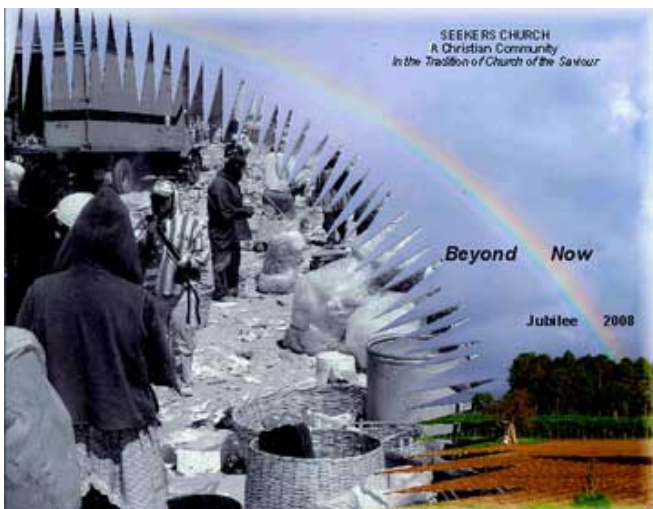


Traditional Islam in South Asia: A Personal Perspective By Zeenut Ziad

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It gives me great pleasure to be here today. I relish the opportunity to share with you a narrative which, sadly for the world, has been drowned out by a cacophony of divisive voices for whom it is profitable and politically expedient to put us all into separate sound-proof boxes.

I am a Muslim and a Pakistani and the image that this statement conjures up in the minds of Americans today is a parallel universe to the reality I knew growing up. Therefore, it is vital that you know the cultural heritage I come from –

a heritage that is much needed in the world today, and which parallels the teachings of Islam's Messiah, Jesus Christ.

I was born into an aristocratic family, which traces its origins to an Afghan ancestor who moved south in the waning days of the Mughal Empire and set up a principality in 1728.

My earliest memories of our large establishment are of exuberant diversity. It was a magical childhood. On the occasions of the Muslim festivals of Eid, family and friends of all faiths feasted with us. Christmas was celebrated by singing carols ("Silent Night" being my all time favorite) with our Christian friends and Divali at Hindu homes. We had a boisterous time with friends in our large garden at the Hindu festival of Holi, when we chased each other, squirting colored water. Among the many people who worked in and around our house were Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and many castes of Hindus, most of whom resided within our compound with their numerous progeny – so there was vast capacity for mischief with my eclectic band of playmates.

A Hindu holy man clad in a loin cloth was a regular visitor as was a white-bearded Muslim Sufi in starched white traditional pyjamas and shirt. Poets and musicians gathered at our house, their verse and music reflecting the exquisite blending of the many-hued



cultures and faiths that surrounded us. Thursday evenings my father took me to the crowded 13th century shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya, among the most revered Muslim saints of South Asia, to hear "Qawwali", the mystical/spiritual musical genre created by one of the world's outstanding musical geniuses, Amir Khusro, a beloved disciple of the saint. I want to share a fact that will astonish those who have no experience of millennia old multi-faith and multi-ethnic coexistence and cooperation: today this shrine is just as

popular as it once was and 65 percent of the devotees of this Muslim mystic are non-Muslims.

My parents were faith-blind, gender-blind, class-blind and color-blind. This understanding of Islam was not proclaimed – it was a self-evident truth that was lived. Oft times my father pointed out to me that the first surah of the Quran, considered the essence of the Quranic message, states explicitly that God is “Rubb al-Aalimeen”, the Sustainer of ALL the worlds and, therefore, all faiths and peoples are equal in His sight. It was this inclusive spirit of Islam that was taught by the saints and teachers of the mystical path (the Sufis) and influenced the entire way of life of Muslims, emperors and peasants alike, in South Asia.

It is a unique fact of history that wherever Muslims settled – whether in Mali in West Africa, Spain in Europe , Anatolia, Central Asia or South East Asia – they catalyzed the indigenous cultures and created civilizations where artists and intellectuals of every faith and persuasion flourished, producing a rich tapestry of accomplishments. In South Asia, Muslim emperors and princes ruled for a thousand years, alongside Hindu kings. Hindu, Sikh and Muslim peasants together tilled the same soil and venerated the same holy men. Centuries of accommodation and assimilation built a symbiotic Indo-Muslim culture based on mutual respect and tolerance. Rivalries and wars were over political and power issues in which religion seldom had a place.

It was a Muslim dynasty, the Mughals (1526-1858), builders of the sublime Taj Mahal, which united South Asia and established the wealthiest and most magnificent empire of its time. The empire comprised of present-day Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and a large part of Afghanistan – an area far more diverse and populous than all of Europe at that time.

The Mughal Empire was the exemplar of a vibrant, culturally plural, multi-religious state – the success of which modern

states would do well to emulate. Exceptional rulers created a political system based on respect for different traditions. This was manifest in the Smithsonian exhibition, "Muraqqa", this summer. The glorious Mughal paintings (of 1600-1660) depict Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary (in Islam both are the personification of purity), Jesuit priests, Hindu ascetics, Muslim saints, emperors, rajas and common folk, all in happy concourse. In the 1580s, Emperor Akbar the Great gifted lands to Jesuits to build churches and proselytize; they even received a daily allowance. This was in the tradition of Prophet Muhammad: He protected and revered the Christian mystics of Arabia, who were the first to acknowledge him as a Prophet. Akbar granted the city of Amritsar to the Sikhs to construct the Golden Temple, the most important site of worship in the Sikh religion. Imperial land and money built Hindu temples and Muslim mosques. For the arts, this was one of the world's most creative eras. Many of the patrons of universities and the arts were powerful women. Diverse cultures were blended into the incomparable Mughal style. The Taj Mahal epitomized this perfect fusion of Persian, Central Asian and South Asian traditions, as the fifth Mughal emperor, Shahjahan, created a monument to his beloved queen and an earthly vision of Quranic Paradise.

The inclusive Mughal vision was rooted in Islam, particularly the universalism practiced in mystical Sufism, the fount of Islamic spirituality. That may indeed have been the origin of the refined aesthetic and benevolent political and social vision of the Mughals. Beauty is exalted in the Islamic Sufi tradition because it is a facet of the transcendence of God. By surrounding oneself with beauty, God can be experienced in every aspect of life: "Islam throughout its history and within the depth and breadth of all its authentic manifestations, from architecture to the art of dress, has emphasized beauty and been inseparable from it" (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 200).

The Sufis actualize the spirit of Islam when they act on the Quranic message:

God loves those who do what is beautiful .

Islam's assertion of the transcendent One God has its counterpoint in its stress on the essential equality, and by extension, fellowship, of humankind; consequently all humanity must be embraced when 'doing what is beautiful'. The Prophet Muhammad set the example when he appointed, Bilal, a black former slave as the first person to call Muslims to prayer. The first constitution of Islam, the Constitution of Medina of 622, enshrined rights and religious freedom for all communities in Medina, which included Jews, Christians and the newly formed Muslim community.

A few stories may illustrate how the Islamic concept of pluralism permeated across religions and classes in South Asia, a land already rich in diversity and spirituality.

From the imperial capital to villages across the vast Mughal Empire, a man, designated the Masnavikhwan, was assigned to recite in the market square the monumental Masnavi of Rumi, the 13th century Muslim saint and Sufi, honored now throughout the world as the Poet of Love. This enabled even illiterate villagers to absorb the beauty and truth of his poetry. Growing up, I remember listening to the Masnavi recited for two hours every morning on the radio, which my mother turned up loud so that our household help could also hear it. It still echoes in my ears. Today, Rumi is the best-selling poet in the US!

Inscribed on the entrance to Rumi's tomb in Turkey, is a message embodying the spirit of Islam:

Come again, again!

Come again, whoever you may be,

Whether an infidel, a fire-worshipper or a pagan;

No matter if you've broken your vows a hundred times.

Ours is not a door of despair.

Just come as you are.

The similarities of expressions and imagery in mystical trends of Hinduism and Islam created a confluence both in high literature and in mystical folk traditions. When Bulleh Shah (d. 1758), the beloved Sufi saint and poet of Punjab sang, common folk of all faiths responded to his critique of religious orthodoxy, as they still do today:

You may destroy the mosque, you may ruin the temple,
But do not break a human heart, for that is the House of God.

This year in Pakistan, which many assume is overrun by fundamentalists, half a million men and women made the pilgrimage to Bulleh Shah's shrine celebrating a festival of dance, poetry, music and prayer. Sikh and Hindu delegations also come from India. But we never read about this because it contradicts the narrative preferred by the US media.

Then there was the Hamzanama, the most popular oral epic of the Mughal age. Professional storytellers enthralled audiences in the public spaces of great cities with nightlong recitations of this rollicking tale of adventure and magic. The elite enjoyed private recitations. I was born into a world culturally ravaged by colonialism but even in this period, I caught glimpses of that bygone era. Occasionally, an itinerant reciter would appear, and in the fading light (of course, it couldn't be otherwise), our imaginations would soar as he conjured up villains and fairies, heroines and demons.

A remarkable translation of this epic, by M.A.Farooqi, has just been published. William Dalrymple's review for the New York Times ends with: "At this perilous moment in history, the Hamza epic, with its mixed Hindu and Muslim idiom, its tales of love and seduction, its anti-clericalism (mullahs are a running joke throughout this book), its stories of powerful and resourceful women, and its mocking of male misogyny, is a reminder of an Islamic world the West seems to have forgotten:

one that is imaginative and heterodox – and as far as can be from the puritanical Wahhabi Islam that the Saudis have succeeded in spreading throughout much of the modern Middle East”(January 6, 2008).

How pertinent this portrayal of resourceful, powerful women! These were the only sort of women I knew or was related to. Indeed, some were the bane of my youth. Others, had they lived in 16th century Italy, would have put Lucretia Borgia to shame. In my extended family, powerful, highly placed men, ran scared of their wives. Muslim women can counter even the arch-misogynist, pointing to the inspirational example of the Prophet Muhammad and his wife, Khadija. This strong, independent, twice-widowed, 40 year old lady employed the 25 year old future Prophet to run her business. His personality so impressed her that she proposed marriage. Through endless persecution, exile and hardship, she was his partner and advisor. Their beautiful marriage lasted 25 years until her death.

I am also related to the royal family of Bhopal, a Muslim state with the unique distinction of highly successful rule (1819-1926) by 4 generations of women. Incidentally, the Queen chose her consort from a lineup of the best looking men in the land, garlanding the one who caught her fancy! My mother's hometown of Lucknow boasts of the courageous Queen, Hazrat Mahal, who, in 1856, commanded Hindu and Muslim troops in a fight against the British, who invaded her realm on the pretext of bringing reforms.

The Mughal Empire began to weaken by the latter half of the 18th century. By mid 19th century, South Asia was annexed through cunning, bribery and force by a phenomenon never before encountered: British colonialism, which destroyed the very fabric of South Asian society and the unifying basis of its 9000 year old culture. One hundred and fifty years of British rule turned a unified multi-religious state, the wealthiest in the world, into one of the poorest, divided

along religious and ethnic lines.

The reason I describe the process of colonialism in South Asia is that this is what most of the Muslim world faced, from the end of the 18th to the middle of the 20th century. It is the source of much of the bad governance, poverty, and ethnic discord we see today. It is vitally important to understand that the abuses of this period sowed the seeds of modern fundamentalism and anti Western sentiments.

Volumes are filled with accounts of the havoc wreaked by British imperialism, such as reducing the peasants of Bengal, the richest Mughal province, to serfdom and cutting off the thumbs of its master weavers so that Bengal's world famous cloth would cease to compete with British cloth. The so-called "Raj," of garden parties and noble Victorians bringing enlightenment to natives, is a brilliant PR job. The reality was captured in the signs which even my parent's generation encountered: "Dogs and Indians not allowed".

Since the British seized power largely from Muslim rulers, the Muslims of India became the principal targets of systematic destruction. Delhi was razed to the ground in 1858 when the British encountered resistance there and its inhabitants slaughtered in a savage bloodbath. This was repeated in many cities. Unbridled greed, racism and evangelism combined to destroy and distort societal structures, through innumerable new regulations. W.W. Hunter, not a friend of Muslims, wrote in 1871: "Hundreds of ancient families were ruined and the educational system of the Musulmans, which was almost entirely maintained by rentfree grants, received its death-blow. The scholarly classes of the Muhammadans emerged from the eighteen years of harrying, absolutely ruined" (The Indian Musulmans, London 1871).

The infamous 1835 plan of Lord Thomas Macaulay made English the official language of India in order, "... to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we

govern, a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”(Minute on Education 1835). Macaulay is held responsible for the destruction of not just Muslim, but Indian education in general and the yawning gap between India’s haves and have-nots.

The famous madrasas (educational institutions) which had produced brilliant scholars, administrators, jurists and doctors were devastated. Thereafter, only the poorest went to madrasas to rote-learn ossified ideas taught by those who were semi-literate themselves. A new English speaking elite was created, estranged from the masses and cut off from its cultural and religious traditions, which it was taught to hold in contempt. Simultaneously, British imperialism encouraged divisions along religious lines. Even our common language was partitioned: Urdu for Muslims and Hindi for Hindus.

As historians of colonialism point out, the British continued this policy of conflict promotion and partition well into the 20th century, devastating societies all over the globe. The British laid the groundwork and short-sighted and greedy South Asian politicians did the rest. India was partitioned in 1947 and Pakistan emerged.

From its inception, Pakistan was allied with the US. We loved everything American. In 1959, when Eisenhower arrived in Karachi I represented my school to greet him, holding aloft a large banner proclaiming “I like Ike”. When Lyndon Johnson spontaneously stopped his motorcade on his visit to Karachi, to befriend a camel-cart driver, (Bashir, the Camel-Cart Driver, Pakistan’s equivalent of Joe the Plumber), the whole country fell in love with him. Pakistan was a vital link in the anti-communist alliance and signed up for any and every regional military pact sponsored by the US. But, in 1958, the first military dictatorship was imposed, incidentally backed by the US, and lasted 11 years, ruthlessly crushing civil liberties. Fatima Jinnah, the sister of our founder, bravely

opposed General Ayub Khan and in 1965, she was elected President, probably the first woman President in the world. But the election was stolen. Disillusionment was inevitable.

Despite the deep cleavages created by colonialism, many of our traditions held on. Pakistanis continued to be liberal, tolerant and easy-going (if anything, a little too easy-going). Karachi was a city of promenades, bars, and cafes. As young women we felt very safe, knowing men would be respectful. I could drive anywhere late at night and girls could take trips into distant areas, un-harassed. In 1974, a group of my friends – men and women – and I decided to hitchhike in Swat, the magnificent mountain region in the northwest which today is suffering terrible tragedies. We were intrigued to see groups of European and American hippies, whom local peasants had welcomed into their homes for months on end and given food and board without any charge. Such is the large heart of even the poorest Pakistani. Greg Mortensen's bestseller, "Three Cups of Tea", beautifully describes these generous people, who maintain their traditions even today.

Then, in 1979 our world began to fall apart. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the West and its allies decided the best resistance to Moscow would come through packaging the war as a religious struggle. The then American and Saudi Arabian backed Pakistani dictator, General Zia, imposed draconian and misogynist laws under the guise of promoting "morality", and madrasas were converted overnight into training grounds for mujahideen.

Pakistan bore the brunt of the anti Soviet struggle, losing tens of thousands of soldiers, a fact never acknowledged in the Western media. But more tragically, for the first time, the Wahhabi extremism from Saudi Arabia, guns, and drugs flowed into Pakistan to tear apart the fabric of society. To the Wahhabi mindset, our traditional Islam is as much anathema as the mores of the secular West. Vast amounts of money poured in from Saudi Arabia to influence policies, institutions,

madrassa curricula etc.

Yet even faced with such odds, Pakistanis continue the struggle to reclaim their heritage and the pluralism of traditional Islam. Pakistanis, from rock musicians to conservative clerics, have vociferously condemned terrorism. It is indeed ironic that when more than a million men and women marched last year in Karachi protesting against extremism, no one here heard about it. In this year's election, fundamentalists were virtually wiped out, losing even the little clout they previously had, but Pakistanis hardly got credit.

Today, with Obama's election, the global community hopes that the US will once again become a force for positive change. At this critical juncture for the world, the lessons from Muslim history are particularly significant: Diverse communities CAN live and prosper in peaceful cooperation, and this symbiosis can be the source of beauty and progress. This message of traditional Islam was beautifully expressed by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu: "...[the rainbow nation] is a place where people of each race and cultural group exhibit their own unique identity, their own distinct attributes, but where the beauty of the whole gloriously exceeds the sum of its parts.

[Obama's] triumph can help the world reach the point where we realize that we are all caught up in a delicate network of interdependence, unable to celebrate fully our own heritage and place in the world, unable to realize our full potential as human beings, unless everyone else, everywhere else, can do the same" (Washington Post, November 9, 2008).