The Potentials and Limits of Going Global

Islam's Social Contingency and Absolute Truth in Arabic Sociologies of Religion

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Abstract

This article takes part in the current quest for more global histories of religion, yet also reflects on the possible limits of going global. To this end, it engages one specific perspective on religion, namely a sociological one. It probes into Arabic sociologies of religion, especially with reference to Islam. The author argues that epistemically, premises of social contingency may well complement assumptions of absolute truth. However, positions that would subject religion in general to contingency – that is, the idea that religion is constructed by humans rather than ensuing from divine revelation – are largely rejected. This partly explains the rather weak institutionalization of the sociology of religion in Arab countries, but it also recalls that such global institutionalization reflects one particular perspective on religion, which is itself underpinned by normative and epistemic assumptions of the social as absolute.

Keywords

1   Introduction: a Case for Testing the Limits of Going Global

"[T]he central concern of global historical approaches is to overcome method-ological nationalism as well as Eurocentrism (cf. O'Brien 2006: 4; Conrad 2016: 3–6), and to tell, speaking with Crossley, 'a story without a center' (Crossley 2008: 4, 102–121)."[1] Thus argue Giovanni Maltese and Julian Strube in their program-matic article on Global Religious History. As the references within this quota-tion recall, the same basic argument and aim is shared today by scholars from different disciplines. I myself come to it from within debates in the fields of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies (*Islamwissenschaft*) and postcolonial soci-ology. By discussing a potential Islamic elaboration on and genealogy of the sociology of religion, I intend to direct the aim of Global Religious History – and of global histories of religion in the wider sense – to a specific, if perhaps unexpected case, which also points to certain limits of going global.

To inquire into the reach and genealogy of particular disciplinary perspec-tives on religion fruitfully contributes to global religious history in two senses: Firstly, engaging particular perspectives on religion seems more productive than discussing the reach of 'religion' in a generic sense. Pointing to particu-lar European or Christian imprints on the concept of 'religion' has certainly been an important step in furthering awareness of the concept's historicity and normativity. In this regard, Islam has been discussed as a counter-example to "the modern/Christian" concept of religion.[2] However, such general, some-times essentializing juxtaposition blurs the variations within and entangle-ments of discursive traditions. In turn, sociological perspectives on religion, while they do indeed have historical and institutional centers, are present and also contested in both Islamic and Christian contexts. Secondly, inquir-ing into the formation of this particular perspective directly speaks to the critical role of academic disciplines themselves in configuring the concept of 'religion' – or rather, a particular conceptualization thereof. It thereby furthers self-reflectivity in the ongoing usage of conceptions of religion and points to normative assumptions and historical particularities in the formation and understanding of particular disciplines, in this case sociology (of religion).

In Arab countries, the sociology of religion is barely formally institutional-ized, lacking chairs or dedicated study programs; yet religion does constitute

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1   Maltese/Strube, *Global Religious History*, p. 235. References are to Conrad, *What is Global History?*; Crossley, *What is Global History? II*; and O'Brien, *Historiographical Traditions*.

2   A recent contribution to the debate, which offers a good summary of the earlier literature, goes so far as to argue that the modern concept of religion was historically present in Muslim cultures even earlier than in Christian ones; see Abbasi, *Islam and the Invention of Religion*.

a prominent topic in Arab sociology, the entangled history of which can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century. Two points follow from this fact, which will be substantiated in the next section: Firstly, institutional and epistemic aspects should be distinguished when one enquires into the formation of sociological perspectives on religion in different contexts. Secondly, approaches within Arab sociology vary, both in their theoretical conceptions and their historical genealogies. One common characteristic, however, is that *programmatic attempts* at formulating a particular sub-discipline of the sociology of religion tend to position themselves as complementary to established Islamic disciplines.

This is the first of three reasons why this article focuses on sociological works in Arabic that explicitly relate to Islam. The second reason is that I aim to disrupt the impression that sociological perspectives are only possible outside or even contra Islam. Thirdly, while this article aspires to a global history of sociologies of religion, in doing so I also have the potential limits of globality in mind. 'Global' here does not mean 'planetary,' but rather in a basic sense indicates going beyond and connecting contexts that are often treated separately.[3] Yet to play on the quote cited at the beginning of this article, some stories might have a clear center after all. By pointing out a potential Islamic twist to the sociology of religion, including its genealogy, this article probes the possibility of including a rather unexpected case, which indeed might prove to be only partially possible. Where it cannot be included, it nevertheless fruitfully informs us about the criteria of perspectives that count as sociological perspectives on religion, and thus about the limits of one strand within the global history of religion. This is why I deliberately discuss a potential outlier in the present article, focusing on theoretical and epistemic issues while largely bracketing political and institutional ones.

Thus I argue that the premises of religion's contingency tend to complement assumptions of absolute religious truth in Arabic sociology, building upon a distinction within Islamic thought: Islamic scholars decidedly consider certain aspects of religion contingent, i.e., constructed by humans in a particular time and location. These aspects can be deconstructed and are subject to change in view of historical and social shifts. In short, they are contingent upon historical and social conditions. The opposite is true for those aspects of religion that are thought to be absolute. These transcend historical and social conditions,

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3 For different versions of global history, including conceptions of the global as planetary, see Conrad, *What is Global History?*, concisely pp. 7–10, and more extensively chs. 3–5. For a summary discussion of these versions, see also Maltese/Strube, *Global Religious History*, pp. 233–235, who explicitly also reject an understanding of global as planetary (p. 234).

are valid for all times and places, and are unchangeable. For religious scholars, the contingent manifestations of Islam should reflect its absolute truth. Since this truth requires different expressions in different times and places, changes in the contingent aspects of religion are meant to more faithfully express the absolute truth of religion once again. This is captured in the term 'reform' (Ar. *iṣlāḥ*), which means making (contingent) aspects of religion mirror their ideal (absolute) form.[4]

Arab sociologists of religion tend to draw on this distinction, while also underlining the fact that, as sociologists, they are only concerned with the social dimension of religion. They are thus addressing those aspects of religion, including Islam, that are said be socially contingent, i.e., theoretically constructed and practically instituted by humans in social interaction. The focus on the socially contingent parts of religion in general, and Islam in particular, is notably formulated and legitimized as not contradicting, but rather complementing assumptions of a religion's stable, non-contingent core, especially that of Islam. Yet what may sound like a neat arrangement is not at all straightforward in the end: the question of which aspects of religion are contingent and which are absolute makes for ongoing contestation, intertwining epistemic issues with political ones.

This becomes especially evident in recent contributions that distinguish between contingent religiosity (*tadayyun*) and absolute religion (*dīn*), as the fourth section on programmatic formulations will show. Conceptually, this distinction is already visible in the first explicit formulations of a 'sociology of religion' in Arabic, discussed in the fifth section on explicit and implicit formations of sociological perspectives, which also points to the implicit forerunners of these formulations in Islamic debates, thereby underlining the possibility of an Islamic genealogy in the sociology of religion. Providing background to our specific case, the second section will sketch the formation of sociology in Arab countries. Attempts at an Islamic sociology have never been a dominant trend within Arab sociology. However, singling out two propositions of an 'Islamic sociology' in the third section will help to elucidate the epistemic and normative issues at stake in sociological perspectives on religion. Drawing on the case highlighted here and going beyond it, in the concluding section I will briefly discuss the potentials and limits of going global.

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4   For basic concepts of reform in Islam, see Voll, *Renewal and Reform*.

2   Background: Arab Contributions to Global Sociology (of Religion)

The quest for more global histories and practices has reached sociology too. Recent years have seen pushes for a "decolonial" or "post-colonial" sociology,[5] works highlighting "colonial origins of social thought"[6] or aiming at "connected sociologies",[7] and attempts to enlarge the canon of sociology beyond its established core of male European theorists.[8] The one Arab thinker who made it into this larger canon is Ibn Khaldun, who is sometimes even considered the founder of sociology, especially by Arab and Muslim scholars.[9] It should be clear that any claim to foundational moments is always made from the present, with hindsight, and is often tied to claims of originality, authenticity, and identity. Independently of how convincing one finds the pioneering role attributed to Ibn Khaldun, the fact remains that he died in 1406. In turn, little is known about Arabic contributions to sociology since its modern disciplinary formation. In order to include Arab perspectives in a more global history and practice of sociology, one must engage much more with modern and contemporary contributions.

At the present moment, we can see the milestones in the formation and development of sociology in Arab countries.[10] The year 1925 marks its institutional beginning, when the first chair of sociology was established at Cairo University and the first monograph, entitled ʿIlm al-ijtimāʿ (Sociology), appeared. Colonial hegemony and local agency intertwined in this early institutional formation, which was moreover preceded by public intellectual debates over social questions that already included sociological perspectives, in the non-disciplinary sense. Sociology was established much more widely in post-colonial nation-states from the 1950s onward, receiving another quantitative push in the 1990s. As part of the associated theoretical developments, Arab sociologists critically reflected on relations to colonial legacies and European hegemony, and programmatic attempts to "de-colonize" began as early as the

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5   Rodríguez et al., *Decolonizing European Sociology*; Go, *Postcolonial Sociology*.

6   Steinmetz, *The Colonial Origins of Social Thought*.

7   Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies*.

8   Alatas/Sinha, *Sociological Theory Beyond the Canon*.

9   For the abundant literature on Ibn Khaldun, see al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldun in Modern Scholarship*; and Irwin, *Ibn Khaldun*, ch. 10. Both authors place Ibn Khaldun in a decidedly pre-modern context, but they also provide comprehensive and sufficiently fair overviews of other strands of reception, including readings of Ibn Khaldun as the first sociologist.

10   For a synthesis of the extant literature, on which this paragraph is based, see Zemmin, (*Post-*)*Kolonialismus, Autoritarismus und Authentizität*.

1970s,[11] thus much preceding the recent wave of post-colonial sociology in English. However, Arab sociologists also directed criticism toward local conditions – such as underfunding, political restraints, or cultural taboos – that hindered sociological inquiry.[12] Both strands of criticism are relevant to the sociology of religion, which is still widely considered a European endeavor and a sensitive topic, both politically and culturally. Epistemic and normative issues around sociological perspectives on religion are especially pronounced when the relation to Islam is addressed.

This is not to suggest that all sociological inquiry into religion in Arab countries has to explicitly position, let alone justify itself in relation to Islam. Indeed the sociology of religion has barely been institutionally established in Arab countries, where designated chairs or study programs are lacking. In the context of this special issue, we should mention that this also holds true for the historical and comparative study of religion as a discipline of its own.[13] However, while minding certain limits imposed by religious and political authorities, Arab sociologists can and do research and write on religion,[14] mostly without positioning themselves in relation to Islamic references. Rather, they share in the theoretical assumptions of French, British, and US-American sociology, which continue to hold a hegemonic position in Arab universities. Expanding sociological perspectives beyond academic disciplines, one would also find Marxist theorists who consider religion a product of society, such as certain Syrian intellectuals of the 1970s.[15] Such non-Islamic sociological perspectives on religion in Arabic, including their historical genealogies, would be equally worth investigating. However, for the reasons mentioned in the introduction, this article intentionally focuses on sociological perspectives on religion with Islamic references – which are most explicitly evident in programmatic attempts at formulating an 'Islamic sociology.'

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11   Jelloun, *Decolonizing Sociology in the Maghreb.*
12   On the need to criticize both colonial and local conditions, see the programmatic work by Khatibi, *Double Criticism.*
13   Scholars highlight both socio-political and cultural reasons for the non-institutionalization of religious studies. Cf., e.g., Wheeler, *The Academic Study of Religion in North Africa and the Middle East*; Henley, *Islam as a Challenge to the Ideology of Religious Studies.*
14   For an overview of the topics addressed in Arab sociology, see Hamudi, *al-ʿUlūm al-ijtimāʿiyya.*
15   Weiss, *Mosaic, Melting Pot, Pressure Cooker*, esp. p. 195, on "disciplinarity without disciplines."

3   Islamic Sociology: Reflecting on the Normativity of Sociological Perspectives

3.1   *The Rise and Demise of Islamic Sociology*

Attempts at explicitly formulating an 'Islamic sociology' surfaced at the very end of the 1970s and into the 1980s. The central locations in which this took place included Malaysia, Iran, and Egypt, but also Herndon, Virginia, where the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) was founded in 1981. The near-simultaneous efforts at 'Islamizing' science, also beyond sociology, reflected and were part of still broader trends of Islamic revivalism. In Iran this is clearly marked by the revolution of 1979. More gradually, Egypt saw the demise of socialism after Gamal Abdel Nasser's death in 1970; his popularity extended to other Arab countries as well. His successor, Anwar Sadat, complemented liberal politics of economic opening (*infitāḥ*) with giving greater space to Islam as a cultural unifier in public space. This furthered the assertion of political Islam. Indeed, attempts at Islamizing the sciences have been motivated at least as much by political identity and cultural authenticity as by theoretical considerations.

On the theoretical level, one can now attest that aspirations to an 'Islamic sociology' were not successful in establishing productive approaches of their own, especially not when the ambition was to create a sociology altogether different from the dominant 'Western' sociology they rejected. Arab sociologists have increasingly diagnosed the overall failure of 'Islamic sociology' in this regard.[16] However, even failed attempts at creating an altogether different 'sociology' remain informative in that they speak back to the criteria of what one considers to be sociology in the disciplinary sense, or to a sociological perspective more broadly. Especially interesting for our discussion are propositions for an Islamic sociology that position themselves not in outright confrontation with, but as complementary to 'Western' sociology, particularly when it comes to positioning religion as an object of study. The remainder of this section will present two typical propositions for an Islamic sociology, which represent the confrontative and the complementary type, respectively.

3.2   *The Confrontative Type: Islam Ought to Shape Society*

Nabil al-Samaluti, professor emeritus of sociology at al-Azhar University in Cairo, is a representative figure for the confrontative type of sociology, which illustrates the limits one faces in attempting to integrate different understandings of sociology. Al-Samaluti has published continuously on Islamic sociology

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16   E.g., Hanafi, *Aslamat wa-taʾṣīl al-ʿulūm al-ijtimāʿiyya*.

since the 1970s and has been active in national and international debates. Here I will focus on his book *The Structure of Islamic Society and Its Institutions: A Study in Islamic Sociology* (*Bināʾ al-mujtamaʿ al-islāmī wa-nuẓumuhu: dirāsa fī ʿilm al-ijtimāʿ al-islāmī*), published in 1981.

Despite the self-designation as 'sociology' (*ʿilm al-ijtimāʿ*), al-Samaluti's book predominantly reads like an Islamic program for shaping society. In other words: society is subjected to the absolute truth of Islam, and he adduces no socially contingent factors that shape Islam. The scientific goal of sociology is posited as the recognition of social and historical laws. Al-Samaluti equates the latter with laws established by God. Orientation toward these laws and their implementation for the benefit of humanity is a social goal, to which sociology contributes. In pursuit of this goal, Arab-Muslim sociologists should turn away from ostensibly positivist European theories and return to the Qurʾan. Only by referring to this divine source can sociology produce true knowledge and realize social values. For the good of all humanity, Islamic sociology must therefore prevail over (Western) positivist sociology. When al-Samaluti asks God for victory over the unbelievers, it seems that his opposition to hegemonic sociology could hardly be more fundamental, either epistemologically or normatively.[17]

And yet it is evident that this book borrows from established sociological theories and makes basic assumptions about a functionally differentiated society. Al-Samaluti pretends to return directly to the Qurʾan in order to reconstruct the supposedly ideal society of early Islam. He postulates that the sharia set out the perfect structure for various social orders, including the institutions of the family, economy, politics, administration, education, and so on. He very clearly projects a modern view of society back onto the Qurʾan and early Islamic times. The introduction of English-language concepts makes the book's orientation toward Western sociology, which has supposedly been fundamentally rejected, even clearer. Moreover, al-Samaluti does not address actual historical or social conditions, nor does he suggest how their analysis from an Islamic perspective would differ in practical ways from other approaches. One thus searches in vain for a specific Islamic theory or method of sociology, let alone its practical application.

3.3 *The Complementary Type: Islam Shapes and Is Shaped By Society*

The latter is also true of Samya al-Khashshab's work, which nevertheless differs notably from al-Samaluti's; in this article, it represents an Islamic sociology complementary to 'Western' sociology. Most interesting for our question, al-Khashshab suggests that society ought to be subjected to Islamic norms,

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17   al-Samaluti, *Bināʾ al-mujtamaʿ al-islāmī*, p. 8 et seq.

but that Islam is also subjected to societal factors – and it is the latter dimension that sociologists are addressing. At the time her book was published in 1980, al-Khashshab was an assistant professor at Cairo University. Her book was used extensively (although the citations were largely uncredited) in a later work on 'Islamic sociology,'[18] which is evidence that her work garnered a certain visibility.

Al-Khashshab argues for the establishment of Islamic sociology as a branch of sociology. This is appropriate, she argues, because Islamic sociology has its own topics (such as social thought in Islam) and its own goals (such as highlighting Islamic sociological heritage), as well as varied approaches.[19] One of al-Khashshab's premises is that Islam is a social religion. Not unlike al-Samaluti, she identifies aspects of modern society which Islam addresses. However, she emphasizes parallels to rather than differences from Western sociology. Moreover, al-Khashshab stresses that Islamic sociology is a descriptive rather than a normative science (*ʿilm taqrīrī yadrus mā huwa kāʾin wa-lā yataṣṣadā li-mā yanbaghī an yakūn*).[20] Admittedly, her own account is not free from value judgements, for example when she seeks to use sociological approaches to ascertain whether Sufism has a positive or negative influence on society.[21]

It is clear, however, that unlike al-Samaluti, al-Khashshab positions Islam not only as an influence on society, but also as influenced by historical and social factors.[22] For al-Khashshab, religion's transcendental truth constitutes a framework and a backdrop for Islamic sociology, but is not used to analyze or shape society. Al-Khashshab's work can thus be considered a local (not particularistic) contribution to a global (not universalist) understanding of sociology. It demonstrates the possibility of justifying sociology within and via an Islamic tradition. Furthermore, it points to the potential of an empirical analysis of (contingent) society as complementary to assumptions concerning (absolute) metaphysical truth.

This complementarity is also implicitly indicated in an introductory work entitled *Sociology of Religion* (*ʿIlm al-ijtimāʿ al-dīnī*), which al-Khashshab published in 1988. She stresses the importance of treating religion as a decidedly social phenomenon. While she clearly takes it for granted that religion has inherent virtues, she argues that these are not the subject of sociological study:

18 al-Shamari, *Mabāḥith fī ʿilm al-ijtimāʿ al-islāmī*.
19 al-Khashshab, *ʿIlm al-ijtimāʿ al-islāmī*, p. 5 et seq.
20 al-Khashshab, *ʿIlm al-ijtimāʿ al-islāmī*, p. 37.
21 al-Khashshab, *ʿIlm al-ijtimāʿ al-islāmī*, pp. 47, 50.
22 See esp. al-Khashshab, *ʿIlm al-ijtimāʿ al-islāmī*, pp. 49 et seq., 57, 63.

The sociology of religion (*al-ijtimāʿ al-dīnī*) is not a normative science (*ʿilm miʿyārī*). Thus it is not concerned with enticing people to cling to virtues. It does not explain the benefits that result from following the principles of religion, does not interpret Qurʾanic verses, and does not distinguish between the worth of religions or defend a specific religion. Rather, its topic is the study of the mutual influences of religious and other social phenomena, using social-sciences approaches that consider religion to be one of the social systems (*al-ansāq al-ijtimāʿiyya*) extant within society.[23]

To position the sociology of religion in relation to normative religious sciences, as al-Khashshab does, is to point out readers' expectations concerning conventional forms of producing knowledge about religion, primarily those of Islamic theology and jurisprudence. She tries to argue for the autonomy of a sociological approach while simultaneously acknowledging the value of normative religious sciences. In a similar vein, recent programmatic works in the sociology of religion try to position their approach as complementary. As we shall now see, this complementarity increasingly crystallized in the terminological pairing of *dīn* and *tadayyun* – absolute religious truth and its contingent human understandings.

4   Programmatic Formulations Today: Sociology and Islamic Normativity

While religion figures as a prominent topic in the Arabic social sciences more broadly, here I will focus on two recent programmatic formulations of the sociology of religion, and more specifically on their positioning in relation to normative religious sciences. Both contributions are included in an edited volume published in 2018 by Sayyid Muhammad bin ʿAbdallah University in Fès, Morocco and entitled *Social Scientific Approaches to Religiosity* (*Muqārabāt wa-manāhij al-ʿulūm al-ijtimāʿiyya li-l-tadayyun*). After analyzing these contributions, I will add a pertinent philosophical contribution to illustrate the wider purchase of the conceptual pairing of *dīn* and *tadayyun*, as well as its political connotations.

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23   al-Khashshab, *ʿIlm al-ijtimāʿ al-dīnī*, p. 13.

4.1 *Rashid Jarmuni:* ʿilm al-ijtimāʿ *as Fundamentally Different from yet Complementary to* fiqh

The author of the first contribution, tellingly entitled "Sociology of Religion and the Epistemological Debate", is Rashid Jarmuni, a sociologist of religion at Mawlay Ismaʿil University in Meknès. As an epistemological question, he first discusses which of the approaches developed in Europe and the USA are most appropriate for Arab-Islamic societies. In this context, he considers it important to go beyond universalistic as well as particularistic assumptions. Secondly, he positions the sociological approach to religion in clear contradistinction to the normative perspective of *fiqh* – that is, Islamic law and ethics: "The sociology of religion differs in its approach from *fiqh*, which strives to interpret social events from outside [those events], based on transcendent texts or ideas that have no relation to what actually happens."[24] He seeks to clearly separate the two approaches, but he sees no conflict, because the sociological – ostensibly objective – analysis of religion does not touch the truth content of religious norms and doctrines: "The sociologist does not study the truth content of a doctrine or ritual practice, and does not judge deviations in the interpretation of the heritage. He [sic] takes all that – in an objective and neutral way – as an object of study."[25]

4.2 *Idris al-Sinhaji:* tadayyun *and* dīn *as Connected yet Distinct*

The contribution by Idris al-Sinhaji, a sociologist at Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University in Fès, addresses the "Difficulties in Approaching Religion and Religiosity Sociologically in Morocco." One major difficulty, with notable political implications, consists in how one can consistently distinguish between religiosity (*tadayyun*) and religion (*dīn*), despite their connectedness. In al-Sinhaji's conception, *tadayyun* refers to the practical side of *dīn*: "it is the manner in which people live their religious experience in a social context." The sociological study of *tadayyun* thus addresses "the external form of religion and its appearance, and not its core (*jawhar*)."[26] Nevertheless, this distinction is not watertight in the end, as al-Sinhaji argues, since any sociological study of religious practice will eventually extend to its underlying thought.[27] Only where scientific inquiry has achieved full independence from religion and politics can sociology treat religion as a social phenomenon (*ẓāhira ijtimāʿiyya*) like any other. While this has largely been achieved in Western societies, it is

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24 Jarmuni, *Sūsiyūlūjiyyā al-ẓāhira al-dīniyya*, p. 6.
25 Jarmuni, *Sūsiyūlūjiyyā al-ẓāhira al-dīniyya*, p. 7.
26 al-Sinhaji, *Ṣuʿūbāt muqārabat al-dīn wa-l-tadayyun*, p. 91.
27 al-Sinhaji, *Ṣuʿūbāt muqārabat al-dīn wa-l-tadayyun*, p. 93.

not the case in Arab-Muslim societies, where questions of religious thought and religion itself are considered the exclusive terrain of religious scholars and jurisprudents.[28] For fear of confronting religious (and political) authorities, many Arab sociologists thus confine their study to *tadayyun*, shying away from *dīn*. In a sense, this amounts to studying the effects without their causes – a phenomenon which al-Sinhaji criticizes.[29]

While al-Sinhaji thus points to a fundamental epistemic struggle between sociological and theological approaches, he still suggests positioning the study of socially contingent religious phenomena as complementary to assumptions about absolute transcendent truth:

> Independent of the extent to which religion is sublime, sacred, and a sensitive topic (*mahmā kānat darajat al-dīn min al-tasāmī wa-l-qadāsa wa-l-ḥassāsiyya*), it is connected with human ideas, representations, and material practices. This connection makes it susceptible to scientific study. We are studying religious phenomena as social phenomena, inso-far as they are firmly connected with human social behavior. "For it is impossible to separate the study of the religious from that of the social, since each is present in the bosom of the other" (Meslin 2009, p. 74).[30]

Since *tadayyun* and *dīn* remain connected, contestations concerning where to draw distinctions are inevitable, and are both theoretical and political in nature.

4.3   *Beyond Sociology: Philosophical and Political Contestations*

Beyond sociology, the categorical distinction between *dīn* and *tadayyun* also figures in philosophical works, perhaps most prominently in a book by ʿAbd al-Jawad Yasin, published in 2012. This Egyptian intellectual – who studies the three Abrahamic religions, with a particular focus on Islam – conceptualizes religion in itself (*al-dīn fī dhātihi*) as referring to God and to absolute moral values (*al-akhlāq al-kulliyya*). It is a universal, absolute, and transcendent idea (*fikra kulliyya muṭlaqa wa-mutaʿāliyya*). Since *dīn*, however, is directed at humans, it appears only in social reality and is understood and viewed from within that perspective. The presence of society within religious structures (*ḥuḍūr al-ijtimāʿ fī al-binya al-dīniyya*) is thus necessitated not only by society,

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28   al-Sinhaji, *Ṣuʿūbāt muqārabat al-dīn wa-l-tadayyun*, p. 94.
29   al-Sinhaji, *Ṣuʿūbāt muqārabat al-dīn wa-l-tadayyun*, p. 96.
30   al-Sinhaji, *Ṣuʿūbāt muqārabat al-dīn wa-l-tadayyun*, p. 98. The reference is to Meslin, *ʿIlm al-adyān*.

but also by religion itself. Moreover, as humans are the ones receiving and practicing *dīn*, the latter can only be perceived through human and thus necessarily social means, foremost among them language.[31]

According to Yasin, contingent social aspects interacted with Islam itself even during the time of the revelation, and society was thereby inscribed in the Qurʾanic text, especially after the hijra and the founding of a Muslim community in Medina. Here he coins the expression "inscribed society" (*al-ijtimāʿ al-manṣuṣ*).[32] In this context, one is reminded of two earlier projects by Muslim reformists: Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid (who died in exile in the Netherlands in 2012), in his hermeneutical approach to the Qurʾan, increasingly highlighted the human, social side of text.[33] Mahmud Muhammad Taha (who was executed by the Sudanese government in 1985) categorically confined the timeless message of Islam to the Meccan verses, while he considered the verses revealed in Medina contingent.[34] Reflecting a still more widespread and even constitutive trope of Islamic reformism, Yasin criticizes the confusion of contingent understandings with the true essence of religion.

The crux of the matter, of course, lies in where exactly to draw the line between religion itself and human understandings thereof. While the epistemic and hermeneutical difficulties this involves are rather evident, it is also a political issue. Based on his minimalist conception of religion itself, Yasin directly criticizes "salafi" understandings that wrongly consider contingent, especially normative aspects to be part of the timeless truth of religion, which must be heeded. The question of whether or not a political dimension is considered an integral part of the Islamic religion remains contested. The organization Muʾminun bi-la Hudud (Mominoun [Believers] Without Borders) exemplifies the nexus between hermeneutic approaches and political interests. Founded in 2013, this organization produces a great number of Arabic translations and publications, as well as organizing events to further critical philosophical and also sociological approaches to religion. Both Jarmuni and Yasin figure among the authors who contribute to Mominoun,[35] which has furthered discussions on *tadayyun* in a prominent way. The contributions facilitated by this organization have intellectual value on their own terms and cannot be reduced to a political dimension. Still, Mominoun is funded by the United Arab Emirates, which pursues a policy of keeping political understandings of Islam at bay.

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31 Yasin, *al-Dīn wa-l-tadayyun*, p. 6.
32 Yasin, *al-Dīn wa-l-tadayyun*, p. 9.
33 Sukidi, *Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd*.
34 Hatina, *Dismantling the Sacred*.
35 See online source: *Articles by Rachid Jarmuni*, in: *Mominoun*; online source: *Articles by ʿAbd al-Jawad Yasin, in: Mominoun*.

Tellingly, al-Jazeera has criticized Mominoun for serving this Emirati policy,[36] while al-Jazeera is itself funded by the government of Qatar, which advocates a role for Islam in the political arena.

Given the constraints of this article, these glimpses must suffice to underline the fact that the demarcation between the absolute aspects of religion and contingent human understandings thereof has a political dimension to it. Independently of their sometimes-direct political motivations, such demarcations are hardly as hermeneutically clear-cut as each of their proponents suggests. What remains to be done is to attempt to distinguish between the contingent and the absolute aspects of religion, to free up space for human analysis and intervention, and to secure firm, absolute ground at the same time. It is precisely in attempting to make this distinction that an Islamic genealogy is worth exploring.

5 Explicit and Implicit Formations of Sociological Perspectives on Religion: Hints at an Islamic Genealogy

5.1 *The Present, Genealogy, and History*

A major challenge for global (religious) history in general is clearly manifest with regard to Arabic and Islamic history, including our present exploration of sociological perspectives. This challenge consists in privileging the (late) nineteenth and (early) twentieth centuries, and the difficulty of tracing non-centric histories to before this period of colonial modernity. Of course attempts at establishing an Arab or Islamic variation or tradition of sociology do resort to history – after all, history remains the space for understanding and justifying the present. However, as I noted in the introduction, Ibn Khaldun remains the most recent chronological reference adduced. In turn, we know little about the immediate pre-history of sociology as a discipline in Arab countries, whence local variations of sociology tend to appear as reactions to – or at best 'creative appropriations' of – European sociology. One task for global history – in our case, of the sociology of religion – is to engage with this immediate pre-history, paying special attention to the local references and trajectories that fuel this pre-history.

This task is consciously formulated based on experiences of the global present, which spark interest in plural, non-centric histories. This research interest is thus connected to a certain position in the present – one which validates

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plurality – but it also challenges any claim to exclusivity. As such, it decidedly defies any claims to origin while acknowledging hegemonic constellations. In the end, the question of whether Ibn Khaldun or Auguste Comte was the first ('the original') sociologist is moot, inasmuch as it hinges on one's own conception of sociology. However, the fact that Arab scholars validate Ibn Khaldun as the precursor to Comte bespeaks historical hegemony, as does the phenomenon of observing Arab variations of 'sociology' rather than variations of *ʿilm al-ijtimāʿ* in European languages. The specific interest in an Islamic genealogy for the sociology of religion – a potential outlier, as I mentioned in the introduction – is thus formulated in view of present hegemonic claims that exclude such Islamic variations.

It should be clear that, like any genealogical perspective, this one is consciously formulated from within the present. Indeed this is in line with previous reflections on global religious history, as most extensively elaborated by Michael Bergunder.[37] In principle, as Bergunder argues in this special issue, a genealogical critique of the present can also resort to pre-colonial contexts directly.[38] Our question here nevertheless favors an interest in the explicit formation of the sociology of religion in Arabic and its immediate pre-history. That the argument is still made in view of the hegemony of European sociologies of religion means that we should consider potential alternative formations and trajectories, which have been neglected thus far. Whether one deems these alternatives relevant to the object of inquiry – i.e., the sociology of religion as it is more conventionally understood – indeed hinges on *the researcher* convincingly establishing a connection between the two (for example, between Ibn Khaldun and Comte). Such relevance is ever more plausible when historical actors make these connections themselves, as is the case in the global formation of sociological perspectives within the framework of colonial modernity. As Sebastian Conrad has argued – independently of a genealogical perspective, but nevertheless in a way applicable to what I am advocating here – "the plausibility and explanatory power of global approaches will be stronger in periods when connections are deep and interactions intense", even though, "as a perspective, a global approach can also be extended further into the past with much benefit."[39] In our specific case, this section cannot even begin to sketch

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37   Bergunder, *Global Religious History*, esp. pp. 453, 456; also Maltese/Strube, *Global Religious History*, pp. 242–244.
38   Bergunder, *Encounters*.
39   Conrad, *What is Global History?*, p. 111. The genealogical perspective advocated here ultimately underpins a more plural understanding of the present and the writing of history that brings together different trajectories, which are connected because they share a common moment. As such, this perspective differs from internalist and particularist

Islamic contributions *as part of* the global history of the sociology of religion, and so I will merely highlight one particular aspect of this – namely the distinction between the (socially) contingent and absolute aspects of religion.

5.2   *The First Explicit Works*

Rather than jumping from the present to Ibn Khaldun, based on the above considerations, we shall engage with those works that the actors themselves have designated as 'sociology of religion' and thus positioned within the very disciplinary field with which we are concerned. The first book on *'Ilm al-ijtimāʿ al-dīnī* was published in 1946 by the Francophile Syrian intellectual Yusuf Shalhat, who came from a Catholic family.[40] Shalhat rejects contemporary predictions that religion will disappear in the face of scientific progress. Religion is present in every society, but it changes and develops along with the human mind. That which is contemporary is true, universal religion, which has been freed from superstition and myth, and corresponds to true understanding: "Sound reason (*al-ʿaql al-ṣaḥīḥ*) demands a sound religion, free from myths and superstitions."[41] This, Shalhat argues, is also necessary for morality and social order.

   Proceeding chronologically, the second book, written by the Egyptian Hasan Suʿfan in 1957, clearly conceives of religion as a social phenomenon: "Religious phenomena (*al-ẓawāhir al-dīniyya*) are social phenomena (*ẓawāhir ijtimāʿiyya*) in the full sense of this scientific concept."[42] However, Suʿfan emphasizes that religion itself is fixed. Human understandings of religion are what change, and it is these understandings that sociology studies: "The development [of religion as a social phenomenon] does not mean that religion itself changes, for the revealed books of each religion remain as they are, they are fixed and do not change (*thābita lā tataghayyar*)."[43]

   These conceptions of a rational religion, as well as the categorical distinction made between supratemporal religious truth and its contingent, inner-worldly manifestations, are well-known aspects of modern reformist Islam, which brings us to implicitly sociological perspectives on religion.

genealogies, against which Conrad posits a synchronist perspective (see esp. ch. 7 on "synchronicity").

40   Shalhat, *'Ilm al-ijtimāʿ al-dīnī*. So far, I only have the new edition, published in 2003, at my disposal: Shalhat, *Naḥwa naẓariyya jadīda*.

41   Shalhat, *Naḥwa naẓariyya jadīda*, p. 217.

42   Suʿfan, *al-Dīn wa-l-mujtamaʿ*, p. 12.

43   Suʿfan, *al-Dīn wa-l-mujtamaʿ*, p. 191.

5.3   *Implicit Formations*

Public debates about social reform were immediate precursors to the disciplinary formation of sociology in Egypt, as Alain Roussillon has shown.[44] One central question in these debates concerned the social roles assigned to religion and science, respectively. Those who argued that common religious convictions were necessary for organizing society also stressed the societal benefits of religion, thus assessing religion from the perspective of society as well. Such societal perspectives on religion go back to at least the end of the nineteenth century. It is characteristic, and even constitutive of the Islamic reformist intellectual trend that a religious perspective on society is integrated with a societal perspective on religion. The Syrian intellectual Rafiq al-ʿAzm adduces just such a societal and even sociological perspective even more clearly than his fellow reformists.[45] For example, in a treatise on the spread of religions written in 1912, al-ʿAzm plainly presumes the divine origin of the Abrahamic religions, but he explains their institutions with recourse to the workings of history and human society.[46] What is more, he argues that "religious orders (*al-sharāʾiʿ*) are necessary for humans to the extent that they are in need of society (*bi-miqdār ḥājatihim ilā al-ijtimāʿ*)."[47] To adduce social causes for the formation and development of religions in this way does not mean that one considers religion a social product through and through, but rather that religion is partially subject to social conditions and factors.

Reformists set out to distinguish between aspects of religion that are historically and socially contingent on the one hand, and a timeless, absolute, unchanging core of religion on the other. According to them, such a distinction was necessary in order to free Islam from false beliefs and practices which had accrued over the centuries, and which contributed to false understandings of Islam, as well as to weakness and disunity in the present. The proposed solution to this perceived malaise was to return to the true core of Islam, which is timeless, as manifest in Islam's early, successful years. In contrast to contemporary practice, this ideal of true Islam stands for unity, strength, and rationality; overall it epitomizes all that is necessary for progress and civilization, the reigning paradigms of the day. While the essentializing mode of validating ideal Islam as absolute truth is well known, more attention needs to be paid to the flip side of this move, which consists in historizing large swathes

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44   Roussillon, *Projet colonial et traditions scientifiques.*
45   Zemmin, *Validating Secularity in Islam.*
46   al-ʿAzm, *Risāla fī bayān kayfiyyat intishār al-adyān*, pp. 32–41.
47   al-ʿAzm, *Risāla fī bayān kayfiyyat intishār al-adyān*, p. 11 et seq.

of present Islamic thought and practice, showing that they are contingent and changeable.

One central terminological pairing in this regard has been the fixed and the changing aspects (*al-thābit wa-l-mutaghayyir*) of Islam,[48] the very terms we already encountered in Suf‘an's 1957 work. The genre of *fiqh* provides additional tools to distinguish between absolute and contingent aspects, such as the conceptual pairing of *ʿibādāt* and *muʿāmalāt*, of (timeless) norms of religious practice and principles of social interaction, which should be contextualized historically. As we have seen above, if present Arabic sociology of religion programmatically distinguishes itself from the genre of *fiqh*, then this also illustrates a certain proximity in the sense that both are attending to the social manifestations of religion – in the case of *fiqh*, with a decidedly normative aim. Under the late Ottoman Empire, drawing on *fiqh* was even a means of developing social-scientific perspectives.[49] On a more abstract, epistemic level – one less directly linked to social practice – debates in Islamic philosophy have also distinguished between eternal truth and the contingent aspects of reality.[50]

It should be clear that none of these distinctions in Islamic intellectual traditions make for a programmatic sociological perspective. What they do suggest, however, is that assumptions concerning epistemic, historical, and even social contingency are not exclusive to modern scientific disciplines as they originated in Europe, and that Arab intellectuals within the framework of colonial modernity have elaborated sociological perspectives by drawing on both Islamic and European intellectual traditions in order to make sense of social transformations and respond to global questions concerning sociopolitical order.

6   Conclusion: Social Contingency and Absolute Truth – a Global Contestation

As in other cases, the historical traces I have hinted at in the previous section refute any binary view of traditional thought-worlds thoroughly entrenched in religion on the one hand, and modern, rationalized, dynamic thought on the other. Not only does the former recognize contingency to some extent, but

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48   For uses of this conceptual pairing and related pairings in twentieth-century Islamic thought, see Krämer, *Gottes Staat als Republik*, esp. pp. 54–65.

49   Özervarlı, *Transferring Traditional Islamic Disciplines into Modern Social Sciences*.

50   Bouhafa, *Towards New Perspectives on Ethics in Islam*, esp. p. 7.

the latter also posits certain absolutes. The ontological replacement of God with the social is an eminent case in point.[51] On the ontological level, theological views on society and sociological views on religion do indeed diverge and may even appear to be mutually exclusive – once they are programmatically formed, that is. For while Islamic tradition rejects the view that social contingency absolutely underlies *all* religion, it also recognizes that social contingency underlies *some* aspects of religion. Partially drawing on this earlier recognition, present attempts at establishing a sociology of religion in Arabic, and also Islamic sociology in its 'complementary' mode, try to maintain a balance between the contingent and absolute aspects of religion, as we saw in the third and fourth sections above.

While the question of whether this balance will hold or be strained beyond the breaking point remains open, the variation I have indicated in the sociology of religion particularizes and provincializes other variations – not least the one that considers *all* aspects of religion to be socially contingent. The emergence of this latter option and its establishment in the European academy seems to require explanation at least as much as its institutional absence in Arab societies. Above all, it appears as one variation in sociological perspectives on religion, even within the European academy. While this variation might appear to be the most consequential, the global history of the sociology of religion would quickly run up against its limits were it to confine itself to this.

Rather, an extended view of sociological perspectives on religion should also consider its non-institutionalized varieties, especially as the pre-institutional formation of sociological perspectives appears to be a more global affair, sparked by common questions concerning an increasingly contingent sociopolitical order brought up in the context of colonial modernity. The project of reconstructing the historical formation of sociological perspectives in all their global variety decidedly bears on the present epistemic understanding of sociology. The aim here remains to sustain a more inclusive and plural understanding, while equally accounting for divergence and particularities. In this sense, the present article has argued that Arabic and Islamic contributions should be included in the history of the sociology of religion. One further step in this direction would be to write a global history, a comparative analysis of the connected conditions and causes[52] underlying the formation of sociological perspectives in different regions in select Arab and European countries.

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51   Kaufmann, *Le Dieu social*.
52   The addition of causality to comparison and connections features in the conception of global history advocated by Conrad, *What is Global History?*, chs. 4 and 5, and succinctly p. 72.

Acknowledgements

Bio

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