What Is Islam?
Reading Group: Session Two of Six
Chapter 2: Conceptualizations

> "By the very movement which enables us to isolate the matrix of Islam, we restrict its areas of deployment on every level." (129, Laroui)

> "Any conceptualization of Islam that is based on identifying an Islam-concentrate whose presence in greater or lesser dilution may then be measured in some sort of litmus test inevitably leaves us with the problem of determining when it is that a given phenomenon is characterized by a sufficient quantum of the concentrate 'Islam' to be 'Islamic' and when it is not. In the absence of universally accepted criterion by which to distinguish the Islamic from the Islamicate, we — Muslims and Unbelievers alike — will, like Hodgson, inevitably fall back onto our own respective preconceptions and predilections to determine what that concentrate is." (175)

> "I will argue that the human and historical phenomenon of Islam is a field of meaning where truth is constituted, arranged, and lived in terms not of categories constituted by mutual exclusion, but rather by categories of mutual insorption and inter-locution that run athwart and conceptually frustrate the religious/secular binary or religion/culture division." (116)

- In reading this chapter, how might Ahmed's conceptual frustration of the religion-or-secular and religion-or-culture binary confute the dualism conceptually established in other traditions and contexts? How is the binary *defined* so that it *may* be refuted as a meaningful conceptualization of "the Islamic"?

What do the existing conceptualizations of Islam do? (113-114)

1) They **privilege** something as constitutive of Islam.
2) They **identify** no coherence in the phenomena and thus deny the validity of the concept.
3) They **define** Islam as flawed analytical category.

Anthropology, Islamic Studies and Religion are the three fields that have tried to define Islam (114). There are **<u>two main axes of deficiency</u>** in their conceptualizations:

> 1a) **Essentialization**:
> "equating of Islam(-proper) with some sort of restricted and restricting element expresses itself in the privileging of the notion of orthodoxy" (115)
> "By the very movement which enables us to isolate the matrix of Islam, we restrict its areas of deployment on every level." (129)

> 1b) **Diffusion into many Islams**: "to conceptualize Islam in terms of an expansion of phenomena without concern to pin down a focal point or to identify a representative spokesperson, with the result that the object at stake spins off irretrievably" (115)

> 2) **Binary between religious and secular/cultural**: "Here Islam is conceptualized in terms of the distinction between 'religion/religious' on the one side and 'secular' on the other, or between 'religion/religious' on the one side and "culture/cultural" on the other, where 'culture' means at best 'not religion-proper' and at worst 'secular' (i.e. not religion at all)." (116)

- Perhaps we should keep in mind the way Christianity is implicated in the secularization of the West, and therefore how 'the secular' or 'the cultural' is, too, folded into 'the Christian'.

Critiques

1) Critique of Islam *as* Islamic Law (117-129)

> "This **totalizing legal-supremacist conceptualization of Islam as *law***, whereby the 'essence' of Islam is a phenomenon of prescription and proscription, induces, indeed ***constrains* us** to think of Muslims as subjects who are defined and constituted by and in a cult of regulation, restriction, and control." (120)

- This is also a debate in the study of religion, viz., in what ways do [religious] 'values' pre-form ethical actions of adherents, and in what ways do adherents post-explicate ethical actions with [religious] 'values'? (in other words, ethical formation vs. ethical rationalization)

> The conceptualization of Islam as Islamic law **excludes every other discourse** and puts scholars at a loss of what to do with these other discourses. "We do not know what is Islamic about Islamic philosophy…." (121)
>
> "For these muslims, **the law was merely *a part* of Islam** that existed in a complex dialectical relationship with *other parts* of Islam: philosophy, Sufism, ethics, aesthetics…" (122)
>
> "To privilege the law and legal discourse as somehow being the arbiter and determiner of the theoretical object 'Islam' is to ***endorse* just one authority claim** among many within the human and historical phenomenon of Islam— and thus to make of the analyst an (unacknowledged) partisan of that claim…" (123)
>
> "We effectively issue a *fatwā* (that is, legal ruling) about 'What is Islam?' that **deems these other constructions less than properly Islamic**." (124)

The **mutual implication of Islam as Islamic law with the nation-state**

> "It is striking that so much of the discourse of modern reformist Muslims — who have, for the most part, received the norms of modernity second-hand and by the force of arms and coercive administration of European colonialism—about (what is) Islam has been about **rethinking the Islamic state by rethinking Islamic law,** and *not* about rethinking theology, philosophy, ethics, poetics, and Sufism as a hermeneutical means to modern Islamic norms." (125)

> "For the modern sensibility, **ethics is law**, and is not philosophy, Sufism, or poetic and narrative fiction." (126)

> "The appropriation of reality by Islamic legal theory whereby 'Islamic law appropriated different realities and systematized them as part of its corpus' with the outcome that **the world is cast in a *shar'ī* mode**." (129)

2) Critique of islams not Islam (129-137)

> "The tendency towards an under-determined and under-delimited constitution of the term 'Islam' that effectively **renders the word itself meaningless as a signifier of any specific phenomenon** — thereby ultimately abandoning 'Islam' as an analytical category." (129-130)

> "The use of the plural "islams" still begs the question: is there a single Islam of which these plurals are somehow expressions? If the answer is 'yes, there is,' then **we are still obliged to answer the question: '*What is it (Islam)*?'**"

Islam as a figment of the imagination:

> "The alternative answer…the implication here is that there is no unity/Islam in any locale; every locale is one local *islam* in a multiplicity of "local islams." Universal Islam exists only as an analytical figment in the eye and mind of the beholder whence it issues in the constraining process of stabilization that is analysis." (131-133)

The **single Islam is real for Muslims**:

> "The fact that there exists a vast human community constituted at the level of the individual by an intimate sense of commonality in the meaningfulness of a something/somehow that is experienced in all its diversity and difference as Islam is another way of saying that Islam, and not merely *islams*, is quite simply a theoretical, experiential, affective, affinitive, and semantic reality for Muslims." (148)

- Otherwise put, the islams-not-Islam conceptualization is entirely etic and has no inkling of the emic. Islam is real for Muslims (even if its an idea/ideal), and so islams is meaningless as a pan-emic concept.

3) Critique of Islam as Faith or Belief (137-150)

> "The Muslim agreement of central normative tenets…This is a standard if not default mode of conceptualizing Islam…[but] the fact of agreement on a minimal universal doctrinal *corpus* of Islam does not itself furnish coherence and shared identity to the vast scope of *disagreement* articulated in a much larger corpus…" (137-140)

"Muslims imitate the prophet." The Qur'ān is the Speech of God." "Muslims pray five times a day." Or, just look at the vastly different interpretations of the otherwise straightforward profession of faith, "There is no god but God," in the multifarious discourses of Islam.

The constructive suggestion of the idea of *ummah* as what connects Muslims:

> "The fact that this community is ….*an idea* — does not make it any less real or salient to conceptualizing and understanding the phenomenon of Islam which is, itself, precisely an idea and the consequences of the human and historical engagement with an imagining of that idea." (141)

Critique of Muslims vs. Islamic; example of violence:

> "If we use the term 'Muslim' only for 'bad' interpretations of Islam such as positive valorizations of violence, then we create a circumstance where 'Islam' connotes 'good' and Muslim connotes 'bad'—which, quite aside from not being a particularly meaningful usage (since the Muslim is the one who *does* Islam) also does not necessarily help to rehabilitate Muslims." (150)

4) Critique of Civilization and Culture (152-157)

Karamustafa's distinction between Islamicate civilization and Islamic culture:

> "Islam is presented in terms of *culture* which is centrally constituted by *religion*…and located in a *political* context—the political, in this image, presented as *surrounding* the religion/culture, but being recognizably separate therefrom." (153)

> "Karamustafa's…solution is to locate unity at the level of 'civilization,' and to locate diversity at the level of 'culture,' thereby effecting a relationship between the two whereby 'a civilizational tradition, simultaneously in and above specific cultures is fundamentally interactive with and inclusive of culture." (155)

Ahmed's critique is that Karamustafa's characterization is **purely *nominal***. (156)

5) Critique of Marshall Hodgson: Religion and Culture / Islamic and Islamicate

What did Hodgson do?

> "He **restricted the term Islam/Islamic to something that he called religion** or faith, and distinguished this Islam in the proper, the religious sense from society and culture which he designated, respectively, with his famous neologisms 'Islamdom' and 'Islamicate.'" (159)

> For Hodgson, "The core of Islamic culture is Islam the religion, and at the core of Islam the religion is **personal piety**, which for Hodgson is 'a person's spiritual devotion: his manner of response to the divine, to what he finds to transcend the order of nature, to a felt cosmic dimension of life giving it ultimate meaningfulness.'" (161)
>
> "Hodgson's conceptualization of Islam is a sort of **fundamentalism of personal piety** in that it is personal piety that is *most* Islam/ic, while its social ramifications are **less Islamic to the eventual point of becoming Islamicate**." (162)

The so-called Islamicate is self-defined with the Islamic, so how are they distinct?

> "The Islamicate — art, literature, politics, wine-drinking, etcetera—should present itself in a distinct vocabulary and with a distinct register of meanings that is 'self-definingly' and self-statedly and distinctly Islamicate and not Islamic. But **the examples given in Chapter 1 strongly suggest the exact opposite**." (165)

- In what way do the examples in chapter one (the six questions) suggest the exact opposite?

> **Islamic = Islamic law**: "Hodgson's schema has proved itself entirely susceptible to translation into the erroneous totalizing notion of **the supreme determinacy for *normative* 'Islam' of Islamic law**." (169)
>
> "The fundamental deficiency in Hodgson's schema, then, is that by conceptualizing Islam as a one-dimensional linear scale descending unilaterally from piety to culture it is unable to provide us with a mechanism by which to come to terms with the definitive and multi-dimensional phenomenon of *internal contradiction* outlined in the first part of this book." (169)
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> "Hodgson's 'pious-fundamentalist' sliding scale also serves, however unintentionally, to endorse one *specific* authority claim about the constitution of 'Islam' and — although this may surprise the reader — it is none other than the authority claim that is made by contemporary Muslim textual-restrictivists, 'fundamentalists,' and Salafists." (171)

- The idea that the Islamicate exceeds Islamic: are we able to say the same thing about the secular and the Christian? (172-173) That is, secularization can be understood as both a specific product of European *Christianity*, the particular values of which *Christianity* actually produced secularization, *and* as something that *exceeds* the Christian. Is this a valid parallel? Is secularization really *Christian* secularization?

> Hodgson's conceptualization "is directly contrary to the conceptualizations held by Muslims themselves…" 173

- What about the case of Maimonides? (174-175)