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OBJECTIONS TO DEVOTION? (OR CAN THE MUSLIM SPEAK?)

Shawkat M. Toorawa

In a splendid essay titled "The Object of Devotion: Fundamentalist Perspectives on the Medieval Past," Suzanne Conklin Akbari observes in *Religion & Literature* 42.1–2 that later scrutinizing of the choices she made when writing her first book, *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory*, revealed to her that she had engaged in a "relentless exclusion of devotional or theological texts" (301).¹ Akbari had earlier assumed that there was a "complete disjunction between the extreme Protestant millenarianism" of her childhood and "the moderate Islam" of her adulthood (301), but now realized that she had been drawn to allegory precisely because "the pleasures of the figurative word" had for so long been "held off by fundamentalist modes of reading" (304). I am grateful to the editors of *R&L* for inviting me to reflect on Akbari's essay and also on the larger question animating the special issue in which her essay appears, namely *the propriety of scholarship in the humanities produced by those with faith commitments*. Indeed, this affords me an opportunity to put into print a few inchoate thoughts I have before only expressed in private. And though I agree with Akbari that recounting one's own intellectual formation is something of an exercise in narcissism (300), it is with an autopsy that I too (must) begin.

I grew up in an observant, cosmopolitan family, an expatriate child who was one of a handful of Muslims at an English school in Paris, then one of a very small number of Muslims at an international school in Singapore, but nevertheless immersed also in the culture(s) of other Muslim and South Asian Singaporeans. My family watched TV and films, went to the theater,

attended musical performances, listened to records, and at the same time put up no pictures of people in our home, did not wear shorts (except at the beach), or eat proscribed foods. Periodically I would visit extended family in Mauritius, where my parents had grown up, and which they had both left for India/England to find their place in the world. When the time came, I left Singapore for college. Unlike my peers, who picked the “course” they were taking in the U.K. (law, geography, biology, etc.), I chose to go to the U.S. where I could decide later what I would study, since I had no idea at the time what specific road to travel. A few years later, to the question, “What are you studying?” my reply would turn out to be, “Arabic.” Fellow college students, extended family, friends and acquaintances, strangers, all responded to this news in the same way—something along the lines of, “Oh, you study Islam.”

Love for Literature

I did take one Islamic civilization course and also an upper-level seminar on the Qur’an (both with a Jesuit professor; more on the Qur’an below), but I was not “studying Islam.” Most of my classes were on Arabic literary criticism, Arabic literary history, medieval Europe, French literature, “mirrors for princes,” even astronomy. People still would not—could not—understand that I was drawn to Arabic literature the way one was drawn to French literature, or African literature, or Latin American literature. My non-Muslim friends studying Arabic did not get the kind of response I got, but in my case I *had* to be studying Islam—because I was, after all, an observant Muslim who was studying Arabic. That my professors and mentors were not Muslim was immaterial. That the poets I studied were typically atheists or Christians was immaterial. That I went on to write a doctoral thesis and book about Ibn Abi Tahir, a ninth-century figure who, unlike most of his peers, did not write a single book on religion or religious matters, and who did not seem to have any interest in religion at all, for that matter, was immaterial.²

My parents, on the other hand, did not think I was studying Islam. Perhaps because my mother could picture me tackling and mastering the difference between the *māḍī* (perfect) and the *muḍāriʿ* (imperfect) just as I had learned the difference between the *passé simple* and the *passé composé*. Perhaps because my father could imagine me plumbing Arabic literature for an analog to, say, “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree: / Where Alph, the sacred river, ran / Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea” (Coleridge 1–5), lines he had taught me when I was quite

young. From my parents I also learned, “Ek hi saf mein khare ho gaye Mahmud-o-Ayaz, na koi banda raha aur na koi banda Nawaz” (“Mahmud and Ayaz stood together in the same flank, / The ruler and the ruled forget the difference in their rank,” Iqbal 41–42). My parents were believing Muslims who spared no effort in teaching me the precepts and practices of Islam. It was, however, equally important to them to impart other values: the virtue of decency (to all people); the importance of generosity (especially to children and the indigent); the need for humility (before God, before Caesar, and before all people); gratitude to God (both for who I was and for what I had been given); and, for want of a better way of putting it, a respect for the human, the humane, the humanities. Three times a week, Maulvi M. S. Babu Sahib came to our apartment to tutor me privately. He taught me classical religious law through a Hanafite lawbook written in Arwi (Tamil written in Arabic), and debated any question I would raise, from theodicy to organ donation. At school, the teachers who exerted the most influence on me had me reading Charles Causley (“Then I saw the crystal poet / leaning on the old sea-rail; / In his breast lay death the lover, / in his head the nightingale,” 13–16), Christopher Marlowe (“Why this is hell, nor am I out of it,” I.iii.80), and Albert Camus (“Le médecin, ennemi de Dieu: il lutte contre la mort,” 129).

So perhaps it comes as no surprise that early in my undergraduate studies I felt empowered to study whatever I wanted, as no surprise that I was drawn to literature and to topics medieval, and that for my masters thesis I elected to translate a poetry collection by someone still regarded as the most significant living Arab poet.³ Or is it that I did precisely what Suzanne Akbari did? Early in her essay she observes that the “efforts of those of us who teach and study medieval literature...to write about the past are colored by our own experience, no matter how hard we work to push that experience to the margins of consciousness” (Akbari 299). When I “picked” Arabic, did I studiously avoid classes on Islam? Did I gravitate toward Christian poets? When I decided to write about Ibn Abi Tahir, is what appealed to me about him precisely the fact that he was not interested in religion, and that he wrote irreverent verse? If I had chosen French or African or Latin American literature, no one would have assumed that I was studying Islam (it should go without saying that the distinction is crucial: to study Shakespeare is not to study Christianity). Why had I picked Arabic? In doing so, was I forcing the question, forcing myself to study a literature in fact steeped in Islam, *because* I was desperate to disaggregate and dis-identify Arabic and Islam?

I spent the next several years emphasizing to anyone who would listen that I was not a scholar of Islam, that my field of study was not Islam, that

Arabic literature was not Islamic studies. That did not stop people from describing me as an Islamicist, even though I was *sensu strictu* an Arabist. And, because of world events, soon enough the question transformed: “You’re an Arabist? Do you study the Middle East?” I went from being a Muslim who studied Islam to an Arabist who studied the contemporary Arab world. In 1990, in my second year teaching Arabic at Duke University, I received a call from a Durham newspaper asking me for my “expert” opinion on Operation Desert Storm. I curtly asked the reporter whether the newspaper had contacted the English department when the Falklands Crisis erupted. I later did teach an “Introduction to Islamic Civilization” class as Duke (for my sins?), a wonderful learning experience for me, but one that blurred lines I had spent—and would spend—so much energy trying to keep sharply distinct.

Two decades and two institutions later, I now see more clearly that different constituencies take responsibility for placing burdens on Muslims teaching Arabic texts in the academy. Most Muslims assume that because I am a Muslim teaching/researching Arabic literature, I am actually teaching Islam, and if I deny this, for them it is because I am uncomfortable admitting it. (Many non-Muslims assume that because I am a “brown” person teaching/researching Arabic literature, I am Arab.) When I am occasionally called upon to teach Islamic Civilization—as I was at Duke, and as I have done a few times at Cornell—I acquire a new set of burdens. Most Muslim students assume I am an objective native informant. Many non-Muslims assume I am not objective (I know this from the tenor of the questions I am asked).

Holy Qur’an

On the first day of “Introduction to the Qur’an,” I tell the students that we will together study the Qur’an the way we would study *Hamlet*. I do this to set the tone for ensuing analysis and discussion. But I have two agendas, besides doing the best possible job to teach the students about the Qur’an: namely, to have Muslim students see that non-Muslims have said important things about the Qur’an, and to have non-Muslim students see that Muslims have said important things about the Qur’an. One might reasonably wonder: why these agendas? My answer can be framed in the form of questions: are Muslims who teach and write about Arabic, Arabic literature, the Qur’an, Islam, taken seriously and seen to be objective? Is the burden to establish one’s objectivity as great for a Christian teaching a course on medieval Christianity, for a Jewish professor of Jewish philosophy, for a practicing Buddhist instructor of Tibetan? Alas, the answer is no.

I am (too) often asked how I “separate” being Muslim from my objects of study. I want to say, “What is there to separate?” but if earlier in my career I could invoke a strong distinction between Arabic literature and Islam, this has become far more difficult now that I have started to write about (and translate parts of) the Qur’an. As far as I can tell, I am one of a very small number of people interested in the Qur’anic lexicon *qua* lexicon, that is, someone interested in the words, the word choices, the word placements, the end-words, in short, how the Qur’an is put together, how it means, that is, as opposed to someone interested in exegesis, commentary, or law. In my articles and essays about the Qur’an, I make a plea for giving it the rhetorical attention it deserves, for paying attention in particular to *hapax legomena*, rare words, and rhyme.⁴ In a recent article, I showed, for instance, that close consideration of the repeated words in sura 19 of the Qur’an (“Mary”) underscores what one scholar has termed the Qur’an’s aural multidimensionality, and that by producing a word-list, a hitherto unnoticed aspect of the sura was revealed, namely, a focus on the power and nature of speech and non-speech (“Surat Maryam”). None of my work on the Qur’an has real dogmatic or theological impact or purchase, so I wonder whether here too I have not forced a question. I do not see how I can deny that among the reasons I picked the study of Qur’anic words—admittedly an area generally in real need of greater scholarly and rigorous attention—is my desire, I daresay need, to demonstrate the possibility of separating the study of the Qur’an from the study of Islam. But there is something else. Could it be that as an observant Muslim, or, more to the point, an observed-to-be observant Muslim, I am looking for a way to say to the academy, to Muslims, to non-Muslims, that it is possible for a believer to be both observant and objective, to be both passionate and dispassionate, to be both religious and rigorous?

ἀποκάλυψις

My beard gives me away, but not much else. I wear superhero t-shirts; I have The Clash’s “London Calling” as my ringtone; I teach classes on the raunchy Arabian Nights and on apocalyptic science fiction. I did not used to think that I do any of this to make a particular point: I genuinely like *Ironman* and I teach *The Watchmen*; I rarely work without Dire Straits or Coldplay or Paul Simon playing in the background; I like Penelope Cruz, a lot. But maybe I am kidding myself. Maybe what I internalized at a young age continues to play out. Maybe I want my colleagues, my students, even our teenage daughters, to see that it is absolutely, utterly, and serenely pos-

sible to have devotion and to be a serious and successful scholar of Arabic literature.

When I was five I spoke only French. A few years later I also spoke English, and the fruit-seller opposite our apartment building in Paris began to call me “le petit anglais.” He did not call me “le petit musulman,” or “le petit indien,” though he would have had evidence for this and been justified in doing so (we were Muslims, my mother wore saris, etc.). If I can get anyone—everyone—to see me as a scholar who teaches Arabic literature, rather than as a Muslim who does so, and if I can, unburdened, be allowed to fashion my own modes and idioms of (re)presentation, then we will have come a long way. That would be a real apocalypse.

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NOTES

1. Akbari’s essay is subdivided into “Love for Leviticus,” “From Holy Image to Holy Dust,” and “Awaiting Apocalypse,” which my subsections, like my title, mirror.

2. *Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur and Arabic Writerly Culture*, but cf. my “Muhammad, Muslims and Islamophiles in Dante’s *Commedia*.”

3. A decision a professor of Arabic literature at an “Islamic” university queried as follows: “Why do you study the poetry of a heretic?”

4. Including my own “Hapless Hapaxes and Luckless Rhymes” in a previous issue of this journal.

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HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT:
RELIGION AND MEDIEVALISM
IN THE BRITISH WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

Carolyn P. Collette

Barbara Newman's essay "Coming Out of the (Sacristy) Closet" raises a number of provocative issues about the relationship among religion, tradition, history, and historicization. Throughout her essay the past appears liminal, on the horizon of experience, a distant yet compelling presence. No surprise, therefore, that early in the essay she addresses the essential work of historicization as an agenda of loosening the past's hold on the present (282). Later in her essay she cites L. P. Harley's famous insight, "the past is a foreign country, they do things different there," weighing this concept against the idea of "continuity too easily claimed...identity too glibly assumed" (284). I want to pursue this nexus of thinking about the continuities between past and present in reference to medievalism, religion, and the distance we impute to "history." To do so I draw on my current research project, which offers a template of historicization that claims the medieval past as directly connected to the present, and situates both past and present within the compass of God's will for human progress.

For the last three years I have been editing the papers of Emily Wilding Davison, a militant suffragette who is best known for moving onto the racetrack at the 1913 Derby, apparently to stop the king's horse, and for being spectacularly, fatally injured in the attempt. Fairly or unfairly, that event has defined her for history. But her writing reveals more complexity than the singular event of June, 1913 could possibly suggest. Highly individual, the relatively large body of her extant writing—essays, published and unpublished, and numerous letters in support of woman suffrage sent