

# RELIGION IN ISLAMIC LITERATURE



# **RELIGION IN ISLAMIC LITERATURE**

**Emrah BOZKURT**

*[This is the “Religion in Islamic Literature” section of the “Concept of Religion” article.]*

**Published In**

Havâss Dergi, sy.I, May- July 2017, Trabzon 2017, s.34-55.

## 2. RELIGION IN ISLAMIC LITERATURE

The focal point of Islamic scholars' definitions of the concept of religion is the Islamic religion, and definitions are based on that. It should also be noted that there is not much data on this subject in the Islamic literature, and those that do exist are similar to each other and lack the diversity found in the West. Based on the verses of the Holy Quran, Islamic scholars have generally defined religion as follows: "Religion is the totality of the divine principles sent by Allah through the prophets, which guide people in all matters to what is good by using their intellect, will and desire, thus enabling them to achieve happiness in this world and the Hereafter."<sup>1</sup> One of the first definitions belongs to al-Zajjāj: "Religion is the name given to all those things by which creatures worship Allah, which Allah has commanded to be followed and made a way of life (adetuhum), and by which He has repaid human beings." This definition is framed by the meanings of the word religion. The most common definition is given by al-Jurjānī: "Religion is a divine arrangement that calls the people of reason to accept what the prophet has revealed." A similar definition is given by al-Azra'i: "Religion is what God has established for His servants through the language of His prophets." Bayjūrī, on the other hand, organized it in a way to include the previous definitions as follows: "It is what Allah Almighty has decreed for His servants in order to lead them to good." As can be understood, the definition of religion in the classical period is nothing other than the definition of Islam.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that these are definitions of Islam, the true religion or the religion of God, rather than definitions of the general concept of religion. The tendency to define the true religion, which is common in the West, is seen here in the form of a definition of the true religion. Here it is clearly stated that the source of religion is God. The elements of revelation and the hereafter are also included in the definition. Revelation and human intervention in religion are excluded, as seen in Rashid Reza's definition: "Religion is a divine arrangement which God has bestowed upon mankind through the language of one of their own, in which there is no interference by this intermediary, and which this intermediary cannot attain either from another or through the knowledge that he can acquire by himself. "When the subject is limited to Islam, al-Tabari provides a more original definition: "Islam is devotion in worship, unity with God, and submission of the heart and the limbs to God." In the case of a single religion, it is possible, appropriate and consistent to bring together its basic characteristics to define it. But this excludes other religions and prevents the definition of a general concept of religion. According to Sicistānī: "Religion is man's adoption of Islam or other religions as his religion." Let us further clarify this generalized concept of religion, which man chooses and lives by whatever means he chooses, with Askerī: "It is the path that a person follows and believes that it brings him closer to Allah, even if it does not have sharia, as in the religion of the polytheists." He emphasized the path to Allah. These definitions are based on the relationship between man and God, that is, they are subjective definitions, so they are far from defining a general concept of religion. However, according to the definitions of the first group, they also included

---

<sup>1</sup> Ahmet Hamdi Akseki, *İslam*, İstanbul 1996, s.53.

<sup>2</sup> İsmail ÇalıŖkan, a.g.e., s.40.

religions other than revelation. Ibn al-Jawzī provides the most general of these definitions: “Religion is that which man deems necessary for himself and to which he is attached (iltizām).” Ibn al-Jawzī states that what is adopted by coercion cannot be religion because religion is “what is attached to with the heart”, and he sees religion as something internalized by human beings through free choice.<sup>3</sup>

Compared to the classical period, the definitions of the concept of religion by contemporary authors are considered subjective-objective. One of them, Draz, states as follows: “Religion is the belief in a supreme (divine) being or beings who has the power to regulate and dispose of the things that concern human beings, and who is supreme and unseen, by choosing and believing in this supreme (divine) being with consciousness and free will, and therefore by fear and desire, exaltation and submission. This is the individual (nafsī/subjective) aspect of religion. Religion from outside the individual (external/objective) is the totality of all the spiritual beings with these sublime attributes and the practical rules that show the way to worship them.” As can be seen, religion has come to be considered not only in its doctrinal aspects but also in its social and individual aspects. M. Iqbal said: “Religion is a system of general truths which, if sincerely accepted and fully grasped in terms of doctrine, has the power to completely change character and personality.” Maintaining this framework, A. Shariati, who interprets religion as a return to man's original state of creation, that is, to his pristine nature, says the following: “Religion is man's return from the earth to God by purifying himself from the worldly concerns that exist with him. Religion is man's sanctification of nature and life, which he sees as 'the world', and its transformation into the hereafter.” With this definition, Shariati expresses the most original definition of religion.<sup>4</sup> Unlike in the West, Muslims emphasize the social aspect in their definition of religion. It is a system-based definition of religion as a way of life. The concept of religion, which was initially interpreted as a system in the social sense, but which was seen as a system organized by Allah, later expanded its framework and began to be reflected in all areas of life. According to Sayyid Qutb: “Religion is the program on which a part of the people walk. Religion is the order of life.” or “All life programs are religion. The religion of a community of people is the program (menhej) that guides the life of this community.”<sup>5</sup> Sayyid Qutb's definition has plenty of evidence from the Qur'an; the reason why such definitions were not made until this period is a matter of debate. There is no thought as to whether the source of such definitions comes from the Islamic world or the West. However, it should be noted that Qutb's definitions are objective and the subjective aspect is not mentioned. In the Qur'anic definition of religion, the subjective aspect of faith is also mentioned within the concept of religion. However, Qutb may have made such a definition by considering godless religions. Wahid al-Din Khan, who excludes this view and points out that the purpose of religion is not such a structuring and that man should fulfill his duties within this framework by knowing his servitude to Allah alone, says, “Religion is based on two principles: psychological (an-nafsī) and external (al-hāricī). That is,

---

<sup>3</sup> İsmail Çalışkan, a.g.e., s.41-42.

<sup>4</sup> See place, s.42-43.

<sup>5</sup> Seyyid Kutub, *İslam Düşüncesi*, çev.: H. Şükrü, R. Tosun, M. Çelen, İstanbul 2006, s.217, 373.

devotion to God, submission, awe', piety (internal) and the actions that people perform in the external world with their limbs and appearance (external).” He rejects definitions that fall outside this framework.<sup>6</sup>

Based on the Qur'anic definition of religion, it is impossible to deny its functionality in the individual (subjective) and social (objective) life of man. We consider the subjective-objective distinction as faith and deeds, and we will give the reasons for this below. As far as the definitions of religion are concerned, there are two approaches to this functionality: one is that religion is an integral part of the human being, the most important phenomenon that directs his/her life, while the other is that religion is an individual and personal phenomenon that people need, but which does not cover their whole life, and moreover, is not the directive of their life. Leaving these debates aside, from the Qur'anic point of view, it is a fact that religion is not only an individual phenomenon but is also reflected in the outside world. We consider this to be the unity of faith and deeds. Today, our scholars who define religion in this way have expressed this fact as follows: “Religion is an institution that has individual and social aspects, is systematized in terms of ideas and practices, offers a way of life to believers, and gathers them around a certain worldview. It is a way of valuing, appraising and living.”<sup>7</sup> As we have already mentioned, Muslim thinkers focus their discussions on religion on Islam. The effort to reduce religion to one's own point of view, which is common in the West, is seen in Muslim thinkers as a reduction of religion to Islam. They were interested in the phenomena they experienced. As can be understood from our analysis so far, it should not be forgotten that a single definition of religion is not possible, that every group and even every person has a definition of religion, just as every understanding of religion has a definition of religion.

---

<sup>6</sup> İsmail Çalışkan, a.g.e., s.44-44.

<sup>7</sup> Mehmet Aydın, *Din Felsefesi*, Nakleden: İsmail Çalışkan, a.g.e., s.45. Benzer tanımlar için bkz. Y. Nuri Öztürk, *Din ve Fitrat*; Hüseyin Atay, *Kur'an'a Göre Araştırmalar II*.