

Plural Voices in the Teaching of Islam

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Abstract

The site where knowledge of Islam is authorized is in institutions of higher learning. This authorized knowledge then determines what is taught in secondary education curriculum, creating limited frames for thinking about Islam, which then limits what is possible in higher education. This feedback loop continues to narrow the ways in which we perceive Islam and Muslims. Edward Said is interested in the political dimensions of this discourse, and he does not eschew the educational impact. In particular, he notes that American media relies on educational systems for the knowledge it reproduces. As Muslims outside the United States consume American media, the Muslim definition of what “Islam” means is conditioned by American understandings of what “Islam” means. My particular interest is in the ways in which US education curtails the breadth of Muslim experience, and why it does so. Using a case study of Shi’ism, I argue that there is a strongly normative bent to the teaching of Islam in higher education that is more befitting of Theology than Study of Religion. That methodological shift is necessary for the control of what “Islam” means and is a logical outgrowth of the origins of the Study of Religion from Comparative Theology.

Keywords: *Islam; Shi’ism; Orientalism; Study of Religion; textbooks; Shi’ah; Ithna’ashari; Isma’ili; cultural studies*

Introduction

Edward Said, in his works *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam*, argues for ways in which the production of knowledge is used to craft political and social realities.¹ In particular, he is invested in the Middle East and Islam. His premise, as it relates to the teaching of Islam, is that the way one “authors” knowledge is a tool of domination. What we witness is a narrative of Islam that is used to curate, curtail, and control the messiness of religion.

The site where this knowledge is authorized is in institutions of higher learning. This authorized knowledge then determines what is taught in secondary education curriculum. As tertiary education has limited ways to discuss Islam, it creates limited frames for thinking about Islam in secondary education, which then limits what is possible in higher educational teaching. This feedback loop continues to narrow the ways in which we perceive Islam and Muslims. While Said is interested in the political dimensions of this discourse, he does not eschew the educational impact. In particular, he notes that American media relies on educational systems for the

1. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979; Said, Edward W. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.

knowledge it reproduces.² As Muslims outside the United States consume American media, the Muslim definition of what “Islam” means is conditioned by American understandings of what “Islam” means.³

My particular interest is in the ways in which US education curtails the breadth of Muslim experience, and why it does so. Using a case study of Shi’ism, I argue that there is a strongly normative bent to the teaching of Islam in higher education that is more befitting of Theology than Study of Religion. That methodological shift is necessary for the control of what “Islam” means and is a logical outgrowth of the origins of the Study of Religion from Comparative Theology.

The approach to Islam in secondary curricula suffers from different methodological issues, although inheriting the biases of higher education. Generally, Islam is introduced through History or Social Studies, which have their own limitations in discussing religion.⁴ However, the difference in approach offers a way to constructively think about how to effectively approach teaching Islam. Using a cultural studies approach of multi-disciplinary, contextual inquiry of human activity, we introduce a more diverse and nuanced religious life of Muslims.

Islam as Person, Islam as Object

The study of Islam, as an academic subject, is tied to the emergence of the field of Study of Religion. Yet the category of religion is inherently one that is imposed from the outside.⁵ As a result, it must come with the biases of the authorizing agent as to what religion is and how it should function; to paraphrase Descartes, we can only imagine what we know. To understand, then, how the the study of Islam is structured, we must look at how the Study of Religion is structured.

Richard King, in his work on Orientalism and religion, argues that there are two different etymologies for the word “religion,” which are germane to our argument. In the pre-Christian era, “religion” is traced back to the Latin *relegere*, meaning “to re-read” or “to re-trace.” This sense of religion is nearly synonymous with tradition, and following what already exists in the culture.⁶ King says by the third century of the common era, we find Christian authors providing a new etymology. He points to Lactantius, who says “religion” is related to *religare*, meaning to “to tie together,” or “to bind.” This shift is important because the argument is that there is one religion, bound to the worship of the “true God,” and all other worship is superstition. This shift in the definition, according to King, “served to establish the monotheistic exclusivism of Christianity as the normative paradigm for understanding what a religion is.”⁷ The category of religion is thus indexed to Christianity as to what religion could be.

While the category of “religion” may be an external category, it does not preclude emic understandings of what a life of worship means.⁸ However, the Study of Religion, in a push to

2. Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam*, 161.

3. *Ibid.*, 52.

4. Susan L. Douglass, “Teaching About Religion, Islam, and the World in Public and Private School Curricula,” in *Educating the Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Farid Senzai, and Jane I Smith (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 86. Morgan, Hani and David Walker. “The Portrayal of the Middle East in Four Current School Textbooks.” *MESA Bulletin* 42, no. 1&2 (2008): 86–96.

5. Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst, “Locating Religion in South Asia: Islamicate Definitions and Categories,” *Comparative islamic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2014), 226.

6. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 35.

7. *Ibid.*, 36.

8. Morgenstein Fuerst, “Locating Religion in South Asia: Islamicate Definitions and Categories,” 229.

prove an objective discipline distinct from Theology, may actually use the language of secularism to erase these emic notions of religion.⁹ In part, this erasure hearkens back to the struggle to define what religion is, as the Study of Religion relies on scientism to establish its objectivity, and in the process losing an investment in tradition. The Study of Religion, in using the language of objective inquiry, relies on an understanding of religion that is based on a static truth, that does not consider tradition in structuring what believers may express. It is, in fact, the diversity of tradition that may allow us to engage with the underlying logic of what adherents understand of their faith, as it is conditioned by their material conditions.¹⁰

Tomoko Masuzawa, in her work on the creation of the category of world religions, argues that the emergence of the Study of Religion, tied to a sense of rationalist discourse, formalizes a discourse of othering.¹¹ Just as theology assumed Christianity was the dominant religion, the Study of Religion emerged with the nation-state, and worked to assure the centrality of the West. Ultimately, religions near to Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, are true religions, because of their proximity to Christian belief, but rejected the “Truth,” therefore remaining problematic.¹² The solution was the introduction of the term “World Religions,” which allows for Christianity to remain the central religion against which other religions are judged, without denying they are religions. The logic of “world music” functions in a similar way. The United States is part of the world, but it is the standard against which other musics are judged and consumed.

By making a religion static, in part by having a textual corpus to interrogate, it becomes easier to exercise control over that religion. In the case of Islam, the structure of the discipline favored legalistic work and works in Arabic as representing the essence of what the religion is, and looking at later developments, particularly mystical movements like Sufism, as deviations from the religion. Regional developments and histories are not part of the study of Islam, but of area studies, because they too are not seen as essential to the core of what Islam is.¹³

Returning to the idea that religion is a category imposed from the outside, it is evident that phrases like “the world of Islam,” or “the Muslim world,” are not inherent to the tradition. While the Arabic phrase *ummah*, or community, may refer to an aspirational sense of a connected Muslim population, it does not carry the same weight of homogeneity that the English phrases do. This idea of a “world” relating to Islam is an external organizing principle.¹⁴ We must question what purpose this organization serves, and the role that Islam and Muslims play in it.

Edward Said argues that the construction of “Islam,” which we can treat as synonymous with “the Muslim world,” serves particular geopolitical ends in the context of the United States.¹⁵ This construction of “Islam” is constituted through and by media, government, and academia.¹⁶ This “Islam” is effectively anthropomorphized and is normalized as *the* Islam against which all others are measured. It is formed through a theologizing process of politicians, who leverage the deficiencies of Study of Religion to their logical conclusion: the elevation of the state against any

9. King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East*, 42-43. cf. Shenila Khoja-Moolji, “Pedagogical (Re)encounters: Enacting a Decolonial Praxis in Teacher Professional Development in Pakistan,” *Comparative Education Review* Online First(2017), (3-4).

10. cf. Talal Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009), 23.

11. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 22.

12. *Ibid.*, 49.

13. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 40.

14. Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” 15.

15. Said, *Covering Islam*, xi.

16. *Ibid.*, 136.

constructed Other. As this idea of Islam, or Buddhism, or Communism, is constructed to serve state interests, it becomes a foil for the nation-state to define itself. This reflection of the state becomes an object of state violence.¹⁷ The lack of a viable, alternative narrative of how religion functions, from the very discipline designed to do this work, enables the violence against the political Other.

If Islam is anthropomorphized, then it can be discussed as a unitary object, removing any sense of agency from adherents of Islam.¹⁸ Muslims are effaced from the narrative of this Islam. There are two mechanisms through which this effacement happens. The first mechanism is scripturalism, which emerges out of a Protestant notion of the primacy of scripture.¹⁹ As it applies to Muslims, it is the belief that verses of scripture control the actions of Muslims, although there is no concordant belief that scripture is predictive of the behavior of Protestants themselves. The second mechanism is culture talk.²⁰ This idea extends beyond Muslims to other minority groups in America,²¹ and seems to be tied to the ways religions were described as part of colonial projects.²² Cultural talk reduces complex traditions to an essence that explains the politics of a cultural matrix. Both mechanisms seek to exert control over Muslim communities by claiming to have a predictive element to their understanding of Islam. That predictive element is about controlling Muslim populations and disciplining them.

Since the study of Islam emerges from the Study of Religion, and inherits the biases of the discipline, including a reference to Protestant Christianity as the reference point for “true religion,” and the legacy of colonial control, we have to understand the academic study of Islam as being linked to power that seeks to maintain its privilege.²³ The Islam constructed through this Orientalist frame is irrational²⁴ and incompatible with modernity.²⁵

Islam at the Secondary Level

This vision of Islam, as anti-modern, and thus a threat to national interests, is constructed as early as high school texts, when we see a construction of an essentialized Islam that is not part of the world. On the production side, publishers may consciously omit commonalities between Muslim and non-Muslim societies to maintain boundaries; Muslim cultures are often introduced through political lens, eschewing what academics would consider elements of the humanities; and Muslim societies are taught outside the flow of world history.²⁶ Many of these textbooks use

17. cf. Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 4-8.

18. Said, *Covering Islam*, 39.

19. Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 55.

20. Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 17-62. cf. A. Kevin Reinhart, “On the “introduction to Islam,”” in *Teaching Islam*, ed. Brannon M. Wheeler (New York: Oxford, 2002), 24. on “phenomenal essentialism.”

21. cf. Richard C. Martin, and Abbas Barzegar, “Formations of Orthodoxy: Authority, Power, and Networks in Muslim Societies,” in *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Carl W. Ernst, and Richard C. Martin (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 193.

22. Hastings Donnan, and Martin Stokes, “Interpreting Interpretations of Islam,” in *Interpreting Islam*, ed. Hastings Donnan (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc., 2002), 2.

23. Said, *Covering Islam*, xvii.

24. *Ibid.*, 51.

25. Donnan, and Stokes, “Interpreting Interpretations of Islam,” 4.

26. Hani Morgan, and David Walker, “The Portrayal of the Middle East in Four Current School Textbooks,” *MESA Bulletin* 42, no. 1&2 (2008).

“Islamic,” as an adjective on almost every description, implying that everything is because of religion, and that religion is the determining factor in all things for Muslims.²⁷ This use of the adjective “Islamic” is a manifestation of culture talk, and seeks to provide an easy explanation for the actions of Muslims, devoid of any historical or political concerns.

The introduction of “world religions” into educational curricula seems to have happened in the 1920s and 30s, as popular books on the topic were on the rise.²⁸ Then, as now, the appellation of “world” is meant to signify difference and otherness. Islam, as a “world religion,” is taught in “world history,” and “world geography.”²⁹ While concerns around the First Amendment and the teaching of religion may make US public schools reluctant to offer courses in religion, the use of the adjective “world,” reinforces an American exceptionalism that removes the United States from the flow of history. Regardless of which subject we discuss, treating the US as an autonomous actor from the rest of the world enforces a sense that the Other exists and is measured against the US.

Textbooks also use the structure of the “great leader” model, of a linear, dynastic history. As Susan Douglass and Ross Dunn point out, “typically, the books characterize each world religion in terms of a founder figure, an origins story, a holy scripture, a set of basic tenets and practices, and identification with a particular historical period or cultural tradition.” This type of narrative does not make room for competing interpretations of the religion. Rather, it focuses attention on the religion as a cultural practice fixed in time. This approach results in an essentialized, ahistorical, non-dynamic presentation of a religion, masking the dynamic elements present in any living tradition.³⁰

We must see these texts as part of a dialogic. They reflect academic thinking that is dated because of the cycle of publication. In addition, the authors of secondary education textbooks, who often do not work in higher education, rely on published material that may lag behind current thinking in the field, or who may not even have access to academic research. There are politics around textbook adoption that limit how quickly new textbooks are adopted, and what types of new scholarship are included.³¹ These textbooks then inform students, who need to be redirected in their learning about Islam, affecting research interests of academics. As Susan Douglass observes, as recently as 2009, “Orientalist canards discredited for decades could be found in the textbooks presented at face value, without any attribution of source or indication of differing views among scholars or advances in scholarship over the past century.”³² The points of critique of the Study of Religion are present in these textbooks, and they are slower to change than academic works. The result is that students at this level are presented a simplified version of Islam that removes Islam from the flows of world history. They have an impression that the most important factor in the construction of identities for Muslims is their religion, absent any other cultural factors; that Muslims act irrationally because they are not tied to the realities of the world.

As a result, these textbooks represent the reality of Islamic Studies, albeit on a different trajectory. If we accept that Islamic Studies is the child of Orientalism and the Study of Religion,

27. Susan L. Douglass, and Ross E. Dunn, “Interpreting Islam in American Schools,” in *Interpreting Islam*, ed. Hastings Donnan (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc., 2002). cf. Richard Maxwell Eaton, *Islamic History as Global History* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1990).

28. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 37.

29. Douglass, “Teaching About Religion, Islam, and the World in Public and Private School Curricula,” 86.

30. Susan L. Douglass, and Ross E. Dunn, “Interpreting Islam in American Schools,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588, no. 1 (2003), 60.

31. Douglass, “Teaching About Religion, Islam, and the World in Public and Private School Curricula,” 100.

32. *Ibid.*, 87.

we know that it is a field whose antecedents were based on power, control, and denying Muslims their own voice.³³ The Study of Religion uses Christianity as a baseline and seeks to put other religions into the mold of Christianity, using languages of orthodoxy, heresy, and privileging literacy and scripture. The premise behind the rise of world religions, in part, was that Christianity was the “true” religion, and all others were lacking.³⁴

A Question of Method

If the core issue is the ways in which the Study of Religion is constituted, and its subsequent impact on the Study of Islam, then there should be methods that allows us to look for other narratives of being Muslim. The anthropologist Talal Asad offers us a potential way forward as he speaks about traditions. He says, “the variety of traditional Muslim practices in different times, places, and populations indicate the different Islamic reasonings that different social and historical conditions can or cannot sustain.”³⁵ According to this argument, it is possible to recognize a multitude of Muslim practices, organized under a logic of “Islam,” but conditioned by lived realities of practitioners. He continues to state that it is a problem of the modern to see and expect homogeneity in traditions. It seems to be an anachronistic reading tied to notions of control.

Asad appears to be echoing some of the theoretical approaches of The Birmingham School of cultural studies. Broadly speaking, the interventions of the Birmingham School were to look at contemporary culture through a Marxist lens, to understand the ways in which culture is embedded in lived realities. Simon During, in his introduction to cultural studies argues that it is about “the engaged analysis of contemporary cultures,” and “engaged” has three distinct senses for him. The first sense is that scholars are politically and critically engaged for those who suffer under social structures. The second sense is that it is engaged “to enhance and celebrate” social experiences by examining their underpinnings. The third sense is to engage with culture as part of everyday life, rather than as separate from it.³⁶

This background is important for Richard King, who argues for a “specific form of ‘cultural studies’” to replace the current methods in the Study of Religion. He believes that it would offer “reconceptualization of the notion of ‘religion’ in such a way that it no longer remains bound to the peculiar orientations of Christian theological speculation.” As a result, it would offer a us a reading of “religion” tied more closely to the pre-Christian notion of “tradition.”³⁷ King offers us a way to bridge Asad’s intervention with the work of cultural studies.

It is Diane Moore’s work on religious illiteracy, cultural studies, and religion in secondary education that seems to offer a specific way of using cultural studies to pedagogically engage with the Study of Religion. While not as explicitly Marxist as The Birmingham School, she states that “all knowledge claims are ‘situated’ claims in that they arise out of certain

33. Carl W Ernst, and Richard C. Martin, “Introduction: Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies,” in *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Carl W. Ernst, and Richard C. Martin (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 2.

34. Richard C. Martin, “Islam and Religious Studies: An Introductory Essay,” in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. Martin (London: Oneworld, 2001), 1-2.; Ernst, and Martin, “Introduction: Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies,” 3, 9.; Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*. For a broad survey of the history of “Islamic Studies,” see Charles Kurzman, and Carl W Ernst, “Islamic Studies in US Universities,” *Review of Middle East Studies* (2012).

35. Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” 23.

36. Simon During, *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.

37. King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East*, 53.

social/historical/cultural/personal contexts and therefore represent particular and necessarily partial perspectives.” By situating the knowledge, we disrupt the claims to an “objective” study, as the observer is as conditioned by her reality as the observed is. Nor can we claim to have a totality of knowledge about the observed or make universalizing claims through partial observation. Moore also avoids the trap of relativism in this position, by arguing that it is the mirror image of totalizing knowledge and objectivity. Both approaches are a “denial of responsibility and critical enquiry.” It is only through recognizing partial perspectives that one can develop a rational and critical discourse.³⁸

Moore allows us to understand how a totalizing sense of knowledge about Islam curtails our actual knowledge of Muslims, by recognizing situated knowledge; that religion exists in a cultural matrix and is manifest in a way conditioned by that matrix; as well as acknowledging the questions of power inherent in cultural studies. Looking at the ways in which Arabic and Sunni notions of Islam are valorized, voices of other communities, such as Persian, Turkish, Indonesian, Sufi, and Shi’i are marginalized. Taking a case study on Shi’ism, we see how the teaching of Islam is limited in tertiary education.

Tertiary Education—Case Study on Shi’ism

In an average 14-week college/university semester, it is impossible to speak to the breadth of diversity of Muslims in the world. They currently constitute about 1/4 of the world’s population and exist in almost every country. There have to be pedagogical choices as to what to include in an introductory class. The critique is not that such curation has to happen, but that it may happen in such a way as to serve as a weak theology, creating a normative Islam against which other Muslims are measured. Equally as important, by engaging with the broad historical parameters of the Study of Religion, the teaching of Islam serves the purposes of power, rather than a critical engagement with Muslim traditions.

For example, when thinking about the history of Muslims in America, the presence of Muslims is often linked to periods of Arab and South Asian migration. By ignoring the large numbers of Muslims who were enslaved, the state does not have to confront its crime of slavery. Ignoring African-American Muslim movements like the Nation of Islam also allows Muslims to be seen as foreign to the United States, and thus a suspect population tied to foreign interventions. Muslims no longer have individual agency but are controlled by an anthropomorphized “Islam.”

This “Islam” must present itself as ahistorical and homogeneous. To investigate situated knowledge and manifestations of the religion in context would upset narratives of control and domination. Muslim communities of interpretation must be effaced.³⁹ To be effective in this erasure, an historically grounded narrative, one that is recognizable as broadly being Muslim, is chosen to be the true manifestation of the religion. This being of “Islam” becomes synonymous with Sunni Islam.

There are numerous ways in which we might look at communities of interpretation. For our purposes, the most salient division is the question of authority after the death of Prophet Muhammad. The two stable communities that ultimately emerge over the succession of Muhammad are the Sunni and Shi’i communities. The Shi’ah make an argument referencing the

38. Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 79-80.

39. Farhad Daftary, “Diversity in Islam: Communities of Interpretation,” in *The Muslim Almanac: A Reference Work on the History, Faith, Culture, and Peoples of Islam*, ed. Azim Nanji (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1996).

Qur'an, the sacred text for Muslims, and the *hadith*, the teachings of Muhammad, that Ali ibn Ali Talib was the successor to Muhammad's political, spiritual, and religious authority. While they do not make a claim to prophethood after Muhammad, they do believe that Muhammad instituted the office of the Imam, and this position is inheritable through the line of Ali and Fatima, Muhammad's daughter. The Sunni position rejects such claims and refers back to a pre-Prophetic model of leadership, which offers a type of elective process for selecting political leaders. Very quickly after Muhammad's death, this type of elective process gives way to dynastic succession.

Within these broad communities, there are subdivisions based on questions of succession and interpretation. Of course, the ways in which we understand these communities now is different than what these communities may have understood of themselves. For example, I would argue that we see a theological formation of Shi'ism during the lifetime of Muhammad;⁴⁰ a political formation of Shi'i identity after the death of Imam Husayn, Muhammad's grandson, at Kerbala; and a legal formation with Imams Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar as-Sadiq.⁴¹ Sunni identity seems to emerge later, partially in response to the crystallization of Shi'i identity.⁴² For numerous historical reasons, the Sunni community becomes the majoritarian tradition. While there are deep theological differences and conflicts over claims of the true meaning of religion, there is also a history of mutual acceptance, known as *taqrīb*,⁴³ most recently manifest through the Amman Message.⁴⁴

The reliance on Arabic and legalistic texts in the study of Islam favors reading the Sunni tradition as normative. Farhad Daftary, a scholar of Shi'ism, argues that Orientalists "studied Islam according to Sunni perspectives and, borrowing classifications from Christian contexts, treated Shi'ism as the 'heterodox' interpretation of Islam, or even as a 'heresy,' in contrast to Sunnism which was taken to represent Islamic 'orthodoxy.'"⁴⁵ Christian categories of religion, married with Christian biases, structured Shi'ism as the internal Other of Islam. The Shi'ah parallel the Catholics, who were despised in the Europe of the time because of the presence of a strong central leader and clerical hierarchy. European scholars favorably compared Sunni communities to Protestant communities and established Sunnism as the Muslim "orthodoxy" as a tool of control.⁴⁶ In addition, orthopraxy is often indexed to orthodoxy,⁴⁷ the vision of Islam that emerges is a simplified, lowest-common denominator form of Sunni Islam.

Carl Ernst and Richard Martin, scholars of Islam, ask the most relevant corrective question to this state of affairs, "why should the study of other historically important (if not outright dominant) Islamic discourses such as Sufism, Shiism, philosophy, poetry, ethics, and history be ignored or dismissed in an effort to maintain an old, some might say 'Orientalist,' criterion of what

40. Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

41. Arzina R. Lalani, *Early Shi'i Thought: The Teachings of Imam Muhammad Al-Baqir* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2000).

42. Daphna Ephrat, *A Learned Society in a Period of Transition: The Sunni "ulama" of Eleventh Century Baghdad* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Yasser Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).

43. Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi, "Sunni-Shi'i Rapprochement (*Taqrīb*)," in *Shi'ite Heritage: Essays on Classical and Modern Traditions*, ed. Lynda Clarke (Binghamton: Global Publications, 2001).

44. "The Amman Message." (2007): accessed Jan. 20, 2016, <http://ammanmessage.com>.

45. Farhad Daftary, "The Study of the Ismailis: Phases and Issues," in *The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Theology and Law*, ed. Farhad Daftary, and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda 2014), 55.

46. Martin, and Barzegar, "Formations of Orthodoxy," 180. cf. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shi'a Become Sectarian?," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75, no. 1 (1955), 5.

47. Martin, and Barzegar, "Formations of Orthodoxy," 184.

is authentic or normative?”⁴⁸ The challenge that this question poses is to integrate a variety of perspectives on what it means to be Muslim, engage with a multitude of Islams, without slipping into relativism. The specifics of language are important, as they contextualize the objects of our study.

The particularity of what we mean by Shi’ism is our first clarifying point. In discussing Shi’ism, I mean Imami Shi’ism, which covers groups like the Ithna’ashari and Isma’ili communities, and as distinct from Zaydi Shi’ism, which operates under a different model of leadership.⁴⁹ Even this simple clarification allows us to understand that under the label of “Shi’ah,” there exists a multitude of interpretations. From there, we make a choice which voices to include. If the goal of situating knowledge is to engage with a transparent process of knowledge making, then our goal here is not to marginalize Zaydi voices, but to acknowledge we cannot do Zaydism justice in this space. At the same time, the term “Imami Shi’ism” is used as a synonym for “Ithna’ashari Shi’ism,” because it is a self-designation from the community. However, without careful usage, the theological meaning is lost, and one group, the Ithna’ashari, emerge as a privileged group.⁵⁰

The language that lends itself most to this sort of exclusion is the word “sect.” This concept clearly emerges out of the Protestant Christian basis of the Study of Religion, with a dominant understanding, or orthodoxy, against which other groups are heterodoxies, or even heresies. “Sect” lends itself to exclusionary truth claims that are not emic to Muslim traditions. The closest term in Arabic comes from the root *faraqa*, meaning a division or separation, and is present as *furqah* when denoting religious difference. Marshall Hodgson, an historian of Islam, argues that the term *furqah*

has been translated “sect,” but it rather rarely answers to the modern English notion of “sect.” Usually it should be rendered by nothing stronger than “school of thought.” Often it is used to refer to a single teacher and his disciples, with reference to one minor point of doctrine. In such a case there is no question of a body of persons sharing a common religious allegiance such that their overall religious life is led among themselves and apart from others, as is implied in a “sect.”⁵¹

Within Muslim traditions, there is a saying of Prophet Muhammad that the community will split into 73 groups, and one will be saved. A variation of the *hadith* says to be saved, follow the majority group. Here, the word “group” comes from the root “*faraqa*,” so there is a call to a right path, but there is no indication which path that is, or the distinction between difference and division. Left open is when an interpretative community can be considered a “sect.”

As a result of *hadith* like this one, a genre of literature emerges known as *firāq* literature. These works attempt to explain why the author’s community is the right one and the others are doomed. Works in this genre are often translated with titles like “The Book of Sects.” However, if the term is translated as “heresy,” it is easier to see these treatises as polemic literature, ascribing difference to other groups to elevate one’s self. To translate the works as sectarian implies a

48. Ernst, and Martin, “Introduction: Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies,” 14.

49. Wilferd. Madelung, *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Albany, N.Y.: Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988), 77-92.

50. Etan Kohlberg, “From Imāmiyya to Ithnā-‘Ashariyya,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39, no. 3 (1976).

51. Hodgson, *The Classical Age of Islam*, 66.

cohesive discourse that is generally absent in these works. They are very much engaged in the construction of what Islam is, but through generating a normative theology, positively and negatively, rather than describing the differences that exist.

The question of how to translate the root *farqa*, and its permutations in this context, provide a way to think about how to approach the teaching of Islam. Our premise is that we are teaching about an organizing principle known as Islam, but that is manifest in particular cultural matrices that results in “Islams” in practice.⁵² As we take Islam in practice as a serious way of understanding the religion, because we consider it a form of interpretation, we enrich textual study.⁵³ Richard Martin and Abbas Barzegar, two Islamic Studies scholars, further develop this point when they state:

This suggests adopting the more accurate, if inelegant, plural reference to “Islams” while continuing to stress that within Hanbali Sunni, Shafi Sunni, Ithna’Ashari Shia, Ismaili Shia, and tariqa Sufi movements are normative institutions of authority as well variations and contestations of belief and practice among constituents.⁵⁴

Their language of “contestations” is an important way to engage with the language of heresies to engage with understanding the limits of a normative tradition. They argue that orthodoxy is a dominant position, which won in a battle of heresies.⁵⁵ They take seriously the internal claims that everyone sees each other as heretics, and the group that wins is orthodox. The elegance of this approach is that it takes internal truth claims seriously, without granting them external validation, and situates the question of power at the center of what defines the traditions. Orthodoxy changes over time and place, allowing us to situate dominant narratives.

One could also speak to competing interpretations,⁵⁶ or competing orthodoxies,⁵⁷ which is my favored approach. My Introduction to Islam course is a hybrid historical-thematic approach. The guiding question revolves around who is claiming authority and on what bases after the death of Muhammad. Such an approach allows me to look at Shi’ah-Sufi-Sunni notions of leadership developing relationally, rather than sequentially. It keeps students from falling into the trap of hearing “this is Islam,” with the first tradition I introduce, and viewing later traditions as deviations from that first community.

With a shift away from an orthodoxy, we can also move away from an orthopraxy. Since we are treating ritual as an interpretative action, praxis and doxis remain linked, but are also tied to questions of location in cultural matrices. A subtle shift in language creates new vistas for exploration. Instead of talking about the Hajj as the act of pilgrimage, we talk about pilgrimage, where the Hajj is the model, but Karbala, Toubā, and Konya are also part of the spaces of a Muslim

52. Talal Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” *Occasional papers series: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, Washington* (1986); A.H. El-Zein, “Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6(1977).

53. cf. Charles Lindholm, “Kissing Cousins: Anthropologists on Islam,” in *Interpreting Islam*, ed. Hastings Donnan (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc., 2002).

54. Martin, and Barzegar, “Formations of Orthodoxy,” 183.

55. *Ibid.*, 182, 186.

56. Keith Lewinsein, “Recent Critical Scholarship and the Teaching of Islam,” in *Teaching Islam*, ed. Brannon M. Wheeler (New York: Oxford, 2002), 52-53.

57. Brannon M. Wheeler, “What Can’t be Left Out: The Essentials of Teaching Islam as a Religion,” in *Teaching Islam*, ed. Brannon M. Wheeler (New York: Oxford, 2002), 11.

pilgrim's options.⁵⁸ Students see differences as part of the tradition, not deviations from a true Islam. We can read about the lives of Muslims in villages in Iran, and connect their actions to their Shi'ism, instead of offering a definitive view of Shi'ah life.⁵⁹

At the same time we want to engage with diversity of thought, we have to be careful of the issue of relativism. The particularities of each tradition are important as well. If we return to the idea that we can trace the formation of Shi'ism to at least three stages—theological, political, and legal—then we can also trace a development of justice in Shi'i thought. There is an early spiritual tradition around Imam Ali, and involves Fatima, and his sons Hasan and Husayn. His descendants inherit that charisma, and create forms of practice that demonstrate the adherents understanding of the teachings of Muhammad his family. By looking at devotion, we center the believer in the conversation, so we look at ritual and literature alongside holy texts and scholastic tradition. What emerges is a sense of social justice grounded in the teachings of Imam Ali,⁶⁰ which is then formalized and refined through through various Imami traditions.

Teaching spaces can be more flexible and adaptive to new ways of thinking about Islamic Studies than textbook spaces can be. Focusing on Shi'ism again, there are few textbooks that are appropriate for teaching Shi'ism at an undergraduate level.⁶¹ Looking at contested authorities allows me to use what is available for maximum impact. It is in the textbook space that we see some of the difficulties presented earlier in the discussion of secondary education appearing in tertiary education. Part of deciding what is taught, especially for non-specialists, is what is available.⁶² To go on a syllabus, one has to consider cost, quality, and accessibility to the audience. While there are a fair number of books on Shi'ism available to scholars of Islam, it is not clear how well many of them fare on the decision matrix. Texts can be too expensive or targeted to a specialist audience. Peer-review also plays a role in which texts are accepted for publication, and the form of their publication. As a result, there are multiple points of resistance in crafting new approaches to introductory texts in Islamic Studies. The advantage that tertiary education has is that instructors are not limited to a single book and can create reading resources from multiple texts to offer approaches to the Study of Islam that destabilizes the limits and presuppositions of the Study of Religion. However, non-specialists are potentially more limited to a textbook approach, mirroring the issues facing secondary school teachers.

Conclusion

Knowledge of Islam is constructed to serve particular political ends. While those aims may not be explicit in educational material, nor obvious to educators, it is present in representations of Islam. Emerging from the Study of Religion, Islamic Studies in the United States inherits the biases and structures of the discipline. Protestant Christianity is held up as the norm, and Islam is

58. Ibid., 9. For an approach that centers common ritual practice and respects differences, see Edward E. Curtis, ed. *The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

59. cf. Reinhold Loeffler, *Islam in Practice: Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988).

60. M. Ali Lakhani, ed. *The Sacred Foundations of Justice in Islam: The Teachings of 'alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib* (Bloomington, Ind: World Wisdom, 2006); Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam Ali* (London: IB Tauris, 2006); Reza. Shah-Kazemi, *Spiritual Quest: Reflections on Qur'ānic Prayer According to the Teachings of Imam 'Alī* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

61. One text that has proven helpful in my own teaching is Najam Iftikhar Haider, *Shi'i Islam: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

62. Wheeler, "What Can't be Left Out: The Essentials of Teaching Islam as a Religion," 4.

constituted against it. As a result, because of phenomenological similarities, Sunni Islam is elevated to the status of normative Islam.

Within this system of knowledge, Shi'i Islam is presented as a heterodoxy that can be discounted or effaced from the presentation of Islam. The unitary form of Islam is then anthropomorphized as a means of control through description. Scripturalism and culture talk become ways of exerting predictive control over Muslim populations. These reductionist approaches appear in secondary school textbooks and are also manifest in higher education.

One of the ways to break this monopoly of meaning making is through a cultural studies approach to the Study of Religion. Cultural Studies, as used in this context, seeks to consider questions of power and cultural context in engaging with constructing knowledge. Within this system, we can consider the actions of Muslims in constructing the religion of Islam, thereby destabilizing a narrative of a fixed, unchanging religion. Offering competing notions of authority, and this paper uses Shi'ism as a case study to illustrate this process, allows one to bring complexity to the narrative of what "Islam" means. People are active agents in constructing their own narratives. As a result, we see claims to a normative Islam as being claims of competing orthodoxies, and not a simple linear history with an obvious teleology.

Unfortunately, this multidisciplinary approach to the study of Islam is not yet a normative part of the making of texts appropriate for undergraduate usage. As a result, non-specialists in the field of Islam may end up reproducing the knowledge systems that give us an anthropomorphized Islam, equivalent to the Sunni understanding of the faith. Perhaps a useful intervention in this scenario is the self-reflexive analysis of what observations about Islam say about the observer. If the Orient is the Other against which Europe defines itself, then Islam must be the Other against which European Christianity defines itself. The United States is not immune to constructing its sense of self against the Muslim Other. This relationship between Self and Other is not unidirectional, but dialogic, so that they are constantly defining one another.⁶³ Perhaps when we ask that question, of how we are to define ourselves against that which we are defining, we can open a richer conversation into what we know and how we know, without accepting textbooks as the sole authority on the topic.

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63. Tim Jon Semmerling, "Evil" Arabs in American Popular Film: *Orientalist Fear* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 81.; Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," *Radical America* 23, no. 4 (1991), 15-17.

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