



Nº 1, VOL. 1 SEPTEMBER 2006 ISSN 1991-2773

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Review of International American Studies (RIAS) is the electronic journal of the International American Studies Association, the only worldwide, independent, non-governmental association of American Studies. *RIAS* serves as agora for the global network of international scholars, teachers, and students of America as hemispheric and global phenomenon. *RIAS* is published three times a year: in September, January and May by IASA with the institutional support of the University of Silesia in Katowice lending server space to the IASA websites and the electronic support of the Soft For Humans CMS Designers. Subscription rates for *RIAS* are included along with the Association's annual dues as specified in the "Membership" section of the Association's website (www.iasaweb.org).

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REDISCOVERING ISLAM THROUGH THE FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE

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On a pleasant, breezy, mildly sunny evening in April 2005, in the 'city of Iowa city', Dr. Jane Desmond escorted me into the lecture hall in the McBride building. This was to introduce me to the young men and women who had opted for the Summer Seminar on 'US, Islam, and the Contemporary Crisis' that I was scheduled to teach as an international Visitor sponsored by Fulbright India and the International Forum of US Studies (IFUSS), directed by Drs Jane Desmond and Virginia Dominguez at the University of Iowa.

As I heard Jane speak about my career in International Relations, my interest in American Studies, my academic achievements, and my earlier visits to the University of Iowa, I surveyed the bright young faces of men and women in front of me—about thirty in all. I was informed earlier by the IFUSS office that it was the maximum permissible intake for a summer course, which had enthused me as well as alerted me to make this experience worth the efforts of all concerned.

The teaching of this course was meant to be an input in the ongoing efforts of all concerned within and outside the US to familiarize the young Americans with the basics of Islam as a religion, as a political movement, and as one of the most significant forces of contemporary international politics. This was to be discussed within the broad field of American Studies, within the parameters of US foreign policy, and with a specific emphasis on the Middle East.

What were the expectations of these young American men and women? Did they think of me as yet another apologist of terror, a proselytizer, a critic, an analyst, or as an academic version of their political 'Other'? Would they perceive me as an 'Agon' in terms of faith, race, nationality and culture? Or were they prepared to meet and interact with me within the secular domain of academia? Was it just the efficacy of acquiring a summer credit in the academic schedule that they had already chartered for themselves? Or was it a desire to discover the causes of the present turmoil? A turmoil that was caused by ignorance, misperceptions, and prejudice about the basics of the Islamic world by the Americans as much as by the prejudice of the Islamic world towards the US? If these young faces reflected doubts and disdain, they also communicated a need for familiarity, a certain eagerness to know, and a visible resolve to go through these four weeks of exchanges, dialogues and discussions.

The 'pro-seminar' (as it was described by IFUSS) on 'US, Islam and Contemporary Crisis' was designed within the format of contemporary International Relations/American Studies to introduce the basics of Islam, its growth and development in different parts of the world, and focused on the contemporary crisis in the Middle East in which US foreign policy remains a major actor. Meant primarily for those not familiar with Islam, the course focused not on theological issues and their myriad intricate legal implications but on those historical, social, and political factors that have led to the contemporary crisis in the Middle East. The major objective was to help provide an intellectual background for the understanding of Islam in its relationship with the US in the context of some recent developments in the Middle East through lecture/cum discussions in eight sessions of two hours, spread over four weeks. A brief response paper towards the end of the fourth week was to determine the credit at the end of the course.

These four weeks were to unfold for me a marvelous experience (and I believe for them too) of sharing worlds, of deconstructing the prejudices, of hoping for a common future for all humankind.

CRASH COURSE ISLAM

When I was informed about a year and half ago about the Fulbright program under the title 'Rapid Access to Islamic World', it reminded me of the US strategy of 'Rapid Deployment Force' in the Middle East. I was mildly amused at the routine American eagerness to accomplish a task quickly and to move on! Later communications revealed that the title was changed—appropriately—into 'Direct Access to Muslim World'. The described objectives provided a room for an interpretation of the present crisis between the US and the Muslims in political and historical terms rather than in terms of a clash between Christianity and Islam as faiths and civilizations.

Yet, again,¹ the Fulbright experience was to lead to my own re-education—this time about a faith into which I was born, a faith that I had taken for granted as a given. This reeducation implied for me a rediscovery of the histories and geographies of Islam within the context of International Relations, a renewed understanding of the basic meanings, spirit, and intent of the Islamic injunctions in the historical and social context over centuries, an exposure to the interpretations and misinterpretations of these injunctions by interest groups, and an understanding of the reasons behind the constant presence of the 'political' in Islam's imaginaries.

It also entailed a personal rediscovery at two levels. First, it enabled me, as an academic, to draw from different disciplines, to understand and to explain, to analyze, evaluate and to interpret, to associate with and to dissociate from the discourses across and within the disciplines, and finally to stake a claim for Islamic Studies within the broadening rubrics of American Studies. And, second, as an individual who happened to be a Muslim I became more convinced than ever before that

¹ I was a Senior Post-doctoral Fulbright Fellow at the Program in Arms Control, Disarmament and International Security (ACDIS) at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign during the year 1994–95. See Azam (1998).



much that is projected as authentic interpretations of Islamic injunctions in our times by some very vocal and powerful groups and individuals would never have been approved by the very founder of this faith! This exercise was to reaffirm my faith in my Islamic rights to seek 'Ilm' (knowledge) and to reclaim 'Ijtihad' (reasoning) under all circumstances, which would equip me to confront, explore, and understand worlds before, beyond, and after Islam.

The awareness of the existence of a vast body of literature on the different aspects of Islam as a political force, a social system, a fiercely monotheistic faith, and the reasons thereof, made my task intellectually rewarding and educative. As a Social Scientist, I had to interject this knowledge within the evolving parameters of US foreign policy towards Islamic lands over a hundred years. This was the most exciting part of the project, blurring the boundaries of International Relations and American Studies—the sites that have shaped my academic identity—through the use of Islam, which provided for an easy permeability between these two disciplines!

Though my students came from different milieus and from different disciplines, ranging from Nursing, Law, Anthropology, Arab Studies, Business Management, History, International Relations, to Philosophy, they shared a desire for a greater familiarity with Islam as much as they shared a critical objectivity in assessing the Foreign Policy compulsions of their own country. Women constituted more than two thirds of this group. There was one Hindu (female) and one Muslim (male) student, and the religious identities of the rest of the group, I assumed, ranged from Protestant, Catholic, and probably Jewish—information about this was neither sought nor offered.

What became obvious to me in the very early sessions was the complete absence of awareness of Islam's respectful acknowledgement of Christianity in the 'Quran' (the holy book of Islam). That a major chapter of 'Quran' is entirely devoted to Mary and narrates with reverence the anecdotes about her and Jesus was indeed a fresh revelation for my students with the exception of one young woman who was specializing in Arab Studies and had traveled all the way from New York to enroll.

The concerns expressed about the position of women in Islam were genuine and sincere, sharpened by the media coverage of the ghastly treatment of women by the Talibans in Afghanistan, and of the 'Hudood' laws in Pakistan.² That female genital mutilation is not a religious injunction in Islam but a continuation of tribal rituals preceding the advent of Islam was a pleasant surprise particularly to those students who came from the Nursing background. The discussions about the economic rights of daughters, the right of women to initiate the divorce proceedings, the religious obligations for yearly charities (Zakat), and the Quranic exhortations to pursue knowledge ('Ilm') across the universe, came as a surprise to all students. The damage that the so-called 'Islamic' administrations have done

² For Hudood Laws in Pakistan, see: <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/hudood.html> and http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/zia_po_1979/ord7_1979.html.

to this faith and its essence by their own distorted practices of faith even within the so-called Islamic world was obvious.

If the fate of the reformers and dissenters within the Islamic countries was lamented upon, so were the effects of Homeland Security and the Patriot Act within the US. For me, an Indian citizen outside the realms of both Islamic regimes and the US administration, who has been equally critical of certain aspects of both worlds, this was a defining moment—a moment in which we all, me and my students (Americans, Indians, Lebanese and others), cherished our small freedoms and hoped and prayed for the preservations of these freedoms across borders, cultures, faiths and political systems.

The role of the media—particularly certain television channels within the US—in further distorting the image of the Muslims in the US, drew a very lively debate, as did the criticism about the print journalism and the films. It was also very refreshing for me to listen to young Americans' critique of the Cold war priorities of the successive American administrations that eventually culminated in the creation of the Taliban and the present crises. The angst of young Americans about the impact of US involvement in 'other people's affairs' on their own lives, spoke volumes about the current emotional turmoil that they are trying to cope with.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH MUSLIMS? THREE PERSPECTIVES

I was pleasantly surprised at the impressions and reactions to the several topics discussed in and outside the lecture sessions. The response papers submitted at the end of the course revealed a certain freshness of approach and perceptions free of bias and marked by openness. Teaching about Islam's responses to US foreign policy within the wider canvass of American Studies introduced me to three very interesting authors renowned in their respective fields, who I may have missed within the prevailing discourses of International Relations—Ziauddin Sardar from the UK, Resat Kasaba from the US, and Irshad Manji from Canada. It was interesting to note that all three moved from their respective 'Islamist' backgrounds to, and have made homes in Western democracies, where their intellect has flourished and has been acknowledged, their opinions respected, and their works have received critical acclaim of a high order.

Though I had been familiar with some of the works of Ziauddin Sardar—a writer, broadcaster, and a cultural critic, I did not know his intellectual autobiography *Desperately Seeking Paradise: Journeys of a Skeptical Muslim*, which was published around the same time when I began my readings for the Fulbright course in Iowa.³ Blending his deep knowledge of Islam with his own experience of growing up as a young Muslim immigrant (from Pakistan) in the UK as well as his vast travels within the Islamic world, Sardar uses the techniques of travel writing, narrating facts with a self-reflexive subjectivity. His incisive analysis of the Muslim psyche rooted in faith but yearning for freedom seeks to reconcile western secu-

³ For a biography of Ziauddin Sardar, see: <http://www.criticalvoices.ie/speakers/display.asp?ArtistID=29>.



larism with the basics of Islam. *Desperately Seeking Paradise* was included as one of the core readings of the course 'US, Islam and the Contemporary Crisis', as I believe it is crucial for understanding the psyche of the contemporary 'Islamists' and their travails. Along with his analysis *Why Do People Hate America*, Sardar's book provided for me a perfect blend of the main themes involved in the course.

Narrating his understanding of Sardar one of the students of my class had this to say: 'I was struck by what I felt were several similar experiences that I felt growing up as a Christian. The struggle to come to terms with faith appears to be universally difficult for those open-minded rational thinkers that question the surface value of certain concepts. His book provides an interesting read because each chapter is continually filling in a historical back-story on some aspects of Islamic history'. And, 'It was surprising to see him remain a Muslim despite his seemingly overpowering doubts'. And finally, 'Most likely, no true faith can come without doubt, and so skepticism may provide the best way for getting to paradise in the end'.

I encountered Resat Kesaba—a Muslim of Turkish origin, presently an American citizen and a professor at the Henry Jackson School of International Studies at University of Washington, Seattle—in Prof. Virginia Dominguez's class. She had invited me to a discussion of his public lecture delivered in the wake of 9/11, on October 25th 2001. It was a good opportunity for me to know the response of young Americans to this lecture five years after 9/11. Entitled 'Do They Really Hate US?' Kesaba's talk formed a sequel to Sardar's *Why Do People Hate America?*

Kesaba reflected not just on the angst of being a Muslim in America after 9/11 but also provided a different contextualization of 'they' and 'us'. The 'they' of his talk—the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack were to be understood as 'a specific, ideologically motivated group with an extremely narrow interpretation of Islam'. The 'us' included not just the Americans, the perceived political enemies of the attackers. Rather, the victims of the attack came 'from many nations, varied in race, religion and economic status' and were the representatives of a 'true cross road of American society, a truly modern society full of people who crossed boundaries and borders every day'. He concluded that 'those who hate "us" must hate modern society' adding that the attackers had 'demonstrated this with deeds and words'.

The note of apology, studied caution, and veiled complaints in Kesaba's talk were to be replaced by different idioms, and modes of complaint in speeches that have followed more recently by others occupying public offices. Partaking in Virginia's discussions and analysis along with her students brought a new dimension to my understanding of the young Americans' response to the present crisis outside the vocabulary of Political Science and International Relations.

Listening to Irshad Manji and to the discussions after her public lecture entitled 'What is wrong with Islam?' was refreshingly different.⁴ Irshad Manji, a Muslim of South Asian origin born in Kampala, Uganda, arrived in Richmond, British

⁴ For more details, see Irshad 2002 and 2003. For her biography, see her official website: <http://www.muslim-refusenik.com/aboutirshad.html>.

Columbia as a child along with her family escaping the edicts of Idi Amin. Now a Canadian citizen, Manji has been an activist, a journalist, an author, and is widely known and admired for her courage in calling for reforms in Islam.

Here was a young Muslim woman critic of Islam, fearlessly sharing her views on a public platform, not only about Islam but also about her youth in Canada, her personal preferences and her encounters with her critics. She was articulate, intelligent, attractive, courageous, and a very engaging speaker. I wondered how fortunate it must be to be placed in open societies, in environments that nurture freedom and individual choices and provide space for fearless expressions of individual freedom. As I listened to her, I could not but feel proud of the Mukhtaran Mais and the other unsung heroines in Islamic societies, who still make a difference by sheer courage and fortitude while suffering the worst possible fate that one can imagine, and who remain the symbols of infinite possibilities of what a human will can accomplish within the formats of their faith.⁵

During the discussions we were also exposed to a mild critique of Manji's recollections of her Islamic childhood when a senior woman professor from Cairo pointed out that one cannot generalize about 'growing up Muslim', and that these narratives reveal the impact of multiple modernities on specific societies, under different historical, social and economic conditions. She pointed out that Manji's experience and encounters with the teachers of Islamic theology were indeed sad, but all this need not be true of other societies and other cultures. I felt that my own experience has been very different from that of Manji's and was closer to that of Zia Sardar's, where the task of inducting youngsters in the teaching of Islam was performed by responsive, enlightened and open minds (in Sardar's case by his mother).

I came back with a feeling that the content of Manji's talk merited the title 'What is wrong with Muslims?' for that appears to be one of the most pertinent questions of our times.

To be able to locate, select, adopt, and adapt these and other varied discourses to the disciplinary rigor of my own discipline of International Relations; to be able to use these as tools of understanding the contemporary scene in American Studies; and to critically resituate political Islam in contemporary times; these were the most precious rewards of this Fulbright program that came to me as 'an experience of the mind' (see Phelps 2005), helping me to rediscover myself yet again in relation to worlds and peoples, faiths and systems that I believed I had always known and yet discovered had not known enough. And, therefore, the quest continues.

⁵ Mukhtaran Mai was the Pakistani woman who was subjected to extremely inhuman treatment but fought her way back and now devotes her time and money to the education of girls in her community. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mukhtaran_Bibi&oldid=62909271.



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