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Looking Inside Muslim Minds.

Gillian Dooley

Flinders University sociologist Riaz Hassan has spent more than ten years doing a comparative study of Muslims in seven countries, and his findings were published earlier this year in *Inside Muslim Minds*.

His study brings together the results of interviews with more than six thousand Muslims in Egypt, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Pakistan and Turkey, all countries in which the majority of the population are Muslims. The data, collected in four countries before, and three countries after, the world-changing events of September 2001, is analysed country by country, showing fascinating patterns of attitudes across these seven countries. I asked Hassan what can be learned if the data is analysed instead by date, using before and after September 2001 as a variable. ‘There is one instance which shows that there may have been some shift. I gave a list of countries to respondents and asked them whether the governments of these countries were pro-Islam or anti-Islam. The usual pattern is that Malaysian findings closely mirror the findings in Indonesia. But in 1997 when I did the Indonesian survey 52% said that the US government was anti-Islam, while in the Malaysian interviews in 2003 93% said the American government was anti-Islam.’

‘But what is to me more revealing is that after 2001 I began hearing from highly placed, western-educated people in Indonesia the observation that all war on terror is a war on Islam. Also, in Pakistan I noticed that many western-educated, formerly liberal democratic, “lefty” intellectuals have become more defensive about Islam and their own identities. I think they have suffered an enormous letdown by America’s shift to the right and they are the ones who ultimately also are becoming

hostile, so when America is looking for friends its old friends are gone, because American policy after 9/11 has created an identity crisis in Islam.’

The September 2001 attacks on America were crimes. However, Hassan points out, ‘as a result of this we have a war on terror, not war on crime. Government defence expenditure of the world for 2006 was 1.3 trillion dollars, and 46% of that was by the United States. And I think personally that the dark side of the war on terror is that Iraq and Afghanistan have become testing grounds for new technology, for example cluster bombs, and unmanned drones flying over Afghanistan and shooting at people. Who are we defending from? A ragtag of Talibans.’ This is not the only aspect of these wars which disturb Hassan: ‘The other dark side is that the legal GDP of Afghanistan is 8 billion dollars. American spends 1 billion a month there. I’m not an economist, but to me it seems you are addicting these people – you’re creating a whole range of hangers on with this kind of money in such a small economy.’

Hassan found that in the Islamic state of Iran the people weren’t as fundamentalist or fervently Islamic as, say, Malaysians. I asked Hassan how he would explain this surprising state of affairs. ‘It depends on the institutional configurations. If religion and politics are fused together, as they are supposed to be in an Islamic state, and the state is relatively weak, then opposition to government also extends to opposition to the religious elite. On the other hand, when religion is kept separate from the state religious institutions become a vehicle for social organisation. By and large in Iran people are very disillusioned by the clerics because of the fusion of religion and politics, whereas in Malaysia they are separate so religious institutions still seem to enjoy very high prestige and trust. A similar phenomenon can be observed in Christian states. In the US religion and politics are constitutionally separate. In Britain it is fused. In a way the secularisation of Britain is partly a

function of the fact that it has a national church. Iran is on the way to becoming a very secular state, because they have to make compromises, continuously. For the religious elite the message of my findings is that you can have love or power but not both. If you want to have power you lose love.'

Hassan had some difficulties with his research in some countries, Egypt and Iran for example. 'In most Muslim countries the study of Islam has become very sensitive for reasons which I can't explain to you, I still don't understand. There is a widely accepted view that the West is trying to undermine Islam and any research is viewed with suspicion, particularly coming from western scholars. In Egypt the research was stopped. The people are so sensitive, and I feel for them, because their identity is being threatened.'

Though *Inside Muslim Minds* does not touch on this problem, Hassan has also studied the sociology of suicide bombers. I asked him about the relationship between suicide attacks and Islamic piety. 'Certainly many suicide bombers are Muslims, but not all Muslims are suicide bombers. And I think religion is used as a mobilising, motivating factor to achieve what is in almost all instances a secular goal, such as freedom of homeland. But it is a weapon of the weak. In ten years in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 there was not a single suicide bombing, because the Afghan mujahideens were provided with money and up to date ammunition by the US. Now they are using suicide bombings because they have no weapons. It has enormous psychological impact. They can never win using this weapon, but the idea is that it will shift the public opinion in home countries. It's effective against democracies. And in Pakistan most of these young people, on the evidence I have, don't come from religious schools, they come from public schools. They are unemployed, they have a romantic notion of jihad. In Indonesia many of these militant groups basically consist

of highly alienated, powerless, marginalised young men who feel empowered by joining these militant organisations.’

Although Australia is not included in this study, I asked Hassan how his findings compare with what is known about the attitudes of Australian Muslims. ‘Some of the findings are obviously going to be different because when Muslims are a minority they will think differently than when they are a majority. I have done a study of Muslim and Christian piety in Australia which use the same methodologies. When it came to the question, have you been punished by God, 84% of Muslims responded that they feel they have been punished by God compared with 32% of Australian Christians. There is an explanation we have in sociology, that the divine is constructed in the image of society. And so if you come from a society which is oppressive you feel more punished. If you live in a society which is humanitarian you feel less punished.’

The hottest issue is radicalisation, and homegrown terrorists. ‘I have to remind people that terrorism is what we call in sociology a dependent variable. It’s a consequence of something else. And if in the case of Australia there’s any radicalisation I would not look for the cause of that in Islamic theology. I would look for the causes in Australian society. For every non-Muslim who is unemployed in the about two Muslims are unemployed. So 40% of Australian Muslim children live in poverty. And of course some of them are attracted to global ideologies. So if you are looking at reasons for radicalisation, it is in this.’

Inside Muslim Minds is published by Melbourne University Press.