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Call for Papers

Reckoning with God: Divine-Human Relations after the Arab Spring

Workshop held at the Orient-Institut Beirut
June 30-July 2, 2022

By some recollections, the Arab Spring was characterized by God's presence. "God is with us," chanted some as they protested in the streets. "God is great," proclaimed others as blood was shed. Remembered differently, the events of 2010-11 could only be the product of God's absence. Where was God when an impoverished Tunisian street vendor, overcome by the injustices of his life, set himself on fire? Which images of God were backgrounded when Egyptians united in their demand for "bread, freedom, justice?" It would seem that, in presence as much as absence, God was a force to contend with during the Arab Spring. Islamist movements, populist uprisings, entrenched regimes, rebellious youth, desperate breadwinners, and secular intellectuals were among those who found themselves— in some form or fashion —reckoning with God in these tumultuous times. This workshop explores the aftermath of this human reckoning with the divine, asking how we as scholars might reckon with these exchanges in our own analyses.

Indeed, the reverberations of the Arab Spring can still be felt today, a decade later. Countries like Syria, Libya, and Yemen remain in economic and political turmoil. Mass protests, a banking crisis, and a pandemic have pushed Lebanon to the brink. Even in states seemingly spared the consequences of 2010-11—those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), for instance—populations do not remain unaffected by regional tumult, with a rise in state-engineered attempts to manage financial crises while enshrining the "moderate" Islam necessary for political and economic stability. Across the Arab world, a post-Arab Spring disillusionment with religious authority has been particularly pronounced among the youth (ASDA'A BCW 2019; Raz 2019), who have been deemed unequivocally "less religious" than their parents (Sanderson 2019). This post-Arab Spring "hope, frustration, and ambivalence" (Schielke 2015) materializes differently in each context; so too do the divine and social relations which stem from these conditions of political, economic, and moral uncertainty.

Who, and where, is God in the Arab world today? How do people's relations to God and to each other, *through* God, materialize? How does God bridge between people, and how does God divide? How are these relations colored and complicated by divergent understandings of proper ethical practice, divine decree, and the afterlife?

These questions lie at the heart of this workshop, in which we reflect upon how God-human relations are colored by the socio-economic and political circumstances in which they are cultivated. In our conversations, as in the lives of believers, God is not a rigidly defined, unchanging being borne of ageless scripture and theology, but a figure which emerges through people's self-reflection and their interactions with others in a specific setting. An analysis of this process offers insight not only into what religiosity and selfhood looks like among believers in the contemporary present-day Arab world, but also what notions of God and God-human relations drive this devotion. Our explorations also accord ethnographic attention to God, an otherwise marginal figure in much anthropological scholarship on religion.

Despite God's centrality to the so-called Abrahamic religions, his active presence in the lives of believers has been backgrounded in much ethnographic writing. As a discipline, anthropology has long been driven by a "methodological atheism" which pits theology against anthropology, with the primary distinction between the two being that God exists as a real agent only in the former. Jon Bialecki (2014) has critiqued this tendency to discount God's reality, arguing that overlooking how God operates in the worlds of our interlocutors means neglecting a key element in the settings and people we study. This workshop contributes to a burgeoning effort to make space for God in anthropological scholarship, and in the social sciences more broadly.

For instance, questions of divine presence have, in recent years, figured more centrally in the anthropology of Christianity (Lester 2005; Engelke 2007; Luhrmann 2012; Robbins 2014; Orsi 2016). At the same time, more anthropologists studying Islam have paid greater attention to how God figures into their field sites (Mittermaier 2012; 2019; Hamdy 2012; Abenante and Vicini 2017; Moumtaz 2021). Most recently, Samuli Schielke (2019) has advocated understanding God and God-human relations through a theory of "relational power." Relational power is not "a binary this-worldly relationship... but a triadic relationship where God (along with the Apostle of God and, in some versions of the relationship, the friends of God) connects humans in this world and the afterworld alike" (9). In this schema, God does not manage nebulous populations, but relates intimately to humans, both as individualized subjects and also as communities "bound by moral ties in a triadic relation with one another and God" (9-10).

Examining the distributions of relational power that God-talk reveals, we highlight in this workshop the importance of paying closer attention to how believers speak of and relate to God. By undertaking a comparative analysis of God-talk and divine-human relations across

the contemporary Arab world, we bridge between disparate settings and build a more encompassing framework for understanding religion and society today. To this end, we seek contributions which foreground the figure of God and divine-human relations in the contemporary Arab world, across religious traditions and from numerous disciplines—particularly anthropology, sociology, history, and religious studies.

The workshop is organized by Dr. Joud Alkorani, an Assistant Professor of Islam Studies at Radboud University in the Netherlands and currently a visiting postdoctoral fellow at the Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB). A primary goal of the workshop is working towards a special issue on the workshop theme.

Proposals should be submitted to joud.alkorani@ru.nl by **March 9th, 2022**. Proposals should include **1)** a title and abstract of 300-500 words **2)** a brief biographical statement **3)** a note on anticipated travel costs **4)** an academic CV. Please specify in the email subject "Reckoning with God workshop." For accepted participants, full draft papers will be due June 9, 2022. Inquiries about the workshop should also be directed to this same email address.

The OIB will provide participants meals throughout the workshop and accommodation for at least two nights. Limited assistance with travel costs will also be available.

Works cited

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