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WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “MUSLIM” AND “ISLAMIC”?

by Ahmed E. Souaiaia *

Abstract: Social labels and categories are exercised in control. They describe opponents, create boundaries, exclude social groups, justify discrimination, and promote persecution. They are imbued with sociopolitical power. Muslims used labels, internally for the first time, during the formative period of the community to privilege the elite and marginalize dissenters. They called those who challenged the established order, Khawarij [Outsiders]. Today, Muslims living in Western societies are often labeled radical Islamic extremists. But aside from this politically charged phrase, even common adjectives, such as Islamic and Muslim, are misused. So in what contexts should these adjectives be appropriately used and why is it important to use social labels judiciously?



Though even advanced students and scholars of Islamic studies use the words

Muslim and *Islamic* interchangeably, it is a mistake to do so in all contexts. The two words are both adjectives, but they have fundamentally different meanings and are properly used in very different contexts.

The word *Muslim* [مسلم] is Arabic in form and function. It is a descriptive active participle [*ism fā'il*] derived from the verb, *aslama*. This Arabic form connotes agency being imbedded within the description. Therefore, it describes a person or a group of persons who consciously follow or adhere to the religion called *Islam* [الإسلام]. Since it is an Arabic term in origin, form, and meaning, the word should be used in the context appropriate in that language. The word *Muslim* is never used in Arabic to describe a thing, and idea, or an event. Rather, it is used to describe human beings who believe in and practice Islamic teachings. It is therefore incorrect to say *Muslim architecture*, *Muslim music*, *Muslim art*, *Muslim thought*, etc.

The word *Islamic* is an adjective that takes its meaning from the fact that it reflects some characteristics of Islam, in varying degrees. It can be used in two contexts. First, the adjective *Islamic* describes things, ideas, and events whose origins are in Islam. In this sense, it complements the adjective, *Muslim*, which describes persons. Second, the word *Islamic* can be used to describe things that are present in Islamic societies and cultures, even if their origins are not rooted in Islam or produced by Muslim peoples. The Islamic civilization came to existence because Muslims' ideas and ideals were dominant, but they were not the sole engines that produced its rich

legacy. Therefore, the adjective *Islamic* was broadly used to account for all the productions of this civilization, authored by all--Muslims and non-Muslims.

It must be noted that it is possible to apply the adjective *Islamic* to a person or group of persons, but such use must be deliberate. For example, some people often ask the question, "are you Islamic?" instead of, "are you Muslim?" This is a common mistake. However, it is possible that the questioner used *Islamic* as it is used in Arabic, *islamiyy* [إسلامي], in which case it would mean *Islamist* (discussed below). Such use would be appropriate, though unlikely to be the intended meaning.

To illustrate the different usages, let's consider the phrases *Islamic architecture* and *Muslim architecture*. The phrase *Islamic architecture* refers to architecture that is broadly influenced, limited, inspired, informed by Islamic values, even if it is produced by non-Muslim persons. *Islamic architecture* might consist of purely Islam-inspired elements, but it might also consist of elements that are not inspired and influenced by Islam or Muslim architects. By contrast, the term *Muslim architecture* is attributive, not descriptive. It refers to architecture created by Muslim persons. Where *Islamic architecture* is a broad descriptive term, accurate use of the term *Muslim architecture* requires a specific context.

With this distinction in mind, it becomes clear that the adjective *Muslim* is exclusive whereas the adjective *Islamic* is inclusive. Not all Islamic things are produced by Muslims, but Muslim-produced things must be things produced by individuals who are Muslim. A musician who is not Muslim may produce an Islamic song. A Muslim band, meaning a band whose members are all Muslim, may produce and play songs that have no roots in Islam or in Muslim

communities of any era of any background. Though in both examples Islam is present through the experiences, expressions, and backgrounds of the persons involved, that link is insufficient to merge the two terminologies.

This distinction is not merely technical. Rather, the misuse of these terms reflects and perpetuates power structures that elevate Western colonial thought and diminish the rich cultural, political, and social legacy of Islamic thought and the many peoples who have contributed to it. Conflating the meaning of the words *Islamic* and *Muslim* forces some to invent new words to communicate aspects that are already embedded within the meaning of these words. I will cite three examples of unnecessary descriptors whose use creates other conceptual and practical problems. First I discuss the use and utility of the words *Muhammadan*, *Islamicate*, and *Islamicist*. Second, I explore the conceptual, practical, and theoretical implications of conflating the meaning of the words *Islamic* and *Muslim* and the ensuing general problems.

When colonial Europe moved into Asia and Africa picking up the pieces of the collapsing Islamic civilization, which by then has morphed into an empire, its thinkers and intellectuals made up new labels like, *Muhammadan religion* and *Muhammadan people*, instead of *Islam* and *Muslims*, as if these communities were obscurely unknown, being defined and introduced by the enlightened, sophisticated Western discoverers. To my knowledge, besides its use mostly in modern Islamic thought as a rhetorical tool, the adjective *Muhammadan* was never used in classical Islamic religious and non-religious texts as a name for Islam. It is therefore bizarre that Orientalist scholars coined it to introduce a religion that has been organized, established, and defined for nearly 1400 years.

In the period when the use of the word *Muhammadan* was in decline, another Western scholar came up with the word, *Islamicate*, ostensibly, to meet the need for a descriptor that account for the productions of non-Muslims in Muslim majority communities. Marshall Hodgson invented the word, *Islamicate*, and many scholars and students of Islamic studies have used it ever since to describe things, ideas, or events that are influenced by Islam but whose origins or ownership cannot be fully attributed to Muslim individuals or Islamic values and teachings. I

believe that the adjective *Islamic* accommodates this need when used consistently and appropriately.

The last example of made-up labels is the designation of academic specialization focusing on the study of Islamic societies and Islamic thought from the formative period until modern times: *Islamicist*. Some scholars and commentators have coined this term, perhaps for specificity purposes. However, in doing so, they reduced the academic study of the rich and complex legacy of all Islamic societies to a single approach that explores the Islamic civilization through the religious lens only, and often from within the discipline of religious studies. In doing so, they denied the fact that scholars from other academic disciplines like anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, historians, political scientists, jurists, economists, philologists, philosophers, and others do in fact engage in the study of the legacy of the Islamic civilization from the perspective of the relevant theoretical and scientific lens.

Regardless of the context and justification of coining labels and categories to catalog and discuss the legacy of Islamic societies, such actions end up producing serious methodological, conceptual, and political problems.

First, conflating *Muslim* and *Islamic* obscures the meaning of and difference between phrases like, *Muslim cultures* versus *Islamic cultures* and *Muslim civilization* versus *Islamic civilization*. However, by keeping in mind the origins of the words *Muslim* and *Islamic*, in the English language, the phrase *Muslim cultures* can be used in the attributive context: cultures of the Muslim people, which is different from *Islamic cultures*, which would be partially influenced, limited, inspired, or informed by Islam but Muslims did not necessarily produce or live them. *Islamic cultures* are not necessarily filtered through Islam's value and judgement systems. However, *Muslim cultures*, generally, are filtered and approved by some of Islam's value and judgment systems since Muslims must reconcile them with their lived faith. The distinction becomes even more compelling when considering the often used phrases, *Islamic civilization* and *Muslim civilization*.

Some scholars of Islamic studies have applied the descriptor *Arab* civilization instead of *Islamic* civilization, effectively denying the contributions of non-Arabs, like African Berber and Touereg peoples, Asian Kurdish peoples, Turkic peoples, Persian peoples, Indian peoples, and thousands of other ethnic

and racial communities. Similarly, some use the label *Muslim* civilization, instead of *Islamic* civilization, willfully ignoring the role and contributions of non-Muslim communities including Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Copts, and hundreds of other religious communities who lived as full productive members of Islamic societies.

Second, with proper definition and understanding of *civilization*, it becomes evident that there could be no *Muslim civilization*. A civilization consists of the collective achievements and contributions (negative and positive) of all ethnic, racial, religious, ideological, economic, and national communities. One religious community might be dominant and contribute significantly more than the other communities, making its culture ever present and influential. However, a single culture can never become a civilization without borrowing from, incorporating, assimilating, and appropriating other communities' legacies.

Since the adjective *Muslim* and the noun *Islam* are Arabic words, the rules governing how they are used in that language might shed some light on their use by Muslim scholars and grammarians of Arabic language as well. Since the rise of religiously inspired political parties in Arab and Islamic societies, the adjective *Islamic* [*islamiyy*] has been coined to refer to a *person* affiliated with Islamist movements, but the adjective *Muslim* kept its original meaning, referring to followers of or adherents to the religion, Islam. In a sense, this conventional naming confirms at least two things about the word *Islamic*: (a) The adjective *Islamic* is a broader descriptor than *Muslim*, and (b) it signals that the thing or idea may not necessarily have roots in Islamic traditions, but it is part thereof.

In fact, its application in Arabic by some governments to describe Islamists suggests that Islamists' ideas may not be rooted in Islam. These governments' actions are reflected in their use of labels: Islamist groups are referred to as being *Islamic* [*Islamiyyun*], distinguishing them from being *Muslim* [*muslimun*]. These groups are often accused of corrupting Islam, making it possible for governments to ban their activities and imprison or kill their leaders. In other words, Muslims themselves have been keenly aware of the existence of a plurality of *Islamic* expressions (in politics, literature, arts, etc.) produced both by Muslims and non-Muslims, that may or may not conform to Islamic teachings. However, they also recognize cultural or artistic productions that are

directly derived from Islamic traditions and filtered through Islamic value and judgement systems that can be said to be *Muslim arts* and *Muslim cultures*. Such things, however, are very specific and limited and are often produced and undertaken exclusively by Muslims.

Third, the richness and specificity of the words *Islamic* and *Muslim* make it unnecessary to invent new words to describe the legacy of the Islamic civilization. The adoption of these adjectives and their proper application relieves scholars of Islamic studies, especially those working within the confines of religious departments in state universities where they have to be mindful of the exigencies of Establishment Clause, from the burden of having to define who is *Muslim* and who is not. Importantly, when Western scholars manufacture adjectives or use adjectives carelessly, they perpetuate the diminutive, reductionist myth that other communities lack the necessary vocabulary to describe themselves, account for their rich legacy and acknowledge, and give credit to the diverse peoples within.

Indeed, misuse of adjectives and labels could be unintentional errors. But some made-up labels are deliberate and are often motivated by politics and prejudice. Labels and categories are consequential tools often used by those in power to keep certain social groups in check and to impose a specific narrative about them. Adjectives are qualifiers, and as such, they are instruments that are used to divide society into social classes, impose legal limitations on certain social groups, and draw boundaries between those with power and those who lack it. The capacity of labels to be used as tools of discrimination make it even more compelling that those who use such descriptors and those being described are aware and mindful of the potential social and psychological harm they could inflict and the legacy of inequality they help preserve.

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