The Ship and the Stranger: A Metaphorical Approach to Governance and Islam

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Abstract

Relying on a metaphorical approach aiming to produce effects that could change how the world is seen and to help free Muslims from restrictive and conventional religious understanding, this paper discusses the issues of governance and Islam by using the metaphors of "the ship" and "the stranger." It argues that both help illuminate the idea of "soft governance" in Islam, understood as an attempt to meaningfully connect a multiplicity of actors from different terrains with complex relationships among themselves in the process of governing with a far more pluralistic conceptualization of power.

Introduction

On 25-26 March 2006, Thammasat University held a seminar on Islam and peace organized by the Muslim Student Association and the National Reconciliation Commission, an independent body set up by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinnawat to find ways to end the recent violence and bring about lasting peace in predominantly Muslim southern Thailand.

During this event, the chairperson of the National Economic and Social Advisory Council (NESAC), himself a human rights advocate, asked how Muslims feel about the death sentence passed on those Muslims who apostatize. From among the audience, Muslim students from all over Thailand, a young man dressed in white, with a skull-cap and a full beard, answered: "It is not violent." The NESAC chair persisted by saying that as a non-Muslim, he could not understand this because various Muslim countries deal with this issue differently. In fact, some might even consider the personal abandonment of faith as a form of freedom of religion.

There were two reactions from the audience. The young man replied to the effect that the punishment in this world is light compared to what lies in the Hereafter and that those who suffer in this life will fare better in the next. Then he serenely added: "This depends on the strength of faith in Islam in different countries. Those with weak faith might not prepare to pass such a judgment." At this point, obviously frustrated by the question, another man stood up in the back and suggested that this is too complicated an issue and that Muslims would be better off listening to the learned.

This case is important for four related reasons. First, it points directly to the issue of Islam and governance, specifically in terms of a clash between a belief in the totality of life and the space for freedom of religion, generally understood as including a freedom to leave the faith. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it points to a highly contentious problem of governance, that of the state's power and its limits to use punishment to uphold its desirable political society. Third, it also points to how many Muslims might choose to ask religious experts when facing a somewhat difficult problem on the road of Islamic governance. Such a choice, no doubt, could be justified by a particular reading of Islamic traditions. Fourth, I do not think this is unique to the Thai scene. I am certain that something similar to this has happened elsewhere, because although state persecution for conversion out of Islam is rare in the Muslim world, at least fourteen Muslim countries (e.g., Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia) consider it a crime punishable by death.[1] The 1994 Yemeni Penal Code (Article 259) and the 1991 Sudanese Penal Code (Article 126), for example, make it a punishable offence that incurs the death penalty. In Iran and Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, apostates have been sentenced to death using an uncodified Shari`ah that serves as the law of the land.[2]

Recently, scholars have shown that the relationship between Islam and governance can be studied in several ways. In Southeast Asia, the main discourses on Islam center on various models of an Islamic state, directly involving the Shari`ah as the only source of reference, as proposed by many in the

Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) or by gradually Islamizing the society (*Shari`ah haraki*), as applied by the Mahathir administration and such social movements as ABIM in Malaysia and such mass organizations as the NU and the Muhammadiyah in Indonesia.[3] On the other hand, Al-Arqam, a Malay Islamic movement inspired by a rare mix of global Sufism and strict Shari`ah, organizes residential communes, institutions promoting economic independence, mutual support, social service, and an extensive mission through using its own schools, clinics, farms, and factories. This could also be seen as an experiment in alternative development and non-state governance.[4]

Using a metaphorical approach with a special emphasis on the state and its monopoly of violence, notably its power to punish, I would argue that the kinds of governance needed for Muslims to maintain their Islamic inspirations should be soft governance. I begin with a discussion of the need for a metaphorical approach in thinking through the issue of governance and Islam and then examine two particular metaphors chosen to reflect the issues of governance and Islam – the ship(s) and the stranger(s) – as well as reasons for choosing them. Finally, situating this discussion in the context of a recent debate on how the future of religion is understood from a contested philosophical perspective, I will analyze how these two metaphors illuminate the notion of soft governance.

A Metaphorical Approach

In *Fiqh-us-Sunnah* on *úud´d* (punishment), after going through juristic opinions substantiated by doctrinal readings on what to do with apostates, the author arrives at the conclusion that they are subject to the death penalty. The reasons given, however, are far more interesting. First, the author argues that if, after attaining perfection (viz., accepting Islam) a person returns to the lowest level, then such a life is not worth living since it would be one without honor or purpose. Therefore, the death penalty is appropriate. Second, he argues that since Islam is a total system, this totality must be protected by forbidding anyone to leave the faith (read "community"), for this would undermine or dissolve it. In this sense, leaving the faith is seen as canceling the system, and thereby betraying the community, not unlike treason in a nation-state, which is generally punishable by death.[5]

Discussing *úud´d* laws that contain contentious provisions for punishing various crimes (e.g., flogging, amputating limbs, stoning to death) passed by the states of Kelantan and Terengganu in northern Malaysia, Zainah Anwar raises the question of why religious authorities tend to codify "the most conservative opinion" into law, although different juristic positions within Islam

exist. For example, the most orthodox view is to apply the death sentence to all apostates. However, some Islamic jurists hold that this punishment can be prescribed only when apostasy is accompanied by rebellion against the community and its legitimate leadership. Yet others, including the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar in Cairo, maintain that although it is a great sin, a personal change of faith is not a capital offence and therefore merits no punishment. It seems that whenever there is a contest for political power, Islamic credentials are measured on the ground of the severity of punishments imposed on those who transgress Islamic teachings understood by a "mindset frozen in seventh century Arabia and medieval jurisprudence."[6] Ordinary Muslims, on the other hand, either accepted or tolerated these severe judgments due to their own fear, which resulted from their respect for the religious authorities and a genuine sense that they do not know enough about religious matters and thus choose to be silent.[7]

If this is indeed the case, then there is a need to find an approach conducive to freeing Muslims from restrictive and conventional religious understandings, especially when exploring such subjects as Islam and governance. These are two very distinctive concepts, for one has a sense of the totality of life while the other connotes a sense of the governing process. Both of these concepts originated at points in time separated by centuries. The usual approaches of doctrinal exegesis of the term *governance* from an Islamic perspective, or a historical exploration of this relationship, will deepen one's understanding of the subject; however, it probably will not open up the space necessary for innovative readings that are important for Muslim contributions to the subject of governance, which could be shared with non-Muslims in the future.

In examining the issues of Islam and governance, an alternative suggested here is the metaphorical approach. In Greek, *meta-phora* means "to carry across." Contrary to the conventional belief that metaphors are used mainly in artistic or literary leanings, they are indispensable elements in a person's thought process, because they serve, in this case, as mechanisms through which such abstract notions as "Islam and governance" can be grasped, described, and shared.[8] In fact, Richard Rorty once argued that the history of the arts, the sciences, and the moral sense as well as the whole of intellectual history could be seen as the history of metaphor,[9] since they are connected to the history of language.

It goes without saying that different theories of metaphors exist. There are those who believe that metaphors are but ornaments of language. When used with verbal skill, they merely beautify the language without adding any knowledge content. Some view metaphors as providing emotive values that

could affect the moods of the texts or conversations. Others, however, maintain that metaphors contain added value because they create new contextual meanings that bring the various connotations of words to life while making thoughts of two different things active together and supported by a single word.[10]

But what exactly does a metaphor do? The philosopher Paul Ricoeur maintains that the function of a metaphor is to transpose the meanings of ordinary language by way of unusual uses.[11] In Rorty's opinion, tossing a metaphor into a conversation is like suddenly breaking off the conversation long enough to slap the interlocutor's face or to kiss him/her. Throwing it into a text is like using italics, illustrations, or punctuation marks. In this sense, metaphors are used not to convey messages, but to produce effects on the readers or interlocutors.[12] If the effects are polemical, using metaphors could sensitize those involved to the politicizing implications of discursive selection. Such politicization of figuration could be directed either toward mystification and legitimation, thereby serving prevailing structures of authority, or toward resistance, especially toward the domain that has been naturalized by a familiar figuration that renders the issue unproblematic.[13]

If a metaphor is construed as the use of a familiar word in an unfamiliar setting, or of an unfamiliar word in a familiar context, to produce effects that could change how one sees or understands the world by giving the individual time to pause and open up enough space to think before a decision can be made, then it is not uncommon to find metaphors frequently used in different traditions where religious knowledge is regarded as sacred and the human mind, though intelligent, does have limits. Perhaps this is the reason why metaphorical language, with all its power, is frequently found in both the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions to produce different effects.

The text of the Qur'an could be classified into different types: those related to the Unseen, the historical, the legal-ethical, and the parables (*mathal*). Islamic scholars have argued that the Qur'an uses parables for a number of reasons: to intentionally convey explicit as well as concealed similarity, and to praise as well as to express disgust. Whatever their form, parables convey meaning in a more effective and lively way. This is the type of text where a literal reading is not intended, while a metaphorical reading is called for.[14] Others have even argued that Islamic political language is "full of metaphors." Although some may be dead, buried, or forgotten, quite a few are alive and used in everyday life.[15] But if this approach is to be used, what would be the metaphors for Islam and governance? And why?

The Ship(s) and the Stranger(s) as Metaphors
for Governance and Islam

It should be noted that the term *governance* is not new; Henry IV used it to justify his usurpation of the English throne in 1399, declaring that his predecessors' failures resulted from the "default of governance" and the "undoying of good lawes."[16] In the twenty-first century, however, the notion of governance originates from the need of economics and political science for a concept broad enough to accommodate diverse meanings in terms of the overall exercise of power not covered by the term *government*. The idea of "European governance" was initiated as among the first priorities of the European Commission's strategic objectives for the period 2000-05. In order to realize such objectives, the notion of governance was suggested as a shift in focus from politics as "who governs?," a là Robert Dahl in his political science book written about half a century ago, to "the how of governing," namely, how decisions and policies are made and implemented.

More importantly, the European governance envisioned by the European Commission is not merely an account of how to govern, but of how governing for the new Europe, given its contemporary problems that affect democracy (e.g., the alienation of citizens and the loss of confidence in institutions) and politics should be. The idea of "good governance," with its five basic principles of openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, and coherence, is therefore suggested as a meaningful way to "connect Europe with its citizens."[17] If the new Europe marks the shape of politics to come, then perhaps as Swedish political scientist Jon Pierre, a leading author on governance, has written, the world has entered "the era of economic globalization, hollowing out of the state, decreasing legitimacy for collective solutions, and a marketisation of the state itself."[18]

Seen in this way, governing in a seemingly "centreless" society where, in fact, many centers of power link numerous state actors at different levels (e.g., local, regional, national, or supranational) involves questioning legitimacy and the accountability of existing structures. At a time when the power of sovereignty has become increasingly suspect, when the magic of the nation-state is declining and the nature of the state itself is changing, the problem of governance is thus the question of how different peoples in various locations of power can be "connected."

Although the meanings of governance are highly contested, they all point to the multiplicity of actors, terrains, and different relationships among them in the process of governing, which is characterized by a far more plu-

ralistic conceptualization of power.[19] When the state becomes a collection of networks with numerous actors, "with no sovereign actor being able to 'steer or regulate,'" the main challenge for government is "to enable these networks and to see out new forms of co-operation."[20] This is one of the reasons why the problem of how to "connect peoples of differences" in this new reality cannot be approached in terms of the "command of a bureaucratic state" with its unitary concept of state and power, but more as "control."

While discussing the problem of governance in terms of control, construed as connecting people with a more pluralistic conceptualization of power, some commentators use metaphors associated with the ship. They argue that the role of government should be to "steer, not row," because the Weberian model of bureaucracy has become bankrupt and should be replaced by "entrepreneurial government" where the state withdraws from government (less rowing) and moves toward governance (more steering).[21]

There is a perfectly good reason why the ship metaphor has been used time and again when discussing politics. Since politics is primarily about speaking and the use of language, it must dramatize itself. Most political expression is therefore metaphorical. In fact the state, understood as the "body politic," has usually been expressed as a ship because this metaphor lies behind the very word *government*, which comes from the medieval Latin *gubernaculums* (a rudder).[22] This word can also be traced to an ancient Greek verb meaning "to steer."[23] In this sense, politics can be seen as the art of navigating or steering the ship of state.

In Book VI of Plato's *The Republic*, Glaucon asked Socrates "how can it be good to say that the cities will have no rest from evils before the philosophers, … , rule in them?"(487 e).[24] Socrates replied that the question needs an answer given through an image. He also apologized to his interlocutor, because his images came "from many sources, as the painters paint goatstags and such things by making mixtures" (488 a). Then he said something peculiar: "Listen to the image so you may see…" (488 a).[25] For Plato, this is how a metaphor works as figurative language. Through words, the image is to be heard. But from hearing, it can then be seen.

More importantly, the image Socrates used is that of a ship where the shipowner is "deaf, shortsighted" and has little knowledge of seamanship. The sailors, without knowledge of the sea and the ship, are doing everything to have the owner turn the rudder over to them. If they fail to persuade him to do so and others succeed, they would either kill the others or throw them out. After they successfully enchain the shipowner, they rule the ship, "using what's in it; and drinking and feasting, they sail as such men would be

thought likely to sail. Besides this, they praise and call 'skilled sailor,' 'pilot,' and 'knower of the ship's business' the man who is clever at figuring out how they will get the rule, either by persuading or by forcing the shipowner, while the man who is not of this sort they blame as useless" (488 b-d).[26]

If politics is seen as conducting the "ship of state," then steering is a proper metaphor for governance understood as knowing how to navigate this ship. A crucial question would then be: what signs should be used to guide the steering? Socrates points out that the true captain who can sail the ship properly is someone who "pay[s] careful attention to year, seasons, heaven, stars, winds, and everything that's proper to the art, if he is really going to be skilled at ruling a ship" (488 d).[27] But here steering the ship as a metaphor leads to other metaphors: the year, seasons, heaven, stars, and winds.

There are at least two elements important to reading these metaphors related to the act of navigating the ship of state: changes and guides. The stars and heaven are high above and appear to be fixed in the sky from time immemorial in order to guide seamen. The winds blow in accordance with the seasons, which, in turn, change throughout the year. Could this mean that when navigating the "ship of state," the steersman steers under the guidance of *ideals*, those distant beacons of excellence at which most people aim, and yet need to be aware of the changing realities that will be responsible for their success or failure to reach those ideals?

Although the ship metaphor clearly reflects the notion of governance discussed above, how is it connected, if at all, to the Islamic imagination? It could be argued that Socrates' point about the fate of the true captain in *The Republic* is not unlike the story of people in a two-decked boat mentioned in a famous prophetic hadith:

> The example of the person abiding by Allah's order and restrictions in comparison to those who violate them is like the example of those persons who drew lots for their seats in a boat. Some of them got seats in the upper part, and the others in the lower. When the latter needed water, they had to go up to bring water (and that troubled the others), so they said: "Let us make a hole in our share of the ship (and get water), saving those who are above us from troubling them." So, if the people in the upper part let the others do what they had suggested, all the people of the ship would be destroyed; but if they prevented them, both parties would be safe.[28]

In the Socratic image discussed above, the fate of the ship in the hands of those without understanding would be similar to the people in the lower deck who plan to make a hole in the ship to get water. True, both the Socratic

image of the ship and the famous hadith have frequently been used to justify not democratic governance, but, to the contrary, to justify authoritarian control based on competence (since the control of a ship cannot be left to amateurs but must be run by a qualified captain). Even today, ships and airplanes are run by captains who have absolute and unquestionable authority. Muslims who support authoritarian governance frequently cite this hadith while advising against permissiveness when it comes to exercising freedoms in a way that would endanger the welfare of the whole community.

But from a Platonic perspective and, I would argue, from an Islamic one as well, if the ship metaphor as well as the hadith are read in terms of "steering" rather than "directing," a different picture of governance emerges. The safety of everyone in the ship (boat) depends upon understanding "the real" in the course of action guided by the lofty aims of "the good." Moreover, underscoring the "how" of sea travel, one could read both the Socratic image of the ship and the hadith of the boat as a teaching on understanding the goal and the reality of life, as well as the degree to which each person can participate in the reality. I would argue that understanding the reality, knowing oneself, and not forgetting the ultimate goal in life is a project well grounded in both Platonic philosophy and Islamic teaching. Together, they could also serve as a powerful corrective platform necessary to prevent a potential authoritarian tendency, since the latter is normally fuelled with pride, a philosophical and religious sin.

Given the context of the desert, it should be noted that the metaphor used for politics in Arabic is neither sailing nor steering the ship; rather, in the many languages used in much of the Muslim world, the word *siyĽsah* denotes politics.[29] Apart from meaning "politics" directly, this word connotes "authority, administrative justice dispensed by the sovereign and his political agents, government administration, policy."[30] It is interesting to note, however, that this word comes from an ancient Middle Eastern word meaning "horse" or, in classical Arabic, from a verb that means "to groom" or "to train a horse."[31]

But the ship metaphor has also been used in Islam, both in the Qur'an and the hadith. It is often found in the story of Noah and the flood[32]:

> And so We revealed to him: 'Build the ark under Our watchful eye and according to Our revelation. When Our command comes and water gushes up out of the earth, take a pair of every species on board and your family, except for those on whom the sentence has already been passed. Do not plead with me for the evildoers; they will be drowned. And when you and your companions are settled on the ark, say: "Praise be to God, Who delivered us from a wicked people ..." (23:27-28)

The words *ship* or *ark* used above are literal, not metaphorical. Unless the whole story of Noah and the flood is understood as a metaphor, the ship or the ark in these verses denote the vehicle that God commands Noah to build in order to save living beings from the flood. People saw what Noah did and laughed at him.[33] But during the flood, Noah did not need to "steer the ship" because the whole world was underwater and there was no place to go, no need to go anywhere.

The ship(s) that appear elsewhere in the Qur'an and are not directly related to the story of Noah are different, however. As metaphors, they lead the readers into an unfamiliar space:

> Among His signs are the ships, sailing like floating mountains. If He willed, He could bring the wind to a standstill and they would lie motionless on the surface of the sea. There truly are signs in this for anyone who is steadfast and thankful. (42:32-33)[34]

That the ship(s) appears in this verse as signs is clear. But other signs in the verses immediately precede it: "the creation of the heavens and earth" and "all the living creatures" (42:29-30). Compared to other signs, the ship(s) is the most human, since it is human-made. This human-made sign, then, signifies God's Mercy because ships are used to "plough their courses" so that human beings can enjoy the fruits of the sea through eating them in order to preserve life and using some of them as ornaments to adorn themselves:

> The two bodies of water are not alike. One is palatable, sweet and pleasant to drink; the other salty and bitter. Yet from each you eat fresh fish and extract ornaments to wear, and in each you see the ships ploughing their course so that you may seek God's bounty and be grateful. (35:12)[35]

Yet this human-made artifact is not entirely under human command, for it depends upon the winds, and God can still the winds and render the ship(s) motionless:

> He enables you to travel on land and sea until, when you are sailing on ships and rejoicing in the favoring wind, a storm arrives. Waves come at those on board from all sides, and they feel there is no escape. They pray to God, professing sincere devotion to Him: "If You save us from this, we shall be truly thankful." (10:22)[36]

> (O people), it is your Lord Who makes ships go smoothly for you on the sea so that you can seek His bounty. He is most merciful toward you. (17:66)[37]

From an Islamic perspective, steering the ship(s) requires that humans not only gaze at the stars and listen to the winds, as Socrates explained in *The Republic*, but also to be humble before God, knowing that the clear night sky can turn cloudy and that a breeze can become a fierce storm.

Conflating the metaphorical and the real of the ship(s) finds expression in the early Muslims' practice in Southeast Asia. In the fifteenth century, the Malacca sultanate used a form of Shari`ah-based law called the Undang undang Laut Melaka (the Maritime Laws of Malacca) as their laws of the sea. These laws consisted entirely of rules, regulations, procedures, and codes of conduct to be used at sea. Among other things, they considered the captain of a ship (*maalim*) to be the imam (leader), and his subjects as followers (*ma'-mum*).[38] If politics in Islam seeks to subject the whole world to the Will of God, the Creator, then governing an Islamic society should be guided by those values and principles enshrined in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. As a result, its legitimacy would be based on implementing the Shari`ah in an attempt to promote the cause of Islam.[39] In this sense, the Malacca sultan extended the Shari`ah-based conduct of governance beyond the land and into the sea, thus requiring those in the ships at sea (no longer a metaphor) to follow them. It goes without saying that the Maritime Laws of Malacca, as practiced in a fifteenth-century sultanate, was an historical authoritarian regime; however, it is used here merely to suggest that the conflation of the metaphorical and the real did take place in the Malay Muslim world.

The ship as a metaphor for governance is therefore relevant from an Islamic perspective. I would argue, however, that if this metaphor is examined critically, possibilities for alternative forms of governance might appear. Tossing the ship into a set of signs created by God (e.g., the heavens, Earth, and all living creatures) clearly juxtaposes something worldly and less abstract with something magical and cosmic. By throwing in "the familiar with the unfamiliar" or the "known with the unknown," the ship metaphor opens up space for a rethinking of what it means to govern and how to govern with all of its limitations.

But if I turn this around and ask how the unknown impacts upon the known, an alternative form of governance with a strong emphasis on the notion of limitations can be read. The steering of the ship, under the control of "those who know" (the captain or the expert) could not but be restrained by the realities of changes of the sea and the power of the wind, at times unpredictable even by the most knowledgeable. In this sense, it does not take away from the original meanings that constitute governance, but rather enriches them with a strong sense of the limitations of governance. Enriched with such a notion of limitation or soft governance, governance would be

more conducive to the reality of a political world with a pluralistic conception of power. Soft governance, with a strong realization of human limits, would engender more space and less harsh punishment to accommodate differences. If one of the tasks of any polity in the twenty-first century is to connect peoples of differences in a common imagined community, then the notion of soft governance might be most conducive to achieving it.

If the ship can be used as a metaphor for governance both from political science scholarship as well as from an Islamic perspective, what could possibly be a metaphor to be used for Islam? According to Ali, the fourth caliph, Prophet Muhammad's guidance in life could be summed up as follows: "Work in this world as if you will live forever, and work for the next as if you will die tomorrow."[40] This teaching can be divided into two parts: (1) believing in the next world as an article of faith and yet living this life as a gift from God, a Muslim has "to do" something for both worlds and (2) working for both worlds takes a radical form when the attitude toward living and dying is reversed. Muslims know that they will not live forever and that death comes to everyone (21:34).[41] Yet here the Prophet teaches them to do their utmost for this world, knowing full well that with every moment, everyone lives under the shadow of death and therefore needs to prepare for the Hereafter to the best of his/her ability.

The advice to "work for this world and the next" is contingent upon an understanding of what it means to "be in this world." Ibn Umar said: "Allah's Messenger took hold of my shoulder and said: 'Be in this world as if you were a stranger or a traveler.'"[42] Abu Hurayrah noted that the Prophet said: "Islam initiated as something strange, and it would revert to its (old position) of being strange, so good tidings for the strangers."[43] The reason why the Prophet chose "the stranger" as a metaphor for Islam was perhaps elucidated by Imam al-Gazzali, who stated that human life exists in three conditions: nothingness before birth, blindness after death until the resurrection, and living between these two "endless" times. Life in this world is significantly short between the endless times. This is why the Prophet said: "I am in this world like a sojourner who travels in the scorching rays of the sun, sleeps for a time under the shade of a tree on the way, and then rises up and walks." A Muslim, therefore, should not become addicted to this world.[44] Conscious of being a stranger is one way to avoid this. But what does it mean to be a stranger?

A stranger (*gharīb*) exists in a state of being forlorn and foreign. Islam can easily be seen as strange and foreign to many who have observed Muslims abstaining from day-to-day pleasures and some ordinary things in life and striving to be austere, in other words, outlanders or strangers (*ghurabā'*). In a society that privileges consumption and a competitive secular

life, even a simple fast during Ramadan or prayers five times a day can be suspect.

Half a century ago, the sociologist Georg Simmel wrote a most insightful article on this very subject. The stranger comes today and stays tomorrow. Since he/she brings qualities that do not come from the group itself, they do not belong there from the beginning. Being a stranger means existing in a tension between far and near. From the inhabitants' perspective, the stranger who is close by is far. But in order to see and feel such strangeness, he/she has to be near at the same time. This unusual positioning gives the stranger a kind of mobility that embodies the synthesis of nearness and distance, since the person will come into contact with every individual but is not organically connected through different ties with any single one of them. In addition, this positioning enables the stranger to approach the world with a specific attitude of "objectivity," a kind of freedom seen when the person is bound by no commitment that engenders prejudice that would, in turn, impair his/her perceptions and judgments of the surrounding world. But because of this uniqueness, the stranger will always be seen not as an individual, but as a type from the outside and can sometimes be perceived as a threat, especially when the community believes that it is facing danger.[45]

Seen through Simmel's theory of the stranger, it is not difficult to understand the state of Muslims and Islam, both of which are subjected to misunderstanding, suspicion, and sometimes fear. More importantly for Muslims themselves, the metaphor of a perpetual stranger reflects a sense of unfamiliarity with the surrounding world. It is interesting to note the locations of both prophetic traditions cited above. In *êaú�ú Muslim*, the place for the metaphor of Islam as "something strange" is found in the "Book of Faith." But the site of the admonition to "be in this world as a stranger" in *êaú�ú al-Bukh�r�* is the "Book of the Softening of the Hearts," a collection of prophetic sayings and practices that could make the heart soft and tender by affecting the emotions and feelings of the one who hears them. A Muslim has to be conscious of being a stranger who lives in the world in a state of awakening while walking through unfamiliar terrains. It is the sense of wonder at the marvels of the world, and not the fixed judgments of them, that dominates the stranger at the moment of encountering the unfamiliar. Without fixation, a stranger with a heart softened by the wonder he/she experiences and with a strange belief (Islam) should live a life with consolation and blessing from the Prophet on being a stranger so that he/she might be in a position to choose from a number of alternatives normally curtailed by the chain of familiarity.

Perhaps this is why in *The Laws*, one of Plato's most significant works that is far more than a legal theory of state (it also embraces the cosmic order), governance, as well as cultural forms, Socrates' direct existential appeal has been withdrawn. Written toward the end of Plato's life, arguably with more experiences with the life of the spirit as an attunement of the soul with the divine Measure, Plato replaced the familiar Socrates with "an Athenian stranger." It is this stranger who, with his knowledge, develops a plan and the motivations for political institutions inspired by the Divine that will be "bearable to men as they are."[46]

Thinking through the issues of governance and Islam, where would the metaphors of the ship(s) and the stranger lead? In what ways would they contribute to governance that would be "bearable to men as they are"?

Conclusion: Metaphorical Illuminations and Soft Governance?

In a dialogue between Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo on "the future of religion" held in Paris on 16 December 2002, the two philosophers shared their belief that humanity has entered "the age of interpretation," in which there are no longer any strong reasons either to be an atheist refusing religion or a theist refusing science. Faith has arrived at a point where it can accommodate these dualisms without recognizing any reason for conflict. Motivated by the notion of "the death of God," the secularization of the sacred has signified the rebirth of religion in the third millennium. Secularization renders philosophical questions about the nature of God useless due to the weakness of human reason; it is not clear what it actually means to affirm or deny His existence and that they are outside of history, among other things.[47] I am curious as to the place of Islam in such a "future." Is this portrait of "the future of religion" also "the future of Islam"?

Toward the end of their dialogue, Vattimo asked: "What can we do with people who apparently do not share civic responsibility either inside our society or outside? What happens when we arrive at a place which refuses us, like some parts of the Islamic world? What do you think we should preach to them?" Rorty, the eminent philosopher of postmodernity, replied that "it seems to me that the idea of a dialogue with Islam is pointless. … With luck, the educated middle class of the Islamic countries will bring about an Islamic enlightenment, but this enlightenment will not have anything to do with a 'dialogue with Islam.'"[48]

Rorty's argument can be easily called into questions in this age of diversity of interpretations and contested identities. For example, what does it mean to engage in a "dialogue with Islam"? Since when in our century does someone speak on behalf of "Islam"? Can there be anyone who represents "Islam" with an authority accepted by Muslims all over the world? Is there only one "Islam," or are there many "Islams" in different contexts?

More importantly, these two philosophers were discussing the future of Christianity in "the West," with its particular historical context, and not the future(s) of all religions.[49] It is therefore safe to assume that the futures of religions in their plurality could take many forms, resulting from each one's particular history and how these histories shape and reshape one another. As a result, the routes through which people from various religious traditions enter the age of interpretation have been different. From basic Islamic belief, which views the world as being divided between the Creator and the created, the weakness of human reason is well understood. Faith may be rejuvenated not by accommodating dualism, but by reaffirming a set of religious identity alongside (as well as over and above) other sets, including the national or the professional. The secularization of the sacred does not mark the future of Islam; rather, its future involves discovering how the secular and the sacred can exist side by side. What takes place at present is that the movement into sacred space by the secular co-exists with how the secular has also become sacred. Fast food in modern Muslim societies, therefore, has to display a *halal* sign on Islamically slaughtered meats offered to the believers/ consumers. Modern financial institutions, banking, and insurance have to provide services in line with Islamic injunctions as understood by Muslims in certain societies. All of this, however, is not to ignore the modern-day use of terrorism to convey political goals and then relying upon Islamic idioms to justify their actions and to mobilize others through their rhetoric.

But could such a figure as Rorty arrive at the surprising conclusion that dialogue with "Islam" is pointless? In addition to a critique of his perspective, it is important to look at how some Muslims choose the most rigid form of governance, for example, in terms of harsh punishment discussed above, which is partly responsible.

Using the metaphors of the ship and the stranger, governance seen from a metaphorically informed Islamic perspective cannot be restrictive or harsh, traditional juristic opinions notwithstanding. Perhaps soft governance, understood as an attempt to meaningfully connect multiple actors from different terrains through complex mutual relationships in the process of governing with a far more pluralistic conceptualization of power, should be explored.

The metaphors of the ship and the stranger help illuminate the notion of soft governance for the following reasons:

First, using metaphors means introducing the unfamiliar into the familiar, or vice versa, in order to produce effects on the readers/interlocutors. But more importantly, the effects produced by metaphors create the space necessary for any dialogue among peoples of differences, which helps efforts to create a meaningful connection among them.

Second, these metaphors point to a highly limited governance, especially in terms of the power to punish, due to the limits that come from being human. The most skillful captain and sailors in a ship are those who know the capacity of their ship(s) and their own limitations. For example, soft governance will influence the choice of the appropriate punishment within the limits of human reasons and understanding and thus will open up the possibility of a far larger space for the accused to redeem himself/herself.

Third, the ship sails on the sea. Although predictable, the rhythms of the sea, the blowing of the winds, and the brightness of the night sky can change quickly and thus upset any certainty. When faced with such a volatility of reality, soft governance allows realistic changes in policies and practices to occur with the possibility of accommodating genuine differences.

Fourth, the ships continue to sail the seas, the captains steer their ships, the sailors perform their functions, and the passengers travel in them. All of this happens not because they are unaware of the fact that human beings have limits when it comes to controlling the ships or their lack of certainty about the oceans, but because in some ways they hope that everything will proceed in its course. For Muslims, belief in God's infinite Mercy makes living with all human limits and uncertainties bearable, as well as engaging others in dialogues possible.

Endnotes

1. See the more recent case of Abdul Rahman, an Afghan who converted to Christianity and had to move to Italy after a furore over his trial under Islamic Shari`ah law in *Bangkok Post*, 10 April 2006. See a useful discussion on this very issue in Zainah Anwar, "Law-Making in the Name of Islam: Implications for Democratic Governance," in *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century*, K. S. Nathan and Mohammad H. Kamali, eds. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 129-30.
2. See Rudolph Peters, *Crime and Punishment in Islamic Law: Theory and Practice from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 179.

3. Jan Stark, "Contesting Models of Islamic Governance in Malaysia and Indonesia," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 16, no. 2 (June 2004): 115-31.
4. Judith Nagata, "Alternative Models of Islamic Governance in Southeast Asia: Neo-Sufism and the Arqam Experiment in Malaysia," ibid., 99-114.
5. Sayyid Sabik, *Fiqh-us-Sunnah* (Bangkok: Arab Universities Alumni Association, 2002), 4:158-59 (translated from Arabic into Thai).
6. Anwar, "Law-Making in the Name of Islam," 129, 124, and 128. The quote is on p. 128.
7. Ibid., 124-32.
8. Guy Deutscher, *The Unfolding of Language: An Evolutionary Tour of Mankind's Greatest Invention* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005), 117.
9. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 16.
10. See a discussion of different theories of metaphors in Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 24-53.
11. Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, John B. Thompson, ed. and trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 181.
12. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 18.
13. Michael J. Shapiro, "Literary Production as Politicizing Practice," in *Language and Politics*, ed. Michael J. Shapiro (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 231.
14. Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.97-100.
15. See, for example, Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 11.
16. David Richards and Martin J. Smith, *Governance and Public Policy in the United Kingdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.
17. Angela Liberatore, "Governance and Democracy: Reflections on the European Debate," in *Good Governance, Democratic Societies and Globalisation*, eds. Surendra Munshi and Biju Paul Abraham (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, and London: SAGE Publications, 2004), 71-74. The quote is on p. 74.
18. Cited in Richards and Smith, *Governance and Public Policy,* 14.
19. Ibid., p. 19.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., p. 18.
22. Kenneth Minogue, *Politics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 83.
23. Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam*, 11.
24. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York and London: Basic Books Inc., 1968), 167.
25. Ibid., 167-68.
26. Ibid., 168.
27. Ibid.

28. The Alim for Windows, *êaú¥ú al-Bukh˛r¥ î ad¥th*, 3: 673. I would like to thank
     my anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to this hadith.

29. See N. S. Doniach, *The Concise Oxford English-Arabic Dictionary of Current
     Usage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 944.

30. Abdul Rashid Moten, *Political Science: An Islamic Perspective* (London:
     Macmillan, 1996), 150.

31. Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam*, 11. For including the word *grooms* as
     a meaning of *siy˛sah* in an ordinary dictionary, see especially F. Steingass,
     Arabic-English Dictionary (Delhi: Kutub Khana Ishayat-ul-Islam, 1980), 520.

32. All Qur'anic verses are from *The Qur'an*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem
     (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). See, for example, 19:58 (p. 193);
     23:27-28 (p. 216); 36:41 (pp. 282-83); and 69:11 (p. 387). The above verse is
     from page 216.

33. 11:38-39 (p. 139).

34. Ibid., 313.

35. Ibid., 278.

36. Ibid., 130.

37. Ibid., 179.

38. Shamsul A. B., "Islam Embedded: 'Moderate Political Islam and Governance
     in the Malay World," in *Islam in Southeast Asia*, 112

39. Moten, *Political Science*, 85.

40. Martin Lings, *Muhammad: his life based on the earliest sources* (Rochester,
     VT: Inner Traditions International, Ltd., 1983), 325.

41. Al-Qur'an, 204.

42. *êaú¥ú al-Bukh˛r¥*, book 74, chapter 2, hadith no. 2092. *The Translation of the
     Meanings of Summarized êaú¥ú Al-Bukh˛r¥* (Arabic-English), trans. Muham-
     mad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1996), 981. See also Lings, Muham-
     mad, 325.

43. *êaú¥ú Muslim*, hadith no. 270. Imam Muslim, *êaú¥ú Muslim*, trans. Abdul
     Hamid Siddiqi (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1978), 1:86.

44. Imam al-Gazzali, *Ihy˛' `Ul´m al-D¥n,* book 3, trans. Maulana Fazul-ul-Karim
     (Lahore: Sind Sagar Academy, n.d.), 198.

45. Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt Wolff (New York:
     Free Press, 1950), 402-08.

46. Eric Voegelin, *Plato* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966),
     227.

47. Santiago Zabala, "Introduction: A Religion without Theists or Atheists," in
     Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago
     Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 1-27.

48. Ibid., 72-73.

49. It should be pointed out that both "the future" and "religion" in the tile of the
     book on these philosophers' dialogue, edited by Zabala cited above, are all in
     the singular.