



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Representing Islam: A Critique of Language and Reality”

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Abstract

Edited and revised from a paper originally presented at the “Perspectives in Islamic Studies” conference, held at The Institute of Ismaili Studies in the summer of 1998, Dr Tazim R. Kassam examines the ways in which Islam is presented in Religious Studies curricula. She questions the prevalent representations of religions as structural identities that can be easily categorised and essentialised, proposing a model such as Marshall Hodgson’s *The Venture of Islam* to complement contemporary conversations in Religious Studies departments.

Power, Reality and Knowledge

Let me begin with the phrase “language and reality” in the title of my presentation. Occidental thinking prides itself on objectivity expressed through a penchant for facts. Nominalism is the assumption that words and what words describe are somehow indivisible, that there is a direct correlation between the two and that once you have the words for things then you have the thing. However, this is a fallacy. There is no *a priori* identity between words and things. Buddhist philosophers like Nagarjuna (d. ca. 250 CE) wrote treatises dismantling the notion that language is reality and showing how conventional reality is *constructed* by language. This Buddhist epistemologist argued that it is impossible to get to know a thing in itself and certainly not ultimate truth which is described as *sunyata* or nothingness/void. The Indian philosopher, Sankara (d. ca. 750 CE) elaborates on the concept of Upanishadic teaching of *neti neti* (neither this, nor that) to pinpoint the limits of language. Al-Sijistani (d. ca. 971), an Ismaili thinker, addresses the failure of language, and by extension, the capacity of human thought, to know the absolute in his brilliant double negation that God neither is not, nor is not not. The double negation asserts that the transcendence achieved through the negation of all attributes of God is still nevertheless a concept and knocks the mind out of its self-satisfied confidence that we know what we know, and that we can fully comprehend the world through our mental constructs.

These cryptic epistemological formulations have an ancient lineage and long preceded modern radical deconstructionists like Derrida. Epistemological questions about the limits of language have been at the heart of mystical philosophy and religious poetry, which seek knowledge of ultimate reality in the deepest sense of the word. In their search for wisdom,

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mystics and poets have thus elaborated a kind of “hermeneutics of suspicion” which views with deep skepticism the taken-for-granted conventional ways of knowing reality. Addressing the relation between perception and thought in “The World We Live In,” William James describes in layperson terms how language works:

Out of time we cut “days” and “nights”, “summers” and “winters”. We say *what* each part of the sensible continuum is, and all these abstract *whats* are concepts. The intellectual life of man consists almost wholly in his substitution of a conceptual order for the perceptual order in which his experience originally comes.

Nevertheless, conventional discourse is important because of its capacity to give shape to things by naming them. The symbolism in God’s act of teaching Adam the names of all things is complex. To name things is to grasp them, constrain them and ultimately manipulate and control them. Naming is about power, both the power that is given to human beings and the power that comes to control them. Michael Foucault has written extensively about the technologies of domination in which language plays the critical role. Drawing on his ideas, Edward Said leveled his critique against Orientalism and disclosed how European and American discourses of the “Other” are hegemonic and ultimately meant to dominate and colonise through the power of representation. While this tendency of “othering” and “objectification” applies to all non-Western cultures, he argues that the Islamic world has been the favored target for reification, mystification and oppression.

Imperialism thus exerts control through the creation and reproduction of representations about its subjects. One may describe this accumulated learning as “Occidental Islam:” it is the Islam that Europeans and Americans have constructed from their own perspectives and with their own categories. Ironically, English-speaking Muslims today learn to think about their own history, society, beliefs and practices from occidental sources, that is, from a tradition of scholarship inscribed largely by non-Muslim specialists. There is nothing wrong in learning about how others have understood the Islamic world. What is problematic is the uncritical acceptance of these representations on the one hand, or automatic reactions against them on the other.

Constructing Islam as a *Religion*

In this presentation, I would like to reflect upon the practice of Islamic Studies in the North American context and to raise some questions about whether or not constructions of Islam as a “religion” or “ideology” approximate the historical and cultural phenomena represented by this “cumulative tradition” to borrow a phrase from the Islamic historian, W. Cantwell Smith. Since all academic discourses are shaped by disciplinary presuppositions, in this talk I will consider what it means to map the Islamic world in Departments of Religion. I would like to suggest that it is worth revisiting Marshall Hodgson's seminal three-volume work, *The*



Venture of Islam, as a means of re-envisioning a multi-disciplinary understanding of Islamic civilisation as an integral part of world history.

What happens to Islam when it is taught from the Religious Studies point of view? Although there is some debate over this, theoretically speaking, the field of Religious Studies does not have a single methodological approach. Rather, it encourages multi-disciplinary, cross-cultural and historical approaches to religious phenomena. However, when we examine the typical textbooks used in entry-level religion courses, it is evident that there are two ways in which religion is approached: in terms of “dimensions” and in terms of “world religions.” The dimensions approach takes supra-religious categories such as founders, scripture, myth, ritual, institutions, and so forth and provides examples of these from various religions. The world religions approach studies the different religions of the world thematically. World religions texts often use the dimensions of scripture, ritual, myth and so on to organise and present materials from within each tradition. Both approaches tend to work against historically situated understandings of a particular text or ritual and encourage a static, descriptive view of religions. However, they persist because they offer an accessible rubric for cross-cultural and topical religion courses. The appeal of teaching Buddhism through the Four Noble Truths and Islam through the Five Pillars of Islam is immense.

In the sixties and seventies, two historians of religion who shaped the curriculum of the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Charles Adams, tried to reformulate Islamic Studies within the wider practice of the scientific study of religion. As historians, they were open to a comprehensive array of sources for the study of Islam. As comparativists, they were interested in larger questions about the nature, characteristics and role of religion in human society. One of their most important contributions was to apply historical-phenomenological methods to the study of Islam rather than the philological-objectivist approaches of earlier scholarship. But even within the ethos of *Religionswissenschaften*, there were problematic assumptions about the nature of religion. Talal Asad, in his book *Genealogies of Religion*, has argued that the very concept of “religion” needs to be queried as an adequate lens for studying Islam because religion as a modern concept is essentially a western construct that developed during the Enlightenment as a by-product of social, philosophical and historical processes in Europe and America. Since the concept and meaning of religion as such will determine how Islam will be studied, Asad suggests that the various disciplinary assumptions of Religious Studies may create obstacles for understanding Islam on its own terms.

Is a Religion a Worldview?

For example, a now fairly prevalent and accepted practice in Departments of Religion is to characterise religions as “worldviews.” One of the best articulations of this concept is found in William Paden’s work, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion*. Paden makes a strong case for using the term “worlds” as an organising category for the study of religions. He defines world as follows: “A ‘world’ is the operating environment of language



and behavioral options that persons presuppose and inhabit at any given point in time and from which they choose their course of action.” (viii) World, Paden explains, is not just an abstract idea but “an actual habitat, a lived environment, a place.” This idea tries to go beyond the limited notion of religion as an ideology, theology or cultural system and to stretch it to signify a way of life. However, Paden goes on to say, “A religious world is one that structures existence around sacred things.” (ix) Worldview, then, becomes a universe that is structured around religious as opposed to mundane things which reintroduces the dichotomy between sacred and profane.

Another problem with the idea of “worldview” is that it suggests that religions provide coherent, systematic, and complete systems of beliefs and practices which are timeless in their relevance and application. This much is clear from Geertz’s now famous definition of religion as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence” (*Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973:90). Anyone who has studied the world’s religions knows, however, that they are more like a wild forest than a well-tended garden. Or that they have had both wild forests and well-tended gardens in different periods and places. A history of the rise and spread of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism etc. does not yield a neat and logical picture of social, institutional, literary and intellectual development. Rather, each tradition reveals both chaos and order, stasis and change, unity and diversity. Can the concept of worldview accommodate such contradiction and plurality within itself? The very notion of worldview, comprehensive and coherent in its appeal, may promote the idea of a single, monolithic Islam which is far from the truth. Fundamentalists find this monochromatic formulation attractive because it confirms their totalistic view of religion.

The notion of “worldview” is parallel to the notion of “tradition.” There is no intrinsic reason why “tradition” must be conceived of as something fixed and static and belonging only to the past, but this is what it has come to represent in debates over “tradition versus modernity.” This recalls to mind Mohandas Gandhi’s reply to the question “What do you think of Indian Civilisation?” He replied simply, “I think it is a good idea.” Instead of proffering some grand, eloquent and quotable description that would characterise Indian Civilisation once and for all, Gandhi subverts the assumption implicit in the question, namely, that Indian Civilisation is a museum piece, its glory days over. He refuses to romanticise it and domesticate it in that process and resists the temptation to reify Indian Civilisation. Rather, he recognises the deeper truth that the reality of human civilisation is to be a work in progress. It is not a *fait accompli*, but alive, evolving and constantly reinventing itself.

The Dynamics of History

As has been noted, although the *scholarship* in religious studies is multi-disciplinary and historical, teaching in religion departments, especially at the undergraduate level, tends to be thematic and synoptic. Hodgson’s *Venture of Islam* is far too demanding in its vocabulary, methodology and intellectual breadth for undergraduates but it deserves a great deal more



attention than it has received because Hodgson approaches the religious practices, beliefs, arts, literature and religious and political institutions of Islamic civilisation in terms of their evolving historical and sociological contexts. From the book's title, *The Venture of Islam*, it is clear that Hodgson too sees Islamic civilisation as a dynamic work in progress. He argues forcefully that the vitality of the Islamic world did not come to an end with the Mongol invasion nor the Crusaders as is commonly stated. He comes to these conclusions because he does not approach Islam as a worldview focused on sacred things but as a historical and social development within the larger framework of world history whose impact has been felt in diverse aspects of life. Hence, he speaks of Islam as a civilisation rather than a religion or a political system or a literary culture. Islam is not an isolated phenomenon cut off from its phenomenological contexts but an integral part of them, both influencing the cultures within which it found itself and in turn being influenced by them.