



Australian Journal of Islamic Studies

<https://ajis.com.au>

ISSN (online): 2207-4414

Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation

Charles Sturt University CRICOS 00005F

Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia

Editor's Introduction

Islamic Studies in the Modern World

Jan A. Ali

To cite this article:

Ali, Jan A. "Islamic Studies in the Modern World." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 5, Iss 3 (2020): 1-3.



Published online: 7 December 2020



Submit your article to this journal



View related and/or other articles in this issue

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at

<https://ajis.com.au/index.php/ajis/tncs>

ISLAMIC STUDIES IN THE MODERN WORLD

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Jan A. Ali*

Islam is a religion whose essence is the doctrine of divine unity or oneness of God, and its founding texts are the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*. The *tawhidic* paradigm makes Islam unique and the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* its life-source, which is what all its adherents share in common, otherwise Islam is a heterogeneous religious tradition. Islam is spread throughout the globe and is not contained in any national culture; thus, is a universal force. With the events of 11 September 2001, Islam has become the most prominent world religion and occupies centre stage in world politics. Those who subscribe to the Islamic doctrine of divine unity are called Muslims, who are over 1.8 billion in number and internally divided along sectarian, ideological, jurisprudential, theological, ethnic and parochial lines. Whatever Muslims deem to be correct and proper belief and practice is highly contested by the lay population and scholars, demonstrating Islam's heterogeneity. Debates surrounding Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy are not new developments but have accompanied Islam from very early in its history with the first such debates occurring with the emergence of the Kharijites ("those who defected from the group") – a group that agitated against Uthman and Ali (the third and fourth caliphs of Islam) and subsequently the leaders of the Umayyad and Abbasid empires beginning in 644. What constitutes Islam as a living tradition and "Islamic knowledge" is inherently contested; therefore, there cannot be a single Islam or unified and universal Islamic knowledge, although some Muslims unreservedly make such assertion for their conceptions of both.

It is worth noting that whatever Muslims do in the modern world is not necessarily Islamic. Muslims engage in a variety of activities and debates that are not informed by scripture – Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* or based on Sharia (Islamic law). The "local knowledge" of Muslim families and communities can include attributes that have no link to their "Islamic knowledge" and on occasion this Islamic knowledge is infused with local elements. There are practices and rituals performed by Muslims that pass for "Islamic" because they have been implemented for generations and taught by an *alim* (Muslim scholar), a *khatib* (sermon deliverer) or even an unlearned parent. Some beliefs and practices, such as shrine worshipping/visitation, celebrating the Prophet's birthday, chanting, female circumcision, self-flagellation, certain healing practices and soothsaying, are considered by some Muslims to be heterodox and unIslamic. They argue, because an *alim* or *khatib* has deemed such beliefs and practices legitimate or the fact they have been performed for generations does not

* Jan A. Ali (PhD) is a senior lecturer in Islam and modernity in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts and founding convenor of the WSU Postgraduate Islamic Studies Network in the Graduate Research School at Western Sydney University.

make them Islamic because of their congruence with the broadly accepted standards of authenticity, legal principles and scriptural teachings are conspicuously absent. Even saint veneration and invocation through a variety of rituals, including divination and ritual sacrifice, although appearing foreign to scriptural Islam have made their way into “normative” Muslim religious practice. These are deeply rooted in Muslim folklore but over the years with consistency in practice have come to be fallaciously accepted as Islamic.

Examining and understanding this kind of Islam – a heterogeneous living tradition with some non-discursive elements, which is internally extremely dynamic and multifaceted – is the purview of Islamic studies in the modern world. It refers to the academic study of Islam, which can be potentially pursued from several perspectival approaches but two are worth mentioning here. First is a traditional perspective in which Islamic studies is pursued by the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) as what in Arabic is called *‘ulum al-din* (“religious sciences”), which is different from non-religious sciences or rational sciences; for instance, mathematics, physics, chemistry and astronomy.

‘Ulm al-din, which is the traditional form of religious knowledge and thought, is pursued by the *ulama*, which includes studying *kalam* (Islamic theology) and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *usul al-fiqh* (methodology of jurisprudence), *ḥadīth* (Prophetic traditions), *usul al-din* (theology), *sirah* (biography of the Prophet) and various other fields. A subdivision of Islamic sciences is *‘ulum ul-Qur’ān* (the sciences of the Qur’ān) involving perfecting proper Qur’ānic recitation in Arabic called *ilm ul-tajwid* and exegesis of the Qur’ān known in Arabic as *ilm ul-tafsir*. In the Muslim context, “science” denotes “knowledge, teaching and learning” and is different from “secular science” or natural science, which involves using observation and testable explanations to develop and produce knowledge about the natural world. Secular science must not to be confused with the scientific works of Muslim philosophers and scholars such as al-Kindi, al-Farbi and Ibn Sina.

Second is a secular (by secular I do not mean irreligious but neutral regarding religion) perspective from which Islam is seen as an existential tradition; therefore, Islam as a religion and civilisation form the objects of analysis. This kind of study generally falls under the umbrella category of what I call the social scientific study of Islam. It is an academic multidisciplinary “studies” program with scholars from a range of disciplines, such as political science, history, sociology, anthropology and psychology, use social scientific tools to study Islam and its adherents in the modern world. We are most interested in the social scientific studies here, particularly sociology of Islam, because in recent decades they have increasingly turned to analysis of Muslim everyday life and Islam as “lived” experiences producing new knowledge for the betterment of our understanding of Islam and Muslims in the modern world.

Despite variations in empirical grounding and theoretical stances, these social scientific studies examine the practice of Islam – that is, what Muslims actually do – and investigate the processes influencing Islam that are intertwined with Muslims’ lived social realities. The social scientific study is not about the study of the religion alone, but also about its adherents.

In the fields of anthropology and sociology, the interest in religion in everyday life has revived a focus on institutionalisation of Islam and Islamic authorities. In a modern globalised world in which Islam has no central authority, who shapes Islamic institutions and who speaks for Islam are important questions for Muslims and non-Muslims. Social scientific studies help address this and provide profound insights into how and what Muslims practice as religious tradition. Since Islam is being interpreted and practised by its followers in a variety of ways, understanding this dimension of Muslim everyday living is critical, particularly through higher learning, which is made possible particularly in universities. For this reason, social scientific study of Islam is a fast-growing phenomenon in universities in Western countries as well as in Muslim majority countries. People from different religious and ideological backgrounds and Muslims are seeking opportunities to study Islam in order to gain a better understanding of the world's fastest growing second largest religion and its followers.

The *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies*, Volume 5, Special Issue 3, endeavours to look for new approaches consistent with contemporary social scientific study of Islam by presenting some important issues in the study of Islam and Muslim societies. Most of the papers collected for this special issue were initially presented at the Postgraduate Islamic Studies Conference organised by Postgraduate Islamic Studies Network from Western Sydney University and the Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation from Charles Sturt University at the Western Sydney University on 5 December 2019. The papers presented here give an overview of some of the major developments, questions, approaches and methods that scholars of Islam discuss at present. Some of the specific areas covered include Sharia, *ḥadīth*, the Qur'ān, Islamic ethics and jihad. These are important areas of investigation that shed light on the what scholars have pursued in the social scientific study of Islam and also what kind of Islamic knowledge is needed and produced in the modern world for the consumption of a wide mix of Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. What it is to be a Muslim involves various bodily practices, attitudes and dispositions, and understanding these embodied forms of Islamic knowledge requires rigorous "scientific" study. The nature and depth of the subject matters examined in these papers reveal the issues connected with Islam and its adherents are extremely complex and they can only be properly understood through a social scientific study of Islam.