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The War of “Authenticities”

Aaron W. Hughes’s new book focuses on some crucial methodological problems related to the academic study of Islam and even to the very existence of Islamic Studies as a field of research. The book is based from its very beginning (even from the title) on a concept that, expressed in Arabic, can be traced back to the nineteenth century, to those early years of the so-called Nahda or Arab Renaissance, which probably included a correlative Islamic Renaissance. This concept is authenticity, Asala, once considered to be the core of a cultural revival and whose comparison with Hughes’ treatment deserves some initial reflections. Those were the days for re-writing tradition as emotional baggage to be carried along for the future – interestingly enough, a precedent for later cultural revolutions allegedly anchored in a certain version, a selected narrative, of the past. And there began what Daniel Brown once defined as “the prism of Tradition,” that prism through which we interpret and color the light of the present. The old sense of Asala once made it possible for a generation of thinkers to set a variety of possible courses regarding “Otherness,” be it modernity, the West, or laicism. Those courses were corporative possibilities, choices among assimilation, management, or refusal of that Otherness. Corporative possibilities, I said: just as if this very subject – my relationship with Otherness – should or could present a collective answer.

Anyway, for much of a century, at least from mid-nineteenth century on, the compass of Asala did sometimes set a course towards Arabism and its options (modernity, i.e. Nahda, or tradition, i.e. Turath), and some other times towards Islamism and its equivalent options (again, modernity, i.e. Sahwa, or tradition, i.e. Salaf). I have recounted all this because Asala is back again, flying not only over huge swathes of Islamic anti-system corporatism, but also over an intellectualism and scholarship that it denounces. And here is where Hughes’ new book makes sense. It admits only one methodological option, Asala, while condemning “the tyranny” of another Asala, the alleged authenticity of just one version or option of Islam that is operative in the opinion and work of a limited number amongst our fellow scholars of Islam.
Following Hughes’s new approach, scholars should devote themselves to *re-description*. This means that they should take ‘native reports’ and re-describe them in their own scholarly categories. This is undoubtedly a good declaration of principles, which avoids getting lost between metonymy and apologetics. In fact, the main idea of the entire book is to contextualize Islam as social phenomenon while not taking sides in debates over legitimacy (p. xii). It is a plea for a critical enterprise, calling on scholars not to adjudicate between authentic and inauthentic versions of religion. A good example Hughes offers is the notorious case of that Boko Haram in Africa, which presents itself as acting in the name of Islam while kidnapping and assassinating school girls. Hughes argues that it is equally a mistake to transform Boko Haram “into a metonym for Muslims worldwide,” and to consider its acts as “somehow not [committed by] Muslims” (p. xi). Here lies an important methodological motif in the author’s extended argument, one building on his essential monograph, *Theorizing Islam: On Disciplinary Deconstruction and Reconstruction*. Hughes shrewdly calls to task what he refers to as “strategically partial Islam,” a supposedly scholarly investigation that is, in the end, little more than apologetics (p. xvi). In this new monograph, the author frequently returns to this point, denouncing the “apologetical discourses that currently define the field” and aim only at analyzing spiritual motivations.

Nevertheless, I think that those “spiritual motivations” could be intellectually considered, at least to an extent, within Islamic Studies scholarship. So too can scholarship address that wide and ambiguous borderline between what is and is not Islam. Religious praxis as well as so many other spiritual, dogmatic, even philosophical, theological and historical compounds may fall into the disciplinary ensemble of those Islamic Studies. For example, if Boko Haram presented itself as acting in the name of Islam, while, to speak very hypothetically, at the same time it declared that it no longer recognized Muhammad as the Prophet, but would from now pray to three different gods, any scholar of Islamic Studies could have something to say to this on the basis of his or her studies on Islamic Theology. To do so would not necessary send that scholar falling into that “strategically partial Islam” or implicate him or her in the “rhetoric of authenticity.” Even the study of personal narratives of Muslim scholars, whether liberal or not, are part of our field of research, though we must always avoid referring to them as the right path. Islamic Studies can’t be so easily reduced to a laboratory-like, aseptic analysis of previously agreed upon and limited elements or manifestations. I even think that confining Islamic Studies to what can be studied in a Department of Religious Studies is another way of reductionism, perhaps even a living proof of the way we tend to confuse Islam as religion and Islam as culture. But this is another story that would deserve fuller reflection.

Hughes calls on scholarship to engage in a war against mythopoesis, and I for one heed the summons. Mythopoesis in our field is a huge problem, fed by a politically charged arena and augmented by the significant fact that many of the scholars of Islamic Studies are Muslims, or converts to Islam, or dependent on Islamic funding. This being the case, it is in fact difficult not to fall into taking sides and confusing between honest work and apologetics, between a subject matter or field of specialization and “defending a particular version of Islam” (p. xvi). Hughes’s diagnosis claims that there is a deep conceptual failure in our field to be treated by critical scholarship. Frequently there appears the “specter of late Edward Said” and his claim, a near obsession, that any attempt to understand Islam on historical grounds should be considered as an Orientalist approach and thus politically motivated to undermine Islam.
The monograph opens with a strong and well done preface about those “noble lies,” Plato’s labelling of untrue stories made up for popular consumption. There follows an introduction about who’s who, or who should be who, in terms of “insiders” and “outsiders” in the study of Islam, to be widely developed in a later section. The body comprises six tightly connected and provocative chapters: Chapter 1 comes back to the theme of boundaries around “Islamic Religious studies” and insists that any genuine academic attempt at Islamic Studies must avoid apologetics. Here Hughes reiterates the argument presented in his previous book Theorizing Islam. Chapter 2 rebels against Saidian, referring to Edward Said’s stigmatization of Orientalism as undermining Islam. At the same time, it fights against the idea of confessional or apologetic scholarship that defends selected and particular versions of Islam. Here lies the core of his decisive oriented critique of the “rhetoric of authenticity,” which makes this chapter central in the entire book. Chapter 3 focuses on personal beliefs of those “Insiders” and “Outsiders” referred to in the introduction. This chapter explores in particular the role of some outstanding scholar-converts (five in number) who tend to equate “Islam with love” and confuse their personal vocation with academic methodologies. Chapter 4 follows the same line, examining the work of another five individuals who voluntarily stand apart from accepted scholarly methodology and who probably follow a certain Saidian anti-Orientalist prejudice. This approach leads them to discover, unsurprisingly, a certain one and only true Islam. Chapter 5, in its turn, offers Jacob Neusner as a counterpart, exploring his work in the field of Jewish Studies and his redirection to the academic study of religion, while being himself an “insider.” Finally, in Chapter 6 the author admits that there is a logic to the “passionate debates about how to negotiate religious data” while aiming at consensual theoretical framework and independent verification in the academic study of religions.

This is Hughes’s third installment against the “strategically partial Islam” in “Islamic religious studies,” following both Theorizing Islam (2012) and the earlier Situating Islam (2007). In it, Hughes reinforces his account of how the study of Islam became, in so many cases, an exercise in liberal Muslim apologetics. It is true that the scope of his research is limited to North American departments of Islamic Studies, but his diagnosis of “confusion of critical scholarship with constructive theology” can be traced elsewhere, giving Theorizing Islam a relevance that transcends its initially intended scope. Again, it was precisely in the second installment that we could read a final declaration of principles aimed at understanding things on their own terms: that scholars of Islam should be “exposed to a more nuanced version of the manifold traditions, practices, rites and ideologies that we often conveniently label as Islam.” In Hughes’s panoramic diagnosis we can also find a quick list of apparently forgotten topics addressed by honest critical scholarship (redaction of the Qur’an, Early Islamic politics, source criticism of Sira, etc.), as well as a continued proposal for contextualizing and historicizing.

All that said, and respecting the traditional completeness of a trilogy, I have some quibbles related to what this book substantially adds for those who had previously read his earlier two monographies in the same series. Theorizing Islam mapped so successfully the necessary scholarly deconstruction of Islamic Studies by means of disregarding apologetics and requiring independent verification that this new monograph can hardly outdo it. Instead, it risks appearing as an ideologized sequel. The intensification of ad hominem criticism and recurring references, seemingly in a populist vein, to one and only particular face of Islam, that running from that Boko Haram to 9/11 and beyond, may descend, at least for a naïve mind, from apologetics to vituperation and scolding. While showing the reader that the real problem of our discipline is hovering
somewhere around a blending of Saidian de-contextualization, jihadist noise, and new-age sufi wishful thinking, the author makes it a bit difficult to discern those necessary “standards of evidence that define scholarship” because he does not offer a complementary view. He jumps from Islamic Studies to Islam, and from Islam to some Muslims – to only one type, such as Boko Haram. But this is a personal view that the author adopts – looking down in the meantime on the personal view of others. And vice-versa, while looking down on others’ personalized views. These maneuvers seem to serve a purpose: to deter anyone from working freely on Islam. This makes it difficult to write on Islam unless we decide to join “the selected club,” this methodologist revival of a scholar Asala, i.e. the authenticity I mentioned in the first paragraphs. The methodological authenticity, Hughes’s Asala as advocated in this book, does not consider thousands of possible other evidences in the academic study of Islam that do not necessarily come from apologetics and these evidences, in turn, converge on the crux of the matter: that Islamic Studies is not a chapter of Religious Studies. And this is a question that severe methodologism can hardly explain, because, in itself, a fixed methodology is useless in the study of an area so multifaceted as the social sciences and humanities.

A remarkable notion appears in this book that is worth pondering further: contextualization. It is true that in this “turf war,” to use Hughes’s own expression, between “Islamic Religious Studies” (the apologetic approach) and “New Islamic Studies,” (the scientific and critical approach) or maybe, simply, “Islamic Studies,” a critical scholarship of relevance regarding Islam, must include specific historical contextualization. But, having said that, and qualifying Hughes’s indictment against “the tyranny of authenticity,” I think that “scriptures and early history” do not explain it all, if they explain anything about history and/or current times. Nor does anthropology of religion or sociology of Islam as such and separately. I wonder, for instance, where could we put Hughes’s earlier outstanding book on the work of Ibn Tufayl (The Texture of the Divine; 2003) in these “New Islamic Studies,” and whether this can be included within the scope of Islamic Studies or not (of course it can). I wonder if we could consider Islamic art as part of the discipline, for instance, and if the synagogue of Toledo, a remarkable piece of Islamic art, falls into our discipline. The same could be said of the Genizah archives at Cairo, which is part of a specific Islamic time and culture. These are only a few examples. Are they all awaiting a certificate of methodological purity, or can they help us to admit the complexity and porosity of Islamic Studies? And one last point to question the “pure understanding” of Islam solely on historical grounds: what is at stake is not closing doors and requesting a corporative accreditation? It is not about “insiders” against “outsiders,” but intended authenticity against open-mindedness, mythopoesis against scholarship. “Authentic” Islam, as “authentic” Judaism, Christianity, and so on, is based on the consideration of “authentic” books and tradition, that old Asala at the nineteenth century. From my point of view, it is also important to oppose development, even evolution, to transmission. For hermeneutics fails when it feeds the mythic dimensions of the sacred texts its studies. In summary, religious systems are far more than foundational literature, at the very end no more than symbolic basement, and Islam is far more than a religious system. Of course, this is not a plea for that notorious Islam as a “Way of Life,” as fundamentalists presently tend to think and advertise. On the contrary, I think that at least three different Islams (the religious system, the civilization spanning the foundation of Baghdad through the collapse of Turkish Caliphate, and the contemporary social system), have historically been mixed together, and Islamic Studies must devote itself to all three, while insisting on the necessary differentiation.
As a last marginal detail: Hughes lays out Jacob Neusner as compelling alternative to Saidian counter-Orientalism. This is an original way of coming back to shared and interconnected early sources in Islamic and Jewish studies. I’m not that sure if this could work apart from originating stages and early medieval developments, after which Judaism and Islam go their separate ways, but it is a good starting point. I am not sure either if, as Hughes contends, Neusner submitted Jewish tradition to critical scrutiny in a period of “rampant anti-Semitism” (in the sixties?). What I do know is that these are not good times for highlighting aspects of that manifold Islam, because the general atmosphere is quite different from what the author proposes – not only in scholarship, but also in the media and the general public, which sees only one version of Islam and focuses exclusively on isolated elements in a paranoid search for clues in cultural sources to explain contemporary barbaric excesses. And I see in this a subtle conceptual Islamophobia of much more range than “progressive Muslim theologizing” in those neo-Saidian books, so full of wishful thinking.

I find “standards of evidence that define scholarship” in the inclusive way of understanding our Islamic Studies, something that I miss in some aspects of this book, which in the final analysis is an interesting and thought-provoking exercise. And, in order to “reconstruct Islamic Studies in a more theoretically responsible manner,” I think we should keep cool and open our minds to whatever light or aspect that may enrich our field of research, not to design exclusive methodologies – authentic ones – to be distributed with a dropper.