Islam Beyond Orientalism
To what extent does the category 'religion' describe what Islam is?

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Abstract

In recent decades, the validity and the sufficiency of the term 'religion' as an analytical category have been examined by many religious studies scholars. This essay urges Muslim scholars, sociologists, and scholars of religion to be cautious and to direct critical attention to the practice of categorizing the term 'religion' in their scholarly discourse and in society at large. Such critical deliberations on the use of 'religion' as an analytical category must occupy a focal position within any meaningful academic discourse pertaining to religious phenomenon in general and Islam in particular. To be more specific, the critical analysis of the term 'religion,' and of its delineations with seemingly secular categories, must be further constructively incorporated into any academic discourse on religious phenomena or Islamic tradition. Each distinct conception of the term 'religion,' as well as its differentiation from other analytical categories, are outcomes of a particular historical occurrence, within the bounds of specific social institutions and interactions, framed by particular traditions and norms. This essay's critical analysis encompasses not only the category of 'religion' in various geographical and historical settings, but also the conception of 'religion' in anthropological and sociological literature.
Keyword: Islam, religion, dīn, orientalism, Goldenberg, al-Ghazali

Introduction

In recent decades, the validity and the sufficiency of the term 'religion' as an analytical category have been examined by many religious studies scholars. This essay urges Muslim scholars, sociologists, and scholars of religion to be cautious and to direct critical attention to the practice of categorizing the term 'religion' in their scholarly discourse and in society at large. Such critical deliberations on the use of 'religion' as an analytical category must occupy a focal position within any meaningful academic discourse pertaining to religious phenomenon in general and Islam in particular. To be more specific, the critical analysis of the term 'religion,' and of its delineations with seemingly secular categories, must be further constructively incorporated into any academic discourse on religious phenomena or Islamic tradition. Each distinct conception of the term 'religion,' as well as its differentiation from other analytical categories, are outcomes of a particular historical occurrence, within the bounds of specific social institutions and interactions, framed by particular traditions and norms. This essay's critical analysis encompasses not only the category of 'religion' in various geographical and historical settings, but also the conception of 'religion' in anthropological and sociological literature.

The following critical analysis has been informed by a collection of theories frequently referred to as 'critical religion' from scholars such as Talal Asad (1993), Timothy Fitzgerald (2000), Shahab Ahmed (2016), William T. Cavanaugh (2009) and Edward Said (2003). The principal aim of this essay is to echo and draw on Goldenberg's proposition: "to build an argument for curtailing the use of the category of 'religion.'" (2013: 40). This requires an examination of the term 'religion' as an analytical category. This, nonetheless, neither necessarily means that all the analytical categories should be abandoned, nor does it vindicate their all-encompassing analytical implementation. This essay's broad stance regarding analytical categories is that whenever a particular term is employed analytically, the aim and end of its use shall be clearly stated. If not, patterns and biases tacitly implied in such use, which envelops the pattern of classification, shall be critically analyzed.

With that in mind, any analytical term shall be substituted carefully or even rejected if it leads to sustaining the dominant power that was being critiqued in the first instance. Concerning the term 'religion' and its celebrated distinction from the secular, Fitzgerald argues: "[religion] constitutes a fundamental constituent of modernity" (2011: 5). For this reason, as far as the analytical category 'religion' is concerned, this essay maintains that it must be expanded or, if necessary, substituted by more specific terms that could allow each tradition or religious phenomenon to be understood on its own terms. Therefore, this essay proposes that instead of studying religion in and of itself as if it were an observable phenomenon, academics need to examine the classificatory practice that uses the broad category 'religion'

within a particular context.

In this spirit, this essay is in line with Arnal who argues that "the academic future of religion as a concept will need to focus on deconstructing the category and analyzing its function within popular discourse rather than assuming that the category has content and seeking to specify what the content is" (2013: 28). Furthermore, this essay adds its voice to the growing chorus of scholars and researchers who advocate the meticulous critical analysis of the of religious-secular dichotomy. Such a systematic study requires charting and conceptualizing numerous processes within which a specific actor or norm turns out to be potentially religious or secular.

As a critical analysis, the first section embodies the principal objective of this essay by reviewing recent scholarly critiques against the term 'religion' as an analytical category. This section is followed by a critical exploration of the equivalent of 'religion' in Arabic literature and Islamic thought. A special focus is placed on renowned medieval Muslim scholar Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's approach to the conception of '*dīn*' in Islamic thought. The interrogation of the conception of '*dīn*' in this essay endeavors to unpack historical and culturally-particular understandings of the term '*dīn*' in Islamic thought. The essay concludes with recommendations for further analytical research.

The Etymology and Significance of 'Religion'

A good starting point for an inquiry into the position of the essence of 'Religion' in the academic circles is to ponder how it is commonly understood. The etymological roots of the English term 'religion' can be traced to the Latin root 'relig' meaning 'to bind', however, the contemporary common use of the term has been changed to refer to an arrangement of individual or collective tenants that most often, not always however, involve belief, as well as frequently a spiritual experience of worship, prayer, ceremony, ritual, etc (Cavanaugh, 2009; Gregorios,1992).

Ever since the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, Western academics employed the category 'religion' to call attention to belief in a 'transcendent creator' whose intelligent design brought forth a meticulously organized existence, which is governed by the natural laws dictated by that almighty creator and could be systematically unveiled by physicists and chemists. With the advancement and accumulation of knowledge about other parts of the world and the peoples therein, the term religion evolved to refer additionally to the doctrines and rituals of the societies newly encountered by western explorers (McCutcheon, 2003).

For this reason, there came what to be known as the major 'world religions', among these are Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism alongside several minor 'religions.' Modern western rationality, dissatisfied with

Christianity's ecclesiastical claims to divine revelation, casted on the societies it came across, on the path of colonization worldwide, the reduced theism that resulted from its historic anomalous concession with Christianity. Following in the footsteps of how western theology deemed all doctrines to eventually refer to one deity, likewise could all multitude of gods, practices, ceremonies and rites be encompassed by the category 'religion' (Woodhead et al, 2009).

Mapping Out a Critique of the Category 'Religion'

For some decades, the academic notion of religion has been a subject of critical analysis and deconstruction by a plethora of scholars. Its worth as a category of analysis has been questioned (Arnal et al, 2013; Fitzgerald 2000; McCutcheon 1997). Such scholarly critical approaches emanate from a post-colonial standpoint that was prominently formulated by Said (1993), and from a poststructuralist angle, substantiated by Foucauldian discourse analysis. Due to the particular cultural and historical conditions of Western modernity, the category of 'religion' evolved as the binary opposite of the 'secular' (Asad 2001, 2003; Cavanaugh 2009; Nongbri 2013). All over the four corners of the globe, there did not exist an equivalent for the term 'religion', yet the Western colonial powers repeatedly dictated the construct of 'religion' upon several cultures and traditions (Chidester 1996; Josephson 2012). Fitzgerald maintains that the exposure of the term's Western imperial legacy attracts postcolonial critiques to its cross-cultural involvements (2007).

Talal Asad is a distinguished UK-trained anthropologist and presently a Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In his 1993 ground-breaking book, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Asad provides a striking analysis that challenges the entire category of religion. In the very first chapter on "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," (p27) Asad argues that Protestant axioms substantially construct the notion of 'religion' in numerous present-day contexts. Therefore, the attempts to define religion are not plausible due to the fact that the foundational idea of such definitions is per se the historical outcome of discursive processes, particularly, given the cultural position of secular modernity.

In the book, Asad attempts to reflect on 'religion' as language, conduct, and awareness established in societal relations in lieu of schemes of meaning. He, moreover, endeavours to reflect upon narrow parts of the Islamic and Judeo-Christian past to attain a well-established comprehension of how and what individuals experience when they employ the term 'religion'. To Asad, the pursuit to define 'religion' is inseparable of the bigger issue of the countless ways language shapes life. He sought to circumvent contentions triggered by typical 'essential' definitions such as "religion provides purpose to life, consoles the human soul, yet is accountable for sizable evil."

Asad further argues that the effort to define 'religion' is supposed to demarcate and restrain specific factors (powers, doctrines, scriptures, figures, sites, duration) as fundamental to 'religion' and other factors as extraneous. The effort made to determine whether or not a given factor pertains to a definition is not ascertained as a result of the same experience – the factors per se are various, and the manner individuals experience them is greatly dissimilar. For this reason, to translate even just one 'religious' concept into another language is precarious and troublesome. Therefore, Asad's dilemma regarding "universal definitions of religion" has been that the insistence on a common core distracts the focus that is supposed to be on what is included in the definition and what is excluded, by whom, in what way, for what reason. The attempt to fathom genealogies of conceptions is one effective way to address such questions.

As a matter of fact, Asad prompts and calls for a wholly different conceptual and methodological approach from that articulated by previous anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz. Clearly, Asad's analysis goes beyond the use of language. His explanation reflects a move beyond symbolic anthropological accounts toward a poststructuralist approach that predominantly looks into power, discipline and the formation of religious practitioners. While there have been numerous critical accounts from materialist anthropologists, Asad's essay constitutes one of the most significant accounts from within the subfield of the anthropology of religion to substitute the symbolic approach. It is noteworthy that his critique is reflective of the consequences stimulated by a shift in perspective. He starts with what could be qualified as a Muslim hypothesis that power and what it is commonly defined as religion are inseparable. Apart from this, Asad grounds his approach substantially on the ideas of the French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, and those of the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. He also grounds his account unambiguously on the work of the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky.

Timothy Fitzgerald was Reader in Religion at the University of Stirling between 2001-2015 and he earlier worked as an Associate Professor at the Department of International Culture at the Japanese Aichi-Gakuin University in the period between 1988-2001. His work treats 'religion' not as a stand-alone category but as a key term in the modern configuration of categories that constitute and construct secular liberal 'reality'. He has thus worked on the critical deconstruction of 'politics' and 'political economy' and their binary relation to 'religion'(Fitzgerald, 2015).

In his 2000 thought-provoking book *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, Fitzgerald joins a growing academic stream that, in addition to disputing the analytical feasibility of the category religion, aims to totally discard it. He does so by employing a two-fold approach. First, by exhibiting that it has no meaningful contribution to make as an authoritative inquisitive criterion. Second, by invoking the category's

detrimental historical role in the evolution of the modern Western ideology, he highlights that its use obfuscates the phenomena it is expected to make understandable. In the book, Fitzgerald literally states, "the word 'religion' is analytically redundant. It picks out nothing distinctive and it clarifies nothing. The world religion merely distorts the field" (p.17).

By scrutinizing supposedly religion-related literature written by anthropologists, ethnologists, historians, religionists, and other social scientists, Fitzgerald managed to broaden simultaneously both the cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural scopes of the analytical capacity of the category commonly known as 'religion'. By examining the multiplicity of usages of the category 'religion', Fitzgerald exhibits and indicates the implausibility of the persistent reliance on the category 'religion' as a means of analysis. Furthermore, he established the untrustworthiness and unreliability of the category 'religion' as the rationale for distinguishing between academic genres and departments by exposing the category's fallacious nature, which per se reflects a discrepancy between an openly declared or naturally implied aim or reason and the true one. Therefore, employing 'religion' as a category of analysis can no longer be defended on the grounds of yielding analytical insights or benefits.

Moreover, Fitzgerald reveals the obfuscation and perplexities brought about in the attempt to fathom and analyze social norms and intuitions in some Asian traditions, namely Japan and India, as a ramification of employing the modern western differentiation between religion and non-religion, and the ensuing contradiction in those cultures between native and western political, legal, psychological, spiritual and theoretical values. By meticulously re-evaluating the category 'religion', researchers are in a better position to offer meaningful contributions to address the dire need to reconstruct academic categories, hence providing more room to novel notions and conceptions regarding social norms and cultural institutions.

Beyond that, Fitzgerald argues that there exists an ambiguity that has always surrounded the long-drawn-out academic disputes and deliberations over the analytical power of the category 'religion'. This is primarily owing to the fact that the theoretical basis for the differentiation between 'religion' and 'the secular' has been predominantly the outcome of extensively standardized western social systems. Nevertheless, numerous scholars of religion still pose persistent questions about the essence and boundaries of their area of academic investigation.

The failure to unanimously agree on which analytical stratum the term religion is employed, let alone agreeing on the distinctive criteria between non-religion and religion, led numerous pundits of social sciences to push the idea that 'religion' as a term is self-validating. Alternatively stated, the pith of the term 'religion' is warranted solely and merely by using it. Along with that, Fitzgerald observes that the unescapable self-justifying epiphany of the term religion in the eyes of those who use it is because the language game is the primary factor in delineating the

significance of the term.

It is noteworthy that Fitzgerald maintains a neutral attitude toward liberal ecumenical theology per se. He clearly states that "Theology as theology seems to me to be a perfectly legitimate intellectual exercise and in one form or another we may all be engaged in an activity somewhat akin to theology" (p.7). He further states "that this argument is not anti-theological. It is an argument against theology masquerading as something else" (p.20). He subsequently refers to the exposition of the English theologian and philosopher of religion John Hick as "a good example of an explicit, non-surreptitious, and philosophically interesting liberal ecumenical theology" (p.253). In the book's concluding section, Fitzgerald advocates a confluence of cultural anthropology, cultural studies, and religious studies into one discipline that would discard the term 'religion' and that could be simply known as "humanities," "cultural studies," or "theoretically informed ethnographic studies" (p.224).

The recently deceased prominent scholar Shahab Ahmed (December 11, 1966 – September 17, 2015) was a Pakistani-American Associate Professor of Islamic Studies at Harvard University (Harvard, 2015). In his 2016 thought-provoking book entitled *What is Islam?: The importance of being Islamic*, Ahmed introduces a defiant, unprecedented conceptualization of Islam that swims against the stream of prevailing trends regarding the categories of "religion" and "culture" as well as those who give precedence to jurisprudence and textual evidence. He argues that such orthodoxy-oriented approaches yield an incomprehensible Islam as they reduce and provide no consistent understanding of it.

Throughout the book, Ahmed seeks to develop a whole new conceptual framework for studying and comprehending Islam. He offers a new paradigm that paves the way for Ahmed's ultimate re-construction and re-conceptualization of Islam as an encounter with hermeneutics by means of, as Ahmed states, 'shared language by and in which people express themselves so as to communicate meaningfully in all their variety' (p. 323). Consequently, to Ahmed, Islam goes beyond the contours of text-based understandings and categories and could rather additionally be delineated by examining the social fabrics and canvases of varying Muslim populations.

Toward the end, one of the principal conclusions that Ahmed draws is that Islam is not a 'religion' in the commonly perceived sense of the term, nor fundamentally a set of jurisprudential rules or orthodox convictions, as most of today's Muslims have come to hold. Instead, Islam to Ahmed is more of a package of disparities – comprising simultaneously the traditions of orthodoxy and jurisprudence as well as those of Sufi thinking and philosophical ethics. Hence, Islam can be viewed as a culture or a civilization. Islam is formed, Ahmed argues, by means of three factors: the words of the noble Qurʾān; the context within which ideas and culture are

tangibly given rise to by Muslims; and the circumstances within which the noble Qurʾān was revealed. It is noteworthy that Ahmed criticizes Asad for viewing all religious traditions as attempting to restore orthodoxy through relations of power. Ahmed argues that it was moving orthodoxy aside that allowed him to fathom the dominant Islamic paradigm in the medieval period, which tended to be Sufi and philosophical and not orthodoxy.

A systematic evaluation of Ahmed's work shows that it has some serious shortcomings. For instance, the biggest pitfall is that it overlooks other attitudes, standpoints, geographies and schools of thought. Overall, however, Ahmed manages to make a case for a pioneering, intellectually-engaging, far-reaching, and field-changing re-conceptualization of Islam that has the robust ability to address and come to grips with the human-related and historical ostensible inconsistencies and paradoxes associated with the phenomenon of Islam.

William T. Cavanaugh is a professor of Catholic studies at DePaul University and the director of the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology. His areas of research are in ecclesiology, economic ethics, and political theology (DePaul, 2017). In his 2009 precedent-setting book, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, Cavanaugh lays out an in-depth analysis that challenges the fundamental basis of the entire religious-secular dichotomy.

In the very first chapter on "The Anatomy of the Myth," Cavanaugh observes that there is a whole raft of literature on religion and why it has a peculiar tendency to cause violence and how religion is inherently absolutist, irrational and divisive. The basic idea is that there is something called religion which is essentially different from the so-called secular aspects of human life. Cavanaugh argues that there is no reason to assume that is actually the case. Secular ideologies and institutions can be just as absolutist, irrational and divisive. There is no essential difference between the religious and secular to begin with. It is a constructed distinction only from the last 400 years and only in a western context, which then, eventually, was exported to the rest of the world. Nationalism, communism, capitalism, and other ideologies that are considered to be secular can cause just as much havoc as so-called religious ideologies and institutions.

Cavanaugh further observes that the idea of there being a difference between religion and the secular is a relatively recent phenomenon. There was not this sort of separation of religion from the rest of life until the modern era. The word religion comes from the Latin word 'religio,' which in the Roman Empire meant something which has a binding obligation on the individual. That could mean obligations towards the gods or obligations towards ones' neighbors, i.e. matters that in modern times would be considered to be secular. In the medieval period, the distinction between the religious and the secular was merely a distinction between two kinds of priests. In the modern era, we get this distinction because we have a

new kind of politics. Essentially, civil authorities seek more power over and against ecclesiastical authorities. So, what is religious is under the charge of the church, and that in turn is something that is created to be inherently separate from the rulers' activities, which are redefined as politics and the secular.

According to Cavanaugh, this constructed distinction serves many different purposes in different contexts. Sometimes for benign purposes, while other times for politically-sharpened non-benign ends. In the colonial context, it was a way of redefining local cultures. In India, for example, Hinduism becomes a religion in the 19th century under British occupation. Therefore, to be Indian is to be private and to be British is to be public. For this reason, the Hindu party the BJP tends to refuse to call Hinduism a religion because they do not want it to be marginalized.

Furthermore, one of Cavanaugh's main arguments in the book is that people kill others for all kinds of reasons. He does not deny that Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and others can and do use their faith to justify violence. Rather, he denies that their violence is of a fundamentally divergent and more troublesome nature than that carried out in the name of supposedly more worldly and secular realities like nations or flags, freedom or oil. Hence, the idea that there is something called a religion that is more troublesome is used to promote violence on behalf of secular nation states.

On top of Cavanaugh's most significant conclusions is that the constructed distinction between the religious and the secular results in making people in certain societies feel evolved – that they have left behind the barbarity of those 'other people'. This is particularly employed against the Muslim world, which is seen as primitive – not having learned to separate 'religion' from 'politics' – and inherently unstable and violent, therefore requiring Muslims to bombed into higher rationality.

Consequently, the critique of the category 'religion' can be summarized in the following themes:

The Category of 'Religion' is a Western Construct to Separate Two Domains of Life

This status of religion as a distinct and classifiable 'grade level' or 'category' is solely and even exclusively plausible in Western thought as the atmosphere for this category had already been set by the West's unique prevailing traditions. One of the long-standing distinctions in the western paradigm that owes its origins to both Greek and Hebraic philosophy is the distinction between the divine realm and the tangible realm which humans dwell in. In this context it is vital to realize that western reverential or 'religious' conception was saturated with the idea that since

the material world is created it shall not as a consequence stand on an equal footing with the creator or God. Hence, the category of 'religion' is merely the outcome of that underlying separation in the Western customary mode of thinking as well as the contemporary academic circles: 'religion' per se vis-à-vis the other aspects of life, is just as God per se against the entire mundane world (Gregorios, 1992).

On that account, it can now be inferred that in the western sense of the term 'religion' signifies to be affiliated with a doctrine upheld by a certain society as well as to be spaced apart from the rest of the non-religious aspects of life. In simple terms: 'religion' is recognized as what is performed at a place of worship by similar individuals while having minimum relevance to the rest of life. For this reason, especially in view of the rising tide of missionary atheism, nowadays we frequently hear from Western laymen the saying; 'I am not into religion' – a remark that in several other modes of thinking (including and primarily Islam) would be analogous to declaring 'I am not into life'.

The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence and evolution of the social disciplines of anthropology, psychology, sociology, etc. The development of these disciplines into independent academic areas of study allowed the conceptualization of 'theories' of 'religion', more specifically, all-encompassing expositions that had the potential to elucidate the whole range of varying religious doctrines regarding certain institutions and norms ingrained in the history or culture of humankind (Byrne, 1998). A common thread in all these theories is the methodological presupposition that 'religion' is a distinct domain or object of analysis that shall be explained in scientific 'categories' that are detached from any intrinsic aspect regarding the religious belief system per se. It is more plausible to see the 'religion category' in a 'family resemblance' light that permits non-reductionist identity.

It is worth noting that Clifford Geertz and other pundits of religion have developed more cognizant theories by considering the claims made by religionists as well as resisting the temptation to make sense of 'religion' vis-à-vis another matter or through approaches that work best with natural sciences. The cultivation of such theories has been parallel to the growing awareness of the limited analytical capacity of the category 'religion' taking into account the majestic mosaic human creeds and cultures (Byrne, 1998). Revisiting the modernist theories of religion, Pals observes that "this hope of forming a single theory of all religions astonishes us by its naïve overconfidence" (1996, p 9). This is indicative of a significant paradigm shift within the contemporary academic spheres of the study of religion, for it acknowledges that 'the category of religion' no longer bears its original understanding. As Hick states, "religion is a family resemblance concept" (1989, p 5), i.e. it seeks to bring together varying 'religious phenomena' in a serried formation yet without assuming them to be identical. Briefly put, employing the term 'religion' today could only be

acceptable if accompanied by the realization that it does not necessarily encompass all the details of a given 'tradition' or 'religious phenomenon'.

Islam beyond Orientalism

What is the common ground between 'Islamic thought' and 'Western Thought' regarding approaches to 'religious phenomenon'? Can 'Islamic thought' expand the analytical power of the category 'religion'? Can Islamic and Arabic literature provide specific terms that would allow a better understanding of the salient characteristics of Islamic tradition? This part of the essay seeks, in a preliminary way, to address these questions.

It is worth noting that, when the term 'religion' is translated into Arabic, the Arabic equivalent is usually rendered as *'dīn'*. If we were to move beyond the dispute among scholars and researchers over using the terms *'dīn'*, 'religion', or 'the religious phenomenon' and were to agree that what matters is the essence, it would be plausible to seek a linguistic definition of *'dīn'* or the 'religious phenomenon' and then follow it up with a technical definition that is non-monolithic and takes into consideration the delicate peculiarities and intricacies of the religious phenomenon, which is per se a prerequisite for an unbiased analysis of the religious phenomenon.

In an attempt to fathom the linguistic sense of *'dīn'*, the Azhari scholar Deraz explains that the word *dīn* has many meanings and it comes from the word *'da-ya-na'.* In the Arabic language, *dīn* is related to debt. Hence, it alludes to a sense of indebtedness towards the creator. Therefore, *'dīn al-Islam'* can be understood to mean 'the debt of obedience'. In other words, the idea is that we have been given or endowed blessings by the creator and the debt that we owe is obedience to the creator. Another meaning has to do with 'the day of judgment' or *'Yawm al-Dīn'*. In the first Chapter of the Noble Quran, Verse number four states that Allah is the "Sovereign of the Day of *dīn*", meaning the day on which the debts fall due. Furthermore, in Arabic, the term *dīn* denotes a relationship between two parties, where one of them reveres and obeys the other. When the term *dīn* is attributed to the former it signifies obedience and submission while when the term is attributed to the latter is signifies authoritative power and compelling sovereignty. When the term *dīn*, however, is attributed to the relationship, per se, it designates the framework within which the relationship is regulated (Deraz, 2010).

Technically, however, the most well-known and frequently-quoted definition of *dīn* in Islamic thought is that of Muhammad Al-Tahanawi (Died 1158 AH/1745 AD). He defines it as a divine revelation that guides the individuals of sound mind based on their free will to successfulness in the worldly life and the hereafter (Deraz, 2010). Otherwise stated, *dīn* is the guidance received from the one and only creator to

demonstrate what is truthful in matters of creed and what is upright in matters of manners and conduct. Reasoning from this fact, it must be acknowledged that the idiomatic definition of the term *dīn* as upheld by Muslim scholars, specifically scholars of Islamic theology, reveals a wide gap between Islamic and Western thought.

Al-Ghazali's Approach to *'Dīn'*

Abu Hamid Muhammad Ibn Muhammad At-Tusi Al-Ghazali or simply Al-Ghazali (born in 1058 AD, Tus, Iran – died in December 18, 1111 AD, Tus), has been recognized across the centuries as *Hujjat al-Islam'* or the 'Proof of Islam' due to his contributions and influence in Islamic thought. Al-Ghazali was one of the most influential and prominent theologians, jurists, sufis, and philosophers of Islam during the fifth century according to the Islamic calendar. He lived and was prolific at a time when Islamic theology had just witnessed its solidification and became mired in fierce intellectual challenges from Ismaili batinists (esoterists), who wanted to esoterize Islam by claiming that outward meanings were not really important, and it was instead the inner message of the tradition that held primacy. In addition, he witnessed and was at the forefront of the intellectual challenges posed by the influence of Aristotelian philosophy on the Arabic tradition (Al-Ghazali, 2016, p11).

Al-Ghazali realized the significance of philosophy and put forward sophisticated arguments that condemned and rejected some of philosophical teachings, which also empowered him to internalize and implement others. Al-Ghazali's methodology in terms of reconciling apparent discrepancies between authentic revelation and sound reason was upheld by the vast majority of all subsequent Muslim scholars and had, through the opuses of Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 1198 CE), a paramount impact on Medieval Latin thought (Al-Ghazali, 2016, 15).

In Al-Ghazali's pursuit to delineate the boundaries of Islam he pinpoints a particular set of doctrines that he maintains transgress the boundaries of acceptability. In a distinct opus, *Faysal al-Tafriqa bayna al-Islam wa al-Zandaqa* (The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Clandestine Unbelief) he explains that postulations that overstep particular basic beliefs shall be regarded as unbelief. These beliefs are essentially three: monotheism, Muhammad's mission as a messenger, and the descriptions of the hereafter in the noble Qurʾān. Moreover, he maintains that all other beliefs, including the ones that are fallacious or even deemed innovations in the matters of the *dīn*, shall be excused and tolerated. Every belief shall be examined distinctly, and if proven plausible and in conformity with authentic revelation, shall be acceptable (Al-Ghazali, 1993). This approach of Al-Ghazali reflects an in-depth understanding that cannot be encompassed by the modern category of 'religion'.

Apart from that, it was Al-Ghazali's magnificent work, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Dīn (The Revival of the Dīn* Sciences), that rendered *Tasawuf* (Islamic mysticism) a plausible aspect or component of Islamic orthodoxy or normative Islam. In 40 ledgers he elucidated the beliefs, acts of worship, and manners of Islam and explained these could be translated into the foundation of leading a genuinely devout life filled with worship, amounting to the higher ranks of *Tasawuf*, or spiritual purification. This work is so highly-regarded that it has been said: "Whoever has not read Al-Ghazali's opus is not among the living." The starting point of the 'the Revival of the *Dīn*' reveals that Al-Ghazali was interested in dismantling and deconstructing the idol of the ego. He actually considered the most troublesome idol to be the idol of the self (Al-Ghazali, 2010).

Overall, Al-Ghazali's opus elucidates the understanding that seeking the purification of the heart constitutes the basis of the *dīn*, and that all acts of worship are pointless if they do not lead to refining one's manners. Therefore, the essence of the *dīn* is to maintain benevolent and humane relations with Muslims and non-Muslims and with all creations. Once again, this is an in-depth understanding that cannot be encompassed by the modern category of 'religion'.

Conclusion

This paper commenced with a critical overview that investigates the literature on the category 'religion' and revealed why the category is problematic and where its limitations are. It consolidated the recognition that devising an all-encompassing definition of 'religion' is an unreachable goal (Beckford 2003: 20). What the term 'religion' signifies is usually inconsistent, antithetical, and controversial. Numerous academic scholars acknowledge these limitations regarding the 'religion' category. This essay proposes that the category 'religion' per se needs to be the subject of further critical interrogation.

Apart from that, this essay advances an optimistic stance in expanding the definition and sensibility of 'religion' by shedding light on prominent medieval Muslim scholar Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's approach to the conception of *dīn* in Islamic thought. In this spirit, it is safe to state that the category 'religion' does not fully reflect the depth, subtleties, and the salient characteristics of the Islamic faith, tradition, phenomenon and civilization. Hence, this essay recommends a cautious approach in describing Islam merely as a 'religion'. Moreover, this essay urges Muslim scholars and researchers to exercise *Ijtihad* (Independent legal reasoning) in light of the profound richness of Islamic literature, and to engage in serious academic discussions that would contribute to the development of well-defined terms to better understand the religious phenomenon and to circumvent any misrepresentations that would pertain to Islam and Muslims.

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