

The presence of anthropological approaches in contemporary readings of Islamic thought



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This article attempts to touch on the presence of anthropological approaches in contemporary readings of Islamic thought, given that the latter raises questions and problems that express events that are still characterised by a permanent and urgent situation, which led to the employment of several approaches and visions that descended from contemporary Western knowledge in the field of human sciences, including anthropology. Despite the Western origin of Islamic thought – anthropology – and the delay in its inclusion as a specialisation within the field of academic practice in Arab universities after independence for various reasons, the years that followed the independence of Arab countries since the second half of the 20th century carried with them the seeds of the formation of the first anthropological research that began to find its way towards gradual maturity.

Contribution: Anthropology, with its devised mechanisms and methodological tools, and the theoretical perceptions it entails, constitutes one of the entrances upon which contemporary readings of Islamic thought are based through a discussion of certain angles related to the historical and cultural heritage that furnish Islamic thought and nourish its references.

Keywords: anthropology; approach; Islamic thought; contemporary reading; interdisciplinary.

Introduction

Anthropology is a relatively recent scientific discipline compared to other specialisations, which appeared during the second half of the 19th century and began to find gradual inclusion within the realm of scientific and academic practice, despite its short lifespan. There is no doubt that there are various related factors that can be attributed to the nature of this specialisation (Abdulla 2018; Abdullah 2017).

Anthropology is characterised by a phrase for common ground among different specialities in humanitarian and social sciences, which has allowed the latter to dispose of the theoretical and technical disabilities of these branches, which earned anthropology riches and versatility in its entries and reading mechanisms for different phenomenological and social and cultural events in their various dimensions and manifestations (Akrim & Sulamsi 2020; Al Jufri 2021).

Therefore, anthropology is based on a wealth of knowledge predicated on history, which is at the same time the history of its theoretical concepts and hypotheses (Auger & Colin 2008). On the other hand, the openness of anthropology to the various social and cultural axes made all human sciences based on hypotheses and anthropological predisposition is often latent (Rappport & Overing 2000). According to this context, anthropology and biology are readings of human practices, both material and moral, in the past and present time, through the application of their methodological and theoretical mechanisms to monitor the various aspects of life – social and cultural, individuals and groups – seeking to understand their mentalities (Al-Qurtuby 2021; Arifin, Agussani & Rudianto 2020).

There is no doubt that this endeavour is achieved through presenting an integrated vision of the patterns and systems of society in all its dimensions, which at least allows for the formulation of visions and forward-looking visions about the future. Therefore, this article presents anthropology as an approach to reading contemporary Islamic thought.

Methodology

This article uses a systematic literature review (SLR) method. The SLR method was chosen in the writing of this article because the purpose of this article is to theoretically and empirically explain

the anthropological approach in Islamic studies. These objectives are in line with the SLR approach's goal, which is to look for empirical evidence that meets specific criteria to solve research problems.

According to Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003), the SLR stages include planning the review, conducting the study and reporting and dissemination. This article uses data from books and scientific reports that explain the anthropological approach to religion. The data are then analysed qualitatively following an interactive data analysis model consisting of three stages: data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification.

Al-Qurthubi (2021) reveals that anthropologists of Islam face new challenges, some of which are the product of new technologies, contemporary political developments and socioreligious changes, among others. The complexity of all matters described above can only be investigated by anthropologists who understand and realise the dynamics and complexity of Islam and Muslim societies, as well as comprehending methods and theoretical frameworks whether of an 'insider' (one who is from the community studied and shares its culture and religion) or an 'outsider' (one from outside the community), a native or foreigner, a Muslim or non-Muslim.

Meanwhile, according to Lambek (2000), it is difficult to reflect on history of the anthropology of religion without recognising to what extent that history is precisely, and to what has constituted the substance of the subject.

In the book titled *Anthropology and theology*, Davies (2020) takes a new look at key anthropological and theological themes and explores the intricacies of their interplay throughout history and in the present.

Anthropology as an approach in the study of Islamic thought is one way to understand Islam and a way to see the forms of religious practices that arise and develop in society. To understand Islam comprehensively, one must use a comprehensive, actual and integral approach from various scientific disciplines. Therefore, it becomes imperative to explore various scientific disciplines in order to actualise Islam in the empirical world, especially mastering scientific theories and methodologies, both theoretically and practically so that Islam can truly be a guide and direction in human life.

This article discusses the anthropological approach in reading contemporary Islamic thought. This is important for the following reasons: firstly, the anthropological approach is exceedingly useful to help study religious thought empirically. This means that the study of religious thought must be directed at understanding the social aspects of the context that surrounds religion. Secondly, anthropological studies provide facilities for the study of Islamic thought to better comprehend the diversity of cultural influences in Islamic practice.

The position of religion in anthropological research

Regardless of the vastness of the fields and axes of research that are concerned with anthropology, there are fields of research that are characterised by a special attraction, despite their being considered thorny and difficult fields because of many sociocultural factors. Religion, cannot, in any case, be considered a branch or marginal field of human knowledge. In fact, in the eyes of many scholars and researchers, the religious issue constitutes a science known independently as the science of religions (Auger & Colin 2008; Bauto 2014).

Religious issues are included in anthropological research within the context of what is acknowledged as religious anthropology, which is known in some writings as the anthropology of religion, perhaps because of the importance of religion in the life of human societies as a whole, through its rooting in the individual and collective unconscious in all times and places (Bergunder 2014; Bielo 2018).

Therefore, the research and studies concerned with the religious phenomenon, or in other words, those concerning the religious issue, define religion as '[...] according to which forms it wears, it explains the human being within the world, enabling him to practice various actions, linking social cohesion, and consolidating all that which exists as a ruler [...] about individual concerns as well as collective distress'. The religious regulation of time also aims to secure people against that temporal shift that leads them to death, and as a human phenomenon, religion appears as a response to people's requirements of their circumstance, as it pushes them to secure their greater selves ... and more in harmony with the reality of themselves. There is no doubt that the great importance of the religious issue has made specialists in general and religious anthropology in particular to submit systematic proposals to facilitate the religious phenomenon, and create the area to dismantle their symbolic components within religious practices and reproductions. These methodological proposals to study the religious issue and read their various aspects have been limited by employing the anthropological approach (Bowie 2008; Buskens & Sandwijk 2016).

Studying the religious issue from an anthropological perspective

It is fortuitous to find a historian of religions who also specialises in anthropology. The French religious leader Michel Meslin insists on the necessity of employing the anthropological approach to understand the religious phenomenon, which according to his point of view and through his long experience in this field of research, is one of the important but basic approaches. In this context, he says: 'This anthropological approach to the religious phenomenon seems essential to me'. Then he adds, '[...] it is the only one that can give it a scientific character' (Dalle et al. 2020; Dariah, Salleh & Shafiai 2016).

The anthropological approach has become one of the most popular approaches adopted in the present era to understand the religious issue, dismantle its symbolism and monitor its dimensions and its manifestations.

Although there are relative differences regarding the names of the first researchers who took the initial place in addressing this methodological problem by adopting the anthropological approach in studying religious practice, most opinions are in favour of the researcher Arnold van Gennep, whose proposed the of 'passing rites' in 1909. This idea had an effective influence not only on the studies of religious anthropology but also on the research that focused on social organisation (Fassin 2018; Frese 2015).

There is no doubt that the insistence of some scholars interested in anthropology in general and anthropological religious issues in particular, stress the importance of employing the anthropological approach in the study of religious issues.

Concerning the justifications related to the religious phenomenon, the issue involves a wide margin of discussion, but it does not depart from the context of invoking the dialectical relationship between the two religious sides and cultural studies, considering that the issue of the relationship between religion and culture is not new, as it is not possible, according to this approach, to understand the religious phenomenon except within its cultural context by the cultural dimension (Galek et al. 2014; Gill 2013).

If religion is the sacred and transcendent aspect, then culture represents the mundane aspect. It is worth noting that the coherence and adhesion between the transcendent – the sacred – and the mundane makes it impossible to understand one of them in isolation from the influence of the other, because religion is closely attached to culture and is far from sin because in the depths of every human culture the religious phenomenon is rooted (Zerihun 2005).

While the justifications related to the curriculum of anthropology are about the privacy of religious thought and are based on the consideration that the anthropological approach, with its methodological tools and theoretical system, qualifies the researcher to access the core of the issues and to open the intractable research axes, which are characterised by their glamour, multiple readings and interpretations, there is no doubt that the religious phenomenon comes at the top of these axes (Gunn & Iogstrup 2014; Harkin 2010).

This justification, mentioned above, related to the anthropological method is considered as a firm conviction that was defended by Marc Augé in his book *Anthropology*, by saying that: Anthropology, in particular, has the equipment that enables it to confront the manifestations and realities of the current era. Therefore, urging the importance of employing the anthropological approach to study the

religious phenomenon as a result of the anthropological researchers' awareness of the ingenuity of the anthropologist method (Harrison 2006; Hublin 2015).

The anthropological approach has features that make them the most capable of touching the core of the religious phenomenon and of diagnosing its merits and dimensions. Furthermore, from the unprecedented angles within the curricula descended from branches of human science and social work, some anthropologists have tried working to contribute to the demonstration that the totality of anthropology's methods, observations and analyses can help explain the complexities of a contemporary world, a victim of contradictory movements to generate diversity and erase barriers.

The importance of the anthropological approach to contemporary Islamic thought

There is no doubt that the anthropological approach to contemporary Islamic thought will open new horizons of thought. It also undoubtedly contributes to enriching the Islamic conscience representation of certain related issues of religious and cultural heritage. This is to address the various questions that arise at the level of the daily developments of contemporary Muslim life. The issue of dealing with the merits of the current cultural, intellectual and social reality through its relation to the Islamic heritage is one of the essences of the problems posed within the space of research and discussion at the level of contemporary Islamic thought (İbrahimoğlu, Çiğdem & Seyhan 2014; Jeder 2014).

Therefore, the application of the anthropological approach in the reading of contemporary Islamic thought is in the first place and without a doubt, a response to those who see that there is no justification or meaning for anticipating the new in the field of jurisprudence in all areas of the world. They unanimously agreed on the main principles of the Qur'an, the Sunnah, consensus and analogy (*qiyas*), just as the views were similar. Their consideration of the issue of complementary origins is represented in *istihsan*, *istishab* and *'urf* and *masalih mursalah*. However, these superficial visions of the Islamic religion in general, and the sciences, which have become basic references for Islamic thought in the present era, do not stand up absolutely in the face of the epistemological presentation based on the process of research and investigation, on the assumption that the inquisitive is a machine, because the historical formation of the Islamic phenomenon in its various societies contains psychological and political and social elements of the anthropological structure of contemporary Islam (Jirasek 2015; Keane 2008).

Hence, the anthropological approach ends with us touching and being aware of the problems of contemporary Islamic thought, and perhaps this constitutes a crucial moment that it is necessary to skip over, and this is before we aspire to renew and revive Islamic thought, to capture points and axes that

lead to understanding the cultural currents, visions and perceptions that permeate this thought, which is referred to as the monitoring of sectarian positions.

The mechanisms of applying the anthropological approach in the contemporary reading of Islamic thought

Recruitment of the anthropological approach in a contemporary reading of Islamic thought is constantly established to represent what Islamic thought requires in its references within the upward track through history. This changing path is undoubtedly and necessarily changing, and this is at several levels, including those related to ethics and transactions as well as general practices, from the premise that Islam as a religious phenomenon cannot be reduced to a set of abstract ideas separated from the social and historical phenomena known and known to the Islamic region. There is no doubt that this perspective, which is attributed to the anthropological approach, is an expression of the fading of visions of traditional anthropology and the birth of new insights. The latter sees religion as a distinct space of human practice and economy that cannot be reduced to anything else (Abdulla 2018).

This makes Talal al-Assad believe there are historical jumps produced for religion as a concept of transient essence of history, so the anthropological approach to the religious phenomenon calls for the status of religion within the social and cultural context that has evolved across him, which stood at times, and from anthropological approach. It stems from the necessity of paying attention to the question of interpretation, through which it is possible to understand how a person expresses through his research and understanding of the sacred (Fakhry 2013).

The issue of interpretation constituted one of the important investigations that occupied an important margin of studies on the cultures of peoples and their religions in anthropological research, and that was since the Sixties of the 20th century, under the influence of American anthropological research – conducted by Clifford Geertz – which culminated in his extensive and in-depth field research on cultural practices, both material and moral (Abdullah 2017).

His book *The Interpretation of Cultures* published in 1973, is among the famous books, as it formed the ground on which Geertz's conceptions and visions of the concept of human culture were based through empirical field studies rather than theory. Through this book, Geertz was able to explain the details on which his interpretive theory is based. His preoccupation with works related to hermeneutic theory deepened Geertz's interest in other topics related to the religion of the societies that were the subject of his field studies, especially Indonesia and Morocco (Akrim & Sulasmi 2020).

In this regard, he wrote a book on Islam from the point of view of anthropology, through his daily living in these two

countries. This book was published in 1968, under the title *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*.

This book has impressed some thinkers such as Edmund Leach. It is a deeply insightful text that compares Islam in Indonesia with Islam in Morocco. Geertz treated religion according to the same approach that he adopted in his analysis of culture, and therefore, according to his point of view, the essence of religion does not change as much as it changes the visions produced towards it by individuals, and it is the interpretive logic on which the anthropological approach to religion has become based (Al Jufri 2021).

It is worth noting that the process associated with interpretation as well as reading is closely related to religion and Islamic thought, as it is constantly emerging and within specific historical contexts is charged with a set of peculiarities, on top of which comes the cultural specificities, the social and economic process without mutual influence. It also falls under the authority of a set of obligations that must be overlooked, and without that, the relationship between religion and the reality of daily life is severed (Al-Qurtuby 2021).

Perhaps the best example of this is the conformity of Islamic thought with its various references to the reality of daily life and the requirements of the conditions that Muslims knew during the flourishing phase of civilisation. This approach and response came as a logical response because of a group of social factors, as well as by the emergency events that resulted from the prevailing culture, as it constitutes an outcome. Therefore, the problem posed at the level of Islamic thought since the completion of the revelation is not the change in the basic references forming this thought, but rather the change in the creation of ideas and the development thereof, that is capable of interpretation (Arifin et al. 2020).

A reader of the history of Islamic civilisation notes that the revelation constituted a moment in time. This was a milestone in the history of societies that embraced Islam as a religion and as an intellectual system that played pivotal roles and represented a strong base in various areas of life. Events are known to the societies that touched that intellectual system (Augé & Colin 2008).

The latter arose from the basic reference represented in the Qur'anic text, and then the rest of the references that emerged from the cultural, social, economic and political situations, with time, the succession of events and the complexity of the issues raised. According to this context, Islam as a religious and intellectual system can be considered one of the most significant subshapes in the formation of the overall format of society, and from here the religious discourse is based on its legitimate authority, which combines individuals and groups within a mental system. In each historical era there is a mental structure, and the individual mind selects from it its thoughts and perceptions (Bauto 2014).

Employing anthropological approaches in contemporary readings of Islamic thought should take into account many contradictory opinions that stand against this thought. The researchers must avoid these two positions as much as possible to be sufficiently objective by standing at some distance from these opinions without being biased to any position, given that Islamic thought is characterised by the breadth, richness and abundance of its axes and starting points. As well as the multiplicity of interpretations that arose around it, this requires a reading characterised by calm and depth, armed with a critical sense that takes into account the soundness of vision and accuracy of analysis, through knowledge of the elements of the anthropological approach and the possession of the mechanisms of contemporary Islamic thought (Bergunder 2014).

Reading in the reality of anthropological approaches to contemporary Islamic thought

The degree of receptivity to modern humanities and social science curricula, especially the anthropologist curriculum, which has come to stand out in the academic landscape in the Arab Islamic arena from the end of the 1980s to the present. Single attempts have been sorted for some researchers and specialists in various fields of humanities and social sciences, through benefiting from the curricula of these sciences, as well as the attempts to root them. This is to use it in the various readings and analyses of some social and cultural phenomena, including those related to contemporary Islamic thought. Within this context, some attempts are presented that are based on the curricula originating from contemporary Western humanities and social sciences to approach Islamic thought and an attempt to research its implications from different angles, as there are many contemporary intellectual approaches that some Arab thinkers have been serious about, those whose interest was focused on addressing the intellectual currently experienced by Arab Islamic societies. This is the current analyses that is marked by stumbling, resulting from a misunderstanding and misuse of heritage, benefiting from it in reality (Bielo 2018).

Perhaps among those attempts which we mention are, for example, but not limited to the contributions made by Muhammad Abed Al-Jabiri, Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd, Tayeb Tizini, Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm, Hisham Jua'it and other attempts that are not less important. However, the most important note regarding these attempts is that they are readings emanating from the different fields of work of their owners. Therefore, they are different according to their different backgrounds and intellectual starting points, which undoubtedly affect their visions and representations of the issue (Bowie 2008).

However, the problem posed at the level of topics and methods that can be applied in the study of Islamic thought, and in which topics and methods can find a fertile intellectual

home and field, distinguished research. Despite the inclusion of anthropology's insufficient size within the space of academic practice in Arab universities, and within the cultural environment of Arab society in general, this did not prevent the emergence of serious attempts that took upon themselves the adoption of anthropological approaches, and in some cases making use of anthropological theories, as well as employing some tools of the anthropological method. This is part of the study and research endeavour in Islamic thought in general or reading some of its broad and complex aspects (Buskens & Sandwijk 2016).

Islamic thought comes at the top of these contributions based on the anthropology group of the workgroup by Mohammad Arkoun. Arkoun tried to establish an intellectual project called 'applied Islamism', which is concerned with the scientific reading of Islamic heritage in general, through research in intellectual references. In particular, by employing a set of curricula drawn from the humanities and social sciences, these include linguistics, philosophy, history, and anthropology (Dalle et al. 2020).

Muhammad Arkoun comments on this intellectual project by saying, 'This is the science that I inaugurated before a few years ago, it aims to read the past and present of Islam based on the discourses of Islamic and Arab societies and their current needs'. He thus aims to provide answers to the Islamic public opinion, as he said, by trying to rid it of the closed dogmatic fence in which traditional theology imprisons it (Dariah et al. 2016).

Despite the seriousness and daring that characterised the intellectual project of Muhammad Arkoun, known for applied Islamism, through his call for the necessity of benefiting from the curricula of the humanities and social sciences, including the curricular approach and its application in studying Islamic thought and trying to explore its depths, by shedding light on some of the silent aspects that abound in Islamic thought and heritage, there are methodological approaches that prevented the clarity of this intellectual project and it was not possible to place it clearly within the scope of application of Islamic thought (Diah et al. 2014).

Despite the methodological flaws that characterised the intellectual project known as applied Islamism, its effects made anthropology a modern scientific discipline, with its devised mechanisms and methodological tools, and involvement in the conception of intersectional theories (Ellison 2018).

This new line of thought has gained wide popularity in the intellectual space and has left a wide echo in academic circles and among the intellectual elite in Western societies, as is the case in the Arab and Islamic societies, where there are followers calling for the necessity of applying the anthropological and anthropological approach firstly, with the possibility of benefiting from the various intellectual curricula derived from the humanities and social sciences. It has also attracted large segments of thinkers and observers,

as it began to spread among the categories of students with inclinations and intellectual interests related to the specialisations of Islamic Arabs (Fassin 2018).

Conclusion

At the end of this article, we present a set of positions and conclusions that include the following.

Firstly, the discussion of the presence of anthropological approaches in contemporary readings of Islamic thought requires in-depth research. It is impossible to be familiar with the subject from all aspects in a limited number of pages, as it constitutes one of the modern topics in the field of anthropological studies as well as in the field of studies related to Islamic thought. Anthropology seeks to see the relationship between religion and various institutions social events that occur in society. Research on the relationship between religion and economics gave birth to several theories that are quite interesting for researchers of religion.

Secondly, Islamic thought must take its place by fulfilling the roles entrusted to it, as it was at the time of the flourishing of Islamic civilisation, by confronting the factors of stagnation, and introversion. It contains opinions, positions and sayings that have transcended in many respects to keep pace with the current questions and developments posed by the sociocultural environment of the contemporary Muslim. Undoubtedly, this proposition leads us to say and assert that it is not logical to preserve some of the inherited visions and attitudes about a period and a sociocultural environment different from our time. The inclusion of anthropology in religious studies is based on an understanding of the strong link between religion and culture. Because, after all, religion will not always exist in a vacuum and always be original. Negating the relationship between religion and sociocultural reality is the same as denying the existence of religion itself, which is always related to humans who are surrounded by culture.

Thirdly, the anthropological approach seeks to touch on the problems of contemporary Islamic thought and be aware of them, and perhaps this constitutes a crucial moment that it is necessary to skip, and this is before the ambition to renew and revive Islamic thought. Therefore, as a science that discusses humans, anthropology has an important value to help understand human religion. Anthropology sheds light on how humans understand, interpret and apply their religion in their daily life.

Fourthly, the anthropological approach leads to removing confusion about the major issues posed by contemporary Islamic thought, in terms of understanding the different situations in which this thought is rife, as they represent an expression of the cultural premises that govern their cultural understandings, Islam, in its dealing with various developments. By using the approach of anthropology, it can be seen that the doctrines and phenomena of religion do not stand alone and are never separated from the network of institutions or social institutions supporting the existence of

the community. This is the meaning of the anthropology approach in understanding religious phenomena.

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Authors' contributions

A.M., N.D.N., I.I., R.K.S.I. and L.M. contributed to collection of data, data documenting and analysis and manuscript preparation. A.M. was the senior author for this study. All authors critically reviewed and approved the final draft and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

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Data availability

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