What Is Islam?
Reading Group: Session Three of Six
Chapter 3: Religion and Secular, Sacred and Profane, Theocentric and Anthropocentric, Total Social Fact, Family Resemblance

The results of the development of post-enlightenment secularization ramified well beyond the contours and contexts of Christian Europe. Secularization had hermeneutical consequences, implicit and explicit, for the way European scholars gazed at non-European "religiosity". (I would add, not just at non-Christian religiosity, but also non-Protestant Christian religiosity, e.g. "Oriental Christianity" or otherwise)

Islam and (the Study of) Religion

Relegation of "the religious" to the ecclesiastical institutions and to the realm of personal "belief" or "morals." (p. 177)

The interpretative consequences effect the following: "To speak of 'religion' today is simultaneously to do two things: to constitute objects as 'religions' by modeling them on the Christian-European historical experience (and, thus, on Christianity) as well as to assume the validity of and speak in terms of the necessary accompanying binary category 'secular'". (p. 178)

Four elements that are pre-eminent among the stabilizing *measures of religion* that resulted from the worldview of the Enlightenment Modern, or, from Christian epistemology:

What is religion?

1. "Religion is habitually seen as empirically unverifiable faith in the supernatural or transcendental—as distinct from empirical observation of verifiable facts in the natural, which we call 'science'". (p. 178)
2. Religion is habitually seen as related to specialized institutions, with textual institutions, with interpreters authorized by an institution, and with an interpretation reduced to prescriptive and proscriptive institutional truths (i.e., creeds and laws). (pp. 178-179)
3. Religion habitually identified as "sacred" as opposed to "profane". (p. 179)
4. Religion is habitually identified with the performance of acts that constitute the self and the community vis-à-vis the the sacred or divine, and that subject the self and the community to a higher power, i.e., piety, worship, and the supplication for divine intervention. (p. 179)

The underlying assumption of such a category of religion, despite every recent effort in the study of religion to uproot the field from the soil of Enlightenment modernity, is that all religion everywhere models itself off the archetype that is Christian Religion, and functions within the following dualities: religion vs. science, sacred vs. profane, religion vs. secular, ordinary acts vs. extraordinary acts, natural vs. supernatural. It also assumes religious authority to be fundamentally, at its core, the proscription and prescription of ethical acts in their particularities.

What makes the category of religion distinct from other categories? Capitalism, Liberal Democracy, Communism, Atheism, Secularism. Many of these systems, movements, philosophies, etc., rely on faith or belief on unseen, transcendental powers, as it were. (pp. 180-181). These other categories are labeled "ideologies" as opposed to "religions". (p. 183)

Religion is "a rehearsed rhetorical device that is complicit in the perpetuation, naturalization and universalization of the conceptual orthodoxy of the modern". (p. 184-185)

How was the category of religion impressed upon non-European contexts by European colonialism and capitalist imperialism? Other contexts were forced to create a category of religion. (pp. 185-186)

What do we make of the "whole way of life" category for Islam posited by Watt, and cited by Ahmed on pp. 187-188? Is the explication by Watt, offered in footnote 29, a description of pre-enlightenment Christianity, too? In modern Christian theology, as well, there is a turn toward religion as a worldview, or as offering a "religious account" of one's position in the world—i.e., the self with respect to alterity.[1] "Religion" functions as a hermeneutical lens through which to view the world and one's engagement therewith.

Is the category of religion applied to other discursive traditions on a scale of similarity? That is, Islam is "more religious" than Hinduism precisely because it is more comparable to Christianity? (pp. 188-189)

Is Ahmed's argument and rather forceful assertion on p. 189, viz., that Islam is so crucially different from Christianity that it "effectively invalidate[s] the category of 'religion' as a meaningful unit of analysis for Islam", **a species of the genre of critique of the Study of Religion being offered from within the field? Is Islam a case study in demonstrating the deficiency of the category "religion"?**

> "A Church is a social and material and political and cultural institution expressly invested *as an institution* with the function of and mechanisms for determining truth, with delineating the relational domains of truth, and with enunciating the communicative idiom for the expression of that truth in society. Now: is it not more likely that a truth-community which does not possess this designated truth-constituting institution will, *as regards its conceptualization of the processes by which truth is made, calibrated, legitimated, valorized, experienced, and socio-spatially distributed*, be crucially *different from rather than similar to* another truth-community which does not possess such a definitive institution?" (p. 190)

> "[When] we make 'religion' our lens rather than, say, *truth* or *meaning*—we are confronted with a difficulty in conceptualizing Islam that simply does not arise in conceptualizing Christianity/religion: namely, that of *where to locate* religion/Islam." (p. 191)

If we take the present category of religion, as offered by Ahmed, at face value, then the *only religion* is *Christianity*, correct?

> "[*Primarily*], Islam is *not* a religion *like* Christianity; whatever the surface similarities, it is in its fundamental structure for the conceptualization and production of truth and meaning so *unlike* Christianity as to render 'religion' a distortative category of common analysis, precisely because 'religion' diverts us from taking stock of the truth and consequences of those fundamental structural differences." (p. 192)

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[1] Here I am thinking of Paul Griffiths's understanding of a religious account that is comprehensive, unsurpassable, and central, and which also contains a pedagogy of *reading*. (Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The place of Reading in the Practice of Religion*)

I am intrigued by Ahmed's use of "**truth and meaning**" in the last few pages. Might Islam be comparable to other semiotic, philosophical, or theological (*gasp!*) systems productive of truth and meaning? How can Islam be studied in terms of truth and meaning? Is this not the turn toward "Islam as a way of *being human*"? Does the modern academy have a space for the study of non-Western philosophical or theological systems *not* for the sole and mere purpose of describing them?[2]

I**s Ahmed creating a straw man's Christianity on p. 193?** "Unlike Christianity, where each Church… issues a creedal statement to which one must con-fess (oneself) in order to partake of the institution of communion with the Church…" **If he is not creating a straw man, then how do we interpret this otherwise reductive comparison? Or, how might we nuance it in order to make sense of the purpose of this comparison?**

On *dīn* and *dunyā* (p. 194); on *dīn wa dawla* (p. 195) — Louis Gardet

> "So, to conceptualize Islam, we must maintain the integrity of the 'sphere of religion' while nonetheless allowing the values of that sphere to 'affect' science, secular literature and art as practiced by the people who practice that religion, to which end we must maintain the non-attachment to religion if these self-articulations by Muslims affected by Muslim values. If this is as close as one can get to an analytical impersonation of having one's cake and eating it, it is because Gardet is struggling valiantly to conceive of the *interactive dīn* and *dunyā* dynamic in conceptual terms of the 'religion' *versus* 'temporal' relationship and is insisting on keeping *dīn* and *dunyā* analytically apart, even as *dīn* and *dunyā* insist on coming dynamically together to work on *Islam*." (p. 195)

Conclusion of the first section of the chapter:

> "My point is that when we conceptualize Islam as 'religion' we put on a pair of lenses that lead us to *organize* and *valorize* the object we behold in primary terms of categorical *separateness* through the questions: Is *x* religion and therefore Islam, or is *x* secular and therefore not-Islam? Is *x* sacred and therefore Islam, or is *x* profane and therefore not-Islam? Is *x* scriptural and therefore Islam, or is *x* non-scriptural and therefore not-Islam? Is *x* prescriptive/proscriptive discourse, such as creed and law, and therefore Islam, or is it non-prescriptive/proscriptive discourse such as love-poetry or wine-poetry and thus not-Islam? Is *x* devotional and therefore Islam, or is *x* not devotional and therefore not-Islam?" (p. 196) **The category of religion simply does not help us conceptualize the poetry of Ḥāfiẓ, the philosophy of Avicenna, figural art, etc.** (p. 197)
>
> **Question:** Can these discourses, however, be proscriptive and prescriptive *in ways other than how* proscription and prescription *are habitually and categorically understood*, viz., as within the domain of law and creed? Can these discourses be sacred, devotional, scriptural, and therefore 'religious', all in ways that *do not correlate* to how these categories function in post-Enlightenment, secular modernity? Is this one of the points Ahmed is making? Or, does he wish to do away with all of these categories?

[2] I am betraying my own intellectual appetites, as well as my self-positioning within the field of comparative *theology*; my apologies! (Axel)

How does the religion-secular binary fail Islam?

Ahmed's preliminary definition of Islam, a negative definition:

> "Islam is the name of a human and historical phenomenon whereby and wherein *truth and meaning are constituted and distributed* in particular **ways that are not** adequately captured or apprehended by the concept of *religion*, constituted and embedded, as that were is today, in the historical experience of the relationship of Europeans to Christianity." (p. 197)

What are the consequences of scholarship that assumes the religious/sacred and secular binary? Ahmed unpacks a lengthy quote from Lenn Goodman (pp. 197-199) in order to demonstrate one such consequence, viz., "the categorical idea of the *separateness* of the spaces of the religious/sacred and the secular is assumed as a *universal* governing concept *a priori*: the secular value being that which is not 'subsumed in some Ultimate,' and the sacred/religious value, by implication, that which is so *subsumed*." (p. 199)

Ahmed begins to explicate his notion of *contradiction* on pp. 200-202, along with the ramifications of assuming that the secular permits contradiction, while the religious/sacred does not.

- "The interests of the secular are aesthetic: elegance, pleasure, fun, fashion, discipline, honor, sport, seduction, vengeance, virtuosity, bravado, sprezzatura, fame; these are described as the *rivals* to the religious—*the implication being that when a Muslim pursues these values, he is leaving the domain of Islam(-proper) and is entering a universal 'secular' terrain*." (p. 200)
- "Once Islam as religion/monotheism is understood by Goodman's definition to be separate from the temporal and *subsumed* in the Ultimate—**rather than, say, in some sort of temporal dialogue with the Ultimate**—it is necessarily identified with absolute and non-contradictory values." (p. 200, **bold mine**, became *italics* were already taken…)
- "…we must…find a means to conceptualize contrast/contradiction as *constitutive* of Islam, and not merely as symptomatic of Islam's problematic encounter with the secular." (p. 201)
- "It makes no sense to classify as *secular*—that is, separate from Islam construed as religion—what is an historically prevalent idiom of Muslims' self-expressions and communication in which ambiguity, ambivalence, contradiction and paradox are legitimate and enfranchising predicaments experienced and lived as a crucial part of *being* Muslims (lived *as* Islam) and are not illegitimate and alienating predicaments experienced in the exile of a desert-island retreat." (p. 201)

The deficiency of the religious/sacred and secular binary as a means to to make sense of *the operation of meaning* of the Islamic: The "sartorial, social, ethical, and cosmological condition of *kajkulāhī* or "crooked-hatted-ness." (pp. 202-206)

> "To set one's hat at a tilt (and to wear a flower-embroidered shirt) is thus nothing less than to make a hermeneutical statement about one's conceptualization of Islam and what it means to be Muslim: it is a statement of an alternate normative notion of Islam expressed in an alternate normative way of going about life (*madhhab, sunnah*)—it is also very much a sartorial gesture by which the individual Muslim social actor spoke to and represented all of the aesthetic models and conditions of elegance, pleasure, fun, fashion, discipline, honor, sport, seduction, virtuosity, bravado, sprezzatura, and fame…Thus did one of the pioneering exemplars of the *madhhab-i ʿishq*, the aforementioned Sufi, Rūzbihān Baqlī, report a vision in which 'I saw God in the form of a Turk with a silk hat which he had tilted to one side.' Crooked-hatted-ness is *simultaneously* couture and cosmology." (p. 206)

Perhaps a question the answer to which we may begin to trace is the following: What is not Islam? What is not Islamic? Or, does this question presuppose the binary such that there *must* be something that is secular? How do we answer "What is Islam" and "How is *x* Islamic" when the religious/sacred and secular/profane binary is removed? What does it mean to answer this question?

On the so-called Sacred and the so-called Profane (Otto, Durkheim, Eliade): pp. 206-210

"…we require a concept that allows us to see a configuration like *kajkulāhī* not as secular/sacred, or as 'Islamic humanism,' but simply *as Islam*." (p. 210)

Conclusion: "Thus, rather than look for tensions and contradictions between secular and Islamic, we should be looking to understand the tensions and contradictions between Islamic and Islamic—here, between the legal construction of meaning of Islam and the crooked-hatted construction of the meaning of Islam—and *to conceptualize those tensions and contradictions as Islam*." (p. 211)

Brief Excursus on Ṭūsī (pp. 211-216)

Questions: How do we understand Ṭūsī's use of Qur'ānic verses and *aḥādīth*? How does Ahmed make sense of them? Some might say that this was just the traditional way of beginning a text, i.e., grounding it in revelation. What assumptions does *that* entail? How do we know whether these revelatory citations are mere pre-text or proof-text? Does it matter? Nevertheless, Arjomand's interpretation seems rather flippant, to be sure.

Religion and the State (pp. 216-223)

"So, in Lapidus' master-narrative, the state is 'religious' only for a short phase of the history of Muslims—for just so long as the Caliphate unites 'state' and 'religious' institutions. After this, regimes come into being which are to be called 'secular' because under them 'religious' life passes from the state to 'quasi-independent religious associations.'" (p. 218)

"If this sounds like 'the golden era of Islam' paradigm that Lapidus identifies at the outset, it is because it *is* the 'golden era of Islam' paradigm—indeed, it is, for all practical and conceptual purposes, Salafi historiography of the first rank where the original paradigm of Islam is maintained and expressed only in the first three generations of Muslims (the *salaf*), after which the authenticity of the original article is progressively corrupted." (p. 219)

On the Saljuqs: pp. 219-223

The assumption(s):

- "for Lapidus, as soon as the 'universalistic, rationalistic, cosmological, philosophical and scientific' are made 'the basis of the right to rule,' we are no longer in the realm of the religious/Muslim, but of the secular/non-Muslim/cosmopolitan." (p. 221)
- "Lapidus' formulation presents an originally *pure Muslim* condition—that of the Caliphate—constituted by its being integrally *religious* and *inherently Islamic*, which pure Muslim condition then becomes effectively *contaminated* by *non-Muslim* elements which render it not *religious* but 'secular.'" (p. 221)

- The example: The Saljuqs merely consented to local religious élites in order to enforce their (i.e., the Saljuqs') rule. "Sincerity-deficit": This makes the the agents of religion, whether élite or the commonality, to be utterly manipulated by the Saljuqs, or by any so-called "secular" government/state.

The critique(s):

- Ahmed briefly exposes the Saljuqs' religious *curriculum vitae*, as it were, and wonders how they could have been any more "religious" than they were, both *de jure* and *de facto*. (pp. 221-223)
- The founding of the Niẓāmiyyah *madrasah* in Baghdad; the proliferation of the *madrasah* as an institution of learning (p. 222)
- The patronizing of Sufi institutions of the *khānqāh* and of the tomb-shrines (p. 222)

It seems there is something utterly patronizing in the assumption by Lapidus and his ilk that these *historical facts* are "purely instrumental actions of a secular or profane elite seeking to advance its political interests of efficient government, or seeking to co-opt 'religious elites." (p. 222) Ahmed instead argues that they are "statements and enactments of a commitment to the continuing construction and elaboration of shared Islamic *values*. (p. 222)

The Sultans are Islamic! (but the Sultanate is *not religious*): "The Sultanate represents a (re-)ordering of the world in terms of Islam in which the religious-secular distinction is not present." (p. 223)

So close, and yet so far: Hamid Dabashi's thesis in *Being a Muslim in the World* (pp. 223-238)

What is it about Dabashi's thesis that requires such a sustained, careful, and lengthy treatment by Ahmed? This is one of the few sections of the book wherein Ahmed spills so much ink on critiquing a single work.

Dabashi distinguishes "Islam" (p. 225)

On the one hand:	On the other hand:
• Qur'ān • ḥadīth literature • jurisprudence and Islamic law (*Shariʿah*) • reducible to doctrinal beliefs	• "Islam" as lived experience • symbolic, discursive, and institutional domains; irreducible to doctrinal beliefs • *worldliness, cosmopolitan*

On pp. 226-227, Ahmed argues that Dabashi "slips…into such binaries himself, with *worldliness/alterity/culture* on the one side of the binary, and *Islam/ic* on the other." (p. 227)

Lest this handout be a mere duplicate of this dense chapter (OK, it already is!), I refer the reader to the only full paragraph on page 227, and the second paragraph on the same page that continues all the way to page 229, and ending with a quote from Dabashi that continues onto page 230. (!)

In brief,

Qur'ān ≠ mere doctrinal foundation
Qur'ān is *not* absent from the other symbolic, discursive, and institutional domains (i.e., the six questions)

> "Reducing the Qur'ān to 'doctrinal absolutes' and eliding from 'a lived experience of Islam' the myriad and ubiquitous *non-doctrinal relativities of meaning* produced by the human engagement with the Qur'ān produces a profound misrepresentation that is strategically crucial to Dabashi's formulation of a 'counter-narrative under the rubric of 'a worldly imagination.' For it is this very delimitation of the scope and consequence of Divine Revelation that enables him to typecast the Qur'ān in the dramatic role of monopolitan other-worldly foil to the actor that he puts forward as definitive and constitutive of Muslim 'cosmopolitan *worldliness'*: namely, *adab*—which he calls (in a loud, albeit unstated echo of Lenn Goodman) 'literary humanism.'" (p. 229)

On pp. 230-231, **what does Ahmed claim Dabashi is implying when the latter does not want to call Avicenna a Muslim philosopher and Ḥāfiẓ a Muslim poet?** What is the implicit definition of "Islam" and "the Islamic" that is offered by Dabashi's thesis?

> "For Dabashi, however, the Islamic-ness of a society is axiomatically limited to the extent of its 'doctrinal absolutes': the less doctrinal, the less absolute, the less Islamic." (p. 232)

> "On Dabashi's terms, if we want to conceptualize a self-contradictory human and historical phenomenon, we must go *conceptually elsewhere* than 'Islam'—*which then renders the domain of contradiction something other than Islamic*. **My point,** as outlined in Chapter 1, is that what is required is the contrary: namely, to conceptualize Islam in a manner that retains contradiction in a constitutionally coherent manner *because this is the only way that we can map the human and historical reality of the internal contradictions of Islam*." (p. 233)

Once again, Ahmed is endeavoring to reveal the latent definitions implied by a certain scholar's (in this case, Dabashi's) use of the terms "Islam" and "the Islamic," no matter how nuanced, only to demonstrate the deficiencies of the presuppositions hidden beneath the analytical surface. E.g., "X is not Islamic because it is not based on doctrinal statements." Or, "Y is not Islamic because its source is not the Qur'ān qua foundation of prescriptive and proscriptive discourse." And then, "Z is based on [*some amorphous*] 'worldly sources of its creative imagination' (p. 234) and therefore *not* Islamic, and based on an anthropocentricity rather than a theocentricity."

The counterexample of poetry, and particularly the poetry of Ḥāfiẓ

- Poetry, the imagination, the imaginal faculty, and *the prophetic faculty* (p. 235)
- Ḥāfiẓ as *lisān al-ghayb* (p. 235)
- **How does Ahmed make use of the intra-Islamic theory of the imagination and imaginal world in order to break down the separation between the worldly and the other-worldly?** (p. 235)
- "My point is that…*adab* is neither imaginable, nor *meaningful* without the active imaginative unfolding of the Muslim engagement with the idea of Divine Revelation (exemplified in the Qur'ān) in the literary trajectories of self-exploration and self-expression" (p. 236, followed by a quote by Hossein Ziai, the footnote—143—which I encourage reading on page 237)

"Dabashi thus presents us with two choices in a conceptual zero-sum game. Either Islam encircles culture, or culture encircles Islam: it is not conceivable for him that the two might productively be conceited of in terms other than encirclement and domination. And for him it is culture that is primary; and it is the privilege of *culture*—and not that of Islam—to be *worldly*." (p. 237)

"Dabashi, then, locates the dialectic creativity and alterity of Muslims, *not* in Islam, but rather in 'culture'—that is, *outside* that which he calls 'Islamic': he does not locate alterity *in* Islam, or culture *in* Islam. 'Islam' is limited, limiting and un-creative: to call a culture 'Islamic' is precisely 'to deny its creative tension' and 'to rob that culture of its most vital energy.'" (p. 238) [followed by sharp Orientalist stab into the heart of Dabashi's thesis!]

Question: Is Ahmed in danger of creating another hegemonic theoretical lens through which to view "the Muslim world"? Is nearly everything, then, "Islamic"? But, is this a problem if "the Islamic" no longer implies proscriptive and prescriptive legal discourse founded on doctrinal formulations of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth literature, but contradiction, ambiguity, paradox, metaphor, cosmopolitanism, etc., and a discourse that takes imaginative creativity (or reason/rational discourse, or existence, etc.) to be from the same source as Qur'ān? What is now at stake? Are we saying *anything* when we say that something is Islamic?

Another Brief Excursus: Islam as "Total Social Fact"
(p. 238-240)

See the final 12 lines of that section on p. 240, viz., the *last sentence*. (!) In other words, how do various points of entry into "the Islamic" ***cohere***?

Incoherence is Unacceptable
(pp. 241-243)

> "It is, therefore, analytically beyond us to tie these profusely differentiated resemblances together and identify a shared relationship that makes the category **cohere**—which is as good as saying that for analytical or conceptual purposes, it **does *not* cohere**. The problem here again is one of *meaningfulness:* if we cannot tie the relations together—even the resemblances, never mind the contradictions—then we cannot escape the nagging suspicion that, ultimately, the things are not tied together, and that the category 'Islam/Islamic' is at best conventional, at mean arbitrary, and at worst just not very meaningful. We are in some undefined and assuredly dubious place located somewhere between the analytical slippery slope and the conceptual thin end of the wedge." (p. 242)

> "Simply, the exclusive focus on resemblance and similarity entirely misses the conceptual and analytical point. Rather, the question to be asked is a *historical* one…The question is *not* about resemblance; the question is whether different things can **meaningfully cohere** *without* resembling each other; not whether the ***forms*** of the various Islams *resemble* each other in a family way, but rather whether the ***meanings*** expressed by the various Islams, no matter how *different*, are in some way(s) or by some process(es) **related *in their difference* to some *mutual* point** or place or moment or mode of *production of* ***meaning***." (p. 243, **bold mine**)

- One cannot miss Ahmed's latent use of *ṣūra* and *maʿnā* here, as well as the cosmological theory of "unity-in-multiplicity." **In what way is or is not Ahmed constructing a conceptualization of "Islam" and "the Islamic" that is thoroughly Islamic (i.e., from within, emic)? Yet, why is he not so explicit about it? Or is he?**

This is not just a "Western" Problem
(pp. 243-245)

"Rather [than suggest that the religious-secular binary (or the legal-supremacist brief) is somehow *not* Islam], the point is that any successful conceptualization of Islam must account for all these contrary claims as Islam, in spite of the degree to which modern Muslims are unable to do the same. I venture that a great deal of the existential tension in modern societies of Muslims arises precisely from the inability of modern Muslims to come to coherent terms with the norms of historical Islam—to come to terms with the *constitution and meaning of their past*—and from the incoherences of the various attempts to address this incoherence." (p. 245)

With what are we to replace the category of "religion", then? Furthermore, are we at risk of an "Islamic" that subsumes and absorbs far too much of…society? culture? knowledge? creativity? literature?—I stumble to find the words lest I be accused of the binaries Ahmed has spent so many pages deconstructing.

Let us recall Ahmed's critique of Gardet: for Gardet, "the secular value [is] that which is not 'subsumed in some Ultimate,' and the sacred/religious value, by implication, that which is so *subsumed*." (p. 199)

- So, is "the Islamic" that which subsumes culture/literature/the sacred/the profane/the religious/the secular?

Is everything Islamic? Or is nothing Islamic? Are we venturing toward a circular argument?