Three Dichotomies in Arabic and Islamic Studies: Continuity and Change, Norm and Practice, Sacred and Profane

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Abstract. The present article introduces the concept of *cultural bifurcation* in Arabic and Islamic studies, exemplifying it through an account of ongoing collaborative research initiated by the Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. Building on notions such as *cultural diglossia* as adopted by some Medievalists, cultural bifurcation is foregrounded as a common foundation that helps achieve a deeper understanding of three entangled key dichotomies in Arabic and Islamic studies: continuity versus change, norm versus practice, and sacred versus profane. This approach allows us to accomplish a two-fold objective—to test the suggested concept of bifurcation by discussing an interdisciplinary work in progress undertaken by a group of scholars in the fields of history and cultural studies, linguistics and literary studies under the Sofia University program on *Contemporary Trends in Arabic and Islamic Studies*. Hence, the analysis sheds light on internationally lesser-known aspects of the activity of Arabists and Islamicists in Bulgaria vis-à-vis some major topics in the field, combining such theorizing with approaches from history and the anthropology of science. Instead of seeking to arrive at "definitive" conclusions, this article proposes an "open-ended" reflection to encourage further research.

Keywords: cultural bifurcation, cultural diglossia, Arabic language and literature, Islam, norm and practice, continuity and change, sacred and profane

Симеон Евстатиев. ТРИ ДИХОТОМИИ В АРАБИСТИКАТА И ИСЛЯМОЗНАНИЕТО: ПРИЕМСТВЕНОСТ И ПРОМЯНА, НОРМА И ПРАКТИКА, САКРАЛНО И ПРОФАННО

Резюме. Статията въвежда понятието *културна раздвоеност* в арабистиката и ислямознанието, като илюстрира концептуализацията му с разискване на едно ново изследване, предприето от Катедрата по арабистика и семитология в Софийския университет „Св. Климент Охридски". Макар и да включва в обхвата си идеи като

споменаваната от някои медиевисти „културна диглосия“, културната раздвоеност е изведена на преден план като по-широко понятие – общ знаменател при разбирането на три ключови взаимно преплитащи се дихотомии в арабистиката и ислямознанието: приемственост и промяна, норма и практика, сакрално и профанно. Подходът позволява да се постигне двояка цел – понятието „културна раздвоеност“ да се представи теоретично, като същевременно се разгледат интердисциплинарните търсения на свързани с арабистиката група учени, занимаващи се с история и култура, лингвистика и литература в рамките на съвместното изследване „Съвременни тенденции в арабистиката и ислямознанието“. Така настоящата студия хвърля светлина и върху по-малко известни сред международната научна аудитория аспекти от дейността на българските арабисти и ислямоведи, която ситуира спрямо някои водещи теми и проблеми в това научно поле. Предложеният анализ съчетава нов теоретичен поглед с методи от историята и антропологията на науката, но вместо да се стреми към формулирането на категорични, „окончателни“ заключения по повдигнатите въпроси, предлага по-скоро моментна снимка – рефлексия „с отворен край“, която би могла да насърчи по-нататъшни изследвания в тази насока.

Ключови думи: културна раздвоеност, културна диглосия, арабски език и литература, ислям, норма и практика, приемственост и промяна, сакрално и профанно

Research/Научно изследване

Introduction

Cultural bifurcation as observed in complex societies is represented in language and literary heritage.* It often stirs up heated discussions and conflicts over the nature and the practical implications of how to interact with normative codes claiming universal validity vis-à-vis diversity and locally embedded notions of culture and tradition. The entire entangled history of the Arab Middle East and North Africa from the advent of Islam in the early seventh century AD can be seen as the history of a remarkable cultural bifurcation. It often takes the form of duality not only in the religious field but also in the understanding and transmission of Arabic language and literature from generation to generation. This nurtures what medievalist Walter J. Ong (1984: 4–5) describes as the phenomenon of "cultural diglossia" when referring to the role of Latin as a "high" language as opposed to the "low" vernacular languages used for other purposes in the Western European Middle Ages. Classical Arabic (*al-fuṣḥā*) shares much of the linguistic arrangements of the Latin Middle Ages when people had mother tongues—be they Old French, Old Norse, or Old English—that gradually replaced Latin as colloquial languages after the sixth or

* I would like to thank Dale F. Eickelman of Dartmouth College for his insightful comments on an earlier draft.

seventh century. Latin, however, became a dead language only after the Middle Ages. In the Arab world today, spoken local languages exist alongside an ancient scriptural language, leading to a situation in which "colloquial Arabic is a living but not fully literary language, whereas classical Arabic is literary but not entirely living" (Ziolkowski, 1991: 194). Classical Arabic, however, will scarcely follow the path of post-medieval Latin any time soon, as it is structurally interwoven in the very fabric of Arab cultures through Islamic normativity.

In the Muslim-majority world, and particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, the duality embedded in the notion of cultural diglossia observed in the history of various cultures does not suffice as a tool for grasping what is conceptualized here as cultural bifurcation. In the Arab world, cultural bifurcation stems from the way the sacred Islamic normative code embedded in the foundational texts of Muslim scripture—the Qur'ān and the prophetic Sunna[1]— underpins the specific religious, educational and socio-cultural practice with which it is differently engaged in a given context. Since the rise of Islam, Arab cultural practices, including language and literary activity, have sought to explicitly or implicitly compare themselves with and juxtapose themselves against that sacred code—whether it be to conform to its divinely revealed truth or to contrast with it. How, then, does cultural bifurcation in Arab societies manifest itself at the intersection of the Arabic language and literary tradition with the Islamic sacred code? What sustains social and cultural cohesion, which is elevated above all tensions between norm and practice to shape patterns of continuity and change throughout Islamic history and the varieties of Arabic language and cultural production? How, after all, do the sacred and the profane correlate, given the inherent tension between norm and practice? All these questions refer, though differently, to the issue of the complex relationships between free individual choice designated as agency and what impedes this choice termed as social structure.

In what follows, I seek to tackle those questions by describing a collaborative interdisciplinary work in progress initiated by the Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski[2] under the *Contemporary Trends in Arabic and Islamic Studies* Program.[3] My reflection on the work done by others illustrates the questions I raise and might overlap but does not necessarily co-

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[1] For Muslims, the Qur'ān is God's Word revealed to mankind "in clear Arabic language" (*bi-lisān 'arabī mubīn*) (Q 16:103; 26:195). The term Sunna designates the normative example of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 632 AD) as codified in ḥadīth (pl. *aḥādīth*) – the traditions based on his words, deeds, and telling silence.

[2] For a brief overview of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Bulgaria, see Evstatiev (2021a).

[3] The collaborative research discussed here is supported by the Scientific Research Fund of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, under Project ID 80-10-59/22.3.2021.

incide with my colleagues' own research perspectives. Combining approaches from history and the anthropology of science, I first introduce the key concepts briefly and then interrelate them in my account of that work in progress thus also shedding light on some internationally lesser-known aspects of the activity of Bulgarian Arabists and Islamicists. In doing so, I share the assumption held by none other than the founder of modern Islamic studies in Europe, Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), who used to say: "Scholarship has no country, but the scholar does have his country."[4]

Cultural Bifurcation, Sacred Normativity, and Change

However wide the range between norm and practice has always been in the remarkably diverse Arab-Muslim societies, there is an implicit spectrum of legitimacy—a change or an interpretation is not feasible if it bluntly overlooks and oversteps the boundaries and limits of that spectrum. What is possible in politics, religious interpretation, language reform or change of the literary canon, is, as historian Quintan Skinner (1998, 105) would have said, albeit about a different context, "[is] generally limited by what it is possible to legitimize. What you can hope to legitimize, however, depends on what courses of action you can plausibly range under existing normative principles". The range between norm and practice therefore entails boundaries drawn by explicit or implicit shared anticipations that place and often replace notions of change—perceived as "wrong", such notions are often reversed and consequently brought back to the scope of legitimacy. Sustaining cultural coherence is therefore an enterprise that requires religious scholars (*'ulamā'*, sg. *'ālim*), jurists, grammarians, poets and men of letters to constantly keep an eye on and cope with the bifurcation between norm and practice in seeking to position themselves within the spectrum of legitimacy in their fields.

Historically, the existence of such a spectrum has provided Arab-Muslim societies with civilizational identity[5] and has shaped a cultural hierarchy of social spaces as those various groups—be they *'ulamā'*, jurisprudents, grammarians or poets—observe, guard, and control any attempt to transcend the boundaries of legitimacy within the group and across various groups. Socio-anthropologically, this assumes firm "ties that bind"—not only among the Arab adherents to Islam

[4] As cited by his disciple, Joseph De Somogyi (1961: 15–16), who reports that Golziher always professed himself a Hungarian despite his wide international recognition and the fact that he wrote most of his works in German. Goldziher used to say this whenever he referred to his numerous invitations to foreign universities.

[5] On recent debates and attempts to (re)-conceptualize civilizational identity, see Halle and Laruelle (2020: 587–89). "Civilizational discourse" in Muslim-majority countries is discussed by Çınar (2018), whose account of modern Turkey's "Muslim" and "Western" identity provides additional examples for the conceptualization of cultural bifurcation.

but also between them and Muslims elsewhere to the east and west. That is a type of tie resembling what anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2005: 2) defines as "cultural intimacy" referring to the "privacy of nations" and denoting "sore zones of cultural sensitivity" shaped and reshaped against the backdrop of alien, external forces. Clifford Geertz (1973: 195, 311), in turn, invites us to think of such ties as part of a cultural system based on "symbolical webs" of meanings or a shared "web of belief". In the Arab Middle East and North Africa, there are two major pillars sustaining this "symbolical web" of shared meanings—Islam and the Arabic language. Paradoxically, Arabic and Islam underpin the "civilizational identity" of that vast region by nurturing its concurrent cultural coherence and bifurcation.

By overstating the role of subjective choices due to the dominant agency-oriented trend in contemporary humanities and social sciences, many studies of Islam tend to underestimate structure by repeatedly using well-intended dicta, such as the phrase that "Islam is what Muslims do"—identities, it is usually presumed, are in constant flux, as they are not primordial or a fixed essence.[6] As a German Arabist and Islamicist writes, under the so-called "pragmatic turn" scholars are focusing on motion, action and interaction, turning agency into a keyword while boundaries are ever shifting and (re)-negotiated, everything is "in flux" and nothing is uniform, developments are contingent and ideas are constructed, "no choir sings unisono" (Krämer, 2006: 181). It is already accepted as conventional wisdom that—being in constant flux—identities are not a "fixed essence" as they are socially constructed and "fluid" as opposed to primordial.[7] Benedict Anderson (2006: 6) introduced his insightful notion of imagined communities not to suggest that nations are "not real" but to re-conceptualize the fact that "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion". Later studies go further beyond these original implications of Anderson's term to propose that the "Muslim world" is "imagined" in the sense it has never existed until it was "invented" by Westerners and their "racialization of Islam" (Aydın, 2017: 3–11). This is one of the outcomes of an observed tendency to "decompose" Islam into many "islams" initiated more than thirty years ago in the work of scholars as Abdul Hamid el-Zein (1977: 242–43). More recently, this trend has not abated but has taken on other forms.

Approaches that entail a full "deconstruction" of Islam to solve the tension between norm and practice, however, fail to suggest any tenable definition, even though some scholars continue to find the question "What is Islam?" highly engag-

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[6] For further detail and examples on the complex tensions between agency and structure, as well as primordialism as opposed to constructivism in understanding collective identities, see Evstatiev (2019: 89). .

[7] On constructivism versus essentialism in the analysis of identities, see Makariev (2017: 24–35).

ing. In an otherwise remarkably erudite book, Shahab Ahmed (1966–2015) tackles the topic more cautiously by rejecting what he designates as the "islams-not-Islam" approach together with the long-established views of Islam "as law" by going to the opposite extreme. Seeking to conceptualize Islam as a "historical phenomenon" against the Orientalists' "Islam as law", Ahmed (2016: 6ff.) brings to the fore six questions related to what he sees as outright contradictions: 1) Arabic philosophy (falsafa) whose representatives, such as Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) are accused of unbelief by theologians like Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111)[8] ; 2) Sufism with its mystical dimensions; 3) Illuminationism and Akbarian Sufism represented by thinkers such as al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), who combine falsafa and Sufism, thus undermining the authority of the Prophet Muḥammad; 4) the homoerotic poetry of the Persian poet Ḥāfiẓ of Shīrāz (d. 791/1389), which, according to Ahmed (2016: 27), displays "love, wine and pretty boys and girls" not simply as such but as symbolizing the relationship between the Muslim and God; 5) "Islamic art" which involves cultural phenomena, such as the miniature paintings in books that break the Islamic ban on images; and 6) wine and alcohol proliferating in medieval poetry written by Muslims.

Ahmed assumes that wine is truly "Islamic", for there have always been Muslim wine-drinkers and the elaboration of his argument around those six questions leads him to eventually propose a conceptualization of Islam as "meaning making for the self in terms of hermeneutical engagement" (Ahmed 2016: 405, emphasis in original). However, if Islam is a "hermeneutical engagement", everything in Muslim-majority societies is "Islamic"—no matter whether it conforms to Islam "as law" and its sacred code or not. Thus seeking to fight against "essentialism", Ahmed offers a total generalization by which he does not distinguish between norm and practice, unlike many of the earlier Orientalists whom his book criticizes. Islamicist and scholar of religion Jacques Waardenburg (2002: 97) summarizes the notion of "normative Islam", established in Arabic and Islamic studies, as "that form of Islam through which Muslims have access to the ultimate norms that are valid for life, action, and thought. At once the polarity becomes evident between this normative Islam and the Islam that is in fact practiced. […] In classical Muslim terms, normative Islam is the Sharī'a". The contradictions noticed by Ahmed are consequently related to a phenomenon long since known among text-oriented Islamicists and social anthropologists studying how "universal" Islam is "localized".[9] It involves not only the tension between norm and practice but also the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane along the lines of which religion, language and literature have partaken in a remarkable cultural production attaining changes

[8] On the legally consequential accusations of unbelief (*takfīr*) in Islam, see Evstatiev (2018: 332–99, specifically on al-Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā, see p. 366); cf. Evstatiev (2015: 215–21).

[9] On the conceptualization of "universal Islam" in local contexts, see Eickelman (1982).

through continuity. The combination of these paradoxical modes of contradiction underlies what I call here cultural bifurcation—it encompasses but trumps the notion of cultural diglossia in covering not only Islam but a larger set of phenomena in Arab societies.

Arabic language plays a pivotal role in the construction of the shared web of meanings throughout the past and present of the Arab world and beyond its regional boundaries due to its specific resonance with Islamic faith and history. Explicitly or implicitly, in and beyond the Arabic-speaking world there exists the notion that God bestowed excellence on the Arabs by sending Muḥammad as a prophet to seventh-century Arabia and revealing in Arabic the "core of the Book", or "the mother of the Book" (*umm al-Kitāb*)—the Qur'ān. In the early Muslim centuries, Islamization went hand in hand with Arabization and those who remained in the homeland of the Arabian Peninsula were honored that Islam was also called "the religion of the Arabs" (*dīn al-'arab*).[10] In this vein, as historian of Islam Michael Cook (2014: 13) writes, "without this historic process of Arabization there would at the present day be no such thing as an Arab world".

Entangled with the sacred code of Islam, Arabic language—often described as the Latin of the Orient—together with its literary heritage shares the pattern of cultural bifurcation implying a set of paradoxes and contradictions. For example, in seeking to ward off a possible accusation against al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī (d. ca. 791 AD) of breaching Islamic sacred law (*sharī'a*) by creating the Arabic science of prosody (*'ilm al-'arūḍ*) and thus making himself equal to Allah who alone can create things out of nothing, the Arabo-Islamic literary tradition invented a justifying story: the philologist undertook a pilgrimage to Mecca and prayed to God to reveal to him a completely new science, and only subsequently did he "receive" it after being divinely ordained (Evstatieva, 2011: 18–9). Poetry, however its practices might have "deviated" from Islamic norms, is thus not left as an entirely profane undertaking in the neutral sense of "secular" or "not sacred". If not integrated into the sacred, poetry could oppose Islamic norms as strongly as the illegitimate "unjust ruler" (*ṣulṭān jā'ir*) does in the realm of politics, since the latter "does not derive his power from God or the Prophet and his government does not embody divine law" (Crone, 2004: 120). Divine intervention in favor of al-Khalīl was therefore needed to legitimitize an engagement with a branch of knowledge and cultural production that was potentially profane but had to be elevated to a higher rank pertinent to the sacred standing of Arabic as the language of Islamic scripture.

The set of entangled dualities nurtured by the exceptionally high cultural standing of Classical Arabic (*al-fuṣḥā*) and its relation to what Western linguists today

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[10] On the Qur'anic term *dīn*, usually translated in European languages as "religion", compared to the Latin concept of religio, see Glei and Reichmut (2012). Among Bulgarian Arabists, this Qur'ānic term has been explored semasiologically by Dyulgerov (2018: 47–90).

usually call literary Arabic or Modern Standard Arabic[11] go beyond the issue of diglossia, which, however, remains highly relevant to grasping the sociolinguistic situation in the Arab world. The concept of diglossia is usually presented as a term borrowed from French and German linguists and introduced into English usage by Charles Ferguson (1959)[12] to denote the use of two language varieties[13] although it was coined three decades earlier by the French Arabist William Marçais (1930). Diglossia has long since been adopted as a tool for thinking of Semitic languages from the ancient times of Biblical Hebrew[14] to the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language (Palmer, 2007) in Europe, America, and elsewhere. Arabic (*al-ʻarabiyya*), therefore, poses a set of conceptual challenges given its high cultural standing among Arabs and Muslims until today.

The origins of bifurcation in the use and conceptualization of Arabic language after the seventh century date back to the rise of the Arabic linguistic tradition as part of Islamic tradition. It is well known that the first authentic grammatical treatise providing a systematic description is Sībawayhi's al-Kitāb—"The Book of Sībawayhi" (d. 796)—compiled in the second half of the eight century AD. Nevertheless, semi-legendary accounts in medieval Arabic sources indicate that the first grammar was introduced by Abū al-Aswad al-Du'alī (d. 69/688) in communication with the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law ʻAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), the fourth of the Pious Caliphs ruling the early Arab-Muslim state after the death of Muḥammad in 632 AD. This account signals that the origins of normative Arabic grammar are to be found among the closest companions of the Prophet and his family. In addition, perhaps the most ancient philological discussions are connected with the recension of the Qur'ān and its recitation for ritual purposes. The earliest traces in the development of Arabic philological tradition are to be found in mentions related to the branch of religious knowledge called *qirā'āt*—"readings", "recitations" of the Qur'ān (Bohas, Guillaume and Kouloughli, 2017: 1–2). Fixing stable, unchangeable readings that inspire religious certainty about the correct meanings of the Islamic revelation (t*anzīl*) was therefore a major incentive for the rise of philological reflections among Arabs.

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[11] See the various designations as mentioned by Beeston (2017: 12).

[12] For examples of such a presentation, see Chouairi. (2009: 35).

[13] Ferguson's exact definition (1959: 336) states: "Diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety."

[14] For further detail on diglossia related to Biblical Hebrew, see Fredericks (1998). On Arabic as a Semitic language within Afro-asiatic language family, see Todorov (2007: 3–7); cf. Versteegh (2014: 10–25).

Although for its speakers al-ʻarabiyya denotes Arabic in its various forms diachronically and synchronically, the perceptions of *al-fuṣḥā* as superior to all other languages and language forms has a long-established pedigree in Arab societies. The shared cultural situation in the Arab world notwithstanding, the wide range of dialects, each of which is designated as *ʻāmmiyya* or *lahja*, or in North Africa as dārija, are the actual mother tongues of Arabic speakers. This is a state of cultural bifurcation, for it entails a "duality (*izdiwājiyya*) of language forms and attitudes in popular conception" (Suleiman, 2008: 173) deeply embedded in identity as rooted in language—the most significant medium of human and social communication (Walters, 2021: 6–7). The encounter with modernity gave rise to a new impetus to the passionate concern for the purity of Arabic promoted not only by Muslims but also by Christian Arabs in the Middle East during the humanist "Arab renaissance" (*nahḍa*) in the nineteenth century, which sought to achieve the common ideals of tolerance, social justice and progress (Patel, 2013: 23) in a search for an identity that trumped the traditional divisions along religious lines. Modern Arab nationalism itself developed from its earlier roots in the works of *nahḍa*-writers who foregrounded Arabic as a shared marker of identity, and favoring high culture is a distinct feature of nationalism (Suleiman, 2003: 10, 159). The age of Arab nationalism thus transformed and enriched the prevailing perspectives to *al-fuṣḥā* but have not replaced it with the vernacular local languages.

Whatever forms this bifurcation has taken over the course of time, what is conventionally described as diglossia continues to be a characteristic feature of Arabic. Some earlier Arabists assumed that Arabic dialects today derive lineally from classical *al-fuṣḥā* or a variety similar to it. Ferguson (1959) elaborates on this assumption by claiming that modern Arabic dialects descend from the earlier language through an Arabic koine that was not identical with any of the dialects, and which differed largely from *al-fuṣḥā* but was used side by side with Classical Arabic. The process of this "koineization" of varieties designates the interdialectal contact entailing linguistic restructuring by which a dialect koine is "the stabilized mixed variety that results from this process" (Miller, 2008: 593). Researchers such as Mejdell (2016) adduce examples to suggest that the imagined boundary embedded in the concept of diglossia is not part of the linguistic situation today for many authors. Drawing on social media and other evidence, as well as adopting insights from linguistic anthropology, Kristen Brustad (2017: 41) proposes a "framework for the study of attitudes toward writing in non-standard Arabic" to look at diglossia as ideology that was initially shaped by the nineteenth-century Arab *nahḍa*.

Yet, a long time ago, other scholars recognized middle varieties of Arabic and rejected the strict dichotomy based on Ferguson's model of diglossia. Alongside Classical Arabic (*fuṣḥā al-turāth*), Badawī (1973) distinguished "Modern Standard Arabic" (*fuṣḥā al-ʻaṣr*), "colloquial of the intellectuals"—the formal spoken language of educated people (*ʻāmmiyyat al-muthaqqafīn*), "colloquial of the literate"—

the informal spoken language of the educated (*ʿāmiyyat al-mutanawwirīn*) and "colloquial of the illiterate" spoken by illiterate people (*ʿāmmiyyat al-ummiyyīn*). There is apparently a high degree of "code-mixing" (Versteegh, 2014: 245) but al-fuṣḥā continues to be the touchstone for educated people—even if they tend to use the "middle language" "middle language" (*al-lugha al-wusṭā*) as *ʿāmmiyyat al-muthaqqafīn* is alternatively designated. Hence, although they rephrase the research vocabulary and the existing linguistic concepts, even the new approaches rejecting the notion of diglossia do not presume "that *fuṣḥā* is in danger of slipping away" (Brustad, 2017: 66).

From the nineteenth century until today, many in the Arab world have been afraid that the role of Classical Arabic would be threatened by increased attention to the dialects, which are perceived as a symbol of fragmentation. The notion that dialects are a "deviation" from the norm is still alive and manifested in what is designated as "hypercorrection"—a mistake caused not by a mixing of al-fuṣḥā with the vernacular but by the wish to speak too correctly, which leads to a failure to use the correct standard form in the correct place (Versteegh, 2004: 4). Dialectology was perceived as a colonial tool, while British authorities actively supported the attempts to replace the Arabic script with Latin script. Religious circles, in turn, considered any venture to investigate the dialects an offence to the Qurʾān. Analyzing these attitudes, the Arabist Kees Versteegh (2014: 174–5) emphasizes that in the modern age, although there are Arab dialectologists, it remains difficult in the Arab world to arouse interest in the dialects as a serious object of study, as many speakers of Arabic realize that these are language varieties without a grammar.

The overall bifurcation stemming from the Arabic linguistic situation is therefore highly complex. Even if dialects were involved into a "koineization" or there were middle varieties between a*l-fuṣḥā* and the dialects, they can hardly replace al-fuṣḥā any time soon in the same way as Latin was replaced by languages such as Italian. Applying the notion of diglossia to Arabic language itself becomes, however, increasingly contested—like the view of Islam as normative law versus a wide range of deviating, vernacular, and mutually contrasting diverse practices that is contested by the above discussed attempts by Shabab Ahmed and others re-conceptualize Islam.

Towards Entangling the Three Dichotomies of Cultural Bifurcation

The evolving work of the research group under the ongoing 2021 program Contemporary Trends in Arabic and Islamic Studies at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski offers some engrossing insights and nuances to the discussion of the three dichotomies entangled through the overarching concept of cultural bifurcation: continuity versus change, norm versus practice, and the sacred versus the profane. This interdisciplinary group, shaped around the Department of Arabic and Semitic

Studies, consists of fourteen senior, mid-career and junior scholars, including aspiring doctoral students whose work is briefly mentioned below as an illustration of this article's main theoretical argument. Tentatively, the research group's principal aim was to discuss a selection of topics pertinent to the state of research in contemporary Arabic and Islamic studies in order to identify cases indicative of a common foundation of teaching and research within interdisciplinary university departments consolidating scholars specialized in Arabic linguistics and literature, Middle East history and Islamic studies. The three dichotomies have gradually emerged as the common ground of our research during a set of academic discussions at different levels in the form of working meetings, seminars and workshops.

Three working groups, whose participants regularly met between April and September 2021, were shaped along disciplinary lines: Arabic and Semitic linguistics (led by Victor Todorov, Associate Professor of Arabic and Afro-Asiatic Linguistics who also serves as Program Coordinator),[15] Arabic literature and culture (led by Galina Evstatieva, Associate Professor of Arabic Culture), and Middle East history and Islamic Studies (led by Simeon Evstatiev, Professor of Middle East History and Islamic Studies, currently Head of the Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies). [16] Each group consisted of scholars at different career levels, whereas some of the junior researchers were involved in more than one working group. An initial seminar on 9 April 2021 and an interim seminar on 1 July 2021 brought together all participants—the former to frame the collaborative research and the latter, consequently, to discuss the intermediate findings within the working groups. A key public event under the program was Language and Identity, Religion and Culture—a seminar for doctoral students and junior researchers chaired by Professor Simeon Evstatiev that was held at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski on 16 June 2021. This seminar involved junior researchers beyond the Program and beyond Sofia University as participants and discussants. It was opened by Professor Madeleine Danova, Dean of the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, and featured extensive concluding remarks by Professor Milena Bratoeva, an Indologist currently serving as Vice-Dean.

The final retreat workshop Continuity, Change, and the Sacred in Arabic Language and Islamic Culture, 10–12 September 2021, was organized in the city of Smolyan located in the Central Rhodope Mountains in the south of Bulgaria. The workshop synthesized the results from the entire research project by discussing the evolving chapters of an edited book in Bulgarian language that will be submitted

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[15] I would like to thank my colleague Victor Todorov for his encouraging comments on my reflection concerning the linguistic aspects of our work against the backdrop of my overall conceptualization.

[16] Unless explicitly stated otherwise, the participants in the program are affiliated to the Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.

for publication to Sofia University Press "St. Kliment Ohridski" in early 2022. Below, I try to explore how the three dichotomies under investigation were entangled within this collaborative research through a set of interrelated studies from the disciplinary fields of linguistics, history, literary and cultural studies. I draw on my own participation in the discussions, as well as on the first draft of the chapters in the thus envisaged volume prior to the stage of peer review, following the emerging preliminary structure of the volume outlined during the workshop and its subsequent analysis. In so doing, it is not my intention to "present" the prepared book but to demonstrate how the contributors to this research approach one or more of the three dichotomies, which underpin what I describe here as cultural bifurcation. Hence, instead of following the preliminary structure of the evolving volume, I regroup the individual studies according to the theoretical approach adopted in the present article.

The fundamental dichotomy between norm and practice in Arab and Muslim cultures is explored in one form or another by most of the individual studies. Pavel Pavlovitch, Professor of Medieval Arabo-Islamic Civilization, builds on his previous experience in analyzing the approaches to early Islam (Pavlovitch, 2017) and offers a study on the transmission of knowledge in that period of Muslim history. He tackles the normative tension between the Qur'ān and ḥadīth persisting through the eighth century AD but abating towards the end of this period with the forceful argument of al-Shāfiʿī (d. 820) that the Qur'ān and ḥadīth were two facets of the same divine revelation. Pavlovitch thus reveals how an initial bifurcation in Arab-Muslim culture, where in the first one hundred and fifty years knowledge was transmitted predominantly in oral form, copes with the potential duality of divine authority by integrating the Prophetic *ḥadīth* into the normative Islamic revelation alongside the Qur'ān. Hence, the scope of revelation was henceforth clear, albeit the precise interrelation between the two foundational texts of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth, as well as their interpretation and localizations in various contexts have persistently posed new challenges to Muslim scholars throughout the centuries.

Conflicts over the practical implications of how Muslims should interact with the universal normative codes embedded the Qur'ān and ḥadīth against the backdrop of locally embedded notions of culture continued to mark Islamic history. An indicative case for a persistent cultural bifurcation stemming from the tension between norm and practice is the question of wine drinking, which took such a central place in the arguments of Shahab Ahmed discussed above. In a promising study, Ana Mincheva, a PhD candidate in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, touches upon the relatively understudied topic of wine and Islam (Michalak and Trocki, 2006: 523) by examining the wine poetry (*khamriyyāt*) of Abū Nuwās (d. ca. 814). Adopting the established conventional view of *khamriyyāt* as Bacchic poetry, Mincheva carefully traces the contradicting approaches to its understanding in

medieval Muslim culture, given the Qur'ānic ban on the consumption of wine and the punishments for this *ḥadd*-crime[17] established by the Islamic legal schools on the basis of the ḥadīth as well (Feins, 1997: 96–97; 267). As Rudi Matthee (2014) writes, historically, most people in the Muslim-majority world did not drink in accordance with the Islamic norms, yet alcohol "has always played a surprisingly important role in male elite circles in the Islamic Middle East". Recent scholarship on Abū Nuwās goes beyond the conventional view of *khamriyyāt* as projecting this kind of wine symbolism into the canon or earlier Bacchic poetry by seeing it rather as a legacy of the Arabic pre-Islamic canon (Kennedy, 2005: 57). Further research on what caused the continuity of this pre-Islamic canon in the Islamic era is therefore worth undertaking given the profane facets of such poetry against the backdrop of the sacred code. Under the dominance of Islam, only some religious groups, such as the mystical Sufis, embraced wine poetry, for they were inspired by its symbolism and therefore understood it figuratively.

The dichotomy between the sacred and the profane is brought to the fore by another subgroup of scholars. Tsvetan Theophanov, a professor emeritus in Arabic literature and culture, examines God's word as a miracle to analyze the literary discourse of the Qur'ān. In doing so, he focuses on the Islamic dogma of the inimitability of the Qur'ān, which was a response to accusations by unbelievers that Muḥammad was a false prophet. Among Muslims, the notion of the Qur'ān as an incomparable miracle required, according to Theophanov, in-depth literary analysis of the stylistics and poetics of the Islamic scripture on the basis of which the disbelievers could be convinced by the eloquence of the revealed text. Philological analysis was for Muslims thus entangled with the sacred, which contrasts with the approaches among Orientalists who apply Western theories to the study of the Qur'ān.

Focusing on the notion of the heavenly virgins, called houris, Galina Evstatieva touches upon a major issue in Islamic eschatology to foreground the tension between the sacred and the profane through a study of these female inhabitants of the Muslim paradise at the intersection of cultural and literary studies. She chooses as a major case study the satirical treatise "The Epistle of Forgiveness" (*Risālat al-Ghufrān*) by the famous Arab poet, philosopher, and writer Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d. 1057). The highlighted concepts and imagery of Qur'ānic scripture along ḥadīth indicates a sharp contrast between the norms of the sacred code and their reflection in al-Ma'arrī's treatise through parody. His profanation of major eschatological topoi entails their complete transformation for literary practices existing in certain contexts in opposition to the sacred norms and their mainstream religious interpre-

[17] In Islamic law, *ḥudūd* (sg. *ḥadd*) designates a category of sins—crimes entailing a transgression of the "boundaries of Allāh" (*ḥudūd Allāh*)—for which fixed punishments are prescribed as derived from the very Qur'ān. For further detail, see Schacht (1964, 113–14; 127–33).

tations. Due to its figurative language, al-Ma'arrī's literary practice was therefore not in line with Islamic normative teachings.

The postdoctoral researcher Stoyan Doklev, Assistant Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, adds a new insight to his 2018 PhD dissertation on Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) by bringing to the fore the notion of *majāz* (figurative speech, allegory) analyzed at the intersection of the more profane traditional Arabic linguistics and Islamic theology. The study proves that once the scope of the revelation was fixed, its interpretation continued throughout the centuries, giving rise to major issue as to how this interpretation should position itself in the Sunni spectrum of legitimacy. A student of the paradigmatic proto-Salafī traditionalist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328)[18], Ibn al-Qayyim was a staunch opponent of the notion of interpreting the Islamic scripture figuratively and entered the more profane linguistic sphere to build a sound traditionalist argument against the resort to *majāz* as allegorical figures that can relativize the meaning of God's word. Traditionalist thought in Sunni Islam thus narrows the boundaries of interpretation for the sake of religious certainty by preventing any duality of meaning and practice that would bifurcate the meaning of the revelation.

Two other studies by aspiring junior researchers interrelate at the interplay between the three dichotomies due to shared, albeit differently evolving cases with an emphasis on language and identity. Preparing a PhD dissertation on Arabic language and identity formation in the nahḍa period, Ekaterina Krasimirova, Teaching Assistant of Arabic, focuses on the well-known book of the Lebanese intellectual Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (1804–1881) "Leg Over Leg Concerning the Fāriyāq" (*al-Sāq 'alā l-sāq fi mā huwa l-Fāriyāq*)—a book published in Paris (1855) in Arabic. She draws on the identity theory of Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets (2009) relating it to al-Shidyāq's various religious conversions that signaled the trajectory of his agency under the circumstances of a major structural change—the complex encounter with European modernity. In turn, Iliyana Bozhova, PhD candidate and Teaching Assistant of Persian in the Sofia University Department of Classical Eastern Languages, undertakes a fascinating study of the modern Iranian debates on the influence of Arabic language on Persian. Comparing various attitudes to Arabic in modern Iran, she offers an in-depth study by delineating the views of three trends within the Persian language reform movement—radical purists, moderate reformers and conservatives.

Bozhova reveals the dramatic bifurcation between Islamic identity presuming a loyalty to Arabic language with its vocabulary and the modern sociolinguistic practices of Persian stemming from Iranian national identity. Her study is thus intertwined with several other linguistically oriented studies across the three dichot-

[18] On Ibn Taymiyya as a paradigmatic proto-Salafi, see Evstatiev (2021b: 182).

omies. Dr. Mario Appen, another Iranist in the group and librarian at the Sofia University Oriental Library, examines the religious vocabulary (Islamic, Christian, Zoroastrian, and other) in two significantly abridged Ottoman editions of well-known "Indian" Persian monolingual dictionaries—*Farhang-e Jahāngīrī* (1608) and *Borhān-e kāte'* (1651). Surprisingly, he finds a rare display of linguistic purism dating back as early as the mid-eighteenth century, as all of the nearly eighty words and phrases in his case study appear to be Persian.

The major issue of normativity vis-à-vis continuity and change in Arabic language practice also features in studies by three scholars in the group. Victor Todorov tackles the development of accentual, stylistically determined, and rhetorical meanings in the tendency towards grammaticalization and the expression of fundamental linguistic functions as a process pertinent to Semitic languages. His in-depth study indicates the existence of shared typological characteristics of change due to the plethora of emphatic markers, as well as the process of their standardization along their tendency to signify other grammatical relationships. Tsvetomira Pashova, Associate Professor of Arabic Linguistics, examines the role of the Arabic infinitive (*maṣdar*), often described as in European languages as a verbal noun, and undertakes a study in situ by drawing on a corpus comprised of fiction and media texts in Modern Standard Arabic. Thus foregrounding the role of context in language practice, she reaches conclusions about what defines the intricate choices of authors or speakers under the circumstances of diglossia in the Arab world.

Also considering the use of Arabic in diglossia, Dr. Hristina Chobanova, Assistant Professor of Arabic and the Teaching of Arabic, adds to the conceptualization of the perspective on the teaching of Arabic grammar at the beginning level. Building on her extensive experience (Chobanova, 2018) in TAFL[19] , she involves some more general pedagogical principles to propose a specific ratio of grammatical forms of standard and colloquial Arabic consistent with the thematic and lexical scope, thus allowing beginners to perform the socio-communicative tasks available for this level. Hence, these studies by the participating scholars of Arabic linguistics can be subsumed around two directions of their work as related to the notion of normativity. One of the views is based on the assumption that language functions as a system of rules (Todorov), the teaching of which poses specific challenges for the instructor (Chobanova). The other view (Pashova) tends to perceive normativity as related to and stemming from the literary norm of Arabic in a situation of diglossia.

Another subgroup of scholars examine the three dichotomies from the broader perspective of the continuity and change in social practice, including as manifested in the history of Oriental studies in Bulgaria and the educational policies of the Bul-

[19] TAFL—Teaching Arabic as Foreign Language.

garian state. Yordan Peev, a professor emeritus in Middle East History and Islamic Studies, offers fresh observations on the rise and spread of Arab nationalism to synthesize the intricate ways in which this major change in Middle Eastern history adopted modern Western patterns of identity by asserting a culturally specific identity. My own study deals with the beginnings of Arabic and Islamic studies as an academic field in Bulgaria that seems to date back to the first years of the twentieth century, and not to the 1960s as it was conventionally assumed until recently. Delineating some early traces of scholarly curiosity and interest in the Islamic Orient in the nineteenth century, I focus on the life and contribution of Ivan Dimitrov Kimryanov (1883–1913), who studied Arabic and Islam along with Turkish and Persian languages, preparing his PhD dissertation (1908) on the major Ḥanafī scholar al-Shaybānī (d. 805) at Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. Kimryanov's interests fall along the lines of norm versus practice in Islamic history. Nadya Filipova, Associate Professor of Contemporary History in the Institute for Historical Studies at the Bulgarian Academy, studies continuity and change in the relations between Bulgaria and the Arab world during the Cold War by focusing on cooperation in the fields of education and culture. Drawing on heretofore undiscovered archival material, she reveals how the Communist regime structured these relations, including by promoting films, music and art.

Concluding Remarks

Cultural bifurcation takes the form of duality by which two major versions of language, religion, and culture coexist concurrently—entangled though separate and, in turn, subdivided into a diverse continuum of religious, linguistic, social and literary phenomena. In the Arab world, this duality implies two major cultural modes that do not necessarily entail syncretism but rather the possibility for people to switch between them according to what is required by contextual settings, social communication, and shared anticipations. Depending on the context, the normative/sacred mode can be legitimately "switched off" by "switching on" the vernacular/profane mode and vice versa, whereas there is a "middle ground" in between—as in the case of the "middle language" (*al-lugha al-wusṭā*). This provides the unity of Arab culture, allowing for the existence of diverse Arab cultures concomitantly. The described phenomenon of cultural bifurcation goes beyond what the term "cultural diglossia" implies to encompass not only language and verbal communication but other forms of cultural expression and production in the religious field, literature, and politics.

The discussed illustrative cases within the ongoing collaborative research undertaken by a group of scholars at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, in turn, elucidates two realities in contemporary scholarship. First, the three dichotomies through the prism of which I introduced the concept of cultural bifurcation—conti-

nuity versus change, norm versus practice, and sacred versus the profane—can still be a useful toolkit for approaching diverse phenomena in the study of Arabic and Islam. Indeed, a further level of academic sophistication no doubt requires a new focus to subsume each of the cases under a pertinent scholarly paradigm for each of the described cases. Second, it is the entanglement of these three dichotomies rather than their analysis as standing alone divisions that can provide new insights and nuances into the study of Arabic and Islam. In addition, the research experience described to illustrate the concept of cultural bifurcation demonstrates that high quality research does not necessarily depend on huge funding.

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