Popular imagination conflates Arab with Muslim, yet for centuries the overwhelming majority of Muslims have lived far from the symbolic Arab heartland and do not speak Arabic. South Asia (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh) has a Muslim population twenty times that of Saudi Arabia, Indonesia nearly ten times, and Nigeria some three times. Today’s popular image of homogenized Islam radiating from its Middle Eastern center obscures a complex history of vernacular Islam on the so-called “fringes.” In these local Islams the shape of the religion and its accompanying polity are adapted to and reshaped by local cultures, ranging from West Africa to Tajikistan, and from China to India and Indonesia. There are as many Islams as languages of Muslims, even among those conservatives who insist on a single uniform Islam. Everywhere Islam has taken root, it has habituated itself to its locale and adapted to local custom. All these versions of Islam clearly show the effects of their ethnic and linguistic environments and are distinctly shaped by their interactions with other religious traditions. This staggering variety in ritual practice, cultural customs, sanctioned forms of governance, and of course theology, creates both unexpected alliances and equally unpredictable tensions among the local communities. As Arjun Appadurai has argued, even the smallest of differences among tiny religious or political factions can generate enormous repercussions in our increasingly globalized world.¹ Difference matters, no matter how insignificant differences may seem to those observing from the outside.

Islamic reformers who rely on a tie to the Arab center for their authority frequently make their way to the so-called “fringe” areas where they attempt to intervene in the practices of Islam that have taken on distinctly local forms. In so doing, these reformers can create new and exacerbate old tensions among the different communities, usually in their zeal to eradicate what they label local accretions. There is no small irony in the fact that each spokesperson for reform promotes a different vision of an ideal Islam—even there we find no unanimity, though strict uniformity is often precisely what is argued as the foundation of universal Islam. It is likewise important to understand that this move to universal Islam is generally equated with fundamentalism, but reform does not automatically take that shape. The ability of vernacular forms of Islam to accommodate local cultural practices, to demonstrate the malleability of the basic propositions of the Islamic message using languages other than Arabic, bespeaks a different kind of universality. This adaptability is possible because vernacular Islams are not grounded in a literal replication of the Arab-centric ideals that would require fringe communities to import alien cultural norms and practices. Rather, careful selection and “translation” ensure the successful development of Islam within radically different cultural frames.

1. Languages of Islam – September-October 2015

In September 2016 we will host a follow-on conference open to the larger public and academic world with presentations by a dozen visiting speakers in addition to Vanderbilt University faculty.

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