

The Religion of Islam: The Qur'an's Essential Notion of *Din*

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Abstract

The overall aim of this paper is to highlight a transcendental usage of the Religion of *Islam* in the Qur'an. I will show that the notion of Islam as a unitary Religion is used in the Qur'an as a genus for religions (*adyan*) which have appeared throughout human history. This usage will show that there is a sense of Religion which guarantees the essential unity of all religions and prepares us to understand the apparent plurality and conflicting diversity of world religions; however, it is essentially different from the sense which has emerged within the modern discipline of religious studies in Western scholarship which interprets religion as a cultural phenomenon and considers the myriad variety of religions to be mere socio-historical events. In this paper, I will first briefly provide a background on the difficulty faced within this modern Western concept of religion, then I will progress to the Islamic concept of Religion to illustrate a model for understanding the plurality and the diversity of religions, which apparently have their own individual boundaries, yet at the same time enjoy a unitary reality.

Keywords: Din, type-Religion, token-religions, Islam, Qur'an, unitary Religion

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I. Introduction

In regards to the history of the word “religion,” it appears quite difficult to integrate different concepts of religions under a universal notion of religion. This problem has led Christian thinkers to posit either an exclusive absoluteness of Christianity² or an acceptance of the plurality of religions.³ The word “religion,” in Western thought, was initially derived from the Latin word *religio*, which Cicero took to be from *relegere*, “to re-read,” indicating that “tradition” is that which is “re-read” and therefore passed on; and with Lactantius from *religare*, “to bind fast,” with the indication of that which binds people to each other and to the gods in the Roman state.⁴ In both cases, *religio*, as does the derivative “religion,” has the indication of a border, a limit or a horizon which is a decisive constraint upon belief, values and behaviours. Though the early church separated itself from the Christian faith as a “religion,” which Paul associated with “false” Paganism,⁵ by the seventh century, the term *religio* referred to communities whose members (the *religiosi*) dedicated themselves to the service of God. By Luther's time, the word had acquired a more general indication as the source of truth,⁶ and with the Deists and the Enlightenment, it became an abstract concept.⁷

2. See, for instance, Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: OUP, 2007); also see Pannenberg, W. *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), v.1, pp.129-136.

3. See, for instance, Menshing, G. *Structures and Patterns of Religion* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 1976), pp.317-324; also Smart, N. *The World's Religions* (Cambridge: CPS, 1998), ch.25, pp.572ff.

4. For the history of this word in the Western tradition, see Bianchi, ed., *The Notion of Religion in Comparative Research* (Roma: L'erma, 1994). Also Despland and Vallee, eds., *Religion in History: The Word, the Idea, the Reality* (Waterloo: WLUP, 1992); Harrison, P., *Religion and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990); Lash, N. *The Beginning and End of Religion* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996). For a discussion on modern religious studies as ideology, see Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially Part I, pp.3ff.

5. Bianchi, ed., *The Notion of Religion*, pp.3-9.

6. Despland and Vallee, eds., *Religion in History*, p.32.

7. Peter Harrison has shown how the modern Western concept of “religion” (and thus the roots of the scientific study of religion) originated with the Deists and developed during the Enlightenment out of a

However, there is no continuous development from the concept *religio* as meaning the “careful and even fearful fulfillment of what man owes to God,” to the Deist's understanding of *religio* as embracing principles “which derive from universal truth itself and represent the truth that can be found by understanding and intellect.”⁸ But while there may be no linear continuity from Luther to the Deists, what is significant is that the abstract concept of religion in modern times develops in harmony with the methods of reason designed for its investigation.⁹

Religion, according to this line of reasoning, did not precede the methods of its research but rather the methods of investigation defined as well as explicated it.¹⁰ The abstract notion of “religion” originated in the context of the critique of Christianity in the Enlightenment and the rise of the modern individual, which has since become an etic concept in being applied outside of Christianity.¹¹ While it does not of course follow that the concept cannot be applied outside of Christianity, it is nevertheless the case that it is difficult to translate the word “religion” into non-European languages.¹² Therefore, there are indeed difficulties and objections in extending the concept to “Judaism,” “Islam” or “Hinduism,” which thereby become part of a single unified field.¹³ An important question here is whether the word “religion” has semantic

Lutheran tradition. Harrison, *Religion and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990).

8. See Feil's “From the Classic Religio to Modern Religion,” in Despland and Vallee, eds., *Religion in History*, pp.32, 41.

9. For details, see my work “Impact of Modernity on Religious Studies” in *Contemporary Philosophical Trends in the West* (Tehran: IHCS, 2007).

10. Saler, *Conceptualising Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), p.1; also Harrison, *Religion and the Religions*, p.14.

11. Lash, *op cit.*, pp.166-71.

12. Sharpe, *Understanding Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1983), p.39; also see Cohen, “Religion in Non-Western Cultures” in *American Anthropologist* 69, 1, 73-76.

13. Lash, *op.cit.*, pp.3-25.

equivalents in other languages and cultures.¹⁴ To answer this question, it seems that such a usage is restricted to Western culture, as there are no strict Western semantic equivalents of religious terms indigenous to non-Western culture which denote certain kinds of discourse and practices concerned with social ethics, transcendence, narratives and ritual.

As regards Islamic traditions, there are no direct English semantic equivalents for the technical terminologies which developed as part of the self-descriptions of those traditions, though a number of Islamic terms have some pragmatical conceptual overlap with the concept. The term *din*, for example, is often taken to be an Islamic equivalent of the word “religion,” a Western term which points towards the idea of social virtues. The situation becomes worse with terms such as *shari'ah*, *madhhab*, *minhaaj*, and *sunnah*. Islamic terminology is much richer than the European languages in this regard. Indeed, these brief examples show how the translation of these terms into European languages is extremely difficult, if not impossible, because of the connotations of each respective word.¹⁵ None of the Islamic terms hinted at here could be a direct equivalent of the concept “religion,” though some of the features within the semantic field of “religion” are encompassed by them. In the rest of this paper I will try to show the meaning and usage of *din* in the Qur'an, and reconsider the concept of religion in light of the text in order to meet the second difficulty we find in modern religious studies - the possibility of a universal notion of religion which integrates token-religions.

14. Some, such as Michael Pye (“The Notion of Religion in Comparative Research” in *Selected Proceedings of the XVI IAHR Congress*, 1994, pp.115-22) citing examples from Japan, have argued that there are such parallels; while others, such as Frits Staal (*Rules Without Meaning* [New York: Peter Lang, 1989], p.401), would wish to restrict its use to the Western monotheisms.

15. The word *din* in Islamic literature is the Arabic form of the Avestan concept of *Daena*, which in its original use, means, among other things, *nomos* or the basic law of life.

II. The Islamic Notion of *Din*

The word *din*¹⁶ is mentioned in many verses in the Qur'an. Its use in the Qur'anic text imparts different meanings, the most important of which are:

1. Subjugation, Authority, Ruling and Having Charge;
2. Obedience and Submission Due to Subjugation;
3. The Method and Means of Life;
4. Punishment, Reward and Judgment.¹⁷

These four meanings constitute the concept of the word *din* as used in the Qur'an where it implies a comprehensive system of life. *Din* is a submission, following and worship by man for the Creator, Ruler, and Subjugator in a comprehensive system of life, with all its creedal, intellectual, moral and practical aspects. As claimed in Islamic literature, all these aspects are embodied in a unique reality which is meta-historical by nature but has appeared as different forms of religions throughout the spiritual history of human beings. In the following delineation of this notion, I will first start with some quotations of Qur'anic verses to show this specific notion in the text and then progress to a description of the notion. In this context, I will use the word "religion" regardless of its European and Christian background.¹⁸

a) *The Qur'anic Conception of Din*

The Qur'an claims that *Din* is a unitary notion which is only one truth in itself; a type-Religion, or a unique divine reality which is the depth

16. This may be mentioned here again, as already hinted, that it is incorrect to translate the Qur'anic word *din* as the English word "religion"; nevertheless, I will use the word religion for the reader's convenience.

17. Tabataba'i, M.H. *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Quran* (Tehran: Intesharat-e Islami, 1984), vol.1, pp.24ff; *Al-Qamoos*, under the word *Din*.

18. Though I realize that, in considering the history of the word "religion," it may be wrong to translate the Qur'anic word *din* as "religion," I will use the latter term solely for convenience in this paper while enlarging its meaning and indication in light of the Qur'anic idea of *Din*.

of all revealed truths, embodied and developed in specific forms of token-religions. Historically speaking, each token-religion is a stream of that unique primary *Din* (type-Religion) and is called *shari'ah* (literally, way or path) in the Qur'an. While all divine religions do truly mirror one and the same reality, some of them are more expressive of that reality and stand above some of the others. However, each one reflects one eternal truth. Therefore, we read in the Qur'an:

“Lo! This your religion is one Religion and I am your Lord, so worship Me.” (21:92)

This unitary type-Religion is called *Islam*.¹⁹ The word *Islam* here is used in its general sense, which refers to the unitary true Religion. In this sense, *Islam* means submission to God. *Islam* is the Religion itself and is not the religion of Islam proper, which indicates a very specific token-religion that appeared in a certain geographical and historical circumstance.²⁰ *Islam* is spoken of here as type-Religion and all other religions are seen as *tokens*. In this sense, the Qur'an says:

“Surely the (unitary type-) Religion with Allah is Islam.” (3:19)
 “Do they seek for other than the Religion of Allah, while all creatures in the heavens and on earth have, willing or unwilling, bowed (*aslama*: submitted) to His Will (i.e., accepted *Islam*), and to Him shall they all be brought back.” (3:83) “He it is Who hath sent His messenger with the guidance and the Religion of Truth (*Din al-Haqq*),²¹ that He may make it the conqueror of all religion however much idolaters may be averse.” (61:9) “He it is Who hath sent His

19. The type-token terminology was originally used in the fields of linguistics and psychology. I am applying this terminology here to show that the word “*Islam*,” in the Qur'an, is considered to be a universal and unitary Religion (which I call type-Religion), while other religions are its historically appeared instances (which I refer to as token-religions). My usage of this terminology here has no implication derived from its usage by other scholars in different fields.

20. Meanwhile, the Quran says that the specific appearance of the religion of Islam (which was revealed to Prophet Mohammad) is the most perfect form of that unitary type-Religion *Islam*. (“Today I accomplished the Religion for you...and approved Islam to be the religion for you.” [5:3])

21. The Holy Qur'an, 48: 28, 61: 9.

messenger with the guidance and the Religion of Truth (*Din al-Haqq*), that He may cause it to prevail over all religion. And Allah sufficeth as a Witness.” (48:28)

As we can see, there is only a unitary type-Religion under which all forms of historical religions have appeared: “He has made plain to you of the Religion what He enjoined upon Noah and that which We have revealed to you and that which We enjoined upon Abraham and Moses and Jesus to keep to obedience and be not divided therein.” (42:13) “And they did not become divided until after knowledge had come to them out of envy among themselves; and had not a word gone forth from your Lord till an appointed term, certainly judgment would have been given between them; and those who were made to inherit the Book after them are most surely in disquieting doubt concerning it.” (42:14) “Then We put thee on the (right) Way of Religion: so follow thou that (Way), and follow not the desires of those who know not.” (45:18) “He hath chosen you and hath not laid upon you in Religion any hardship; the faith (*mellat*) of your father Abraham (is yours). He hath named you Muslims of old time and in this (Religion), that the messenger may be a witness against you.” (22:78)

This unitary type-Religion is an innate (*fitri*) Religion which is privileged as upright (*hanif*) and encompasses submission and peace (*Islam*). All forms of religions are but manifestations of this truth: “Do they seek for other than the Religion of Allah.” (3:83)

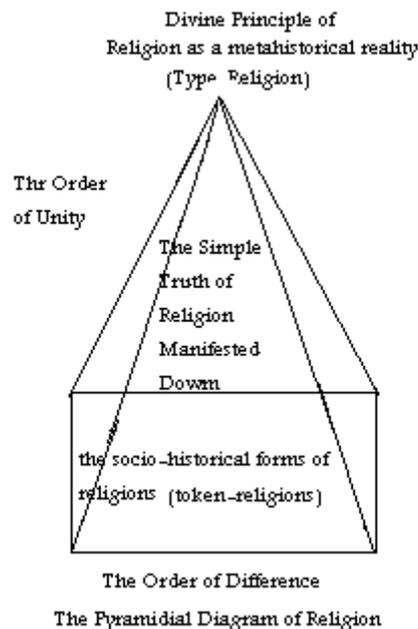
“There is no compulsion in Religion. The right direction is henceforth distinct from error.” (2:256) “Allah speaketh the truth. So follow the Religion of Abraham, the upright. He was not of the idolaters.” (3:95) “Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian, but he was an Upright (man), a Muslim; and he was not one of the Polytheists.” (3:67) “And, (O Muhammad) set thy purpose resolutely for Religion, as a man by nature Upright, and be not of those who ascribe partners (to Allah).” (1:15) “And who forsaketh the Religion of Abraham save him who fooleth himself? Verily We chose him in the world, and lo! in the Hereafter he is among the righteous.” (2:13) “And be thou

upright as thou art commanded, and follow not their lusts, but say: I believe in whatever scripture Allah hath sent down, and I am commanded to be just among you. Allah is our Lord and your Lord. Unto us our works, and unto you your works; no argument between us and you. Allah will bring us together, and unto Him is the journeying.” (42:15) “So set thy purpose (O Muhammad) for Religion as a man by nature Upright - the nature (framed) of Allah, in which He hath created man. There is no altering (the laws of) Allah's creation. That is the right Religion, but most men know not.” (3:31) “Say: O People of the Scripture! Stress not in your religion other than the truth, and follow not the vain desires of folk who erred of old and led many astray, and erred from a plain road.” (5:77) “Of those who split up their Religion and became schismatics, each sect rejoicing in what they had with them.” (3:32) “But they (mankind) have broken their Religion among them into sects, each group rejoicing in its tenets.” (23:53) This is because “those to whom the Book had been given did not show opposition but after knowledge had come to them, out of envy among themselves.” (3:19)

Therefore, according to Qur'an, *Islam*, as type-Religion, is the code of real life and “all creatures in the heavens and on earth have, willing or unwilling, bowed (*aslama*: submitted) to His Will (i.e., accepted *Islam*), and to Him shall they all be brought back.” (3:83) There is only one Religion of Truth, which conflicts with all man-made forms which are called religion. “Those whom ye worship beside Him are but names which ye have named, ye and your fathers. Allah hath revealed no sanction for them. The decision rests with Allah only, Who hath commanded you that ye worship none save Him. This is the right Religion, but most men know not.” (12:4)

The true Religion is mistaken by human beings - as their social conditions affect their knowledge of truth, and they therefore interpret the truth according to their needs, benefits and worldly policies, and change the manifested forms of the unitary Religion into utilitarian ones: “And forsake those who take their Religion for a pastime and a

jest, and whom the life of the world beguileth. Remind (mankind) hereby lest a soul be destroyed by what it earneth.” (6:7) “And they differed not until after the knowledge came unto them, through rivalry among themselves. Lo! Thy Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning that wherein they used to differ.” (45:17)



b) The Description of the Qur'anic Idea

As a matter of fact, what has been mentioned in the Qur'an can be illustrated by a pyramidal diagram referred to here as “the pyramid of Religion.”²²

In this perspective, the truth of the type-Religion flashes out from God at the vertex all the way down to the socio-historical forms of religions. While all token-religions emanate from the simplicity of the

22. The description of the Qur'anic idea of Religion presented here is based on inspirations from the Illuminative philosophies of Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra. It must be noted that the ontological system developed by the Persian Illuminationist philosophers is presupposed in this illustration and its description.

type-Religion, they all enjoy the strongest essential connection and unity with their Divine Principle at the top. But they are, on the other hand, widely diversified when they are considered at the specific socio-historical conditions where the horizontal levels converge into an absolute unitary simplex.

Within this pyramid, the relationship between type-Religion as a meta-historical reality and token-religions as its historical manifestations can be considered in two different ways: vertical and horizontal. Considered as vertical, this relationship is that of “unity in difference,” while considered as horizontal, it is that of “type-token.” The type-Religion manifests its unique reality in token-religions according to the degrees of importance they may have (depending upon the needs and conditions of a society within the spiritual history of human beings). Token-religions are also actually separated and diversified in format as well as in individuation, etc.; but since this separation and diversity which occurs in the socio-historical (horizontal) order does not happen in the vertical order (that of unity), it has no impact on the inner system of their continuity and unity with the reality of the *only* Religion. In other words, the multitude of the horizontal order has no bearing upon the unitary connection of the vertical order.

This pyramidal diagram of Religion, together with the distinction between the vertical and horizontal lines within itself, must be taken into serious consideration in understanding an Islamic notion of Religion. It is of fundamental importance to understand the “inner unity” in relation to the “outer diversity” of this diagram when one meets the paradoxical statements of religious experiences. It is also vitally important in helping us to know how religious pluralism indicates a different understanding of the unitary truth.

This “unity in difference” is taken as the major axiom in the idea of the “univocity” and “gradation” of the reality of Religion; and indicates a hierarchic (*tashkiki*) structure for Religion. Token-religions are pyramidally emanated from the reality of the unitary type-

Religion. A token-religion is entirely dependent upon this reality. This reality will, in its turn, have been dependent, with all its depending content, upon its own tokens, as they are all reduced to, and fuzzy in, the reality of that unitary type-Religion. Thus no matter to what extent there is a multiplicity of token-religions, it appears quite certain that the whole multitude is designed as but one manifestation of the type-Religion.

There is an unbroken vertical line connecting all manifested religions to the unitary type-Religion in a strictly essential unity.²³ And there are also horizontal lines along which the manifested token-religions are to be regarded as different from one another and characterized by multiplicity in rank, culture, and individuation. All these belong to the factual texture of the unitary type-Religion *itself*. For the sake of distinction, the vertical lines are called the “inner order” of Religion, while the horizontal lines are called the “outer order” of Religion. The former is that which religious experiences and meditative apprehensions are concerned with, and the latter, which is called *shari'ah* (way) and *menhaaj* (path), contains rituals and practices, and is what the scholastic sciences account for. In dealing with the former, all scholarly study can do is to account for the interpretation and conceptualization of religious experiences, customs and social traditions. These interpretations and conceptualizations will fall into the order of the horizontal line, whereas the depth of the factual unitary type-Religion always remains in the vertical dimension and belongs to the inner order of reality. It is not, strictly, representational.

In regards to this notion, it is possible for the token-religions, with all their characteristic multiplicity, to have emanated from and be reduced to the unitary type-Religion as the ultimate source of

23. The notion of vertical and horizontal lines are obtained from the Avicennian principle of the “nobler possibility” (*al-imkan al-ashraf*) together with Suhrawardi's principle of the “more posterior possibility” (*al-iakan al-akhass*), *Kitab Hikmat al-ishraq*, pp.154-157.

religions. This is made possible without the intermediary role of history, geography, culture, social condition or any other element of disruption and discontinuation in the unitary system of Religion. At the level of historical appearance, the reality of Religion, by its very nature, is a continuously “fuzzy” one. For a token-religion to exist means that it can never be detached from its principle and stand by itself as an independent entity, either in the mind or in the world of reality.

It is therefore true to say that a token-religion is but a manifestation of the type-Religion and thus its truth is dependent on it. This interpretation would mean that a token-religion was possible when, and only when, it comes into consideration of being a revealed version of the type-Religion. But as soon as that same token-religion was to come into reality, it would change its basic status to the form of a self-sufficient religion due to the socio-historical condition in which it appears. Whatever a self-sufficient religion might be, it becomes a self-grounded religion for the socio-historical condition in which it manifests. This religion then, even though it is at that very moment a form of the continuing type-Religion, is subject to be interpreted by human individuals according to their specific socio-historical conditions and their capacity of knowledge and research. This is obviously a transmodification of Religion from its pure reality to its interpretive format. Meanwhile, this latter form of religion (the token one) is a form of type-Religion.

This does not, however, indicate by any means that the ultimate reality of the type-Religion is changed into a human interpretive format and is relegated to certain social and historical conditions. For one thing, the vertical nature of the type-Religion is undoubtedly immanent and thus can never be transitive. Furthermore, when we are speaking of the type-Religion, we are not dealing with a religion constituted by custom and culture, but rather with that very simple indivisible and unitary entity. The token mode of Religion, appearing in a specific period and culture, refers to the dependent state of the

horizontal forms of Religion which occurred in particular historical and social contexts. It would indeed be false, if we were to visualize a token-religion in itself as an independent by-product of human culture or psycho-biological nature.

What happens in the horizontal (socio-historical) line is that man approaches the reality of the type-Religion and makes it accessible to himself.²⁴ This effort can be performed within a wide domain - from profound interpretation to very superficial dogma and custom. But all these different ways appear in the horizontal line. The vertical reality of Religion might be somewhat apparent in some human-created forms while it might be absent in others as it is dependent on the conditions in which it appears.

It is only in this sense that, one may say, token-religions are different ways of responding to - and as paths for individuals to follow which point towards - an ultimate, transcendent reality which is the core content of the type-Religion.²⁵ Thus, only in this sense, the Moslem "Allah," the Christian "God," and the Hindu "Brahman" are all terms for the same ultimate reality towards which the various token-religions are climbing. In itself, then, the type-Religion is ineffable and transcendent, yet human beings respond to this reality through the token-religions. In this horizontal (socio-historical) line, we experience the type-Religion in different ways according to different dispositional states. Although religious meanings are diverse in this sense, we have the cognitive state to believe and to live on the basis of its experience in our socio-historical norms. The religious plurality and the diversity and mutually exclusive claims of the

24. This an extension of what Sadra argues for in his principle of hierarchic gradation (*tashkik*); see Sadr ad-Din Shirazi, *Kitab al Asfar, Journey I*, vol.I.

25. John Hick's pluralistic approach to religions as presented in his book, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), can be interpreted in light of this theory. However, his major problem is that he does not logically justify all religion as comprising one and the same reality. Presupposing that the religions respond to transcendence in divergent ways, he supposes the oneness of the transcendent as a *noumenon* in its Kantian sense. He is not able (and apparently does not intend) to show the unitarity of the type-Religion or that all religions are manifestations of the one and only type-Religion.

traditions, then, appears in the various forms of human interpretative and linguistic systems and it is only possible to rationally access the principal uniqueness of Religion within the different cultural ways of being human. The human experience of this uniqueness is structured in the different traditions. Incompatible doctrinal schemes within diverse religious traditions cannot be resolved by human concepts and do not therefore threaten the overall hypothesis that token-religions manifest the eternal truth embodied as the type-Religion and that token-religions represent different historical examples of the same reality and evoke parallel transformations of human life.

III. Conclusion

The above interpretation, so I think, outlines the general elements of the Islamic notion of Religion (*Din*) and the analysis of the connection of the token-religions to the type-Religion. This connection, as mentioned, is fuzzy (as we consider Religion to be one and the same reality which manifests as a “continuity in difference” through the vertical line) and token-type (as we consider Religion as type and every specific religion as token through the horizontal line). According to this notion of Religion, we have a model for understanding the diversity of religions which have their own individual boundaries, yet at the same time enjoy a unitary reality and have one identity and reality in spite of their appropriate socio-historicity.