Article
Decolonizing Qurʾanic Studies

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Abstract: The legacy of colonialism continues to influence the analysis of the Qurʾan in the Euro-American academy. While Muslim lands are no longer directly colonized, intellectual colonialism continues to prevail in the privileging of Eurocentric systems of knowledge production to the detriment and even exclusion of modes of analysis that developed in the Islamic world for over a thousand years. This form of intellectual hegemony often results in a multifaceted epistemological reductionism that denies efficacy to the analytical tools developed by the classical Islamic tradition. The presumed intellectual superiority of Euro-American analytical modes has become a constitutive and persistent feature of Qurʾanic Studies, influencing all aspects of the field. Its persistence prevents some scholars from encountering, let alone employing, the analytical tools of the classical Islamic tradition and presents obstacles to a broader discourse in the international community of Qurʾanic Studies scholars. Acknowledging the obstacles to which the coloniality of knowledge has given rise in Qurʾanic Studies can help us to develop more inclusive approaches in which multiple modes of analysis are incorporated and scholars from variegated intellectual backgrounds can engage in a more effective dialogue.

Keywords: Qurʾan; decolonization; colonialism; Islam

> "To control a people you must first control what they think about themselves and how they regard their history and culture. And when your conqueror makes you ashamed of your culture and your history, he needs no prison walls and no chains to hold you."
>
> —John Henrik Clarke

Over the past forty years there has been a growing body of literature that seeks to respond to and counter revisionist approaches to the Qurʾan that have arisen in the Euro-American academy. Multiple articles in English and French, as well as a growing library of books in Arabic and Persian criticize the perceived attack on the textual traditions of Islam and on the means by which Muslim scholars have worked with and analyzed the Qurʾanic text.[1] Many of these works express great distrust toward Western scholarship regarding the Qurʾan. This attitude is perhaps best expressed in Parvez Manzoor's (1987, p. 39) oft-cited article, "Method Against Truth: Orientalism and Qurʾanic Studies," which begins,

> The Orientalist enterprise of Qurʾanic studies, whatever its other merits and services, was a project born of spite, bred in frustration and nourished by vengeance: the spite of the powerful for the powerless, the frustration of the "rational" towards the "superstitious" and the vengeance of the "orthodox" against the "non-conformist."

Similar grievances were expressed more recently by Muzaffar Iqbal in his critical review of the *Encyclopaedia of The Qurʾān*, where he maintains that, when viewed as a whole, the approach taken in many articles of the *Encyclopaedia* "negates, ignores, or considers irrelevant the phenomenon of revelation (*waḥy*) as understood in Islam" (Iqbal 2008, p. 12). Likewise, in his analysis of the collection of the Qurʾan, *The History of the Qurʾanic Text*, M. M. Al-Aʿzami writes, "Orientalist research transcends mere subjectivity to manifest itself as anti-Islamic dogma" (al-Aʿzami 2020, p. 373). Mansour, Iqbal, and al-Aʿzami

address the manner in which paradigms of thought in the Euro-American academy have led to a truncated presentation of the Qurʾan, the Qurʾanic sciences, and the *tafsīr*, or exegetical, tradition. In this article I seek to go beyond such responses by drawing upon aspects of postcolonial theory to develop an analytical framework within which to view the development of Qurʾanic Studies in the Euro-American academy and contextualize the grievances expressed by many Muslim scholars.

Much of the consternation expressed by scholars who critique approaches to the Qurʾan that have emerged from within the Euro-American academy arises from the fact that Qurʾanic scholarship in many parts of the Islamic world is often ignored in Euro-American Qurʾanic Studies. The extensive research in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Indonesian, and other languages is rarely cited in work written in European languages,[2] and many of the sources that have informed the Islamic tradition for some one thousand years continue to receive little to no regard in the Euro-American academic study of the Quʾran. As Behnam Sadeghi and Uwe Bergmann observe,

> The amount of work yet to be done is great, and the main paths of embarking on the tasks are clear. It is now equally clear that recent works in the genre of historical fiction are of no help. By "historical fiction" I am referring to the work of authors who, contentedly ensconced next to the mountain of material in the premodern Muslim primary and secondary literature bearing on Islamic origins, say that there are no heights to scale, nothing to learn from the literature, and who speak of the paucity of evidence. Liberated from the requirement to analyze the literature critically, they can dream up imaginative historical narratives rooted in meager cherry-picked or irrelevant evidence, or in some cases no evidence at all. They write off the mountain as the illusory product of religious dogma or of empire-wide conspiracies or mass amnesia or deception, not realizing that literary sources need not always be taken at face value to prove a point; or they simply pass over the mass of the evidence in silence. (Sadeghi and Bergmann 2010, p. 416)

The "silence" to which Sadeghi and Bergmann refer arises from the beginning of Euro-American scholarship on the Qurʾan with Abraham Geiger (d. 1874), Gustav Weil (d. 1889), Aloys Sprenger (d. 1893), and Theodore Nöldeke (d. 1930). Qurʾanic Studies within the Euro-American academy was built in large part upon a foundation that disregards many methodological and factual contributions from the Qurʾanic sciences and from the *tafsīr* traditions of classical Islam. Encapsulating this trend, Bruce Fudge (2006, p. 127) observes, "The earliest studies of Islam in the West were dominated by philological inquiry and an emphasis on origins that favoured a European interpretation of the Qurʾān over what Muslims themselves might have had to say."

Favoring Euro-American approaches and interpretations of the Qurʾan pervades the field to the extent that many of the revered studies of the Qurʾan in the Western academic tradition have failed to take account of the cumulative development of knowledge that lies at the heart of the academic enterprise. Even factual evidence that would complicate contemporary theories is all too often either explained away or willfully ignored. For example, Harald Motzki (2001, p. 21) has demonstrated that when John Wansbrough was confronted by hadith collections which complicated his theory that traditions regarding the compilation of the Qurʾan did not arise until the third Islamic century, Wansbrough chose to rewrite history by asserting that the collections in which these traditions occur "were not really compilations by their putative authors but by their pupils or by later generations," rather than to modify his own theories.[3] More recently, Christoph Luxenberg (2007) has provided a more audacious rereading of Islamic textual history, one which requires that the foundations of the Arabic language itself were not known to Arabs, but only discovered by Luxenberg (with help from Alphonse Mingana and Gunter Lulling before him) in the late 20th century. Luxenberg's reading leads him to declare that "the entire scholarly edifice of Islam, largely based on the reliability of oral tradition, is unfounded" (Neuwirth 2003, pp. 9–10). In both of these examples, the theory demands the exclusion and re-configuration

of large swathes of historical data in order to fit a preconceived narrative. A more recent example of such revisionist trends occurs in David Powers' (2011) *Muhammad is Not the Father of any of Your Men*, which in theorizing collective international linguistic amnesia to advance a theory of forgery in the Qurʾan requires that we ignore basic principles of paleography, linguistics, and historiography.[4] Each of these works exhibits an extreme example of a prevailing tendency in Euro-American scholarship to declare interpretive frameworks that arise from within the Islamic tradition invalid in order to arrogate to authors of the Euro-American tradition the primary or even sole authority for theoretical production.

Within the this structure of Qurʾanic Studies in the Euro-American academy, one is still required to subscribe to a universal epistemological hierarchy in which secular Eurocentric approaches to the text are given pride of place.[5] Such privileging ensures that indigenous Muslim approaches to the text are relegated to the status of "information supply." They are seen as efficacious when they serve the purposes of, and can be incorporated into, a Euro-American epistemological hierarchy, but in and of themselves they are not permitted to generate alternative epistemic discourses, much less call into question the ideological foundations of Euro-American scholars who selectively draw vittles from their larder. As Sajjad Rizvi (2021, p. 124) writes, "to put it rather starkly, the naïve native could not be trusted when it came to accounting for the historical formation of the tradition, or the linguistic frameworks needed to decipher it, or even the hermeneutical skill required to make sense of scripture." Under this configuration, the possibility of what Walter Mignolo (2012, p. ix) refers to as "diverse and legitimate theoretical loci of enunciation," wherein multiple epistemological frameworks from different cultural paradigms engage in productive dialogue, is rejected out of hand.[6]

In many cases, Euro-American approaches to the Qurʾan have taken disregard for the commentary tradition, the Qurʾanic sciences (ʿulūm al-qurʾān), ḥadīth literature, and *sīra* literature as a methodological principle.[7] The consistent assumption that "real" scholarship cannot and should not rely upon the classical commentary tradition for the study of the Qurʾan often claims to be grounded in the quest for "historical accuracy." To achieve this vaunted goal, many of the sources are discounted out of hand. As Andrew Rippin writes of the Islamic commentary tradition, "The actual history in the sense of 'what really happened' has become totally subsumed within the later interpretation and is virtually if not totally inextricable from it" (Rippin 2001, p. 156). Following Wansbrough's lead, Rippin claims that the material provided by *tafsīr* and *sīra* does not provide historical records, but simply "the existential records of the thought and faith of later generations" (Ibid). As Angelika Neuwirth observes regarding those who take this revisionist approach,

> Constrained by their revisionist preconception, these scholars assume that historical reality is so deeply warped that, today it is impossible to discover any exact information concerning the early history of the Islamic scripture. Thus, not only was the idea that an original community had emerged from the Hijaz assigned to the realm of pious legend but any attempt to undertake a microstructural review of the text and the history of its growth was branded meaningless, and was abandoned. (Neuwirth 2014, p. 10)

Such methodological jettisoning of the *tafsīr* tradition, Qurʾanic sciences, and the Islamic historiographical tradition has resulted in approaches to the Qurʾanic text that, as Feras Hamza observes, "almost completely dislodged the use of *tafsīr* for reconstructing the historical context of the Quranic text" (Hamza 2014, p. 21).

These observations apply equally to philological and etymological inquiries that often bypass primary sources from the Islamic tradition in an effort to retrieve the "original" meaning of a word from other Near Eastern languages. Such approaches to the material provided by the classical tradition are methodologically and ideologically problematic. As regards the methodological shortcomings of this form of etymological investigation for Qurʾanic Studies, Tohshihiko Izutsu (2002, p. 17) writes that "Etymology, even when we

are fortunate enough to know it, can only furnish us with a clue as to the 'basic' meaning of a word. And, we must remember, etymology remains in many cases a simple guess work and very often an insoluble mystery." The fractured approach of such etymological analysis leads to a fractured image of the Qurʾan. As Angelika Neuwirth (2014, p. 35) observes, "Ultimately, based upon the Western philological literature on the Qurʾan, the Qurʾanic corpus appears to the untrained eye to consist of an amorphous set of verses with no recognizable rationale of their own." Walid Saleh (2010b, p. 667) is more emphatic when he observes that, since serious academic study of Islam began in the Euro-American academy in the 19th century, many Western scholars have operated within a framework that presents the Qurʾan as a "disparate hodgepodge of a book, derivative at the lexeme level, chaotic at the compositional level, and ultimately fascinating only in so far as that we will never be able to explain its paradoxical power to hold the attention of the benighted Muslims." Incorporating other materials from the Near Eastern milieu of late antiquity is no doubt of value for understanding the milieu in which the Qurʾan took shape, but bypassing Islamic sources for etymological and philological analyses reveals ideological biases, as the classical *tafsīr* tradition has been from its outset been "profoundly invested in the recuperation of meaning at the basic level of the grammatical and lexicographical significance of the Quran" (Zadeh 2015, p. 39).

Methodological aversion to incorporating primary sources inevitably leads to the question, "If we cannot start at the beginning, then where should we begin?" Much Euro-American scholarship on the Qurʾan begins with the assumption that an historical, and indeed Arabian, context for the Qurʾan cannot be recovered from the primary sources, as they are too deeply tainted by pious lore and political embellishment. In this vein, Gabriel Said Reynolds (2010, p. 13) argues, "that the Qurʾān—from a critical perspective at least—should not be read in conversation with what came after it (*tafsīr*) but with what came before it (Biblical literature)." Reynolds derides the use of *tafsīr* by scholars such as Watt, Neuwirth, and Abdel Haleem. Then, based upon the hypotheses of Burton (1977, p. 228), who posited that if one can imagine a theological motivation for a report, the report cannot be historically true, Reynolds concludes that the historical accounts provided by the commentators

> can be a proper guide for a pious reading of the Qurʾān. But to the critical scholar they should suggest that *tafsīr* is a remarkable literary achievement to be appreciated on its own right. These *tafsīr* traditions do not preserve the Qurʾān's ancient meaning, and to insist otherwise does a disservice both to *tafsīr* and to the Qurʾān. (Reynolds 2010, p. 19)

One wonders how it can be a disservice to the scholars of the classical commentaries to claim that the history and philology they sought to ascertain and to preserve should be reduced to "literary achievements" that do not in fact serve to preserve and convey the Qurʾan's ancient or "original" meaning. Given more recent developments in the field, it is also surprising that one would cite Burton in such contexts. As Behnam Sadeghi and Uwe Bergmann have demonstrated, the manuscript tradition—the most objective material evidence we have—indicates that Burton's thesis regarding the collection of the Qurʾan during the Prophet's lifetime is not supported by the available material evidence:

> Manuscript evidence now corroborates pre-modern reports about the existence of Companion codices, their having different sūra orderings, and, to an extent, the nature of their verbal differences. Conclusively refuted is John Burton's theory that all such reports were post-ʿUtmānic fictions aimed at "countering, ellucidating, or even evading the ʿUtmān text". (Sadeghi and Bergmann 2010, p. 412)

Like Rippin, Wansbrough, Mingana, and others before him, Reynolds proposes that the authority to interpret the text no longer lies within the classical Islamic tradition and that it never really has, because that tradition remains putative at best, and its methodologies are epistemically inferior to the methodologies of the modern Euro-American scholar.

As Travis Zadeh observes for such revisionist historical critical methodologies, "The power of historical criticism is usually advanced in direct opposition to what is necessarily constituted as an interpretive tradition that is enfeebled intellectually and is theologically untrustworthy" (Zadeh 2015, p. 340).

This manner of discarding Islamic academic traditions past and present without having taken the time to assess them relies upon the epistemological cartography of the modern academy, a cartography that results from the particular definitions originating from Euro-American civilization. Founded upon the false universal of "Western man", this form of Eurocentric intellectual totalitarianism is assumed to have the right to define the manner in which all modes of knowledge are evaluated and subliminally charted in relation to one another. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos observes, this epistemological cartography first draws a visible line that separates the various epistemologies accepted by modern thought, with hard science placed at the top. Then there is an "abyssal invisible line that separates science, philosophy and theology on the one side, from on the other, knowledges rendered incommensurable and incomprehensible for meeting neither the scientific methods of truth nor their acknowledged contesters in the realm of philosophy and theology" (de Sousa Santos 2007, p. 47). All that lies on the other side of the line is not considered real knowledge, but relegated to the realm of "beliefs, opinions, intuitive or subjective understandings, which at most, may become objects or raw materials for scientific inquiry" (Ibid, 47), or in the case of Qurʾanic Studies, historical and philological inquiry. In the abyssal approach identified by Sousa Santos, *tafsīr* and the Qurʾanic sciences are considered an object worthy of historical and literary investigation, but are not considered to provide material that is useful for the actual study of the Qurʾanic text. The Eurocentric cartography of knowledge inherent in this approach produces a massive divide between the majority of those who research the text in the contemporary period while continuing to engage the Islamic scholastic tradition and the majority of those who study the Qurʾanic text in Western and Westernized universities dedicated to various approaches that remain informed by secular assumptions regarding the origins and nature of the text. To establish an authoritative voice, those invested in Euro-American approaches to the text engage in the "radical denial of [the] copresence" of other epistemological approaches (Ibid, 48).

In the eyes of those in other disciplines within the modern Euro-American academy, such denial appears logical, because it is grounded in assumptions to which we have been acculturated or in which we have been "educated." The result is that approaches that originate in the Euro-American academy are accepted as the "civilized" or "enlightened" approaches to the text, while the approaches employed in the classical commentary tradition, or that incorporate aspects of it, or even that maintain a creative connection with it, are viewed as inherently flawed, since they are grounded in alternative epistemologies whose legitimacy is denounced *a priori* because of the ingrained position that arises from what Boaventura de Sousa Santos refers to as the "realm of incomprehensible beliefs and behaviors which in no way can be considered knowledge, whether true or false" (Ibid, 51). In the case of Qurʾanic Studies, historiographical, lexicographical, philological, or archaeological evidence that has been cited to support creedal positions and theological arguments is discarded because it is assumed to have been created to support these positions and arguments. Theological positions are thereby rendered non-cognitive, that is, they cannot be the result of objective rational thought processes akin to those of the modern scholar. Any evidence used to support them is therefore deemed a fabrication, as in the example of Burton cited above. Here, the thought processes of classical Muslim scholars and their modern counterparts are portrayed as backwards; it is assumed that they did not know how to derive conclusions from evidence and that they therefore produced evidence to support their conclusions. From this perspective, any historiographical, lexicographical, philological, or archaeological evidence that has been cited to support a theological position cannot but have been created to support that theological position. As a result of this abyssal approach to Qurʾanic Studies, an academic tradition that has spanned over a thousand

years and continues into the contemporary period is written off as "pious readings" and presented as inherently uncritical.

One of the central means of supporting the premise of the relative uselessness and irrelevance of the Islamic scholarly tradition for critical scholarship is to present the lack of unanimity regarding certain aspects of the Qurʾan, such as the separated letters (*al-muqaṭṭaʿāt*) at the beginning of 29 *sūrah*s, or chapters, the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), and various words of the Qurʾan, as evidence that "even the earliest *mufassirūn* [exegetes] are unable to understand basic elements of the Qurʾān" (Reynolds 2010, p. 19) and that "when the *mufassirūn* began their work, they were dealing with a text that was fundamentally unfamiliar to them" (Ibid, 21). Lawrence Conrad exemplifies this line of thinking when he writes:

> Even words that would have been of great and immediate importance in the days of Muḥammad himself are argued over and guessed at, sometimes at great length, and with no satisfactory result. We might expect that comparisons of the work that proceeded in different regions would show that scholars of the ʿijāz had a better record in arriving at likely or compelling solutions, since their own forefathers, the first Muslims, would have known the truth of the matter and passed it down through their descendants. But this is not the case. Confusion and uncertainty seems to be the rule, and at the centre of it all, is a written text in which textual anomalies could not be solved, and for which oral tradition offered no help, and for which clarifying context was unknown. (Conrad 2007, p. 13)

Arthur Jeffrey takes this epistemic bias back to the earliest days of Islam, proposing that Muhammad himself did not actually know what he was saying:

> It has been remarked not infrequently that the Prophet had a penchant for strange and mysterious sounding words, though frequently he himself had not grasped correctly their meaning, as one sees in such cases as *furqān*, and *sakīna*. Sometimes he seems even to have invented words, such as *ghassāq*, *tasnīm*, and *salsabīl*. (Jeffery 2007, p. 39)

The evidence for such conclusions is the debates among the *mufassirūn*. Differences of opinion that in Euro-American scholarship would be seen as evidence of a lively scholarly debate and a rich intellectual atmosphere are portrayed as evidence of confusion and uncertainty, and hence ignorance. As Talal Asad (2009, p. 22) observes, such characterizations are central to the Euro-American academic representation of "tradition," wherein "Argument is generally represented as a symptom of 'the tradition in crisis,' on the assumption that 'normal' tradition . . . excludes reasoning just as it requires unthinking conformity."

Based upon this abyssal epistemological cartography in which "tradition" is relegated to the realm of "unthinking conformity," only those who employ modes of analysis that originate in the modern Euro-American academy are deemed capable of informed disagreement. Some contemporary scholars go so far as to conclude that "scholars today might with some justification feel themselves better qualified than the *mufassirūn* to study the original meaning of Qurʾānic passages" (Reynolds 2010, p. 22). This represents a mode of scholarship wherein the Western scholar is, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith observes, presented as the knowing subject and the Eastern scholar is presented as the known object (Smith 2012). The former is given power to define the latter, and the latter is only admitted the ability to know itself through the categories determined by the former.[8]

What is proposed is not merely a process of dividing Qurʾanic Studies, *tafsīr* studies, and the study of the Qurʾanic sciences (ʿ*ulūm al-qurʾān*) into different disciplines. Rather it is a process of declaring *tafsīr* and the Qurʾanic sciences as ineffectual and illegitimate tools for the study of the Qurʾanic text.[9] This is a form of "epistemic colonization" wherein methodologies or forms of knowledge that pose viable alternatives to Eurocentric epistemologies are impoverished and marginalized, or even "ghettoized," while other forms of knowledge are obliterated or curtailed until any epistemic challenge they may present to dominant epistemologies can be comfortably confined to the condition of artifacts to be

displayed in museums as examples of so-called "traditional" knowledge (Nygren 1999, pp. 267–88). Those who then seek to reassert the primacy or even validity of modes of interpretation by which non-Western peoples understand themselves, their histories, and their texts, and through which they present themselves to others are said to be "naïve" and labeled as "apologists," "essentialists," "traditionalists," "romantics," or whatever the disparaging term of the day may be.

Such forms of epistemic colonization within Qurʾanic Studies have led to a line of inquiry wherein only theories of Euro-American origin, and many speculations that do not rise to the level of theory, are taken seriously, while indigenous approaches to the text are studied as cultural artifacts that no longer have the ability to generate understanding of the Qurʾanic text itself. They are assumed to have been displaced and replaced by "more sophisticated" critical approaches. Native epistemologies are here reduced to the category of historical artifacts, with no acknowledgement that modern academic approaches to the text are just as, if not more, historically and ideologically situated.[10]

Shades of the epistemic biases perpetuated by the inability and refusal to situate the foundational contributions of classical commentators in relation to paradigms originating from within the Euro-American academy can be found throughout the field of Qurʾanic Studies.[11] Even scholars who display great appreciation for the Qurʾanic text lament the use of *tafsīr* within the field. Discussing the propensity of some scholars to employ *tafsīr* within Qurʾanic Studies or to "combine the Qurʾanic text and Qurʾanic commentaries to form a single subject of study," Angelika Neuwirth writes, "The fact that an analogous approach in Biblical studies (e.g., reading the Hebrew Bible together with the Midrash or reading the New Testament through the lens of the early church fathers) would be frowned upon in academic contexts, shows clearly what exotic status has, until now, been assigned to the Qurʾan" (Neuwirth 2014, p. 38). In another article, Neuwirth writes:

> Let me stress that a comparable marginalisation of the text itself in favor of its exegesis would be unconceivable in serious Biblical studies. Nowhere in the current academy does critical Biblical scholarship build on exegetical traditions. Neither are the texts of the Hebrew Bible read through the lens of the Midrashic discussions, nor is the New Testament read with reference to the treatises of the Church Fathers. In both fields of Biblical studies, individual units of the scriptural texts are contextualized with the writings and traditions current in the milieu that they emerged from. (Neuwirth 2007, p. 116)

Rather than building upon an analysis of the Qurʾanic textual and interpretive traditions to demonstrate why combining the two is problematic, this argument appeals to the Biblical studies tradition and posits it as the norm. Neuwirth's contention rests upon the premise that the textual traditions and the exegetical traditions of the Biblical tradition and the Qurʾanic tradition are similar. Yet very different methodologies *must* be employed to deal with different problem sets, and the exegetical and broader scholarly corpus of each tradition must be considered in its own right. Although both the Bible and the Qurʾan arise in the Near Eastern milieu, the history of the composition, compilation, reception, and transmission of the Bible and the Qurʾan differs significantly, as does the nature of the classical scholarship in the respective traditions. The Bible is a library of books by many different authors collected over centuries and its canonization process remains "only vaguely understood" (Brettler 2004, p. 2072). The earliest extant manuscripts of the Hebrew Scriptures are dated to over a thousand years after the time when tradition maintains they were first composed. In contrast, the most recent scholarship indicates that the Qurʾan is a single book that was compiled and canonized well within a hundred years of the time when its composition is said to have begun (610 CE).[12] Furthermore, the most extensive scientific textual analysis of the Qurʾan to date, an analysis wherein the text is subject to rigorous stylometric, stylistic and statistical computer analysis, reveals that the Qurʾan exhibits a high degree of concurrent smoothness, indicating that "*the style backs the hypothesis of one author*" (Sadeghi 2011, p. 288). Such findings demonstrate that while Euro-American

Qurʾanic Studies has engaged in extensive speculation regarding the origin and authorship of the Qurʾanic text, the classical Islamic tradition, in treating the Qurʾan as a coherent text by a single author, has been much closer to examining the text as it arose within its original historical context.

Derogatory attitudes toward modes of Qurʾanic analysis that draw from and incorporate the classical Islamic tradition derive from a long-standing perception of Qurʾanic Studies as an extension or subset of Biblical studies that must follow many of the same methodologies and principles. This approach assumes both that the histories of the Biblical and Qurʾanic texts are similar and that the relationship between the exegetical tradition and the scriptural text in the Islamic tradition must mirror that of the Jewish and Christian traditions. From one perspective, this contention is a secular variation of the polemical canard that Islam is mostly if not entirely derived from the preceding Abrahamic faiths. However, one of the fundamental differences among the Islamic, Christian, and Jewish traditions is that a central part of the Islamic exegetical tradition from its inception has been the historical provenance of the text. Thus, there is already a "historical critical" tradition that attempts to assess the context and provenance of the text. Muslim exegetes recognized from the beginning that "texts have contexts" and must be understood in accord with those contexts. As Emran El-Badawi observes, "The related genre of 'occasions of revelation' (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) supports the notion that early Muslims realized that revelation was mediated through historical context" (El-Badawi 2014, p. 44). Within the first centuries of Islam, Muslim scholars conducted detailed manuscript analysis in an effort to identify the original form of the Qurʾanic text.[13] This level of detailed historical consciousness is not manifest in the same way in the early Jewish and early Christian traditions. As a result, the argument that Qurʾanic Studies should not employ the tools of the Qurʾanic sciences and work with the Qurʾanic commentarial tradition and its attendant materials must be understood as being completely distinct from the argument that Biblical studies should not work with the Biblical commentarial tradition. As Zadeh observes, "We may also wish to question the extent to which Quranic Studies should emulate the methods and theories of Biblicists. For while the corpora overlap in important and obvious ways, there are meaningful differences in the actual histories surrounding the texts and their respective interpretive communities" (Zadeh 2015, p. 340).

This process of discounting the modes of scholarship that are native to the object, peoples, texts, or civilizations of study is not limited to Qurʾanic Studies. It is an underlying assumption of the modern Euro-American academy that non-Western epistemologies are fit to be the object of investigation or analysis, but that they are not fit to be the tools of analysis through which we might understand texts and the world, or through which we might even analyze the dominant Eurocentric epistemologies. Assumptions regarding the epistemic and heuristic inferiority of methodologies of non-Western origin are particularly problematic in the field of Qurʾanic Studies, since historically there are tens of thousands of studies that establish different epistemic approaches to the text and internationally there are far more scholars of the Qurʾan still employing methodologies grounded in or connected to the classical Islamic tradition than there are scholars employing methodologies that derive from Euro-American models.[14] Nonetheless, any epistemic orientation that does not derive from the orientation(s) of the Westerncentric model is declared by a large contingent of Euro-American scholarship, by which I refer to all scholarship that adopts its underlying premises regardless of geographical origin, to be inferior or even invalid.

Despite its variegated, polycentric nature, the *tafsīr* tradition is more often than not portrayed within the Euro-American academy as a monolithic tradition. But one could just as easily observe that the modes of self-proclaimed "higher criticism" advocated within the modern academy are based upon and perpetuate a narrow epistemological cannon. This trend toward epistemic stenosis in the Euro-American study of the Qurʾan reflects the overall process of limiting the cannon in Western academia. From the fifteenth century onward, the construction of the modern world-system has "rested upon multiple 'creative destructions,' often carried out on behalf of 'civilizing,' liberating, or emancipatory projects, which

aimed at reducing the understanding of the world to the logic of Western epistemology" (de Sousa et al. 2008, p. xxxiii). Qurʾanic Studies in Western and Westernized universities is, for the most part, an extension and continuation of this process. The non-divine origins of the text are posited as the only rational approach, and the methodologies of any analyses that do not incorporate this underlying assumption are too often discarded from the outset. In the process, as noted above, mountains of historical, philological, lexicographical, and literary analysis are pronounced a molehill. The sciences of the Qurʾan and all of their attendant methodologies are relegated to "local forms of knowledge" relevant only insofar as they provide information that can be employed by modern techniques of "higher criticism," which is perceived as the sole source of "objective knowledge."

This multifaceted epistemological reductionism represents a form of conceptual orthodoxy that is a constitutive and persistent feature of coloniality.[15] Non-western peoples are not taken seriously when they conceptualize and present their history, their traditions, or their texts in a manner that calls upon and evokes "local" or "native" epistemologies, and they are denied the right to evaluate Euro-American intellectual traditions with categories that derive from their own intellectual traditions. They are in effect rendered epistemologically non-existent until they learn to represent themselves, their texts, and their traditions through Euro-American modes of analysis.[16]

The inability to account for the situatedness and partiality of Euro-American academic approaches rests upon such epistemological reductions. It is so pervasive in the study of the Qurʾan in the Euro-American university that even scholars who are sympathetic to Islam and its interpretive traditions often remain unaware of the assumptions regarding the universal epistemic validity of secular approaches that inhere in their analyses. As Wael Hallaq observes when discussing the broader phenomena of Orientalism, although more recent approaches aspire "to a set of attitudes that show relatively more respect and tolerance than any preceding period," nonetheless,

> The common denominator of Orientalist academia undoubtedly remains one of epistemic superiority, which is to say that respect and tolerance come with a dose of epistemic self-confidence (and often arrogance) that still assumes—consciously or not—the validity of the Euro-American modern project, especially as it has been guided by the paradigmatic principles of the Enlightenment. (Hallaq 2018, pp. 238–39)

In this way, even many "sympathetic" approaches to the Qurʾanic text prolong the paradigmatic socio-epistemic structures that have given rise to more "critical" revisionist approaches. Such an approach is found in Carl Ernst's (2011) *How to Read the Qur'an*, from which, as Travis Zadeh (2015, p. 331) observes, "a reader may easily be left with the impression that the most important scholarship on the Quran today comes from outside the sphere of Islamic learning, however broadly construed."[17] Zadeh remarks that "Ernst explicitly aims to bracket out interpretations rooted in religious commitments as a means of advancing what he terms a non-theological reading accessible to a wide range of audiences" (Ibid). Here one is forced to ask why a theological reading would be inaccessible to a wide range of audiences. Given that the Qurʾan has been subject to theological readings that continue to impact Muslim civilizations from Indonesia to Africa and beyond, what is it that makes "theological" readings inaccessible? Do not those readers to whom theological readings have been "accessible" constitute "a wide range of audiences?" Through Ernst's assertion, those to whom theological readings would speak and those who have an interest in theological readings have in effect been rendered non-existent. One must also ask if one can indeed have a non-theological reading of a text whose central subject, even on a linguistic level, is God, and that has been read theologically for over a thousand years. Given the historical reception of the text, any attempt to avoid "theological readings" must already privilege a secular approach to the text that is alien to the faith communities for which the text has served as the central devotional document. Any effort to privilege readings that are not informed by theological commitments thus represents a significant epistemological

shift that is undergirded by the assumption of the epistemological sovereignty of secularism. Such studies can make contributions to the understanding of the text, but it must be acknowledged that, on the one hand, they begin with too many embedded assumptions to be theologically neutral, and on the other hand, they are usually written for a non-Muslim audience whose members remain a minority among those who engage the Qurʾan.

The secular reading proposed by Ernst would in fact have significant theological ramifications. In one instance, following upon the work of Nöldeke that was later followed up by Kevin van Bladel, Ernst (2011, p. 138) explains the Dhuʾl-Qarnayn legend in the Qurʾan as the adoption of a Syriac legend into an earlier body of Meccan material during the Madinan period. This interpretation is itself questionable, as Travis Zadeh has pointed out, since it is "rather tenuous to attempt to historicize the Quranic account using material that may not have been a direct intertext for the Quran" (Zadeh 2015, p. 333). More importantly, such attempts to historicize the Qurʾanic account often entail a claim about the historical origins of the Qurʾanic text that cannot but have theological implications. Any attempt to replace theological explanations of the text with secular interpretations necessarily entails the assumption of an overarching metaphysic that is at odds with the overarching metaphysic that informs the worldviews of classical and post-classical Muslim conceptualizations of the Qurʾan. The theological questions cannot simply be "bracketed out," as Ernst suggests. The very belief that one can do so, though not overtly theological, is predicated upon beliefs, values, and assumptions embedded in a worldview which carries ideological and theological implications that have just as much impact on the reading of the text as do overt theological commitments. In privileging a secular approach, the scholar has already come to the text with as many embedded assumptions as has the devoted theologian. The fundamental difference may be that the secular scholar is less "confessional" regarding his or her views, though equally constrained by them.

Ernst's approach represents another aspect of the process whereby bodies of knowledge from within the Euro-American context are declared intelligible and authoritative, while bodies of knowledge that arise from without the Euro-American context are deemed unintelligible and thus have no authority. The Euro-American scholar, by which I mean any scholar who shares this epistemic outlook, whether advertently or inadvertently, is empowered to speak seriously about the Qurʾan, to determine the procedures by which the credibility of statements is assessed, and ultimately to determine which statements and conclusions are to be taken seriously and thus constitute the framework for dialogue.

Conclusions

Recent developments in the field of Qurʾanic Studies in the West demonstrate that the field remains mired in assumptions of the epistemic sovereignty of Euro-American thought and as such perpetuates the colonialist project of producing epistemologically domesticated and pacified subjects. In the current structure of Qurʾanic Studies in the Euro-American academy, the scholar is still required to adopt or subscribe to a single universal hierarchy in which secular Eurocentric approaches to the text are given pride of place and native Muslim approaches to the text are relegated to providing information which may then be incorporated into a Westerncentric epistemic hierarchy. Such approaches, be they contemporary or pre-modern, cannot be viewed as generating useful applications of knowledge on their own. Methodologies developed in the Euro-American academy are presented as the more "critical," "serious," or "rigorous" approaches to the text. In contrast, methodologies employed in the Qurʾanic sciences and in the classical commentary tradition, or those that incorporate aspects of it, are viewed as inherently flawed because they are grounded in alternative epistemologies whose legitimacy is denounced *a priori*, due to ingrained opposition to what is considered the "realm of incomprehensible beliefs and behaviors which in no way can be considered knowledge, whether true or false" (de Sousa Santos 2007, p. 51).

At present, when we speak of the relationship between Qurʾanic Studies methodologies grounded in the classical Islamic tradition and those that arise from the Euro-American

academy, there is more often than not a non-relationship, because most Euro-American scholars refuse to consider non-Western epistemologies as relevant epistemological alternatives.[18] Alternative epistemologies are in effect rendered "non-cognitive" unless they can be translated into dominant secular paradigm(s). But this very process of translation denatures and repurposes them so that they no longer fulfill the functions for which they were established and developed. They are, instead, rendered secondary to Euro-American paradigms and considered to be of value only insofar as they might contribute one or two observations to it, or insofar as they have at some point reached similar conclusions, in which case they are construed as validating the dominant paradigm.

To move beyond the assumptions of Euro-American epistemic privileging and epistemic sovereignty that pervade the field, we must be cognizant of the situatedness of Westerncentric thought and "unthink" the dominant criteria that have too often defined the field of Qurʾanic Studies in the Euro-American academy. This requires that we go to the roots of these criteria in order to examine and question "their cultural, epistemological, and even ontological presuppositions" (de Sousa Santos 2014, p. 237). Such a process can allow for "emancipatory transformations" that follow scripts outside those developed by Westerncentric critical theories.[19] The manner of bridging the divide between Euro-American scholars and scholars in other countries by translating "contemporary work" from multiple languages, as proposed by Rippin (2010) and others, too often becomes a tool for extending Euro-American epistemological hegemony when it functions to extend abyssal thinking by privileging any approach that favors epistemologies arising from within the dominant paradigms of the Euro-American academy. Under this proposal, if Muslims are to be included in the conversation of Euro-American Qurʾanic Studies, they are required to define their approach to the Qurʾanic text in relation to methodologies arising from the epistemological universe of their intellectual colonizers. This creates an epistemic universe similar to the world of which W. E. B. Du Bois speaks when he writes of the black man living in "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (Du Bois 2008, p. xiii).

For there to be a transmodern field of Qurʾanic Studies in which scholars from multiple backgrounds are in discourse across methodological and epistemological divides, the field of Qurʾanic Studies must be decolonized. Such decolonization can allow for new "ecologies of knowledge" that recognize the validity of multiple perspectives to develop. Recognizing diverse ecologies of knowledge would allow for a different hierarchy of validation that does not privilege one methodology over others due to little more than the legacy of intellectual colonization. Much more important than translation is the development of counter-hegemonic approaches that facilitate "equity between different ways of knowing and different kinds of knowledge" (de Sousa Santos 2014, p. 237). This would allow a much greater role in Qurʾanic Studies for *tafsīr* and the Qurʾanic sciences than what is currently afforded by most approaches in the Euro-American academy. When we are better able to integrate the methodologies of the Islamic tradition and those of the Euro-American academy, what are now regarded by many as "residues of the past" may in fact prove to be seeds for new intellectual paradigms in the future.

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Notes

[1] Dozens of books and articles have appeared in Arabic. Among the most notable are ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī (1997); Bamba (2015); ʿUmar b. Ibrāhīm Riḍwān (1992).

2   For an example, see Nicolai Sinai (2017), whose bibliography includes extensive resources from many European languages, but excludes recent scholarship in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and other Islamicate languages, as well as scholarship written by Muslims outside of the Euro-American academy in English, such as the work of M. M. al-Aʿzami.

3   Motzki's analysis of the traditions pertaining to the collection of the Qurʾan, traditions that Wansbrough and subsequent scholars have maintained did not arise until the third century, demonstrates that "it does seem safe to conclude that reports on the collection of the Qurʾan on Abū Bakr's behalf and on official edition made by the order of ʿUthmān were already in circulation toward the end of the 1st Islamic century and that al-Zuhrī possibly received some of them from the persons he indicated in his *isnāds*" (31).

4   For a comprehensive critique of Powers' argument, see Walid Saleh's review (Saleh 2010a). Saleh writes: "As Powers' monograph shows, revisionism in Islamic Studies is a rhetorical artifice rather than a coherent analysis of evidence; it functions as an intellectual exercise that has little to do with the history it purports to explain. One starts with the axiomatic assumption that things are not what the tradition has been telling us (and by tradition here I mean mainstream Western scholarship); then one moves forward by means of presuppositions, plausible or implausible, that are sustainable only because they presuppose a different reality than the one attested by our sources, not because they are cogent in themselves. These presuppositions turn out to be conceivable only because of their value as counterclaims. The entire exercise is sustained rhetorically by a tone of condescension" (Saleh 2010a, p. 256).

5   For a discussion of this same phenomena in relation to Islamic Law, see Lena Salaymeh (2021).

6   For a broader analysis of the manner in which epistemic exclusion perpetuates epistemic injustice, see Miranda Fricker (2009).

7   This tendency is all the more remarkable when one considers how little of the commentary or *tafsīr* tradition has in fact been read by scholars in the Euro-American academy, let alone analyzed. For a discussion of the parochial nature of *tafsīr* studies in the Euro-American academy, see Walid (Saleh 2010c).

8   As Elliot Bazzano observes, [Reynolds] contends that classical Muslim exegetes have sullied a frank interpretation of the Qurʾan by relying on guesswork and theological agendas; he even refers to some of these exegetes as "totally incapable" (Reynolds 2010, p. 21). He asserts that scholars today may be better qualified than the classical exegetes to study the original meaning of Qurʾanic passages, because contemporary scholars enjoy greater freedom to speculate (Reynolds 2010, p. 22)" (Bazzano 2016, p. 89).

9   In this approach, *tafsīr* comes to represent the inelastic and inflexible tradition presented as a straw man against which the representatives of "rationalism" can argue for the superiority of their approach to the text. This approach is dependent upon advancing the artificial dichotomy of "tradition" vs. rationality that was deconstructed by MacIntyre. As Ovanmir Anjum observes, "It is because of their failure to take note of or evaluate the reasoning employed by the subjects that they see all transformations of tradition as incomprehensible except in terms of manipulation" (Anjum 2007, p. 669).

10   Research in the field of cultural hermeneutics demonstrates that cultural assumptions specific to the time and place in which particular academic methodologies develop must be accounted for when applying said methodologies. As de Sousa Santos observes, "The relevance of a given object of analysis lies not in the object itself but in the objective of the analysis. Different objectives produce different criteria of relevance" (de Sousa Santos 2014, p. 140).

11   The attitude that one cannot rely upon the Islamic scholarly tradition is so pervasive in Islamic Studies in general that scholars such as Aaron Hughes will declare with little analysis or justification that "It is also important not to go to later interpretations of, for example, the Qurʾan to try and shed light on it" (Hughes 2015, p. 111).

12   The last twenty years have witnessed the most significant developments in the understanding of the development of the Qurʾanic text in the history of Western academia. Foremost among these studies are Déroche (2014); al-Aʿzami (2020); Motzki (2001). Other articles that touch upon the dating of early manuscripts are Dutton (2001, 2004, 2007); Rezvan (2000); Sinai (2014).

13   Recent scholarship has demonstrated that the earliest attempts to identify the "umm" or "original source" of the written Qurʾanic text in Abū ʿAmr al-Dānī's (d. 444/1053) *al-Muqniʿ fī rasm maṣāḥif al-amṣār* indicate a genuine transmission of the Qurʾanic text from a single original source in the mid seventh century; see Cook (2004); van Putten (2019).

14   For example, Bahāʾ al-Dīn Khurramshāhī and Ahmad Pakatchi in Iran and Fāḍil Ṣāliḥ al-Sāmirāʾī and Faḍl Ḥasan ʿAbbās are but a few of the contemporary scholars whose extensive scholarship draws upon methodologies from the classical commentary tradition to produce new and important observations regarding the language of the Qurʾan. Amin Ahsan Islahi (d. 1997) and his teacher Hamiduddin Farahi (d. 1930) in Pakistan have done groundbreaking work on coherence and order in the Qurʾan that is often ignored or occluded in Euro-American discussions of the order of the Quʾran. Nonetheless, many of these scholars are rarely, if ever, referenced in studies of the Qurʾan in the Euro-American academy.

15   Coloniality refers to the manner in which colonialism persists after various forms of "settler colonialism" have been abandoned. The structures and paradigms that insure the continuation of imperial power remain. As Ramon Grosfoguel writes, "Coloniality refers to the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations. Coloniality of power refers to a crucial structuring process in the modern/colonial world-system that articulates peripheral locations in the international division of labor, subaltern group political strategies, and Third World migrants' inscription in the racial/ethnic hierarchy of metropolitan global cities" (Grosfoguel 2002, p. 205).

16   For an analysis of the manner in which this leads to truncated analyses of the Qurʾanic text within the Islamic world, see Ta Ha ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (2006, pp. 175–206).

17   This is similar to Rippin (2010, p. 7) proposing that to bridge the divide between Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship on the Qurʾan works should be translated from European languages into Islamicate languages.

18   As de Sousa Santos (2014, p. 212) remarks, from within the paradigms of the Euro-American academy, one is not able "to consider non-Western cultures as relevant cultural alternatives in any conceivable sense."

19   Any bridge between Qurʾanic studies in the Muslim world and the Euro-American academy that remains grounded in assumptions of the epistemic sovereignty and heuristic superiority of Euro-American thought will only serve to perpetuate the hermeneutical marginalization of Muslim scholars. All approaches to the text should be analyzed in relation to the epistemic contexts in which they have arisen.

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