

DR. D. LATIFA

ON THE DESTRUCTION OF NORMATIVE ISLAM



Photo by Mohammed Anverzada

Academic, psychologist and feminist. It's never nice to use short labels for uncategorizable people like Dr. D. Latifa,¹ but it sets the tone. For a long time, she was the director of an important research program in a Pakistani university. These days, however, she mainly focuses on her work as a psychologist and her tasks in a centre for the study of gender and culture.

If she had to place herself within a certain strand of Western psychology, it would be Jungian psychology, although she can be quite critical about the Jungian approach as well. In fact, being critical is a general aspect of Dr. Latifa's character and, as such, instead of just having a chat for an hour or two, I ended up spending three days with her, discussing various topics related to religion and society. When I eventually headed back home, it was in high spirits and with new insights.

What follows is just a small extract of one of our conversations.²



¹ As Dr. Latifa tries to keep a low profile, certainly considering her stance on certain issues, I changed her name per her request.

² This conversation was originally published on www.halalmonk.com. It was also taken up in the book "Halal Monk. A Christian on a Journey through Islam" by Jonas Yunus Atlas (Yunus Publishing, 2014).

One of the things I noticed while traveling in Pakistan is how closely the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam interlock. I already knew that the current conflicts between the different groups are a very recent development fuelled by the geo-politics of the last fifty years,³ but I was nevertheless surprised to see how intertwined they were on a daily and spiritual level. Sunni and Shia live side by side, attend each other's festivities and pray at the same shrines. It all makes the current violence seem even more absurd. Do you, as a Pakistani, actually still see a difference between the two?

In my eyes, one of the great aspects of the Shia tradition is its enormous contribution to passion and love within Islam. In some ways, I actually see this as the main rift between the two branches. As you know, their conflict never was about the Qur'an or the Prophet, but it also wasn't simply about the choice of who would be the next caliph, as it is always presented. According to me, it was also about the way Islam should be *lived*. Of course, every aspect of the Islamic religion can be found in every branch; that is to say, love, fear, jurisprudence, the unity of God and all other core concepts are present in both the Sunni and the Shia theology. However, in a way, the 'psychological approach' of the Shias had a somewhat stronger emphasis on passion while the Sunnis focussed somewhat more on the fear of God, which is, of course, also needed.

Not a lot of your Western psychologist colleagues would easily say that fear is needed – and most certainly not in relation to God.

There is a cluster of ways to relate ourselves to God. We can do so through fear, love, justice or many other aspects. And within the monotheisms, the aspect of fear also gets a strong emphasis. Look at the Ten Commandments for example; seven of them are about what you will *not* do.

The emphasis in Christianity is on love. In Islam, as a whole, it's on knowledge, if you ask me.

It's not that there's no love in Islam, no knowledge in Judaism or no fear in Christianity, but it's what's emphasized as a profile. It's bland to say that all religions are the same, but when we speak of the differences between different religions, it's not so much about theory or dogmas. It's about the emphasis on a certain aspect of relating to the divine. And whether emphasized or not, fear has its place. It teaches us limits. It makes us recognize that there are lines that we shouldn't cross. One of the biggest examples of the absence of fear is the disastrous situation of the environment, for example. So statements like Roosevelt's, "The only thing you should fear is fear itself", are nonsensical to me. You can't explain to a one year old not to put his fingers in an electrical socket; only fear will teach him not to do it.

I personally think that the West certainly made phenomenal contributions in the realm of the hard sciences, but when it comes to psychology, it's a complete disaster. Western psychology really hasn't gotten far in terms of explaining what human beings are or in grasping the fullness of what they're all about. So, this modern idea that there is no need to fear, for example, is actually an impoverished look on the world.

Also, if you think about it, what has really happened? We are surrounded by fear! Everywhere you go. The present day fear of terrorism is the multiplied version of it. First there was a denial of fear and now we can't escape it. To paraphrase Carl Jung, whatever you deny eventually comes to face you.

³ Throughout the centuries, conflicts between (subgroups of) Sunni and Shia would often surface, but, in spite of what many people think, Sunni and Shia have most often lived peacefully together. As previously mentioned in the explanation on the sharia, the best example thereof is the fact that both Sunni and Shia have always come together for the hajj in Mecca. Because of the geo-politics of the last decades, however, the division has often been rekindled and strengthened to serve other purposes. This can, for example, be seen in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, in the doctrinal radicalisation of the Taliban during the 1990s, and in the insurgences in Syria and Iraq in the 2010s.

I agree that fear can sometimes give us a proper and even necessary sense of boundaries. But fear, certainly in a religious context, can also be quite stifling.

Of course context, gender, etc. are very important, but I also think that age is very critical. To encourage a sixteen year old to be fearless is a good thing. To do the same in the case of a fifty year old, I'm not so sure. (*Dr. Latifa laughs.*) Past forty, a lot of issues are actually moral issues, for example. As a psychologist, I think it's important to realize this if you properly want to address certain psychological problems. But modern psychology has no room for that.

Generally speaking, modern psychology is overwhelmingly modelled on the psyches of young males. That is to say, the model of the young male is the archetype. It was Freud's archetype as well, which is all fine for young males, but it simply doesn't work to impose that on women or on men who are in the later stages of life. It doesn't leave enough room for the soul.

So does religion often come up in your work as a psychologist?

Again, it depends on the person and his age. There's mostly no point talking religion to a sixteen year old. In fact, it might often be wrong to do so. It's a bit unnatural. But later on, it can certainly come up. Though when people come to me, expecting a psychologist who has studied in Western countries, they mostly don't come to talk about religion.

Sure, but I also suppose that underneath all their questions, there is some sort of embedded religion and spirituality. At least a lot more than in the West I would think, where religion is, by and large, not at all as embedded in people's minds as it is in the minds of the Pakistanis.

You're right, but then again, a lot of Christian concepts are strongly anchored in the unconscious of Western people — and not always in a pleasant way. So, when dealing with people who had a highly Western education and who are asking questions about religion, the first task is to get rid of their 'Christianist' unconscious.

I've been fortunate because I spent my schooling first in Anglican schools, in a Catholic convent, an American Presbyterian college — all in Lahore by the way — and, therefore, got to know the whole spectrum. So, I probably know the bible better than most Europeans. And, as such, I think I can fairly judge the depth of the critique of people like Jung. He was right when he said that it's a critical issue today to make people aware of how they think about religion. For our view on religion has fundamentally changed. In the Islamic world as well — because the tragedy is that we're now seeing the worst form of Protestant Christianizing of Islam, though it's dreadfully politically incorrect to say this. (*Dr. Latifa laughs.*)

Don't bother about political correctness. A good bit of political incorrectness brought about quite a lot of justice throughout history. So, by all means, explain further.

Well, then, if you ask me, the West is stuck in some sort of 'Cartesian Christianity'. Essentially, it's this Protestant mindset, combined with Cartesianism. By Cartesianism, I mean the rational approach to things, the mental, disembodied and purely analytical way of looking at reality and knowledge.

Combine this puritan 'scientific' approach with a Protestant mindset that holds, at its core, the conviction that only faith in Jesus saves a soul, and what you get is the idea that every question can only have one answer and that everything in existence can be brought back to specific essential parts. In such a worldview, religion becomes something that must, by definition, consist of certain strictly organized convictions and beliefs. But this isn't at all the case in most religions. Also not in Islam, even though the Muslim world, by now, has come to see religion in the same terms.

This of course relates to your idea that people in the West have lost the capability to think mythologically. You have written about this in some of your essays in which you explain that there are different types of knowledge of which 'logic' is but one. You see 'mytho-logic' as another type. And I must admit that in the West we, indeed, tend to see 'real' knowledge only in logical terms. We ask: "Where do people come from?" and the only answer we expect is: "Out of the fusion of an egg and sperm cell." But many people, me included, derive knowledge about life by relating to stories. As a Christian, for example, I find much more truth and answers about life by 'mirroring' my personal experiences to stories in the Gospels than by reading scientific magazines.

Indeed. It's the capacity of the symbolic. Science, as it was filtered through modernity, is literal. But when you're drinking water, you're not thinking of it as H₂O. It's your experience that matters and that experience can be multiple. So, the meaning of water can be multiple. H₂O has no meaning; it just tells you what the elements in the product are. The tendency is, therefore, to reduce the meaning of everything into its most literal aspect because of the conviction that there is only one answer to things.

Look at the way we nowadays deal with homosexuality, for example. It's clear that the West has brought in a particular view of homosexuality. I guess it partly originates in the way Christ was severed from sexuality in the Christian tradition, as he was considered to be an unmarried celibate. But in certain regions, homosexuality had a place, particularly in those areas that were once a part of Alexander the Great's empire and where the Greek influence was, therefore, evident. In such places, homosexuality could exist side by side with family life. Men simply had certain gatherings – sort of stag nights – once a month or so, in which they could meet other men and have a lot of experiences of male bonding, sometimes also sexually. As long as it didn't threaten the family existence, everyone, including the wife, was okay with it. Again, for the West, you can be only one thing: either homosexual or heterosexual, but here you could have different experiences of reality and sexuality could change during certain life stages.

I keep joking among my friends that within Islamic jurisprudence, people can only be punished for having extramarital sex when there aren't just four witnesses, but four adult, well-respected citizens who are eye witnesses. Now, if you're going to copulate in front of four well-respected citizens, you probably should be stoned. The punishment is more for stupidity than for sin. (*Dr. Latifa laughs.*)

All joking aside, Islam just takes human nature for what it is. So, in Islam, the concept of sin has more to do with hubris and arrogance. When you look at the parameters of the punishment, it seems to me that it says: "Okay, you're going to do this probably, but if you do it, can you please be a bit discrete about it?" So, along with the basic message of 'don't do it' there is also a strong message of 'don't mess with the social order'.

In the non-Western world, then, it has often not been an issue. It even always existed in Arab society. But the minute you ask the question, people will have an opinion and create a 'problem'.

The same happened with family planning and abortion. That wasn't an issue in the Muslim world before, but it became one after that bizarre coalition in Cairo with the Catholics and the Muslims, because the Catholics went into overdrive and started asking Muslim scholars what their view on abortion was. And, of course, once they were asked, they started to exert their patriarchal views. But that doesn't mean women didn't do it.

Yet another example is the debate about creation versus evolution. I keep telling people that these are false debates that we have internalized. It's not as if Muslims and Hindus didn't have science. These debates stem from mainstream Christian dogmatism, but they were internalized by the Muslim community. In our history, science and religion always went together. But suddenly, certain Muslims feel the need to have an opposite opinion about it — an opinion that coincides with the views of conservative Christians.

Isn't it remarkable, then, how quickly this 'rational-scientist' and single-minded approach to reality was taken over by other cultural groups in the world? If we look at the modern fundamentalist forms of Islam, for example, we can see that they have taken up the same rhetoric of one single and literal answer to everything. Yet, that sort of contemporary Muslim extremism is an evolution of the last fifty years or so. It is interesting to see, therefore, how quickly people have taken up the Western way of looking at their own religion and how quickly they have forgotten their traditional 'mytho-logical' approach. How come it all happened so fast?

Well, that's modernity, colonialism and its educational system.

In my own family, religion was always very much a part of our lives. We were encouraged to be modern and get an education, but unlike many middle and higher class Pakistanis and Indians who were enthralled by the Marxist and scientific worldviews, which were also prevalent in the West, my parents never turned their backs on religion. So, in the nineties, I could see that things had changed quite a bit and that something very wrong was creeping up on us. A rigid mindset that knows only one way of dealing with religion started to take root in our society. Only one particular form of Islam was promoted more and more as the correct form of Islam, even though this wasn't the way we traditionally looked at religion.

Even today, a research showed that if you ask people in India: "What is your religion?" almost three to four million people will name you at least three. So, the fact of the matter is that, as you go down the literacy ladder, there are still huge numbers of people whose self-image, though mostly unconscious, is "I'm a Hindu, I'm a Muslim and I'm a Christian."

That's indeed something I noticed during my trip through the Punjab and Kashmir region. Religions really get mixed up. And not just as a fact of history, but also in today's reality. Here in Lahore, for example, there's the shrine of Baba Shah Jamal. Every Thursday, people smoke bhang⁴ and dance into a trance to the loud beats of the dhol.⁵ When I went there, I noticed it actually has a very 'Hindu' feel to it. It's a bit like a loud, colourful Hindu gathering but in honour of a Muslim saint. It made me remember how you once wrote about Lal Ded, the female saint of whom no one actually knew whether she was Muslim or Hindu. In that text, you explained how nobody really cared either and that only now, in the last few decades, many academics suddenly feel the need to prove to which religion she belonged.

For my generation, such things have been traumatic. My parents were in love with the West and didn't bother any bit about the Christianity they encountered in their lives. Until my father died, in the seventies, my parents still said that if you wanted to see Islam, you had to go to the West. The people there perhaps don't recite the shahada, he said, but they pay their taxes, they're clean, there is social security, and so on. So there was a tremendous admiration for the West. They were devout Muslims, but they never thought twice about me singing Christian hymns at my convent school. They were very happy that good education was given to their children, and they had tremendous respect for the nuns and so on. Nowadays, however, that type of flexibility is being threatened.

When I speak to people in Pakistan about my work, they all say that they are very religious. Often they add that they're of the Sufi tradition, but above all, they tell me how they respect all religions, how they think all faiths are fine and so on. When I continue the conversation, however, I'll eventually get to a point where they present Islam as the best religion in the world. As such, it quickly became clear to me that they weren't conveying a literal message about the

⁴ The local cannabis variation.

⁵ A dhol is a big barrel-shaped drum. It is a prominent instrument in a lot of Punjabi folk music as well as in contemporary bhangra.

equality of all religions. They above all wanted to distance themselves from the radical Islamists who are, in their eyes, destroying the country. That is to say, they simply don't relate to that single-minded type of Islam that has been imported into Pakistan during the last forty years. How come the Pakistani type of 'blended' Islam with an open-ended view on reality wasn't resilient enough? Why did it not withstand the fundamentalist type?

On one level, it is still resilient. If the rituals at Shah Jamal can still go on every Thursday, that means it's in fact still very alive. It's our roots. It's the ground beneath our feet.

This is also why I must admit that this whole 'Sufi' business drives me a bit crazy. I first heard the word 'Sufism' when I was forty years old. We saw ourselves simply as Muslims. The word Sufi – or Sufiya, the plural in Arabic – was always traditionally used to describe the saints. But the saints themselves would never say: "I'm a Sufi". They would say: "I'm a Muslim" or "I'm a believer". So, it was a title that expressed respect, but it wasn't a part of our self-definition. So, for me, it makes no sense to say: "Hello, I'm Dr. Latifa, I'm a Sufi."

What is now called Sufism simply was the normative form of Islam. The norm is taken for granted. You don't have to label it. Calling it Sufism only started in the nineties. So it started once the demonizing of Islam began, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. And now, in the same way that children play doctor-doctor, we are now playing Sufi-Sufi. But all this, "oh life is nice, I can listen to music and smoke my dope", that simply isn't what religion is about. It only tries to make it more acceptable to the West.

I readily agree on this. Sufism is often sold as the 'nice type of Islam', but in the end, it's a term that is used by the West to throw a whole bunch of religious sentiments into one big pot. If it's mystical and Islamic, then it must be Sufism and a bit 'different', so it seems. Yet, as I have come to realise by now, mysticism has always been an essential part of general Islam all over the world and, therefore, knows a huge variety of expressions.

These are the critical issues that people need to realize because it's all about the lens through which we see religion and it stems from the dominance of Protestant Christianity, which is tied up with the history of religion in the West.

Of course, there has been patriarchy in all religions, but show me one religion that has something comparable to the Inquisition. Or show me one thing that is comparable to the witch hunts. In scale, it is mind blowing when you start reading about it. Wouldn't you say there is something hugely wrong there?

So what's your answer to that rhetorical question?

Well, what went wrong was the way they wiped out mysticism in Christianity. And once it was wiped out, the scholars became very surprised when they came across mystical aspects in other religions. Because they marginalised many mystical aspects within Christianity, people today can't understand that those aspects were actually normative to all religions.

The same happens when people think of the way a religion should be structured. In most religions, there simply is no centralized institution. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, they're decentred religions. The centre is the individual. So, concepts and words like 'doctrines', 'heresy', 'dogma' all come from Christianity, but then they wanted to apply them to other religions like Islam and say: "Oh, this is the 'dogma' of Islam." Yet decentredness was the natural state of all religions. Yes, you have the Dalai Lama, but he's only there for the Tibetans. He's not there for the Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Protestant Christianity is also decentralized. But eventually, every splinter group of Protestants created its own structures and often held on to very 'single-minded' approaches to reality. Protestants killed a lot more 'witches' than the Catholics did, for example.

And now, vast numbers of Muslims have internalized notions like heresy, doctrine and dogma without

wondering: “Is our history the same?”

The export of the Petro-Islam of the Gulf seems essential in all of this. Even though Islam is still a decentred religion in nature, because of the present day geo-politics that part of the Islamic world has become, to say the least, a very dominant power. I don't think that one could deny that its ideology has widely spread in recent years, and that this ideology contains such a single-minded approach to Islam. But do you think it also holds a true 'structural power' within the broader Ummah? Does it really threaten the decentredness of Islam?

Yes. They've created the priests since the fifties. Now they will declare Mecca as the Rome of Islam. Perhaps I won't live to see it anymore, but you will.

I'm reluctant to agree on that one. After all the people I've talked to, I feel that those in power won't be able to hold on to their power like they do now since the dissenting voices are also getting stronger. And not only are their voices getting stronger, they are also becoming a part of the top layers of the ulama.

They won't be able to extinguish the normative Islam or the dissent of certain intellectuals, but slowly, the space is shrinking and I'm not hopeful at all. This whole region of Southeast Asia will eventually be 'niqabed'. Their work is done. Their mission was to destroy the expressions of normative Islam and they've succeeded.

Of course, in their own minds they don't see their destruction as something harmful. Quite the contrary, from within their own ideology, they see it as a way of setting things straight.

Sure. They feel that they're very right, but this is not an ordinary debate of ideas. Where I draw the line is the imposition of a certain lifestyle and way of thinking through brute force. In their case, it's the brute force of money. Their Islam has become a *money*-theism instead of a *mono*-theism.

Let me give you an example of how they gradually 'Arabized' our Islam and started to destroy the local normative expressions of our religion. The standard goodbye for people like me and other Pakistanis of about fifty is “Khudahafiz”. Khuda comes from Persian and means 'God' in a very general way. It can imply Allah, but not necessarily. Pakistanis below forty, on the other hand, will say Allahafiz. That's typical Salafi influence and their indoctrination.

So, because of many small things, like how you suddenly say hello and goodbye, I feel like I'm living in an alien place.

As a Western Christian, I don't easily notice such things, of course. I only see the influence of the Gulf when I pass some mosque that clearly has a different architecture and that is visited by more Salafi-oriented people.

I have my mad theories, you know. One of them is that the changing mosque architecture shows the change in ideology and spiritual outlook. Not only are those Arab-funded mosques completely un-Pakistani, they're also macho and masculine. The Faisal mosque in Islamabad, which is the biggest mosque in Pakistan, is a good example. It has no curves at all. It has only straight lines with phallic rockets for minarets. You just have to compare it to the old Ottoman mosques in Turkey that have huge beautiful domes. The dome and the minaret were a perfect balance. It's the feminine and the masculine. And often we forget that perhaps the call for prayer is done from the minaret, but it asks you to go into the feminine part of the mosque to actually pray. So, what we're seeing now is the disappearance of the feminine elements and all that we're left with is these jagged lines. You can see the same in the growing

use of the Kufic script.

All this Arabizing of our culture is everywhere and it runs very deep.⁶

I do agree that architecture is very important. I had a teacher once who claimed that trees and complex natural objects like them have some mathematical ‘formulas’ behind them, but that those ‘formulas’ are equations that create infinitely irregular forms. He added that today’s city architecture takes away our capacity to deal with such complex and irregular forms and formulas. According to him, it impoverishes our minds when our surroundings only consist of straight lines because all our streets are straight and our buildings are nothing but cubes put on top of each other.

I call such buildings anorexic. They reflect the state of the anima. The feminine is starving in the modern world. It’s dying — as is nature.

We can see the same in interior design. It’s all minimalist, clean, cold, straight lines. It’s often sold as Zen, but it’s not the same. Zen is a state of mind, but this modern style is often simply soulless.

True. Real Zen is about inner peace. In its art, one can, therefore, see many curves, circles and waves . . . But to come back to the ‘Arabisation’ of Pakistan, it might be very visible in the architecture and art, but does that necessarily mean it also has a strong impact on daily life? Does it truly also take away certain ‘feminine’ aspects of society?

Of course. That’s exactly what’s under attack. Mysticism is a female dimension of every religion, while the scriptural is the more masculine. And this is yet another example of how the Christian Cartesian mindset has taken over the Islamic world as well. The scriptural, the literal and the puritan become the norm. Everything else is considered ‘pagan’ – and again, paganism is, of course, a Christian term for what used to be indigenous, natural religions lived and practiced without a structure being imposed on them.

So, my problem is how to get out of that vocabulary and reclaim a different view on religion because there are a lot of Muslims these days who say that several traditional elements aren’t a part of ‘pure’ Islam. Certainly, in the diaspora you can often hear it, because the migrants have been cut off from their culture. But the very reason why Islam took wings and spread so rapidly is because it could adapt itself to different cultures.

If we look at history, we can see that Islam had reached its borders within a hundred years. So, it only took a century for Islam to spread out to Spain, Asia and China. I often joke that that this means that God wanted to say: “Get out of the Middle East as fast as you can!” (*Dr. Latifa laughs.*)

But seriously, even today, only fifteen per cent of Muslims live in the Middle East. Eighty-five per cent are elsewhere. And if we look at the art and architecture, we can see how it has flourished because of the way it always bonded with culture.

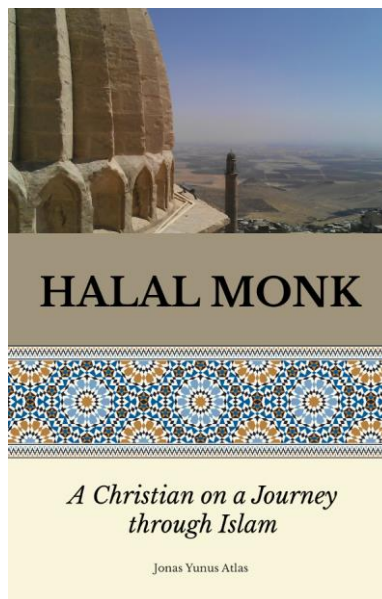
If Islam didn’t have that openness and simplicity, we wouldn’t have had the Alhambra or Sultan Ahmet Mosque. They’re so different, but both are Islamic. And this multiplicity of expressions of the same faith is, in fact, the strength and beauty of Islam.

⁶ Dr. D. Latifa talks about Pakistan here, but the same phenomenon of ‘Arabisation’ can be witnessed in many parts of the Muslim world from Somalia to Indonesia and certainly within migrant communities as well.

This conversation was published in

Halal Monk
A Christian on a Journey through Islam.
by Jonas Yunus Atlas

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