



Anglophone Islam: A New Conceptual Category

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Accepted: 4 July 2022
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Abstract

The field of ‘Islamic Studies’, like ‘Religious Studies’, is a broad-church. It includes a number of epistemological and ontological positions associated with a range of disciplines. The diversity inherent in a category such as ‘Islamic Studies’ is challenged by a bifurcation of two predominant approaches found within the field, the textual and the sociological. In this paper, I seek to propose a new concept for contemporary Islamic studies, that of Anglophone Islam, which will allow a broader range of scholarship to be contextualised in relation to each other. The concept also opens a new set of questions to be explored by scholars of Islamic studies. It will be of particular interest to scholars involved in contemporary Islamic studies in fields such as American Muslim studies, British Muslim studies and European Muslim studies, but will also have utility to theological, historical and philosophical scholars of Islam working in the English language.

Keywords Islamic Studies · Sociology · Textual · Muslim · English

Introduction

The field of ‘Islamic Studies’, like ‘Religious Studies’, is a broad church. It includes several epistemological and ontological positions associated with a range of disciplines. The diversity inherent in a category such as ‘Islamic Studies’ is challenged by a bifurcation of two predominant approaches found within the field, the textual and the sociological. In this paper, I propose a new concept for contemporary Islamic studies, that of Anglophone Islam, which will allow a broader range of scholarship to be contextualised in relation to each other. This is evidenced by the primacy of English as a medium for expressing Islam amongst Muslims. The role of English will in coming decades also shape, structure and influence the content and subtleties of Islam as a contemporary and historical tradition. The concept also opens a new set of questions to be explored by scholars of Islamic studies. It will be of particular

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interest to scholars involved in contemporary Islamic studies in fields such as American Muslim studies, British Muslim studies and European Muslim studies, but will also have utility to theological, historical and philosophical scholars of Islam working in the English language.

Mind the Gap – The Textual and Social

This article begins from the premise that there is a significant gap between the textual and social disciplinary approaches. The following section seeks to provide an illustrative example of this gap and its implications for scholarship. A work by the late scholar, Shahab Ahmed, has recently stirred significant debate within Islamic Studies. *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Ahmed, 2015) is a six-hundred-page tome that seeks to redefine our conceptual framework of Islam. Ahmed argues that rather than understanding Islam as a ‘religion’ or a ‘culture’ (as Hodgson does with ‘Islamic’ and ‘Islamicate’ (1977)), we need to broaden our perspectives entirely. Ahmed proposes instead analysing Islam as a discursive relationship, in which meaning and action are constructed in dialogue with ‘text’ (the key religious sources of Islam, the Quran and the *hadith*, or any ‘revelatory product’ considered as such by Muslims), the ‘pre-text’ (claims and inferences from and about ontology and the nature of reality itself) and ‘con-text’ (the broad artistic, literary, conceptual, architectural resources and tradition developed and available to Muslims throughout history) (Ahmed, 2015, pp. 344–361). His concern is to establish a framework for making sense of claims of Islam and Muslimness that do not fit the typical, legalistic, method for determining normative Islam. His book would, in my view, be more accurately titled ‘How is it Islamic?’ rather than ‘What is Islam?’, since a key endeavour is understanding the contested claims of what is ‘Islamic’. The book has spurred numerous debates amongst Islamic studies scholars, from reviews in journal articles (Mohammad, 2016; Ali, 2017; Choudhury, 2017; Moten, 2017; Tremblay, 2018), symposiums (‘What Is Islam? A Symposium in Memory of Shahab Ahmed’, 2016), and fiery YouTube rebuttals (Abou El Fadl, 2018).

A relevant section in Shahab Ahmed’s book is a brief sentence criticising the ethnographer and anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Ahmed writes, in reference to *Islam Observed* (Geertz, 1971) that ‘one is hard pressed to find in it any evidence that Geertz has actually taken into serious consideration a single written text from the intellectual tradition of either of these two countries’ (Ahmed, 2015, p. 249). This criticism of Geertz is a valid one. Despite Geertz receiving commendation from Edward Said as a scholar capable of studying Islam without indulging in Orientalism (1978 – a position Said revised in 1989), Ahmed considers Geertz’s scholarship to be severely lacking. For Shahab Ahmed, texts are not simply written documents or luxuries for educated elites, he views them as the very bedrock of meaning through which society is made possible. Engagement with different forms of text is what produces Islam and all its various civilisation, artistic, spiritual and intellectual outputs. Ahmed’s critique of Geertz is one that stands for many social scientists, anthropologists, geographers and qualitative researchers. How full, true and substantive are observations about living and breathing

Muslims if they do not consider the texts Muslims read, learn from, teach and share? Is it possible to comprehend American politics without also comprehending the formation, history and various applications of its sacred constitution? Would a study of communism and socialism, in any of its complex manifestations, be taken seriously if the scholar had not at least considered the role of *Das Kapital*? And can we pretend to know contemporary Muslims unless we also look to their texts, not just the Quran, but the translations being read, the textbooks children study in mosques or the Islamic literature through which ordinary Muslims learn their religion? I would imagine that many scholars, of any discipline, would agree that it is not possible, but the more meaningful divergence is over how texts should be studied, and to what extent.

However, Shahab Ahmed's criticism of Geertz can also be levied in reverse. Ahmed's *magnus opus* covers almost every aspect of Islam, ranging from law, philosophy and spirituality, to colonialism, linguistics and the very notion of religion. In the work, he makes substantial and significant claims about Muslims today, how they manifest their Islam, about their everyday lives, and how they live and die. And yet Ahmed does all this on the basis of an examination of texts. There is not a shred of evidence that Shahab Ahmed undertook even a single day of fieldwork. Certainly his living amongst Muslims, conversations with Muslims and observations of Muslims, all informed his ideas and writing, but he does not at any point interrogate his experiences, reflect on them, and apply rigour and analysis to them, in the same way a social scientist does to their days spent in the field.

This too is a serious methodological omission and demonstrates well the wide gap between textual and social scholars of Islam. Geertz and Ahmed are both influential scholars and have contributed to the wide project of Islamic studies, yet they inhabit separate disciplinary spheres. This division is recreated in scholarship on Islam more widely. By way of illustration, the programme for the British Association for Islamic Studies can be used. In 2018, I attended a talk at the conference titled 'Lost Property? God's Speech as Divine Action in al-Māturīdī's *Kitāb al-tawhīd*' by Dr Ramon Harvey, followed by 'The Mipsterz debate: Muslim women's online self-representation' by Dr Laura Mora. These two talks both fit well within the British Association for Islamic Studies broad aims, but I found it difficult to relate them to each other. What was the common theme or thread that tied the two together? It is possible to simply answer 'Islam', but this feels unsatisfactory. What is the wider scholarly project to which these two works contribute? One emerges out of a textual approach, theologically minded, a revival of an interest in *kalam*. The other is sociologically grounded, using qualitative methods and concerned with the empirical realities of life. This disciplinary gap can cause whiplash, as it did for me as I walked between these two lectures. Despite this, I believe it is possible to outline a concept that allows for a recontextualization of textual and social scholarship in relation to each other, and at the same time provide an agenda of study that can reveal more to us than current concepts in operation. The concept I'd like to introduce is that of Anglophone Islam; however, to fully appreciate what I mean by Anglophone Islam, it is necessary to return to Shahab Ahmed and his concept of the Balkans to Bengal Complex.

The Balkans to Bengal Complex

Ahmed notes the primacy of Persian as a lingua franca amongst Muslims in Eurasia during the centuries between 1350 and 1850. Words such as *ramzan* for Ramadan, *roza* for a fast, *namaz* for the daily prayers, *behest* for paradise and *duzduk* for hell are used by millions of Muslims in the world today as a legacy of this period. Despite Arabic being the language of the Quran, these Muslims will use Persian-origin words to express key Islamic concepts. From the Balkans to the Bengal, and even further, to South East Asia, the influence of the Persian language is felt. This is visible too when you look at scholarship. Ghazali's *ihya ulum ad-din* was written in Arabic, but *kimiya-yi sa'adat* was written in Persian. Few Muslim poets are as celebrated as the Persian-language poets Rumi or Hafiz. Hodgson calls this civilizational expanse 'Persianate' (Hodgson, 1977). Shahab Ahmed calls it the 'Balkans to Bengal Complex' (Ahmed, 2015). Ahmed draws upon the notion of a paideia – a Greek term for the 'syllabus' or 'curriculum' in which a person is raised (2015, p. 80). The paideia informed the way in which Muslims expressed their Islam according to Ahmed. It shaped their view of the world, their understanding of truth, what is valued and what is virtuous. The Muslims of the Balkans to Bengal Complex, despite heterogeneity and diversity, shared a paideia that instructed and socialised them into a shared mutually intelligible paradigm, a conceptual understanding, that meant they were able to agree, disagree, communicate with each other (not just verbally or through language, but through action, art and architecture). This concept is how he reconciles the contradictions of the Islamic 'Gunpowder Empires'. It is not that Muslims in the Balkans to Bengals Complex recited poetry about wine, celebrated artists and valorised Christian, Jewish and Hindu saints in spite of their Islam, as Hodgson implies with his religion/culture distinction of Islamic and Islamicate, a view echoed in a more recent work by Thomas Bauer in which he distinguishes between religious poetry (for example, praising the Prophet) and aesthetic poetry (celebrating wine, sex and romantic love) (Bauer et al., 2021, p. 24) but because of their Islam. Ahmed's conclusion is to forgo a strict creedal or normative understanding of Islam in favour of one that looks at processes, drawing on a discursive understanding of the tradition developed initially from Talal Asad (1993).

Ahmed's description of the world of the Balkans to Bengal Complex is compelling. He relays the centrality of the figures of Layla and Majnun (a tragic couple that make Romeo and Juliet look timid) in the expression of love, and so the motif is found in everything from poetry to art miniatures. Ahmed also traces the influence of Greek philosophy, something that was happily incorporated and developed by Muslim scholars, but which was also present in the praise-songs sung by the masses (Ahmed, 2015, p. 88). The world was also one where Sufism was the norm. Challenging the trite trope of Sufis as 'spiritual-but-not-religious-types' who fought against the dogmatism and literalism of the powerful legal elite, Ahmed contends that in the Balkans to Bengal Complex, Sufi antinomianism was the status quo. The impassioned dogmatism of the legal scholars is the voice of a minority trying to place limits on what they saw as the

religious excesses of the masses (Ahmed, 2015, p. 94). But what connected all of this was Persian. It became the language by which to engage in this world, debate its boundaries, and censure its heretics. It is important to emphasise here that a linguistic primacy did not entail a geographic primacy. The Persian speakers in Turkey, Hindustan and the Maldives, never looked towards the Seljuks or Shiraz as somehow more sacred. Persian was not a foreign language, it was their own. Sheldon Pollock observes that there was more Persian literature produced by the Mughal Empire than from Persia itself during the same period (2011).

So what is being argued is that English presents a similar ‘field’, a similar emerging world in which religious norms are formed and conceptions debated, with its own motifs and shared expressions. English is a language used not (just) to speak out to a non-Muslim ‘other’ but to communicate with other Muslims about Islam. It is something I term Anglophone Islam and which is introduced in the next section.

Anglophone Islam

In Wales the term ‘Anglosphere’ is used, usually disparagingly, to refer to the public sphere of the English language (in contrast to that of the Welsh language). A similar term has been used by James Bennett (2007) to propose a broad English-speaking political alliance, and while I am sceptical of many of the claims made in his work, his description of the Anglosphere is useful:

‘The Anglosphere, as a network civilization without a corresponding political form, has necessarily imprecise boundaries. Geographically, the densest nodes of the Anglosphere are found in the United States and the United Kingdom. English-speaking Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and English-speaking South Africa (who constitute a very small minority in that country) are also significant populations. The English-speaking Caribbean, English-speaking Oceania and the English-speaking educated populations in Africa and India constitute other important nodes.’ (Bennett, 2007, 4)

The broad geographic areas and populations Bennet refers to also operate in my concept of Anglophone Islam, but with a focus on Muslims for whom their engagement with Islam is in some way related to the English language. Sadik Hamid and Philip Lewis argue the same, writing ‘for a new global generation of Muslims, English is the language for communication and knowledge transmission – or, arguably, the new Persian’ (Lewis & Hamid 2018, p. 216).

The first argument outlined in a case for Anglophone Islam is that there are populations of Muslims across the world for whom English is a significant component (though not necessarily dominant or primary) of their expression of Islam. Important to note however is that I am not simply arguing there are Muslims who speak English, or that there are Islamic texts translated into the language. If we build on Shahab Ahmed’s argument, and Hamid and Lewis’ contention, then Anglophone Islam, to have parity with the Balkans to Bengal Complex and Persian, must be more than just a geographic and temporal arena in which English is spoken by Muslims. It must be ‘a common paradigm of Islamic life and thought by which Muslims

(and others) imagine, conceptualise, valorize, articulate, and give mutually-communicable meaning to their lives in terms of Islam', one that manifests in a 'discursive cannon, embedded in which is a conceptual vocabulary, an array of expressive motifs, and other mutually-held and/or mutually-translatable modes of valorization and self-articulation' (Ahmed, 2015, p. 75). This is what I am arguing, that there is a distinctive and noteworthy expression of Islam which has manifested in the English language which has become 'a common paradigm of Islamic life and thought', with its own 'discursive cannon' and with a 'conceptual vocabulary'.

The act of translation by necessity is an act of creativity and innovation; however, we are in, arguably, the earliest days of Anglophone Islam. As this common paradigm develops, the contours and composition of Islam itself will be shaped by the particularities of English (though the same can be expected in reverse, with the English language itself changing and evolving as Muslims use it to express themselves and their religion). In the remainder of the paper, I present some of the salient features of Anglophone Islam which are also a case for the validity of the concept itself along the divisions of a common paradigm, a discursive cannon and a conceptual vocabulary, and how it allows for a recontextualization of textual and social scholarship in relation to each other.

A Common Paradigm

I am advocating for the study of 'Anglophone Islam' alongside other alternative terms such as American Islam (Haddad & Smith, 2014b; Hammer & Safi 2013), British Islam (Gilliat-Ray, 2011; Bowen, 2016; Lewis & Hamid 2018) or European Islam (Nielsen, 1999; Cesari, 2015; Hashas, 2018) because it more readily applies a meaningful boundary. The porous boundaries of the digital age especially undermine pre-existing nation state boundaries, but language remains a more concrete barrier. Is there much of a substantive difference between British Muslims and American Muslims? I struggle to see it. Because even when they disagree, they disagree on the same terms, within the same paradigm, they operate in the same complex (something beginning to be 'mapped' by a research project which explored the links between the United States and the United Kingdom under the frame of the 'Muslim Atlantic' (DeHanas et al., 2020)). The relationship between the aforementioned concepts and terms and the Muslim Anglophone need not be a competitive one, in which one term supersedes or replaces another. American Islam, British Islam and European Islam have delineated a conceptual space through reference to geographic space. Scholars of this field regularly interrogate the boundaries of the nation state and explore transnational relationships. The edited collection 'Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe' (Metcalf, 1996) is one of many examples of works in which the movement of ideas and people is considered globally even when the focus is on Islam in the 'West', and as an early work in this field of study, it also underlines that this broad consideration has been present from the earlier times. Yet the title and chapters also point towards another important recognition, that there is an emergent paradigm that bridges the experience of Muslims in North America and Europe. The 'Muslim Atlantic' is a more explicit consideration

of this underlying commonality, focusing on four predominant networks bridging Britain and the United States – that of Movement Islam, Neotraditional Sufism, Malcolm X and middle-class Muslim professional networks (DeHanas et al., 2020, 3, 9-11).

Where ‘Anglophone Islam’ differs, or adds to, these existing frameworks of study is by first identifying a linguistic boundary, thereby expanding the geographic space considered (while also downgrading the salience of geography) and then turning to consider the shared paradigms, discourse and expression within this boundary. The existing body of scholarship in American, European and British Islam can thereby be relocated as nodes within the project of Anglophone Islam, and so too the ‘Muslim Atlantic’ provides a means by which to assess more closely the relationship between a dimension of the common paradigm of Anglophone Islam. As argued throughout, Anglophone Islam also enables us to locate textual and sociological scholarship together. Relevant to my own scholarship (British mosques) are three works with a textual focus. The first is Katz’s *Women in the Mosque: A History of Legal Thought and Social Practice* (2014), as the title suggests, it is a comprehensive overview of historical textual documents outlining various classical Islamic responses to the question of women attending the mosque, triangulated with historical reports that provide an indication of social practice. The second is Nadwi’s translation of ibn Hazm’s *On the Lawfulness of Women Attending Prayers in the Mosque*, it is a translation of an eleventh century Andalusian scholar, one who rejected the positions of the four emerging canonical schools (ibn Hazm, 2018). The third is *Reclaiming the Mosque: The Role of Women in Islam’s House of Worship* by Auda (2017), an original piece of scholarship (in the sense that it is not a translation of historical opinions, but the articulation of what the author would see as the Prophetic practice). To describe Katz’s work as one on American Islam pushes the boundaries of the term, what is meant by American? Does it simply identify the author or does it indicate something more substantive about the work? One could argue Nadwi and Auda’s work are products of ‘British Islam’, but most Muslim scholars would bristle at the suggestion their work is so geographically bounded and in anyway disconnected from the historical tradition. Yet all three works could meaningfully be described as part of Anglophone Islam, whether academic publication or legal *fatwa*, whether translation or original. They are all contributing to the textual canon of Anglophone Islam by virtue of being works about Islam in English. Even more than that however, one can begin to consider the audience for all three works. They are in part influenced by Muslim women who are advocating for their inclusion in mosques in Britain and America in a context where provision is limited. British Islam, American Islam or the Muslim Atlantic would struggle to bring together these varied factors, or arbitrarily disconnect them from the picture.

Returning to Anglophone Islam, what, then, is the common paradigm that makes it something we can speak about coherently? As discussed, Anglophone Islam is, geographically speaking, spread across the English-speaking world, defined as those places in which English is the most commonly spoken language (Britain, North America and Australia) or spoken in some other capacity. This of course includes much of Europe, where literacy in English is high even when it is not a recognised language, but importantly, it also includes many former British colonies.

Anglophone Islam is the legacy of the British Empire, just as the Balkans to Bengal Complex owes much to the Mongol Empires. This, the colonial experience, is one common paradigm of Anglophone Islam important to consider. An aspect of this is of course, as Rushdie expresses it, that the 'Empire Writes Back' (Ashcroft et al., 2002), and thus there are many examples of Muslim engagement with the West with literature aimed at their colonisers (Morgenstein Fuerst, 2017) that went alongside armed struggles (Motadel, 2014). Colonisation, along with modernity, also contributed towards the development and spread of religious reform movements from South Asia and the Middle East that still dominate the denominational diversity of Muslims today in Britain (Geaves, 1996; Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Hamid, 2016) and the United States (Cesari, 2014; Hermansen, 2014; Haddad & Smith, 2014a).

This is best exemplified through the Indian subcontinent, which following over a century of rule under the British, has more English-language speakers than England. Through migration, transnational links, and a confidence in the English language, the Indian-based Deobandi tradition has established itself to be one of the most important movements in Britain (King, 1997; Birt, 2005; Gilliat-Ray, 2006; Gilliat-Ray, 2007; Geaves, 2012; Gilliat-Ray, 2018; Ingram, 2018). Anglophone Islam may be an English language phenomenon, but it would be wrong to presume it to be the preserve of those living in what we refer to as the West.

A contrasting example is that of the 'Zaytuna Institute', founded by Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, part of what has been termed the 'neo-traditionalist movement' (Quisay, 2019). The college is seeking to craft an 'American Islam' (Kashani, 2014) through in an explicit project of 'revival' (Jawad, 2021). Hamza Yusuf's influence and reputation is international, and a brief series of engagements between Hamza Yusuf and the former Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan in late 2021 (dawn.com, 2021) broadcast by the Pakistan Television Corporation highlighted the reach and appeal of 'Western' Islam beyond the West. Masooda Bano counts the Zaytuna Institute alongside the British 'Cambridge Muslim College' and Spain's 'Alqueria de Rosales' as three institutes that represent a 'rationalist Islam' which appeals not only to young Muslims in the West but also to elites in Muslim-majority countries. The multidirectional flows of scholarship and authority cited above are better viewed and understood as movements in the Anglosphere or as projects of Anglophone Islam.

Perhaps one of the most idiosyncratic features of Anglophone Islam is the digital. While travel, trade and scholarship have been global in pre-modern times, the digital age has allowed for transnational communities to be formed in a way hitherto not possible. It can be accessed anywhere, and by anyone, through online content. And that too brings us to an interesting aspect. While the lecture and sermon has regularly featured as a part of Muslim practice, the digital age has allowed it to be preserved, recorded, redistributed and consumed in an entirely new way. The world of online religion, studied by scholars such as Stephen Pihlaja (2018), Gary Bunt (2009, 2018), and more recently in an insightful, and at times unsettling, book by Hussein Kesvani (2019), reminds us how fundamentally important 'public spheres' are to religious practice. YouTube has emerged in recent years as an important global public space for debating Islam (Mosemghvdlishvili & Jansz, 2013). As mentioned, the linguistic barriers are more concrete in a digital world. Though this barrier can be important in unexpected ways; a study by Moe (2019) presents findings

and analysis on how search results on Islam varied on YouTube depending on the language used (in the case of the study, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish). Searching for Islamic content in a digital space will bring different results depending on language, not just due to the content available but also the decisions of coding supporting the site in question. This is in a context however in which there is an overwhelmingly primacy for English online, with one survey indicating 61.9% of content online is in English. Russian comes in second place with 5.7%, and most other languages accounting for less than 1% (Web Technology Surveys, n.d.). This incredible dominance of English online and the digital turn of the twenty-first century combine to ensure that Anglophone Islam is hard to avoid online, no matter where the user is located or the languages the user can communicate in.

Another important paradigm, and a very Anglophone one, is ‘religion’ and ‘culture’. These two terms are central to Anglophone Islam’s self-conceptualisation. ‘This ain’t a culture, it’s my religion’ British Grime artist Skepta state’s emphatically in his hit song ‘Shutdown’. The religion/culture dynamic is arguably tied to the sacred/secular dynamic in the English language (see Woodhead, 2011 for more). It is often used by Anglophone Muslims to express their diverse identities and their strategies to negotiate them. A 2008 article in the Minnesota Post by Tamim Saidi summarised a not uncommon refrain, Saidi writes that on ‘numerous occasions authors and ‘pundits’ have wrongly attacked the religion of Islam for the cultural practices of Muslims in certain places in the world’ (Saidi, 2008), sometimes the distinction is articulated differently, for example, in a video by Canadian Muslim convert Nicholas Taylor advising that ‘converting to Islam does not mean that you have to embrace the culture of a certain Muslim country’ (Taylor, 2022). A more developed work by two British Muslim activists titled *Being British Muslims: Beyond Ethnocentric Religion and Identity Politics* (Khan & Nizami, 2019) argued the same point in greater depth. These examples, a brief snippet of a wider discourse, are intended to demonstrate the way in which a simple distinction between ‘culture’ on one-hand and ‘religion’ on the other operate. Of course, not all agree that such a simple distinction can be made (Ahmed devotes extended time critiquing the notion of Islam as religion or as culture (2015, pp. 177–297)), but what matters is it part of the milieu of Anglophone Islam. Speak to a Muslim with no English-language knowledge, and they would struggle to comprehend, let alone make, the same distinction. The ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ axis are a product of European secularisation of religion and modern categories, a case articulated by Asad in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) and more recently by Spickard in *Alternative Sociologies of Religion* (2017). The relationship between ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ varies depending on context, usage and audience. The debates, disagreements and contradictions present in the word ‘religion’ in English are adopted when a community adopts English to communicate religious ideas, and as such, the debate is a relevant one in the world of Anglophone Islam.

The common paradigm is not just abstract theory but also practice. My own research has explored the congregation as the primary means of communal religious organising amongst British Muslims (Ahmed, 2020) though I consider it applicable to diasporic Muslim communities elsewhere. It is in some ways the simplest form of communal religious organisation possible. They typically are local (though the

internet is challenging this), multi-generational, voluntary, hold wider affiliations but with the loci of authority within the congregation itself, and they will also meet in some pre-determined way, according to some rhythm and calendar (religious or otherwise). I summarise it as ‘people doing religion together’, though importantly, much of what congregations do might not appear particularly religious (coffee mornings, meals out and movie nights). The congregation has a less pronounced role historically in Muslim majority countries where other forms of religious organisations and institutions have prominence. However, in the lands of Anglophone Islam, the congregation is the key communal mechanism by which religion is done, communicated, taught and reinforced (with the exception of the family). The congregation can be placed alongside the *tariqa* as two forms of communal organising. In the Balkans to Bengal Complex, the primary way of doing religion together was the *tariqa*. It was a form that emerged in the Anatolia in the twelfth century according to Yilmaz (2018); and Shahab Ahmed traces the Balkans to Bengal Complex as being a paradigm that was in operation from 1350–1850, the two are, in my view, inextricably linked.

The *tariqa* however is not a strong feature of Anglophone Islam. In Britain, America, Australia and parts of Europe, Muslims have been disconnected from the historical institutions developed by Muslims and Sufi groups have largely failed to transport the *tariqa* into these contexts. The Fultoli tradition, a movement emerging from Sylhet Bangladeshi which was established in Britain through migration is one example of many of the *tariqa* failing to attract new members, especially intergenerationally. Thus despite Fultoli Muslims in Britain establishing numerous mosques, they have struggled to survive beyond first-generation migrants, in part due to the insistence of the *tariqa* (Ahmed & Ali, 2019). The *tariqa* has required reinvention (van Bruinessen & Howell, 2013) which itself has led to the phenomenon described as ‘post-*tariqa* Sufism’ (Sedgwick, 2017), something further documented by Ayesha Khan (2020). Post-*tariqa* Sufis in the West can in many ways be argued to behave much more like congregations than the *tariqa* of the past.

The congregation’s importance to Anglophone Muslims emerges from its simplicity, Nancy Ammerman argues that ‘wherever religious communities are in diaspora, something like a congregation can stand alongside families to sustain a religious tradition that gets little support from the rest of culture’ (2009, p. 564), and specifically in relation to Islam, Ammerman argues that ‘outside Muslim territories, mosques often take on fully “congregational” forms, with imams who function much like other professional clergy’ (2009, p. 565). The early Muslim community in Makkah during the time of the Prophet Muhammad organised and operated much like a congregation until other forms took prominence, which means there is precedence for congregational behaviour amongst Muslims historically. However there is an Anglophone context necessary to consider, Vinding (2018) has written about the ‘churchification of Islam in Europe’. This is a range of process that include ‘pedagogical, analogical or rhetorical’ mobilisation of comparison between Muslims and Christians, mosques and churches, imams and priests; the implicit presumption that Islam in Europe should operate in the same way as Christianity in Europe; the unavoidable influence of churches and Christianity on Muslims in Europe; and finally, the deliberate co-option or rejection of Christian models by Muslims (Vinding,

2018). Congregational behaviour by Muslims is in part adopted because of its familiarity in the Western European context. Ammerman highlights this influence too, stating that religions are ‘shaped both by the dictates of religious traditions and by each society’s cultural and legal expectations as to how religious organizations are supposed to work – what sociologists might call an “institutional template”’ (2009, p. 566). The Anglophone ‘institutional template’ of the congregation has played a role in shaping the religious practice of Muslims in diasporic communities.

Thus far I have introduced some of the features particularly central to the Anglophone Islamic context. They are the colonial experience and response to it, the centrality of the digital world, the conceptual frameworks of religion and culture, and the emergence of congregational organising. The next section goes further, beyond the features and towards the deeper discursive practices shaping Anglophone Islam.

The Discursive Canon

The emergence of a ‘discursive cannon’ is also something that draws out the distinctiveness of Anglophone Islam, and situates it as a concept that transcends but binds together the aforementioned frames of British Islam, American Islam and other attempts at regionalisation. Ahmed, as we’ve seen, refers to a *paideia* – but a simpler expression is to ask, what is the reading list of the Anglophone Muslim? What books or key texts do English-speaking Muslims learn Islam from? The most engaging aspect of this question is that it is still emerging. The canon is being set and determined at this moment.

Students are educated on a range of translated texts, from *Taleemul Huq*¹ and *Bahishti Zewar* (a work written specifically with Muslim women in mind and now available in English (Thanwi, 2005)). They are Tablighi Jamaat staples. There are also original works of repute such as *Islam: Beliefs and Teachings* by Ghulam Sarwar (2006) or *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* by Martin Lings (1991). However, to comprehend texts in practice, we need to broaden our horizons and include the numerous pamphlets and booklets produced by Muslims in English, readily available and aimed at a lay audience. These include those produced by Salafi groups, which ‘eschew human systems of argumentation, preferring instead to make a point and follow it with a series of direct quotes from the Qur’an and sound hadith collections’ (Wiktorowicz, 2006) or the evangelical material of Zakir Naik or Ahmed Deedat. Deedat, for example, popularised a model of preaching that modelled itself on Christian evangelicalism (Larkin, 2008). Deedat’s approach and influence continues today with Zakir Naik, a current preacher with a global appeal and capable of drawing huge crowds during his charismatic and scientifically rooted

¹ The original Urdu work has been translated and published into English by the Millat Book Centre in India and more recently by Mufti Shabbir Ahmed Desai and published by Mustafa Publications (Desai, n.d.). Despite being a readily available work in the United Kingdom, the United States, South Africa, and parts of the Indian Subcontinent, its publication and details are surprisingly non-standardised.

defence of Islam (Sadouni, 2013). Naik, his predecessor Deedat, and their defence of Islam is predominantly in the English language, speaking more to Muslims than a non-Muslim audience, and is a style directly imitating, influenced by, and in conversation with a Christian Protestant preaching. Naik and Deedat's work may not be considered robust scholarship, but they are read, shared, consumed and reproduced by Muslims. Likewise, they influence the parameters and conceptualisations of Muslims themselves.

The influence of dawah material, for example, in shaping a 'rationalist' approach to Islam amongst some Muslims, is notable. Literary critic Sameer Rahim's (2010) offhand comment that 'nearly every mosque library in Britain has a book claiming that modern scientific discoveries were already described in the Koran' is accurate, and reveals an epistemological world view held by Anglophone Muslims. Anglophone Islam is not exclusively rationalist, but certainly it is an important part of the whole as argued by Iqbal (2016). Likewise, the Salafi insistence on textual arguments proved appealing to young second-generation Muslims and forced other Muslim groups to respond in order to maintain their legitimacy (Hamid, 2016, p. 55–67), this textual preference (over say mystical experience as a source of religious legitimacy) are all features of Anglophone Islam.

The texts of interest however are not just introductory works aimed at laymen, but also the original and important scholarship being undertaken in the English language. There was a time that to study Islam deeply required learning a foreign language and going abroad. Increasingly, it is possible to embark on a meaningful and in-depth study of Islam without going abroad. Shaykh Abdal-Hakim Murad, aka Timothy Winters, makes such a point in his lecture 'How Islamic is Islamic Studies?' (Cambridge Muslim College, 2018). So alongside the introductory texts, browsing the shelves of the Islamic bookstore, you will find more advanced works, for example, the writing of Wael Hallaq (2005, 2013, 2018), Khaled Abou El Fadl (2001, 2007, 2017), Tariq Ramadan (1999, 2005, 2009), Sherman Jackson (1996, 2002, 2009) and Jonathan Brown (2007, 2014, 2019). The significance of these texts is that they express original, noteworthy and substantive advances to Islamic thought and scholarship, but do so primarily in the medium of English. Anglophone Muslims do not receive this scholarship second-hand through translation, but have immediate primary access to it. It is what was once called the 'Muslim world' which must wait for the translation.

International Muslim scholars of repute often invest in ways to make themselves accessible to English-speakers. Whether by learning English, like Muhammad al-Yacoubi, or by adopting an English-speaking protégé, like Abdullah Bin Bayyah and Hamza Yusuf. To be an influential Muslim scholar requires communicating to an Anglophone audience. The investment of Muslim philanthropists into universities studying Islam further underscores the pull of the Anglophone Islam – to be relevant to the Islamic world today needs one to be relevant in English. Examples in Britain include Yousef Jameel and the Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK at Cardiff (of which the author is Deputy Director), or Azman Hashim and his funding towards the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. There is the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World at Edinburgh in the United Kingdom as well as Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim Christian Understanding

at Georgetown University in the United States. Other Centres founded by Muslim philanthropists include The King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Arkansas and the Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies at George Mason University.

The discursive canon of Anglophone Islam, produced through translation, original scholarship, missionary activity and university-led research and teaching, is embedding English as an international language of Islam.

A Conceptual Vocabulary

Emerging from this canon is an associated range of Anglophone terms, or a conceptual vocabulary (Ahmed, 2015, p. 356–68). A tongue-in-cheek Facebook post by Hisham Mahmoud² lists English words ‘monopolised’ by Muslims. The post highlights a particular vocabulary used to translate Islamic terms into English by Muslim authors and preachers, which are otherwise relatively uncommon in vernacular. ‘Circumambulate’ is top of the list, used to translate *tawaf* or circling the *kaaba*. ‘Supererogatory’ for *nafl*, or optional additional acts of worship; ‘ablution’ for the ritual washing of *wudu*; ‘revert’ as a term for a convert to Islam that recognises that all are born in submission to God (thus not converting to a new religion but reverting to the original faith of the individual); ‘unit of prayer’ for *rakah*, one cycle of a canonical prayer, and even the ‘verily’ used most commonly in translations of the Quran. These English language terms are becoming part of the lexicon of Anglophone Muslims. The humour in the post aside, there is an undeniable emergence of a specific register used by Muslims to communicate religious ideas. A more serious linguistic study would no doubt reveal further words emerging to convey ‘Islamic’ meaning, not simply as translations of pre-existing terms but a unique expression of a particular concept. Martin Nguyen (2018) documents this well in his work ‘Modern Muslim Theology’, while he draws on specific examples and cases that fit well into the argument for Anglophone Islam, the very term ‘theology’ as he outlines it is a strong case for the emergence of Anglophone vocabulary of Islam. Theology is neither exclusively *fiqh* nor *kalam*, it is both the enterprise of the trained scholar and the layman, and encompasses a unique set of activities when used in relation to Islam than when used in relation to Christianity or another religion. In a forthcoming monograph, I explore the words used by British Muslims to describe mosques and their heterogeneity. For the ‘prayer room’, the ‘house mosque’ and the ‘central mosque’, there is an associated vocabulary which conveys to other Muslims the size, dimensions, sometimes even the denominational identity, of a mosque using categorisations unique to the English context (though not always English-origin words).

In summary, there is an emerging canon of English-language texts in Islam used broadly to educate English-speaking Muslims, both children and adults. This is accompanied by valuable scholarly works produced on Islam by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. This shift has been recognised by Muslims themselves, with

² The post is no longer available publicly.

various Muslim actors seeking to ensure their relevance and accessibility in the Anglophone world. Collectively this process is creating a unique register or vocabulary of English, communicating ideas and concepts in a unique way. Ahmed's work considers the features of modern Islam to be a radical departure from historic Islam on the basis of modernity's defining features, namely:

'European colonialism and the emergence of the capitalist world-system; the formation of nation-states; the idea of the religious-secular binary; the rise of modern science and its totalizing empiricization of the world; the accompany phenomenon of what Weber called *Entzauberung* (literally: "the driving out of magic from things") or "disenchantment of the world"; the spread of mass education; the proliferation of new technologies of communication from the printing press to the internet; the commodification of information; an increasing emphasis on the importance of the *purportedly* rational, objective public sphere over the purportedly emotional, subjective, private sphere; the (mythic) emphasis on egalitarianism over hierarchy; the strategic and lucrative importance of fossil fuels; *etcetera*' (Ahmed, 2015, p. 514–515).

This description serves well to highlight the technological, temporal, spatial and ideological landscape in which Anglophone Islam is emerging.

It was mentioned previously that Anglophone Islam is a by-product of the British Empire, creating the transnational field in which English is spoken. There are relevant questions raised by the emergence of Anglophone Islam about power, access and elitism. Can English ever be used to express the politics, passions and piety of the subaltern? Or is it forever tied to the legacy of the Empire which spread it through force, exploitation and conquering? It is a debate that Black American and African postcolonial voices have long been familiar with. There is the argument of Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) in *Decolonising the Mind* that English (and other European languages) can never separate from the colonial oppression of Empire. There is the more ambivalent response of James Baldwin who reflects on his complex relationship with English in *Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare* (Baldwin, 1964). There is too the optimistic (or perhaps radical) view, such as that of Booker Prize Winner Afua Hirsch who celebrates the pre-eminence of Nigerian authors in the English cannon describing it playfully as 'Africa's colonisation of the English language' (Hirsch, 2020). Whether Anglophone Islam is an assertion of Western hegemony, alienating historic Muslim civilisations from their own religion by only being accessible to those in the West or elites in Muslim-majority countries who are competent in English, or whether it is the product of Muslim agency resisting Western hegemony, is not a question with a singular answer. It is, likely, in my view both at the same time, and this is itself something worthy of investigating. *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, a work by German scholar Thomas Bauer recently translated into English (Bauer et al., 2021) argues that pre-modern Islam was characterised by a high tolerance and embrace of ambiguity, uncertainty and contradiction. How Anglophone Islam manages the paradox of English, a language of historic and contemporary oppression as well as now a language of Islamic scholarship, may reveal more about the continuities and disruption of Anglophone Islam in relation to historic expressions of the faith.

Having made the case for the validity of Anglophone Islam, next the possibility of the concept to bring together the sociological and textual gap discussed prior is considered.

Re-Contextualising the Social and the Textual

To explore and capture and understand the phenomenon of Anglophone Islam, if you agree with me that such a thing even exists, is naturally an inter-disciplinary project. It requires social scientists to consider the role of texts and their readings in the everyday lived experiences of Muslims. Likewise, it requires textual scholars to more readily engage qualitative and ethnographic methods when working with their texts.

So to return to the contradiction I opened with, what is the common thread between Mipsterz and Maturidi? They are both explorations of Anglophone Islam. Whether by excavating the theology of the past and making it accessible in English, as Ramon Harvey did, or by mining the ways in which Muslim women take ownership of their self-identity and representation, as Laura Mora did.

Likewise, both are engaged, indirectly, with the social and political challenges facing Muslims in the Anglophone context. Harvey's re-visiting of *kalam* and early Muslim philosophy has value to Muslims contending with postmodernism, and Mora's study of agency and femininity is an interrogation of existing caricatures of Muslim women in Western thought.

By configuring studies within the broader world of Anglophone Islam, I would hope it is possible to contextualise a broader range of scholarship on Islam in relation to each other, to see their common thread. Such a project does not require a radical readjustment of what is already happening, but simply dispensing with some categories and instituting some new ones.

Likewise, I'd argue that by considering Anglophone Islam as a field relevant to understanding contemporary Islam and religion, we can be more attuned to important developments as scholars of the sociology and anthropology of Islam, and forgo increasingly irrelevant dichotomies such as Islamic and Islamicate, the Muslim World and the Western World, 'minority fiqh' or 'diaspora studies', and embrace a concept for understanding Islam that is grounded in the empirical.

Conclusion

To close, I'd like to end with what I think is the strongest evidence that there is such a thing as Anglophone Islam.

The *ghazal*, a poetic form, can be found wherever Islam makes itself home. Originally Arabic, it became Persian, Turkish and Bengali. It is the Islamic form of poetry.

Its presence in English has been extremely limited. That is beginning to change, however, as more Muslims take up English as their primary medium of expression. Agha Shahid Ali, in my view, has written one of the best English language Ghazals,

one that continues the spirit of the originals, and illustrates my point well. The ghazal is titled ‘Tonight’.

‘Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?
 Whom else from rapture’s road will you expel tonight?
 Those ‘Fabrics of Cashmere—’ ‘to make Me beautiful—’
 ‘Trinket’—to gem—’Me to adorn—How tell’—tonight?
 I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—
 A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight.
 God’s vintage loneliness has turned to vinegar—
 All the archangels—their wings frozen—fell tonight.
 Lord, cried out the idols, Don’t let us be broken;
 Only we can convert the infidel tonight.
 Mughal ceilings, let your mirrored convexities
 multiply me at once under your spell tonight.
 He’s freed some fire from ice in pity for Heaven.
 He’s left open—for God—the doors of Hell tonight.
 In the heart’s veined temple, all statues have been smashed.
 No priest in saffrons left to toll its knell tonight.
 God, limit these punishments, there’s still Judgment Day—
 I’m a mere sinner, I’m no infidel tonight.
 Executioners near the woman at the window.
 Damn you, Elijah, I’ll bless Jezebel tonight.
 The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer
 fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.
 My rivals for your love—you’ve invited them all?
 This is mere insult, this is no farewell tonight.
 And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—
 God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.’ (Ali, 2003)

The final couplet does what every good ghazal should do, introduce the name and pen-name of the author. He is Shahid, his given name, but he also insists ‘Call me Ishmael tonight’. This line, like much of his ghazal, refers back to the English literary canon. In this case, the opening lines of the most famous of English language novel, *Moby Dick*. But there is a second meaning too, the author reaffirms his identity, heritage, and religion as a Muslim. ‘Call me Ishmael’ references the son of Abraham through which the Prophet Muhammad traces his lineage, and a spiritual ancestry that leads back to the Arabian Prophet, a lineage that is shared by the ghazal too.

This line, for me, is an example of what Muslims in the Anglophone world are currently doing. They are drawing upon the literary, linguistic, historical, philosophical, political and religious resources of the Anglophone world in order to produce something entirely of their own, their own expression of who they are.

This is, I believe, a seismic shift. A new chapter of Islamic history which we are witnessing, and likewise, a worthy project for scholars of religion, of all disciplines, to turn their attention to.

Declarations

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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