The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Islam: Monolith or Mosaic?

Minaz Kerawala

Imagining Islam

Of late, particularly since 9/11, the Muslim world has attracted much attention in the West. While such attention is unprecedented, interest in Islam has ebbed and flowed at least since the Crusades.[1] It waned after the Reconquista (the 15th century Catholic re-conquest of Muslim Spain) and waxed in colonial times with dashing figures like Richard Burton and Lawrence of Arabia carrying romantic tales of the Orient to Europe.

This space precludes a full exposé of the socio-political forces that shape interest in all things Islamic. However, even cursory reflection can reveal a pattern. The Muslim world has interacted with the West at every stage in history when the two have come into contact. Broadly speaking, benign commercial or intellectual exchange produced mutually beneficial results.

Early Muslim scholars, for example, studied, critiqued, extended and developed the work of Greek thinkers like Aristotle. Later, European Renaissance thinkers borrowed from the Muslims, who kept classical learning alive while Europe was in turmoil.[2] Another example is the current popular interest in Europe in Sufism, especially the ideas of Mawlana Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (d. 1273 CE). Unfortunately, cataclysmic interactions like war, empire and geopolitical intrigue yield less happy results.

In colonial times, the central myth was that of the Oriental despot who tyrannically ruled subjects incapable of orderly conduct or intelligent political behaviour. Edward Said has argued how such Orientalist[3] myths helped justify Empire as a civilising mission.[4] Now, the image dominating airwaves and column inches is that of a fanatic ready to destroy 'our way of life'.

---

[1] The Crusades were a series of attacks mounted between 1095 CE and 1291 CE by Western Christian powers against Muslim powers in the Middle East. Purportedly seeking to keep the Holy Land in Christian control, this 'religious cause' often disguised the political ambitions of some European kings and nobles. For many ordinary people in Western Europe, Crusade battles were the first contact they had with Muslims.

[2] A good place to begin exploring Muslim contributions to science, technology and learning is the Open University webpage.

[3] While Orientalist scholarship served to justify colonialism and imperialism, it also made some of the greatest contributions to literature, music, painting, philosophy, linguistics and anthropology.

[4] Said, E W. *Orientalism* (New York, Vintage Books, 1979).

Of such misrepresentation, His Highness the Aga Khan has noted,

> The media and some opinion-leaders [of the West] tend, if not to actively perpetuate old clichés and stereotypes, show a lack of anything like a nuanced knowledge or appreciation of the traditions of the Muslim world.[5]

Sweeping, untenable generalisations often underpin these stereotypes. A few misguided individuals have come to typify Muslims and Islam in the media. Such limited imagining is a feat of 'dual essentialisation'. Both the 'us' and the 'them' can only be conceived of in certain prescribed ways. A picture thus emerges of the West as uniformly peaceful, liberal and prosperous, and of the Muslim world as violent, conservative and regressive. The former ignores the Western realities of internal conflict (e.g., Irish and Basque separatism), the rise of neo-fascist politics and swathes of poverty and inequity. What the latter picture omits is the subject of this article.

Beyond Arabia

Geographic diversity is a key fact of the Muslim world. From its 7th century origins in the deserts of Arabia, Islam spread across North Africa, Southern Europe, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Far East. The hardy Bedouin tribesmen who were Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) earliest followers were as Muslim as are the Mongoloid nomads of the Central Asian Steppe. It often surprises those who use 'Muslim' and 'Arab' interchangeably that the country with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia (nearly 210 million).[6] What implications does this distribution have for the everyday lives of Muslims? Let us consider Indonesia.

Islam is traditionally regarded to have been brought to Indonesia by a charismatic saint, Kalidjaga, whose austerity attracted the king to the faith. This tradition conforms closely to Hindu ideals of sainthood and asceticism that prevailed in Indonesia.[7] Moreover, the fact that early Indonesian converts to Islam were seafaring traders and fishermen continues to influence their cultural and religious practices.

It is important to note that being a fisherman may influence how a person practices Islam but that being Muslim has virtually no impact on how they fish. This is not a frivolous distinction, but a crucial one. The facile habit of seeing Islam as an overbearing reality shaping every aspect of Muslims' lives leads to absurd typification and caricaturisation.

[5] Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan at the 25th Anniversary Graduation Ceremony of The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 19th October 2003.
[6] *Country Profile: Indonesia* (Washington, Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, December 2004).
[7] Geertz C. *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1971).

During the infamous 'Rushdie Affair', a commentator in a leading British newspaper, concluding that some Muslim beliefs were incompatible with a pluralistic society, wrote:

> Islam does not know how to exist as a minority culture. For it is not just a set of private individual principles and beliefs. Islam is a social creed above all, a radically different way of organising society as a whole.[8]

Viewed thus, Islam leaves no room in the lives of Muslims for circumstances to shape thought or behaviour. Fortunately, such views are easy to refute. One has only to look around oneself, amongst the Muslims one knows, to realise that this is obviously not the case.

Fortunately, more deservedly expansive views of the Muslim world do exist. His Highness the Aga Khan has expressed it thus:

> The Muslim world today is heir to a faith and a culture that stands among the leading civilisations in the world. The revelation granted to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) opened new horizons and released new energies of mind and spirit. It became the binding force that held the Muslims together despite the far-flung lands in which they lived, the diverse languages and dialects they spoke, and the multitude of traditions – scientific, artistic, religious and cultural – which went into the making of a distinctive ethos. This message is still potent in the Muslim world today….[9]

Domes and Minarets Only?

At the dawn of Islam, Prophet Muhammad built a simple space of gathering for his followers – a courtyard with palm-trunk pillars supporting a thatched roof. Ideally suited to the harsh desert heat, this became the prototype for subsequent congregational spaces.[10] Nonetheless, there is an astounding variety of such buildings, old and new, that dot the skylines of the Muslim world. Simple mud mosques in Africa; minimalist, modernist ones in Bosnia; grand, ornate structures in Iran, Turkey, India and Pakistan; bold, opulent mosques in the newly-wealthy Middle East, and mosques that resemble pagodas in the Far East.[11]

This diversity goes further than the shape of buildings. The mausolea of saints, the *khanaqas, tekkes* and *zawiyas* of Sufi orders, the *imambaras* of the Ithna Asharis and the Jamatkhanas, a label for places of gathering common to Shias and Sunnis, are among the many architecturally diverse places where Muslims connect with the divine. What remains common to them all is that they are not only places of worship but also hubs of social and cultural activity as the very first space was.

---

[8] Times columnist Clifford Longley, quoted by Mark Steyn in *The Daily Telegraph*: "We are falling under the imam's spell" (*Daily Telegraph*, 13th January 2004).
[9] Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan at the 25th Anniversary Graduation Ceremony of The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 19th October 2003.
[10] Hillenbrand R. *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function and Meaning* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1994).
[11] For an idea of the range of mosque architecture see The AKDN website.

A Hundred Different Notes

Few cultural expressions reveal the diversity of the Muslim world as music does. The Indian Sufi genre of *qawwali* that was given global exposure by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan is a blend of Arab-Persian mysticism and Indian classical music. It is but one example of music that is typically regarded as 'Islamic' yet is enriched by non-Muslim influences and appeals to audiences beyond the Muslim world. The passionate Arabian *raqs sharki* borrowed from North African tribal music is an influence that also crossed the Straits of Gibraltar to fertilise flamenco. The *santoor* that moved Persian mystics to ecstasy came, through Safavid influence on the Mughals, to be a favoured instrument in Kashmir. The lilt of *shashmaqam* in Central Asia still echoes Chinese and Mongol influences that came along the Silk Route. The story continues with Pakistani musicians fusing *qawwali* with Western rock and French-Algerian artistes whose Berber roots are bearing jazzy fruit.

Worlds of Words

The literature of the Muslim world too is richly diverse. In the Indian subcontinent alone, there are stark contrasts between the direct, folk paeans of Bhulhe Shah and the complex ruminations of Asadullah Khan Ghalib, the former a passionate Sufi and the latter an angst-ridden poet responding to the decline of the Mughal Empire. The influence of Nietzsche on Mohammed Iqbal (a late 19th-century philosopher-poet who is regarded in Pakistan as the ideological father of the nation), Faiz Ahmed Faiz's[12] biting critique of the Pakistani elite and Jan Nisar Akhtar's lyrics for the Bollywood screen are examples of Muslim litterateurs' imaginations responding to their circumstances.

Muslim writers, poets, musicians, filmmakers and actors constitute the creative mainstream in Bollywood cinema. Their work has always reflected the spirit of the age – resistive and political in colonial times, idealistic and optimistic up to the mid-1960s, violently cataclysmic in the 1970s, kitschy and rose-tinted in the 1990s and avant-garde in the new millennium.

Countless examples of stylistic and topical diversity exist among Muslim writers all over the world. A list of internationally acclaimed writers from Muslim backgrounds can easily prove the point. The Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz has produced some of the best treatments of everyday life in the Arab world. The Lebanese Hanan al-Shaykh is perhaps best known for her recent novel, *This is London, My Dear* (published 2000) that provides a rich view of a European city through immigrant eyes, as does Monica Ali's, *Brick Lane*. (2003).

Because traffic on the streets of cultural influence is not one-way, circumstances shape words in more ways than one. Etymological dictionaries reveal many gems. The English word 'cipher' comes from the Arabic, '*sifr*' (zero). This hails from when Venetian money-changers were suspected of duping clients by using new Arabic numerals instead of familiar Roman ones (that lacked zero). Sugar, seersucker, alchemy, algebra

[12] Faiz was one of the most important Urdu litterateurs whose resistance poetry inspired many young leaders in Pakistan in the 1980s when political freedom was severely curtailed by a military regime.

and algorithm are just a few of the words whose origins are steeped in the histories of benign cultural exchange. Others such as 'assassin' have roots in historical fantasy and misunderstanding that are no less revealing.

Intellectual, artistic and literary life in the West bears Muslim imprints that, because of a sort of cultural amnesia, seem rather unlikely and surprising today. From the designs of stately gardens to the counting taught to toddlers, the influence of the Muslim world pervades the West in subtle but profound ways.

Pluralism and Diversity

It has emerged from the preceding discussion that the world of Islam is far from monolithic. In fact, a similar discussion could be conducted about almost any faith group. Even in a religion like Hinduism, most of whose adherents reside in a single country, there is a remarkable diversity in dress, diet, politics, philosophy and doctrine. Christianity too, reveals similar diversity. One has only to contrast the austerity of Greek Orthodoxy with the exuberance of Brazilian Catholicism or the serenity of a European convent with the bonhomie of an American Baptist convention to see that diversity is not unique to Islam.

Such cross-faith reflection can also help tease out the causes of diversity. Religions are understood and expressed diversely because they are practised by people, who by their very nature are diverse. Regardless of whether it is central or marginal to people's lives, religion is but one tile in the mosaic of human endeavour. Being sentient, humans work, imagine, paint, sing, dance, write, fight, love and philosophise in addition to believing (or not) in God or a divine power. Indeed, the sum of all this is what we call culture. And because religion is one element of culture, culture shapes the practice of religion just as religion contributes to culture.

When speaking of diversity and plurality, it is vital to not simply treat diversity as an existing condition (or worse, as a problem) that must be managed. Truly pluralist thought conceives of diversity as an asset to be cultivated. As His Highness the Aga Khan has emphasised:

> I put it to you that no human development initiative can be sustainable unless we are successful in achieving… essential conditions. First, we must operate in an environment that invests in, rather than seeks to stifle, pluralism and diversity…. The effective world of the future will be one of pluralism, a world that understands, appreciates and builds on diversity. The rejection of pluralism plays a significant role in breeding destructive conflicts, from which no continent has been spared in recent decades. But pluralist societies are not accidents of history. They are a product of enlightened education and continuous investment by governments and all of civil society in recognising and celebrating the diversity of the world's peoples.[13]

[13] Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan at the Nobel Institute, Oslow, Norway, 7th April 2005.

Conclusion

What does this idea of pluralism imply for the day-to-day understanding of Islam? An over-arching conclusion must be that since the condition of being Muslim varies so dramatically from place to place, the worldview of Muslims too, must vary equally. Obviously, the manner in which a poor Balinese fisherman sees the world must be different from that of a British office worker. Therefore, sweeping statements on Muslim attitudes to ideas like democracy and women's liberation, for instance, become impossible to justify.

Another attitude of caution that must wend its way into one's reading of the Muslim world must be to avoid what Talal Asad calls 'turning all Islamic behaviour into *readable gesture*'.[14] This means that not everything Muslims do is significant for the way they react to their worlds. An example of reading too much into ritual behaviour is the accusation, often levelled against Muslims in different parts of the world, that because they pray facing Mecca, their political, social and cultural affiliations are exclusively Middle Eastern. Such reductive reasoning must be avoided at all costs. Akin to this attitude of caution must be the realisation that the adjective 'Islamic' ought to be used sparingly and with discretion. Not everything Muslims do is necessarily 'Islamic'. Many Muslims, for example, break the Ramadan fast with dates. While this may be done because it was the Prophetic tradition, would it not be absurd to label date-eating as an Islamic dietary habit?

Does this mean that it is impossible to speak conscientiously about a Muslim community or a Muslim world? Is nothing common to Muslims the world over? Ahmet Karamustafa offers an answer. He considers several possible approaches to this issue and comes to the conclusion that all those who profess any of the many variations of the *shahada* are Muslim.[15] Belief in one God, belief in His Prophet, Muhammad, and, for the Shi'a, belief in the Prophet's successors – the Imams from the Ahl al-Bayt, are the uniting principles of the Muslim community. Insofar as this faith shapes belief, practices, political behaviour and social attitudes, there can be said to exist a Muslim community. Any other category that carries the Islamic label is difficult to justify. For example, of late there have been attempts to apply the Islamic label to academic disciplines like sociology, anthropology and psychology and to political ideals like human rights. Well-meaning as they may be, they often come across as no more than contrived categories.

However, Karamustafa goes on to recommend that Islam be viewed as a civilisational project that is still unfolding, always changing and richly complex. There are several advantages to thinking in this expansive manner:

> Viewed as a civilisational project, Islam emerges as a dynamic, evolving phenomenon, one that cannot be… fixed in any way. When it is understood as an ongoing civilisational construct, it is easier to

[14] Asad, T. *The Ideas of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington DC, Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986: 9).
[15] Karamustafa, A. *Islam: a civilisational project in progress* in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, Omid Safi (ed) (Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 2003).

> highlight and to appreciate Islam as a truly global tradition. The emphasis on Islam's globality enables us to acknowledge and cherish its transcultural, transracial, transnational, in short, its truly *humanistic* dimensions. Islam is an interactive and inclusive tradition: it interacts with the cultures it comes into contact with and, where it takes root, reshapes and reforms cultures inclusively from within.[16]

It is apt that its present-day adherents and observers cultivate such a broad conception of Islam. For such, undoubtedly, was the scale at which the Prophet Muhammad conceived his mission and was therefore called *Rahmat lil Alamein* (Mercy to the Worlds).

Additional References

Daftary, F. *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis*. London, I B Tauris (1995).

Humphreys, S R. *Between Memory and Desire: the Middle East in a Troubled Age*. Los Angeles, University of California Press (2001).

Lewis, B. *The Political Language of Islam*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press (1991).

[16] Ibid: p109-110.