

Conversation with Bernard Haykel

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People talk about globalization and multiculturalism as though they were something new; that's really being ahistorical, Bernie says. The Indian Ocean world was both globalized and multicultural long before the rise of Europe. The Hajj is a perfect example. The Hajj brought people together in the name of religion but it also encouraged trade and the exchange of ideas. Who knows? Maybe it brought people together to marry; and people went on the Hajj to die. It was good to die in Mecca, says Bernie. If you die on a pilgrimage you go straight to heaven.

It gets complicated when we talk about the impact of the rise of Europe, Bernie suggests. It's counter-intuitive to say that the European intervention in the Indian Ocean was beneficial to anybody, but it was. We think of the Europeans as having a devastating effect on Indian Ocean trade. They introduce huge ships and guns; their contribution was to militarize Indian Ocean trade and to introduce a new form of violence. But there is another side. When the Europeans introduced the steamboat they enabled a huge number of pilgrims to travel to Mecca. The European presence, in fact, energized the Hajj.

If you concentrate on the Hajj you can map out global changes in travel and commerce. You have a way to gauge the state of the Islamic world in microcosm. A good example of what Bernie is talking about is an article by Ziauddin Sardar titled "Mecca" in a recent issue of *Granta*. Sardar, a Pakistani, has been living in Saudi Arabia and he wants to leave. In the process of writing about his struggles to get a visa to get out of the country he gives a critique of what Saudis have been doing to Mecca over the last 40 years. Saudis have a flat understanding of Islam and they have been imposing their ideology on the physical space surrounding the Holy Places; they have actually been flattening the area around the holy sites, flattening the hills. This is a physical manifestation of the "flattening process of modernity." When a strong, centralized state gets involved in taking care of holy places you begin to lose the variety of pre-modern times. This is one of ironies of modernity, says Bernie: the Hajj used to be global, diverse; now there is a deadening uniformity. "The modern moment isn't necessarily multicultural" in the sense of tolerating difference.

We have to get beyond the crude idea of talking about Islam or Christianity as terms that can be used to represent people. It's wrong to reify Islam but it's also not good to romanticize it.

Muslims as a group are neither all good nor all bad. And don't think in terms of the rise and fall of Islam. If you want to talk about Islam and Europe together, think about the Islamic world as interconnected with the European world. Bernie mentions Andre Gunder Franc's book, *Re-Orient* as a good place to start.

Here's an idea: if you want to think about the Islamic world, think in terms of Empires, Geographies and Linguistic Groups. These suggest something about changes over time and diversity at any one time. You want to get away from thinking about one big blob.

Thinking about the Hajj can help in getting a sense of political changes over time. Depending upon where you were in the Islamic world, you may have to cross several borders in order to get to the Holy Places. Somebody had to take responsibility for the safety and provisioning of the pilgrims. When the Europeans took over colonies in the Middle East they managed the Hajj through their colonies.

Who can you trust in reading about Islam? Europeans distorted history, but so do Islamic scholars. They put an Islamic coloration on everything. Islamic scholars tell you what Muslims believe, Bernie says. You always have to remember that Islam isn't like the Catholic Church, for instance. There is no institution supporting orthodoxy. To get a sense of how you can talk about an Islamic world, think about "civil society" – groups not linked to government or any centralizing agency of state, but capable of creating bonds. These might be brotherhoods, guilds, scholarly networks, student groups. If you were a legal scholar in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, like Ibn Battuta, you could travel from Tangiers to China and get a job wherever you went. And everywhere you could find people who spoke your language. Arabic was the universal tongue.

If we're going to teach about the Hajj, Bernie suggests, we have to think seriously about periodization. Let's focus on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The changes during those centuries are dramatic. We will certainly have to talk about what effect colonialism has on the Hajj. To do that, we'll have to go back into the period before the European intrusion, to make comparisons.

There are some very specific details to master. According to the Muslim calendar, there are 12 lunar months with 29 or 30 days each. The Hajj has to take place on specific days and there are rituals that have to be performed, but there is some confusion about when the month starts. Two people have to agree about when the appropriate month starts, but the rising of the crescent moon

is not the same all over. There have always been struggles between Arabs and non-Arabs about when the month starts. The Saudis and the Iranians disagree. Some people follow one, and some people follow the other. What do American Muslims do, I ask. They have to decide who to follow, Bernie answers.

You can still only go on the Hajj if you're a Muslim, and even then there are restrictions. You need a visa and the Saudis have quotas. If you're an Indian you have problems getting a visa, and if you're an American you get one right away. It always helps to have pull if you want your visa quickly. Contemporary politics plays a role in who can and who cannot make the pilgrimage.

Bernie wants to talk about postcolonialism. The problem with the postcolonials, he says, is that they don't decenter the West. To do that, you have to look at texts and use languages that don't privilege the West. (This is directed against the perceived Anglophone predominance among postcolonial scholars.) Islamic revival movements of the 18<sup>th</sup> century have nothing to do with the West. They are about a strict vs. a loose construction of the Quran. There is always a vibrant discussion going on inside Islam on legal matters.

Has the West had an impact on that discussion? Yes, in this sense: strict constructionists get favored in the debates, and as it turns out, there's oil underground in the places where strict constructionists live. Probably more to the point, though, the West opened up new professional avenues. It used to be in the Islamic world that legal scholar was the most sought after position with the highest prestige. The West introduced the professions: engineer, doctor, all kinds of white color professionals. Once these were introduced they became the privileged professions with the highest prestige. Joining them was the way to get ahead. Think of Stephen Greenblatt's notion of "self-fashioning." The smartest Muslims stopped going into Islamic studies and went into the professions instead. The dummies ended up becoming the legal scholars. So these new opportunities for self-fashioning led to a decline in religious elites; but it opened up a space for lay intellectuals.

I ask Bernie about scholarly networks in the Islamic world. Medina is the center of Islamic learning, he says. People come to Medina from all over. The Arabs didn't introduce printing until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Medicis in Renaissance Florence were the first to print Arab texts.

We talk about Europe in relation to the Islamic world. Europe, says Bernie, was not an evil force. Some scholars argue that the Europeans made everything worse than it was before they arrived. “I reject the lamentation for what Europeans did,” Bernie says. It’s common sense: if you push Europeans too hard you’ll get a Fascistic reaction. “It’s my Jewish side,” Bernie says: “you don’t push the goy too hard.”

On the question of Edward Said and his influence, Bernie thinks that *Orientalism* has had profound effects on scholarship but has now run its course. Postcolonial scholars got very well placed in universities but now there is an empiricist and positivist reaction in the offing. There is also a big reaction to Deconstruction, the method and theory associated with Jacques Derrida. Some people went along with these things out of fashion; some went in for the politics. Foucault has something to say, but when you’ve brought together knowledge and power, so what? If everything is power then it doesn’t mean anything any more. If it’s everywhere, it just gets diluted. “I agree with Said’s politics,” Bernie says. “but not his methods.”

On the question of Saudi Arabia, Bernie notes that Saudis believe in progress in the same way that Americans do. They see technology as the answer to everything.

Do you have any wisdom to offer about why students should study history, I ask. “How about because it’s fun,” Bernie answers. I like what I do.” As far as he’s concerned, there’s no moral lesson to be learned from studying history. The teachers who interested him the most were the ones who gave him something new to think about, the ones who provided him with “a radical new way of looking at the world.” He thinks it is worthwhile to try to help American students to see the world as a Muslim might see it, to get an insider’s view. Maybe studying the Hajj can do that. Let’s look at the role Saudi Arabia has played in the construction of Islam, and then fit the Hajj into that frame. That might do it!

