3
The ‘Heroic Self-denial’ of ‘Christian Rulers’

The Oriental despot renewed

It has been suggested that Steel’s Indian ‘Mahommedan’ is essentially a secular entity. That secularity is achieved, in part, through a series of negative comparisons to the category ‘Mahommedanism’. Indeed, as one by one other forms of description (geographical, racial, social) are exploded, it is the rapid accumulation of these negative signs – the accretion of customs ‘repugnant’ to the ‘whole teaching of Islam’, an alienated ‘social comity’ (‘riddled [...] with Hinduism’) – that performs the initial narrative task of definition. In this way, ‘Mahommedanism’ as a deconstructive category (literally separating ‘Indian’ and ‘Mohammedan’) paradoxically becomes the means by which the narrative as description continues to function. The portrait that evolves out of this paradox, centred on the relationship – antagonistic, incommensurate – between the two terms, Indian and ‘Mohammedan’, is thus necessarily characterised by the notion of degeneration. The apparent bathos of Steel’s concluding comment that the ‘Mahommedan is not at his best in India’ is misleading precisely because not being at his best is what the ‘Mahommedan’ in India is all about.

Of course, ‘decline’ has always formed an important trope in the modern Western perception of Islam. For Western writers reflecting on the Enlightenment ideal of progress through the apprehension of things Islamic, ‘decline’ as an illustration of Islam’s essential lack of ‘perfectability’ becomes, in the words of Aziz Al-Azmeh, ‘metaphysically necessary’. More specifically here, Steel’s degenerated ‘Mohammedan’ joins the larger trend in later imperial ideologies that insisted upon Indian racial ‘decline’ as a necessary corollary to a self-consciously British rule of progress (and in particular, feeds into the long-held British
perception of the enervating influence of the Indian environment on non-indigenous racial stock). But the dialectic between ‘Mohammedanism’ and the Indian ‘Mohammedan’ in India goes beyond its obvious impetus in Orientalist and imperialist theories of racial degeneration. It produces a figure central to the late colonial discourse on Indian Muslims, one not simply disconnected from or incommensurate to, but actively corrupted by, religion. Steel spells out the nature of this corruption in the final paragraph of the chapter:

His star is not in the ascendant, and his position wars with his religion. That enjoins conversion by the sword if need be, and an almost fierce intolerance of the idolater. His whole entourage therefore is galling, and the friction shows itself in a lower moral standard in the many.

Apart from a reference to ‘Mahommedan’ visions of ‘heaven’ as ‘an eternal procession of sensual pleasures’, this retrospective explanation of the preceding portrait of moral and social degeneration constitutes the only attempt to describe Islamic doctrine in the chapter. It is a common enough colonial misreading of what Marshall Hodgson has called ‘kerygmatic piety’ (that is, piety ‘focused on history’), developed in the High Caliphal Period of Islam and adapted by nineteenth-century Indian Muslim intellectuals attempting reformulations of their faith. What was conceived of as the example of a glorious past sealed in the ‘classical period’ of Islam, both as an ideal and as holding out the possibility of future spiritual and material renewal for the Muslim community, functions here as a form of inexhaustible tyranny through which the corruption of the Indian ‘Mohammedan’ is endlessly re-enacted.

This cycle of corruption finds a partial genealogy in European perceptions of Mughal rule since the seventeenth century as a paradigmatic form of ‘oriental despotism’. Alain Gosrichard has suggestively described this paradigm as an economy of ‘enjoyment’ which, primarily in travel accounts, presented a spectacle of the ceaseless consumption and reproduction of power aimed at the simultaneous gratification of and disavowal by, a European audience. At the centre of this economy he locates the despot himself as a necessary absence, a ‘vanishing point’ into which the service of the realm is drawn, never to be satisfied. What Steel retails to the early twentieth-century Metropolitan reader is an inversion of that economy of ‘enjoyment’, divested of power and producing not ‘jouissance’ (to borrow Grosrichard’s Lacanian terminology) but an eternal ‘galling’. In a sense, it is an economy of powerlessness: in place of the absent despot, an immanent, unassuageable religious