



ISLAM WITHOUT ISLAM

By Sead Zimeri

'If Islam means submitting to God, we all live and die in Islam' – Goethe¹

'Therein resides the 'existential' kernel of the Hegelian 'negation of negation': the subject has to experience how the negation (sacrifice) of a particular content on behalf of the Thing is already the negation-sacrifice of the Thing, of that on behalf of which we sacrifice the particular content'.²

The Muslim encounter with European modernity has had all the symptoms of a difficult affair. It has been a nuisance, at times impossible to sustain, a conflict-ridden relationship bordering on obfuscating edges and an obtuse mutual understanding, more violent and exclusive than peaceful and inclusive. This encounter has often been described as a 'shock'³, a trauma inflicting an 'anthropological wound'⁴ on the Muslim part which has since proved resistant to healing.

Although traumatic, however, the encounter has not been wholly negative. After being awoken from dogmatic slumber Muslims sought to remedy the situation by seeking the reasons and causes which had led them to this long torpor. The orientalist discourse of the 19th century reasoned that the culprit for the lethargic state of Muslim people was none other than Islam itself. Islam was portrayed as being static, monolithic and irrational; an order standing outside and beyond human history, a self-contained whole, an obstacle to the development and progress of Muslim people. Muslims were enchanted with modernity and soon internalized the orientalist discourse and the negative value judgments on their culture. They accepted the

basic premise of the orientalist discourse, that of lagging behind the European nations, although this was to be explained not by referring to Islam, an eternally young religion, but to the fact that Muslims had failed to apply Islam by engaging it critically. 'The door of *ijtihad*' (critical, independent thinking) as it has been called, had been closed for many centuries, and, as Muslims were led to expect, by returning to Islam and engaging this noble principle they would be able to catch up with their Western fellows.

Despite modernity's apparent scientific and technological superiority, the deadlock of the reluctant and protracted adaptation to modernity has not been satisfactorily resolved. Islam has proved to be more recalcitrant than enchanting, however selective and apologetic it may appear with modernity. First, it proved harder than imagined for Islam to tear itself away (and therefore rejuvenate itself) from the immense traditional scholarship, the habitualized modes of existence and the intuitive understandings of Islam. Second, the Koran itself presented Muslims with a universal deadlock in need of an immediate 'rational' solution. How was one to reconcile these two distinct world-views without compromising their claims to the universality they propounded?⁵ The problem seemed to require a hermeneutic solution, – one of the fusion of these distinct horizons each with its own mode of being and general ethical guidelines. The ensuing debates and discourses have largely dealt with issues related to these two axes.

There have been a number of proposals of how to best achieve a workable or pragmatic synthesis. Nevertheless, contrary to all expectations, a satisfactory resolution or fusion has yet to be achieved. Muslims appear to be wand-

ring in a long and dark tunnel with no rays of light seen on the horizon. As Al-Azm, for whom the strategy of hermeneutic reconciliation clearly comes out as misguided, explains, 'like the endlessly celebrated prince, they seem able continually to join the underlying passion of the elemental to the brooding intellectuality of the cerebral to the lyrical sensitivity of the poetic but only to end up in unrelieved tragedy. The tragedy consists of unending hesitations, oscillations and waverings between the old and the new, between *asala* and *muc̣sara* (authenticity and contemporaneity), between *turath* and *tajdid* (heritage and renewal), between *huwiyya* and *hadatha* (identity and modernity), between religion and secularity'.⁶

This article cannot offer a comprehensive survey of the modern scholarship on Islam and its concomitant problematization and deconstruction. Rather, it offers a diffused critical inquiry into and draws certain consequences that seem to follow directly from these unending debates pro or against Islam and which the author of these lines has tried to follow for a number of years.⁷ I draw two main conclusions. First, that Islam is rarely if ever spoken in terms of truth. Most speak in terms of their own subjective 'best meaning' or most 'plausible' or 'sensible' conceptualization of what Islam is or 'should be'. Second, is a conclusion which cannot be dissociated from the first. Islam exists in a state of 'Islam without Islam' - a spectral Islam. This text shall be concerned mostly with the second thesis.

'Islam without Islam' stands for an Islam without substantial truth, that is, without a worldview that legitimizes its autonomous existence as a religious system. This may seem a rather bold claim. A claim that may not only discredit itself but also flatly contradicts both our knowledge and experience of Islam and Muslims. 'Islam' is full of substance, capable of moving and mobilizing millions of its faithful adherents even for such trivial issues as the Muhammad caricatures published in a small circulation Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*. However, the thesis that modern Islam stands for some substantial coherent vision is a pure deceptive lure designed by its architects to hide the truly difficult problem of the relations of Muslims to Islam and the insurmountable gaps and conflicts of posture between Islam as a body of doctrines and Muslims as peoples living under the hegemonic regime of modernity.

Principally, the revisionist and modernist thesis of the return to Islam stands for precisely its opposite. Indeed,

it may be argued that the very return to Islam is not to redeem some truth or particular way of life. Modernity and the principle of historicity of Islam's first expression have made all such claims redundant. Rather, it is predicated upon justifying on some traditionally accepted basis the wholehearted acceptance of and capitulation to the modern philosophy of life. Since the return to tradition pure and simple is impossible (the institutional conditions that made the existence of tradition as a totality have all disappeared), the only justification for such a return is 'to serve as a shock-absorber for the process of modernization'.⁸ The very return to Islam stands as a screen to hide the reality of its absence, the fact that Islam - whatever that means - does not provide its followers with any kind of cognitive mapping which would ensure their smooth navigation in the oceans of a globalizing modern world.

'Grasping clouds of error instead of the heaven of truth': What is (not) Islam?

The status and the definition of (modern) Islam is a strongly contested issue embroiled in unceasingly tedious arguments and idle polemics of whether there is one or many Islams, and how to endorse, reconcile or simply dismiss one of the constituents of the divide between tradition and modernity. Islam has become a contentious, notoriously difficult to define concept, somewhat of an embarrassment to the scholars engaged in varying degrees for its elucidation as evinced in the avoidance of being caught in the race trap of definitions altogether.⁹ Reacting to the fetishizing and reifying trends of the concept Islam, Omid Safi, in a condescending style reminiscent of unmistakable machismo, blatantly stated that "Islam' as such teaches us nothing".¹⁰ No one has ever observed, seen, smelled or touched Islam as a metaphysical postulate. After Edward Said's outstanding display, in his *Orientalism*, of the intellectual shortcomings and political underpinnings of viewing Islam as monolithic, the essential thrust of Muslims scholars' endeavours has been an attempt at exorcism. There are as many Islams as there are Muslims.¹¹ Indeed, some have simply equated Islam and Muslims thereby denying the ontological priority of Islam over Muslims and restricting Islam to a mirroring relationship with what Muslims do.¹² The Algerian-French historian of Islam, Muhammad Arkoun, in agreement with a host of other writers and notwithstanding his own definitions, has no qualms about and dismisses any attempt to of

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providing monolithic definition of Islam as a case of pure delusion. Islam, like any other social movement is plural and changing. It 'is the result of continuous historical and social construction of human actors; it is a series of political, intellectual cultural, economic and juridical faits accomplis given to be perceived, interpreted, lived...'.¹³ Put differently, Islam is the immanent, evolving mode of a contingent being, unfolding in a number of possible actualizations, discursively manufactured in 'the act of obedience to a socio-political and religious body in the process of institutionalization'.¹⁴

Considering the steady proliferation of conflicting discourses and indeterminacy of the various definitions of Islam, I will opt for a hermeneutic approach to Islam, used all too loosely here, as the ontological horizon or frame of reasoning and its (however unstable) epistemological limits initiated and founded by the prophet Muhammad in Mecca and recorded after his death in a book named the Koran as well as an ethical mode of conduct. What exactly this ethical mode of conduct or moral order and the status of its interpellated subjects was is difficult to ascertain considering the role of the human mind in dialectically sublating norms to its needs. Islam is the name for the horizon opened up by the prophetic parallax event which strove to refashion human beings in the image of the newly acquired perspective, unthinkable prior to the time of the prophet. The intellegibility of the ensuing commands, reprimands, prohibitions, exhortations, etc, was ensured by reference to the newly opened prophetic horizon and the subversive and daring ethics of resistance which the prophet championed. As a result of this prophetic event, people were transformed and in the face of the new horizon, the old polytheistic horizon appeared as if it was always wrong.

In the first years of Islam, nothing really changed in the objective socio-economic relations. It was a case of pure parallax, yet, on the subjective level, the subjective position, everything changed. It is only fair to credit Muhammad with changing the world of heathen Arabs by directly disturbing the subjective libidinal economy and the politics of enjoyment of its new followers. As if all of a sudden what had seemed indisputable and sacred to the prophet's companion, after their contact with, and openness to Islam, was no longer so. Islam is therefore conceived here not as a system of rules but as a paradigm which defines as well as constitutes, circularly of course, the intellegibility of the horizon; the horizon that 'determines the questions that can be asked and those that are excluded, the thinka-

ble and the unthinkable'.¹⁵ This horizon/frame of Islam however is partly framed by its content. 'The aim of the hermeneutical endeavour' then comes 'to render visible the contours of a "frame", a "horizon" that, precisely by staying invisible, by eluding the subject's grasp, in advance determines its field of vision'.¹⁶

We can also approach, following Arkoun, both the Koran as an 'epic narrative' and Islam as events and happenings. This would allow us to differentiate between the Koran and Islam as two different manifestations, two sides of the same coin. They are different in the sense that they are englobed within a hermeneutic horizon which keeps them separate with distinct identities but within an ontological horizon of interrelatedness that confines them to a common point of reference. Within the space opened by the Koranic event, the Islamic event moves and orients itself in the sense of understandings and interpretations of the Koranic event.¹⁷ Therefore, it is not that important that Muslims, or non-Muslims for that matter, offer contradictory interpretations of the same event as long as they remain within the same horizon. It would not have been an event if it were not open to more than one understanding, i.e. subjective appropriation of the revelation expressed in terms of fidelity or infidelity (as the case may be) to the event. And yet, it cannot be an event, which by definition restructures the very coordinates of thinking and reasoning if it cannot provide a new horizon and structure of meaning, to start, as it is, from anew; to constitute its own cognitive limits of what is possible and impossible to think within its own coordinates of reasoning. Islam in this sense is the space opened and simultaneously contained by the Koran. However, the way to approach it passes through the specific instances of interpretations that function as the mediation point between the horizon of the Koranic event and the changing socio-economic conditions of times. Interpretations are the bridge that relate and negotiate two or more different horizons of being. Interpretations thus conceived are an instrument not only of controlling and limiting the possibility of change which may cause the decline, suspension, and replacement of the Koranic horizon, but also of justifying the desirable changes.

Viewed from this perspective, Islam as an instance of double movement of interpretation is a historically dynamic category. The process of transforming the individual or the society is subject to the same transformation as an expression of the demands of both history and religion. In this sense, one can hardly speak of misinterpretations even though there are plenty instances of mistaken under-

standings of some of its specific applications, but only of adaptations and maladaptations. Many great intellectual efforts were invested to invent a hermeneutics which provided the means necessary for the successful adaptation or integration of Islam in the wheels of history. Al Shafici's (d. 821) hermeneutics is a supreme example of such an effort. However, it has exhausted itself and is unable to accommodate Islam in the modern world. Modernity with its disenchanting philosophy seems to have made superfluous not certain religious practices per se but the religious horizon itself. The clash is not between certain practices and rituals but more fundamentally, between the horizons which are

unable to relate to and understand each other's perspectives and positions of enunciations. What is needed then is a hermeneutics which can bridge these horizons and make them meaningful to each other.

Be that as it may, considering the lack of a viable hermeneutics that can bridge the distance of these multiple horizons, one can hardly define Islam holistically. The preservation of Islam may in fact require that it be approached fragmentarily by developing a certain kind of piecemeal methodology. One can ask how Islam relates to this or that contemporary issue or article of faith. One can position oneself in the space opened up by the Koranic event and view the world through the categories of perception provided by the horizon itself, but one cannot answer the question of what Islam really and objectively is. This question is better left unanswered, not so much because it cannot be answered but because the answers are always biased and therefore not always illuminating. Viewed from this angle, indeed, Muslims least of all can define Islam, although they can meaningfully speak of their experiences of the divine. Islam is what Muslims are, what it cannot be otherwise and what resists being different than what it is. Islam has opened a horizon which sheds light upon the world when viewed from its subjective positions of enunciations. However, one would greatly err were one to mistake this horizon as homogenous, coinciding with itself in symmetrical or a self-enclosed whole. This horizon is hermeneutically open and contains many points of departure from where one can define oneself in relation to the embracing horizon which supplies the categories of vision and division. One must take a critical distance from Islam to be able to define it. Nevertheless, such a critical distance is possible only from another horizon, a perspective that comes from outside the horizon in question. In absence of another horizon, critical distance cannot even be thought possible.

One cannot define Islam by referring to the Koran, the prophetic tradition, or the history of Islam, as necessary as they are. One cannot define Islam either by abstracting an ensemble of arbitrarily juxtaposed formulas or rituals that Muslims

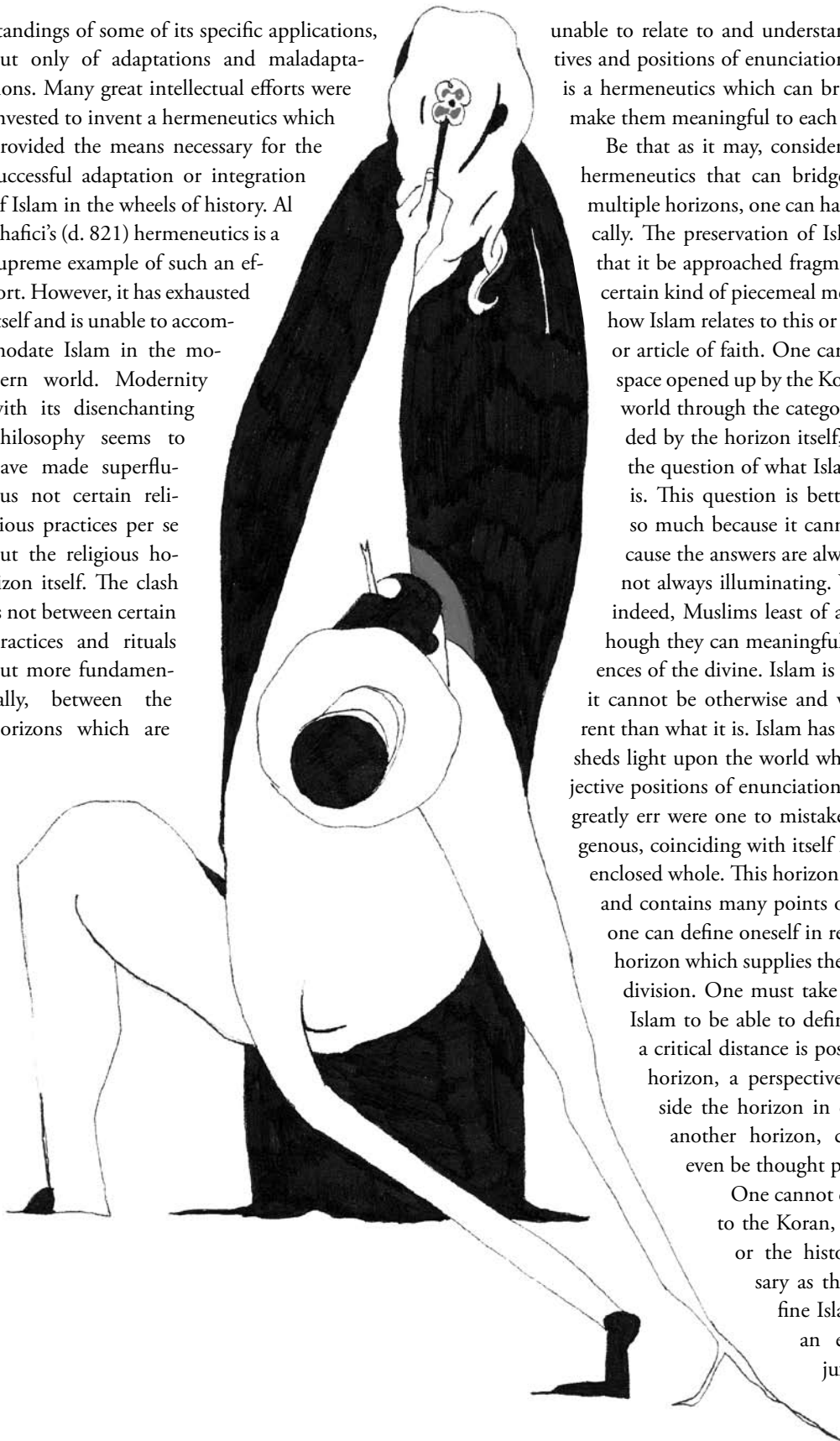


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enact in their lives. Islam is always more and less than all these. It is more because Islam is not reducible to some, no matter how relevant, semiotic or somatic rituals. And it is less than what the over-zealous believers imagine it to be, invoking and projecting notions that surpass even their capacities of imagination. Probably, as an expression of despair, the best way to speak of Islam is to remain silent about it. It is what each Muslim says it is, how they see it unfolding in their lives and what gives meaning and orientation to those who are and however they are committed to its worldview. Islam by definition surpasses the Koranic event since Muslims are not bound causally by its norms but constantly renegotiate them as the politics of time necessitate.

In a sense, only those who are marked by Islam, who are assimilated and consumed by its fire, who are significantly transformed by its force, whose effects they live, feel and translate in their lives can speak meaningfully of Islam. Those from outside (nominal Muslims included) can describe it, categorize it in neat intellectual categories but probably never understand the 'subjective' meanings and investments that can only be experienced but not narrated. Islam in this sense is neither a system of Sharica (the holy Law) nor of politics. As a Sharica system Islam is all too human. As a political system, Islam is a secular scandal masquerading as divine.

In the absence of a feasible Koranic hermeneutics that should have provided an opportunity for the problematization and consequently the fusion of tradition and modernity without wreaking emotional havoc, Islam's openness to historical contingencies has meant only one thing: moving away from the horizon of the Koranic event whilst paying lip service to some ritualistic practices devoid of any proper meaningful content. In this process only the name of Islam has remained unchanged, or to be more precise, Islam has been reduced to some meaningless practices to be used from time to time to serve certain ideological and mostly retrograde and backwards programmes. Earlier attempts from the days of colonization have all failed as genuine programmatic solutions in integrating the scientific (or others related to the advent of modernity) propositions into the horizon of Islamic meaning and ended up in one form or another of eclectic reconciliation.¹⁸ The discontent with and the failure of the direct return to the mythical

horizon of the Koranic event is evident: modern Muslims are not satisfied with the Koranic expression of Islam.¹⁹ Many are unable and unwilling to succumb to those sorts of temptations. Islamic feminism, as the newest version of the principled discursive engagement with the scripture, has demonstrated that such unmediated and naïve returns to the founding act are impracticable and counter-productive. The truth of Islam or the form of the Koranic event, which was rendered into the Koranic idiom, is unbearable; staged in the position of the alien or an unwanted guest, if not directly suffocating for the contemporary conditions under which Muslims live.

What contemporary Muslims are missing, therefore, is the ability to, not objectively but, subjectively make the Koranic message their own. Objectively of course Muslims are speaking of a return to Islam, to an Islam appropriated only from an interpassive position. What is Islam returned, intruded into the modern space if not a big ideological machine or ritual where Muslims can lose themselves by hiding behind its objective and normative rituals! By freeing themselves from the sense of responsibility of subjective appropriation, it is Islam as a big ideological machine which believes for all of them. Beliefs are delegated to Islam in an interpassive way – believing through the other, the medium which figuratively performs and takes over our beliefs for, 'we do not have to believe for others to have the illusion that we believe' as the Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller reminds us. The returned

Islam, whether in the form of an Islamic state or Islamic modernity or even Islamic terrorism serves as an 'anonymous illusion.' An illusion that takes place in the medium of the 'other's' ideology. An illusion without a subject for, 'when the objective belief is there, the religious subject can go away'.²⁰ Consequently this therefore necessitates the following result: the more anachronistic such a return to the founding act is, the more appealing and acceptable it becomes. There is an asymmetrical and disproportional configuration between the simple and the anachronistic return to the founding act. It increases to the extent that Islam becomes an 'Islam without Islam,' and it decreases to the extent that Islam becomes more Islamic, or comes closer and more faithful to the degree this is possible to the Koranic event as it is rendered in the Koran itself.

The closer Islam comes to its 'pristine' form, the grea-

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ter the risk for an outright rejection of it. Furthermore, those who espouse unmediated versions risk being accused of misunderstanding, naïveté or fundamentalism. Islam is acceptable to the modern Muslim intellectuals and masses only to the extent its truth is masked, hidden under the various intellectualist discourses by constantly inventing new versions of the founding act. The case argues itself. Muslims are interested in not knowing the radical otherness of Islam's founding act or the prophet's version and understanding of Islam or Islam as recorded and collected in the Koran. (Why otherwise would Muslims still refuse to apply critical historical tools of analysis to the Koran?) What matters is modern symbolizations of that founding act. To be more precise, what matters is a projection of modern myths onto the founding primordial myth designed (most often unconsciously) to hide another primordial truth, that of Islam's absence. For Islamic feminism, which has conjured up and projected another myth on the founding act, i.e. the egalitarian Islam, Muslims never really were Muslims but they lived an illusion of Islam; an Islam turned upside down, subverted as it is, from within. Earlier Muslims either misunderstood the Koran or willfully manipulated it, the patriarchal systems, that 'monumental deception' being a constant reminder that Islam was an illusion of Islam. Islam and patriarchy (God's rule vis-à-vis man's rule) for Islamic feminism do not coincide. They cannot inhabit the same space without negating each other.²¹

An analysis of books written by conservative, fundamentalist or modernist liberal authors demonstrates that despite, at times, their fundamentally different approaches to Islam, there is evident consistency on one thing: that Islam is continually misunderstood. Each accuses her/his adversary for distorting the noble truth of Islam, a truth that is always left vague to the point of being inarticulate. Their writings on Islam foreground a decisive conclusion: if Islam was so misunderstood and misapplied then Muslims were never really Muslims. They lived an illusion of Islam; an Islam that despite the strong conviction of its followers in mastering its truth, was neither known nor followed by anyone. Islam was in one valley and Muslims in another. The distance between them was insurmountable. They were not ruled, as they innocently believed, by the divine Sharica derived from the Koran, but from a Sharica 'guilty of Satanic logic'.²² God was displaced from his throne soon after the prophet's death only to be replaced by other little gods.²³

The lesson to be taken from these modern discussions

of Islam is that Muslims are left with an Islam that resembles everything else except Islam, whatever that means for the writers concerned. The radical conclusion, however, is that Islam, as a unified body of doctrines, dogmas, postulates and rules, sustained by its own vision of the world has ceased to exist. Not the horizon of meaning that it is supposed to be, it only manages to create confusion.²⁴ Even the last vestiges of 'Islamic law' concerning women which Muslim states still apply, the Personal Status laws, are by and large considered discriminatory and in need of radical revision. The historical Islam in other words is no longer a viable option that could threaten to take over the burning issues in Muslim societies, as the example of Iran seems to demonstrate: the birthplace of Islamic feminism. Naturally, Muslims of all stripes and trends of thought will employ Islam as a symbolic capital for furthering their agendas but in a vital sense, the Islamic horizon is a thing of the past.

The Truth of Islam, no thanks!

So what does then the thesis of 'Islam without Islam' mean? For reason of space I shall quote a passage by Arkoun as a representative of the 'Islam without Islam' trend. Arkoun relies heavily on the anthropological concept of social and religious imaginaire²⁵ to explain why Islam is not essentially that different from the two other religions of the Book. He maintains that various interpretations of a religion, especially those that succeed in creating an orthodoxy through an arbitrary dissemination of selected meanings and by excluding other interpretations as deviant, have a propensity to equate their versions with the open symbolic religious core common to all religions imageries. Thus, if Islam stands for 'a special case,' then that is not the result of any inherent specificity of Islam as a religion because all the monotheistic religions are concerned with the sublime Word of God. Arkoun goes on to argue that the special case of Islam may be ascribed to 'sociological, cultural and economic facts.' He continues,

We know, however, that these givens are circumstantial and impermanent; consequently they do not allow us to speak of a specific characteristic of Islam that distinguishes Islam from others. [Emphasis added]. Our position is the reverse of those theological teachings which emerged later by virtue of the interpretation of the following verse "The religion of God is Islam" [19:3]. Our response to that is that the word Islam in the Koran does not have the dogmatic, theological and cultural meaning which was imposed upon it throughout the history of

the Umayyad and Abbasid Empires. The word Islam in the Koran means the primordial religion, the pure ritual, and the complete, loving submission to Allah; this submission was symbolized by the mythical personality of Abraham in the Koran. The Koran says, "Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian, but he was true in faith, and [Muslim] bowed his will to God's, which is Islam" (19:67). The context of the word in the Koran leaves no space for doubting the primordial and original meaning of the word Muslim. But the jurists and the theologians forgot this primordial meaning in the crowd of the polemical disputes for the sake of hegemony under the wing of the empire (this is the special context of imperial Islam). Only historians, and to some extent the Sufis, attend to the study of the Koranic meaning of Islam, that is, as a primordial or original religion, as a primordial and foundational experience of what is divine. This is the difference between it [the Koranic Islam] and the later Islam, that is, the ritual and liturgical Islam.²⁶

The gist of Arkoun's historical analysis is not difficult to detect. It is that in the final instance, Islam is another name\ label for the other two religions of the Book and vice versa. The primordial meaning of Islam is submission and whether Muslims, or non-Muslim for that matter, like it or not, all revealed religions rely on and bear this primordial meaning. All religions are instances and expressions of the same religious fact or phenomenon. Reflecting over this analysis it seems rather improbable for it to be true or indeed plausible. Notwithstanding Arkoun's excellent historical analysis and deconstruction of Islamic reason, his vast arsenal of resources, and his rather tenuous distinction between religion as an anthropological phenomenon pointing in the dimension of the beyond evoked by the rich symbolism as to substance and religion as an interpretation conditioned by the cultural contexts of its actants as to form, his conclusions nonetheless are premature. It seems to allow for one or both of the two impossibilities: i) a rather impossible and even bizarre religious creature, one that can be religious in general, a sort of free-floating believer, and/or ii) a space for not only irreconcilable beliefs but also for apparent contradictions. Not the enclosure of a multitude of reconcilable contradictions within the totality of a belief system, but beliefs which the belief system as such excludes. Paradoxically, Arkoun provides his adversaries, i.e. religious ideologists and fundamentalists with a blank cheque and an implicit apology for filling up this empty universal with their narrow political visions.

Clearly then, Islam and the other religions of the Book are not only loving and complete submission to God in ab-

stract. In that sense, indeed, we are all Muslims, as Goethe knew very well. Islam as a set of not Sharica doctrines as developed later, but Koranic doctrines as developed in the historical span of revelation, is clearly discernible and different from the other two religions of the Book. Fundamentally, this is what is or was important to Muslims and not the fact that Islam means total submission to God. It is this phenomenological and historical aspect of Islam which gives Islam its historical identity, authenticity and definition, as well as Muslims their headaches: Islam as a concrete historical manifestation of the divine will. Once the particular instance of religion is renounced in favour of some common imaginary representation or universal religious Law, the way is fully open to suspend Religion itself. Religion 'disappeared' in modernity when it was rendered abstract, equated with an empty universal Law without doctrinal support.²⁷

In the above quoted passage, Arkoun has given the clearest definition of what an 'Islam without Islam' means. That is, Islam as submission to God in abstract versus Islam as submission to God by way of submitting to the historical expression of divine will. 'Islam without Islam' means surrendering oneself to and entering a free covenant with God as Muslims find it proper to confer a meaning on their lives without necessarily assuming Islam's historical expression subjectively. Arkoun's project of retrieving the original meaning of Islam is thus not entirely or ideologically innocent. The particularities of Islam can be exhibited in museums and historical documents. Islam, 'yes, but not quite; let us keep our finger crossed and maintain an inner distance; better a finger crossed than a finger burned,' as Zizek beautifully declares.²⁸ Arkoun thus subsumes all particular instances of religion under a universal and primordial meaning of religion, thereby denying the possibility of each religion's 'own mode of universality'. He falls under the illusion, peculiar of modernity according to Zizek²⁹ that Islam can exist outside the network of its 'inessential', 'irrelevant' but specific characteristics of Koranic Islam and its conditions of existence; that by distinguishing the unessential from the essential and accordingly disregard the necessary link between the two, viz. that renunciation of the particular content and specificity will not affect or amount to the renunciation of Islam itself.

Zizek referred to the same problem in one of his writings when explaining the Hegelian concept of 'concrete universality'. As an instance of the 'concrete universality,' Zizek argues that with religion, 'it is not enough to say that the genus Religion is divided into a multitude of species ('primitive' animism, pagan polytheism, monotheism,

which is then further divided into Judaism, Christianity, Islam...); the point, rather, is that *each of these particular species involves its own universal notion of what religion is 'as such', as well as its own view on (how it differs from) other religions*. Christianity is not simply different from Judaism and Islam; within its horizon, the very difference that separates it from the other two 'religions of the Book' appears in a way which is unacceptable for the other two. In other words, when a Christian debates with a Muslim, they do not simply disagree – they disagree about their very disagreement: about what makes the difference between their religions'.³⁰

If Žižek makes a correct observation or deduction then it follows that one cannot maintain that because Islam is an instance of religion then all religions in essence are the same or have the same inbuilt specific features and characteristics that make them a religion in the first place. True, one would not make much sense of Islam in the absence of a comparative study of the universal religious reason. Yet, Islam as a particular instance of religion in general is not only a confirmation of the universal category of religious genus, but also a challenge, negation and transformation of the same reason. As all other religious manifestations, it has its specific particularities as expressions not only of the religious reason in general but of its own queries. Islam in a crucial sense, has not only filled in the empty universal, but has redefined the very contours of what counts as a (universal) religion. It is not only subsumed under the law, more precisely, in the process of subsumption the universal law comes to be seen as an instance of this particular.

Whither Islam?

Islam's impossible-to-avoid otherness makes it almost unintelligible to speak in terms of the subsumable truth of Islam or even of some kind of a Hegelian dialectical sublation. Perhaps this partly explains why modern Muslims rarely speak of Islam's truth. They are forever on the threshold of transcending it, more preoccupied with what Muslims want Islam to mean than with Islam itself. They constantly write of Islam's compatibility with this or that system but avoid completely subjecting Islam to any critical enterprise that would realistically show to Muslims its potential for guiding the complex relations of Muslim nations. Possibly also, the Syrian philosopher Sadik al-Azm is fundamentally right when asserting that Islam as an eternal philosophy of life is compatible only with itself.³¹ Islam

of course can function, as it is functioning today, as an empty signifier, a horizon stripped of any vision of its own, a medium functioning as a nodal point for the articulation of new values in different settings that takes its meaning from the ideological social struggles for power. Islam being empty can then be defined 'in relation to a matrix of historically possible signifieds. The signifier becomes temporarily connected to a specific signified – that is, it attains its "meaning" – through social struggle in which the prevailing ideology and social contradictions insist on a particular signified. Such a relation is insecure, continually contested and changeable. Signifieds are challenged, struggled over, and displaced by opposing ideologies asserting other signified in relation to a particular signifier in order to support their own meanings and practices and to propose their own "reality". The signified which gets picked up and inscribed in the relation of the signification is the one that contributes to the legitimation of the prevailing ideology (the prevailing ideology is not always the dominant one...).' ³²

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One can hardly add anything more to this concise description of the struggle over the sign and the relation of signifier to 'signifieds'. In absence of any 'transcendental signified' modern 'Islams' follow, more or less, the same trajectory. Depending on the spectrum of the ideological forces, Islam gets its meaning or, rather, loses its meaning only to take on the meanings conferred upon it irrespective of its epistemologically and ontologically distinct worldview. As a result of these interpretive confusions Islam sometimes appears with an ahistorical identity and at other times without any recognizable identity. An ahistorical Islam unbeknownst to and torn, as it is, from its own historically inaugurated traditions has little to offer Muslims save some vague ethical maxims in the form of parables. Islam separated from its inaugurated traditions is unintelligible at best, irrelevant at worst.

After this short detour one can perhaps abruptly conclude, as all conclusions in a sense must be, that from the modern discussions of Islam one could infer that the story of Islam is a story of its deviations. A story of heresies and conflicting interpretations; of a lack of any social determination, of dogmatic closures, of the suspension and the bracketing of each others readings and of unscrupulous power and ideological manipulations of the Islamic scripture. Islam as 'Islam' (in the sense of un-schematized Islam) was shown to

be a pure fantasy. For the concept of a true and universal Islam invites us, so the story goes, to ask what the true representation of Islam is and who acts as the representative of this Islam. Questions that are apparently made impossible to answer by the fact that each Muslim community upholds its version of Islam to be true and absolute, perhaps even disregarding others as tout court deviations. Thus, contrary to the appearance

that Islam has fully immersed in the world, subsisting there despite the vicissitudes of subjective uncertainties of its followers and monitors all Muslims actions, modern discussions of Islam point in a different direction. 'Islam' has completely surrendered and capitulated to the secular modern ideologies prior to even being offered an in-depth intellectual apology. Indeed, what is left of Islam except its name?

NOTES

- 1 Quoted in: Piscatori, 1986, p. 14.
- 2 Zizek, 1996, pp. 121-122.
- 3 Tarabichi, 2005, pp. 15-35.
- 4 Tarabichi, 2005a, pp. 137-152.
- 5 John Cooper, Ronald Nettle and Mohamed Mahmood (eds). 2000.
- 6 Al-Azm, *Islam, Terrorism and the West Today* Unpublished paper, personal handout.
- 7 I have developed more elaborately the consequences of these debates in my book which is about to be completed: *In Search of Islamic Equality: The Jargon of In-authenticity*.
- 8 Zizek, 1993, p. 225.
- 9 Karamustafa, 2003, pp. 98-110.
- 10 Safi, 2003, p. 21.
- 11 Piscatori, 1986, pp. 9-14.
- 12 Abu Zayd, 2002.
- 13 Arkoun, 2006, p. 224.
- 14 Arkoun, 2002, p. 152.
- 15 Bourdieu, 2004, p. 15.
- 16 Zizek, 2001, p. 14.
- 17 Arkoun, 2002, pp. 256-264.
- 18 Abu Zayd, 2006.
- 19 One only needs to read the books of Muslim intellectuals, such as Muhammad Arkoun, Fazlur Rahman, Hasan Hanafi, Nasr Abu Zayd, Abdulkarim Soroush, Halis Albayrak, etc, to see the full impact of the discontent with and unwanted status of Koranic Islam, even when they pay lip service to their very endeavours of such a return with names of 'Koranic Islam'. These scholars move in the direction of not the universality of Koranic teachings but rather, its historically contextualized nature. For the Turkish intellectual debate of the historical status of the Koran, see: Albayrak, July 2006, p. 457-469. See also: Taji-Farouki, (ed). 2004.
- 20 Pfaller, 2003.
- 21 Barlas, 2002, p. 119.
- 22 Al-Hibri, 2003, pp. 204-205.
- 23 Muhammad Arkoun for example, writes 'The basic difference between the Quran [sic] and the Sharica is that the first makes use of contingent data in order to emphasize the relationship between God and man and to fill men's minds with a consciousness that there is a world beyond this world of events, values, norms and possessions. All this is clothed in mythical language and structure which opens the way to problems rather than excluding them. The second, on the other hand, systematizes, within the framework of a code of law, the pragmatic solutions that were adopted at an early period. It is understandable, then, why it is wrong to call norms that have been included in this code by an inflexible teaching Islamic'. [Emphasis added]. Quoted in: Rippin, 2005, p. 255 Arkoun, 1998, p. 296-300 See also, Majid, Winter 1998, pp. 351-353.
- 24 Possibly this warrants the transposition of these confusions into Islam as such.
- 25 Arkoun, 1994, p. 6.
- 26 Arkoun, 1995, pp. 132-133. Emphasis in original.
- 27 Speaking on the modern subject, Zizek asserts that 'the modern subject is strictly correlative with the dimension 'beyond the second death': the first death is the sacrifice of our particular, 'pathological' substance for the universal Cause; the second death is the sacrifice, the 'betrayal', of this Cause itself, so that all that remains is the void which is the 'barred' subject—the subject emerges only via this double, self-relating sacrifice of the very Cause for which ha was ready to sacrifice everything. Perhaps the fundamental fantasy of Modernity concerns the possibility of a 'synthesis' of the Particular and the Universal.' Zizek, 1996, pp. 121.
- 28 Zizek, 1996, pp. 120-121.
- 29 Zizek, 1999, p. 370.
- 30 Zizek, 2000, p. 315. Emphasis in original.
- 31 Al Azm, 2007, pp. 283-295.
- 32 Ebert, 1991, p. 897.

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