MDPI

Article

Who Defines Islam? Critical Perspectives on Islamic Studies

Abdessamad Belhaj

Institute of Religion and Society, University of Public Service, 1083 Budapest, Hungary;
belhaj.abdessamad@uni-nke.hu

Abstract: This paper endeavors to answer the question of who defines Islam as an academic discipline. Firstly, it discusses the epistemic authority of producers and transmitters of knowledge about Islam. It is argued here that, despite modernization, religious scholars and learning centers in the Muslim world still define, to a certain extent, the main curriculum of texts and interpretations of the Muslim tradition within the discipline of Islamic studies. Furthermore, Western scholars of Islamic studies must navigate between the demands of politics and identity, which put pressure on the discipline. Secondly, this article maps the major models and approaches of Islamic studies at work today. In particular, this section highlights the diversity of research norms and practices in Europe. Finally, multiple critiques produced by decolonial, historicist, and theological views within the field of Islamic studies are shown to be complementary rather than exclusivist.

Keywords: critique; Islamic studies; Islam

1. Introduction

Born as *Islamwissenschaft* in Germany in the second half of the 19th century, then exported to France as *islamologie*, and later as Islamic studies to the English-speaking world, the study of Islam as a discipline has always been contested.[1] A key question in the controversies around Islamic studies is who defines Islam as a subject study. Claiming to define Islam is an argument for epistemic authority, that is, to the right to research and inform others about Islam. Since epistemic authority is only legitimate in relation to a specific community of readers and seekers of knowledge, diverse as they are across the world, it matters for whom we define Islam as well. For example, a researcher who studies the biography of the Prophet (*sīra*) as a set of normative narratives, engaging with their contents (i.e., Muḥammad and the Jewish tribes) operates in a different way from the researcher who investigates the transmission of these narratives as historical material.

For this reason, the pluralism of the epistemologies, models, and paradigms of defining Islam as a subject of study today is a given matter of fact. In Germany, the birthplace of the discipline, we have seen the emergence of "Muslim academic epistemic communities", leading to the secession of *Islamische Theologie* (intended for Muslims) from *Islamwissenschaft* (now seen as a discipline of non-Muslims). Jan Felix Engelhardt, a leading researcher and actor in this transformation, has the following to say about the hybridization of Islamic studies with Islamic theology:

> In Germany, an epistemic community within the study of Islam trans- formed from a low institutionalized network of Muslim scholars into an autonomous aca- demic discipline that combines epistemic and social insiderism in its studies: Islamic Theology. In the US, the epistemic community works as a network of scholars based mainly on an epistemic-normative research framework within the existing structure of disciplines dealing with Islam—primarily Islamic Studies. This different institutional development shows that science systems may react in various ways to the emergence of insiderism within the study of Islam, by either establishing a separate discipline or allowing insiderism to take place within the existing disciplines (Engelhardt 2016, pp. 740–41).

As pointed out by Agai and Omerika, *Islamische Studien* was suggested as the name of the new discipline as opposed to the older, "secular" discipline of *Islamwissenschaft*, but *Islamische Theologie* (Islamic theological studies) better expresses the specific content of the new discipline, keeping *Islamwissenschaft* for "purely academic purposes" (Agai and Omerika 2017, p. 330). In France, *islamologie appliquée* or *pratique* of Mohammad Arkoun is increasingly competing with the classical *islamologie*. For the past ten years, *islamologie* has been at the heart of debates and political–ideological issues in France. The risk of polarization did not spare the Anglo-American universities, where decolonial Islamic studies is a serious challenge to the existing liberal tradition of studying Islam within departments of religious studies. The latter has long provided a functional approach to studying Islam as history, religious thought, rituals, and ethos (Martin 1996).

The evolution of Islamic studies can be predicated on the regional and global changes within Islam and the West (Nanji 1997, pp. xii–iii). Larger forces (e.g., the reform of Judaism, Orientalism, the identity politics of the 1960s, 9/11, the fight against terrorism, the creation of a liberal Islam, etc.) create new epistemic communities and establish diverse interpretive lenses to study Islam (Hughes 2007). Defining Islam also depends on whether Islam is taken as a religion (a set of rituals and norms), a political theology, social practices, a civilization, or a product of the media (Rippin 2007). Islam, thus, manifests itself in a variety of dimensions, and defining it is only possible if one studies one dimension at a time. In European contexts, Islamic studies strives to normalize its interdisciplinary character and the diversity of its epistemic communities despite some resistance within universities and Muslim communities (Pisani and Aziadé-Zemerli 2023).

In this paper, I will attempt to answer the question of who defines Islam as an academic discipline by addressing three tasks: 1. Discussing the epistemic authority of the producers and transmitters of the Muslim learning tradition. I argue that, despite modernization, religious scholars and learning centers in the Muslim world still define, to a certain extent, the main curriculum of texts and interpretations of the Muslim tradition within the discipline of Islamic studies. 2. Identifying the major models and approaches of Islamic studies at work today. This section will emphasize the diversity of research norms and practices in Europe. 3. Arguing that the multiple critiques produced by decolonial, historicist, and theological views within the field of Islamic studies are complementary rather than exclusivist.

2. Who Defines Islam?: A Question of Religious and Epistemic Authority

While Russell T. McCutcheon's call to study religion as "critics not caretakers" (McCutcheon 2001) and Stanley Fish's claim that competing interpretative communities rather than basic texts shape a literary tradition (Fish 1980) are compelling, in the case of Islam, caretakers and texts still play a central role in defining the tradition.

2.1. Texts and Caretakers

Islam was born as a revelation (the Quran), and, thus, it puts emphasis on logocentrism and authoritative words (similarly to Judaism and Christianity) (Arkoun 1972, pp. 5–51). Throughout its history, medieval Muslim scholars studied Islam as a tradition of transmitted sources, focusing in particular on three types of texts: the Quran, *ḥadīth*, and *fiqh* literature. Insofar as these sources regulated the practice of religion itself (in religious rituals), as well as the management of private and public life (including everyday transactions), the Quran, *ḥadīth*, and *fiqh* were authoritative in themselves. These texts were memorized, transmitted, and commented on until modern times. When European scholars, especially within the German tradition (the Germans C. H. Becker and Theodor Nöldeke; the Hungarian I. Goldziher; and the Dutch C. Snouck Hurgronje), created the *Islamwissenschaft*, they shaped the discipline of Islamic studies along the same lines, that is, by conducting research mostly on the Quran, *ḥadīth*, and *fiqh* sources. As Asad puts it, "if one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith.

Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals. It is a tradition" (Asad 1986, p. 20).

Some leading scholars of Islamic studies in 19th-century Europe not only centered their attention on the Muslim discursive tradition (investigating the religious texts of the Quran, *ḥadīth*, and *fiqh*, among others) but also interacted with the caretakers of the Muslim tradition (Goldziher, Snouck Hurgronje, and Massignon come to mind in particular). Traveling to the Muslim world, sometimes for prolonged periods, was a main source of information on Islam (Kohlberg 1987, p. 33). Furthermore, as caretakers of the Muslim discursive tradition, Muslim theologians continue to produce commentaries, edit manuscripts, expand on classical knowledge, etc., all of which provide rich material for research in Islamic studies. Most Western scholars of Islam entertain partnerships, scholarship programs, and anchors in the Muslim world. Thus, the discipline of Islamic studies is partially defined by the clerics of Islam today, insofar as researchers are indebted to their works, interpretations, and teachings. Many Western scholars acknowledge their debt to contemporary Muslim scholars in the formation of their own research (Vishanoff 2004, p. vi). Conversely, many Muslims acknowledge their debt to Western scholars of Islam (Badawī 1993). This means that the transfer of knowledge can go both ways, enriching Islamic studies in the West as well as in the Muslim world.

2.2. Western Researchers and Universities between Politics and Identity

Muslim immigration to the West and the major geopolitical clashes between Western foreign policies and states in the Middle East brought about a dramatic interest in Islamic studies. In the 1980s and the 1990s, and especially since 2001, the field turned from a marginal area of research in humanities into a major field of academic activity. Today, the Index Islamicus of Brill contains 575,000 records, covering over 3000 active periodicals in the West.[2] Demand for expertise on Islam in the West comes from two main "clients": 1. Western media, agencies of foreign affairs, and internal security bodies that promote particular political agendas, perceiving Islamist terrorism as having "a decisive religious dimension"; some governmental agencies seek the expertise of researchers in Islamic studies for confirmation bias: they use information and opinions that confirm their political agendas. This is the case of Bernard Lewis, whose expertise on Islam was mobilized by neoconservatives in the US (Shalbak 2018, p. 509). Muslim governments also voluntarily dwell in this market, as they fund departments or centers of research on Islamic studies in the West to influence the political agenda on Islam[3]. 2. Muslim students, born or raised in the West, increasingly impose limits for spiritual or identity reasons on teaching Islamic studies in Western universities as accusations of Islamophobia become a serious problem.[4]

In particular, politics have indeed impacted the field of Islamic studies since 1979 (the Islamic Revolution in Iran), as shown by the number of publications on jihad (the Index Islamicus cites 1567 publications)[5]. Interest in jihad (as a chapter of classical Islamic law), violence; Islamic political thought; and other related themes, such as Hanbalism, Salafism, fundamentalism, etc., became a driving force of investigation in Islamic studies. Hundreds of researchers in the West come to the rescue of Western political agendas, as well as Islamism, providing justification for the incompatibility of Muslim beliefs with the demands of modernity, Islamic exceptionalism, the inherently political character of Islam, etc. (Ghalioun 2009, pp. 142–51; Dakhli 2016, pp. 4–17). As researchers and universities strive to claim epistemic authority on Islam, their enterprise is increasingly contested as Islam becomes more political, mediatized, and securitized. Polarization has, thus, offered researchers of Islamic studies ample opportunities, and yet, at the same time, it casts doubt on the authoritativeness of their research.

To illustrate the influence of politics in Islamic studies, let me quote Clinton Bennett, whose overview of Islamic studies starts with a section on politics and the study of Islam, which goes as follows:

> The last 20 years has seen chairs, programs, and centers established in Islamic
> Studies, quite a few with funding from Muslim rulers and organizations. This

funding has raised the question, in Britain, Germany, the United States of America, and Australia—are strings attached that might compromise academic integrity? Britain's Centre for Social Cohesion published a report in 2009 called A Degree of Influence on the funding of "strategically important subjects in British universities," which focuses on Islamic Studies. Government interest in the subject or field of Islamic Studies, alongside A Degree of Influence, suggests that Islamic Studies cannot be pursued in isolation from politics, actual or perceived national interests, culture war, even from how the media covers Islam (Bennett 2013, pp. 4–5).

Identity is another leading element of demand in Islamic studies in the West. The demand for identity discourses is global (Islamic practice, Islamic dress, Islamic food, etc.), which initially spread from the Middle East to Muslim communities in the West. However, there is a local and autonomous Muslim identity market in the West that favors a return to tradition and authenticity (Hughes 2015; Sinclair 2019, pp. 403–21). It is not claimed here that Muslim students who attend classes on Islamic studies shape the discipline of Islamic studies in a broader way. However, the identity demands of Muslims in the West can sometimes create a market for research on particular Islamic topics such as the headscarf (the Index Islamicus cites 337 publications on *ḥijāb*).[6] The Index Islamicus also shows that works on the identity of Muslims in the West have increased to 1664 publications as of 2023.[7] Some topics that were once anecdotal in Islamic studies, such as Islamic ethics and Sufism, have been increasingly rising since the 1990s. Thus, the Society for the Study of Muslim Ethics was created in 2010 in the US, a journal of Islamic ethics was established in 2017 (published at Brill), and another journal for Sufi studies (also at Brill) was established in 2012. Thus, Western researchers and universities have had to provide expertise on trending topics such as the headscarf, modesty, and gender in a way that does not transgress Muslim traditions. In this manner, Muslim piety (as literature and practices) also defines Islamic studies. Providing "expertise on trending topics" does not necessarily mean that identity influences how topics are discussed in all contexts. This means that, in certain contexts, this can be the case. For example, in France, since the terrorist attacks in 2015, some lecturers on Islam display a certain *Islamo-gauchisme*, that is, sympathy toward Muslims as oppressed people.[8]

Let me now introduce a quote by Aaron Hughes, who comments on the emergence of a discourse on the progressive Muslim identity among scholars of Islamic studies in the USA:

> This redefinition of Islamic studies and what gets to count (or not count) as valid scholarship creates real epistemological problems. What role, for example, do non-Muslims or even Muslims who are interested in historical and critical scholarship have to play in this new Islamic studies? Islamic Religious Studies, to reiterate, risks becoming a form of liberal Muslim theology...this "progressive" identity is something that is manufactured by scholars of Islamic Religious Studies. And that is precisely what they do: seek one another out, read each other's works, write blurbs for each other's books, and invite one another to their conferences, where religious studies and overt (not even crypto-) theology intermingle (Hughes 2012, p. 112).

Researchers in Islamic studies can be under pressure from various forces and factors in the West (Bernasek and Canning 2009, pp. 259–75; Kurzman and Ernst 2012, p. 42). For instance, any researcher who wishes to teach or publish a paper on the Muslim headscarf ought to show sensitivity to various expectations at the same time; otherwise, if the researcher sacrifices one perspective for the sake of coherence, he/she risks de-legitimization as an "objective" academic of Islam. This is true of all disciplines, as failure to address competing perspectives can lead to false conclusions. Thus, writing on the Muslim headscarf needs to take into account the feminist claims of critical Muslims who argue that the Muslim tradition is not as rigid ethically as is widely held. One, thus, ought to unveil the "liberal side of scripture" since the headscarf is but an invention of modern Islamism.

Yet, the researcher should also take into consideration the opposite claim, namely, that Islamic scripture is a source of Islamic patriarchal practices, supporting, to a certain extent, misogynistic views; all this should be expressed in politically correct terms in order to avoid hurting critical Muslims and enrolled Muslim students at the university. Finally, research on Muslim veils should satisfy neo-traditionalist Muslims who see it as a symbol of modesty and post-modern ethics. Often the conclusion is shallow enough to allow everyone to fit well in the outcome of this "Bed of Procrustes". Accordingly, academia usually defines Islamic studies only insofar as it negotiates between various demands coming from conflicting political and religious publics.

Epistemic authority is an authority that is based on knowledge (De George 1976, p. 79), but *knowledge of Islam* is imprecise. It can mean knowledge of Islam needed by the state to justify its policies, as most available funding on Islam is monitored by powerful economic and political actors who expect concrete and useful findings. It can also mean "Islamic knowledge" sought by students, communities, and researchers to satisfy their spiritual needs; this kind of knowledge is religious and normative, which can make the researcher, willingly or unwillingly, a preacher or a theologian. Knowledge of Islam can, lastly, mean subjective reflections, polemics, and opinions expressed about Islam. Consequently, any researcher who claims epistemic authority on Islam will need to confront diverse institutions, theologians, communities, and intellectuals who compete with him/her in producing and disseminating knowledge on Islam. This applies to all disciplines as well since a thorough research method considers all aspects of its topic in various contexts. The epistemic authority of the academic on Islamic studies faces a paradox then: it is necessary, in the current political context, to respond to various needs, and yet, researchers should be humble enough to lay low and accept the dividing lines, the interests involved, and the diversity of figures who claim epistemic authority on Islam.

To conclude this section, it can be said that, as a discipline, Islamic studies is defined by Islamic authoritative texts and a millennium of discursive tradition and its caretakers, as well as by Western academics who sail, in the realm of the possible, between the expectations of political power, pious Muslims, and competing figures of Islamic authority (intellectuals and theologians mainly).

3. Islamic Studies: A Diversity of Models and Approaches

So far, we have discussed Islamic studies as producing academic knowledge on Islam, as well as the claims to epistemic authority made by the producers of this knowledge. I will now turn to the structures and the various methodologies involved in the production of knowledge on Islam. It is argued here that the institutional models of organizing knowledge on Islam and the research techniques deployed to investigate Islamic themes are also responsible for shaping academic discourse on Islam.

3.1. Models of Islamic Studies in Europe

Initially, I thought it would be important to examine how Islamic studies evolved as a field of study in our multipolar world (beyond Europe). However, in the space of one article, it is impossible to cover the various models of conducting research and organizing knowledge on Islam in countries as diverse as Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Russia, and China. Yet, it is necessary to expand the view and investigate models of Islamic studies from the East and West for any comprehensive account of the current status of the discipline. Thus, my task in this section will be to make a few remarks on the functioning models in Western Europe.

Let us contextualize Islamic studies in Europe. Three variables seem to be at work in the background of conducting academic research on Islam in Western Europe. First, the Islamic networks of producing authoritative knowledge by Muslims (first-or-second-generation figures of authority) established as institutes, research centers, faculties, or even academic chairs in Western universities (Bano 2022, pp. 20–35); for example, Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss Muslim intellectual, was a professor of contemporary Islamic studies

at the University of Oxford between 2009 and 2018.[9] Second, ordinary Muslims engage in learning and developing Islamic knowledge as individuals or communities (van Bruinessen 2011, pp. 1–27). This is by no means a marginal factor. Indeed, as Muslims became the bulk of students, instructors, and researchers of Islamic studies in Western Europe, academia had to shift the kind of readings they require, topics, methodologies, and sensitivity displayed.[10] Third, Islam is a contested field of political conflict, mobilized by various state and non-state actors. For the past 20 years or so, Islamic studies have been at the heart of political–ideological debates and issues in Europe—and even attempts at political–ideological–religious instrumentalization by states—in connection to its role in understanding and/or fighting Islamic radicalization. Islamic studies in Europe have also been solicited as a resource in governmental and community initiatives, notably in the thorny question of the training of imams. For example, in the UK, the government provided funding in 2007 to higher education institutions to address gaps in Islamic studies (teaching and research) that could be made for the training of imams (Ali 2018, p. 297).

A major feature of current research on Islamic studies concerns the increase in its hybrid character as an academic and theological discipline. Besides autonomous academic Islamic studies (understood as *Islamwissenschaft*, which would not hesitate to articulate itself to a critique of Muslims or Islamic sources), often housed within faculties of arts and humanities, and which works on Islam from historicist premises and methods of teaching or investigation, another type of Islamic studies is developing as a hybrid discipline; this hybrid Islamic studies could be defined as that which primarily addresses Muslims, training them for theological or confessional careers and starting from or respecting the premises of Muslim faith and traditions (forming new collaborations with religious authorities or representatives of the religion). In Germany, centers for Muslim theology have existed since 2012 within state universities, thus diversifying the historical offer of departments of Arabic language and classical Islamic studies often created in the 19th century in the tradition of Orientalistik and then in that of Islamwissenschaft (Agai 2015, pp. 181–95). The University of Vienna in Austria has opened a similar center, directed by Ednan Aslan, which aims to offer a pluralist, even liberal, teaching of Muslim theology. The University of Helsinki has established a Chair of Muslim Theology based on the same model. In France, although the experience remains largely different, an attempt to create a master's degree in Islamic studies in Strasbourg has been successful, albeit with difficulties.[11] In Belgium, the Leuven Centre for the Study of Islam, Culture and Society headed by Chaïma Ahaddour, Professor of Islamic Ethics at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, combines the ethical concerns of Muslims with research methods in theology and ethics.[12]

Despite these changes and the hybridization of research on Islam in Europe, the classical model of Islamic studies known as *Islamwissenschaft* is still dominant and clearly distinguishable. Islamic studies is often housed in faculties of arts and humanities, studying Islamic traditional disciplines from historicist premises. The disciplines of Islam are approached through philology via the study of the terminology of the authors and the criticism of the major sources of each discipline. They are also analyzed from a historical perspective by studying their central ideas and figures, their currents of thought, their relationship to previous and subsequent processes, and their diversities. It should also be noted that Islamic sources are analyzed, in particular, in their relationship with non-Muslim religions and philosophies (the Greco-Roman world, Christianity, Judaism, etc.). In short, it is a discourse on Islam as language and history, and not as content or arguments. It is understandable, therefore, that Islamic studies could not be popular among Muslim audiences who expect a content-oriented look at faith and spirituality and an understanding of the "coherence" of the foundational texts. Most departments of Islamic studies in European universities offer similar research and teaching programs centered around the core subjects of the history of the Muslim world, the texts of the Qur'an, the Prophetic tradition, Islamic law, and Islamic theology, supplemented by secondary topics such as Islamic philosophy, Shi'a Islam, Sufism, Islamic ethics, and modern Arab–Muslim thought.

3.2. Approaches to Islamic Studies

As a branch of humanities, Islamic studies embraces a variety of methods, constantly cross-fertilizing its tools with evolving techniques in social, historical, and philological sciences. The various approaches used in Islamic studies reflect diverse perspectives on how Islam as an idea or history is perceived by researchers (Waardenburg 1973, pp. 247–60). Each approach emphasizes one aspect of the norms and realities of Islam. Therefore, all approaches are defining, in some way, our current knowledge of Islam, and yet all of them show certain limitations and weaknesses. This highlights the importance of approaching Islam from a multidisciplinary perspective.

Let us begin with the phenomenological approach, which finds its most successful application in Islamic ethics and Sufism (Henry Corbin, Annemarie Schimmel, etc.). This approach, as described by Mujiburrahman, is anti-reductive (does not reduce the religious experience to historical factors), a-theological (supposedly, it is not influenced by a certain commitment to religious beliefs), and ahistorical (does not differentiate between what actually happened and what is thought to have happened, because history for believers is "myth", with a religious significance) (Mujiburrahman 2001, pp. 442–43). This approach can be useful in helping understand Muslim piety as a whole but fails to satisfy most academics, who expect contextualized knowledge about the experience as an interaction with past beliefs and experiences or contemporary realities. In recent years, to counter-balance the explosion of academic work on Salafism and Islamism, interest in Islamic ethics and Sufism has increased, and the phenomenological approach has made a great impact on various departments of Islamic studies, especially in North America. With this approach, however, there is a serious risk that a researcher will blur the boundaries between "knowledge of Islam" and "ideological claims about Islam".

Since the turn in social science in the 1970s, especially in France, a generation of applied Islamicists has emerged who are also trained in or borrow the tools of sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, etc., looking more at Islam as complex and plural realities and at textual data in relation to different historical contexts (Arkoun 1984). This cross-fertilization of Islamic studies and social science can be seen particularly in France in the *islamologie appliquée*, following Akoun's influence. Beyond France, Islamic studies have evolved as a result of incorporating the research methods of social science, and scholars also have a much better understanding of how societies functioned in the past, how social control has been maintained, how politics has been negotiated, and how propaganda has been mobilized by different sides (Crone 2016, p. 246). In particular, anthropology is a brilliant tool fruitfully exploited by many researchers, for example, Jacqueline Chabbi in her anthropological study of the Quran around the concepts of alliance, gifts, and guidance (Chabbi 2016). Yet, sometimes, the *islamologie appliquée* and its offshoots can be an exhibition of the latest theories, with little relevance to the history of Islam and its traditions.

More recently, various attempts have been made to propose new methods of studying Islam, using concepts of history, philology, comparative theology, cultural theory, geography, anthropology, hermeneutics, and phenomenology (Aghdassi and Hughes 2022; Aghdassi and Hughes 2023). Yet, the historical–philological method of research on Islam is still the most defining approach to Islamic studies. It consists in the study of the texts of the Muslim tradition through careful work on the classical Arabic language, translation, and the method of commentary in seminars. The historical–philological method can limit itself to work on Muslim literary sources, in line with the premises and traditions of Muslim scholarship in general, or include the study of relevant and contemporary non-Arabic literature and material, such as archeology, epigraphy, and numismatics (Koren and Nevo 1991, p. 87).

4. The Need for Multiple Critiques

The critical study of Islam can denote a criticism or critical comment on some given problem or the art or practice of criticism (Mas 2012, p. 389). Besides the ambiguity of critique, there is also an absence of academic consensus on what ought to be the limit of

critique. Furthermore, the concept of critique as Western criticism of the Islamic tradition can be politically significant (Mas 2012, p. 389). Nevertheless, a great deal of published work takes critique to be exclusivist. Far from developing a relativistic approach, I argue that, to a certain degree, all types of critique are legitimate and can be useful to the study of Islamic texts and realities, provided that each type of critique acknowledges its limitations and the fact that multiplicity is inherent to inquiry.

4.1. Practices of Critique

When it comes to critique, perhaps the most defining practices of critique in Islamic studies nowadays are historical critique and decolonial critique. The former has prevailed in Islamic studies in the West, continuously focusing on source critique, that is, the critical examination of sources with the tools of history and philology to verify their validity. It also implies a critical attitude toward Muslim claims about their beliefs, texts, and history. This critique produced fundamental research on Islam from the 19th century until, most recently, *Le Coran des historiens* (Dye and Amir-Moezzi 2019). However, this type of critique can be fundamentalist, especially when it takes its process of falsifying or verifying Muslim claims about tradition to the extreme. I will illustrate this limitation with the example of violence in the biography of the Prophet (*sīra*). The biography of the Prophet (*sīra*) is religious literature that was written in the course of the 9th century about events that supposedly happened in the 7th century. The term *sīra* (short for *al-sīra al-nabawiyya*, which means "the *sīra* of the Prophet") refers to the life of the Prophet Muhammad. It has a double meaning: 1. a narrative meaning as the events of Muhammad's life and 2. an ethical meaning of an exemplary journey, path, or model to follow. Although its value as a historical source has been questioned by classical and modern scholars, *sīra* continues to be used for the purposes of the historical reconstruction of Muhammad's life and the early history of Islam by Western scholars. Early Muslims looked at the *sīra* as a major source of ethical teachings in relation to the concept of prophecy; the nature of religious authority, law, and guidance on the right path; the ultimate truth; etc. (Miskinzoda 2019). Muslims started writing about Muhammad to tell the story of a people led by a man or simply to tell the story of a man who overcame various difficulties and temptations with one eye on the Quran and the other on their own challenges. The *sīra* derived its structure from the Quran while also attempting to provide the revelatory context of the Quranic verses. Thus, the *sīra* reflects the image of the Muslim tradition based on the norms intended as paths for individuals and communities. Thus, the quest of finding the historical Muhammad is hindered by the sheer unreliability of the sources (if taken as accounts of historical truth), as shown by F. E. Peters (1991, p. 306). Within European scholarship, some researchers endorse a fundamentalist critique by historicizing Islamic narratives and attempting to validate or discredit the "historical truth of these stories" in order to prove that the Prophet prosecuted his adversaries or that such prosecution could not have taken place, drawing therefore, general conclusions about early Islam and violence. We have seen this type of critique gaining momentum since 9/11, and hundreds of publications have been made about Islam and violence, approaching early Islamic narratives as a precedent for Muslim violence. While these narratives teach Islamic worldviews on violence and peace, they are normative and prescriptive (under certain conditions) but not descriptive or positive sources of what happened or what should happen in all circumstances. Of course, a fundamentalist view within Muslim milieus is widely diffused, and the treatment of early Muslim narratives as historical truths or prescriptive in all circumstances is wide. However, both attitudes of fundamentalist critique and fundamentalist Muslim apologetics take the stories of the *sīra* too literally rather than reflecting on what they mean as narratives for a nascent Islam in terms of individual and public ethics. And so, these polemics still inhabit critiques of Muslim tradition, although Western scholarship has done a lot of work to bypass this negative attitude (Daneshgar and Hughes 2020, pp. 1–8).

Let us now turn to another type of critique, known as the decolonial critique, which has been significant in Western universities since E. Said's *Orientalism* (Said 1978). This

type of critique targets Islamic studies as an enterprise of Western ideological power over Muslims disguised as expertise on Islam; it finds roots in the critical attitudes of Muslim intellectuals and others from colonized areas in Asia and Africa since the encounter with European imperialism. In particular, antagonism toward *istishrāq*, orientalism, is a popular subject in modern Islamic thought. As it benefited from the turn in cultural studies in the West, decolonial critique is more sophisticated than apologetic critique. That is the reason it has its merits. For example, it can be useful in identifying the political agendas, ethnic centrism, and philosophical beliefs of researchers in Islamic studies, which are implied or assumed in studies on Islam and Muslims. Some of the voices of recent decolonial Islamic studies include Irfan Ahmad, who published *Religion as Critique* in 2017 (Ahmad 2017); W. Hallaq's *Restating Orientalism* (Hallaq 2018); and the journal *ReOrient: The Journal of Critical Muslim Studies* (edited by Salman Sayyid). Their critiques teach us to see the motifs of fear, violence, Eurocentrism, and essentialism, as they inhibit "seemingly objective" Islamic studies (whether written by Muslims or non-Muslims). A positive effect of decolonial critique is counter-balancing the "jihadization of Islam" by "research" on Islam, politics, and violence, which has flooded the market and universities since 2001.

However, the decolonial critique can often be mere ideology and absurd cultural wars. A recent example of this "ideological critique" is Ayesha Chaudhry's article on the critical historiography of Western Islamic legal studies. Chaudhry stated that "there is no reason why Arabic should be a prerequisite for the study of Islam and Muslims. Most Muslims do not speak Arabic, do not regard the Qur'an as an authoritative legal text, and do not live a life structured by Islamic laws or what they believe to be Islamic laws" (Chaudhry 2019, p. 29). Such a statement is tantamount to saying that English is not necessary to study English literature. The reason Chaudhry went to this extreme position is her critique of Western academia regarding the study of Islam. Since Western Islamic studies has made the study of Arabic essential to understanding Islam, that also might be a "tool of power", which should be eliminated. Certainly, the study of Islamic law by Westerners has its flaws, sometimes involving imperialistic agendas and Eurocentric positions, but questioning the value of classical Arabic in studying Islamic law is not a radical critique but an ideological overreaction.

Precisely, the decolonial critique has a major limitation, namely, that it often confuses epistemic authority and power. Yet, there is a line to draw between the two. European scholars of Islamic studies have demonstrated epistemic authority in helping better understand the Muslim tradition (beyond the so-called sympathies many European researchers have developed toward Islam and Muslims). One such case of epistemic authority is that of Ignác Goldziher, the Hungarian scholar of Islam, whose book *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, published in 1920 (and translated into Arabic in 1955), has impacted the history of Quranic exegesis in the West and the Muslim world up to today, enjoying certain epistemic authority among Muslims and non-Muslims (Saleh 2012, pp. 201–14).

4.2. Islamic Studies between Power, Hegemonic Epistemology, and Competence

Like in any other field of human inquiry, various discourses of power, competence, and hegemonic epistemology compete constantly in Islamic studies. We must, then, distinguish between these discourses and critically evaluate each approach fairly and properly (although that may not be an easy task). Some researchers in Islamic studies, such as Bernard Lewis (and his line of thought), can indeed embrace the imperialist attitudes of some arrogant and disdainful Western authors. This discourse on manifest power and the securitization of Islam has greatly shaped the literature on political Islam in some Western universities as well (Eroukhmanoff 2015, p. 246). It is a discourse that posits Muslims as incompatible with modernity and, therefore, colonizable. However, my own experience as a reader and researcher in Islamic studies (over 25 years of experience) reveals that many researchers in Western universities do not give any credit to this discourse of manifest power. However, there is a discourse of latent power displayed in the claims regarding "hegemonic epistemology" practiced by some Western researchers who privilege

specific secularist, rationalist, and historicist methods of approaching Islam. M. Arkoun has frequently warned against this dimension of power in Western Islamic studies, showing how hegemonic rationalism in the West, which reproduces the enlightenment paradigm of thought (existing since the eighteenth century), can inhibit the study of Islam (Arkoun 2002, p. 21). Latent power can influence some Western claims of reconstructing the meanings of the Muslim tradition or the understanding of Islam as a religion with its various relationships to sociohistorical articulations or constellations (Olsson and Stenberg 2015, p. 205). In general, Said, Hallaq, and Asad have made compelling arguments about the links between Western knowledge and power (Said 1978; Hallaq 2018; Asad 1993).

My observation has been that latent power can also be seen in the "protected authority of the outsider", a main criterion of whose voice is academically "heard" among researchers; many academic circles in the West reproduce privileged quotes and authors, as well as "canonized references", almost as a totem, a world that is usually closed to "the insiders". Yet, there is a debate that opposes "some researchers who advocate a strict 'out- sider' perspective, while some advocate a more empathetic and engaged approach towards an 'insider's' perspective" (Olsson and Stenberg 2015, p. 204). The religious and academic lines between outsiders and insiders are still difficult to cross. As a side effect, primary sources are approached less and less with curiosity and passion; the theory or the agenda of the doctoral advisor sets the framework, further weakening the quality and critical perspective of the currently produced research.

One of the shortcomings of many researchers who work on Islam is that they read between the lines of religious texts in a quest for "political Islam". Thus, they emphasize a version of "Muslim exceptionalism" (a shared property with Muslim fundamentalists) in which Islam is depicted as particularly militant. Thus, there is much to be gained in studying Islam in a similar manner to the study of other religions (as symbolic narratives about belief, conduct, and salvation) by avoiding the fallacy of presentism (thinking about the past from the perspective of the present). In particular, the present in the Muslim world, especially in the Middle East, constitutes an object of power and interest for the West, which can make the study of Islam and Muslims a tool in a global ideological war. Some researchers willingly join this war, while others are instrumentalized. Decoupling Islamic studies, as much as possible, from economic interests and political alliances, which impact the academic study of Islam, to focus on religiosity could help better understand Islam and Muslims. In many circles in the West, the "orientalist discourse" has indeed become less condescending, although the geopolitical agenda did not change much, as new forms of colonization were implemented.

That said, I would argue that Western Islamic studies can also exhibit competence in editing manuscripts, producing relevant scholarship, and publishing thorough investigations, which are then translated by Muslims into their own languages (the list of translated works is too long to be included here). For example, the competence of Harald Motzki in hadith studies and Dimitri Gutas in Islamic philosophy have allowed Islamic studies to progress as a field. Most recently, the prestigious King Faisal Prize for Islamic studies in 2023 was awarded to the historian Robert Hillenbrand for his work on Muslim art and architecture.[13]

4.3. From Self-Criticism to Multiple Critiques

Leyla Dakhli, the French historian of Islam, has called Islamic studies a fighting sport, in relation to how terrorism has shaped the way Islam is approached by experts who created a world of their own, in which knowledge and power collide (Dakhli 2016, pp. 4–17). This can be seen in other European countries in which the question of jihad spread from think tanks (who respond to political agendas) to academic circles. Since 2001, it can be said that the political establishment has trapped the Islamicist in the world of jihad. Consequently, violence, its scale, and its context were approached in Muslim societies as if they were defining features of Islam. The excess of the jihadization of Islam in academia is as toxic to our understanding of Islam as jihadist groups are (monitored by various geopolitical

forces) to the societies of the Middle East and North Africa. Both are inflated products that not only fail to see the whole and real picture but also serve strategic interests, which can change overnight (since the coronavirus crisis and the war in Ukraine, we hear less about jihad); according to the Index Islamicus, there were 86 publications on jihad between 2021 and 2023, while between 2018 and 2020, there were 151, and between 2017 and 2019, the number of publications was 179.[14] There is, thus, decreasing demand regarding jihad as the political agenda has shifted its focus.

The many-sided critique is the only way out of misinformation; it begins with self-criticism and the acknowledgment of mutual critiques between multiple producers of knowledge on Islam as fact-checkers and moderators of discourse. Self-criticism should not be only preached to Muslims but should govern how researchers in Western academia envisage their own enterprise as well. The Homo Academicus, whether working on Islam or another subject, should also deal with its status as a political and social agent who reproduces certain hierarchies and interests, which it projects in its methodology and findings (Bourdieu 1984). There is no escape from the social and political dynamics of one's engagement with Islam. The credibility of a researcher can be saved if one creates distance from one's setting and assumptions about Islam and Muslims. Furthermore, critique should be mutual, in that researchers in Islamic studies who endorse a critical approach to Muslim sources and figures of authority need to also seriously read the Muslim critique (decolonial or non-decolonial) of their enterprise, findings, and methods. They might learn how incoherent their critical approach is and how lacking it can be in terms of philology and history. Finally, critique should be multiple. Apologetic and fundamentalist Muslim discourses are equally critiqueable, as are academic productions on Islam. None of them represent the truth about Islam. The latter being a strategic subject (of political importance for governments in Europe) and a matter of identity for Muslims in Europe, there is a tendency to classify one set of doctrines as "true" Islam and the other as an aberration (Gleave 2008, p. 156).

Within the West itself, Islam can be approached in many ways, and not only because Muslims in the West are also producing academic knowledge about Islam. Perhaps one concrete solution to the current crisis in Islamic studies is to widen the scope of edited journals, book series, and academic bodies, as well as research perspectives, into a much more diverse configuration. Without promoting any relativism, the mutual recognition of the diversity of models and approaches and the embrace of multiple critiques can be beneficial to the field of Islamic studies.

5. Conclusions

The main goal of the current paper was to answer the question of who defines Islam as a field of study. I have identified the Muslim discursive tradition, religious caretakers, and Western academia as the definition-makers of the discipline. Some Western researchers respond to demands for identity content (coming from Muslims living in the West, mainly), while others adapt to political demands by governments and other political actors, whose power agendas are in search of expertise or justification for particular interests in the Middle East put pressure on Islamic studies. Beyond identity and politics, the discipline of Islamic studies experiences various models and methodologies, especially in Europe. Processes of cross-fertilization with social science, Islamic theological studies, and philosophy have enriched the field, although philological–historical approaches continue to dominate research methods. Critique, being a major feature of Islamic studies, was shown to be multifaceted (self-criticism, historical critique, decolonial critique) and compulsory for the future of Islamic studies as a reliable field of inquiry.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Islamic studies—scientific or confessional? A contested University subject https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/ptr/departments/theologyandreligion/events/2018/islamic1903.aspx (accessed on 30 April 2023).

2 https://brill.com/display/db/iio?language=en&contents=about(accessed on 30 April 2023).

3 Saudi Prince Donates $40 Million to Harvard, Georgetown Universities: https://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=1402008 (accessed on 30 April 2023).

4 Grenoble: les noms de deux professeurs accusés d'islamophobie placardés sur les murs de l'IE: https://www.marianne.net/societe/grenoble-les-noms-de-deux-professeurs-accuses-dislamophobie-placardes-sur-les-murs-de-liep (accessed on 30 April 2023).

5 https://bibliographies.brill.com/IIO/trial/?anyField=jihad (accessed on 30 April 2023).

6 https://bibliographies.brill.com/trial/urn:cts:brillBibl:iio.79dd32f1ed/?searchNumber=2&totalItemCount=undefined&anyField=hijab (accessed on 30 April 2023).

7 https://bibliographies.brill.com/IIO/trial/?anyField=identity&subjects=Minorities%20(Muslim)%20%2F%20Muslims%20in%20non-Muslim%20societies (accessed on 30 April 2023).

8 «Islamo-gauchisme»: la majorité ne veut pas raviver le débat à l'université: https://www.la-croix.com/France/Islamo-gauchisme-majorite-veut-pas-raviver-debat-luniversite-2023-05-23-1201268397 (accessed on 30 April 2023).

9 Islamic Studies Chair is appointed: https://web.archive.org/web/20131203013519/http://www.ox.ac.uk/media/news_stories/2009/090730.html (accessed on 30 April 2023).

10 See most recently the controversy in the US over a university lecturer at Hamline University who showed an image of the Prophet Muhammad in class. An image of the Prophet Muhammad ignites an academic storm: https://religionnews.com/2023/01/03/an-image-of-the-prophet-muhammad-ignites-an-academic-storm/ (accessed on 30 April 2023).

11 Institut des mondes musulmans: https://histoire.unistra.fr/faculte/departements-et-instituts/departement-dhistoire/institut-des-mondes-musulmans (accessed on 30 April 2023).

12 Leuven Centre for the Study of Islam, Culture and Society: https://ghum.kuleuven.be/lcsics/members/00070795 (accessed on 30 April 2023).

13 https://www.arabnews.com/node/2272526/saudi-arabia (accessed on 30 April 2023).

14 https://bibliographies.brill.com/IIO/trial/?anyField=jihad&from=2018&to=2020 (accessed on 30 April 2023).

References

Agai, Bekim. 2015. Introducing Islamic Theological Studies at German Universities: Secular Expectations and Epistemic Rearrangements. *Toronto Journal of Theology* 31: 181–95. [CrossRef]

Agai, Bekim, and Armina Omerika. 2017. Islamic theological studies in Germany: A discipline in the making. In *The Piety of Learning: Islamic Studies in Honor of Stefan Reichmuth*. Edited by Michael Kemper and Ralf Elger. Leiden: Brill, pp. 330–57.

Aghdassi, Abbas, and Aaron W. Hughes. 2022. *New Methods in the Study of Islam*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Aghdassi, Abbas, and Aaron W. Hughes. 2023. *New Methodological Perspectives in Islamic Studies*. Leiden: Brill.

Ahmad, Irfan. 2017. *Religion as Critique: Islamic Critical Thinking from Mecca to the Marketplace*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Ali, Mansour. 2018. Muslim Chaplaincy as a Model for Imamship: From Liminality to Immanent Spirituality. In *Imams in Western Europe Developments, Transformations, and Institutional Challenges*. Edited by Niels Valdemar Vinding, Jan Jaap de Ruiter and Mohammed Hashas. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 295–314.

Arkoun, Mohammed. 1972. Logocentrisme et vérité religieuse dans la pensée islamique: D'après al-I'lām bi-manāqib al-Islām d'al-'Âmirî. *Studia Islamica* 35: 5–51. [CrossRef]

Arkoun, Mohammed. 1984. *Pour une Critique de la Raison Islamique*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose.

Arkoun, Mohammed. 2002. *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*. London: Saqi Books.

Asad, Talal. 1986. *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*. Washington: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies.

Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Badawī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān. 1993. *Mawsū'at al-mustashriqīn*. Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li-l-Malāyīn.

Bano, Masooda. 2022. Islamic Authority and Centres of Knowledge Production in Europe. *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 11: 20–35. [CrossRef]

Bennett, Clinton. 2013. Introduction. In *The Bloomsbury Companion to Islamic Studies*. Edited by Clinton Bennett. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 1–27.

Bernasek, Lisa, and John Canning. 2009. Influences on the Teaching of Arabic and Islamic Studies in UK Higher Education. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 8: 259–75. [CrossRef]

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Homo Academicus*. Paris: Ed. de Minuit.

Chabbi, Jacqueline. 2016. *Les Trois Piliers de L'islam: Lecture Anthropologique du Coran*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Chaudhry, Ayesha. 2019. Islamic Legal Studies: A Critical Historiography. In *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Law*. Edited by Anver M. Emon and Ahmed Rumee. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 5–44.

Crone, Patricia. 2016. *Islam, The Ancient Near East and Varieties of Godlessness*. Leiden: Brill.

Dakhli, Leyla. 2016. L'islamologie est un sport de combat. *Revue du Crieur* 3: 4–17. [CrossRef]

Daneshgar, Majid, and Aaron W. Hughes, eds. 2020. *Deconstructing Islamic Studies*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

De George, Richard T. 1976. *The Nature and Function of Epistemic Authority. Authority: A Philosophical Analysis*. Edited by R. Baine Harris. Alabama: University of Alabama Press, pp. 76–93.

Dye, Guillaume, and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi. 2019. *Le Coran des historiens*. Paris: Les éditions du Cerf.

Engelhardt, Jan Felix. 2016. On Insiderism and Muslim Epistemic Communities in the German and US Study of Islam. *The Muslim World* 106: 740–58. [CrossRef]

Eroukhmanoff, Clara. 2015. The Remote Securitisation of Islam in the US post-9/11: Euphemisation, Metaphors and the "Logic of Expected Consequences" in Counter-Radicalisation Discourse. *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8: 246–65. [CrossRef]

Fish, Stanley Eugene. 1980. *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Ghalioun, Burhan. 2009. L'islamologie au secours de l'islamisme. *Diogène* 226: 142–51. [CrossRef]

Gleave, Robert. 2008. The 'Future' of Islamic Studies: A Clutch of Conferences. *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 10: 153–56. [CrossRef]

Hallaq, Wael B. 2018. *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hughes, Aaron W. 2007. *Situating Islam: The Past and Future of an Academic Discipline*. London: Equinox.

Hughes, Aaron W. 2012. *Theorizing Islam Disciplinary Deconstruction and Reconstruction*. London: Equinox.

Hughes, Aaron W. 2015. *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity: An Inquiry into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self-Deception*. Sheffield: Equinox.

Kohlberg, Etan. 1987. Western Studies of Shi'a Islam. In *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*. Edited by Martin S. Kramer. Boulder: Westview Press, pp. 31–44.

Koren, Judith, and Yehuda D. Nevo. 1991. Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies. *Der Islam* 68: 87–107.

Kurzman, Charles, and Carl W. Ernst. 2012. Islamic Studies in U.S. Universities. *Review of Middle East Studies* 46: 24–46. [CrossRef]

Martin, Richard C. 1996. *Islamic Studies: A History of Religions Approach*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall.

Mas, Ruth. 2012. Why Critique? *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 24: 389–407.

McCutcheon, Russell T. 2001. *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Miskinzoda, Gurdofarid. 2019. *sīra*. Oxford: Oxford Bibliographies. [CrossRef]

Mujiburrahman, H. 2001. The Phenomenological Approach in Islamic Studies: An Overview of a Western Attempt to Understand Islam. *The Muslim World* 91: 425–50.

Nanji, Azim, ed. 1997. *Mapping Islamic Studies: Genealogy, Continuity, and Change*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Olsson, Susanne, and Leif Erik Stenberg. 2015. Engaging the History of Religions—From an Islamic studies Perspective. *Temenos—Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 51: 201–25. [CrossRef]

Peters, Francis Edward. 1991. The Quest of the Historical Muhammad. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23: 291–315. [CrossRef]

Pisani, Emmanuel, and Zohra Aziadé-Zemerli, eds. 2023. *Renouveau et dynamiques de l'islamologie en Europe*. Paris: Cerf.

Rippin, Andrew. 2007. *Defining Islam: A Reader*. London: Equinox.

Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Saleh, Walid. 2012. An Arabic translation of Ignaz Goldziher's Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung. *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14: 201–14. [CrossRef]

Shalbak, Ihab. 2018. The Roots of Bernard Lewis' Rage. *Postcolonial Studies* 21: 505–11. [CrossRef]

Sinclair, Kirstine. 2019. An Islamic University in the West and the Question of Modern Authenticity. *Numen* 66: 403–21. [CrossRef]

van Bruinessen, Martin. 2011. Producing Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe: Discipline, Authority, and Personal Quest. In *Producing Islamic Knowledge: Transmission and Dissemination in Western Europe*. Edited by Martin van Bruinessen and Stefano Allievi. London: Routledge, pp. 1–27.

Vishanoff, David R. 2004. *Early Islamic Hermeneutics: Language, Speech, and Meaning in Preclassical Legal Theory*. Ann Arbor: UMI.

Waardenburg, Jacques. 1973. Changes of perspective in Islamic studies over the last decades. *Humaniora Islamica* 1: 247–59.