

MY FUTURES LESSONS

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Ever since I remember, I have had a strong desire to be well organised. I like to keep track of events, important dates and significant developments of my life. Apart from sticking to a planner, I would also constantly be making plans regarding my studies, work, free-time, and everything in between. Importantly, I have always had a number of different plans at hand – a plan A, B, and C. Wherever my destiny takes me, I thought, my path will not be one-dimensional nor contain only one lane. I wanted to be prepared for the different outcomes and for the possible changes any (forced) diversions from my original plan would come my way. After all, my idea about the way life proceeds was not just me rowing the boat by myself but I acknowledged that there are also other forces at play that affect the course of things.

Thinking back now, I have realised that from my early youth I internalised the idea of multiple futures. There will always be more than one possible outcome for my endeavours. However, I never realised that you could actively work to shape a desirable future. Nor was I aware of futures studies. This despite the fact that I come from a country, Finland, that has one of the world's most famous futures institutions – the Finland Futures Research Center at University of Turku. Schools in Finland are regarded as some of the most successful in the world. This must have something to do, at least partly, with the fact that futures thinking is advocated in the Finnish schools through projects and futures-themed days. But I missed all that!

I began learning about futures only in my early 30s while children at home in Finland are raised to be aware of futures issues and methods. I had just started my PhD program in Civilisation Studies at the Institute of Alliance of Civilisation, Istanbul. I heard about a Summer School, organised annually by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), held in Demirköy, a small town in the Kırklareli Province in the Marmara region of Turkey. I applied; and was accepted. A full day was devoted to futures studies on the

programme. I remember thinking why on earth should we spend so much time discussing technology and sci-fi in a summer school that actually was focused on Islamic studies and Muslim societies. Classic mistake.

That day blew my mind. I learned about how change itself is changing, and interdisciplinary approaches to exploring and studying alternative futures. I got hands-on experience of analysing trends, recognising emerging issues. I must admit, I took to futures studies like a duck to water. Later on, I attended workshops on 'Futures Studies in Postnormal Times', organised by the Centre for Postnormal Policy and Futures Studies (CPPFS), a network of futurists and scholars who have pioneered the theory of postnormal times, and learned about backcasting, visioning and how to build scenarios. There was a great deal of emphasis in these workshops on polylogues – bringing in different disciplinary, cultural and religious perspectives in our analysis. The students combined their knowledge and expertise from religious studies to medicine, history, economics, IT, and cultural studies to explore and scrutinise the potential future impact of established trends and emerging issues both globally and in Muslim societies. In one workshop, we explored the futures of Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Turkey; this required some fieldwork and we established a small committee to visit the refugee camps and interview refugees. In another, we developed an inclusive and pluralistic vision for Turkey. I was hooked; and decided that I would incorporate futures in my own research on Muslim minorities and Islamophobia in Europe. Within a year my new academic path would lead me to become a Fellow of CPPFS.

Now that I give workshops myself, mostly to Muslim youth and young adults, my participants often ask me to first explain the benefits Muslims would have from gaining futures literacy. The fact that this question is repeatedly asked already suggests that there is a dire need of talking about futures studies. While the millennials of my generation are becoming aware of the need for critical thinking, they are totally unaware of the equally important need of futures thinking. While history plays an important part in their outlook, futures is conspicuous from its absence. Even when they think critically, they think critically only about the past; they have little or nothing to say about the future.

We humans tend to think about time in linear dimensions; the past, the present, and the future. Even language, its grammatical structure, affects

the way we think about the possibilities of human action. When future is equated only with the *akhira*, the Hereafter, it is hardly surprising that our thoughts about the future hardly venture anywhere else! Members of my community, Muslims of Finland, speak of themselves only within the frames of the past and the present. Like most Muslim they tend to glorify and desire to relive the past – that is, the times of the Prophet or the magnificent eras of Al-Andalus or the Ottoman Empire. But the historical narrative of Muslims in Finland also includes the glories of the ‘native Muslims’ of Finland, the Tatars and their migration to the country. The Tatar Muslims arrived in Finland from Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. They fought with the Finnish troops against the Russian army during the Second World War. The discourse of Muslims as part of the Finnish society includes references to the Tatar’s war efforts and political commitment to the country.

However, the discourse on the present situation of Finnish Muslims reflects the success of past generations. In Finland, similarly to other European localities, the discussion about Muslim residents is problem-oriented, focusing on the immigrant community with questions of integration and discrimination dominate the political and public debates and here, we are stuck in the evergreen narrative of the Tatar Muslims being those who were successful in integrating themselves in Finland, which actually means their religiosity being non-visible and activism less rights-demanding than that of those with immigrant background.

However, this discourse does not address the current problems of the Muslim community let alone say something about their futures. Although the history of the Muslim community in Finland has determined the way in which, for instance, state-minority relations are governed nowadays, being stuck in history, does not help the new generations of immigrant Muslims. The Tatars have their own peculiar way of identity construction between cultural, religious and national sense of belonging. However, the Finnish Muslim community has changed ethnically and now consists of very diverse groups. The young have the potential to shape the community into a cohesive entity that does not know sectarianism or intra-group racism. The new generation of immigrant Muslims, who have arrived over the last few decades, have stronger religious and cultural identities. They face, like immigrants elsewhere, problems of discrimination and Islamophobia, and

they are active in demanding their rights. The rise of the far right in Finland has aggravated their problems; the questions of integration and prejudice dominate the political and public debate in Finland. The Muslims need to realise that the only way in which we may actually contribute and change the condition of our community is to focus on the future instead of the past or the present, both over which currently have no influence over the Finnish political establishment.

The speed and the scope of change today is such that it leaves little space for thinking about such deep rooted inequalities. Finland itself is also going through rapid change; and some of these changes, such as those being initiated by the far right, may creep for a while and eventually transform Finnish society in unrecognisable ways. We need to think seriously about these changes and how they may shape Finnish society. This is where futures studies come to its own; futures literacy and tools can help navigate these changes and usher us towards more desirable change. It is imperative for us to take the step towards thinking about the consequences of our choices and those of the others. This is also necessary because of the simple fact that Muslims are just as much part of the society as everybody else – contrary to what others or even Muslims themselves might be think. Trends and emerging issues on societal, cultural, political, economic, religious, and technological developments touch the lives of Muslims just as much as they non-Muslims. I would even emphasise those societal developments that are directly connected to the lives of Muslims in a minority setting, such as legislations regarding governance of religion or shifts in values of the majority society that forces the Muslims to change their own paradigms as well.

The Muslim community in Finland suffers from three varieties of inequalities. The first is material inequity, such as lower socio-economic status of the Muslim population in comparison to other groups and communities in society. The second is structural related to legislation and institutional practices that allow discrimination and marginalisation of Muslims in our society. Finally, the third is related to knowledge inequality in the sense of an epistemological racism which leads to the suppression of intellectual and rational and agency of Muslims, a product of Eurocentric thinking, which frames Muslims as inferior outsiders. I often think about the Quranic verse ‘Verily God does not change the condition of a people unless they change their state’ (13:11), which reminds me of our

responsibility to be an active part of our own destinies; I understand it as an obligation to not to get complacent in a minority setting creating parallel ghetto like structures and institutional practices and at the same time complaining about the discriminatory practices of the majority society. This is to say that Muslims need to engage as active citizens both the sake of the social cohesion as well as the coherence of their own Islamic identity.

I find the young Muslims very receptive to these ideas. It was well demonstrated during an introductory workshop on futures studies I gave in the winter of 2017. It was hosted by the Muslim Students Network in Finland. My aim was to introduce futures thinking to empower and mobilise the youth and to get them involved in building their own narratives about the future of the Muslim community in Finland. The focus of the workshop was on the challenges Finnish Muslim youth face as well as the local impact of global and regional changes in economics, culture, politics, religion, and technology. The participants were keen to explore trends and emerging issues of all varieties – many the elder generation would probably shun. We discussed how the issue of gender-neutrality will affect Muslim communities and what would they have to do to adjust to societal changes that may emerge, the consequences of microchips in humans and how they might impact the Muslim community if they are used for surveillance, and the role of religious education in schools which has always been separated for various congregations but the trend now being, through a curriculum reform, more and more towards common classes for all. The group also drafted a Finland 2040 vision and produced a workable plan using back-casting. We discussed the values, actions and structures that may support the group's preferred vision of futures; for instance, promoting a good environmental conscience, sustainable housing and financial services, strengthening of social solidarity among Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as building a stable Finnish Muslim identity. The lesson I learned from the workshop experience is that futures is a significant tool for providing agency to the youth, they need to voice their aspirations and desires, articulate their visions and build strategies that can usher an inclusive and dynamic futures both for Muslim communities as well as Finnish society as a whole.

So, it seems to me, the millennials are keen to embrace futures literacy and consciousness. Unlike the elder generation, they seem, at least in Finland, not to be trapped in nostalgic history. The young need access and

opportunities, the kind provided to me first by the IIIT Summer School and then the CPPFS workshops. Indeed, I would argue that futures literacy should be an integral part of secondary school in all Muslim societies.

The characteristics of postnormal times are indeed testing the identities of those who define themselves as Muslims. Questions of epistemology, ethics and the foundations of our worldview are at play when Muslims are required to rethink their stances on issues that (do not necessarily) emerge from within their own community but could have a profound impact on them – such as LGBTQ+ rights, climate change, bioengineering, cybercrime and Artificial Intelligence (AI). A futures approach facilitates the opening of horizons where a plurality of alternatives can be explored, when we may consider different aspects of outcomes and actors at play, decide what futures we prefer and what futures are actually colonising all our futures. The essence of everything is in futures studies', especially when approached from a de-colonial perspective, is that it offers the ability and space for us Muslims to create our own narratives about the future(s).

But we should remember that there is, and cannot be, such as thing as a single Muslim futures narrative. Futures is all about plurality. The very meaning of polylogue is to include a variety of voices and perspectives for this generates new understanding, an integrated knowledge, that we would otherwise miss. Futures studies is a participatory exercise; it involves all of us as it is about all our futures. But I must also emphasise another lesson that I have learned: *the* future is actually very easily pre-programmed to reflect old colonial structures and hierarchies, both economic and mental. Thus, we should not lose sight when we discuss what we know and what we wish for. As the grand dame of futures studies, Eleanora Barbieri Massini, notes, the way in which we think about the future is always related to our values, to our choices, to our basic principles, which alternate depending on generation, culture and experiences. Hence, even though normativity might be a lost concept in postnormal times, the plurality of futures is what enables us to include narratives of futures that consider our epistemological fundamentals, and prevent us from creating our own Frankenstein's monsters, and finally to acknowledge, that absolute Truth belongs only to God. It is all about navigating our way to balanced and preferable futures.