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Enhancing Religious Literacy in a Liberal Arts Education through the Study of Islam and Muslim Societies

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Over the two decades that I have been teaching at Harvard I have been asked many questions about Islam, but I was ill prepared when, a couple of years ago, a student asked me over dinner at a restaurant in Harvard Square: "How can anyone who is rational and intelligent believe in and practice a religion that promotes violence, terror, [and] suicide bombings and is blatantly against fundamental human rights and freedom?" Frequently, what characterizes the majority of the questions I am asked about Islam is not just a profound ignorance about a religion practiced by over a billion people around the world, but a deep-seated prejudice and implicit fear of Muslims: "I am afraid of Muslims," a minister of a church in Boston confessed even as he invited me to participate in an outreach event to promote a better understanding of Islam.

Exacerbating the lack of knowledge about Islam and Muslim cultures in the United States is a widespread illiteracy about the nature of religion in general. Religious illiteracy can be defined as the inability to conceive of religion as a cultural phenomenon intricately embedded in complex cultural matrixes. As a result of this illiteracy, a person is unable to appreciate the significant role that factors such as poverty, social status, gender, and political ideologies can play in shaping what are overtly perceived as purely religious expressions. Religious illiteracy is a direct consequence of a failure of educational systems to provide students with opportunities to engage critically in the academic study of religion. Employing social scientific and humanistic methods, the study of religion seeks to go beyond the faith-centered or devotional

approach that is often employed to teach religion in parochial and Sunday schools, *madrasas*, *yeshivas*, and other similar institutions. It posits that religion is a dynamic and powerful force central to the human experience and that understanding it is critical for the study of a broad range of subjects, a fact recognized by the U.S. Supreme Court when it ruled on the importance of providing instruction about religion as a cultural phenomenon in schools: "It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization" (*Abington School Dist v. Schempp* 1963).

At every level of education, from grade school to high school and college, students encounter religion as they study history, literature, art, music, social studies, world civilizations, geography, and so on. Yet neither do the curricula of our schools equip students to think critically about religion as a cultural phenomenon, nor are teachers who teach humanities and social science subjects professionally trained to teach about religion. In this chapter, I discuss the nature of illiteracy about religion and culture that prevails not only in the United States but in many other nations as well, its grave consequences for the ability of students to interpret the multicultural and multireligious world in which they live, and my own attempts to foster literacy through two courses I offer at Harvard in the General Education program. Although employing different perspectives, the courses are designed to help students understand that the manner in which the world's Muslims interpret their religion is significantly influenced by the diverse contexts in which they live. Students come to appreciate that conceptions of Islam are varied and dynamic—as circumstances and situations change, so do understandings of the religion. The courses have two principal goals: first, to foster among students literacy about the nature of religion by using the Islamic tradition as a case study; and second, to combat, through responsible education, one of the most dangerous phenomena of our times—Islamophobia—which is prejudice and fear of Islam leading to the dehumanization of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims.

The Problem: Religious and Cultural Illiteracy

The *Report of the Task Force on General Education* (2007) at Harvard observes that we are faced with the challenge of educating students about a world that is interconnected to a degree almost inconceivable thirty or forty years ago. At the same time, the report points out, it is a world that is deeply divided, unstable, and uncertain. It is one of the great paradoxes of our times that while peoples from different religious, cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds are in closer contact with each other than ever before, still this closeness has not resulted in better understanding and appreciation for differences. Rather, our world is marked with greater misunderstandings and misconceptions resulting in ever-escalating levels of tension between cultures and nations. His Highness the Aga Khan (2006), a Muslim leader, has aptly described the nature of these conflicts with the phrase "the clash of ignorances," a clash that perpetuates fear and hatred of peoples different from oneself.

A key factor that is responsible for the clash of ignorances is widespread illiteracy about religion and culture. Lacking the intellectual tools to understand and engage with religious and cultural differences, people tend to paint those who are different from themselves with one color, with a single brushstroke, representing them through simplistic caricatures that can sometimes result in unjust forms of humiliation. In her study on the prevalence of religious illiteracy in American educational systems, Diane Moore (2007), director of Harvard's Program in Religious Studies and Education, identifies some of its consequences: the curtailment of historical and cultural understanding, the fueling of culture wars, and the promotion of religious and racial bigotry.

Our lack of understanding about the ways that religion itself is an integral dimension of social/political/historical experience coupled with our ignorance about the specific tenets of the world's religious

traditions significantly hinder our capacity to function as engaged, informed and responsible citizens of our democracy. In these ways, religious illiteracy has helped foster a climate that is both dangerous and intellectually debilitating. (pp. 3–4)

Professor Moore also points out that religious literacy is particularly important for the United States, which, despite being the most religiously diverse country in the world, has a population that is “woefully ignorant about religion” (p. 3). The devastating impact of ignorance on democracy, which is fundamentally premised on the existence of an educated and well-informed citizenry, was best summarized by Thomas Jefferson, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, when he wrote, “If a nation expects it can be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” Certainly, democracy cannot function when ignorance breeds fear of our fellow citizens who happen to be in some way or another different from ourselves.

One of religious illiteracy’s common symptoms is the tendency to associate a religion solely with its devotional practices, such as rites, rituals, and religious festivals. Another is the propensity to attribute the actions of individuals, communities, and nations exclusively to religion. With regard to Islam, it results in the perception that the faith is chiefly responsible for all the actions of anyone who is a Muslim. It also leads to the assumption that everything that happens in a predominantly Muslim country can be attributed to religion. Thus many people commonly assume that Islam is the principal cause of a variety of ills that plague some Muslim majority countries, such as the lack of democracy, economic underdevelopment, unjust treatment, and marginalization of women. To many Muslims, such explanations are as absurd as the claim that Christianity is responsible for the United States, a predominantly Christian nation, having one of the highest crime rates in the world. Illiteracy about religion and culture hinders the ability to look for complex and more plausible explanations rooted

in political, economic, and sociological conditions. It also hampers people from realizing that, while religion may be invoked as a legitimizer for certain human actions, the primary motivating forces are often rooted elsewhere. Religious literacy helps students to recognize that all interpretations of religion are essentially human enterprises; the faithful may consider certain religious truths to be divinely revealed, but the meanings they construct from these truths are heavily dependent on their worldly circumstances and realities.

Ultimately, if unchecked, religious and cultural illiteracy strips peoples and nations of their history, their culture, their politics, their economics—in short, their humanity. History is full of examples of conflicts and tragedies that result from a group of people from one religious, racial, or ethnic background failing to accept and to respect the humanity of others. During times of heightened political and military conflicts, religious and cultural illiteracy strongly influences how peoples of different nations, cultures, and religions perceive each other. Frequently, these conflicts are depicted within frameworks and language characterized by hyperbole and absolute opposition: between the civilized and the barbaric, good and evil, “us” and “them.” These polarizations have been particularly prevalent in contemporary discussions about differences between Western and Islamic civilizations. Such characterizations, while appealing to many, are troublesome and problematic from a number of perspectives. It is historically inaccurate to talk about Western and Islamic civilizations entirely in oppositional and antagonistic terms when both share common roots in religious ideas and concepts derived from Abrahamic traditions as well as Greco-Roman culture. Moreover, such polarizations are particularly problematic since they are based on stereotypes and humiliating caricatures of “the other.”

Historically, stereotypical perceptions have been common between peoples of the Middle East (Arabs, Persians, and Turks) and Europe and the United States. They result from centuries of hostile and confrontational relationships based on the need for political power and

control of economic resources, particularly oil in recent years. They are couched in the language of conquest and reconquest, jihad and crusade, colonialism and nationalism, occupation and liberation. In the context of war and armed conflict, such stereotypes serve to dehumanize the other, often leading to tragic consequences. Evident in the events of 9/11 was the dehumanization of Americans by some Saudi terrorists, just as the abuse and torture of prisoners at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison revealed the dehumanization of Iraqis in the eyes of their American captors.

How Do You Know What You Know about Islam?

Let me return to the dinner question that instigated these thoughts. I responded to the student's question with a question of my own: How do you know what you know about Islam? My intent was to engage the student in a dialogue on the construction of knowledge and the importance of examining critically our sources of information. In the ensuing conversation, we discussed the powerful and historically unprecedented role of the media, controlled by corporate conglomerates and sometimes nation-states, in shaping our knowledge about the world in which we live and, in particular, influencing our images of Islam and Muslims. Our conversation reminded me of a well-known story told with slight variations by several different authors, including the famous thirteenth-century Muslim Persian mystic Jalal ad-Din Rumi (d. 1273). The story, which probably originated in India, tells of some blind men who attempted to describe an elephant. Since none of them had the all-embracing vision necessary to see the complete creature, they failed to appreciate it in its entirety. Each man's perception of the elephant was limited to the specific part he touched. It is the same with those who attempt to describe Islam, I explained to the student. A person's description of Islam, whether he or she is Muslim or not, is based on sources of information—what he or she has subjectively experienced, perceived, read, or been taught. Consequently, people hold

strikingly contradictory conceptions of Islam depending on their point of view and sources of information: for some Islam is a religion of peace, while for others it is a religion that promotes violence; for some it is a religion that oppresses women and for others it is a religion that liberates women; for some, its teachings are compatible with democracy and fundamental human rights, while others associate them with dictatorship and tyranny.

Clearly, descriptions and characterizations of Islam, its beliefs and doctrines, are sharply contested. This has been particularly the case in the United States and in Europe where, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the 7/7 bombings in London, there have been innumerable public and private debates on the "true" nature of Islam and its alleged role in promoting terrorism. Perceptions of Islam as an anti-American ideology have even prompted two members of the Washington State legislature to walk out of prayers at the beginning of state legislative sessions because they were led by a Muslim imam: they considered their participation in such prayers to be un-American and unpatriotic. Reverend Rod Parsley, an evangelical preacher of the World Harvest Church, goes so far as to claim that America was founded in part to destroy Islam, with 9/11 being a call to arms against this faith that cannot be ignored (Corn 2008).

Anxieties about Islam's being a "fanatical" religion and Muslims being "hate-filled extremists" have fueled the growth of anti-Islamic sentiment and even a deeper kind of Islamophobia. This deep-seated fear and dread of everything associated with Islam has led to violent physical attacks on Muslims or even persons mistakenly assumed to be Muslim. For instance, in the United States, male members of the Sikh community became targets of violence after 9/11 because their ill-informed attackers misperceived their turbans and beards as indicators that they were Muslims. "What we have here is a climate where Islamophobia is not only considered mainstream, it's considered patriotic by some, and that's something that makes these kinds of attacks even more despicable," says Brian Levin, director of the Center for the

Study of Hate and Extremism at the University of California at San Bernadino (Marks 2007). During a United Nations seminar on Islamophobia, Kofi Annan (2004), former secretary general of the United Nations, declared it “at once a deeply personal issue for Muslims, a matter of great importance to anyone concerned about upholding universal values, and a question with implications for international harmony and peace.”

Approaches to Studying and Understanding Islam and Religion More Generally

How can we move beyond combative and ill-informed characterizations of Islam? Is it possible to describe Islam, or any religion, objectively, in a manner that is not colored by the subjectivity of perception? Although there exist several ways in which we can approach the study of a religious tradition, here I wish to highlight three distinct approaches: a devotional approach, a textual approach, and a contextual approach.

First, the *devotional approach* is perhaps the most easily grasped since it is the perspective that most people commonly associate with the idea of religion. It understands a religious tradition primarily in terms of its doctrines, rituals, and practices. Representing the perspective of a believer or practitioner, it is traditionally the approach adopted in institutions, such as Sunday schools and madrasas, that impart faith-based education pertaining to the practice of a particular religion. In addition, this approach is also common in many textbooks, at both the high school and college level. It presents the world's religions in monolithic terms, rarely acknowledging the existence of a diversity of interpretations and practices within a tradition as a result of different interpretive contexts. For instance, in such texts, wearing the *hijab* is often represented as religiously mandated for all Muslim women, whereas in reality there are vigorous debates among Muslims about the theological basis of this practice and whether it is

in fact Islamic in origin. This approach is often, though not always, exclusivist and sectarian in character, privileging the truth claims of a specific denomination.

Second, the *textual approach* regards the sacred writings and texts as the authoritative embodiment of a religious tradition. According to this approach, a religion is best understood through its scriptures, which are perceived as containing its “true” ethos, or essence. For example, after 9/11, as many non-Muslims sought to understand the possible influence of Islamic teachings on the heinous actions of the terrorists, there was a massive upsurge in sales of Qur'an translations. The underlying assumption was that, in order to acquire a proper understanding of Islam, it was sufficient for a person to read the Qur'an from cover to cover. By adopting this approach, several American and European politicians and public personalities asserted that on the basis of their reading of the Qur'an, Islam was a dangerous religion. Citing certain verses from the Islamic scripture, they claimed that the values Islam espoused were incompatible with the values of Western societies, while others went as far as to compare the Qur'an to Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and declared that reading it while the country was engaged in a war against terror was an act of treason. For example, in the United States, the television talk show host Bill O'Reilly of Fox News made this comparison in 2002 after the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, assigned Professor Sells's book *Approaching the Qur'an* to incoming first-year students as part of their orientation. Why, he asked, should students study what he called “the enemy's religion”? In Europe, Dutch politician Geert Wilders has also made this analogy several times, including in an op-ed piece he wrote in the newspaper *Volkskrant* on August 8, 2007. In their view, Muslim minorities living in Europe and the United States are “Trojan horses,” dangerous to the interests of national security. They therefore need to be expelled.

There are several problems with this way of characterizing Islam through the citation of randomly selected verses from the Qur'an. Most obvious is the fact that none of these self-proclaimed experts on

Islam knew Arabic. They had, therefore, relied on translations of the Muslim scripture that, in reality, are more accurately characterized as interpretations of the original Arabic text. In this sense, the so-called translations reflect the ideological biases of the translators. Anyone who compares even a couple of English translations of the Qur'an will become aware that translator bias is responsible for remarkable disparities between different texts, resulting sometimes in contradictory readings. Indeed, we will see below how translator bias can impact the translation and significance of even key terms such as "Islam" and "Muslim" in the Qur'an. It is for this reason that Muslims themselves have insisted on using the Arabic text during prayer and other forms of worship, since they regard it to be the "original" or "real" text.

The more serious problem with this approach is that it attempts to restrict the understanding of religion to what poses as a decontextualized reading but is really the projection of one narrow reading, which, in many cases, is compounded by ill-informed and unrecognized assumptions. If we were to use this approach to study Christianity, for example, we could also declare, by citing certain words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, that it is an intolerant religion that espouses violence and terror. For example, see Matthew 10:34–35, "Do not suppose that I am come to send peace on the earth; I came not to send peace but a sword." (See also Luke 12:49–53.) By granting absolute sovereignty to the text, this approach ignores a crucial fact: religious texts do not have meaning in and of themselves; they are only given meaning by believers who revere, venerate, and consider them authoritative. Without these communities of believers, scriptures are inconsequential and of little significance. In their interpretations, believers are, however, influenced by the various contexts in which they live. Since these contexts are constantly in flux, the interpretations of scriptural texts are always changing. To illustrate the significant role that the context of the interpreter plays in shaping the reading of scripture, we may consider a paradoxical situation in early twentieth-century America: while members of the Ku Klux Klan read the Bible as a text

justifying white racial supremacy, African Americans, struggling for their civil rights as they emerged from a legacy of slavery, saw in the Christian scripture a message of hope and salvation. Each group's interpretation of scripture was strongly influenced by its specific historical, political, economic, and cultural situation.

The recognition of the importance of relating expressions and interpretations of religion to a complex web of many nontheological factors is the central organizing principle of the *contextual approach*. Through this third approach, which emphasizes the need to pay close attention to the contexts of interpretation, we can better understand how a religious tradition can be depicted and practiced in contradictory ways, or how religious texts, such as the Qur'an or the Bible, can be interpreted by believers to justify a wide range of contradictory goals—tolerance and intolerance, liberation and oppression, democracy and theocracy.

The contextual approach provides an effective framework for students to develop skills that will help them to think critically about religion. In contrast to the devotional and textual approaches, it emphasizes that the study of religion must be primarily concerned with human beings who actually practice and interpret it and whose daily lives it influences. On the basis of the cultural studies model described in Diane Moore's *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, I contend that religion is a phenomenon that is embedded in every dimension of human experience. Its study, therefore, "requires multiple lenses through which to understand its multivalent social/cultural influences" (Moore 2007, 79). This approach challenges "the assumption that human experience can be studied accurately through discrete disciplinary lenses (e.g., political, economic, cultural, social, etc.) and instead posits an approach that recognizes how these lenses are fundamentally entwined" (p. 79). Such a focus is not meant to discredit the study of the doctrines, rituals, and texts that have come to be identified with various religious traditions, but rather to orient their study primarily to the multiplicities of their human context.

Key to fostering religious literacy through a contextual approach is the realization that even the way we think about and use the term “religion” today is itself a cultural construction. The late Wilfred Cantwell Smith, one of the twentieth century’s most influential scholars of religion and for many years Professor of Comparative Religion at Harvard, contends in his book *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1964) that the manner in which we commonly conceive of religions as homogeneous, well-defined, and systemized ideologies, each with a distinctive set of beliefs and practices, is a product of the European Enlightenment. This conception, which is almost universal today, was disseminated globally when European powers colonized large parts of the world, particularly Africa and Asia, from the nineteenth century onward. In the process of colonizing other lands, Europeans categorized their subjects there, on the basis of their practices and doctrines, into “religions” following European Christian paradigms. They then proceeded to label these “religions” as Mohammedanism (the common European term for Islam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and so on, forcing their colonial subjects, through various bureaucratic means, to identify themselves primarily in terms of the new categories they created (Smith 1964). In this regard, Professor Smith argues that, from a historical perspective, our notions of religion today are radically different from those of personalities such as the Buddha, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, whom we commonly identify as the founders of the world’s major religions. In other words, these luminaries would not recognize the religions the world associates with them today. He consequently devotes much of his book to tracing the complex processes by which fluid conceptions of personal faith, experience, and practice attributed to these “founding” personalities were gradually abstracted and systematized as “religion.” He uses the term “reification” to refer to these processes that result in the crystallization of narrowly defined and distinctive religious identities.

Fostering Literacy about Islam

The two courses I offer about Islam and contemporary Muslim societies at Harvard are designed to remedy the cultural myopia that afflicts prevalent views of Islamic civilizations and Muslim societies by empowering students with the appropriate content, vocabulary, and frameworks of analysis. Adopting a contextual approach to the study of Islam should lead the student to recognize that the experiences and expressions of the faith are far from homogeneous or monolithic. In the course of its history, the Islamic tradition has come to be interpreted in diverse ways around the world, depending on each region’s history and cultural traditions, its social, economic, and political structures, and its geography and physical location in the world. Recognizing this reality, Abdol Karim Soroush, a contemporary Iranian intellectual, states:

In reality the history of Islam, like the history of other religions such as Christianity, is fundamentally a history of interpretations. Throughout the development of Islam there have been different schools of thought and ideas, different approaches and interpretations of what Islam is and what it means.

There is no such thing as a “pure” Islam or an a-historical Islam that is outside the process of historical development. The actual lived experience of Islam has always been culturally and historically specific, and bound by the immediate circumstances of its location in time and space. If we were to take a snapshot of Islam as it is lived today, it would reveal a diversity of lived experiences which are all different, yet existing simultaneously. (Noor 2002, 15–16)

The story of Islam is, therefore, not one story but many stories involving peoples of many different races, ethnicities, and cultures, professing a myriad of conflicting interpretations. To acquire a correctly nuanced understanding of Islam and its role in Muslim societies, crucial questions you should ask include: Which Islam? Whose Islam? In which context? Many Muslims, whose understanding of their religion

is restricted to a particular sectarian version (Sunni, Shi'i, etc.), are often surprised when they encounter the many different ways in which their fellow Muslims practice and interpret their faith. Some are threatened by this plurality and vehemently claim that there is only one true Islam—the version that they believe in. Others, while recognizing diversity, feel the need to emphasize that all Muslims are united by certain fundamental beliefs, such as those expressed in the *shahadah*, the Islamic creed of faith—"there is only one God and Muhammad is His Messenger"—or by common ritual practices such as ritual prayer, pilgrimage to Mecca, and fasting. Yet others willingly embrace this pluralism of belief as a sign of communal strength and God's mercy.

Who Is a Muslim and What Is Islam?

One way we can appreciate the significant role that contexts play in shaping understandings of Islam is by examining the diverse ways in which Muslims have defined key religious concepts. For instance, even fundamental terms such as "islam" and "muslim" may be understood in entirely different ways depending on the specific circumstances of the interpreter. Although today most Muslims generally employ the words "islam" and "muslim" to refer respectively to a religion and a person who adheres to it, they have significantly different meanings in the Qur'an. In this scripture, which Muslims believe to be divinely revealed to Muhammad, "islam" refers not to a systemized religion or belief system but to a private act of faith—the act of submission to God's will. This interpretation is based on the literal meaning of the word "islam," which is derived from the Arabic verb *aslama* (to submit, to surrender). From a linguistic perspective, "islam" is therefore a verbal noun signifying the act of submission, while "muslim" is the agent noun, referring to one who submits—a submitter.* In a theologi-

* Arabic is a Semitic language. Most words in Semitic languages, including Hebrew, are derived from roots usually consisting of three consonants. The verb *aslama* originates in the triliteral consonantal root s, l, m. From this root also stems the Arabic noun *salaam* (cognate with Hebrew *shalom*), meaning "peace," popu-

cal context "islam," therefore, signifies submission to God, while "muslim" denotes anyone who has submitted his will to God. Historically speaking, this was the primary sense in which these terms were first understood by the Prophet Muhammad and his early followers in seventh-century Arabia.

A survey of Quranic verses in which these terms occur indicates that not only is it perfectly acceptable to read "islam" as signifying submission and "muslim" as signifying submitter, but that, in the majority of instances, these are clearly the only meanings intended. For instance, the Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic), the great patriarch of the three monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—is declared to be a "muslim" in the Qur'an:

Abraham was not a Jew or Christian but an upright man who had submitted [*musliman*]. (3:67; translations are the author's)

According to verses 131–132 of the Qur'an's second chapter:

When [Abraham's] Lord said to him, "Submit [*aslim*]" he said "I have submitted [*aslamtu*] to the Lord of the Worlds." And he [Abraham] enjoined his sons as did Jacob: "O my sons, God has chosen the religion for you; do not die except as muslims/submitters [*muslimuna*]."

Submission to the Almighty is an act not limited to humans. As Qur'an chapter 22:18 declares, everything in creation submits to God by prostrating before him:

Have you not seen how to God bow down all who are in the heavens and the earth, the sun and the moon, the stars and the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and the many of mankind?

In the Quranic worldview, the primordial path of submission to God was preached by a series of prophets (124,000 according to popular Muslim tradition) who were sent by the one God to every people

larly used in the Arabic greeting *salaam alaikum*, "peace be upon you." On account of this linguistic association many Muslims also associate Islam with peace.

and every nation. Although these prophets have, over time, come to be associated with communities who appear to follow different paths or religions, they are represented in Quranic discourse as having preached the identical message of submission. Hence, the Qur'an (3:84) commands Muhammad and his followers:

Say: We believe in God and in what has been sent down to us and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes. We believe in what was given to Moses, Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We do not make a distinction between any of them. It is to Him that we submit. [Literally, "before Him we are submitters."]

Since submission to God was a central precept in each prophet's teaching, a Jew, Christian, or a follower of any religion who submits to the one God may be called a "muslim." Indeed, the Qur'an portrays the various prophets of God as exemplary "muslims," often illustrating their "muslimness" by narrating anecdotes from their lives. For example, the twelfth chapter of the Qur'an tells the story of the prophet Joseph (Yusuf in Arabic) as a parable for a life of faith. Key events in Joseph's life are recounted with the purpose of upholding him as one who maintained his faith and trust in God in the face of many trials and tribulations. Similarly, Mary, the mother of Jesus, who, incidentally, is mentioned more times in the Qur'an than she is in the Christian Bible, is also portrayed as an exemplary "muslim" woman.

If the Qur'an, the scripture considered to be the foundation of Islamic theology, defines "islam" and "muslim" in such a broad manner, what circumstances gave rise to the narrower understandings of the terms with which we are more familiar today? In other words, why and how did "islam" (submission to God) become Islam, the name of a religion, and "muslim" (anyone who submits to God) become Muslim, a person who is an adherent of the Islamic faith? Professor Cantwell Smith argues that these transformations are the product of reification, the process by which fluid conceptions of personal faith, experience, and practice gradually became abstracted, generalized,

and systematized as "religion." This process can be observed in the history of many religious communities. Consider, for instance, the gradual processes by which the disciples of Jesus developed a distinctive identity as Christians as they began to progressively differentiate themselves from Jews. In the Islamic case, reification was similarly associated with the need for Muhammad's followers to differentiate themselves socially and politically as a community (Wensinck [1932] 2007). Their identity evolved from a kind of megatribe, bound together by their shared allegiance to Muhammad's leadership, into a distinctive religious community, whose members referred to themselves as "muslims." The process of reification resulted in the emergence of distinctive rituals, such as the *salat* (ritual prayer) and the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) as markers of communal identity distinguishing the followers of Muhammad (as Muslims) from other monotheists (Christians and Jews) and later, Sunni from Shia. That decrees of rulers and governors as well as communal practices played a significant role in these developments emphasizes how intricately the complex process of reification was embedded with the promotion of specific political goals. Professor Fred Donner of the University of Chicago dates the beginnings of the process of reification to the eighth century when he claims that the followers of Muhammad first began calling themselves Muslims in the narrower sense of the term (Donner 2009).

To throw further light on the emergence of the term "Islam" as the name of an organized religion, Professor Smith examined the titles of some 25,000 Arabic works written by Muslims over twelve centuries. His research revealed that it is only since the latter part of the nineteenth century that Muslims have increasingly come to think about their religion predominantly in the institutionalized sense as "al-Islam" ("the Islam"). As the notion of "al-Islam" as a religious and sociopolitical ideology gained popularity, concepts such as *iman* (faith in God) and *mu'min* (believer), which were prominently employed by earlier generations of Muslims, dramatically declined in usage in titles. This decline is rather ironic, for it indicates that as Muslims increasingly

conceived of "Islam" in ideological terms, the focus on God and faith receded. In explaining this gradual shift, Professor Smith (1964, 105) suggests that the conception of Islam as an ideal religious system, and later a civilization, is the result of Muslims attempting to defend and articulate their faith and their beliefs within European colonial contexts, involving Western conceptions of religion and the idea of secularism:

On scrutiny it appears that the almost universal Muslim use of the term *islam* in a reified sense in modern times is a direct consequence of apologetics. . . . The impulse to defend what is attacked would seem a powerful force towards reifying. This process has clearly been at work in the Islamic case.

In support of Professor Smith's assertions, Carl Ernst, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, observes that the use of the term "Islam" as the name of a religion was first introduced into European languages in the early nineteenth century by Orientalists such as Sir Edward Lane, as an alternate to "Mohammedan religion" or "Mohammedanism," both European terms that Muslims today find offensive. As employed by Europeans, "Islam" was meant to be analogous to the modern Christian conception of religion. Professor Ernst (2003, 11) further asserts:

The use of the term "Islam" by non-Muslim scholars coincides with its increasing frequency in the religious discourse of those who are now called Muslims. That is, the term "Islam" became more prominent in [Muslim] reformist and protofundamentalist circles at approximately the same time, or shortly after, it was popularized by European Orientalists. So in a sense, the concept of Islam in opposition to the West is just as much a product of European colonialism as it is a Muslim response to that European expansionism.

These observations concerning the importance of the colonial context on the ideological use of "islam" by Muslims are hardly surprising

to those familiar with the historical evolution of reified religious identities among other non-European faith communities. In this regard, "Mohammedanism," and later "Islam," were invented European terms just as much as the terms "Hinduism," "Jainism," and "Buddhism," which emerged only in nineteenth-century India as broad labels to group together various philosophical and devotional traditions in South Asia.

Our brief discussion reveals that there are two different ways of thinking about the terms "islam" and "muslim," each with its own contexts: one broader and more universal in meaning, the other reified and narrower. Upon these are premised two fundamentally different worldviews: one inclusive, the other exclusive. Interpreting "islam" as a personal act of submission and "muslim" as submitter forms the basis of a universalist, or at least pluralist, worldview, acknowledging that there are many ways to submit to God, many ways to be "muslim." Such a perspective is more tolerant and respectful of difference, for it affirms that salvation is open to peoples of all faith traditions. On the other hand, interpreting "islam" to refer to a specific religion or ideology creates the potential for fostering a sense of exclusivity and superiority. This is evident in the claims that some Muslims make that since Islam was the last revealed religion, it superseded all predecessor religions, including Judaism and Christianity. In this sense, they consider it is the best of religions and only those who faithfully adhere to its tenets will be granted salvation.

From a historical perspective, the two different interpretations represent, in fact, two conflicting strands within the Islamic tradition that have interacted with each other over the centuries as represented in the thoughts and works of many theologians, poets, and statesmen. They have profoundly influenced how Muslims view and engage with religious diversity. For instance, the Qur'an affirms and confirms what was revealed to prophets prior to Muhammad, specifically designating Jews and Christians as "People of the Book" because they follow scriptures that originate from the same divine source. It states that they are

among those who have submitted to the one God and who will be granted salvation. Inclusive and pluralist understandings of "islam" have contributed to tolerant policies toward Jews and Christians in territories under Muslim rule dating as far back as the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad. We have evidence that in the late seventh century, followers of other religions regarded Islam as an open-minded and tolerant movement. A Nestorian Christian patriarch writing to a bishop in 647 CE confirms that not only did his new Muslim rulers "not fight Christianity, they even commend our religion, show honor to the priests and monasteries and saints of Our Lord, and make gifts to the monasteries and churches." An Armenian bishop records around 660 CE that the first governor of Muslim Jerusalem was Jewish (Donner 2009). Such tolerance is later reflected in the policies of the Arab dynasties of Spain, the Fatimids in North Africa, and the Turkish Ottomans in the Middle East, granting maximum individual and group autonomy to those adhering to a religious tradition other than Islam. We can also cite the example of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (d. 1605) in India, who, much to the dismay of the religious right wing of his time, promoted tolerance among the various traditions that compose the Indian religious landscape, drawing on local Muslim traditions that had extended the category of "People of the Book" to Hindus and Buddhists. This pluralist ethos is still very much alive today, providing a strong countervailing voice to temper exclusivist tendencies within particular Muslim communities.

On the other hand, exclusivist perspectives have provided, in certain circumstances, the bases for the development of a theology promoting the idea of Islam as a religion of empire in order to legitimize claims of several dynasties to political hegemony in various regions of the Middle East, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Such perspectives also led to the conception of "islam" as an abstract object revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by God in the form of an ideal and perfect system of beliefs and practices, outside the process of normal historical development. Such a view perpetuates what historian Ahmet Kara-

mustafa has termed "the cocoon theory of Islamic civilization," since it refuses to accept the significant ways in which the variegated cultures of the Near East, Asia, and Africa have been incorporated into many aspects of Muslim life and thought, including its theology:

Islam, it is often observed, came into this world fully grown, and, to boot, in full daylight: a holy book, a prophet, a divine law—all introduced into this world from another world, like a potent drug injected into the body. Exceptionally, however, this drug—which is "true Islam"—does not interact with the body and is only efficacious when it is preserved intact in its pure and pristine state. (Karamustafa 2003, 104)

It is this utopist Islam, unpolluted by human context or any foreign influences, which some contemporary Muslim groups, including the so-called fundamentalists, invoke today in their quest to re-create an ideal and imagined golden-age Islamic state as they respond to the failure of economic and political policies in many Muslim nations to deliver social justice.

Several years ago, "Elizabeth" (not her real name), a student of mine at the Harvard Divinity School, discovered the importance of distinguishing the two different ways in which Muslims employ the terms "muslim" and "islam." During a peace conference on the Middle East, Elizabeth, an ordained minister, found herself engaged in an extensive conversation with a Muslim woman on what it meant to be a Muslim. The conversation ended with "Fatima" (a pseudonym) joyfully proclaiming to Elizabeth, "so you, too, are a muslim." Elizabeth was shocked by this statement and deeply offended to have someone impose a "foreign" religious identity on her. Not only was Islam not her religion but she was terribly ignorant of it, even as she condemned the post-9/11 intolerance of Islam and Muslims. The depth of her own negative reaction surprised her, but it was only later, when she had read more about Islam, that it dawned on her that her peacemaking companion had based her understanding of the term "muslim" on different

criteria than those that had shaped her own. Fatima regarded her as a fellow submitter to a common God, fully embracing her as a spiritual companion, notwithstanding her Christian background. As Elizabeth reflected on her experience in retrospect, she wondered that if she, a tolerant person, found her friend's comment to be so jarring, how would it be received by one who blatantly associated the entire Islamic tradition with violence and human rights abuses? Reflecting on this incident, Elizabeth wrote in the journal entry she submitted for my course: "When we understand with our rational minds what is happening within a religious tradition across time and space, we can also challenge ourselves and others to confront the gut-level prejudices that are often masked by intellectual tolerance."

On the basis of the brief example above, the reader will appreciate how the contextual approach and its premise that all constructions of religion need to be situated within specific cultural matrixes can help better inform our understandings of Islamic concepts. Through this approach, we realize that religious concepts can have several contradictory connotations depending on the perspective of the interpreter. This perspective is shaped by the lived reality of a person's day-to-day experience. Therefore, if we want to understand why some Muslims are more inclusive in their worldviews and others less so, we should seek to understand what factors, specific to their individual contexts, have fostered the difference in outlook.

Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Islam

A fundamental premise of the contextual/cultural studies approach is the notion that the study of religion is an interdisciplinary enterprise necessitating the use of several perspectives as a means to appreciate the complexities of religious expression. Studies of Islam and Muslim societies cannot be limited to simply an examination of religious doctrines and concepts. For instance, it is crucial to consider the hegemonic role played by colonial and postcolonial nation-states in shaping the

ways an individual Muslim interprets, practices, and experiences his or her faith today. A sociopolitical perspective considers the interplay between historical contexts and ideologies, such as colonialism and nationalism, in shaping contemporary expressions of Islam. To give just a sampling of the diversity of experiences grouped under the label Islam: a Muslim woman living in Taliban-controlled regions of Afghanistan, where pre-Islamic Pushtun tribal codes prevalent in the region mandate that women cover themselves completely from head to toe, experiences her religion very differently from a Muslim woman in Turkey, where secularists vehemently discourage her from wearing a simple head scarf since it is seen as a symbol of religious fundamentalism and a betrayal of cherished Turkish national ideas of secularism. In Senegal, Muslim fraternities espousing a mystical, or Sufi, interpretation of Islam exercise significant political and economic influence, whereas in Saudi Arabia such mysticism is banned, for it is considered a heresy and contrary to the state's official Wahhabi religious ideology. Similarly, being a Muslim in China, a state that is officially atheist and considers its Muslim populations to be ethnic rather than religious minorities, differs from being Muslim in Pakistan, a Muslim majority state in which the invocation of Islam as the ideology for the state and the politicization of religion have led to violent sectarian conflict. In Western contexts, we can look at the experiences of Muslims of Turkish origin in Germany or North Africans in France who have been marginalized in their adopted countries on account of their race and religion and compare and contrast them with those of African Americans, many of whom turned to Islam as an alternative ideology to Christianity in their struggle against institutionalized racism in the United States. The overall point I am making is that the political and social contexts in which a Muslim practices his or her faith are just as important or, some would argue, even more important than doctrines and rituals in determining how contemporary Muslims experience and interpret their faith.

Another framework that may be used to study Islam is to explore the dynamic relationship between religious ideas, artistic expression,

and literary contexts in Muslim cultures. My thinking is inspired in part by the prolific cross-disciplinary scholarship of my own teacher, Professor Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2002), Harvard Professor of Indo-Muslim Culture emerita, who fervently believed in the study of world literature, particularly poetry, as a medium of global reconciliation. Many Muslims have enthusiastically embraced the arts and literature as vehicles to express their ideas on a variety of topics, including religion. Thus, poems, short stories, novels, folk songs, rap, miniature paintings, calligraphies, films, architecture, and gardens can provide us glimpses into Muslim worldviews by representing understandings of Islam that often go unrecognized by students of religion. In this regard, studying literature and the arts can “humanize” Muslim countries and cultures that have been “dehumanized” by discourses of nationalism and patriotism, premised as they are on the notion of the Muslim as “the other.”

I consider the study of Islam through this framework to be particularly crucial, since literary and artistic genres have played a pivotal role in shaping the development of the Islamic tradition. Let us reflect on the significant ways in which the Qur’an, the scripture at the heart of the tradition, is intimately connected with various arts in Muslim societies. Long before the Qur’an was compiled into a book, it functioned as an aural/oral text meant to be memorized and recited aloud. In Arabic, its name literally means “The Recitation.” In form and structure, the Qur’an shows sensitivity to a culture that prized the poetic arts and beauty of oral expression. In pre-Islamic Arabian society, poets enjoyed a special status, for they were believed to be inspired in their utterances by their relationship with spirits, or *jinn*s. As a result, their words were conceived to have a powerful spiritual potency. When the Prophet Muhammad began to recite the beautiful verses that eventually came to comprise the Qur’an, his opponents accused him of being a poet. In response to such accusations, he declared that he was a prophet inspired by the one Almighty God. Although the Islamic scripture criticizes egotistical poets who compete with the

Divine Word, it nevertheless displays acute sensibility to the rhythm of speech. With its rhyme schemes and sound patterns, the Qur’an bears all the hallmarks of a text meant to be publicly performed. Reciting it or listening to it was perceived as a way of communing with the Divine. Not surprisingly, Muslims consider the unparalleled beauty and aesthetics of the recited Qur’an as proof of its divine origin, for (according to their thinking) no human could have composed such a perfect text in classical Arabic.

Over the centuries, the Qur’an became the heart of an Islamic soundscape that permeates traditions of spirituality and the arts of poetry, music, and dance as vehicles to transcend the material and the physical and access the realm of the spiritual. Quranic recitation has become such a highly developed art form that every year thousands of Muslims from around the world gather to participate in national and international Qur’an recitation competitions. Just as the Qur’an needs to be melodiously recited so that it moves the heart, it has also to be beautifully written so as to please the eye. Calligraphy in the Arabic script developed into an important religious art form practiced by Muslims all over the world, with distinctive styles emerging in certain regions. For example, among Chinese Muslims, Arabic calligraphy is strongly influenced by the local Chinese traditions. And the art of Quranic calligraphy is not confined to paper. As visual texts, Quranic words and phrases adorn and lend meaning to all kinds of objects: walls of mosques, palaces, and hospitals; ceramic plates and glass lamps; and jewelry and other kinds of ornaments. Since the sacred word is vested with a special power, calligraphic formulas in Arabic can be used to create amulets and talismans to protect against evil. Verses from the Qur’an written in ink on paper may also be dissolved in water and drunk by those seeking to cure a variety of illnesses. The Qur’an has served as an important source of metaphors and symbols, concepts and themes, for Muslim poets and writers as they engage in creating their literary works (similar to the way the Bible permeated works of the so-called Western canon). As a result, it is quite usual to come

across subtle and not-so-subtle references to Quranic texts in a wide range of genres—a West African praise poem (*madih*) in the Hausa language, a *qawwali* (a genre of South Asian Muslim devotional music akin to gospel singing), or a rap composed by an African American Muslim artist.

Conclusion

Based on what they have seen or read in the popular media, many people have stereotypical notions about Islam. Contemporary political and military tensions and confrontations, including the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and 9/11 and the war on terror, have all contributed to exacerbating misconceptions about the religion. Particularly after 9/11, Islam is perceived in some circles in the United States as an anti-American and anti-Western ideology. As a result of widespread illiteracy about the nature of religion in general, many people have also tended to regard Islam as the root cause of instability and violence in these regions. Unfortunately, this obsession with “religion” as an exclusive factor of explanation, ignoring the complex ways it is embedded in and influenced by its sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts, dehumanizes not only people in the region but also adherents of the religion around the world. Ultimately it fails to explain the real causes underlying global tensions and polarizations, perpetuating more misunderstanding and conflict.

In this chapter we have discussed how the contextual approach to the study of Islam, with its insistence that expressions of religion must always be related to a complex web of nontheological factors, is one way in which we can effectively foster literacy about religion and deconstruct the stereotypes and mistaken notions that result in Islamophobia. It is an approach that pays close attention to the dynamic nature of religion as it responds to the ever-changing cultural matrixes

in which it is located. Asking crucial questions such as “Which Islam? Whose Islam? In which context?” dissuades us from conceiving of religion as a fixed “thing” or an “object.” When notions of religion become reified, people personify them or give them agency by declaring, for instance, that “Islam says . . .” or “according to Islam . . .” As Ernst (2003, 51) correctly observes, “No one, however, has seen Christianity or Islam do anything. They are abstractions, not actors comparable to human beings.” A contextual/cultural studies approach reminds us that religions do not have agency; people do. The ways in which people understand and interact with their religious traditions are influenced by the realities of their daily lives and factors such as poverty, feelings of powerlessness and marginalization, sense of humiliation, pride, and arrogance.

Muslim societies, like other societies around the world, are currently searching for a satisfying and legitimate interpretation of religion in relation to a host of issues: nationalism, modernity, globalization, industrialization, and inter- and intrareligious and cultural pluralism. It is crucial to remind ourselves that this search takes place against a particular historical backdrop. In the last 200 years, most Muslims were colonized, directly or indirectly, by various non-Muslim powers who sought, as part of the colonial project, to radically transform these societies in the colonial image. In a postcolonial world, Muslim societies are now seeking to recover and/or discover an identity that is based on values they consider authentically their own, not simply those that are based on foreign ideals and norms. In the process a variety of solutions and interpretations of faith are being proposed, ranging from reactionary to progressive. We should be cautious not to generalize about the entire Islamic tradition on the basis of a single interpretation simply because it manages to capture the attention of the media. If today there are certain interpretations of Islam that are considered “radical” or “extremist” (by Muslims and non-Muslims alike), rather than attributing their origins to an

essence located within an imaginary monolithic “Islam,” we need to examine carefully the contexts and circumstances in which these interpretations evolved. Many contemporary interpretations of Islam are clearly products of the radical transformation of Muslim societies by forces such as globalization and nationalism. Emphasizing the need to contextualize representations of religion, Carl Ernst (2003, 30) reminds us: “Religion never exists in a vacuum. It is always interwoven with multiple strands of culture and history that link it to particular locations. The rhetoric of religion must be put into a context, so that we know both the objectives and the opponents of particular spokespeople.”

The contextual approach also promotes the use of cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary resources, such as literature and the arts, to study religion. In the case of Islam, this has the advantage of “humanizing” the study of Muslim cultures. It helps us weave the voices of poets, novelists, short story writers, folk musicians, and rock stars alongside those of clerics, theologians, mystics, scholars, and politicians to create a nuanced picture of the rich and multicolored tapestry that we call Islam.

Further Reading

Topics in this chapter are covered in two courses I offer about Islam and contemporary Muslim societies for the Harvard General Education program. “Culture and Belief 12: For the Love of God and His Prophet: Religion, Culture and the Arts in Muslim Societies” employs a literary-artistic perspective, while “Culture and Belief 19: Understanding Islam and Contemporary Muslim Societies” adopts a sociopolitical focus. This chapter draws on material from the introductory chapters of my forthcoming book, *An Infidel of Love: Exploring Muslim Understandings of Islam* (Harvard University Press).

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Bulliet, Richard. 2004. *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*. New York: Columbia University Press.

A brilliant critique of the “clash of civilizations” theory, arguing that the Muslim and Christian worlds have, for most of their history, had much more in common than is popularly assumed. They have experienced the same stages of development and confronted the same challenges; it is only with modernity that the two have followed distinctly separate trajectories on account of differences in economic and sociopolitical contexts.

Ernst, Carl. 2003. *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

A highly accessible introduction to Islam for the nonspecialist, broad in scope yet careful in not making sweeping generalizations; successfully integrates historical, theological, and cultural contexts in discussing the role of Islam in contemporary Muslim societies.

Gottschalk, Peter, and Gabriel Greenberg. 2008. *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

This book explores the demonization of Islam and demeaning of Muslims among Americans, including many liberals who regard themselves as unbiased and broad-minded. It also examines the roots of fear and suspicion about Islam in contemporary America founded on the projection of the Muslim as the “other.”

Moore, Diane. 2007. *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Moore makes a strong case for the incorporation of the study of religion into the curriculum of high schools, advocating the use of pedagogic methods that enhance not only religious literacy but also democratic discourse within the classroom and in the public sphere.

Prothero, Stephen. 2007. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*. San Francisco: Harper.

Arguing that Americans are the most religiously ignorant people in the Western world, Prothero sees America's religious illiteracy as even more dangerous than cultural illiteracy “because religion is the most volatile constituent of culture, because religion has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces for evil.” He is particularly concerned about widespread public ignorance about the role of religion in America's political and cultural history. Tracing the historical decline of religious literacy in America, the author proposes several remedies with the hope that “the Fall into religious ignorance is reversible.”

Renard, John. 1996. *Seven Doors to Islam: Spirituality and the Religious Life of Muslims*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

An introduction to Islam and traditions of Islamic spirituality through the literary and visual arts of Muslim cultures; provides a vivid and colorful portrayal of the devotional lives of Muslims in different parts of the world; a wonderful antidote to the many books on Islam that provide only a narrow one-dimensional depiction of a monolithic religion of empire and conquest, devoid of any artistic and humanistic traditions.

Sachedina, Abdulaziz. 2001. *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Discusses the pluralist ethos of the Qur'an and the interpretive strategies used by exclusivists to counter it. (For more on this topic, see also my own 2002 article, "Pluralism, Intolerance and the Quran," *American Scholar* 71: 52-60.)

Sells, Michael. 1999. *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*. Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press.

An exemplary study of the Qur'an as an aural/oral scripture.

Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. 1964. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*. New York: Mentor Books.

A provocative examination of the concept of religion, arguing that the ideological way we think about religion today is a product of the European Enlightenment and was disseminated globally through European colonialism; the so-called founders of the world's religions, including the Prophet Muhammad, would be highly disturbed to think that they had founded a religion. See also Smith's chapter "The Historical Development in Islam of the Concept of Islam as an Historical Development," in B. Lewis and P. Holt, eds., *Historians of the Middle East* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

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