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TITOLO/TITLE: Crossing and Contaminations in the Study of Islam and Muslim Life ('Open Panel')

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ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

This panel aims to explore current multidisciplinary debates in the study of what is variably defined as “Islam” or “Muslim life” within the realms of humanities and the social sciences. The goal is to convene scholars from different disciplines, including Islamic Studies, Anthropology, Sociology, Political Sciences, Gender, and Postcolonial Studies to discuss the epistemological and methodological questions that have surrounded the study of “Islam” and “Muslim life” over the recent decades within these fields.

The study of Islam has long historically rested in the hands of philologists and orientalists, primarily concerned with its doctrinal dimensions. However, following different strains of critique, the focus has progressively moved from how Islam is conceived doctrinally to how it is, or was, lived by Muslims around the world, also but not exclusively in relation to texts and the discursive tradition they uphold (Asad 1986). Whereas the methods and approaches of these disciplines remain different, they all grapple with the question of defining the subject of their study and delineating its contours, as well as with how to reconcile the multiplicity of Muslim experiences within a singular tradition.

This panel aims to ignite a multidisciplinary discussion on these themes by exploring the primary and most recent obstacles encountered by scholars across different disciplinary traditions when considering and investigating “Islam” and “Muslim life.” For instance, anthropologists and sociologists have manifested a certain degree of unease in dealing with the religious experiences of the people they study. Given that their epistemological and methodological apparatuses emerged from a relatively recent modern-secular lineage, they have encountered limits in engaging with “worlds” contemplating an interaction with transcendent entities (Furani and Robbins 2021; Vicini and Di Puppo 2024). Additionally, their approach to Islam has often been influenced by secular and/or Christian-inflected categories and views, which often obscure and distort the distinctive features of the Muslim religious experience (Asad 1993; Furani 2019).

In a similar vein, religious studies have grappled with similar challenges, in particular reflecting on the translatability of the category of “religion” to the Muslim context, along with the constraints and the Orientalist implications inherent in its application to the study of Islam and Muslim life. Concurrently, Islamic studies have typically tackled the issue (also discussed within the anthropology of Islam) of how to encompass the multiplicity of Muslim experiences, including their not-strictly-religious “Islamicate” manifestations, under the overarching denominator of “Islam” (Hodgson 1974; Ahmed 2015).

Challenges have come also from historical and anthropological research in other contexts, especially in Africa, Southeastern Europe, and Southern Asia. The conventional focus on considered-to-be more authentic Arab and Middle Eastern manifestations of Islam has led to the marginalization of other “Islams.” This has resulted in an epistemological and methodological cleavage that has prompted philological studies to focus on intellectual productions from the Arab world, leaving historians and anthropologists to focus on what was considered the “peripheral regions of Islam”, such as sub-Saharan Africa, Southeastern Europe, and Southeastern Asia. These and other similar oppositions have contributed to framing Islam as a self-contained “structure,” distinct from local cultures often relegated to a non-Islamic status. The recent shift in focus towards regions beyond those traditionally regarded as central has challenged highly normative and straightforward dichotomies between central/peripheral and orthodox/heterodox Islams (Ahmed 2015; Green 2012).

These cleavages also intersect with another concerning aspect: the fact that Islam has always been shaped, defined, and redefined by the dynamics of everyday life, its intersections with secular institutions, and its entanglements with other religious and non-religious practices. Even when radically critical of Orientalism, some studies have tended to reify Islam, making it the opposite of secularism and/or the West (Soares and

Osella 2010; Schielke 2010), suggesting that Islam and Muslim life should be considered the “necessary” and “resisting” other of secularism. Recent studies on “Islam” and “Muslim life” have instead opened a new perspective, along with ensuing debates, on what have long been considered secular, non-religious, or “everyday” practices and their interactions with supposedly more religious ones (Schielke 2015; Cf. Fadil and Fernando 2015).

Beyond pointing to epistemological and methodological questions, all the aforementioned discussions have delved into the fundamental essence of their subject of study: What is Islam? How do we delineate the boundaries of Islam and Muslim life in our research? What makes a practice more or less “Islamic,” or more or less “religious”, or “Muslim” than others? What happens to Islam when relied upon, as a living tradition, to face the challenges posed by social, political, economic, ecological, or any other sort of crisis? What are the implications of all these considerations for how we represent the voices of Muslims in our scholarly writings?

This panel aims to tackle these and similar interconnected questions, inviting contributions that analytically examine one or more of these aspects through the lens of specific cases and from the perspective of their respective fields of study. Papers are encouraged to highlight the crossings and contaminations between disciplines, as well as possible interactions between them. Submissions may focus on any regional specialization, including the study of Islam and Muslims in Western contexts.

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PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Gianfranco Bria is Research Fellow and Adjunct Professor of Islamic Law at La Sapienza University of Rome, Adjunct Professor of Islam and Gender at Roma 3 University and associate member of the CETOBAC at EHESS in Paris. He is the Editor-in-chief of *Occhiali - Journal on Mediterranean Islam*. He is also scientific member of the research project on Muhammad in the mirror of his community in early and modern Islam (ANR-DFG, three-years project: 2017-2020) and of the project Red Golden Legend (ANR). He obtained his Ph.D. at EHESS and UniCa; his doctoral research analyzed Islamic and Sufi revival in post-socialist Albania. He profoundly knows Balkan territories and societies where he lived over one year. His research deals with Islamic authority, sainthood and charisma in the Balkans, the embodiment experiences of daily-lived Islam (practices, beliefs and rituals) and Muslims history in southern-eastern Europe since late modern Ottoman Empire.

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