"Neither of the East nor of the West"

Crossing and Dwelling in Islamic Studies

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The Sound of Theological Silence

In the early 1990s, Catholics and Protestants in my hometown began to organize more systematic interfaith meetings. Although being a fairly small town, it had a large migrant population given the presence of a major pharmaceutical and chemical company. In the German context, this means a migrant population primarily originating from Turkey. These early interfaith meetings involved the local Turkish Sunni Muslim mosque and also included representatives of the Alevi community. Alevis are part of a religious community from Eastern Anatolia and primarily of a Kurdish background. Alevism is often described as syncretistic and as combining elements of Shia Islam, Sufism – Islam's mystical tradition – and pre-Islamic shamanistic practices. Alevism is named after Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, who plays a central role in Alevi religious devotion.[1]

In one of the first interfaith meetings, one representative of the local Alevi community was supposed to introduce the beliefs of his religion. However, he clearly struggled to do so and admitted that he did not really know what their actual beliefs were or from where to obtain information about them. He was visibly embarrassed about this. For him, his Alevi identity did not

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1. Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam*, New York 2015, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199969401.001.0001.

revolve around theology, doctrines, and beliefs, but around something else. The central ritual for Alevis is called *cem*, which is a kind of ritual dance that forges a sense of community and a connection with the transcendental. The *cem* ritual is accompanied by music and also used to solve conflicts within the community. Community creation as an embodied ritual experience is therefore central to Alevism.[2] For the local Alevi from my hometown tasked with introducing the beliefs of his religion, his Alevi identity revolved around and was articulated in this ritual, which was more important than his religion's theology.

The encounter of Protestant and Catholic Christians with Alevis in my hometown illustrates the clash between a religious paradigm that prioritizes theology with another religious paradigm in which theological considerations were not that central and did not constitute the foundation of Alevi religious identity. Alevis certainly have beliefs, but do not necessarily reflect about these in the manner of Christian theology. This anecdote also illustrates the limitations of what Jan Hjärpe calls the "Schleiermacher model" in theology.[3] Named after the German Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), the model articulates a conception of religion as interior spiritual experience that has been fundamental to both post-Enlightenment Christian theology and the non-confessional study of religion. For Hjärpe, the Schleiermacher model also entails a particular approach to theological training. It starts with teaching Christian doctrines (systematic theology) and their practical application (practical theology), includes learning the original languages of the normative texts of Christianity and their interpretation (exegesis), and finally contains instructing in church history. Hjärpe is critical of how this model is applied to other religions when teaching and researching them. In the case of Islam, standard textbooks would usually start with the Prophet Muhammad as the founding figure, present the foundational authoritative textual sources and their interpretations, introduce the formation of different schools of thought and sects, and conclude with questions of ethics and rituals. The main problem of this approach lies for Hjärpe in the assumption that theological considerations central to Christianity are equally relevant to other religions. The example of Alevism shows that this is not necessarily the case.[4]

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2. Hege Irene Markussen, *Teaching History, Learning Piety: An Alevi Foundation in Contemporary Turkey*, Lund 2012, 47–67.

3. Jan Hjärpe, "Essentialism or an Anthropological Approach: The Role and Function of the Scientific Study of Religion in a Historical Perspective", *Numen* 62 (2015), 307–311, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341367.

4. Hjärpe, "Essentialism or an Anthropological Approach", 309–310.

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This article takes its cue from a contemporary anthropologist of religion: Thomas A. Tweed.[5] Based on his ethnographic research among Cuban Catholics in exile in Miami,[6] Tweed develops his own theory of religion. With much intellectual self-irony, he admits the far-reaching ambition of this task and that there are objections against such an endeavour because so many attempts have been made before. He defends the value in both seeking to define religion and keeping this concept itself, despite being a term of Western origin that can only be applied to other cultures and societies with enormous difficulties. I shall not discuss his own definition of religion,[7] as I find the wider issues he addresses in his book around the concept more relevant. What he seeks to do is to define religion not as an abstract concept with rigid boundaries but as something dynamic, associated with transformation and moving across boundaries, with mapping, building, and inhabiting the world. For him, religion is something connected to *crossing* and *dwelling*. Religions are not "parallel tracks" but "a flowing together of currents".[8] Religions are part of the creation of physical and social spaces, of homes or homelands, and create dwellings in providing spatial and temporal orientation. Equally, "religions are flows, translocative and transtemporal crossings",[9] connecting people with other times and other places, literally and symbolically.

Tweed's intervention reminds us to critically engage with the term and how it is used and understood. Religion and its modern reception as a concept is based on the secular/religious divide and on the exclusion of certain epistemes and paradigms. Rather than coming up with a new definition myself, I suggest adopting a critical and self-reflective stance to the theoretical assumptions and their cultural provenience that shape the academic study of religion in general and of Islam in particular. What could be some of the consequences of applying Tweed's dynamic, fluid, and confluent understanding of religion that recognizes intellectual and cultural positionality when studying Islam as both a historical and human phenomenon? How can this be done in the context of Islamic Studies? I will make an attempt by examining three themes that have shaped my own research interests in the intellectual history of Islam, Islam as translocal phenomenon, and the material culture of Islam: ambiguity, multi-locality, and aesthetics.

5. Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, Cambridge, MA 2006.

6. Thomas A. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*, New York 1997, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195105292.001.0001.

7. "*Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.*" Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 54. Italics in original.

8. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 60.

9. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 158.

A Culture of Ambiguity – Thinking Islam

Two recent contributions suggest an intellectual climate of ambiguity as central to understanding Islamic intellectual history. Thomas Bauer's book *A Culture of Ambiguity* is the first intervention making this point,[10] followed by another contribution within English-speaking academia, namely the posthumously published book *What is Islam?* by Shahab Ahmed (1966–2015).[11] The approach and propositions of both books are quite similar, though their authors' agendas differ as do some of their conclusions. Bauer's main premise is that pre-modern Muslim societies and their intellectual life exhibited a strong tolerance towards ambiguity and accepted conflicting claims to truth. This cultural ambiguity became manifest in language, literature, and other textual or verbal discourses, but also in acts of daily-life and of religious worship.

Bauer discusses different areas of Islamic intellectual and cultural life where this tolerance towards ambiguity was evident. A plurality of Islamic discourses was accepted and efforts were made to reconcile conflicting worldviews without vindicating one at the expenses of the other. Islamic jurisprudence traditionally accommodated different legal principles and sources of law and considered a variety of legal interpretations as equally valid. Islamic discourses on politics were not just based on conceptualizations in theology and jurisprudence. Political discourses were more informed by panegyric poetry and treatises on successful statecraft, so-called "mirrors for princes". These two latter genres of political discourse incorporated pre-Islamic literary and political traditions and co-existed with theological and jurisprudential reflections on politics in Islam without always agreeing with them. Pre-modern Islamic exegesis conceived the Quran as deliberately revealed by God as an ambiguous text. Hence, exegetical praxis was always an exercise in probability and never arrived at complete certainty. Finally, the tolerant and inclusive ethos of Muslim societies was evident in their material culture: architecture, art, and aesthetic conventions more generally incorporated with pride the heritage of non-Muslim cultures.[12]

The aim of Bauer's book is to open the eyes of historians of Islam to the significant tolerance towards ambiguity as a particular cultural achievement of pre-modern Islamic intellectual life. This tolerance marks the capaciousness of Islamic thought and allowed the co-existence of conflicting views: one could live with contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambiguities. In addition, the cultural and intellectual sources of Islamic thought and

10. Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*, Berlin 2011; Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, New York 2021.

11. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton, NJ 2016.

12. Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität*, 41–53.

Muslim societies were not solely the Quran and the example of the Prophet Muhammad but also non-Islamic sources in philosophy, ethics, politics, and literature that preceded Islam. Equally, Bauer points out that the genres of Islamic discourses were not just theology and jurisprudence but Islam was also discussed, represented, and theorized in philosophy, poetry, literature, and material culture. Religious and non-religious elements were thereby blended in Muslim societies, made possible by their tolerance towards ambiguity. Bauer seeks to avoid the Islamization of Islam ("Islamisierung des Islams"); an approach that reduces the Muslim world to acts and discourses of piety and that marginalizes non-Islamic elements as deviations.[13]

Ahmed's book makes a similar intervention. He approaches Islam as "*a human and historical phenomenon of exploration,* [...] *of ambiguity and ambivalence,* [...] *of relativism, and* [...] *of internal contradiction*".[14] Rather than compartmentalizing different discourses as mystical, philosophical, juristic, and theological, and thereby as contradictory and mutually exclusive to one another, Islam is expressed in its discursive diversity. What appears contradictory, inconsistent, or ambiguous is implicated in a discursive process that seeks to define what it means to be Islamic. Ahmed conceives Islam as "*hermeneutical engagement*",[15] in which theologians, jurists, mystics, philosophers, and poets are equally involved. Despite the different epistemes they are working with and their intellectual competition, these different knowledge traditions were not mutually exclusive. Muslim scholars combined them, employing the particular intellectual assumptions of each tradition and conventions of the literary genre and engaging in seemingly contradictory discourses. As a jurist they would clearly state that the consumption of alcohol is prohibited, while in their poetry they praise the intoxication that the consumption of wine produces.

Islamic intellectual traditions have developed different strategies to make contradictions coherent and meaningful. For Ahmed, Muslims developed an epistemological hierarchy that distinguishes between different registers of truth. There are higher and lower levels of truth; the latter are for the common people while access to and understanding of the former requires sufficient philosophical sophistication, esoteric initiation, or theological erudition. Intellectual elitism allowed for the co-existence of different truth regimes. Related to this hierarchization of truth, private and public modes of meaning-making were established. Different discursive, social, and physical spaces existed to allow Muslim actors to pursue their various

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13. Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität*, 192–223.
14. Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 303. Italics in original.
15. Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 345. Italics in original.

hermeneutical engagements with Islam. This spatio-social segregation of discourses provided space for their co-existence.[16]

Both Bauer and Ahmed seek to alert readers to the capaciousness of pre-modern Islamic thought and culture. The differences in their conclusions are perhaps best illustrated by the question whether a wine goblet can be called Islamic. For Bauer, the answer is clear: talking about an Islamic wine goblet makes as much sense as talking about Christian adultery.[17] Ahmed disagrees. A wine goblet can be called Islamic not only because Muslims have always drunk wine since the beginning of Islam. He refers to the prevalence and long history of wine drinking in Muslim societies as a collective act expressed in poetry, literature, and material culture, which makes it Islamic.[18] Bauer still follows a distinction between religion and the secular.[19] For him, referring to a wine goblet as a piece of Islamic metalwork in a museum is an example of Islamizing secular aspects of the social life in Islamic history. Ahmed, however, rejects this religious/secular dichotomy as potentially reducing what is Islamic to a set of restrictive normative practices. However, Ahmed's suggestion is not unproblematic either. To approach "*whatever* Muslims say or do as a potential site or locus for expression and articulation of *being Muslim*" reduces Muslim actors to their Muslimness and ignores the intersectionality and different layers of their identities.[20] Muslims are not only and not always Muslims and do not engage in meaning-making by solely referring to Islam.

Both are interested in moving scholarly engagement with the pre-modern intellectual world of Islam outside of the Schleiermacher model, which focuses on theology and law (the Islamic equivalents to systematic and practical theology), and considers philosophy, mystical, and esoteric traditions and material culture as standing outside of Islam because of their alleged non-Islamic origins or for being somehow heterodox. What can their approaches and suggestions, primarily informed by the pre-modern Muslim world, tell us about studying the intellectual history of modern Islam?

The Egypt-born Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) was a pivotal figure in the intellectual reform of Islam in the nineteenth century and has been influential on a diverse range of intellectual and ideological movements in modern Islam. Both liberal Muslim thinkers and Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood would consider him as one of their intellectual

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16. Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 367–386.

17. Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität*, 194. See also Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 409–410.

18. Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 57–71.

19. For Ahmed's critique of this binary see Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 197–211.

20. Quote from Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 538. Italics in original.

precursors.[21] Not only his reception history is quite diverse. Abduh has been portrayed by posterity as a beacon of Islamic orthodoxy who defended Islam against its modern detractors and proved its conformity with modern science.[22] He has also been described as a lax Muslim, a freethinker, and agnostic.[23] Various labels have been attached to him in order to make sense of him as an intellectual figure. Abduh has been pigeonholed as either a defender of orthodoxy or an opportunistic exploiter of religion because of his contradictory religious and intellectual inclinations. Yet, these efforts to attach a clear label to him do not sufficiently recognize how he was steeped in Islam's culture of ambiguity that operated with different registers of truth.

Abduh's student Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935) is otherwise sceptical of Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam. Yet, he attributes Abduh's ability to master the culture of ambiguity to his background in Sufism. Writing about his teacher's involvement in mystical Islam, Rida admits that

> he considered it necessary to conceal everything he has obtained from the fruits of Sufism. He adapted to the qualities and conditions of the people he associated with. It was like this: among philosophers, he was a philosopher; among jurisprudents, he was a jurisprudent; among literati, he was a litterateur; among historians, he was a historian; among officials and judges, he was the most capable official and the most just judge. He talked with each group and each individual according to how he viewed their capacity, while holding onto truthfulness and independent mindedness.[24]

Abduh's complex literary *oeuvre* equally illustrates how he mastered the intellectual parameters and linguistic conventions of different scholarly genres, how he operated within different registers of truth, and knew how to address different audiences in line with their abilities and expectations. He wrote mystical treatises for fellow mystics, provided a philosophical commentary on Islamic theology to rehabilitate philosophy in the eyes of theologians, was active as a political journalist throughout his life, issued legal injunctions as grand mufti of Egypt at the end of his life that conform to mainstream Islamic jurisprudence, produced catechisms that confirm Sunni

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21. Oliver Scharbrodt, *Muhammad ʿAbduh: Modern Islam and the Culture of Ambiguity*, London 2022, 1–8.

22. Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Taʾrikh al-Ustadh al-Imam al-Shaykh Muhammad ʿAbduh*, vol. 1, Cairo 1931, 974.

23. Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and ʿAbduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam*, London 1966, 14.

24. Rida, *Taʾrikh*, 126. My translation.

notions of orthodoxy for young Muslim students, and gave public lectures on the Quran to encourage lay Muslims to study it.

Multi-Locality – Islam in Motion

Crossing boundaries is a key element in Tweed's approach towards religions, which understands them as translocative and transtemporal. Tweed develops his theory based on his frustration with existing approaches to religions, which he does not consider helpful in investigating transnational religious communities. In his case, he wanted to understand the complex spatial emplacements of a Cuban Catholic community in exile in Miami. Space has been a key category in the study of religion since its emergence as a field of study. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) emphasized the spatial separation between sacred and profane as key in defining religion. Sacrality is thereby imposed on certain spaces or certain matters as part of a social imaginary.[25] Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) built on the differentiation between sacred and profane and presented it as central to what is considered a religious experience: the sacred breaks into the continuity of profane space and time and makes it meaningful. Eliade calls the manifestation of the sacred hierophanies, which become archetypical events commemorated in religious holidays or rituals or sacred spaces demarcated from profane space.[26]

We can observe a wider spatial turn in Cultural Studies, influenced by developments in Marxist and postmodern human geography by figures like Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991), Doreen Massey (1944–2016), and Yi-Fu Tuan (1930–2022). Tuan distinguishes between place and space – a distinction which resonates with Eliade's notion of the ordering power of the religious spatial imagination. For Tuan, space is open and unordered, but also threatening and vulnerable. Space becomes place when it is ordered and made meaningful.[27] Massey counters the perception of space as just being an objective reality or an empty vessel and argues that space in its social imagination and physical reality acquires certain properties.[28] Equally, Lefebvre is interested in the production of space in its physical dimension, but also as spaces of social interactions and relations: how spaces are created, imagined, and discursively constructed.[29]

25. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York 2001, 36–46.
26. Mircea Eliade, *Die Religionen und das Heilige: Elemente der Religionsgeschichte*, Frankfurt 1997, 21–38.
27. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis, MN 1977, 6–18, 85–100.
28. Doreen Massey, *For Space*, London 2005.
29. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford 1991, 26–67.

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In the study of religion, Kim Knott has picked up these threads and applied them specifically to the investigation of the emplacement of religions. For Knott, space, following Lefebvre here, possesses physical, social, and discursive dimensions. It consists of buildings and streets that change and transform, are demolished and rebuilt. Not only the physicality of space is dynamic but also discourses and spatial imaginations that are created around it. Finally, spaces are marked by the flow of people that changes the demographic composition of places. Religions possess all three elements. The physical emplacement of religions occurs in buildings, sites, and places used by religious communities. The social dimension of religious spaces is evident in the communities and networks created around them, who convene and interact in a particular locality but also take the communities beyond their specific locality. Finally, religious communities are engaged in discursive constructions of spaces assigning meanings to places and marking them as special and significant. Place is thereby neither conceived as mere local context or "passive container"[30] that hosts particular religious communities nor regarded as static locality demarcated by fixed boundaries of a nation or community. To overcome the impression of a static and localized approach to the study of religious communities in a particular place, Knott prefers an understanding of space that is dynamic and multi-dimensional.[31]

I would like to illustrate how space configurates people, ideas, and networks physically, socially, and discursively by using an example from my fieldwork among Twelver Shii Muslim communities in London.[32] The foundational event for Twelver Shiism is commemorated every year in a period called Ashura. During the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram, Shiis remember the murder of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad – Husayn – who rose against the ruling Muslim dynasty and was killed together with his supporters in Karbala, southern Iraq, in 680 CE. For Shiis, his death marks the ultimate martyrdom not just in Islamic but in human history: a righteous man stood up against tyranny and oppression and paid the ultimate price.

Shiis perform a number of rituals during this period which is the peak of the Shii calendar: memorial lectures re-narrating the events of Karbala, recitations of eulogies of Husayn and his family and supporters, and

30. Kim Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*, London 2015, 7, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315652641.

31. Knott, *The Location of Religion*, 127–130.

32. Oliver Scharbrodt, "Creating a Diasporic Public Sphere in Britain: Twelver Shia Networks in London", *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 31 (2020), 23–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2019.1643098.

different types of self-flagellation such as rhythmic chest beating or using chains, razors or swords. All these ritual activities are meant to articulate their grief or to partake in the suffering of Husayn. The events of Karbala are re-enacted in passion plays or in artwork such as statues and paintings that narrate or depict the tragedy of Karbala. One ritual is public mourning processions on the day of Ashura when Husayn was killed and forty days later (Arba'in). These processions are important articulations of communal assertion in the public and have played such a role throughout Shii history. During the procession, events are re-enacted, eulogies recited, and people self-flagellate. How is such a procession transposed to London? For several decades now, Shiis have held processions in London on the days of Ashura and Arba'in. These processions have been held not on the outskirts of London with a significant Muslim population but in the very heart of the city around Marble Arch and Hyde Park.

The poster in Figure 1 announcing the Arba'in procession of 2013 juxtaposes and configurates different physical spaces. One can see the main site of the procession of London, Marble Arch, which is an important landmark of the city. In the background, we see the dome of the shrine of Husayn in Karbala, where he is buried. The poster connects these spaces symbolically: while many Shiis would perform a pilgrimage to the shrine of Husayn in Karbala, the procession becomes a symbolic re-enactment of the pilgrimage connecting the Shii diaspora in London with the shrine. Equally, the procession itself brings different ethnic communities together and combines their ritual practices: Iraqi and Iranian self-flagellate or wave the national flags of their countries and South Asian Shiis carry replica coffins of the martyrs of Karbala or include a horse in the procession that represents the horse Husayn rode.

Comparing the signage of banners in the processions of 2013 and 2014 (Figures 2 and 3), significant changes in how political issues of a transnational nature are addressed and communicated to the wider non-Muslim public in London also become evident. The procession in 2013 included general statements around freedom from oppression and justice as being core values that Husayn sought to establish in his revolt and for which he was killed. The slogans on banners at the 2014 procession responded directly to the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and are used to denounce terrorism in the name of Islam more generally. Hence, we can observe not only the simultaneity of different spaces (the shrine of Husayn with the procession in London) and different times (the killing of Husayn in 680 CE and its contemporary public commemoration). Different layers of meaning for diverse audiences are also created: traditional diasporic elements in terms of the
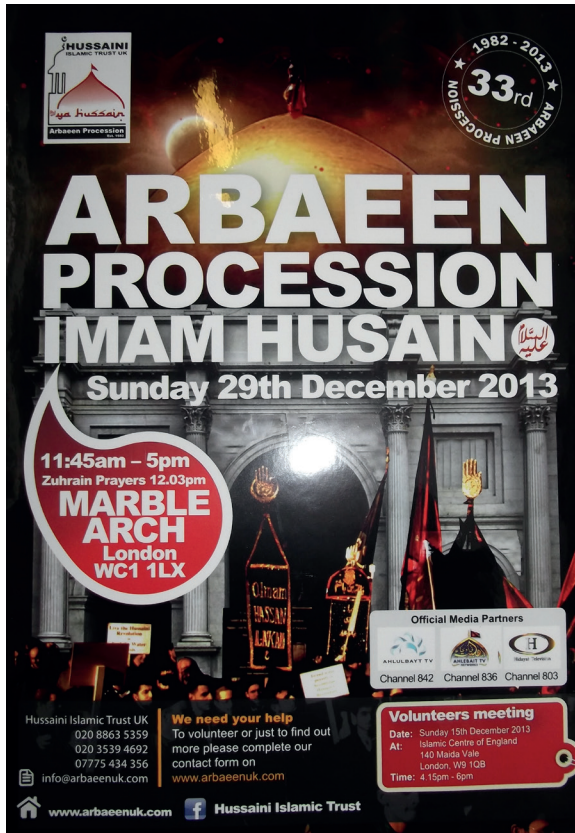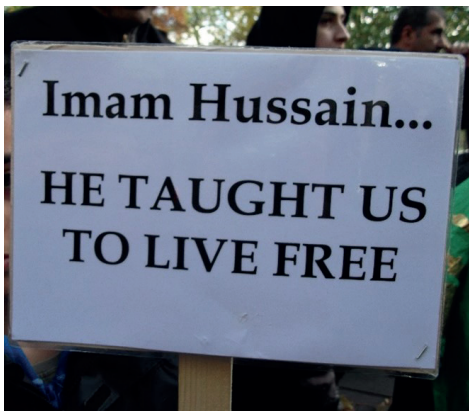
Figure 1. Arba'in poster of 2013.

Figures 2 and 3. Slogans at Arba'in processions in 2013 and 2014.

rituals performed or objects carried around during the procession replicate similar processions in Iran, Iraq, or Pakistan. At the same time, Shiis use the procession as a public demonstration to present themselves as victims of radical and militant forms of Sunni Islam that have been made responsible for the rise of global terrorism since 9/11.

Aesthetics – Sensing Islam

Religious rituals such as public mourning processions are also embodied and sensory experiences. This takes me to the final part of the article. At a conference on aesthetics and religion, a colleague mentioned research on Islam to one of the keynote speakers. The speaker responded with surprise at the suggestion that someone could work on aesthetics in Islam: "of course, in Islam, there is no real aesthetics. There is no imagery, no figurative representation [...] just a little bit of calligraphy." This common and quite popular perception outside and within academia that Islam does not have an aesthetic tradition reminds us of the trappings of the Schleiermacher model: essentializing religion and taking one particular articulation as normative or reducing Islam to particular normative articulations, as Bauer and Ahmed have pointed out as well. On the contrary, there is a rich artistic and aesthetic tradition in Islam.[33]

However, I would like to take the notion of aesthetics further by undertaking a kind of rewind from Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) to Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and follow here Birgit Meyer's scholarship. The Kantian understanding of aesthetics has been most significant in modern philosophy and defines it as a reflection on beauty and art, the individual encounter with the sublime, and the awe it creates. The definition mirrors Schleiermacher's understanding of religious experience as equally subjective and beyond rationalization. Aristotle, on the other hand, provides us with a more generic understanding of aesthetics as embodied, sensory experiences of the world. Aesthetics comes from *aesthesis*, which means perception and sensation, as the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) also emphasized in his influential reappraisal of aesthetic philosophy.[34] Meyer's work is particularly significant, applying an understanding of aesthetics as embodied, sensory experience to the study of religion and understanding religions as "aesthetic formations".[35] In this sense, aesthetics is understood

33. Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction*, Edinburgh 2004.

34. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, Hildesheim 1970.

35. Birgit Meyer, "From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding", in Birgit Meyer (ed.), *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, New York 2009, 6–11, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230623248_1.

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as the ability of the body to experience objects through its senses and have bodily sensations through their particular constellation. The embodied sensory experience of the world shapes how humans acquire and construe knowledge of it. Such an aesthetic experience of the world is thereby not just individual and subjective but intersubjective as shared experiences and thereby plays a crucial role in the formation of socialities. Meyer prefers the term "aesthetic formation" to underline the dynamic and processual nature of socialities that the term "community" does not sufficiently encapsulate, since it suggests a certain static and homogenous constitution. Aesthetic formations form subjects and their identities and also socialities based on shared and collective identities. Given that rituals, material culture, and cultural production are key components in the aesthetic formations of religions, Meyer suggests a performative understanding of community formation. Religious socialities as aesthetic formations are performative articulations of embodied experiences. Social formations – such as specific religious communities – are thereby created by a shared aesthetic style that distinguishes different religious communities from one another.

Meyer already points at the political dimension of aesthetic formations in the manner in which shared aesthetic styles create collective religious identities while equally demarcating them from others. Her vantage point is equally shaped by her research interests in global forms of Protestant Christianity and the limitations of research approaches to contemporary forms of Protestantism, such as Pentecostalism. Such research activities are implicitly shaped by Protestant theological assumptions, which favour intellect over experience and the spiritual over the material and thereby focus on theology, ethics, and inner experience.[36] Meyer seeks to counter this overemphasis on the intellectual and spiritual side of religion by highlighting the material side of religious formations that is manifest in their aesthetic side: images, symbols, rituals, and similar elements that are more significant when understanding contemporary forms of Christianity. Her interest lies in the notion of mediation – how religions as aesthetic formations bridge the divide between human and divine.[37] Equally, she seeks to delineate the dynamics of the global marketplace of Pentecostal and other Evangelical forms of Protestant Christianity, who compete over adherents and therefore engage in an "aesthetics of persuasion".[38]

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36. Birgit Meyer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109 (2010), 743–750, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2010-015.

37. Meyer, "From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations", 13.

38. Meyer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion", 754–758.

Meyer's contribution is extremely helpful in bringing aesthetics into discussions on the formation and articulation of individual and collective religious identities. However, her work is still shaped by concerns of Protestant theology: how religions as aesthetic formations use sensual forms to overcome the chasm between God and humanity. Other roles for aesthetic formations have been explored in the context of Judaism, for example. The role of rituals in forging collective memory has been identified by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1932–2009).[39] The Jewish calendar with its ritualized remembering of key mythico-historical events of Judaism and their roots in Biblical narratives illustrate how aesthetics cannot only be an embodied sensory formation to mediate between the divine and human but can also facilitate the embodied and sensory participation in myth. Jewish life has been kept alive and its memory sustained not through the study of chronicles but through rituals associated with the past. Rituals are embodied re-actualizations of the past and an aesthetic internalization and articulation of collective memory. Rituals are thus understood as sensual constructions of memory. As an embodied practice, memory is experienced through the senses while memory is equally used to make sense of these sensory experiences. The sensual base of memory thereby connects the interior and the exterior, since the sensory encounter with material culture through the body forms and performs memories and links the past to the present.[40]

Understanding aesthetics as an embodied and sensory articulation of collective memory is equally relevant to Islam. Shii Islam possesses various rituals associated with Ashura, the ten days in the Islamic calendar when Shiis remember the killing of Husayn. Public processions, as discussed previously, are both public communal assertions and embodied and sensory experiences which demark boundaries and articulate a sense of religious belonging. I would like to refer to one example that I have come across more recently during my fieldwork among Shii communities in Kuwait in the spring of 2022. Mosques, like churches, have a pulpit, or a *minbar* as it is called in Arabic, where the religious scholar sits and gives a sermon. The pulpit is elevated for practical reasons to make the speaker visible and audible to the entire congregation. The spatial elevation also reflects power relations: only a religious scholar would ascend to the pulpit to give a sermon as it is not accessible to lay people. However, in Kuwait, I observed something new: after the sermon when the speaker had descended from the pulpit, people approached the pulpit and touched and kissed it. I asked the person who acted as my gatekeeper why these people are doing so. He replied: "This

39. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Seattle, WA 1996.
40. S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjanim, Religion and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts*, London 2005, 132–139.

is the pulpit of Husayn – it is as if he was with us here." He took me to the pulpit and told me to touch it and to kiss it: "Smell it! It is the smell of Husayn, the smell of paradise." The pulpit was not just a pulpit but an object of ritual veneration whose presence was consumed by using various senses: the wooden craftwork of the pulpit itself, its smooth surface, and its smell of sandalwood. Its material presence in the congregation marked the symbolic presence of Husayn within the congregation and also allowed congregants to internalize the blessing of Husayn's presence by touching, kissing, and smelling it.

Figure 4. Pulpit with knots in Kuwait.

Other rituals are also associated with pulpits in Kuwait. I saw many pulpits to which various knots were attached (see Figure 4). Individuals had made particular vows in order to have their wishes granted and attached these knots in order to receive the blessing of their wishes. Knots act transculturally as symbols of vows. In the English language, one says "tying the knot" when making the marriage vow. In Kuwait, individual Shiis hope that Husayn would help them in having their wishes granted. There is a particular procedure at play, which involves the entire community: individuals would tie a knot around the pulpit for Husayn to grant them a wish. Another community member would then untie the knot later for the wish to be granted and make a new knot for their own wish. Hence, knot-tying as part of making a vow is not just an individual act but requires communal support in order for the wishes to come true and hence creates a sociality around the physical presence of the pulpit within the mosque.

Decentering Islamic Studies

Let me conclude with a few reflections on how ambiguity, multi-locality, and aesthetics can contribute to decentering Islamic Studies. Defining religions such as Islam as multi-local and transtemporal currents moves Islamic Studies as an academic discipline rooted in Western intellectual traditions outside of its historical Eurocentric cultural positionality. Seeing Islamic Studies as "neither of the East nor of the West" (Quran 24:35) challenges the dichotomy between "secular" outsider or etic approaches to the study of Islam as a Western academic exercise and Muslim insiders themselves, who become the object of study. Jan Hjärpe warns about the dangers of essentializing Islam and imposing theological frameworks stemming from Christianity on Islam. Islam's culture of ambiguity also challenges notions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, which are still dominant in Islamic Studies. Rather than considering one articulation of Islam as normative, representative, or mainstream and other articulations as deviant, insignificant, or marginal we need to recognize competing normativities in Islamic intellectual history, which co-existed for centuries and interacted with diverse religious, cultural, and intellectual currents. Finally, the distinction between "normative Islam" and "lived Islam" does not help us in understanding either normative discourses in Islam or Islam as a lived tradition. This distinction still assumes a certain hierarchization between what Islam actually says Muslims should believe and do and what Muslims actually believe and do. In reality, we encounter a plethora of normativities throughout Islamic history, at odds or at ease with one another, and a diversity of lived experiences among Muslims who do not necessarily position themselves against these

normativities but renegotiate them when it comes to defining what it means to be Islamic. ▲

SUMMARY

What does it mean to do Islamic Studies within Religious Studies? Taking the cue from Thomas A. Tweed's intervention, this article discusses new theoretical and methodological approaches in Religious Studies and their relevance to researching Islam. Such approaches cross geographical, disciplinary, and intellectual boundaries while equally being emplaced in particular socio-cultural contexts that inform their perspectives. In order to overcome statist, normative, and essentialist understandings of Islam, the article explores three key themes: ambiguity, multi-locality, and aesthetics. When we approach the intellectual history of Islam, not only its diversity and plurality become obvious but also its culture of ambiguity, which is at ease with contradictions and inconsistencies. Recent reflections on diaspora religions decentre Islamic Studies from the Middle East and allow for exploring the multiple transnational connections between Muslim minority and majority contexts. Such approaches illustrate the multi-locality of Islam. Finally, the article explores what it means to approach Islam as an aesthetic formation in which rituals as embodied experiences and material sensory culture are central in forging and articulating Muslim individual and collective identities.