

Another Introduction to Islam: The Myth of the Value-Free Study of Religion

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“ . . . a form of secular intellectual arrogance which, even while it cannot claim absolute certainty for a particular hypothesis, deems its findings superior to the content of religious truth.” (p. 267)

David Wainey, *Introduction to Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), x + 332 pp. (hardback).

Following the recent events in the Muslim world, bookshops have been flooded by works on the subject of Islam. On examination, it becomes clear that very few authors are willing, or indeed able, to write about the cultural phenomenon of the Islamic religion. Wainey shows with his *Introduction to Islam* that he is one of those few. The approach taken in the book raises important methodological issues for the study of Islam and religion in general. Wainey's phenomenological approach raises doubt about the validity of a purely secular account of Islam which attempts to be “value-free.” The author is on the right track in terms of a social anthropological perspective in saying, “Religion is not a thing, but a happening, and it is people who make things happen.” This reminds the reader that Islam too has to be understood within its social and historical manifestations.

In general, Wainey portrays Islam in accordance with the phenomenological approach, from the traditional Muslim standpoint, and leaves the readers to judge Islam for themselves. In the introduction he states “It seemed more appropriate to present the Qur'an and the Prophet Mohammed as Muslims might recognize them, rather than as others have described them.” It is in this approach that he generally breaks with

the Orientalist tradition of Western scholarship on Islam¹ who have paid little or no attention to the viewpoint of the Muslim scholars and Islamic sources and have either rejected the authenticity of the Qur'an and the Hadith, or approached them as sources shaped by the collective memory of later generations of Muslims after the first century of Islam. The aim of this article is to see if the author has kept his "phenomenological" approach throughout the book, in terms of both general conceptual and informative context. To this end, we will also ponder on, within the limits of this article, the question of whether the way a scholar of religion approaches the question of, say, "origins" also has relevance to the question of whether his/her conclusion is "objective" and "value-free." Related to this is the issue of whether methods of interpretation of religion are basically to be "religious" or "secular."

Imagery versus Stereotyping

Let us begin with the imagery represented in the section of photographs of Muslims just after the introduction. Although Waines's selection of photographs partly reflects his approach of "many cultures, one faith," his emphasis on two kinds of images only appears to keep feeding on the typical stereotyping of Muslims in "so-called 'best-sellers' works of 'instant analysis' by self-styled experts" (p. 266), which is an important point and is even criticized by the author himself.

One of these images is "Islam as religion of peasantry"; the other is "Islam as exotic religion of the 'other,'" namely African, Arabic, and Asian. Muslims are of course happy with their being African, Arab, or Asian, but the point here is that Western writers on Islam and Muslims have presented a distorted picture to the Western reader if they ignore or overlook the important fact that Islam is also spreading in the West. Millions of Muslims live in Europe and North America in a modern (not necessarily modernist) urban lifestyle. Hence the occasional photograph of a "white" Muslim living in an urban environment or a Turkish Muslim living in Istanbul is necessary to give a correct and complete visual image.

We no longer live isolated from Asian and African cultures. The marketplace of ideas, values, and faiths is much broader than it used to be. We need to seek a genuine understanding of "others" in the expectation of broadening, deepening, and clarifying our understanding that what is "out there" is not a curiosity from a bygone age, but a subject worthy of study and relevant to our needs. By doing so, we can avoid painting a false picture of a culture and thereby triggering what might be aptly termed "intellectual allergies."

Admirably, Waines cannot be placed in the category of those who only pretend not to follow the "Orientalist line" but who trigger intellectual

allergies. It would be enough just to look at the cover photograph of vol. 2 of *Muslims* by Andrew Rippin² to get a sense of the ongoing stereotyping of Muslims, using eccentric and marginal images (e.g., a woman of Asian origin covered in a black garment from head to foot and with a miserable face, suggesting this as the typical common dress and image of a Muslim woman). Contrary to the Rippin-like presentations, Waines's overall approach reflects an insightful and sensitive analysis of historical and contemporary Islam.

Insights on Islamic Faith, Law, and Spirituality

The author's success in applying the phenomenological approach can be seen on issues and concepts like "*Haneef*" (pp. 13–14), which is one of the crucial concepts in making sense of the Muslim understanding of monotheistic history, the textual character of the Qur'an (p. 23), "The Art of Recitation of the Qur'an," "The Quest for Knowledge," and "Divine Will and the Law," "Hudud."

The chapter "Divine Will and the Law" is an informative and at the same time concise examination of central issues of Islamic law, ranging from methodology (analogy, *ijtihad*, etc.) to basic social relationships (family, inheritance, etc.). This chapter is particularly helpful for non-specialists. Waines proves that he has knowledge of the history of Islamic law and the major contemporary issues facing Muslim scholars on matters of law. The following quotes from this chapter will be sufficient to show that the author is well aware of major issues of methodological discussions in Islamic law:

Recent research suggests that the still widely held view that Islamic law in its postformative period was a stagnant institution divorced from social realities and change must be abandoned, or at least dramatically revised. (p. 84)

In any case, the so-called "closure of the gate of *ijtihad*," discussed by scholars from the thirteenth century, was never accepted by consensus of all the schools. (p. 85)

As for *hudud*, the author indicates that Islamic penal law includes acts that have been explicitly forbidden or sanctioned by punishments (*hudud*) in the Qur'an, and these form only six major offenses mentioned in the Qur'an (murder, theft, illicit sexual relations, alcoholism, highway robbery, slanderous accusation of illicit intercourse as offenses against society within the Islamic understanding of morality). The execution of *hudud* is suspended if there is any doubt established during the proof of crime. This practice is validated by several prophetic injunctions, one of which is: "Leave out the Hudud (punishments) if you find any alterna-

tive way out.”³ Although Waines only cites the act of theft as an example supporting the above Prophetic tradition, the punishments for the other five major offenses can also be restricted by qualifying principles, such as narrow definitions of a crime, difficulty of proof (for example, the minimum number of witnesses required in proving the offense of adultery is four), recommendation of forgiveness, and possibility of repentance. These principles are indicated either in the Qur’an or in the prophetic traditions and therefore greatly limit the number of cases in which the *hudud* has been and can be applied, so that “punishments are enacted under a different aspect of the law which renders the culprit liable to the discretionary punishment of a judge” (p. 81).

Generally, it can be said that matters of punishment in Islamic law (which actually consist of a small—though important—part of the whole Islamic framework) are primarily based on the concept of deterrence and retribution. The debate over the penal code of Islamic law should not be reduced to a question of which method of execution is more humane than the other (e.g., lethal injection and electrocution in the United States⁴ or beheading in Saudi Arabia). This point is crucial in understanding the fact that for the Muslim, faith has a deep spiritual meaning aimed at addressing the totality of life, human relations, and the afterlife and thus reaches far beyond legal and political issues. Most Muslim scholars agree that the philosophy of punishment should be an integral part of the social system which can be applied and understood only if its principles, values, and moral schemes exist and are adhered to by its members, at least to a certain degree. In order to execute a penal code based on Islamic morality, Islamic law requires the existence of a strong Islamic moral and cultural framework, which can be established through education in society. This process also needs to be supported by protecting the rights of law-abiding citizens through the process of punishing law-breakers. It is an issue of just deserts, not human rights, says the Muslim scholar. In this chapter, Waines’s summary of the Islamic framework on social relations is especially worth reading, although some points require more analytical explanation.

Muslim Faith: The author has also shown that he understands Islamic faith/theology. This becomes immediately clear when one notices that chapter 4 on theology begins with what is called the “Gabriel Hadith.” Indeed, this hadith is regarded by Muslims as the very expression of Islamic faith. In the same chapter, Waines gives us a summary of the main issues and schools of *kalam* in Islamic history. But he does not mention an important theological school, namely, the Maturidi school of *‘aqidah*, named after its founder Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 944), which came to be recognized as the second orthodox Sunni *kalam* school besides the Ash’ari. The Sunni tradition of *kalam* has been presented by

al-Ash'ariyyah and al-Maturidiyyah schools since the tenth century. Today nearly 53 percent of Sunni Muslims in the world are Hanafites, and most of them are Maturidites in their theological (*kalami*) understanding.

The Way of the Sufi: Waines pinpoints precisely the Sufi understanding of spirituality by beginning the chapter with the tale of a Muslim "Robinson Crusoe," namely, Hayy b. Yaqzan. This tale makes the chapter even more enjoyable to read. In the same context, he explains that the life of the Muslim, according to the Sufi, is the outcome of the balance between the Shari'ah and the *tariqah*. In this chapter, he also gives us two examples of Sufi orders, Chistiyyah and Shadiliyyah. It is understandable that within the limits of space, the author inevitably has had to take only a few representative *tariqahs*. Nonetheless, one of them should have been the Naqshbandiyyah order because the Naqshbandiyyah is one of the main *tariqahs* emerging from the Central Asian tradition. Two *tariqahs* dominate Central Asian Islam: the Naqshbandiyyah, founded in the fourteenth century in Bukhara and introduced into the North Caucasus in the late eighteenth century; and the Qadiriyyah, a Baghdad order founded in the twelfth century and introduced into the North Caucasus at the end of the nineteenth century. Imam Rabbani (d. 1624), the preeminent Shaykh of the Naqshbandi tradition, is also worth mentioning here, since it was he who broke away from the earlier mystic tradition by rejecting Ibn Arabi's pantheism (*wahdat al-wujud*) and propounded his theory of "unity of the phenomenal world" (*wahdat al-shuhud*). He also raised his voice against the innovations introduced by some of the Sufi groups and struggled hard to bring about a change in the outlook of the ruling classes. Therefore, the Naqshbandiyyah is worthy of mention.

"The Mosque and Its Traditional Place in Islam" is a well-written summary of the place of the mosque in Islamic culture in both artistic and religious terms. But a brief chapter on Islamic art and science in Islamic history would also have been very helpful for a nonspecialist to get an understanding of Islamic history.

Issues in Contemporary Islam: Waines's comments on Palestine, Bosnia, the United Nations, "fundamentalism," and the Rushdie affair are quite analytical and useful in forming a balanced picture of the relations between the West and the Islamic world.

Authentic Tradition (Hadith) and Islamic Origins

According to Waines, what the modern reader has received regarding the Prophet Muhammad's (as well as Moses's and Jesus's) reflections,

intentions, and activities is a rich tapestry of tradition and a product of many generations (p. 10). He takes the Tradition (Hadith) as a vast body of material extant in the form of sayings and anecdotes which comprise "the later community's collective memory of" (p. 11) the Prophet and his Companions. This expression appears to be a polite way of rejecting the authenticity of Hadith and the existence of early recordings from as early as the first century of Islam. It also seems to follow the Orientalist assumption of Hadith that there was no written hadith record left from the time of the Prophet and his Companions. If this is Waines's stance, in terms of his own phenomenological approach to present "Islam as Muslims might understand," how will he then explain the Muslim scholars' standpoint that most of the *hadiths* of the Prophet, if not all, came to be written during the life of the Companions? This argument has been successfully presented by at least three contemporary Muslim scholars, namely Fuad Sezgin,⁵ Muhammad Hamidullah,⁶ and M. M. Azami,⁷ whose works are readily available. According to Sezgin, Hamidullah, and particularly Azami, let alone the classical scholars on Hadith criticism (*naqd al-Hadith*) by Muslim scholars in the early centuries, there were quite a number of *saha'if* (scripts) written by some of the Companions at the time of the Prophet Muhammad and after him, including letters sent by the Prophet himself. They were transmitted and absorbed into the work of later authors. In their viewpoint, the phenomena of *isnad*, the number of transmitters belonging to scores of provinces, and the science of *criticism* should also be significant in proving that traditionalists have taken the utmost care to check errors and discrepancies with sincerity in a methodological way.

In particular, Azami's book is an extremely scholarly work in which he successfully establishes that even in the first century of the *hijra*, hundreds of booklets of hadith were in circulation. A. J. Arberry wrote in the foreword of Azami's work, "In this field of Tradition, Dr. Azami has done a pioneer work of the highest value and exact standards of scholarship." This being so, it is quite difficult to understand why Waines does not mention Azami's scholarly work (originally a Cambridge Ph.D. research paper) on early hadith literature (which is available in both English and Arabic), while readily giving a summary of the orientalist J. Schacht's view that rejects the existence of any authentic record of hadiths from the early centuries of Islam. The discussion of the authenticity of hadith and Islamic origins may be more of a topic for a book aimed at the specialist of Islam rather than for an introduction the novice. But since Waines himself refers to this topic in his well-informing "Excursus on Islamic Origins (a summary of discredited Orientalist literature)," the works of the three Muslim scholars mentioned above should have been also brought to the attention of the reader. The fact that he gives the Orientalist views without mentioning the works of Muslim

scholars such as Azami, Hamidullah, and Sezgin is a grave omission; it might mislead the reader into thinking that there are no well-established historical works by Muslim scholars that are worthy of being taken into account at least alongside the Orientalists'. It would have been better for the author to include these works in terms of adhering to his "phenomenological" approach so that he could also present Islamic origins "as Muslims recognize them, rather than as others describe them." That he ignored this makes the reader think that Waines advocates a renovated Orientalism.

All in all, it should be said that, since there is a "degree of certainty" in the light of so much historical material on the authenticity of Hadith, it is again not clear what Waines really means by saying "we shall never know the details of 'what really happened' during the first Islamic century" (p. 34). Is this the author's own "educated value judgment" or an established objective historical fact? The same question can be asked in regard to what Waines means by "authentic" in his own approach in the conclusion to the Qur'an when he writes "I take the [Qur'anic] text as an integral and authentic document of the Prophet's day." Does the term "authentic" here mean that the Qur'an is not a divine revelation, but Muhammad's own composition—a man-made historical source—nevertheless historically authentic? If so, the author here simply takes the same line with the Orientalists whom he calls "skeptics" (pp. 273–278). Despite these criticisms, Waines's "Excursus on Islamic Origins" (pp. 265–279) a useful and brief survey of the relevant Orientalist literature within its own context and history on Islamic origins.

The Myth of a Value-Free Study of Religion

Waines's approach to Islamic "origins" takes us to the question of whether the way a scholar of religion approaches the question of origins is also relevant to the question of whether his/her conclusion is "objective" and "value-free." The question which begs to be answered is, What is an "objective" and "value-free" study of religion? This issue is also important in order to locate the place of the phenomenological approach to the study of religion. Does a scholar's claim of using a phenomenological approach necessarily mean that he/she has an "objective" and "value-free" approach? For example, is the approach that rejects the Qur'an as a revelation necessarily "objective" and "value-free"?

In my view, the idea that the study of religions and human sciences should and could be value-free is a myth and an ideology in itself. We can agree that the study of religion can be objective in methodological and descriptive aspects. But, does the belief in a value-free study of religion mean that, in point of fact, religious studies is a discipline actually

free of values and that it successfully excludes all nonscientific assumptions in selecting and studying a subject? The myth of value-free studies of religion should not become a hollow catechism, a password, and a good excuse for keeping quiet, normless, and indifferent.

The value-free doctrine has a paradoxical potentiality as well: it might enable men to make better value judgments rather than none. The image of a value-free study of religions also should not be the armor of scholars of religion but rather invite them to the mutual connectedness of facts and values. Obviously, we can ask whether Euro-American scholarship (as implied by Waines himself) from both secular and religious backgrounds on other religions in general and on Islam in particular, is itself "value-free," knowing that the former is essentially based upon the rejection of "revelation" in advance through an agnostic presentation at least, and the latter being underlied within the Judeo-Christian understanding of history. Unless it is made clear by scholars writing on Islam whether Islam can be taken as a phenomenon based on divine revelation manifested itself in the history of humanity as it is recognized by its believers, it will mean that their approach is neither value-free nor phenomenological. Otherwise, how are students to be safeguarded against the unwitting influence of judgments, which shape the scholar's selection of problems, his preferences for certain hypotheses or conceptual schemes, and his neglect of others?

A Challenge to "Secular Intellectual Arrogance"

Different approaches accomplish different objectives. This is not necessarily negative, but one should not forget that each objective is in itself value-oriented. Basically, what we are trying to point out is that, at its deepest roots, the myth of a "value-free study of religions" is the secular worldview's means of adjudicating the tensions between two vital traditions: secular (given to the primacy of reason) and religious (given to the primacy of faith first, and reason second). Although it is very difficult to believe in an enduring and final resolution to this conflict, skeptics or secular intellectuals should be able to accept the fact that the problem of studying "other" religions transcends that of historical events and phenomena or of sentimental attitudes. Scholars of religion should not see themselves as narrow technicians who reject responsibility for the cultural and moral consequences of their work. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr puts it briefly, once man rejects "revelation" and "tradition" there is little virtue in religious open-mindedness because there is no longer a criterion for distinguishing the true from the false, even within an historical context. For one who is colorblind it matters little what colors make up the rainbow.⁸ Is it not that, according to contemporary Western (as

Waines refers to) scholarship, there apparently exists a secular truth distinct from religious truth? Or is it only the secular “truth” that is value-free, whereas the religious truth is not? According to Waines, this idea of “secular truth” as superior to “religious truth” comes from “a form of secular intellectual arrogance which, even while it cannot claim absolute certainty for a particular hypothesis, deems its findings superior to the content of religious truth” (p. 267). Related to this point is the question of whether methods of interpretations of religion are to be “religious” (as in the case of scholars such as W. C. Smith, S. H. Nasr, and J. Hick) or “nonreligious” (as in the case of R. Segal). All in all, are secular approaches not as laden with values as religious approaches? Or should we say, “The West has to learn from Kierkegaard that religion is something toward which ‘neutrality’ is not possible”?⁹

Conclusion

I agree with Waines when he says that the broader question of how any of the contemporary sources relevant to Islamic origins, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, can be understood and interpreted in a manner that has some hope of securing a consensus, remains a task that awaits completion among Western scholars (p. 274). However, Waines’s *Introduction to Islam* also seems once more to pose without offering the answer for “that consensus” about whether the Islamic origins must have been from “this” world or “beyond” even when all the existing historical sources are taken into account.

All in all, Waines’s approach, as a Western scholar, to the phenomenon of Islam in his *Introduction to Islam* is indeed a challenge to “secular intellectual arrogance” (p. 267). This challenge best expresses itself when Waines makes an important point on the controversial nature of the “Rushdie affair.”

Many of Rushdie’s supporters damaged their cause by turning the issue of freedom of speech into a stone-graven commandment of their own secular, liberal “religion,” ignoring thereby the obvious fact that free speech is not an absolute moral principle in any Western society. (p. 260)

According to him, central to the whole affair is the gulf of misunderstanding that exists between the dominant liberal, secular culture (of which Rushdie is a part) and the Muslim minority (in Britain). Maybe that is why he brings to our attention the fact that too often, from a secular, liberal perspective, the term “fundamentalist,” used usually in a derogatory sense, “is simply a code word to distinguish ‘us’ (the good guys) from ‘them’ (the bad guys)” (p. 239).

It would be unfair to end this review on a note of criticism. Despite a few omissions, the book is the work of a successful scholar of culture and religion, and it contains insights and stimulating views. It is to be expected that this book will take its place among the best introductions to Islamic culture and religion in English. One of the aspects that makes the book an enjoyable read is the author's modesty, leaving his own position open to criticism (p. 279)—a scholarly modesty which is also a cautionary position noticeable throughout the whole book. Indeed, Waines is correct when he says:

The reader who comes fresh to the subject of Islam, with or without a prior interest in any of the great contemporary religious traditions, will find the literature on Islam bewildering in its sheer quantity and varied in its quality and apparent aim.

The overall approach in the *Introduction to Islam* reminds me once more that what is required in the study of "other" religions is not indifference—"Grey cold eyes do not know the value of things" says Nietzsche—but rather an engagement of feeling, interest, *metexis*, or participation.¹⁰

Notes

1. Such as Ignaz Goldziher, D.S. Margoliouth, Joseph Schacht, Julius Wellhausen, G.H.A. Juynboll, H.A.R. Gibb, W.M. Watt, Richard Bell, Charles Trolley, John Wansbrough and a few others who follow their approach in one way or another. For a survey of the works of these Western Orientalist scholars, see pp. 265–279.

2. Andrew Rippin, *Muslims*, vol. 2 (1993).

3. Quoted from Ibn Majah in Sayyed Sabiq, *Fiqh al-Sunnah*, vol. II (1968), 360.

4. Human Rights Watch, *World Report 1995* (London 1994), 315.

5. Fuad Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums* (Leiden 1967), and *Buharinin Kaynaklary* (Istanbul 1956).

6. Muhammad Hamidullah, *Sahifa Hammam Ibn Munabbih. The Earliest Extant Work on the Hadith* (Paris: Centre Cultural Islamique, 1979), and *Wasayq al-Siyasiyyah*, 3rd ed. (Qairo: Dar al-Irshad 1969).

7. M. M. Azami, *Studies in Early Hadith Literature* (London: Al-Saq Books 1992).

8. S. H. Nasr, *Living Sufism* (London: Unwin, 1972), 109–111.

9. Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 9.

10. *Ibid.*, 12.