



ENGAGING WITH THE OTHER: FARID ESACK'S 'ON BEING A MUSLIM'

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ABSTRACT

*Though the religious 'Other' has always been a vilified entity, it doesn't necessarily have to be so. The 'Other' plays an important role in shaping one's religious identity in a more meaningful way, as Farid Esack's memoir *On Being a Muslim: Finding a Religious Path in the World Today* shows. Esack is an internationally known South African Muslim scholar, speaker, and social activist, who played an important role in South Africa's fight to end apartheid. This paper focuses on the intense spiritual crisis that Esack went through as a student in a religious seminary in Karachi, and how his Christian friends from Breakthrough, a group of Liberation theologians struggling to make sense of living as Christians in a fundamentally unjust and exploitative society, helped him to cope with this crisis. Inspired by Breakthrough's commitment to social and gender justice, Esack borrowed many of their ideas, reinterpreting them in a Muslim context as he became increasingly involved in a struggle against apartheid back in native South Africa. This fruitful experience with the religious 'Other' helped Esack rework his identity as a Muslim, an identity going beyond a mechanical adherence to the five pillars of Islam and locating it in a broader and a wider frame of reference, which as Esack describes it, "cannot be done in isolation from the struggle to work against unjust socio-economic systems". Thus, Esack's memoir holds important lessons on how the 'Other' can also work as a balm to help cure human inter relations, which often seem to be on the verge of breakdown.*

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INTRODUCTION

Farid Esack is an internationally known South African Muslim scholar, speaker, and social activist, who played an important role in South Africa's fight to end apartheid. Esack was appointed a national commissioner on gender equality by President Nelson Mandela. He has taught at the University of the Western Cape, at Amsterdam, and Hamburg Universities, and at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He is currently a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Johannesburg. His memoir *On Being a Muslim: Finding a Religious Path in the World Today* talks about what it means to be a Muslim in today's world.

Esack was educated at a traditional Islamic school. In 1974, Esack moved to Karachi where he completed his undergraduate studies at the Jamia Ulum-al Islamiyya. A large part of the memoir is based on his experience when he oversaw Islamic studies at St Patrick's Technical High School in Karachi. This was the first time Esack became acquainted with the struggle to relate Islam, initially, to day-to-day realities and, later, the struggle for a more humane society in Pakistan. These were also difficult days for Esack because at that time when he was just emerging "from a long night of spiritual anguish and emotional trauma." (Esack 14). Esack candidly admits that two elements saw him through it all: the support and encouragement of a friend and brother, name, a group of Christian Liberation theologians struggling to make sense of living as Christians in a fundamentally unjust and exploitative society. Inspired by Breakthrough's? commitment to social and gender justice, Esack borrowed many of their ideas, reinterpreting them in a Muslim context as he became increasingly involved in a struggle against apartheid back in native South Africa.

Albert Hourani, the noted British historian, in one of his lectures delivered at Cambridge University has argued that "from the time it first appeared, the religion of Islam was a problem for Christian Europe" and that "(t)hose who believed in it were the enemy on the frontier" (Hourani 8). Hourani adds that in the seventh and eighth centuries, armies fighting in the name of the first Muslim empire, the Caliphate, expanded into the heart of the Christian world, and that the conquest was not only a military one, but was followed in the course of time by conversions to Islam on a large scale. These conflicts, Hourani observes, continued until as late as the seventeenth century, when Muslim armies were able to occupy the island of Crete and to threaten Vienna. Commenting on the relationship between Muslims and European Christians, Hourani observes that it was not simply one of holy war, of crusade and *Jihad*, but there was also trade across the Mediterranean, and an exchange of ideas, and adds that here the traffic moved mainly from the lands of Islam to those of Christendom. As Hourani describes it, "... separated by conflict but held together by ties of different kinds, Christians and Muslims presented a religious and intellectual challenge to each other" (Hourani 12).



Elaborating on the nature of the challenge, Hourani adds that Christians could not easily accept that Muhammad as an authentic Prophet and the Qur'an as 'the word of God'. The Christians, he points out, would argue that with the coming of Christ, there was no further need for prophets. The reason for this claim, Hourani explains, is that the teaching of Muhammad was seen as a denial of the central doctrines of Christianity: The Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, and therefore also the Trinity and the Atonement. With the coming of Christ, there was no further need for prophets". Hourani argues that to the few Christians who knew anything about it, the Qur'an seemed to contain distorted echoes of biblical stories and themes. Commenting on the reason for this view, Hourani observes that with few exceptions, Christians in Europe who thought about Islam, during the first thousand or so years of the confrontation, did so in a state of ignorance, given that there was very limited knowledge, however, of those works of theology, law, and spirituality in which what had been given in the Qur'an was articulated into a system of thought and practice.

Hourani adds that Christians would look at Islam "with a mixture of fear, bewilderment, and uneasy recognition of a kind of spiritual kinship." "The most widely held belief", Hourani asserts, "was that which lay at the other end of the spectrum: Islam is a false religion, Allah is not God, Muhammad was not a Prophet; Islam was invented by men whose motives and character were to be deplored, and propagated by the sword." Reference? Once-powerful Muslim empires like the Ottoman and the Mughal had either disintegrated or had been defeated by European powers or were in a state of terminal decline by the early twentieth century. As long as Europe was in a superior position to Islam in military, socio-economic, technological terms, Europe, one could argue, did not bother too much about Islam and Muslims.

However, following the Second World War, Europe faced the problem of a severely depleted labour force that was needed to rebuild the continent devastated during the War. As a result, many former colonial subjects moved to Europe for work and studies. Many 'guest workers' from India and Pakistan moved to the United Kingdom during this period. Similarly, Germany, recruited 'labour migrants' from Turkey, while France and Belgium attracted many young men from Morocco and Algeria. As European economies flourished, and job opportunities continued to grow, these immigrants were joined by more immigrants, and also by their family members. Along with the overall increase of immigrants in Europe, Muslim populations also grew throughout Europe over the past few decades ("Muslim Migration to Europe").

Once immigrants started settling down for good on a large scale, some countries like Britain adopted a policy of multiculturalism. The idea behind multiculturalism probably was to create a more tolerant society, one in which everyone, regardless of colour, creed or culture, felt at home. However, an offshoot of the policy of Multiculturalism was that many Muslim



immigrants lived an isolated existence in boroughs of London like Tower Hamlets, Newham, Hackney, and in cities like Birmingham and Bradford, with little/no interaction with mainstream British culture and society at large. It is now generally accepted that the British policy of multiculturalism has turned out to be a failure. Before multiculturalism, there was also a policy of adaptation: in Rome be a Roman. There was also the practice of class - Asian and African immigrants were treated as slaves and servants; they were practically invisible from public life.

Joceyln Cesari points out that Islam first emerged as a social issue between Muslim communities and their host societies in Western Europe, when European governments changed their immigration policies in response to the 1972-74 recession. Cesari points out that owing to the governments' family reunification plan, a lot of Muslim immigrants' families settled down in Europe. The impact of the family reunification drive, Cesari observes, was that it increased the contact surface between Muslims and their hosts: children entered schools, women appeared in daily life, and families gained visibility. Cesari points out that Muslim immigrants increasingly demanded recognition of their religious practices, provoking debate among European societies and, occasionally, violent clashes between immigrants and native Europeans. Cesari also points out that this new generation of Muslims, born and educated in Europe refused to practice their religion covertly or with a sense of shame, as their parents had done and committed themselves to establishing *masjids* and Islamic community organizations, and eventually forced Western European governments and societies to confront the cultural and political consequences of migration".

While Muslims in Britain, just like many Muslims the world over, have been vocal in their criticism of United States of America and United Kingdom in helping Israel continue with its brutal and repressive occupation of Palestine, it was only during the Rushdie affair, when hundreds of Muslims resorted to a public book burning of *The Satanic Verses* to express their anger and distress, that the issue of difference of values between mainstream British society and the Muslim population in Britain came to the fore. As Alok Mukhopadhyay points out, it was almost as if Muslim societies till then had an invisible existence in Europe, and it was only the Rushdie affair that led to the emergence of Muslims on the European scene.¹ The controversy was an eye opener not only for British society but also for British Muslims. Though most Muslims were deeply offended by Rushdie's blasphemous writing and demanded a ban on it, the British government refused to do so, citing the freedom of speech guaranteed under British law. What became immediately apparent to British Muslims was the fact that the British law related to blasphemy only covers Christianity. Pleas for extending this law to Islam, and banning Rushdie's book fell on deaf ears. Many British Muslims saw this as a case of discrimination against Muslims based on religion.

¹ qtd in T. Abbas 57



The Rushdie affair was followed by the Balkan crisis. Despite reports of a large scale massacre of innocent Muslims in Bosnia by Serbian forces, the West and the United Nations forces on ground refused to intervene militarily, arguing that it would aggravate the situation. This convinced Muslims across Europe that the reasons given were just a sham and the real reason was a bias that the West had against Muslims. The two Gulf Wars aggravated the feeling that Muslim countries were being targeted by the West. The media also played a big role in aggravating this feeling by portraying Muslims as opposing 'British values' such as tolerance, democracy and freedom of speech. During the Rushdie affair the portrayal of Muslims was largely negative and stereotypical, informed often by a virulent, racialized Islamophobic discourse. In this connection, Tahir Abbas points out that in the last three decades, from the Iranian Revolution of 1979 onwards, the Muslim world has been in turmoil while Muslim minorities in the Western world have faced economic, social, political and cultural marginalization. Reference? Endorsing Abbas' point about the feeling of being beleaguered faced by the European Muslims, Sara Silvestri argues that the idea of Islam as a 'problem' continues to exist in Europe not only as a legacy of past history, stereotypes and narrow-minded attitudes of native Europeans, but more importantly, as a consequence of the increasing visibility of political Islam and of its progressive physical proximity closer to Europe.²

In his memoir *On Being a Muslim*, Farid Esack deals with the question of the Other on multiple levels. The first one is where various forms of otherness within the house of Islam are looked at through the prism of the many displays of 'official' Islam as well as 'popular' Muslim spirituality in a Cairo mosque. Explain and analyse. He talks about his experience outside the Mosque of Husain in Cairo. After the formal congregational prayers got over, Esack describes how 'the masses took over and the mosque was rapidly transformed into a veritable feast (or fleamarket) of Sufi (or quasi-Sufi) groups doing their own thing; the ever-changing Azharite 'orthodoxy' made way for the 'heretical'. Esack started wondering what had he walked into? As he describes it, (h)overing between his eternally dual, rather multiple, identities as a fascinated outsider, confused insider and a host of in-betweens, he wandered from group to group. When someone from within one of the groups beckoned him to join them, he quickly walked away – somewhat frightened – a bit like a child when confronted with the unknown 'other'. He points out that it is the ignorance about the Other that often makes us fear it. Esack rightly points out that in their ignorance and fear of the other many believers elevate group solidarity to the level of absolutes which take the place of Allah as an object of worship. Reference? Thus, the commitment to the clan and, the invariable corollary, the demonizing of the other acquires a greater value than truth and our beliefs.

²qtd in T. Abbas 57



On another level, Esack engages with the subject of the ‘internal other’, with his relationship with those inside the house of Islam who do not share his perspective of what Islam ‘really’ is or how best to work on really getting it into our lives. Esack argues that we all have our inside-outsiders; the ones who share our labels but whom we cannot stomach. The way we deal with others, he argues, is really a reflection of the way we deal with ourselves. Reference? Esack points out that in his travels throughout the world where Muslims live, whenever he is asked to address a congregation, the most common topic is ‘the unity of the Muslims’. Few aspirations seem to be as sacred to Muslims as the quest for unity, Esack argues. In this connection, he adds that the desperation of many Muslims for a single understanding of Islam is, in fact, a reflection of their desperation for wholeness. While he admits that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, Esack contends that we need to walk carefully with ourselves and with others who do not fit into our understandings of what this single understanding is all about.

The question is not whether there will always be differences among us, but how we deal with them. He refers to the example of one of his lecturers Mawlana Anwarullah. Whenever he was approached by someone abusing another group, he would politely ask: ‘*Aap kia bechte hain?*’ (What are you selling?) What his teacher implied was that a marketing of one’s own ideology based on bad-mouthing other ideologies was bound to put people off. Reference? Esack rightly points out that the truth is that obsession with the bad in the other most likely hides a problem with the self. Explore further.

Building on this line of thinking further, Esack adds that real unity and respect are based upon a refusal to engage in the blanket rubbishing of those with whom we disagree; it is a respect and tolerance of other opinions that most ordinary Muslims desperately long for. Esack rightly points out that the groups, organizations or individuals that we disagree with are seldom the unmitigated disasters that we make them out to be. He cites the role played by the Tablighi Jama‘ah in providing spiritual guidance to many individuals who would otherwise have gone astray and chosen the path of crime. What Esack is implying is that however much we may disagree with the internal other, they might still have some role to play and it is wrong to dismiss them summarily. Explain and explore further.

Esack points out that there are many people for whom their movements, organizations and opinions are the sum total of their lives, and they are proud of them. They have invested an enormous amount of time and emotional energy in them. When someone suggests to such people that the path or opinions of others may also be worth something and may possibly also be rooted in Qur’an and *sunnah* could even mean the loss of their sense of identity and the sense of security that comes with certainty To this Esack argues that while he does understand and value a passionate commitment to a path, it is important that we spare a



thought for what our absolutism and organizational arrogance do to the ordinary person in whose name we denounce each other. Reference?

The third level on which Esack engages with the Other is on the level of the religious Other. When he was a child, life was tough for Esack's family as they lived as victims of apartheid. Very often there was nothing to eat at home and Esack and his brother frequently resorted to scavenging for food. Their neighbour, Mrs Ellen Batista a devout Catholic woman, was his mother's constant companion throughout these difficult years and she would help them out with money, provisions, and moral support. These ties with Mrs. Batista continued long after his mother's death and even after they had moved out of Bonteheuwel. Given the benevolence, generosity and warmth of Mrs. Batista which helped them survive very difficult times, Esack discusses the question of the Quranic injunction (Surah Al-Baqarah: 62) which says that Muslims must not befriend the *kuffar* (Infidel), the Christians and the Jews and that in the end they will all end up in hell. As Esack describes it:

What do I do now? As a Muslim I cannot say that the Qur'an does not speak the truth. Do I say that our suffering and poverty, on the one hand, and Mrs Batista's help and companionship, on the other, are not real?...

Do we continue to benefit from Mrs Batista and yet in our hearts believe that the best deal that she can get in the hereafter is to be a servant of the Muslims in Paradise?

Many people can actually live with the idea of a God who is as unjust as this; I cannot inhabitants (Esack 150).

Faced with such a dilemma what does one do? Esack argues that there are two other ways out. The more popular and the easier one is to ignore the Qur'an and carry on as if it has nothing to say about the situation. Reference? The other way out is much more difficult, requires a lot of work and, above all, means having to take Allah and the Qur'an seriously. It means rethinking the meaning of the Qur'an and trying to find out what a particular text means in your situation. It also means asking these questions:

What did it mean in the Prophet's time? When was it revealed? About whom was it revealed? To whom is it addressed? What do the words (in Mrs Batista's case) 'islam' (submission to Allah's will), *iman* (faith), *kufur* (rejection; heresy) and friendship mean in the Qur'an? What did they mean before Islam? Did they relate to a specific situation or to a general situation? (Esack 151).

Thus, Esack is calling for a context based approach. However, it must be pointed out that Esack is not really the first person to do so. His suggestion is part of the well-established



tradition of *Ijtihad* (meaning independent reasoning) in Islam, which was forcibly stopped around 1305 AD. For a variety of reasons, this tradition has fallen into disuse. Many other scholars like Shah Wali Allah, Jamal al-Din Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Mohammad Arkoun have also advocated *Ijtihad*.

Esack adds a note of caution here. He points out that the path that he is advocating may be rather complicated. He candidly admits that not all believers might have the time or the inclination to think it all through, to do the research, to study the Qur'an and the Prophet's life. However, this does not give people the right to condemn others who are determined to be true believers. Esack argues that a believer may walk away from these difficult questions if she wants to, but she should do so silently and with respect towards those who have the courage to grapple with them. Reference.

Esack rightly points out that the theological search for a place for Mrs Batista under Allah's shade, therefore, does not come from a perverse sense of taunting traditional Muslim exclusivist understandings of faith. Rather, he argues that it is part of the struggle to create a world where people are judged by their deeds and not by their ethnic, religious or sexual labels: in brief, a world of justice. Thus, we see that Esack's views on the Other are closely linked to his struggle to make sense of what it means to be a Muslim, and show his inclusiveness and compassion for those who don't share his view. They not only helped Esack survive difficult times, but also to become a better Muslim. Hopefully such a view of the Other can act as a balm soothing the ... between Islam and the rest of the world.

CONCLUSION

Memoirs like Esack's are very important in today's age where hostility and distrust among religions is at an all-time high after 9/11. As Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat's review succinctly put it, "the author examines the meaning of Islam in relationship to self-esteem, sharing as an act of love, conflicts with Western ideals of progress and development, discrimination against women, the problem of religious labels, and the value of religious pluralism" (Brusatt). Frederick and Brussat rightly state that "Esack's vision of Islam comes across as very relevant to our times". Reference. You need to make your claims rather merely citing conclusions of other people. You need to make your own conclusion. I conclude using Esack's lines that "while there are many ways of dying, there is, however, only one way to live: through discovering what the self and other is about, to understand how much of the other is really reflected in us and to find out what it is that we have in common in the struggle to recreate a world of justice, a world of dignity for all the inhabitants of the earth" (Esack 151). Rather than making this concluding point, making it your starting point, explain it with the help of Esack, critically evaluate it and make creative suggestions.



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