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Islam in today’s world
A conversation with Akbar Ahmed

GUSTAAF HOUTMAN

How do the many Islam find their place in the world today? In the context of the ‘war on terror’, how do Muslims define themselves and their faith? What can anthropologists do to further better understanding of Islam and promote dialogue between Muslims and the West?

ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY asked Islamic scholar and filmmaker Akbar Ahmed to reflect on the place of Islam and the role of the anthropologist studying Islam in the 21st century.

Akbar S. Ahmed holds the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at the American University in Washington, DC. He was formerly Visiting Professor at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and Iqbal Fellow at Cambridge University. He has also been High Commissioner of Pakistan in Great Britain. His email is: akbar@american.edu. For more information, see www.akbarahmed.org.

ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY: Much of the media depicts Islam as a monolith. As an anthropologist, how does one challenge such stereotypes and how do you see diversity in Muslim society today?

Akbar Ahmed: Since 9/11 the Western media has depicted Islam not only as a monolith but even as a shorthand term for terrorist or extremist. This is of course, to any anthropologist, nonsense. The Muslim world consists of about 1.4 billion people and some 57 Muslim-majority states. There are differences in society that arise out of region, sect, ethnicity, local custom and political developments. So while there may well be an overarching and unified identity as ‘Muslim’ there are nonetheless significant differences between Muslim societies.

In my forthcoming book Journey into Islam, which is based on an anthropological excursion to the Middle East, South Asia and the Far East, I suggest three distinct categories of Muslims today: the universalist mystic who is inclined to accept those not of his or her tradition; the orthodox literalist who draws boundaries around Islam and is inclined to see it under attack; and the modernist who wishes to synthesize with the outside world and be part of it. In one significant sense the battle you see in the world of Islam is the struggle between these categories.

The only way to challenge stereotypes is to have dialogue and create understanding, to write and appear in the media as frequently as possible. This I have tried to do.

AT: What can anthropologists do to help forge new paths for dialogue and reconciliation between the West and the Muslim World?

AA: Anthropologists can do a great deal to bring better understanding between the West and the Muslim world. They need to play their part in the world today which is riven with religious, sectarian and ethnic conflict. But they can only do so if they rid themselves of the belief that somehow their discipline is so ‘pure’ that it needs to be restricted to the four walls of a classroom. They need to overcome their aversion to what is called ‘applied’ science.

After 9/11, I imagined that the time of anthropology had arrived. Much of what I saw around me, between the West and Muslim societies, rested on ideas of group loyalty, revenge, suicide and tribal codes of honour. People were, of course, not aware that these were the interests that anthropologists had been looking at since the origins of their discipline. Because people wanted quick and simple answers and because anthropologists were slow in providing them what we saw was the emergence of a new breed of instant media expert. Overnight we saw people who were clueless about society, culture and religion giving lectures on precisely these subjects in Islam. Those who called themselves ‘security experts’ and ‘terrorism analysts’ were everywhere. Much of what they had to say was little more than a concoction of prejudice, ignorance and sometimes plain stupidity. The result was that a great opportunity for an effective contribution of anthropology to world affairs was missed. Much of the growing antagonism between the West and the Muslim world could have been minimized or even avoided if anthropologists had been heard in the early days.

Anthropologists could have pointed to the sensitivity Muslims feel around the mosque, the honour of women and the respect for the Prophet. If the West needs to win the hearts and minds of the Muslim world it needs to be sensitive to these particular features. At a time of war – there are after all American and British troops now in Iraq and Afghanistan – cultural misunderstandings make things worse for soldiers. The response of local people then becomes much more personal and intense. It then encourages widespread brutality. Societies begin to descend into anarchy. This is what is happening.

AT: You have made many documentaries on Islam worldwide. Why is making documentaries important?

AA: You have discovered in making these films?

AA: Documentaries and films are important because they reach a far bigger and broader audience than books. Decades ago I was fortunate in becoming friends with and partner to Andre Singer, a truly outstanding filmmaker and anthropologist. I was able to work with him on several films on the tribes that live along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. These were award-winning documentaries. In the early 1990s I spent time and effort helping the BBC make its six-part series Living Islam, which was broadcast in 1993. It was based on my book Discovering Islam and I was asked to present it. The film helped changed the climate around Islam. Prince Charles saw it before his seminal lecture at Oxford later in the year and indeed there are echoes of the film in his speech.

I spent much of the 1990s completing a project called the Jinnah Quartet – films and books. The project was based on the life of Muhammad Ali Jinnah the extraordi

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looking at the character on the screen. Sometimes they have an intense sense of ownership. People challenge or reject a different interpretation. This rejection can sometimes take the form of protest. In the case of someone like Jinnah there can be strong emotions. While making the film in Pakistan I was threatened, taken to court and faced huge demonstrations in the streets. Some people did not like the depiction of Jinnah as a tolerant, accepting and modernist leader. They wished to see him as a straightforward orthodox, literalist figure. Others objected to showing his daughter in the film. The British were not happy because they felt we were revising history and exposing the role of Mountbatten in his unfair bias towards Nehru and the Congress and against Jinnah.

I am hoping that the present series I have narrated and presented for Channel 5, The Glories of Islamic Art, will make a contribution to the debate on Islam. Because Islam is such a hot topic this will bring a new perspective. It is an outstanding British production and is based on interviews with top professionals. We see the sophistication and splendour of the architecture of Islam of a thousand years ago. We also see the complexity of that civilization. For example, the great Hassan mosque in Cairo was not only a place of worship; it was also a hospital, a hostel and a university. It was open to everyone, not just to Muslims. The series also has a message for Muslims. I hope that they discover the importance of learning and knowledge in their own tradition. That will help them move away from those who encourage them towards violence.

**AT:** Do you make a distinction between Islamic scholars and scholars of Islam? Which do you admire and why?

**AA:** No I don’t. Some of my favourite scholars of Islam are not Muslim. In particular I admire some outstanding anthropologists. Some of them, alas, are no longer with us. Clifford Geertz who worked in Morocco and Bali, Ernest Gellner who worked in Morocco, Louis Dupree who worked in Afghanistan, are great names. You can pick up Geertz’s *Islam observed or Gellner’s Muslim society or Dupree’s Afghanistan* – written decades ago – and find the discussion as fresh as if composed yesterday. Their depth and understanding is far superior to much superficial stuff we have by the so-called experts today.

The present generation of anthropologists has also produced some excellent scholars of Islam, like Professor Lawrence Rosen who is the head of department at Princeton University. Other outstanding scholars of Islam include Tamara Said at William and Mary College, and John Esposito and John Voll at Georgetown.

For an example of a Muslim anthropologist in the young generation let me proudly mention my daughter, who obtained her PhD in anthropology from Cambridge University and has a book called *Sorrow and Joy among Muslim women,* published by Cambridge University Press. She has just been appointed the first director of the recently established Jewish-Muslim Centre at Cambridge.

Unfortunately even these top-notch scholars are not making the kind of impact in the mainstream media that they need to. We need to hear their voices and see their work on our screens. Instead of their balanced opinions we often get the view of some ‘expert’ who has little idea of what he or she is talking about.

**AT:** What are your views on depiction of the Prophet of Islam and the cartoon controversy?

**AA:** This is not a simple question. It is complicated by history, culture and religion. It is as old as the confrontation between the Western world and Islam. It is the classic situation of the irresistible force meeting the immovable object. Offensive depictions of the Prophet go back to the earliest European history. Dante shows the Prophet being burned in the lower depths of hell in the *Divine Comedy.* This tradition has survived into modern times. What has changed, however, is the advent of what we call globalization. Modern media information means that an image in Bradford of protestors burning a book can be flashed across the map of Islam. Such images can inflame Muslims in Nigeria and Indonesia. This is exactly what happened when the Salman Rushdie crisis erupted around his book *The Satanic Verses* almost two decades ago. I had just arrived at Cambridge to take up the Iqbal Fellowship and was drawn into the debate. I recall thinking to myself that this is a complicated situation and so difficult to explain to both sides. The West correctly treasures the freedom of the press, of writing, of thought etc. These have been won with great sacrifices. They must be preserved at all costs.

On the other hand traditional societies – like Muslim ones – hold their religious figures in high regard. For Muslims the Prophet of Islam is considered the ‘insani-kamil’ or perfect person. For every range of Muslim – whether Sufi or modernist or orthodox – the Prophet is the ultimate source of inspiration. He is described in the Qur’an as a ‘blessing for humanity’ and Muslims see him through the eyes of love.

For someone so highly loved and revered to be seen to be reviled and humiliated is offensive. However, Muslims have to – and I have been saying this now for almost two decades – express their emotion through debate, discussion and writing. Death threats, burning embassies and becoming violent are neither in the Islamic spirit nor do they have any effect but could make matters worse.

Because we are living in the age of globalization, with different societies overlapping, juxtaposed and interacting with each other through the media and travel, we need to be much more sensitive to each other’s cultures, beliefs and customs than we were even a generation ago. We cannot plead ignorance of each other any more. This is not only a conclusion I have come to on the basis of the common courtesy that is required to deal with different peoples of different backgrounds, but the reality of the fact that we are living in a world which is truly reflective of diversity and therefore needs to be more accepting.

**AT:** Many write about Islam as repressive of women: how do you view this characterization?

**AA:** There is a negative misaia around Islam regarding women. Yet Islam is perhaps the first religion to give women rights to inherit property, divorce, lead armies, write poetry and participate fully in life. The injunction to be modest at home is seen by all Muslims to be a protection for both men and women and helps create an environment of balance and decorum in society. It is not meant to be repressive. Unfortunately many Muslims have not treated women with the respect and honour that Islam tells them to. In many parts of the Muslim world women are deprived of their property and treated with brutality. ‘Honour killings’ – which are not Islamic but tribal – are associated with Islam.

The good news is that women are active in fighting for their rights. There have even been women presidents and prime ministers. I am optimistic in the long run.

**AT:** In Europe, the issue of freedom of religion. What is your view on the British and French ways of dealing with this issue, and where would you draw lines, if any?

**AA:** I believe that individuals should be allowed freedom of choice to dress in the way they want to as long it is not impinging on anyone else’s freedom. If a woman wants to wear a veil she should be allowed to do so. I find it both hypocritical and ludicrous that a young teenager is penalized for wearing the veil and demonized in the media, whereas politicians who may be responsible for the deaths of thousands of people are able to live in apparent comfort and security. We need to be much more tolerant of each other than we are. We must understand the nature
of the world we live in. It is much more multicultural than ever before in history. I am constantly amazed at how rapidly British society has absorbed foreign influences. The curry, when I was an undergraduate in the 1960s, was an exotic Indian dish. Today it is the number one choice of the British who eat it as part of their own diet. We need to show a similar tolerance towards custom and culture. By banning the veil we are not only signifying our own closing of the mind but putting further pressure on a young girl who may be wearing it in order to create a sense of identity and dignity for herself in a difficult social environment.

AT: 9/11 and 7/7 have transformed the world we live in, and the blame is often placed on radical Islam. Do you believe this is correct?

AA: 9/11 and 7/7 have transformed the world and those Muslims who want violence are partly to blame. The rest of the blame falls squarely on the shoulders of those who are not Muslim and who could have responded with a different strategy. Instead of alienating the vast body of the Muslim world they could have reached out through dialogue and understanding and thereby marginalized the extremists. By failing to do so they only swelled the ranks of those Muslims who believe that they are standing up to defend their faith, which they see as being under attack.

AT: What are your views on the ‘war on terror’? Does al-Qaeda ‘exist’ in the way official government sources would have us believe, and to what extent has the West created its own enemies?

AA: The ‘war on terror’ has become a war on human civilization. It has no boundaries and therefore involves the entire planet – we have seen explosions and killings across the globe whether in Madrid, London, Karachi, Delhi or Bali. The objectives of the war on terror are vague and its timetable is unknown. People talk of a war that is going to last ‘decades’. On 12 September 2001 99% of the Muslim world sympathized with the Americans for what happened the day before. Many said public prayers in public places. But several years on – and after the killings and scandals in Iraq and Afghanistan – we now have the reverse situation. There is little sympathy for the United States. The enemies of the United States – al-Qaeda or any other group – have now, it appears, an unending line of volunteers waiting to blow themselves up in the cause. Al-Qaeda itself seems as shadowy as it did a few years ago. Many in the Muslim world doubt whether it exists – or ever existed. It seems to have become a convenient whipping boy not only for the United States but for many local Muslim tyrants. They can label someone al-Qaeda and arrest him without anyone batting an eyelid. Tyranny and injustice are being implemented in many parts of the Muslim world in the name of the war on terror.

AT: How compatible is Islam with academic life in a secular Western society? In what ways do you practise Islam yourself, and how do you personally reconcile it with doing anthropology?

AA: Islam is compatible with academic life in Western society. Working in different societies is rooted in Muslim history. In our discipline one of the earliest anthropologists was Al Beruni, who lived a thousand years ago. He lived in the court of Mahmud of Ghaznavi in Afghanistan and worked on Hindu India. His methodology was rigorous. He arrived in a different culture, learnt the language and ended up studying – perhaps the first Muslim to do so – the Hindu classical texts. His view was that the anthropologist needs not to give his or her opinion but to ‘simply relate without criticizing’. He also presents us with a wide range of cross-cultural comparisons referring to Jews, Christians and the ancient Greeks for whom he had much admiration.

The problem is not so much whether Muslim scholars can work in Western society but whether they can survive in their own. The story of modern scholars in Islam is a sad one. Scholars have been persecuted, hounded and killed in Muslim societies across the world. Rulers do not take kindly to criticism. Even the few Nobel Prize-winners in the Muslim world faced physical attacks or verbal abuse. In all cases they needed police protection from violent critics.

The paradox is that Islam holds knowledge in high esteem. The word for knowledge – ilm – is used more often than any other word except the name of God in the Qur’an. The Prophet urged his followers to go to China to acquire knowledge. China in the seventh century would have been a different and distant world. The Prophet’s saying that the ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr clearly places the importance of scholarship in Islam in its correct perspective. Muslim rulers need to accept this fact and restore scholars and scholarship to their rightful place.

AT: What important Islamic ideas have been least understood in the West?

AA: Many important Islamic ideas have not been understood in the West. Perhaps the most important Islamic idea of genuine acceptance has been lost in the tidal wave of Islamophobia that has now engulfed many commentators in the West. It is easy to forget that there is a verse in the Qur’an, sura 2, verse 256, which says ‘There is no compulsion in religion’. The Qur’an also underlines the diversity of human society. It talks of different tribes and states all created by God. God is underlining the need for us to know one another and respect each other on the basis of our differences.

AT: What is your view of the anti-terrorism research projects proposed recently in the UK? How do you view anthropologists who accept funding from the military or security services for the study of terrorism, whether overt or covert?

AA: The question assumes that somehow anthropology is pure and pristine. It is easy to forget that some of the great names like Evans-Pritchard were part of a colonial administrative structure. Yet they produced excellent ethnography.

As long as we understand that these colonial officers were working in a certain cultural and political context we can learn much from their narrative of local tribes and peoples. When I became Political Agent of South Waziristan Agency (where Osama bin Laden is supposed to be hiding) I discovered a moth-eaten copy of Mizh written by Evelyn Howell when he was Political Agent half a century before me. I had met him just a few years before his death at Selwyn College in Cambridge. I had no idea then that I would one day be filling his shoes in one of the most difficult and turbulent postings in the subcontinent. I found Mizh both objective and useful. There were great insights into tribal society. It was also sympathetic to the tribal peoples. I asked Oxford University Press to republish it and to my delight they did so. In my foreword I acknowledged the contribution that even colonial officers could make.

What we are seeing is a rush to support all security- and terror-related scholarly activity at the cost of disciplines like anthropology. An already marginalized subject like anthropology then risks being further marginalized. Anthropology needs to reclaim its ground in today’s world and needs to point to its relevance. It can and must lead the way to genuine bridge-building through its understanding of other cultures and societies. In that sense it has a role to play at a critical time in world affairs. It can either shape history or become history. However, lines must be clearly drawn at shopping informants, spying on academic colleagues or damaging the people anthropologists work with. At no time must moral boundaries that we universally uphold be compromised. This is particularly true in the ‘anything goes’ atmosphere that has been encouraged by the security and terror masters, who even argue for ‘torture’. ❖