

Usage of Terms

ISLAM, ISLAMIC, AND MUSLIM

Another very common problem in materials related to Islam is incorrect or inconsistent use of terminology. Fortunately, the era when Islam was dubbed "Mohammedanism" as a parallel construct to Christianity and Buddhism has come to an end. Nowadays, the most frequent errors encountered relate to the use of the terms "Islam" or "Islamic" and "Muslim." An additional complication is that categories and terminology taken from Christian discourse and history are inaccurately used to describe very different categories and institutions in Islam.

Islam is the name of the religion whose final Prophet was Muhammad, and simply means a state of peace achieved through submission to God. *Muslim* is the name used for an adherent of the Islamic faith. Authors have created misunderstanding by confusing adjectival expressions concerning Islam. The term *Islamic* is accurately applied only to what pertains directly to the faith and its doctrines (such as Islamic law, Islamic worship, Islamic celebrations, Islamic values, principles and beliefs). The term *Islam* belongs to the realm of the aspiration, the ideal, the pure faith. We may acquire knowledge from this realm from authentic Islamic sources, and we may examine its constructs, interpret its doctrines and describe what is required of adherents of the Islamic faith; however, we may not describe a person or any historical phenomenon as Islamic.

To illustrate the problems inherent in usage, an author or educator might employ a seemingly benign formulation like "Islamic women" or "Islamic populations," even "Islamic countries," when "Muslim" women, populations or countries are clearly meant. When the historical phenomenon and cultural content begin to diverge from what is Islamic (doctrinally speaking), the situation becomes more problematic. Some scholars have tried to identify and describe phenomena such as an "Islamic city," "Islamic trade routes," "Islamic villages," as though the religion includes a blueprint for such cultural forms. At their worst, such incorrect adjectival constructions produce oxymorons such as "Islamic terrorists" and "Islamic militants" or "radical Islam" or "Islamic extremist groups," frequently used uncritically even while the same text states clearly that Islam is a religion of moderation, not radicalism, one that condones neither wanton violence nor extremism, much less terrorism, which is expressly forbidden by the most basic limitations placed upon legitimate warfare by Islamic doctrine.

The simplest solution is to use the terms "Islam" and "Islamic" solely for what pertains to the religion, and use Muslim as an adjective to denote the works and acts of Muslims, or groups of people and their institutions (such as Muslim women or men, Muslim population, Muslim countries or civilization, Muslim art, Muslim government or leaders, Muslim extremists). The important distinction is that human interpretation of Islam by Muslims is necessarily imperfect, and that persons, cultural artifacts and institutions are derived from and informed by Islamic precepts with admixture of secular, regional and ethnic influences. In short, human acts and constructs fall short of being purely Islamic, and therefore may not be denoted as such.