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Muslims and Futures, universities and imagination

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I want to talk to you about Muslims and futures, and to do that I need to talk about universities and imagination, and the best way to do that is to start with myself. Because my academic journey runs parallel with and intersects with the path leading to today's interest in Muslims and futures.

Islamic state

I entered university late, at the age of 44. Before that, I had a patchwork career with a variety of jobs in the Middle East and in the Netherlands. Before that, I had studied Arabic and Law, and it is in that time that my interest grew in Islamic law, and I continued to study this field when I lived in the Middle East. In those days, my main interest was the notion of the Islamic state. Da'esh did not exist then, but I was fascinated how Islamic law constructed the concept of a state. The thing was, Islamic law has very few, if any legal ideas about this. The notion of an Islamic state, I realized, was an invention by the Pakistani thinker Mawdudi, in 1941.

But what intrigued me was that, even though Islam had very little to say about an Islamic state, so many Muslims I met wanted it. To them, that was the ideal future. But when I asked them what they meant by this Islamic state, or how they envisaged it, they usually could not answer that question. My suggestions of any state today that might serve as an example were dismissed offhandedly: none of them fit the profile of their idealized Islamic state. The only definition usually given was what I call the photo-negative, that is, what the Islamic state was *not*: it was not the Muslim-majority states that we have today. It was, therefore, more utopian dreaming than imagining a concrete state structure.

This was my first encounter with future thinking. The Middle East was a place where the discontent of people made them look for alternatives, to look ahead to a better future. This was also the elation everyone felt with the Arab Spring. And this explains, to my mind, the enthusiasm for Da'esh (even though so many scholars said this had nothing to do with Islam). Nowadays, future thinking in the Middle East seems to be concentrated in the Gulf, and more focused on technological grandstanding. This is the futurism of science fiction coming through. And mind you, science fiction has always been the main vehicle to carry the ideas and dreams of future thinking.

Digging a hole

But I am not really interested in this type of future thinking. And to explain this, I have to back pedal a bit in time, to 2008, the moment that I got my position as a professor of Islam and the West at Leiden University. At that time, the world was entirely focused on Islam, terrorism and on security. I was working in a European environment that was, in addition to Islam, terrorism and security, also focused on integration of people of foreign origin, in particular Muslims. That was what the world was about, and that was therefore also what Islam Studies was about.

I found that both fulfilling and frustrating. Fulfilling because this academic work was also a form of activism. My job was, or at least that is how I defined it, about calming the waters, explaining what was Islam and even more so what was not Islam. I found myself part of a larger fight against the overdose of security thinking, political populism, and rampant anti-Islam sentiments. Because this was not just about Islam or Muslims, it was about society as a whole, about my society.

This had nothing to do with future. To the contrary. It was as if we found ourselves in a hole, the hole of radicalism and integration and national identity, and we were only digging deeper. We were not going anywhere. And that was the frustrating part. Our European societies were at a standstill, I found, and the relationship of these societies with Islam was not evolving. The Muslims in Europe, on the other hand, were undergoing rapid developments, mostly because they were put in this pressure cooker of hopes and anticipation from the side of their parents and peers, and of suspicion and criticism from their immediate environment. The focus was always on those who derailed, and hardly on the large majority who were bristling with innovative energy and a keen interest to participate in their society. But this went largely unseen by most of the public, policy makers, and politicians. Today, they are talking, thinking and acting towards Islam and Muslims in the same way they did twenty, thirty years ago. As if nothing has changed. I call that the treadmill of Islam in Europe: it's repetitive, not going anywhere, and not open to any new views.

Future of Islam in Europe

This was frustrating, personally but also academically. I thought of changing jobs, as I had done so often in the past. But then I thought: if I am so frustrated that we are not future oriented, why do I not make it part of my academic curiosity? So, I started to ask Muslims, friends, students: how do you see your future in Europe? How do you want it to be? And what role does Islam play in all this? Their enthusiasm to talk and think about these questions was both unexpected and overwhelming. These questions tapped into a creativity and an optimism I had rarely seen before.

And that is not so strange, if you come to think of it. We have a tendency to focus on problems, not on dreaming. Take any meeting you have ever sat in (and I assume those are quite a few). Were they not almost always about problems? Problems that needed to be solved, things that had to be settled and arranged. Personally, whenever I leave such a meeting, I am drained. How different is that from a meeting where we put our feet on the table and start brainstorming, making plans, thinking about where we want to go. That type of meetings is very energizing, and it is telling that we do that so little.

So, I started a research project called *The future of Islam in Europe*. To do so, I developed research structures and methods that are also known as citizens science. I wanted the Muslims themselves to come up with ideas and dreams, and I did not want to do this in the old-fashioned way that these Muslims were respondents to the questionnaires and focus groups of researchers. I wanted these Muslims to be co-owners of this research. Partly because I believe in that type of research. But partly also because Muslims in Europe have been subject of research for too long. In my country, Muslims are not only reluctant, but

suspicious of such research, because the outcomes are never helping in improving their lives. But now, for the first time, they could talk about what they wanted to talk about, what they thought was important.

Imagination

In all this excitement, I met a few Muslims who made me realize that I was engaging in a particular type of future thinking. This was the type of what we may call prediction or forecasting. This answers the question 'Where are we going'. It means that we plot a course into the future from here, based on what we know now. And of course, many Muslims had changed this question to 'Where do I *want* to go?' but even they were stuck in the structures and the ways of the present. And to be honest, that was also the way I was thinking: I was taking the context and parameters of the European structures as the environment in which to think forward.

But these few Muslims I mentioned did something else. They were not plotting courses, they were not thinking about futures. They were imagining it. And imagination, that is an entirely different ball game. Imagination requires that you disentangle from your comfort zone and from everything you learned and are familiar with. Imagination is, excusez le mot, an epistemological mind fuck. Philosophers have tried to wrap their minds around it. According to Paul Ricoeur imagination serves three functions: to critique today's realities, or to escape those realities, or to recreate a new reality. Charles Taylor speaks of social imaginaries, by which he means that all our social realities are products of our imagination, like money, or patriarchy, or the nation-state, human rights.

So, what is it what these Muslims are doing? The one who first started thinking about what he called an Islamic future, is Sardar Ziauddin. The reason to do this is to restore the pride and self-confidence of Muslims. To do so, Muslims need to, and I quote:

"(...) chart a path towards a desirable future, develop insights into managing and anticipating change, and work systematically to achieve our desired goals. We need to move forward from antiquated and ossified modes of Muslim thought to a fresh, deeper, futuristic understanding of Islam and a conscious, collective will to overcome the present impasse. Most of all, we need intellectual boldness and imagination. We need to imagine what has hitherto been impossible to imagine."

Imagination, therefore, is key. But there is another movement that undertakes something similar, but slightly different. They call themselves Muslim Futures, because, according to them, it is not about Islam but about Muslims, they are the ones who should be taking central stage. And they are not working towards a single, communal goal, but focus on the development of each individual Muslim. Hence the plural of Muslim Futures.

Why, how, whereto?

But the two also have a difference in their view of what Islam stands for. Sardar Ziauddin's Islamic Futures takes the classical Islamic legacy as its point of departure and advocates that intellectual boldness is needed to re-interpret this legacy and its sources. The proponents of Muslim Futures agree with this but take it a step further. They argue that Islamic law and

scripture are not necessarily the essence of what makes up Islam. They make this point to counter the mainstream acknowledgement in today's Islamic Studies of Talal Asad's concept of Islam as a discursive tradition. According to Asad, Muslims have been in debate for centuries about what Islam stand for, and these debates always revolved around Islam's sacred texts. The proponents of Muslim Futures disagree with this view. Islam is more than rules, they say. They look for, and find their Muslimness, if I may call it that, also in other dimensions of the Islamic legacy, like poetry, arts. They do not only want to address the intellectual faculties of their being, but also the sensory, the emotional, the psychological.

So, the goals of these types of imagination are not geared to structuring a utopian society, like Islamic state thinkers do, but towards creating new ways of being Muslim. In the case of Islamic Futures, it is more like creating ways to being Muslims as they were, to recreate the ideal past. Muslim Futures, I would say, is much more future oriented, and they are prepared to be surprised where their imagination may bring them.

The role of environment

And there is something else. Imagination is mostly reactive, I mean it responds to what is happening around us. Pure imagination, for the sake of imagination, is something that one hardly sees. There is always a reference point, why we do it. And here we see again an interesting difference between Islam Futures and Muslim Futures. Islamic Futures with its dreams of restoring the pride and self-confidence of the Muslims seems to me to address the Muslims in the Muslim-majority countries, the countries that can look back on a rich past of great empires and civilizations.

The proponents of Muslim Futures are more active in Europe. And the environment to which they are responding is therefore completely different from that of the Muslims elsewhere. It reminds me very much of the futurism that is taking place among indigenous peoples in North America and Australia. What they do, is to recreate and embrace their own epistemology, their own way of thinking with their own traditions and language, and to exclude the dominant epistemology of the world where they live in.

An example of this way of thinking is from Jason Edward Lewis who is of Cherokee and Hawaiian origin. We must, he says, and I quote, *"centre our practice in the cultural discourse and practices that frame it, and create a distinct future where we are not dependent on the gatekeepers to open the gates—not required, even, to storm those gates, or go around them."*

In short, he suggests disengaging from existing frameworks and to devise one's own. And that framework is only partly an intellectual exercise. It is much more a practice, to experience who one is. This is what we also see in Muslim Futures. The imagination of a future is therefore not to reach some destination or create some utopian place, but it is more a manner of walking one's own path. Imagination is not the means to a goal, as is the case with Islamic Futures, but a goal in itself.

So far, I have taken you into the uncharted territory of Muslims and their future thinking, and the many ways that this is manifesting itself. There are two more questions I want to discuss with you. What is the role of Islam, and what is the role of universities in all this?

The role of Islam

Islam, from a theological point of view, has little to do with futurism. The future of Islam is the Hereafter, which in itself is endless and not something that can be shaped by people. What Muslims have been shaping is their earthly life, and to live it in such a way that entry to Paradise is secured. The philosopher Farabi had ideas about such a life, that he described as the Virtuous City. A thousand years after him, Mawdudi came up with the notion of the Islamic state, that had similar ideas but was conceptualized in an entirely different manner. Strictly speaking, there is little futurism in that, because all that activity is confined to the living the correct life of a Muslim.

But the other forms of future imagination that we have been talking about - Islamic Futures and Muslim Futures - are different. They are not so much theological but delve into the rich legacy of Islam. In that sense, they are not so much Islamic, but more what we might call Islamicate. They rely on the lived tradition of Islam, and not exclusively on its orthodoxy.

This does not mean that orthodoxy does not play a role, and that it is all song and dance. To the contrary. My PhD student Sara Bolghiran and I hosted a special of the *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, wherein we invited young scholars to write about any topic of their choice but to expound in terms of Islam and futurism. It was interesting to see that most contributions were about new developments in how Muslims practiced their Islam. And some were indeed very imaginative, like a new take on Islamic children's books, or the emerging popularity of sufism, or the rise of Islamic education - *tarbiyya* - and its impact on European schooling. Very interesting, but these were more observations of developments that were new, and that were therefore considered belonging to the future.

But more interesting, I found, were articles whereby the authors explored Islam and came up with completely novel ways of looking at it and experiencing it. The same Sara Bolghiran wrote an article in which she identified beauty and ethics (*jamal* and *akhlaq*) as the corner stone of Islam. Another author, Hureyre Kam, re-did the ancient discussion about the question how we may know God by drawing parallels with today's discussions about reality as a computer-generated simulation. And yet another author from Bosnia unfolded an Islamic ecological cosmology based on the observation of the life of bees. Whatever you may think of all this, these were people who took the combination of Islam and imagination to the next level.

Imagination at university?

But this brings me to the second question. All this imaginative kind of future thinking, is that something we can do at universities? I find that a problem, for two reasons. First, because universities are not the cradles of creativity that I thought they were when I joined Leiden University in 2008. I was a bit shocked how methodologically strict they were, by putting every student in the same mould of what was called academic thinking. At a certain moment I started small think tanks of students to come up with alternative ways to think about Islam and society, and the first thing I had to do was to de-universitize them, as I called it, that is to

extract them from that corset of academic thinking and give their minds the freedom to roam, fantasize and, yes, imagine. So, there we still have a world to win.

The other problem is that our universities are still stuck in a Western way of thinking, a Western epistemology. And no, I am not one of those academics who will call for the decolonization of universities. But I am calling for a broadening of our academic tools, for a widening scope of epistemologies. In the field of Islamic Studies, for instance, I am advocating that Islamic thought and the entire epistemology that comes with it, is not only studied but is put to use, and that, if possible, and if need be, is merged with the best elements of Western academic epistemology. For instance, I have a young imam who does a PhD with me about the future position of imams in the Netherlands: not where they will end up - that is the prediction of the future - but what they should be, how they should function. He is fully trained in the Islamic theological way of thinking, and I have asked him to also master the Western academic way of thinking, and then to take from those two what best suits his research. What I want - and this is my own personal *jihad* in academia - is that bright students dare to think again. Of course they must learn the academic ropes. But then they must be set free to use those magnificent minds.

So, this is all very exciting stuff. But where does it leave me? Because a sad consequence of this project and this approach is that it has made me more of an outsider. I am not a Muslim, so I cannot think and dream along with these Muslims. I can merely observe, and that makes me into the traditional academic who watches and does not participate. So, my work in this is mostly to provide spaces to think and dream, and to ask the pertinent academic questions to keep everyone sharp.

But there is more. I am also learning. Because this type of future thinking is not only beneficial to Muslims but also to others, and to our European societies in general. For Muslims, this type of imaginative future thinking will create new spaces in European society that will allow them to live their lives the way they want to live them. But by the same token, European societies may benefit from this new type thinking, as it provides one of the ways forward that are so much needed in the Europe at this juncture of the 21st century. Perhaps we are witness to a new Ibn Rushd, the twelfth century Muslim philosopher who influenced and inspired European thinking.