Fostering World Peace Through 'Cultures of Meaning': A Case Study of Shaykh Hamdi Ben Aissa and the Sanad Collective

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Abstract

When considering the question of world peace, many of the political and intellectual responses of our age continue to operate within a well-defined prism that privileges secular, diplomatic, political, and economic solutions that have failed to adequately diagnose the root causes of this persistent global challenge. Further still, religion is frequently regarded as an exclusionary and divisive force, or worse still as an obstacle, that is to be channeled and contained. This paper seeks to address this imbalance. Part I seeks to provide a wider critique of the contemporary status quo and to proffer a diagnosis of the underlying root causes of our current global crises. In doing so, I build upon existing critical academic scholarship, with a special focus on Rajani Kanth's forceful critique of 'Euro-modernism' and Steven D. Smith's 'cage' of secular discourse. Here, I argue that the central malaise of our age relates to the shrinking landscapes of 'meaning' in our expanding global monoculture, a challenge that the paradigm of traditional religion is well suited to address. Part II, seeks to bolster this point further through an illustrative example of one such local communal solution in practice working from within the rich resources of Islamic spiritual tradition in my case study of Shaykh Hamdi Ben Aissa and his dynamic community, the Sanad Collective, in Eastern Canada.

Keywords: Religion, Meaning, Spiritual, Peace.

A. Introduction

In a globally interconnected twenty-first century, where the natural barriers of time and space have been thoroughly transcended

thanks to the unimaginable pace of our technological revolution, humanity remains as ever divided along sectarian, ideological, economic and political lines, and the elusive mantra of "world peace" continues to animate the passions and energies of countless intellectuals, politicians, philosophers, religious leaders, and decision-makers alike. Can such a dauntingly complex challenge, with its multi-faceted and frequently unpredictable dimensions, even be adequately theorized, much less resolved? On a more technical note, how are we to even define "peace"? Is it merely the absence of the destructive ravages of war and the presence of public order? And if we were to take on such a challenge, are we to adopt a primarily 'political' prism of analysis, whereby state legislation, foreign policy, international law, international organizations, and international diplomacy are the principal avenues for effecting real change? Are the individual subject and more subjective notions of "peace" even relevant to this discussion, or can such concerns be neatly excised as inconsequential, or be considered perhaps marginal at best? To complicate matters further, is religion a central player in the discussion or have the lessons of history and religious pluralism taught us that an exclusively secular solution is all that we can aspire to?

While such probing questions are certainly warranted, perhaps a more fundamental and immediate theoretical concern lies in attempting a proper diagnosis of the underlying crisis of our times, without which deliberating over solutions and their minutia becomes a fruitless affair. Part I of this study thus hopes to provide a convincing diagnosis of the root cause for the multifaceted crises of our contemporary age, while Part II attempts to elucidate what the paradigm of traditional religion may have to offer on how we may begin to frame and address such a daunting global challenge. In doing so, I appeal to the rich resources of the Islamic tradition as an example, and I offer a detailed case study of a particularly interesting and dynamic Muslim community from Eastern Canada, Shaykh Hamdi Ben Aissa's Sanad Collective, as an illustrative example and model of local solutions in practice. As this case study hopes to reveal, in sharp contrast to the deliberations and solutions of our

political leaders, opinion-makers, and the world's leading intelligentsia, the divergent solutions presented by the paradigm of 'traditional religion' are frequently far more elemental in nature and closer to home, and the roadmap to world peace that such a paradigm proffers stems ultimately from an alternative reading of human nature that suggests a radically different diagnosis of the underlying causes of our multiplying global crises, be they sociological, political, economic or environmental.

B. Part I: Diagnosing the Crisis

"Neoliberalism, the dominant narrative guiding Western democracies and their economies for almost 70 years, is crumbling all around us."[1] Such prognostications of a dire and uncertain future are increasingly fashionable in our day. Whether it is the recent financial crises, the appalling levels of income inequality globally, the rise of right- and left-wing populist movements across several Western democracies, Brexit, or the tragedy that is Trump and his ensuing tariff wars and radical government overhauls, we certainly live in murky times.

Our world indeed seems to be losing hope in its politics as usual, with a heightened consciousness of the failures of our global economic and political orders and the narrow elitist and corporate interests that they primarily serve.[2] What is more, with the catastrophic failures of Communism and Fascism and two devastating World Wars behind us, the political experiments of the twentieth-century can hardly serve as a moral compass and a source of consolation of gentler tides to come. On the environmental front, the international failures of the past several decades to curb climate change suggest an inexorable path towards immanent global catastrophe, to say nothing of the other

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[1] Sandra Waddock, "The neoliberal consensus is crumbling. What happens next?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, Dec. 14, 2016, https://www.csmonitor.com/Technology/Breakthroughs-Voices/2016/1214/The-neoliberal-consensus-is-crumbling.-What-happens-next

[2] See, for instance, the following classic reads, to name but two examples: Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Vintage Canada, 2008); John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hitman* (Plume, 2005).

numerous and equally pressing environmental challenges plaguing our planet's ability to regenerate itself for future generations, such as the Great Pacific garbage patch as another example. Additionally, whether it is the thriving global military industrial complex, the uncertain aftermath and chaos of the Arab Spring, the global refugee crisis, or the embarrassing failures of the United Nations to hold all its member states to the same basic standard of accountability, the major challenges of our age are indeed too many to mention. All this begs the question: How did we get here in the first place?

The Crisis of 'Euro-Modernism'

"(Euro) Modernism is a Bell Jar, inside an Iron Cage, within a Gated Gulag. Yet, in tragic paradox, it comes meretriciously wrapped, within the exalted drapery of 'freedom'."

"Modernist Economics poses as 'universal' and 'culture free' – until one understands that it is, in embodied form, European, Capitalist, Protestant, Secular, Quasi-Theology." – Rajani Kanth[3]

In *Farewell to Modernism*, the social thinker, philosopher, and economist Rajani Kanth attempts one of the most thoroughgoing intellectual critiques of our modern condition that may help us to identify the underlying root of our multiplying crises. For Kanth, the principal threat to our collective and individual well-being and survival as a species lies in a slew of bad ideas and axioms that were bequeathed to us via the Enlightenment and violently exported around the globe through the Western world's unchecked colonialist and imperialist ambitions, which may be summarized in the paradigm of 'Euro-Modernism.' The undergirding assumptions of this paradigm, or more accurately this world-view, are so thoroughly entrenched in every aspect of our intellectual, political, economic, and social landscapes, veiling us from our deepest intuitions concerning our true 'anthropic nature,' such that rarely are we able to see beyond the dysfunctional 'solutions' that it continually regurgitates.

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[3] Both quotes are taken from Rajani Kanth, *Farewell to Modernism: On Human Devolution in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017), 80, 101.

For Kanth, 'Euro-Modernism' rests upon four metaphysical foundations: a) a near-blind 'Faith' in Science (or scientism); b) at self-serving, triumphalist belief in 'Progress' (measured principally in material terms); c) an overriding philosophy of 'Materialism'; and d) a readiness to use illimitable force to achieve its 'progressivist' ends.[4] As he explains, the first fateful step was taken by Europe in the seventeenth-century, when its dominant tribes left behind its 'organic' *modus* in favor of a 'contract' model of society, such that what was once a "natural, unconscious, immanent End" was suddenly turned into "a willful means to individual fulfillment," a historic change that set Europeans "radically apart from the rest of the social universe – and their own previous history." This radically bold societal model was entirely novel in replacing the "'balance of affections' reality of real, anthropic society with the 'balance of interests' notions," succinctly encapsulated in Hegel's 'Civil Society' of 'universal egoism;' while the world up until then had always known of morality and immorality, '*amorality*' by contrast was a uniquely European invention.[5]

As Kanth argues, such a monumental change, has served to collectively stunt and disfigure our essential anthropic nature, veiling us from humanity's deepest and most basic instincts and intuitions. To put it in more metaphorical terms, 'Euro-Modernism' seeks to destroy our "tribalist Mammilian nature," characterized as "warm-blooded, emotive, and familial" and consisting of "close-knit, affective ties," turning us instead into "Post-Human Reptiles: cold, canny, uncaring, and calculating." The difference in outlook is immense: it is the difference between a 'social economy of affections' (moral economy) and a 'political economy of interests' (material economy); while one leads to civilization, the other can only end in barbarism.[6] "Real *anthropic* societies," Kanth notes, "are not '*contractual*' but *Affectual* – which is why *modernist* 'society' is

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[4] Seen in this light, both Capitalism and Socialism and the concomitant solutions of the 'Right' and the 'Left' are no more than the "Tweedledum and Tweedledee of Modernist Discourse," and we are best to look elsewhere if we are to authentically resolve our current impasse. Kanth, *Farewell*, xxiv, 16, 189, 199

[5] Kanth, *Farewell*, 16-17.

[6] Kanth, *Farewell*, 83, 88.

society rent with conflict/dissention, dysfunction, and anomie and is therefore not a society at all."[7] These observations are indeed as elementary, as they are telling; in sharp contrast to the long list of inalienable rights enshrined in the hegemonic international human rights regime, "the best things in life can be allocated freely," and "the real freedoms requisite to our species are not innumerable: freedom from want, indignity, and insecurity." To state it more simply, "*the greatest human need of all is: to huddle.*"[8]

Kanth is indeed far from being a lone wolf in his encompassing critique of modernity. Along similar lines, in *The Impossible State*, Wael Hallaq offers an exhaustive critique of the modern hegemonic state, presenting the bold case that the Sharī'a, especially as it existed in premodern times, is fundamentally and philosophically irreconcilable with the dictates of the "paradigmatic modern state" and its underlying 'secular metaphysics,' which, as he points out, is a product of a uniquely European genealogy that is grounded in an Enlightenment ethic and is predicated upon the doctrine of 'modern progress.'

While Hallaq's thesis is far too multifaceted to thoroughly engage at this juncture, some quick points concerning his critique of the modern state is in order.[9] Though it is discussed as an abstraction and as a universal and timeless phenomenon, the modern state is not ideologically neutral but reflects peculiarly European historical developments, with its own concomitant 'metaphysics.' This metaphysics is reflected in the rise of legal positivism and the irreversible chasm that has been created between the domain of the moral and the domain of the legal, between the 'Is' and the 'Ought' of 'fact' and 'value.'[10] While for Hallaq, the nation represents the ultimate metaphysical foundation of sovereign will, whereby God is

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[7] Kanth, *Farwell*, 70.

[8] Kanth, *Farwell*, 10, 128.

[9] For his full critique, see Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). For a recent and more extensive interrogation of modernity's ills that seeks to build upon Edward Said's thesis in *Orientalism* and extend its critique to other fields within academy, see Hallaq's *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

[10] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 78, 158ff.

displaced by the Sovereign state, "Islamic governance rests on moral, legal, political, social, and metaphysical foundations that are dramatically different from those sustaining the modern state."[11]

For Hallaq, the scale of disagreement between the two modes of governance and their philosophical underpinnings is immense, a fact that has been inadequately addressed by the many modernist champions of the 'Islamic state,' if it is addressed by them at all. His central critique of modernity holds that the rise of legal positivism and the displacement of the 'moral domain' has led to catastrophic consequences that are only perpetuated by the driving logic of the modern paradigmatic state, as reflected in its highly destructive and environmentally unsustainable utilitarian relationship with nature. By contrast, as he cogently observes, very much in line with Kanth's line of reasoning, Islamic law (and most premodern worldviews for that matter) knows of no bifurcation between the realm of the moral and the realm of the legal; the realm of the legal is always placed in the service of the moral, and legal rights are not to be seen as 'absolute entitlements' that are 'ends' in themselves but are merely instruments in the service of a higher 'telos.'[12]

This fundamental difference is clearly demonstrated, for example, in Islamic law's extensive intrusions in the regulation of economic activity and its largely overlooked yet unique formulation of the concept of private property. As Hallaq observes, in a legal system where God is the Absolute Sovereign, Legislator, and Owner of everything, "Human ownership of any kind, including the absolutely unencumbered ownership of property, is merely metaphorical and ultimately unreal."[13] This would explain why, in Islamic law "care for the poor is legislated as 'their right' against the wealth of the well-to-do, since the wealth is God's, and God's compassion is first and foremost bestowed on the poor, the orphans, and the wretched of the earth."[14] This *weltanschuung* has far reaching implications for how an Islamic authority may dispense with

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[11] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 49.
[12] Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 75-89.
[13] Ibid., 50.
[14] Ibid.

private property, a detail that is beyond the immediate scope of this current paper to explore.

It suffices us to note that this profound emphasis on the moral, leads some scholars like Sherman Jackson to conclude that if one were to conceive of an Islamic regime of human rights, it would necessarily be far less hegemonic than the Western scheme since from an Islamic point of view, an exhaustive list of 'rights claims' is not the primary means by which we produce good citizens. Thus, 'freedom from slavery,' for instance, is not a right that can be attained legally, but is rather something that materializes through society's cultivation of morality.[15] Hence, he proposes the concept of 'virtue' (*akhlāq*) as an alternative Islamic theorization to the discourse on human rights.[16] This Islamic focus on moral obligations over rights, is eloquently captured by Soroush, who reflects,

> One of the markers of the modern – in contradistinction to the traditional – world is the emergence of a 'rights carrier,' as opposed to a duty bound human being. The language of religion (especially that of Islam as exemplified by the Qurʾān and the Tradition) is the language of duties, not rights. In these texts, human beings are given commandments by a supremely Sovereign Authority. The language of the Shariʿa is that of commanding, as the picture of humanity in the mirror of religion is that of a duty-bound creature.[17]

As these observations point out, from the perspective of Islam's moral cosmology undergirding the Sharīʿa, there are indeed compelling philosophical and epistemological reasons for disagreeing with the hegemonic nature of the legally monistic nation state.

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[15] This perspective is indeed reminiscent of Kanth's collapsing of any regime of 'rights' to the barebones essentials, discussed above; these are namely, "freedom from want, indignity, and insecurity."

[16] Sherman Jackson, "Western Muslims and Human Rights: An Alternative Framework?" YouTube Video, 1:22, March 3, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQAMUB2PiJA.

[17] Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 61-62.

The Modernist 'Cage' of Secular Discourse and the Challenge of Pluralism

Given the hegemonic stranglehold of the modernist paradigm, one would expect to see its standardizing and homogenizing spirit in the arena of public discourse as well. In this regard, perhaps no single concept has been as influential in the regulation of our public discourse, at least within the liberal democratic tradition, as John Rawls's notion of 'public reason.'

The central question that Rawls attempts to resolve with his 'restricted' conception of 'political liberalism' is: how can an overlapping consensus between a society's divergent comprehensive doctrines be effectively achieved such that they come to freely endorse the constitutional essentials needed to build a just society? [18] Rawls's conception of 'political liberalism' claims to be 'neutralist' in orientation, and in order to garner wider acceptance within a pluralist society, his conception of 'justice as fairness' is defined as 'freestanding,' meaning it is not derived from any commitments to a wider comprehensive doctrine. More importantly, citizens are considered to be 'reasonable' in their doctrinal views so long as they are capable of viewing each other as 'free and equal citizens' who are capable of offering each other 'fair terms of social cooperation'.[19]

Rawls's definition of 'reasonableness' seems to ostensibly suggest that not all comprehensive doctrines need necessarily be liberal ones; the definition is left "deliberately loose"[20] and minimalist. Accordingly, in order to obtain an 'overlapping consensus' on constitutional essentials in a society of 'reasonable pluralism,' citizens must engage in an inclusive mode of deliberation, namely Rawls's 'public reason.' This entails a form of collaborative dialogue on matters of public justice that eschews the grounding of justifications in exclusivist metaphysical principles. Through this limited mode of reasoning, it is argued that citizens are capable of ideally affirming Rawls's political conception of justice, while

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[18] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), xvi.

[19] Rawls, *Political Liberalism,* xlii, 122.

[20] Rawls, *Political Liberalism,* xlii, 59.

simultaneously seeking to endorse it for themselves from within their own respective traditions.[21]

While Rawls's model of 'public reason' continues to be immensely influential, it is certainly not without its long list of detractors and serious critics. For Kanth, it reflects nothing more than modernism's ill-fated attempts at social engineering that continue to serve as a necessary distraction. To begin with, 'justice' is not simply reducible to 'fairness;' rather 'fairness' (Kanth prefers 'impartiality') "is more a rule of legality or procedure, not justice, in the first instance."[22] Furthermore, Raswls's religious critics would take issue with the designation of his conception of 'justice as fairness' as 'free standing,' arguing that his project is simply a modified version of "secular liberal politics as usual." Even secular critics may hold that contrary to his assertions, there is nothing 'reasonable' about expecting everyone to argue in the same terms, "which just happens to be a slightly adjusted version of the same terms dictated by his comprehensive secular liberalism."[23] Thus, as Nicholas Wolterstorff, among others, has argued, given that a fundamental tenet of liberal democracy is the ability of citizens to enjoy equal freedom in living their individual lives as they see fit, how can this be compatible with the moral restriction on discussing and deciding political issues as they see fit? Essentially, while the right to express one's religious commitments freely is fully guaranteed, this is not a right to be enjoyed in the political sphere, where the most important issues are resolved.[24]

Others like Jeffry Stout have more serious reservations about Rawls's conception of what is 'reasonable.' As he observes,

> [T]o be reasonable [for Rawls] is to accept the need for a social contract and to be willing to reason on the basis of it, at least when deliberating in the public forum . . . This definition implicitly imputes

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[21] Muhammad H. Fadel, "Public Reason as a Strategy for Principled Reconciliation: The Case of Islamic Law and International Human Rights Law," *Chicago Journal of International Law* 8:1 (2008), 3.

[22] Kanth, *Farewell*, 154-55.

[23] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004), 76.

[24] Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 68.

unreasonableness to everyone who opts out of the contractarian project, regardless of the reasons they might have for doing so."[25]

Thus, Rawls's vision of politics remains explicitly 'contractarian' and homogenizing in its assumption of a single relevant political community, failing to account for the plausibility of a 'politics of multiple communities' as the natural concomitant of living in a pluralist society. As Nicholas Wolterstorff sums it up concerning what he regards as liberalism's misguided project, "The liberal is not willing to live with a politics of multiple communities. He still wants communitarian politics. He is trying to discover, and to form, the relevant community. He thinks we need a shared political basis; he is trying to discover and nourish that basis."[26]

Aside from these compelling critiques, perhaps none are as comprehensive and powerful in their analysis and force as the arguments of Steven D. Smith in *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse*. Noting the widespread sense of 'disenchantment' shared by many public intellectuals concerning the tattered, shallow state of America's public discourse and the dearth of meaningful and genuinely fruitful political debate, Smith argues that many of the reasons proffered by leading intellectuals for this sad state of affairs, while possibly containing some grains of truth, are more reflective of the symptoms of the essential problem than of any real underlying causes.[27]

For Smith, the shift in our public discourse can be seen in the gradual displacement of the unfettered belief in 'Reason' that was bequeathed to us via the Enlightenment by the more restrictive Rawlsian notion of 'reasonableness' in contemporary public discourse. While the early Enlightenment belief in the unfettered primacy of 'Reason' may have initially led its early champions to cheerfully assume that a climate of free inquiry would be sufficient enough in leading people to recognize the truth, implying an eventual

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[25] Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 67.

[26] Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 109.

[27] Steven D. Smith, *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 6-12.

convergence of public opinion, a similar expectation today would seem "utterly naïve with respect to religion, morality, politics, or political philosophy." As he thus argues, "a central function of 'public reason' today is precisely to keep such matters out of public deliberation." In this sense 'public reason' has come to serve as the 'nemesis' of free-thinking, "or at least its nanny – whose task it is to keep Reason under control and out of sight whenever the important public functions occur."[28]

Smith's central concern with the regime of 'public reason' is its stifling of genuine rational debate. As he asks: What if the "truncated discursive resources available within the downsized domain of 'public reason'" are simply insufficient to yield any definitive answers on "the difficult moral questions" of the day? Indeed, much of the remainder of his book serves to illustrate the "limited scope of beliefs and methods that can actually claim an 'overlapping consensus' in a radically pluralistic society" are generally "insufficient to provide just such a persuasive basis for decision and justification."

So how has our public discourse carried forward with a semblance of normalcy despite such inadequate restrictions? Smith's explanation is that nearly all participants in the American political arena have been guilty of appealing to their most valued beliefs and truth claims through the crafty art of "smuggling" them *incognito* under a more palatable host of terms and normative political commitments; here he identifies two families of commitments that have been used to smuggle in so many conflicting beliefs and values as to become practically vacuous in their meaning and import (the 'autonomy-liberty-freedom' family vs. 'the equality-neutrality-reciprocity' family).[29]

Perhaps among Smith's most compelling insights lies in his analysis of how we got here in the first place, and in his views on the role of religion, where he echoes much of Kanth's and Hallaq's observations on modernity's predicament. Far from the standard narrative that attempts to place much of the blame for our current

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[28] Smith, *Disenchantment*, 13-14.

[29] Smith, *Disenchantment*, 26-34.

state of affairs at the feet of religion as a natural 'conversation stopper' in our public discourse, he begins by recalling that many of the Enlightenment's most ardent champions of 'Reason' were in fact deeply religious; echoing much of Carl Becker's prescient observations in the early 1930s, much of Smith's intellectual ammunition is thus geared at illustrating how the modern philosophical project of basing our moral commitments on the ground of 'reason' and 'human experience' alone (e.g. Rawls and Nussbaum) is, in the final analysis, guilty of the same circular reasoning decried of the religionists and is nearly always culpable of the sin of 'smuggling' or importing a host of preconceived values that have been bequeathed to us from the religious worldview of medieval times.[30]

In the final analysis, for Smith, it is largely modernity's secular worldview, which has supplanted the teleological and religious cosmology of earlier times, albeit in uneven fashion, that in fact serves the function of an 'iron cage' over our public discourses (leading us to Marx Weber's 'disenchantment of the world'). Ironically, at least within the academic and legal spheres, it is this near total hegemony of 'secular discourse' today and its concomitant set of 'artificial constraints' that serve to inhibit genuinely open and frank conversations about our deepest and most profound values and commitments; as such, the only way to know what the future will hold is to bravely open the cage![31]

On Culture and the Crisis of 'Meaning'

"*Culture is 'difference' writ large. Modernism, au contraire, standardizes and homogenizes any and all cultural/institutional 'differences,' so as to better co-opt, control, and dominate the world.*"
– Rajani Kanth[32]

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[30] Smith, *Disenchantment,* 151-186. For Carl Becker's seminal observations on this vexing problem see, Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (Yale University Press, 2003).

[31] Smith, *Disenchantment,* 23-25, 220-25.

[32] Kanth, Farewell, 203.

In a recent penetrating reflection on the state of American pluralism, the renowned Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, laments with a deep sense of pessimism:

> We find ourselves in a pluralistic society of countless creeds, colors, and cultures. In reality, this chromatic character of our society has been *subsumed* into a monotonous monoculture of ersatz arts, entertainment, and consumerism. The American people now share a common creed of consumption . . . In the midst of this civilizational decline, the question of pluralism keeps rearing its head, asking to be asked: can we live in a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society in peace? This, however, begs a deeper question: are we really multi-anything?[33]

A somewhat similar sentiment is shared by the historian Samuel Biagetti, coins the term 'IKEA humans' as a fitting depiction of the frailty, dislocation, and unmoored nature of the American middle class psyche and its sense of identity. Describing a hypothetical urbanite middle class couple, he states:

> *For* Jennifer and Jason, cuisines, musical styles, meditative practices, and other long-developed customs are not threads in a comprehensive enduring way of life, but accessories like cheap sunglasses, to be casually picked up and discarded from day to day. Unmoored, undefined, and unaware of any other way of being, Jennifer and Jason are no one. They are the living equivalents of the particle board that makes up the IKEA dressers and IKEA nightstands next to their IKEA beds. In short, they are IKEA humans.[34]

For Biagetti, such a development does not bode well for the future of America primarily because it is "an incomplete foundation on which to build an ethical life. If one is not attached to a way of life structured by inherited values and customs, then one is unlikely to be attached to anything at all."

These reflections suggest a keen awareness of the gnawing sense of anomie, dislocation, and emptiness that lies at the core of a

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[33] Hamza Yusuf, "Pluralism in a Monoculture of Conformity," *Renevatio: The Journal of Zaytuna College*, Dec. 15, 2017, https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/pluralism-in-a-monoculture-of-conformity.

[34] Samuel Biagetti, "The IKEA Humans: The Social Base of Contemporary Liberalism," *Jacobite Magazine*, Sept. 13, 2017, https://jacobitemag.com/2017/09/13/the-ikea-humans-the-social-base-of-contemporary-liberalism/

'global monoculture' brought about by the logic of Capitalist greed and the deeply ingrained materialist worldview that sustains it, where instant gratification and consumption (what we tend to pass off for 'happiness') is all that we can aspire to. In short, what they painfully lament is the shrinking landscapes of 'meaning' in our contemporary age.

So is this all that we can hope for, and can we make amends? Journalist and author Emily Esfahani Smith, attempts to boldly answer this very question.[35] Drawing upon her many interviews over five years of research in the fields of positive psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy[36], her central argument allows the data to speak for itself: chasing after 'happiness' (defined in narrow materialist terms) is making us unhappier than ever before; while our material standards of living continue to improve by every conceivable measure, the world continues to witness a steady rise in the rates of depression, loneliness, and suicide.[37] According to her research, what seems to be primarily fueling these worrying trends is not a "lack of happiness" but a "lack of meaning and purpose in life." Taking her cue from Psychologist Martin Seligman, Smith argues that "'meaning' comes from belonging to and serving something beyond yourself and from developing the best within you."[38] Unsurprisingly,

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[35] Emily Esfahani Smith, "There's to life than being happy," TED Talk, 12:19, April, 2017, https://www.ted.com/talks/emily_esfahani_smith_there_s_more_to_life_than_being_happy?language=en. For her book on the research that is the topic of this TED talk see, Emily Esfahani Smith, *The Power of Meaning: Finding Fulfillment in a World Obsessed with Happiness* (Broadway Books, 2017).

[36] A comprehensive list of the academic references serving as the foundation for her conclusions is helpfully provided beneath the TED video.

[37] See Greg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse* (Random House, 2004); "The saddest trend: suicide rates in America, and in other rich countries" *The Economist*, April 30, 2016, https://www.economist.com/united-states/2016/04/30/the-saddest-trend; Sabrina Tavernise, "US Suicide Rates Surge to a 30-Year High," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/health/us-suicide-rate-surges-to-a-30-year-high.html?mcubz=0&_r=0.

[38] For more on the distinction between 'happiness' and 'meaning', Smith recommends Martin E. P. Seligman's works *Authentic Happiness* (Atria Books, 2004) and *Flourish* (Atria Books, 2012).

the data also reveals that individuals with a strong sense of meaning tend to live longer and do better in school and at work.

The conclusion of Smith's research outlines four essential pillars to the 'meaningful life':

1. **Belonging:** when relationships are nurtured and individuals are valued intrinsically for who they are, as opposed to any political allegiances or ideological leanings

2. **Purpose:** when one's talents and strengths and directed positively in the service of others

3. **Transcendence:** which is characterized by those experiences that lift one up above the hustle and bustle of daily life, causing one's sense of self to fade away and feel connected to a higher reality. These may be expressed through the variant forms of art, music, writing or religious experience.

4. **Storytelling:** this consists of how we craft our own stories of redemption, growth, and love throughout our individual life journeys. Choosing to craft a positive narrative of our past events and traumas brings greater clarity and meaning.

These four pillars are next explored in Part II in my case of Shaykh Hamdi Ben Aissa and his dynamic Muslim community of the Sanad Collective in eastern Canada, which arguably serves as a rich model and illustration of how such "cultures of meaning" can be successfully established and sustained.

C. Part II: From the 'Global Monoculture' of the 'IKEA Human' to 'Cultures of Meaning': The Case of Shaykh Hamdi Ben Aissa and the Sanad Collective

Background

Shaykh Hamdi Ben Aissa is a man on a mission.[39] A passionate and restless spiritual guide residing between the Canadian capital of Ottawa, Ontario, and the lively cosmopolitan city of Montreal,

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[39] The details that follow in this case study are the result of direct personal observations of Shaykh Hamdi's community in Eastern Canada over several years, and both Shaykh Hamdi and Ustaza Shehnaz have consented to the mention of their teachings and work in my research.

Quebec, he has been an imam and spiritual counselor for the Anglophone and Francophone Muslim communities of Eastern Canada for over ten years. He studied the sacred Islamic sciences in a traditional Islamic milieu[40] in Tunisia, where his father is a Zaytuna-University trained Imam. He later went on to study with the world-renowned spiritual guide and preacher, al-Ḥabīb ʿUmar b. Ḥafīẓ in the ancient city of Tarīm, Yemen. His wife Ustaza Shehnaz Karim is similarly a teacher and religious counselor in her own right, having received a foundation in traditional Islamic education in Syria.

Around 2012-13, shortly after his return from Yemen, Shaykh Hamdi began holding weekly series of classes on Islamic spirituality and gatherings of spiritual remembrance (*dhikr*) in his residence in Ottawa and at a communal Zawiya that he had established in Montreal, both of which slowly began to coalesce into a community of disciples and followers. These gatherings were the seed from which he was able to establish his community organization the Sanad Collective, with the blessing and support of his teacher Ḥabīb ʿUmar.

Up until around 2015, Shaykh Ḥamdi had been working as only one of two full-time Muslim chaplains in Canada's federal prisons in the province of Quebec, mentoring and counseling Muslim inmates and attending to their diverse spiritual needs and well-being. At this juncture, given the very rapid growth of the Sanad community and its many pressing demands on his time and attention, in addition to a host of institutional obstacles and challenges that he faced within the Canadian penitentiary system, Shaykh Hamdi made the difficult choice of quitting his career to establish a new mosque and center that would serve as a permanent home for his Sanad community, where he could devote himself as a full-time teacher, spiritual counselor, and imam.

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[40] By 'traditional Islam,' I am principally referring to the classical Sunni tradition, characterized a direct association or open tolerance for the Sufi tradition, a foundation in one of the four schools of Sunni law, and in the Ashʿarī or Māturīdī creeds of theology, in contradistinction to other more 'modernist' varieties of Sunni Islam, which may be of 'Salafi' provenance and are frequently characterized by a distaste or rejection of the classical Sufi tradition.

The Sanad Experience: Forging a Culture of 'Meaning'

'Sanad' in Arabic means 'link,' 'anchor,' or 'chain.' For Shaykh Ḥamdī, like traditional Muslims, it is the organic chain of religious transmission that is the thread that connects each Muslim generation to its forefathers and pious predecessors running all the way back to the Prophet Muhammad; it is the chain that keeps religion alive, well-anchored, and unphased by the storms and vagaries of historical change. What makes Shaykh Hamdi and Ustaza Shehnaz's organizational vision so novel and relevant for many, among young Muslims especially, contributing to Sanad Collective's phenomenal success as one of the most active and dynamic Muslim communities in Eastern Canada, is their near paramount focus on all the minutia of what it takes to build a healthy and vibrant Muslim culture in all its diverse needs and aesthetic manifestations. While other like-minded sister organizations across much of Canada and North America have tended to focus on religious instruction and the dissemination of religious knowledge, Shaykh Hamdi and Ustaza Shehnaz by contrast, have keenly observed that the central challenge facing Western Muslims today is primarily a cultural one: how to build a relevant, engaging, and relevant culture that brings 'meaning' to Muslims, sheltering Muslims (and non-Muslims) alike against the social ills of an extreme individualism, materialism, and consumerism that are antithetical to the very mode of being of traditional religion and authentic spirituality.

In a promotional article, "A Cup for Your Tea," which may be read as a personal manifesto, they attempt to argue that "Culture is to Revelation like a cup is to tea":

> Think of a Japanese tea ceremony, or the way that Moroccans serve tea. The experience of drinking tea from a round clay cup that fits perfectly in the palm of the hand, or from decorated hand-blown glass, is vastly different from that of drinking it from a styrofoam cup. Just like tea, Divine Revelation needs a vessel into which to be poured, for it to be served to the human being and imbibed safely and with satisfaction. Traditional Islamic cultures were those tea cups, holding the Divine Revelation. The principles and concepts delineated in the Revelation found their expression in the unique cultures of Islamic

societies. It was through this process that messages from God could be woven into the fabric of earthly existence.[41]

In attempting to tackle the question of culture, they necessarily must touch upon the prevalent attitudes and notions surrounding the profane nature of the 'cultural' that have crept into Muslim societies globally through the slogans of a politicized modernist Islam:

In the sixties and seventies, Muslims were taught that culture was something suspect . . . People were told: all you need is the Quran and Hadith – you are Muslim, not a member of any culture. And yet, even though this movement stripped Muslims of our traditional songs, dances, and the organic expression of the faith, it failed in doing away with culture altogether. In the place of these ancient sacred customs, the modern Muslim ended up with a pastiche of the worst aspects of Western culture: tinny synthesizer harmonized *nasheeds*, borrowed wedding customs with white wedding dresses and limousines, massive conferences that stood in for traditional festivals and fairs, and, all around, styrofoam cups for tea.

For Shaykh Hamdi, culture serves primarily as the 'mount' Muslim's mount for any authentic religious expression, and the challenge is thus how to delicately negotiate between the anchor of custom and the flexibility of the present moment, between rigidity and change, to create an aesthetically and intellectually relevant culture that is at once familiar to the traditional Muslim elder but equally a place to call 'home' for the young Canadian Muslim novice down the street. Whether it is the celebration of a traditional Mawlid ('celebration of guidance'), with its unique blend of classical Arabic religious poetry (*qasīdas*) occasionally interspersed with English and French songs composed by members of the community, the burning of traditional incents to mark any sacred occasion, the serving of Moroccan mint tea or Yemeni coffee, or a recital from the annual

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[41] Hamdi Ben Aissa and Shehnaz Karim, "A Cup for Your Tea," accessed July, 2018, https://sanadcollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CultureandRevelationone-pager-3.pdf. For another Islamic critique of the global monoculture that seeks to highlight traditional Islam's historically positive embrace of cultural diversity, offering a passionate case for the reassertion of 'culture' in our contemporary age, see Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, "Islam and the Cultural Imperative," (Nawawi Foundation, 2014), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54eb86afe4b0b896afa4080a/t/58dc1008bebafb6c9335 4861/1491015358668/Islam%26TheCulturalImperative.pdf

Letters to the Beloved poetry contest, the proud celebration of Muslim culture at Sanad Collective, both old and new, is everywhere prevalent.

Digging Within & Confronting the Tropes of a Modernist Reactionary Islam

"*Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.*" - Rumi

On the intellectual front, Shaykh Hamdi's live-streamed weekly classes, where he specializes in the Biography (*Sīra*) and Virtues (*Shamāʾil*) of the Prophet, serve to respond to the many inherited notions, mistranslations, and inadequate conceptions of a modernist, reactionary, and overly-politicized Islam, favoring instead a more nuanced exploration of the rich spiritual resources of 'traditional Islam.' A recurring feature of his teachings thus consists of a heightened sensitivity to proper definitions and to critiquing the popular mistranslations that have served to obscure central Islamic concepts and teachings, offering his audience an alternative 'living' vocabulary that is at once truer to the original Arabic and more universally accessible. Thus a significant part of his time is devoted to translating key religious texts, litanies, prayers, and poetry into a more accessible 'living' language, with the assistance of Ustaza Shehnaz and a few of his bilingual students.

A simple example may be found in the Arabic word '*Rahma*,' frequently translated as '*Mercy*,' which is more restricted to a sense God's leniency and forgiveness but obscures the sense of "unconditional love or compassion" that is clearly present in many examples of the Arabic usage, as when a popular *ḥadīth* speaks of a mother's '*rahma*' to her child for instance. Given that such a word is so central to Muslims' daily practice and their relationship with their Creator, such concerns are far from pedantic and can immensely affect the quality of Muslim religious experience. For Shaykh Hamdi, the ubiquitous effects of poor quality translations are so thoroughly entrenched within the Muslim psyche, that they frequently serve to undermine the universality and accessibility of Islamic teachings, especially to a non-Muslim Western audience.

As for the Sīra, while typical readings of the Prophetic biography tend to take on a more activist skew, highlighting the Prophet Muhammad's successes as a 'social revolutionary' by focusing unduly on his battles or his role as a champion of women's rights, of the downtrodden, and the oppressed, Shaykh Hamdi's teachings, by contrast, illustrate how such a framing of the Prophetic narrative frequently obscures the far more central spiritual dimension, recalling that the paramount function of any Prophet or Apostle of God is to guide people to their Creator; as such a great deal of attention is paid to the Prophet's great emotional and spiritual intelligence in guiding his Companions on their path, a focus that takes center stage in his teachings. In this sense, the great genre of Shamā'il or Prophetic Virtues, takes on a renewed significance as a 'self-help' genre in the Muslim's path to spiritual transformation.

With regards to the challenge of world peace, Shaykh Hamdi's teachings reflect a keen awareness of the Prophetic and perennial 'methodology' of all traditional religion, which may be contrasted by the modernist paradigm of the 'social revolutionary': while traditional religion begins by orienting the person inwards, giving us the courage and tool to confront and transcend our own demons and moral limitations prior to any attempts at changing our external circumstances, most activist-oriented and revolutionary ideologies for social change operate in reverse: they orient the individual's energies outwards in an endless struggle against the oppressive social and institutional structures of society, leaving the far more fundamental challenge of self-mastery and of taking individual moral responsibility for one's own actions relatively unaddressed.

In reflecting on the principal lesson of 'transcendence' that can be gleaned from the life and example of Imam Hussein on the occasion of ʿĀshūrā', Shaykh Hamdi notes that Muslims in the West, have a choice to make in the face of the many real challenges confronting their community:

> Either we play the game and run after a comfortable material life of assimilation, acceptance, big cars and houses, mortgages and bills . . . that is, we seek the material good of this world in selfish pursuit of short-lived gratification and never-ending consumerism OR we enter

into another kind of trap: which is to be in continuous conflict with the circumstances we are in, fighting over scraps of short-lived material victory. Feeling refused and rejected, constantly threatened by our surroundings, perceiving ourselves as under attack, reacting to the slightest matter as a victim, becoming defensive and playing the blame game. Always aware and on the lookout . . . that we never have time to orient ourselves heavenward. . . *But it is our choice to either engage . . . on the same playing field, or rise above.*[42]

In yet another publication aptly titled "No Peace, No Justice"[43], he outlines this alternative path of 'transcendence' by playing on the common activist slogan of "no justice, no peace." His title is a bold proclamation that much of today's reactionary activism, both Muslim and non-Muslim alike, has its priorities in fact quite reversed. Without attaining to an anchored sense of inner-peace and self-mastery that altogether transcends the impulses for reactivity and blame, human society is bound to continue in its great 'game' of fear, conflict, and mutual recrimination.

The Lotus Community Corner & Café Floraison: Forging the 'Third-Place' of Belonging

In *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg makes a passionate case for the 'third spaces' (alongside the home and the workplace), such as the local café or bookstore, as vital components of healthy and thriving communities, noting the disappearance of such spaces in modern culture, due to poor urban planning, among other factors, to the great detriment of our community-life and the well-being and vitality of society at large.[44]

Within the Canadian Muslim community, Sanad Collective has taken a keen note of the crucial necessity for such 'third spaces' and has quickly risen to meet the challenge. Among the most successful and valued achievements of Shaykh Hamdi's communal vision has

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[42] Hamdi Ben Aissa, "Rise Above," (Friday Sermon, Ottawa, 2014), http://rhodainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Rise-Above.pdf.

[43] Hamdi Ben Aissa, "No Peace, No Justice," accessed July, 2018, https://sanadcollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/No-peace-no-justice.pdf. See also Shaykh Hamdi's "Dreaming of Peace," accessed July, 2018, https://sanadcollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Dreaming-of-Peace.pdf.

[44] Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (Da Capo Press, 1999).

been the establishment of two non-profit community bookstore-cafes, the Lotus Community Corner in Ottawa and Café Floraison in Montreal. Both bookstore-cafés are operated by a mixed team of volunteers and paid employs and serve as a true nucleus or 'third space' for Muslims and non-Muslims alike to commune regularly over high quality organic food and coffee and interact with a highly diverse and steady stream of customers and curious visitors.

The phenomenal success of these two relatively new spaces and their highly diverse slew of community projects, public events, movie screenings, and workshops on such diverse themes as the arts, health and well-being, and international cuisine, has meant that such places are far more than mere businesses, fostering deep relationships and engagements and capturing the heart and soul of the community.[45] Indeed, the rapid and remarkable success of the cafes is partly a reflection of the failures of the wider Muslim community's mosques to adapt and provide alternative social venues that can better cater to Muslims, and the youth in particular, with culturally relevant programming. This communal shortcoming has led to a growing sense of malaise and alienation among Canadian Muslim youth and women with local community mosques, manifesting itself in the phenomenon of the 'unmosqued' Muslim.[46]

What makes these two spaces all the more unique is the great extent to which every aspect of their décor, aesthetics, programming, and positive messaging, are imbued with a deep intentionality and sense of meaning. Indeed, the name 'Lotus' is meant to appropriate a familiar universal symbol of personal growth and spiritual transformation; just as the lotus flower grows out of the murky waters and the mud of the pond to bloom in all its beauty and splendor, so too is this space meant to shelter individual hearts in their personal transformations and assist them to bloom all their beauty out of the murkiness of their lower selves. Similarly,

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[45] In the case of Ottawa, the Lotus Community Corner also has the added advantage of being adjacent to Shaykh Hamdi's Rhoda Masjid and Institute, and being connected to a large community garden that serves as the ideal place for community barbeques, a community gardening project, and that is even fitted with a fire pit for an evening bonfire.

[46] See for instance the documentary film *Unmosqued*, which addresses this phenomenon in America.

Montreal's trendy Café Floraison is also meant to play on the same theme, where the French 'Floraison' may be translated as a 'flowering' or 'efflorescence,' hinting once more to the journey of growth and transformation.[47] Additionally, the bookstore sections of the cafes offer a wide selection of high quality books not only on Islam and Islamic spirituality, but also on world religions, philosophy, self-help, and health and well-being, where each book is carefully screened and selected with great care for quality control and a messaging that is congruent with Sanad's overarching vision and objectives. Furthermore, the cafés are constantly on the lookout for adopting healthy and environmentally friendly practices, where the food on the menus is fully organic, frequently local, and the meat is ordered from one of the only suppliers in Canada to offer ethically raised, grass-fed, and organic halal meat.

Service, Service, Service: The Pathway to Personal Growth and Communal Transformation

In the center of the Lotus Community garden lies a Canadian serviceberry tree, appropriately selected and planted to inaugurate the Rhoda Masjid's opening ceremony. The choice of this tree is likely not coincidental, as 'service' (*khidma*) is a credo that Shaykh Hamdi and his students live by. Nearly each core member of the community has their own role and contribution cut out for them: whether it's managing the finances or fundraising, organizing the logistics of Shaykh Hamdi's three annual spiritual nature retreats, the graphic design, the photography, the livestreaming of public events, the uploading of online content and video-editing, the translation work, cooking meals for the many potluck gatherings, managing and staffing the cafes, buying supplies, watering the garden, or cleaning up, everyone is on a mission and there is plenty of work to go around. So much so that Shaykh Hamdi's slogan for 2018 states: "*Look for the real need and fulfill it. Find the gap and fill it. Don't stress. Don't*

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[47] The name itself was inspired from the Arabic '*al-fath al-mubīn*' (i.e. the great opening or victory), a name selected by Shaykh Hamdi's teacher Ḥabīb ʿUmar to bless his annual Floraison spiritual retreat in Thetford Mines, Quebec, the only French Muslim retreat of its kind in North America.

try to impress. Just finish the task and clean the mess!" If it is real change that you seek, as he frequently reminds his students, then "find your seed and plant it!"

For Shaykh Hamdi and Anse Shehnaz, 'service' in not merely a catchy slogan or credo. It is a philosophy and way of life; it is the art (*adab*) of finding your purpose in life and is hence the open pathway to personal and communal transformation. Indeed, such a message and such a buzz of energy can at times be unsettling for a post-millennial generation accustomed to the passive state of consumption that is the natural concomitant of a highly individualistic, social-media obsessed culture. Thus, 'service' and 'responsibility' in this context are the battle cries against the rampant culture of consumerism that characterizes our age. For Shaykh Hamdi, 'consumerism' comes in many forms, and the worst form of consumerism is the "consumption of religion," where a teacher's classes, time, and energy are passively consumed, as we would a Netflix movie. For some of his students, it may be a steep learning curve at first, but a highly rewarding one nonetheless.

The 'Celebration of Guidance': A Weekly Dose of 'Transcendence'

Anas b. Malik narrated: The Apostle of God, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "When you pass by the meadows of Paradise, then graze to your fill." They asked, "And what are the meadows of Paradise?" The Apostle said, "The circles of remembrance." - Ḥadīth in Sunan al-Tirmidhī, 3510

The crowning jewel of Sanad Collective's diverse projects and activities has always been their weekly 'celebration of guidance' (or *Mawlid*), the humble ground from which it all began. The weekly gathering at the Rhoda Masjid every Saturday in Ottawa, and at the Dar al-Muhajir Zawiya every Sunday in Montreal has been the regular staple and highlight of the Sanad community since its humble beginnings. Simple and elegant in format, it consists of a communal potluck dinner followed by the recital of a litany of prayers and supplications (*al-Wird al-Latif* of Imām Ḥaddād), and the chanting of Ḥabīb ʿUmar's internationally popular *al-Ḍiyāʾ al-Lāmiʿ* (The Shimmering Light), accompanied to the beat of a traditional

tambourine or drum and the warm sip of Moroccan mint tea, where each chapter is interspersed with a smattering of highly popular classic Arabic Islamic *qasīdas* and some local French and English compositions that are the unique creations of Shaykh Hamdi's most talented students. These recitals are followed by a spiritual meditation or reflection by the Shaykh covering various spiritual or religious themes, where students are also occasionally given the mic to share their own insights.

The Mawlid and its rich and diverse Islamic melodies, honoring equally the great classics and the new, is a weekly opportunity for the community to reflect more deeply, leave the world behind, experience the moment, and re-connect to the well-spring of 'meaning' that is the source of their hopes, dreams, and aspirations; in short, it is their weekly gateway to a higher state of harmony, unison, and, above all, 'transcendence.' With its incorporation of local melodies made in Canada, it is also for some a most honorable avenue for artistic and spiritual expression, with the opportunity to share such expressions of love and joy with the wider world, thanks to Sanad's substantial international following via social media. As Shaykh Hamdi likes to remind his students, the Mawlid is far more than the mere routine or chanting of 'folkloric' tradition: it is a living gateway to the Divine and an invitation to access our deepest essence, the experience of which is the bedrock of any authentic spiritual culture.

Sharing Stories of Love, Growth, and Redemption

On the side of the Lotus community garden lies three unassuming shrubs that appear to be well-planted but are a curiously dry, crispy yellow: they are in fact dead plants that Shaykh Hamdi had personally planted into the ground after having died prematurely. A student informs me that Shaykh Hamdi had insisted to plant them, nonetheless, as a living reminder and testament to his unshakable belief in God's power to revive the heart after it has died.

Many of Shaykh Hamdi and Anse Shehnaz's students have their own redemptive stories to share of how they came to Sanad, and they are frequently encouraged to do so on numerous occasions. Camp Connect, an annual weeklong nature retreat that seeks to

mentor the youth in their transition to adulthood, is one such opportunity where the youth are encouraged to write their story and turn a new page.

Some of Sanad's members will admit to a previous life mired by the personal crises of depression, loneliness, and a loss of purpose or direction, all of which are an increasingly common staple of daily life in a highly individualistic age, where Instagram and Facebook serve as quick replacements for real, meaningful relationships. The story of Sanad Collective and its contagious appeal is thus in the positive narrative that it has successfully created and propagated; it is a story of a disparate group of people, coming together, celebrating life together, and witnessing each other grow into more fulfilled and realized human beings.

This story is perhaps best encapsulated in the founding of the Rhoda Masjid. The mosque was once an abandoned, and badly dilapidated grocery store that had been put up for rent, along with the barber shop next door, which came to eventually house the Lotus Community Corner. After surveying the property, it was estimated that it would take two to three weeks at most, with a reasonable budget, to convert both spaces into a functional Mosque and café. While both estimates were way off the mark, a deep faith and hope remained in abundance. Instead, the community ended upon embarking on a three-month journey of major funding drives, intensive construction work, and self-discovery, a project that was mostly managed by an inexperienced and disparate troop of volunteers from all backgrounds and walks of life. Together, with much prayer, long-nights of hard work, and the guiding direction of a few elders and YouTube tutorial videos, they learned how to saw, scrape, nail, varnish, paint, and erect walls and fences from scratch. The three-month process was a living testament to the power of community to heal and to grow, and the power of believing in something greater than one's self. Just as the mosque had once been an unattractive, dilapidated piece of real estate and had been converted through the power of love into the heart and center of a thriving community, so too is the promise that Sanad delivers to its many members, if they are willing to do the work.

D. Conclusion

In addressing the perennial question of world peace, this paper has attempted to profer a diagnosis of our contemporary global malaise by building upon Rajathani Kanth's critique of 'Euro-modernism' as is the hegemonic foundation of our global monoculture and upon Steven D. Smith's insightful critique of the closed 'Cage' of modern secular discourse. In so doing, as the data from positive psychology and neuroscience research seems to confirm, I have attempted to argue that the resultant crisis of our age is the shrinking landscape of 'meaning,' which is the principal symptom of our contemporary crisis. While it is the principal symptom of a much deeper crisis, reaffirming 'meaning' all its dimensions, can serve to alleviate not only the symptom but hopefully lead the path forward towards a more tranquil horizon. Part II of my essay has attempted to explore the idea of a 'culture of meaning' as an avenue for positive change from within the paradigm of traditional religion and the rich resources of the Islamic tradition in particular. This is illustrated in my case study of Shaykh Hamdi Ben Aissa and Ustaza Shenaz's work at the Sanad Collective as a practical living example of one such 'culture of meaning.' It is hoped that such a case study may serve as a good illustration of contemporary solutions in action and as a constructive model to ponder and emulate from within the rich tapestry of our diverse wisdom traditions and our collective human experience.

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