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**Not Just Gandhi:
The Tradition of Nonviolence
Among Muslims in South Asia**



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NOT JUST GANDHI:

The Tradition of Nonviolence Among Muslims in South Asia

Why are all these stories of significance to us in the United States? Because of the continuing vilification of Muslims, with the supposed inherently violent nature of Islam being a major talking point. Bashing Muslims seemed to be on the wane for a few years, but it has made a comeback in recent times. It started with the agitation against the Islamic interfaith center in lower Manhattan in 2010. Over the past couple of years, such ideas have been further spread by the anti-Shariah law campaign in several states.

There have also been a series of hearings held on Muslim Americans by House Homeland Security Committee Chair Congressman Peter King of New York and repeated anti-Islam statements by national figures such as Republican presidential aspirants Newt Gingrich and Herman Cain.

“Rightwing activists, elected officials and even some presidential candidates have launched an overt assault on American Muslims, using a religious minority as a scapegoat for any number of national fears and frustrations,” said Michael Keegan, president of People For the American Way, in highlighting a report his group issued on the anti-Islam movement in the United States.⁵²

The result is a widespread suspicion of anything to do with Islam that has manifested itself recently in a number of ways. Whole Foods last year, for instance, backtracked on acknowledging Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, in its stores. Lowe’s withdrew a couple of months ago its sponsorship of a Muslim reality television show due to objections from some groups. And then there is the nationwide opposition to Muslim religious sites, with dozens facing resistance in the past couple of years.

The aspects of Islam that I have highlighted in my work show how absurd many prevalent notions about the religion are. The more we come to know about Islam, the more we realize that it is a complex entity—containing within it enough for us to admire and respect.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AMITABH PAL

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⁵²Michael Keegan, “PFAW Report: The Right Wing Playbook on Anti-Muslim Extremism,” <http://www.pfaw.org/press-releases/2011/07/pfaw-report-the-right-wing-playbook-anti-muslim-extremism>, July 25, 2011.

Let me start off with a prologue that contains within it both the past and the present.

Many of us know of the legendary Indian classical musician Ravi Shankar. But not many know that his musical guru was a Muslim, Allauddin Khan, and that his first wife was Khan’s daughter, who converted to Hinduism and adopted the name Annapurna Devi. The contribution of South Asian Muslims to this sublime art form is little known outside the region. Yet the role of Islam—a religion commonly thought to be inimical to cultural expression—in this and so many other artistic traditions has been immense. And in South Asia and elsewhere, it often has happened in the most wonderfully syncretic way.

“Hindu musicians converted to Islam but performed in temples. Muslim rulers became enthusiastic patrons, but were unmindful that the compositions being sung in their courts might have been in praise of Hindu gods and goddesses,” writes Namita Devidayal in *Himal Southasian* magazine. “During the mid-19th century, the Nawab of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah, an epicure, poet and musician, was known for his pluralist beliefs. In one of his verses, he wrote: ‘Hum ishq ke bande hai / Mazhab se nahin vasta...’ [We are slaves of love, religion means nothing to us].”¹

The result was an amazing fusion of religious and cultural streams.

“Alladiya Khan [a renowned classical musician] might have been Muslim but he, or some member of his family, performed every day at the Mahalakshmi temple, in Kolhapur, as part of his duty to the king and the people,” writes Devidayal. “Another well-known Muslim family of Dhrupad singers, the Dagers, played and sang regularly in the inner chambers of a famous temple in Rajasthan, which was out of bounds even to high-caste Hindus. Their music, not their faith, was their offering to the gods. Even today, the Muslim Dagar family is largely responsible for keeping alive a Hindu tradition—one of the many beautiful ironies in the music world.”²

From the past, we move to the present.

In the aftermath of September 11, a Texas man, Mark Stroman, set out to take revenge by killing Arabs. Instead, in choosing his victims he inadvertently succeeded in uniting most of South Asia in a uniquely horrible way by murdering an Indian Hindu and a Pakistani Muslim, and badly injuring a Bangladeshi Muslim.

“There were 38 pellets in my face,” Rais Bhuiyan told the *New York Times*. “I couldn’t open my eyes or talk or open my jaw. I couldn’t even eat or drink any-

¹Namita Devidayal, “Jugalbandi: Hindustani Music is Our!Music,” *Himal Southasian*, February 2011, 47.

²Ibid.

thing. It was very painful to even swallow because I was shot in my throat. After a few hours in the hospital I could open my left eye. My face was heavily swollen. There were gunshot wounds. My face was horrible. I couldn't believe it was my face.”³

Why is this story relevant to us? Because Bhuiyan led a clemency plea for Stroman. His religion played a strong part in his compassion.

“I was raised very well by my parents and teachers,” Bhuiyan said. “They raised me with good morals and strong faith. They taught me to put yourself in others’ shoes. Even if they hurt you, don’t take revenge. Forgive them. Move on. It will bring something good to you and them. My Islamic faith teaches me this, too.”

Bhuiyan’s appeal for mercy for his would-be killer proved to be unsuccessful, and Stroman was executed—but not before he saw the error of his worldview.

“I have the Islamic community joining in,” to get me clemency, Stroman told the *New York Times*, “spearheaded by one very remarkable man named Rais Bhuiyan, who is a survivor of my hate. His deep Islamic beliefs have gave him the strength to forgive the unforgiveable... that is truly inspiring to me, and should be an example for us all.”⁴

I spent much of my childhood in India, where Hindus and Muslims live and work together at numerous levels. The idea of Muslims being inherently violent goes against a lifetime of my observations. I had Muslim neighbors, friends, and classmates, and the notion that they were somehow more disposed toward violence was ridiculous.

So, after 9/11—and the relentless focus on Osama bin Laden, the September 11 terrorists, and their ilk—I’ve felt a responsibility to correct the distorted picture that has emerged of Islam.

The incessant drumbeat of negative news about Muslims has had a deep impact. A 2006 *USA Today*/Gallup poll revealed that 39 percent of Americans wanted Muslims to hold special identification cards.⁵ More recently, a March 2011 Gallup poll discovered that nearly three in ten Americans think American Muslims sympathize with Al-Qaeda, while barely 50 percent think they support the United States).⁶

At least four individuals have been murdered in the United States on account of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim feelings, with another seven killings possibly due to the same bigotry. Lesser acts of discrimination have ranged from Middle Eastern-looking passengers being denied seats on a commercial flight, to Arab

to the charms of peaceful protest.

“I feel so proud because our long struggle for an independent judiciary has borne fruit,” Shauqat Saddiq, a lawyer, told the *Washington Post*. “We fought for only one goal: the rule of law. Whoever sits in the justice’s seat, this has been a victory of the principle, not the person.”⁴⁸

And Pakistan is not the only Muslim country even in South Asia to have an inspirational ending in the past few years. In late 2008, in a little-known instance, the people of the small Indian Ocean island nation of Maldives brought down a tyrant, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, after thirty years of his autocratic rule, the longest in Asia at that point in time. Mass peaceful mobilization by the opposition candidate, former political prisoner Mohamed Nasheed, helped ensure that Gayoom finally conceded when he lost the presidential election to Nasheed in October. Gayoom was no slouch in the repression department. Demonstrators were badly beaten by the police, and critics were sentenced to long years in prison. Nasheed himself was brutally tortured before being forced into exile.

Nasheed has “earned a place in the history books as the person who brought an end to the thirty-year rule of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom—Asia’s longest-serving leader,” BBC reported. “To his supporters, Mr. Nasheed is a latter-day Nelson Mandela, overcoming the hardships of prison to secure an inspirational election win against the odds.”⁴⁹

A feature story in *Himal Southasian* magazine detailing Nasheed’s rise began with a stirring juxtaposition of events. “June 1990. After eighteen months in solitary confinement, [a political prisoner] was finally sentenced to a jail term of three and a half years. By the time the sentence was handed down, the damage caused by the regular torture he had endured had become overwhelming: his backbone was damaged, and he was suffering from internal bleeding,” the article read. “November 2008. There, standing before the chief justice of the Maldives, was that very writer and activist [ready to be sworn in].”⁵⁰

This saga was “no fairytale,” wrote Simon Shareef, but “the true story of a man’s fight for rights and justice on behalf of the people against a brutal autocracy.” “There is little doubt that the triumph of Nasheed, or ‘Anni,’ as he is widely known, will go down in Maldivian history as an enduring and inspirational tale.”⁵¹ But why only Maldives? This was an inspirational tale for the whole world. (Maldives did serve as a role model for protest leaders in Egypt, some of whom were aware of Nasheed’s triumph, and the fact that there has been a recent coup by elements aligned with Gayoom does not detract from the achievements of the Maldivian democratic movement.)

³Timothy Williams, “The Hated and the Hater, Both Touched by Crime,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2011, A15.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Marilyn Elias, “USA’s Muslims under a cloud,” *USA Today*, August 10, 2006, 1A.

⁶Frank Newport, “Republicans and Democrats Disagree on Muslim Hearings,” Gallup.com, March 9, 2011.

⁴⁸Pamela Constable, “In Pakistan, Elation Over Restoration of Judges,” *Washington Post*, March 17, 2009.

⁴⁹Olivia Lang, “‘Anni’ Heralds New Era in Maldives,” BBC News, October, 29, 2008.

⁵⁰Simon Shareef, “Democratic Dawn,” *Himal Southasian*, December 2008.

⁵¹Ibid.

agitation. The results were impressive, even in the face of the murders of dozens of protesters by Musharraf's allies (in the city of Karachi), and a massive bomb blast at a site where Chaudhry was due to give a speech. Musharraf was initially forced to accept a Supreme Court ruling when it reinstated Chaudhry as the chief justice, but then decided to dig in and crack down. He declared emergency rule and arrested thousands of lawyers, judges, and their allies in civil society. In fact, he reserved a fury for them that he didn't show toward religious fundamentalist parties, subjecting the lawyers to massive detentions, beatings and teargasing.

"If we define a 'lawyers' movement' as a coherent nationwide struggle by legal professionals, sustained over time and fought primarily in the streets, Pakistan would emerge as the only case," writes analyst Daud Munir. "The problem is that while Western policymakers are ready to extend billions of dollars in military aid to subdue the extremist impulse, they seem unwilling to engage with—or even to adequately acknowledge—the secular, reformist impulse in Pakistani society that is represented by the lawyers' movement."⁴⁵ "Global media coverage of Pakistan suggests a country of generals, corrupt politicians, and bearded lunatics, but the struggle to reinstate the chief justice had presented a different picture," writes Pakistani-British analyst Tariq Ali.⁴⁶

Even though the movement received favorable coverage in the United States, the official response was different. "People in the United States wonder why extremist militants in Pakistan are winning," lawyer Aitzaz Ahsan, a leader of the movement, wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed on December 23, 2007. "What they should ask is why does President Musharraf have so little respect for civil society—and why does he essentially have the backing of American officials?"⁴⁷

But domestic and international pressure forced Musharraf to hold elections. The results vindicated the protesters, with Musharraf's party being decimated. The game was up. Musharraf held on to the presidency for a few more months, but eventually gave up the ghost in August 2008 and fled to England. Democracy was restored, and the protesters triumphed. When Benazir Bhutto's widower, Asif Ali Zardari, procrastinated about restoring some of the top judges, the lawyers came out again in force in early 2009 and forced him to reinstall them. Such a victory, twice over, may be unprecedented in recent times.

The amazingly defiant lawyers' stir that took on and toppled Musharraf's military dictatorship demonstrated that the Muslim world is as fertile for the application of nonviolence as any other part of the planet. The movement was once more an extremely effective counter to the libel that Muslims—being followers of an allegedly intrinsically aggressive and violent religion—are immune

and Muslim organizations receiving nasty phone calls and e-mails. In a particularly nasty trend, many U.S. mosques have been firebombed, vandalized, and desecrated.

This distrust has been reflected at the official level. The recent revelations about the New York Police Department's surveillance of Muslim Americans (topped by special scrutiny for Shiite mosques and the screening of an anti-Muslim movie for recruits) is just the latest episode.

It's never been more important to understand Islam and its followers. According to a recent Pew report, roughly one in four people in the world practices Islam. There are 1.57 billion Muslims around the world, making Islam second only to Christianity as a global religion. And, if we are to understand Islam, there is no better place to start than South Asia, home to the largest population of Muslims in the world. Contrary to notions held by many people, two out of three Muslims are not Arab. "The Pew Forum study depicts the world's second-largest religion as complex and nuanced, challenging the notion that its trajectory is defined by a minority of Islamists," reports the British *Guardian*.⁷

Too few have asked the question as to whether there are qualities in Islam that make it compatible with nonviolence, and whether there are instances in history—and especially the modern world—that show this to be true. South Asia provides fertile ground for our explorations.

My research on Islam in general—and South Asian Islam in particular—provides a rebuttal to the general misperceptions of Islam by showing that the tradition of nonviolence and coexistence within the religion has been rich. These findings are invaluable for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. For Muslims, they reveal an alternative tradition that they can embrace; for non-Muslims, they will show a side of Islam they probably have never seen before.

In its source texts and the conduct of its prophet, is Islam a religion of peace? The answer would be a qualified yes.

Islam has never abjured the notion of war, and the Qur'an allows self-protection. Similarly, there are a number of instances of the Prophet Muhammad taking up arms. But the wars sanctioned by the religion and its texts are of a defensive nature, when the religion and its followers are under attack. The primacy of peace is emphasized.

Muslim nonviolence scholar K.G. Saiyidain asserts that the core of Islam is nonviolence, and that, even if there are circumstances in which Islam contemplates the possibility of war, the essential thing in life according to Islam is peace.⁸

⁴⁵Daud Munir, "Struggling for the Rule of Law: The Pakistani Lawyers' Movement," *Middle East Report* (251), Summer 2009, 37.

⁴⁶Tariq Ali, *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power*, (New York: Scribner, 2008), 164.

⁴⁷Aitzaz Ahsan, "Pakistan's Tyranny Continues," *New York Times*, December 23, 2007, 11.

⁷Peter Beaumont, "One in Four People is Muslim, Says Study," *Guardian*, October 8 2009.

⁸Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003), 38.

“Life in Islam is sacred and to be respected,” Bangladeshi author Tamizul Haque says. “Islam therefore advocates peace as a fundamental principle of life, and it not only takes all the necessary measures to secure it but also to maintain it.”⁹

Professor Muhammad Abu-Nimer contends that Islam does not need to be thought of as an “absolute pacifist” religion for Muslims to engage in nonviolent resistance campaigns and activities, since there are abundant signposts within Islam that can provide ample guidance.¹⁰

So, Islam stresses values such as compassion, benevolence, wisdom, and justice, which are compatible with the practice of nonviolence. A corollary to this is the emphasis on performing good deeds toward everyone, not just Muslims.

My journey of exploration starts with the founder of the religion, the Prophet Muhammad, and Islam’s holy book, the Qur’an.

The Prophet Muhammad is a role model for devout Muslims. In support of the fact that Islam places an emphasis on nonviolence, scholars point to the conduct of the prophet in Mecca. For twelve long years, he endured persecution in that city without fighting back, emphasizing instead the virtues of forbearance (*sabr*) and patience. Even after his emigration to Medina, Muhammad often used skillful diplomacy instead of warfare to placate his enemies. And when he triumphantly reentered Mecca, he forgave the inhabitants instead of taking revenge. There are other instances in his life that have him engaged in peacemaking and conflict arbitration, important episodes to build upon. The founder of Islam—the most venerated figure in Muslim history—provides a guide map to embark on the path of nonviolence.

As for Islam’s holy book, we enter into the realm of endless debate about its contents and about which particular passages take precedence. The Qur’an clearly contains, however, several verses forbidding aggression. And there are strict rules of conduct for warfare, with, for example, restrictions on harming children, women, and old men.

Muslims consider the Hadith, the preachings and deeds of Muhammad that have been passed down over time, second to the Qur’an in importance. There are many commendations of nonviolence within Hadith literature, too. Such references in the Qur’an and the Hadith demonstrate the place of nonviolence within Islam.

The nature of the spread of Islam has also generated controversy. Critics charge that, even if the actual conversion of people to the religion wasn’t at the point of a sword, at the least it was made possible through the conquest of lands in

thankfulness and praise of God.” In conjunction with Gandhi’s famous salt march in 1930, Azad organized a nonviolent raid on Dharasana to protest the British tax on salt. Muslim scholar Muhammad Mujeeb says of Azad that “the Qur’an inspired all his thinking,” and that he avoided the pitfalls of “accepting traditional interpretations by deriving his opinions from other sources.”⁴³

Another Gandhian Muslim, Zakir Husain, earned such stature as an educationist that he was chosen as the third President of independent India. Husain’s main project was to have a modern and expansive version of Islam. “Releasing woman from the four walls of an unhygienic house” was essential, he argued. And the Islam he believed in was “the religion that made believers out of unbelievers, civilized men out of barbarians, that gave woman a status and a place in society in which she had none before, which recognizes only an aristocracy of character amidst a brotherhood of man.”⁴⁴

The above sketches profile only some of the Indian Muslims who joined with Gandhi in his campaign, sharing with him his values of nonviolence and religious tolerance. They ranged from social workers and politicians to educationists and administrators. And after India’s independence, many of them went on to serve the new country in various capacities. (Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, an active participant in the Gandhian struggle, also became President of India, in the 1970s.) The commitment of Indian Muslim Gandhians to Gandhi’s program and their determination that nonviolence and pluralism were the best values to effect change went a long way toward ensuring that India became a secular republic, committed to the full protection of people of all religions. While these figures are well known and highly regarded in India, they are unheard of in the West. The fact that numerous Muslims joined with the best-known proponent of nonviolence gives the lie to the perception that peacefulness is anathema to Muslims.

Modern South Asia also provides several examples of predominantly nonviolent uprisings successfully toppling dictators. One occurred back in 1969, when a popular movement in Pakistan forced military ruler Ayub Khan to step down. Another one, in Bangladesh in 1990, caused dictator Muhammad Ershad to abdicate and democracy to be restored.

But the most incredible instances have taken place in the recent past. An amazingly brave nonviolent movement occurred in Pakistan. It was precipitated by military ruler Pervez Musharraf’s wanton dismissal in 2007 of the Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry. In response, lawyers’ groups and other segments of Pakistani civil society mounted a sustained peaceful

⁹Tamizul Haque, *Islam: Prophet Muhammad as Warrior and Peace Maker* (Dhaka: Syed Farooque Azam, 1982), 15.

¹⁰Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam*, 182.

⁴³Muhammad Mujeeb, *Indian Muslims* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), in Rajmohan Gandhi, *Understanding the Muslim Mind* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), 228-232.

⁴⁴Muhammad Mujeeb, *Dr. Zakir Husain* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1972), in *ibid.*, 291-292.

Hussain, proving for the umpteenth time the incredible resonance of a good example.)³⁸

Muslims often reciprocated Gandhi's affection. "Our Hindu brothers ... are our brothers in all truth, for the Holy Qur'an teaches that the friends of the faith are our brothers," two Muslim leaders, Hakim Ajmal Khan and Mukhtar Ansari, said in 1922. "Let us remain faithful to our cause, our country, and to the leader we have chosen—Mahatma Gandhi." Another prominent Muslim, Abid Husain, declared, "In Calcutta and Noakhali, the fire of hatred was put out by the love of by Mahatma Gandhi."³⁹ And then there are the various effusive praises that the Muslim personalities I've highlighted heaped upon him.

"We can suggest that Muslim trust of Gandhi was based on four things: his respect for religion and religious commitment; his regard for Muslims as full members of what he once called India's 'joint family'; his peace-loving nature; and his honest friendship," writes scholar Roland Miller.⁴⁰

The most prominent Indian Muslim Gandhian was Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a highly respected scholar and theologian who headed Gandhi's Congress Party for a number of years. In sovereign India, he rose to the highest ranks of government, being appointed education minister by Jawaharlal Nehru. Azad was a renowned theologian—no less—who was awarded the title of Maulana (an honorific bestowed on respected Muslim scholars) for his religious achievements.

Ramin Jahanbegloo, an Iranian dissident intellectual in exile in Canada, considers Azad a role model for Muslims in his advocacy of pluralism and peace. "Maulana Azad clearly accepted principles of nonviolence and participated in Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent movement," writes Jahanbegloo. "The end result was Azad's unequivocal endorsement of Hindu-Muslim peaceful coexistence in an independent India."⁴¹

"Islam does not commend narrow-mindedness and racial and religious prejudice," Azad wrote in 1913. "It does not make the recognition of merit and virtue of human benevolence, mercy and love dependent upon and subject to distinctions of race and religion. Rather, Islam actually teaches us to respect every man who is good, whatever his religion, and to be drawn towards merits and virtues, whatever be the religion or race of the person who possesses them."⁴²

In 1922, he offered a statement in court when arrested for giving anti-British speeches that Gandhi termed "the most forceful and truthful statement offered by a *satyagrahi* [nonviolent protester]": "When I ponder on the great and significant history of the convicts' dock and find that the honor of standing in that place belongs to me today, my soul becomes steeped in

the Middle East and beyond. Reality was more complicated, however. Contrary to stereotype, the message of Islam was often extended peacefully by Sufi orders.

The way Islam spread in South Asia at the ground level illustrates this point. The more lightly Hindu regions on the subcontinent's western and eastern flanks—where the notions of religion and caste had infiltrated less—were the most easily persuaded. And the process of conversion to Islam corresponded with the growth of settled farming. On the western edge, in the Punjab and Sind regions, Sufi saints formed alliances with clan leaders, and were granted tracts of lands by kings to build shrines. At the other end, in the Bengal area, Sufi saints went along on the drive to clear forests and convert land into rice-farming land. They built mosques along the way. On both flanks, Muslims became numerous, much more so than in the heartland, where established practices and religious customs held sway.¹¹

In superb research on the largest concentration of Muslims in South Asia and among the largest concentration of Muslims anywhere in the world—the Bengali Muslims—Professor Richard Eaton has shown that the process of conversion was a slow, peaceful process that took centuries. It was initiated when Sufi pioneers accompanied the clearing of the land in the Bengal deltaic region. These individuals were granted land to help push the conversion of the land from forests to agriculture. This was meant to foster progress in the area.¹²

These pioneers could be either Hindu or Muslim, and, if they were Hindu, the focal point of the local community became a temple. "Since most pioneers were Muslims, however, mosques comprised the majority of institutions established, with the result that the dominant mode of piety that evolved on East Bengal's economic frontier was Islamic," says Eaton. Too, the spread of printed matter granted the Qur'an almost magical powers. "In the east, then, Islam came to be understood as a religion, not only of the ax and the plough, but also of the book," writes Eaton.¹³

The reputation for violence that Islam has is also due to the extreme magnification of the episodes of violence in the religion. A good example is India. If you talk to a lot of Hindus, the widespread notion is that Muslim invaders destroyed hundreds, if not thousands, of temples and engaged in a cultural, if not literal, genocide. The reality is quite different.

"Had instances of temple desecration been driven by a 'theology of iconoclasm,' as some have claimed, such a theology would have committed Muslims in India to destroying all temples everywhere," writes Eaton.¹⁴

Instead, what happened infrequently (eighty times over more than 500

³⁸John Leland, "Speaking Freely Where Fear Rules," *New York Times*, http://nytimes.com/2010/02/02/world/middleeast/02/baghdad.html?_r=1, February 1, 2010.

³⁹Dallmayr, "Gandhi and Islam," 149.

⁴⁰Ibid., 160.

⁴¹Ramin Jahanbegloo, <http://jahanbegloo.com/articles/mus-gan.html>

⁴²Ibid.

¹¹Richard Eaton, *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 36-38.

¹²Ibid., 264.

¹³Ibid., 264-265.

¹⁴Ibid., 126.

years) was driven by a desire to punish kings by desecrating the temple most closely associated with the ruling deity. In doing this, Muslim conquerors were extending a practice that was carried out by Hindu kings in prior centuries.¹⁵

On the Southwest extremity of India, a different—and peaceful—process of Islamization happened. The Malabar subregion of Kerala became an important trading post. Arab traders came there in large numbers. “Eventually, a sizeable Muslim community emerged through Arab intermarriage with the local population,” writes Eaton. Kerala has one of the largest Muslim concentrations in India, famed for its high socioeconomic development and for the harmony in which the various religions coexist (Muslims and Christians form roughly 20 percent each, with the majority Hindus comprising almost all the rest).¹⁶

We then turn to streams within Islam. Several Muslim sects have exhibited a pacifist bent. The most famous of these are the Sufis, whose pacifism and tolerance are acknowledged even by many critics of Islam. Sufism has played a big part in the Islam of South, Southeast, and Central Asia, hence I am baffled that this aspect of the religion has been almost completely ignored in the United States. Either it has not been acknowledged to exist, or if it has, it’s been treated as something that is extraneous to the religion.

This notion is erroneous. Sufism has been an integral part of Islam since its founding, and has played a significant role in South Asia. “Muslim mystics or Sufis have made a highly important and enduring contribution to the development of a composite, syncretistic ethos” in India, writes scholar A.R. Momin. “The Sufi saints drew upon essential Islamic precepts, especially the Islamic tenets of equality and brotherhood of humankind, compassion and tolerance, and service to humanity,” he states, adding that “Sufi saints drew Muslims and non-Muslims alike to their fold through their simplicity and sincerity, their broadmindedness, tolerance and compassion, and built bridges of understanding, amity and conciliation between people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds.”¹⁷

To the two major aspects of Islam delineated in the Qur’an—*islam*, or surrender to God, and *iman*, or faith—the Sufis have attached a third dimension, said to be added by Muhammad himself. This is *ihsan*: the notion of doing beautiful things through the constant awareness of the presence of God.¹⁸

The notion of forgiveness also loomed large in Sufism. Shaikh Nizamuddin Awliya, a legendary Sufi mystic, said that evil should be countered with forbearance, forgiveness, and kindness, a truly Gandhian notion. So, he said, if someone placed a thorn in your path and you did the same to him, the whole

When Gandhi went to South Africa to work as a lawyer, he came to know well a number of Muslims, such as his employer, Dada Abdulla Sheth, who was the principal owner of the firm of which Gandhi was the legal representative. It was here he launched his first campaign, against discrimination toward Asians in that country—a category that included both Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi attempted to bond both communities together, and tried to come up with a Hindu equivalent of jihad defined in the most rightful way—the struggle a person has within himself to become a better human being. The result was *satyagraha*, a term now globally famous, which literally means “truth force,” but has connotations of “civil disobedience.” Here, Gandhi showed his “extraordinary facility in using language to inspire and direct the religious awareness of his hearers,” writes scholar Sheila McDonough. From then on, he was convinced of the need for unity between Hindus and Muslims.³⁴

Once Gandhi came back to India, he joined in several movements with extensive Muslim membership. Although some of these campaigns were more successful than others, he succeeded in forming lasting bonds. He was dogged throughout, however, by his chief adversary, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, whose vision of a separate state for the subcontinent’s Muslims contrasted sharply with his. And when India’s partition came about, the accompanying violence left him distraught. But he never gave up his idea of “heart unity” between Hindus and Muslims, and his last fast was impelled in good part as protest against the forced exodus of Muslims from Delhi. He was assassinated in January 1948 by a Hindu extremist for allegedly being too pro-Muslim.³⁵

Gandhi studied the work of Muslim reformer Shibli Numani and, through him, the lives of early Muslim leaders in order to understand how to combine piety with creative action. For him, Muslim extremism was based on “a corrupt understanding of Islam.” “Islam is not a false religion,” he said. “Let Hindus study it reverently, and they will love it even as I do. ... If Hindus set their house in order, I have not a shadow of doubt that Islam will respond in a manner worthy of its liberal traditions.”³⁶

Gandhi was adept at using Islamic imagery to inspire Muslims. He thought the Prophet Muhammad’s struggles akin to the efforts of the Hindu God Ram to set up a new society. He compared Muhammad’s exodus to Medina to India’s independence campaign. And he cited the martyrdom of Hassan and Hussain, the grandsons of Muhammad, correlating their action to the Hindu notions of self-sacrifice and renunciation.³⁷ (At a gathering in Baghdad in 2010, Iraqi Member of Parliament Ali al-Allaq proudly noted Gandhi’s invocation of

¹⁵Ibid., 127.

¹⁶Ibid., 37.

¹⁷A.R. Momin, “The Role of Sufis in Fostering Inter-Cultural Understanding and Conciliation in India,” in *The Islamic Path: Sufism, Politics and Society in India*, ed. Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Rainbow Publishers, 2006), 260-261.

¹⁸Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1978), 29.

³⁴Ibid., 146-147.

³⁵Ibid., 149.

³⁶Ibid., 156-157.

³⁷Ibid., 159.

their forbearance and self-restraint than for their fierceness. The reply rendered him speechless.”²⁸

Scholar Attar Chand states, “It would indeed not be wrong to say that even as Mahatma Gandhi was the master of the practice of nonviolence at the personal level, Ghaffar Khan proved to be its more successful practitioner at the group or societal level.”²⁹

One of the main values that Khan derived from Islam and the Prophet Muhammad was *sabr* (patience) in the face of oppression. “Great troubles were given to the disciples [of Muhammad],” he told his people. “They were made to lie on the hot sand: A rope was put on their necks and they were dragged in the streets. Because of patience, the Muslims succeeded.”³⁰

The members of Khan’s movement imbibed the same values. “We did not follow nonviolence because Gandhi told us,” a Khidmatgar member told researcher Mukulika Banerjee. “We followed it because in Islam our prophet said that violence does not solve anything.”³¹

Nonviolence, religious tolerance, women’s rights and social justice—certainly Khan could have done a lot worse than try to spread these ideals. And he did it while deriving his inspiration from a religion vilified by some as being intrinsically intolerant, and practiced it among people thought by many to be inherently violent and incapable of social reform. Khan deserves a better fate than to languish in obscurity. And we need to learn from Khan and the Khidmatgar movement how wrong it is to label entire cultures and religions. The “Frontier Gandhi” is a person whose achievements can truly be compared with the original.

Khan’s “claim to a Muslim platform is certainly not weaker than that of Osama bin Laden or Mullah Omar,” writes Rajmohan Gandhi, the Mahatma’s grandson. “The open and accessible life of Badshah Khan, who was rooted in the Peshawar valley, with links to Jalalabad and Kabul, is a contrast to the concealed and mysterious figure of Kandahar’s Mullah Omar.”³²

Khan was far from the only Muslim to be associated with the Gandhian struggle for Indian freedom. There were several others. Indeed, Gandhi continually sought inspiration and support from Muslim sources.

The Mahatma himself followed a strand of Hinduism that with its emphasis on service and on poetry and songs bore similarities to Sufi Islam. Gandhi’s family was very open-minded, and Gandhi himself had an assortment of friends from various religious backgrounds since a young age. His mother, Putlibai, though a Hindu, belonged to the syncretic Pranami sect, which drew much from Islam.³³

landscape would be strewn with thorns.

The tolerant and pluralistic spirit of the Sufis had the most profound impact on the great Mughal Emperor Akbar, two of whose closest friends were the children of a Sufi saint. The arts and poetry under Akbar became heavily influenced by Sufism, and Akbar was a devout follower of the illustrious Sufi saint Moinuddin Chishti. Akbar adopted the Sufi notion of peace and tolerance toward all as his reigning creed, and went beyond by conceptualizing Din-I-Ilahi, a syncretic moral code that sought to incorporate the best from the region’s religions.¹⁹ Akbar’s reign is still regarded in India as a high point of religious co-existence and harmony, with modern-day intellectuals such as Nobel laureate Amartya Sen citing him as a role model for posterity.

The attempt at finding a union of Hinduism and Islam (a softer version of the religion) reached its acme under Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan and the great-grandson of Akbar. He became influenced by Sufi thought quite early on in life and started compiling biographical studies of the early Sufi masters (one of which was translated into Arabic in his lifetime). He wrote mystical poetry and tried to find common ground between Hinduism and Islam. He even translated one of the great Hindu philosophical treatises, the Upanishads, into Persian. (This volume, in turn, was translated into Latin by a Frenchman, Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, in 1801, and was one of the major reasons for European fascination with Indian philosophy, since philosophers such as Schopenhauer first came into contact with Indian thought through Anquetil-Duperron’s work.)²⁰ In his inner circle were a Jew and a Hindu. Shikoh aroused strong opposition among the orthodox Muslim clergy. He facilitated the translation of Hindu holy books and composed a treatise, *Majma ul-Bahrain* (The Mingling of Two Oceans)—the oceans here being Islam and Hinduism. He said that the two religions were like twin sisters or two columns, both equally valid as a path to salvation. Sadly, his own brother Aurangzeb opposed him, and, after defeating Shikoh in battle, executed him and launched a reign of intolerance. (Interestingly, Aurangzeb’s sister, Jahan Ara, and daughter, Zeb-un-Nissa, were Sufis who penned works of literature and poetry, but he seemed to be more indulgent toward them.)²¹

The impact of Sufism can be seen everywhere in South Asia. Shrines of Sufi saints, equally popular among Hindus and Muslims alike, dot the Indian subcontinent. (In fact, perhaps the most revered Sufi shrine in India is in the city of my boarding school.) These shrines are an amazing testament to religious harmony, with people from all faiths and walks of life visiting them in an act of

²⁸Ibid., 139-140.

²⁹Attar Chand, *India, Pakistan and Afghanistan: A Study of Freedom Struggle and Abdul Ghaffar Khan* (New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 1989), 41.

³⁰Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the North West Frontier* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2001), 123.

³¹Ibid., 149.

³²Rajmohan Gandhi, *Ghaffar Khan: Nonviolent Badshah of the Pakhtuns* (New Delhi: Viking, 2004), 274.

³³Fred Dallmayr, “Gandhi and Islam: A Heart-and-Mind Unity?” in *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi for the Twenty First Century*, ed., Douglas Allen (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 145.

¹⁹Ibid., 344-360.

²⁰David E. Cartwright, *Historical Dictionary of Schopenhauer’s Philosophy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowan and Littlefield), 77.

²¹Ibid.361-363.

nonsectarian piety. The fact that the guardians of the tombs—as well as those buried within—are Muslims is irrelevant to the legions who come to pay their respect and offer decorative cloth as a mark of reverence.

The Kashmir region in South Asia has traditionally had a very broad and syncretic version of Islam flourishing in its culture, something that may be very difficult to imagine because of the turmoil that has engulfed the region since an insurgency started against the Indian government two decades ago. (Interestingly, one of the projects of some of the insurgent groups has been to replace Kashmiri Islam with a puritanical, Wahhabi version, which has met with pushback from the area's inhabitants.) The type of Islam followed by Kashmiris is no surprise when you trace its antecedents. The disseminators of Islam here were Sufi saints, revered by both Hindus and Muslims alike. Their influence was so strong that they were advisers to the Muslim kings, impressing upon them the notion that a ruler is a “shadow of God, and God's mercy embraces all, including non-Muslims.”²²

In Kashmir, “as elsewhere in India, Islam attracted a large number of followers principally through the missionary endeavors of Sufi mystics,” writes Yoginder Sikand, who has extensively researched religious coexistence in South Asia. “Scores of ‘low’ castes, victims of an inhuman caste system, sought to escape Brahminical tyranny by embracing Islam.”²³

Sufi influence can be also seen in the distinctly South Asian art forms that are extremely popular in the region. One prominent example is the devotional music *qawwali*, the most famous exponent of which in the West was the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who collaborated with rock stars like Peter Dinklage and Eddie Vedder. From Pakistan, the rock band Junoon, which has used Sufism as a touchstone, has attained megaphenomenon status in Pakistan and India, selling tens of millions of albums, and attaining a devoted following throughout South Asia and among immigrant populations from the Indian subcontinent settled elsewhere. From India, you have Allah Rakha Rahman, the Oscar-winning composer of the *Slumdog Millionaire* soundtrack. Rahman has been a living legend in India, and his newfound international fame is just a capstone. Rahman has taken the best lessons from the worldview that Sufism has to offer—our mission in life is to overcome barriers and unite the world in love and peace.

“Love can transcend all these segmental issues,” he said. “You need to find a larger perspective which bridges all these worlds—West and East, Muslim and non-Muslim, or whatever else divides us.”²⁴ Performers like Junoon and Rahman—and ordinary South Asian Muslims—are keeping Sufism's flame alive.

Lesser-known South Asian Muslim sects, such as the Ahmadiyyas, have

also concentrated on Islam's pacifist aspects. The Ahmadiyya movement is controversial on many levels. Many devout Muslims don't consider them true co-religionists, mainly since their founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, proclaimed himself a messiah, hence negating the notion in Islam that Muhammad is the final prophet. Another area of difference is the notion and meaning of jihad. “The fundamental revision of the idea of jihad is a central element in the Ahmadi worldview,” writes Israeli Professor Yohanan Friedmann. “This revision amounts to the virtual renunciation of military jihad in the modern period.”²⁵ Groups like the Ahmadiyyas deserve to be better known to an American audience that often reflexively pictures violence when thinking about Islam.

And then we come to the many instances of pacifist conduct in modern South Asia.

One of the region's most remarkable examples of nonviolent resistance, which has been almost completely ignored in the West, is that of Khan Abdul Ghaffar “Badshah” Khan and his movement. Khan, a Pashtun friend of Gandhi, founded a peace force of more than 100,000 Pashtuns—the Khudai Khidmatgar or the Servants of God—dedicated to social reform and nonviolent protest in the area of the world currently most closely associated with terrorism—the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Nicknamed the “Frontier Gandhi” for his association with the Mahatma, Khan, who had the same ethnicity (and grew up in the same area) as the Taliban, nevertheless drew much more inspiration from the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad than from Mohandas.

“There is nothing surprising in a Muslim or a Pashtun like me subscribing to the creed of nonviolence,” Khan said. “It is not a new creed. It was followed fourteen hundred years ago by the prophet all the time when he was in Mecca.”²⁶ In spite of massive repression by the British, he and his followers kept to their creed. The movement had as its bedrock principles nonviolence, societal reform, religious tolerance, social justice, and women's rights. “As we have seen with Gandhi, the leadership of Ghaffar Khan was, above all, creative,” writes Joan Bondurant, a scholar of nonviolence. “He used Islamic precepts to communicate to his people the need for changes in the traditional. The effect which the Khudai Khidmatgar had on Frontier society is incalculable.”²⁷

For Khan, Islam's core was nonviolence and tolerance. “I cited chapter and verse from the Qur'an to show the great emphasis that Islam had laid on peace, which is its coping stone.” Khan recounted to Gandhi an argument he had with a Punjabi Muslim about the compatibility of Islam with nonviolence. “I also showed to him how the greatest figures in Islamic history were known more for

²²A. Q. Rafiqi, “Impact of Sufism in Kashmir,” in *The Islamic Path: Sufism, Politics and Society in India*, ed. Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Rainbow Publishers, 2006), 154.

²³Yoginder Sikand, *Sacred Spaces: Exploring Traditions of Shared Faith in India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004), 207.

²⁴Shoma Chaudhury, “The Mystic Master,” *Tehelka*, January 24, 2009.

²⁵Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 178.

²⁶N. Radhakrishnan, *Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan: The Apostle of Nonviolence* (New Delhi: Gandhi Smriti, 1998), 1.

²⁷Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 143.