

## ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE

Paula Span

**Could a public conversation between a Muslim from Pakistan and the Jewish father of murdered reporter Daniel Pearl be something more than “just two grandfathers on a stage, talking”?**

On the second anniversary of his son's death, Judea Pearl stands onstage at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan, lighting a memorial candle. A larger-than-life image of the beaming Daniel Pearl appears on a screen behind him.

“You lived an extraordinary life, Danny, and you died an extraordinary death,” he says, as people in the auditorium listen silently. He talks a little about his son, the Wall Street Journal reporter murdered in February 2002 by terrorists in Pakistan. He chants a Hebrew prayer in his warm tenor, and then translates: “Age would not slow his growth, and time will not fade his youth.” He speaks of his need for “revenge”—by eradicating the hatred that took his son.

It's a long evening, with panelists discussing Jewish identity—“I am Jewish” were among Daniel Pearl's final words, captured on the videotape his killers made—and then a book signing. Through it all, Pearl remains cordial, lively, greeting friends and strangers. He signs copies of *I Am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl* for someone's birthday and someone else's grandchild.

Only when the last book has been inscribed and everyone has left does Pearl sag. As though someone had switched off the current, the brightness leaves his face.

A much-honored computer scientist at UCLA, Pearl has been more accustomed to addressing conferences on artificial intelligence. Now he's on a different mission.

“I wasn't born for this,” he says. “This strange mixing of tragedy and celebrity and friendship.” He looks very tired.

Akbar Ahmed, on the other hand, probably *was* born for a high-profile public life. On an early spring day in Washington, Ahmed is in a taxi heading downtown from American University, where he holds a chair in Islamic studies, for a quick BBC interview.

Too often he has heard supposed experts on television. “‘Islam is terrorism,’ ‘Islam is extremism’—they're ‘explaining’ Islam, and I'm telling myself, America is being misled,” Ahmed complains in the cab, “It's frightening for a superpower to be so ill-informed.”

Today's headlines report Pakistani troops hunting al Qaeda forces in Waziristan, the remote region where Ahmed—who for decades balanced a high-level career in Pakistan's civil



service with his academic appointments—was once the chief administrator. If he doesn't accept media requests, will the interviewee replacing him know as much about that part of the world? Or even be a Muslim? "If I don't do it, who's going to do it?"

In the studio, Mike clipped to his tie, he crisply tells an interviewer in London about the terrain and tribes in Waziristan, the potential dangers, and what he sees as the long-term insignificance of one day capturing Osama bin Laden. Minutes later, he dashes out to the waiting cab, back to campus.

At some other point in history, Ahmed and Pearl probably never would have crossed paths. Despite some similarities—both are immigrant academics in their sixties who as children witnessed the costs of religious and ethnic strife—Pearl was usually cloistered in a California lab while Ahmed was making himself a fixture at lecterns in London and Washington.

Yet they've become partners and, gradually, friends. Every few weeks they travel to another city for an event with a title like "Towards Interfaith Understanding: A Journey Through Dialogue."

It's a low-tech communications medium: two chairs on a stage, two mikes, two men talking about their religions and the misunderstandings and tensions between them, while several hundred people listen. It can seem a paltry effort in the face of the unceasing violence in the Middle East and the accompanying rift between Judaism and Islam. Yet Ahmed and Pearl are a hit, with organizations around the world begging the interfaith roadshow to stop in their towns.

It was supposed to be a one-time event in Pittsburgh last year, until the participants grasped that a lot of people wanted to hear what Daniel Pearl's father had to say to a Muslim intellectual who grew up in the city where his son died—and vice versa. So, although they've also learned that merely sharing a stage is a controversial act in some quarters, their public conversation continues.

"The world must be in worse shape than I thought," Ahmed says, "if just two old men talking gives people hope."

IT'S LATE EVENING before Ahmed can settle into an armchair. He and his wife, Zeenat, have led a peripatetic life; this brick colonial in Bethesda is the first house they've ever owned.

A former Pakistani ambassador to Britain, he still looks the part of the dapper diplomat—pinstriped suit, tonsorial fringe of gray hair, lots of eye contact. He sounds like one, too, with his British-Asian accent (schedule becomes "shedyool"), his impressive memory for names, his trove of stories.

His family lived near Delhi, he says, and, as Muslims in India, confronted a stark, sudden choice when the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947: to remain in Hindu India or to depart for the new Muslim nation, Pakistan. His parents had 24 hours to decide whether to leave their elegant home and, if they chose to relocate, pack a few suitcases and find space on outbound trains so overcrowded that passengers huddled atop the cars.



"There was widespread rioting," Ahmed recounts, blending childhood memories and family lore with history learned later. "Muslims were being killed in India, Hindus and Sikhs were being killed in Pakistan, a general state of anarchy." Trains carrying refugees between the capitals, Delhi and Karachi, were being stopped, passengers slaughtered. "Very often they'd leave the driver, so when the train pulled in, you had a whole trainload of dead bodies."

Ahmed's father opted for Pakistan, whose founder hoped to forge a modern, democratic Muslim state, and wangled passage for his family. The frightening journey to Karachi was made more ominous by the fact that they'd let an earlier train go—Ahmed's mother wasn't quite ready to leave—and then learned that its passengers had been murdered. Who knew what might happen?

"I have a very faint memory of a compartment," Ahmed recalls. "Greenish light. When the train slowed down you were supposed to switch off the lights, so as not to attract attention." As they felt the train stop, the children, warned to keep silent, hid by sliding beneath the sleeping berths. Nothing was stranger, for a 4-year-old, than to see his peaceful father clutching a pistol in the dimness.

No one boarded the train, as it happened. But more dislocation awaited in Karachi, where Muslim refugees soon poured into their home, set up tents on the lawn. "In the corridor, there was a huge tin trunk and on top of it, a young man used to sleep," Ahmed remembers. "He must have lost his entire family in the partition, because he was all alone. He never talked or interacted with anyone. He lay on this trunk like a corpse, with a white sheet over his head."

For years afterward, as Ahmed excelled at elite schools and English universities and became an anthropologist, the refrain stayed with him: Hindus had done *this*. If you saw a snake and a Hindu, you should kill the Hindu first; the snake was less dangerous. Perhaps his desire for interfaith dialogue first germinated in London, where he was shocked to meet Hindu classmates raised on precisely the same bitter accusations about Muslims — down to the snake.

Instead, he put his energies into writing well-received anthropological books and into his civil service career in Pakistan, until a couple of events changed his course.

His father, "the one person in the world I felt really understood me," had been urging him to write about Islam, but he'd resisted. "Look, Daddy, I'm not an Islamic scholar; I'm a scientist," he argued. "Let the mullahs talk about it." But in 1981, when Ahmed was at Princeton, he called home and heard "the most unexpected news of my life": His father had died. When a colleague wandered into his campus office and asked what he was working on, Ahmed replied in a daze: a book about Islam.

"You're not an Islamic scholar," she protested.

"I'm becoming an Islamic scholar."

The result, *Discovering Islam*, was published in 1988, just as Ahmed arrived in the United Kingdom to teach at Cambridge, and just as the fatwa against Salman Rushdie created a



sudden demand for someone articulate and urbane to explain Islam. A few years later, the book became a BBC series that Ahmed hosted, making him something of a celebrity—"probably the world's best-known scholar on contemporary Islam," the BBC said last year.

And then, if one believes in a guiding hand that causes odd confluences of events (Ahmed does), consider this one: After years of interfaith activity in Britain, after leaving his ambassadorship ("all diplomats have to get up and, in a very smooth and charming way, tell lies") and resigning from the civil service, after another year at Princeton, he accepted an offer to teach at American University—and arrived in the U.S. capital weeks before September 11, 2001. "Since then until today," he says, "I don't think I've had a peaceful 24 hours."

By now, his life *is* an interfaith dialogue. He's perennially maneuvering disparate people into the same room by, say, accepting a speaking engagement at a tiny Iowa college ("I was the first Muslim they'd ever seen") or bringing South Asian Muslims from a State Department seminar to a Passover seder. It requires faith in small victories.

At 61, Ahmed remains the cautious diplomat, but it's clear that he's appalled by the consequences of the U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq; every bomb that falls on Muslims, he says, strengthens the appeal of Osama bin Laden. As a South Asian, he's avoided wading squarely into the Arab-Israeli conflict but laments the way it's damaging relations between Islam and Judaism. Nothing he sees on CNN makes him sanguine.

But a letter from Britain's chief rabbi, praising his latest book, does. "We have trouble, we have hate, and then we have these wonderful moments that really make us human, that inspire us," he exults, showing off this prize.

"Dr. Pearl is one of those wonders."

JUDEA AND RUTH PEARL are sitting in their garden in suburban Encino on a day when the sunshine splashing down on lemon trees is a potent reminder of why people move to Southern California. It's also reminiscent of Israel, where they met as engineering students.

All these years later—he's 67—Judea retains an Israeli informality. With an undisciplined beard and lively eyes behind utilitarian glasses, he's wearing a T-shirt and sweat pants. He sounds Israeli, too, his swallowed-R accent still strong, though he's lived in the United States since graduate school and became a citizen in 1971.

His grandparents helped found a sandy little village near Tel Aviv called B'nai B'rak. Family legend says that his grandfather, assaulted by thugs in Poland, announced to his family, "Start packing, we're going home." In the last moments of his life, Danny Pearl volunteered his family connection to B'nai B'rak—proof, to his father, that he was speaking of his Jewishness not under duress but with defiant pride.

Judea dislikes discussing the details of what he usually calls "the tragedy" or "the disaster." It's intensely painful, and it focuses attention on how Danny died when the family's goal—since establishing the Daniel Pearl Foundation within days of his death—is to talk about how he lived. Still, even when no one is asking, the grief and the questions persist.



"How brave do you have to be to kill a single noncombatant?" Ruth Pearl demands, pondering anew why extremists targeted her son.

Judea shrugs. "The more cruel you are, the more powerful you are perceived to be."

As a child in what was then British Palestine, Pearl remembers Jewish and Arab kids playing together in the orchards and fields. Yet he also recalls air raid sirens sounding as intense violence erupted after the establishment of the new Jewish state in 1948. Soon the Arabs, "all our friends who used to come to the village with their donkeys and their fruits, they simply disappeared, overnight." Within a few years, Pearl was in the army, patrolling the Gaza border. He considers himself lucky that he used a weapon only once—and that the nighttime intruder, subsequent investigation showed, was a fox.

Such war-and-peace issues receded for several decades, though he still had family in Israel and visited frequently, as he pursued a career in the sciences. His wife and children understood that, while he won top prizes for work on probability and causality, Dad wasn't likely to notice when the car needed servicing.

A towering figure in artificial intelligence, Pearl posted a sign on his office door: "Don't Knock: Experiment in Progress," a fib meant to dissuade interruptions. "He wanted to spend his professional time on research; everything else was a distraction," says his UCLA colleague Richard Korf. At a Seattle conference in 1987, a rising computer executive wanted to meet him, but Pearl—who had never heard of this guy Bill Gates—blew him off.

He had hoped that Danny, also a gifted scientist and violinist, would follow him into computer science or study music; journalism, Judea thought, meant being "an ambulance chaser, a stenographer." But he changed his mind as Danny began traveling the world for the Wall Street Journal.

Naturally, the family worried. Though cautious about his safety, Danny often operated in dangerous regions. "He had this illusion that journalists are somehow protected," Judea says now, grimly. His parents were relieved, in late January 2002, that Danny and his pregnant wife, Mariane, were about to leave unstable Pakistan.

In his last phone conversation with his parents, Danny was exultant over the news that the baby was a boy. The next communication from Karachi was a call from Mariane: "Something bad happened to Danny. He didn't come home. He's not answering his cell."

The Pearls' response was methodical, relentless activity. Judea spoke with the State Department and the FBI; he lobbied prominent Muslims like Muhammad Ali and Louis Farrakhan to make public statements. "Two or four o'clock in the morning, his time, Judea would be on the phone," recalls John Bauman, then U.S. consul general in Pakistan. With camera crews, satellite trucks and squadrons of reporters encamped outside the house, nobody slept much anyway.

What's striking, in retrospect, is how optimistic they felt. Four days after his disappearance, Danny's captors sent e-mail to news organizations, appending photographs. The Pearls



and their younger daughter, Michelle, alerted to expect the images, gathered around Ruth's computer, waiting, watching. When they saw the photos—in one, a revolver was held at Danny's head—they wept not in horror but with “elation”: He was alive. “They made some demands!” Judea says. “They didn’t want to kill him. They wanted to get something.”

Besides, the Pearls were certain that if any of his abductors could speak even a little English, Danny could forge a connection. “He could charm people; he could communicate with people of all levels,” Judea says. By now, they told one another as time passed, Danny was probably organizing a backgammon game.

For 30 days, they waited for a ransom demand, more photos, any news at all. They tried to imagine what the terrorists were thinking, “to put ourselves in their minds,” says Judea. Even a series of nerve-racking false alarms helped stoke hope. Four times, the family was told that Danny was dead, then that he wasn’t. “The longer it went on, the more convinced we were that he was alive,” Ruth says.

They were also convinced that Danny's Jewishness, if it became known, could doom him. Like most Israelis, Judea considers himself “a secular Jew,” identified with Jewish history and culture but without much interest in religious observance. “I do not believe that there is some entity up there that writes down what you do and what you think, and punishes and rewards accordingly,” is his take. But that would hardly matter to Danny's kidnappers, the family thought. So news organizations quoted statements by “his parents” without mentioning their Hebraic first names; Michelle Pearl even re-recorded their answering machine message to eliminate their accents.

Still, an Israeli reporter learned the truth and called Judea to say he was about to publish. “I pleaded with him, ‘Don’t do that.’ He said, ‘Why?’”—pointing out that Israeli records already documented Danny's background. “The excuse I hate the most,” Judea says. “You’re pouring oil on the fire and it doesn’t matter, because there’s already a fire.” Michelle, hearing her father's end of the conversation, began to scream, *They’re going to kill him. They’re going to kill him*. “You are really playing with life and death,” Judea told the reporter. In the end, the newspaper held back.

But it didn’t matter. Daniel Pearl was already dead, though it was late February before the authorities learned this from a ghastly videotape.

Consul general Bauman broke the news to Judea.

“Is he dead?”

“Yes,” Bauman said.

“Are you sure?” “Yes.” There was a video, Bauman explained. “Do you want me to describe it to you?”

“Tell me one thing: Did they cut his head?” It was the one act that couldn’t be faked on video, Judea thought, proof of death.

Yes, Bauman said, Danny had been decapitated. “Should I go on?”



"No. It's enough."

At a trial in Pakistan that summer, Sheik Omar Saeed, the British-educated mastermind with a long terrorist history, was sentenced to death, and three others were given life sentences. But two years later, their appeals have yet to be heard, other suspects have yet to be charged, and the Pearls are losing hope, fearing that the perpetrators will find a way to freedom. Anyway, Judea says, "What is hope in this case?"

He quickly channeled his fury, however. "I'm driven by pragmatics," he says. Even if he could retaliate against the murderers, "What do I achieve? There will be 100 more." True revenge, he decided, meant taking aim "at the whole ideology that created the madness." So when he tells audiences that he's offering a "weapon"—a little intake of breath generally follows—he explains that he wants to "tame that hate."

That's what the still-fledgling Daniel Pearl Foundation, with Judea as president, works toward. The foundation brings journalists from Muslim countries to work in American newsrooms; it organizes hundreds of concerts around the world on Danny's birthday to promote tolerance; it sponsors cross-cultural programs for young people. And it supports this Muslim/Jewish dialogue.

There were times, early on, when both Ahmed and Pearl felt uneasy about it. Ahmed worried that nothing he could say about the compassion in Islam would outweigh people's horror at Danny's murder.

Judea Pearl, for his part, felt somewhat inadequate. Because the world remembers his son's murder, people will listen to him. "I must call it an 'opportunity,' even though that sounds ridiculous," he says. "I see doors opening to me that were not open before and are not open to everyone."

If only a door had opened to someone with more political savvy, greater organizational skill, he thinks. "But it happened to me. Me with my shortcomings, with my not speaking Arabic, with my imperfect knowledge of Islam," he says. "To me, not Henry Kissinger. So I have to do the work."

**HISTORICALLY, SCHOLARS POINT OUT,** animosity between Islam and Judaism, two "Abrahamic" faiths (after the patriarch they—and Christianity—share), makes little sense. They have a great deal in common, "the same history, the same personalities and the same values," says Tamara Sonn, past president of the American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies. Judaism and Islam coexisted for centuries with comparative tolerance, even friendship. Islam's Golden Age in medieval Spain was a 500-year joint venture among Christians, Muslims and Jews. For centuries afterward, every Muslim capital—Baghdad, Istanbul, Damascus—included a flourishing Jewish community. Jews generally fared far worse under Christianity.

Even the wounding violence in the Middle East was couched, until very recently, in nationalist, not religious terms: a territorial and political struggle between Israelis and Arabs, not a religious dispute pitting Judaism against Islam.



Now, however, extremists on both sides wield religious imagery to justify their actions. Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the suicide bombers they recruit cite the Koran; Israel's religious ultranationalists, like Yitzhak Rabin's assassin, invoke the Old Testament. This marks the "religionization" of the conflict, says Mumtaz Ahmad, a specialist in Middle Eastern politics at Hampton University, and, thanks to the growth of extreme Islamist movements and to globalized communications, its bitterness has spread around the world.

Ahmad collects militant publications from Muslim countries and finds them "almost entirely based on religious idioms of conflict with the Jews." That old anti-Semitic hoax *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* circulates in Pakistan; it also transmuted into an Egyptian television series. Many non-Muslims' equation of Islam with terrorism has further poisoned the relationship. Muslim/Jewish dialogues have cropped up in some Western cities, but they're mostly small, sometimes fragile efforts.

Such was the discouraging state of affairs when discussions about a dialogue in Pittsburgh began last year. A retired businessman attracted to public affairs, Lewis Jaffe, happened to see Ahmed on a news show, tracked down his phone number and called, saying, "I've found the right Muslim." Then he asked Pearl (another complete stranger) if he'd join Ahmed for a public discussion. Both parties cautiously agreed.

One measure of the suspicion and sensitivity between Muslims and Jews was the extreme care taken in organizing the first dialogue. Although the local American Jewish Committee was its sponsor, everyone nixed the idea of staging the event at a synagogue, opting instead for the neutral University of Pittsburgh in October. Ahmed, they agreed, should speak first. "If somehow this program was perceived as being about Judea Pearl and Akbar was secondary, many Muslims would see that as a slight to Islam and him as a tool of American Jews," explains David Shtulman of the AJC.

The Q&A session would limit audience responses to two minutes. "If some radical gets up and starts ranting," was Shtulman's thinking, "it only happens for two minutes."

Despite some doubts on all sides—the two dialoguers had met just once before, briefly—everything went off without a hitch. Almost 500 Christians, Jews and Muslims turned out. Pearl and Ahmed, determined to avoid a warm-and-fuzzy exchange, tackled some pointed questions. A member of the Pakistani National Assembly, invited by Ahmed, even humbly offered Pearl the first public apology from anyone in the Pakistani government. Nobody got insulted, ignored or drowned out.

"In the car on the way to the airport," recalls Shtulman, who was driving his two guests, "we said, 'This may really have legs.' " They soon decided, as invitations streamed in, to take the dialogue to Philadelphia in January and then to the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg.

Though much of their early trepidation has eased, some remains. Pearl, who's been reading the Koran and receiving tutorials in Islam, frets about whether he's being effective, whether as a "proud Zionist" who favors both a Palestinian and a Jewish state in the Middle East (as does Ahmed), he can tackle such "hot issues" without appearing to be anti-Muslim.



Others worry about him, too. "You represent this horrible story," says Mariane Pearl, who understands the psychological difficulty. "You have to embrace other people's emotions." It entails, she says, "a certain loneliness."

But the greater risk may be to Ahmed. In some countries, Muslim academics perceived as too Western, too critical of religious or political leaders, too sympathetic to Jews, have been arrested, deported, even murdered. In Britain, Ahmed's calls for understanding generated flak from militant Muslims, who denounced him as a naive "apologist," an Uncle Tom. He continues to get nasty e-mail in this country, too, from mistrustful Muslims ("How can one shake hands with someone firing a gun at you?") and angry non-Muslims ("Does your culture BUILD anything, or just blow things up?").

Being in America doesn't ward off acrimony. Three years ago, an explanatory book about Islam, commissioned by the American Jewish Committee, was assailed by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and a Jordanian cleric branded its author—Khalid Duran, then at Temple University—an "apostate" whose blood should be shed. A few years earlier, University of Virginia professor Abdulaziz Sachedina faced a heresy trial in Iraq after publishing books and articles advocating religious pluralism. The resulting fatwa (which he ignores) forbids Sachedina to speak to Muslim gatherings anywhere in the world.

So Ahmed is careful with his words and assiduous about cultivating allies—but he is also fatalistic. "When you take the middle position, you are attacked from both sides," he says, sounding untroubled. "But I am dragging people along."

#### WILLIAMSBURG IS BASKING IN ITS FIRST WARM SPRING DAY.

"Welcome, welcome, dear friend," Ahmed declares, flinging an arm around Pearl's shoulder when he comes downstairs in the morning. "Come sit down, calm yourself, have some coffee."

They're staying at an elegant William and Mary guesthouse.

This afternoon's dialogue will, like the others, be bracketed by a press conference and a brunch with local religious leaders. That leaves just enough time for the dialoguers and their small advisory team to map out the coming months.

Spreading their papers over a conference table, they sift through invitations. The annual meeting of human rights agencies in Chicago in August? Yes. The Islamic Society of Central New Jersey in September, their first dialogue in a mosque? Definitely. Boston? Not a priority. But Detroit, with its large Muslim population, is.

Next up, however, is London, where they're planning a week's worth of programs. "The U.K. is very volatile," warns Ahmed. The key is to avoid being drawn into others' controversies: "We're just two grandfathers on a stage, talking."

A few hours later, the two grandfathers are about to face a crowd of more than 400. Remember, Ahmed says in Pearl's ear, what Winston Churchill advised a young friend about public speaking: "Check your fly."



Onstage, Ahmed introduces his usual theme: that the merciful Islam he knows is unrecognized by the West and in danger of being usurped by some of its own angry, dispossessed believers. Pearl asks, as he often does, why Muslim leaders don't exorcise their dangerous fanatics. Ahmed acknowledges "a problem with leadership across the Muslim world" but complains that when leaders do condemn extremism, the Western media ignore them. Pearl, trying to point out that Judaism isn't the enemy, suggests that American Jews, veterans of civil rights battles, could help "our neighbor Muslims" with the legal fallout they've faced since September 11.

There are a few tense moments. "What if you were to run a poll in, say, a village in Morocco and ask them who they would choose as a role model for their children," Pearl asks, "Jinnah or Osama bin Laden?" Mohammed Ali Jinnah, everyone who knows Ahmed soon learns, was Pakistan's democratic-minded founder. But the current answer to the question, Ahmed acknowledges, is bin Laden.

"So the idea that al Qaeda represents only a negligible minority . . . that's wrong," Pearl concludes.

Not so, says Ahmed. Muslims are drawn to bin Laden "as a symbol: This man is standing up and talking on our behalf." That doesn't mean they subscribe to his philosophy. "Osama's actions, you need to know this, are not rooted in Islam," he insists; the Koran condemns the murder of innocents.

Perhaps there's not much expressed that people couldn't learn by reading a few books, but the interfaith roadshow is more compelling, more moving, more alive. Listeners seem touched by an uncommon response from a man who's suffered a harrowing loss; they're reassured, though also alarmed, by what his counterpart has to say. The crowd gives Pearl and Ahmed a standing ovation.

**BUT HOW MUCH CAN TWO GRANDFATHERS ON A STAGE ACCOMPLISH?** Can speaking to several hundred people in one Western city or another create significant change? Fifteen million people live in greater Karachi, and the roadshow—though its participants intend to visit Muslim countries—is not headed there anytime soon.

It's not a bad idea for Ahmed and Pearl to keep talking; this may be among the few statements the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Muslim Public Affairs Council and the American Jewish Committee currently agree on. But that doesn't mean they're changing hearts and minds—or policies. "It's a noble attempt, but I personally don't think it's going to go anywhere," says George Irani of the conflict analysis and management program at Royal Roads University in British Columbia. Ahmed, he thinks, "should be reaching out to Islamic groups in the U.S. and elsewhere, not making it an individualist quest, but a collective quest" that reaches "from the furthest mosques in the Philippines to the closest synagogues in Brooklyn."

It's not difficult to find critics. They appreciate the effort but say that the dialogue is elitist, taking place on campuses instead of reaching into ordinary people's lives. Or that it's hit-and-run, attracting crowds and then moving on (something the dialoguers are working to address). Or that it draws the already tolerant, not the haters.



On the other hand, symbols matter. "It's in the nature of our People magazine society; personalization of the news does have an effect," says Steven Wasserstrom, a Judaic and Islamic scholar at Reed College in Oregon. "A face can make a difference." And if the dialogue has not yet traveled the world, its media coverage has: News stories and columns have appeared in Karachi, Jerusalem, Riyadh and Beirut. Pearl and Ahmed have been interviewed on al-Jazeera.

Besides, there's a certain desperation, given a steady barrage of depressing news, to do *something*. "It's a drop in the bucket," says Rabbi Reuven Firestone, the Islamic scholar who's tutored Pearl, of the dialogue. "But you have to keep dripping."

A STORY ABOUT PUSHING A BOULDER UP A HILL should conclude with an uplifting moment, something to hang hope on. Something like the World Tolerance Forum.

This spring, Pearl received a manila envelope, encrusted with postage stamps, from the Pakistani city of Faisalabad. Inside, he was surprised to find a magazine in Urdu commemorating Danny Pearl's death and—intriguingly—snapshots of a "condolence ceremony."

They showed perhaps 50 men and women gathered in a hall hung with English banners: "Peace Through Dialogue, Peace Through Discussion." Someone, adapting the international symbol of prohibition, had drawn a picture of a gun with a line through it. Mounted on the lectern, wreathed with flowers, was a photograph of Danny Pearl; before it, a young boy was lighting a candle that said "Peace and Reconciliation."

"It's what I dreamed of," Judea said, looking at the photos. How often had he spoken of his hope that one day, children in Pakistan would see Danny as a role model for open-mindedness and tolerance?

Ahmed, hearing about the photographs, was skeptical. However laudable the sentiment, he cautioned, in Islam, lighting a candle before an image would be considered idolatrous, "wrong, religiously and culturally." Perhaps the group belonged to the country's small Hindu or Christian minorities.

But no, the forum's chairman replied by e-mail: The boy was indeed a Muslim, engaged in a "unique example of paying tribute to Jewish people by the Muslim Community."

To Pearl, the photos provided one more reason to keep going. If this was indeed a Muslim group, then even this single small event meant "the hope of more." And if it wasn't, if "decent Muslims with the same sentiments" were not yet ready to publicly embrace dialogue? That just meant, he said, "that we are more needed."



## FOREWORD TO AKBAR AHMED'S 'RESISTANCE AND CONTROL IN PAKISTAN'

*Francis Robinson*

Akbar Ahmed belongs to the pages of the *Boy's Own* paper. Both scholar and administrator, both poet and man of action, he has, since going down from Cambridge, combined a glittering career in the tribal regions of the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan with a no more subordinate one as an anthropologist of international repute. In recent years, he has pacified fractious tribes, advocated a forward policy, and, for the first time, carried the authority of the Pakistani state in the South Waziristan tribal agency right up to the Afghan border. He has also written half a dozen books, not to mention numerous articles, on the economy and society of the Pakistani people, as well as on their life and culture.

This book is based on Ahmed's experiences as a political agent in South Waziristan from 1978 to 1980. Stimulated not just by the growth of Muslim revivalism in the world at large but also by a Muslim movement in Waziristan, he reaches beyond his former purely Pakistani and anthropological concerns to try to discover 'first, what is happening in the Muslim world and, second, the underlying causes'. He aims to do so 'by illuminating the social structure and the operative principles in contemporary Muslim society'. The outcome is a significant book, not only partly because it offers an intimate analysis of the interplay between economic, social and ideological factors in human action, some of which he has experienced at first hand, but partly because it marks a notable transition in Ahmed's own concerns. Up to the first publication of this book in 1983, he focused mainly on his scholarly work, making a contribution to anthropology. Since then he has been primarily concerned, as he declared in the subtitle of a recent book, to make sense of Muslim history and society<sup>1</sup>: a process which has fed a deeply felt desire to use his skills to enable Muslim and non-Muslim to understand each other better.

Ahmed's sense of mission comes at an important time for Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Rarely has it seemed more urgent that Muslims and their neighbours should understand each other better. After a period of nearly twenty years, the movement of Islamic assertiveness, which grew after the apparent slumber of the colonial period, shows no signs of abating. Indeed, it seems to be entering a new phase as now it comes to flourish, not just in the central Islamic lands, but also on the periphery: in South Asia, where the demands of the Kashmiri Muslims for self-determination have taken on an Islamic colouring; in China, where the Uigher-speaking peoples of Xinjiang have participated in an Islamic uprising against the state; and in western Europe, where Muslim immigrant communities have begun to express their grievances in Islamic terms. Moreover, as the relationship



between the Russians and their subject peoples changes shape, there are signs that the Muslims among them will express their aspirations for greater autonomy in terms not just ethnic but also, on occasion, Islamic.

The prime focus of Ahmed's book is on an analysis of an Islamic movement with ethnic dimensions. Ahmed begins by setting the scene, describing Waziristan, its two great tribes, the Wazirs and the Mahsuds, their culture and their rivalry. He then places their rivalry, in which the Mahsuds have come to have the upper hand, in the context of its relationship with the developing framework of the modern state. The core of the book examines, as the region develops economically from the late 1950s, the rise to power of a mullah. Noor Muhammad, as the Mullah was known, asserted himself against established authority in the form of the tribal maliks and the political agents. As he came to command more and more resources, he built the largest and most ornate mosque in all the North-West Frontier tribal agencies with an attendant *madrassah*, or Islamic school, at which the sons of the maliks were taught. By the mid 1970s he led what was virtually an alternative government in the region and was both instrument and symbol of a resurgent Waziri pride. The situation ended, as it was bound to do, in tears. In pressing forward Waziri interests, the Mullah declared *jihad* against the Mahsuds; the government was forced to take military action against the Wazirs. The Mullah was tried and imprisoned, which did not lose him either the loyalty of any of his followers or the substantial income they brought. Examining the Mullah's motives Ahmed finds political opportunism rampant beneath a threadbare Islamic guise. Examining Waziri motives, he finds the Mullah and his Islamic rhetoric to be the vehicle through which the Wazirs could reassert their tribal position and their tribal honour against the dominant Mahsuds.

Towards the end of the book Ahmed's focus shifts from Islam to himself as observer, anthropologist and representative of government. Drawing on his own experience as political agent in the aftermath of the conflagration raised by the Mullah, Ahmed reveals, through a series of case studies, how his anthropological understanding enabled him, without bloodshed, both to settle disputes and to advance the interests of government. After an assessment of his period in office, in which there seem to have been many successes and few failures, he seems to suggest (although not in so many words) that there is much to be said for those representatives of the modern state who exercise its authority in tribal societies being like himself, trained in anthropology.

Finally, he considers the meaning of his study for segmentary theory in anthropology. This involves the argument that in tribal societies the individual is defined by patrilineage in which smaller lineage groups fit neatly into larger ones and form balanced 'segments' which all acknowledge one common ancestor. The result is a society in which all are cousins and therefore equal; chiefs tend not to emerge and lineages tend to come together in the face of a common foe. Ahmed, while finding much to support segmentary theory in the world of Waziristan, finds its working distorted by administrative boundaries. The Wazirs were not able to wield all the force they might against the Mahsuds because the Afghan Wazirs refuse to cross the frontier to answer calls to their lineage loyalty. He also finds its working distorted by culture, in the way in which a charismatic religious leader is able to



overwhelm, for a moment at least, segmentary lineage politics. Ahmed concludes by offering an alternative theory for Islamic societies, the Islamic district paradigm. It is a theory which comprehends the working both of segmentary lineages and of supra-lineage Islamic values within the framework of district administration. Such administrative divisions were products of the modern state as it emerged under colonial rule, in particular that of the British who controlled more than half the Muslim world. As these divisions were by and large inherited by independent national states, the paradigm, he suggests, is well worth broad consideration.

This book can be read at several levels. First of all, it is a good story well told. The ingredients are excellent: some of the toughest tribesmen in the world, some of the hardest terrain, and the added spice of an international context in which a Soviet-backed Afghan regime is playing border games; there is a mullah who, at a time of revivalist feeling through much of the Islamic world, sets alight the Frontier Agency in much the same way as Mullah Powindah or the Fakir of Ipi might have done in days of yore; there are many telling details gleaned by the administration about the Mullah's activities, methods and interests—his income of £2,000 or more per day from taxes levied, his monopoly of the radio, and therefore an important source of revelation, his large and assorted supply of condoms, or French 'leathers' as the Pakistanis call them; there is the privilege of sharing in the political agent's work, though fortunately not his risks, as he treads the knife-edge of Waziri politics in more than usually dangerous times—indeed, as he flouts the rules and walks alone at sunset in the ravines outside Wana camp we almost expect to hear the crack of a .303, or perhaps Kipling's ten rupee jezail.

At a second level, in the biography of the political agent in office who is also an anthropologist in the field, we have one of those fashionable exercises in auto-ethnohistory. As Ahmed conducts us through his tour of duty, we are given rare insights into the work of a representative of the modern state in tribal society and into the skills which make for success in the job. Frankly, the Wazirs who took him on have my sympathy because few can have come to the Frontier with such knowledge and such understanding. Knowledge of the Pukhtun peoples of the region runs in his blood and in his affiliations. Although born into a family of government servants, which fled to Pakistan at partition, Ahmed's mother's father was of the Afghan Barakzai tribe, his wife is a granddaughter of the Wall of Swat. He has sat at the feet of those two great Frontier officers who lived in recent times, Olaf Caroe and Evelyn Howell. He commands all that has been written about the tribes of the Frontier; he knows much of what has been written of tribes elsewhere. He uses his knowledge of Pukhtun values and culture to the full in order to get his way. On his arrival in the Agency the Wazirs are smouldering, dispirited, their pride wounded by the downfall of the Mullah. Ahmed's technique is to show his confidence in them, his belief in their sense of honour. So he plans a visit to the shrine of the Wazirs' saintly ancestor, Musa Nikka, who rests close to the Afghan border, in difficult and traditionally hostile territory never before penetrated by a representative of government. The risks are great; the region is in the hands of the Mullah's partisans; one false move by either side and the Frontier would be ablaze once more. It is made clear that Ahmed is the Wazirs' guest. He places his life in their hands, they are on their 'honour'. The hundred-mile expedition passes off without incident;



Ahmed offers to pay for a dome of the tomb of Musa Nikka; the Wazirs donate land to help establish a post for the South Waziristan Scouts. It is a brilliant stroke. By this one move Ahmed not only did much to restore Waziri goodwill towards the government, but also for the first time the authority of the Pakistani state was taken up to the Agency's border with Afghanistan. Using similar tactics, Ahmed persuades Mahsuds to surrender arms supplied by the Afghan government, murderers to come out of hiding, and outlaws to surrender. Thus one man using the incisive key of knowledge unlocks the barriers of another culture without bloodshed and in circumstances where regiments of soldiers might have failed. It is tempting to suggest that translations of Ahmed's book should find a ready market wherever the modern state faces up to the restive tribe: in Turkey, Iraq or Iran, where the Kurds seem so intractable; in India where tribes present difficulties in the north-east; in Burma where they do so in the east, or even, dare one say, in Afghanistan.

But, if at one level the book can be treated as a handbook for ambitious government officials in tribal regions, at another it offers substantial insights into the complexity of the relationships between tribe and modern state in Pakistan, a complexity which is mirrored elsewhere in Asia and Africa. Ahmed demonstrates the limitations of the official view of the Mullah, the view that he was an agitator playing on the minds of simple folk for material gain, that all the administration had to do was to remove him and the trouble would subside. He is able to show that the Mullah is serving and being sustained by many interests; by the National Awami Party, which wanted a stick with which to beat the government; by the commandant of the South Waziristan Scouts who wished to embarrass the political agent, no less than by the Wazirs who were looking for a man who would restore their influence and their honour. The Mullah, as the representative of the Wazirs was enmeshed, in the purposes of several wider interests in Pakistan. And what was the case for the Mullah is also shown to be true of his enemies the Mahsuds. Their lines of communication with the rest of Pakistan might seem tenuous; there was, for instance, only one metalled road into the Agency. But these tribesmen were nonetheless able to influence provincial and national politics in their favour, and to do so with speed. Ahmed reveals how in October 1979 the Mahsuds were able, by using obduracy in Waziristan and by activating influential kin networks in Dera Ismail Khan, in Peshawar and in Islamabad, to nullify completely the attempt of the martial law administration to 'clean up' their town of Tank. The tribal agency was a home base for a lineage network of national, and at times of international, reach.

The most important level, however, at which this book may be understood is as an analysis of an Islamic movement in the modern world—as an example of what the none-too-careful observer might label as Islamic 'fundamentalism' on the march. Islamic 'fundamentalism', of course, means different things to different people: to academics, who might see it as a concern to return to what Muslims feel is the original form and content of Islamic teaching (a concern which, paradoxically, is both influenced by the West yet sees itself resisting the West in the broadest possible way), and to members of the general public, who, in societies much influenced by the European 'enlightenment', might apply the term to those who insist on conducting public affairs in a religious idiom or even on judging them by a religious standard. What Ahmed shows us is that there is more to movements, in



which the enemy might be designated *kafir* (infidel), where leaders might call for *jihad* (holy war), and followers might be asked to become *shaheed* (martyrs), than just the Islamic idiom. Thus, Mullah Noor Muhammad's Waziri followers, besides seeing him as their Maulvi Sahib—their religious leader, saw him both as a provider of money, shops, jobs and education, and, as their unifier, their source of pride and hope. Thus the motives of the Mullah himself, although Ahmed has difficulty in deciding what they were, are seen as having little to do with religion. Certainly, he made himself the focus of Waziri assertion against the Mahsuds, but the paradox of his situation was that the more successful he was in promoting the Waziri identity, the more he undermined his own Islamic base. Certainly, he was an able politician, who was increasingly, in the 1970s, coming to 'play' the politics of Pakistan, but it is not clear that political power was his main objective. Certainly, as he came to acquire power, he came to enjoy the comforts of wealth as a sleek and perfumed man, but it is not clear that this was anything more than a by-product of his success. When, on the other hand, Ahmed comes to religion he declares:

Was the Mullah's primary motivation religious? It would appear not. Although he employed a specifically religious idiom, his objectives remained explicitly political. His actions were patterned on military themes rather than religious ones. The Mullah was adept at converting mundane information into what appeared to be spiritual powers.... The Mullah, it seems, wished to control Islam rather than be controlled by it. Moreover, he wished to harness Islam in the cause of the Wazirs. Part of his genius as a strategist was to impose a religious frame on secular agnatic rivalry-, part of it was to identify the need to couch the problem in semiotic terms for tribesmen.

Ahmed, therefore, offers us a picture of an Islamic movement in which Islam is little more than the language through which material interests are expressed. For many this would be an acceptable understanding of the relationship between ideas, material interests and social action. Nevertheless, in considering Ahmed's picture, it should be noted that, while he gives us a full image of government's concerns and Waziri needs, that of the Mullah's world seems less well-rounded. Admittedly, we are told that he is a Wazir, born and brought up in the region, and that he attended Mufti Mahmud's famous school for *ulema* (men learned in Islamic knowledge) at Multan. We are also given a detailed description from the agency records of his growing power, from the construction of the magnificent Wana mosque to his final clash with government, a description which continually emphasizes his political skills, his wealth and his enjoyment of its trappings. On the other hand, we may need to know a little more about the Mullah and his activities to be able to form a judicious opinion as to their Islamic quality. What kind of teaching, for instance, did the Mullah receive at the school in Multan? To what extent was this teaching directed at training *ulema* who might wield power in the Pakistani state? What kind of teaching did the Mullah offer in his own school? What was the normal tenor of his sermons in the Wana mosque and of the guidance he gave to those who sought his counsel? How frequent were his contacts with the Jamiat-i-Ulama-i-Islam, which sponsored the school in Multan, and with Mufti Mahmood, the school's founder and the leader of the National Awami Party? Did he have any sufi predilections? For one thing, it is not uncommon for students in schools such



as that at Multan to become the spiritual followers of their teachers. For another, his distribution of *taweez* (amulets) was the typical action of a sufi holy man, while the continuing loyalty of his 'cabinet' of twelve, as he languished in prison, suggests the devotion of disciples for his movement, it is worth bearing in mind that there may be more to its Islamic context than at first meets the eye.

A similar point can be made regarding Ahmed's major theoretical contribution to the study of Islamic societies, and this is his concept of the 'Islamic district paradigm'. He suggests that modern Islamic movements, indeed Islamic societies, might best be understood, in many although not in all areas, in relation to the district, the local administrative unit of the modern state. Such an idea is what one might expect from a man in government, a man used to thinking in terms of local, provincial and national arenas of power; a man who, because he is often about the government's business, tends to see society shaping itself about the structures of the state. It is also a view once shared by historians, whose work rested to a large extent on the records of government and those concerned with state power.<sup>2</sup> There is a danger, however, that the 'Islamic district paradigm' might not give sufficient weight to Islamic connections and loyalties which exist quite apart from the structures of the state. Of course, there is no official organization of Islam, no priesthood, no church, as Ahmed rightly stresses, yet there is a considerable informal organization of flexibility, of reach and of strength. There are the loyalties of pupils for their teachers, of *ulema* for those who made them the bearers of the central messages of Islamic society—loyalties which stretch across oceans, mountain ranges and state boundaries. There are the loyalties of disciples for their sufi masters, loyalties which, again, know few physical or administrative barriers. These have formed the channels along which the prime moulding forces of an Islamic society—knowledge of God's word and knowledge of how to know Him in one's heart—have passed down through time and travelled throughout the Islamic world.<sup>3</sup>

In modern times these connections fostered by shared approaches to Islamic learning, shared doctrinal positions or shared paths towards spiritual discovery have come to be embraced by formal organizations of a bureaucratic kind. The great Islamic school at Deoband, whose pupils come from all over the eastern Islamic world, and in whose administrative records scholars are learning to quarry, is one example. The Muslim Brotherhood, whose organization ranges throughout North Africa and the fertile crescent, is another. The Jamaat-i-Islami and the organization of the Barelvi *ulema*, whose branches cover India, Pakistan, Bangla Desh and Britain, are yet others. Indeed, such connections, although of sympathy rather than of formal organization, have reached even into the Soviet Union. When the Grand Mufti, Baba Khanov, visited the north Indian city of Lucknow in the mid 1960s, he made a point of visiting the house of Maulana Abdul Hai Firangi Mahali, whose books he used in his school in Tashkent and which he had come greatly to admire. Doubtless further longstanding linkages between the Muslims of the Soviet Union and those of the wider world will re-emerge as Soviet power retreats.<sup>4</sup>

Evidently, Muslims who form part of such connections do not see their sympathies as confined to any district, nor indeed to any state. They regard the whole Muslim world, if



not mankind, as their potential field of operation. There are, of course, points, sometimes many points, at which they interact with the state, as Deoband did in the matter of the Indian freedom movement, as the Bareilvis did in the demand for Pakistan, as the Muslim Brotherhood has most notably in Egypt, and as the *ulema* have had to do in the Soviet Union. Such is the power of the modern state to intrude into every aspect of people's lives that those who wish to guard the faith cannot ignore its operations; they must work to influence its actions. Yet the framework of the state, its district, provincial and national levels of government, does not entirely define the fields which they envisage or even those in which they strive: the 'Islamic district paradigm' should be placed in the context of Islamic connections and sympathies which persistently operate beyond the purview of the modern state. This said, Ahmed's suggestion forces us to consider the extent to which a new degree of involvement with the framework of the state may distinguish Islamic movements of the twentieth century from those which have gone before.

*Resistance and Control in Pakistan* is being published in paperback about a decade after it was written. Glancing over the developments of the intervening years, there is much to suggest that the Mullah's movement was not a one-off event but a manifestation of longer term tensions and structural changes on the Frontier, in particular a decline of order and authority. On the surface this may not seem so. Soon after the Mullah was imprisoned, General Zia came to power and the Russians invaded Afghanistan. Zia was supported by the organization of the Mullah's patron, Mufti Mahmood's Jarniat-i-Ulama-i-Islam, which demanded that the Mullah be released. Eventually this happened, the Mullah being expected to play his part in leading a *jihad* against the Russians. Now he is back in his mosque, the Russians have left Afghanistan and the Wazirs walk in peaceful paths. Wana, moreover, boasts a public school, a spanking new hospital and its market has been rebuilt. But beneath the surface all is not well. Waziri discontent still simmers in the face of Mahsud domination, and matters are not helped by the fact that all the figures from the Agency in positions of national importance are Mahsuds. As the Soviet enemy has departed and the Islamic card has, for a moment, lost some of its potency, it seems that the Wazir's discontent may well be expressed, as so many other discontents are in Pakistan, in ethnic form. Furthermore, the old mechanisms for maintaining law and order—respect for old tribal leaders, the authority of the tribal *jirga*, and the code of Pukhtunwali—are breaking down and are not being satisfactorily replaced by the machinery of the state. Tribesmen are now involved in kidnapping and hijacking, not for political purposes as in the past but for economic ones. They are also much involved in the trade in arms and drugs. The North-West Frontier, however, is not unique in the breakdown of the underpinnings of order and the failure of the state to replace them with new ones. This is a problem of much of Pakistan, in fact, of South Asia in general.

This book forces the reader to think about the relationship between Islam and social action. Ahmed reveals that what purported to be an Islamic *jihad* was a very much more complex movement than it at first seemed to be, indeed that it expressed a wide range of material, social and psychological needs alongside the personal ambition of individuals. It is not helpful, he shows us, to confuse the grammar and metaphor of protest with its essential



causes. By making this clear Ahmed also encourages us to consider the significance which we should attach to the dimensions of religious training, outlook, feeling and belief which can both mould and suffuse such movements. If it is a mistake to see all Islamic assertions as manifestations of 'fundamentalism', to be understood purely in religious terms, there are difficulties in valuing the religious dimension as little more than an expression of material and other non-religious interests. Moreover, if this is true for the movement of the Mullah of South Waziristan, it is no less true of other Islamic movements, and not least that against *The Satanic Verses* of Salman Rushdie.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Akbar S. Ahmed (1988), *Discovering Islam. Making Sense of Muslim History and Society*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
2. See, for instance, 3. Gallagher, G. Johnson and A. Seal (eds) (1973), *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics, 1870—1940*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
3. I have developed aspects of this point in the following publications: (1982), *Atlas of the Islamic World since 1500*, Phaidon, Oxford; (1980) 'The Veneration of Teachers in Islam: Its Modern Significance', *History Today*, 30:, 22—5; and (1983) 'Islam and Muslim Society in South Asia', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n. S.) 17 (2): 185—203.
4. For an exploration of these linkages see: R. Canfield (ed.) (forthcoming), *Turko-Persia: The Middle East, Central Asia and India in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.



## FOREWORD TO 'DISCOVERING ISLAM'

*Lawrence Rosen*

Challenged by a request from his father that he initially felt neither disposed nor capable of fulfilling, Akbar Ahmed came to this book only after he had found his voice both as an anthropologist and as a believing Muslim. It is a happy coincidence of orientations for the reader who joins him in this venture, for this is not a book to be read as a member of an audience nor even as a text from which didactic expertise is to be sought. For all its deceptive appearance as straightforward description and analysis, the book is, I believe, best approached as an opportunity to look over the shoulder of one who is unflinchingly trying to explore and assess his cultural and religious heritage. Indeed it is a book that is almost oral in nature, an attempt to engage those who are willing to walk in the author's shoes for a while in a genuine conversation, one that teases up the readers' own assumptions, experiences, and reactions in the hope, not of overcoming them, but of engaging and even incorporating them. 'Part autobiography, part history, part literature, and part science' (as the author himself describes it), 'its aim was political' (as he later said)<sup>1</sup> in the sense that it engages us in imagining a world where power may indeed come to be shared through mutual comprehension. Seen in this light a strategy for reading the book necessarily suggests itself—as the sincere invitation of a host who so respects his guest as to share and attend to the exchange of honest views. For even though the reader cannot reply directly, at each point in the presentation one can hardly fail to sense, even without knowing the author, the openness for dialogue that suffuses his life and his work.

From the outset non-Muslims raised in the West with an image of Islam drawn from the Arab world will be tipped slightly off centre as they find the baseline for many comparisons situated in South Asia rather than in the Middle East. This is not a matter of authorial chauvinism: rather, it is a focus that allows the reader, guided by one coming at issues from the South Asian experience, to appreciate, in ways that are neither idealized nor impersonal, that Islam as a religion is indissoluble from Islam as a series of cultures—that the peoples who embrace this faith do not do so in the abstract but as embodied communities whose diverse experiences are conjoined by engagement in a common challenge. Two crucial aspects of this approach thus engage the reader from the outset: first, that Islam and Islamic cultures may best be understood in terms of themes and variations rather than as a scattering out from some real or imagined base of purity; and second, that whatever the perspective from which one approaches Islam—as a believer or a non-believer, as a South Asian or a member of the faith from any spot on the globe—one is necessarily at the centre, drawn to the concerns of a faith that holds the vision of reality for one person out of five on the planet, and which thus places every single one of us at a central point joined to every other such point.



That all who read this book are of necessity drawn together in a common enterprise is not, alas, a vision that is shared by even many well-educated people in either the Muslim or non-Muslim worlds. It is all too easy to cite those whose animosity blinds them to the simple grasp of others' beliefs or values. How can one hear without shame an American Congressman, John Cooksey of Louisiana, following the events of September 11, 2001 say: 'If I see someone come in and he's got a diaper on his head and a fan belt around that diaper on his head, that guy needs to be pulled over and checked.' How without sadness can one hear Muslim commentators on Al-Jazeera, the most open of television broadcasts emanating from the Middle East, perpetuate the canard that thousands of Jews were warned away from the World Trade Towers before the terrorists attacked, thus suggesting it was all a plot by Jews rather than Muslim extremists. And reviewers of the first edition of the book displayed every stereotype and form of personal agenda imaginable.<sup>2</sup> All of them are, however, among the voices that Akbar Ahmed wants us to understand without being forced to forgive, to place in their historic contexts without thereby justifying them, to accept as part of the landscape of a shared world while struggling to undercut their claims to acceptance. In doing so he tries to follow that most difficult of courses, the middle path.

The Quran (2:137) says: 'Thus we appoint you a midmost nation, that you might be a witness to the people, and thus the Messenger might be a witness to you.' On its face it sounds as though positioned at the middle must be the easiest of paths: avoiding extremes one can avoid difficult choices; dodging pitfalls to either side one can easily prevaricate; eschewing attachments on either hand one can claim as the high ground an imagined neutrality. In fact, the very opposite is closer to the truth. For the middle path, whether stretching forth for believer or for scholar, is in fact the most difficult of passages: it demands decisiveness at every step; the capacity to knit together the seemingly irreconcilable without sacrificing principle; the ability to unite groups who are in need of constant attention to their own sense of injury. To see the difficulties inherent in such a middle course one need only consider, for example, the place one gives to history.

In a recent interview, Bernard Lewis, the well-known scholar of Middle East history, said that people in the West 'need to understand that people in the Middle East, unlike in this country [the United States] have a very strong sense of history. In America, if you say, "That's history", you mean it's unimportant, irrelevant, of no concern. That is accompanied by a breathtaking ignorance of even recent history.'<sup>3</sup> One does not have to agree with Henry Ford, who famously asserted that 'history is bunk', to suggest, however, that even here the matter is not so simple. Memory, both individual and collective, is highly selective: contemporary events may not only colour one's uses of the past but as a culture's ideas of what constitutes a fact, a cause, or an explanation change so do the ways they relate to the past. It is thus quite common in the Muslim world, as elsewhere, for events that are no longer seen as affecting current relationships to be relegated to the attic of memory. The key, then, may be to understand what is regarded as relevant to present-day relationships, images, and identities, and how some, but not all, elements of the past are shaped by larger cultural ideas that are at once common to most Muslim groups and distinctive to each



Muslim culture. It is here, as in so many other ways, that Akbar Ahmed pursues his middle way.

Three axial moments in Islamic history reveal the author's approach: the early period of the Caliphate, when the death of the Prophet challenged the very existence of the Community of Believers; the Moorish renaissance in Spain, when accomplishment and tolerance appeared as a model for future ages; and the colonial period, when the confidence of Muslim cultures was undermined by political subordination and technological superiority. Ahmed's approach to these moments may call forth hints of the romanticization of the past or even of that form of nostalgia that sees inevitable decline from ages of greater purity or from models extremists have rendered ever more distant. But a careful reading of his overall orientation shows a much more subtle theme: for to Ahmed it is the constancy of moral themes, within a framework of variable practices, that renders history a wellspring for the templates and choices that confront Muslims in every culture and every age. The Caliphate thus becomes an icon of shifting from the Prophetic moment to the institutionalization of the Message, and with it the hard decisions that must chart a course between extremes—a course the early successors did not, in their humanity, fulfill through constancy to the moral precepts laid down, with extraordinary practicality, in the Prophet's own life and works. The Moorish moment may well have incorporated a level of tolerance, a meritocracy of accomplishment, but it was still within a framework of confessional separation that conflicts with modern Western ideas of equality, thus posing the hard question of whether some forms of segregation—by gender or religion—constitute discrimination or enablement. And in that most difficult of moments for the author's own generation, the aftermath of colonialism, one may be forced to ask if one's fathers collapsed in the face of outside force or resolved to preserve a core of inner solidity their successors would have to revivify through means their forbears could neither determine nor fully comprehend. History matters, but it does so not as an omnipresent entity strikingly different from experience in the West, but as just that sort of localized and personalized, culturally situated and personally integrated element all of whose contradictions Akbar Ahmed confronts in his account.

To pursue the middle course is also to ask whether certain matters are indeed incompatible or capable of being reconciled. Here, too, the traveller cannot avoid taking a position as he glances to either side: he is forced both to judge (and hence to establish criteria for judgment), and to decide what is or is not incompatible such that one avoids the feckless or morally bankrupt practice of pretending that everything and everyone are really alike. The twinned questions of democracy and tolerance are examples of such concerns.

Consider the following quotations. The first comes from a member of the Caliphate State, a self-declared Islamic state comprised of Turkish workers living in Germany, who said: 'It is very simple—Islam and democracy are incompatible.'<sup>4</sup> This stark statement is not only placed in the context of a European state that protects the speaker's right not to believe in the system that protects his ability to make such utterances but may make it possible for him, like the Islamicists in Algeria and elsewhere, to use democracy to gain power for an undemocratic regime. The second quotation, from the New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman, poses the issues no less baldly:



We patronize Islam, and mislead ourselves, by repeating the mantra that Islam is a faith with no serious problems accepting the secular West, modernity and pluralism, and the only problem is a few bin Ladens. Although there is a deep moral impulse in Islam for justice, charity and compassion, Islam has not developed a dominant religious philosophy that allows equal recognition of alternative faith communities.<sup>5</sup>

Ahmed's approach to both of these positions is, again, a middle course. He certainly does not deny that to some Muslims, even those who intend no harm to the West, authoritative religious guidance cannot simply be left to each individual to determine. He shows that, although there is neither church, formal hierarchy nor authority, it comes from consistency with foundational moral doctrines, not the cultural slant given to that which lies within human control. He can, therefore, applaud the Saudis' construction of a social welfare state in the 1960s, but he challenges them for their lack of generosity to Africans and their indulgent life-style. He appreciates the distinctive sense of injustice articulated by Shiite Muslims, but he does not mince words about political corruption or even the frequency of incest within Muslim families. His middle course is not the 'evenhandedness' that cites tit for tat, or one that casts a pall on everyone alike. Instead it gives us the concrete information about specific cultures on the basis of which we can converse with him about the very points of democracy and authority, tolerance and power that are raised by a wide range of believers and analysts.

At the end, as the Welsh saying would have it, one must judge. Ahmed's judgment is, however, neither that of final arbiter nor all-seeing scientist. Instead, it is the voice of one who seeks criteria for evaluation, and through these at least implicit criteria to assess the extent to which the moral principles of Islam suffuse the cultures to which they have given shape. Nowhere is this carried out more poignantly than in the contemplation of the father who inspired the book. It is not for sons to judge fathers, though sons *will* always judge fathers. In poetry and impassioned account, Ahmed confronts the plight of that generation absorbed by their encounter with the West, and by keeping the account at once personal and exemplary he honours both the difficult circumstances of parents who sought to retain what is most valuable in their faith without sacrificing what is most distinctive. And, where the local practices of one's culture may seem the only reality of enacted faith, the evaluation of that culture, and the role of one's predecessors in its design, cannot but be a painful challenge. Ahmed lets us see his criteria—and lets us think about our own—without ever letting us or himself escape into easy generalities or the simple erasure of difference.

It is, I know, a veritable act of heresy to attribute to a faith a belief I know it does not hold. And yet it is hard to avoid the feeling that the author is the incarnation of those whom he has reason to most admire. Never having met Ibn Khaldun or Saladin, the great Mughal Akbar or the medieval social theorist al-Beruni, one comes away from every encounter with his work prepared to believe one has indeed encountered each of them reincarnated in Akbar Ahmed himself. So let me introduce you to this most genial and enlightened of guides, and through him, as his friends and colleagues know so well, to yourself.



## NOTES AND REFERNECES

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2. Id.
3. Jennifer Greenstein Altmann (2001), 'Lewis: Strong Sense of History Compels Muslims', Princeton [University] *Weekly Bulletin*, Vol. 91, No. 11, (December 3), p. 1.
4. Ian Fisher (2001), 'Europe's Muslims Seek a Path Amid Competing Cultures', *The New York Times*, December 8, pp. B1jj at, B5.
5. Thomas L. Friedman (2001), 'The Real War', *The New York Times*, November 27, p. A19.  
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## ON TWO VIEWS OF THE SWAT PUSHUN (DISCUSSION IN CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY)

In anthropological circles, the name Fredrik Barth conjures up visions of an itinerant (Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Pakistan, New Guinea), indefatigable fieldworker and imaginative theorist (at least five books, numerous articles). By exposing himself so liberally (and generously), Barth comes under heavy flak from his detractors and receives unquestioning adulation from his admirers and students. As is true in the case of many innovators, the followers of Barth who slavishly and uncritically mimic his models are primarily responsible for much of the criticism (see, for example, Bailey 1970, Dumont 1972, Gluckman 1971, Mail' 1972). This is not to say that Barth is infallible (none of us is) and does not deserve an occasional theoretical and methodological slap on the wrist. He does, and Akbar S. Ahmed's (1976) *Millennium and Charisma among Pathans* administers a gentle but effective one.

Ahmed is currently Political Agent, Orakzai Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies of Pakistan, a post which permits him to translate his theoretical talents into action. Having served as a government official in various parts of Pakistan (including former East Pakistan, now Bangladesh), he transferred to the Government of the North-West Frontier Province as Deputy Secretary in the Home and Tribal Affairs Department in 1971. Later he served as Registrar of the Co-operative Societies of the North-West Frontier Province. His wife is the granddaughter of the former Wali of Swat, and this gives him unrivalled access to his subject: the dynamics of Swat society through time. He uses his material, not only to illuminate unknown (and previously unperceived) corners of Swat ethnography, but to criticize (fairly and at length) Barth's models, particularly in reference to *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans* (Barth 1959). In doing so, Ahmed manages to enlighten, elaborate, and extend both our factual knowledge and our theoretical concepts. Social anthropologists of all persuasions should be grateful.

Basically, Ahmed criticizes Barth for looking at the Pushtun (I prefer "Pushtun" or "Pukhtun" to the bastardized "Pathan" of British Indian terminology) society and culture through Western-tinted glasses and for incorrectly interpreting and downgrading (probably unwittingly) the role of indigenous religious leadership. According to Ahmed (p. 50), Barth also creates a wrong impression in lumping as "Saints" such diverse role-players as "Sayyeds," 'Mians,' 'pirs,' and 'faqirs'" and equating "khan" with "chief."

Barth's model characterizes the Swat Push tun as a political animal in search of political power. Ahmed argues that Barth presents a "khan's-eye view" of Push tun Swat society (p. 131). He views his subjects, says Ahmed (pp. 3-4), in terms of "methodological individualism," or man confronting society, in contrast to "methodological holism," or



"man born into a matrix of interacting and largely fixed social patterns." Barth concludes that individuals can assume and shed "group commitments" at will (Barth 1959:2). Ahmed disagrees: The Swat Pushtun, he says (p. 139), "is born into an interconnected number of social matrices that may continue to determine or 'limit' his choice or 'strategies.'" (For a similar discussion of the same problem, see Dupree 1973:248-51 and Dupree and Albert 1974:1-12.) He adds (p. 128): "In spite of the structural web that the State has spun around him, requiring holist analysis, Barth's Swat Pathan is still seen in individualist terms and his socio-political milieu continues to be equated to that of 'transactionalist' Western Man." He quotes Barth: "The political life of Swat resembles that of Western societies."

How did two persons studying the same society come up with diametrically opposed views? According to Ahmed, most of Barth's respondents were apparently khans, the landowning elite in Swat, so Barth's models revolve about three elements which Ahmed insists give a skewed picture of Swat society (p. 9). These three crucial points are:

1. *Ethnological ethnocentricity*. Ahmed holds that Barth views the Swat Pushtun as a Norwegian entrepreneur; i.e., returns must exceed costs, an extension of the Hobbesian ideal to South Asia. The transactional model, he says (p. 3), contends that "man is therefore a free agent faced with the problems of 'choices,' how he 'values' them, and the alternative 'strategies' open to him to mobilize them. Maximization finds its ultimate expression in the pursuit and attainment of political power." The ultimate prize, therefore, is the control of land (p. 22). Since Barth lays such stress on increased land ownership's leading to increase in power, Ahmed deplores the lack of data on landowners and non-landowners (p. 60).

2. *Reductionist analysis*. Ahmed agrees that the Yusufzai of Swat are indeed Push tun, but insists that to accept them as the norm in Push tun society is fallacious. In fact, according to Ahmed (and I agree), the Yusufzai represent a deviant cultural facies of Pushtun (p. 139).

3. *Synecdoche*. While the khans do spend an inordinate amount of time trying to "maximize" their political power, says Ahmed (p. 12), they certainly do not represent the bulk of the people of Swat, and other forces are equally important. Barth uses the "zero-sum" theory in establishing his model of the Swat power game. Such a mode), however, is based on the assumption of equality among participants, and Ahmed argues that in Swat "shifting boundaries or an uncertain number of participants would mean imbalanced opposition and make for uncertain rules" (p. 22).

The key question, as Ahmed sees it, is synchronic: Which Swat is Barth writing about? Ahmed divides the history of Swat (in relation to the struggle for power) into several major phases: Pre-Akhund (up to ca. 1850); Akhund (up to the death of the Akhund in 1877); Pre-Wali State (1877-1903); Wali of Swat rule (1903-26); Wali of Swat State (1926-47); Swat State in Pakistan (1947-69); Swat absorbed into Pakistani government administrative structure (1969-). Within this chronological framework, Ahmed attempts to put Swat in proper perspective. He adds several ingredients left out (or mentioned only in passing) in Barth's analysis: the role of the Akhund and other religious leaders in the creation of a Swat consciousness; the gradual centralization of power in the Wali of Swat, particularly in the early 20th century; the greater role played by the British in the power game; and the various reactions of the people of Swat to encroaching imperialism.



Ahmed feels that Barth is wrong in proposing that power oscillated between khans and Saints throughout Pathan socio-political history, partly because Barth fails to understand that his category of "Saints" actually embraces several, often sharply contrasting groups: "the orthodox (mullahs, 'Sayyeds,' 'Mians') and the unorthodox ('Sufis,' like the Akhund) .... Whereas the orthodox 'mullah' (and also 'Barthian Saints') work within the village social organization, and in practice with the good will of the khan, the Sufi works outside the village organization and established normative patterns of social behavior" (pp. 55-56). In leaving out the Sufi, Barth leaves out one of the more important elements in Swat Pushun dynamics. (It is not that Barth is unaware of Sufism, for he discusses the institution in an earlier work [Barth 1953].).

Ahmed offers a short, brilliantly conceived discussion of the significance of Sufis and Sufism in the Muslim world in general and Swat in particular. He points out the polar difference between the Sufi and Marxist and Barthian man:

The Sufi is in the world but not of it. While the bourgeois-capitalist and the Marxist-socialist stand on opposite ends of the politico-economic continuum and confront each other, the Sufi stands outside the relationship forming a third mid-way and tri-angular point. The Sufi is not unaware of the material world; he confronts it, comprehends it and then rejects it. The interaction remains mechanistic and the world peripheral. Marxist and Barthian man (as "maximizing entrepreneur"), on the other hand, confront the material world, comprehend it and wish to possess it; the interaction is dialectical and the world is central.

The Sufi cannot be characterized in Barth's terms (transactionalist, manipulating, maximizing, strategizing), for "maximization" becomes "minimization" to the Sufi mystic, and what Barth would consider as "minimizing loss" becomes a deliberate "minimizing gain." The original Sufi Akhund of Swat, therefore, was neither "strategizing" nor "manipulating" when he refused to be king, "but simply limiting an increasing involvement in extra-Sufi activity" (p. 88).

In order to clarify his concept of "millennium and charisma," Ahmed discusses the role of three Sufis in the late-19th-century Islamic revivalism which resulted from the impact of European imperialism. His examples are Ahmad Al-Sanusi, who founded the Sanusi Order in Libya; the Mahdi (Mohammad Ahmed) of the Sudan and the Samami Order; and the Akhund of Swat, Abdul Ghaffur of the Naqshbandi Order. The message of all three was "inner-directed and non-material and, what is more important, non-political," but led inevitably to "both millenarian activities and charismatic leadership" (p. 86).

Ahmed divides the Muslim world into the "orthodox-formal" (mainly urban and state-oriented) and the "rural-informal" (mainly rural and locally oriented). It is in the latter that the Sufi had the greatest impact and appeal. The "orthodox-formal" elite, although stunned by the rapid penetration of European imperialism, usually adjusted and, in Barth's terms, continued its game of "strategizing and maximizing," at times even working with imperialist authorities to gain its ends. Members of the "rural-informal" sector of Muslim society felt the totality of their lives threatened as the Christian, Western European imperialists not only gained the upper hand economically and politically, but invaded the values of the conquered societies. Arising out of this uncertainty came the certainty of the messianic



Sufi, "visionary leaders promising a, better order. couched in apocalyptic language and assuring divine assistance" (pp. 16-17). "They promised a land free of the infidel and a return to Islamic values (an Islamic Utopia)" (p. 107). Of course, all the Sufi uprisings ultimately ended in disaster, but, as Ahmed points out, the struggle was more important than the victory, the principle more important than the objective (p. 93).

In Swat, most of the greater khans, always distrustful of such movements, stayed out of the Malakand fighting of 1897-98, and some even secretly allied themselves with the British. Between 1877 (death of the Akhund) and 1917, the Swat millenarian movements witnessed a shift of political power from the khans to the charismatic Sufi mullahs, but superior British logistics, firepower, and discipline won the day. The sound of British bagpipes wailed throughout the area and then with-drew. (The people of Swat have their *own* bagpipes.).

Once again the khans entered into the Barthian games for power. By 1902, however, a new charismatic leader was rising who promised not a millenarian return to the past, but the creation of a state under unified leadership. Barth, according to Ahmed, chooses to ignore the rise of this charismatic leader following the collapse of the millenarian movements and, therefore skews the picture from the early 20th century on. The khans lost power as the future Wali of Swat gained. The British, for their part, always had two goals in India-maintain law and order and collect revenue-so they constantly sup-ported loyal Indian princes who voluntarily participated in such imperialist activities.

After killing his two competing agnatic cousins (and elder sons of the old Akhund), Miangul Wadud became the heir (now political combined with spiritual) to the Akhund. Miangul Wadud successfully competed with several millenarian mullahs and in 1917 was elected Badshah (King) of Swat. Initially, he instituted a program designed to minimize the power of the local khans and centralize Swat. He built roads, strung telephone lines, established schools and hospitals, and by 1926 had laid the foundations for a welfare state. More important for the creation of the Islamic State of Swat (recog-nized by the British in 1926, with Miangul Wadud installed as the Wali) was the establishment of a "standing force" of "800 mounted men, 3,000 footmen and 5 or 6 guns" (p. 96). Using this armed force, Miangul Wadud maintained internal order at the expense of the local khans and expanded and solidified his frontiers at the expense of neighboring tribal rulers.

Barth omits the emergence of the Wali and the conditions which led to it. Like many anthropologists, but particularly the British, says Ahmed (p. 112), he neglects the important *direct* connections between British colonial administration and socio-political change. Without the British, would millenarian movements and revolts have occurred? Without the dilution of the power of the khans *because of* the millenarian movements, would the Wali of Swat, *supported by* the British, have risen to power? Of course, the political charisma of the Wali, sanctified by religious charisma, was not a minor factor.

Barth argues that the Wali was *imposed*. Ahmed insists that he grew out of the society and became the overriding force. In the post-1926 period, the Wali brooked no opposition from the khans, weakening their power so that the peasants were able to challenge the khans after the Wali retired from the scene in 1949. The peasants became citizens of a state which offered them a set of functioning rights and obligations, instead of having to serve as



vassals to a khan (p. 125). Long before the partition of India in 1947 and the accession of the Wali to Pakistan, the khans had turned to economic wealth as *the* prestige factor. Even the Wali and his family became economic entrepreneurs as the political struggles for internal power ceased to be dominant.

Summing up his critique, Ahmed writes (p. 139), "Barth's Swat Pathan has become the Pathan; a theoretical model has been accepted and substituted for ethnographic reality. Swat, a 'unique' Pathan situation, has become representative of Pathan society at large. The aberrant or deviant has become the standard and the normal." Now, however, we can be grateful for an antidote, gently administered and cogently argued by Ahmed. The ball is in the "transactionist's" court, but an ace has been served.

Ahmed concludes (and rightly), "Professor Barth's Swat study ... is a lasting and rich ethnographic contribution to the limited number of serious books on the North-West Frontier Province" (p. 141). The same can be said about Ahmed's brilliant new work.

### Comments

It is a saddening, but no doubt common, experience to see one's analyses made banal and one's points of view reduced to simple stereotypes. It is perhaps even more distressing to be attributed a web of trivial and fundamental errors and omissions which one has not committed. I hesitate to take up space for refutation—some criticisms are indeed refuted by the reviewer himself: It is argued that "Barth omits the emergence of the Wali," and yet I am (wrongly) cited as arguing that he was "imposed"; my emphasis on competition between political leaders in Swat is said to be derived from the ethnocentric source of Norwegian entrepreneurs, and yet Ahmed himself states that the khans spend an inordinate amount of time trying to "maximize" their political power; a frequently cited infelicitous expression is referred to out of context as my conclusion, and yet the reference given is to p. 2 in the introduction to the monograph.

Dupree seems to accept the imputation that most of my "respondents" were khans—imply quite apart from the untruth of the intended criticism, a *method* so foreign to my procedures in the field that I should have thought any reading of the monograph would reveal its baselessness. Secondly, I am ascribed the general assertion that "power oscillated between khans and Saints throughout Pathan sociopolitical history." This is erroneous on two counts: Dupree here (as elsewhere) ascribes to me an error of which even Ahmed absolves me, namely that of confusing a half-million Swatis with 10 million Pathans. What is more, the contention is so directly contrary to the main thesis of my Swat monograph that I must seriously doubt that my book has been read or remembered at all.

For such reasons, it seems fruitless to take up my own ideas to serious debate on the basis of Dupree's bowdlerization of—Ahmed's versions of my views. Let me rather comment briefly on Ahmed's main substantive theme: the place of Sufism (and millennial thinking) in Swat political development. This is no doubt a topic of considerable importance and interest to the understanding of Pathan/Afghan culture and culture history, but it raises issues which require a far more adequate historical context than Ahmed provides. Briefly, though the Akhund of Swat may have been a Moslem thinker of importance, there was as



far as I could ascertain a striking absence of traces of his thought even among religiously oriented folk in contemporary Swat in 1954. And though he through his main teacher was affiliated to a religious order (the Qaderi, *not* the Naqshbandi, with which he was only briefly associated in his early years), I was unable to establish the existence of any such orders in Swat today, or traditions of such in the recent past. The absence of any strong Sufi heterodoxy seems to have been characteristic since the 16th century, when the orthodox Akhund Darweza Baba defeated the leading Sufi Bazid (called by his followers Pir Roshan = "Saint of Light," but subsequently generally known as Pir Tarik = "Saint of Darkness") in several great theological debates, thereby establishing orthodoxy and fundamentalism as the Pathan mode of embracing Islam.

What, then, was the theological content of the thinking of . subsequent "extrainstitutional" hermits and scholars, among them the Akhund of Swat? What was the connection between them and the series of "holy war" movements—largely led by faqirs and mullahs of an intellectually very different character? In what sense can these movements be regarded as millenarian? Was the founding of Swat State significantly related to these?

To answer such questions authoritatively requires an investment in historical scholarship far beyond my ambitions. A considerable volume of sources exists but remains unutilized. This research and compilation required to discuss millennium and charisma in Swat, much less among Pathans, has unfortunately been left undone by Ahmed. Let us hope that the interest with which his present book is received will stimulate him, and other scholars, to do the job.

**Fredrik Barth**

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Dupree stresses Ahmed's gentle but justified criticism of some of Barth's concepts. Barth has indeed contributed substantially to anthropological knowledge and debate, but he has certainly made mistakes. As an ethnographer (in Scandinavia a special distinction is made between social anthropology and ethnography), I notice particularly such errors as collectively calling sayyeds, pirs, etc., "saints" and not observing the distinction between "khan" and "chief." Many social anthropologists oversimplify our complex reality in order to create theory. These oversimplifications and generalizations often carry social anthropological works a bit too far from man himself.

Dupree formulates a question of extreme importance: "How did two persons studying the same society come up with diametrically opposed views?" There are naturally differences in background; two entirely different cultural settings cannot be neglected. What Barth observes from the outside, Ahmed explores from the inside.

If Ahmed's statement that most of Barth's informants were khans is correct, then the Barthian model reflects only *one* group within a limited group of Pathans, and this to me seems to make the whole discussion biased. Further, I agree that the Sufi cannot be described in terms such as "manipulating," "maximizing," etc., because of his mystical, and to others, irrational appearance.



To sum up, I consider the view of Ahmed (and Dupree) closer to reality than Barth's. Ultimately, a model should not be expressed so categorically.

**Charpentier**

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Dupree's review is a summary rather than a criticism of Ahmed's book, and his commentary devotes too much attention to one particular chapter. For social anthropologists, it is chapter 5 that is by far the most significant. This is an exciting and stimulating chapter considerably advancing our ethno-graphic understanding of the Pathans. The review not only fails to record the quality of this chapter, but also fails to note the book's fundamental methodological error-the view that there should exist a congruence between a model and a particular body of ethnographic data, attributing to models a mere representational function. Ahmed notes that in the case of the Swat Pathans there is a great distance between Barth's model and the Swati ethnography as he (Ahmed) saw it in 1974. It is not, however, on such grounds that we can discard Barth's model or, indeed, any other. Certain models may be low in information value either about particular systems or about certain problems relating to a group of systems. When a model is inadequate in an explanatory role, it can be criticized. Being abstract in nature, it cannot be criticized simply because it does not fit empirical reality. The question Ahmed poses-Is ethnography to be subordinated to theory?- is therefore not the correct one. The issue is instead whether the models we use yield adequate information about societal processes. There are certain abstract criteria by which to judge methodological individualism, irrespective of whether or not it suits the Swati data. Furthermore, since it is one of the main subjectivist theories, its moral and political implications for man in society should perhaps be considered, as well as its capacity, if any, for yielding information on macrosocial and macropolitical processes.

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While Dupree and Ahmed may make a valid point regarding Barth's data base and misinterpretation of local events, they swing the pendulum a bit too far in the opposite direction by attempting to invalidate Barth's concept of strategic interaction. Surely Ahmed, as quoted by Dupree, overstates the case when he says that Barth sees the Swat Pushtun as "a Norwegian entrepreneur"; even the Sufi Ahmed cites as running counter to Barth's analysis by withdrawing from conflict has made a strategic decision. To call the Sufi's behavior "minimizing gain" instead of "minimizing loss" does not effectively diminish Barth's insight; rather than eliminating strategy as a helpful way of understanding people's reasons for doing what they do in situations requiring decisive action, one merely has to apply different strategic frameworks. The general value of



Barth's approach, viewed by someone not directly in social anthropology (I am an ethnomusicologist), is not that it creates a prototype of Barthian Man, as Dupree says, but that it indicates how flexibility in culture operates on a day-to-day basis, an insight applicable to my work in a nonpolitical area among Pushtuns and their neighbors in Afghanistan.

*Mark Slobin*

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Rarely does a book so effectively undermine an accepted anthropological classic. Ahmed's diachronic reanalysis of the political structure of Yusufzai Pukhtuns is devastating to the "transactionalist" interpretation of political behavior offered by Barth. Although I believe that "methodological individualism" remains a necessary and valuable component of anthropological research, Barth's application of this approach in Swat is left largely denuded of empirical support. I find Dupree's summary of Ahmed's argument accurate in all details, and the following comments seek to identify some remaining theoretical problems.

1. *Transactionalist Man.* Ahmed's refutation of a pervasive "manipulating" and "maximizing" theme in Pukhtun society is convincing, especially given the apparently clear-cut historical changes in the role of the khans vis-a-vis their clients and the state and the inappropriateness of generalizing from their behavior and attitudes to those of tenants/clients. One major difficulty that Ahmed leads us into, however, is an unnecessary identification of "maximizing" behavior with materialist values. Burling and others have long argued that psychic, spiritual, and social values may be the goals of individual adaptive strategies, and Barth himself has noted that the Basseri of Iran have other goals beyond mere economic advantage. I do not see a contradiction between Barth's "self-interest" position and Ahmed's holistic "social matrices" view if we keep it in mind that the individual occasionally has to choose between competing (and conflicting) goals but generally understands the consequences of his behavior and makes choices accordingly. This wider use of the concept of maximization is also pertinent in an analysis of the discrepancy Ahmed finds between maximization theory and Sufi behavior; the Sufi minimizes gains of a material nature but presumably not those of spiritual consequence.

2. *Intracultural diversity.* Ahmed exaggerates unfairly when he accuses Barth of a Norwegian-entrepreneur bias in his view of Swat. Materialistic behavior is not restricted to Western capitalist societies, as we see in the actions of the khans. He is correct, however, in arguing that a quest for power and material gain does not characterize all Pukhtuns; nor, we assume, would it characterize all Norwegians. Cogent criticism is offered of Barth's ahistorical analysis, particularly the failure to recognize the transition from *nang* to *qalang* societal types and the equally serious omission of internal religious developments in Swat during the 19th century. Ahmed believes that Barth ignores the religious and political forces which limit manipulating strategies of the individual and which ultimately place



overwhelming power at the disposal of the khans and the state. A valuable contribution of Ahmed's field research will be to resolve the confusion we have about internal differentiation within nang-and qalang-based Pukhtun communities. With such information we may better assess the applicability of Barth's supposedly nang-based decision-making models within post-state qalang-type communities.

3. *Holism versus determinism.* Ahmed makes a valuable point in arguing that Yusufzai Pukhtun political organization must be understood within the context of Islam, Pukhtunwali, and Pax Britannica. The strength of his attack on Barth is to be found largely in his ability to interweave explanations of the internal workings of Pukhtun society with an analysis of external influences on local developments. Barth's actor-centered analysis of political behavior runs the risk of oversimplifying individual aspirations and strategies, and Ahmed is quite correct 'to note interconnected, crosscutting, and sometimes contradictory influences on the individual. Viewing the Individual within a holistic context, however, should not be equated with a mechanistic determinism, and occasionally Ahmed seems to want to move toward the latter position. For example, he simplifies the source of nang/qalang differences to contrasting environments (p. 78) and extends this view to suggest a deterministic relationship between nang/qalang categories and the doctrines and popularity of Sufi leaders (p. 89). I cannot subscribe as devotedly to Talal Asad's material determinism and find more persuasive Ahmed's repeated mention of the importance of religious and cultural symbolism in the analysis of economic and political adaptation.

These suggestions have been meant to complement Ahmed's very fine work. The unintentionally negative view of Pukhtuns in the social science literature has now been admirably corrected, and we can all eagerly await further illumination and insights as a product of Ahmed's field research in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan.

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## THE PUKHTUN DE-ROMANTICISED

*Louis Dupree*

At last! We can add a Pakistani name to the long list of administrator-scholars, who have carved out brilliant names for themselves along the Frontier. The names of past greats roll off the tongue like Sir Lawrence Olivier spouting Shakespeare: Elphinstone and Edwardes, Bellew and Biddulph, Burnes and Barton, Raverty and Roos-Keppel, Pettigrew and Sandeman, Masson and Merk, Warburton and Goodwin, Howell and Caroe—among others.

None, however, have approached the Frontier with such qualifications as Dr. Akbar S. Ahmed. He is almost too good to be true. Pukhtun born and bred, Pakistani (Burns Hall) and British (Ph.D. in Anthropology, University of London) educated, and currently Political Agent, South Waziristan. Dr. Ahmed combines all the best of these worlds, and once one gets into the swing of his sometimes jargonistic phraseology (the curse of most of us anthropologists!), the rewards are immeasurable—and occasionally poetic.

The book under review is but one of a series by this distinguished young (35) administrator-scholar-poet. His other works include (also distributed by Oxford University Press-Karachi): *Millennium and Charisma among Pathans* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, paperback edition, 1980); *Social and Economic Change in the Tribal Areas* (OUP 1977); *Mataloona-Pukhto Proverbs* (OUP 1975).

Among those who have favourably reviewed these previous works is that lovable old survivor of the Empire (and Frontier-wallah), Sir Olaf Caroe.

Dr. Ahmed has already made his mark as an anthropological theorist. His book on *Millennium and Charisma*...successfully challenged one the more respected Western specialists, Professor Fredrik Barth (University of Oslo). Dr. Ahmed shot down several of Barth's favorite theories about the Pukhtun. For example, Barth had misinterpreted the importance of the non-material, spiritual aspects of Pakhtun culture, particularly the role of "saints" and the concept of honour. In addition, Dr. Ahmed's scientific approach broke through the romanticism of the Frontier perpetuated by many Western writers.

Dr. Ahmed has lived with, researched among, and worked in several Pukhtun groups: the Yusufzai of Swat, Orakzai, Wazir, Masud—to name a few. He is also fortunate in having married a granddaughter of the former Wali of Swat, and she (and her sister) greatly assisted Dr. Ahmed in his research, for only women can gather data on *parda*.

The book under review, based on Dr. Ahmed's Ph.D thesis, deals with two groups of Mohmand: one in the Tribal Agency, labeled TAM; the other in Peshawar District, labeled SAM. The study basically focuses on the survival of the *Pukhtunwali*, the Pukhtun Code of the Hills, for the past 400 years. He insists (and, to my satisfaction, proves) that the major features of the Code are two: *tarboorwali* (agnatic, primarily cousin, competition), and *tor* (which relates to the preservation of the honour of women). In Pukhtun society, the *nang*



(honour) of a group is symbolized by the role of women; they are literally the embodiment of the group's honour.

It is refreshing to see a modern social scientist go back to Max Weber, and yet not forget Karl Marx. After the recent deluge of pseudo-Marxist tracts, this is a healthy sign. And I am sure Marx himself would agree, particularly as one views the awful misconceptions and misapplications of socialism by the unholy trinity in Afghanistan: Tarakki, Amin and Babrak Karmel.

Weber's concept of the ideal vs. the reality in culture has seldom been explored more implicitly and explicitly than the analysis found in Dr. Ahmed's study of the Pukhtunwali. He shows conclusively that the reality of the daily lives and annual cycles of the TAM and Sam coincide with the ideals of the Code, naturally, with degrees of variation.

Unfortunately, Dr. Ahmed has not been able to study the third major group of Mohmands, those living in Afghanistan. By the time the Afghan Mohmand can be studied, many of their patterns will probably have been altered considerably, both economically and politically, but I predict the social values of the Pukhtunwali will remain substantially intact—or the Mohmand and other Afghans will have fought their last fight against foreign intervention, and either be refugees—or dead.

On the Pakistani side, the pattern since 1947 has been more economic than political or military penetration. Administrators have followed the development programs. The post-Partition process has been one of encapsulation, the absorption of a smaller unit into a larger one. But the process has not been easy. Not until 1973 did a break-through occur in the Mohmand Tribal Agency, which had been created in 1951.

It is still too early to predict the end results of the penetration of the TAM by a major road leading over the Nahakki Pass in 1973. But, for the first time in history, government administrators came into the area peacefully. Naturally, conflicts arose as groups began to adapt to the new economic and political opportunities. Junior lineages began to challenge the political power of the senior lineages, which generally have not taken advantage of the new economic opportunities, in transport, trade, and smuggling. The senior lineage leadership considers commerce beneath their dignity: "It is not Pukhto."

In addition, non-Mohmand Pukhtun and non-Pukhtun (mainly religious and non-agricultural occupation groups) have also jumped on the new economic bandwagon. In the past, ownership of honour, rather than ownership of land, had been the most important prestige factor among the TAM. Now that is changing, and money increases status. Not only is the outside world coming into the TAM area, but young men leave to work in Iran and the Persian Gulf, and return with their new wealth.

For the SAM in Peshawar District, encapsulation began in 1951 after the creation of the Mohmand Tribal Agency. However, the government emphasized development in the TAM and generally by-passed the SAM. The SAM area had been virtually ignored by the district administrators since 1947, but after 1951 the SAM were integrated into the provincial system, with all its related benefits and drawbacks, mainly drawbacks. For example, the SAM are subjected to the strain of three contradictory legal systems: local custom (as symbolized by the Pukhtunwali), Islamic *Shariat*, and secular law.



Also, at this point in time, things apparently look brighter for the TAM than the SAM, particularly in overall development. After the opening of the Nahakki Pass road the government rapidly moved into the TAM area with electricity, schools and clinics—plus construction contracts for government buildings and more road building. The neglected SAM area still waits for its share of the developmental goodies. Government emphasis on development in the Tribal Agencies is as much politically as economically inspired.

Fortunately for us, Dr. Ahmed does not characterize the Mohmand as being the “typical Pukhtun”, and he even delineates the TAM from the SAM in some detail. Although the Pukhtunwali existed as a common thread through time, major differences in institutional patterns developed between the two groups. A deceptively simple chart (p. 329) places these differences in their proper perspective. The table deals with the perceptions of the TAM and SAM about themselves—and each other. For example (see attached chart to be included here).

A tantalizing sample which should whet the appetite to see more and inspire other to conduct additional studies of this nature, not only on the Frontier, but the major provinces as well. Misconceptions of Punjabis about Pukhtun and Baluch are well known, but what about Punjabi misconceptions about Punjabis!

Dr. Ahmed approaches his subject logically, running from geography and ecology through the intricacies of the kinship system and its importance on the socio-political-economic scene. He relates marriage, settlement patterns, non-Pukhtun groups to the concepts of the Pukhtunwali. He presents an ethnohistorical whole, as well as illuminating, specific institutions, the Pukhtunwali.

Pukhtun Economy and Society is recommended to all Pakistanis (and, of course, non-Pakistanis) who wish to gain an insight into what makes the Frontier tick, and tick away it does, a misunderstood and often overly-romanticized, timebomb, which can only be defused through a genuine understanding of the positive aspects of tribalism, and how rational regional autonomy can be achieved. Force and coercion will not work; meaningful development projects will.

Some may mourn the passing of the old Frontier as they knew it, but, for better or worse, roads become highways of cultural change as well as conquest and commerce. The Pukhtun will adapt, but will not be assimilated.

Revolutionary anthropologists would seize culture by the throat and change it, but Dr. Ahmed's encapsulating anthropology would take culture by the hand, and, in association with Islam, win its heart. Only Islam, with its offer of a complete way of life, can prevent the Pukhtun (and other Pakistanis) from becoming completely corrupted by material progress. The problem, as ably articulated by Dr. Ahmed, is to make the blows of change fall the lightest on the most conservative people, a formidable, but not impossible task.



## POSTMODERNIST PERCEPTIONS OF ISLAM: OBSERVING THE OBSERVER

*Akbar S. Ahmed*

We are living in times of change; structures that have held for half a century are being pulled down. Changing, too, are concepts both of the self and of the "other," although the nature and depth of these are debatable. A perception that we may be entering a distinct phase of human history, tentatively called postmodernism, is forming.

The contemporary formulation of postmodernism as a distinct phase succeeding modernism is rooted in, and explained by the recent history of the West, broadly defined as Europe and the United States. For the West, much of the last half-century has been a period of prosperity and tranquility unmatched in history. It is characterized by a strong and widening economic base, unassailable democracy, and an increasing sense of possibilities. Plague, starvation, and war seem features of a distant, almost medieval past.

To understand the postmodernist age is to presuppose a questioning of modernity; it is to turn toward a spirit of pluralism, an increased assertiveness of local or folk identity; it involves exposure to a plethora of discourses and the consequent dangers of culture schizophrenia, a heightened skepticism of traditional orthodoxies, and finally a rejection of looking at the world as a universal totality, of final solutions and complete answers. Postmodernism is to look for the richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning, to avoid choices between black and white, to evoke many levels of meaning and combinations of focus. It is "an enigmatic and troubling post-modernity," it is "a moment of gentle apocalypse." Contradictory developments, disturbing paradoxes puzzle the mind: a questioning of materialism on the one hand, and an insatiable desire to join the consumerist order on the other; individuals enjoying rights and privileges as never before in history, yet the State has never been as omnipotent as in our age; the implosion of large blocs, the most notable example of which has been the communist one, and West European countries heading rapidly toward consolidating another. Because large parts of the population live in urban areas and a larger part still is influenced by ideas originating from these areas, the city becomes central to postmodernism. Postmodernism in the end may just turn out to be a journalistic cliché, an undefined catch phrase, and not really the beginning of a new phase in human history.

But what does postmodernism mean for Muslims, and when does it become distinct from modernism, the preceding period? Is it yet another concept borrowed from the West to be misapplied to Muslim society, as with some key notions of modernism—progress, rationality, secularism? Among Muslim nations, there are certain markers, events, and dates that signified fundamental changes and served to introduce a period that would be



termed as "Islamic revivalism" or "resurgence." In the 1970s, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia provided, for the first time, a clear Islamic direction to Saudi Arabia, and Zia ul-Haq seized power in Pakistan and attempted to "Islamize" it. Imam Khomeini led an Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, and in the same year the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and the Afghans launched a *jihad* (holy war). A bloody and violent attempt was made, also in the same year, by Juhaiman and his group to seize the Kaaba in Mecca, for Muslims the holiest of the holy, and the action sent shock waves throughout the Muslim world. An international attempt toward an "Islamization of Knowledge" was made by scholars such as Ismail Faruqi, which challenged many existing modernist ideas. Muslim economists like Khurshid Ahmad labored to create an "Islamic economics," and anthropologists an "Islamic anthropology." The publication of books such as Edward Said's *Orientalism*<sup>3</sup> further provided ideas fueling the challenge to Western scholarship. Although some of the personnel may have changed, the Islamic tempo has not faltered; it currently beats in Azerbaijan and Kashmir. And in Pakistan, which Islamic modernism in the 1940s helped to create, postmodernist characteristics herald a new phase in its history: a heightened awareness of, and debate about religious identity, an ethnic re-vivalism, diverse political discourses, and a questioning of modernity.

With these factors in mind, I will examine some elements forming postmodernist perceptions of Islam. I will do so by challenging prevalent orthodoxies and broadening the base of our discussions beyond academic confines. The method will be to employ the reviews and comments elicited by my book, *Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society*.<sup>4</sup> My book's central argument suggests a close relationship between contemporary Muslim society and Muslim history, at the core of which is an understanding of ideal Muslim behavior. It is the effort to define and live up to this ideal that provides the dynamics of Muslim societies. The confrontation between the universal ideology of Islam and diverse local ethnic groups creates tension in society. Tolerance and compassion are key elements in the Islamic ideal, but the lack of a proper understanding distorts perception, which results in the negative images of Islam. My book attempted to challenge these distortions and thereby the negative images that accompany them. In that sense its aim was political, although its method was autoethnographic, allowing an insider-outsider perspective. It was, it stated, "part autobiography, part history, part literature, and part science." I will endeavour to ingest the bewildering range of responses to the book and from them create an aesthetically and intellectually coherent frame of argument. My methodology will allow us to arrive at certain broad conclusions regarding contemporary Islam and how it is perceived, both by Muslims and non-Muslims. The comments will allow us to examine developments in the study of Islam since Said's influential arguments in 1978 and to examine the impasse they have created. Said's central argument became widely understood as a forceful condemnation of Orientalism<sup>5</sup> for the connection it represented between power and knowledge. But traditional Orientalism has not withered away completely; it affects and influences postmodernism in numerous subtle ways. Postmodernism, vague and lacking a center, may well disintegrate further into a



cacophony of fragmented voices. It may develop into some new "ism"-perhaps "deconstructivism"-but embedded in these views appear to be many features identified by Said.

The last decades have projected negative images of Islam in the media of the West: it was the age of OPEC, of Muslims hijacking passenger planes and attacking embassies. Islamic leaders, like Gaddafi and Khomeini, were reduced to fairy tale monsters, instantly recognized and booed as the embodiment of evil. Like its leaders, Islam appeared threatening and fanatic. Rounding out the 1980s was the Islamic response to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, which appeared to typify Islam to the West. Images of Muslims burning books and hurling death threats seemed to threaten the fabric of Western civilization. Not unnaturally, the *Economist* noted in its review of *Discovering Islam* that "Ahmed's portrait of that [Muslim] ideal . . . would surprise anyone who formed his impression of Islam from the newspaper.

During this period numerous academics, including many Islamic experts, abandoned their role as largely neutral observers and became active participants in the drama, portraying Islam in an unsympathetic light. They advised governments, prepared reports, and appeared in the media. The voices of scholars explaining the gentle aspects of Islam-Persian paintings, Arabic calligraphy, suJ mysticism-were drowned out by those arguing geopolitical strategy and imperatives. Indeed, some experts demanded an outright invasion of Muslim countries in order to capture their wealth, oil wells, and ports to make them safe for the West. In this charged atmosphere, a book written by a Muslim, promising not only to discover Islam but also to make sense of Muslim history and society, appeared doomed. Critics, too easily fusing the belief of the author with his academic work, could simplify dangerously, falling victim to stereotypes. The wonder, therefore, was not the hostility of the negative reviews the book received but the number and enthusiasm of the positive ones.

### Methodology

My data consist of 120 reviews of, and comments on *Discovering Iran*. These are dealt with not as a statistical base but rather are used as text and discourse to represent intellectual and cultural positions. Although it may be difficult to reach quantitative conclusions based on these commentaries, we are able to discern interesting intellectual patterns in them. Making allowances for variations in quality and depth, we hear the voices of political scientists, historians, anthropologists, and political leaders. I divide the total into three broad and crude categories on the basis of geography and culture. First, the West, which in our case means the United Kingdom and the United States; second, Muslim countries, mainly Pakistan but including Arabs and Turks; and third, India and others. Placing authors in these three categories is not entirely satisfactory, as many Muslim writers do not appear in the Muslim category; those living in the U.K. are classed as in the West, those in India as Indian.



Table 1  
Response to *Discovering Islam*

	<i>Theological</i>	<i>Academic</i>	<i>Humanist</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>Totals</i>
West (US/UK)	4	6	2	51	63
Muslim Countries	2	2		39	43
India and Others		2	9	3	14
Totals	6	10	11	93	120
Per cent	5%	8.33%	9.17%	77.5%	100%

Comments also are divided, along the horizontal axis, into another set of broad categories according to the main idea or theme contained within a cluster of ideas and themes: theological, academic, humanistic, and political. These categories are thematic—for example, an academic review that concentrates on a political understanding of Islam will be placed in the political category—and thus are arbitrary and neither absolute nor watertight. Although for purposes of the table I have chosen only one label for each review based on the main viewpoint expressed, some reflect more than one theme. The diversity of the reviews and the plurality of the reviewers cannot be captured by, or reduced to one characterization, but the schema provides us with a certain insight that will become self-evident.

The definitions are general. *Theological* for our purposes is the study of, or system of religious faith. Islam, it would be reasonably imagined, as a religion would evoke theological responses. In fact, as we shall see, this is not so. Although there are examples of neutral *academic* reviews, in most cases academics express an awareness of the political nature of the subject. By *humanism* or humanitarianism, we understand a philanthropic and benevolent promotion of human welfare and the human race as a collectivity. Although humanism in the West derives from Greek and Roman civilization, we point out that it is also embedded in the great religious philosophies of the East. We define *political* in a wide sense, covering matters of foreign and public affairs and impinging on policy matters that, in turn, affect society. Our categories reveal interesting bedfellows; for instance, commentators who belong to a religion—Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam—and those who are secular appear comfortably together in the humanist category.

The data provide a clear idea as to how the three geo-cultural areas responded to the book. The responses of the West are more in number (63) than those of the Muslim countries (43), indicating the interest Islam holds for the West. An overwhelming majority (77.5%) of the responses may be defined as political. Clearly there is a compulsion to view Islam in the context of global geopolitics, as a major world civilization commanding almost a billion adherents and represented by 44 countries. It is significant that the smallest percentage (5%) is theological, while the academic and humanist responses amount to less than 10% each. On the basis of the figures, we may conclude that theological, academic, and humanist responses to Islam are overshadowed by a political understanding of it.

Further analysis of the data reveals interesting patterns that cut through religious, cultural, and political boundaries. If we divide the 120 responses into another three categories of favorable, neutral, and hostile, we note that 113 are in the first, five in the second, and two in the third. Of the 63 Western responses, 58 are favorable, as are 41 of the 43 in the



Muslim countries and all 14 in India. Three reviews in the West and two in the Muslim countries are neutral; two are notably hostile, both written in London by a Muslim and a non-Muslim. A third, written by a Muslim in Pakistan, is not personally hostile but faults me on a technical, constitutional point. We have attempted to locate each commentary in relation to its cultural and political context. Dominant modes of thinking, key concepts, and benchmarks of the landscape in which the author functions are revealed. Through the texts we learn as much about the writer as about the writer's environment.

### Analysis

Using the reviews as texts enables us to observe what I am terming postmodernist perceptions of Islam that are in the process of being formed. Both among non-Muslims and Muslims, perceptible shifts are noticeable; along with the traditional certainties are new ambiguities and new possibilities for each knowing the other. Having divided the responses into three broad categories, one must note a complex range of further divisions.

Within the Western world, the U.S. and U.K. differ in their historical associations with Muslim countries, their political understanding of them, and their attitudes toward Muslim immigrant communities. Within these countries, certain disciplines and academic centers may have characteristic ways of examining foreign societies, and these also change over time. Although I am not fully able to subdivide the data, the existence of further layers points to substantial areas requiring research if we hope to understand the complexity of, the responses to, and the nature of Islam.

### Western Responses

The Western category comprises a wide range of responses. Some of the older Orientalist voices are combative, whether speaking in scholarly<sup>8</sup> or strident<sup>9</sup> tones. Others, like Waddy at Oxford, make the point that an understanding of Islam "would require a new openness in the West to what others say, an appreciation of what they respect."<sup>10</sup> Still others are enthusiastically responsive to the author: "a remarkable phenomenon . . . one of the more gifted and sensitive Muslim minds of today." Postmodernism, say a number of the reviewers, expresses the need to understand Islam on its own terms and within the framework of a common humanity. Significantly absent are allusions to the traditional Orientalist stock-in-trade criticisms of Islam (the Prophet's wives, etc.). Some scholars berated me for being overly critical of Western imperialism and society,<sup>12</sup> but most of the Western reviews reflect a political understanding of Islam. This was reflected in the *Economist* review, which concluded that the book was "a stimulating introduction to a religion of 800 million people and a quarter of the world's countries: a religion which is also an extraordinary political force."

I refer to a broad Western response but it is also one that reflects divisions, ranging from neutrality toward Islam to a strong desire to nuke it wherever possible. The West may be usefully divided into the U.S. and the U.K. The U.S. as the dominant world power must deal with Islam on various levels: as a world leader providing a leadership role and dealing with opponents like Iran and Libya or friends like Morocco, Jordan, and Pakistan; as a



nation involved in the geopolitics of the Middle East and Afghanistan; as a major donor of economic aid. It therefore accepts Islam pragmatically as a phenomenon on the world stage.

It may be assumed that there is a danger of negative Western media images of Islam appropriating analysis and judgement. This is not the case in academia. American responses are balanced and neutral. Even those who do not like the book point out its significance: "It is telling that a Western-trained anthropologist in this time of great self-consciousness about Islam chose to write this book; it is a document of its times and of a lively and enterprising scholar who wants to identify himself as an exponent of central themes in the Islamic past."<sup>14</sup> Another American reflects on the complexity of the author's task: "Much writing about the Muslim world by Muslims is marred by either apologetics or unfair comparison between the romanticized ideals of Islam and the sordid practice of its rival faiths, especially Christianity and Hinduism. . . . (Ahmed's) very thesis—that Islamic history exhibits a continued tension between the religious norms of Islam and the actual behavior of Muslims, with the gap cyclically narrowing and expanding—testifies to the author's liberation from the inferiority complex of the European colonial era.

Schematizing broadly, we find opposite trajectories forming for the U.S. and the U.K. The latter reflects immediate concerns with Muslim immigrants and their impact on race relations and also Britain's recent decline from a great imperial power. "Britain needs the skills of its two million Muslims, including those who are training at school or college today. It is shortsighted to treat them as part of an 'inner city' problem," notes Waddy.<sup>16</sup> British Muslims also concern another writer contemplating the climate in the wake of the Rushdie affair. They raise "the fear of physical danger should my writing be deemed 'blasphemous' by some group of self-appointed guardians of Islamic purity."<sup>17</sup> He conjectures critical scholarship may not survive the atmosphere of terror and threats when he writes: "Dr. Ahmed's book may mark, not the beginning of a new process of self appraisal, but its end." These were prophetic words. In a recent issue of his magazine, *Crescent*, K. Siddiqui, leading the campaign in the U.K. to implement the *fatwa* against Rushdie, attacked me (under the signature of his son, a graduate student) for being too pro-West.

It is significant that the five million Muslims in the United States are not viewed as posing a domestic, "race relations" problem by the majority. There are historical reasons for this. Muslims in the U.S. are relatively better off than those in Britain, and there is a much higher percentage of professionals among them. They are spread evenly across the vast country, with no Bradford-like concentrations. Indeed, they are almost invisible and mute in comparison to the UK Muslims, who are less than half their number. Above all, as far as possible, America offers equality to its citizens and no bar keeps down, or out, a person because of race or religion. For all its crass racism and imperialism, traditional Orientalism also displayed an affection, even a kind of perverse respect, for some Muslim colonized groups. The Pathan dress of Burton and the Bedouin robes of Lawrence were vulgar kitsch, but whatever the psychological motivations a certain romanticism developed in Britishers' dealings with the "noble savage." This romanticism has been replaced by impatience and irritability. At best, Muslims are unwelcome immigrants and at worst, dirty



wogs to be reviled and harassed. The change is as much a comment on British history as on its contemporary society. It is little wonder that a sympathetic British Islamic specialist finds that "the obstacles to increasing harmony in religious terms are great" and the situation "depressing."

British responses may be divided into a schema that includes academic, global geopolitical, race relations, and responses by Muslims themselves living in the UK. Most reviews are a combination of this combustible mix, which perhaps explains the most hostile comments, those of Siddiqui, Sulani, and Vatikiotis. They are immigrants to the UK and mirror in each other a pathological hatred for the "other" and what it represents. To the former two, Muslims must be malevolent toward anything Western, and they condemn me for my associations; my Islam is of the "Princeton kind." On the other hand, for Vatikiotis, the Christian refugee from the Middle East, the author and Islam represent hatred of the West, fanaticism, terrorism, and militancy. Both sides reject explicitly the themes of tolerance and compassion that I raise in the book.

### *Muslim Responses*

My second category, the Muslim response, is distinct from the other two in that it is unequivocally based on a political understanding of Islam. For a Muslim, Islam is not divisible; a discussion of society and history whether academic or theological-is a discussion of politics. Consider humanism. In our chart there is a notable blank in this category because humanism in this sense is a given; it is embedded in Islam, taken for granted, and therefore does not feature prominently on the Muslim agenda. Two of the most common ways to describe God are as "the Compassionate" and "the Merciful." God's glory and greatness are reflected in humanity. The Quran specifically rejects the notion of an East and a West: "To God belongeth the East and the West: whithersoever ye turn, there is the Countenance of God" (Surah 11:15).

We read these texts for signs that will reveal for us the nature of Muslim thought and society. For Muslim intellectuals, the book constituted a new elaboration of the hermeneutics of the self. Significantly, some of the internationally best known, orthodox Muslim scholar-activists in each one of my geographical categories endorsed the book-the late Ismail Faruqi, Khurshid Ahmad, and Khalid Ishaque saw the drafts and S. Shahabuddin and Tahirul Qadiri wrote reviews.<sup>2</sup> This is significant in the light of my claims of postmodernism and Muslim society. Colonel Sarwar, chief librarian of the National Defence College, Pakistan, wrote: "The author represents a new trend in Muslim scholarship. He has tried to analyse and understand the Islamic World view primarily, in order to cope with the contemporary challenges which the Muslim World faces today. The book . . . should be required reading for students and researchers," and equally benefited would be "policy makers who establish forward-looking priorities."<sup>22</sup> In the same vein "Ariel," a Karachi intellectual, observed: "There are signs that scholars like Dr. Akbar S. Ahmed could cut some ice, since theological explanations have failed to excite our curiosity."

Many confessed they harbored similar thoughts, which motivated a highly respected Pakistani journalist to write: "Akbar is not alone in having such an experience. Almost all



Muslim intellectuals today feel similarly stimulated and gratified while at the same time disturbed in their relationship with their faith, its history, and social environment.

Younger intellectuals spotted the tension in the book and identified with it: "Like any work of enduring significance, *Discovering Islam* is a product of a dual odyssey-through Muslim history and the author's inner world-which inevitably leads him to an encounter with his own self and his culture."<sup>25</sup> One of Pakistan's most distinguished historians reflects a sense of pride in concluding his lengthy and critical review: "There is not the least exaggeration in saying that since Akbar S. Ahmed's emergence, Pakistani scholarship-which as a whole has not been in an enviable shape for long-is able to hold its head a little higher than before.

There was the other side of the coin too. The book drew some interesting criticism in the context of Pakistani politics of the left and right, which reflected the respective interests of the two sides. Chattan, a rightist Urdu paper based in Lahore, complained in an editorial in October 1988 that I had listed Professor Abdus Salam, the Pakistani Nobel prize winner, as a Muslim. Technically the Chattan was correct. Ahmedis, along with groups related to them such as the Qadiyanis, were declared non-Muslims under the Pakistan constitution by the Z. A. Bhutto government in the 1970s. Salam belongs to this community. But my usage of "Muslim" was as a sociological and cultural category rather than a religious one. For this error I ought to be, it was suggested, dismissed from government service and tried. This exaggerated reaction is to be understood in terms of Pakistani politics in which the rightist community is often at the center of violent religious controversy, especially in Lahore. At the other end of the spectrum, Safdar Mir (a.k.a. Zeno), an old-fashioned Marxist and also based in Lahore, criticized the book for its lack of class analysis, failure to address the materialistic base of the class struggle, and so on.<sup>27</sup> However, the resentment stopped short of burning the book. Privately, Muslims expressed their annoyance and discomfort because of my frank admissions of the treatment of women and the failure in education. I was holding up the mirror to society too steadily, too cruelly.

The West continues to disturb and perplex Muslims. The unease is rooted in memories of numerous encounters from the recent colonial period to earlier ones centered on the crusades. Muslims in each of our categories expressed the view that the book represented too conscious an attempt to open a dialogue with the West, even an element of apologia for Islam.<sup>28</sup> There is thus a legacy of deep-seated distrust of the West among Muslims. Syed Shahabuddin, who spearheaded the successful campaign to ban *The Satanic Verses* in India, wrote:

*'There is still an air of "apology" about Akbar Ahmed's Islam; an inner desire to explain Islam to the West, to the non-Muslim, to liberate the West from its "horror" of Islam, from the remnants of the spirit of the Crusades. . . . In any event, through the pages of this book, the non-Muslim reader will discover a new Islam-vibrant, liberal, and progressive'.*

Some Muslims also continue to exhibit a cultural inferiority complex in relation to the West. Sulani suspects the book was actually written by the editors at the publishing house



as the style is too "chaste" and "sparkling. This is blissful ignorance of the Orientalist image he is reinforcing: Muslims are not capable of writing "chaste" and "sparkling" English.

It is the pervasive political interpretation of Islamic themes that explains why the late President Zia-ul-Haq did not like the book (although his response is not included in our list of 120). Both he and his staff officers were unhappy with my analysis of Z. A. Bhutto, as it placed him in the ranks of legitimate Muslim leadership. This was a time when Bhutto's name was virtually barred from the media in Pakistan. In an analytical model I had presented an explanation of Muslim sociopolitical behavior, keeping in mind time (a continuum with the past) and space (political space, from left to right). The model suggested that there is a perceptible genealogical continuity in thought and style in South Asian Muslim leadership. Bhutto's position was traced to Dara Shikoh, Zia's to Dara's orthodox brother, Aurangzeb, who was the last great Mughal emperor. Both Dara and Bhutto were taken to represent a legitimate strand in Muslim political leadership based on folk culture, which reflected aspects of *Sufism*. Bhutto's supporters, however, were not pleased with my model either. Misunderstanding it, they complained that Zia had been elevated alongside the exalted position of a Mughal emperor.<sup>30</sup> The analytical models were easily appropriated and distorted by the discussion of the larger-than-life political figures. The boundaries between academic analysis and political debate in Muslim society were simply obliterated.

The Muslim response is predictable: it is to focus on the "Muslimness" of the enterprise. There is a strong element of narcissism, of navel-gazing, of flag-waving, once again reflecting the inherent inability to examine events within Islam critically and connect them with events outside of it. It is the eternal fascination with the subject among Muslims that creates and imposes limitations on them.

### *India and Others*

Discussion of religion in India touches on the most fundamental and pervasive notions of nation and statehood. Communalism-.in India the code word for religion-is widely perceived as threatening the fabric of Indian politics and society. The sense of communal vulnerability is overdeveloped; it is traced directly to the events of 1947 leading to the birth of Pakistan on the basis of a distinct religion. More recent events confirm the dramatic rise and disintegrating influences of communalism: the Sikhs in the Punjab in the 1980s and Muslims in Kashmir in 1990. The rise of Hindu communalism, which marks a sea change in Indian politics, is represented by the spectacular showing of the Bharatiya Janata Party in the 1989 elections. For Indians, communalism can be contained effectively by the notions of secularism and humanism. These shibboleths echo the founding fathers of India who valued and idealized them. Electoral reality in the village and the *favela* (shantytown) have forcibly removed secularism from the Indian agenda, though it remains enshrined in its constitution. Indians have only one straw-humanism-to clutch at. But there is a problem with the idea of humanism because it is too supple, too amorphous, to serve as an axis for analysis. However, our reading of the Indian reviews as texts shows awareness of this problem. Humanitarianism is not to be understood as a rarified ideal, a discussion point in the manner of traditional liberals; rather, it is to be the basis for a practical method of administration and ensuring social justice.



T. N. Madan, one of India's foremost social scientists, comes to the same conclusion: "His goal through the Highway of Islam is humanism, which, I myself have gradually come to believe, is a more appropriate concept in South Asia than a narrowly defined secularism. Sane voices such as Ahmed's need to be heard across the international frontiers inside South Asia and not war cries in the name of religious identity or nationalistic fervour. . . . The value of *Discovering Islam* lies, in my opinion, in its author's conviction that faith and reason are both essential elements of humanism."<sup>31</sup> This is a theme that Aftab Seth, a distinguished scholar-diplomat, underlines: "Akbar's book has an important message for Indian Muslims and non-Muslims alike-Islam has a gentle and humane face; it is not all blood and thunder, vengeance, forced conversion and political intolerance. It is only when these aspects of Islam are highlighted and emphasized, that prejudices against Islam and its followers will begin to disappear, and that Islam can become a bridge, connecting different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, in different lands."<sup>32</sup> An exhaustive review article by Krishna Iyer, Supreme Court judge and statesman, raises questions of a philosophic and eternal nature: "The despair of man is a universal malady. Is the spirit of Islam at least a partial remedy? Is the Advaita philosophy with its Upanishadic profundity a better response? Is Marx the answer, or Gandhi? The perennial process of human suffering and the perpetual search for happiness are questions all religions and philosophies must grapple with. Ahmed enlarges our vision and faces these riddles.

In the Indian reviews, the emphasis on humanism is notable, 11 of the 14 comments in this category discussing it prominently. From Kashmir in the north to Cochin in the south, from Bihar in the east to Bombay in the west, or indeed in the U.K., Indians point to humanitarianism as *pana ~ e al.t ~is ~so* in print or in the electronic media. It is the only basis for social existence in a multicultural and multireligious society rent by sectarian tensions. Both academics and activists, both Hindus and Muslims- Brahmin and non-Brahmin, Sayyed and non-Sayyed-constantly emphasize the topos of a common humanity, pointing to a consensus. The density with which the theme appears makes India stand out in our survey, even in comparison to the champions of humanist values, the U.S. and the U.K. The Indian emphasis thus has both historical and contemporary echoes. It is a tribute to the caliber of Indian thought that it creates a vision above the narrow politics and sectarian passions of South Asia, allowing it to interact positively with the ideas of a Pakistani on Islam. An equivalent example from other areas with similar political problems, such as the Middle East, would be difficult to locate. At worst, this is woollyminded, wishful self-deception, at best, a manifestation of the Anglo-Indian encounter that gave birth to such extraordinary, humanist, liberal figures as Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru, Radhakrishnan, Tagore, and Iqbal.

### Moving Beyond Orientalism

Edward Said has led us into an intellectual cul-de-sac that perhaps the developing postmodernism may help overcome. Otherwise there remains the real danger of simplifying the complex problem of studying the "other" or the foreign. Said has left us with what he set out to denounce: stereotypes and large blocs-Orientalist, Oriental, Orient. Said's Arab



passion may have ultimately damaged his own case. The PLO links allow a genuine academic argument to be diverted to, and fused with political exchanges of a highly virulent nature. It is also incorrect to dismiss at one stroke the entire body of Orientalist scholarship. Here are found examples of rare insight of learning and literary gems; indeed, there are giants in the list of names Said denounces, people with a lifetime's work distilled in their books. Generations have turned to them for instruction, guidance and advice; they were trusted to interpret history and describe society. While decrying some of their political assumptions, I, for one, salute the efforts of the translators of favorites like Al-Beruni, Ibn Battuta, Ibn Khaldun, and nearer home, Babur.

But in the very premise of Orientalism, something central and indispensable is absent. It is the notion of a common, universal humanity embracing human society irrespective of color and creed. By denying a common humanity, Orientalism corrodes the spirit and damages the soul, thus preventing a complete appreciation or knowledge of other people. In this light, Orientalism is either cultural schizophrenia or a complex form of racism. We assume, indeed demand, an Olympian impartiality from our academic reviewers and commentators with their lofty titles and distinguished locations. But academics are mortal, indeed sometimes fatally so in today's world. Contemporary cultural ideas affect them. Although Said emphasizes the close relationship between power and knowledge, we discover in the Orientalists' range of observations many that are not inspired by great themes and ideological battles; petty emotions and the desire to settle scores also influence comments.

It has been a valetudinarian decade for Orientalists with the crisis quickening. For one thing, Orientalists failed to predict, and later to make much sense of the political changes occurring in Muslim countries such as Iran. They saw Muslim society, as in Iran, progressing along a linear, modernizing, secular path, the outward signs of which were discos, cinemas, and jeans. Scholars who had spent a lifetime on Persian studies were projecting a secure and long future for the Shah almost up to the revolution. After the revolution, their previous commitment to, or simply association with the Shah barred them from the country. Their knowledge was of little avail in dealing with the new leaders. Orientalism, by creating a mythical Orient, also failed in another aspect. An unintended consequence of its scholarship was an image of Islam as a monolithic and unified bloc. The differences in society-politics, sects, and culture were blurred, when in fact ethnicity, sectarianism, and politics divide the Muslim world. The decade-long war between Iran and Iraq underlined the differences among Muslims, and viewing all as one was to reduce Muslims simplistically to media stereotypes; it made dealing with them that much more difficult.

A reaction also developed against Orientalists as still tainted by colonialism in Third World countries. Alternative modes of thinking were explored, and in some places, notably India, a critical mass of scholars formed, producing first-rate scholarship. Syntesis, debate, and dialogue produced a rich Indian harvest. For the first time since colonization, Indians have reappropriated the capacity to represent themselves. This, unfortunately, is not true for Muslims. And Said's *Orientalism*, which has acquired the aura of the sacred, is partly to blame. Through its reading, passion feeds on passion, emotion sparks further emotion. One inevitable consequence is the rejection of Western scholarship by Muslims.



Muslim scholars in the West, whether Arab<sup>36</sup> or Pal-istani, are deeply suspicious of Western Orientalism. They are thus pushed into the hole Said has unwittingly dug for them.

For Muslims in Africa and Asia, imperfectly grasped bits of Marxist dogma, nationalism, and religious chauvinism create incorrect images of the West. For them the West is peopled by creatures whose sole purpose is to dominate, subvert, and subjugate them. In the vanguard, aiding and abetting, are the self-styled scholars. Unfortunately, there are many in whose work paranoia and hysteria pass for thought and analysis, but fulminating against Princeton and Harvard is no answer; it is intellectual bankruptcy. The distortions, the travesty, are not only incorrect but also a sad reminder of what Muslim scholarship once was. After all, Muslims are exhorted in the holy Quran to know and marvel at the variety of people God has created. The holy Prophet urged his followers to go as far as China to acquire knowledge; to an Arab in the seventh century, China would have been at the outermost limits of the known universe. The bankruptcy today is made poignant by the achievements and observations centuries ago in foreign lands of the great Muslim travelers like Al-Beruni and Ibn Battuta.

A study of how contemporary Orientals conceive of the Occident would reveal images as distorted and dishonest as those in Orientalism. This Occidentalism merits study. It derives almost entirely from the media-films, television, and the VCR. Muslims have still to produce scholarly studies of the West. This includes Muslims, over 10 million in number, who live permanently in the United States and Europe, and in whose interest it is to study the countries where they have made their home. For Muslims living in the West, knowledge of their host population is critical, not necessarily for academic reasons but practical ones. Employment, immigration controls, housing, cultural integration are all affected. The lack of knowledge has led to a dangerous gap in communication, and as a result the immigrants, especially in Europe, live in intellectual and cultural ghettos. They face serious discrimination based on race and religion. The lives of Muslims from North Africa living in France and from Turkey living in Germany are difficult and humiliating, and politicians like Le Pen in France thrive on this religious hatred. It is therefore imperative for Muslims to learn about their host countries if they wish to be fully accepted by them.

Not unnaturally the gap in information has resulted in a drastically incorrect understanding of the West among Muslims, particularly in their own countries. Consider the stereotype of Western women as promiscuous. This image is confirmed by the reports of contemporary women writers, for example, Linda Blandford's *Oil Sheikhs*, 1978, for the Arabs and Emma Duncan's *Breaking the Curfew*, 1989, for Pakistanis. Most men, according to these authors, have little beside seduction or rape on their minds. This may well be exaggerated, but too many ministers, generals, and politicians pant and puff around the bedroom in their amorous pursuit of the authoresses for the stories to be entirely fictitious. The priapism of these males is not explained biologically and may be traced to their own notions of Western women. These very leaders ritually denounce the West as a place of dystopia from which their wives and daughters are to be protected. In their cases, power and wealth corrupt absolutely.



If Muslims expect sympathetic understanding from others, they too must be prepared to make serious efforts to comprehend non-Muslims. One way is through genuine friendship cutting across cultural and religious barriers. By reducing Said's serious arguments to caricature, that is, that the West can know the Orient only in a negative, exploitative way, friendship across borders is removed from human relationships. Yet we know of the many long-lasting and fruitful friendships between Muslims and people from the West: Thomas Arnold and Muhammad Iqbal, Olaf Caroe and Iskander Mirza, E. M. Forster and Ross Masood; or nearer our times, Salim Ali and Dillon Ripley, Ralph Russell and Khurshid ul Islam. They were equal friendships, symmetrical, and not represented by "border, nor breed, nor birth." Great books were dedicated, *A Passage to India* to Ross Masood, *The Pathans* to Iskander Mirza; and odes written, Iqbal's for Arnold, Ripley's for Ali.

Our data in the section on Methodology have shown that the majority of non-Muslim reviewers, many of whom Said would term as Orientalists, were open-minded about Islam and the author's views. These texts are not neocolonial or Orientalist discourses, but part of dialogue, an on-going discussion marked by symmetry between participants. Reviewers who had not met the author were prepared to accept his interpretations: "He records what he observes with the objectivity of a social scientist, the sensibility of a believer, and the imagination of a poet."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, another American reviewer who had not met the author concludes: "The book is a superbly well-written and useful corrective to both orientalist and apologist biases in the history of Islam."<sup>41</sup> Clearly, neutrality and fair play are possible in examining the "other." We may conclude, with due respect to Said, that the power, pervasiveness, and malignity of Orientalism are exaggerated. By raising the question whether postmodernism is cause or effect of this trend in Orientalism, we have identified another substantial area of research.

## Conclusion

The deck is rapidly clearing for a radically different shape of things to come in the twenty-first century. Communist governments appear to be disintegrating and the success of the West appears complete. Most nations wish to become as Westernized as possible, and as quickly as possible. The main features of Westernization are democracy, technology, high standards of living, and a culture that glorifies consumerism. Even the great centers of non-Western civilization, Japan or India, are happily seduced by these features. It is the triumph of the consumerist culture. It could indeed be the end of history, as Francis Fukuyama pointed out. But even before the ink on his paper was dry, Muslim groups in Azerbaijan and Kashmir were proving him wrong; they were rejecting the establish\$ order and demanding an Islamic one. Fukuyama had made the same mistake that Western experts were making up to the 1980s: assuming Muslim societies were like Western ones. For most Muslims, belief and custom act as brakes to the materialism of the consumer culture. Muslim societies will not fall easily into the emerging global pattern.

Not being able to understand Islam fully and being impatient with it, the West will consider Islam as problematic. It will be seen as the main counterforce to Western civilization.



Into the 1990s, an opinion is already taking shape of Islam as the major enemy after the collapse of communism. There are signs that some of the free-floating hostility directed against communism over the last decade will move toward Islam. What will it be then, dialogue or discord? asks a leading British political figure in his comment, hoping it will be the former.<sup>42</sup> The understanding of Islam is, therefore, critical in the coming years. Islam has much to offer the global civilization: piety, care for the family and the aged, a balance between affairs of the world and spirituality. But dialogue and interaction with Islam are possible only if its core features are understood with sympathy and its intrinsic dignity is recognized. This is not likely in the traditional manner of the Orientalists. And the Rushdie affair illustrated how easy it was for the Western liberal mind to slip into Orientalist stereotypes.

It is significant that the overwhelming number of responses are political. This is both a sign of the times and of how Islam is perceived in the world today. The character of the political debate about Islam differs according to the region. For the United States, larger issues concerned with its role on the world stage dominate the agenda, while domestic problems occupy the United Kingdom. In each case it is clearly a parochial agenda and it determines the topoi in the responses. That so many commentators transcend their positions in order to reach out to, and understand the "other" suggests evidence for what we have identified tentatively as postmodernism and post-Orientalism. The very fact that such diverse people are able to locate a common platform, a point of contact, suggests the way out of the impasse. The list includes Professor Saadudin Ibrahim, the Arab social scientist, Krishna Iyer, the Indian Supreme Court judge and statesman, Sir David Lane, the British political figure, Professor T.N. Madan, the Indian social scientist, Julia Neuberger, the Jewish rabbi in London, Professor Kemal Oke, the Turkish political scientist, Professor Tahirul Qadiri, the religious leader in Pakistan, Professor Francis Robinson, the British historian, Professor Annemarie Schimmel, the German expert on Sufism, Syed Shahabuddin, the Indian Muslim leader, Dr. Antony Sullivan, the American academic, and Dr. Charis Waddy, the Christian scholar of Islam at Oxford. These people of different sexes, races, ages, and professions, situated across the globe-in all probability unaware of each other-are linked. It is their perception and interpretation of meaning that we may identify as postmodernist. They are prepared to question modernism and the dominant modes of thought that have held for decades in their field. Perhaps these wise people have identified that object in the dark room, different in form and touch to each and yet in essence the same.



# **THE TRIAL OF DARA SHIKOH: A PLAY IN 3 ACTS BY AKBAR AHMED**

## **Comments on *The Trial of Dara Shikoh***

“Professor Akbar Ahmed’s brilliant new play, ‘The Trial of Dara Shikoh,’ is not only a fascinating Drama, but a most important, highly instructive study of the major forces within Islam that continue to reflect the fatal struggle between Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb that grip our modern world and may help to decide our global future.”

**Stanley Wolpert** (Distinguished Professor, University of California, Los Angeles/ Historian of South Asia).

“As gripping as the trial of Socrates, ‘The Trial of Dara Shikoh’ documents the final days of the wise and virtuous Mughal prince, son of Shah Jehan and his wife Mumtaz (for whom the Taj Mahal was built). Like the trial of Socrates, ‘The Trial of Dara Shikoh’ allows the audience to experience both the logic of the accusers and the piety of the accused, bringing into sharp focus the tragedy that results when right and reason, compassion and judgment collide. Although it depicts actual events that occurred in the 17th century, ‘The Trial of Dara Shikoh’ could well be set in the 21st century, so deftly does it portray the inner conflicts that grip the Muslim world today.”

**Tamara Sonn** (Distinguished Professor, College of William and Mary/ former President of the American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies).

“There has always been more than one perspective, approach, and interpretation of Islam. Professor Akbar Ahmed’s new play, ‘The Trial of Dara Shikoh’, is not merely a drama in a South Asian setting but an incisive presentation of the struggle between the exponents of liberal/humane Islam with its worldview based on the centrality of love of God and opposed to it, the intellectualism of orthodox theologians. The forces representing the former have always been confident about the strength of Islam and Prophet Muhammad’s idealism and pragmatism, while the latter always suffered from a sense of insecurity and a tendency to retreat into their shell. Akbar Ahmed has presented both positions of Islam in a fascinating manner. The language and idiom keep even those not familiar with Sufism or South Asian history engaged and engrossed. This is a well deserved tribute to a forgotten man of history.”

**Nadeem Hasnain** (Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Lucknow, India (Currently Visiting Professor, St. Lawrence University, New York)/ Editor, Islam and Muslim Societies/ The Eastern Anthropologist/ Director, Center for Social Action and Development, Lucknow, India).



## Introduction

This three act play is about the clash of two brothers who oppose each other because of their dramatic differences in temperament and world-views. They are also fighting for the throne of one of the most powerful and richest empires on earth, the Mughal Empire. At its peak the Empire included what are now Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. In the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the father of the two brothers, the Mughal Emperor Shah Jehan, built the Taj Mahal; a monument which reflected the sophistication, boldness and vision of a civilization at its confident best. It is a time when Muslims are secure in political and economic power, when further east there is another great empire, the Safavid that is also Muslim. Beyond the Safavids is another world empire, that of the Ottomans, which, too, is Muslim. Two centuries later the world would turn upside down for Muslims as the Mughal Empire in its entirety would be colonized by European imperialists, and the Ottomans and Safavids in parts indirectly dominated by Europeans. But at the time Shah Jehan ruled India the idea of being reduced to a colony by Europeans would have been unimaginable and preposterous. There was no idea or perception of a threat. If Europeans did arrive in India as travelers and traders they were so awestruck by the might and splendor of the Mughals that the very word was incorporated into their languages and even today signifies a powerful individual—mogul.

The Emperor Shah Jehan had declared Dara Shikoh, his eldest son, his heir apparent. Dara was an extraordinary prince, both bold and noble in his behavior, but also a learned scholar of mysticism. He was responsible for the first ever translation of the Hindu text *Upanishads* and the *Bagavad Gita* into Persian from where they would be translated later into the European languages and thus introduced to the world. He was beloved of mystics and sages of all the religions and there was high expectation that finally India would have an Emperor who would truly unite the different faiths and peoples of the land. Dara's younger brother Aurangzeb, an orthodox Muslim and a battle hardened veteran, resented this declaration of succession. Many powerful Muslim nobles and generals preferred Aurangzeb in order to underline the Islamic nature of the Mughal Empire. Women played a significant role in Mughal life, women like Jahanara the elder sister of the princes and Roshanara the younger one.

When Shah Jehan fell ill, Aurangzeb made his move, and in a series of battles defeated Dara Shikoh and his other brothers, declared himself Emperor and took the Emperor Shah Jehan prisoner and locked him in rooms from where he could just see the Taj Mahal. Aurangzeb's first act was to try Dara Shikoh for apostasy and execute him.

The trial and death of Dara Shikoh raises the big "what if?" question about India and the directions it could have taken had Dara succeeded to the Mughal throne. Dara's downfall is more than the death of a noble prince; it is also the rejection of a certain interpretation of Islam and attitude to the divine. Aurangzeb's rule set the course for Indian history in the direction of religious conflict and confrontation. The tragedy of Dara Shikoh is therefore not only the loss of an extraordinary scholar, not only that his death pushed a large part of the world into dangerous directions but the fact that he appears to have been erased from history and does not find mention even in standard



biographies (for example in the *Cambridge Biographical Encyclopedia* by David Crystal, Cambridge 1994). Dara has become the forgotten man of history. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century confronts a world locked in religious and cultural conflict the story of Dara becomes urgently relevant. Salvation in the future could lie in the message of Dara Shikoh.

### **Dramatis Personae**

#### ***Qazi Faizul Haq***

Learned, dry scholar presides over the court. Mid-50s, bearded and robed in grand, flowing green gowns.

#### ***Prosecutor Abdullah Khan***

Plodding, plotting bureaucrat. Mid-40s and eager to please the new dispensation forming around him in Delhi.

#### ***Dara Shikoh***

The eldest son of the Emperor Shah Jehan who declared him the crown prince. Early 40s, slim, elegant, poetic and impractical, a passionate, mystic scholar. He is fighting a losing battle for his beliefs of universal acceptance and compassion in a world in which he appears to be lost. In the play he appears in torn and dirty but once elegant clothes. He looks tired and unshaven.

#### ***Sipahr***

Teenage, confused son of Dara, not sure of what is happening around him.

#### ***Aurangzeb***

Younger brother of Dara Shikoh, and now self-declared Emperor of the Mughal Empire. Late 30s, serious and sober he takes his work as champion of Islam as his destiny. Passionate in his defense of Islam and believing he is right and on a mission to save Islam from internal and external attacks. He is simply dressed.

#### ***Jahanara***

Wise, compassionate and mystic scholar, the elder sister of Dara and Aurangzeb. A humanist, she can see both points of view but her interest is to preserve the integrity of the family and therefore through that the dynasty. She is simply dressed.

#### ***Roshanara***

The younger passionate sister of Dara and Aurangzeb who identifies strongly with the latter's Islamic interpretation of culture and politics.



***Witness 1: Gopi Lal***

Hindu mystic and scholar dressed in saffron robes. Shaved head and face. He carries the marks of a religious Hindu.

***Witness 2: Bahadur Singh***

Sikh religious leader wearing turban and traditional white Shalwar-Kameez. He has full beard.

***Attendee 1 and Attendee 2***

Young Muslim men wearing traditional clothes.

***Attendant to Qazi in court and to the Emperor***

As attendant to Emperor he must wear fancier clothes than others in court.

***Female attendant to Jahanara***

Young court attendant.

***Salim Bukhari***

Court physician. Long white beard, tired and stooped in appearance. Expensive clothes.

***Act 1***

*Courtroom scene with a judge presiding. Prince Dara Shikoh is accused of apostasy. The trial of the Prince is being heard in Delhi in the court of Qazi Faizul Haq, August 1659.*

***Qazi***

Let the trial of the accused Prince Dara Shikoh begin. Please present the evidence on behalf of the prosecution first. We will hear who will represent the accused.

***Dara Shikoh***

I will, your honor.

***Qazi***

Are you sure? We can provide a good defense council for you.

***Dara***

No, I am ready to confront my accusers.

***Qazi***

Please proceed then. Are there witnesses in this case?



***Prosecuting Lawyer Abdullah Khan***

I have here, oh wise and noble Qazi, three witnesses to help establish my case and I am sure the accused will not object.

***Qazi***

*(making notes)*

And who are these witnesses?

***Prosecutor***

The first prosecution witness is the Hindu scholar Gopi Lal and the second the Sikh holy man, Guru Bahadur Singh.

***Qazi***

You said three witnesses.

***Prosecutor***

The third is Dara Shikoh himself.

***Qazi***

That is interesting. So you will both be sharing the witnesses. This will make for an unusual case.

***Prosecutor***

I would like to examine my witnesses, calling Dara Shikoh last.

***Qazi***

Prince Dara Shikoh, Abdullah Khan, *Prince* Dara Shikoh. This court will uphold the honor of the defendant by referring to the correct title given to him by birth.

***Prosecutor***

I am sorry. You are right. Prince Dara Shikoh it is. I request permission your honor to summon my first witness, the Hindu scholar Gopi Lal.

***Qazi***

Summon the witness.

***Attendant***

Gopi Lal, please present yourself in the witness box.

*(Gopi Lal walks up to the witness box and attendant brings the Hindu holy text).*

***Qazi***

Please swear that you will tell the truth and nothing but the truth on your holy text.



**Gopi Lal**

I swear to tell nothing but the truth.

**Prosecutor**

To the best of your knowledge is it true that Prince Dara translated the Hindu holy texts, the *Upanishads* and the *Baghavad Gita* into Persian for the first time ever?

**Gopi Lal**

Yes, it is.

**Prosecutor**

And are these texts as sacred to Hindus as the holy Quran is to Muslims?

**Gopi Lal**

Yes, your honor.

**Prosecutor**

So why was a Muslim chosen to perform this task?

**Gopi Lal**

There is a marvelous story to this explanation your honor. It was Lord Ram himself who chose Prince Dara for this noble task.

**Prosecutor**

I am sorry I do not understand. Could you please explain this so that a simple Muslim like me can understand.

**Gopi Lal**

Lord Ram, the Hindu God, appeared in a dream to Prince Dara Shikoh. He commanded the Prince to have these ancient sacred texts translated into Persian so that the world would discover their wisdom and beauty.

**Prosecutor**

Please note your honor that it was the Hindu god who asks the accused in a dream to translate these Hindu texts. Please note Hindu gods do not appear to normal Muslims and certainly not to provide instruction to them to propagate alien ideologies. Thank you, Gopi Lal. No more questions. May I call the Sikh scholar Bahadur Singh, your honor?

**Qazi**

Summon the witness.



***Attendant***

Bahadur Singh, please present yourself in the witness box.

*(Bahadur Singh walks up to the witness box and attendant brings the Sikh holy text).*

***Qazi***

Please swear that you will tell the truth and nothing but the truth on your holy text.

***Bahadur Singh***

I swear to tell nothing but the truth.

***Prosecutor***

Is it true that when Prince Dara Shikoh fell gravely ill your most holy religious leader, the Guru himself, prayed for Dara to recover?

***Bahadur Singh***

It is true your honor, and the power of the Guru worked, and our Prince Dara recovered. We distributed sweets in celebration.

***Prosecutor***

So you will agree that Prince Dara is seen as especially close to the Sikhs?

***Bahadur Singh***

That is so, your honor. There is another link between Dara and the Sikhs that I wish to point out to the court. Prince Dara is a disciple of Mian Mir, the Sufi saint of Lahore and it was Mian Mir who we Sikhs requested to lay the foundation stone of our Golden Temple in Amritsar. Yes, your honor, Prince Dara is beloved among the Sikhs.

***Prosecutor***

Thank you, Bahadur Singh. That will be all.

*(Bahadur Singh leaves the witness box).*

***Prosecutor***

I would now like to officially examine my third witness, Prince Dara Shikoh.

***Qazi***

The third witness may take the stand.

*(Dara Shikoh walks to the witness box and is given the holy Quran by the attendant to swear on).*

***Dara***

*(placing his hand on the Quran)*

I swear to tell nothing but the truth.



**Prosecutor**

I have here two documents to begin my examination of my final witness and to establish the clear cut case of apostasy. Would the accused verify that he is the author of "The Mingling of the Oceans" and "The Great Secret"?

**Dara**

Yes, I am the author of both.

**Prosecutor**

Could you explain for favor of the court what you mean by the titles of these two documents? What oceans are you referring to in the first title, and what is this great secret?

**Dara**

Both contain my philosophy, which I have developed all my life in order to discover the common sources of our spiritual being, that which transcends particularistic faith and elevates us to the knowledge of the Unknowable and the Unseen.

**Prosecutor**

Could you translate that in simple language, language that someone simple like me can understand?

**Dara**

I think I have been as plain as I can be. The matter is quite clear.

**Prosecutor**

Let me then attempt to clarify what I have understood from reading these two works. Is it correct to say that the main idea in the books is to convey the common source, common bonds and indeed common character of Islam and Hinduism? That, in their essence, they are similar, one and the same?

**Dara**

In essence, yes.

*(gasp goes up in court).*

**Qazi**

Silence. I will hear this case with respect to the court. I will not have emotional outbursts.

**Prosecutor**

So the noble monotheism of Islam, preached by the Prophet of Islam, peace be upon him, and the declaration of faith itself, "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger," is nullified by you. Moreover, it is equated to the polytheism preached in Hinduism, with its many gods taking making many diverse shapes.



**Dara**

In essence, yes. The driving force and overarching idea behind both are the same. Islam and Hinduism meet at source and there is much in common. Of course, their history, their rituals and even their form are different. The aim of a great religion like Islam, or indeed Hinduism, is to produce pious, compassionate, and concerned individuals.

**Prosecutor**

Are you suggesting that Muslims should allow other religions to flourish?

**Dara**

As a Muslim you must allow other religions to flourish.

**Prosecutor**

You note, oh wise Qazi, that Prince Dara Shikoh is already admitting to a deviation from Islam.

**Dara**

Not at all, I am simply reflecting the core philosophy of Islam. The Quran categorically states "there is no compulsion in religion". This is as final a statement as you can ever get to define religion.

**Prosecutor**

*(looks in his papers)*

I have here a phrase attributed to you. Yes here it is. In this document, you have written a phrase which reads: "Love alone is the Ultimate Truth, the rest is ritual". Did you write this? And if so, what do you mean by it?

**Dara**

The phrase should be self-evident. We are faced by our nature which is dominated by anger, hatred and jealousy. But we also possess the antidote to these terrible human emotions, and the antidote reflects the divine part of our nature, and that is love. If we can develop this attribute of the divine, we can overcome our base nature. Thus, love is the ultimate truth and the ultimate reality.

**Prosecutor**

And what would you do with rituals like the five daily prayers? Abolish them?

**Dara**

No, not at all. Don't trivialize the deep human impulse to discover the path towards God through worship. That, too, is what the Quran teaches us. Prayer help us to love, in no case does it hinder or prevent us from reaching out to others.



(Attendees muttering appreciation)

*Attendee 1*

Subhanallah.

*Attendee 2*

Beautiful answer.

*Prosecutor*

No one is denying the glory of Islam and its enlightened principles. Let me turn to another writing of the accused. I have here a poem written by the accused, entitled "What shall I do?" Let me first confirm whether the accused accepts authorship of this poem. Did you, Prince Dara Shikoh, write this poem with the following words. "I know not what I am/ I am not a Christian/ I am neither a Jew/ Gabonese or a Musalman"?

*Dara*

I did; yes those are my verses.

*Prosecutor*

"I am not a ... Musalman". The words of the accused, your honor, in which he unequivocally rejects Islam. There is nothing further left for me to add, then. The accused has accepted his crime. He has rejected Islam from his own mouth, and I ask the court to announce the punishment for apostasy according to Islamic law.

*Qazi*

What have you to say in your defense Prince Dara Shikoh? Do you accept that these are your verses?

*Dara*

I have said what I have to say, and yes these are my verses. If I am guilty, then so are Islam's most celebrated mystic poets Maulana Rumi and Sheikh Ibn-Arabi. I am in good company and I will happily go to join them.

*Prosecutor*

Let me develop the theme of the poem of the accused. Prince Dara Shikoh you are so close to the Sikhs that you are beloved by them. We just heard confirmation of this sentiment from the Sikh scholar, Bahadur Singh. Yet you call yourself a Muslim. Is it not true that Islam categorically declares that the final messenger of God was our beloved prophet?

*Dara*

That is certainly true and I have never denied it.



**Prosecutor**

Then if our beloved Prophet is the final messenger how can you accept these other messengers the Sikhs call Gurus? Did they not claim to bring the word of God a thousand years after our holy Prophet?

**Dara**

Islam believes that God has sent 124,000 prophets to remind us of the right path. They have been sent by God to different peoples, in different lands to speak in different languages. These extraordinary spiritual messengers articulate transcendent values of the divine. I am sure Guru Nanak is such a figure.

**Prosecutor**

It is the same Guru Nanak who insulted all scholars of Islam, especially the true guardians of the state. I would like the court, oh honorable Qazi, to note what Guru Nanak said about Qazis: "The Qazis who sit in the courts to minister justice rosary in hand and the name of God on their lips commit injustice if their palm is not greased. And if someone challenges them, lo, they quote the scriptures."

**Attendee 1**

Shame.

**Attendee 2**

This is an insult to Islam.

**Qazi**

I have noted carefully these defamatory references to the Qazis of Islam.

**Prosecutor**

Now let me establish a link between the thought of Guru Nanak and the accused. This is what Prince Dara Shikoh said "Paradise is there where there is no mullah".

**Dara**

I ...

**Prosecutor**

Unless he denies it now.

**Qazi**

Do you deny you said this?

**Dara**

No. I don't. Both Guru Nanak and I meant ...



**Prosecutor**

Please note that the accused through his own mouth has equated his ideas to those of Guru Nanak; the same who had made these hostile remarks about Islam.

**Dara**

I object. Neither Guru Nanak nor I have ever made negative remarks about Islam. On the contrary ... What both of us have done is to underline the spirituality of Islam and contrast it to the hypocrisy of its religious clerics who do not practice what they preach.

**Prosecutor**

In short you endorse Guru Nanak's vilification of all Qazis.

**Qazi**

Yes, I would like to know your answer to this question.

**Dara**

I simply emphasize the inner spirituality of faith and not its outward superficial behavior, which can so easily degenerate into mechanical ritual and empty hypocritical gestures.

**Prosecutor**

The accused is just fudging the question you asked, your honor. The accused has exposed himself.

**Dara**

My Islam teaches me to understand and appreciate other societies and religions. That, too, is written in the Quran.

**Prosecutor**

That is why the sort of Islam you practice encourages you to spend your time with non-believers, with so-called mystics, yogis and mendicants, like that Sarmad. The Jew Sarmad wanders around like a beggar.

**Dara**

Don't judge people by the simplicity or austerity of their appearance. There is many a saint wearing the clothes of a beggar and I believe Sarmad is one such.

**Prosecutor**

I am surprised at your friendship with Sarmad, the Jew...

**Dara**

Please respect the wishes of Sarmad, as he has willingly accepted Islam and only God can judge what is in his heart, not you.



**Prosecutor**

I suppose your friendship with Sarmad has nothing to do with the fact that he propagates your candidacy for the position of the Emperor of the Mughal Empire.

**Dara**

Sarmad's political opinions do not matter to me. I am interested in his spiritual insights.

**Prosecutor**

I wonder how much he influences you about the mumbo-jumbo of Sufism.

**Dara**

The Quran teaches us to respect other faiths, so that in turn people can respect ours.

**Prosecutor**

Is it written in the Quran to worship trees and rivers, as the Hindus do? And we have on record the works of Gopi Lal telling us that Lord Ram appears to you in your dreams.

**Dara**

Both give life, and therefore we must respect that which provides us sustenance.

**Prosecutor**

And what about worshipping animals like the cow as divine?

**Dara**

The cow helps us live a better life.

**Prosecutor**

In what way, a better life? I am sure the honorable Qazi would like to know.

**Dara**

The cow provides us milk and curds; its dung helps cook food, its hide is used in so many ways and it assists the villagers in tilling the fields. Truly, the cow is like a mother that sustains us.

**Prosecutor**

This is reducing everything to absurdity. Let me see how you will explain, and I hope you will not mind, your honor, but I need to ask in order to pursue my case, the shameful obsession with the male and female sexual organs? There are entire cults and rituals around the lingam and the yoni.

**Dara**

I appreciate that expressed in this crude way the subject could seem shocking, but in the abstract they represent the unity of the male and the female. The lingam and the yoni



represent the masculine and feminine in each individual. Together they create balance, thereby promoting enlightenment, bliss and worldly success.

**Prosecutor**

Are you then suggesting that this is a different spirituality, a different truth?

**Dara**

In answer, let me quote the Rig Veda: "Truth is one, sages call it by various names".

**Prosecutor**

Perhaps your Lord Ram has inspired you to quote the Rig Veda. Please note your honor that Prince Dara Shikoh prefers to quote the Hindu text to the Quran.

**Dara**

I have quoted the Quran in your court several times this very day your honor and it reflects the same message of acceptance and openness as does that of the Sikh and Hindu texts.  
(gasps in the audiences again)

**Qazi**

I will ignore the diversion, but will not tolerate it any more ... You may proceed.

**Prosecutor**

Your honor please note the accused has virtually admitted to equating a religion that worships snakes, stones and cows to Islam itself. He is admitting to having wandered from the straight path of Islam.

**Dara**

You, sir, are an ignorant fool. The Mughal dynasty accepts and nurtures and appreciates all the different faiths that make up our great Empire. It is this which makes the Mughal dynasty different from the previous Muslim dynasties. It echoes the tradition of this great land. You would have heard of the Emperor Asoka who in many ways was a forerunner of our own Akbar-i-Azam.

**Prosecutor**

Precisely, that is why I need to remind the accused that we are proud to say that the Mughal Empire is an *Islamic* empire.

**Dara**

And may I point to the strong respect the Emperors have shown for other faiths. The Emperor Akbar cited Jesus above all other religious figures on the main entrance of the Baland Darwazah of his new capital at Fatehpur Sikri. Even you, Abdullah Khan, would have seen the portraits of the Emperor Jahangir looking with deep devotional love at Mary, the mother of Jesus.



**Prosecutor**

Well I will concede that we do accept Christians as people of the Book. It is there in our holy Quran; but that does not include the non-believers.

**Dara**

Once again you have shown your ignorance of our own traditions. Babar, the founder of our dynasty, banned cow slaughter in Delhi as a mark of respect to our Hindu population.

As for Akbar, there are so many examples. Akbar's chief wife was the Rajput princess Jodhabai and was allowed to practice her culture and faith openly. Raja Toda Mal who ran Akbar's administration so efficiently was another prominent Hindu. As for the Sikhs, Akbar honored the Sikhs by presenting a gift of gold as a mark of respect to their holy book.

**Prosecutor**

And would Prince Dara Shikoh tell the court what the leading Islamic cleric of his time thought of Akbar.

**Dara**

Take care. You are referring to his imperial majesty, Muhammad Jalaluddin Akbar, the Mughal-i-Azam. He is not plain Akbar.

**Qazi**

Yes, decorum must be observed and due titles of this land be honored.

**Prosecutor**

I am sorry your honor, but could the accused comment on what the leading cleric thought of the Mughal-i-Azam, Akbar.

**Dara**

The narrow-minded and the bigoted opposed the Emperor Akbar, but they never discouraged him from uniting the land. This particular mullah, Ahmad Sirhindi ...

**Prosecutor**

Point of order, your honor. Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi needs to be referred to with his official title Mujaddid Alf Sani. Surely the most distinguished Islamic scholar of the Mughal Empire deserves the same respect as others in this court in the usage of titles; although the Sheikh may not have the privilege of royal birth.

**Qazi**

Yes, we must observe correct decorum in court. This needs to be noted by all concerned.



**Dara**

Noted your honor. Sheikh Mujaddid Alf Sani finally accepted imperial authority and that is the point I wish to make. Some would call it compromise and some would see it as his seeing the correct path.

**Prosecutor**

The accused is again fudging the facts. The great Sheikh fought against the unorthodox accretions to Islam which came from the so-called mystics and Sufis. These people even challenged the concept of the unity of God Almighty, the central feature of Islam. God sent the great Sheikh to re-invigorate the faith of Islam and when the Emperor Jahangir accepted the Sheikh's views he was prepared to come out of prison. Under the Sheikh's supervision the Emperor Jahangir then removed everything that was contrary to Islam. In our case, before your court your honor, it appears that the accused is talking as if neither the Sheikh nor his reforms ever existed.

**Dara**

I believe when the Sheikh was locked up in Gwalior Fort it persuaded him to see the world differently, and he soon repented.

**Prosecutor**

On the contrary, it is guardians of faith like him who preserve the integrity of faith in this land where the infidel are in the majority.

**Dara**

Your honor, it is the openness of Emperors like Akbar that has brought Muslim genius to the front. I could give you list upon list of the names of buildings, paintings, poems and books produced because of this rich tradition. This I believe is the Mughal contribution to the world.

**Prosecutor**

Even if we grant the Mughal achievements, and who can deny them as they are all around us, where is the link with Sufism, your brand of Islam?

**Dara**

The connection between the idea of acceptance and openness that the mystics provide and the capacity of human beings to nurture their inner spiritual resources and artistic abilities is undisputed. Akbar is called the Mughal-i-Azam, the Great Mughal, because he created a strong and prosperous empire which harnessed the energies of all the faiths.

**Prosecutor**

I still don't see the connection between Akbar, the Mughal-i-Azam, and Sufism.



*Dara*

You are not looking too closely. Akbar's command to his governors was to spend their spare time reading Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi. As you know, your honor, Rumi is the quintessential Sufi poet.

*Prosecutor*

That was all very well in the last century. This is a different time, a different age.

*Dara*

Wrong again, Abdullah Khan. Our own beloved Emperor Shah Jehan is a great devotee of the celebrated Indian Sufi Sheikh Moin-uddin Chisti, buried in Ajmer. Indeed, for my own birth Shah Jehan, prayed like a humble supplicant at the shrine in Ajmer, and ordered celebrations throughout the empire when God heard his prayer.

*Prosecutor*

Hindu holy books, Sikh Gurus, shady Sufis, these seem to define religion for Prince Dara. Note your honor, the accused does not show any remorse whatsoever. He remains unrepentant. He is adamant in his wayward, unorthodox and dangerous beliefs. I rest my case.

*Qazi*

I think I have heard enough. As this court is based in the Islamic principles of justice, it is my duty to once again ask Prince Dara Shikoh if he would like any more witnesses before I decide the case?

*Prosecutor*

Your honor, I object. Who can be a more reliable witness than the accused himself? May I also remind your honor that the highest authority in the land is closely observing the proceedings of this case because of its nature, and justice must be swiftly done.

*Qazi*

You do not have to remind the court of its duties, but I take your point.

*Prosecutor*

I am so sorry your honor, I do not mean to be ...

*Qazi*

In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful let me sum up. Islamic jurisprudence demands swift and sure justice; there is no cause closer to God Almighty. Justice delayed is justice denied. I have taken notes and carefully heard the arguments presented for and against the accused. Having considered the arguments on both sides and examined the



evidence in the light of the principles laid down in the holy Quran, I, Qazi Faizul Haq, find abundant evidence that the accused, Prince Dara Shikoh, is guilty of the crime of apostasy. The court therefore condemns him to be executed without delay. Let this punishment be a lesson to others. God's justice embraces all, even members of the imperial family; such is the glory of the Mughal Empire.

*Attendees*

*(gasp)*

*Prosecutor*

Oh great paragon of justice, oh great...

*Qazi*

Let me finish, please.

*Attendees*

1. Mercy, oh judge.
2. Spare our beloved prince, he is the people's prince.
3. We will appeal to the Emperor for mercy.
4. May the Emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir reign for a thousand years.

*Qazi*

Silence in court. According to the law of the land the accused has 24 hours within which to appeal the death sentence through a mercy petition to be submitted to the Emperor. Even an apostate must be given this chance as God is Compassionate and Merciful, and Islamic justice reflects these attributes of the divine being.

*Prosecutor*

A Solomon, a wise judge, may Allah shower His blessings on you and your family oh Qazi Faizul Haq. History will remember you as having upheld the justice of the Emperor Jahangir, you have upheld the famed Adl-i-Jahangir of the Mughal Empire.

*(he is drowned out by voices)*

*Attendees*

*(repeated cries in a wailing tone)*

1. Mercy
2. We demand mercy.

*Qazi*

The hearing is now closed. The court will adjourn.



*Attendees*

(continue to wail)

*Curtain*

**Act 2. Scene 1**

*Midday, next morning.*

*The Emperor Aurangzeb is sitting center stage on a prayer mat silently. There is an attendant behind him unobtrusively standing with folded arms and bowed head in the corner. The Emperor takes his time, turns to the right, pauses, then to left, pauses, and then holds up his palms in supplication. After a while, he makes a motion as if he is washing his face with his palms and slowly rises, saying effortlessly, without even looking behind him.*

*Aurangzeb*

*Ask her in.*

(Attendant quietly disappears. Emperor folds up prayer mat and sits on a flat divan richly covered with brocade cloth with gold and crimson cushions just by where he was praying. There are papers and an ink pot with a quill on a side table. Picking up his quill he dips it in ink and begins to slowly and carefully copy Quranic calligraphy).

*Attendant*

*(in hushed tones)*

The imperial princess Jahanara is here.

*Jahanara*

*(enters)*

Brother.....

*Aurangzeb*

*(Looking up)*

Asalamalaikum sister.

*Jahanara*

Walaikumasalam. You know , your hand-written Qurans are a collectors' item throughout the empire. Highly prized.

*Aurangzeb*

*(continues to look down and work)*

The better the sales, the more money I can give to charity. It is our Islamic duty. Now, what can I do for you, my sister?



**Jahanara**

Aurangzeb, I have been trying to see you since last night, but you are so difficult...

**Aurangzeb**

I am sorry Jahanara, but I have been busy with affairs of state. We have the rumblings of a rebellion in the Punjab again, and I am watching developments carefully. It is this new religion that is causing the trouble. They claim they are neither Hindu nor Muslim, but have borrowed from both to create a way of peace.

**Jahanara**

Yes, the Sikhs are a marvelous community, and I can say with pride that the celebrated Sufi saint of Lahore, Mian Mir, helped to lay the foundation stone of their Golden Temple in Amritsar.

**Aurangzeb**

I don't see why a new way is required when we already have Islam. After all, Islam is the religion of peace. But you have not come, sister, to discuss theology with me. Come sit by me, and tell me what I can do for you.

*(Attendant has quietly arrived with some glasses of sherbet and delicacies and places them in front of Aurangzeb and Jahanara).*

**Jahanara**

Brother, I have come to plead for the life of Dara. I have the mercy petition with me, please sign it and spare his life.

**Aurangzeb**

*(puts away quill in ink pot and gives Jahanara full attention)*

I am sorry sister; I cannot interfere with the judgment of the courts. I have appointed my finest Islamic scholars to run these courts and we must allow justice to be done, and seen to done, especially when it concerns one of our own.

**Jahanara**

I am here to beg you for his life, in the name of Babar, the founder of the dynasty, of Taimur, from whom we derive our identity.

**Aurangzeb**

Jahanara, you appear to be so agitated. This cannot be good for your health. Tell me what has the court actually decided? I haven't yet seen the details.

**Jahanara**

*(handing Aurangzeb the mercy petition)*



The Qazi has condemned him to execution but declared in court that the Emperor in his wisdom can sign the mercy petition and thereby save Dara's life.

*Aurangzeb*

*(taking the paper)*

Hmm, let me look at this.

*(takes it and puts in on the pile of papers by his side on the divan).*

*Jahanara*

Please, brother, Dara has little time unless you intervene.

*Aurangzeb*

Sister, please leave matters of state to me. I promise I will deal with this.

*Jahanara*

Dara has only till sunset after which the orders of the Qazi will be carried out.

*Aurangzeb*

I have always respected you and looked up to you Jahanara, even when you sided with our brother Dara. I have admired your goodwill for people, and wisdom in most situations, and you have great qualities of heart and head. I have even overlooked your infatuation with those heretical, so-called mystics and their strange ways.

*Jahanara*

Brother, I am not here to discuss Sufism with you but to plead with you for my brother's life. If you truly respect me you will do this for me. I implore you in the name of our beloved prophet who showed mercy even to his enemies who taunted him and wished to kill him. God is Rahman and Rahmin, Compassionate and Merciful; these are His greatest attributes, so as a good Muslim, please show mercy, Aurangzeb.

*Aurangzeb*

God is also the Just and the Avenger, and we must fear His wrath. He has chosen me to be the humble commander of the armies of Islam, and I will not allow anyone, anyone, to compromise my religious principles.

*Jahanara*

Think of our father, Aurangzeb.

*Aurangzeb*

I will not squander state money on grandiose building projects just to satisfy my personal ego and end up by bankrupting the empire. My focus will be to create Islamic madrassahs and centers to strengthen the foundation of our faith.



**Jahanara**

Have a care, you are talking of a monument built by our father to honor our mother.

**Aurangzeb**

That is why I made sure that he can see it from his royal apartments in Agra until the end of his days.

**Jahanara**

I believe that is a cruel joke on our father. To imprison him in a place where he can barely glimpse the Taj Mahal from a slit in the wall; so he is reminded of the glory he once commanded and the plight of his present situation. Cruel indeed.

**Aurangzeb**

I, too, will create a monument that will outshine the so-called Taj Mahal, but it will be a mosque, and I will build it in Lahore to remind those rebellious Sikhs who rules this land. You will see that history will condemn our father for squandering public funds in creating this monstrosity, which is doomed to be forgotten.

**Jahanara**

Be that as it may, I am here to persuade you to spare the life of our brother.

**Aurangzeb**

Here, have some of this sweet delicacy which I specially ordered for you, knowing that you will be visiting me. The English Ambassador brought it from his land, and says it is made of a concoction of cocoa and milt. I know you are partial to it.

**Jahanara**

I confess my weakness for this delicacy, but I have no appetite today.

**Aurangzeb**

Stop worrying, sister; I assure you justice will be done. I am here to ensure God's will is done. Now, I have matters of state to attend to. I shall call you in due course.

**Jahanara**

*(bows in salaam):*

Asalamalaikum.

*(leaves with quiet dignity)*

**Aurangzeb**

*(quietly as if to himself)*

So, one sister begs for his life; I wonder what the other sister has to say?



*(enter Roshanara, stepping out from behind the curtains, which are hanging behind the divan).*

***Roshanara***

You see how dangerous he is. He has already sent a dagger to your heart by setting your naïve sister against you. If Dara is allowed to continue he will damage the Mughal Empire irreparably. There is already unrest among the Sikhs and Hindus and they have the nerve to demand that Dara should be set free. They call him the rightful Emperor of India. They even complain that there would be no tax on them had Dara been the Emperor. They demand you back down from your path to impose Islam on them.

***Aurangzeb***

Never. I will never abandon my duty to Islam. I will always quote the holy Prophet who when he was pressurized to give up Islam said, "I will never do so, even if you place the sun in the palm of one hand, and the moon in the other."

***Roshanara***

That is what I admire in you, brother. Your clear moral compass, especially in this dangerous time when Islam needs strong leadership.

***Aurangzeb***

My burden is heavy. How can I even put it in words? Sometimes I wonder whether I can carry the weight of my family, my dynasty and the future of Islam itself on my frail shoulders.

***Roshanara***

No one apart from you can do so, that is why I admire you.

***Aurangzeb***

You cannot imagine how much agony it gives me to have to pass harsh judgment after harsh judgment, even on my own blood.

***Roshanara***

You must be steel. I truly believe, brother, you are all that stands between defeat and victory for Islam. You cannot fail. You must not fail.

***Aurangzeb***

Sometimes, my sweet little sister, I feel so alone.

***Roshanara***

I am always here, my brother.



**Aurangzeb**

*(glancing at the mercy petition)*

So what do you think I should do with this?

**Roshanara**

Sign it if you wish to destroy the Mughal Empire that your ancestors have nourished with their blood. Otherwise, do nothing. The Islamic court has already tried him, and found him guilty of apostasy.

**Aurangzeb**

Dara is our elder brother ...

**Roshanara:**

Brother, never forget how close Dara came to capturing the throne. I don't have to remind you that he defeated the imperial armies before you finally triumphed at Samugarh.

**Aurangzeb**

I must confess God was on our side that day or we would have lost. Dara's son Sipahr led such bold charges he almost broke through the left wing of my army and the Rajputs hammered on my right wing with such ferocity that I feared the battle would be lost. Then the miracle happened.

**Roshanara**

What do you mean, brother?

**Aurangzeb**

Quiet unexpectedly a rocket hit the howdah in which Dara was sitting and when he got off the elephant to mount a horse, his troops saw Dara's elephant without their leader. They feared he was dead and began to lose heart. I saw my chance and ordered my cavalry to charge Dara's center and thus smashed Dara's army.

**Roshanara**

Then with a brilliant stroke you took control of the imperial treasure and ammunitions magazine at Agra.

**Aurangzeb**

Yes, and prevented our father from further interfering on behalf of Dara. I had no choice but to order that our father be put under house arrest, but I allowed Jahanara to take care of him.

**Roshanara**

So you agree how close Dara came to taking the throne.



*Aurangzeb*

God is great.

*Roshanara*

And if our loyal Afghan chieftain Malik Jiwan had not turned him over to us in Baluchistan, Dara may well have slipped across the border to the Persians. Who knows then, perhaps he would have returned like our own ancestor, the Emperor Humayun, with a Persian army, to take Delhi.

*Aurangzeb*

I was glad to finally capture Dara, but I cannot appreciate the actions of Malik Jiwan. He betrayed a guest, a member of the royal family at that, and one who had saved his miserable life when he stood condemned to die in court. This man has no honor whatsoever.

*Roshanara*

Many would have done what Jiwan did. The very future of Islam in India is at stake; our destiny as Muslims in Hindustan. That is why so many nobles and generals and Islamic scholars are demanding that the Qazi's orders be implemented swiftly.

*Aurangzeb*

You are right. I too have been thinking along these lines.

*Roshanara*

Justice requires stern resolve and swift action.

*Aurangzeb*

I know where you are going with this, but he is our elder brother. He is also extremely popular with people of all the faiths throughout the length and breadth of the Empire.

*Roshanara*

God has provided you the opportunity. The Islamic court has found him guilty of apostasy. He will be forgotten after his death and his message buried with him.

*Aurangzeb*

Ameen. The sooner the better. Still, he is our elder brother. Perhaps exile ...

*Roshanara*

No, brother, the stakes are too high and you see how Dara can manipulate people. Just remember it was he who poisoned the mind of your eldest daughter Zebunissa into believing the mumbo-jumbo that he preaches about mysticism. All your excellent teaching of orthodox Islam was lost on her. Can you imagine Zebunissa now writes love poems.



**Aurangzeb**

This is a matter of shame for me.

**Roshanara**

She has given herself a pen name to disguise her identity and calls herself Makhfi, the Hidden One.

**Aurangzeb**

To be fair to her she has not supported Dara's naïve attempts to unite Islam and Hinduism. She draws the line in this regard.

**Roshanara**

Of course; she is after all your daughter, but have you read her poetry? Its explicit passion would shock even the most hardened drunks in the most notorious taverns of Delhi.

**Aurangzeb**

It breaks my heart to see Zebunissa in this condition. It is as if someone has done magic on her.

**Roshanara**

She has no will in front of Dara, and thinks he is her master and inspiration. Dara manipulates her.

**Aurangzeb**

*(to himself)*

Zebu, my child...

**Roshanara**

What is most tragic is that a child who knew the Quran by heart when she was seven years old, now writes love poetry of an explicit nature and wanders about in those bizarre black clothes. Who does she think she is, a mendicant Sufi or a Mughal Princess, the daughter of the Emperor himself?

**Aurangzeb**

It is a matter of shame.

**Roshanara**

Dara must be stopped.

**Aurangzeb**

*(rising without even looking at the mercy petition).*

Sister you must excuse me, I have to lead a military campaign.



**Roshanara**

So, you are returning to the Deccan.

**Aurangzeb**

The Shia kingdoms are challenging the authority of Delhi. I have been diverted too long by this Dara business.

**Roshanara**

Then you must close it before leaving Delhi. Too many illiterate fools believe that their Dara Shikoh, "the Possessor of Glory", will bring them salvation.

**Aurangzeb**

Enough, Roshanara, I have heard you. Keep me informed of the situation in Delhi.  
(walks out as Roshanara follows, a few feet behind).

**Curtain****Act 2. Scene 2**

*The second day after the trial. A gloomy, dungeon with straw on the floor and iron bars clearly visible on one side. On the straw sit Prince Dara Shikoh and his son Sipih. Both appear somewhat desperate and are wearing clothes that look unkempt and dirty.*

**Sipih**

Father, I feel responsible for us being here, like this, prisoners waiting to die like common criminals.

**Dara**

Son, you must never despair. Always trust in God. We have no idea why God does what he does. Maybe in our death is our salvation. Maybe in our defeat, is the victory of our ideas.

**Sipih**

No, Father, I wish I had fought better and harder at Samugarh. I was *this* close to breaking uncle Aurangzeb's left wing, and our noble Rajput allies almost smashed his other wing. *This* close.

**Dara**

It was written, my son. You were so heroic that day, and my heart was bursting with pride as I saw you in battle. You were like a young Babar.

**Sipih**

Yes, but the battle of Samugarh turned the tide against us.



**Dara**

Let us not talk about defeat. I regret nothing in my life. But I am truly sorry I could not spend more time with you. I would have liked to know you as a friend.

**Sipahr**

Well you were doing such great things, changing the world. Single-handedly you were altering the very image of Islam.

**Dara**

Perhaps, my son, saving the world and losing my family, those nearest and dearest to me. I wish I had spent more time with you. Now that we have this time together I really want to get to know you.

**Sipahr**

Why? Are we going to die? Will uncle Aurangzeb have both of us killed? Surely, his blood will prevent it.

**Dara**

There is no point in deluding ourselves. Uncle Aurangzeb will do what he has to do. But son, I want to savor this time with you. Let us not waste it talking of uncle Aurangzeb. Let us get to know each other.

**Sipahr**

What is the point, if we are doomed to die shortly?

**Dara**

Time is a constraint in this mortal life alone. Our souls will live on. Go on, ask me any question that you may have wanted to ask.

**Sipahr**

Well, I ... anything at all?

**Dara**

Anything, my son.

**Sipahr**

Tell me, father, about my uncle Aurangzeb. What was he like as a young man?

**Dara**

I thought we were not going to talk of him.



*Sipahr*

Your insights will help me understand what is happening to us better.

*Dara*

Aurangzeb was quite normal as a young man.

*Sipahr*

I hear he was without fear.

*Dara*

That he was. Once an enraged elephant charged at the Emperor Shah Jehan and Aurangzeb galloped in front of the elephant to stop it from attacking the Emperor. Aurangzeb was thrown off his horse but stood his ground, until other horsemen arrived to subdue the beast.

*Sipahr*

Uncle Aurangzeb has a reputation as a successful military commander, the man with the sword.

*Dara*

The sword, my son, is always a double-edged weapon and injures both, he who wields it and he who is attacked.

*Sipahr*

What do you mean?

*Dara*

One day you will find out.

*Sipahr*

Strange are the ways of God, this brave and noble prince became such a stern, unsmiling man. Have you heard the story of uncle Aurangzeb and the musicians?

*Dara*

Tell me which one? There are so many.

*Sipahr*

The musicians of Delhi were ordered to put away their instruments by uncle Aurangzeb as he did not wish to promote music. The musicians took out a mock procession with a shrouded "corpse" which was made up of musical instruments. Uncle Aurangzeb, hearing their wailing, asked them who was dead and who they were burying. Music, they answered. Bury it deep then, said uncle Aurangzeb, so that it does not rise again.



**Dara**

*(smiling)*

Yes, I have heard this story.

**Sipahr**

Was he always so loveless? Do you ever recall uncle Aurangzeb with ordinary emotions like the rest of us? Was he ever in love?

**Dara**

You will be surprised, he was. In fact he was so much in love, that when his beloved died something seemed to die in him.

**Sipahr**

Uncle Aurangzeb in love? Wonders will never cease. Who was she?

**Dara**

You will be surprised to hear who she was. A Hindu dancing girl. Yes, a Hindu girl had won the heart of your uncle Aurangzeb, the champion of Islam.

**Sipahr**

Truly, wonders will never cease.

**Dara**

That is why poets say the ways of love are mysterious.

**Sipahr**

Well father, I always wondered what it would be like to fall in love.

**Dara**

Sipahr, you are barely 15 years old. You will find out.

**Sipahr**

To be truly, passionately in love, to find the true soul-mate, to belong in body and soul to someone else.

**Dara**

*(smiling)*

You speak like a young man who reads much about love but has still to experience it.

**Sipahr**

Tell me father, I mean can I ask you ... *any* question?



*Dara*

Of course, I gave you permission.

*Sipahr*

Have you ... have you ever been in love?

*Dara*

The question of a young man; and not entirely unexpected, after all we are talking as friends.

*Sipahr*

Tell me, then father, I would really like to know.

*Dara*

Yes, my son, I have loved.

*Sipahr*

I mean, deeply and madly in love.

*Dara*

Yes.

*Sipahr*

I don't mean your mystical or Sufi kind of love.

*Dara*

Hm, well ...

*Sipahr*

Please, father, I would really like to know.

*Dara*

I would say, it was Ranadil.

*Sipahr*

Nek Bibi?

*Dara*

Yes.

*Sipahr*

I can't picture her in anyway but covered in shawls and veils and fasting and praying.



**Dara**

She wasn't always like this. She wasn't always my wife. You know, I first heard of her when I was a young man. It seemed everyone in north India was in love with her and sang her praises. This bewitching dancing girl from the Punjab.

**Sipahr**

Did her being a Hindu matter to anyone?

**Dara**

Yes, it did; certainly to the orthodox and the narrow-minded.

**Sipahr**

How could Hinduism be a problem when my grandfather Emperor Shah Jehan was the son of a Hindu himself?

**Dara**

Perhaps that is why he did not want his sons to marry a Hindu.

**Sipahr**

Would you mind if I asked you what it felt like?

**Dara**

What felt like?

**Sipahr**

When you first met her and fell in love.

**Dara**

Well son, you will find out one day.

**Sipahr**

Tell me father, tell me.

**Dara**

It was like intoxication, like being completely drunk every minute of every hour, of every day.

**Sipahr**

Like your passion for the divine?

**Dara**

In a way, yes. Love is the purest expression of devotion. It is only through love that your soul really begins to explore its own capacity to reach towards the mysteries of creation.

*Sipahr*

Yes, but tell me more about your human emotions. What, for instance, did you love best about her?

*Dara*

Well there were so many things about her that I loved. Her laughter, she made me laugh. Her eyes; I loved those dark and mysterious windows to the universe itself.

*Sipahr*

Father, you sound like a poet in love.

*Dara*

Love makes everyone a poet, my son.

*Sipahr*

Did you ever write any love poems to Nek Bibi?

*Dara*

My poems expressed my love for God.

*Sipahr*

I am never sure when your verses talk about the Beloved they mean God or some woman.

*Dara*

Or man. A good example is the poetry of your cousin Zebunissa and her references to the Beloved. It's a deliberate ambiguity that mystics create in order to throw the orthodox off the scent. But when they write of the Beloved, they mean God.

*Sipahr*

Was my cousin Zebunissa any good?

*Dara*

Yes, she was my favorite pupil and wrote beautiful verses. One of my favorite is something she called, "I bow before the image of my Love".

*Sipahr*

How does it go? Do you remember any lines?

*Dara*

Let me see ... I used to remember some lines that struck me as particularly powerful: "No Muslim I, But an idolater, I bow before the image of my Love, And worship Her.



No Brahman I, My sacred thread I cast away, for round my neck I wear Her plaited hair instead”.

### *Sipih*

By God, that is so bold. I never suspected my quiet, sweet cousin would have such passion lurking in her. I look forward to getting to really know her when I am out of this place.

### *Dara*

I remember some more lines from another poem of hers that left an impression on me:  
“Here is the path of love—how dark and long  
Its winding ways, with many snares beset!  
Yet crowds of eager pilgrims onward throng  
And fall like doves into the fowler’s net...  
But Makhfi, tell me where the feast is made?  
Where are the merry-makers? Lo, apart,  
Here in my soul the feast of God is laid,  
Within the hidden chambers of my heart”.

### *Sipih*

Sounds deep. Sufi stuff. So she called herself Makhfi. No wonder uncle Aurangzeb was mad at her.

### *Dara*

Yes, it’s a pity your uncle doesn’t appreciate poetry or literature,

### *Sipih*

Nor music, nor anything that is artistic or creative. It’s a miracle that poor Zebu has survived so long with a father like that.

### *Dara*

Her poems cost her the love of her father. You know she was his favorite child and he particularly wished to groom her to follow in his orthodox learning of Islam.

### *Sipih*

What was the story of Zebunissa writing a line of verse which infuriated her father?

### *Dara*

That was typical of my brother. He had grown weary of his daughter’s poetic fame and arranged for a famous poet to challenge her in a poetry contest. The poet would recite the first line of a verse and Zebu would have to complete it in rhyme while matching the subject. If she failed to do so within three days, Aurangzeb declared, she would have to renounce poetry forever.

*Sipahr*

That was harsh. So what was the first line?

*Dara*

"Rare it is to find a black and white pearl ...."

*Sipahr*

"Rare it is to find a black and white pearl ..." What does that mean? What happened then?

*Dara*

Zebu felt crushed after three days as she could not find the answer, and in desperation prepared to take her own life by swallowing her diamond ring. At this point her best friend, a Hindu girl, began to cry profusely. Seeing her friend's tears Zebu began to smile and then clap her hands in joy and then laugh loudly.

*Sipahr*

I don't understand father.

*Dara*

Zebu had found the answer in the tears of her friend. This friend had big beautiful eyes and she lined them with kohl or *surma*. Zebu saw the dark *surma* run from her friend's eyes as she cried, forming little black and white "pearls". So as the first verse was, "Rare it is to find a black and white pearl," Zebu's line was, "Except the *surma*-mingled tear of a beauty."

*Sipahr*

What an amazing story. I am sure uncle would have been furious.

*Dara*

Zebu summoned him and Aurangzeb came running, because he thought he had triumphed and he would finally silence Zebunissa's poetry.

*(Guard approaches outside the cell)*

*Guard*

Oh Prince, I bring an imperial order.

*Sipahr*

Father, he has news for us. Uncle Aurangzeb has reprieved us.

*Guard*

*(head bowed, doesn't answer)*



**Dara**

Speak.

**Guard**

I am ashamed, oh noble prince ...

**Dara**

Please, do your duty.

**Guard**

I have been asked to convey the orders of execution to the prisoner Prince Dara Shikoh. The prisoner must make himself ready at daybreak at the time of the morning prayer for the execution of the orders of the Qazi's court.

**Dara**

I will be ready, inshallah.

**Sipihir**

Father, what does this mean? Is there no justice, no compassion in this land?  
(*Sipihir wobbles at his knees and Dara moves to him to put his arms around his son*)

**Dara**

Have faith, my son, have faith. We must never fear the sword. The Beloved is with us here in this very room and awaits us outside it.

**Guard**

I will take my leave, noble prince.

**Dara:**

(*moves to cell door*)

Yes ... but wait. What happens to Prince Sipihir. Is he free to go?

**Guard**

He is ordered to be taken to another prison where he will spend the rest of his days.

**Dara**

The rest of his days. Where, which prison?

**Guard**

Gwalior Fort.

**Dara**

*(slowly collapsing to the ground)*

No, not Gwalior Fort. No condemned prisoner leaves that hell-hole alive.

**Sipahr**

*(putting his arms around his father)*

Father, we must not despair. You have taught me that.

**Curtain**

**Act 3**

*It is a September evening in the year 1681, 22 years from the time Dara Shikoh was executed. The scene is set on the balcony of the famous Red Fort in Delhi overlooking the Jamna River. A light breeze touches the muslin curtains. Jahanara is reclining on the divan but is gravely ill. She has a faraway look on her face. There is a female attendant fussing about.*

*Enter Aurangzeb, accompanied by the imperial chief physician Salim Bukhari. Aurangzeb looks aged, with white beard and a stoop. They pause and talk out of Jahanara's hearing.*

**Bukhari**

Everything possible is being done, your Majesty.

**Aurangzeb**

She has been so weak these last few days. Her mind is wandering. I fear the worst ...

**Bukhari**

God will be Merciful.

**Aurangzeb**

I have entrusted my sister's health to you as a physician. So please leave God out of this.

**Bukhari**

I am sorry your Majesty, I meant ....

**Aurangzeb**

Have you talked to the British physician yet?

**Bukhari**

Dr. Smith was away from Delhi, but is returning at my request. I will be seeing him as soon as he comes back.



**Aurangzeb**

See everything is done to ensure the comfort of her Imperial Highness.

**Bukhari**

Of course, your Majesty.

**Aurangzeb**

*(motions Bukhari to leave with a flicker of his hand, and then walks towards Jahanara).*

And how is my sister feeling this morning?

*Bukhari exits with head bowed, hands folded, careful that his back never points towards the Emperor.*

**Jahanara**

*(without moving, speaking slowly)*

Who is that?

**Aurangzeb**

*(motions to female attendant to leave)*

Jahanara is I, your favorite brother, Aurangzeb.

**Jahanara**

*(makes attempt to sit up)*

I don't feel so well today.

**Aurangzeb**

The English doctor will see you shortly and I promise you, you'll feel better. I hope Bukhari has been taking care of you in the meantime?

**Jahanara**

How are you, brother?

**Aurangzeb**

I am as well as can be, sister. The problems of state demand all my time and energy.

**Jahanara**

You look tired.

**Aurangzeb**

I don't get rest. There are unending challenges to Muslim rule in India. The Sikhs have revolted in the Punjab, the Hindus in central India; and that Sivaji has become a thorn in my side. The Marhattas have found a dangerous leader.

*Jahanara*

You must take special care of your Hindu and Sikhs subjects.

*Aurangzeb*

But I do. There is propaganda against me, that I am a fanatic. Don't they know that my top generals are Hindus? that I have sanctioned lands and grants to Hindu temples? that I have ...

*Jahanara*

Even your Muslim subjects ... The Pathans in the north are unhappy, the Shia in the south...

*Aurangzeb*

This has to do with the sheer size of India. The Empire has never had so great a reach. Mughal armies now command the largest territory in history.

*Jahanara*

The ordinary man is not concerned with the grandeur and glory of the Empire.

*Aurangzeb*

I work night and day for Islam. To unify the land, I have established Islamic schools and codified Islamic law.

*Jahanara*

People need something more than law.

*Aurangzeb*

More than law? What can that be?

*Jahanara*

Love. The path of Dara ...

*Aurangzeb*

Dara? What made you think of him?

*Jahanara*

Sometimes at dusk I hear the voice of Dara. He calls to me. He speaks of love and compassion.

*Aurangzeb*

Don't go there, Jahanara. Nothing is to be gained of it.



**Jahanara**

I hear laughter and music. Friends talking and reciting poetry.

**Aurangzeb**

Those were frivolous gatherings. They encouraged un-Islamic thoughts and behavior.

**Jahanara**

"What shall I do?

I know not what I am

I am not a Christian

I am neither a Jew

Gabonese or a Musalman."

**Aurangzeb**

*(softly, shaking his head in disapproval)*

Blasphemy.

**Jahanara**

*(tears in her eyes)*

"I am neither of the East

nor of the West

or of the earth or the ocean

Only Him, I search, only Him, I know

only Him, I see, and only Him, I call

He is the beginning and the end."

**Aurangzeb**

This is blasphemy, Jahanara.

**Jahanara**

Then execute me, like you executed the writer of the verses.

**Aurangzeb**

This invocation of Dara is morbid. He was threatening Islam; I had to ...

**Jahanara**

*(becoming agitated)*

Why were you so cruel? Why, Aurangzeb?

*Aurangzeb*

That was a different time. I did what I thought was right. For Islam. For the future of the Mughal Empire.

*Jahanara*

To humiliate him, the most noble prince of the Mughal dynasty ... To parade him and Sipihr on a dirty, mangy, female elephant; to send his head in a box to our father. To kill Sipihr, a mere boy; innocent and brave.

*Aurangzeb*

Sister, don't think of the past. Many mistakes were made. But let us not talk about these matters as no purpose is served.

*Jahanara*

The weeks after Dara's death were the worst in my life. I felt my better half had been killed. We were one soul in two bodies. People were right when they said that.

*Aurangzeb*

Please, Jahanara.

*Jahanara*

My loss was nothing compared to the grief of our father. I still hear that long, slow, haunting groan from the depths of his soul when he saw Dara's head. The once mighty Emperor collapsed in agony. I thought he would never forgive you.

*Aurangzeb*

Yet you convinced him, on his death-bed, to forgive me and in his magnanimity he forgave me. My advisers ...

*Jahanara*

You have always had bad advisers. Sycophants. Timeservers.

*Aurangzeb*

There I will agree with you.

*Jahanara*

Even the title they gave you. Alamgir. World Conqueror. Owner of the Universe.

*Aurangzeb*

Yes, I now realize some of these things. They even convinced me that the Mughal Empire was at the center of the world; that the kings of England and France were like our petty chieftains.



**Jahanara**

They persuaded you to do away with my beloved brother Dara. Why did you allow it? Why?

**Aurangzeb**

Sister, stop harking back to the past. It will do us no good. I had to – and have to – defend Islam.

**Jahanara**

You know it had nothing to do with Islam.

**Aurangzeb**

What do you mean?

**Jahanara**

Jealousy. Plain and simple.

**Aurangzeb**

Jealousy?

**Jahanara**

You were jealous of Dara.

**Aurangzeb**

I? Aurangzeb. Jealous of Dara. How can you say that?

**Jahanara**

He was loved by everyone. And you went after all of Dara's favorites with a vengeance. Even poor Sarmad, a harmless mystic. It was the same with Dara's beloved, Ranadil.

**Aurangzeb**

I did offer her marriage after Dara's death, so that I could preserve her status and give her security. Dara's other wife agreed.

**Jahanara**

Ranadil preferred to slash her face with a blade.

**Aurangzeb**

These women make no sense to me.

**Jahanara**

What integrity. What beauty. All sacrificed for her beloved Dara.

*Aurangzeb*

She had a duty to her Emperor.

*Jahanara*

A low-born Hindu dancing girl had shown the Emperor of India the meaning of love. This ordinary Punjabi girl has entered the legendary annals of India. You didn't even spare your own daughter, Zebunissa.

*Aurangzeb*

She was just a child, but Dara filled her mind with dangerous thoughts ...

*Jahanara*

You imprisoned the hapless princess for life. You silenced the rare beauty of her mystic verses.

*Aurangzeb*

The enemies of Islam were exploiting her, using her to undermine Islam.

*Jahanara*

Nothing but jealousy.

*Aurangzeb*

Nonsense. For me sister, matters of state must take precedence over everything. I must look to the future.

*Jahanara*

I fear for the future, brother.

*Aurangzeb*

Only God can tell the future. We can but do our best in the light of His instructions.

*Aazan, the Muslim call to prayer, floats into the room.*

*Aazan*

"God is Great, God is Great, Come to Prayer, Come to Prayer.

Come to what is good for you, Come to what is good for you."

*Aurangzeb*

I must go to offer my prayers.

*Jahanara*

I miss him every day and every hour.



**Aurangzeb**

I will return tomorrow to check how you are feeling. You must rest now.

**Jahanara**

*(sighs softly)*

I will, brother. The time is near when we will meet again.

**Aurangzeb**

Please, princess. You must not exhaust yourself. You are most dear to us.

**Jahanara**

You honor me. You have always been kind to me.

**Aurangzeb**

It is my duty. Now rest.

**Jahanara**

I will rest. I will rest peacefully in the courtyard of the great Nizamuddin Aulia; in the company of Amir Khusro the great mystic poet.

**Aurangzeb**

Your wishes will be honored, I promise. *When* the time comes, you will be buried in the presence of the Saint of Delhi.

**Jahanara**

Ideal company for eternity. Surrounded by saints, poets and seekers ... And you ... ? A simple, unmarked, anonymous grave. A true Muslim to the end.

**Aurangzeb**

God alone is worthy of praise. I haven't changed my mind about how I wish to be buried. But enough talk of death, sister. India needs you. I need you, Jahanara. I need your love and your advice, more than ever. No one talks to me with the candor and integrity you do.

**Jahanara**

I am tired ... *(closes eyes and reclines back)* I want to sleep.

**Aurangzeb**

*(Leans across and kisses her on the forehead. Speaks softly, as if to himself)*

God be with you. You are a true saint. I know you will intercede for me with Dara. May God have mercy on our souls ... *(Quietly exits)*

**Curtain.**

**THE END**

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