



# Islam, critique, and the canon: an introduction

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This special issue is one of the most exciting products of 8-year-long conversations with critical-minded friends and colleagues. The conversations have begun with the reading group that Dr. Sehlakoglu has hosted at Pembroke College, the University of Cambridge. In ‘Is Critique Islamic?’ reading group (2017–2020), we visited the classical Muslim scholars and polymaths from theology, philosophy and sciences to understand how concepts related to power, authority, critique and resistance were understood by some of the most acclaimed scholars ranging from Al-Ghazali to Ibn Khaldun, Al-Kindi, Maimonides and Ibn Taymiyya. Professor Humeira Iqtidar’s intellectual contributions to those meetings have been quite influential in conceptualizing the formation of the Islamic canon across time and space. These conversations played a crucial role in the 2-day conference Sehlakoglu co-convened with Mahvish Ahmad and Ayse Su Polat, *Imaginative Landscapes of Islamist Politics: Aspirations, Dreams, and Critique*, at the University of Cambridge’s Centre for Research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (CRASSH) in 2018. The event hosted papers by Humeira Iqtidar, Khaled Fahmy, Katherine Ewing, Layli Uddin, Samuli Schielke, Irfan Ahmad, Charis Boutieri, Iza Hussin, James Caron, Nandu Menon, Sabiha Allouche and Mashuq Kurt. As Polat later stated in her reflections on the conference, ‘Central to the debates around decolonisation, dreams, and aspirations, were conceptual and methodological questions of power, sovereignty, and critique’ (Polat, 2018). Although the realms of imagination have been where the critical movements within Islam have sought refuge, it became essential for the participants of this conference to allow separate conversations in order to address the contours of critique in Islam and Islamic formations.

Islamic ideas have, for a long time, been de-historicized, decontextualized and approached as if developed in isolation from broader intellectual and political

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debates or as if only developed in a reactive relationship with other traditions of thought, including colonialism—a problem that has been pointed out repeatedly. Indeed, a growing scholarship is resisting the politically problematic accounts that centralize canonical Islam in their analysis as the primary reference and thus marginalize any critical Islamic voices as somewhat less Islamic (Al-Rasheed, 2015). One of the repeating errors contributing to this failure is where we locate the critique in Islam.

The Durkheimian sacred-profane binary continues to resurface in studies of Muslims in the form of associated dualisms such as Islamic-secular, traditional-modern and pious-mundane. The ontological turn in anthropology provides a set of conceptual references to the scholars studying Muslim contexts and develops theories that are less ethnographic and more self-referential, leading to a reproduction of dualist thinking and a failure of comprehension. Is there a spectrum for Islamic-ness in evaluations and analysis of Islamic movements? Is the Wahhabi perspective more Islamic than a Sufi one, for example? We believe that such nuances join the intellectual *care* against dividing Muslims as pious vs non-pious, as if that was a zero-sum game, as once put by Lara Deeb (2015). In different periods of time, Muslims argued for the possibility of pious intoxication as a spiritual transcendence (Gezer, 2021; Karateke, 2005; Kim, 2021), an idea that is foreign to orthodox Islam. Whether such diverse Islamic practices are to be categorically studied as marginal or alternative forms of Islam is the epistemological issue we are taking. Any claims on the canon and knitting a scholarship that inadvertently contributes to that zero-sum game would remain problematic.

The process of forming and preserving an Islamic canon is then one of the questions we have to deal with as an ongoing process, within and beyond the scope of this issue. That is why we ask: Where do we locate the critique *in* Islam and *in* the studies of Islamic societies? Where are the loci of critique and source of sovereignty in various Islamist movements? Can the body be a locus of critique? How can we trace and capture the imaginative and ethical self as a realm of critique? How do we excavate, in the present or in the archives, the colonial imaginaries of brutalized subjects? How exactly do contemporary critical movements interact with ongoing debates about the canon within the Islamic tradition? Which elements are common, and which are at variance with other movements?

As scholars working on Islam and different Muslim groups, we do not think these are questions that can be addressed in one single special issue. Instead, we hope that this issue will serve as a platform to open up more space for critique within Islam and Islamic thought.

The papers in this collection allow an insight into some of these debates with a particular focus on Islamist ideas that carried tension in the desire to critique the canon while also claiming legitimacy through a return to some elements of it. Part of this issue deals with the ways in which the strongest anti-colonial critique of contemporary Islamist ideologies had been developed as an attempt to establish a new and populist canon to colonial encounter and thus inevitably reiterate the very same dualisms in their discourses. Often, populist angles end up being the most divisive ones, as we have seen with Maududi and Wahhabism (Iqtidar, 2020; Iqtidar & Scharbrodt, 2022). On the other hand, the less populist Islamic critique of

colonialism would be much more nuanced and thus less black and white. In a time where an immediate threat is known so intimately, the non-populist voices would be forced to the margins and not become part of the canon of the time.

The collection of articles joins this stream of thought to complicate some of the assumptions about the Islamic canon and engage with the question of critique within Islam and contemporary Islamic thought. It pushes the boundaries of existing scholarship through a reconsideration of what constitutes 'the Islamic,' with a particular focus on non-western lineages of critique and affective rather than rationalist registers of Islamic politics. The authors in this collection link the debates around critique within Islam and Islamic groups by simultaneously questioning the political and social processes that have formed a canon and a canonical Islam, which also happened to be the Islam the majority of the anthropologists and sociologists of Islam have been focusing on.

Another question is the critique of canonical Islam towards feminist, liberationist, leftist or anti-capitalist Islamic critiques. Although these critical formations are discredited by canonical Islam and accused of being Westernised, outsider and illicit, they provide us with important perspectives on what a non-canonical Islamic critique can contribute to the understanding of lived Islam in contemporary times without falling into the binaries of neo-colonial and neo-orientalist discourses. To what extent, for example, does a feminist reading of Islamic history, society and text deconstruct populist understandings of what constitutes Islam? What challenges does it pose towards patriarchal and canonical Islam's problematic accounts of gender issues? What are non-canonical critiques and objections of liberation theologies on the question of the imagined Muslim ummah, the place of nationalism in Islamist governmentalities and disparities around social and economic justice? To what extent do populist Islamism and right-wing ideologies inform each other, and what are some alternative readings of political theology in Islam?

Contributors to the special issue tackle some of these questions to open room for a plurality of perspectives and critiques that come from within and the margins of Islamic thought. Mashuq Kurt examines the dialectical relation between canon and critique by focusing on protests of Anti-capitalist Muslims in Turkey, examples of Civil Friday prayers (*Sivil Cuma namazları*) of the Kurdish imams and the reconfiguration of Kurdish mosques of liberation in Europe. In doing so, he presents how religious practices and discourses are instrumentalized for Islamist colonial governmentalities on the one hand but also serves as a decolonial critique to deconstruct contemporary Muslimness and open room for a plurality of Muslim perspectives excluded from the overly militarized and nationalist rhetoric espoused in Turkish Islamist discourses and practices. Sertaç Sehlíkoglu approaches the notion of critique from privilege and studies it through the ways in which privileged positions of ethics and critique reinforce fragility. She does so by looking at a clash between two political formations, both built on positions of privilege in Turkey, through their Sunni-Turkish-ness. The article juxtaposes these two Sunni Turkish groups' privilege-based ethics: the Milli Görüş of the 1970ies, which in time transformed into the new Erdoganist politics, and of the Gülenists. Using the battle between the two over claiming power and authority in canonical Islam makes it possible to question the notions of privilege, comfort

and critique in the ethical self-making processes. Zora Kostadinova analyses the self-critique and self-improvement of the Naqshbandi Muslims in Bosnia by arguing for a greater ethnographic focus on how self-critique can be oriented toward the social and contribute toward formulations of ideas of tolerance and local forms of sociality. The deployment of *adab* as an internal critique arguably represents an ongoing process of reformulating local ideas of a canon, where personal hermeneutics plays an important role and where historical temporalities are deployed in pointing to the fractured nature of a canon and toward the impossibility of cultivating a ‘global Islamic canon’. Kamal Soleimani examines the influence of nationalism and colonial racial theories on modern Islamic thought in Muslim South Asia and the Middle East. He provides examples that show how contemporary Islamic thought has internalized the colonial discourse on religion, nation and state. Sabiha Allouche draws on her experience in teaching gender studies in relation to the Middle East in UK higher education institutions to posit a ‘pedagogy of opacity’ when producing knowledge on Othered bodies—in this instance, the fictive category of the ‘Muslim woman’. She demonstrates how a pedagogy of opacity forces home, self and early mis/information about the other to realign and confront each other. This triadic realignment showcases the workings of home (the UK)—not of a geographically distant Islamic culture—in the manufacturing of the Muslim woman other. Lastly, in her Afterword, Humeira Iqtidar reminds us that it is crucial to expand our concerns about (1) undue reliance on the canon by even anthropologists who have taken to privilege texts over practices, (2) the process of formation of the canon that tends to solidify power relations and (3) the confluence between right-wing ideologies and the canon. The last two needed empirical data to understand how and when a canon is established, what purposes it serves and whether the main problem you have with the canon is the fact that it exists or that the problematic and even incorrect elements are canonised.

**Author contribution** Sehlikoglu confirmed the creation of the skeleton of the editorial project and the conceptual pillars of the conversation. She also drafted the article. Kurt made a substantial contribution to the concept of the article. They both brought their existing scholarship into the conversation, approved the version to be published and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring that questions related to the accuracy of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors are editorial board members of the journal.

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