

MEDITATIONS OF A MULTICULTURAL MUSLIM

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One aspect of my multiple identity is being a Muslim. It is an identity I share with over one billion other people. As signaled in the title, this is the perspective I will be sharing I will be sharing with you, on this panel, throughout the conference, and - or such is my hope - beyond. This is fitting because, as Sanaullah Kirmani observed in 1994 in his address presented at Temple Israel in Silver Spring, Maryland, in an interfaith Yom HaShoah Commemoration Service [subsequently published in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* as "The Holocaust: Reflections of a Muslim"], Muslim and Jewish peoples are "joined together by a braid, some strands of which are dark, some of which are glistening gold." He continues: "In unlit moments-- such as the post-War world - and walled in by the present, we forget the golden strands and also what might yet be possible."

I came across Kirmani's reflections in the context of my own meditations in preparation for this conference. But it was not easy. In spite of the resources of the combined research libraries of the world, of the benefit of what I believe to have been an outstanding education - - and I don't just mean schooling -- and of the formidable access afforded by the web, his is the only statement I have found that clearly articulated a Muslim position of empathy. It is also, to my knowledge, the only pro-active Muslim denunciation of the Shoah.

I ask your indulgence as I use my own biography as a way of formulating my reflection. It is meant to provide opportunities for meditating on various aspects of the Shoah from the perspective of a multicultural Muslim. It is not meant to draw attention to me. If it does so, I apologize in advance.

I was born in England to Mauritian parents of Indian origin, Muslims both, one Shi'i, one Sunni. My father, having abandoned medical school in India, took employment with a kind family in what was then Bangladesh. After several years, this kindly family paid his passage and told him to make a life for himself in England. In London, he took work in the clothing district, befriending all and sundry, in particular immigrant Jews who, like him, were seeking ways of making ends meet. It was the late 1950s. My mother, who had been sent to boarding school at Tunbridge Wells, had been told to call upon my father, one of only a handful of Mauritians then in the UK, if she was having difficulties. She did, they courted and in 1962 were married. I was born a year later. In 1961, my father had joined a company that had developed a revolutionary new textile product, fusible interlining. In 1965 he was transferred to Paris and we followed.

I do not know when I first became aware that I was a Muslim -- probably around the age of 4 when Abdullah Diop, a Senegalese graduate of the world's oldest university, in Cairo, was hired by my parents to come daily to our apartment and teach me the Arabic script, and tell me the stories of the prophets. That would have been the first time I would have heard stories about Jewish people, but I do not remember the identification. I say I do not remember, not because my memory has failed me, but because it was not singled out in any significant way. When I was 5, I started attending the English School of Paris. My father had explained that the Principal, Mrs Cosyn, a Scotswoman, had insisted to Nazi authorities in 1940 that the

school be allowed to continue to serve the children of expatriates and that they were not welcome to occupy the premises -- and they did not. That is when I first learned about the Nazis.

I learned in primary school about Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. I remember learning about the Exodus and the parting of the Red Sea and how it echoed what I was being taught by Abdullah Diop. I remember learning that Jesus was the son of God - my *Children's Encyclopedia* at home said the same thing. And I remember that my parents told me that different people believed different things. That we were Muslims and consequently believed that God could not have a son, but that He loved Jesus dearly. I was told that we did not believe that he had been killed or that he had died on the cross, but that Christians did, and that was OK. I remember getting a little chocolate Jesus in a candy manger every year from the school, and my parents never objected.

At school, I was the only person who wouldn't eat meat in my age group. I would be given plain yogurt with two lumps of sugar and fruit when everyone else had meat. No one made fun of me, but I did ask my mother why I couldn't eat the meat my classmates were eating. We could, we just don't, she told me. We follow certain rules, others follow different rules. We aren't better than your friends, they aren't better than us. This sank in right away. My wife and I teach our children that different people do different things, behave in different ways, eat different foods, speak different languages, have different complexions, but that these differences amount to nothing more complicated, and nothing less spectacular, than the difference between flowers, each a different color, size, scent and so on.

We use to buy our meat in the Algerian quarter of Paris. One day, the Muslim butcher said something to my father that created doubts in his mind about the meat. From that day on, we only ever bought our meat from the kosher butchers down the road. We ate out at Boule de Neige, an Algerian Jewish restaurant.

I began to understand that being Jewish was a lot like being Muslim. That a belief in one indivisible God, attention to ritual and diet, and what I would later understand was a shared and intertwining history that created affinities and empathies which it was hard to find in mainstream French and European culture, tied us together.

My father was transferred to Osaka and then to Hong Kong in 1972. We performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, the *hajj*, before traveling to Japan. I have been again since, but I remember that first trip like it was yesterday. I remember also that our fellow pilgrims from Mauritius, Réunion, South Africa and elsewhere, would talk about the "Yahud," as if they were something to malign, distrust, and demonize. I remember images of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War on television and I began to understand that Muslims insisted on making a link between the Palestinian cause and Islam, and between Zionism, the State of Israel and Jews worldwide and from all time periods. This is an elision of identities and histories, a monolithizing I have spent my life rejecting.

I do not know when I first learned that my father's company had been founded by a brilliant Jewish scientist, Harry Rose, but I don't remember the fact that he was Jewish ever being singled out. Neither the fact that my father's immediate superior, Derek Kartun, a wonderful

novelist incidentally, was Jewish too. It was they who urged my father to move to Japan, Hong Kong, and finally Singapore.

We moved to Singapore in late 1973 where I attended an international school. Singapore is about 17% Muslim. But as a school for expatriates, I was the only Muslim in my class, and one of only handful at the school. It was a school that celebrated the multiple identities of the students, which welcomed diversity of faiths, convictions, and practices and which was serene in its own largely Christian origins. I say this because this serenity, on the part of anyone, allows for empathy. Extreme attachment to one's origins - imagined, constructed, or real - creates barriers of dogma and constriction; excessive laxity about these undermines and perhaps even devalues difference. There is a serene middle ground, a golden mean. I read the Lord's Prayer at assembly, even though I didn't have to; I sang Christmas carols, and still do.

In 1977 I needed glasses. All our Muslim friends told us that the best optician in Singapore was Isaac Benjamin, so it was that began a friendship with someone whose family members had been killed by the Nazis. We learned this in 1978 when the series "Holocaust" showed on Singapore television, creating a sensation on an island that still remembered its own Japanese occupation, and that had a Jewish population. I remember my father asking Mr. Benjamin if he was watching the series. He said he was, but that he wondered whether it wasn't best to remember without representing; never to forget, but also never to project. As *Schindler's List* and *Life is Beautiful* have recently shown it still is a question of incalculable importance. I watched and I saw horrors I could not have imagined. I cried, and began to see things in a new light. Or, I should say, a new darkness.

My relatives in Mauritius trivialized anything Jewish, demonized anyone Jewish. I had come to expect this in and from the Arab world, where the question of Palestine had been inextricably linked with Jewish identity. But what were Muslims of Indian origin, like myself, living on an island where there were no Jews, doing? Simply, they were collapsing their theology with political ideology.

In 1981 I left Singapore for the University of Pennsylvania, where I studied Arabic and where I met many Jewish people. But whereas I had known many Jewish people before, and knew Jewish culture, ritual and custom, I, on the other hand, was the first Muslim most had ever met. They assumed I was Arab - complicated by the fact that I decided to major in Arabic, a language I knew only how to read without comprehension. They assumed that my theological and political positions were one and the same, that that position must be the position they imagined all Muslims -- remember, a billion people - held worldwide. Even though had never met a Muslim.

I spent 1988/1989 in Cairo studying Egyptian poets and their urban poetry and took the opportunity to visit Jerusalem, in March of 89. I visited the tombs of Abraham, Joseph and others in Hebron. I visited Bethlehem, and also many of the sites in East Jerusalem. One of the curious things I noticed was all the Mercedes Benzes. One taxi driver told me these were part of a reparations package from the German government.

As fate would have it, I spent much of the 90's in Mauritius. I had been born to Mauritian parents, I had just married a Mauritian, and have two Mauritian children. I was finally spending

part of my adult life there. This was an eye-opener. I was now living in a communalized milieu, where every racial or ethnic or political or religious group had a gripe against the other; where a history of slavery and massive immigration had complicated demographics, governance, and opportunity; and where the lingua franca was among other things a repository of history and racism. I was fluent, though not native in Mauritian Creole, but it was only there that I learned that in Kreol *Zulu* means a black man, or that *zujif*, Jew, means thief. I knew that there had been no Jewish immigration to Mauritius. Why and how had such a terrible term come into being? I realized quickly enough that it had come from French, the language from which Kreol has borrowed much vocabulary, and was not surprised. I was surprised, however, to learn from my father that there had been Jews in Mauritius. [Professor Toorawa shows a copy of *The Mauritian Shekel*].

I watched a lot of videos in Mauritius. It was a way to keep in touch with anglophone culture. One day, I watched *Fiddler on the Roof* with my wife. I had seen it many times, but it was my wife's first time. She was enchanted and recommended it to her sisters, then 27 and 28 years old, both educated and well-off. They both refused to watch it, inquiring why they would need to watch a film about Jews. We insisted that they watch, and you will not be surprised to learn that they loved it, and that they then would say things like, "I didn't know Jewish people did things this way..." They began to develop an interest in Jewish history in its different dimensions.

It was in Mauritius that I saw *Schindler's List*, dubbed in French. I'm not much of a Spielberg fan because his filmmaking manipulates audiences and replicated stereotypes in an overly influential medium, namely, popular cinema. He demonized Arabs in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*; he did the same to Indians in *Temple of Doom*. But I had liked *The Color Purple*, and I knew he was capable of helping shape opinions and promote discussion. I did not like *Schindler's List*. I thought, as does Judith Doneson, that the Jew is feminized in it. I thought that the little girl and her red outfit, was oversymbolic. I thought the camera was voyeuristic. I thought the Nazi colonel was demonized and shown as sadistic, instead of being shown as someone "average," someone for whom unspeakable horror had become commonplace, explicable, excusable, enabling, necessary. And I thought that the fact that it was based on a true story -- which breaks opens the question of representation and verisimilitude -- took away from it more than it contributed. But I was delighted that it was a huge success in Mauritius and that it brought to the movie theaters people whose view of Jews, the Holocaust and its wrenching aftermath it forever changed. I was very disturbed to learn that *Schindler's List* was banned in most Arab countries. Once again, the issue of Palestine has been elided with the Shoah in the most insidious of ways.

Elision has also been a strategy of the *Nation of Islam*. This is a group whose faith I have no right to question. But, both as a Muslim and as a student of things Arabic and Islamic, I can and do question a theology steeped in racialized, and therefore racist, claims: that Wallace Fard Muhammad was an incarnation of God; that white people are devils and the result of an experiment gone awry; that Jews bear special responsibility for the North Atlantic slave trade. And I can and do question the statement made by one of the Nation of Islam leaders that there was "a Holocaust but African Americans pay a hell of a cost." As Yosefa Loshitzky pertinently observes, these "witticisms" give voice to African-Americans' frustration with attempts to frame their victimhood through the experience of other groups. For African-Americans, such efforts are ways of silencing their own victimhood and making it invisible.

This needs to be addressed by all concerned. It is hard to imagine that Spielberg's movie *Amistad* was not partly a response to this, a need to speak about the more than 12 million who were enslaved.

If the Nation of Islam's links to Islam have been questioned by many Muslims, those of the now-banned radio station and still operating website, Radio Islam, are non-existent. Radio Islam is an organization that self-endows legitimacy from its appeal to objectivity in the word "radio" and from its appeal to divine sanction in the word "Islam". I needn't tell you that it is nothing but diatribe of the most offensive, criminal - he has been convicted in France and Sweden and has served a prison term - and un-Islamic material I have seen. What makes it worse, far, far worse, is that if the Muslim world is aware of it - and I cannot believe, in the age of cyberspace that it isn't - that it has not condemned it in the strongest possible terms. The same goes for the South African Radio 786, which aired the views of one Yacoub Zaki of the Muslim Institute in London, who said that he accepted that 1 million Jews had died during World War Two but disputed the fact that they were killed in gas chambers. They died, he maintained "like other people in the camps, from infectious diseases, particularly typhus."

All these individuals and organizations use the word Islam, hide behind it, and thereby taint it. This is exacerbated by the fact that a number of prominent Holocaust deniers and revisionists have sought and obtained refuge in Muslim countries. Jürgén Graf, the Swiss revisionist, fled Baden in November 2000 to escape a 15-month prison sentence for Holocaust denial. In the words of his colleagues, "Jürgen Graf is staying in Tehran at the invitation of a group of Iranian scholars and university professors who are sympathetic to Holocaust revisionism." And Roger Garaudy, prosecuted in France for his Holocaust denial, was received royally in Egypt. Fortunately, Reda Hilal, deputy editor of *Al-Ahram* was one of the first Egyptian journalists and intellectuals to write against Arabs associating themselves with racist historians "who are looking for Arab money as well as sympathy for their anti-Semitic and Holocaust-denial discourse." Hilal even says, "We should not sympathize with those who should be blamed for it."

One strategy of revisionists is not to deny the Holocaust outright, but to insist on revising the extermination figure down from six million, a figure they criticize is a mantra. Hilal says, "Even if only five people were killed, it is still a crime against humanity." The significance of this issue cannot be underestimated, and must, however grudgingly, be understood as the prism through which many Arabs - and I say Arabs, not Muslims, a distinction it is crucial to remember to maintain - view the Holocaust. It is crucial for Muslims to dissociate themselves from revisionists and deniers, and to denounce them in the strongest possible terms.

Because of time constraints, there are so many things I have not mentioned, such as reading Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939* in a class on Middle Eastern Literatures in my second year of college. In all my life I had never lived in a place that was so profoundly, and openly, anti-Semitic as Durham, North Carolina.

Allow me to close these meditations with the following from Sanaullah Kirmani, whom I invoked at the beginning:

As a Muslim I take the event of the Holocaust as the moral negation of the Ruler of all. These evil perpetrators deny the rule of the Almighty. The fool in Psalm 16 affirmed in his heart

that there was no God, but the fool never claimed that he believed in other than God. The Nazis went an enormous step beyond. They asserted they were God. They played God. In Islam, coming into being and passing away, life and death, condemnation and salvation, establishment and destruction of nations are only for God to command, and not for human beings to decide. No person has the right to limit another person's humanity.

DISCUSSION

Panelists

Professor Rouhana: I appreciate the passion in Shawkat's presentation but I think we also have to understand the limits in impressionist presentations. I think it is also good to get involved in self-criticisms, it is essential to bring things to the floor, rather than sweep them under the rug, as our previous speaker told us. However, I think it is also important not to rely on impressions. I think these impressions might contribute to further stereotyping of the Muslim world and the Arab world. As you might know, intellectuals in the Arab world are dealing with the issue. There are various views about it, and I think it is worth serious investigation.

There was a conference planned in Beirut for those Holocaust deniers that were prevented from holding their conference somewhere else. Under the pressure of Arab intellectuals, Beirut stepped in and banned the conference two weeks ago. I think this is very important. Just saying *Schindler's List* was banned in every single Arab country, stereotypes the Arab world as people who cannot or do not sympathize with the Jewish experience. I think that is wrong. I think it's important why *Schindler's List* was banned in the Arab world. It is also important to investigate why there were attempts to cut the very last minute or two from *Schindler's List*. As you remember, the last two minutes brought out the Zionist, not the Jewish, experience in order to present it to the Arab world. The last minute or two in *Schindler's List* connects the Holocaust with the Zionist enterprise. Now whether it is an issue for the Arabs or not is a legitimate question. I want to talk about that in my presentation. Without problematizing the issue, just presenting it as such.

Audience

Samuel Bernstein: I am a Professor of English here at Northeastern. I have two questions. Perhaps, Professor Rouhana has already addressed them. First, for the speaker: I am curious if, in the face of so many examples of anti-Semitism throughout the world, he is hopeful and sanguine about the possibility of Jews' self-actualizing in the modern world both as a people and in relation to the state of Israel. The second question relates to the distinction made by Professor Rouhana in his question. Does it serve a moral purpose to make a distinction between those who see the return to Israel for the Jewish people as an important dimension for Jewish culture and Jews as a whole? Is there really so wide a difference between those two attitudes - those two notions as he implies?

Professor Toorawa Responds

I thank Professor Rouhana for recognizing my passion, and I suspect that academic inquiry without passion risks becoming only academic inquiry. It becomes an abstraction. I take every point, and I am looking forward to his own presentation and elaboration.

Stereotyping through impressions? I can only speak for myself, and I cannot pretend to speak for a billion other people, and do not. But I can, with full confidence and with no excuse, comment on what they do. Evidently, I have not met all one billion Muslims. I tried to use an autobiographical account as a way of organizing my meditations. I tried to give you a sense that I've met Muslims in a lot of places saying different things. If I have thereby stereotyped, I apologize. I did not mean to do so. If however, I conveyed to you that there are monolithic positions -- that are both self-actualized and also imposed by others -- then I have succeeded. Both positions are problematic and have to be studied.

It may be that the Beirut 2001 conference was banned as a result of the Arab intellectuals. It is also true that there has been a tremendous amount of activism on the part of Jewish organizations to ban that conference. I do not want to say it was one or the other.

It is true that *Schindler's List* was shown in film clubs in Egypt and elsewhere. But I don't think that by pointing out that *Schindler's List* was banned in most Arab countries, and many Muslim countries, I am stereotyping the Muslim world. I am simply pointing out something that needs to be pointed out, and something that needs to be understood. *Jesus Christ Superstar* was banned in Singapore. There are reasons for that. There are concerns in Singapore about offending its Christian population, concerns hinging on a line in one of the songs that Jesus is "just a man." I don't think I am stereotyping Singapore. I think if you say Singapore bans chewing gum, you are not stereotyping Singapore unless you decide that any fact or datum you have about that place is enough for you to decide about that place. Then the problem is you and not the information. Everything is multiple and must be understood multiply.

I don't know if I satisfied you or at least repositioned what I have done. As far as it being impressionistic -- absolutely it is. It was entitled "meditations." I referred to it as "reflections." It is largely impressionistic, but I fear that it is one of the few ways discussions by Muslims can take place now, until it becomes far more a part of the fabric to engage these questions.

This brings me to the last question. Have I ever engaged with an anti-Semite? The answer is yes. (If by "anti-Semite," you mean anti-Jewish, because there is some discussion as to whether the term anti-Semite can be also applied to someone who has a problem with Arabs. Certainly, it's what the term would imply; it's not what it has come to mean.) Absolutely, I have. They surround me. I've had long protracted discussions with people who feel everything is wrong in the world because the Jews control it. I've had discussions with people who read the Quran, and for whom it is clearly all about how the Jews failed to worship God accurately, correctly, and in a good way. They believe that is why Islam came about. They believe this is a defensible reading of the Quran. So, yes, I have.

Professor Bernstein, am I hopeful and sanguine about Jews self-actualizing in the modern world? Absolutely, I am hopeful and sanguine about *anyone* self-actualizing in the modern world. But if you mean, and I think you mean, because of the pressures on the worldwide Jewish community -- then, yes, I am hopeful. As is everyone in this room.

Does it serve a moral purpose to make a distinction between those who attach an importance to return to Israel and to Jews worldwide? Does it serve a moral purpose to make that distinction? I think there is no doubt the issues are now inextricably linked, and have been since Israel has been an entity about which one could meaningfully speak. Does it serve a moral purpose? I don't know, but I think it does serve a moral purpose, when one is teaching Muslims to think about the issues, to make the distinction between the state of Israel and the fact of a Jewish population; of a history of Judaism in the world; of Jewish practice, ritual, and custom. There has been a fractured history.

There have been long and distinguished associations between Jews and Muslims throughout Islamic history, in literature, art, culture, science, and pretty much in every domain. I think that has evaporated. I think there is a perception among many Muslims that Jews are the enemy or demons of some kind. This is completely false. It comes, I think, from political ideologies, possibly racist ideologies. It is certainly not an Islamic position, and those who claim that position as an Islamic position need to be called to task.