

Islam as a Challenge to the Ideology of Religious Studies:

Failures of Religious Studies in the Middle East

Alexander Henley

Faculty of Theology & Religion, University of Oxford

alex.henley@theology.ox.ac.uk; admhenley@gmail.com

Abstract: Why has Religious Studies failed to gain ground in Middle Eastern universities? This article aims to move beyond a lens of under-development to think about the significance of Muslim opposition to the discipline. When we suppose that studying religion and religions is an obvious thing to do, we risk casting those who deliberately avoid it as somehow irrationally refusing to see what is in front of them. But what if their objections reveal something troubling about the received terms through which we talk about cultures around the world? By taking seriously a certain Islamic perspective on the terms of Western scholarship, this article highlights ways in which it supports Timothy Fitzgerald's critique in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000). It poses a challenge to the idea of value-free study of religion, religions and the religious as conducted through any discipline. This author's hope is that a focus on Muslim voices may bring these concerns home in particular to the fields of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, where the terms of comparative Religious Studies have been embraced as an escape from Orientalism.

Keywords: Religious Studies; Islam; Middle East; Jordan; universities; Timothy Fitzgerald.

Timothy Fitzgerald's classic critique, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000), aimed to provincialize Religious Studies as a product of Euro-American discourse of "religion" and the "secular," and further to expose the discipline's disguised ideological function:

The industry known as religious studies is a kind of generating plant for a value-laden view of the world that claims to identify religions and faiths as an aspect of all societies and that, by so doing, makes possible another separate "non-religious" conceptual space, a fundamental area of presumed factual objectivity. (Fitzgerald 2000, 9)

Pre-empting the question of why "he can see what others cannot see," Fitzgerald notes firstly that "many other scholars are working toward similar ideas," and secondly that it was "in the process of living and researching in India and Japan that this ideological mystification became apparent" to him (20). Albeit without similar first-hand experience of Muslim-majority societies, he notes in a later work that "Today the most obvious challenge to these Euro-American categories comes from Islam" (2007, 10). Elaborating on this observation, Fitzgerald continues:

I am after all hoping to persuade the reader that we need a *different standpoint* from which to view our own conceptual productions in a dangerously volatile world in which material satisfaction through processes of globalisation and consumerism *can only be challenged by non-Western forms of life such as Islam*. (2007, 15; emphasis added)

To what extent, then, has Islam actually provided an obviously different standpoint from which to challenge the globalising ideology of Religious Studies? That is the question I seek to address, however partially, in this article.

Several of the other scholars referenced by Fitzgerald as "working toward similar ideas" have paid significant attention to Islam: notably Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962), Talal Asad (1993) and to a lesser extent Jonathan Z. Smith (1998). But although Asad may be the single most

influential living scholar in Islamic Studies, his genealogies of “religion” and “its Siamese twin ‘secularism’” (2001, 221) have not in fact steered that field to become the major locus of critical approaches to religion that we might expect. The most significant recent critique of religion as a category for understanding Islam – Shahab Ahmed’s much-discussed *What is Islam?* (2016, especially 176-245) – draws more on Fitzgerald’s work than Asad’s, despite the former’s minimal treatment of Islam. Fitzgerald does at one point quote a Muslim scholar’s observation that “Islam is not merely a religion but a way of life,” and suggests that “If the implications of this statement are thought about at all, then they could be very great indeed” (2007, 32). It is a statement that, as Ahmed says, “Every student of Islam will recognize as commonplace;” yet it is “one of those commonplaces that are routinely stated without due consideration of its *meaning* or *consequence* for conceptualization or analysis: it is, precisely, ‘acknowledged but then sidestepped’” (Ahmed 2016, 188; quoting Fitzgerald 2000, 136).

Like Fitzgerald teaching at a university in Japan, I have been struck by incongruities between my position as a researcher trained and employed in Religious Studies departments in the UK and the standpoints of Muslims at universities in the Middle East. The particular parochiality of Religious Studies was driven home to me during a recent four-month research stint in Jordan. There I spent time with professors and students of several major universities, attending a range of classes and conferences on Islamic themes. I was most interested in the function of Shari‘a Colleges, which in Jordan are university departments that specialise in *‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, the so-called “Sciences of Religion” that engage with the Qur’an, Hadith and Fiqh, the systematic study of Shari‘a. Meeting dozens of scholars trained in or currently working in these Shari‘a Colleges, I introduced myself with a business card from Oxford’s “Faculty of Theology and Religion,” translated on one side into Arabic as “*Qism al-Lāhūt wa-l-Dīn*.” This was my first stumbling block, as I found myself repeatedly apologising for my lack of expertise both in

Christian Theology – the perceived implication of “Theology/*al-Lāhū*” in both English and Arabic – and similarly in *‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, the Islamic Sciences of Religion – the perceived implication of “*al-Dīn*.” Some of the scholars I met suggested I correct this to *‘Ilm al-Adyān* (the Study of Religions), going on to ask me about my (equally poor) knowledge of Buddhism or Hinduism. I, on the other hand, explained that my work may be better characterised as History and Anthropology. The implication that I wanted to study Islam through Religious Studies, History or Anthropology all frequently caused visible consternation among Muslim scholars of Islam (*‘ulamā’ al-dīn*). Rather than serving as a straightforward short-hand between fellow academics, these labels only prompted confused or suspicious questioning of my intentions, including whether I was an Orientalist (*mustashriq* – occasionally said in a tone I took to be frankly hostile). In mentioning these awkward first impressions here, I do not mean to suggest that Jordanian Muslim scholars were naturally hostile toward me; far from it!¹ The point I want to make in this article is that although the Euro-American vocabulary of “religion” is at some level immediately comprehensible to Muslims everywhere and deceptively easily translatable into the Arabic *dīn*, we still find that its common-sense usage in Religious Studies (or Anthropology of Religion, History of Religion, etc) fails to map neatly onto the social worlds it is supposed to describe. Moreover, these astute Muslim scholars’ discomfort highlights something more than a Western category mistake or even their own theological commitments: by recognising a clash of perspectives, they expose the value-laden epistemology being generated covertly by the industry known as Religious Studies.

¹ Perhaps out of an abundance of caution on their behalf, I will not identify any of those involved in this research. I remain, however, extremely grateful for and humbled by the wisdom and hospitality extended to me by many sincere *‘ulamā’* in Jordan whose *‘ilm* I will never match. Insofar as this article attempts some critical analysis of their discourse, its criticism is of Western Religious Studies not of any Jordanian scholar or institution.

My focus in this article is on the fate of Religious Studies in Muslim-majority societies. Certain Muslim attitudes toward the discipline, I suggest, provide an instructive entry-point through which to reflect on Religious Studies as ideology, and on Islam as a standpoint from which to challenge that ideology and open up a space for more inclusive and transparent conversations. In what follows, I will first outline the supposed failure of Middle Eastern academia to establish a discipline of Religious Studies, arguing in the process that the existing literature on this issue reveals as much about the discipline's own disguised "liberal ecumenical theology" (Fitzgerald 2000, 7) as about problems facing Muslim scholarship. Set against that backdrop, I then put Fitzgerald's critique into conversation with some of my own observations on the category religion in intellectual and institutional frameworks at Middle Eastern universities.

The Failure of Religious Studies in the Middle East

In the opening pages of *Religious Studies: A Global View* (2008), Gregory Alles outlines the aims of its eighteen contributors who survey intellectual and institutional developments across ten broad regions of the world:

the volume aims to make serious readers aware that, despite the impression left by many otherwise excellent introductory texts (e.g. Michaels [ed.] 2004; Nye 2003; Pals 2006; Strenski 2006), thinking about religions is not confined to their own or someone else's corner of the globe. One may hope that increased awareness will result in increasingly greater collaboration between scholars in different regions. (2008, 3)

Despite this laudable intention to de-centre North American and Western European scholarship, the volume betrays a notable shortage of institutionalised Religious Studies in the Middle East and North Africa, especially its predominantly Arab Muslim regions. As of 2020, no departments in the Middle East or North Africa have made it into the QS World University Rankings for "Theology, Divinity & Religious Studies," except the Hebrew University of

Jerusalem.² The International Association for the History of Religions – which Alles uses to illustrate that “The study of religions is a global enterprise” (2008, 2) – does indeed have national and regional affiliates *almost* everywhere in the world, but from the whole of the Middle East and North Africa only Turkey is represented.³ This perhaps explains why, among an impressively global list of contributors to *Religious Studies: A Global View*, the chapter on “North Africa and West Asia” is written by a Canadian scholar at the University of Montreal (Brodeur 2008).

The explanation for the Middle East’s apparent “failure” to develop a significant field of Religious Studies is not that its higher education sector is under-developed. The QS World University Rankings do include a large number of entries from across the region, none of which appear in this particular subject ranking. Patrice Brodeur’s survey highlights the wide range of universities in each country, from transformed pre-modern Islamic and missionary institutions to twentieth-century national and private universities (2008, 90-98). Nor is the absence of Religious Studies a characteristic of all Muslim-majority contexts, as is amply evidenced by Turkey, which is often presented as the region’s success story in this regard. In 2004, Bulent Senay counted twenty-three “faculties of divinity” at Turkish universities, in which “the ‘phenomenological/secular’ type of the study of religion has found its way into the traditional pattern of institutional self-understanding with relative ease” (71). He gives one significant explanation of the difference:

In part, this is due to the fact that the Turkish-Muslim experience (quite a different one compared to the Arab-Muslim experience) of overcoming the tension between modernity/secularization and Islam has led to a wider tendency towards intellectual

² Accessed May 15, 2020. <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2020/theology-divinity-religious-studies>.

³ Accessed May 15, 2020. <https://www.iahrweb.org/members.php>.

freedom and a “value-free” study of religion despite criticism of the idea of “value-free” study itself. (Senay 2004, 71-72)

Putting aside for the moment Senay’s comment about “the idea of ‘value-free’ study,” several other scholars including Brodeur have similarly observed “a direct link between the emergence of a modern academic study of religions and democratic nation-state building” (Brodeur 2008, 88). Brodeur explains that this is because “The space for such debates [around religion] often requires more than what a university provides; it requires a degree of freedom of expression within a given society.” On top of a regional democracy deficit, Jacques Waardenburg (1998) and Sjoerd van Koningsveld (2002) both point to top-down imposition of an official interpretation of Islam by many Muslim and especially Arab regimes: “An empirical and potentially critical interest in interpretations of Islam may thus become politically suspect. It may also make the study of other religions seem dubious” (Waardenburg 1998, 247).

There is no doubt that societal limitations on freedom of expression play a profound role in steering the agendas of academic research and teaching. Any Jordanian will tell you that there are unwritten “red lines” one must not cross, and university professors report working under particularly intense scrutiny, both governmental and social. In many fields this is expressed as a triple taboo against “politics, religion or sex” as topics of discussion in class. I would suggest, however, that there is more at work when it comes to Religious Studies. For a start, Jordan presents a curious counter-example of a monarchy that *both* promotes an official Islam *and* has actively sponsored projects for research and teaching in Religious Studies and inter-faith understanding. Like van Koningsveld’s case of Morocco, in Jordan “the king and the political institutions dependent on his authority control the official religious discourse” (2002, 272). Sunni Muslim identity has always been a key element of the Hashemite monarchy’s self-legitimation, and a degree of doctrinal uniformity is maintained by a set of government

ministries and departments collectively known as the “official religious institutions” (*al-mu’assasāt al-dīniyya al-rasmiyya*). On the other hand it was Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, Chief Adviser to the King for Religious Affairs (*al-shu’ūn al-dīniyya*) and the man responsible for supervising those very institutions, who from 2005 onward launched the Amman Message and Common Word initiatives to promote understanding across different Islamic schools as well as between Muslims and Christians. Prince Ghazi also endowed the King Abdullah Fellowship for the Study of Love in Religion at the University of Oxford in 2015. Similarly, former Crown Prince Hasan bin Talal founded a Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (*al-Ma’had al-Malaki li-l-Dirāsāt al-Dīniyya*) in 1994, one of whose objectives has been to establish a Masters in the Study of Religions (*dirāsāt al-adyān*). According to staff at the Institute, this degree course would have been the first in the Arab world to offer “objective study of world religions,” which they explained as “not faith-based or polemical.” What is particularly significant here is that despite its royal backing, the idea of such a programme in Religious Studies proved controversial enough that after some years of planning they were unable to find a partner university in Jordan to accredit it. The Institute has been highly successful at attracting partners for other projects, and Brodeur’s regional survey gives it rare praise: “Its research, publications, and activities reflect the best academic standards and would normally be found within a university structure... The academic research carried out in this institute definitely falls within the modern academic study of religions” (2008, 94-95). If the Institute’s problem is not government pressure nor lack of funding nor the quality of its scholars, and they have a supply of both teachers and students (as evidenced by the private courses they already run), what is it? Opposition to their teaching of Religious Studies comes from among other Muslim scholars who regard this approach to Islam and world religions with suspicion, a point I will come back to below.

Some Arab universities, including the famous centres of Islamic learning at al-Azhar in Egypt and Ez-Zitouna in Tunisia, do offer “limited introductions to a few religions, primarily Abrahamic” (Brodeur 2008, 91), within the context of Islamic theological studies. A few more substantial exceptions also exist in Lebanon and Egypt (the latter at the American University in Cairo, which I will discuss later). Lebanon in particular is home to a small cluster of programmes styled in the terms of Religious Studies, notably at overtly Christian universities such as Balamand and Saint-Joseph as well as the inter-faith Adyan Foundation. Brodeur notes that these Lebanese programmes tend to focus on pluralism and dialogue, advocating “for the place of religious dimensions in the culture of modern societies in a way that prepares for a middle ground approach to the often dichotomous language of religion and secularism, a position shared by many Islamic institutions throughout NAWA [North Africa and West Asia]” (2008, 95). This trend is reminiscent of Senay’s connection between the development of Religious Studies in Turkey and “the Turkish-Muslim experience ... of overcoming the tension between modernity/secularization and Islam” (2004, 72). While some form of thinking about this “tension” is virtually ubiquitous in modern Islamic discourse (see Tayob 2009b), Lebanon shares with Turkey not only a degree of democratic freedom of expression but – concomitantly – a well-entrenched state apparatus that demarcates “religious” spheres of social life and generates the “separate ‘non-religious’ conceptual space” (Fitzgerald 2000, 9) for “objective” Religious Studies.

What, then, of Alles’ (2008, 2) claim that “The study of religions is a global enterprise”? On the face of it, he appears correct that “Scholars of religions are found throughout the world, on every continent and in every religious tradition.” Although there is a remarkable shortage of Religious Studies departments and programmes in Muslim-majority contexts, one could point out that even among Muslims in these regions there are “scholars who are at work crafting

knowledge about religions.” Van Koningsveld’s study (2002), which focuses on the severe structural limitations in Morocco, nevertheless gives several examples of Moroccan historians and social scientists doing research on contemporary religion, most of which is published abroad. Even Abdulkader Tayob, who might not agree with Alles’ assumption that “the object of study [i.e. religion] is global” (2008, 2), draws attention to a wide range of Arab Muslim intellectuals who for more than a century have been applying critical methods to locate religion in Arab/Islamic heritage (Tayob 2004; 2009a; 2009b). Of course, all these attempts to identify what counts as Religious Studies around the world are forced to wade into the muddy question of its distinction from Theology. According to Alles’ own standards, most of the products of scholarly thinking about religion in the Middle East “do not count as knowledge in a strict sense” (2008, 5). Brodeur’s chapter covering the Middle East in the same volume concludes: “If by ‘academic’ one means ‘non-confessional’ or ‘non-theological’, then the percentage of academic production versus non-academic production on topics related to religions is small indeed” – though Brodeur himself thinks that these “issues are similar to those in Europe and North America” (99).

What interests me here is that almost all the scholars who investigate the state of Religious Studies in Muslim contexts treat its relative absence as a form of under-development, as if it is a natural and obvious thing to do.⁴ The questions driving these investigations appear to be: (1) why have Muslim academic milieux failed to achieve the same level and range of scholarship in Religious Studies as counterparts elsewhere?; and (2) how could these be improved? From these questions arise a focus on the democracy deficit and the intellectual straitjacket of official

⁴ With the notable exception of Tayob, who locates an Islamic discourse on religion squarely in modernity as new and transformative, while arguing that it not be seen merely as a poor reflection of Western intellectual hegemony, instead “as a parallel or perhaps an intersecting development with the Western discourse of religious studies – with some distinct differences” (2018, 28). I see this article as complementary to Tayob’s work, at least insofar as we share the dual aims of historicizing discourses of religion in modernity and positing the potential for certain Islamic discourses to parochialize Western Religious Studies.

Islam. Waardenburg adds to these explanations the sheer difficulty of doing good Religious Studies with weak institutional resources: “Technical and mental training is essential for anyone seriously investigating languages, texts, historical facts and social structures of whatever religion” (1998, 246; echoed in e.g. Brodeur 2008, 99). Looking to Islamic norms, he also adds to this list “the adage that Islam is the final and true religion,” which he says “distracts attention from the obvious fact that there are other people than Muslims and other religions than Islam, and that they all are worth knowing.” This obstacle, in Waardenburg’s view (echoed by Alles and others), ought to be a non-issue when Religious Studies is properly understood, because “in fact, the study of religions modestly puts the question of the ultimate truth of these religions between brackets (*epoché*).” Each of these scholars is aware of the parochial Euro-American history of Religious Studies – that, after all, is the backdrop against which they identify and investigate comparable modes of scholarship elsewhere – but they suppose that tradition in which they were trained to be but one (possible) systematization of a universal quest. The result is oddly reminiscent of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1963) investigating the reasons why various world cultures have “reified” to different extents or in different ways their human experience of faith. But whereas Smith viewed that systematization – typified by modern Western thinking – as a distortion of “mankind’s religious life,” these scholars seem to consider its absence a kind of distortion or false consciousness that obscures “the obvious fact” of world religions. I would ask, using the words Fitzgerald uses about Smith, whether they are “putting forward an academic theory or a confession of faith” (2000, 43).

In the search for others with inclinations similar to their own, several scholars with “*A Global View*” of Religious Studies find their faith validated in the discovery of pre-modern prototypes. Brodeur claims that there is fertile ground in Islamic culture for the revival of an earlier “proto-scientific study of religions,” so long as a strict separation between Theology and Religious

Studies is not enforced (2008, 99). Waardenburg suggests that “Perhaps Western scholarship could be a catalyst in this process” of revival (1998, 246). More perceptively, I think, Brodeur locates the obstacle in modernity, asking:

Just what happened in the initial encounter with colonialism and modernity that the vitality of the medieval proto-scientific study of religions could not be sustained? Why did this study not lead to an internal revival similar to what happened in the field of Arabic literature? (2008, 99)

Interestingly, Senay traces the more successful Turkish school of Religious Studies back to the first Ottoman Turkish textbook on *The History of Religions* in 1912, which explicitly called it a new discipline separate from the earlier Islamic scholarship. Its author is quoted saying, “it is essential that the historian of religion study the ‘religious phenomenon’ with an objective approach” (Midhat 1912, 15; quoted in Senay 2004, 74). “Midhat supported his point about the need to be objective to the point of agnosticism by referring to Descartes’s assertion that to do philosophy one must forget all that one has learned and look at things without bias” (Senay 2004, 74). Yet Senay himself dismisses such differences in order to argue that, “first and foremost it must be both acknowledged and emphasized that *Religionswissenschaft* is an Islamic discipline” (78). This allows Senay, like Brodeur and Waardenburg, to romanticize a forgotten Islamic golden age that is part and parcel of “humanity’s intellectual history”: “Where the Muslims left off, the West picked up, and thus the discipline was subsequently developed under a different worldview (Smart 1991) and academic tradition, for different needs and purposes” (79). Senay does explore the distinctive features of the Western discipline, even drawing on Russell McCutcheon (1997) and Richard King (1999) to critique the category of religion itself, but he ultimately reduces these to a mere “difference of language” (94) in the universal quest to understand “the relationship between the human receptacle and divine revelation” (96). Coming back to the failure of Religious Studies in today’s Middle East,

Waardenburg neatly sums up what all these treatments of the problem seem to conclude: “Most important perhaps is whether or not they see in our studies a danger or, on the contrary, a way to truth as well as an intellectual and human enrichment” (1998, 248). The danger that many Muslims see in Religious Studies is cast again and again as an irrational, gut-reaction “apologetic stance” (Brodeur 2008, 100). But in the final analysis, the hope that committed Religious Studies advocates harbour for a global convergence of “thinking about religions” (Alles 2008, 3) – whether or not they believe Theology may be integrated successfully – turns out to represent a particular theological vision of its own. It is precisely because this “liberal ecumenical theology has been *disguised* (though not very well) in the so-called scientific study of religion” (Fitzgerald 2000, 7; emphasis added), that advocates can dismiss challenges to its worldview offhand as simply unobjective rather than addressing them as *alternative* theological visions.

Islamic Confrontations with the Ideology of Religious Studies

Fitzgerald recognized the potential for Muslims to see through the “ideological mystification” of Religious Studies (2000, 20), as I explained in my introduction. What is presented as the common-sense study of social reality, an undertaking available and comprehensible to any right-minded person “on every continent and in every religious tradition” (Alles 2008, 2), has a hidden “theological and more generally ideological function” (Fitzgerald 2000, 27). “Only by clearly exposing this function can the category [religion] be defused, as it were, and laid to rest” (27). Fitzgerald’s work to this end could be characterised as the autocritique of a scholar trained in Religious Studies, holding up a mirror to Western scholarship for others like himself to see its flaws. This mirror is not magic, however, and continues to be “acknowledged but

then sidestepped” (136);⁵ in this the field of Islamic Studies is no exception, despite the significant contributions of Asad (1993), Tayob (2009b) and Ahmed (2016). One reason for this appears to be a common scepticism that autocritique can be of much use in the real work of understanding others.⁶ A somewhat more sophisticated version of this sceptical argument is made by Rushain Abbasi, who complains that scholars in the critical camp “place modern European history at the very centre of their analysis... This obstructs the ability of premodern Muslims to speak for themselves” (2020, 3). Though I have my doubts that premodern Muslims speak to Abbasi about religion and the secular quite as clearly as he thinks, my suggestion here is that we listen to the voices of Muslims *today*, some of whom do speak from a standpoint that challenges the worldview of Religious Studies. That is to say, there are many intelligent and well-educated Muslim scholars in the Middle East who already regard Religious Studies as inherently “connected to cultural imperialism and orientalism” (Fitzgerald 2000, 23).

When talking about Muslim attitudes to Religious Studies, we cannot forget of course the troubled legacy of European and North American Orientalists’ studies of Islam. The very idea of value-neutral study of religion has lost credibility among Muslims in the face of a mass of evidence to the contrary (see Daneshgar 2019; al-Samarrai 2002). This has included uses of historical-critical methods to undermine the provenance and integrity of Qur’an and Hadith; to explain away the central miracles of revelation; to defame the Prophet Muhammad himself (notably including the accusation that he was not genuinely “religious” because of his entanglements with “non-religious” pursuits like power and sex); and to attack the methods of Muslim scholarship as credulous traditionalism. In light of a catalogue of offences against God,

⁵ See McCutcheon (2015) for a useful, if pessimistic, review of “The Category ‘Religion’ in Recent Publications: Twenty Years Later.”

⁶ The idea that we can acknowledge but then effectively ignore the critique of “religion” is, I think, exacerbated by face-value readings of statements like Jonathan Z. Smith’s that “‘Religion’ is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define” (1998, 281).

the Prophet and his scholarly heirs, we might forgive Muslims when they are unimpressed by a Religious Studies scholar's assertion that "What they make of their religious convictions after that is their own business" (Alles 2008, 7). On the other hand, most of us in Western universities today would distance ourselves from the excesses of Orientalism along with patronising rankings of world religions (Masuzawa 2005), to the extent that I found myself astonished and affronted to be asked by Jordanians whether I was an Orientalist. The field of Islamic Studies has in recent decades largely been detached from its roots in philological Oriental Studies in order to bring it into the fold of a "cosmopolitan" Religious Studies (Martin and Ernst 2010) characterised by attention to ethical coexistence and empathetic neutrality, as well as the application of various disciplinary methods to "Islamic religion" (for a thorough critique of these trends, see Hughes 2012). Although this shift has made Islamic Religious Studies more user-friendly to *some* Muslims, it does not resolve the confrontation seen by others, not least in the Middle East.

The Religious Studies approach of "empathetic neutrality" is in itself a positionality that Fitzgerald says "presupposes a modern [originally Western] epistemology" of methodological atheism or agnosticism (2007, 11). Rather than being value-free, its primary function is "to embed the superior nonreligious space of objective neutrality" (31), which is presented as "the arena of the 'really real' ... an appearance of undeniable factuality that hides (from westerners, but not from so many members of third world societies) the value-laden assumptions upon which so much of the western view of the world rests" (2000, 14-15). Even in Turkey, where Religious Studies has been established "with relative ease," Senay noticed some "criticism of the idea of 'value-free' study itself" (2004, 72). This is clearly conveyed in a recent textbook (al-Malkawi et al. 2019) on *Aqīda* (Doctrine) written in Arabic by four prominent Jordanian professors and adopted by a number of Shari'a Colleges. In an introduction to key terminology,

they list atheism (*al-ilhād*) not as a neutral position of indifference but as a rival “school” (*madhhab*) based on “antipathy to the path of the people of faith” (15). While some Religious Studies scholars might agree with this assessment of atheism, the alternative formulation of methodological agnosticism fares no better. Agnosticism (*al-lā’adriyya* [lit. not knowing] or *madhhab al-shakk* [lit. the school of doubt]) is defined as a classical Greek “philosophy” (*falsafa*) further developed by Kant and based on “denial of the ability of the senses and the intellect to realise what is Certain [*al-yaqīn*], using doubt and the principle of probability as a method of argument, to shake an adversary’s grasp of what is Certain” (16-17). I have capitalised “Certain” in translation of a significant Qur’anic word that seems to indicate the conception of Islam that Fitzgerald thought might be “something more analogous perhaps to what Religion understood as Christian Truth was before the Enlightenment, a framework specifying the order of things and persons which, by its very nature as revealed Truth, encompasses and judges all valid human practices” (2007, 32). Interestingly, al-Malkawi et al. connect the modern rise of agnosticism with a particular European history “as a response to the religious repression and ecclesiastical hegemony that inhibited intellects and fought against knowledge and scholars” (17). Whereas they touch on atheism only briefly as a straightforward rejection of God and those who have faith in Him, they treat agnosticism as an altogether more insidious methodology. By locating agnosticism in Europeans’ attempts at intellectual liberation from a repressive Church, these Muslim scholars make it clear that this Enlightenment epistemology of doubt is neither neutral nor appropriate to the academic study of Islam.

This textbook is used in undergraduate courses on *‘Aqīda* – a term variously translated as doctrine, creed or belief – and engages students in “useful debate and satisfying discussion” of each of the six revealed Pillars of Faith (al-Malkawi et al. 2019, 5). In the authors’ own

definition of *'aqīda* it is distinguished from mere opinion “in which there may be uncertainty or doubt,” for it is a Certainty “that Man owes [*yadīn*] to his Lord” (10). This carries none of the implications of either blind faith or subjective belief, for the “believer” (*mu'taqid*) in this case is someone who “makes a firm judgment on decisive evidence, and the proofs furnished for his belief” (9). Such an epistemology stands starkly at odds with the premise of Religious Studies that religious beliefs are clearly distinguishable as those “We simply lack the means to demonstrate ... in a manner consistent with criteria that we ordinarily use for knowledge,” and that “people are entitled to disregard religious claims and thinking that depends upon them in a manner in which they are not entitled to disregard, for example, the existence of the ground on which they walk or, more abstractly, Newton’s equations defining motion” (Alles 2008, 5 and 6). Those Religious Studies scholars who wonder why Muslim academia has been so slow to adopt their discipline are assuming that its “orientation [to knowledge] does not necessarily make it a secular, anti-religious pursuit, nor does it require scholars of religions to be outsiders” (7). Of course there are plenty of Muslim insiders around the world who are happy to adopt the orientation of Religious Studies, whether they regard it as complementary to their theological concerns (as suggested by Senay 2004; Brodeur 2008) or as a separate kind of pursuit (as recommended by Alles 2008). Yet the very framing of such discussion around the possibility of combining Religious Studies with Theology tends to ignore the elephant in the room: that Religious Studies operates on its *own* theological/epistemological premises that demand conformity. That is to say, practitioners of Religious Studies may be insiders, but only certain kinds of insiders.

It is no coincidence that projects for Religious Studies in the Middle East (as elsewhere) so often dovetail with theological projects for inter-faith dialogue. This connection is overt in all of the Lebanese and Jordanian cases I am aware of, as detailed above. The only attempt to set

up a whole degree programme in the Study of Religions was a project of Jordan's Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies. My point is not that these endeavours are somehow less academic, just that we can see in them the alignment between liberal ecumenical theology and Religious Studies. When they fail as that one did, we also get glimpses of the objectors who do not share the theological premises of Religious Studies, a discipline we might otherwise assume to be an "apparently harmless" (Fitzgerald 2007, 29) response to "the obvious fact that there are other people than Muslims and other religions than Islam, and that they all are worth knowing" (Waardenburg 1998, 246). In Jordan I heard of some smaller-scale examples. One professor in a Shari'a College tried to teach about the Shi'i sect of Islam "on its own terms" rather than through the lens of Sunni orthodoxy; he told me that senior colleagues demanded to know why, if he was not himself Shi'i, did he refuse to declare them unbelievers. In another instance, a university offered a general education elective in World Religions for a couple of years; a member of staff involved said it was abolished once it became clear that professors at the Shari'a College had "warned their students not to listen," while students based in other departments were avoiding the course because they thought "religion should only be for students in Shari'a." A similar case has been reported in Egypt, where in 2003 the American University in Cairo established the Abdulhadi H. Taher Chair in Comparative Religion, along with an Interdisciplinary Minor that one incumbent called "the only non-sectarian comparative religions program in the Islamic world" (Bhatti 2019). The intention behind Taher's endowment, "to promote peace between religious communities" (AUC News), was decidedly ecumenical; after the donor's death, however, his son had the funds redirected away from Comparative Religion on the basis of theological objections. According to the professor in post at the time, the donor's son "wanted the program to promote Islam over other religions, teach other faiths as if they were 'incorrect,' ... refrain from teaching about non-Abrahamic religions," and avoid translating the Qur'anic word *Allāh* generically as "God" (Bhatti 2019).

I would suggest that cases like these indicate something more than prejudice or a misunderstanding of the neutrality of Religious Studies. In what Brodeur saw as “a preventive strategy to avoid misunderstandings” (2008, 92), the AUC course website explained: “The academic study of religion does not make value judgments; it is not interested in promoting or demoting any particular religion or religions.” Yet the very act of identifying something as (a) religion *is* a value judgment that implicitly promotes it in relation to some things and demotes it in relation to others. Muslims who object to Religious Studies see that it makes Islam one option among many “religions,” all essentially the same kind of thing, all equally possible (but equally doubtable) truths that we are therefore entitled to disregard as we please. After all, if “religious” thinking does not constitute real knowledge that we can or ought to make judgments about, then presumably the place left for *‘aqīda* is that of a life accessory, a commodity to be bought and sold on the basis of aesthetics or utility.

Conclusions

In short, the supposed failure of Middle Eastern academia to adopt Religious Studies is in fact a sign of failures in Religious Studies itself. It is not the “global enterprise” it is claimed to be, nor do its operative categories straightforwardly describe the world as it self-evidently is. Religious Studies might better be described as a *globalising project*, one by which “so-called underdeveloped societies come to realize and conform to this natural reality in order to be considered fully rational” (Fitzgerald 2000, 8). By approaching this problem through an Islamic standpoint, I hope this article may go some way to addressing the concern that “The current hyper-theorization ... is far too introspective and inward-looking to teach us much about ‘the other’” (Abbasi 2020, 41). The critique of categories like religion and the secular in Western scholarship comes *from* the other, and attention to it helps us realize how our naming of the world constantly recreates that world (to paraphrase Freire 1970, 90). There are Arabic words

like *dīn* that may be used in ways that resemble “religion,” including in pre-modern Muslim writings, but are they always doing the same things? For example, Islamic *‘aqīda* can be described as religious/*dīnī* knowledge (as it appears in al-Malkawi et al. 2019, 10) as opposed to worldly/*dunyāwī* knowledge (which Abbasi 2020 argues to be “secular”). The Arabic terms at first glance appear easily translatable into the religion-secular binary as we know it in English, but in this instance they are performing opposite discursive functions: the Arabic *dīnī* locates the arena of the “really real” in the Certainty “that Man owes [*yadīn*] to his Lord” (al-Malkawi et al. 2019, 10); the English “religious” displaces the arena of the “really real” to the “non-religious, the scientific, the natural, the world as it is simply given to rational observation” (Fitzgerald 2000, 15). What is important to realize is that our act of naming is no more neutral or objective than theirs, and has equally powerful theological implications. If we want to understand others on their own terms, we need to do so with a critical eye to what our terms may be doing when applied as matter-of-fact descriptions or translations.

At the outset of this article, I posed a question that seems to arise from Fitzgerald’s comments about “non-Western forms of life such as Islam” (2007, 15): To what extent has Islam actually provided an obviously different standpoint from which to challenge the globalising ideology of Religious Studies? The simple answer is that we *do* find in certain Islamic contexts “alternative conceptualisations which shift our perceptions of ourselves” (25) – if we allow them to. I have highlighted a markedly broad-based resistance to the discipline of Religious Studies in the Middle East, a resistance that has tended to be glossed by Religious Studies scholars themselves as a “failure” stemming from regional authoritarianism and dogmatism. For a discipline that prioritises empathetic understanding, I find it curious that this empathy appears to find its limit when it comes to a Muslim perspective that challenges the claims by which Religious Studies is validated: claims to a non-religious, objective order of knowledge

that makes religion and religions available to rational observation. In such instances – “limit-situations” as Paolo Freire might call them (1970, 99) – we see the discourse of Religious Studies operating to enforce the ideological conformity indicated by Fitzgerald.

I have outlined in rough strokes one alternative conceptualisation found among some Muslims, but I am not proposing it as *the* alternative: neither as a better methodological basis for all scholars nor as an authoritative standpoint for all Muslims. There are many Muslims both in the Middle East and elsewhere who have no objection to the discourse of Religious Studies (e.g. Senay 2004), or who have found in the category religion a vital tool for self-empowerment through claims to religious freedoms, rights and representation (e.g. Uddin 2019). My argument is simpler: that the conventional formulations of Religious Studies fail to afford the neutral playing-field they are intended to. Waardenburg expresses quite elegantly that shared humanistic intention to provide “a way to truth as well as an intellectual and human enrichment” (1998, 248). By contrast, what is useful about Fitzgerald’s critique of Religious Studies as ideological is that it implies “the existence of persons who are directly or indirectly served by these [limit-] situations, and of those who are negated and curbed by them” (Freire 1970, 102). Some Muslims are indeed well served by religion discourse, precisely due to its elision of description with prescription; other Muslims find their perspectives negated and curbed. If we hope to achieve a more fully humanising scholarship, we must step outside of the limiting and loaded categories of religion, religions and the religious, seeing them as part of the modern social reality which challenges us all (paraphrasing Freire 1970, 110).

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