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The Story of Embracing GENED 1087

How is it that I, a non-Arabic speaker, feel an immense emotional, yet immaterial, relatedness with my faith as I interact with expressions that I do not understand on a daily basis? Why is it that I experience the semblances of an intimate community while being surrounded by unfamiliar crowds? In what ways do I (and those I will never get the benefit of meeting) simultaneously experience and interpret faith traditions? How do others experience Islam through the Arts?

Well aware of how my perception of faith is largely colored by my direct experiences, I have always felt drawn to learn from those quite different from me. While I often associated this concept of “different” with those of other faith traditions, I now can acknowledge that far too often I overlooked that there are varying interpretations within Islam in itself. I never placed myself in environments where I questioned my experiences with my faith—I was either surrounded by people completely different than me while attending a Catholic High School or people very similar to me, having grown up within five minutes from my primarily Sunni masjid for the majority of my youth. What happens when I face an intermediary between the two—will I find my experiences of faith to prove to be dynamic?

This course, conveniently named, has (gently) pushed me to rethink my perception of faith and religion through a multisensory analysis of Islam. Through the subsequent six portfolios, I hope that you, my audience, can follow my transformation facilitated by Professor Asani, Aaron Viengkhou, as well as my fellow peers, both inside and outside of this course.

However, just before we turn the key and start our engines to begin this story, a preface is in due order. From the get-go, the methodology used to analyze Islam must be defined. Without a well-defined approach to analyzing Islam, one cannot replicate this approach for other religions. Are we taking into account the theology of Islam? What about the context surrounding Islam? How do individuals' identities outside of Islam play roles in their interpretations of Islam?

Preface

I have paired my blog posts into groups of two, each with the intent of highlighting a specific development through my progression in this course. Tying into the theme of a “Story”, each pairing is grouped as a chapter. This course, grounded in the cultural studies approach, emphasizes the context surrounding an event. The context in this understanding is a very broad category and includes, but is not limited to economic, cultural, social, political, literary, and artistic lenses. Highlighted within one of the very first readings of the semester, Professor Asani writes in his book *Infidel of The Love*:

“Religions are shaped by a complex web of factors, including political ideologies, socioeconomic conditions, societal attitudes to gender, educational status, literary and artistic traditions, historical and geographical situations—all of which are inextricably linked in influencing the frameworks within which sacred texts, rituals, and practices are interpreted. It is a framework through which we can deepen our understanding of religious tradition by recognizing that they are internally diverse and constantly in flux.” (7)

Hence, this Story of Embracing GENED 1087 explores my own personal deeper understanding of the various contexts that allow for different interpretations of Islam. It first begins with my initial interpretations, gradually expands to alternative ideas rooted in concrete contexts, and concludes with transcendent experiences, albeit completely unbeknownst to me before this course. Without further ado, here are the portfolio creative responses.

Chapter 1: Rudimentary Recipes & Reflective Recitations

What is Islam and who is a Muslim?

While the answer to this question might initially seem fairly simple, if you were to ask different people, Muslim or not, this question can give you very diverse answers. Is it that Islam is a growing monotheistic religion based on the Quranic Scripture and founded by Muhammad, and a Muslim follows it? What does it mean to follow Islam? Does failing an aspect of Islamic tradition task automatically prevent someone from being a Muslim? And... whose Islam are we using? Is it what is conveyed in popular media? Is it based on local Imams in Masjids?

My [first response](#) (response 1) seeks to highlight the many conflicting interpretations of Islam and what it means to be a Muslim, all through the medium of drawing. Rooted in readings from the first chapter of Professor Asani’s book *Infidel of Love*, is an analogy from Barbara Petzen who compares the various interpretations of Islam to a Chef in a kitchen with ingredients: “The ingredients represent the core ideas, or principles, of a religious tradition, while the chef represents a person interpreting the tradition within her own context”, as “a different chef would cook the same ingredients with an entirely different recipe” (Asani 24).

After both reflecting on my understanding, as well as the reading’s explanation of the key universal “ingredients” in Islam, I was motivated to depict a kitchen that these different “chefs” could approach. Ultimately, by using the “recipe”, yet simultaneously adding their interpretations based on each “chef’s” context (akin to the cultural studies approach), there can be these different conflicting interpretations. In other words, the alternating analyses of Islam are initiated by an individual’s usage of the different proportions of “ingredients”.

Henceforth, my natural inclination for the [next response](#) (response 2) was to depict my personal experience of Islam through the arts—in my case, through the voice of recitation. In other words, this next response is my take... when I am the chef. Perhaps my interpretation is the byproduct of constantly gravitating around my local masjid (the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati), whether through daily prayers, youth programming, Quran competitions, or even interfaith and interfaith basketball tournaments hosted annually by the masjid. Nevertheless, with this next portfolio, I wanted to convey how, despite my physical distance from my local masjid at home

with school, I still felt connected to being at “home” through the voice of recitation—the medium for my second portfolio.

Listeners can hear Hafiz Furqan, as recited this past Ramadan (2022), invoke a supplication (dua) during a prayer. With this response, I sought to convey how the art of recitation is one of the ways that I, and many other different communities, interact with the Quran as a sacred text—one of the very themes for Week 2. Explained throughout the post is the explanation of the concept of weeping—one of the many rules rooted directly in Abu Hamid al-Ghazali’s “External Rules of Qur’an Recitation”.

Together, both creative responses 1 and 2, directed from Weeks 1 and 2 respectively, highlight my initial understanding of using the cultural studies approach to analyze Islam through the arts. Here, I sought to convey my primary opening ideas entering this course, which are broad understandings of different concepts of Islam, largely rooted in my own experiences.

Chapter 2: Silenced ‘Secrets’

This next chapter is centered around what I call silenced “secrets”—in other words, alternative perspectives that I did not have much exposure to before this course. With the [creative response for week 6](#) (response 4), I wanted to illustrate the impact of Loud Islam on individuals, ultimately leading to “silenced Islam”, all in the guise of aid, through the medium of graphic design.

I found it particularly stimulating and thought-provoking when learning about the concept of erasing culture—primarily because I felt the effect of its actions. Without this course, I would not have been exposed to the duality of “Loud Islam” and “silenced Islam”—while I directly experienced the strife between these two concepts internally, I did not know how to describe the difference (in words) between the Islam portrayed by popular western media, and the personal Islam I felt when listening to recitations as shown in the second creative response. Specific readings such as the article in the *Turkish Times* article titled “Erasing Culture: Wahhabism, Buddhism, Balkan Mosques” as well as Gülru Necipoğlu’s *The Topkapi Scroll* gave me the much-needed context when learning about Loud vs silenced Islam.

I sought to broaden my horizon, using this creative response as context for the others in this “chapter”, to explore the “silenced” individualistic Islam experienced in Shia Islam. As shown in the first creative response, though I had a basic conceptual understanding of the differences between Shia and Sunni Islam, this course taught me about how Shia theology developed in the context of martyrdom and worldly defeat—an alternative perspective that I would not have had exposure to without this course.

Hence for my [response for week 5](#) (response 3), I chose to use photography as my media for this portfolio. Depicted is an image of an ice-cold glass of water under the sun on a hot summer day. The bottom half of the photograph is dominated by sizzling sand, whereas the top half of the photograph emphasizes the shining sun and its glare to viewers. Using the readings “Martyrdom of Husayn” and Peter Chelkowski’s book *Ta’zeiyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, I was able to

understand the context of Shia Islam—an alternative perspective/interpretation of Islam that I was not quite familiar with.

I sought to incorporate these ideas in this creative response, for example, the glass of ice water represents the perspective of Hussain's intercession to those who participate in this ta'ziyah, with the understanding that Hussain will quench their thirst on an incomprehensibly hot day of the Day of Judgement—a Shia concept explained in this class that I would not have the context to understand.

When combined, both creative responses #3 and #4 highlight my shift from initially understanding different interpretations in Islam from my own direct experiences, into an intermediate stance—one where based on my concrete knowledge I could begin to understand alternative interpretations. Yet, as seen in the next “chapter”, this too shall expand.

Chapter 3: The Pursuit of Knowledge of the Unknown

Towards the latter half of the course, we explored concepts associated with mysticism and primordial experiences. Unlike concepts from earlier portions of the course, I no longer had any true background in understanding these ideas.

One of the most influential texts that I have come in contact with is Aṭṭār's *The Conference of the Birds*. Correspondingly, I found it important to dedicate a portfolio to primarily this text alone, by emphasizing key concepts found in the book that can explain different movements of reform in Islam. With this [creative response](#) (response 5), I sought to convey an idea key to Sufism Mysticism in that human love is a stepping stone to divine love. In this instance, I used drawing as my medium of choice, where depicted a nightingale bird viewing its reflection in a mirror, as Aṭṭār's nightingale-rose symbol has drawn popularity and is a common reference in other poetry—those found in Iqbal's *The Complaint*. This marks, what I see as, a significant transformation facilitated by this course. Now, I was able to gradually progress from only being able to recognize interpretations of Islam from MY experiences, into being able to recognize alternative perspectives without focusing on my concrete encounters.

Altogether, each one of these previous five creative responses culminates in my last and [final response](#) (response 6) titled “Knowledge”. When reflecting on this course as a whole, the emerging idea that I drew from the readings, lectures, and section discussions is my understanding of Islam is embodied by the idea of the pursuit of knowledge of the unknown. This idea was eloquently described by Iqbal, albeit controversial (during his time) in *The Complaint and Answer (Shikwa and Jawab-i-Shikwa)* where Sir Muhammad Iqbal writes, “Infidels who live like Muslims surely merit faith's reward” (Iqbal 48). In my final creative assignment (and very much representative of my journey in this class), I discovered how Islam is a path centered around people taking great strides to live enriching lives, centered around learning—the pursuit of knowledge. An idea that unites my individualistic Islam away from my direct experiences, but rather an immense physical yet immaterial conquest—one only possible through encountering the arts. So, to answer the question I proposed at the beginning of this story: when placed in an environment like this course where I could question my experiences

with faith, I find myself learning about myself, my faith, and something new in the process—in this case, trust in transcendent experiences.