

A Prolegomena to an Emancipatory Reading of Islam

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Abstract

Despite the fact that Islam is approached from so many different angles and interpreted in ways which rarely cohere with one another, all these readings can be subsumed under two groups: ahistorical and historical approaches. The ahistorical approach generally abstracts Islam from its context, treating it as a free-floating signifier which remains the *same* in all contexts of its use. According to this approach there is only *one* Islam (which is the Islam they identify as the true Islam), and all other readings are deviations. The historical readings approach Islam as being part of the world in which it interacts where history and context play a determinant role in how Islam is understood. A proper understanding of Islam requires not only situating it in its historical context, but also understanding the forces that went into its production, and this is true of both its originating as well as interpretive contexts. According to this approach, Islam is not singular but plural; there is not one but *many* Islams. In this essay I want to problematize the historical approach by problematizing the way they understand *recontextualisation* of Islam. I argue that important as the historical reading is, to have an emancipatory reading of Islam we have to move beyond it.

Keywords: Islam, Islamic feminism, contextualisation of Islam, interpretation, Žižekian reading, emancipatory reading of Islam.

It is a truism that the Koran can be interpreted in variously different ways, but in broad outlines we can classify all interpretations of the Koran into two categories: a) ahistorical and b) historical. In the following I will explain the general modality of each of these readings, and why they cannot provide the basis for an emancipatory reading of Islam. It is suggested that a new reading of Islam is needed, a reading which is neither a synthesis of the two previously identified readings nor necessarily an overcoming of them. This new reading need not negate other readings, but simply provides an alternative to the existing interpretations and which manages to avoid the problems that the previous readings raise but are unable to solve with the methodologies that they follow. I argue that Islam needs a Žižekian type of reading which reduces a movement, or a doctrine, to a radical cut that it constitutes with what comes before it and which creates a new subjectivity that is thoroughly historical, but centred on an unhistorical evental point. I shall make the case that there is a place

for this Žižekian reading of Islam, a reading which has the potential to dislocate Islam from the comfort zones into which it has fallen but also has the possibility of showing the inherent capacity of Islam to be a truly emancipatory movement or, at least, to provide some basis for an emancipatory direction which Muslim politics ought to take. This type of reading is necessary, I argue, because Islam today exists in a state of intellectual and political poverty. In light of the current developments of sectarianism which has spread all over the Middle East and the Muslim world, the historical and ahistorical ways of reading have so far not been able to provide a theoretical way out of the sectarian impasses. I have no doubt that the current sectarian resurgence in the Middle East has nothing to do with the way these readings present Islam, that the immediate causes are to be sought somewhere else, namely, in the two wars that were waged against two Muslim states, the collapse of the state in Iraq and Syria, the spread and dissemination of the reactionary Wahhabi ideology from Saudi Arabia, the failure of the Arab spring, all kinds of imperialistic interventions in the internal affairs of the Muslim countries – which, incidentally, shows their utter dependency on these same Western countries, and the lack of basic liberties all over the Middle East. But although the immediate causes are not to be found in the way Islam is interpreted, it is *symptomatic* that almost all expressions of contemporary Islam are antithetical to any emancipatory spirit that has characterized the Prophetic Islam. Islam is mired in sectarianism, and this sectarianism, dormant as it might have been prior to the last decades, has always been there as an undercurrent of the Islamic thought. The fact that the fight against the foreign invaders and imperialism take the form of reactionary politics to the extreme, and that Islam is constantly used to justify these forms of reactionary politics, is a cause for concern. It should be possible to have an emancipatory politics that is neither alien nor antithetical to the spirit of Islam; that Islam can develop, on the one hand, a philosophy of resistance against invaders, colonialism, and imperialism and, on the other hand, that it promotes the values of inclusiveness and liberty for all. Thus far we have only seen how resistance movements against the foreign invaders have turned oppressive and inwardly sectarian: the Hezbollah's military involvement in a war waged against the Sunni Muslims in Syria exemplifies the trend generally. These movements that seek inspiration from Islam and even speak in its name are generally reactionary movements that do not recognize the equal rights of all people who live under their control and thus prevent the development

of Islam in a direction that is, at least, conducive to the spirit of equality and liberty for all.

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The *ahistorical* reading is one that detaches Islam from its historical context. This reading usually encompasses traditional, orthodox and canonized readings. Even when it attempts to historicize the content of the Book, like when it employs the genre of the *asbab al nuzul* (the occasions of the revelation) it does so only to reinforce an image of the Book itself as ahistorical, as standing outside history but capable of being brought down to earth from the height of the sphere of ideality. It is an image that is frozen in space and time, and then dragged into our time. When this is taken literally, it produces bizarre scenarios of fundamentalisms that seek to implement the realization of Islam of the prophet in *to* in radically different circumstances. Since these images are usually rigid and negotiation with them is reduced to minimum, violence becomes constitutive part of its horizon. Even when violence is not used, the threat of it, structures its horizon. Insofar as we remain within this horizon, the possibility of reform or change is minimal. What is crucial here is that this hermeneutics is completely oblivious to the historicity of its model, the prophetic model. Historicity is the unthought-of and even the unthinkable dimension of this type of reading. Islam assumes the form that it took in the prophet's time; its first materialization is the only authentic (original) materialization. Muslims are obliged to follow not only the principles that are embodied in the first materialization, but the form must be, of necessity, adopted and emulated. This interpretation speaks in terms of true and false Islam, of deviation and true guidance, and in this binary pairing the first terms are always the privileged terms, the form of the salvation history. We are caught in a battle of good and evil, of those who try to live up to the prophetic Islam and those who deviate from it. Islam is on one side and the world is on the other. This does not at all mean that there is no place for the other in this grand scheme of things. There is, only that it must be coherent with the ahistorical model of the prophetic society. Reform for them has nothing to do with thinking proper, but with reconstructing the prophetic model: the best times are always behind us.

In contrast to this there is the *historical* model, which historicizes the prophetic model. This emphasizes the historical dynamism that led to the creation of the prophetic model, the socio-historical conditions

that enabled it, but also its historical limitations. It refuses to idealize and to fetishize the first model, thereby historicizing its expressions. Historicity plays a pivotal role in this methodology. Broadly, the historical model can be divided into two categories. First, there are readings that historicize the understanding of the prophetic society, revealing the purely human element to the equation. Here, however, The Book is shielded from a direct historicization of its content. Islamic feminism embodies this tendency more than any other form of progressive reading. Historicization of the content of the Book comes in through a back door, in unacknowledged interventions, through an assimilation of the content of the Book entirely into interpretation. This gives a space from which to criticize the ahistorical reading directly, but also indirectly to criticize the content of the Book. In the hands of Islamic feminism the Koran exists only in interpretation. This is not an entirely consistent position however, for should that have been the case their readings of the Koran would be an exercise in idleness. They want to maintain that their readings are, if not the true readings, at least the truer readings that are there. Islam finally found its expression, its ultimate expression, in their readings which they present as being embodiments of the intent of the Book. This raises several difficulties with regard to the voice of the Koran: what becomes of it? Does it have any voice at all, and if so, how do we recognize it? How do we know that we are in contact with that voice? Once we ask these methodological questions it becomes obvious that we have to rely on the first prophetic expression of Islam to determine whether the distinctive form that Islam took was necessary or merely a contingent expression of the prophetic movement. Islamic feminism does not have a good hermeneutics to settle these questions. Unlike the traditional, ahistorical approach which seemingly effaces its own voice entirely, the historicist methodology cannot recognize an othering voice, a dissenting voice, and a contradictory voice to its own voice. As a consequence, they have “developed interpretive techniques and complex maneuvers to try to prove that, in spite of what the text appears to mean, the Qur’an somehow coheres with our notion of gender egalitarianism. This strategy is inadequate and at times disingenuous, as it obfuscates the inclinations of the Qur’an that may be irreparably nonegalitarian from our contemporary perspective.”¹ This is problematic insofar as it commits the same mistake of which it accuses its opponents, namely,

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Hidayatullah 2014, p. 151.

of identifying its own voice with the voice of the Book. To make sense of the return to the Book they have to acknowledge not only as a matter of faith, but also methodologically the irreducible otherness of the Book, which traditional scholars always signified with “God knows best”. “God knows best” leaves the space of dissent, error, misrecognition, of minimal difference between the interpreter and the thing interpreted open; it left open the possibility of a radical restructuring of their own understanding. The gap between the Book and the interpreter could never be closed, for otherwise we would be dealing only with interpretations and would never find a way to reach the otherness of the text. In that case we are before an abyss that can never be crossed and forever losing the Book.

The other segment of the historicist reading is willing to go a step further and historicize the content of the Book itself. What is more, it proposes that the sources of the sharia are not the Koran and the Prophetic Sunnah, but its interpretations. In contrast to the timid approaches of Islamic feminism regarding the historicization of the Book, this approach is bold and courageous and also less dogmatic. They are not so much reading the book from the angle of faith as from the angle of the available historical data, but also from an examination of the way the Book has been interpreted. Arkoun² has convincingly shown in his reading of the verses of the woman’s inheritance how, through a use of a methodological tactic known as *al nasikh wa al mansukh* (the process of abrogating -suspending, qualifying, restricting- a verse by another, later verse), traditional/canonical interpretations have unabashedly subordinated the Book to their own time’s imagery. This approach affirms that there is already intervention directly within the Book and it is this intervention that the canonical interpretation tries to render invisible. Islamic hermeneutics has de facto performed a radical historicization of the Book, though it was never able to theorize it, to make it a possible in thought. The Islamic school of rational and speculative theology that flourished in Basra and Baghdad, the Mutazilites (8-10th century AD) is the only school to have broached the subject with any seriousness, but even theirs will remain limited and obliterated by the dominant forces. Historicity would be rendered impossible-to-think but also an area fraught with danger, for the Word of God was so completely subjected to the ruling methodologies that Islam

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Arkoun, 1993.

and interpretation became one and the same thing. God's voice became the voice of the ruling elites. God would become an institutionalized God, a God who had forgotten his initial mission to free the oppressed and the poor. This transformation is achieved by an astute political talent that the prophet had gained in his struggle for liberation and collective emancipation.

The necessity of recontextualizing Islam

If conservatives rely on a sacred time to interpret God's speech, they rely on a view of secular (historical) time to elevate some Qur'anic Ayat over others and also to declare the prophet's community paradigmatic. Ignoring the doctrine of the Qur'an's universalisms and transhistoricity, which they themselves profess, conservatives want instead to adhere to the contexts and "unicultural perspective" of the Prophet's community, a view that "severely limits its application and contradicts the stated universal purpose of the Book itself" (Wadud 1999, 6). Moreover, instead of conceptualizing the Qur'an's universalism in terms of its ability to be read anew by each new generation of Muslims in every historical period (recontextualized), conservatives canonize readings of it generated over a thousand years ago in the name of a sacred history and historical precedent (as represented by classical Tafsir, the Ahadith, and Ijma'). They thus end up with a historical defense of the sacred/universal even as they refuse to accept (at least, formally) a historicizing understanding of it³.

In this admirable passage Asma Barlas, the author of one of the foundational texts of Islamic feminism, has succinctly summarized the predominant methodology followed by conservatives who treat Islam as a free-floating signifier, unconstrained by history and context and, at the same time elevate into a fetish the first Muslim generation. The first generation is treated as the only normative and the only true embodiment of Islam, people with super-human qualities absolutely devoted to God and His prophet. Their understanding of Islam and the form that Islam took during the prophet's time is *the* form of Islam. This Islam is above and beyond history, affecting everything and paradoxically affected by nothing; that cultures and circumstances should accommodate themselves to this Islam. In one word, Islam

³ Barlas, 2002, p. 52.

is unchangeable.⁴ Conservatives do not acknowledge that Islam is a part of the cultures to which Muslim people belong and it cannot be separated from it except arbitrarily. It adapts itself as it makes the traditions and cultures adapt to it. It is a two way process which make Islam and cultures submerge into a unity, form a tradition, which then gives meaning to those who adhere to it. Like any other doctrine it is subordinated to, mediated by, and lives through interpretation, which is undertaken by fallible, prejudiced, culture-bound, one-sided, and imperfect human beings. It is in constant dialogue to secure and play a role with the cultures that respect its moral and legal sanctions⁵.

Despite the patent fact that Islam is in constant flux, subjected to so many contradictory definitions, conservative Muslims still view it as a monolithic, timeless and ahistorical, if not downright anti-historical.⁶ There are many reasons for this immunity to change and social adaptation, but they need not concern us here. I want, however, to problematize Barlas' critique of the traditional interpretation, which she believes has contributed not only to misinterpreting Islam but also

⁴ "What do you mean by saying that the laws should be subject to the needs of the time. If the laws obey the times, then who should the times obey? [...] That would imply that the laws should follow the wishes of the people. But one of the functions of the law is to control and conduct society. [...] Humanity is capable of moving forward, or veering to the right or the left or stopping and regressing. [...] *This free will means that humanity is capable of making many mistakes. [...] This is precisely why we must not be subjected to the will of the times. We must rely on absolute values. [...] We have faith in and rely absolutely on the knowledge that our series of laws and practices are eternal. [...] We regard religion as an absolute and independent of the economics and political circumstances of the time*" [Emphasis added]. Ayatollah Morteza Mottahari quoted in: Afshar, 1998, p. 104. See also: Al-Buti, 1998.

⁵ It gives a completely wrong impression to say that Islam should be historicized: how else can one understand Islam but as being historical. No matter how abstractly or timelessly it is thought to be, its historical character cannot be separated from it without at the same time misunderstanding the nature and the objective that it sought to achieve. Interpreters, however, must be aware that the 'text does not stand alone, it does not carry its own meaning on its shoulders, it needs to be situated in a context, it is theory laden, its interpretation is in flux, and presuppositions are here as actively at work as elsewhere in the field of understanding. Religious texts are no exception. Therefore their interpretation is subjected to expansion and contraction according to the assumptions preceding them and/or the questions enquiring them'. Soroush, 1998, p. 244/251.

⁶ A Moroccan writer, 'Abd al-Kabir al-'Alawi al-Madghari in his book (1999), *Al-Mar'ah bayna Ahkam al-Fiqh wa al-Da'wah ila al-Taghyir*, writes, with respect to Muslim women, the following: "We say that [the position of women in Islam is absolutely different and incomparable to any known society of the past, present, or even the future] because we absolutely believe that what Islam brought, as such, is a new recreation of a woman as a human being in a way which has no equal neither before Islam nor after its advent. This model and new creation which Islam came with, and gave meaning to woman's existence, soul and significance to her being, features to her images, and limits to her sanctity, is unique to Islam. No other civilization neither in the past nor present could have come with the like. Therefore it makes no difference whether woman had any position or not in earlier civilizations; her position in Islam is completely new... *It is an outstanding, unchangeable and perennial model which remains unaffected by people's thoughts, ideas, cultures and their visions of things*", p. 15. Emphasis added.

using the Koran itself to suppress ideals of gender equality, and, we may add, the ideals of equality in general. In her critique, traditional Islam is still being explained and interpreted in accordance with the rules of the classical/historical methodology, rules that have been devised by the scholars of the first Islamic centuries⁷. These rules are regarded sacrosanct, beyond any discussion or criticism. The scholars who devised the rules and methodologies of interpretation of Islam (*usul al fiqh*) 'were able to replicate the Prophet's own methodology because of their proximity in real time to him and to the first Muslim community'.⁸ Hence, Islam must be approached accordingly. Any attempt to modify or change these rules of interpretation is considered an attack on Islam and sarcastically ridiculed⁹. History and philosophy of modern hermeneutics has yet to take its place in the corpus of Islamic studies¹⁰.

However, does this critical approach not involve its own aporias and contradictions? Let's read Barlas again. She says, "Ignoring the doctrine of the Qur'an's universalisms and transhistoricity, which they themselves profess, conservatives want instead to adhere to the contexts and 'unicultural perspective' of the Prophet's community, a view that 'severely limits its application and contradicts the stated universal purpose of the Book itself' (Wadud 1999, 6)". How can this transhistoricity of the Book be translated into anything other than the model society founded by the prophet himself? Is it realistic to propose that the model society founded by the prophet is historically not paradigmatic but contingent, and that the Koran must be recontextualized in each historical period? But how? "In terms of its ability to be read anew by each new generation of Muslims in every historical period (recontextualized)" answers Barlas. But neither Barlas nor other Islamic feminists have provided a detailed hermeneutics that could make such a project of recontextualization possible. One can hardly ignore that the prophet's society was transformed by the teachings of the Book and that it extensively relied on the Book's instructions to regulate social interactions between people. The

7 McAuliffe, 1998.

8 Barlas, 2002, p. 51.

9 Al-Buti, 2006.

10 Al-Azm, 1997 & 1981.

Book was utilized to consolidate the new emerging frontiers of the prophetic society and the emergence of the new ethical subject in relation to the prophetic code of conduct. The new ethical subject did not simply conform to the moral and religious precepts of the Book but was created by those norms and precepts. The new ethical subject in a fundamental sense was the embodiment of the norms that were introduced by the emergence of Islam. Without this assumption Islam's rapid success becomes mysterious. Through the Islamic practices and rituals, followers were transformed and transubstantiated into a new being. These practices have helped to create and institute the distinct ontological horizon and self-understanding of Islam which became visible for the first time in the prophet's time. The prophet's society under his supervision was an actualization of those principles and rules of conduct to be found on the Book. Referring back to the Koran for its recontextualization anew, in all probabilities, would produce a society similar, in moral outlook, to that founded by the prophet. The differences would be minimal and only quantitative. What route, then, should the new readings follow to make its recontextualization possible?

Moreover, speaking of recontextualization implies that the content of the Book, if any, has not been bound by the limits of historicity and its discursive production. Only its understandings, that of the prophet included, have history. On what bases does this division of historicity of the text and its interpretation depend? Presupposing that the Koran is transhistorical in its character or contains some primordial truths, can we recontextualize them by a pick and choose methodology, by giving certain verses priority over others, that is, we choose arbitrarily from the Koran what fits our situations and discard what is out of place in our contexts? Or by emptying its content to refill it with what Muslims consider appropriate to them? In this case we have the reversal case of the Koranic process of transforming society. The Koran as Islam, in transcending its immediate context out of which it emerged, posited its own context, generating it from within its theoretical vision and a set of practices, thus making possible to apply its norms. It opened a new field. It was not passively shaped by its contextual location, though it was inserted in that context and formed in response of the same, but it created the context and the field where its game was going to be played. This means that the content of the Book cannot be separated from the context it created and was a response of, because its content *is* the context of its application and the newly emerged religious and

ethical subject. The context, as it is, is included and signified in the content of the Book. This newly opened field is also the limit and the deterrent of the purely ideological and idiosyncratic interpretations. That is one reason why conservatives cannot be faulted without falling into their trap. One therefore must insist on the non-detachability of the content from its inclusive context for the Koran to make any sense at all. The context of the Koran and its interpellated subjects, even if they never fully coincide with the content, are a product of its “theoretical”, “ethical” and “ideological” perspectives and investments; content and context stand in an asymptotic relationship to each other.

The separation of the content from its context projects an element of extreme arbitrariness on the community created by the prophet, treating it as a pure contingency which relied on the social dynamism of its surroundings, and which can be substituted for another one in another place and at another time. In other words, there was nothing particularly normative about the first Muslim community. Is not Barlas making the Koran an absolute referent, a transhistorical universal which in order to function as such must, in a significant sense, be empty? We end up with a necessarily empty Book which is carved with a new context each time in order to be inserted into it. The new context determines the meaning of this empty universal, whereas the Koran supposedly determined its context by its religious meaning and worldview. Meaning and context is another version of the content and form dyad, they cannot be separated without both of them disintegrating or vanishing. It is obvious that the separation of the content from its context allows the interpreter to find some deeper meaning behind or beneath the literal meaning or truth. It allows her to “distinguish between the inner true meaning of the [Koran] (accessible to us today through philosophical analysis) and the mythical, imaginary, narrative mode of its presentation as conditioned by the immature state of humanity in the period when the [Koran] was written”.¹¹ This reading, as Žižek notes, misses the “level of form as such: the inner necessity of the content to assume such a form. The relationship between form and content is here dialectical in the strict Hegelian sense: the form articulates what is repressed in the content, its disavowed kernel – which is why, when we replace the religious form with the direct formulation of its “inner” content, we feel

11 Žižek, 2004, p.76. Although I quote from Žižek, Arkoun would easily lend his voice to this position. Žižek however, opposes it.

somehow cheated, deprived of the essential”.¹² While Barlas says that conservatives are led back to the historicity of the first community that they reject by a different route, she is led back to an ahistorical view of the Koran by yet another route. She knows very well about the historicity of the Koranic discourse but in her writings she acts as if the Koran has not been bounded by the historicity of its discourse. So Barlas makes it seem that, after all, conservatives got it right even if for the wrong reasons.

Islam, of course, has to be situated within its context of production just like the Muslims’ understanding and practices have to be placed in their own contexts. This, however, cannot be done at the expense of Islam’s provided context, its own ontological, ethical and hermeneutical horizon and the principles of constituting and interpellating Islamic ethical and political subjects. The landmark achievements of the prophet are readily apparent to whoever is familiar with the historical landscape of the pre-Islamic society and the formative period of Islam. Islam in a profound sense constituted an ontological, epistemological and social break with the context which gave birth to it out of its numerous internal contradictions, impasses and aporias. Islam’s break with its own environment by either reshaping the customs or breaking off completely with them cannot be seen but as an attempt to refashion human beings from within a new philosophy of life. This could be achieved, in praxis, not only by transforming the traditions but by transforming the human beings and instilling in them a new horizon from where they could rethink the old form of life, and which could not but appear as chaotic and oppressive. Because Islam is not only an abstract doctrine, it provided its followers with a general ethical guidelines, a way of life from where the doctrines and practices were seen as fully intelligible, if not the only intelligible form of life. The newly acquired “epistemological certainties” enforced by the advent of Islam and the break with its past, were not only supported by the existing contingent tribal mercantile economy and nomadic pastoralism. They, in addition, in a kind of circular determination, supported the newly emerging order. One could not exist without the other. The new game was not only contingent on the outside cultural conditions, but it conditioned the culture by providing a space for playing the game as well as some rules

12 Žižek, 2004, p. 76/7.

for how to play the game.¹³

The historicity of the Koran discourse and its interpellated subjects must not be lost when interrogating the context provided by the Koran. The Koran indeed made a break, constituted its own modernity, but even this is historical, situated in history and, as such, limited - which means that there is a need to go certain beyond its constitutive horizon. Thus the principle of the historicity when applied to the Koran means that its own worldview is bounded by the shift it constituted from the pre-Islamic period and the larger historical unfolding of history, part of which, indisputably, is the Koran.

A historical reading of the Koran must be willing to admit that the Koranic content and context is what (and how) the prophet's generation understood and applied. Islam understood historically and situated within its own context will, in all likeliness, reproduce itself along the lines of the prophet's community. The re-inscription of the Koran into another context, a context that it has not assisted in creation, will produce distorted readings and misapplications. Putting the Koran in such a context and demanding that it provide normative justifications for the believers' conduct is a function which the Koran cannot perform successfully, because it would be subordinated to a context not of its own creation. This is an Islam without its kernel, its own context, an Islam without Islam.

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13 The verses that speak about the prohibition of alcohol (*al-Khamr*) (219:2; 4:43; 5:90/1) best exemplify how the Koran created its own context even if triggered by outside stimuli. In a specific sense, the Koran was a response to its own questions and the problems it raised, to the failures to see through the consequences of its own questions. Most, if not all, of the Koran can be explained through this inner context. Thus, I think, there is little to be gained from explaining the Koran away contextually. That is, for example, the woman's inheritance is half that of man can be explained by referring to the context of the Koran's origination: she was completely deprived of inheritance and the Koran granted her the half of what the man inherits. This approach strips the Koran of any vision of its own: it followed no eventual rules, principles or guidelines of its own but simply mirrored the reality of its own context. It saw women had no right to inheritance, felt pity for them and granted them some rights. This approach does not tell us anything about the Koran's vision of femininity or masculinity, for instance. It simply assumes that it had no vision. And if one tried to clarify that vision one runs the risk of being accused of pursuing an outdated essentialist approach. However, there is nothing essentialist about it. It simply elucidates the epistemic and hermeneutic frame for a certain view. If we say that the Koran sanctions different modes of behaviour for man and woman does this mean that we are espousing false essentialism? I can hardly add my voice to this caricature of essentialism. Essentialism is a view which holds that things, persons or people are made up of unchangeable essences, a set of characteristics which remain the same in all possible worlds. Now, if I say that "women are equal to men", and you report and interpret my claim, you cannot be accused of espousing an essentialist view about my views. You can interpret them as saying that I hold the claim to be true in an essentialist manner which could be true or false depending on the view I hold or you can adopt my view as yours and defend it in essentialist terms which, again, may or may not be my view. But these are two different things which should not be confused.

That is the reason why the truth of Islam is none other than the experience of Medina, an experience that with the rapid expansion of Islam became more and more difficult to hold onto. This insufficiency explains the rise of hadith and the new schools of jurisprudence. The Koran on its own proved insufficient and unable to absorb the rapid expansion of its, by now, decontextualized doctrines. Because the individual and the community as was shaped in Medina was historical through and through, the Koran cannot be viewed but through its workings, historically, while its founding act, the revelation, must be inserted in history through connecting it with the historical reality it helped to shape. The act of revelation is, in itself, of transhistorical value, since in all its radicalness, the decision to transform a society for better can be reclaimed without directly implicating the content as inseparable, as it is, from its own context.¹⁴ The Koran is, of course, there for everybody, it is there to give hope to the unjustly treated, signifying that a change is possible, a better world can exist. But one would radically undermine the Koran's function if it understood this hope or guidance to be hidden somewhere in the Koran or in between its lines. The transhistorical truth of the Koran is the *struggle* for justice. Justice creates its own context, its own conditions of applicability but it is not determined by, even if it is a response to, the context it is trying to modify. It becomes possible only after a *decision* to alter and suspend the existing norms and the context that sustains the unjust norms, for an act, equivalent to the act of the revelation, to posit its own presuppositions, its own context. This is what the prophet did and this is what should be followed and repeated, "to regain the creative impulse"

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14 Žižek's Hegelian reading can be of help here: first we isolate Islam's key breakthrough, then we deconstruct it, analyzing its necessary inconsistency to demonstrate how it necessarily missed the key dimension of its own breakthrough, and finally, in order to do justice to it, one must move beyond it. Žižek, 2014, p. 33.

of his act but not the results of his act.¹⁵

The prophetic decision can be *repeated* to create better societies and individuals, to fight injustice, corruption, oppression, and all ills that any society at a given time and place is faced with. This is done not by another recontextualization of the Book. On the contrary, it is done by avoiding it. It is not a matter of *ijtihad*, but of *suspending* the use of the Koran as a manual in the contexts that bear no relation to it, unless of course the first materialization of Islam is considered the only authentic achievement, while others are merely derivatives of it, in which case, all later historical achievements must be redefined in terms of the model of the prophetic society - this is what fundamentalism does. The mistake that adherents of both interpretations make is that they still believe it is possible to be guided by the Koran in the modern world. Conservatives remain incapable of providing inclusive methodology that would take into account the historical distance that separates the modern Muslim from the society the prophet was struggling to create, under radically different socio-economic conditions. Their ahistoricity (the ahistorical approach) is a real problem, because it does not let the new emerge, and when it emerges it is incapable of making its own ground. The Contextualists similarly believe that the Koran offers guidance in the modern world, from which springs the idea of recontextualizing it. What both approaches have in common is the belief that the Koran

15 Žižek, 2004, p. 12. I would like to quote here a brilliant passage from this work of Žižek as it bears *direct* relevance to the issue under discussion. Žižek writes apropos of Deleuze's understanding of revolutions as they "turn out historically and people's revolutionary becoming". Žižek writes, "Becoming is thus strictly correlative to the concept of REPETITION: far from being opposed to the emergence of the New, the proper Deleuzian paradox is that something truly New can *only* emerge through repetition. What repetition repeats is not the way the past "effectively was" but the *virtuality* inherent to the past and betrayed by its past actualization. In this precise sense, the emergence of the New changes the past itself, that is, it retroactively changes not the actual past –we are not in science fiction- but the balance between actuality and virtuality in the past... Let us take a great philosopher like Kant. There are two modes to repeat him. Either one sticks to his letter and further elaborates or changes his system, as neo-Kantians (up to Habermas and Luc Ferry) are doing, or one tries to regain the creative impulse that Kant himself betrayed in the actualization of his system (i.e., to connect to what was already "in Kant more than Kant himself", more than his explicit system, its excessive core. There are, accordingly, two modes of betraying the past. The true betrayal is an ethico-theoretical act of the highest fidelity: one has to betray the letter of Kant to remain faithful to (and repeat) the "spirit" of his thought. It is precisely when one remains faithful to the letter of Kant that one really betrays the core of his thought, the creative impulse underlying it. One should bring this paradox to its conclusion. It is not only that one can remain faithful to an author by way of betraying him (the actual letter of his thought); at a more radical level, the inverse statement holds even more, namely, one can only truly betray an author by way of repeating him, by way of remaining faithful to the core of his thought. If one does not repeat an author (in the authentic Kierkegaardian sense of the term), but merely "criticizes" him, moves elsewhere, turns him around, and so forth, this effectively means that one unknowingly remains within his horizon, his conceptual field", p. 12/3.

can be utilized as a normative source. They both subject the Book to manipulation and intrigue, particularly when the Book espouses a radically different view.

It is possible to speculate how would the Koran have responded to our problems had it been in our situation, but the answers we will be giving are still *our* answers. One cannot, therefore, proceed to recontextualize the Koran prior to decontextualizing it from its matrices of domination, the latter being inscribed on the former. In order to recontextualize the Book one must first repress its original context in order to free the content therein. Because such a separation is *not* possible, except on the level of very general principles, without destroying its content, the recontextualization issue cannot even be raised, not if the interpreter is troubled by this delicate issue and has an understanding of its workings. In that case one retains an illusion of Islam and holds it as truth unaware that it is only an illusion. The (social, historical, cultural, linguistic) context of the Koran not only renders God's Word relevant¹⁶ but the relevance of the God's word is in the context itself. Outside that context Islam is anything but Islam, since the text can be made to speak contradictory things¹⁷ or the interpreter can project any meaning that serves some ideological interests. Islam is able to reproduce itself not despite of, but because it contains its context within the text -"enabling us to understand properly a given historical situation"¹⁸- in a manner that one cannot speak of Islam without imagining a certain, real or imaginary, context to it. The containment of the context within the text is both the condition of the possibility and impossibility of its "recontextualization". By the condition of possibility I mean that outside its context Islam does not exist, whereas by the condition of impossibility I mean that within its context Islam can hardly absorb the changes that have occurred since its inception. The Koranic context, besides anchoring and determining the meaning of God's

16 Barlas, 2002, p. 58.

17 Abu Zayd, 2000, p.141.

18 Žižek, 2004, p. 15.

Word, is the meaning of God's Word.¹⁹ On the other hand, what allows for appropriate insertion of God's Word into different contexts is the very ambiguity of the immediately relevant context. The more ambiguous the context of the revelation is, the more universal it becomes in its scope. The Koran, as Arkoun²⁰ has shown, erased the histories, the names of places and people and the individual occurrences from its verses (memory) in order to remove the historical character from its discourse through binding everything in this world to God.

I am not advocating any extreme view that filters through and passively reduces the Koran to a combination of contingent historical and social conditions “which form the framework of what is thinkable at a particular moment”²¹. We should, following Žižek, make a distinction between historicity proper and historicism. “Historicity proper involves a dialectical relationship to some unhistorical kernel that stays the same – not as an underlying Essence but as a rock that rips up every attempt to integrate it into the symbolic order”.²² Whereas “in historicism, the paradox of historicity (the thing in question *becomes* – reveals itself, proves itself to be - what it *always already was*) is somehow ‘flattened’, reduced to a linear succession of ‘epochs’”.²³ Islam is not a disembodied signifier which can move from one context to another. Wherever it goes it carries with itself its own context and wherever it settles it creates the conditions for the use of the context. The text and the context of the Koran are the two sides of the same coin. It therefore is a crude simplification to explain the text simply on

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19 To avoid any possible misunderstanding: I criticize the reduction of the Koran to its context of production not to its *produced* context. There are two contexts to emphasise: the historical context from which the Koran originated and moved away and can be analytically distanced but not historically since such a dissociation amounts to severing the connection between the Koran and the context that produced it and which the Koran made maximal use of in developing its own worldview. But the second context, the context produced by the Koran cannot be separated from the Koran and it can be reduced, analytically if not historically, to that context and vice versa.

20 Arkoun, 1996, p. 72.

21 Copjec, 2002, p.62.

22 Žižek, 1994, p. 199.

23 Žižek, 2001, p. 184. In his book, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 2007, writing against historicism Žižek states: “A particular social phenomenon can never be completely ‘contextualized’, reduced to a set of sociohistorical circumstances – such a particularization would presuppose the crudest universalism: namely, the presumption that we, its agents, can speak from a neutral-universal place of pure meta-language exempt from any specific context”, p. 214. See also Arkoun’s distinction between “radical historicity” and “positivist historicism” in: Arkoun, 2002, p. 89-96.

account of its cultural situation, important as that is for elucidating the social conditions of the working of Islam. This reductive methodology of contextualism where the context imprints itself passively onto the textual space, besides being guilty of a simple logical mistake, “the genetic fallacy” – the presumption that to determine the origin of an idea is to determine its truth or falsity - reduces the influence of the Koran on its surroundings to nothing. Islam, to borrow from Žižek once more, “‘posited its own presuppositions’, and re-inscribed its contingent/ external circumstances into an all-encompassing logic that can be generated from an elementary conceptual matrix”²⁴. In other words, the Koran created its own context, its own space with specific rules where it could play its game. It goes without saying that the Koran was, in a significant sense, part of the pre-Islamic culture. As such, it can be explained neither outside the parameters of the context of its production nor can it be reduced to it without destroying and “make -[ing] us blind to the real kernel which returns as the same through diverse historicizations/symbolizations”.²⁵

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24 Žižek, 2000, p. 225.

25 Žižek, 1994a, p. 328.

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