ORDINARY MATTERS IN ISLAMIC STUDIES: NOTES FROM THE FIELD

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Abstract: This essay is a reflection on the everyday conceptual matters that inform the workings of the academic field of Islamic Studies and constitute its conditions of possibility. The research is based on observations I made while working at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. The everyday of the Institute is marked by arguments that reject orientalism but also foreshadow its return in different guises. In this context, historical and linguistic approaches, with their own tensions and limits, appear as safeguards, but they are inevitably caught up in a binary that juxtaposes theory to the archive as two opposing but equally necessary modalities of knowledge. While several ideas about what constitutes Islam seem to cohabit without much friction, a quite fixed and stable notion of politics overdetermines the possibility to think otherwise. The essay is primarily descriptive, but it contains a few personal and “extra-territorial” notes on how to inhabit these matters differently and follow desire.

Keywords: post-orientalism, Islamic Studies, critical philology, ethnography of knowledge, history, language, theory, archive, politic

This essay is a reflection on the everyday conceptual matters that today inform the workings of the academic field of Islamic Studies in contemporary North America. The research is based on observations I made while working at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University, especially during the period between 2005 and 2014. In my workplace, the matters I discuss in this essay tend to be considered as mostly non-essential to further the immediate goals of research and teaching in Islamic Studies, and yet, I argue, they play a major role in delineating Islamic Studies as a field of knowledge. By focusing on a specific case, and examining these ordinary matters in detail, the essay aims at highlighting their resilience by reflecting on their constitutive tensions.

Nobody would deny that Islam has been one of the most relevant contemporary fields of discussion of the last twenty years or so. In parallel, Islamic Studies has become a more capacious terrain of inquiry and institutional presence (Ernst and Martin 2010; Kurzman and Ernst 2012), often triggering debates (for example Safi 2014; Hughes 2014a, 2014b; Mas 2014; but also Mirsepassi et al.)
2004; Sedra 2015) and hence offering an important vantage point to gauge the current state of the relationship between epistemological questions and institutional settings. This essay aims to take a different vantage point by reflecting on this relationship through the prism of several conceptual questions that accompany the everyday workings of an academic unit. Paying attention to concrete discussions and decision-making processes, I identify a series of conceptual matters that constantly circulate at the Institute in everyday conversations, often in relation to concrete situations such as students’ proposals or exams, changes in the curricula of undergraduate and graduate degrees, requests from the university administration, or the elaboration of collaborative research projects. While often evoked, these conceptual ordinary matters are rarely discussed at length. They take the form of problems that would need further reflection, but cannot be dealt with for lack of time or appropriate circumstances, or, conversely, they are taken to be superfluous in relation to the goals of academic work.

I interpret the elusive presence of these matters as a symptom of their relevance and discuss their constitutive elements, highlighting the epistemological tensions they generate and that work as powerful mechanisms for reproducing the contours of the field of Islamic Studies. While my aim is mainly descriptive, I accompany the discussion of these ordinary matters with short, extra territorial intermissions that aim at introducing a set of at once more distancing and more personal comments meant as prolegomena for future discussions. They are extra-territorial in that they speak less to the specificity of Islamic Studies than to modalities of knowledge overall.

Before moving to a consideration of the ordinary matters of Islamic Studies, it should be noted that the resilience of these matters is linked to the effects of an academic system focused on measurable performance. This context imposes goal oriented work practices aimed at maximizing quantifiable output in relation to research and student training (Strathern 2000). A full discussion of this system is beyond the scope of the essay, however one could briefly mention that at the Institute, for necessity rather than choice, practices that are seen as countering this model tend to be abandoned, even when valued. Research that organizes what is already known is preferred over inquiries that enter into a relationship with the unknown. Innovations are highly regarded, only if they fall within the boundaries of perceived acceptance, or diverge only to a recognizable extent. Not much room is left for the play of incertitude (Menger 2009).

Post-Orientalism Matters

A post-orientalist condition characterizes research, teaching, and advising at the Institute. “Post” refers to an intellectual attitude predicated on both the rejection and
restatement of orientalism. While the inadequacy of orientalist modalities of knowledge is generally recognized, students and faculty are still living in their wake. It is a form of disavowal in which the rejection of orientalism goes hand in hand with its continuing presence, hence reinforcing its grip but in the process turning what had been a critique of dominant methods into a normative system of evaluation.

At the Institute, the term orientalism is used in the everyday as a shorthand for a broad set of concerns in which conceptual and methodological issues intertwine with political ones to delineate a space of abjection. Engagement with Said’s book (Said 1978) is less relevant than the identification of orientalism as a repository of what is bad. Different elements and vocabularies compose this space of abjection: past western scholarship; views considered ethnocentric, racist, patriarchal or in any way discriminatory; universalizing paradigms; exoticizing and eroticizing descriptions; more rarely, opinions associated with the political right.

Most research and training at the Institute has the explicit aim of overcoming these abjections of orientalism through what are perceived to be alternative approaches to knowledge. And yet, even if continually dismissed, orientalism haunts the Institute’s academic practices. As much as vigorous critiques, generational change, and dominant consensus have modified academic discussions, the basic institutional structures for the reproduction of Islamic Studies have not significantly altered. Some things have of course changed, but institutional change is slow, predicated more on geopolitical articulations (end of the Cold War, 9/11, funding distribution) than on internal developments, and limited by the reproduction of academic habits (Abu-Lughod 2013; Lockman 2004; Mitchell 2004). One telling example is the constitutive ambivalence that many faculty and students at the Institute feel about the term Islamic Studies. The term is often seen as embodying the very colonial history they want to challenge, but is also what makes their research identifiable (and thus academically marketable): alternatives are not easily found. Another example of orientalism’s reproduction is the continuous appeal of its images. The Institute’s advertisements often reproduce photographs of domes, calligraphies and arabesque decorations, or, less often, photographs of veiled women and mustachioed men because they are considered images that will attract an audience, and they often do.

In addition to these institutional frames and advertising concerns, the post orientalist condition is palpable across a spectrum of everyday academic practices: conversations between colleagues and students, seminars, supervision, public talks, but also research projects, proposal discussions, dissertation defenses and so on. Many of these practices are predicated on a set of arguments that explicitly aim to distance research projects, teaching and advising from any posture considered orientalist. They draw a line of demarcation between what is considered orientalist and rejected, and what is considered good and pursued.
Post-orientalist arguments that emerge from formal or informal discussions at the Institute can be summarized in the following three broad categories. First, there are “setting the record straight” arguments. These consist in approaches that aim at reversing received views by critiquing past western scholarship and giving value to what orientalists had dismissed. For example, writing a history of Islamic thought that challenges the received orientalist view that Muslims were passive receivers and transmitters of Greek philosophy or science. However, the problem is that such approaches inevitably depend on past orientalist research. Discarding the Eurocentric presuppositions of past orientalist scholarship and correcting its mistakes also entails coming to terms with its value and practices. Practitioners themselves often identify the needed expertise and training for such researches as “orientalist,” both in terms of method and conceptual premises. As faculty at the Institute argue in discussions, one needs philology in order to demonstrate that European philologists were wrong.

Second, there are the “awareness” arguments which claim that examining European and North American representations of Islam and its people are necessary steps for researching their literature, history or culture, in order to reveal the power relations that are nested in the construction and reception of knowledge. For example, analyzing Western discourses on Muslim women is thought to be a crucial starting point for any discussion about “them.” However, while “awareness” arguments are the ones that confront orientalism most directly, they tend to become an integral part of what is under scrutiny. Denunciations of orientalism call into question the extent to which an argument can be based on its own denial. Paradoxically, extreme nominalism risks of giving substance to the terms one brings under scrutiny: even if just to discuss its inconsistency, a focus on the term “Muslim woman” reproduces it. In addition, awareness becomes awareness of one’s own orientalism—a realization that might have worked as a critical lever forty years ago, but that today sounds as institutionalized as what it pretends to unsettle, and hence more a conceptual stalemate than a critique.

Third, there are the “in its own terms” arguments, which consist in developing research out of the premise that what one is studying (e.g. law, literature) should be analyzed on its own terms, because European categories misrepresent, or fail to identify, concepts or phenomena that need to be reconstructed through indigenous categories. For example, it is argued that the study of scholars and scholarship in Muslim contexts should be based on a conceptual toolkit derived from these same scholarly traditions: only in this way one can make sense of sharia, adab or other notions. However, these arguments often risk reproducing orientalist tropes. If one claims, as many do at the Institute, that adab cannot be translated as literature, because the notion also entailed an ethical discourse and a code of conduct that set its practitioners apart from other kinds of literati (European Scholastics, Chinese
Confucians) is one not rehearsing a well-established orientalist trope about the intellectual mindset of the irreducible Others? And what about arguments that sharia is something so special and so unique that has nothing to do with law? What are the entailments of arguing for the incommensurability of sharia?

Extra-territorial: Desire

The critique of orientalism has become a morality with its own set of normative standards that aim at regulating research and training practices. “Anti-orientalism” has become a value deployed to judge people, thoughts, and behaviors: it is a form of self-cultivation. The arguments outlined above might be needed to turn research projects into academically marketable commodities, however they work on a moral plane (what to do/what not to do) rather than an ethical one (how to do). One has to police one’s actions and thoughts to make sure one is not engaging in orientalism. This moralizing attitude is especially vigilant against exoticism. Escape into its constitutive outside, a conceptual space where the weight of these judgments can be eluded, might be liberating. Granted, exoticism breeds certain forms of racism, and yet, one might not want to extirpate desire. What would be left? Desire cannot be explained, but it can be cartographed. Re-describe the above-mentioned arguments as trajectories of desire: the love of detail, the pleasure of revenge, the bliss of immanence.

History Matters

At the Institute, the tension in the arguments outlined above, engendered by the will to overcome orientalism and its return under a variety of guises, finds its foremost expression in history and language. As methods and objects of research, history and language are the two dominant and unifying axes of all knowledge at the Institute. They are seen as safeguards against the return of orientalism and with a normative role operate as vectors for the three arguments outlined above. They are practice oriented compromise strategies in which the will to overcome orientalism and its inevitable return find an unstable equilibrium.

At the Institute, history is the dominant response to the orientalist predicament, to the extent that there is widespread skepticism about non-historical approaches. All three broad arguments discussed above are predicated on a historical approach. Yet at the Institute, it is less clear what history itself stands for. One has to deal with the orientalist entailments of history itself. Chakrabarty’s book *Provincializing Europe* (2000) is usually still the standard corrective, allowing practitioners to dislocate the European genealogy of concepts, while retaining their explanatory power. This implies that awareness of the European provinciality of concepts such as time, place, or reason, is considered a safeguard to make
their continued use possible. However, in the practice of research and supervision, it is difficult to uproot the power of history that speaks from the perspective of European past.

First, it is difficult to inhabit the simultaneous appreciation and condemnation of history that genealogical approaches call for: at the Institute, the perspectivism (Nietzsche 1997) on which genealogy is predicated is easily forgotten. It is not easy to develop researches that both show how the values of scholarship have been constituted, and at the same time go beyond negative assessments of said scholarship to foreground positive models for inquiry. This is especially challenging for students, who must learn about the history of the field, while being told to be skeptical about it. Given the complexity of such layering, the balance often shifts to one side or the other. On one side, prevalent at the Institute, one tends to disregard the history of western interpretations, or acknowledge them only for context. On the other side, a posture suggesting that “yes, they were orientalists, but they produced important knowledge” is used in order to recuperate what are perceived to be orientalist contributions, minus their own history and conceptual apparatus. In hypothetical discussions neither scenario is accepted, but both strategies are actually deployed.

Second, drawing on a valuation of historical approaches (not seen themselves as foundational) to theology, law, philosophy, literature and culture, many faculty and students at the Institute attack opinions and research projects that are considered making foundational assertions about a population or a phenomenon, calling these approaches “ahistorical” or “too broad” and “sweeping.” Foundational approaches are seen as nationalist (with a negative connotation) and at times equated with orientalism. For example, any trans-historical analysis of Iranian society’s penchant for messianism is questioned as reductive. This anti-foundational posture becomes problematic when the proponents of approaches considered foundational are scholars who come from or work outside North-America and Europe. The shadow of orientalism’s most discussed trope: “they do not know their own tradition as well as we do” returns in the form of an anti-foundational stance.

Third, history promotes the refusal to engage with non-western conceptual articulations as part of one’s own methodological toolkit. If one adheres to a strictly historicist paradigm, engaging past and present thinkers from elsewhere, not as objects of research, but as part of one’s perspective, is daunting or impossible. A project that draws on Mulla Sadra to discuss being and temporality without engaging in a historical genealogy of the seventeenth century thinker, or his reception in the West, and uses Sadra’s vocabulary in presentist and abstract terms to study European thought or to rethink media theory, is unacceptable for a post-orientalist Islamic Studies, because it is considered as “essentializing” Sadra and unduly appropriating his views out of context.
The Non-historical of History

In Islamic Studies, there is a tendency to rely on history (as method and approach) as a reassuring scientific framework. However nowadays, besides recurrent debates within history itself, many scientists look unfavorably at a linear conception of time (Rovelli 2018). There are plenty of alternative ways of accounting for temporality. And it might be the appropriate moment to recognize that every history has a non-historical component that cannot be evacuated without erasing the very history one is trying to write. Sounds like a theological argument? It is. But it’s Islamic Studies, no?

Language Matters

Language is also seen as a safeguard against the return of orientalism. Language is essential in reproducing the current configuration of Islamic Studies. The teaching of languages fulfills academic needs beyond the research scope of Islamic Studies units, and justifies their existence for the university at large. Languages are also one of the main unifying elements of such multidisciplinary units. At the Institute, language competence constitutes one of the ultimate parameters of valuation, foremost when hiring faculty and admitting students. For the latter, their capacity of carrying out significant work is often measured against the language training they require and, in parallel, no supervisor accepts to work with a student unless they share the same research language.

For these reasons, the approach to language is a sensitive terrain. Said’s Orientalism is often received as an attack on philology, whether this was the case or not. While philology continues to be a crucial modality of knowledge, its reign does not go unchallenged. Its practitioners feel the need to qualify its use, by developing comparative approaches that take non-Western scholarly traditions seriously, and deploy the kinds of “in its own terms” arguments discussed above to study the history of vernacular philologies (Most 1997–2002; Pollock et al. 2015). The practitioners of decolonized philology often continue to be on the defensive, caught between the need to constantly reassert the necessity of philology and the meticulous work that it requires, while being aware of the epistemological entailments that this brings. The threat of disappearance, the policing of competence, the fetishism of the text, and the aura of expertise are elements of this condition (Pollock 2009).²

Language training highlights these tensions. About twenty years ago, the Institute opted for a proficiency approach to language teaching. This framework aims at developing the student’s performance in listening, speaking, reading and writing, and, at least in principle, promotes communication in real life situations.³ The adoption of this new framework was a significant departure from the older
approach, which was based on teaching *about* the language, starting with gram-
mar and syntax, focusing mostly on reading, eventually moving into literature.
Instead, in the proficiency framework, texts and contexts are both used to familiar-
ize the student with communicative events, and with the culture that is supposed
to be expressed in the language of training. At the same time, philological skills
continue to be considered a must, especially to study what are called the classical
and post-classical periods of the textual traditions. While the two frameworks of
language training are not incompatible, in practice they are significantly different
in the way they structure one’s relationship with a language, one’s research ori-
entation, and outcome. Without judging which of the two is better, it is important to
reflect on their effects in matters of formal valuation, recognizing that the question
“what does it mean to know a language?” does not have a single answer.4

At the Institute, philological training is expected for students and applicants
whose profile is seen as requiring it. Instead, it is welcomed, but not required, for
those seen as working on time periods and topics that are seen as not requiring it.
This double system of valuation depends on the reproduction of academic habits
more than on a perceived division of labor, and is sometimes seen as problematic.

At the same time, proficiency based language training comes with its own
presuppositions. By functionalizing “real life,” it makes the learner’s person oper-
ative in the valuation. Besides reifying culture, by foregrounding the notion of a
competent subject, proficiency based training demands a rounded, lived knowl-
edge of the language, with its own rules and required emotional responses. If, for
whatever reason, one fails to appear emotionally attuned to the interplay of what
is constructed as real life, and “does not speak” the language, or does so in a way
that is perceived as inadequate for interpersonal communication, this is valued
negatively. The emphasis on “real life” sometimes translates into arguments that
see the past only as a useful resource for the present: knowing textual traditions is
good, to the extent that it will help one understand “living Muslims” (see Pollock
2009 for a critique).

There are many languages in Islamic Studies, related to the objects of study but
also to the researchers’ upbringing and training. Arabic’s predominant role poses
dilemmas for those who are primarily interested in other languages, notably in
relation to training students in ever shrinking times to degree completion. At the
same time, Arabic’s hegemony troubles monolingual specializations and nation-
state boundaries, allowing for cross-regional discussions. On a more abstract
level, the relationship between the term Islamic Studies and the variety of lan-
guages currently taught in academic units with this name, is a crucial component
of the post-orientalist condition. There are obvious cultural and historic reasons
that link languages like Persian, Turkish or Urdu, and of course Arabic. However,
these idioms cannot be called “Islamic” without problematically equating peoples,
cultures and languages. In the same vein, many other languages, including French and English, but also Indonesian or Chinese, could be included in an expansive understanding of what falls under the purview of Islamic Studies, thus continuing to pose challenging questions about inclusion and exclusion of certain texts and contexts as accepted topics of inquiry and teaching. Conversely, languages constitute the concrete terrain where the current domination of English in academia can be challenged, and the multiplicity of languages and their respective archives opens a space for promoting and elaborating alternative forms of knowledge.\(^5\)

**Philology and Sense**

Even conceptually minded contemporary philologists like Pollock (2009), while reading Vico, seem to forget that philology is a creative practice linked to the poetic dimension of existence (Vico 1968: 104), and while reading Spinoza, seem to forget that modern philology was born in the difference between sense and truth (Spinoza 2007: 100). More than granting philological truth to non-European traditions—elevating them to the status of “they also were scientific”—the potential of philology rests in the contribution it brings (along with its attendant modalities of thought and action) where it is not demanded. Vice versa, a non-philological approach to issues that are expected to be the precinct of the professional practitioners of philology opens up a new set of research paths. A (poetic) sense-making philology moves away from orientalist positivism/perfectionism and its focus on the objectivizing metaphysics of literal truth, but moves also away from the current overwhelming focus on subjectivity of biopolitical approaches to language. While opposite, both approaches share an idea of language as foundational—either as absolute system or as absolute interiority—failing to come to terms with the senses through which it is articulated. As Vico suggests: “the mind uses the intellect when, from something it senses, it gathers something which does not fall under the senses; and this is the proper meaning of the Latin verb *intelligere*” (Vico 1968: 98).

**Theory and Archive Matters**

Recent years have seen a growing demand for theoretical models in Islamic Studies. While this is an old concern in some quarters, it is new in others, and raises questions about inquiries’ method, scope and audience (see Ernst and Martin 2010 and the lineage they refer to: Cantwell Smith 2001; Adams 1985; Lawrence 2000; see also from a different angle Mas 2018a). At the Institute, in publications, Ph.D. proposals, grant applications as well as in lectures and conferences, theoretical frameworks and methodology are given increasing weight. These requirements are often in a contrastive tension with one’s own archive—the collection of materials (already organized,
or yet to be ordered) that constitute the object of one’s research, but also the attendant knowledge and techniques that are necessary to gather and make sense of these materials, as well as the instituting acts that include and exclude items from the collection (on digital humanities, see Stoler 2009; Cecire 2011). The archive varies depending on the research, and the disciplinary or thematic frameworks on which a project relies. It can be a collection of texts, economic data, ethnographic observations, or a combination of different materials.

The opposition between theoretical models and archival materials goes back at least to nineteenth century debates about nomothetic and idiographic sciences, between an orientation towards generalization on the one hand, and one towards specification on the other, along with the epistemological interrogations that accompany such partitions (Windelband 1998).

In discussions at the Institute, one recognizes that the tension between theory and archive develops out of the misplaced assumption that one can separate the material analyzed from the perspective used to analyze it, the content from the form. There are many frameworks (theory!) to demonstrate the fallacies of this partition (see for example Kleinberg, Scott and Wilder 2018; Malabou 2012). However, in research practices, conversations and, most of all, in evaluations, there is an unintended and persistent fault line between theory and the archive. The most recurrent version of the partition is not a crude one between theory and facts. It is a slippery version that starts from the recognition of a continuum between conceptual tools and materials, and ends up separating approaches foregrounding speculative reflections from those interested in empirical analyses. Competence and disciplinary habits play a major role.

Critics of speculative reflections note that conceptually oriented projects only engage with an archive to the extent that they need confirmation for their hypotheses, without delving into fine grain analysis of the corpus and the techniques needed to study it, often requiring language competence. Suspicious of frameworks that tend to the abstract and the general—usually described with the pejorative adjective “broad”—these critics invoke historical or textual depth, plurality and complexity in their evaluations: “I can see the argument, but it depends . . . it was certainly not always like that! . . . and she forgets all that material which shows . . .” Archival knowledge is seen as including its own set of conceptual perspectives and techniques of analysis, but whenever these perspectives tend to take an autonomous weight and forfeit an account of the variety of the corpus in favor of a synthetic view, critics see the danger of inadequate generalization.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, others are impatient with what they consider as old fashioned or absent conceptual articulations, research projects that they see as limited to a “mere” description of an archive. These critics interrogate the archive’s self-sufficiency and are dismissive of approaches that do not formulate research
questions with enough conceptual import. For these critics archival knowledge does not lead to better understanding if there is no argument that shows the conceptual relevance of the evidence presented.6

At the Institute, the unreflective split between theory and archive permeates many of the validation processes for admission, hiring, and promotion, and plays a role in delimiting what is considered acceptable knowledge, and who is knowledgeable. In the ideal world, theory and the archive merge in the perfect match, but, more frequently, either one is considered at fault, at the advantage of the other. At the same time, a research project that is explicitly only theoretical, or only archival, is considered unacceptable. When the question of the relationship between theory and archive is unwillingly posed, the archive tends to be privileged, though theory tends to have more prestige. The privilege of the archive is linked with the role of history and language discussed above, as well with the notion that Islamic Studies is a configuration that makes more sense in relation to its objects of study than to a shared approach to such studies. This allows for relative openness, because the question of whether something is or is not pertinent to Islamic Studies can be answered in relation to the variability of its objects of study. At the same time, it cannot be argued that the privilege of the archive is an element of cohesion and mutual engagement, because there are many different archives with their own attendant expertise; they are not a shared ground, but a point of contention.

The prestige of theory is related to the relationship between Islamic Studies and other disciplines and their departments. Notwithstanding eminent calls for revisiting the partition (Mitchell and Rao 2013; Bayat 2013), discussions between Islamic Studies and the disciplines remain complicated. While, especially since 9/11, there has been the sense that Islamic Studies has opened up to conversations across campus, and Islam is discussed everywhere, the relationship is not equal, because theory (rather than the archive) is the idiom needed to join the conversation at interdepartmental tables. In these venues, often theory is not provincialized, and the prevalent unwillingness of the social sciences to engage difference and its incommensurables, makes conversations falter or replicate forms of Euro-American universalizing projections in an epoch of globalization.7

The Political Economy of Humanism

In considering how much the split between theory and archive continues to matter, one should look at its technological and political entailments, not just at its epistemic ones. The split is about the technologies that organize the materials one collects, which are hardly separable from the abstract criteria that inform them, even though a persistent humanism is inclined to reproduce the illusion of autonomous human thought. The split is also about the control of territories of knowledge:
it matters for the allocation of resources and the strategies to obtain them. These technological and political dimensions are also economic. More than with any conceptual or archival dead end, the destiny of the split will have to increasingly come to terms with institutional rearrangements of the divides between humanities and sciences, and the impingement of digital economy on them. After all, the algorithm is a product of Islamic traditions of knowledge.

**Islamic Studies Matters**

Even if considered inadequate, three underpinning frames of reference to think about Islam matter in the everyday of the Institute. First, there is an idea of Islam as religion. By religion, I mean the notion with Christian roots that developed in the last two hundred years through its encounter with secularism, in its literary, humanistic and social scientific articulations. Those who think of Islam as a religion are in dialogue with the social sciences, mainly with the field of Religious Studies. A humanitarian view oriented towards ecumenical efforts often characterizes these perspectives. Even though it is the least pursued approach at the Institute, and it is often rejected, one cannot really say that the approach is absent, given that the understanding of Islam as religion is so common in the academy and the world at large. The goal of this approach is to make philology relevant for understanding Islam in the present, by interpreting the tradition through the tools of contemporary theory. Here one often finds that theory is split and superimposed on an archive in view of making it functional to a humanitarian need and the formulation “real life of Muslims” is geared at authenticating faith.

The idea of Islam as religion is predicated on the relevance of belief, and institutes a sharp line of partition between believers and non-believers, between Muslims and non-Muslims, and often between Muslims who are interested in working out the relationship between Islam and liberal values, and those who are not. If the critique of this latter partition is widespread, the fault line between believers and non-believers, or, as some put it, “practitioners” and “non-practitioners,” has more unspoken and gradient effects. At the Institute, they range from a clear demarcation of respective fields of pertinence, to an uncharted zone of indistinction that works towards a temporary suspension of the politico-theological implications of considering Islam a religion. Indistinction is often brought about by the importance given to knowledge (as opposed to belief) but is also a correlate of a disinterest in the question “who are you?”

The second view is that Islam is a civilization. Researchers working on art, philosophy, literature, sociology and sometimes history, in particular for the pre-modern period, often adopt this broad perspective. In civilizational understandings, Islam is usually employed as a qualifying adjective (Muslim, Islamic,
Islamicate) to refer to textual or material objects, epistemological or social formations. These adjectives are used to name discourses and dispositions that are seen as having common matrixes. The matrixes, often not conceptualized in themselves, are time-space trajectories built around archival elements, where commonalities, cross-references and lineages are established through research. Most of the research and discussion around civilizational notions is oriented at the specificity of archival materials, and often less analytical emphasis is put on defining what the adjective Islamic and its cognates refer to. In some cases when the adjectives are more conceptually grounded, the civilizational view, notably in Marshall Hodgson’s version, offers an important viewpoint to include institutions and texts that are not “Muslim” from the point of view of belief, but which cannot be separated from the context of their production and are intrinsic to the understanding of Islam itself (Hodgson 1974).

At the Institute, terms such as Muslim, Islamic, Islamicate are seen as advantageously flexible and as bypassing the ethnic and geopolitical language of empires or nation-states, though often the discussion shifts to the relative contributions of ethnic or national components (Turkish, Iranian, Pakistani, Indian, Arab . . .) of the civilizational complex. In some variants, the civilizational ideal of Islam is related to the implicit or explicit celebration of heritage, and points to a humanistic ideal, in which some of the values of the European Enlightenment are amplified to encompass different traditions. So reason, literature, refinement and cultivation are valued as intrinsic components of Islamic civilization in an expanded view of what humanities in the twentieth-first century should look like. In this regard, it is a frame that shares the humanitarian values of the idea of Islam as religion, though differently articulated: subtracted from the imperative of belief, political theology resurfaces as a commitment to a secular humanity bound by an underlying notion of shared “human” values, such as that of life itself.

When civilizational analysis is deployed to elaborate a notion of Islam as analytical-historical concept, for example in Salvatore’s remarkable work (Salvatore 2016), the notion of civilization offers the possibility of a historically nuanced approach to the analysis of institutions and modes of life. For Salvatore, Islam is not a civilization among others, but a concept through which it is possible to theorize society anew. Standing in a dialectical relationship to the disciplinary process of civility, Islam operates as changing configuration of power and knowledge that is able to absorb transformations by bringing them back into the fold through vernacular civilizational adjustments (Salvatore 2016: 258).

There is certainly much to be gained from this perspective that upsets the focus on ethnos or cultural heritage that characterizes other less nuanced civilizational approaches. However, it remains to be seen how, even in light of Salvatore’s solid
conceptual scaffolding, civilizational views can come to terms with the constitutive line of partition of all these approaches, namely the way they deal (or not) with the “non-civilizational” spaces and times with which, and through which, they delineate civilizational domains of life. Civilization remains a heavily normative and institutionalizing notion that establishes an outside and a series of constitutive distinctions with what is not civilized. It is a configuration of knowledge that is predicated on this distinction, and that deploys it for regulating both the borders and a set of internal evaluative differentiations.

If a view of Islam as religion articulates its politico-theological dimension through belief and personhood, a view of Islam as civilization deploys a politico-theological trajectory by turning knowledge into a set of powerful and exclusionary distinctions.

Third, there is an idea of Islam as the global south. Less conceptually developed, and more diverse than the other two, this view has acquired growing relevance. In general terms, this perspective takes Islam as a synonym for the subaltern, or, in some variants, as the non-West. It is a nominalist perspective, in that it reads Islam as a signifier that stands for a set of social and economic trajectories, even if these trajectories have only an indirect relationship to Islam understood as a body of doctrines and practices, or as a mode of life. It’s a perspective that focuses on what Islam has come to stand for in the contemporary globalized world, focusing on race, class and gender, and reading these through the prism of how exploitation and discrimination have been articulated in reference to Islam and those who get coded as Muslims. Or alternatively, it is a perspective that seeks to establish “south–south” historical and conceptual relationships, questioning received European historical and geographical categorizations, in line with debates in world or global history. Within these emerging possibilities, this perspective runs into the limit of emptying the signifier Islam of anything beyond its representational value, and it is not clear to what extent Muslims and their institutions would fit into the idealized category that names them, or how their politics would in fact be consonant with the expectations that making them by default subalterns seems to entail.

The Power of the Indefinite

Elaborating definitions might be an important modality in the pursuit of knowledge, but it is not in discussing what Islam is that Islamic Studies will find its future. The tensions generated by these different approaches to Islam are more linked to the underlying concepts mobilized (religion/spirituality, civilization, emancipation) than to questions of definition. A certain degree of indefiniteness solicits a less diagrammatic space, one in which, either by choice or chance, different ideas cohabit. An excess of coherence generates closure.
Political Matters

Islam is the political question of the contemporary epoch. From geopolitical issues to questions of migration, from concerns about emancipation to discussions of structural inequality, from debates on sovereignty to those of the relationship between religion and the state, from ideas of civic representation to human rights, from debates about torture to those around the common good, from issues of sexuality to those of difference, every relevant political question involves a discussion of Islam and Muslims. Hence possibilities open up for Islamic Studies to be a locus for rethinking the very notion of politics, or at least to participate in debates about some of the leading questions of the day. Hence also the limits that Islamic Studies faces, since any knowledge produced in its context is overdetermined by politics.

In Islamic Studies, all practices of research, training and administration have to deal with politics. This is true for any academic field, but in Islamic Studies almost no one can avoid being asked by students, colleagues and others about their political opinions. This impacts everyday and long terms engagements, forcing reflections on what one does, how one does it, and with what effects. In the last fifteen years, many have remarked that this situation puts Islamic Studies on the defensive, always in need of justifying itself, and of offering rationalizing, explanatory, or pedagogical views about its objects of study.

At the Institute, the outcomes are multiple and there is no shared ground. While there is disinterest, and mistrust of politics, the idea also circulates that one is by default involved in politics, understood broadly as a commitment to taking a position in current debates concerning questions of local, national, and international government and citizenship. Involvement takes different forms. Some believe they are participating in politics through their scholarly or administrative work, others by speaking to the media, others with activism. There are indifferent and deliberate silences, outspoken interventions, moments of common commitment or, vice versa, long enduring disagreements. Political interpellation translates into individual or collective reflections on what is or is not appropriate in an academic setting. Besides quite superficial discussions about freedom of expression, the questions revolve around the propriety and efficacy of words and actions. There is a tendency to overestimate the effects of one’s actions, but also awareness that outcomes might be the opposite of what one expected. There are equal, if not greater, challenges in relation to non-academic contexts, both close and far from campus. The Quebec City mosque massacre of January 29, 2017 has certainly made all of this even more urgent.

Some see silence as a powerful tool that allows for more forceful statements when they are needed. Others equate silence with the status quo. Either way, the idea that politics corresponds to taking a silent or vocal position is itself the product of the
defensive position of Islamic Studies. At the same time, if politics in the contemporar-
y world is foremost a question about Islam, Islamic Studies is the place to think
about politics, and not just about the politics of Islam. Discussions about secularism,
migration, exploitation, and the government of people and things, fall within the
purview of Islamic Studies, which offers a vantage point to interrogate current local,
national and international arrangements and invites reflections on the current world
order. The very existence and growing relevance of Islamic Studies is an effect of the
relevance of Islam to think about politics.

Making Sense of Politics

By overdetermining Islamic Studies, politics confines political approaches to
available vocabularies. By declaring that “everything is political,” there is a ten-
dency to read any initiative in predetermined ways, either those of the institution
or those of its opponents. There is little opportunity to develop a substantive cri-
tique of politics itself as a horizon of expectations. Not much space is left for the
cultivation of views that question from a political perspective the contours of polit-
ics itself, and the interpellation that it demands. From the ethnographic viewpoint
taken in this essay, it is precisely this rethinking of politics itself that constitutes
the chance for Islamic Studies to rework the relationship between politics and
knowledge, and work to temporarily suspend the reproduction of ordinary matters
outlined here. These experiments dismay both those who want to avoid politics at
all costs, and those who in heralding the “political” dimension of any action (espe-
cially those presented as going against academic management) simply use this
argument to foreground a different but equally managed modality of operation.⁹

Ordinary Matters

The ordinary matters outlined above intersect in the web of conceptual articulations
that constitute the practice of Islamic Studies. From the post-orientalist condi-
tion descend the historical and linguistic approaches that shape most research at
the Institute. These approaches impinge on the separation between theory and the
archive, since both history and language might appear as inert research materials
which could be interpreted (in theory . . .) through different theories. History and
language are also intrinsically related to the broad interpretative schemes that are
implicitly deployed to approach Islam as either religion, civilization or as global
south. These schemes are especially relevant for the kinds of research they enable
(a history of religion, of civilization, of subalterns) and for the political stakes to
which they are attached (ecumenism, humanism, anti-racism) but are also part
and parcel of the post-orientalist condition in that they carry in different ways
the tension between a rejection of orientalist mores and their return. The political
overdetermination of Islamic Studies solidifies post orientalist history and language into commitments perceived as moral stands.

Outlining the conceptual (and operational) tensions of these ordinary matters, the essay aimed at delineating the conditions of possibility of the field of Islamic Studies as currently configured in a North American unit with this name. Undoing some of these tensions in order to divert them towards a different use is the future task of those who are interested in these matters.

Acknowledgements

I thank all students and colleagues at the Institute of Islamic Studies and the Islamic Studies Library at McGill for their engagement with the project, in particular Pascal Abidor, Malek Abisaab, Rula Abisaab, Salua Fawzi, Michelle Hartman, Ahmed Fekry Ibrahim, Kamran Karimullah, Prashant Keshavmurthi, Pasha M. Khan, Khalid Medani, Laila Parsons, Junaid Quadri, Shirin Radjavi, Jamil Rajep, Anaïs Salomon, Sean Swanick, Robert Wisnovsky and all students in the ISLA 603, fall 2013 seminar. Discussions with participants in the workshops on “New Approaches to World Islamic and Middle East Studies” organized by the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill on March 14–15 and May 16–18, 2014, sharpened my ideas. Samera Esmeir, Katherine Lemons, Andrew Ivaska, Wilson Jacob and Armando Salvatore have been great conversation partners and have offered substantive comments on the manuscript. Shahzad Bashir and Alireza Doostdar have also been generous readers.

Notes

1. For example, applicants who are perceived as possibly not successful under the current system are rejected, often independently from the qualities that they are recognized as having; research projects that risk not being well received because they do not fit a presumed format are discouraged, as are dissertations that are imagined not to get students a job.
2. Though outside of Islamic Studies proper, Pollock’s defense of philology is exemplary of current trends: his appeal to history, his reluctance towards “theory” (see below), his call for universalism are all in different ways present in discussions at the Institute, hence I take him as indicative of the field, without obviously reducing the latter to his positions.
3. The description from the University of Minnesota Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (www.carla.umn.edu/articulation/MNAP_polia.html) synthetizes discussions at the Institute.
4. These questions betray the domination of textual approaches in opposition to oral, visual, or material ones. For example, for Pollock (2009: 948), philology is a discipline about written texts. Questions about what constitutes a text, and how it can be historicized, are part of this new philology, but images and objects are often read as if they were texts, or excluded altogether, see Fotiadis (2013).

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5. See Appadurai et al. (2013). Jennifer Pineo-Dunn raised this point at the Institute’s New Approaches to World Islamic and Middle East Studies workshop in 2014. On translation as a model for thought, see Cassin (2014).

6. In these debates, the archive’s organization and availability is crucial. Many argue that the first task is to create and organize the archive: theoretical speculations will only be possible once the archive is sufficiently excavated. Others respond that this means postponing the question indefinitely and fostering a colonial attitude that foregrounds North European or American archives as a normative model.

7. Mas (2018b) rekindling of “critique” and her focus on the relationship between theory and politics take Islam’s difference into account but seem unwittingly to replicate the prestige of theory in arguing for the relevance of Islam.

8. In the last few years, the adjective “Persianate” has emerged for example to refer to the cultural area where Persian language (and culture) was used as a lingua franca and or cultivated language, suggesting a formation that is culturally hegemonic without being national, or imperial. The use of the term is however more and more used in celebratory terms for a certain refinement and political and religious tolerance (Dabashi 2015).

9. Here again Mas’s thoughtful interventions (2018a, 2018b) seem to suggest a way forward, however her understanding of politics, grounded in the critical tradition, might limit the scope of what is envisaged: it’s a theory of politics.

References


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