

"It's Not Just Academic – Writing Public Scholarship in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies"<sup>1</sup>

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[forthcoming in *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*]

Everyone knows that the work of scholars in America is often considered to be irrelevant to the real issues of life. According to the mild anti-intellectualism that seems to be an endemic feature of American culture, anything that is "academic" is automatically impractical, complex, and impenetrable – in short, it is bad. This is a little hard for professors to live with; no one likes being called a pointy-headed intellectual or an egghead. The very skills and specializations that are the keys to academic success can be seen by the public as defects that remove scholars from the sphere of ordinary existence and disqualify their pronouncements. Here I would like to argue that the gap between academics and an unappreciative public is in good part a function of the language and style of communication that scholars commonly practice in all fields. But if in fact there are large segments of the public who are keenly interested in issues relating to subjects like Middle Eastern studies, or the study of Islam, it should be possible for academics to communicate the results of their labor in clear and meaningful ways. If qualified scholars do not respond to the demands of the public, we know what the alternative is: the public will remain content with the standard media sources of information – and disinformation. In response to this problem, I would like to sketch out

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Fatemeh Keshavarz and Ahmet Karamustafa, of Washington University in St. Louis, for encouraging my initial public reflections on this topic, and likewise to Shafique Virani for organizing this collection of papers.

some of the barriers preventing academics from communicating to the public, and to propose some ways to make scholarly research on these topics more accessible and available to a public that genuinely wants to understand them. While some of these observations apply to the academy at large, I will also reflect on some of the particular problems – and publics – that face scholars in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies.

The task of making scholarship accessible to public audiences, no matter the subject, is complicated by one of the central features of graduate education today, the doctoral dissertation. This is a literary work aimed at just about the smallest possible audience, the five members of the doctoral committee. Frequently, dissertation writers feel compelled to write in contorted ways, sometimes inserting incompatible items in order to satisfy the well-known prejudices of Professor X, or making sure to quote approvingly from the lesser-known articles of Professor Y. Excessive use of the passive voice, coy polemics buried in footnotes, concern with “literature review” to the neglect of the subject matter itself, and insider jargon are several of the less attractive aspects of dissertation style. The exercise of researching and eventually writing the dissertation, which can stretch over several years, is a powerful experience, creating in the scholar a sort of academic conscience that tends to be perfectionist and unforgiving. Some people never get over it. There are scholars who over the course of an academic career seem to be unable to write in any other way than in the arcane style they learned in the dissertation. On the face of it, the compulsion to continue to write in the dissertation style is odd. After all, everyone uses a different register and language for addressing different audiences, such as family members, children, or friends. There is a time and place for different styles of communication, including creative forms such as poetry, which some academics are rumored to compose. Nevertheless, dissertation-style writing permeates academic writing to an

alarming degree. It is ironic that the very time when graduate students should be preparing for entering into a profession in which they will need to communicate with a wide range of colleagues (not to mention students) is the same time that they are moving into ever-narrower areas of expertise.

Another aspect of academic life that militates against public scholarship is an open scorn and derision directed at writing that might be considered "popular." I vividly recall, while in graduate school in the late 1970s, hearing both graduate students and faculty members speak scathingly about someone who had written a book that had moderately successful sales and was even mentioned in newspapers. The basic idea seemed to be that it was a kind of treason to write in a style that departed from the esoteric forms and conventions of what may be called *The Journal of Obscure Studies*. I have known more than a few people who freely confessed that their ultimate goal was to publish a book with a certain European press that will remain unnamed, which they imagined would confer upon them the academic status and dignity that they sought. The notion that such a publication would be priced out of the range any fellow scholar could afford, or that it would get little distribution outside of a few libraries, was not something that they considered relevant. Now it is true that many scholars feel the need, from time to time, to write specialized pieces aimed at the most serious of readers. But isn't it possible to entertain writing for a larger public as well?

One of the key markers of specialization is technical terminology, the use of which automatically divides readers into insiders and outsiders. Those who are in the know recognize familiar signals, while the uninitiated feel frustration on seeing strange and baffling terms. For graduate students, learning the jargon of the field (including the study of Middle Eastern languages) is part of their entry into scholarship, but too often they fail to appreciate the cost such language

incurs by excluding a good portion of their potential audience. It is common to hear students using hard-core technical terms, or even worse, sprinkling their conversation liberally with Arabic words, to demonstrate their status as insiders. They may not recognize the extent to which this coded language gets them off the hook in terms of their responsibility to explain what they mean. But assuming that one's audience is the perfect reader is almost like asking for a mind-reader; in such a case, one is absolved of the duty to take a stand in interpretation, since one assumes that the reader should divine one's inner thoughts. For this reason, I demand that research papers should be written clearly and entirely in English, and I have outlawed the use of Arabic broken plurals in conversation. Technical terms can accomplish legitimate work for readers, of course, but one needs to weigh the benefits and costs of using them. The same principle applies to diacritical marks, which are generally useless for those who do not know the original languages and superfluous for those who do.

Well over a decade after receiving the PhD, I had several writing experiences that led me to question the idea of remaining stuck in dissertation style forever. Over several years, I went through a process almost akin to deprogramming, in which I deliberately began to set aside certain kinds of writing habits and cultivate new ones. This happened first as a matter of style, with my translation of an Arabic Sufi text, which was a very challenging project.<sup>2</sup> After struggling with the powerful metaphorical style of the author, and his intricate vocabulary, I produced a draft translation which was reasonably satisfactory, in my view. But then, with the publisher's encouragement, I located an editor who was not only experienced in editing university press publications, but was also herself a published poet and critic, and even a judge in poetry competitions. Her approach to editing the

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<sup>2</sup> This translation was published as Ruzbihan Baqli, *The Unveiling of Secrets: Diary of a Sufi Master* (Chapel Hill, NC: Parvardigar Press, 1997).

translation can only be described as ruthless. I was amazed to see the manuscript come back with at least ten yellow slips on every page, taking me to task for indulging in a vocabulary that automatically excluded many potential readers. "There is a literary style in English," she remarked to me, "that is appropriate for a mystical text, and it goes back to the 14th century and *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It does not," she added sternly, "include a lot of Latinate and Greek-derived words." In addition, she cautioned me that, in general, any readable book should employ no more than a dozen foreign words, and those need to be clearly and carefully explained. On reflection, I realized that I had imbibed a highly technical vocabulary from reading specialized works of scholarship, including works in French which tend to habituate one towards using a Latin-based terminology. Moreover, the habits I had picked up were flagrantly opposed to the principles of clear writing that I increasingly was requiring of students, since teaching writing has become an essential part of nearly all courses in humanities disciplines. My writing, in other words, was not up to the mark of Strunk & White's *Elements of Style*, nor did it adhere to the standards of George Orwell's 1946 essay on "Politics and the English Language," in terms of economy of expression, vigorous word choice, and clarity of meaning.<sup>3</sup> In practice, this harsh editing experience provided me with several liberating realizations, and I deliberately embraced the notion that clarity should triumph over insider language.

The second step took place on the level of argument, when I undertook to write a couple of introductory books for general audiences. One was commissioned by a trade publisher who asked

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<sup>3</sup> William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007); George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," *Horizon* (April 1946), available online at <<http://www.resort.com/~prime8/Orwell/patee.html>>.

me to write a survey of Islamic mysticism.<sup>4</sup> The other, which took this process a step further, was an introduction to Islam, something I had previously resisted due to my discomfort with the standard notion of a textbook.<sup>5</sup> That is, the textbook approach employs an authoritative mode of discourse that can be easily reduced to a list of bullet points. It proclaims statements about the way things are, and it is welcomed particularly by younger students who want to know mainly what questions will be asked on the final exam. The textbook mode is simplistic and prone to the bald assertion of ahistorical truths that can drive scholars crazy; too often it represents a condescending dumbing down of scholarship. What is the alternative?

I propose the model of "stealth analysis." This is a method of presenting to the reader an argument and accompanying evidence that enable the reader to understand the critical issues and consequences that are at stake in any particular issue. It is most effectively done by providing a compelling example that demands engagement by the reader, effectively providing a reason for the reader to entertain a new narrative, and to construct a path to the explanation of that example, in a way that goes beyond received opinions. This style of presentation needs to be done without jargon, since jargon both reduces the size of the possible audience and short-circuits critical thought by inviting the reader to employ slogans. It need not sacrifice any of the subtlety or ambiguity that scholars find in their research; it presents a reasonable amount of references to the best of current university press publications and summarizes the main issues and debates. Ideally, one can present a subject fully enough so that it also achieves what I call "dismediation," displacing the media images

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<sup>4</sup> Carl W. Ernst, *Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> This book eventually became *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

that stand in for face-to-face encounter. This form of communication is one of the best ways to begin to break down stereotypes, which rely heavily on the language of overworked clichés.

To my mind, the “stealth analysis” approach is far superior to the authoritative textbook, insofar as it respects and empowers the reader rather than dictating a conclusion. Many readers have responded to this kind of argument with such vehement approval that it is clear they resent the patronizing attitude that characterizes far too many scholarly books and textbooks. It consequently became clear to me that there is a great need for books that employ a mode of argumentation that readers can more readily engage with and which furnishes them with materials of substance. And while I deliberately avoided the textbook style in writing the books in question, I have been delighted by the extent to which my academic colleagues have found them useful in their courses; I have been even more delighted, however, by students who tell me that they recommend the books to their relatives, and by appreciative non-academic readers who write to me out of the blue.

It is not that difficult to practice writing in a clear and open style for a non-specialist audience. Many scholars hone their arguments in discussions with students, who are after all an ideal audience in this respect: they are generally intelligent, but they know nothing of the subject. Thus the strategies that one develops in the classroom can often be refined into arguments and examples that will prove effective with others. Public lectures for local civic or religious groups are another kind of forum that can provide a useful laboratory for experimenting with different kinds of presentation.

Against such observations, one may point out that it is easy to propose writing in a style and argumentation that is publicly accessible, but that one then runs into the professional requirements of tenure, which don't tend to recognize the value of these public-oriented goals. This is admittedly

an important objection. It is still the case that tenure reviews generally require the achievement of specialized scholarship that is recognized by one's peers, rather than explication of a subject to a wider public, and sometimes promotion and tenure committees only consider publications in certain journals or presses to be worthwhile. Indeed, writing "textbooks" or introductory works is generally considered to be a waste of time as far as tenure is concerned. Given that situation, it may be most practical to suggest that scholars who are past the bar of achieving tenure should be tasked with the job of making their scholarship public. Regardless, giving more value to what the French call "un livre de diffusion" would fit well within the national trend toward "engaged scholarship" as a way of connecting universities to the constituencies whose support makes their existence possible; this movement is already resulting in several initiatives aiming to give greater support to valuing public scholarship in the tenure process.<sup>6</sup> One should also keep in mind that it is much easier to place a manuscript with a publisher if one can argue that there are likely to be general readers interested in buying the book. In any case, I feel that it is definitely worthwhile to urge doctoral students to write their dissertations with a view to creating successful publications that will open their subjects up to much wider audiences than their doctoral committees. Without adding any more burdens to degree requirements, one might also encourage graduate students to consider writing in a more accessible way, by offering prizes for the best essays that could be considered publishable in a journal like *Harpers'* or *The Atlantic Monthly*, on subjects relating to Middle Eastern or Islamic studies.

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance the reports of the Imagining America Consortium, available online at <<http://www.imagingamerica.org/>>, which aims to integrate "all the missions of higher education: research, teaching, service, and public engagement." A similar effort is under way at the National Center for the Study of University Engagement (NCSUE), as seen on its web site at <<http://ncsue.msu.edu/default.aspx>>.

There is, of course, a particular political climate for Middle Eastern and Islamic studies in the US today, relating both to longtime security concerns in the region and to anxieties over terrorism after the attacks on American targets in September 2001. In terms of public discourse and debate, this means that the Middle East and Islam are the subjects of heated disputes similar to controversies over evolution and global warming. Academics can find themselves the targets of attacks from right-wing news media and ideological think tanks.<sup>7</sup> This started to happen to me after the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, at my innocent suggestion, adopted an anthology of literary translations from the Qur'an as its summer reading program (required for all incoming first-year students) in 2002. The university was attacked as unpatriotic by Fox News (whose anchor Bill O'Reilly compared the Qur'an to Adolf-Hitler's *Mein Kampf*), it was sued by an evangelical Christian group who claimed that UNC was trying to convert students to Islam, and it was accused in the North Carolina state legislature of assisting terrorism. Eventually the discussions went forward, with full support from UNC, but the controversy demonstrated how many people were convinced that Islam remains the enemy of the American people.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, the administration at UNC was strongly committed to defending academic freedom, and in my opinion the exercise was a resounding success in demonstrating the importance of books and ideas, which is the principal goal of such summer reading programs, after all.

Beyond the controversy over the summer reading program, the publicity surrounding this

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<sup>7</sup> I have discussed some of these issues in "Changing Approaches to Islamic Studies in North American Universities," in *Islamic Studies Curricula*, ed. Azizan Baharuddin (Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> For a dossier on the 2002 UNC Summer Reading Program controversy, including several articles plus press coverage, see <<http://www.unc.edu/~cernst/quran.htm>>.

event provided me another lesson in how to communicate with a public audience. Along with UNC's provost, I underwent a brief training session with a media consultant, in which we were coached on how to provide sound bites to the news media, which had become a necessity due to the hordes of reporters descending on the campus. The consultant told us, by way of example, that the answers of presidential candidates to TV journalists' questions had been as long as 85 words in length in 1960, but that they had been reduced to about 17 words by 2000. Moreover, he advised us that it was perfectly appropriate to ignore the question and say what one wished, since only the answer would be shown on the TV news. I began to consider the sound bite in a new light, as almost a genre of literature (like haiku poems). It was a challenge to present meaningful answers in the briefest possible compass, but with some concentration and a little luck, I found that one could provide something reasonable concise and satisfactory without wandering off into complicated and overly qualified evasions. In this way, even brief interactions with the media can be made into positive experiences at times.

The demand for responsible information on Middle Eastern and Islamic studies has increased decisively in recent years, as can be seen in the increases in enrollments in classes on Arabic, Middle Eastern studies, and Islam around the country. No doubt that increased demand is directly to be correlated to the political shifts caused by 9/11. In any case, I believe this sea change is more than a passing fad, and that it mirrors a decisive change of perspective that includes the Middle East and Islam as immediate realities that are no longer foreign and exotic topics. Given the relative

dearth of expertise on these subjects in the US, I believe that at least some academics<sup>9</sup> should take on the responsibility of trying to provide explanations to appropriate audiences of the important issues they have studied. Clarity of expression and a willingness to engage with audiences are the chief prerequisites for this activity. I hope that our professional organizations and the academy at large will support public scholarship and provide incentives for scholars to address this important task, so that it becomes more practical and normal for both graduate students and faculty members to communicate easily and effectively with the public.

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<sup>9</sup> In this respect, I am calling for a recognition of the importance of public scholarship as similar to the doctrine of *fard kifaya* in Islamic law, i.e., a duty that needs to be fulfilled by some but not all members of the community.