

EXPLORING MUSLIM UNDERSTANDINGS OF ISLAM

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PREFACE

At the Social Science Research Council sponsored workshop, “Presenting Islam and Muslim Communities in Context,” held at Harvard University in November 2008, academics, Muslim community members and journalists affirmed the importance of combating religious illiteracy in the US, particularly around Islam and Muslim communities. In order to understand and produce more accurate and complex information about Islam and Muslim communities, Professor Asani suggests in this essay that journalists, academics, and Muslim community members must approach the study of religion through a contextual lens.

Professor Asani poses the question, “How do you know what you know about Islam?” He offers an insightful analysis of the modern-day “clash of ignorances” and briefly discusses the serious consequences of cultural and religious illiteracy for a world that is multicultural, multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-religious. Professor Asani problematizes traditional textual and devotional approaches to studying religion as static and limited. Instead, he advocates a “contextual approach” to the study of religion that promotes an understanding of Islam and Muslim communities within their particular cultural, socio-political, and economic contexts. Through pointing out the co-existence of diverse conceptions and experiences of Islam worldwide, Professor Asani suggests the importance of asking questions such as, “Which Islam? Whose Islam? In which context?”

“How can anyone who is rational believe in and practice a religion such as Islam that promotes violence, terror, suicide bombings and is blatantly against fundamental human rights and freedom?”

An acquaintance asked me this question a couple of years ago while we were having dinner in a restaurant in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Although I have been asked many questions about Islam during my teaching career, I was taken aback by this one. For a moment, I was not sure how to respond. There was only one answer to give, and it was a counter question: **“HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT ISLAM?”**

THE “CLASH OF IGNORANCES”

It is one of the great ironies of our times that peoples from different religious, cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds are in closer contact with each other as never before, and yet this closer contact has not resulted in better understanding and appreciation for differences. Rather, our world is marked with greater misunderstandings and misconceptions, resulting in ever-escalating levels of tensions between cultures and nations. Some have characterized these conflicts as symptomatic of a clash of civilizations—especially between Western and Islamic civilizations. However, others feel that it would be more appropriate to say that we are currently witnessing what the Aga Khan, a Muslim leader, has aptly described as “the clash of ignorances,” a clash that perpetuates fear and hatred of peoples different from one’s self:

Those who talk about an inevitable ‘clash of civilizations’ can point today to an accumulating array of symptoms which sometimes seems to reflect their diagnosis. I believe, however, that this diagnosis is wrong, that its symptoms are more dramatic than they are representative, and that these symptoms are rooted in human ignorance rather than human character. The problem of ignorance is a problem that can be addressed. Perhaps it can even be ameliorated but only if we go to work on our educational tasks with sustained energy, creativity and intelligence.¹

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS ILLITERACY

A key reason for this collective ignorance is cultural and religious illiteracy. As a result of not having the intellectual tools to understand and engage with cultural and religious differences, people tend to paint those who are different from themselves with one color, with a single brush stroke, representing them through simplistic caricatures and other unjust forms of humiliation. The ignorance that is associated with religious and cultural illiteracy is not bliss; it has serious consequences for the multicultural, multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-religious world in which we live. In her study on the prevalence of religious illiteracy in American educational systems, Diane Moore, director of Harvard’s

¹ His Highness the Aga Khan, on the occasion of the Signing of the Funding Agreement for the Global Centre for Pluralism, Ottawa, Canada, 25 October 2006

program in Religion and Secondary Education, identifies some of its consequences: the curtailment of historical and cultural understanding, the fueling of culture wars, and the promotion of religious and racial bigotry.² She remarks:

*...our lack of understanding about the ways that religion itself is an integral dimension of social/political/historical experience coupled with our ignorance about the specific tenets of the world's religious traditions significantly hinder our capacity to function as engaged, informed and responsible citizens of our democracy. In these ways, religious illiteracy has helped foster a climate that is both dangerous and intellectually debilitating.*³

The devastating impact of ignorance on democracy, which is fundamentally premised on the existence of an educated and well-informed citizenry, was best summarized by Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers of the United States, when he wrote, "If a nation expects it can be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

One of the common symptoms of cultural and religious illiteracy is the tendency to attribute the actions of individuals, communities, and nations to simply "religion." With regard to understandings of Islam and Muslim cultures, it leads to the "blame it all on Islam" syndrome in which "religion" is perceived to be chiefly responsible for all that defines or happens in a predominantly Muslim country. For example, many people commonly assume that "Islam" is the principal cause for a variety of ills that plague some majority Muslim countries such as the lack of democracy, economic underdevelopment and unjust treatment and marginalization of women. To many Muslims, such explanations are as absurd as the claim that Christianity is responsible for the United States, a predominantly Christian nation, having one of the highest crime rates in the world. Illiteracy about religion and culture hinders the ability to look for complex and more plausible explanations rooted, for example, in political, economic and sociological conditions. It also hampers people from realizing that while religion may be invoked as a legitimizer for certain human actions, the primary motivating forces are often rooted elsewhere. In this way, illiteracy strips peoples and nations of their history, their culture, their politics, their economics, in short, their humanity.

Ultimately, cultural and religious illiteracy provides a fertile breeding ground for the most dangerous and tragic phenomenon in human history: the dehumanization of those who are unlike ourselves. History is full of examples of conflicts and tragedies that result from one group of people failing to accept and to respect the humanity of others. The Holocaust, the genocides in Bosnia, Rwanda and Sudan, and the conflicts in Ireland, Israel-Palestine, and India are some recent examples of the consequences of such failures. In a pluralistic world, we all need to learn more from difference if we are ever to truly accept and respect one another. This includes knowing better those whom we think we already know well. Knowledge engenders understanding and respect for difference. As long as we refuse to acknowledge and address our collective ignorance, we can never be at peace.

² Diane Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

Today, we live in times marked by heightened political and military conflicts, conflicts that have strongly influenced how peoples of different nations, cultures, and religious traditions perceive and imagine each other. Frequently, as a result of cultural and religious illiteracy, these conflicts are depicted within frameworks, employing language characterized by hyperbole and absolute opposition: between the civilized and the barbaric, good and evil, between us and them. This polarized framework has been particularly prevalent in contemporary discussions about differences between Western and Islamic civilizations. Such characterizations, while appealing to many, are troublesome and problematic from many perspectives. For example, it is historically inaccurate to talk about Western and Islamic civilizations entirely in oppositional and antagonistic terms when both share common roots in religious ideas and concepts going back to Abraham as well as in Greco-Roman culture. Moreover, such polarizations are particularly problematic because they are based on stereotypes and humiliating caricatures of the other.

Historically, stereotypical perceptions have been common between peoples of the Middle East (Arabs, Persians and Turks) and Europe and the United States. They are the result of centuries of hostile and confrontational relationships based on the need for political power and control of economic resources (particularly oil in recent years) and couched in the language of conquest and reconquest, jihad and crusade, colonialism and nationalism, occupation and liberation. In the context of war and armed conflict, such stereotypes serve to dehumanize the other, often leading to tragic consequences. 9/11 and the crashing of the jets into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are the result of the catastrophic dehumanization of Americans by some Saudi terrorists, just as the abuse and torture of prisoners at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison revealed the appalling dehumanization of Iraqis in the eyes of their American captors.

DIVERSE CONCEPTIONS OF ISLAM

Let me return to the dinner question that instigated these thoughts: How do you know what you know about Islam? I followed my initial question to the acquaintance with whom I was dining with two others: what are your sources of information and how much do you trust them? In the ensuing conversation we discussed the powerful and historically unprecedented role of the media, controlled by corporate conglomerates, in our construction of knowledge about the world we live in, and in particular shaping images of Islam. It reminded me of a well-known story told with slight variations by several different authors, including the famous thirteenth-century Muslim Persian mystic, Mawlana Rumi. The story, which most probably originated in India, tells of some blind men who attempted to describe an elephant. One groped the elephant's trunk and declared that the animal resembled a water pipe; another felt its ear and believed that it must be like a large fan; a third man touched its leg and assumed that it was as thick as a

pillar; the fourth one stroked its back and deemed the beast to be as immense as a throne. Each man's perception of the elephant, though partially correct, was limited to the specific part of the elephant he touched. Since none of them had the all-embracing vision necessary to see the complete creature, they failed to appreciate it in its entirety; each man's understanding was limited to only what he knew through touch.

So it is with those who attempt to describe Islam. A person's description of Islam, whether he or she is Muslim or not, is based on what he or she has subjectively experienced, perceived, or read about. People hold strikingly contradictory conceptions of Islam depending on their point of view: for some, Islam is a religion of peace, while for others it is a religion that promotes violence; for some, it is a religion that oppresses women, for others it is a religion that liberates women; for some, its teachings are compatible with democracy and fundamental human rights, while others associate them with dictatorship and tyranny. Clearly, descriptions and characterizations of Islam, its beliefs and doctrines, are sharply contested. This has been particularly the case in the United States and in Europe where, in the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7 bombings in London, there have been innumerable public and private debates on the "true" nature of Islam and its alleged role in promoting terrorism.

Perceptions of Islam being a "fanatical" religion and Muslims being "hate-filled extremists" have fueled the growth of anti-Islamic sentiment or a deeper kind of Islamophobia. This deep-seated fear and dread for everything associated with Islam has even led to violent physical attacks on Muslims or persons mistakenly assumed to be Muslim. "What we have here is a climate where Islamophobia is not only considered mainstream, it's considered patriotic by some, and that's something that makes these kinds of attacks even more despicable," says Brian Levin, director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at the University of California at San Bernardino.⁴ Commenting on the prevalence of Islamophobia, Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, declared it "at once a deeply personal issue for Muslims, a matter of great importance to anyone concerned about upholding universal values, and a question with implications for international harmony and peace."⁵

APPROACHING THE STUDY OF RELIGION

How can we move beyond combative and ill-informed characterizations of Islam? Is it possible to describe Islam, or for that matter any religion, objectively, in a manner that is not colored by the subjectivity of "perception?" Although there exist several ways in which we can approach the study of a religious tradition, here I wish to highlight three distinct approaches: a devotional/sectarian approach, a textual approach and a contextual approach.

⁴ As quoted in Alexandra Marks "After 'hatecrime' melee, calm eludes Quaker school," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 29, 2007.

⁵ Address to United Nations Seminar on "Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding"

THE DEVOTIONAL APPROACH

The devotional approach is perhaps the most easily grasped since it is the perspective that most people commonly associate with the idea of religion. It understands a religious tradition primarily in terms of its doctrines, rituals and practices. Representing the perspective of a believer or practitioner, it is often faith based in character and is, therefore, commonly the approach adopted in institutions which impart formal religious education such as Sunday schools, seminaries and madrasas. Frequently this approach conceives of religion in monolithic terms, not acknowledging the diversity of interpretation and practice within a tradition. It is often, though not always, exclusivist and sectarian in character, privileging the truth claims of a specific denomination (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox Judaism, Reform Judaism, Shia, Sunni etc.).

THE TEXTUAL APPROACH

The textual approach regards the sacred writings and texts as the authoritative embodiment of a religious tradition. According to this approach, a religion is best understood by reading its scriptures which are perceived as containing its “true” ethos or essence. For example, after 9/11 as many non-Muslims sought to understand the possible influence of Islamic teachings on the heinous actions of the terrorists, there was a massive upsurge in sales of Qur’an translations. The underlying assumption was that, in order to acquire a proper understanding of Islam, a person had to read the Qur’an from cover to cover. By adopting this approach, several American and European politicians, media and public personalities asserted that on the basis of their reading of the Qur’an, Islam was a dangerous religion. Citing certain verses from the Islamic scripture, they claimed that the values Islam espoused were incompatible with the values of the Western societies while others went as far as to compare the Qur’an to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and declared that reading it while the country was engaged in a war against terror was an act of treason. In their view, Muslim minorities living in Europe and the United States are “Trojan horses,” dangerous to the interests of national security and, therefore, need to be expelled.

There are several problems with this way of characterizing Islam through the citation of random verses from the Qur’an. Most obvious is the fact that none of these self-proclaimed experts of Islam knew Arabic. They had, therefore, relied on translations of the Muslim scripture which, in reality, are merely interpretations of the original text in Arabic, reflecting the ideological biases of the translators. Anyone who compares even a couple of English translations of the Qur’an will become aware that translator bias is responsible for remarkable disparities between different texts, resulting sometimes in contradictory readings. It is for this reason that Muslims themselves have insisted on using the Arabic text for worship because they regard it to be the “original” or “real” text.

The more serious problem with this approach is that it attempts to restrict the understanding of religion to what poses as a de-contextualized reading, but is really the projection of one narrow reading which in many cases is compounded by ill-informed and unrecognized assumptions. If we were to use this approach to understand Christianity and Judaism, for example, we could also declare, by citing selected portions of the Torah and the Gospels, that they are religions that espouse violence and terror. By granting absolute sovereignty to the text, this approach ignores a crucial fact: religious texts do not have meaning in and of themselves; they are only given meaning by believers who revere, venerate and consider them authoritative. Without these communities of believers, scriptures are inconsequential and of little interest or significance. In their interpretations, believers are, however, influenced by the various contexts in which they live. Since these contexts are constantly in flux, the interpretations of scriptural texts are always changing. To illustrate the significant role that context of the interpreter plays in shaping the reading of scripture, we may consider a paradoxical situation in early 20th century America: while members of the Ku Klux Klan read the Bible as a text justifying white racial supremacy, African Americans, struggling for their civil rights as they emerged from a legacy of slavery, saw in the Christian scripture a message of hope and salvation. Each group's interpretation of scripture was strongly influenced by its specific historical, political, economic and cultural situation.

THE CONTEXTUAL APPROACH

The contextual approach I present in this essay stresses the importance of relating understandings of a religion to the various human contexts in which they are situated. In contrast to the devotional and textual approach, it emphasizes that the study of religion must be primarily concerned with human beings who actually practice and interpret it and whose daily lives it influences. Such a focus is not meant to discredit the study of doctrines, rituals and scriptures that have come to be identified with various religious traditions over the centuries but rather to orient their study primarily to the multiplicities of their human context. Based on the cultural studies model described in Diane Moore's *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, I contend that religion is a phenomenon that is embedded in every dimension of human experience. Its study therefore, "requires multiple lenses through which to understand its multivalent social/cultural influences."⁶ This approach challenges "the assumption that human experience can be studied accurately through discrete disciplinary lenses (e.g. political, economic, cultural, social, etc.) and instead posits an approach that recognizes how these lenses are fundamentally entwined."⁷

Furthermore, it views all conceptions of religion as constructed within contexts. It maintains that religions are shaped by a complex web of factors such as political ideologies, socio-economic conditions, societal attitudes to gender, educational status, literary and artistic traditions, historical and geographical situation—all of which are inextricably linked in influencing the frameworks within which sacred texts, rituals and practices are

⁶ Diane Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, 797 *Ibid.*

interpreted and understood. Some of these factors may be specific to a local context or, as we have seen in the last two centuries, they may be transnational or global in nature. As these contexts change, the interpretations and characterizations of a tradition change. It is only by paying close attention to the contexts of interpretation that we can better understand how a religious tradition can be depicted and practiced in contradictory ways, or how religious texts, such as the Qur'an or the Bible, can be interpreted by believers to justify a wide range of contradictory goals—tolerance and intolerance, liberation and oppression, democracy and theocracy.

HOW WE THINK ABOUT RELIGION

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, one of the twentieth century's most prominent scholars of religion, argues that since every religion is necessarily located in the context of human history, it is part of the mundane but constantly changing and evolving world of humanity. As a result, it is never fixed; it is unstable, dynamic and always changing and evolving, strongly influenced by and influencing the milieu in which it is situated. He points out that we can observe every religious tradition changing over time, with each generation of believers adding to it a "mass of historical deposit," representing a broad range of understandings and practices, influenced by contexts. This "deposit" sets the context and conditions, but does not determine the understandings and practices of the next generation. In this sense, all religions are cumulative traditions composed of multiple layers. In summary, he writes that although some may consider a religious tradition to be divinely inspired, it is "a part of this world; it is the product of human activity; it is diverse, it is fluid, it grows, it changes, it accumulates. It crystallizes in material form the faith of previous generations, and it sets the context for the faith of each new generation as these come along."⁸

Reiterating this point in his book, *Following Muhammad*, Carl Ernst emphasizes that we always have to contextualize representations of religion. "Religion never exists in a vacuum. It is always interwoven with multiple strands of culture and history that link it to particular locations. The rhetoric of religion must be put into a context, so that we know both the objectives and the opponents of particular spokespeople."⁹ He further points out that by adopting an approach that pays close attention to the multiple and ever changing contexts within which a religion is located, it is impossible to conceive of a religion, at least in an academic context, to be a fixed "thing" or an "object," a conception which scholars of religion call "reification" or "objectification." When notions of religion become "reified," people personify them or give them agency by declaring, for instance, that "Islam says..." or "according to Islam...." As Ernst correctly observes, "No one, however, has seen Christianity or Islam do anything. They are abstractions, not actors comparable to human beings."¹⁰

⁸ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, 1539 Carl Ernst, *Following Muhammad*, 30

⁹ Carl Ernst, *Following Muhammad*, 30

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51

CONTEXTUALIZING MUSLIM EXPERIENCES OF ISLAM

A contextual approach to the study of Islam recognizes that the experiences and expressions of the faith, or for that matter any religion, are far from homogeneous or monolithic. In the course of historical evolution, such a dazzling variety of interpretations, rituals and practices have come to be associated with the faith of Islam that many Muslims, most of whose understandings of their religion are restricted to their specific devotional and sectarian contexts (Sunni, Shii, etc.), are astonished when they become aware of this diversity. Some are even threatened by it and vehemently claim that there is only one true Islam – the one they believe in. Others emphasize that all Muslims are united by certain fundamental common beliefs such as those expressed in common ritual practices and the shahadah, the Islamic creed of faith in which a Muslim declares that there is only one God and that Muhammad is His Prophet to whom the Qur'an was revealed. However strong the desire to reduce or simplify Islam to a few common beliefs or rituals, the historical reality is that the religion, including its fundamental creed, has come to be interpreted in diverse ways around the world, depending on each region's history, cultural traditions, its social, economic, political structures, and its geography and physical location in the world. We cannot dismiss the crucial and incontrovertible historical evidence that as the Islamic tradition evolved after the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 and spread beyond Arabia to many different regions and cultures, ranging from Bosnia and China to Yemen and Zanzibar it came to have different significations for different groups, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. We may even think of Islam as an umbrella term comprising layers of meaning, or even as a rainbow-like spectrum consisting of many distinctive colors. Commenting on this diversity, the late Edward Said, University Professor of English at Columbia University and a cultural and literary critic, wrote:

*The problems facing anyone attempting to say anything intelligible, useful, or accurate about Islam are legion. One should therefore begin by speaking of Islams rather than Islam (as the scholar Aziz al-Azmeh does in his excellent book *Islams and Modernities*), and then go on to specify which kind, during which particular time, one is speaking about. . . .once one gets a tiny step beyond core beliefs (since even those are very hard to reduce to a simple set of doctrinal rules) and the centrality of the Koran [Qur'an], one has entered an astoundingly complicated world whose enormous—one might even say unthinkable—collective history alone has yet to be written.*¹¹

To underscore the role of context, let us consider experiences of being Muslim in our contemporary world, a world that is divided into many nation-states and in which a person's identity and rights as an individual vary dramatically according to the country in which he or she resides. These states, along with the political ideologies they espouse, are enormously influential in determining the ways in which an individual Muslim interprets, practices and experiences Islam. We may cite here a few examples. A Muslim woman living in the Taliban controlled regions of Afghanistan, where those in political authority mandate

¹¹ "Impossible Histories: Why the many Islams cannot be simplified," *Harper's Magazine*, July 2002, 69-74.

that women must cover themselves completely from head to toe, experiences her religion very differently from a Muslim woman in Turkey where those who are committed to a vision of secularism, vehemently discourage her from wearing even a simple head scarf since it is seen as a symbol of religious fundamentalism and a betrayal of cherished national ideas of secularism. The experience of being a Muslim in Senegal, a nation where certain groups and individuals espousing a mystical or Sufi interpretation of Islam exercise a great deal of political and economic influence, differs from the experience of a Muslim in Saudi Arabia where such mysticism is banned for it is considered to be a heresy, contrary to the state's official Wahhabi religious ideology. Being a Muslim in China, a state that is officially atheist and considers its Muslim populations to be ethnic rather than religious minorities, differs from being Muslim in Pakistan, a Muslim majority state in which the invocation of Islam as an ideology for the state and the politicization of religion has led to violent sectarian conflict. The experience of being a Muslim of Turkish origin in Germany is very different from being an African American Muslim in the United States.

Clearly, today, the political and social contexts in which a Muslim practices his or her faith is just as important or, some would argue, even more important than doctrines and rituals in determining how Muslims experience and interpret their faith. Recognizing this reality, Abdol Karim Soroush, a contemporary Iranian intellectual, states:

...in reality the history of Islam, like the history of other religions such as Christianity, is fundamentally a history of interpretations. Throughout the development of Islam there have been different schools of thought and ideas, different approaches and interpretations of what Islam is and what it means. There is no such thing as a "pure" Islam or an a-historical Islam that is outside the process of historical development. The actual lived experience of Islam has always been culturally and historically specific, and bound by the immediate circumstances of its location in time and space. If we were to take a snapshot of Islam as it is lived today, it would reveal a diversity of lived experiences which are all different, yet existing simultaneously.¹²

This essay is premised on the idea that the story of Islam is not one story but many stories involving peoples of many different races, ethnicities and cultures, many literatures and languages, many histories, and a myriad of interpretations, some of which are bound to be in conflict with each other. To acquire a correctly nuanced understanding of Islam and its role in Muslim societies, the crucial questions we should be asking are: Which Islam? Whose Islam? In which context?

¹² As quoted in Farish Noor, *New Voices of Islam*, 2002, 15-16