

Rendering Traditions
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Within scholarship on contemporary Islam, one of the issues that has generated considerable discussion (and often perplexity) concerns the accuracy or validity of Muslim historical claims. Many authors have pointed to a discrepancy between what Muslim activists today invoke as belonging to the traditions of Islam and the actual historical record of Islamic societies. It is argued that historical reality is ignored or rejected, while a false, distorted, or selective version of the past is affirmed in its place. In attempting to characterize and explain this use (or misuse) of history, scholars have had recourse to a variety of concepts, some of which merit a re-examination, especially in light of recent work within historiography. A brief review of these concepts suggests a need for new analytical approaches to the styles of historical argumentation prevalent within Islam today.

A common current argument is that the Islam invoked by contemporary activists is an 'invented tradition', in the sense that it is founded by a sort of historical sleight-of-hand, positing ancient roots while actually being of recent origin. In many ways, Hobsbawm and Ranger¹ provided the respectability of a concept for a phenomenon that had long been central to the definition of fundamentalist Islam: namely, the duplicitous (or in sympathetic accounts, naive) misrepresentation of history. Additionally, Benedict Anderson's work,² in showing how a similar creative historiography undergirded modern nationalism, encouraged scholars to interpret Islamist historical claims within the framework of nationalist politics. Accordingly, arguments for the traditional Islamic status of the headscarf, democratic political forms, or the idea of an Islamic state are unmasked as strategic moves within a modern politics of cultural authenticity, and thus as not really – historically – authentic. One paradoxical aspect of this argument, it might be noted, is that while cultural authenticity is often criticized as a reactionary form of modern politics, it is assumed that there is an *authentic* relation to the past (not invented, mythological, etc.), and that Islamists are in some sense living falsely not to acknowledge it and adjust to its demands.

Anthropologies of error

Scholars have also frequently drawn on the resources of 19th-century anthropology in their attempts to grasp the mode of historical reasoning employed by contemporary Muslims. Note, for example, Aziz al-Azmeh's use of the notion of the *fetish* in his complaint that 'their [Arab society's] exaggerated attachment to what is past and what they fetishize as "Heritage" means that they are effectively forbidden to perceive reality for what it is or acquire the means to evolve.'³ As developed within colonial anthropology, fetishism referred to the false attribution of objective value by non-Europeans, the sacralization of objects that European Christians recognized as actually profane. Al-Azmeh's reference to the incapacitating effects of a historical vision clouded by religious passion testifies to the ongoing impact of this scholarly tradition.

Colonial anthropology also bequeathed to students of religion a particular elaboration of the concept of myth, one to which scholars of Islam have frequently had recourse. Take, for instance, the following two well-known authors' suggestions that Muslims have a 'mythical' or 'mystical' relation to knowledge:

'The historian and the sociologist must call attention to the anachronism inherent in [the Islamists'] approach and its nullifica-

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tion of the historicity of meaning as subject to the political, economic, and cultural metamorphoses of society... The Muslim cognitive system is essentially mythical.'⁴

'It is in the myth of the complete and Perfect Man, and not in the corpus or in History, that one can read the universal, that all knowledge adds up and that the return to the golden age – the time of the prophet – is foreshadowed. It is with this mystical conception of knowledge that the new [Islamist] intellectual completes his home-made construction.'⁵

There is often a slide in such arguments from the simple charge that Islamists cheat in representing history to the more complicated claim that they are incapable of grasping reality. The latter claim resembles the long-since discarded anthropological theory, associated primarily with the early Levy-Bruhl, that primitives were possessed of a mythical consciousness. This pejorative sense of myth is particularly surprising in light of the large body of literature exploring the importance of myth within modern societies, its foundational role within our individual psychologies, national politics, social customs and other areas.

The assertion that Muslim historical claims involve a kind of mythical reasoning is frequently coupled with the idea that such claims ignore or deny 'real history'. Gilles Kepel, for example, notes: 'What distinguishes the extremist Islamist movement from the bulk of Muslims as far as reference to the golden age is concerned is that the former blot out history in favor of the reactivation of the founding myth, while the latter accommodate themselves to the history of Muslim societies.'⁶ The claim being made is not that Muslim activists offer no accounts of the past; on the contrary, they are generally accused of exaggerating its importance. Rather, it is not history as an account of past events which Islamists erase, but history understood as the sole ground of present reality, as the real (material) conditions of their lives. Kepel implies that by not 'accommodat[ing] themselves' properly to these conditions, Islamists take up a false or distorted relation to their actual historical situation. He assumes, in other words, that there is a single correct relationship to the past: when Muslims do not acknowledge its dictates, it is they, and not the analyst's concept of history, that are at fault.

Sources and selectivity

Let us look more closely at the issue of historical accuracy, since it seems to animate much of the scholarly critique of Islamist arguments. What all of these views have in common is the assertion that Islamist claims are not supported by historical facts. But is this claim valid? Historical facts, in the sense of the documentary or archaeological remnants that constitute the historian's sources, provide evidence but are not equivalent to 'history'. Were this not the case, then the historian's task would be to simply collect and display these remnants. Historical narratives, however, are produced by interrogating the sources, asking particular questions of

them so as to reveal patterns and processes more extensive than the sources themselves. It is by embedding source materials within a theoretical construct of history that a particular kind of historical knowledge is produced. Moreover, it is not the sources themselves that determine which construct is to be applied (e.g. economic, social, theological); that decision precedes the analysis, and to some degree conditions which sources will be relevant, capable of providing evidence. As not every historical detail can be presented, this process always involves a certain selectivity: within any narrative, certain objects of discourse are excluded while others are foregrounded. Importantly, this selection and arrangement reflects the use to which that narrative is put, the institutional forms (political, theological, scientific) which that historical practice upholds, legitimates, and extends. Historical writing, in other words, is always shaped by the historian's location at a particular time and place, and by the commitments that he or she holds. It is odd, therefore, that we fault Islamist historical narratives for presenting the past from a limited perspective, as this is a feature of *all* historical works.

This does not mean to imply, of course, that we need to interpret Muslim history 'Islamically' (or theologically, for that matter), but that to the extent that Muslims do so, that choice will impact their societies in ways that (secular) historical work must take into account. Thus, the goal should not be to unmask the error of Muslim historical practices from the standpoint of a set of supposedly universal criteria, but to ask what their presuppositions, modes of constructing and arguing from sources, and methods of verification are, and how these practices have been transformed under current conditions in Muslim societies. This entails greater attention to the kinds of historical objects which Muslim historical practices presuppose and the purposes and projects those practices sustain.

To say this is to acknowledge that a tradition is more than a mere record of facts which the researcher (with proper academic training) can scrutinize and re-describe. As J.L. Austin noted long ago, arguments about history always entail a performative aspect: any assessment of their validity must take into consideration the context of goals, practices, and assumptions within which they are embedded.⁷ For this reason, we need to recognize that the institutional goals, standards, and competencies (both moral and intellectual) involved in Western academic practice may be distinct in certain aspects from those undergirding Islamic knowledges. The statements made by a professor at a Western university, for example, and those of an *'alim* in Saudi Arabia are embedded in very different kinds of social-historical projects. This difference conditions the *kinds of engagement* each will have with Islamic tradition, the status of their respective claims. Despite the increasing scope and speed of global interaction and movement ('globalization'), such differences in societal and insti-

tutional location remain extremely important to contemporary relations of power and knowledge. This point seems to be insufficiently appreciated by those scholars who rush to chastise Muslims for unfaithfully rendering their own traditions.

Notes

1. Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger, Terence (eds.) (1988), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Anderson, Benedict (1991), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.
3. Al-Azmeh, Aziz (1996), *Islams and Modernities*, New York: Verso, p. 57.
4. Arkoun, Mohammed (1994), *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, p. 99.
5. Roy, Olivier (1996), *The Failure of Political Islam*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 148.
6. Kepel, Gilles (1993), *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and the Pharaoh*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 228.
7. Austin, John L. (1962), *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 143-145.

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