

RELIGION

2019, VOL. 49, NO. 3, 343-363

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1622837>

Qur'anic terminology, translation, and the Islamic conception of religion

Maria Massi Dakake

Department of Religious Studies, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA

ABSTRACT

A key question in the field of religious studies is the extent to which 'religion' as a concept 'translates' in various cultural contexts, with some arguing that it is a purely Western and academic construct. In this article, I argue that the Islamic understanding of religion as a universal category of human experience with various, distinct manifestations is similar to the concept of religion widely operative in the academic discipline of comparative religion; for this reason, Islamic terms related to religion can easily be translated into terminology broadly found in the study of religion, including the term 'religion' itself. I argue, however, that the apparent ease with which one can translate Islamic religious terminology may obscure some important nuances in the Islamic conception of religion that make it both distinct and internally coherent with its broader view of human nature and of its own particular religious system relative to others. Attentiveness to the semantic range and usage of some key terms in Qur'anic and Islamic terminology regarding religion yields a distinctly Islamic conception of religion that is independent of Western, academic theories of religion.

KEYWORDS

Qur'an, Islam, religion, faith, translation, Arabic

CONTACT Maria Massi Dakake  mdakakem@gmu.edu

© 2019 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

One of the most fraught questions in the academic field of religious studies centers around the concept of 'religion' itself, its definition, and the identification of its necessary constituent components. Yet the problem of 'definition,' which seems technical and methodological, but not insurmountable, reflects a larger set of theoretical questions regarding the extent to which 'religion' can or should be understood as a *single* concept that describes a *distinct and discreet* dimension of human life, and as a concept that is *universal* in its application, transcending cultural and ethnic boundaries and present in one form or another in all human societies. A number of scholars have argued that the concept of 'religion' as a universal category of human experience is the peculiar construct of modern religious studies scholars themselves, operating largely or exclusively in the context of Western academia (Smith 1978; Smith 1982, 2004; McCutcheon 1997, esp. 127–157; Mazuzawa 2005). This is not an indifferent or objective construct, some argue, but one that, from its inception, employed concepts that had their origins in the particular religious and cultural experience of the West – an experience that was historically Christian in its orientation, but reshaped profoundly during the Enlightenment. Despite the arguably culture-specific origin of the academic concept of 'religion' as it

developed in the field of comparative religions, this concept and its discipline-specific terminology were employed as a set of analytical tools, by means of which all other examples of 'religion' could and should be identified, studied, compared, and evaluated. The religious terminology and concepts of non-Christian religions were thus 'translated' by the scholar using a vocabulary that made them comprehensible within a Christian or Western post-Enlightenment conception of religion, even if this terminology was not always an easy or natural fit for other cultural contexts.

Critics of this approach argued that the uneasy fit of Western academic religious studies terminology in certain non-Western cultural contexts may begin with the word 'religion' itself. After all, words corresponding to the term religion do not traditionally exist in many languages; for example, what a Western scholar might refer to as Hindu 'religion' would be described by its followers as *dharma* or 'duty,' which clearly has a different resonance than 'religion' in its Christian sense. Moreover, what religious studies scholars might identify and refer to as 'religious' practices are not necessarily recognized by those who engage in them as belonging to a special sphere of human experience that one would call 'the religious' – a term that Talal Asad and others have pointed out exists properly only in dialectical engagement or co-dependency with the equally recent and Western-originated category of the 'secular,' and has its 'genealogical' origin in a series of powerful paradigm shifts that began with the very Western historical experience of the Enlightenment (Asad 2003). However, we do not encounter this problem of 'translatability' in the same way in the case of either the Islamic worldview, or in the Arabic language that was central to its exposition. There is most definitely a word that translates as 'religion' in Arabic, which was used from the origins of Islam (being a key word in the Qur'an, and in some of Islam's earliest written sources), and indeed whose usage can be traced back to the pre-Islamic period. But despite the existence of an Arabic and Islamic equivalent for the Western academic term and concept of 'religion,' Islam as an example of a 'religion' does not always fit neatly into the major Western theoretical approaches to the study of religion. As we hope to argue here, the apparent translational compatibility between Western academic and Islamic (primarily Qur'anic) religious vocabularies masks a deeper and subtler disconnect between the Western and Islamic conceptualizations of 'religion,' as well as the largely unacknowledged fact that the Qur'an and early Islamic tradition operated on the basis of their own independent conceptualization of religion, that was both aware of and engaged (sometimes critically) with its Christian antecedent.

The applicability of classical and contemporary academic approaches to diverse manifestations of 'religion' might be limited by their origin in the peculiarities of Christianity, whose relative novelty was its claim to be a religion that was ideally universal in scope, transcending ethnicity, geography, and culture, and thus leading to the origin of a category of the 'religious' as something discernible apart from these other categories relating to identity; or else in the peculiarities of the secular Western academic tradition that eventually developed out of it, which retained the concept of religion as a separate category of human experience, while divorcing it, at least nominally, from its Christian origins. But Christianity (and the Western culture that developed from it) is not alone in this particular set of experiences, nor in its universal conception of religion, or even in its own particular self-conception *as* a religion. Foundational Islamic texts also assume religion to be a universal human phenomenon, and consider Islam to be a universal religion, and

indeed, the final and most complete religion, and so most closely identified with religion *as such*. Like Christianity, it emerged in the context of, and in polemical encounters with, other established ways of being 'religious,' including the Christian, as well as Jewish, Zoroastrian, Manichaean and polytheistic/pagan forms of religious belief and practice. But in the 7th century Near Eastern context in which Islam emerged, Christianity was certainly the most powerful and influential religious form. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that early Islamic conceptualizations of 'religion' are, at least in some ways, quite similar to either traditional Christian understandings of the term or later Western, secular academic formulations that emerged in culturally Christian contexts. In fact, one might surmise that the similarities provide evidence that the Islamic conception of religion was simply borrowed from the Christian.

Yet as we shall see, the Christian and Islamic conceptions of religion as such, of the universality of religion as a human experience, and of the universal applicability of their own particular religious forms are hardly identical. The Islamic conception of religion, as manifest in Qur'anic and early Islamic hadith discourse, seems to be constructed quite independently of Christian thought, and is both distinctive and internally coherent. In fact, Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued decades ago that Islam was the first of the major religions to think of itself, *ab initio*, as a 'religion' in a manner consistent with our contemporary, secular use of that term – that is, as a complete, coherent, distinct, and bounded system of beliefs, rituals and ethics dwelling among other such systems. The emergence of Islam as a more or less 'complete' religious system – e.g., with its own self-ordained name, '*Islam*,' with a scripture that seems aware of itself as 'scripture,' and with a conception of itself as one religion among many (even if it considers itself the best, it is the best among 'similar') – was the culmination and crystallization of a series of what Smith referred to as 'systematizing' and 'reifying' trends in religious self-perception that had been ongoing in the Near East for centuries before Islam's arrival (Smith 1978, 81–106). Thus, far from having the term and the academic conception of 'religion' – that is, as a distinct and complete system of belief and practice amid a plurality of other similar systems – imposed upon it from the outside, Islam was in many ways the earliest example of a religion constructing such a view of itself and others on an indigenous basis, well predating the emergence of the comparative religions academic model.

Given that the Islamic understanding of 'religion' is conceptually and structurally close to the secular academic conceptualization of religion that still frames the discipline of comparative religion, it might seem a rather straightforward matter to 'translate' Qur'anic and Islamic terms related to religion using terminology broadly found in the study of religion, including the term 'religion' itself. In what follows, however, I intend to show that the apparent ease with which one can translate Arabic/Islamic religious terminology may be deceptive. My discussion will focus on three key terms: religion (*dīn*), submission to God (*islām*), and faith/belief (*īmān*) – all of which are fundamental to the Qur'anic, and by extension, Islamic, conception of religion in its universal and fullest sense, and at the same time, seem to correspond to well-established concepts found in the study of religion more generally.¹ These terms have familiar conceptual counterparts in Western religious terminology, and perhaps for this reason, have fairly conventional translations into English and other European languages, both in scholarly treatments of the subject, and in more confessional literature meant for the education or edification of non-Arabic speaking Muslim communities. Yet the

existence of standard and readily available translations for these terms often conceals their polysemic usage in Islamic scripture and tradition, and this, in turn, obscures the underlying and distinctive religious philosophy that informs the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition more broadly. These more or less standard translations for Islamic terms related to religion, even if they approximate the range of meaning of their counterparts in the original Arabic, do not adequately reflect or convey the different registers in which the terms are used in Islamic literature, and the way in which the meanings of these terms broaden or narrow, depending on context. Moreover, the complex way in which these terms and their associated concepts are interwoven with one another in Qur'anic rhetoric throws additional light on the Qur'anic view of religion itself, including questions of the universality or particularity of religion, its meaning and definition, modes of religious belonging, and views of the religious 'Other.'

In this article, I argue that moving toward a more comprehensive understanding of the specifically Qur'anic or Islamic conception of 'religion' as a universal human phenomenon requires attentiveness to issues of translation in two ways: At the broader conceptual level we need to assess the extent to which the academic/secular (although largely Christian-influenced) conceptions of 'religion' have an indigenous and corresponding counterpart in Islamic scripture and religious discourse, and the extent to which the concept of 'religion' is mutually understandable and 'translatable' between these two intellectual traditions; on a more detailed level, we need to evaluate the adequacy of standard academic translations of key Islamic religious terms that bear upon the Islamic conception and definition of 'religion,' given the polysemy of these terms, their wide semantic range, and the intersecting and interdependent roles they play in Islamic scripture and religious discourse and rhetoric, as mentioned above. Ultimately, I argue that a new, and closer study of Qur'anic and early Islamic terminology related to 'religion' reveals a way of conceiving of religion and human religious development as a universal phenomenon that is independent of, and distinct from, *but relatable to* both the traditional Christian view of religion, and the secular, comparative religions model. I intend to focus my discussion primarily on scriptural and premodern Islamic uses of these terms, for once the Muslim world begins to have sustained (often colonial) encounters with the West, its thinking about religion becomes inescapably tied to its interaction with modern Western conceptions of religion, and colored by the attempt to either assimilate to, or differentiate itself from, these conceptions. This latter development is also in need of investigation and historical analysis, but such a project lies outside the scope of the present article.

***Din*: religion as universal and as particular**

The Islamic/Arabic term most commonly translated as 'religion' is *dīn*. This is the case in translations of the Qur'an produced both by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, as well as in both scholarly and confessional literature. For example, in our brief survey of how the Arabic term '*dīn*' is rendered in fourteen important or widely-used English, French and German translations of the Qur'an,² we found that 'religion' was the unanimous or majority translation in 17 of the 20 representative verses surveyed.³ Although the use of the single term 'religion' to translate *dīn*, despite the various textual circumstances in which it was located, was the clear preference for a large majority of the translations we surveyed, it was more consistently the case in translations aimed at scholarly or educated lay audiences (Sale, Droge, McAuliffe, and Nasr et al), which

may value a technical consistency in translation over the importance of ensuring that the word is, in each particular instance, translated in a manner that reflects and promotes established or normative communal understandings. In some modern Muslim translations, including most notably the English translation of Muhammad Asad and the German translation of Abu Rida, we see the word *dīn* translated as 'faith' in English or '*Glaube/Glauben*' in German in some of the instances we surveyed, although the same terms were also used by these translators to render the term *īmān* (which we will also discuss in this article, as a distinct term). We also found that in cases where *dīn* was not rendered as 'religion,' it was usually rendered using terms meant to indicate the specific aspect of religion that the translator believes the verse is addressing. Thus *dīn* is occasionally rendered as 'worship'⁴ (Fr. *culte*)⁵ or 'veneration' (Ger. *Verehrung*),⁶ as 'moral law'⁷ or as 'obedience'⁸ – although again, this is more common in translations done by Muslim scholars (and thus perhaps intended to establish normative readings) than in translations done primarily for scholarly or lay audiences.

The overwhelming use of 'religion' (or corresponding words in other European languages) to render '*dīn*' in translations of the Qur'an, indicates that the term *dīn* is quite close to the essential meaning and semantic range of the English word 'religion.' The term can refer to religion as a singular and distinctive category of human life and experience, with positive valence, and indeed the ultimate vocation of human life, which may take many forms. It can also be used, however, in a value-neutral way to refer to various human manifestations of 'religiosity' – whether these displays of religion are considered to be, from the Islamic perspective, rightly guided or errant, divinely sent or humanly constructed. *Dīn* can refer to religion as a singular (if not uniform) and universal reality, a conceptualization that is conveyed, at least in part, by the fact that the term *dīn* only occurs in the singular in the Qur'an (even as the scripture acknowledges other ways of being religious). This does not seem to be merely accidental – indeed, the singular *dīn* is sometimes used in the Qur'an precisely where the plural might have been expected.⁹ Yet the term can also be particular and particularized, for example by using phrases such as *dīn Muhammad* (the religion of Muhammad), or *dīn al-islām* (the religion of Islam). *Dīn*, then, can denote religion as a universal category or 'genus,'¹⁰ which has many variations or 'species' (each also referred to as a '*dīn*') – much in the same way that religion is understood in the academic discipline of religious studies, which often defines itself as the study of 'religion and religions.' Outside of the Qur'an, the plural form of *dīn* (*adyān*), can be used to denote the multiplicity of known religious cults or even civilizations, as distinct sets of beliefs and practices or distinct communities, regardless of the Islamic perspective on their validity or divine provenance; and the modern academic discipline of comparative religions is thus rendered in Arabic as *muqāranat al-adyān* (the comparison of religions). The term can be used to refer to large and established religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism, to small, local, or minor religious communities,¹¹ and even to the somewhat inchoate 'religion' of the pagan Arabs of Muhammad's time.¹² Like the word 'religion,' in its common usage, *dīn* can further be used at the micro-level to describe personal religiosity or religious conviction and commitment, and at the macro-level to describe a communally recognized and enacted set of beliefs and practices. *Dīn*, therefore, refers to religion as a phenomenon that has both interior and exterior, subjective and objective manifestations.

I would also argue (against the conventional wisdom on this issue) that *dīn*, like the term 'religion' in Christian and later secular usage, can in some cases point to a distinct and separable aspect of human experience. In early Islamic texts, *dīn* is often rhetorically juxtaposed with *dunyā* (meaning matters of 'this world')¹³; in other contexts, *dīn* may be juxtaposed with *mā'āsh* (meaning livelihood and welfare in this world)¹⁴ or even *dawlah* (meaning 'state,' or structures of worldly authority).¹⁵ These dichotomous terms are frequently invoked together to argue for the *impossibility* of secularism in Islam. In particular, the dyad *dīn* and *dawlah* (religion and state) is understood to suggest an unbreakable bond between religion and state in Islam, meaning that 'Islam' necessarily encompasses *both* religion and state. While it is undoubtedly true that these terms were often brought together to signify just that – namely that Islam must direct and regulate, in principle, all aspects of individual and social life – one could also argue that the very use of the dyad *dīn* and *dunyā* (religion and world) or *dīn* and *dawlah* (religion and state) suggests an indigenous understanding of the 'religious' (whether personal or communal) as a realm of human experience that can at least be *heuristically* distinguished from the 'mundane,' or the 'secular/worldly'¹⁶ realm. This is the case despite the fact that *dīn* (religion) is considered not only to be hierarchically superior to *dunyā* or *dawlah*, but also to encompass all significant components of human life on earth (*dunya*), including *dawlah* – as reflected in the comprehensive nature of Islamic ethical code (*sharī'ah*).

Similarly, at the level of the individual, *dīn* in the sense of personal religious commitment or practice is also occasionally distinguished from other aspects of an individual's life and character. Various hadith reports juxtapose *dīn* (religion) in the sense of personal religious commitment, devotion, and practice with other, more 'secular' or worldly markers of nobility, for example mentioning together *dīn* and *khuluq* (ethics/good character) (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 2000 ed., v. 3, 1105, hadith 5331); *dīn* and *muruwwah* (worldly nobility, chivalry, or 'manliness') (Mālik 2000 ed., 164, hadith 996); and *dīn* and *'aql* (intellect) (Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 2000 ed., v. 1, 49-50, hadith 250; Abū Dāwūd 2000 ed., v. 2, 786, hadith 4681). as aspects of a person's character that are at least partially distinct from one another. Of course, good character, nobility, and intellect are all intimately linked with religion in Islamic moral theology. But the tradition also makes clear that while sound religion requires sound character and intellect, the latter are not necessarily a guarantee of sound religion. One well-known example of this from the tradition would be the case of Muhammad's uncle, Abū Ṭālib, who nobly and virtuously protected Muhammad from persecution in Mecca, but died without formally embracing Muhammad's religion.¹⁷ It is possible, then, for good character, nobility, and intellect, at least at some level, to be manifested in an individual whose religion is not sound or correct, from the Islamic perspective, and thus to be separable human qualities that might exist independently of religion or strictly religious motivations. The idea that religion represents a distinct and separable aspect of an individual's life is often considered the hallmark of modern, post-Enlightenment, and secular conceptions of religion. Yet we see that both the Qur'an and the hadith literature speak about and understand religion, at least occasionally, in this way.

***Dīn* and the interiority of religion**

If religion is understood to be a universal phenomenon in Qur'an and Islamic discourse, then this

universality is largely connected to the personal and interior dimension of 'religion'; for although religion is ideally manifest in a believing community, from the Qur'anic perspective, it is not always so. Qur'anic sacred history gives us many examples of individuals believing and practicing a life of interior devotion to God, or practicing their devotion among a small and outcast group of believers, in avoidance or defiance of the hegemonic religious corruption of their native communities – Abraham and Muhammad being the two most significant examples, although the Qur'an also offers non-prophetic examples of this as well.¹⁸ It is clear that from the Islamic scriptural perspective, the religious institutions of the dominant community do not determine the interior religious life of the individual, and the community itself can become corrupt and inimical to personal religious devotion. Rather it is the internal sincerity of believing individuals choosing to live in collective support of one another that ideally constructs the religious community, not the other way around. Thus, while religion has both interior and exterior, personal and communal manifestations, it is the former that is always primary and indispensable in relation to the latter. Such an emphasis on the interior dimensions of religious experience and commitment is often associated with Christian, especially Protestant religious sensibilities, and manifests itself in a secular fashion through the contemporary trope of being 'spiritual but not religious,' or the increasingly popular notion of 'religion' as an internally directed means of self-improvement, rather than as a set of external institutional commitments and constraints. Yet we see that the primacy of religion as an interior experience and commitment has an independent basis within Islamic religious philosophy.

While the communal aspect of religion is hardly neglected in the Qur'an, and the imperative of joining the 'believing community (*ummah*)' openly once one has become a 'believer (*mu'min*)' is made clear in both in scripture and in law, the Qur'an contains a set of generative metaphors and descriptions pertaining to religion that point to religion's essential interiority. There is, above all, the idea that one's religious commitment is ultimately known only to God, as the sincerity or hypocrisy of outward displays of religion is hidden in the heart,¹⁹ as well as the Qur'anic dictum that there is 'no coercion in religion' (Qur'an 2:256). While most commentators understand this latter statement to mean that religious choice has to be based on the free intellectual discernment of truth from error, the mystical exegete al-Kāshānī understands it to mean that the interior reality of religious sincerity cannot be coerced from without, because it comes from a guiding light within the individual heart that is instilled in the primordial nature (*fiṭrah*) of every human being.²⁰ One way to characterize the Qur'anic conception of *dīn*, then, is as an inherent (*fiṭrī*) connection between Creator and creature – a bond or connection that all human beings and indeed all creatures²¹ existentially have with the divine. One can reject, mock, or deny that relationship, one can misdirect one's religious devotion toward false deities or toward other human beings or created things, but one cannot escape this existential bond or the religious impulse it generates. One might describe this Qur'anic discourse on religion as based upon a personal and even natural (rather than institutional or social) conception of 'religion' as something intrinsically rooted in the human being, but which can be strong or weak, correct or distorted, guided or misguided, as a result of the way in which one responds to it. As the Sufis might say, all people seem to be seeking some particular thing, but they are all really seeking *one* thing, which is the connection with God.²² In other words, this 'seeking' impulse is universal to human nature, but its source and real aim

are often obscured or distorted. Or as some more secular observers of the human condition have noted, human beings, even in the absence of commitment to a specific religion, often behave 'religiously' – they search for meaning and even experiences of 'transcendence,' act ritualistically, tend to value ethical limits on behavior, and so on – they are somehow, inexplicably, inherently 'religious,' even without 'religion.'²³ *Dīn* in the Qur'an should be understood as referring, at least in one register and perhaps most importantly, to just such a religious impulse, understood to be a universal and congenital aspect of human nature, rather than merely a set of beliefs and rituals enacted and defined by a particular community.

***Dīn* as dynamic and relational**

In Islamic scriptural sources, we see an original and indigenous conception of religion as 1) a universal and thus recognizable 'genus' with various 'species' that all share analogous and recognizable characteristics, even if they are not all equally regarded as sound, and 2) an aspect of human experience rooted in the individual response to an inherent religious instinct, but manifest, ideally, in communal and collective forms. It is important to emphasize, however, that the term *dīn* in its Qur'anic usage, is neither a unidirectional human 'response' to the divine, nor a static set of cultic beliefs and practices that 'institutionalizes' this collective human response. Rather, it can be said to refer to the inescapable *relationship* between the human and the divine, a relationship that is dynamic and reciprocal in nature. As one exegete explains, *dīn* is a noun, but it is a *verbal* noun (*maṣḍar*, in Arabic) (al-Qurṭubī 2006 ed., v. 9, 226, on Qur'an 48:28); it denotes an ongoing act, rather than reified institution that exists outside of its continuous, dynamic performance. It is reciprocal insofar as the term *dīn* can refer both to the human disposition toward God and God's disposition toward the human being. Synonyms sometimes given for *dīn* in Muslim scholarly and exegetical literature are obedience (*ṭā`ah*) and recompense (*jazā`*) (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 1972 ed., 177-178), which represent reciprocal elements of the hierarchical human-divine relationship. Proper *dīn* entails orienting oneself in obedience toward God and his commands, which is then reciprocated by God's granting the appropriate recompense for that obedience. In this latter sense, *dīn* can also mean 'judgment,'²⁴ as in the repeated Qur'anic phrase '*yawm al-dīn*' usually translated as 'Day of Judgment' (rather than day of religion).²⁵ While this dynamic and relational resonance embedded in the term *dīn* may not be exclusive to Islamic conceptions of religion, its emphasis both in the Qur'an and in Islamic cultic practice is distinctive, and is reflected in the repeated Qur'anic image of the individual or the community that regularly 'turns' or 'orients' itself toward God.

***Dīn* as personal 'orientation' toward God**

One functional understanding of the term *dīn* that is connected to all aspects of its multivalent Qur'anic usage is as individual's or a community's self-orientation toward the divine; and the Qur'an occasionally describes religion (*dīn*) itself as the direction of orientation. This idea of religion as 'orientation' or 'turning' is sometimes expressed through metaphors referring to the human and divine 'face' – a word associated in English and in its Arabic counterpart (*wajh*) with both the physical countenance and the act of directing, turning or orienting. For example, those who are pious 'turn' or 'set' their faces toward God or religion itself,

as in Qur'an 7:29:

Say, "My Lord has commanded justice. So set your faces [toward Him] at every place of prayer, and call upon Him, devoting religion (*dīn*) entirely to Him. Just as He originated you, so shall you return."

At the same time, those who are sincere in their good deeds are said to do them because they 'seek' or 'desire' God's 'face,' rather than some earthly reward or praise (Qur'an 6:52; 13:22; 18:28; 76:9; 30:38-40 and 92:20). Religion can thus be described as a relationship between the human being and God that is reciprocal and hierarchical: it is a meeting of 'faces,' human and divine.

One who recognizes and responds to his/her existential connection to God by 'turning' toward him, independent of the support of a believing religious community, is referred to in the Qur'an and in early Islamic accounts of pre-Islamic Arabia, by the peculiar term '*ḥanīf*,' which is sometimes translated as 'primordial monotheist,' or in cases where the term is a description of religion itself, as 'original religion.' In the following passage, we see the term *ḥanīf* directly connected with the idea of orientation, or 'setting one's face' toward religion and 'turning' to God, as well as with the idea that all human beings come into existence in the pure form or mold (*fiṭrah*) in which God creates them:

Set thy face to religion (*dīn*) as a *ḥanīf*, in the primordial nature (*fiṭrah*) from God upon which He originated mankind – there is no altering the creation (*khalq*) of God; that is the upright religion (*al-d. al-qayyim*), but most people know not – turning unto Him. And reverence Him and perform the prayer; and be not among the idolaters, among those who have divided their religion (*dīn*) and become factions, each party rejoicing in that which it has. (Qur'an 30:30-32)

In this important and well-known passage, the term *dīn* seems to be used in multiple ways, all of which point to *dīn* as dynamic and responsive, as intrinsic to human nature, and as originally whole and undivided – ideas conveyed through the interweaving of the terms: *dīn* (religion), *ḥanīf* (primordial purity), *fiṭrah* (original nature), and *al-d. al-qayyim* (upright religion). Two early Qur'an commentators, al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī emphasize the inter-relatedness and semantic overlap of these terms, which serves to amplify the dynamic and intrinsic (as well as personal and interior) aspects of religion in this passage. Al-Ṭabarī understands *dīn*, in the opening clause, to mean both obedience (*tā`ah*) and direction or orientation (al-Ṭabarī 1995 ed, v. 28, 48-51, on Q 30:30), while al-Zamakhsharī considers the idea of 'setting one's face to religion' to refer to a *return* to religion, a movement that should be clear and direct, 'without deviating to the right or the left.' (al-Zamakhsharī 1995 ed., v. 3, 463-464, on Qur'an 30:30). For both exegetes, the term *fiṭrah*, *dīn*, and *khalq* (creation) are interrelated and nearly synonymous. Al-Ṭabarī glosses *fiṭrah* as '*Islam*' and *khalq* as religion (*dīn*), while al-Zamakhsharī explains *khalq*, like *fiṭrah*, as referring to God's having created human beings 'predisposed and receptive to the recognition of God's oneness and to the religion of Islam (submission).' (al-Ṭabarī 1995 ed., v. 21, 48-51; al-Zamakhsharī 1995 ed., v. 3, 463-464).

Moreover, both al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī (along with most other classical exegetes), understand those who have become 'divided in their religion (*dīn*)' to refer to Jews and Christians. This may reflect an awareness on the part of the Qur'an's original audience that Judaism and Christianity had become internally divided into sects. But insofar as *dīn* is described as original and intrinsic to humanity, Judaism and

Christianity *in themselves*, as distinct and separate religious systems, could be seen as religious movements that have, at least to some extent, deviated from this one original and universal *dīn*, the ‘upright religion’ (*al-d. al-qayyim*). The intersecting associations between all of these concepts as found here and in other passages constitute an important aspect of the Qur’anic rhetoric that identifies the religion brought by Muhammad, ‘*islām*,’ as a return to the original, monotheistic, ‘*ḥanīf*’ religion of Abraham, pure and unencumbered by the later ritual and theological developments in either Judaism or Christianity.²⁶ Collectively, these various terms used in association with one another reinforce the concept of ‘religion’ as a path of return to what is most natural and ‘normative’ in the human being – a restoration of the pure state in which he/she was born. It is, moreover, a normative state that never changes, according to this passage, since ‘there is no altering God’s creation’; one can *turn* away from one’s normative ‘*fiṭrah*,’ but one cannot change it in its essence. Considered in light of the congenital nature of religion asserted by the Qur’an, *dīn* and *islām* (submission) can be said to be the voluntary, active, and outward performance of a connection with the divine that is acknowledged inwardly.

The idea of religion as a mode of ‘orientation’ of the human toward the divine is further reflected in Qur’anic descriptions of communal ritual devotion. The most important ‘physical’ manifestation of religion as a mode of orientation toward God, as well as the idea that different communities are defined, at least in part, by different orientations, can be found in the Qur’anic and broader Islamic concept of *qiblah* (direction/orientation for prayer), which for Muslims is the direction of the Kābah in Mecca. However, the first Muslim community, at least for a period of several years, worshipped in the direction (*qiblah*) of Jerusalem – similar to both Jews and Christians of the time and region, but done because the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have received the canonical form of the Muslim prayer (*ṣalāt*) during his heavenly ascension from the site of the former Jewish temple in Jerusalem. When the Muslim community emigrated from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE (1 AH), they had reportedly been praying toward the Jerusalem *qiblah* for approximately two years in Mecca, and are said to have continued to pray in that direction (a direction shared with the native Jewish population of Medina) for another two years in Medina. Around the year 624CE (2 AH), as Muslim relations with the Jewish clans in Medina deteriorated, Muhammad received instructions to change the direction of his community’s *qiblah*, turning nearly 180 degrees to face the direction of Mecca. The passage of the Qur’an that records this revelation to Muhammad brings together an important set of concepts that reflects the broader significance of *qiblah* as a divinely (but variously) mandated demonstration of a collective communal orientation that distinguishes one religious community from another:

The fools among the people will say, “What has turned them away from the *qiblah* they had been following?” Say, “To God belong the East and the West. He guides whomsoever He will unto a straight path.” Thus did We make you a middle community, that you may be witnesses for mankind and that the Messenger may be a witness for you. And We only appointed the *qiblah* that you had been following to know those who follow the Messenger from those who turn back on their heels, and it was indeed difficult, save for those whom God guided. . . . We have seen the turning of thy face unto Heaven, and indeed We will turn thee toward a *qiblah* well-pleasing to thee. So turn thy face towards the Sacred Mosque, and wheresoever you are, turn your faces towards it And wert thou to bring every sign to those who were given the Book, they would not follow thy *qiblah*. Thou art not a follower of their *qiblah*,

nor are they followers of one another's *qiblah*. . . . Everyone has a direction toward which he turns. So vie with one another in good deeds. Wheresoever you are, God will bring you all together. Truly God is Powerful over all things. (2:142-148)²⁷

The polemical tone of this passage indicates that the *qiblah* change happened in the context of a conflict between the Muslim community in Medina and the city's Jewish population. What is interesting here, though, is the juxtaposition of the particular and the universal in the concept of *qiblah*. The passage above suggests that '*qiblah*' represents a particular, and indeed changeable, aspect of communal religion. Moreover, the passage suggests that different religious communities have different *qiblahs* or communal orientations for prayer, which also serves to distinguish between them²⁸: 'they would not follow thy *qiblah*' and 'Thou art not a follower of their *qiblah*, nor are they followers of one another's *qiblah*.'²⁹ Indeed, in early Islamic sources members of the Muslim community are sometimes referred to as '*ahl al-qiblah*,' meaning, 'the people of the *qiblah*,' that is, those who pray according to the Muslim *qiblah* in the direction of Mecca.

At the same time, 'Everyone has a direction (here *wahjah*, related to the word *wajh*, "face") to which he turns,' indicating the universality of committing oneself to a particular 'direction' of worship; interestingly, the pronoun here is the singular ('to which *he* turns') indicating that this orientation is a personal as well as communal commitment. The *qiblah* can thus be said to represent the collective/communal manifestation of the internal orientation of each member of a religious community. Perhaps most importantly, we are told that 'to God belongs the east and the west,' indicating that God is not confined to any one direction or orientation, but rather encompasses and transcends them all. Such 'orientations' must be seen therefore as relative and temporal manifestations of religious identity and commitment. Earlier in the same *sūrah* we are told that because God encompasses east and west, 'wheresoever you turn, there is the face (*wajh*) of God' (Qur'an 2:115),³⁰ and in a slightly later passage, that piety is not constituted by simply turning one's face to the east or the west (a likely reference to the idea of *qiblah*), but that piety is constituted by proper belief and righteous action (Qur'an 2:177). It is the interior, *moral* orientation or response of the believer, rather than the exterior direction of his/her prayer that manifests 'piety.' For if God encompasses east and west, then all directions of devotion, all *qiblahs*, are ultimately toward him, and the differences in orientation are relative and changeable, rather than fixed and absolute. It is the obedience demonstrated by turning in the direction of God's command that is meaningful, not the direction itself, as all directions are one in relation to a God who encompasses all directions. Thus *qiblah*, like religion itself in its Qur'anic understanding, is both universal (everyone has a 'direction' to which he turns) and particular ('thou art not a follower of their *qiblah*, nor are they followers of one another's *qiblah*'). Moreover *qiblah*, like religion, is both individually and communally manifested, and it is an orientation – a 'turning' – both inward and outward.

Islam as 'true religion' in the Qur'an

As the above discussion of the *qiblah* indicates, the Qur'an and early Islamic literature attest to an awareness of the existence and claims of multiple religious communities – many of which the Prophet Muhammad directly engaged during his lifetime – although curiously, 'religion' as '*dīn*' in the Qur'an is always mentioned in the singular, which we have considered to reflect the notion of religion as a 'genus' for which

there may be a variety of species (each also referred to as a '*dīn*'). The use of the singular might also suggest, however, that religion is not merely singular as a genus, but that there is, in fact, only one species of religion that constitutes perfect embodiment of the one, original, *ḥanīf*, religion.

Correct, proper, guided, and salvific *dīn* is sometimes referred to in the Qur'an as the *d. al-ḥaqq* (religion of truth, or 'true religion') or 'upright religion' (*dīn qayyim*). The Qur'an repeatedly associates the terms 'upright religion' (or 'true religion') with Abraham's *ḥanīf* religion, with Muhammad and his message, and with the act of submitting to God, using the verbal form (*aslama*), the active participle (*muslimūn*), or even with the verbal noun, *islām* itself – a term whose literal meaning is 'submission' or 'surrender,' but which is also, of course, the proper name of the specific religion practiced by Muhammad's followers. See, for example, Qur'an 6:161-163:

Say [O Muhammad], "Truly my Lord has guided me unto a straight path, an upright religion (*dīn qayyim*), the creed of Abraham, a *ḥanīf*, and he was not of the idolaters." Say, "Truly my prayer and my sacrifice, my living and my dying are for God, Lord of the worlds. He has no partner. This I am commanded, and I am the first of those who submit (*al-muslimūn*)."

The association, here and elsewhere, of true and upright religion with both the original religion of Abraham and with the act of submission/surrender to God (*islām*) has led most Muslim thinkers throughout history to consider Islam, in the sense of the distinct religious system brought by Muhammad, to be the only complete and pure embodiment of 'true' or 'upright' religion, once it was revealed and established. It is, from this perspective, the *particular* religion that effectively comprises and epitomizes all religion, or religion as such.

The Qur'anic perspective on the singularity and the plurality of 'true' religion is rendered ambiguous, not only as a result of these two different meanings for the term *islām* (submission to God, generally, or adherence to the religion of Muhammad specifically), but also by the consistent use of the singular term '*dīn*' even in places where multiple religions seem to be meant. In Qur'an 9:32-33, for example, the *religion of truth* (*d. al-ḥaqq*) is said to have been revealed to Muhammad, and to be destined to prevail over all religion. This passage comes in the context of a polemical *surah* dealing with both idolaters and with Jews and Christians (People of the Book):

They desire to extinguish the Light of God with their mouths. But God refuses to do aught but complete His Light, though the disbelievers be averse. / He it is Who sent His Messenger [Muhammad] with guidance and the Religion of Truth (*d. al-ḥaqq*) to make it prevail over all religion (*al-dīn kullihī*), though the idolaters be averse.³¹

Classical commentators directly associate the 'religion of truth' or *d. al-ḥaqq* in this verse with Islam in its specific, confessional sense, and thus understand the verse to mean that there exists a plurality of 'religions' over which the religion revealed through Muhammad – identified here as the 'religion of truth' – will eventually prevail.³² To further this point, exegetes sometimes gloss the singular phrase '*al-dīn kullihī*' with the corresponding plural, *adyān*, or with other plural terms designating different religious affiliations, such as 'creeds' (*milal*) (al-Ṭabarī 1995 ed., v. 10, 149-151) or 'religious laws' (*sharā'i*) (al-Qurṭubī 2006 ed., v. 5, 129-130).

Yet the passage does not say that the *d. al-ḥaqq* will prevail over all *religions*, but over all *religion*. If one is attentive to the singular form, then instead of being understood as a claim of the eventual prevalence of Islam, as a particular religious community, over all other particular religions, it might be read as referring to the ultimate dominance of all proper and correct *dīn* over all false, vain, or artificially contrived *dīn*, on either the communal or personal/individual level. How different the one interpretation is from the other depends (in an irresolvable way) on the extent to which the 'religion of truth' is associated with *islām*, in the general sense of submission/surrender to God, or with Islam, in the more specific sense of the religious system sent through 'the Messenger [Muhammad].'

This presents a natural dilemma for the translator of terms related to *islām* in their various Qur'anic contexts, especially when the term is used in the definite form, *al-islām*. Should it be rendered literally as 'submission' or 'surrender' (which can work throughout, but is awkward in some places), or as the proper name, Islam, which may indicate a more exclusive reading than is necessarily intended? We examined various translations of seven Qur'anic verses in which the term is found in its definite form, *al-islām*, (Qur'an 3:19, 35; 5:3; 6:125; 9:74; 49:17; 61:7), using the same 14 Qur'anic translations as we did for the term '*dīn*.' We found that eight of these translators rendered the term '*islām*', all or a majority of the time, untranslated and in the form of the proper noun, 'Islam' (including the English translations by Sale, Yusuf `Ali, Shakir, Mohsin Khan, Droge, as well as the German translations by Abu Rida and Paret); others rendered the term all or a majority of the time as 'submission' (Nasr et al), 'surrender' (Pickthall, McAuliffe) or 'self-surrender' (Asad); and three were mixed, using the proper name, Islam, in some contexts, and translations such as 'submission' (Fr. *soumission*) or 'devotion' in others (Abdel Haleem, Hamidullah, and Michon). While the approach to translating the term '*islām*' differed among our translators, no clear pattern predicting the translation of this term seemed to emerge – perhaps reflecting the intractable ambiguity of the term.

We should note, however, that nearly all of the Qur'anic examples we surveyed employing the term '*islām*' in its definite form (*al-islām*) were found in Madinan *sūrah*s; the only exception being one located in what many consider to be the latest of all Meccan *sūrah*s (Qur'an 6:165).³³ As the religion brought by Muhammad gained established territory and developed institutionally in Medina, we find passages where 'true' religion is identified even more directly and exclusively with '*al-islām*.' See, for example Qur'an 3:19-20:

Truly the religion in the sight of God is submission (*Islam*) [note: the Arabic is *al-islām*, in its definite form – md]. Those who were given the Book [i.e., Jews and Christians] differed not until after knowledge had come to them, out of envy among themselves. And whosoever disbelieves in God's signs, truly God is swift in reckoning. So if they dispute with thee, say, "I submit (*aslamtu*) my face to God, and so too those who follow me." And say to those who were given the Book and to the unlettered, "Do you submit (*aslamtum*)?" Then if they submit (*aslamū*) they will be rightly-guided, but if they turn away, then thine is only to convey. And God sees His servants.

This passage indicates that the *only* religion recognized by God *as a religion* is '*al-islām*.' But what does *al-islām* denote here? Is it exclusively the religion of Muhammad, or perhaps also the religion of Abraham (in its day)? Is it religion as such? Does it include or exclude Jew and Christians? In this passage, the

relationship of Jews and Christians to *'islām'* seems to be a relationship, not of two distinct religions to a third, or even of false religions to the true one. Rather, they are discussed almost as 'schisms' in relation to the original religion of 'submission' (in its broad, rather than confessionally specific sense) in that they 'differed after knowledge [i.e., revelation] had come to them.' Indeed, this 'differentiation/schism' can be resolved, the passage suggests, simply by their 'submitting' their faces to God (*aslāmū*), rather than 'turning away.' The ambiguity of the term *islām*, and the verb *aslama* persists, however. It is unclear whether this passage is suggesting that they formally accept and enter into the religion of Muhammad, or simply that they return to the fundamental (and, according to the Qur'an, paradigmatically Abrahamic) religious act of sincere 'submission' to God. The latter could perhaps be accomplished by maintaining their Jewish and Christian communal identities and ritual practices, but accepting the Qur'anic critiques of their doctrinal 'differences' with the original Abrahamic religion of 'submission,' and reforming their communities accordingly. In either case, however, it implicitly requires that they accept the divine provenance of Muhammad's mission and its specific message *for them*.

Later in the same Madinan *sūrah*, submission (*islām*) is said to be the only religion accepted by God. This statement has sometimes been read to mean that Islam, in its particular sense of the religion brought by Muhammad is the only 'acceptable' religion, although at least some commentators considered it a reference here to the broader meaning of *islām* as simply submission to the one God (Nasr et al. 2015, 153–154). Notably in this passage, the statement that Islam alone will be accepted as a religion is preceded by a confession of faith that includes belief in God, the Qur'anic revelation and the revelation given to all of the prophets in the Abrahamic line, among whom 'no distinction' is to be made with regard to their recognition as prophets, and the act of submission to God:

Say, "We believe in God and what has been sent down upon us, and in what was sent down upon Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what Moses, Jesus, and the prophets were given from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and unto Him we submit." *Whosoever seeks a religion other than submission (islam), it shall not be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter he shall be among the losers.* (3:84-85, emphasis mine)

The Qur'an's invocation of these Biblical sacred figures in this passage implies that they are all included in the religion of *'islām'*, and in multiple places the Qur'an identifies Biblical figures and their contemporaneous followers as *'muslims'*, including Abraham,³⁴ the followers of Moses (Qur'an 10:84) and Jesus (Qur'an 3:52; 5:111), Solomon (Qur'an 27:42), and Lot (Qur'an 51:46.), and even historical Jews and Christians in general (Qur'an 28:52-53). The Qur'anic *'islām'* thus seems to include these earlier communities as well.³⁵

In other places, however, the term *'islām'* seems more likely to refer specifically to the religion of Muhammad and those who followed him, and to be not only the 'original' and primordial religion of Abraham, but the 'completed' religion of Muhammad, the 'seal of prophethood' in Islamic doctrine, understood to mean the one through whom religion reached fullness and perfection. This more specific and therefore exclusive usage of the term *islām* is clearest in the Qur'anic verse that many have argued is among the last that Muhammad received, just weeks before his death – a revelation that reportedly led him to believe that his prophetic vocation had also reached its end:

... This day I have *perfected* for you your religion, and *completed* My blessing upon you, and have approved for you as religion, Submission (*islām*) (Qur'an 5:3, emphasis mine)³⁶

The most direct and literal reading of this verse indicates that *islām* is used in a narrower sense to mean the religion of Muhammad which, in Qur'anic rhetoric, encompassed and embraced all previous prophets known to the Arabs at that time, and both confirmed (and considered itself confirmed by) the earlier monotheistic scriptures (the Torah, Gospels, and Psalms).³⁷ The term *islām* is thus irreducibly multivalent in the Qur'an. In one register, it refers to the universal and personal submission to the one God, based on an instinctual realization of the existential 'submission' of all things to their creator 'willingly or unwillingly' (Qur'an 3:83). But in another register, it clearly refers to the specific religion brought by Muhammad, whose purpose in the Qur'an is described as restoring the original 'creed of Abraham' on the one hand, but also as 'confirming' the scriptures of the Abrahamic traditions (Qur'an 3:3; 5:48) and correcting what it considers to be errors of interpretation or deviations from these original scriptures by their religious communities (Jews and Christians) on the other, and thereby completing or perfecting the Abrahamic spiritual legacy. *Islām*, then, is used to refer to both the origin and the completion of religion, as well as to the essence of religion itself.

***Islām* (submission) and *īmān* (faith/belief) in the Qur'an**

As we have seen above, the term *islām* as it is used in the Qur'an can refer to the confessional community that adheres to the message brought by Muhammad in the 7th century and contained in the Qur'anic scripture specifically, but also to the personal, sincere, inward submission and turning toward God of all those who act properly on the religious instinct that is part of their original '*fiṭrah*,' and thus by extension to all monotheistic religious communities. Thus, Qur'anic passages where *islām* is identified as true religion, or the only religion accepted by God, are rendered ambiguous as to the degree of religious exclusivity of inclusivity they are meant to indicate. It is well known to those who study the Qur'anic text, but less appreciated by non-specialist readers, that the term *īmān* (faith/belief) has comparatively less ambiguity in the Qur'an, where it almost always – and especially in the form of its active participle, *mu'min/mu'minūn*, or in the phrase 'those who believe (*alladhīna āmanu*)' – refers specifically to those who believe in Muhammad and the Qur'an. In fact, the Qur'anic usage of these two terms (*islām* and *īmān*) is more or less a direct inversion of their usage in contemporary, secular contexts, especially as considered through the lens of their conventional translations. In English, the terms 'Islam/Muslim' denotes *specifically* the religion and followers of Muhammad and the Qur'an, while the terms 'faith/belief/believer' are used *generically* to refer to all forms of religious adherence. One regularly speaks in a secular context of Christian believers or Muslim believers, the Christian faith or the Jewish faith, for example. 'Believers,' in a contemporary, secular context refers to all religious adherents, regardless of the religion (institutional or otherwise) that they follow.

Yet, in the Qur'an, we find the opposite pattern of usage for these two terms. 'Believers' or 'those who believe,' even when used alone and not otherwise modified, almost always refers to the followers of Muhammad, exclusive of other religious communities. An interesting (but also ambiguous) example of its usage can be found in Qur'an 2:62:

Truly those who believe (*alladhīna amanū*), and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans – whosoever believes (*man amana*) in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve.

In this passage, ‘those who believe’ is a reference to the Muslim community specifically, and defines them as a community distinct from the other religious communities of Jews, Christians and Sabeans. But there is a certain ambiguity built into the verse, since while ‘those who believe’ is a specific reference to the followers of Muhammad, the subsequent phrase ‘whosoever *believes* in God and the Last Day’ seems here to be a summative reference to all of the religious groups mentioned just prior to this phrase: insofar as each group ‘believe in God and the Last Day,’ they are ‘believers.’³⁸ This bit of ambiguity, however, is for the most part the exception that proves the rule, for in the majority of other cases – including in the opening clause of this verse – the term ‘believers’ or the phrase ‘those who believe,’ refer to followers of Muhammad and the Qur’an. The fact that the term *Islam* is confessionally specific in current usage (as used by both Muslims and non-Muslims) but conceptually broader in the Qur’an, while the terms *īmān/mu’min* (belief/believer) are confessionally *non-specific* in contemporary, secular usage, but tend to be confessionally *specific* references in the Qur’an, means that the Qur’an may well appear, in translation and as read by the contemporary reader, as being exclusive or inclusive in places where the meaning could well be the opposite. Using or even thinking about these Qur’anic terms through their standard academic translations, without a full consideration of these terms in the context of Islamic scripture as a whole, and without a recognition of the different registers in which they may be rhetorically invoked, might mask or even distort the assertions the Qur’an makes regarding religion as such, religious plurality, and religious belonging.³⁹

Conclusion

Our analysis of the key Qur’anic and Islamic terms *dīn* and *islām* suggests the outlines of a distinct and indigenous Islamic view of religion *as such*, whose complexity and distinctiveness can easily be missed without careful attention to the limitations of literal translation and cultural translatability. This Islamic conception of religion is similar to the working concept of religion that is still operative in the academic study of religion, despite the criticism that the latter is heavily influenced by the particular religious experience and biases of the West (Christian and secular) and thus a distorting lens through which other human practices or experiences are translated as forms of the ‘religious.’ Yet the Islamic conception arises independent of the particular experiences of Western Christianity and post-Enlightenment secular discourse. Even if Islamic religious discourse is shaped by its response to the historical and cultural circumstances of its original context, namely, the Late Antique Near East, in which Christianity played a dominant and influential role, the Islamic conception of religion, especially in the early context of the Qur’an, reflects neither a simple adoption of Christian views of ‘religion,’ nor a form of ideological resistance to them. The Qur’an and early Islamic texts discuss religion as a universal, discreet, and identifiable aspect of human existence, while also identifying Islam as a universal religion. Like the Western secular concept of religion, the corresponding Arabic term ‘*dīn*’ can refer to religion both as genus and as species, and can refer to the various ‘species’ of religion regardless of their varying degrees of soundness, from the Islamic perspective. Moreover, Islam

considers itself *a* religion among many others, even as it tends to view itself as the completion and perfection of religion as such.

As accurate and appropriate as the translation of 'religion' for '*dīn*' would therefore seem to be, it is on some level misleading, given that 'religion' has come to have a more institutional meaning in contemporary Western parlance, and typically refers to defined religious communities and systems with clear boundaries. By contrast, *dīn*, as it is used in the Qur'an especially, is a term that embeds a more dynamic, relational, and active meaning – it is a response (whether correct or misguided, strong or weak) to a universal and deeply personal and internal impulse to recognize and devote oneself to what is beyond oneself – a response metaphorically described in both its universal and specific sense as a 'turning' and an orientation of oneself toward the divine. The simple translation of *dīn* as 'religion,' especially given the reified connotations of that term in contemporary discourse, has the effect of flattening, and even obscuring, the dynamic and responsive nature of *dīn* in Islamic and especially Qur'anic discourse, as well as obscuring the dialectic between religion's universal and particular manifestations.

While '*islām*' is most commonly understood as the name of the religion brought by Muhammad and encapsulated in the spiritual vision of the Qur'an, in the Qur'an itself, it refers, above all, to the recognition of God and God's claim on his creatures' obedience and worship, and to the voluntary, outward manifestation or recognition of the human being's existential and unalterable submission to God. It is thus at least potentially universal, and the foundation of *all* true religion; and in this sense, the Qur'an identifies various pre-Muhammadan prophets and their followers as '*muslims*.' By contrast, the terms *īmān* and *mu'min*, whose standard English translations ('belief' and 'believer') are typically understood as applying to all forms of religious adherence/adherents, are more commonly used in the Qur'an to designate the followers of Muhammad and the Qur'an specifically. In other words, both terms broaden and narrow in different contexts, both can be used in a general and a particular sense, sometimes in the same verse.

Significantly, the translation and interpretation problems one faces when trying to understand these various terms comprehensively in the Qur'anic text, especially when reading the text synchronically, rather than diachronically, is not simply a matter of the polysemy of these terms. It is also their dynamism, their shifting references and borders, the layering of both general and particular meanings, and their interrelation with one another that must be carefully considered, as these may be obscured entirely in translation, even when the translations are technically accurate. Through consideration of these terms comprehensively and in relation to one another, a distinctly Islamic conception of religion begins to take shape and suggest its independent outlines, and in doing so, offers a new perspective on the definition and critique of the category of religion that originates outside of Western Christian or academic circles.

Notes

1. A seminal and still unparalleled study of at least some of these terms, including *islām* and *īmān*, as well as their common opposing term *kufr* (disbelief) and *shirk* (polytheism) can be found in Izutsu's (2002), which treats these terms primarily as concepts elucidating the moral and ethical principles of Islam.
2. The English translations include: the oldest extant complete translation of the Qur'an into English by George Sale (d. 1736), (1853); Khan and al-Din Hilali (1994); Pickthall (1996); Yusuf `Ali (1995); Asad (2003); Abdel Haleem (2004);

- Shakir (1993); Nasr et al. (2015); Droge (2013); and McAuliffe (2017). The French translations include: Hamidullah (1966) and an unnamed translation by the French scholar, Jean-Louis Michon (both accessed on altafsir.org). German translations include: Paret (2015); and Abu Rida Muhammad b. Ahmad b. Rassoul (accessed on tanzil.net).
3. The verses selected for our survey include: Qur'an 2:256; 4:125, 171; 5:3; 5:54; 6:70, 159, 161; 8:39, 72; 9:11; 10:22; 16:52; 22:78; 30:30; 42:13; 48:28; 49:16; 82:9; 109:6. It should be noted, however, that the term *dīn* can also mean 'judgment,' especially in the widespread Qur'anic phrase, *yawm al- dīn* (Day of Judgment). This particular usage, occurring almost always as part of this specific phrase, was not considered here.
 4. See Asad and Abdel Haleem's translations of Qur'an 8:39.
 5. This is found in Muhammad Hamidullah's French translation of Qur'an 10:22, and in Jean-Louis Michon's French translation of Qur'an 8:39.
 6. See Abu Rida's translation of Qur'an 8:39.
 7. See Asad's translation of Qur'an 107:1 and 109:6.
 8. See Sale, Asad, Abdel Haleem, Mohsin Khan's translations of 16:52, as well as Hamidullah's translation of the term in this same verse as *obeissance*.
 9. See, for example, Qur'an 9:33: 'He it is Who sent His Messenger with guidance and the Religion of Truth to make it prevail over religion, all of it (or more idiomatically, "over all religion").' An identical verse is statement is found in Qur'an 48:28 and 61:9.
 10. In the commentary on the verse cited in the note above the usage of the singular rather than the plural form of *dīn* is sometimes explained by saying that the verse is referring to *dīn* as a '*jins*', that is, the Arabic term for 'genus.' See, e.g., al-Zamakhsharī (1995, v. 2, 257) (commentary on 9:33); and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, commentary on 9:33.
 11. A similar appreciation for, and overview of, these various usages for the term *dīn* in Islamic discourse can be found Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, where he also notes that *dīn* and related terms (*den*, *daena*) had already started to be used to refer to something close to our contemporary understanding of 'religion' by several different cultural and linguistic groups in the Near East in the centuries prior to the rise of Islam, see pp. 98–102.
 12. See Qur'an 109: 1–6 where Muhammad is told to address the pagan Arabs in Mecca as 'disbelievers (*kāfirūn*),' and saying: 'To you your *dīn*, and to me my *dīn*.' The religion of the pagan Arabs is also mentioned as *dīn*, in hadith reports: See, for example, a hadith that describes the way that the Quraysh and 'those who adhered to their religion [i.e., the religion of the Quraysh]' (*man dāna dīnahā*) use to make pilgrimage before the time of Islam (Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, v. 1, p. 502, *K. al-hajj*, h. 3013), or another which describes someone as being an adherent of the 'religion of the Qurayshi disbelievers (*alā dīn kuffār Quraysh*),' (Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, v. 1, p. 418, *K. al-ijārah*, h. 2307).
 13. See, e.g., al-Tirmidhī (2000), *Sunan* v. 2, p. 626, *K. Sifat al-qiyāmah*, h. 2636, for a hadith that offers a warning about seeking 'the world' (*al-dunyā*) through religion. See also al-Bukhārī (1968), *Adab al-mufrad*, h. 1200, where a recommended supplication (*dūā*) asks for good both in *dīn* and *dunyā*.
 14. See, e.g., al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, v. 1, p. 218, *K. al-tahajjud*, h. 1171, where Muhammad teaches his followers a form of supplication, in which they ask God for guidance toward what is best for both their *dīn* and livelihood (*māāsh*).
 15. The juxtaposition of these terms emerges early in Islamic intellectual history, see, for example, a 9th century work by al-Ṭabarī (1973). It has become more prominent beginning in the 20th century, as the statement that Islam is *dīn* and *dawlah* is regularly invoked by those arguing that Islamic principles should govern both religion and state.
 16. It should be noted, however, that the term for 'secular' in Arabic is *alamī* (lit., 'worldly' or 'of the world', a direct translation of European terms for the secular), and does not emerge until the late 19th century. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity*, pp. 206–207.
 17. This is the view according to the majority Sunni tradition. Shīites, however, generally argue that he did accept Islam before death – a position related to their reverence for `Ali, the son of Abu Talib, whose was the first of their Imams.
 18. The primary example of this being the *aṣḥāb al-kaḥf* (companions of the cave), a group of young believing men who

- escape religious persecution by taking refuge in a cave, where God causes them to remain in a sleeping state for 309 years, awaking after the tyrannical king has died (Qur'an 18:9–26). This story is very similar to the Christian story of the seven sleepers of Ephesus.
19. Perhaps the clearest articulation of this is the formulaic definition of 'faith (*īmān*)' as 'knowledge/recognition (*màrifah*)' in the heart. There is also the well-known story a close companion of Muhammad, Usama b. Zayd, who once killed an enemy soldier even after the soldier – who had been overcome by Usama and was facing certain death – pronounced the Islamic testament of faith. Usama thought the soldier was merely trying to save his own life, and killed him anyway. Muhammad later admonished him, 'Did you cut out his heart to see if he had uttered the testimony [sincerely]?' Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, K. *al-īmān*, h. 287.
 20. The original Arabic text al-Kāshānī's commentary on Qur'an 2:256 was accessed at <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir>, where it is listed under its attribution to Ibn `Arabī as *Tafsīr Ibn `Arabī*. It is now known, however, that this work was actually written by `Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī as *Ta'wīlāt al-qur'ān al-karīm*. An English translation of the first part of al-Kāshānī's *Ta'wīlāt*, properly attributed to him, can now be found on the same site: <https://www.altafsir.com/Books/kashani.pdf>.
 21. The Qur'an frequently represents various created beings (animate and inanimate) as manifesting a worshipful or humble relationship with God. See, for example, Qur'an 2:74; 13:13–15; 16:49; 17:44; 22:18.
 22. See, e.g., the passage from Jalal al-Dīn Rūmī's, *Dīvān-i Shams* (lines 34969–34975), as translated in Chittick (1983, 182–183), which says, in part,

All the tasks of the world are different, but all are one ...
I sought round the world for 'others' and reached certainty: There are no others.
The buyers are all a single buyer, the bazaar has but one aisle ...
 23. See, for example, Dworkin (2013) (although he draws different conclusions from such observations).
 24. W.C. Smith notes in his discussion that *dīn* as 'judgment' is similar to the usage of the word in Hebrew, whereas *dīn* in pre-Islamic Arabic seems to have related more to the idea of proper behavior and honorable comportment (*The Meaning and End of Religion*, pp. 99–102). The term as used in the Qur'an encompasses the first meaning directly in some places, and the second insofar as *dīn* can mean proper comportment toward God. The dynamic and reciprocal quality of *dīn* in the Qur'an and Islamic literature derives from the combination of these meanings.
 25. The *yawm al-dīn* (Day of Judgment), as described in the Qur'an and in Islamic literature, is very much like *dīn* as we have described it in its Qur'anic sense, in that it is both a universal and radically individual and personal experience. See Qur'an 6:94; 80:33–37.
 26. It also refers to *islām* as the original Abrahamic religion untarnished by the polytheism of the Meccan pagans, whose religious practices were understood to be a corruption of an original monotheistic cult brought to Mecca by Abraham and his son Ishmael, whom the Qur'an identifies as the original builders of the Meccan Kāba. See Qur'an 2:125–126; 22:26–29.
 27. For an analysis of the role of this 'turning point' in the context of the Qur'anic *sūrah* in which it is found (*Sūrat al-Baqarah*), see Robinson (2004).
 28. Given that both communities in Medina initially prayed in the same direction, the communal distinction between the Muslims and the Jews may not have been so clear during the Muslim community's first two years in Medina.
 29. The rhetorical structure here is remarkably similar to an earlier Meccan *sūrah*, *Sūrat al-Kāfirūn* (109), in which the Prophet is instructed to say to the Meccan pagans: 'Say, 'O disbelievers! I worship not what you worship, nor are you worshippers of what I worship, nor am I a worshipper of what you worship, nor are you worshippers of what I worship ...'
 30. See also commentary on this passage in Nasr et al. (2015, 53–54), as well as Hamza, Rizvi, and Mayer (2010, 67–126).

31. The two lines that comprise the passage cited above end with references to those who might be 'averse' to the message of Islam – the 'disbelievers' in the first line, and 'the idolaters' in the second. Note that these two terms are not synonyms. Jews and Christians (who are likely the referent for 'they' in the first line), are disbelievers insofar as they do not believe in the mission and message of Muhammad, but they are not idolaters (a term that refers to followers of the pagan Arab religion). See also Qur'an 48:28, for a similar passage.
32. Many early commentators understood the 'prevailing' of Islam over all religion to mean prevailing through the strength of its proofs and arguments (see al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*. v. 2, p. 257; al-Qurtubī, *Tafsir*, v.5, pp. 129–130; al-Rāzī (2009), *Mafāṭīḥ al-ghayb*, v. 16, pp. 32–33, commentary on 9:33).
33. We should also note, however, that another of our examples, Qur'an 61:7 is found in a *sūrah* that most consider Madinan, but at least a few scholars suggest might be Meccan; see J. Lumbard's introduction to this *surah* in Nasr et al, *The Study Quran*, p. 1364.
34. Abraham, among all the pre-Muhammadan prophets, was probably the most directly and frequently associated with the terms *Islam* and *muslim*. See, e.g., Qur'an 2:127–131; 3:67; 22:78.
35. We would also note here Qur'an 42:13, which connects the religion brought by Muhammad with that enjoined upon Noah, as well as with Abraham, Moses and Jesus.
36. Note that the verb translated as 'perfected' (*akmaltu*) in this verse, as well as that translated 'completed' (*atmamtu*), can both connote completion.
37. This is so only in principle, however, since Muslims considered these scriptures as they existed by Muhammad's time to have already been corrupted so that they were no longer in their divinely revealed form. This doctrine, known as *tahrīf*, is derived from a particular reading of several Qur'anic verses, including Qur'an 2:75.
38. See also Qur'an 3:199:

And truly *among the People of the Book are those who believe* in God and that which has been sent down unto you, and that which has been sent down unto them, humble before God, not selling God's signs for a paltry price. It is they who shall have their reward with their Lord. Truly God is swift in reckoning.

39. Recently, the historian Fred M. Donner has made the argument that the early Islamic movement was above all a 'believers' movement (based on the preponderance of references to the 'believers' in the Qur'an), and that 'believers' included all those willing to remake their religious lives according to the monotheistic and pietistic example of Muhammad and his teachings, which may well have included Jews and Christian in their number. While his argument has much merit and has opened an important avenue for further study, it is based, in part, on an assumption that the word 'believer' (*mu'min*) is as general and inclusive a term in the Qur'an as it is in contemporary English parlance. See (2010).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Abdel Haleem, Muhammad. 2004. *The Qur'an*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Abū Dāwūd, Sulaymān b. al-Ash`ath. 2000. *Sunan Abū Dāwūd* (2 vols.). Liechtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation.
- Abu Rida, Muhammad b. Ahmad b. Rassoul. *Die ungefähre Bedeutung des Qu'ran Karim in deutscher Sprache*, Accessed at tanzil.net.
- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. [Crossref](#).
- Asad, Muhammad. 2003. *The Message of the Qur'an*. Bristol, UK: The Book Foundation.
- al-Bukhārī, Muhammad b. Ismā'īl. 1968. *Faḍl Allāh al-ṣamad fī tawḍīḥ al-adab al-mufrad* (2 vols.). Cairo: al-Maṭbāah al-

Salafiyah.

- al-Bukhārī, Muhammad b. Ismā'īl. 2000. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (3 vols). Liechtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation.
- Chittick, William. 1983. *The Sufi Path of Love*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Donner, Fred M. 2010. *Muhammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Droge, A. J. 2013. *The Qur'an: A New Annotated Translation*. Bristol, CT: Equinox.
- Dworkin, Ronald. 2013. *Religion Without God*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hamidullah, Muhammad. *Le Saint Coran* (originally published by Amana Publications, 1966).
- Hamza, Feras, Sajjad Rizvi, and Farhana Mayer. 2010. *An Anthology of Qur'anic Commentaries, v. 1: On the Nature of the Divine*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press and the Institute for Ismaili Studies.
- Izutsu, Toshohiko. 2002. *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press. (originally published as *The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Qur'an* 1959).
- al-Kāshānī, Abd al-Razzāq. *Ta'wīlāt al-qur'ān al-karīm* (also known as *Tafsīr Ibn `Arabī*). www.altafsir.com.
- Khan, M. Muhsin, and Taqī al-Dīn Hilālī. 1994. *al-Qur'ān al-Karīm bi-al-lughah al-Injilīzīyah*. Riyad: Maktabah Dar al-Islam.
- Mālik, b. Anas. 2000. *Al-Muwattā'*. Liechtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation.
- Mazuzawa, Tomoko. 2005. *The Invention of World Religions: How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. [Crossref](#).
- McAuliffe, Jane Dammen. 2017. *The Qur'an (Norton Critical Editions)*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- McCutcheon, Russell. 1997. *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Muslim, b. Hajjāj. 2000. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2 vols). Liechtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation.
- Nasr, S. H., C. K. Dagli, M. M. Dakake, J. E. B. Lumbard, and M. Rustom, eds. 2015. *The Study Quran*. New York, NY: HarperOne.
- Paret, Rudi. 2015. *Der Koran*. 3rd ed. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Pickthall, Muhammad Marmaduke. 1996. *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*. Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications.
- al-Qurṭubī, Abū `Abd Allāh. 2006. *Tafsīr* (10 vols.). Cairo: Maktabat al-Īmān.
- al-Rāzī, Fakhr al-Dīn. 2009. *Mafāṭīḥ al-ghayb* (33 vols.). Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-`Ilmiyyah.
- al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī. 1972. *Mūjam mufradāt alfāz al-qur'ān* (ed. N. Mar`ashli). Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-`Arabī.
- Robinson, Neal. 2004. "The Medinan Sūrahs." In *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, 196–223. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Sale, George. 1853. *The Koran: Commonly Called the Alcoran of Mohammed*, with M. Savary and R. A. Davenport. Philadelphia: J.W. Moore (originally published in 1734).
- Shakir, M. H. 1993. *The Qur'an: Arabic Text and English Translation*. New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an.
- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. 1978. *The Meaning and End of Religion*. New York, NY: Harper and Row. (originally published in 1962).
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1982. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 2004. *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- al-Ṭabarī, `Alī b. Sahl Rabbān. 1973. *Al-Dīn wa'l-dawlah fī ithbāt nubuwwat Muhammad*. Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīdah.
- al-Ṭabarī, Abū Jāfar Muhammad b. Jarīr. 1995. *Jamī al-bayan `an ta'wilat ay al-qur'an* (30 vols.). Beirut: Dar al-Fikr.
- al-Tirmidhī, Muḥammad b. `Isā. 2000. *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* (2 vols.). Liechtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation.
- Yusuf `Ali, `Abd Allah. 1995. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*. Chicago, IL: Kazi Publications.
- al-Zamakhsharī, Jār Allāh Maḥmūd b. `Umar. 1995. *al-Kashshāf* (4 vols.). Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-`Ilmiyyah.