

BEING MUSLIM:
HOW LOCAL ISLAM OVERTURNS NARRATIVES OF EXCEPTIONALISM
conveners:

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Project. The overwhelming majority of Muslims worldwide live outside the Middle East, especially in Africa and Asia, but the Islam they practice is generally devalued in favor of the idealized Arabic-centric standard forms, especially found in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Yet we have observed that everywhere Islam spreads it becomes local—and the overwhelming majority of Muslims do not reside in the Middle East or speak Arabic: they live across Africa and Asia. This project seeks to bring together several generations of scholars from all parts the world to complicate our—and the public’s—understanding of the ways Islam has naturalized itself in communities worldwide.

Workshops. Over the next two years, we plan to host a series of workshops that will convene in four successive semesters.

• WORKSHOP I: 26-28 SEPTEMBER 2013

“Rethinking the Non-Muslim Other: Internal and External Religious Differentiation” – the historical encounter of Islam with other religious, linguistic, and ethnic traditions up through the early modern period (roughly prior to 1750 CE).

• WORKSHOP II: 13-15 FEBRUARY 2014

“Genres of the Imaginaire: How Creativity Mediates Islam with Local Vernaculars” – the exercise of Islamic creativity in these encounters, mediated through literature, art, architecture, city planning, courts.

• WORKSHOP III: 18-20 SEPTEMBER 2014

“Muslims Negotiating Modernities” – how Muslims have adapted to modernities, including divergent political and legal systems, technology, gender, minorities, environment.

• WORKSHOP IV: 19-21 MARCH 2015

“Transnational and Local Networks of Pilgrimage” – how each of these has helped to generate different concepts of pilgrimage through development transnational and local networks, not just the injunction to visit Mecca.

Observation: Over the last two centuries, many scholars and sections of the media have approached Islam as if it were a bounded entity, radically separate from its environment and neighbors. At the same time, political Islamists and certain Muslim intellectuals have presented Islam as exceptional, a unique human experience that is fundamentally incomparable to other religious and cultural traditions. In a universalizing vein that has been exacerbated since the events of September 2001, both apologists and critics have argued that there is but a single, monolithic, transnational (“true”) Islam. Such universalism obscures the world of real Muslims and the shapes Islam takes in each regional, ethnic, and linguistic community and state. As several nations in the Middle East are convulsed by political change (the so-called Arab Spring), what it means to be a Muslim, and what Islam means in the present day are constantly being negotiated. Equally, the idea that Muslim-majority societies are uniquely at odds with democracy, human rights, and gender equality has come under serious strain. *Our thesis suggests that the history of Islam is a history of local innovations by Muslims in response to their surroundings. Instead of looking at the history of Islam as a singular monolith, we propose to investigate how Muslims have made Islam their own wherever they live.*

Proposition and Strategy. The concept of challenging the *exceptionalism* of Islam is hardly novel; indeed, we would argue that we in the academy tend to do this on a routine basis by virtue of the fact that we

ground our studies historically, whether in the realms of politics and power, or in literatures and theologies. But what is not emphasized—and what this project would seek to address directly—is the *symbiotic nature* of the various Islams as they have developed historically in different environments. While Islam is always local and takes its local shape through negotiations with other actors in multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities, the metaphor of symbiosis takes us beyond simple and imprecise notions of “influence” or “interaction” into a different conceptual world. *Our aim is to turn away from models of essence and origin and their attendant search for static characterizations. Instead, we seek to focus on a heuristic of process.* We are more interested in the procedures that ‘do Islamic religion’ than we are in settling the boundaries of what constitutes Islam and Muslims. We thus turn toward the complex encounters—historically and culturally grounded—that make up a history that is Islamic (not a history of Islam). Likewise, we focus on the experiments that have constituted participation in the multitude of Islamic traditions, in other words, the ongoing strategies that together generate the practices of Muslims. Here ‘history’ and ‘tradition’ are animated with a dynamism and flow, not from a recoverable center or origin, but locally in response to constantly evolving realities. *Islam is in this sense constantly being invented and re-invented.* In these procedures and processes, we are not seeking to identify a fixed mechanism that Muslims inevitably put into play; the experience of Islamic history itself becomes a series of locally-determined strategies, all of them unique yet fully Islamic, the strategies and practical procedures by which Islamic worlds are created, the ways Muslims experience the world. By refusing to reduce these activities to normative, ‘orthodox,’ or essentialized notions of religion, we thus undo the notion of Islamic exceptionalism.

I. *Rethinking the Non-Muslim Other: Internal and External Religious Differentiation*

During the thesis year, we would problematize the areas of contact, the so-called borderland and frontiers, arguing that Islam is always local and the forms it takes are conditioned by close interactions with other individuals and groups. We would also address the historiographical assumptions behind the development of the Shi’i and Sufi traditions. In areas where Islam has been established as the dominant norm, we would discuss the boundaries of exclusion, such as those found in heresiography, the rights of minorities in Islamic states, separate courts for religious communities, shared sacred sites, and religious figures whose followers demonstrate allegiance to different, often multiple, communities. In locales where forms of Islam coexist and interact with other ethnic and religious alternatives, for instance in the worship associated with tombs and holy men, especially throughout Asia and Africa, we can recognize a double-effect: the culture bears the distinctive impact of the Islamic presence (Hodgson’s characterization as ‘Islamicate’), while that plural environment dramatically affects the shape of Islam-as-practiced. The forms of Islamic experience in the farther reaches of the Islamic world will reflect the strong cultural effects of such traditions as Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, and Christian, giving the Islamic experience a unique shape in each locale.

II. *Genres of the Imaginaire: How Creativity Mediates Islam with Local Vernaculars*

Experiments in Islamic theology express the constant negotiations with other theological and philosophical traditions which historically led to different schools of thought and this creative activity is a function of the *imaginaire*, though it is seldom characterized as such. We define the *imaginaire* as the ‘limits of possibility’ or the structures within which the local imagination can be exercised. It is both constraining and enabling. The Islamic *imaginaire* fosters creativity in literature and the arts more generally by opening a space for and encouraging an exploratory mode that reflects each immediate geographical locale and its accompanying vernacular—literary, musical, visual languages—as proper vehicles for valid Islamic expression. In the study of Islamic religion, literary and artistic expression has been routinely subject to a double critique: assumed to be different from theology, these expressions are often demoted to entertainment or pirated as a vehicle for doctrinal propaganda, but seldom evaluated according to their own standards. In this section we will question the established scholarly divide between the theological and the creative by exploring the diverse genres operational within the Muslim *imaginaire* and interrogating the complex interplay between transregional and local genres. From theological and legal elaborations to other forms of artistic and aesthetic expression—including architecture, city planning, the structure of premodern cosmopolitan courts, trade and craft production, or music and visual art—we will discuss how certain forms have been endlessly elaborated in the

broader Muslim *imaginaire* while others have remained resolutely local. Additionally, we will explore how literary, creative, and theological speculations probed creative alternatives in the face of censure, a dynamic that played no small role in the expansion of Islam.

III. *Muslims Negotiating Modernities*

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the various practitioners of Islam found themselves faced by different, often alien, political and legal systems, market forces, technology developments, and new forms of cosmopolitanism that required response and adaptation. It is these encounters that challenged, if not precipitated, the crises that ultimately generated new traditions. While Salafi-style fundamentalists would hearken back (in a tendency echoed by some modern scholars) to an idealized fantasy of “original” Islam they believed was subsequently sullied by innovation, most Muslims adapted creatively to changing circumstances. In this year we will explore, for example, Islam beyond Arab culture and language (the majority of Muslims worldwide do not speak Arabic); the rise of empire and the institutionalization of religion; debates around gender and sexuality; responses to colonialism; questions raised by technology and globalization; and meeting the challenge of being a minority religion in Europe, North America, and so forth. The results will demonstrate the recursive generation of innovation that can ultimately be traced through the whole of Islamic history.

IV. *Transnational and Local Networks of Pilgrimage*

In most popular narratives of Islam, the concept of pilgrimage almost exclusively invokes the *hajj* to Mecca, as stipulated in the classical five pillars of religious obligation. For many Muslims it is the crowning achievement which binds the world brotherhood. But the ideal somewhat belies the reality. The Muslims who make the *hajj* today usually make the journey with members of their own cultural and linguistic communities who retain local identities in the process. Far greater numbers of practicing Muslims participate in regional and local pilgrimages—to cities with historical significance, shrines, and tombs. These regional and local destinations often loom as large or larger than Mecca. For instance Shi‘as relive the massacre at Karbala in their visits, or Hausa pilgrims travel to the city of Maiurno in modern Sudan as a substitute destination rather than as a jumping off point for the trip to Mecca. All through the Muslim world, but especially in South and Southeast Asia, visits to tombs of *pirs* and *shaykhs*, such as that of Mu‘in al-Din Chishti in Ajmer, displace the need to make the *hajj* at all. The *hajj* has always been set apart, but this study of pilgrimage across the Muslim world should serve as a capstone to the propositions of the project of overturning the narratives of exceptionalism.

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Funding. Funding for the series has been generously provided by The Fant Fund, the Dean of the College of Arts and Science, and the Department of Religious Studies, Vanderbilt University.

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