

REVIVING BEAUTY, CRITICALITY AND CREATIVITY IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

14

Hamza Yusûf



The Muis Occasional Papers Series

THE MUIS ACADEMY OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES

Represents individual lectures delivered by scholars who were invited under the Muis Visiting Scholars Programme. The aim of this series is to shape the local discourses on Islam and the Singapore Muslim Identity.

REVIVING BEAUTY, CRITICALITY AND CREATIVITY IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Hamza Yusuf

Muis Academy
The Occasional Paper Series
Paper No. 14



Other Titles in the Series:

1. *Muslims in Secular States: Between Isolationists and Participants in the West*
by Abdullah Saeed
2. *Contemporary Islamic Intellectual History: A Theoretical Perspective*
by Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi'
3. *Islamic Law and Muslim Minorities*
by Khaled Abou El Fadl
4. *Religious Values in Plural Societies*
by Chandra Muzaffar
5. *Islam in Southeast Asia: Between Tolerance and Radicalism*
by Azyumardi Azra
6. *A Framework for Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islam*
by Mohammed Abu-Nimer
7. *Civic Responsibility in Political Society: An Islamic Paradigm*
by Abdulaziz Sachedina
8. *The Construction of Gender in Islamic Legal Thought and Strategies for Reform*
by Ziba Mir-Hosseini
9. *Basis for Interfaith Dialogue: Prospects and Challenges*
by Mahmoud M. Ayoub
10. *Shari'ah, Ethical Goals and the Modern Society*
by Jasser Auda
11. *Religious Extremism, Islamophobia and Reactive Co-Radicalization*
by Douglas Pratt
12. *Morality in the Public Sphere: Islamic Ethics and the Common Good*
by Ebrahim Moosa
13. *Islam and Humanistic Relations in Multi-Religious Societies*
by Maszlee Malik

Copyright © 2017 Muis Academy, Singapore

Published by Muis Academy, Singapore

Designed and Printed by HoBee Print

The following is an edited transcript of a Public Lecture on 'Reimagining the Role of Islam for the Future' delivered at Muis Auditorium on 16 March 2017.

The views represented here do not necessarily reflect the views of Muis Academy, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), or its partners.

ISBN: 978-981-11-5648-9

REVIVING BEAUTY, CRITICALITY AND CREATIVITY IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Hamza Yusuf

❧ ON BEAUTY, LANGUAGE AND POETRY ❧

Alḥamd li Allāh (Praise and Gratitude be to Allah)

These days we are almost compelled to make things beautiful and what does that mean? When I was in West Africa, I was struck by the fact that this *Big* pen became very widespread in Sahara, Mauritania where I studied. But people always embellished it with coloured leather strips as a cover and I asked, “why?” and they said that they thought that the *Big* pen was ugly. So they wanted to embellish it and make it beautiful.

That was interesting because one of the things about Western culture now - even though we traditionally have a real love of beauty - is that much of it has become very ugly and very functional. In fact now for clothes, wealthy people actually spend an extraordinary amount of money for rags - clothes that have holes in them; so that many people now, instead of adorning themselves and their clothes, as most traditional cultures have, including the Melayu (Malay) culture, with beautiful embroidery or colour, now they actually relish a type of ugliness in their clothes.

For the first time in human history people wear underwear as just clothes to wear outside like T-shirts. T-shirts were traditionally underwear. So one of the fascinating things about modern people is that we are losing our sense of beauty. For me that is a dangerous indication of where we are going, as a species, and as a civilisation.

The most beautiful thing that human beings have is language. And the most beautiful language that we had historically was poetry and every culture is built upon poetry. There is no human civilisation that does not have poetry at the foundation of its civilisation. Plato and Aristotle do not exist without the great poetry of Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It was the great poetry of the Elizabethan English that enabled the King James' Bible to come into existence.

And even though, as Muslims, we believe the Qur'ān is the eternal word of God, nonetheless Arabic poetry reached its pinnacle at the moment the Qur'ān was revealed. Because the Qur'ān cannot be understood without incredible linguistic skills. And so there is a reason why nobody in the history of Islam has ever reproduced the poetry of the Pagan (*jāhili*) Arabs. It is considered the pinnacle of Arabic language.

One of the hallmarks of modern society is the loss of poetry and this is another very deep sign that something is wrong with us as a species. In my country, there is something called “rap,” which undeniably has a poetic element to it, but one of the things about traditional poetry is, it was always a rigorous discipline and some people had it naturally, as in oral cultures, but generally it was something that had to be studied - what they called porosity (the science of metrics) and this is true in all cultures that have a metrical poetry that is either related to accent or time. And these are the two interesting things about language.

The English language is largely spoken in Iambic accent, a light-heavy alternation in stress. Shakespeare largely wrote in Iambic pentameter. A lot of people who read Shakespeare do not realise that it is poetry because it is so natural. “To be or not to be, that is the question.” People do not realise that it is actually beautifully metered in an Iambic pentameter because it is the natural way that we speak.

And so there is something about the beauty of language that poetry is an aspiration of every civilisation. And poets were incredibly honoured in cultures. With the great poets of Arabia, the tribes would celebrate the birth of a poet, because they were elevated by their poetry. It was something that was very, very important. Arguably one of the last great poets in American civilisation was Robert Frost, who was honoured by Kennedy at his presidential inauguration because he had a great love of poetry and educated people traditionally were forced to study poetry.

One of the important things that I am seeing in the world is this loss of the rigour of poetry and the meanings that were infused in it. When language is honoured, poetry is honoured, and the reverse holds true, when language is denigrated, poetry loses its importance in its society; people lose interest in poetry. However, that is unfortunate, as poets have much to tell us.

According to Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī (1808 – 1883), the great Algerian Shaykh, the reason that prophets were called poets (*shā’ir*) is because no one other than a poet has a type of inspiration that is very close to revelation. There is a fine line between the inspiration of a true poet and somebody who receives verse. A true poet, an inspired poet, is also somebody who has inspiration from God and this is why the language of revelation is always an exalted language. Because it is a fine line between the two, God made the distinction explicit, otherwise, according to Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī, they can be easily confused. Thus the “Qur’ān” is not poetry – for Allah says,

“We did not give him (Muhammad) knowledge of poetry, nor is it befitting for him” (Q: 36:69).

And in our modern education the importance of embedding meaning in language is very often lost on people. Yes, poetry is difficult to understand because it teaches people to meditate on meaning. My father once told me that it took him almost fifty years to understand one poem of Robert Frost. He had memorised it and meditated on it for that long. And during the last days of this life, he was discussing that poem, called “*Fire and Ice*”:

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire,
I hold with those who favour fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

What Frost is talking about there is the essential human problem of what is called the hot sins and the cold sins. The hot sins are sins like human appetite; the desire to consume the desire to explore sexual appetite without limits; the desire to eat without boundaries. As Allah described this state where Man may say boastfully,

“Wealth have I squandered in abundance!” (Q: 90:6)

Much of the world right now, those parts that are called ‘developed’ or ‘advanced’ are deeply embedded in the appetites. They are literally destroying themselves with the sins of fire. And if you look at the inequality on this planet, in the other places, it is the cold sins that are eating them up; the sins of hatred, the sins of resentment, the sins of envy. These are cold sins.

ALL CULTURES HONOUR THE INTELLECT AND THE ENVIRONMENT

I think what he is saying is that it is fire that is going to destroy us. It is our human appetites, because they override our reason. This is called the ‘concupiscent soul’ in traditional ethics. But it might be the ‘irascible soul,’ the emotional soul of anger. But both of them suffice. Both of them will do the job. And the only thing that can override fire and ice, in the human being, is reason, is the actual intellect. And this is why every culture traditionally honoured the intellect.

We now know aboriginal people always had wise people that they recognised and deferred to. So even at the aboriginal level – the ‘orang Asli’ – these people understood the importance of wisdom and their intelligence is not less than the intelligence of advanced people. We know that through the idea of Homo Sapiens, as sapiential beings and as beings of intelligence, the aboriginal people in some ways, can adopt and learn our advanced civilisations very quickly. And they have proven that in many places. But it is very difficult for an advanced, civilised person to adapt to an aboriginal condition. They will perish in those conditions.

Aboriginals are very important for our overall survival. They are natural conservationists. They conserve their water resource. I will give you one example. I was in Mauritania. Our student housing were burlap sacks that were sewn together by the women. And then we took branches of trees and built what they called a ‘Ḥūsh,’ and this is how the students who were very poor live where I studied in the Sahara. But one of the Americans who came to study there after me tried to cut down a tree. One of the ‘illiterate’ people, when he saw him doing that, ran to catch up with him. And when he caught him, he said, “What are you doing?” He said, “I’m cutting the tree down to build a ‘Ḥūsh’.” He said, “That is not how it is done. Take branches different trees. Do not take the whole tree.”

That man should be in the United Nations teaching them about environmentalism and how to preserve our natural resources. Because, in this age of overconsumption, we have a crisis, all over the world. In America, nobody thinks about tap water. They just let it run while they brush their teeth. Our Prophet told us to conserve energy; conserve water even if you are on the bank of a flowing river. Be conservative in your use of water.¹ Why would he say that? They are living in a desert and they would think like that because it is not abundant. But even if it is abundant you should not be wasteful. The Qur’ān says do not be wasteful,

“Eat and drink but be not excessive. Indeed, He likes not those who commit excess” (Q: 7:31)

MODERN DISTRACTIONS AS IMPEDIMENTS TO REFLECTION AND CREATIVITY

In the seven deadly sins, the great sins of Saint Gregory, who is the Pope of the Catholics, ‘luxuria’ in Latin, is one of them. The sin of luxury is translated into lust. This desire which will only get more intense the more we get what we want. When is enough then enough? It is never enough if that is your pursuit. The human soul will never be satisfied. However, the great sin of our time, in my estimation, especially amongst

¹ *The Messenger of Allah passed by Sa’d when he was performing ablution, and he said: ‘What is this extravagance? He said: ‘Can there be any extravagance in ablution?’ He said: Yes, even if you are on the bank of a flowing river.” From Sunan Ibn Majah, Vo. 1, Book 1, No.425.*

the young people, who are preoccupied on their cell phones, is distractibility. This is called 'acedia' in the seven deadly sins. The great desert monks called it the 'noonday devil.' And they say that its quality was always to be like that the monk, who instead of meditating, he would look to the window and would listen to see if anybody was in the quarters. Like people now check their cell phones to see if they have got any new notifications.

People are losing the ability to sit and be patient in thinking deeply about things. The quality boredom (*malal*) and being bored is very important. It allows us space and time for creativity. But now everybody has these machines so they are never bored anymore. They are never left to 'their own' devices to think of something. God relies in Himself and from his inner most Essence, He creates what He wishes. And this is what creative people do. They do not need to seek anything outside of themselves - they are creative in their own right. Creativity is needed today, more than ever before, because we are confronted with problems that have never confronted the human species. We now have the ability to destroy ourselves. When the nuclear bomb was unleashed, the Japanese people felt the brunt of it from not one but two nuclear bombs. And they still have people alive today that still have the effects of those bombs. They are now the most vociferous people against the proliferation of nuclear bombs because they know what it means. When the bombs were unleashed on this world by the Americans, Einstein said the world has changed but we have not really changed since.

THE NEED FOR A REVIVAL OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

We must think anew. This is one of the arguments of Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah about Islam; that we cannot live Islam of the seventh century today. Our Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) lived in the seventh century but we live in the fifteenth century according to our 'Hijra' calendar or in the twenty-first century according to the Common Era or in the year 'Anno Domini', according to the Christians. This is a different time. It is a different place. The principles we believe are valid because the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) taught universal principles but the particulars are not always valid. Because many of the particulars are for that time and that place.

Take for example the concept of jihād, many Muslims still believe in this idea of pre-emptive jihād; that you have to do an offensive form of jihād. Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah said that in the early period of Islam, there was disagreement (*khilāf*) on the matter. It was an issue of difference of opinion. Some of the scholars ('ulamā'), Ibn Taymiyyah for instance, rejected this notion; instead he argued that all types of jihād are defensive. The Malikis rejected Ibn Taymiyyah's stand and maintained that you

have to do jihād twice a year. This is found in our books of jurisprudence. Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah says that we can consider anybody calling for that in today's context, as clinically insane; as it is no longer relevant.

The world has changed, for the first time, in human history, mosques are built all over the world, including Singapore, which is a secular society that honours its Muslims, even though the people that are ruling the country by and large are not Muslims. Yet the government says - we honour you and your religion. We honour the Buddhists, the Hindus, the Christians and people of all faith. There are ten official religions in Singapore. This is the world that we need to promote today. We are not in the world where the Arabs said "Europe, if you do not fight it, it fights you." This was the pre-modern mentality and colonialism might have proved that opinion.

We now have international agreements between independent sovereign states like Singapore and Malaysia. Undeniably, there are still influences by the great powers. The G7 have powers that other countries do not have, they influence the United Nations. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of America is the largest in the world, and it impacts the world. It also has the most powerful military, for good or for bad. Some of things that it does like monitoring and preventing piracy are beneficial to our societies. And then there are other things about foreign policies that can be unfortunate. But overall we do have a global order.

ISLAM AS A RELIGION OF PEACE AND STABILITY

If we did not have this order or if this order collapsed, then we will see the anarchy of Middle East where one country eats up another country. Or one group becomes a criminal group that begins to terrorise other groups. The Yazidis have been protected in the Muslim civilisations for centuries. And suddenly they are being taken as slaves, or sexual slaves in some extreme cases. This is completely antithetical to basic human decency, let alone a world religion that convinced billions of people over human history of its truth, including the Southeast Asians, that the essence of your culture is '*adab*,' which is this idea of comportment, decorum and courtesy. This is your civilisation. Islam came here as a peaceful religion. They did not conquer you with their swords. They conquered the people that became Muslims in this region with their hearts. And this is one of the beauties of Southeast Asian Islam. Islam was not spread by the sword. It was spread by the peace. Now, in our tradition we do not believe Islam spread by the sword because we have no indication that the Muslims forced people to become Muslim. And in the few instances when they did, and when the Caliph found out, he allowed the people to revert back to their religions. Because they consider it as coercion and that is in opposition to the Qur'ānic principle of freedom of religion.

❧ HONOUR THE PAST BUT REIMAGINE THE FUTURE ❧

I will conclude with this, in terms with “reimagining” the future, the first thing we have to do is stop being nostalgic about the past. One of the interesting things about Muslim societies is that there is never been a successful science fiction television programme. Star Trek does not work in Arabia because Muslims cannot imagine the future. They are so nostalgic for the past. And this is one of the tragedies for the modern Muslim community. They are always talking about the past and how great we were.

Aristotle said that young men talk about the future because they have no past but old men talk about the past because they have no future. And the Muslim civilisation is behaving like an old man, when we are not. We are filled with young people who need hope and aspirations. They need to actually think that the future can be better. And one of the most extraordinary Ḥadīth in our tradition is that the Prophet said,

“The parable of my Ummah is that of a rain. It is not known if its beginning is better or its end.”²

So we should always be optimistic and hopeful about the future. We should never despair. Allah (glorified and exalted be He) reminds us:

“Do not despair of the Mercy of Allah” (Q: 39:54)

We are confronted with immense challenges. By ‘we’ I mean that I am talking to the Muslims (in Singapore) now. Your community is one of the few communities today that is living in real security. And you have to thank God for that. And then you thank the government - for whoever is not grateful to people has not thanked God. And this government wants to maintain security in their country. I am not going to criticise the government now but I guarantee you that if I studied the situation here enough, I could provide some criticism because there is no government that is perfect. There never has been and there never will be. But if you are grateful for what you have, God will increase it as is stated in your Holy Book. Your Lord has declared that if you are grateful, I will increase reasons for being grateful. But, if you are ungrateful, I will give you more reasons to be ungrateful. And so even by acknowledging that there is always much room for improvement in any state, you still have one of the most flourishing states in the world today.

² Jāmi al-Tirmidhī

❧ CIVILISATION AND CULTURE ❧

As an American, I am watching my own civilisation really struggling right now; morally, financially, racially, and in many other ways. So hold on to your culture. Do not recreate yourselves in somebody else's image. The Muslims here should not become Arabs. The Arabs are Arabs because they are Arabs. You are Melayu (Malay) because you are Melayu (Malay). Every culture is distinct and unique. Our Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) honoured cultures. He spoke to every tribe in their dialect. Why did he do that? Because he was honouring their culture. When the Yemenis came and visited him, he addressed them in their Ḥimyari dialect. Why would he do that? Because he wanted to make them feel that he is one of them. 'I' am not different from 'you.'

Yet now we have Muslims from indigenous cultures that adopt the clothes of another people. And in the great book of the Shafi'ī scholar Al-Mawardi, he said that for anyone to go against the culture of a people in the way they dress, is coming from stupidity and foolishness. Because you alienate yourself. Now obviously if you are a visitor to a country and you are wearing your traditional clothes that is another thing. But when you live amongst the people, you should dress like the people. And this is why the Muslims have always dressed like the cultures that they lived in. Obviously, there are modesty issues. There are issues of modesty because we adhere to modesty. But honour your own culture. These are your people and you should be proud of your culture and your people. Do not lose sight of who you are and try to be somebody who you are not.

Our prophet wore clothes from Yemen, from Ethiopia, from the Byzantine. He had a Byzantine robe that was *ḍaiyak*. It is almost like Europeans always have had tight clothes but he had one that had been comfortable. Why did he wear clothes from other cultures? That was not the habit of the Arabs. I believe he did it because then nobody could say that this (Arabic clothes) is the Sunnah (tradition) of the prophet.

Allah Knows Best (*Wallahu a'lam*)

May Allah bless you with abundant goodness (*Jazākum Allāh Khairan*) May May peace, mercy and blessings of Allah be upon you (*wa al-Salām 'alaykum*)

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Moderator: Thank you very much Shaykh Hamza. I would not attempt to summarise the presentation but probably to make the connection to the topic of our discussion this evening, 'Reimagining Islam in the Future.' If one thinks that, now how is this related to the theme, to the topic and my attempt to make that connection is this way –

Firstly, the importance of the appreciation of a language because that is the biggest miracle that Allah (glorified and exalted be He) has granted us. And not to underestimate the importance of language. After all, Qur'ān is a language.

Secondly, as Shaykh Hamza talks about appreciation of beauty and nature, now that is very religious. When we think of religiosity, we do not only think about rituals, forms and ḥukum (pl. *aḥkām*) (legal rulings). After all, we have less than fifty per cent of verses in the Qur'ān that pertain to *aḥkām*, the rest is on ethics, on appreciation of beauty and so on and so forth. So as Muslims, we need to think beyond simply requesting for our rights to exercise or to practise the *aḥkām* but also to contribute to humanity, to contribute to the green movement and to minimise waste. I can tell you how much we waste when we have our wedding receptions (*walimah*), you know, when we get married. So, and that is the very core, that is very religious. That is to say, we need to take ownership of the objective of contributing to humanity and to common good of our society. And that is very religious and that is the future of Islam, as we aspire for it to be, by the will of Allah.

Q: I would like you to take us further into what you mentioned at the end of your speech. The uniqueness about the Malay Muslims here is that, first Islam came about the fourteenth century, so we have been with Islam since five hundred or six hundred years. So through that, we have built some sort of consciousness of who we are but the uniqueness of our time now, especially for Singaporeans Muslims is that we are in the juncture, meeting points of different civilisations. So we have the Arabs, we have the Chinese, we have everyone. We are connected to the world, in that sense. So what we have, as a product of that, is that acculturation happens, simulation happens. Something, however, was lost in our midst.

For example, one of the biggest things that disappeared from us is Jawi script, which is the original script of the Malay language. And we have like many manuscripts that are not read and it is within the Islamic fold of Muslim writers that have written for all these centuries. So how do we do it, as Singaporeans today? How do we take it to that next level?

The second is that, and we have a lot of us here who are young religious teachers/clerics (*Asatizah*). So they are the beacons of our children in the future in that sense of bringing this faith to them. So what is your advice to the youths, who are the ones who are going to preach Islam?

A: Get off Facebook. First of all, we cannot be nostalgic about the past that is gone. I agree with that. Nostalgia, you know the Arabs call that longing for the past. The Arabs have a poetry that indulges sorrow and sadness. It is a very Arab motif in a lot of their poetry – they would say “let us cry over the remnants of what was here before.” But no, we cannot do that.

Globalisation is a reality. But the homogenisation that much of globalisation comes with is not a foregone conclusion. I think it is very dangerous for cultures to allow this type of homogenisation where you lose the distinctive qualities that make you who you are.

And this is identity politics; it is very big right now, for the very reason that so many identities are being obliterated in the face of this globalising force that is reimagining the world in its own image. Much of it is still Western and I am a Western person. My own ancestors came from Ireland and migrated to America. On my mother’s side, in the 1760s and my father’s side in the 1830s. The Irish were under English occupation for over 700 years. And their tongues were cut out for speaking Gaelic. And so the Irish no longer speak their language either. The Welsh are re-learning Welsh. Because their language was taken from them also.

This is one of the sins of the past. I do not blame modern English people for this. And the English have an incredible contribution to human civilisation. They have a lot of sins, like any great civilisations, but they also have a lot of incredible contributions. They outlawed the transatlantic slavery. People like Hannah More – an incredible woman that everybody should know about. Or William Wilberforce or the Clapham Twelve. These were great people and they were people of real sincerity, very often Christians, motivated by their Christian Ethics.

But the past is gone. We are in the present but at the same time, you do have a culture. You have traditions. You have ‘ways of being’ that are your own and they enhance you. They do not diminish you. And so it’s very important to honour those things. I think Singapore has far more to teach me than I have to teach Singapore and that is the truth. I think this is an extraordinary example of human possibility. The fact that you have so much diversity in your ethnicities and yet there is so much mutual respect. I mean this is something stunning and you should be incredibly proud of it. Not in a way that makes you arrogant or feeling superior to other cultures but in a way that I think, places a burden on you to spread this in other places that are suffering so greatly.

I think you have far more to teach Arab culture right now than the Arabs have to teach you. I really believe this and I love the Arabs. I spent much of my life studying Arab language, Arab culture not just the Islamic aspect of it but the pre-Islamic. And their literature was not really Islamic. And I love the Arabs. But I think the Arab culture is in deep crisis right now. And I think that some of the things that you have done

here are things that need to be exported to places like Syria, where one of the great testimonies of Islam, is the great churches that were oppressed by the Byzantine church (my grandfather on my mother's side was Orthodox). I was actually raised in the orthodox tradition. The great church of the East was the Orthodox Church but it was very oppressive. It oppressed the Chaldean church, the Nestorian church, the Ebionitic church, all the Semitic traditions that ended up in India, for some reason.

So I think it's really important to really acknowledge things have changed but at the same time, there are things that are constant in you. The word 'identity' is from a Greek word which means 'the same.' That is why we say 'identical' because it is what remains the same, which gives you, your identity. If you lose that quality, you will lose your identity. One of the things that the world is suffering from today is what I call 'Spiritual Alzheimer's' disease. They have forgotten that they have a soul, that we are not just matter. That we are also immaterial and this is something very important.

In terms of the youth, the youth have challenges today that are unprecedented in some ways. You know my mother was at the grocery store. May Allah have mercy on her soul - She died last year at 96 years. When she was born there was an Ottoman Caliph. So it shows you, you know, our amazing history. It is not that far gone. But she was at a grocery store and for some reason in America, at the checkout they put all these weird designs, like aliens in the White House with very weird headlines that are very weird. So, this very old lady looked at my mother, who was very elderly, at that point and said, "Aren't you glad we are on our way out?"

We do not want our youth to start thinking like that, and one of the signs of the later days is that young people are depressed when they get pregnant. That pregnancy should be a great joy. It should not be a means of sorrow. Or when they walk past graves they say, "I wish I was in his place." And the Prophet said they have no debt. You know because debt really used to burn people. So he was saying that this was just from worry and stress. So the modern world is very stressful.

And I think we are losing sight of important things like just sitting and having family dinners together and having tea, your tea. These human things make us human, they are very important and you know they say that nobody on their deathbed says, "I wish I spent more time at the office." You know we forget about family and just being human and this is something that many traditional cultures really understood, just the importance of downtime or just going out walking. Walking is the biggest anti-depressant we know literally. Walking in nature is more effective than any anti-depression drug that we have. And you can read the Harvard study that was done showing this. Kierkegaard said - and he was very melancholic - he said, "I was never depressed except when I took a long walk and by the end of it, I felt joyful." Just walking. We're humans. These legs weren't built for sitting around.

Q: I looked at the word 'imagine' and when I think about the word 'imagine' I think you have to be creative in order to be able to re-imagine the role of Islam and I started to think about the role of a 'creative minority' in a community.

I really like the idea of the creative minority because you have got to be, when you have to re-imagine a role of the future, you have to be creative and you have to be dynamic and I feel that the voice of the creative minority is what is needed in a majority that is diverse like in Singapore. However now I am reading just something that says that when you have to be creative, it demands a finessing of identity, which is exactly what we spoke about. How important it is to have a strong root with our identity but it also says something along the lines of being willing to be in the state of 'cognitive dissonance.' So I am just wondering if you can you elaborate on what cognitive dissonance means when you are in a creative minority. I mean when you have to be a creative minority in a diverse community like Singapore.

A: Okay. First question about the creative minority and cognitive dissonance. Creative minority is an idea that came, as far as I know, I have one of the real experts here, Dr. Omar Abdullah Al-Faruq because he knows Toynbee much better than I do. I read the brief version; he read the long version. But Toynbee argues that societies rise and fall based on how they address the challenges that face them. And he argues that when they have a creative minority, that is able to present to them solutions to the challenges that face them, they are able to address those challenges and overcome them. And then they will be faced by a new set of challenges. This is the nature of the world. And so he makes this argument that it is important for society to have this creative minority.

Now one of the tragedies of a lot of modern societies is the idea of 'elitism.' That somehow, intellectual elitism is seen as a negative thing that we are all equal but just like we have world class athletes and we honour them for their elite athletic abilities. We also have world class musicians and we honour them for their elite abilities. Now some of it is purely hard work and discipline but it is often enhanced by natural ability. Very often we have failed to honour the intellectuals in a society.

In fact, because of envy which is a major problem in the Islamic tradition and envy was one of the concluding remarks of the Qur'ān. People of intellect are often envied for the gifts that God has given them. And so other people will try to keep them down or they will attack them. And Kierkegaard said people will admit a felonious crime before they will admit to envy. Envy is a real problem in societies. Cream should rise naturally but homogenisation basically shakes it up so that the cream is not allowed to rise. And so it is very important to allow people to flourish intellectually and to honour that intellect. And if a society does that and also, it is very important for those who have been gifted with highly creative minds that they maintain humility. Because every person no matter how brilliant they are, is human and they will be flawed. I

learned from the process of working how important it is to put ideas down before you articulate them to other people that you trust and honour. Because very often they will point out things that you did not think of. And they will show you the flaws in your own reasoning.

And this is why collective fatwa is so important today, for really major issues. Because one person cannot burden deciding on major issues on their own. The Qur'ān says,

“Their affair is [determined by] consultation among themselves.” (Q: 42:38) and

Consult them [O Muhammad] in the matter. And once you have decided, then rely upon Allah (Q: 3: 159)

The Prophet said,

“He will never fail or be misguided, the one who takes the counsel of others”

It's a beautiful word 'consult' (*shār*) in Arabic. It means to take honey from each of the combs in a honeycomb. That's what consultation (*shūrā*) is. It is taking the benefit of each person and listening to them. Amazing, there was this famous business consultant in the United States who failed to convince American corporations how important his views were. He ended up going to Japan and the Japanese adopted his model. And one of his points was to allow even the lowest employees to advise senior management and Toyota and others actually did this and implemented this. And very often the humblest person can actually have a creative solution to problems.

Many mothers in America have become wealthy because they had some problems with baby carriage and instead of complaining, they actually ended up designing it. And then it becomes the standard.

So creativity is very important. But reimagining or even imagining a future of Islam is tough because Muslims are still caught up imagining a past that never existed. It's a fantasy. There has never been an Islamic state, ever, in Muslim history. Medina was not a state, by any stretch, in terms of a modern understanding of what a state is. Medina was akin to the Greek city-state than it is to a country (*dawlah*).

When Muslims became an empire, things changed and they adopted a Persian model in many things. And so this fantasy that a lot of Muslims have. Islam served an empire. Many of the fatwas of the past were fatwas in service of an empire and they are problematic. And Muslims did terrible things in many places. My friend and colleague says when you read Muslims' history you have to take a lot of 'faith vitamins.' Muslims did terrible things in India. Not always but sometimes. Muslims, we have our atrocities like every civilisation but we have this fantasy of the past that

the Muslims were perfect. And wherever they went they just brought goodness. That's not always the case. Very often it was, but it is not always the case. And so we have to take the bitter pill of reality and not fantasize the past.

But imagination is also a very difficult thing when you are in an image-based society. Because traditionally, children were raised on words, on oral stories, on reading and now they are raised on images. So it stunts their creativity. We know that children that watch a lot of television have a smaller corpus callosum than children that do not. We know that the brain actually is smaller. Reading is very important. Listening is also very important. Memorising too is very important. We have lost many of these things so creativity is stunted.

Now the other thing that we have lost in terms of creativity, is a recognition of how important it is to master a language. Robert Frost said, "All of life is discipline." And the first discipline is the acquisition of words. We do not know what words mean anymore. We had a woman and I do not agree with what she may have meant by it. But we had a woman in America who talked about 'alternate facts.' Well, if you use the fourth definition of fact in good dictionary, fact means allegation. So you can have alternate facts if you meant by the word allegation and this is why juries in the American law judge facts, the prosecution present facts and the defence present facts. The jury judges the facts, the judge judges the law.

But if you do not know language, these nuances get lost. It is called Rule Systems of Languages (*Fiqh al-Lughah*). The Arabs would not call this [referring to a cup made of glass in his hands] as a "glass" (*zujājah*) - instead they would call it a "ka's" because it is a cup made of glass and filled with water. But if there is no water in it, it then becomes a "zujājah." Those are distinctions that are completely lost on Modern Arabs, let alone the English language.

We have lost so much because we do not study words anymore. People used to study languages. If you open up any dictionary, there are multiple meanings of words in various contexts, and the context changes the meanings of the words change too. So language is difficult. It takes hard work. They used to have grammar school, where you have to memorise by rote, lots of things. If we want creativity, we have to give our young people tools of creativity.

And finally about cognitive dissonance in a place like Singapore, where you have multiple religions. You have different dress codes. The Muslim women who are practising, very often dress in a very modest dress. Traditionally, all Asian cultures dress very modestly because naturally you are modest people with certain morals. However, there is a need to be cautious, because there's a very slow process that erodes the morality of a people. So you should guard your morality.

I will quote a part poem called “*An Essay on Man*” by Alexander Pope. He said,

Vice is a monster of frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.
There is a need to guard morality because
Civilisations are nothing other than a character that
that they embody,
And when the character goes, they soon follow.

And unfortunately a fool is easily separated from his culture and soon parted. So cognitive dissonance is the idea that you have a belief and you have an action. And your action contradicts your belief. This creates a type of dissonance in the psyche, in the soul. And so there is one or two solutions to get rid of the dissonance. One of them is that you change your belief. And this is very often what people do. They began to justify their actions. The other is to change your actions. And so in a culture where you are dressing modestly and you are in the culture where other women do not dress like you do. For some people, that can create a problem in the self because their religion is telling them to do something and yet outside, people are doing another thing.

And so the men have a hard time. Well, first and foremost, there's no time in Muslim history that you did not have half-dressed women walking around. If you do not believe me, just look at the images of the orientalist in Egypt, even a hundred years ago. Because ladies ‘*imarah*’ then were only required to cover from the navel to the knee. Nubian women were walking around bare-chested. So this obsessive idea that we have to cover our women up completely, and force upon them some kind of coat is cultural and not Islamic. God said in the Qur’ān: “Tell the [male] believers to lower their gaze.” Why will that injunction be in there if there was nothing to look at? I personally and I’m not culturally sensitive on this issue.

Personally, I really have a very hard time as a Muslim, hearing people say Islam commands women to cover up like that. I have a hard time with that. And I know I was taught to be culturally sensitive about all these things, but I think women need to be honoured. I would prefer to see women honour themselves also. There are certain ways of dressing that can be provocative, and they do not help the men. And there are certain bestial men out there, that will do things that are very troubling, to women. I would argue that you have to find ways of being true to your own principles and your own self. Without also demanding that other people be true to those same principles because we are all on this planet together and we have to learn to live with one another.

Q: We have been reading your '*Content of Character*' for four weeks now and one of the participants came up to me after my class and said, "What do you think about Shaykh Al-Amin Mazrui's Kenyan experience?" He said that, "Don't you think that we need the content of character for Singapore too? And he was saying that, "Don't you think that some part of the Ḥadīth is out of the context, maybe?"

A: I would argue that those are universal Ḥadīths and so I do not think they reflect just the Kenyan experience. I really like the collections and that is why I chose to translate it. And I do believe that most of them are universal. Most of what the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said is universal. There are very few things that are very specific to his culture, for instance a Ḥadīth - whoever imitates a people then he is from among them. There are many Ḥadīths about not being like the non-Arabs. Al-Mawwaq (died 1492), one of the greatest Andalusian judges, said that, "Every Ḥadīth that tells Arabs not to imitate others, is only for the Arabs. It's not for other people." It is recommended that you don't change your distinctiveness to imitate another people. And so it actually confirms the very thing that I am saying is that you should allow cultures to be distinctive and not try to impose other cultures on anyone.

Q: Peace be upon you. My name is Muhammad Arif and to provide you some context, I am currently serving as the vice-president of a local university's Muslim association. I think I have reasons to be thankful for the existence of the Muslim associations in local universities while there are probably other reasons to be depressed as well.

And given the current conflict-filled and unfortunately the conflict-oriented global fabric that we have right now which probably trickles down to Singapore in some ways. Although generally there is peace. What would be your key advice or what would be one or two pieces of advice that you would give to those who serve the Muslim associations in local universities? What would be the guiding foundation for these leaders in Muslim associations? Thank you.

A: I would say there are certain things that we would like to see. I know for instance that you have a sermon (khutbah) that is read in the masjid. There is a lot of people that want the freedom to say whatever they want. Unfortunately, in this time right now, in many places, this has caused a lot of the problems. Spreading ideas that are very dangerous in the mosques, and I have seen it with my own eyes and heard it with my own ears. And so my experience with the people that are involved in this, is that they are very highly intelligent people, and they are very well-intentioned people, and I think they will probably provide very good sermons that are beneficial.

I went through a book of the khutbahs of the Prophet that have been recorded. It is all in one book. I cannot find one khutbah that mentioned anything political. Not one. I cannot find one khutbah where the prophet mentions the grievances that they had towards the Quraish or towards the other Arabs. All I found was exhortations about

piety, about being better people, about doing this. If this is the khutbah of the prophet, then why are you not following the Sunnah of the Prophet. If you want to talk about politics in the mosque, you are going against the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) because he did not talk about politics in the mosque.

And so I think it is really important, you know, to recognise that we are in a very sensitive time. And Islam right now is considered synonymous in the minds of millions of people with terrorism. That is unacceptable, so there are many people that believe that Islam is a religion that incites violence and hatred. If you have Imams, with a lack of understanding of this religion's core principles, preaching or inciting hatred or denigration of other religions, then that person has to be stopped. Because this situation has gotten out of hand. The Qur'ān says,

“Do not insult those who invoke other than Allah, lest they insult Allah in enmity without knowledge” (Q: 6:108)

So the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and his people were commanded not to curse. If you do that, you would cause your God to be cursed. So if you offend the religions of other people, you are breaking the Sunnah of our prophet and denigrating this religion. Our Prophet did not denigrate Hinduism or Buddhism or Jainism or Sikhism or any other religion.

Now if you say, “Well, he destroyed the idols in Makkah.” That is true. The ḥadith, according to Malik that said: “I was commanded to fight the people,” was specific to the Arabian Peninsula. He was restoring the Abrahamic tradition in Makkah because one man, Ḥuyay, brought the idols from Syria to Makkah. He was actually restoring the integrity of the house to the original intention that Abraham built that house with. So he was purifying the house.

But we have no right to go to any country in the world and if we are the majority, and rule that country, we have no right to destroy the temples of those people. The Qur'ān says in Sūrat al Ḥaj,

“Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged. And indeed Allah is competent to give them victory.” (Q: 22:40); and

“[They are] those who have been evicted from their homes without right – only because they say, “Our Lord is Allah.” And were it not that Allah checks the people, some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of Allah is much mentioned” (Q: 22:41)

So the very permission to defend ourselves was to defend multi-faiths. And Islam is a religion that has always, when it is being understood correctly, has always protected

other faiths' right to worship. And freedom of religion is one of the most important things that we have to spread on this planet, as long as that religion is not calling to the destruction of other people. At that point, we have to say, "This is unacceptable." And that's why things like ISIS have to be stopped because they are oppressing.

Q: I am asking on behalf of the Religious Rehabilitation Group, which is a group that does counselling and religious rehabilitation for those detained or involved in extremism or/and extremist activities. So this is also built up from the question posted by my father, Ustaz Hasbi yesterday to Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah with regards to spirituality (Taṣawwuf). From your perspective how can Taṣawwuf be part of our rehabilitation work or counter terrorism work? Other than Taṣawwuf, what else can be instilled to do this counter terrorism work? And especially for the youth who, have no religious foundation but are eager to redeem themselves because we have an increased number of youths who are involved in these activities.

Q: As we discussed on the topic of reimagining the role of Islam for the future, my question is do we need to reconfigure the role and how we develop our future 'ulamā' or scholars? Which leads me to also ask what makes a scholar in this time and age? And how do you also ensure, as much as we are trying to preserve the tradition of Islam, how to make sure it is relevant with the changes we are going through, in today's context?

A: There is a lot in that question but it is a very good question. I would argue that more important than Taṣawwuf per se, is actually an understanding of the Principles of Jurisprudence (*'Uṣūl al-Fiqh*). Because I think one of the major reasons that we are seeing these gross misunderstanding is that people do not know the true nature and complexity of Shari'ah. They do not understand how complex and sophisticated Shari'ah actually is. And it is only through a knowledge of the Principles of Jurisprudence, that one can really acquire a proper understanding of Islam. And I really believe that the basic fundamentals of the Principles of Jurisprudence should be taught in Islamic education – that is very important.

In terms of Taṣawwuf, one of the problems with modern quote-unquote, "Ṣūfis," [mystics or aspirants of the Islamic Spiritual Path] is that they become extremely uncritical of themselves. And this has led to a reaction from other groups. And one of the things that Ṣūfis constantly do, is they say, "Oh, those "Wahhabis." If we could, just get rid of them the world would be perfect;" or "Oh, those *'Ikhwān al-Muslimīn* (Muslim Brotherhood folks) if we could just get rid of them, the world would be perfect." But it is just not the case.

The Salafi school actually emerged out of a lot of the decadence that was in the Hijāz [currently the eastern part of Saudi Arabia]. I mean, originally, the Salafi school was from Egypt, but what they call the Wahhabis, they actually call themselves the *muwaḥhidun* [monotheists]. But the *Salafīyah* [the Salafi school] came to mean the school that is sometimes derogatorily called the Wahhabis.

And now, Şūfīs use Wahhabi for anybody that disagrees with them. They just call you Wahhabi, which is a problem because the greatest critics of Sufism are the great Şūfīs themselves. So I challenge you to read in, *al-Mabāḥith al-Aṣliyah*, (The Original Enquiries) for Ibn al-Bannā' al-Saraqustī (d. 1418) in its last section entitled *Fuqarā' al-ʿAsr* (The Contemporary Mystics), where he said,

يدعي الذي يمشي عليها سالك *** وسالكوها اليوم حزب هالك

It is said that those who journey [on the spiritual path] are [smooth] way-farers Yet the aspirants of today are a doomed party

He died long ago, in 812 in Andalusia. Even though the whole book is about Taṣawwuf, the very end is a total criticism of the Şūfīs of his age, whom he said were filled with innovations.

So where are the critics of Taṣawwuf from within Sufism today? Because the Salafi people are criticising the Şūfīs, the Ikhwān are criticising the Şūfīs. All these other people are criticising the Şūfīs. Where are the Şūfīs critics of themselves?

Because our tradition is to blame ourselves. And so if you think Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī is a Şūfī? Know that al-Ghazālī is the single most important principled jurist ('Uṣuli scholar) in the history of Islam. His book, *al-Muṣṭaṣfa*, which was his last book, was a book on the Principles of Jurisprudence - and that is the basis of the Hambali 'Uṣul. *Rauḍat al-Nazir*, which is taught in the Medina University, to this day, is an abridgement of Imam al-Ghazālī's book, despite the fact that many of the graduates of that school continue to denigrate him, which is a problem.

But Abu Hāmid is an 'Uṣuli before he is anything else. And his Taṣawwuf is largely derivative from Imam Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (986 – 1072) and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996). In his book, the treatise (*Risālah*) called *al-Kashf wa al-Tabyin fī Ghurūr al-khalq Ajma'in* (Exposition and Explanation of the Delusion of the Whole of Creation), he said there are different types of delusion for different groups - the delusions of the scholars; the delusions of the businessmen; the delusions of these people that, when he gets to the last group they are called the Şūfīs. And in their regards, he says,

الصوفية وما أعظم غرورهم

The Şūfīs, O how great is their delusion

And then he goes on to say that they are deluded in the way they dressed and the way they speak. That is Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī – he is a critic of the Şūfīs.

Mohammed Nasr al-Darī' (d. 1676) from the great Zāwiyah Dar'iyah in Morocco wrote a book, entitled *Iṣlāḥ al-Zawayah* (Reforming the Sufi Circles). It was about all of the *bida'ah* (heresies) that were in the Moroccan Zawiyahs. And so the Şūfīs today, they have not reformed themselves.

Ahmad Zarruq (d. 1493) wrote a book, entitled, *Qawā'id al-Taṣawwuf* (Principles of Sufism). He is another great critic of the Ṣūfis. So if the Ṣūfis do not reform themselves and everybody is criticising the Ṣūfis. How can the Ṣūfis reform other people if they have not reformed themselves? And how many Ṣūfis now, these so-called Ṣūfī Shaykhs that write talismans and charge people, I mean, we are filled with these in the ummah. These people that trick other people. There are many people that go around in the name of Taṣawwuf, fooling people and taking *Murīds* (disciples).

I have had some teachers that were great icons and great Ṣūfis. But Ibn al-Banā says,

“If you want to know a false Ṣūfī, it is the one that claims to be a Ṣūfī.”

That is the first sign that they are not a Ṣūfī. And I was in America and a beautiful Mauritanian scholar that we brought, whom I consider a real Ṣūfī, because the definition of a Ṣūfī, according to Ahmad Zarruq, and it has over 2000 definitions but all of them are centre upon ‘sincere inner-directedness towards God,’ and that is Taṣawwuf.

That means that a Salafi can be a Ṣūfī, by that definition. If they have sincere inner-directedness towards God. So this Shaykh came and we visited this man who was a Ṣūfī Shaykh. And when we came in – this was the conversation that transpired;

Host: “By the Grace of Allah, Welcome O Great Ṣūfī.”

My teacher (who was well into his 70s, beautiful man, and a scholar):

“I seek refuge in Allah, for I am not a Ṣūfī.”

Host: “I seek Allah’s forgiveness, do you deny Sufism?”

My teacher: “No.”

Host: “Then why you seek refuge in Allah, and deny being a Ṣūfī?”

My teacher: “In my country, a Ṣūfī is the one that has no worldly matters in his heart. And the fact that at my age, I am in America, is proof that I am still after the dunya (what the world has to offer).”

So Taṣawwuf is very important in our religion. I believe that. It is an important science. It is what we would call our psychology. It is to understand the soul. And there are two types of Sufism; there is what is called Taṣawwuf al-Adhwāq (Spiritual Experiences) and Taṣawwuf al-Akhlāq (Spiritual Ethics). The latter is more important because you cannot get to the experience without the ethics. And so the first stage of Sufism is called Takhīyah (emptying the soul of bad qualities). The second stage is Taḥlīyah (adorning the soul with good qualities) and the last stage is Tajlīyah (where you begin to have spiritual experiences that strengthen your faith).

Everybody wants the last stage without going through the first two stages. It is like people on an escalator, you know, in the old days you have to walk up the stairs and exert yourselves. Now Sufism is just an escalator and you move up on *Maqamāt* (Spiritual Stations) without exerting any effort. So this is a problem.

The secret of that *Takhīyah* (تَخْلِيَة), *Tahliyah* (تَحْلِيَة) and *Tajliyah* (تَجْلِيَة) is in the 'dot.' It begins on the top of the ḥa-shaped letter, then it is removed, which symbolises the removal of arrogance and then it goes on the bottom, which is humility and "Whoever humbles himself before God, God will elevate him." But to end, I admit that Allah knows these matters best and may Allah forgive me, if I am wrong, but that is my view.

Q: [Moderator reads a written question] Before I pass for some reason, I think this question comes from the ladies' side.

A: The testosterone does give some advantages in public space but the ladies should be honoured, always. There is a beautiful book by Susan Cain called *Quiet* which is about the importance of introversion. The greatest contributors to human civilization have very often been introverts. It is an important book. Never be ashamed of your shyness or your introversion. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), they said, was more modest than a virgin who is still cloistered. And so it is a beautiful quality and should always be honoured and nobody should have to be forced to lose that quality if that is their natural quality.

Q: [Moderator continues reading the written question] Can we give advice to young people in the society where Islam is put forward as a negative religion? What can we do as young people for the religion?

A: In the name of Allah, I am in the country where Islam has been framed as a very negative thing and even before 9/11 it was nowhere near as bad but after 9/11. In the wake of 9/11, Muslims did not do a lot because literally the vast majority of our mosques were covered with flowers. There was so much good will. For every one negative call we got on the phone, we got a hundred calls to the mosques and we have recordings of these where they said we are really worried, we heard people attacking mosques and that is wrong and if you need people to guard your mosques, we will come.

This is a fact that happened, but that goodwill was squandered by the Muslims. I will explain how shortly. At that time Dr. Omar actually was there, when we met in Los Angeles in 2001. And I said to a large group of Muslim leaders that we are going to be framed as a 'fifth column' in this country. They are going to present us an evil religion and a danger to their civil society and we need now to literally do something about this to frame ourselves properly, give our narrative and not allow others to define us. Everybody said, "No, no, no. We do not want to go there. That is being apologetic. We should just ignore it."

This is called the ‘Streisand’ effect. You know, Barbara Streisand. They took pictures of all these houses, you know and put them online, from aerial photograph and so Barbara Streisand got really upset because it is a private house. She did not want her house online like that, and so she sued the people. Well, because she did that, it got into the newspaper and everybody went to the website to see her house. So the very thing she was trying to stop, ended up happening. And so they called that the Streisand effect. When you try to prevent something from getting out and you are doing it, actually makes it get out even more. And so in some ways, Muslims are guilty of not doing anything.

Now the other thing, many years ago, Dr Thomas Cleary, who is a brilliant Buddhist scholar in America, he has translated over 70 works from Chinese. Brilliant Chinese scholar. In fact, his Harvard professor said in an interview that what he knows in Chinese is equivalent to knowing about 50 European languages. Just incredible genius and one of the things he said was that the purposes of a Zen ‘Kōan,’ is to awaken a slumbered consciousness. Like when your mind is not thinking properly, what a Zen Kōan will do, is wake you up. Like, if you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him. Right, that is a Kōan, in Japanese Zen tradition. And so a Buddhist would ask how do I kill a Buddha? It is about killing the idolatry in oneself. And our imagination of what we think, the Buddha is. Anyway, that is one interpretation. There are many interpretations of Zen Kōans but I am not a Zen master so I would not go there.

But Cleary said that you do not need a Zen Kōan to do this. All you have to do is ask the average American what they think of Islam. And you will hear somebody begin to spew the most prejudicial views. And if you ask them, “Have you ever read the Qur’ān? Invariably they will say, “No.” “Have you ever read the Ḥadīth of the Prophet? Invariably they will say, “No! So on what basis are you judging the Muslims? Their religion? Well it is what I read in the New York Times about ISIS or it is based on what I saw on CNN when they showed them blowing up some building or some suicide bomber. So that is their view. So you judge a world religion with 1.7 billion people, based on what the criminals of that religion are doing?

When the Ku Klux Klan, which was the devout Christian sect in the United States, at the height of their membership in 1920s, there were between two and five million people, according to historical stats on their membership. So do you judge Christianity by the Ku Klux Klan? Do you judge Christianity by what happened at Waco, Texas with the Davidian sect of Koresh, who was a Seventh-day Adventist. The seventh-day Adventists are very nice people. They are vegetarians, which does not mean you are nice. Hitler was a vegetarian. But generally vegetarians are nicer than other people.

I had an experience on an airplane, where I called in advance to get a vegetarian meal. This is a true story. I called to get a vegetarian meal and they said, “Sorry, your flight is tomorrow at 12 o’clock and its 12.05 and we need 24 hours.” I said, “What? It’s

12.05.” She said, “Sorry. The computer does not accept it at that time.” So I hung up, a little distraught because it is a long flight back to America. So my friend was with me and he said, “No... no... no. Just call and ask for a Kosher meal.” I said, “What?” He said, “Yes, just ask for a Kosher meal. Trust me.” So I called up. Same thing and I said, “Can I get a Kosher meal?” She said, “The flight is at 12.” I said, “Yes.” She said, “Okay, fine.” I said, “Why would they do that?” She said, “Because vegetarians never complain.” So they just blow you off, you know. But meat-eaters, that is a different matter.

Q: You are talking about us not being stuck in the past and I believe this issue is at the core. However it is very hard not to allow the sequence of events that have happened in the past not to dictate one’s decisions. How does one break away from the past and let the future have a bigger influence on one’s decisions? But the question is, and I believe this issue is at the core of free choice, if one is stuck in the past, they in essence, they have no free choice and they are just going through the motions. Appreciate your comments on that.

A: Yeah, that’s quite a question. The past is important. Dr Umar many years ago gave a talk called “*Stop where they stopped and then continue.*” Because it is important for you to know past. I mean, history is a very important field of enquiry. It is discipline that is ignored. They say, George Santayana (1863 – 1952), the great philosopher said,

“Those who do not learn the lessons of history are condemned to repeat them.”

Then somebody added to that “And those who do learn the lessons of history are condemned to watch those who do not repeat them.” So it is definitely a problem, not knowing history. It is very important. We should know what happened in Bosnia. We should know what happened because that can happen again. We should know what happened in the Holocaust. We should know what happened with the Armenians. These are very complicated and painful issues but they are important to know. But we should not make them the sources of a continued hatred that never ends. It is very important that we do not turn these calamities of the past into this kind of constant memorialisation.

This is something in America that it’s very tragic – about certain things that have happened in the past that were very horrific. But the Qur’ān says, “Those people are gone.” They have what they have earned and you have what you have earned. We cannot dwell on what the British did a long time ago. They are not the same people today. Those were different people. We cannot dwell on what the Japanese did when they occupied other countries. Those people are dead. And these people today have no blame. The Quran reminds us that “No soul bears the burden of any other soul.” So you cannot blame the present people for the sins of the past. It is very important for us to remember that.

So we have to know the past, it is important. And we should learn the lessons of the past but we also have to recognise that while there was much pain in the past, there were also great areas of incredible inspirations from the past. And I will just give one example of that. The Muslims, the Jews and the Christians, there are periods when they really, did live together. It was not perfect, it never is. But there are times when they did live together. Which means if they could live together in the past with all the baggage and mentalities of the past, how can we not do the same thing today, when we have been freed from so much of that baggage?

My civilisation was a very arrogant civilisation. And in some ways we still have some arrogance, I do not deny that. But there are many people in my country – and they are reconstructed. They are different people. They are not the people of America of the 1950s or 1940s who hated Jews, the Blacks, and the Mexicans; that had derogatory names for them. When I was a very young person, there were still many names that I no longer hear anymore. Like ‘wop’ and ‘spic’ and ‘mick.’ They used to call Irish people ‘Micks.’ It’s a derogatory term. I do not hear those types of words anymore. And if they are said, they are said in private because people do not accept them in public anymore.

These are things we have to honour, that we have to celebrate - how far we have come, and we constantly need to remind ourselves of how far we have to go. If we always are complaining about how bad it is today, then how do we encourage people to change? If it is all about grievances, how do we encourage people?

And finally ‘collectivism’ is a disease. Do not collectivise people. Our Prophet (Peace and blessings be upon him) never collectivised a group. He looked at individuals as individuals. People should be judged not by the colour of their skin or what group they belong to, but by the content of their character that they embody. And so when you see Muslims in Singapore, do not lump them all together, as a group. There are good Muslims in Singapore and there are bad Muslims. There are Muslims that are principled, that are practising their faith and then there are some that are not. There are good Chinese Singaporeans and then there are the bad ones. Every people has this but do not lump them all together. Judge people as individuals and this is our way. This collective judgement on a whole people is so unjust. So it is really important that we look at each other as individuals and let that individual reveal himself to you through his character.

If you want to change the negative attitudes, stop complaining about the attitudes and start being good, decent people, really. Start being good, decent people. Serve your society. Volunteer. Do things and not simply for pragmatic reasons of public relations. Public relations used to be called ‘propaganda.’ It was the great propagandist’s name Edward Bernays, he changed the name from propaganda because the Nazis gave it a bad name. The Catholic Church used to call their missionary work, propaganda. So it used to be a positive term. It does not anymore. PR is propaganda. Do things because it is the right thing to do. Not because you want to get some kind of a public relations boost from it.

Q: I would like to ask about political Islam, regarding Islam in the future. On the relevance of politics in Islam, so for example, arguing about of having an Islamic state, Shari'ah law, Hudūd, is there any role Islam can play or should play to revive or reinstate or has Islam got nothing to do with all these things?

A: Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah, in this very same auditorium, the other day said, "We do not deny anything about Islam. We do not deny anything." The Qur'ān encourages us to perform jihād - we do not deny jihād. None of these things we can deny. But what is important is that there is a certain, very small section in any Islamic text, called Hudūd (Limits). It is the smallest section of any Islamic Fiqh book. The largest section is on purification, prayers, commercial law, divorce and marriage. These are all the civil aspects of Islam. The smallest is called Hudūd. Out of all the Hudūd in Islam, there are only five and arguably only four that are agreed upon. All of those are called "*ahkām Sulṭāniyah*" (Royal Decrees). They have nothing to do with common Muslims. Nothing. They are the prerogative of the government of a Muslim state, and that government can suspend the Hudūd for the public interest/public good. And this is simply a fact.

The Mufti is here. I am not making this up. This is our religion. And among the principles of Jurisprudence, the implementation of Hudūd is the prerogative of the Sultan or the ruling government. That is an accepted principle in our jurisprudence. And so the Hudūd is not the concern of common people. It is the concern of the government and penal codes are solely the prerogative of the government.

Vigilante justice does not exist in Islam. If somebody curses the Prophet, whether in public or private or any situation, no Muslim can take the law into his hand. No Muslim. It is prohibited – this idea of sentencing these people to death because they express their views. Our Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) listened to the worst things said about him. In fact, they call him blameworthy, the opposite of Muhammad, and when he heard it, how wondrous has God removed my name from their tongue. They are talking about somebody they named as blameworthy, but my name is Muhammad. He did not give it any reality.

If you think those cartoons were pictures of our Prophet, you are not a Muslim. Because the Prophet's reality cannot be denigrated. Our Prophet cannot be denigrated by an imaginary picture. There is no picture of him. We have a description of what he looked like and it is all beautiful. He is well known as the most beautiful person in form, quality and character. So those are possible depictions of him.

You know there is famous picture by Magritte. It is a pipe but then it says, "This is not a pipe," in French. People had a hard time understanding that. Because they do not differentiate between an image of the thing and the actual thing itself. The image is not the thing. And that is like a Zen Kōan. It is to wake you up and make you think. So we cannot take the law into our own hands.

Is it wise to implement the Ḥudūd today? That is the prerogative of a government to decide but many states become pariah states when they do. So it is something that is not my purview or your purview or anybody else's. That is for the government to decide what they do with the penal codes. That is my view and Allah knows best.

May Allah forgive me if I have said anything incorrect but that is my view. And I think it is important for Muslims to really learn to implement the Shari'ah of purification, prayer, giving alms, of honouring women and marriages. Domestic violence is haram. That is Shari'ah. Stop domestic violence. That is implementation of Shari'ah: sound commercial laws. That is implementation of Shari'ah, not exploiting people or cheating people. That is all Shari'ah. Why do you limit Shari'ah to this one small section of a book that has nothing to do with you when you are not implementing the other things? This obsession of modern people about this is very strange, in my estimation.

Concluding remarks: I really thank all of you, for your patience and please excuse me for my long windedness. I would just like to say that I really feel like I have a lot to learn from all of you. I have not come here to teach you Islam. You have had Islam for many centuries here and it is a beautiful Islam. What I see here is a beautiful Islam and may it be preserved, may it be protected from any bad ideas from other places that has no relevance for you and will only harm you. May your young people be protected and may God protect this island and protect the people of Singapore and all the people. And may He protect all their places of worship and may He give guidance to the government and the wisdom to do the right thing. And it be a source of flourishing and goodness for your society. You have your national motto - it is onward Singapore, yes? Majulah Singapura. So onward Singapore.

Al-Salāmu 'Alaykum.



Scholar's Profile



Hamza Yusuf

Hamza Yusuf became Muslim in 1977 and subsequently spent 10 years studying in the U. A. E., Saudi Arabia, as well as North and West Africa. He received teaching licenses in various Islamic subjects from well-known scholars in various countries. He also pursued degrees in Religious Studies and Health Care. Hamza Yusuf founded Zaytuna Institute which is committed to presenting a classical picture of Islam in the West and dedicated to the revival of traditional study methods and the sciences of Islam.

Currently Hamza is President of Zaytuna College, Berkeley, California, Advisor to Stanford University's Program in Islamic Studies and the Center for Islamic Studies at Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union; and the Vice President of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, which was founded and is currently presided over by Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah. For almost a decade, Hamza Yusuf was consecutively ranked as "The Western world's most influential Islamic scholar" by The 500 Most Influential Muslims, edited by John Esposito and Ibrahim Kalin, (2009).

Hamza is one of the leading proponents of classical learning in Islam. He served as an advisor to many organizations and heads of state. He has also been a strong advocate for social justice, peace, and conviviality among peoples and places.

Among his influential achievements and contributions is that he was the first American lecturer to teach in Morocco's prestigious and oldest University, the Qarawiyyin in Fes. In addition, he translated several classical Arabic traditional texts and poems into modern English. Hamza Yusuf has also authored several encyclopedia articles and research papers. His published books include *The Burda* (2003), *Purification of the Heart* (2004), *The Content of Character* (2004), *The Creed of Imam al-Tahawi* (2007), *Agenda to Change our Condition* (2007), *Walk on Water* (2010), and *The Prayer of the Oppressed* (2010).

