

Prologue

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Islam is a complex, multivocal tradition. This semester, I learned that there are perhaps as many islams as there are Muslims. Furthermore, religion—a human enterprise—is never separated from its practitioners. There is no “core,” or “unadulterated” Islam that transcends all the little islams lived out by individual Muslims. These practices themselves comprise Islam collectively. They all must be taken into account if we want a comprehensive understanding of the Islamic world. Thanks to this course, I have begun to understand the full breadth of this religious tradition, but I still have a long way to go. One semester is only enough to make a start. I scratched the surface, but the biggest lesson for me is that uncharted depths still remain.

I also learned that just as Islam is vast and diverse, so it is also a dynamic tradition. It has evolved over the centuries and continues to evolve today. This capacity for change contributes to the complexity of the tradition; every development in Islam provides a branching-off point from which numerous new perspectives can bloom. Religions, I have learned, are hardly static phenomena.

This fact flies in the face of Islamophobic ideologues, for whom it is convenient to think of Islam not only as univocal but also as unchangeable. This monolithic, static conception of Islam has never been Islam’s reality. Even as the Qur’an itself was dictated, its message developed. Some of its later verses contradict earlier verses, perhaps because they indicate responses to increasingly specific cultural, political, and social contexts as the book was composed. The Islamic Holy Book itself—perhaps the only constant across myriad manifestations of Islam—exemplifies the evolution at the heart of its tradition.

The Shahada also exemplifies the Islamic capacity for change. At first it simply had a “there is no god but God clause,” but later developed a more exclusive “Muhammad is His prophet” clause, and with the development of Shi’a theology a clause venerating Ali. Understanding the Shahada as a complex statement that changed over time and evolved differently depending on its sectarian context is a perfect microcosm for our ideal understanding of Islam: Islam is a complex tradition that has changed over time and evolved differently depending on its cultural context.

I also learned that Islam, and indeed religion in general, is neutral, rather than innately good or bad. Religion can be harmful in some limited contexts, it’s true, but in other contexts it can be a source of light, life, and social progress. The effect a religion has on the world has everything to do with the people who interpret its precepts and put it into practice. So, it is crucial to remember that despite the negative press the Islamic tradition receives because of a minority of fundamentalists who use Islam as an excuse to do violence and inflict pain, Islam is often a life-giving force that empowers human beings around the globe in numerous ways. Islam inspires art, provides the spark for social justice movements, and—as much of the literature in the AI54 syllabus taught me—has a capacity to focus on innate human dignity in the face of poverty and systems of oppression (the potential of religions to do both good and evil in the world is a core theme that informs the chaos that happens in the climax of my song “heavenly prototype”; more on that blog post later).

This course has also reminded me that religion and language have similar functions. That is, religious traditions provide a means of expressing both our humanity and our relationship with Divinity. To illustrate this, I recall my experience watching the Islamic film *The Color of Paradise*: paradoxically, the film is both totally familiar and completely alien to me. The

emotional truths related by it—the pain of loss, the anguish of failure, the pangs of regret—are of course not limited to the Muslim experience and speak to all our lives. But the language that the film uses to articulate these truths is less familiar to me. First and foremost, the film is in Persian, a language of which I have zero knowledge. But even beyond that, the film speaks a religious language in which I have only a neophyte’s training. Its imagery and highly symbolic narrative employ Sufi paradigms that I do not fully understand, and the distinctly Islamic culture in which the film’s characters live and move and breathe is different from my own Christian culture. Religion provides a language for expressing truth, and because I didn’t speak the religious language of *The Color of Paradise*, I had to work hard to understand its message and get at the emotional and spiritual truths it elucidated. Thankfully, this course gave me the tools necessary to successfully analyze the film, so I did eventually figure it out, and when I did I was struck by how personal the message was. This exemplifies the general effect of my work in this course: beginning to engage with the language of the diverse Islamic tradition has equipped me to better understand the way Muslims around the world engage with questions that all humans know and wrestle with: questions of meaning, duty, spirit, soul, God, and love, and allows me to relate to my human brothers and sisters more deeply, regardless of religious affiliation.

In general terms, these were my biggest takeaways from **AI54: For the Love of God and His Prophet**. I hope these lessons I have learned over the course of the term shine through the blogposts I have created and curated over the past three months. I hope that you will get a taste of the vast, diverse, dynamic Islamic tradition through these posts, and I hope you will encounter Islamic language or styles with which you were previously unfamiliar.

Perhaps you, like me, have not given the Islamic tradition as much sophisticated thought as it deserves, and perhaps you, like me, will find that some of your constructions, definitions,

and understandings surrounding Islam are incomplete. But this is not meant to be a threat. If you find your notions of Islam are on some level subverted, I hope you will feel the joy of growth and discovery that I have felt thanks to this course's material. I also hope you will feel a sense of excitement at the prospect of a search for Divinity and meaning in life. As you will see as I go through some course themes and theology in relation to my posts, a lot of my work focuses on the mystical search for God. The art of the Islamic tradition evokes a sense of deep longing for Allah and fills me with wonder and anticipation. How exciting to embark on a spiritual quest! God willing, some of the excitement I have felt while engaging with the Islamic language of longing and searching for God will pass on to you in my posts.

My blog has seven pieces (not counting this introductory essay), and these pieces can be divided into two groups. The first group (posts 1-4) is a mini-album of original music that I composed, arranged, recorded, and mastered. The first song on the album is called "basmala," the second "isa and the dead dog," the third "love on moth's wings," and the fourth "heavenly prototype." The third song is the title track. The second group (posts 5-7) consists of more eclectic media. Post #5 is a ghazal in English, post #6 is an epistolary short story, and post #7 is a poster/drawing that takes themes from an Iranian pro-Khomeini poster and subverts them for a different Islamic purpose.

The posts are all fairly different, but I think they are united in a few ways reflective of some core themes from the course. First and foremost, they are united in that they all speak to my favorite theological framework from AI54: Islam as a theology of love. They are also united in that they represent a collision between my own devout Christian identity and the Islamic identities and modes of expression I have studied this term. This collision, however, has been

more constructive than destructive, because AI54 has so heavily focused on the aspects of the Islamic tradition that are pluralistic and inclusive.

I will begin by discussing the Islamic theology of Love that permeates my artwork and springs from various aspects of AI54. This theology of Love manifests in my blog in two ways.

The first is the theme of the soul's mystical longing for God. As I have already stated, this theme has proven to be an integral part of Islam as presented in this course, and it shows up again and again. There is the mystical longing for God that informs the individual, quotidian prayer of Muslims around the world. There is the longing for God that inspires great works of art in the Sufi tradition. There is also the longing for God that is reflected in the desire of an imperfect world to reach the perfection of divinity. Many communities press for social justice and reform as a means of fulfilling this longing. Other, more fundamental communities try to fulfill this longing by fighting progress and attempting to return to an idealized ritual/cultural purity that they believe God wants for us. All in all, if we engage with the vast world of Islam, chances are we will encounter the longing of imperfect people for a perfect God, and this fact permeated both AI54 and the artwork in my blog.

Post #2, "isa and the dead dog," reflects a mystical longing for God by expressing the distance between myself and the God I desire. This distance is highlighted by my own inability to see myself and the world with as much love and grace as God does, and this informs the lyrics (*isa, it's been lying there for far too long! / how do you see the beauty when the breath is gone?*).

Post #5, "a ghazal for the desert of the soul," expresses long for and the discovery of God in unexpected places and in surprising ways, seeking God in desolation, silence, and the nothingness of contemplation. Post #7, called "an image of victory," reflects longing for God by subverting Iranian pro-Khomeini symbolism and instead portraying an ultimate Muslim goal:

union with God and His radical love through submission to His will (see the figure prostrating in the fire of God's love). Post #3, my song "Love on Moth's Wings," perhaps most directly engages with the theme of longing for God by evoking the language of a South Asian *ginnan*, a hymn about longing for and recklessly sacrificing oneself for a mystical beloved.

In addition to longing for God our Beloved, another component of the Islamic theology of love which inspires my blog posts is the collision of eternity with temporality: that is, the manifestation of Divinity in the fleeting world around us. One of my favorite quotes from the entire course is a quote from the Persian poet Saadi, who writes something to the effect of: "Every leaf of the tree becomes a page of sacred scripture, once the heart is opened and it has learnt to read" (I have heard this translated in a few ways). Saadi suggests that the beautiful world around us in all its complexity can be a source of revelation, not just the holy books we read and venerate. This notion about God's presence in the natural world pervades much of the artwork we have engaged with in class, and by extension informs my own. The great Persian masnawi *The Conference of the Birds* uses language of nature and her creatures to tell a story about human relationship with God, imbuing birdsong with spiritual weight. In the tradition of that poem, my sixth post, "A Letter from a Sparrow," tells the story of a shameful bird left behind. Here also do we find an articulation of human experience and religious truth in an interpretation of nature and nature's denizens. The Islamic tradition of ghazal poetry often employs language of nature in spring time to express and exemplify the new life God gives; my ghazal (post #5) also uses imagery from the natural world to articulate a mystical experience, albeit in a somewhat subversive way (deserts and wastelands, rather than the beautiful, verdant gardens of traditional ghazals). Post #1, my song "basmala," employs a chorus of many voices to remind us of how we can find God's loving, compassionate voice in so many places, in nature

and in our fellow human beings. Post #2 reflects how a pervasive God can be found even in the ugly aspects of nature, like dead animals. Post #4, my song “heavenly prototype,” is fundamentally about how we find God in the world. How does God manifest? Through incarnation? Through inlibration? Or perhaps simply the beauty of the creation which surrounds us? (*the sun shines, the stars blink, / the tome talks in celestial ink.... You still come to us in love, / in book, or man, or leaf, or in anything i could dream of.*)

This theology of love flows naturally into the collision of my Christian identity with the Islamic themes in the course. Professor Asani has endeavored to show us an Islam that is more inclusive, an Islam that transcends stricter political or religious ideologies. I remember learning that in Islamic thought, Jesus is understood as a devout Muslim in that he *submits to God*. Learning that made me wonder, *I try to submit to the will of the one God. Within the bounds of the inclusive, Qur’anic sense of the word, am I perhaps a muslim, like Jesus? And if the line is blurred, what life-giving connections might exist between my Christian identity and modern Muslim identity?* This search for connection between traditions informs my art. The song “basmala” has lyrics that are distinctly Muslim, and yet I can pray them very earnestly as a Christian (in the same way that Muslims often describe the Lord’s Prayer as Islamic). “isa and the dead dog” springs from a Muslim folk tale about the central figure of the Christian tradition—Jesus is beloved in both, and I play with that by engaging with the Muslim Jesus narrative as a Christ-follower. “love on moth’s wings” imbues Islamic *ginan* imagery with some flavors of my native Christian mysticism, and the combination because the traditions have more similarities than differences—both are based in longing for God’s Love. The lyrics of “heavenly prototype” collide the Islamic idea of the “Mother of the Book” and the manifestation of that Divine Word on earth with the distinctly Christian theme of Incarnation. My ghazal evokes the

aesthetic of a famous Jesuit poet, G.M. Hopkins, while nevertheless fitting the paradigm of the Sufi love poem. My letter from a sparrow is in the tradition of *The Conference of the Birds*, but also explores a spiritual obstacle that is deeply personal to my own experience as a Christian. There is nothing explicitly Christian about my seventh post per se, but even in my poster, the desire presented is unity with the fire of God's Love. This desire for Love is Islamic, but it is Christian too. I remember when Professor Asani told us about a Sufi who held that anyone who doesn't think the Qur'an is a book about Love misunderstands the Qur'an. A lovely sentiment, made all the more beautiful by the fact that in the Christian canon Augustine of Hippo is known to have said the exact same thing about the Bible. The course theme of Islam as fundamentally inclusive allowed for my Christianity to interact with the Islamic tradition in fruitful ways through my artistic expression.

Ultimately, all of it is about **Love**. The simple lyrics of "basmala" reflect the core traits of a merciful and compassionate God, a God who is **Love**. "isa and the dead dog" shows how someone with high god-consciousness like Jesus can see beauty in ugliness because of divine **Love**. "love on moth's wings" shows how we can give of ourselves in sacrifice to our beloved God out of mutual **Love**. "heavenly prototype" expounds on the myriad ways God makes himself known to us through creation, despite our continual failure to understand Him, out of Love. My ghazal suggest that even in silence and desolation, God meets us and fills us with His presence in an act of **Love**. My letter from a sparrow shows that despite our shame and sinfulness God calls us to submission and offers enlightenment out of **Love**. And, as shown in my poster, our ultimate goal as submitters (*muslims*) is to embrace God's power and be enveloped in His **Love**. It's all **Love**, and if you take anything away from my AI54 blogposts, let it be that.