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De-Westernizing media theory, or reverse Orientalism: 'Islamic communication' as theorized by Hamid Mowlana

Gholam Khiabany

DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES, LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY,
UK

It is merely in the night of our ignorance that all alien shapes take on the same hue. (Perry Anderson)

There is increasing concern over 'Western' bias in media theory and reaction against the lack of understanding of other cultures – their values, belief systems and communication models. This concern has paved the way for some important and much needed comparative analysis. However, since 'culture' has become an essential category in trying to explain the post-1989 world, not surprisingly in all areas of social sciences including media studies, a new wave of essentialist thinking has emerged. Many, while trying to take issue with Eurocentrism, operate within an Orientalist worldview. It would be a grave mistake to treat this 'reaction' and 'awareness' as a singular, homogeneous current. There exist a variety of different projects – undoubtedly all of them political – with different aims and concerns. One such political reaction, mirroring the official views and policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is the so-called Islamic theory of communication that is offered by Hamid Mowlana. His views and conceptualization of 'authentic' Islamic culture, and what he has called the 'Islamic communication paradigm', have attracted attention and proved rather influential.

Hamid Mowlana's model of 'Islamic communication', while drawing mainly from 'Iranian experience', aspires to a general interpretation of all Muslim societies. In a number of studies, in the pages of this journal and elsewhere (1979, 1989, 1993, 1996, 1997) he has offered a model that not only challenges Western models of communication, but also Western models of society. He argues that, in contrast to the nation-state, which is a political state, the Islamic state is a 'God-fearing' state, founded on Qur'an, the *Sunna* (tradition) and the *Sharia* (Islamic law). Unlike the nation-state model, in the Islamic state, sovereignty belongs not to the people but rests in God. The Islamic community also differs from the Western notion of community. In Islamic society, the *Umma* (community of faithful) is formed on the basis of shared belief in the unity of god, the universe and nature. In

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such a community, race, nationality and ethnicity have no relevance.¹ In this system there is no separation between public and private, religion and politics, spiritual and temporal powers and, as such, communication has a rather different meaning, set of roles and aims. Islam, in this view, is regarded as an independent force and engine of history in the 'Islamic world'. This article questions the validity of Mowlana's model and rejects the general assumption of a unified Islamic community, in terms of culture as well as communication.

A singular 'Muslim society'?

When comparing Islam with other religions and 'cultures', we must make it precisely clear what we speak of, and what comparisons we make. The meaning of 'Islam', even when used to denote the religion of Islam, is too general and imprecise to be useful in an analytical argument. Do we mean the collection of material known as the Qur'an and the *Sunna*, or is it the aggregate beliefs of the mass of Muslims in Iran today, or in Egypt five centuries ago, or rules and 'Islamic codes' as applied and reinforced by Islamic regimes? Modern Islamists refer to the same anthology and come away with quite different, and even conflicting, deductions. One cannot deny, of course, that there is such a thing as the 'religion of Islam', but to use it as a generic term in an analytical argument leads only into a tunnel of ambiguities. According to Al-Azmeh (1993: 1) 'there are as many Islams as there are situations that sustain it'. Mowlana's problem is that, in order to reach the conclusion he desires, he needs a definition of the 'religion of Islam', which is not so diffuse. His monolithic model easily crumbles in the face of a variety of religious structures, organizations, traditions and schools, and not only in different societies, but even within one society.

In his 'analysis' of Islam, Mowlana only acknowledges the main branches. The differences are addressed in few pages of his book, *Global Communication in Transition* (1996: 153–8), under the heading of 'Islamic reform movements'. In general, he is of course right in stating that 'all Islamic schools of thought are united on the fundamental principles of faith'. But that can be said about all religions. Mowlana repeatedly argues that what bring Muslims together is their faith and, for that reason, the Islamic community, is unlike any other community. Equality among all faithful in an Islamic state should come as naturally as breathing:

Although the official religion of Iran is Islam and the *Twelver J'fari* school of *Shi'a* thought, other Islamic schools of thought, including the *Hanafi*, *Shafi'i*, *Maliki*, and *Yazdi* schools, are to be accorded full respect, and their followers are free to act in accordance with their own jurisprudence in performing their religious devotions. (Mowlana, 1996: 175)

The above quote, which is hidden away in one of the footnotes, is not created by Mowlana, but is part of Article 12 of the Islamic Republic's Constitution. It does not require great analytical skill to see and understand the difference between being 'accorded full respect' and 'equal rights' in a community. In this sense other branches of Islam in Iran, other than the official one, both among the *Shi'a* and the *Sunni*, generally have the same rights as other recognized non-Islamic religions under the Iranian Constitution. Mowlana's idea of *Umma* and 'Islamic exceptionalism', therefore, crumbles before the realities of Iranian case.

Commentators, including Mowlana, constantly refer to the Muslim world, and Islamic culture. Is there such a thing? There are an estimated 1.2 billion Muslims in the world. Roughly a quarter of the people living on our planet are Muslim. The

Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) has 55 member states, and within these states there is a variety of languages, histories, levels of economic development and cultural practices. The ten countries with the largest Muslim population are as follows: Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Nigeria and China. It is difficult to conclude those Islamic countries and communities are similar simply because of their Islamic essence. No one can claim, surely, that the 'Christian world' does not share a universe of discourses and a 'common heritage'. However, it would be impossible to argue that the Christian entities have taken on the same forms, and the same political and social significance in various parts of Christian world and throughout history. One cannot deny the labels 'Christian world' or 'Islamic world', but it would be absurd to argue that the 'content' of these labels has remained the same throughout history and under different socio-economic conditions. No one, in the Middle East or elsewhere, belongs to just one 'community'. Mowlana's 'banal communitarianism' offers nothing but the old Orientalist sense of uninterrupted history, a unified history of Islamic culture and identity and an undifferentiated 'Muslim' mass, with no distinct social locations and groupings, and certainly no class, gender, ethnic or regional differences. *Umma*, in this vision, is offered as the only way to 'imagine' a community.

Islamic communication?

In his works, Mowlana has outlined what he regards as an Islamic response to the Western model of communication (as if there is only one), one more in tune with the cultural values and history of the Islamic world. Central to his analysis is the notion of *Tablig* (propagation). He warns us that *Tablig* should not be confused with the Western concept of propaganda. *Tablig* throughout the history of Islam has 'provided, for a vast number of people from diverse races, languages, and histories, a common forum for participation in a shared culture' (1996: 119) which is Islam. *Tablig*, Mowlana notes, has four main principles: monotheism (*tawhid*), doctrine of responsibility, guidance and action (*amr bi al-m'ruf wa nahy'an al munkar*), the idea of Islamic community (*Umma*) and, finally, the principle of piety (*taqwa*).

The issue here is not simply some dispute over definitions of these principles, although they have become the subjects of massive rifts and struggle among the Islamic ruling elite since 1979, and especially after Khomeini's death (see Ehteshami, 1995; Brumberg, 2001). I have no intention of challenging Mowlana's definitions. My question, initially, is over whether such abstract concepts tell us anything at all about the dynamic media culture in Iran, or any other Islamic country.

Those principles that are mentioned by Mowlana are by no means exclusive to Islam. They are narratives common to all religions. Furthermore, even among Muslim scholars, the debate and struggle over the definitions and meanings of such 'codes' and their applications in society, is by no means settled. Islamization, like any other '-ization' is linked to the crucial question of agency. In this sense, Mowlana's view is quite different from that of other commentators on the subject of Islam and communication. Take the example of three non-Iranian contributors to the special edition of this journal (*Media, Culture & Society* 15(1)). Akbar Ahmed (Schlesinger, 1993) sees the relationship between Islam and communication, and what he refers to as return to tradition, in the context of postmodernity. Mowlana (1990), on the other hand, argues that the 'passing of modernity' should not be confused with postmodernism. Syed Pasha (1993) points to the fundamental role of an open conception of knowledge and stresses the centrality of the various forms of communication in the Islamic world. Similarly, and on the basis that the *Qur'an* was sent for all the faithful and talks directly to them, Sardar (1993) has argued for

a more open interpretation of the holy text. He suggests that computing technology and, in particular, CDs, can affect a potential revolution in the interpretation of Islamic culture. The banning of print by *ulama*, he says, was in effect an illegitimate monopolization of authorized knowledge with disastrous long-term consequences. Leaving aside the apparent technological determinism in this argument, what one cannot miss is the impact of European experience: it is hoped that the CD can do for Islamic reformism what printing did for Protestantism.

This is not the place to engage effectively with such analysis and claims. The main point is to show that Mowlana's reading of the relationship between Islam and communication is a rather rigid attempt to formulate and explain 'Islamic communication'. All of the above commentaries appeared in the same journal edited by Mowlana himself, and it is quite astonishing that there is not a single reference to any of them in Mowlana's subsequent writings. What are we to make of this?

Mowlana suggests that 'the word communication, in its Latin usage does not exist in Islamic literature, and when it is used and translated in its contemporary context in Middle Eastern countries, the term takes a more technical rather than social connotation' (1996: 149). This is a classic Orientalist position that explains 'Muslim society' in terms of *absences*, but it is also a bizarre line of reasoning, especially for a *communications* scholar. There exist within many Islamic countries a number of words that perhaps according to Mowlana are un-Islamic: Republic comes to mind! We also have to ask: What 'Islamic literature'? Which Middle Eastern countries?

It is in this spirit that Mowlana proposes the two broad understandings and models of communications and conveniently lines two *ideologies* against each other: the information society paradigm versus the Islamic community paradigm. The dispute, as he states, is not only about two visions of communication, but also two visions of society. He asks:

Should the Information Society Paradigm dominate the epistemological, theoretical, and practical aspects of Islamic Community Paradigm, or should the latter control and direct the former. In short, which paradigm must be the basis of process of social, political, economic and cultural change? (1996:132)

The anxiety over the structure of international communication is understandable. But why only these two paradigms? Must we choose one of them? Are there any other possibilities? Why this poor remake of what was very poor and ahistorical in the first place: Lerner's modern/traditional dichotomy?

In Mowlana's view, the information society paradigm has a number of elements that are evident in United States as well as a number of other countries. On one level, 'the philosophy and theory of information and communication have replaced transcendental discourse as the prime concern of philosophical reflection in the West', while at the practical level it has 'come to portray the ideology of neomodernism, postmodernism, or postindustrialism *without abandoning the capitalist economic and social systems* that continue to characterize its core' (1996: 131, my emphasis)

If not *capitalist economic and social systems*, then what characterizes 'Islamic' Iran's mode of production and social relations? For Mowlana, this is irrelevant since, in the Islamic model, 'the central question is not one of economics but of culture, ethics, and *tabligh*' (1996: 126). Another sign of Islamic exceptionalism? Mowlana, conveniently, avoids specifying the economic and political system that the Islamic state would create or has created. As we have seen, he is content, or assumes we are content, simply to stress the uniqueness of such a society. Here God is sole legislator, sovereignty belongs to him, and it is to him that all forms of

communication are directed. And we all know God works in mysterious ways! The truth is he has nothing to say on this matter. As Table 1 illustrates, this leaves a big gap in his model.

Mowlana, like many contemporary Islamists, imagines a past that never was, a golden age that never existed, a pure and uniform Islam that could not be, and a model of communication and society which does not need the backing of any empirical evidence. If one focuses on a specific culture, surely a substantial analysis of that culture should be the basis of any argument and should take into account the ambiguity of such culture in the past as well as the present. In Mowlana’s writings there is not even any basic demographic data and analysis.

Equally, he fails to provide any coherent and substantial empirical evidence. There are some references to different important public spaces in Islamic tradition (Mowlana, 1979, 1989, 1996), but his account is far too general and based mainly on the experience of revolutionary upheaval of 1979, which was unique and should not be generalized. There are some references (Mowlana, 1996) to the role of small media, again during uprising of 1979, without any reference to or acknowledgement of the detailed examination of the role of small media in the Iranian revolution by Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994).

Two short articles (Mowlana, 1989, 1997) deal specifically with process of ‘Islamization’ of Iranian television. Much of the evidence provided in them, interestingly enough, deals with communication in its *Latin usage*. It is not the facts that are presented by Mowlana that we might find interesting, however, but the difference in his accounts, which are the inevitable product of socio-economic changes in Iran. Mowlana claimed (1989, 1996) that commercial advertising on television is not allowed in Islamic Iran. In another document (1997) we are told: ‘Commercial advertising is common but subject to specific rules and regulations, including the time framework, to prevent the fragmentation of programmes’ (1997: 206). Any student of mass communication is fully aware that the central concern when it comes to advertising is not about ‘specific rules and regulations’.

In the same article, Mowlana admits – unlike before – that there is ‘considerable demand [for] and interest [in]’ foreign programmes. And this is despite the fact that satellite dishes are officially banned and declared illegal in Iran.

One of the major criticisms directed toward television in Iran deals with the lack of entertainment programmes to occupy leisure time. The argument is made that Iranian television should create more attractive and popular cultural activities

TABLE 1
Information society v. Islamic society

	<i>Information society</i>	<i>Islamic community</i>
<i>Economic system</i>	Capitalism	?
<i>Motive of media</i>	Profit	Propagation/mobilization
<i>Sources of funding</i>	Advertising	State
<i>Organizational structure</i>	Hierarchical	?
<i>Professional practices</i>	Centralized/produced by professionals	?
<i>Relationship with audience</i>	Consumer	Guidance
<i>Model of control</i>	Owner/bureaucracy	?

for leisure time; otherwise, the audiences will turn to foreign satellite television programmes or seek alternative means of entertainment elsewhere. In recent years, satellite piracy and illegal reproduction of international films and videos have increased. The expansion of new television channels and increased amount of coverage given to sports, movies, and animated features are among strategies to overcome these problems. Television in Iran thus illustrates a fascinating communication problem in many Islamic countries: how traditional culture can be synthesised with contemporary electronic media, such as television, and how television can be employed in ways that better suit the mode and styles of the country's history. (1997: 207–8)

This is far removed from the Islamic community paradigm in Mowlana's previous works. Yet he still manages to avoid providing a clear explanation and reasons why this should be the case in Iran after 23 years of Islamic rule. How Islamic is expansion of television channels in Iran? What is specifically Islamic and different about modern animated features, movies and sports? What happened to the principles of Islamic *Tablig*? Why is there a need to come up with strategies to 'overcome these problems'? What are these problems anyway?

Instead he asks his own set of questions: Is there a chance for 'traditional culture' in the age of contemporary electronic media? And how can television be used to fit the 'style of the country's history'? Well, which history? What traditional culture? What versions of specific 'tradition'? The answer lies neither in a country's history nor in methods of using electronic media. The contradiction that worries Mowlana is an integral part of Islamism as an ideology and the realities of running a modern country. It is quite true that electronic media were used to perfection by Islamists in Iran, and it is true that the claims of a 'universal, uniform Islam' would have never materialized without the aid of new global communication technologies. However, the very tools which give Islamism a global voice, expose it to 'Western' consumerism and messages (Roy, 1994; Turner, 1994). They also create a movement for religious reform that will, in turn, undermine religious apparatus (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2001)

In Mowlana's view 'Iranian television in general serves to diffuse Islamic culture in pursuit of state legitimacy but refrains from the diffusion of propagation of anti-Islamic practices' (1997: 211). One of the achievements of Iranian television, we are informed, is self-reliance and the number of original programmes that are produced in Iran. What he fails to mention is how far the Islamic state will go to achieve its legitimacy and propagation of Islamic values. He also fails to mention that one of the main 'original' programmes produced by Islamic television was the televised confessions of political prisoners.

As Abrahamian (1999) states in his disturbing book, television confession was not a new invention. Public recantations are not peculiarly Islamic or Iranian inventions, and certainly have nothing to do with the 'traditional/modern' dichotomy. Other regimes, including Stalinist Russia, did not have television at their disposal. In Iran, however, public recantation took a rather interesting twist. While Shah used television exclusively to show stage 'trials' of left-wing activists, under the Islamic Republic:

. . . television has become an equal opportunity medium featuring prominent figures representing a wide spectrum of opinion – from monarchists, liberals, religious conservatives, and secular nationalists, to conventional Marxists, Maoists, and Trotskyists, all the way to radical Muslims and even ex-Khomeinists, who, for one reason or another, have fallen by the political wayside. (1999: 5)

Among the notable recantations was that of Ayatollah Shariatmadari, who many in Iran, and especially in Azerbaijan, believed outranked Khomeini in seniority and religious scholarship. As Abrahamian notes, Shariatmadari appeared on television hoping to save his son-in-law, Sadough Qotbzadeh, who supported and accompanied Khomeini on his return to Iran, and was rewarded by being appointed the first director general of the Islamic radio and television network. Shariatmadari's hopes were not fulfilled. Qotbzadeh was executed for 'participating in a pro-Western military plot', and Shariatmadari was depicted as 'liberal, linked to SAVAK [the Shah's secret service], the royalists, the Saudis, and the West'. In unprecedented move in the history of Iran, he was defrocked and stripped of the title of Ayatollah (1999: 155–9).

Mowlana is well aware of this dark chapter in Iranian history and 'Islamic television'. Compare two largely similar comments in Mowlana's works: 'Exiled from Iran by the Shah in 1963, suffering like the Shi'a leader of old, he [Khomeini] and other leading ayatollahs like Shariat-mdari and Mahmoud Taleghani were the symbols of cultural integrity' (1979: 111–12). This sentence appears in *Global Communication in Transition* with a *minor* change: 'Exiled from in Iran by the Shah in 1963, he [Khomeini] and other leading ayatollahs like Muttahari, Beheshti, and Taleghani were the symbols of cultural integrity' (1996: 49–50). Shariatmadari's name has vanished, but the evidence of the history that has been denied stands out like Clementi's fur hat.²

Conclusion

The intention of this commentary has not been, by any means, to deny the importance of 'religion' or 'tradition'. The case of Iran, where the old gods seem to have risen from their grave so 'suddenly', provides a fantastic opportunity to re-examine some of the central concerns of social theory. The key phrase, however, is social theory. The experience of Iran should not be regarded as an Islamic exceptionalism. Furthermore, as the *absolutism* of cultural relativism in Iran illustrates, emphasizing differences and references to an ahistorical essence cannot provide us with proper questions, so central in research, let alone answers. 'Islamic culture' for the repressive regimes of the region (Iran included) and their official and unofficial spokesmen is what 'Asian values' has meant and been for the repressive regimes of Asia. There are many lessons to be learned from this revealing parallel.

In Mowlana's 'alternative' model, culture is simply an 'extension' of the state, and 'religion' determines the guidelines for 'community', political action and participation. In this essentialist model 'culture' and 'community' can be reduced to singular, unchanging and ahistorical entities, and 'Islam' taken as the sole signifier of the realm of culture and communication. So there is little wonder that in Mowlana's analysis, there is no mention of possible conflicts of interest, power structures, the right to 'interpretation' and the possibilities of internal divisions in 'Muslim society'. And it is exactly this 'vision' of media, culture and society that has come under attack by the movement for democratization in Iran. The events leading to and following the 1997 presidential election, and the debate about 'civil society' (again, similar to a parallel movement in Asia) has shifted attention from a consideration of the *state*, which Mowlana and the conservatives in Iran prefer, to engagement with *society*. Essentialist thinking about the non-existent singular, homogeneous 'Muslim society' cannot provide an adequate explanation of the realities of Iran, or for that matter any 'Islamic' country. How can they, since what they offer, fetishism of 'culture', is not even their own product, but rather, like themselves, the product of 'modernity'?

Notes

1. In Mowlana's writings, gender is, astonishingly, an absent category.
2. See the opening paragraphs of Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

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Gholam Khiabany teaches Mass Communications at the Department of Applied Social Sciences, London Metropolitan University, UK.

Address: Department of Applied Social Sciences, London Metropolitan University, Ladbroke House, 62–66 Highbury Grove, London N5 2AD, UK. [email: g.khiabany@londonmet.ac.uk]