Discussion and Debate Forum

Beyond East and West: Rethinking Islam in the Digital Age

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Abstract: This essay looks at the role of the Internet in dehumanizing Muslims and demonizing Islam while reinforcing the idea of Islam and "the West" as archetypal opposites. Drawing on insights from earlier essays in the Discussion and Debate Forum, this essay suggests ways in which scholars of Islamic studies can use the same technology to counter the specious arguments that lead to the dehumanization of Muslims and the demonization of Islam.

This essay is meant to be part of a larger conversation that includes two recent essays in the Discussion and Debate Forum of this journal. The first of these essays is Hasan Azad's "Thinking about Islam, Politics and Muslim Identity in a Digital Age," and the second is Soroush Shahriari's interview with Professor Mohammed Rustom, entitled "Neo-Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy."[1]

The essays come from political/social and philosophical directions, and they raise issues and provide insights that inform the current essay, which aims

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Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies, Vol. 3.2, pp. 109–116
 doi:10.2979/jims.3.2.10

to challenge the "master categories"[2] of "the West" and "Islam" that continue to dominate the discourse and to shift the focus of the discussion.

In Azad's "Thinking about Islam, Politics and Muslim Identity in a Digital Age," the author argues that digitality is "inseparable from the West's Orientalist machinations which are conscious and unconscious."[3] Azad's article is an excellent example of the pervasive influence of Orientalism in that Azad himself reifies and reinforces the dichotomy between "the West" and Islam and Muslim, in which each is "the archetypal Other" of the other. The division of the world into East vs. West has a long history. However, the division is more a mental than a geographic boundary. The identification of Europe (or more accurately parts of Europe) with "the West" was an act of self-identification, and the identification of Islam and Muslims with "the East" was an act of othering.[4] Both Muslims and non-Muslims have broadly accepted this mental division of the world into East and West, and it is the framework in which understandings of Islam and Muslims most often are formed and operate.

In his interview with Soroosh Shahriari, Professor Mohammed Rustom's discussion is nuanced and highlights the distinction between Classical Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism, saying "Neo-Orientalists are not hostile in the way many Orientalists were." The continuing problem Rustom highlights is that of unconscious assumptions that perpetuate misunderstanding.[5] Another issue that Rustom raises that deserves greater attention is different understandings of the methods and goals of transmitting knowledge.[6] This division is not one of "the West" on one hand, and Islam on the other. Rustom contrasts the approach in which "the study of Islamic philosophy is reduced to a few texts without any connection or relevance to today's world beyond academic interest," with the approach in which Islamic philosophy is considered a living tradition that has "very meaningful answers to our contemporary predicaments and questions."[7] While Rustom is speaking specifically about studying Islamic philosophy in secular academic institutions and/or at the feet of Muslim sages, the point he makes about approaching Islamic texts applies more broadly. The issue is a question of mindset and assumptions. Scholars of Islam, both Muslim and non-Muslims, are in a position to study Islamic texts of all genres as objects of more than academic interest, as texts that offer meaningful answers to contemporary problems, if they are willing to approach the texts from that mindset. One need not convert to Islam or believe that the Qur'an is the word of God and that the Prophet Muhammad is God's messenger to be able to approach Islamic texts to see what meaningful answers they may offer today. Digitization and the Internet have made a wide variety of Islamic texts, in the original languages and often in translation, available to anyone anywhere with access to the Web.

Azad has painted a stark picture of the implications of global digitalization for Muslims, who are increasingly dehumanized in the media, and for whom

challenges to traditional religious authorities and interpretations raise questions about what it means to be Muslim. Who is a "good" Muslim? What is "Islamically correct"? Muslims face difficulties from both Islamophobes and other Muslims.

A large number of Islamic texts are readily accessible to anyone who wishes to find them. This offers both benefits and challenges, depending on how the information is utilized. On the one hand, those conducting serious research into Islamic history, practices, and doctrine can access crucial materials; on the other hand, pseudo-scholars and pundits seeking to vilify Islam can do so through careful misuse of the same information. From the earliest centuries, Muslims have recognized the existence of problematic content in prophetic reports (Hadith), which were used to make the religion an object of ridicule.[8] This, in part, drove much of early Hadith scholarship. Although many such problematic reports did not make it into the major collections used today, there is still grist for the mill of those who would disparage Islam by appealing to "authentic" Islamic sources. Authors such as Robert Spencer[9] and websites such as The Religion of Peace make liberal use of online resources to support their claims that Islam does not respect human life, or foster moral and ethical values. The site's stated purposes are "to counter whitewashing and explain the threat that Islam truly poses to human dignity and freedom. . . ." Regarding sources, they say: "These historical texts are readily available in the information age, meaning that anyone can go straight to the source from any referenced article on this site."[10] Another problematic website is Political Islam. In addition to making use of online resources, they reject scholarship and the role of experts saying:

> People assume that you must understand Arabic or have a university degree in Islam to understand Islam's texts. However, look at these scholars' history. After 1400 years they have produced scholarly papers for presentations at scholarly meetings, but they have not made the material available to the common person.
>
> The work stands on its own. The only person that matters in discussing Islam is not the "expert" but Mohammed. Every paragraph of our books is referenced to what Mohammed did and said (his Sunna). Each paragraph can be verified by the use of the reference numbers. Our books are fact-based knowledge, not opinion. Mohammed is our expert. We quote him in every paragraph.[11]

The quotation of, and the linking to translations of Islamic texts gives visitors to these sites the impression that what the authors of the sites are claiming is more authentically "Islamic" than any counterclaims, which are openly dismissed as the whitewashing of apologists. Bypassing centuries of both Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship, these authors carefully select specific texts and portions of texts from often problematic translations and with only selective reference to context and history, and they then interpret them in ways that differ dramatically

from the understandings and interpretations of the vast majority of Muslim scholars spanning more than a millennium.

Knowledgeable scholars of Islamic studies tend to ignore such works because they recognize that there are serious flaws in the logic and methodology on which authors rely in reaching their conclusions.

It is not only non-Muslim Islamophobes who contribute to the demonization of Islam and the dehumanization of Muslims on the Web. There are also those who self-identify as Muslim and promote a supremacist, anti-Western understanding of Islam that plays into the narrative of an inevitable clash between Islam and "the West." The most egregious example of this is the online propaganda magazine *Rumiyah*, published by the terrorist organization ISIS/ISIL/Daesh.[12] The name "Rumiyah" is the Arabic word meaning "Roman," and is the name the terrorist organization chose to rename the magazine after losing control of the Syrian town of Dabiq, for which earlier editions of the magazine were named. Both names are rooted in an anti-West bias. The first, *Dabiq*, is taken from a Hadith about the end-times in which the Prophet Muhammad is quoted as saying that the hour of judgment will not come until after the Roman army is defeated by the Muslims in a final battle in the town of Dabiq.[13] When ISIS gained control of Dabiq in 2014, they saw it as the first step in fulfilling this prophecy. They renamed the magazine after being driven out of Dabiq by Turkish-backed forces in 2016. The shift in fortune prompted a renaming of the magazine, but the focus remains on "Roman" as representing the West as the archenemy of Islam. The oppositional framing of Islam against the West is not only something that occurs in the minds of extremists. As already noted, this framework has a long history and has informed the discourse of more moderate voices on both sides.

Two centuries of European colonial activities effectively dislocated Muslims from the roots of the Islamic intellectual and religious traditions, and a century of ongoing European and American political machinations, aptly described by Hallaq as "hegemonic modernity,"[14] has created an environment in which authoritarian regimes have arisen and thrived in the Middle East and South Asia. These regimes are "not a genuinely Islamic order but an Islamic-flavored version of Western reality."[15] This is also the perfect environment in which extremism of all stripes grows and flourishes. The oppositional framing of Islam vs. "the West" is not only counterproductive. It also contributes to the demonization of Islam and the dehumanization of Muslims when Muslims use it as the foundation of an anti-Western dialectic that pits Islam against "the West." This is the Muslim counterpart to Islamophobia, and it needs to be acknowledged and criticized in the same way.

The Islamic texts offer ways to reframe the discourse and abandon the oppositional framework of the "West" and Islam as archetypal others. Islamic

scholars in the formative and classical periods freely incorporated knowledge and explored thought paradigms from all parts of the Muslim Empire. Traveling in search of knowledge was a common and praiseworthy activity, supported and encouraged by sayings attributed to the Prophet himself, such as "seek knowledge even though it is in China," and "seeking knowledge is a duty of every Muslim."[16] While some Muslims are seen to be reconfiguring Islamic concepts in ways that comport with "Western" thought paradigms, the oppositional framing of Islam against "the West" is also changing the ways in which contemporary Muslims approach and treat Islamic texts. Luminaries of the classical period, such as al-Ghazali and Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr cited the Hadith about seeking knowledge even in China to support and encourage traveling the globe in search of knowledge, but some contemporary Muslims now reject this Hadith as weak and even fabricated. The website "Islam: Questions and Answers," states directly that "'Seek knowledge even if you have to go as far as China' is a false hadeeth."[17] According to the website ranking page, Alexa, after a website for find prayer times and mosque locations, and the website of an Islamic bank, "Islam: Questions and Answers" (islamqa.info) is the most popular site related to Islam.[18] According to the site's mission statement:

> Islam Q&A is an academic, educational, *da'wah* website which aims to offer advice and academic answers based on evidence from religious texts in an adequate and easy-to-understand manner. These answers are supervised by Shaykh Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid (may Allah preserve him). The website welcomes questions from everyone, Muslims and otherwise, about Islamic, psychological and social matters.[19]

It is difficult to determine the impact this site has on popular Muslim understandings of Islam, on the basis of site traffic and time on the site. However, the site's purpose is to offer advice and answers on religious matters, and it is currently ranked as the most often visited site with that purpose. Its declaration of this particular Hadith as false, which is made in the context of study in the United States and on the authority of a twentieth-century Muslim scholar, is a clear departure from the attitude of medieval Muslim thinkers such as al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE) and Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 1071 CE).

Al-Ghazali includes the Hadith about seeking knowledge even though it is in China in two places in his *Iḥyā' ʿUlūm al-Dīn*. The first is in his chapter entitled "Faḍīlat al-Taʿallum" ("The Virtue of Learning"), where he uses it to support the obligation of Muslims to seek knowledge.[20] The second is in his chapter on "Praiseworthy and Blameworthy Knowledge and the Divisions and Rules of Both," where he uses it to support the idea that seeking knowledge is an individual obligation (*farḍ ʿayn*).[21] Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr also cites the same Hadith several times with different chains of narrators in his *Comprehensive Proofs of Knowledge and Its Excellence* (*Jāmiʿ Bayān al-ʿIlm wa Faḍlihi*).[22]

The Qur'an also offers what may be a very useful perspective on the question of East and West.

> To God belong the East and the West. Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God. God is All-Encompassing, Knowing (Qur'an 2:115)

> It is not piety to turn your faces toward the east and west. Rather, piety is he who believes in God, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets; and who gives wealth, despite loving it, to kinsfolk, orphans, the indigent, the traveler, beggars, and for [the ransom of] slaves; and performs the prayer and gives the alms; and those who fulfill their oaths when they pledge them, and those who are patient in misfortune, hardship, and moments of peril. It is they who are the sincere, and it is they who are the reverent (Qur'an 2:177).[23]

Early commentators such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) who address this part of the verses understood it to be addressing the direction of prayer, and the relationship between prayer and other acts of piety. They did not understand them as a reference to East and West in the way those terms are used in the contemporary "clash of civilizations" discourse because they did not perceive the world as divided between "the West" and "the East." This does not mean that these Muslim thinkers did not recognize religious and cultural differences. Al-Ṭabarī and other commentators mention that Jews faced West in prayer, while Christians faced East. This is stated as a matter of fact and not criticism, and al-Ṭabarī makes it clear that the verses indicate that piety is more than prayer and the direction in which the faithful turn to perform it.[24] Just as the focus of the Hadith on seeking knowledge even if it is in China was viewed through the lens of the value of knowledge, the focus of the verses that mention East and West was viewed through the lens of the value of the ethical behaviors listed in Qur'an 2:177. In both cases, we see that the authors' perceptions shaped their understanding and interpretations. Understanding how changing perceptions change understanding and interpretation is a crucial first step toward treating Islam as a living tradition and seeking meaningful answers within it to contemporary predicaments.

The answer to increasing demonization of Islam and the dehumanization of Muslims on the Web is not to limit access or engage in polemics or apologetics, but for skilled and knowledgeable scholars to use reason, logic, and evidence from the broad corpus of Islamic texts to address the flaws and fallacies on which specious interpretations are founded. Having the ability to respond brings with it the responsibility to do so in ways that reach not only beyond the confines of our particular disciplines, but also beyond the walls of our ivory tower.

The academy may not reward public scholarship, and some in the academy openly criticize Muslim academics who engage in constructive theology.[25]

However, given the popularity of Islamophobic books and websites—and equally problematic Muslim sites that feed into Islamophobia—and the influence they have on the general public's understanding of Islam, those who have the skill and knowledge need to look for ways to address these types of works just as scholars of the past addressed similar problems in their time. To do this requires us to become aware of our own perceptions and frameworks and approach the texts, asking important questions: How did Muslim thinkers of early generations perceive the world around them, with its cultural and religious differences? How did they perceive humanity and what it means to be human? How did they understand knowledge and its role? How did they understand concepts such as justice, righteousness, piety, and their opposites? What insights can we gain from looking at our understandings through the lenses of their understandings? Using such questions can help us avoid imposing our underlying assumptions and presuppositions on the texts.

While good use may be made of those websites that include information in English on Islam, the fact remains that to do in-depth scholarly work in any branch of Islamic studies requires delving into primary sources in the original languages. In the past, this required access to specialized library collections available only at top universities. Advances in technology have now made it possible to access many important texts from anywhere with Internet access to anyone with a computer. The same technologies that allow for the selective misuse of Qur'an and Hadith also provide the means for scholars trained in Islamic studies to craft knowledgeable and thoughtful responses to the problematic arguments of polemicists.

Endnotes

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