Religion, Diversity and Hermeneutics: the case of 'teaching about Islam'

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'What is your faith and creed,' they ask me,
'And who are you? Tell us your lineage.'
I am a child of time, my tribe, humanity,
And now this world is my caravanserai.
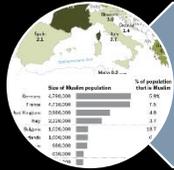
(Al-Maarri, d. 1058)

DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY AMONG PEOPLE WITH MUSLIM HERITAGE
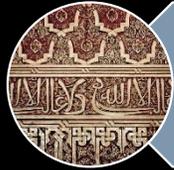

Cultural/ethnic diversity

Socio-economic diversity

Political diversity

Doctrinal diversity

Diversity of Islam as identity-marker

KEY QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

- *Why do we have this diversity among Muslims?*

- *How to study this diversity in RE?*

  - *The hermeneutical approach*

- *What are the curricular and pedagogical implications of the proposed approach?*

Changing approaches to the study of Islam in academia

A range of responses to philological-orientalist or essentialist approaches going back to the 18th century:

- W. C. Smith (1962) 'The Special Case of Islam' in *The Meaning and End of Religion.*
- Clifford Geertz (1968) *Islam Observed*
- Eickelman, D. (1976) *Moroccan Islam*
- El-Zain, A. H (1977) 'Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam' *Annual Review of Anthropology Vol. 6, pp. 227-254*
- Said, E. (1977) *Orientalism.*
- Asad, T. (1986) 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam' and (1993) *Genealogies of Religion*
- Al-Azmeh, Aziz (1993) *Islams and Modernities*
- Arkoun, M (2002) *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*
- Bowen, J. (2012) *The New Anthropology of Islam*
- Ahmed, S. (2016) *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic.*
- And others…

UNDERSTANDING ESSENTIALISM

- **Is Islam compatible With Democracy? Why? Why not?**
  - http://gatesofvienna.blogspot.com/2007/04is-islam-compatible-with-democracy.html
- **Is Islam compatible with modernity? Why? Why not?**
  - http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/3119464.stm
- **Are Human Rights compatible with Islam? Why? Why not?**
  - http://www.religiousconsultation.org/hassan2.htm
- **Is Islam compatible with capitalism? Why? Why not?**
  - http://www.newcriterion.com/posts.cfm/is-islam-compatible-with-capitalism-4701
- **Is Islam compatible with the West? Why? Why not?**
  - http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/7/9/7/5/p279750_ind
- **Can Islam and democracy co-exist? Why? Why not?**
  - http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/10/1021_031021_islamicdemocracy.htm
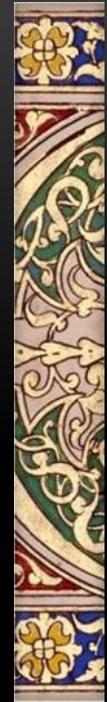
PUBLIC LECTURE ON:

ARE HUMAN RIGHTS COMPATIBLE WITH ISLAM?

Date : Tuesday, 31st May 2016
Time : 3.30PM – 5.30PM
Venue : IKMAS, UKM

UNDERSTANDING ESSENTIALISM

- Educational manifestations

  - *The five pillar approach*

  - *Lack of attention to the interpretive nature of tradition*

  - *Islam seen as a fixed object to be applied to life*

- Problems with essentialism

  - *Denies the lived and historical diversity of Muslims*

  - *Makes Islam into a thing – reification*

  - *Islam as Inert and Muslims as passive*

  - *Takes the texts – Quranic/Prophetic/Imami – as the exhaustive definition of Islam*

  - *Can be used to create harmful boundaries of us and them*

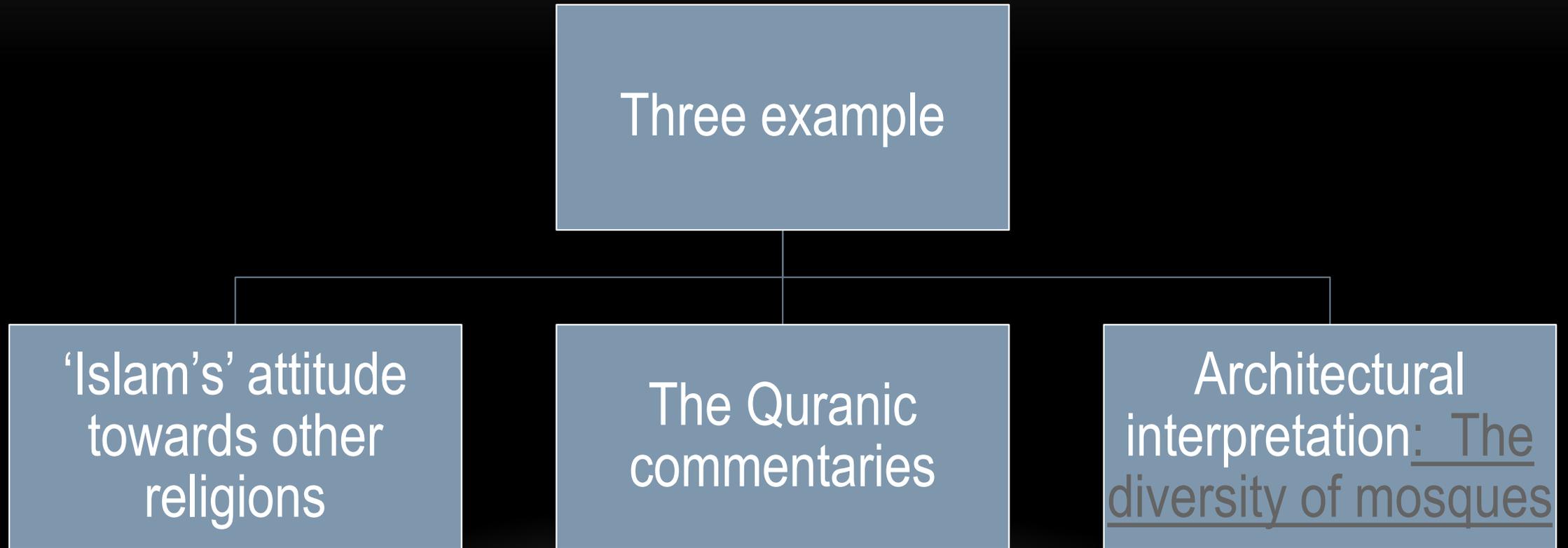# HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH: A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

- *Martians anthropologists (with time machines) have arrived among the populations of Muslims*

- **What will they observe and hear in:**
  - *a Sufi Shrine in Turkey;*
  - *a sanctuary of Taliban;*
  - *an upper class residence in Tunis in 1960s;*
  - *Dar al-Hikma (research/translation centre) in Baghdad in 9ᵗʰ century;*
  - *a Deobandi Madrasa;*
  - *the Meccan phase of Prophet Muhammad;*
  - *Medina, during Prophet Muhammad's time;*
  - *the palace of an Abbassid king;*
  - *a Madrasa under the Imam Ghazali;*
  - *In India in 1858;*
  - *IIn the army of Mahmood of Gaznavi invading India;*
  - *n a Muslim school in London;*
  - *In an Islamic fashion show in Istanbul;   ....?*

HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

- Talal Asad: Islam as a **discursive tradition**

  - "historically evolving set of discourses, embodied in the practices and institutions of Islamic societies and hence deeply imbricated in the material life of those inhabiting them." (1986 – 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam')

- At the heart of discursive tradition is hermeneutics

- It has a long pedigree, including in Muslim and Christian histories

  - Hans Gamadar's (1900- 2002) idea of hermeneutics

  - *Truth and Method (1960)*

- The idea, in Gadamarian sense, that meanings are created through *fusion of horizons* of Texts and Readers/Believers in their historically situated conditions in the wider context of tradition and community

UNDERSTANDING HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

Three example

'Islam's' attitude towards other religions

The Quranic commentaries

Architectural interpretation: The diversity of mosques

UNDERSTANDING HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

- **What is Islam's view of Christians and Jews?**

- **The Qur'an**

  - The Qur'anic verses reflect intense engagement, debate and discussions between Prophet Muhammad and Jews, Christians and polytheists (*mushrikun*) (Qur'an 3:113; 5:73; 21:22; 38:4–11 and others).

  - *'Those who believe, and those who are the Jews, and the Christians and the Sabians – any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve' (Qur'an 2:62).*

  - *'O you who believe, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies. They are allies of one another. And whoever is an ally to them among you – then indeed he [is one] of them. Allah guides not the wrongdoing people.' (Qur'an 5:51).*

UNDERSTANDING HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

What is Islam's view of Christians and Jews?

1) Indifference to other religions; superseded by Islam;

2) Suspicion of people of other religions as subverts;

3) A degree of curiosity to learn about other religions but primarily to refute;

4) A degree of positive interest in learning about other religions and even integrating some doctrines and ideas into one's conception of Islam;

5) The view that 'all things true and good in other religions and cultures were evidently already present in Islam itself';

6) A tolerant attitude which saw 'one universal world in which adherents of different religions lived side by side, accepting the reality of religious plurality';

7) The stance which saw essential spiritual unity among all religions underlying and superseding apparent differences of rituals and doctrines.

SOME QURANIC COMMENTATORS

- Muqatil b. Sulayman al-balkhi (d. 767)

- Ali b.Ibrahim al-Qummi (10th century)

- Abu Jafar al-Tabari (d. 923)

- Abu Hatim al-Razi (d. 935)

- Jafar b. Mansur al-Yaman (d. 957)

- Rashid al-Din Maybudi (d. 12th century)

- Jar Allah al-Zamakshari (d. 1144)

- Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209)

- Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani (d. 1336)

- Ismail ibn Kathir (d. 1373)

- Allama Abd Allah al-Sharafi (D. 1651)

- Sayyid Ahmed Khan (d. 1898)

- Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905)

- Abul Ala Mawdudi (d. 1979)

- Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadl Allah (d. 2010)

- …

HERMENEUTICS AND THE IDEA OF REVELATION

- "Revelation is not a normative speech that came down from heaven compelling man to reproduce indefinitely the same rituals of obedience and action; it is an offer of meaning for existence and can be revised…. It can be interpreted within the scope of the freely consented Alliance between man and God" (Arkoun, 1992).

- Architectural interpretation – diversity of mosques

TOWARDS A HERMENEUTICAL RESPONSE

Fusion of horizons
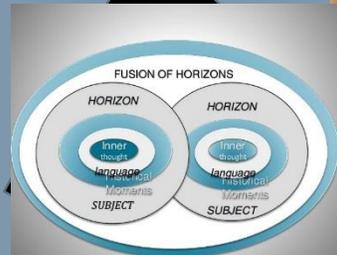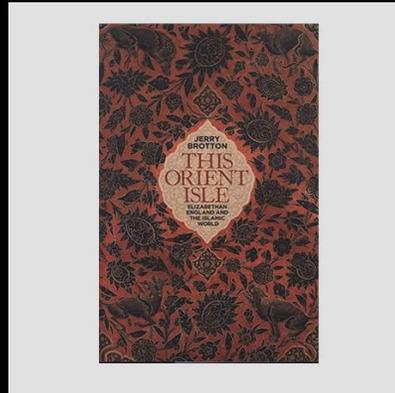
Text:
- Language;
- history of ideas;
- context

Reader:
- Background;
- intellectual and emotional make-up;
- Context
- 'historically-affected consciousness'

UNDERSTANDING HERMENEUTICAL APPROACHAPPROACH

- "Muslim intellectuals still talk about Islam as if it were a simple, unified entity; a singular object. But in reality the history of Islam, like the history of other religions such as Christianity, is fundamentally a history of different interpretations.

- Throughout the development of Islam there have been different schools of thoughts and ideas, different approaches and interpretations of what Islam is and what it means. There is no such thing as a "pure" Islam that is outside the process of historical development.

- The actual lived experience of Islam has always been culturally and historically specific and bound by the immediate circumstances of its location in time and space" (Abdol Karim Soroush quoted in Noor, 2002, p. 25).

UNDERSTANDING HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

- 'Although it is common to hear people say, for example, 'Christianity says that...' or 'according to Islam' the only thing that can be observed is that individual people who call themselves Christians or Muslims have particular positions and practices that they observe and defend. No one, however, has ever seen Christianity or Islam do anything. They are abstraction, not actors comparable to human beings.' (Ernst, C., 2003)

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TOWARDS A HERMENEUTICAL RESPONSE

- Recognises the role of the text/tradition and community in the making of the meanings

- But it also recognises the role of reader/Muslims in the making of meanings

- The text and the community puts limits of interpretation at any time; but these limits are not eternally given

- Hermeneutical approach sees a dialogical relationship between TEXT-COMMUNITY-READER

CLASSROOM APPLICATION: AN EXAMPLE

- **Understanding extremism (e.g. in Muslim contexts)**

Essentialist approach	Hermeutical approach
Islam is a religion of Peace or of War	Islam is neither a religion of peace nor of war but can be used for both
Quran inspires tolerance or intolerance	Social context matters a lot in how Muslims understand their religion; interpretation is shaped by social and political milieu
Extremism is therefore either perversion of Islam of its inevitable outcome	Extremism is a complex phenomenon that has a religion, social, political and psychological dimensions

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS: DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

- Not: What does Islam say about other religions?

  - But: How have Muslims understood Islam's relations with other religions?

- Not: Is Islam compatible with democracy?

  - But: How have Muslims understood democracy and its relations with Islam?

- Not: What is the Islamic concept of knowledge?

  - But: How have Muslims understood the idea of knowledge in light of their religious texts?

These questions lead to simultaneous investigations of religious thought/ideas and social/historical contexts of these ideas

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS
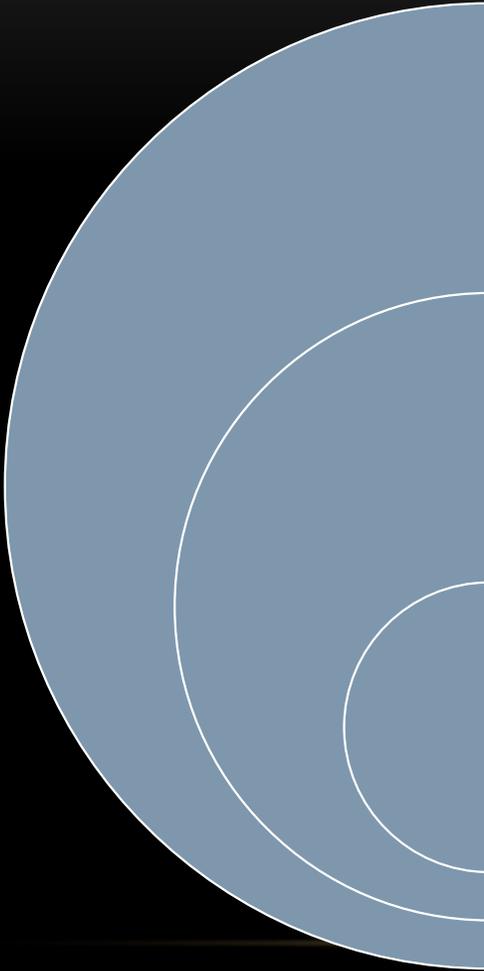
Conceptual:
- Academically rigorous approach
- Presents 'Islam' as we know it: diverse, civilisational and interpretive
- Humanises Muslims

Pedagogical:
- Explores religious experience of humanity
- Can help avoid sanctified presentation of religions – helps discuss difficult topics

Student focused:
- Respect for a student's right to learn about the broad range of Muslim history
- Encourages autonomy and empathy

SUMMARY OF KEY IDEAS

- Islam is not a physical entity which can be touched or seen. It is rather a part of the inner life – the mind and the soul – of those who believe in it. It is an idea, a social fact, a feeling.

- People/Muslims express their idea of/feeling about Islam in a variety of ways.

- When we study Islam we are actually studying these expressions.

- The key question is: is there a unity behind this diversity of expressions?

- Hermeneutical approach

- Contemporary Muslim challenges have generated a wide range of response; all share an appeal to scared texts but are diverse because of hermeneutical reasons.

- Within certain limits at a given time, Islam is what Muslims make it.

- Educational implications include an academic subject and student autonomy