

REORIENT: A FORUM FOR CRITICAL MUSLIM STUDIES

ReOrienting

Etymologically, the “orient” referred to the sky, the east in the sky, and the eastern expanse of the heavens. The epistemological significations of “orient” developed as it focused the human gaze on the rising sun in the east so that seeing and therefore knowing were ever and always marked with each passing day. The temporality of knowing was a knowing anew, concomitant to the continual arising and appearance of the day, of the *orient* sun. The terrestrial connotations of “orient” that followed were imperative ones, directives for the placing of objects to face the east. The most notable of these were to be found in the structuring of churches whose main entrances were on the west in order to lead and turn the penitent towards its eastward chantries and sacrariums. The authority of this Christian evocation of the grounding of knowledge, symbolically entered into from the West in order to face the east, and whose terms were both worldly and transcendental, would eventually take hold of Europe and establish the grounds for the secularizing imperatives of its later governing apparatus and epistemologies. What began as the constant and daily orienting of the self and arrangement of objects to face the east eventually turned into the finding of one’s bearings in relation to the east and about the East; this was the Orient towards which Europe politically directed the largesse of its militaristic gaze and what would become the heartland of its colonial reach and imperialist ambitions. The “orient” thus became the Orient and in its Islamicate iteration, the ripe object of Orientalism and its co-opting of temporalities and epistemologies in the service of a Eurocentric ordering of the world.

ReOrient then signals a turning away from an Orientalizing gaze, and as such, it can be seen as belonging to the family of concepts and critiques associated with decolonial thinking and its call for delinking from the Western episteme. This process of delinking, however, is not the sum total of Critical Muslim Studies. *ReOrient* as the journal of Critical Muslim Studies is not unified by an exclusive focus on the figure and figurations of the Muslim and its associations. It is not a more critical analysis of the Muslim experience that constitutes Critical Muslim Studies but rather a relationship to it which does not reproduce the hierarchy between the West and the Rest. If the colonial/modern (i.e., Western) episteme is founded on an axis that differentiates between a West that is fully formed and richly elaborated and a Rest that is merely a residual category, then the project

of Critical Muslim Studies is a thought experiment that asserts a distinction between the Islamicate and the non-Islamate as an opening gambit. In other words, Critical Muslim Studies is based not so much on describing the various permutations and problems occasioned by the articulation of a Muslim object of analysis as on examining the constitution of Muslim and its cognates. In short, Critical Muslim Studies signals a shift from the ontic towards a more ontological inclined understanding of matters Islamicate.

Critical Muslim Studies is, then, characterized by a series of epistemological orientations, rather than by substantive properties, permanent categories, or persistent methodologies. That series of orientations and commitments, which make possible the emergence of Critical Muslim Studies, can be grouped into four broad currents within contemporary intellectual developments (Sayyid, 2014: 11-14). Firstly, there is a critique of Eurocentrism understood in a variety of registers (epistemological, cultural, geopolitical, etc.) that express the way in which Europeanness is deployed as master referent, in relation to which all things are measured and understood. Eurocentrism, as a project that persistently seeks to articulate the universal as the synonym of Europeanness, not only precludes the possibility of Muslim agency but also forecloses the venture of Critical Muslim Studies. How this critique of Eurocentrism presents itself will vary from contributor to contributor and from article to article, but its presence, implicit or explicit, helps structure statements into Critical Muslim Studies.

Secondly, Critical Muslim Studies is informed by an ongoing (but not necessarily consummated) suspicion of positivism. Positivism here is to be understood to include all investigations that implicitly or explicitly hold on to the dream of producing a neutral, transparent, and predictive knowledge, more or less discreetly packaged in disciplinary categories or thematics that are supposed to have an independent validity. The opening gambit of Critical Muslim Studies would ideally include a questioning of whether categories, concepts, and themes bequeathed to us for understanding Islam and its cognates are fit for purpose and adequate to current circumstances. Thus, for Critical Muslim Studies, there is no necessary comfort in having “the facts and data” (Volpi, 2010: 1-20), nor does the comfort come from wholesale rejection of these tools, but rather it requires a middle path in which the idea of a universally valid social science has to be demonstrated rather than simply assumed.

Thirdly, there is recognition of the significance of the critique of Orientalism. Not the unveiling of bias and prejudice to which the critique of Orientalism is so often reduced but that which opens the possibility of enquires that understand the complex constitutive interplay between power and knowledge, between the “Orient,” orientalizing, and the Occident.

Fourthly, there is an embrace of postcolonial and decolonial thinking. Decolonial thought calls for epistemic delinking as the means of delivering on the promise of critical theory in contexts where the dispossessed are not represented by the “translation of the proletariat” (Mignolo, 2007: 449). It is a project that places at its heart the “wretched of the Earth” and follows the consequences of this placement for an understanding of the emergence of the current world order and investigations of obstacles to its replacement. The insistence on understanding modernity and coloniality as unified phenomena is one of the key insights of decolonial thinking. Decolonial thought identifies the current world order as being the outcome of systematic and systemic (not absent-minded or accidental) imbrications between modernity and the colonial, and in doing so helps to historicize and denaturalize gendered and racialized rationalisations of cruelty and injustice. Its ambition for pluri-versal world history points to the contingency in the formation of the world and opens the way not only for a people without history to write their history but in the process to also have the potential to redefine the nature of the historical. Critical Muslim Studies, however, is not the application of decolonial theory or its mere enlargement, with the figure of the Muslim replacing the “wretched of the Earth” at the heart of its deliberations and formulations. Critical Muslim Studies is an engagement with some of the key concerns and responses of decolonial thinking, in particular the project of writing a new history of the world without the telos of the West.

These orientations make Critical Muslim Studies possible but do not police let alone determine its development. The orientations are neither exclusive nor sequential but rather overlapping, sharing some resemblances without necessarily forging a foundation around which alone the project of Critical Muslim Studies can be established. This much we affirm: that the conditions of normal science that governed the production of knowledge and understanding of the Islamicate in its multiple manifestations can no longer hold, and that the solution lies neither in mere reform of the existing paradigm nor in calls for more informed scholarship, less partisan commentary, or greater empathy. What lies ahead is in the making: *ReOrient* is neither a house journal nor does it have a party line as such, rather it marks out a horizon, a platform for sustained collective conversation.

ReThinking

The need for something like *ReOrient* stems from a conviction that the project of Critical Muslim Studies needs to have a regular and established intellectual point of output. In part, this stemmed from the experience of struggles to find journals willing to publish scholarship that challenges Eurocentrism beyond the ways in which it has become permissible to do so; not as the betrayal of the universal

nature of European values or distortion of the real Europe but as the way in which it constitutes a disciplinary caging around Muslims and Islamicate. It stems too, from the need for a journal that does not emphasize the literal over the contextual, that does not privilege the theological over the sociological, and that understands the division between people with history and those without, as historiography not history.

To this end, *ReOrient* forges a space for critical and interdisciplinary discussion across a diverse range of disciplinary debates, interventions, and critiques. The articulation of critical with the Islamicate and its multiple cognates (Muslims, Islamic, Islam) yields three major clusters: self-criticism, critique of Islamophobic representations and constructions, and critique of tradition. The seemingly most prevalent is Muslim self-criticism, an element of critique which, however intended, insidiously aligns with dominant inscriptions of the Muslim problem and the crisis of Islam. No less common, particularly in cultural and media studies approaches, is the critique of the way Islam and Muslims are problematized in constructions and representations; critical work indeed, but too often mired in demarcations of founded and unfounded criticism, misrepresentation, and internal versus external constructions. While modernist criticism of traditional authority and ossified traditions often inform Muslim self-criticism, and are equally often similarly aligned and re-inscribed, critical engagements with the tradition are the core both of a living Islam and of approaches to Islam as a discursive tradition, attentive to the play of power in its formations and reformations. Critique in the latter two senses most closely approaches and overlaps with Critical Muslim Studies and its roots in practices of critical theory.

Critical Muslim Studies draws on “race” and racialization studies no less than on post-Orientalist and post-“Religion” Islamic Studies, on critical theory and poststructuralism as much as on literary criticism or cultural studies. History, comparison, and critique are central to its project. Its horizon is global but in multiple contextual scales and spacializations. Its temporal frames of reference are less the compliments of 9/11 or any of the many iterations of the making of the Muslim Question over the last century, than the decolonial temporalities of the making and unmaking of the colour question, 1492, or of the Venture of Islam out of the transitions of Late Antiquity. Its imaginary geographies no less the ummatic polycentres of Southeast Asian, Sub-Saharan African, Central or Far East-Asian Islam, than the South Asian and MENA (Middle East and North Africa) Islam of the canons of Orientalism and Religious Studies. To this extent, the criticality of Critical Muslim Studies is predicated on the displacement of perspectives that read the Islamicate as being contained within the precincts of ahistorical and enduring Arabness. In the process of the forging of a critical space, we are de-naturalizing the historiographies, ideologies, and teleologies that are normalized, produced, and

enabled by unquestioned protocols of knowledge formation. With this journal, it is our aim to unmoor the foundations that give logical coherence to these paradigms in order to focus our conceptual and analytic attention on ontological rather than merely ontic questions of Muslim subjectivity and agency.

ReWriting

It is with this in mind that we welcome our readership to the inaugural volume of the journal. This issue opens with an essay by Richard W. Bulliet titled, “The Other Siege of Vienna and the Ottoman Threat.” Revisiting of the second siege of Vienna in a counter-factual mode, Bulliet envisages an Ottoman victory in 1529 as a turning point in reverse, not, however, to repeat the scenario of an Ottoman overrunning of Europe but of how the reconfigured territorial and inter-state system of Western Europe would have been politically and intellectually reconfigured by the presence among them of a Muslim state. The counter-factuality of this essay represents the ambition of the journal to destabilize, displace, and denaturalize the verities of an Orientalizing imagination. Counter-factual historical essays will be a regular feature of the journal, not only because they undermine the necessitarian logic that underpins much history of the Islamicate but also because speculative fictions are perhaps one of the best ways to explore contingency in the historiographical narrative.

A set of Exchanges similarly launches another regular section and focus of the journal. This section will be organized around a scholar to whose work we invite others to respond. In this issue, Ruth Mas is joined by Ananda Abeysekera and Sian Melvill Hawthorne in an engagement with and response to Gil Anidjar. Anidjar’s contribution, “The Forgetting of Christianity,” challenges our conceptual indebtedness to Christianity as part of a secularizing and imperial frame within which we write and from which politics towards the rest of the world are formulated.

The issue’s free-standing articles illustrate the range of themes and approaches, geographies, and concerns the journal cultivates. In “Fawly Logic: The Cracks in Cameron’s 2011 Munich Speech,” philosopher Brian Klug treats the controversial speech that the British prime minister gave at the 47th Munich Security Conference in Germany, in order to address the reasoning and rhetoric behind Cameron’s rejection of “state multiculturalism” and embrace of “muscular liberalism.” Klug’s ensuing analysis brings to light the implications of this reasoning for Islam and Muslims in Britain. In her essay, “Muhammad Iqbal on Muslim Orthodoxy and Transgression: A Response to Nehru,” the scholar of South Asian religions, Teena Purohit, examines anxieties about Ahmadism and its relationship to Islam that arise

in the thought of Muhammad Iqbal, in order to argue that they extended beyond theological differences and instead were directed at concerns with Muslim unity.

A collection of book reviews completes this first issue. The first is a review essay by Warren Chin, “Colonial Wars, Postcolonial States: A Debate on the War on Terror,” in which he addresses the debates that govern the military analysis on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Roshan A. Jahangeer, Kamran Bashir, and Shamim Miah review *The Republic Unsettled* by Mayanthi Fernando, *The Lives of Muhammad* by Kecia Ali, and *The Last of the Lascars* by Mohammad Siddique Seddon, respectively. Each in turn interrogates in decolonial fashion the unity and universality of modern forms of power and the logics of historiographies about the Islamic tradition and Muslims that they produce.

The range of writings included in the first issue of *ReOrient* is an index of the way in which Critical Muslim Studies is unified not by a specific subject or set of topics but rather as an ongoing series of reflections on the possibility of comprehending the world by a relationship that provincializes the West and the Rest, differences that founds both the Western episteme and the world that it made. *ReOrient* then, is not a journal that seeks answers to the Muslim Question, nor is it a journal that just raises the European Question as a replacement, but rather it is a surface of inscription for a history of the future.

The Editorial Board

References

- Mignolo, W. (2007) Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality. *Cultural Studies*. 21 (2-3), 449-514.
- Sayyid, S. (2014) *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonization and World Order*. London: Hurst.
- Volpi, F. (2010) *Political Islam Observed*. London: Hurst.