

Redeeming Islam: Constructing the Good Muslim Subject in the Contemporary Study of Religion

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Abstract

This paper provides a perspective and analysis of the notion of ‘redeeming Islam’ - Islam as the subject of attempts by others to save it. The paper challenges the contemporary scholarship undertaken in the academy in respect of the Study of Islam whereby such scholarship operates within a context that endorses the agenda of Empire, particularly in regard to the construction of the ‘good Muslim’ who is consistent with contemporary notions of human rights, pluralism, non-violence and Western modes of thought and being. The ‘bad Muslim’ is one who does not endorse or support this project. The consequence of this type of scholarship is that it is uncritical and unaware of the context in which it operates as well as the historico-political legacy of Muslim societies in relation to colonialism and Western violence. In addition, it ignores the pertinent questions of poverty, sustainable development, and the voices of the marginalised – important questions for much of the Muslim and Two Third World – while concentrating on questions that are framed by a Northern context.

Keywords: redeeming Islam, Empire, ‘good Muslim’, Western modes of thought and being, historico-political legacy of Muslim societies

A customer is the most important visitor on our premises. He is not dependent on us; we are dependent on him. He is not

an interruption in our work; he is the purpose of it. He is not an intrusion in our business; he is a part of it. We are not doing him a favour by serving him; he is giving us an opportunity to do so ('MK (Mahatma) Gandhi')¹.

Islam is peace (George W Bush)².

Introduction

This paper primarily provides a perspective and analysis on the notion of 'redeeming Islam' or Islam as the subject of attempts by others to save it. The title is a slightly mocking play on the irony of religion which is usually itself in the business of offering redemption. 'Constructing the Good Muslim' suggests a) that this 'Good Muslim' is manufactured by an external agency, b) that there is a project to distinguish between a 'Good Muslim' and a 'Bad Muslim' which may be related to the philological meaning of the word '*muslim*' (Arabic for 'someone who submits') but not in the manner in which Muslims have 'traditionally' understood it, in, for example, the distinction between a pious (*salih*) Muslim on the one hand and a sinful (*fasiq* or *fajir*) one on the other, and c) that this Muslim is an object of enquiry. The borrowing of the term from Mahmood Mamdani's *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (2004) further suggests two things: first, that this Muslim is the subject of a larger 'civilizational' project located within an hegemonic project; and second, he or she is a subject in the sense that subjects of monarchs exercise their rights at the pleasure of the monarch rather than as citizens of a republic.

After some introductory overview remarks about the current context

¹ I saw this quote - which did not originate from Gandhi - on a poster at a pharmacy in Accra, Ghana in November, 2006. It is a good example of how prophetic figures are routinely appropriated for causes entirely unrelated to the ones for which they lived and died.

² <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010917-11.html>. (Accessed 27 July 2012).

of the Study of Islam in the academy and some of the major issues around its development and place in relation to the Study of Religion, two major factors which contributed to a significant irenic tendency in the field will be looked at. Following the work of Richard Martin and Carl Ernst (2010), I will argue that the publication of Edward Said's book, *Orientalism* in 1978 and some of the more spectacular revolts against the West by Muslim actors (primarily the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the September 11th 2001 attacks in the United States of America) impacted significantly on Islamicists - both in terms of how they viewed their primary obligations in the academy and the content of much of their work. I concur with the view that these events contributed immensely to the growth of irenic scholarship which saw Islamicists increasingly getting into the trenches to help save the Muslims and their image as they were coming under attack from different quarters, primarily Western governments and armies and the mass media in these countries³.

This defensive engagement of many contemporary Islamicists raises significant questions about fidelity to the post-Enlightenment foundations of critical scholarship. More than simply being an irenic approach to Islam that does not take these foundations seriously or assisting Muslims to redeem the image of Islam, I argue that such scholarship often plays a significantly accommodationist role⁴ in co-creating compliant Muslim subjects in a larger

³ See for example the following statement by Ron Greaves in his *Aspects of Islam*: 'After a decade of close contact with Muslims in Britain and elsewhere in the Muslim world I find myself horrified by the opening of a Pandora's box whose contents are over-simplification, overwhelming ignorance, and blatant racism directed at a religious community; This is combined with a fear of the 'other', which at the beginning of the twenty first century, it is to be hoped that any thinking member of the human race would view with great distrust and suspicion, especially as we are all familiar with the historic consequence of the anti-Semitism that so blighted the twentieth century' (2005:1).

⁴ The term 'accommodationist theology' has been used in various senses (cf. Green 2004; Hendrickson 2006). It is used here to describe the attempts to present Islam in a form acceptable to dominant powers by removing elements that are found offensive by the shifting needs of those powers.

hegemonic project⁵. I critique the idea of essentialist approaches to both Islam and these foundations and argue that the focus should shift from epistemology to hermeneutics to take cognisance of the ideological dynamics at play in the construction and representation of Muslims as reliable subjects and of Islam as an empire-friendly faith. Finally, I argue for an engaged scholarship attentive to the radical inequality between the partners to the conversation and conscious of the political, cultural and economic conditions that shape the terms of the dialogue.

An Overview of Contexts and Issues in the Study of Islam and the Academy

First, the academic study of religion remains a largely Western endeavor although far greater numbers of Muslims, (relatively few of them in Muslim majority countries) are emerging as leading figures in the discipline. More specifically it is increasingly a US-centric field. For example, a major question that academic or trade publishers consider before proceeding with a particular manuscript on Islam is ‘How well will it do in the States?’ Priority is provided to what may be described as ‘Northern questions’ (e.g. ‘Tell us about Islam and reconciliation?’) with an attitude of ‘irrelevance’ or disinterestedness in Southern questions (e.g. ‘Does Islam have anything to say about pandemics, poverty/ impoverisation, or death by starvation?’). Notwithstanding this, ‘contemporary’ - as in the ‘Contemporary Study of Religion’ title of this paper - is largely confined to observations of the academy in North America and in recent introductory works to Islam published there or geared towards that audience. This is due in large part because the work done in this regard in North America is increasingly shaping Muslim self-understanding across the globe.

Second, there has been significant increase in interest and literature

⁵ An example of such accommodationist theology is supporting theological justification for jihad as armed insurrection in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation (1967-1989) and then offering alternative non-violent interpretations of jihad when the dominant power becomes one with which you identify.

on Islam and the Muslim world in the last thirty years both at a public and an academic level. This is evident in bookstores, openings and offerings at universities, journals and members of professorial societies etc⁶. However, as Carl Ernst and Richard Martin point out, ‘while Islamic studies as a field has been powerfully affected by political events, debates within the academy have had a longer and more pervasive role in shaping ... this area of inquiry.’ (2010:1). (Cf. Martin, Empey, Arkoun & Rippin 2010).

Third, Islamic Studies (*dirasah al-Islamiyyah*) – notwithstanding the claims of the faithful to ahistoricity or the divine origins of that ‘other occupation’ of the same name, ‘Islamic Studies’ (*islamiyyat*) in the *madrasah* (Islamic seminaries), may make – has a relatively recent history. Like several of its siblings in other fields and/or disciplines in the humanities, it is still undergoing a struggle to be ‘not-a-step-child’. For now, much of this struggle⁷ takes place within departments of Religious Studies, a discipline itself not entirely beyond suspicion, both from its internal ‘others’, such as the Church and the managers of the sacred, and its external others such as sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists. At a deeper level

⁶ Ernst and Martin note that as ‘recently as the last decades of the twentieth century ... interest in, and room for, curriculum on Islam and Muslims could be found in barely one-tenth of the approximately 1200 academic departments of Religious Studies in North America ... and it was not so long ago that Islam did not even have a primary presence in the major professional society for faculty of religion, the American Academy of Religion’ (2010:1).

⁷ The idea of the hierarchy of knowledge is that the basic fields of the sciences and mathematics can be organised from its least specialised and most derivative manifestation to its purest form. In relation to Islam the lowest level in the hierarchy of knowledge would probably be the *slamseskool*, followed by the local *madrassa* or *maktab* (the equivalent of Sunday School for Christians), the *dar al-`ulum* (seminary or yeshiva), then the faculties or departments of *ilahiyyaat* (divinity) or Divinity School and finally Religious or Religion Studies located in departments in non-confessional or secular institutions where it forms part of a humanities cluster. Then the pecking order continues in the academy in roughly the following chain: Sociology < Psychology < Biology < Math < Chemistry < Physics.

though, this quest is also connected to the academic impulse for greater specialisation and deepening commitment to post-Enlightenment scientific rationality – which remains the uncritiqued *raison d'être* of the modern university and the intellectual foundations of the academic study of religion. This deepening commitment to enquiry which is 'descriptive, phenomenological and theoretical' (Smart 2001: xiii), rather than confessional or faith driven, is reflected in the shifting nomenclature where 'Islamic Studies' and 'Religious Studies' becomes the 'Study of Islam' and 'Religion Studies' or the 'Study of Religion' respectively. 'Our work', says Ninian Smart, 'is morphological; it presents an anatomy of faith, ... for the application of *epoche*. It is an intentionally bracketing method which tries to bring out the nature of believers' ideas and feelings.' (Smart 2001: 3). While this 'involves walking in the moccasins of the faithful' (Smart 2001:3), we are not supposed to be the faithful - at least not the faithful ones in whose moccasins we are walking⁸.

Fourth, while in the *darul 'ulum* (the Islamic religious seminary), the yeshiva or the seminary's one's work and quest may be sought from the Transcendent or some sacred foundational texts; in the study of religion where the debates shift primarily between methodological atheism or agnosticism, affirmation is sought from our peers, more particularly from the species above us in the academic pecking order. This conscious shift in the source of affirmation inevitably – arguably also 'ideally' – places the faithful/believing academic in a comprising position. She exists in a state of tension with her peers, who may suspect her of *nifaq* (proclaiming one view

⁸ At a time when *Religionswissenschaft* was having its own struggle for acceptance as a serious social discipline the idea of obeisance to distance – of *epochē* (to stand apart, to hold back) – was crucial. The debate ranged largely between phenomenologists of religion who argued for methodological atheism (scholars must deny the possibility that the objects of religious faith are true or real) on the one hand and Ninian Smart's alternative of methodological agnosticism, on the other. 'Not knowing how the universe really is organized – not knowing if it is organized at all – the scholar of religion seeks not to establish a position in response to this question but to describe, analyse, and compare the positions taken by others' (McCutcheon 1999:216-17).

while believing in another) or rational *shirk* (associating a power with or as equal to God or in this case Reason)⁹; with the faithful; and herself all wondering how the believing academic manages to simultaneously ride multiple horses¹⁰.

Fifth, the development of disciplines in the humanities takes place within what are presented as ideational contestations as well as fiscal and budgetary constraints. A common argument would be concerning the dominance of revelation or theology over reason or Western modes of thought. While the Study of Islam rather than 'Islamic Studies' and the critical Study of Religion rather than Theology or 'Religious' Studies' are emerging as victorious; these victories are not necessarily won because of an intrinsic [secular, objective, post-Enlightenment] superiority of the Study of Islam over 'Islamic Studies' or theology but because it is a subsidiary recipient of a larger enterprise and part of a 'web of economic, cultural, and political forces which propagates and perpetuates a mode of production' (Brodeur 1999:9). It is to this larger enterprise that Edward Said (d. 2003) spoke so eloquently about and which I want to address in considering how the Muslim is increasingly constructed as a 'moderate' and 'harmless' subject.

⁹ In recent years, this suspicion of unduly warm relationship between the academic/enquirer and the subject (sometimes also 'subjected') community being researched or of the believing scholar has waned somewhat in a number of fields in the humanities as is evident in the presence of committed feminist women in Gender Studies, gay people in Queer Studies, and black people in African Studies. There is still, I suspect, a much deeper suspicion of people with a religious commitment located in the Study of Religion.

¹⁰ From time to time one reads fiery warnings against studying Islam at 'secular universities' and these are usually dismissed as the ranting of extremists. I am not sure if, in terms of the worldview of these traditionalists, and the inevitable and necessary critiquing of faith and its marginalisation in the academy, these fears are entirely ungrounded. It is somewhat disingenuous for academics to consciously promote 'objective' and non-faith enquiry and then to complain when others find this threatening to their worldviews and power paradigms.

Orientalism

For more than three decades, the term ‘Orientalism’ has cast a long shadow over the study of religion in general and Islamic studies in particular. The term acquired its overwhelmingly pejorative connotations in scholarly discourse largely due to Edward Said’s groundbreaking book *Orientalism* (1978). In looking at the development of the field of the Study of Islam and the other disciplines where Islam and Muslims were studied over the last century or so, the general demarcation – the dangers of simplification and reductionism, notwithstanding – is often described as pre- or post-Saidian¹¹.

In summary, Said argued that Orientalism constitutes ‘not only a field of investigation but an exercise of power’, ‘part of the story of cultural hegemony’ over the ‘other’ against which European culture is asserted. In the context of radical inequalities of power Orientalism was more revealing of the formation and presence of Euro-Atlantic power than as a truthful discourse of the Orient itself. European culture not just managed but produced the Orient and Western analytic categories not just reflect but also produce facts. A rationalist analysis is not simply the application of non-normative, ahistorical constructs to apolitical phenomena but involves the translation of all culture through the filter of Western categories of knowledge. The terms ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident,’ ‘East and West’, thus do not refer to real entities or essences, but rather to bodies of knowledge that have been constructed in the service of particular aims, foremost among them, the domination of the Middle East by European imperial powers in the

¹¹ Said’s work was also, and not unsurprisingly, greeted by a chorus of criticism from virtually all of the well-known Orientalists at that time including Ernest Gellner, (1993) Albert Hourani, (cf. Hopwood 2003) Mark Proudman (2004), Maxime Rodinson, Robert Graham Irwin (2006), and, most famously, Bernard Lewis (1993). Said was criticized for presenting, in fact, constructing, a monolithic ‘Occidentalism’ to oppose a similarly constructed ‘Orientalism’ of Western discourse, of failing to acknowledge the diversity in impulse, genres and ideological and scholarly orientations of the various scholars that he treated uniformly. For a critique of the Irenic approach to the study of Islam and a review of the Said-Lewis debates see Aaron W Hughes, *Situating Islam: The Past and Future of an Academic Discipline*, London: Equinox, 2007.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and by the United States in the twentieth century. Said presented Orientalism as a rather disaggregated monolith, ‘a constellation of false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the East’, (mashrabiyya.wordpress.com) and ‘a subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture’ (mashrabiyya.wordpress.com). Despite Said’s disdain for orthodoxies, his ideas became the basis for a new orthodoxy and his critique of Western scholarship on the Orient has too often been reduced to a Manichaean division of opposing sides. This transformation, in the words of MacKenzie, has turned Orientalism ‘into one of the most ideologically charged words in modern scholarship’ (MacKenzie 1995:4) ‘and remains for most scholars the *bête noir* in the expanding family of Islamic studies today’ (Ernst & Martin 2010: 4).

The Turbulent Gulf, then New York, and Kabul, and Bali, and Lahore, and the Horn of Africa and ...

The successful framing of Orientalism as a disreputable profession by Edward Said coincided with the Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the hostage taking drama which lasted for a year. This event and, even more so, the spectacular displays of raw violence against the empire on September 11th 2001 rather rudely altered the spatial dimensions of the narrative of Islam as a volatile Middle Eastern phenomenon, prone to militancy and brought it ‘closer to home’. September 11th, particularly, saw the beginning of a frenzy of Islamophobic caricatures of Muslims and Islam as an enemy of all civilised values in the print, audiovisual and virtual media. Everyone remotely connected to the study of Islam and Muslims were marshaled in to service the desperate need for clarity about the religious impulses of ‘these people’ who had the *chutzpah* to challenge the empire on its home ground. Their motives had to be located somewhere outside the reasoned and ‘normal’ behavior of Western human beings. The mass media does not suffer complexity gladly and many were drawn into what Said had lamented as ‘a culture of headlines, sound-bytes, and telegraphic forms whose rapidity renders the world one-dimensional and homogenous’ (Bhaba 2005:11). The ‘subject’ communities of the Islamicists – the Muslims - were and (indeed are) constantly under attack and Islamicists felt an enormous compulsion to

push against the ‘misrepresentation’, misinformation, and politically incorrect attitudes of citizens who ‘formed opinions about Islam from media fixations on sensationalism and a grossly inadequate and Eurocentric textbook industry.’ It was understandable that many of those who had insights into the tradition would step in as its interlocutors¹².

This defending of Islam though is also located within a particular ideological project, a project like Orientalism, not without its hegemonic interests. It is common cause that identities, including religious ones, are constantly in a state of flux. Conversation, in all its tentativeness and heurism in the academy, more characteristic of hermeneutics rather than the essentialism of both traditional religion and supposedly objective scholarship, is certainly valuable. However, it is important to note and pay attention to how the ‘bad Muslim’ of Orientalism is being supplanted by the construction of the ‘good Muslim’ as a citizen of the Empire with all the essentials of what constitutes the Empire still in place (occupations, greed, imbalanced power relations, exploitation, etc.).

In researching for this paper, I considered about fifty op-ed pieces written by generally serious scholars in Islam in various United States, Canadian and British publications; more than a dozen introductory books on Islam produced in the last six or seven years; and another dozen selected anthologies which aimed at introducing the latest ‘good Muslims’ and their ideas to the [Western] world. A few general observations about the work which I considered are noted below. In addition, the question of the relationship between what is being cast as the post-Enlightenment basis of

¹² This form of scholarship, as Clifford Geertz had pointed out as early as 1982, is certainly not new in the history of Islamic studies: ‘The tendency has always been marked among Western Islamicists ... to try to *write Muslim theology from without*, to provide the spiritual self-reflection they see either as somehow missing in it or as there but clouded over by routine formula-mongering. D.B Macdonald made al-Ghazzali into a kind of Muslim St. Thomas. Ignaz Goldziher centered Islam in traditionalist legal debates, and Louis Massignon centered it in the Sufi martyrdom of al-Hallaj ... A half-conscious desire not just to understand Islam but to *have a hand in its destiny* has animated most of the major scholars who have written on it as a form of faith’ (e.a.) (Geertz 1982).

Religionswissenschaft of methodological agnosticism or atheism versus an engaged or embedded scholarship needs to be interrogated.

First, most authors writing on Islam in the academy are largely still non-Muslim although they have been joined by a growing number of younger Muslims, nearly all of whom – with notable exceptions – are located in the North. A significant number have also started their scholarly journeys as non-Muslims and have since become Muslims. The dominant pattern of edited anthologies and accredited journals dealing with Islamic Studies is still one where the Non-Muslim is the editor, bringing Muslim and non-Muslim voices – and occasionally, only Muslim voices – together. Where books are co-authored the primary author is usually a non-Muslim.

Second, while a number of these younger scholars have indeed been able to saddle multiple horses, many have remained wedded to the irenic scholarship of their mentors in the post-Saidian academy. The work of Kecia Ali (2006), Ebrahim Moosa (2008), and Anouar Majid (2006) do reflect a relatively rarer Muslim willingness or ability to deal seriously and critically with the traditions of Islam (or the tradition of *Islams*).

Third, there is a growing emphasis on Sufism in the academy. While the motivations of this remain largely unexplored I relate this to a) the modern interest in individual experiences and fulfillment, b) the perceived pliability of Sufism as amenable to various cultures, gender friendliness, and religious and sexual diversity, c) the interest in Islam as a lived reality rather than a dogma located in texts, and d) a part of a desire to see Muslims ‘calming down’ and returning to a mythical innocence where Islam is perceived as inherently inward looking, apolitical, gentle and non-confrontational (cf. Nixon Center 2004). Related to this is a discernible pattern of assigning the Shari`ah (Islamic law) a less important role in Islam. When the Shari`ah is actually covered it increasingly is done within a framework of re-thinking its contents and privileging its supposed spirit and objectives (*maqasid*).

Fourth, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Waines 2005; Rippin 2005; Sheppard 2009), Islam is largely still reified and presented in essentialist terms (Islam ‘properly understood’ means this or that) – even if that essentialisation is now adorned with the currently fashionable virtues of inclusivism, multi-culturalism and religious diversity along with the assumption that all Muslims do or should aspire to these values. The

desperation to prove 'real' Islam's 'compatibility' with contemporary political and western cultural values has resulted in a plethora of affirmations of gender equality, democracy, religious pluralism, human rights and more recently also of sexual diversity that are often not nuanced.

Finally, and most importantly for purposes of this paper, the major contestations are often presented as one between Muslims where internal Muslim identities are at odds with one another, a 'battle of ideas' taking place between 'moderate' and 'literalist' or 'extremist' Islam (Abou El Fadl 2005), a 'civil war' taking place within the religion, and a struggle between 'reactionary Islam' and 'moderate, mainstream Islam' (Lewis 2003; Aslan 2005). Islam had to be taken back from those who had hijacked it (Wolf 2002), wrestled back from the extremists who captured it in '*The Great Theft*' (Abu El Fadl 2005). This portrayal is largely silent about any possible Western responsibility for any of the current crises around the Muslim world and displays not only a rather ahistorical and equally unscientific ignorance of the interconnectedness of cultures, but also a willful blindness to the impact of colonialism and its socio-political engineering of colonised societies. To raise this question risks politicising what is usually presented as disemboweled scholarly cultural, theological and civilizational critique and opens the door to the possibility that there may even be something that requires fixing inside western society itself¹³. The fundamental values underpinning the imperial impulses are, for now, not on the table for discussion – at least not in the project of dealing with the Muslim barbarians.

¹³ In March of 2007, the RAND Corporation, a major US think tank issued a widely discussed paper 'Building Moderate Muslim Networks.' The paper defines 'moderate' or 'good' Muslims as ones who support democracy and internationally recognised human rights, including gender equality and freedom of worship, notions of non-sectarian sources of law and oppose terrorism. The report's stated objective is to promote an alternate version of Islam that is compatible with American policies in the Muslim world by painting 'moderate Muslims' as a marginalised group that has been silenced by a radical minority. To counter radical networks, Western governments need to actively help 'moderate Muslims' better articulate and disseminate their views (Rand 2007).

Disinterested Scholarship

The first question that warrants reflection is, if in the keenness to ‘walk in the moccasins of the faithful’ – to return to Ninian Smart’s metaphor – does the ‘disinterested’ scholar risk becoming one of the faithful?’ The second question is whether an increasingly accommodationist academy has simply moved on to another kind of essentialism with its construction of the ‘Good Muslim’ and ‘Islam is peace’ – a project as fused to an ideological agenda as the Orientalism critiqued by Edward Said – an approach which while it presents itself as objective really seeks to construct a particular kind Islam, a non-threatening or, to use Slavoj Žižek’s term, ‘decaffeinated faith’ (Žižek 2004) without raising any questions about the imperial, ethical nature or sustainability of that which is threatened?

Post-modernity and post-colonialism have raised some serious questions about the Enlightenment basis of learning, its assumptions of rationality and of the mind as a clear slate, or as capable of being cleansed from the ‘distortions’ of personal commitment. Not only has the assumption of objectivity come under sustained criticism by a host of new entrants into the academy, such as feminists, liberation theologians, and post-colonial scholarship, but leading philosophers have argued that ‘the notion of knowledge as an accurate representation ... needs to be abandoned’ (Söderström 2005:12). Rather than conceiving of knowledge in terms of the accurate representation of a ‘nonhuman reality,’ with which the mind interacts, often within a falsely assumed ‘permanent, neutral, framework for inquiry’ (Rorty 1979:8) we should conceive of knowledge in context¹⁴ a) in

¹⁴ Context is something particularly privileged by feminist and liberation theologians. Writing in another context, but with relevance to our subject here, Gustavo Gutierrez (1973:25), the famous liberation theologian, describes this appeal to ideological neutrality in the following terms: ‘The last systematic obstacle for any theology committed to human liberation is ... a certain type of academicism which posits ideological neutrality as the ultimate criterion; which levels down and relativizes all claims to absoluteness and all evaluations of some ideas over others. This is the theological equivalent of another great ideological adversary of liberation: the so-called quest for the death of ideologies or their suicide at the altars of scientific and scholarly impartiality’.

terms of a conversation between persons, and b) a conversation that takes place within particular power relationships. Scholars operate within history along with their critiques of the theories of both knowledge and the way it is produced and the intellectualist responses to the material that they study or communities that they observe. As such, we cannot view communities, traditions and ideas historically and then take an ahistorical view of ourselves and of our critiques.

Said offers a clear statement of what he finds problematic about Orientalism in the *Afterword* to *Orientalism* at the fifteenth anniversary of its publication. Those who thought they had the requisite distance to produce knowledge about the 'Orient' were, in fact, imposing their own agendas without subjecting those agendas to any kind of critical scrutiny.

My objection to what I have called Orientalism is not that it is just the antiquarian study of Oriental languages, societies, and peoples, but that as a system of thought Orientalism approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint; this suggests both an enduring Oriental reality and an opposing but no less enduring Western essence, which observes the Orient from afar and from, so to speak, above. This false position hides historical change. Even more important, from my standpoint, it hides the *interests* of the Orientalist (Said 2003:333).

Feminists, liberation theologians and post-colonial scholar do not propose that the alternative to Orientalism is 'scholarly disinterest.' After all, they argue, such disinterest is a mere fiction. 'There is no innocent interpretation, no innocent interpreter, no innocent text' (Tracy 1987:79). Instead they appeal to a spirit of relentless critique of tradition, religion, academicism, but also of modernity and ourselves. Knowledge, like any other social tool, while it can and must be critical, is never neutral. The issue here is not with the idea of empathetic scholarship that characterises much of essentialist irenics and liberal material produced in the contemporary Study of Islam, but with its uncritical position towards the larger ideological and power structures wherein it is located, or in other words its embeddedness in

those structures and how it contributes to provide them with meaning¹⁵. The question is therefore not one of the faithfulness of the academic or lack of faith but rather of ‘Which faith?’ and ‘In whose service?’

The Construction of the Decaffeinated Muslim

There is more to embedded scholarship than a desire to simply dispel misconceptions or help create a better understanding of Islam for the general public. In attempting to ‘write Muslim theology from without,’ this approach implicitly provides a sympathetic yet essentialised view of Islam that casts ‘good Muslims’ against ‘bad Muslims’. The ‘real’ Muslims follow the ‘true’ Islam and the main detractors, who obscure this essentialised goodness of Islam, it is argued, are both the neo-Orientalist scholars – in the Saidian sense – from a variety of disciplines (such as Daniel Pipes, Ibn Warraq, and Bernard Lewis) who ‘misunderstand’ then ‘misrepresent’ them, as well as the ‘bad Muslims’ themselves (Osama bin Laden or the Wahabis)¹⁶ who resort to ‘extremism’ or other ‘false ways’ because they do not represent the ‘true’ Islam which is moderate, peaceful, and inoffensive¹⁷.

This kind of essentialism does have a role in the life of faith

¹⁵ The term ‘embedded journalism’ first came into vogue with media coverage of the US invasion of Iraq in 2001 when selected journalists were given privileged access to military units after undertaking to censor information that could negatively impact on the war performance of those units.

¹⁶ Wahabism, a more puritan austere form of Islam, has for long, and not without just cause, been viewed as the nemesis by Sufi groups or what has been variously described as ‘popular’ or ‘folk’ or ‘low’ Islam and by modernist Muslims. The post 9/11 era, particularly with the alleged role of Saudi citizens in the events and the putative role that this religious approach has played in the theological formation of the alleged terrorists, have given a much more pronounced tone and energy to anti-Wahabism.

¹⁷ Mahmood Mamdani refers to this essentialisation as ‘Culture Talk’; a kind of discourse that assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and then explains politics as a consequence of that essence. Muslim cannot be any other way. This of course opens the way for the argument of Islam’s inherent incompatibility with modernity and, by extension, Western practice and thought. (Mamdani 2005: 17-18)

communities much of which is based on belonging which necessarily entails constructing or embracing ideas of who constitutes an outsider and insider. The disciplines of dogma and heresiography, after all, have well-deserved places in most religious traditions. The post-Saidian problem though is the assumption that once that (Non-Muslim) scholar is convinced that he or she is positively disposed towards Muslims, he or she can now participate in the reconstruction of the Muslim identity and Islamic tradition in ways which are more acceptable to the largely Northern/Western society or context in which that scholar is located and with which dominant ideology he or she identifies is more comfortable. For the Muslim scholar, the problem is often an inability to ask critical questions of his or her socio-political context on the one hand and a seamless embrace of the dominant politically constructed assumptions about what is a 'good Muslim' on the other, indeed, an often blissful ignorance of the fact that there are conscious political and economic forces initiating and supporting these assumptions.

The 'moderate Muslim' is held up as the ideal. New slogans of '*wasatiyyah*' (moderation) are bandied about with little or no critique of what constitutes the center and peripheries and who defines these, as well as the historical-ideological moment and agenda that creates the urgency and need for moderate Muslims or a moderate Islam. Indeed the very raising of the question of agendas in relation to 'moderate Islam' makes one suspect. The foregrounding of the themes of pluralism, human rights, democracy, peace and non-violence¹⁸, the framing of liberal responses to them as the new

¹⁸ In a challenging essay, Paul Salem critiques conventional notions of Western approaches to conflict resolution and points out that its 'theorists and practitioners operate within a macro-political context that they may overlook, but which colors their attitudes and values. This seems remarkably striking from an outsider's point of view and is largely related to the West's dominant position in the world. All successful 'empires' develop an inherent interest in peace. The ideology of peace reinforces a status quo that is favourable to the dominant power. The Romans, for example, preached a *Pax Romana*, the British favored a *Pax Britannica*, and the Americans today pursue – consciously or not – a *Pax Americana*. Conflict and bellicosity is useful – indeed essential – in building empires, but an ideology of peace and conflict resolution is clearly more appropriate for its maintenance (2003: 362-364).

orthodox Islamic response, and the way the ‘good Muslim’ is constructed reflect the triumph, however temporary, of the liberal ideological moment at least in relation to the Study of Islam in the West. In a similar way, the concrete rapiers which dominate the entrance of the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg (‘Democracy’, ‘Equality’, ‘Reconciliation’ and ‘Diversity’) signify the triumph of a particular liberal vision of South African society, and through these symbolic structures which resemble swords, perhaps the willingness of a liberal society to also resort to violence to establish its hegemony.

Yoginder Sikand, an analyst of South Asian Islam, describes in his article, “‘Civic, Democratic Islam’: America’s Desperate Search for the “Liberal” Muslim’, (2007: n.p.) the inconsistency of a United States which at one point supported some of the most extremist and fanatical Muslims in the world, the Taliban, to counter the growing popularity of secular nationalist and progressive forces, but now is devising a myriad strategies to create an America-friendly, moderate Islam:

Today, America’s policy on Islamic movements has turned full circle. In order to counter the radical fringe of Islamism that it had so fervently courted till recently, America is desperately scouting around for ‘liberal’ Muslim allies who can sell an alternate vision and version of Islam that fits into the American scheme of things. This explains the sudden flurry of conferences and publications on ‘liberal Islam’ and the setting up of NGOs in Muslim countries with liberal American financial assistance. The underlying aim of these diverse activities appears to be the same: to promote an understanding of Islam that cheerfully accepts American hegemony, camouflaged as global modernity, as normative and, indeed, ‘normal’. This goal, is, of course, not stated openly. Rather, it is generally clothed in the garb of high-sounding slogans such as ‘democracy’, ‘human rights’, ‘liberalism’, and ‘pluralism’.

Irenic scholarship on contemporary Islam, other than an occasional and casual nod to Muslim sufferings and a lamentation of US foreign policy, lacks a critique of larger patterns of consumption, environmental or socio-economic justice, of modernity and liberalism as class projects which hugely

impact – and not always positively – the peripheries. The urgings towards awareness of these usually come from those outside the Study of Islam such as anthropology (Talal Asad & Sabah Mahmood), critical theory (Salman Sayyid), political science (Mahmoud Mamdani) and literary criticism (Hamid Dabashi). The Study of Islam with the Study of Religion must be studied as social and cultural expressions within historical, geographical, political and economic contexts. I agree with Ninian Smart's polymethodical approach whereby we draw on 'the full range of human sciences to understand how traditions have been transmitted authoritatively in various societies and how these have been re-enforced in myths, rituals, doctrines, legal institutions, artistic expressions and in testimonies of believers, including states such as spirit possession and out of the body experiences.' (Cox 2003: 8). More important though, given the urgencies of the multiple crises facing humankind such as warfare, environmental and economic systems deeply wedded to systemic impoverisation, we desperately need to bring the insights of these post-colonial scholars and others who work on the peripheries into our work. Scholarship – like all of human life – is compromised. We have a choice between an uncritical embeddedness in the structures of power with accountability to armies, governments, empires, and a critical engagement with the margins – however shifting – for a more just world.

Re-Thinking Contexts for Contemporary Scholarship

Finally the question seems to be 'What is our context as engaged African Muslim scholars?' Where is our authenticity located when we uncritically embrace the constructed intellectual and political categories and urgencies of others as our own and seek to re-define a fourteen hundred year old tradition – albeit an ever-changing one – in the face of external demands (even if these demands were generated by a complex array of factors wherein that tradition is not entirely innocent)? Muslims too, have a conflicting relationship with both 'outsiders' and the tradition of Islam and its ideals. The tensions are palpable of being in a world in which the vast majority of Muslims feel trapped between the demands imposed on them existentially as subjects of the Empire on the one hand, and the violent convulsions of a fascist-like Islamic invoked response by some co-religionists. At every step of our encounter with our non-Muslim neighbours, colleagues, students and

immigration officers, those of us – committed or nominal Muslim, confessional or cultural – living or working in the West, have to justify our existences, our faith, our humanness and our non-violent intentions.

Declarations that Muslim societies must ‘come right’ are fairly easy. In nearly all of the work that I have perused there is no shortage of argument against the idea that Muslim societies or Islam are inherently opposed to democracy or that Islam is compatible with democracy (Cf. Feldman 2003; Abou el-Fadl 2005; Mousalli 2002; Sachedina 2001; and An-Na’im 1990). The questions are what does ‘come right’ really mean, what does the cover of democracy and moderation really hide, and what are the historico-political reasons for the democracy and moderation deficit in the Muslim and Two Thirds World?

Questions of religious pluralism wedded to inter-religious solidarity against oppression, of gender justice, human rights, and democracy have for long been ones with which I have been engaged and with a sense of principled urgency that has its origins in a rather different context than the current dominant empire building one that only seeks to civilise the rebellious Muslim barbarian. My own engagement with the South African liberation struggle and that of my comrades, my work in the field of gender justice and my current work with Muslims who are living with HIV & AIDS has often inspired many Muslims by providing a sense that Muslims can be part of a vision larger than obscurantist fundamentalism. It is, ironically, precisely this location of my own scholarship within a principled vision of a just world that makes me so profoundly suspicious of the dominant urgency to re-think Islam in ‘contemporary terms’.

I have spoken about our witnessing, - with many Islamicists participating - in an intense and even ruthless battle for the soul of Islam that often escapes many of us who are keen to nurture and imagine a faith that is peaceful and compatible with the values of dignity, democracy and human rights. For many non-Muslim Westerners who are driven by conservative ideological imperatives, Islam and Muslims have become the ultimate other. Many liberals, on the other hand, move from the assumption that ‘global harmonies remain elusive because of cultural conflicts’ (Majid 2000:3). Hence, the desperation to nudge Islam and Muslims into a more ‘moderate’ corner, to transform the Muslim other into a Muslim version of the accommodating and ‘peaceful’ self without in any way raising critical

questions about that western self and the economic system that fuels the need for compliant subjects throughout the Empire.

I am not suggesting that issues of democracy, human rights, and moderation have not been dealt with in Islamic scholarship before Edward Said's *Orientalism* or 11th of September 2001. I am concerned that a teacher with a formidable cane has sent all of us into a corner after one of our classmates said something unspeakable about his favourite project. Discerning a lack of complete and unqualified remorse – even some rejoicing – the entire class is now subjected to collective punishment. And so, all of us now have to write a thousand times, 'I shall behave – I shall be democratic – I shall respect human rights – I shall be peaceful.' As it is, the class – Muslim societies – is a 'remedial one' for 'slow learners' and we are on probation. In the interim, children are literally dying in Africa and much of the Two Third World and a significant number of the world's population live in poor and inhuman conditions while the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest increases.

There are also other realities around me including coercion, the irony of violence being used to impose a language of peace, and the larger context of education and schooling which pretends not to be grounded in any particular ideology. Neither the elite nor the aspirant elites of our generation, so desperate to succeed within the system, have ever been too interested to engage the works of thinkers such as Paul Goodman, Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich. Too tantalising is the promise of entry into the domain of the establishment which is subject to turning a blind eye to its inherent injustice, the demand for uniformity, the moulding of human beings to serve a particular kind of society with particular economic needs and the transformation of *insan* (humanity) into *homo aeconomicus*.

In many ways, scholarly elites are represented by the student who is desperate to outdo his fellow students in appeasing the teacher. For these students, threats are unnecessary; the promise of acceptance by the teacher and the concomitant material advantages are sufficient incentives. Despite the protestations of benign objectives of advancing education and learning, the teacher is there as part of larger project – a project that is politically unwise to interrogate – in an authoritarian system where any moment spent on challenging teachers means losing marks. As with the learners, the teacher is also not a disemboweled human being. There are larger civilisational and

ideological issues at stake such as understandings of development and its price on the earth, the transformation of the earth as sacred in traditional cosmologies into simple real estate and our very understanding of what it means to be human, of culture, the commodity value attached to people and land. This includes the supremacy of supposedly rationalist forms of thinking. The issue of the teacher's sullied pet project represents only the sharper edge of the frustration, anger and agenda, the rise and march of the Reconstituted Empire. The larger context of this is globalisation for which we require the intellectual courage and political will to also historicise and unravel its implications when we consider issues of human rights, democracy and the moderate Muslim in relation to Islam today.

Conclusion

I have argued that an approach to the Study of Islam should challenge the imposition of Western analytic categories and should also foster dialogue. I also argue for the abandonment of a positivist epistemology both within Islam and outside that sustains a conception of understanding as discovering the objective and final truth. Instead I consider understanding to be the result of a dialogue between horizons of meaning none of which can claim a monopoly over truth. Here the demand is for a willingness to risk oneself into a transformative process in which the status of the self and the other are constantly renegotiated. Authentic dialogue is about entering the other's world while holding on to yours, with the willingness to be transformed. It is not a space of trade where deals are struck. One cannot speak of genuine political participation and integrity of communities, unless one can reach some kind of consensus on a shared system of ethics. The context of power in which the current drive for such conversation is driven by the Empire's agenda which makes it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to have any kind of genuine conversation that holds within it an openness to mutual transformation.

I subscribe to the notion of the inexhaustibility of the meaning of texts and challenge the possibility of an objectively valid interpretation. At the same time, one should be deeply attentive to the radical inequality between the partners in the conversation and should also be conscious of the political, cultural and economic conditions that shape the terms of the

dialogue. The ideal towards which we should strive for, and religious scholars especially, is not a scenario of culturally isolated factions but an ongoing dialogue for and commitment to radical social change.

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