Era of Responsibility

The Meaning of Brotherhood
Reshmaan Hussam

The Indescribable Moments of Life
Daniel Jou

The Road Ahead?
Thoughts on the Economic Crisis
Taha Abdul-Basser

Global Responsibility
Sadia Ahsanuddin

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In the name of God (Allah), the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful

Dear Reader,

Barack Obama heralded in a “new era of responsibility” as he was sworn in as the nation’s 44th president. He called on Americans to make difficult choices, take action, and be accountable. But what does this mean for a diverse society like America? And what is so novel about this notion of responsibility? Why do we now find it so compelling?

From our youngest years, the importance of being responsible was ingrained in us and was emphasized: from the young child who was taught responsibility through household chores, to the employee whose livelihood depended on the responsible completion of a specific set of duties. Commonly, the gravity of being responsible is judged by the consequences of failing to be so. On an individual level, these consequences are often material in nature. An allowance might be withheld from the child who failed to complete his or her chores, for example, and a paycheck from the employee who was negligent in accomplishing his.

When one considers the consequences of responsible action, or lack thereof, on those surrounding an individual, the imperative to be responsible gains fresh meaning. Rather than working for a monetary reward, a child completes his chores in order to help the family and lighten the burden on his parents or siblings. A responsible employee now does his job so that he is not the weak link that prevents the entire company from profiting and all of his colleagues from earning a livelihood. Responsibility is thus underscored by the interconnectedness of people’s decisions and the effect that a single person’s actions have on others.

The question becomes, then, what exactly is a person responsible for? It is not enough to carry out only the specific duties that define one’s role as a student or an employee or any of the many other roles we fill. Instead, the understanding of interconnectedness must motivate us to greater action. It is an underlying humanity that ties us all together and compels us to act when we observe some need in the world, even though the need might not be our own. Often times, we might not even be in a “reasonable” position to address these needs.

The Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace, once said, “The believers as regards their being merciful among themselves and showing love among themselves and being kind, resemble one body, so that, if any part of the body is not well then the whole body shares the sleeplessness and fever with it.” We are confronted, on the one hand, with a world in which there is increasing poverty and economic inequality, rampant disease, growing environmental challenges, and widespread human rights abuses. On the other hand, we have the human capability to create positive change. Will we consider responsibility only something we owe ourselves for individual benefit? Or will we adopt the view of humanity as a single interconnected body, making it our responsibility to respond to the challenges that threaten any part of this body and that thereby affect us all?

We take on the theme of Responsibility in this issue of Ascent. With works such as Daniel Jou’s essay on purpose, free will, and their relationship to responsibility, and Reshmaan Hussam’s article on Latino Muslims and the importance of brotherhood, we present a view of an interconnected humanity that motivates response. We hope you will enjoy reading, and be inspired to think, reflect, and act.

Sincerely,
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When you have rootlessness, despair, and poverty in one part, it creates a much less stable and peaceful planet overall. If we could guarantee that every boy and girl in the world could go to a school with a good teacher and have a library with books, we would all be better off financially and in terms of global stability.”

JOHN WOOD in Parade magazine.

“I believe that now we have a profound responsibility to open the gates of opportunity for all the world’s people so that they can become stakeholders in the kind of society we would like to build at large in the world and at home.”

AL GORE

“I don’t feel comfortable making empty music. I will never do a record without some sense of responsibility.”

TALIB KWELI

“While a person was going along the path he found a thorny branch upon it. He pushed it to a side and God approved (this action) of his and (as a mark of appreciation) granted him pardon.”

PROPHET MUHAMMAD, peace and blessings upon him

“We must strive to become good ancestors.”

RALPH NADER

“A human being is born in this world fully equipped not only to take care of him or herself, but also endowed with the ability to enlarge the well being of others.”

MUHAMMAD YUNUS
Earlier this year, the media caught drift of news that the Indonesian Navy had found and rescued some two hundred boatmen cast off at sea in a rickety boat. Those rescued had to be treated in a hospital for dehydration. The survivors said that there were originally 1,200 of them in nine boats; the whereabouts of the others was not known at the time. Upon landing in Thailand, one survivor reported that they were detained, beaten, and then set out to sea by Thai officials without fuel for the engines in their boats. It was nothing short of a death sentence; being subjected to nature’s elements in the open ocean with little to no resources would likely result in nothing else. And yet, this is not an isolated instance of such treatment for a migration fleet that had set out eastward from Burma. Understanding the situation of these migrants, their reasons for flight, and the reason for their mistreatment in the countries to which they fled requires a detailed review of the history leading up to the present-day circumstances.

The vast majority of the migrants who underwent the abuse described above were Rohingya. The Rohingya are Muslims who claim to be natives of the province of Arakan in present-day Burma, also known as Myanmar, the largest Southeast Asian country on the mainland. Arakan is a mountainous north-western state that shares a border with Bangladesh; it is the only Muslim-majority province in the nation. It has been home to a diverse number of traditions and has a complicated history. Starting in the 7th century, it is said that Moorish and Arab travelers—sea-farers, merchants, and occasionally holy-men—began settling in Arakan. Mughal influence simultaneously crept over the region. Soon, Arakan was inhabited by what came to be a “poly-ethnic and poly-religious” society. Up until the unification of Burma in the 18th century, the region was ruled by independent kingdoms. However, Burma was not impervious to the threat of British imperialism and fell to the British crown later that century.

During British rule in Burma, there was a population influx from China, India and the Chittagong region of Bangladesh. Hindus and Muslims alike were among the migrants. Since Burma was being administered as a province of British India, the British instituted Hindi as the language of the Burmese post office. Hindi thus replaced Burmese, despite there being only a small percentage of Hindi-speaking migrants in the country. In addition to the imposed change of language, moneylenders of Indian origin, belonging to the chettyar caste, provided a source of great resentment for poor rural farmers in Burma. This rising resentment, compounded with a general misunderstanding of cultural norms, eventually mounted to bloodshed. Violent anti-Indian communal riots erupted in the early 1930s and again in 1938. During this time, several hundreds of Indians were killed and the appetite for nationalism was whet. Buddhist monks became vanguards of the independence movement. It wasn’t until 1948, however, after World War II, that the British were expelled. The country was democratic for two decades before a military socialist regime took power in 1962.

Today, a military junta and its State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) govern Burma. The policies of this administration have resulted in much negative media attention for the Burmese regime. Just this past year, the International Labor Organization accused the military of Burma of subjugating over 800,000 of its inhabitants into forced labor. Perhaps the Burmese government is most notorious for its detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung San, a hero of the Burmese national liberation movement and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate of 1991. Aung San Suu Kyi heads the political party National League for Democracy, and has been under strict house arrest for the past thirteen years for political reasons. Despite these and similar infringements on citizens’ freedoms, the junta declared a constitutional referendum in
May 2008 whereby they promised that Burma would become a “discipline-flourishing democracy.” Yet this promise is far from being realized.

The Rohingya in particular have suffered numerous human rights violations at the hands of the junta and the SPDC. Their movement is restricted: the Rohingya cannot travel from one town to another without permits, which are difficult to obtain. Furthermore, they are completely banned from visiting Rangoon, the capital of Burma, and other major cities. This restriction prevents Rohingya from pursuing education in universities that are located in the capital. Unfortunately, this is merely the tip of the iceberg.

The Rohingya have also been forced into resettlement. According to the international human rights group Minorities at Risk, there have been a significant number of forced and voluntary migrations of Rohingya internally and to neighboring Bangladesh over the past three decades, as Rohingya are accused of being migrants from Bangladesh. In 1977, the military government sought to root out its illegal immigrants and at least 200,000 people fled to Bangladesh as refugees. Further, in 1981 and 1982, the government instituted the Citizenship Law, a statute that granted citizenship only to those who could prove that they and their families had lived in the country since 1824. To prove such a thing is difficult, however. The problem is partly that the ethnic group of Rohingya that is native to Burma is simply not recognized as an extant entity, and those who are native Rohingya have their identities conflated with people who had immigrated during the British colonial era. The Citizenship Law has become a means and method of ethnic discrimination and persecution. It is unrealistic that such a large number of Rohingya could have suddenly occupied an area of land as vast as Arakan, enough to become a majority, without having been native to the land. Nevertheless, forced emigrations continued. George Orwell, the author of *1984*, served in Burma in 1920 as a British colonial police officer. Orwell offered a remarkable insight to the current situation when he said, “In Burma, the past belongs to those who control the present.” Not much seems to have changed.

During 1991-1992, another wave of refugees crossed into Bangladesh, and in April of 1992, a bilateral agreement between Burma and Bangladesh declared that they would be repatriated to Arakan. Seventeen years later, many of these refugees are still awaiting their repatriation. Those who have remained in Arakan...
have complained of forced seizure of their land and property. From 1998-2000, the Burmese government evicted thousands of Rohingya villagers from their lands so that their rice fields could be turned into poppy plantations. Insult upon insult, the land that belonged to the Rohingya in Bangladeshi refugee camps was given to the Burmese. There have also been instances of rape, slave labor used to build Buddhist shrines, arrests, torture, and killing of Rohingya political leaders. Mosques are not allowed to be repaired or renovated. Rohingya were stripped of their nationality cards and now cannot marry freely without permission, which is expensive to obtain. This denial of citizenship renders these people stateless, forcing upon them refugee status. As people are forced to flee their country and leave their rights behind, violence within Burma against Rohingya also continues. In 2001, at least 1000 people died in major anti-Muslims riots in Arakan.

Why is there so much repression? The answer centers on the identity of the Rohingya and their popularized history. When the British left Burma, they left behind a strong sense of nationalism and culture among the Burmese people, particularly in the Buddhist population, whose monks had led the movement to independence. The Muslims came to be associated with the immigrants that had come with the British: their religion came to be regarded as a foreign influence, contrasted with the “native” Buddhism. In addition to this, the Rohingya were implicated in a separatist movement that attempted to join the state of Arakan to East Pakistan, which would have split the newly formed nation. Perhaps Burmese nationalists continue to take revenge for this, driven by mistrust of the Rohingya for these past deeds.

Today, being Burmese is almost synonymous with being Buddhist. This is problematic for the minorities, who have come to be viewed as emigrants to the land. The problem of identity develops into a racial problem as well. Though multiple ethnicities had existed in Burma for centuries as organic products of diffusion and population flux, now, one ethnicity is privileged over others. This is best evidenced in a letter written by the Consul General Ye Mint Aung of Burma to fellow diplomats in early February 2009. In this letter, Mint not only affirms that he believes that Rohingya are not “Myanmar people” or an ethnic group of Myanmar, and that this fact is obvious to the plain eye: the complexion of the Myanmese is “fair and soft,” and good-looking, in stark contrast to the Rohingya who are “dark brown,” and “ugly as ogres.”

When all these factors are considered together, it may explain why Rohingya flee abroad. They say that only death awaits them back home. Sometimes, they are lucky in their attempts at leaving. They turn to brokers who can arrange boats for them to sail off on, often from Bangladesh, to what they hope might be a better situation in countries such as Malaysia and Thailand. Malaysia had offered refuge to around 10,000 to 20,000 Rohingya at one time, but this policy has changed. In Thailand, Rohingya refugees face a worse fate—in one instance, reports indicate that around 410 refugees were taken out to sea by the Thai Navy and forced to board an open barge with few provisions and little drinking water. In order to threaten the Rohingya into boarding the barge, reports indicate that four people were thrown overboard with their hands and feet tied. Thailand claims the refugees are economic migrants, and the Prime Minister admits that the Rohingya were turned away from Thai shores. Thai residents told a local newspaper it could be because they might provide fodder for political instability. But does such speculation warrant a death sentence?

Racism and discrimination based on one’s religion are social facts that cannot be ignored. Though history might be bitter, there is no justification for such abominable prejudice: they function only to divide people and destroy societies. It is obvious that such policies are not constructive in the long run. Thailand was strongly reprimanded at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit and human rights groups have been increasingly critical of its policies. The Rohingya should be accepted back into Burma and protected from further persecution. They have lives and a history in Arakan, and have as great a right to fundamental human freedoms as the next Burmese. And even if there truly is a question about the legitimacy of Rohingya roots in Arakan, it is not acceptable to torture and persecute the living for something that is generations out of their control. Until Burmese officials realize this, it seems that hundreds of Rohingya will continue to submit themselves to treacherous journeys across vast expanses of sea, grasping at an apparently unlikely hope at life.

Notes
4. Ibid.
5. http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1729818,00.html
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. http://www.burmadebate.org/archives/winter00inbrief.html
The recent economic turmoil has been a wakeup call on several levels. It has allowed both the common man and the political machinery to (try to) recognize the dysfunctional and disingenuous elements that are widespread within our financial system. More importantly, the crisis is providing some impetus to correct operations, oversight, and expectations—both from the top down and from the bottom up.

In at least one way, this frustrating time has been a Godsend, in that it urges us to investigate other systems and norms of our society. It is now incumbent upon us to reexamine powerful systems at play so that we may know ahead of time whether the modus operandi of a given structure is putting us at unnecessary risk, just as major players in the financial sector have done.

The norm that this article addresses—that we must confront—is anti-Islamic religious and racial discrimination. While this norm will not sink the economy or impact most of us materially, it threatens something precious: the standards of equality and freedom that make America great. There has been a shift in this country towards anti-Islamic sentiment that is at once quiet and loud. It is loud by virtue of its inescapable breadth: the message is all over TV, politics, and academia. Anti-Islamic sentiment is simultaneously quiet because it eludes honest confrontation and, despite the familiar language being used to demonize Muslims, this sentiment escapes being called by its true name: racism.

This article focuses on racism in television media, so let’s begin with the loudest voices on TV. Whether they intend to or not, TV personalities such as Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter, and Bill O’Reilly, amongst many others, often discuss Islamic History and Islamic Law through the filter of an Orientalist discourse that is highly disingenuous. Orientalism, as it pertains to this discussion, refers to the pervasive understanding that Islam and the lands where Islam is a majority religion have (and have always had) a tendency towards barbarism; also, it is understood that violent acts perpetrated by Muslims are of a different kind entirely than violent acts perpetrated by citizens and leaders of developed countries. So Bush I and II were, by all accounts, “dealing with a difficult set of circumstances,” and the fact that they caused the nutrition-related deaths of literally millions of children through savage embargoes and imbecile military campaigns, respectively, is largely ignored. Charlemagne, the “father of Europe,” executed 4,500 people in a single day for heresy (to say nothing of his other violent tendencies), and yet he is remembered primarily as a model governor, soldier, and Christian. Naturally, violent people and historical figures of any religion or race deserve scrutiny for their actions. But it is certainly due to the subtle racism of intellectual negligence that Western violence is allowed to be filtered through the story-telling language of political expediency while Islamic history (and the current politics of majority-Muslim nations) is roughly assumed in mainstream dialogue to be a collection of rash, calculated exploits and berserker military campaigns.

“Blacksoul,” as I will call him (that Violent Arab you have seen in television drama a million times), is the new Blackface.
Be Very Afraid

On November 14, 2006, Glenn Beck asked newly elected Muslim Congressman Keith Ellison to, “prove to me that you are not working with our enemies,” on his CNN show. The statement itself is obviously grossly presumptive and McCarthyesque, in addition to being racist. But more importantly, the man wasn’t immediately condemned and fired—the value of Beck’s shock factor somehow outweighs the seriousness of his racism in the eyes of CNN bigwigs.

O’Reilly, Coulter, and Beck have lowered the bar for inappropriate accusations, often by preceding them with: “It may not be PC, but someone’s got to ask [something racist or personally insulting].” And “liberals,” portrayed as a monolithic bloc, are denigrated for being “soft on terrorism,” which is code for “not presumptuous about the possible guilt of fellow citizens based on creed or skin color.”

During my time in Cambridge, Ann Coulter asked a Harvard crowd, “After Manhattan is nuked by Muslims, then should we give an extra look to swarthy Middle Eastern men?” This type of repugnant speech seemingly precipitated a lucrative career filled with television appearances and book deals. This raises the question: Which is worse—that the woman is racist or that the television networks cannot tell?

Coulter plays statistical games. For example, she will rattle off violence perpetrated by Muslims or Arabs without normalizing it to the background of non-Muslim violence of the same kind; thus, Coulter will emphasize Muslim violence to her audience simply by virtue of the length of time she spends on a given list of violent acts. And Ann Coulter can speak uninterrupted for a very, very long time. Or she will choose a type of violence where the sample size is extremely small by statistical standards, airline hijackings for example, and say that overrepresentation of Muslim violence in this arena justifies special racial profiling.

We Shall Overcome

For some time, American outcry against this type of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim racism has largely been a footnote to the on-air discussion. Yet the affront to dignity entailed by this treatment is serious. And this kind of racism is not confined to TV-news talk shows. “Blacksoul,” as I will call him (that Violent Arab you have seen in television drama a million times), is the new Blackface. Let me reiterate, because it’s a serious accusation: a form of overtly racist Blackface is still in popular use, even now in 2009. John Strausbaugh, American author and culture commentator, characterized the original Blackface in general terms as: “displaying Blackness for the enjoyment and edification of white viewers,” which is exactly what has been happening to Arab-ness, Muslim-ness, and Brownness across a range of popular and well-received television shows from “Lost” to “Real Time with Bill Maher.” These are not exuberant cartoons being foisted on you, so it may be difficult to initially verify this statement from your personal experience. But look and you will see that the character is pervasive. Watch “24” on FOX, where Muslims and Black Africans are demonized and essentialized in the vilest way. Watch episode 7 of “Lie to Me” on FOX, where Arab-Muslim diplomats are given the Black soul treatment: they are at once cunning and daft, obvious and inscrutable, and culturally inaccessible yet easily subverted through an ever-present cultural Achilles heel. Watch the new show “Sit down, Shut up,” in which the premier episode declares one of the main characters “The Scary Muslim.” He is brown. He speaks in unintelligible guttural tones that include threatening English words (yet are subtitled with a harmless English “translation”). He occupies the only menial position in the show. This latter example is not even live-action, dramatic “Blacksoul.” It is literally Blackface of a new, anti-Islamic flavor. Taddei racism lives. And not only does it live, it flourishes.

Please Stop Stepping On Brown People

For a time, the rhetoric of the valiant black civil rights struggle seemed inaccessible and inappropriate for the plight of American Muslims. After all, our struggle is against talking heads and posturing politicians whereas the civil rights struggle, as the name makes clear, sought to guarantee essential liberties. But it has come to the point where our struggle has become a patriotic civil rights one and a transnational human rights one, especially given the incredible reach and impact of players in the media arena in which we now struggle for a basic commitment to common sense and common decency.

The threat is real for Muslims. The undercurrent of racism in this country has meant and will continue to mean physical and financial harm. It is a fact that in many cities and towns, Muslim civic engagement and community involvement are made impossible by bigotry. For Muslim American youth, the result of the racism-laden media is a culture-crisis: American television news personalities and popular TV programs tell them a story about American-Muslim culture that is demeaning, not to mention wholly inaccurate. As for the general American public, racism in the media skews opinions about (and treatment of) Muslims in a way that we have seen before in this nation’s history with media attitudes towards black culture and concurrent pervasive anti-black racism. American-Muslims have news for the news-cycle and those who propagate it: We are intelligent and we are capable of intelligent discourse. We cherish our American History, including the struggle against discrimination, even while you do not—and there are those among us who will fight with our pens and our advertising dollars until you recognize and remedy the racist overtones infecting your treatment of American-Muslim culture, domestic policy agendas, and foreign policy postures.

Notes

1. Why say “Racism”? I will use the term “Racism” even though what I focus on is more accurately termed “Religious Discrimination.” I use the word “racism” for two main reasons. Firstly, those writers and pundits who try to mask their project of discrimination as a defensive measure (e.g., as a necessary preemptive measure within a broader culture war) very often confuse and muddle their racial discrimination and their religious discrimination on any given issue. Thus, it has become difficult to analyze their perspectives without talking about both kinds of discrimination (this muddling is also characteristic of writers, performers, politicians, and pundits who are negligent or ignorant rather than malicious).

Secondly, “Racism” is a strong word. As long as both “racism” and “religious discrimination” apply to the types of actions cited here, I use “racism” to describe the pair. “Racism” engenders high-profile, serious scrutiny that “Religious Discrimination,” for some reason, does not. In lengthier responses to the issue, once there is momentum behind this conversation, it will be easier to tease apart racial discrimination as it applies to Africans, Middle Easterners, Southeast Asians, and Black Americans (who happen to be Muslim) from religious discrimination as it applies to Muslims of any race in the US and the world over.
The Road Ahead?
One Islamic Financial Ethicist’s Reflections
on the Current Economic Crisis
and Possible Recovery Strategies

by TAHA ABDUL-BASSER
HARVARD UNIVERSITY, PHD CANDIDATE
HARVARD MUSLIM CHAPLAIN
The following is a combination of two lectures given by Taha Abdul-Basser, one at Wesleyan University on February 16, 2009 and the other at the University of Pennsylvania on March 18, 2009.

In the following remarks, I hope to touch upon several pressing issues in the field of Islamic finance (also known as “shari’a compliant finance” or “halal [i.e. permissible] finance”). Specifically, I will make some observations about contacts between Islamic finance and the current financial crisis. In the process, I hope to also have something to say about an ongoing debate about issues of coherence, legitimacy, and applicability in contemporary Islamic financial ethics.

In a recent CNN commentary, Joseph Stiglitz—the Noble-winning Columbia University economist—made intensely critical statements about the financial system. In the CNN commentary entitled “How to Prevent the Next Wall Street Crisis,” Professor Stiglitz frankly stated: “…at the center of blame must be the financial institutions themselves. They—and even more their executives—had incentives that were not well aligned with the needs of our economy and our society.” Elsewhere, he has been intensely critical of the performance of the management of the United States’ largest financial institutions, claiming that they failed to allocate capital and manage risk, which are ostensibly their primary responsibilities. Such sentiments have been echoed by noted commentators other than Professor Stiglitz. Public discontent with the perceived mismanagement of the bailout funds, by CEOs and other C-suite level leaders of entities such as Citigroup and AIG, suggest that the American public itself may be prepared to consider deep changes to the American financial system. Therefore, it is interesting to consider the following questions: how should we as a society respond to the financial crisis? What changes need to be made to our financial system in order to mitigate the harm resulting from the crisis? What are the principles that should govern our reform of the dominant financial system so that such crises are less likely to occur again? How does one “do” modern finance such that it conforms to Islamic precepts, principles and ethical norms?

My comments will not be those of an economist and finance academic, as I am neither (although I work with them through my work as an Islamic financial ethicist). Rather, I am a student of traditional Islamic ethics and law, known as fiqh, an Arabic term that literally means “deep understanding” in the Islamic intellectual tradition. The system of ethics that consists of the ethical values associated with human actions is known as the shari’a, Islamic sacred ethics. Islamic ethics, like other systems of ethics is concerned with what is right and wrong, what human beings ought and ought not to do. Like other systems of religious ethics—particularly the traditional ethics of its fellow Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity—Islamic ethics result from scriptural sources. Specifically, Islamic ethicists rely primarily on two revealed sources: 1) the Qur’an, the book that Muslims recognize as verbo Dei, a communication from God himself to humankind, and 2) the authoritative example of the Prophet Muhammad (upon him be peace), whom Muslims recognize as the last of prophets, a line beginning with the father of humanity, Adam, and including individuals known to the Judeo-Christian traditions, such as Abraham, Moses and Jesus. It should be noted that Islamic ethics relies on various secondary sources as well.

What is worth emphasizing here is that although normative Islamic ethics is characterized by the deontological tendencies that one would expect (i.e. things are right or wrong because God has made them so), most traditional Muslim ethicists recognize what we might call a consequentialist or teleological bias to Islamic ethics as well (i.e. actions are right of wrong because of the consequences associated with them). The apparent tension between these two principles is a matter that has been worked out by theologians and ethicists over the centuries. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, one of the ways in which this apparent tension has been addressed is through the elaboration and application of ethico-legal maxims. In Islamic ethics, maxims are pithy expressions that capture principles that apply to broad areas, if not all, of the law. It should be noted that maxims make it easier for us to discuss Islamic ethics in a comparative ethical context.

I make mention of some of the philosophical bases of Islamic ethics and law above because in the remainder of this talk, I will discuss proposed strategies for recovery in light of Islamic ethical and legal considerations. Islamic finance is a movement experiencing an ever-increasing groundswell of support across the world, across various communities and networks, in support of its development and expansion...

Islamic finance is a movement experiencing an ever-increasing groundswell of support across the world, across various communities and networks, in support of its development and expansion...
subprime loans. There’s no doubt that they have weathered this better than the conventional banks.” With this understanding, I will ask what has protected *shari’a* compliant financial institutions from the same degree, at least, of harm that has been experienced by conventional banks and what is it then that can be adopted in the US from the practice of Islamic finance as part of a sound response to the US and global financial crisis.

Let’s first review the recommendations of the experts. The current plan for reform of the US financial sector that has been described by US Treasury Secretary, Tim Geitner, in essence consists of 1) a review of the banks’ books with the intention of revealing what troubled assets they actually have and 2) a creation of a public-private investment fund, a so-called “bad bank”, that will gather these troubled or toxic assets (non-performing loans, CDS, bonds secured with mortgage and credit card debt and the like) and facilitate the creation of a market for them, thereby allowing the private sector to purchase them at acceptable prices. Professor Ferguson, the noted Harvard economic historian and author of the recently published work, *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World*, has suggested that shareholders of banks should be “wiped out,” that the creditors should take a “hair cut.”

He also calls for what he admits is essentially “nationalization”, for a limited time, of banks. He suggests that it is imperative that the U.S. financial system avoid the perceived mistakes of the Japanese financial system during the so-called “lost decade.”

During the 90s according to many economic historians and expert observers, Japanese banks were not forced, as the observers believe they should have been, to divulge their non-performing loans and other “sour” assets. In retrospect, critics have said, the Japanese banks should have been more aggressively closed by regulators.

For some time, Islamic economists have been calling for national and global economies, and in particular, national financial sectors and the global financial system to be redesigned so that there are direct and immediate connections between so-called real, tangible assets (such as land, infrastructure, buildings, factories, vehicles, etc.—and the services associated with them), on the one hand, and banks and other financial intermediaries, on the other. They have also called for the removal, through regulation and legislation, of excessive leverage.

For example, Islamic ethics might suggest that one support the move to regulate financial players such as hedge funds more aggressively, with the aim of phasing out or eliminating certain risk management tools, such as short selling and other derivative contracts that are characterized by major non-specificity or non-feasibility. Such derivative contracts can be replaced with synthesized derivative contracts that are based on the coordinated sales (or leases) of real assets. Such alternative hedging and risk management contracts have increasingly begun to be used in the Islamic finance sector.

Islamic financial ethics as realized in the *shari’a* compliant finance sector also suggests that all home repossessions associated with the reset of variable interest rates, or in cases in which there is financial difficulty, such as unemployment or under employment, be frozen immediately, by legislation or governmental authority, subject to further review.

Furthermore, Islamic ethics would suggest that all existing mortgages should be reduced to 0% over original purchase price. Banks, or mortgage holders, that refuse or resist these reductions should be either incentivized to comply or penalized for their resistance. Similarly, bankruptcy judges should be allowed, and encouraged, to reduce mortgage loans. The basis for these suggestions is 1) the wrongfulness of imposing interest payment stipulations on loans and 2) the scriptural encouragement that creditors reduce the debts of those in financial difficulty. One of the primary concerns of economists, when it is suggested that...
government relief (or aid) be directed toward indebted corporate or natural persons (although it seems to be more of an issue when dealing with the latter rather than the former) is the issue of moral hazard. Economists ask, “won’t people who purchased ‘too much house’ and other bad actors be encouraged to act poorly in the future if others assume responsibility for their recklessness?” Islamic ethicists are quite sensitive to this argument. Islamic financial professionals, accordingly, when advancing financing tend to perform due diligence that screens out individuals who are unlikely to be able to repay their financing. However an Islamic ethicist would recognize interest-bearing lending itself as a wrong and, therefore, that the ‘perverse incentive’ exists on both sides of the transaction. When we add considerations of predation and the mass applicability of system practice, the focus of systemic remediation is likely to shift primarily to the lender.

Professor Stiglitz in the aforementioned commentary summarized his recommendations in six points. To quote him in brief:

1. We should mitigate the incentives for excessive risk-taking and the short-term focus that has so long prevailed.
2. Secondly, we need to create a financial product safety commission, to make sure that products bought and sold by banks, pension funds, etc. are safe for “human consumption.” … What we need is more innovation addressing the needs of ordinary Americans, so they can stay in their homes when economic conditions change.
3. We need to create a financial systems stability commission to take an overview of the entire financial system, recognizing the interrelations among the various parts, and to prevent the excessive systemic leveraging that we have just experienced.
4. We need to impose other regulations to improve the safety and soundness of our financial system, such as “speed bumps” to limit borrowing.
5. We need better consumer protection laws, including laws that prevent predatory lending.
6. We need better competition laws. The financial institutions… should not be in situations where a firm is “too big to fail.” If it is that big, it should be broken up.

It has been noted by several journalists, analysts and other observers, that the recent financial crisis raises the questions of whether Islamic finance could have saved the global economy from the current crisis and if so, how. While some Muslim commentators have made comments on this topic that can be faulted for a certain lack of sophistication and nuance, or an air of hyperbole, the thrust of their comments are in the main correct: without doubt, compliance with basic Islamic ethical principles and norms would have made the current crisis an impossibility.

To summarize the sort of changes to the current financial regime that an Islamic ethicist might support: Deep structural changes to the prevailing financial system characterized by 1) the elimination of interest-based debt financing mechanisms in favor of asset-based financing mechanisms and 2) the elimination of risk-shifting risk management tools and techniques in favor of risk sharing, tangible asset-based mechanisms. While this evolutionary path may seem radical and strange to some, it is, in fact, not. Rather, such changes, to a large extent, are consistent with what several economists and finance academics have already been calling for.

As I mentioned earlier in this talk, I want to address claims of incoherence in the application of traditional fiqh to contemporary finance. Critics argue that complying with the ethical norms that have been developed by Islamic ethicists—what some of the critics call “contract-based jurisprudence”—no longer satisfies the raison d’être of Islamic financial law. These norms—the entire edifice of Islamic financial ethics, that is—are therefore ill-suited to our times and should be dropped, the critics claim. (By “ethical norms” I am referring here to the definitions of the nominate contracts, the rules that govern which transactions are permissible and which are impermissible—the rules that establish what the integrals and conditions of validity of the permissible transactions are and are not, etc.). A new system of ethics and jurisprudence, the critics continue, should be created that is appropriate to the modern financial reality, a reality in which innovations in financial engineering and low transaction costs allow financial engineers to create synthetic contracts that circumvent the prohibitions found in the standard texts. It is only by destroying and then recreating the entirety of Islamic financial jurisprudence, the argument goes, that we can stop those dastardly financial engineers from accomplishing what the pre-modern jurists wanted to prevent with the norms that they captured in their texts.

To summarize my response briefly, let me first state that this argument does not stand up under scrutiny. Firstly, the contract-based approach to financial ethics and law is an approach that prevails in many, if not most, of the world’s enduring ethico-legal systems—Justinian law, English law, Napoleonic law, etc. Is the problem, then, having the concept of the contract at the heart of our system of financial ethico-legal analysis? If so, is English law and American law similarly flawed? The answer would appear to be no, based on the critics’ own comments about these two legal systems. So, if the problem is not to be found in the centrality of the concept of the contract in Islamic financial ethics, is there something peculiar to the Islamic tradition that makes its “contract-based jurisprudence especially moribund and out of step with the times? The critics might argue at this point that the problem with Islamic financial ethics lies in the norms that define what the basic or nominate contracts are and describe the integrals (i.e. components) and conditions of validity for each. The problem with this argument is that the nominate contracts are so basic as to resemble other basic typologies of contract (sale, lease, gift, partnership, etc). The simplicity of this typology would seem to weaken any claim that the typology itself is the fatal flaw.

If the problem is not the typology, we must turn then to the integrals and conditions of each nominate transaction. The integrals are minimal and are often merely descriptive (e.g. a contract requires contractual parties, a contractual form [offer/acceptance], etc) and as such appear, in other ethical and legal systems. Those conditions that are not merely descriptive are traced to texts that indicate the impermissibility of certain prohibited transactions. It should be noted that such prohibited transactions are few in number. In any case, it is recognized in the fiqh that the application of the conditions in this last category (and all of the other concepts, for that matter) is subject to elaboration and extension in consideration of ethico-legal principles and in consideration of the aims of the law, in the face of changing circumstances, as the critics themselves recognize. The point here is that, even if it is accepted that, in some cases at least, the norms found in the manuals do not fit some of the
circumstances found in contemporary finance, the mechanisms for
dealing with such changes are part of the tradition itself. Therefore,
in order to argue for the wholesale tossing out of Islamic finance
ethics with the proverbial bathwater, it does not suffice for one
to merely show that implementation of a superficial reading of
the norms found in the beginner-level and intermediate-level texts
does not safeguard the aims of the law—for no competent, not to
mention master-level, ethicist would ever apply the norms in this
way. Rather one would have to go further and show that the ethico-
legal principles and the rules-cum-ethico-legal tests (bukhriyya)
that govern a competent ethicist’s application of the norms to a given
real world circumstance also fail, routinely, to accomplish the aims
of the law—since these principles are as much a part of Islamic
ethics as the norms captured in the manuals (if not, in some ways,
more so). In the absence of such a demonstration, the matter is
reduced to this: the critics are contending with contemporary
experts in Islamic ethics about conclusions that the latter have
reached as to the permissibility of some transactions that the
former regard as prohibited (or vice-versa). This places the critics
in the unenviable position of contesting with experts in the latter’s
field of expertise. Furthermore, such disagreement on select issues
does not constitute the basis for a call for the creative destruction
of fiqh al-mu`amalat. One has only to look at the standards published
by leading ethicists in the area, such as AAOIFI Shariah Standard
#20 on the “Synthesis [i.e. the Combination] of Contracts”,
to understand that contemporary Islamic ethicists 1) are aware
of changes in contemporary finance that affect the application
of the norms captured in the texts; 2) do not slavishly apply the
norms found in the texts to contemporary financial issues; 3) insist
nonetheless on building off of the centuries of effort captured in
the texts through extension and elaboration (rather than reckless
dismissal of the norms documented therein) and 4) are fully aware
of the potential attempts by malicious financial engineers to circumvent
the tradition’s bright lines of usury, non-feasibility, non-specificity
leading to contention, misappropriation of wealth, inequity, etc.
The recent buckling of the US financial system has led
observers to show a renewed interest in the Islamic finance sector.
The guidelines for reform being suggested by prominent experts
reflect, in significant ways, the ethics of shariah-compliant finance.
The elimination of interest-based debt financing mechanisms and
risk-shifting risk management tools in favor of asset-based financing
mechanisms and risk sharing, tangible asset-based mechanisms,
which an Islamic ethicist might recommend, is compatible with the
views of notable experts in the financial world.
To the critics calling for a complete overhaul of Islamic
financial ethics, the use of the nominate contracts as analytical
tools when confronting modern transactions has continued, in
part, because this type of analysis has consistently proven useful.
It allows the ethicist to apply Qur’anic and Sunnah guidance to
contemporary financial issues reliably and predictably, provided
that basic precepts and principles are also observed. Furthermore,
such disagreement on select issues does not constitute the basis for a call for the creative destruction
of fiqh al-mu`amalat. One has only to look at the standards published
by leading ethicists in the area, such as AAOIFI Shariah Standard
#20 on the “Synthesis [i.e. the Combination] of Contracts”,
to understand that contemporary Islamic ethicists 1) are aware
of changes in contemporary finance that affect the application
of the norms captured in the texts; 2) do not slavishly apply the
norms found in the texts to contemporary financial issues; 3) insist
We are all the others.

Each of us.

All we are or attain in life is also due to all the others.

Everybody—alone—is nobody.

We are the success and the failure of everybody else, we are the joy and the sorrow of everybody else.

We are the result—besides of ourselves—of everybody else’s life.

In each of us all the others are mirrored.

Each of us is the sum of all the others.

Each of us—without exception.

Without anybody being witness to us we’d be nobody.

And we’d be nothing.
The Meaning of Brotherhood

by RESHMAAN HUSSAM
MIT '09

“Two brothers are likened to a pair of hands, one of which washes the other.”

- Prophet Muhammad

In the year 622 CE, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his small band of Muslims landed in the city of Medina. Escaping persecution in Mecca, these Muhajirin, or emigrants, were welcomed by the Ansar, better-established Muslims living in Medina.

The Muhajirin arrived in a state of complete material poverty. And so a system of support and brotherhood was established, in which every member of the Muhajirin was made a brother of one from the Ansar.

In tribal Arab society, to ask two individuals from different cities, tribes, and races to form a bond so deep in love and support was a revolutionary request. For this brotherhood was no small duty. Material possessions were shared without question; but more significantly, this seemingly artificial relationship evolved for each pair into one that was closer than that of kin.

The America of the 21st century is a melting pot for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. If the Muslim community seeks to sustain itself in this diverse environment, developing a brotherhood that transcends race, culture, or (dare I say) creed is our only hope and perhaps greatest challenge. And it is through this lens that I share the story of two Latino Muslim converts in America.

The Latino Muslim experience is especially meaningful in a discussion on the necessity of brotherhood. Latino Muslims
MEANING OF BROTHERHOOD

come from a community and culture where Islam is still quite foreign. In joining a Muslim community, finding others with similar backgrounds is rare. Thus the support so many Muslims take for granted is lost for those who may value it most.

This is not meant to be yet another convert story. Rather, through the experiences of these Latino Muslims, we realize that true brotherhood, both within and without the Muslim community, is absolutely essential to the development of the American Muslim identity.

Farah’s Story

Farah Martinez grew up in the town of Dorado, Puerto Rico as the only child of a Catholic father and a Lutheran mother. Exposed to many religions in her own childhood, she developed an interest in the diversity of the human experience. At sixteen she entered the University of Puerto Rico as a foreign language major, mastering French, Italian, and German along with her native Spanish and English. It was in college that Islam made its first appearance on her radar. “I would see people praying under the trees – always with the same motions, always in the same direction.” She was struck by the *sajdah*, the prostration, during which one puts one’s head upon the ground. “The act of kneeling in prayer…of all the ways I’d ever seen, it was to me the most humble way a human being could approach God.”

Leaving Puerto Rico after college, Farah spent some time in San Francisco and then landed in Los Angeles in 2006. She had not found a Latino Muslim community in San Francisco, but Los Angeles was a different story. “It’s not up until I saw how diverse the community [in LA] was that I recognized this truth,” she says. “Islam doesn’t know color, Islam doesn’t know sex, Islam doesn’t know age. Islam is just it, it’s purely Islam.” It was here, at the Omar ibn al Khattab Masjid in LA, that Farah officially took her * Shahadah*, the declaration of faith.

Los Angeles, California and New York City are home to the two most active hubs of Latino Muslims in the US. The Los Angeles Latino Muslim Association, a group dedicated to raising awareness about Islam across the Latino community through Spanish texts, was established in 1975 by a group of Puerto Rican converts. Five years earlier the first Latino Muslim organization in America, Alianza Islamica, had been established in New York City.

After California, Farah moved to Florida, and then to Boston, Massachusetts. When I spoke with Farah, it had been four months since her move to Boston. Though active in the local Muslim community through the Islamic Society of Boston, she had met only one other Latino Muslim in her four months in the city. “The few Latino Muslims that are here—we need to seek them out, invite them, and pray as an *ummah* [the worldwide Muslim community]. I feel the Islamic community here is very fragmented.”

Farah’s request is two-fold. The Latino Muslim community in Boston needs to be more actively engaged and integrated into the Muslim community at large. But in order to do this effectively, outreach efforts to the wider Latino community must be made. “There are a lot of misconceptions about Islam in the Latino community. But in many ways it is easier for a Latino to identify with Islam than [it is for] many others. Why? Because of the sense of family, of unity to us. Family first, after God.”

Thus our conception of brotherhood expands from within the Muslim community to one beyond it. One cannot fulfill the former without first appreciating the latter.

Hamza’s Story

In the nearby town of Worcester, the last decade has seen another sort of Latino Muslim experience play out.

Jason Perez came from the projects of Worcester, where he spent much of his young adult life dealing drugs. To him and his brothers on the street, Islam, though local, was foreign. “We grew up right across the street from the mosque, but there was no Muslim presence in front of us ever. The rumor was that all they did in there was kill goats.”

The story begins in 1998, when Jason’s roommate, Louey, went missing. “He was real miserable; then he went missing and we didn’t know what happened, but the rumor was he was kidnapped by some Arabs.”

Coming across a Pakistani Muslim in the neighborhood, Jason asked about Louey. The answer was unexpected. “I don’t know a Louey, but I can tell you where Brother Laqman is.”

So Jason found his roommate. His story was brief. Walking by the mosque one day, Louey stopped on the steps to roll a blunt. A few Muslims stepped out, asked what he was doing, and Louey
began talking. The conversation deepened, and the men invited him inside. Louey went in, he learned, and he became Muslim.

For Jason, who now goes by Hamza, the rest is history. “It really impacted me how he looked, how he carried himself, how his manners had changed and he seemed at peace. The sheikh came with Luqman to my house on the street. He asked me if I believed there was only one God; I said yes. [He] asked me if I believed that the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings upon him) was the last messenger of God. I didn’t know much about the Prophet, but I felt it in my heart and said yes…I saw Louey and I became Muslim right then and there, on the street. Nobody around me knew what was going on.”

The community soon learned the news. Within that year, fifty-five men and women of the Latino community in Worcester converted. Another mosque was established, Masjid Al Haqq, and Hamza and his community found a school based in Connecticut through which to pursue Islamic studies. The San Kore Institute of Islamic African Studies focuses on reviving Islamic scholarship through West African texts, many of which were once filtered through Spain during Muslim rule in the 8th-15th centuries and are thus documented in Spanish. This literature offered Hamza’s community a window into their own historical roots through Islam.

In 2002, news came of a scholar in the San Kore Institute who had brought two thousand manuscripts from the respected late West African scholar Sheikh Usman Dan Fodio to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Not wanting to miss this opportunity to further their knowledge, Hamza and much of his community moved to Pittsburgh.

At age thirty, Hamza is now married with five young children and is part of an established community in Pittsburgh. They have opened a mosque in their neighborhood and are in the process of establishing an Islamic school. Besides his scholarship and a rapidly growing reputation as a hip hop and rap artist, Hamza spends much of his time involved with the community at large in the projects of Pittsburgh. He and his largely Latino and African Muslim community serve breakfast to and share life skills with the homeless, heroin addicts, and others in need in the nearby districts. Hamza is currently working with one of Pittsburgh’s largest and most violent gang areas. Asked why he does what he does, Hamza relates the story of some friends who, on Hajj, asked a respected sheikh how to best help Islam in America. The sheikh answered, “Learn Spanish and feed the people.”

The Meaning of Brotherhood

Farah and Hamza’s stories go on, but even in these brief encounters one message surfaces again and again. Islam at its purest will strike people simply by being: by watching someone pray outside under a tree, by seeing and speaking with one who has adopted the faith. They are hardly conscious actions, but they are Islam in presence, Islam in intention and in action rather than in words alone.

Developing a sincere brotherhood is at the heart of this physical Islam. If the American Muslim community can embody a fraction of that which the Ansar and Muhajirin cultivated in Medina, then we have opened a treasure chest in America. For Islam is a universal faith and this country is a melting pot. There is huge potential here for mutual respect and understanding. But it is the Muslim community’s prerogative to make this faith accessible.

Our Muslim identity is arguably incomplete without active service in our communities and open-minded interaction with the cultures and religions of our home. And to do this fiyabiilab—for the sake of God. To be brothers and sisters, but ask for nothing in return. Hamza describes, “The programs that we run don’t have one dawah pamphlet. We get a box of doughnuts from Dunkin Donuts, sweep front steps and clean up neighborhoods, and feed the people. We don’t ask for anything, we don’t want anything, we just help and we look Muslim. Don’t force it.”

There is brotherhood among Muslims and there is brotherhood between faiths. But living in a world of ever-growing diversity, one cannot be sustained without the other. The Latino Muslim community is one of many communities that are small but growing in America. It is through this lens that the real necessity of a supportive community among Muslims and an open character towards non-Muslims becomes especially clear. “Your goal is to not even look at others as non-Muslim. You look at every single person as an opportunity to get closer to God. You have sincerity towards each other for the sake of God. It helps you be a mirror to each other. That’s what it is.”

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The perfect price for the things we do
circulates through angelic stations like a wheel
with candles on the inside circumference lit and kept alight through
each revolution while starlight on the outer circumference
shatters the darkness with intense incandescent shafts
and equal amounts of ecstatic song
each window we open in a dark house
each spider we wink at when the broom leaves its
web intact each word like a sliver of soap sent to
another through bars of a dank prison on a steep hill
the confounded confabulations of our
own knotted crossroads like the harsh symptoms of an
ancient curse uttered aloud and reverberating all the
way to here
I sing that starry candled wheel out of
circumstances beyond our control sending it on its
upward road
the utterly vulnerable humanity of us wiping our
own mouths with the tattered napkins of our
own souls in a windy place barely
holding on and made as
one-dimensional as possible by this world when in purest
actuality there are a
thousand million voices in our voice and the light of a
thousand million universes in the lights of our
eyes and each gesture of ours conscious or
unconscious takes in Tibet with its intricate icons
and the warm open currents of Caribbean seas
our bodies themselves perfect or deformed by the
slightest or greatest flaw inward or
outward like a pantheon of mythological beings waiting to be
called from the wings to perform in a
grand classical tragicomedy accompanied by
choruses and tympani and the clear
angelic trumpets of ideal musical undercurrents flowing
directly from overlapping seas of
love in latitudes beyond all our mortal fathomings
Like the lily the form of whose liquid petals only
divine geometry knows
how it will flute out at the end of its stem and
hang its bee-platform into space at just such an
angle at just such a tilt in the clear air

or how the winds will blow on a certain day at a
certain hour when all was perfectly still a moment before
suddenly leaves and branches torn and sent
flying like angry love letters across unpredictable
distances

or like what we will do and how we will
do it when we've sat up in bed and put our
feet squarely on the floor again for another
episode of mobility in this world whose
edges and corners actually
jut out into the next
and whose windows and air-currents actually
open out onto untold vistas of the Unseen

this world huddled up against the next in the divinely
drenched molecular rainfall of barely
substantial materiality that supposedly sets this world
off from the next when it's more like an
interrupted extension from one world to
another one breath from this side through death to the
other side where radiant splashes are oceanically
greater and travel between stars soaked in
spectacular starlight is made
infinitely easier

and far easier to understand
are the deepest messages
in the meanings we receive
The Indescribable Moments of Life

Thoughts on Reason and Responsibility

by DANIEL R. JOU
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Before graduation day at Harvard, traditionally the president of the University addresses the graduating class with parting words of wisdom. President Drew Faust, at the end of her first year as University president, addressed my graduating class. She began her speech by mentioning that nearly forty percent of the graduating seniors that year were headed into the finance and consulting industries. She went on to describe how many Harvard students and colleagues would approach her in amazement at this statistic and ask her why she thought this was the case. Of course, in some sense it should be clear why it is the case: the most lucrative careers are to be found in finance and consulting (or at least they were at the time, before the current economic crisis). Faust's response to the question, however, was notable. She explained:

"Why does this seemingly rational choice strike a number of you as not understandable, as not entirely rational, as, in some sense, less a free choice than a compulsion or necessity? Why does this seem to be troubling so many of you? You are asking me, I think, about the meaning of life, though you have posed your question in code—in terms of the observable and measurable phenomenon of senior career choice rather than the abstract, unfathomable, and almost embarrassing realm of metaphysics."

And so, in a few sentences, President Faust subtly hinted at several deep and ponderous issues: rational choice, agency, purposiveness. I would like to mull over these issues in thinking about the subject of Responsibility, a subject that, I think, is most important and salient to us in our youth. But I will approach the topic from a, perhaps, unusual perspective, that of philosophical investigation. Which means that I will most probably leave you with many more questions than answers. Hopefully, it will still be beneficial.

When we talk about responsibility, we must presuppose some agency, some freedom to choose one path as opposed to another. At least that is how we conventionally think and talk about responsibility. Whether it comes to our day-to-day choices, moral or otherwise, or larger matters of political and civic freedoms, agency is the underlying concept that goes hand-in-hand with responsibility. But agency, or freedom of the will, has been a notoriously intransigent problem as far as Western thought is concerned.

Nevertheless, freedom and agency are popular topics in all manners of films, novels, and other works of art. Interestingly, from 1990 through 2009, each of the winners of the Academy Award for Best Picture has involved escape from imprisonment in some form or another.1 There is an obsession with escape in the popular consciousness. But it is a very idiosyncratic conception of freedom that is invoked, a rich, uniquely Western conception shaped through the centuries by everything from Christianity to political history to the industrial revolution. And of course, it is not only film and art that have been influenced by this conception. The very legal system, and the Western conception of justice itself, is deeply wed to that fundamental understanding of freedom.

That being said, it has been suggested that films and novels do more to depict the lack of freedom and agency than to present any true representation of the two. Freedom is almost always set in contrast to subjugation and oppression, so much so that one may be led to think that it is the subjugation and oppression that is doing all the work, so to speak. What I mean by this is that any notion of freedom in these movies only comes across indirectly, i.e., only in virtue of subjugation and oppression, which ultimately constitute the central subject matter of the piece. In more crude terms, one might say, there is no freedom in these works of art per se, only non-oppression. So, in these films, for example, the hero has to suffer some form of hardship in order to later experience freedom. And the more severe and violent his hardship, the more poignant his eventual freedom. To drive this point home, we can try to imagine a story bereft of any obstacle or tribulation (not only the more overt, physical tribulations but also difficulties of the spiritual, emotional, or existential kind). No doubt, this would be a boring tale indeed. But besides that, can we really visualize what a depiction of freedom, or, more specifically, the experience of freedom would look like?

Actually, one archetypal image does come to mind. Many of us often fantasize about vacationing on a tropical island with not a care in the world, perhaps with a loved one. It does not seem like such fantasies are particular to our modern, Western appetites. Such depictions of a heavenly garden-like paradise are quite common in works of art and literature—religious or otherwise—of cultures throughout time and space. But again, these depictions draw their significance from their contrast with the un-heavenliness of the average life. Where can we find a representation of freedom without that representation relying principally on a concomitant contrast with imprisonment and hardship?

The difficulty in representing freedom and agency in films or novels is not dissimilar to the difficulty we inevitably face in thinking about and discussing our own freedom and agency, whether we are coming from the perspective of philosophical inquiry or otherwise. Ask yourself a seemingly straightforward question: Why are you reading this essay right now? The question might also be rephrased as: How did you come to decide to read this essay? You should try to address the question from a first-person—perspective; your personal thought process is what is important here. In an attempt to answer the question, you might say: “Well, I was bored and had nothing to do, so I decided to read something. This essay caught my eye, so I sat down and started reading it.” This may serve well as an explanation in conventional conversation with speakers of a particular background; namely, our background as speakers of the English language in this day and age. On another level, however, in another context, this explanation would not suffice—the validity of any given explanation is context-dependent. This is obvious enough in our daily conversations. For example, a person is feeling anxious for some mysterious reason. The way he describes this feeling of anxiousness to, say, his wife will be different from how he describes and explains it to his parents, his guy friends, or his co-workers. It is not that he deliberately adds or omits anything from each account. It is just that different things are relevant to different people and he naturally “accounts” for this when explaining his predicament to others. I put “accounts” within cautionary-quotes because I do not want to imply that this poor anxious man preliminarily plans and decides how he is going to present his situation to particular people. There is no deliberation

But intellection is not our only relationship with the world nor is it necessarily our primary relationship.
involved; it comes quite naturally, which itself is something for us to note, and we will come to it later. But we can extrapolate from this example in a very simple fashion. The different conversations the man has in talking to others about his anxiousness most likely differ in only slight ways. How would his conversation have to change in talking to people more far removed from his spouse, parents, friends, and co-workers? Imagine him having to explain to a psychologist he has recently hired, for example. But let us take this to the extreme and imagine him having to communicate with people of another culture entirely, perhaps a culture where the concept of “anxiety” does not even exist, at least in the same form as it does in this culture. There seem to be two interrelated obstacles here that hinder effective communication between these two parties. The first obstacle is, again, that the people from this second culture do not have the concept of anxiety at all. The second obstacle, of course, is that these people will most likely speak another language entirely. Social anthropologists will be quick to point out the inherent connection between culture and language and how each plays off the other in complex and subtle ways. And philosophers will be equally quick to point out the inherent connection between language use and cognition itself. Taken together, these interconnections imply that people of different cultures and languages, to varying extents, think differently. This does not foreclose the possibility of communication, not in the least. Yet, there inevitably will be much lost in translation, the extent of which depends on the degree the two cultures share in whatever variable is pertinent to the content of the communication in question.

What does all this have to do with agency? Going back to the question, “Why are you reading this essay right now?”—not only is the specific answer that you give dependent on your cultural milieu, your very thoughts on the matter are as well. I am using the term “cultural milieu” in its broadest sense. What does all this imply for agency and rationality itself? We will come back to this.

Even if we take for granted our particular conceptualizations of our own agency and our explanations as somehow universal across cultures, there are still fundamental issues to be raised. For example, in answering such crucial questions as, “Why are you reading this essay right now?” again, you might reply, “Well, I was bored and had nothing to do, so I decided to read something. This essay caught my eye, so I sat down and started reading it.” Upon this explanation, further questions can be asked (though such questions would not arise in the course of a typical exchange; in fact, they would be quite unusual). A person might go on to ask, “Well, why did you decide to read something? What sort of reasoning exactly led you to that decision?” At this point, you might have to rack your brain trying to remember the decision-making process. What if there weren’t any decision-making process at all?

Maybe we should consider a less trivial example of human decision-making such as choosing a career. An average senior in college will probably have at least a few career options to seriously consider. How will he go about making his decision? What factors are the most worthy of his consideration? Let’s say he chooses his career and, in an effort to understand his reasoning, we ask him why he chose that one as opposed to the others. He might reply that the one he chose is the highest-paying. Again, in typical conversation, this would satisfy us in our effort to understand his reasoning. But, we can ask further questions, however; for example, “Why did you choose the highest-paying career?” At this point, our senior is quite confused. Nevertheless, he humors us: “Well, I want to be able to live comfortably, buy a nice house, a nice car, etc.” From here, we further question, “Why do you want to be able to live comfortably, buy a nice house and a nice car?” This is just intolerable to our senior. He most likely thinks we are playing some asinine game with him (and, in a sense, we are). If we insist he answer, he might say, “Well, what do you mean ‘Why’ do I want to live comfortably?! It’s quite clear that any sane person wants to live in a nice house and drive a nice car and to live a decent, comfortable life. What’s the mystery, Sherlock?”

“Still, why?” we continue to badger. Our senior might finally, with much exacerbation, concede to playing our game. “Well, I don’t know why. Maybe because living comfortably is good. It’s something that I want. And if you’re going to ask me why I want that, the answer is I don’t know. I just do.” If our senior is a biology major (or otherwise), he might be inclined to start delving into evolutionary biology, trying to ground his choice and human action and judgment in general in what he understands to be fundamental human nature. “Humans, like all organisms, have evolved to behave and make decisions based on what increases their chances of successful reproduction.” Of course, at this point, our senior has left the realm of the agential and has moved into another realm entirely. In our questioning, we were concerned with the agential, subjective perspective. What exactly served to motivate this person in the course of
his personal ratiocination? Eventually there was a stopping point beyond which he could no longer further substantiate his thought process for us. Of course, it is clear that he did not reproduce his actual thought process regarding career choice. It would be more accurate to say that he constructed his thought process, after the fact, in relaying it to us, especially after the first two why-questions. By this, I mean that there is a difference between the senior’s deliberation leading up to his choice and his account of that deliberation in describing it to us. And the difference becomes increasingly pronounced the further we prod him with why questions. That is not to say that he is being disingenuous in reporting his deliberation; nor does it mean that what he has mentioned has nothing at all to do with that deliberation. Nevertheless, in reproducing his deliberation, the senior to a greater or lesser extent “constructs” things. This construction happens on two levels. First, there is undoubtedly much of his thought process that the senior deliberately and/or inadvertently omits in his reproduction. Second, there is much that he deliberately and/or inadvertently includes. As far as omission is concerned, he may deliberately omit parts of his thought process he deems irrelevant to the questioner, for example, or for any other reason. And by inadvertent omission, I am referring to parts of his thought process that he simply cannot recall (and does not even realize that he cannot recall) after the fact. As for inclusion, he may, again, decide what is relevant to the questioner and focus on that in his reproduction. By inadvertent inclusion, I am referring to the ability to near-spontaneously answer certain why questions in explaining our motivations. Phenomenologically-speaking, we do not have to sit there and think about what part of our prior deliberation is salient enough to mention to the questioner (sometimes, we may, but that is not the norm). Similarly, the anxious man did not have to take a moment and consider how he would fashion his complaint for each party he would address; he just does it. And so, as far as “inadvertent” omission and inclusion are concerned (and we do need to take pause at the use of the word “inadvertent” here, but not for now), there seems to be the implication that a person has limited access to his own prior deliberation, ratiocination. The more subtle point is that a person’s actual deliberation is itself limited and pre-structured from the start—this goes back to our discussion of the interconnection of culture, language, and cognition.

Now, several important questions arise.

First of all, does all this have any implication for our consideration of agency? This is a very big question that will require an equally big answer. But insofar as agency concerns our abilities to make decisions and think thoughts, there are limitations and dependencies as far as cognition is concerned. This is more or less the case in any number of examples. The agency expressed in deciding what career path to choose is a more straightforward example because there is more thinking and deliberating involved. But what about other kinds of choices? For example, imagine driving your car out of the driveway and onto the main road. You look for a large enough gap in traffic to be able to pull out. About a dozen opportunities present themselves to you. How do you decide which one is the right one to take? The correct answer is probably that you do not really
decide anything. You just see the right opportunity and you pull out. Furthermore, you do not decide to take your foot off the brake and onto the gas, to turn the wheel at such and such an angle, etc. You just do all these things in a split second without even thinking about them. There is no deliberation or deciding. But do we want to say that there is no agency?

Secondly, does the fact that the senior had to throw his hands up in the air at some point and say, “I don’t know why!” have any implications for our consideration of his rationality? The questioning, no doubt, would never have to terminate. No matter what, we can always continue to ask why; we can continue to ask for justification, in spite of the inappropriateness of doing so. If we bring a foundationalist understanding of rationality to the table, where any judgment or claim must be grounded in further and further justification in order to count as rational, we would be forced to foreclose on the possibility of rationality altogether as far as human judgment is concerned. This is an undesirable conclusion. Clearly there must be some form of rationality, or reasonableness; this is plainly demonstrated by the simple fact that we all understood as mostly (if not completely) lucid our senior’s response to the very first why we threw at him. In fact, our further questioning beyond this initial point of mutual understanding revealed our own unreasonable and irrationality as questioners, as indicated by our senior’s annoyance at the prolonged conversation. In other words, we as questioners share something deep with the senior, deep expectations. And rationality, generally, is nothing if not a set of shared expectations, though they may never be made explicit. So how are we supposed to characterize this rationality in broad terms, these shared but implicit expectations? And, more importantly, is a coherent characterization possible at all?

The third question we should consider is, what does all this mean for how we talk about agency, reason, and our experience
of the world? The point of all of the above is to question and problematize a primarily cognitive relationship we have with the world (the keyword here being “problematize,” as I have posed many more questions than answers). We see ourselves as primarily thinkers and observers, as subjects. And the rest of the world serves as objects of our thoughts and theories, objects that we come to know and understand through analysis, reduction, abstraction, in a word, intellection. But intellection is not our only relationship with the world nor is it necessarily our primary relationship.1 There are many more ways we are a part of and engaged in the world. On the most basic level, we do, say, and feel many things in nearly every moment of our lives without a single thought, or at least, a lot less thought than we might otherwise suppose. Everything from washing the dishes or driving our cars to talking to different people about our day-to-day problems or enjoying a juicy hamburger; none of them requires much, if any, conscious deliberation, whether before or during the act/state in question. In one way or another, the aforementioned examples of the anxious man, the deliberating senior, and the automobile driver were all in service of this basic point. On another level, our relationships with other people also involve so much that is non-cognitive. Of course, there is the fact that we are able to communicate so effectively; we are connected by the shared expectations that constitute what can be considered rationality, but those expectations are never put into words or expressed in any propositional form. Yet, they are at play in so many complex and subtle ways. Furthermore, this is often neglected in philosophy, but what of our bonds of love, care, and responsibility? Feelings of loyalty and respect as well as hate and animus and a million other connections we have with others? None of these states are primarily cognitive, yet they are so crucial to our being in the world. And among the higher levels of human being, we can add the feelings of awe, wonderment, and transcendence in our experiences of the beautiful and the sublime, especially when we share in those feelings with others.

Nevertheless, we are taught to understand authentic existence as examined existence, dissected existence, intellectualized existence. Thought and intellection are held supreme, while the other experiences of the world are dismissed in one way or another. For example, how might one respond to the fact that so much of what we do and do in the course of daily life proceeds without that constant examination and dissection? A typical reaction would be to say that we do these things unconsciously or, perhaps, subconsciously—anything that we do without cognitive presence is by default the product of the unconscious, which is itself, for the most part, the product of millennia of evolutionary development. The eventual result of this strategy, predictably, is that more and more of human experience will be relegated to the realm of the distinctly un-human and non-experiential. Until there is not even consciousness left. No consciousness, no agency, no what-it-is-like, no being, and we are all nothing except cold products of an enormous series of chance, meaningless events, one by one, from the beginning of time to the end of it.

So, this is not the right approach. An ever-expanding realm of the unconscious is not only required, it is inevitable when we understand cognition as the fundamental and singular mode of our presence in the world. Of course, by “presence,” I mean much more than physical presence in the physical world. In all the above examples of non-cognition, there is always presence, more or less; we are not unconscious automatons driven by this or that genetic hardwiring. We are very aware, conscious, and “plugged-in,” for lack of a better term. In fact, sometimes these are the most conscious and indescribable moments of our lives.

It is no wonder, then, that issues like consciousness, agency, rationality, freedom, and justice continue to elude theoretical packaging. In some sense, they are, at least in part, beyond theorizability. Rather, they are manifested and experienced in those other modes of life. Now, no doubt, intellection has its place, and I do not want to negate its role and significance entirely. But we, as a species, have vastly overestimated the realm of intellection. And this is because we have vastly overestimated our cognitive abilities. This is among the greatest delusions of human history, a delusion that has plagued us from the start.

It has not escaped me that this essay is a piece of theorizing itself, and so, to remain consistent, it must acknowledge its fundamental and inherent inadequacy in conveying its very own thesis. So, it has been done.

And to come full circle, what of responsibility? We can no longer maintain a view of the human person as separate from his world, in essence. And we can no longer maintain a view of human nature as fundamentally divided between the faculties of “reason (i.e., cognition) against emotion,” or “reason against faith,” or “is against ought,” or “subject against object.” These strict dichotomies will fail to be tenable once intellection as a necessary medium between us and the world is dissolved. And at this point we will need a new understanding of human nature, right? No! We will need a new way of being, not (solely) understanding. And with this being in the world will come an authentic sense of responsibility and purpose, one that proceeds from a genuine existence—responsibility towards all that exists: the earth, the trees, the skies, the people, the words, the Creator.

Notes
2. In discussing “culture” here, I am very much drawing from the work of Wittgenstein and the ordinary language philosophers on “forms of life.”
3. For more on this, consider Kant’s Critique of Judgment, specifically sections: Introduction, “The Analytic of the Beautiful,” and “The Deduction of Aesthetic Judgments of Taste.”
4. These thoughts are in the spirit, for example, of some of Heidegger’s points in Being and Time and his other writings.
A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation

by ABDELNASSER RASHID
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Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes in a forward for Naim Ateek’s *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*: “Ateek gives voice to [...] hope by calling for a theology and a practice of nonviolent justice and love. He examines a past filled with injustice and pain, but he also looks forward with hope to a future that might truly reflect the dream of God for the Holy Land. We need voices like this to call us to seek reconciliation and to live in justice and love.” Ateek, a Palestinian Anglican priest who received his Masters in Divinity from the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California, calls for a Christian Palestinian liberation theology that forms the basis for the nonviolent resistance to the Israeli occupation that Archbishop Tutu promotes.

Perhaps young Palestinians, amongst others, who embrace and imbibe Ateek’s message of justice through nonviolence can become the Gandhi’s and Martin Luther King’s of Palestine.

Ateek’s book can be roughly divided into three sections: a history of the conflict, an introduction to Christian and Palestinian liberation theology, and the way forward. In the second and longest section of his book, Ateek explains Christianity as he, a priest and scholar, understands it: peaceful, nonviolent, and just. Ateek applies this understanding of Christianity to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict throughout the book, calling for the necessity to establish justice for Palestinians by means of nonviolent resistance. He devotes a chapter to addressing Christian Zionism, a militant distortion of Christianity and analyzes and compares Christian theology to Christian Zionist theology.
Ateek notes that there are between 10 and 30 million Christian Zionists in the United States today, who believe that at the end of times the Jewish people will either be converted to Christianity or be annihilated. Ateek addresses this theology and explains how it contradicts and distorts the peaceful, nonviolent theology of Christianity.

To address Christian Zionism, Ateek first explains how Christians and Jews approach the Old and New Testaments and how each group forms its respective theologies. He notes that the Old Testament is the foundation of two religious movements: Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism. “Both interpret the Old Testament for their own religious community and within their own faith’s understanding of it.” Jews view the Mishna and the Talmud as the fulfillment of the Old Testament while Christians view the New Testament as its fulfillment. Ateek explains that Christians read the Old Testament through the lens of their Christian faith. “What renders the Old Testament important to me is the New Testament.” Christian theology, according to Ateek, is based on the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. Ateek emphasizes that Christian Zionists, in contrast, base their theology largely on a militant and exclusivist reading of the Old Testament.

Ateek examines passages from the Old and New Testaments and demonstrates the contrast between Old Testament passages and New Testament ones. The Old Testament contains a theology of land that is exclusive in some passages but inclusive in others. The following, from Genesis, is an example of an exclusive passage, when God speaks to Jacob:

And God said to him, I [am] God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a multitude of nations shall spring from thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins. And the land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land. (Genesis.35: 10-12).

In the New Testament, the Letter to Ephesians alludes to the people of the land and states, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.” The phrase “strangers and aliens” is a reference to the non-Israelites who, in the Old Testament, did not have any right to the land. In Galatians, Ateek notes, Paul explains that the promise which God made to Abraham is fulfilled though the coming of Jesus Christ, who is considered the “offspring” of Abraham. The New Testament contains many similar passages, inclusive in nature, that are more difficult to find in the Old Testament (though inclusive passages are not absent from the Old Testament, e.g., passages in the Book of Jonah). As many Christians view the New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, they read Old Testament passages in light of the inclusive ones, which make it clear that God does not endorse the exclusion of non-Israelites from the Holy Land. Ateek says, “In Palestine, we must continue to stand for what is just and against all injustice that dehumanizes people.” This injustice is the same injustice that Christian Zionists support and encourage. Ironically, Christian Zionists attempt to use the Bible to justify Israeli injustice whereas Ateek uses Biblical teachings to encourage fighting Israeli injustice through nonviolence.

Ateek also provides a historical dimension in explaining Christian Zionism, noting that it did not originate in the 20th century or with the birth of Israel but, rather, at the height of British imperialism in the 19th century. In this context, Ateek states, “For [Christian Zionists], Christ is no longer a Suffering Servant at all but one who will return with wrath and anger to destroy his enemies. Such an approach typically fails to notice the importance of the sword coming from Christ’s mouth (Rev.19:15).” He continues, “The way Jesus makes war is significant: ‘Jesus makes war not with a sword of battle but by the sword of his mouth.’ The word is Jesus’ only weapon.”

A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation provides an illuminating assessment of Christian theology, which is very much opposed to the militant theology of Christian Zionism. The assessment of Christian Zionism is one of many illuminating tasks Ateek undertakes in his call for fighting injustice using nonviolence. Perhaps young Palestinians, amongst others, who embrace and imbibe Ateek’s message of justice through nonviolence will become the Gandhi’s and Martin Luther King’s of Palestine.
WHAT’S IN A GENE?

Trying to Visualize a Future Moral Landscape at the Speed of Science

by FAHIM ZAMAN
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The timeline of discoveries in the field of genetics portrays the rapidly accelerating nature of scientific advancement. Hunter-gatherer societies used their primitive sensibilities of genetics to breed the canine class as a subspecies of the gray wolf. Thousands of years later, agricultural societies used similar genetic sensibilities when selecting for bigger and stronger crops, or breeding for specific types of animals. Following the discovery of Mendelian genetics, and the discovery of recessive genes, the quest to identify, measure, and read genetic material began. In 1869, during the same decade of Mendel’s observations, the existence of DNA was discovered by Friedrich Miescher; he isolated phosphate-rich particles from a cell, thereby jumpstarting the search for DNA’s molecular structure. The next one hundred years saw the rapid development of health care and biology: the first rabies vaccine was developed; the chromosome was discovered; the system of immunology was identified for treatment; hormones, viruses, bacteriophages, etc. were identified; and penicillin was discovered. Science’s role in enriching human life and revolutionizing medical treatment was fully apparent. The period after Watson and Crick’s 1953 breakthrough further emphasized the exponential rate of discovery, but the role of genetic science as a societal enhancement would see considerable changes as the decades approached the present.

The role of genetics in medicine is widespread in diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of diseases. With the human genome fully sequenced by the 21st century, and the mapping of the human genome progressing rapidly, scientists are able to identify the molecular origins of specific ailments. The power of DNA analysis allows for the detection of diseased genes, and thus for the detection of a myriad of diseases associated with those genes, including leukemia, Huntington’s disease, Duchenne muscular dystrophy, and Hemophilia. Through pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, this analysis can actually be done at the blastula stage, even before the human fetus is formed.

Preventing diseases through genetic analysis and engineering are sometimes executed in crude ways; for example, embryos in which the gene for cystic fibrosis is observed are often not chosen for implantation. Another way of treating patients used widely is hormonal intervention, which counters the imbalances our natural genetic makeup might produce. The process of gene therapy, on the other hand, focuses more on the causes of genetic disorders. Here, a phage process similar to that of viruses is used to insert genes into the patient’s genetic material and thereby counter the ones causing a deficiency.

However, even intricate insertion techniques do not perform what one would call a “clean job.” Gene therapy results in patients having different chromosome sets in different cells. To avoid this and provide a uniform genetic template in patients with diseases, even more refined methods are necessary.

The solution to this problem lies in a yet to be economized method developed by geneticist Mario Capecchi. Capecchi has managed to harness the power of our own bodies to correct mistakes in DNA sequences (called homologous recombination) to induce insertions of replacement gene sequences at specific sites. This method is not yet as easy and efficient as using the relatively crude bacteriophages, but according to Dartmouth bioethicist Ronald M. Green, it is a technology that could change human life as we know it.

Before understanding what Dr. Green means, it is helpful to take a look at the various potentials of stem cell research. Stem cell research has been on hold because of the previous administration’s refusal to provide funding. The recent change in Washington, however, may turn the tide for researchers. Putting aside the ethical
questions surrounding stem cell research procedures and utilization of embryos, the announcement from President Obama commencing research funding for stem cell research may allow for breakthroughs that change the face of medical operations. Instead of searching for compatible organ donors, stem cells from the patient could be used to grow the needed organ for replacement. Stem cell research also allows scientists to understand the developmental stages of diseases by examining the diseased tissue grown from stem cells of a diseased patient. This gives scientists the ability to understand and treat root causes of currently incurable diseases, as well as the means to replace diseased tissue with healthy grown samples. But taken from a different perspective, this is a technology that could revolutionize life as we know it.

The science-fiction genre has long presented far-fetched predictions about how future human societies would look and function if our mastery and control over genetics and biology continued to increase. In Star Wars, we see cloned soldiers being created for the sole purpose of letting them die in war. In H.G. Wells’ The Time Machine, we see a future in which the human species has separated itself into an upper class and lower class species that is apparently the result of genetic differentiation. Nancy Kress’ series of novels, named Beggars, portrays a society in the near future in which humans make decisions to have children that have been modified for talent and success. The modified humans sustain and propagate these traits amongst themselves and their communities, and are dubbed the Sleepless because of the many traits that make them superior in productivity. The result is a rift in the species, wherein many of the modified believe that they are inherently superior beings to the “beggars” (the original, unsuccessful human societies).

Though these scenarios may be fictional, the technology needed to realize them is coming ever closer to reality. Capecchi’s previously mentioned method which redirects DNA recombination and corrects mistakes in DNA sequences, when used on sperm or egg, would in fact pass the superior traits over to future generations. The result would be a “natural” system in which modifications for superiority are passed down to offspring, along with any new modifications purchased for the children. In a scenario in which the demand for engineered human beings rose above the supply of women willing to sell their egg cells, advances in stem cell research could potentially lead to production of modified oocytes that respond to the market demand. Only the perfection of the directed differentiation of human stem cells into usable egg cells is required, and as Dr. Douglas Melton would call it, one could grow “baby farms.”

But this too sounds like something from a science fiction story. Surely, we are horrified now at the idea of a “baby farm” or at the thought of a factory for egg cells. Why should anyone assume that such a market for oocytes would exist in the future? Why would humans give up their natural ways of raising families for a mechanical, test-tube system in which humans are designed according to their preferences? The proof that this scenario is not so far from reality lies in how many people are already choosing to direct the specific qualities of our children. While current technology does not allow for the control and manipulation of offspring genes, it does allow for non-medical use of advanced genetic analysis through which parents can choose whether to implant a boy or a girl for pregnancy. Such expensive services are becoming popular in the United States. In countries like India, the trend has become so rampant that there are an estimated 2000 human female feticides occurring every day due to a high cultural desire for male children. If people are submitting to societal pressures and preselecting their children’s chromosome configuration, then with a few more options available, childbearing is likely to transform into an impersonal market system.

Under such a system of marketed biotechnological gene manipulation, a stratification and resulting social hierarchy would threaten the equality that we value in society. The technologies, judging by today’s costs, would be expensive and thus affordable to only a specific class of people. This class would have inherent genetic superiority over others, separating the two vis-à-vis opportunities and freedoms. The market would facilitate a gene race, and the disadvantaged of society would be left behind as “beggars,” in terms of physical and cognitive abilities, not to mention monetarily. What difference would this trend make given that we already select our mates from within our own levels of a hierarchic society? It would be a potential way to perpetuate a successful progeny for the elite, and a stagnant one for the poor. The most immediate difference is that in the current system in which people naturally procreate, there remains an element of chance that could deliver a successful couple a normal child or an unsuccessful couple a brilliant child. This provides the possibility that even those from modest backgrounds could be successful. The potential future market of engineering offspring would eliminate these chance balances.

Even if we were to allow for the impossible and assume a perfectly equal society in which selecting traits was subsidized and
equally available to all, the societal trend of genetic engineering would risk another side effect. Let us imagine that the concept of modifying our genetics became generally accepted by society. This would begin with humans improving their genetic endowment by selecting only the best of their offspring by embryo screening. As this level became widespread through competition, the demand for interventional enhancement would increase from parents who want their children to have an even greater edge. More and more commonly, the genetic makeup of the offspring generation would have origins in labs rather than in biological parents. Thus, the genes of these offspring would lose their relation with the parental genes. This would undermine the concept of lineage and family from the human psyche.

A child born through such selective and intervening enhancement, if given the true knowledge of his origins, would realize that he is not necessarily genetically related to his parents, being the product of intervention techniques that added laboratory genes. He would not have a biological father, mother, or siblings of his own. One must also wonder how the child’s concept of identity would be affected by the knowledge that he was produced by men in white coats in a lab, rather than through the union of two parents. As Jessica Cohen puts it in the Atlantic, “When conception doesn’t occur in the natural way, it becomes very complicated. Once all possible parties have been accounted for—egg donor, sperm donor, surrogate mother, paying couple—as many as five people can be involved in conceiving and carrying a child.”

A future child, with a genome designed in a lab and grown through a possible baby farm, would have no genetic connection, no genuine sanguine relation, to his guardians. The situation is eerily reminiscent of Lois Lowry’s anti-utopia in The Giver.

It is easy to imagine that buying our children a strength-boosting, attractiveness-enhancing gene package would increase the happiness and opportunities that life presents them, but to look at the bigger picture, one must be farsighted and anticipate the possible issues in a culture engineering its own genetic endowment based on merit and wealth. From a nearsighted point of view, the measure of satisfaction and potential in one child’s life may seem to increase, but what about the collective loss associated with the disintegration of family relations and parent-child connection? Are these not disadvantages that would greatly decrease the moments of joy, meaning, and character building that come from the interactions between family members?

The strong feelings that many people have about gene manipulation are difficult to articulate because the scientific trend for radical change has so many apparent rational motivations, whereas the conservative and cautious side can only supply warnings about past mishaps or uneasy predictions about future anti-societies. Other than that, resistance to human genetic manipulation is ascribed by proponents to an irrational, religion-based hesitance towards the great unknown. But perhaps it is not a result of irrationality. As Harvard’s own moral philosopher Michael Sandel says, when science moves faster than moral understanding, we struggle to articulate our unease.

When Watson and Crick first determined the structure of DNA and thus the physical nature of genetic information, they may not have anticipated the extent to which their discovery would challenge the norms of human society. To them, it was a puzzle that needed solving, the secret to life, uncovered to increase the human understanding of ourselves and the natural world around us. That puzzle-solving incentive, compounded by curiosity, gives scientific discovery an almost exponential advancement rate. Inadvertently, human control over existence increases with this increased understanding. Our accurate measurements of the material world give us a unique power over our situations, and the field of genetic engineering does this with regards to our own inherent biology. But as human beings, are we properly equipped with the moral sensitivities and responsibility to have such levels of control? To answer this question, our unease needs to stop being reactionary. Our morality should direct our science, rather than constantly trying to catch up with it.

Notes:
1) www.biotechinstitute.org
2) Ronald M. Green, Babies by Design
Following the events of September 11, 2001, the United States found itself confronted by a threat posed by a group of individuals based halfway across the world. Coming out from the Cold War as the world's sole superpower, the United States seemed untouchable, invincible. How was it attacked? And had the US done anything to provoke these attacks? These two questions, among others, provided much fodder for discussion in the aftermath of the attacks.

However, the realization that underpinned both of these questions, that the United States is part of a world whose activities, conflicts, and woes affect our country, has remained under-addressed. It is a realization of our interconnectedness with the rest of the world, and that it would not be reasonable to seek to extricate ourselves from it, or claim that we can. Rather, we ought to consider that there is a need for an encompassing vision of our past as a nation, our present, and our future.

The American response to the tragedy on September 11 emphasized and exploited American military strength, something that had been prefigured by plans the administration had formulated with respect to the military. When former President George W. Bush had first begun campaigning, his stated mission had been to completely transform the American military and bring it up-to-date in terms of technology and tactics.1 With reference to these proposals, Dick Cheney stated in 2000: “Rarely has so much been demanded of our armed forces, and so little given to them in return.”2 The sad irony of this statement is now becoming apparent.

The events of September 11 served to further the administration’s path along this trajectory: among other developments, the military transformation came to include reconfiguring Trident submarines to make them capable of holding long-range cruise missiles, developing “unmanned aircraft” that have the ability to perform combat missions like those of the Joint Strike Fighters, and establishing military bases along an arc from Central Asia to Southeast Asia.3

While there is not much, if anything, objectionable about the desire to defend oneself, it is questionable whether military exploits (what the military was ostensibly built up to engage in and what it did engage in) always aid one in this goal. Upon al-Qaeda’s announcement of its culpability for the attacks, the administration announced that the US would be embarking on “a new kind of war,” a war wherein the revamping of the military would prove most useful. Bush announced that the US would “take the battle to the terrorists” and would create a “forward defense,” one that would include preemptive strikes if it was sensed that they would aid our ability to protect ourselves. In “The National Security Strategy of the United States,” a document prepared by the former administration and issued a year after the attacks, former President Bush states that, “The United States can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past,” and furthermore, that, “As a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed.”4 Thus, the building of the military was supplemented with justification for preemptive strikes, and, moreover, a disregard for differing cultures and worldviews—i.e., the prime recipe for disaster. And perhaps the most evident manifestation of this was the war in Iraq, which has thus far cost us nearly 1.3 million lives, the vast majority of them Iraqi civilians.5

What worsens the situation is that we have failed to grasp one of the most important lessons we could have learned from September 11: that we, as strong and as great as we may be, are human and are susceptible to harm, harm inflicted by others around us. Without acknowledging this, we put ourselves in even greater danger than before. In “Revamping American Grand Strategy,” Sherle R. Schwenninger, a senior fellow at the World Policy Institute, stated: “Thus, the end result of America’s war on terrorism may be to increase the range of threats to American lives and interests well beyond the al-Qaeda network, almost ensuring that the number of terrorist acts will increase in the year ahead.” The number of attacks by masked gunmen and suicide bombers in Iraq and Afghanistan bears testimony to these words.6

In the same report, Schwenninger continues on to make several suggestions for improving the war on terror, i.e. moving towards a more intelligent foreign policy. He suggests targeting the financing for terrorist networks, cooperation of the intelligence agencies of the US, Britain, France, and Germany, and their collaboration with local authorities from Thailand to Pakistan. However, moving towards a more effective foreign policy, a wiser and, yes, a nobler one, requires more than this. Schwenninger's
suggestions treat the symptoms of terrorism (terrorist ideology being of the greatest of our current adversaries) with increased accuracy but not the cause of the malady itself. Combating terrorism requires taking a more encompassing and considering view of our history in terms of our relations with other peoples, our actions today, and what would be most advantageous for us tomorrow. This should guide us in shifting the national mindset such that it acknowledges this interconnectedness and advocates corresponding action. It is the responsible thing to do, for us and for others.

With that in mind, there are a few principles I think would be worthy to bear in consideration. We Americans make up only 4.5% of the total world population. I am inclined to think that truly recognizing this would entail treating the rest of the world population justly and humanely, both in terms of our words and our deeds. Antagonizing, condescending words, then, have no place in our ideal interactions with other peoples, and rather, reassuring words go a long way in facilitating cooperation and understanding. Thus, President Barack Hussein Obama’s recent gestures to the Muslim world, particularly significant in today’s environment, are laudable: “The United States is not at war with Islam,” and “We will convey our deep appreciation for the Islamic faith, which has done so much over so many centuries to shape the world for the better—including my own country,” being two such statements. Words such as these combat the effects of ideologues who spout hatred and increase enmity; indeed, words such as these were exactly what much of the Muslim world had been waiting to hear. On the other hand, belligerent and antagonizing words and gestures serve to drive people towards ideologues who assert that “the West” will never understand “the Muslim world” and is out to destroy it.

In the preface of his book *Unholy War*, John Esposito addressed the former administration, stating: “The Bush administration remains challenged to remember that this is as much a political war as a military war…[that] in the long term, the most effective weapon will be public diplomacy…America will need to join with its partners in the international community, addressing the root causes of terrorism.” He continues on to urge Americans to become educated about Islam, and become more familiar with its basic tenets and history—it would not be surprising to find that there is much in common. He also encourages people at large to explore what the roots of terrorism truly are, stating that the actions of terrorists, who may be Muslim, do not reflect Islam and do not reflect the vast majority of Muslims. Rather, Muslims who turn to terrorism are products of deeply malignant social conditions, many of which can be traced back to treatment by Western countries. Compound that with the influence of ideologues who are bent on presenting “the West” and what it stands for as being wholly antithetical to Islam, and who assert that the two are and will be at war until one wins, we are presented with the trouble we have now. (Incidentally, both are false assertions—the existence of Western Muslims, who comfortably straddle both identities, illustrates this). Esposito insists, “Never before have soft phrases like ‘building bridges of understanding’ been more critical in a war that ultimately cannot be won simply by military power.”

The seeds of hatred spewed by ideologues can only find fertile soil if we, as Americans, cultivate that soil with unjust and antagonizing words and deeds.

Because our actions are not conducted in a vacuum, it is important for us to inculcate a certain amount of foresight, intelligence, caution, and responsibility, and use those effectively in our dealings with others. President Obama is at the moment preoccupied with healing the wounds of yesteryear. And while it is said that the most he can do at the moment is work solely towards healing those wounds, i.e., move from negative to zero,
in order for us to move towards the positive, we need to address some critical areas in which we have not exercised the greatest responsibility, ranging from our unfortunate and prolonged abuse of the environment to conflicts that are taking the life, limb, and conscience of too many.

One fairly obvious source of discontent in the world, and certainly among Muslims, is our hypocrisy and our lack of impartiality in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Recently, however, President Obama has announced that he will be meeting with Egyptian, Palestinian, and Israeli leaders in order to strengthen the United States’ relation with each country and reconstruct a plan for the peace process, reviewing each country’s role in establishing peace in the region. While the attainment of a lasting peace will require a great deal of patience, strength, and diplomacy, this move, the first of many, hopefully, is both courageous and praiseworthy.

On the part of us Americans, this all means we need to be informed of where this country is going and what it is doing and take a greater role in its decisions. Adjunct professor at Loyola University Omer Mozaffar states: “Because it is a democracy, what the country does is an extension of you. Thus, you wash your hands with the blood of each person who dies in war.” It is up to us to seek to be informed: Where are our resources going? What are they being used for? Are they being used efficiently? To whom does our aid go? Who is in need of aid? How is that aid being used? What about needy Americans? After seeking information, the next step would be to work towards influencing policy through writing, contacting people, and, simply, voting. As citizens, we have to play a larger role in what this country does and where it goes. We have to work for the establishment of an active citizenry that is concerned, learned, knowledgeable, and prepared to fight for our security today and our future tomorrow.

Notes
11. Ibid., xiii.
What other jobs and career paths were you considering when you started out? What made you choose the particular path you're on now?

The interesting thing is that I didn't really consider very many career paths. Civil engineering was something that was very stable...and I didn't start thinking about other possible career paths until I became comfortable in my own and I realized that there were actually other possibilities. Being in a stable career gave me the freedom to start considering other fields like marketing or technology. Ever since then, I've deviated from my primary career into technology and marketing, tapping into the skills those fields offered. That's just the kind of world we live in. We can switch from career to career and draw from diverse areas. It's not actually considered a detriment.

What is the best way for Muslims to get their voices and opinions out there?

People come away with a lot of misconceptions about Islam and Muslims because they don't hear a Muslim's voice. Muslims need to tell themselves that they're good enough and their opinion is important enough to be heard. I think they just need to get out there and practice writing and expressing themselves. If your ideas get shot down, then stand up and try again. The only way to get to a high level and be good at it is to exercise a skill again and again and again. And once you do get to a point where people respect your opinion and come to you for advice, that's when you start having influence. Right now, the worst that you see in terms of analysis and reporting on Muslims is the simple result of the lack of Muslim input. In terms of getting started on getting the Muslim voice out there, I would say that you don't even need to go into journalism school. You don't need a journalism degree. You don't need to go into a mainstream media outlet. That's the great thing about the web. You can practice being a blogger. You can practice writing op-eds and just hone your art. Try to master a certain aspect of opinion making or reporting. And you'll see there is a need for it. There's a thirst for news about Islam with very few people who can actually report on it. Eventually, it would be ideal if it came to a point where there were professional Muslim commentators and journalists to fill that niche.

Shifting gears a bit, you were quite socially and politically active during your college days. We have some questions about activism on campus and beyond. What do you think Obama was talking about when he mentioned the era of
I think politicians have for too long risen to power by blaming other people and focusing attention on the people that led us to our current predicament. The most productive way to move forward is to clearly state how you’re going to help address problems and solve problems rather than continuously ascribing blame to the past. This is why Obama has been reluctant to look back at the Bush years and is more willing to look forward. It is especially important for Muslims to look to the future. There are plenty of things we need to do to both clean up our own house and help the larger society overcome the evident gap between Islam and the West. We can either do that outside the political system, working from the outside in, or we can do it from within the political sphere. If there’s anything I’ve learned from my personal experiences of running for elected office at Berkeley or here in Austin where I live, and from seeing the experiences of other Muslim politicians is that Americans by and large will give you the benefit of the doubt even if you have a funny name, even if you have an immigrant background, even if you have a Muslim background, so long as you can stand up and earn their trust and show them that you can be a good candidate. For Muslims to be elected to Congress in a post-9/11 world says a lot about America. It says a lot about our chances and possibilities. The door is open. We just need to walk through it. People need to shed their fear about getting involved in engagement and the public domain.

Broadly speaking, do you see a rising trend of Muslims in community engagement and if you do, what would you suggest is driving the numbers?

One thing that is driving it is that Muslims cannot hide anymore. I think before 9/11 Muslims were content to keep to themselves, because it was difficult being a Muslim in the public sphere. Now after 9/11, we are forced into the public sphere. There are two reactions you can have to that: either to withdraw further, or to engage. A byproduct of 9/11 is that Muslims, especially younger Muslims who are comfortable with American culture and system, have felt that it is better to engage in the public sphere than to withdraw. Because of that, I’ve seen a lot of Muslims being more visible. My non-Muslim friends have in fact mentioned that after 9/11, they feel like they see a lot more Muslims. I don't think its because the number of Muslims is increasing. It's because they are more public with their identities, whether within the media or within their interactions with other Americans. They say, “Yes, I am a Muslim.” It’s really good that the younger generation is feeling comfortable and confident despite what they see on TV and read in the newspaper.

In the Obama era, with the pendulum bound to swing the other way as we dismantle the frame of the “war on terror”, do you think Muslims who were overly self-critical during the old days are going to have a hard time making the switch?
I think anyone who got to any of the extremes is going to have a hard time making the switch. There were Muslims that stepped out of the Muslim community and turned around and pointed their fingers at the community in a very non-constructive way. I think it’s going to be very hard for them to make the switch back. It will leave them by the wayside. But I also think that Muslims who had their heads in the sand and insisted, “There’s no problem. Everything is fine. Stop speaking ill about us,” are going to fall away as other Muslims take charge of their own affairs and take charge of their own problems and start addressing those problems. Such naïveté will also be left behind.

The problem with polemics is that it has a longer shelf life than moderate discourse so I think people are going to look back and notice extremists on both sides because they’re both so shocking. Polemical words and actions have staying power. It’s a much quieter thing to work behind the scenes and to work in moderate circles with moderate strategies. But I think in the end, that is the direction we are heading in. We are working toward a society in which Muslims are going to be an integral part of this country and this progression is fairly unstoppable at this point. Muslims are rising up and being heard and trying to be counted as fellow citizens. Americans and government are acting in kind.

So long as we can build a strong enough presence, historians are going to look back and say, There was a gulf between Muslims and the West before 9/11, and then, after 9/11, people got their act together and spent the next couple of decades building trust and confidence and partnership. I know I’m being really optimistic about that, but I can’t help but be optimistic. It’s my nature.

Often, the underlying challenges of our times are invisible to us and colored by the polemics of the day. In 50 years, when people look back at today, what problems will historians then see and how will they judge our time?

There are some industries where it is very easy to say there’s a limited future; some manufacturing sectors for example. There are some segments, no matter what, that will always be around. There’s always going to be need for infrastructure. There’s always going to be need for health and education. So, I would advise people to choose broad careers that have some staying power. But, within that career, you can always find some flexibility to try to do things. There will always be level of innovation within each of these larger spheres, so there’s no fear of going into an industry and finding everything stagnant. There’s plenty of room for opportunity and growth. Technology is another place where twenty years from now, the whole landscape is going to be different than it is now. There’s no such thing as a life-long career path. There’s no such thing as lifetime employment. The average employee changes their job every 3 to 5 years and that’s considered good. I think you need to embrace that. You need to not

be afraid to switch careers back and forth. Earn skills that can carry you from one career to another. For example, if you learn marketing skills, you can carry those very well from one career to another. Technology skills also carry very well. I know those two have always given me the edge in whatever job I’ve had. When people see me, even as a developer or an engineer, my marketing and technology background, that gives me the edge over another candidate. Learn those extra skills that will give you an edge. Don’t be afraid to switch careers. Pick careers in which you can look into the future and see that they are going to morph or evolve but not disappear.

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Often, the underlying challenges of our times are invisible to us and colored by the polemics of the day. In 50 years, when the people then look back at today, what problems will historians then see and how will they judge our time?
So give to the kindred his due, and to the poor and to the wayfarer. That is best for those who seek Allah’s Countenance; and it is they who will be successful.

Qur’an 30:38