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Enlightened Perception: An Introduction

“Hi, my name is Austin. I’m a sophomore in Mather House concentrating in neurobiology. I don’t really have any background in any religious studies, but Islam is particularly foreign to me. I guess my closest connection to the religion is my sister who has studied for years, but I haven’t done much myself.”

That was my answer to the first question in section of this semester. Among describing who I was as a Harvard student, I laid out exactly what I knew about Islam – almost nothing. I had seen the religion from afar, often influenced by what the media had shown or what my older sister told me about her studies in Egypt. I was, at best, clueless. Yet, while some may see this as a hindrance or as “more work” in getting from nothing to a fuller understanding over the course of a semester, I saw this class as an opportunity. An opportunity to sow the seeds of my unframed mind into something that grew out of the material in this class. And after the events that transpired over the course of this year (the shootings in Paris and bombings in Brussels and Ankara), I truly believe that my outlook around and understanding of the circumstances of the events are much clearer and organic than had I not taken this class. For in taking this class, I wanted to learn, if not anything else, what is the Islamic story: who are the Muslims, what do they think, and how do their beliefs translate into modernity?

Throughout my blog, I attempt to address these issues as I learned about their application to my wants and needs from this class. Thus, as the blog posts progress chronologically, my

interpretation and understanding of Islam grows just as well. Yet, even as my prototype of Islam changes from post to post, some constant themes that seem to recur are love and peeling through the exterior layers of Islam to truly appreciate its principles and workings. So as I jump through these posts in my own interpretations, I keep in mind both the love that each work radiates and the love that I put into the piece itself to offer a multifaceted interpretation that interacts with Islam on many different levels.

First, I will address the role that love plays in my blog posts and in Islam as a whole. In day to day life, I often hear differing views on Islam; some will argue that Islam is a religion of love, whereas others will argue that it's a religion of violence. I've come to find that it's impossible to classify an entire religion as an expression of a specific characteristic – there are just far too many exceptions to any rule that could be laid out about 1.6 billion different individuals that all practice Islam. Yet, I wanted to offer a rhetoric that counters the typical comments that come from the American media – that Islam is a religion of violence – to rebut a largely incorrect and overused belief. Thus, one could argue that I solely fall on the side that Islam is a religion of love because of its recurring appearance in my blog posts. Again, I want to reiterate that no religion is characterized by a single trait; people will interpret religion in their own manner and thus individuals can be loving or violent, but an entire religion cannot. I offer my ideas to in support of the idea that nearly all Muslims are loving people and that Islam is nearly always interpreted in a sense of overwhelming love, not violence.

My experiences with love in Islam began with my first exposure to the roles of Muhammad and Allah in Islam and how their influences were transcribed into holy Arabic writing known as calligraphy. Prior to learning about his role, I thought of Muhammad as an accessory to the Muslim faith and that, just as Christ in Christianity, Muhammad was a

descendent of God. However, after learning about Muhammad's position as the reflection of God's loving light and the Qur'an and its writing functioning as God's word codified by Muhammad, I began to understand a larger picture of the relationship between the three. God is interpreted to be loving of his people and Muhammad and the Qur'an are proof of his love; Muhammad was sent to deliver the codified divine word to the people so they could gain entrance to Heaven. These are the ideas that I tried to convey in my week 2 blog post *Interconnection*. By tying together three of the major elements of Islam – Allah, Muhammad, and Arabic calligraphy that the Qur'an was written in – all under love, I explicitly link each of their roles to love. At this point in the course, I was largely taken aback by the focus on love: God's love inspired Muhammad to write down his word and distribute it to the people so as to gain entrance to heaven. That, ultimately, is what inspired my work for *Interconnection*.

As the course progressed, as did my understanding of Muhammad's role in Islam. Having already learned his reflecting God's light, we dove further into his historical narrative prior to the formalized inception of Islam. In addressing this period, two important events came to the forefront in the Muslim lore: the *Isra'* and the *Mi'raj*. These two events, Muhammad's journey to the Dome of the Rock and his ascent to heaven, respectively, have been used to symbolize both the role of love in everyday Muslim life and the love that Muhammad had for his people. After ascending to heaven, Muhammad debated with God in order to get the best deal for Islam's people and to confer with the previous prophets about the religion. I interpreted this bartering with God as an example of Muhammad's love for his people; he was willing to argue with the highest power for the sake of human beings. Yet Muhammad never would have been able to do this for his people were it not for the transporting ability of Buraq – a modern symbol for love as a vehicle to God – to take him to the Dome of the Rock. For that reason, I chose Buraq as the

subject of my next post, *The Transporter*. Buraq was the symbol of love that brings everyone – even the Prophet – to God, and she is depicted as a beast with beauty beyond comprehension. The way she was portrayed further intrigued me; she wasn't just a typical horse or winged beast, but rather a one that was other-worldly and special. Later on in the class, I made another connection to Buraq's significance and the different types of love in Sufism. Just as Buraq is a Godly subset of love that brings you to Him, only "real love" or *ishq-i haqiqi* can open your eyes to God. Thus, I equated Buraq to *ishq-i haqiqi*: they are essentially one in the same.

As my conquest for understanding love continued into the second half of the course, Sufi beliefs continues to open a door in Islam that I had no exposure to prior to this class. Additionally, I came to find that my questions about Islam were largely mirrored by the central questions in Sufi doctrine: who are we, what are we doing here, where are we from, and where are we going? The shared uncertainties between the Sufi undercarriage and my quest for knowledge drove me to take a deep interest in Sufi thought and their practices in writing my final blog post regarding love. As we learned in class, Sufism is based in the idea of reaching God through annihilation of the self, or *nafs*, in a conquest for *haqiqah*, or "the real". Yet, I came to find out that expressing this annihilation changes from individual to individual in Sufism. Some choose to write epic narratives, or *mathnawis*, as an expression of their obliteration of self; others choose music devoted to God; many perform ritual practices to reach a new, heightened state in God; and still more use poetry, an originally demonized practice that was developed into a prized Islamic art form, as a more subtle approach in exhibiting love for God. With such a wide range of devotional aspects to Sufism, I felt it necessary to explore at least one in my search for knowledge. Thus, I wrote a ghazal, *Cedar*, to experience firsthand what it was like to craft something that was based in love. Throughout my poem, I maintain the common ghazal structure

and yearning for the lover by an ambiguous beloved. These love stories truly epitomize both the Sufi experience specifically and the Muslim experience as a whole; love for God and losing oneself in God are the keys to the faith. Whether it be through a spiritual experience for Sufis or through understanding scholarly Islam for many of the ulama, love for God is ultimately vital to gaining entrance to heaven and living life as a strong Muslim.

Now that I've addressed the role of love in my blogs and its recurrent importance in the course, I want to move onto my next major theme: looking beyond the surface for a deeper understanding. This aspect of the course was extremely valuable to me, coming from a historically conservative and anti-Muslim society that often only takes for face value the news they receive from the media and interactions with Muslim individuals in our community. Growing up, I knew that there was something deeper to Islam and its believers that many of the people around me were overlooking, but I never had an opportunity to access the information that this class has provided to guide my own opinion. For these reasons, I wanted to focus on my growth in interpreting widespread Islamic values throughout my blog posts so as to not only show how far I've come but also to open this differing opinion to the people in my own community.

As this class began, I often found myself learning about opinions I had never heard before: Islam as a religion of love, one that's inherently connected to Christianity and Judaism, and that holds a completely different dynamic in all regions of the world. The last of these realizations often jumped out at me as arguments with family members and friends from home categorized a Muslim as an Arab who practiced a specific prototype of Islam. For that reason, I decided to test a political cartoon that would not only shake off this assumption, but show that Islam meant drastically different things to two regions that were predominantly Muslim. My post

Wave of Saudi Appropriation depicts a literal wave washing over the Balkan states with an aim to whiten their cultural Islamic identity in favor of the Saudi prototype for Islam. This Saudi practice – using oil money to pay for renovations to destroyed mosques given that they hold the Saudi influence – has become a common practice in stripping the region of their own architectural and vibrant design styles that formerly dotted the region’s mosques. Thus, by juxtaposing the whitewashed Saudi appropriated countries with the countries that still lie on the edges of their appropriation shows the drastic change that Saudis exert on the projects they fund. Additionally, I wanted to shoot for a larger goal of looking beyond the common misconception that all Muslims are the same. On the contrary, the Balkan and Saudi Muslims have very different interpretations of the same religion and thus cannot be seen as one in the same, necessitating a thorough interpretation of each region in its own right. This is the very interpretive ability that I not only acquired by taking this class, but also implore others to develop in looking at Muslims and the societies that they live in.

As we explored the Muslim world further, I continued to grow in my knowledge of the differences between regions and countries that had radically different views of Islam. In particular, I found Iran’s presence and its revolution to be fascinating considering the national stage it has taken with the United States over the last year. After having often heard family members speak about how Iran deliberately destroyed relations with the US “for no reason” and that they ruined their own chances at “civilization”, I wanted to form my own opinion on the matter. In learning about the Iranian Revolution in 1979, I came to believe that it was not Iran deliberately overthrowing the Shah simply because they didn’t like him. Rather, the Shah taking money and support from the United States, advertising and building up the western portions of Iran to appeal to a minority of individuals, and doing so at the expense of his own religiously

conservative people rightfully pushed them over the edge. Now I finally understood why the people both wanted a new leader and wanted to move away from relations with the United States: their leader had marginalized their value in the country and did so with widespread support of the United States government. With these things in mind, I created another political cartoon, *Khomeini's Insight*. In making the piece, I represented the country's foundation on the religious conservatives, the Shah's obsession with the west, and Ruhollah Khomeini as a believer in Islam as the true path for the marginalized Iranians. And yet again, this piece marked my deeper observations about the Muslim world. I understood why the people of Iran wanted to overthrow an oppressive leader who was funded by and represented the United States in Iran by looking beyond the surface and more deeply into the matter.

As the course drew to an end and we had circled nearly the entire Islamic world, one question still stood out to me: what about the American Muslims? We had talked about people in largely Muslim countries, addressed those governments and mosques, but had yet to address what life was like in modern America. Finally, we began to speak about the composition of Muslim and American life, reiterating the idea that the two are not mutually exclusive and that many Muslims find no interference between the two spheres of influence. Yet, despite the American Muslims reaffirming this belief, many non-Muslims still believe that the two are incompatible – seemingly one cannot be a pious Muslim and a proud American at the same time. As I pondered why anyone could truly believe this, I stumbled upon a friend who exemplified what it meant to be both American and Muslim. Luckily, I entered her room as she was taking a study break to read the Qur'an and she gladly allowed me to take a photograph of her while she was doing it. My photograph *American "versus" Muslim* completes the full circle of looking beyond the surface into both the Muslim faith and the people who follow it. My friend

symbolizes both typical American and Islamic identities and feels no tension between representing them both at the same time. This is the idea that I found most important from this class and the concept that I want to project with not only this photo, but my entire blog. There is no one Muslim, one Islam, or one identity; rather, every person, culture, building, or region is a conglomeration of different bits and pieces that make them up, whether they're Muslim or not. And the only way to find out what's truly going on is to peel back the layers to see the bigger picture.

Now that the semester has come to a close, I like to take time to reflect on what I've learned and how far I've come from the first day in section. I've learned to never take things at face value, especially when it comes to describing nearly a quarter of the world's population. In doing so, I've come to see Islam in a different light than the agenda that had been pushed on me in the past. I see it as a religion of love, diversity, and differences. There is no typical Muslim and there is no singular Islam. Instead, just as the United States was said to be a melting pot of cultures, Islam is as well. Muslims live in their own right in nearly every country worldwide and each one has a different application of their faith to who they are and where they are. Now, if I'm ever addressed with that same question from the first section again, I'll be able to speak my mind and my own opinion.