Islamic Discourse Contested: Middle Eastern and European Perspectives

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Introduction

Under the impact of several epistemological turns, including the linguistic and the pragmatic, scholars in the humanities and the social sciences have become absorbed with action, motion, and interaction: agency has become a key word, processes and trajectories are the subject of serious enquiry, social spaces are explored, and so are boundaries, ever shifting and constantly negotiated. Everything is in flux, people are mobile, ideas are constructed and developments contingent, nothing is uniform, no move stays uncontested. The fascination with change, and exchange, and transformation, interactive, interwoven and entangled, full of contradictions and for this reason never unilinear, has strongly affected the study of Islam, which used to be thought of as the abode of culturalist essentialism. But not any longer: situated between the local and the global, spanning what for lack of a better term are still called the Islamic and the Western worlds, Islam, or rather the study of Islam, offers exceptional opportunities to test the concept of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt et al.), so attractive conceptually and of such obvious practical relevance. Islamic thought and discourse will serve to illustrate this point.

A concern with contextualization and historicization lies at the core of the present project, which looks at Islamic thought and discourse, more specifically concepts of the good life, good society, and good governance past and present. To speak of Islamic discourse today is to speak of politics: Islamic discourse is part and parcel of a contest over moral values, social norms, and political institutions at a local as well as a global level. Over the last decade, the issue of "values" has gained new relevance: this is true for (Western) Europe, which, in the process of its enlargement toward the East, possibly reaching as far as Turkey, has begun to reflect more systematically on its identity and commonality of values (Joas and Wiegandt 2004); for the United States, which particularly since 11 September 2001 has felt impelled and justified to lead a global crusade for freedom and democracy; and for sub-Saharan Africa and South, East, and Southeast Asia insisting on their socio-cultural specificity ("African" or "Asian values"). In the Islamic world or, to be more precise, in Muslim-majority states and societies, the issue of values, and more specifically "Islamic values", is equally high on the agenda and hotly debated. The same holds true for Muslim minority communities in the West.

The debates are public. All speakers have to rationalize and justify their choices in the public sphere and in a pluralistic setting. What we observe is not a free exchange among equals, as understood by Jürgen Habermas ("herrschaftsfreier Diskurs"). The global asymmetry of power impacts strongly on the character and content of the debates. International agencies from the International Monetary Fund to the World Bank and from the government of the United States to that of Germany join in demanding that "Islam" (meaning present-day Muslims especially in the Middle East) undergo a process of reform and enlightenment and

that they accept the rule of law, good governance, and human rights, first and foremost in the realm of gender relations. The Western role in propagating these norms and values is deeply ambivalent: on the one hand, there is active support on both a governmental level (e.g., the Barcelona Process) and a non-governmental one (e.g., Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Transparency International). On the other, interventionism, "humanitarian" or otherwise, and war, including the so-called war on terrorism, bolstering authoritarian regimes in their struggle against internal critics and opponents, tend to compromise the principles as well as their advocates. External pressure puts Middle Easterners, and not just Muslims, in a defensive mood. There are many who see no threat to their "identity" in adopting and adapting modern norms and values precisely because they are not uniquely Western or exclusively tied to their historical origins in the West, but universally valid and for that reason transferable to a variety of contexts (here the concept of multiple modernities becomes relevant). The authors of the Arab Human Development Reports published in 2002, 2003, and 2004 are a case in point. Yet they cannot do so without defining their relationship vis-à-vis the West (as the quintessential and overpowering "Other") and vis-à-vis Islam (as the alleged expression of self, identity, and authenticity). The debates on values, proper conduct, the good life and good governance, therefore, cannot be separated from the issue of identity and of identity politics. In this context, Islamic discourse appears to rule supreme.

Islamic discourse

Like any other thought and discourse, the Islamic one is constructed: its advocates may claim to represent Islam writ large. What they offer are readings of tradition based on a selection of references, textual and otherwise, that could be replaced by others or combined in different ways (Krämer 1999; with different emphasis, Salvatore 1997). "Islamic thought", to use the term most commonly employed in the relevant literature (al-fikr al-islami), is itself a problematic concept, possibly suggesting more coherence and continuity, and at the same time more compelling power on the minds and hearts of Muslims, than it actually holds. Like any other intellectual tradition, the Islamic one is rich and plural and filled with discordant voices (for a pointed statement, see Bouzar 2004; in a different vein, Eickelman and Piscatori 1996). Again as in most other cases, it is often difficult to precisely situate specific elements of "Islamic thought" within a given socio-cultural and political context and to assess their capacity to effectively shape the thought and conduct of Muslims in their own time and place and beyond. Here the issue of religious authority and religious authorities comes into play. It will constitute an important element of the present project. "Islamic thought", then, may best be thought of as a repertory of references – ideas, images, rules, terms, and concepts – that Muslims draw upon when trying to define an Islamic position (or as they usually put it, "the position of Islam", mawqif al-islam) on any given subject. In doing so, they are not restricted to the Islamic tradition (which in itself has never been "purely" Islamic, untainted by external influences, or rather interactions with others): overtly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously, they draw on other traditions and references as well, integrating them into an Islamic frame of reference as best they can.

This is particularly relevant with regard to modern Islamic thought: the religious field is becoming increasingly crowded, with more and more actors entering the stage to speak on Islam, and very often in the name of Islam. Some consider themselves moderates, or liberals, or enlightened or progressive (Islamic) thinkers. Others reject such labels as contrary to Islam and their own self-view. Some have an explicit political agenda, others don't. Islamists constitute only one segment of a wider public, although over the last few decades they have come to set the tone of public debate and to define some of its most salient features. For the present purposes, Islamists are defined as a discursive community sharing a common

theme, or concern, rather than as members of any specific political group or movement. They can be found in opposition as well as in government circles, ranging from the administration to the army to the judiciary.

Islamists claim that Islam provides a distinct, coherent and comprehensive set of norms and values that makes it into a unique system competing with other religious, cultural, and political systems. The element of competition marking relations between Islam and other religio-cultural communities from the very beginning is important here. It highlights the element of plurality that will be important to the project as a whole (for earlier periods, see Berkey 2003; Krämer 2005; for modern Europe, see also Kippenberg and von Stuckrad 2003). Islamists further claim that in order to establish an "Islamic order" (nizam islami) on any given territory, the Sharia has to be "implemented" in its entirety and at the expense of all other sources of morality and normativity (Islam as a system requiring the so-called application of the Sharia). Leaving aside the many problems these claims and assumptions pose, the identification of Islam with the Sharia as an all-embracing moral and legal code has proved powerful enough, appealing to many and appalling others, to dominate public debates in most Muslim communities and societies, particularly in the Middle East. And not just the debates, but also private conduct and public order including legal, social, and cultural policies at all levels of society. The project will look at the many ways Sharia is being understood and "applied" within specific contexts, Middle Eastern as well as Western (for different perspectives, see Weiss 1998; Johansen 1999; Masud 2001; also Salvatore 1997, Krämer 1999).

Islamic discourse refers to the normative textual tradition of Islam, as enshrined in the Qur'an and Sunna, to make its peculiar choices and assertions appear compelling, ineluctable, and unassailable. In this respect, it is heir to the reformist tradition that, since the eighteenth century, has made such a deep impact on Muslim thought and societies. Depending on the local context, Islamic reform may have taken different hues and forms. But it has always insisted on the superiority of the normative textual tradition over the manifold local traditions shaping Muslim life in local settings, ranging from legal practices, especially in the field of personal status, family, and inheritance law, to ritual and religious practices more generally. Reform was meant to "purify" local practice in the light of the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunna – as interpreted by the respective reformers. For that reason, it went hand in hand with an effort to reassert and reinforce the boundaries between the licit and the illicit, good Muslims and bad ones, believers and unbelievers. The same applies to much contemporary Islamic thought and Islamist action. The project will have to explore the inherent tension between this tendency toward drawing well-defined boundaries, on the one hand, and the implicit recourse to universal norms and values, on the other, that has been part and parcel of the Salafi reformist tradition going back to al-Afghani, Abduh, and Rida.

The centrality of Sharia to Islamic discourse is reflected at various levels, including the linguistic one: concerning economic, political, and social issues, "Islamic thought" presents itself largely as a moral discourse using the language of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). This does not imply that, in the process of reflection, interpretation, and adaptation, the logic, hermeneutics, methodology, and substance of classical fiqh are preserved, too. In fact, the subtle and sometimes not so subtle transformations involved are remarkable and worthy of serious study. In spite of its insistence on the unity and indeed the uniformity of Islam, commonly associated with the doctrine of the unity of God (tawhid), Islamic discourse is by no means uniform. In spite of its insistence on Islam's uniqueness, it is influenced by contemporary notions of the good life and good governance that do not exclusively derive from Islamic sources. One line of argument illustrates this rather well: certain Islamists as

well as most self-declared Islamic moderates or liberals hold that Islam, or, as they often put it, the Sharia, has primarily to do with general principles or values rather than with the detailed rules and regulations derived from scripture (nass) according to the conventions of Islamic jurisprudence (for different perspectives, see Masud 2001; Kamali 2002; Naqvi 2003). To use more technical language, it is the finality or spirit of the law (maqasid al-shari'a) that matters, rather than its specific provisions. According to this logic, Muslims must "discover" the objectives, principles, and values embodied in the Qur'an and Sunna so as to be true to the spirit of the law, rather than blindly following the letter. What they mean by "objectives", "principles", and "values" is not just the effective cause ('illa) or purpose (hikma) of a particular injunction that traditional fiqh seeks to establish with a reasonable degree of certainty, especially by using analogical deduction (qiyas). Nor is it the legal rules or principles derived from examining particular injunctions. What they aim at is a different level of abstraction that is not so much concerned with the epistemology and hermeneutics of Islamic legal reasoning, but rather with the moral economy enshrined in revelation.

Here as well as in other contexts, modern authors refer to the classics in order to win respectability for an idea, practice, or institution that might otherwise be seen as novel (a bid'a) and hence of questionable status. Yet in the present case, they go beyond the grand tradition, arguing that what Islam essentially is all about, and what the Sharia represents, is a number of supreme objectives (maqasid) and basic values (qiyam): justice, freedom, and equality, consultation / participation (shura) and accountability / responsibility. Significantly, these include core elements of good governance as propagated by international agencies from the World Bank to major Western governments. This is, of course, no coincidence. At any rate, this list of items is clearly quite different from what classical writers such as al-Ghazali (d. 1111), al-Shatibi (d. 1388), and even al-Tufi (d. 1316) had in mind when elaborating the notions of the common good and the five essential benefits or interests – religion, life, progeny, property, and either honor or intellect – to be protected under Islam or the Sharia. The difference has much to do with the status accorded to reason in determining the objectives of divine will and law; the status of these objectives as weighed against explicit scriptural injunctions in formulating legal rules and rulings; and the frame of reference chosen to determine the hierarchy of objectives, norms, and values attributed to the divine lawgiver (God). It will be one of the aims of the present project to explore more systematically the logic and creative potential of this kind of reasoning, past and present.

Given the present dominance of Islamic discourse and its proponents, a dominance rooted in specific historical circumstances and not inherently Islamic, it becomes all the more imperative to give proper weight to its critiques and critics. Here the analysis must not be restricted to those speakers who openly declare themselves to be secularists. For reasons having to do not only with European imperialism and American neo-imperialism, but also with Atatürk's experiment in imposing a secular order from above, the notion of secularism is compromised in the eyes of many Middle Easterners, irrespective of their religious affiliation (cf. Tradition and the Critique of Modernity). Many advocates of a constitutional or outright liberal order of state and society prefer not to advertise themselves as secularists. Some project a vision according to which the realms of religion, state, and society are united under the normative umbrella of Sharia but nonetheless distinct. A minority opt for a secular model of state-society relations (of which, of course, there are several) (Binder 1998; Filali-Ansary 2003; also Faath 1994). In this context, attention should also be paid to the proponents of a New Center (wasat, wasatiyya) that have emerged in a number of Middle Eastern societies, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, with the aim to develop a new synthesis between Islamic values and modern principles and institutions of good governance (Lübben and Fawzi 2000; Hamzawy 2000; Lacroix 2004; Krämer 2004). A comparison with the Turkish Türk Islam Sentezi may prove useful here.

Religious Authority and Authorities

Given the preoccupation with change, mobility, and hybridity characteristic of (Western) academic discourse at the turn of the millennium, it is not easy to come to terms with what is still the object of much contemporary Islamic discourse: to draw boundaries, to delineate spaces, and to classify actions according to what appear to be fixed categories of right and wrong, engaging in the very kind of normative, prescriptive writing so abhorrent to the postmodern scholar. The urge to circumscribe the space of legitimate thought and action rather than to open it up and to categorize acts and notions rather than to contextualize and deconstruct them, seems to express a need alien to the observer but deeply relevant to those involved. The remarkable output of legal opinions (fatwas) addressing all sorts of issues, from the utterly mundane to the highly sensitive, suggests a strong demand for moral guidance and an equally strong readiness to offer it. So does the proliferation of religious advice literature, ranging from expositions of conventional assumptions to fresh enquiries into the limits of legitimate doubt and interpretation and from lengthy monographs to brief exchanges on the Internet, TV, and the radio. The same applies to political treatises, statements, and manifestos presenting Islamic alternatives to global trends or models. The search for guidance and for certainty highlights the issue of religious authority that has been of major relevance to Muslim communities from a very early date, always controversial and contested, and never fully resolved (for recent contributions, see Gaborieau and Zeghal 2004; Krämer and Schmidtke 2006). For obvious reasons, it forms an integral part of the present project.

As a rule, Muslims today will not dispute the binding character of the normative textual tradition – the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet – and they will quote liberally from such classical texts as they consider authoritative. This applies not only to those committed to an Islamic discourse, but to many of their critics as well. But in doing so, they make their own selection of references and they read them in the light of present demands, concerns, and aspirations. Just as importantly, they define their scope of normativity. This raises the twin issues of competence and authority in interpreting the normative tradition and in "applying" it to present circumstances. Critical scholarship has tended to emphasize processes of individualization of religious experience, practice, and orientation, particularly with regard to Muslims in the West (for critical reviews, see Salvatore and Amir-Moazami 2002; Tezcan 2003; for relevant studies, see Schiffauer 2000; Dassetto 2000; Césari 2004; Cohen, Joncheray, Luizard 2004). At the same time, we are witnessing the emergence of various types of religious authorities, some traditional but subtly transformed (imams, muftis, preachers, Sufi shaykhs), others altogether new (not just Islamic intellectuals, but also Islamicists and social scientists). We are also witnessing new forms of articulating authoritative statements on all matters Islamic (collective fatwa bodies, media muftis, Internet fatwas, etc.) (Eickelman and Anderson 1999; Mandaville 2001; Bunt 2003). One aim of the present project will be to try to link specific visions of an Islamic order with specific authorities, their scope of activities, and their respective audiences.

Research program

Analyzing Islamic discourse and the lively debates focused on it takes on a number of dimensions. In addition to analyzing its components, i.e., the norms and values discussed (e.g., justice, freedom, equality), it involves looking at the references used; the hermeneutics employed; the individuals and groups involved; the authorities invoked; and the audiences targeted. In regional terms, the project will focus on both the Middle East (the Arab world, but also Iran and Turkey) and Muslim communities in the West, first and foremost Western Europe. To say, as it is both fashionable and correct, that all discourse is contingent implies that it has to be situated within a given socio-political context. This context may not be

adequately defined by the modern territorial state, but it still has a territorial dimension. Indeed it can be shown that political thinkers and activists, including committed Islamists in say, Egypt, act and argue primarily within the parameters of the Egyptian nation state (one of the few nation states in the Middle East). And yet to say that Islamic discourse is not just local or regional, but also translocal and transnational is stating the obvious. The art consists of finding the proper balance between the two. One way to do so is to look closely at how, within a specific socio-regional context, various components are combined or woven together without attempting to deprive them of their flexibility and volatility (in attempting to do so, the present project and Travelling Traditions share much common ground). While there is a certain tendency among Europeans to think primarily in terms of a European Islam when searching for models of the "Islamic modern" (the title of a study on Islam in Malaysia; Peletz 2002), contributions from the United States should be given due consideration. In certain fields, such as gender relations and women rights more particularly, Muslims in the US appear to have been more vocal and innovative than their counterparts in Europe (Abou El Fadl 2001; for an example, see Asma Barlas, "Believing Women" in Islam. Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an, Austin 2002).