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ISLAM AS METHOD

ABSTRACT
This essay presents "Islam as Method" as a multi-dimensional approach that serves as an academic framework, a process of engagement, and an activist strategy. It argues that Islam, in the "Islam as Method" thesis, is an ontological category rooted in a commitment to divine unity and ethical principles such as justice (*'adl*), dignity (*karama*) and excellence (*ihsan*). These commitments enable Muslim activists to assert intellectual and cultural autonomy beyond Euro-American academic, political, and ideological constraints. Drawing on examples from Islamicate contexts, this multi-dimensional approach recognizes the diversity within Islamic traditions while identifying common ethical threads that guide collective action. By emphasizing shared principles and the dynamic reinterpretation of Islamic ethics, "Islam as Method" challenges the dominance of secular and (neo)liberal perspectives and fosters the development of autonomous, cross-cultural dialogue. Informed by the works of contemporary scholars like the late Shabbir Akhtar, Taha Abdurrahmane and Khaled Aboul El Fadl, this method suggests that an intense epistemological shift is underway, allowing committed Muslims to reclaim their agency and produce coherent, ethical knowledge aligned with their values and historical experiences.

KEYWORDS
Islamic ethics, social mobilization, epistemic autonomy, Muslim subjectivity, liberation struggles.

Introduction

This essay is a brief deliberation on the idea of "Islam as Method."[1] This idea functions across multiple dimensions: as an academic framework, a process of engagement, and a strategy for activism. One important aim with this deliberation is to highlight a proposition that "Islam as Method" can be understood as a heuristic tool that allows Muslim intellectuals to redefine their understanding of themselves and their societies beyond the constraints of Euro-American academic traditions. Another aim is to suggest the need of a platform where the Islamicate is both the subject and agent of knowledge production, promoting an intellectual environment where Muslim-majority societies become each

1 This thesis is inspired by my reading of Chen (2010).

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other's points of reference. "Islam as Method" therefore represents an attempt to reassert autonomy over one's cultural and intellectual identity.

The most important aim here is nevertheless to put forth an analysis of a framework for committed Muslim activists to reclaim their intellectual and cultural autonomy by grounding their actions in the ethical principles of Islam. This strategy, as we shall see, challenges the dominance of Euro-American-centric, secular, and ideologically prejudiced frameworks and asserts a path toward self-determination, justice, and ethical living.

I propose that "Islam as Method" represents an understanding of committed Muslims' social mobilization in relation with the historical trajectory of Islamic tradition on the whole, and especially its ethical repository of principles. These principles anchor activists' self-understanding, their purpose, and their engagement with the world, functioning much like a critical counterpoint to the dominance of Western-centric knowledge production and the Euro-American hegemonic ideological, cultural and material imaginaries.[2]

One important assumption that underlies this deliberation is that the intellectual and material context of modernity and postmodernity (colonialism, secularism, globalism, capitalism, etc.) have shaped much of the activist Muslim collective consciousness (including other traditional ways of being in the world) in the last centuries (Abu-Rabi' 2005, Haj 2008, Sinanović 2012). One line of reasoning is that the ideological structures and material conditions within which Muslim majority populations have organized their societies have been dominated, shaped and conditioned by others then Muslims themselves (Hurd 2003). Ideological structure would here encompass descriptive and prescriptive frameworks of action that help individuals and groups to navigate complex social realities as to interpret social experiences (Maiese 2022). This is an almost entirely functionalistic understanding of ideology and as such is not pursued here.

The alternative line of reasoning that goes beyond the focus on ideology, and one that I suggest here, highlights the underpinning coherence of contemporary Muslims' claim of transhistorical commitments to Islamic ethical principles. My claim of coherence might sound strange, or even incoherent, to people who are focused on highlighting the heterogeneity of Muslim practices which they sometime translate into the idea of "many Islams," due to the fact that there are innumerable expressions and experiences of Muslims (El-Zein 1977, Hussein 2003).[3] It might even sound as essentializing of Islam, claiming that it is a monolithic entity with a uniform set of ethics, values, and principles. Possible critics may further argue that this approach reduces the diversity within Islamic thought and practice by assuming that there is a single, cohesive framework that can be universally applied to all Muslim societies. Or even that "Islam as Method" overlooks the internal plurality within Islamic

2 Such realities are here understood in line with the criticisms presented in Hallaq (2018: 213 ff.).

3 For a recent iteration of this thesis, see: Otterbeck (2021).

traditions, such as differences between Sunni, Shia, Sufi, and other interpretations, thereby oversimplifying complex social realities.

These and similar criticisms are valid withing the constructivist and culturalist view of Islam. For example, this consideration puts forth a view that, Islam, much like all other all religious traditions, are human constructs. As such, religious rituals, doctrines, stories, and spiritual practices are, culturally and temporally contingent, and ways through which self-appointed clergy exercises power over people. A less cynical view could be that religions are super-structures and that contain a set of psychological, emotional, social, political scaffolding which contains a set of rules through which populations engage with the world and one another. Whichever position is taken, the bottom line is that Islam and other religious traditions are products of human mind manifested in a ray of ways in the world throughout history.

As a student of Muslim social movements and Islamicate societies, I take a position that Islam, as understood by a wide variety of committed Muslim activists throughout time and space is ultimately ontological. In other words, Islam, according to vast majority of Muslims, has a coherent set of ethical principles that are non-contingent in relation to time and space – in other words such principles are of divine origin. This position is in many ways in line with Salman Sayyid's claim that "[o]nly an understanding of Islam that emphasized the ontic would be reducible to a set of its key features, but because Islam is an ontological category for Muslims such a reduction is unsustainable" (2022: 149). Islam, and its ethical principles (justice, sincerity, faithfulness, devotion, etc.) contain noncontingent moral claims. This does not mean that the tradition should or could be essentialized.

Instead, as Sayyid suggests, Islam as a phenomenon manifested in the world through time and space, is not reducible to any single of its adherent's discursive and devotional expressions, or architectural, political, or social manifestations. Put differently, devotions of believers, their rituals and discursive practices are not the measure of all things "Islamic." Committed Muslims seem nevertheless to argue that by recognizing the divine, humans fulfill their own "nature." Recognition here does not imply comprehension, but striving to reaffirm one's "being" in the world. Being implies agency both physically (body) and metaphysically (soul) and engaging this duality in making ethical choices. These claims can be tested in a conversation with a committed Muslim activist, who might oppose unethical practices of a vast majority of Muslims, including some of his own actions, but that is done on the basis of an agreed upon set of ethical principles that are enshrined in the foundational sources of the tradition, including the moral example of the Prophet.

For instance, an individual's expression of Islam or collective interpretative act of Muslims in the world at any point in time is considered ontic or temporary expressions of Islam and thereby non-essential to the tradition as a whole. In other words, Islamic ethical reality exists even without Muslims. More concretely, Islamic ethical principles are transhistorical. If so, is it then enough to say, "I'm a Muslim, therefore, I am?" in order to reaffirm one's ontological

commitment to Islam and its ethics? Regardless of the answer to such a question, some secular anthropologists consider this set of premises seriously, and suggest that others should do it too (Schielke 2019).[4]

Let us assume that the meaning of "Muslim" (the one who imperfectly and voluntarily surrenders him/herself to the divine commands) in this set of claims, means to be a committed witness and devoted individual agent in relation to the Qur'anic ethical maxims. This assumption precludes and builds upon a premise that in pre-history, all humans reaffirmed the divine reality and their own created natures in a form of the primordial covenant (The Qur'an 7: 172–173).[5] This, by extension, suggests that by confirming the validity of this covenant through devotional acts (grounded in these maxims) an individual lives up to his/her "purpose" (The Qur'an 30:30). Such a teleological view of human nature and existence is deeply rooted in Muslim ways of being in the world. It is possible to argue that there is a full range of manifestations of being in the world, where such teleology makes sense (Akhtar 2007: 233). What holds this teleology together is shared understanding that ethics are fundamental to committed Muslims' interpretations of reality – such interpretations are manifested in countless forms across different contexts.

Another way to interpret the "reality" of a Muslim could be one that is presented in late Andrew Rippin's, *Defining Islam: A Reader*. This volume discusses a range of Euro-American academic approaches to defining Islam, all of which had focused on a range of variables related to Islam. For mainly practical reasons, Rippin described Islam as a theological and juristic reflection:

> There was a group of people who called themselves "Muslims" and who understood themselves to be adhering to a certain group of practices and basic assumptions about the nature of existence ("beliefs") in common. But the fact of "difference" – with those "outside" who did not call themselves Muslims and with those "inside" who shared some of the same assumptions but not all of them – conjured forth attempts to define membership Rippin (2016: 2).

Here, Rippin, like many Islamologist in Euro-American academia, understand Islam to represent a social category constructed by the Muslims themselves.[6] Islamic principles are here largely arbitrarily, culturally, politically etc. manifested in the observable social relations separate outsiders from insiders. This understanding implies that there is a belief system (theological aspect) upon which the distinction happens and that is embedded in cultural and legal settings (juristic aspect). In other words, Rippin and others, understand spiritual, moral and ethical principles that are historically manifested as nothing more than peoples' interpretations of constructed Islamic doctrines in the first place.

4 See also: Mittermaier (2021).

5 See also: Lumbard (2015).

6 Rippin furthermore cogently summarizes the field of Islamic studies in the West – the field that can be understood as a microcosm that reflects broader epistemic and methodological issues discussed in Religious Studies (Rippin 2006: 13). See also: Hughes and Aghdassi (2023).

This approach is oftentimes referred to as Methodological atheism, or Methodological agnosticism (Bell and Taylor 2014, Craig 2018). This means that this normative positioning cannot consider believers' ontological or truth claims as relevant in the analysis of either their spirituality, doctrines or their religious practices.

Muslims have, nonetheless, debated and practiced the distinction between believers and non-believers in the Islamic scholarly tradition for centuries. In fact, such distinction has been guided by widely shared and disputed criteria found in the foundational sources of the tradition (Ghazali 2002). On the whole, the Euro-American academic study of Islamic tradition and the Islamicate is not interested in theological, metaphysical, or philosophical claims – only in jurisprudential and observable behaviors. This choice is oftentimes justified as the methodological impossibility of verifying or falsifying "religious" claims.

From a so-called, confessional perspective, an observer can be interested in qualitatively different aspects of the tradition and his/her community. One such observer might be interested in understanding but also evaluating or changing Muslim behavior, its epistemic roots, and its consequences vis-à-vis social realities or ethical principles. Processes of knowledge production in the two epistemic communities have, therefore, different objectives.

Epistemic and Ethical Commitments

Within the framework of this paper, the larger point here is that Muslim ethical commitments are particularly noticeable in social mobilizations and activism in service of just causes and social change. As we shall observe further down, such processes present dynamic social phenomena where commitment to Islamic ethical principles shines through. This further suggests that by paying particular attention to Islamic ethical principles in mobilization-situations, such as various liberation struggles, we can also observe "Islam as Method"-manifested across time and space. The emancipatory potential in explicitly Muslim activism today rests more of less explicitly on variety of ethical principles such as justice (*'adl*), human dignity (*karama*), virtue ethics (*akhlaq*), excellence (*ihsan*) and the wider conceptions of "enjoining good and forbidding wrong."

This assumption also suggests that regardless of the Islamicate context, Muslim mobilization today, contains explicitly Islamic components, which in variety of ways, draw upon the ethical repositories found in the foundational sources of Islamic tradition. Throughout a millennium and a half, such repositories have become embedded in Islamicate (his)stories, doctrines, political, financial, discursive and cultural practices, art etc. These repositories offer both a vocabulary and grammar for emancipatory mobilization of Muslims. It also holds a potential to reclaim, reinterpret, and revive a vast intellectual and spiritual heritage that offers alternative ways of knowing, being, and acting in

the world. Such potential is embedded in increasingly activistic consciousness of committed Muslims.

This so-called activist consciousness underpins the "Islam as Method"-thesis. I argue that this activist consciousness extends beyond specific spiritual practices or rituals; it involves an epistemic and systematic awareness that foregrounds a dynamic worldview rooted in the above-mentioned ethical principles. Contemporary social movements – ranging from Malcolm X's short-lived, but transformative civil-rights activism in North America, to the groups like the Muridiyyah in West Africa, the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East, Jamat-e-Islami in South Asia, and Muhamadiyah in Southeast Asia – reflect some of the observable commitments to these principles. These movements, in various ways, embody a practice of ethical witnessing (*shahada*) that challenges not only external forms of domination but also internal forms of oppression, seeking to bear witness to justice even at personal or collective cost. In doing so, they revive Islamicate societies by drawing on their own ethical resources, charting a path for growth and renewal that is grounded in the repositories of their historical experiences and indigenous traditions. As such, these movements are not prisoners of Euro-American theories of practice, however modern and modernist some of these movements might be. The so-called West, is, for them, not the measure of all things Islamic.

Islamicists and students of the Islamicate need therefore to grant themselves freedom to recalibrate their epistemic position in order to pay greater attention to, and gain better appreciation of, how committed Muslims navigate challenges and transform social, political, and economic systems within the Islamicate contexts.

Abdelkader Tayob does this in part when he discusses the dilemma of redefining the meanings of Islam in relation to parts of the Islamic scholarship's discourse on modernity (Tayob 1999). He rightly recognizes that the ongoing conceptual grappling with Islam's meanings often focus on reconciling insider perspectives with external scholarly observations highlights the need for an epistemological shift (ibid.: 1–4). He surveys a number of groundbreaking Muslim intellectuals and thinkers, including the tensions among them. Notably, Hossein Nasr, Fazlur Rahman and Ismail al-Farouqi's understandings of Islam are juxtaposed with their respective modernist and traditionalist theological lenses.

Tayob concludes his analysis as follows, "in spite of [the] differences [between these thinkers], however, there is overwhelming agreement on the need to locate the ultimate meaning of Islam" (Tayob 1999: 13). In the context of modernity, within which we are thoroughly immersed, Tayob argues that "one cannot dissociate the meaning of Islam from social contexts and social agents .... In [these thinkers'] search for the core values of social justice, rational theology, and mysticism, they are able to reintroduce the relevance of Islam in public discourse" (ibid.). This relevance of the broadly understood Islamic ethical principles, one of the topics of this essay, is often found in the discourses of the above-mentioned and other Muslim scholars. Their interpretative

approaches consider ethically constitutive Islamic *principles* that seemingly guide their meaning-making intellectual projects.[7]

Both analyses provided by Rippin and Tayob regarding the meanings of Islam in the words and deeds of Muslims remain highly relevant today, particularly in light of the growing political, racial, and social polarization and the hostility directed toward Muslims and Islam in Western contexts and beyond (Afana 2014, Schmuck et. al. 2020, Verkuyten 2021, Deshmukh 2021: 317–336). This relevance is further amplified when we consider the ongoing suffering in Palestine and the failure of international institutions to prevent what many view as the systematic destruction of a people (Thabet and Sultan 2016, Afana 2020, Bishara 2024, Fassin 2024). How do we make sense of the responses from both Muslim and non-Muslim protestors in the face of Gaza's annihilation? It is evident that vulnerable Palestinian communities show resilience through both resistance and expressions of faith, utilizing well-known Islamic symbols, evocative narratives, and the sheer struggle for survival (Nijim 2023)[8]. Similar traumatic and cataclysmic human experiences in the modern world vis-à-vis Islamic tradition are the subject of continuous intellectual and spiritual liberatory practices guided by Islamic principles, a sort of autonomous "Islam as Method" approach.

Similar traumatic experiences in the modern world, when seen through the lens of Islamic tradition, continue to inspire intellectual and spiritual practices aimed at liberation – an approach that can be termed "Islam as Method." This paper, therefore, seeks to explore the ways in which contemporary Muslims assert their agency and empowerment in proactive and constructive ways. Instead of getting caught up in endless debates about defining Islam or its authenticity, this essay focuses on examples of Muslim mobilization, highlighting how activists use Islamic ethical repositories, their cultural and intellectual traditions to independently critique and engage with the world. Next, I lay out how "Islam as Method" can look like in two well-known examples where Muslim mobilization takes place facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Islamism as Resistance

In 2007 during the early stages of my PhD project, I asked a simple overarching research question: Why are Muslims nonviolent? This was a strange question to ask, for at the time the U.S. and its European allies had already invaded Afghanistan and Iraq and launched an all-out war on Muslim-majority states and their populations. These military attacks and occupations generated waves of violent resistance among the Muslims being affected (Gregory 2004, Pape 2010, Bird and Marshall 2011). All the while, the U.S. and its allies were supporting several authoritarian Middle East and North African (MENA) regimes that

7 Consider the foundational works of the three scholars which center on the ideals of justice, divine unity, ethics, moral duties and, not in the least, love and mercy.

8 See also: Grotenhuis 2016, Fahmy et. al. 2024, Hall 2024.

were repressing its Muslim populations, which also generated notable violent responses (Hinnebusch 2006, King 2007). The same could be said about the West's decades-long support of Israel's colonial endeavor in the eastern Mediterranean and the consistent resistance against this modern settler-colonial project (Aruri 1997, Makdisi 2002, Khalidi 2005). This and other oppressive policies, including, arguably, a number of neo-colonial projects up to 2007, had not resulted in massive and systematic waves of organized violent resistance of the existing social movements in the MENA region (Kurzman 2018)[9]. In the late 2006, I decided to sociologically explore the reasoning of young Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) activists and their choice of nonviolent mobilization (Poljarevic 2012).

The study's results pointed out that those youth activists who chose to mobilize with the MB in Egypt, at least until the breakout of the Arab Spring in the late 2010 and early 2011, did so based on the following main reasons:

(1) The interviewed activists indicated clearly that they saw the MB as the ethical and moral opposite mirror-image of the Mubarak regime. The main argument was that Mubarak's corrupt, oppressive and violent regime represented the antithesis of their own sense of Muslimness (self-understanding of their own agency) (Poljarevic 2012: 234, 251; see also: Rashwan 2008). It meant that regardless of the regime's viciousness, the mobilization needs to remain nonviolent as to further demonstrate the regime's illegitimacy on ethical and moral grounds.

(2) The interviewed activists did not see any utility of violent mobilization. After all, they had seen and heard of the violent 1990s mobilization of the popular *al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyyah* movement, and the general sense of mayhem and destruction the regime's brutal response inflicted upon Egyptian society (Stein 2014: 63–82). Their pragmatic reading of previous and current events led them to believe that other Muslim politically violent and zealous organizations such as al-Qaida represented further evidence that violence did not bring about constructive and positive social and political change (Poljarevic 2012: 155, 249).

(3) The last important element of their conscious choice of nonviolent mobilization was the fact that they have been thoroughly socialized into nonaggressive modes of expressing their ethical commitments within the existing educational (*tarbiyyah*) framework of the MB (Poljarevic 2012: 229 ff., 251–254; Zollner 2009: 9 ff.).

My further research and reflection on the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) nearly a century-long mobilization process have led me to conclude that the organization's multigenerational response to societal grievances has fostered a broader culture of resistance among Islamist activists. This form of political resistance draws not only from Islamic legal traditions but also from its ethical

9 See also: Zollner 2009, Utvik 2022.

and moral principles (Ismail 2004: 614–631, Mustafa 2018: 123–137). It is primarily aimed at channeling public discontent over ethical and moral grievances to the usually insular and oppressive elites across the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA). These grievances are articulated by thought leaders and activists, highly informed by their respective socio-political context. What is more, activists' specific circumstances give rise to moral and ethical commitments. In the context of Islamicate societies, these commitments are widely rooted in religious principles and moral public reasoning. Through individual and collective commitments Islamist activists address a wide range of issues, from political legitimacy, state bureaucracy, education, and financial concerns to public safety, sanitary conditions, personal wellness, and spirituality (Ismail 2004, Utvik 2022, Vannetzel 2017). If one gazes further afield and considers similar movements such as the Moroccan Party of Justice and Development (PJD), Tunisia's Ennahda, or Jordan's Islamic Action Front, and Turkey' Justice and Development Party, it is possible to observe the complexity of Islamicate moral framings and the political components expressed through the consciousnesses of millions of activists (Merone 2017, Daadaoui 2023).

This apparent resilience contradicts the notions that Islamism might dissolve, transform, or grow stronger in response to post-Arab Spring authoritarianism and neocolonial regression. These movements can be better understood as evolving within the broader framework of Muslim emancipatory consciousness. To reduce this consciousness to simplistic terms like "religion and politics," "Islamism," or "Muslim Democrats" overlooks the essential point: Muslim identities, political awareness, and moral sensibilities are deeply assimilated and analytically hard to decouple. This further suggests that rationality, morality, and perhaps even spirituality are intrinsically linked in the social actions of committed agents. In the case of middle-ground (*wasati*) Islamists, such as the MB, but also other movements, the idea of "Islam as Method" is manifested in the modern framework of mobilization that is grounded in the indigenous ethical principles that seek solutions to perceived grievances.

The main claims that activists are making are expressed through advocating the usage of historical experiences (such as the Prophetic life), cultural practices (hospitality, negotiation tactics, etc.), and social contexts (local knowledge, networks, etc.) as mutual reference points for knowledge creation. Committed Muslims therefore draw upon their own ethical principles and spiritual traditions to interpret and engage with the world. This approach fosters a self-reflective and intercultural dialogue within and between Islamicate societies, allowing Islamic intellectuals and activists to redefine their understanding of themselves and their societies beyond the constraints imposed by Western (neo)colonial frameworks.

Within this integrated perspective, Islamicate ethics play a crucial role in efforts to transform – or at least attempt to transform – social, political, and cultural structures. To adequately explain grievances, demand reforms, and address broader emancipatory impulses (both nonviolent and violent) in the Islamicate world, it is essential to reframe our understanding of social

movements by recognizing the moral and ethical principles embedded in the Islamic tradition. Here, we can discern the contours of the "Islam as Method" thesis, where processes of emancipation, resistance, autonomy, and agency seek to reclaim intellectual autonomy from the Euro-American narratives and build frameworks based on local cultural and historical contexts.

Now, let us turn to another example of "Islam as Method" that is situated outside the Islamicate context. Nevertheless, this example demonstrates the emancipatory mobilization impulse rooted in Islamic ethics and as such makes it relevant for the analysis.

The Emancipatory Ethics of Malcolm X

The late Malcolm X (a.k.a. El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) currently represents a symbol for generation of Muslim youth and activists both inside and outside the Islamicate societies. Anyone familiar with his life-story recognizes the continuously transformative nature of his activism. The last year of his life allowed him to frame his activism not merely as a fight for civil rights, but also as a moral and spiritual quest for the dignity of all humans, with particular concern for those oppressed in the U.S. This final shift illustrates the convergence of his political actions with a renewed modality of ethical principles informed by spiritual experiences (Malcolm X: 1984, 2013).

This is particularly clear in his *Diary*, wherein his rationalization and spirituality come together in a more straightforward way then in his *Autobiography*. For example, Malcolm X's fight against racism is an ethical action that calls for upholding of human dignity. In his 1961 interview with Eleanor Fischer, he declares:

> [The goal] should be the solution of the problem of the black man in America, now. Not integration. Integration is the Method toward obtaining that goal. And what the Negro leader [e.g., Martin Luther King] has done is gotten himself wrapped up in the Method and has forgotten what the goal is. The goal is the dignity of the black man in America. He wants respect as a human being. He wants recognition as a human being. Now, if integration will get him that, all right. [...] But after he gets integration and he still doesn't have this dignity and this recognition as a human being, then his problem is still not solved. (Nessen 2015)

His other writings and speeches testify to the centrality and emphasis that he placed on human dignity. In his discourse, dignity was often linked directly with freedom, justice and equality. To him, these were not merely political acts, but also expressions of his sense of activist responsibility that, in turn, reflect his belief that *true* worship of God is both spiritual and ethical. Consider the following statement he gave shortly after his break with his former mentor Elijah Muhammad:

> I am and always will be a Muslim. My religion is Islam. I still believe that Mr. Muhammad's analysis of the problem is the most realistic, and that his solution

> is the best one. This means that I too believe the best solution is complete separation, with our people going back home, to our own African homeland ... I am going to organize and head a new mosque in New York City, known as the Muslim Mosque, Inc. This gives us a religious base, and the spiritual force necessary to rid our people of the vices that destroy the moral fiber of our community. (Malcolm X 1965: 20–21)

This shows that his phenomenological approach to social change and mobilization against injustices included social protests that can be simultaneously understood as ethical and spiritual acts. In other words, the last stage of his activism is less about transforming an unjust society's system or structure, and much more about the contents of moral and ethical agency and autonomy of people rooted in his understanding of Islamic tradition (Poljarevic 2020: 26–27).

Here he seeks to de-center the "White" epistemic core of political thinking, especially among the Black-Americans, and instead draws upon what he understands to be Islamic cultural, historical, and spiritual experiences as primary reference points (ibid.). Malcolm X's integration of Islamic ethics into his activism exemplifies a turn to Islamic principles as the foundation for his civil-rights struggle, and intellectual emancipation. Malcolm X's activist journey suggests a self-reflective, Islamic-centered dialogue that enables activists to redefine their identity and social purpose beyond "Western" constructs. This is further demonstrated in a short diary note that summarizes his experiences during his pilgrimage to Makka:

> The Hajj makes one out of everyone, even the king, the rich, the priest [viz.] loses his [worldly] identity on the Hajj – everyone forgets self & turns to God & out of his submission to the One God comes a brotherhood in which all are equals ... When they [whites] accepted Islam, it removed that [racism]. Well, white people whom I have met, who have accepted Islam, they don't regard themselves as white, but as human beings. (Malcolm X 2013: 23)

The brief entry demonstrates further Malcolm X's maturation and integration of wider Islamic ethics into politics and other aspects of his life. This supposed integration is not necessarily a result of his prolonged and in-depth study of Islamic doctrines and jurisprudence, but rather is directly connected to both his life and spiritual experiences.

Martin Nguyen summarizes his spiritual transformation in eloquent prose:

> Malcolm's response to God – his theology – was to live and struggle alongside the oppressed, his own community foremost of all (but not exclusively so), even at the cost of his own fragile and fallible life. His response to revelation was to proceed with faith and humility pulsing at his core and his utter mortality hanging ever before his eyes. (Nguyen 2018: 144)

This convergence of moral, ethical, and spiritual concerns in Malcolm X's activism aligns closely with the broader objectives of social movements in Islamicate contexts. Many activists I have encountered in the MENA region assert,

much like Malcolm, that they strive to align their ethical responsibilities with their political claims and social activism. Thus, Malcolm X's integration of Islamic ethics into his life and politics points to the validity of "Islam as Method"-thesis. It is within the scope of this process that committed Muslim ground their intellectual and social projects in indigenous, histories, traditions, spiritualities, and values, enabling both a critique of, and an alternative to, Western hegemony.

The mobilization of moral outrage within Islamicate contexts, like Malcolm X's emphasis on dignity and justice, highlights a similar effort to resist oppression by drawing upon deep-rooted ethical and spiritual resources.

"Islam as Method" and Moral Outrage

This framework of resistance became increasingly relevant in the years following my field studies in early 2010, as the charged social atmosphere in Egypt and across the Arab world came to a boiling point. Let us remember Khalid Saeed, a 28-year-old non-political activist, who was brutally beaten to death by Egyptian security forces in June of the same year. In his death he became the symbol of Egypt youth's collective rage against the ruling Mubarak government. His story was not unique, for many murdered men (activists and non-activists) had succumbed to such violence. The difference was that those men had usually been political activists, primarily those labeled as Islamists, and as such, they were at risk of brutal treatment and something to which the wider public did not pay much attention.

The image of Khalid's battered face ignited a firestorm that would sweep across the Arab world. Wael Ghonim, a young activist and a Google employee, saw the photo of Khalid and felt such indignation that he could not ignore it. He organized the online campaign that would later fuel the January 25th Revolution in Egypt (Parvaz 2012). Wael and his friends started a social media campaign "We are all Khalid Saeed," giving a voice to a popular movement that included Islamists, liberals and many others.

Similarly, images from Tunisia in December 2010, showed Mohammed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old fruit seller, in an act of desperation and defiance against unjust treatment by the local policeman and municipal governor, burning himself alive (Lageman 2020). These and many more tragic and violent deaths can be seen as a rallying point that has already ignited charged ordinary populations across the MENA region.

Parallels can be drawn to the events in the U.S. For example, in August 1955, a 14-year-old Afro-American boy Emmett Till was brutally tortured and murdered by two white men in Mississippi. The nationwide rage over the event erupted after his mother arranged for an open casket funeral, the images of his mutilated corpse were circulated by the media and an all-white jury declared the murderers innocent (Whitfield 1991). The moral outrage became even more poignant when even the justice system was not willing or unable to enforce the law. This event was arguably the starting point of the Civil Rights Movement, for the igniting power of images cannot be underestimated.

Despite the growth of this movement, Malcolm X continued to criticize its leaders throughout the late 1950 and early 1960, primarily for their willingness to engage in, as he saw it, negotiations with the white political establishment of the issue of rights. For instance, the Civil Rights leaders, along with Martin Luther King, organized "The March on Washington" in August 1963. Only a few weeks after the event, a bomb attack on a black church in Birmingham, Alabama, killed four black underaged schoolgirls. Malcolm X criticized the Civil Rights movement leaders' efforts: "The black masses are still without land, without jobs, and without homes ... their [Civil Rights leaders'] Christian churches are still being bombed, their innocent little girls murdered. So, what did the March on Washington accomplish? Nothing!"

Why is such example important in the deliberation of "Islam as Method"? In order to interpret an event or phenomenon that carries moral significance, we must use our perceptive faculties, rooted in ethical sensibilities, to decipher what we are observing. Traumatic, unjust, and closely experienced violence tend to invoke various populations' collective consciousnesses that are deeply connected to ethical and moral frames of reference. Such sensibilities are contingent on shared worldviews that are historically shaped and culturally transmitted. Malcolm X's words resonate with Muslim ethical sensibilities even today (Aljunied 2020, Poljarevic and Ackfeldt 2020, Suleiman 2020).

For instance, the moral outrage felt by the masses in Egypt and Tunisia in the context of Islamicate societies, were not only directed towards fellow Muslims (police officers and municipal administrators) who were to blame for deaths of Khaled and Mohammed. The rage was directed towards the entire system of repression built on corrupt practices and injustice (Mahmoud 2015). This might be related to the wider public sentiments and commitments to fundamentals of Islamic tradition which is at the basis of public ethics. For instance, belief in the oneness of the divine (*tawhid*) and the centrality of the Prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*) are ubiquitous (Lugo et. al. 2013). These fundamental beliefs' pervasiveness (orthodoxy) does not necessarily translate in coherence and conformity in religious practices (orthopraxy).

The data does suggest that the fundamental pillars of Islamic beliefs are deeply rooted in local and national knowledge across the Islamicate societies and this clearly has to do with coherence in ethical and moral sentiments. In other words, it is reasonable to suggest that the spectrum of values and moral commitments are, in a similar fashion, coherent and to a great extent shared (Abou El Fadl 2017, Zahra 2020, Lawrence 2021). One could argue that despite the historical "disruption" of Muslim sensibilities and ethical framings during the 200 years of Euro-American colonial and neocolonial projects, a surprising amount of ethical and moral coherence remains (Hashas 2020). Arguably, the same could not be said about other civilizational clusters that have survived the initial phases of modernity.

Consider again the ethical roots of mobilization in the cases of the MB and Malcolm X, in combination with the moral outrage of the Egyptian and Tunisian masses in the face of oppression, murder and torture. The roots of such

mobilization are directly connected to people's moral and ethical sensibilities, which are directly or circuitously connected to the traditional reservoir of ethical and moral values (i.e., the Qur'an) (Abou El Fadl 2017, Mrahorović 2023). It is at the same time important to highlight humanist reactions to brutality and injustice, including genocide, cut, for the most part, across cultural and religious divides – indicating perhaps an innate human ethical and moral sensibility. In other words, you do not have to be Muslim to condemn extermination of a people and live streamed acts of savagery, you just need to be ethically conscious human.

Conclusion

"Islam as Method" has been presented in this paper as a multi-dimensional approach that functions across three key dimensions: as an academic framework, a process of engagement, and an activist strategy. By framing Islam as an ontological category – marked by permanence, coherence, and independence, and defined by principles guiding humanity toward excellence (*ihsan*)[10] – this method allows for a rethinking of how Muslims understand themselves and their societies beyond the constraints of Western academic traditions. The examples of Muslim agency discussed above illustrate a consistent impulse towards ethical action, grounded in Islamic teachings, demonstrating that Islam, for committed Muslims, operates as a signifier of justice and ethical living.

Now, this does not mean that Islam is a monolithic entity with a singular, uniform set of ethics and values. Rather, it recognizes the rich diversity within Islamic traditions and practices, and the multiplicity of ways in which Islamic ethical principles are interpreted and applied across different contexts. The focus on shared ethical principles, such as justice (*'adl*) and dignity (*karama*), is not meant to ignore the heterogeneity within Islam but to identify common threads that can guide collective action and understanding.

The paper has argued that "Islam as Method" serves as a heuristic tool that critiques the dominance of Euro-American-centric knowledge production and promotes an alternative epistemological standpoint grounded in Islamic ethical principles. This approach offers a framework for reclaiming intellectual and cultural autonomy by providing a way for Muslim scholars and activists to ground their knowledge and actions in the Qur'anic moral paradigm and a broader repository of Islamic values, indigenous resources, and historical experiences.

This aligns with the insights of Islamic philosophers such as Taha Abdurrahmane, Shabbir Akhtar, or legal scholars and theologies such as Khaled Aboul El Fadl and many others, who argue that the primordial covenant between the divine and humanity, as depicted in the Qur'an, verse 7:172, underpins all Islamic moral claims. This suggests that there is an inadvertent attempt to work towards a shared Method through which committed Muslims engage with the world, one that produces coherent ethical and moral knowledge that is a result

10 "Be a community that calls for what is good, urges what is right, and forbids what is wrong: those who do this are the successful ones" (The Qur'an: 3:104).

of their agency, inquisitiveness and commitment to the divine from the very beginning of time. Individual curiosity and pledge to the divine are in turn manifested in various ways, depending on peoples' respective environments and levels of knowledge.

This is not to say that "Islam as Method" relies on a static or dogmatic essentialism. Yes, the claim here is that Islam should be understood as an ontological category with certain transhistorical ethical principles – it also recognizes that these principles are interpreted and manifested differently across various contexts and historical moments. "Islam as Method" is not about asserting an unchanging essence, but about affirming the relevance of Islamic ethics in contemporary settings. It provides a framework that is flexible and adaptive, open to contextual nuances and reinterpretations.

"Islam as Method" suggests that committed Muslims, some of whom have been discussed above, have dedicated themselves to Islamic ethical principles and which act as anchoring points. These function as primary reference points in understanding of self, one's purpose and ways in engaging with the world (Abou El Fadl 2017). Advancing such self-understanding and situating them in historical experiences of Islamic tradition contains presumably a high-level of emancipatory potential to dislodge epistemic dependance of Euro-American production of knowledge. Now, this does not mean to suggest that there is a total opposition between "Islamic" and "Western" knowledge frameworks. Instead, my critique aims to provide a necessary corrective to the dominance of Euro-American perspectives by foregrounding Islamic ethical and epistemic traditions. The approach is dialogical, acknowledging the potential for cross-cultural exchange and mutual enrichment, rather than isolation and animosity. The goal is to diversify the sources of knowledge production, not to reject "non-traditional" ideas categorically.

A more constructive engagement with "Islam as Method" involves epistemic consciousness and a dynamic worldview centered around ethical principles of justice and goodness. Committed Muslim activists seem to want to reclaim their intellectual and cultural autonomy by grounding their understanding in Islamic ethical principles. For instance, broad notions of Muslim activists' concerns, be it in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood's culture of resistance, Malcolm X's emancipatory activism or a guerilla-style resistance against occupation, aggression and colonization, all of it entail the commitment to justice and bearing witness, even if that means going against one's own interests.[11]

"Islam as Method" calls for grounding ethical commitment and social mobilization in the Qur'anic moral paradigm. This approach draws on a wide range of Islamic values, discursive tools, indigenous resources, and historical experiences. It challenges the dominance of Western-centric, secular, and ideologically biased frameworks, asserting a path toward self-determination, justice, and ethical living.

11 This entails avoiding pitfalls of moral relativism, ethnonationalism, and other similar diversions from ethical commitments.

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Emin Poljarević

Islam kao metod

Apstrakt:

Ovaj esej predstavlja „Islam kao metod" kao višedimenzionalni pristup koji služi kao akademski okvir, proces angažovanja i aktivistička strategija. U radu se pokazuje da je islam, u tezi „Islam kao metoda", ontološka kategorija ukorenjena u posvećenosti božanskom jedinstvu i etičkim principima kao što su pravda (*'adl*), dostojanstvo (*karama*) i izvrsnost (*ihsan*). Privrženost ovim principima omogućava muslimanskim aktivistima da uspostave intelektualnu i kulturnu autonomiju izvan evro-američkih akademskih, političkih i ideoloških ograničenja. Oslanjajući se na primere iz islamskog konteksta, ovaj višedimenzionalni pristup prepoznaje različitost unutar islamskih tradicija pri čemu identifikuje zajedničke etičke niti koje vode kolektivnu akciju. Ističući zajedničke principe i dinamičnu reinterpretaciju islamske etike, „Islam kao metod" dovodi u pitanje dominaciju sekularnih i (neo)liberalnih perspektiva, te podstiče razvoj autonomnog, međukulturalnog dijaloga. Oslanjajući se na radove savremenih naučnika poput pokojnog Šabira Aktara, Taha Abdurahmane i Kaleda Abul el Fadla, ovaj metod nagoveštava da je u toku intenzivna epistemološka promena koja omogućava posvećenim muslimanima da povrate svoju moć, kao i da proizvedu koherentno, etičko znanje koje je u skladu sa njihovim vrednostima i istorijskim iskustvima.

Ključne reči: islamska etika, društvena mobilizacija, epistemološka autonomija, islamska subjektivnost, borbe za oslobođenje.