took roots in Timbuktu. In effect, even though Islam arrived in Timbuktu through the agency of merchants, it is only through the toil of the learned and pious men who lived in the vicinity of the three main mosques of the city that Islam was established in Timbuktu, informing all aspects of life in the city. As a matter of fact, life in Timbuktu was organised around the learning centres. The scholars were a learned elite, playing the role of religious leaders, administrators and judges. Most of them belonged to the Māliki school of law (Saad 1983: 96). In its chapters nine and ten, the *TS* gives the list of some of the renowned scholars of Timbuktu, cataloguing their achievements and personal

qualities. The most renowned of these is, without doubt, Ahmed Baba al-Massufi al-Timbukti (1556-1627).[18] He came from a family with a long tradition of scholarship and wrote dozens of treatises addressing different issues that were brought to his attention.

As would be expected in a crossroads, competing interpretations of Islam co-existed in Timbuktu from the onset. Nonetheless, Sufism stands out as the version that has wielded the greatest influence.[19] Vestiges of this influence are present in the city in the form of Sufi shrines which have developed around the burial sites of the men whose saintly life and erudition have made the city's fame in history. These burial sites have earned Timbuktu the fabled appellation of the 'City of 333 Saints.' Locals go to these shrines to seek divine favour, in conformity with the Sufi belief in the intercessory powers of saints (*wali*).

A political, religious, cultural, and scholarly crossroads, Timbuktu can consequently be accurately described using the words of Al-Saʿdī, the great historian of the Songhay Empire, as

> [a] virtuous, pure, undefiled and proud city, blessed with divine favour, a healthy climate, and [commercial] activity (...) It is a city unsullied by the worship of idols, where none has prostrated save to God the Compassionate, a refuge of scholarly and righteous folk, a haunt of saints and ascetics, and a meeting place of caravans and boats (*TS*, 29).

During its purported golden age (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), Timbuktu was part of the Songhay Empire (c. 1468-1591). It is worth noting that during its spell under Songhay rule, Timbuktu was plundered by the Songhay ruler, Sunni Ali Ber (d. 1492). In effect, Sunni Ali "perpetrated terrible wickedness in the city, putting it to flame, sacking it, and killing large numbers of people" (*TS*, 93). The deadliest blow for the centres of learning will nonetheless

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[18] The Ahmed Baba Institute, the only public library in Timbuktu, is named in his honour.
[19] There are two main Sufi orders or *tariqas* present in West Africa, namely the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya. The latter overtook the former in the 19th century as the leading Sufi order in West Africa.

come with yet another invasion of Timbuktu, this time around by Moroccans, in 1591, under the leadership of Ṣultān Ahmad al-Manṣūr (1578-1603). Scholars were accused of being behind an uprising that opposed the authority of the Moroccan masters of the city. They were consequently persecuted. Many of them were sent on exile to Marrakesh in Morocco (*TS*, 315). With the exception of Ahmed Baba, all those sent on exile died as a result of a plague. While in Marrakesh, Ahmed Baba expressed his nostalgia for Timbuktu and mourned for the death scholars in a poem preserved in 'Al-Ifrani's account of the Sadian conquest:

> O traveller to Gao, turn off to my city, murmur my name there and greet all my dear ones, With scented salams from an exile who longs for his homeland and neighbours, companions and friends. And condole there in my city beloved kinsmen for the passing of masters who were buried here.
> Abii Zayd, shaykh of virtues and guidance, of the stock of my cousins, and closest of my family. I am overcome by the grief of separation in death. Death has destroyed my pillar and support. Forget not 'Abd Allah the brave and generous. The loss of kin and family sharpens my grief. The young folk of my family have all departed to the Owner of all things in the days of my absence. Woe to me and my sadness for them. O Lord, grant them Thy widest mercy. (Cited by Hunwick 2008, *appendix*)

Timbuktu attained its apogee in the sixteenth century and began declining when alternative trade routes emerged, notably through the Oceans. Nonetheless vestiges of Timbuktu's prestigious past have survived. Apart from the three historic mosques of *Jingere-Ber*, Sidi Yahya and Sankore, these relics include hundreds of thousands of manuscripts preserved in private libraries, and mausoleums built around the burial sites of the scholars and holy men of the city. In 1988, parts of this rich heritage were inscribed on the list of World Heritage Sites by the UNESCO.

II.2 Mausoleums and Libraries

Among the mausoleums found in Timbuktu, there is that of Sidi Mahmoud Ben Amar (1463/64-1548), a great uncle of Ahmed Baba. In *TS*, Mahmoud is portrayed as one who was the locus of many manifestations of divine grace or *Baraka* (*TS*, 43). Several legendary

accounts of his actions are contained in *TS*. For instance, it is said of him that "Many a time he was summoned to distant places to bring succour to those in danger or distress, and he would appear and effect relief" (*TS*, 43). The reputation he enjoyed as a saintly and scholarly figure continued after his death. His tomb became a place of pilgrimage. This has continued to this day, and many of the locals who go to his tomb to seek *Baraka* believe he has the power to bring rain.

Equally noteworthy, the mausoleum of Sidi Yahya, in the mosque that bears the same name. This mausoleum has a specific legend associated to it. The locals believe that its main gate will remain closed until the end of days. This door is accordingly known as 'the door of the resurrection.'[20] Sidi Yahya is considered as the main patron saint of Timbuktu. Other mausoleums include that of Cheikh el-Kebir, Sidi Elmety, Mahamane Elmety, all held in high esteem by the locals. They all have in common the fact that they are pilgrimage sites and the locals believe that all these saints watch over the city of Timbuktu.

Apart from these mausoleums, Timbuktu is home to numerous private libraries of ancient manuscripts. These cover a wide variety of topics: philosophy, astronomy, chemistry, religious sciences and other disciplines. They bear witness to the rich intellectual life that flourished in this city a few centuries ago, around its Sankore University. There are also manuscripts of recognition of debts and other legal proceedings that give a glimpse of the social life of the time.

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[20] The origin of this legend is uncertain.

II.3 Destruction

On 22nd March 2012, the civilian government of Mali was toppled by a military coup. This gave the *coup de grâce* to an already weakened state infrastructure and demobilized the soldiers who were trying to halt the progression of yet another Tuareg rebellion, this time under the banner of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad[21]. The first Tuareg uprising in Mali took place in 1916 against the French colonial state. Mali got its independence from France in 1960. The first post-colonial Tuareg rebellion broke out in 1963; the second one in 1990. All these rebellions had to do with frustrated hopes and unfulfilled promises stemming from the non-respect of signed agreements. In 2005, the Malian government launched an agency for the development of the North, to cater for some of the queries that were voiced during these successive uprisings. The agency having remained an empty shell, another Tuareg rebellion broke out in 2006. In 2009, a peace agreement is signed and a ceremony held in Kidal, the Tuareg stronghold, for the official surrendering of weapons. This was yet another dead letter. The MNLA was founded in 2010. After the ousting of Muammar al-Gaddafi from power, Tuaregs serving in his army, notably in the "Tuareg Legion", returned well-armed and spearheaded the 2012 uprising.

In the days that followed the military coup of Captain Sanogo, the major cities of Northern Mali, along the Niger Bend, fell in the hands of Tuareg rebels and their circumstantial allies, made up mainly of radical Islamist groups, namely al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unicity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), best known through its French acronym MUJAO (*Mouvement pour l'Unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest*), and *ansar al-din*. *Ansar al din* ('defenders of the faith' or 'helpers of the faith') is a politico-religious movement founded by Iyad Ag Ghali, a Tuareg from the Irayaken clan. He served in

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[21] This movement is best known by its French acronym MNLA (*Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad*)

Muammar al-Gaddafi's Islamic Legion in the early 1980s. He then served in successive Tuareg rebellions against the central government of Mali. Following the peace agreement brokered between the government of Mali and the Tuaregs in 1996, Iyad Ag Ghali got involved with *Tablighi Jama'at* ('Society for spreading faith'), an Islamic revivalist movement founded in 1926 by Muhammad Ilyas Khandalvi (1885-1944), as a reformed branch of Deobandi, a revivalist movement from the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence . He was appointed as cultural attaché in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia) in 2007. He was expelled in 2010 by the Saudi authorities because of his interactions with radical groups linked to al-Qaeda during his stay in Saudi Arabia. The following year, he founded *ansar al-din*. In a propaganda video published in March 2012, the objectives of the movement are outlined by Cheikh Ag Moussa, the deputy chief of the movement. Topmost on their agenda is the implementation of Islamic Law in Mali.[22]

The groups that made up this circumstantial coalition had differing agendas. Whereas the main agenda of the MNLA was secession from Mali and the creation of the independent state of Azawad, their circumstantial allies' avowed goal was to impose a puritan brand of Islam on the whole of Mali. The latter eventually prevailed in what is now known as 'the Battle of Gao'[23], thanks to their greater firepower and superior military and ideological infrastructure. The MNLA thus side-lined, the Islamists ruled for about ten months over the major cities of Northern Mali, including the historic city of Timbuktu.

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[22] This video is available at http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20120315171453/ Accessed on 29 May 2015
[23] This refers to the battle that took place in Gao between 26-27 June 2012, between the MNLA on one side and the MUJAO and its *ansar al-din* allies on the other.

Among other things, the implementation of a puritanical interpretation of Islam was translated into public flogging for violating the rules on socializing, smoking or listening to music or again the dress code put in place. Thieves' limbs were amputated. However, the most spectacular deeds of the puritans who ruled over Timbuktu for close to a year was the destruction of a number of Sufi shrines or mausoleums and the torching of manuscripts. In effect, in July 2012, shortly after UNESCO put the cultural treasures of Timbuktu on the list of endangered World Heritage Sites, the members of *ansar al-din* destroyed two tombs in the vicinity of the *Jingere-Ber*. At the Sidi Yahya mosque, the mausoleum of Sidi Yahya was likewise destroyed and the 'door of the resurrection' was smashed. The mausoleum of Sidi Moctar and Alpha Moya were equally destroyed. The media were rife with images of militants carrying guns, pickaxes and shovels, levelling shrines while shouting *Allahu Akbar*. By the time they were driven out of Timbuktu in January 2013, the puritans had destroyed at least eleven mausoleums. Reports have however shown that only a small quantity of manuscripts were destroyed, as most of them had been hidden by the locals before the puritans became masters of the city.

These destructions were followed by an international outcry condemning them as well as their perpetrators. Their symbolic character was best captured by the words of the director general of UNESCO, Irina Bokova. In an Op-ed, written for CNN, she stated that 'The attack on Timbuktu's cultural heritage is an attack against this history and the values it carries — values

of tolerance, exchange and living together, which lie at the heart of Islam. It is an attack against the physical evidence that peace and dialogue is possible.'[24]

II.4 Motivation and Objective
The motivation and objective that led to the destruction of the mausoleums and manuscripts are both religious and political. These are related to the identity of the iconoclasts. Both *ansar al-din* and the MUJWA are groups professing a puritanical brand of Islam. Indeed, both groups are affiliated to al-Qaeda, a nebula that drinks avidly in the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology. These groups abhor Sufism, perceived by them as a deviation from the path of Islamic orthodoxy. The main Sufi practice that was attacked in Timbuktu through the destruction of Mausoleums is known as *tawassul* ("intercession"). In effect, Sufi believe in the intercessory power of saints, whereas Islamic puritans argue that there should be no intermediaries between oneself and God. They assimilate the acceptance of intermediaries to idolatry and polytheism, otherwise known as *shirk*. The Islamists equally argued that the heights of the tombs destroyed were not in accord with Islamic precepts regarding this matter. As such, the way they were constructed was deemed un-Islamic.

Questioned by a journalist about the way he felt regarding the outpouring of condemnations that accompanied the destruction of the mausoleums, Sanda Ould Boumama, the spokesman for *ansar al-din*, replied as follows: 'God is unique. All of this is haram (forbidden).'[25] He is

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[24] Irina Bokova, 'Opinion: Timbuktu Tomb Attack is an Attack on our Humanity' *CNN* (online edition), 4 July 2012. Available at http://edition.cnn.com/2012/07/02/opinion/unesco-mali-opinion/ Accessed on 16 November 2013.
[25] Serge Daniel, 'Timbuktu Shrine Destruction a "War Crime": ICC' *AFP*, 1 July 2012. Available at http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hS4fpZaK-oeiFeVW-vVBB4pqZqxA?docId=CNG.7e9882926048daeb240a763da105c530.461 Accessed on 16 November 2013.

equally quoted as having asserted that 'The destruction is a divine order.'[26] Likewise, when destroying the legendary door of Sidi Yahya, the Islamists indicated that they wanted to "destroy the mystery" that surrounded this gateway, so that the locals could see that it was mere superstition and had nothing to do with true religion.[27]

In a letter written by Abdel-malek Droukdel, the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, to the *mujahedeen* in Mali, the project of this movement and its allies in the North of Mali and beyond is detailed. This is basically a religious-political project. He calls upon his men to act with tact, reproaching them their harshness in applying the *shari'a* (Islamic law), with the risk of jeopardizing the entire project, particularly if the people reject them. He equally invites his men to make alliances with the major tribal groups in the region and even espouse their political agenda, at least temporarily, as this could serve their cause, namely foster Islam in this region and beyond, and ultimately usher in an Islamic state. His words are worth quoting:

> We must not go too far or take risks in our decisions or imagine that this project is a stable Islamic state. It is too early for that, God knows. Instead, it is necessary to be cautious in the matter and we must be more realistic and look at it from a broader and more complete perspective to see a historic opportunity that must be exploited to interact with the Azawad people, including all its sectors, with the aim of uniting it and rallying it behind our Islamic project, by adopting its just cause and achieving its legitimate goals, while giving it an authentic Islamist tinge. This exceptional people, upon whose shoulders were established the Islamic conquests of the region and the Moravid nation (which maintained Islam and defended the Islamic nation for ages), is one of the warrior Islamic peoples that is a candidate for championing Islam and bearing its burdens in the region in the future.
> It is an important golden opportunity to extend bridges to the various sectors and parts of Azawad society _ Arab and Tawareg and Zingiya (black) _ to end the situation of political and social and intellectual separation (or isolation) between the Mujahedeen and these sectors, particularly the big tribes, and the main rebel movements with their

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[26] Ishaan Tharoor, 'Timbuktu's Destruction: Why Islamists are Wrecking Mali's Cultural Heritage' *Time Magazine (online edition)*, 2 July 2012. Available at http://world.time.com/2012/07/02/timbuktus-destruction-why-islamists-are-wrecking-malis-cultural-heritage/. Accessed on 16 November 2013.
[27] Monica Mark, 'Malian Islamists Attack World Heritage Sites Mosques in Timbuktu' *The Guardian (online edition)*, 2 July 2012. Available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/02/mali-islamists-attack-world-heritage-mosques-timbuktu. Accessed on 16 November 2013.

various ideologies, and the elite of Azawad society, its clerics, its groupings, its individuals and its noble forces.[28]

This document states, in unequivocal terms, the combined political and religious agenda of the puritans that ruled over Timbuktu for close to a year. The destructions of mausoleums took place in a bid to foster religious orthodoxy. However it equally took place in the context of symbolic power games with the international community. In effect, the dates on which the destruction occurred were not chosen randomly. They usually followed a declaration made by the UN Security Council or the UNESCO regarding the situation in Mali. For instance, in destructions that followed one of such declarations, the Islamists indicated that they wanted to show those who condemned them what they were really capable of doing.[29]

As things stand, therefore, the motivation and objective in both Bamiyan and Timbuktu appear to stem from a complex web of factors, mainly religious and political. Indeed, religion and politics stand out as two inseparable dimensions of the puritan project of the iconoclasts in Bamiyan (2001) and Timbuktu (2012). Each aspect reinforces the other. On the one hand, the puritans' political agenda is a logical offshoot of their religious project of spreading their version of Islam. On the other hand, the puritans' political project of building an Islamic State serves their desire to have the necessary space where their particular brand of Islam can flourish, thus resuscitating a romanticized golden age of Muslim history epitomised by Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, and his first set of companions. In order to come to a better understanding of what took place in Bamiyan and Timbuktu, it is important to place these two happenings in a broader framework by looking at other instances of Islamic iconoclasm.

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[28] *Mali-Al-Qaeda's Playbook*, pieced together and published by the Associated Press (pdf version), Chapter 1, page 2. Available at http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf

[29] Monica Mark, "Malian Islamists Attack World Heritage Site Mosques in Timbuktu" online version of the Guardian, published on 02 July 2012, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/02/mali-islamists-attack-world-heritage-mosques-timbuktu, accessed on 29 May 2015.

CHAPTER TWO

BAMIYAN AND TIMBUKTU IN PERSPECTIVE: OTHER INSTANCES OF ISLAMIC ICONOCLASM

I. The Purification of the Kaʿba (ca. 630)

I.1 The Kaʿba: A Muslim Site of Memory

The French historian and member of the French Academy, Pierre Nora, coined the expression

lieux de mémoire ('sites of memory') in the context of his major work on French memory and

identity, entitled *Les lieux de mémoire* (1984-92), made up of seven volumes. In his

understanding, "A *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material

in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of

the memorial heritage of any community" (Nora 1996: XVII). In other words, sites of

memory are loci "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora 1989: 7). These sites

are the expression of "a will to remember" (Nora 1989: 19), and they are an essential

component in the definition of a people's identity. Sites of memory include material objects and places such as commemorative monuments, inherited property, libraries, archives and museums. However they equally comprise concepts and practices such as mottos, rituals and commemorative festivals or pilgrimages. Sites of memory respond to the need for every ideological system, be it political, religious or other, to produce a symbolism of its own in which its worldview is encapsulated. They are the object as well as the subject of a historical narrative. This narrative is part of the communal memory and identity of the group under consideration.

The Ka'ba ('the cube'), also known as *Bayt Allāh* (the house of Allah) or again *al-Bayt al-Ḥaram* (The Sacred House), is indisputably the most sacred site of Islam. It constitutes the historical, spiritual and geographical epicentre of the Muslim community. Five times a day, devout Muslims turn in the direction of the Ka'ba to perform their ritual prayers (*salat*), a sacred direction known as *qiblah*.[30] The Qur'an suggests that the choice of this direction was a divine directive: 'We have seen you turning your face about the sky (searching for the right direction). We now assign a Qiblah that is pleasing to you. Henceforth, you shall turn your face towards the Sacred Masjid. Wherever you may be, all of you shall turn your faces towards it.' [2:144] Other ritual acts such as the slaughtering of animals and the making of offerings equally take place while facing this direction. Furthermore, every year millions of Muslims converge to Mecca for the *ḥajj* (major pilgrimage) in compliance with one of the five pillars of Islam, which stipulates that every Muslim, who is fit and can afford the means to do so, is bound to go to Mecca on pilgrimage at least once in their life time. The circumambulation of the Ka'ba constitutes one of the focal points of this pilgrimage. Indeed, the Qur'ān stipulates in *Sura Al 'Imran* (The Amramites) that "The people owe it to GOD that

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[30] Q*iblah* (Ar.) means 'that which is opposite'.

they shall observe Hajj to this shrine [The Ka'ba], when they can afford it" [3:97]. The *ḥajj* symbolises, among other things, the spiritual and historical link between Muslims of all generations, from Muhammad and his first companions to contemporary Muslims. This historical bond, portrayed in the pilgrimage, is accurately described by McMillan (2011)[31] for whom

> [The] rituals of the *ḥajj* to Mecca, the City of God, and the *ziyārah* to Medina, the City of His Prophet, anchor the Islamic faith in its Arabian origins and preserve the sense of historical continuity with Muḥammad and the earliest community of Muslims. The *ḥajj* gives Muslims the chance to follow their Prophet's precedent, to walk where he walked, and to enact the rituals he laid down in the Farewell *Ḥajj*.

Therefore, much more than the mere re-enactment of a ritual performed approximately fourteen centuries ago by Muhammad, each pilgrimage to Mecca and to the Ka'ba constitutes a way of re-appropriating the perennial message conveyed by the mere presence of the Ka'ba, namely that 'there is no divinity but Allah.' This message is at the heart of Muslim collective memory and identity. The Ka'ba is thus the principal material site of memory for the Muslim community. However, considering the fact that the Ka'ba predated the advent of Islam as a religious system, it is worthwhile asking how it became the site of memory *par excellence* of the Muslim community. This appears to have occurred through a process of purification understood here as symbolic re-appropriation.

I.2 The 'Purification' of the Ka'ba

As the Islamic tradition[32] would have it, prior to becoming the nexus of Muslim communal prayer and identity, the Ka'ba was home to a number of idols, worshipped in the Arabian Peninsula during a period of history known as the *jāhiliyya*. The word *jāhiliyya* is made up of

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[31] M.E. McMillan, *The Meaning of Mecca: The Politics of Pilgrimage in Early Islam* (ebook edition for kindle).

[32] Throughout this discussion, the expression 'Islamic tradition' is used generically to refer to the body of traditional Muslim literature, which includes the biographies of Muhammad (*sīras*), exegetical commentaries of the Quran (*tafsīrs*), and collections of narratives pertaining to the words and deeds of Muhammad (*ḥadīths*). The earliest among these writings were produced in the second century of the *Hijra* (8th century C.E.).

the root *j-h-l*, which refers to ignorance or lack of knowledge. This root occurs at least

twenty-four times, in six different forms, in the Qur'an. More often than not, it either depicts a

mind-set or a historical period. The historical period to which it customarily refers is that of

the centuries which immediately preceded the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. This

epoch is portrayed as one characterised by a state of "pagan ignorance": "Do they want

judgement according to the time prior to the advent of Islam in Arabia [lit. the state of pagan

ignorance]?" [5:50] Again, "do not make a display of yourselves in the manner of the first

jāhiliyya (*ḥamiyyat al- jāhiliyya*)" [33:33].[33]

The religious ignorance entailed here was made manifest in the polytheism and idolatry

rampant in Mecca, in and around the Ka'ba during the epoch prior to the advent of Islam. The

Ka'ba, this cuboid structure –destroyed and reconstructed a number of times– is portrayed in

the classical Islamic tradition as having been willed by Allah as a place of worship for Adam

after his expulsion from paradise, allowing him to emulate the circumambulation of the angels

around the divine throne in heaven. The Ka'ba was thus meant to be an earthly replica of

Allah's Throne in heaven. It was wrecked by the flood that destroyed the people of the

prophet Noah. Nonetheless its foundations were preserved. The Ka'ba was then rebuilt by

Abraham, the proto-Muslim, with the help of his son Ishmael, at God's behest. *Sura Al-*

Baqarah (The Heifer) makes reference to this when it states: "As Abraham raised the

foundations of the shrine, together with Ismail (they prayed): 'Our Lord, accept this from us.

You are the Hearer, the Omniscient'" [2: 127]. In effect, Abraham is viewed in Islam as a

prophetic figure and the representative of proto-Islam, an uncorrupted form of monotheism

prior to the advent of the the Judeo-Christian tradition. Abraham is notably portrayed this way

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[33] See H. Altenmüller et al. (ed.), *Handbook of Oriental Studies. Section One: The Near and Middle East, Vol. 85 Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Leiden.Boston: Brill, 2008), 179-180.

in *Sura al-Baqarah* [2:135]: "They said, 'You have to be Jewish or Christian, to be guided.' Say, 'We follow the religion of Abraham - monotheism - he never was an idol worshiper.'"

As things stand, therefore, the Ka'ba was diverted from its original purpose by polytheistic and idolatrous Arabs. Indeed, before becoming the nexus of Muslim communal prayer and identity, it was a shrine that offered shelter to a number of statues and paintings, many of which were allegedly associated with some of the Arab deities worshiped in and around the Arabian Peninsula during the *jāhiliyya*. Famous among these deities was Hubal, the foremost male deity of Mecca (See Ibn al-Kalbi, *Kitab al-asnam*; King 2004: 219). Following the advent of Islam and in order to regain its original role as a place of worship for the one true God, the Ka'ba needed 'purification' or re-establishment.

Consequently, when Muhammad and his followers wrestled Mecca from the hands of the Quraysh (ca. 630), reclaiming the Ka'ba as the sanctuary of the one true God stood topmost on their agenda. This project entailed the obliteration of anything leading to idolatry or polytheism in and around the ka'ba. We get a glimpse of how this purification was carried out from the account of the historian Ibn Kathir:

> The Muslim army entered the city unpretentiously and peacefully. No house was robbed, no man or woman was insulted. The Prophet granted a general amnesty to the entire population of Mecca. Only four criminals, whom justice condemned, were proscribed. He did however, order the destruction of all idols and pagan images of worship, upon which three hundred and fifty idols [other accounts speak of three hundred and sixty idols] which were in the Sacred House of Ka'ba were thrown down. The Prophet himself destroyed a wooden pigeon hung from the roof and regarded as one of the deities of the Quraysh. During the downfall of the images and idols he was heard to cry aloud: "Allah is great. Truth has come and falsehood has vanished; verily falsehood is fleeting" [Q. 17: 81]. The old idolaters observed thoughtfully the destruction of their gods, which were utterly powerless (Ibn Kathir 1999: 221).

The purification of the Ka'ba is thus portrayed by classical Islamic literature as an act of restoration or re-appropriation, meant to give back to the Ka'ba the role it should never have

stopped playing, namely that of a sanctuary where the one true God is worshiped. This is expressed in the verse of the Qur'an seemingly recited by Muhammad as he went about smashing idols in and around the Ka'ba: "The truth has prevailed, and falsehood has vanished; falsehood will inevitably vanish" [17:81].

Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984), a researcher in Islamic wisdom tradition, provides a spiritual reading of this purification by asserting that

> [I]f the Ka'ba is the heart of man, the idols, which inhabited it, represent the passions which invest (*sic*) the heart and impede the remembrance of God. Therefore, the destruction of idols –and, by extension, the putting aside of every image likely to become an idol –is the clearest possible parable for Islam of the 'one thing necessary', which is the purification of the heart for the sake of *tawḥīd*, the bearing of witness or the awareness that 'there is no divinity save God' (2009: 5).

A "parable for Islam" as Burckhardt calls it, the purification of the Ka'ba is undoubtedly a major milestone in Islamic history for at least two reasons. Firstly, it expresses the very essence of Muslim faith and identity. The cornerstone of this identity is made up of two inseparable features: a firm rejection of *shirk* and an unequivocal affirmation of *tawḥīd*. In this light, Burckhardt (2009: 5) strikes the right chord when he depicts this act as "a parable of what Islam stands for". Secondly, it takes on the features of nothing less than a template of what Islamic iconoclasm is supposed to be. This prototypical character is reinforced by the involvement of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, in this episode. Muhammad's endorsement of this event is indeed of paramount importance, considering the fact that his words and actions take on a normative character for the Muslim community, as they constitute the kernel of the Sunnah or tradition. Whether or not he had this in mind, he set a precedent that could become the template for ulterior iconoclastic acts in Muslim history. Each iconoclastic act worth the name will have to serve the same purpose envisaged by this inaugural act, namely eschew *shirk* and promote *tawḥīd*. However, concurrently with this religious motivation and

objective, it will equally have a political dimension, namely aim at reforming the society in accord with Islamic precepts. In effect, far from being a mere affirmation of a subjective creed, the conquering of Mecca and the corollary purification of the Ka'ba was an eminently political act. At the time, Mecca was not only a religious high ground, but also a commercial and political crossroads where competing tribes sought to wield influence. Furthermore, Muhammad and his followers entered Mecca coming from Madinah where they had put in place what is perceived in Muslim history as the ideal Islamic society.

As things stand, therefore, in Mecca as in Bamiyan and Timbuktu, a politico-religious agenda led to iconoclastic acts being carried out. Even though each case has its own peculiarities, they have this politico-religious motivation and objective as their common feature. These are equally found in another episode of Islamic iconoclasm, namely the iconoclastic edict of Yazid II (721).

II.   The Iconoclastic Edict of Yazid II (721)

Yazid bin Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (687-724), otherwise known as Yazid II, was an Ummayad Caliph who ruled from 720 to 724. Yazid II took over from Omar II (r.717-720). Yazid II is reported to have issued an iconoclastic edict in 721. The most elaborate exposition of the reasons that led Yazid II to issue this edict is contained in a report presented at the fifth session of the Second Council of Nicaea (787) by presbyter John of Jerusalem, representative of the bishops of Anatolia:

> On 'Omar's death, Ezid [Yazid II, 720-724], a man of frivolous and unstable turn of mind, succeeded him. There lived a certain man at Tiberias, a ring- leader of the lawless Jews, a magician and fortune teller, an instrument of soul-destroying demons, whose name was Tessarakontapechys, a bitter enemy of the Church of God. On learning of the frivolity of the ruler Yazid, this most-wicked Jew approached him and

attempted to utter prophecies ... saying: 'You will remain thirty years in this your kingship if you follow my advice.' That foolish tyrant, yearning for a long life (for he was self-indulgent and dissolute) answered: 'Whatever you say, I am ready to do, and, if I attain my desire, I will repay you with highest honours.' Then the Jewish magician said to him: '**Order immediately, without any delay or postponement, that an encyclical letter be issued throughout your empire to the effect that every representational painting, whether on tablets or in wall-mosaics, on sacred vessels or on altar coverings, and all such objects as are found in Christian churches, be destroyed and thoroughly abolished, nay also representations of all kinds that adorn and embellish the market places of cities**' (Cited in Vasiliev 1956: 28-29).[34]

It is suggested here that Yazid II took his decision under the influence of a Jewish magician who had promised him longevity in power in exchange for an iconoclastic edict. However, Yazid died barely two-and-the-half years after this edict and his son Walid is reported to have ordered the execution of the magician.

Some scholars doubt the fact that such an edict was ever passed. Their suspicion is based on the fact that, most of the information available on this edict comes not from Muslim but Christian sources which mention it in the context of polemical discourses (see Oleg Grabar 1977). However, there are indications that there was iconoclasm carried out by Muslims under 'Omar II, the predecessor of Yazid II and which is likely to have continued under Yazid II. This suggests that there was at least a tacit approbation of iconoclasm. For instance, based on his analysis of an inscription dated 719-720, R. de Vaux conjectures that the mosaics of the church of Ma'in were restored in this year, following their destruction by Muslim iconoclasts during the reign of 'Omar II who died in 720 (cf. de Vaux 1938).

Furthermore, Grabar's argument that no Muslim sources make mention of Yazid II's edict is inaccurate. Indeed, a number of documents exist, pointing to the mention of this edict in Muslim sources. The historian Abu Umar Muhammad ibn-Yusuf al-Kindi (d. 961) is the

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[34] The highlight is mine.

earliest known Arab Muslim author to mention the edict of Yazid II. Al-Kindi thrived in the

10th century, under the dynasty of the Ikshidids (935-969). In his opus *The Governors and*

Judges of Egypt, he writes: "Yazid, son of 'Abd-al-Malik, wrote in A.H. 104 [A.D. 722-723]

ordering the statues to be broken; and all of them were broken, and the likeness were

obliterated" (Cited by Vasiliev 1956: 39). In the fifteenth century, another Arab Muslim

historian, Taqi-al-Din Ahmad al-Maqrizi (1364-1442) makes mention of this edict in his work

Al-Khitat (*A Historical and Topographical Description of Egypt*). He writes:

> Then churches were destroyed; crosses were broken; likenesses were obliterated. All
> statues were destroyed –and they were many –in the year A.H. 104 [A.D. 722-723]. At
> that time, the caliph was Yazid, son of 'Abd-al-Malik. And after Hisham-ibn-'Abd-al-
> Malik had become caliph, he wrote to Egypt that the Christians might follow their
> customs, and that they should not thereafter be disturbed (*Al Khitat*, II, 493; cited by
> Vasiliev 1956: 39).

Al-Maqrizi suggests that there was need for another edict, to cancel the one that was issued by

Yazid II, in order to allow Christians to follow their customs.

The most explicit reference to Yazid II's iconoclastic edict in Muslim sources comes from yet

another historian, of Mamluk origin, Abu-l-Mahasin-ibn-Tagribardi (1411-1469). In his work

on the history of Egypt, he writes: "Then came to the governor to Egypt a letter from the

Caliph Yazid-ibn-'Abd-al-Malik-ibn-Marwan [commanding] statues and pictures to be

destroyed. All the statues, in his time, were broken, and the pictures in the houses of Misr and

of other places were obliterated" (Cited by Vasiliev 1956: 40). There are consequently no

unwavering reasons to doubt that such an edict was ever issued.

Yazid's edict has an eminently political component. It is indeed portrayed as a condition he

needs to fulfil in order to stay in power. Here, as in Bamiyan and Timbuktu, the religious and

political agenda reinforce each other, leading to iconoclasm. Yazid's edict is a case in point of

Islamic iconoclasm carried out, like in Bamiyan (2001), with respect to a different faith tradition, unlike in Timbuktu where iconoclasm is intra-Muslim, having to do with Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxis. This said, it would be interesting to explore our third historical instance of Islamic iconoclasm. This is the relation of Islam to the Byzantine Iconoclastic controversy.

III.   Islam and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy (726-843)[35]

The Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy refers to the dispute that took place in the Christendom in the 8th and 9th centuries on the production and use of religious images (icons). This controversy occurred in two waves. The first wave started in 726 when the Byzantine emperor Leo III took a public stance against icons, thereby paving the way for iconoclasm and the persecution of iconodules. It ended in 787 when the seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, convened by the empress Irene, condemned iconoclasm and re-established the use of images. The iconoclast party regained power in 814 when Leo V became emperor. This led to the second wave of iconoclasm starting in 815 with the official banning of images by the Council of Constantinople. This second iconoclastic period ended with the death of emperor Theophilus in 842 and the official restoration of icon veneration by his widow in 843. In this controversy, iconoclasts backed their arguments by quoting from Exodus 20: 4: "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below." They consequently argued that iconography was a form of idolatry. On their part, iconodules put to the fore the symbolic role played by icons, stressing

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[35] For a detailed account of the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy, see Edward James Martin, *A History of the Iconoclastic Controversy* (1930).

the difference between the signifier and the signified. They equally upheld the dignity of matter made manifest in the Incarnation, as an argument for the making and use of icons. Matter is indeed used in Christian liturgies: water, wine, bread, etc.

By the time of the first iconoclastic period in the Byzantine Empire (726-787), Islam was an already well-established and expanding religion. Its teachings were spreading far beyond the Arabian Peninsula. It will therefore be legitimate to wonder whether or not the iconoclastic edicts of Emperor Leo III were inspired by Islam's rejection of figural representations and the edict of Yazid II published in 721. Was Byzantine Iconoclasm influenced by Muslim Iconoclasm? In other words, did Islam influence the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy or were Islamic aniconism and Byzantine Iconoclasm two parallel movements? Scholars are divided around this question.

Some scholars argue that there wasn't any influence of Islam on Byzantine iconoclasm. André Grabar (1896-1990), a historian of medieval and Byzantine art, is one of them. Founding his argument on the analysis of obliterated monuments of the Umayyad period and texts related to them, he asserts that Islamic iconoclasm and Byzantine Iconoclasm were two independent, parallel and simultaneous movements (Grabar 1957: 396, 401). King (1985) equally denies any influence of Islam on Byzantine Iconoclasm. He contends that there is scarcely any evidence of iconoclasm in Muslim territories outside Arabia, before the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate in 750. In King's opinion,

> It is possible that the Iconoclast party within Byzantine territory was encouraged to imitate Yazid's activities, but in terms of doctrine and iconography, iconoclasm had deeper roots within Christianity itself. It did not need Islam to invent Christian opposition to images; the extensive use of icons in the Christian world was sufficient to stimulate a profound objection to them among those Christians who felt that alien, pagan-like practices had intruded into their religion (King 1985: 268).

Furthermore, King views the silence of Christian and Islamic sources on the issue as an indication that "no long-sustained and total repression of Christian images ever took place in the early Islamic period to match in effectiveness the suppression of pagan idols in Arabia carried out by the Prophet" (King 1985: 268-269). Notwithstanding the arguments of Grabar (1957) and King (1985), it is hardly conceivable that the ideas and beliefs of the rapidly growing Muslim community had not reached the heart of Byzantium by 726, at the beginning of the Iconoclastic Controversy. This is the basic conviction of scholars who argue that Islam played a role in Byzantine Iconoclasm.

Patricia Crone, a scholar of early Islamic history, sees the influence of Islam in the proportions taken by Byzantine Iconoclasm. She speaks of the propensity of Islam to render epidemic what had hitherto been merely endemic:

> *A priori*, the theory that Iconoclasm was a Byzantine response to Islam is certainly not implausible, and no serious objection has so far been advanced against it. It can, of course, be argued that, inasmuch as hostility to images is endemic in Christianity, what looks like a pattern of Christian-Muslim interaction is to be dismissed as pure coincidence. But it is considerably simpler to assume that it was the role of Islam to turn epidemic what had hitherto been merely endemic –particularly as the search for alternative causes has only lead to an alarming accumulation of unsatisfactory theories (Crone 1980: 59).

Crone blames the official iconoclasm among Arabs initiated by the edict of Yazid II for the outbreak of popular iconoclasm in Anatolia in 724. This reached Constantinople in 726, year of the passing of Leo III's first iconoclastic edict. For Crone (1980: 69-70), there is no coincidence in this pattern.[36]

Furthermore, there are indications that at the time Leo III ascended the imperial throne in 717, he was not a declared iconoclast. The first of such indications is a seal from the first years of

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[36] L. Brubaker and J. F. Haldon equally argue for an influence from Islam on Byzantine Iconoclasm in *Byzantium in the Iconoclast era (ca. 680- ca. 850): A History* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

his reign. This seal bears the emperor's image on one side and the image of the Virgin holding

the Infant Jesus on the other. The seal bears the legend: "Leo and Constantine, the Faithful

Emperors of the Romans." This is an indication that it must have been in use after 720, when

Constantine V was associated to the imperial throne (Lihacev 1936: 473). Also, Leo III

received a letter from the Caliph 'Omar II, predecessor of Yazid II (hence before 720), in

which 'Omar II asks him why he adores pictures and the cross. In his reply, Leo III explains

why Christians honour the cross and goes ahead to add:

> As for pictures, … finding in the Old Testament that divine command which
> authorized Moses to have executed in the tabernacle the figures of the Cherubim, and
> animated by a sincere attachment for the disciples of the Lord, who burned with love
> for the Saviour Himself, we have always felt a desire to conserve their images, which
> have come down to us from their times as living representations. Their presence
> charms us, and we glorify God who has saved us through the intermediary of His only
> begotten Son, who appeared in the world in a similar figure, and we glorify the saints.
> But as for the wood and colours, we do not give them any reverence.[37]

This text suggests that Leo III was not an iconoclast at the moment of his accession to the

imperial throne. His change in attitude must have been the result of a later influence, most

likely Islamic faith and culture.

Oleg Grabar (1929-2011) adopts a typographical distinction in order to distinguish 'Byzantine

*I*conoclasm' from 'Islamic *i*conoclasm.' According to Grabar, 'this secondary typographical

distinction illustrates first of all the difference between a historical moment (these are

presumably capitalized) and an attitude or mode of behaviour, the latter being apparently too

common to deserve capitalization' (Grabar 1977: 45). One other difference that stands out

from history is the fact that in Islamic iconoclasm, the target is often non-Muslim. In this

sense, contemporary waves of Islamic iconoclasm, notably Timbuktu, where Muslim shrines

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[37] Letter given by the Armenian historian Ghevond, translated and explained with care by A. Jeffrey, 'Ghevond's Text of the Correspondence between 'Omar II and Leo III,' *Havard Theological Review*, XXXVII (1944) 269-332), p. 322.

come under attack, are a new development, initiated in the nineteenth century with the Wahhabi attack on Mecca and the *hajj*.

IV.   The Wahhabi Attack on Mecca and the *Hajj* (1803)

An attack on Mecca and the *hajj* was carried out by the alliance formed by the Wahhabi[38] and the house of al-Saud in 1803. Wahhabism was founded in the 18th century by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1787) in the Arabian Peninsula, under Ottoman rule, in a move to correct what he perceived as a deviation from the pure monotheistic faith of Islam. In fact, the major work written by this son of a *qadi* and grandson of a *mufti* was entitled *Kitab al-tawḥīd* or *Book on the Oneness* (*of God*), in direct reference to the cornerstone of Muslim theology, namely God's oneness. His puritan theology did not come out of the blue, but took shape while he was studying in Medina under Sheikh 'Abd Allah Ibrahim al-Najdi (al-Madani), of the Hanbali School of Islamic jurisprudence, who insisted in his teaching on the decline of Islam in Najd and on the necessity for in-depth religious reforms. Waardenburg (1988) asserts that this Sheikh drew abundantly from Ibn Taymiyya (1262-1328), a puritan reformer along Hanbali lines. This is probably a major reason why Ibn Taymiyya is one of the few authoritative figures of the juristic tradition who are recognized and cited by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab.

The 1803 alliance between the Wahhabi and the house of al-Saud was one between an Islamic puritanical movement and a political elite, with the aim of fighting another political power equally perceived as a source of corruption for the faith. Indeed, the alliance between the movement founded by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and the house of al-Saud was meant

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[38] For a history of Wahhabism and Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, see Commins (2006) and Cook (1992).

to fight the Ottomans viewed both as an occupying political and military power as much as a religious enemy, introducing innovations contrary to what the Wahhabi perceived as Islamic orthodoxy. In their vision, this orthodoxy coincided with the austere Bedouin culture of Najd. This Wahhabi-Saudi pact was sealed in 1744 with "the conquest of Hijaz and the control of the *hajj* as its primary objective, in order to unify the Arabian peninsula both religiously and politically as a revived model of the first Islamic community" (Noyes 2013: 76). El Fadl (2005: 62) further specifies the objectives of each contracting party: "The Al Sa'ud family sought to defeat all other contenders and rule over Arabia… the Wahhabis sought to enforce their puritanical brand of Islam on all of Arabia." Noyes (2013: 76) gives the justification for the control of Mecca. It was based "on perceived abuses of the Kaaba with the idols and rituals that had become associated with the *Hajj* through a combination of local Hijazi tradition and the influence of thousands of foreign visitors." During this attack, images and shrines were destroyed, just like in the 'purification' of the Ka'ba by Muhammad. Tombs and domes built over tombs were equally destroyed and pilgrims were prevented from going to these tombs for intercessory prayers. This alliance went ahead to equally attack Madinah in 1805. On this occasion, the dome designating the tomb of Muhammad's daughter, Fatimah, was destroyed. That of Muhammad's tomb was spared. Burckhardt (1992) opines that it wasn't spared for theological reasons but rather because of the difficulties encountered in trying to destroy it:

> Even the large dome over the tomb of Muhammad, at Medinah, was destined to share a similar fate [obliteration]. Saoud had given orders that it should be demolished; but its solid structure defied the rude efforts of his soldiers; and after several of them had been killed by falling from the dome, the attempt was given up. This the inhabitants of Medinah declared to have been done through the interposition of Heaven (Burckhardt 1992: 108-110).

The religious and political agenda of the Wahhabi together with their circumstantial allies are quite clear and fall in line with instances previously cited.

This overview has given us the opportunity to apply the method of variation of imagination, key to describing phenomena in the phenomenology of religion. Variation of imagination consists in comparing the phenomenon under study with other related, but different phenomena. This situates Bamiyan (2001) and Timbuktu (2012) in a broader framework and points to the 'universal structures' present in the 'particular cases' being considered. The intermingling of religion and politics, as the basic motivation and objective of the Muslim iconoclasts, is noteworthy in all these different cases. The demarcation line between religion and politics is blurred in each of these cases. Very often this is a reflection of the lack of clarity in the motivation and objective of the iconoclasts. Their avowed aim is often not what is achieved at the end of the day by acts of iconoclasm, even if they claim the contrary.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONTRADICTION INHERENT TO THE PURITANS' AGENDA

I.   *Tawḥīd* versus *Shirk*

In the classical Islamic tradition, *tawḥīd* (oneness or unity) is understood under three interconnected and complementary categories.[39] The need for this categorization of *tawḥīd* arose when Islam started embracing new cultures, beyond the borders of the Arabian Peninsula. The first category is *Tawḥīd ar-Rubūbīyah* (unity of lordship), which refers to the imperative to maintain the unity of lordship. In other words, it affirms that Allah is one without partners in his sovereignty. This category is based on the fact that Allah is the creator and upholder of everything that exists: 'Allah created all things and He is the agent on which all things depend' (39: 62; see also 37: 96, 8: 17, and 64: 11). In this light Allah has authority over all that exists and on the course of history. Commenting on this, the nineteenth hadith of an-Nawawi's *Forty Hadith*, reported by Ibn 'Abbās and collected by at-Tirmidhi has this to say:

> Be aware that if the whole of mankind gathered together in order to do something to help you, they would only be able to do something for you which Allah had already written for you. Likewise if the whole of mankind gathered together to harm you, they would only be able to do something to harm you which Allah had already ordered to happen to you.'[40]

This category consequently stresses Allah's absolute sovereignty and cautions against ascribing him other partners (*shirk*) in this sovereignty. The worship of figural representations is consequently a breach of *tawḥīd*.

The second category is *Tawḥīd al-Asmā' waṣ-Ṣifāt* (the oneness of names and attributes). According to this categorization, Allah's names and attributes are unique and unrivalled. This

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[39] See ibn Abil-'Ezz al-Ḥanafi, *Sharḥ Al-'Aqīdah aṭ-Ṭaḥāwiyah*, p. 78, cited by Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, *The Fundamentals of Tawheed* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005), 18-41.
[40] 'Ezzedin Ibrahīm and Denys Johnson-Davies, *an-Nawawi's Forty Ḥadeeth*, English translation (Damascus: The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1976), 68.

entails, amidst other things, that Allah cannot receive any names except those he has given to himself and these names cannot be given to creatures without adding the prefix 'Abd meaning "slave of" or "servant of" (Philips 2005: 30). This categorization is based on the Qur'anic assertion according to which "there is nothing like Him" [42: 11]. In effect, "Allah, none has the right to be worshiped but He. To Him belong the most perfect and beautiful names" [20: 8]. The Sunna equally upholds *Tawḥīd al-Asmā' waṣ-Ṣifāt*. For instance, a hadith from both Bukhari and Muslim, reported by Abu Hurairah, attributes the following words to Muhammad, the prophet of Islam: "Verily, Allah has ninety-nine Names, one hundred except one. Whoever memorises and comprehends them will enter paradise." Finally, the third category is *tawḥīd al-ʿIbādah* which maintains that Allah alone has the right to be worshiped.

Any breach of *tawḥīd* is an act of *shirk*. Indeed, *shirk* is the antithesis of *tawḥīd*. It is built from the root *sh-r-k* which could mean "side road, to branch off; to share, to become a partner, to make as partner, or associate, partnership" (Altenmüller et al. 2008: 483). Words and expressions making use of this root are relatively frequent in the Qur'an, occurring at least 168 times, generally used against those who are accused of "associating" others with God as objects of worship, be it in the form of idolatry or polytheism. *Shirk* is undeniably the greatest sin in Islam as evidenced by a passage in the Qur'an which clearly states that Allah forgives all sins except *kufr* (disbelief) and *shirk* (*Surah an-Nisa*: 116). The 'purification' of the Kaʿba constitutes a stern rejection of s*hirk* and a vibrant assertion of *tawḥīd*. But in what way do the figurative representations destroyed during iconoclastic acts constitute a breach of the sacrosanct Islamic precept of *tawḥīd*?

II.   *Shirk* and Figural Representations

Representation (*taswir*) is not an issue *per se* in the Qur'an. As a matter of fact, the Qur'ān does not contain any straightforward directives either permitting or prohibiting figurative representations. Whenever it evokes representations, it does so in terms that suggest that they are not a problem in themselves. This is the case in *Sura Al'Imran* (The Amramites), where Jesus, God's messenger, creates replicas of birds with clay: "As a messenger to the Children of Israel: 'I come to you with a sign from your Lord - I create[41] for you from clay the shape of a bird, then I blow into it, and it becomes a live bird by GOD's leave'" [3:49]. In the same vein, in *Saba'* (Sheba), Solomon, a prophetic and kingly figure, is given authority over *Jinn*[42]. Among the many duties they perform at his service, they make statues: "They made for him anything he wanted - niches, statues, deep pools, and heavy cooking pots" [34:12-13]. Nonetheless, figural imagery becomes problematic if it leads to *shirk*. This is the case in the episode of the golden calf made by Moses' people (*Al-A'araf* 7:148). It is equally the case in the incident in which Abraham destroys the statues worshipped by his father and his people (*Al-Anbya'* 21: 51-67).

In the Sunna, there are approximately a dozen hadiths, hailing from different collections, pertaining to figurative representations. All of these are *ahadith ahad*, in other words, each of them was narrated by only one narrator. Some of them are *mawquf*, meaning that they can be traced back to a companion of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. In effect, based on the number of narrators at each level in the *isnad* (chain of transmission), *ahadith* can be sub-divided in two categories. The first category is *mutawatir* or 'successive' narration in which there are numerous narrators at each level in the chain of transmission. The veracity of such

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[41] It is significant that here the verb *khalaqa*, 'to create', is used – probably the only instance in the Qur'an of it being used with any being other than God as its subject.
[42] In Arabian mythology, a *jinni* (plural *jinn*) is a supernatural spirit below the level of angels and devils.

ahadith is usually considered unquestionable. Those that do not fulfil the conditions to qualify as *mutawatir* fall in the category of ahadith *ahad*.

These hadiths underscore the eschewal of figurative representations. These representations are forthrightly rejected as offending God. For instance, in various hadiths, the making of figurative representations is considered a usurpation of divine creative powers and the only representations allowed are pictures of plants and other inanimate objects[43]:

> Narrated Sa`id bin Abu Al−Hasan: While I was with Ibn `Abbas a man came and said, "O father of `Abbas! My sustenance is from my manual profession and I make these pictures." Ibn `Abbas said, "I will tell you only what I heard from Allah's Apostle. I heard him saying, **'Whoever makes a picture will be punished by Allah till he puts life in it, and he will never be able to put life in it.'** "Hearing this, that man heaved a sigh and his face turned pale. Ibn `Abbas said to him, "**What a pity! If you insist on making pictures I advise you to make pictures of trees and any other inanimate objects**." (3.428)

Furthermore Angels, considered as Allah's messengers, do not enter a house in which there are figural representations, neither do they enter into a house where there is a dog.[44] Figurative representations are thus ranked among impurities which keep Allah's messengers at bay (4.448; See also 4.449, 4.450 and 5.338[45]). Additionally, still according to the hadiths, a severe punishment awaits makers of pictures on the Day of Judgement. They will be challenged, amidst other things, to give life to the work of their hands. This challenge is an indication of the fact that their work is perceived as a usurpation of divine creative powers [4:47]. Some *ahadith* call forthrightly for the destruction of images and the levelling of graves. For instance, Abul Hayyaj al-Asadi told that Ali ibn Abu Talib said to him: "Should I not send you on the same mission as Allah's Messenger sent me? **Do not leave an image without obliterating it, or a high grave without levelling it**. This hadith has been reported

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[43] In each of the *ahadith* cited the highlight is mine.
[44] In some narrations dogs, particularly black ones, are associated with evil or impurity.
[45] [5.338] specifies the kind of images that are rejected: 'images of creatures that have souls.'

by Habib with the same chain of transmitters and he said: **(do not leave) a picture without obliterating it"** (*Hadith - Muslim, Narrated Ali ibn Abu Talib*).

In the same vein, those who worship at the graves of pious people and makers of pictures are despicable in the sight of God:

> When the Prophet became ill, some of his wives talked about a church which they had seen in Ethiopia and it was called Mariya. Um Salma and Um Habiba had been to Ethiopia, and both of them narrated its (the Church's) beauty and the pictures it contained. The Prophet raised his head and said, "**Those are the people who, whenever a pious man dies amongst them, make a place of worship at his grave and then they make those pictures in it. Those are the worst creatures in the Sight of Allah.**" (*Hadith - Sahih Bukhari 2.425, Narrated Aisha, r.a.*)

These last two hadiths would particularly be relevant in the case of Timbuktu where the 'icons' that came under attack were mausoleums.

However, a hadith seems to suggest that playing with figurative representations can be allowed as long as the person playing with them does so innocently:

> I used to play with the dolls in the presence of the Prophet, and my girl friends also used to play with me. When Allah's Apostle used to enter (my dwelling place) they used to hide themselves, but the Prophet would call them to join and play with me. (**The playing with the dolls and similar images is forbidden, but it was allowed for 'Aisha at that time, as she was a little girl, not yet reached the age of puberty**.) (*Hadith - Bukhari 8:151, Narrated 'Aisha* Fateh-al-Bari page 143, Vol.13)

At face value, therefore, Hadiths are more straightforward than the Qur'an in their condemnation of figurative representations. Their sternness could be explained by the fact that the Muslim community emerged against the backdrop of the *jāhiliyya*. As mentioned earlier on, during the *jāhiliyya*, idol-worship was common place in the Arabian Peninsula and one can legitimately assume that most Arabs who embraced Islam had hitherto worshiped idols. These idols were essentially materialised by figurative representations. This interpretation is

corroborated by a hadith which suggests that the proximity to the period of the *jāhiliyya* might be the reason for the hadiths' intransigence vis-à-vis figurative representations:

> Had your people not been close to the days of *jahiliyah*, I would have ordered that the *Bayt* [*Ka'bah*] be demolished, brought back to it what was removed from it, made it closer to the ground, and made for it two doors, an East door and a West door, and would have thus returned it to its Abrahamic basic (*See Sahih Al-Bukhari bi Sharh al-Sindi*, at 276, 'Baab Al-Hajj').

Al-Awlani (2000:9) asserts that "This *hadith* indicates that the Messenger of God (SAAS) was striving to eradicate the making of idols and their dissemination in the Arabian Peninsula among peoples who had until recently worshipped and adored them." The proscription of figurative representations is accordingly justified by the proximity with a period where they were considered as gods, and the ensuing need to completely cut ties with the idolatrous practices organised around them. As such, the hadiths prohibiting the making and usage of figural representations could be interpreted in relation to this particular context and perceived as bound to this time and context. However, as shall be seen below, the understanding of *jāhiliyya* has been expanded by reformers such as Sayyid Qutb. Beyond merely an epoch, it is a state of mind. This understanding of *jāhiliyya* is popular in groups professing a puritanical strand of Islam. The branding of a culture or a particular situation as being one of *jāhiliyya* can thus trigger the implementation of the hadiths proscribing figurative representations. Nevertheless, beyond the boundaries of these groups, the interpretation of these hadiths will vary over a wide spectrum, from one school of thought (*madhhab*) to the other, with some embracing their verbatim formulation and others putting them into context.[46]

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[46] For the variety of schools of thought on this issue, see Taha Jaber al-Awlani, '*Fatwa* concerning the United States Supreme Courtroom Frieze' in *Journal of Law and Religion* 15–1/2 (2000–2001): 1–18.

III. The jāhiliyya

The purification of the Ka'ba by Muhammad and his followers occurred against the backdrop of the *jāhiliyya*, the epoch that preceded the birth of Islam. According to the Islamic tradition, this era had ignorance of divine guidance as its main feature. This ignorance was displayed in the heterodox beliefs and practices that were rampant in the Arabian Peninsula, notably idolatry and polytheism. Even though the iconoclasm that took place in Bamiyan (2001) and Timbuktu (2012) occurred more than fourteen centuries after the birth of Islam, it still occurred against the backdrop of *jāhiliyya*. This time around, not so much as an epoch but rather as a state of mind. This perception of *jāhiliyya* is notably put to the fore by Sayyid Qutb, a Muslim reformist whose writings have had a far-reaching influence in shaping the thinking of Islamic puritan movements. In his *Milestones*, he asserts what follows:

> We are also surrounded by *Jahiliyyahh* today, which is of the same nature as it was during the first period of Islam, perhaps a little deeper. Our whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws is *Jahiliyyahh*, even to the extent that what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy and Islamic thought are also constructs of *Jahiliyyahh*. (Qutb 2006: 34)

In this light, iconoclastic acts in Bamiyan and Timbuktu are faithful to the template set out in the Meccan episode by Muhammad and his followers. The veneration associated with the Sufi shrines of Timbuktu and the existence of the giant Buddha statues in Bamiyan were perceived by the puritans as exhibiting a *jāhiliyya* mentality that had to be done away with.

IV. The Puritan Agenda

The emergence of a puritan orientation is a common feature of all ideological systems, be they political or religious in nature, or both. Puritanism usually arises as a response to the need felt by some to return to a perceived pristine purity. Those who decide to follow this path usually have the feeling that the initial intuition and ideal of the founder and his first set of followers have been betrayed. Puritans consider it a moral if not divine obligation to uproot

all sources of 'impurity' within the movement they are seeking to reform. Their stance is usually characterised by a Manichean outlook. This is accurately portrayed by van Velzen and van Beek (1988: 5) who assert that "Puritans view the world as a battlefield, where the forces of Good – always in short supply – battle against omnipresent Sin, Corruption and Evil". They are usually intolerant of alternative views and tend to raise their cultural idiosyncrasies to the status of unassailable truths. In Western scholarship, the term 'Puritan' or 'Puritanism' was first used in the 1560's to refer to those who were dissatisfied with the Protestant Reformation in the Elizabethan Church, particularly as regards ceremonial worship (Broeyer 1988: 38). They advocated a strict religious discipline.

Taken in the larger framework of the Abrahamic tradition which comprises Islam, Christianity and Judaism, Muhammad's purification of the Ka'ba is a puritan's act, seeking to radically reform a religious tradition that had lost its way. This iconoclastic project reaches far and wide into Muslim faith and identity. For instance, taking iconoclasm in its figurative meaning as the radical refutation of cherished beliefs and traditions, the Qur'an is, in itself, an iconoclastic text. In effect, at the heart of its message, lies the assertion of a radical monotheism in which ascribing partners to Allah (*shirk*) is an unforgivable sin (*Surah an-Nisa*: 116). In the Qur'an polemics against polytheists and idolaters is common place. These include not only the Arab tribes of 7th century Arabian Peninsula, but equally members of other monotheistic traditions, notably Christians and Jews, designated collectively in various passages by the appellation *ahl al-kitāb* (The People of the Book).[47] Even though Islam portrays itself as being in continuity with these two traditions, it equally denounces their deviations and presents itself as a return to the pure monotheistic faith practiced by Abraham.

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[47] For an account of this polemic, see G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), particularly Chapter Three.

The message of the Quran is portrayed as reintroducing those parts of previous scriptures that the People of the Book attempted to conceal [5:15]. Essential tenets of Christianity such as the double nature of Christ (human and divine) and the Trinity (three persons in one God) are radically questioned (Q. 16: 51; 6:163; 10:18, 28-9; 23:91). The Trinity is notably portrayed as a deviation [4: 171]. The Qur'an equally denies the reality of the crucifixion of Christ [4: 157], albeit the fact that it is perceived by Christians as essential to the salvation of the world. Furthermore, Jews and Christians are accused of having indulged in the distortion (*taḥrīf*) or substitution (*tabdīl*) of the original text of their own sacred scriptures (Q. 4:46; 5:13, 41-3; cf. Q. 2:75). [2:79] notably makes allusion to this when it denounces those "who write the book with their own hands and then they say, 'This is of God.'" As such the Qur'an questions these religious traditions in a radical manner, touching at the very essence of their faith and history, and portraying itself as the definitive revelation, and depicting Muhammad as the seal of the prophets. In this way, therefore, it is an iconoclastic text and Islam can be perceived as a puritan orientation within the larger framework of the Abrahamic tradition.

In contemporary Islam, puritans are heralds of what is fashionably known as "political Islam" or "Islamism," that is "Islam as political ideology rather than religion or theology" (Ayoob 2008: 2). Political Islam could be defined as

> [A] form of instrumentalization of Islam by individuals, groups and organisations that pursue political objectives… [Islamism] provides political responses to today's societal challenges by imagining a future, the foundations for which rest on reappropriated, reinvented concepts borrowed from the Islamic tradition" (Denoeux 2002: 61).

The puritans' reading of the main sources of Islamic faith and history is geared toward re-creating a society mirroring that which supposedly existed during the golden age of Muhammad and the "rightly guided companions" (*al salaf as-sahih*). This romanticization of a mostly mythical golden age is at the heart of the puritans' instrumentalization of Islam

(Ayoob 2008: 2). This passes through a decontextualization of Islam that denies the situatedness of many of the concepts and practices that are part and parcel of this faith tradition. As Ayoob accurately points out,

> This decontextualization of Islam allows Islamists to ignore the social, economic, and political milieus within which Muslim societies operate. It therefore provides Islamists a powerful ideological tool that they can wield in order to "purge" Muslim societies of "impurities" and "accretions", natural accompaniments of the historical process, which they see as the reason for Muslim decline (2002: 2).

This puritan agenda, perceivable in the Meccan episode, is very much present in the Bamiyan and Timbuktu occurrences. In Bamiyan, the Buddha statues were perceived by the Taliban as non-Islamic. Likewise in Timbuktu, the Sufi shrines that came under attack were seen as dangerous innovations introduced in the 'pure' religion of Islam. In both cases, there was an avowed aim to restructure societal life in a way that befits Islamic orthodoxy as understood by the puritans involved.

V.   At the Crossroads

The sites of memory that came under attack in Bamiyan and Timbuktu were all situated at cultural, religious and political crossroads. At such crossroads, a site of memory is, by essence, multifaceted and consequently beckons a plurality of meanings. In its very nature, such a site of memory eludes all attempts at reducing it to say one and only one thing. A fine case in point of such a plurality of interpretation would be the monument to the unknown Jewish martyr in Paris with inscriptions in French and Hebrew. Pleading for the sympathy and respect of the onlooker, its French inscription reads '*Devant le martyr Juif inconnu incline ton respect ta piété pour tous les martyrs...*' (Bow before the unknown Jewish martyr, showing respect and piety for all martyrs…). On its part, appealing to the collective memory of the Jewish people, the Hebrew text reads: '*Zakhor et-asher assa lekha Amalek*' – 'Remember

what Amalek did unto thee' (Deuteronomy 25: 17-19). One site of memory conveying two different messages to two different sets of people. This and all other sites of memory call for the creation of a space where this plurality of meanings can co-exist without necessarily cancelling out each other. In fact, this plurality in meaning points to the complex yet rich character of every site of memory, particularly those that are erected at the crossroads of cultures and religions. Whenever one particular meaning hijacks this space, there is likely to be violence and destruction, as was the case in Bamiyan and Timbuktu, where a particular religious perspective overran all other ways of looking at the sites of memory against which iconoclastic activities took place. In Bamiyan, the Taliban's actions were a forthright negation of other ways of looking at the giant Buddha statues. These other ways were suggested to the Taliban by the many voices that called upon them to give up their iconoclastic agenda. In Timbuktu, the puritans involved in the desecration of Sufi shrines failed to appreciate the plurality of approaches of the Muslim faith to which these shrines are a testimony, and the rich cultural heritage they represent, notably for the locals. This lack of appreciation, be it in Bamiyan or Timbuktu, led to the puritans' endeavour to hijack these sites of memory in an attempt to compel them to say one and only one thing. This is not different from the single meaning given to the Ka'ba after it was 'cleansed' of the numerous Arabian deities which had their home there.

VI.   The contradiction inherent to the fight against idolatry

Just like in Mecca, the main religious motivation and objective for the iconoclasm that took place in Bamiyan and Timbuktu had to do with the fight against idolatry. However, it is not certain that in each of these three cases, the act of 'purification' has indeed led to the abolition of idolatry. For instance, the purified Ka'ba, which is the most sacred site for Muslims, has

been perceived by some as an aberration. It was the case among the first generations of Christians to come into contact with Islam. They viewed the fact that Muslim communal prayer was done in the direction of the Ka'ba as a form of idolatry or, better still, litholatry (stone-worship). The earliest available allusion to this perception in Christian circles can be found in the letter of the Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople (715-730) to Thomas of Claudiopolis, an iconoclastic bishop of Asia. This letter, written in 724 and preserved in the acts of the Second Council of Nicaea (787), mentions that the Saracens[48] 'venerate in the desert an inanimate stone which is called Khobar[49]' (Mansi, XIII, 109 B-E, cited by Vasiliev 1956: 26). Just like Germanus, John of Damascus charges Muslims with idolatry. They purportedly adored and kissed this stone which, John of Damascus claims, represents the head of Aphrodite, the ancient Greek goddess of love, beauty and procreation (Vasiliev 1956: 27). As such, what one tradition considers as orthodox teaching can be another tradition's heresy.

Besides, in trying to show the utter meaninglessness of the sites they attack, puritans actually demonstrate how meaningful these sites are to them. In effect, no one acknowledges the power of the idol more than the idol-breaker. Furthermore, the amount of publicity surrounding these destructions enhanced the popularity of the sites. The giant Buddha statues of Bamiyan thus became more popular after their destruction than when they were preserved. Likewise the Sufi shrines of Timbuktu attracted much attention after the attacks perpetrated on them. *Per se*, by destroying sites of memory, puritans give representations a power and authority which they did not necessarily have prior to their destruction. In an ironic turn of events, the act of *idol-breaking* thus turns out to be an act of *idol-making*.

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[48] A word used to refer to Muslims during the Medieval era, particularly at the time of the Crusades.
[49] Khobar refers to the Kaaba. John of Damascus will refer to it in his *De haeresibus Liber* as Khaber.

These different points highlight the contradiction inherent to the puritans' project. In effect, their avowed aim of doing away with *shirk* and promoting *tawḥīd* culminates in a contradiction in terms. It ends up producing the complete opposite of what it purportedly set out to do.

CONCLUSION

The word 'Iconoclasm' is a portmanteau made up of two Greek terms: *eikon* (image) and *klaein* (to break). Etymologically, therefore, iconoclasm refers to the breaking of images. In the way it is often used in theological discourses, the term 'iconoclasm'[50] is vested with the meaning it acquired during two historical occurrences, namely the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy (726-843) and Reformation Iconoclasm (1517-1648). These two episodes have vested the word 'iconoclasm' with strong religious overtones and trapped it in the confines of the history of Christianity. Nevertheless, from the Age of Enlightenment onward, usages of the term have gone beyond the literal breaking of religious images and outside the cocoon of religion. Each time it is used without qualification, the term 'iconoclasm' can thus refer to a wide range of attitudes and actions connected to the obliteration of cherished beliefs and institutions. In this light, it can be used to denote the defilement of graves, the sacking of a city, as well as refer to a literary work, or to any other ways in which a tradition is radically called into question, irrespective of whether or not there is an actual assault on art and imagery. Furthermore, 'it is the motivation and the objective behind the act of destruction that makes an act iconoclastic, be this objective political, religious, magical, economic, or an interlacing of all these'(May 2012: 3). Consequently, not every destruction of images constitutes an iconoclastic act; conversely not every iconoclastic act entails the literal destruction of images. The term 'iconoclasm' can therefore be used in a literal sense to refer to the obliteration or defacement of figural imagery. Nonetheless it can equally be used in a metaphorical sense to refer to the radical questioning or challenging of traditions or institutions, whether or not this involves physical assaults on the symbols of these institutions.

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[50] The development of this notion is well documented by Alain Besançon in his book *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009). See also Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: University of New York Press, 1992). Not in bibliography

In this vein, one could say that Islamic movements such as Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's destruction of shrines in 18ᵗʰ century Arabia, Osman dan Fodio's 'reformation' in northern Nigeria, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Timbuktu, and ISIS in Iraq and Syria, all share the same iconoclastic attitude, not only towards material images but also to received teachings that appear to have added layers to the original teachings of Muhammad.

The motivation and objective underpinning iconoclastic acts vary greatly. In the case of Bamiyan and Timbuktu, this motivation and objective stood out as a complex web of religious and political factors. The religious factor had to do with the rejection of *shirk* which can be understood as 'idolatry' or 'polytheism', and the promotion of *tawḥīd*, God's oneness. These two inseparable features are at the heart of Islamic faith and identity and every Muslim worth the name should normally strive to faithfully observe these two tenets. The endeavour to eschew *shirk* and foster *tawḥīd* necessarily leads to the imposition of a model of society in which this twofold goal is upheld. For contemporary Islamic puritans, in Bamiyan and Timbuktu, this entailed the destruction of sites of memory deemed incompatible with orthodox Islamic belief and practice. However, our exploration of the avowed motivation and objective of the iconoclasts in Bamiyan and Timbuktu has unearthed the complexity and, sometimes, contradiction of their venture. On the one hand, iconoclastic acts carried out against sites of memory effectively abolish *shirk* –at least in the eyes of the iconoclast –since the object of veneration or worship is literally obliterated. However, on the other hand, there is an inherent contradiction in the iconoclastic act. In effect, the very fact of attacking a site of memory is a recognition of its symbolic power and, therefore, an act of *shirk*. Further still, the destructions seem to backfire as the sites that have come under attack, in the name of the fight against *shirk*, have actually gained wider notoriety as a result of the very acts that were meant

to dip them into oblivion. In effect, thanks to media coverage, sites like the giant Buddha statues of Bamiyan and the Sufi shrines of Timbuktu have reached a wider audience and there has been a renewed interest in them worldwide thanks, ironically, to those who sought to make sure no one got to know them let alone, show any kind of interest in them. As things stand, therefore, the fight against *shirk* runs the risk of being a contradiction in terms. In effect, nothing is more absurd than trying to show that something has no power by precisely acknowledging its power.

To the question asked at the beginning, that of knowing whether or not Islamic iconoclasm, as carried out by Muslim puritans in Bamiyan (2001) and Timbuktu (2012), effectively abolishes *shirk* and promotes *tawḥīd*, the answer will be 'yes' and 'no'. 'Yes' because the material object of worship is effectively annihilated; 'no' because the object's symbolic power is increased instead of being suppressed.

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