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Islam, Tradition, and Colonial Modernity: Teaching Theory without Theory Talk

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Blog Series: Teaching Islam

March 29, 2017

Tags: teaching Islam | teaching Qur'an | teaching critical thinking

This is the third and penultimate blog in a series of posts in which I have sought to meditate on the question of how one might present theoretical/conceptual arguments to students in an introductory course on Islam in a manner that does not burden them with theory talk. To recap, in the last two posts, I shared some thoughts on this front in relation to teaching about the category of religion and in regards to teaching Sufism. In this post, I want to continue this theme by reflecting on the topic of what could broadly be categorized as “Islam and colonial modernity.”

Through this topic, I want to reflect on the experience of teaching two central and interconnected theoretical arguments: 1) that tradition/modernity is not an oppositional binary, and 2) that conditions and discourse are always intimately connected such that new conditions generate new kinds of argument and ways of arguing. These two points are by now staple to the humanities and to the study of religion. But what are some specific ways in which they might be impressed in an introductory Islam course? Here are some examples that speak to this question.

In this context, I have found most helpful working with collections of primary texts, such as the anthology of Muslim Modernist writings (edited by Charles Kurzman) and the anthology of Islamist texts (edited by Muhammad Qasim Zaman and Roxanne Euben). Let me walk you through some moments from my teaching when I draw on these anthologies. I employ the relatively straightforward tactic of locating and then discussing places in a primary text where

the author's argument is indebted to modern conditions. So for instance, in the Modernist Islam sourcebook, we find the example of the 19th century Indian Muslim scholar Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) arguing that Muslims should alter their explanation for why the Qur'an was miraculous. Rather than attach the Qur'an's miracle to the inimitability of its language (a long running argument in the tradition), he argued that Muslims should instead locate the miracle of the Qur'an in the inimitability of its meaning and guidance.

More crucial than the argument here (which was not altogether novel) was the logic behind the argument: namely that a linguistic explanation for the Qur'an's miracle "cannot," in his words, "be put forward in confrontation with nonbelievers" (Kurzman, *Modernist Islam*, 300). He continued tellingly, "it will not satisfy their mind" (Ibid). Clearly, the new condition of missionary activity and competition in colonial India had a lot to do with the content and framing of Khan's argument. Similarly, elsewhere in the same anthology, we find the Lebanese/Egyptian scholar Rashid Rida (d. 1935) expressing his admiration for European "nationalism" (Ibid, 82). And even more illustrative is the case of the 20th century Central Asian intellectual Abdurrauf Fitrat (d. 1938) who championed a new system of education as a way to cultivate "perfectly civil, patriotic Muslims" (Ibid, 247). I have students reflect on the question of how desires such as nationalism and patriotism might be contingent to the emergence of the nation state as the center of modern politics. Would these desires have existed even a couple centuries ago? What would they have looked like? Again, what I am after in posing these questions is to have them ponder, even if indirectly, the interaction of conditions and discourse.

Perhaps the most effective case study for this task is the extract from the 20th century Egyptian thinker/activist Sayyid Qutb's (d.1966) landmark text *Signposts Along the Road* in Zaman's and Euben's anthology of Islamist thought. There are many moments in this text that can be mobilized. Let me offer one particularly cutting example. In pushing for an exclusively Qur'an centered understanding of tradition, Qutb exclaimed that Muslims should read the Qur'an "like a soldier studies 'the daily command' to act immediately upon what he learns in the battlefield" (Zaman and Euben, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 141). "Knowledge is for action" (Ibid), he had memorably continued. Again, these quotes provide an opportunity to have students think about possible connections between approaching the Qur'an as a soldier's manual and new technological conditions such as the efflorescence of print and the concomitant materiality of the Qur'an as a bound printed book.

Having worked through some of these examples, I put on the board a list of different categories of conditions including political (rise of the nation state, colonialism etc.), technological (print, commerce, railways), institutional (new educational institutions etc.), and

epistemic/intellectual (valorization of science, championing of secular reason and progress etc.). In another column, I list the discursive moves of the authors we have examined that depended on and were made possible by any of these conditions. The point of this exercise is to show students that in analyzing discursive arguments, it is important to carefully consider the conditions, the terrain so to say, that make those arguments thinkable in the first place, and that shape the modality of their articulation. This of course is the now familiar conceptual point advanced and executed most forcefully in the work of Talal Asad. A careful navigation of and commentary on illustrative primary texts holds the potential of at least attuning students to such a conceptual orientation that takes seriously the interaction of discourse, conditions, and ultimately, power.

There are two limitations of this method that I should like to briefly mention by way of conclusion. First, while this exercise is effective in demonstrating the dynamicity of tradition by showing ways in which it adapts, responds, and negotiates modern conditions, it is less successful in interrupting a celebratory teleology of modernity. “Ok, Muslim scholars can also desire modern stuff” is an all too convenient conclusion that some students might draw. Constantly reminding them about the power differentials involved in how modern conditions shape indigenous discourses and about the violence of colonial modernity (physical and otherwise) is thus very crucial. It might also be useful to frame modernity as a “narrative category;” a narrative that dramatizes its own claims to have eclipsed the past and tradition. I have found that students respond favorably when asked to think carefully about the kind of story modernity tells about itself and to reflect on the problems attached to that story.

And second, the teaching tactic described in this post makes acutely palpable the absence of a substantive anthology that engages the work of Muslim traditionalist scholars (the *‘ulama’*). Certainly, many among the modernists and Islamists were also trained in traditionalist methods. But still, there will be much to benefit from a reader (like Kurzman’s and Zaman’s and Euben’s) that takes as its focus the writings of modern Muslim traditionalist scholars. Such a resource will be especially useful for discussing continuities and ruptures in Islamic legal and ethical reasoning in the modern period, a topic that adds a particularly rich layer to this discussion.

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