MUSLIM THEOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN THE WESTERN ACADEMIA

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ABSTRACT

This article will begin by examining the academic background of Religious Studies in the Western academia. It will then try to explore the definition of theology in both Christian and Muslim terms. It will argue that the various academic ways of studying Islam in Religious studies can create both complementary and contradictory findings with Muslim theology. It will be argued that there is a certain way that the epistemology of studying Islam through both Muslim theology and through social sciences can create a healthy balance between understanding Islam as an insider and an outsider.

Key Words: Religious Studies, Islam and West, Muslim Theology

This paper will critically evaluate the relationship, if any, between Muslim theology and Religious Studies within the Western academic arena. Only in recent times has there been a dramatic growth of studying Islam at liberal art universities in the Western world. In contemporary times, the critique of Orientalism has produced a widespread post-modern mood of self-criticism of one’s motives for studying the ‘other’. Scholars that looked at Islam from a Orientalist lens in the past has been deemed to be based upon confessional claims, i.e. fideistic subjectivism and scholars that used to study Islam through history has been critiqued for their claim of absolute detachment on the part of the observer, i.e. scientific objectivism. Both have been rejected by many post-modern thinkers, which have strongly challenged the idea of a detached observer, by arguing that all interpretations are conditioned by a horizon of understanding i.e. her or his historical milieu. In the end, the post-modernist thought argues that all that is possible to truly know about the past is what people believed happened and literary analysis of historical sources can define

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1 This word in itself is a conundrum-see T. J. Winter, (2008), The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology, (Cambridge: Cambridge Press).
the various arguments present at that time. Hence, today the subject that is increasingly being emphasized is the exposition of Islam as it is experienced and lived by the members of the community. In liberal art universities you not only learn about Islam from the text but also look at it through the lens of phenomenology of religion.

This can cause a number of problems between what is believed and what is perceived within the study of Islam in Religious Studies. Working within Religious Studies, I have come across perplexing problems of how to align the theological understanding within Islam with the social phenomenon called Islam. I believe one of the main reasons for this is that religious studies as we study it is still very much anchored within a western Judeo-Christian and a western post modern society. The main theoretical proponents behind core subjects such as Sociology of Religion, Philosophy of Religion, Psychology of Religion and the Study of Religion are names such as Durkheim, Marx, Weber, Freud, Jung, Smart, Smith, Sharpe etc. There is no doubt that these scholars have all been firmly anchored within a Western Judeo-Christian and the ideas established about religion in Europe during the enlightenment era in the 19th century. One example of this should suffice; the study of religion at university level seldom uses non-western scholars to define religion from a non Judeo-Christian tradition. From a post-modern thought, such a definition must be argued to be limited to the Latin derived word ‘religion’ and must be recognised to be subjective to a certain milieu. Hence, any further research in this area and any further benefit for Religious Studies must include definitions of religion coming from outside this milieu. Thus, even if this would somehow challenge the idea of anything remotely acceptable as ‘a definition’ by all, it would lead the students of religion to grasp the underlying distinctions and nuances that exist between the various religions and cultures of how they view their universe.

It is therefore interesting to note that many Religious Studies Departments in the United Kingdom today are either studying Islam from a ‘study of religion’ lens, which superimposes a secular worldview on Islam or through social sciences which try to understand Muslims in their social context. However, one of the main losses from their focus is that Islam is not seen through the lens of the Muslim theological beliefs but through contemporary social theorist on topics such as power, economics, community, identity and representation-all far removed from the practical theological application of Islam. What the study of Islam through these social sciences does is unfortunately exclude the ‘Muslim theological views’ as a world view.


So, how do we understand the word theology in Western context? Today, if a Muslim or an Orthodox Jew were sitting in a Christian theology conference they would just be baffled and mystified to hear the array of theology strands that exists within the Christian tradition such as dogmatic theology, liberal theology, moral theology, systematic theology, comparative theology, feminist theology and positive theology. This is because it is still a challenging task for Orthodox Jews and most Muslims to claim to have even a brand of theology. This is based upon the fact that both of these religions are law based in comparison to Christianity, whose crowning jewel has always been Islam’s scholarly gemstone without a doubt has always been the shari’ah. Muslim theologians were always first of all jurists and even Sufi scholars and philosophers were expert jurists such as Ibn Rushd (d.1198) and Ibn Arabi (d.1240). It could be asked why shari’ah was recognised as the gemstone of Muslim scholarship. One possible argument is that Islam is a predominantly a practical religion and its adherent’s goal is to respond to God’s call through their deeds. Thus, the need for Islamic law, that guides Muslim behaviour through life, has predominantly superseded the theoretical dedication to Muslim thought. This is re-iterated by Josef Van Ess in his book ‘the Flowering of Islamic Theology’ where he states “For Islam, orthopraxy is more important than orthodoxy. At the level of action, in the liturgy and in daily life, details counted a great deal.”

So, what is theology? According to the ‘Encyclopaedia of Religion’ the term theology means discourse or speech about God and the word was used by Plato to describe the poets who wrote about gods and theogonies, whereas Aristotle attributed theology to scholars that dealt with mythology or even metaphysics in comparison with philosophical enquiry about the Divine. During the first centuries of Christianity the word theology was primarily used by Origen (d. 254) to designate the knowledge of God and slowly it moved way from paganism to be exclusively about the Christian God. With regard to this theology, it is an enigma for Muslims that Christian theology is reliant on the human enquiry or rather explorativeness of the nature of God. For Muslims on

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5 Islamic Law in this sense is a far broader concept than what is generally perceived in the English language, since it includes not only penal, state, trade and family law but as well manners, rituals and worship which does not only have an impact in this world but as well in the next world; thus making the Shari’ah a subject matter important for both the physical world and the metaphysical one.
the other hand there is a total reliance on the revealed scripture to know the nature of God. The Christian understanding of the term may just be the main reason for the evasion of the term theology in contemporary Islam. Tariq Ramadan writes in his book ‘Western Muslims and the Future of Islam’ that “there is no Islamic theology” and continues to point out that historically Muslims have never questioned the absolute Oneness of God and the impossibility of His representation nor doubted the Qur’an to be the revealed word from God. He continues to argue that to have an authentic ‘theology’ one has to inquire into the truth of the above three statements about God and speech, which Islam has never done. Even though scholars of Islam did not question the existence of God (since it was already agreed that God existed due to revelation), it is argued by many contemporary scholars, including Ramadan, that Muslims have continuously discussed the meaning and significance of the names and attributes of God. They have also had to deal with the question of free will and particulars of resurrection.

Islam therefore seems to have a kind of theology but it all depends on what is meant by the word theology. In Islam, it seems that the word theology can not be understood in the same context as it is understood in Christianity. Seyyed Hussain Nasr compares theology in Christianity with Islamic theology as “In Christianity not only has theology attempted to provide a rational defence for the faith, but it also sought to provide access to the highest realms of the life of spirit, as one finds in the mystical theology Dinoysius Areopagite or, in the Protestant context, in the Theological Germanica of Martin Luther. Such has never been the case in Islam, where Kalam, which means literally ‘word’, continued to be the science that bears responsibility of solidly establishing religious beliefs by giving proofs and dispelling doubts”. It becomes very clear when looking at the Islamic intellectual history that Kalam (Islamic dogmatic theology), Falsafah (philosophy) and Tasawuf (Sufism) can easily be confused with each other when looking through Christian theological lenses. An over-simplistic division of what is referred to as theology with regards to belief in Christianity can be found scattered within three sciences of Islam; in Tasawuf where Muslim scholars sought “access to the highest realms of the life of the spirit” and wrote about gnostic experience, within Falsafah where Muslim scholars ventured into speculating about metaphysical reality and tried to reach it with the intellect and within kalam where Muslim scholars defined and defended the faith. It is often found that these scholars, the mutakallimin (theologians), the Muslim philosophers and the Sufis touched upon similar topics coming from different directions but always existing within the Islamic world view. Through time, certain figures were able to combine these sciences, such as al-Ghazali (d.1111) and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d.1209).

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As Merry\textsuperscript{11} points out, “contrary to western custom of reasoning by way of doubt and uncertainty, Muslim—while encouraged to be critically minded—are called to an education built on the premise of faith in a divine order.” I have found that most misunderstandings in dialogue between Muslims and people of other faiths (or no faiths) in the West more often than not stems from assumptions made about the theology of Islam. It is presumed that somehow because Islam is a theistic and an Abrahamic faith it would necessarily follow a similar approach as the other two Abrahamic faiths with regards to religion. It is also assumed that the Muslims of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century would have a similar history as the two other faiths and thus would have come across the self-professed ‘enlightenment’ that the other two monotheistic faiths encountered during the 18\textsuperscript{th} century.

From a Muslim theological point of view it is important to highlight the differences that exist due to these nuances. From all the empirical evidence available, it is safe to state that religious belief in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and today, still seems to be very much at the roots of Muslims’ lives and God is very much a part of their everyday life. The concept of a unified Muslim theology consistent with a divine Active Creator follows throughout, since this it is very much a part of the Muslim world as social scientists have proven.\textsuperscript{12} The concept of Tawhid in Muslim theology represents an awareness of God in all spheres of life, whether modern or traditional.\textsuperscript{13} It is from this juncture we need to start to understand the Muslim faith in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, which may suddenly become for someone experienced, in only a certain western society, an unrecognizable era; where the world of the primacy of science, of autonomous human and a secular reality is not anymore the norm, but a rarity. For example, the majority of the 2.1 billion Muslim worldwide, including the majority of their scientists, disagree with the view of macro-evolution found within Western post-modern studies, but this disagreement is never covered except in the most condescending of ways. This post-modern way of studying religion ranges from suppositions of how history and science should be instead of how it is perceived by adherents of Islam and to even how Islam is understood in the lecture rooms. In other words, Islam is seldom portrayed in the way it is understood by its adherents and Muslim theology and its world view become lost in the social scientific teaching on Islam. Take for example research on the Prophet Muhammad that portrays him as the ‘founder of Islam’ as factual; in Muslim theology this is a false

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construct. The social scientist could argue this to be a historical fact, however, this must be coupled with the Muslim understanding that Muhammad is but a messenger of God and could possibly not be the founder of Islam. This theological fact is imperative to understand anything at all of the Muslim view.

This does not mean that we exclude studying Islam from a ‘study of religion’ lens or through the ‘social sciences’. Findings from both of these can help us comprehend Muslims and Islam in the contemporary world from a social and phenomenological theorist sense but it will not explain their own world view. Understanding God as active in the universe for example shape the practices of Muslims in major ways. The concept of a unified theology consistent with a divine Active Creator follows throughout the Muslim world, which social scientists have proven through numerous anthropological studies. However, it is when studying Islam through the lens of post modernistic thought, which only defines belief within the confines of social sciences, that the Muslim conviction as a valid post modern belief is lost from the field of study. Thus, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued there is a need for a dialogic approach where the object needs to a scholarly understanding of the faith held by individual Muslims. This means that Muslim theology needs to be taken seriously within the study of religion to reach a balanced view. This is the only way that a social dialogue can truly take place with regards to the place of Islamic theology within liberal academia and its traditional Judaic/Christian background.

ÖZET
(Bati Akademiyasında İslam İlahiyatı ve Dini Araştırmalar)
Bu makale önce Bati Akademiyasındaki dini çalışmaların arka planını inceleyecek, daha sonra da gerek Hristiyan gerekse Müslüman terminolojisindeki teoloji tarifini keşfetmeye çalışacaktır. Çeşitli akademik yöntemlerle, dini araştırmalar bağlamında İslamı incelemenin İslam teolojisyle çelişen ve uyuşan bulguları ortaya çıkarabileceğini tartışılacaktır. İslam teolojisi ve sosyal bilimlerin katkısıyla İslami incelemeye epistemolojisinin, İslami içerdere ve dışardan biri olarak anlamarnın arasında sağlıklı bir denge kurabileceği belli bir yöntemi olduğuna kavşatılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dini Araştırmalar, İslam ve Bati, İslam İlahiyatı