**The Soul of Islam**

**Americans are ignorant of Islam. And ignorance breeds fear. The anxiety is reflected in opinion polls that identify terrorism as the chief threat facing our society. And the fear is fueled by cruel images of black clad fighters beheading their helpless victims. Yet the Muslims I know, like Abdur Rauf, who was iman of the mosque in Santa Fe when I was minister of the Unitarian church there some years ago, hardly fit the stereotypes of the evening news: a geologist, a graduate of Cornell, tireless in his work to build bridges of understanding between Jews, Christians and worshipers of Allah.**

**Like many since the attacks of September 11, I have been trying to educate myself about this ancient faith. I now know that Islam has been rooted in American soil for centuries, brought here by the slaves who descended from the great kingdoms of Africa, and that today as many twelve million of our fellow citizens follow the teachings of the prophet Mohammed, about a third of them black like my friend the imam, whose parents were Cuban, who grew up speaking Spanish rather than Arabic, and who now finds his identity as an Afro-Latino Muslim American so perplexing to his Anglo neighbors. I know that millions like Abdur convert to Islam precisely because it offers a home where the color line matters little, as befits a truly world religion.**

**Islam has more than a billion adherents across the globe and only a small fraction of them live within the Middle East. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population, followed closely by India, and when I look at a map showing the distribution of Muslims across the world, the dimensions of any conflict begin to look less like a polarity of opposing cultures than a geopolitical split between the southern hemisphere and the north.**

**And yet even as I accumulate information like this, the religion itself remains foreign to me. As Huston Smith writes, “of all the non-Western religions, Islam stands closest to the West--closest geographically, and also closest ideologically; for religiously it stands in the Abrahamic family of religions, while philosophically it builds on the Greeks. Yet despite this mental and spatial proximity, Islam is the most difficult religion for the West to understand.” “No part of the world,” an American columnist affirms “is more hopelessly and systematically and stubbornly misunderstood by us than that complex of religion, culture and geography known as Islam.” This describes me well. I’ve read about the five pillars of the faith, the importance of pilgrimage, Islam’s emphasis on charity and concern for the poor, and the life of the Prophet. Nonetheless, I feel like a stranger to this religion, an outsider--rather like a man who’s tone deaf trying to understand some great symphony or opera. I have the lyrics down pat, but seem to have missed the melody entirely.**

**But it may be that Islam is as much about rhyme as reason. The Qu’ran, after all, is a book meant to be intonated, read aloud. It’s a book of song, a chant, a ululation. And this is true not only of the Qu’ran. Poetry in general holds a hallowed place is the Muslim world. Abdullah al-Udhari, a translator of modern Arabic poetry, writes that:**

**Ever since pre-Islamic days, poetry has been the mass art form of the Arab language. Through the centuries of classical Arab civilization in the Middle Ages, the long years of Arab decline, and into the decades of confrontation with European culture in the twentieth century, the poets have never lost their place of esteem in the minds of the people of the Arab world. In modern times, poets have had a greater impact on popular culture than novelists: there are more published poets than authors of literary prose in the Arab countries today, and public readings by poets consistently attract mass audiences, in settings ranging from rural villages to sprawling and sophisticated capital cities.**

**Consider the evidence: When the Taliban vacated Kabul in 2003, a radio program of Afghan poetry, narrated by women, was one of the first broadcasts back on the air. I found it remarkable that a nation so ravaged by war and impoverished by misrule would tune in to poetry rather than the latest news. But then, poetry has been called “the news that is always new.”**

**Consider item two: As he sat in New York City’s Metropolitan Correctional Center, a supermax prison designed to contain the most dangerous inmates, Ramzi Yousef, who was awaiting trial for the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, sent a poem he had written in Arabic to Politics and the World, a radical Islamic journal published in New Jersey. “My soul is longing for liberty, yearning for release, and my world is a shackle,” ran one of the lines, penned in a classical “tawil”style. “He is certainly not illiterate and seems to be quite well read in classical poetry,” said Philip Kennedy, Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. “It’s very impersonal and austere--his poetry is something of a rallying cry to people like him.”**

**Consider item three: When the Christian Science Monitor ran an article entitled “Why Do Hate Us”shortly after the trade towers fell, the front page carried a short verse written by a Saudi national, expressing the sense of frustration and powerlessness felt within a Muslim world beleaguered by the West. The author, it was startling to learn, was not a poor and oppressed *mujahideen* but the Saudi ambassador to London, presumably a man of substantial wealth, influence and privilege. But equally startling, to me at least, was that an international diplomat would find time to write poetry at all.**

**But then, Islam may be the most lyrical of all the world’s great religions.The Persian poet Kiumars Monshizadeh, who writes blank verse and lists among his favorite things the Qu’ran, Surrealism, and the theory of relativity states that “Our first art as a nation is poetry. Our second is more poetry.” Nima Yushij, the father of modern Iranian poetry, says simply that “Poetry is power, the power of sense perception through which various images, in their manifestation, are charged with meaning and are thus made powerful.” Elsewhere, the twentieth century Turkish poet Fazul Husnu Deglarcara declares in his poem titled “Echo”:**

**When a poet**

**Dies**

**God**

**Feels it first.**

**Poetry may be the key which can help non-Muslims like me begin to appreciate the inner dynamic, the spirituality, the “soul” of Islam (as it were). For while Islam sometimes seems to casual students like me to be rather harsh and rigid in its strictures, devoted Muslim testify again and again that the opposite is true. Islam, they say, is marvelously soft and subtle, flexible and pliable, like an easily-fitting garment that does nothing to restrict the motion of the spirit but only adds warmth and comfort and beauty to the one who wears this raiment. Islam from the inside, I suspect, is experienced as poetry, while to those on the outside it appears as prose. Prose tends to pin things down; poetry tries to open them up. A prosaic frame of mind tries to say things plainly; poetry hints at things that can’t be spoken at all. Prose seeks to convey precise information about the world; poetry attempts to elicit an emotional response from the listener. The root meaning of the word “metaphor,” remember, means “to carry over”or “to move beyond.” And this is what the metaphors of poetry seek to accomplish: to carry us beyond our ordinary perceptions of the world and toward the ecstatic and sublime.**

**An English literary critic once called poetry “spilt religion.” He meant that when the outward forms of religious observance--the creeds and commandments--became rusted and brittle like an outworn container, the vital juice of life would still need to find expression, a channel to direct its flow. And poetry is that channel.**

**That could account for the fact that the thirteenth century Sufi mystic and Islamic scholar Jalal ad-Din Rumi is currently the best-selling poet on Amazon. Yet this morning I’ve decided to focus on Islamic poetry of more recent times—from our own century--to help us understand Islam as a living, contemporary expression. I’ve selected poems from Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and the Arab world to help us appreciate the range and breadth of a faith that is multicultural and planetary in scope. Most of the poems focus on recognizable religious themes, but many also deal with politics and social problems, for in Islam there is no hard distinction between the realms that are sacred and secular. I hope you find something here to feed your deeper hungers, not only your intellectual hunger for knowledge of a neighboring faith, but also your hunger for the perennial wisdom that Islam has to offer. For in the words of poet Yusuf al-Khal, “We are all hungry for the body and thirsty for the essence of the soul.”**

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**When Forugh Farrokhzad was killed in an auto crash in 1967 at the age of thirty-two, she had always established herself as an outstanding Iranian writer, intellectual and filmmaker. She began writing poetry at the age of sixteen and by her twenty-fifth year had published three volumes of her work. Her poem “Someone Who Isn’t Like Anyone” seems to be written in the voice of a child struggling to understand a complicated adult world beyond her comprehension, but who has nonetheless retained a childlike wisdom and faith that most adults have forgotten.**

**[Someone Who Is Like No One](http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/someone-who-is-like-no-one/)**

**Born in 1908 in Sumatra, Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana studied law, linguistics and philosophy as a young man and has been called the dean of Indonesian letters. His poem “Oh Most Beautiful” reminds me that the literal meaning of “Islam” is submission or surrender to God, for it seems to express a feeling of absolute dependence upon the ultimate source of joy and tears and courage.**

[**Oh, Most Beautiful**](https://books.google.com/books?id=CWJMbS4NwhwC&pg=PA35&lpg=PA35&dq=Alisjahbana+%22Oh,+Most+Beautiful%22&source=bl&ots=lDSz3kg3gG&sig=uFStWJqbn5LOllEkSLMkDv96WFs&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiKz-y6oN_KAhVGwWMKHcjuBU4Q6AEIIzAB#v=onepage&q=Alisjahbana%20%22Oh%2C%20Most%20Beautiful%22&f=false)

**Quite a different mood can be found in the verse of Chairil Anwar. Born in 1922 in Sumatra, Anwar was the first Indonesian poet to be featured in an American literary magazine, Prairie Schooner, in 1962. “At the Mosque” seems to encapsulate the poet’s inward battle to come to terms with his faith, a battle which remains unresolved even to the end. Anwar clearly lives within the Muslim faith, and simultaneously chafes against it.**

[**At the Mosque**](http://allpoetry.com/At-The-Mosque)

**There are two inescapable themes within modern Islamic poetry. One is the confrontation between traditional faith and the modern world. The other is resistance to the economic, military and political encroachment of the West, and the imbalance of power between the weak and the strong. The is the theme of our next poem, “The Postman’s Fear,” by Muhammad Al-Maghut, a self-educated poet born in Syria in 1932, who made his living as a journalist and playwright and writer for television and cinema.**

[**The Postman's Fear**](http://biseenscene.tumblr.com/post/81989221689/the-postmans-fear-by-muhammad-al-maghut)

**When he died in 2008, Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish was the best-selling poet in France. Born in the upper Galilee in 1942, he and his family fled to Lebanon when their village of Birwe was destroyed by Israeli armed forces. The next poem, “We Love Life Whenever We Can,” speaks of the Palestinian people’s ongoing struggle and hope to regain a homeland.**

[**We Love Life Whenever We Can**](https://wijblijvenhier.nl/1631/mahmud-darwish-1941-2008/)

**With a humanitarian crisis unfolding in a land where millions are trapped between a brutal dictator and a barbaric caliphate, I wanted to include this poem by Amal Kassir. She is a 20-year-old Muslim, Syrian-American who attends university in Denver, Colorado, even as she recites her verse around the world in youth prisons, orphanages, and refugee camps. Her first chapbook, *Scud Missile Blues,* is out this very month. Here is her poem titled “My Grandmother’s Farm.”**

[**My Grandmother's Farm**](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/poetry/art-blog-syrian-american-activist-amal-kassir-uses-slam-poetry-to-fuel-her-cause/)

**Born in Palestine, poet and peace activist Ibtisam Barakat was three years old when she fled her home with her family during the Six-Day War. She grew up under Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, received a BA in English literature from the West Bank’s Birzeit University, and emigrated to the United States in 1986. I close these readings with her poem, “Tea Invitation.”**

[**Tea Invitation**](http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/tea-invitation/)