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Scaffolding Theory at the Introductory Level

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The core learning goal of my introduction to Islam is that "Islam" is not a thing. Islam does not say anything. Islam does not do anything. Islam holds no power over anyone. Given the incredible diversity across time and space that marks the practices, habits, desires, sensibilities, beliefs, and feelings that might fall within the category of Islamic, I want students to struggle with the idea of Islam itself. Is there a thing we can point to as *Islam*? This, of course, is a potential recipe for students leaving the course feeling somewhat befuddled by what they have just studied. To provide coherence to a course grounded in critical perspectives in the study of religion, I build my introduction around the concept of tradition. I have found this to be an effective theoretical axis because by the end of the course students typically come to appreciate the historical and cultural contingencies of Islamic practice while also having some sense of what makes it possible to speak about something called Islam.

The single best source I have found for the theoretical consideration of tradition is Talal Asad's "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam." Unfortunately, it is entirely too complex for an introductory course. So how to make good use of a theoretically rich piece that is itself beyond the grasp of students? By identifying and introducing individual concepts that are crucial to Asad's definition of a tradition over the course of the semester, I can work toward explicit engagement with his theorization at the end of the semester without ever overwhelming students (or having them read the entire essay for that matter—I leave that for a more advanced course on Islam and modernity). The passage from Asad's essay that I eventually

present to students captures the core of his argument:

A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long-term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions). An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present. (*Qui Parle*, Spring/Summer 2009, 20)

After an initial overview of the historical conditions in which revelations began and continued apace with the development of the early Muslim community, we move on to a closer study of the Qur'an, hadith, and exegetical traditions. During these explorations, I emphasize that from the very first moments of revelation people struggled with what exactly to make of God's guidance (including the nature of revelation itself). What is God asking of humanity?

Bringing God's words to life has always required continuous engagement, negotiation, and debate. This is the first crucial element in scaffolding the idea of tradition. As we move from the emergence of exegetical practices to the development of distinctly Islamic legal and political models of community organization in the course, we continue to focus on the place of debate—and difference—in bringing God's guidance to life. This helps students begin to appreciate how common foundations—such as the Qur'an and hadith, or the "from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted"—can yield a rich variety of understandings.

I call the penultimate unit of the course "Modern Transformations," and it is here that I introduce the above passage to the class. While we have been attentive in various ways to historical change up until this point in the semester, I find that the kinds of changes we see during the modern period are especially given to really engaging the temporal nature of Asad's theory of tradition. At the introductory level, the hajj consistently proves to be most conducive to this goal. In fact, the hajj works very well as a vehicle for taking students through Asad's theory of tradition piece by piece: foundations of a given practice, its historical development (including debates when possible), and the way that conditions of the present provide the immediate framework for thinking about its future.

We begin by looking at material in the Qur'an relating to the pilgrimage and at classical exegesis on this foundational material. We then read selections from FE Peters' *The Hajj* and discuss maps of pilgrimage routes to create a sense of how the journey developed over time as an important element of the pilgrimage in the life of Muslim communities. From there, we continue with selections from *The Hajj* to see how nineteenth-century revolutions in transportation transformed the nature of the journey to Mecca. Finally, we close out the unit by watching the National Geographic documentary *Inside Mecca*, which follows different

pilgrims from around the world to and around Mecca, and reading "Modern Mecca: The hajj meets a boom in development," an April 2012 *New Yorker* article that provides an accessible look into the transformation of Mecca and its environs. There are a number of more recent media accounts that provide some insights into debates within Muslim communities around Mecca's continued development, which I briefly introduce in class.

Over the course of discussing these materials, we touch on a series of questions, such as: What is the point of the practice (the pilgrimage) as we see it in foundational sources? As the pilgrimage developed historically? Is the journey to Mecca—and its role in generating an *umma* along the way—a crucial element of the practice? Or is the pilgrimage entirely about ritual practice in Mecca? This line of questioning culminates with a query that often generates a good deal of debate in class: With the transformation of the journey to Mecca, historically novel manifestations of economic inequality in Mecca during the pilgrimage, and the increasing routinization of ritual, does the pilgrimage we see today constitute a continuation of an existing tradition? Or are we seeing the development of a new pilgrimage tradition? When does something (and the conditions in which it unfolds) change so much that it becomes a new tradition? As they engage these questions the students participate in the very kinds of debates that we find in Muslim communities about Islamic traditions.

Thus, by the end of the semester, we have slowly worked toward that idea that Islam is a discursive tradition. This makes it possible to study local forms and practices of Islam, identify common foundations that draws them into a common frame of "Islam" without depending on normative claims, and to see how debates drive historical change in light of conditions in a given time and place. Slowly but surely, we have built toward a theory of Islam at the introductory level without overwhelming students in any given moment of the course.

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