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Progressive Muslims

ON JUSTICE, GENDER AND PLURALISM

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referents of the term "supernatural," which has proven to be a frustratingly elusive enterprise. The lack of consensus and the spread of confusion over the subject matter of religion have in fact led to powerful calls recently to abandon the concept of religion altogether for scholarly purposes on the grounds that it is an analytically obscure and methodologically unhelpful category.

The woes of scholarship are also reflected in popular usage, where the term "religion" is often passed over in favor of more appealing terms like "myth" and "spirituality" in reference to originally Asian, African, or Native American beliefs and practices, while observers as well as practitioners of Western monotheisms (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity) frequently have difficulty in fitting these faith traditions into the concept of religion. Perhaps the most notorious instance of this difficulty is the oft-repeated adage that "Islam is not simply a religion but a way of life." When used by outsiders, this maxim normally carries an air of opprobrium around it, with the implication that Islam should not, of course, be more than a religion, while insiders tend to repeat it with a special relish that also betrays a degree of astonishment ("How could anyone possibly have thought of reducing Islam to the level of being a mere religion?") When we probe this issue further, however, it emerges that Orthodox and Catholic Christianity as well as Conservative and Orthodox Judaism are also viewed by most parties – both insiders and outsiders, scholars and observers – as "ways of life." After all, who could say, in good conscience, that there is no such thing as "leading the life of an Orthodox Jew or of a devout Catholic?" To put it slightly differently, for most people there would be something amiss about any attempt to reduce Catholicism or traditional Judaism to a limited set of beliefs and practices called religion which is completely cut off from other aspects of human life. What, one wonders, is this thing called religion if Western monotheisms and non-Western beliefs and practices are not adequately captured by it?

At this point, many of you will no doubt want to object to this unexpected assertion that the term "religion" does not adequately embrace either Western or non-Western beliefs and practices. You will point to the existence of religious institutions (typically the Church is offered here as the obvious example), or to the widely held opinion that religion is a matter of beliefs about the cardinal questions of human life nourished in individual consciences. Could it not be claimed, you will continue, that "religion," as a descriptive term, denotes particular institutional structures like the Church or, failing that, personal beliefs held by individuals and/or collective doctrines shared by large human groups? The term should have a referent after all!

Unfortunately, this well-intentioned attempt to salvage the term is ill-fated from the start. On closer scrutiny, "religious" institutions do not prove to be significantly different than "non-religious" institutions like the state or the market, so that it proves to be impossible to distinguish one from the other. Worse yet, not all faith traditions seem to have developed complicated institutional structures like the Church. Many, indeed, display relatively low

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ISLAM: A CIVILIZATIONAL PROJECT IN PROGRESS

Ahmet Karamustafa

WHAT IS ISLAM?

One of the most difficult challenges awaiting anyone – Muslim or non-Muslim – who would like to observe, study, or understand Islam is to define and identify it. What is Islam, after all? To many, it will come as a surprise that such an innocent question does not have a simple answer. Wouldn't most people – again, Muslim or non-Muslim – agree in calling Islam a religion, for instance? Aren't there Islamic cultures? Isn't Islam a civilization? Each of the statements implicit in these questions ("Islam is a religion," "Islam is a culture or a set of cultures," and "Islam is a civilization") may look simple and straightforward, but in reality each is a mask that serves to cover up interminable difficulties.

ISLAM AS RELIGION

Let us first examine the assertion "Islam is a religion." What exactly does this statement tell us? Not much, unless we agree on a definition of religion first. It turns out, however, that there is no universally accepted definition of religion. Even though scholars of all stripes, over the course of the past century or so, have made valiant attempts to fashion a universally applicable definition, it is fair to say that their attempts have not led to any meaningful consensus. The one candidate for a commonly accepted definition – that religion is belief in supernatural beings – has proven to be riddled with problems. Foremost among these is the indisputable fact that some major faith traditions like Buddhism lack beliefs in supernatural beings of a kind comparable to the one God of Western monotheisms! Further, there is the problem of determining the exact

levels of institutionalization. And where institutions do exist, they do not serve to define the boundaries of the faith traditions. As is well known (though not adequately appreciated), there is, for instance, no church in Islam, though religious institutions of various kinds have existed from very early on in Islamic history. And none of those institutions (for instance, the religious college or the mystical association) can be said to stand for the whole of Islam. In short, trying to fill in the concept of religion by focusing on institutions is like describing the human body by fixing one's attention only on the bones.

If institutions do not help us define religion, what about the assertion that religion is all about belief and faith? Surely, this assumption at least will withstand scrutiny? Surely, all religious traditions are built around matters of individual conscience? Interestingly, it turns out that only Protestant Christianity fits this particular take on religion. It is true, of course, that concepts of belief, faith, individuality, and individual conscience were not invented by reformed Christianity; they are more or less universally found in the last three millennia of human history. But the suggestion that faith, hence religion, is to be understood primarily, even solely, as a matter of individual conscience is peculiar to Protestant Christianity. Since this form of Christianity was the civil religion of the United States throughout the twentieth century, it should not be surprising that popular conceptions of religion in America were shaped by it. But this view on religion does not serve us well when we turn our gaze to faith traditions other than Protestant Christianity (not to mention evangelical Protestantism, where it also fails). In Islam, for instance, individuality and individual conscience have always been at the core of the tradition, but very few have ever suggested that Islam can be defined using only these concepts.

To summarize our discussion so far: in both scholarly and popular usage, "religion" proves to be a murky concept with an unclear content, and there are serious doubts about its universal applicability. Under these circumstances, trying to define Islam by calling it a religion is, to say the least, singularly unhelpful. To the extent it can give rise to the false impression that Islam is a distinct entity with clearly delineated borders, the statement "Islam is a religion" might even be downright misleading.

But if viewing Islam as a religion is not particularly illuminating, how *should* we view it?

ISLAM AS CULTURE

If, in spite of our popular inclinations, the concept religion proves to be of little use in our attempt to answer the question "What is Islam?" do we perhaps stand a better chance by turning to the concept of culture? Is Islam a culture?

Indeed, there are many who claim or implicitly assume that Islam is completely identical with a particular culture, so much so that they almost see Islam as another name for that culture. This kind of cultural particularism has

always been more influential than you might suppose. A version of it, popular among both Muslims and non-Muslims (though more among non-Muslim Westerners), for instance, has been the tendency to establish an equivalence between Islam and Arab culture. In this view, Islam is seen as a divine sanction placed upon certain or even all aspects of Arabian culture after certain undesirable aspects of it (for instance, unlimited polygamy) were removed or reformed through the prophetic mission of the Arabian Prophet Muhammad. Especially prevalent in the first centuries of Islamic history, this view was successfully challenged and eventually displaced both by other cultural particularisms (not surprisingly, non-Arab Muslims too tended to value their own indigenous cultures over those of others) and by other intellectually and culturally more egalitarian approaches to Islam. Yet cultural particularism never completely faded away, and it was given new license in the twentieth century with the emergence of nationalism among Muslims. The new Muslim nationalists, the majority of whom worldwide were non-Arab, claimed Islam for themselves and their own nations. The new nationalisms were on the whole built on secularist foundations, but many nationalist Muslims, Arab and non-Arab, had to build their nationalist ideologies on the cultural particularisms of the pre-modern era, which were intertwined with Islam. This naturalization of Islam by the new national cultures of the second half of the twentieth century, though never built on solid intellectual grounds, has proven to be influential in the formation of the popular cultures of these societies, so that it would be fair to assume that most Muslims on the globe today, as members of nationalistic cultures, associate Islam in the first instance with their own national culture and only secondarily with any other culture. This is not to deny the global dimensions of Islam, but only to observe that the identification of Islam with particular local, regional, and national cultures is the norm among Muslim populations in the world. Cultural particularism is a major force to be reckoned with.

Does this mean that for all practical purposes, we should accept the claim that Islam is to be understood as culture? Not quite. For one thing, it is crucial to remember that particularism of any kind (ethnic, cultural, racial, and, yes, even gender based) has always been challenged, contested, and, more often than not, counterbalanced in Islamic history by universalism (as most definitively demonstrated by the declining fortunes of Arabism after the third Islamic century). In other words, the globalist, universalist, and humanist dimensions of Islam have never been completely submerged by any limited and limiting particularism. Yes, there are many different Islamic cultures on local, regional, and national levels, but identifying Islam with any one of these cultures would be to reduce and to distort it. This is because Islam is primarily a supra-cultural package of values, practices, and resources that Muslims adopt to navigate the stormy waters of human life on earth. We simply cannot ignore this global, universalizing nature of Islam.

Conversely, it would be equally erroneous to identify any particular culture thoroughly with Islam. In the first place, the attempt to identify Islam with only one of the literally innumerable particular cultures that claim to be Islamic is manifestly nonsensical. Also, it is crucial to remember that the fit between Islam and culture is never snug. No matter how we choose to delimit and define any particular culture, we can be certain that it can never be completely identified with Islam, which is simultaneously in and above cultures. This is emphatically the case with Arab culture as well, which was, it is true, the locus of the latest divine intervention in human history that resulted in the two sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the exemplary life story of Muhammad. Contrary to what some rabid Arab Muslim nationalists and their non-Muslim counterparts may believe, however, Muslims have never seen this as a divine command to Arabize humanity. Instead, wherever they are in the world they have always been and likely will always be engaged in an ongoing struggle to bring their own local cultures into concordance with their own understandings of Islam. This engagement is not a restrictive or destructive one, nor is it meant to level the rich cultural diversity of the worldwide Muslim community into a banal cultural uniformity. On the contrary, it is a productive and creative affair whereby believers actively attempt to shape and resculpt their cultures in the light of Islamic precepts. Particular cultures will always be both more and less than Islam, and Islam will forever be both in and outside of particular cultures. It is this creative tension between the two that attracts and fascinates Muslims.

The inevitable conclusion is that Islam cannot be viewed as a culture, nor can it be identified with any particular human culture. Some cultures have longer histories of Islamization than others, but the cultures of all people who self-identify as Muslims are all equally Islamic and cannot be hierarchically organized as being more or less Islamic. This is primarily because Islam is a transethnic, transnational, transracial idiom that people use to craft cultural identities for themselves. Could it be, then, that Islam should be understood as a civilization?

WHAT IS IN A CIVILIZATION?

It is a common practice to view human history as a composite narrative of numerous civilizational stories: ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Persian, Indian, Chinese, Aztec, Mayan . . . the list is a very long one. In this perspective, individual civilizations are self-contained entities that come into being, live their stories, then disappear from view, leaving behind physical and mental traces – some faint, some spectacular – on the stage of history. Civilizations, it would seem, are all but natural entities with distinct characteristics and life-cycles, not much different than the animate and inanimate genera and species that collectively make up our natural habitat. And who can take issue with this popular view? Civilizations indeed existed and continue to exist (though endangered by the onslaught of globalization), and, since none has yet proven to

be permanent, they are indeed transient, some would even say fickle, phenomena.

Agreed? Yes, but there is a nagging concern. Granted that civilizations are entities of some kind, where and how do we draw their boundaries? Better yet, do they even have boundaries in the first place? This turns out to be a thornier question than first imagined. And in asking it, we run into a major misconception about civilizations that we need to dismantle in our attempt to identify Islam as a civilization. This misconception can be called the "cocoon theory of civilization." Contrary to this all too pervasive idea that civilizations somehow have protective skins around them that jealously guard their quintessential kernels, close scrutiny of any civilization worthy of the name reveals only highly porous transitional areas instead of continuous and firm borders. Civilizations are entities alright, but they are not self-contained, watertight units. Their stories often tend to be thoroughly intertwined, even incomprehensible when told in isolation from the stories of other civilizations.

What leads to the prevalence of the cocoon theory is often the temptation to imagine civilizations not only as natural entities of some sort but also, and more specifically, as *biological* entities endowed with life and purpose. The naturalization of the concept of civilization does not stop at the observation that civilizations are similar to natural entities: since a civilization has a beginning and an end and is subject to growth and decay, we naturally assume, it must be alive and must function like any living organism. This is another major misconception about civilizations that we have to clear up, and it can be called the "personification of civilization." Contrary to this view, civilizations are not independent agents on the stage of human history. They are not capable of any kind of action, nor are they alive in any biological sense. A civilization is nothing more than a particular, even unique (though this *singularity* should not be abused), combination of ideas and practices that groups of human actors – who are the real agents of human history – affirm as their own and use to define and develop their own sense of presence and agency in the world. On a radical level, human history is not the cumulative narrative of civilizational stories; it is the story of individual and collective human agency as defined around a fascinating series of core ideas and practices that we call civilizations. Islam, we contend, is best understood as a civilization in this sense.

Before we can identify Islam as a civilization, however, we need to unwrap the layers of misconception woven around the concept of Islamic civilization by proponents of the cocoon and personification theories. You should be forewarned that these misconceptions are held by Muslims and non-Muslims, Westerners and Easterners alike: if no one has a monopoly over the truth, much the same can be said about untruths.

It is often thought that Islamic civilization, built originally on divine foundations (the view of most Muslims) or ideas and practices derivative from Judaism and Christianity (possibly the view of most non-Muslims), took its

peculiar shape through a series of complicated, evasive maneuvers that enabled it to preserve its pristine purity. Muslims, it is assumed, rejected cultural influences from the outside and jealously guarded their core values from being contaminated through contact with other civilizations. An influential Muslim view, perhaps the prevalent one, is that whenever and wherever they succeeded in preserving the divine kernel, Muslims flourished; whenever and wherever they succumbed to non-Islamic "contamination," they perished or lost power and became weak, even subjugated. The prevalent non-Muslim view seems to be the exact opposite: Muslims gained power where and when they were willing to temper the rather uncompromising, even rigid dictates of their religion with unabashed borrowing from other civilizations and lost this power where and when they turned a blind eye to the benefits that others had to offer.

Yes, you have guessed it: this is one, perhaps the most prevalent, version of the cocoon theory of Islamic civilization. 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 the other 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.

Proponents of this view often focus on the interaction between the nascent Islamic civilization and the Hellenistic philosophical traditions of late antiquity to exemplify what can be characterized alternatively as the presumed civilizational/cultural xenophobia (if the proponent is a non-Muslim detractor) or the unsullied purity (if she or he is a Muslim defender) of Islam. According to this reading of Islamic history, Islam had one genuine opportunity to assimilate the admirable qualities of Greek philosophical and scientific traditions (most crucially, its *rationalism*), made a serious venture in this direction (hence the glorious period of Islamic philosophy and science of the ninth and tenth centuries CE prompted by a massive translation movement from Greek into Arabic), but ultimately reverted to its original stock of ideas and practices unaffected by any cultural or civilizational influences (like Greek rationalism) that did not bear the divine stamp of approval.

That this caricature of an account of the encounter and interaction between an emerging Islamic civilization and the pre-existing Hellenistic traditions of learning still appeals to a significant number of Muslim and non-Muslims around the globe is disturbing indeed. What is wrong with this view? Wasn't Islam the product of a revealed message after all? And wasn't the revelation at the very core of the civilization that was fashioned in its image? Even if we answer both of these questions with a resounding "yes," the cocoon theory of Islam in general and its representation of its encounter with Greek learning in particular still remains indefensible. The divine message may have supplied the impetus for the development of a civilization, may have even been its nucleus, but the civilization undoubtedly drew from many other cultural wellsprings. Heir to the

variegated cultural heritage of the Hellenistic Near East of late antiquity (with distinct Greek, Persian, Mesopotamian, Syrian and Egyptian strands, to name only the most prominent), the new civilization proceeded to incorporate many other cultural traditions – North African, Saharan/sub-Saharan African, Iberian, South-east European, Indian, Central Asian, South-east Asian – into its multicolored fabric. Indeed, it would be more proper to talk about an Islamic civilizational sphere with numerous distinct cultural regions instead of a single, uniform Islamic civilization with an unchangeable cultural kernel. Simply put, Islamic civilization went global almost immediately after its formative stage. The cocoon theory either ignores this "global" facet of Islamic civilization or belittles it. It ignores the cultural plurality and diversity of Islamic civilization by placing the Arab Middle East at its cultural center (so that Arab Islam is purported to be "true Islam"). It belittles such diversity by suggesting that Islamic civilization remained forever closed to non-Arab cultures even where significant interaction took place. Islam's Greek heritage (yes, *heritage* and not just a fleeting, traceless flirtation) is just one prominent aspect of the historical development of Islam that is almost thoroughly masked by the cocoonists. Other aspects of Islamic civilization – some weighty and broad, others more subtle – similarly concealed from view by the senseless application of the cocoon theory are so numerous that we cannot hope to list them here. But whether local, regional, or global in nature, all interactions of Islamic civilization with originally non-Islamic cultures and civilizations are equally interesting and important: they all deserve our full attention and complete acknowledgement. Any other approach would be to impoverish and ultimately to desiccate Islam.

But cocoonists are not the only guilty party: there are also those – though they are frequently one and the same as the cocoonists – who talk about Islam as if it were a living organism or even a person. We may call these the "personifiers." They falsely and, alas, perniciously imagine Islam (and other civilizations) to be self-contained *organisms* closed in on themselves and engaged in perpetual strife and competition with others of their kind. Their "proof" of Islamic xenophobia/purity (as the case may be), tirelessly fed especially to Western audiences from many media and pseudo-educational venues, is Islam's supposed intolerance of others and its willingness to overwhelm them through *jihad*. This "proof" is equally as alarming – if not more – as the cocoonists' attempt to erase Islam's Greek heritage. This view too finds high numbers of subscribers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, though its Muslim proponents are an extremely small, yet highly vocal and visible, minority made up largely of discontented urban youth who find themselves in deplorable economic and cultural conditions.

What is wrong with this view? After all, did not Islam break into the world scene through a spectacular series of conquests? Is not jihad often proffered as the sixth pillar of Islam? Isn't there a certain exclusiveness written into the very core of Islam? The answer is straightforward, though it comes from an oblique

angle, thus avoiding the deception conjured by talk of jihad: no, Islam is not doomed to such a poisonous exclusivism of the kind imagined by personifiers, since Islam is not an "agent" in any sense of this word. The personifiers are guilty of a chilling, indeed deadly, fallacy, which is the fallacy of denying agency to real human actors (individual and collective) and imputing it instead to phantasmagoric concoctions called religions or civilizations that are seen as the true agents of history. Only Muslims (and of course non-Muslims), and not some imaginary agent named Islam, can determine the historical course of Islamic civilization. Of course, overlaying this fallacy and concealing it from view is another fallacy about jihad that needs to be set aright. This will be to dwell on the obvious, but it bears repetition: no, jihad is not an exclusivistic doctrine of elimination of non-Muslims but an attempt to realize the central mandate of Islam, which is the ceaseless, perpetual attempt to *become* a true believer.

Let us take stock. The cocoon and the personification fallacies, it emerges, are simply instances of that exclusive particularism we have already met under the name "cultural particularism" in our discussion on culture above. They betray the same unfortunate attempt to erect permanent, waterproof boundaries among social entities (cultures, civilizations) that are erroneously projected as the only true yet necessarily aggressive and mutually hostile actors of history. This combination of *exclusive particularism* – call it the grand illusion! – and *misplaced agency* – should we refer to it as the great agency robbery in human history that utterly dehumanizes all history? – this *unholy alliance* is utterly dangerous and should be resisted at all costs. The fundamental assumptions of all who push this envelope, namely, Islam's supposed imperviousness to historical and social change as well as its totally exclusive and, to boot, imperialist particularism, fly in the face of incontrovertible historical and, ultimately, human evidence to the contrary from Islamic history and contemporary Muslim communities. In this connection, it is absolutely crucial to realize that this toxic combination is peddled equally by both Muslims and non-Muslims, Westerners and non-Westerners. The Muslims are, yes, you've guessed it, those "fundamentalists" who crowd all other Muslims out of our screens, while the non-Muslims – from self-appointed voices of Western civilization like Bernard Lewis through Samuel Huntington, to Hindu nationalists and those like V.S. Naipaul who willingly cooperate with their appalling agenda of cleansing India of Muslims, not to mention Christian fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson – are those who divide the world into civilizational cocoons and like to transform Islamic civilization into a bogus enemy called the Islamic menace. It is imperative to expose this unholy alliance between Muslim and non-Muslim exclusivists for what it is: a dangerous game of recasting Islam into their own particularistic molds, one that dehumanizes not just Muslims but all humanity. At this stage, you will no doubt want to point out that our main objective, which was to answer the question "What is Islam?" has yet to be accomplished. We may have dispensed with some misperceptions that plague our understanding

of Islam as a civilization, but we have said precious little about what exactly a civilization is and how it furthers our understanding of Islam to identify it as a civilization. This is precisely where we are headed, but there is one more stop on the way before we reach our final destination ...

DEFINING ISLAM

We have been searching for a definition of Islam, and many of you have no doubt been somewhat uneasy about the fact that we have not yet considered any of the common, standard definitions of Islam even though these proliferate in popular venues among both Muslims and non-Muslims worldwide. These standard definitions, you might even assert, are rather straightforward and fairly easy to understand. Why not use them? Why, they may even help us supply the substance for the otherwise hollow concept of religion and steer clear of the problematic concepts of culture and civilization!

Let us take this point seriously and consider these common definitions, encountered in descriptions of Islam provided by scholars and non-scholarly observers and believers alike. The ubiquitous "five pillars" formula is the obvious example, and we will limit our discussion to this definition. According to this formulaic approach, Islam can be defined as honoring the foundational principle of *shahada* (standing witness to the truth of the claims that there is only one God and that Muhammad is His messenger) and performing the four foundational ritualistic acts of *salat* (daily prayer), *zakat* (charity), *sawm* (fasting during Ramadan), and *hajj* (pilgrimage to sites in and around Mecca during a set time period in the Islamic calendar). Does this formula work?

Contrary to the popular view that it works, I would like to argue that it largely fails. In fact, the only part of this formula that stands up to close scrutiny is the *shahada*: it would be fair to say that anyone who does not subscribe to it (of course, after interpreting it in his or her own fashion) cannot be considered a Muslim. But the same cannot be said for the other four pillars, since the ways in which these four performative acts factor into the definition of Islam have always been hotly contested theologically, legally, and culturally. Let me cut to the chase here and announce the main point directly and clearly: the four ritualistic pillars do not form a good and accurate measure of being a Muslim, historically, sociologically, or theologically. To put it in reverse, there have been and continue to be millions of people who wholeheartedly adhere to the *shahada* but who do not perform these four particular ritualistic acts in the manner prescribed in legalistic manuals. Not only that: a good percentage of such Muslims would *not* agree that these four rituals are necessary to be considered a Muslim. In other words, these "believers" are not just slackers who know perfectly well that they should perform these rituals but fail to do so for a number of reasons. (Incidentally, it is chastening to remember that there may well be more *negligent* Muslims in the world than *observant* Muslims. The largest Muslim movement on

the globe by a wide margin, *Tabligh-i Jama'at* with its headquarters in Pakistan, is out there to win the slackers back to Islam by teaching them the five pillars.) Instead, they are Muslims who consciously and deliberately stay clear of some or all of these rituals and express their allegiance to alternative ritual packages. Examples in history and contemporary societies simply abound. To stick to only the contemporary Middle East, one can name the Alevis in Turkey (fully one-fourth of the population, perhaps even more), the Ahi-i Haqq in Iran, the Alawis in Syria, the Ismailis in both Syria and Iran, the Yezidis and some radical Shi'i communities in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. To these Muslims who observe the precepts of Islam according to their own, alternative pillars, one should add the millions who choose to emphasize belief over acts and consequently de-value the performance of some or all of the four ritualistic pillars. These are not negligent believers or simply non-believers, but Muslims who choose to prioritize certain beliefs over certain ritualistic acts in accordance with longstanding theological orientations in Islamic history.

Where does all this leave us? Should we do away with the definition of Islam that is based on the five pillars, since it fails to be as comprehensive as it is sometimes made out to be? Or, more to the point perhaps, is this formulaic approach of any value to us in our attempt to identify Islam? In answer to these questions, we can say that there is utility in this formulaic definition, but only if it is embedded in a civilizational framework and used with care and caution. Islam *does* revolve around certain key ideas and practices, but it is imperative to catch the dynamic spirit in which these core ideas and practices are constantly negotiated by Muslims in concrete historical circumstances and not to reify them into a rigid formula that is at once ahistorical and idealistic. Many different formulae made up of the same core stock of ideas and practices that we call Islam have always co-existed in Islamic history, and it would be a mistake to attempt to freeze Islam into only one of these molds by fiat.

ISLAM AS CIVILIZATION

We are now in a position to identify Islam as a sprawling civilizational edifice under continuous construction and renovation in accordance with multiple blueprints (these are the numerous Islamic cultures at local, regional, and national levels encompassing innumerable individual, familial, ethnic, racial, and gender identities) all generated from a nucleus of key ideas and practices ultimately linked to the historical legacy of the Prophet Muhammad. It is vital to realize that nothing about this edifice is ever fixed or frozen in either space or time and that the construction itself is in constant flux. Alternative plans of new construction, renovation, even partial demolition emerge, rise to prominence, are implemented to different degrees, and fade away, while the core ideas and practices themselves, visible only through these very plans, assume different shape and color depending on the blueprint one uses to view them. What ties all

this together is the commitment of Muslims to a shared stock of ideals and key ideas along with their willingness to express these in a shared idiom, a common language. In short, Islam is a civilizational project in progress; it is an evolving civilizational tradition constantly churning different cultures in its crucible to generate innumerable, alternative social and cultural blueprints for the conduct of human life on earth.

"But, what," you will ask, "exactly is in that nucleus of ideas and practices lying at the center of this civilizational tradition?" Unfortunately, there is no pithy and definitive answer to this question. There have always been and continues to be a multiplicity of perspectives among Muslims even about what the core ideas and practices of Islam are. Minimally, however, we can assume a set of beliefs (a version each of monotheism, prophecy, genesis, and eschatology) that underwrite a set of values (dignity of human life, individual and collective rights and duties, the necessity of ethical human conduct – in short, a comprehensive moral program), in turn reflected in a set of concrete human acts (ranging from the necessity of greeting others to acts of humility like prayer). It is also necessary to add, though this is an obvious point, that this nucleus is believed to be contained in the fundamental sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the exemplary life story of Muhammad. It is a version of this core that lies at the center of each and every one of the innumerable manifestations of the Islamic civilizational tradition in human history.

We have arrived at our final destination. We now know what Islam is, and, equally important, what it is not. Has the journey been worth it? How useful is it to view Islam as a civilizational tradition, as opposed to seeing it as a religion or a culture? By way of closure, let us enumerate some of the virtues of this perspective on Islam.

- Viewed as a civilizational project, Islam emerges as a dynamic, evolving phenomenon, one that cannot be reified or fixed in any way. This is a healthy reality, one that needs to be acknowledged and celebrated, and not to be concealed from view under the banner of dubious calls issued by some Muslim activists "to establish true Islam" (normally an unmistakable sign of authoritarianism) or "to unify all Muslims" (normally betraying an extremely naive political utopianism).

- When it is understood as an ongoing civilizational construct, it is easier to highlight and to appreciate Islam as a truly global tradition. Not only is Islam not inextricably attached to specific human groups or to specific geographical locales (Judaic, Chinese, and Hindu traditions, for instance, have largely been so attached), but it is genuinely adaptable to most, if not all, human communities anywhere on the globe. To put it in other words, the emphasis on Islam's globality enables us to acknowledge and cherish its transcultural, transethnic, transracial, transnational, in short, its truly *humanistic* dimensions.

• A civilizational tradition, simultaneously in and above specific cultures, is fundamentally interactive with and inclusive of culture. As an ongoing civilizational discourse, Islam is an interactive and inclusive tradition: it interacts with the cultures it comes into contact with and, where it takes root, reshapes and reforms cultures inclusively from within. As a result, there are numerous different Islamic cultures on the globe, and they are all equally Islamic, equal partners in the making and remaking of the Islamic civilizational tradition.

• Finally, identifying Islam as civilization puts it on a par with the other major civilizations on the globe that share all of these same characteristics. While all civilizational traditions are by definition *dynamic*, surprisingly there are only a few traditions other than Islam that are also *global* and *inclusively interactive* in the sense we have discussed: Christianity, Buddhism, and Secular Humanism (which normally goes by the name Western civilization). The history of these civilizations clearly needs to be retold in a comparative and interrelated manner, and the future of all civilizational traditions (some global and interactive, but all dynamic) needs to be considered in the light of this history and in the context of increasing globalization. These are weighty and involved matters that need not, however, detain us from proceeding to our final point: Islam is one of only several truly global and inclusively interactive civilizational projects currently available on our globe, and all signs are that it will remain a major civilizational resource from which all humanity will continue to benefit. Let us all, Muslim and non-Muslim, contribute to the realization of this prospect by acknowledging Islam as a treasure trove of civilizational riches.

4

THE DEBTS AND BURDENS OF CRITICAL ISLAM

Ebrahim Moosa

A great painter does not content himself by affecting us with masterpieces; ultimately, he succeeds in changing the landscape of our minds.¹

INTRODUCTION

Modern Muslim thinkers are not only challenged to be innovative, but they are also simultaneously required to engage with tradition. And yet, the content of tradition is possibly one of the most complex and contentious issues contemporary Muslims face. In the past two hundred years, tradition has been subject to an extraordinary assault both from within Muslim societies as well as from outside. The advent of colonization brought yet another tradition, namely modernity, into a more forceful encounter with Muslim tradition.

On the one hand there are the pre-modern or traditionalist/"orthodox" accounts of tradition.² On the other hand, staunch advocates of Enlightenment rationality within Muslim societies not only challenge the idea of the pre-modern tradition or tradition itself, but propose a version of modernity as a mode of living and thinking for Muslim societies. The poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal was extremely perceptive in understanding the challenge with which the modern Muslim intellectual has to grapple. "The task before the modern Muslim is therefore, immense. He has to rethink the whole system of Islam without completely breaking with the past ... The only course open to us is to approach modern knowledge with a respectful but independent attitude and to appreciate the teachings of Islam in the light of that knowledge, even though we may be led to differ from those who have gone before us."³