THE ELUSIVE UMMAH: BETWEEN THE POLITICAL, SECTARIANISM, AND AUTHORITY

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Abstract: The thrust of this article provides an exposition of considering Islam not simply as a constricted theoretical and discursive tradition, but as a broad historical phenomenon that is shaped by the ummah (the global heterogeneous Muslim community) which in turn is influenced by the manner in which Islam was understood by the those from the ummah who have come before. Accordingly, the article argues for Islamic inclusivity in such a way that it translates into freedom from sectarian ideological provincialism and the ability to be free to enter and remain within Islam as a Muslim on terms that may not necessarily be considered as sufficient by other Muslims. In this sense, it is both liberation from dominant orthodoxies and the existence of freedom which allows groups and individuals to debate together and participate with each other in determining the affairs of Islam and what it means to be Muslim.

Keywords: Islam, community, ummah, Muslims, sectarianism

Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (Anderson 1998: 6)

I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I may have of myself. Under these conditions, the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other as a freedom which confronts mine, and which cannot think or will without doing so either for or against me. (Sartre 1973: 45)

Introduction

The question that this article explores and attempts to provide a response to is specific. However, in order to appreciate the way in which the question is framed and the pertinence the writer attaches to it requires prefacing. For a period of three
years, I was involved in the study of the Ahmadi community in South Africa. The Ahmadi movement is one of the most controversial modern Muslim movements primarily due to their unorthodox beliefs pertaining to the continuation of prophethood after the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632). A minority branch among the Ahmadis – the Lahore Ahmadis - however reject the claim of continuous prophecy but affirm their belief in a messianic figure who made contentious claims relating to the nature of prophecy and eschatological matters. Even though Ahmadis continue to identify as Muslims and Islam as a religious faith, they are persecuted and/or condemned as apostates and regarded as non-Muslims by their co-religionists. During my research and fieldwork, I reviewed reams of archival material documenting the engagements and relationship between the majority Sunni community and the minority Ahmadi community (who together formed a miniscule, albeit, not inconsequential religious minority) in South Africa between the years 1926 and 1992. The nature of the engagement was for the most part persistently hostile. An effective watershed in this narrative is the year 1965, when the largest religious Sunni Muslim organisation in the Cape, the Muslim Judicial Council, issued a *fatwa* (literally a legal opinion but understood as an edict) declaring Ahmadis and their sympathisers as *murtad* (apostates). The *fatwa* instructed individual Muslims to institute a social and economic boycott against all self-identified Ahmadis and their sympathisers – any person who is sympathetic to the particularities of Ahmadi creed, who fraternises with them, or who refuses to denounce them as apostates. Furthermore, it instructed the imams of mosques to forbid Ahmadis from accessing mosques. Ahmadis were also denied the right to bury their dead in racially classified Muslim cemeteries and their meat considered prohibited (*haram*) for Muslim consumption. The *fatwa* is an interesting document for, among other things, the way in which it prescribes social and communal relations between those who are deemed “Muslims” and those who it identifies as “heretics” and “apostates”. The following incident related to me exemplifies this issue.

On Monday, 10 May 1965, a few days after the *fatwa* was issued, an Ahmadi Muslim female teacher entered the primary school where she had been teaching for a decade, the Kipling Road School in Salt River. This was a predominantly Coloured residential area on the edge of Cape Town’s Woodstock district. The school was a public institution funded and administered by the apartheid government, but its students and teachers were mostly if not completely Muslim. For the past decade at the school, this particular teacher had experienced nothing but a sense of camaraderie: nurturing deep friendships, confiding in her colleagues, and consistently thinking of how they could support their students. On this particular morning, this close-knit environment changed permanently for her. She arrived and entered the Grade Three class where the students were approximately 8 years of age, and she extended the familiar Muslim greeting *assalamu ʿalaykum,*
kinders (peace be upon you, children), expecting the usual response wa ‘alaykum as-salam. Instead, what she heard was the formal Afrikaans salutation: goeie-môre juffrou (good morning teacher), a greeting usually reserved for non-Muslims. In the eyes of her students, she was no longer a Muslim and accordingly did not deserve to be treated as one even by way of extending pleasantries. She soon discovered that it was not only the students but, with the exception of the school’s principal who had some sympathy for her predicament, all of her fellow teachers – whom she loved and whose friendship she enjoyed for years – who viewed her differently. None of the teachers socialised with her for the next eight months until she exited the school. No longer welcomed among the group of educators who sat and chit-chatted freely with each other, she had to sit by herself. Her crime was that she identified as an Ahmadi. In the ubiquitous parlance of our time, she was cancelled. Matters worsened for her personally. Her prospective husband operated a food outlet in Woodstock whose customers were mainly factory workers defined as ‘Coloured’ by the apartheid regime. The Muslim workers boycotted the food outlet because the food was no longer considered halal (permissible) and they impressed upon their Christian co-workers and friends not to support the outlet since those Ahmadis, *Hulle is slegter as julle* (They are worse than you). The business did not survive the boycott and it had to shut its doors. It became clear to all Ahmadis, those suspected of being such or of being sympathetic to them (i.e. refusing to disconnect with them socially or religiously), that they could no longer rely on means of livelihood that depended on the Muslim and the larger Coloured community for patronage.5 This was a serious development as, increasingly, the apartheid regime was forcibly relocating communities on the basis of race with people of colour forced to live in townships on the far reaches of the city. In most instances, these communities were also religiously homogeneous, with most of the city’s Muslims now spread among the state-demarcated Coloured and Indian racial communities.

The Cape Town *fatwa*6 came almost twelve years after severe civil disturbances against the Ahmadis rocked the state of Punjab in Pakistan which elicited a judicial enquiry into the cause of the riots. This larger enquiry ultimately led to the disenfranchisement of Pakistani Ahmadis by state sanction 17 years later, including their legal designation as a non-Muslim minority.7 In South Africa, it set in motion a series of events that instituted an effective social and economic boycott against all self-identified Ahmadis and their alleged sympathisers. It ushered in a phase of sectarian disharmony which raises extremely pertinent issues on the politics of religious identity and belief and what constitutes the Islam of the *ummah* (global Muslim community) in a time of increasing connectivity, transformation, and the absence of an earthly authority to set and enforce a framework for an Islamic ethics in the temporal world.
How can we think of the ethical in relation to religious diversity, marginality, and moral relativism? What role do the theological and political spheres play in shaping religious discourse, experience, and difference? How can we think about religion, tradition, and the customary in meaningful ways without referencing popular notions of the secular as a resolution to problems of religious diversity?

There is a body of literature, heresiography, that examines the categorisation of sects in (or outside) the ummah in various ways. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse or provide an exposition of that discussion. What is relevant for our purposes here is a brief preliminary indication of what from the onset is meant by the “umma”. A fuller exposition of the concept umma is developed in the latter part of this article. The historian, Fred Donner, has argued (2010: 69) that the nascent Muslim community (umma) was confessionally ecumenical and that it was not proscriptive in relation to rigorous ritual or narrow theological beliefs, with the exception of perhaps a broad exposition of monotheism. Some have referred to the Accord of Madinah which the Prophet entered into with the various religious groups of the city, including Jewish communities, as clear historical support for Donner’s position (Jomaa 2020). On the face of it, this view can be interpreted to mean that the nascent Muslim community was theologically open, in effect a broad church of believers who were brought together into an umma by a charismatic leader who did not demand any significant amendment to their existing theological beliefs, customs, or clan identities. While this historical assessment may furnish a helpful, but not necessarily comprehensive, picture of the early Muslim community as existing prior to the consolidation of rigid rituals and specific theological positions, the fulcrum of this representation is unsteady without the vital recognition of the Prophet’s role as arbitrator within this community, irrespective of the extent of its ecumenism. Hamza Zafer articulates this position as follows:

The ecumenical community was forged by the arbitral authority of the scripture-bearing emissary. His authority transcended the ritual and customary differences among the various individuals and sub-groups who were subject to his arbitration. It was adherence to an emissary’s “guidance,” not the maintenance of particular ritual minutiae, that marked one’s membership in the scriptural community. (2021: 140)

Effectively, the authority of the Prophet, which transcended any of the other identities present in the community, is what constituted the umma. After the death of the Prophet, the umma was constituted through the signifier Islam by way of a community that is committed or devoted or connected to the legacy of the Prophet in manifestly plural and heterogeneous ways. In this sense, Islam is a distinctive
din (religious worldview)\(^8\) that signifies or refers to an ummah that subscribes to the name Muslim as inheritors of the Prophet’s legacy. It is important to note here that Islam is also simultaneously a political modality. From its inception, the ummah was both a religious community and a political congregation, where religion regulated, but did not extinguish, the secular domain (Crone 2005: 11; Abbasi 2021: 6).\(^9\)

In this paper, I attempt to centre the ummah as the locus of an ecumenical Muslim ethics that provides responses to the above questions. In doing so, I argue that the ummah is or should be the instrument through which an Islamic ethics is manifested, engaged, and translated at the social level. In so doing, the ummah is the symbolic custodian of an Islamic ethics which is fulfilled through individuals and communities as well as the platform through which difference is engaged. Accordingly, this articulation of the ummah proffers that the mediation of human conduct and aspiration qua human conduct and aspiration constitute the kernel of the ethical and the habitation of a religious tradition such as Islam at any given time.

An Existentialist Islam: Ummah as Muslim Community, Aspiration, and Possibility

Salman Sayyid, in his critical work Recalling the Caliphate (2014), makes the cogent argument that a unified Muslim political subjectivity is the only potential for Muslim societies, or “Muslimistan” as he terms it, to intervene in dominant imperial Western discourses, or “Westernese”, which have reigned supreme for the last two hundred years. The vehicle for this subjectivity is the ummah which has undergone subalternation over this period. For Sayyid, Islam is the underlying stratum which holds together the various expressions of Muslimness and the meaning of Islam and determines the history of Muslims, their present identity, and the future of the global community, as interpreted and understood by Muslims despite its different elocutions. By developing and ensuring the intellectual and political mobility of Islam through the ummah, the emphasis is on finding a way of speaking through Islam, notwithstanding rival projects of constructing the Islamic, that interrupts Enlightenment thinking, Westphalian conceptions of nation-states, and Western intellectual and political dominance, and has as its primary purpose to inscribe Islam as the central tenet of any social order. But what exactly are the contours and substantive content of this global ahistorical ummah for Sayyid? This is Sayyid’s definition of ummah:

The ummah refers to the sum total of all adherents of Islam, regardless of whether they are located in Muslimistan or elsewhere. There are three factors that point towards the formation of a globalised ummah. First, there is the phenomenon of
the assertion of an explicit Muslim subjectivity. This process has reached all Muslim communities. There are no significant Muslim communities in which more visible indicators of the assertion of Muslim subjectivity are absent. Second, Muslims are heavily represented in various migrant communities throughout the Western plutocracies. This has occurred partly because of integration that has been attended upon decolonisation, but it is also the case that since the 1980s a large percentage of refugees have been Muslims. Third, like most recent migrants, Muslims have tended to concentrate in urban areas. These areas are in the nodes of the new developing planetary networks. The net effect of these developments has been to produce situations in which Muslims from different traditions converge around commonalities. This juxtaposing of various Muslim populations has the effect of producing the conditions for the articulation of a ummah . . . The universal nation can be an exceptional grouping, an incarnation of all that is considered to be great and good; it can be infinite in a temporal sense, but spatially it has to be bounded, it cannot expand forever. The idea of the ummah rejects all such limits and its universalism and implicit expansionism is constantly reiterated. Clearly, the ummah is not a nation. Nor is the ummah a common market . . . The unity of the ummah is not built upon trading contacts and global networks of labour and capital flows . . . Nor is the ummah a common way of life or a linguistic community. (103)

Sayyid defines the universal ummah in negative political terms. It is simply what the ummah is not that necessarily implies that the ummah-cum-nation-state complex is impossible, nor that it is preferred. Rather, for Sayyid, the ummah’s only path towards achieving an optimal political subjectivity is through articulating itself through a diasporic identity that binds the community through linkages of displacement, commonalities despite diversity, and a realisation of some type of caliphal power which has the potential of actually obtaining great earthly power and executing the necessary political, intellectual, and economic interventions and interruptions. Sayyid’s imagined ummah is as much dependent on realpolitik as it is on effecting a Muslim hegemony – if not for all the world then, at least, for Muslims who can no longer be burdened with living as subordinate or “other” citizens in non-Muslim-majority nation-states or subjects of corrupt and/or anti-democratic Muslim-majority nation-states, both of which do not sufficiently manifest the ethos of a globally linked and ethical ummah (117–32).

Sayyid is somewhat elliptical on how this iteration of the ummah adequately defines how the richness and diversity of the Muslim religious landscape including its creedal differences, ritualistic practices, and ideological contradictions can cohere within an imagined community that is based on religious identity. Nonetheless, his proposition opens up a space of imagining the ummah as not a
community that is held together by a monolithic understanding of religious piety but rather a dynamic engagement that is relational. This much Sayyid suggests by crafting the identity of a Muslim as

being in a relationship with other Muslims through which we learn and unlearn what being Muslim means or should mean. One can only be a Muslim in one’s own way, as other Muslims are Muslims in their own way. The social nature of this “one’s own way” cannot be easily set aside. There is no monadic Muslimness. Being a Muslim means to partake in social practices which are constitutive of being part of a community. This is not peculiar to Muslims but rather the consequences of the impossibility of following rules except against the backdrop of a cultural setting which makes rule following possible. (178)

Sayyid’s scheme is helpful as it confirms the existence of Islam and the ummah without prescribing a specific essence to these categories. Rather, these categories are pregnant with possibilities that Muslims in any given time are responsible for developing through a sustained engagement with each other. In other words, to use a commonplace phrase from European continental philosophy, existence precedes essence. The existentialists, prominent among whom was the famous Jean Paul Sartre (d. 1980), articulated a metaphysics of anti-essentialism. Life’s journey has no inherent meaning. This does not mean it is meaningless, rather life generates meaning through the deliberate choices of the subject.

Ummah as Generative Reimagining: An Ummah beyond Sectarian Constraints

To tease out the consequences of this notion of the ummah, we need to consider three questions: first, what are the implications of otherworldly salvation for this stripe of communal thinking; second, what are the contours of the ummah and how is it constituted in relation to Islam as a historical, social, and religious tradition and identity; and finally, how does the ummah relate to or interact with that which is the non-ummah?

Islam as a religious tradition is concerned primarily with ultimate salvation in the hereafter. What type of person – i.e. what creed should a person subscribe to and what type of conduct should a person pattern himself or herself in accordance with – to ensure that such a person will ultimately obtain the grace of God in that interminable period after temporal life has departed the human body. For many contemporary Muslims this question may have receded in importance as it has become more urgent for them to respond to more expedient social and political demands on their faith in an increasingly hostile and Islamophobic world.
However, the question is important for discussing how an understanding of otherworldly salvation affects the community to which salvation should ideally be granted but which is extremely diverse in both practice and belief.

Neither consensus nor creedal conservatism have been successful in preventing communities from claiming to be Muslim and a part of the House of Islam despite the deplorable treatment that they may be subjected to from the wider “orthodox” community – whatever the context. To the contrary, theological obscurantism paired with political expedience and ideological zealotry have exacerbated the sectarian and creedal fault-lines in more recent times. Restricted religious metaphysical claims regarding ultimate salvation in the afterlife among Muslims are marshalled to provide direction on the proper manner of relations between people and communities in this worldly life. Whether these claims are instrumentalised for such a task or reflect a genuine belief of how salvation in the hereafter should influence and distinguish relations in this world is beside the point for this enquiry. What is of concern is that both approaches construct inter-Muslim categories of beliefs and sectarian divisions that are exploited to mould human behaviour that is differently disposed towards people in matters of this world who are considered sufficiently Muslim and those who are considered heretical.

The debate on what constitutes “true theological belief” and “correct” religious and/or ritual practice is not an unimportant one and I do not suggest that it should be terminated. Such a debate is important for communities who hold that only true *aqidah* (religious belief system or creed) guarantees one divine salvation in the hereafter. No Muslim or, by extension community of believers, should be coerced into accommodating beliefs and practices as acceptable within a religious belief system that they deem to be errant or, more seriously, destructive or a mockery of the very religious tradition that they are so assiduously committed to. However, a fundamental distinction needs to be drawn between Islam as salvation theory and Islam as historical and social fact. In the former case, Muslim communities of varying stripes make the case for what is proper and authentic Islam as opposed to mere innovation and heresy with a view to explaining and marking theological, epistemological, and metaphysical understandings of what should be considered as certain within the interior of one’s self and how one should live his or her life to gain the pleasure of God and eternal felicity and avoid God’s displeasure and punishing torment. However, this part – Islam as salvation theory – should not have any substantial bearing on who is a Muslim and accordingly a part of the *ummah* for the purpose of constructing the political and religious identity of “Muslim” within the larger framework of the Islamic as a historical, social, and civilisational category or subjectivity.

More recently, the late Shahab Ahmed (d. 2015) cogently argued (2017) that Islam within this paradigm is far more diverse by way of containing concepts, ideas,
and practices that contradict what is usually considered “properly” Islamic in terms of Islamic law and orthodox theology. The only type of coherence that the tradition in its totality exhibits is one of coherent contradiction. Ahmed argues (2017: 5–112) that the tradition vis-à-vis Muslims included forms of thinking and behaviour that were at once both Islamic and contrary to legal Islamic rulings. The fact of contradiction in creed and practice and/or in law is essential to understanding the depth of the ummah through history and the possible futures – or futurity – of the ummah. To remove or deny this productive contradiction limits the cosmopolitanism and boundlessness of a community that has never been constrained by ethnicity, language, race, theological homogeneity or uniform practice. The grundnorm that enables parts of the ummah to claim their place within the ummah and also to discuss, debate, decipher, negotiate, and argue with each other is that it lays claim to the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad which gave birth to the historical fact of Islam. The consequence of this line of reasoning is that we have to take a person or a community at its word. If a person or a community laying claim to being a part of the ummah – including but not limited to the Ahmadis – we are required to affirm that inclusion. This is not a metaphysical or epistemic claim in confirming that such a person or community shall be granted eternal felicity on judgment day (something which is rather rich for any person or community to confidently claim). Rather, it is an ethical claim in that an Islam that is entrenched in exclusionary theological positions and bloated representations of inherent truth and authority is tantamount to performing exclusionary acts of people and entire communities that end up dominating the very human subjects that it says it has come to liberate.

In summation, such a construction and articulation of Islam renders its worldly and very human manifestations divine and beyond reproach through its own self-appointed and self-perpetuating authority, which is destructive of the logic of the ummah. Accordingly, it is only by insisting on the identity of Muslim as a historical, social, and political subjectivity and at the same time confirming the limitations of what we can understand from the historical, social, and political underpinnings of the ummah, on the one hand, i.e. that the salvation of a belief community cannot be grasped fully and that such divisive claims for otherworldly redemption internally within the ummah are valid but cannot be a reflection of the representation of the ummah in real time. Consequently, the ummah is not a fantasy of communitarianism that exists “only in the imagination or on the Internet” (Roy 2007: 84). The point of the ummah is not a globally unified religious community that belongs to a single Church of sorts but rather a community of historical importance and heritage and ways of being, thinking, and embodiment that can be identified as Islamic – not one of ancestry like Judaism or geographical sacred locatedness like much of conservative and right-wing political Hinduism. In this way the ummah has always been real and continues to exist beyond geographical borders and ideological partitions.
The fact that Ahmadis continue to debate and argue – sometimes rather vociferously – with other Muslims regarding their Muslimness and LGBTIQ Muslims, by way of example, continue to defend their places within the ambit of the Islamic ummah with other Muslims, and Islamists of all stripes defend their legitimate political aspirations among Muslims for a dominant Islamic political authority as an intervention and resistance to the hegemonic Western model of capitalist liberalism, among many others, are confirmation that all these communities and movements and their detractors have to engage with each other, as the ummah qua ummah. There is a shared legacy and tradition as well as a shared future that is at stake which ironically binds internally disparate groups together in contact, even if such exchange is antagonistic. It is as much a conversation about power as it is about Islamic authenticity. The fact is that Islam is far too important for all those who identify with it not to entrench their claim as belonging to the ummah. But that claim need not be based on the exclusion of another’s claim to being a part of the same ummah.¹⁵

So how is the ummah constituted in relation to Islam? It is reported that on the eve of the Battle of Badr (624 CE), the first military encounter between the nascent Muslim community and the elite tribes of Mecca that forced the community into either a slow death or exile, the Prophet Muhammad fervently supplicated for God’s assistance for his small band of followers against the much larger and more well-equipped Meccans. At one point during his supplications the Prophet Muhammad called out to God “O God! Should this group be defeated today, You will no longer be worshiped” (Bukhari 1995: no. 398). This is where the logic of the ummah begins. The worship of God via the moral mission of the Prophet Muhammad was constituted through that community of believers who struggled and fought and those who provided aid to this small community who battled on the plains of Badr. Without them, the mission of the Prophet would have ceased and, had they been defeated, Islam as the historical legacy of Muhammad would have been eclipsed. Islam neither existed nor can it exist without the ummah. Islam is constitutive of the ummah.

What, however, does this mean and what is the role of a moral community in this regard?

In the first instance, the ummah consists of, as described by Samira Haj in her superb analysis of the eighteenth-century reformer Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab (d. 1791), “individuals who have agreed to live by a set of authoritative texts and practices” and “an individual who belongs to the collective has to accept the moral and institutional boundaries that define the community” (Haj 2009: 36). Ibn Abdul Wahhab’s assessment of the ummah here is precise. It is indeed both an existential and a moral community where an individual and/or a group of people exercise their agency to be constrained by the moral precepts – primarily what it means
to live a good-cum-ethical life – which have their grounding in the interpretation of texts and customary practices that are or become pervasive within the community. Accordingly, an individual’s submission to Islam is, in fact, a submission to the moral claims which the community makes on him or her, something which progressive or modernist Muslims tend to ignore. However, it is also an engagement with and/or acquiescence to the human relations – family, friends, and the wider religious community – which manifest those moral claims through their conduct and understanding of the texts and practices of Islam. In other words, one owes an allegiance or a duty of some sort to the people who embody the ummah together with oneself as Muslims whose pasts were and futures are directed by Islam. These “authoritative texts and practices” are determined by the people who form a vital part of the Islamic intellectual tradition – the ulama – in relation to the community of individuals and micro groups that embody the ummah. The Islam of the ulama is one – albeit an extremely important one – dimension of Islam. The other important dimension is how the ummah either submits to, inhabits, and/or resists the norms articulated by the former dimension, what one accomplished South African jurist terms the “strange alchemy of life and law” (Sachs 2011).

The intellectual tradition on its own without the practices, lived realities and doubts, and the interior life of believers, i.e. the vast number of sophisticated and intellectually rich texts that make up the intellectual traditions of Islamic law and theology, is at best a simulacrum of Islam. To present Islam as exclusively that discursive tradition is a type of chicanery that modulates the influential and agentive power of the ummah in also determining what is Islamic. The effect of this relationship between the apparently universally applicable intellectual theological-legal discursive tradition and the contextual particularities of the ummah is a productive antinomy for two reasons: first, at the instance when we try to understand Islam without reference to the ummah and the historical discursive tradition we lose Islam as a living and dynamic tradition itself. Second, Islam can be likened to a travelling theory in terms of Edward Said’s (d. 2003) articulation of this concept (1983: 226–48). Building on Said’s theory, Peter Mandaville conceptualises the ummah as an embodiment of Islam’s journey through the global Muslim community where it multiplies and reproduces such that what we eventually end up with is many theories. Within any set of ideas, then, there will be multiple and often competing discourses on the nature of the “true” (or originary) idea. Part of travelling theory’s task is to capture this sense of fragmentation. Muslims in translocal spaces often come into contact with other Muslims who interpret and practise Islam in disparate fashions. Often debates ensue about the nature of “real” Islam and about who is licensed to speak on Islam’s behalf. (2001: 87)
Consequently, the *ummah* – in part or whole – plays an indispensable role in affirming and subverting existing genealogies of power both from within the discursive tradition by offering various and discordant readings of the tradition and also by inhabiting a changing world as Muslims. Henceforth, the *ummah* is never complete and Islam is never static and the relationship between the two is certainly not inert. It is a continuous negotiation of meaning and representation.

This brings us to the question of how this *ummah* interacts with that which is outside of itself. This is an intriguing question due to the fact that the *ummah* is consistently interacting with and influencing and being influenced by that which is not the *ummah* politically, economically, culturally, aesthetically, and ethically. The *ummah* is not a hermetically sealed community but rather it is a porous body that contributes to, assimilates into, and/or challenges the context around it, for better or worse. It is a heterotopia in the Foucauldian sense in that it is both a space with layers of meaning and relationships that are existentially real, which spread out into the world becoming entangled with other layers of meaning and relationships, and also a space that represents an ideal imagined community separate from other imagined communities (Foucault 1971: 175–85). To demonstrate this point, I will provide an example from the Ottoman Empire during the period when it was moving closer to the cusp of modernity, yet still moored to the old ways of Islamicate being in the pre-modern period.

As a substantive point, this example is demonstrative of the tendency of the Muslim worldview regarding pluralism and diversity that pertained in the vast majority of Muslim societies over most of the pre-modern period. An Italian traveller visiting Istanbul in 1788 penned this description of diversity and pluralism in the capital of Islam’s caliphate:

> A stranger, who has beheld the intolerance of London and Paris, must be much surprised to see a church here between a mosque and a synagogue, and a dervish by the side of a Capuchin friar. I know not how this government can have admitted into its bosom religions so opposite to its own. It must be from degeneracy of Mahommedanism, that this happy contrast can be produced. What is still more astonishing, is to find that this spirit of toleration is generally prevalent among the people; for here you see Turks, Jews, Catholics, Armenians, Greeks, and Protestants conversing together, on subjects of business or pleasure, with as much harmony and good will as if they were of the same country and religion. (Jezernik 2004: 232)

It is ironic that here the European reduces Islam’s cosmopolitanism and pluralism to a dissoluteness of sorts, since such a thing was not, at least to the mind of this Italian, a good in itself and could only be understood by assuming that decay had
set in within the realm of the Islamicate. However, this narration demonstrates the historical existence of a more confident ummah that was prepared to extend its boundaries of temporal and worldly sociality to include people of other religions despite such people being viewed as strictly misguided. Here the ummah was not closed towards others but accepting of religious diversity and protective of religious liberty. Harmonious relations and kindred associations were not limited to those of one’s own faith or ethnic group but rather extended towards any who came within the ambit of the ummah.

Conclusion

In conclusion, two inferences follow from the above discussion. The first is that terms such as “fundamentalist”, “moderate”, “radical”, “extremist”, “heretic”, etc. have no meaning in and of themselves. These terms are usually defined by those external to the ummah who desire to direct the course of Islam’s future without any substantial or significant discussion with the ummah. If Islam is constituted by the ummah and the ummah is constituted by Muslims i.e. all those who lay claim to the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad and the ummah engages with the world on its own terms, definitions of what is “true” Islam as opposed to “false” Islam or “fundamentalist” and “moderate” Islam can only have meaning, if any, in relation to an internal dialogue within the ummah. It also means that any such dialogue will never be final but always ongoing as the ummah continues to change and reconstruct itself in relation to itself and its surroundings. The second is that Islamic identity is never a unified, static, insular, and limited ideological, epistemological, or ontological category, regardless of the contrary bold claims by some partisans of the Islamic tradition or those external to it.

The late Edward Said, in his masterful lecture titled Freud and the Non-European (2003), provides a nuanced analysis of how the Viennese psychoanalyst constructed a Jewish identity in relation to that of the non-European. Said’s ultimate conclusion of his analysis of Freud’s works on identity is that even an identity as insular and communal as that of the Jewish identity, at least according to Freud, has its limits and cannot function as a completely incorporated unique and exclusive identity. For Said, the importance of this insight is that any identity “cannot be thought or worked through itself alone”, which yields a form of an essential cosmopolitanism or hybridity “from which there can be no recovery, no state of resolved or Stoic calm, and no utopian reconciliation even within itself” (56).

This assessment is equally applicable to the Islamic identity. Islam as a living tradition exists insofar as Muslims exist and Muslims do not exist separate from other Muslims – who are different from them in belief and practice – as well as those who interact with the ummah – either in a permanent state or flitting in and
out of its perimeters. An Islamic identity can only be grappled with, constructed, and reconstructed through these interactions or relational entanglements that provide meaning to what it means to be a Muslim in any given context. Returning to Sayyid’s configuration of the ummah,

there is no way to be a Muslim except through a relationship with the ummah: past, present and future; even if that relationship is based on denial of the ummah. Being a Muslim cannot be exclusively a matter of private indulgence or whim, for being a Muslim means being in a relationship with other Muslims through which we learn and unlearn what being Muslim means or should mean. One can only be a Muslim in one’s own way, as other Muslims are Muslims in their own way. (Sayyid 2014: 178)

Accordingly, the ummah entails within it contradictions of various kinds but the politics of the ummah – the relational dimension that connects all Muslims together – makes the dissonance fluent.

The politics of the ummah and the investment in Islam of those who claim to be a part of this ummah is in one important way a politics of friendship that binds the fragmentary patchwork of Muslims and others. The Aristotelian tripartite division of friendship or philia suggests that friendship can be of the utilitarian or ethical kind. The former are friendships of convenience or pleasure where the longevity and stability of the friendship is dependent upon the existence of a temporary object that provides some benefit or pleasure to the parties. The third type of friendship is underpinned by an ethical worldview when “one spends a great deal of time with the other person, participating in joint activities and engaging in mutually beneficial behaviour” or in other words “between real friends, there is seldom need for the interventions of outsiders, justice is made possible by the nature and depth of the relationship . . . Those who consider themselves to be good and moral cannot be truly good or moral if they do not have the ‘friends’ to prove it” (Msimang 2016: 33). The entire ummah project and communal subscription to Islam is an approach towards a friendship of character; an attempt at realising a world where the interconnectedness between people makes it possible to accept the lacuna of differences not as solid barriers to living together but rather as ways of being that expand the sphere of belonging and inclusion. On one level it is easier to sustain this politics of friendship, especially when it deals with people who more or less hold identical views on the world such as Deobandi Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, or Ismaili Muslims or Wahhabi Muslims or the members of a discreet Sufi order. However, it is far more challenging when there is less agreement on what constitute the essentials of Islam among a larger cohort of self-described Muslims. In this regard, a solidarity of civic engagement is required if one of friendship is not possible. It is a solidarity among
strangers similar to that described by Charles Taylor as follows: “I may not know most of my compatriots, and may not particularly want them as friends when I do meet them . . . my bond to these people passes through our participation in a common political entity” (Taylor 1995: 184). This form of solidarity is based upon a bonding and concordat of common participation in an ideal community that is both open to the world and inclusive of its internal dissonances. The imperative to recognise the difference between theoretical doctrinal teachings and the messiness of lived reality is essential to recognising that the ummah is larger than the doctrinal elements that supposedly demarcate the outlines of Islam according to any particular group. As such, irrespective of whether doctrinal teachings – established in law or theology – change or need to change, the dynamism of the ummah will always be a decentralised community that takes different approaches to issues of creed and religious practice. And it is at this point that a person, a group, can either respond with hospitality or hostility towards the other who is religiously different and doctrinally dissimilar. A politics of solidarity ensures that one’s autonomy to be Muslim and one’s Muslimness can only be had in relation to and through one’s responsibility towards the Muslimness of others.

In the absence of universal legal and theological principles applicable to all, the community of Islam will always be a transitional community that reconstructs its identity in relation to each other and with it each internal community’s right to belong and call themselves Muslim. It is only through wrestling with difference and moving toward a sense of alterity in relation to oneself – always restless in the confidence that one’s tribe has obtained the truth – is Islam understood and exposed as “the impartial perception of the truth . . . inscribed within each of the seventy-two or seventy-three” sects (Diagne 2011: 33). In the words of Muhammad Iqbal (1977: 55),

The true doctrine is lost in the quarrels

Of the seventy-two sects:

Impossible to understand it if your perception

Is not impartial!

Notes

1 I would like to acknowledge the NIHSS (National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences), South Africa, for its support during the period within which this article was produced.

2 After the death of the movement’s founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908), and subsequently the first leader, Hakeem Nur-ud-Din (d. 1914), the Ahmadi movement split into two branches based on divisions and disputes relating to creed, leadership of the community, and the nature of relations with non-Ahmadi Muslims.
The MJC was established in 1945 in Cape Town as an umbrella body of disparate ulama and imams (prayer leaders – often with no formal training in Islamic theology or pastoral care) in the Cape region who for the most part followed the Shafi’i school of Islamic law. The organisation did not historically represent all Muslim persuasions and does not do so currently; there have existed and continue to be Muslim religious leaders who operate outside of the authority or jurisdiction of the MJC. However, the MJC is one of the largest Muslim organisations in South Africa – the largest in the Western and Northern Cape – and has the widest representation among Muslims in these regions. The ulama affiliated to the MJC have since its inception been the foremost religious leaders of the Cape Muslim community and recognised as an official mouthpiece of the community on religious matters. For a history of the MJC see the unpublished thesis of Lubber 1989.

The term Coloured in South Africa has a very particular meaning which was used to refer to the descendants of slaves and their descendants and the term was and continues to be used to designate this community of originally mixed ethnic heritage. The “Coloured” identity was recognised by the apartheid regime as a valid racial category that was applied to this community.

The MJC fatwa can be viewed as part of a tradition of fatwas termed “the fatwas of condemnation”. The primary purpose of these fatwas was not to provide an opinion on whether some act was lawful or not or a response to a question relating to some details of Islamic law. Rather its purport was to explicitly condemn certain actions and/or beliefs and to declare as heretics or apostates those involved in the relevant actions or who subscribed to the “unsound” beliefs. (See Willis 1996: 153–61.)

The Ahmadi issue or the question of whether Ahmadis are Muslim originates earlier, prior to the partition of colonial India into the independent nation-states of Pakistan and India. While there were some strong views among the Muslim ulama and others that the Ahmadi movement and its founder suffered from the defect of deviance, the tendency was not one of complete excommunication. In fact, the Muslim League prior to partition, and its leader, Muhammmad Ali Jinnah (d. 1948), continued to permit Ahmadis to join the party, projecting a front of Muslim unity. A senior member of the Muslim League and Pakistan’s first foreign minister, Muhammad Zafrulla Khan (d. 1985), was an Ahmadi (Zaman 2018: 167–8).

There has been significant debate, discussion, and declarations on the use and nature of the term “religion” in our contemporary understanding of “religious” communities and the extent to which our current and dominant understanding of the term or analytical category “religion” may owe to Western constructions of religion and secularism. A good example from the discipline of anthropology is the work of Talal Asad (1993). In short, the argument is that the term “religion” and its attendant meanings as understood in the postcolonial context cannot be self-evidently used as an explanatory term for non-Western cultures such as Islam. However, Rushain Abbasi has persuasively argued that, while this discourse has been illuminating, “premodern Muslims did indeed possess a concept akin to the modern sense of ‘religion’ long before the rise of the modern West and that . . . they were the first historical community to sustain a rich and robust analytical discourse around the idea of religion” (2021: 5).

Patricia Crone’s work is considered by many scholars to be problematic, particularly in respect of her early work on the origins of Islam which argued for a revisionist account of Islam’s beginnings through an assessment of non-Arabic and non-Muslim sources. However, my interest here is in her later work where she provides a relevant analysis of Islamic political thought and Muslim governance.

Even a cursory assessment of the Qur’an suggests that the fundamental aim of the Prophet’s mission is the primacy of eternal life in the hereafter which is predicated on belief in God’s message.
and righteous works. Humans have failed except those who believe in God and conduct righteous actions (Q 103: 2–3), especially since this worldly life is designed as a plane for the assessment of righteous conduct which includes the correct creed (Q 67: 2). The life of this world in some ways presents a distraction from the true and eternal life of the hereafter (Q 62: 8) which is accessed through the correct belief and good deeds that a human subject will be accountable for and witness on the Day of Judgment (Q 99: 6–8).

The discussion regarding orthodoxy and orthopraxy relating to which phenomenon renders a more accurate description of Islam has featured in Islamic Studies. F. M. Denny claims (2011), among others, that Islam is essentially a faith of practice where belonging or identification with the religion is primarily based on certain practices and no creed or belief. Norman Calder, for example, claims (2001: 66–7) otherwise, stating that correct belief is intimately tied to salvation and accordingly is essential to Sunni Muslim definitions of who is a Muslim. In totality, a more reasonable view would be that both orthodoxy and orthopraxy, together forming a prism of normative orientation and practice, signify a more exact representation of Islam.

An example is the Ahmadis. Besides the Republic of Pakistan’s official declaration of Ahmadis as a non-Muslim minority, the “consensus” and “traditional” argument in this regard holds sway. In the 2016 edition of The Muslim 500 “traditional Islam” is defined as “[a]lso known as Orthodox Islam, this ideology is not politicized and largely based on consensus of correct opinion – thus including the Sunni, Shi’a, and Ibadi branches of practice (and their subgroups) within the fold of Islam, and not groups such as the Druze or the Ahmadiyya, among others” (28) and further states that declaring as non-Muslim any adherent of the schools of either “Sunni or Shi’i law, Ibadis, Sufis or Thahiris [Zahiris] is impossible and impermissible”. This generosity of Muslim inclusiveness does not extend to the Ahmadis.

Ahmed demonstrates this point through providing the existence and widespread practices of five things within pre-modern Muslim societies between the geographical regions spanning from the Balkans to the Bay of Bengal. These five things deal with philosophical deism, epistemology, and metaphysics; Sufi exceptionalism; philosophical and mystical pantheism; the consumption of wine; and animate picture making.

This point – even if one disagrees with its representation here – is essential to fully understand the politics of the ummah beyond narrow ideological positions of who is a Muslim. The Ahmadi case is instructive again. The declaration by the Pakistani state that Ahmadis are non-Muslim through a constitutional amendment in 1974 and then later in 1984 criminalising the practice of Islam by Ahmadis, on the basis that the legal copyright of Islam is held only by genuine Muslims and it is the nation-state that distinguishes between genuine and fake Muslims, vests the nation-state with the authority to chart the future of the ummah and delineate its limits. The ummah cannot be bound or reduced to a nation-state or a sectarian body which at its outset excludes certain Muslims from its processes only to adjudicate upon the alleged harm those persons as “fake” Muslims pose to the larger body of legitimate Muslims and thereafter effectively bind all Muslims within its jurisdiction to its judgment through coercive methods including the full might of the law and the power of the state. This process is, in many ways, a distinctively modern treatment of sectarianism and religious difference. (See Khan 2012: 91–120 and Saeed 2017.)

The Ahmadi case is a clear one where ideas of Islamic belonging are predicated on notions of exclusion. Less clear or visible, particularly among Muslims living in Western contexts, is the way in which exclusion functions to distance those Muslims who are considered by the state as undesirable or as terrorists. These persons are excluded from the ummah on ideological and political grounds as well. An example is the refusal by the religious leaders of the British Muslim community to perform funeral prayers over the bodies of Muslims determined by the non-Muslim secular
state as guilty of committing politically motivated crimes, with one imam saying these people are “not welcome in our community either in life or in death” (Sherwood 2017). Irrespective of one’s disagreement with and revulsion towards the criminal actions of the people who conducted the attacks on London Bridge, the ideological reasoning for the exclusion of these people from the ummah is similar to that of the Ahmadies – the Ahmadies are the cause of doctrinal harm while these people are the cause of physical harm. If anything, the exclusion of the London attackers is more politically loaded in that the exclusion is also influenced by the urgency to respond to hegemonic Western pressure that has identified Islam as inherently dangerous and violent.

Sabah Mahmood is instructive here (2004). In her path-breaking study of the women’s piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood examines the notion of agency and emancipates it from its liberal trappings which have become entrenched in current discussions about Islam and deemed Western values. Mahmood says: “Put simply, my point is this: if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes ‘change’ and the means by which it is affected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and affectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentive capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways which one inhabits norms” (14–15).

For a more detailed discussion on this point see Ahmed (2017: 270–95).

References


