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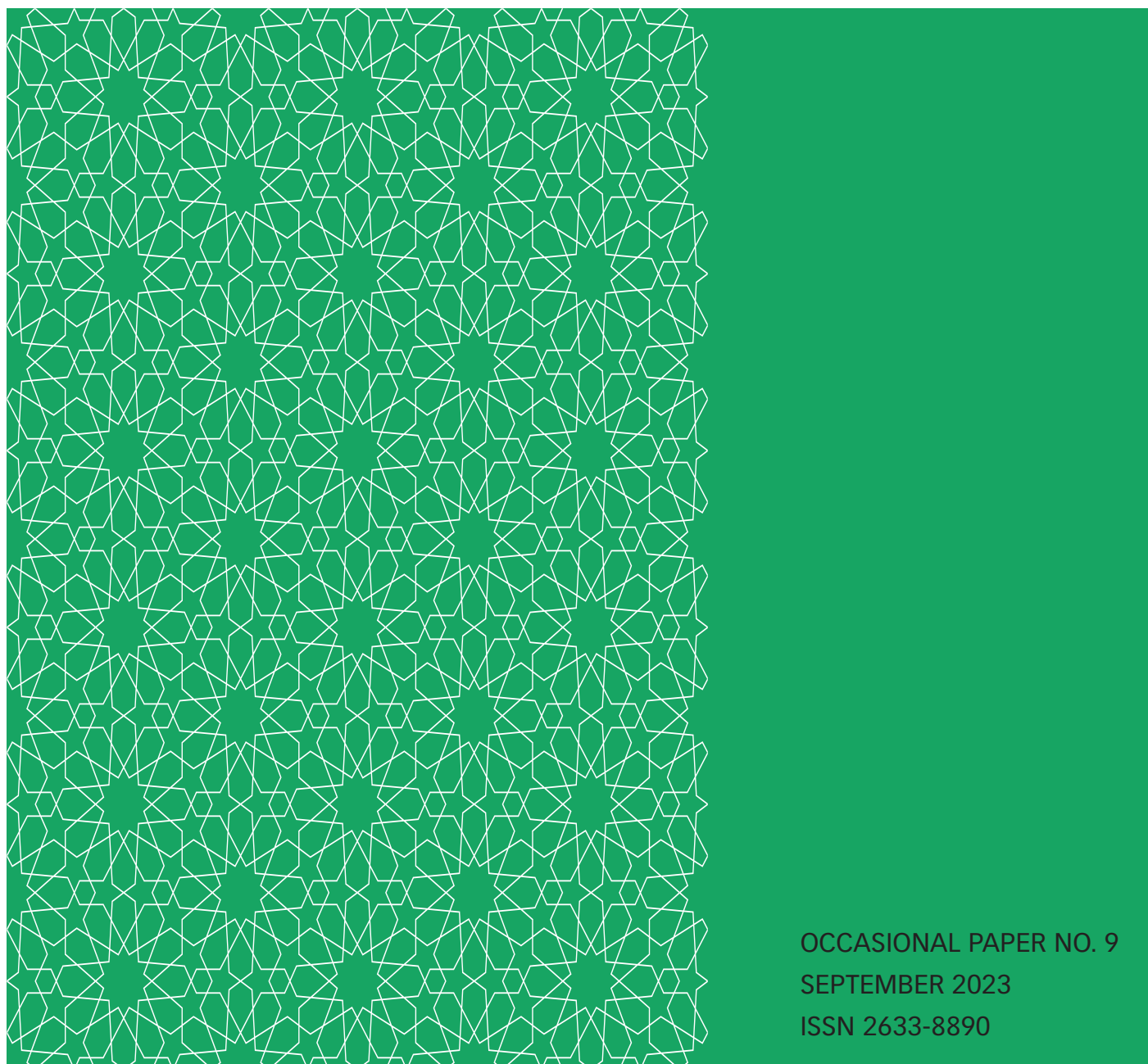
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From Both Sides Now

Reflections on Recent Methodological Trends
in the Study of Islam

Aaron W. Hughes



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Abstract

From Both Sides Now: Reflections on Recent
Methodological Trends in the Study of Islam

Aaron W. Hughes

What follows provides a set of critical reflections on the place and role of ‘theory and method’ within the context of the study of Islam, especially (but not solely) as carried out in the field of religious studies, over the course of roughly the last twenty years. While I have been critical in the past of many of these trends, the present essay offers a more inclusive and positive assessment, one derived from looking at the field, as the title suggests, ‘from both sides now’. The goal here is not to criticise, but instead to come at this issue of ‘theory and method’ in the study of Islam from a more mature perspective, a perspective to which it has taken me a rather long time to arrive. Despite the length of the journey, or indeed because of it, it is safe to say that we witness a diverse set of attempts to imagine ‘Islam’, not as a theological category that must be defended, but as something embedded in and indistinct from the manifold cultures in which Muslims find themselves.

Keywords: Islam; theory; method; religious studies; lived Islam; gender; history; decolonialism; Orientalism

I like to think that I have been at the forefront of several conversations surrounding the place and role of ‘theory and method’, a rather vague concept to be sure, within the academic study of Islam. Much of this was critical of what I considered to be a too apologetical reading of Islam that the historical record neither did nor could support, something that often coincided with the avoidance of connecting Islamic data to some of the major trends in the *critical* study of religion, and a concern about the rhetoric used when it comes to what constitutes (or does not constitute) an ‘authentic’ Muslim expression or practice. This concern began as early as my very first week on the job as a young assistant professor of religious studies that just happened to coincide with the events of September 11, 2001. Few days or events, I would submit, have been more transformative for the study of religion in general and that of Islam in particular. How, framed most succinctly, does one engage in such study after a horrific act, one committed in the name of religion no less? It would seem safe to say that the field of religious studies has been struggling massively with this over the course of the past twenty some years and is only now, roughly a generation later, coming to terms with what transpired on that day. Yet, if the study of religion has had to deal with 9/11 from the larger and more general perspective of religion, those of us engaged in the study of Islam have had an even more difficult time, often called upon to function as both defenders and cheerleaders (or, framed alternatively, as ‘caretakers’ and ‘insiders’). It has not been easy, but recent trends in scholarship point the way to a very interesting and rich future.

Here, it might be worth noting that, while 9/11 was certainly a turning point globally for the study of religion, much of what I shall here discuss and the debates to which I refer are primarily centred in North America. Although some of these discussions and debates may well have proved to be influential beyond that context, I am also aware – and, indeed, have written as much on these other contexts – that they tended to play out somewhat differently in other parts of the world.¹ Much of what follows, then, primarily reflects a North American perspective and highlights how the field’s discussion about Islam has changed in that context.

Before proceeding to that future, however, it is worth reflecting a little more on the past, since it still looms large in our collective imagination. The events of 9/11 jarringly exposed to the full light of day the *perceived* problematic nature of Islam and Muslims,

1 Hughes 2021a: 11-32.

something that had been simmering just below the Euro-West's consciousness for decades (if not centuries). Very few knew anything about Islam prior to this date, but everyone soon claimed knowledge of this religion and subsequently entered the public domain as so-called pundits. I do not know how many times I heard complete incompetency from those who styled themselves as so-called experts. No one saw the events of 9/11 coming, but, in retrospect, we all saw it coming. It was a strange turn of events, to be sure. One from which the study of Islam has never fully recovered.

I need to clarify, however, or at least narrow down, two key subjects that appear in my subtitle: 'methodological trends' (aka, 'theory and method') and 'the study of Islam'.

By 'methodological trends', I refer rather simply and perhaps basically, but to be expanded upon in greater detail below, to the idea that we ought to be aware that our terms, categories and the scholarly narratives they construct – our entire conceptual toolbox, in other words – all come from somewhere. None of these are natural markers that we have blindly stumbled upon and that allow us to present the world objectively or from some Archimedean point. Our interpretive strategies construct certain narratives, we would do well to remember, just as they marginalise others. As a result, we need to be cognisant of whence these terms, categories and scholarly narratives emerged, including when, where, why and how.² As I shall make clearer shortly, and this is where the 'from both sides now' of my title comes into play, there are a plethora of methodological approaches used to study Islam that include the sociological, the ethnographic, the political, the historical and so on. My goal here is not to say which is better and which more problematic; rather I simply draw attention to this diversity as a mark of the field's more general health.

With 'the study of Islam' I refer to the study of this religion as it specifically takes places within the larger field known as religious studies.³ I am, of course, also well aware that the study of Islam, with its deep Orientalist pedigree, is even older than the modern field of religious studies, and that it has a lengthy and veritable history that stretches back at least to, if not before, the publication, in 1698, of the Latin Qur'an by Ludovico Marracci (1612–1700). The history of Orientalism has been told many times before and, though that field

² For my attempts to do this, see the two monographs I co-wrote with Russell T. McCutcheon: *Religion in 50 Words: A Critical Vocabulary* (Hughes and McCutcheon 2022a); *Religion in 50 More Words: A Redescriptive Vocabulary* (Hughes and McCutcheon 2022b).

³ I have no intention of wading into arguments about the first principles or even utility of this larger field. Russell McCutcheon and I have also edited a book that, among other things, provided a platform in which a group of senior international scholars reflected on the field and its status: *What Is Religion?: Debating the Academic Study of Religion* (Hughes and McCutcheon 2021b). I refer the interested reader to that volume to get a sense of where the field is, at least at the time of this writing (2023).

of study will certainly make appearances in what follows, I have no intention of retelling it here.⁴ In like manner, I am well aware that ‘Islam’, howsoever we calibrate that term, can be, has been and will continue to be – as just noted – studied within the disciplinary confines of history, sociology, political science, anthropology, economics and comparative literature, among others. Again, though, for the sake of convenience I primarily (but not solely) limit my scope here to the various ways that Islam is studied within the field of religious studies.

To return to the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001, it seems safe to say – at least in hindsight – that those uncertain days changed everything for those of us either working in or, like myself, just about to enter the field of Islamic studies. Virtually overnight, we went from scholars of often obscure events, figures and texts in epochs much different from our own to spokespeople for an entire religion, one comprising billions of practitioners and one spanning all continents of the globe. ‘Why did *they* do this?’ many asked us, or ‘Why do they hate *us* so much?’ News outlets, the public, campus administrators and even our own students all wanted simple answers to questions that had long and often highly convoluted genealogies.

What surprised me more than anything, and this provides the subtext to so many of my subsequent interventions, was the study of Islam’s collective response to 9/11 (and, of course, as they would be to all those momentous days that would follow in its wake, such as the 7/7 London bombings in 2005 or the November 2015 Paris attacks). That response tended to pivot on two key points: 1) that ‘real’ Muslims could not possibly have been responsible for such events; and that 2) Islam was a ‘religion of peace’ (the root of Islam, and I do not know how many times I heard this, is *s-l-m*, the same root in *salām* or ‘peace’). While, on the one hand, I could not have agreed more (Islam, after all, wasn’t and isn’t more [or less] prone to violence than any other tradition, and the majority of the world’s Muslims are peaceful), on the other, I was surprised that we had missed an opportunity for a nuanced discussion of religion as a social (and political) construct. Missing in so many analyses in those days was the fact that some individuals or groups could code their malfeasance using religious discourses and do so, moreover, in a manner that made

4 The classic work, of course, is Said 1978; more recently, see Hallaq 2018. Also useful, and certainly more historically informed, is Marchand 2009. For an attempt to salvage some aspects of Orientalism, see Daneshgar 2020b, which offers a response to a set of critical reflections on his *Studying the Qurān in the Muslim Academy* (Daneshgar, 2020a).

themselves out to be the only ‘real’ Muslims.⁵ Instead of appreciating the rhetoric of authenticity, many scholars actively and willingly entered that rhetorical arena and insisted that they knew better than anyone concerning the ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ nature of Islam and who was (or was not) a veritable Muslim.

Perhaps because I was teaching at a large Canadian university as opposed, say, to a small American liberal arts college, and given that I was, perhaps more than many of my colleagues in the study of Islam, heavily invested in the critical study of religion, I resisted this narrative. I used that resistance to mount a critique of the theological and ecumenical underpinnings of the larger field of religious studies using the subfield of Islam as my prism. I was perhaps not as nuanced as I could have been, with some of my criticisms occasionally becoming personal, something that in retrospect I regret.⁶ I did, however, manage to get my point across and, for better or worse, became associated with ‘theory and method’ in the study of Islam. Despite criticisms of some of my interventions, I submit that the latter had to be made and I like to think that they left a mark on the field. Even those critical of my work were forced to engage with it in responding to it.⁷

I do not want what follows to function as an *apologia pro vita sua*, however. Far from it. Rather, the goal of this essay is to come at this issue of ‘theory and method’ in the study of Islam anew and from a more mature perspective than I had in those years immediately following the events of 9/11. Allow me, then, to state my major premise forthrightly: There are many ways to study Islam, as there should and must be, and when I speak of the necessity of ‘theory and method’ in what follows, I now realise that this term should admit of greater valence than I perhaps gave it in the past. While such inclusivity should be obvi-

5 Indeed, and perhaps telling, one of the first to engage in this sort of activity was Bruce Lincoln, a scholar of religion, but not of Islam. See his impressive *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After 9/11* (Lincoln 2003).

6 Indeed, at least as far as I know, one book and two special issues of journals were devoted to my criticisms. For the book, see *Identity, Politics and the Study of Islam: Current Dilemmas in the Study of Islam*, edited by Matt Sheedy (Sheedy 2018). For special issues of journals, see *JAAR (Journal of the American Academy of Religion)* 2016 and *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (2012). I should note that while the latter journal asked me to respond, the former did not. And whereas the *JAAR* articles were meant to be largely critical of my work (which is, as far as I am concerned, positive), the Sheedy book attempted to provide a much wider context to a dispute between my colleague, Omid Safi, and myself over the use of theory in Islamic studies. To quote from Sheedy’s introduction:

It should be stressed, however, that the point of this collection of essays is not to choose sides in this “dispute,” but to attempt to situate the ideas and concerns that it raises and place them within a broader framework of theoretical, methodological, and political debates within the subfield of Islamic studies, and in the broader study of religions. (4-5)

7 I think for example of one of the most sustained critiques that is found in Stewart 2018.

ous enough, I am not certain that I was as charitable in some of my earlier work as I could have been.

To this end, I offer up the present piece some twenty years later from a position whereupon I can reflect upon the study of Islam, to use the words of the great Canadian singer Joni Mitchell, ‘from both sides now’. From then and now. It has been a long and circuitous journey, to be sure, one from which I have learned a great deal, and one that has forced me to change my mind on some things, become more entrenched in others, and – I think most importantly – to realise that the study of Islam only benefits from a wide array of methodological approaches and certainly not just what we might call ‘critical’ ones. There can be no question that I am not the person now that I was then, and I would like to hope that my approach might be considered somewhat more broad-minded now than it was in the past. I have no intention, nor do I really think I ever did, of functioning as some sort of gatekeeper. And the more I have travelled through the field and the more interlocutors I have engaged, the more I have learned. And then some. I, thus, offer the present set of reflections to all my colleagues – those who disagreed and agreed with me – to say ‘well done’ and let’s proceed creatively in our collective endeavors.

Within this context, I certainly have no intention of saying there is a correct way to study or research Islam or an incorrect way. My goal, instead, is much more limited: to examine some of the recent trends in the study of Islam, to trace how we got from there to here, and where – given this trajectory – we might be headed in our collective subfield. It is a future, from where I stand, that has much promise. And the goal of this is to point out that promise so that others will hopefully capitalise upon it.

The Importance of Theory and Method

Before I start discussing recent trends in the study of Islam, it might be worthwhile defining what precisely I mean by ‘theory and method’, showing more specifically how and why these activities are so important for what we do. I have written a good deal on the importance of ‘theory and method’ in the academic study of religion,⁸ and, more specifically, in the study of Islam.⁹ I have no intention of wading into the contents of those studies in

⁸ See, once again, my two co-written monographs with Russell T. McCutcheon (Hughes and McCutcheon 2022 a & b).

⁹ E.g., my *Situating Islam: The Past and Future of an Academic Discipline* (Hughes 2007); *Theorizing Islam: Disciplinary Deconstruction and Reconstruction* (Hughes 2012); and *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity: An Inquiry into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self-Deception* (Hughes 2015).

the present context and refer the interested reader to them. The goal here, to reiterate, is to provide an assessment – or reassessment, as the case might be – of some of my earlier works. What I will say, however, is that, for me, ‘theory and method’ defines or, perhaps better, codes into our work a critical posture – and by ‘critical’ I mean a multitude of approaches – that denotes a certain sensitivity and self-reflexivity when it comes to what we do.¹⁰ This is, perhaps, another way of saying that the world does not self-categorise for us; rather, *we* supply categories to make sense of it. Self-reflexivity necessitates reflection upon the questions we ask, how they have been asked (and answered) in the past and the uses to which such answers have been and continue to be put. And, perhaps in retrospect, I think that many of us are aware of this, perhaps more than I traditionally gave credit to, even if we do not make it explicit in our work.

We saw a momentary, if fleeting, glimpse of attunement to some of these issues in Shahab Ahmed’s wonderful, but unfortunately posthumous, *What Is Islam?*¹¹ Therein, he sought to break with tradition by stating that, for him, ‘a valid concept of “Islam” must denote and connote all possible ‘Islams’ whether abstract or ‘real’, mental or social.¹² Here, he suggestively, I would say even playfully, makes the point that our traditional understanding of Islam is but the tip of a much larger conceptual iceberg.¹³ We would do well, he reminds us, to reorient ourselves to all that we thought we knew about Islam, including both its beliefs and practices. Or, as he states in the conclusion to his work, ‘this book has sought to locate the logic of difference and contradiction as coherent with and internal to Islam – that is, to provide a coherent account of contradiction in and as Islam.’¹⁴

The field certainly took notice. The book’s publication was immediately followed by numerous workshops and online symposia devoted to the work. ‘This dense book exerts an irresistible attraction’, remarked Michael E. Pregill at the time, ‘and alters the intellectual

10 I should perhaps say something about the material conditions behind my change of heart. In November of 2021, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I delivered a keynote address via Zoom entitled ‘Crisis? What Crisis?: The Study of Religion is Always in Crisis’ to the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR). I tried to do what I have always done: theorise an issue in a critical manner, in this case the very nature of ‘crisis’. Many in the virtual audience were upset that I would ‘make light’ of their suffering (e.g., life under a Trump presidency, daycare issues) during a pandemic, with the implied understanding that they were the only ones who were suffering. I was surprised, to say the least. It dawned on me, then and there, that my audience, all of whom claimed to be theoretically sophisticated, could only go so far and then they had to make it about themselves personally. As a result, I began to evaluate my own relationship to critical method, becoming more expansive in the process.

11 Ahmed 2015.

12 Ibid: 104.

13 See the helpful comments in Pregill 2017.

14 Ahmed 2015: 542.

trajectory of those drawn into its orbit.¹⁵ This initial very positive assessment, however, unfortunately proved to be short-lived and I would argue, though I hope I am wrong, that it ultimately flew off our collective radar just as quickly as it entered. I am not quite sure why that happened. Perhaps many were initially attracted to the newfound theoretical sophistication, but then were worried what the result of such theoretical interventions might entail? Academics, after all (and for good reason), are a notoriously conservative lot. Here, at long last, was a Muslim scholar of Islam who brought theoretical concerns to the table and could now be used as a sort of code for many that they were interested in ‘theory and method’.¹⁶ A more charitable reading, and, I am certainly willing to grant this, might be that we collectively internalised Ahmed’s impressive work and that many, following his footsteps, have begun to use relevant cognate fields to illumine and be illumined by Islamic data. Indeed, in what follows I am going to assume the latter and try to show just where the study of Islam is in the aftermath of the publication of Shahab’s work.

To do this, and for the sake of convenience, I subdivide what follows into the following rubrics: Gender; Lived Islam; Presentism; Late Antiquity (i.e., historical) studies; and Decoloniality. These rubrics provide me with the space to look at recent work in the study of Islam, showing important discussions being carried out across the length and breadth of the subfield and, in the process, to note several avenues for future research moving forward.

Gender Studies

I recently attended a theological-philosophical workshop on the concept of *tawhid* (monotheism) in Islam. Scholars, all male, debated the merits of the usual proofs for God’s existence (e.g., ontological, cosmological), whereupon a (male) scholar, assuming I was Jewish¹⁷ said in front of the audience that my paper contributed nothing to the theme of the workshop and then he subsequently informed (albeit, this time in private) a Catholic priest who was also presenting that his religion was based on ‘lies and superstition’.¹⁸ The

15 Pregill 2017: 149.

16 Perhaps not unlike the same manner that the trope of ‘J.Z. Smith’ is used in the larger field of religious studies.

17 The subject of my paper was on ‘the Jew’, which I argued functioned as a convenient textual trope in early Islamic literature to establish the outer limits of orthodoxy. Presumably because I was presenting on Judaism (in the context of Islam), he assumed, post hoc ergo propter hoc, that I must be Jewish.

18 This came after another participant had said in the Q&A period that the Qur’an was a superior book to the Bible because it, unlike the Old and New Testaments, had not been tampered with!

following day a female scholar, wearing a hijab, gave a lecture, also on the subject of monotheism, explaining how Islam had much to learn from other religions, including Indigenous traditions of North America. It was a fascinating paper not only because it was not based on ‘scientific’ or philosophical arguments for God’s existence and was not interested in engaging in mediaeval-like disputations that elevated one religion by critiquing others, but was instead concerned about justice and inclusion in a world that is at constant odds with itself. It also made me starkly aware, perhaps more than I have ever been, of the importance of gender and gendered interpretation in the study of Islam and religion more generally.

Among other things, an attunement to gender permits us to analyse the position of women – including the construction of gender, class, race, sexuality and disability – in society. We should not forget that, throughout much of the history of scholarship, men were not only the ones doing much of the research, but also the ones on whom much of the research was carried out. Historically, we know a lot about men and their interests, including the way they think with women and women’s bodies, but not a great deal about the active and daily lives of women.¹⁹ A critical analysis of gender, as seen in the early pioneering works of Judith Butler,²⁰ for example, provides an important example of the more recent trend in the humanities that sees identity as a constantly negotiable and shifting attribute as opposed to a static and inner quality simply projected outward and into the world.

This trend has increasingly made its way into the study of Islam, and has led to the questioning of everything from the construction of sex/gender as an identity marker in the tradition to undermining the centrality of male leadership in various Muslim communities in the past, in the present and moving into the future. Increasingly we see how Muslims, and especially male elites, take full advantage of gender-stereotyping to assign and regulate their members’ roles, sexualities and spheres of influence. This shows us clearly, returning to the issue of method, that religion is not some privileged, ahistorical essence that is somehow set apart from surrounding cultures but, instead, is but one more element within it.

¹⁹ As Kecia Ali shows this is not just a problem of research, but is even as fundamental as the secondary sources scholars use. See Ali 2019.

²⁰ Butler 1990 and Butler 1993.

When it comes to the study of Islam, we witness numerous approaches to issues of gender and women, most of which, for the sake of convenience, can be bifurcated into two groups: historical and constructive. The former seeks to read gender and women into areas that have traditionally been overshadowed by an overwhelming interest in male elites. Recent studies in this regard build upon the pioneering work of an earlier generation of scholars such as Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite*²¹ and Leila Ahmad's *Women and Gender in Islam*.²² Both of their titles, however, reveal the very thin line between the 'historical' and 'constructive' in the sense that most historical treatments of gender understandably have an interest in and are informed by often modern concerns. More historical works include Marion Katz's recent *Wives and Work*,²³ which provides a discussion of how Sunni legal scholars of the ninth to the fourteenth centuries CE debated whether wives had the legal duty to do housework, an activity that seemed to conflict with what most scholars understood to be morally and religiously incumbent on women. In the ninth century, she argues, women did not have such a legal duty, but that subsequent Sunni scholars sought to change this, thereby shedding new light on the interplay between legal and ethical doctrines in Islamic thought.

Juxtaposed against Katz's historical narrative we could place Julianne Hammer's important and constructive *Peaceful Families*,²⁴ which examines domestic violence amongst contemporary American Muslims, and which attempts to provide *concrete* suggestions on how to overcome such violence using the rich tools supplied by the Islamic tradition. Like Katz's work, her more contemporary concerns revolve around similar issues of family, gender and marriage. But, for her, there is a more constructive desire to confront the intolerance and Islamophobia that American Muslims must face on an almost daily basis and how this not infrequently exacerbates issues of domestic violence – the latter being an issue that pervades American society regardless of the religious tradition. Unlike other Americans, however, Muslim anti-domestic violence workers combine methods learned from the mainstream secular anti-domestic violence movement but combine it with uniquely Muslim perspectives and interpretations. Hammer's approach is not just scholarly, then, but also practical as she seeks to provide an important resource for those

21 Mernissi 1987.

22 Ahmad 1992.

23 Katz 2022.

24 Hammer 2019.

actively involved in working with Muslim communities to eradicate issues of gender-based (and, of course, other forms of) violence.

Combining the two approaches are works such as Ayesha S. Chaudhry's *Domestic Violence and the Islamic Tradition*.²⁵ Therein she shows how one verse from the Qur'an, the problematic 4:34 ('Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God's guarding. And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches and beat them. If they then obey you, look not for any way against them; God is All-high, All-great') has received diverse and divergent interpretations via various Islamic traditions. Such interpretations, she argues, are often contingent upon the prior ideological orientation of the interpreter. A conservative interpreter, for example, will tend to interpret the verse literally and in such a manner that encourages husbands to beat disobedient wives; a more liberal interpreter will interpret the same verse, but in a non-violent manner. Such contradictory readings, she argues, show the importance of the reader, something that leaves the original text of the Qur'an up to interpretation. The divine text of Islam, in other words, is not responsible for violence, domestic or otherwise, but human readings of the text are. Here, we see her attempt to redeem the Qur'an, which, for her, exists outside of history, with various historically contingent interpretative paradigms. It is a delicate move, to be sure, and I leave it to others to ascertain if it is successful.

Activism has come to play a large role in the study of Islam, as indeed it has in the study of religion more generally. While I was critical of this approach earlier in my career – afraid, I think, that activism might lead to the avoidance of asking critical questions – I now realise that this literature does indeed ask critical questions. But it just doesn't ask them in the traditional sense or ask them in the ways that I had previously defined them. Rather, the target is not so much nudging the scholarly status quo as it is dismantling the traditional male perspective that is assumed to be normative because the (male-constructed) narrative tells us that it is. Feminist scholarship in Islam, thus, seeks a fundamental and much-needed reorientation of the traditional structures of power, one that, to return us to the anecdote with which I began this section, is sorely needed.

Another feminist approach to, and ultimately critique of, the tradition comes from what I like to call more presentist studies. This involves the tendency to interpret past events in terms of modern values and concepts.²⁶ We see this in attempts, for example, to read cer-

²⁵ Chaudry 2013.

²⁶ In a controversial opinion piece, the president of The American Historical Association argued against

tain modern virtues – feminism, for example, or liberalism or homosexuality – onto the time of Muhammad. Again, my goal in this venue is not to critique, but to present recent trends. Examples that I have used in the past include Tariq Ramadan’s *In the Footsteps of the Prophet*²⁷ and Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle’s *Homosexuality in Islam*.²⁸ I only note in hindsight that works like Kugle’s represent important interventions in helping young Muslims, and others, to think about important issues they confront in their daily lives. Nor must all work on Islamic sexualities and gender involve women. Within this context another important intervention is Amanullah de Sonty’s *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities*.²⁹

Lived Islam

Islam is the second largest religion in the world. Currently there exist close to two and a half billion Muslims scattered across every continent and in nearly every country on the planet. These staggering numbers inevitably beg the following question: Do they all believe and – even more importantly – practice their religion in the same manner? I think we could all safely agree that they do not. While we might well say, rather problematically, that all these Muslims subscribe to the so-called five pillars and the six articles of faith,³⁰ as so many introductory textbooks claim, this tells but part of a much larger and far more complex story.

My grandfather, to cite one very concrete and personal example, was a Twelver Shi`i from what is today South Lebanon and who, as a young man, made his way to the Canadian arctic where he became a fur-trader, with neither a fellow Muslim nor Arab in sight. When he moved to Edmonton, Alberta he and several other Muslims (both Sunni and Shi`i) (whom he had met there subsequently) built Canada’s first mosque, *al-masjid al-rashid* (aka Al Rashid), in 1938.³¹ What did Islam mean to them? I am certain that the way they thought about Islam, if they even did so beyond trying to maintain a sense of local community amidst a largely Christian and white majority, was surely different from how

the practice. See Sweet 2022. For a philosophical (though, note, not a historical) defense of the practice, see Markosian 2004.

27 Ramadan 2009.

28 Kugle 2010 and see also Kugle 2013.

29 de Sonty 2013.

30 Even this, however, is a misnomer. Twelver Shi`a, for example, combine certain prayers so that many only pray three times a day.

31 On the history of this mosque, see Waugh 2018.

Muslims conceptualised Islam in, say, Saudi Arabia at the same period or even how most Muslims do in Edmonton (and, of course, in other places) now.

When we reduce Islam to convenient formulae, in other words, we treat it as if it were a monotheistic monolith. Such reductions, while perhaps making the majoritarian *ulama* or more conservative religious elites happy, overlook the incredible regional, national and local variations within Islam. Some might argue that all these variations represent different manifestations but share the same essence. Others might take an anti-essentialist position and argue that there is not some Platonic form of Islam that all variants tap into. Yet, others might maintain that these variations are so distinct as to represent distinct – radically distinct – Muslim traditions.

Perhaps the easiest, accessible and most recent way to deal with such regional and local variations – at least from the perspective of academic study – has been to invoke the term ‘lived Islam’.³² According to A. Kevin Reinhart:

Anyone who has traveled in Islamdom has noticed differences of emphasis and practice, in belief and conduct among Muslims of different locales – as well as of different classes and sexes....The Muslim differences so prominent in travel literature or ethnography mostly disappear from textbooks and *scholarly studies of Islam* [my italics], however. It is in fact *Muslims* who disappear, to be replaced by some ideal construct, ‘the Muslim’. Such idealism may have a place, but there also ought to be a place in a general study of Islam for *real* Muslims and their particular religious lives.³³

‘Lived Islam’ is a term that derives its meaning from ‘lived religion’, a rather new sub-field that has developed in the larger context of the study of religion over the course of the last decades of the twentieth century. It does, however, have much earlier roots in the French tradition of ‘la religion vécue’, as associated with, among others, the work of the French sociologist Gabriel Le Bras (1891–1970) on regional Catholicism in France.³⁴ In the words of David D. Hall, who has done much to examine the idea of ‘lived religion’ especially in the context of American religion, the concept is ‘rooted less in sociology than in cultural and ethnographical approaches to the study of religion and American religious

32 For a recent and very good articulation of this concept, see Reinhart 2020.

33 Ibid: 6.

34 E.g., Le Bras 1976.

history that have come to the fore in recent years.³⁵ The term, at least in the context of religious studies, is often interchangeable with others such as ‘material religion’, ‘popular religion’, or ‘religion on the ground’.

For many, employing the method of ‘lived religions’ offers a corrective to what is generally regarded as a traditional over-emphasis on the interpretation of texts and a preoccupation with studying (mainly male) elites. Emphasis instead is now placed on how religion was and is experienced and thus often largely overlooked by scholarship in everyday settings. An examination of ‘lived religion’ leads scholars to draw on a set of sources outside those traditionally used by, say, historians or Orientalists (i.e., textualists), given that those studied are often absent from archives. Scholars interested in studying lived experience and, by extension, lived religion, often engage in fieldwork that allows them to try to understand what it is like to inhabit a specific subjective position that had traditionally been left unstudied and therefore remained unknown and silent. Though there have been attempts to get at ‘lived religion’ in earlier times.³⁶

This, of course, is not to say that the study of ‘lived Islam’ is a completely new phenomenon, even if the name is. Early iterations of this approach, though it was not called by this term, included the late Clifford Geertz’s idea that culture is comprised of the everyday meanings people find to make sense of their lives and guide their actions, and that it is the goal of scholarship to attempt to engage those meanings, something that he did (and did very well) through ethnographic study. The term that he used to describe this understanding was ‘thick description’. In his *Islam Observed*, for example, he examines the practice of Islam in two different, often radically different societies: Indonesia and Morocco.³⁷ These two societies, he argues, produced two different conceptualisations of Islam, each one of which drew upon local cultures that had, at least initially, very little to do with Islam, but that ultimately became instrumental to local definitions of the religion. Geertz’s work was picked up in that of his students, perhaps the best-known being Laurence Rosen. In his *The Anthropology of Justice*, Rosen argues that rather than imagine Islamic law, as is so often the case, as a jurisprudential tradition wherein professional elites (e.g., lawyers) define and, in the process, maintain social relations and cultural concepts, we should instead see legal systems, like all social systems more generally, as grounded in

35 Hall 1997: vii.

36 E.g., Gasparini et al 2020; Rask 2023; Lewis 2021; Toivo and Katalaja-Peltomaa 2017; Katalaja-Peltomaa 2020.

37 Geertz 1971.

concepts and relationships encountered in everyday social life. To tease this out, Rosen examines Islamic law courts in Morocco, showing how the organisation of judicial structure is reliant upon local concepts and personnel and not simply lawyers.

If the fieldwork of Geertz and his students represents the ‘first generation’ of those working in ‘lived Islam’, though of course they would not have called it this, the second generation focused on, what we might call, more Islamic themes. We see this, for example, in Anna Gade’s fascinating study of Qur’anic recitation instruction and performance in Indonesia³⁸ to Robert Rozehnal’s examination of the intersection of ritual, identity and politics among the Chishti Sufi order in Pakistan.³⁹

So popular has the study of ‘lived Islam’ become that, in a recent intervention into issues of ‘theory and method’ in the field of Islamic studies,⁴⁰ Abbas Aghdassi, an Iranian colleague, and myself ended up devoting over half of a volume to the topic. Magdalena Pycińska’s chapter in that book, ‘Everyday Islam’,⁴¹ for example, begins with a premise that we see in the work of Robert Orsi,⁴² namely, that we should first focus on our informant’s understanding of his or her relations with God and the saints. Such understanding, she further argues, provide insights into specific intersections of social and individual categories that might not otherwise be apparent, such as issues of race, gender, class and age. Likewise, in her ‘Moving from a Madrasa Situation to the Process of Doctrinal Development’, Zahraa McDonald focuses on Islamic education at Warda Madrasa in Johannesburg and shows how it inculcates in students certain expressions of citizenship.⁴³

More recent trends in what we might call ‘lived Islam’ take place at the crossroads of Islam and popular music. In his *The Awakening of Islamic Pop Music*, for example, Jonas Otterbeck is not so much interested in showing how Islamic themes come out in popular music so much as how this music actively shapes contemporary interpretations of Islam.⁴⁴ This is important as it shows how something as broad and generic as ‘Islam’ is actively shaped by culture as opposed to vice versa. In this, he joins with other recent studies exploring topics that were hardly imaginable prior to 2001 including Lara Deeb and Mona

38 Gade 2004.

39 Rozehnal 2007.

40 Aghdassi and Hughes 2023.

41 Pycińska 2023.

42 See, in particular, Orsi 2006.

43 McDonald 2023.

44 Otterbeck 2021.

Harb's *Leisurely Islam*,⁴⁵ Su`ad Abdul Khabeer's *Muslim Cool*,⁴⁶ Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir's *Representing Islam*⁴⁷ and Faegheh Shirazi's *Brand Islam*.⁴⁸ Within this context of 'lived Islam', I might also point to interesting work being done in the context of Islam and sport, especially football (what Americans and Canadians call 'soccer'), such as the work by Carl Rommel⁴⁹ and Leif Stenberg.⁵⁰

The study of 'lived Islam', as we can see, now plays a very large role – one might even say commanding role – in Islamic studies, moving the centre of gravity from texts to bodies and from texts composed by male elites to more popular expressions. This is certainly for the good, though I would hesitate to add that this cannot, nor should not, come at the expense of textual study. Indeed, the study of Islam, as I have said, only benefits from a multitude of methodological and theoretical approaches.

One aspect of 'lived Islam' that concerns me, however, is that rather strange subfield that is currently emerging and that goes by the name of 'auto-ethnography'. The latter approach, from what I can tell, uses self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal experience and, in the process, attempts to connect this autobiographical narrative to wider cultural, political and social meanings and understanding. While I certainly get that 'self-reflection' is one of the hallmarks of critical scholarship – why have I chosen this, for example, and not that? – auto-ethnography would seem to put the 'ego' or the self at the forefront of one's analysis. And that is what I object to: it makes research about the whims of the scholar at the expense of the analysis. In their 'Lived Institutions in the Study of Islam', for example, Brian Arly Jacobsen, Kirstine Sinclair, Niels Valdemar Vinding and Pernille Friis Jensen examine the dynamics of power, significance and influence inside and around mosques in Denmark given recent debates in that country regarding the role and place of Islam. Taking these mosques to be 'lived institutions', they show how difficult it is for (non-Muslim) researchers – that is, themselves – to access mosques. The study, then, becomes primarily about them and their access (or lack thereof) to mosques.

45 Deeb and Harb 2014.

46 Khabeer 2016.

47 Nasir 2020.

48 Shirazi 2016.

49 Rommel 2021.

50 Stenberg and Hughes 2024 (forthcoming).

Historical Studies

The study of ‘lived Islam’ has certainly changed the way manifold Islams or Islamic cultures have been studied in certain parts of academia, especially as carried out in the field of religious studies and to a lesser extent anthropology. I would, however, be remiss if I did not also mention some recent important work in the more traditional, textual and historical parts of the field. Perhaps not coincidentally none of this work takes place in the context of the study of religion but tends to be done by those working in cognate fields like History or Near Eastern Studies. Also worth noting is that many of these works derive genealogically from Orientalism in the sense that they often use a more critical hermeneutic, do not take traditional sources at face value, and, in so doing, frequently undermine the narratives that Muslims tell themselves. Despite such similarities with Orientalism, which is largely out of favour among those in religious studies, it is certainly worth noting that the studies mentioned below are much less likely to be led into imaginative flights of fancy or make civilisational reifications involving the West’s superiority and Islam’s inferiority as their nineteenth- and twentieth-century counterparts.

Some of the most interesting of this work takes place in the context of early Islam – a period whose sources are notoriously difficult to ascertain given the paucity of authentically early sources and the number of later sources that masquerade as earlier ones. In particular there has been a reassessment of the relationship between early Islam and the Late Antique period. Though earlier generations of Orientalists regarded Islam as symbolizing the end of this period, most scholars working in the field today see Islam as its natural extension, absorbing or redirecting certain Late Antique themes and operating assumptions.⁵¹ This, of course, has the added intention of showing how Islam is an intimate part of Western civilisation rather than in opposition to it or used as a strawman to articulate ‘Western’ values.

Much of this creative historical work draws its inspiration from the revisionist school associated with the late John Wansbrough,⁵² including his students such as the late Patricia Crone.⁵³ Not content to take the earliest Islamic sources as historically accurate, these scholars developed all sorts of creative models to account for Islam’s emergence, many diametrically opposed to what these early sources (including the Qur’an) say about the

51 See, for example, Wood 2022.

52 E.g., Wansbrough 1977 and 1978.

53 E.g., Crone and Cook 1977.

events in question. Needless to say, their work met with considerable criticism and is still seen by many as problematic. Despite such criticisms, however, they have successfully situated the emergence of Islam within the broader religious context of the late ancient Near East. If some of the work of Wansbrough or the early Crone was highly suggestive,⁵⁴ recent trends have been more historically grounded – though they are still met with criticism especially in circles associated with religious studies. Most significantly and productively, such work investigates Islam’s emergence using the same historical-critical methods used to study early Judaism and early Christianity as opposed to simply taking the earliest sources at face value.

We see this clearly in Sean W. Anthony’s *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith*.⁵⁵ Not content with simply reading later Islamic sources as eyewitness accounts, he engages in critical readings of *both* non-Muslim and Muslim sources together to see what they tell us about the historical Muhammad and his message. To do this, he places these sources against the broader backdrop of the intellectual, social and cultural worlds of the Late Antique period.⁵⁶ This opens up potentially endless and exciting possibilities. In particular, he examines non-Muslim texts (e.g., *Doctrina Iacobi*, *Ps-Sebeos*), in addition to extensive discussions of relevant Arabic epigraphic, papyrological and numismatic evidence that discuss either Muhammad or the *hijra* to Mecca. Indeed, it is the latter sources (e.g., numismatics, papyrology, epigraphy) that promises much in our understanding of pre-Islam and its relationship to Islam in the Arabian Peninsula and beyond.⁵⁷

Marrying ‘lived Islam’ and the historical record is Jack Tannous’s impressive *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*. His work is premised on a simple, yet all important question: ‘[h]ow did the Middle East go from being the birthplace of Christianity and eventually a largely Christian region, to being one where Christianity was a minority religion, if it had any presence at all?’⁵⁸ To answer this question, Tannous shifts his focus from elite texts and the theologians who produced them, to what he calls, ‘the simple believer’. Such believers, in their Christian guise, would not have been mini-theologians interested

54 Indeed, in their Preface, Crone and Cook write, ‘This is a book written by infidels for infidels, and it is based on what from any Muslim perspective must appear an inordinate regard for the testimony of infidel sources. Our account is not merely unacceptable; it is also one which any Muslim whose faith is as a grain of mustard seed should find no difficulty in rejecting’ (Crone and Cook 1977: viii).

55 Anthony 2020.

56 Important precursors to this approach include Robert G. Hoyland’s *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Hoyland 1997).

57 See, e.g., Al-Jallad 2022; van Putten 2022.

58 Tannous 2018: xiii.

in post-Chalcedonian conversations about Christology and other rarefied metaphysical topics, and instead would have been focused on far more mundane and quotidian concerns (e.g., sustenance for themselves and their families). Membership in churches, for example, would most likely have been based less on precise doctrinal understanding and more on 'loyalty to a local holy man or bishop whose sanctity and judgement about such matters was held in reverence and trust.'⁵⁹ Indeed, Tannous warns us against assuming that even members of the clergy were necessarily theologically literate; instead of a simple clerical-laity binary, he posits a 'layering of knowledge', wherein there existed 'a spectrum or continuum of engagement with and understanding of religious ideas and doctrines, and we should not assume that theological illiteracy meant an absence of theological curiosity.'⁶⁰

Within this context, it becomes quite clear that most Muslims were largely descended from non-Muslim converts, and what would go on to become normative Islam was largely a set of responses to deal with non-Muslim minorities in their midst.⁶¹ The Islam that these former Christians converted to was not the sophisticated and fully-worked-out Islam of, say, 9th century Baghdad; rather, it was a slogan or set of slogans that would have included very little detailed knowledge of Muhammad's message; most likely, he concludes, such new Muslims 'paid scant heed to its implications for how they lived their lives.'⁶²

In his *The Apocalypse of Empire*, Stephen Shoemaker likewise places Muhammad and his movement squarely within the well-attested Late Antique tradition of 'imperial expansion and triumph, which expected the culmination of history to arrive through the universal dominion of a world empire.'⁶³ This idea of imperial apocalypticism meant that worldly empires were believed to play both an active and a positive role in bringing about the end of times. To place Islam within this context, Shoemaker marshals a set of texts that often exist outside of the purview of traditional Islamic studies: Syriac Alexander legends, Jewish and Zoroastrian apocalypses, in addition to oft-ignored Muslim eschatological treatises. Such an approach, Shoemaker argues, explains why Muhammad and his followers would 'spill blood to establish their dominion over a world that they believed was soon to pass away.'⁶⁴

59 Ibid: 43.

60 Ibid: 357.

61 I deal with some of these issues in my own *An Anxious Inheritance: Religious Minorities and the Shaping of Sunnī Orthodoxy* (Hughes 2022c). And also see the still magnificent study in Richard W. Bulliet's *Islam: The View from the Edge* (Bulliet 1995).

62 Tannous 2018: 261.

63 Shoemaker 2018: 3.

64 Ibid: 132

Using such sources as his guide, Shoemaker argues that the Muhammadan movement would have been driven by an eschatological urgency to liberate Jerusalem and the Holy Land from infidel occupation. The centre of the early Muslim vision was not Mecca, he argues, but the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the locus of much Late Antique eschatological speculation. To show this, Shoemaker argues that the early Muslim armies shared the same imperial apocalyptic vision as previous empires in the Ancient Near East. Despite this, he argues that ‘the later Islamic tradition chose not to remember Muhammad as an apocalyptic prophet but instead as a great teacher of ethical monotheism and social justice, and as a ruthlessly successful military leader.’⁶⁵ To get at these earlier traditions, Shoemaker argues that it is necessary to, among other things, ‘read the Qur’an against, rather than with, the traditional narratives of Islamic origins.’⁶⁶

Where there is history in Islamic studies inevitably there is philology. Perhaps no more recent trend in the academic study of Islam, as in the humanities more generally, is digital humanities. This term denotes new ways of engaging in traditional scholarship in a manner that involves collaborative, transdisciplinary and computationally engaged research. One such example of this in the study of Islam is the Knowledge, Information, Technology and the Arabic Book (KITAB) project based at the Aga Khan University’s Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (AKU-ISMC) in London.⁶⁷ Lead investigator Sarah Bowen Savant describes the project as opening up ‘one of the world’s largest and most complex textual traditions’, by, among other things, detecting how authors copied from previous works, discovering relationships between diverse sets of texts and their larger cultural contexts, and understanding the ‘profoundly intertextual circulatory systems’ in which they sit. As a collaboration between computer scientists and scholars of medieval Arabic texts, KITAB is developing continuing digital methods and datasets for enquiry into Arabic book history (700-1500 CE) and the cultural memory associated with it, and to make it accessible to researchers from the comfort of their own offices. In this, it is connected to other projects that are also seeking to expand our understanding of Islamic and Islamicate textual traditions, such as The Open Islamicate Texts Initiative Arabic-Script OCR Catalyst Project⁶⁸ and The Invisible East.⁶⁹

65 Ibid: 124.

66 Ibid: 125.

67 <http://kitab-project.org>.

68 <https://openiti.org/projects/OpenITI%20AACP%20Phase%20One.html>.

69 <https://invisibleeast.web.ox.ac.uk/home>.

Decoloniality

In direct response to the perceived excesses of Orientalism – and, of course, the colonialism and Eurocentrism that both informed and was informed by it – recent years have seen calls to ‘decolonise’ the study of Islam. In this, it is certainly related to all those attempts since the 1970s to open various canons to include more women, black and other historically marginalised groups. In many ways I think we can even see this call as a direct response to some of the studies examined in the previous section. I have been thinking quite a lot over the past few years about calls to decolonise – and I think part of this sympathy emerges out of my own work on Indigenous Canadians and their absence from important constitutional changes in the 1970s and 1980s (which are currently, and thankfully, beginning to change).⁷⁰ The Euro-West, after all, has tended to privilege its own epistemologies over those of others, and the West has decided that whereas the former (i.e., its own) is universally binding, the latter is imagined as particularistic and thus of limited utility. There are certainly other ways of knowing and classifying the world, all of which are neither better nor worse than those systems developed in the so-called West.

At the same time, and this is the proverbial other hand, the Western university – our major site of knowledge production, mobilisation and dissemination – is predicated on certain (for the most part) and agreed-upon systems of rationality. While I doubt we would ever attempt to decolonise mathematics, for example, or medicine, the situation becomes somewhat different when it comes to the social sciences and the humanities. A canon, whether of literature or of philosophers, for example, that includes only white men, Europeans, or Christians is increasingly problematic and out of sync with the multicultural and multiethnic worlds so many of us inhabit. As a direct result of this we encounter calls to diversify (canons, curricula, etc.) and include those traditionally excluded. A reading list in the history of philosophy, for example, ought to include not just Western philosophers – which from Late Antiquity until the 18th century were, after all, Christian philosophers/theologians – but also Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu philosophers/theologians.

While this is one step in decoloniality, for its proponents it is but a baby step and they seek to go even further. All of this, of course, gets very complicated when we bring the study of religion into the picture. If the academic study of religion is predicated, as we are

⁷⁰ Hughes 2023: 153-176 and Hughes forthcoming.

so often told, on ‘objectivity’ and ‘scientific foundations’, which differs from theology, how then do we decolonise its study without simply reintroducing (someone else’s) theology back into the picture?⁷¹

I certainly understand that a ‘decolonial’ approach is an attempt to undo the logic of colonialism, something that, for many, is often associated with the Enlightenment project. The paradox, of course, is that the call to undermine this project takes place at the very heart of the Enlightenment’s epicentre, to wit, the modern university.⁷² In so doing, however, those wanting to decolonise must ultimately translate other epistemologies into those of modern Western academia. Decolonial approaches, in this respect, seek to go deeper than simply expanding canons or curricula and, in the process, seek to replace the very logic that structures Western civilisation, including its systems of knowledge production, with a set of critical Indigenous methodologies. We see this, for example, in Joseph Lombard’s provocative call as found in his ‘Decolonizing Qur’anic Studies’. Therein, he is certainly correct to note that ‘the extensive research in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Indonesian and other languages is rarely cited in work written in European languages.’⁷³ The result is that Western approaches to the Qur’an, and Islam more generally, are imagined as superior to these other traditions. He further explains that:

Within this structure of Qur’anic Studies in the Euro-American academy, one is still required to subscribe to a universal epistemological hierarchy in which secular Eurocentric approaches to the text are given pride of place. Such privileging ensures that indigenous Muslim approaches to the text are relegated to the status of ‘information supply’. They are seen as efficacious when they serve the purposes of, and can be incorporated into, a Euro-American epistemological hierarchy, but in and of themselves they are not permitted to generate alternative epistemic discourses, much less call into question the ideological foundations of Euro-American scholars who selectively draw vittles from their larder.⁷⁴

71 Russell McCutcheon and I raise some of these issues in our ‘Indigeneity’ section (Hughes and McCutcheon 2022a: 136-141).

72 Nye 2019.

73 Lombard 2022.

74 Ibid. This theme is also stated by Sajjad Rizvi, who writes, ‘to put it rather starkly, the naïve native could not be trusted when it came to accounting for the historical formation of the tradition, or the linguistic frameworks needed to decipher it, or even the hermeneutical skill required to make sense of scripture.’ See Rizvi 2021: 124.

Lumbard here calls our attention to the fact that there are other ways of classifying the world around us. And he is certainly correct to do so. Since my goal here is neither to critique nor dismiss, I only point out that there is an inevitable tension between critical and Indigenous methodologies, one that needs to be worked out, especially as far as the academic study of religion is concerned. Basic questions include who gets to define the meaning of terms like ‘critical’? And, perhaps just as importantly, who is allowed to critique using such methodologies? In like manner, who is silenced in the process? There is an implicit danger that a decolonial approach to the study of religion might become – this, of course, is not to say that it has to – little more than a description using a set of Indigenous categories that are reserved only for practitioners. This may well be just the other side of the coin where ‘other’ local traditions are now understood in terms of Western (and thus themselves local) categories that are assumed to be universal in both nature and scope.

Perhaps the most radical attempt at decolonisation may be found in Wael Hallaq’s *Restating Orientalism*. Therein, he makes, for me, the unsupported claim that premodern Islam did not undergo the fact/value split that the Enlightenment created in the West. For this reason, he argues, Islam emphasises ethics – through the *sharia* – over all spheres of life, not the least of which are those of politics and economics. The Enlightenment’s refusal to keep the fact/value relationship intact dislodged the supremacy of ethics and with the result that it directly resulted in colonialism, genocide and secularism. It is a bold argument, to be sure. He also argues that contemporary scholarship has a role to play in this and that the goal of what we as scholars (especially in the humanities) do is not to explain or understand Islam to the secular West, but to critique modern forms of knowledge in ethically Islamic terms, something that would contribute to the larger need to redeem the world from genocidal and environmental destruction, both of which for him, are the hallmarks of the West. The reification here, of course, is as problematic as that of traditional Orientalism.

It is difficult to know if reverting to Indigenous terms and categories is the answer, especially if done so in a manner that is largely untranslatable using the categories of modern academia. We cannot, in other words, have separate ‘academies’ – madrasas, for example, or yeshivas – housed within Western academia (which would presumably then function as yet another academy within some larger consortium of higher learning) that are unable to relate or connect to one another. Or, if such were the case, it becomes little

more than an inter-faith dialogue. My one worry, however, is that a decolonial approach to the study of Islam (or any other non-Western tradition) might mean that only those who are part of the tradition can have a voice. There is also the risk that the boundary between the academic study of Islam and Islamic perspectives on a particular topic might blur so that one does not know where the one begins and the other ends. I will conclude this section, however, by saying that I am very curious how this will play out in the future and imagine that much of interest will come out of this project moving forward, if done in a thoughtful manner.

Conclusions

As should be clear from the trends surveyed here, much interesting work is being done within the context of the study of Islam. Some of these build on traditional historical analyses of Late Antique and medieval texts, but many are moving us into uncharted territory, much of which was unknown to us twenty short years ago. I certainly make no claim to being exhaustive here. My goal, instead, has been much simpler: to give the reader – whether in Islamic studies, religious studies, or ‘theory and method’ in the study of religion – a sense of how far the study of Islam has come since the events of September, 11 2001. As someone who has spent the past twenty-five years engaged in the overlap between these three fields or subfields, I have truly looked at them ‘from both sides now’.

I began this study arguing that the events of 9/11 had a major impact on the academic study of Islam, at least within the context of the Western academia. Would the richness and diversity surveyed above have happened without those events? It is certainly impossible to tell. However, what is possible to state is that many scholars in the post-9/11 world, and especially over the past ten years or so, have gone far beyond apologising for Islam in theological terms. What we witness is diverse attempts to imagine ‘Islam’, not as a theological category that must be defended, but as something embedded in and indistinct from the manifold cultures in which Muslims find themselves.

I began this paper reflecting on my own place within the academic study of Islam. I would like to return there briefly and document where and how I now see myself fitting into the field. I like to think that I have helped to nudge certain conversations along and, though not nearly as cynical or perhaps as sardonic as in the past, I am much more open to new methodologies regardless of their source. Decoloniality, the creation of alternative

epistemologies, attention to issues of gender and sexuality – whether in the past or in the present – have much to contribute to our collective endeavors. Within this context I would like to think I raised and made a few small contributions to our discussions on ‘theory and method’.

The future of Islamic studies is exciting, indeed.

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