

Islam and the Sui-generis Discourse: Representations of Islam in Textbooks Used in Introductory Courses of Religious Studies in Sweden

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Abstract

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, some professional scholars of Islam argued that the terrorists involved in the attacks were not really Muslims, but hijackers of Islam. According to other scholars, such arguments reflect a common *sui-generis* discourse in religious studies which stresses the autonomy of religious phenomena and the priority of faith over cultural production. The scholars in favor for a naturalistic approach in religious studies argues that, in order to approach religion in a naturalistic way, we have to be critical of representations of religion—and in this case representations of Islam—drawing on a sui-generis discourse. The aim of this article is to investigate how Islam is represented in textbooks used in religious studies introductory courses in Sweden. The article shows how the texts and textbooks are drawing on sui-generis discourses to invent consensus in favor of difference, when representing Islam and Muslims.

Keywords

Islam – Muslims – religious studies – textbooks – consensus-difference – insider-outsider – sui-generis discourse

In the aftermath of 9/11, 2001, issues related to religion and violence have been actualized in the media. Do Islamic texts and sources legitimate violent actions?

In response to these questions, some professional scholars of Islam argued that the 9/11 terrorists were not really Muslims, but hijackers of Islam. Labels such as “authentic Islam,” “traditional Islam,” “classical Islam”—often in contrast to “terrorism,” “hijackers,” and so on—were used extensively, by scholars as well as journalists, in the media.¹ However, there is a group of scholars within religious studies advocating a naturalistic approach, based on the assumption that those beliefs and practices commonly named religion are no more or less than a set of ordinary human social practices embedded in different historical and social contexts. According to some belonging to this later group of scholars—Russell T. McCutcheon and Aaron W. Hughes for example—these sorts of labels previously mentioned, “authentic Islam,” “traditional Islam,” etc., can be linked to certain common discourses and practices within religious studies generally, and within the study of Islam in particular.

The argument of Russell McCutcheon in his study *Manufacturing Religion* (1997) is that scholarship on religion often adopts a so-called *sui-generis* model of religion. This model stresses the socio-historical autonomy of religious phenomena, claims that religion cannot be completely reduced to social and historical categories, and gives priority to hermeneutic understanding over explanatory theorizing. Aaron W. Hughes makes a similar argument in his study *Situating Islam* (2007), where he, inspired in part by the writings of McCutcheon and others, investigates the modern academic study of Islam. Roughly, Hughes criticism against Islamic studies can be summarized in two statements or theses: (i) the study of Islam, as it is currently conducted, is charged with essentialist assumptions and categories which stress consensus in favor of difference; (ii) the study of Islam, as it is currently conducted, lacks critical theoretical explanatory models and is content with describing Muslim self-reports.

I The Aim of the Article

This leads me to my own study. Reading McCutcheon and Hughes, I was curious about the case of Sweden. While there is a lot of research on how Islam is, as well as how it *should* be, represented in textbooks in primary and secondary education, there is little research about how Islam is represented in religious studies scholarship at the university. The aim of this article is therefore to investigate how Islam is represented in texts and textbooks used in religious studies introductory courses in Sweden.

¹ For more examples, see Hughes (2007:93-111).

The study is limited to four universities in Sweden: Uppsala University, Lund University, University of Gothenburg and University of Gävle. These universities were selected because they all offered courses in religious studies with introductory books on Islam, and because they have had the largest number of full-time students in religious studies courses between year 2003 and 2007 (Gunneng & Magnusson 2008). The textbooks selected are John Esposito's *Islam, den raka vägen* (2001) (*Islam, The Straight Path*), Göran Larsson's *Att läsa Koranen, en introduktion* (2006) (*Reading the Quran, an Introduction*), and Anne Sofie Roald's *Islam: Historia, tro, nytolkning* (2005) (*Islam: History, Belief, Reinterpretation*). It should be pointed out that the study is limited to the content of the books in question and will not investigate didactic aspects of the books.

The main overall issue that will be in focus in this paper can be summarized with a quote from Aaron W. Hughes from his book *Situating Islam*:

[...] what happens when we read the scholarly literature produced on Islam not as secondary literature, but instead as primary data? That is, how and why do scholars of Islam construct theories the way they do, and how do these theories, in turn, predetermine what type of Islam will be found? (2007: 2)

This is my point of departure, although some additional limitations are necessary. I have chosen to focus on what linguist Norman Fairclough (2003: 41) calls *dialogicality* in texts. According to Fairclough, texts differ in their orientation to difference, or in other words, in respect of *dialogization*. Fairclough uses a model consisting of five scenarios of dialogicality:

- (a) an openness to, acceptance of, recognition of difference; an exploration of difference, as in "dialogue" in the richest sense of the term;
 - (b) an accentuation of difference, conflict, polemic, a struggle over meaning, norms, power;
 - (c) an attempt to resolve or overcome difference;
 - (d) a bracketing of difference, a focus on commonality, solidarity;
 - (e) consensus, a normalization and acceptance of differences of power which brackets or suppresses differences of meaning and norms
- (2003: 41-42)

Using this model of orientation to difference and consensus, I will examine the representations of Islam and Muslims in the afore-mentioned introductory books.

To be fair, it should be pointed out that there is clearly some orientation to difference, and thus examples of (b), in all of the textbooks examined. Especially in Larsson, issues regarding interpretation and authority are in focus, at least in some parts of the book. In Anne Sofie Roald's book, a consensus-based approach is challenged, mainly by feminist-theology. Nevertheless, the focus in this paper is mainly on instances of (c), (d), and (e) in the textbooks. Focusing on three different themes, one for each of the books, I will give examples of particular types of consensus-making. When looking at Esposito's *Islam, den raka vägen* (2001) I will focus on how Muslims are represented as social actors belonging to the mass social formation commonly called Islam. In Göran Larsson's *Att läsa Koranen, en introduktion* (2006), I will put particular emphasis on how Larsson moves between, in my view at least, two quite different objects of study: (i) The Quran as a text, and (ii) Muslim, but also scholarly, interpretations of the Quran text. Of special interest to me is the mixing of these two perspectives in the text. In regard to Anne Sofie Roald's book, *Islam: Historia, tro, nytolkning* (2005), finally, I will be looking into how Roald uses the insider/outsider distinction, and the assumptions lurking behind the use of this classical binary.

II The Theological Robot

The first book I will examine is *Islam, den raka vägen* (2001) written by John L. Esposito, professor of Religion and International Affairs, and professor of Islamic Studies at Georgetown University. *Islam, den raka vägen* (2001) is divided into six chapters which addresses a variety of topics such as: Muhammad and the Quran, the Muslim community in history, Muslim theology, Muslim Law, contemporary interpretations of Islam, etc. In the preface to the first edition, Esposito writes that "[t]he goal of this volume is to enable readers to understand and appreciate what Muslims believe and practice" (2001:18).

As previously mentioned, I will focus on Esposito's representation of Muslims as social actors. While Esposito seems, in most of the cases, to offer a descriptive account of Muslim beliefs and practices, I will argue that some of these descriptions actually carry normative assumptions with them. Consider the following quotes:

[...] despite this recognition of diversity [different interpretations and applications of Islam], the focus of this volume will be the core of beliefs,

practices, and institutions that unite and are integral to Muslim life, whatever the differences may be (2001: 24).²

When *Muslims worship five times each day*, they declare Islam's absolute or radical monotheism: "I witness that there is no God but the God (Allah)" (2001: 48; emphasis added).

Despite the rich diversity in Islamic practice, the Five Pillars of Islam remain *the core and common denominator*, the five essential and obligatory practices *all Muslims accept and follow*. (2001: 126; emphasis added).

What we have here are not in fact descriptions but norms and ideals, in other words, what Muslims ought to do in order to follow the "core teachings of Islam." The rhetorical trick is to formulate the norm *as if it were an actual behavior*. The quotes in question constitutes a good example of what the Swedish scholar of Islam, Jonas Otterbeck (2006: 248), calls "the theological robot"; Muslims do, more or less, exactly what the "core teachings of Islam" tells them to do.

III In the Game of Orthodoxy

Moving on, I will investigate some passages in *Att läsa Koranen, en introduktion* (2006), written by Göran Larsson. Larsson is professor of religious studies at the Department of Literature, History of Ideas and Religion at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. The purpose of Larsson's book is to give a brief introduction to the content of the Quran, as well as to the Muslim Quran-science. Another purpose is to point out the differences between how believing Muslims and secular scholars approach the Quran text (2006: 9).

In my view, Larsson has two quite different objects of study: (i) the Quran as a text, and (ii) Muslim, but also scholarly, interpretations of the Quranic text. The first object of study, the Quranic text, is two-fold; it is for the most part a content-analysis, but it is also a philological study of the meaning of keywords in the text itself. As for the other object of study, Muslim and scholarly interpretations, Larsson uses Muslim self-reports, as well as scholarly research, to show how the Quran can be read. For example, in the following quotes, so-called secular scholars analyze Muslim interpretations of the creation stories in the Quran. These interpretations are then juxtaposed against Larsson's

² Esposito's book was translated to Swedish in 2001, and it is this edition that is examined here. When translating the quotes, I have used the English third edition (Esposito 1998).

content analysis. First we see how secular scholars approach the Quran, and how they are comparing Muslim and Jewish creation stories:

According to the majority of secular scholars, the Muslim interpretation of the Adam and Eve creation story is strongly influenced by Jewish traditions. For instance, several hadith texts describe how Eve was created from Adam's "crooked" rib (2006: 50).³

Then, Larsson switches to his own content-analysis and claims that, despite these interpretations, several passages in the Quran are quite clear when it comes to men and women's equality before God:

Although these *interpretations* can be seen as a subordination of women, it is important to emphasize that several passages in the Quran says *clearly* that men and women are equal before God (2006: 50; emphasis added).

I find these two quotes interesting for several reasons. The portrayal of the woman as subordinate is represented as an *interpretation*. Men and women's equality before God, however, is apparently not an interpretation, but, in contrast, something the Quran *is very clear about*. The consequence, then, is that the content-analysis in this context becomes highly theological: although the Quran *can* be subject to interpretation, it's apparently clear cut when it comes to women and men's equality before God.

To make my point more clear, consider another example from Larsson's book, in which he deals with passages in the Quran that, according to Larsson, have been used to legitimate persecution of Jews.

Although these passages have been *used* as arguments to persecute—above all—Jewish believers, it is *reasonable* that these two passages *must be read* in light of the political and theological struggle that was going on in Medina, according to the Quran. According to Islamic tradition, when Prophet Muhammad received these revelations, it was *necessary* for the early Muslim society to draw up a clear line against the Jewish tribes in Medina and also clean out among the hypocrites (Al-munafiqun), i.e., those who only verbally confessed to Islam, but in reality stuck to their old beliefs and faiths (2006: 73-74; emphasis added).

3 Translations from Swedish are the author's own.

This reasoning is noticeably normative and Larsson makes quite clear how the two passages in question *ought to be* read. Thus, he enters the game of orthodoxy. But this is a tricky game; which passages in the Quran that ought to be read literally, metaphorically, or in this or that context is clearly a controversial theological matter where the stakes are quite high. In the quote above, Larsson sticks to one particular use of the passages in question, and other possible uses are implicitly rejected.

IV The “Insider Perspective” Rhetoric

With these troubles in mind, I suggest we proceed to Anne Sofie Roald’s book, *Islam: Historia, tro, nytolkning* (2005). Anne Sofie Roald is professor of religious studies at Malmö University College. In the introductory chapter Roald writes that the book is intended to “serve as an introduction to the Islamic tradition’s development in historical and modern times” (2005: 29). In the preface Roald writes that another objective of the book is to challenge, and to problematize, negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam that circulate in western media (2005: 9–11). The reader is also being told that the book aims to provide both an outsider and an insider perspective on Islam and Muslims (2005: 29). It’s the use of these categories—insider and outsider—that I especially want to explore further here.

In the introductory chapter Roald differentiates between three possible ways to study Islam: (i) the outsider perspective, (ii) the insider perspective, and (iii) a sort of intermediate position. She begins by describing the outsider perspective:

The first perspective is that *which now goes by the name of “orientalism”*; here the scholar has a clear outsider perspective on Islam and Muslims. Orientalism, according to Edward Said, constitutes a paradigm with a distinct power relationship between the one who defines, and those who become defined (2005: 28; emphasis added).⁴

We learn that the outsider perspective is equivalent to orientalism, and that this perspective constitutes a paradigm. Roald proceeds by describing the insider perspective:

⁴ Translations from Swedish are the author’s own.

The opposite perspective [to the outsider perspective] is the insider perspective, where Muslim and Islamic scholars write about Islamic themes. This genre is based on a concept of science in which the Islamic sources are considered to be the absolute truth (2005: 28).

First, consider Roald's depiction of the outsider perspective as equivalent to orientalism, and inextricably linked to relations of power and domination. Consider then, how these relations of power are completely absent when it comes to the insider perspective. The insider perspective—also, notice the use of singular here, as opposed to perspectives, in plural—seems to be in a specific genre, where the Islamic sources constitute the absolute truth. But who gets to be *the* insider, interpreting the sources, and perhaps formulating what is assumed to be the absolute truth?

V Conclusion

This leads us back to Fairclough's model of dialogicality in texts. The three examples picked from each of the books constitute, in my view, good examples of consensus-making in the form of (c) (d) and (e). In the case of Esposito, while there are a lot of different applications of Islam, inside, it is seemingly the same, old tradition. Despite certain differences, Muslim pray five times a day and follow other core principles of the faith, as they apparently always have done. But who are allowed to formulate exactly what constitutes these core principles? Such issues of power, authority and privilege are largely ignored in favor of a more consensus-oriented approach.

In the case of Larsson, while some passages in the Quran are open to interpretation, other passages are certainly not. While some of the passages have been *used* to persecute other believers, there nonetheless exists a stable, reasonable and valid interpretation, one that can be obtained through an accurate account of context. And in the case of Roald, while the outsider perspective seems to be inherently filled with power and privilege, this is not the case when it comes to the insider perspective. However, this is certainly to ignore important matters. For example, which of the many insider perspectives is to be authorized? The trick with Roald's use of the insider perspective in this case, at least as I see it, is that it rhetorically invents consensus and unity, where, in reality, there are conflicts, issues of interpretation, issues of authority, and so on—in other words: issues of power and domination.

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