



Islam

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Islam is not an anthropological concept in the way, for example, culture, or even religion, are. People have thought about and discussed Islam long before anthropologists started thinking about it, and those discussions therefore inform anthropological ones. Fieldwork encounters have been important for a textured understanding in context of what it means for specific people in concrete situations to have a relationship with the God of the Qur'an and His revelation to Muhammad. Such contextual nuance is especially important vis-à-vis the highly politicised context of the demand for social scientific knowledge 'about Islam'.

Basics

The Arabic word *islām* describes human recognition, submission, and worship towards the One God of the Qur'an. It has connotations of completeness, health, peace, surrender, and handing over. In its archaic meaning, which prevails in the Qur'an and also remains relevant today, Islam is first and foremost an act humans commit towards God.

Over the following millennium and a half, the word Islam has gained a wider range of meanings, including: the creed and practice established by the divine revelation to Muhammad and the tradition (*sunna*) of Muhammad and his companions; the historical era that began with Muhammad's revelation; the lives and acts of those who associate themselves with Muhammad's revelation, and their traditions of interpreting and living by the revelation; knowledge, cultural production, and social life related to the revelation in one way or another; and the identity of people and peoples associated individually or collectively with that revelation.

Evocations of 'Islam' are often normative: they are somebody's claims about what that creed, practice, [history](#), tradition, knowledge, cultural and social life, and identity *really should be*, as opposed to the mistaken understandings or misguided practices by others. Followers of different branches of Islam – such as the majority Sunni tradition and the minority Shia tradition, both of which encompass numerous more or less distinct traditions and movements within them – have many different views and practices. And yet Muslims generally recognise each other as such even in disagreement. Muslims don't generally brand other Muslims as part or not part of the same faith on account of their practice or non-practice of Islamic doctrines and norms; and debate and disagreement about how to follow these doctrines and norms

correctly are a constant part of the history of Islam. Some Muslims, among them many contemporary Sunni Jihadists, claim that some people following other interpretations of Islam are infidels. Such exclusionist views have gained currency recently but remain a minority position. What is widely considered a bare minimum of [shared](#) faith is remarkably basic: that there is only one God, and that Muhammad is His messenger.

There are widely shared basics of faith and practice that one is likely to encounter in almost any Muslim community. The Qur'an is the central text of Islam, and is generally understood to be the direct speech of God to humans. Muhammad is understood to be the ultimate prophet in a series of revelations involving (among others) Adam, Moses/Musa, David/Dawud, and Jesus/'Isa. Groups of Muslims like the Ahmadiyya, who believe to have received a later, additional prophecy, are often rejected – even not considered Muslims at all – by followers of mainstream traditions. Prophecy is a cornerstone of Islamic faith, with various dimensions. In the mystic tradition (Sufism), the Prophet Muhammad is elevated to an almost super-human medium of divine love and help, whereas in the tradition of normative reasoning, he is the perfect example of proper human conduct. Along with the Qur'an, his acts and sayings (*hadiths*) provide a main source of *shari'a*, the teaching of normative action.

The [Shari'a](#) is often translated as Islamic law, which is misleading. It includes norms that are legal in a contemporary sense (such as marriage, inheritance, contractual procedures, some crimes and punishments), along with norms concerning polite greetings and interaction, and the proper form of worship and ritual. The tables of contents of classical works of *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence, such as the *Muwatta'* of Malik ibn Anas (711-795) give a good sense of these many dimensions. There is no code of 'Islamic law', but various traditions (*madhhabs*) of *fiqh* that provide ways to find judgment or advise.

For example, the so-called 'five pillars' of Islam are all matters of Shari'a: the declaration of faith in God and Muhammad as His prophet; fasting from food, drink, and sex during the daytime in the month of Ramadan (Möller 2005); pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime (Mols & Buitelaar 2015); ritual prayer; and almsgiving.¹⁴ While marriage and divorce, contractual procedures, crime and punishment, polite greetings, and decent clothing are acts between humans (*mu'amalat*), the 'five pillars' are acts of worship (*'ibadat*) directed to God.

When followers of contemporary Islamist movements demand 'the application of the Shari'a'; when modern states codify Shari'a norms on marriage and divorce, prohibitions and punishments; and when these codes are considered at courts: then Shari'a can become Islamic law (Dupret 2006). But a great number of Muslims who may or may not agree with Shari'a-based state law also do live by the Shari'a, in the sense that they practice worship and consider right and wrong in their actions based on Islamic traditions of normative reasoning. Yet others may express a strong Islamic faith but give less concern to living by Shari'a.

Human worship of the God of the Qur'an raises questions about truth and falsehood, right and wrong, and salvation and punishment after Resurrection Day. Anthropologists, however, have usually not seen it as their task to tell what or how Islam should really be. Instead, they have in various ways recorded and tried to understand how humans around the world live in relation to Muhammad's revelation.

Is there an anthropology of Islam?

There is a long-standing debate among anthropologists about how to define Islam as an object of study. I cannot give a full account of that debate here (for overviews, see Bowen 2012; Kreinath 2012). Instead, I will highlight three proposals that are helpful to understand what anthropologists may mean when they claim to study Islam.

Responding to an emerging conversation about how to understand the simultaneous unity and plurality of Islamic faith and practice, Abdul Hamid El-Zein (1977) argued that, anthropologically speaking, Islam could only be understood in context and not be taken for an analytical category. Telling what Islam truly *is* is the job of theologians, not of anthropologists. El-Zein did *not* argue to study locally specific 'Islams'; he was skeptical of such qualifiers as 'local' or 'Moroccan Islam'. Instead, El-Zein proposed to take specific articulations of Islam seriously in their own right, without assuming or establishing a hierarchy between them. El-Zein's proposal is helpful to understand how people may live Islam in ways that do not foreground debates about orthodoxy (Marsden & Retsikas 2013). But how can one account anthropologically for those debates? After all, they are an important part of becoming and being a Muslim.

In an influential essay, Talal Asad proposed to study Islam as a 'discursive tradition' that 'consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history' (1986: 14). Previously, anthropologists had tried to explain Islam's plurality as a socially embedded practice vis-à-vis its unity as a revelation. For Asad, in contrast, plurality is a hallmark of the Islamic tradition, and therefore requires no explanation. Instead, an anthropology of Islam should have as its topic the ongoing attempts by Muslims to maintain coherence and establish correct practice.

Tradition, in Asad's sense, means being grounded in an authoritative past that provides one with [values](#), practices, and concerns to cultivate in the now and towards the future. The [historical](#) formation and scope of the Islamic tradition are not in focus. Asad does not suggest that anthropologists should tell what is correct practice and what not. Rather, he suggests studying how Muslims debate about and establish orthodoxy – that is, the power to successfully claim one's interpretation of the tradition as the correct one. Those who are able to claim orthodoxy and those who appear heretic according to them are all part of the conversation. However, some of Asad's readers have distinguished between 'Islam as a long-standing tradition and [the term's] various contemporary uses' (Hirschkind 1996: 475), thereby excluding heretic

views^[4] from the discursive tradition.

Asad's proposal has been very productive, because it directs attention to a key concern of contemporary movements of Islamic revival and reform: how does one follow correctly the commandments of God and the example of the Prophet?^[5] However, people also engage with God's message to Muhammad in ways that are not about living by the [Shari'a](#) or about establishing coherence. Is it possible to understand them together, without excluding one or the other?

In light of the many overlapping dimensions of Islam, Shahab Ahmed's (2016) book, *What is Islam?* proposes a theory that tries to understand them all at once:

A meaningful conceptualization of 'Islam' as *theoretical object* and *analytical category* must come to terms with – indeed, be *coherent* with – the capaciousness, complexity, and often, *outright contradiction* that obtains within the historical phenomenon that has proceeded from the human engagement with the idea and reality of Divine Communication to Muhammad, the Messenger of God (6, emphases in original).

Ahmed, a scholar of Islamic studies, proposes understanding Islam as the historical totality of different hermeneutical engagements – that is, ways to make sense of, understand, and perhaps also to misunderstand – with the 'text' of God's revelation to Muhammad, the 'pre-text' of an overarching understanding of a God-centric world in which a revelation is understood, and the 'con-text' of all other hermeneutical engagements with the text and pre-text of the revelation (Ahmed 2016: 346; 356; 405). According to Ahmed, learning to live by the Shari'a is Islamic, and so are seemingly counter-intuitive aspects such as classical Persian poems about wine and seductive boys.^[6] Thinking with Ahmed, when Islamophobic European or Hindu nationalists circulate fearful stereotypes of Islam, and when Muslims and others try to counter those stereotypes, this is also Islamic.

The choice for the best theoretical approach does not need to be decided on the level of abstract conceptual debate. Personally, I rather agree with Abdellah Hammoudi's (2009) suggestion that fieldwork should not be a surrogate for theory, but instead an open-ended and often surprising encounter through which anthropologists may learn how God's revelation to Muhammad matters for some human beings in specific situations.

Where is Islam?

Where might such encounters take place? Muslims often understand themselves as being part of a global community (*umma*) – a very large and diverse one, currently counting some 1.8 billion people; that is, close to a quarter of the world's human population. And yet Muslim faith is usually inseparable from the social

worlds in which people grow up and live, and goes hand in hand with [ethnic](#), cultural, doctrinal, and ideological traditions and divisions. Some people are very committed to practicing their faith, others less so. Local and political contexts make for different articulations and experiences of Muslim faith and lives. It is a different experience to be Muslim in, say, Pakistan than in Belgium - in the first, one is part of the dominant category that defines a multi-ethnic nation (Khan 2012); in the second, one faces the stigma of an exceptionalised 'Other' (Fadil 2009). A similar gender ideology of female modesty and shyness (*haya'*, see Mahmood 2005; Sehlikoğlu 2018) is taught in mosques and reading groups in the Middle East and Indonesia alike, but in much of the Middle East it is linked with an ecumenical ethos of male honour through control over female kin (Joseph 1999: 135-39), while in many parts of Indonesia it is not (Srimulyani 2010).

To what degree does it make sense to speak about the lifeworlds, lives, and strivings of different people around the world as Islamic? Certainly it makes sense when they explicitly engage in acts of worship, or try to craft their lives according to what they see as Islamic teachings. But Islamic faith and norms can also inform the ways in which more or less pious people eat their lunch (Tayob 2017) or interpret their [dreams](#) (Mittermaier 2011). Where should one draw the line? Should one draw a line?

Anthropologies of Islam in a *narrow sense* have focused on practices of worship, religious discourses and movements, and ways of becoming a God-fearing person. Dedicated religious groups and institutions therefore offer accessible starting points for fieldwork, especially in urban contexts where a 'community' for anthropologists to study is not easily found. In such contexts, God-oriented strivings and activities are also most pronounced.

Good [ethnographies](#) of Islamic practice in the narrow sense always also tell about the wider societal and political context. Marloes Janson (2013) conducted fieldwork in the Gambia among followers of Tablighi Jamaat, a global proselytising movement originally based in South Asia. Members of the movement travel near and far to call other Muslims to follow the proper teachings of their faith, which they understand in a conservative and purity-oriented way, but with a conscious avoidance of politics. In the Gambia, members of the movement can enter conflicts with their families when they reject communal traditions of life-cycle celebrations and ostentatious [gift-giving](#). In turn, they may be seen as behaving in weird and improper ways, for example, when Tablighi men share in [household](#) duties that are considered women's business in order to give their wives time to spread the call. Studies of religious movements often provide good accounts of urban living, be it in the milieu of Hizbollah's ^{us} supporters who search for spiritual and material progress at once in the southern suburbs of Beirut (Deeb 2006), or members of a Muslim youth organization for whom their religious commitment is linked with striving for successful living in Berlin (Bendixsen 2013).

However, one can also encounter Islam in a rural community where faith and ritual practice are

inseparable from communal life (Marsden 2005; Kloos 2017), or in a restaurant where people come to eat halal food¹⁰ (Tayob 2017). In such places, anthropologists are also more likely to meet some of those people who do not frequent organised religious groups. The list could be continued endlessly, for in a *wider sense*, most good ethnographies among people of Muslim faith also tell something about Islam, but it is often impossible to isolate Islam as a separate topic.

Thus, in many parts of the world, the God of the Qur'an is a third party in most transactions and polite speech that is often indistinguishable from prayers. The polite answer to 'how are you?' in Arabic is 'praise to God', meaning that God is to be praised for good and bad times alike. Running a small business in Egypt means that one must equally consider supply and demand, Chinese imports and currency exchange rates, Islamic understandings of legitimate income and mutual trust, and political and family networks of patronage (Ismail 2013). Maintaining peace among neighbours in Pakistan involves mutual [care](#), cultivation of emotions, female modesty, and male provider roles – all of which are also Islamic [values](#), and may be at the same time articulated by neighbours as markers of their social class or ethnic group (Ring 2006). Nightlife in a small town in northern Ivory Coast is structured by the way Islamic norms of public interaction dominate the daytime, confining drinking to the discretion of night (Chappatte 2017).

The twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are marked by a global demographic shift from villages to cities. Among many Muslims, this move has been accompanied by a shift of theological dominance: since the late-twentieth century, localised traditions, Sufi movements, and also [secular](#) lifestyles of old urban populations have become contested, influenced, and sometimes replaced by a worldwide 'Islamic revival', i.e. the proliferation of strivings to make lives and societies more in line with a ritually purified and [morally](#) disciplined understanding of Islamic scripture. Rural-urban migrants and urban middle classes have been at the forefront of revivalist movements, and consequently are also at the focus of most contemporary anthropologies of Islam.

Everyday ethics and exceptional politics

At the height of the Islamic revival in Egypt in the 1990s, an increasing number of women attended study circles at mosques. They were something of a puzzle for Egyptian and foreign researchers of feminist inclination. Were they unable to resist the pressure of a patriarchal religious movement? Or were they perhaps subverting that rule from inside by reinterpreting Islamic teachings? Saba Mahmood (2005) conducted fieldwork with women in lecture circles in Cairo, and found neither to be true. She encountered women who wanted to be better at submitting to the will of God. This was not easy and required active learning. These women clearly had [agency](#). But they did not resist the divine or male authorities they faced.

Mahmood argues that Cairene women's 'pedagogies of piety' needed to be understood in the framework of a discursive tradition (see above) that provided models and techniques towards becoming a 'docile subject'.

Such [ethical](#) self-making – that is, a reflective work on oneself to become a certain kind of person – is a key concern of Islamist political movements that aim to change society and state, as well as pietist movements that encourage more and better worship.

Part of a wider anthropological turn towards ethics in ordinary life (e.g. Lambek 2010), Mahmood's intervention has inspired a wave of studies foregrounding Muslim women's pious, ethical strivings (e.g. Huq 2009; Masquelier 2009; Hafez 2011; Jouili 2015; Liberatore 2016), and has established piety and ethics as key concepts through which anthropologists try to understand Muslim lives.

Within that same turn, some anthropologists have highlighted the cultivation of a complex set of skills. Magnus Marsden (2005) describes how young Sunni and Ismaili men in Chitral, northwestern Pakistan, learn to skillfully balance and shift between different forms of cultivation, including religious debates, the pleasures of music and poetry, and careful considerations about when to act in what way, which feelings to show and which to conceal and when. In my own research in Egypt (Schielke 2015), I have argued that strivings for perfection and purity are inherently fragile. The intense ethical work described by Mahmood may be of short duration, and ethical strivings may more likely take the shape of temporal 'islands of certainty' that allow one to be committed to God in one moment, and follow other moral aims (and also amoral ones) at other moments.

In reply, Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando (2015) have critiqued approaches that, according to them, mistakenly treat religion and everyday life as separate entities, and normalise a liberal-secular ideal of [resistance](#) to religious norms, while possibly pathologising followers of Salafi and other revivalist movements. In a direct reply to that debate, Lara Deeb (2015) has suggested to 'think together' the power of normative discourses to structure everyday life on the one hand, and the open-ended productivity of everyday life that complicates normative discourses and shapes life trajectories, on the other. A good example of how they can be thought together is a book by Daan Beekers and David Kloos (2018) that shows how experiences of moral failure can also motivate and enforce pious strivings.¹⁴

There is a deeper, political layer to this debate that is not easily resolved, however. Fadil's and Fernando's critique is explicitly directed at the ongoing scandalization and problematization of Muslims in Europe, and the associated political search to tell 'good Muslims' from 'bad' ones. A European nationalist discourse demands Muslims to 'act normal' (in the words of the Dutch Prime Minister Rutte). In places like Pakistan and Egypt, in contrast, the same revivalist movements that are scandalised in Europe have successfully established themselves as mainstream, normal models for Islamic religiosity. They have partly marginalised ways of life, theologies, and practices that until recently had been normal, even dominant. In some countries – notably Saudi Arabia – they provide the religious ideology of the ruling elite. Just like Egypt and Pakistan can't provide a model of what it's like to be a Muslim in Europe, so also France and Belgium may not help to understand Muslim living in the Middle East and South Asia.

The way Islam is exceptionalised in European and Northern American contexts requires special attention, because it is the political backdrop of the current interest in knowledge 'about Islam'. The global 'war on terror' has generated a strategic interest for security-relevant knowledge (Deeb & Winegar 2016). Social conflicts related to migration in Western Europe have become addressed increasingly in terms of religion instead of [ethnicity](#) or nationality (Spielhaus 2013). Fear and hatred towards Muslims – known as Islamophobia – has proliferated (Bangstad 2014). In such a highly politicised [atmosphere](#), it is the task of anthropologists and other social scientists to also ask critical questions about the political desire to know and 'domesticate' Muslims and Islam (Sunier 2014; Amir-Moazami 2018).

For example, anti-radicalization programmes and radicalization studies have recently proliferated to counter the 'radicalization' of young Muslims (that of European nationalists appears to cause somewhat less concern). But what is radicalization? It remains unclear. Based on [ethnographic](#) research in Belgium and the Netherlands, Nadia Fadil, Martijn de Koning, and Francesco Ragazzi (2018) argue that the concept of radicalization has no content and explains nothing – but it compels political institutions and social actors to do something about it. And by doing something about it, they generate societal realities. Sometimes this can be helpful for the families of youths who have joined Jihadist militia, but often it does not contribute towards an understanding of and solution for violent conflicts. In the worst case, it can structure and justify a generalised suspicion of Muslims without offering productive solutions. Some anti-radicalization programmes deal with 'radicalization' as if it were a sort of virus – which renders invisible the political, societal, and personal conflicts that make it reasonable from some people's point of view to enter the path of violent struggle to promote their political, religious, or other causes.

Frightening as such militant movements are, one can understand them better by asking open-ended questions. Anthropologists working with people who may sympathise with or join militant movements have found out that militancy is but one possible path among others in the difficult struggle for radical moral purity (de Koning 2018), and that while some people recently moved to Syria to join the Jihadist war, others may have gone there to lead a God-fearing married life (Navest *et al.* 2016). European nationalist media and politicians have sometimes mistaken such research for endorsement of terrorists, and some researchers have faced media outrage and political pressure as a result of their work (Moors forthcoming).

Humans and God

In addition to His disciplining role as the Commander about right and wrong, the God of the Qur'an is also the Creator, Protector, Provider, Healer, and the one who decides about life and [death](#). Everyday use of invocations as greetings is a way to call upon God to be a third party in [relations](#) of trust, a helper in need, a healer of the sick, and an ally against enemies – not only enemies of Islam, but also one's intimate enemies among neighbours and family. Migrants and refugees who leave their homelands search for their God-given share of worldly income (*rizq*) (Gaibazzi 2015). They and others take risks or endure, trusting in

their God who has written everyone a destiny which they do not know, but will actively fulfill (Hamdy 2009; Elliot 2016; Menin & Elliot 2018). These and other dimensions of faith include [ethical](#), normative aspects but cannot be reduced to them.

This capaciousness is evident also in core Islamic acts of worship. Ritual prayer (*salat*) consists of a sequence of prostrations towards God that one should undertake in a state of ritual purity five times a day, either alone or in congregation with others. It can be an individualised communication with God (Haeri 2013), part of an ethical project of pious becoming (Mahmood 2005), or a way to address – but not necessarily to solve – the moral tensions of life (Simon 2009). Prayer can also be a powerful gathering of a community under God, a ‘fixed point of Islamic tradition’ (Henkel 2005) that can mobilise political projects but also transcends them. Also, for those who don't pray or don't do so regularly, the expectation that one should pray (if not now, then at a later stage in life) can structure their life trajectories (Debevec 2018; Kloos 2017).

Based on an obligation to give a part of one's income (ca. 2 per cent annually) as alms (*zakat*) to the poor and needy, Islamic [charity](#) stands in an interesting contrast to [humanitarianism](#). Although alms are given to other humans, they are an act of worship (*ibada*) towards God. Giving alms does not require (but can involve) compassion or attempts to overcome social inequality. As an ethical practice, Islamic charity is thus not only about acting towards others and being a certain kind of person: it has its main focus on God and one's own reward in life after death (Schaeublin 2016; Mittermaier 2014; 2019).

Prayer and alms are material, visible practices, although alms are usually given discreetly. However, the invisible realm (*ghayb*) also is an important part of Islamic faith and lives. God is omnipresent yet invisible, which is further underlined by the taboo on images of God. Instead, the Arabic word for God, Allah, is very present as calligraphy (see Starrett 1995). The reality of angels and spirits (*jinn*) is considered an orthodox doctrine across Islamic traditions, but there is no agreement about whether and how humans can be in contact with them (Drieskens 2008; Doostdar 2018).

[Dreams](#) are the most important way of contact with the invisible. The appearance of the Prophet Muhammad in a dream vision is understood as a true message from elsewhere, and not just an expression of the human subconscious. In her work on dream interpretation in Cairo, Amira Mittermaier (2011) argues that such dream visions point beyond both the liberal fiction of the autonomous subject as well as the religious ideal of the disciplined pious subject, and instead highlight the dialogical dimension of ethics as an encounter – often a puzzling one that can also unsettle anthropologists' professional certainties (Ewing 1994; Willerslew & Suhr 2018).

Followers of Sufism often understand the [Shari'a](#) as the visible (*zahir*) surface of Islam, accompanied by a hidden (*batin*) truth (*haqiqa*) that followers of the mystical path strive to access. In Sufi ‘paths’ (*tariqa*, often translated as ‘orders’ or ‘brotherhoods’) the ‘friends of God’ or saints take an intermediary position

between humans and God (Werbner & Basu 1998; Mayeur-Jaouen 2005; Soares 2005). Among Sunni Muslims, this has resulted in a disagreement between those who see the friends of God as a legitimate part of Islamic devotion, and those who consider their veneration a heresy that borders on polytheism (*shirk*). Sufi pilgrimages generate a space and time of celebration markedly different from everyday life, which can be seen as backward and un-Islamic by those who equate modernity and Islamic faith with order and discipline (Schielke 2012). And yet, the idea of learning to 'taste' (a Sufi metaphor for knowledge that is not mediated by language) the invisible layers of Islam remains compelling and productive also in an age of reformist revivals (Abenante & Vicini 2017). Rather than being a binary alternative to a Shari'a-based life, Sufism and other metaphysical pursuits offer themselves as an additional dimension, an invitation to explore invisible realms (Doostdar 2018).

The search for the invisible is an embodied practice, just like learning to live by the Shari'a is. For example, embodied vocal performance is central to *dhikr* (remembrance of God), a Sufi meditation based on rhythmic movement, speaking out names of God, and devotional poetry (Abenante 2013). This has made Sufism a rich ground of devotional music (Frishkopf 2001). Music is a crucial part of Muslim popular cultures and devotional practices around the world, but is also considered illicit by many (van Nieuwkerk *et al.* 2016). While music remains controversial, [voice](#) is central to core practices of worship. Recitation of the Qur'an is an indispensable part of ritual prayer, and a highly valued religious [art](#) that can take elaborate melodic forms (Frishkopf 2009). Preaching and the call to prayer rely on the aesthetics of the voice as much as they do on the message (Hirschkind 2006; Tamimi Arab 2017).

The body is also the site of another very important relation that humans have with God: sickness and healing. Be it with traditional techniques of healing and [divination](#) (Sündermann 2006; Graw 2006) or among [professionals](#) and patients in contemporary biomedical and psychiatric therapies, sickness raises pragmatic questions about what works, and ethical questions about good living. It can be a compelling reminder of God's power over human destinies. Unlike in political conflicts, where Islamic and [secular](#) visions of life can be pitted against each other, the search for healing tends to be integrative. In Egypt today, it can relate to molecular and microbiological factors, Islamic [ontologies](#) of body, self and spirit, the will of God, witchcraft and envy, politics, and ethical conduct alike. These aspects typically come in combination, and one of them seldom excludes the others (Hamdy 2012; Tabishat 2014).

Sickness and healing thereby remind us that Islam is not so much a separate object or practice that can be understood on its own, but is rather an inseparable part or dimension of many different ways to be in the world, importantly including ways to expect life after death. As a part or dimension of life, Islam constantly intertwines with other parts and dimensions, shapes them and is shaped by them – sometimes in inspiration, sometimes in conflict, and sometimes in modes that are not easy to name but are simply good to live with.

Women and men

In her book *Veiled sentiments*, Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) tells about Bedouins from the Awlad Ali [tribe](#) in Egypt's sparsely populated [Mediterranean](#) coast. The Egyptian government was busy turning them from nomads to permanent settlers, in part so as to control them better. But they remained staunchly and proudly people of their own kind. Bedouin men, they asserted, were real men who had a sense of honour unlike the people of the Nile valley whom they considered effeminate. Honour provided a gendered language that described how men would not show their emotions, and would protect and control their womenfolk. But it was not the only language in circulation. The women with whom Abu-Lughod spent much time took pride in their husbands' honour – which was always dependent on the acts of their female kin. Yet, they also composed and sang poetry that told about passion, suffering, and other emotions that might not be quite as honourable. Abu-Lughod argues that honour and poetry both provide partially true accounts that depend on each other, yet cannot be reduced to one another.

Neither honour nor poetry are Islamic in a narrow sense. They weave together Islamic [values](#), Bedouin custom, and wider Middle Eastern and Mediterranean traditions, as well as conditions of livelihood in such a way that it is difficult (and perhaps also not helpful) to tell them apart. Abu-Lughod's book paved the way for an understanding of gender relations that is not reduced to a binary of oppression and liberation, and that brings together intimate relations and social hierarchies in equal measure (for an overview, see Sehlikoğlu 2018).

Today, [relations](#) between men and women are among the most important concerns advanced by movements of Islamic revival. The same is true of those who are critical or fearful of the Islamic faith and norms, and also those who hope to rethink Islamic teachings along emancipatory lines (such as Islamic feminists, see Mir-Hosseini 2006). The position, behaviour, and appearance of women in particular raises emotions on different sides.¹⁴

In Saba Mahmood's aforementioned work, women's striving to be God-fearing unsettled the liberal assumption that 'everybody wants to be free'. In European debates on Islam, Muslim women who willingly follow a conservative [moral](#) discipline cause puzzlement, because they fit neither the role of the helpless victim, nor that of the freedom-striving emancipated woman (Fadil 2018). Conversely, the Islamic revival has encouraged women to act as responsible moral agents in their own right, rather than as extensions of their families (Karlsson Minganti 2007). This is a form of authority and assertive action that, in turn, does not fit either to the role of the committed and obedient Muslim daughter or wife, nor to that of the sinful improper woman.

In her more recent work, Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) has argued that the Western desire to 'save' Muslim women is more likely to serve imperial political aims than to actually help oppressed women. I taught her

book in Egypt to an audience of young, highly educated people, more than half of them female. Some of them very much agreed with her argument. Others disagreed, and argued that her proposal did not help them in their feminist struggle either. One participant took no sides, and instead told that Abu-Lughod inspired her to reflect about how being a Muslim structures her way of being a woman.

Such questions go beyond issues having to do with [agency](#) and [resistance](#). Some examples: when women's covering dress (*hijab*, literally 'veil', usually taken to mean a covering of the body except of the face, hands, and feet) was reintroduced in urban milieus in the late-twentieth century, it was initially a form of anti-fashion, promoting female modesty and invisibility. With its popularization, however, the *hijab* has become a form of Islamic fashion, which includes the commerce, desire, and vanity that characterise the industry (Jones 2010; Tarlo & Moors 2013). A religious life can also mean that one seeks to have pleasure and desire in a halal way. Turkish women's recent interest in [sports](#) is a way to pursue personal wellbeing without openly challenging female roles (Sehlikoğlu 2015). Thriving Islamic cafeterias and restaurants in southern Beirut invite conservative Shia Muslim families and youth to participate in leisure activities (Deeb & Harb 2013). Different ways of talking about sex and desire exist in Egypt, but new sexuality counselling services (some of them provided by Islam-inspired groups) tell that there is a need to 'break the silence', which actually means learning to speak about desire in a therapeutic framework (Kreil 2016). Young men and women in Morocco, who seek to marry a partner they love, imagine a better world ruled by affection and [care](#). But they are also acutely aware that God's predestination may set another path for them, and that love stories are often unhappy ones (Menin 2015).

Reform and critique

Recently, some [secularists](#), critical of [values](#) promoted by conservative and revivalist Islamic currents, have called for a 'reformation' of Islam. This demand is problematic for two reasons. First, another [historical](#) movement of reformation, the Christian Reformation in the sixteenth century, initially resulted in a century of devastating wars – something hardly worth imitating. Second, most Islamic currents against whom secularist critics address their demand are in fact the outcome of a successful Islamic reform that began in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For modern Muslims, as among Christians since the sixteenth century, reform more often than not means a purer, stricter, more encompassing practice of faith. Powerful reformist theologies today include the Sunni Deobandi school of theology in South Asia, and various Sunni currents such as Salafis and Wahhabis (not all followers of these latter movements accept these labels) that strive to live as exactly as possible by what they understand to be the example of the Prophet and his companions (Meijer 2009). Reformist theologies have inspired political movements like the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world and Jamaat-i Islami in South Asia, and also militant groups like the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the so-called Islamic State. Reformist theologies are not inherently militant, however, just as conservative and mystical theologies are not inherently peaceful. More often than not, though, they offer

compelling ways to live an 'enchanted modern' life (Deeb 2006).

School education and upward social mobility have proven to be powerful allies of the Islamic revival (Eickelman 1992; Starrett 1998). Islamic schools that combine traditions of religious learning with contemporary national curricula promise a spiritual [moral](#) education and knowledge towards social advancement (Hefner & Qasim Zaman 2007). Religious movements of various colourings have proven very media-savvy – some by appropriating commercial formats, others by creating parallel 'counterpublics' (Meyer & Moors 2006; Hirschkind 2006; Moll 2018). Southeast Asia is a forerunner region in the Islamization of [neoliberal](#) capitalism – and neoliberalization of Islam (Hefner 2012). Fashionable styles of conservative religiosity fuse with global consumer cultures to promote a godly life in style (Jones 2010; Hew 2018). A thriving sector of interest-free Islamic [finance](#) offers halal profits (Rudnyckyj 2018). Training programs for company employees promote both capitalist profit-maximising as well as a pious care for salvation (Rudnyckyj 2009). In the Arab Gulf states, migrant [workers](#) often find appeal in the combination of cosmopolitan mobility, flashy consumerism, the prospect of ascent in social class, and revivalist theologies of [ethical](#) self-discipline that are opposed to localised communal traditions (Osella & Osella 2007; Stephan-Emmrich & Mirzoev 2016).

Secularism in Muslim lands has usually not meant a decline of religion, but more often its subordination to political imperatives (Asad 2003). Egypt, for example, is not secular in the sense that religion would be rendered private, but it can be seen as secular in the sense that the nation state is the primary instance of power (Agrama 2012; Mahmood 2016). In Western Europe, by contrast, where Islam is a minority faith, secularism vis-à-vis Islam has often entailed the attempt to 'domesticate' Muslims and Islam towards an imagined European norm (Bowen 2007; Fernando 2014; Sunier 2014).

Islam and government are interlinked in many ways, only some of them secular. Many states, amongst which we also find some western ones, enforce and standardise what they and their constituencies understand to be correct Islamic practice (Müller 2017; Dahlgren 2013). State institutions take over key religious responsibilities such as determining the beginning and end of Ramadan based on the sighting of the new moon (Long 2017). Reflecting the neoliberal shift of power from governments to international standards, halal food has become subject to [bureaucratized](#) international certification procedures (Tayob 2017).

A key insight of Asad's discursive tradition concept (see above) is that debate and disagreement *are* the Islamic tradition. Islam as a lived practice involves ongoing reflection, discussion, and critique (Kresse 2007; Khan 2012; Aishima 2016; Ahmad 2017). Given the tremendous amount of sophisticated cultural production and knowledge by Muslim intellectuals for over a millennium, this should not come as a surprise. Critical thinking and debate are not inherently secular – but they are also not necessarily emancipatory. Whether religious or secular, grounded in Islamic or other faiths, they hinge upon structures

of power and ethical premises. They open avenues to question some things, and pose others as unquestionable.

Sometimes, religion can be explicitly marked as outside of debate. Matthew Carey (2012) describes how Amazigh (Berber) villagers in a mountaneous region of Morocco entertain pluralistic and often heated debates about local issues – and carefully avoid linking them with their faith. For them, Islam is a site of absolute truth. Evoking it could put an end to pluralistic disagreement.

Furthermore, not all debates are as consequential as others. When men in eastern Africa gather to chew qat (a mild stimulant) in the afternoons, they often become involved in debates that have the intrinsic pleasure of debating itself as their main purpose (Desplat 2016).

Islam as a critical engagement has inspired many anthropologists to think against the grain of secular, religious, and other assumptions. Anthropological theories about Islam have always carried acknowledged or unacknowledged theological and political sympathies and antipathies, and anthropological debates may echo theological ones (Moll 2018). But there is more space for dialogue today than there was in the past. Even if unsolved problems remain, it has also become easier to combine Muslim faith and mainstream academic research. While it indeed is not the anthropologists' job to give a normative account of Islam, they may nevertheless have some constructive critiques to offer.

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[1] More on prayer and alms comes later in the section, 'Humans and God'.

[2] Hirschkind takes issue in particular with the liberal hermeneutics of Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd (1943-2010), see, e.g. Abu Zayd 1991.

[3] More on this question below.

[4] They are commonly interpreted as allegories of a mystical union with God, and they thrive on the ambiguity of two possible readings.

[5] A Shia Islamist party and a main power-holder in Lebanon.

[6] Food is considered *halal*, i.e. permissible, when it contains no blood, pork meat, or alcohol, and when the meat comes from animals that are slaughtered by cutting their throat with a knife.

[7] For other examples, see, e.g., Dupret *et al.* 2012.

[8] Men and masculinities have received attention more recently, e.g. Ghannam 2013.