

## Reflections on Teaching Islam at a Liberal Arts College

*Zayn Kassam*

Pomona College

Parents Weekend, February 19th, 2000

In welcoming you here today, I would like to spend a few minutes talking with you about the study of religions in the Academy, and why, as your loved ones decide between which courses to take and which books to read in the library, they might end up in one of my classes. Religion, as the great 20th-century theologian Paul Tillich specifies, is about addressing ultimate questions: what is for us ultimate reality,<sup>1</sup> leading us to ask who are we, why are we here, where are we headed, and how do we get there? Jonathan Z. Smith, in thinking about what it means when we study religion in an academic setting, remarks:

What we study when we study religion is one mode of constructing worlds of meaning, worlds within which men find themselves in which they choose to dwell. What we study is the passion and drama of man discovering the truth of what it is to be human. History is the framework within whose perimeter those human expressions, activities and intentionalities that we call “religious” occur. Religion is the quest, within the bounds of the human, historical condition, for the power to manipulate and negotiate ones ‘situation’ so as to have ‘space’ in which to meaningfully dwell. It is the power to relate ones domain to the plurality of environmental and social spheres in such a way as to guarantee the conviction that ones existence ‘matters’. Religion is a distinctive mode of human creativity, a creativity which both discovers limits and creates limits for humane existence. What we study when we study religion is the variety of attempts to map, construct and inhabit such positions of power through the use of myths, rituals and experiences of transformation.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich, *What is Religion?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 81ff. Edited with an introduction by James Luther Adams.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1978]), 290-291.

The study of religion, then, is not about contesting the “truth” about scriptures or authoritative figures; rather, it is about how human beings through the ages have sought to make meaning, and as such it is, very simply said, a study of how human beings have mapped out or understood what it means for existence to be meaningful at different times and places. In the classroom, when we study a religion other than our own, or even our own, for that matter, we do so in the spirit of attempting to understand a religion in an empathic and appreciative manner, recognizing that it is different from our own, or that our own has been understood differently during the course of the history of that religion at different times by people in different locations. The Academy is not, as Rita Gross points out, “the place for proselytizing for any specific religion or religious position.” Rather, it is a place where “(f)ull and fair presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of all positions studied can and should be expected.”<sup>3</sup> After all, the enterprise of the academy is not to teach students **what** to think, but rather **how** to think.

Accordingly, when I teach Islam, the primary considerations I take into account are that Islam is not a static entity revealed sometime during the seventh century of our common era and left at that. Nor are Muslims a monolithic body of people all sharing the same customs, histories, languages or cultures even though there may be certain beliefs that they may each hold, which again, they may express differently given their specific histories and contexts. The cardinal text for Muslims, the Qur’ān, has remained an authoritative source for Muslims throughout the fourteen centuries since it was revealed, and the cardinal statement of belief (“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His

---

<sup>3</sup> Rita M. Gross, *Feminism and Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 12-14.

Messenger” to which Shi’ites add, “and øAl’ is the Commander of the Faithful”) has been recited by pious Muslims everyday, everywhere, along with the performance of some prescribed rituals and religious obligations.

Despite these enduring features, just about everything else connected to how Muslims have understood and expressed their faith over time has been in a state of continual mapping and negotiation. Communities of Muslims at different points in their history and different locations have sought to make sense of their lives and incorporate prior understandings germane to their location with respect to what it means to be a religious human being living in a particular political, social and cultural context. In what follows, I want to talk briefly about the courses I teach and the particular ways in which I seek to extend students’ understanding of the issues relevant to the study of the material presented.

The first, and in some senses, my favorite course, is a Critical Inquiry Seminar taught only to first-year students, fourteen of whom sign up for any one of a number of such courses taught by faculty. The purpose of this course is clear: to inculcate in students academic skills such as how to use the library and electronic resources, how to present a paper, how to take logical and stylistic issues into consideration in writing the paper, how to initiate and participate in class discussions, and how to communicate ideas clearly both when speaking and when writing. All of this is done within the context of studying something in particular; in my case, they sign up for a course titled *Muslim Literary Landscapes*. I expect that some students will already have encountered Muslims through

fellow students or neighbors, or may even be Muslim themselves. Students will likely also have formed an impression of Muslims through the media as people who live in politically explosive parts of the world, be those the Middle East, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, the Sudan or Indonesia. They may perceive Muslims generally as people who are associated with terrorism, who compel women to lead somewhat veiled and restricted lives, or, in a more positive light, who exhibit tremendous discipline as they fast for a month during Ramadan, and to whose community Rumi, the mystic poet, belonged. But while we know what others say about Muslims, what do we know of how they themselves define their identities and their values?

This was a challenge laid down to us by Edward Said in his seminal work titled *Orientalism*, in which he argued that the lens through which the Oriental world, by which he means the non-European world, views Muslims is as the Other. According to this lens, the Orient was characterized as eccentric, backward, indifferent, penetrable and malleable. Such an Orient thus was “a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption”<sup>4</sup> and that is precisely what the colonizing impulse to dominate and civilize the native, so to speak, set out to do. Although the period of colonization has come to an end, the attitude it characterized, that of the backward “Other” that needs western, that is the European or “civilized” world’s redemption is still to be found in much media discourse about the Islamic world and its peoples. In a modern incarnation of the European, much of North America with its Eurocentric focus perpetuates this attitude.

---

<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 206.

However, in the last few decades, the academic universe has attempted to recover the voices of those marginalized by the dominant discourse of the politically ascendant West, and we are now turning our attention to examining how it is that people have represented themselves. Accordingly, in this course, we read six or seven literary works written by Muslims in different parts to the world, in order to hear for ourselves how they articulate their issues and view their societies through the colorful characters that leap off the pages and begin conversations with us. This year, we read novels written by Naguib Mahfuz, the Nobel Prize-winning author from Egypt; Orhan Pamuk, a rising literary figure in Turkey; Salman Rushdie, a Booker prize-winning British South Asian author who was catapulted into world attention with the controversy over his work titled *The Satanic Verses*; Sadegh Hedayat, an Iranian author who ended his life tragically and much too young in Paris in the fifties; Cheikh Hamidou Kane from Senegal who also began his writing career in Paris in the fifties before returning to serve and ultimately be rejected by his newly independent country; and short stories by Ismat Chughtai, writing mainly at the time of the partition of India and who has been compared with Simone de Beauvoir.

In these works we hear the voices of characters struggling with the pain of colonization, of losing their ancient customs and traditions in the European wave of modernization and military and technical supremacy, characters struggling with the policing of thought, characters expressing both sorrow and rage at patriarchal structures that imprison both men and women into gender roles that are no longer satisfactory or meaningful, characters that depict the tragedy of class deprivation, and characters that explore the

fountains of spirituality inherent in each of their traditions. And through all of these, as a class we begin to see that life is a perennial struggle no matter where we are and that societies are continually in a state of development and change, sometimes caused by outside factors, sometimes caused by internal factors. We begin to see the effects of being told continuously by colonial powers that one's culture and civilization is backward, and we see the spiritual emptiness and racial degradation that occurred when attempts were made to become like the powerful European, which of course one could never be, not least because of skin color and not most due to a lack of scientific control over the environment.

And as a class we begin to understand that perhaps the desperate attempt made by formerly colonized Muslim societies to Islamize their societies rather than secularize their societies stems, in part, from realizing two things: first, that although Europeans may have felt the need to civilize and redeem the natives, the natives have woken up to the fact that they actually do have a civilization and are perfectly capable of redeeming themselves because the European solution exacts too high a price, the price of losing one's history, one's culture, one's language, one's ability to make meaning of one's own accord. Second, that the local governments that have come into power after the dismantling of colonial rule have failed to deliver on their promise of bread for the people, jobs for the newly educated, cultural integrity for those who feel robbed of their past, and justice in society. Yet, since there is never a going back, despite the desperate attempt on the part of the world's fundamentalists to grasp at solutions that promise everything but deliver only at the cost of further threats and erosion of human rights, we

also learn that the colonial encounter has created vast hybridities on both sides of the colonial divide through the process of migration between colonized and colonizing lands, on the one hand, and the process of education and the transfer of knowledge, on the other. This learning holds out the hope that non-Muslims and Muslims can now enter into conversations not as antagonist rivals or in a relationship characterized by domination, but rather as equals when equality is understood in terms of human dignity and not material wealth. For what used to be the other is now in our midst and part of oneself, in one's language, one's food, one's son or daughter-in-law, one's music, one's theater, one's story, one's concern for global welfare.

But the fact that formerly colonized Muslim nations have awakened to the fact that they too have a great civilization worth remembering, and to which they must continue to contribute, does not mean that critical reflection must be given up. After all, no civilization is capable of advancing without self-reflection and without re-examining what it is in the past that one wants to retrieve and regenerate, and what can be safely archived as important then, but not so now. My course on women in Islam is perhaps the most difficult to teach because students by and large enter the classroom with the view--which I share, though not for the same reasons necessarily that they hold--that Muslims treat their women unfairly, rendering them passive and subject to the will of the male head of the household. Of course it can be argued that the position of women in the western world was not much different from that of women in Muslim world until very recently in our history, but the difference is that Muslim women, who are already part of that Other whom we find at the same time both threatening and unenlightened, become a

rod with which to beat to the Muslim horse who clearly has not yet been broken in. No one would dare to say that Western women's lack of legal control over their bodies is a sign of Western civilization's backwardness; or that the U.S. failure to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women reveals the misogyny inherent in our culture. That having been said, there is no doubt in the minds of many Muslims that there is a need to examine the question of gender as intelligently as possible, and this is evidenced in the tremendous surge in scholarship on gender issues by both Muslim and non-Muslim academics and activists alike.

Accordingly, in the course on women in Islam, students examine whether the patriarchal organization of society is a global phenomenon, and if so, what characterizes it. They learn that Islam enters a world stage in which both the Persian and the Byzantine empires over which it establishes much of its own political dominance are already societies in which women are veiled and have lesser rights under the law, and that it seamlessly incorporates these into its own program for society. They investigate the politics of the veil and examine its function as a marker of status, an upholder of women's privacy to see but not be seen, and in the post-colonial world, as a proud symbol of identity that is separate from that of the colonizing masters. Students also learn to examine the "woman question" in terms of critical markers such as the level of education and literacy attainable by women; access to the workplace; family law matters such as divorce, child custody, inheritance; access to healthcare and the legal system; access to professional training and occupations such as medicine, law, and engineering. Markers such as these state much more about the choices women are able to make and hence the level of control

women have over their lives than what is ordinarily reported over the media about religious ideologies pertaining to women.

The question of religious discourse, however, cannot be left aside. Thus about a third of the course is spent examining what the QurūĀn says about women, and how authoritative Muslim sources, including the law or *shar'ah*, developed historically. This enables students to come to an understanding of the many factors that contributed to the process by which certain views of women and their position in society came to prevail and better to understand the development of Islamic law in the context of the three or four centuries it took for this law to be codified.

We then look at how, in the modern world, Islamic law as it pertains to women is capable of both being undermined or reinforced by the state, and the role played by the state in initiating programs that affect women's lives in the larger context of economic, political, and social realities faced by the state. For example, a country that needs to be economically viable cannot exclude the labor value of half its population, and thus programs that will increase literacy and education levels, and concomitantly provide greater access to the paid workforce will necessarily have to be undertaken--as is the case in Egypt, while simultaneously religiously authoritative voices are arguing that for a society to be stable, the nuclear family must be maintained along with gender roles in which the male is responsible for feeding his family while the woman is responsible for raising their children. In many instances, states are recognizing that while this may be a worthy ideal, it is beyond the reach of all but the wealthy and parts of the middle class,

and not a realistic option for the bulk of the populace where every adult member, and in many cases children, have to do whatever they can to make ends meet. Rather than challenging such religiously authored discourses frontally, the more persuasive approach is to make education available so as to make it possible for citizens to ameliorate their lives with a set of tools rather than a set of prescriptions that cannot put bread on the table, especially when the patriarchal dream becomes an illusion as fathers are lost to war or illness or simply abandonment of their families, or when the father is unskilled and unable to earn very much.

Thus, for many of our students who may go on to become policy analysts or opinion makers, in this course I attempt to give them frameworks through which they can analyze gender issues in the Islamic world with a higher degree of sophistication and with much greater awareness of the larger social institutions involved than can be realized from reading media accounts of the punitive measures taken against some Muslim women in some parts of the world. That is not to say that there are not some terrible atrocities being committed, such as the mutilation and killing of women for reasons of honor in places such as Jordan or Pakistan, or female genital mutilation which is still prevalent in many parts of Africa and is a custom shared by Coptic, tribal and even some Jewish and Christian women, or, in a move highly criticized by other Islamic nations, denial of access to education in the name of religion as in Afghanistan. All of these need to be seen in the larger contexts of violence against women globally and as part of a program that calls upon religious rhetoric but whose agenda is clearly political in nature. In this context, we also study grass roots organizations who address issues poor and rural

women face daily, and individuals, both men and women, who argue that Islam is a matter of interpretation and who believe that God clearly did not intend for half the human race in the Muslim world to suffer.

Speaking about the interpretation of Islam, I want to turn very briefly now to two of my favorite courses, one on Islamic Mysticism, also known as Sufism, and one on Islamic Philosophy. In both these courses students read texts written from the eighth or ninth centuries onwards examining how Muslims have understood their faith in mystical terms or in philosophical terms. This is a vast body of literature of which much is yet to be translated, and which attests to the enormous wealth left behind by prior generations of Muslims as they sought to address questions of ultimate meaning. Aside from discussing with students how to think about mysticism or philosophy, one of my main considerations in bringing these texts to the attention of students is to show how intertwined European and Islamic traditions are and have been through the course of history. Thus we find that Islamic philosophy--which in the medieval world included both what we now call the sciences, that is, the study of physical things, and what we now call a branch of philosophy, metaphysics or the study of those things that are not physical--builds its own understanding upon the works of Plato, Aristotle, Galen, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plotinus and Porphyry, to mention but a few. Muslim thinkers such as Alfarabi (al-Fārābī), Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), Averroes (Ibn Rushd), the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-ʿaṣāfiyya), Ibn Tufayl and others took ideas from the Greek works they read and developed these in order to produce seminal works in disciplines as far reaching as medicine, astronomy, architecture, mathematics, chemistry, political

theory, and metaphysics. The works of Avicenna and Averroes, which were translated into Latin along with the writings of other thinkers and entered the European curriculum from the 12th centuries onwards, stimulated much intellectual activity in western circles. It has been noted that Muslim texts played a critical role “in the formation of Latin scholasticism--that is, in the realm of religious discourse--and the study of the natural sciences--that is, the realm we now consider as belonging to the sciences--in the Western world from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries.”<sup>5</sup> The words algebra, algorithm, alchemy all come from Arabic. This has led to speculation that the European Renaissance was in part made possible through European contact with Muslim scientific treatises. Indeed, Avicenna’s epithet, the Prince of Physicians, was earned due to the widespread use of his medical encyclopedia known as the Canon in the Islamic world as well as the European world, while several Jewish and Christian texts after this period enter into a debate with his philosophical positions. Intellectuals in all three faiths were concerned with reconciling revelation with human inquiry, with issues of political philosophy in which both the sacred and the secular could be harmoniously reflected, with probing the nature of a universe created by divine command and reflecting divine order, in the nature of prophecy as distinct from or as a highly developed form of natural reason, of ethical virtues that found divine sanction, and so forth.

The point to be made here is that although for practical purposes we separate Western European and Muslim civilizations from each other, in fact these civilizations were very much in contact and conversation with each other; drawing from each other’s texts while

---

<sup>5</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (New York: State University

at the same time engaged in political conflicts. The former has of course enabled each one to benefit and flourish, while the latter has created in the popular mind the notion of an “Other” that must be dominated and vanquished, and we see this dual representation in our own day, where at the same time as anti-American sentiment is expressed, American technology is used to broadcast it, and here, on more familiar ground, at the same time as we feared Muslim terrorists as we prepared to see in the new millenium, translations of the Muslim mystic Rumi’s works were selling out at Borders bookstores.

In the mystical texts we read we encounter the deep-seated view that the stream of prophecy was continuously maintained from the time of creation and it is not at all unusual to find in Muslim mystical writings mention of and elaboration upon the spirituality of the figures one encounters in the Hebrew Bible, along with Jesus. Such writings emphasize attaining nearness to the divine, whether through diligent observation of revealed law or through remembering, glorifying or meditating upon God’s names and attributes. One also finds in these texts a tongue-in-cheek critique of those who diligently observe religious ritual forms but who, nonetheless, do not understand its inner transformative meaning where one lives in constant ethical, moral and enraptured awareness of the divine permission to exist and to act.

Students quite often emerge from these classes with the keen awareness that the three monotheistic traditions had similar concerns at the level of thinking about how the world is constructed, how salvific knowledge is attained, what comprises virtue, how society

---

of New York Press, 1993), xxiii.

could best be ordered, what is true happiness, and what it means to be human. Our medieval authors were preoccupied with opening up the meaning of revelation so as to relate it to the experience, whether joyous or sorrowful, of existence and in this regard students are able to see how many of the questions we struggle with today have remained quite similar, although our perspective and the manner in which we address these questions has undergone a significant paradigm shift. Further, they are able to see that even in the medieval period, the scriptural text was considered to be a guide towards understanding the world and our place in it and did not take away our human responsibility to examine both in order to extend our understanding of it. Finally, they see that the life of spirituality advocated by the mystics and the disciplined use of reason advocated by the philosophers can be harmonious rather than being set at odds with one another. That is, medieval thinkers and mystics struggled with acknowledging that the spirit of human inquiry was intended as divine grace, not as an instrument through which to dislocate spirituality from our frames of reference as our scientific understanding of the world grew. Students also read in the lines of these texts the concern that their authors had with how to live in this world in a manner that illuminated the best that a human could be and strive for, in harmony with those around them.

But when we speak of harmony, Islam does not immediately come to mind, certainly not the Islam that we have associated with the latter part of the twentieth century, which brings me to a brief discussion of my foundational course for students titled *The Religion of Islam*. This course, which is an introduction to Islam, is one in which I take students historically from the beginnings of Islam to the present day. The importance of studying

the historical development of a tradition is that it contextualizes for students that while any religion may have an idealized, eternal form that is held in the mind of the believer, as students of a religious tradition we have to bear in mind that all we can know is what believers thought and practiced at a particular time in a particular place in a particular context. In other words, the intent of this course, as mentioned at the beginning, is not to convert students to Islam, but rather to enable them to think intelligently about how to go about understanding what Muslims believe, why they might do so, how they enact their faith, and why they may sometimes disagree with each other.

We learn that Muslims in different cultures expressed their faith in different languages and composed and sang devotional works in a multitude of ways, and we learn that their mosques took on different architectural styles common to their region even while ensuring that the direction of prayer always faced Makkah (Mecca). We learn that Muslims presently make up slightly more than a quarter of the world's population and that at every moment somewhere in the world there is a Muslim reciting the Qur'an; that there are as many Muslims in North America as there are Jews, and that the diversity among the Muslim community or ummah is so great that it is nearly impossible to make a generalized statement about them any more than it is possible to make generalizations about Christians.

In studying the tradition historically students learn about the connection between politics and theology, about struggles for succession that led to schisms that we call sects, or alternate traditions within Islam; we learn how differently minded people understood the

same sacred texts differently; we learn that Muslims coexisted relatively peacefully with peoples of other faiths and that times of tension included political upheavals. We learn that scriptural sanction of Holy War or Jihad, a concept we associate with militant Muslims especially in the 20th century and fear most in the 21st century, came about in response to a historical situation and in a specific context, and was not necessarily a blanket statement intended to inculcate within Muslims a passion for taking up arms against anyone who was perceived to be an enemy. There is no question that verses pertaining to jihad in the Qur'an and in the Hadith or traditions have been interpreted by later Muslims after the death of Muhammad as allowing jihad or fighting to be conducted against all unbelievers. Yet, as Reuven Firestone in his careful analysis of jihad during the time of Muhammad points out, hostilities against unbelievers were to cease if they belonged to the Peoples of the Book, that is Jews or Christians, or if they were willing to pay a special tax, and further, that hostilities were to be undertaken only with Muáammad's permission. In the Hadith literature, Muhammad is quoted as saying that the greater jihad is the fight against one's soul, whereas the lesser jihad is that of taking up arms. The use of jihad, then, by later Muslims must be understood within the particular historical context and political situation in which it is invoked, for there is compelling evidence that divine sanction for war occurred within guidelines set out in the Qur'an with Muhammad's permission as a necessary corrective to the decision to take up arms. And while it is not possible to examine the Crusades within the scope of this course, students are alerted to the possibility that the concept of a Holy War was not unknown to medieval European Christians.

We learn that the issues facing Muslims cannot be understood unless we examine what is happening in the region, in the world around them, that they have hopes and dreams that are continually being negotiated with their contexts, and we listen to the variety of inspiring contributions they have made to the arts and to music and to culture. And we learn the reasons for which some Muslims are associated with terrorism, others with spirituality, others with philanthropic work, others with community development, others with fighting the onslaught of fundamentalism that has left no religious community in the world untouched, and yet others with working for human rights internationally. Here I might invoke the name of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan who worked tirelessly for refugees at the UN and continues to work for human rights. Students thus emerge from a course such as this with the perspective that through greater understanding, perhaps there are ways in which we can collaborate to see our way towards peace and sheltering our fragile world resources. While it is not an easy task to teach about Islam in a larger cultural context that is not always receptive to Muslims, it is a challenging and rewarding endeavor, for in the end, I believe, in the words of our founder, James Blaisdell, inscribed on the entrance gates to Pomona College, that those who leave here with the knowledge and the analytical tools we struggle to impart to them, do so “bearing their riches in trust for (hu)mankind.”

Zayn R. Kassam is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Pomona College, Claremont, California. This address was made to parents of students during Parents’ Weekend, February 2000.