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Debating Shirk in Keralam, South India: Monotheism between Tradition, Text and Performance

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Inspired as much by interfaith dialogue as by ethnographic discussions of intersubjectivity, I draw some narrow debates within Indian Islam outside of their usual South Asianist and/or Islam-centric frameworks and also resist the academic injunction to purify boundaries between theology and anthropological analysis. I present ethnography from Kerala factional debates raising two vexed questions: authority of interpretation; and the matter of *shirk* or deviation from *tauheed*, or true monotheism. My analysis follows impulses towards, firstly, a de-exceptionalising of Islam via comparison, drawing ethnography towards a wider 'Abrahamic' framework, in an eccentric move of reading Islamic debates through moments in commentary on Christian traditions; and secondly, I engage recent theological moves toward performative and deconstructive readings of religion. In Muslim traditions, Quran and *hadith* as ultimate authority are supported by the methods of *qiyas* – analogy – and considerations of *ijma* – community consensus. From the beginning, Islam has recognised that, "The Quran does not speak with a tongue; it needs interpreters and interpreters are people" (Esack, 1997). Performative and deconstructive understandings of religion are perhaps then already anticipated in the Islamic tradition, unlike (Western) Christianity, which has long been restrained by a narrow focus upon either *scriptura* or *traditio* – with the third pole of 'community consensus' hidden from sight and not often acknowledged, matters of consensus/performativity only recently becoming recognised as a proper and legitimate part of processes of interpretation, as Dalit, queer and feminist theologies emerge and come of age.

Introduction

In the 20 years between Katherine Ewing's careful disavowal of the ethnographer's "temptation to believe" (1994) and Meneses, et al.'s daring proposal for an anthropological "epistemology of witness," grounded in evangelical Christian readings of good and evil (2014), lie (on the one hand) Simon Coleman's sensitive discussion of the dangers of exposing oneself as an insufficiently distanced "abomination" (2008) and (on the other) a bold exposure effected by Saba Mahmood and others of the partiality of the secular world-view and its claims to neutrality (Mahmood, 2006, 2008, 2009; Zine, 2004). Inspired by this trajectory and as much by interfaith dialogue as by ethnographic discussions of intersubjectivity, it is in a spirit of feeling that the time is (finally) right that I set aside criticisms of projects of comparative religion, draw some very narrow debates within Indian Islam outside of their customary analytic framework and into a wider one, and offer some thoughts on two vexed questions dear to the heart of Muslims: authority of interpretation; and the matter of *shirk* or deviation from *tauheed*, or true monotheism. My starting point for this is a 1970s set of formal debates between sects which I encountered as still haunting Muslim life during ethnographic fieldwork which I conducted from 2002–2004 in north Keralam, south India.[1] My discussion proceeds from grounds of connectedness: as longtime ethnographer of Keralam, and as a member of an Abramic faith-practice tradition which, like Islam, engages with wrestling with texts, traditions, and the existence of differently situated sub-communities within the wider tradition (Christianity).

Keralam's *ulema*, religious scholars, have long been holding public debates in which apparently well-defined positions backed by textual evidence are presented and where audiences are expected to be persuaded or confirmed in their judgment that one or other of the positions is rooted in correct interpretation. Here, various groups of reformists (*Tablighi Jammat*, *Jammat-i-Islami* etc.) familiar on the South

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[1] I have been conducting fieldwork working in various sites and with different communities in Keralam, south India, and among Kerala migrants in the Gulf states, since 1989. Since 2000, my main field site has been Calicut town, (Kozkikode) a port and bazaar town on the coast with strong links to the Gulf stretching back at least to the 10th century. I use Indian rather than Arabic transliteration conventions for terms such as *moulud* (Ar. *mawlid*).

Asian scene (Metcalf, 1982; Robinson, 2008; Ahmad, 2009) are pitted against *sufi*-style 'traditionalists' (cf. Ahmad, 1982; Das, 1984), but in practice just one strand of reformism dominates Kerala: the *Islahi mujahid*s, consisting of two schisms from the Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen, hereafter the KNM movement). A broad binary distinction prevails (in discourse, in sect affiliation and in Kerala's wider landscape – mosques, *madrassas*, charitable foundations etc.) between 'Mujahids' and 'Sunnis' – in other words, between 'Islahi' and non 'Islahi' tendencies.[2]

As I collected and analysed ethnographic material from *ulema* formal public debates, from shrine festivals, from popular practice and from everyday conversations, *shirk* (deviation from monotheism) emerged as a recurrent preoccupation across several registers. As I have written elsewhere, academic (especially anthropological/ethnographic) commentators and non-Muslims alike often share a certain sympathy for 'traditional' practices like *nercha/urs* (shrine festivals) and saint veneration (Osella & Osella, 2008a, 2008b). This goes along with a widespread academic unwillingness or inability to comprehend the gravity – from an inside point of view – of *shirk*. One needs to appreciate that, if one is taking the existence of God as real, and if one is also taking as real the claim that God is one and not many, and that God wishes – or commands – to be recognised and worshipped as such, then to commit *shirk* is indeed a horrible blasphemy. Academic discussions of saint veneration and shrine festivals in frankly evaluative terms which pit 'cuddly' or syncretistic or imagined authentic practices against a demonised and joyless and inauthentic, putatively foreign-inspired 'wah'habism' are not merely wide of the ethnographic mark, but also overlook the importance for all Muslims of *tauheed*, the unity and singularity of God. I will return to this point later.

Turning then to *shirk*, which we might follow research respondents in glossing, variously, as deviation from monotheism, or the attributing of partners to God, or the dilution of God's singular power, I find that my Kerala ethnography treads familiar

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[2] See Osella & Osella (2008a) for a discussion of the problems of terminology, the difficulties of terms such as 'salafi' and the absolute inaccuracy and inadvisability of terms such as 'wahabi'. I choose Islahi as being the term which Mujahid activists themselves use when speaking to me in order to locate their movement in global reform landscape.

pathways: reformists deplore tombs, saints, shrine festivals, intercessionary prayer, *zikr* (remembrance chants), *moulud* (celebrating the prophet's birthday) and so on; traditionalists engage in such practices and defend them. There is no need in this paper to reproduce what is an utterly banal ethnographic scenario, and I will use my space instead for analysis and argument, where I will follow firstly, my impulse towards a de-exceptionalising of Islam, making an eccentric move to read debates in Islam through Christian theologies[3] and secondly, make a suggestion that theological insights may be useful for academics, before finally turning to recent moves towards performative theologies and what they might do.

Writing Against Purification

Recently, working with sympathies to interfaith dialogues, some Christian theologians have called for Christians actively to engage with Islam in order to understand better the nature of the Abrahamic God which the two traditions share (e.g. Swanson, 2005a, 2005b). Swanson (2005b), who teaches Protestant Christian theology to those who will enter (Lutheran) ministry, has argued, for example, that, "Christians need to recognise more fully the force of Muslim arguments on behalf of the oneness of God against the doctrine of the Trinity . . . . Christians could benefit from the concept of *shirk*". Nicholas Lash, holding for 20 years the chair of theology at Cambridge and Britain's seniormost Catholic theologian, offers at once a most elegant formulation and a very useful generalising statement which can apply across the board of all three Abrahamic faiths, when he claims that, "People fail in religion in one of two ways: they either treat some creature or creatures as God, or they treat God as a creature" (Lash, 2007: 30–35). Such 'thinking across' theological debates and literatures can then be helpful; and taking theology not as inferior object of study for academic discourse but as coeval partner in a conversation can also be helpful.

I am interested in possibilities for conversations both ethnographic and interfaith in the worlds of Islam and Christianity. As such, I want to situate my Kerala

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[3] A version of an accepted 're-positioning' move often made in anthropological theorising – see the work of Viveiros De Castro (2004), Marilyn Strathern (2005).

ethnographic material into wider anthropology of religion debates and write against the grain of two types of exceptionalism and narrow focus: firstly, a South Asianist narrow bias, something which is all too common via regional studies; and secondly, another common analytic which would exceptionalise Islam (Coleman, 2013). I hope that by keeping my sideways glance narrow – looking not, for example at pantheistic Hinduism, but only at a related Abramic tradition, that this will be more palatable to Indian Muslims. While general theories of religion are often over-ambitious, a classic anthropological 'middle level' comparison between related traditions is a good starting point.[4] Working in India – where many of my own fieldwork respondents are Syrian Christians, responsible to an Eastern Patriarch – also helps de-stabilise representations which would simplistically represent 'Christianity' as a 'Western' religion. I also refuse all representations which would treat Islam as a middle-eastern religion. Instead, on the one hand I treat both Christianity and Islam as analagous in being global networked religions (Voll, 1994) and discursive traditions (Asad, 1986), while on the other hand also holding fast that we need to pay good attention to ethnographic situatedness and complexity, without ever falling into the 'many Islams' or 'many Christianities' trap (Osella & Osella, 2007). We must recognise the global/ised nature of both Islam and Christianity, and to keep our ear attuned to the claims of these two Abrahamic traditions for global status and for universalistic messages and concerns. I am dispensing with the anthropologist's usual rich empirical and ethnographic detail, and will only use short examples where needed to make a point. My ethnography of the differences and arguments between sects is predictable and does not differ from similar material about the reform process which we find over and over throughout the Muslim world (e.g. Ewing, 1997; Blank, 2001).

Recently, we've witnessed academic interrogations of the putative neutrality of secularism and secularity (e.g. Mahmood 2006, 2011). This challenge has not been adequately responded to, which is not surprising. Still, some scholars have raised the question of the slippage between a commitment to secularism into a supporting of atheism, a kind of rationalist imperative within hegemonic traditions of doing

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[4] I am hoping also in time to bring in what in this paper is the still-absent third Other of Judaism.

academic work (King, 2002). There are emerging explorations into the normativity and disciplining mechanism of atheism within the academy (e.g. Zine, 2004). Others are experimenting with possibilities for bringing faith-based academic work into academic conversations, albeit dressed in the rationally respectable clothing of 'philosophy' (Kresse, 2007). If, as Simon Coleman has noted, academics are not likely to take up the call to permit coevalness to the marginalised faith-based stance[5], but to remain extremely hostile to such moves (2008), then the academy must at least now begin to explore more carefully its own positioning. It ought to cease to privilege the highly particularistic ideological commitment to atheism or secularism (with the latter being such a problematic term, however defined) as some sort of imagined neutral ground, and begin to take up the challenge set by the work of Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood to examine 'secularism' as culturally and historically specific. We can recognise that atheism and secularism alike are – like faith – matters of commitment: a positioning of the academic which will shape, produce, and foreclose that academic's analytic possibilities, a standpoint (Naples & Gurr, 2013) which will produce certain kinds of analysis.

This point leads me back to the question of the status of theological writings for those of us working in the academic field of religion. These often offer us highly nuanced and sophisticated discussions, such that it is unhelpful to treat such work entirely as 'insider discourse', or as artefacts whose insights are to be analysed, but never taken on board. As an experiment, in this paper I take a lead from performative/post-modern theologies (they're not the same) to think through the issues raised by my Islamic material. My hope is that this move might at once, firstly, demonstrate the potential of academic moves towards a de-exceptionalising comparison; secondly, suggest interesting directions for future comparative analysis; thirdly, bring academic theology into the conversation and prompt us to begin to engage

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[5] I'm keeping the term 'faith based' because it is in common use, but would register that this term is equally problematic, emerging from an understanding that a relationship to God is a matter of faith or belief, which is a stance which my research respondents would deny, grounding their relation to Islam instead in practice, knowledge, experience, ancient and revealed wisdom, and so on.

with it; and finally, contribute to the unsettling of the liberal secular hegemony which has held sway in academic life. We are in a moment in which a pluralist framework now seems possible. Eve Sedgwick deftly showed us how academic practice came to be ruled by paranoid thinking and by stances of cynicism, disbelief, mistrust, fear, disavowal (1997). Like Bruno Latour, whose 'compositionist manifesto' treads similar anti-paranoid ground (2010), or Eileen Joy (2013), who explains why hospitality and generosity can be helpful intellectual stances, Sedgwick asks for academic positionings which do not grow from adolescent practices of mere cleverness and suspicion, but from more tempered practices of speaking from a generous-hearted wisdom. The paranoid thinking which academic practice of the 16th and 17th centuries perhaps did indeed require in order to drag itself free from church hierarchy and hegemony is not only no longer necessary in this moment – when God has decisively been dead for many for a long while – but is now acting as a drag on understanding and analysis.

Finally, then, I want to move at the end of this paper towards observing and playing around a little with some possible lines of thought emerging from the post-1980s seeping into analytic and theological discourses alike of frameworks which stress the inauthenticity of all human attempts to describe and classify, and to capture 'reality'. As John Caputo (1997) observes, in his explorations of the encounter between St Augustine and Derrida, such moves bring us to a space which is near to that of traditional apophatic theology: what do I love when I love my God? As a human, I cannot possibly hope to know or delimit this, such that the future must always be left open. I will not have space to get into the complexity of such arguments, but merely begin to signpost them here.

Kerala's Mujahid Reformists Debates with the Sunni Majority

I have said that the Kerala ethnography is banal. So it is, on first approach: utterly predictable. Mujahid reformists battle against shrines, saints, festivals, and customary practice. Traditionalists continue to engage in a range of practices and appear to hold beliefs which diverge from modernist reform styles of Islam.

And yet . . .

Kerala Mujahid reformists' straightforward representation of themselves (e.g. in ethnographic interviews which I have no space here to reproduce) as proper mono-theists, while others commit *shirk*, was only to be expected. But their entirely con-ventional and predictable claims to be upholding monotheism against traditionalist Sunnis' blasphemous failure to hold the line did not prepare me or lead me to expect to find what I actually did then hear in the public 'Kuttichira debate,' nor what I observed over two years' fieldwork.

The famed 'Kuttichira debate,' which ran for over a week in 1976 in Kuttichira (the principal Muslim neighbourhood of Calicut/Kozhikode, Kerala) is one of a few public debates continually referred to as a landmark and as clarifying ground between Sunnis and Mujahids. The debate, which drew together *ulema* from across Kerala into two factions, affiliated with 'reformist' or 'traditionalist' camps, spent almost all of its time discussing issues around *tauheed*, the uniqueness and unity of God. Mujahids had the opening words, and Sunnis were permitted to close the debate. I have access to a full transcript in English, and here I only mention a few points which I draw from that transcript.

As I had expected, Mujahids accuse Sunni traditionalists of engaging in *shirk* when they 'give too much respect' to saints; also stereotypically, Mujahids argue that petitioning saints or holy people for help is equivalent to praying and hence is also *shirk*. Traditionalists also give the usual responses when defending their practices, for example, insisting that at a shrine they are 'praying with' and not 'praying to' a saint. So far, so predictable, so familiar (e.g. Van der Veer, 1992; Mayaram, 1997; Alam, 2008; Zaman, 2010). But what I had not expected to find was that tradition-alists are equally keen to lay accusations of *shirk* at the door of reformists. How can this happen?

Traditionalist and Mujahid scholars engage in highly complex arguments about agency, power and whether power is divisible or not, and – against my expecta-tions, formed from familiarity with academic literatures about the different styles of Islam – both accuse the other side of dilution of God's singular power.

At one point in the public Kuttichira debate, the reformist Mujahids discuss *isthigasa* (help-seeking), and argue that Sunnis who pray and ask help at a saint's shrine are effectively praying not to God but petitioning and praying to the saint, hence committing *shirk*. This is coherent and familiar ground. But – unexpectedly – Mujahids appear in the debate as being also at pains to refute Sunni accusations that they, the reformists, are the ones committing blasphemy, by splitting God's power and giving some of it to human beings. Let me explain how this accusation arises.

At one point, the Mujahid speaker Abdulkhadar has the floor. He insists that power and agency in the world can be split: he points out that if one wants the salt at table, one knows well that it is in the capacity of a fellow diner to pass it, and so, "We don't ask for salt to God, believing that God would come down here with the salt." This reformist speaker insists upon making a distinction between human agency – passing the salt is covered under this – and divine agency – which is, he claims, a quite different type of agency, and is the type which is – blasphemously – being attributed by Sunnis to human and saintly intercessors.

Speaking for the Sunni traditionalists, AP Aboobacker Musaliyar first returns to earlier discussion of *isthigasa*. He reiterates the Sunni traditionalist position that "asking for help" is not "worship," that the two must be understood as distinct, and that petitioning saints is legitimate. He also argues that Islamic injunctions referring specifically to prohibitions on idol-worship are being wrongly extended by Mujahids towards legitimate 'helping' relationships with saints, martyrs, angels, and so on. AP also reiterates that all agency flows from God, even in the most trivial and mundane issues (like passing the salt at dinner), and that it is indeed possible to ask God for anything.

This traditionalist speaker then turns on the Mujahids, "You yourselves have said that medicine is not capable alone to cure – that is what we are saying too." He also points out that God in the Quran itself promises the help of a thousand angels. He insists, "Gabriel helps. Believers and pious people help." He wonders why the Mujahids continue to ignore this and insist that we can only ask God for help.

EK Hassan for the traditionalists then also reiterates that all agency flows from God and repeats the accusation that to differentiate those actions which are within human agency/capability from those actions which go beyond it and into the realm of God, is itself a form of blasphemy. He asks the Mujahid reformists how they can possibly divide power into two types, when the Prophet taught that everything comes from God. Hassan also then reinforces the legitimacy of petition, by moving on to cite verses wherein it is advised that Gabriel, angels and rightful people will be helpers. Hassan ends dramatically:

> We can ask for rain, children and what not. When science progresses, the reason behind everything will be discovered and there won't be any need for God. This is the place where these Moulavis [reformist teachers] are leading us.

AP Abdulkhadar Moulavi (for the Mujahid reformists) responds that ordinary help seeking – *isthigasa* – is an ordinary and natural help, which is legitimate; but that asking God's help is a different type of asking, where a different type of help is expected. It is, he claims, clearly this type of – supernatural – help which Sunnis expect when they conventionally call upon the martyrs of the battle of Badr. AP then proceeds to condemn the common practice of making appeals to martyrs and saints: "Nobody asks help to Muhyudeen Sheikh with a belief that he can help in a natural manner."[6]

In this and similar exchanges, two things are happening: firstly, the traditionalists are calling upon textual authority to back up their claims that petitioning help is permissible and that there are lesser agents who do legitimately help humans; and secondly, traditionalists turn the tables by insisting that it is the reformists who must face the accusation of siphoning power away from its proper source – God – and of committing the dreadful mistake of attributing God's power, not even to the saints

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[6] Muhyudeen is the most popular martyr-saint in Kerala, and the practice of reciting in his name and chanting the *moideen mala*, poetic verses recounting his story, as a form of prayer and petition, was formerly widespread and still endures today in Sunni pockets. The vocative exclamation "Oh! My martyrs of the Battle of Badra!" (Ente daivame! Ente Badringale!) was a common one in pre-reform times, in the same way that vocative "Oh! My God!" is common among Kerala Hindus and Christians.

or to the friends of God who may indeed be accepted as having powers of intercession, but to any ordinary human who is able to "pass the salt" at table.

The issue of sect differences and these endless points and counter points in lengthy and repeated public debates like the classic one at Kuttichira seem to turn almost exclusively on one key issue: whether one is or is not a proper monotheist. The anxiety and issue on both sides then becomes to prove that what one does is not *shirk*. This is an interesting departure from the trend in academic discussions of such debates, which focus upon reformist critique of saint and shrine practices, but do not enter into the complexities of debates; nor consider counter charges. Ethnographers have tended to work with one group and not to focus on interactions across sectarian divisions; and nowhere have I read about reformists being the ones at risk of *shirk*.

In my next analytical move, I note that in *ulema* debates, the relative weight accorded to 'tradition/practice/example' versus 'only the text' emerges as an important preoccupation. Again, I do not have time or space here to give ethnography, and again, it is entirely predictable that over and over, Mujahids present themselves as a revivalist 'back to the text' movement, which then positions Sunnis in an interesting way. On the one hand, because Mujahids claim text as their foundation and accuse Sunnis of *bida* (unlawful extra-textual innovation), Sunnis are placed by this binarised polemic on the side of anti-text, tradition, practice, which then easily (so easily!) can slip into charges of *taqlid*, blind following. At the same time, because 'tradition' in post-independence Kerala has become such an uncomfortable and loaded term, Sunnis (albeit a huge numerical majority), have been forced into the Mujahid modernist frame of action: they are compelled to engage in debate and to defend their path in ways which follow Mujahid affectual and decision-making styles – rational, reasoned argument backed up with example and text. Such styles are perfectly in accord with the modernity which has been vigorously promulgated in Kerala since colonial encounter. Mujahid meetings therefore have more in common with Kerala's mainstream dominant Marxist groupings than it might at first seem. I will show later how one Sunni leader tries to interrupt the flow of hegemonic modernist framing of all practice.

While Sunnis have been forced (since the 1930s) into public debates in which textual authority is given precedence, they have also manage to push past the argument that everything that is Islam can be straightforwardly or simply traced back to or read from texts. In debate, they counter:

> There is no point in boasting that you have recited ten verses. We can't show the verse which prohibits us to marry our sister and to marry another girl . . .

Sunni *ulema* also defend extra-textual referents, and plead for the need for Islam to allow a place for tradition. At times, they also (carefully and discreetly) argue in terms of a 'greater good' and for the imperative this puts on *ulema* to work pragmatically with the needs and existing practice of believers. This point will also become important later when I discuss below more fully the triangle of 'text,' 'tradition,' and 'community.'

In the public Kuttichira debate which I have drawn from above, the Sunnis close in a dramatic way. After a succession of (male) speakers offer point and counter-point, each leader is asked to offer his final words, in the manner of a modernist legal court case summing-up. Mujahids were granted first and penultimate words, Sunnis the last.

In a sudden departure from the tone of the entire 5-day debate – rational argument, point and counter-point, always backed by text in the manner of a court of justice – the Sunni *ulema*'s chief scholar makes his final intervention not by summing up his case, but by way of singing a chanted verse:

> From wherever I am called
> I can answer without my mouth.
> Those who travelled the right path
> Can be awarded paradise.

He continues this shift in tone with bold musings in *sufi* mystic vein: "God's great people, they were made great by God himself. They are God's lovers. Their life and death are equal. . . their *karamath* (miraculous power) lives on after death . . . they can do what they like with these supernatural powers . . . everything is given by God . . . power is limitless."

Summarising, Mujahids like to present themselves as pure scripturalists, claiming that they are returning to the early texts and purging practice of pre-Islamic hangovers and later innovation alike, all of which deviates from what is described in Quran and *hadith*. Mujahids also reject all *fiqh* (Islamic traditions of jurisprudence), another key point distinguishing them from Sunnis and making them recognisable as part of wider Islamic trends advocating a 'return to core texts.' Like Mujahid self-representation, academic representations of Islamic reformism also often present it as scriptural, textual, and as working towards a decontextualised Islam stripped of the hangovers of pre-Islamic culture and of religious innovation alike, guided only by the purity of text (Robinson, 1993). Traditionalists then find themselves, in defending extant and long-standing Muslim practices like saint-calling or shrine festivals, placed as somehow pitted against textual purity and as allowing greater place for community practice than for textual guidance. At the same time, with the rise since the 19th century of modernist styles of public culture, argument, affect, formation of the self and so on, one aspect of which is a stress upon text and reasoned ways of knowing, traditionalists have been forced onto the back foot and find themselves constrained to work within modernist frameworks, of which the public debate which mimics a court-room performance, with rational speech making and textual 'evidence', is a dramatic example.

Muslim religious scholars themselves, like the laity, seem then at first blush to be caught up in an issue of what relative weight to give to tradition and to scripture. But beyond the rhetoric, traditionalists and Mujahids alike make appeals to texts at times, and ignore texts at other moments. And despite a vast academic literature and public representation which would lead us to imagine Mujahids as concerned with *shirk* and Sunnis as the ones dangerously (in Mujahid representation) or liberally and happily (in academic representation) as not gripped by anxieties about *tauheed*, both groups are actually deeply concerned with the problem of *tauheed* and *shirk.* Meanwhile, Mujahid and Sunni *ulema* alike in private interviews during fieldwork do not proceed by the sort of reasoning evident in their public debates, but instead talk in terms of pragmatics, about how best to gather people to them. There is then a tacit recognition on both sides of the importance of practice and community; please continue to hold this point in mind, as I continue to disrupt the text vs tradition binary.

I have to complexify the common representation which would pit the Mujahid = textualist rationalists against Sunni = traditionalists, as I am reminded of Simon Coleman's discussions of the ways in which evangelical Christians relate to the Bible (1996). The importance evangelicals give to Bible, as foundational and opposed to tradition, leaves them committed, for sure, to textualism but also to a sense of the power of the Word. Coleman discusses ways in which evangelicals understand God's Word as an active, agentive force on its own, beyond human agency, and ways in which they expect to see it intruding into presentations and discussions, working in miraculous ways beyond rational discussion to change the heart of the listener (cf. Keane, 2008). Holding tightly to textualism is not then, I am arguing, necessarily what is at the root of Mujahid rationalism; it is more likely Kerala's modernist formal-legalist (and often Marxist) public culture which inflects the Mujahid religious aesthetic.

Let us think now a little more about the ways in which social groups ally themselves with 'text' and/or 'tradition' and the ways in which tension arises over which of the pair should be used as a guide for ultimate arbitration, via a detour into Christian histories. This will lead us to an unexpected place.

The 16th-century Christian Protestant reformation was, of course, about events such as Martin Luther's calling for *solo scriptura* (only Scripture) – a greater reliance on scripture and a rejection of existing tradition, which encompassed such factors as the institution of the papacy, the granting of indulgences, saying masses for the dead, and so on. In 1520 Martin Luther burnt the Pope's writ against him (the papal bull), and named the Pope as the Anti Christ, the demonic figure who appears in the last book of the Bible. The violence and force of this accusation can hardly be communicated (attributed to Martin Luther). Muslim reformist zeal, which arouses such deep repugnance among so many commentators, appears pretty mild when placed alongside many statements of Christian Protestant reformers: "I feel much freer now that I am certain the pope is the Antichrist", or "Reason is a whore, the greatest enemy that faith has" (also variously attributed to Martin Luther).

Christian clergy and lay people alike still commonly understand and frame the distinctions between Catholic and Protestant as covering issues such as the possibility or impossibility of intercession, the extent of the power granted to religious

specialists and officials, the place of ritual in one's religious life and how it is to be understood in relation to internal intentionality, the status and importance to be given to founding texts, and so on – all very familiar ground to Christians and Muslims alike, then. For now, I want simply to note that all of these discussions down the years since the Reformation – lay, academic, theological – have generally been rooted in the question of where lies the ultimate arbiter in Christian religious matters and the proper guarantor of truth and legitimacy: the text (Protestant) or the tradition, as passed on from the Church's founding fathers down through Pope and clergy (Catholic), via various Church councils and proclamations.

Now, the Catholic Church's momentous Vatican II conference (1963–5) and its eventual proclamation *Dei verbum* (the word of God) was about overturning the Catholic privileging of tradition over scripture, which had been doxic to the extent that tradition was, in pre-Vatican II Catholic theology manuals, seen as independent and not requiring any scriptural grounding; this position had hitherto been understood and justified as an allegiance to the continuity of the living church and a way thereby of ensuring authenticity in practice and spiritual understanding. Vatican II rejected this, and the reformed post-1965 Catholic church has allowed and encouraged a far greater weight to be given to scripture. The Charismatic renewal movement among contemporary Catholics pushes heavily upon this point, and engages in such Protestant-style activities as Bible reading classes, the production of daily lectionaries for the laity and other activities foregrounding the importance of the text (Csordas, 2007). Like Kerala's Sunni Muslims who nowadays engage in public debate justifying their theological positions with reference to texts, the contemporary Catholic church has also made a turn towards a "theology of the Word" (see e.g. Cherbonnier, 1953), previously the preserve of Protestants.

Let me take the next step in my argument, which leads me towards the work of Najeeb George Awad, a theologian of the eastern Christian church.[7] Awad has

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[7] National Reformed Synod of Syria and Lebanon. Choosing an Orthodox Eastern Christian theologian is also part of my rhetorical work of refusing to forget Christianity's 'forgotten lung' (Pope John Paul, n. date) or to pit 'western' Christianity against 'Eastern' Islam. India hosts both global religous traditions from their outset (Visvanathan, 1999; Mosse, 2012; Ho, 2006; Ricci, 2011).

argued that this classic Christian division between scripture and tradition is rooted in misunderstandings of the relationship between *scriptura* and *traditio*, and even of the position of Martin Luther. Luther, while he certainly rejected papal authority as arbiter of theological authenticity, did not by any means reject *traditio* (Awad, 2008). Awad also makes the very important point that Luther rejected outright the possibility of hermeneutics based on individual understandings of *scriptura* and insisted upon the role of the Church in passing on scripture to believers, thereby, we have to note, allowing a strong role to the church and to its traditions (2008: 68). Awad also points out that the very existence of differences between different Protestant sects' interpretations of scripture is due to the contact made by texts with different communities of readers, and by this move, Awad allows in a third pole – community – to the classic binary (2008: 74). Awad's point about there being an unacknowledged third aspect which we need to keep in mind – giving us now a three-cornered interpretive ground of scripture, tradition, and a community – is important.

Returning to Kerala *ulema* debates (exactly as one would predict and expect) Mujahids claim a stance as 'scripturalists' – "We put verses before you . . . we demand more verses from you" – and Sunni traditionalists respond to this with an anti-scripturalist stance which asserts that not all that is right is contained in verses – "There is no point in boasting that you have recited ten verses. We can't show the verse which prohibits us to marry our sister." But the detour into a parallel Abrahamic text-tradition binary and Awad's assessment of it pushes recognition that both sides are actually drawing upon complex configurations, which themselves pull in a combination of appeals: to scripture, to tradition, to contemporary practice, to pragmatic and aesthetic-affectual considerations and to the mysteriousness or the clarity of God's instructions and communications. Assemblages of various human and non-human factors come together temporarily into moments of debate or encounter or decision, to produce positions which then become ossified into objects with power and afterlife, named 'Mujahid' or 'Sunni', and shorthanded as associated with 'text' or 'tradition' (Stausberg, 2010). As Awad argues for the Christian case, the gulf between Muslim sects is more apparent than real. Both sides actually draw upon dynamic

recommendations for practice rooted for authority within a powerful text which, both sides recognise, must never be interpreted individually, but always within the context of a recognised tradition, with tradition necessarily embedded – whether *ulema* disavow this or not – in a contemporary living community who claim to be heirs to it. Just as Christians may imagine themselves as engaged in a struggle to return to the Desert Fathers or perhaps to the early church in their revival movements, but will never actually be able to know – much less replicate – those forms of practice, faith, subjectivity, institutions or community, and will instead produce a contemporary version of a contemporary understanding of early Christianity, so too Islam is necessarily dealing with text and tradition as they appear now to the people who live them today.

The move towards a foundational appeal to a divide between 'text' and 'tradition,' and the production of communities who then imagine themselves as following 'only the text' or opposing this with arguments that 'text alone is not enough' is then not in any way a description of reality but is part of the rhetorical work of difference making and community building. This points towards recent understandings of sect difference as actively and continually produced and performed, as being about the identity work necessary if one is to call oneself 'Sunni' or 'Mujahid', rather than as being rooted in foundational difference or being anchored in actually existing incommensurate differences of doctrine, practice or interpretative method. As Arshad Alam argues, discussions about Islam may at heart be less about Muslim vs. non-Muslim dynamics than about the production of sectarian difference and reproduction of community, a matter of doing the continual identity work which is necessary if one is to be able to pronounce oneself as 'Sunni' or 'Mujahid' (Alam, 2008).

When *ulema* or laity argue and debate, something is clearly being performed: while sectarian stakes were high in the 1930s and 1940s, with families torn apart by disagreement, stone throwing along the road, defections, ostracism and so on, nowadays positions have settled and it is not likely that many – any? – people will leave a public debate convinced by what they have heard that they must change their position and practice. In the post-1970s days, at the end of the Kuttchira debate, the

two sides part, each having stated and re-stated their already well-known positions and brought out into the public square some well-worn arguments. In the extracts above, nobody involved is expecting sudden revelatory change on either side simply as a result of listening to the speeches; the debate is more a matter of enacting difference, of bringing supporters of the two sides together and allowing them to make public display of their difference and of their disdain for each other.

Once again swerving sideways, we can think about how the four great christological councils were enacted (325 Nicea, 381 Constantinople, 431 Ephesus, 451 Chalcedon). These early church councils were public debates which eventually produced orthodoxy and identified heresy with regard to the question of how Christ could be at once 'fully human' and 'fully divine,' and the histories of these debates suggest to us the degree to which they were embedded in communities of practice, who then undertook dramatised public performances and shows of allegiance (Hanson, 2005; Ayres, 2006). Public debates on matters raised by the councils spread, as individual bishops vied to push forward their specific stance, and it seems that these local events were also at least as much about rhetorical flourish and public enactment of a position and show of mass support as they were about any effective attempt to convince waverers to switch sides. Burrus and Lyman write, of 4th centrury councils, "We have evidence of public demonstrations and debates around doctrinal issues . . . Whether the resulting acclamations of consensus were spontaneous or orchestrated is difficult to judge, though it is clear that clerical and doctrinal authority rested to a great degree on popular acceptance" (2010: 21).

The next step in my argument is then to point out that 'Text' and 'Tradition' alike are not here actually signifying what they claim to signify, but are instead being operationalised as indices of community. In this way, my analysis is quite different from many anthropologists, who take on very similar types of material to those which I work with, but who take the debate at face value and also maintain a hard distinction between globalising, 'monolithic' scriptural Islam and local 'lived Islam,' with the academic's usual clear preference for the second, which has been challenged elsewhere (Rao, 2004; de Munck, 2005; Osella & Osella, 2007a). Returning to Caputo's

re-statement of St Augustine's question – "What do I love when I love my God?" (1997), the answer often seems to be, 'a version of myself'. I'll move on in a moment to discuss how some 21st-century emergent theologies are recognising this all-too-human tendency, and seeking to move beyond it.

Ethnographic Interjections of Shirk Talk

I went with Jumailath (26) to visit some cousins living in a small unmodernised house in a working class neighbourhood out of town; the menfolk here are working as unskilled labourers in the Gulf, having escaped irregular and poorly-paid work as auto-rickshaw drivers back home. As we were admiring the baby swinging gently from the roof-beam in his sari-sling, Jumailath yelled out, as if burnt, "What's this??!!" She was pointing to a small thread tied onto the baby's wrist, containing a silver amulet – supernatural protection offered by Thangals, Kerala's Hadrami Sayyids, to whom – predictably – traditionalists offer respect and believe to be endowed them-selves with powers of *barakat* (blessing) or able to call upon a saint's *barakat*, and whom reformists criticise as unscrupulous and unauthorised charlatans. Jumailath's young cousin (19) shyly but defensively said, "It doesn't do any harm." Jumailath, exasperated, turned to me and said, "You see?! This is the new generation, they have no sense. If we do all this superstitious rubbish, then in what way are we different from Hindus? Tell me!"

Razi, from a poor beach-side family, was looking forward to attending the *nercha* (shrine festival). When I asked him what he thought of reformist opposition, he told us, "They say all this is not Islam. I do my *namaaz*, I fast at Ramzan – aren't I a Muslim too?" Razi here is arguing for his right, as a Muslim (i.e. as an irreducible religion-based identity), as a member of Kerala's Muslim community and not a Hindu or Christian, to have some say in what may count as proper 'Muslim' practice.

Imbichibi, an elderly lady who had remained untouched and unimpressed by the reformist waves which had swept through her own household, responded to her niece's teasing and criticisms with the remark: "How can you say that going to see the Thangal is a bad thing? Is he a bad man? No, you know he is not. He is a good man, so how could this be wrong?"

As with Catholic and Protestant, who tend to imagine themselves as incommensurable communities rooted in a fondness for either *traditio* or for *scriptura*, but who actually tread remarkably similar ground and who have to do strong performative work in order to maintain the differences between them, so too, Mujahid and Sunni traditionalists, when we engage them in close interaction, do not appear to be standing on either side of an insurmountable mountain, as their rhetorics – *ulema* and laity alike – would have us believe. They are, indeed, able to engage in public debate exactly because the appeals to reasoning and the terms of authentication are common to both: that sect leaders and scholars can give guidance to laity through appeals to practices which are rooted in a solid community of believers, and which can also often (but not always) be justified by reference to text.

And taking more time to reflect upon the details of the *ulema* debate above draws us into recognising that, while Mujahids claim a stance as 'scripturalists' – "We put verses before you . . . we demand more verses from you" – and while Sunni traditionalists respond to this with a stance which asserts that not all that is right is contained in verses – "There is no point in boasting that you have recited ten verses. We can't show the verse which prohibits us to marry our sister" – actually both sides are drawing in the debate upon complex configurations which pull in a combination of appeals: to scripture, to tradition, to contemporary practice, to pragmatic considerations and to the mysteriousness or the clarity of God's instructions and communications.

We must not then take at face value *ulema* – or anybody else's – claims to be working straightforwardly from a text or a tradition, although such claims are, of course, generally made in good faith. We must complexify our understandings of what is happening when people make critique and debate. In an equally important move, we must also go beyond a modernist perspective which imagines that 'reasoned debate' with textual evidence is actually how theological shifts do proceed – or must proceed. Recent academic trends have emphasised the democratisation of theological debate, as first print and then audio cassettes, DVDs, reading and study groups, and the like spread (Robinson, 1993; Hirschkind, 2006). I wonder if perhaps the effects of these changes is sometimes overestimated and whether at times

too much explanatory power is given to these movements. I also perceive in recent trends in studies of Islam and the 'democratisation of *ijtihad*' arguments (especially evident in the literature on women's religiosity, e.g. Huq, 2008; see review in Tohidi 2003) a privileging of reason which can lead us to overlook embodiment, affect and the ways in which persuasion, shift, debate and difference making may (legitimately) proceed by other means. Attiya Ahmad (2010) has a difficult job, trying to allow a full human complexity into her accounts of the work done by migrant women in the Gulf who adopt Islam, without laying her respondents open to charges (from religious or academic purists alike) of 'instrumentality.' Jumailath's cousin can only try to protest that tying a protective thread "does no harm." Imbchibi tries to protect Keralam's hereditary Hadrami-origin charismatic leader by getting agreement that he is a 'good man.' Razi calls upon agreed markers of Islam to anchor his claim to authentic Muslimness. Practitioners of faith and those writing about it alike have been painted into a corner where it is very difficult to live up to the purist standards set by modernist discourse.

While the Sunnis have been forced by the growth of reformism into the mode of reasoned rational public debate, in which propositions are made and are then backed up by verses, they clearly recognise at heart that God may not speak to humanity using post-Enlightenment styles of communication, nor move in the world accord-ing to rational-logical laws of agency. This returns me to the comments of Nick Lash, a Catholic theologian, about the human tendency to attribute human-like qualities to God: God would hardly, surely, be God, if God proceeded, spoke, acted, behaved, like a human. There is little reason to imagine that God communicates in United Nations-style memoranda and probably every reason to imagine that infinite degrees of interpretive work will always be necessary – and never enough – to discern God's plan and will. Sunnis in their style of argument sometimes reach this place, and they work at times with the grain of the poetic and polysemic nature of the Arabic Quranic language. At the end of the 5-day Kuttichira public debate, when offered his turn to present a summing up of the Sunni case, Sunni leader AP Aboobecker Musaliyar simply breaks into sung verse with absolutely no exegesis or discussion: he simply leaves the verse there for the audience to ponder. He thereby ruptures the

court-room performance of modernist reasoned debate and offers instead a glimpse
of ineffability, mystery and a power which is beyond reason.

> From wherever I am called
> I can answer without my mouth.
> Those who travelled the right path
> Can be awarded paradise.

Despite considerable technical complexity in sectarian debate, and despite the
range of issues which divide traditionalists and reformists, in popular understand-
ing and in personal choice of alignment, it all tends to get stripped down to a single
issue: does what Sunnis do mean that they commit *shirk* or is it misinterpreted as
such by reformists? A complex discussion in the Kuttichira debate about different
types of help, the ultimate agency of God, what – if any – sort of power God gives
to prophets, the differences between the living and dead, and so on, all eventually
became flattened down to just one question: what is your intentionality when you tie
a thread, go to a shrine, call upon a saint, see a Thangal or so on?

In my discussions and interactions with Kerala Muslim laity, a range of issues
are at stake in lay people's reasoning about their particular orientation – social
class, modernity, education, family culture, aesthetics, human needs, how we must
be/how we are different from Hindus, how we are careful not to appear like idol
worshippers, how people misinterpret what we are doing, and so on. In everyday
life, people are (in varying degrees) aware of *ulema* arguments and sometimes
repeat them. But reformist *ulema* preoccupied with avoiding *shirk* also – in private
interviews – frame the matter in terms of wider concerns. Activists and lay people
tightly affiliated with reformism, like the mass of Muslims, also depart from scrip-
ture and reasoned debate in private discussion and interaction, and also draw upon,
in making their own discussions and arguments about *shirk*: social embarrassment;
ethnic/class identity; preoccupations with what is modern; social hierarchies and
status difference; a teleological understanding of religious enlightenment, such that

spiritual maturity of the individual and of the community leads one to outgrow the need for reliance upon saint or shrine and towards an appreciation of *tauheed*. The counter-arguments from activists and lay people affiliated with the Sunni traditionalist faction deny accusations of *shirk* but also, and in a similar manner, draw upon . . . a wider rhetorical and practical background, such as: discourses of spirituality as personal; economies of power; an acknowledgement of the importance of embodied, aesthetic and affectual dispositions in faith practice; an insistence upon the irreducibility of a core 'Muslim' identity; moral evaluations of others' behaviour; intentionality as private and knowable only to God; God as merciful and comprehending of human weakness and needs.

Even when *ulema* positions are brought out by the laity, as when Jumailath scolds her young cousin for having visited a Thangal and obtained a protective amulet, what is indexed by this practice, according to Jumailath, is an insufficient commitment to making oneself clearly separate, as a Muslim, from the Hindu majority which surrounds. The embodied practices of religion are certainly located within theological arguments but, crucially, they are also clearly rooted in concrete communities on the ground, and even if it is theologically perfectly possible to argue that Muslim amulets are not at all similar to Hindu ones, in that the power therein derives from the One God and not some minor godling, or to visit a shrine with the intent of prayer to the One God and not to a saint housed there, still it is the superficial observable apparent similarity of such practice to Hindu practice which makes it, for reformist laity like Jumailath, dangerous and best avoided.[8]

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[8] This has two aspects: firstly, while the position in the eyes of God of the other 'people of the book' in Islam is ambiguous, there is no such ambiguity towards 'idol worshippers,' and one's contemporary Hindu neighbours may dangerously evoke the pre-Islamic pagans and idol worshippers so roundly excoriated in the Quran; and secondly, there is the sociological fact of community difference and of being a beleagured minority in India, which encourages Muslims to protect themselves and police themselves against assimilationism, communal violence and continual overtures by Hindu activists to 're-convert' (Hansen, 1999, 2007; Mohsini, 2011; Gayer, 2012).

Performative Communities

Let me now make another comparative turn, by bringing in discussion of recent developments in Christian theology; this will demonstrate that – as I am by now arguing – understanding all reasoning and action as framed in a performative mode does not – as one might imagine – weaken the *ulema* arguments, as they clearly fear by sticking publicly to 'theology' and purging 'context' out, nor does it in any way discredit *ulema* private discussions of the imperative to consider wider issues as mere 'instrumentalism' on their part.

Butler's work on the ways in which sex/gender works has been taken up amongst those interested in how religion works. Ken Stone offers a short and lucid exposition of Butler's theory and how it is now being extended in contemporary theologies.

> Butler's work explores the possibility that gender, rather than being conceived in a modernist fashion as the social interpretation of stable sexed bodies, is best understood in terms of collective practices that produce perceptions of fixed sexes and genders as performative effects. So too the Bible, often conceived as a fixed object, may be reconceptualised in terms of the collective practices, including conventional modes of scholarly and popular analysis, that produce perceptions of a single, stable Bible as performative effects. Martin argues forcefully that textual meaning is inseparable from herme-neutics and interpretive rhetoric, which take place in specific contexts and under the influence of traditions and interpretive communities (religious and scholarly) . . . Martin's argument [is] that notions about textual agency actually conceal readerly moves. (Stone, 2008: 1)

Within Christianity, out of this performative turn has emerged a new Christian theol-ogy. There are some theologians who are not threatened by Butlerian analysis, but are embracing it and trying to use its insights. Armour, et al. (2006), Bielo (2008), Shults (2014), Stone and many others note the contemporary re-imagining of biblical the-ologies. "For biblical theologies, too, can be reimagined as performative enterprises" (Stone, 2008: 11). The implications of this performative embrace of Butlerian insights are that 'Scripture' here, refers not to some reality lying behind the text (whether in a

reconstructed history or a reconstructed authorial intention), but rather to meanings reached or created "in the performance of Scripture . . . in the enacting of Scripture in particular practices" (Dale Martin, 2006, cited in Stone, 2008: 2.)

To understand how the critical, post-Butlerian framework is being understood by some Christian theologians not as threatening but as eventually allowing for a reinvigorated relationship to religion, let us turn again to Stone, who lays out the extension of Butler into religion as follows:

> I would like to consider the possibility that 'Bible' stands to 'hermeneutics,' here, in something like the same way that 'sex' stands to 'gender' in conventional modern ways of thinking the sex/gender distinction. On the one hand, there is a material entity, 'the Bible,' the existence of which is presupposed in much the same way that sexed bodies are presupposed under the rubric of the sex/gender distinction. On the other hand, there are what we imagine to be 'expressions' of that entity – translations, versions, scholarly and popular accounts – which differ from one another in many ways but are nevertheless usually considered manifestations or interpretations of what is ultimately a substantive foundation in the Bible. Even as some diversity in interpretation is allowed, the assumed stability of the foundation is often used to limit proper expression . . . We might borrow Butler's words . . . and – substituting 'Bible' for 'gender' – reflect upon the possibility that, 'the substantive effect of Bible is performatively produced and compelled by regulatory practices of Bible performance . . . Bible is always a doing . . . there is no Bible identity behind the expressions of Bible; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its effects' . . . Notice that I said 'Bible', here; and not, in this case, 'the Bible'. One implication of a performative account of Bible may be that Bible, like gender, is best understood as something other than a noun. Bible, too, has more to do with doing than with being. (Stone, 2008: 6)

Those who are picking up performativity – be that in mainstream or in feminist, queer and other dissident theological circles – point out that, "Textual meaning is inseparable from hermenutics and interpretive rhetoric, which take place in specific

contexts and under the influence of traditions and interpretive communities religious and scholarly" (Stone, 2008: 2). Within Islam, pluralism is well established and anticipated: Irfan Ahmad (2008) notes wryly how the same *sura* is used by some to support Communism and by Maududi to rail against Communism! Famed contemporary scholars such as Arkoun and Soroush are working to call for 'reformation' and insist upon the right to interpret from different grounds than those holding sway (Soroush, 2000; Arkoun, 2003). There is a gathering wave of female scholars working through processes of *ijtihad* to challenge hegemonic and customary practice which claim Islamic theological grounding (Barlas, 2002; Wudud, 1999; Vatuk, 2013). While contemporary Muslim theologians would perhaps not put it in these terms, arguments from within Islamic theology about contemporary practices of *ijtihad* are perfectly congruent with Butler, in whose terms Quran, as divine revelation, can never be apprehended directly; only 'Quran' – an apperception, approximation, interpretation, limited understanding, can ever be produced here on earth by humans. Analysing the debates between Sunnis and Mujahids as performative events in a Butlerian mode allows us to see not only how each group thereby produces itself as different from the other, but also to appreciate how each group is oriented towards a certain style or set of readerly moves in its own approach to Quran and thereby produces its own 'Quran.'

If 'Quran' and 'Bible' (like 'Body' for Butler) exist only through human apperception, interpretation, representation, and if religious texts (as Bielo [2009] traces out) also structure and produce religious subjectivities in people, then firstly, there can never be a possibility of reaching a pure, authentic interpretation, and, secondly, all people whose religious subjectivities are produced through engagement and interaction with 'Quran' and 'Islam' are part of the process of producing 'Quran' and 'Islam.' New performative critics go much further, in seeking to lay bare the politics by which texts have been interpreted in certain directions and in refusing any notion at all of any possible authenticity, guarantee by way of a revelation of authorial intention or, sometimes, limits to potential future interpretive moves.

If the prospect of emerging feminist Islamic theologies and queer Islamic theologies are too much – right now – for many to bear, just as liberation theologies,

Dalit theologies and queer Christian theologies undoubtedly exist, but are, for some in the church, impossible to understand or accept (Mosse, 2012), then perhaps Awad – himself a preacher and theologian of the National Reformed Synod of Syria and Lebanon – will give some comfort to them. Awad strongly suggests that interpretation is not and can never be a free for all, but must continue to move carefully between the limits and constraints set by existing frameworks. Yip (2005) delineates four strategies of re-reading Islamic and Christian texts among queer subjects, of which only one – the last – is a subjective 'my meaning' positioning. Lash himself – a sympathetic reader of performative theologies who is nonetheless firmly located within the Roman Catholic church – states unequivocally: "The emphasis on responsibility is emphatically not an encouragement to individualism – to myths of 'my' meaning" (Lash, 2007: 3). We are not then on the territory described by Robert Bellah in his 'Habits of the Heart', with Sheila-ism, or the faith which is held on to by Sheila – a totally individualised, asocial and personally crafted mixture of Christian and various new-age beliefs (2007). Awad argues that Martin Luther would be in perfect agreement with contemporary Roman Catholic theologians who argue both that, "Scripture can only function as norm if it is interpreted from within and in terms of the tradition" and that, on the other hand and at the same time, "Clearly, the authority of tradition does not derive from tradition itself, but from Scripture and also from God", even as they argue that "both [*traditio* and *scriptura*] are primarily dependent on God's spirit" (2008: 69). Concluding, Awad insists that *sciptura* and *traditio* are always, in Catholic and Protestant streams alike, in a circular relation of mutual exegesis and support. He urges theologians, in their enthusiasm for the performative turn, to understand that such a turn does not necessarily entail an abandonment of scripture, and is not, as he claims it is sometimes being understood, an 'about turn' towards the pure grounds of 'community', such that any community can claim the right to interpret texts or adopt practices, in their own way, as heir and performers of, and rightful innovators within, a particular 'tradition'. He asks us to work with a triangle, coming close (I note) to a Peircian semiotics, in which we have the referent; the signified; the signifier; and the interpretant, and in which 'interpretant', the particular person who is hearing or reading a signifier, is given weight.

The material-social circumstances of any utterance become not a sidelined 'context' but an intrinsic part of the meaning making (Peirce, 1991).

Conclusion

Butlerian readings of religion understand that structures (texts, traditions, communities) exist which demand coherence and 'readability' in the subjects which they produce. The particular subjectivities which emerge must always signify to others and not merely to an individual; there is an imperative towards readability to others of any particular 'Quran'. As Butler points out, the demands of iterability and citability do also tend to buttress existing tendencies, referring as they do to already completed successful performances, past citations and previous copies; at the same time, the continued production of the abjected 'outside' and the inevitable imbrication of power in practices of citation make it highly likely that feminist, queer and other theological strands being produced by minorities will not easily move into the centre as acceptable 'copies' of that 'original' which can never be grasped/does not actually exist. What is relegated to the outside, as abject, rejected (for Butler, the 'bodies that do not matter', such as the bodies of trans people), then produces the ones that do matter, the normative, the hegemonic, the ones allowed pride of place at the centre. As Stone suggests: "The Bibles produced in the . . . theologies of Eichrodt, Von Rad, and Brueggemann are clearly different from one another, and different yet again from that found in the work of . . . Childs. Each of these produces an 'intelligible' Bible that matters, which also relies on its particular constitutive outside" (Stone, 2008: 11). Dissident communities like anarca-Muslims (Veneuse, 2014) or the queer subjects discussed by Yip all produce (at the moment) 'Qurans' which, from the point of view of the mainstream, decidedly do not 'matter' (Yip, 2005, 2007).

Of course, one might expect many theologians to resist the performative turn and understanding of what they are engaged in doing. Embracing a performative theological understanding opens up even more radical possibilities for interpretation and practice than does the by-now very well-rehearsed argument that greater exposure and Islamic knowledge democratises processes of *ijtihad* (e.g. Huq, 2008; Mirza, 2008; Vatuk, 2013). Crucially, the performative turn disempowers religious

specialists by placing them within the same space in relation to critique as non-specialists, and insists that all critique and commentary is inevitably immanent. While some might be tempted to dismiss such commentators as Amina Wadud – the African American Muslim revert who has controversially led mixed prayers (Wadud, 1999) – as so far removed from global mainstreams of *ulema* thinking as to be hardly worth engaging with, or as insufficiently scholarly in the presentation of her arguments, a performative understanding of theology would offer her a place at the table; not as part of a 'discursive tradition' (Asad, 1986), where she would continue to be judged on the 'authenticity' of her contribution to the conversation, but as a practising 'Muslim' woman who has around her many other 'Muslims', willing and wanting to follow her lead in their practice and understanding of a core sacred text, hence as leader of a performative community which is structured and produced by a 'Quran', and as interpreter of 'Quran' from a particular point of view – <u>which is as valid as any other consensual community's situated interpretation</u>[9].

I conclude by coming full circle here, reiterating that within Muslim traditions, Quran and *hadith* as ultimate authority are supported by the methods of *qiyas* – analogy – and considerations of *ijma* – the consensus of the community. In the summing up speech for the Kerala traditionalists, their leader moves between rational-legal discourse of proposition and proof, the chanting of a mystical passage, and a reference to *ijma*. Esack (1997) points out that "Believers as far back and as authoritative as 'Ali ibn ali Talib, Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law, advised that, 'The Quran does not speak with a tongue; it needs interpreters and interpreters are people'" (Esack, 1993, 1997: 50). Arkoun (2003) makes the same point. A performative understanding of religion is perhaps then already anticipated in the Islamic tradition, unlike the Christian tradition which had been restrained for so long by a narrow focus upon either *scriptura* or *traditio* (as handed down from church hierarchy) – with the third pole of 'community consensus' hidden from sight and not often acknowledged and only recently – as Dalit, queer and feminist theologies

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[9] This would also have interesting implications for the way in which groups such as the Ahmadiya sect are understood.

emerge and come of age – becoming recognised as a proper and legitimate part of processes of interpretation. In the 21st century, the gates of *ijtihad* are open; but, more than this, the appreciation of embeddedness which was long held within and preserved within Muslim traditions is struggling its way into wider recognition.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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