



Beauty in the Worlds of Islam

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Panel 1: Literary Aesthetics & Learning in Muslim Worlds
Chaired by Syed Akbar Hyder
(Friday April 3 10:00-12:30)

Joseph: The Embodiment of 'Half of the Beauty of the Entire Universe'
Nargis Virani (The New School For Social Research, NY)

“God is beautiful and loves Beauty, *innallaha Jamilun wa yuhibbu-l-jamal*,” is probably one of the most oft quoted saying, *hadith*, of the Prophet of Islam, even though some scholars may doubt its authenticity. The mystics say, “when God decided to create, He placed half of all beauty in the entire creation, the other half he granted to Joseph!” Joseph, the paragon of beauty, appears prominently in Biblical exegetical works as he does in Muslim poetry from around the world in many languages. For the mystics, his lover, Zulaykha’s, passionate love for him begins with falling head over heels for his physical ‘beauty,’ as testified by the Qur’an. In both the Old Testament and the Qur’an, Potiphar’s wife (Zulaykha) is vindicated when her very critics cut their fingers instead of the fruit in their hands, as they behold the beauty of Joseph. Yusuf and Zulaykha’s, then, is the ‘love-story par excellence’ that could never be rivaled by any other famous love-stories. It is no wonder that in Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi’s (1207-1273) lyrical as well as didactic poetry, Joseph plays a central role: the ever elusive, handsome, gifted, wise, cruel, and forgiving beloved. My presentation will explore the various functions that Joseph performs in his poems, and the literal and metaphorical meanings that Rumi gives to Joseph’s gift of beauty.

The Art of Arabic Oratory: A Classical Sermon on Piety by Imam Ali
Tahera Qutbuddin (Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literature at the University of Chicago)

In the seventh and eighth centuries C.E., rather than painting or sculpture or music, the peoples of Arabia assiduously cultivated the art of the spoken word—the eloquently, metaphorically, rhythmically, appositely spoken word. The primary prose form of that art was the *khutba* or oration, which included both sermons and speeches, and whose themes and style continue to influence the rhetoric of public address in the contemporary Islamic world.

The oration was a crucial piece of the Arabic literary landscape, and a key component of political and spiritual leadership. In both the pre-Islamic and early Islamic phases of Arabian life, it had significant political, social, and religious functions. It roused warriors to battle, legislated on civic and criminal matters, raised awareness of the nearness of death and the importance of leading a pious life, called to the new religion of Islam, and even formed part of its ritual worship. The oratorical texts extant in the medieval Arabic sources form some of the most beautiful and powerful expressions of the Arabic literary canon.

Evolving from its oral culture and its end goal of persuasion, the aesthetic features of the classical oration may be divided into five groups: (1) heavy use of brief, parallel sentences, and repeated phrases, as well as sporadic utilization of rhyme (*saj‘*)—which yielded a strong rhythm in the oration and facilitated its comprehension and retention; (2) frequent direct address, emphatic structures, and rhetorical or real questions—which engaged the audience in the speech act; (3) vivid imagery to portray abstractions as observable, desert phenomena—which gave physical form to theoretical concepts; (4) citation of Qur’ānic and poetic verses—which anchored the orator’s words in the sacred or semi-sacred literature of pre and early Islam, bestowing divine or quasi-divine authority to them; and (5) dignified yet simple language—which rendered the oration formal and simultaneously made it understandable to its public audience.

The first shi‘a imam and the fourth sunni ‘rightly guided’ caliph, Imam ‘Alī is widely acknowledged as a master of Arabic eloquence, and the best known compilation of his words is aptly titled the *Path*

of Eloquence (*Nahj al-balāgha*). A translation cannot capture the full beauty of the sermon, for its aesthetic effect is intrinsically connected with its language; still it can bring us part of the way in understanding the sheer power of ‘Alī’s rhetoric. A stylistic analysis of his famous sermon on piety demonstrates the mnemonic, rhythmic, additive, aggregative, close-to-the-human-world features that are characteristic of orally based expression. To the goal of convincing the audience to prepare for the hereafter, he harnesses from within the five groups mentioned earlier several aesthetic techniques of tacit persuasion: antithetical parallelism, repetition of key terms, application of emphatic structures, posing of rhetorical questions, and straightforward yet elevated vocabulary and syntax. Through a skillful usage of these devices, he delineates a clear contrast between this world and the next, today and tomorrow, good and evil, guidance and error. His brilliantly crafted text leaves the audience starkly reminded of the transience of this world, and the necessity for each individual to utilize his or her precious and limited time in it to the fullest, in order to ensure salvation in the ensuing eternity.

Perfection of Paradise

Nerina Rustomji (Department of History at St. John’s University)

Islamic Paradise is a realm of gardens, rivers, fountains, golden thrones, silk couches, fine food, pure wine, abundant fruit, luxurious carpets, glorious music, eternally pure female companions, angels, prophets from the Hebrew Bible, and the presence of God. In terms of beauty, this otherworldly realm, known as *al-janna* or the Garden, is not just a place of ultimate beauty that can only be enjoyed after a lifetime of righteous behavior, it is also considered a perfected realm. In exploring the various representations of Paradise or the Garden (*al-janna*), this paper argues that the Garden offers the ultimate standard of beauty since it represents moral and aesthetic completion.

In order to explore the ways that the Garden reflected ideals of perfection, the paper will discuss how ethics and aesthetics are intertwined in Islamic textual tradition. By tracing proscriptions for behavior in the Qur’an, traditions of the prophet Muhammad, and eschatological manuals, the paper will initially present how the Garden represented a developing corpus of what was being interpreted as righteous behavior. Alongside the proscriptions and injunctions, the same texts also detailed how the Garden would look, feel, taste, and smell. In order to explore this sense-perception of the Garden, the paper will introduce how writing about the Garden yielded an aesthetic vocabulary. After discussing the function of the Garden as moral and aesthetic guide, the paper will introduce images from the Umayyad mosque in Damascus and books arts from Nizami’s *Haft Paykar* in order to demonstrate how the Garden as a perfected otherworldly form was represented in artistic productions.

Beauty in the Laughter of Children: Muslim Preschools in East Africa

Shafique Virani (Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Toronto)

The sun has just begun to peak out over the horizon, and already laughter permeates the air as groups of tiny tots merrily make their way to a simple but inviting little schoolhouse on the outskirts of their village near Mombasa. The preschool where they play and learn is next to their local mosque and is part of the Madrasa Program of East Africa. In the early 1980s, research on early childhood interventions began to reveal the highly positive long-term impact of high-quality preschool experiences. As this research gained attention from international foundations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as well as from a variety of donor agencies, educators began to focus on the need to support and invest in young children and their families. Taking note of these findings, a number of visionary Muslim leaders in East Africa and beyond decided that this would be one of the best ways to help the marginalized Muslim communities of the region. After much planning, they enlisted the support of Bi Swafiya Said, a well-respected community member, who today is best known as "Nyanya" or "grandma" in Swahili. A teacher by profession, Bi Swafiya loved playing with her first grandson, but struggled with how to provide him with a good education, rooted in the values and ethics of Islam. She began to create bedtime stories, songs and nursery rhymes to this end, and

dreamt of establishing a Muslim pre-school upon retirement. When she was invited to become the first director of the pilot madrasa preschool program initiative, she was excited. She would serve as trainer, curriculum developer and community organizer. However, while she had done some very creative work for her grandson, she could not have imagined the enormity and complexity of the task she had taken on. She was given opportunities to spend time with mentors and trainers in a number of projects in India and the United Kingdom, and became well-grounded in the concepts and theory of programming for young children. Finally, she was ready. The first madrasa preschool, attached to Liwatoni Mosque, opened on October 2, 1986. There were only four children. Not disheartened at the low turnout, Bi Swafiya began a door-to-door campaign, and within two weeks the attendance had increased to thirty. Today, the East African madrasa program boasts over 200 preschools, close to 800 teachers, reaching some 30,000 households, and serving more than 54,000 children. Independent research by educational specialists at Oxford University and elsewhere has demonstrated the profound educational impact these schools are having in some of the world's poorest communities. Between 1999 and 2004, the Effectiveness Initiative, a joint project between the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development and the Bernard van Leer Foundation reviewed the underlying principles and practices for "Effective ECD Programs" and based on an international study of 10 acclaimed projects across different regions of the world, named the East African Madrasa Preschool Program as one of the most effective for having enhanced the development and welfare of young children and their families. This presentation will analyze the experiences and challenges of the East African Madrasa Program in such areas as child-centered and active learning, community involvement, cultural and religious relevance, female empowerment, donor considerations, and impact studies.

Panel 2: Encountering Difference
Chaired by Gail Minault
(Friday April 3 2:00-4:30)

Sex Change in the Islamic Republic of Iran
Faegheh Shirazi (Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin)

Systematic campaigns against homosexuality have been instituted by numerous Islamic governments to safeguard not only moral, cultural, and traditional values, but also national identity as well. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, homosexuality is potentially punishable by death, per Shi'i *Sharia Islam*, which was adopted by the Islamic Republic of Iran as the constitutional law since 1978. While throughout the Muslim world, all non-heterosexual individuals face the constant threat of exposure, ostracism, or even the fear of death, it is noteworthy to mention that, out of this climate of fear, an increasingly popular phenomenon is emerging: surgical gender change.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran where homosexual behaviors carry the death penalty under the blessing of members of the ruling Shi'i clergy, hundreds of people are having their gender changed legally. The late Ayatollah Khomeini gave his blessing to this type of surgery and issued a 1980 *fatwa* (religious decree) endorsing it. Ayatollah Khomeini believed that if men or women felt trapped in the wrong body, they should be permitted to experience relief from their misery by have a sex change operation.

Khomeini's ruling on the validity of sex change went largely unquestioned because of the *absence* of such topics in the Qur'an or *ahadith* (recorded sayings of the Prophet Mohammad). Because sex change is not mentioned in the Qur'an, there are no grounds on which to justify its prohibition. However, approving of gender change is not approving homosexuality under the watchful eyes of religious clerics in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus, celebratory portrayals of Iran's attitude toward transgender should not be taken as a kind gesture towards the gay, lesbian, or transsexual community in Iran. Whereas homosexuality is considered a sin, transsexuality is categorized as an illness subject to cure. It is based on this ideology that the cure is granted by the religious authority, thus a sex change operation is considered a cure for this "sexual problem." A significant number of people in Iran who get a sex change are actually gay people who find this surgical operation as the

only legal way to be with persons of the same sex.

My research is focused on: 1) general issues related to sexuality in Iran, and 2) more specific issues relating to the societal, medical, and religious matters concerning sex change operation in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

**Cosmopolitan Muslim Empires and Religious Diversity: The Ottoman Experience
Cemil Aydin (Department of History at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte)**

If we take the peaceful existence of religious and cultural diversity in a society as a sign of “beauty” in governance, Muslim empires seem to have been very successful in this effort in world history. From the first century of Islam to the 19th century, various Muslim empires exhibited some of the best practices of tolerance and protection of diverse groups of non-Muslim populations. In fact, despite our dominant perception of the notion of Muslim community, *ummah*, there was never an abstract, closed-minded and exclusive interpretation of this term. The idea of the *ummah* has always included non-Muslims living under Muslim political protection and involved global links to other societies. Cosmopolitan Muslim empires seemed very harmonious with the ideals of political community in Islamic tradition.

In this paper, I will first depict the practice of governing diversity in the Ottoman Empire in order to discuss the various interpretation of this cosmopolitan Islamic tradition. Then, I will analyze how this cosmopolitan Muslim imperial tradition was challenged by new norms of governance and national vision of homogeneous community during the 19th century. Only with this historical background and by situating the transformation in Muslim societies within the broader global historical context, can we understand the shift towards more communal and ultimately narrower notions of the idea of the *ummah* and Muslim nationalism. Based on careful consideration of the imperial aspects of Muslim cosmopolitanism and the broader global roots of its transformation during the 19th century, we can grasp the secular roots of much less cosmopolitan interpretations of the Islamic religious and political tradition in the Islamisms and nationalisms of our time.

**Kabir: God's Mystic Witness
Rupert Snell (Department of Asian Studies at The University of Texas at Austin)**

It is appropriate that we should ‘know’ so very little about the true history of Kabir, India’s most celebrated mystic poet, because the spiritual irrelevance of such historical epistemology and ‘knowledge’ would be a ready target for his mercilessly caustic critique. Kabir’s insistent inner quest for the true knowledge of an ineffable God has inspired countless millions over half a millennium, while his derisive castigation of religious institutions has often been wilfully misinterpreted as an appeal for religious ecumenicalism. Often portrayed as lying at the cusp of Hinduism and Islam, Kabir is known to us through multiple traditions or streams, and some verses ascribed to him are also enshrined within the Sikh scriptures; sung or recited, his strident poetry speaks to us today with a uniquely forceful directness.

**Muslims & Urdu in the Worlds of Bollywood
Ali Mir (Department of Management at New York Institute of Technology)**

In his presidential address to the first Conference of the All India Progressive Writers’ Association, held in Lucknow in 1936, Munshi Premchand declared: “We will have to transform the standards of beauty.” Over the next few decades, Urdu poets of the progressive movement in India and Pakistan devoted themselves to challenging and redefining extant ideas of beauty, as well as reconfiguring the relationship between aesthetics and politics through their poems and songs. Understood as a crucial part of a project of progressive social transformation, their work was premised on a wholesale rejection of the ‘art for art’s sake’ framework which revered the idea of a ‘pure’ aesthetics free of ‘worldly’ concerns. In a society defined by injustice, they said, such art was nothing less than an abomination. Their cultural politics involved transforming the very structure of feeling of Urdu

poetry both in terms of form and content. They reworked, reinterpreted and/or redeployed its existing metaphors, struggled with, against and through the ghazal, and chose themes that were hitherto considered inappropriate for poetic expression. In this presentation, I intend to examine the ways in which these progressive Urdu poets sought to redefine the idea of beauty through both their poetry and the lyrics they wrote for 'Hindi' cinema.

**Keynote Address
(Friday April 3 5:30-6:30)**

**Striving for Beauty: Poetics and Ethics in Muslim History
Ayesha Jalal (Department of History at Tufts University)**

In the Islamic conception, all creation is a manifestation of the one and only God, whose two main attributes are beauty (*jamal*) and majesty (*jalah*). In keeping with the spirit of the Quranic verse, 'To God belong the most beautiful names, so call Him by them' (7:180), Muslim poets through the ages have celebrated the wonders of the creator, who is the most perfect, the incomparable and ultimate beloved. While all Muslim poets have attempted to construct beautiful verses, poetry like other forms of Islamic art has rarely been an end in itself. Poetry in the Muslim tradition is ideally meant to spur the faithful into God's presence, by inculcating in them the high ethical standards expected of true believers. The first part of the talk will elucidate the philosophical basis of the Islamic idea of *husn-i-ikhlaq*, literally ethical beauty. It will then turn to demonstrating how poetry, instead of being just another aesthetical form to be enjoyed for its own sake, has been used by an array of poets to invoke the ethical ideals of Islam. In striving for beauty, it will be shown, Muslims are expected to constantly struggle to approximate the ethical in Islam, both as a way of inner self-strengthening and also improving the world.

**Panel 3: Muslim Spaces in America
Chaired by Kamran Ali
(Saturday April 4 10:30-12:15)**

**Could a Muslim Be President? Islam in America
Denise Spellberg (Department of History at The University of Texas at Austin)**

In July of 2006, I published an article in the journal *Eighteenth Century Studies* that I trust none of you ever read. Why should you? *Eighteenth-Century Studies* is not a venerable site for the study of the Middle East or Islam. However, it was the journal where I first considered a question in early American history that has since gained some currency in contemporary American political discourse. The question: "Could a Muslim be president?"ⁱ

I will argue that this is *not* a new question, despite the obvious unease, fear, and hatred the idea aroused during the campaign of now president Barack Hussein Obama. Despite his practice of Protestant Christianity, he came with an Islamic heritage that he could not fully excise. He certainly seemed as if he wished to, however, because he wanted to win. Political commentators talked endlessly and with great self-congratulation about race, even using the term "post-racial" for this country. Yet most studiously ignored the fact that religion remained an issue – and not just any religion: Islam, a faith that, I believe, trumped race in this election. Neither then-candidate Obama, nor most of the mainstream American media challenged the fact that while the "n" word was now reprehensible in political discourse, the word "Muslim" had taken its place, along with "Arab." The news stories peaked in June 2008, dropping then rising again in October just before the election.ⁱⁱ Why wouldn't this story die – even after so many denials by the candidate?

The words "Muslim" and "Arab," mere markers of religious and ethnic identity, became code-words synonymous with a neo-Orientalist campaign strategy of opposition to then-candidate Obama. They drew upon a politics of fear, one that implicitly posited that Islam was un-American, despite the

presence of seven million American Muslim citizens, who while perpetually insulted during the campaign, also retained the right to vote. The last presidential campaign confirmed that the concepts “Muslim” and “American” were antithetical to many in discernibly neo-Orientalist terms. This binary definition of Islamic Otherness as dangerous to this country, however, was not projected as part of American foreign policy, but instead targeted a domestic political campaign for the highest office in the land. The Muslim acquisition of political power became central to neo-Orientalist, American assumptions that no Muslim citizen could - or ever should - be president.

Embodying Gender Justice: American Muslim Women and the 2005 Woman-Led Friday Prayer in New York

Juliane Hammer (Department of Islamic Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte)

On March 18, 2005, Amina Wadud, professor of Islamic Studies and leading American Muslim scholar in women’s Qur’an interpretation, gave a sermon to a mixed-gender congregation of Muslims in New York City and subsequently lead the same congregation in Friday prayer. The event was organized by journalist Asra Nomani and supported by a network of American Muslims, many of whom were associated with the Progressive Muslim Union.

The prayer was an embodied performance of a particular understanding of gender justice as gender equality, based on Qur’anic hermeneutics and readings of Muslim history. It stands at the center of my larger research project on American Muslim women scholars, activists and writers and their textual production. The prayer and the women writing about it inform my discussion of larger questions relevant to American Muslim women, including women’s leadership, reinterpretation of foundational texts, self-representation in the American public sphere, and community activism.

In this presentation, I am exploring the multi-layered and diverse responses of Muslims in America and worldwide to the prayer in March 2005. I argue that the prayer as an event and as a performance needs to be understood in the larger context of Muslim debates about women’s leadership roles and their place (and space) in American mosques and communities. The heated debate about the permissibility and meaning of the prayer, carried out over various forms of media, was and is at the same time a debate over who can and cannot define the Islamic tradition and contemporary interpretations and applications of the Qur’an, the Sunnah, and Islamic Law. The paper will focus on the arguments and frameworks developed by the organizers, participants, and supporters of the prayer on the one hand, and the various critiques and rejections by scholars, organizations and activists. In arguing against binary constructions of ‘for’ and ‘against’ on this issue, I will develop a more nuanced approach to the agendas and concern at stake for those who participated in the worldwide conversation about the event. It will contextualize the woman-led prayer in 2005 as part of a global Muslim conversation on women and gender roles in the contemporary world and as an American religious event with consequences for the perception and representation of Muslim women, Muslim men, and Islam in the American public sphere.

Nineteen: A Story

Naveeda Khan (Department of Anthropology at Jawaharlal Nehru University)

This is a story about a man who fell in love with a number. The man is Dr. Rashad Khalifa, born in Egypt in 1935, immigrated to the United States in 1959 to study biochemistry, and assassinated in the mosque that he established and ran in Tucson, Arizona in 1990. The number is 19. The number 19 is sacred in various pathways within Islam. It appears in the Holy Quran, in Sura 74, titled “The Cloaked One.” Sufis have long delved into the mystery of why God specifically mentions 19 in the sura. 19 is also accorded great importance by the Bahais, whose context of emergence is Shi’i Islam. Thus, for instance, the Bahais have a calendar comprised of nineteen months, each nineteen days long. 19 fascinated Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam finding repeated mention in his speech at the Million Man March of October 1995. Yet Dr. Rashad Khalifa was not Sufi, nor Shi’i, nor Bahai, nor

of the Nation of Islam. He was a modern Sunni Muslim, who prided himself in being scientific. He felt that Islam was perfectly compatible with modernity, providing it lost the baleful accretions of history and tradition. With the aid of a computer he found numeric proof of the Quran's divine origins, so as to rescue it from the field of polemics and theological additions that threatened to undermine this miracle.

In this paper I examine the nature of Dr. Khalifa's relationship to the number 19, through a brief excursus of the theological debates surrounding the Quran and the Hadith and instances in the Islamic tradition in which number feature prominently, notably in magic squares and in attempts to unveil the scientific knowledge contained within the Quran. In so doing, I explore the ways in which number may both aid and deter the contemplation of God's majesty.

Panel 4: The Poetics & Politics of Art, Architecture, and Law
Chaired by Kamran S. Aghaie
(Saturday April 4 1:30-3:15)

Aesthetic Dimensions in Classical Islamic Law
Hina Azam (Department of Middle Eastern Studies at The University of Texas at Austin)

The meeting between law and aesthetics is not one that is easily seen nor commonly sought, and so to locate that meeting requires some creativity. The most obvious route might be to examine legal attitudes toward artistic endeavors, such as painting or music. Or one might, more interestingly, evaluate legal treatises along literary and stylistic lines: Jurists routinely incorporated rhyme, alliteration and assonance into their titles. Legists with poetic inclinations penned pedagogical poems. Legally-oriented ḥadīth scholars, in their desire for comprehensiveness, included empty chapters in their ḥadīth compendia. Yet another possible route would be to see the extent to which jurists may have been influenced by particular definitions of beauty, such as by the Greek designation of beauty's three elements as order, symmetry and definiteness. The problem with these approaches, however, is that they somehow seem to sidestep exploration of the fundamental relationship between art and law. What I would like to do here is suggest a way in which we might consider this relationship head-on, to see how we might think about the aesthetics of legal interpretation.

In order to identify aesthetic standards – that is, standards of beauty – in Islamic law, I suggest doing something counterintuitive, which is considering legal interpretation as an *artform*. If we do so, then we might look at Islamic legal doctrines as *works of art*, in which the artist – that is, the jurist – seeks to realize certain *ideals of beauty*. These works of art can thus be examined as *exemplary* of those standards and ideals.

If legal interpretation is to be regarded as an artform, then what is its objective, distinct from the other great classical disciplines such as cosmology and theology on one hand, and exegesis on the other? If the scholarly pursuit of cosmology and theology was primarily concerned to produce ontological diagrams, and the focus on exegetical methods was to enable epistemological confidence, then we might say that the concern of the jurists was, above all, *ethics*. Thus, if legal interpretation is an artform, then its objective is to *produce ethical models* by which we may know virtue from vice, that is, to provide blueprints for moral action.

Doctrinal systems – that is, the artistic output of jurists – were evaluated among their peers according to three main aesthetic criteria:

- a) *concordance with truth*: a legal interpretation, in order to be aesthetically pleasing (hasan, not qabih), had to make sense in light of cosmological claims, eg that humans are imperfect, that judgment awaits every soul, or that human actions are determined by God;
- b) *comprehension of / explanation of revelation*: a doctrine had to account for all divine

communication, all “signs,” on that subject, eg verses of the Qur’an, ḥadīth, rational reflection; thematically, eg, texts on the obligation of prayer, the virtue of charity and the prohibition on eating swine;

c) *conduciveness to the ultimate end (telos) of religious life*: a legal system had to enable achievement of, eg, salvation in the afterlife, public welfare, or preservation of the five purposes of the law.

Defining Identities: Lessons from Bamiyan and the Taj Mahal

Janice Leoshko (Department of Art and Art History and Asian Studies at The University of Texas at Austin)

The valley of Bamiyan in Afghanistan, where the two large Buddhas stood that were destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001, was placed on the list of World Heritage Sites by UNESCO in 2004, some would say, somewhat belatedly. Various debates continue about copying these lost sculptures at locations in India, Sri Lanka and China, and there is support by some Afghanistan leaders to actually rebuild them—put them back together—, a Humpty Dumpty job of epic proportions indeed. With the Taliban’s recent resumption of power, the lost Bamiyan Buddhas are remarkably back in the news again, as this past act of destruction is pressed once again into service to illustrate the degree of the Taliban’s uncivilized nature. Given that before their destruction, these sculptures had merited little attention in recent times, one news account declaring that the destruction was the best thing that may have happened to these gigantic figures may not be a complete misstatement. Such an act provides relevant and apparent meaning to a work even as it destroys that work.

Rather than seeing it as an act of fierce iconoclasm, which unfortunately was and remains a dominant interpretation, it is important to also see the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas as a tightly managed operation of image development. The image is far more than one of the Taliban’s religious intolerance of non-Islamic things. Sadly, it is still not well recognized how this act of destruction was directed too towards Shia Muslims who have long inhabited the Bamiyan valley. These people, known as the Hazara, were among the fiercest foes of the Taliban during their first rise in Afghanistan. The limited interpretation of the Buddhas’ destruction demonstrates how those who look at the past need also to think about the fallacies that we deal with in the present.

This presentation first points out some of things missing in the present record concerning Bamiyan in order to understand the complexity of all acts. Secondly, a consideration of how similar constraints may operate with seemingly very different material and events demonstrates the degree to which previous knowledge production actually can undermine our understanding of Islamicate culture. This example centers on the Taj Mahal, one of the best-known monuments in the world, which is, however, also frequently one of the most misunderstood. For instance, this mausoleum is often called a palace. Built in the seventeenth century by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan for his wife, the Taj Mahal significantly reflects the diversity to be found in Indian art. Elements drawn from Hindu, Persian, and European traditions created a powerful and sophisticated visual culture during the rule of the Mughals from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. By focusing upon the Taj Mahal we can consider the significance of the shifts in constructing knowledge about it. In particular, the ways in which the image of Shah Jahan are discussed demonstrate the extent of troubling preconceptions that often underlay discussions of the presence of Islam in the South Asian subcontinent.

Persianate Elements in the Traditional Athletic Cultures of West and South Asia

Houchang Chehabi (Department of International Relations and History at Boston University)

Centuries before the universal popularity of soccer and cricket, wrestling was a popular athletic contest from the Balkans to Bengal. Athletes, called *pahlevans*, traveled widely back and forth in this region, seeking court patronage and entertaining the masses. This paper examines the common agonistic traditions of southeastern Europe, West and South Asia, arguing that it has to be understood as part of the cosmopolitan Persianate culture that united these parts of the world before the rise of modern nationalisms.

