Islam in the World or Islamic World System?

HSTAFM 162
Lecture 10.1 (3/8/16)
Five Questions

1. From a scholarly perspective, should one speak of an Islamic world?
2. Does it make sense to use the adjective “Islamic” to describe this world?
3. Is Islamic civilization fundamentally separate from European/Christian/Western civilization?
4. Did Islamic Civilization Decline?
5. Taken as a historical entity, what is Islam?
Question 1:
From a scholarly perspective, should one speak of an Islamic world? In other words, is there sufficient cultural unity in the history that we have studied to speak of a world-system or a civilization?
Unity vs. Diversity
Gustave E. von Grunebaum (1909–1972), Professor of Near Eastern History, UCLA
The casual onlooker is struck by the picturesque uniformity of Islamic civilization. Individual objects as well as entire cities appear to speak the same *Formensprache* [language of form], most clearly symbolized by the sinuous intricacies of the Arabic script, the foreignness of it all being emphasized and protected by a difficult and puzzling language. Gradually, the student becomes aware of the inexhaustible diversity hiding behind the colorful veil, and he perceives the national and the regional elements. Further analysis reveals the alien provenience of much that looked indigenous; still, in the end, the most careful investigation will have to testify to that unity in the spiritual structure and that amazing power of adaptation that will present the foreign borrowing, hardly recognizable, in native garb. [...] The evolution of Muhammad’s preaching with its comparatively poor background of Arabian civilization into the cultural system of Islam with its claim to universal validity, forcefully coloring with its own and unmistakable patina every single object appropriated and every single thought accepted, is one of the most fascinating spectacles history presents.
The center of this system is religion. The modern Occidental, attracted by the theological development of the rigid monotheism preached by Muḥammad, is apt to overlook the subordinate place of doctrine in this system which aims primarily at regulating all and everything, in the life of the individual as well as in that of the community, in obedience to specific prescriptions issued by the Lord through His Prophet. There is nothing too slight, too personal, too intimate not to stand in need of being arranged by divine will. […] No distinction exists between matters sacred and profane since nothing is religiously irrelevant. Such a system is bound to prize stability. God is above change and so is His order, revealed once and for all by His Messenger. […] Change has to be justified as the true interpretation of divine ordinance […], or else it must be ignored, denied, or fought.

Clifford Geertz (1926–2006),
Professor of Social Science, Institute for Advanced Study
I have attempted both to lay out a general framework for the comparative analysis of religion and to apply it to a study of the development of a supposedly single creed, Islam, in two quite contrasting civilizations, the Indonesian and the Moroccan.

Indonesia
peasant
wet rice cultivation
inward and docile farmers built on diligence
Islam adopted civilization
Islam came by trade
cultural diversification
syncretistic
comprehensive
largeness of spirit
intellectualism
reflective
multifarious

Morocco
tribal
dry farming
aggressive sheikhs
built on nerve
Islam constructed civilization
Islam came by conquest
cultural homogenization
uncompromising rigorism
pure
intensity
formalism
rigorous
dogmatic
Shaykh Lutfullah and Sokollu mosque domes
Isfahan, Masjid-i Shah
Masjid-i Shah, maydan portal with heraldic peacocks
Istanbul, Sultan Ahmed Mosque (1609-17)
Istanbul, Sultan Ahmed Mosque (1609-17); Isfahan, Masjid-i Shah (1611-31)
Agra, Taj Mahal: Tomb-centered complex

Süleymaniye: Mosque-centered complex
Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal Floral Ornament
Question 2:
Does it make sense to use the adjective “Islamic” to describe this world?
Islamicate Civilization
Marshall G. S. Hodgson (1922–1968), Professor, Committee on Social Thought, University of Chicago
I plead that it has been all too common, in modern scholarship, to use the terms “Islam” and “Islamic” too casually both for what we may call religion, and for the overall society and culture associated historically with the religion. I grant that it is not possible, nor perhaps, even desirable to draw too sharp a line here for (and not only in Islam) to separate out religion from the rest of life is partly to falsify it. Nevertheless, the society and culture called “Islamic” in the second sense are not necessarily “Islamic” in the first. Not only have the groups of people involved in the two cases not always been co-extensive (the culture has not been simply a “Muslim culture,” a culture of Muslims)—much of what even Muslims have done as a part of the “Islamic” civilization can only be characterized as “un-Islamic” in the first, the religious sense of the word. One can speak of “Islamic literature,” of “Islamic art,” of “Islamic philosophy,” even of “Islamic despotism,” but in such a sequence one is speaking less and less of something that expresses Islam as a faith.
I have come to the conclusion that the problem can be solved only by introducing new terms. The term “Islamdom” will be immediately intelligible by analogy with Christendom. Islamdom, then, is the society in which Muslims and their faith is recognized as prevalent and socially dominant in one sense or another—a society in which, of course non-Muslims have always formed an integral, if subordinate, element […] Islamdom does not designate in itself a “civilization,” a specific culture, but only the society that carries that culture. There has been, however, a culture, centered on a lettered tradition, that has been historically distinctive of Islamdom the society, and which has been naturally shared in by both Muslims and non-Muslims who participate at all fully in the society of Islamdom. For this, I have used the adjective “Islamicate.” I thus restrict the term “Islam” to the religion of the Muslims, not using that term for the far more general phenomena, the society of Islamdom and its Islamicate cultural traditions […] The term “Islamic,” correspondingly, must be restricted to “of or pertaining to Islam in the proper, the religious sense” […] When I speak of Islamic literature, I am referring only to more or less “religious” literature, not to secular wine-songs, just as when one speaks of Christian literature one does not refer to all the literature produced in Christendom […] “Islamicate” would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims.

—Marshall G. S. Hodgson

To presume that a distinction between “secular” and “religious” literature that might be self-defining or self-evident to us in the Christian context is necessarily and equivalently meaningful in conceptualizing and categorizing the literary discourses of Muslims serves precisely to put out of conceptual focus the crucial and distinctive confounding or confusing quality of the paradigmatic literary expression of Muslims that is the very opposite of a clear-cut “secular” versus “religious” or “religious” versus “cultural” distinction. Indeed—and this is important—instead of making us realize that it is crucial to (try to) conceptualize the literature of Muslims on its own terms of engagement, Hodgson’s distinction between “Islam=religion” and “Islamicate=culture=secular” diverts and restrains us from the possibility of conceiving of Ḥāfizian literature as symptomatic and constitutive of Islam, rather than as “secular” or Islamicate “wine song,” or from conceptualizing art as symptomatic and constitutive of Islam rather than of “the social and cultural complex associated with Islam and the Muslims.”

—Shahab Ahmed

Praise, praise to Mahmud, who of like renown,
In battle or the banquet, fills the throne;

Lord of the realms of Chin and Hindustan,
Sovereign and Lord of Persia and Turan,

With his loud voice he rends the flintiest ear;
On land a tiger fierce, untouched by fear,

And on the wave, he seems the crocodile
That prowls amidst the waters of the Nile.

Generous and brave, his equal is unknown;
In deeds of princely worth he stands alone.

The infant in the cradle lisps his name;
The world exults in Mahmud’s spotless fame.

In festive hours Heaven smiles upon his truth;
In combat deadly as the dragon’s tooth;

Bounteous in all things, his exhaustless hand
Diffuses blessings through the grateful land;

And, of the noblest thoughts and actions, lord;
The soul of Gabriel breathes in every word;

May Heaven with added glory crown his days;
Praise, praise to mighty Mahmud – everlasting praise!

—Firdawsī Ṭūsī, *Shāhnāma*, ca. 1010 CE
The leader of the monarchs of the age, he whose every heart’s desire is fulfilled by God,
The possessor of the world, just and glorious, in whom the crown and throne of grandeur delight—
Like the sun compared to the stars in the sky, he is the greatest and loftiest of kings.
The celestial sphere is the threshold of the king of solar glory. In his service, the constellation Gemini girds its loins.
Besides the world-rider, [Rustam], the son of Zāl, there never was and never will be a match to him.
In manliness and heroism, he resembles Isfandiyār. He does not turn his face away from the battle, from the fray.
Even if Mount Alburz itself came after him, its form would become clay in his grasp.
At times of war, on the plain and in the sea, the panther and the crocodile flee from his clutches. On the battlefield, he is a cavalier; at the banquet, he is king. In generosity, he is like Bahrām. His court is the moon.
Though the custom of Kaykhusraw had grown old, it has begun anew thanks to him. At his palace, during weddings and nuptials, no one so much as thinks of the court of Bahrām Gūr. Alexander [the Great], with all of his wisdom and intelligence, with all of his manliness and strength,
If he were alive today, Alexander would worship him like a servant—
The Solomon of the age, with whom all chiefs seek sanctuary, King George III.
—Fīrūz b. Kā’ūs, Georgenāma (1818).
Question 3.
Is Islamic civilization fundamentally separate from European/Christian/Western civilization?
Richard Bulliet (1940–)
Professor of History, Columbia University
A fundamental restructuring of Western thinking about relations with Islam calls for a fresh look at history. […] The historical development of Western Christendom and Islam parallel each other so closely that the two faith communities can best be thought of as two versions of a common socio-religious system, just as Orthodox Christianity and Western Christendom are considered two versions of the same socioreligious system. For eight centuries, the pathways of development led in the same direction and occasionally virtually overlapped one another.
Latin Christians and Middle Eastern Muslims experienced common challenges in parallel time frames. However, they reacted to these challenges in different ways, and the variations in their responses had consequences in terms of how they responded to the next set of challenges. These divergences accumulated and contributed to a parting of the ways that became evident in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. From that time on, Western Christendom, with its overseas colonies, and Islam, now including mass Muslim societies outside the Middle East, followed trajectories that differed markedly, like fraternal twins that are almost indistinguishable in childhood but have distinctive, and not necessarily compatible, personalities as adults. Where in the earlier centuries the sibling traditions moved through their life stages in astonishingly similar ways, after 1500 they began to act as rivals in a worldwide drama. Yet the ways in which they played their roles as rivals still reflected their sibling character and their functioning within a common system: Islamo-Christian civilization.

Bahram Mirza Album, created by Dūst Muhammad, 1544-1545
Scene of a Safavid Majlis
Composite page of paintings and drawings showing figures in combat; two cheetahs attributed to Shaykh Mahmud; Qarpuz Sutlan signed by Shah Tahmasp; and enthronement attributed to Bihzad; the dervish Shallaqi Jami; and a dragon attributed to Shah Quli Rumi.
Angel of inspiration visiting the sleeping poet Khvaju Kirmani, from a Three Masnavis of Khvaju Kirmani (manuscript dated 1396 at Baghdad)
Two Grooms, Ming Dynasty, China.
(Caption reads “These pictures are the work of the great masters of Cathay.”)
3 Ch'an eccentric monks (Feng-kan, Han-shan, and Shih-te)
A dervish, attributed to Master Mīrak and Behzād
Portrait of a Young Man, after Bronzino (1503-1572)
Question 4: Did Islamic Civilization Decline?
Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406) on the Rise and Fall of States

1. Group solidarity (‘aṣabiyya) leads to the establishment of a state.

2. Ruler monopolizes power, becomes absolute sovereign.

3. Ruler uses his authority to satisfy his own personal needs, reorganizing finances to reduce individual taxes to obtain large revenue from small assessments.

4. Contentment, satiation and complacency.

5. State declines due to increasing costs of luxury.
Question 5: 
Taken as a historical entity, what is Islam?