

# HUMANIORA ISLAMICA

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meaning, is elegantly summarized by Schuetz in his essay on 'Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality':

...only the experiencing self can judge upon which sub-universes it has bestowed the accent of reality. Intersubjective experience, communication, sharing of something in common presupposes, thus, in the last analysis faith in the Other's truthfulness, animal faith in the sense of Santayana; it presupposes that I take for granted the Other's possibility of bestowing upon one of the innumerable sub-universes the accent of reality, and on the other hand, that he, the Other, takes for granted that I, too, have open possibilities for defining what is my dream, my phantasy, my real life. This is the last insight into the intersubjective dialectic of reality (Schuetz, 1971: 155).

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## Islam studied as a symbol and signification system<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

The problem underlying this paper may be formulated as follows: How to conceptualize that which is common to, and even unites, Muslim societies which are separated from one another in terms of time and space. Since it is Islam which, by Muslims themselves, is considered to be the unifying bond, it is our concept of Islam in Islamic studies which is at stake here. The search is, then, on a theoretical level, for a concept of Islam such that it indicates a common structure of all Muslim societies and communities, and that it can be made operational in the study of these societies so that their different aspects as well as their interrelations become more intelligible. A side effect would be the theoretical integration of various disciplines, in so far as they work on Islamic materials, into a common framework. This would make 'Islamic studies' a distinct field of research.

Several definitions of Islam have already been given, especially in the fields of cultural history and religious studies. Two examples may suffice here. On the one hand, one may think of G. E. von Grunebaum's interpretation of Islam as a culture and civilization, a view which compelled him to understand Islam through an historically oriented cultural anthropology.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, one can think of W. C. Smith's interpretation of Islam as a faith, which made him understand Islam through the model of the relationship between a communal or personal faith and a given religious tradi-

1. The concept of 'symbol system' is used here in the sense which it has in the social sciences and particularly in cultural anthropology. The concept of 'signification system', as far as we know, has not been current as yet.

2. G. E. von Grunebaum, 'An Analysis of Islamic Civilization and Cultural Anthropology', Chapter III of the author's *Modern Islam: The Search for Cultural Identity*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1962. Pocket book edition Vintage Book V-248, New York, Alfred A. Knopf and Random House, 1964, pp. 40-97. The same essay has appeared in a slightly shorter form in the *Actes of the Colloque sur la sociologie musulmane* (11-14 septembre 1961), published in the series 'Correspondance d'Orient', No. 5. Bruxelles, Centre pour l'Etude des Problèmes du Monde Musulman Contemporain, 1962, pp. 19-74. A German translation with some revisions appeared under the title of 'Analyse der islamischen Kultur und Kulturanthropologie' in G. E. von Grunebaum, *Studien zum Kulturbild und Selbstverständnis des Islams*, Zürich und Stuttgart, Artemis Verlag, 1969, pp. 145-180, 351-365.

tion.<sup>3</sup> Such definitions could not help but affect Islamic studies in a fundamental way, both on a methodological and a research level.

Our attempt here will start not primarily from an historical or a religious point of view, but rather as a search, through methodological analysis, for a conceptual framework that would allow one to develop a theory of general validity. This theory should be basic to a whole range of special disciplines in so far as they deal with Islamic materials; it should be of a heuristic nature and liable to be made operational in concrete research. Some elements of such a theory are submitted here in a preliminary way for further consideration and discussion.

Our point of departure is the concept of symbol system as this concept is used in the social sciences. Just as one speaks of the symbol system of a concrete society which is the subject of investigation, so also could we speak of a 'second grade' symbol system to indicate that system which is basic to the different symbol systems of a number of societies and by which they ultimately identify themselves. In order to distinguish the 'first grade' from the 'second grade' symbol system, it is preferable to term the latter 'signification system.' A signification system, consequently, comprises a number of symbol systems. It suggests that people in different societies, at different times and places, deal in certain particular ways with problems of the world, of society, and of themselves. Such a signification system will contain one or more basic views with regard to reality, views which have some permanency through historical and social variations, a permanency which guarantees the continuity of the given tradition. Such basic views largely determine the orientations which exist within a given civilization or religion, as, for instance, the way in which in a given context the tension between the ideal and the real is articulated.

The concept of signification system, perhaps even more than that of symbol system, explicitly intends to do justice to the signifying aspect of a given culture or religion. It is particularly appropriate in the study of world religions and world ideologies, and of their corresponding societies and cultures. In Islamic studies, too, it would seem to be an extremely useful concept.

## 2. Preliminaries

Although the problem of meaning arises in research in many ways, we are concerned here only with 'subjective meaning' as a subject of investigation. Under subjective meaning is understood here the explicit or implicit mean-

3. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1963. Pocket book edition Mentor Book MT 575. New York, The New American Library, 1964. See especially Chapters 6-8.

ing which a given fact or set of facts has for a given group or person, or the specific meaning, significance, or relevance which is assigned by a group or person to a given fact or set of facts. No attention is paid here to the 'objective meaning' of a fact among other facts as such, or of one meaning among other given meanings. At this stage our sole concern is that of the meaning of facts to people.

It would be characteristic for 'meaning' in this sense, that it always occurs in patterns or fields of meaning which often seem to be self-contradictory and often are only partly explicit, and that such patterns are linked to certain intentions which may be at their origin. Meaning in this sense implies some kind of communication between the people concerned and the significant object which again may provide communication between the people themselves, and the perception or assignment of such meaning nearly always leads to a certain action or at least behavior on the part of the people involved.

From these premisses the following points may be made with regard to any cultural research which has to do with subjective meaning:

A. If social life, for its own survival, is built around a number of social meanings and meaning patterns which stand in close connection with what is meaningful to individual consciousnesses, cultural life seems to imply certain codes of meaning built around what is held to be meaningful. Such codes may be related to what are considered to be the highest values of a society, but they often are attached to things or to forms of behavior which express, for the people concerned, self-evident and thus unquestioned assumptions and rules. Each society, as well as each group of societies considering themselves as belonging together, appears to have its own codes of meaning which are shared by the participants and which perform a cultural function. Symbol systems, or signification systems in a wider sense, imply such codes of meaning to which constant reference is made and which, in their turn, refer to what is considered to be of general validity, that is, general values, norms, and assumptions. That is to say, such systems seem to signify values, norms, and realities that, though being beyond empirical reality, are considered to have validity to the people. They signify something that is beyond society and its members, but not completely separated from them.

The function of such a symbol or signification system for the society concerned is manifold. It not only cements the internal unity of that society, but it also provides communication channels between groups and individuals therein. It would be of special interest that, by the values contained in it, such a system should make it possible for members of that society to perceive and assign meanings, be it to daily life matters or to the world and human existence as such, and to make the expression of such meanings pos-

sible. Consequently, in the study of a society or of a group of societies it will be necessary to pay attention to its symbol and signification systems. Understanding a culture would largely come down to decoding its codes of meaning as contained in its symbol and signification systems, and to distinguish their signifying function.

B. Within the symbol and signification system the symbols play a key role. They not only store up experienced meaning but they also offer a concentration of meaning available for experience. They may be said to represent certain 'cores' of meaning: that is, a number of meanings of the symbol system or signification system seem to be condensed and concentrated in them, so that the study of such symbols and their symbolism is essential to the understanding of a culture. Signification being defined as wider than symbolism, a signification system may function in the absence of symbols in the precise sense of the word, through signs signifying something that is transcendent to empirical reality. The vitality of a society and the coherence of a culture seem to depend to a very great extent on the part which the 'cores' of meaning, symbols, and signs, play in it. Important thereby are, for instance, their area of radiation, the ways in which they convey significance to the life of the people, the recognition which the signified values and realities enjoy on the side of the people.

C. As a rule of thumb we would suggest that meanings are 'religious' to the extent that they have an absolute quality for the people concerned. This happens by means of symbols and signs which, as 'cores' of meaning, are 'religious' in the same sense that they have an absolute quality for the people concerned. It would seem that in those cultures or communities which we are used to calling 'religious', specific 'cores' of meaning signify or have a reference to something religious, which cannot be defined, that feeds significance and meaning to the life of the community or the individual concerned.

The difference between a religious and a non-religious signification system would not be easy to discern in practice. Both signify something which may be called transcendent with regard to common sense and daily life. Theoretically speaking, the religious signification system appeals to a source of meaning and significance which is at the origin of meaning itself, whereas the non-religious signification system appeals to a source of meaning and significance which is not its own absolute origin. In the study of any culture, whether religious or not, it will be necessary to pay special attention to the transcendent references or significations which are characteristic for it, and to develop some kind of sensitivity to the orientations contained in them and to the intentions they evoke in people.

D. Seen from this theoretical angle, 'religion', in the way it is commonly understood, is that specific part of a signification system which, to the people involved, has or represents an absolute quality and which, consequently, contains transcendent references and significations which have some absolute connotation to these people. Religion will be linked to symbols and signs which also have an absolute quality for the people; and further, the relationship between the people and their religious symbols will have absolute connotations.

It is a particular trait of the religious signifying process that it does not remain restricted to certain fixed symbols and signs which function as 'cores' of meaning. It has a typical radiation effect by which, in the light of one perceived meaning, a number of other facts are seen according to a new meaning pattern which determines a whole communal or personal perception of reality, and action derived therefrom. According to this interpretation, religion is bound to empirical realities, but sees these realities as transparent in view of certain transcendent significations that are assumed to have an absolute origin or to be 'revealed.' This implies that the study of any religion in view of understanding its 'meaning' basically requires, besides paying due attention to its transcendent references or significations, an attempt to reconstitute the signifying character of the religious data and to look at their radiation effect.

E. Religion could be said to be 'alive' to the extent that people actually recognize the transcendent references of a religious signification or symbol system as self-evident, and accept the absolute validity to them of that which is signified. The life of a religion takes place through social and psychic reality; it implies a signifying function of the system for actual groups and persons. It would be inextricably correlated with a community or with individuals who assign meaning to things and who recognize meaning in them.

It is in the nature of a religious symbol or signification system to pretend permanence, in so far as it refers to something deemed to be permanent and as the 'something' which is signified is considered to be of eternal value. It even may present itself as existing in itself or as being itself eternally valid. Nevertheless, not only its significance to people but also its historical existence never can be guaranteed. The very history of religions bears evidence of the continuous rise, change, confrontation, influencing, and succession of signification systems. There are times at which, either by the force of circumstances or by inner arteriosclerosis and ossification, a given signification system loses its functions and is extinguished, and there are times at which new sets of significations pervade a society, giving it vitality and meaning.

Perhaps it is a feature of our time that people try and succeed in becoming

conscious of their own signification system as a whole, to objectify and see it in the form of one 'idea.' Through this process of objectivation and ideation, signification systems nowadays can change more quickly than before. A symbol or signification system can be made mobile, with or without absolute reference; it can also become reinterpreted, articulated, and manipulated on a scale unknown before.

F. A crucial question, of course, is that of the objectivity and certainty of our knowledge of signification systems. Like facts, meanings too, to be known, require evidence, be it through documents, direct observation, or otherwise. Meanings in the sense of this paper can be known or understood only through the intermediary of expressions of people: Whether such expressions be investigated in their factual reality or as vehicles of conveyed meaning, they have to be there. Any scholarly analysis of meanings that wants to do justice to transcendent references and to reconstitute religious views, needs a maximum of evidence. Only on this condition can certain intellectual inferences be made on the basis of these materials. If a particular scholar is of the opinion that he has a more immediate perception of what has been meant, he still has to check and verify his 'intuitions' before presenting them as scholarly conclusions.

This kind of research, basically, is of a hermeneutical nature and various hermeneutical theories have already tried to come to terms with the problems of such research. For any 'meaning' which was or is valid for certain people at a certain time and place with a certain religion, it is a long way from being expressed in the cultural forms of its time and situation to being perceived by a scholar working in another context at a different time, who takes upon himself the task to understand, express, and interpret that "meaning" adequately.

A special problem is that by objectifying our subject-matter we automatically tend to neglect the possible transcendent references or significations which these materials may have (had) for the people concerned. One apparently has to ask explicitly for the 'subjective meaning' of such materials for such people if one wants to avoid considering, explicitly or implicitly, such materials as dead objects in themselves apart from the people living with them. There certainly is a point in the reproach commonly made to orientalists by people originating from the cultures which were and are studied, that the scholars 'kill' such cultures, if not by conscious action, then by studying them as 'objects.' The same reproach is made to scholars of religion with the charge that they reduce religion to a dead thing by not taking into account its signifying function and its subjective meaning. It is worthwhile to ask whether research itself makes something a 'dead' object, or whether such a result is due to something that may accompany this research

but is not necessarily identical with it. The act of studying a signified value does not necessarily mean declaring it 'false'; the 'ultimate' truth or reality of the signified reality will rather be suspended or bracketed and the scholar will concentrate on the question what this signified reality may mean or may have meant to people in given circumstances.

The same methodological rule holds true for the study of Islam, whether it be studied as a religion or as a civilization. It is even of particular relevance here, since Islam presents itself precisely by explicitly transcendent and absolute references for the people living in it, and also to outsiders. The very fact that Islam is full of such references, actually tends to mislead Western scholars who feel themselves obliged to take sides for or against the signified values and realities. Such claims of the material should be subject to scholarly investigation, instead of constituting an obstacle to it.

### 3. The case of Islam

The concept of signification system can be made operational to analyze what unites Muslim societies of different times and places. As the second world religion Islam stretches over a number of countries and cultures which vary considerably one from the other, and this over a period of thirteen centuries. It is possible to see this in Qur'ān and *Sunna*, in the basic prescriptions of the *Shari'a* and the principal arguments of *kalām*, in those perceptions of man, the world, and God which have found acceptance within Muslim communities. We can see here elements, signs and symbols of a signification system that, in more or less systematized form, is common to the great majority if not all Muslim societies, past and present. Moreover, the Muslim consciousness of constituting a privileged *umma* and sharing the absolute religion of Islam gives to *umma* and Islam a symbolic function with a signification to something absolute. Adding up a number of norms, values, and assumptions which are held to be of more or less unquestioned validity by Muslims, and looking at their inner coherence, one might even say that the concept of 'signification system' particularly suits the case of Islam, with its many variations of certain basic structures.

To interpret Islam as a signification system is not meant to apply merely an outside model to Islamic materials, so that Islam is 'neutralized' in a scheme of general categories. It is not either meant to submit a philosophy of what Islam metaphysically is or should be. It is submitting a theoretical framework which offers the concepts to analyze what unites the different Muslim societies. Beyond that, it opens a perspective on Islamic studies so that they are seen as a distinct field of research.

Islam is to be considered then not only as a set of prescriptions and

doctrines, as a particular way of life or as an historical and sociological variety of cultural forms and expressions. In its narrower sense, and at the basis of this all, it is to be seen as one particular signification system with a number of subordinate symbol systems. As a signification system it signifies a transcendent and even religiously-absolute reality, it conveys meaning to the thought and action of a number of communities, and it provides views and insights on which societies and individuals always can fall back.

As Islam is a specific signification system, it allows, notwithstanding many variations within its orbit, in principle only a limited number of fundamental life orientations. Of the many orientations possible, only certain ones can either identify themselves with Islam or can be considered to be in harmony with it. Together with this, Islam is able to evoke within its orbit only a certain number of basic life intentions, to the exclusion of others which are considered to be un-Islamic. The varieties which can be found to exist within the Islamic structure itself are, as any Islamicist knows, probably infinite, but a number of possibilities are excluded by the structure itself.

Belonging to a 'religious' signification system, Islamic thought and action has a transcendent reference which is itself of a specific religious character and which signifies something which is absolute to people in a specific way. Besides many elements, signs, and symbols of the Islamic signification system, it is also 'Islam' itself which has a signifying function. Of all things, 'religion' means most to Muslim people; that is to say, what they call 'Islam' which has, besides many other functions, also a clear symbolic function and which signifies absolute religious, if not divine, reality. When studying Islam as a signification system, special attention will have to be given to its religious references. The meaning which the basic elements of this system as well as the system as a whole have for particular groups or societies, or for the Muslim community as a whole, deserves, therefore, careful consideration again.

It is probably superfluous to say that in pragmatic Islamic studies we are always concerned with specific forms of this signification system. These forms arose and continued to exist under particular circumstances and in a specific political, social and economic setting. They evoke specific intentions and subjective meanings among people again in particular circumstances. The important thing, however, is that from whatever discipline or angle one pursues one's research, one nearly always has to do, through one's materials, with views and actions which have, to the people concerned, a religious significance, also, if they are used to lead to results which cannot be called religious. The conceptualization of Islam as a religious signification system is a device by which such religious elements, signs, and symbols can be studied for their meaning-giving coherence and structures.

#### 4. Alternative hypotheses

In the foregoing all stress has been laid on the idea that it is the signified meanings rather than a number of common facts which must be considered to unite Muslim societies and persons, and that it is these meanings which have to be subjected to investigation. The concepts of signification system and symbol system proved to be crucial here.

By and large four alternative types of hypotheses have been designed to explain the unifying bond of Islam:

1. *Sociologically*, stress has been laid on the self-consciousness of the *umma*, on its self-interpretation which tends, certainly when compared with the self-interpretation of other communities, to self-absolutization. So 'Islam' would practically represent the *umma* itself in symbolized and absolutized form.

2. *Philosophically*, attention has been drawn to the implicit and explicit doctrines of God, man, and world which are contained in the Qur'ān and *Sunna* and important parts of which are learnt by heart by great numbers of Muslims, so that certain basic beliefs concerning ultimate realities and truths are held in common. So 'Islam' would be the result of a common mental orientation or structure acquired by all Muslims.

3. *Psychologically*, it has been observed that the rituals and celebrations prescribed and often performed in common, as well as the coercive character of many other religious and moral obligations, with their religious sanctions, would account for the unity of Muslims. 'Islam' would be in the first place a common religious-moral obligation, and then it would also be a common tradition or heritage by which all Muslims can identify themselves and feel themselves as one community.

4. *Religiously*, it has been said many times that Muslims have one religious faith in common. This would lead to one basic ultimate significance given to human existence and perceived in it, and to one basic attitude with regard to life and the world. It has even resulted in one general normative value and action system, and leads also in its secularized form to particular absolute ideologies centered in Islam. It would be the common religious faith or the common attitude with regard to God which would constitute the unifying and even uniting bond between Muslims in 'Islam.'

In the first three of these hypotheses the cause of unity is sought in socio-psychological facts or in mental training, whereas in the fourth case it is sought in a hypostatized religious faith which as faith would escape complete investigation. We shall not discuss these hypotheses here but it should be noted that none of them explains why not only individuals but also whole

societies, without being in actual touch with each other, have this sense of unity among themselves.

Compared with these four hypotheses, the approach in terms of meanings, signifying function, signified realities, and transcendent reference has the advantage that it leads not only to investigations which concentrate on precise historical or social facts and their relevance to people, but also a systematic kind of research in what would be typically Islamic patterns of meaning. More than the other approaches, it is a conscious attempt to do justice to the religiously significant aspect of those facts which can be found in all Muslim societies, and to open this dimension of meaning or significance to systematic research. The premise remains that facts are studied in view of the meaning which they have for specific people, and this feature is absent in the case of the other four hypotheses.

If time and space would allow, we would have liked to give here some attention to the methodology of Islamic studies, in connection with definitions given to Islam and with the four approaches sketched here. We can only state here that we are concerned with Islam as a basic variety of human cultural and religious expression. Our aim is not to study Islam according to its contrasts to or similarities with the West or with Christianity; there can be no question of polemical, apologetic, or rehabilitating motivations. Our basis remains that of research for the sake of the truth of research itself, whereby human intelligence is applied to the available materials which are questioned by it, and with a sincere desire for genuine human communication or 'dialogue' without compelling ideologies of whatever kind.

## 5. Application: Islam

Research as envisaged here is the study of the meaning, religious or otherwise, which a number of significant facts, signs, and symbols in Muslim societies have for people identifying themselves as Muslims, under given concrete circumstances. Such research intends to grasp the Islamic signification system in its specificity. As a tentative example, this procedure will be applied here first to Islam in general, and then to a particular theological statement.

### A. Islam as a symbol and signification system

The search here is for the meaning of those facts which to all Muslims have a symbolic or signifying function.

1. Among such facts may be counted: the Qur'ān and the person of the Prophet; specific texts or sayings from Qur'ān and *Hadīth*; social data

such as the rituals and other prescriptions including a number of customs held to be 'Islamic'; the self-consciousness of the *umma* and its interpretations of Islam; certain words and deeds of certain religious leaders. Such facts may be studied in their concrete place and function in a given society, but their special interest is that they occur in nearly all Muslim societies where they perform the function of sign or symbol.

2. It is typical of these symbolic facts that it is not only Muslims who assign meaning or significance to them according to their individual will, but that these facts are accepted and function on the assumption that they radiate significance to life and thought in Muslim societies, in so far as people respect them.

3. The facts mentioned distinguish themselves not only by a transcendent reference proper to each symbol, but they explicitly or implicitly refer to or signify something absolute, some transcendent non-empirical reality that conveys meaning. These religious signs and symbols signify ultimately Allāh: an entity which, to the Muslim religious sense, is 'god' to the people concerned. However much the various societies or people may differ, through the symbolic facts a common reference is made to a non-empirical entity which is absolute to the people.

4. These religious key facts as well as their implicit and explicit meanings, are considered not only to be coherent and to constitute as such a whole, but they are also decisively considered to constitute the religion of these societies: Islam as *dīn*, as the absolute religion. Indeed, this Islam itself, in its plain existence, is again considered to signify or to refer to the entity Allāh, that fulfills the 'god-function' in these societies and is considered to be 'god' as such. Consequently, it is not only the individual symbolic religious facts but also the whole or totality of them that has an absolute reference.

5. The existence of different signification systems poses implicitly the problem of the relationships between 'adherents' of the Islamic signification system and those of other signification systems, religious or otherwise. The key factor thereby would be, as will be evident from what precedes, the absoluteness of the Islamic signification system itself in its reference to the signified absolute reality. In other words, this is the question to what extent Islam is considered by Muslims to be the absolute religion, and what is meant or implied by that opinion for and by the people themselves; what Islam 'means' to them. In view of this question many historical and sociological data concerning the actual relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims can be analyzed.

6. There appears to be no inherent necessity that Islam, in its meaning for Muslims, keeps this its religious quality, always and everywhere. It can very well be a signification system with transcendent but not absolute reference: In other words, it can very well function as an ideology rather than as

a religion. And the symbolic facts mentioned above can quite well obtain a side position in the daily life of Muslim society, so that we could speak of a secularization process. However, both the elements of the Islamic signification system and Islam as such as a signification system can always, in principle, be rediscovered in terms of their absolute transcendent reference. In this way Islam, in modern times as well as previously, continues to exert a great appeal to more or less latent intentions of Muslim people, both in the realm of imagination and thought and in that of action.

### B. An Islamic theological statement

A fundamental problem for any research of this kind is to investigate how, within the Islamic orbit, people express themselves about that absolute transcendent reality to which they refer, whether it be the supernatural in general or what is called 'god'. In the study of other religious signification systems too, an important subject of investigation is what people say, or express in other ways, regarding what they call 'supernatural' and specifically regarding what is 'god' to them. The question itself as well as the different expressions which signify transcendent reality, certainly if this is held to be absolute, are complex. In Islamic studies it implies nothing less than an investigation of expressions of god-consciousness in the Islamic orbit, both on a normative and on an experiential level, in ritual and prescribed ways of behavior, in inspired and poetical texts, and in all expressions of reflective thought. It would be, in short, an inductive analytical study of the transcendent and often absolute transcendent references which are proper to the Islamic signification system. Such a study should use not only direct expressions but also the apparent relevance or meaning of given elements, signs, and symbols of the signification system for the people involved.

Two important results, at least, of such study have to do with Islamic theology. In the first place the signification system itself would turn out to be of an eminently theological nature. It signifies and refers to an entity that is absolute to the people concerned and to which reference always should be made. This entity is straightforwardly called 'god', and this *theos* is characterized in various ways.

In the second place, as suggested above, an analysis of the interpretation of the religious signification system by Muslims themselves would show this to be considered as being itself of an absolute nature. As *dīn* it is god-given, it is the absolute religion, and as such it mediates to the people proper knowledge and action in view of god or absolute transcendent reality. As noticed earlier, Islam has indeed a highly religious meaning for the people involved, not only sociologically or psychologically but also because of the

way in which it presents itself theologically as 'revealed'. This religious quality of Islam is still strengthened, emotionally as well as intellectually, by the simple fact that the same word '*islām*' is used both as the name of the religion and as the indication of man's proper religious attitude.

It is an interesting and perhaps important question why the idea of Islam has such absolute value for Muslims. There are concrete reasons in various socio-historical contexts for such an absolutization and for the use of a particular version of Islam as an ideology in view of further aims. But more general considerations can be developed too. Like other religious signification systems, that of Islam has not only been articulated and elaborated rationally, but it also has been encompassing and all-comprising so that it became difficult for man to fall out of it, or to leave it altogether. The fact that the Islamic signification system does not as such distinguish religious and socio-political community is an important factor so that Islam lends itself to being used as an ideology. But why should this ideology be, to the adherents at least, of such an absolute nature? Even when, on closer investigation, the absolute transcendent reference of the signification system is not at all clear or is apparently completely lost from view for the people concerned – that is, when the system is no longer religious in itself –, it still tends to maintain for its adherents its absolute traits as the supreme value in thought and imagination, or as the normative ideal to which always an appeal can be made or upon which one always can fall back. So it still has, through this absoluteness, a religious significance for the adherents even if it is no longer a 'religion' in the proper sense of the word. Moreover, Islamic ideology not only tends to keep its religious significance for the people involved but also, though there may be all sorts of variations according to circumstances and though it may be able to take numerous shapes, it cannot disappear itself and those who adhere to it appear forever to be bound to it. Much of this may be true for all world ideologies: Man hardly leaves them but he reinterprets or transforms them, or he exchanges one ideology for the other. The interesting thing with Islam is that a Muslim seems not to be able or willing to do the latter; once Muslim, it seems, he wants to keep his identity as a Muslim.

There may be a theological structure proper to Islam which would make this inner persistence of Islam intelligible not only on the emotional but also on the intellectual level. We have indeed to do here with a signification system which has a quite specific religious quality. It contains a quite specific kind of transcendent reference, for it signifies a transcendent entity which may be said to be absolute in its transcendence, or the transcendence of which may be said to be absolute. From this it might be inferred, since this transcendent reference has to do with an absolute entity which is anyhow basically elsewhere and absent from here, and which has to be recognized

as such by the adherents, that for all purposes it would not seem to matter too much whether the transcendent reference to this 'absent' absolute entity is there or not. Critically speaking, it would seem only to serve to make people conscious of an absence here that is as such an 'absence'. Would this specific system not retain then for its adherents its absolute quality even if it might lose its absolute reference and become an ideology instead of a religion? To this theologically-structural argument another may be added. The attitude prescribed to man, of 'islām' either to transcendent reality (*Allāh*) or to the signification system (*Islām*) itself, unavoidably means that this Islam becomes the more absolute for man. The religious attitude proper to Islam, together with the theological structure of a completely transcendent god, appear to be key factors in making certain, together with favorable historical and social conditions, that Islam tends to retain its absolute quality for its adherents even if it becomes and functions as an ideology not religious in itself.

## 6. The problem and the approach

The problem formulated from the outset was: What unifies different Muslim societies of different times and places, as Muslims feel such a unity to exist. Instead of trying to discover a factual historical, religious, or other reason which would have to explain this state of affairs, we developed a theoretical framework of reference through which the problem of the link between Muslim societies could be defined as a problem of shared meanings and significations. In developing the argument we argued that the hypothesis of a religious signification system could lead to a new approach in Islamic studies, whereby the primary concern would be that of the symbolic or signifying facts, signs, and symbols in Muslim societies and their meaning for the people involved with them. The study of Islam, in this perspective, would be basically the study of meanings assigned by Muslims to the world, society, and man, nourished as these meanings are by the symbol and signification systems which exist and function in the Muslim life world.

The main feature of this approach would be that the available documentary and directly observed materials would be studied and especially analyzed not only in terms of objectively given facts and processes, but that they would also be questioned and interrogated for the relevance, meaning, or significance which they have or had for the people concerned. This questioning is performed according to criteria which, during the process of investigation, continuously correct the way of questioning itself. The concept itself of a religious signification system would open up for research the whole field of actual norms and values which played or play a role in concrete

Muslim societies, and which ought to be distinguished from the ideal norms as they are put down particularly in the legal handbooks. The approach to Islam as a signification system would be particularly appropriate to laying bare the signifying function of religious data in Islam and the specific quality of their transcendent references. The next task will be to put this conceptual framework to test in actual research.

Another feature of this approach is that it takes as point of departure the symbolic or signifying function of Islam itself. So it specifically lends itself to the study of the different ways in which Islam was and is redefined as an idea, ideal, value, or ideology, as these have been formulated at different times and places and especially in recent times. Such redefinitions are of interest not only for their own sake but also for what they express of what is felt to belong to Islam and to be Islamic.

Also, if no conscious redefinition has been made, much research can be and should be devoted to the actual validity for a society of the different elements of the Islamic signification system. The question is then, what these different elements, signs, and symbols, of the given signification system meant or mean to concrete Muslim groups or individuals. Special attention will have to be paid thereby to the transcendent references of such symbols, to the meaning of the signified realities as far as they were or are relevant to the people concerned. Such research should take into full consideration the specific political, cultural, and social situations in which certain groups made an appeal on certain elements of Islam, often according to specific overall interpretations of Islam.

On the other hand, if a redefinition of Islam has been made in whatever sense it may be, we have to do with a much more dynamic subject matter. Each redefinition of Islam indeed, and even each attempt thereto, is revelatory of certain ideological tendencies and trends in society, often but not always bound to particular situations and circumstances. Not only is the rise of such ideologies to be investigated, but also the way in which they try, with or without success, to assimilate and use Islam for their purposes; it is of interest to note where Islam, as a typically religious signification system, is able to resist such ideological manipulation. There always is a tension between on the one hand the religious appeal of a religion like Islam at different times and places, and on the other hand the meaning which people with their intentions want to assign to Islam. This leads to many more temporary divergent redefinitions than is usually acknowledged. An interesting question therefore is to what extent, in each case, Islam takes the direction of an ideology which may keep a transcendent but no longer an absolute reference; and to what extent certain elements of Islam, or Islam as such, retain a specific religious quality. The meaning of the signified transcendent reality may lose its absoluteness as well, or it may become totally unintelligible.

There is no reason to make light of the *problems* inherent in this approach. If from the whole of the documentary materials available, still only a small portion has become accessible, not much has been done yet to investigate the signifying function of the system in the societies concerned as far as the known documents would allow us to do. Moreover, each new hypothesis should be verified by research on concrete Muslim societies in present and past, and such verifications have been pretty much neglected. If reasonable hypotheses were made at all, the verification procedures were poor; moreover, given the state of the materials, these procedures often could not be much better. And yet, such verifications are indispensable to avoid all idealization and any ideologizing in the field of Islamic studies, apart from the scholarly necessity of it for the sake of knowledge itself.

Another problem is that of the complexity of any signification system and of a religious signification system like Islam in particular. Indeed, a signification system is more than a 'second grade' symbol system comprising a number of converging local symbol systems. It contains overall subsystems which equally transcend local contexts and which may become heavily competitive to the often officially recognized main system. In many respects such different systems, adhered to by various orthodox and heterodox groups and communities under different circumstances, are like family branches; they go back on historical decisions and lines of development, made when alternative options were available in crucial situations and a choice had to be made. The ongoing historical and social analysis of Muslim societies and movements shows that 'Islam' actually is not one monolithic bloc but shows an astonishing variety of forms and variations.

A special problem is the very breadth of the concept of 'signification system' itself, comprising both the concepts of religion and of ideology, and implying a signifying function as well as a reference to transcendence as perceived from inside the system. Yet the concept itself is useful precisely because of these latter qualities and because it is wider than the concept of symbol system, not only in the sense that it is a 'second grade' symbol system, but also in the sense that symbols serve to keep significations intact which, as such, can also arise outside the traditional symbolism. As far as research is concerned, 'signification system' remains a theoretical concept. Practically speaking, it is exceedingly difficult to arrive at an overall view of a whole signification system, especially in the case of world civilizations, world ideologies, and world religions like Islam. Often we will have to make inferences and generalizations on the basis of the meaning of a small number of known phenomena.

Over against such problems it is good also to stress the *positive possibilities* of the concept of 'signification system' in religious studies and in ideological studies in general. Religious expressions, by the meaning which

they convey, turn out to be more coherent and radiating than was often assumed earlier, and they become therefore more intelligible also in their mutual relations. This is a fruitful starting point in our time when specialized research, both in history and in the social sciences, tends to stress the individuality and heterogeneity of the numerous elements, symbols, and signs, of a given religion or ideology. It allows one to see the interrelation between religious views and non-religious realities, since the meaning-patterns of the former mitigate the latter, and since the sheer existence of the latter has a critical function with regard to the former. Generally speaking, in the scholarly study of meaning religion is not studied as a thing in itself but as meaning assigned to things. The concept of signification system opens up for further research the way in which, within a given religious or ideological tradition, certain religious or other basic views and outlooks are favored and even cultivated at the expense of others, by the simple fact that under specific conditions certain basic intentions of man are stimulated whereas others are repressed. This implies modifications of meaning-sensitivities whereby the concrete motivations and expressions are of course heavily conditioned by historical, sociological and psychological factors.

In the study of Islam as a signification system it is possible, in principle, to analyze not only the historical continuity of facts and processes, and the permanency of structures, but also the variations in meaning and even relevance of these facts and processes, and the way in which the structures crystallize the consciousness of the people with regard to meaning and significance. In this way literary-historical and socio-anthropological research can be related to each other, and diachronic and synchronic sequences can be combined, in principle, on a semantic level. In short, it would be possible to distinguish continuities and modifications of meaning both in time and in local variations.

Another aspect of this approach in Islamic studies is that it justifies such studies as a special field of research. This not so much because Muslims or Muslim societies would be so different from other people or other societies, or because Muslim civilization, apart from its classical period in the Middle East, would have such unique cultural characteristics. The argument is rather that *these studies are all centered around the meanings and significations by which Muslims identify themselves as Muslims socially and individually*. The very notion of Islam as a religion, a way of life, a faith, and an ideology, plays a key role thereby.

If the concept of signification system serves to see connections between Muslim societies of different times and places, this does not mean that there have not been or are not real and manifold differences between these societies, groups, and trends within the Islamic orbit, or that the uniqueness of these groups, like that of individuals, should be discarded. Both that which

unifies and that which distinguishes in the Islamic world will have to be subject of investigation. Perhaps historians and social scientists will tend to stress the variables, whereas students of religions and ideologies will tend to stress the constant intentions, permanent features, and overall structures. Both groups of students meet, precisely, in the question how one should assess the meanings which Muslims assign to certain facts, with or without a transcendent or even religious reference. They also meet when coming across overall definitions, interpretations, or reinterpretations of Islam as given by Muslims under specific circumstances. We cannot but recognize a plurality of Islam-interpretations, which are all related to the special needs of people at given times and places. With the recognition of the existence of this plurality, the freedom of man with regard to his interpretation of his religion or ideology is postulated. But throughout the plurality in Islam the question remains: Is there yet a deeper unity of all these different views and outlooks, definitions and interpretations of Islam within the Islamic orbit? And this is, to our sense, precisely posing the problem of Islam as one signification system.

## 7. Conclusion

In summing up the preceding pages in a few points, the following hypotheses are submitted for further consideration:

1. For any empirical research on Islamic materials there is need for a clear conceptualization of what is meant by Islam as that which is a common bond between Muslim societies and groups of different times and places.

2. The advantage of considering Islam as a religious signification system is that this view conceptualizes the common bond between Muslim societies and individuals and that it can be made operational in concrete investigations. Other advantages of this concept of 'religious signification system' are that it does justice to the signifying function of things Islamic with regard to transcendent reality and specifically to what is called 'god' in Islam, to the fact that Islam as such symbolically is instrumental with regard to man's attitude toward this transcendent reality and the world at large, and to the fact that in concrete societies Islam can be studied both as an ideology and as an action system.

3. Compared with other religious and ideological signification systems, the Islamic one has a distinct character. It prescribes or calls to a specific Muslim way of life – which may have many local variations according to circumstances, to a specific social and religious solidarity – which extends beyond the practical relations between Muslims of different societies and their temporary interests (and which contributes to the rarity of apostasy of

Muslims) and to a specific set of ideas concerning the world, society, and man, and implicitly or explicitly also transcendent reality – with variations according to specific forms of spirituality at different times and places. The signification system itself refers primarily to written documents as authoritative sources of a revelatory origin.

4. The Islamic signification system, though it may be used as an ideology, is to be called religious in more than one respect. Its sources are considered to have been divinely revealed. The religious texts, the ritual, and the Islamic way of life contain specific views or outlooks and intentions which are considered to be religious by the people themselves. The system itself, to Muslims, has an absolute quality: It is something sacred to be defended, it provides a basic ideology to man, it is considered as *din* (religion) referring directly to what is considered to be transcendent reality. This reality is particularized in one 'absolute' god as one and unique. Man is called upon to recognize Allāh as divine and solely divine, or as the god who is absolute in himself; or conversely to recognize the absolute transcendence, unity, and uniqueness of God; or again to recognize a transcendence which is absolute in itself and on which man is dependent.

5. It is through pragmatic precise research that the specific circumstances can be ascertained in which the Islamic signification system has retained or lost for its adherents its absolute quality, its notion of transcendence, its signification character as such. On this basis perhaps some general rules could be found, specifying under which general conditions Islam tends to be more 'religious' or to be more 'ideological.' In so far as it loses its absolute reference the system would have become ideological rather than specifically religious or theological. In so far as it retains this absolute transcendent reference character for the people involved, it is religious rather than ideological and can be interpreted according to its theological structure. In the latter case its elements are like, telephone numbers to transcendence, for the people involved, and its structure is like a crystal system which provides coherence and is transparent to outside light.

6. Only the application of such an approach to Islam as a signification system in a case of concrete empirical research by means of questioning the materials in view of their signifying function will be able to show if and to what extent this approach can be helpful in pragmatic studies. It probably also will show to what extent the whole theoretical framework which has been outlined here contains assumptions and presuppositions that are of heuristic value and lead to better insight in Islamic realities of the mind, both in their universal and in their particularistic aspects.