

Guest Editor's Foreword: Islamic Cultures in East and South Asia

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The world is home to 1.6 billion Muslims, the vast majority of whom reside in Asia. Not only is Indonesia with its 210 million Muslims the largest Muslim country in the world, but the combined Muslim populations of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh far outweigh those of the Arab world. What's more, China's Hui—the so called Chinese Muslims (discussed in this issue by Yamazaki-Unno), who remain relatively unknown even among their coreligionists, are approximately as numerous as Tunisians. The rich history as well as the great geographic and ethnolinguistic diversity of the Asian continent fostered a myriad of traditions and practices as various communities adopted Islam. Yet Asian Muslims with their distinct lifestyles are usually not the first to spring to mind as the representatives of Islam and the Muslim world.

This special issue explores the intricate histories and realities of Islamic thought and Muslim lives in East and South Asia from religious, social, political and artistic perspectives. It demonstrates that development of Islam—in religious, cultural and political terms—has been a complex process shaped by distinctive regional, local or even personal (see Petek's article) considerations and responses to Islam's universalist teachings.

South Asia is culturally and intellectually one of the centres of Muslim world in terms of influence and importance. For centuries it has presented one of the fountainheads of Islamic learning, often visited by Muslim scholars from afar who stopped and studied there on their years-long pilgrimages, including to Mecca. That this significance is not waning today is exemplified by the fact that the largest contemporary Islamic lay movement, Tablighi Jamaat, which commands dozens of millions of followers worldwide (including in China), originated in early twentieth century India. Culturally, South Asian Islam is characterised by practices alien to large parts of the Middle East, such as music, dance and figurative art (for the latter, see Petek in this volume), and it is precisely such syncretism that time and again evokes attempts to restore "pure" Islam, thus leading to establishment of new religious schools.

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East Asia, on the other hand, is considered peripheral to the Muslim world, if that at all. The presence of above mentioned Chinese Muslims—descendants of foreign Muslim merchants who settled in China from the seventh through the fourteenth centuries and became Sinicized in language and much of the culture due to assimilation pressures and intermarriage with Han—may seem exotic to Muslims from Islam's core regions, or a demonstration of the greatness of Islam, boasting historically established, thriving communities in the heart of this grand civilization and global superpower. Yet as the growing scholarship on Islam in China shows, despite (or perhaps because of) life at the margins and the accommodation to Chinese society and culture, Chinese Muslims have persistently been concerned with their own orthodoxy and orthopraxy. They have maintained contact with and sought knowledge from what they called the Western regions, and all the significant currents in Islamic thought and practice found their way to China. Chinese Muslims (much like their counterparts in Southeast Asia) are also a good example of the importance of commerce for the spread and development of Islam. More recent in origin and much smaller in number are Muslim communities in Japan, which are mostly comprised of Indonesian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Iranian immigrants and their Japanese wives who converted upon marriage. Japanese intellectual and academic engagement with Islam and Muslims, however, is far from negligible, offering new perspectives and valuable insights into Islamic thoughts and practices (see Al-Daghistani's and Unno-Yamazaki's articles).

Islam, then, is not monolithic nor are Muslim lives uniform. As local cultures and practices significantly influence the practice of Islam, this may beg the question: what is Islam and who is Muslim? Arguing against the essentialising, reifying and totalising constructions of Islam, an anthropologist might answer with Talal Asad that it is a discursive tradition, where the discussion of a certain present (Islamic) practice is tied to its past (and future), and where any definition of being Muslim is bound up with the relations of power, with contestation and conflict; in other words, Islam as a struggle over Islamic normativity. Another anthropologist, Gabriele Marranaci, however, suggests that we should proceed from studying people who feel Muslim and treat Islam only as map of discourses which rationalise, symbolise and ritualise this feeling. As the authors of this special volume come from a variety of disciplines, they adopt a range of approaches.

The issue is divided into two thematic sections. The first examines the influence Islam as an ideology may exert on social action, demonstrating how reference to Islamic teachings may serve to justify different, sometimes even opposing practices. The article "Cutting off the Queue for Faith, Preserving the Queue for Face: Chinese Muslims' Queue-Cutting Movements in North China during the Xinhai Revolution Period", by Noriko Unno-Yamazaki, is a fine-grained study of the very

different ways Chinese Muslims in the metropolitan areas of Beijing and Tianjin justified whether or not they and their coreligionists should join those of their Han compatriots who cut off the queue as a symbol of rebellion against the Manchu-ruled Qing dynasty and in support of the new Chinese nation state project. Unno-Yamazaki presents the arguments of several influential thinkers and imams, showing that—in the published writings of that period, at least—there was a considerable consensus that wearing a queue is at least inappropriate if not forbidden in religious terms. The queue cutting among Chinese Muslims thus tended to be advocated on religious rather than on nationalist grounds. Yet her case study further complicates the standard piety-and/or-patriotism explanations of Chinese Muslims' activities in the first decades of the twentieth century. As she shows, many probably cut their queues simply to follow the ever-growing trend around them, and at least one important imam chose to refrain from cutting it in order to avoid internecine conflicts in his community, thus preserving the social standing of his position, in spite of his private belief that the queue was un-Islamic.

In the next article, “The Dynamics of Islamic Ideology with Regard to Gender and Women’s Education in South Asia”, Forkan Ali focuses on the discussions of Muslim intellectuals in the late colonial period on the education of women and women’s rights. Not unlike elsewhere, then, the raising of women’s educational levels was one of the central concerns of nationalist-cum-modernist and pietist movements among Muslims on the subcontinent. As Ali demonstrates with reference to Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, this has largely remained an unfulfilled promise, even as countries gained their independence.

The second section examines various aspects of Islamic theory and philosophy in more or less explicitly comparative terms. It opens with Sami al-Daghistani’s article “The Time Factor – Toshihiko Izutsu and Islamic Economic Tradition”, in which the author draws on Izutsu’s semantic theory to offer new insights into the Islamic economic thought. Following this Japanese comparative philosopher, al-Daghistani argues that Islamic economic tradition is underpinned by a unique set of notions and values that derive from the worldview which is embodied in the key concepts of primary sources of Islam. He adopts key word analysis to the classical and contemporary Islamic economic thinkers and their views on the interrelation of time and money, or the time value of money. He shows that while both conventional economics and Islamic economic thought agree on money’s basic usefulness for the exchange of commodities, the fact that in Islam money should be utilised to improve the human condition and has no value in itself (i.e. as a commodity) imbues all economic behaviour, especially that of interest and money utilization with moral considerations. We should thus speak of Islamic ethico-economic, rather than simply economic terms.

The following article by Nina Petek, entitled “Aesthetics of the Classical Period of the Islamic Mughal Empire in India through the Portrait of Abū al-Faṭḥ Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Akbar”, examines the development of Mughal Art as a parallel process of Akbar’s personal development. The author traces the gradual transformation of this extraordinary ruler from a young, inquisitive boy who assumes the throne earlier than expected to a mature man who becomes not only a political unifier but also a great spiritual leader of his multicultural empire. The three-stage evolution is detailed through the changes in paintings created at Akbar’s court, the three phases of his quest for Oneness reflected in the choice of motifs and painting styles. For Akbar, Islam, particularly in its mystical interpretations, becomes the framework which is interwoven with many other traditions, especially Hinduism, and a rich, cosmopolitan tapestry emerges both from Akbar’s life and in Mughal paintings of his period.

Finally, this special issue concludes with a review by Jana S. Rošker of the 2016 special volume of the journal *Synthesis Philosophica* on Islamic and Comparative Philosophy. Edited by Nevad Kahteran and Daniel Bučan it, too, endeavours to shed light on the versatile traditions of Islamic thought and Muslim practice.

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