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CONGRESS

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Studies

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Panel 7 a)

Human Sciences and Epistemological Debates in Contemporary Islamic Thought

Since the middle of the 20th century, Muslim thinkers have considered human sciences as a decisive instrument for the transformation or defense of Islamic knowledge and culture. Among the disciplines, history and law are seen as means of reconstructing, subverting or asserting the legal, epistemic and theological legacy of Islam. Rooted in the human sciences, theologians and jurists from Syria, Iran and other countries have undertaken to criticize classical Islamic knowledge. Their criticisms led to new formulations of dogmas and legal theory, and even to the creation of new disciplines of knowledge within religious schools. At the same time, the historiographies of European scholars of Islam were challenged both by religious scholars and by international cultural institutions that wanted to promote specifically Islamic writing of history. By paying attention to scientific and cultural institutions, the workshop participants would like to highlight the content and scope of the epistemological debates conducted within them. In particular, they aim to highlight the patrimonial stakes of scientific norms and the interactions between scientific work on Islam and the debates of actors who speak in the name of Islam.

Person in charge : Constance Arminjon, École pratique des hautes études (EPHE-PSL)

Discussants: Dominique Avon, Rainer Brunner, Pierre-Jean Luizard

Program

Dominique Avon (École pratique des hautes études, EPHE-PSL)

Muḥammad al-Ġazālī vs Ignaz Goldziher: a historiographical issue

In the late 1950s, shaykh M. al-Ġazālī (1917-1996) released the following essay: « دفاع عن العقيدة والشريعة ضد « مطاعن المستشرقين » [« Defense of doctrine and (Islamic) law against attacks by orientalists »]. He aimed to sustain a systematic criticism of the Arabic translation of *Le Dogme et la Loi de l'Islam* (1920), the French version of Goldziher's (1850-1921) book. The purpose of the refutation was part of a collective approach promoted by several ulama from al-Azhar at the same time. This objective was twofold: disqualifying research about Islam when it is a work coming from specialists who do not assume for themselves an adherence to the traditional Islamic doctrine; discouraging Muslims to refer to those works and raising such publications by translations in Arabic.

Rainer Brunner (CNRS – Laboratoire d'études sur les monothéismes)

"The Coran is enough". Hadith criticism as the foundation of a new epistemology in modern Islam

As Salafi currents (re-)discover the Prophetic tradition (ḥadīth) as an indispensable foundation of an "authentic" Muslim identity, one has also been finding, for several decades, several individual thinkers

who deny this pivotal source in a remarkably radical way. Their field extends from so-called “Quranists” (who explicitly see themselves in the tradition of Martin Luther), via the Syrian intellectual Muḥammad Shaḥrūr (d. 2019) who, some 30 years ago, presented a spectacular new interpretation of the status of the Qur’an (and who was thereupon compared to Luther by some Western observers), to finally some Shiite self-critics, such as the Iraqi Aḥmad al-Qābanjī who, by referring to Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Feuerbach and Émile Durkheim, calls for “an adaption of traditions”. While it is undeniable that they have always been a small marginalized and even exiled minority, the violent polemics with which they are confronted make it clear that their epistemological approach is taken note of by conservative religious authorities – and that it is perceived to be dangerous. This is all the more remarkable as the ḥadīth is also in the center of Muslim sectarianism between Sunnites and Shiites. Without saying so explicitly, these thinkers and their theories thus also contribute to a new idea of Muslim identity beyond boundaries that had been imposed by sectarian traditions.

Pierre-Jean Luizard (CNRS – Groupe Sociétés Religions Laïcités)

Western researchers and the challenge of modernity facing Muslim popular piety in Egypt: a matter of generation

Popular piety illustrated by the veneration of Muslim saints’ graves attracted the first generation of western researchers. Its spectacular aspect, through specific rituals and the crowds mobilized for this purpose, was indeed feeding a vision that we can consider as a romantic one. In France, Louis Massignon and René Guénon are a good illustration of this passion for a spirituality both carnal and mystical. Sufi brotherhoods used to structure this piety, which is hardly controlled with rituals that are nowadays considered as an excess. Like most of the travelers, British Heyworth-Dunne stated and described the main role played by the Sufi brotherhood in Egypt in the 18th and 20th centuries.

Today, popular piety and Sufism still succeed in mobilizing huge crowds. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, researchers on Sufism were unanimous to state a pessimistic forecast. These researchers opposed the “decline” of the Sufi brotherhoods from the first half of the 20th century facing the rise of modern trends, whatever secularized or/and Islamic, offering a rationalized project and hostile to Sufism. Nevertheless, from the 1980s, a new generation of young researchers (Fred de Jong, Alexandre Popovic, Eric Geoffroy, Catherine Mayeur, Rachida Chih and Pierre-Jean Luizard among others) assessed the durability of Sufism organized in brotherhoods, taking its energy from this inexhaustible source which comes from popular piety that a reformist disembodied view of Islam seems unable to erase.

Constance Arminjon (École pratique des hautes études, EPHE-PSL)

Humanities and Criticism of Islamic Knowledge in Contemporary Iran

Whereas leading figures of Shi’ism aimed in the 1960s and 1970s at the Islamisation of knowledge, several prominent clerics and lay thinkers questioned Islamic religious knowledge in the 1990s. While their predecessors were promoting a culturalist conception of science, they engaged in an epistemological critique of religious knowledge. The use of humanities and European philosophy was instrumental in this shift. Perhaps the philosopher ‘Abd ol-Karīm Sorūsh inaugurated the critical turn. However, there were intense epistemological debates in the howzeh of Qom as early as the mid-1990s. Instead of the completeness of Islamic law (fiqh), Shabestarî, Kadîwar, Malekiyân and others revealed the limits of this discipline, which is at the core of religious education. In stating that classical law and theology were obsolete, some of them called for the “humanization of Islamic sciences”.