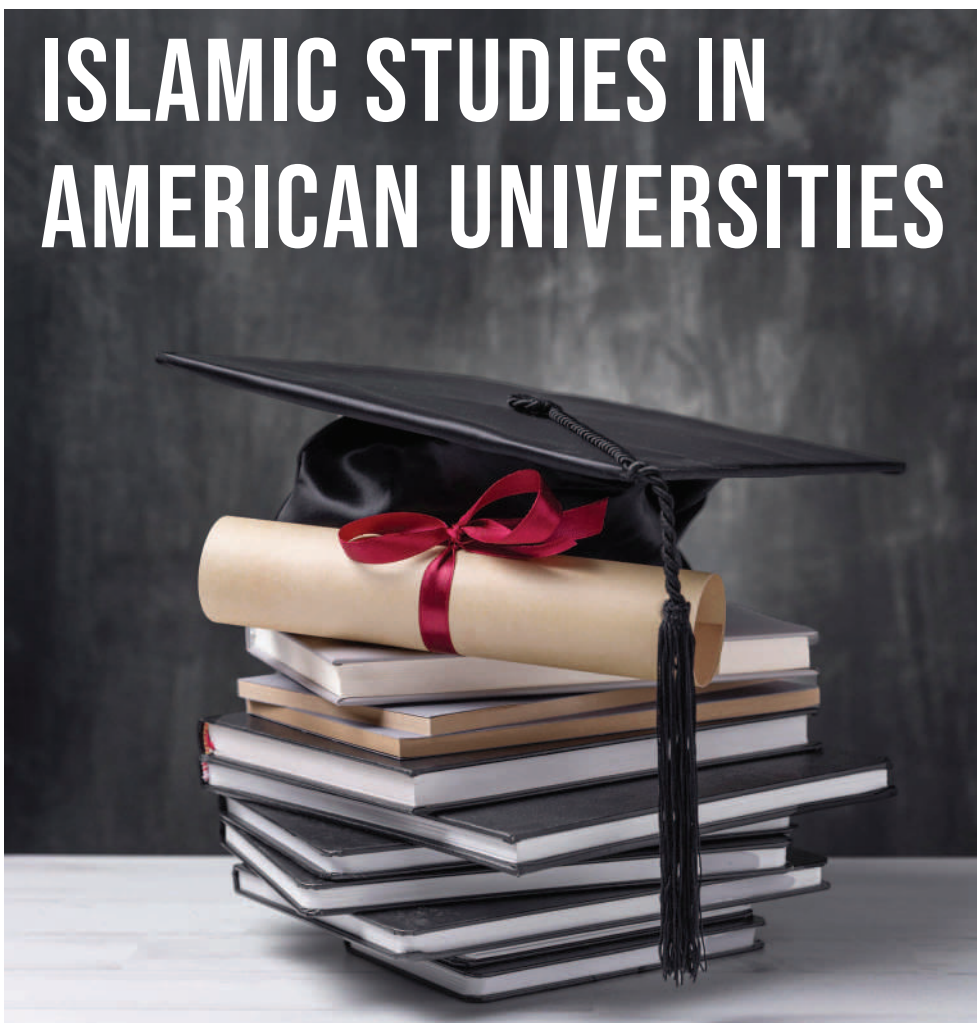


# OBSERVING THE OBSERVER

THE STATE OF

ISLAMIC STUDIES IN  
AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES



EDITED BY

MUMTAZ AHMAD, ZAHID BUKHARI & SULAYMAN NYANG

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## The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities

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Mumtaz Ahmad, Zahid Bukhari & Sulayman Nyang



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# FOREWORD

THE STATE OF ISLAMIC STUDIES IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES was a project undertaken by IIIT and the Center for Islam and Public Policy (CIPP) between the years 2004 and 2007 resulting in the publication of the 1st edition of *Observing the Observer: The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities*. As IIIT presents this second edition we reflect on the journey it has taken since its initial release. The insights, findings and discourse contained within the essays that make up the volume resonated with readers, sparking discussion and inspiring further research.

Indeed, at the time of writing and the protests which have taken place across American campuses the need for open discourse has never been more pressing. The complexities surrounding identity, culture, and religion demand thoughtful engagement, particularly in the field of Islamic studies and the work remains as relevant today as when first published, if not more so.

Today as then the current state of relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world, as well as debates about Islamic education and study programs in American campuses, necessitated a thorough and rigorous study of Islam in American universities. Through both qualitative and quantitative research, the project sought to develop an understanding of the origins, history, and growth of the discipline, tracing the historical roots of Islamic studies in American universities, examining their current state, presenting and analyzing the theoretical frameworks and methodologies of approaching the study of Islam and Muslim world affairs, and collecting and disseminating data on the major academic programs for the study of Islam and Muslim world affairs in American universities.

To reiterate, as part of the project research, a scholarly and edited volume was compiled forming this work: *Observing the Observer*, a

## FOREWORD

collection of papers covering a wide variety of topics, including the historical development of the field, Western approaches to Islamic studies, the study of Qur'an, gender, and Sufism in Islamic studies programs, conversations with scholars, and analysis of Islam 101 courses.

We hope that both general and specialist readers benefit from the perspectives offered and the overall issues examined in the book.

Where dates are cited according to the Islamic calendar (hijrah) they are labelled AH. Otherwise they follow the Gregorian calendar and labelled CE where necessary. Arabic words are italicized except for those which have entered common usage. Diacritical marks have been added only to those Arabic names not considered modern. English translations taken from Arabic references are those of the author.

The IIIT, established in 1981, has served as a major center to facilitate serious scholarly efforts based on Islamic vision, values and principles. The Institute's programs of research, seminars and conferences during the last thirty years have resulted in the publication of more than five hundred titles in English and Arabic, many of which have been translated into other major languages.

We express our thanks and gratitude to the contributors for their cooperation throughout the various stages of production. We would also like to thank the editorial and production team at the IIIT London Office and all those who were directly or indirectly involved in the completion of this book including, Shiraz Khan, Dr. Maryam Mahmood, Tahira Hadi, and Salma Mirza. May God reward them for all their efforts.

IIIT LONDON OFFICE  
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# INTRODUCTION TO 2ND EDITION

## READING TRADITION: PATHWAYS TO THE STUDY OF ISLAM

THIS Introduction addresses two key aspects of the study of Islam at U.S. universities. The first part briefly situates how the study of Islam is linked to and shaped by U.S. policy considerations and geopolitics. This topic was previously explored in the 2014 introduction of *Observing the Observer: The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities* by Muntaz Ahmad and his co-editors. A decade having passed since then, I will highlight only a few salient issues.

The second aspect offers a more substantive examination of the intellectual agenda that Islamic studies at U.S. universities might consider, keeping past experiences and anticipated developments in mind. The demographics of faculty and students engaged in the study of Islam have shifted noticeably, leading to inevitable changes that have sparked debate within the academy about the role and place of Islamic studies in U.S. higher education.

### PART I: GEOPOLITICS AND SCHOLARSHIP ON ISLAM IN THE UNITED STATES

It is worth briefly recapping the venues and learned societies in the United States where the study of Islam is cultivated. The 2014 introduction to this book detailed the relationship between Islamic studies and U.S. government policy. A recap is necessary because Islamic studies has yet to achieve an autonomous position in the academic landscape of U.S. universities and remains deeply intertwined with national learned societies as well as global and national politics.

The American Oriental Society (AOS), founded in 1842, is one of the oldest learned societies in the U.S. dedicated to the study of the

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cultures, histories, and literatures of the Near East and Asia. Addressing more contemporary issues is the Middle East Institute, established in 1946 to promote knowledge of the region, though critics argue that it tends to align with the policies of incumbent administrations. The larger and more dynamic Middle East Studies Association (MESA) was founded in 1966. The platform for Islamic studies was further expanded through the American Academy of Religion (AAR), established in 1905 and renamed in 1963 with its current title. In 1973, Ismā‘īl Rājī al-Fārūqī (d. 1986) presented at a co-convened panel on the “Muslim-Christian Encounter” at the AAR. That same year, an Islamic Studies Consultation – later formalized as a “Group” within the AAR – was established. However, by 1983, Fārūqī resigned in frustration over the AAR Program Committee’s failure to give Islamic studies the attention it deserved.<sup>1</sup> Fārūqī was a pivotal figure behind the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), under whose imprint this book is published.

Since Fārūqī’s time, and that of his contemporary Charles Adams – who recalled being sometimes the sole presenter on Islamic studies at the AAR – the field has grown significantly. Today, the AAR hosts several specialized committees dedicated to Islamic studies, has had multiple presidents specializing in a field of study related to Islam, and has at least one Muslim president. Demographically, these learned societies now include a broad range of participants, with a growing number of scholars of Muslim heritage, many of whom were born in the U.S. and others who trace their ancestry to various parts of the Muslim world.

The views of Carl Ernst on research questions, methodologies, and the diverse audiences in classrooms and the reaction of the broader American public have already been discussed in Essay 10 of this volume, authored by the late Mumtaz Ahmad. Unlike the last decades of the twentieth century, the field of Islamic studies is gradually diversifying in both its participants and areas of focus. Increasingly, scholars of Muslim heritage hold teaching and leadership positions at U.S. universities. Their participation in learned societies like the AAR, MESA, and AOS, as well as their influence in classrooms and research agendas, has generated new interests, questions, and occasionally, suspicion and

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dissatisfaction. These interests vary widely, encompassing professional, societal, and personal dimensions, as well as impacting political and public spheres.

Scholars unaffiliated to Islam as a faith tradition have long set the agenda for Islamic studies in the West. Many maintain a keen interest in Islam as a religion, approaching it through comparative religion or theology, and they bring distinct inquiries to the academic table. These contributions are significant and valued, enriching the field's diversity and advancing its intellectual rigor. However, for some, recent shifts in research focus are difficult to accept. The orientalist approach to Islamic studies is not monolithic—and many scholars who identify with this label do so freely. Others whose research agendas are more hostile to Islam, an attitude once widely accepted, now find their views increasingly challenged in the academy.

Historically, the academic study of Islam in the West has passed through multiple stages, each tied to distinct political and economic phases in the West's encounters with Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority societies. From the period of Muslim rule in Spain, Christian scholars eagerly sought knowledge about Muslims and their scriptures. In the premodern era, European embassies frequently visited Muslim lands for diplomatic purposes. However, European colonization from the sixteenth century onward introduced a distinct agenda: to study the Orient and Africa in order to govern and control their peoples. Islam, as both a faith and a civilization, remained a central focus of this colonial enterprise.

The essays in the 2014 edition of *Observing the Observer* highlighted some of the political issues shaping the academic study of Islam, the Middle East, and its languages and cultures. The introduction and essays documented various thematic issues affecting Islamic studies in the United States. Some authors identified historical trends, elaborated on specific fields of study, and commented on disciplinary developments, while others proposed ideal frameworks for the flourishing of Islamic studies in the American academy. Contributors also noted constitutional challenges affecting the study of religion, including Islam, at public universities, as well as the impact of landmark security legislation on the study of the Middle East and Islam. For example, the

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1958 National Defense Education Act encouraged the acquisition of less commonly taught Middle Eastern languages.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that a decade earlier, in 1947, Britain's adoption of the Scarborough Report had similarly emphasized the study of Asia and Africa in British academia as a national priority.<sup>3</sup>

Recent campus protests in the U.S. present a complex challenge for universities, particularly with regard to balancing the principles of free speech with the need for a safe and inclusive environment for all students. On the one hand, universities encourage diverse viewpoints as essential components of academic freedom. On the other hand, they voice concerns in relation to parties who may feel marginalized or threatened by certain expressions. This dual commitment is placing universities in a difficult position. The dynamic raises important questions about the role of academic institutions in fostering open discourse while also considering the implications of speech that in their opinion may be harmful or divisive. It is an interesting time in which thoughtful dialogue is required and a commitment to fostering a respectful campus climate.

The evolving political landscape in the United States, coupled with the increasing diversity of the American Muslim population, has significantly transformed the study of Islam and Muslim societies, both domestically and globally, in profound and intriguing ways. While the academic focus on politics in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa will continue to fluctuate in response to global events – particularly those impacting U.S. interests – the domestic ramifications of these developments on the broader public and the Muslim community, remain difficult to predict. At no point in history has the responsibility of the academic community been more critical in educating domestic audiences about how the media, and special interest groups perpetuate the scapegoating of Muslims, Arabs, and people of color to advance narrow agendas.

As these challenges loom – or, in many cases, as they are already unfolding – the study of Islam faces a pivotal moment. The field's trajectory will likely involve a complex interplay of challenges and opportunities, shaped by the existing networks of learned societies and the evolving academic landscape at American universities. Moving

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forward, the discipline must navigate these dynamics with both rigor and sensitivity, ensuring that it remains a vital force for fostering humanistic understanding and justice in an increasingly interconnected world.<sup>4</sup>

### PART II: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

One of the key challenges facing Islamic thought today is the growth of an interdisciplinary field that integrates both quantitative and qualitative disciplines affecting Islam and Muslims, cultivated in U.S. universities and beyond. Here I will focus on the study of Islam. This scholarly legacy is marked by tensions between dispassionate, descriptive approaches to the study of religious phenomena and those who approach the subject with a commitment rooted in faith or in humanistic pursuits. These tensions manifest both within the academy and in interactions with traditional practitioners of Islam outside academic institutions, and this constituency is also addressed here. My approach in this introduction was to signal trends, point to debates and signpost possible pathways without claiming to be exhaustive.

In many parts of the world, including the United States, the divide between the academy and society – between university-educated scholars of Islam and traditionally-trained theologians, *madrassa*-educated scholars – has become increasingly apparent. These differences are not merely about confessional versus non-confessional approaches, but also about how the history and tradition of Islam are interpreted by a wide array of scholars. While the tension between confessional vs non-confessional is often unproductive and avoidable, it persists. Notably, there has been a rise in institutions of higher Islamic learning within Muslim communities in North America, including Islamic colleges, *madrāsas*, and traditional seminaries (*dār al-ʿulūms*) focused on Islamic theology and law. Many graduates of these institutions aspire to pursue advanced education at universities to better serve their communities and educational institutions. If this trickle of students turns into a steady stream, there is reason for optimism that they will become valuable contributors to advancing Islamic thought. The conditions in

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North America could foster respectful intellectual exchange rather than unproductive hostility. Dismissing these traditional institutions as merely confessional divinity schools unworthy of academic recognition would be an unfortunate and shortsighted attitude. In many parts of South and East Asia and Turkey, among other countries, graduates from traditional institutions are admitted to different fields of studies in the humanities and the social sciences. Instead, there are opportunities for U.S. universities to embrace multiple approaches to the study of Islam, promoting greater complexity and expansion in Islamic thought. Changing demographics and new student cohorts might encourage universities to reconsider rigid methodologies and explore more open, creative, and experiential approaches.

Decades ago, Isma‘il al-Faruqi championed the idea of the “Islamization of knowledge,” which sought to align knowledge production with Islamic conceptual and normative frameworks. Initially met with enthusiasm, this project led to the establishment of several Islamic universities worldwide. However, like any hyper-normative and ideological endeavor, its limitations became evident over time. Attempts to wed knowledge to ideological projects often constrain intellectual exploration. A less prescriptive alternative, epistemic integration, represents a more laudable direction in intellectual thought.<sup>5</sup>

The process of knowledge integration requires ongoing refinement and intensification, meaning rigorously pursuing the virtue of difference in the pursuit of knowledge. The goal is to uncover the reality of the world as it is, for it is in this effort that creativity flourishes. Rigorous pursuit of Islamic thought demands an equally rigorous embrace of knowledge in its most comprehensive forms. This is where proposals for Islamic thought often falter: when the pursuit of knowledge is subordinated to narrow identity or ideological agendas. Only through unfettered intellectual exploration can meaningful breakthroughs in Islamic thought be achieved. Embracing analog thinking that anticipates a continuous spectrum of knowledge in the field of Islamic studies is better than its opposite—digital thinking that espouses binary and either/or units of thinking. Binary thinking encourages the search for an intellectual saviour, a feature that still predominates the field of Islamic studies. Scholarship is additive; some scholars make a

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larger impact than others, but no one provides the totality of answers to complex questions either in a single book or in a lifetime's scholarly output.

Islamic thought, as a field encompassing multiple disciplines and approaches, necessitates both disciplinary openness and a creative, active engagement with learning. Learning (*ta'lim* and *tarbiya*) opens one to living concepts and ideas, which are inherently antithetical to fixed modes of thinking. Fixed modes generate similarities, shared features, hierarchies, and limits but fail to produce dynamic, living concepts.<sup>6</sup> In theory, there is no single modality for experiencing faith, practicing religion, or understanding a complex civilizational tradition like Islam – even within a broad framework of normativity. It is precisely when individuals exercise their choices that a tradition becomes dynamic and flourishes.

Of course, one cannot be naive: all forms of knowledge have pedigrees, or genealogies. Knowledge emerges as a creative and active process, cultivated and nurtured within specific contexts. Each context in which knowledge is produced becomes embedded, consciously or subliminally, into the mechanisms of knowing. Existence – or being in the world – is inseparable from knowing (epistemology), as our beings and bodies participate in the learning process. Thus, knowledge continuously produces new ways of knowing and being. Viable truths sustain life, but since no two moments are identical, there is always potential for creativity and renewal. Knowing and existence are continuous processes. Knowledge also generates power, which can both empower and be abused.

As an active process, knowledge inherently resists ideological pressures, power impositions, and prescriptive ways of knowing. Learning new ideas, engaging with the discourses of others, acknowledging and organically integrating them into one's understanding are all part of the creative act of learning and knowing. The method is simple, not complicated: to deploy knowledge in a way that harmonizes all human faculties. Achieving collaboration among the complex faculties of an individual – or within a university – is perhaps the most daunting task. Pursuing rigid methods is as futile as searching for a treasure with a map; most treasures do not come with a guide.

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Yet, many contemporary Muslim thinkers hesitate to immerse themselves fully in the pursuit of knowledge – particularly when it comes to issues related to the *dīn* (practices that offer deliverance, called religion in modernity), with its ethical, theological, spiritual, and legal dimensions. Traditional *‘ulamā* (scholars) trained in Islamic universities, *madrasas*, and *hawzas* worldwide could benefit from exposure to complex forms of knowing and exploration, making the inherited Muslim tradition more dynamic and capable of addressing the increasing complexity of the post-modern world.

When it comes to Islamic thought, many Muslim thinkers and practitioners still practice a form of knowledge segregation – distinguishing between knowledge of the Islamic tradition and “other” knowledge produced in secular spheres. The former is deemed licit, while the latter is often viewed with suspicion or outrightly rejected, save for a few who are open to cross-pollination between knowledge traditions. For most traditionalists, the two shall never meet. In their view, knowledge is not cosmopolitan but confined to geographical, imaginary, and faith-based boundaries. The decolonial critique of Western knowledge is often misunderstood; it is not a wholesale rejection of Western intellectual traditions but an exposé of their limitations, prejudices, and harms. It cannot entail a total rejection of what we know. Instead, there is a need to robustly pursue pluriversality – the embrace of diverse knowledge formations. However, it would be misguided to think that an entirely new discursive tradition can be built only on a foundation of disenchantment, disappointment, and resentment.

### *ReImagining Islamic Tradition*

Let’s explore how one might engage with the Islamic tradition. It is not helpful to discuss “Islam” without qualifying the time, place, and concepts involved. When lay people or non-experts invoke the term “Islam,” they often mean something prescriptive and normative, assuming there is one right answer. The reality is more complex, but in a practical sense people need answers. In a more informed context, the term “Islam” can refer to civilization and culture possessing internal diversity and plurality.

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Historically, it is preferable to discuss the Islamicate – cultural practices, political systems, and global interactions fostered within societies where Islam was the dominant “religious tradition,” as Marshall Hodgson describes. A civilization, for Hodgson, consists of “formative ideals” that are not static but continuously evolve. Islamicate civilization encompassed multiple cultures and diverse religious traditions, including Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist, all of which contributed to its cultural dialogues. Hodgson, as explained by Edmund Burke III, argued that “the notion of a dialogue with the formative ideals permits him [Hodgson] to conceive of an Islamic civilization that is sufficiently generously defined to admit all manner of sub-dialogues, parallel (often competing) cultural traditions, and regional variations.”<sup>7</sup> In doing so, Hodgson was open to various practices of Islam without succumbing to the sterile debate over the “real” Islam.

For Hodgson, “culture” centered on a lettered tradition historically distinctive of Islamdom, where Muslims and their faith were dominant, and where Muslims and non-Muslims shared and participated in society. As Bruce B. Lawrence noted, “Islam is radically cosmopolitan...Islam, born in an Arabian niche, became a cultural and trade entrepôt linking the Mediterranean world to the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea.”<sup>8</sup> After the seventeenth century, Muslim intellectual and cultural actors tapped into “Muslim networks,” which involved a choice to connect across recognized boundaries. Socio-political movements linked with each other in the early nineteenth-century ummah, providing a bond of faith and practice. With the rise of nation-states and nationalist identities, the discourse of civilization has receded but not entirely. People now discuss Islamic civilization in the past and Islamic culture in the present. Given the diversity of Islamic cultures, which merge universal Islamic features with national elements, “tradition” serves as the link to the past to address concerns related to continuity and authenticity. Debates about Islamic tradition are complex and contested.<sup>9</sup> However, the quest for a civilizational discourse continues. Several authors committed to Islam in the late twentieth century aspired to a civilizational debate where faith and ethics were the starting point for a dynamic civilization.<sup>10</sup> These

avenues are worth revisiting for more critical discussions especially the role of the political in making of tradition and civilization.

*Thinking of Tradition*

In the debates surrounding the Arab awakening (*nahḍa*) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the term “tradition,” or *turāth* in Arabic, gained significant attention, especially by the mid-twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> The Arab awakening focused on intellectual revival and reform in education, politics, society, and religion, involving translation, literary innovation, historical and philosophical inquiry, modern schools, modernism, and nationalist social reforms. It generated substantial intellectual ferment – reinforcing and preserving older scholarly traditions, undermining existing ones, importing new traditions, or creating hybrids. A most unhelpful feature in the engagement with the *turāth* is a regrettable feature of what I call, “scapegoat historiography.”<sup>12</sup> By this I mean the predisposition to study the tradition with a view to establish causes and reasons why Muslim civilization ceased to flourish in the view of these ideologues. Based on very sketchy evidence, centuries of complex scholarship is unthinkingly scapegoated as the cause of civilizational decline. Some of the standard scapegoat narratives that masquerade as ‘causes’ are to hold Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) responsible for arresting philosophy and reason-based discourses, for his critique of some of the views of the Muslim philosophers. Another is to blame sufism for the infusion of debilitating gnostic thought into the body-politic of Islam from the eleventh century onwards.<sup>13</sup> While these debates about the *turāth* were energetically pursued in the Arab-majority regions of the Muslim world, they manifested under different names elsewhere, particularly in Muslim communities in North America and Europe, as well as through global academic scholarship on Islam.

In both Arabic-speaking and non-Arabic-speaking religious scholarly circles of the *‘ulamā*, the term *turāth* was not frequently employed as a conceptual resource. Some *‘ulamā* involved in Islamic reform, such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), used the term with reference to the archive. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn

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Khaldūn (d. 1406), whom some traditionalist scholars referenced, used the term *turāth* in two senses: securing a political legacy for offspring (*hifẓ al-turāth ʿala al-abnā*) and as material inheritance, but not as an intellectual tradition.<sup>14</sup> A shift is noticeable in the discourses of legendary spiritual master and anti-colonial activist ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jazāʾirī (d. 1883). He cautioned against abandoning the “*turāth* of our pious ancestors” in favor of foreign novelties. Muhammad ʿAbduh is alleged to have remarked: “The *turāth* of our ancestors is a treasure, but it must be sifted with the sieve of reason.”

It was customary among traditional scholars to discuss various disciplines of thought (*ʿulūm*) and the diversity of perspectives documented and canonized. In one sense tradition is largely a canon of exemplary texts, with some deemed more important and referred to as “classics” and the discursive traditions they inhabit.<sup>15</sup> At least some traditional *ʿulamā*, including those involved in the *nahḍa*, preferred to use the term *ijtihād*, meaning “intellectual effort,” to engage the tradition to arrive at new discursivities. The texts and the history of the *turāth* serve as a repository for memory, insights and wisdom, but also difference between the past and present. They invite repeated engagement and re-readings that may yield new interpretations. Nowadays it is common to refer to the complex tradition as simply ‘the Islamic tradition.’ However, greater specificity is required and should be encouraged.

The vocabulary of ‘tradition’ might imply singularity, but it is not. When ‘the Islamic tradition’ is invoked, closer investigation reveals a multiplicity of meanings and traditions. Islamic practices, both historically and contemporarily, are marked by difference. Ideas, concepts, and practices across different geographical areas, from the Nile to the Oxus historically and in today’s globalized world, demonstrate that differences persist.<sup>16</sup> Normative claims are understood and practiced differently by various actors due to changes brought about by time, geography, and technology.

Students of Islam in the American academy might hope to advance the literacy and understanding of Islam as a complex tradition. Renowned anthropologist Talal Asad reflects on tradition in terms of critique, good order, as a network, and as a means of navigating disagreement.<sup>17</sup> Asad argues that tradition occurs in a traditional mode of

thought, and that critique and invention are processes through which traditions overcome their limitations. He posits that tradition serves as a way of navigating uncertainty and disagreement regarding what is inside and outside of a tradition.

The study of Islam in the American academy can benefit from a deeper engagement with Asad's proposal for critique, constructive disagreement, and embracing uncertainty for creativity and movement. Arabic thought distinguishes between two related words, each signifying differently within a conceptual framework. One is *khilāf*, meaning contrarian and adversarial, resulting in conflict without addressing a constructive purpose. Thus, in matters of *dīn*, or required practices for deliverance, maintaining a conflictual stance (*khilāf*) is viewed as heresy (*bid' a*).<sup>18</sup>

To understand the more meaningful term *ikhtilāf* fully, philologists suggest examining the Arabic language's lifeworld. In ancient Arab life, people observed various animal behaviors. For instance, if a hyena saw a rider, it would flee (*khilāf*), while a fox would confront the rider. An Arabic parable states, "you are as contrary as a hyena, shunning a rider."<sup>19</sup> As Syrian thinker Salih al-Farfur noted, *khilāf* is not constructive and fails to engage with the issue.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, *ikhtilāf* denotes intellectual disagreement if legitimate epistemic differences underlie the disagreement.

Disagreement centers on debates about evidence (*dalīl pl. adilla*), involving serious features in knowledge. Being adversarial often suggests a lack of a basis for difference. The historical Muslim tradition views engagement with knowledge and practice as a regular normal activity while acknowledging that human experiences change over time. Disagreement includes independent thinking called *ijtihād*, especially regarding applied or secondary rules (*furū'*). Argument and constructive disagreement are essential to a vibrant tradition. Muslim thinkers and legal practitioners have long welcomed disagreement in secondary matters as a source of divine mercy. Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī (d.1388) cites the disagreements among the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad as a model for independent thinking (*ijtihād*). The practice of the Companions authorized disagreement (*ikhtilāf*) in understanding and practice as an expression of divine mercy, high-

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lighting its constructive effects. However, Shāṭibī noted that the scope of *ijtihād* in law was limited to interpreting applied rules.<sup>21</sup>

The bigger challenge for Islamic thought, particularly in the twenty-first century, lies in learning, *paideia*, or *tarbiya*. The past four centuries have introduced new philosophical perspectives that have influenced and shaped the human soul, often referred to as the self. Learning, as proposed by Giles Deleuze, is a transcendental movement of the soul.<sup>22</sup> The knowledge the soul has acquired result in new understandings of the self and being. It is at this meta-level that Muslim thought has yet to fully engage, it remains a work-in-progress.

This is partly due to the colonial framing of life in Euro-America, which is based on hierarchy, segregation, and prejudice. Another contention is identity: American society is a melting pot of newcomers and those with deep roots. The new and modern pose challenges, especially for newly arrived Muslims grappling with their identity. The expectation that community, culture, and civility can facilitate easy assimilation to broad cultural norms is more complicated than simply aligning with dominant liberal capitalist trends, which come with both advantages and disadvantages. A robust engagement with Euro-American knowledge systems and the power they exert on bodies and souls is necessary. However, it is naive to believe that intellectual critique and protest alone will change the moral, ethical, political, and knowledge landscape in North America. Change requires transformative action on the ground.

Despite awareness of deficiencies in shared fields of knowledge, the need to consider Western knowledge as integral to Islamic thought remains unresolved. This is resisted by many traditional Islamic scholars, who may lack access to materials in European languages or reject knowledge from those geographical regions. Nevertheless, all aspects of Muslim thought – juridical, theological, ethical, moral, and cultural – are influenced by significant changes. Important thinkers from Shāh Walīyullāh, Muḥammad ‘Abduh, to Muhammad Iqbal emphasized *ijtihād*, independent thinking, as a solution to the challenges Muslims face. Yet, these challenges are so vast that they cannot be resolved merely by invoking *ijtihād* without understanding the scope of the problem.

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Firstly, not all issues in life are bound to matters of deliverance (*dīn*). The premodern notion of *dīn* facilitated the interaction between worldly and after-worldly concerns. This was disrupted by the creation of a realm marked as “religious,” separating it from the rest of life. Rather there is a need to think of *dīn* as a shared and a habitual way of life as one of its philological sensibilities signifies. And as Talal Asad has pointed out, language dissolves “into everyday behavior where shared life goes on in habitual ways.”<sup>23</sup> The separation of the religious from the worldly is characteristic of secular modernity. The worldly domain, described as the secular sphere, has led Muslims to think in binary terms – religious versus secular – resulting in the belief that everything must either have a religious stake or require a religious rationale. This separation of the ‘religious’ in Islam from the worldly is not necessarily true.<sup>24</sup> The misunderstanding often stems from those exclusively embedded in tradition, entwined with discussions about civilization. Every civilization is fragile, but colonization and the post-colonial global order have been dominated by Western civilization and its norms. Under these conditions, the Muslim intellectual tradition is in crisis, as the *nahḍa* thinkers acknowledged.

But this crisis is not unique to Islam. “Every tradition is always in danger of lapsing into incoherence,” wrote philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, “and when a tradition does so lapse, it sometimes can only be recovered by a revolutionary reconstitution.”<sup>25</sup> There have been a few attempts to reconstitute tradition in Islam in the past. Unfortunately, the readiness to abandon or truncate tradition has become rife. Abandoning tradition occurs in multiple reflexes, of which I will only mention two. One was to only focus on the Qur’an and Sunnah as sources of authority and clear the ground of tradition that girded it with a complex humanistic interpretative framework. Some made the Sunnah subservient to the Qur’an, while others deemed a limited number of authoritative commentaries and supplements as a hermeneutical backdrop. The second, is to raise myriads of epistemological defenses to prevent questioning the tradition or to ignore challenges from rival traditions.<sup>26</sup> This is a clear indicator that a tradition is in a degenerate condition.

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Debates about tradition are related to deliberations about civilization and what constitutes forms of life that meet the highest aspirations of communities and societies. One aspect that thinkers and participants in Muslim communities might wish to consider is the crisis of tradition in Islam. The challenges related to knowledge in areas such as law, morality, ethics, politics, and culture require a toolkit broader than merely accessing past traditions. While the past is a valuable resource, cultivating a robust Islamic tradition in all its complexity and diversity is vital. Calls for *ijtihad* can turn out to be hollow if Muslim scholars do not address the vital role human knowledge developed over the past few centuries in dealing with a myriad of philosophical and social challenges. Actors involved in religio-moral and ethical debates in Muslim societies often claim to be forward-thinking while seeking answers from the past. Engaging with the past is important, and a grounding in tradition can unlock new insights, preventing the current generation from reinventing the wheel. However, credible *ijtihad* cannot occur without genuinely engaging with the knowledge traditions of the present that influence our everyday lives.

Many traditional Muslim scholars of religion (*‘ulamā*) worldwide view engagement with Western knowledge traditions as unacceptable due to the colonial divide and matrix. While Western knowledge is adopted in practices like science, medicine, and engineering – impacting the Muslim self and shaping lived environments – these same scholars often resist contemporary knowledge related to culture, history, philosophy, and morality. Such knowledge is often viewed with suspicion and labeled as corrupt or atheistic because of its Western origins. Opponents include a range of Muslim intellectuals, from traditionalists to those adhering to specific Islamic perspectives.

Furthermore, in late modernity the limitations of the Western episteme have become evident. Knowledge is never neutral, since they are related to lifeworlds, cosmologies and worldviews that generate interests and passions. Muslim civilization is not unfamiliar with this debate and knew this well in its encounter with Greek, Persian and Indian knowledge systems, known as the “knowledge of the ancients” (*‘ulūm al-awā’īl*). It created tensions within the tradition in the past, just as the encounter with Western knowledge creates tensions today.

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Some suspicion may be warranted in engaging the modern epistemic tradition, but not everything in any single tradition is detestable. Dismissing Western knowledge with rhetoric that invokes hyper-suspicion, such as proclaiming the futility of using “the masters’ tools since it will never dismantle the master’s house,” as Audrey Lorde stated, is only a partially true assertion.<sup>27</sup> It is a statement of caution, not prohibition. An Arabic proverb reminds us: “What cannot be fully achieved should not be entirely abandoned.”<sup>28</sup>

In every act of borrowing, there is selectivity; what works in one place might not work in another, and different sets of conditions require adaptation. Errors can also be made, but that is part of the learning process. In the pursuit of *ijtihad* even an error made with integrity is rewarded as an instance of divine mercy. We learn from the decolonial movement that experiences and reflections from the global south, in conversation with multiple traditions, including Islamic traditions, can lead to new forms of understanding and greater insight into complex issues of self and tradition.

The changes in Muslim societies require significant investment in knowledge and ethical development. Achieving this vision culturally necessitates a rethinking of self, society, and tradition under new conditions. Some advocate for *ijtihad* at a meta-level, particularly in addressing aspects of life in late modernity. However, the concept of *ijtihad* may be limited due to its historical context, necessitating a more creative epistemic framing of what constitutes, knowing and learning. A creative blending of Islam as a tradition requires a sophisticated cultural hermeneutic. By cultural hermeneutic, I refer to the engagement of the classical tradition of Islam in conjunction with modern disciplines, notably history, anthropology, sociology of knowledge and ethics, through translation and philosophical integration to create a robust Islamic tradition. Important is how the Muslim experience can impact debates in the humanities and social sciences, particularly ethics, with an aspiration that Islamic thought can contribute meaningfully to the knowledge process. These important questions should be considered in serious scholarly endeavors at universities. Such efforts are often stridently dismissed as attempts to promote Islamic ‘theology.’ However, universities thrive on normative inquiries across

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disciplines, and many issues Muslims face resonate with various communities of practice.

### *What the Tradition does Teach*

Interestingly, centuries ago, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) argued that diverse forms of knowledge are essential for human flourishing, believing all knowledge is interconnected. Ghazālī advocated for interdisciplinarity, which contemporary Muslim practitioners often overlook. In his text *Weighscale of Deeds*, *Mīzān al-ʿAmal*, he wrote:

All forms of knowledge in their entirety are mutually reinforcing (*mutaʿāwina*), interconnected (*mutarābiṭa*), with some parts tied to others; the benefit to the learner is instant, so that the learner is not hostile to that form of knowledge of which he is ignorant. Humans are, surely, enemies of what they do not know.<sup>29</sup>

Today, traditional Islamic thought engages only with knowledge related to *dīn* while shunning learning emanating from non-Muslim cultures. The intellectual culture of traditional religious scholars remains isolated from interdisciplinary knowledge conversations. If properly equipped, they can potentially bridge historical Muslim disciplines with modern knowledge traditions, producing a robust intellectual tradition. Some traditionalists and neo-traditionalists defend this knowledge segregation without compelling foundation.<sup>30</sup> This attitude contradicts the intellectual tradition fostered by scholars like Ghazālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Ghazālī opposed evaluating knowledge based on the identity of its bearer, stating:

Your fanciful intuition (*wahm*) [prejudgment] will invariably make you to perceive things based on their superficial exterior, rather than their quintessence (*lubāb*). This is why you fail to evaluate a statement as it stands, in terms of its own essence. Instead, you judge it either by the elegance of its literary craftsmanship or by your personal bias toward its author. Should you dislike the text or deem its author reprehensible, you would dismiss the statement outright – even if, itself, is good and true.<sup>31</sup>

Ghazālī noted that despite theological disagreements with Christians on the Trinity and their rejection of the Prophet Muhammad’s veracity as a prophet, their views on other topics should be accepted at face value as true.<sup>32</sup> Scholars of Islam in the American academy can significantly contribute to creating a robust intellectual tradition in various domains of the study of Islam, where both the historical tradition of Islam and modern disciplines can effectively cross-pollinate. It also requires a certain amount of critical acumen and fearlessness. Facing unfair criticism for his critical and robust scholarship Ghazālī with sarcasm and daring threw down the proverbial gauntlet at his critics: “Indeed, despise the one who is neither envied nor slandered, and belittle the one who is not accused of unbelief and misguidance.”<sup>33</sup> Doing critical scholarship will result in unfair accusations which Ghazālī turned into a badge of honor; yet he did not recoil out of fear from doing critical scholarship. Ironically, Ghazālī expressed these provocative sentiments in the introduction to a work where he himself would establish the boundaries within which, according to his judgment, legitimate theological interpretation could occur.

Yet as Deleuze pointed out, learning cannot be reduced to the acquisition of knowledge. Knowledge helps discover empirical realities, but there is a dimension outside our discursive knowledge field. In the Muslim philosophical tradition, this is the realm of the intuitive, framed by Ibn Sīnā as related to the *sensus communis* (*al-ḥiss al-mushtarak*). This sensory perception coordinates information from our senses – sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste – along with the inner senses of imagination and rationality.<sup>34</sup> Ibn Sīnā also describes the intuitive faculty, referred to as the estimative faculty (*wahm*). For example, when a sheep sees a wolf, its senses provide it no warning of danger, except that the wolf’s instincts signal that the sheep is its prey. More intriguing is how the sheep can sense the threat from the wolf. Ibn Sīnā argues that animals, including humans, possess an intuitive ability to sense danger, as a sheep does when it runs from a wolf. This ability, combined with other senses, is part of the *sensus communis*. The dimension of the intuitive, prophetic and revelatory aspects of Islam as a faith tradition have a robust presence in academic studies in the West, from European orientalist to American scholars of different back-

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grounds. This aspect of study might profit from a deeper engagement of the imaginative dimension of human experience, encompassing poetry, mysticism, and various psychic experiences.

### *From Orientalism to Religious Studies: The Aftermath?*

The role of historical Orientalism in shaping the academic study of Islam in the West requires clarification. Binary thinking of good versus evil in matters that demand deep and complex contemplation never yields good dividends. Orientalism is not monolithic and manifests in various forms in relation to the study of Islam. It has often been caricatured as an outdated obsession with historical, literary, and philological expertise dedicated to a vast textual tradition in multiple Islamic languages, while frequently ignoring the living practice of Muslims. While the commitment to Islam's textual tradition is commendable, it is not sufficient. It is also important to acknowledge that some Orientalists were in tune with many traditionalist Muslim scholars from the seventeenth century onward, where texts played a significant role in the authority structures of orthodoxy. However, where Orientalism often fell short was *in understanding how* those canonical texts influenced and shaped the living discursive traditions of Muslims. Muslim religious authorities were embedded in their societies, providing contextual responses to questions on law, theology, and other aspects of Islamic thought and practice that differed from the literary texts explored by Orientalists.<sup>35</sup>

In many cases, Orientalism relied on its own historical methods and criteria to examine the Muslim legal or theological canon, creating insider and outsider perspectives on these topics. This generated a dialectic in scholarship but also bred significant suspicion. Orientalists often overlooked the fact that their perspective on the Muslim subject was not neutral; despite their claims to dispassionate scholarship, they could not conceal their political interests. Orientalism, despite its internal variations, sought to naturalize a distorted Western perspective of Islam since the Renaissance, a point that is often insufficiently acknowledged. They served European colonial and foreign interests, both consciously and unconsciously. Some, however, adopted a *laissez-*

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faire approach to studying and translating texts to serve a common civilizational purpose.

The renowned English scholar of Arabic and Persian literature, A. J. Arberry, demonstrated self-awareness of his role as a scholar. He candidly addressed the distortions of Islam in the West, stating, “Before the truth about the East and its people can be established in the common consciousness of the West, a vast accumulation of nonsense, misapprehension, and deliberate lies will need to be cleared away. It is part of the task of the conscientious orientalist to affect that clearance. . . . If the orientalist, being by profession an academic, rightly judges that reform, like charity, begins at home, he must be prepared for a struggle no less frustrating. It has been truly observed that revolutions of ideas that affect the outlook of nations often begin with universities.”<sup>36</sup> Arberry advocated for familiarity with the cultural and intellectual legacies of both the East and the West as part of a shared human heritage.<sup>37</sup> He was no idealist, recognizing that the “humanizing of oriental studies” would not cure the “dangerous psychological maladjustment” affecting nations during a time of decolonization. However, he hoped that if adequately supported, Orientalism could provide “a sound diagnosis of the disorder and suggest hopeful methods of therapy.” Arberry aspired to integrate the world’s creative impulses in pursuit of a “civilization infinitely varied, drawing on the water-springs of all previous civilizations, realizing itself in the peaceful and neighborly exploitation of mankind’s inexhaustible wealth of mind, heart, and spirit.”<sup>38</sup> While there may have been more orientalists like Arberry, they were often overshadowed by more influential figures who insisted that colonized people conform to the norms of Western civilization, a point effectively exposed by Edward Said, despite the limited scope of his study.<sup>39</sup>

If Said did not comprehensively study orientalism in all its varieties and nuances, he did achieve one thing: he made scholars and audiences aware that knowledge is associated with power – the ability to act and make a difference in the world. Knowledge intertwines with power discourses, ideological interests, and worldviews that we should be mindful of – not as neutral and benign as imagined, but also without succumbing to paranoia. There have been several responses to Said’s

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book, *Orientalism*, the latest by Wael Hallaq. Hallaq claims that Said “reinforced modern academia and the foundations on which it stands.”<sup>40</sup> To be fair, it is unrealistic to expect Said, who combined liberal notions of culture with new left perspectives, to have become a decolonial warrior four decades ago. Said was not a trained orientalist and never claimed to be one. Rather, he was a secular humanist who critiqued the politics of a select sample of Orientalism. Despite legitimate critiques of Said, his work was well received in literary studies, Middle East studies, and Islamic thought. It empowered generations of scholars to interrogate the assumptions of their fields and initiate transformative scholarship. *Orientalism* itself did not engage or incorporate the experiences and wisdom of the peoples of Asia and Africa that it studied. The colonial matrix of power undeniably influenced Orientalism as a field of study.<sup>41</sup>

Before Said’s intervention, two anthropologists, Talal Asad and Syed Hussein Alatas, began to counter and question the colonial and oriental gaze focused on Muslim societies, Africa, and East Asia.<sup>42</sup> Surprisingly, Hallaq argues that, with the help of Foucault and MacIntyre, a “subversive discursivity” and a redefined rationality could partner with “Orientalism, once refashioned, can provide an oppositional discourse that facilitates the change needed to address the crises generated by the modern project.”<sup>43</sup> After describing Western knowledge resources as sovereign and fostering “structural genocide,” in which Orientalism is fully embedded, it is surprising to find that Hallaq still favors a refashioned Orientalism. He believes this discipline can aid in forming the new self, possesses superior philological tools compared to anthropology, and accommodates the esoteric, law, philosophy, and mystical traditions of Islam. In my view, all these disciplines and Hallaq’s goals can be achieved through interdisciplinary and theoretically rigorous approaches to the study of the Islamic tradition. In my view, there is no compelling need to resurrect the specter of Orientalism. A robust engagement with disciplines including a complex engagement with history and philology, among other fields, would suffice.

Totalizing thinking and critique are prevalent in rhetoric but lack practical solutions especially in combating colonial discourses on

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Islam. Unfortunately, the desire for robust intellectual debate has given way to accusatory labels such as “Orientalist,” “secular,” “liberal,” “fundamentalist,” “Marxist,” “modernist,” “traditionalist,” and “anarchist,” among others. Such attitudes hinder reasoned conversation, critical debate, and dialogue unless some view those forms of discourse as traps too. This lack of intellectual space fosters an expectation for heroic figures whose scholarly work will be imbued with messianic qualities and promises of decisive solutions. Often the self-proclaimed heroic figures dismiss the views of their rivals as imitative of Western norms, whereas their own appropriation of the same Western tradition, is justified.<sup>44</sup> Incomprehensible prose is no indication of profundity or insight: it could also serve as a cover-up for the absence of clear thinking. I believe these approaches and expectations are neither wise nor realistic. If we seek heroes and messiahs, we should heed the wisdom of the legendary Shaykh Sa‘dī in his book *Orchard/Bostān*. We might end up with an unwanted surplus.

“If every dewdrop turned into a pearl,  
Then the market will be flooded with cheap glass beads.”<sup>45</sup>

The essential task is to piece together the diverse aspects of a complex Islamic tradition – its histories, producing detailed micro- and macro-histories of concepts, epochs, events, and ideas in law, theology, ethics, mysticism, philology, literature, and related fields. Until a critical mass is reached, our claims about the past and its connection to the present remain tentative and elusive.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, efforts to question and interrogate the Western canon of knowledge in the humanities and social sciences, including Orientalism, are yielding more nuanced insights into the past and present. From the perspective of Islamic thought, an opportunity for border thinking emerges at the intersections of multiple experiential and epistemic viewpoints. This can be articulated as *dihlīz*-thinking, referring to the portico or intermediate space of the Persian home, which is neither inside nor outside but indispensable for entering and exiting the home.<sup>46</sup> We inhabit an inescapable, agonistic modernity where dissatisfaction often out-

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weighs satisfaction. However, we cannot discard everything; the foremost reason being the cruelty of throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater!

Orientalism until a few decades ago focused on the authenticity of Muslim texts, starting with the material origins and history of the Qur'an, the *hadith*, and other texts, which did little to radically change our view of early Islam. There were notable studies in Sufism, literature, and poetry that are commendable. Orientalism and its approaches to Muslim history and artifacts vary significantly. Translations of texts into European languages were immensely valuable. However, failing to showcase translations and literature as part of a humanistic endeavor risks ghettoizing it. As such Muslim cultures were presented as different and exotic, warranting exceptional treatment. This Islamic exceptionalism is a double-edged sword. Sometimes, it is promoted by those insiders who are passionately committed to the texts of tradition but who exhibit tunnel vision: they refuse to engage with insights from other fields of study, viewing such interactions as a form of fallenness and corruption or worse, as a form of epistemic colonization. Others have mastered the texts of tradition but with a singular goal – to relegate them to museums as relics of a bygone era. In this view, Islamic culture and civilization reached their peak and are now obsolete, offering only entertainment value akin to the legends in *One Thousand and One Nights*. Friedrich Nietzsche identified this as monumental history. It is a pity that classical literature of an Islamic pedigree in different languages is not taught along with other world classics.

Religious studies departments have, for decades, evolved into venues for the study of Islam, distinct from traditional Near Eastern and Middle Eastern studies. This field is robust in various theories of religion and has produced an impressive body of scholarship. While strong in the phenomenology of religion, it fosters a dispassionate examination of religious phenomena. Historically, this field was referred to as the “history of religions,” though not in a literal sense; it specifically pertained to the study of religious experiences, symbols, myths, and rituals. When approached comparatively, it is also known as comparative religion. Early figures in the history of religion faced

significant criticism for their shortcomings. The main critique was that they hastily sought to establish universals, overlooked context, and failed to recognize the constructed nature of religion influenced by power and politics. In response to these critiques, the field has broadened, allowing religious studies curricula to encompass sociological, anthropological, historical, literary, and artistic perspectives, or combinations of these orientations. Many insist that the primary role of the scholar of religion is to only be a critic. Yet, there is much to recommend when the scholar becomes a “critical caretaker” and thinks holistically about transforming unjust sociopolitical conditions and addresses interpretations that require remedy.<sup>47</sup>

Regarding the study of Islam, some scholars have raised concerns about how Islamic scholars, particularly those who identify as Muslim, may have blended their roles as public intellectuals with their academic work. The late Richard C. Martin, for example, expressed concern that, in combating Islamophobia and advocating for progressive Islam, some scholars allowed their activism to overshadow their scholarship.<sup>48</sup> He was particularly troubled by scholarly developments post-9/11, fearing that such advocacy might favor one Muslim theological tradition over another. Martin called for more inclusive discussions of diverse theological positions, as well as secular and non-Muslim perspectives. He also voiced concern that some scholars portrayed themselves as the saviors of Islam. Additionally, he emphasized the ethical responsibility of scholars in the post-Orientalist era to acknowledge the actions of Muslim actors, both in their positive and negative roles. However, in making this call, Martin himself invites scholars into a degree of advocacy, and there is no definitive way to prescribe its limits. In a society that values free speech, individuals are expected to responsibly engage in advocacy.

Martin, a friend, spoke from a position of intellectual integrity. However, he might have benefited from viewing the aftermath of 9/11 in academia – not just for scholars and students, but especially for those scholars from a Muslim background – not as a linear event but as one shaped by several overlapping factors rather than a single cause. Some Muslim scholars reacted defensively, seeking to distance themselves from the single-cause narrative promoted by the U.S. govern-

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ment, media, and certain parts of academia, which linked the events of 9/11 exclusively to Islam. This perspective unfairly indicts nearly two billion people of complicity with terrorism. Less than two decades later, millions of Americans stoked by the statements of politicians and a hostile media still feel that Islam hates the USA. While some individuals identifying as Muslim have claimed that their rationale for terrorism stems from their own interpretation of Islam, the best antidote is for people – Muslims and non-Muslims – to disagree with them, even passionately. Proposing alternative explanations does not amount to apologetics or an attempt to monopolize the meaning of Islam. Framing this as privileging one interpretation is an exaggeration unless there is solid evidence that other competing perspectives are deliberately silenced. It is also problematic to assert that what the 9/11 terrorists did was not “Islam.” It was a specific interpretation of Islam, contested by many, in which the scholar plays the role of the interpreter not that of the judge. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, there was a lack of an intensive discussion about the U.S. acting as an imperial power entangled with the national politics and destinies of millions in various Muslim countries. Expecting no political reactions in response to neo-imperial ventures is not just naive but misguided. Few scholars and commentators acknowledged the pervasive atmosphere of fear and intimidation that Muslims experienced in the U.S. Self-identifying Muslim scholars could not escape the atmosphere of intimidation at the time. Political anxiety, fear, and mass arrests of Muslims in the U.S. were widespread and largely went unchallenged when the US government invoked emergency powers. Few universities offered support to their Muslim faculty and students. Only if you identified as a Muslim in a post 9/11 US would one be able to grasp the palpable intensity of hate and bigotry, even if you were not personally targeted.

One should also acknowledge that to claim that progressive Islam offers the “correct,” “sound,” and “proper” interpretation of Islam, is an overstatement. Such a claim is naive and problematic. While contributing to a volume titled *Progressive Muslims*, I also later cautioned that announcing something like progressive Islam is premature.<sup>49</sup> At best, progressive Islam is a sentiment that shapes the research focus of some scholars; it is not a theory or an established intellectual orienta-

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tion that has established any comprehensive intellectual apparatus or theory. The discourse of progress is also deeply problematic and questionable. Making claims without intellectual backing is bound to invite criticism.

On the other hand, some scholars have taken it upon themselves to use public advocacy statements and publications aimed at general audiences by Muslim scholars, as data to critique a segment of the Islamic studies academy. Aaron Hughes has written extensively, often cherry-picking statements from public outreach scholarship to argue that Muslim scholars are preoccupied with authenticity or engaged in extravagant claims.<sup>50</sup> This jaundiced charge overlooks the significant contributions made by scholars from Muslim backgrounds as well as those unaffiliated to Islam over the decades, but especially in the past three decades. High-quality monographs on Islamic law, theology, gender studies, sexuality studies, Islamic mysticism, history, education, environmental issues, ethics, and, importantly, Muslim societies in North America have been published. What has indeed changed is that the demographics in the study of Islam, compared to fifty years ago, have shifted. While the field was previously dominated by white males, it is now much more diverse in terms of gender, race, and religious affiliation. African American and Hispanic, Muslim as well as non-Muslim, representation in the study of Islam, however, remains low. There is still much to be done regarding these diversity issues. With changing demographics among scholars, there is likely to be a shift in the questions being asked, aligned with their affiliations and commitments. Islamic ethics and theological questions are now being seriously explored by a younger generation of scholars in the United States. Some of these questions are relevant and of interest to segments of American Muslim communities. However, there remains a gap between the proverbial “Muslim town” and the “Muslim gown” on campus. Scholarship that can support lived communities requires the translation of ideas to enhance religious literacy within Muslim communities, but very little of this is happening. Community-based institutions focused on Muslim literacy are better at reaching sizable audiences. Closer collaborations between academia and these community-based institutions might yield significant benefits.

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### CONCLUSION

The study of Islam at American universities fluctuates with the national mood and America's overseas ventures. After September 11, 2001, universities and colleges hired faculty to teach Islam, but that trend has peaked. While hiring may continue at a slower pace, opportunities for scholars of Islam soon may be found in community-supported Islamic institutions growing across the country. As these institutions become accredited, the demand for qualified graduates will also increase.

It is risky to make predictions, but there are strong fears that the USA may pursue domestic and foreign policies affecting Muslims both at home and abroad. Additionally, as the U.S. campus protests during the Israeli actions in Gaza have demonstrated, Islam is once again in the spotlight, for better or worse. The likelihood of increased confrontations with pro-Israel supporters in the White House, Congress, legacy media, and the corporate world is high. College and university administrations are facing a dilemma: they claim they must choose between accepting federal funds or supporting the dissent of their students and faculty. Serious institutions can do both. Corporate universities conveniently overlook that institutions of higher education should prioritize ethics, justice, and compassion. *Parrhesia*, the Greek term for fearless speaking, is part of the university's tradition of supporting dissent. In Islamic ethics, this is echoed in concepts like "commanding the good and forbidding the wrong" and "speaking truth to power" (*kalimat-u ḥaqqin amāma sultānin jā'ir*). Each of these challenges demand excellent and conscientious scholarship. Education and the cultivation of societal vision(s) have always been the work of individuals from time immemorial. It is their courage, vision and determination that made entire worlds. Ibn 'Aṭā' Allah al-Sikandarī (d. 1309), a jurist, scholar of *ḥadīth*, and sufi shaykh, stated, "Competitors in aspiration do not violate the boundaries of destiny."<sup>51</sup> It means that individuals with high aspirations do not go against destiny; instead, they create their own paths. In essence, God empowers them – either psychologically or through direct inspiration – to confidently pursue their hopes and aspirations, enabling their talents to thrive and their objectives to be achieved.

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NOTES

*I want to thank Mohammad Ali for his research support and suggestions.*

- 1 Richard C. Martin, "Islamic Studies in the American Academy: A Personal Reflection," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2010): 899.
- 2 See Marcia Hermansen "The Academic Studies of Sufism at American Universities" in Mumtaz Ahmad, Zahid Bukhari, and Sulayman Nyang, eds., *Observing the Observer: The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 2012), 90.
- 3 A. J. Arberry, *Oriental Essays: Portraits of Seven Scholars* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), 242-46.
- 4 Thomas H. Brobjer, "The Late Nietzsche's Fundamental Critique of Historical Scholarship," in *Nietzsche on Time and History*, ed. Manuel Dries (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 5.
- 5 See Malkawi Fathi Hasan, *Epistemological Integration: Essentials of an Islamic Methodology* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 2014).
- 6 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 165.
- 7 Edmund Burke III, "Conclusion: Islamic History as World History," in Marshall G. S. Hodgson and Edmund Burke, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History, Studies in Comparative World History* (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 317.
- 8 Bruce B.; Lawrence and Ali Altaf Mian, *The Bruce B. Lawrence Reader: Islam Beyond Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), "Muslim Cosmopolitanism," 78.
- 9 See my Ebrahim Moosa, "Disruptions and Connections: Rediscovering and Remaking the Muslim Tradition in Late Modernity," in *The Idea of Tradition in the Late Modern World: An Ecumenical and Interreligious Conversation*, ed. Thomas Albert Howard (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020); E. Moosa, "Contrapuntal Readings in Muslim Thought: Translations and Transitions," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (2006).
- 10 Muhammad Fathi 'Uthman, *Al-Qiyam al-Ḥaḍārīya fī Risālat al-Islām* (Riyadh: al-Dār al-Sa'ūdīya, 1402/1986); al-Shaykh Muhammad Bin 'Ashur and (ed) 'Umar 'Ubayd Hasana, *Rūḥ al-Ḥaḍāra al-Islāmīya* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1412/1992); Malik bin Nabi, *Mushkilat Al-Thaqāfa*, trans. 'Abd al-Sabur Shahin, 4th edn. (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1404/1984); *Mushkilat al-Afkār fī al-'Ālam al-Islāmī*, trans. Bassam Baraka, Ahmad Sha'bu, and 'Umar Misqawi (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1408/1988); Fadi Isma'īl, *Al-Khiṭāb al-'Arabī al-Mu'asīr: Qira'ah Naqḍīya fī Majāhīm*

- al-Nahḍa wa al-Taqaḍḍum wa al-Ḥadātha*, 1978-1987, 2nd edn., *Silsilat al-Rasāil al-Jāmiʿiyya* (Riyadh; Herndon, VA: Al-Dar al-ʿĀlamīya lil-Kitāb al-Islāmī; al-Maʿhad al-ʿĀlamī lil-Fikr al-Islāmī, 1992).
- 11 Muhammad Fathi ʿUthman, *Al-Qiyam al-Ḥaḍāriyya fī Risālat al-Islām*; Though deficient in many respects see an effort to translate the tradition into a contemporary idiom. Hasan Hanafi, *Al-Turāth wa al-Tajdīd: Mauqifunā min al-Turāth al-Qadīm* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anglū al-Miṣriyya); Ismaʿīl, *Al-Khiṭāb al-ʿArabī al-Muʿaṣir*; ibid.
  - 12 Ebrahim Moosa, “Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī (D. 505/1111),” in *Islamic Legal Thought: A Compendium of Muslim Jurists*, ed. David Powers, Susan Spectorsky, and Oussama Arabi, *Studies in Islamic Law and Society* (Brill, 2013), 268.
  - 13 I credit Jabiri for writing some really detailed accounts of the tradition, for his encyclopedic grasp but I profoundly disagree with his diagnosis of the causes and aspects of his reading of the tradition. Muhammad ʿAbid al-Jabiri, *Binyat al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī: Dirāsah Taḥlīliyyah Naqḍiyyah li-Nuẓum al-Maʿrifah fī al-Thaqāfah al-ʿArabīyah*, 6th edn., *Naqd al-ʿAql al-ʿArabī 2* (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥdah al-ʿArabīyah, 1986).
  - 14 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldūn*, ed. Darwish al-Juwaydi (Ṣayda/Beirut: al-Maktaba al-ʿAṣriyya, 1460/2000), 196; 354.
  - 15 For modern efforts in curating the classics see Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).
  - 16 See Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).
  - 17 Talal Asad, “Thinking About Religion through Wittgenstein,” *Critical Times* 3, no. 3 (2020).
  - 18 Abu al-Baqaʾ Ayyub b. Musa al-Husaynī al-Kafawī, *Al-Kulliyāt: Muʿjam fī al-Muṣṭalahāt wa al-Furūq al-Lughawīya*, 2nd edn. (Beirut: Muʿassasa al-Risāla, 1419/1998), s.v. ikhtilāf, 60.
  - 19 Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Maydani, *Majmaʿ al-Amthāl*, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifā, 1959), 1:26. “innamā anta khilāfa al-ḡabuʿ-i al-rākiba.”
  - 20 Muhammad ʿAbd al-Latif Salih al-Farfur, *Miʿyar al-Maʿāyir, Aw Uṣūl al-Khilāf al-ʿIlmī: Asbābuhu wa Qawāʿiduhu wa Khaṣāʾiṣuhu wa Thamarātuḥu: Dirāsah Muqārana* (Damascus: Dār al-Maʿmūn lil-Turāth, 1988), 21; See also Taha Jabir Alwani, *Preserving Unity and Avoiding Division: A New Approach to the Ethics of Disagreement in Islam* (Herndon, Va: IIIT, 2024); Taha Jabir Alwani, *The Ethics of Disagreement in Islam*, 1st edn., *Issues in Islamic Thought* (Herndon, Va.: IIIT, 1993).
  - 21 Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Mūsā b. Muḥammad al-Shāṭibī, *Al-Fīṣam*, 2 vols vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1332/1913).
  - 22 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 165–66.
  - 23 Asad, “Thinking About Religion through Wittgenstein,” 404.

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- 24 See the important work of Sherman A. Jackson, *The Islamic Secular* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024).
- 25 Alasdair MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” *The Monist* 60, no. 4 (1977): 461.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 13th edn. (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984; repr., 2000), 112.
- 28 “Mā lā yudraku kulluhu lā yutraku kulluhu.”
- 29 Abū Hāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī and Maḥmūd Bījū, *Mīzān al-ʿAmal* (Damascus: Dār al-Taḳwa, 1428/2008), 125.
- 30 See Masooda Bano, *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change, Volume 2: Evolving Debates in the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).
- 31 Muḥammad al-Ghazālī Abū Hāmid Muḥammad b and Maḥmūd Bījū, *Al-Qisṭās al-Mustaqīm (Al-Mawāzīn al-Khamsa fī al-Qurʿān)* (Damascus: al-Maṭbaʿa al-ʿIlmīya, 1413/1993), 42; al-Ghazali and R.J. Mc Carthy, *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography, Al-Munqidh Min Al-Dalal Freedom and Fulfillment* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1980), Appendix III, 262-62.
- 32 Abū Hāmid Muḥammad b and Bījū, *Al-Qisṭās*, 42-43.
- 33 Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa Bayn al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa* (Damascus: n.p, 1413/1993), 14; Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa Bayn al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa*, Studies in Islamic Philosophy; V. 1 (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 86 with a slightly different translation.
- 34 Al-Shaykh al-Raʿīs Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Sinā and Ḥunayn b. Ishāq, *Tisʿ Rasāʾil fī al-Ḥikma wa al-Tabīʿīyāt wa fī Ākhirha Qiṣṣat Salāman wa Absāl*, 1st edn. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿa Hindīya, 1326/1908), 64, *al-Risāla al-Thālitha fī al-Quwā al-Insāniya wa Idrākātihā*.
- 35 Talal Asad, “Two European Images of Non-European Rule,” in *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, ed. Talal Asad (London; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Ithaca Press and Humanities Press, 1975), 111, esp fn 20.
- 36 Arberry, *Oriental Essays: Portraits of Seven Scholars*, 255.
- 37 Ibid., 252.
- 38 Ibid., 256.
- 39 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: 25th Anniversary Edition with a New Preface by the Author* (Kindle Edition), (1979; New York: Vintage Books, 1994).
- 40 Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 174.
- 41 Walter Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, and Praxis, On Decoloniality* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2018), 196.
- 42 Talal Asad, *Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter* (London, Ithaca Press; Atlantic

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- 43 Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 243.
- 44 Malkawi, *Epistemological Integration: Essentials of an Islamic Methodology*, 62–64.
- 45 <https://ganjoor.net/saadi/boostan/bab3/sh5> line 25.
- 46 See my Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
- 47 Atalia Omer, “Can a Critic Be a Caretaker Too? Religion, Conflict, and Conflict Transformation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 2 (2011): 487.
- 48 Martin, “Islamic Studies in the American Academy: A Personal Reflection.”
- 49 See my Ebrahim Moosa, “Transitions in the ‘Progress’ of Civilization: Theorizing History, Practice, and Tradition,” in *Voices of Change*, ed. Omid Safi and Vincent J. Cornell general editor *Voices of Islam* (Westport & London: Praeger, 2007); “The Debts and Burdens of Critical Islam,” in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (London: Oneworld, 2003); *ibid*.
- 50 Aaron W. Hughes, *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity: An Inquiry into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self-Deception* (Bristol, CT; Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2015); *Muslim Identities: An Introduction to Islam*, 1st edn. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
- 51 Tāj al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Sikandarī and Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn ‘Ajība al-Ḥasanī, *Īqāz al-Himam fi Sharḥ al-Ḥikam* (Cairo: Dār al-Muqattam, 2018), 28.

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