



# Representations *of* and *by* Muslims

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Full English text of my presentation at the session: Representações do Islão e dos Muçulmanos nos Media (Representations of Islam and Muslims in the media),  
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I would like to begin by indicating that my area of expertise is not the study of Islam, or Muslims. Nonetheless I have quite an intimate experience of Muslims. Islam, and Muslims have also been critical to my own formation, both as an intellectual and the deepening of my own faith practice. This is perhaps not surprising given that questions of Islam have been debated substantially in the past couple of decades and produced a rich literature in a number of fields. My core area of intellectual work has been the operation of citizenship in India and the regime of secularism that apparently structures the experience of Indian citizenship. Given that Hindu nationalism has been on the rise for decades now, I realised that Christians in India faced the same challenges as did the Muslims in India; they were both seen as undesirable elements in the Indian republic. As such alliances between these various groups made eminent sense and the belief that the best alliances are built on solid understanding gave me reason to the study various texts that I have referred to above.

There is also a personal aspect to this encounter. About a decade ago, a couple of friends and I began the Patna Collective. Among other things the Collective was interested in probing the issue of secularism in India. Was it possible that persons of faith rather than being barriers to secularism could in fact contribute to a secular society? Was religion necessarily an obstacle to the realisation of secularism? I was the lone Indian Christian among a number of Muslims in this group, and the conversations with them were critical to my experiences about Islam and Muslims. In the course of these interactions I realised that my learnings from Muslims allowed me to deepen my own faith practice as a Catholic allowing for a peculiar identification and affection for Muslims and Islam.

Finally, for some years now I have been interested in exploring the idea of the Islamicate. A neologism coined by Marshall Hodgson (1974), the term refers not to Islam or the religion itself, but to the socio-cultural complex where Muslims are dominant, or subjects of emulation. Exploring the Islamicate, I believe allows us to create a space where conversations between non-Muslims and Muslims can fruitfully take place. Where Islamophobia is replaced not by Islamophilia (just as problematic a stance) but where we can establish the contributions of Muslims, and see ourselves as partners with Muslims in the building of our futures.

To move on to the subject on which I have been asked to reflect; a mind that operates primarily in English reads the term ““Representações... dos Muçulmanos” in two ways. The first, is to read it as the intended representations *of* Muslims, and the second is representations *by* Muslims. I think it is important to deal with both these aspects for at least two reasons. We need to avoid a focus *on* Muslims from developing into a paternalist attitude, and from creating space for white saviours. What we need to

do is deepen a rights discourse and as such the agency of Muslims too needs to be taken into account when we discuss representations.

Having said that I have to confess that I do not see myself as able to provide an insight into representations of Muslims in the Portuguese media, nor even in the European media. I will leave this task to my more than capable colleague Joana Gorjao Henriques, who is a journalist of some acclaim. What I would like to do is to speak about international tendencies, and in particular, the tendency to speak of “Muslims” as if they were a single community. As I will point out later, and that Richard Alexandre the moderator of our debate has already alluded to, this is an idea that is gleefully taken up by some Muslims themselves. But that doesn’t make it right, and this tendency itself needs to be taken up critically. To retain to the point, I don’t think that we should necessarily see Sunnis, Shias, and the various groups within these more popular sects as members of one single community. Indeed some of the more radical members of some groups, do not even see others as Muslim! There is this situation in Pakistan for example – where Ahmadis are not seen as Muslim, Shia are seen by Sunni as not quite Muslim, and members of the Shia elite are routinely assassinated. This is, of course, not the situation only in Pakistan but can be seen all across locations marked by feuding Muslim groups. Take Iraq, for example, where Sunni and Shia are attacking each other down precisely because they are not seen as belonging to the same group. As Faisal Deviji has [recently pointed out](#), even the Hajj, the pilgrimage hailed as one of the five pillars constituting Islam as a single faith is experienced differently by different Muslims.

As an anthropologist I would turn to this difference in experience and practices to suggest that we are in the presence not of one Islam, but multiple Islams and we need to be ever conscious of this fact. Part of

the problem emerges from our intellectual traditions that seek to define and box practices and place them under a single label. Thus, we are told that the essence of Islam is contained in the five pillars. What does this make of groups that see themselves as Muslim, and pray not the namaz but other forms of meditation? Does this make them less Muslim? What of persons who do not actively confess Islam, but may constantly turn to the intercession of a divine who is Muslim? Our obsession with looking for well-defined practices is a part of the problem that we need to address to be able to see the diversity within Islam/s and not ourselves fall into the kind of fundamentalism that we accuse Muslim radicals. I would rather privilege the way in which groups and individuals frame their relationship, with the Prophet, or others who claim to be inspired by him to determine Muslim-ness. Once we do this we are, I believe, in a new world, that is more open to the diversity, dynamism and fluidity of the human experience.

Another reason for the creation of the idea of a single Muslim community is because of the nature of the secular liberal state. While the secular liberal state has more recently come into conflict with Islam, the fact is that the secular liberal state has been in conflict with organised religions ever since its emergence! This is one way to make sense of the offensive illustrations of Charlie Hebdo, that mocks the Catholicism as well as those of Islam. As Philip Hamburger (2004) has pointed out, the U.S. of America's separation of the Church from State was not the separation of just any church, but the Catholic Church. Reading Joskowicz' work (2013) we realise the extent to which anti-Catholicism was a part of French secular values. That this anti-Catholicism then morphed into anti-Judaism, and now Islamphobia tells us something of the nature of the secular liberal state and its persistent problem with religions and those who follow these practices. The reason for this violence, of course, is the much discussed desire of the liberal state to be the sole signifier of the people whose allegiance it claims.

Yet, as Talal Asad has pointed out in his analysis of French secularism, even as the secular state does not wish to deal with religious groups in the first place, it also defines religion, and what is religious and what not. It is this consolidation of actually existing diversity into a single church – along the nature of the Catholic Church, in itself perhaps a grand, but much emulated, aberration in terms of religious organisation, - that generates fundamentalist tendencies that look to a single practice and brooks no dissent. It is in this context that I noted with some concern, the existence of a ‘Comunidade Islâmica de Lisboa’. I know very little about this community, but from what I have heard about it, it does not include all the various ethnicities or sects that claim a relationship with Islam. I point to this community not to demonise it but to point to the fact that there is a particular kind of a legal and political arrangement that allows for such claims to singularity in the first place.

Thus, while many have rightly pointed to the racism that underlies the problematic representations of Muslims, it is not only racism at work, but also secular liberalism that is a part of the problem. Any resolution needs to recognise this fact and work towards the articulation of a post-liberal state. There is no time here to elaborate what such a state would look like, but I can say this much, that Such it is not necessarily, in fact most certainly not, *anti-liberal*, but transcends the problems of liberalism, its problematic binaries, and its desire for homogeneity.

Clearly what we need a new intellectual frame, one that is not obsessed with literary traditions alone, but is attentive to the diversity of practices around not a single Islam, but Islams. This intellectual

practice would not be gripped only with establishing origins and tracing genealogies, but with documenting dynamism in practices, fluidity .

Having made this argument I would now like to shift to the second part of my reflections, the representations by Muslims. Towards this end I would like to direct your attention to the video of the Egyptian pop-star Hisham Abbas's song '[Habibi Dah \(Nari Narain\)](#)'. What we see in operation here is Orientalism pure and simple. We have all the clichés about India, the colours and such like. What I found particularly interesting, however, is that India is (once again) represented as a Hindu country. What is erased in this representation is the fact that there are many other groups, other than Hindus that live in the country. Indeed, what is most distressing is that such iconic buildings like the TajMahal and other Mughal structures, are torn out of their Timurid, Persianate, and Muslim context to be placed within this orientalist fantasy of a Hindu India.

I am unaware of the faith tradition that Abbas belongs to. I assume from some of his natal names that he is Muslim. Watching this video I wondered what it says about how Arabs view Islam? As Arabic? Can there be an Islam in India that is unrecognisable to Arabs? What do videos like this do to Muslims in India who may not fulfil the standards of what Arabs think Islam is supposed to look like?

Leaving this provocative questions out there I would like to turn to a personal anecdote. Some decades ago I had the opportunity to [review the exhibition of the works](#) of the Pakistani artist BaniAbidi. In the course of my research for the review I encountered some of Abidi's [earlier work – problematizing the adoption by Pakistanis of an Arab history](#). I had, and continue to have a problem with her discomfort,

probably because I myself assert a European and Portuguese identity for myself and members of my community – Goans, especially Goan Catholic – even though so many of us have no physical or direct contact with Europe or Portugal. I believe it critical to allow people to choose their own history, and not be deterministic about identities. Nevertheless, I also recognise Abidi's point that this embrace of Arabic histories also results in local Islamic practices, and the people engaging in these practices, as being seen as not properly Muslim. The problem is, however, more complex. There exists an inner and external problem. If people are adopting Arabic histories we need to inquire if this is the result of inner class and caste discrimination that marks South Asian life. The external problem would be the condition where thanks to orientalist predilections of the Euro-Americans, and the dominant economies of some Arab countries, Arabs seem to be determining what Islam *really* is.

I would like to make just one small, rushed and haphazard reflection pertaining to Portugal before I conclude. I am quite troubled by the continued use of the term 'Reconquista' in Portugal and I believe it critical to address the question of representations of Islam(s) and Muslims in this country. It well established that there were times when Dom Afonso Henriques worked alongside Muslims in the course of his conquest, just as it is also know that resistance to the Franks was mounted not only by Muslims, but also by Christian Mozarabs. To speak of a Christian expulsion of Muslims is therefore problematic. We are speaking of perhaps a conflict between Arabs (a cultural, rather than racial group) and the Franks.

The very term Reconquista itself needs to be challenged, and here I think Portuguese historians and scholars could take a leaf out of Indian secular nationalist historiography which refuses to use the term "Muslim invasions" to refer to the conquests by the Turko-Afghans. As should be clear, emphasis is

placed on political conquest, rather than the suggestion of foreign aggression, and further one refers to ethnic identity, rather than religious identity. This latter shift allows for us to recognise that religion is not always the most important reasons for human action. Indeed, one could use this insight to inquire if the Reconquista was not used to secure legitimacy for the independence that Afonso Henriques desired for his county? Let us not forget that Henriques operated within the context of Christendom and framing his actions as that of a Christian crusading prince against non-Christians would have made eminent political and strategic sense.

Finally, isn't it odd that while much is made of the expulsion of the Jews from Portugal, and the suffering they endured, there is not a similar conversation about the expulsion of the Moors from this country? Is this silence because the new found European concern with Jews has a certain symbolic charge? By this I mean, that in a context where the Portuguese seem to suffer from a 'dubious whiteness' and are at pains to demonstrate, in various ways, their European-ness, merging with the larger northern European obsession with their former Jewish populations, assuages this dubious condition and produces the Portuguese as authentically European.

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(A recording of the entire session in which this presentation was made is available at this [link](#))