Unruly Subjects

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Islam has a bad name. This is true for the negative images and stereotypes that many non-Muslims associate with Islam, as does it hold for the academic, political, and religious arenas that address Islam as a problem to be solved or a crisis to be managed.[1] The countless expressions of animus and suspicion directed toward Muslims in Europe, North America, and Asia are merely one indication of the global rise of Islamophobia and its enduring prevalence. The news is filled with stories from liberal democracies to authoritarian governments of Muslim minorities facing various forms of persecution and repression. While the particular formulations of hatred and fear vary—whether, say, in China, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, the United States, or France—collectively they tap into a larger global discourse that characterizes Islam as radically other and Muslims as wholly inadmissible.[2]

Numerous forces have contributed to this state of affairs. Some of them are wrapped up in the legacy of colonialism or the authority of secular reason, while still others are tied to the diverse manners in which minorities are managed within the boundaries of nation-states. Yet each of these diverse expressions of animus is shaped in some fashion by the rhetoric of facing the terror posed by Islamic extremism. In the push and pull of majoritarian identity politics, what constitutes Islam and its varieties has itself become an ever-shifting battlefield of definitions.

Knowledge of Islam takes on distinct shapes in the numerous contexts in which it is generated and circulated. Academia plays a significant role in defining, challenging, and reinforcing these epistemic formations. For North America and Europe, the academic study of Islam has a notoriously complicated history. Throughout the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth, the field often served as a mouthpiece for racism and xenophobia.

Philologists and historians once filled departments of Oriental studies, which long served as the primary location for the academic study of Islam. Almost all of them were men.[3] And while the majority were Christians of some variety, there were also several important Jewish scholars. A good number were deeply sympathetic to their object of inquiry, even as they articulated admiration in the clumsy terms of power over a foreign and curious other. Here and there, particularly among those who had actually spent some time in the East, there were expressions of ambivalence toward

the imperial and colonial forces that dominated Muslims. Yet, above all, exotic stereotypes and rank condescension served as the hallmarks of authority, signaling mastery over an intractable subject.

TERMS OF ART

The field focused largely on the so-called Golden Age of Islamic history. Celebrated as a period of heightened power and intellectual effervescence, this age of mighty caliphs was usually bookended by two invasions—the Arab conquests of the seventh century, on one side, and the Mongol destruction of Baghdad in 1258, on the other. The study of Islam often followed three stages of development moving through the formative, classical, and postclassical periods. Both nostalgia and contempt gave a mooring to this periodization. On the whole, everything after the Mongol conquests represented an age of decadence and stagnation, and thus not worthy of full attention, or interesting only for its diagnostic value when assaying the roots of Islamic decline.[4]

This particular historical framework advanced modernity as not part of Islamic history proper. Conversion to the modern required, as it were, an entire reordering, if not rejection, of all things Islamic. As an ideological conceit, the modern served as a vehicle to school the world in the technical and moral supremacy of the West. In this regard, the discursive horizons of Orientalism were coterminous with a secularism that had emerged from particular forces within Western Christianity.[5]

To be sure, Edward Said was not the first to critique the colossal power of Orientalism. Many others before him expressed deep misgivings toward the often hostile and polemical motivations guiding Western scholarship on Islam.[6] Yet, Said's role in calling out the ideological underpinnings of scholarly production cannot be overstated for the current constitution of the field. Not only has our vocabulary on Islam changed but so, too, have our disciplinary, geographical, and temporal boundaries.[7]

The model of decline, if not the terminology of a classical age, has been largely rejected. The centuries after the Mongol conquests, it turns out, continued to be quite dynamic across a host of societies and areas of activity. The conceptual parameters of the field have also drawn on and questioned the language of the premodern as a heuristic device for tracking historical developments, as there have emerged sophisticated discussions of the competing or alternative modernities that evolved alongside and in dialogue with the rise of European hegemony.[8] Yet, as with all secondary categories of analysis and periods for dividing up history, there remain discernable limits to the terms of art that we use, some of them quite obvious, others rather discrete.

DISCIPLINE AND MASTERY

Today the study of Islam extends through numerous disciplines, including anthropology, art history, literature, history, political science, religion, and sociology. Scholars of Islam no longer focus solely on the distant past of Arabia or on law, scripture, and theology. While these areas still retain considerable prestige, entire new fields have opened up as the study of Islam has expanded in broad global terms across Asia, Africa, and Europe to the shores of the Americas. The continued rise of area studies has further compartmentalized the study of Islam into regional clusters, often with explicit geopolitical aims and aspirations. This shifting terrain also extends to the distinct theoretical prisms and methodological frameworks guiding inquiry, with significant engagements in gender studies, ethics, social theory, and political thought.[9]

One of the most notable changes for the field of Islamic studies as a whole lies not just in its expansion across diverse disciplinary horizons. The very composition of the scholarly class has come to include increasing numbers of Muslims, women, and people of color who have challenged the intellectual and ideological legacies of the field.[10] In this regard, it is worth noting, nonetheless, that the structures undergirding Orientalism—in Said's sense of a discursive pattern of epistemic control—have by no measures collapsed. Orientalism's influence can still be felt in academia, the media, and the broader political enterprise of assaying and containing Islam through the vast intersections of state power, surveillance, and the ongoing wars against "Islamic terrorism"—a phrase often used in such broad terms to appear to be indistinguishable from Islam itself.

Today any frank discussion of Islamic studies thus must address, in some fashion, the current historical conditions governing the production of knowledge about Islam. In addition to the basic problems of knowledge formation, we also face moral ones: what does it mean to study Islam within the privileged frameworks of the academy and to do so in a public climate marked by deep suspicion of Islam as radically foreign and unassimilated?

Much of what we know about Islamic history has been shaped by categories and modes of analysis that developed in the academic study of religion during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Importantly, these discursive processes are implicated in both the colonial production of knowledge and the diverse means by which various Muslim reformists set about reconstituting Islamic history. The problem of how we know what we know about Islam is thus also related to the interpretive challenges of thinking with distinct and often contradictory vocabularies for seeing and inhabiting the world.

These dialogical structures also have had broad implications for the articulation of Islamic normativity. Perhaps most notable is the abiding emphasis on law as constituting the authentic core of Islam and, with it, the thorough textualization of religious authority—an ailment suffered historically both by Orientalists and Muslim reformists alike.[11] Similarly, no less significant is the identification of mysticism as a separate and thus fundamentally nonnormative sphere of Islamic religious activity. Numerous other examples of such confluences abound, where Muslim reformists absorbed, repurposed, and subverted Orientalist and missionary scholarship on Islam. These ruptures extend from the person of the Prophet Muhammad and the nature of the miraculous status of the Quran to such abstract ideals as equality, justice, and liberation.

Similar observations can be made about the very category of Islam, which, at least in the Western context, emerges as a relatively modern coinage. *Muhammadan* and its various derivatives had long been the preferred term to refer to both Muslims and their religion. As a category, Muhammadan served to advance a polemical comparison between Muhammad and Christ. In contrast, so new was the word *Islam* that early Orientalists repeatedly had to explain to their readers that the term was the name that Muslims used to refer to their faith.[12] While there certainly was ample reason for the simple corrective from the "Muhammadan religion" to "Islam," the shift also resulted in a significant reconstitution of what exactly Islam was and who was able to define it.

Defining Islam, it turns out, is no simple task. This is a question raised by Shahab Ahmed (2016) in his posthumous monograph, *What Is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic.* His work is perhaps the most exhaustive attempt in the field to take on the now common wisdom that our categories of analysis are entirely the products of nineteenth-century taxonomies that sought to carve out religion as a distinct and universal field of human experience. In dialectical fashion, this carving out of religion also served as the basis for creating a secular sphere from which objective reason could operate and be universalized. In the comparative impulse guiding the academic study of religion, Islam came to play a notable role, largely as a foil to liberal secularism.[13]

It is this very oppositional logic that leads to a vision of Islam as entirely unassimilable to the values of a liberal society. Ahmed's work is important not so much in its originality but for its rigorous engagement with the conceptual limitations that govern our categories of analysis. Indeed, a good deal of the terrain had already been covered by several others. This is seen notably in Talal Asad's (1986) view of Islam as a discursive tradition, an argument that Ahmed largely leaves intact, though

with minor variations (Ahmed 2016, 246–97; cf. Anjum 2007; Grewal 2016). Similarly, Aziz al-Azmeh (1993) took on elements of the problem in his short monograph *Islams and Modernities,* published in the wake of the Rushdie affair. Unlike what Ahmed attempts to achieve through recourse to hermeneutics, al-Azmeh is not particularly concerned with defining Islam or with developing methods for conceptualizing its "coherent contradictions." He is entirely content observing the competing forces that govern the production of authority and authenticity.

As for Islam and modernity, al-Azmeh puts the two plurals of his title to the service of a devastating critique aimed at the essentialism and the vitalist discourses of the Enlightenment and of Romantic nationalism, with their accompanying fixations on teleologies of progress and civilization. Al-Azmeh is not interested in defending the ontology of multiple "Islams" per se; he is rather more concerned with documenting the vast potential of the term. And in this way, he dispenses with a full anatomy of Islam as a category, in all its salient forms that, he argues, are acquired "in the folds of the social imaginary" through "a polarized system of binary classification in which 'the West' is taken as a normative metalanguage from which are generated, by negation, the tokens that together constitute the properties of 'Islam'" (24). This criticism turns to the retrievable repertoire of what constitutes Islam, for whom and by whom, a repertoire as immense as it is recursive (cf. Ahmed 2016, 131).

As with all such transhistoric formations in discourse, Islam is contested as it is refashioned, from within and from without, a point that Ahmed demonstrates in encyclopedic detail. Invariably, from this ocean of potential signifiers, only a limited number of elements need to be reclaimed "to betoken Islamicity," as al-Azmeh puts it. The same holds true with modernity and its periodization of history into developmental stages of progress, as well as the spatial categorization of Islam as pertaining to an entire world or some distant land.[14]

WHAT IS IN A NAME

Guiding these ideological divisions is a persistent refrain: "Islam and the West." The very ease of the phrase demands an unassimilated, radical other; it also advances in its unstated syntax the status of modernity as chiefly a Western prerogative, in both form and content. The pairing is a logical fallacy—a false analogy in categorical terms, opposing a religion to a region. Yet the oppositional and stubbornly territorial framework endures, for it builds on a ready-made grammar of unexamined assumptions and foregone conclusions.[15]

In the face of the singular superiority of liberal secularism, Islam signifies an entire civilizational complex that, in its very illiberal essence, opposes the ideals of secular progress. The categorical solecism of the pairing demands that we consent to the implied premise, namely, the incommensurability of the terms. The power, after all, that gives modernity, in such configurations, its reiterative capacity is precisely in its origins as the sole propriety of the West. It is for this reason that when we accept the unstated logic that governs the categories and their meaning, the project of modernizing Islam is always bound to fail as a contradiction in terms—that is, how can something that is in its essence opposed to the ideals of modernity become truly modern?

Modernity's global scale occasioned new ways of seeing the world in universalized typologies of knowledge, reflected notably in such salient oppositional frameworks as progress, reason, secularism, civilization, science, religion, magic, mysticism, and fundamentalism. Just as all large-scale group formations necessitate conceptual endeavors of ideology, our categories of analysis are products of the imagination; they are found not in being but in language—not ends or discrete points but fields of contestation. Yet, like legislative power or the boundaries of nation-states, the imaginary quality of these categories by no means limits their actual power to control, shape, and condition the world.

All of this suggests that we ought to focus our attention on the means by which Islam is constituted and contested. Thus the "importance of being Islamic" in Ahmed's subtitle points to Islam as a complex discursive formation situated in history, which is continually in a state of regeneration and contestation. In such a light, what makes something distinctively Islamic is ultimately a matter of both the repertoire and the concrete contexts for performing and interpreting it.[16]

To this end, the tokens of Islamicity, of normativity and orthodoxy, are very much a question of what one generation values sufficiently from the previous to preserve for the next. But memory has its jagged edge, torn along by countless acts of effacement and willful erasure that transform the past into foreign and unrecognizable territory. Western scholarship on Islam is profoundly implicated in these dialogical structures and in all the ruptures that have ensued. Approaching beliefs and practices as discursive formations that are conveyed and imagined within specific historical, geographical, and ideological contexts goes some way toward narrowing the gap, by showing that Muslims have been and continue to be active agents of humanity and not just subjects of history, stuck in time. Questioning our categories of analysis and their historical parameters is certainly one step in this process. Attending to the complexity inherent

in these innumerable sites of translation is itself a means of subverting the essentializing discourses that reduce Muslims into grotesque caricatures. Such attention may also occasion a deeper understanding of the heterogeneous vocabularies of Islamic authority across time and place and the human agents who speak in its name.

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NOTES

1. Examples are legion. See, for instance, Lewis (2002, 2003) and Ferguson (2011), who follow distinct ends but converging conclusions. This also extends to Islam as a historiographical problem in Becker (1910), discussed in Fück (1962), Van Ess (1980), and Batunsky (1981). On the broader consequences of these discourses, see Bayoumi (2008) and Uddin (2019).

2. For an overview on a global scale, see Morgan and Poynting (2012). For further legal and social implications, see Razack (2008), Shryock (2010), and Ernst (2013). On networks of propaganda, see Wajahat Ali et al. (2011). For more on the racialization of Muslims, see Love (2017).

3. For critiques of the gendered politics that still shape the field, see Kecia Ali (2013, 2019).

4. See, for instance, the argument that the purported moral failings of Islamic law were the ultimate cause of the retrograde state of scientific knowledge among Muslims in the nineteenth century in Huff (2003). On the raw essentialism that often characterizes these discussions in the history of science, see Dallal (2010, 18–20, 151–57) and Brentjes (2012). For overviews of and rebuttals to the decline narrative in Ottoman studies, see Kafadar (1997–98) and Sajdi (2007). More broadly for the field of Islamic studies, see von Hees (2017).

5. For more on these historical processes, see Viswanathan (1998), Anidjar (2006), and Yelle (2013, 3–5).

6. On assessments of Orientalism and of the polemical study of Islam prior to Said (1978), see, for instance, Schwab (1950), Daniel (1960), Abdel-Malek (1963), Tibawi (1963), Waardenburg (1963), and Rodinson (1974).

7. For a range of responses, including efforts to address areas not covered by Said, see, for instance, Gandhi (1998, 64–80), King (1999), Varisco

(2007), App (2010), Marchand (2009), Pouillon and Vatin (2014), and Hallaq (2018). For debates and reflections on the constitution of Islamic studies in the wake of *Orientalism,* see Kerr (1980), Martin (1985), Nanji (1997), Wheeler (2003), and Ernst and Martin (2010).

8. For examples of interconnected modernities, see Elshakry (2013), Barak (2013), Ogle (2015), El Shakry (2017), and Doostdar (2018).

9. For developments in the field of anthropology, see, e.g., Asad (1993, 2003), Mahmood (2005, 2016), Hirschkind (2006), and Grewal (2013). For more on expanding areas of focus and methods, see Gillette (2000), Curtis (2002), Jackson (2009), GhaneaBassiri (2010), Mittermaier (2011), Ware (2014), Kane (2016), Ngom (2016), and Petersen (2017). For recent studies on gender, see El-Rouayheb (2005), Najmabadi (2005), Kecia Ali (2006), Ze'evi (2006), Massad (2007), Kugle (2010, 2013), Shaikh (2012), Chaudhry (2013), Bauer (2015), and Ayubi (2019).

10. For an early testament to these shifts, see Safi (2003). For anxieties concerning emic/etic distinctions and scholarly impartiality, see Hughes (2012a, 2012b) and McCutcheon (2017); compare Tite (2014) and Hammer (2016). For a further critique of the field of Islamic law taking on related problems, see Chaudhry (2018; cf. Siddiqui 2020; El Shamsy 2020).

11. For the colonial construction of Islamic law, see Kugle (2001), Hallaq (2002–3), and Giunchi (2010). For further context, see Ahmed (2016, 113–75).

12. See the etymological definition given in the early Quran translation by Sale (1734, 70, note a). This still needed to be explained in Scott (1800, 358, note n), where "Islaum" is glossed as "the mussulmaun religion."

13. On the colonial underpinnings to early liberalism, see Mantena (2010) and Lowe (2015). For the construction of Islam as an antithesis to liberal freedom, see Massad (2015) and Devji and Kazmi (2017).

14. For the construction of the Muslim world as a geopolitical category, see Aydin (2017). For the diverse ways in which Islam is conceptualized in spatial terms, see Grewal (2013, 31–78).

15. On the sense of grammar used here, see Asad (2003, 17, 25n9; cf. 161–80).

16. These hermeneutical processes are elaborated in Ahmed (2016, 405–541). For further on Ahmed, see Griffel (2017, 7–17). The metaphor of language is taken up in Reinhart (2020, 8–10, 91–123). The question is thus not so much how intelligible or recognizable these scripts for colloquial, dialect, *koiné,* and standard Islam, as Reinhart terms them, are across time or place but rather how they are voiced and to what ends they are deployed.

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