DOUBT AND CERTITUDE IN ISLAM

International research seminar
Aarhus University, Denmark, 13-15 December 2016

Is there a place for doubt in Islam? In contemporary public debates in the West, the "problem of Islam" is often associated with blind faith in archaic religious scriptures and a general incapacity of doubt and critical thinking. However, in Muslim practice as well as intellectual thinking this view is challenged by a range of diverging interpretations, intense discussions, and even armed conflict. With this seminar we aim to challenge the public image of Islam by asking: What is the place of doubt in the social and religious lives of various Muslims? What is the relationship between religious doubt, certitude, and critical thinking? What forms of cultural, political, and religious critique are cultivated or disabled through different modalities of religious practice?

Recent debates in the anthropology of Islam have focused on the piety of Muslims, the lack of piety, and the development of various Muslim subjectivities. This seminar proposes to advance this focus by bringing together key scholars whose work has evolved around the question of faith and doubt in contemporary Muslim traditions and practices. When and how are various Muslims certain and uncertain of the presence of the divine in their lives, their own faith, and their interpretation of Islamic texts? How are such certainties and uncertainties expressed, and how are they affected by current pressures of growing sectarianism on the one side and secular understandings of critique on the other? What role does doubt play among contemporary Muslims, and how can this question develop current academic understandings of Muslim piety and subjectivity?

The seminar is free and open to all. Please register by sending an email entitled "Doubt and Certitude" to: Nynne Visbo-Bomose: nynnevb@cas.au.dk

Organizers: Thomas Fibiger, Mikkel Rytter, and Christian Suhr, Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University
Funding: The Danish Institute in Damacus, AUFF, Research Programme of Anthropology, Aarhus University

AARHUS UNIVERSITY

MOMU
MOESGAARD MUSEUM

Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University, Moesgaard, Foredragssalen, room 4206-139

Mayanthi L. Fernando,
University of California Santa Cruz
The republic unsettled: Muslim French and the contradictions of secularism
Public lecture

Discussant: Heiko Henkel,
University of Copenhagen

DECEMBER 14, 9 am – 5.30 pm

Moesgaard Museum, conf. room, 3rd floor 4240-301
(access through back entrance)

9.00 – 9.15 am
Welcome, coffee, practicalities

9.15 – 10.30 am: Session 1
Chair: Mikkel Rytter, Aarhus University

Giulia Liberatore, University of Oxford
Navigating Islamic knowledge in London: reflections on the opposition between pious conviction and doubt

Christian Suhr, Aarhus University
Methodological atheism among "religious fanatics"

11.00 am – 12.15 pm: Session 2
Chair: Thomas Fibiger, Aarhus University

Heiko Henkel, University of Copenhagen
The halal regime and liberal citizenship

Thomas Hoffmann, University of Copenhagen
"Perhaps…." or the Rhetoric of Doubt and Ambiguity in the Qur'an and the Prophet's Biography

12.15 – 1.15 pm: Lunch

1.15 – 2.30 pm: Session 3
Chair: Nils Bubandt, Aarhus University

Dietrich Jung, University of Southern Denmark
Subjectivity, Modern Contingency and Islamic Reform: Approaching Doubt and Certitude with Social Theory

Mayanthi L. Fernando,
University of California Santa Cruz
The Ethics and Politics of Non-Sovereignty

3.00–4.45 pm: Session 4
Chair: Mark Sedgwick, Aarhus University

Elvire Corboz, Aarhus University
The Shi'i Marja'iyya, its Representatives, and the Constitution of a Transnational Trust Network

Martin Riexinger, Aarhus University
The civilization of doubt: Mawdūdī's characterization of the West

Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen,
University of Copenhagen
Doubt on Display

5.00 – 5.30 pm:
General discussion chaired by Nils Bubandt

DECEMBER 15, 9 am – 2 pm

Moesgaard Museum, conf. room, 3rd floor 4240-301
(access through back entrance)

9.00 – 9.15 am
Good morning, coffee, practicalities

9.15 – 10.30 am: Session 5
Chair: Mikkel Rytter, Aarhus University

Thomas Fibiger, Aarhus University
Walahu Alim – **God knows better: Doubt and Certitude in a Sectarian Setting in Kuwait**

Edith Szanto, American University of Sulaimani
When Kurds doubt Islam

11.00 – 12.15 am: Session 6
Chair: Christian Suhr, Aarhus University

Karen Waltorp, Aarhus University
Counting people's sins does not make you a saint

Maria Louw, Aarhus University
Irony as Moral Mood among Muslims in Kyrgyzstan

12.15 – 1.00 pm: General discussion
1.00 – 2.00 pm: Lunch and farewells

Mayanthi L. Fernando,
University of California Santa Cruz
The republic unsettled: Muslim French and the contradictions of secularism

This talk examines how Muslim French—i.e. those committed to practicing Islam as French citizens and practicing citizenship as pious Muslims—negotiate a social and political world in which they are imagined, *a priori*, as always already not-French because they are Muslim. It explores how this impasse is not only lived but also challenged by a post-immigration generation of Muslim civic activists. In so doing, it considers the ways that French secularism (*laïcité*) and French republicanism—and not Muslims—may be the real problems for pluralism. Rather than accepting the conventional narratives that *laïcité* entails strict neutrality and that the French nation is one and indivisible, my talk analyzes French secularism and French republicanism as "myths" that are historically fabricated but have real effects on the world. Through ethnography and critical historiography, it also reflects on new forms of public religiosity, national citizenship, and political possibility in France.

Giulia Liberatore, University of Oxford
Navigating Islamic knowledge in London: reflections on the opposition between pious conviction and doubt

This paper explores the ways in which the opposition between doubt and certitude currently operates to separate 'moderate' from 'extreme' Muslims in public debates and policies in Europe, and recent anthropological work on Islam. It explores how, as a consequence, some Muslim activists, as well as researchers working with Muslims, have felt increasingly compelled to present Muslim subjects as 'more-than-only-Muslims', or as 'critically engaged' subjects, in an attempt to 'de-exceptionalise' Islam in Europe. In so doing, they have forged particular understandings of religious knowledge, and of how this knowledge ought to be engaged by pious subjects. Drawing on ethnographic work with young Somali women, this paper discusses their efforts to search for, debate, and decide what, in their view, constitutes authoritative knowledge in London. It shows how they engage with knowledge through choice, reason, critical debate, submission, and affect. In so doing, it argues that their understandings of, and attitudes towards, knowledge cannot be fully understood by opposing pious conviction with doubt, submission with choice, or reason with affect.

Christian Suhr, Aarhus University
Methodological atheism among "religious fanatics"

"I don't know what happens to me," says Feisal, a former Bosnian karate-master who now lives in Denmark where he became possessed by more than 26 jinn-spirits of multiple religious and ethnic origin. Were all these jinn-spirits just a construct of his imagination, he speculated while slowly returning to consciousness after a prolonged exorcism: "*subḥān Allah*, this is the will of God." Submission to God paradoxically appeared as the only viable answer to the unknowable presence within his own body. Feisal's uncertainty and doubt opened a way for me to understand the operation of faith in a so-called "Salafi"-oriented community of Muslims in Denmark. In Danish media this community has been singled out as a particularly problematic group of blind believers, religious fanatics, extremists, and fundamentalists driven by "dark forces" and hatred to democracy. Yet doubt, skepticism, and critical self-scrutiny play a decisive role in the formation of their religious lives. Indeed doubt appears to be a precondition for the practices of faith among my interlocutors. Finding doubt at the heart of a community of believers made me reconsider the conventional doctrine of methodological atheism which holds that anthropologists must at all times remain skeptic and doubtful when faced with strange religious experiences during fieldwork. Yet it left me equally critical of the recent "ontological" call to simply take other people's religious experiences at face value. Based on my work with Feisal and other possessed patients, I investigate what it entails to take religious realities seriously, to take doubt seriously, as well as to doubt the doubts of the people who inhabit such religious realities.

Heiko Henkel, University of Copenhagen
The halal regime and liberal citizenship

In his polemic *On the Jewish Question* from 1843, Karl Marx famously asks – and answers in the negative - the question of whether liberal society could recognize Jews *as Jews*. Liberal society, Marx contents, is premised on the very principle of erasing religious identities as qualities of citizenship. While the confessional state would not recognize Jews as citizens on religious grounds, liberal society could not recognize them because these religious grounds had been discarded. In his 2002 piece "Muslims and European Identity", Talal Asad rephrases Marx' question and asks whether Europe can recognize Muslims as citizens and *Muslims.* While not explicitly referring to Marx, Asad seems to agree with his

conclusion. And indeed, the surge of unbridled Islamophobia as a central plank of Neo-nationalism seems to have all but answered the question of whether liberal European societies can recognize Muslims as citizens *and* Muslims.

But has the question really been decisively answered? Examining the growing significance of halal practices as markers and mediators of Muslim identity in Denmark, and the intersection of this 'halal regime' with the Danish tradition of citizenship, the paper I will present at Moesgaard suggests that it may be premature to close the case.

While, clearly, halal practices (which I define loosely as a mode of practice that ties modalities of practice to the example of the prophet and its codification in Islamic legal reasoning) are as old as the Islamic tradition itself, they have taken on a particular format in the context of liberal society. This format, the paper suggests, is closely linked to the particular challenges the emerging Muslim minorities in western Europe have faced over the past half-century, resulting chiefly from the intermingling of formal equality (freedom of religion, equality of all citizens) with the informal privileging of established citizenship traditions (with their religious and ethnic overtones). The collective project of establishing what one could call a liberal halal regime has enabled Muslims of very different ethnic, sectarian and political affiliations to claim formal and practical citizenship *as Muslims* in Denmark – despite considerable resistance from the established citizenry.

The longer version of this paper examines the interplay between *tradition effects* and *citizenship effects* of the liberal halal regime in contemporary Denmark. The paper presented at Moesgaard will focus more narrowly on the ways in which this historical trajectory has transformed the relationship of Muslim minorities in Denmark (and perhaps Europe more generally) to liberal secular society – and with it the sites of doubt and certainty regarding the place of Muslims in liberal society.

Thomas Hoffmann, University of Copenhagen
"Perhaps…." or the Rhetoric of Doubt and Ambiguity in the Qur'an and the Prophet's Biography

This paper calls attention to the often neglected moments of doubt, hesitation, irresolution, and ambiguity in the Qur'an and some of the early biographies of the Prophet (Ibn Ishaq and al-Tabari). These doubtful moments have existed as strange bedfellows with a certain "economy of certainty" (to quote the title of Aron Zysow's famous PhD-thesis) within the Islamic tradition and the Western, academic study of the Quran and Islam. Recent research (especially Thomas Bauer's *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islam* and Shahab

Ahmad's *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*), however, has attempted to come to terms with these moments of doubt and ambiguity and in fact rehabilitate their role and function within the so-called Islamic tradition. This research seems to complement the research pursued in the past decades in the so-called anthropology of Islam (e.g., the work of S. Schielke). By calling attention to the Qur'an and early Islamic writing it is my attempt to argue for certain historical continuity of 'Islamic doubt and ambiguity' and the ensuing importance of developing theoretical and methodological tools that can deal with it.

Dietrich Jung, University of Southern Denmark
Subjectivity, Modern Contingency and Islamic Reform: Approaching Doubt and Certitude with Social Theory

The histories of religious traditions are full of stories of personal doubt. This applies certainly also to the history of Islam. A prime example is the life and crisis of faith of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111). Yet any understanding of religious doubt and certitude depends on the social and historical context in which they occur. Ghazali's doubts and the renewed certitude in his faith were therefore of a different nature than those of contemporary Muslims. Consequently, the answer to the workshop's central question about doubt and certitude in Islam needs a theoretically informed contextualization.

When it comes to the religious life of contemporary Muslims, so the basic thesis of this paper, this contextualization has to refer to Islam as a modern religion. Contemporary Muslim life takes place within the social and historical coordinates of global modernity. From this perspective, the expressions of doubt and certitude of individual Muslims are the results of the social interplay among global social structures, religious traditions and local practices. In which ways does this interplay shape phenomena of doubt, certitude and critical thinking among contemporary Muslims?

In trying to find some tentative answers to this question, the paper presents a heuristic framework combining theoretical elements from Max Weber, Michel Foucault and Niklas Luhmann. While putting its focus on the macro-sociological context, it will do so from the position of the modern subject. Modern subjectivity formation provides us with an analytical strategy to bridge the gap between macro- and micro perspectives. Empirically the paper includes some examples from modern Islamic history beginning with the Islamic reform movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. It argues that doubt was one essential element of Islamic reform and the return to early Islam developed into a major intellectual strategy to find certitude in face of modern contingency.

Mayanthi L. Fernando,
University of California Santa Cruz
The Ethics and Politics of Non-Sovereignty

My paper is an exploration of the kind of ethics and politics that can emerge from a position of human non-sovereignty. It takes as its starting point debates about homosexuality and same-sex marriage in France, and the discomfort many of my Muslim French interlocutors felt when asked to "respect" the practice of homosexuality and the right to same-sex marriage. Conventional wisdom reads their discomfort as pure intolerance, extrapolates a certain anti-progressive politics from that position, and sees in Islam the source of these problematic ethics and politics. I ask whether a different kind of ethics (understood as how one relates to others) and a progressive politics might emerge from exactly the same source, namely, Islamic traditions of thought and practice. Engaging with philosopher William Connolly's work on agonistic respect and critical responsiveness – which, he argues, are premised on doubts about the fundaments of one's faith – I propose that certitude might be equally productive of such an ethics. I reflect on how Islamic ideas about divine sovereignty and human non-sovereignty, and an attendant calculus of certitude (about God's truth) and doubt (about the human capacity to reach that truth), might offer possible alternatives to secular tolerance as a way of living together.

Elvire Corboz, Aarhus University
The Shi'i Marja'iyya, its Representatives, and the Constitution of a Transnational Trust Network

Martin Riexinger, Aarhus University
The civilization of doubt: Mawdūdī's characterization of the West

Abū l-Aʿlā Mawdūdī, who is generally considered a founding father of Islamism, wrote – in particular before he changed his occupation from publisher to a political activist – on a broad variety of issues. He was not least particularly interested in Western history – political, intellectual, and social. In a longer essay he sketches the development of Western thought from the early modern period to the 20th century. As the decisive characteristic of post-Renaissance thought he singles out the skepticism which led to doubting all traditionally recognized values. This lead to different varieties of thought which all center around the human instead of God. These lead to the corruption of the moral order which will – in spite of its present economic superiority – sooner or later undermine Western society. His ideas resemble to a certain degree Western ultraconservative thought as for

example LeMaistre, and it is remarkable that the superiority of Islam is explained functionally and not with reference to revelation.

Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen,
University of Copenhagen
Doubt on Display

Summarizing classical views on doubt in Islamic theology and law, this paper will discuss the tendency of modern Islamists to consider doubt a threat to belief, and the role of doubt in contemporary Muslim discussions of faith. Finally, it will look at examples of treatments of doubt in film and tv.

Thomas Fibiger, Aarhus University
Walahu Alim – **God knows better: Doubt and Certitude in a Sectarian Setting in Kuwait**

On the very last night of my initial fieldwork in Kuwait, in 2013, I was dining with a new friend of mine, Mahmood, and his friends. I had been put in contact with Mahmood a few weeks before by other interlocutors, who knew that he was knowledgeable in religious studies without himself claiming any religious authority within the system of *marjaiyya* learned scholarship of Shia Islam. Mahmood was merely interested in religious thought and dilemmas. On this night Mahmood provided answers to some questions posed by his friends on religious affairs, and ended up with acknowledging the uncertainty that also true religious scholars add to their fatwas and advices: *walahu alim*, they state, in the end 'God knows better'.

In this presentation I will use Mahmood's particular answers to the uncertainties of his friends as point of departure for a discussion focused on the uncertainty of lay Muslims in religious affairs. This is not doubt in belief in God, but rather doubt in oneself and also a question of doubt and certitude of different religious traditions living side by side in contemporary Kuwait, in particular Sunni and Shia. For the reason for the uncertainties laid out on this night, Mahmood suggested, was that these Shia had been given wrong information by his Sunni peers. The presentation, therefore, is a discussion of how a (low-conflict) sectarian setting such as Kuwait affects doubt and certitude in everyday life and imaginaries.

Edith Szanto, American University of Sulaimani
When Kurds doubt Islam

The rise of ISIS and its takeover of Mosul in 2014 ended a decade of prosperity in the autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region and ignited doubts and debates on Islam. Though the discussions and developments were

not without precedents, this paper will focus on the period following the summer of 2014. What does it mean to doubt Islam? A common understanding equates doubt with *kufr* or unbelief. In Kurdistan, it is not always framed as such. Instead, the intellectual elite depict doubt as an act of rationalism and patriotism, which I will analyze drawing on Talal Asad.

This paper examines three cases involving Kurdish fundamentalists, angry atheists, and apostates. The first is the scandalous affair which the Salafi preacher Dr. 'Abdul Latif had with a married student. A recording of them flirting on the phone was leaked to the press. Ultimately, she became his third wife. Feminist activist and scholar Dr. Choman Hardi cites this incident to publicly critique Islam. The second example refers to two branches of the Kasnazani Sufi order, which split in the late 70s when Shaykh Muhammad al-Kasnazani demanded that other Kasnazanis disband their Sufi lodges. Meanwhile, his sons and successors turned out to be corrupt politicians and businessmen. Muhammad al-Kasnazani's cousin uses this fact to legitimize his own Sufi order and to discredit his rival. The members of Muhammad al-Kasnazani's branch largely ignore the corruption and focus on the beneficial connections the leadership provides. Third are Kurdish converts to Zoroastrianism. They claim it was the religion of their forefathers before they were supposedly forced to enter Islam. By analyzing these cases, my paper sheds light on how, surrounded by warring sectarian certainties, doubt splits Kurdish society as it invigorates elite secular critiques of less than exemplary religious figures with working class constituencies that in turn are seen as incapable of articulating critical views necessary for modernity, peace, and progress.

Karen Waltorp, Aarhus University
Counting people's sins does not make you a saint

Based on scenes from 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork and filmmaking, this paper explores discussions and doubts at play among young Muslim women in Nørrebro, Copenhagen. Most of the women I worked with are born in Denmark, children of immigrants from Arab countries, Iran and Pakistan. Among the groups of friends are also ethnic Danish women who have converted to Islam. The first scene presents a young woman of Iranian origin and her doubts about wearing the headscarf. The second scene shows a young woman of Palestinian origin who turns to God in an existential crisis. She points out that God is the one who witnesses, and the only one, ultimately, to judge. This is a point often voiced in situations of gossip in the area, and in the sphere of social media. While there is agreement that 'counting people's sins does not make you a saint' there is constant boundary work around who are 'not-us'/not proper Muslims due to certain behaviour. Women of Muslim immigrant parents who frequent nightclubs, drink, date and do not veil or wear modest dress belong in this category: 'They've sold their religion'. The last scenes discussed concern Islamic authority on silicone breast implants, and gelatine in the candy-shop where a converted Danish woman doubts how to tackle this in accordance with Islamic principles. There are many positions to speak from, and 'tradition', 'culture' and 'true Islam' are invoked in a multitude of ways. Even though 'likes' on Facebook, and 'followers' on Instagram are not usually thought of as 'critical thinking', I argue that these modes of expression constitute crucial ways of 'struggling with oneself' (*jihad al-nafs*) and points to the simultaneous individual and social aspects of this struggle.

Maria Louw, Aarhus University
Irony as Moral Mood among Muslims in Kyrgyzstan

An ironic attitude or mood seems to permeate many Kyrgyz Muslims' relationship with religion: whether they see themselves as 'atheists' or 'religious', they tend to deliberately cast doubt on their own beliefs and to emphasize how skepticism and playfulness has always characterized the Kyrgyz' attitudes toward religion. Based on fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan carried out intermittently in the period between 2007 and 2016, the paper will explore this ironic mood and its historical roots, arguing that it – located somewhere halfway between moments of explicit reflection and habitual embodied forms of morality – carries important moral concerns: not least the importance of balancing of commitment to a worldview – whether religious or not - with the attention to the demands of the community.