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May 8, 2014

Introduction to *Wanderings*

What does it mean to experience a religion? As Professor Ali Asani so often notes, religions are not reducible to their sacred texts, or their ritual practices, or even their fundamental ethical teachings. Analyzing these vital elements of religious traditions are of course essential to critically examining the evolution of ideologies of faith, yet for a number of reasons this approach is unfortunately insufficient to wholly elucidate the lived experience of religion. Most major world religions, including Islam, are practiced in the context of local cultures and regional politics. In his book *Infidel of Love* Asani writes:

...all interpretations of religion are essentially human enterprises: the faithful may consider certain religious truths to be divinely revealed, but religious meaning is constructed by humans based on their worldly circumstances and material realities. As these circumstances differ, multiple conflicting interpretations are not only to be expected but also inevitable.... these conflicting definitions provide incontrovertible evidence of the role of context in formulating religious worldviews. (p. 20)

This inherent diversity in manifestations of religion calls into question the singularity of any one religion. To say that any globalized religion exists as a solidified set of ideological principles dangerously ignores the diversity of practices contingent on geography, class, regime, and time period within a religion. Yet simultaneously many people do believe that their respective religions have core traits that define them, despite the range of practices and expressions of religion. The resulting tension between the essential and the variegated within a religion necessitates an analytical approach that sees the many manifestations of a single religion within the frameworks of validity presented by the people who espouse them, as well as in relation to each other, the numerous concepts of the religion's 'true' iteration.

Because interpretations of religion and the roles that they play in the daily lives of individuals are so often culturally contingent, religion is interactive with various modes of cultural expression, including but not limited to literary, musical, visual, and culinary traditions, as well as innovations and critiques. For example a profound reading of the Torah would explain little about the importance of Eastern European dishes in Ashkenazi Jewish Americans' understandings of their own Jewish-ness. Similarly a great deal of historical context would be important in analyzing the place of gospel music in some black American Christian congregations, not simply doctrinal or Biblical study. In the preface to his comprehensive text *Seven Doors to Islam*, John Renard notes:

Although theology and law are crucial elements in any study of Islamic religious tradition, the writings of professional theologians and jurists have generally had little direct influence on the everyday lives of the vast majority of Muslims. (p. xiv)

The complex history and broad geographic spread of Islam necessitates a multifaceted “cultural studies” approach in order to begin to appreciate the impact of Islam—as a belief system, sociopolitical ideology, component of personal identity, etc.—in the lives of Muslims, past and present.

Wanderings presents six artistic responses to various facets of culture and thought from locales within the Islamic world ranging from Senegal to Iran and temporally from Islam's early post-prophetic years and conflicts to contemporary social discourse. As a whole integrated portfolio *Wanderings* represents the meandering journey of a non-Muslim to gain insight into the lived experiences of diverse Muslims. Each individual artistic endeavor responds to the relationships between Muslims and elements of Islamic life that pervade personal worldviews in varying contexts. In this sense the pieces that constitute the portfolio are divided into three groups, respectively exploring the relationships between Muslims and Allah/the universe

(response 1), Muslims and historical leaders (resp. 2–4), and Muslims and the self (resp. 5–6) within societies divided over differing interpretations of Islam. Despite the differing focuses of these groupings the pieces within them attempt to add ideas to the whole of what it means to feel Muslim, especially important in an era plagued by deafening rhetoric and dangerous generalizations about who Muslims are and what Islam means both within largely Muslim societies and external to them. Then the overarching goal of *Wanderings* is to provide a limited yet unique window through which to understand better some of the relationships to the physical and spiritual, historical and social, which inform the modern Muslim experience.

The first group comprises only the first post, *Daybreak* (medium: altered digital photograph), which functions as the philosophical and symbolic origin. This calligraphic response explores notions of Allah’s omnipresence and the spiritual interaction between humans and their divinely inscribed world, examining how certain theological ideas (rather than social discourse, as in “Choosing a Meaning”) inform some Muslims’ worldview. The calligraphy itself represents an important form through which Muslims experience many textual, artistic, and aural elements of religion: the Arabic word. More broadly it points to a relationship between humans who are forgetful of God and a universe that, through its “creative orderliness,” exists as a constant reminder of God (Asani, Lecture 1/30; Lecture 2/6). At the same time it opens the portfolio with an exploration of some Qur’anic elements; the experience of the holy writing and its connection with cosmological concepts of the world as evidence and output of the divine is the first of several intensely personal relationships between Muslims and components of Islamic life that *Wanderings* seeks to comprehend.

The second grouping of works within *Wanderings* is composed of pieces numbers two (“Encounters with *Ra’uf*”), three (*Elegy for Husayn*), and four (*Bamba Fépp*), each of which

attempts a greater understanding of the connection that Muslims feel to important historical religious figures (the Prophet Muhammad for all Muslims, Husayn for Shi'ah Muslims, and Shaykh Amadou Bamba Mbacké for Senegalese Muslims, particularly the Mouride Brotherhood). The relationships between contemporary Muslims and these respective leaders are complex, yet crucial to understanding the worldview of many Muslims, and include notions of ethical grounding, foundation of group identity, political history, and spiritual intercession. These three artistic responses understand the presence of these figures in everyday life in several ways. One is the relationship between Muslims and historical leaders through art. For example, the figure of Bamba is literally present via photograph and visual representation throughout the landscape of daily Mouride life. In their book *A Saint in the City*, which presents various facets of Sufi art making in Senegal, Allen and Mary Roberts present the testimony of one woman “wringing laundry on a Dakar sidewalk in front of a wall mural of Bamba,” who describes that his ubiquitous image:

...is very important to me because everybody feels like a Mouride in these neighborhoods. This is a picture that gives a lot of peace. Since my childhood, Bamba has been part of my family.... Everyone is touched by Bamba, somehow.... I believe in the power of the Holy Man. (p. 51)

This omnipresence of the image of Bamba in the Senegalese Mouride world, and the cosmology embodied by it, are the principle subject of *Bamba Fépp* (medium: mixed colored pen and pencil shading). Similarly, the emotional and theological relationship between Shi'ah Muslims and Husayn is the subject of *Elegy for Husayn* (medium: music). Like *Bamba Fépp* it responds to Muslims' own artistic expression, in this case the Persian Ta'ziyeh play depicting the Battle of Karbala, of their highly personal relationships with leaders of the past, whose impact on politics, culture, and beliefs is still important in the present.

The second way in which this set of three pieces understands the presence of religious figures in individual Muslim lives is through the embodiment of their teachings. This theme is most profoundly explored in “Encounters with *Ra’uf*” (medium: poetry) which describes the process of a non-Muslim coming to know the Prophet Muhammad via the reflection of his teachings in the lives of ordinary faithful Muslims. In examining individual devotion to the Prophet, Asani recalls British Muslim reactions to Salman Rushdi’s much contested novel *Satanic Verses*. One community leader explains, “Muslims seek Muhammad as the ideal on which to fashion our lives and conduct, and the Prophet is internalized into every Muslim’s heart” (p. 106). Not only do many Muslims feel a close personal spiritual connection to the Prophet Muhammad, but this relationship also informs many of the behaviors of daily life, ritual, social, or otherwise. Hence Muslims’ understandings of their interaction with prophets and leaders alike are crucial to gaining invaluable perspective on the contemporary Muslim experience.

The final group within *Wanderings* is concerned with Muslim understandings of self, and by extension their identity within societies where interpretations of Islam are often hotly contested. As with the blog as a whole, the limited number of responses determines that only a few select points of focus are examined, but they offer important insights. “The Classroom of Birds” (medium: pencil shading) is a political cartoon relating the Persian Sufi epic poem *The Conference of Birds* (trans. Darbandi and Davis) to the present. Sufism is by definition an alternative interpretation of Islam, and the ideology of humans being able to transcend the gap between the earthly and the divine central to some Sufi movements directly contravenes the teachings of some more legalistic Islamic traditions. In its commentary on *The Conference*, “The

Classroom of Birds” implicitly interrogates how traditional Sufi understandings of the self (*nafs*) differed from those in other Islamic communities and continue to affect Muslims today.

Similarly “Choosing a Meaning” (medium: pen and ink) explores the discourse surrounding female veiling and head covering, a conversation that historically has been and continues to be divisive both within some Muslim nations and elsewhere. Division over the role of *hijab* in contemporary Islam represents broader social tensions in the various locales of dialogue. The agency inherent in the Muslim girl depicted in “Choosing a Meaning” crucially points to the conscious decisions contemporary Muslims face in formulating their own outward and inward identities, at times balancing conviction with sociopolitical pressures. Like “The Classroom of Birds,” this piece examines one facet of Muslim understandings of the self and self-identity within a greater context of plural interpretations of the meanings of Islam.

Although the works that constitute *Wanderings* maybe divided into the broad segments described above as one way of organizing this creative inquiry into the various meanings of Islam to Muslims around the world, in reading, viewing, and listening to *Wanderings*, the audience will notice several themes pervasive throughout the artistic responses across the categories. One such theme is the reinterpretation of the immediate meanings of theology within culturally and temporally contingent contexts. Another is the historical impact on Muslims’ lives (and creative expressions) of the confluence of local or sectarian politics with and theological interpretations. However the most obvious and important of theme throughout is that because creative endeavors are such powerful clarifying lenses into the importance of various religious concepts in Muslim lives, the choice of medium for each post reflects creative media traditionally used to express the ideas addressed:

(1) *Daybreak* unifies calligraphy with environment-as-divine-expression; Arabic calligraphy has traditionally expressed that “the Arabic language, occurring in the Qur’an, is to be considered a miracle” (Khatibi and Sijelmassi, p. 18), just as the whole of creation is a divine gift.

(2) “Encounters with *Ra’uf*” addresses relationships with the Prophet through poetry, which has long been the medium of choice, especially for praise of the Prophet, within Islamic cultures. Furthermore that its structure is inherently narrative lends it to oral recitation, a vital element of poetry from the Islamic world.

(3) *Elegy for Husayn* understands the Karbala tragedy (in Shi’ah tradition) through highly dramatic performance, which theoretically requires emotional engagement on the part of the listener not necessary for more easily achieved passive viewing of visual art. This inevitable self-situating within the space of the performance, even as a member of the ‘audience,’ as well as the emotive elements of the music reflect the “actor-spectator confrontation in Ta’ziyeh” which “induce self-analysis in all who participate and create in them an inner harmony” (Chelkowski, p. 11).

(4) *Bamba Fépp* as a surrealist collage of imagery reflects Sufi notions the human ability to bridge the gap between human and divine. Perhaps more importantly, the heavy symbolism of its imagery is well suited to the visual lexicon of Mouride arts given that “because of the strength of their faith Mourides possess... a “devotional eye”” (Roberts and Roberts, p. 22) which permits a strong visual language centered on their faith. Furthermore the imperative incorporation of Shaykh Amadou Bamba’s image in one sense requires that the facets of Mouridism examined here be addressed in visual terms, regardless of abstraction.

(5) “The Classroom of Birds” is a political cartoon, an important Western mode of social critique. This genre is the contemporary Western reflection of poetry in 12th century Persia, which as a popular art form was ideal for Farid ud-Din Attar to explain the mystical path to spiritual realization and critique the essentially human flaws in each of the birds, transformed to present distractions in this modern illustration.

(6) “Choosing a Meaning,” like “The Classroom of Birds,” provides contemporary commentary through a political cartoon style illustration. However the important element of the visual vocabulary here is the use of stark black-and-white pen, which refers to (but does not directly imitate) the recognizable style of Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel *Persepolis* to which the illustration should be juxtaposed thematically in order to be understood.

Each piece in *Wanderings* responds to facets of Muslim life, not only by their thematic examinations of the relationships Muslims experience between themselves and their world, history, and society, but also through inherent engagement with the art forms that have been used to express them. In other words, *Wanderings* is concerned with what Renard calls “creative endeavor that is inspired by and fosters spiritual growth.... how Muslims have communicated, recorded, and displayed, both textually and visually, the beliefs and convictions underlying those practices” (p. xiv). For the reader, viewer, or listener of *Wanderings* the portfolio should be a journey through these relationships and artistic discourses alike. Through their *Wanderings* the audience will not achieve definitive answers about the so-called true nature of Islam nor the reality of a single version of Muslim life, but rather should begin to ask questions about the wealth of creativity and spirituality as well as plurality of experience in historical and contemporary Muslim communities.