

Report on the Workshop and Ideas for Public Programs

As an initial outcome of the Beyond Golden Age and Decline project, scholars benefited from the interdisciplinary exchanges among participants at the Forum, where common problems and solutions were discussed, and ideas for publication and collaboration emerged. The academic audience of specialists in the history of Muslim societies, world historians, and practitioners became aware of numerous key issues related to the history of Muslim societies and world history as a whole that will inform future public programs and policies in these areas.

At the outset of the workshop, the summary from the conference by Principal Investigator Cemil Aydin, with Giancarlo Casale and Sinem Arcek laid out areas for further work developing public programs around these ideas. Under the leadership of Kevin McFadden of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the workshop group was tasked with deciding how the research findings from this complex body of scholarly work might be disseminated to the public. Planners building upon these events can glean from the presentations, readings, and workshop discussions posted online to develop a variety of public programs for various audiences.

Summary of problems and issues identified at the Forum

Pervasive but flawed perceptions about the history of Muslim societies after the 14th century suggest an agenda for approaching this set of problems, because they are all rooted in ideas about the history of modernity between Europe and the rest of the world. The past 500 years of history have marginalized Muslims by classifying their societies as oppressive, as fighting against the West, as uncreative, incapable of invention, and as being in a state of inexorable decline at the point of Europe's rise to global dominance. According to these perceptions, Muslim societies not only failed to contribute anything to the construction of global modernity, but actively resisted modernization, or at best achieved only superficial, ineffectual imitation of some aspects in response to irresistible pressures. This entire colonial set of ideas has not fallen away, but new elements have been added to it through current events and ongoing political struggles due to the crisis of September 11 and its aftermath, the Arab-Israeli issue, and wars in the region, now engulfing not only the Middle East but Central Asia and even beyond.

Islamophobia is a more virulent form of prejudice, building upon these misperceptions and reaching toward the longer roots of distrust and rejection of Muslims in European culture. Othering and dehumanization of Muslims does rely on various scholarly arguments about the essential incompatibility of Islam. It is similar to the dehumanizing of blacks and modernity, rather than deriving from common racial notions of difference. Thus, Muslims are dehumanized by using various sets of historical categories, some related to Islam, some sharing similar assumptions about tradition and decadence with attitudes toward other non-European civilizations. The Bridging Cultures initiative of NEH encourages scholars, artists, and others in the humanities to create bridges and correct these stereotypes and misleading categories in the public discourse. Some of these are based on innocent

misunderstandings, but others are quite consciously deployed dehumanizing tools of exclusion. Each requires different responses and methods for changing public perceptions.

The Forum revealed that good scholarship refutes the arguments on which these perceptions are based, showing that the distinction between “Islam” and “The West” is an artificial one. Civilizations were not surrounded by walls and borders that had to be breached in order to make contact. People, ideas, and material things crossed without friction and have done so for centuries.

Messages from the Forum

The idea of decline can be countered by stories of shared and connected histories across empires, and by drawing attention to products that changed global consumption patterns and had profound effects in the political and social spheres. Coffee, textiles, ceramics, and even weaponry provide examples of global stories that illuminate the development of the modern world. Biographies and stories challenge perceptions of pervasive conflict and decline by highlighting individuals and intellectual achievements that represent counternarratives. For example, Hindu-Muslim interaction is illustrated by the literary output of a Hindu court official who served several Mughal emperors, or by the profound influence of indigenous informants on Europeans in the development of new academic disciplines such as linguistics, archaeology, and religious studies. Enlightenment thinkers drew upon knowledge of the larger world, and ideas stemming from encounters with religiously and racially pluralistic indigenous societies, for example.

Public exposure to artistic and literary artifacts can correct both the perception that culture was only created from the political center. Artistic and literary production outside of courtly production highlights social life among non-courtly elites and ordinary people. Islamic art is not a phenomenon isolated from other periods and cultures. Its expressions were not limited to a past golden age nor did it come to an end two centuries ago. Islamic art must be viewed within a framework of transregional and intercultural connections, and change over time. For example, Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal architecture were part of a global discourse that expressed the imperial presence, but was embedded in the expansion of urban spaces in which new social and cultural institutions were emerging.

Viewing the history of Islam through world historical frames corrects the tendency toward Islamic exceptionalism by showing how Muslim societies were involved in large-scale processes of change all over the world. For example, viewing Muslim societies from 1300-1900 in terms of the worldwide transition from large-scale urban agricultural societies to nation-states as globalized spaces in which intensified linkages, exchange of commodities have brought about new cultural and social forms. The Mediterranean Sea can be a frame for viewing changes in European, North African and West Asian societies that cuts across dichotomies of East and West, Europe and Islam.

In many sub-fields received wisdom has been questioned by new research in recently available archives. The notion of a static Ottoman society in decline has been replaced by a more dynamic view of socially mobile groups attempting to limit the power of the sultanate through economic, political and legal means. Patient archival research has disproven the assumption that Ottoman lags in technology attributed to Islamic conservatism caused

them to lose military superiority. The notion of static imitation in the fields of legal and political thought, either devolving into imitation of past legal scholarship, or accommodating itself uncritically to existing political structures, has been challenged by careful reading of rarely used sources. Investigation of court records, often little accessed by scholars, provides more complex perspectives on Muslim society, overturning outdated notions of decline and social stagnation and imperviousness to change in contrast to dynamic, rising, mobile European society. The notion that non-Muslim communities in Muslim societies suffered a long decline following a Golden Age of tolerance gives way to a more complex picture of semi-autonomous communities who were recognized by the government as corporate units with rights and duties, living under the rule of law, and partaking in inter-communal relations in various ways. Scholars with access to these court materials note that the millet system could not have survived for so long had it not enjoyed a measure of legitimacy and met people's needs for order and justice.

Matters of consensus emerging from the Forum

Among the main areas of consensus at the Forum were the following points that constitute the main messages to be disseminated to the public:

1. There was absolute consensus that the paradigm of Muslim history being one of golden age followed by stagnation then collapse is wrong and needs to be discarded.
2. The importance of the empires remains debatable, but there is agreement that study of the period must look beyond the political center to view the workings of Muslim societies in other significant regions.
3. In the field of legal studies, the idea that Islamic law—*shari'ah*—is timeless and unchanging is both ahistorical and misleading.
4. The idea that the history of Islam is characterized by insularity and exclusiveness is completely wrong, as opposed to the history of the West being open and expansive. To the contrary, Islamic history is also characterized by openness and dynamism, and the period 1300-1900 saw significant expansion of Muslim populations in peripheral regions..
5. Understanding the history of Islam as reflected in current scholarship is important for understanding Muslim societies, but also for understanding the history of the world.

Planning public programs

Workshop leaders and participants in Charlottesville addressed the challenge of distilling for the wider public the complex scholarship presented at the Forum at George Mason University. They developed ideas and frameworks for future projects built upon these ideas. Among the points of interest that are critical to changing the public discourse about Islam and the period since 1300 are the following:

- The Mughal and Ottoman empires were not homogenously Muslim, and included a significant non-Muslim populations—few people realize this.
- Most Muslims did not live under the empires during the period after 1500, so African and Asian Islam are important and need to be made familiar to a public accustomed to hearing about Islam in relation to the Middle East.

Beyond Golden Age & Decline: Legacy of Muslim Societies in Global Modernity, 1300-1900 Workshop Summary

- In Europe until the 19th century it was illegal not to be a Christian, and in the post-Reformation period individuals had to adhere to one sect or another; to the contrary, as enshrined in Islamic law, and under the policies of the empires and other states during the period, it was not illegal to be non-Muslim.. More Christians lived in the Middle East and Asia than anywhere else in the world.
- Interactivity is very important in considering the history of Muslim societies in this period, into which and from which many ideas, technologies, people and goods were flowing. These lands were not isolated in any way, contrary to the idea that they were slumbering giants until European contact. There is no evidence to support this notion.
- Instead of asking what went wrong, or falling back on a narrative of decline, we need to re-examine the process by which modernity emerged on a world-wide scale. The process of changing public and academic views about decline and the rise of the West is not unique to Muslim societies in the early modern period. Changing views of China are undergoing a similarly fraught process of revision of outdated ideas based upon inadequate data.
- In summary, while the concepts and ideas proceeding from this scholarship may not be easily accessible for the public, they have the potential to displace simplistic notions about decline and resistance to acceptance of modernity—often assumed to be related to these societies' adherence to Islam. Effective presentation of alternative narratives across a broad spectrum can challenge such ingrained ideas and give a more multi-focal perspective on the emergence of global modernity.

Approaches to the content

Workshop participants expressed anxiety about the diversity of opinion and the specificity of the questions that the scholars ask. Rather than trying to distill a complex message into sound bites, the workshop would identify a variety of vehicles for these different messages in visual, textual, and other forms.

The content requires a layered approach. Some audiences—even sophisticated ones—are in need of very basic information on what is Islam and who are Muslims. The American public has been relentlessly exposed to negative information about Muslims, with broadside assertions about a propensity toward violence, endemic conflict with the West, and anti-modern attitudes among Muslims. These pervasive attitudes affect how questions are asked, how answers are heard, and how new information is processed. Basic information on Islam and Muslims should be integrated into public programs related to the content. Similarly, members of the public in Muslim societies are often ill-informed about Western societies, and harbor similar misperceptions about the way ordinary people live. As a small minority of the American population, Muslims are nonetheless a mirror of American society in their diversity. A significant portion of American Muslims are African American, a growing number is Hispanic, and Euro-Americans are present, alongside immigrant Muslims from Asia, Africa, and Europe. One approach is to emphasize this diversity among Muslims and explain it in terms of the openness of Muslim society over time and its spread across three continents in the fourteen centuries of its existence. Historical discussions about religious tolerance here can emphasize the legacy of religious

tolerance in Muslim societies, of which many in western nations are unaware. The atmosphere of growing intolerance in post-colonial nations has nearly erased this idea of tolerance, and replaced it with the impression of endemic sectarian and intercommunal violence.

There is an organized, growing Islamophobic movement and its assumptions need to be identified and challenged, its methods isolated and discredited. The problem of Islamic terminology being given pejorative meanings on a routine basis must be countered by understanding that includes awareness that Islamic understanding of these terms is neither monolithic nor historically static. Words like *jihad*, *madrassa*, *fatwa*, *shari'ah* need to be highlighted in public programs and media interventions. Fair play is an American characteristic on which to build.

What audiences are we are trying to reach with which aspects of the message?

Certain aspects of this complex of ideas may be most appropriate and needed for audiences in different spheres, including cultural, economic, artistic, legal, journalistic, educational messages and ideas. Workshop practitioners outlined varied approaches and projects to reaching such audiences.

Public and Private Education initiatives must meet the curriculum needs of teachers and students in secondary education, but also include emphasis on religious and civic literacy at all levels. At the elementary level, diversity studies include information and stories about communities in the US and the world, holidays, dress, and other customs, but also stress the U. S. civic framework of religious liberty, civil rights and citizens' responsibilities to uphold them. Advanced Placement history courses, as well as world history and world geography are taught in most schools at the secondary level, meaning that there is already a place in the curriculum for study of these topics (world religions, early modern history, modern history). Educators at the post-secondary level, scholars in other fields, and professionals in public education institutions such as museums and libraries could benefit from programs focused on their needs, and in turn would become providers of this information to their publics.

The out-of-school, **adult general public**, which includes library and museum visitors, arts and folklore consumers, offer additional opportunities for outreach. The subgroup of **interfaith community groups** and religious communities is important as a specialized audience, and should include the full range of traditions practiced in the US, and not just those of the Abrahamic tradition. Addressing misunderstandings and drawing connections between and among various faith traditions helps overcome the lack of public knowledge and as negative mindsets. Programs may address common issues such as stereotyping, to which many faith groups have been and continue to be subjected, and suggest how to alleviate these problems.

The **American Muslim community** is both an audience and an asset in improving knowledge about Islam and Muslim history. Several Muslim organizations were represented in the workshop and generated ideas for education of youth and adults, and conducting outreach through Muslim institutions. A wide variety of programs including political and media engagement, civil rights work, and schooling of youth and adults were

put forward as suggestions. Training in outreach should be combined with programs to increase knowledge of recent scholarship.

Elected officials at the local, state, and national level have become an audience for information about Islam and Muslims in recent years. With the recent spate of anti-shari'ah legislation being put forward in state legislatures, and outspoken Islamophobic statements made in conjunction with political campaigns, there is a need to provide basic information about Islam, demographic information about Muslims in the US, and historical context for the presence of Muslims in the Americas. Through organized information sessions and other means, academics and public policy professionals can help to enhance the level of public discourse and its tone of civility by offering alternative viewpoints grounded in good scholarship.

A **presence on the Internet** is a necessary part of any project, in addition to made-for-for-the-web projects disseminated through social media and other online venues.

What are the best delivery methods and venues?

Workshop participants identified public programs that can carry these messages to their audiences, and discussed ways to make complex ideas accessible, attractive, and relevant to sectors of the wider public. They identified cost-effective ways to tap into existing programs and institutions through partnerships and providing programming from institution to institution, including the following, arranged by category:

Libraries and Museums:

This is a global world and the theme or concept is a global one. Exhibits that highlight complex ideas need to be multi-dimensional, and may range from lavish exhibits to simple, reproducible presentations such as traveling exhibits on posters for libraries. Specialized museums are likely sites, particularly those that present familiar objects on American culture and its roots, such as quilts, domestic furnishings, fabrics, foods, musical instruments that resonate in local and regional settings in the U.S., but have deep roots in other world regions and periods.

Visitors must be able to physically see Islam in the world rather than Islam as a world. An exhibition on this theme might focus on these connected histories in ways that don't require labeling everything as "Muslim" or "Islamic" but incorporate it into other categories, shifting the focus while still being linked to the theme, avoiding both boosterism and essentializing. Objects from material culture can be connected to larger historical concepts such as the history of consumption and social patterns that resulted, such as the use of coffee, tea and other social beverages. Material culture projects can make the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar through connected histories. Toolkits for libraries and museums can assist in local program development that helps people connect with things, and through them with big ideas.

Bridging between American cultures and the regions where Muslims live should involve local people, immigrants from the community, indigenous people who play a role in the message behind featured stories from history in the exhibit or program. It would be

fascinating and helpful to talk to someone from another country or a culture represented in the US that is less familiar to most Americans. Exhibits and program themes should be universal but adaptable to local interests and cultures, showing ways in which people share rites of passage and important events.

Another suggestion was to provide a network of program experts, speakers and facilitators to whom local programming specialists can turn. Several suggested themes for exhibits are:

- *The Culture of Textiles*, an exhibit on the cultural roots in the eastern hemisphere of common “American” textiles such as calico, damask, denim, brocades, chintz, and quilts. Traveling exhibits could be shown at historic sites related to the textile industry, featuring cotton and linen agriculture, industrial textile workers, and the culture of textile use among different classes of people, possibly modeled on Kew Gardens’ “Plants and People” exhibit and website in London. Textiles and People would give the stories of cloth, clothing articles, their origins, their meanings in different cultural contexts. Quilting is a particularly rich resource for this exhibit concept.
- *The Written Word* would be an exhibit about printing, calligraphy, lithography, and use of moveable type in Arabic and other languages such as Turkish, Farsi and Urdu. The stereotype is that printing was rejected in Muslim societies, but the actual story is more complicated. Lithography, for example, was a technique more amenable to printing Arabic letters than moveable, cultural transmission, lithographed books in the Arab Muslim world etc. On the other hand, the early history of lithography in the west brought broad exposure to the arts, architecture, and crafts of foreign cultures including Muslims to the American public. Design books and university arts programs as well as children’s books and other mainstream publications introduced millions to the world’s artistic traditions, and these in turn influenced design of buildings and objects of everyday use.
- Create a partnership to have an exhibit on the connections between Jewish and Muslim cultures, histories of discrimination and creative assimilation. A similar exhibit could emphasize links with Christianity and artistic as well as literary connections and exchanges.
- *The Newseum* might do an exhibit on editorial and political cartoons on ethnicity. It could be a traveling or online exhibit, building on local papers in museums. The exhibit would draw in the history of the US and cartoons about ethnic groups—racialized and otherized. Such an exhibit would help to process the Danish cartoon controversy that has not healed over yet.

Interventions with politicians and policymakers:

Scholars should have organized, regular meetings with policymakers. There are more than two thousand scholars of Middle East studies and related fields who want to enhance public understanding and to see the paradigm change. Programs to involve them in the public discourse will tap into this resource. Scholars can articulate ideas to bring different points of view, to challenge the conventional wisdom with arresting ideas. Peer-to-peer briefings for journalists should take place with experts in these fields. Scholars should

receive training before embarking on work with journalists to avoid talking past one another or getting trapped in oversimplification or excessive complexity. Scholars can provide 1-2 minute interviews or podcasts on issues that come to the public regularly and post them online through accessible institutions. Reports created for the Congressional Resource Service, directed at members of Congress, can be followed up with briefings.

Education initiatives:

A key aspect of the theme for educational intervention is the nature of modernity: “Changes in the framework for talking about this period need to flow from the concept that “Modernity” is the result of a global encounter among various societies, and not a phenomenon transmitted via European domination.”

Participants listed ongoing educational initiatives with vehicles like iTunes U, National History Day, Model UN, Model Arab League, presentations at the National Council for the Social Studies annual meetings, the AP College Board’s Annual Conference, and professional associations on history and education. Conference sessions and workshops can be proposed for regional and national exposure.. The advantage in using these is that teachers and other officials, including textbook editors, attend these meetings looking for teaching resources, and they can be added to school districts’ professional development assets. This is one of the few non-university venues where ideas of considerable complexity can find an appropriate audience. The major challenge is to formulate the message about this period and document where it fits into existing standards and curriculum, and identify what teaching materials are needed for the classroom to implement these ideas. The focus should be a shift in the framework teachers use to teach this period and this region, and shift in the way it is structured into courses within the academic standards. This is not easy, since some state standards reflect very outdated paradigms. Information needs to be accessible, interesting, and organized into training modules that present compelling reasons to adopt a new approach.

To address these ideas as a whole, a summer institute is probably the best vehicle. Several major themes of the Forum can be addressed, such as the Golden Age and Decline narrative, the problems of historical tropes and misperceptions in the older literature. Presenters can tell the story of connected histories in ways that not only expose teachers to recent research , but encourage teachers use these ideas as a model to create lessons using primary sources and literature from the featured scholars. A summer program for teachers allows time for people to incorporate what they have learned into their courses and into their approach. Study tours for teachers are expensive but very effective, and require searching for partners and grantmaking organizations.

Film and media ideas:

Workshop participants with media expertise identified three tracks for programming: one for more knowledgeable and professional audiences, and another to reach the general public at a various levels. A third track would provide media outlets with expert speakers, experts who can help empower journalists to cover the whole story with the kind of background information that challenges many of the assumptions that we have been

addressing in the forum. Many experts are somewhat camera shy, and some level of training would assist them in presenting their case.

Another entry point is to use existing media productions, adding value by bringing them to audiences with experts. Film screenings and festivals can be combined with film and book discussions. Documentaries and feature films with strong story lines can be used to good effect. There are effective projects of this nature underway, so linking to those projects by engaging knowledgeable scholars and public practitioners would further enhance public awareness of the deeper issues and engage critical thinking.

The forum brought forth a multitude of concepts and fields of study that challenge received wisdom about the process of modernization. If this complex of ideas were brought to the public in the form of a film or documentary, it would need to be focused around a series of stories from different parts of the world that illuminate different aspects of the encounter between Europeans, Muslims and others, This might include stories about common items of consumption such as fabrics, ceramics, furnishings, foodstuffs and luxuries like coffee and tulips, for example. The most challenging type of narrative material would capture stories of human interactions across these lines, such as the encounter between Europeans and their native informants in colonial space, or the various global influences and texts through which Enlightenment thinkers were exposed to religious pluralism in Asian societies, for example, at a time when religious wars were raging in Europe, or had recently exhausted themselves. There are troves of stories from the early modern period on such encounters and responses by Europeans and indigenous thinkers. Spadework in recent scholarship would turn up such compelling narratives, and some, like the story of coffee and its journey through multiple societies, are already at hand. As an example of another form of cultural exchange from the period, a public program carried out by the Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies featured a slide lecture and performance of shadow puppetry from Turkey, featuring the picaresque characters Karagoz and Hacivat. The lecture traced the history of shadow puppetry from China across Asia to Turkey and Egypt, and related its stock characters to such figures in European entertainment as Pulcinella in Italy and Punch and Judy in England (see video link on this website).

Training and support for practitioners and scholars:

With ideas of this level of complexity, significant knowledge sharing will be needed to support individuals and groups working on public projects in this area. The project website at <http://www.muslimmodernities.org> offers an educational resource section to provide information and knowledge, in addition to the videos from the forum, discussions, and readings. TED lectures on Muslim societies can also be used as training modules. Projects involving scholars speaking to journalists will require training for scholars in working with the media; the same is true for engaging scholars as spokespersons in media interviews in print, online and on video/audio formats. This scholarly group could become a one-stop-resource for media professionals.

The Bridging Cultures Bookshelf/Muslim Journeys website, to be launched in June 2012 and completed by December 2012, will offer content and support for educators and librarians, with ALA guidance surrounding the collection of books to be featured in public programs (see link from this website's home page).

Evaluation of public projects:

There are so many modes of this message—it is about the nature of modernity, the non-monolithic nature of Muslim societies, misperceptions about history, current issues about conflicting values or the lack of common values as perceptions. This complexity makes evaluation challenging. The target audiences are not monolithic, so evaluation needs to be tailored to educators, average citizens, variations in age and level of education, profession and different regions and settings in the country. Tools for measuring perceptions before and after interaction with public programs can track changes in attitude, increases in specific understandings, and gains in knowledge. Relevant passive measures of access would include tracking website, museum and exhibit visits. Appropriate active measures include surveys of visitor/user satisfaction and reactions on social media sites. Educational materials for schools can involve more complex and detailed evaluations that assess knowledge as well as attitudes in students, and teachers' assessment of instructional materials. Both qualitative, anecdotal data, including testimonials, and quantitative surveys of usage and attitudinal changes, as well as assessing the likelihood of programs to create the desire to learn more, and to seek out personal connections with target communities.