

INTERPRETING INTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAM

Hastings Donnan and Martin Stokes

Disciplinarity and Islam

Islam is known in a bewildering diversity of ways in an increasingly interconnected world. What one knows about Islam, one knows, inevitably and inescapably, with reference to the ways in which other people come to know about Islam. How one goes about constructing an argument, or articulating a point, about the Muslim world increasingly relies on a knowledge of how other people might use the same facts to construct another kind of argument, or articulate another kind of point. Islamist arguments thus increasingly demand familiarity with the terminologies and procedures of secularist arguments. The reverse is every bit as true, as many have noted with regard to secularism in Turkey (Gellner 1981: 60). Selves rely on and involve Others with an increasing self-consciousness, in today's Muslim world and elsewhere. This does not imply, of course, the inevitable emergence of broad areas of agreement and consensus in the management of difference – the liberal dream. If anything, an awareness of intellectual diversity seems to have increased the vociferousness of those who claim particularity, and the imperative of managing difference on their terms only. This book constitutes, we believe, a different kind of response to the diversity of contemporary knowledge about Islam. Its implicit argument, throughout, is that patterns can be observed in the bewildering and seemingly anarchic diversity of disciplinary approaches to Islam, and that we, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, might learn much by reflecting on them.

What has generated academic diversity in the field(s) of Islamic studies? Differences between national scholarly traditions loom large. French Orientalist scholarship was marked by its entanglement with a distinct locale (North Africa), and to a certain extent remains so. The close connection between colony and former colonial domain is marked both by the presence of large Arab communities in French cities, and by the continuing political force of francophonie in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Violent decolonization struggles are far from distant memories; the anti-colonial struggle continues to reverberate. It does so across lines separating, for many in France and North Africa, not only colonizer from colonized, but also civilization from civilization. The sheer proximity and intensity of historical and geographic entanglement, it seems, has demanded the

most dramatic and all-encompassing terms of distinction. Throughout most of the twentieth century, much Anglo-Saxon scholarship was marked, in contrast, by an apprehension of Islam as localized and diverse 'culture' rather than unitary 'civilization'. The culture concept has been implicated in a very different kind of colonial and post-colonial experience: a more distant historical relationship in comparison to France, different techniques for structuring and managing the differences between colonizers and colonized, and more fractured struggles for independence in India, Palestine and Cyprus. Subsequently, the culture concept adapted itself well to the mediation of relationships with 'minorities' in the Anglo-Saxon nation-states (and those in their sway) in the post-colonial period. Anthropology, whether in its social (British) or cultural (American) manifestation, has produced some of the most intellectually persuasive accounts of the Muslim world by non-Muslims, depicting an Islam localized and embedded in plural cultural worlds. Though the different colonial histories implied by the culture concept and the notion of civilization explain a certain amount about the different trajectories of French and Anglo-Saxon writing on Islam, however, there has been much slippage between the two terms as well. The western world still needs its others, and these have become hard to find after the collapse of the Soviet Empire. Islam, understood now more as 'civilization' than 'culture', has filled the gap conveniently (see Samuel Huntington 1993), as is well known. Diverse colonial and post-colonial histories thus pattern distinct national trajectories in thinking about the Muslim world.

The market for news and non-academic publications has also had a significant impact on the diversification of knowledge about Islam. Popular knowledge about Islam in the West does not exist in a totally separate, hermetically sealed cultural space. In many cases, university academics participate actively in the proliferation of popular literatures on Islam. The motives and imperatives at work here are varied: demands for publication on the part of university administrators; vanity and fantasies of intellectual omnipotence on the part of authors; a sincere commitment to public education and reaching beyond the university campus; the varied demands of the culture of the public intellectual (or responses to its lack, or demise); the pressures of academic publishers seeking cross-over readerships – all play a part. Academic writers respond to, as well as contribute to, popular knowledge about Islam. Anybody involved in teaching, writing and thinking about Islam in the non-Muslim world comes across popular literatures or other traditions of representing Islam on a more or less daily basis. Converts require a 'how to' literature, videos and instructional tapes. Tourism requires its myths of exotic others, with sights and sounds that can make a trip necessary and worthwhile. The popular western press habitually reminds its readers of the premodern horror of life in Muslim society, 'the position of women' still the main issue (women's magazines provide an interesting case study). Radio and television, both locally and nationally, make space for western society's 'minorities' with special programming for the month of Ramadan, explained sensitively before, during or after the main feature for the benefit of non-Muslims who might still be up at that hour. Odd corners of 'everyday' public space pick up on and play with Orientalist tropes: science fiction villains have quasi-Arabic or Turkish names, and act like

the Oriental despot of nineteenth-century sociological imagination. Doom-laden scenarios in television documentaries use background music with clearly 'Islamic' references and samples. A day spent wandering around in any Western European or North American city, or simply spent watching television, will bring anyone interested in Islam face to face with an extraordinary diversity of knowledges and modes of representation, shading a news item or piece of popular reportage, an ideological turn in a conversation, a domestic soundscape, a detail of visual or architectural décor. These imprint academic practice in diverse ways. More importantly, they inform academic authors of the kinds of knowledge about the Muslim world that they might take for granted amongst their non-academic readership. They provide some sense of habitual ways of thinking about Islam that might be manipulated or turned to authorial advantage, or indicate habits of thinking that must be confronted and overturned. Popular and specialist knowledge about Islam do not exist in hermetically sealed spaces, but increasingly bear on one another in productive and varied ways.

This volume is mainly concerned with matters of academic disciplinarity. These have been decisive in academic traditions of writing about Islam. The study of Islam in the western academy has characteristically been divided between departments of humanities and departments of social sciences. The lines are blurred, but there are important differences, which are relevant even when the object or issue being approached remains the same. Hermeneutic traditions in the humanities have resulted in historical and cultural ways of knowing Islam, from bodies of law, to miniature painting, to theories of government, to styles of religiosity. Specificity and local patterns of meaning are important to grasp in the hermeneutic tradition whether or not these are subordinated to some master teleology, some over-arching generality (though the relationship between general and specific is a matter of explicit concern in most interpretative traditions). Description and prescription, subjects and objects are dialectically entangled. Interpretation has a performative aspect, bringing critical thinking to bear on the present and hoped-for futures. What matters, for example, about an account of Islamic jurisprudence in a provincial Yemeni town as observed by an American anthropologist in the late twentieth century is not simply that 'the way things were' in a particular place at a particular point in time is now preserved in print for all eternity, but that readers elsewhere might learn ways of demystifying and transforming their common-sense assumptions about writing and law. The local, in this respect, speaks for itself (appropriately translated) and establishes its own context.

Within the social sciences, writing about Islam has been more explicitly concerned with forms of generalization and prediction; this constitutes the theoretical context against which 'the local' is read. As has often been stressed (see, for example, Turner, Chapter 2, this volume), Islam has, at least since Marx and Weber, been figured in terms of absences, against which the story of European distinction has habitually been read. Modernization theory in the social sciences dominated the view of Islam for much of the later twentieth century, and still continues to do so in some circles. Daniel Lerner's classic study *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1958) enshrined the view that

Islam and modernity were incompatible, and that the task of social science was to quantify the movement between the two in order to be able to point to the success stories (Turkey) and the failures (Iran): the policy implications have always been obvious, at least from an American perspective. The lines separating humanities and social science research have, in recent years, been productively blurred. Epistemological concerns in the social sciences have found their way into humanities departments; questions of interpretation have, conversely, borne more and more strongly on the practice of social science.

The notion of disciplinarity (which is to say, the critical reflection on disciplinary practice) implies the notion of interdisciplinarity, or at least some kind of trans-disciplinary space from which the observer can reflect calmly and abstractly on the shortcomings of (narrowly conceived) disciplinary practice. It is worth reflecting on this briefly, since all of the contributors to this volume imply the value of an interdisciplinary approach to Islam, and imply interdisciplinarity in their critiques of their own disciplinary practice. The gaze from interdisciplinary space involves a certain critical pessimism quite in keeping with the dominant intellectual ethos of the last twenty years, even though this is often dressed up in the language of intellectual entrepreneurialism and opportunity. It suggests that institutions may constrain as well as generate knowledge. It suggests that we may have something to learn about the circuitry of power within the discipline by reflecting on what disciplines select for attention and what they repress. It is harder, though, to say what the implications of this should be. Do we step out of disciplinary space into a trans-disciplinary space? Or do we shuttle between disciplines, reading them against one another dialectically to produce fresh insights? Is there a self that, unconstrained by the particular regimes of truth a particular discipline organizes, can come to reasonable conclusions about a discipline's shortcomings? Can the strengths of several be combined in order to initiate more progressive and productive lines of inquiry?

There are plenty of reasons to be critical of what one might call the naïve perspective on interdisciplinarity, or at least to qualify its liberal implications. It nurtures a vision of 'true' knowledge freed from institutional shackles and disciplinary tradition, a vision that unfortunately chimes with right-wing critics of academic obscurity, faddishness and 'political correctness'. More directly, perhaps, it promotes a fantasy of the 'free-range' academic: shaken from the cosy security of his or her disciplinary perch, the interdisciplinary professor can be relied upon to do a reasonable and unprotesting job in whichever department university downsizing blows him or her into next. It also obscures the processes by which certain intellectual traditions come to occupy a central place in interdisciplinary thinking. In these contexts, 'interdisciplinary' activity can mean little more than a poorly represented discipline in a particular institutional setting adopting a theoretical vocabulary from a stronger one. This perpetuates the illusion that the weaker discipline is engaged in a mutually beneficial conversation with the powerful one, whilst, clearly, nothing of the sort is happening. Rather, interdisciplinarity might be seen to involve a 'nesting' model of theoretical capability: the less powerful disciplinary apparatus nests inside one more powerful, and that in turn can nest inside another, and so on. It also involves some deeply rooted

intellectual habits, in which certain disciplines have been particularly privileged. In continental Europe, sociology has effectively been the master discipline. In the Anglo-Saxon world, lacking a strongly independent sociological tradition, literary criticism, at least since Leavis (and arguably since Coleridge), has fulfilled this function. Anthropology has sat uncomfortably between the two, both in Europe and in North America, though it derives much of its energy from this situation. Sociology, anthropology and literary criticism compete with one another to attract those who have become unstuck from their disciplinary moorings.

We might usefully consider how and why some books appear to occupy a central space in interdisciplinary reflection on Islam. Said's study of *Orientalism* (1978) has undoubtedly been of extraordinary importance in questioning not only how we think about Islam, but also how we think about interdisciplinarity. It is worth pointing out that this is not the only work that is read and discussed widely across the main disciplines concerned with the study of Islam today. One would also have to include the work of Akbar S. Ahmed, Aziz al-Azmeh, Dale Eickelman, John Esposito, Ernest Gellner, Michael Gilson, Bernard Lewis, Fatima Mernissi, Brinkley Messick, James Piscatori, Maxime Rodinson, Bryan S. Turner, and Sami Zubaida, to name only a few writers representing very different intellectual traditions. What, then, are the specific qualities of Said's work that have made it so crucial to interdisciplinary conversation? First, and this should not be underestimated, the writing has a humane intelligence to it without which it simply would not sustain prolonged scholarly interest. Second, the impact of Said's work has been pronounced in the Anglo-Saxon world, tied as it is to the colonial and neo-colonial dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle. For a variety of reasons, anglophone scholarship is globally predominant today, which is not to ignore the significance of work written in other European or Asian languages, but simply to state that work written in English and published by an English or American academic publisher reaches the larger global readership. Third, Said's work, along with that of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, represents the consolidation of activist post-colonial critique in North America's most prestigious academic institutions. The voice from the margins is now, in a sense, firmly located in the centre, and radicalism can now speak with all of the authority that the centre can muster. This is a relatively new moment in Anglo-Saxon academia (though, again, not in France: recall Sartre on the Algerian crisis), and the energies that sustain this scholarship and attract people to it can easily be understood. Fourth, it represents the continuing role of literary criticism as the dominant disciplinary framework in the world of Anglo-Saxon scholarship; though anthropologists and sociologists claim as their own the basic insight that knowledge is a social construction serving complex political ends, they often do so now in a style that owes more to Said, Bhabha and Spivak than it does to Evans-Pritchard or to Merton. Said's work has thus been of particular importance in shaping interdisciplinary conversation in the study of Islam, as many of the contributors to this volume indicate. The complex politics of interdisciplinarity, however, should not be forgotten, since they do at least as much as the politics of disciplinarity to shape the ways in which we come to understand and interpret Islam as scholars today.

Interpreting Islam

Calling this collection of essays *Interpreting Islam* clearly begs a number of questions, such as who is doing the interpreting, for what audience, and for what purpose? Even to ask how we are to understand Islam raises questions about the ways in which 'we' can have a range of shifting rhetorical referents that are not always explicit, and for each category of which interpreting Islam may involve a different process and a different outcome: fellow readers of this book, those who share an academic discipline, other scholars in general, other westerners, other Muslims, and so on. For each of these, there may be different ways of knowing, different ways of interpreting, and no grand over-arching or universalizing scheme. *Orientalism* exposed the intellectual and interpretative certainties of an earlier age for what they were: not the disinterested, objective studies that scholars supposed, but a kind of political discourse that both grew out of and helped to constitute global relations of power. As a result, we are all conscious now that the pursuit of knowledge has political implications, as a form of domination, control and even subjugation. Knowledge and power are inextricably linked. And although different academic disciplines have responded to Said's critique in different ways, accommodating his insights to greater or lesser extent, most are now necessarily more self-conscious than before of the nature of their voice, their audience and the contexts from which they write.

Said's work poses something of a conundrum for scholars, one that raises ethical and moral dilemmas, as well as presenting an intellectual and epistemological challenge to those who seek to understand alien cultures. For Said, all work that takes as its starting point a dichotomy between 'Occident' and 'Orient', and that essentializes the Oriental mind, 'Islam' or the 'Arabs', is characteristic of a style of thought that he calls 'Orientalist'. This Orientalist perspective has systematically misrepresented the East in ways that legitimate the West's understanding of itself as a civilizing, rationalizing and modernizing force, and that contribute to global inequalities of power at the same time as they arise from them. Orientalist images of the East are shown to be the outcome of the Orientalists' own ideological and cultural prejudices, with imperial administrators and academics alike equally enmeshed in this web of politically and culturally mediated imaginings. The knowledge that results is thus imbued with the power to dominate. And since all observers are inevitably culturally and politically positioned, it would seem that all representations are forever destined to be misrepresentations: they arise from, and serve, some other cause beyond the observer's apparently well-meaning wish to supply a disinterested account. This, then, is the challenge with which Said confronts his readers. 'How does one *represent* other cultures?' (1978: 325, emphasis in original). How does one escape or step outside the political, cultural and biographical factors that shape how we see the world? It would seem impossible to talk about others without misrepresenting them at some level.

Said has his supporters and his detractors, both in large numbers, this critical attention being in itself an obvious measure of the importance and reach of his argument (see, for instance, summaries in Halliday 1993; Yeğenoğlu 1998: 14–26).

Some of Said's detractors, notably Ernest Gellner and Bernard Lewis, have engaged in furious polemic with him. Gellner (1993) sprang to the defence of Enlightenment reason and modular man in the face of what he understood as an attack on the autonomy of thought. Lewis (1993) sprang to the defence of Orientalism as benign cultural curiosity, emerging, according to him, much earlier than the moment of colonial expansion with which Said identifies it. It is probably true to say that the polemic generated by Said's book has done less to advance thinking about the issues it raised than its more modulated reception within the fields of post-colonial theory, cultural studies and literary criticism. Here, discussion tended to focus on some significant contradictions in Said's work as a whole: between a Foucauldian determinism concerning intellectual production, and a refusal fully to understand his own capacity for critical awareness as itself socially determined; between an insistence on understanding the western canon in terms of the colonial processes it represses, and his evident feeling that texts (particularly 'great texts') speak for themselves; between the call for action on the part of the public intellectual, and his recognition that the epistemological grounds for political action are always flawed. These tensions in his work have undoubtedly promoted a great deal of constructive reflection, as many of his critics acknowledge (see, for example, Moore-Gilbert 1997). Turner's chapter in this volume is firmly situated in this genre of critique. As Turner reminds us, Said exaggerated the degree of coherence within western discourse on the Orient. He concentrated heavily on literary works on Islam, as opposed to the historical and social scientific literature on the subject, and failed to acknowledge crucial shifts in the institutional circuitry of Orientalism over the course of the twentieth century (from 'strong' and nation-state-centred to 'weak' and cosmopolitan). Orientalism, Turner argues, needs to be seen as part of an ensemble of 'othering' processes (for example, an 'Occidentalism' that looked to the Celtic Fringe) that attended the birth of modern nation-states, and not in isolation, as Said implied. The Orientalism hypothesis, finally, fails to grasp what Turner describes as 'good Orientalism', fictions circulating during the formation of the modern nation-state that articulated crucial notions of civic consciousness and practice. If Said has been justifiably criticized for not offering a way out of the dilemmas he identifies (Lindholm 1995: 808), those such as Turner, engaging with his work from within the traditions of scholarship he represents, have done much to move the argument forward (see also Turner 1994: 31, 45).

Scholars thus still grapple with the issues of interpretation and representation that Said's *Orientalism* so compellingly raised, issues now perhaps made even more complex by a world of accelerating communications technology, transnational migration and cultural displacement, one in which grand narratives and over-arching theories have been largely rejected. None of the options that have emerged in response to the postmodern critique seems that attractive or persuasive: advocacy of dialogical exchange with those being studied, a call to gather under a neo-positivist banner, and a let's-note-the-problems-but-get-on-with-it-anyway approach are all examples of such options, which, while addressing aspects of the critique, often simply end up generating a different set of difficulties. In this volume we suggest that it is possible to get some critical leverage

on such issues by further reflecting on the process of interpretation itself; by drawing attention to how scholars with diverse intellectual and personal biographies and from different disciplinary traditions have written about Islam. Since Islam is made known to us in their writings through these disciplinary and biographic filters, it is critical that we grasp the nature of what these filters emphasize and sift from view. Why are some topics selected for study and not others? To what extent might gender refract interpretation? What images of Islam predominate within and across disciplines? How might this skew our interpretation of Islam? These are some of the questions addressed by our contributors.

We do not set out to provide a compendium or to be encyclopaedic, something that space alone prohibits. Consequently, not every discipline is represented, nor every national tradition of study. Nor have we been able to include every possible (or even very many) permutation(s) of biographical/personal and disciplinary combination. Though different disciplines may be viewed differently by variously positioned practitioners within them, we can offer little more than a flavour of such perspectival spread. Instead, the essays gathered here are intended to generate questions about, and to be illustrative of, the kinds of processes likely to be found whatever the disciplinary approach or circumstances of the author. They remind us of the disciplinary and methodological diversity that characterizes the 'field' of 'Islamic studies', and thus of the many ways in which 'our' knowledge and interpretations of Islam are partial, contestable and forever threatening to fragment. A reflexive grasp of what is involved here might at least enable us to interpret the interpretations that result. This is especially important in a field where the right to interpret as well as the interpretations themselves are disputed.

Some contested interpretations

One aspect of Islam that provides an especially good example of how interpretations are contested is 'fundamentalism'. Amongst the West's gathering anxieties about post-war shifts in geopolitical trends, the press of events towards the end of the 1970s, and subsequently, ensured that 'Islamic fundamentalism' bubbled to the top of the pot. This notion has been hotly debated throughout the academy and in much popular reporting ever since. It is easy to see why. The images with which Islamic fundamentalism came to be associated in the popular western imagination, stimulated to a large extent by media coverage, as we consider below, were impossible to ignore: bearded, kalashnikov-carrying clerics, urban carnage and scimitars dripping with blood. Saatchi and Saatchi could not have done better had their brief been to strike fear into every western heart and instil a sense of vulnerability. A projected medieval and naturalized barbarity had been fused with contemporary politics. The message was clear: they're coming to get you. At the same time, however, Islam clearly and self-evidently involved much more than an apparent will to destroy the West, and much more than a radical political perspective. Even those labelled 'fundamentalist' were not everywhere of the same order. How, then, are these selective and prominent images of threat

that attach to fundamentalism to be understood? What do they tell us about Islam and the state of Islamic scholarship in the West?

Milton-Edwards tackles the vexed issue of interpreting 'radical Islam' in Chapter 3. Although at first glance it may seem slightly contradictory to suggest that what looks like the most conservative form of Islam – a back to basics 'fundamentalism' – is in fact the most 'radical', these terms are now often used synonymously, even if, taken as a pair, they frequently mean rather different things to those who use them. Milton-Edwards distinguishes two main analytical camps among those who write about radical Islam: the '(neo-)Orientalists' and the 'apologists', both of these being terms of abuse in use by one camp of the other (rather than being self-descriptions). She explores how radical Islam has come to be written rather differently by each of these camps, which, at least in the field of politics and Islamic studies that Milton-Edwards describes, confront each other across an interpretative chasm with an intensity and passion matched only by that of some of those they set out to study. The (neo-)Orientalist perspective, according to Milton-Edwards, associates Islamic politics exclusively with violence, authoritarianism, terrorism, fundamentalism, clerical domination and hostility to modern, 'western', secular democratic government, a constellation of negatives that the 'radical' in 'radical Islam' then signifies and evokes. This interpretation of Islam is somewhat monolithic, drawing, for instance, on studies of the Iranian revolution to show that 'Islam' is inherently revolutionary (while ignoring critical differences between Sunni and Shi'a) and, by placing so much emphasis on politics, even squeezing out its ethical and religious significance. Islam thereby becomes equated not just with radical politics, but with a radical politics associated only with violence and mayhem. Radical, in this view, becomes all that Islam is about. By contrast, the 'apologists', with whom Milton-Edwards has more sympathy, advocate a view of radical Islam that, she says, seeks to understand the violence while recognizing at the same time that many Muslims also engage in more passive forms of protest and resistance. Rather than ascribing a radical character to Islam itself, these critics of the (neo-)Orientalist position stress the need for political scientists to recognize the many instances of radical Islam that have nothing to do with terrorism, and to set these – and their violent counterparts – in their wider political and socio-economic contexts, something that the other social sciences have so far perhaps been better at. Not only has there not yet been any real *rapprochement* between these two antagonistic positions, but the vituperative exchange between them seems set to continue and even intensify. Part of the problem, of course, is that underlying the rival interpretations of each camp is to some extent the (often unexamined) personal politics of their adherents. Milton-Edwards' suggestion that to understand radical Islam we should draw upon a hitherto underused feminist epistemology, and that we should pay more attention to a new generation of Muslim intellectuals attempting to rethink the issues from 'within', may be just the reframing that is needed, provided, of course, that such new approaches remain reflexively aware that they too are driven, in part, by personal politics.

This debate within the discipline of politics about how to interpret radical Islam has percolated through into popular understandings of the religion, not only

because high-profile projects – such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences’ ‘Fundamentalism Project’ – bring the arguments to public attention, but also because the views of political scientists are probably more likely than those of researchers in other disciplines to be sought for television news and current affairs programmes, where, unsurprisingly, the kinds of interpretation and image mentioned above regularly appear stripped of all subtlety in even starker, sound-bite size. Though it is a cliché to note the media’s pre-eminent role in shaping how we see the world, it is of course no less true because of it. Understanding the processes by which the media have shaped and shape our views of Islam, as well as the recursive interpretative loop between media and academy, whereby analyses and debate in one influence and are influenced by analyses and debate in the other, is essential if we are to gain some critical purchase on a major source of our interpretations.

Ruthven (Chapter 4) begins his account of Islam in the media by noting the striking contrast between the glare of publicity that surrounded the death of Princess Diana and the comparative obscurity and lack of interest in Dodi al-Fayed, the man who died at her side. The disparity is hardly surprising, but it leaves Ruthven wondering about what kinds of question might have been opened up had the couple survived and their relationship flourished. We will never know of course, but it is an interesting speculation, for here was the mother of the heir to the throne mixing with a man from a world that the British tabloid press in particular was given to describing in images of medieval barbarity and backwardness. Deleting Dodi from the reports of Diana’s death is just one instance of the many ways in which media accounts of Islam are highly selective. In *Covering Islam* Said (1981) has shown how the western media have obscured Islam by reporting only those aspects of it that are consistent with the pursuit of western economic, political and cultural aims. The broader picture of Muslim faith and practice is played down, and differences among Muslims flattened out. The result is, as Ruthven illustrates, a view of Islam dominated by images of extremism, especially in relation to gender and violence, a demonization that others have noted and that, in Britain, has been the subject of a specially commissioned inquiry (cf. Ahmed 1992; Runnymede Trust 1997). What has not always been so clear, however, is how Muslims themselves interpret and contest these selective projections of their lives and religion.

In an increasingly globalized media, Muslims themselves are obviously consumers, audience to western images of Islam, many of which they roundly and rightly condemn. But how might they best respond? Drawing on the work of Baudrillard, Hall, Eco and Thompson, among others, Ruthven suggests that we should approach media-transmitted images as a kind of quasi-interaction in which, though a common stock of cultural knowledge among the audience is often presupposed by those who transmit, the audience interpret and ‘decode’ according to their situation, leading to wide variability and even unpredictability of interpretation. Ruthven considers a series of examples of how television can have a polarizing effect on the subject of Islam, among which he includes a BBC report on the Ayodhya riots of 1992. This report shows quite clearly how audio-visual images can be interpreted very differently by western and Muslim

audiences, even when in the hands of the most experienced and sympathetic of journalists. Ruthven argues that in this report the voice-over is critical to the interpretation of the visual images transmitted. Turn off the sound, or assume that the audience cannot understand English, and viewer interpretations are likely to diverge. The inability to hear or understand the commentary, which tells how Hindu leaders condemned the anti-Muslim violence at Ayodhya and explains why the Indian police did not intervene, leaves only scenes of destruction as Hindu demonstrators over-run the Babri mosque at the centre of the conflict while the police stand idly by. To such a viewer, Ruthven suggests, it could only seem that the Indian government was out to get the mosque. Cases like this indicate just how complicated it can be to identify and to respond to Muslim misrepresentation in the media, even though we may recognize it is there. Perhaps the best possible response to perceived media bias towards them, Ruthven concludes, is for Muslims to generate their own alternatives.

The graphic sensationalism of so many of the skewed media portraits of Islam – with their unrelenting but gripping emphasis on violence and extremism – makes them difficult to ignore. Even Ruthven, whose experience of working for the BBC World Service gives him a particular insight into the ambivalent demands of programming, confesses that the need for good copy sometimes persuaded him to employ the articulate and media-friendly militant at the risk of reproducing images of Islam that he regarded as biased. Scholars who wish to present a more rounded picture of the religion and its adherents may find themselves similarly constrained by publishers whose commercial interests dictate the striking or gory image. Authors may learn that the cover proposed for their book implicates them in the very view they are trying to supplant or dislodge. Worse still, scholars themselves may be tempted to enliven an otherwise dull and dusty text with gratuitous scenes of violence and sensuality taken from the Muslim world, or surround it with a romanticized and exoticized serenity as epitomized by the ubiquitous image of the sun rising (or is it setting?) beyond the rounded domes and pencil-like minarets of the mosque. For such writers, claims to irony may offer no defence. Immensely difficult, then, is the task of the textbook writer charged with outlining the broad sweep of Islam and interpreting it for the student, the subject of Douglass and Dunn's chapter.

Douglass and Dunn (Chapter 5) tell us that twenty-five years ago in the US the popular media's interpretation of Islam was the main source of information about the religion for young Americans. Ironically, it was as these media representations grew ever more negative throughout the 1970s that work began to develop the new educational materials through which American schoolchildren are now taught interpretations of Islam. Douglass and Dunn critically reflect on the content and representations of Islam in eleven such texts in context of the wide-ranging debates over curriculum reform that were the impetus for their emergence. One of the most important factors in reaching a consensus in the debate about the desirability of promoting understanding of different religions in the schoolroom was the development of criteria to distinguish between teaching religion and teaching about religion, a general debate to which American Muslims themselves directly contributed. With the ground rules thus established,

texts on 'world history' began to appear in which Islam was an element. Although Islam is now a fashionable topic in American classrooms, largely due to the high profile of Muslim countries in the news and to the growth of the Muslim population in the US itself, only a handful of publishers produce these school texts and they have been reluctant to go beyond what they believe will be acceptable to state textbook adoption boards.

These school texts on world history with their sections on Islam not only provide the student with factual information about the religion and the faithful, but they also offer the conceptual framework within which to place Muslim history in relation to everything else. As Douglass and Dunn make clear, depending on the order of the chapters, students may learn to interpret Islam as antiquarian and exotic, or as an integral and continuing dimension of human history and community. Chapter order is paramount in determining the textbook interpretations, some of which are highly contestable because they retard student understanding of the chronology of how world history unfolded or obscure the connections that existed among people in different parts of the globe. In three of the eleven texts, for instance, the 'Ottoman Empire is sent into decline before students read about the early modern Iberian expansion or the development of bureaucratic states and religious wars in sixteenth-century Europe'.

The tendency of these school texts to treat each of the religions they discuss, including Islam, as independent cultural entities – typically offering outlines of their origins, key beliefs and practices – reinforces the rather monolithic interpretation of Islam prevalent in the popular media: as homogeneous, essentialized and ahistorical. Traditions shared with other religions are played down – most notably the Abrahamic tradition shared with Judaism and Christianity – a glossing over that Douglass and Dunn argue is one way in which the texts sustain an interpretation of these three faiths as neatly discrete, an interpretation widely challenged by Muslim critics. Some basic facts are ignored, others selectively emphasized. Moreover, Muslims all but disappear from view in these texts after the sixteenth century, except for walk-on parts in the twentieth century in variations of the 'sick-man-of-Europe' role. In short, Douglass and Dunn suggest that these texts interpret Islam not as Muslims would understand it, but in terms thought acceptable to textbook adoption committees. Only a more human-centred approach to world history, Douglass and Dunn conclude, as well as advice from Muslim reviewers, will counteract such interpretations, which too often recall the kind of misrepresentations that we have noted can characterize the media.

As with Ruthven, therefore, Douglass and Dunn suggest that one way in which to tackle bias or misrepresentation of Islam in the media or school texts is to have Muslims generate their own alternatives, or, less radically, to have Muslims at least enter into conversation with those currently responsible for these forms of cultural production. This would seem like common sense, though, of course, as these authors are aware, it is not just as easy as that, since such alternative interpretations will be just as positioned, albeit in different ways, as any other. So far we have been considering some examples of how interpretations of Islam are contested, but let us now turn to examine the different perspectives and insights

into Islam that have been generated by those differently positioned by discipline and personal and biographical background.

Some contending interpreters

The basis of the authority that underpins different interpretations of Islam is not always something that is closely examined or revealed. What can make a particular account, explanation or interpretation compelling/authoritative – or more authoritative than other competing interpretations – is not just the agreed criteria of scholarship such as internal coherence, elegance and parsimony of explanation, important as these are, but the disciplinary and personal credentials of the individual offering the interpretation, credentials to which we may be differentially predisposed. In the marketplace of academic interpretation, some scholars, or some kinds of scholar, are better able to sell their wares than others, and if we are to understand why this is so, we need to understand some of the processes that operate there.

We have already mentioned how several of our contributors advocate greater Muslim participation in the production of materials that interpret their religion and its adherents for people in the West. Clearly an element of brokerage or cultural translation is at issue here. There is a feeling that the ‘insider’, in this case a Muslim, can provide new depths of understanding and a different perspective, one that may act as a balance, allowing us to ‘triangulate’ on the subject of study, and so improve the interpretations on offer. There may even be a feeling that Muslim involvement in the production of interpretations about Islam lends them greater credibility, at least among other Muslims (though one could also argue the opposite). These claims are thought to be no less true of academic writing than of media and textbook interpretations.

In an analysis that recalls Akbar Ahmed’s argument in *Discovering Islam* (1988), the Muslim sociologist Ilyas Ba-Yunus (Chapter 6) advocates a holistic approach in order to avoid what he refers to as the ‘confusing array of perceptions’ that arise from the varied cultural, political and disciplinary biases of scholars who write about Islam. He roots this holistic approach in a combination of Parsonian functionalism and the Qur’anic notion of *deen* in an effort to determine what a ‘living Islamic society’ might look like if such existed today. In this regard, his chapter might be seen as an extension of his earlier advocacy of an ‘Islamic sociology’, which sought to incorporate into western social science the values and intellectual traditions of Islam in order better to understand the forces operating in Muslim society and history (Ba-Yunus and Ahmed 1985; on the related attempt to formulate an ‘Islamic anthropology’, see Ahmed 1986). As Ba-Yunus outlines, the *deen* of the Qur’an provides for a full set of institutions essential to human society – for economic, domestic, political and religious life – and in so doing offers, he suggests, at least when practised in its totality, a median course between a range of extremes such as asceticism and materialism, selfishness and altruism, democracy and authoritarianism. Contemporary realities in Muslim societies, and elsewhere, frequently depart radically from this model, as Ba-Yunus

notes, so that the model's value lies less in accounting for these realities than in allowing us to measure the extent of this departure. It also, Ba-Yunus suggests, offers an 'insider's' insight into the worldview of contemporary Islamic movements that otherwise would be relatively inaccessible to a western readership.

Such calls for 'insider' accounts certainly find a positive reception in a discipline like anthropology, with its emphasis on 'the native's point of view', and it is not surprising to find here that there have been a number of prominent attempts at insider-outsider authorial collaborations. Probably the best known of these is Fischer and Abedi's *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogue in Postmodernity and Tradition* (1990), whose very title epitomizes what is at issue here. Although a rich repository for the intrepid reader, the book explicitly offers no less than three routes through it, a potentially shifting sand of interpretative ambivalence as far as some critics have been concerned, and a positive advantage in the eyes of others. The danger of drawing upon such different voices may be the temptation to try to reconcile them, rather than leaving them to speak for themselves. Each can offer different things, with the insider bringing insight into the 'intimate cultural reverberations of a symbol or motif' to the outsider's 'entitlement to integrate parochial perspectives into a global context' (Bedford 1994: 84). According to Bedford (1994: 84), this was Fischer and Abedi's failing: that they sought to go beyond this and to 'contrive to exploit their dissimilar speaking positions to forge a unity of utterance which is all the more misleading the more authoritative it appears'. It is impossible in places for the reader to disentangle one voice from the other, yet the negotiations and compromises that must inevitably underlie such passages in *Debating Muslims* are rarely made clear. The resulting 'omniscience', laments Bedford, is far from reassuring, and where such different voices are presented we should strive to reveal, as the better model, the 'dialogue' involved. But equally there will be those who balk at Bedford's suggested intellectual division of labour. Why should insiders be confined to providing local knowledge, while the outside observer runs off with the global and comparative models? At one's most pessimistic and most cynical, attempts at dialogical interpretation could seem merely to replicate in microcosm the very structures of power one had hoped they might transcend.

Perhaps one of the reasons that anthropology has seemed peculiarly receptive to insiders studying their own cultures is because these 'indigenous ethnographers' appear to epitomize how the discipline has historically validated its knowledge: through the ability to claim that 'I was there'. Anthropologists are expected to accumulate experiential 'inside' knowledge of the worlds they study through long-term participative residential research, something that in some sense 'insiders' clearly already possess. Such eye-witness accounting has long been the ultimate legitimation of ethnographic endeavour and, in part, is what has helped to distinguish anthropological work on Islam from that of other researchers, particularly those who concentrate on texts. It also partly explains why anthropology came relatively late to the study of Islam, as Lindholm shows in Chapter 7.

Extended residential fieldwork obviously entails an interest in the everyday occupations of those one is living alongside. In the tribal, segmentary societies of the Middle East that were so often the focus of attention for anthropologists of

Lindholm's generation and earlier, this usually meant politics. It rarely meant religion. Where Islam surfaced at all in ethnographic accounts, it was generally to note the mediatory role played by Sufi saints in conflicts between warring factions. Reflecting the apparent lack of interest in religion among their rural hosts, Islam was for many anthropologists in the 1960s and 1970s a taken-for-granted assumption and background noise that they did little to probe or record. Other factors too deflected or discouraged anthropological interest in Islam. Anthropological accounts of religion generally revelled in imaginative decodings of cosmology, myth and symbol, a type of analysis that Islam's apparently uncomplicated and straightforward codes of behaviour and belief did not readily invite. Islam hardly ever found its way into the discipline's introductory textbooks (see Ba-Yunus, Chapter 6), in contrast to the pages and pages devoted there to unravelling the symbolism of a religion that might have only a handful of adherents. Lindholm offers many such examples of this neglect of Islam, including, compellingly, his own.

For anthropologists of this period, then, gripped by the dynamics of rural, tribal politics, the Middle Eastern towns and the Muslim scholars who lived there might never have existed. Islamic texts and Muslim historiography simply seemed an elitist irrelevance to a discipline principally concerned with downtrodden and largely illiterate tribesmen. The result was a division of labour in which, Lindholm argues, 'anthropologists avoided cities, and rarely read texts' while Orientalist historians were uninterested 'in tribal societies or even in living people'. Although this was an unproductive and shortsighted partition of tasks between parties that had potentially so much to learn from each other, fieldwork and textual scholarship quickly became institutionalized as divergent academic pursuits, and it was to be many years, Lindholm notes, before anthropology incorporated the study of Muslim texts and history as an integral and complementary part of its practice.

Anthropology was thus something of a late starter in the field of Islamic studies, which was dominated for years by disciplines that could muster more by way of textual clout (cf. Gilsenan 1990: 230). If someone wanted to learn about Islam, he or she was more likely to turn to the work of a historian or philosopher than to that of an anthropologist. Anthropologists consequently had to learn their trade in a context where the research agenda was set by other kinds of expert. Text-based interpretations of Islam generally held greater sway than those based on ethnography. It is only in the last decade or so that anthropologists have begun to make a name for themselves and their subject in the study of Islam, and to overcome the previously widespread conviction that Islam's true nature could only be understood through texts and not fieldwork, which some were inclined to dismiss as the collection of folk superstitions. And only now, too, is the value of traditional anthropological fieldwork being recognized for its ability to locate in time and space 'the Islam' of the Muslims it describes, tempering any temptation to think, in a world obsessed by Islamic revivalism, that all Muslims are preoccupied by debating doctrine and pursuing apostates. While textual scholars and fieldworkers still challenge one another's views, there are signs that interpretations of Islam now increasingly draw on a convergence of their expertise: with

knowledge of texts informing fieldwork and fieldwork informing our reading of the texts.

Interpreting the margins

The final three chapters shed light on disciplinary formations in scholarship on the Muslim world by attending to areas that have attracted relatively little critical attention: sea-faring, music and charity. Characteristically western scholarship has grasped these areas in terms of failure, as Xavier de Planhol's provocatively titled chapter suggests. The notion of failure is, of course, a persistent Orientalist trope, in which Islam is deemed responsible for lacks and absences, which in turn leave the Muslim world chronically ill equipped for modernity. Of course, the failure lies not with Islam but with scholarship, which has often posed its questions and selected its terms of analysis in such a way that the answer ('failure') is inevitable. All of the final chapters suggest ways in which these absences can be turned into productive and revealing social and historical presences.

Planhol's chapter concludes by reminding us just how much of modern western history has revolved around advances in seafaring. By the fifteenth century, when a global economy was beginning to emerge and the exploitation of the Americas was well underway, Muslim powers had apparently fallen behind in the race for maritime supremacy, and this was to have crucial consequences. As Planhol starkly asserts, had this not been the case, 'the fate of the world could well have been different'. The evidence is certainly compelling, but more complex than one might at first expect. Sifting through a variety of documentary sources to illuminate the interplay of geography, politics and economics, Planhol reveals complex social and cultural formations connected with the sea and seafaring in classical Islamic society. Across the Mediterranean, the Muslim powers relied on Christian minorities for naval prowess. Fishing and piracy were also largely in the hands of Christians, renegades or recent converts (such as the Berbers). The partial exception to this picture was the Indian Ocean, though here, Planhol argues, Muslim domination of maritime trade took place in the absence of sustained resistance. What were the reasons for this? Planhol argues that it was not simply a case of falling behind technical developments being pursued in the Christian West. The practical consequences of an asymmetry in the field of naval power were negligible, even though heavier and slower boats were clearly a factor in the defeat of the Ottoman navy by the Habsburgs at the decisive battle of Lepanto (in 1571). There was, Planhol points out, 'no intrinsic ineptitude, no individual incompatibility', as the careers of such exemplary Ottoman seafarers as Barbarossa Hayreddin Paşa demonstrate. The answer, as Planhol meticulously documents, was a cultural disposition, which resulted not only in a certain social stigma attached to sea-faring in medieval and early modern Muslim society, but also in an active indifference on the part of its rulers. What was at issue here was a conflict of cultural values, which closely identified seafaring with pastoral nomadism in the minds of the civic-minded urban elites of the Arabian Peninsula in the early years of Islam. Just as the conflict between sedentary, urban Islam

and the Islam of the nomadic tribes shaped early medieval Islam in crucial ways, as Ibn Khaldun noted, so the conflict between 'Islam and the sea', as Planhol puts it, was to have decisive and far-reaching consequences.

Inevitably, as Rosaldo (1988: 79) has pointed out, certain topics of study are overlooked because they do not conform to standard disciplinary expectations about what is theoretically interesting or worthwhile. Such absences not only leave gaps in our knowledge, but may also hint at the ideological assumptions that underlie existing interpretations. One such absence has been the study of organized charity, which, as Milton-Edwards hints (Chapter 3, this volume), is not something that has generally figured large in either popular or academic imaginings of Islam. In fact, when Benthall (Chapter 9) began his research on Muslim charity he could find practically nothing at all written about any of the twenty-eight Red Crescent national societies. This is surprising, since the obligation to be charitable has, of course, such high visibility as one of Islam's 'five pillars'. While mentioned briefly in practically every book that has ever been published on Islam, charity is paradoxically probably one of the religion's least written about and most poorly analysed elements, its very self-evidentness perhaps being partly what keeps it from view. Benthall's interest in researching Muslim charity developed out of his earlier involvement in the management and study of a range of western non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Focusing particularly on Jordan and the Middle East, Benthall explores the relationship between these western NGOs and their Islamic equivalents, showing how the latter have adapted and 'localized' some of the practices of the former to produce a voluntary sector characterized by many different types of organization, from quasi-state bodies to popular movements for radical change. This process has unfolded in a context with a long history of Islamic charitable trusts informed by extensive and doctrinally elaborate Qur'anic teachings on the giving of alms that are only dimly and incompletely known to the West. It is only comparatively recently, Benthall suggests, that western NGOs have begun to recognize and appreciate the role played by such local, non-western charitable welfare provision. For a long time the Judaeo-Christian West saw organized charity as its own unique domain, an assumption that, with more than a trace of Orientalism, constructed the non-West in general and Islam in particular as the objects of charity rather than its agent. Such an assumption would certainly help to explain why Muslim charity is generally missing from western scholarly accounts of Islam, as another 'failure' that can take its place beside the Muslim failure at sea.

Stokes' final chapter discusses the variety of disciplinary formations that bear on the study of music in the Muslim world. Hadithic condemnation has in various ways and at various times relegated music and musicians to a marginal position in Muslim society, in stark contrast to the situation that has pertained in Europe, at least since the middle of the nineteenth century. It is not surprising that musicologists who have looked at the Muslim world have found it to be full of all manner of lacks and absences, and understood these in terms of a monolithic and, by implication, culturally repressive Islam. The Orientalist reflexes of an earlier musicology have been absorbed and reproduced in Europe by the popular market. 'Islamic' samples by the popular cultural avant garde invest the trope of cultural

repression with a sado-masochistic eroticism, most strikingly represented in Jocelyn Pook's soundtrack to Stanley Kubrick's film *Eyes Wide Shut* (in which the sound of Qawwali accompanies the orgy at the masked ball). Ethnomusicologists have had to work hard to challenge these kinds of unwitting reflex ascriptions and identifications, not least by pointing out that what is routinely heard as 'Islamic' in a Middle Eastern context may have nothing to do with Islam, or Muslims, at all. Stokes' chapter evaluates historical and ethnographic traditions of thinking in ethnomusicology, and some of the consequences of the division between the two. As Lindholm (Chapter 7, this volume) also suggests of anthropology, the rift between historical and ethnographic study has been debilitating. But in both cases, as Stokes demonstrates, the critical ethnomusicological tradition has done much to disentangle the study of Middle Eastern musics from the Orientalist idea of a musical culture dominated by a historically inert Islam.

Stokes' consideration of the separation between historical and ethnographic perspectives in ethnomusicology returns us to the space of interdisciplinarity with which we began, and which implicitly provides a platform for many of our contributors to survey their disciplinary practice. While the disciplines they review in the essays that follow are diverse, the processes that shape these disciplinary knowledges are shown to share some similarity of form. Only by reflecting on these processes, we believe, will we begin to understand what is involved in interpreting Islam.

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