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ISLAMIC AND MUSLIM STUDIES IN THE PERIOD OF GREAT TRANSFORMATION

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Jan A. Ali*

We are living in a period characterised by great transformation where transformation denotes a radical change in appearance, form, nature or structure. The scale, force and sometimes callousness of the transformation taking place in the world in which we are living is monumental. The transformation, the like of which humanity has rarely known, is not only diverse and multidimensional but occurring rapidly in all spheres of life.¹ There is also a constant shift happening in ideas, ideologies, and socio-cultural, economic and political rules and policies. Many social actors, processes and forces are involved in a complex variety of transformational processes in numerous domains of social life. The essence of transformation reveals a modification in the structure and function of a societal system, impacting interaction patterns, social processes and institutional functions. Members of society have been led to believe the transformation of inefficient system of central planning and distorted resource allocation by replacing them with decentralisation, liberalisation and privatisation will bring general prosperity and wellbeing. However, the reality is that the transformation is not always universal and often only benefits some sections of the society. Sales notes, "For many segments of the population, transformations are sources of new benefits but for others change triggers anxiety, resentment and trauma...with these 'past injuries' possibly leading to revolt, new conflict or regeneration."² Suffice it to say, there are deficiencies in transformation and in its internal workings with serious consequences, particularly when the pace of transformation is uneven and rapid, which is often the case. Considering this, many individuals, groups, organisations, communities and societies are struggling to transform their social universe and some even attempt to stop, limit or ease transformation, and sustain social stability, often within the structure of relationships of power and domination.

In the context of society, transformation involves change in behavioural patterns, social institutions and socio-cultural, economic and political structures within the wider framework of social systems and transnational spaces over time. In the realm of sociology, transformation is always linked to social change and understood as alterations that manifest in the social structure, elemental and comprehensive processes, and relationships within a society. It is a

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¹ Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

² Arnaud Sales, "Social Change: Definitions and New Issues," in *Sociology Today: Social Transformations in a Globalizing World*, ed. Arnaud Sales (London: Sage, 2012), 43.

profound and sustained, irregular systemic change within the broader structure of social order.³ Transformation, therefore, is a vital shift that occurs in the social fabric, affecting the way individuals behave, interact within a societal structure and carry out the tasks of everyday living. Such changes have the potential to produce modifications in norms, values, behaviours and cultural traditions. Considering this, Arnaud Sales defines transformation:

as the modifications, fluctuations, differentiations, evolutions, reconfigurations and revolutions that affect social life in time and space through creative processes generated and shaped by individual and collective, spontaneous or programmed, intentional or unintentional *human action*. [He continues saying] A transformation is the result of a group of processes – on occasion still under way (because these processes should not be artificially brought to a close) – in a social field, the state of which differs significantly from what it was in the selected reference period.⁴

One of the prime examples of this is religion, in this case Islam, in the integration and protection of a system of values, beliefs and rituals. Islam, which was founded by Prophet Muhammad in Arabia in 610 CE, is a strictly monotheistic religion and has historically been an impetus for social transformation in Muslim societies but has been itself subject to transformation exogenously. The translation of Islamic scriptures into non-scholarly everyday language and the extensive use of modern means of communication, such as digital media, have empowered Muslims to shape their religion as well as transform society. The Muslim world is no stranger to Islam as an agent of social transformation. In fact, some of the early Muslim propagators in what became the Muslim world were acting on religious convictions when they moved from the birthplace of Islam in Saudi Arabia to various parts of the world.

Islam as a religion and sociocultural force is a unified system of beliefs and practices. It instructs its adherents called Muslims to steer away from what is forbidden (e.g. alcohol, gambling, pork, usury, fraud, slander and the making of images) and pursue what is permissible (e.g. gift giving, charity, fasting, family making and caring for parents). Islam is a comprehensive way of life and rests on Five Pillars – belief in a single God and the prophethood of Muhammad, five ritual prayers, fasting, charity and pilgrimage. It unites Muslims into one single moral community known as the *umma* (community of believers). Therefore, for Muslims, Islam is a system of beliefs, values and practices concerning what one holds as sacred or believes to be spiritually significant.

By the time Prophet Muhammad passed away, most of the Arabian Peninsula had converted to Islam. From here, Islam expanded under the Rashidun Caliphate (632–661) and subsequently under the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750) to the Indus Valley and beyond. Then, during the reign of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1517), a vast region of the Muslim world experienced cultural, economic and scientific prosperity and extensive trade flourished. This era was dubbed the Islamic Golden Age.

³ Björn-Ola Linnér and Victoria Wibeck, *Sustainability Transformations: Agents and Drivers Across Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

Due to the spread of Islam far and wide from its birthplace into other parts of the world, including the West, Islam has become existentially a diverse religion. Its heterogeneity manifests in Muslims practising their faith in a variety of ways and being socially, culturally and nationally dissimilar.

Islam has various groups and subgroups. They are divided along ideological, theological, sectarian and jurisprudential lines, immensely complicating Islamic diversity. Some Muslims attach themselves to a particular theological or legal school, some belong to particular groups that seek to align religious teachings with contemporary issues or vice versa, and some belong to groups that focus on how one should interpret religious texts. Some divisions are politically based; others are theologically or spiritually based. This division is further compounded by separation along cultural, denominational/sectarian, linguistic, parochial and national lines.⁵

So, why study Islam and Muslims? As I said above, rich diversity exists in Islam and among its adherents. Islam is the world's second largest religion "with an estimated 1.8 billion followers worldwide."⁶ Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim country and, although most Arabs are Muslim, most Muslims are not Arab. There are different assumptions about Islam and Muslims and much of this is erroneously represented in the media. Islam and Muslims are often and automatically otherised because of their different ideas and way of life and general lack of knowledge in the society. It is, therefore, critical for individuals to try to understand the social and cultural diversity, values, ideals and practices of Islam and to make effort to learn more about and study Islam and its adherents in an endeavour to develop an inclusive and peaceful community and avoid excluding Islam and Muslims based on their "otherness."

Moreover, studying Islam and Muslims will enable individuals to acquire expansive new insights into Islam and its history, intellectual life, adherents and societies. It will provide an appreciation of Islamic theology, philosophy and mysticism, and the myriad ways that Muslims think through what it means to be a Muslim in the constantly changing modern world. The study of Islam and Muslims introduces individuals to Muslim societies across an amazingly expansive geographical span, from West Africa to Central Asia and down to Southeast Asia. Given there is a massive amount of misinformation about Islam and Muslims in the media today and ever-increasing irrational fear in the community, studying Islam and Muslims academically and social-scientifically is the most appropriate way to learn about Islam and Muslims and come to a better appreciation of the world's fastest growing religion and its adherents.

⁵ Jan Ali, *Islam and Muslims in Australia: Settlement, Integration, Shariah, Education and Terrorism* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 23-24.

⁶ Don Vaughan, "What is the Most Widely Practiced Religion in the World?" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 19, 2020, accessed March 8, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/story/what-is-the-most-widely-practiced-religion-in-the-world>.

Today, to study and understand Islam and Muslims is a complex intellectual endeavour. In intellectual and academic circles, this endeavour is covered under Islamic studies.⁷ Islamic studies is a multidisciplinary academic investigative instrument to study Islam and its adherents. It is an all-encompassing term drawing on a mixture of fields including Islamic history, culture, religion, Islamic civilisation, Sufism (mysticism), Islamic philosophy, human rights, comparative religions, Islamic social sciences, Islamic scientific heritage, interfaith dialogue, gender studies, Sharia (Islamic law), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *kalām* (Islamic theology), Islamic banking and finance, Islamic scriptures (Qur'an and *ḥadīth*), *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) and the Islamic state. Collectively, they form the instrument for the cognition of Islam as what is often described as a complete and comprehensive way of life.

Those who study Islam and Muslims often do so from different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, making Islamic studies a multidisciplinary academic program. Using the instruments of multidisciplinary and a comparative approach elucidates the various expressions of Islam as a lived tradition, the impact of Islamic civilisation on global processes and systems, and the complex debates surrounding the place of Islam in the modern world.⁸ Many contemporary scholars and students who work in the area of Islamic studies have adopted analytical tools and methods in their investigative endeavours, usually used in humanities such as philosophy and social sciences such as anthropology and sociology.

Although Islamic studies, in its current form as an academic discipline, is a recent development, it is fast becoming a popular academic investigative instrument to examine Islam and Muslims in the modern world and the interaction and interface between Islam and the West.⁹ Those who study and teach Islamic studies are from Islamic and non-Islamic backgrounds and it is recognised as an important field of study in the universities of Western countries including Canada, USA, New Zealand and Australia.

This Special Issue, titled *Islamic and Muslim Studies in the Period of Great Transformation*, examines Islam as a religion and sociocultural force. It surveys and discusses the inner complexities of Islam as an existential tradition and its variety of rituals, practices and teachings embedded in the pattern of Muslim everyday living. Moreover, it explores the transformation of Muslim societies in different periods and various localities, providing a broad narrative of Islamic tradition and Muslim everyday reality. Using modern academic tools, scientific research methods and theoretical frameworks, it provides in-depth analysis of the diverse ways through which the religious dimension at the core of Islamic tradition has paved the way for the emergence of a distinctive type of Muslim world; one that is modern religious. The deep analysis shows that various historical forces have converged and matured in institutional forms at different levels and the diverse ways in which Islam has flourished and continues to permeate daily life in Muslim majority countries and beyond.

⁷ Jan Ali, "Teaching Islamic Studies in an Australian University," *Perspectives: Teaching Islamic Studies in Higher Education* 2 (2011).

⁸ Jan Ali, "Islamic Studies in the Modern World," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 5 (2020).

⁹ Jan Ali, "Studying Islam and its Adherents in Australian Universities," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7 (2021).

The general idea of the Special Issue is to use specialised research to show the contingent paths taken by Islam and Muslims to come to terms with the transformation occurring in the complex shifting modern world and different levels of interrelationships occurring in it. It is to foster and disseminate ongoing and new research about Islam and Muslims in this period of great transformation. In other words, using the tools of multidisciplinary and comparative approach, it seeks to better understand the transformation occurring in Islam as an existential phenomenon and in the patterns of Muslim everyday living.

The contributors to the Special Issue have examined specific dynamics of Islam and the transformation of Muslim social life as triggered by changes and achievements made in the modern world. Thus, the first article, titled *Evaluating Ayaan Hirsi Ali's Views on Adherence to Islam in Heretic*, evaluates Ayaan Hirsi Ali's ideas and thinking about Islam and Muslims in secular liberal West. The article, based on ethnographic research with Muslims in the West, reveals that Ayaan Hirsi Ali's claim that there is a clash of norms and values between Islam and the West is unfounded. Muslims in the secular liberal West generally practise Islam with ease and Ayaan Hirsi Ali's views are thus a misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in the West.

The second article, titled *Finding the Moral High Ground: The Unshackled as Defenders of 'Truth'*, explores the dual role of conservative right-wing media in shaping public perceptions and formulating anti-immigration rhetoric with Muslim immigrants as the main target. The article posits that this is one among very few studies that have looked at the relationship between alternative news outlets that use 'free speech' to spread anti-Islam and anti-Muslim rhetoric in the context of immigration to Australia. The study found that an alternative news outlet – *The Unshackled* – reported issues on Islam and Muslims in 2019 using the power of 'free speech,' giving voice and authority to biased commentators who promote anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments in the community. Consequently, this further negatively impacted the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia.

The third article, titled *The Application of Islamic Principles on Entrepreneurship Competence Development Framework*, examines the concept of entrepreneurship, which is essential for economic growth. The article recognises that the European Union's Entrepreneurship Competence Development Framework is comprehensive; however, it is by nature secular and not Divine. This framework is geared towards achieving immediate worldly goals and has unconstrained creativity. As such, the framework is not compatible with Islam. Using core Islamic principles and teachings, an alternative framework is proposed called Muslimpreneurship Competence Development Framework, which puts the transcendental as the foundation and axis of all things. The suggestion is that the Muslimpreneurship Competence Development Framework is comprehensive, compatible with Islam and Muslim user-friendly.

The fourth article, titled *Islamic Pluralism and the Muslim Voice: Western Attitudes that Define Islamic Identity in the West*, investigates the parameters of Muslim voice in the West in the context of Islamic pluralism and modernity. Relying on the works of Said Nursi and Fazlur

Rahman, complemented by the perspectives of Bernard Lewis and John Esposito, the article examines the impact of biased Western attitudes towards Islamic identity and practice. The article also relies on Muslim artists and their spoken words as the medium to express their pain and struggles. The aim is to explain the perceptions of Islamic pluralism in the West.

The fifth article, titled *Revisiting the Crucifixion of Jesus Within Islam*, explores the concept and phenomenon of the crucifixion of Jesus in Islam. While the Qur'ān claims Jesus was not crucified and simply raised up to the heavens, the Shi'ite Isma'ilis reject that and offer an alternative interpretation of the crucifixion as being "real." The article examines this in some depth by discussing different approaches to Qur'ānic hermeneutics with a focus on the Shi'ite Isma'ili exegetical analysis of the crucifixion.

The sixth and final article, titled *Analysing 'Jihad' Rhetoric in the Australian Context*, examines how jihad is represented in Australian print media, namely in *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The article claims that Australian newspapers represent jihad in a certain way that solidifies its meaning erroneously as a 'holy war' when in fact the Qur'ān discusses it as a tool for struggle in the path of Allah. Such ill media conceptualisation and misrepresentation of jihad has general consequences for Muslims and Muslim–non-Muslim relations.

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