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Inside Muslim Minds

Wednesday 21st Jan 2009

Prof. Riaz Hassan, Assoc Prof. Shahram Akbarzadeh, Thu 8 May 2008 13:00 - 14:00

Audio recording


Speakers: Prof. Riaz Hassan, Assoc Prof. Shahram Akbarzadeh

Professor Hassan's new book, Inside Muslim Minds, is a ground-breaking comparative study of contemporary Islamic consciousness, an important insight into aspects of the Muslim faith, and its place in the twenty-first century. Using data gathered from more than six thousand Muslim respondents from Southeast, South and Central Asia and the Middle East, Riaz Hassan examines attitudes to issues such as religious commitment; the status of women; the concept of jihad and its alleged links to terrorism; Islamic philanthropy; attitudes towards blasphemy; and Muslim perceptions of the 'other'.

Inside Muslim Minds argues for a new intellectual commitment that honours Islamic heritage yet simultaneously confronts Islamic reassertion and the sense of powerlessness felt by Muslims as they strive to reaffirm their faith in the twenty-first century

Venue: James Hardie Lecture Theatre (Level 2 of Architecture Building) Building 133

Riaz Hassan is an Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow and Emeritus Professor in the Department of Sociology, Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia.

Transcript

This transcript was typed from a recording of the lecture. The NCEIS cannot guarantee its complete accuracy because of the possibility of mishearing and occasional difficulty in identifying speakers.

Shahram Akbarzadeh: It's an honour to have Professor Riaz Hassan with us today to talk about his latest
question of identity and affiliation to Islam and piety among Muslims in a range of societies and backgrounds, which has led to this quite substantial book, Inside Muslim Minds. The book is based on over 6,000 surveys across seven countries. Professor Hassan is the ARC Professorial Fellow and, again, it's quite an honour for me to introduce to you Professor Hassan. All I can say is that this is quite an explosive and dynamic book and if you have just flicked through it, you will come across quite a few gems that you really want to take note of.

So, with that, I will give the floor to Professor Hassan and we can engage in the conversation and questions in due course. Please.

**Professor Hassan:** I'm not an Islamic specialist, I'm a boring sociologist who tries to make sense of the world in which I see and experience. Over the last ten years, I have been engaged in a comparative study of Muslim religiosity in seven countries. You will find, if you have time, the details of how the study was done described in the appendix of the book. This is the second of the two books on my study – the first one was published a few years ago entitled Faithlines: Muslim Conception of Islam and Society.

Now, people ask me and Shahram might ask me why on earth did I spend ten years doing a study on this topic. The reason was that there's very little comparative study of the Muslim world and over the years, teaching sociology of Islam, I was struck by people making statements, “Oh, the Muslims are all like that, the Muslims are like this”, it sort of, didn't quite sit with me well because I could see enormous differences in Indonesian Islam, in Malaysian Islam, Pakistani, Indian, Saudi, Egyptian, Moroccan. Now, I'm not suggesting that all these countries have very distinct Islam; there's a unity. But also, there is a diversity in the Muslim world and what I was noting – and many of you may have already noted this – that lumping the Islamic world together really doesn't take you very far because it is a very diverse world, moving in different directions. If you really want to make sense and understand it, you have to really try to take different snapshots.

So what I have done in this book is to take snapshots of what it means to be Muslim in the beginning of the 21st century in seven Muslim countries really. That’s why the book is plural – it says Inside Muslim Minds; it’s plural minds, not one mind. The second purpose is that if you have any ideas about the Islamic world or Muslim religiosity or stereotypes – unfortunately, there are lots of them now – you can at least use this book to test some of your stereotypes and find out how far they are verified. If they are not verified, I hope it would be possible for you to pause and reflect and see why your stereotype doesn't seem to fit well with the data that I have or vice versa.

The starting point of my book, of my work was, I grew up as a Muslim. I have always been wonderfully happy with who I am and what I am. I was surrounded by people doing simple things; charity, compassion, mercy, being kind to each other – and also cruel at times. To me, I think the fact that I am 70, I still comfortable with my identity and as a Muslim, in spite of everything that has happened in the lifetime that I have: I went through the partition of India, I went through a whole range of further upheavals and 9/11 when I was working in the United States and teaching in the US.

I think what has really struck in my mind is that there’s enormous beauty in Islam and, by beauty, I mean let me quote one of the preeminent scholars of Islam in the 20th century, Fazlur Rahman in his book – in a number of books – but particularly in his book The Major Themes of the Qur’an, says that the central aim of the Qur’an is to establish a viable social order on that, that would be just and ethically viable. He goes on to point out the emphasis on justice, humanism, mercy, compassion and charity in Islam – and this is what I call beautiful in Islam.
happens in Pakistan and a number of other countries, particularly directed against women; cruel punishment; misogynous attitudes; and social and physical segregation of women.

In my book, I start Chapter 1 by giving examples of these ugly practices: from flogging of petty gamblers in Aceh, to harassment and imprisonment of women in Pakistani jails in Pakistan who go and complain about rape and molestation – under the Hudood laws very often they are taken into custody and imprisoned.

A case that happened in Saudi Arabia; a Muslim’s girls’ school caught fire and the students were running out of the building and the Mutaween, the religious police, would not let them out because they were not properly attired – they were running out of the building – they sent them back. Fourteen of them were burned and died in the fire. Not much really happened, although the Government of Saudi Arabia said that they will do something. Similarly, there are a number of other examples – I won’t go into the catalogue – I actually collected 50 or so and I used about, I think, six or seven in the book.

So what I ask myself, if I am right about religion that I’ve experienced and the Muslim world that by and large is fairly middle of the road – Muslims, basically, are middle of the road sort of people; they get up in the morning and they do nothing more than they just want to struggle on to have enough money to make sure that they have resources to feed their family and do the right thing – then how is it that they also tolerate practices that I’ve just described?

This was the starting point in the study. So I looked at my data and I find in Chapter 1, I basically describe a little bit about the evidence that I think – because in order to explain human behaviour, you have to actually find at some point some concrete examples why people tolerate certain things. I’m not suggesting that most Muslims would approve of these things that I have just mentioned, but they certainly tolerate – there is a wide enough tolerance in the societies that some of these practices continue. I’m also happy to say that many of these practices also disappear because people finally get fed up and say, that will be enough, we don’t want to continue with these practices.

My explanation is that there is a particular mindset, and I call this Salafibism, which seems to be pervasive in the Muslim world – at least among the respondents that I surveyed: 6,000 of them in seven countries. By the way, the countries were Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Kazakhstan and this study was done in two phases, between 1996 to 2000 and then 2002 to 2004. Of course, I have spent a lot of time revisiting and analysing and writing of the data.

Now, Salafibism is a fusion of two strands of Islamic consciousness – Salafism and Wahhabism. The characteristic feature of Salafibism is belief in self-sufficiency of the Islamic text, literalist interpretation of Islamic texts, supremacist and arrogant mindset, misogynist attitudes and hostility towards the indeterminacy of the modern world. I go on to make a case – remember I’m a sociologist, I’m not a theologian – I don’t have the monopoly of truth. I can just present, in fact, in a very bold way – I’m being very bold probably in some ways. I’ve been a teacher for a long time and when you are teaching you have two approaches to teaching; one is either you hide how little you know, or you try to display how much you know. I like to tell you that in my book I have tried to hide as much as I could because I’m not a scholar. I admire and wish I were a scholar of Islamic text, but I have educated myself and I have enough knowledge to deal with some of the issues that I have dealt with.

So my answer is that there is a pervasiveness of Salafibist consciousness in the Muslim world. Again, that is the one message which I call the pessimistic message. The optimistic message is that it varies from country to country. It is high among my respondents from Malaysia – I hope that is not a sign of anything. Malaysia,
Salafibist consciousness. Turkey and Kazakhstan have the weak Salafibist consciousness. Then there are variations along gender and age and education.

My guess is that if you read it, you would find Chapter 1 quite annoying because you may not like what I have said. Believe me, it also was depressing for me when I was writing.

The next chapter deals with what does it mean to be a Muslim. When you ask somebody what is your religion and they say, I am a Muslim, what does it really mean? For a sociologist, the question is can we actually measure, can we actually rank people in terms of strong Muslimness as opposed to weak Muslimness?

In my study I used five dimensions of religious commitment which can be used to study any religious commitment. For those of you who are studying religion, you can use it, it’s a quite well-established practice – not exactly the way I've done but certainly it's something that has a long tradition in sociology.

Firstly, you focus on beliefs. You ask what people know about their beliefs, about their participation in rituals, then devotion – because rituals can be socially pressured, devotion is very private. What I call cognition, cognitive dimension; if you believe in God, you have some experience of the divine. It’s very common. Then, lastly, it’s consequential religiosity – if you believe in something, if you believe God created humans, then you have to also believe that evolution was not right – so if you believe in something as a result of it, you have to not believe in something else.

Now, in my research, and what I think perhaps may be my important contribution, is to provide a framework to study Muslim identity, and this is the framework that I have used. The implication of this is that Muslim identity is basically the whole range of grounds for Muslim identity, but my study shows there are two principle grounds for Muslim identity when you ask people, what's your religion, and then you ask them why. Firstly, that Muslim identity is grounded in practice, in that they actually practice religion and they are very devout Muslims and they therefore, quite legitimately say that they are Muslim because they are believing Muslims.

But the majority of the Muslims in the world – over 1.54 billion Muslims – are Muslims who ground their identity not on practice but on heritage; they are just born to Muslim parents.

Most of us – 99%, in fact, in modern societies for which we have data – we inherit identity; 75% of people inherit a religious identity from parents in the United States and Australia. About 15% of them change from one sect to another but the remainder simply don’t have any religion – they give up.

In Islamic world, most of the Muslims have their identities actually based on heritage. I would be talking in Kazakhstan to my respondents and I would say, “What is in your religion?”. I would be in a friendly place and we would be talking and they would say, “Well, I am a Muslim”. They would be eating, perhaps, or drinking while they are telling me they are Muslim. So I would say, “Well, why do you think so?”. They will look at me – Kazakhs would have a very fierce look and they gave me this look – they said, “Because I am a Kazakh, you fool.” They had no problem. They were Kazakhs therefore they’re Muslims, period. So it is not the content but it is the fact that they – and they were very proud to tell me they were Muslim, I didn't have to say that.

The same thing applies, you know, if you are asking in Malaysia what is your religion, they say, “I'm a Malay – I am a Muslim.”

So, what is interesting about my finding in the chapter about Salafibism is that Muslim societies have to provide grounds, rooms for both identities to flourish. Identities grounded in religiosity, in religious practice, and identity grounded in heritage.
a society will benefit if it provides the environment in which both identities can flourish. Some societies have done it better than others. Indonesia, for example, have allowed the Nahdlatul Ulama, which is much more sort of what I call the popular Islam, and Muhammadir, which is a more puritanical Islam, allowed these two identities to flourish.

My argument about Indonesia – Indonesia has made progress and Indonesia have enjoyed stability. People say it's military rule. Let me put a hypothesis to you. Both divisions of Islam, both Islamic identities are so powerful in Indonesia that one can't knock the other out – it would be a massacre of absolutely horrendous scale, so they have decided to live together. So Indonesian stability, really there's no rhyme or reason for Indonesia to be a country, but if Indonesia is a country and progressing very well – and I have followed Indonesian development for a long time – it is because the social contract between Muhammadir and Nahdlatul Ulama that “Let both of us flourish”, and that contract between the two is a very important reason why Indonesia has actually followed the trajectory it has.

Not in Pakistan. Not in some of the other countries. So, one of the crises in Muslim countries is that Salafibist consciousness probably prohibits the flourishing of these two dominant identities.

Now, another implication of this – and this is something that is very dear to my heart – I have been either a student or a teacher in a university much of my life. The thing that really strikes me is the absence of world class universities in the Muslim world. Why is it that not a single university in the last – in 2006 ranking by the Times Higher Education Supplement there were two universities in the top 200; 189 and 191, University of Malaya, University of Kebangsaan Malaysia – but on creativity they are basically low, but in terms of ranking there are a whole range of other measures, but in the last 2007, not a single university in the Muslim world made it into the top 200 universities. It is not the absence of intelligent people, so there is something which is happening in the Muslim world – and I would go as far as to say that it may well be a particular type of religious commitment, the state itself is acting out in such a way that it sort of takes on the responsibility of enforcing a particular kind of orientation towards religion and towards what is truth. My argument is that universities don’t flourish in societies based on conviction and absolute, you know, where people say, this is the truth. Universities flourish in an environment in which civil society is robust and there is doubt and debate. This is precisely what is sometimes absent as a result of a particular domination of a particular kind of religious orientation.

I can understand why Indonesia does not have world class universities – okay, because the Dutch were terrible colonisers, they didn't really do much – but Indonesia has done a remarkable job after 1949 in educating the Indonesian people.

So, I can understand the absence of resources in Indonesia and Pakistan or Bangladesh. But, I cannot explain the absence of good universities in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait because they are getting half a billion dollars every evening from the oil revenues.

I then go on to deal with a whole range of further issues. Let me just say that to provide an evidence of the compassion and charity, to the institution of zakat, Muslims give billions of dollars every year. What I argue, I show in my book on philanthropy for social justice and focusing on zakat, in Indonesia alone, the actual money payment for zakat – not to other sources like the hides and various other non-monetary way people give zakat – is about $1.69 billion. That’s a lot of money in the Indonesian context.

But the distribution of that money is, and my argument in my book, is when the state takes over the control of distribution of zakat, the collection and distribution, people start giving money. When it is people who are
So the distribution of charity in the Muslim world is not strategic. Only Turkey is doing something about it and I make a plea, I make an argument that there is probably enough room in the Muslim world to actually develop strategic ways – I mean not the state, but the communities should develop strategic ways of actually collecting and using zakat in order to promote social justice.

I could go on and I think the issue on gender issues – which I think is one of the most important issues – you can't ignore the issue because half the humanity are women. My argument in that is that for much of Islamic history men scholars, male scholars, have taken upon themselves to integrate Islamic texts which benefits their position. Consequently, women have been gradually relegated to a position where their quality of citizenship is not comparable to that of men.

I actually investigated the trust in religious institution in Muslim countries and my findings are where religion is fused with politics, i.e. with an Islamic state – Iran, Pakistan – religious institution decline in public trust, they suffer from deficit in public trust. In other words, people in Pakistan and Iran, people do not trust religious institution. But, where religion and politics are kept separate, religious institutions actually thrive, like Indonesia for example. In Egypt, in Pakistan and Iran, religious institution actually is held in low esteem.

Now, my message to the religious activists who are fighting and who are striving to establish an Islamic state, is this: you can have love or you can have power but not both.

Question: If there is a criticism of Islam, criticism of some traditional practices coming from outside, that is easily dismissed. But, there is a need for, perhaps, reform-minded Muslims to speak out and deal with.

Professor Hassan: I think that's a very sharp and very great observation. Texts do not interpret themselves. They require interpretations and, talking as a sociologist again, the interpretations depend on the social and political environment in which we live.

So, let me give you an example. By the way, this has been gradually – Fazlur Rhaman, one of the great, I think eminent, Islamicists of the 20th century, in his book Islam and Modernity, he makes a very interesting observation and it is worth repeating. Qur'an says a Muslim man can marry and have four wives, provided he can treat them equally. Most people say, well, it's very difficult to treat equally. But he takes a slightly different point. He says why four? What is so great about four? Our prophet had more than four wives – he could have very easily have said, as many as I have, that would make a lot of sense. Why four? Why not three? Why not five?

Now, his interpretation is that at the time the Qur'an was being revealed, an Arab man could have as many wives and concubines as he wanted, so consequently the rich people have lots of wives. So, in his wisdom, he thought, one, they wouldn't buy it, four seemed reasonable – sort of very rational – four may be a good number, and it turned out to be a good number. So the point is, he says, not that it is the number four, it is the restriction. At that point in time, you could restrict to four and there's nothing that it cannot, the restrictions cannot go down to one or two.

So the principle, what his argument is, the Qur'an has an intellectual message and that message is that you reflect on the conditions revealing times and then decide how appropriate Qur'anic thought and interpret Qur'an accordingly. So, I suppose that it was the gist of your argument, that Qur'an has to be interpreted according to time. I think, whether we like it or not, we are doing it but there is a resistance – like in Christianity, in Judaism – there is a resistance to the moving away from literalist interpretation of the text and Islam is much more so.
reproduction of social life in non-literate society is through word of mouth – when the storyteller can tell you
the story and you can’t read to verify, the storyteller can change the version depending on what their listeners
want. Well, when a society becomes literate, the storyteller does not have that option.

So in a literate society you can’t fool people. In literate society, if you continue to say the story which doesn’t
make sense, then people will become cynical and critical. Criticism and cynicism is a very unique feature
which emerges from when society is moved from non-literate reproduction to literate reproduction. As the
Muslim world moves into literate reproduction of social life, the interpretations of text will consequently
become – the stance towards them will become much more critical and cynical.

Question: [Inaudible]

Professor Hassan: I have been wandering around in the Muslim world for most of my life, for this research
ten years. When I ask people, how do you explain the absence of vibrant economies in Muslim world? In the
Muslim world the GDP per capita has not increased, in real terms, in the last 25 years. This is very striking.
Why this absence of robust economies, welfare, general wellbeing? One answer I get is that we are not
practicing true Islam. The second answer, which is very common, is the Western conspiracy.

When I ask, who practices real Islam? Is there anybody? You know, it sort of doesn’t make sense to me –
why can 1.5 billion people suddenly have strayed en masse from practicing true Islam? I think, unfortunately,
it’s a cop out. It is blaming ourselves for weaknesses that we have.

It’s the lazy way out. I believe that Muslims today practice Islam probably more rigorously than they ever did
in history. I don’t believe, I think Maududi and Sayyid Qutb were wrong. I mean, what I see, Muslims – in 35
years I’ve seen Muslims much more believing, caring, actually practicing Muslims. So, I don’t understand
when people say we have strayed away. What do they mean by that

Secondly, Western conspiracy. I remember talking to my brother, he was giving me this lecture, you know – I
can tell you, this is a Western conspiracy. He was teaching in Brunei. So I said to him, “What evidence do
you have?” I love him very much. He brought out the Brunei Times. There was a little item of somebody
saying in the Brunei Times there is a Western conspiracy against Islam. I said, “Anything else?”. He said,
“No, this is it, this is it.” So, that’s not evidence. I have been in Australia, I have been in the United States. I
really do not know – a bias?

Yes. But conspiracy to oppress the Islamic world? No.

First about the comparison of a Muslim world with WHO. I’m afraid any measure I have done in the Muslim
world I have tried to, about 2 per cent of the Muslim world lives in economies which are advanced and 13 per
cent in middle range economy and the rest in poor economies. I don’t think we can get away from comparing
the Muslim world with their neighbours. I have lived in Indonesia, I have lived in Singapore. If you just look at
the people like Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, started roughly at the same level as Pakistan did and
they have gone on to do really much better.

The Muslim economies, outside of the oil rich countries, have really not done very well. Oil rich countries are
basically oriented towards production but they are at least providing reasonable quality of life for their people.
I think I have done a whole range of analysis and it’s simply, Pakistan is not doing as well as India is on a
whole range of measures. The UN indicated some development.

Let me go to religion and politics in Turkey. The religious institution are not trusted very much in Turkey,
But basically people, because of the secular fundamentalism I think, Turkish people have a very problematic view towards the state, attitude towards religion. I found it difficult to explain Turkey, by the way, in my book, and I make that point several times, Turkey’s example.

But, in general, while the trust may be low, the people actually are much more – particularly in Anatolia religious beliefs are very strong, religious identity is becoming extremely important. Much of my sample came from Ankara, Istanbul and Ismeed – these are urban centres and that sort of makes it problematic for me. I went to Anatolia and spent a lot of time travelling around and I found the Turks religious identity was very strong, and commitment to Islam. But, as you move close to Turaz, to Istanbul, it becomes much more secular – that’s where the nationalist influence is.

Again, one of my central points is political and social environment is much more powerful explanation of religious trends than religion itself, than anything else that I could find.

Measures of religiosity, in terms of philosophy of life – you know, I find it very puzzling. Most migrants – from African migrants, Asian migrants – will go to enormous length to migrate to Europe, get killed. You know, experience of poverty is a very debilitating experience. I do not believe any religion can flourish when your stomach is absolutely empty, when you’re deprived of the normal needs of your body and meeting the needs of your family. I think it sort of doesn’t make any sense that we must be praying to please the Creator when we are physically unable to do that prayer. So, I cannot make that statement, by the way, that you have made because I have seen poverty – I have been fortunate not to be poor myself – but I have seen what poverty does to human beings and I don’t think God would want to receive somebody’s prayer when the family is starving to death. It is just a matter of, you know, I’m not a theologian, I’m a sociologist, so that is the position I will take.

Literacy is having an enormous impact on the political and social trends. I’ll give you an example – and technology, by the way, particularly internet technology and communication technology. For the first time it is making Muslims aware that Islam is different in different parts of the world. The Indonesian Islam is not the same as the Saudi Islam, etc.

This particular impact of technology and globalisation is, I would say, Islamic fundamentalism is the first intellectual response of Muslim intellectuals to globalism. It’s predominantly male, so religious fundamentalism would not have emerged without the impact about the realisation that Islam is a very pluralistic universe, pluralistic world. The literacy and communication technology, in 2002 when Pakistanis went to vote, 11.5% of them voted for Islamic parties. Out of 282 or 288 national assembly seats, 50 were won by the Islamic parties in the national assembly. In two of the four provinces, Islamic parties actually have governments. In 2008 election held two months ago, Muslim parties won 2.1% of the vote – went down from 11.1% to 2%-- and this is in a country which is regarded in Australia as the jihad central. The Islamic parties lost from 50 seats to five – they have five seats in the national assembly – and they lost completely in the provinces in which they had power. The reason? Because, people felt they were not delivering the goods.

Not that the Muslim in Pakistan have become less religious – they have become much more critical and much more cynical of the promises the Muslim parties were giving.

Now that’s just an example of the impact it is having. I think in Egypt the same thing. People are saying, look, if you can’t deliver the goods, we are going to vote for Islamic brotherhood, they’re going in the opposite direction. At the last election Islamic brotherhood was banned, the field candidates were independent – 20% of Egyptians voted for them.
were translated in every language, in seven languages; in Indonesian, Urdu, in Egyptian, Arabic, into Russian, Kazak, Turkish and Persian. But basically, I used the texts and I used survey methodology.

The interpretation of male scholars, I mean, that's a fact of life – Shi'ite Islam is the only sect of Islam in which there is a formal hierarchy of clerics. Do you know of any women who are Ayatollah? I see this, I have a great affection – I think Iran is a remarkable country. I think we are actually being misled by the media. Iran is a country which is very sophisticated. After the Iranian revolution, almost every child of school going age goes to school, particularly girls – 100% of all primary school age girls go to school; 52% of all students in the universities in Iran, after the Islamic revolution, are women. Women participation in the labour forces increased.

Iran is a country which, essentially, is a secular country ruled by clerics. Turkey is a country which, essentially, has a very important devout religious part but, again, secular power has been enforced on them for much of the time – not now. So Iran is actually, in my sample, Iran comes out to be a much more moderate and enlightened country than, for example, Pakistan, Malaysia and Egypt. But, you wouldn't think of that if you just simply read the newspapers.

Shahram Akbarzadeh: Please join me now in thanking Professor Hassan.

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