ASIAN AND MIDDLE EASTERN ISLAM

By Robert W. Hefner

We in the West have long identified Islam with Arab culture. In one sense this is reasonable enough. After all, the Quran and the canonical accounts of the actions and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed (the Hadith) are all written in Arabic, and Muslim scholars insist that a proper study of these sacred works is possible only in Arabic. The holy lands to which Muslims daily turn in prayer, and to which they are enjoined to make the pilgrimage at least once in their life if they have the means, are also located in Arab lands. And during the first century of their spectacular expansion from the Arabian peninsula north into Syria, westward to Spain, and eastward toward India beginning in the seventh century C.E., the armies that created one of the most cosmopolitan empires Eurasia has ever seen were Arab-led and Arab-staffed.

Beyond these early historical facts, however, the ethnic and civilizational complexity of the Muslim world becomes clear. Ethnic Arabs comprise only about 15-18 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims. More than 60 percent of the Muslim population lives not in the Middle East, but in Asia. The single largest Muslim-majority society in the world is Indonesia, whose population of 230 million is 89 percent Muslim. The greatest single regional concentration of Muslims lies in the Indian subcontinent, with its almost 400 million Muslims.

The Arab expansion northward into Central Asia stimulated a process of Islamization and militarization among Turkic people of the Central Asian frontier. By the early Muslim middle ages (11-12th centuries C.E.), the now-Islamized Turkic peoples of Central Asia had become rulers across much of the Middle East. Descendants of these early Turks, the Ottomans grew from their small beginnings in the 13th century to create the most expansive empire the Muslim world has ever seen.

By the eighth century of the common era, peaceful Arab traders had made their way to southern China, and by the 11th century, Arab armies had marched into northern India. Between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, the maritime territories that stretched from southern Arabia and India all the way to today's Indonesia and southern China were transformed into the most prosperous trading zone in the world. Trade and travel, not force of arms, helped spread Islam to the coastal peoples of archipelagic Southeast Asia--what is today Indonesia, Malaysia, and the southern Philippines. From the 15th to the 18th century, the Indonesian portion of this great trading arc developed towns, arts, and a commerce that rivaled those of Renaissance Europe.

Thus, Muslim civilization was long engaged with and influenced by Asian peoples, in military organization, commerce, and state structures. Islamic civilization after its first century was not the property of one region or ethnicity, but a multiethnic and trans-regional religion in which Asian Muslims played a central role.

Even as we acknowledge these Asian influences on historical Islam, the question remains, Is there a difference between Asian and Arab Islam? Answering this question requires making an important distinction between Islam's scriptures and normative commentaries, on the one hand, and Islam as a civilization or a set of "lived" cultures, on the other.

NORMATIVE ISLAM

To understand this distinction requires that we stand back for a moment and make an important distinction between Islam's scriptures and normative commentaries and Islam as a civilization or a set of "lived" cultures. With regard to Islam in this first, "normative" sense, the simplest answer to the "is Asia different?" question is "no"--a "no" that can be qualified, but a "no" nonetheless.

To understand why this is so requires a brief comparative aside. Since the European reformation, Westerners have become comfortable talking about Christianity in broadly national terms. Thus we speak of the Church of England, the Swedish Lutheran Church, Dutch Calvinists, and the like, without our feeling that we are somehow doing violence to Christianity. For most modern Muslims, however, any comparable discussion of "Indian Islam" or "Indonesian Islam" as opposed to "Arab Islam" is disquieting; indeed, for some Muslims such ethnic references are repugnant. The first meaning of *Islam* for most

Muslims refers to an attitude of surrender to God based on the universal and invariant guidance that God provided for humans in the holy Quran and the recorded words and actions of the Prophet Mohammed. To distinguish Muslims and Islam on the basis of ethnic or national culture, then, is to confuse what is contingent and local with what is invariant and sacred; only the latter, God's revealed guidance, is "Islam."

Accordingly, Muslims' disquiet at the ethnicization of Islam is not the result of the Muslim community's greater *empirical* unity by comparison with Christianity. On the contrary, just as with Christianity, Islam in its first centuries splintered into a variety of opposed sects; the most important of these today is the well-known division between Sunnis and Shias. Moreover, beyond the Sunni-Shiite divide, other differences emerged during the first centuries of the Muslim era: differences among schools of religious law; differences among rival mystical or Sufi brotherhoods; differences in the state's role in managing religious affairs; and, last but not least, differences in local Muslim customs and behaviors, including such still-vexing issues as to how women should dress and what role they should play in public life.

All world religions "succeed" by striking a sometimes uneasy balance between a universalizing message and localizing accommodations. The Muslim case is especially complex, because Islam does not have a formal ecclesiastical organization or Church to stabilize its development, as the main streams of Christianity did prior to the great splintering of the early modern period. Rather than a priesthood and a Church, Islam has scholars, as does orthodox Judaism. In Shiism the scholars are more organized and even have some of the qualities of a Catholic hierarchy. But in most of the Sunni world--85 percent of modern Muslim world's population, and about 97 percent of Asia's Muslims--there is no hierarchy, just a network of scholars.

It was precisely in response to the acephalous and non-ecclesiastical nature of Islam and the threat of the religion's dissolution into a disparate variety of local traditions that Islam's religious scholars came to emphasize the unity of Islamic ritual and the unchanging finality of its holy word. Islam's central rituals and canons emphasize unity and commonality, as in the insistence on the finished truth of the Quran, on the five pillars or ritual activities incumbent on Muslims, and on the implementation of God's law as incumbent on all Muslims.

Of course, this has not prevented Muslim communities from dissolving into fractious sects or even falling into fratricidal warfare. When the battle is over, however, Muslims far more than modern Christians return to the Quran and the idea of a God-given law (sharia) and affirm that they are a single community of believers. It is this influence that leads most modern Muslims to take exception to the idea of national versions of Islam and insist that there is just one Islam.

CULTURE AND PRACTICE

In culture and practice, as opposed to in the normative ideal, the answer to the question as to whether there are Arab and Asian versions of Islam is a highly qualified "yes." The strongest qualification concerns the religious law that developed in Asian and Arab Islam. Islam is, with Judaism, a religion of divine law. In Sunni Islam, the Islam of most Asian Muslims (unless we include Iranians as Asians, as specialists of Islam sometimes do), the law has been discussed and developed since the eighth and ninth centuries through the conventions and authorities of four schools of law. Notwithstanding their different histories and cultures, not one Asian Muslim society developed its own tradition of religious law. On the contrary, the scholars of Islam in Asia all took the texts and methods of the schools of law developed in Iraq and Syria in the eighth and ninth centuries.

This is very significant. In modern times, print culture and mass education have tended to make Muslims more textualist and legal-minded in the way they understand their faith. Accordingly, the influence of the schools of law on the popular practice of Islam became *greater* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as more and more Muslims came to understand their religion through schooling and religious books. As Asian Muslims have become more religiously schooled, they have become more legal-minded. Their views on everything from divorce to women's dress have converged with their counterparts in the Middle East.

There are two realms where Asian Muslim culture does look different from Middle Eastern Islam: in popular culture and in politics.

POPULAR CULTURE

As much as Asian Muslims have always differed in their religious practice from their Middle Eastern brothers and sisters, they have differed almost as much among themselves. When speaking of Asian Islam, it is helpful to distinguish between two primary Asian civilizational streams: a Central and South Asian tradition, on one hand, and a Southeast Asian tradition, on the other. Each of these has its own variants, but one can draw a broad South-Southeast Asian contrast.

First, some commonalities. South and Southeast Asian Islam have long had in common the tradition of mysticism, or Sufism. Asian Islam has always been deeply mystical. Sufism is actually a congeries of traditions. Most variants are quite orthodox in their profession of the faith, not deviating too much from the letter of religious law. However, during the early centuries of Islam's diffusion to South and Southeast Asia, a number of folk schools of Sufism developed that were deeply syncretic or heterodox. In South Asia, some of these blended Hindu concepts of divinity with Islamic concepts of sainthood. To this day in India, some of the shrines of great Sufi saints are also visited by Hindus and Sikhs, although this practice is in decline.

In the 14th century, when mass conversion to Islam began, Hinduism and Buddhism were the religions of state in much of island Southeast Asia. Unlike India, however, where most Hindus did not convert, the Hindu-Buddhist tradition in Southeast Asia suffered a near-total collapse. In Indonesia and Malaysia today, the only surviving indigenous Hindus are those on Bali and in a small corner of neighboring Java. But folk Sufism in Indonesia and Malaysia contained a number of sects that were vigorously syncretic. Their syncretism drew on indigenous tradition of ancestral veneration and pantheistic naturalism. These "heterodox" Sufisms survived well into the twentieth century, but are declining today.

A second commonality to popular Islam in both South and Southeast Asia is that, beginning in the early 19th century, both regions saw the rise of new and powerful movements of Islamic reform, most of which sought to abolish heterodox traditions and bring the profession of the faith into conformity with an Islam closer in spirit to that practiced in Arabia. The reform movements benefited from, and to some degree were a response to, the intrusion of Western colonialism into Muslim lands. But they also reflected the diffusion of new methods of learning and schooling across the Asian Muslim world. Most of these new methods were in turn modeled on new patterns of printing and education that had been pioneered in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. It is hard to exaggerate the impact of these reform movements on Asian Islam over the past two centuries, especially since these nations achieved independence in the 1940s and 1950s. They have pulled popular Islam in Asia into far greater conformity with the style and standards professed in the Middle East.

Where it comes to the status of women, however, Southeast Asia still differs from South Asia. Southeast Asians are heirs to a tradition of kinship and gender that accorded women a significantly higher social standing than even their sisters in premodern Europe. In Southeast Asia, Muslim women were not subject to home confinement after coming of age. On the contrary, they worked in agriculture, operated most of the stalls found in local markets, and moved about quite freely in villages and the countryside. In farm families, girls were often given a share of the inheritance equal to that of their brothers, an arrangement that is contrary to Islamic family law (which specifies that brothers should receive shares twice that of their sisters).

In modern times, Southeast Asian women have not achieved full equality with men. But girls today participate in education at a rate comparable to that of boys. And although there is a gendered pattern to the professions, the idea that women might want to work outside the home after marriage does not provoke the controversy that it does in some parts of the Muslim world.

The gender difference between Muslim Southeast Asia, on one hand, and South Asia and the Middle East, on the other, relates to an even more complex aspect of local culture. Arab society in the Middle East preserved a clan and tribal organization that, along with the sectarian divisions of Sunnism and Shiism, has played a pivotal role in political alliances and violence. South Asian society--but not Southeast Asian--is only somewhat less fissiparous, and its profusion of clan, lineage, and sub-ethnic groups is no less complex. One of the effects of all these allegiances is that politics and public life in South Asia tend to have a clannish and often vengeance-prone quality.

Southeast Asia is not entirely lacking in acts of honor and vengeance. But kinship in most of Southeast Asia is what anthropologists call "cognatic"--the more individualistic kinship found among most modern Americans and Western Europeans. Similarly, in Southeast Asia there are almost no tribal or clan associations. Southeast Asian Muslims tend to be more individualistic and familistic than tribalistic, which is one reason they have found it easy to accept modern notions of citizenship and human rights.

POLITICS

In modern times all three of South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East have experienced a similar series of political movements. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, South and Southeast Asia were swept by Islamic reform movements similar in method and ambition to those seen in the Muslim Middle East. Both areas also witnessed a decline in heterodox Islam and the rise of a more legal-minded orthodoxy. During the first six decades of the twentieth century, South and Southeast Asia, like the Middle East, were swept by nationalist movements demanding independence from European colonial powers. There was a "Muslim" wing to the nationalist movement in Asia, as there was in the Middle East. In both regions, however, a more or less secular or non-Islamist leadership dominated the nationalist movement during the first half of the twentieth century. In all three areas, though, the last decades of the twentieth century witnessed an Islamic resurgence that has challenged secular nationalism to its core. In the Middle East, as in Asian Muslim countries, secular nationalist governments have had to make enormous concessions to Muslim cultural interests, with the result that secular nationalism in Egypt, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia today has many more Islamic colors and hues than it did in the 1950s.

The differences in politics between the Middle East and Asia have less to do with Islam per se, then, than with the concrete political arrangements and alliances that came to characterize individual countries in each region after independence. In India, the Muslim minority, which comprises about 12 percent of India's more than one billion people, has been an enthusiastic participant in that country's democratic government. Just to the north, in Pakistan, the Muslim population shares identical cultural roots with its counterparts in India, but has proved far less skilled at making democracy work. Born out of a bitter secession war with Pakistan, Bangladesh has done a slightly better job than Pakistan in operating a system of free and fair elections. However, like Pakistan, it has in recent years witnessed the emergence of a militant Islamic movement that

demands that the country be transformed into an Islamic state.

The situation is not entirely different in Muslim Southeast Asia. The Muslim minorities of the southern Philippines and southern Thailand have been treated badly by the non-Muslim governments, and since the 1970s both regions have witnessed the rise of Muslim-led secessionist movements. In the 1990s, some among the local militants made contact with international jihadi networks, like Al Qaeda, adding fuel to the secessionist fire.

That's the bad news from Southeast Asia, but there's much good news as well. Notwithstanding the intensity of the conflict in the southern Philippines and southern Thailand, Muslims have at the same time been affected by what they have seen taking place in their Muslim-majority neighboring countries, Malaysia and Indonesia. The economic prosperity these latter countries experienced beginning in the 1970s has taken much of the wind out of the sails of Muslim separatists in the southern Philippines and southern Thailand. Certainly, Muslims in these two regions want a better deal from their non-Muslim rulers, but for most the deal need not include full independence, especially if the package allows the Muslim minority to share in something of the mainstream population's prosperity.

Although far removed from the Middle Eastern heartland, Malaysia and Indonesia present an even more promising picture, and remain two of the most politically interesting countries in the Muslim world. Plagued by ethnoreligious tensions between the Malay-Muslim majority and a prosperous Chinese minority, Malaysia in the 1960s looked as if it were teetering toward national collapse. However, not only did the country not collapse, it worked out a new prosperity-sharing deal between the Malays, who were then agricultural, and the urban and industrious Chinese minority. It wasn't a perfect deal: the Chinese do not enjoy full equality with the politically-dominant Malays, and many chafe at affirmative action programs that target Malays but not poor Chinese. Nonetheless, Malaysia since the 1970s has implemented what is arguably the most successful program of affirmative action in the world. Today there is a confident and prosperous Malay-Muslim middle class and a Malay-dominated leadership that has been outspoken in its opposition to radical Islamism and terrorism. The present leadership of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi is particularly impressive. Badawi has sought to disseminate his message of Islamic moderation not only in Malaysia, but to the broader Muslim world. Of course, the Muslim opposition to Badawi is also large. Nonetheless, the prospects for Malaysia's future remain bright.

Indonesia is a special case. Not only the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, it also has the world's largest and most broadly based tradition of democratic Islam. Since the ouster of the authoritarian President Soeharto in 1998, the country has conducted two free and fair elections marked by thundering moderation, which is reassuring for those worried about the compatibility of Islam and democracy.

Alas, problems remain. An archipelagic country of 12,000 islands and more than 300 ethnic groups, Indonesia has a proud tradition of multiethnic and multiconfessional nationalism. However, since the middle of the twentieth century, it has always also had a small but determined armed Islamist community. The radicals have proved skilled at maintaining underground networks and carrying out occasional terrorist attacks. The Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), the group responsible for the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005, is the most recent expression of this. But the longer the Indonesian political system continues to make progress toward democracy, the weaker will be this group's appeal.

CONCLUSION

What conclusions can we draw, then, about the relationship of Arab and Asian Islam? The scholarly and normative tradition of Islam in both regions has always been more closely aligned than were the folk and populist Islamic traditions indigenous to each area. The fractious tribalism and honor-and-vengeance politics that is so much a part of politics in much of the Middle East has some counterpart in South Asia but very little in Southeast Asia. The same applies to the patriarchal traditions of clanship and lineage that confined women. Although this tradition of gender and honor made its way to South Asia, it failed to make the passage to Southeast Asia. On gender matters, Southeast Asian Muslims remain among the most liberal in the Muslim world.

With the rise of Islamic reform movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, Islamic culture in both the Middle East and Asia has become more normative and somewhat more alike. But since the reformists themselves disagree on just what is required to be a good Muslim, we shouldn't expect Islam in the Middle East and Asia to become drably unitarian any time soon.

The most significant influence on Muslim politics in both regions has been not Islam but the nation-state. Even as scholarly traditions of Islam have converged, most of what goes on in the national political arena shows the distinctive influence of country-specific state structures, alliances, and conflicts.

On Asian Islam's political future, we will probably continue to see a cautious and generally democratic development of Muslim politics in India. Bangladesh is still a hopeful case, but much will depend there on the state's ability to handle its enormous economic problems. In Pakistan, the situation is more serious. Although there is an intermittently effective system of national elections, the tradition of democratic Islam in this country is weak. The war in Afghanistan and Iraq may yet push the tradition over the edge. Pakistan's future is also tethered to the outcome of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Malaysia and Indonesia look far more promising. Notwithstanding a conservative Islamist opposition in Malaysia and a tiny terrorist fringe in Indonesia, both of these countries have begun to develop an impressive system of democratic elections. Both also have established traditions of pluralist and democratic Islam. If they continue to develop economically and link market development to efforts to revitalize Islamic education, as the moderate leadership in both countries is attempting, these countries will jump to the front of the global struggle to forge a pluralist and democratic Islam.

In short, a democratic Islam is emerging, and its first land of accomplishment may well be not the Arab heartland, but Muslim Southeast Asia. If this happens, the achievement will be good news for the entire Muslim world.

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