Journal of Textual Reasoning 4:1 (November 2005)
ISSN: 1939-7518

MEMORY OF THE NEIGHBOR: ISLAM AND ITS FORGOTTEN NEIGHBORS

MEHNAZ M. AFRIDI
Institute for Jewish-Muslim Relations, Los Angeles

Bismillah hir rahman nir rahim. In the name of God the most merciful, beneficent, and the dispenser of grace.

In Islam there are ninety-nine names for God, who is primarily described as endless, unknowable, and all-encompassing, as he is in Judaism. I begin with three of the relevant names of God for this particular topic "The Ethics of the Neighbor", the protection of the other, generosity of friendship, and the forgiving God within Islam:

Al-Ghafur (All-Forgiving)

Al-Karim (The Generous one)

Al-Wali (The Protective friend)

Neighbors? Who are my neighbors? Do I know my neighbors? And do I know them as neighbors or as people whom I invite inside my house from the outside, and sit amongst them as I eat, sleep, share stories and woes? Where do I live physically, and with whom do I share food,

laughter, pain, and love? Are my neighbors truly outside of my boundary wall? Is this wall a memory that reminds us that we are separated and bounded by the ruins of stones, cement, and physical separation? These are the first set of questions that languished in my mind as I set out to think about "The Ethics of the Neighbor" on both a theological and literary trajectory within Islam focusing on the issues of hospitality, the memory of the "other," and the Ummah (unity of all Muslims regardless of race, and ethnicity). If we take the three meanings of God—the all-protecting one, the forgiving friend, and the generous one—the questions of the neighbor and of how we treat others are the cornerstone of Islamic hospitality. However, I find that some Islamic actions towards others who are labeled "infidels" within Muslim communities is disheartening and discouraging especially in light of the Qu'ran's message, the names of God, and Prophet Mohammed's life.

For me as a Muslim it would be very simple to make a teleological argument for the "Ahlay Kitabi" or the "People of the One Book or God" as the accepted believers in the one god, or as the three Monotheistic traditions, as good neighbors, those who are not only welcomed by God but by Muslims as brothers and sisters of the one God. However, as Muslims we have expressed a disinterest in fully embracing other monotheistic faiths, which has compelled me to explore the notion of the People of One Book. To me the acceptance of the People of The Book has become an old memorized phrase or, when needed, a polemical or defensive response to other faiths. The notion of all faiths as viable is no longer a living practice within Islam, which states essentially that all humans are Muslims (submitter to the one God) and the descendants of Abraham. In other words, we are all Muslims, and this implies that all those who are Jews and Christians somehow went astray even under the acceptance by God and Muslims. God chose Jews and Christians and revealed His message to them, but they were too stubborn in their own already established convictions to accept the last, final, and *true* revelation, the Qu'ran. The belief that Abraham was the first Muslim has been set forth in the Qu'ran, but as Muslims we need to reaffirm this revelation within the Muslim community and allow our neighbors to experience this

as familiar neighbors. What this means then is that Muslims who affirm that our Jewish and Christian neighbors are equal to us through the Qu'ran must try to put this into practice all over the world. There have been many instances in which we have included our monotheist brothers and sisters in our beliefs, but we have also converted the meaning of Ummah to one singular group: Islam. In addition, we have changed the meaning of Islam, which has two meanings, the first that includes all those who submit to the one God, and the second for those who submit to the one God and the last revelation and Prophet Mohammed and the Qu'ran. This second and quizzical approach is complex, and, depending on what kind of a Muslim one is, one can either include or exclude our monotheistic neighbors. However, the Qu'ran states:

> God, there is no God but God. It is He who sent down the Book (the Qur'an) Upon you (Muhammed) in all truth confirming what came before. And He sent down The Torah and the Gospel before as a guidance for people, and He sent down the Discernment the Qu'ran.[1]

More importantly, I would like to offer a new reading of how some Islamic moments or epochs have been neighborly and of other periods when the memory of the same neighbors has effaced the urgency to recognize a neighbor, another tradition, or even another being. All that we are left with is the ruins, traces, and memories of good times shared with neighbors. So, I begin with optimism, and I stand upon a strong epistemological basis for my simple assumptions that Muslims can and must reconstruct a forgotten cultural past that held them as the most hospitable and welcoming hosts to the "other" and the "stranger."

As I recall the ideas of hospitality in Muslim cultures, ruminations of Prophet Mohammed's imprints set upon my mind as if he were the role model to guide the perplexed into the already complex web before the advent of Islam. I quote from Amin Maalouf, who believes that people are responsible for the way in which they believe rather than allowing the faith, and sacred text to stand alone without the perspectives of the human lens and interpretation. Similarly, Abrahamic faiths have mustered and

---

[1] *The Message of the Qu'ran,* trans. Muhammad Asad (Gibraltar: Al-Andalus, 1980), Surah 3:3.

rallied human beings around static texts to create meanings, homes, homelessness, and boundaries between neighbors. However, there is a desperate longing to "love thy "neighbor" from a monolithic perspective that has created rifts amongst the faiths. Maalouf writes:

> Too much emphasis is often laid on the influence of religions on people, and not enough on the influence of peoples and their history on religions. The influence is reciprocal, I know. Society shapes religion, and religion in its turn shapes society. But I have observed that because of a certain mental habit that we have gotten into we tend to see only one side of this dialectic, and the omission greatly distorts our perception.[2]

As Maalouf points out that people give religion meaning, not the other way around, in most cases, I too recall that even Prophet Mohammed had causes of revelations that called for introspection and transformation in the ways in which he conducted his life with others in terms of hospitality, guests, sharing of food, and sharing thoughts and ideas with Jews and Christians. For example, when Mohammed was in a quandary in a certain situation, he would pray to God who would then reveal to the Prophet Mohammed the way to manage the situation. He was always apt to use knowledge and perspective when it came to a revelation. As he is quoted repeatedly:

> Upon a person whom Allah desires well. He bestows the knowledge of faith. . . . A Muslim is never satiated in his quest for good (knowledge) till it ends in Paradise.[3]

Prophet Mohammed, who is less frequently mentioned in the Qu'ran than Moses, becomes a role model for Muslims through Qu'ranic interpretation, but the context surrounding his life with neighbors and his own exile from Mecca has been lost to most Muslims. Prophet Mohammed's struggle and his willingness to share with Jews and Christians a sense of social justice and hospitality has become a lost

---

[2] Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Arcade Publishers, 1996), 67.

[3] Bukhari, al-Muhammed b. Ismail, Shahih al-Bukhari, 9 vols. (Lahore: Kazi, 1979).

narrative, although his piety and strength against others has been highlighted today.

To me part of the loss of neighborliness amongst Muslims is the loss of memory and the increased nostalgia for purity, home, and an ideal whereby many Muslims can see another ideal form of who they are and where they are from, whether it is from Ishmael's tribe, the Sayeds of Arabia, or even the Hanifates. I would like to take a brief look at Prophet Mohammed's own transformation and radical inversion of who the neighbor was, who was included in the Ummah, and eventually whether Muslims can rely on being inside and never on the outside? In other words, Islam as a social religion has had a difficult time separating the private and public, inside/outside and even "us" and "them." However, in today's Muslim communities that have developed a sense of homogeneity, the continuity of such a paradigm has been fractured due to a literal and systematic interpretation of the neighbor. The memory of Bedouin culture or pre-Islamic history has been lost to sedimentary infrastructures of cities like Mecca, Jerusalem, Baghdad, Damascus, Istanbul, ruins of lost empires, but there has been an effacement of the fact that the message of Islam and Prophet Mohammed stemmed from a nomadic life. The ideas of place, of the sacred, and of Islamic terrain came during the advent of Islam that separated the Neighbor from the Muslim. Muslims found themselves seeing the "other"—in this case the Jew or Christian—as being outside the land of Islam, and this has become a problem in many conflicts and much hostility today. The story of Islam, along with many contemporaneous theological and cosmological experiments, rotates around such tensions in ways of seeing and assessing the outside—and by extension the inside—of human society.

Pre-Islamic Bedouin poetry and later Sufi mysticism were the remnants of and Islamic culture that resonated with the fractured and nomadic identity of being, since the two forms of Islamic tradition have held very little interest in a center. This is especially true of Sufis, who are constantly engaged in an attempt to become a whole and work through a dualistic paradigm. However, the power of Sunni Islam that spread through the world directed its energy to a more sedimentary life and

created centers like Mecca, Baghdad, Istanbul, Jerusalem, and Damascus, and the memory of nomadic and wandering traces were lost, such that the desert became a city and the city a desert. As Avicenna writes:

> This land is like a desert of salt. Each time that anyone tries to grow a crop there, it is scattered. Each time that anyone builds there, the edifice falls to ruin. These migrants would like to settle permanently, but their wish is not granted them.[4]

Here Avicenna is forewarning that the land is a place of wandering, and that building edifices is an act of ruin. Furthermore, one can read from *Bedouin Poetry from Sinai and the Negev: Mirror of a Culture*, by Clinton Bailey[5] that hospitality was the land and the tent of the dweller:

> Take from me Salman,
> Some weighty advice,
> And accept it, Salman,
> Though it's told you in verse.
> If you spot strangers traveling
> From lands far away,
> Stand in front of the tent
> Till they see you and turn.
> Then shake out your carpets
> And make yourself mild,
> So your guest may sit down
> In the tent and feel sure.
> Then the fires do kindle
> Though never too hot,
> Lest the coffee beans burn,
> When the pain is held near.
> Fight fiercely for the right
> To sup the camp's stranger.
> God gave us hands and fingers
> And will keep us in store,

---

[4] Cited in Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and The Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), 35.

[5] Clinton Bailey, *Bedouin Poetry from Sinai and the Negev: Mirror of a Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon / New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 204.

> And if your guests themselves
> Do lapse into joking,
> Let your eye laugh with them,
> But add nothing more.

One finds that biblically, Abraham and Lot displayed a willingness to grace guests and open up their homes to show that strangers were never on the outside of one's home, but inside it, as one can further read in similar passages in Genesis 18 and 19:

> And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth . . . Let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I fetch a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant . . . And Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds, and milk and the calf, which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. (Genesis 18:1-8)[6]

The hospitality of the Bedouins and Abraham resonates with Prophet Mohammed who treated his guests and strangers alike but these narratives have been lost in modern-day understandings of the stranger and the "other," about the guest and the neighbor resulting in today's interpretation of the "other" as an outsider or even in some cases the conqueror. One of the most controversial and significant verses in the Qu'ran is centered on the Hijab, the Hajaba that means a curtain, or separation. You may ask why I include such a verse or even such a controversial one. And the reason that I might give you is that it is one of the most interesting stories about Prophet Mohammed and his relationship with guests, or what was called community or Ummah, who attended his marriage to Zaynab. The verse of the hijab "descended" in the bedroom of the wedded pair to protect their intimacy and exclude a

---

[6] Cited according to *The Holy Bible*, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford UP, 1962).

third person, in this case Anas Ibn Malik, one of the companions, but more importantly, Prophet Mohammed was impatient to be with his new wife and was unable to get rid of a small group of tactless guests who remained lost in conversation. The veil was to be God's answer to a community with boorish manners and lack of delicacy, which offended the Prophet Mohammed whose politeness bordered on timidity. Prophet Mohammed was unable to ask his guests to leave and the cause of this particular revelation of the hijab, the curtain, was to separate intimacy from the public and never admonish a guest in one's house even if they were unknown or disruptive. This event has been controversial because of the many interpretations that have caused women to become secluded due to strangers and their gaze upon them; however, Prophet Mohammed showed a separation between men and men that included women in this case. To ask a guest to leave is the most offensive act in Islam, and the Hadith that stresses community and courtyards as a manner of living and giving invokes a certain form of *Zakat* (alms-giving) that includes all communities regardless of religious background. For example, the sharing of food, of God's plenty, was a sacred duty to the Prophet. He memorably declared, "the food of one is enough for two, the food for two is enough for four, and the food for four enough for eight." In the prophet's house there was a stream of visitors to be greeted, fed, and talked with as he spread his revelation. Destitute refugees were housed in a shelter in one corner of the courtyard, while the poor could always be sure of receiving something at the door.

Furthermore, since Islam was emerging at a time when Jews and Christians had established certain identities and places that were sacred to their religions, Prophet Mohammed always included Jews and Christians amongst his friends. Indeed, while he lived in Mecca he might have had more in common with them than with his own pagan cousins, the Quraysh who persecuted him. The hospitality shown by the Christian emperor of Abyssinia had only served to intensify his regard for Christianity, while the mystical night flight made it seem natural that praying should be undertaken facing the direction of Jerusalem. Prophet Mohammed's exchanges with his neighbors also took on another

transformation, which most Muslims do not address, and that is the question of who is part of the Ummah? In other words, who is the neighbor?

At some points in the Qu'ran, the attempts to incorporate the imagery of strong kin relationships seems to overpower the barrier that otherwise divides the believers from the unbelievers. In other words, the insiders/outsiders; among all of the infidels, for instance, Abraham singles out his father for a special appeal for divine clemency. Thus, having accepted traditional kinship ties as a model for the ideological battle in the open community, at least for the time being, the Qu'ran sought to generalize rather than replace such a conception of social cohesiveness. At what was evidently a later stage, we have the story of Noah who rendered his last request to Allah before the flood as follows: "Forgive me, lord, and forgive my parents and every true believer who seeks refuge in my house. Forgive all the faithful, men and women, and hasten the destruction of the wrongdoers" (Sura 26). Here Noah's parents are mentioned for the first time and are to be forgiven not because they are believers but solely as his parents. They are those who join him not simply in an abstract bond of co-religiosity but in his own house. Here, the Qu'ran transcends the predetermination of familial linkages, but only by extending their domain. Now all believers, men and women, were one family. The nasab line was losing its monopoly and this included all families that were even divided. Here we see the Ummah as an inclusive community throughout Islamic history, rather than what we witness today as an exclusive community. Therefore the message of the Qu'ran and Prophet Mohammed's life is that no one is a neighbor in the sense of an outsider; rather, we are all related through the harmonizing message of Allah. But what has occurred today is that the call and meaning of the Ummah serves only Muslims and not other believers who are also included in the Qu'ran and in Mohammed's life.

What transpired is that the idea of the neighbor or outsider changed within the Muslim perspective, and the proclamations of the unity of the People of the One Book were transformed. The literal interpretation of texts altered Muslim relations with the "other." Within Islam the idea of

Duniya (worldly) and *Din (faith)* seems to be relevant in the context of how Muslims perceive the word of God as spiritual, but also as very much a material or even practical action within the worldly life. The balance of the material and spiritual has been lost to the simple demarcation of Others as non-spiritual, and, as one verse has been repeated publicly by mosque pulpits, conferences, and seminars, this implies a monolithic attitude toward Jews and Christians: "The Jews and Christians will not be pleased with you unless you follow their religion." To have this attitude stemming from a literal interpretation makes it impossible for dialogue, however, if Muslims accept that Jews and Christians similarly are satisfied with their own messages, and that to have similar feelings of living and sharing the essential elements gives meaning and light to one's life. This does not imply that in failing to satisfy fully the neighbor's belief one expresses only mistrust. Within Islam, Muslims can manifest deep and sincere respect toward human beings with whom they do not share this full spiritual communion. In other words, the mistrust and disinclination of Muslims towards Jews and Christians is one that creates a rift with other faiths. More importantly, the following verse should be recited from the pulpits of mosques:

> Certainly those who have believed, the Jews and Christians, and the Sabeans, Those who have believed in God and in the last day of judgment and who have Done good—they will have their reward from God. They will not be afraid and they will not grieve. (Surah 2:62)

The Muslim memory of how Jews and Christians are seen and imaged as the "other" within the trajectory of Islam has bestowed on that "other" the term of "unbeliever," although these two faiths have been stressed as viable and accepted brothers and sisters of Islam. Why do many Muslims see the Christian or, even now, the Jewish world as an "other" or a long-lost forgotten brother or sister?

Memories of Prophet Mohammed's neighbor, Bedouin strangers, and Abraham's hospitality have been lost to a new reading of the Jews and Christians as the colonizers, the outsiders, the ones who have built cemented tents and roadblocks for the brothers and sisters of Islam all

over the world. Today during war and conflict we have all moved further from the realities of neighborly love to neighborly power, constructing the barbarism that Allah/Adonai/Christ forbid to all of us; yet the three progenitors of Abraham have created a profound and damaging static image and landscape of otherness that even Rodin would have a tough time to chisel away. As the Palestinian poet Samih Al-Qasim writes about loss, misunderstanding, forgetting, and false promises that come from within, I too hope that Muslims try to reflect on their neighbors and follow the Islamic path of inclusion and sharing:

"Ashes"[7]
by Samih Al-Qasim

Don't you feel we have lost so much
That our "great" love is now only words,
That there's no more yearning, no urgency,
No real joy in our hearts, and when we meet
No wonder in our eyes?
Don't you feel our encounters are frozen,
Our kisses cold,
That we've lost the fervor of contact
And now merely exchange polite talk?
Or we forget to meet at all
And tell false excuses...
Don't you feel that our brief hurried letters
Lack feeling and spirit,
Contain no whispers or dreams of love,
That our responses are slow and burdened...
Don't you feel a world has tumbled down
And another arises
That our end will be bitter and frightening
Because the end did not fall on us suddenly
But came from within?

[7] Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., *An Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992), 352.