

## Islam and the Orientalists

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**Abstract:** The term *Islam* has been used in various ways, i.e., (a) as submission, (b) as definition of religion and, (c) as the name of a particular religion. However, some orientalist erroneously argue that the term *Islām* is not the name of a particular religion and thus they try to confuse true *tawḥīd* with *shirk*. Both orientalist and supporters of the modern concept of transcendent unity of religions have skillfully used it to confuse Muslims and other readers.

There is much confusion in the writings of Western scholars as well as some Muslim scholars who have been influenced by them with regard to the term *Islām*. Some of them may be genuinely confused about the true meaning of the term, limiting it to the vague act of submission.<sup>1</sup>

These scholars misinterpreted certain Islamic literature, gave new meanings to certain terms, ignored clear-cut verses of the Qurʾān and *aḥādīth* and confound the writings of ancient and modern writers. This is as described by the Qurʾān (4:46) of the ancient Jewish scholars who “displace words from their right places and meanings.” For example, Cantwell Smith states that the word *Islām* has three meanings: “submission; the empirical reality of the world of Islam as it exists sociologically;” and the ideal Muslim community in a historical sense.<sup>2</sup> He argues that Islam is not the name of the religion revealed to Prophet Muhammad (SAS). To him, the use of the term Islam as a particular religion is of recent (19th-20th centuries) development. He claims that Muslims, like Christians and the followers of other religions, have gradually changed the meanings

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of religious terms as they became more conscious of themselves as a separate religious group and became more devoted to an in-group feeling than to the original faith.<sup>3</sup> Religion of Islam, it need be emphasized, was perfected by Allah (SWT) from the start and is in no need of going through the process of maturity. As a revealed religion, Islam is conscious of itself from the very beginning; it originated from Divine Revelation not from the circumstances of history.<sup>4</sup>

It is true, as explained by al-Attas, that in the case of other religions, their fundamental teachings or doctrines have suffered from the process of evolution. They evolved their system of beliefs or forms of submission through the historical development of their cultural traditions.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the rise of various denominations, as in the case of Christianity, is an evidence for the developmental changes in its religious fundamentals. Gerhart B. Ladner, among others, contends that:

The New Testament is one great message of newness. In its various aspects, the Christian kerygma, and the theology and law that grew out of it, include redemption, resurrection, conversion, baptismal regeneration, penance, and an eschatological new world. To these foundations St. Paul added still another innovative concept, that of the reform or innovation of man according to that image-likeness between man and God, in which, as Genesis 1: 26 tells us, he was created.<sup>6</sup>

A similar outlook is alluded to by John L. Esposito, who sees Islam in the same position as other religions such as Christianity and Judaism as needing a substantial reformation of faith and belief under the impact of modernization. He writes:

The very process of modernization, which includes the impact of reason, science, and technology, was seen as encouraging and enhancing this secularization process...As the more rationalist approach of modern biblical criticism and critical theological scholarship resulted in a substantial reformation of faith and belief in Christianity and Judaism, many predicted that if Islam did not follow suit, it could not hope to remain relevant to modern generations of Muslims. Islamic revivalism, like some forms of Christian revivalism, has countered and discredited such a uniform, evolutionary view of historical change and development.<sup>7</sup>

### The so-called “reforms” in Islam

Like Esposito, Jane Smith, in order to prove this evolutionary process that has effected the so-called ‘reforms’ in the religion of Islam, suggests that in the Muslim community itself there has been a change in the understanding and interpretation of Islam. By combining historical and the semantic approaches to the study of Islam, she concludes that the Muslims of the present age understand the term *Islām* different from what it meant to the Muslims of the earlier centuries of Islam.<sup>8</sup>

In refusing to accept the meaning of the word *Islām* as the name of the religion revealed to Prophet Muḥammad (SAS) and practically limiting it to a vague concept of submission, Cantwell Smith, Frithjof Schoun, Jane Smith and others wish to bring Islam under their broad umbrella of the unity of religions. In doing so, they go against the clear meanings of Qur’ānic verses and *aḥādīth* and confuse obvious reality with an intellectual and pedantic smoke-screen.

As a clear example, Cantwell Smith says that “Muslims and outsiders may disagree as to what Islam really is...Yet they may come together in discussing how specific persons at certain times and places have understood it.”<sup>9</sup> By such statement, Cantwell Smith and others of his kind had created doubts about the clear meanings of the term and create semantic confusion. Cantwell Smith proposes to perform an intensive research to “unearth” the evolution of the meaning of the word *Islam*. He states:

The fundamentally rewarding task would be to make a study of the history of the word ‘Islam’; to discover the evolution of its usage and the meaning over the centuries and the variety of connotations that it has evinced in the course of its historical development. We have been recently reminded that ‘the history of Muslim religion has yet to be written.’<sup>10</sup>

To Muslims, Smith’s statement that “... the history of Muslim religion has yet to be written” is not acceptable. There is absolutely no need to write the history of Muslim religion since Islam is not a historical religion that undergoes a historical process of evolution in line with changing circumstances. Indeed, as a revealed religion, Islam was already complete from the period of its inception.<sup>11</sup> But this completeness refers to the meaning attributed to the term *Islām* which

came to be the name of the religion as well. If, however, later generations of Muslims deviate from the complete Qur'ānic understanding, this will be similar to what the adherents of other distorted religions did to their religions, and as such the distorted understanding of Islam cannot be taken as a development over and above the original complete meaning with which Islam was endowed by the Qur'ān.

However, it must be obvious that such an invented confusion cannot cloud the striking clarity of Qur'ānic verses denouncing the *shirk* of Christianity, Judaism and other pagan religions; nor can this confusion cloud the Qur'ānic verses unequivocally saying that “those who seek a religion other than Islam will not be accepted by God” (3:85) or that: “the true *dīn* accepted by God is Islam” (3:19). To get around these problems, scholars who uphold the belief in a transcendent unity of religions avoid speaking about some verses and misinterpret others.

### Islam is Nothing More Than Submission

Of interest is the way Cantwell Smith changes the meaning of Qur'ānic verse of 3:19 so that it will enhance his position. He writes:

I myself do not necessarily find a systematic, institutionalized sense even in the classic verses where it is customary nowadays to see the religion as being named. *Inna al-dīna 'inda Allāhi al-Islām* (3:19) may be read as stating the essential religious truth that ‘the proper way to worship God is to obey Him.’ I will not however, repeat here my reason supporting this and similar interpretations. One may assert, however, that there is no instance in the Qur'ān where ... the dynamic sense of the term as personal faith is patently absurd or grammatically intolerable.<sup>12</sup>

Cantwell Smith is saying in effect that since Islam is nothing more than submission, and since all religions profess some form of submission then no religion can be properly called a religion without being a form of Islam or submission. There is an agreement among Muslim scholars that the word *al-dīn* in this context means “the religion,” and not “the proper way to worship,” and the word *al-Islām* here does not mean simply “to obey,” which is merely one aspect of submission. The expression “the proper way to worship

God” necessarily implies improper ways of worshipping Him and such improper ways of worshipping Him amount to disobeying Him. This means that there are other ways (read religions) of worshipping God that are not proper, and that there is only one way that is proper which is given the name of *al-Islām* because the form of submission (*al-Islām*) is true to the command of God and approved by Him.<sup>13</sup> As al-‘Attas points out, there are two forms of submission: (1) the willing and true kind (*taw‘ān*) which follows the way of the Prophets and, (2) the unwilling and false kind (*karhan*) which follows the inventions of the various religious traditions not emulating the way of the Prophets.<sup>14</sup>

### *Islām* as a Result of the Process of “Reification”

To further support his stand, Cantwell Smith indicates that it is only recently (19th-20th centuries) that Islam has incontestably become the chosen term to signify both a religion and a type of politico-social involvement. He suggests that the usage and meaning of the word *Islām* has undergone the process of evolution over the centuries. Accordingly, he concludes that the religion of Islam is no longer in its true, original form but has taken a “reified” sense.<sup>15</sup>

This statement is supported by Toshihiko Izutsu:

But by far the most important of all the concepts belonging in this class is the concept of Islam itself, not, of course, in the sense of the historical, objective religious culture known as Islam - Islam as a result of the process of ‘reification’... but Islam in the original sense of the determined self-submission, self-surrendering to the Divine Will, i.e., a decisive step taken by each individual person and existential problem, towards resigning his soul to God.<sup>16</sup>

In order to prove his view, Cantwell Smith has produced a number of arguments, such as Islam gets much less attention than *īmān* in the Qur’ān, with the ratio of one to five and the title Islam in the works of very early Muslim scholars are considerably less common than today.<sup>17</sup> His thesis eventually leads the readers to accept his conviction that Islam as the name of a particular religion is a comparatively new development and that the term really means religious submission in its general sense.

Cantwell Smith found it necessary to prove to the readers that the Qur'ān and the works of very early Muslims scholars used *īmān* to refer to the religion revealed to the Prophet (SAS), whereas the term *Islām* was used to refer to submission in general terms (individual submission) only. This is an obvious falsification of the Qur'ānic text.

### *Islām* Outnumbers *Īmān*

Cantwell Smith uses statistics to support his thesis, as he states that the ratio of the term *īmān* to Islam in the Qur'ān and in the works of very early Muslim scholars was statistically very significant in comparison to modern Islamic literature. According to this statistics, the ratio of the term *īmān* to *Islām* in the Qur'ān is five to one. Therefore, he concludes:

... during these centuries, *Islām* slightly outnumbered *īmān* in titles, in ratio of three to two. We have already seen that in the Qur'ān the ratio was one to five, in favour of *īmān*. In modern times, this ratio changes to over thirteen to one. That is, *Islām* gets much less attention than *īmān* in the Qur'ān, gradually comes to get slightly more attention as Islamic history proceeds, and today is vastly more considered.<sup>18</sup>

It needs be emphasized that the term *Islām* and *īmān* in the Qur'ān, *aḥādīth* and the works of the early Muslim scholars was synonymous and interchangeable and that the term *Islām* was clearly mentioned as the name of the religion revealed to the Prophet (SAS). Furthermore, the statistical technique as applied by Cantwell Smith can be extremely misleading in reaching such conclusions. For it is clear that for the purpose of the Qur'ān, *īmān* is more important than the name of the religion, and as such it must lay more stress on this vital concept. In the verses repeated so many times (41:8 and 30:35), *īmān* is put prior to 'amal (deed) (*inna al-ladhīna āmanū wa 'amilū al-ṣāliḥāt*).

Finally, one must stress that the use of statistical technique in discussing such conceptual issues is out of place and can lead to absurd conclusion. For example, one can say that the Qur'ān mentions the name of Prophet Mūsā (AS) one hundred and thirty-six times, whereas the name of Prophet Muḥammad (SAS) was

mentioned only four times as Muḥammad and once as Aḥmad. From this, and using the statistical technique, one may wrongly conclude that the Holy Qurʾān gives more importance to Prophet Mūsā than to Prophet Muḥammad (SAS), and that modern Muslim scholars have not followed their Holy Book in giving Prophet Mūsā the respect he deserves.

In the same vein, though from a different line of argument, we find other scholars as well, such as Haddad, who have even confused the term *Islām* with the word *al-salām* and concluded erroneously that *Islām* is not the name of a religion (*dīn*) but it is one of the names of God. She argues that:

Islam is not the name of a religion. It is God's name to what He has established as His *dīn* and is totally concerned with every action, every detail of all relevant and irrelevant aspects of life.<sup>19</sup>

Islam, Jane Smith believes, is "... the individual submission of the servant with acceptance of the heart and obedience of the limbs, or as the community open to all people united in love and peace."<sup>20</sup> She mainly relies on the works of a few famous orientalist, such as, Tor Andrae, Goldziher, and Ringgren. Tor Andrae emphasizes that Islamic submission by a Muslim is a voluntary one, a decision one takes out of one's free choice. He states that: "... religion is primarily a voluntary surrender in trust and faith. It was as designation of this voluntary act that Muhammad used the term Islam."<sup>21</sup>

Goldziher also reduces *Islām* to mere submission of the believers to God and he says the word *Islām* is better than any other word to denote submission, in expressing the situation in which Muhammad (SAS) places the believers in relation to God. Above all, to him, Islam is an indication of the feeling of dependence before the Almighty, to whom, it is necessary to abandon oneself in abdicating one's own will completely. He argues that this feeling of dependence is the main element in all forms of the Islamic religion and characterizes the mentality of its adherents.<sup>22</sup>

In the same manner Helmer Ringgren's writing reveals a clear linguistic analysis of the several forms of the verb, indicating both possible and probable meanings. Considering first the form of *s-l-m*, he summarizes its general meanings to be that of "wholeness,

entirety, or totality, an unbroken and undivided whole, peaceful and harmonious.”<sup>23</sup> In discussing the fourth form, *aslama*, he admits the difficulty in verifying the meaning in its Qur’ānic usages because usually *aslama* is a technical term for professing the religion of Muhammad (SAS), which is Islam.<sup>24</sup>

Ringgren relates that Islam is an act of gratitude towards God in the light of the relationship between man and God to whom everything belongs. In expressing the meaning of Islam as submission, Ringgren concludes that:

Submission and self-surrender are well known phenomena in religious life, and also is the feeling of total dependence upon God...we meet them also in modern Christian preaching. Submission is the true religious reaction towards a God, who is highly exalted beyond that which is earthly and human. And it is certainly a very natural reaction in a religion like that of Muhammad, which stresses the distance between God and man, and in which God is conceived of as the exalted Lord, ... Fear and submission are characteristic features of that religion, but as true religion cannot exist without faith and trust in God, the relation to God in Islam has also these characteristics. In many cases submission and faith are even identified. Total surrender is total confidence.<sup>25</sup>

Like other orientalist, Izutsu, as hinted above, defines Islam as submission. Citing the Qur’ānic verse (2:128) in connection with the total submission of Abraham, he says that here we find deep religious meaning of surrendering. He comments on Islamic submission by saying that, “... far from being a lukewarm and superficial sort of belief, or the first stumbling step in the faith, (it in fact) is the very foundation on which the whole religion of Islam is to be based.”<sup>26</sup>

Izutsu continues his emphasis on the internal aspect of Islam when he says that “...Islam, as inner personal religious experience of each individual person, means the occurrence of an important event that marks the initial point from which real obedience and humbleness begins.”<sup>27</sup> Without realizing that Islam, was conscious of itself from the very beginning, and has not been subject to historical process of evolution, Izutsu outlines what he sees as the smooth transition from the pre-Islamic *hilm* (in which are included



elements of *ihsān* (kindness), *‘adl* (justice), the forbidding of *zulm* (wrongful violence), the control of passion, the criticism of arrogance, etc.) to the concept of Islam. He notes: “From the Qur’ānic point of view, Islam in the sense of absolute submission and self-surrender was not a simply downright negation and rejection of *hilm*; it was rather a continuation and development of *hilm*.”<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Some orientalists and scholars of the transcendence unity of religions and their Muslim followers have erroneously interpreted Islam to mean submission. Their understanding of Islam is based upon atomistic selection and textual readings and is generally subjective and aims at furthering a particular agenda. Needless to say, these scholars neglect the semantic richness of the term *Islām* and assign it a meaning which is extremely broad. By so doing, they open the door for any person who submits to any form of deity to be a Muslim.

The term *Islām* stands for (a) submission, (b) definition of religion and, (c) the name of a particular religion. As a religion, Islam is complete in its fundamental outlook from the very beginning. All the essentials of the religion of Islam, such as the name, the faith and practice, the rituals, the creed and system of belief are revealed in the Qur’ān which is eternally absolute in nature. Accordingly, there is no place for the evolution of major conceptions of belief and *‘aqīdah* in Islam (5:3). These basic concepts do not undergo the process of change which clerics proclaim in other religions.

## Notes

1. D.Z.H. Baneth, “What Did Muhammad Mean When He Called His Religion “Islam?””, *Israel Oriental Studies*, 1(1971), 189-190.
2. Cantwell Wilfred Smith, *On Understanding Islam* (The Netherlands: Mouton Publishers, 1981), 174.
3. Ibid.
4. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 2001), 4.
5. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, (Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, 1978), Chapters 1 and 2.

6. See Gerhart B. Ladner "Reform: Innovation and Tradition" in *Medieval Della Vida Biennial Conference*, ed. G.E. von Grunebaum (Wiesbaden: Otto Hassarowitz, 1971), 53.
7. John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 194.
8. See Jane I. Smith. *An Historical and Semantic Study of the Term Islam As Seen in A Sequence Of Quran Commentaries* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1975), 1-2.
9. Smith, *On Understanding Islam*, 49.
10. *Ibid.*, 46.
11. See Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 4.
12. Smith, *On Understanding Islam*, 47.
13. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 11
14. See Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 61.
15. *Ibid.*, 48.
16. Toshihiko Izutsu, *God And Man In The Qur 'ān* (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Culture and Linguistic Studies, 1964), 199.
17. Smith, *On Understanding Islam*, 50.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "The Conception of the Term *Dīn* in the Qur'ān," *The Muslim World*, 64 (1974), 22. She probably refers to Ibn Manẓūr for the interpretation of the term *Islām*.
20. Smith, *On Understanding Islam*, 234.
21. Tor Andrae, *Muhammad, the Man and His Faith*, trans. Theophil Menzel (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1946), 67. He seems to have cited from Ibn Manẓūr.
22. See, Ignaz Goldziher, *Le Dogme et la Loi* (Vorlesungen, 1910), 2, as cited in Smith, *On Understanding Islam*, 25.
23. See, Helmer Ringgren, *Islam, Aslama, and Muslim* (Uppsala, 1949), 13, as cited in Smith, *On Understanding Islam*, 25.
24. *Ibid.*, 29.
25. *Ibid.*, 33. The Qur'ān not only stresses that God is immanent but also transcendent, for example, God describes Himself as nearer to man than (his) jugular vein (50:16) and also God says: But We are nearer to him than ye, and yet ye see not (56:85).
26. Toshihiko Izutsu, *God And Man In The Qur 'ān*, 187.
27. *Ibid.*, 187.
28. *Ibid.*, 200.