

Islamic *Dīn* as an Alternative to Western Models of "Religion"

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In a pioneering study published in 1962, the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith subjected the category "religion" to close scrutiny and argued that, far from being a universal concept found in all or most human cultures, "religion" was a specifically Western category with a peculiar history.¹ Cantwell Smith's remarks on the topic were highly original, and his book soon became a classic in the newly emerging field of religious studies, where a tradition of rigorous debate and discussion developed on the definition of religion and the proper methods for its academic study. Over the past two decades, these methodological issues have come under particularly intense scrutiny.² "Religion" has been explored as a peculiarly European concept of relatively recent, post-Enlightenment provenance, and its unquestioning application to non-European contexts has been questioned and even decried as an egregious instance of cultural colonialism.³ In these debates, the discipline of religious studies has been criticized as academic "caretaking of religious traditions"⁴ and as "the ideology of ecumenical liberal capitalism,"⁵ and serious doubts have been raised about its academic integrity and social function.

Curiously, this soul-searching on the nature and definition of religion has occurred largely as an in-house Euro-American affair,⁶ and apart from some notable exceptions,⁷ there have been relatively few serious attempts to question the concept of religion from a comparative perspective. Yet, in his pioneering examination of "religion," Cantwell Smith, who was a specialist on Islam as well as a comparativist, had also contended that of all the living religious traditions of the world, Islam alone possessed a category, *dīn*, that was close to the Western "religion," and had offered tentative observations about what he termed the "special case of Islam."⁸ His comments were penetrative and provocative, and the comparative method he adopted made it all too clear that the utility of "religion" as an analytical category could be reevaluated fully only when the category of religion was placed within the larger semantic context of its presumed parallels from non-Western cultural traditions.

Even though Cantwell Smith's penetrative examination of the history of the Western concept of religion had a formative impact on the development of religious

studies as a separate academic field of study, surprisingly, only a few scholarly sequels to his account of the Islamic concept of *dīn* have appeared to this day.⁹ Significantly, practically all of these later studies have focused solely on the uses of the category *dīn* in the Qur'ān, paying little or no attention to its historical development over time or to its undoubtedly complex cross-cultural journey across the numerous linguistic and cultural landscapes that came to be associated with the Islamic tradition. What shape would such a historical and critical scrutiny of *dīn* take, and how useful would it be?

First, a summary of just what the Qur'ān has to offer on *dīn* is in order.¹⁰ With over ninety occurrences, *dīn* is a common qur'ānic word with two primary meanings: "judgment" and "cult or worship," more specifically, the "law" that governs such worship. In the former sense, the word is normally found in the phrase "Day of Judgment," referring to the Last Day in historical time when God will take account of human actions, after which all individuals will be consigned to either Heaven or Hell. In the latter sense, it occurs in a variety of contexts and generally denotes human obligations to God, or, to put it differently, God's expectations from and his commands to humans, often including acts of worship. These divergent meanings may have come about in Arabic as a result of its interaction with Persian and Aramaic in pre-qur'ānic times. In other words, as used in the Qur'ān, *dīn* was most likely a polysemous Arabized word of foreign origin (as already suggested by several pre-modern Muslim scholars themselves) with the aggregate meaning "God's directives for the conduct of human life on earth, which will form the basis of his judgment of humans on the Last Day in order to determine their status in the afterlife."

Even though *dīn* thus appears as the most kindred term for "religion" in the Qur'ān, the matter is not that simple. Not only are there several other words with closely related meanings such as *milla* (a community united by creed and cult), *'ibāda* (acts of worship), *islām* (surrender to God), and *sharī'a* (the law), but there is also the complicated question of the appearance of a whole array of "religious groupings" of indeterminate designation such as *ahl al-kitāb* (people of the book), Jews, Christians, Magians (Zoroastrians), Sabians (Mandaeans? Manichaeans?), *hunafā'* (pre-Islamic Arabian monotheists?), and *mushrik* ("polytheists/idolaters," or even "half-baked monotheists"). Indeed, "often, it is not clear if the qur'ānic concept indicates an actual, contemporary religious group identifiable as such to the qur'ānic audience, a pre-Islamic group or a theological concept."¹¹ In addition, there are quite possibly the Qur'ān's most positively charged key "religious" terms, *īmān* (belief, faith) and *mu'min* (believer, faithful). The latter, *mu'min*, occurs "almost a thousand times, compared with fewer than seventy-five instances of *muslim*," which demonstrates its centrality to the message of the Qur'ān.¹²

The landscape of religion in the Qur'ān, therefore, is complex and often quite puzzling. On the one hand, scrutiny of *dīn* and terms associated with it suggests that the Qur'ān presents a consistent vision of a single, continuous relationship between God and humanity in history, and it is this relationship that is depicted by

the cluster of terms around *dīn*. This vision is "centered on the ideas of monotheism, preparing for the Last Day, belief in prophecy and revealed scripture, and observance of righteous behavior, including frequent prayer, expiation for sins committed, periodic fasting and a charitable and humble demeanor."¹³ In this sense, theistic belief and practice would appear to be the natural form of religiosity for all humans. On the other hand, there is also a clear awareness, and acceptance, of the various manifestations of this God-humanity relationship, throughout history and contemporaneously with the Qur'ān, in the form of multiple socioreligious communities lined up at different points along the spectrum of monotheism. The Qur'ān would seem to be aiming at reviving the naturally theistic state of humanity over against its multifarious deviations from this optimal state by instigating a "believers' movement" through the agency of Muhammad.¹⁴

Dīn in the Qur'ān thus appears as the name of both a natural aspect of the human condition as "believers" in a relentlessly monotheistic universe and, simultaneously, of the different manifestations of this "natural disposition to monotheism" in the form of actual human groupings. This peculiar duality of its meaning (along with its foreign origin as a word) might explain why it does not have a plural form in the Qur'ān (later, it acquired the plural *adyān*). To the extent that *dīn* and its conceptual relatives signify "religiosity," then, the Qur'ān makes humans into inherently theistic beings, and the concept *dīn* simultaneously entails both elements of belief (prophecy, revelation, afterlife) and practice (worship and righteous behavior, including militancy when necessary). Humans organize themselves into socioreligious communities (the most common word for such communities being *umma*), though this organization occurs normally as a result of divine intervention in human history in the form of divinely appointed "messengers" sent to particular peoples with the basic monotheistic message, often as "revealed books."¹⁵ Each such community has a specific history, which determines the place of the community and its members in the soteriological spectrum ranging from salvation to damnation.

The historical development of *dīn* is infinitely more complicated than its qur'ānic meaning. The natural instinct of scholars of Islam would be to trace the ramifying trajectories of the term along the various paths and byways of the enormous textual tradition of qur'ānic, legal, theological, and mystical expertise generated by Muslim elites over the course of the past millennium and a half. This is a daunting task, and, not surprisingly, it has not yet been attempted, except in piecemeal fashion. What we already know suggests that Muslim specialists on *dīn* (religious scholars and mystics) have designated the movement led by Muhammad as Islam (with a capital "I") and tended to see it as the "true" *dīn*. In their eyes, the community of *muslims*, the Muslim *umma*, which came about as a direct result of God's last major redemptive intervention in human history, achieved the most efficacious combination between the affairs of this world (*dunya*) and the demands of the other world (*ākhirah*). This view emphatically foregrounds Islam but still leaves room for other, albeit mostly historically corrupted or deficient, *dīns*, and thus allows for a plurality

of human orientations to God. This scholarly perspective on *dīn*, like the Qur'ānic one, is decidedly theistic (though scholars did not agree on a single conception of God) and generally insistent on some combination of belief and righteous behavior (though scholars cultivated many different formulas of this combination). Significantly, *dīn* functioned at both the individual and the collective level and in both the private and the public sphere, once again with many different configurations. Crucially, scholarly and mystic specialists on *dīn* were not united among themselves, and inner Islamic diversity was a patent reality throughout Muslim history. Nevertheless, such specialists of all stripes clearly viewed *dīn* as a natural phenomenon in a naturally monotheistic cosmos, much as *dīn* appeared in the Qur'ān.

As an example, let us look at a single trajectory: conceptions of *dīn* as a private affair according to the Murji'a, the Malāmatiyya, and the Hanafī legal school.¹⁶ Questions about the nature of faith surfaced very early in Islamic history, and the debates on these questions soon congealed into different trends that unfolded along different historical trajectories. One of these trends, the Murji'a (second century of Islam), formed around the reluctance to define faith in terms of concrete human acts, ritualistic or otherwise, or, more directly, around the view that faith was a state of the heart that remained a private affair between the individual believer and the Divine. The historical path of this particular orientation to faith takes the researcher from its beginnings in the Murji'a, through its close association with the Hanafī legal school (from the third century of Islam), to its merger with the Malāmatiyya (fourth century of Islam), a mystical trend originating in northeastern Iran that was theologically akin to the Murji'a. This trajectory, which can be traced all the way to the present in areas where the Hanafī legal school has been prevalent, demonstrates that there were powerful trends within Islam that equated faith with inner piety. Indeed, it is possible to argue that a conceptualization of Islam as a private affair between God and each and every human being—a pietistic orientation that is not fundamentally different than the generic Protestant theistic understanding of religion as a relation between the individual believer and God—has occupied a central role in the unfolding of the Islamic tradition. This recognition of the existence of powerful privatizing currents within mainstream Islam suggests that the post-Enlightenment construal of religion as a private affair of the individual had long-standing counterparts in the Islamic tradition.

It would, however, be deceptive to limit the history of *dīn* to a semantic delineation of its history as a key term in scholarship and learning on Islam. Moving beyond Muslim scholarship on Islam and mystical thought, there is a clear need to probe other intellectual arenas, from literature to philosophy and from historiography to science. Here, the picture is more colorful and the spectrum of opinion much broader, ranging from skepticism and outright denial of revelation and prophecy—as exemplified, for instance, by the philosopher-physician Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 925 or 935) and the poet and writer al-Ma'arrī (d. 1058)—to curiosity about inner

diversity within Islam as well as *dīns* other than Islam.¹⁷ On this last front, it is well known that premodern Islam possessed rich intellectual traditions of heresiography and polemics that were directed at internal sectarian/heretical developments and sometimes at external, non-Muslim "religious" communities.¹⁸ In addition, much more can be discovered about Muslim perceptions of other *dīns* in general, outside works of heresiography and polemical tracts.¹⁹ All this literature needs to be probed with the purpose of uncovering the operative categories such as *dīn* that were used by Muslim authors to demarcate the boundaries of the various communities they discussed in their works.

As an example for notions of *dīn* beyond the legal and theological realm, we can turn to the views of the Persian sage/mystic philosopher 'Azīz-i Nasafī (d. after 680/1280), who envisioned *dīn* as a pragmatic necessity.²⁰ This thirteenth-century thinker introduced a conception of *dīn* that was radically different than the piety-based conception of Islam at work in the Murji'i-Malāmātī-Hanafī theological orientation mentioned above. Nasafī viewed human life as a continuous struggle to achieve perfection in which individual human souls attempt to develop themselves to the highest level of the "spiritual" domain of existence (which is, nevertheless, inextricably interconnected with the "physical" domain). However, only very few humans—sages, prophets, and saints—ever come close to achieving this goal on their own (this he termed the theory of the "perfect man"), while the great majority rest content with simply following this small group of nearly perfect individuals. Indeed, *dīn* is the name of recipes issued by the perfect few for the use of the great majority of humankind; in short, it is nothing other than a set of guidelines for the conduct of human life to be adopted by most as a matter of pragmatic necessity. Nasafī had monistic views about the cosmos, and seen in this context, such a conception of *dīn* as a pragmatic framework for human conduct proves to be quite different from the theistic understanding of *dīn* as a natural human propensity toward monotheism.

Not surprisingly, the scholarly and intellectual visions of *dīn* were never fully translated to social reality, and the attempt to scrutinize the history of *dīn* ultimately needs to break out of the confines of the intellectual realm to social and cultural history. Studying the history of *dīn* on the level of practice on the ground with an eye toward distilling conceptions of *dīn* that actually informed daily life is an enormous challenge, but there are hopeful signs that progress is being made on this front.²¹ In this process, it is crucial to pay adequate attention to communities that have been marginalized or excluded, by both premodern Muslim and modern scholars, as being "heretical," "heterodox," or even outright "un-Islamic" because the recipes of Islam produced by normative works of scholarship often failed to include them.

As an example of such communities, let us consider the case of the Alevis of present-day Turkey. In brief, the emergence of Alevis dates back to the earliest phase of the simultaneous Islamization and Turkification of the Anatolian peninsula,

roughly from the beginning of the twelfth to the end of the fifteenth century. The influx of large numbers of western Turks, most of them pastoralist nomads, into Anatolia triggered a long process of de-Hellenization in the peninsula that went hand in hand with increasing Turkification. Although some Turks that came to Anatolia had already "Islamized" for several generations, others were in rather early stages of Islamization. The same applied to the indigenous Kurdish populations of the Eastern Anatolian highlands, whose exposure to Islam up until that point had been minimal and sporadic. Many Turkish nomads and Kurds of this period came to adopt various permutations of the form of Islam fashioned and deployed by popular Sufi saints (dervishes commonly known as *abdals*) that was centered on a divinization of the human through veneration of 'Alī, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, hence the name Alevi.

Significantly, this 'Alī-centered Islam, though definitely tinged with Shi'ism, did not produce a class of learned authorities: there were no religious scholars who staked out a claim to authority on the basis of their scholarship, nor was there a developed literary/scriptural tradition that spelled out the doctrinal and practical parameters of Alevi Islam. In the absence of legal and theological scholarship that characterized urban Islamic environments, Alevis of the countryside developed their identity around oral teachings imparted to adherents through communal rituals, generically known as *cem*, in the form of gatherings that featured music, dance, alcoholic drinks, and shared food. Such rituals as well as regulation of communal affairs were overseen by a class of hereditary ritual specialists and communal elders known as *dede* (grandfather), many of whom claimed descent from 'Alī. During the Ottoman period, Alevi communities continued to maintain a distinct distance from Islamic scholarly discourses and canonical practices, and believed that they had captured the true core of Islam, shorn of its legalistic and deceptive accretions fabricated by self-absorbed scholars and mystics, including divisive definitions of *dīn* that falsely divided humanity into mutually exclusive socioreligious communities. According to them, the correct path was simply love and acceptance.²² Such an implosion of *dīn*, not uncommon in vernacular forms of Islam, certainly needs to be included in the complex, hitherto largely unexplored history of the concept and its permutations in Islamic history.

As this rapid survey of the different chapters of the discursive and practical history of *dīn* demonstrates, it is an enormous task to scrutinize this concept with an eye toward comparing it with "religion." This task is rendered even more complicated in the modern period by the actual intertwining of the two concepts largely through the application of post-Enlightenment conceptions of religion to Islam by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars and activists over the past two centuries. This intertwining is intricate and complex, and scholars have barely started to pay attention to it. The pitfalls of viewing Islam through the spectacles of historically specific (in particular Protestant Christian) understandings of religion have been noted,²³ and

preliminary attempts are being made to explore the ways in which the category of religion informs modern Muslim understandings of *dīn*.²⁴ However, the modern reconfiguration of Islam as a "world religion,"²⁵ the deployment of this concept in Muslim and non-Muslim conceptions of Islam, and the casting of Islam as the mirror opposite of privatized religion that leaves no room for secularism all require in-depth analysis.²⁶

An example of the modern imbrication of *dīn* and religion that is difficult to unpack is a sophisticated articulation of the philosophy of *dīn* by the Ottoman scholar Elmalılı Muhammed Hamdi (d. 1942). Elmalılı, who was one of the last great Ottoman scholars, worked with a thoroughly traditional theological definition of *dīn* that dated at least as far back as the fourteenth century: "*dīn* is a divine institution that leads those possessed of intellect to the absolute good through the use of their free will." However, Elmalılı reinterpreted this definition through an impressive set of intellectual maneuvers and argued that Islam, which he saw as the *dīn* of truth, is synonymous with freedom from coercion and freedom of conscience. The path of reasoning that led him to this conclusion, utterly traditional in many ways, is interesting in itself, but his conclusion is striking in its approximation to the post-Enlightenment discourses of human rights and individual freedom. The fact that Elmalılı was intimately familiar with contemporary European philosophy of religion makes his reinterpretation of the traditional Islamic theology of *dīn* a fascinating instance of the complex process through which *dīn* and religion became intertwined.²⁷

With a rich and long history, Islamic *dīn* is certainly a powerful reminder that "religion" is not a naturally universal category. At the very least, close scrutiny of *dīn* leads to a serious reconsideration of the legitimacy of characterizing Islam as a "religion." Indeed, it is clear that "religion," in any of the specific forms it took in Western history, is not an automatically suitable category to use in describing Islam. This conclusion not only enriches the ongoing discussions on the history and global applicability of the concept of religion within the academic discipline of religious studies; it also compels us to work toward alternative conceptualizations of Islam that would do justice to the historical record and self-images of this major tradition. In addition, a reconceptualization of Islam as a category other than "religion" (and *dīn* would work perfectly here) promises to transform prevalent perspectives on a host of significant issues of current interest such as secularization and democratization in Muslim communities, Muslim understandings of the discourse of human rights and gender equality, "religious" pluralism, and "religious" conflict. It challenges the ways in which Islam is currently studied in academic settings and brings to greater relief the necessity of moving the scholarly scrutiny of Islam out of the confines of the departments of Middle and Near Eastern languages and civilizations as well as religious studies into the broader canvas of humanistic and social-scientific research in all its richness and diversity.

NOTES

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