Ed Husain on the British Museum and "The True Face of Islam" (Part One)

by Hugh Fitzgerald

Ed Husain, a self-described former Muslim extremist who once headed the Quilliam Foundation, which is ostensibly dedicated to turning Muslims away from Jihadist activities, is ecstatic about the exhibit of artifacts of Islamic civilization at the British Museum that opened last November.

> *In Britain today, Islam in its original essence is not to be found in mosques or Muslim schools, but on the first floor of the British Museum. There, the Albukhary Islamic gallery, newly opened to the public, dazzles visitors and defies every certainty promoted by today's hardline Muslim activists. This spectacular exhibition of objects from across continents and centuries shows us a history of continuity of civilisations, coexistence of communities. It offers a compelling corrective*

> *to current popular notions of Islam as an idea and a civilisation.*

What “certainties” are those “promoted by today’s hardline Muslim activists”? That it is the duty of Muslims to follow the commandments, found in 109 verses in the Qur’an, to wage violent Jihad? That it is a Muslim’s duty to “strike terror” in the hearts of the Unbelievers? That Muslims should not take Christians and Jews as friends “for they are friends only with each other”? That non-Muslims are “the most vile of created beings”? How do exhibits of Iznik tiles, Persian miniatures, Qur’anic calligraphy, Islamic coinage, illustrations of epic romances, oriental carpets, astrolabes, do anything to undermine those Qur’anic commands to wage Jihad against Infidels, to strike terror in their hearts, to avoid being friends with Christians and Jews, and to despise the “vile” Unbelievers? None of these Qur’anic verses are the least bit softened by that display of astrolabes, carpets, ceramics, and Arabic calligraphy.

> *Too often, we assume that Islam’s arrival on the world stage involved some violent break with the past that brought forth a new Muslim civilisation. The artifacts, coins, pottery, and tiles on display here from the British Museum’s own collection from the 7th century onwards reveal a different and more accurate history. The Prophet Mohammed was born in 570 in a world dominated by the Sassanians and Byzantines. He and his followers broadly followed the art and architecture, empire and power structures, of this pre-existing world. The earliest Islamic coins were copies of the gold and silver drachms used by the Sassanians. Even the name of the Muslim gold coin, the dinar, was derived from the Roman denarius.*

Did not the earliest Muslims themselves believe that Islam represented a complete break with the past, that pre-Islamic past that Muslims dismissed as the Jahiliyya, or Time of

Ignorance? Nothing that came before Islam was of worth. The lightning conquests of the earliest Muslims within the span of a century tore up the political structures of the Middle East and North Africa. The Muslim warriors did not follow the "empire [sic] and power structures" of the pre-Islamic world, but rather smashed those political entities to bits and incorporated the conquered territories into the earliest caliphates. Islam was both a faith and a politics, and in both, it broke with the past.

In what way did Muhammad and his followers "broadly follow the art and architecture" of what came before? As for art, the Muslim prohibition on statuary and paintings of living creatures, which were central to both the art of classical antiquity and to Christian art, led to other forms of artistic expression being emphasized in the Islamic lands. These were chiefly Qur'anic calligraphy, ceramics (also with Arabic calligraphy), carpets with elaborate geometric designs, and mosque architecture. There was little connection with the previous art of the pre-Islamic East or of the West. In other words, far from "broadly following" the art of their predecessors, Muslims were prohibited from engaging in the same kind of sculpture and paintings because the depiction of living creatures was forbidden. In mosque architecture, the Muslims did borrow the architectural element known as the squinch, either from Sassanian Persia or from the Byzantines – scholars still argue over which – in building the domes for their mosques, but there are no other obvious architectural borrowings by mosque architects from pre-Islamic buildings.

> *Euclid's Elements taught Muslims the rules for the monumental mosques they built with their domes and perfect proportions. Gilded flasks from Syria from as late as the mid-1200s show designs with an eagle and dancer, popular motifs in the arts of the Mediterranean at the time. The Prophet's shirt was 'Made in Rome.'Medieval Muslim philosophers such as Averroes referred to Aristotle as 'al-Shaikh al-Yunani', the Greek*

> *sheikh. Islam did not kill the Greco-Roman past, but revived it. That spirit radiates through the British Museum's exhibition.*

The use by Muslim artists of an eagle-and-dancer motif found throughout the Mediterranean does not amount to a significant borrowing by them from non-Muslims. Given that both the "dancer" and the "eagle" were living creatures whose images would be forbidden in Islam, it is possible – unless both figures were not real images of either an eagle or a dancer but stylized abstractions – that the "gilded flask" on display was the product of a Christian, not a Muslim, artisan in Syria. The Prophet's shirt was "Made in Rome" – does that mean Muslims imported their clothes from the Christian West? And if it were true, so what? No one has claimed that there was no trade between the Islamic world and the West.

Averroes wrote a lengthy commentary on Aristotle, but that does not amount to "reviving…the Greco-Roman past." Jewish and Christian translators, in Cordoba and Baghdad, did almost all of the translations of Greek and Latin works into Arabic. Should those translations be considered an achievement of Islam? Were they not, rather, the achievements of non-Muslim translators?

It was the Humanists of Europe who revived interest in the civilization of classical antiquity which, in turn, gave rise to the Renaissance. And that revival of European interest in classical antiquity does owe something to the Muslims, but not in the way Ed Husain thinks. The conquest of the Byzantine Empire by the Turks – first the Seljuks, and then the Osmanlis – led many Greek scholars to flee to Italy, bringing with them many Greek (and Latin) manuscripts. In this purely negative way, the Muslims contributed to the West's Revival of Learning, and thus to the Renaissance.

> *Coexistence was the hallmark of Muslim civilisations, from*

> *China to the Philippines, from Malaysia to Africa and the Middle East. It was not isolated to Muslim Spain. Jewish, Christian and Muslim bread stamps, a practice from Roman times, thrived in Muslim-controlled Egypt. The gallery has a sample of remarkable stone stamps from between 1000 and 1200. Paintings and tile works, engravings on flasks, works by Sephardi Jews and Armenian Christians, but also perfume carriers from 11th-century Ismailis and 19th-century paintings from Bahais, show the diversity that thrived within Islamic civilisations.*

Not coexistence, but brutal conquest, was the "hallmark of Muslim civilisations." Ed Husain carefully refrains from mentioning the conquest of Hindu India, by far the most significant Muslim conquest beyond the Middle East. It's understandable. That Muslim subjugation of the Hindus extended over many centuries, and caused the deaths, over several centuries of Mughal rule, of between 70-80 million Hindus, and resulted in the conversion of tens of millions more who, by becoming Muslims, could escape the difficult conditions imposed on dhimmis. That hardly qualifies as "coexistence." Husain says such "coexistence" was "not isolated in Muslim Spain." It turns out that modern scholars have definitely put paid to the myth of that famed "convivencia" – coexistence – in Islamic Spain. Ed Husain might take time to read Dario Fernandez-Morera's *The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise*. Muslims in Spain massacred Christians and Jews. Sometimes those doing the massacring were soldiers, and sometimes they were ordinary Muslims, their rage sparked by some supposed affront to Muslims, causing them to go on a killing spree against Unbelievers. In 807, 700 Christian notables – civilians – were killed by a Muslim army in Toledo. In 1066 in Granada, the Muslims turned on their Jewish neighbors overnight, killing 4,000, or almost all of those living in the city, because the Muslim emir had appointed a Jew, Joseph ibn Naghrela, to be his vizier. A Jew helping an emir to govern

Muslims? That was intolerable. No one ordered the Muslims to kill the Jews; they were just doing what came naturally. Jews were also the victims of Christians. In 1391, a Christian mob in Seville killed 4,000 Jews, and in the same year another Christian mob killed 2,000 Jews in Cordoba. These were only the big massacres; there were many other smaller atrocities committed, by Muslims against Jews and Christians, and by Christians against Jews and Muslims. None, apparently, were committed by Jews, who were always on the receiving end. Some convivencia.

Ed Husain's mention of the inclusion, in the British Museum exhibit of Islamic art, of artworks by Sephardi Jews, Armenian Christians, and Bahais – none of whom were Muslim, and all of whom were persecuted, and even murdered, by Muslims – is at least bizarre. These minorities created as they lived, defying the unfavorable conditions created by their Muslim overlords. Their achievements were attained in spite of, not because of, Muslim rule.

> *A powerful corrective awaits schools and teachers from across the country who visit the museum. Today's insular Muslim community leaders may reject science and Darwin, oppose music as a tool of the devil, and cover their women for fear of love and lust. But from the 700s onwards, scientists and thinkers built on pre-Islamic advances in the study of astronomy and other sciences. Astrolabes, the name derived from the Greek astro labos or 'star-taker', were the computers of the time. A magnificent 13th-century astrolabe reminds us of the patronage of innovation in science and free thought by medieval Muslim rulers.*

It's not "today's insular Muslim community leaders" who "reject science and Darwin." It's the Islamic clerics, and many ordinary Believers, too, who insist that "evolution" is merely a "theory." Muslim views on evolution vary, but those who refuse to accept evolution are hardly limited to a handful

of “insular community leaders.” For many Muslims, “evolution” contradicts Qur’anic creationism and cannot be accepted. As for “music as a tool of the devil,” it is not “music” in general, not, for example, a cappella singing, but musical instruments that are haram, having been condemned by Mohammed in a hadith that Ed Husain fails to mention. He ought to have explained that the ban on “musical instruments” is not something that arose with “today’s insular Muslim community leaders,” but began 1,400 years ago.

The question of Muslims who “reject science” brings up two matters. First, many Muslims believe that the Qur’an contains all of knowledge, and that the advances of modern science can be located and teased out, by careful study, of the verses in the Qur’an. An absurdity, but tens of millions of Muslims believe that absurdity. Second, Islam itself encourages the habit of mental submission, and discourages the habit of free and skeptical inquiry, so necessary for the advancement of science. There seems to be a fear that once Muslims start exhibiting doubts in other areas, they might begin to question aspects of Islam itself. Two Western historians of science have studied at great length why science continued to evolve in the West but not in the Islamic world. Ed Husain might profitably consult Stanley Jaki and Professor Toby Huff to discover what it was about Islam that discouraged the advancement of science.

In mentioning the astrolabe, Husain obliquely suggests that it was invented by Muslims: “A magnificent 13th-century astrolabe reminds us of the patronage of innovation in science and free thought by medieval Muslim rulers.” But the first astrolabe dates back to Hellenistic civilization, between 220 and 150 B.C., that is at least eight hundred years before Islam even appeared.

> *Musical instruments from various Muslim civilisations are evidence that music, with its diverse regional styles, was significant in religious and secular settings. Theatre, dance*

> *performances, divine remembrance or dhikr using music were all popular in mosques, town squares and at Sufi gatherings. Yet Islamic State, the Taleban, and other hardliners ban music today.*

The mere fact that musical instruments from "various Muslim" peoples are on display does not tell us how "significant" instrumental music was "in religious and secular settings" among Muslims. We simply have no way of knowing how often such music was played, or where it was favored, and where deplored. We do know, however, that most church services have a musical component, and that there has never been an equivalent "mosque music" since the beginning of Islam.

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