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A Journey of Understanding
Introduction to My Blog Posts and My Reflection on the Class
(<https://blogs.law.harvard.edu/jming/>)

Before I this semester, I was only able to approach Islam as an intelligent observer--I approach the subject as someone with an academic background in other fields, with some scholarly interest in this one. I would not consider myself particularly ignorant, as I was open to the idea of learning more about the topic, but I would not consider myself particularly knowledgeable either. I had some middle school knowledge about some of the simplified and abstracted Pillars of Islam, but barely knew the difference between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims beyond the politicization of some of the conflicts being reported in the media. And I acknowledge that my perception of Islam is colored by the information that is presented to me, from the attribution of violence to the religion of Islam from the Taliban to Nigeria's Boko Haram in the #BringBackOurGirls incident. But when I was in India two summers ago, I was standing on top of the "tower" in Jama Masjid (which I now realize is a minaret), overcome with serenity, with peace. And as I was watching the prayers during Ramadan in the Nizamuddin Dargah, I was surrounded by activity and spirituality all around me. But even in both places, I was not sure what the meaning of all of this was--why is there a tower on the masjid? How are the people set up when they are praying? In taking this class, I wanted to answer some of these questions and bridge the gap between understanding just some of the textbook details of Islam or the sensationalized media coverage to being immersed in the

vibrant culture associated with it.

The blog posts presented document my journal of understanding from an intelligent observer to an educated one. They highlight some of the weekly concepts brought up in class and discussions, such as qur'an recitations, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, Islamic art in architecture, and ghazals and miniatures as well as the stories of the Conference of the Birds and Persepolis. And they do so in a way that reflects not only my increased understanding and internalization of the basic principles that were being taught during class, but also the context in which this knowledge exists, from my personal artistic abilities and talents in the artforms that I am creating to the position of modern society, including the infusion of technology and current references. Rather than having a clash of civilizations, presented is the product of a synergy, a constructive effort of civilizations. In viewing the blog, it is important to keep an open mind to all of the cultures and factors that have come together to create these works of expression. The goal of these blog posts is to accessibly contribute to better and potentially changed understanding and perception of the art and culture of Islam.

In order to understand the blog posts, there are some basic concepts of and definitions associated with Islam that should be laid out. First and foremost, Islam is a monotheistic religion that approximately a fourth of the world population practices. What is interesting coming from a Judeo-Christian dominant background, is that Islam is within the same family of religions as Judaism and Christianity. As a matter of fact, Muslims consider these people to also be *ahl al-kitab*, or People of the Book, sharing similar scriptures, religious histories, and heroes and protected under Islamic Law. The difference is that in Islam, the scripture was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad during his mystical night journey, known as the *Isra* and *Miraj*. The Prophet

Muhammad holds an exalted position, including having the roles as a messenger or intercessor between the human and the divine and is revered to the point that stories of his life known as *hadiths* are studied to try to adopt his custom, or *sunnah*. All this is proclaimed in the *shahadah* that all Muslims recite, stating that “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” All those that recite the *shahadah* are known as Muslims, or those that undergo the action of submission to God, or *islam*. This is one of the five pillars of Islam, also including *salat*, or ritual prayer, *zakat*, or alms giving, *sawm*, or fasting during Ramadan, and *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, as can be afforded.

However, beyond some more basic concepts, there are many different communities of interpretations of Islam. This can stem from even the way in which some of these concepts are presented. For example, the divide between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims can be traced back to the time of determining post-prophetic authority--how power would be transferred after the Prophet Muhammad passed on. And because the Shi’a believe in the passing of power in the *Nur Muhammad*, or the light of Muhammad, transmitted through the *ahl al-bayt*, or the Family of the House, or the relatives of the Prophet. This is depicted in “Light of Muhammad,” the blog post for week 4. For that reason, the Shi’a often append another line to the basic *shahadah*, stating that Ali, or the son of Muhammad, is the friend of God, among other things. And since the holy book, the *Qur’an* was based on an oral tradition and passed on many generations before being recorded by hand in an ancient Arabic, any translation would be regarded as an interpretation, and the right to interpretation has many prerequisites and is a hotly contested issue. Therefore, studying Islam can be done using a devotional, textual or ritualistic approach, but those would not fully cover the diversity of the population. The class and this blog present a cross-cultural study of the religion,

focusing on art, to understand the different ways in which Islam is interpreted and presented.

This class really highlighted the idea of the many different flavors of Islam. For example, looking at the idea of Islamic architecture that was discussed in class and highlighted in the *Mirror to an Invisible World* documentary, each of the architectural styles really drew from its own environment. Since the definition of a mosque relies mainly on having a place for prayer that has a wall that faces Mecca with an indentation called a mihrab. Since then, other elaborations on the interpretation of what a mosque is have been developed, including more traditional Mughal architecture including domes and minarets. Some examples that were given include the grand construction of the Alhambra, drawing from the similar architectural style of its surroundings while infusing some of the natural sandstone that is common to the area. Or looking at context-specificity in having less obvious minarets and other common denotations of the mosque regions under much religious divide, as described by a guest lecturer. Another example is the great mosques of Djenne, where the mosque is constructed using the mud that surrounds the area, taking in the literal natural environment. This adherence to nature falls in line with observing the surroundings and perceiving the *ayats* or signs of God's creation all around. This idea of the beauty of God's creation in the natural context is highlighted in the week 6 blog post of the "Arabesque", drawing inspiration from plants in my own surroundings.

Having a context-based interpretation is also important with regards to having an interpretation based on personal level, as seen in the *New Muslim Cool* about a Puerto Rican American rapper's take on Islam in his own community and context. I infused my personal interest in technology to a traditional allegorical story in the week 10 blog post of the "Twitter of the Birds." And having a personal interpretation truly depends on having both the knowledge be based

on experience and being able to express this experience in a way that is best for the individual.

This experiential nature is very strong in both the Sufi mysticism, which believes in truly removing the self and all distinctions to blend into the surroundings, the everything. This type of transcending experience is seen in the qawwalis where the musicians pour their hearts into their worship and adoration or dances such as the Damba dance of the Northern Ghanaian Muslims as described by a guest lecturer. However, the same concept of having experiential interpretation is also true for more mainstream Muslims that do not necessarily subscribe to Sufi mysticism. Since the Qur'an was originally passed down in generations through *hafiz* or guardians of the Qur'an, there is a strong oral and aural experience associated with the recitation and listening of the Qur'an. And after generations of history, there are also different styles for the recitation on top of the basic *tartil* and *tajweed* guidelines spelled out that allow for the expression of devotion. The same idea can also be held for prayers or call to prayers. This process of experiencing and expressing is shown in the week 3 blog post about the "Improvisation on the Adhan."

And yet, even though Islam can be interpreted differently among different local worlds, there is a universality in the concepts presented by Islam. There is artistic beauty, a concept that resonates across cultures. For example, in the course we talked a lot about the ghazals, which are often paired with miniatures, as seen in the blog post for week 9 "Ghazals and Miniatures." These two art forms that have been examined in literary and artistic traditions across the world. Miniatures are displayed in many prominent collections of artwork, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit that we visited, as well as incorporated in various wall hangings, book covers, and more. There are many adaptations of the ancient Persian form of poetry into English, whether it is translations of the previous poems or the creation of new art. I even at one point bought a book of

Rumi's poetry, finding solace in his beautiful words and uncanny ability to depict the human condition. The naturalistic imagery is fairly common across all means of expression, but, more importantly, the feelings and emotions of love and loss are relatable and universal. This reminds us that we, as humans, are all witnesses, sharing the world in which we live.

Similar to Christianity, and what I would hope is true for most major religions, there is a strong emphasis in Islam on social justice and community work and we saw many images of soup kitchens during Ramadan. The *hadiths* depict Muhammad as not only devout, but also kind, extending sympathy and understanding across the different cultures he encounters, regardless of their religion, but because of their humanity. These are not too different from the parables of Jesus, which also spread the teachings of various virtues. As depicted in the comic, or the final blog post for week 12, "Islam Isn't Scary," I am personally interested in cohesion and service, so this idea of having caring and compassion as a basic guiding principle in the religion really speaks to me. The universality shows that Islam is not by any means scary, rather, that the individuals who practice Islam or any other background are as much cut from the same cloth of humanity.

I am thankful that I took this course to get a better understanding of Islam and its culture. This will prove to be a great foundation when I spend my summer in the United Arab Emirates and for my future endeavors as a global citizen. It also will be a good basis for understanding more about Islam in the context of my own home country. As depicted by *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and a recent movie I saw by Bollywood star Sharukh Khan, *My Name is Khan*, being Muslim in America, especially post September 11th, is becoming increasingly difficult. I hope that I can share what I have learned and help spread better awareness and understanding for Islam to others in my own local community. And through these blog posts I hope that you can as well.