Call for paper for an international conference

"Positionality in the Study of Islamic Theology"

Berlin Institute for Islamic Theology: Chair of Islamic Intellectual history and the research unit "Religious Plurality in Islamic Theology"

"No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society." (Said, Edward, Orientalism, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

The rise of Islamic theology as a distinct field of research in the European academic context has pushed the question of positionality in the study of Islam to the fore. Given the significant overlap in the methodologies that researchers in Islamic studies and Islamic theology employ, the distinction between the two fields remains ambiguous and uncertain at times. As some scholars have suggested, the distinction may be boiled down to what questions the researcher ultimately asks (Coppens 2022). It seems however, that in most discourses concerning the field of Islamic theology and its distinction from Islamic studies, the issue is commonly framed as a distinction between "insiders" and "outsiders" to the Islamic tradition. As the field of Islamic theology continues to grow, the question of positionality in Islamic theology and studies with regard to both notions of "insiders" and "outsiders" becomes more pertinent.

This workshop welcomes papers from the fields of Islamic studies as well as Islamic theology, from various disciplinary backgrounds. The scope of the workshop encompasses reflection upon the positionality of the researcher in their specific field of study, the place of researchers within the wider fields of Islamic theology and Islamic studies, as well as the wider discourse on disciplinary boundaries between Islamic theology and other fields of research and study. It is not only limited to Islamic studies, but includes history, literature, and anthropology to name a few. In this way, the workshop aims to elucidate multiple sites of knowledge production in the academy.

As well as considering the place of the researcher within academic institutions, this workshop welcomes papers that discuss the position of the researcher in relation to their own field of study. Most scholars would today agree that no researcher is truly free from their own life experience, as well as structures of power and community, including institutional, economic and societal relations, in addition to personal upbringing and belief. However, how these relations affect research in Islamic theology and studies has not been the subject of much discussion. Reflecting on the researcher's identity and positionality has been a part of research methods, especially in anthropology and where ethnographical work is concerned. There exists a vast body of literature in these disciplines regarding positionality. They consider religion, gender, class, and age among many other markers of identity and belonging. However, so far, little attention has been given to this topic from the perspectives of Islamic theology, as well as textual and historical scholarship. Here we are interested in the question of the insider researcher with regards to markers of religion, gender, class, and ethnicity/race.

The workshop is therefore divided into three main sections:

1. The researcher's identity and positionality with respect to the subject of their research
2. The disciplinary boundaries between Islamic theology and Islamic studies
3. The role of positionality in knowledge production in the academic institutions

We also encourage papers that discuss positionality with respect to the following methodological areas:

1. Selection of texts, subjects of study, and methodology

The selection of texts and interlocutors most obviously involves some degree of pre-analysis, since in the process of selecting the text others fall out of the scope of research. The same holds true for choosing a field site and a certain community or people to work/cooperate and 'analyse' during field research. This also extends to the methodologies of ethnographic work. Why for example would the researcher choose interviews, participant observation, or material religion and culture as a framework for analysis? This can also be extended to textual scholars who treat texts and images as material objects, and the study of Islamic art history. Why does a researcher choose to analyse or refer to particular texts or historical figures? What kind of normativity does she/he imply to the texts and scholars? How does her/his choice influence the research result and the understanding of what (e.g. Sunni or Shii) Islam is?

2. The effect of research on researchers themselves

How does research (or research participants and components) influence the researcher? How does the researcher's approach to the study change over time? What role does the researcher's affective responses play, and how do emotions influence the research outcome?

3. Presentation

Another question that is important concerning theological research is the researcher's role in the presentation and framing of their work. In other words, what intervention does the study claim to be making? And to what audience does the study speak to?

Deadline for abstracts

Abstracts should include a clear leading question related to outline above and should be submitted till February 15th 2023. Please submit the abstract at eyad.abuali@hu-berlin.de.

Organization information:

The workshop will be held in September 2023, in person in Berlin, with a preliminary workshop in the last week of April 2023, to be held online.

For more information, please contact Dr. Claudia Seize (claudia.Seise@hu-berlin.de) or Dr. Eyad Abuali (eyad.abuali@hu-berlin.de).