Epistemic Injustice and the Veil: Islam, Vulnerability, and the Task of Historical Revisionism

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Abstract

Academic work on the ‘veil,’ while important in challenging commonly held ideas about Islam and gender, often falls into a familiar series of observations: veiled women are frequently excluded from these debates; women’s bodies and sexuality have become (or rather, taken on new significance as) battle grounds in arguments about national identity, religion, and culture; and the veil not only marks religious identity, but plays a role in the racialization of religious minorities. Despite this important work, ideas about Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular seem particularly resistant to counter evidence. The essay employs work on epistemic injustice to develop an account of the persistence of negative attitudes towards Muslims. Connecting research on testimonial injustice and epistemologies of ignorance, I argue that epistemic injustice can help explain the epistemic significance of visible manifestations of Islam for white, European forms of knowing.

Key words: epistemic injustice; ignorance; Islam; race; the veil; vulnerability

Academic work on the ‘veil,’ while important in challenging commonly held ideas about Islam and gender, increasingly arrives at a familiar set of conclusions: veiled women are frequently excluded from these debates (Scott 2008, 10; Inge 2017, 4; Parvez 2011, 289); women’s bodies and sexuality have become (or rather, taken on new significance as) battle grounds in arguments about national identity, religion, and culture (Bracke 2011; Duits and van Zoonen 2006; Werbner 2007); and the veil not only marks religious identity, but plays a role in the racialization of religious minorities (Al-Sajii 2010; Galonnier 2015; Franks 2000). Much of this work argues that viewing veiled women as submissive or oppressed by her family is rooted in popular misconceptions rather than evidence. As Azadeh Moaveni (2018, 17) observes, ‘Officials often argue that Muslim women are too submissive to challenge extremist views even within their own families. But women who wear a garment that annoys their families, that provokes regular verbal abuse and leads to their being pelted with food in public are something other than submissive.’

Given the pervasiveness of these arguments, why is the veil still widely misunderstood? Of course, academic consensus does not always result in a shift of popular opinion. Yet, it is still the case that ideas about Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular seem particularly resistant to counter evidence. Why is it that debates about the veil do not take seriously the claims of the women who wear it? And why do people continue to call it the veil, despite the fact that this is an unhealthily general term for a variety of approaches to covering one’s head? Perhaps most importantly, why is it that one form of the veil, the burka, is depicted as a threat to Western civilization, despite the fact that it is worn by an incredibly small number of women in Europe and North America? And finally, why has this issue become one of the primary ‘metonymic location’ for debates about religion, immigration, and society (Duits and van Zoonen 2006, 114)?

In one sense, the answer to these questions is simple: a combination of racism, sexism, and religious bigotry. These cultural scripts run deep, however, and measuring this depth requires understanding the specific forms of knowing that enable these scripts. Put differently, what are the epistemic mechanisms that maintain popular misconceptions of Islam despite a wide variety of evidence that challenges those misconceptions? Analysing the nature of this resistance would thus help generate more effective ways of challenging misconceptions of religious minorities as well as indicate what is at stake in maintaining these ideas of the religious other.

A number of sociological, anthropological, and philosophical approaches have been used to answer these questions, but I will argue that concepts from the field of epistemic injustice should be added to this theoretical repertoire. There has been relatively little work on religion and epistemic injustice, despite growing concerns about the role of religious identity in various forms of political oppression and discrimination. What research does exist tends to make passing reference to the field (Akhtar 2011, 773; Gentry 2015, 367) or applies concepts derived from the study of epistemic injustice to a particular context—especially education—rather than further developing the study of epistemic injustice itself (Moyaert 2019; Markowitz and Puchner 2018; O’Donnell 2016). Ian James Kidd (2017) is the exception to this trend, but his work primarily focuses on epistemic injustice within religious traditions rather than the role of religion in fostering epistemic injustice within wider society.

There are two key ways in which work on epistemic injustice can engage questions of religion, race, and gender. First, Miranda Fricker’s now classic examination of testimonial injustice helps us understand the mechanisms by which the voices of Muslim women are ignored. Second, this testimonial injustice should be located within a broader practice of ‘active unknowing.’ The discounting of Muslim women’s testimony is both enabled by and facilitates a structural ignorance of Islam and its intersection with race and nationality. Here the work of Charles Mills and Linda Martín Alcoff on epistemologies of ignorance provides an important complement to Fricker’s analysis. Examining these perspectives together helps explain the epistemic significance of visible manifestations of Islam for white, European forms of knowing. It also draws attention to the need for more awareness of religion as an issue within social epistemology and political philosophy of race. Thus, unlike the important work on the varied and complex motivations and forms of subjectivity entailed in wearing the veil, this essay is not about the practice of veiling itself. Rather, I seek to understand the epistemic crisis provoked by this act.

Two brief qualifications are necessary. First, ‘the veil’ has become the generic English term to refer to the variety of ways Muslim women cover their heads. The term is doubly problematic. Islam is not the only religion with a tradition of ‘veiling’ and the practice within Islam varies from loose coverings of the head to the niqab in which only the eyes are visible. Debates about clothing also are not only concerned with covering the head, but length and tightness of sleeves, trousers, or other garments, and are not limited to women’s clothing. Despite these issues (and symptomatic of the underlying problems I seek to address in this essay), the veil persists as the dominant term in discourse about Islam, multiculturalism, and ‘the West.’ There is a need for greater precision, but my concern is to critique existing the notion of ‘the veil’ itself and its role in perpetuating epistemic injustices..

Second, the discrimination of people who are or who are perceived to be Muslim always occurs in distinct cultural, political, and historical contexts. Yet whether the background to the discussion is France’s preservation of *laïcité,* Britain’s anti-terrorism efforts, or American opposition to immigration from Muslim countries, the underlying epistemic injustices that shape those discussions bear a striking similarity (Chaudhary 2005, 351). As such, while there are important differences in the North American and various European contexts, my argument here applies to what is often called the North Atlantic and my focus is on similarities rather than differences in these various contexts. There is a slight privileging of the UK, as it the context with which I am most familiar, but my goal is to identify a more widespread epistemic injustice at work in the construction of ‘the West.’ Equally, I am not attempting to offer an analysis that extends to debates about epistemic injustice and the veil in other parts of the world.

**Islam and Testimonial Injustice**

Fricker’s concept of testimonial injustice explains why, when some people speak, they are not heard. In its simplest form, the argument is that ‘identity prejudices’ result in misjudgements about the trustworthiness of a subject (Fricker 2007, 27). Hearers either inflate or diminish their judgment of someone’s reliability on the basis of this perception. Like Fricker, I am interested in prejudices that go beyond isolated, contextual exchanges and cut across a variety of social fields (Fricker 2007, 27). In her work, she is primarily concerned with race and gender, drawing on the two key examples of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. While religion does not feature in Fricker’s discussions of epistemic injustice, her argument is easily extended to cover the experience of religious minorities (not least because of the frequent intersection of race and religion in these communities) (Lynch 2017). If you live in the UK and are ‘visibly Muslim,’ questions about your credibility are probably a regular feature of your life (Fatima 2013; Al-Saji 2010).

There are many qualifications and clarifications in Fricker’s work on these issues, but what is key for the present discussion is that people who are raced as ‘Arab’ or ‘Muslim’[[1]](#endnote-1) are encountering what Fricker (2007,35) calls negative identity prejudice: ‘*A widely held disparaging association between a social group and one or more attributes, where this association embodies a generalization that displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to an ethically bad affective investment*.’ In relation to Islam the prejudices will be familiar: fanaticism, irrationality and a mixture of cultural and religious inferiority. And in ‘the West,’ where Muslims are likely to be racial minorities, these judgments are inseparable from race (Rana 2007, 149; Lynch 2020). The epistemic dimension of this prejudice comes when a speaker is not trusted on the basis of this negative identification. This distrust, or ‘credibility deficit,’ takes the form of questions about competence and sincerity (Fricker 2007, 45). On both fronts, judgments are based on ‘unreliable empirical generalization[s]’ (Fricker 2007, 32).

Questions of competence and sincerity are also clearly present in critiques of Islam. In terms of competence, it is frequently asserted that Muslims lack agency. Muslims not only have certain beliefs, but *must* have these beliefs.[[2]](#endnote-2) As Wendy Brown (2006, 299) puts it, ‘we have culture, while they are a culture’. Similarly Sarah Bracke (2011, 35) traces how women are depicted as ‘victims of their culture’. Rationality is a precondition for agency and the purported irrationality of Muslim beliefs render Muslims necessarily incapable of the agency necessary to be credible. The question of agency is particularly acute when it comes to the veil. As has been well documented, one of the recurring arguments in feminist critiques of the veil is that women *cannot* freely choose the veil. Women who wear the various forms of the veil are frequently positioned as unable to offer an account of this practice. They do not so much wear the veil but are veiled and, in submitting to this practice, reveal themselves to lack the agency necessary to participate in debates about their own attire. Sirma Bilge (2010, 18) succinctly summaries this argument as ‘*agency involves free-will; no woman freely chooses to wear the veil because it is oppressive to women; thus veiled women have no agency*.’ This judgment brings with it assumptions about the compatibility of certain forms of religion with modernity. The veil is taken to signify a premodern approach to religion. Modernity is defined, in part, by the civilizational achievement of a form of individual, rational agency (Siedentop 2017). The veil, when taken as a rejection of this achievement, means that the veiled woman is essentially incapable of justifying the practice (Moyaert 2019, 617-18).

While the challenge to the competency of women who wear the veil is particularly acute, it reflects common elements of the construction of racial and religious others. Cultural difference is projected onto a narrative of historical progress, where Muslim women have not achieved the agency of Western women and may require the help of feminists from outside their religious tradition (here constructed as distinctly patriarchal) (Helliwell and Hindess 2005). Islam is described as a ‘medieval religion’ in need of a Reformation (a critique that says much about the conceptual connections between Protestantism, liberalism, and secularism) (Abu-Lughod 2002, 786; Mahmood 2006). A European and Christian (white) modernity is constructed in opposition to this relic which persists outside of the temporal progression of civilization.

This intersection of religion, race, and culture adds an additional dimension to Fricker’s discussion of testimonial injustice and gender in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Without rehashing the details of the plot, a woman is not believed because she is a woman. She is not taken to be a competent knower of her fiancée or the ways of the world more generally. The example of debates about women who wear the veil is clearly similar, though different in a way that complicates Fricker’s discussion. In Fricker’s example, there is no possibility of women becoming competent. In the case of Muslim women, there is at least the promise of equality. The abstract possibility of conversion masks the unjustness of the epistemic situation. Of course, conversion is not always as easy it appears. The mixture of race, gender, and religion congeals into an essentialised identity. From medieval Spain to the present, the experience of Muslims in Europe shows that religious identity is not always a matter of choice (Lynch 2017).

It is not only questions about competence that contribute to the epistemic injustice experienced by Muslim women. People who either are Muslim or who ‘appear’ Muslim also confront credibility deficit based on doubts about their sincerity. Women who wear the hijab are suspected of offering insincere accounts of their religious beliefs. Particularly for young people, who inevitably spend time in institutions that monitor their ideas and beliefs (or, more accurately, what they are perceived to believe), to be Muslim is to be positioned as a potentiality—potentially an extremist, either violent or non-violent.

In the UK, Prevent duty guidance imposes duties to report extremism on teachers, university lecturers, and a whole variety of those employed at public institutions. The observed are constituted as objects of suspicion and, because they are objects of suspicion, they may modulate the way they express their ideas and beliefs. The Home Office’s *Revised Prevent duty guidance* (2019) makes repeated reference to non-violent extremism, defined as extremism that ‘can create an atmosphere conducive to terrorism and can popularise views which terrorists exploit.’ As Aislinn O’Donnell (2016, 982) explains, this includes holding ‘dissenting or radical position that involves questioning, for example, fundamental British values (FBV) or British foreign policy.’ The Home Office (2019) defines FBV as ‘including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.’ Being constituted as an object of suspicion risks excluding the very communities that Prevent aims to engage (O’Donnell 2016, 994-95). ‘They’ cannot be trusted because ‘we’ regard them with suspicion and, once aware of this fact, all actions are tainted by potential insincerity. In terms of both credibility and sincerity, Muslims must confront an a priori credibility deficit.

**Islam, Race, and Epistemologies of Ignorance**

Thus far, using Fricker to engage with debates about the veil primarily serves to introduce new theoretical vocabulary. As useful as such vocabulary may be, it does not add substantially to understanding why it is that Muslim women who wear the veil are confronted with such persistent negative identity prejudice. Why are these beliefs so resistant to counter-evidence? If they result from ‘ethically bad affective investments,’ the question becomes what is secured by these investments? What is protected through this resistance? This dimension of testimonial injustice is less developed in Fricker’s account, but other work in feminist epistemology and philosophy of race, namely epistemologies of ignorance, provide an explanation of this dynamic.

The epistemology of ignorance argues that ‘ignorance,’ usually regarded as privative, is actually a substantive practice (Alcoff 2007, 39). Not knowing and continuing to not know is advantageous for those who occupy dominant social positions and requires an active not-knowing. This form of not-knowing is sometimes referred to as ‘willful ignorance’, for example in Nancy Tauna’s (2006, 10) work on women’s sexual anatomy and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr.’s (2012, 722) development of hermeneutical injustice. I prefer the language of active rather than willful as the former avoids the latter’s ambiguity regarding individual epistemic agency. This preference is not to imply that either Tuana or Pohlhaus, Jr. use willful in a straightforward sense. As Erinn Gilson (2011, 314) helpfully clarifies, the term should be read as knowledge which is disavowed rather dismissed. ‘Active’ avoids this ambiguity, while still allowing for some forms of ignorance may in fact be willful.

While there are a range of positions within work on epistemologies of ignorance, Alcoff argues that Charles Mills offers a particular strong account with regards to race. Mills ‘argues that whites have a positive interest in ‘seeing the world wrongly’’ (Alcoff 2007, 47). Or, put another way, whites have less motivation to correct errors in their social perceptions (Alcoff 2007, 50). Whites possess‘*an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made*’ (Mills 1997, 18). This strong version of an epistemology of ignorance starts to get at the nature of the ‘ethically bad affective investment’ that resists counter evidence. Actively not knowing is an integral component of the social construction of whiteness. Mills’s primary example is the treatment of Black people in the United States, though he is clear that his critique extends to other racialised groups.[[3]](#endnote-3) His analysis can be applied to the experiences of racialised religious minorities by focusing on his concept of ‘white ignorance.’

Mills’s analysis of white ignorance feels viscerally correct in the historical and contemporary context of the United States (from which all of his examples come). Some people may be less convinced of its applicability to Europe and Islam. In order to show that this argument applies, it is useful to reconstruct the types of arguments that Mills makes in *Black Rights/White Wrongs*: first, establishing existing connections between racial discrimination and religion; second, demonstrating that these are not simply individual moral failings, but part of a systemic issue.

On the first point, there is widespread evidence that Muslims are subject to racial discrimination. For example, the work of Tariq Modood and Nasar Meer tracks the varieties of discrimination faced by Muslims in the UK (Meer 2012; Meer and Modood 2009; Modood 2005). In following their work, it is important to remember that race is not only a (false) biological category, but a marker that encompasses fashion, mannerisms, food, art, and other aspects of culture (Goldberg 1993, 70-71). It is in the naturalisation of this culture and its attachment to visual indicators (hair, skin colour, and dress) that racialises religion.

Second, Mills’s analysis of the racial contract is not just an argument that racial discrimination persists in the United States, but that the racial logic that enables that discrimination is central to the political and epistemological order that defines contemporary white America. In a post 9/11 world, it can be easy to think that anti-Muslim sentiment is either a new phenomenon or has recently been radically transformed. While there may be some truth to the latter, it is important to remember that anti-Muslim attitudes are a long-standing feature of European social and political discourse. Bans on the headscarf started long before 2001. The UK’s Runnymede Trust recently released a 20th-anniversary report updating its 1997 *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*—the new report is entitled *Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for Us All* (2017).And though the clash of civilizations thesis has been rightly challenged, it would be a mistake to underestimate the power of that narrative. The notion of a clash of civilizations taps into a long-standing opposition between a Christian Europe and the Islamic other. The interrelated notions of the West, Europe, and Christianity have all been constructed in opposition to the Orient, the Muslim world (variously understood as the Levant, Middle East or ‘the Arab world’), and Islam. Or, as Anya Topolski (2018, 75-76) shows, race is a political theological concept emerging from the opposition between the Christian and non-Christian. To adapt a point made by Mills (2007, 17), anti-Muslim ideas ‘have not been the *exception* but the *norm*’.

Viewed through the frame of white ignorance, animosity towards Muslims is not a simple error or lack of information, but a sustained and disciplined social misperception. As Iqbal Akhtar (2011, 773) argues, it is not merely lack of information, but an active ‘not hearing’. For example, it is frequently shown that stereotypes of Muslims as more violent or excessively patriarchal ignore the widespread evidence that violence and patriarchy also characterise ‘the West’ (Gentry 2015, 323). Prejudices against Muslims thus consist in overlapping ignorances. The ability to homogenise a religious community and then mischaracterise their beliefs and behaviours relies on not knowing the variety and complexity of those beliefs and behaviours, while also being ignorant of the reality of the society one is constructing in opposition to this ‘inferior’ other (Gentry 2015, 323). José Medina (2018, 250) describes this ignorance of ignorance as meta-ignorance and argues that it is typical of racist forms of epistemic injustice. Put another way, an investigation into the epistemic practices that inform perceptions of Muslims does not entail an analysis of epistemic equals. It is the consideration of the ‘knowing practices inculcated in a socially dominant group’ and the ability of the socially dominated to better understand the reality of that social situation (Alcoff 2007, 47).

A clear, if cheap, example is Richard Dawkins’s remark that one college in Cambridge has more Nobel Prizes than all the world’s Muslims (Malik 2013). Indeed, the work of the New Atheists more generally exemplifies Mills’s (2007, 17) argument that white ignorance ‘tend[s] to produce self-deception, bad faith, evasion, and misrepresentation’. Yet, the useful clarity of such a flagrant example can also be misleading. It is the ‘smaller,’ more mundane judgments that construct Muslim people as objects of suspicion and fear. This misapprehension of Muslims is not intentional in any simplistic way. Rather it informs a particular form of white Europeanness—one in which the Islamic is outside the history of Europe (Lynch 2020). Its presence is always in the form of an invader. Ignorance of Islam and the people who identify with that tradition sustains a notion of Europeanness which is white and Christian, whether that Christianity travels under the name of a religious identity, cultural heritage, liberalism, or secularism.

There is a paradox to this ignorance which helps correct any impression that epistemologies of ignorance cast Muslims as the helpless victims of white European forms of knowledge. While it is true that the socially dominant knower sees the other as epistemically inferior, this condescension reveals itself as the real inferiority. Those who retain knowledge of excluded testimonies have the benefit of being versed in both the dominant and excluded forms of knowledge. The whiteness and Christianity of European identity may be invisible to those for whom the narrative of racial and religious multiculturalism seems an accomplished goal, but to those who occupy marginal places within that dominant epistemic system things may seem very different.

Epistemologies of ignorance, thus explain the intransigence of certain negative identity prejudices. Mills brings into focus that which is only latent in Fricker’s argument. She argues that ‘[t]here can be operations of power which are dependent upon agents having shared conceptions of social identity’ (Fricker 2007, 14), but does not attend to the epistemic activity necessary to maintaining that shared conception (20). Negative identity prejudice as a feature of a social imaginary requires active unknowing.

Focusing on this active unknowing also brings in another form of prejudicial dysfunction: credibility excess. In Fricker’s (2007, 20) initial discussion of the distinctive injustice of prejudicial dysfunctions, she argues that credibility excess may be ‘disadvantageous’ but does not amount to an injustice to the speaker. While there may not be an injustice to the speaker, credibility excess plays a role in perpetuating unknowing. As the over-evaluated voices are empowered, they drown out critiques from those who are judged to be lacking credibility. That is, there may be situations in which deficit and excess credibility are independent, but in the systemic forms of epistemic injustice that both Fricker and I are considering they are usually linked. Epistemic credibility is unevenly distributed.

**Righting Epistemic Wrongs**

Fricker, Alcoff, and Mills all propose responses to epistemic injustices and their recommendations are applicable to issues of religious identity. Thinking about religion not only applies their responses to religion, it raises questions about agency and the ability to shift socially dominant forms of knowledge.

Fricker concludes her book by calling for more virtuous hearers. ‘The guiding ideal is that the degree of credibility is adjusted upwards to compensate for the cognitive and expressive handicap imposed on the hermeneutically marginalised speaker by the non-inclusive hermeneutical climate, by structural identity prejudice’ (Fricker 2007, 170). She is less clear on how this adjustment occurs. The emphasis is on the righting of an epistemic wrong and the narrowness of the goal is both a strength and weakness. It is a strength in that it offers a seemingly obtainable goal—individuals who are part of a ‘hermeneutical micro-climate’ (Fricker 2007, 174) practice epistemic virtues, trusting those whose identity would otherwise leave them unheard. It is a weakness because this epistemic affirmative action leaves the larger systemic issues unaddressed. The focus is on the inclusion of an excluded speaker rather than the transformation of a hermeneutical situation predicated on that exclusion (with the idea that the former will eventually lead to the latter). In order to understand this dynamic of inclusion, testimonial injustice must be supplemented by an epistemology of ignorance.

Alcoff (2010, 132) raises similar concerns about Fricker’s approach, questioning her reliance on ‘volitional practices’. Fricker is not unaware of this problem. After all, she is clear that epistemic injustice is not normally the result of deliberation. It is a habit of perception (Fricker 2007, 36). Much of her initial analysis emphasizes the involuntary dynamics at the root of injustice. ‘Bad affective investments’ are not freely chosen, but endemic within a social imaginary. Yet there is still the persistent problem of explaining why someone would willfully surrender the ignorance that sustains their worldview. Here, Alcoff’s critique echoes Mills’s work on ideal theory. Mills (2017, 75) is critical of political philosophies which operate through the construction of idealised political situations at the expense of the actual. One of the primary flaws of ideal theory (John Rawls being the key example) is that it envisions agents with ‘human capacities significantly deviant from the norm (for example, their degrees of rationality, self-knowledge, ability to make interpersonal cardinal utility comparisons, and so forth)’ (Mills 2017, 75). Again, Alcoff and Mills provide a necessary supplement to Fricker in highlighting that this act of misperception is enabled by ignorance. How does one correct a misconception that is itself rooted in the exclusion of counter evidence? It is not a matter of ignoring evidence, but not perceiving it at all.

Both Alcoff and Mills offer stronger correctives to epistemic injustice than Fricker, but their suggestions also present new problems. Alcoff (2010, 135) places greater emphasis on diversification and inclusion. Fricker is not opposed to inclusion but stops short of claiming that it is necessary for the reforming of epistemic habits, while Alcoff is adamant that the transformation of epistemic habits requires a material change to the hermeneutical situation. Or, put more directly, it is not enough to become more sensitive to the testimony of Muslims about life in Europe. It is necessary to ensure that Muslims are an essential part of conversations about life in Europe. Yet even this point should give ‘us’ pause. Insisting on diversity requires an understanding of what is being diversified. Inclusion is a fundamentally conservative gesture. It is (usually though not always) the reluctant incorporation of that which seems to threaten the solvency of an epistemic system. To ask how a social group might be included is to position that social group outside the norm. In its most radical version, Alcoff’s goal is not to have ‘representatives’ of ‘those people’. Rather, the goal is to challenge the situation constituted by the divides that establish the category ‘those people’ in the first place.

Mills, on the other hand, argues for a combination of what Alison Bailey (2007, 81) terms cognitive reform and historical revision. His argument for cognitive reform avoids Fricker’s optimism, yet in its own way does not sufficiently pursue the roots of ignorance. Much as inclusion conserves that entity which includes, there is a risk that cognitive reform preserves the very thing it aims to change. As noted above, Mills describes the cognitive errors of whiteness as an ‘inverted epistemology’. Bailey (2007, 81) argues that this language suggests that cognitive reform aim to ‘reinvert’ these forms of knowing. This framing reveals a problem in Mills’s strategy, because to reinvert something is to take the inverted ‘object’ and return it to its original state. But there was no original state that could be inverted in the process of establishing racial knowledges. Race was invented in an action of miscognition and this act cannot be undone. It is entangled with notions of religion, civilization, and geography.

Mills’s project of historical revision, however, holds more promise. Like Alcoff’s call for transforming the divisions constitutive of epistemic injustices, historical revisionism rereads the past in order to re-understand the present. This project is not just about highlighting (intentionally) forgotten histories. It requires understanding the way that epistemic injustices are embedded in specific histories. Rethinking history is not merely adding more data to existing ways of thinking, but developing new modes of thought through new histories.

**Historical Revisionism and Epistemic Vulnerability**

In the case of Islam, one approach to historical revisionism is to ask with Gil Anidjar (2008, 191), ‘What if al-Andalus had a future?’[[4]](#endnote-4) What if the history that ‘we’ told—a telling vital to the ongoing construction of a ‘we’ in the first place—was not one of a secularised (Christian) Europe, or even an expanded notion of Europe which includes the continual presence of Islam and Muslims (along with Jews, witches, and all those others who are ever present in the margins of history)? What if the story told did not require the gesture of inclusion? As Anidjar (2008, 193-95) argues, such a story would require thinking across, through, and around the divisions that have come to define Europe after 1492: race, religion, philosophy, culture, literature, and politics.

Initiating a project of historical revisionism is speculative but need not be nostalgic. One does not have to idealise Andalusia in order to understand how it could be part of a different history of what currently operates under the name ‘Europe.’ As Anidjar argues, al-Andalus was not exceptional. Throughout the Maghreb, the Middle East, Southern Europe, and South Asia, there are numerous examples of the coexistence of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in a variety of historical and cultural contexts (Anidjar 2008, 205). It is also true that Andalusia was the result of an invasion, but this invasion can be figured in different ways: geographically (North African), imperially (Umayyad) or religiously (Muslim). And it is worth remembering that Christianity is not ‘native’ to ‘Europe’ either. One element of the construction of Europe is the narration of its past as first Christian then secular (though the former continues to operate under the name of the latter). Of course, there was history before Christianity, but even that time is read in light of Europe’s essentially Christian nature.

This revision is not project of relativizing history. Analyses of epistemic injustice, and feminist epistemology more generally, have resisted easy relativisms. To recall the memorable argument made by Catherine MacKinnon (1989, 123), women are aware of the independent reality of the world because it hits them in face (or spits on them in the street, tugs at their headscarf, or yells slurs from a passing car). Likewise, for Mills (2017, 81) it is crucial that an epistemic perspective is able to grasp the objective conditions of oppression that mark certain social positions (see also Alcoff 2007, 41). He argues for a perspective ‘in which *truth*, *falsity*, *facts*, *reality*, and so forth are not enclosed with ironic scare quotes’ (Mills 2007, 15). There is no confusion of objectivity and a disinterested form of knowing—objectivity does not equal neutrality (Harding 1992).

Taking into account the testimonies of those who have been unjustly ignored or questioning the systemic ignorance that structure one’s experience of the world is not the invention of a past, but a retelling of the past in the process of reconceiving the future. This task requires interrogating the forms of knowledge that assume religious differences are necessarily the source of problems (never mind constructing the notion of a distinctly ‘religious’ difference in the first place) and enquiring after histories that might give a new ‘us’ different knowledges. Rather than arguing about whether or not secularism is a feasible approach to religious difference, this approach investigates the way that secularism emerges and mutates as a culturally specific response to a particular way of framing the problem of ‘religion.’ This historical contextualisation is equally an analysis of the ignorances that structure and are structured by secularism (Sayyid 2014). Historical revisionism requires opening socially dominant forms of knowledge to the dangers of the actively unknown.

Another way of way describing the ends of historical revisionism is in terms of habits of epistemic vulnerability. Pretending to be immune to the knowledge of the other is a defensive mechanism which aids in the constitution of a ‘we’ or ‘us’. Or, to follow Gilson (2011), ignorance is a strategy for maintaining a sense of epistemic invulnerability. It protects against knowledge that might result in change. Epistemic vulnerability, after all, cannot be isolated from other forms of vulnerability. A growing awareness of complicity in forms of racism, economic exploitation, or sexism does not just threaten the way the socially dominant think, it disrupts the way they live. Ignorance allows one to assert that there is nothing to learn here and, in so doing, preserve a way of life (Gilson 2011, 324).

It is crucial to note that one does not become vulnerable but acknowledges vulnerabilities that are already there. In so doing, one opens up to ‘an *awareness of processes of constitution*’ (Gilson 2011, 326). The ‘we’ is destabilised as there is a shift in the relationship with the other against which the ‘we’ is defined. The other is always a part of the process of constitution, but in acknowledging vulnerability the other moves from the function of the ‘actively not known’ to a genuine part of an epistemic situation that is in the process of being redefined. Engaging in this project of historical revisionism is as much about the process by which this revision happens as it is the histories it generates.

There is a delicate balance to be struck between acknowledging the inequality of positions in the political economy of knowledge and reducing the reality of people’s lives to that inequality. There is an uneven distribution of assumed credibility, perceived sincerity, and tolerated ignorances. Identifying these inequalities is in danger of casting the ‘other’ (and her knowledge) as merely a victim. It risks repeating an objectification of ‘the Muslim.’ Before, the Muslim woman was an object, denied agency, ready to be liberated and made a subject. Now, the Muslim woman is regarded in her otherness, a means for the self-liberation of Western academics. Having dispensed with the idea that brown women need to be saved by white men (Spivak 1999, 284), veiled (and thus racialised) women become the salvation of white academics. The dynamics have shifted, but real people are still being reduced to the site of metonymic struggles (Sotsky 2013). This risk is ever-present and only further highlights that epistemic vulnerability is not merely an intellectual posture, but a lived relation between those trying to rethink the world that whiteness built.

**Conclusion**

Taken together, testimonial injustice and epistemologies of ignorance provide tools for understanding the pernicious persistence of stereotypes about Muslims. Extending these approaches to religion not only helps further conceptualise the forms of epistemic injustice faced by racialised religious minorities, but also helps extend notions of epistemic injustice in two key ways.

First, it clarifies the religious dimension of European whiteness. While it would be reductive to argue that Christianity equals whiteness in an absolute sense, Christianity and whiteness are historically and conceptually intertwined in European thought, both Christian and secular. There is burgeoning literature in and across the fields of theology, anthropology, sociology, and history tracing these connections, but insufficient philosophical attention to the way that these connections continue to shape purportedly secular European forms of understanding religion.

Second, it raises questions about agency in the realms of belief and identity. As Saba Mahmood (2012, xii) argues, investigating the connections between belief and identity challenges the assumption that the only legitimate form of subjectivity is one rooted in a ‘narrow conception of autonomized agency.’ Building off the work of Mahmood and others, one can go further and demand an expansion of the concept of agency by arguing that the notions of ‘autonomized agency’ are central to the identity of whiteness as identified by Mills. Aspects of this argument are present in Mahmood’s work—for example, when she asks about the role of the agential subject within ‘a particular political imaginary’ (2012, 33)—but I am calling for a further step beyond the narrower focus of her research. The autonomised subject is preserved by an ignorance that enables delusions of epistemic invulnerability. This ignorance of the various determinations that have shaped a normalised world view is necessary for regarding that world view as the freely chosen perspective of an agent. Epistemic vulnerability erodes this vision of autonomous actors and requires a new vision of the ceaseless historical and subjective processes of constitution.

This epistemic vulnerability returns us to the topic of the veil. Those who have sought to move beyond standard conceptions of the veil—oppressive or liberatory—insist on a revised concept of agency: ‘if subjects are both constituted and constituting, and are not prior to social actions and discourses, then agency in the context of submission (to the divine) can be thought of as constituted within the act of “taking the veil” (Bilge 2010, 23). Rendered more abstractly, this theory requires all agency be contextual: ‘a socially-fettered-and-culturally-mired agency’ that is constituted rather than simply determined (Bilge 2010, 23). In other words, it is not only that philosophy (and cognate disciplines) have failed to understand the connections between history, tradition, agency, and subjectivity in regards to women who wear the veil. This failure exposes the pretense of invulnerability and in so doing reveals a deeper failure to think subjectivity as such. A better understanding of religion is a better understanding of the world.

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1. While ‘Muslim’ is most commonly understood as a religious identity, it is a religious identity which is racialised as non-white. For an overview of understanding the relationship between Islam and race, see Selod and Embrick (2013, 644-45) and Al-Saji (2010). In the US context see Selod (2015) and Bayoumi (2006). For the UK, see Meer (2013) and Meer and Modood (2009). Finally, Galonnier (2015) shows how the racial stereotyping of Muslims applies even to those who would otherwise be classed as white. To discuss ‘Muslim’ as a racial category is not to deny that race operates within the lives of Muslims, as white and non-white Muslims may experience the world differently due to their differing racialised identities (see for example Mogahed and Ikramullah 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The question of agency will be developed in greater depth below, but on the idea that Muslims are required to hold certain beliefs, see Stephen H. Jones, et. al. (2019). Their work is particularly significant in drawing attention to the ‘misrecognition’ of beliefs held by actual Muslims (166). It should be noted that while their work helpfully draws attention to epistemic issues, they take themselves to be correcting a lack of attention to belief. They do so, however, without sufficiently attending to recent work which has challenged the relationship between individual agency, belief, and identity as it pertains to race and religion. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. There is a complex debate about the relationship between anti-Black racism and racial injustice more generally. For example, Falguni A. Sheth (2009, 159) has argued that a Black/white binary has dominated philosophical work on race and that alternative political philosophies of race are required if we are to make sense of the experience of other groups, including Muslims. For an alternative view, see thew of Frank B. Wilderson, III (2010), especially chapter one on ‘The Ruse of Analogy.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Al-Andalus refers to the areas of the Iberian peninsula that were governed by Muslim rulers from the 8th to the 15th centuries. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)