

Teaching Theory without Theory Talk in an Introductory Islam Course

SherAli Tareen

Franklin and Marshall College

Introduction

In an introductory religion course, how might one share conceptual arguments that are now taken as established positions in the study of religion and the broader humanities? For instance, take conceptual lessons such as tradition is not the opposite of modernity, religion is not the inverse of the secular, power is not only repressive but also productive, and so forth. How might one advance such theoretical arguments in a manner that bypasses the density and difficulty of scholarly theoretical texts and discussions? In other words, how can one do theory in the classroom without subjecting students to theory talk? These are the central questions addressed in this essay with a focus on the specific context of an introductory course on Islam. I will draw primarily from my experience of teaching religious studies for a little more than a decade at Franklin and Marshall College, a liberal arts college in the US, though I hope this analysis will benefit instructors teaching Islam in a range of contexts and settings. By discussing some specific pedagogical strategies, I want to advance the broader argument that rather than shying away from theoretical issues and questions in an introductory Islam course, the intro course is in fact among the most fertile sites for such inquiry and exploration.

Broadly, I wish to engage two connected objectives regarding the presentation of theoretical discussions in an introductory course on Islam: (1) cultivating a practice of thinking critically about key categories like tradition, modernity, secularism, and (2) disrupting conventional binaries (like tradition/modernity, religious/secular) through which such categories are popularly

approached. Perhaps the most difficult pedagogical task awaiting courses on religion and Islam is that of unsettling certain ingrained assumptions and attitudes about particular concepts that students bring with them.

Dismantling common stereotypes about Islam to do with violence, patriarchy, and political repression is quite doable with most reasonable students. Much harder is the task of disturbing students' entrenched assumptions about the presumed goodness of, say, modernity, secularism, pluralism, and liberal democracy. This is a problem that hovers over most religion courses, including the introductory Islam course. I will share some of my experiences in wrestling with this problem and offer possible pedagogical strategies to productively engage it. I will do so by highlighting some illustrative moments in an introductory course at different points of a semester: the beginning, at thematic units that typically emerge in the middle, and the end. I realize that this chronology might be more suitable to thematically arranged courses but I hope some of the tactics and strategies discussed here will be also prove useful for courses designed in other ways. In my concluding comments, I will take a step back from the pedagogy of teaching theory to reflect on the sorts of theoretical assumptions that often sustain pedagogy in religious studies. I will especially consider some of the ways in which the often-rehearsed distinction between the academic study of religion and theological studies replicates the religion-secular binary, and its implications for an introductory Islam course.

The First Day: Presenting a Genealogy of Religion

On the first substantive day of the semester in which an assigned reading is discussed, I set the task of interrogating the concept of religion so as to begin the work of thinking about the central category that informs the disciplinary orientation of a course. I begin all my courses with chapter two of Carl Ernst's *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*, "Approaching Islam in Terms of Religion."¹ This chapter charts in an eminently lucid manner major conceptual and political transformations in the category of religion over time. By comparing the understanding of religion espoused by premodern thinkers like Cicero (d. 43 BC) and St. Augustine (d. 430) with that of the seventeenth century Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius (d. 1645), Ernst highlights profound ruptures in the early modern and modern career of religion.

An earlier notion of religion (as articulated, for instance, by St. Augustine in his text *Of True Religion*) centered on the cultivation of virtue through repetitive practice. In contrast, the modern concept of religion was marked by intensified competition over the question of authenticity (as found in Grotius's text *On the Truth of the Christian Religion*). Moreover, Ernst shows that this modern competitive notion of religion was shaped in large mea-

Particularly effective in this regard is to complement Ernst's chapter with a sample of the British census survey in late nineteenth-century India. It is through this visually charged primary source that students get jolted into recognizing the tectonic implications of being compelled to box one's religious identity into one among several competing options. Also invaluable is the narrative told in this chapter regarding a student at the American University of Beirut who when asked to identify his religious identity in university registration forms, responds in puzzlement "But I am an atheist?" To which the university registrar replies, "But are you a Christian atheist, a Jewish atheist, or a Muslim atheist?"³ This story (that we read aloud in class) brings home for students the point about a modern countable and competitive notion of religion with particularly clarity. This point can be nicely reinforced by complementing discussion on Ernst's reading with the viewing of author Reza Aslan's infamous exchange on Fox News regarding his book *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, in which the anchor kept questioning Aslan's capacity to write a book on Jesus when he was a Muslim.⁴

While students generally get the idea that meanings attached to categories like religion shift over time, they struggle to dismantle a celebratory attitude towards modernity and modern pluralism. In the "religion" to "religions" argument, while recognizing



sure by the power and politics of colonialism coupled with the activities of European missionaries who in fact used Grotius's text as a debating manual.²

What I find remarkable about this chapter by Ernst is the way it presents in simple language the key features of the world religions argument that has occupied so much of the often-dense theoretical landscape of religious studies. I ask students (in small group discussions) to list and identify key differences between pre-modern and modern conceptions of religion, best encapsulated in the shift from "religion" as embodied practice to "religions" as exclusive clubs reducible to distinct scriptures and competing truth claims. We also spend considerable time discussing the intimacy of a modern competitive understanding of religion and the emergence of the modern state.

the problem of religions as competitive clubs, students tend to retain the idea that having multiple religions is an achievement of pluralism in modernity. That the discourse of pluralism is itself stained with the violence of colonialism and modern state power is a point they are not quite ready to entertain. Particularly instructive in this regard is the critical attitude students often adopt towards St. Augustine on why his text was titled *Of True Religion*. They protest: Why did St. Augustine not recognize (read respect) religions other than Christianity (the True Religion)? The tenor of this discomfort says much about the deep internalization of liberal gestures of recognition and respect among undergraduate students. But despite all this, what starting a course with Ernst's chapter does achieve is the attunement of students to the labor of taking seriously the histories and ideological arguments invested in the crucial categories of life, like religion.

But how can one sustain such a genealogically-oriented pedagogy in discussions on more specific topics in Islam? It is to this question that I now turn by discussing ways in which the themes of colonial power, Orientalism, and their afterlives can be impressed while teaching varied topical units including Sufism, gender, and popular culture and film.

The Legacies and Afterlives of Colonialism and Orientalism

Before getting into specific teaching strategies, let me first describe the kind of conceptual problem I want to think through and address by means of this discussion. One recurrent tendency I have observed among students is to regard phenomena such as colonialism and orientalism as historical events consigned to a safely distant past, as belonging to a nineteenth century neatly separated from their own present. How could this problem of assumed shelter from the violence of colonial pasts and their attached knowledge legacies be addressed in an introduction to Islam course? How could the persistence of the shadows of colonial power be impressed upon students?

The first day of a unit on Sufism presents a potentially profitable moment for such a task. The unit on Sufism (for thematically organized introductory courses) represents a highly rewarding yet challenging stop on the pedagogical itinerary. While providing excellent possibilities for close primary-source readings, and use of narrative, textual, and audio-visual analysis, the danger that students will fall prey to viewing Sufism as the stereotypical exotic or eccentric variety of Islam is always all too ripe.

The first day of the unit on Sufism can also be utilized to do some important conceptual work on the interaction of colonialism, orientalism, and Islam precisely by tackling major commonplace stereotypes about the Sufi tradition. As an illustration, let me share some highlights from a lesson plan for this day that I have frequently employed in my introduction to Islam course. The goal of this class session is to make students think critically about the legacy of colonial knowledge production and Orientalism in the study of Sufism and Islam more broadly. We do this by focusing on nineteenth-century Orientalist stereotypes about Sufism and their continuation in contemporary popular discourses on the subject. In a nutshell, some of these stereotypes include: (1) that Sufism is foreign to Islam with Greek, Indic, or Persian origins, (2) that Sufism is opposed to Islamic law and that Sufis do not care about normative legal obligations, and concomitantly (3) that while Sufism is the exotic, soft, and liberal brand of Islam, Islamic law or the Shari'a is its harsh, puritan, illiberal other.

One can fruitfully show the effects of these Orientalist stereotypes in the present by juxtaposing text with film. More specifically, for this day, I combine discussion on the first chapter of Carl Ernst's *Shambala Guide to Sufism* (which they read before class) with the in-class viewing of the first twenty minutes of the 1994 documentary *I am a Sufi, I am a Muslim*.⁵ The more recent documentary *Sufi Soul* by popular writer William Dalrymple is also a good alternative that serves the purpose.⁶ In small group discussions, I have students identify and make a list of stereotypes about Sufism in the works of various eighteenth and nineteenth-century European Orientalists and colonial officials

(such as August Tholuck, Mountstuart Elphinstone, and James William Graham) as presented in the Ernst text.⁷

As student discussions are winding down, I pop in a documentary (either *I am a Sufi, I am a Muslim* or *Sufi Soul*). I then ask them to note and make a running list of any overlap between the Orientalist stereotypes they just discussed from the Ernst text and ways in which the narrator of the documentary describes Sufism. The overlap is astonishing. Almost all the Orientalist depictions (Sufism has non-Arab origins, it is opposed to "orthodox" Islam, Sufis don't prioritize ritual practices, and so forth) are repeated nearly verbatim in the two documentaries. This conglomeration of textual and visual evidence invites students to reflect on traces of powerful nineteenth-century discursive regimes on a popular and seemingly sympathetic documentary more than a century later. Film and text complement each other, the former amplifying the argument of the latter about the Orientalist reformulation of Sufism.

But this much is not enough. In addition to uncovering the problems and persistence of Orientalist narratives about Islam and Sufism, it is also important to have students address the question of how Sufis themselves understand their tradition, especially in regards to Sufism's relationship with Islamic law. For this we again turn to the Ernst chapter, that details Sufis' self-imagination of their tradition in clear, concise, and singularly productive ways.⁸ By reading relevant passages aloud in class, we establish the point that in contrast to nineteenth-century Orientalist and contemporary popular stereotypes, the relationship between Sufism and law within the tradition is hardly understood in the form of an oppositional binary. Rather, this relationship is imagined as a hierarchy whereby abiding by the law and its limits represents a prerequisite to progress on the path to divine reality. This hierarchical arrangement is reflected in the rhyming progressive (in a literal sense) formula: Shari'a (divine normative order), Tariqa (the Sufi path), Haqiqa (divine reality).¹⁰ Put simply, Sufis do not reject the law and its imperatives. They instead consider it a first step towards higher spiritual refinement. A hierarchy is not the same as a binary.

Through this class session, some highlights of which I have outlined above, students in an introductory course can be equipped to interrogate the afterlives of colonial power and Orientalist discourse in the present without being burdened with the weight of prohibitive theory talk. It also attunes them to ways in which a careful consideration of the logics and textual resources within a tradition can disrupt popular stereotypes and representations about it. Genealogical skepticism is thus usefully complemented with discursive analysis.

Another text that is particularly effective in bringing home the persistence of colonial and Orientalist stereotypes about Islam and Muslims in the present is Leila Ahmed's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*¹⁰ The first two chapters of this book, that I regularly assign in my intro course, dissect in piercing and remarkably accessible prose the Orientalist assumptions that sustain theoretically wanting yet powerful contemporary representations of Muslim women as objects of Western sympathy in need of urgent care and rescue. By interrogating the discourses of a vari-

ety of actors ranging from journalist Nicholas Kristof to popular ex-Muslim renegades like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Ahmed convincingly argues that critiquing patriarchy in Muslim communities need not resort to a patronizing practice of caricaturing Islam and Muslim women as primarily defined by their enchainment to patriarchal theologies and societal norms. Ahmed memorably, and from a pedagogical perspective very effectively, coined the term "Islamland" for the discursive product of such a practice of caricature.

Just as with the Sufism example, text can be nicely complemented with film. I juxtapose the Leila Ahmed reading with a film based in Syria called *The Light in Her Eyes*.¹¹ This somewhat slow paced yet often brilliant film showcases practices of pious embodiment, especially veiling, among Muslim women and girls by focusing on the aspirations and activities of a revivalist Syrian female Qur'anic educational institution. Houda al-Habash (the founder and principal of this school) and her students, are hardly suppressed or oppressed victims of unyielding patriarchy crying out for liberation according to a Western liberal template. The actors who populate this film, in effect, provide living examples of Leila Ahmed's argument and push to view Muslim women, including those who embody practices of piety like veiling, as complex beings irreducible to and unavailable for any predetermined needs and desires for freedom from mythically constructed conceptions of bondage. The film also does a particularly good job of showing the spectrum of views and attitudes on the place and role of Muslim women in contemporary Muslim societies, thus furthering the conceptual point of viewing Islam and Muslims beyond binaries like liberal/fundamentalist, and as involved in a dynamic and contested ongoing discursive tradition.

Finally, another film that is especially effective in connecting Orientalism, its persistent manifestations in the contemporary moment, and Islamophobia is the documentary *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*.¹² In biting and often harrowing narrative and visual detail, this documentary displays the long history, extending to the present, of Hollywood simultaneously dehumanizing and exoticizing Arabs and Muslims in ventures ranging from a variety of early twentieth-century black and white movies, to Disney's *Aladdin*, to more recent movies such as the 2000 Samuel Jackson-starring *Rules of Engagement*. Addressing Orientalism and Islam through Sufism, gender, popular culture, and film can better show the far-reaching tentacles of Orientalist discourse and power. In the next section, I will offer another illustration of teaching theory without theory talk by reflecting on the topic of what could broadly be categorized as "Islam and colonial modernity."

Islam, Tradition, and Colonial Modernity

In this section, I want to reflect on the experience of teaching two central and interconnected theoretical arguments: (1) that tradition/modernity is not an oppositional binary, and (2) that conditions and discourse are always intimately connected such that new conditions generate new kinds of argument and ways of arguing. These two points are now widely accepted by scholars of the humanities and the study of religion. But what are some specific ways in which these arguments might be im-

pressed in an introductory Islam course? Here are some examples that speak to this.

In this context, I have found working with collections of primary texts, such as the anthology of Muslim Modernist writings (edited by Charles Kurzman) (Kurzman 2002) and the anthology of Islamist texts (edited by Muhammad Qasim Zaman and Roxanne Euben) (Euben and Zaman 2009) most helpful.¹³ Let me walk you through some moments from my teaching when I draw on these anthologies. I employ the relatively straightforward tactic of locating and discussing places in a primary text where the author's argument is indebted to modern conditions. For instance, in *Modernist Islam*, we find the example of the nineteenth-century Indian Muslim scholar Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) arguing that Muslims should alter their explanation for why the Qur'an was miraculous. Rather than attach the Qur'an's miracle to the inimitability of its language (a long-running argument in the tradition), he argued that Muslims should locate the miracle of the Qur'an in the inimitability of its meaning and guidance.

More crucial than the argument here (which was not altogether novel) was the logic behind the argument: namely that a linguistic explanation for the Qur'an's miracle "cannot," in his words, "be put forward in confrontation with nonbelievers."¹⁴ He continued tellingly, "it will not satisfy their mind." Clearly, the new condition of Christian missionary activity and competition in colonial India had a lot to do with the content and framing of Khan's argument. Similarly, elsewhere in the same anthology, we find the Lebanese/Egyptian scholar Rashid Rida (d. 1935) expressing his admiration for European "nationalism."¹⁶ And even more illustrative is the case of the twentieth-century Central Asian intellectual Abdurrauf Fitrat (d. 1938) who championed a new system of education as a way to cultivate "perfectly civil, patriotic Muslims."¹⁷ I have students reflect on the question of how desires such as nationalism and patriotism might be contingent to the emergence of the nation state as the center of modern politics. Would these desires have existed even a couple of centuries ago? What would they have looked like? Again, my goal in posing these questions is for students to ponder, even if indirectly, the interaction of conditions and discourse.

Perhaps the most effective case study for this task is the extract from the twentieth-century Egyptian thinker/activist Sayyid Qutb's (d.1966) landmark text *Signposts Along the Road*.¹⁸ There are many moments in this text that can be mobilized; Let me offer one particularly cutting example. In pushing for an exclusively Qur'an centered understanding of tradition, Qutb exclaimed that Muslims should read the Qur'an "like a soldier studies 'the daily command' to act immediately upon what he learns in the battlefield."¹⁹ "Knowledge is for action,"²⁰ he memorably continued. Again, these quotes provide an opportunity to have students think about possible connections between approaching the Qur'an as a soldier's manual and new technological conditions such as the efflorescence of print and the concomitant materiality of the Qur'an as a bound, printed book.

Having worked through some of these examples, I put a list on the white board of different categories of conditions including political (rise of the nation state, colonialism, etc.), technological



(print, commerce, railways), institutional (new educational institutions, etc.), and epistemic/intellectual (valorization of science, championing of secular reason and progress, etc.). In another column, I list the discursive moves of the authors we have examined that depended on and were made possible by any of these conditions. The point of this exercise is to show students that in analyzing discursive arguments, it is important to carefully consider the conditions, the terrain so to say, that make those arguments thinkable in the first place, and that shape the modality of their articulation. This is the now familiar conceptual point advanced and executed most forcefully in the scholarly oeuvre of anthropologist Talal Asad.²¹ A careful navigation of and commentary on illustrative primary texts holds the potential of at least attuning students to such a conceptual orientation that takes seriously the interaction of discourse, conditions, and ultimately, power.

There are two limitations of this method to briefly mention by way of concluding this discussion. First, while this exercise is effective in demonstrating the dynamicity of tradition by showing ways in which it adapts, responds, and negotiates modern conditions, it is less successful in interrupting a celebratory teleology of modernity. “Ok, Muslim scholars can also desire modern stuff” is an all-too-convenient conclusion that some students might draw. Constantly reminding them about the power differentials involved in how modern conditions shape indigenous discourses and about the violence of colonial modernity (physical and otherwise) is thus very crucial. It might also be useful to frame modernity as a “narrative category”; a narrative that dramatizes its own claims to have eclipsed the past and tradition. I have found that students respond favorably when asked to think carefully about the kind of story modernity tells about

itself and to then reflect on the problems attached to that story.

Second, this teaching tactic makes acutely palpable the absence of a substantive anthology that engages the work [in English translation] of Muslim traditionalist scholars (the *ulama*). Certainly, many among the modernists and Islamists were also trained in traditionalist methods. But there would be much to benefit from a reader²² that takes as its focus the writings of modern Muslim traditionalist scholars. Such a resource would be especially useful for discussing continuities and ruptures in Islamic legal and ethical reasoning in the modern period, a topic that adds a particularly rich layer to this discussion.

The Importance of African American Islam to an Introductory Course

A few years ago, in the wake of the Trayvon Martin and later George Floyd tragedies, as protests and debates around questions of racism and state violence in the US intensified across college campuses including mine, I decided to add three class sessions on African American Islam to my introductory Islam course. This three-sessions unit explores the themes of Islam and the transatlantic slave trade, the Moorish Science Temple and Noble Drew Ali (d. 1929), the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad (d. 1975), prominent women in the Nation of Islam such as Clara Muhammad (d. 1972), and the discourses and career of Malcolm X (d. 1965). For the first theme, Islam and the transatlantic slave trade, my class watches and discusses the tragic and fascinating 2006 documentary film *Prince Among Slaves* (based on a 1986 book by historian Terry Alford with the same title).²³ The documentary details the narrative of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima Sori (d. 1829), a prince from the Fouta Djallon region in Guinea, West Africa who was sold into slavery at the

age of twenty-six in 1788 and spent forty years in slavery in Natchez, Mississippi. After being finally freed in 1828, his quest to return home was unsuccessful. He died enroute in Monrovia, Liberia the year after. This nicely-paced documentary combines storytelling and scholarly commentary (by a range of scholars of Islam and the transatlantic slave trade) to probe important questions of love, religious identity, language, and the brute force and violence of slavery. Its central theme revolves around the tension between the agentive capacities of individuals like Ibrahima to circumvent the adverse conditions of slavery and the grossly unequal relations of power put in place by those conditions.

For the twentieth-century African American religious movements like the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, I assign select chapters of historian Brent Turner’s monograph *Islam in the African American Experience*.²⁴ In this intellectual cum social history, Taylor presents a detailed yet accessible account of the socio-political context surrounding the emergence of these movements. But more importantly, he employs the enormously profitable category of signification or naming to interrogate the place and importance of Islam in the struggle of actors like

Noble Drew Ali, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X to confront and overcome the traumas of slavery, structural and everyday racism, and white supremacy. Chapters in Turner’s book can be helpfully complemented by extracts from the writings and speeches of these figures found in the *Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States*.²⁵ Also incredibly useful are video clips from interviews of and speeches by Elijah Muhammad and especially Malcolm X in which they elaborate the key political and philosophical underpinnings of their struggle for justice, often to hostile audiences/interviewers.²⁶

Why is the topic of African American Islam indispensable to a theoretically-grounded introductory course on Islam? For at least a couple of reasons. First, this topic opens up the difficult but fruitful question of how one goes about defining and circumscribing orthodoxy in any religious tradition. Seemingly, movements like The Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam—with their emphasis on theologies of racial justice, premised on narratives of racial purity, and articulated through claims of prophecy, and at times, divinity—seem rather distant from what one might imagine as “mainstream Islam.” However, Islam, as a discursive and lived tradition, was obviously very important to the pioneers of these movements and to their massive number of followers. Moreover, Elijah Muhammad is arguably the most influential figure in the history of Islam in North America. And Malcolm X, both prior to and after his embrace of Sunni Islam, is inarguably among the most influential modern Muslims, within the US and globally. What would it mean then to designate such important articulations of Islam in the modern world as outside the fold of “mainstream Islam?” Wherever students, Muslim or non-Muslim, might stand on this question, if it

gets them thinking about the politics of constructing categories like “orthodox Islam” and about the malleability of claims to religious authenticity, it will have done its job.

And second, focusing on the politics and political thought of a figure like Malcolm X yields the dividend of connecting struggles for racial justice in the Global North and South. At several institutions including mine, students enroll in the introductory Islam course to fulfill the terribly named “Non-Western” requirement. Even the name of this general education requirement plants in the minds of students the unfortunate impression that the “non-West” is some distant land elsewhere, unconnected to the histories and present of the “West.” In my first few years of teaching, I often felt confounded about whether I should feel proud or resigned over comments on my teaching evaluations that read, “He taught me so much about a different religion and culture.” For all my attempts to familiarize students with the language and vocabulary of Islam over the course of a semester, its underlying *difference* would persist. The topic of African American Islam represents an excellent avenue to address this problem. Through serious engagement with this topic, an instructor can advance the dual and interconnected arguments that (a) Islam is central to the story of race and religion in North America, and that (b) African American Islam is central to the discursive and political career of Islam as a religious tradition, especially in modernity.

Concluding Thoughts: Being More Critical of a Critical Secular Pedagogy

To review, this essay explores ways in which one might present to students in an introductory course important theoretical arguments (for example, complicating binaries like tradition/modernity or religion/secular; appreciating the intimacy of discourse, power, and material conditions; interrogating the legacy of colonial modernity in the formation of contemporary categories of life) that are now commonplace in the study of religion. How might one advance such conceptual tasks without burying students in the often intimidating and prohibitive protocols and operations of theoretical discourse? I have shared my experiences wrestling with this challenge at different moments in an introductory Islam course. In these concluding remarks, however, I take a step back from the dominant theme of my discussion so far. Rather than reflecting on teaching theory through teaching Islam, let’s think through some of the theoretical assumptions that often sustain the teaching of Islam within the study of religion. More specifically, I wish to ponder aloud a certain discomfort I have often experienced on the first day of a course, especially the introductory Islam course.

On day one, to immediately set straight the intellectual menu, I explain to students what the study of religion is and how it differs from theological studies (as is common practice among religion scholars). This usually involves making a list of contrastive attributes. The study of religion (and Islam) is historical, non-confessional, nonnormative, and analytical as opposed to the normative confessional study of religion as an object of faith. This sentiment is usefully captured in the formula of the contrast between studying religion and studying about religion. There is obviously much merit in these explanatory gestures. One would not

want the academic classroom to become a space for resolving competing truth claims or of passing certificates of normativity and heresy. However, there is nonetheless an underlying secularity at work in this exercise that I find not only conceptually troubling but also a potential roadblock to teaching Islam.

To begin with, the act of contrasting the historical, academic, and non-confessional study of religion with the allegedly confessional character of theological studies risks reducing the latter to a caricatured representation. Surely, despite their normative preoccupations, Western seminaries and Islamic madrasas also often engage in analytically sharp and historically-informed scholarship, even if their logics of history and critical thinking might differ. Making a conscious and concerted effort to distinguish religion studies from theological studies might have the unintended effect of smugly suggesting the superiority of the former over the latter; “We are cooler than those people who are unable to separate personal faith from scholarly inquiry.” Even if not intended as such, it is hard to imagine this not being among the implicit messages communicated by the assertion of the religion/theological studies dichotomy.

Making such a contrast also embraces and replicates the secular/religious binary, which as many scholars have argued, is a very problematic binary. “We, the critical historians of religion, will undertake for the next fourteen weeks (or fewer, in the quarters system) the secular study and inquiry of this religion and these religious subjects.” That is the upshot of the eager disclaimer that the study of religion is not theological/seminary studies. There is an underlying nod to the virtues of secularity at the heart of the promise of historicizing religion. This secular gesture does bring the benefits of absolving a course on Islam from the sins of establishing orthodoxy, encouraging piety, or promoting confessional bias. But it also carries certain limitations that are important to acknowledge and engage, if not resolve.

Let me highlight just one such limitation. The positioning of an introductory course as a non-confessional (read secular) inquiry into Islam can hamper the effectiveness of discussions on

the affective and phenomenological aspects of a religion. An important moment in the introductory Islam course that speaks to this point is that of the revelation of Islam to Prophet Muhammad. This is an incredibly powerful moment. It combines awe, terror, anticipation, physical pain, and marks a permanent cleavage in time and world history. But the history of religion approach deflates the power of this moment. Having taken their position as detached (even if sympathetic) observers of a tradition, students are unburdened from the weight of entangling their beings with the experiential registers of the religion. They are absolved of feeling, perhaps even suffering, the mixture of perplexity and wonder that suffuses and accompanies moments like Prophet Muhammad’s revelation. They might sympathize with such moments or be fascinated by them, but the thick crust of secular historicism makes even the attempt at inhabiting the experience of such moments almost impossible.

My attempt here at articulating a less than fully formulated doubt and discomfort is not a rehearsal of predictable musings on the insider/outsider problem, namely the problem of how one studies a religious tradition while identifying with that tradition or not. Rather, I am noting the implications and effects of a pedagogical orientation towards Islam that renders it a foreign object of secular historicist inquiry and consumption. Such an orientation, animated by the assumptions and logics of secularity, captured most prominently by the secular imperative of historicizing and desacralizing life, can produce rather deleterious effects. Most notably, it relies on and perpetuates a binary between the enlightened critical investigator and the tradition-bound uncritical religious subject who is the former’s object of investigation. In other words, the history of religion approach to teaching Islam is a decisively secular approach that replicates and advances the religion/secular binary.²⁷ Obviously, recourse to a confessional approach is hardly the solution; that is both untenable and undesirable. Perhaps what is needed is a pedagogical orientation that is thoroughly unaccepting of the religion/secular binary in all its manifestations. Being more critical of the critical historical study of religion, especially when set in contrast to traditionalist theological studies, might be a useful step towards the cultivation of such an orientation.



About the Author

SherAli Tareen is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Franklin and Marshall College. His research focuses on Muslim intellectual traditions and debates in early modern and modern South Asia. His book *Defending Muhammad in Modernity* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020) received the American Institute of Pakistan Studies 2020 Book Prize and was selected as a finalist for the 2021 American Academy of Religion Book Award. His second book is called *Perilous Intimacies: Debating Hindu-Muslim Friendship after Empire* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

Notes & Bibliography

- 1 Carl Ernst, “Approaching Islam in Terms of Religion,” in *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 38-57.
- 2 Ernst, “Approaching Islam,” 38-57.
- 3 Ernst, “Approaching Islam,” 58.
- 4 SouthsideTokyo, “Worse Fox News Ever: Reza Aslan’s New Book, Zealot” YouTube video, 9:59, July 31, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_0UkKHy1U4; Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013).
- 5 Carl Ernst, “What is Sufism?” *Shambala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambala Press, 1997), 1-32; I am a Sufi, I am a Muslim, dir. Dirk Dumon, et al., Films Media Group, 1994.
- 6 *Sufi Soul: The Mystic Music of Islam*, dir. Simon Broughton, et al., Riverboat Records/World Music Network, 2008.
- 7 Ernst, “What is Sufism?” 1-32.
- 8 Ernst, “What is Sufism?” 26.
- 9 Ernst, “What is Sufism?” 28-32.
- 10 Leila Ahmed, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 11 *The Light in Her Eyes*, dir. Julia Meltzer, Laura Nix, et al., Cinema Guild, 2015, <http://thelightinhereyesmovie.com/>. I use the shorter fifty-minute version.
- 12 *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, dir. Jhally Sut, et al., Media Education Foundation, 2006; Narrated by the late Jack Shaheen and based on his book of the same name (Northampton: Interlink Publishing, 2001).
- 13 Charles Kurzman, ed., *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Roxanne Euben, and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
- 14 Kurzman, *Modernist Islam*, 300.
- 15 Kurzman, *Modernist Islam*, 300.
- 16 Kurzman, *Modernist Islam*, 82.
- 17 Kurzman, *Modernist Islam*, 247.
- 18 Zaman and Euben, *Islamist Thought*, 136-144.
- 19 Zaman and Euben, *Islamist Thought*, 141.
- 20 Zaman and Euben, *Islamist Thought*, 141.
- 21 See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003); Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
- 22 Like Kurzman, *Modernist Islam*; and Zaman and Euben, *Islamist Thought*.
- 23 *Prince Among Slaves*, dir. Andrea Kalin, et al., Kanopy, 2008; based on Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- 24 Chapters 3 (“The Name Means Everything: Noble Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple of America”), 5 (“Missionizing and Signifying: W. D. Fard and the Early History of the Nation of Islam”), and 6 (“Malcolm X and His Successors: Contemporary Significations of African-American Islam”) of Brent Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).
- 25 Edward Curtis, *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
- 26 For instance, see Mekki4ever, “Malcolm X Speeches,” YouTube video, 9:42, April 11, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qCl8m_KvJk.
- 27 See Ananda Abeysekara, *The Politics of Postsecular Religion: Mourning Secular Futures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).