

## From common sense to good sense: studying 'Islam' in the university

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### **Introduction: Heidegger's hammer**

It is rare but it happens. Philosophers come up with memorable analogies. Heidegger's hammer is one such example. Think of a carpenter. In an ordinary setting, he would simply lift the hammer and start using it for his work. He would hardly think about the hammer which acts as if it was an extension of his hand. One day, as the carpenter strikes with his hammer he hears an unusual sound. He senses that something is not right and looks at the hammer. For Heidegger, with this gaze the hammer becomes an object, a presence-at-hand and no longer an extension of the carpenter's hand. It becomes a separate object which needs to be studied, contemplated, and examined.

It can be argued that for some years now, the study of Islam and its place in academia – and of course in the larger cultural space of the West – is a Heideggerian hammer. Not only the religion and histories of Muslims being studied, but the modes, perspectives and meanings of these studies themselves have become an object of study.

If one searched for the issues related to higher education and different religions of the world on the Internet, the religion that would yield highest and most varied kinds of results will be Islam. The search will throw up numerous conferences, seminars, books and reports about the relationship between Islam and higher education. Beyond the sheer number of events one gets a sense of urgency about this topic, and a feeling that all is not well. The study of Islam has become a Heideggerian hammer.

### **Question about Islam in university is also a question about university**

Islam is not alone in having become a Heideggerian hammer; it can be argued that university can now be considered likewise.

Thus, scores of books and hundreds of articles are devoted to explaining the crisis and the future of university. The marketization of higher education is just one of the trends that are being hotly

contested. There are also debates about academic freedom, methodologies, boundaries of knowledge, the status of the student and social and civic role of universities. In October 2013, for example, the forum Intelligence Squared organised a debate titled, ‘University as an unwise investment’ – a thought that would have been almost unthinkable until quite recently.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, it is not simply that we are discussing how Islam is to be approached in the stable institutional context of the university. Rather, the university itself is an unstable and contested institution and the recent trends are deeply relevant to understand the issue of Islam in university.

The question about Islam in the university is therefore also a question about the university itself; its function and its relationship to the rest of the society.

### **Macro factors shaping the study of Islam**

I would like to propose that there are at least three macro factors that are of particular relevance when we discuss Islam in the university today.

*From Islam and the West to Islam in the West:* Firstly, the recognition that with the presence of millions of Muslims in the West, the fact of Islam’s links with the roots and identity of the West can no longer be ignored. This means that the study of Islam as the ‘Other’ of Europe is now viable neither intellectually nor pragmatically. Not ‘Islam and the West’, but ‘Islam in the West’ is the approach that now needs to be taken.<sup>2</sup> This is not just a semantic shift. Rather, it requires rethinking of the interpenetration of historical trajectories in ways that can recast the narratives of self and other in social and political imagination. It also requires the recognition that contemporary understandings of Islam, whether articulated as compatible or in opposition to the West, are infused with modernity.

*Scholarship and reformist impulse:* Secondly, the post-modern critique of the Enlightenment notions of academia as distant and objective study of subject matter – and the modern university is a child of the Enlightenment – has, in many cases, helped blur the boundaries of scholarship and community reform or even apologetics. This is particularly the case post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, where scholars often have to play the role of spokesperson of Islam and engage in public discourse to challenge superficial but socially influential views. Alongside it benefits, this trend also raises some concerns to which I will come back later in the paper.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.intelligencesquared.com/events/university-is-an-unwise-investment/>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Lewi, D. (2008) *God’s Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570–1215* New York and London: W. W. Norton.

*State, Islam and securitization:* Thirdly, as Islam has become a matter of security, governments in turn have become more interested in its teaching and learning; hence, the role of the state in promoting or favouring particular approaches to the study of Islam can no longer be ignored.

So, how do we talk about Islam in university given the above contexts?

There are a number of ways in which this can be approached. Perhaps one way is to look at the student profile and reflect upon the responsibility universities have towards their students and what pedagogical approaches become important as we seek to fulfil this responsibility. This has the advantage of simultaneously discussing Islam and the university in the same context, as noted above.

In this regard I spoke with some senior scholars in this field to get their views about the changes they have observed in this field over last several decades. We had very interesting conversations on a variety of themes, but there was one point that was noted by almost everyone I spoke with. It was about the changing profile of students who take courses on Islam.

One scholar with teaching experience spanning 35 years put the matter this way:

... in my early days of teaching I used to have majority of students who had no strong opinions about Islam. They knew it was a religion and for various reasons they were interested in learning about it. But, students who are coming to course more recently usually come to the class with fairly strong opinions and fragments of information which they weave together in some narrative.

He said that one would think that these opinions would be divided along Muslims and non-Muslims lines, but that is not the case. You could have Muslims with deep scepticism about Islam, and you could have non-Muslims almost on the verge of converting to Islam.

### **From Common Sense to Good Sense**

Antonio Gramsci has two terms which I think are relevant here as heuristic tools: his ideas of common sense (*buonsenso*), and of good sense (*buon senso*). Interestingly, in Italian there is a play on words as well because both these words ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense’ are made up of the same letters: when joined as one word – *buonsenso*, it means common sense, and when separated into two words, *buon senso* – it means good sense.

For Gramsci, common sense refers to a conception of the world which is uncritically absorbed by people through various social and cultural environments; it is fragmented, disorganized, ‘diffused’

and ‘un-coordinated’. In common sense, what is specific and partial is universalised and what is cultural is naturalised.

It seems that students now come to Islam classes with ‘common sense’ in the way that Gramsci understood it, where there is no one ‘common sense’ among students: rather, their diverse ‘common senses’ these can range from intensely negative narratives to deeply held positive beliefs.

If we accept that students increasingly come to higher education with some sort of ‘common sense’ regarding Islam, following Gramsci we could also say that the task of the teaching and learning about Islam in higher education should be to move them to ‘good sense’.

By ‘good sense’ Gramsci means a systematic, coherent and critical thought achieved through calm and conscious contemplation and critical enquiry. The ‘common sense’ acts as the starting point through which the teacher—for Gramsci the ‘organic intellectual’—leads the student to develop ‘good sense’.

I would like to thus propose that the task of the university curriculum about Islam should be to transform the ‘common sense’ with which students come to the class into ‘good sense’.

But what is good sense with regard to the teaching Islam?

This is precisely where the Heideggerian hammer comes in. Since the Orientalist consensus – if it can be called a consensus – broke down, we are in a period when what is ‘good sense’ has become a highly contested issue. Every book, every seminar and every conference on this topic might be seen as an exploration of what is this good sense. Perhaps this contestation is a healthy thing – a sign that the field is engaged with its context and experimenting with new ideas.

If so, then I cannot do worse than throw in my lot and share some observations about what trends seem to be helping or hindering universities to fulfil this role of moving students from common sense to good sense?

### **Trends in the study of Islam**

Let me start with positive trends, of which there are many. I will highlight just a few.

- Highly engaged students
- Growing inter-disciplinarily approaches
- Interpretive turn
- Impact of digitization

*Highly engaged students:* First, the very fact that students come to classes interested in a subject is a big help for the teacher. Often, the most difficult step is to get students interested. In particular, I have noted that students from many Muslim majority contexts sometimes come into higher education with psychology of what one might call the *hanif*, to adopt a term from Muslim perceptions of the pre-Islamic Arab religious context.

A *hanif* was a person who was searching, who had developed dissatisfaction with the existing religious milieu, but had not yet arrived at an alternative. Some students that I come across are in that stage, deeply dissatisfied with the interpretations they have grown up with, but not sure what to do with that dissatisfaction.

However, this is just one type of student background that we get in the classroom. The larger point is that the field is fortunate that it now has interested and engaged audience.

*Growing inter-disciplinarily approaches:* Secondly, the study of Islam has begun to attract attention of new constituencies of scholars who otherwise may not have paid much or indeed any attention to it.

Such scholars can be found primarily in sociology, anthropology, gender studies, historians of regions such as South Asia and periods such as Late Antiquity/the Early Middle Ages, and within theory communities such as post-colonialism; such scholars have started to examine the so-called Islamic issues from new perspectives.

I will offer a few examples. Perhaps the most fateful is the exploration of the emergence and early centuries as part of Late Antiquity. This historiographical shift has momentous consequences some of which are provocatively illustrated in Aziz Al-Azmeh's recent book.<sup>3</sup> Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* provides an example of the application of post-structural feminist thought to an Islamic context.<sup>4</sup> Aziz Esmail's *The Poetics of Religious Experience: Islamic Context* is a fine example of applying contemporary literary theories to Islamic contexts.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Teena Prohit's investigation of the *Aga Khan Case* is a good example of a work rooted in post-colonial theory.<sup>6</sup>

One can easily add many new studies of contemporary Muslim contexts, particularly in the West, where we see an extensive use of social sciences and humanities approaches; although these sometimes seem to lack the historical dimension, which can lead to somewhat unsatisfactory analyses. I will come back to this point later.

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<sup>3</sup> Al-Azmeh, Aziz (2013) *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People*. Cambridge University Press. The book had not come out at the time of the talk and hence it was mentioned as an anticipated work.

<sup>4</sup> Mahmood, S. (2011) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Esmail, Aziz (1998) *The Poetics of Religious Experience: Islamic Context*. London: I. B. Tauris

<sup>6</sup> Prohit, T. (2012) *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India*. Harvard University Press.

*Interpretive turn:* Another positive development is that as far as serious academic work in Islamic Studies is concerned it is now rare to find scholars writing about Islam as if it was an entity independent of wider contexts, history and interpretation. Even if the titles would sometimes use the term, often because of a publisher's insistence, as in recent book titles such as '*Islam and Higher Education*'; '*Ulema in contemporary Islam*'; '*Partnerships and profits in Medieval Islam*'; '*Islam in America*' among others, the actual works are more complex and we can observe an agential discourse of Muslims. Thus, it is being increasingly realised that ideas of Islam cannot be separated from the being and contexts of those who hold such ideas. One of the ways in which this happens is the use of the phrases such as 'Muslim culture', or 'Muslim civilization', often in plural, as in talk of multiple 'Islams'. This too may not be entirely satisfactory, but it is certainly a step forward.

This is the reason why I have put the word 'Islam' in inverted commas in my title. As scholars we do not study 'Islam' as such; rather, we study, understand and attempt to explain Muslim constructions of experiences in which Islam plays a very important role. Islam, itself, as an idea in the minds of those who invoke it remains inaccessible to scholarship directly.

A key outcome of this development is that much more attention is paid to the internal diversity in Muslim contexts. In my own field of education, this is beginning to happen, and the question of how to teach about Islam in schools by taking into account various Muslim perspectives is increasingly a concern which is at the theoretical and practical forefront. And, this is also true of legal studies, historic studies and rituals

However, as Dietrich Jung has observed, this shift may not be widespread outside Islamic studies proper:

'Beyond the disciplinary confines of Islamic Studies proper, many Western scholars and media pundits have retained the image of Islam as a holistic system.'<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, it must also be said that this is less true of some Muslim scholars and institutions. It seems that in that context, Sorosuh's concern still remains alive:

First of all we have the phenomenon of Islam. Muslim intellectuals still talk about Islam as if it were a simple, unified entity; a singular object. But in reality the history of Islam, like the history of other religions such as Christianity, is fundamentally a history of different interpretations. Throughout the development of Islam there have been different schools of thoughts and ideas, different approaches and interpretations of what Islam is and what it means. There is no such thing as a 'pure' Islam that is outside the process of

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<sup>7</sup> Dietrich, J. (2011) *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere*. Equinox.

historical development. The actual lived experience of Islam has always been culturally and historically specific and bound by the immediate circumstances of its location in time and space.<sup>8</sup>

*Impact of digitization:* Finally, the huge amount of new primary texts that have become available, particularly in digital form, is a big boost to the field. It has allowed scholars to adopt methods of approaching texts in ways that were either impossible or extremely time and labour intensive in the past.

Together, all the above and many other developments, seem to suggest that the study of 'Islam' is making a good progress in complex, exciting and uncharted directions.

Having noted some positive developments, let me now remark on some trends that remain hindrance to the development of good sense, as mentioned earlier.

### **Some concerns and a way forward**

Perhaps one can begin by referring to a positive development noted above. That is that we are observing that scholars are increasingly discussing Muslim constructions rather than an essentialistic notion of 'Islam'; however, on occasions this leads to the privileging of some constructions over others.

In other words, there is sometimes a tendency to create a normative 'Islam' which then serves as implicit apologetic discourse within academia. A real or normative 'Islam' is postulated, and the interpretations that do not fit with it are considered to be misunderstandings or distortions of the 'real', essential 'Islam'.

One form this takes is the blurring of distinction between scholarship and reformist approaches. Understandably, many scholars wish to play a positive part in countering the public and media discourses on Islam and Muslims which are often unhelpful and contribute to furthering social divisions. Scholars also recognise challenges in some Muslim contexts in particular areas (such as gender or human rights or science) and wish to contribute to a reformist approach by advocating fresh interpretations of historical texts and concepts to make them compatible with our modern sensibilities. This is all very welcome but on occasion this happens at the cost of critical scholarship. The real problem is when it happens under the aegis of universities. It is now not uncommon to see universities appointing scholars who are essentially advocates and reformers in Muslim communities. Sometimes different media are employed by the same scholar-cum-reformist to write critical scholarship on the

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<sup>8</sup> Abdol Karim Soroush quoted in Noor, F. (2002) *New Voices of Islam*. Leiden: ISIM. p.25.

one hand, and to promote reformist ideas on the other: journal articles and personal blogs, for example, but of course, the reformist ideas are being listened too because of the university authority.

Now, a caveat is needed here. I am not of the view that a reformist and scholarly impulses are incompatible. There are many very good examples of bringing together the two. The late Professor Muhammad Arkoun was arguably a fine case of this. However, Arkoun and others started with scholarship and then sought reform from a sound scholarly basis. This is the reason why such people are sometimes not appreciated within the community, as they raise difficult questions. Hence, my concern is with the particular form this relationship is taking where reformist impulse becomes the guiding force for scholarship.

There is no doubt that academicians who engage in reformist tasks and sometimes even become spokespersons for Islam, are doing so out of very good intentions and with a desire to counter strong negative currents and misinformation about Islam, yet I am not sure that it is a desirable or even an effective approach for a university.<sup>9</sup>

Here it is important to return to the point about the larger context of higher education, as some of these developments are linked to the marketization and commercialization of education whereby community relations and societal impact are seen as a major function of universities. Hence, the funding mechanisms begin to influence how the field is defined and what voices are promoted as 'authentic'.<sup>10</sup>

The second concern I have relates to the growth of contemporary studies about Muslims. Although over all this is a desirable trend, sometimes this happens without the required historical depth. Increasingly, interesting work on contemporary Muslim contexts is taking place in departments of law, sociology, gender, education and others. However, one weakness that we can notice here is that sometimes the resulting analysis is devoid of historical contextualisation. For example, a recent paper submitted to a very reputable journal which I reviewed had an aim of challenging the stereotyping of Muslim women in the media by giving voice to British born girls of South Asian origins. The finding of the underlying research was that contrary to media stereotypes, Muslim girls were not oppressed in

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<sup>9</sup> This apologetic trend has been sharply critiqued by Aaron Hughes in his various writings, most stridently in *Situating Islam; The Past and Future of an Academic Discipline*:

I...submit in the pages that follow that we all too frequently witness the construction of a noumenal Islam by scholars who should know better, but who still continue with such attempts for a variety of political and apologetical reasons. Nowhere is this more palpable than in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, where many scholars of Islam were all too quick to bracket off something that often coincided remarkably with so-called 'Western' values and to which they subsequently attached labels such as 'authentic' or 'real'. All that could not be neatly subsumed under this veritable (and constructed) religious tradition was then circumscribed using labels like 'terrorist', 'illegitimate', or 'fringe'. (Hughes (2007), p. 3).

<sup>10</sup> Here one cannot ignore the argument made by Mamdani in his book, *Good Muslims, Bad Muslims*. Interestingly, Chase Robinson invoked this idea in his review of Siddiqui Report <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/todays-lecture-the-good-muslim/209648.article>

Islam. Rather, these girls claimed and showed that not only were they able to deploy their agency, but also that their faith actually empowered them. What the writer did not recognize, partly because lack of knowledge about Muslim history in the last two hundred years, was that these girls were themselves at least partially a product of the modernist Islam. Their construction of their religion was rooted in particular historical experience where by empowerment of women was among the modern interpretations of historical texts. The writer was unable to go back to earlier sources – including the Quran and the Hadith – to see a historically changing understanding of gender in Muslim contexts. The author was working with a construct of true ‘Islam’, and saw this construct re-articulated by her research subjects.

What is required here is a collaborative engagement to approach Muslim past through the tools of historical anthropology and to inform the exploration of Muslim present with historical consciousness.

The third and final concern I wish to note is the still pre-dominant trend of approaching Muslims as primarily religious beings and the cultures of Muslims as primarily religious cultures.

This of course is part of a long standing construction of Islam as the ‘Other’ of secular, post-Enlightenment Europe. As noted by Jonker and Thobani, for centuries Europe has constructed itself partly by scripting stories about its ‘Others’, including those about Muslims. This script narrates Europe’s relations with Muslims primarily as conflict-laden, a string of armed disputes, with Islam perceived ‘as Europe’s enduring enemy, antithesis and negation.’<sup>11</sup> If Europe is democratic and secular, Muslim societies are autocratic and religious. The notion that Islam provides the key to everything that happens historically is thus reinforced.

It is perhaps not inappropriate to call it the continued ‘religiofication’ of Muslims. Here religiofication – a term I borrow from Eric Hoffer’s seminal work *The True Believer* (1951) -- means a process of turning practical everyday matters into Holy causes.<sup>12</sup> This issue was subject of a recent book by Sami Zubaida where he notes that

A common thread in the essays is the book is to ‘de-sacrilise’ the region, questioning the predominant role attributed to religion in so much of the writings on these histories and societies, where the adjective ‘Islamic’ is applied to every culture and society.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jonker, Jonker, G. & Thobani, S. (2009) *Narrating Islam: interpretations of the Muslim world in European texts*. London: Tauris Academic Studies.

<sup>12</sup> Hoffer, E. (1951) *The True Believer. Thoughts on the nature of mass movements*. New York, Harper & Bros.

<sup>13</sup> Zubaida, S. (2010). *Beyond Islam: A New Understanding of the Middle East*. London: I B Tauris

One consequence of this religiofication is that there are hardly any matters – aesthetic, ethical, pedagogic, jurisprudential, philosophical, artistic, and economical – in which data from Muslim contexts are integrated into the mainstream discourses in Europe. It also means that Islamicate secular spaces, movements, subjectivities and cultural products often do not gain the attention they deserve. Arguably, this was one of the reasons why the ‘Arab Spring’ came as a surprise to many scholars of Islam.

There is no doubt that there are many Muslims for whom their religious identity is overriding and who root their values deeply in religion. It is also true that anyone who calls himself or herself a Muslim, no matter how faintly, accepts religion as an element of identity. Islamic sacred texts are a source of existential symbols with which life in Muslim societies is oriented and social actions acquire meaning. But religion has never been the only source of such symbols and values. This is particularly true for the modern period. The cultures of Muslims, like almost all cultures, are continuously created and are now a mix of religious and secular attitudes, approaches, orientations, desires and trends. Muslims too now live in what Martin Marty (2003) calls ‘our Religio-Secular world’ (p. 42).<sup>14</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

These are very interesting times for those engaged in the study of ‘Islam’, no matter what particularly aspect they explore. Their work is likely to impact not only academic understanding of a religious tradition but also the manner in which some of the big questions of our times will be answered – questions to do with dealing with difference, the fate of inter-cultural possibilities and the place of religion in societies. It is thus not surprising that students are coming to learn about Islam with passion and existential quest.

I have argued that the role academia can play in this regard is extremely crucial as it can help the students move from their ‘common sense’ to ‘good sense’, in Gramscian terms. There are many trends – from growing inter-disciplinary approaches to availability of primary texts at the touch of a button – that can further this goal. But, there are also demands generated by factors such as the need to engage in public discourse and issues of funding that has the potential to make the move to good sense difficult.

If there ever was a time that the world, including Muslims, needed Islam to be taught, learnt and researched in the best tradition of modern higher education, it is today. In other words, more than at any other time we need universities to approach Islam as universities should do.

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<sup>14</sup> Marty, M. (2003). Our religio-secular world. *Daedalus* (Summer), 42-48.