# *Muslims, Modernity, and the Prospects of Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, by Robert Hunt

Abstract

*This paper seeks to understand contemporary Islam in such a way as to suggest new approaches to Christian-Muslim dialogue. However, the general approach it offers is equally useful in the pursuit of other forms of engagement with Muslims and the Muslim community. It is the thesis of this paper that understanding Muslim (and Christian) identity in terms of narrative will provide a more illuminating and fruitful basis for engaging in interfaith dialogue, or at least a better understanding of those with whom we as Christians are in dialogue. A focus on Muslim narratives will also provide an alternative taxonomy of Islamic movements in the hope that this will provide indications of how future dialogue most usefully can be pursued.*

## Taxonomies of Islamic Movements

From the beginning of the Muslim community there occurred divisions that were recognized and enumerated by Muslims themselves. Most of the groups emerging from these divisions were referred to in older Muslim histories and theologies as heretical sectarians, and the distinction between the faithful and the heretics is the oldest taxonomy in Islam. With the related distinction among those outside of Islam between people of the book (monotheists) and polytheists, it usefully described, for the purposes of regulating Muslim behavior, the entire human world. Eventually there emerged other distinctions within the Muslim community, most notably the recognition of four "schools" of law, as well as of numerous philosophical and theological movements that, if questionable were not strictly heretical (depending upon who was making the evaluation). Muslims also recognized the movement known as Sufism with its multiple lineages originating in different leaders as a kind of parallel spirituality to one based primarily in the observance of God's moral and ritual law. And as Ibn Kaldun observed in his pioneering work, these taxonomies of the Muslim world continued to overlay more primal groups such as tribes and clans, as well as complex emerging urban and rural classes. In short Muslims were conscious, as were the Christians and Jews sharing their social and religious landscape, of a complex world of overlapping social and religious distinctions that singly or in combination would guide interaction with both other Muslims and non-Muslims.

Consciousness of these complex taxonomies by no means disappeared with the advent of colonialism and the intrusion of modernity on the Muslim world.[1] While obscure to most non-Muslims, the complex patterns of pre-colonial social divisions continue to color Muslim thought and behavior. In Malaysia, for example, Muslims of Arab descent remain identifiable by inherited titles, as do those whose ancestors were supposedly Indian demigods descended to intermarry with the people of Sumatra. (One of these, *Iskandar* (Alexander) has roots even further West) Yet distinctions between the schools of law are almost moot in the Malaysian and Indonesian contexts. On the other hand, those between Sufi tariqahs, and between Sufis and non-Sufis, can be quite significant in forming political partnerships. And of course more uniquely Malaysian distinctions (between the court-based Islamic leaderships, that of the villages, that originating in new Islamic universities, and those empowered by official positions in government) play a role as well.[2] Yet while pre-colonial distinctions remain important,

with the advent of modernity in Muslim lands Muslims themselves began to identify new taxonomies based in the Muslim community's response to European ideas, European political power, and European forms of social organization, in short to modernity in all its fullness. Through these new distinctions Muslim leaders could identify themselves to one another and their followers, and around these there grew struggles for social status and political power.

Bennabi in his *Islam in History and Society* (Bennabi 1988) makes one of the earliest modern Muslim examinations of these emerging taxonomies, identifying *reformers* and *modernists* as two specific movements flowing out of the encounter of Islam with modernity. Dismissing the long-term consequentiality of both groups he then suggests the emergence of a new consciousness flowing directly from an encounter with the source of the Qur'an that will restore the civilizing power of Islam. It is a movement he associates with Hassan al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood more generally. The distinctions he makes, like those made in Southeast Asia between the *kaum tua* (old group) and *kaum muda* (new group) leaders emerging in the early 20th century, were based on one hand in whether or how to appropriate the full Islamic tradition or only its earliest elements, and on the other how far to adapt distinctly modern ways of understanding reality. Bennabi's "reformers" wished to return to the roots of Islam and rethink it in the tradition of Islamic renewal movements down through the ages. They rejected the intellectual and spiritual assumptions of modernity. The "modernists" generally accepted the intellectual and spiritual assumptions of modernity and by re-evaluating the sources of the Islamic tradition sought to re-conceptualize Islam as a modern religion. Of course the relation of each of these movements to the others was complex, and none simply accepted out of hand Western worldviews and social structures. Indeed Muslims, like Christians, continue to struggle to understand and articulate for themselves all the underlying assumptions of modernity even as the world of post-modernity emerges. Bennabi's own view has been given new life as Muslim leaders have sponsored the re-publication of his work in new contexts.[3]

More recent attempts at taxonomies of Muslim movements include those of John Esposito (*Islam and Politics,* 1998*)* and Clinton Bennett (*Muslims and Modernity,* 2005*)*. The latter argues for a taxonomy that in his words, runs left to right from modernists to neo-traditionalists to traditionalist to radical revisionists, although he notes that almost every author he surveys would place him or herself in a different schema (Bennett 2005). Muslim authors such as Samira Haj are similarly engaged in creating and critiquing such taxonomies. (Haj 2009) Indeed one of the noteworthy characteristics of contemporary Muslim reflections on everything from politics to child-care is the effort place those reflections in some sort of genealogy, and thus identify the author.

Both Muslim and non-Muslim authors recognize is that the Muslim reaction to modernity took place at several levels, not least political and social, so that very quickly the three responses that Bennabi identified morphed into a wide variety of political and social movements, some of which adopt similar ideas of social change out of very different basic assumptions. One example of this is the understanding of the role of women in society. Modernists (in Bennabi's schema) generally argued that women should be educated and play a full and equal role in society. But they accepted that distinct gender roles (which might mitigate against such equality) were affirmed by revelation *and* the natural order as well. Like modernists some reformers argued for women's education and more active social engagement, but on the basis of cutting past cultural accretions upon original Islam to recover its supposed liberation of women from pre-Islamic misogyny. Their argument from the teaching of "original" Islam then goes

deeper into the tradition to justify, for example, unequal shares in inheritance. Both groups might offer similar *language* about implementing policies allowing women to participate more fully in the economic and social life of Muslim communities, but their reasoning would distinguish them in relation to other issues. Modernists, for example, might disagree with reformers about issues of inheritance and child custody: opting for theoretically "modern" patterns that put an equal obligation for self-support and support of family on women and men, and avoiding any idea of "ownership" of children belonging to men as such.

It is in part this confusing presentation of similar assertions about everything from women's rights to political structures to accepting the results of scientific research that has hindered Muslim-Christian dialogue. What appear to be agreements among Muslims, or Muslims and Christians, mask deeper conceptual differences. This paper, in suggesting a different form of taxonomy of Muslim identities, hopes to at least bring to light some of these underlying differences in a useful way. Older taxonomies have been based on describing contemporary Islamic movements in terms of the intersection of two sets of ideas; those found in the Islamic tradition, and those found in the modern world. The variety of those movements came from their different understanding and appropriation of the tradition on one hand and their understanding and appropriation of modernity on the other. The taxonomy offered here is based on the way Muslims articulate and embody a narrative description of their identity, without suggesting that Muslims consciously embrace the taxonomy of I offer, any more than they self identify with other taxonomies offered by either Muslim or non-Muslim scholars. As importantly, this taxonomy shows the continuity of Muslim narratives that pre-date Islam's encounter with modernity, even if their contemporary forms arise out of a modern Muslim identity crisis.[4]

In the paper *narrative* means simply a way of describing the origins of Islam as a religious movement, the "plot" which characterizes its engagement with the non-Muslim world, and the end toward which it is understood to move. The narratives that I will describe can be inhabited, or embodied, and I believe (but will not fully demonstrate in this essay) that differences in Muslim movements within a particular narrative can be understood by the difference in which the same narrative is embodied. Like all taxonomies this is not to be taken as a normative description of reality, but rather a useful way of making distinctions that will highlight opportunities for more fruitful interreligious dialogue.[5]

## Muslim Narratives

### *Transnational Islam*

One of the taxonomies presently being used to describe Muslim movements distinguishes between a *transnational* understanding of Islam and an understanding of Islam by those for whom local cultures and loyalties remained paramount.[6] (Hefner 2009) For Hefner and others the distinction between transnational and local Islam is the distinction between: 1. an understanding of Islam that is scripturalist, a-historical, a-cultural, and possessing primary loyalty to a transnational Muslim community and 2. understandings that situate themselves in a particular historical/cultural situation with appropriately local primary loyalties.[7] An alternative description of transnational Islam would focus on how Muslims understand themselves to be engaged in a distinctive history, and that the identifiable features of transnational Islam derive from the way in which they narrate their engagement with the non-Muslim world.

What Hefner and others refer to as transnational Islam I believe identifies with a narrative that is repeated in many of the accounts of Islam generated by this movement, one of the most famous being that of Sayyid Qutb in the introductory paragraphs of his book *Milestones*. Here he speaks of the first generation of Muslims and its relationship to the current generation.

> When a person embraced Islām during the time of the Prophet, peace be on him, he would straightway cut himself off from *jahiliyyah*. . . .
>
> Today too we are surrounded by *jahiliyyah*. Its nature is the same as during the first period of Islām, and it is perhaps a little more deeply entrenched. Our whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws is *jahiliyyah*, even to the extent that what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy, and Islamic thought are also constructs of *jahiliyyah*! This is why the true Islamic values never enter our hearts, why our minds are never illuminated by Islamic concepts, and why no group of people arises among us equal to the caliber of the first generation of Islām.
>
> 2. We must return to that pure source from which the first generation derived its guidance, free from any mixing or pollution. . .
>
> Our primary purpose is to know what way of life is demanded of us by the Qur'an, the total view of the universe that the Qur'an wants us to have, the nature of Allāh, taught to us by the Qur'an, the kind of morals and manners enjoined by it, and the kind of legal and constitutional system it asks us to establish in the world. We know that in this we will have difficulties and trials, and we will have to make great sacrifices. But if we are to walk in the footsteps of the first generation of Muslims, through whom Allāh established His system and gave victory over *jāhiliyya*, the Allāh must be the master of our wills (Qut b 1990, 15 -16).

This account begins with the world of pervasive *jahiliyya* or polytheistic ignorance. Into that world there comes, through Muhammad, God's revelation. That revelation initiates a movement to recognize God, to offer God fit praise, and fully implement in human lives and society God's immutable law. It is a narrative of order being created by the first Muslims in the midst of a chaotic world, and gradually spreading until the entire earth is a realization of God's law. This order recognizes no enduring significance to different languages, ethnic and tribal distinctions, or local forms of social organization. All that is normally attributed to culture is understood to be best dictated by God's law, which is comprehensive and universal.

According to Qutb this primal narrative needs to be, and is, being re-lived by the *avant garde* of the Muslim world, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood of which he was a part. His inspiration, however, has older roots, in the work of Ibn Taymiyya and later Ibn Wahab, both of whom saw their Muslim World overwhelmed by barbaric superstition and ignorance, and struggled to overcome it. He and they looked forward to the restoration of the divine order almost entirely lost in the modern age. Because a divinely dictated social order includes an understanding of appropriate relations between all religions, dialogue is less a means of mutual understanding and accommodation than a means of persuasion through which non-Muslims are invited to take their appropriate places in an emerging divinely approved social order.

If there are differing narratives within this transnational narrative they relate to the means for accomplishing the end of implementing the divine order in society. Thus we might distinguish two sub-narratives in a single narrative of establishing God's order in a chaotic world. A minority find their roots in Muhammad at Mecca, toiling for Islam in the face of ignorant intransigence and oppression. The majority narrative refers to Muhammad in Medina as a normative account of the Islamic plot, and would not, as Qutb does, so lightly dismiss the importance of the Hadith (traditions of the prophet). According to this narrative Muhammad slowly, through persuasion and reason (albeit not without violent conflict), brought new Muslims, Christians, and Jews into conformity with God's will. Either of these narratives can allow for an abrupt end to human effort in the eschatological arrival of God's judgment.

Some of the difficulties related to dialogue with Muslims that identify themselves through the transnational narrative may be exemplified by the 2008 Madrid initiative of the Muslim World League and its sponsor, the Saudi Arabian King Abdullah. In the opening statement at the Madrid conference the head of the Muslim World League asserted that the world was in a major crisis due to the failure of humans to follow God's guidance. He then suggested that what the world needs is a *Shari'a* (divine command) oriented vision arising out of dialogue. And although (he noted) Islam itself gathers all the wisdom of all revelations of God, Muslims are nonetheless *commanded* in the Qur'an to engage in dialogue and respect other monotheistic creeds. The objective of dialogue, as he stated it, would then be to coordinate internationally a response against those who insult religion, defend the rights of religions, and implement laws that counterbalance immorality, permissiveness, and family disintegration (Madrid, July 17, 2008, *personal notes*). If this seems like an approach to dialogue that diminishes the independence of the second voice in dialogue it is the author's observation that indeed, at this conference other voices were indeed wittingly or unwittingly marginalized.

Nowhere was the marginalizing of a second voice more obvious than with regard to women. No women were invited in a formal capacity to the Madrid dialogue from *any* religious tradition, the publically stated reason (by the head of the Muslim World League) being that "women do not hold significant positions of world religious leadership." Finally, in the end the document by the multi-faith working group was reworked by Muslim World League officials before it was released; the result being a document that many delegates found problematic. This may be seen as simply lack of experience in dialogue, but the changes made between the draft of the working group and the final document appeared to remove all affirmations of any religious commonality not in accordance with the rather strict orthodoxy of transnational Islam, and returns to the themes of the opening statement at the conference. Whatever their intentions the MWL apparently could not publically articulate a religious agenda other than the transformation of a *jahiliyya* world through implementation of *shari'a*. And indeed to do so would be to step outside the narrative that defines their understanding of a Muslim identity.[8]

Ultimately the *transnational* Muslim narrative is a simple story in which the recipients of God's unique revelation in the Qur'an, the revelation of a divinely mandated order, engaged in the task of implementing that order universally until such time as they succeed or God intervenes. It is a narrative that is also observable among Christians and followers of other religions.

***International Islam***

What Hefner and others refer to as Islam centered on local loyalties I believe can be better understood as the story of *international* Islam, or Islam as the story of Islamizing different ethno-cultural groups, and more recently nation-states, unifying them without necessarily diminishing their distinctiveness.

The narrative in which international Muslims understand themselves to be participating begins not only with God's revelation to Muhammad in the midst of a world of *jahiliyyah*, but with God's creation of the world and Adam and Eve, its first people and its first Muslims. In this narrative (with which transnational Muslims would not disagree, but for whom it plays no identifying role) Adam as the first prophet receives his role as vice-regent of the earth and takes responsibility for keeping it in order according to God's law. A divinely mandated diversity of peoples arise and God continues to send prophets to remind them of their role as orderers of creation according to God's will.[9] Muhammad is the last of these prophets; his revelation is both pure and sufficient; and the community he founds will fulfill its ordering vocation worldwide. Yet the story is not one of dominating and destroying all past revelations, but of complimenting and fulfilling them. According to this narrative Muslims encounter a world full of God's order and truth, and are obliged to learn from that world and its peoples even as they restore order where it has been lost. The result will be an Islamic world unified by certain fundamental practices and structures, but religiously diverse and highly variegated in the ways in which fundamental practices and structures are clothed by culture. Because it recognizes the presence of God's ordering revelation prior to Muhammad and independent of the Qur'an it seeks to purify local custom and the exercise of civil authority rather than displace them. *Adat* (local custom) *Kanun* (state initiated law) and *Shari'a* (revealed law) are considered compliments in the ordering of society. As a result the Islamic story can be conceived in terms of striving for religious and spiritual unity and not necessarily cultural and political unity.

Yet it must be noted that this recognition of a plurality of nations, and even polities, does not admit to a plurality of basic orders for human society. That order is determined by *Shari'a*, whether conceived rather broadly as in the case of the early work of Tariq Ramadan,(Ramadan 1999) or narrowly as in the case of Muhammad abd. Rauf (Muhammad 1991)[10] What distinguishes this from transnational Islam is not a lessened commitment to a *Shari'a* based order, but an allowance that this order can be realized in a world of nations. Thus Ramadan, abd Rauf and others reject the older Islamic ordering of the world into the *Dar al-islam* (realm of Islam) and *Dar al-harb* (realm of war/conflict) and interpret the classical but now purely theoretical recognition of a *Dar al-sur* (realm of treaty obligations) as the basis for an Islamic order that recognizes the validity of non-Islamic states.

This narrative has a long history with the Muslim world and is reflected in a work that is enormously widespread in the Muslim world, *The 1001 Nights*. The vast and complex narrative is itself a reflection of the way in which Muslims saw their world for much of Muslim history - a world of many rulers and nations and many cultures and classes. One story in particular, set somewhere on the Silk Road, is particularly representative. In this portion (from a rather free popular translation) we find a characterization of a generic (but of course magical) Muslim kingdom that is recounted by its king.

> After this cruel sorceress unworthy of the name of Queen had metamorphosed me thus,' and brought me into this hall, by another enchantment she destroyed my capital, which was very flourishing and

> populous. She annihilated the houses, the public places and markets, and reduced the site of the whole to the lake and desert plain you have seen. *The fishes of four colors in the lake are the four kinds of inhabitants of different religions, which the city contained. The white are the Muslims; the red, the Persians, who worship fire; the blue, the Christians; and the yellow, the Jews*. The four little hills were the four islands that gave name to this kingdom. But her revenge not being satisfied with the destruction of my dominions, and the metamorphosis of my person, she comes every day, and gives me over my naked shoulders a hundred lashes with a whip until I am covered with blood. When she has finished this part of my punishment, she throws over me a coarse stuff of goat's hair, and over that this robe of brocade, not to honor, but to mock me. ("The Story of the Young King of the Black Isles", Anon. 1946)

This fantasy well describes the international Islamic ideal of cosmopolitan urban culture. In the end it is a narrative of God's best order steadily realized by humanity worldwide. It recognizes true religion, which is to say religion that *must* be accommodated within an Islamic order, as monotheistic and ethical if not distinctly legalist. Interreligious dialogue is thus pursued to discover the assumed shared understandings of God, God's relation to humanity, and ways in which human relations should be ordered. Like transnational Muslims, most international Muslims understand the end of the earth in terms that suggest a continuation of history as a return to the primal paradise that God bequeathed Adam and Eve. In that paradise the ordering that is the responsibility of all believers continues, purged of all elements of ignorance or hardheartedness.

The recent *Common Word* initiative is the example of dialogue as understood within international Islam. Many of the scholars who signed the document come from religiously plural contexts, or from Muslim minority contexts, and are engaged in articulating political theories that allow for religious diversity to flourish even as religious voices play a role in making public policy. Yet as it emerges in dialogue the international narrative, while it will allow for cultural and political difference, does not seem to allow for substantial disagreement over the ordering of either divine or human relations in a pluralistic society.

I would suggest that an attentive reading of the initial *Common Word* document shows that while it appears to appeal to common principles (love of God and love of neighbor) it does so within a narrative that interprets these principles according to divinely mandated structures for both human society and authentic spirituality. The issue of love of neighbor, which the document assumes is commonly affirmed by Christians and Muslims, is one example. While respect for one's neighbor is clearly a value found in the Islamic tradition, it is expressed by the document in terms of obligations in behavior toward others and circumscribed by the obligation to purify the Muslim community of heresy and polytheism. Thus the assertion in the document that Christians, Muslims, and Jews should live together in peace does not necessarily extend that invitation to all humanity. Excluded are polytheists and all those whose personal and social relations do not conform to supposedly universal religious norms. Similarly the *Common Word* document consistently asserts that true worship of God is "God without partners" and references verses in the Qur'an that traditionally are interpreted as a direct contradiction of Trinitarian doctrine. So while it encourages the recognizing of a common obligation to worship God it does so by directly denying the validity of Christian worship of God in Christ. In short it invites a dialogue based on presumed Christian and Jewish agreement with an Islamic conception of the divine and human order. The initial response initiated out of the Yale Divinity School carefully avoided

these problems, opting to focus on the need for shared works in achieving justice for all. And the emergence of this shared narrative may be the most positive fruit of dialogue.

***Principled Islam and its Emerging Narrative.***

The narratives of transnational and international Muslims begin and end in different places, but remain narratives of divine order revealed, chosen, and possibly imposed. The third narrative I believe can be identified within the Muslim community is that which I call a *principled* narrative. This designation is not intended to suggest that Muslims who identify themselves within the other narratives lack principles. Most writing on Islamic law identifies basic values and purposes identified and codified relatively early in the history of Islamic theology. The basic values of *Shari`a* are *Adl* and *qist*—Justice and equity, *Huquq*—Rights and obligations, *Shura*—Consultation, *Masalih*—Public interest, *Falah*—Success (in this world and in the hereafter). The purpose of *Shari'a* are identified as the protection of *Din*—Religion (way of life with God), *Nafs*—Life (Soul and Body, Living Being), *Nasl*—Progeny or family, *`Aql*—Intellect, *Mal*—Property or wealth.[11] Similar lists are found in most standard works on Islamic law. What distinguishes the principled Muslim narrative is its assumption that these principles and others either clearly articulated in the Qur'an or discovered upon later reflection *precede* and take precedence over the implementation of specific structures in human society and religious worship.

An example of this difference may be found in different interpretations of the meaning of gender equality. The Qur'an consistently states both that all humans are equal, and that men and women in particular are equal. At the same time the Qur'an and its compliment in the traditions of the Prophet appear to mandate both distinct gender roles for men and women in the family and human society, distinctive realms of influence, differences in inheritance and child custody, and a male dominated social hierarchy both in the home and in public. Thus the great corpus of traditional Islamic law interprets Qur'anic calls for equality to mean *spiritual* equality, while the mundane world is governed by differences in roles and a strict hierarchy.

Modern transnational and international narrative Muslims frequently appeal to nature and supposedly universal social norms as confirming but not revealing a divine order of gender relations. However, Muslims for whom principle *precedes* specific structures have argued that Qur'anic calls for equality, taken as a face value statement of principle, demand equality in mundane as well as spiritual matters. Amina Wadud-Muhsin in her *Qur'an and Woman* provides an example:

> However, in order for the Qur'an to achieve its objective to act as a catalyst affecting behavior in society, *each social context must understand the fundamental and unchangeable principles of that text, and then implement them in their own unique reflection*. . .(italics added)
>
> Therefore, to force it to have a single cultural perspective - even the cultural perspective of the original community of the Prophet - severely limits its application and contradicts the stated universal purpose of the Book itself.
>
> 3. Although there are distinctions between men and women, I argue that they are not of their essential natures. More importantly, I argue against the values that have been attributed to these distinctions. Such attributed values describe women as weak, inferior inherently evil, intellectually incapable, and spiritually lacking. These evaluations have been used to claim that women are unsuitable for performing certain tasks, or for

> functioning in some ways in society. The Qur'an does not attempt to annihilate the differences between men and women . . .In fact, compatible mutually supportive functional relationships between men and women can be seen as part of the goal of the Qur'an with regard to society." However, the Qur'an does not propose or support a singular role or single definition of a set of roles, exclusively for each gender across every culture (Wadud-Mushin 1996, 5-9).

The difference between narratives based on realizing principles and those based on implementing mandated social structures may also be found in the rise and eventual fall of the *mu'tazilah*, a rationalist school of Islamic theology that dominated in the early Abbasid period but was eventually rejected as heretical. Among the many theological disagreements that led to the banning of the *mu'tazilah* was their assertion that certain verses in the Qur'an must be interpreted metaphorically or allegorically, since to do otherwise resulted in logical contradictions. Similarly they insisted that the principle of divine justice demanded human free will, and that the concept of God's oneness made it necessary that the Qur'an be created rather than co-eternal with God. Influenced by Greek philosophy, they saw the world, both natural and spiritual as the outworking of principles fundamental to the Divine life.

At least part of the Sufi tradition might also be identified with a *principled* narrative, in so far as some Sufis rejected the necessity of practices (such as the prayer ritual) when they didn't advance the Sufi goal of self-extinction into the oneness of Being.

The narrative of principled Islam, suppressed politically, has never died out among Muslims. In the 20th century it has gained renewed interest among some Muslims, including scholars like Fazlur Rahman (Rahman 1982). It is a narrative that begins with the calling of the prophets (including Adam) to carefully use their rational minds to read God's revelations and submit to the fundamental principles of the universe and the human social world. The Qur'an in this view is the most clearly principled revelation, and thus one that, like all others must be interpreted in light of its principles. In this principled narrative it is the *surahs* revealed at Mecca, before there was an organized Muslim polity seeking to form a Muslim society, that outline the basic principles later articulated in specific practices found in later revelations and the traditions of the Prophet. Thus the later Medina *surahs* are understood to be specific to a context and timeless only as examples of the way in which principles must be applied in context. (See an-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation* (Na'i m 1990) and the more recent work of Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform* (Ramadan 2009). Sometimes this narrative, as in the work of Rahman, postulates a continual movement in which with each new generation and situation the specific ordering of the Qur'an is used to understand the underlying principles, which are then applied in new ways to the contemporary situation. Others (such as an-Na'im) who articulate the principled Muslim narrative speak of "reverse abrogation." Instead of the older principle of abrogation which stated that earlier revelations are abrogated by later revelations, this hermeneutic approach says that later verses whose specific command in a specific situation runs contrary to the principle of God's justice and mercy found in the earlier surahs are "abrogated" by those principles, and thus are no longer applicable.[12] In this narrative the story of being Muslim is, or should be one of continual attentiveness to the specific ways that God's principles of justice, equality, grace, mutual concern, and honesty need to be applied in ever new and changing circumstances.

If Haj is correct in her interpretation of Asad's work it may be that in the scholarly rehearsals of the narrative of reform that one finds the narrative expression of principled Islam. Thus Bennabi's work, as well as that of Rahman, Ramadan, Wadud and others offer a narrative account of Islamic reform prefaced on the ultimacy of a principled narrative. There are also popular indicators of a principled narrative. In Malaysia it is rehearsed by popular bloggers and authors such as Raja Petra Kamaruddin and Syed Akbar Ali, and more concretely in the vocal defense of the principles of human rights and democracy by the Sisters of Islam and the Malaysian Bar Association. Syed Akbar Ali's interpretation of the *surahs* of the Qur'an generally taken to support the structures of an Islamic banking system is a popular and accessible example. He contests all interpretations of the word *riba* as " payment of interest" in the modern sense, and interprets the words of the prophet Shuaib in Qur'an 11:85 to mean that "the definitive principle of what an Islamic economic system should strive for . . . . Is that prices charged for goods and services be fair. . . . Competition in an Islamic economic system would therefore continuously seek to lower the cost of living or raise the standard of living" (Akbar Ali 2006, 253-254). Ali's interpretive strategy is representative in taking the many narratives in the Qur'an and reinterpreting them as statements of principle rather than legal prohibitions or requirements.[13] More generally Kamaruddin, Ali, the Sisters of Islam, and their political allies are distinguished by their insistence that the story of Malaysia as a nation has been and should be the implementation of principles of human rights through a democratic system to which all citizens have equal access. They reject explicitly the alternative narratives of transnational and international Islam that insist that Islamic laws have a privileged place in shaping such a society.

Dialogue with Muslims whose self-understanding is based on a narrative of working out fundamental principles reflective of the Divine Will has no ongoing international focus at this time that I know of. However, Muslims who might be regarded as articulating such a principled narrative are regularly engaged in different interfaith dialogue efforts. One example is a Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue around the topic of human rights, held at the United Nations from September 3 - 5, 2008. At this conference it appeared to this author that there emerged a clear distinction between women representing Islam, including Awan Nammar and Mona Siddique, who understood human rights as principles to be implemented in law, and Shayk Muhammed Hisham Kabbani, of the Islamic Supreme Council of America. The latter maintained that the framework for understanding and interpreting human rights was the obligations enjoined on humans by the God through *Shari'a*. It appears that for Shayk Kabbani God alone has rights, humans have obligations, some of which are to God, and some of which are to other humans. Apart from such explicit inter-religious initiatives it appears to this author that the principled Muslim narrative is primarily represented in dialogue that centers around specific political and social agendas rather than inter-religious engagement per se. Tariq Ramadan's most recent work, which suggests that civil society should evolve on the basis of agreed principles accessible through study of universally available information is suggestive of how principled narratives can enter into dialogue with one another to form a shared narrative of social reform (Ramadan 2009).

### *The Mystic Narrative*

A fourth narrative identity in Islam, in so far as it can be distinguished from the three already discussed, is that of Sufism, or mystical Islam. It is a narrative which has a beginning, a plot, and an end but which is nonetheless a-historical: concerned about the ascent of the soul toward *fana* in which its being rejoins God its source. In this narrative Muhammad the prophet is the first (in stature if not history) mystic. His flight on a

winged horse into the seven heavens, until he arrives at the realm of God in God's self, is the primary story of humanity in relation to God. It is the archetype of all subsequent *jihad,* or the struggle of the soul to loose itself from being captured by the illusion of distinctions among beings. It is a narrative in which the primary meaning of the Qur'an, and every other revelation, is esoteric in addition to being ethical and legal. The path of submission to God's law is merely a small part, one possibly to be eventually discarded, of the journey toward submission of one's claim to exist to the presence of Divine Being itself.

For many Christians this mystic narrative seems to offer particular promise for a shared narrative. Yet it must be noted that the great majority of Muslims identify themselves with *two* narratives: the one of engaging the world with the demands of God's revelation on society, the other of the personal ascent of the soul to God. The second of these narratives finds amiable companions in many mystical traditions, and weaves in and out of such traditions worldwide. It travels a road that followers of many different religions may travel with some ease, and it does offer respite from the rigors of paths where every intersection presents a choice of heaven or perdition, and thus must be contested. Yet daily life must be lived on those narrow, contested paths, and in the end that is where the will to engage in dialogue is most severely tested, and its results most consequent.

**Conclusion**

In seeking to understand contemporary Muslim movements through the narratives with which they identify I do not want to suggest that inter-religious dialogue should be restricted to one group or another, or even that it will be fruitful only with one group rather than another. Christians likewise identify themselves within their own version of these narratives. There are Christians for whom all of human history has only two parts; that which takes place before God's saving act in Jesus Christ and that which takes place after. And thus the history of world is made simply of two possible narratives with their respective endings: heaven and hell. There are Christians who see in the Biblical narrative a more complex unfolding of God's relationship with both creation and humanity. It is a narrative that recognizes many and diverse ways that God has engaged, and continues to engage humans in God's saving act, even if it is a narrative in which (according to some but not all) of these diverse engagements converge on a single point. Christians also have a narrative based more on the outworking of divinely ordained principles in human history rather than simply implementing divine law. And of course there are Christian mystics. Thus Christian Muslim dialogue will often be more complex than simply the interaction of two different narratives. Instead the identification of these different narratives suggests two conclusions.

First that dialogue will be most fruitful when it recognizes that which is possible within the narratives that serve to give the participants their religious identity. Transnational Muslims are unlikely to give up efforts to implement *Shari'a* law within human societies. To do so for them would be to cease to be Muslim. It may be possible, however, to mitigate the impact of realization of their narrative on religious minorities, for example, by engaging in a dialogue over the status of contemporary religious groups in relation to the status of traditionally accorded "the people of the book." There is, after all, a traditional stream of Islamic thought that does just this; essentially "finding" a monotheistic essence in each religious tradition and then regarding apparent polytheism as a problem internal to those traditions.[14] Dialogue with international narrative Muslims might need to be content to make progress on matters of forming a multi-religious civil society with an understanding that democratic structures and a secular

government are a pragmatic rather than principle means of living harmoniously. This is what Ng Kam Weng suggests in his book *The Quest for Covenant Community and Pluralist Democracy* (Ng 2008). Even dialogue over issues of human rights need not be impossible, so long as it is understood that transnational and international Muslims will interpret the basis of these rights differently than those Christians who identify with a more "principled" narrative. While these accommodations may seem like thin gruel in the face of the urgent demands created by the exploitation of women, children, and the poor the only alternative to dialogue appears to be the application of overwhelming force; a neo-colonial alternative that has thus far proved less than effective.

Secondly it seems that understanding identity in terms of narrative, rather than the interaction between two sets of beliefs, values, laws, or worldviews called Islam and Modernity respectively (and regardless of whether such sets are regarded as bounded or centered), offers a way of approaching dialogue that is emerging but hasn't been adequately articulated. *This form of dialogue is the exploration of two or more religious narratives in the hope of finding a shared story that allows not merely religious tolerance, but real cooperation in the project of creating a shared society and world.* What makes such dialogue powerful, and distinctly religious, is that each party learns that these shared concerns arise from the deepest level of commitment to live within an order that, whether it is structured by principle or law transcends the concerns of any one religious community or even humanity as a whole. Presently the author is experimenting (with Muslim partners) with reformulating plans for dialogue between Christians and Muslims, and persons of other faiths, that focus on bringing narrative to the fore and seeking out shared stories in the dialogue process.

Christian Muslim dialogue can be seen, I believe, as the engagement of two or more different religious narratives. In some cases a particular Christian narrative may resonate quite well with a particular Muslim narrative. In other cases they may find themselves at odds over basic understandings of how the human story in relation to the divine can or should unfold. In either case productive dialogue will depend on the participants representing themselves as accurately as is possible and knowing, quite literally, where the others believe they are coming from and where they understand themselves to be going.

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## Notes

[1] There are those who believe that the European Enlightenment actually had its roots in Islamic thought. So for example *The Vital Roots of European Enlightenment: Ibn Tufayls Influence on Modern Western Thought*, by Samar Attar(Attar 2007). Without judging these scholarly forays into re-writing intellectual history, what is important for this paper is that rewriting the story of Islam and the West so as to put Islam as a source of modernity is the distinctive mark of narrative identities discussed below which seek to find in Islam all that is, or can be, positive in the eyes of the narrator).

[2] It was recently drawn to my attention by members of the North Texas Islamic Association that in North Dallas the dominant school of legal interpretation is Hanafi – unsurprising since this school predominates in the South Asian Subcontinent from which a majority of Dallas Muslims come. This, rather than Shafi' (Egypt), Hanbali (Arabia), or Maleki (Turkey). This makes a real difference in some practices, for example the celebration of the prophet Muhammad's birthday. In the 20th century Shafi'ite commentators have encouraged it, and it is celebrated widely in Southeast Asia and North Africa. Hanafi commentators have discouraged it, and thus it is not celebrated in Dallas area mosques. For those interested in how distinctions between classical Islamic schools of law retain their relevance through contemporary rulings the Wikipedia article on Mawlid is well written, and relevant to the actual working of interfaith dialogue (http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mawlid?wasRedirected=true).

[3] My own copy of *Islam in History and Society* was published in Malaysia in the 1980's and has a forward written by a prominent Muslim politician named Anwar Ibrahim who has since become a globally recognized Muslim leader, and leader of Malaysia's political opposition.

[4] Zaiuddin Sardar, for example, in his trilogy, *The Touch of Midas*, *Islamic Futures,* and *The Future of Muslim Civilization* (1985-7) seeks to identify the patterns characteristic of previous Muslim history and literally chart a future unencumbered by that past.

[5] Only after substantially completing this article did I come across the work of Samira Haj on the Wahabbi tradition (Haj 2009) in which she makes use of Talal Asad's elaboration of Alasdair MacIntyre's conceptionalization of tradition. Asad suggests that Muslims themselves approach Islam as a "discursive tradition", or a set of "discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a *past* (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a *future* (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a *present* (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions)." (Asad 1986) Clearly this represents both an alternative approach to identifying Islamic movements (one which to my knowledge was not taken up after Asad's paper was presented until the work of Haj) and is suggestive of ways of deepening the conceptual roots of the taxonomy I explore below. Samira Haj, in a detailed analysis explicitly rejects the taxonomies of Esposito, 1999, Eickelman and Piscattori, 1996, Voll, 1994, and Bas, 2004.(Haj 2009) p.21 However, her focus is on discursive reiterations of a tradition constantly in the process of re-interpretation concentrates on a single narrative of *tajdid, ihya*, and *islah* (renewal, revival, and reform) in the context of *aswa*, (progressive retreat from the golden age of Muhammad). (Haj 2009) p.8 This narrative is explicit in all sorts of Muslim literature, but is somewhat different than the narratives on which this essay focuses.

[6] Hefner's work is a good example of the confusion in current taxonomies. Hefner uses the term "modernist" for what Bennabi called reformist Muslims because they appear in SE Asia in the

modern era. Others such as Bennett refer to Hefner's "modernists" as "traditionalists" or even "radical revisionists." (Hefner 2009, 22).

[7] Such local loyalties are in part related to traditional social structures that mediate Islam to the point that they become inseparable from it, and the understanding of Islam as a religion of ineffable wonder into which one must be initiated by face-to-face interaction with a local teacher.

[8] The Muslim World League is not the only bearer of transnational Islam into the realm of interreligious dialogue. Another example is the discussion of Malaysian government sanctioned inter-religious dialogue that emerged between the years 2000 and 2008. (Hunt 2009) In the Malaysian case elements within the government's Islamic authority themselves rejected participation in the proposed dialogue as an insult to the sovereignty of Islam in the state.

[9] In Dallas our local dialogue partners at the IANT and IID constantly cite the Qur'an's assertion that God intentionally made a variety of peoples so that they might know each other (Qur'an 30:20-23, 49:13). Thus the Qur'an as revelation is used not as the starting point of the Muslim narrative, but *refers* to that starting point in God's creation of humanity. This is a move not alien to other religious traditions.

[10] Francis Tiso, in his critique of Leonard Swidler's "Dialogue Decalogue" points out that Ismail al-Faruqi's thought, and in particular his forceful assertion of the superiority of an Islamic worldview, has provided the "intellectual gymnasium in which many progressive and moderate Muslims have had their basic training," including Tariq Ramadan and Ziuddin Sadar. It is an observation the author would at least in part affirm. Tiso points out that al-Faruqi's *Islam and Other Faiths* describes an understanding of the role of non-Muslims under *Shari'a* law "that on the surface seems quite rational, but that would in practice lead to the most gross violations of human rights imaginable, short of outright slavery." If this seems an overstatement one need only observe the way in which al-Faruqi's thought is used by Muslim groups to circumscribe the human and civil rights of non-Muslims in countries like Malaysia. In brief, as I understand him, al-Faruqi asserts that Islam is not merely a religion, but an ideology, the most complete and perfect ideology, and that an Islamic state (like all states according to al-Faruqi) would legitimately demand that their citizens learn, master and conform to the state ideology even while allowing religious freedom (meaning freedom of private spiritual convictions and practice)(Heckman and Picker Neiss 2010, 236).

[11] Mattson, Ingrid (Mattson 2008, 205). Mattson goes on to cite the work of Muhammad Kamali, a contemporary scholar of Islamic jurisprudence on the role of principles and values in interpretation.

[12] In identifying a principled narrative I am not speaking of merely the use of *ijtihad* or independent reasoning in Islamic exegesis and legal discourse. The term *ijtihad* can mean merely questioning the results of earlier scholarship within a framework that nonetheless accepts the enduring validity of specific social structures and relations.

[13] It must be noted that at some level this strategy serves the purpose of transnational and international narratives as well, for example in interpreting "jihad" to mean a general principle of struggle rather than an explicit command to war. The difference is that principled Islam sees *jihad* as a struggle for principles, while transnational and international Islam see jihad as a struggle to implement structures.

[14] The Vatican dialogues with Muslim leaders over the status of Christian and other religious minorities in Muslim lands appears to be one example of such dialogue.

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