

Islam and How to Approach It: A profusion of methodologies

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Who am I? A partial disclosure

- I am a Soviet product (“Made in the USSR”)
- Education: Leningrad State University, Department of Oriental Studies (Orientalism). Specialization: Modern Arabic Literature (Najib/Nagib Mahfouz). Graduated with honors in 1979.
- Worked as a customs’ officer in 1979-1982, while simultaneously pursuing graduate studies at the Institute for Oriental Studies (Orientalism) of the Russian Academy of Sciences, The Leningrad Branch.
- Obtained a PhD in History from the Institute for Oriental Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1986. Specialization: Islamic studies with special focus on Islamic mysticism (Sufism)

My overseas adventures

- Left the Soviet Union in the fall of 1991 on a one-year research fellowship of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey in 1991-1992.
- In 1992-1993, was a Rockefeller fellow in the Humanities at the Center for the Study of Islamic Societies and Civilizations, The Washington University at Saint Louis, Missouri.
- Taught European history, the Arab-Israeli conflict and Middle Eastern history at the History Department, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO (1993-1994).

My overseas adventures (continued)

- Joined the faculty of the Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 1994.
- In 1997 left Michigan for England where held the endowed chair in Islamic studies at the University of Exeter established by the ruler of the Emirate of Sharjah (al-Shariqa), the UAE.
- Returned to Michigan in 1998 as full professor of Islamic studies.
- From 1998 through 2004 served as chairman of the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Michigan.
- Served as President of the Central Eurasian Studies Society, director of the Program on the Study of Religions and director and associate director of the Center for Middle Eastern and North African studies, University of Michigan.
- More recently, served as co-director and then as director of the Islamic studies initiative, University of Michigan.
- Publications: seven books and numerous articles and book reviews.
- Editorial work: Section editor for Sufism on the editorial board of the *Encyclopedia of Islam, Third edition*; E.J. Brill, Leiden and Boston; executive editor of the *Encyclopedia of Islamic Mysticism*, E.J. Brill, Leiden and Boston.
- Academic Director (2011-2014) “Islam: Religious and Social Practices. Universality and Locality”; Higher Education Support Program (Regional Seminar for Excellence in Teaching); Open Society Foundation; Budapest

WHAT IS RELIGION? The Major Components (after Bruce Lincoln's *Holy Terrors*, 2006)

- I. RELIGION IS A DISCOURSE (TEXT/NARRATIVE) THAT CLAIMS TO TRANSCEND THE HUMAN, THE TEMPORAL AND THE CONTINGENT; IT CLAIMS TO REPRESENT A TRANSCENDENT, OTHERWORLDLY AUTHORITY AND TRUTH.
- II. RELIGION IS A SET OF PRACTICES WHOSE GOAL IS TO PRODUCE A PROPER WORLD AND/OR PROPER HUMAN SUBJECTS AS DEFINED BY A RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE TO WHICH THESE PRACTICES ARE CONNECTED.
- III. RELIGION IS A COMMUNITY WHOSE MEMBERS CONSTRUCT THEIR IDENTITY WITH REFERENCE TO A RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AND THE PRACTICES THAT IT STIPULATES AND ENDORSES.
- IV. RELIGION IS AN INSTITUTION THAT REGULATES RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE, PRACTICES, AND COMMUNITY, REPRODUCING THEM OVER TIME AND MODIFYING THEM AS NECESSARY, WHILE ASSERTING THEIR ETERNAL AND TRANSCENDENT VALUE.
- V. RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS ARE RUN BY LEADERS WHO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR PRESERVATION, INTERPRETATION, AND DISSEMINATION OF THE GROUP'S DEFINING DISCOURSE; THE LEADERS ALSO SUPERVISE THE RELIGION'S RITUALS, ADJUDICATE AND ENFORCE ITS ETHICS; THEY DEFEND THE RELIGION AGAINST CRITICISMS AND NURTURE THE COMMUNITY THAT IS BASED ON IT. THEIR MAJOR TASK IS TO ACCOMMODATE CHANGE WHILE PRESERVING THE RELIGION'S CLAIMS TO ETERNAL TRUTH AND ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY.

Implications of these components for the study of Islam and Muslim communities

Islam can and is studied from the five possible angles outlined in the previous slide:

- (a) as a set of **discourses** in dialogue with one another and external (often polemical) discourses
- (b) as a set of **practices** and rituals
- (c) as a **community**-forming and maintaining
- (d) set of **institutions** established and controlled by religious specialists (**leaders**) who shape and re-define the discourses, practices, communities, and institutions listed above.

Possible Conceptualizations of Islam, Muslims and Muslim Societies

- **Historical /chronological (as linear progression of historical events)**
Political and social history of Muslim societies: History of dynasties (e.g., Umayyads, Abbasids, Mamluks, Ottomans, etc.); history of Islamic institutions: educational, military (army), economic (*waqf*); demographics
- **Topical, e.g., based on the ideas of Mircea Eliade (1907-1986): religious rituals; sacred time; sacred space; sacred texts; sacred beings, etc.**
- **Micro (anthropological)/macro (civilizational): Gilsenan vs Hodgson**
- **Artistic expressions of Islamic ideas, values and practices: Islam as art, crafts, literature, and architecture**
- **Islam as a spiritual and devotional tradition (Sufism/mystical experience, everyday devotional practices, various styles of worshipping God)**
- **Gender-based: male-female relations in Islam/Islamic societies. Status of women. Patriarchy versus Islam/Islamic norms.**
- **Insider/outsider dynamics (normative/apologetic versus uncommitted and claiming objectivity).**
- **Ecological (Islam's attitudes toward environment and wild life)**

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- Islam is an object of analysis and interpretation; it is a “structuring structure” (per Pierre Bourdieu 1930-2002) that works as any language (linguistic system) or any other complex semiotic systems (ideologies).
 - For Muslims, Islam is a major source of meaning, identity and devotional practice; Islam is also a language that Muslims employ to describe their daily experiences, hopes, frustrations and aspirations in order to make sense out of them; human beings “are animals suspended in webs of meaning they themselves have spun (Clifford Geertz, *Interpretations of Culture and Islam Observed*).
 - On the plane of real action in this world, Islam’s rich and variegated imagery acts as a powerful means of social and political mobilization as well as identity formation (and identity maintenance)
 - Seen from this vantage point, Islam is similar to any other mobilization and identity-creating/ maintaining ideology, such as nationalism, socialism, communism, liberalism, and more recently anti-globalism/ green movement.
 - The major task of scholars of Islam and Muslim societies is to determine what is specific or unique to Islam as a devotional practice, intellectual/ discursive tradition, legal, educational and institutional system in comparison with other religious systems and ideologies.

Problematizing the notion of “Islam”

- Islam is not an independent and self-sufficient actor: It is being constantly re-interpreted and readjusted by its followers (leaders) in response to the changing conditions of their lives
- Muslims, not Islam, are the true agents of historical and intellectual processes. They use Islam as a frame of reference to formulate goals and objectives and to mobilize themselves to achieve them
- Islam can be seen as a language/meaning generating device and an ever evolving process. Therefore, **interpretation** is key!
- Different interpretations of Islamic ideas and values give rise to numerous divisions within the Islamic tradition, producing an astounding diversity and polyphony of Islamic voices.
- This diversity and, some say, a lack of coherence raise the issue of whether “Islam” as an analytical category has any heuristic value at all (should not we speak we rather speak about “Islams” as Aziz al-Azmeh does or “Islamic” versus “Islamicate” as Marshall Hodgson does?) Cf. Ahmed Shahab, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*.

Context: Who, when and where interprets Islam is of critical importance

- **Continuities and discontinuities** of interpretations (quantitative jumps in discourse; innovation vs tradition; *ijtihad vs taqlid*).
- Interpretative **mechanisms/strategies** and their justification by the interpreters.
- **Selective nature** of interpretations: the dynamics of remembrance and forgetfulness. What is remembered is as important as what is forgotten!
- The problem of **authority** in the past and at present: Who was/is seen (and by whom) as a legitimate interpreter of Islam?
- Interpretative dialogues within the tradition: the polyphony of voices/discourses; definitions of “**correct**” Islam are contested.
- Incompatibility of some interpretations: the same scriptural references are understood and implemented differently by Muslims seeking to live their lives in accordance with the Divine Will as manifested in the Qur’an and the Custom (Sunna) of the Prophet

The new media and IT open up new angles and possibilities

- The emergence of the global Islamic media: blogs / internet forums, fatwa-issuing websites, You-Tube video clips
- The appearance of electronic muftis / amirs (al-Qardawi / al-Qaradawi; shaykh Nazim al-Haqqani, Anwar al- 'Awlaqi, Said al-Buryati (Said Buryatskii), etc.
- How have the dramatic changes in information technologies affected the contents and form of the message(s), language(s), the audience(s) and the behavior(s) of the presenter(s)?
- Pioneering studies by Gary Bunt (University of Wales): *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environment; Virtually Islamic; iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam.*

Old issues persist: Is religion a “cover” for deeper (and real issues)? Were Marx and Engels right, after all?

The issue of the structure and superstructure: What influences what and how?

Neo-Marxist approach: Religion is secondary and reflects the changing economic conditions of human societies and the shifts in global markets. E.g., Protestantism is the result of the specific economic conditions in early modern Europe (the rise of the bourgeoisie and the attendant commercialization and industrialization of western European societies from the 16th century on)

The Weberian thesis: Emphasis on the primacy of religious convictions and behavior.

Is influence unidirectional or mutually conditioning? I.e. convictions emerge from socio-economic realities, but, in their turn, shape these realities, often decisively.

How can one explain the persistence and even resurgence of religion (and Islam in particular) in the post-modern age, when other forms of identity and intellectual commitment are available?

Is, in industrial and post-industrial societies, God dead indeed, as argued by Steve Bruce and other sociologists of religion? Or is the news of his death greatly exaggerated?