

# IIS Alumni

Newsletter 2013

## MESSAGE FROM THE CO-DIRECTOR



**To all IIS alumni,**

In the past issues of the *Alumni Newsletter*, I highlighted the milestones and achievements of the IIS as we broaden the scope of the Institute's work in Shi'i Studies. For me, one of the key factors in achieving the IIS' goals is our continued engagement with

our alumni. I feel it is appropriate for me to mention here His Highness' aspirations for IIS graduates, expressed in a letter to the Board of Governors in October 2003:

*"I hope you will ... work out good answers to their questions, so that the largest number possible of your graduates will decide to serve our many varied programmes and institutions. These graduates are a resource of the greatest importance to the future of the Ismaili Tariqah."*

I hope you share my belief that your years of study at the IIS were just the beginning of your journey and that, after graduation, applying your knowledge and using the research tools you acquired at the IIS is equally, if not more, important. As such, I am always proud and happy to meet our graduates who are contributing to academic institutions as well as institutions of the Ismaili community. As alumni who have an appreciation of the cultures and histories of the Muslim world, you are now placed in positions of responsibility to contribute to scholarship and learning about Islam and address the issues and challenges facing Muslim communities in different parts of the world.

Since 1983, over four-hundred alumni have completed various human resource development programmes at the IIS. For our alumni, there are a number of

opportunities for involvement with the IIS, through voluntary contributions of your time and knowledge or by working professionally for the Institute. I am pleased to report that currently there are as many as 42 alumni working as members of staff or as consultants on specific projects for the IIS.

With the joining of the IIS and ISMC libraries this year, and the establishment of a dedicated Ismaili Special Collections Unit headed by an alumnus, Wafi Momin (GPISH, class of 2006), there will be opportunities for our alumni to develop their careers in this important area of work.

Dr. Laila Halani (GPISH class of 1998) was appointed Head of the Department of Graduate Studies. She played an instrumental role in the recent review of the IIS by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education when the Institute received the highest available ranking of "making commendable progress." I am also pleased to share the news that Dr Omar Ali-de-Unzaga (GPISH class of 1997) has been appointed Deputy Head of DARP. As such, we now have several IIS graduates holding senior management positions at the IIS.

Finally, I would like to suggest that you reach out to our Alumni Relations Unit and let us know where you are on your individual learning paths. The IIS offers a range of exciting opportunities, whether it is to mentor a new graduate, contribute to a specific research project, or even take part in a learning opportunity through attending one of our Chapter Group meetings. More than anything, I hope you will stay in touch and allow us to engage with you as you move forward on your academic and professional careers.

**Dr. Farhad Daftary**

Cairo, Chicago, Damascus, Dhaka, Dubai, Dushanbe, Houston, Islamabad, Istanbul, Kuala Lumpur, Lisbon, London, Mumbai, New York, Ottawa, Paris, Rome, Toronto and Vancouver. In one respect, this varied group of cities reflects the diversities inherent in the Alumni body. Yet, these locations have one element in common for the Alumni: they represent cities where, over the past five years alumni chapter group meetings and conferences have been held. My engagement with the alumni has been a most meaningful and challenging experience for me, and I would like to thank you all for your support. During 2013, alumni from different parts of the world contributed over 11,000 hours to numerous TKN assignments. This is a matter of great pride for the Institute. At the same time, the loss of one of our colleagues, Laila Lokhandwalla (WTEP 1983), reminded us all of the transiency of life. Laila will be

remembered with fondness and respect, and I am sure you will all join me in extending our sincere condolences and prayers to her family.

As we look to the future, I hope that you will continue to participate in the activities and programmes of the Alumni Association, building upon past friendships and creating memories afresh. I would like to take this opportunity to welcome new alumni and wish them the very best as they begin their careers. Congratulations!



**Shellina Karmali,**  
**Alumni Relations Coordinator**

### NORTH AMERICAN CHAPTER GROUP

Alumni from across North America met in New York for their annual meeting on 21-24 June. The meeting brought together over 65 alumni to explore “Quran: Approaches to its Study and its Contemporary Relevance.”

Speakers at the meeting included Professor Carl Ernst (University of North Carolina), Dr Omar Ali-de-Unzaga (GPISH Class of 1997; currently with The Institute of Ismaili Studies) and Dr Nargis Virani (WTEP Class of 1983; currently with New School, New York), Mr Shiraz Kabani (Head of Community Relations, IIS), Ms Shumaila Hemani (GPISH Class of 2009 and currently a PhD candidate with University of Alberta), Mr Amin Noorani (HR, AKDN) and leaders of the Ismaili community from Canada and USA.



### EUROPEAN CHAPTER GROUP

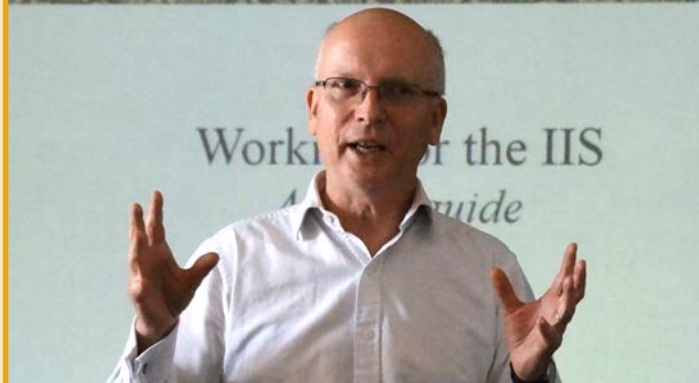
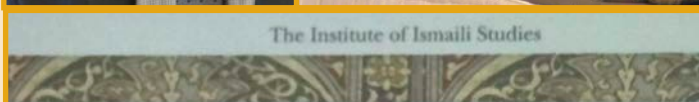
Alumni from across Europe met in Rome for their annual meeting on 25- 28 October 2013. The meeting brought together 35 alumni to explore “Secularisation and Religion in the Modern World”.

Speakers at the meeting included Professor Paolo Luigi Branca (Department of Religious Science, Universita Cattolica del Sacro Cuero, Milan), Professor Alberto Melloni, (Istituto dela Enciclopedia Italiana), Dr Aziz Esmail (Governor, IIS); Dr Dagi Dagiev (GPISH Class of 2003, currently with IIS), Dr Otared Haider (GPISH Class of 1998; currently with University of Oxford) and Mr Shiraz Kabani (Head of Community Relations, IIS).

### ASIAN CHAPTER GROUP

Alumni from across Asia and Africa met in Istanbul for their annual meeting on 4 -7 July 2013. The meeting brought together over 40 alumni to explore “Secularisation and its impact on Faith Communities.”

Speakers at the meeting included Professor Recep Senturk (University of Istanbul), Dr Hadi Adanali (Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister of Turkey), Professor Mehmet Pacaci (Director General for External Relations at the Presidency of Religious Affairs in Turkey), Dr Daryoush Mohamed Poor (Research Associate, IIS), Mr Steve Lewitt (Head, Human Resources, IIS) and Mr Shiraz Kabani (Head of Community Relations, IIS)



## THE MENTORS IN TRAINING (MIT) INITIATIVE

Fayyaz Ali, Asif Penwala, Zohir Piltaboev (STEP Class of 2009) and Riz Muhammedi (STEP Class of 2010)<sup>1</sup>

The Institute of Ismaili Studies recently announced an exciting initiative that would allow STEP teachers in the field to support the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of teachers globally. In this initiative, a few STEP teachers from various countries were selected through a process to become Mentors-in-Training. These Mentors-in-Training worked closely with Mr Hanif Virani (WTEP Class of 1983), Ms Mehjabeen Dattoo as well as CPD scholars - Dr Shainool Jiwa (Mc Gill Class of 1984) and Dr Farouk Mitha (WTEP Class of 1986) – and teachers in Pakistan to develop hands-on professional training sessions for teachers in Pakistan.

## REFLECTIONS FROM FOUR MENTORS IN TRAINING

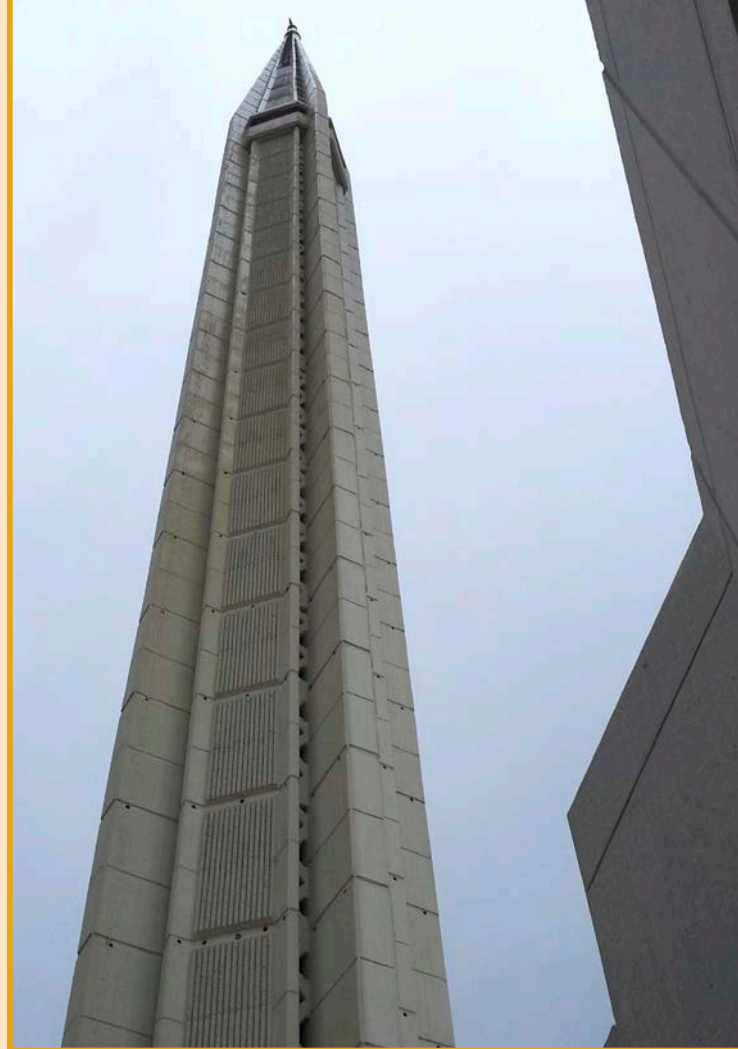
It was an honor to attend the CPD workshop in Pakistan and work with such amazing teachers in the field! Moments of profound reflection were interspersed with enjoyable pursuits: deep contemplation of our pedagogical practices, pedagogical sessions and field trips to Islamabad were coupled with poetry recitations, dancing and laughter. This experience allowed us to see leadership as a means of empowering others to achieve their full potential. It also provided us with the opportunity to meaningfully engage with the IIS's Secondary Curriculum and with scholars, and to look for ways in which we could make the pedagogical content come alive for our students. We were able to share our knowledge and teaching practices from Canada and Tajikistan with others in Pakistan, as well as learn from our colleagues there. We were excited to discover that we all shared similar struggles, though our individual contexts were different.

It was inspirational to work amongst scholars and experienced pedagogues. Their support empowered us to co-lead processes with confidence. We felt that we were part of an intellectual community, constantly inquiring into, developing, refining and enacting the best ways to support teacher development. Our interactions with IIS scholars and experienced pedagogues were truly invaluable.

The collaborative approach to planning the workshop alongside an international group of teachers led to our growth. We exchanged ideas and perspectives from our local contexts which deepened our own understanding of what it meant to teach the Secondary Curriculum. This kind of international collaboration and collective inquiry was greatly appreciated because such interactions are rare within our busy, day-to-day schedules.

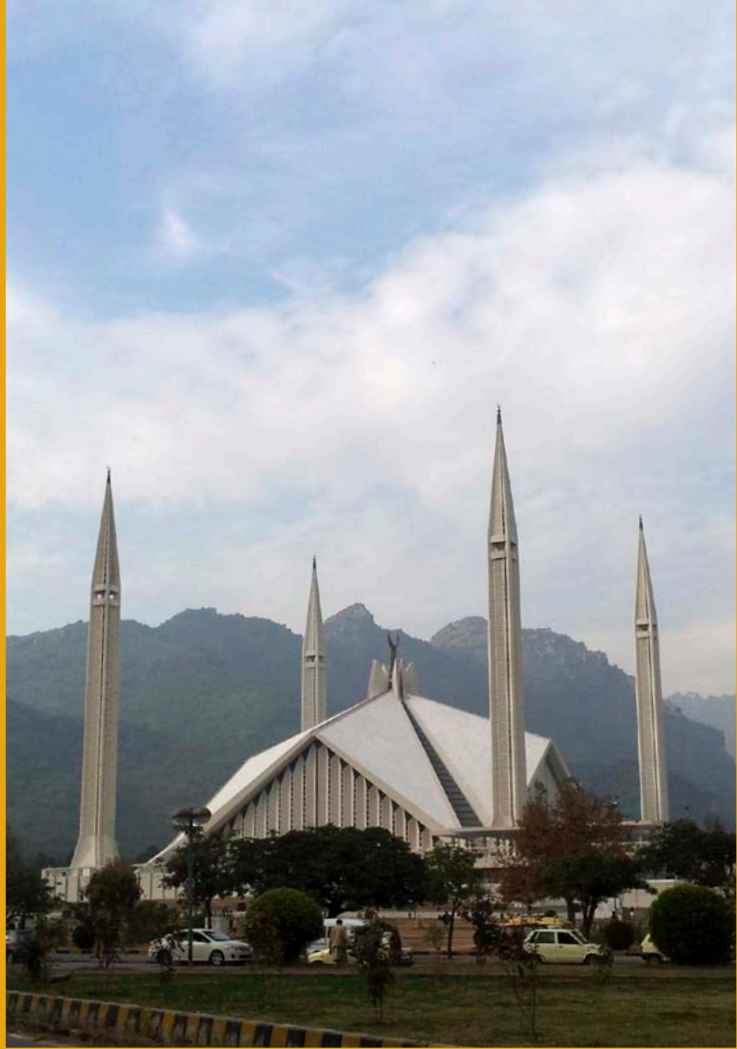
All the Mentors-in-Training had an opportunity to

<sup>1</sup>STEP teachers from Canada and Tajikistan, who visited Pakistan on a Mentors-in-Training programme.



participate in the Mentorship Training Workshop which took place in Dubai in late December. Participation in this workshop enabled us to access theories as well as practical approaches to mentorship. We immersed ourselves in the educational literature to plan for effective mentorship in our local contexts. Insights from this workshop have significantly enabled us to serve as mentors on the ground.





### **REFLECTIONS ON SHAH FAISAL MOSQUE: A TRIBUTE TO GOD AT THE FOOTHILLS OF THE HIMALAYAS**

Ambreen Saleh, GPISH Class of 2008

**T**he Shah Faisal Mosque is located in Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan. Nestled at the foot of the majestic Margalla Hills which eventually become part of the Himalayan mountain range, this pristine marble mosque cuts a striking figure.

The Shah Faisal Mosque was completed in 1986 at a cost of approximately US \$120 million. It was built through the support of King Faisal Bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia, and is named in his honour. It is one of the largest mosques in South Asia, and has been host to dignitaries from around the world; many local people from Islamabad also identify closely with the mosque and can be seen in the prayer hall and courtyards.

Initially, the mosque's eclectic blend of traditional and modern architecture evoked criticism. The mosque does not have a round central dome and wide minarets, which is the traditional design of many mosques in the country; instead it is a series of triangles, dominated by pencil-shaped high minarets. However, the setting of the mosque brought out the beauty of this unusual design, as the thin minarets and sloping roofs (modeled

on a desert tent) reflect the slopes and angles of the Margalla Hills. Man-made beauty is reflected in the beauty of nature as many critics acknowledge, and the Shah Faisal Mosque seems to pay silent homage to God, the creator of all natural beauty.

The mosque was designed by Vedat Dalokay, a respected Turkish architect, writer, artist and politician. Dalokay served as Mayor of Ankara from 1973 to 1977. The Shah Faisal Mosque was a significant project in his career and reflects a long-standing cultural and professional relationship between Turkey and Pakistan.

To reach the interior of the mosque you have to walk across an expansive white marble terrace adorned with fountains. This walk seems to symbolically usher you away from the mundane aspects of daily life and into a more spiritual, calm realm. It is only upon approaching the entrance to the mosque that you are able to get a sense of the impressive scale of the building which, from afar, had been masked by its geometric design. Over 100,000 worshipers can be accommodated in the main prayer hall and the courtyard.

The interior of the mosque is a symphony of triangles in blue, white and gold. Both the carpets and the front of the prayer hall (which symbolizes the *qibla*) are a vivid blue. The *qibla* is decorated with gold geometric calligraphy which enhances the effect of the central round gold chandelier. The walls of the mosque and its columns are white. The *mihrab* in the wall of the *qibla* (the focal point during the prayer ritual, which also indicates the direction of the *Ka'ba*) is elegantly designed in the shape of an open copy of the Holy Quran, a masterpiece created by the Ismaili artist Gulgee. The simple yet striking geometric interior brings to mind the *Ka'ba*, one of the most sacred Muslim sites in Mecca. Paintings by the famous Pakistani painter Sadequain decorate the main prayer hall.

Along with the subliminal message of the importance of art, the messages of the importance of acquiring wisdom and knowledge seem to resonate through the prayer hall. All this was suggested by the light flowing through the structure, the central golden sun, the open Holy Quran at the *mihrab*, another beautiful copy of the Holy Quran in a glass case at the entrance, and the books lining the shelves leading to a reading room. As I stood in the central hallway, I was reminded of the famous opening lines of the Quran: 'Read! Read in the name of thy Lord . . .'

I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to the Shah Faisal Mosque and would recommend it to any visitor to Islamabad. Away from the hustle and bustle of the growing city, the moments of silence in the majestic prayer hall or a walk across the marble terrace give the visitor a sense of peace.

## ALUMNI CONTRIBUTING TO THE PRESERVATION OF ISMAILI HERITAGE AT THE IIS

Since the creation of the IIS Library in 1979, The Institute of Ismaili Studies has rigorously pursued the mandate of acquiring, preserving and studying materials of special relevance to the heritage of the Ismailis. With its commitment to promote scholarly research on this heritage, the IIS encourages its scholars and students to make use of the invaluable opportunity to engage with the special materials and pursue their interests. A major step forward in this direction has been the creation of a new research unit, the Ismaili Special Collections Unit (ISCU), in which the alumni are playing an important part.

The aim of the Unit is not only to preserve, develop and manage the special collections housed at the IIS – manuscripts, artefacts and coins, rare books and periodicals, archival material, photographs and audio-visual materials – but also to facilitate the study of this significant repository of special items. The unit is headed by Mr. Wafi Momin (GPISH Class of 2006) who brings his wide-ranging knowledge and experience of working with manuscripts and other special items to the Unit. Mr. Momin is currently finishing his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago; his research focuses on the historical formation of the Satpanthi Ismaili tradition. Most recently serving as the Keeper of Ismaili Collections, Wafi has been leading the project of cataloguing the IIS’s unique collection of Khojki and Gujarati manuscripts.

*“It is indeed a great opportunity to be a part of this major endeavour; the training, education and intellectual interactions I have had at the IIS surely play a critical role in what I seek to achieve at the ISCU through various projects.” (Wafi Momin)*

Another alumnus who brings invaluable experience to the Unit is Dr. Nourmamadcho Nourmamadchoev (GPISH Class of 2005), who is currently a Research and Administrative Assistant at the ISCU. Nourmamadcho recently completed his PhD at SOAS, which focused on the Ismailis of Badakhshan. In his contribution to the work of the unit, he draws on his educational background in Middle East and Islamic Studies as well as his experience of working with manuscript sources in various archives in the UK and abroad.

*“It is a great challenge to work with primary sources such as manuscripts and coins. I started reading manuscripts in my early teens under the guidance of my father. What fascinates me in working with manuscript sources is that you discover new details that reflect the evolving nature of Ismaili history in a particular context.” (Nourmamadcho Nourmamadchoev)*

The special collections at the IIS hold close to 3,000 manuscripts written in Arabic, Persian and Indic languages, and the Unit is actively engaged



in completing the cataloguing of this repository to better facilitate scholarly access to and research on these precious items. Mr. Karim Javan’s expertise in Persian language and literatures is extremely valuable in this context. A GPISH alumnus from the class of 2004, Karim is currently pursuing a PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies. His role in the Unit involves the cataloguing and study of Persian manuscripts, about which he is extremely passionate.

*“Working with Ismaili manuscripts has always fascinated me. I have inherited this passion from my family as they owned many of these manuscripts and always talked about them, or about certain qasidas or an ideological point within them. It gives me great pleasure to see some of them in our collection in the IIS.” (Karim Javan)*

Besides special materials in Arabic and Persian languages, manuscripts in the Khojki and Gujarati scripts also form a significant part of the manuscript collection. A number of these manuscripts are yet to be catalogued, and this is currently being undertaken by Wafi Momin. Under his supervision, Naureen Ali is assisting with this cataloguing project. Having recently graduated from GPISH in 2013 with a Masters in Gender Studies, awarded by the School of Oriental and African Studies, and having previously interned for the Unit, Naureen Ali is applying the knowledge of Khojki and Gujarati that she acquired in GPISH.

*“GPISH has provided me with a wonderful opportunity to broaden my horizons. It was in this programme that I discovered my love for languages and scripts, especially Arabic and Gujarati. It was also through GPISH that I developed my passion for studying devotional literature, gender issues and Islamic art. My work within the ISCU amalgamates my various interests and adds dynamism to my learning.” (Naureen Ali)*

Along with its commitment to serve the community through the collection, preservation and study of the materials of Ismaili heritage, the ISCU is equally committed to nurturing the passion of our scholars and encouraging their contributions, as they are an instrumental part of maintaining this heritage.

وَأَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ وَأَفُوضُ أَمْرِي إِلَى اللَّهِ تَزَكَّى عَلَى اللَّهِ وَوَجَّهْتُ وَجْهِي لِلدِّينِ وَنِعْمَ الْوَكِيلُ



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**BRIEF REVIEW: A FATIMID CODE OF CONDUCT FOR THE IMAM'S ADMINISTRATORS**

Karim H. Karim, Mc Gill Class of 1984

Ismaili history has produced a rich body of literature on ethics. They include the *Pandyat-i Jawan Mardi*, attributed to the Nizari Ismaili Imam Mustansir bi-Allah II's, and *ginans* such as *So Kriya*. The Fatimids put forth materials that served as behavioural guides for the Imam's followers as well as for institutional administrators. Two examples of such writings are those by Qadi al-Nu'man and Da'i Ahmed bin Ibrahim al-Naysaburi. The IIS has published a critical edition of a work by the latter author; it is the Arabic text and English translation of al-Naysaburi's *al-Risala al-mujaza al-kafiya fi adab al-du'at*, titled *A Code of Conduct: A Treatise on the Etiquette of the Fatimid Ismaili Mission*, edited and translated by Verena Klemm and Paul E. Walker.

Da'i al-Naysaburi, who lived around a thousand years ago in the 11th century CE, had achieved a high status in the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah's court. His *Risala* was written at a time when the Fatimid administration was suffering from corruption and rebellion. As he states near the end of his book:

The heart of the Imam is preoccupied with what then happens to his community. He becomes impatient with them and, despairing of them and of the faith and those who adhere to it, he turns away and becomes angry with them. The evil misfortune of rebellion and the wrath of the Imam will hit them, his mercy having disappeared. Yet each day they increase their corruption and thus add to the chastisement in store for them. That becomes like the corruption that we are seeing at the present moment.<sup>1</sup>

The *Risala* was therefore intended to remind the administrators, the *da'is*, about their duties and the Imam's expectations of them.

Al-Naysaburi comments that the Imam depended on the *da'is* for the proper administration of the community:

When God questions the imam about things connected to the affairs of his community and his safeguarding and caring for them, the imam will ask him (the *da'i*), for the imam made that his responsibility. He is the one answerable for it, and it was up to him to arrange matters in that regard.<sup>2</sup>

In this respect, the *da'is'* responsibilities were not only administrative but religious in nature.

Klemm and Walker note that the 'term *da'wa* comes from *da'wat al-haqq*, "call to truth".<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this was the proper name of the dynasty generally known as 'the Fatimids'. The concept of the *da'wat al-haqq* embodies an integral commitment to truth and ethics. This was the mission of the Fatimid Caliphate. According to al-Naysaburi, 'the *da'wa* is built on knowledge [*ilm*], God fearing piety [*taqwa*] and good management [*siyasa*].'<sup>4</sup> He warns that if these characteristics are missing in the administrators, then 'security, decency, piety, life, honour and chivalry [will] cease' in society and 'chaos will reign' in the Imam's community.<sup>5</sup>

Klemm and Walker's edition of al-Naysaburi's *Risala* is an important contribution to the understanding of Ismaili concepts of governance, particularly with respect to the intertwined nature of *din* and *dunya*.

<sup>1</sup>Klemm, Verena and Paul E. Walker, eds., *A Code of Conduct: A Treatise on the Etiquette of the Fatimid Ismaili Mission*. London, IIS/IB Tauris, 2011, p. 75.  
<sup>2</sup>*Ibid*, p. 72.  
<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, p. 1.  
<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, p. 76.  
<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, p. 75.

## CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Dr Karim Gillani, GPISH Class of 2003

‘There is no flute, yet there is melody. There is no sound, yet there is music.’<sup>1</sup>

I was born in Karachi, Pakistan, into a humble and knowledgeable family, where the significance of the arts, such as the oral traditions of singing folk songs, reciting poetry and appreciating diverse forms of music, was very much part of my everyday life. This subsequently led me to start my own music classes for the youth and children in Karachi and to become involved in the musical and cultural scene. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, I observed a significant cultural shift in Pakistan. It was a time in which many performing artists were placed under immense pressure. Interestingly, many Sufi musicians such as Abida Parveen and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, employed mystical ideas and music as weapons to counter extremist views. Therefore, I was always interested in exploring what role music plays in the socio-cultural environment of a society; how do people attach meaning to any particular kind of music and why; what is the cultural connection of music with oral traditions and memory; and what is the connection of sound with prayers and spirituality. I was also intrigued by the function of music in society, especially when music is used as a tool to spread moderate and mystical understandings of Islam. Some of these questions have always inspired



me to better understand the unique feature of music and why it is a powerful tool to express emotions and ideas that are otherwise difficult to communicate.

As part of the Institute’s Graduate Programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities, I completed an MA and then a PhD in Music and Religious Studies from the University of Alberta. In my PhD dissertation, entitled ‘Sound and Recitation of Khoja Ismaili *Ginans*: Tradition and Transformation’, I examined the role and power of music and recitation within the socio-cultural and religious contexts of the Muslims of South Asia. My research shows that *ginan* hymns play a significant role in maintaining the collective and cultural memory of the Ismailis, wherever they may live. These hymns are a central feature of Ismaili Muslim practices, both in South Asia and some other parts of the world.

My dissertation situates *ginans* within the wider context of Muslim piety in general and in South Asian poetic and musical contexts in particular. Thus far, *ginans* have been studied mostly from textual and historical perspectives. However, it is through hearing, reciting and performing them that one connects with their spiritual and cultural origins. Based on their musical structure and poetic metre, one can recognise the close cultural proximity of *ginans* to other known musical genres like the



<sup>1</sup>Pir Shams Sabzwari (13th century CE), *Brahm Prakash (Divine Light)*, verse number 71. Cited from N. Shafique Virani, ‘Symphony of Gnosis: A Self-Definition of the Ismaili *Ginan* Tradition’, in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam*, ed. Todd Lawson (London, I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2005), p. 516.





*Kafi, Wai, Bait* and *Dhal* traditions of Sind, Punjab and Gujarat. My research explored how the *ginnan* tradition is not a textually static or culturally bound tradition. It has always been transmitted through various means and is continuously evolving in its socio-cultural, linguistic and musical contexts, and continues to be a vital source of spirituality among the Ismailis from South Asia.

I have been privileged to work with the Department of Music at the University of Alberta to organise two international conferences, which included concerts, workshops and community discussions. The first conference was ‘Sounds and Spaces of Muslim Piety: Tradition and Transformation’, which was held in March 2011 ([www.muslimpiety.org](http://www.muslimpiety.org)). The second was titled ‘I Am a Bird from Heaven’s Garden: Music, Sound and Architecture in the Muslim World’, which was convened in September 2013 ([www.heavens-garden.org](http://www.heavens-garden.org)) in partnership with the Aga Khan University, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, and the Aga Khan Music initiative. Both of these international conferences involved renowned speakers and musicians from various parts of the world.

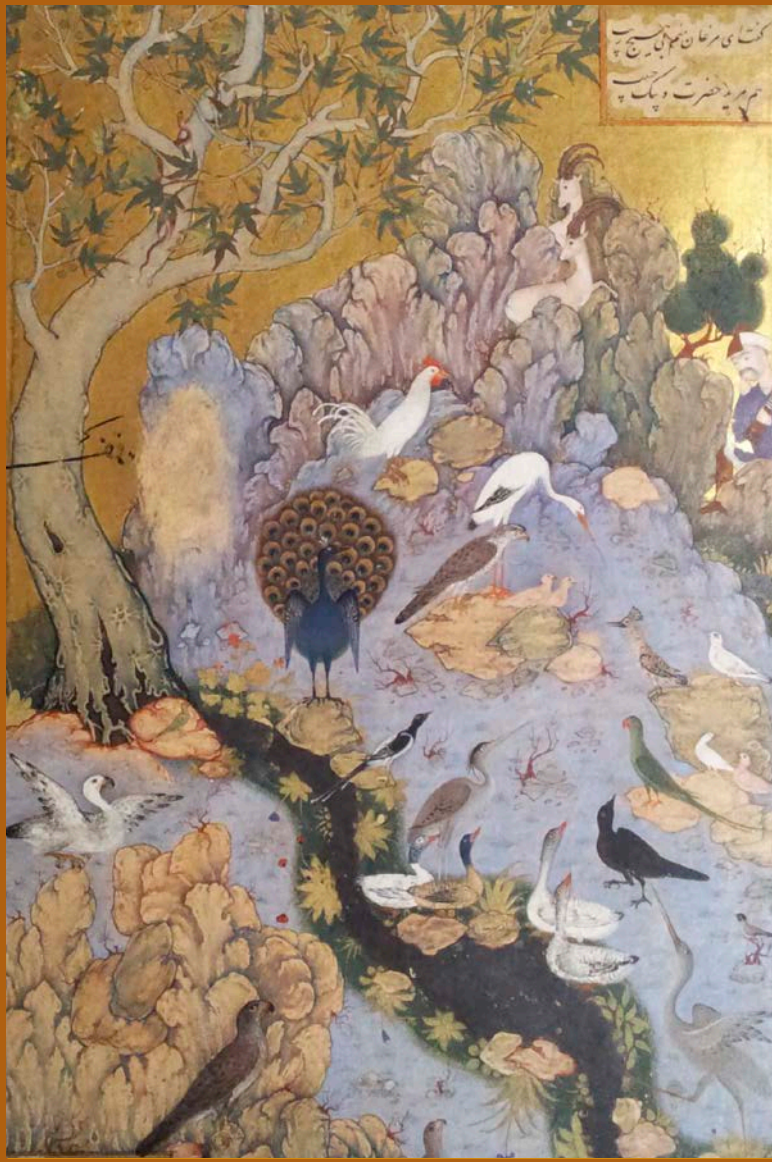
I have also been composing and performing Sufi music for the last ten years and have, so far, released one

album. My recent musical work, *Raah-e-Ishq: The Path of Eternal Love*, will be launched in March 2014, for which I have selected exclusively classical Sufi poets from Central and South Asia to be set to music and performed with my Sufi ensemble to share the profound messages of eternal love, especially during a time when the media focuses on the stereotypical images of Islam. I have performed in various parts of North America, and some of my performance highlights include spots

on CBC Television, and CJSR and CKUA radio. One of my greatest honours was to perform with the Canadian National Ismaili Musical ensemble (NIME) before Prime Minister Stephen Harper and His Highness the Aga Khan at the opening ceremony for the Delegation of the Ismaili Imam in Ottawa in 2008 and at the foundation ceremony of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto in 2010.

I think now is the time that we should use music, culture and the arts as tools to share the diverse expressions and articulations of Islam with other faith communities in order to better educate them about Muslim art, culture and spirituality.





**CANADA**

*A room full of souls  
I see myself in all  
Yet I wish only to see you*

**TAJIKISTAN**

*Flip charts, LCDs  
A heavy load.  
Exhausted birds of chhor bogh*

**USA**

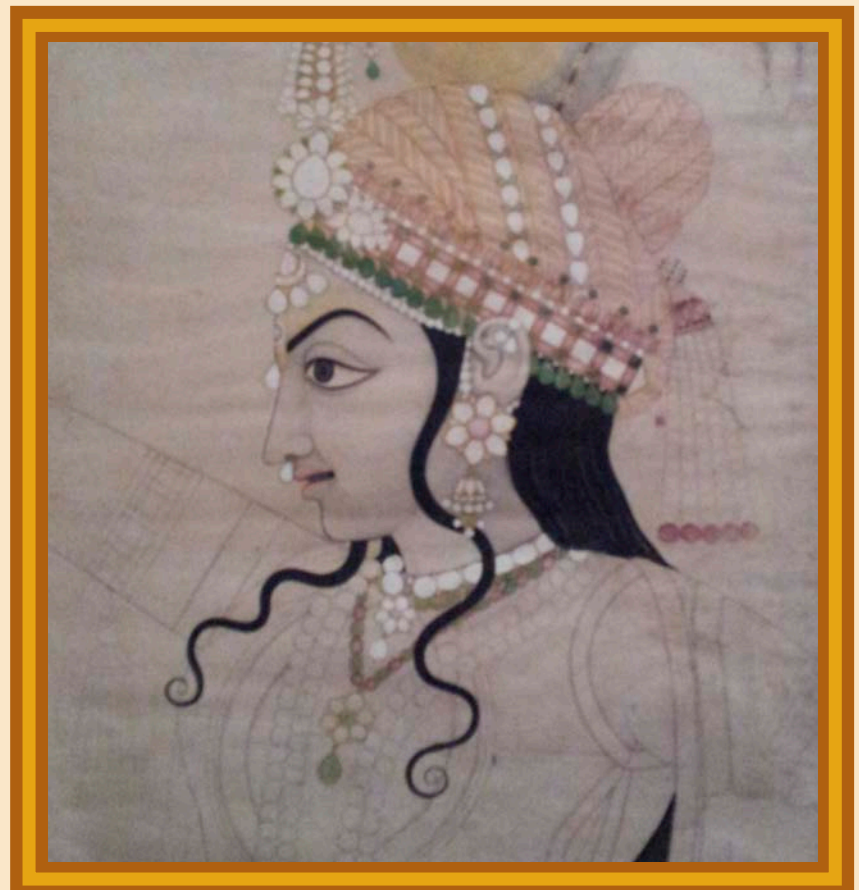
*Soft winter snow  
Ideas keep falling  
But have not melted*

**INDIA**

*Two wondering eyes,  
One in joy,  
One in despair*

**PAKISTAN**

*Moving on a hot desert  
Touched that spark  
Crying loud and relief*



**REFLECTIONS ON THE  
AL SABAH COLLECTION,  
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS,  
HOUSTON**

Arif Sunesara, STEP Class of  
2012

**O**n a typical hot and humid August afternoon in Houston, Texas, I weaved my way through the dense traffic to meet my fellow colleagues from other parts of the United States at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Like most of the other STEP teachers, I gratefully stepped into the air-conditioned oasis of the museum where I was immediately confronted with numerous sculptures, paintings and artefacts. Overwhelmed, I took a deep breath and wondered how I would make sense of the discordant mixture of visual stimuli. After all, museums are mostly baffling to me, usually making me feel uncultured and unrefined – what does yet another ceramic bowl with an etched peacock really mean? Why are all these sage-like people around me so enthralled?

And so, I half-heartedly proceeded into the ‘Islamic Arts’ spaces where masterworks from Kuwait’s renowned al-Sabah Collection were on display. The privately held al-Sabah Collection is one of the most exquisite visual art collections in the world, boasting spectacular jewellery, metalwork and glasswork, carpets, paintings, scientific and musical instruments, ceiling panels, manuscripts and, of course, ceramics from many geographical areas, including the Iberian Peninsula, Central Asia and more.

While sitting in the auditorium after a guided self-reflection on the collection, in front of us stood Dr Farouk Mitha, the former academic course director of STEP. Like a captain of a ship, he took us on an adventure, calmly steering us through roaring seas of intellectual curiosity and academic rigour. As an educator, Dr Mitha compelled us to challenge our thinking and hold ourselves to high academic standards of critical thinking. He encouraged each of us to consider, for example, how luxury items and the items of daily life reflected or did not reflect ‘religion’ in the colloquial or academic sense. For instance, why exactly were armoires etched with calligraphy considered ‘Islamic’ in its historical context, and why is it considered so today? My colleagues passionately debated whether the use of artefacts could enable effective pedagogy, particularly in a religious education classroom. We reflected on how contemporary notions of spiritual and cultural identities may have been exemplified in



thousand-year-old manuscripts and coins.

It was then that I began to view material culture as a medium that could stimulate greater conversation. For example, although the subtleties of *Gulistan*, the Persian story by Sa‘adi, shown via art, was lost in translation when read in English by my colleagues and I, we were nevertheless able to converse about the apparent disconnect between the story, its description provided by the curator and the accompanying paintings. Finally, after some strong hints about language and historical context from Dr Mitha, we all started to make sense of the message of Sa‘adi, that is, though many ‘wise’ men may comment on and discuss the meaning and purpose of life, they are generally too ideological to truly understand the experiences of the common man.

Additionally, for example, we were able to understand the oud (Arabic musical instrument) in the collection as an instrument that was an exemplar of cultural borrowing and ingenuity once it was juxtaposed alongside the commentary of the Egyptian novelist and political commentator Ahdaf Soueif: ‘The Museum’s objects may be exiled from their place of birth, banished from their quotidian use, but their indispensable job now is to remind us of a central strand of the world’s heritage; of an attitude of mind; of the genius of a culture that was able to combine differences, even opposites, and to hold them in a balance that constantly remade the world beautiful, useful, new.’ The ingenuity witnessed within the works of Andalusian music became a source of joyous inspiration through which to continuously discover the beauties of creation. Most of all, I was grateful that the once daunting feeling induced by museums was replaced by a personal sense of awe, sincerity and intellectual humility modelled by the leaders of our professional development session in Houston.

## REFLECTIONS ON HAGIA SOPHIA, ISTANBUL

Shahnoz Valijonbekova and Sabira Virani - STEP  
Class of 2010

Buildings are reflections of the past and, when one explores them carefully, they can tell us stories of people and places in history. Turkey's Hagia Sophia is a prime example of a building that unfolds the narratives of two great empires – the Byzantine and the Ottoman.

Hagia Sophia began as a church that was commissioned in the 7th century by the Byzantine emperor Justinian. It served the dual purpose of announcing his political aspirations and establishing religious ideologies. The structure itself was an architectural feat of its time, standing tall at the crossroads of Europe and Asia and challenging the supremacy of the then powerful Roman Empire.

The Muslim rulers who captured Constantinople centuries later continued using spaces as symbols of their authority. They refused to destroy the building and turned it into a mosque. They adapted the space by adding features like a *mihrab*, calligraphic roundels, Qur'anic inscriptions, and pencil shaped minarets. It was also a model structure for their subsequent constructions in Istanbul.

Hagia Sophia was turned into a museum by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the first Turkish president, during his drive to modernise the country in the early 1920s. The restoration done to the building at that time allows us to see both the Christian and Muslim features next to each other. In its true essence, the building tells us

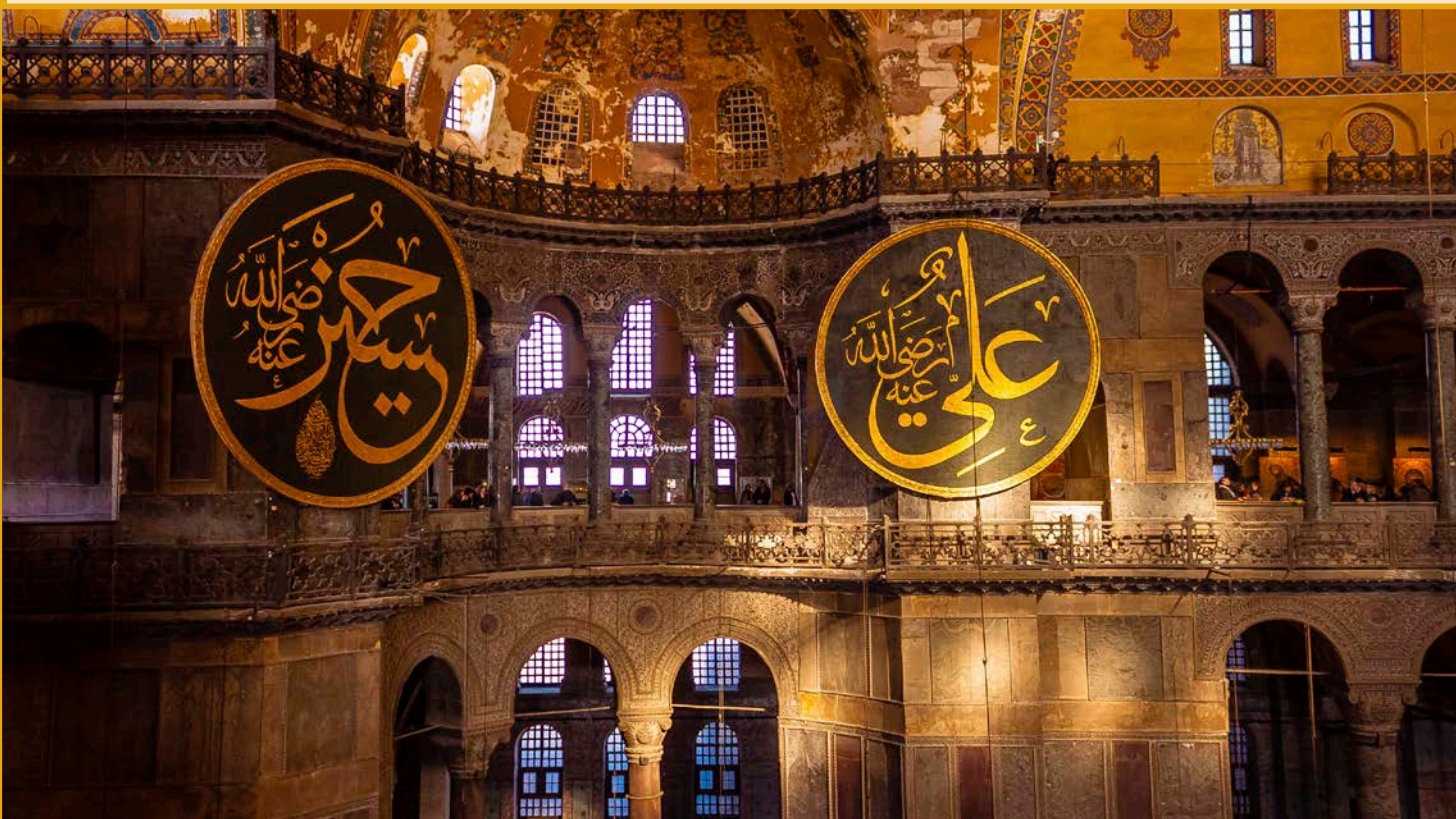
a story of a city which has been the cradle of the great Ottoman and Byzantine civilisations.

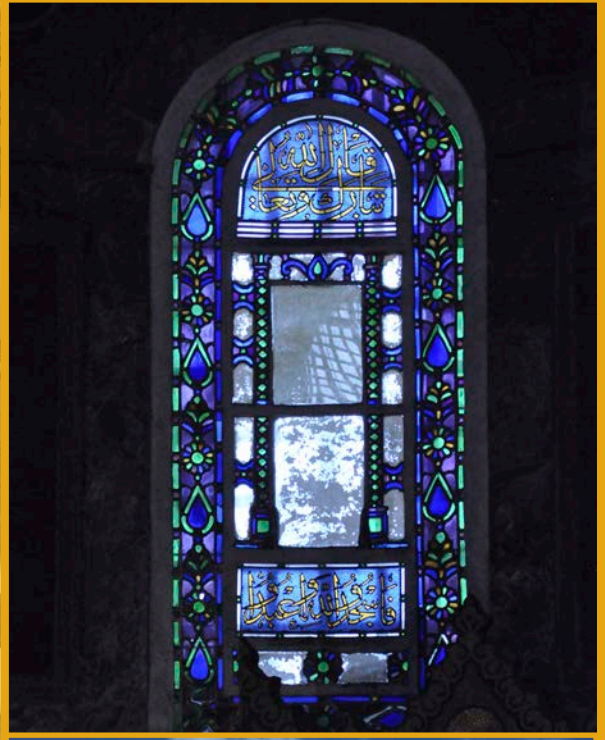
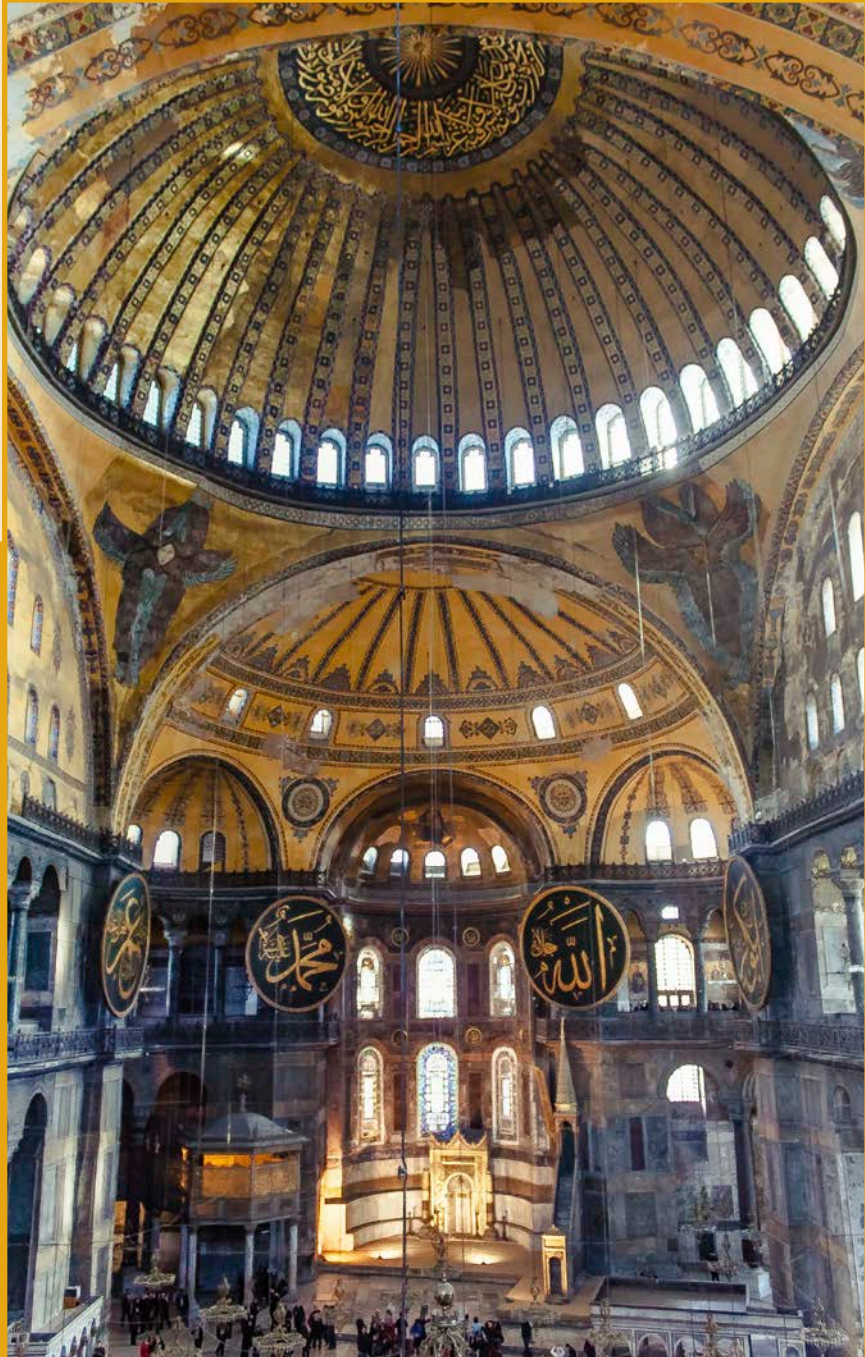
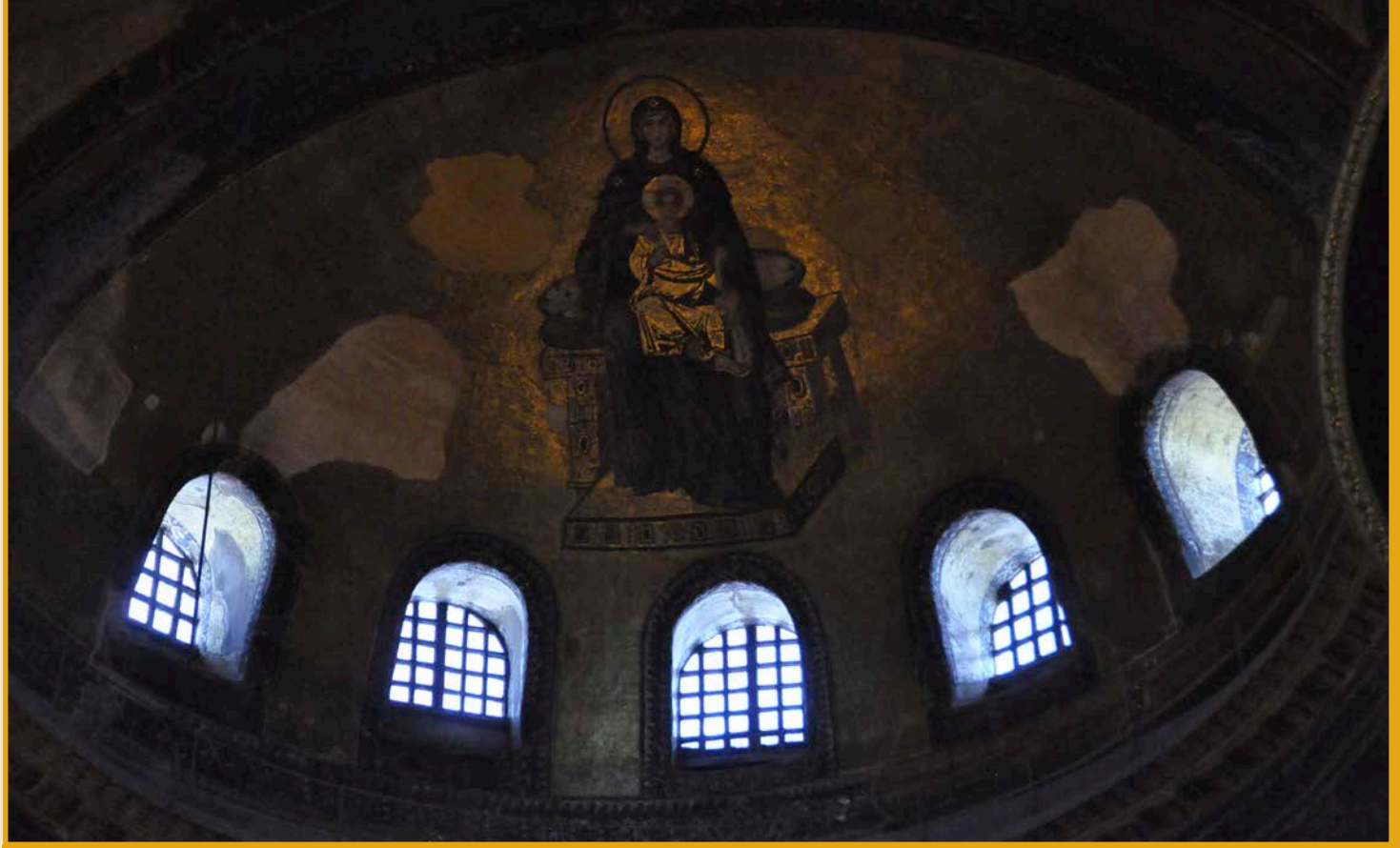
For teachers involved in the delivery of the IIS' Secondary Curriculum, the visit to Hagia Sophia brought many aspects of the curriculum to life, especially those of the *Muslim Societies and Civilizations* module. This module uses architecture as one of the tools to explore various facets of different civilisations. It presents works of architecture as mirrors of the issues and challenges as well as the values and beliefs of a society, and of the changes that occurred in these societies. If one views Hagia Sophia in this light, there are crucial lessons to be learnt from this architectural masterpiece.

The first lesson is that the past inspires the future. The Ottomans created a unique identity for themselves by drawing on the knowledge of their predecessors. This principle allows us to understand the value history holds in the present to create a progressive tomorrow.

The second lesson is that people, cultures and religions have more in common than meets the eye. Common ground can be found by accepting diversity.

Finally, one feels that the values of past civilisations, which are reflected in the architecture of the building, may hold the key to resolving the conflicts confronting our societies today. The need to establish an individualistic identity is being pursued more than ever before, fuelling rifts rather than synergy. Yet, identity is multilayered and multidimensional, and its various aspects cannot be segregated from one another. The beauty of Hagia Sophia is its assimilation of the multifaceted aspects of its past to generate something unique. Visiting the Hagia Sophia reinforced our strong belief that buildings talk; you just need to learn to listen to them.





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