

Ed Husain on the British Museum and “The True Face of Islam” (Part Two)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



What Ed Husain wants his readers to believe is that Muslim opposition to music is only to be found among the “Islamic State, the Taliban, and other hardliners.” That’s not true. He leaves out any mention of the belief, among many Muslims, that Muhammad himself condemned musical instruments when he said: “There will be among my Ummah people who will regard as permissible adultery, silk, alcohol and musical instruments.” (Bukhari, 5590). And all of these things he’s listed are, of course, prohibited. Many prominent Islamic scholars of the past who agreed that musical instruments were haram include Abu Hanifa, Al-Shafi’i, Ahmad bin Hanbal, Al-Tabari, Al-Hasan Al-Basri, Al-Bukhari, Al-Tirmidhi, Al-Nawawi, Al-Bayhaqi, Al-Tahawi, and Al-Qurtubi.

Not all Muslim scholars agree with this view. Some who argue that music is in some cases halal (permitted) claim that this hadith relates only to the use of instruments in the mosques. At the time when Muhammad spoke about the matter, the polytheists – Unbelievers, whether Christians or pagans – used music and musical instruments as part of their worship. These scholars claim that Muhammad’s prohibition was meant to apply only to music that might be similarly used in Muslim worship; it was another way to distinguish the new faith of Islam from the practice of the “polytheists.”

However, the Hadith from Bukhari 5590 unambiguously condemns “musical instruments” – no matter where they are used – as being on the same level as “adultery” and “alcohol.” It says

nothing about allowing, in certain limited circumstances, the use of musical instruments. It is a flat prohibition.

The curators do a fantastic job of tackling modern shibboleths with intelligence and subtlety. The Taleban detonated the ancient Bamiyan Buddhas and Islamic State exploded parts of Palmyra because the statues and figurative art offended the sensitivities of today's literalist monotheists. A centuries-long collection of tiles and jugs and other objects shows us that figurative art was normal in the Islamic world. Umayyad coins from the 7th century, decades after the passing of the Prophet, carry the image of the caliph Abd al-Malik (r.685–705). Verses of the Quran appeared on tiles with peacocks as late as 1308; Persian dishes from the 1600s, possibly from Muslim hunting lodges, were decorated with pheasants.

Ed Husain claims that the Taliban blew up the Bamiyan Buddhas, and the Islamic State blew up what it could of the Roman buildings in Palmyra “because the statues and figurative art offended the sensitivities of today's literalist monotheists.” That claim misleads. It was not the sensitivities only of “today's literalist monotheists” that were offended. Husain seems to think only the “extremists” – the Taliban and the Islamic State – are “literalist monotheists.” But devout Muslims have been “literalist monotheists” since Islam began. The Bamiyan Buddhas would have been blown up long ago, by mainstream Muslims, if only they had possessed the technical wherewithal. These Buddhas offended Muslim sensibilities in two ways. First, they were representations of living creatures, which are forbidden in Islam. Second, they belonged to another, non-Muslim religion, and consequently were especially offensive. Similarly, the Roman buildings in Palmyra were blown up because they were from the pre-Islamic Time of Ignorance, or Jahiliyya, and consequently worthless. Roman statuary would also have violated the Islamic proscription on images of living creatures.

Ed Husain wants you to think that the recent destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas and of Roman statuary and buildings in Palmyra are a new phenomenon, the result of today's brain-addled extremists ("literalist monotheists"), who do not represent the true Islam. But Muslims have been destroying artworks that showed living creatures – statues, frescoes, paintings – for 1,400 years. Ed Husain knows why, but he's not about to mention the hadiths in which Muhammad makes clear that all "pictures" (of living creatures) are haram.

Here are just two of those hadith:

1. Narrated Aisha: (the wife of the Prophet) I bought a cushion having on it pictures (of animals). When Allah's Apostle saw it, he stood at the door and did not enter. I noticed the sign of disapproval on his face and said, "O Allah's Apostle! I repent to Allah and His Apostle. What sin have I committed?" Allah's Apostle said. "What is this cushion?" I said, "I have bought it for you so that you may sit on it and recline on it." Allah's Apostle said, "The makers of these pictures will be punished on the Day of Resurrection, and it will be said to them, 'Give life to what you have created (i.e., these pictures).' " The Prophet added, "The Angels of (Mercy) do not enter a house in which there are pictures (of animals)." –?Muhammad al-Bukhari, Sahih al-Bukhari

2. Narrated Salim's father: Once Gabriel promised to visit the Prophet but he delayed and the Prophet got worried about that. At last he came out and found Gabriel and complained to him of his grief (for his delay). Gabriel said to him, "We do not enter a place in which there is a picture or a dog." –?Muhammad al-Bukhari, Sahih al-Bukhari

Ed Husain ought to have admitted that there is strong textual authority for a ban on "pictures" of living creatures – figurative art, whether two or three dimensions, paintings or statues – and he ought to have provided the supporting

hadith. He might then have argued that the most fanatical enforcers of this ban – though hardly the only ones – have recently been the Taliban and the Islamic State. But leaving out these hadith altogether, and hoping you won't find out about them, shows Ed Husain's bad faith or rather, his taqiyya.

Then he mentions several examples of figurative art found on Islamic artifacts. First, a “centuries-long collection of tiles and jugs and other objects shows us that figurative art was normal in the Islamic world.” How does he know that figurative art was “normal” in the Islamic world? Where are these tiles and jugs from? He does not claim they were from all over, which leads one to suspect that they may all have originated in one area – it could even have been a very small area – of the vast Islamic world. And from when do they date? Tell us exactly what “centuries-long” means. Were these tiles and jugs, with figurative art on them, produced over a span of 100 years, or 500, or 1,400? We need to know. All Husain can legitimately conclude from this particular exhibit is that some tiles and some jugs had figurative art on them. A convincing study would require many thousands of examples, from all over the Islamic world, since the beginning of Islam.

This collection of Umayyad coins from the 7th century, decades after the passing of the Prophet, carry the image of the caliph Abd al-Malik (r.685–705). Verses of the Quran appeared on tiles with peacocks as late as 1308; Persian dishes from the 1600s, possibly from Muslim hunting lodges, were decorated with pheasants.

Again, the image of the caliph Abd al-Malik on coins, toward the end of the 7th century, of peacocks (living creatures) painted on tiles in 1308, and pheasants painted on Persian dishes from the 1600s – that is, exactly three examples of the use of “figurative art” – are hardly enough to contradict the claim that most Muslims, following Muhammad, refrained in

their art and artifacts from depicting living creatures. Were there any other caliphs whose images appeared on coins? No, for otherwise such examples would have been on display and Ed Husain would have certainly mentioned them. How many tiles, of all the tiles produced in the Islamic world, were painted with peacocks or any other living beings? How many Persian dishes had pheasants painted on them, and when and where, exactly? We don't know. Nor, of course, does Ed Husain.

The main point is this: Muhammad's hadith that in essence prohibits images of living creatures remains valid, observed by almost all Muslims during the past 1,400 years, even if here and there examples of art by Muslims that violate the hadith can be found. These are the exceptions, not the rule. No doubt the curators of the British Museum exhibit went out of their way to find and display pieces that would call the application of that hadith into question. They wanted to put Islam's best foot forward.

This love of beauty and divinity did not shy away from human desire. The British Museum has a copy of the Mughal's Hamzanama (Book of Hamza), an epic romance inspired by the Prophet's uncle Amir Hamza. Also on display is the other classic tale of deep yearning, the story of Layla and Majnun, lovers who met at school and have inspired generations of Muslims. That true love is remembered at the British Museum. Although Layla loves Majnun, the two are forbidden to marry – the eternal story.

Husain cites exactly two examples of what he thinks of as Islamic love stories. One is called the Hamzanama, and is the story of Muhammad's paternal uncle, Amir Hamza. But the Hamzanama is not really an "epic romance." It's a fictional tale of adventures, punctuated by interludes with different women, and much of this "epic romance" is about Hamza's violent exploits in war, including smashing the heads of his enemies. Not exactly a love story as we in the West understand

it. As for the tale of Layla and Majnun, it's a story of star-crossed lovers. Ed Husain might have added that this story is hardly reflective of Islamic reality, with men having up to four wives and as many concubines as they could afford. The most prevalent "eternal story" of real life in Islam, then and now, is not that of a couple prevented from marrying, but that of the jealousies and jockeying for position among rival wives of the same man.

Where is that Islam of love, compassion and coexistence? Hasan al-Basri, an 8th-century Muslim thinker from Basra, was so frustrated with the Muslims of his day, compared with earlier believers, that he wrote: 'The Muslims are all in their graves and Islam is only to be found in books.' In Britain today, it seems that real Islam is only to be found in the British Museum.

Forget about 7/7/2005 attacks on buses and the London Underground. Forget about the other terrorist attacks in the U.K., at Woolwich, Westminster, Manchester Arena. Forget Anjem Choudary, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Al-Shebab, Boko Haram, Islamic Jihad, Al-Nusra Front, Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah. None of those attacks, none of those groups, have anything to do with the real Islam. "The real Islam is only to be found in the British Museum." Ed Husain said it. Now you have to believe it. But after all, why would he lie?

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