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TITOLO/TITLE: Crossing and Contaminations in the Study of Islam and Muslim Life ('Open Panel')

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S: GIANFRANCO BRIA (SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME); FABIO VICINI (UNIVERSITY OF VERONA)

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ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

This panel aims to explore current multidisciplinary debates in the study of what is variably defined as “Islam” or “Muslim life” within the realms of humanities and the social sciences. The goal is to convene scholars from different disciplines, including Islamic Studies, Anthropology, Sociology, Political Sciences, Gender, and Postcolonial Studies to discuss the epistemological and methodological questions that have surrounded the study of “Islam” and “Muslim life” over the recent decades within these fields.

The study of Islam has long historically rested in the hands of philologists and orientalists, primarily concerned with its doctrinal dimensions. However, following different strains of critique, the focus has progressively moved from how Islam is conceived doctrinally to how it is, or was, lived by Muslims around the world, also but not exclusively in relation to texts and the discursive tradition they uphold (Asad 1986). Whereas the methods and approaches of these disciplines remain different, they all grapple with the question of defining the subject of their study and delineating its contours, as well as with how to reconcile the multiplicity of Muslim experiences within a singular tradition.

This panel aims to ignite a multidisciplinary discussion on these themes by exploring the primary and most recent obstacles encountered by scholars across different disciplinary traditions when considering and investigating “Islam” and “Muslim life.” For instance, anthropologists and sociologists have manifested a certain degree of unease in dealing with the religious experiences of the people they study. Given that their epistemological and methodological apparatuses emerged from a relatively recent modern-secular lineage, they have encountered limits in engaging with “worlds” contemplating an interaction with transcendent entities (Furani and Robbins 2021; Vicini and Di Puppo 2024). Additionally, their approach to Islam has often been influenced by secular and/or Christian-inflected categories and views, which often obscure and distort the distinctive features of the Muslim religious experience (Asad 1993; Furani 2019).

In a similar vein, religious studies have grappled with similar challenges, in particular reflecting on the translatability of the category of “religion” to the Muslim context, along with the constraints and the Orientalist implications inherent in its application to the study of Islam and Muslim life. Concurrently, Islamic studies have typically tackled the issue (also discussed within the anthropology of Islam) of how to encompass the multiplicity of Muslim experiences, including their not-strictly-religious “Islamicate” manifestations, under the overarching denominator of “Islam” (Hodgson 1974; Ahmed 2015).

Challenges have come also from historical and anthropological research in other contexts, especially in Africa, Southeastern Europe, and Southern Asia. The conventional focus on considered-to-be more authentic Arab and Middle Eastern manifestations of Islam has led to the marginalization of other “Islams.” This has resulted in an epistemological and methodological cleavage that has prompted philological studies to focus on intellectual productions from the Arab world, leaving historians and anthropologists to focus on what was considered the “peripheral regions of Islam”, such as sub-Saharan Africa, Southeastern Europe, and Southeastern Asia. These and other similar oppositions have contributed to framing Islam as a self-contained “structure,” distinct from local cultures often relegated to a non-Islamic status. The recent shift in focus towards regions beyond those traditionally regarded as central has challenged highly normative and straightforward dichotomies between central/peripheral and orthodox/heterodox Islams (Ahmed 2015; Green 2012).

These cleavages also intersect with another concerning aspect: the fact that Islam has always been shaped, defined, and redefined by the dynamics of everyday life, its intersections with secular institutions, and its

entanglements with other religious and non-religious practices. Even when radically critical of Orientalism, some studies have tended to reify Islam, making it the opposite of secularism and/or the West (Soares and Osella 2010; Schielke 2010), suggesting that Islam and Muslim life should be considered the “necessary” and “resisting” other of secularism. Recent studies on “Islam” and “Muslim life” have instead opened a new perspective, along with ensuing debates, on what have long been considered secular, non-religious, or “everyday” practices and their interactions with supposedly more religious ones (Schielke 2015; Cf. Fadil and Fernando 2015).

Beyond pointing to epistemological and methodological questions, all the aforementioned discussions have delved into the fundamental essence of their subject of study: What is Islam? How do we delineate the boundaries of Islam and Muslim life in our research? What makes a practice more or less “Islamic,” or more or less “religious”, or “Muslim” than others? What happens to Islam when relied upon, as a living tradition, to face the challenges posed by social, political, economic, ecological, or any other sort of crisis? What are the implications of all these considerations for how we represent the voices of Muslims in our scholarly writings? This panel aims to tackle these and similar interconnected questions, inviting contributions that analytically examine one or more of these aspects through the lens of specific cases and from the perspective of their respective fields of study. Papers are encouraged to highlight the crossings and contaminations between disciplines, as well as possible interactions between them. Submissions may focus on any regional specialization, including the study of Islam and Muslims in Western contexts.

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PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Gianfranco Bria is Research Fellow and Adjunct Professor of Islamic Law at La Sapienza University of Rome, Adjunct Professor of Islam and Gender at Roma 3 University and associate member of the CETOBAC at EHESS in Paris. He is the Editor-in-chief of *Occhiali - Journal on Mediterranean Islam*. He is also scientific member of the research project on Muhammad in the mirror of his community in early and modern Islam (ANR-DFG, three-years project: 2017-2020) and of the project Red Golden Legend (ANR). He obtained his Ph.D. at EHESS and UniCal; his doctoral research analyzed Islamic and Sufi revival in post-socialist Albania. He profoundly knows Balkan territories and societies where he lived over one year. His research deals with Islamic authority, sainthood and charisma in the Balkans, the embodiment experiences of daily-lived Islam (practices, beliefs and rituals) and Muslims history in southern-eastern Europe since late modern Ottoman Empire.

Fabio Vicini is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Verona, Senior Research Associate in the "Quite Aid" Project (<https://quietaid.info/>), and founder and convener (with Lili di Puppò) of the EASA Muslim

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SINGLE ABSTRACTS

RIDEFINIRE IL SUFISMO COME COMPONENTE ESSENZIALE DELL'ISLAM GLOBALE

Gli ultimi 50 anni hanno visto una sempre più manifesta presenza del Sufismo all'interno del dibattito interno a un Islam globale che lo integra, insieme ad alcune sue pratiche, nella vita musulmana. Tale riavvicinamento storico, che non esclude il Sufismo dal discorso islamico mainstream, sembra rispondere all'esigenza di integrare la spiritualità di matrice sufi all'interno di un processo di costruzione di un'identità islamica condivisa.

Il paper si propone di analizzare il discorso pubblico di alcune figure seminali, come il predicatore marocchino 'Abd al-Salām Yāsīn (1928-2012) e il maestro siriano Muḥammad al-Ya'qūbī (1963-), il cui orientamento di matrice sufi, nel primo caso, o pienamente inserito nel discorso di legittimazione iniziatico delle confraternite sufi, nel secondo, emergono in modo esemplare come esempi di un riavvicinamento storico tra Islam politico e Sufismo. Il tratto caratteristico di questi pensatori, e di altri pensatori sufi occidentali, come Hamza Yusuf e Tim Winter, è quello di un attivismo islamico che si lega a un discorso spirituale di perfezionamento interiore.

Tale ridefinizione dell'identità islamica pone degli interrogativi sulle definizioni obsolete di Islam politico e Sufismo, tra spazio pubblico e spiritualità in una pratica religiosa in cui i confini tra le classiche categorie accademiche risultano ormai difficilmente tracciabili.

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PROBLEMATISING THE STUDY OF ISLAMIC SECULARITY: CURRENT ISSUES AND DEBATES.

This article aims to address recent scholarly debates on the study of secularity in the Islamic tradition. The notion of secularity indicates institutionally entrenched forms and modes of divergence between religion and other social spheres and behaviours, as well as basic cultural and symbolic differences that mark political and civic cultures. This is different from the concept of secularism, which outlines the ways in which politics, the state and religion are institutionally and legally separated, as well as the ways in which these divisions are ideologically justified. A variety of studies asserted that secularity in Islamic societies did not exist before the colonial expansions, since a 'secular' post-Westphalia model of government based on the prerogative of the state and its regulations on religion expanded in most Islamic majority countries. Other studies, however, argue that elements of secularity existed from the very beginning in the development of *fiqh* ('jurisprudence') just as there was elaborated a 'reified' conception of religion (*dīn*). These pose a range of insights upon which to redefine analytical and methodological frameworks for the study of Muslim life and Islamic tradition that can challenge the self-evident dialectic (or rather dichotomy) between religion and secularity.

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CROCEVIA DEL SACRO: ISLAM ED ESPERIENZA RELIGIOSA OLTRECONFINE

Il ripensamento epistemologico e metodologico con cui le scienze umane e sociali hanno affrontato negli ultimi due decenni lo studio dell'islam e dell'esperienza religiosa musulmana riflette le aporie e gli impliciti slittamenti semantici che, più in generale, l'assunzione ad universalità della categoria di "religione" (e del suo ineliminabile contrappunto, il "secolare") ha comportato nell'applicarla oltre la genealogia storico-politico-culturale che l'ha generata.

In questo intervento mi propongo di avviare una riflessione su quegli "sconfinamenti" teorici e metodologici che condividono l'ambizione a un rinnovamento nelle prospettive di studio sull'islam. A partire dagli stimoli etnografici ricavati da ricerche in corso sul rapporto tra migrazioni e rituali nella regione maghrebina e nel solco di quegli studi che, specie in ambito antropologico, negli ultimi anni hanno provato a individuare le reciproche interazioni tra sacro ed esperienza sociale quotidiana, vorrei mettere in evidenza come l'islam – inteso nelle sue molteplici ramificazioni

etico-morali, teologico-dottrinali e politico-sociali – possa essere prolificamente colto ed esplorato oltre gli ambiti e le pratiche cui esso viene "naturalmente" ascritto. È il caso dei contesti della migrazione ("regolare" e "irregolare"), nei quali l'islam stimola la riflessione e la proiezione immaginativa degli attori sociali, l'interrogazione delle appartenenze comunitarie e la messa in forma delle soggettività individuali e collettive, imponendo lo sconfinamento del nostro sguardo oltre gli steccati delle consuete demarcazioni disciplinari.

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RE-ENVISIONING CENTRAL ASIAN "MUSLIMNESS" THROUGH TALAL ASAD'S WORK "THE IDEA OF AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF ISLAM"

This paper proposes a study of the category of "Muslimness" as conceived by Central Asian Muslims through Talal Asad's analytical framework. A terminological difference between the terms Islam and "Muslimness" is commonly recognised in Central Asia, where the latter represents the living religion, the embodied tradition as the foundation of a lifestyle and a stable community identity. The rift between the two conceptions began with the forced secularisation imposed on Central Asian society by the Soviet system, but what was a rift later became a specific trait of the regional Muslim identity. The definition of Islam as an object of investigation, in terms of a "discursive tradition", helpfully contributes to clarifying this issue. Moreover, it entails a revisiting of the dualistic categorisation of "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxis", which in this context is closely linked with the dynamics of secularisation and power. With this in mind, the paper will focus on anthropological literature based on fieldwork and the speaker's personal experience in the region to show examples and explain why this framework is very suitable for the study of Islam in Central Asia.

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RIPENSARE L'ANTROPOLOGIA DELL'ISLAM OLTRE ALLA SVOLTA ONTOLOGICA

L'intervento intende focalizzarsi su come l'idea di "trascendenza" è stata affrontata nell'antropologia del cristianesimo e soprattutto dell'Islam, per ripensare il modo in cui essa viene concettualizzata nelle scienze sociali. Lo fa a partire da come un senso di trascendenza è pensato e coltivato quotidianamente dai membri di una comunità musulmana turca, ma si sofferma anche a considerare le esperienze di trascendenza che gli antropologi possono aver esperito, pur se in modo effimero ed estemporaneo, durante la ricerca di campo. Anche se momentanee e sfuggenti, questi momenti sono stati a lungo narrati dagli antropologi, ma raramente sono stati "presi sul serio", per mutuare una espressione mutuata dalla "svolta ontologica" in antropologia. Nel mio intervento, spiego come tale svolta non sia stata del tutto in grado di afferrare il portato delle ontologie musulmane così come di altre tradizioni religiose che presentano versioni diversificate e raffinate della trascendenza e di come relazionarsi ad essa. Illustrando questi aspetti, affronto alcune questioni epistemologiche e metodologiche che emergono quando si conduce ricerca su musulmani che si rapportano all'Islam come sistema religioso, di pratica e senso, conferisce orientamento alle loro azioni nel mondo.

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