

Triple Critique: Critical Epistemology and Islamic Studies in Europe

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Abstract

Drawing on the idea of multiple critiques, this article explores the potential of a critical epistemology for studying Islam in Europe. It first recognizes the de facto variety of paradigms that produce and disseminate knowledge about Islam in Europe, which resulted from various historical and sociological dynamics, both in Europe and the Muslim world. The first section of this article, thus, will be dedicated to mapping the multiplicity of research practices and discourses of Islamic studies as an academic discipline hosted in European universities. Next, we will make the case that in order to overcome the traps that Islamic studies face in Europe, a triple critique grounded in post-traditionalism, post-orientalism, and post-Islamism is required. That is, researchers need to challenge the epistemological tools of the dominating paradigms in Islamic studies (traditionalism, orientalism, and Islamism), conduct self-criticism, and bypass the limitations of ideology, political interest, and self-righteousness. Lastly, we will examine the notion of umma as understood by these paradigms and show the possibilities of a threefold critique in fostering a critical epistemology of Islamic Studies in Europe and beyond.

Keywords

Critique; Epistemology; Islamic Studies; Europe

Triple critique : épistémologie critique et études islamiques en Europe

Résumé

S'appuyant sur l'idée de critiques multiples, cet article explore le potentiel d'une épistémologie critique pour l'étude de l'islam en Europe. Il reconnaît tout d'abord la diversité de facto des paradigmes qui produisent et diffusent les connaissances sur l'islam en Europe, résultat de diverses dynamiques historiques et sociologiques, tant en Europe que dans le monde musulman. La première partie de cet article sera donc consacrée à cartographier la multiplicité des pratiques de recherche et des discours de l'islamologie en tant que discipline enseignée dans les universités européennes. Ensuite, nous démontrerons que pour surmonter les écueils auxquels est confrontée l'islamologie en Europe, une triple critique fondée sur le post-traditionalisme, le post-orientalisme et le post-islamisme est nécessaire. En d'autres termes, les chercheurs doivent remettre en question les outils épistémologiques des paradigmes dominants en islamologie (traditionalisme, orientalisme et islamisme), mener une autocritique et contourner les limites de l'idéologie, des intérêts politiques et de l'autosatisfaction. Enfin, nous examinerons la notion d'oumma telle qu'elle est comprise par ces paradigmes et montrerons les possibilités d'une triple critique pour favoriser une épistémologie critique de l'islamologie en Europe et au-delà.

Mot-clés

Critique ; Épistémologie ; islamologie ; Europe

نقد ثلاثي: الإبيستمولوجيا النقدية والدراسات الإسلامية في أوروبا

المخلص

انطلاقاً من فكرة النقد المتعدد، تستكشف هذه المقالة إمكانات نظرية المعرفة النقدية لدراسة الإسلام في أوروبا. تبدأ المقالة بتقرير التنوع الفعلي للنماذج التي تُنتج وتنتشر المعرفة حول الإسلام في أوروبا، والناجم عن ديناميات تاريخية واجتماعية متعددة، سواء في أوروبا أو في العالم الإسلامي. ولذلك، سيُخصص القسم الأول من هذه المقالة لرسم خريطة لتعدد الممارسات البحثية وخطابات الدراسات الإسلامية ك تخصص أكاديمي في الجامعات الأوروبية. بعد ذلك، سنبين أنه لتجاوز العقبات التي تواجهها الدراسات الإسلامية في أوروبا، يلزم القيام بنقد ثلاثي قائم على ما بعد التقليدية، وما بعد الاستشراق، وما بعد الإسلاموية. أي أن الباحثين بحاجة إلى تحدي الأدوات المعرفية للنماذج السائدة في الدراسات الإسلامية (التقليدية، والاستشراق، والإسلاموية)، وإجراء نقد ذاتي، وتجاوز قيود الأيديولوجيا، والمصالح السياسية، والانكفاء. أخيراً، سندرس نقدياً مفهوم الأمة كما تفهمه هذه النماذج، ونبين إمكانيات النقد الثلاثي في تعزيز نظرية معرفية نقدية للدراسات الإسلامية في أوروبا وخارجها

الكلمات المفتاحية

النقد؛ نظرية المعرفة؛ الدراسات الإسلامية؛ أوروبا

1. Introduction

Like any other discipline of humanities and social sciences, the scholarly study of Islam oscillates between the dynamics of heterogeneity and the pursuit of coherence. If we take into account all the efforts made to study Islam since the 19th century in Europe, we can see how discoveries about the history of the Quran, hadith, Islamic law, theology, and other genres of Islamic legacy cast doubt on a number of myths about Islamic history and religion. These findings typically demonstrate how the history of texts and practices that was taken for granted was assembled or canonized much later than previously believed, and the processes of assemblage and canonization were far more diverse, contentious, and questionable than previously thought. This diversity resists any attempt to frame Islamic history in one storyline and find one single influence that explains it all (Lukens-Bull, 1999, p. 4). Over the course of several centuries, Muslims have used a variety of assemblage techniques, initially in a more open manner and later under the rigid control of jurists and theologians. Thus, Hadith depended on storytellers and biblical material, Sufism drew from rich traditions of spirituality from India to Christianity, fiqh drew from the wealth of customs, Roman laws, and analogical reasoning techniques practiced in various legal systems of antiquity, and kalām also borrowed elements from Greek philosophy and other religious systems that were prevalent in Iraq. Nevertheless, these Islamic disciplines developed differently from the many sources they interacted with; even within a single discipline there is much heterogeneity, as scholars and schools of thought endorsed distinct viewpoints on the material that was taught to them.

Accepting heterogeneity concerning both the past and the present of Islam could be most beneficial to the discipline of Islamic studies. Muslims spent centuries to establish schools of law or thought. Yet, they were unable to reconcile structural contradictions and inconsistencies, leaving behind a complex legacy that reflects their attempts to make sense of the world and the traditions that were passed down to them, while also carefully dealing with uncertainties, power dynamics, and the diversity of research tools (Mårtensson & Vongraven Eriksen, 2018). To name a few significant issues, they were unable to resolve in any reasonable way conflicts between science and religion, religion and politics, and tradition and interpretation. Any search for consistency and simple answers in any scholarly perspective on Islam or approaching Islamic studies as a single set of guidelines to generate information about Islam is thus reductive.

Yet, in order to portray their work as scholarly or scientific, many contemporary perspectives in Islamic studies sought coherence; as a result, they became reliant on self-righteous concepts and arguments to maintain “the coherent framework” they were trained in. The search for coherence has been continuing and has accelerated recently. While some scholars prioritize methodological coherence (Aghdassi & Hughes, 2023), others seek coherence by acknowledging the interdisciplinary nature of Islamic studies (Pisani & Zemirli, 2023). Other researchers argue

that in order to make Islamic studies up-to-date, thoroughly embedded in society, and balanced, that is, free from excessive criticism and apologetics, research should grow by combining Islamic and modern knowledge (Widiyanto, 2023). At the same time, differentiation works fully and at various levels, as researchers make compelling claims about the regional specificity of Islamic studies (Azra, 2023; Daneshgar & Nurtawab, 2023), its gender specificity (Ali, 2024), or the confessional impact on Islamic studies (Nielsen & Jones, 2023). Yet, achieving coherence is almost impossible in a world that is becoming more complex and fragmentary.

It is argued here that all prevailing viewpoints in Islamic studies should regularly, harshly, and carefully examine their methods, conclusions, and presumptions. This is all the more relevant as each epistemic community of Islamic studies tends to believe in what it writes and claims to diffuse the right kind of knowledge on Islam. Critique is increasingly discarded in Islamic studies, leaving a void that has to be filled. The orientalist viewpoint has changed slightly as a result of E. Said's work and the critical shift in the social sciences and humanities since the 1970s (Said, 1978). Decolonial Islamic studies were born out of criticism of colonial Islamic studies, but it contains flaws of its own, primarily ideological, that ought to be rigorously examined. M. Arkoun's work, especially in the French-speaking Europe has fostered a keen sense of criticism of traditionalist and Islamist discourses in Islamic studies (Arkoun, 2001). More importantly, multiple critiques should be extended to any research or perspective on Islam, regardless of its subject or research methodology, and accept the current diversity of academic practices in Islamic studies in Europe. In the following, I will first revisit the variety of academic practices in Islamic studies at work in the European contexts. Then, I will discuss the potential of a triple critique for Islamic studies today. Lastly, I shall apply the triple critique to the use of the concept of *umma*.

Before examining the multiplicity of models in Islamic studies in Europe, I may need to briefly discuss my own viewpoint in supporting a "post-traditionalist, post-orientalist, and post-Islamist" approach, though this may become clear as I develop my argument in the article. Having been trained and conducted research in Islamic studies in Morocco and Europe, I have observed firsthand (and probably also displayed) the limits of these three dominant paradigms in research on Islam. The most crucial lesson, though, is that post-modernist critique, which is occasionally exploited even by the three perspectives, is ineffective in avoiding the dead ends I point out here. As I show in the last section on reading the concept of *umma*, using a historicist attitude, which I try to maintain in this article, as well as the techniques of philosophical questioning and taking a distance with bias and myths can overcome some of the major limitations of traditionalism, orientalism, and Islamism.

2. Multiple Research Practices and Discourses in Islamic Studies in Europe

Rooted in the variety of religious experiences and the intricate realities of Islam in Europe, Islamic studies are a multifaceted intellectual tradition by nature and, thus, cannot be a single, monolithic, and cohesive field of study. It is a given fact that Islamic studies encompass a wide range of perspectives and experiences that cannot be reduced into a set of study topics, research questions and heuristic tools. Islamicists use sociology, linguistics, anthropology, cultural studies, the history of religions, and many other disciplines, to cross-fertilize the study of Muslim texts and practices. For decades now, this diversity challenged the establishment of training programs and research agendas in Islamic studies, as there are variations related to linguistic, cultural, religious, and national aspects to take into consideration. The approach to Islamic studies is profoundly influenced by national frames of reference and tradition in Europe. Moreover, the distinctions across European Muslim communities still have an impact on the institutional religious level, both within and outside of mosques (in the local, European and global realms of Islamic discourse and practice). This diversity also pertains to the imams and religious leaders, as well as to the types of backgrounds that influenced their social roles and religious services. Islamic studies also have to work with the confluence of perspectives, trends, and languages in Europe (El Asri, 2015, p. 80). In addition to the multiple European contexts Islamic studies evolve in, this multiplicity finds its origin in the diverse interpretations in the pre-modern Muslim tradition which navigates between various ethical and legal projects (Katz, 2022, p. 680). As argued by A. Meddeb, Islam can be seen as a civilization that has been productive in the grand scheme of history and within which people, from Granada to Agra, manipulated the same concepts, the same axiology, and the same value systems and produced textuality of the same nature. At the same time, Islam can be seen as a vernacular dimension embodied in local cultures (Meddeb, 1999, p. 98).

If we focus on the European continent, different languages, different authoritative sources and figures, and different central points compete in Islamic studies; these diverse dynamics cannot be reduced or even reconciled as they operate independently from each other, but they can learn from one another and develop awareness of what each can offer for knowledge and society. In particular, numerous historical influences and models of state-religion policies had an impact on European societies and their patterns of teaching and researching religious studies (Ambrosio & Mignon, 2021). The study of Islam in Europe depends on the dominating academic paradigms, privileged tools of research, and the kind of interactions with society as well as politics universities tend to embrace. Currently, the diversity of research methods and discourses in Islamic studies (as an academic discipline housed in European universities) is displayed in the three dominating models in Europe: French, German and Anglo-Saxon models. Each of these experiences should be envisioned in its own context and historical dynamics, in light of

the negotiated possibilities between the states, the communities and the universities.

In addition to having one of the most intransigent types of governmental secularism that opposes confessional content in universities, France displays a rich Catholic legacy of researching Islam (Messner & Abou Ramadan, 2018). Until recently, Islamology, as a discipline of its own, was not allowed in French universities. Many French orientalist greatly influenced Islamic studies (Henri Laoust, Louis Massignon, and Louis Gardet). Yet, departments of Arabic have mainly carried out the study of Islam, emphasizing history, language, and literature and influencing the French scholarly endeavors in studying Islamic texts. French anthropologists, historians, and specialists in Islamic law also benefited from French colonialism in North and West Africa to access rich materials and societies. Despite tremendous opposition, in 2011, the University of Strasbourg established the first French program in Islamology (Zwilling, 2014). Sensing the importance of shaping a French Muslim discourse tamed and adapted to the expectations of the French state, the French government created *L'Institut français d'islamologie* in 2022. Its purpose is studying “the belief systems, knowledge and practices specific to the different branches that make up the Muslim religion”.¹ Still, this institute relies on old and existing departments of history, Arabic studies, and anthropology. It is too early to assess the kind of turn French Islamology will take. This evolution is still largely shaped by the will to respond and frame the discourse on Islam in France, which is seen as confrontational vis-à-vis the French state. This can be said to be a political consideration. Still, in terms of knowledge, French universities began to recognize the need to approach Islamic studies with the tools of religious studies and engage more closely with Islamic texts, theological content, and ethical assumptions.

The French experience contrasts with the German academic tradition, which embraces a more pluralistic outlook, recognizing an equal parity between Catholic and Protestant universities. Moreover, confessional studies coexisted with historical-critical approaches to the Bible (sometimes taught and researched by the same scholars), while the German state is far more tolerant of religion than the French state (Ehret & Khalfaoui, 2025). German universities have been pioneering Islamic studies since the early 20th century, when *Islamwissenschaft* was envisioned as a distinct field from Arab and Oriental studies, and Germany was considered the birthplace of Western Islamic studies. Thanks to the work of this school, many advances in the Quran, hadith, Islamic theology, and Islamic law were made and had a lasting impact on the whole discipline. Germany has also established the first departments of Islamic theology, or Islamic studies, as a confessional field taught by Muslims to Muslims in Europe. These departments of Islamic theology aim to train Muslims in Islamic education, chaplaincy, and the foundations of Islamic

¹ L'Institut français d'islamologie <https://institut-islamologie.fr/>

faith, law and ethics. As a result, the two perspectives on Islamic studies (*Islamwissenschaft* and *Islamische Theologie*) in German universities became competitive and tense (Agai & Omerika, 2017). Although the two types of Islamic studies converge in many ways, their methods and approaches differ significantly, with Islamic theology taking a less critical posture about the development of Islamic ideas and practices, while *Islamwissenschaft* focuses on the philological and historical critique of sources.

Beside the French and German models, we should also highlight the Anglo-Saxon model, which follows the paradigm of religious studies, concurrently developed in the US and the UK. Anglo-Saxon institutions modelled Islamic studies on pre-existing departments and resources of religious studies or theological studies, which are far less philological or critical than the German tradition, endorsing a significant historical-descriptive component. At the same time, Anglo-Saxon Islamic studies influence, as a by-product of globalization and the fact that English is the common language of most scholarly publications, European researchers in Islamic studies all over Europe.

Diversity is evident not only in the models of Islamic studies used in Europe, but also in the approaches at work in the European institutes and research centres of Islamic studies. In the next section, we will discuss the prevalent concepts and methods in Islamic studies.

3. Dominant Paradigms in Islamic Studies: Assumptions, Tools and Implications

In order to make clear the reasoning behind the need for critical research in Islamic studies and showcase the diversity of research practices in Islamic studies, here, we will briefly discuss the differences between the perspectives of traditionalism, Orientalism, and Islamism. We would like to go into additional detail about the unique characteristics of each paradigm in a few more sentences, mostly providing more information about the assumptions, tools and implications of their perspectives in Islamic studies. Let us start with traditionalism, which in a sense serves as the foundation upon which Islamism and orientalism build their own presumptions, tools, and implications for knowledge about Islam and Muslims. Traditionalism is predicated on the idea that tradition is revealed, passed down by reliable communities, and preserved by authoritative figures and sources. It offers a system of beliefs, a certain coherence built on trust in the past and prevents or conceals inconsistencies. It uses a curriculum of transmitted texts (the more concise the better), memorization, and a master-disciple connection which fosters mutual trust. As it depends entirely on suspending doubt, it has ramifications for rejecting science in general, rational inquiry, and defiance of history (Azami, 1977).

Islamism considers Islam as a worldview, an ideology, and a project of social and political action, intended for a group of militants to take power over the state

and society. It carefully selects within the corpus of traditions transmitted by traditionalists, elements that enable mobilization around specific political myths and themes (leadership, conflict, sovereignty, justice, solidarity, revolution, state, youth, Palestine, family, politics, civilization). In order to give tradition a sense of action and militancy (similar to nationalist and socialist ideologies), it employs ideological assembling tactics (correlations, textual interpretation, flexibility in reading legislation, and exegesis) to motivate Muslims to create a "Medina everywhere". The so-called re-Islamization movement, *ṣaḥwa* and the rise of political Islam are direct consequences of this perspective (Laroui, 1967; Arkoun, 1984).

Orientalism assumes that the Muslim Orient is the historical other, if not the adversary in terms of its otherness, difference, irrationality, fragility, reliance on others, violence, and mystical nature. Orientalists have used a variety of techniques, some of which are pertinent to critical research in history and religious studies (identifying bias, comparing sources, analysing languages, and challenging Islamic claims in light of contradictions and history). These tools, however, are combined with others of an ideological and biased nature (particularly in establishing correlations between events and discourses), which serve a conclusion in mind, choose material, and replicate an image of a tradition that constantly lies to itself, in need of Western thorough verification and rationalization. Since Orientalism is discourse of power, an obvious implication of its produced knowledge and ideology is colonialism and control over Muslim societies and states (Said, 1978; Hallaq, 2018).

4. Triple Critique: Definition and Process

The critical study of Islam can denote a criticism or critical comment on some given problem or the art or practice of criticism (Mas, 2012, p. 389). Besides the ambiguity of critique, there is also an absence of academic consensus on what ought to be the limit of critique. Furthermore, the concept of critique as Western criticism of the Islamic tradition can be politically significant (Mas, 2012, p. 389). The kind of critique in religious studies that we envision here begins with the refusal to accept religious claims as transcendent and sacred which is a requirement of being a historian (Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). Starting from this basic element, critique treats any aspect of social life, including religious experience, as revealing cultural and historical pressures, and the so-called facts or truths are already part of intricate frameworks that need to be acknowledged (McCutcheon, 2001, p. 86). This type of critique involves interpreting everything that Muslims say or do as a historical construct based on social, political, and economic concerns that were combined into frameworks and facts to support a particular understanding of meaning, order and authority. A critique in the study of religion also challenges the authority of religious individuals to define terms and reexamine the origins, evolution, and contradictions of religious terminology. Another process of critique in Islamic studies questions ideological frameworks embedded in theories that are thought to

be coherent, such as the Islamist or orientalist frameworks, as well as post-modernist, Marxist or feminist theories. We will provide examples of this type of critique in the final section of this article. However, it is sufficient to state that critique is a research practice of analyzing religious claims, sources, and terms through history, philology, knowledge gained about the construction of meaning, order, and authority in the humanities and social sciences, as the main tools of identifying bias, values and interests.

Due to its fragmentary character as a subject of study, Islamic studies elude verification through homogenization. However, it still can undergo verification through multiple critiques. The latter can be used as a means of confirming the precision and applicability of findings in Islamic studies. Multiple critiques began with self-criticism of one's own presumptions and methods, which then extends to broader critiques via peer review, scholarly discussions, and critical works to show the limitations of any scholarly discussion on Islam. At this level, a critical epistemology can protect Islamic studies from becoming doctrines or ideologies. The notion of multiple critiques finds its inspiration in the works of the Moroccan thinker 'Abd al-Kabir al-Khaṭībī and the British-Pakistani thinker Z. Sardar who offer a double critique of tradition and modernity. As formulated by al-Khaṭībī, double critique, *naqd muzdawji*, is an approach to discredit any ideology that asserts authenticity or absolute unity, questioning both Arab and Western cultures, and discarding any notion of unity or universality. According to him, double critique entails drawing attention to the differences that exist in the Arab world on all levels, including those between societies, political wills, cultural norms, and international levels, all of which call for ongoing critical engagement (al-Khaṭībī, 1980; Sabih 2015). Therefore, double critique is the right to difference rather than identity, an idea that opens a whole range of possibilities. Sardar's double critique of Western modernity and Muslim orthodoxy reflects a sense of cosmopolitanism, interest in intellectual and social emancipation and ethics. His double critique focuses on the production of knowledge and science. On the one hand, modernity is developed and knowledge and science are created in the hubs of power, the intersection of the western governments, economics, industry, and popular culture ; then, they are exported to the Muslim world (Sardar, 2006). Science practice in the West displays a "repulsive facade" of metaphysical trappings, violence and haughtiness of its technique, and the ideology of dominance and control that has come to define it (Sardar, 2006).

This double critique can be extended to triple critique or multiple critiques. As we will see in the following section, traditionalist, orientalist and Islamist viewpoints on Islam all hold their own limitations. As a consequence of decolonial Islamic studies and the rise of Islamism, an ideology of Islamic exceptionalism, authenticity, consistency, and claims to the existence of Islamic institutions and beliefs on a variety of medieval and contemporary issues has affected academic discourses as well and not only a public of militants and their sympathizers. That is to say, Islamism has been as ahistorical and unwilling to have a critical and logical

conversation about the realities of Muslim societies, which are far more complex, diverse, as traditionalism and orientalism. As noted by Laroui, Orientalism and Islamism endorse a linear and coherent understanding of history in which disruptions, evolution, and inconsistencies are sidelined and thus do not take history seriously and critically. Orientalists view the West as a concept that is predetermined and compare it to what they refer to as true or pure Islam in every way. Islamists inverse the process (Laroui, 1997, p. 4).

Interestingly, M. Cooke has used the concept of multiple critiques to describe a feminist Islamic discourse that draws on various registers to engage against and critique the different people, organizations, and systems that restrict and oppress Muslim women, while also avoiding being trapped in their own rhetoric (Cooke, 2000, p. 100). Cooke is inspired by the work of Arab Islamic feminists who suggest moving from multifaceted consciousness to multiple critiques; they contrast histories, which are a result of both the transnationalism of their political and religious commitments and the drastically different status of women within slave and colonial economies. As a result, these feminists crafted new perspectives to overcome the multifarious ways of silencing and marginalization (Cooke, 2000, pp. 102-103). Perhaps one distinction between feminist multiple critique and triple critique in Islamic studies we advocate for here is that triple critique could be seen as a process of verifying accurate and historical knowledge about Islam rather than a post-modern and liberating endeavor. Although they may occasionally coincide, these are two distinct processes. Triple critique should focus on the techniques, conclusions, concepts, and processes of particular paradigms of thought and study (especially the traditionalist, Islamist, and orientalist perspectives) and aim to produce grounded knowledge about Islam that avoids ideology as much as possible. Many feminist Muslim scholars have conducted critical research in Islamic studies. However, they can also endorse ideological stances in their reading of Muslim sources, which requires verification and critique from historical and philological points of view.

Islamic Critical Studies, whether it takes the form of Aaron Hughes's new Islamic studies, which focuses on the examination and analysis rather than just describing Islamic data, or Arkoun's applied Islamology, which concentrates on the critique of the imaginary (Kersten, 2022, p. 44), the fundamental process at stake is that of continuously challenging methods and conclusions in research on Islam. Researchers in Islamic studies should therefore approach their subjects with critique as a habit and a practice. The ongoing critique results in knowledge becoming more pertinent and verified. Critical researchers use sociological theories, anthropological research, and historical critical methodology and integrate approaches from a variety of contemporary historical and empirical viewpoints with classic textual methods. In recent years, many successful studies that cross-fertilize interdisciplinary approaches and incorporate textual, contextual, and empirical have been published (Adiyono et al., 2024, pp. 191-192.). Over time, it is even possible to envision critical Islamic knowledge, in the context of secular European societies,

extending to education and society, and helping Muslims and non-Muslims better understand each other (Legrand & Yakin, 2024).

Additionally, modern knowledge has also come to merge with contemporary power dynamics, in the geopolitical sense of the word. Many researchers approach Islam in relation to the West or from the Western vantage point. Some see the Muslim world as a victim of Western imperialism; others perceive it as a superior other of the West, while some see it as a backward and illogical neighbor of the West. While masking a colonial project, many orientalist claimed a self-righteous and purportedly scientific nature. Since 2001, American foreign policy has made religion, nationalism, and gender pillars of a narrative about bringing "democracy" and "human rights," especially "women's rights," to areas that apparently need to catch up with Western modernity. Islamic studies mirrored this agenda, chasing out antidemocratic, patriarchal, and tribalistic elements in Muslim societies (Maira, 2009). Thus, focus was directed through research funds and outlets towards gender, democracy, and jihad, creating bubbles for scholars to dwell on and, in a sense, justify foreign geopolitical interference in the Middle East, which is typically done for strategic or economic reasons. In many cases, orientalism is a weapon of power as well as a discourse of hegemony (Said, 1978; Hallaq, 2018). Among Muslim scholars, in both traditionalist and Islamist circles, an apologetic counter-narrative was strengthened and similar self-righteousness and claims to superiority, authenticity, political visions, and ideologies were advocated (Zaidi, 2007, p. 413).

Burhan Ghalioun has rightly argued that Islamic studies came to the rescue of Islamism, as scholars of Islamic studies have fallen victim to "theologocentrism". By focusing on religion, they obscured the real questions raised by the process of modernization in the Muslim world: why does religion continue to play such a role in societies that have been confronted with modernity for two centuries? Where does Muslim resistance to change and fascination with material and intellectual modernity come from? Why was the reform of Islam delayed, failed to take place, or been impossible? (Ghalioun, 2009, p. 147). Ghalioun contends that "responsibilities and roles between religion and society were thus reversed, and the social, cultural, religious, and political regression that is an effect of the blockage of the modernization process becomes its cause" (Ghalioun, 2009, p. 147). Ghalioun adds that "mainstream Islamic studies put forward the thesis of Islam's incompatibility with modernity to explain the failure of Muslim societies to modernize, exonerating the two real actors responsible for the crisis, both in Arab countries and in many non-Arab and non-Muslim countries: a highly hierarchical international order that controls access to resources and determines their use for the benefit of transnational elites and systems of control and power maintained locally for the sole benefit of local elites and in close cooperation with the former" (Ghalioun, 2009, p. 148).

Theologocentrism, be it orientalist, traditionalist, or Islamist, has implications for epistemology. In other words, it influences the types of questions we pose, the methods we use to generate knowledge, and the kind of evidence we value during the process. Theologocentrism also can turn into a tool of power relations;

it masks the secular dynamics at work in regional and global processes where Muslims could be subjects or objects of action and discourse (religion is, at best, a factor in the process, and typically not the most crucial one). For example, many researchers begin their analysis of Islamist terrorism with a discussion of the meaning of jihad in the Quran, shifting the conversation from the complex geopolitics of the Middle East, its most pertinent context (where Middle Easterners themselves are far from being sovereign), to 7th century Arabia. However, the latter does not provide one single narrative on jihad; hence, some researchers in Islamic studies attempt to distill the Quran into a single narrative in order to use it as an argument to explain contemporary Islamist terrorism.

Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin propose a post-Orientalist approach to renew Islamic religious studies that takes into account the commitment of Muslims in the West to public interest as well as the growing demand for religious content. According to them, the post-Orientalist approach combines a collection of methods that include studying foundational texts but insist on relating them to the issues and discussions of current scholarship across disciplines and geographical areas (Ernst & Martin, 2010, p. 8). Furthermore, this approach highlights a strong foundation in the languages, texts, and history of premodern Islam as essential for discussing Islam and Muslims today and brings critical and theoretical tools to the analysis of Islam and Muslim societies and the data of Islamic studies. This could be a productive way to foster a post-orientalist discourse even if orientalism is still deeply ingrained in the attitudes, discourses, and research methods of many Western researchers. Some of these limits are institutional, some cultural, and some have to do with hegemony, and the Western project of dominating research in humanities in general, and the creation of narratives about the others. Reducing the influence of orientalism on Islamic studies in the West will require time and constant critique.

5. A Critical Look at the Concept of *Umma*

To illustrate how the triple critique approach can benefit a more accurate knowledge in Islamic studies, I will now examine the concept of *umma*, a heuristic tool widely employed by the three perspectives (traditionalist, Orientalist, and Islamist). Other viewpoints on *umma* include modernism which deconstructs the political *umma* (Al-Dakkak, 2019), Arab nationalism (Nasr, 1981), some particular applications of *umma* as an alliance beyond religious differences in the so-called Medina Treaty (Emon, 2001), and even the use of *umma* as a re-imagined community in the discourses of Muslims in the West (Schmidt, 2005, p. 577). All of these applications are not scholarly, though, and since I will be concentrating on how *umma* is used in Islamic studies research by professors who are regarded by their partners as fairly authoritative in generating scholarly knowledge.

As for traditionalism, it uses *umma* as a supposed religious community that follows one single and coherent Muslim tradition and asserts traditionalist authority

that claims to speak for this large religious community and advocates for the religious unity of all Muslims. This concept puts aside all the religious divisions, conflicts, and inconsistencies as if the religion of Islam did not evolve in history, and the *umma* was some sort of immaculate community. Traditionalism also uses the notion of *umma* to appropriate and turn the diverse and rich intellectual history of Islam into a theological project, making Muslims believe that everything was religious, coherent, and consistent in the past (Ahmed 1975; Al Faruqi 2005). The notion of *umma* has assisted the Salafi movements and other traditionalist movements in their different offshoots to idealize the Muslim tradition and past.

Let us now turn to al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), whose influence on the traditionalist perspective in Islamic studies is significant. Al-Ṭabarī understands (Q. 43:22) “Rather, they say, “Indeed, we found our fathers upon a religion, *umma* and we are in their footsteps [rightly] guided”² as “we found our fathers following a religion, and that is their worship of idols” (al-Ṭabarī, 2015, v. 20, p. 569). Yet, the word *umma* was used in the Quran for a variety of meanings, including a group of creatures and for Abraham as well. The majority of the authorities he cites are supposed to corroborate his interpretation of *umma* as a religious denomination. Still, he also refers to a minority opinion of Quran exegetes who read (أمة) *imma* rather than *umma* to mean the path (and therefore argue that the Quranic *imma* would mean “to lead the path” as in, *amamtu al-qawma fa-anā a’ummuhum immatan* (I lead a group of people, that is, I am their guide) (al-Ṭabarī, 2015, v. 20, p. 571). Al-Ṭabarī demonstrates here his ability as a historian and exegete to open up the heterogeneous archive of exegetical positions that seem to coexist in his thinking and, consequently, in early and classical Islam. This historical perspective allows us to observe a diversity of viewpoints, which de-sacralizes any claim to a single, definitive, and authoritative position, while charting the path for further interpretations. Moreover, his choice of a particular point of view was based on the awareness that it was only one position among others, requiring reasoning to support it.

As for orientalism, it mobilizes the notion of *umma* to assert that Muslim societies sustain collective identities, beyond history, that oppose modernity, democracy, and nation-states. *Umma*, thus, helps othering Muslims since “wherever the Muslim *umma* is, there is the polity of Islam, and elsewhere is the abode of war” (Kedourie, 2013, p. 6). Such *umma* allegedly prevents Muslims from being autonomous, active agents of nation-states with their own real-politik and decision-making, similarly to Western nation-states. In the worst scenario, nation-states even oppress Muslims, who ought to be treated differently (since they are not made for nation-states but to be members of the

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Sahih International

<https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=43&verse=22>Other translators render the word *umma* as religion, a course, belief, way or community.

umma). An implication of this orientalist discourse is that Arabs are not nation-states but just tribes unable to evolve towards modern nation-states with clear borders and national identities.

A case of orientalist discourse on *umma* would be the article with the same title in *The Encyclopedia of Islam* II, written by F. M. Denny. The latter assures with all certainty that:

There is in the Kuran a chronological development of the meaning of *umma* from generic application to religious communities to a more focused reference to the emerging Muslim community. So we have here a matter of *umma* not essentially changing its meaning as religious community throughout the chronological development of the Kuran so much as having its meaning progressively augmented as the prophetic message reaches its fullest development. That is, if by the Medinan period *umma* tends to refer more exclusively to the Muslims, it nevertheless also carries with it the more inclusive meaning of humanity in its potential toward becoming Muslim. The Kuran does not thus apply *umma* exclusively to the Muslims. But it does appear to hold up *umma*, by Medinan times, as a special term that may refer only to the godly component within a religious community (Denny, 2000, v. 10, p. 862).

While Denny begins his article by stating the polysemy of *umma* in the Qur'an, its various meanings (group of animals, guides, nations, or religious communities), he chose to reduce the meaning of *umma* into Muslim religious community, submitting to a selection bias here; he opts for the Quranic meaning of *umma* as a religious/Muslim community derived from a late interpretation of Islamic literature (among others), and combines it with the contemporary use of *umma* as a pan-Islamic aspiration. This reading of Quranic meanings in light of later Islamic thought and contemporary Islamic discourses has been perpetuated by many Orientalists and scholars of Islamic studies for over a century. The persistence of this confusion can have two consequences for both Islamic studies and contemporary Islamic thought. For Islamic studies, the understanding of Quranic terms remains largely trapped by Muslim tradition and the orientalist selection bias. For contemporary Muslim thought, the position of conceptual confusion (between past(s), present(s), and imaginary(ies)) prevents this thought from distancing itself and considering critical relationships with "its words and narratives." It is even possible to say that uncritical Islamic studies risks feeding traditionalist Muslim thought because it validates, through an apparently "scientific approach," normative narratives based on belief, such as the narrative of the *umma*.

Finally, Islamism employs *umma* as a geopolitical entity, political alliance, and a community of solidarity that supposedly enables Muslims to oppose foreign powers and utilize it to achieve influence in different parts of the Muslim world. This political rhetoric is also used by states (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia among others) or movements (the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaida and many others) to claim a Muslim shared political destiny (Piscatori & Saikal, 2019). The Islamist *umma* is a militant community with a set of causes to defend (from Muslims in the West to

the Philippines) (Widhiyoga, 2019). Islamism needs the rhetoric of the *umma* to sustain the narrative of Muslim victimhood and thus justify the many battles Islamist organizations are engaged in to allegedly uphold the *umma*. Ironically, these Islamist movements contributed to the weakening of nation-states and undermined the authority and sovereignty of states, and, thus, served the geopolitical interests of foreign powers.

Similarly to other terms found in the Quran, *umma* has different meanings because it was used in various contexts of which we have no precise knowledge at all. When later jurists and theologians used *umma* subsequently as a religious community or an imagined religious-political community, they were endorsing a normative stance that calls Muslims to transcend their ethnic, political and social divides. However, similar to other societies, Muslim states and societies change throughout time, and in modern times, nation-states have supplanted empires and tribes in the Muslim world. As for today, there are 57 members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, each of which has its own geopolitical realities, interests, and conflicts with other Members. Thus, the rhetorical *umma* cannot reasonably be utilized to comprehend or describe contemporary Islamic dynamics, nor does it have a reality of its own. Even if they share some religious beliefs and part of their history, Muslims are diverse nations and political entities with a wide range of ethnic, confessional, political, and regional identities. The researchers who take a concept like *umma* for granted ignore the complexity of reality and therefore make their analysis irrelevant. In order to stay grounded in the current social and political dynamics and prevent the discipline from falling into its own traps, Islamic studies can benefit greatly from multiple critiques that reveal the boundaries and distortions imposed on the field by three ideologies: Islamism, Orientalism, and Traditionalism.

Exegetical sources beyond al-Ṭabarī and various lexicons from classical Islamic history as well as later Islamic history could offer more diversity in the use of *umma*, which would strengthen the argument regarding plurality (Naṣṣār, 1978). We cannot afford here a detailed hermeneutic framework (semantics, history of usage, comparative analysis of lexical fields) of the concept of *umma*. I would like, however, to elaborate on its history of usage, taking the opportunity to use and test the first historical dictionary of Arabic terms (The Doha Historical Dictionary of Arabic), the first Arabic dictionary that traces the origin and the etymology of the Arabic words in a historical context, launched in December, 2025. This dictionary claims that the oldest documented use of *umma* was in 476 by the pre-Islamic poet Mālik b. Fahm al-Azdī who used *umma* as a group of people. Then in 573, the phrase of *ummat al-nabī* was used by the soothsayer Shāfi' b. Kulyab al-Ṣadafī as *qawm* (the people the Prophet was sent to). Around 609, *umma* was used as the way taken by an individual, and the shape of bodies. Then, in 618, the Quran used *umma* in various meanings including the guide, the period, the way, nation, and

religion.³ The issue here is that later Islamic sources on which the Doha dictionary primarily relies are written pre-Islamic poetry and al-Ṭabarī, which are sources from the ninth and tenth centuries. There are five centuries between the supposed date of the oral utterance of *umma* and the period of writing, which assumes there was no record of forgery or remaking during these centuries; this cannot withstand historical criticism. Nevertheless, let us observe that the usage of *umma* even in the Quran and transmitted poetry conveys a variety of meanings. The decision to fix a specific meaning later (of *umma* as a universal religious community or a religious-political entity) can only be explained by the historical and cultural pressures that existed at the time of fixing that meaning.

6. Conclusion

Critique is crucial to an accurate, verifiable, and pertinent epistemology of Islamic studies. Much like any other area of the humanities and social sciences Islamic studies is influenced by ideologies and tendencies towards homogenization and simplification. In particular, traditionalism, Islamism, and Orientalism uphold a set of presumptions, methods, and conclusions that make Islamic studies a contentious field of study. We have suggested a triple critique of these paradigms, showing through the examination of the concept of *umma* how these paradigms distort and oversimplify Islam. Therefore, critical Islamic studies should embrace complexity and multiplicity as inherent features of Muslim discourses and practices as they developed and responded to diverse changes throughout Islamic history. Moreover, critical Islamic studies should refrain from theologizing and overestimating the impact of Islam on the history of contemporary Muslim societies, and rather consider Islam as a variable in a much more composite cultural assemblage.

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³ www.dohadictionary.org/dictionary/أمة

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