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CONGRÈS

des études sur le Moyen-Orient
et les mondes musulmans

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Panel 23

The Invention and Reinvention of Tradition in Islam

The notion of tradition is a difficult one to grasp. On the one hand it is confused with backwardness and conservatism and thought to be obsolete in the name of modernity and the attachment to the present. On the other hand, it is equated to what constitutes the foundation of a culture and the inscription into a set of references, which are necessary to reach consensus within a community. The Islamic tradition illustrates this conceptual ambiguity; one of the major themes in contemporary Muslim thought is nothing else but the reconciliation or harmonization between tradition and modernity, authenticity and innovation (*asâla wa mu'âsara*). This tension allows for criticism towards tradition since it can be used to pronounce disagreement with religious extremism; it can even be used to invoke a tradition of peace, pluralism, and tolerance which should be considered as the main message of Islam and to reject all violent practices as a symptom of a non-tradition.

By asking the question of homogeneity or heterogeneity of the components of Islamic tradition this workshop proposes to think of unity within diversity and considers its identity in pluralism. Only this approach can bring a vibrant tradition to life and demonstrate how it nourishes reflections on the present and inspires projects in the future.

Person in charge : Dziri Amir (University of Fribourg)

Discussant : Nora Tazouti (ENS Lyon, UMR 5206)

Program

Makram Abbès (Professor in Arabic Studies, l'ENS, Lyon)

The Criticism of Tradition as a Sign of its Vitality

This presentation proposes to reflect on the different forms of criticism on the religious tradition of contemporary Islam, which constantly comes into conflict with apologetic or conservative positions. The current tendency in theological and ideological doctrines, in place since the beginning of the 20th century, can show it well: Islamism and Salafism alike seek an authentic essence that legitimizes their loyal adherence to the Islamic tradition; this can even go as far as confusing an abstract idea of Islamic tradition with the traditions, i.d. the sayings and habits of the Prophet. According to this presentation, attachment to tradition is misunderstood as the scrupulous respect towards the scriptures which embody the prophetic traditions, so that traditionalism (the defense of tradition) presents itself as traditionism (exclusive control over the body of hadith).

Maroussia Bednarkiewicz (Dr in Islamic Studies, University of Tübingen, Germany)

The Islamic call to prayer: Simplicity and Resilience of a tradition

The Islamic call to prayer, adhān, and its formulae are sounds of the past in our present. This simple call (nidā') was introduced in the first half of the seventh century CE and, under multiple influences, it seems to have quickly become a tradition with codified rituals that adapted to constantly changing circumstances, across time and space. It is practiced today by Muslims around the world and displays, along with its resilience, a homogeneity that contrasts with the heterogeneity of Muslims' societies. To which extent did the adhān adapt and reinvent itself while remaining a recognizable, central tradition? If "[t]raditions, to survive, must be fitting to the circumstances in which they operate and to which they are directed" (Edward Shils, 1981, p.258), how could the adhān 'fit' to such heterogeneity while retaining its unity? Could the adhān be at odds with Shils' paradigm and 'fit' to something else or does it hide a certain plurality behind its monolithic appearance?

Hocine Benkheira (Professor in Islamic Studies, EPHE)

Remarks on the Islamic Tradition: the Case of the Hadith on the Plague.

The largest part of the hadith collection contains medical traditions. Some of them seem to represent the medical knowledge of their time. This certainly is the case with a commandment concerning the fight against epidemics, which preoccupied discussions in the Islamic world and the Occident alike. Instead of reading it as a simple medical command, it was often read as an expression of a theological view.

Amir Dziri (Professor in Islamic Studies, University of Fribourg)

"the good old days in Islam": Classicist Thought and the Invention of Islamic Tradition in Contemporary Muslim Discourse.

In contemporary Muslim discourse, the reference to Islamic tradition has become a powerful instrument to declare one's adherence to an Islamic identity or even claim its authenticity. To evoke an Islamic tradition seems to be a legitimation in itself for a position or behavior to be called "Islamic". However, by proceeding with a thorough analysis one finds that talking of an Islamic tradition rather reflects a certain attitude of remembrance and a call to the past.