

Muslim Cosmopolitanism: Recovering a Forgotten Stream in the History of Islam

On November 8, 2013, Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (National University of Singapore; Fulbright Fellow, Columbia University) addressed the topic of “Muslim Cosmopolitanism.” The event was held at the IIIT headquarters in Herndon, Virginia.

He began his talk with a personal example: He is the child of an Arab father and an Indian mother, his culture is Malay, he prefers to talk in either Malay or English, and he understands Chinese. Thus, he is a living example of his assertion that “being Muslim is part and parcel of being able to appre-

ciate many cultures . . . We are all hybrids,” and therefore it is only natural for Muslims to embrace diversity. While this was true for the first millennium of Islamic civilization, it is, unfortunately, “not the case today.”

Aljunied cited several examples of how contemporary Muslims have put this reality aside. For example, he raised the question of why, when a Muslim engages in something that is clearly wrong, do Muslims apologize by saying that he/she is a “bad Muslim,” instead of a “bad person,” or become offensive by saying that the action was somehow justified. He noted that this is “an unhealthy development in the world in general, and especially in the United States” – one that Muslims should abandon. Instead, Muslims need to study their history and understand exactly who they are. With this goal in mind, he praised AbdulHamid AbuSulayman’s *Crisis in the Muslim Mind* (IIIT: 1993) for its analysis of such concerns.

A major theme of his talk was just how parochial and insular the once very cosmopolitan Muslim world has become. He elaborated upon this by comparing several great Islamic cities of the past – Baghdad, Bukhara, Cordoba, Damascus, Cairo, Fez, Mogadishu, Malacca, Timbuktu, Sarajevo, and Delhi – with their contemporary counterparts, to remind Muslims that such grand undertakings were not beyond their ability. These traditional Muslim cities were built in a way that enabled extended families to live together, religious minorities to live in their own quarters and run their own affairs, and to interact with each other in conveniently located public spaces. There was a great deal of commerce in the markets, as well as security, open spaces for meetings, and debates in the main mosque and elsewhere on any topic – with the only requirement being that no speaker could curse the Prophet.

Moreover, these cities were purposively built with environmental concerns in mind (e.g., trees, fountains, open spaces) so that they would be “comfortable.” And above all else, they were remarkably clean. The people were open and hospitable, respectful of strangers, mobile, celebrated their hybridity (e.g., many intermarriages), and were inclusive of others. Today, the Muslim world’s leading cities do not bear even the slightest resemblance to these long-ago cities.

Saying that he travels a great deal due to his job, he is always shocked when he comes to the West and finds mosques based on race, parents who object to their children marrying a person from another ethnic group, and the racism he sees among Muslims. All of this, he remarked, violates “O people, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of

Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware” (Q. 49:1) and “All humanity is from Adam and Eve. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab. A white person has no superiority over a black person, nor does a black person have any superiority over a white person, except by piety and good action,” from the Prophet’s last sermon. He remarked that the colors mentioned were very relevant to the American context. In short, Muslims in the West must stop building walls around themselves; instead, they should seek to engage with their fellow citizens.

Cosmopolitanism can help Muslims transcend such artificial divisions. Further refining this concept, he opined that cosmopolitanism is also “a style of thought, how we think and look at people” – one that calls for Muslims to be morally responsible for others (even non-Muslims), as this attitude is a core part of the Islamic tradition of open-mindedness and the *maqāsid al-Sharī‘ah* (e.g., compassion, justice, cooperation, doing good, and consensus to safeguard the public interest). Muslim scholars of the classical era studied the texts of classical Greek and many other non-Islamic civilizations to expand and deepen their understanding of Islam. They sought to improve upon whatever they found wherever they went. This can be seen in politics, as well as in architecture and art. He presented several slides of various Muslim architectural structures to prove his point.

The lively question-and-answer period dealt with such issues as how the Muslim world produces almost none of the world’s scientific literature, how Muslims are not taught their own history and seem to be content to let others write it for them, how they are generally not interested in reading books – despite Islam’s emphasis on reading in order to acquire knowledge – and how nationalism has so effectively fractured the ummah. A rather delicate subject was also raised: What should parents say when their children ask them why what they are taught in school differs from what they learn in the mosque (e.g., how the universe was created)? Several participants pointed out that today’s schoolchildren are too well-educated to be satisfied with the traditional answers.

In closing, Aljunied agreed with the comments and broached a topic that has been part of IIIT’s mission for many years: the need to develop an alternative curriculum so that Muslims can present themselves on their own terms.

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