

Typologies of Islamic Thought

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ALEX GRIFFITHS, AUG 30 2011

Assess the relative merits of the typologies of Islamic thought suggested by Bennet/Esposito and Shepard.

The first typologies did not concern themselves with the politics or alignment of human beings; rather they were an effort to categorize the natural world of which human beings are but a small part. In 1735 Linnaeus published the *systema naturae*, one of the first typologies of living organisms and its categories were defined by shared physical characteristics. The subject which this writing concerns itself with, that of Islamic thought however defies such straight forward typological organisation and we are far from building a concrete typology. Regardless of if you consider the classification of a human phenomena and its inherent capacity for fluidity possible, efforts to create typologies of Islamic thought have become an important part of Islamic studies[1] and serve as a key point of reference for any student wishing to understand how writers organise the faith, culture and identity which they study. Here we will critically assess elements of the contributions to this effort from Bennet and Esposito[2], and Shepard[3]. Bennet and Esposito's work will be henceforth referred to as simply Bennet's.

Bennet and Shepard's typologies Westernise the study of Islamic thought through the systems they have chosen to organise their typologies and in several places their typologies do not accurately reflect the reality they are attempting to typify. Alternative typologies exist which do not attempt to tie Islamic thought to a Western dominated conception of the organisation of politics along a left/right and achieve a greater degree of accuracy and detail in relation to reality. In regard to the specific parts of the two typologies addressed here, the work of the two authors work would appear to be surpassed by others in usefulness and accuracy.

Methodology

To assess the merits of Shepard and Bennets work we must first define what we will evaluate their typologies relative to. I posit first that in order for a typology to be successful it must transcend the regional peculiarities of specific terms or frameworks in order to be understood in a mildly uniform manner by varying audiences. This writing will explore if this is achieved through looking at the spectrums both writers tie their typologies upon and if this creates issues with inaccuracy and unhelpful preconceptions. I have chosen to explore how a Westerner, specifically a Briton would regard the use of the spectrum principally because the texts are written in English and are thus presumably considered suitable and accurate works for an English speaking audience.

Secondly, a typology must accurately apply to the reality that it is attempting to typify; this will be ascertained simply by applying the typologies to their evidence to highlight errors, inaccuracies, generalisations and simple oversights. Thirdly, a successful typology must represent a beneficial departure from contemporary typologies or alternatively a significant build upon those pre-existing typologies in order for it to be a worthwhile endeavour. This writing will compare the works of the authors in question with the differing typological approaches of Saeed and Ramadan in relation to the issues identified above. I have chosen these authors because they have pursued significantly different approaches and in the intention that the conclusions will be more far ranging than a simple comment upon the works of Esposito and Shepard between whom there are some similarities.

The decisions to tie the typologies to a broad left/right spectrum of organisation; will confusion arise?

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Both Bennet and Shepard seek to tie their respective typologies to a Left/Right spectrum; the merits and problems will be explored here within this section with reference to the differing forms of organisation used by Saeed and Ramadan.

The answer is twofold; it is helpful in the sense that it provides an easy term of reference for Western scholars of Islamic thought and in allowing for the practical dissemination of the typologies to a non-specialist. This is where the merit of the method ends. Tying Islamic thought to a left/right system with Western trappings represents an oversimplification of Islamic thought, Westernises its study and organisation and can lead to obstructive and often quite incorrect preconceptions in the mind of the reader as to the nature and character of the various constituent parts of contemporary Islamic thought. Whilst both authors make fleeting attempts to disassociate their left/right spectrum with that of the West, these fleeting efforts are not successful.

A Western audience will naturally hold on to some elements of the spectrum they are familiar with, it is therefore a risky endeavour to assume a left/right spectrum in the Western sense, applied to Islamic thought does not carry with it considerable risks of misunderstanding. The risk of misunderstanding is heightened by the residual similarity their method of organisation holds with the Western method. Within Bennet the left is termed “progressive” whilst the biggest right wing movement is termed “traditionalist” [4]. A synonym of “progressive” is liberal; a synonym of “traditionalist” is conservative. Shepard renames the left “adaptationist” and the right “rejectionist”[5] but this is arguably purely cosmetic. Thus the left/right system at first glance conforms to the Western model but as will be demonstrated it later departs. This leaves readers in something of a grey area, from here misunderstanding will arise. Less weighted, more neutral means of organisation are preferable. To evidence this we will look briefly upon the relationship the audience has with their left/right wing spectrum.

The British experience with the left/right spectrum, Britain with its ‘Mother of all Parliaments’, clearly demarcated party system along left/right lines and despite lying solidly within the boundaries of “Western political thought” has a not so clear relationship with the spectrum many would argue it organises itself around. As Tony Wright puts it in text on British politics “[In regard to] our old friends, ‘left’ and ‘right’ [the problem is Britain has] ... a peculiar left and a peculiar right”[6]. From the pragmatic and almost conservative [in the sense of restraint] left wing to the right which prides itself on a lack of ideology and believes in reform to preserve[7]. To suppose then that applying a left right spectrum to Islamic thought, removed to great extent from Western political left/right discourse both ideologically as well as geographically whilst Britain that exists solidly within that discourse fails to conform is helpful and not a simplification is dubious. The matter of if the writers are using the left/right spectrum in a Western sense or specific to Islamic thought is made irrelevant in that neither authors make convincing efforts to disassociate their spectrums from that their audiences would be familiar with.

Furthermore, looking into the typologies themselves for evidence that the Western left/right spectrum is unhelpful: Taking the definition of left wing as “now indicative of a radical or progressive spectrum ... varies much over space and time making definition difficult but the following issue orientations would normally be involved: egalitarianism, support for the working class, support for the nationalisation of industry, hostility to marks of hierarchy, opposition to nationalistic foreign and defence policy”[8] and right wing as “The opposite of left ... right wing political parties have included elements of conservatism, Christian democracy, liberalism, libertarianism, nationalism and for the extreme right, racism and fascism.”[9] We can see the importance of economic attitudes to the organisation of Western political thought. Within the same definition a general point is made as to the Western attitude to the left/right spectrum: “in surveys, self placement on a left/right scale is associated with attitudes on economic policy, especially redistribution and privatisation/nationalisation, post materialism and especially in Catholic countries, religiosity.”[10]

We can see that in both Shepard and Bennett’s work, their typologies do not ascribe any great level of importance to economics, thus the left/right system as specifically British audiences would understand it has little bearing. The discrepancy between Bennett’s spectrum stretches further than in economic attitudes, “some want an Islamic state”[11] on the left of Bennet’s spectrum whilst Westerners as demonstrated believe “religiosity” to be a right wing trait. Both authors accept that the left/right spectrum has limitations; Shepard renames his terms[12] whilst Bennet notes that within his left/right spectrum some elements “may stand on common ground in some areas. For example both may advocate a redistributive economic system”[13].

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Both authors do not present alternative methods and appear unwilling to deal with the undeniable problem of preconceptions in the mind of their audience, it is unreasonable to assume readers both specialist and non specialist will not enter into the typologies with specific attitudes towards a left/right spectrum. This is demonstrated by the residual similarities both methods hold with the Western spectrum and the minimal efforts both make to disassociate their system of organisation from that Western sense. One would presume that the utilisations of the left/right spectrum have been adopted out of practicality and ease of dissemination rather than of genuine need. The method of organisation greatly throws up more problems than it solves, particularly with Bennett's typology. This is especially so if we regard the need for a typology to be organised in such a way as unproven.

For example Abdullah Saeed within his text "introduction to Islamic thought", which is in actuality an entire text dedicated to the typology of Islamic thought within the fields of art, theology, politics and law which are demarcated within his writing, does not attempt to tie his broad typology (which he only deems necessary to bring together within the epilogue) to a left right system of organisation. Akin to this approach is the work of Tariq Ramadan who similarly makes no attempt to assign a left/right label to the various parts of Islamic thought, within his organisational diagram he assigns positions to trends of thought based on their attitude towards text and reason rather than any Western framework, indeed those movements which within his typology "liberal reformism" which is similar to Bennett's "progressive" and Shepard's "adaptationist" terms (which occur on the left of their spectrums) in Ramadan's method, appear on the right.

The use of terms and the relevance and accuracy of the typologies to the evidence provided to demonstrate them

It will not be possible to explore all of the terms Bennet and Shepard utilise, it was necessary therefore to select a few choice terms where problems have presented themselves in order to demonstrate the apparent inaccuracy of key facets of both typologies.

Bennet notes that his "traditionalist" distinction "tends not"[14] to involve itself in politics to achieve Islamic government or to implement a withdrawal from Western influence. To evidence this he holds up Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, founder of "Wahhabism" and the engineer of the alliance with Ibn Saud a key figure in the founding of Saudi Arabia. Further, deobandi's whom the author also identifies as traditionalists have also proven politically active such as the Bangladeshi Oikya Jote and the Pakistani Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind. The Deobandi movement was born and bears a history of internal conflict towards attitudes to the anti colonial struggle against the British and partition. To suggest therefore that the "traditionalist" distinction has a tendency not to involve itself in politics is ungrounded. Further in his text Bennet mentions the Deobandis who again perhaps contrary to his claims within his typology that traditionalists "make little use of Western technology" notes that students with certain limitations can use both computers and televisions[15]. Bennet has exploited the generality within his definition of traditional Islamic thought to make assertions that his examples defy.

Bennet notes that three of his four distinctions could be regarded as fundamentalist; this is perhaps unhelpful as fundamentalism with its fluid meaning means vastly differing things. It would appear given the differences which the three types have in attitudes to Qur'anic interpretation that instead of using the less controversial and altogether more specific notion that fundamentalism is the belief in literal interpretation that Bennet is using the term in the Western sense to denote movements which believe in Islamic government. He goes on in later chapters to discuss the disagreements that exist between traditionalists and radical revisionists whom Bennet both designates fundamentalist over the stationing of Western troops in Saudi Arabia noting that the Saudi traditionalists had been "innovative" in justifying the presence[16], it is difficult to imagine thus that Bennet intends fundamentalist to mean literal interpretation.

Shepard on the other hand posits within his work that in essence secularist contemporary Islamic thought equates to "Westernization" but this does not entirely fit to what he goes on to describe and exemplify Islamic Secularism as. Turkey which Shepard designates as secularist is not true to the definition of secularism which this writing regards as "The detachment of the state or body from religion"[17] such as the secularism of the United States but rather more "incompletely secularist" insofar as the state is still very much intimately involved in the regulation of religion as well

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as within the institution itself. To take a similar example, the UK with its hybrid relationship between Church and State is not regarded as truly secular and so to suppose that Turkey with a strong Muslim culture and identity and a similar hybrid system in which the state is still engaged with and directly controls the practice of religion in Turkey can be described as simply secularist is misleading. Shepard accepts this when he states "In Turkey ... secularism does not mean the separation of Mosque and state"[18] but despite this, he continues to term Turkey as a secularist state. Why Shepard considers it appropriate to label Turkey secularist despite accepting it is not is a result of his willingness to subtly alter the meaning of secularism from a separation of religion and state to the shift of dominance between the two bodies. In his work on what parts of the Turkish example qualify as secularism he describes this shift, not separation. "Sharia law was replaced with Swiss Code, the banning of the Sufi orders, the closing of schools run by the Ulama and the establishment of a secular state school system with no religious instruction"[19]. At no time has Turkey been a secular state, rather the state merely swapped places with the religious institution that had previously held sway.

Shepard's work on "radical Islamists" is problematic, his use of Iran as a "dramatic and significant victory for radical Islamism"[20] is not convincingly evidenced. Shepard speaks of the "rejection of the modernist tendency to put Western borrowings in Islamic form"[21] but the example, the Islamic Republic of Iran framed its very birth in French revolutionary discourse[22]. Shepard tells us that radical Islamists "react against certain aspects of modernity while continuing others"[23] but later states "[radical islamists] are no less avid for modern material technology ... make full use of modern methods of organisation and communication"[24] and "the most popular Western derived ideological ideas are nationalism and democracy"[25]. All of these things are identifiable in the Iranian example and so the question arises, what elements of "modernity" are the Iranians rejecting? Are we to presume that Shepard has based his distinction on a difference in attitudes to social phenomena such as hijab and homosexuality?

Iran has pursued foreign policy with an aim to "development of normal diplomatic relations with the outside world, improvement of access to Western technology and the integration of Iran into the global capitalist economy to enhance economic development"[26] and demonstrated its clear willingness to ignore the unity of the umma and risk Muslim lives with its cooperation with Armenia during the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict[27]. And so it is clear that in truth, Iran rejects very little of the West, even less of modernity and pursues rationally its material interests counter to the tenets of Islam if the need arises. Within this same "radical islamist" distinction are movements such as Al-Qaeda[28]. Al-Qaeda clearly does reject vast swathes of modernity and Western notions. A typology by its very nature requires a certain degree of generalisation but to suppose Iran which is demonstrably more similar to a "secularist orientation" state such as Turkey in economics, rationality, nationalism and democracy than it is to Al-Qaeda is misleading.

Perhaps tellingly Saeed does not attempt to tie his simplified typology to the states of the Middle East in what is presumably recognition of the nominal ultimate relevance a dogmatic approach to ideology has to state policymakers. He uses Muslim thinkers and non-state movements to exemplify his terms of reference thus eliminating the great risk demonstrated above that states void his conclusions with rational decisions. He also acts to use the states of the Middle East as a sounding post for the positioning of his typology, for example the attitudes of Political Islamists towards the status quo employed by many Muslim states[29].

Ramadan also does not seek to tie his typology broadly to the states of the Middle East, his only two references to a state is Turkey where he describes Kemal's "Secularisation project" as part of his "rationalist reformist" definition[30] making reference to the rationale put forward by Kemal rather than the results and avoiding placing secularism as centre of the definition as Shepard does with "Secularist orientations"[31] thus deftly avoiding the debate Shepard has walked into. The second reference is to the Taliban[32] whose state/movement status is fluid and whose capacity for at least on the surface, solely ideologically motivated action is largely accepted as something of an oddity in the field of IR studies.

Conclusion

I hope I have acted to demonstrate that Bennet and Shepard have in their efforts to make their typologies accessible to a Western audience muddled and fused a Western understanding of the left/right wing system and developed a

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complicated and in places contradictory method of organising Islamic thought. This is at a time when other academics have forsaken the left/right wing system as Saeed or better disassociated the method by making it their own, a true creation of the subject rather than a method applied as Ramadan does with his method.

The typologies presented by Bennet and Shepard are in several places inaccurate or misleading, Bennet in his evidencing of “traditionalist” Islamic thought presents an unconvincing argument, contradicting himself later in his text. That the author feels comfortable making a general comment on traditionalists which hinges on an interpretation of “little” such as “they make little use of Western technology” using the Deobandi movement whom he later accepts do use Western technology, just not the internet or Western television reflects badly upon the typology. Further, the misuse of the term fundamentalist is again an effort to address his audience whom “fundamentalist” means many things but in this Bennet mistakes the purpose of a typology and ought to have used the more authoritative, less Western centric definition of fundamentalist noted above or in the very least put forward his own conception rather than being constrained by regional peculiarities he has otherwise generally ignored.

Shepard and his confused use of “secularism” leaves us uncertain, is Turkey secularist or is it not? Shepard accepts that Turkey is not secularist and is a hybrid but persists in terming the state secularist nonetheless. Like Bennet and his fear that his audience would misconceive “fundamentalist”, Shepard should not have avoided better defining his “Secularist orientations” or creating a more accurate term better able to transcend Western bias and free from the constraints that secularism as a term brought to Shepard’s definition and which he failed to overcome.

Both Saeed and Ramadan have succeeded in areas that this essay identifies as oversights on the part of Bennet and Shepard. Saeed and his use of Islamic movements and theorists rather than Middle Eastern states better avoids the pitfalls Bennet has succumbed to. In doing so, Saeed arguably remains truer to presenting a typology of Islamic thought than Bennet who focuses much more on states and overtly political movements. Ramadan with an interesting development of a left/right method of organisation rises above the problem of Western centrism, the arrangement of movements which very broadly could be described as “liberal” in a sense of believing in individual agency is on the right in presumably a nod that such a method need not be presented in a the typical Western form.

Relatively speaking, both Bennet and Shepard fail to disassociate their method of organisation from the Western sense whilst other authors have avoided the method or better developed it. In the definitions looked at Bennet and Shepard also fail to ensure total accuracy and clarity in relation to the reality which they are seeking to address, whilst the two other authors looked at succeed through the better selection of evidence. It is not the case that the typologies are without merit; they are both accessible and represent valuable contributions to the ongoing debate over the best means to demarcate and organise contemporary Islamic thought but they are ultimately betrayed by their inaccuracies and bettered by the writings of others.

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