

An Intellectual Journey in Islamic Studies: Navigating Islamic Discourse with *Faltah*

Abdulkader Tayob
University of Cape Town

Abstract

This essay offers a perspective on studying Islam as a complex discourse constituted by unexpected events (*faltāt*, pl. of *faltah*). The concept of *faltah* is developed from a close reading of statements attributed to the companions of the Prophet after his death. It is shown that the experience of *faltah* introduces fundamental features of Islamic discourse such as self-reflection, performance, debate and unresolvable contradictions. While *faltah* may be disruptive, these features have proven to be productive in the history of Islamic discourse. This essay, then, turns to religion as a discourse of colonial modernity that has impacted societies and traditions across the globe. It argues that religion in this form may be treated as a *faltah*, like other disruptions that Islamic discourse has encountered in the past. The discussion offers a perspective of Islam in its encounter with the discourse of religion through self-reflection, performance, debate and unresolvable contradictions.

Introduction

Islam has been variously identified in modern scholarship as religion, culture, civilisation or tradition.¹ Constructed in modernity, these terms

1 Timothy Fitzgerald, "A Critique of "religion" as a Cross-Cultural Category," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 9, 2, 1997, 91-110; Richard Martin, *Journal for Islamic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2021, 11-27

are limited by the purpose for which they have been employed in the humanities and the social sciences. The translation from Islam to these universal terms requires a conceptual leap or modification. These general and universal terms prove inadequate when Islam's full complexity and history are considered. In this essay, I propose that a study of Islam is best approached as a discourse that emerged in the past but is always open to change in both subtle or dramatic ways. The challenge to change or transform emerges from critical reflection within the discourse, generated by events thrust upon it in the flow of history.

A term used by Caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb on the death of the Prophet Muhammad is a valuable starting point for capturing key elements that constitute the discourse of Islam. As reported by Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310h/923 C.E.), the Caliph used the term *faltah* (a sudden, expected event)² to describe the allegiance given to Abū Bakr after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. A close examination of 'Umar's reflections on and response to the *faltah* introduces us to self-reflection, diversity, creative performances and unresolved contradictions. The first part of the essay is devoted to discussing these constitutive elements in the discourse of Islam. The second part turns to a discussion of religion as a *faltah* of modernity. Religion is regarded as a project of modernity that cannot be extricated from colonialism, the modern state, science, and development. I use this insight to reflect on my work on the contemporary discourse of Islam.

Discourse through *Faltah*

On one of his pilgrimages to Mecca, the Caliph 'Umar wanted to say something about the oath of allegiance given to Abū Bakr. 'Abd Allah b. 'Abbās dissuaded him and suggested that he postpone his talk until he returned to Medina. Upon his return, Caliph 'Umar recounted the events that led to the oath of allegiance given to Abu Bakr:

"Islam and Religious Studies: An Introductory Essay," in Richard Martin (ed.), *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Tucson, Ariz.: The University of Arizona Press, 1985), 1-18; Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

2 Muḥammad b. Mukram Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab* (Cairo, 1300), vol. 2, p. 66.

“Let a man not deceive himself by saying that the pledge of allegiance given to Abū Bakr was unexpected and unintended (*faltah*). Admittedly it was so, but Allah averted its evil.”³

Umar’s reflection that the selection of Abū Bakr was a *faltah* may have been directed against any claim that the Prophet Muhammad had designated a successor. But there is more to this term than the familiar conflict between Sunnis and Shi’is on the succession of the Prophet.

To appreciate the full implication of experiencing *faltah*, other statements attributed to the Caliphs ‘Umar and Abū Bakr should be taken into consideration. They offer insights on the discourse of Islam that are relevant to this momentous event and other *faltāt* (plural) that followed in the history of Islam. When ‘Umar first heard that the Prophet had died, he refused to believe the news:

“Some of the hypocrites allege that the Messenger of Allah is dead. By Allah, he is not dead but has gone to his Lord as Musa ... went and remained hidden from his people for forty days. Musa returned after it was said that he had died. By Allah, the Messenger of Allah will [also] return, and I will cut off the hands and feet of those who allege that he is dead.”⁴

‘Umar made sense of the death of the Prophet as a temporary absence. The Prophet Muhammad would return like Moses did after his time (*mīqāt*) with God on Mount Sinai for 40 days. There is an implicit reading of the Qur’an in this reaction.⁵

But this may not have been the only statement of ‘Umar on this event. Al-Ṭabarī also reports that ‘Umar made the following statement a day after Abū Bakr was given the oath of allegiance.

O people, yesterday I said something to you that was based on my own opinion. I neither found it in God’s book nor was it something by which the Messenger of God had enjoined me; but *I thought that the Messenger of God would conduct our affairs until he was the last of us [alive]* [emphasis mine].⁶

3 Muhammad b Jarir al-Tabari, *The History Al-Tabari: The Last Years of the Prophet, the Formation of the State*, trans. Ismail K. Poonawala (New York: State University of New York University Press, 1990), 192.

4 Ibid., 184.

5 Qur’an 7:142-143; 28:30.

6 al-Tabari, *The History Al-Tabari*, 200.

In this statement, 'Umar seems to anticipate his use of the term *faltah* for the selection of Abū Bakr as Caliph. But the second phrase reveals a different interpretation of the death of the Prophet. In his first statement, the death of the Prophet was likened to the absence of Moses. In this case, 'Umar referred to a dominant theme in the Qur'an of God sending Prophets to remind their people of a day of reckoning that may come in the form of an immediate punishment (*al-'adhāb al-adnā*) (e.g. Qur'an 32:21).

In addition to the reflections of 'Umar, there is another statement that is relevant to the experience of the *faltah*. Narrated in the collection of al-Bukhari, the Caliph Abū Bakr reminded 'Umar of a verse from the Qur'an when he was talking to a group after the death of the Prophet:⁷

“And Muhammad is only an apostle; all the [other] apostles have passed away before him. If, then, he dies or is slain, will you turn about on your heels?” (Qur'an 3:144)

This was a third way of making sense of the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The Caliph 'Umar's reference to the allegiance given to Abū Bakr's as a *faltah*, then, should be extended to all the reactions and statements attributed to the close companions of the Prophet. The unexpected event was not only the *bay'ah* given to Abū Bakr, but more importantly, the death of the Prophet itself.

Examining 'Umar's reaction and reflection helps us think of Islam's discourse in response to a *faltah*. At least four constitutive elements of the discourse may be identified. The first of these is the role and value of self-reflection and review within a religious discourse. 'Umar's later reflection on the allegiance given to Abū Bakr suggests that Islamic discourse is more than the sum of reactions, beliefs, practices, experiences and values. The discourse has periodically gone through critical moments of self-reflection and re-evaluation. *Faltah* is an unexpected event from the perspective of an existing discourse of Islam, but inspires a reflection and deliberation on its future. After the death of the Prophet, the most famous of these reflexive exercises may be seen in the life and works of al-Ḥasan

⁷ Muḥammad b. Ismā'il al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'lā li 'l-shu'ūn al-islāmiyyah, 1382), Volume 2, Book 23, Number 333.

al-Baṣrī (d. 728) for emergent *kalām* (scholastic theology); Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 820) for *uṣūl al-fiqh* (sources of jurisprudence); Junayd b. Muḥammad al-Baghdādī (d. 910) for *ʿilm al-taṣawwuf* (Sufism) and many others leading up to modern times. Seminal figures in these disciplines (*ʿulūm*) or fields, together with their various interlocutors, formulated or turned the discourse in a different direction. Such reflexive exercises transformed Islamic discourse in response to challenges in the justification of belief and values, on hermeneutical strategies of reading the Qurʾan, and on experiences of God.

The importance of reflexivity and self-reflexivity in the discourse has not been completely ignored in the modern study of Islam. But there is a deep-seated tendency to approach religious traditions as data to be reflected upon for theory-making. Contrasting the modern with traditional life, sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that a radical self-reflexivity is a characteristic trait of the former:

“... the reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character.”⁸

Whilst admitting that this happens in all societies, Giddens emphasizes that “only in the era of modernity is the revision of convention radicalised to apply (in principle) to all aspects of human life... .”⁹ Giddens’s binary distinction between modernity and tradition has led to a tendency to approach insider reflections in religious traditions as data and information.¹⁰ For example, the well-known scholar of religion, Victor Turner, reflects on how theoretical reflections found in religious traditions should be treated:

“But after collection and analysing the demographic, ecological, and topographic facts, I would go beyond Durkheim’s view in

8 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 38.

9 Ibid., 38-39.

10 J.J. Thatamanil, “Comparing Professors Smith and Tillich: A Response to Jonathan Z. Smith’s “Tillich(’s) Remains”,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, 4, 2010, 1171-81.

laying stress ... not only on rules, precepts, codes, beliefs, etc. in the abstract, but also on personal documents which give the standpoint of the actors, or *on their own explanations and interpretations of the phenomena* [my emphasis]). These would constitute a further set of social facts. So too would one's own feelings and thoughts as an observer and as a participant."¹¹

Turner recognises "explanations and interpretations of the phenomena" in the field, but puts them on the same level as the researcher's observations and experiences. In this way, he turns such "theory" into data. My point is that the self-reflexivity shown by the Caliph indicates that scholars of religion in general and of Islam in particular, cannot ignore theory making within traditions. Such self-reflexivity should be placed on the same level as theory-making in, and for, modern disciplines.

The second constitutive element in Islamic discourse is a deep-rooted diversity. The exchange between the companions of the Prophet highlighted above shows that discourse through *faltah* was open to deliberation and debate. In the first *faltah*, Abū Bakr disagreed with 'Umar, 'Umar disagreed with himself, and they both disagreed with those who argued that the Prophet had chosen a successor. From then on, Islamic discourse would remain pluralistic, deliberative, and conflictual on critical issues.

Modern studies have recognised that Islam is deeply pluralistic. The point, however, is not merely to recognise diversity and pluralism, but to acknowledge the explicit and implicit addressability of the discourse. While a particular scholar (*'ālim*) may argue convincingly to herself and others that she is correct, interlocutors near and far may contest that judgement. Sometimes the contestations are explicit and result in competition or conflict. In general, a loosely defined body of sources and methods holds the discourse together. Muslims debate with each other over the Qur'an, over hadith reports, and the strategies that have been developed over time on issues of meaning, interpretation, authenticity and relevance.

The third constituent element of Islamic discourse lies in its per-

11 Victor Turner, "The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal," *History of Religions* 12, 3, 1973, 205.

formativity. The term is used to refer to practices that demonstrate a discourse. When not disagreeing, Muslims pray; fast; go on pilgrimage to Mecca, Medina and other significant places; join daily or weekly Sufi gatherings; celebrate birth; commemorate deaths, and earn a living. Jurists, theologians, philosophers, poets and Sufis have created a detailed and elaborate canvas of values (*aḥkām*) for such practices. Such a canvas is highly differentiated and prescribes values ranging from those that are obligatory to those that are voluntary or neutral. It declares in sometimes meticulous detail what ought to be done, where and when. It offers intensifying performances, connecting Muslims with their teachers, saints, the Prophet Muhammad and God. It is impossible to enter a home, market, mosque, burial place and state without coming across Islamic performances in word, deed and value.

A *faltah* may introduce a new performance in the discourse that is worthy of close observation and analysis. The sudden and unexpected event of Abū Bakr's appointment introduced leadership in the absence of the Prophet into the existing discourse of Islam. Until the death of the Prophet, this was not a key practice in Islamic discourse. In the subsequent history of the discourse, the leadership of Muslims took on various forms, first as caliph or Imam, but later in the shape of *muḥaddiths* (hadith collectors), *faqīhs* (jurists), *ʿālims* (intellectuals), *awliyāʾ* (friends of God), among many others. Numerous other terms and leadership practices may be added to these through the experience of Muslims in different parts of the world in different languages. In all their complexity, the emergence and development of leadership shaped and reshaped Muslim performances of authority in different times and places. Performances in other dimensions of the discourse may be elaborated in a similar way.

The fourth constitutive element of Islamic discourse is the presence of deep tensions and contradictions in it. Shahab Ahmed has reflected on the hermeneutics of Islam from Bengal to the Balkans, showing that poets, Sufis and ordinary people were not discomfited by ambiguity and contradiction when making sense of Islam.¹² I argue for an unresolvable

12 Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*

contradiction in the constitution of the discourse on a wider scale. The first *faltah* introduced this feature to appoint a successor to the Prophet who could never be a prophet. The metaphor of the death or absence of the Prophet and the impossibility of replacing him introduces one kind of tension and contradiction in Islamic discourse. In this case, the Prophet has a successor, but he could not be succeeded. And yet, significant developments in the history of Islamic discourse may be identified as attempts to take the place of the Prophet. The successor of the Prophet has been identified and debated in *siyāsah* (politics), *fiqh* and *Sharī'ah* (jurisprudence), hadith studies, Sufism, philosophy and modern experience. In each case, the Prophet was succeeded by the *caliph/imam* in politics, by *ijmā'* (consensus) in Shariah and *fiqh*, by the *ḥadīth mutawātir* (multiple unbroken chains of a report) in Hadith studies, by *kashf* (divine disclosure) in *taṣawwuf* (Sufism), by *burhān* (demonstrative proof) in philosophy, and by institutions and personal experience in modern Islamic life. In each case, an attempt was made to close the gap between the Prophet and the experience of later Muslims. For example, the *ḥadīth mutawātir* comes close to guaranteeing that a statement attributed to the Prophet is beyond doubt. A hadith narrated by multiple chains of transmitters comes as close as saying that one hears the Prophet in person.¹³ The Prophet is recalled in a Sufi *ḥaḍra* differently, turning to an equally powerful and persuasive imaginary realm.¹⁴ Thus, the central position and role of the Prophet in the discourse were creatively reproduced in the discourse. Such intellectual and experiential projects are incredibly creative for the discourse. New directions and practices are forged. But they remain fundamentally impossible at the deepest level. Thinking about the death of the Prophet as a metaphor for the *faltah* in Islamic discourse reflects both creativity and unattainability.

The *faltah* on the demise of the Prophet was the first among many others that were to occur in the history of Islam. The absence of the Prophet became a metaphor for an experience of, and reflection on,

13 Sherman A Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), 179.

14 Zachary Valentine Wright, *Living Knowledge in West African Islam: The Sufi Community of Ibrahim Niasse* (Brill, Leiden, 2015), 352.

the *faltāt* (disruptions, unexpected developments) that faced Muslims over time and place. These include but are not limited to the building of empires, their dissolution; the emergence of strong military leaders; Hellenic thought; encounters in Africa, India, Indonesia; and, more recently, colonial modernity and post-colonialism. Each time, a *faltah* demanded a response, reflection, new questions, debate and disagreement, and intractable contradictions. The discourse is identifiable from the past as Muslims draw on this accumulated tradition, but the accumulated tradition and the foundational texts take on new meaning in the experience of a new *faltah*. A discourse in the shadow of *faltah* has made demands on intellectuals, mystics, theologians and rulers to address further questions and dimensions. And Muslims, in general, engage in this discourse through deliberation and performance.

Religion as the *Faltah* of Modernity

Having shown that the experience of *faltāt* constituted Islamic discourse through self-reflexivity, debate and performance, I turn now to its modern manifestation. Using the model developed in the first part of the essay, I argue that religion may be regarded as a *faltah* for Islamic discourse. Rather than a set of neutral terms for analysis, religion as a discursive construction has challenged the discourse of Islam. My questions for Islamic discourse in contemporary times do not begin with the theoretical terms from the discipline of religious studies, but from the model of Islamic discourse that I presented in the first part of this essay.

The study of religion emerged in the modern academy as a method and framework for understanding and interpreting religious traditions in history and society. Various theoretical and methodological frameworks emerged to study religion as such. Immanuel Kant called this abstracted idea 'natural religion' and inspired others to identify its essence, history, morphology and function.¹⁵ In the last few decades, critical and postcolonial scholarship have questioned the goal and effect of this enlightenment project. Rather than seeing the study of religion as a neutral academic inquiry, it has been identified as a discourse in the

15 W.H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Fortress Press, 1995).

Foucauldian sense. Talal Asad's influential *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* captures the relationship between the academic definition of religion and modern politics:

"It may be a happy accident that this effort of defining religion converges with the liberal demand in our time that it be kept quite separate from politics, law, and science..."¹⁶

In Asad's view, an academic discourse is part of the larger discourse in which it is located:

"There cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes."¹⁷

From Asad's perspective, the academic discourse of religion has not reflected on its object, but has instead created it. Something called religion has been made in the discourse. Religion-making as a key signifier in a discourse has been crafted for modernist conquest, state-making, and economic exchange projects.¹⁸ Students of religion have focused on and thus created a history, evolution and value for contemporary societies.¹⁹

With this critical postcolonial understanding of the study of religion as a project and not a theoretical method, we may pose the question

16 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 28.

17 Ibid., p. 29.

18 David Chidester, "Classify and Conquer": Friedrich Max Müller, Indigenous Religious Traditions, and Imperial Comparative Religion" in *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*, edited by Jacob Olupona, 71-88 (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); David Chidester, "Real and Imagined: Imperial Inventions of Religion in Colonial Southern Africa," in Timothy Fitzgerald (ed.), *Religion and the secular: historical and colonial formations* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2007), 153-75; Fitzgerald, "A Critique of 'religion'"; Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W.C. Smith's the Meaning and End of Religion." *History of Religions*, 40, 3, 2001, pp. 205-22; Markus Dressler, "The Social Construction of Reality (1966) Revisited: Epistemology and Theorizing in the Study of Religion." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 31, 2016, pp. 120-51; Markus Dressler and Arvid-Pal S. Mandair. "Introduction: Modernity, Religion-Making, and the Postsecular," In *Secularism and Religion-Making*, edited by Markus Dressler, and Arvid-Pal S. Mandair, 3- 36. Oxford University Press, 2011.

19 Prathama Banerjee, Aditya Nigam, and Rakesh Pandey, "The Work of Theory, Thinking Across Traditions," *Economic & Political Weekly* 51, 37, 2016, 42-50.

of Islamic discourse in the modern world. Rather than asking which theoretical terms from the study of religions are best suited for the study of Islam, we might ask how the discourse of religion confronts or challenges Islamic discourse. By approaching religion as a *faltah* for Islamic discourse, we can examine self-reflexivity, performance, debate and contradiction in it. How are these continued and discontinued in the contemporary discourse of Islam? What new performances are created? What new debates simmer in the discourse, and what new challenges have been experienced?

Islamic Discourse Encounters Religion

I have not always followed the strategy that I am proposing here. Rather, like others, I have worked with the terms and concepts from the study of religion to make sense of Islam. Through insights derived from Michel Foucault, Talal Asad and Ismā'īl Al Fārūqī, I combined these terms with a study of the discourse of Islam in three interrelated fields. The first was the shape of Islamic discourse among those exposed directly to modernity, such as youth movements, activists and modern schools. The second field has been a reflection on religious authority, most fully articulated in *Islam in South Africa: Mosques, Imams and Sermons*.²⁰ In this work, I drew creatively on the work of Talal Asad to elucidate an Islamic discourse of mosques and imams shaped by the history and politics of South Africa. I also turned to Qur'anic hermeneutics to understand sermons delivered at a critical moment in the history of South Africa.²¹

20 Abdulkader I. Tayob, *Islam in South Africa: Mosques, Imams and Sermons* (Gainesville: University of South Florida Press, 1999).

21 Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986); Talal Asad, *The Idea*; Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*; Abdulkader Tayob, "The Role and Identity of Religious Authorities in the Nation State: Egypt, Indonesia, and South Africa Compared," in Azyumardi Azra, Kees van Dijk, and Nico Kaptein (eds.), *Varieties of religious authority: changes and challenges in 20th century Indonesian Islam* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) Publishing, 2010), 73-92; Abdulkader Tayob, "Muslim Responses to Kadhis Courts as Part of Kenya's Constitutional Review," in Abdulkader Tayob and Joseph Wandera (eds.), *Constitutional Review in Kenya and Kadhis Courts: Selected papers presented at the Workshop 20 March 2010* (Cape Town: Centre for Contemporary Islam, 2011), 56-64.

The third field of inquiry has been devoted to a study of Islam in the public sphere. Led by Habermas's suggestions that debates in the public sphere constituted a new society and politics, I followed an Islamic discourse in South Africa and beyond among Muslim interlocutors.²² In general, I followed a hybrid model of religious studies and the discourse of Islam in the modern world.

From the perspective of religion as a discursive construction, I want to critically reflect on my past work through the model that I have presented in this essay. Hence, I will focus on the constitutive elements of self-reflexivity, diversity, performance and contradiction in my work. Islamic discourse in contemporary times demonstrates extensive self-reflective deliberation on identity and authenticity, politics, gender and ethics. More directly relevant to the discourse of religion, we find extensive deliberations on Islam as religion. We may begin with the definition of Islam given by Ḥasan al-Bannā (d. 1949), the founder of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt:

"Islam is a complete system, and includes all the mani-festations of life. It is a state, a nation, government or community (*ummah*). It is a creation, power, mercy and justice. It is a culture, a law, knowledge and judgement. It is materiality, wealth, earnings and riches. It is a struggle (*jihad*), an invitation, an army and an idea, as it is equally a true creed, and correct worship."²³

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- 22 Yunus Dumbé and Abdulkader Tayob, "Salafis in Cape Town in Search of Purity, Certainty and Social Impact," *Die Welt des Islams* 51, 2011, 188-209; Abdulkader Tayob, "Muslim Shrines in Cape Town: Religion and Post-Apartheid Public Spheres," in Barbara Bompani and Maria Frahm-Arp (eds.), *Development and Politics from Below: Exploring Religious Spaces in the African State*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 56-73; Abdulkader Tayob, "Politics and Islamization in African Public Spheres," *Islamic Africa* 3, 2, 2012, 139-68; Abdulkader Tayob, "The One and the Many: Religious Coexistence and Belonging in Post-Apartheid Society," in Charles Villa-Vicencio, Erik Dostader, and Ebrahim Moosa (eds.), *The African Renaissance and the Afro-Arab Spring*, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 121-37; Abdulkader Tayob, "Utopia and Heterotopia in Post-Apartheid South African Muslim Discourse," in Peter Antes, Armin Geertz, and Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *Contemporary views on comparative religion in celebration of Tim Jensen's 65th birthday* (Yorkshire: Equinox Publishers, 2016), 351-62; Abdulkader I. Tayob, "Civil Religion for Muslims in South Africa," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 8, 2, 1995, 23-46.
- 23 Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906-1949), *Majmū'at rasā'il al-imām al-Bannā* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadāra al-Islāmiyya, 2010), 231.

The term religion (*dīn*) is conspicuously absent in al-Bannā's statement. Religion, as a system of beliefs, values and rituals, was too limited for al-Bannā. Around the same time in the 1930s, Mawlana Abū al-A'lā Mawdūdī (d. 1939) emphasized Islam's distinction from religion more directly. In a book defending Jihad, Mawdūdī declared that "Islam is not a religion, nor even a nation."²⁴

These two self-statements of Islam have cast a long shadow on twentieth-century so-called fundamentalist or Islamist movements. They point to a deep resistance or discomfort among some Muslims to embrace the idea that Islam is a religion. Ḥasan al-Bannā and Mawlana Mawdūdī's, are not, however, the only self-reflexive statements on the matter. There is a long history of similar deliberations on religion that began in the 19th century by intellectuals like Sayyid Ahmed Khan, Jamaluddin Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. Muslim states, religious leaders and publics re-examined definitions, practices and values of Islam as religion. Al-Bannā and Mawdūdī's statements are part of this self-reflexive exercise on religion in modern Islamic discourse.²⁵ In another publication, I have pointed to its decolonial dimension.²⁶

The self-reflexive nature of Islamic discourse in contemporary times is closely connected to its diversity. In the past, Muslims disagreed on reading and interpreting texts, justifying Islam, or coming closer to God. In the modern world, the differentiation of Muslims and groups have added to this history. While these earlier distinctions have not entirely disappeared, new forms of belonging and identity have been forged through the formation of nation-states and associations.²⁷

24 Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi, *Jihad Fi Sabilillah (Jihad in Islam)*, trans. Khurshid Ahmad (London: UKIM Dawah Centre, 1939).

25 Abdulkader Tayob, *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourse* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2009).

26 Abdulkader Tayob, "Decolonizing the Study of Religions: Muslim Intellectuals and the Enlightenment Project of Religious Studies," *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 31, 2, 2018, pp. 7-35.

27 Louis Brenner, "Introduction: Muslim Representations of Unity and Difference in the African Discourse," in Brenner (ed.), *Muslim identity and social change in sub-Saharan Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 1-20; James P. Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press publ. in assoc. with The Royal University Press, 1986).

Modern scholars have recognised the differences among Muslims in their beliefs, practices and values. Clifford Geertz's seminal study on Moroccan and Javanese Islams is iconic in emphasizing this point.²⁸ But the study of these differences among Muslims is often led by theories of society and culture developed in the West.²⁹ When such theories changed, scholars turned their attention to other dimensions of the social and cultural world. At one time, for example, modernity and secularization were dominant frameworks used to map diversity in Muslim communities.³⁰ Later, new theoretical models were introduced, such as the religious market, rationalisation, postmodernism, security, agency, materiality, and the everyday. In each of these, new insights were 'discovered' of the diversity of Islam and Muslims.³¹ Such intellectual strategies, rooted in Western experiences of the modern and then applied to Muslim societies, offer useful insights. But they often imposed a structure or historical telos derived ultimately from Western experiences of modernization.

Approaching Islam as a discourse never loses sight of the local or the global. It does not ignore the differences that exist among Muslims

28 Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Daniel Martin Varisco, *Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation* (New York: Palgrave, 2005). While Varisco is critical of the model used by Geertz, he supports the usefulness of multiple Islams.

29 Asad, *The Idea*, 15.

30 Abdulkader Tayob, "Dialectical Theology in the Search for Modern Islam," in Léon Buskens and Annmarie van Sandwijk (eds.), *Islamic Studies in the Twenty-first century: Transformations and Continuities*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 161-82.

31 A few examples of such theoretical tendencies are given here. Note the models in some of the titles: Roman Loimeier, "Is There Something like 'Protestant Islam'?" *Die Welt des Islams, Series*, 45, 2, 2005, pp. 216-54; e on the value of the everyday (French, *mondain*), see Benjamin F. Soares and Filippo Osella. "Islam, Politics, Anthropology," In *Islam, politics, anthropology*, edited by Benjamin F. Soares, and Filippo Osella, 1-22 (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); on materiality and aesthetics, see Brian Larkin, "Islamic Renewal, Radio, and the Surface of Things," in *Aesthetic Formations*, edited by Birgit Meyer, 117-36 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); for a critique of agency in modern social theory, see Saba Mahmood, "Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject," in *Bodily Citations: religion and Judith Butler*, edited by Ellen T. Armour, and Susan M. St. Ville, 177- 177 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

on issues that range from toothpaste to politics. Nor does it ignore the reality of colonisation that comes through modernization or neo-liberal economics. But it focuses on the deliberations and justifications that animate the discourse. It shows how individuals and societies deliberate over the texts and values of Islam, but also about new conditions and practices over which Muslims disagree. Focusing on Islamic discourse sheds light on the justifications and modes of argument across Muslim societies and communities.

The third element in Islamic discourse, performance, has not been difficult to identify. But it also faces theoretical frameworks that determine how they may be appreciated and analysed. Two dominant positions may be identified in the study of religions. Arguing against the privilege of inwardness in modern social theory, Talal Asad suggested that scholars focus on disciplinary practices on the formation of “moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledges.”³² This emphasis on ethical practices may be placed in sharp contrast with a critical, postmodernist trend in the study of religion that privileges innovation and creativity in the performance of religion. This idea was first initiated by Jonathan Z. Smith, and further developed by scholars such as Catherine Bell and Ian Murphy.³³ The latter, for example, suggested that every religious act points to a new meaning wrestled from the old.³⁴ In contrast with the ethical practices in Asad, the idea of performance has come to denote creativity in religious performances, replacing previous theories of ritual that emphasized repetitive actions.

Islamic discourse sometimes points to one, and sometimes to other models for practices or performance. In my study of the Muslim Youth

32 Talal Asad, *The Idea*, 7.

33 Jonathan Z. Smith, “Scriptures and Histories,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 4, 1/2, 1992, 97-105; Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Theodore M. Vial, “Opposites Attract: The Body and Cognition in a Debate Over Baptism,” *Numen*, 46, 2, 1999, pp. 121-45.

34 Tim Murphy, “Elements of a Semiotic Theory of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 15, 1, 2003, pp. 48-67

Movement,³⁵ I found that its discussions, study circles and practices created new forms of social organisation and ethical practices. But these were derived in creative readings of foundational texts in relation to global developments in the Muslim world. I used the term popularised by Thomas Kuhn, that university and college graduates fashioned a new paradigm for Islam. But I kept to the key insight of Asad's, that a continuous debate and deliberation was pursued between this new and the old. These features in the study of religion are represented as divergent frameworks by Asad and Smith respectively. In reality, a devotion to ethics through practices inherited from the past and creatively reproduced are found in the discourse. Islamic discourse suggests a complex construction not employed solely with full devotion to the technology of the self as Asad seems to argue.³⁶ Discourse is not just the special preserve of piety through prayer, charity and listening to moral counsel.³⁷

As outlined earlier, the impossibility of finding a true successor to the Prophet introduced an intractability in Islamic discourse. Modernity has forced upon Muslims a fair share of tensions and contradictions. The radical transformation of the world through Western colonialism, modern science, the capitalist market, and the nation-state has produced extensive debate and deliberation among Muslims. In response to these challenges, some fundamental tensions and contradictions have emerged that cannot be resolved. Islamic discourse is sometimes desperately torn between the past and the present. Taking human rights as an example, many Muslims have embraced the fundamental values of freedom and individuality. But modern Islamic discourse is mired in profound contradictions between

35 Abdulkader I. Tayob, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1995).

36 Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the self: a seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, 16- 49 (University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Talal Asad, "Thinking About Religion through Wittgenstein." *Critical Times*, 3, 3, 2020, pp. 403-42.

37 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Amira Mittermaier, "Beyond Compassion: Islamic Voluntarism in Egypt." *American Ethnologist*, 41, 3, 2014, pp. 518-31; Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

the full implications of individual liberty against a history of values and practices drawn from revelation.³⁸

Conclusion

The responses of the Caliph ‘Umar to the death of the Prophet and the appointment of Abū Bakr were closely read here to identify constitutive elements in the discourse. It was shown that self-reflectiveness, diversity, performativity and unresolvable tensions and contradictions were key elements in the discourse. Islamic discourse is constituted to respond to change through debate, performance and contradictions. It is a fragile construction that, however, does not fail to show performance, a diverse manifestation that exhibits connectivity through shared sources, methods and values. *Faltah*, then, offers a useful starting point from which to appreciate the constitutive elements of Islamic discourse.

In the second part of the essay, I argued that Islamic discourse may be examined for its encounter with the study of religion in the modern academy. From a critical postcolonial perspective, the study of religion is a project of modernity that subjects and regulates religious experiences, practices and social formations. More than a set of analytical tools, it has created a model for religion. Using this insight from postcolonial theory, I argued that one might see the discourse of religion as a *faltah* in the history of Islam. The discourse of Islam, then, is confronted by the discourse of religion. Thus, it has deliberated in modern times over the value of “religion” for its self-identification. New forms of diversity have been introduced, but not only as social formations mediated by modernization, state-making and postmodern self-formation. Performances are present and effective, but they are neither separated from debate and deliberation, nor are they free of ambiguity or contradiction. With the full appreciation of experiencing *faltah*, Islamic discourse shows itself to be self-reflexive, diverse, performative and sometimes self-contradictory.

38 Abdulkader Tayob, “Human Rights in Modern Islamic Discourse,” in Nicolet Boekhof-van der Voort, Kees Versteegh and Joas Wagemakers (eds.), *The Transmission and Dynamics of the Textual Sources of Islam: Essays in Honour of Harald Motzki* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 349-66; Ebrahim Moosa, “The Dilemma of Islamic Rights Schemes,” *The Journal of Law and Religion* 15, 12, 2000, 184-215.