Why do we study Islam, and how should we do it? As usual, what appears like a simple question poses the most intricate problems. Compared to the ‘how’, the ‘why’ is relatively an easier question. It is very much a matter of position and, in this instance, of the discipline. I was first trained in and remain attached to: history. The cultural turn has made an impact on sociological and political science, and to a lesser extent on economics. The long period of state socialism was more or less a reaction against excessive political interference and a desire to do politics for itself, for there can be little doubt that this demise of the Soviet Empire and the intensification of ethnic conflicts were not the only factors contributing towards giving such a high profile to matters of culture and identity. The fact that there should be a link to politics (and I hasten to emphasize that I do not subscribe to this view) and that there are disturbing aspects to this preoccupation with culture, if it is not an outright obsession; aggressive ethnic assertiveness on one hand, and the talk about a potential and unsustainable ‘clash of civilisations’ on the other, are amongst them. The latter in particular would not have found such fertile ground and would not have had an existence, had it not been for the cultural turn in academic as well as in what is commonly considered to be ‘real’ life.

The attraction of the cultural turn for the scholar is obvious: if culture is seen not as a separate compartment of life, let alone a system in its own right, where literature, music and the arts belong (at least good literature and what in German is called serious music), but as a mobile configuration of patterns of perception, representation and conduct that guide and inspire the way we live our lives both individually and in communion with others, including society at large or any other community real or imagined, then much more can be gained from a close scrutiny of these patterns and configurations: the making and unmaking, their complex interplay, their meaning to different people in different contexts, their ambiguities and contradictions, their variations over time and space, their adaptations and transformations. The risks involved in focusing on cultural change can be considerable, for we or the international system are equally oblivious: there is a danger that economic reductionism as propagated not so much by Marx himself but by some of his more simple-minded adherents (or were they just single-minded?) could be replaced by cultural determinism. There is a risk that intra-cultural choice, conflict and change be overlooked. This is difficult to avoid when culture is understood to be uniform, timeless and totalizing, creating discrete units that are fully integrated internally and sealed off by water-tight boundaries against an outer world of equally distinct entities. But we could aspire to be more sophisticated. If the analogy of the personality that is sometimes used in this context is understood to be a system which is entirely integrated and free from contradictions, nor does it develop in splendid isolation. For the personality to grow it needs a certain ‘openness’ (Bryan S. Turner, who, to avoid orientalism past and present, and all the more ideological, for the unreformed orientalist, Muslims are over-determined by Islam. This is, of course, vintage culturalism. But orientalism, its critics continue, does not stop here: it ‘constructs’ Islam as the ultimate Other, using it as a negative foil against which the achievements of Western civilization, restating on the triple foundation of ancient Judaism, ancient Greece and the Christian faith, appear all the more glorious. Islam, by contrast, lacks the notion of liberty, a sense of responsibility both individual and civic, a spirit of scientific inquiry, an independent middle-class, any kind of recognized common sense, unity and diversity in Islamic studies, and here I use the term in the widest possible sense to include various area studies such as Turkish, Iranian or Indonesian studies as in as far as they touch on Islam, the dangers of culturalism have been discussed at great length, only in this case the culturalism has become known as orientalism, and orientalism is a very bad thing indeed. It is awkward enough to be addressed as an ‘Islamist’ rather than an ‘Islamicist’, as it frequently happens among the uninitiate, for there is after all a distinction between the practitioner of political Islam and the researcher studying the phenomenon. But as a self-respecting scholar, one would not nowadays want to be called an orientalist, much less so in Arabic where mutashabih (orientalist) comes perilously close to mustashiq (pagan, heretic) – although it must be said that the connection is seldom explicit made.

Orientalism, as we have learned, is a project that presents, or as many would say ‘constructs’ or ‘represents’, Islam as a distinct, homogeneous and timeless entity that is essentially defined by its normative texts, i.e. the Qur’an as divine word and the Sunna, or tradition of the Propheth Muhammad. For the unformed orientalist, Muslims are sufficiently defined by being Muslim. Little does it matter whether they live in Kuala Lumpur, Cairo or Paris. They are over-determined by Islam. This is, of course, vintage culturalism. But orientalism, its critics continue, does not stop here: it ‘constructs’ Islam as the ultimate Other, using it as a negative foil against which the achievements of Western civilization, restating on the triple foundation of ancient Judaism, ancient Greece and the Christian faith, appear all the more glorious. Islam, by contrast, lacks the notion of liberty, a sense of responsibility both individual and civic, a spirit of scientific inquiry, an independent middle class, any kind of recognized common sense, unity and diversity in Islamic studies, and here it does not seem to matter much whether we use the singular or the plural. This corresponds to a marked tendency in the humanities and the social sciences to focus on actors rather than on systems, and therefore to concentrate on agency, practices and processes mediating between the social sciences to focus on actors rather than on systems, and therefore to concentrate on agency, practices and processes mediating between structures, or systems, on one hand and actors on the other. ‘Negotiation’ is the catchword here, taking us straight to the market-place. This has contributed much to the shift of emphasis and perspective. Historians have learned from anthropologists, and anthropologists from sociologists who have spoken about the ‘accommodation’ of discourse(s) that characterizes any given situation. In our context, we should perhaps rather refer to a ‘polysphere’ of Muslim voices, for even if they are numerous the sound need not grate on the ear, as a cacophony does. Yet even when we focus on plurality, polyphony and variation, major challenges remain, and they do so on several levels. Islamists may insist on the plurality of Islam(s), they may use inverted commas to express their discomfort with essentializing terms, they may even deny that there is such a thing as Islam, or Islamic law, art or architecture. They may choose to talk about the ‘thing that is essentially defined by its normative texts, i.e. the Qur’an as divine word and the Sunna, or tradition of the Propheth Muhammad. For the unformed orientalist, Muslims are sufficiently defined by being Muslim. Little does it matter whether they live in Kuala Lumpur, Cairo or Paris. They are over-determined by Islam. This is, of course, vintage culturalism. But orientalism, its critics continue, does not stop here: it ‘constructs’ Islam as the ultimate Other, using it as a negative foil against which the achievements of Western civilization, restating on the triple foundation of ancient Judaism, ancient Greece and the Christian faith, appear all the more glorious. Islam, by contrast, lacks the notion of liberty, a sense of responsibility both individual and civic, a spirit of scientific inquiry, an independent middle class, any kind of recognized common sense, unity and diversity in Islamic studies, and here it does not seem to matter much whether we use the singular or the plural.
discourses on Islamic history rather than Is- lamic history proper, suggesting that histo- ry proper does not exist, no matter whether Islam or other. There still remains the fact that for ever so many Muslims, Islam is pre- cisely the timeless, homogeneous and unique whole, the sum total of divine or- dained norms, values and aspirations Islami- cists spend so much time and energy on ‘deconstructing’. That they often do so in order to defend Islam (no inverted commas here) and the Muslims against those critics who seem unable to distinguish between the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Islamic Re- public of Iran, a mullah in Cologne and the teachings of the Prophet as understood by Muslim communities in the Netherlands, adds to the irony of the situation. How then should the student of Islam deal with the firm convictions of the Muslim believer (that is to say: not just any Muslim regardless of his or her personal views)? For it will hardly do to summarily dismiss them as evidence of false consciousness.

Culture in the market-place

One way to reconcile the demands of in- tellecual integrity with the recognition of strong beliefs among those who are after all the main or principal partners of the students of Islam, and not just the object of their re- search, is to look at Islam as a repertory of references, textual, visual and other, that can be variously transmitted, but which under all circumstances require interpreta- tion if they are to acquire force, and have done so from the very beginning of Islamic histor (I do not hesitate to use the term). In- terpretation is done by active minds, or to put it in current scientific jargon: it is premised on agency. To speak of a repertory of references that are continually re-inter- preted, re-defined, and frequently con- tested, without losing their status of norma- tivity for those involved, has a liberating ef- fect. Among other things it frees students of Islam from the necessity to declare them- selves on the highly sensitive issue of whether the Qur’an is actually God’s word, or whether Muhammad was truly God’s prophet, or indeed the last and final one in a long line of messengers that had been sent beforehand on God’s behest and bid- den to wake up the world. What matters is that Muslims believers view and revere them as such. Considering the productive nature of the issue particularly in our times, this is an advantage not to be un- derestimated.

To put it bluntly then, it is not the task of those who study Islam to define Islam for the Muslim believer, to delimit its bound- aries and to measure transgression. I would maintain that in spite of the current fascina- tion with negotiated space, shifting bound- aries and imagined communities, bound- aries exist that cannot all be negotiated. The- se boundaries are tested, without losing their status of normativity does not mean that ‘anything goes’. Islam, Sayyid Qutb is said to have re- marked, is flexible but not fluid. But it is not for the scholar to fix those boundaries. It is our task to unravel how in a given context the available (normative) references are se- lected, used and combined, and by whom, to what purpose and to what effect. In doing so we should perhaps be more careful when employing the market metaphor: shopping around for suitable references to uphold specific views and to further particu- lar interests has not always been an option and may not always be one today. It is pre- cisely more interesting to find out what ref- erences are available to specific people in specific situations. In many cases, the choice could turn out to be more restricted than it might appear to the scholar with full access to all kinds of ideas, sources and resources. At the same time I would be more cautious when speaking about inside and outside views, for in many situations the divide by no means as clear as some seem to think. I see, at any rate, no reason why the ‘under- standing’ of an urban middle-class academ- ics of Muslim faith should by definition be restricted (or should I say ‘bounded’?), and that it can be exhausted. To speak of negoti- ation space does not mean that ‘anything goes’. 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