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Assumptions and Presuppositions in Islamic Studies

Introduction

When we are doing scholarly work on texts or other evidence from the past or the present, and when we do our best to arrive on the basis of such evidence at a knowledge and understanding of reality — or certain aspects of reality — we are striving basically to "do justice" to reality in all its aspects. This holds true, not only for the facts which we have to establish with the critical tools at our disposal, but also for the study of the meaning which these facts had or still now have for the people concerned, that is to say the outlooks and views, problems and expressions of these people. The demand for a knowledge which is generally valid, is constitutive for any scholarship; and those who are led by particular ideals — even of the highest kind — tend to leave out of consideration those data which fall outside the scope of those ideals. Both the skeptic and the idealist, for instance, tend to distort reality as it is and as it presents itself. It is so as to know how things really are that we interrogate the available data in an intelligent way, and we cannot afford to have assumptions and presuppositions that would either make research meaningless, or would replace critical verification by preconceived dogmas and ideas.

Definition of Assumptions and Presuppositions

What should be understood by "assumptions" and "presuppositions"? Both have to do with the conditions under which knowledge is pursued. Whereas the assumptions are held implicitly, without the scholar being necessarily conscious of them, the presuppositions may, rather, be called the conscious starting-point from which a scholar pursues knowledge; that is to say what he uses as his own point of view or approach, thereby rejecting alternative points of view or approaches. Presuppositions, as we

define them, may be of an ideological nature, but this is not necessarily so; many of them are methodological in essence and some of them are even of a technical nature. It is essential, in our view, for presuppositions that they become articulated in one way or another: as motivations behind the investigation or as insights as a result of the investigation. Presuppositions may be articulated not only in the course of the scholarly work itself, but also formulated in more formal or incidental remarks about what the scholar takes, for instance, society or culture, religion or civilization — or simply "man" — to be. Assumptions, on the other hand, as we define them, are not articulated and remain outside the will and mostly even the consciousness of the scholar, though from time to time he may become aware of some of them in a sudden and passing flash of understanding. Assumptions appear to be related to the factual conditions under which a scholar works, the situation in which he finds himself during his work, and the society and culture — including its history and social organization — in which he lives. Such external conditions tend to provoke a response on his side, and subsequently this response easily leads then to conscious presuppositions. Briefly, we take presuppositions to be part of the person and mind of the scholar himself, and that more or less consciously. Whereas assumptions, basically, are part of a larger whole in which the scholar participates and to which he may respond as a person.

I became interested in these matters which precede our actual research work when preparing my dissertation which gave an analysis of the images of Islam as they are presented in the work of some distinguished Islamicists who wanted to study Islam objectively[1]. The interesting thing was that not only the total image as such was different according to each scholar, but that also significant details of Islam were interpreted by the scholars in different ways. It became clear that the details of a civilization like Islam were mostly seen in the context of an overall picture or idea of this Islam, and that both the total image and the interpretation of details were to a very large extent variables of what was understood by a particular scholar as "civilization", "religion", in general. In other words, in the study of Islam by these first--rate scholars who worked between 1880 and 1960, we have to do not only with their concrete findings as the results of their work, but also with a particular framework of reference which they used and within which these findings found their place and were appreciated. So there appears to be every reason to relate a creative scholar's findings of facts especially if ideas are concerned, to the overall developing image which he has of his subject-matter. Subsequently, one should relate this overall image in its turn not only to the "real" state of affairs of the subject-matter which was investigated, but also to the methodology which was used by the scholar, and to his cultural or a-cultural religious or non-religious presuppositions. The next step will

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[1] Jean-Jacques W a a r d e n b u r g, *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'Occident.* Comment quelques orientalistes occidentaux se sont, penchés sur l'Islam et se sont formé une image de cette religion: I. G o l d z i h e r, C. S n o u c k H u r g r o n j e, C. H. B e c k e r, D. B. M a c d o n a l d, L. M a s s i g n o n. Third revised edition: The Hague and Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1970, XIV + 381 p.

be to relate these subjective presuppositions in their turn to his objective assumptions, that is to say the actual conditions and the situation in which the scholar was working.

Here, when I draw some lessons from the work of some Islamicists of the past, looking at the relation between each scholar and "his" Islam, this does not mean that we have to do with a situation which has really "passed". By knowing something of the extent that they were determined at their time, we can extrapolate some rules of these determinations which apply to us too, and we can draw a conclusion and adopt an attitude. Moreover, I have always had the impression that some prominent scholars of Islam like, for instance in the U.S.A., the late H. A. R. G i b b and G. E. von G r u n e b a u m, and at present Wilfred C. S m i t h, worked or are working by questioning the available materials in particular ways. Their questions can be traced back, in principle I believe, to some kind of basic framework of reference and interpretation, if not to a basic outlook on man and on life. It is this way of studying, for instance, Islamic history, which makes their work as a whole more interesting than the sum total of their concrete investigations would be. To say it in my own terms, these scholars showed that they had a mind of their own.

Presuppositions

With regard to the problem of scholarly presuppositions, the method of analysis of the work of five Islamicists of the "classical" stage of Islamic studies, all five living in the academic culture of Western Europe before World War I, proved to be useful. In my dissertation, I tried to explain the differences between these five images of Islam not so much by checking the image with the facts about what we now know of Islamic realities, but by taking each scholarly work as a whole and by analysing it as such with reference to its inner coherence. First I was interested in the relationship between the basic intentions of the work as a whole, in the most important or innovating concepts that were used, and in the concrete results that were obtained.

Secondly I concentrated on what may be called the subjective elements in a scholar's image of Islam, that is to say those elements that cannot be explained by the subject–matter under investigation, but that can find — as intentions and presuppositions — their explanation only in the person of the scholar. There turned out to be indeed a direct correlation between, on one hand, what may be called the "position" of a scholar, and, on the other hand, the perspective according to which he views his subject–matter. It is precisely this perspective, which shows itself in the image which the scholar develops of his subject of investigation, and which can be drawn from the work of that scholar. At three moments, at least, the subjectivity of the person of the scholar enters the field: in the process of his gradual "discovery" of Islam, in his discovery of values inherent in Islam, and in the scholar's own stand or position at the point of departure of his research, of which the final result of that research is the outcome.

An analysis of the relation between a scholar and the "Islam" he studied, finally,

showed that: (1) when a scholar is striving for understanding, in the course of his study a relation forms itself between the scholar and his better known subject–matter; (2) the attitude and the presuppositions of the scholar, when facing an unknown object, are here of fundamental importance; (3) this relation and this attitude gain in meaning and significance for the scholar himself to the extent that he is more deeply engaged in his subject–matter.

In the case of the five scholars under consideration, we were able: (1) to trace their approaches with their modes of work, methods and presuppositions; (2) to compare their attitudes; (3) to lay bare the relation which established itself between the scholar and "his" Islam; (4) to trace the influence of the discovered object on the subject, that is to say the meaning which Islam had for each particular scholar. Altogether it appeared, at least for the five cases analysed, that in creative scholarly work the role of presuppositions is immense.

Let me resume the conclusions reached with regard to the problem of presuppositions in scholarly work, including Islamic studies, in five points:

(1) It is possible, on the basis of the written work and the biography of a scholar, to reconstruct to a large extent the genesis and elaboration of a scholarly work in its historical development;

(2) It is possible, on the same basis and taking into account possible oral communications, to disentangle the basic intentions of a scholarly work, by taking this work as a whole, and then paying attention to those aspects which are revelatory for such intentions, to the concepts used, and also to general statements made by a particular scholar about science, history, society, religion, reason, etc. as such;

(3) It is possible to reconstitute the image which a scholar has presented of the object which he studied, and then to find a number of so–called "subjective" elements, that is to say elements of the image which cannot be explained by the nature of the object itself. Closer analysis of such subjective elements shows then that they contain, besides intentions or aims of research, also value judgements (through values), types of factual relationship (through general concepts, or ideas), and presuppositions (through the nature of the interpretations);

(4) It is possible, on the basis of these "subjective" elements, to infer the epistemological "position" of a particular scholar and to correlate it with the "perspective" in which the subject–matter has been viewed and which shows itself in the image which was developed by the scholar. This position of the scholar is supposed to be of an existential nature — having to do with his life — and can be checked with biographical data concerning his personality etc. It goes without saying that both the subjective elements and the existential position of any scholar can be known only approximately. Theoretically speaking, they enter into play in the growing interest of a scholar in the subject–matter which becomes "his", in the process of his gradually discovering the subject–matter, in the values and structures recognized by him in it, and ultimately in the final result of his research, which can usefully be compared with the initial point of departure of his research;

(5) Though all of this may be valid for all scholarly work or research under-

taken, it is particularly true if the object of study has a "human" aspect — as in the humanities and social sciences — since the "human" side of the scholar then becomes directly or indirectly involved in the study process, perhaps less in his knowledge of facts that in his understanding of their meaning.

It appears from any analysis that a scholar professionally is first and foremost centreed upon discovery and invention. High words and ideas as these may sound, they yet constitute the focus of his mental activity, the direction of his mind. The sector to which the interest is applied may vary, but the movement itself is that of aiming at what is unknown, and what — in some way or another — attracts. It is clear that without certain presuppositions a scholar not only would not be able to discover something: he also would not even exist as a scholar. Indeed, he would have no motivation to study anything.

Assumptions

Contrary to presuppositions as they direct research on a conscious level, and as we can spot them through the internal analysis of a given scholarly work, there are the assumptions of a much less personal nature and which occur at a much less conscious level; they are largely determined by the circumstances at a given time and by the trends of particular situations. I would like to give three instances of such situations which were to reflect themselves in studies of Islamic realities.

In the first place we can think of the Middle Ages and still later times in which, in the Christian West, Islam was seen as a danger, or at least as a power which one ought to reckon with. In addition to those people who went out to fight this power militarily, politically or ideologically, there were also those who wanted, rather, to investigate it, and to discover its sources, specifically its religious sources. As many other things, Islamic studies were then, to a large extent, born out of fear: the Islamicist at the time studied an enemy, basically; and an enemy of which, like with other enemies, the available data were scarce.

In the second place, we can think of Islamic Studies in Europe during the century (1850–1950) in which Europe — England, France, Russia, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Spain — had political control over nearly all Muslim territories. Islam, at that time, belonged to the indigenous populations who had no part in modern western civilization or in the Christian religion. Islam as an "enemy" had been subdued and its danger had become real in the sense that local uprisings might take place with an appeal to Islam, in so-called pan-Islamic or in nationalistic movements. The larger political decisions over the future of these peoples were largely made in London, Paris, Petersburg and The Hague ... This meant that much research, especially on contemporary Islam, was done in the light of colonial policies. There could be complete subservience of research in the intelligence services through which western governments could be informed about actions of the religious leaders and possible religious agitators. But research could also lead to a binding advice in juridical matters (applica-

tion of sharī'a law, use of 'ādat, introduction of western law, problems of codification, etc.), or it could lead to a free advice following a particular interpretation of what was going on among the Muslim population. More subtly, the colonial situation determined also in a number of cases the topics of research, and the questions that were put. On the whole, the image of Islam was rather black and the average scholar working in the field tended to see Muslims as moving towards a dead end, to see their societies as doomed to stagnancy, their beliefs as survivals of the past, their religion as a hindrance to development. In short: in most cases there was a sheer impossibility to see a "future" for Muslim people and their society. Over and against this majority group of scholars there was, however, in each "colonial" country also a small group of well–informed Islamicists who had not only the necessary knowledge of contemporary Muslim societies and of the greater past of Islamic civilization, but who also, for some reason, had a sympathetic stand toward a Muslim population. It is typical that, apart from a few scholars working on contemporary Islam, a much greater number of others withdrew from the contemporary scene and devoted themselves to study history, philology or literature of past times. Unless I am quite mistaken, this very withdrawal from the realities of the contemporary scene may have had some relationship with an atmosphere of irreality or alienation on the scene in the colonies whenever the question was raised of what kind of vitality and future the religion of the indigenous masses could have.

The third example is still more recent, and more in an ideological realm. This is the present stress on cooperation, understanding and dialogue with Islam. This is partly to be seen as a reaction to earlier negative attitudes; for instance, certain missionary efforts made without much regard for what Muslims themselves were, believed or thought. It is partly also the opening up of a dimension of common human needs and of interhuman relationships among people of different cultural and religious traditions. This change in attitude within the last twenty–five years has to do with a change of the world situation and a corresponding change of assumptions held by people. Whereas fifty years ago Islam as a religion was generally held to be responsible for the state of underdevelopment of these countries, it is now acknowledged that such a situation of stagnation is too complex to ascribe it to religious views and practices only, as if these would have had no earthly antecedents and causes.

Islamic Studies

After these examples of actually working presuppositions and assumptions, let us turn now to what this all means for Islamic studies: not only in the past, but also and especially at present and in the future.

Let us be frank and say that the whole term "Islamic Studies" itself is an intellectual construction and implies an interpretation. Many scholars who do research on specific subjects in language and literature, history and social sciences, would be astonished to see their work interpreted as "Islamic" studies. They rather feel them-

selves as working on particular subjects or within the lines of a discipline, applying its methods and techniques to the subjects of their choice. Others would consider a term like "Islamic Studies" to be more useful in terms of study programs, institutionalized centres and institutes without applying it to something like Islamic culture or civilization. What would one expect, for instance, "Buddhist" or "Christian" studies to be? Such terms are simply too broad. Others again would be critical with regard to the term itself which would actually imply a deformation of the facts. Most data or facts of Muslim societies have many more aspects then the "Islamic" one, and often have nothing to do with Islam. Much depends then on what we understand by "Islamic" as a qualification, and what we call "Islam".

If we must maintain the expression "Islamic Studies", I would prefer to use it in a particular sense. It cannot be the purpose of these studies to ascertain what "Islam" really is on earth and in heaven, in ideals and in practice, as if it were a thing or a kind of entity in itself. I have also certain reservations with regard to the study of Islam as a "religion" or as a "civilization", since in most cases we then apply a given model of what is called a "world religion" or a "world civilization", so that we tend to neglect those aspects which we cannot classify under a general category such as "religion" or "civilization". It makes more sense to ask what ways of life Muslims had and have — be it as a view of life as such, be it as the way they lived under specific conditions and circumstances — ; what they actually mean when they speak of their Islam as the highest value; what they consider themselves to be their norms and values. But, if, such a definition of Islamic Studies makes sense, it is still too comprehensive: it would be the study of all that Muslims in all times and places have done, thought and believed, and this is much too wide and vague a subject.

Personally, I would prefer to understand by "Islamic Studies" two things. In the first place it would, as a formal expression, embrace all scholarly disciplines which study data relevant to Muslim societies. Consequently, it is a field of studies in which several disciplines cooperate. This definition would be useful in terms of organization and of institutional study programs. In the second place, it would be the study of that which unites Muslims, and Muslim societies, as a kind of sign system, with various interpretations and applications by different groups in different times and places, in thought and practice. This also concerns one's self–identification as a "Muslim" or the identification of something as "Islamic".

Conclusion

I would like to summarize the different kinds of presuppositions and assumptions we can distinguish when we are studying expressions of people who identified or identify themselves as Muslims — if we take this to be the distinguishing mark of this field. This is already a presupposition in itself. If it is necessary to study a considerable number of facts about Muslim societies independently of any reference to Islam, we are here concerned with facts which are relevant in terms of their "Muslim" quality.

The first set of assumptions centres upon what may be called the often unreflected identification of "Islam". What kind of idea, "picture" or value judgment emerges when the notion "Islam" comes to the mind of a scholar? It will often start with the associations of the word as they are current in the immediate surroundings in which one works, and in many cases such old "pre–scholarly" notions continue indeed to play a role. The same is true for the particular school in which the student was educated, or even the attitude of a particular teacher with regard to Islam. It may sound somewhat ridiculous now, but there have been "schools" of Islamic Studies which were considering "Islam" — whatever it meant — as outdated, as something negative from a social, cultural or religious point of view, just as there also were more "sympathetic" schools. Of course such evaluations took place especially in countries which had Muslims under their rule. It is interesting to observe that, even if such "pre–scholarly" notions were partly or wholly corrected by factual research, there could still remain something of it on the level of feeling and emotion — especially if one had been in Muslim countries oneself.

The second set of assumptions goes back to the way in which the society or country of a particular scholar is related to some part of the Muslim world. One may think of the *question orientale* of the 19th and early 20th century, and of the Middle East conflicts at present. Most of the interest in Europe for Islam, expecially in recent and contemporary history, has been directed by underlying relationships. If France wanted to bring civilization to the Arabs, the Turks and the Persians, French Islamicists tended to be interested in things Islamic in particular ways — and if they were interested in Islam in other ways too, it was the more remarkable. And if a contemporary scholar has chosen an explicitly anti-Arab or anti-the-state-of-Israel stance, this will not only determine to a large extent the direction of his own interests but it reflects a group or a society which relates itself to one side of the conflict or to the other. It becomes indeed all the more remarkable, in terms of our analysis, if an Islamicist takes a professional and independent attitude with regard to religious and social pressures and investigates the views of all parties involved. Generally speaking, when the scholar's society or country has adopted a particular stance toward Islam or toward particular Muslim countries, this will reflect itself in his assumptions: unless he himself adopts a conscious attitude with regard to this matter, which will reflect itself then as a presupposition. In most cases, scholars will not take part in conflict–situations, but adopt a moral stand and carry out their research work as their first duty.

The third class of examples has to do more with individual presuppositions than with structural assumptions; they concern the way in which scholars interpret what is unique and specific and what is humanly universal in Islamic realities. One extreme is to call anything which Muslims do, think or believe, or, for that matter, what Islam as a culture and religion contains, "unique"; the other extreme is to deny any specific quality to Islamic phenomena, except the pretention itself, made by Muslims, that Islam would be something specific. The debate between these two extremes is not only of an academic nature. If one party wants to study Islamic realities apart from what other cultures or general disciplines offer and consequently will fail to see what

kind of universal aspects of man, culture and religion appear in the Islamic orbit, the other party will play down the special character of Islam. He may tend either to derive Islamic realities historically from outside or preceding influences, or he may deny any specific structures in Islam or special kinds of relationship between Muslims and other people, so that actually there would be no cultural "worlds" which would distinguish themselves fundamentally from each other. The issue becomes still less academic if one thinks of the distance which a scholar may perceive to exist between himself — his own culture and society — and his subject–matter "Islam" as a culture and society. Those scholars who hold Islam to be unique tend to see this distance as infinite; those who deny the existence of any essential differences, tend to neglect any distance and to identify themselves with their subject–matter. In both extreme cases, however, Islamic Studies are subjected to cultural presuppositions which heavily determine a scholar's outlook on his subject–matter. The question of what one considers to be specific and what to be humanly universal in Islamic realities seems to be indeed a key question in Islamic Studies.

The fourth kind of presupposition to be mentioned in Islamic Studies includes all those private values, beliefs and convictions of the scholar, in the light — or darkness — of which he gives a particular evaluation of Islamic phenomena. It is the framework of reference within which evaluations are made: in the case of some scholars quite explicitly, in most cases in a less explicit way. It is not only the study and evaluation of individual facts, but also and even more the way in which such facts are related to each other — their relationships and the interpretations of these relationships — that reflects the total framework of reference and evaluations of a scholar. The only way to escape from this would be to eliminate rigorously, and from the very outset the subjectivity of the scholar by a complete formalization of the research work. The result of this would be a lack of understanding both about the content and the meaning of the relevant phenomena. Every effort to understand Islam as a civilization, religion or a particular social system immediately introduces a number of imponderables due to the scheme of reference and the values which the scholar — (self-) critically or not — applies. And these imponderables, it should be said, lead to the most interesting interpretations. The real debate, therefore, is not about the question of whether or not there ought to be a scheme of reference, but rather which one is the most suitable.

The fifth and last class of assumptions and presuppositions is to be found on a most subjective level, that of "interest". The problem here is whether and why a particular scholar is at all interested, beyond his specialized factual research, in some "Islamic" meaning beyond the pure facts. Why is a scholar interested precisely in Islamic phenomena, and what are his motivations to pursue Islamic studies? It will appear that, in this field too, there are the realists and the idealists who have different interests, and that it is relatively rare that someone is "interested" in something just for its own sake. In many cases it will be, of course, rather difficult to trace interests and motivations, both among other scholars and in our own case.

This difficulty seems to indicate that it is here that we really come to the heart of the assumptions and presuppositions in Islamic studies.

I want to dismiss at once one possible conclusion: that all assumptions and presuppositions are wrong, or that it is wrong to have them. In that case, any interest — and anyone interested — would be impossible. I. G o l d z i h e r would not have studied Islam if he had not had his liberal-religious and historical cultural outlook. L. M a s s i g n o n would not have studied the work of a l - Ḥ a l l ā ǧ if he had not had his delicate religious concerns, his Catholic dedication, and, again, his exegetical rules of spiritual truth. Similar remarks can also be made about H. A. R. G i b b and G. E. von G r u n e b a u m. In all these cases, the assumptions and presuppositions of the scholar have distorted the subject–matter only to a certain extent. More important is that they gave access to subject–matter, and that new fields were opened for research. The problem seems to be that under certain conditions a particular scholar makes certain assumptions and presuppositions which close off for him part of the real world, and that under certain conditions certain assumptions and presuppositions give precisely access to that reality. Moreover, it is our assumptions and presuppositions which largely determine what kind of questions we ask, and also: what are the good questions?

I hope that this will contribute to further reflection and scholarly discussion.