



WHERE CAN I LAY MY EGG? JACQUES WAARDENBURG

Born in Haarlem, Netherlands, in 1930. Studied theology and the science of religions at the University of Amsterdam, concentrating on Islam (1948–54) and Arabic (Leiden, 1954–55). Research in Paris (1956–59) and the Near East (UNESCO fellowship, 1959–60). Doctoral dissertation on Orientalists' image formation of Islam (Amsterdam 1961). Research on development assistance and on universities in the Arab world. Researcher at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal (1962–63). Teaching Arabic and Islamic History at UCLA (1964–68), Islam and Phenomenology of Religion at Utrecht (1968–87), Science of Religions at Lausanne (1987–95). Relevant publications: *L'Islam dans le miroir de l'Occident* (1961, 3rd ed. 1970). *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religions* (2 vols., 1973–74). *Islam et Occident face à face: regards de l'Histoire des Religions* (1998). *Islam: Historical, Social, and Political Perspectives* (2002). *Muslims and Others: Relations in Context* (2003). – Address: Avenue de Cour 155, 1007 Lausanne, Switzerland.

These lines cannot but be a song of praise for the *Wissenschaftskolleg* in Berlin. I had been a Fellow here in 2000–01 and, besides my research project properly speaking, that year had motivated me to revise and publish a couple of essays I had written earlier on Islam and on Muslim views of the outside world, in particular the West. As we say in Dutch, “*ik kon mijn ei leggen*”: I was able to lay my egg. In fact one egg/book was the result of that stay, and a second egg/book appeared in 2003.

The theme of my three-month Wiko project in 2004 was “Islamic Studies and the Scholarly Study of Religions”. I conducted research on existing interaction between the two

fields and a possible increase of cooperation between them on an academic level. Now I had to produce an egg.

It turns out that on the one hand, until very recently relatively few scholars trained in the scholarly study of religions specialized in Islam. Conversely, relatively few scholars in Islamic Studies with a supplementary training in the Study of Religions carried out research on the religious aspects of Islam. In fact, nearly all scholars interested in research on the religious dimension of present-day Muslim cultures had theological presuppositions. They worked out their own evaluative ideas about Islam rather than being interested primarily – for the sake of knowledge – in what Muslims themselves have to say about the subject. And Muslim scholars are hesitant about giving scholarly accounts of present-day Muslim discourses about Islam. Yet during the last few years, an increasing number of Muslim researchers have started to participate in research projects of sociology, anthropology, and the history of religions that focus on Muslim groups and societies.

My hypothesis, on a theoretical level, is that more cooperation between Islamic Studies and the scholarly study of religions should be possible, specifically in the study of religious meanings. Research in this area is the most direct link between the two fields. My starting point is that Muslim references to Islam function to a large extent to provide various kinds of meaning. Such references have mostly been studied either in disciplines that do not focus on religious expressions or from a particular Muslim, Christian, or Western perspective on religion. What such references to Islam mean to Muslims remains an open question.

An adequate study of specific meanings of particular data in Islam requires factual research on texts, historical data, social scientific materials, as well as concrete literary, artistic, and religious expressions, as is done in Islamic Studies. Complementing this, the scholarly study of religions can identify and study certain meaning patterns in Islamic materials. It can also elucidate various Muslim interpretations of these materials and the meanings particular groups and persons assigned to them in specific situations.

I want to stress that the proposed cooperation between the two fields of scholarship does not imply the development of a general theory of meaning applicable to Islam or other religious systems. The approach is empirical and interpretative, intent on laying bare the meanings that specific Islamic data have had or have for particular persons and groups in particular contexts. The only really important theoretical task is to develop a device that

provides maximum access to the ways Muslim persons and groups have interpreted and constructed their Islam and derived meanings from it.

From this perspective, chapters of the book/parts of the egg deal with subjects like the scholarly study of meanings (in religions), specific issues in Islamic Studies (e. g., pre-suppositions, cooperation with Muslim scholars), specific issues in the scholarly Study of Religions (e. g., method and theory, subjective meanings), and the broader context of the scholarly study of religious aspects of Islam.

The result is a book that deals, in the end, less with Islam itself than with questions of how to study and interpret it. It contains a design of Islamic Studies as I have practiced it until now. Here it is presented as a methodological formula.

The project, although of a scholarly nature, is not without cultural interest. During the last thirty years, research on contemporary Islam has focused increasingly on the political use of Islam and on its political aspects. The War on Terrorism has established this political view of Islam that has been translated in ideological readings and has led to dualist constructions of Islam and the West.

Islamic Studies at the present time need to focus on the manifold interpretations Muslims have given of their Islam in a variety of contexts during the last half century. Instead of considering Islam as an entity in itself – and still less as a more or less closed ideological system authoritatively imposed on Muslim subjects – I see Muslims as actors in their own way, people who are living and constructing their Islam before our eyes, mostly in turbulent or oppressive contexts, whether in Muslim societies or elsewhere.

On a cultural level, one of the factors involved in current fears of Islam is a certain ignorance or neglect, at least in Europe, of the resources Muslims find in Islam for human faith and ethics. Is there perhaps a certain blindness in the West toward the moral aspects of Islamic religion? Is there a certain tendency to maintain conceptualizations of Islam that are largely outdated? Is there a certain taboo against an enlightened approach that recognizes human constructions not only in Islam, but also in other religions?

On a scholarly level, the study of meanings in Islam may also reveal something of the deeper motivations and intentions at work in present-day Muslim commitment to Islam, beyond the immediate political concerns.

When I arrived at Wiko at the beginning of May 2004, it was like going into retreat. I seized on the opportunity generously offered, concentrating more or less obsessively on my texts. Nowhere else could such a pace of work and life have been possible. The intellectual environment was favorable and I had many stimulating encounters. Slowly the egg/manu-

script took shape. That Wiko – staff and Fellows – showed patience and encouragement to such a crazy guest to work and live here in peace has saved the book – and probably my mind. I was able to lay my egg at Wiko in Berlin – but is there a chicken in it?