

Muslims at the Edges

Thanks to Richard Bulliet, the Muslim world may now be examined meaningfully from the outside in. Bulliet writes mainly about Iran in the 11th century but much of what he says is worth considering today. Whereas prior to Bulliet both theology and social change were believed to have cascaded from the center of the Muslim world to its edges, Bulliet's counterintuitive argument is that change actually begins at the edges of the Muslim world, and then moves backwards into the center. This implies that in the past Muslim society was more influenced by circumstances and ideas operating at a distance—insulated almost, from the political uncertainties that roiled the caliphs of Baghdad and the sultans of Constantinople—than by those that occurred at the center. It is clear to me at least, that the cultural efflorescence Muslim so rightly admire is not just a product of faith per se—although faith, it must be stressed is at the center of this process—but rather, a byproduct of the inevitable clash between one's alien faith and one's local culture.

Two arguments that seem to give this view some traction will be examined here: one looks at history for examples that support this view, and the other searches for patterns in that very history that might explain why this happens. For examples we turn to the biographical data of our intellectual ancestors and find that a large majority of them were non Arabs or displaced Arabs who lived and worked at the edges of the Islamic empire. So while revelation itself began in Mecca, and the community that subscribed to its tenets developed its social institutions in Medina, the civilization this faith community spawned—from its law, to its philosophy, to its arts—actually gelled at the edges, in places like Persia, Spain, and Africa. It should come as no surprise therefore, that almost every single scholar of hadith along with a large number of historians, exegetes, and philosophers were drawn from the periphery of the Islamic world, from those who were either displaced Arabs, or local converts. Even the Arabic language benefited enormously from scholarship at the edge—as if those who were disadvantaged by distance had to make up through scholarship.

As for patterns that might explain this phenomenon, we start by restating a misconception that is now widespread. Contrary to popular belief, religion actually comprises of both faith and culture! This was less obvious to those who lived in 7th century Arabia than it is, say, to those who call Denmark home today. In Arabia, at the dawn of Islam, Arab culture and the Islamic faith enjoyed a symbiotic relationship that eventually turned the ethically wholesome that was Arabic into the morally sacred that became Islamic. This process has continued throughout Muslim history with varying results. Entire communities at first grappled with the rather onerous task that individuals today face, that of accepting the faith system of Islam, then abandoning with great angst key elements of their old cultures, then adopting the culture of their newly acquired faith, and possibly living thereafter in those very communities as cultural apostates. They also learn along the way that their communities are often more forgiving of theological apostasy than they are of cultural apostasy. Believe all you want in the God of Islam, but come the last weekend in November, and the community expects to see a turkey on the table! While this goes on, those at the center see themselves not as agents of change, but rather as custodians of authentic Islam, and theirs is the task of preserving the center's link to its past, protecting its cultural ethos, and ensuring that the status quo perseveres.

Islamic scholars who operate at the edge also face challenges quite unlike those found at Islam's center. Their challenge pertains to the heterogeneity of the milieu they serve, to the fact that Muslims in their neighborhoods who want to live by the sacred law also happen to live next to non Muslims, and quite often together with them as part of one family. And it pertains to the fact that acculturation in their case works in reverse. Instead of being born into and slowly becoming part of a Muslim milieu—as is the case where Muslims are in the majority—those born to Muslim families at the edge or those who later embrace Islam have to gradually and selectively opt out of their native cultures and into the culture of their new faith communities. Together, these communities eventually push the envelope in areas such as family law, banking practices, and religious pluralism. Their primary objective often is to do no more than imbue their lives with the practices of their faith but the end result is a large scale redesign of those very practices.