

## Editorial Notes: Decentering Islamic Studies

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*After Orientalism*, a landmark work edited by Francois Pouilion and Jean-Claude Vatin, was published in 2014 in the Leiden Studies in Islam and Society series in collaboration with renowned publisher, Brill. The work, featuring dozens of leading scholars including Francois Pouilion, Jean-Claude Vatin, Robert Irwin, Leon Buskens, Baudouin Dupret, Zakaria Rhani, Jessica Marglin, Oliver Herrenschmidt, Edhem Eldem, Emmanuel Szurek, Stephane Dudoignon and Elisabeth Alles, is aimed at shifting the focus of Islamic studies from the 'centre' to the 'periphery', by raising new issues through innovative perspectives.

At the so-called centre, Islamic studies has developed for centuries as a field of scholarly inquiry. It refers to the academic study of Islam (and Arabic) which is multidisciplinary in character, discussing history, texts, theology, philosophy, law, Sufism and all related matters, involving scholars from various disciplines, widely known as Orientalists. Since the 16th century, these scholars began to study Islam as part of the study of the divine sciences (divinity). Pioneered by members of Christian churches, the field of Islamic studies that developed at that time was strongly influenced by Biblical studies, resulting in a strong emphasis on refuting and undermining Islamic doctrines in their work.

The structure of scientific knowledge that developed after the Enlightenment period clearly influenced the further development of Orientalism. Using logical, empirical and critical scientific research methodologies, subsequent Orientalist scholars offered a more nuanced perspective on Islam by adopting social and humanities disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology and political science. Emerging from this context, Islamic studies have developed across various universities in Europe and have undeniably contributed to the formation of a representation of Islam that continues to influence the global community's view of the religion, which is embraced by more than 1/4 of the world's population.

Debates about Orientalism have emerged in the wake of colonialism. In 1963, Egyptian Marxist sociologist Anouar Abdel Malek published an article entitled “Orientalism in Crisis” to criticise Orientalists’ basis for understanding Islam and the Islamic world. Other scholars, including Mohamed Sahli and Abdelkebir Khatibi, followed in Malek’s pioneering step by criticising certain practices in Orientalism (Pouillon 2014). However, it was only after Edward Said published *Orientalism* in 1978 that academic communities paid greater attention to this topic, making it a new focus of study.

Said strongly criticised colonial knowledge about the Orient, especially Islam and Muslim society, which he believed was intertwined with colonial interests that sought to understand Islam only in order to establish control and domination over Muslims. This work has had a significant and broad impact on the development of social sciences and humanities to this day, giving birth to, for instance, so-called sub-altern and post-colonial studies, which established *Orientalism* as their foundational text. Since the publication of Said’s work, critical readings of Western representations of Islam have emerged across various regions of the world, offering more nuanced understandings of the development of Islam.

Nevertheless, the importance of Said’s ideological critique in *Orientalism* did not prevent it from being the target of criticism from many scholars. They questioned not only the accuracy of the facts and interpretations proposed by Said (Irwin 2014), but also his tendency to reduce Orientalism to being a unilateral action on the part of the West. As a result, Orientals are not depicted as having recourse to any agency or intervention in the global movement for the production of self-knowledge. They are seen only as victims of the creative process of global scientific development (Pouillon and Vatin 2014). In fact, new centres for the study of Islam have been established in many Muslim countries, including Indonesia. Here, in the world’s largest Muslim nation, Islamic universities and centres for the study of Islam have blossomed, in tandem with scholars from Islamic backgrounds becoming more active in publishing scientific works in internationally-respected publications and journals. Their voices have become an increasingly important part of the global academic discourse.

Within the Muslim community itself, Islam, as a text and doctrine, has been long-studied by theologians, jurists, philosophers, and historians, giving birth to the basic structure of Islamic knowledge that is produced, reproduced, transmitted, and disseminated to this day. Thousands of books on the various Islamic sciences were produced as part of this process and played an important role not only in shaping the system of orthodoxy in Islam but also in influencing the social, political and cultural dynamics of the Muslim community. Some of these books

developed into canonical texts. What Muslims understand about Islam is actually more a result of their studies of foundational texts in Islam, which were engaged in an intensive dialogue with the history and context surrounding them. The question is, therefore, whether the works of these scholars are free from the influence of certain dominant ideologies, such that they can really be understood as a true representation of Islam?

Omid Safi in *The Politics of Knowledge in Pre-Modern Islam* (2006) shows how the Seljuk regime, which sought to build and expand its political influence after the fall of the Abbasids, co-opted religious scholars (ulama) by providing various facilities and sources of support in the development of Islamic knowledge – including through the construction of the Nizamiyya Madrasah – in exchange for their deep involvement in legitimising the Seljuk state ideology. These ulama stood at the forefront of efforts to delegitimise Ismaili Shia ideology, which opposed the Seljuk military regime and was considered to be contrary to the state ideology and accused of heresy and infidelity. They also worked hard to eradicate the influence of philosophy and rational thought, which was deemed to be critical of the political establishment. Through this process, Sunni orthodoxy was born, which underpinned the long reign of various regimes throughout the Islamic world. The Islamic sciences that we have inherited today, according to Safi, are largely part of the orthodoxy built through this process.

Safi's critiques to some extent inspired Ahmet T. Kuru to pen his recent influential work, *Islam, Authoritarianism and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* (2019). In this book, Kuru seeks to uncover the root causes of the underdevelopment of the Islamic world from various angles; economic, political, social, educational and cultural. In fact, most Muslim countries still rank below average in the Human Development Index, Human Rights Index, Democracy Scores, Program of International Student Assessment (PISA), and many other global development measurement systems.

For Kuru, the root cause lies not in Islam as a teaching system nor the Western colonialism that plagued the Islamic world long after the Islamic world's stagnation began in the mid-11th century, but in the alliance between the ulama and the state intended to unite Muslims in the hope of creating an ideological bulwark against the emergence of Shi'i states in North Africa, Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The real root cause was the establishment of a Sunni orthodoxy that branded Shi'is, rationalist theologians and philosophers as apostates, liable to be executed. For Kuru, the alliance between the ulama and the state that was developed through this process had an important influence on authoritarianism and underdevelopment in Muslim countries.

Understanding the issues that lie behind the ways in which Islamic knowledge or knowledge of Islam is produced is critical in order to offer new directions in the study of Islam. There is no need for the dichotomy between the West and East to be constantly maintained. We need to learn from Orientalists, especially their methodologies and criticisms of the objects under their study, which will, in turn, promote more dynamic development of knowledge. But we should avoid supporting the ideological interests that may lie behind Orientalism, as identified and criticised by Said, by consistently applying the critical scientific method the Orientalists have bequeathed to us.

At the same time, we also need to explore the Islamic knowledge handed down to us by the ulama, in order to enrich our knowledge about the development of discourse and scholarship in Islam. But we need to do this without being trapped in obsolete creeds that were deliberately developed to serve the interests of certain political establishments. We can reread the Islamic scientific legacies of the Muslim scholars using a scientific-critical methodological framework to produce fresh thought and ideas that can generate greater awareness among Muslims, enabling them to rise out of authoritarianism and under development.

In other words, we need to study Islam from various perspectives. We need to study all relevant knowledge about Islam — from these so-called Oriental and oft-considered ‘peripheral’ parts of the Muslim world, through to the well-established traditional abodes of the Islamic sciences — and offer nuanced explanations about how Islam and Muslim society have developed dynamically, by overcoming historical obstacles and moving forward toward a more promising future.

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