Text of Marjo Buitelaar's inaugural lecture for the chair 'Contemporary Islam' at the Faculty of Theology & Religious Studies as presented on January 16 2018 at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. Please do not quote without permission of the author. M.W.Buitelaar@rug.nl

Comparing Notes: An Anthropological Approach to Contemporary Islam

"Dear Members of the board, colleagues, friends and family,"

A few years ago, a friend of mine felt that her life had somehow come to a standstill. After her youngest child had moved out, she realised how stale her marriage had become. Workwise, she had a good position that paid well, but lately she had begun to wonder about the purpose of it all. To get in touch with what she really wanted in life, she decided to take a sabbatical and walk the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela.

About the same time, Nilgün, a Turkish-Dutch participant in my current Hajj research, found herself in a similar situation: having divorced early in her marriage, her focus had always been on working hard to provide for her children. The crown on her work had been the recent wedding of her eldest son. Soon afterwards, however, she found herself drained of all energy and staring into emptiness. A friend suggested she take a break: 'Why not join the mosque group that's going on Umra, the voluntary pilgrimage to Mecca?' Initially, Nilgün dismissed the idea, considering the cost an insurmountable obstacle. The more she allowed herself to dream about it, however, the stronger her desire to visit Mecca grew. Not just to have a break, she hastened to explain during our interview; what she had longed most for, was to stand in front of the Ka'aba to pray for the well-being of her children, and to thank the Lord for the strength He'd given her to raise them as a single mom. In short, Nilgün felt Mecca pulling her towards itself like a magnet and eventually could not resist: she sold her jewelry, and some family members stepped in to help her pay for the journey.

As a token of my gratitude to Nilgün for sharing her pilgrimage stories with me, at the end of our interview sessions I gave her the catalogue of the Hajj exhibition at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden. Flipping through the pages she expressed surprise: "How could it be that in the Netherlands, where so many people think of Islam in negative terms, a museum should care to host an exhibition on what Nilgün called 'the beauty of Islam'! "

A few months ago, I saw the surprise shown by Nilgün mirrored by that of a Dutch journalist who interviewed me for the RTL-news show about the then upcoming Hajj. One of the rites I described was the *wuquf*, consisting in the pilgrims standing at Mount Arafat to

contemplate their lives and ask God forgiveness for their wrongdoings. The *wuquf* inspires many pilgrims to decide to make a fresh start and lead a more meaningful life upon return home. 'Gee', the interviewer exclaimed in response, 'I had no idea Islam could be like that. This sounds all pretty spiritual, kind of like what you hear people say who go to Santiago de Compostela!'

Unfortunately, this particular dialogue did not make it into the broadcast. The reason I mention it here, is that the mirror image of Nilgün's surprise and that of the journalist, points to a gap; a gap between what non-Muslims often think Islam is about on the one hand; politics, oppression and violence, and, on the other hand, what Islam actually means in the everyday lives of most Muslims; a source of consolation, inspiration, strength. In today's lecture, I will argue that as Islam and the West are increasingly pitted against each other in popular European discourse, it is precisely this gap that makes anthropological knowledge production about the meanings of Islam in everyday social existence of utmost importance.

Globalisation and the further integration and expansion of the European Union have changed the life-worlds of Europeans significantly over the past decades. These processes went hand in hand with a growing presence and, above all, an increased visibility of Muslim citizens in the public domain. These simultaneous trends, exacerbated by a refugee crisis and by violent attacks by perpetrators who claim to act in the name of Islam, have resulted in Muslims becoming the focus of public anxiety .

In the dominant public discourse, Islam is portrayed as a static and monolithic religion that is intrinsically incompatible with modernity and western values. Also, Islamic scriptures like the Qur'an and the Hadith, the sayings of the prophet Mohammed, are assumed to determine all dimensions of Muslim life. Thus, people of Muslim backgrounds are reduced to their 'Muslimness' (Brubaker 2012). They are viewed as Muslims only, rather than being recognised as multi-dimensional individuals whose life-worlds and daily concerns overlap significantly with fellow citizens of non-Muslim backgrounds. To put it differently, in the dominant discourse Muslims are represented as 'the other'; those who do not belong to 'us'. Vice versa, exclusivist Muslim discourses also exist. As a result, commonalities in how people of Muslim and other backgrounds tackle everyday life concerns are easily obscured.

In policy-making the unease about Muslim presence in Europe is reflected in a strong focus on security issues and the integration of Muslims (cf. Sunier 2012). Not surprisingly,

societal demand for information about Islam has increased tremendously. For scholars in Islam studies this raises the question of how we can best cater for such demands. What are the most productive ways to contribute to public debates about contemporary Islam? Also, how do societal interests relate to academic ones?

The past decade has shown an upsurge of studies on Muslim radicalisation and terrorism, often conducted by experts in political science and international relations. I am therefore extremely proud of the accomplishments of our faculty's Centre for Religion, Conflict and Globalization; on the basis of specific religious studies expertise it produces knowledge and provides policy advice offering more nuanced understandings of 'religion' and its relations to politics and society. We should be careful, however, not to respond to public demand with an over-emphasis in our research and study programmes on how religion is involved in politics and conflicts. My main argument today is that in order to fully grasp the rich and varied meanings of what people identify as 'religious' in their own lives, it is vital that besides situations in which religion is foregrounded, we should also investigate circumstances in which religion is only a background presence.

This, in my view, is where the unique contribution of the anthropological approach to the study of contemporary Islam comes in: through long term participation in the lives of the people we study, by observing them as they try to make sense of the puzzles of everyday life, and by engaging with them far more extensively through small-talk than by means of formal interviews, ethnographers learn how religious understandings and practices are embedded in people's wider life-worlds (cf. Blok 1978; Jansen & Driessen). Through participant observation we gain insights in how religious concerns intertwine with other motivations, and how religion may be brought to the fore in some settings, and is left unaddressed in others.

In the remainder of this lecture, I will argue that the ethnographic mapping of the contextual presence of Islam in the everyday lives of Muslims, is of crucial importance in the study of contemporary Islam. Ethnographic research not only provides us with insights in the wide variety of ways in which the Islamic scriptures are appropriated in practice - thus serving academic interests - but ethnographic accounts also challenge the assumed gap between

Muslims and non-Muslims that characterizes public anxiety about Islam in Europe - thus serving societal interests.

Accounts of the experiences of individuals of Muslim backgrounds as they try to make sense of everyday social existence take us beyond specifically Muslim understandings, yet without glossing them over (cf. Rasanayagam 2013: 116-7). Stories about how people tackle the kind of everyday concerns we all deal with, render their lives intelligible to others, thus allowing people of different backgrounds to find common ground and take what they share as a point of departure to discuss their differences. In other words, the ethnography of everyday life-worlds produces the kind of knowledge that invites people to compare notes (cf. Orsi 2005).

Ethnographic accounts of people's daily concerns also contest the assumption in the public discourse that Islam determines all dimensions of Muslims lives. The problem of this assumption is that it presupposes the existence of a cultural essence; it implies a view of culture as a kind of mould that keeps producing identical copies (cf. Baumann 1999: 25). Contrary to this static conception of culture, anthropologists understand culture as time-sensitive, open-ended models of historically embodied traditions, that are continuously adjusted in the practice of everyday life (cf. Marsden and Retsikas: 14). Anthropologists therefore study culture not only as a force that shapes people's daily life-worlds, but also as a re*source* on which people draw to address their everyday concerns and to make sense of their experiences.

One could conceive of culture as providing people with a 'toolkit' that contains various kinds of tools to interpret and act upon the world (cf. Swidler 2001: 104-6). Cultural toolkits come with a socially transmitted body of knowledge and views that function as a kind of 'instruction manual' on how to use those tools. Some guidelines are articulated explicitly, while others 'go without saying'; we incorporate them by observing others apply them.

Rather than strictly following the rules, in the practice of everyday life people improvise upon established ways of doing and seeing things. As such, they are active contributors to the innovation of tools and their use. Over time, as changing circumstances create new issues to be tackled, people may invent new tools or adopt instruments from other people's cultural toolkits. Gradually, some older tools fall in disuse and are thrown out of the toolkit. Alternatively, they simply end up at the bottom, maybe disappearing from collective memory altogether, or making a come-back to serve new purposes, as the renewed popularity of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela illustrates (cf. Roseman 2004).

Not all cultural tools are equally valued by those who share similar toolkits, nor does everybody have equal access to tools. For the majority of Muslims, for example, the pilgrimage to Mecca is beyond reach because of their gender, their financial situation, health issues, or, as of recently, because of the quota system that allows only a small number of applicants to be issued with hajj- visa (cf. Bianchi 2004:11). Moreover, there is often no consensus among people who have similar toolkits concerning the issue which tools should be used how to tackle a specific situation. Take, for example, package tours to Mecca that include safaris on quads in the Saudi desert. Such overly touristic activities are frowned upon by many Muslims (Buitelaar 2017). Particularly among older Muslims the pilgrimage to Mecca is conceived of as an act of penitence and obedience; it is the fulfilment of one's last religious duty in preparation to meet one's Creator (Haq and Jackson 2009; McLoughlin 2009). Quad safaris obviously have no place in such conceptions.

This example illustrates that the use of cultural toolkits is always open to contestations and innovations. Therefore, while Islamic scriptures may provide a 'script' to lead a morally good life, the ways Muslims interpret and enact that script is shaped by the wider cultural context in which they are embedded. Moreover, Islam is not the only moral register that informs their life-worlds. In the course of everyday life, people engage in a number of different socio-cultural settings, each with their own frames of reference (Schielke 2010). To complicate matters, people's views and practices are not only informed by the local contexts they physically inhabit, but also include imagined and enacted global connections (Appadurai 1996). The world of commercial media, for instance, strongly promotes exactly the kind of consumerist life-style that creates a market for package tours to Mecca that include quad rides (cf. Haenni 2011; Aziz 2001).

The overlapping and intersecting settings and imaginaries that inform people's life-worlds result in a hodgepodge of tools to tackle the complexity of everyday social existence. Not everybody is equally well-equipped to cope with such complexities and, again, not everybody has equal access to tools; a person is never Muslim only, but also gendered, young or old, rich or poor, of specific ethnic and educational backgrounds, and-so-on-and-so-forth. These various identity categories intersect to locate a person's position in society, their access to specific resources, and their outlook on life. Therefore, rather than a priori privileging a decontextualized 'Muslimness', the meaning of Islam in the lives of Muslims is more productively explored by teasing out the complex and often contradictory ways in which various frames of reference and

different sets of power relations simultaneously shape their life-worlds (cf. Schielke & Debevec 2012).

This is why we should avoid a one-sided focus on how Islam is invoked in situations where people close ranks and take a public stance to defend their interests either *as* Muslims or *against* Muslims. To assess the scope and import of diverging habits and value systems in the everyday routines of living together as citizens of different backgrounds, settings where Islam's presence is less foregrounded must also be taken into account.

One reason for this is that precisely since everyday life is complex and full of ambiguities, in their daily practices people do not always manage to live up to high moral standards quite as much as they think or say they do when reflecting on those standards on a meta-level. This is often overlooked in debates about the compatibility or incompatibility of so-called 'Western' and 'Islamic' norms and values.

Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, in their daily routines people navigate multiple socio-cultural scenario's. As they move between different settings, they improvise upon and negotiate between different moral registers. Several ethnographic studies have demonstrated, for example, that the social ethics of women involved in Islamic revivalist movements are not only informed by principles that they derive from Islamic sources, but also include liberal political concepts such as democracy, rights and equality (e.g.Fadil 2008; Jouili 2015; Hafez 2011).

While obviously not all research into contemporary Islam focuses on conflicts, there is a strong tendency in Islam studies to concentrate on situations where Muslim actors foreground what they conceive of as 'the religious'. To capture the contextual meaning of Islam in people's everyday lives, we must, however, equally study settings in which religion is only a casual or background presence. Take, for example, a statement by Malika, a Moroccan-Dutch woman whom I interviewed as part of my life story project (cf. Buitelaar 2009; 2014). After pondering my question what being Muslim meant to her, her first response was: "Well, I don't drive my car as a Muslim, for instance." Nevertheless, later in the interview Malika mentioned that listening to Qur'an recitation while driving home after a long working day, helped her to unwind. Depending on her mood, however, she might equally opt for a Leonard Cohen album.

The detail about Malika's switching between the Qur'an and Leonard Cohen to reduce stress, illustrates that if we move away from an over-emphatic research focus on specifically religious matters and explore Islam as a background presence in the everyday mundane practices

of Muslims, distinctions between 'us' and 'them' become more fuzzy. An even more powerful example concerns the public expressions of shared grief by Dutch football fans over the fate of Ajax midfielder Abdelhaq, or 'Appie' Nouri, who lies in coma after collapsing during a match and suffering serious brain damage.

Thousands of fans from all walks of life gathered at Nouri's home in Amsterdam to pay respect to him and his family. It was obviously Nouri's 'being one of us' as an Ajax player that enabled people to identify so strongly with what he and his family were going through. The family itself inserted their Muslim identity as a self-evident element in sharing their grief with the crowd. Nouri's father, for example, asked people to pray for his son. Interestingly, in media coverage of the event, the family's religiosity was neither foregrounded nor ignored. For example, a particularly strong 'bonding' image appeared of a young blond Ajax fan shaking hands with Nouri's sister who wears the kind of cape-like covering that is often associated with an orthodox religious style. Other images showed #StayStrongAppie banners that fans put up, all of which having the Ajax logo and colours, one of them including *du^{c}â',* a supplication prayer in Arabic.

Pertinent to my argument here is the 'normalizing' effect of the casual or background presence of Islam in these images. This demonstrates the power of shared, immediate experiences - in this case shared grief over Nouri's tragic fate - to acknowledge both commonalities and differences. In turn, this acknowledgement enables productive communication and interaction that crosscuts diverse ways of being in the world. In other words: it is concrete shared experiences that create common ground and space for 'comparing notes'. Comparing notes in the sense of opening up to the perspectives of others and scrutinizing our own in order to recognise, assess and learn from both commonalities and specificities.

Conducting participant observation in situations that take us out of our own comfort zones provides anthropologists with a thorough training in de-exceptionalising others and, to some extent, becoming strangers to ourselves. Even if we have been equipped to voluntarily tackle the unfamiliar in situations of our own choosing, I have to admit it is not always easy. For most people whose life-worlds are directly affected by Islam's growing presence in contemporary Europe, confrontation with the unfamiliar was not their own choice, nor have they been professionally trained to handle cross-cultural encounters.

The very real experiences of uncertainty that come with globalization must be taken into account in our research. Therefore, the most valuable contribution that anthropology can make to the public debate about Islam in Europe is to tell stories that undermine those spread by actors who tap into feelings of anxiety and oversimplify the complexities of societal issues by scapegoating a specific category of citizens for all societal wrongs. Since framing multi-dimensional people of Muslim backgrounds as 'the Muslim other' is the main feature in such discourses of exclusion, ethnographic counter-narratives can demonstrate the fluidity and fuzziness of distinctions between 'us' and 'them' by producing analytical descriptions of the contextual presence of Islam in Muslims' everyday lives.

Studying how and why Islam takes centre stage in some circumstances and at certain moments, but fades into the background in others, is one of the two main strands of the research programme of the chair in Contemporary Islam that I propose. In my own research I alternate between a focus on topics in which Islam is foregrounded, as in my Ramadan study and the present Hajj project that I coordinate, and those in which Islam is a casual or background presence, as in my *hammam*-project or my study of intersecting identifications in the life-stories of Moroccan-Dutch women.

The overarching theme of research on contemporary Islam that I conduct or supervise concerns the issue of how in specific settings being Muslim intersects with other social identifications and positions to inform Muslims' views and practices as they try to make sense of their daily lives. I plan to continue this line of enquiry, for example in projects that focus on the 'normalization' of representations and self-presentations of Muslims in media or that analyse how Islam features in stories about virtues that Muslim and non-Muslim citizens ascribe to themselves and to others, to name but a few promising research topics explored by some of my students that deserve a follow-up. Also, thanks to several PhDs who currently investigate the cultural tools that help or hamper refugees in finding their way in their new environment, we are quickly acquiring expertise on which to build for future research designs.

As my current Hajj research illustrates – a project in which I cooperate with fellow anthropologists Khadija Kadrouch-Outmany & Kholoud Al-Ajarma *and* with the Islamicists Richard van Leeuwen and Ammeke Kateman - studies that integrate ethnographic and historical-textual research can be very productive to analyse intersecting identifications. Therefore, a second problem-set I hope to pursue concerns the ways in which contemporary Muslims draw

on their religious heritage, and how their use of this tradition relates to religious practices and textual interpretations of Muslims in the past. If we aim to deconstruct conceptions of Islam according to which Muslims' views and practices are determined by Islamic scriptures, we can do so only in close cooperation with Islamicists such as my dear colleague Clare Wilde. Islamicists and historians produce knowledge and insights into the historical richness of the tools and instruction manuals that Muslims presently designate as belonging or not belonging to the Islamic tradition.

Therefore, while the chair in contemporary Islam is aptly situated in the department for the Comparative Study of Religion, I am looking forward to cross-departmental cooperation in the Centre for Cultural Heritage, the Centre for Religion and Well-being, and of course, continued participation with projects in the Centre for Religion, Conflict and Globalization and the Centre for the Study of Religion in Asia.

A last remark on participant observation. The ethical guidelines for ethnographic fieldwork prescribe that when we participate in the rituals of the people we work with, we respect their regulations on condition that no one suffers harm. This university's protocol does not permit inaugural lectures to contain acknowledgements. So, I am faced with an ethical dilemma. To minimize damage to any of the parties involved, allow me to conclude by expressing my gratitude to all those present and to several other people who, I am sure, would have loved to be with us here today.

"Ik heb gezegd."

This online version allows me to specify my acknowledgements: First of all, I would like to thank my parents Wilhelm Buitelaar en Alida Buitelaar - van den Berg. It was their sense of adventure that made my father accept a job in Taiwan and take our family to live there for two years when I was a teenager. Unlike many other so-called 'expat-families' my parents took a great interest in Taiwanese culture and toured us extensively across the country. They also encouraged me to learn Chinese and to integrate in the local American high school culture by becoming a cheerleader. Thus getting acquainted with various cultural settings in such a formative phase of life has triggered my interest in anthropology. That I should have specialised in Muslim Societies

rather than becoming a sinologist is also related to my parents adventures; in the same year that I began my studies in Anthropology they moved to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for a new step in my father's career within the Philips Company. During my frequent visits to Riyadh, again we would make many cross-country trips. Also, a Saudi colleague of my father arranged for me to visit the women campus of the King Saud University where I conducted my first 'real' interviews and participant observation.

In hindsight, this experience proved to be the first step in my career in the anthropology of Muslim societies. Soon after returning to the Netherlands, for several years I spent nearly as much time at the department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures as I did at the department of anthropology. I have benefitted tremendously from classes taught by my lecturers Ed de Moor, Jan Peters, Everard Ditters, Jan Hoogland and Lieke de Jong and at the former, and Anton Blok, Henk Driessen, Willy Jansen, Huub de Jonge, Fenneke Reysoo, Albert Trouwborst and last but not least Ton Zwaan at the latter. Sadly, like my father, Ed de Moor and first supervisor of my PhD. thesis Albert Trouwborst died before the chair in Contemporary Islam came into view. I'm sure that both my father and Albert as my 'Doktervater' would even have been so proud to see me don my black gown and cap for my inauguration as full professor, while we would have found Ed behind the piano at the reception.

It means a lot to me that Jan Peters, my other 'promotor' for the PhD-thesis on Ramadan in Morocco that I defended in 1991, and Henk Driessen, who acted as daily supervisor, as well as the 'master' of anthropology in Nijmegen Anton Blok and my specific role-model Willy Jansen, like most aforementioned lecturers who later became appreciated colleagues, were able to attend my inaugural lecture. So did many of my fellow students and friends in anthropology. I felt deeply honoured by your presence. In particular, I would like to thank the women of my 'Anthropological Reading group': Britt Fontaine, Fenneke Reysoo, Alide Roerink and Roswitha Weiler, with whom I shared some first thoughts on my inaugural lecture.

I am most grateful to Thijl Sunier and Léon Buskens who provided me with their incredibly valuable feedback on one or two draft versions. To Léon I owe much more than I can express in words. Throughout my studies and career he has been my closest friend and mentor, coaching me both during our fieldwork in Morocco and our ongoing participant observation in academia. The kind of trust and closeness that characterizes our friendship based on nearly forty years of 'comparing notes' are among the greatest gifts in my life. *Alf shukr a khuya*!

My dear friend and colleague Hetty Zock plays a similar role in my personal and academic life within the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Groningen. Our friendship started out by co-teaching a course on 'Religion, Migration and Identity'. I learned at least as much from Hetty's expertise in the psychology of religion as our students did, something I have benefited from a lot for my own research. It was a great honour to be introduced by her on the occasion of my inauguration and I thank her for sharing with the audience some of the things she got to know about me over the years while kindly ignoring others.

Co-teaching the Master in Religion, Conflict and Globalization with colleagues like Brenda Bartelink, Peter Berger, Kim Knibbe, Julia Martinez, Joram Tarusarira and Erin Wilson is also a very enjoyable endeavour from which I learn a lot. Peter, thank you for being such a talented and wise leader of our department , and Kim, thank you for being the best next door neighbour one can wish for. In my academic life you are my family in the 'foreground'.

I would be at a loss, however, without the backing of my husband Lex Touber and my wider family. 'The squeaky wheel gets the grease' is one of the many English expressions that Lex taught me. I'm afraid I have lent my ears to the claims of institutional squeaky wheels much more often than my family deserves. Rita and Ines, it is time we organize another sisters-day out. Ant, Hil, and Jetze, thank you for adopting me in the Touber clan. Meike, Liselot, Josefien, Hugo, Luc, Lieven and Meri, thank you for being the most wonderful grandchildren and for putting academic concerns into perspective. Most of all, thank you Lex for your incredible patience and for your support, whether coming in the way of correcting my English or helping me with various modalities of 'software' problems, not to mention the cooking.

To conclude, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the board of our Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies and the Board of the University of Groningen for creating the chair in Contempory Islam and entrusting me with it.

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