Construction of the Islamic religious narratives: toward a new theoretical lens

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Abstract

The study is a prelude to our understanding of the religious Islamic narratives, and the plausibility of application the sociological idea of the Islamic narratives in everyday lives of Muslim realities. However, this study offers a new definition of the Islamic religious narrative and its sources and provides three major elements to the study of religious narratives among Muslim actors, including religious experiences, religious embodiments and construction of religious identity. Studying these elements in empirical and archaeological levels of the Islamic narrative sources bridges the gap between ideal beliefs and daily lived Islam. In this regard, further studies should pay attention to the relationship between Islamic narrative sources, social reality of religious actors and other narratives that could play important roles in producing religious agency.

Keywords: Islamic narratives, religious experiences, religious embodiments, religious identity.

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Introduction

One of the complicated tasks that confront researchers involved in Islamic studies is how to construct the social reality of Muslim societies and grasp the message of Islam. Indeed, the seminal ethnographic studies which appeared in the late of nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries relating Islam and Muslim societies were thoroughly western ethnographies carried out by orientalists encouraged by colonial and biblical motives. In general, the attitude of those scholars toward Muslim societies and Islam was negative, and they portrayed indigenous people and their daily lives in a derogatory manner. Even some of them were methodologically less ambivalent and more objective. In Orientalism (1978) and *Covering Islam* (1997{1981}), Edward Said in an

influential way covers the false assumptions underlying western scholars toward Islam and Muslim societies arguing that European discourses, far from being neutral, are ideological and stand on certain power relationships marked by political interests (Said, 1978, 1981).

After 1960s, plethora of anthropological and sociological studies attempted to put different paradigms aiming to understand the everyday life in Muslim societies and its relationship with Islam and historical transformations of social system. These paradigms can be categorized into five classes, namely: 1) the great and little religion (Geertz, 1971; Gelner, 1981; Gilsenan, 1990): this paradigm distinguishes the orthodox religion from the popular religion. Based on this distinction, the orthodox religion is representative of Islamic main sources (Qur'ān, hadith and Jurist interpretation) in which the degree of religious actors is close, whereas the little religion is syncretism and reflects different interpretations of religion and mingles different religious practices. In his seminal study, *Observed Islam* (1971), Geertz distinguishes between the religious experience of Indonesian and Moroccan Muslims and the Islamic traditions as universal characters. According to him, the cultural system of Islam is constant and unchangeable, so the official Islam is triumphant in urban areas while popular religion is common in villages and Bedouin rural areas; 2) the religious experience paradigm (El-Zein, 1977, Eickelman, 2006, Soroush, 2009); this paradigm focuses on the particular form of religious experience of individuals and the historical continuous traditions of meaning, arguing that instead of paying an attention to the dichotomy between orthodox and popular Islam, it is better to understand the diversities of the religious experiences and its discursive practices (El-Zein, 1977:232); 3) the discursive tradition approach (Asad, 1986, 1993, 2003; Al-Jaberi, 1981; Soroush, 2002; Shabestari, 2007; Arkon, 2003; Abu-Zayd, 2006); this approach seeks to analyze the Islamic historical discourses, its discursive practices and the institutional power based on critical methodology and then alter these discourses to be accommodating the present social condition and how the practices and beliefs could be secured and modified in the future (Asad, 1986:14); 4) the modernization approach (Turner, 2010; Roy, 2006; Bayat, 2007); this approach adopts the Differentiation and Privatization thesis and its impact on Muslim societies, arguing that religious affairs among Muslims become more focus on the fulfillment of self-identity rather than collective issues; 5) The Tawḥīdic paradigm (Al-Farūqī, 1988; Al-Attas,1995; Al-Alwani;

1995): this paradigm focuses on the unity of studying the social reality of Muslim;(6)The comparative religion paradigm (Elmessiri, 1999; Al-Sawah, 2002).

Despite the plethora of studies dealing with Islam and Muslim societies over the last decades, these studies suffer from dualism in understanding Islam from anthro-sociological points of views. This dualism can be observed in some domains: the failure of distinguishing between the ideal Islam and Muslim religious experiences and practices, the disability to settle the dichotomy between high traditions and little traditions, the disability of understanding what Islamic is and what is not Islamic, or there is Islam or several Islams. These approaches have also ignored the power of Islamic religious narratives in studying the discursive practice of Muslims in everyday lives and how the historical Islamic narratives provide a rich ideological framework for construction of the religious identity of the agents, and how these Islamic master narratives intersect with the personal narratives of the Islamic believers. Our argument in this part aims to give an initial insight into Islamic narratives as master narratives, the sources of Islamic narratives, the function of Islamic master narratives, the intersection between personal and master narratives and, then, attempting to find out how Muslim agents internalize the Islamic narratives in their personal religious experiences and performances.

Islamic Religious Narrative: Definition and Sources

In my account, Islamic religious narratives are defined as a body of contentious ritualistic and discursive narratives associated with representation of Islam and Muslims. These narratives are usually stemmed from five main sources, Qur'ānic narrative, Prophetic narrative, Islamic Biographies, Islamic law narratives and Muslim religious narratives. These various sacred narratives include also religious ideal models, empirical sacred narratives and religious manifestations such as religious experiences and embodiments. Religious Islamic narratives provide a comprehensive understanding of the personal, communal and transcendental narratives and the relationships among them. It also provides individuals with rituals of life cycles that serve them as model for their lives and self-identity based on the sacred narratives.

Despite the unity of the different sources of religious narratives, the study argues that every source of these narratives has peculiar traits and functions, explained briefly as the following:

The Qur'ānic Narratives

The Qur'ān provides a rich reservoir of narratives that contain figures of messages and semiotic functions. The Qur'ānic narratives have their peculiarity compared to other religious and secular narratives and are considered as truthful but veiled narratives (Factuality of Events), historical narratives which are not limited to a specific time or place and purposive narratives revealed through articulating the general principles. It can be argued that the Qur'ān is a comprehensive narrative dealing with different issues regarding the relationships between the creator and His creation in its various types, namely: 1) narrative of the unity of God, 2) the prohibition and recommendable beliefs, 3) moral narratives and pity, 4) stories related to incidents which took place in the life of the Prophet, 5)learning lessons and consideration of the former ancient stories of the previous prophets and individuals, 6) spiritual path of the individuals, 7) narrative is interested in establishing Islamic community (*Ummah*) (Mazari, 2001; Kater, 2004; Latif, 2009; Shamalla**,** 2010; Tahaan, 2010).

The aim of these narratives is assurance of the unity of God and sustaining the faith among the believers among others. It also provides series of functions as general guidance and reminder, intensification of the conviction of the Prophet and the believers, reminder of the earlier prophets and their struggle through different types of stories, indicating the continuity and truth of Muhammad's message genre, and providing arguments against some opponents of Islam such as Jews and Christians. In this regard, Donner (1998) states:

> The purpose of stories in the Qur'ān then is profoundly different from their purpose in the Old Testament, the later uses the stories to explain particular chapter in Israel's history, the former is to illustrate again and again how the true believer acts in certain situations. In line with this purpose, Qur'ānic characters are portrayed as moral paradigms, emblematic of all who are good or evil. In this sense, the Qur'ān can be seen profoundly ahistorical and it is simply not concerned with the history in the sense of development and change, either of the prophets or people before Muhammad himself, because in the Qur'ān the identity of the community to which Muhammad was sent is not historically determined but morally determined (83).

In *Image of Muhammed* (2009), Khalidi distinguishes four narrative voices mentioned in Qur'ān: 1) apocalyptic voice describing dramatic images of Hell and Paradise scenes; 2) narrative voice regarding the previous prophets and, less or more, kings and rulers; 3) moral narrative which intersects the legal force; and 4) communicative and dialogic narrative (22-23).

The Prophetic Narratives

The Prophetic narratives are sets of discursive narratives that are established through recitations, transmissions and reinterpretations of the context of the Islamic doctrine. The prophetic narrative merges the historical explanations and historical metaphors through finding out how ritual and religious practices are to be performed, on one hand, and the details about the groups, persons and places that belong to a time before, during and after the prophet's life. In other words, the prophetic narratives evoke three functions: a) explaining the Islamic tradition (beliefs and practices): the prophetic narratives aim to guide Muslims to a good life and to give immanent answers to the ordinary Muslims' daily life questions and needs; b) clarifying the spiritual path of the individuals and the community: the prophetic narratives are not only oral or verbal, but they are embodiment of emotional narratives that describe what the prophet liked and disliked, describing the valid religious experiences of the prophet; c) appearing as the headline of the leadership of the community: the prophetic narratives are foundation to the concept of *Ummah* and Islamic identity (Khalidi, 2009: 40-41; Schuon, 2008:49; Nasr, 2008: 106).

It should also be emphasized that the charismatic character of the prophet and his discursive narratives - despite the remoteness of time and place of these narratives - make up a concrete model for the ritual experiences and the embodiment and configuration of an ideal and empirical model for religious self-identity in Muslim agents in modern life. Gibson (2007) points out:

> In the world religion, the unique life experiences of the founding prophet do more than providing raw material for scriptural narratives. They also provide a template for their lives on that of the prophet. Most individuals are trained to model their lives on that of the prophet. The most complete fusion of the self and the prophet is achieved by those who master ascetic disciplines that enable them to achieve a state of transcendental consciousness similar to the one that was granted to the

prophet. Where the meanings are embedded in traditional ritual works making their way up into an individuals' consciousness and religious works, the abstract explicit meaning is then contained in scriptural narratives flowing down into an individual's unconscious (18).

Historiographic Narratives (sīrah narratives)

The historiographic narratives are series of Islamic narrative passages constructed and shaped throughout the Islamic history and the impact of the various levels of constructions on the individual and collective identity of religious actors. It can be argued that the historiographic narratives satisfy different levels of needs, which can be summarized into five points: 1) the different threads of historiographic narratives give a clear and comparative vision to religious agents about the noble prophet as a lawgiver, leaders and ideal persons; 2) tracing the key episodes of the believers and their communities in different stages in pre-Islamic, early Islamic, and *khalīfah* periods and in the contemporary days as well; 3) tracing the master narratives of the Muslim communities, its evaluation, transformations, contradictions, crises and salvations, on one hand, and how the true faith of religious agents and communities are encountered by the master narrative circumstances; 4) tracing the different master narratives throughout the social Islamic history giving archeological explanations for the self-identity of the religious actors and the relationships between individual self-identity and holistic overview of the Islamic master narratives; 5) the peculiarity of the personal and master narratives throughout the Islamic socio-history establishing the collective Islamic memory through links between religious actors' memory, and hybrid of different communal memories with the united collective master narratives of the Muslim societies, in other words, threading Muslim narratives with the *Ummah* master narratives.

In his *Analysis of Early Islamic Narrative* (1998), Fred Dooner argues that there are three central themes shaping this historical period: the theme of Arche, the theme of Preparatory and the theme of boundary. The theme of Arche is retrospective and related to the intersections between Islamic narratives and the previous narratives such as Judeo-Christian and pagan narratives. The theme of preparatory deals with how Islam embraces or adopts the previous narratives such as the ones concerning the previous protests mentioned in the Old and New Testaments. The boundary themes peruse the emergence of the Muslim identity and its devolvement as collective

identity (Dooner, 1998: 142-143). The main questions inquire how to thematize the historical Islamic narratives and how they can be linked to different themes in diachronic and synchronic ways. However, the utmost question is how, in light of these themes, the Islamic narratives construct the personal and master narratives of the religious actors.

Islamic Law Narratives

These narratives deal with the association of the social construction of reality among individuals with the narrative construction of the Islamic law. To put it differently, these narratives deal with how construction of personal self-identity of religious actors and its representations of religious embodiment and experiences in the light of the large collection of the Islamic law can be understood, and how it can employ the precious sources of the legal Islamic texts and its stories in launching ethnographic, methodological and Islamic social theories which are interested in the social and historical thoughts of the Muslim societies and their past, present and future. However, the Islamic law narratives can be deconstructed into two distinctions: the Islamic law narrative as a legal text is stuck of specific rules and criteria, and the narrative stories accompanying these legal texts. Both of the legal texts and narrative stories constitute a rich source for the construction of the self-identity of the religious actors and their social history. Dubpert (2007) states that:

> Legal narratives and case reports, in particular, constitute a one dimensional version of reality and are to a large extent shaped by the particular context in which they are produced. There are theoretical and methodological issues concerning the role of the ethnographers and historians as tellers of the stories and the extent to which legal documents can be used as sources of the social history (13).

The Islamic laws and their narrative stories are dynamic and flexible narratives as they conflate between the ideal narratives and the pragmatic (real) narratives. To put it differently, they stress on the universality of the Islamic narratives and their principles and they take into account the empirical case of the ordinary through their social contexts. Indeed, the Islamic law narratives are thoroughly moral, purposive, communicative and able to deal with several levels of realities.

It can be argued that the Islamic law narratives, as any other types of narratives, have their own construction stages and procedures, that is, the events as they happened, *Fatwa* issuers, the tellers of the main and previous stories similar to the current events, witnesses and so on. The Islamic law narratives are dialogical and disciplinary narratives which can be categorized into three levels of communication, occurring between individual versus individual, individual versus judiciary and individual versus society. Despite this categorization, the narration process covers introduction, problem, description, external circumstances and specific questions (religious plot) and closing (Zomeno, 2008).

The evaluation and development of the Islamic law narratives are crucial for re-reading the social history of the Muslim societies and providing the objective interpretation of the religious self-identity among the actors. In order to achieve that goal, the Islamic law narratives should be reconstructed and practiced in diachronic and synchronic reading. In this regard, Zomeno (2008) comments that "the stories told to muftis, the narratives of the stories which took place in the society of certain places, have in them a textual history that makes them change with the dynamics of Islamic jurisprudence and the compilation processes" (47).

Muslim Ordinary Narratives

The most challenging Islamic religious narratives are the representations of Muslims in everyday lives and the paradox contained in them. This paradox could be lurking in various levels of complexities, which cover issues such as the relationships between various Islamic narratives and religious agents, the ideal model adopted by religious agents as a main source of their narratives which cover the structure of Islamic traditional narratives in religious actors narratives, the relations between the personal narratives and other narratives, secular or sacred, and the development of the actors. Self-identity and its turning points and finally the complexity of measuring deals with the very private issues regarding religious` actors' beliefs such as faith, religious transience and discursive practice of the ritual.

From Islamic point of view, there are three essential realms regarding the Muslim sacred narrative of one's relation with God, namely: faith (*īmān*), action (*amal*) and realization (*iḥsān*). Faith is simply a believer's expression of the Islamic ideological framework as well as his/her devotion to internalizing the Islamic doctrine. The submission of Islamic doctrine must include

believing in the unity of God and rightness of His messenger and other Islamic pillars (prayers, *zakat*, and hajj, fasting and judgment day among others). Action (ʿ*amal*) is considered as the discursive practice of the Islamic traditions through the faith in the divine doctrine message and prophet's religious practices and experiences from an Islamic moral view. The realization (*ihsan*) represents the spiritual aspect of the private relationship between man and God. Realization is regarded as the truthful thought and devotion of Muslim to love of God and His messenger by submission to their commandments and guided path (Ahmad, 2010: 21-24).

However, it should be noted here that relationships between religious experiences, religious doctrine and religious practices in Islam are intrinsic and relational. In other words, religious beliefs and practices of religious agents in Islam are full of religious experiences and there is no religious experience without established ideological belief systems and religious practices. With a particular emphasize, Mohammad Iqbal (2011{1930}), an Islamic scholar, comments that "religion is not a mere thought, nor a departmental affair; it is neither a mere thought, nor a mere feeling, nor a mere action; it is an expression of the whole man." As such emphasis refutes the dualism in approaching religious phenomena, particularly the divisions applied to segregate sacred from profane, religiosity from spirituality, individual religion from collective religion and so on.

Revering to the crucial question to find out how the contemporary Muslim religious narratives can be grasped through rereading the inter-sectionality between Islamic narrative sources on one hand and the personal narrative and other different master narratives dominant in the post-modern era on other hand.

Varieties of Muslim Religious Narratives in Everyday Life

The current study suggests three ways among others to comprehend the religious narratives among the Muslim agents: the representations of religious experiences, the religious performance and embodiments and the configuration of religious narratives of self-identity.

Representations of Religious Experiences among Muslims

As per Islamic point of view, religious experience is an essential element in Islamic narratives and on the level of daily Muslim lives. It can be defended that religious experience is individual

encounter with the sacred in which the subjective experiences of an individual connects the transcendent divine reality. A number of scholars such as Iqbal (2011{1930})), Al-Faruqi (1973), Soroush (2009), Shabestari (2007) and Schimmel (1998) agree that the essence of religious experiences in Islam is based on the unity of God and the religious narrative experiences of the prophet are the best expansion of Islamic narrative manifestations.

Hence, the manifestations of religious narrative experiences cover diversities of knowledge, practices and religious feelings about the unity of God. In his influential book, *The Construction Religious Thought in Islam*, Iqbal discusses the relationship between knowledge and construction of religious experiences arguing that religious experiences are facts among other facts of human experiences. The human experiences should be viewed with regard to the unity of God. Therefore, life is not fluid, but it is the organizing principle of unity and has a constructive purpose. Based on this argument, Iqbal summarizes four main characteristics of the religious experiences, namely: 1) all religious experiences are immediate, which means that the knowledge of God comes as we know other kinds of knowledge, rendering the subjective of religious experiences as interpretations of our knowledge of God; 2) religious experiences are unanalyzable experiences. This assumption assumes that the ordinary distinction between subject and object exists, the religious experiences are neither cognitive processes nor emotional feeling but comprehensive dimensions covered by knowledge, cognitive thinking, feeling and practices; 3) religious experience has a moment of association with a transcendent self. In light of this understanding, religious experiences and self-identity of the religious agents are dependent on divine self; 4) religious experiences of actors are private experiences which cannot be transmitted directly to actors but they can be conveyed to others in the form of propositions (Iqbal, 2011: 18-21).

Al Fārūqī discusses the religious experience through Tawḥīd's paradigm. Like Iqbal, Al-Fārūqī argues that the essence of the religious experience is the unity of God. According to Al-Fārūqī, the religious experiences of a Muslim can be viewed as the experience of God by perceiving one of the three dimensions: 1) the orderliness of the universe through realizing the ultimate power of God on the level of nature and transcendence; 2) perceiving the experience of God normativeness, that is, the commands' movements, thoughts, deeds and all realities are beyond doubt; 3) perceiving God as a final end through understanding God as the axiological ground of all chains or nexuses of ends (Al-Fārūqī, 1973: 2-3).

In the same vein, Soroush (2009) and Shabestari (2007) extend the cycle of religious experiences to speak about the prophetic religious experiences as the narratives of prophet which are full of religious experiences regarding the unity of God. Shabestari argues that the essence of religion is the religious experiences of actors. In this context, the role of religion is to edify the religious experiences and give them meaning. Hence, the role of the revelation for the prophet is giving correct and clear interpretations of the religious experiences. The religious experience in Shabestari's understanding is providing two goals, consolidating the idolatry and love between human and God and revival of the practical side of faith within the religious actors. It seems that Sahbarsti attempts to elaborate the religious behaviour of the actors from dogmatic perspective and the self-identity from the big jail to open space through encountering the transcendence (Sahbarsti, 2007: 200-201).

In his *The Expansions of Prophetic Narrative,* Soroush (2009) attempts to create a particular theory of Islam. The core of Soroush's work that the prophetic narratives serve as threshold to understanding religious representations of theological agents and their religious experiences in contemporary era. Therefore, Soroush's work deals with the nature of the prophetic experiences and its relationship with Qur'ānic narratives. According to Soroush, the history of the prophet religious experiences could expand our understanding of the religious experiences of the actors. Soroush states that the religious experiences of the Prophet are truthful experiences that have already passed through evaluations and developments and have grown steadily through contacts with the revelation. These experiences, besides their encounter with the divinity, deal with followers' needs as the Prophet's experiences two type of experiences: inward and outward experiences. The outward experiences focus on building of new structure of the Islamic community and the inward experiences refer to the prophetic revelations, ascension-reverse, insight and illuminations and his spiritual path of him. Soroush comments:

> Religion is the totality of the Prophet's gradual, historical deeds and stances. And, since the Prophet's personality is divinely sanctioned and tantamount to revelation, anything he does and says is likewise sanctioned and approved. And this is how it comes about that a holy human being presents a religion that is at once both human and holy. Islam is not a book or an aggregate of words; it is a historical movement and the history-incarnate of a mission. It is the historical extension of a gradually-realised prophetic experience. The Prophet's personality is the core; it is

everything that God has granted to the Muslim community. Religion is woven through and through with this personality. Religion is the Prophet's inward and outward experience. Anything that he does is the right thing to do. Anything that he says is rightful guidance, for he never speaks on a whim. Religion, then, is the Prophet's spiritual and social experience, and it is therefore subject to him. And since these experiences are not arbitrary, but are founded on the Prophet's holy and divinely-sanctioned personality, it becomes binding on all his followers, as well as on the Prophet himself. With its spirit, its *muḥkamāt* (unambiguous principles) and indisputable elements remaining intact, the Qurʾan was revealed and realised gradually; in other words, it had a historical genesis. Someone would go to the Prophet and ask him a question. Someone would insult the Prophet's wife. Someone would set alight the flames of war. Some would accuse the Prophet of being insane (17).

In order to expand his definition of religious experience, Soroush points out three types of religiosity: 1) pragmatic/instrumental religiosity that is emotional, dogmatic, ritualistic, ideological, identity-bound, outwardly superficial, collective-communal, legalistic-juristic, mythic, imitative, obedient, traditional and habitual; 2) discursive/reflective religiosity is saturated with rationality and, as such, brings along a tireless need for raising questions, and a relentless individuality, and 3) experiential religiosity, the highest order of worship, is the type of religiosity that leads to certitude (while the other two lead to dogmatism and wonder, respectively). According to Soroush, experiential religiosity is:

> passionate, revelatory, certain, individualistic, deterministic, quintessential, reconciliatory, ecstatic, intimate, visual, saintly, mystical and mysterious. Here, God is graceful, alluring and beloved. The Prophet is the ideal (*murād*), a contemplative man (*mard-e bātinī*) and a model of successful religious experience. To follow him is to share his passions, to extend and repeat his experiences, and to be drawn into the magnetic force of his personality field . . . Here, sin is that which muddies, weakens or destroys the devotional link, the power of discovery and the state of union. And worship is that which, tinder-like, feeds the flames of ecstasy. Heaven is the experience of union, and hell the bitterness of separation. Here,

secularity means experiencing being as deaf and blind, void of divinity; a kind of atheistic existentialism. The certainty that is unattainable in discursive religiosity is picked like a fruit from the tree of experience here, and the free will that was seen as virtue there now gives way to the passionate compulsion of love . . . the guardian addresses the believer's heart not his mind or emotions (Soroush, 2009:190).

It is assumed that all the arguments mentioned above focus on the essence of religious experience in traditional narratives. But it is clear that these arguments ignore the nature of religious experience among religious actors. Therefore, a plethora of questions can be raised regarding this as the following: How religious experiences are constructed by the actors? What is the relationship between construction of religious experience and challenges of life? What are the relationships between religious experience and construction of the religious identity of the actors? How can the relationships between religious experiences, religious practices and religious beliefs be read? Any new paradigm interested in practical Islamic thought should take these questions into account. Let us show how previous religious narratives are intersecting with the religious narrative practices of Muslims.

Representations of Religious Narrative Practices among Muslims

It can be argued that studying religious practices is not an easy task due to the complexity of decreeing various aspects of religious practices. It should also be emphasized that a task in Islamic realm is more complicated due to the absence of borderline between what is religious practice and non-religious practice in Islam and the intersections between reflective Muslim practices and meta-narrative practices. However, central questions regarding the study of the religious practices and its discursive narratives among the Muslim actors are present in my mind. Some of these questions are: if religious narrative practices cut off the Islamic narratives as their sources, then what is the essence of any religious practice in Islamic narrative and how these essences are associated with the Islamic narratives sources such as Islamic law, personal Islamic narrative, penal Islamic narratives and so on? What is the place of concepts such as moral unity, social responsibility, embodiment and religious agency in construction of religious practices of

Muslim actors? How can the relationships between religious practices, religious experiences and discursive religious narratives of the religious agents be deconstructed? And to what extend do the ultimate functions of the religious practices make up a practical medium to internalize the wellness of God and enhance the goodness in societies?

In Islamic realm, the intention (*Niyyah*) is considered as the essence of religious practices among religious agents. Based on all the Islamic resources, intention is considered as the first step toward the unity of God and construction of the religious belief system and practices among the religious actors. The centrality of intention to the religious practices is an obligatory object of Islamic ritual law (*ʿibādah*), the contract law (*Muʿāmalāt*), personal status law (*Ahwāl shakhṣiyyah*) and Islamic state laws (*Al-Siyāsahal-shar'iyyah*). Therefore, intention is integral part of these various Islamic laws and these Islamic laws in turn concern the comprehensive understanding of Muslim discursive and religious practices. Islam interconnects intention and religious action. In other words, the intent is an obligatory element of any action and discursive narrative. The Prophet (pbuh) had realized in his early mission the centrality of intent in making up the social habitus of the actors and their religious identities. Therefore, he shed light on intention as an element effective in constructing the purposive and intangible actions of religious actors. In this regard, the prophet says:

> Verily actions are by intentions, and for every person is what he intended. So the one whose '*hijrah*' (migration) was to Allah and His Messenger, then his '*hijrah*' was to Allah and His Messenger. And the one whose '*hijrah*' was for the world to gain from it, or a woman to marry her, then his '*hijrah*' was for what he made '*hijrah*' for" (*Al-Bukhārī and Muslim*).

From Islamic perspective, intention is a comprehensive aspect that covers the internal and silent actions of religious actors through involving their mind, consciousness and attention in the action, the genuine and primarily dispositions of verbal narratives, and performative and embodied practices. Intention further includes the spiritual and emotional sides of the Islamic rituals and performances and its inward and outward religious experiences and practices. In his important book, *Intent in Islamic Law,* Powers (2006) comments:

> *Niyyah* then is a silent, internal, mental, phenomena, what *Niyyah* does is to help define actions mentally making out the bounders of a given action and

differentiating otherwise giving acts of worship their specific identity. *Niyyah* thus serves a crucial taxonomic purpose, linking actual human actions to the ideal-typical actions defend by the texts of ritual law. *Niyyah* turns the undifferentiated flow of human gestures and movements into particular named actions. Especially the actions required by God and regulated *Fiqh*. In this way, *Niyyah* may also serve a psychological purpose, allowing a person some degree of knowledge and confidence that he has fulfilled his religious duties (43-44).

Religious practices in Islam are not restricted to intention, but rather to the changeable and unchangeable in Islamic narratives. Islamic resources classify religious practices into what is essential and non-essential giving large space to decreeing the changeable and unchangeable in Muslim daily lives. This space, due to the sacred text in Islam, conflates between the particularity and universality. It is particular because it treats Muslim daily lives as moments and it is universal because it is concerned with the humanity throughout life and time. All the Islamic recourses deal with religious practices of the religious agents and they put general model to guide them in their practices. The noble Qur'ān distinguishes between the ambiguous and unambiguous deeds, beliefs and practices. In a prophetic narration there are many Hadiths mentioning the changeable and non-changeable in the religious practices of Muslims. Amongst these Hadiths, there is one quote from the Prophet saying "that which is lawful is clear and that which is unlawful is clear, and between the two of them are doubtful matters". The Islamic legal narratives expand what is unchangeable and changeable regarding the religious practices to many classifications such as permissible, commendable and condemnable or based on terms of excess, crossing over disbelief and moderation (Shrouse, 2009: 10-11; Barlas, 2009: 18).

The reformist Muslim scholars expand the cycle of what is considered as an Islamic religious practice through the concepts of *Al-maqāṣid*. Ahmad al-Raysuni defines the maqāṣid as goals and objective enacted for the benefit of God. Scholars such as al-Qaradawi and Al-Turabi point out that the objective of the *Al-maqāṣid* is to achieve the ethical and legal purpose of Shari on one hand, and seek the people's benefit on the other hand. In general, modern Islamic scholars classify *Al-maqāṣid* into three types, namely: essential, complementary and desirable. Hence, in the Islamic world of views the religious practices are not fixed practices connected to the established belief system or based on particular dogma, but rather they are purposeful and aim to

achieve certain goals seeking the benefits of Muslim religious agents (Kamali, 2009: 31; Al-Qaradawi; 2007: 27).

It should be emphasized, however, that religious practices in Islam are not ritualistic processes only associated with acts and Islamic laws. Rather, they are associated with issues such as moral responsibility, agency and embroilment, materiality, piety, and they can be used as counter narratives to dominant discourses. In an interesting way Talal Assad (1999, 2003, 2011) deconstructs the relationships between the religious practices, ritual process, agency, body and moral responsibility. According to Assad, it should not be misunderstood as agency self-empowerment or of universal historicity but as a moral responsibility. In this understanding, terms such as pain, body and emotion are associated with the religious practices of the agents. According to Assad, the moral responsibility of the religious practices in Islam is associated with the main aspects that are: virtues (*fadā'il*), sensibilities (*iḥsās*), rite of worship (*ʿibādah*) and intention (*niyyah*). It is assumed that the moral responsibility is integral parts of the construction of the religious practices and thought in all religions including Islam, in particular. It is also considered as an essential part of the construction of the religious agency in the Islamic realm (Assad, 1999:49). In the same vein, Anwar (2006) argues that the ethic and social responsibility and embodiment of righteousness of the self-identity are the top priorities in Islam. Anwar (2006) comments:

> The act of worship is implicated in everyday life and carries with it moral responsibility to one self, others and God. The self responsibility toward God is in a harmony with the ethic concept of the self as expressed in the Qur'ānic admonitions: that self is responsible for his / her own self; that the self's responsibility will be based on his/her capacity and that the self's good deed for himself /herself (132).

Some researchers such as Mahmood (2005; 2001), Hirschkind (2006), Tong and Turner (2008) and Tobin (2012) analyze religious practices of Muslim agents from the perspective of the religious piety. Conceptions such as agency, feminism and political ritual are presented in these works. In *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), Saba Mahmood deconstructs the relationships between memory, bodily acts, and religious authority, social patriarchal and the construction of a pious self through cultivation of bodily practice of Egyptian

women who participated in women's mosque movement. Mahmood (2005) criticizes the liberal and secular thought regarding the gender agency on one hand, and the construction of religious agents in general on the other hand. In her ethnographic work, Mahmood argues that mosque movement participants' primary mode of agency is through the construction of a pious self through cultivation of bodily practice. She states:

> Although piety was achievable through practices that were both devotional as well as worldly in character, it required more than the simple performance of acts: piety also entailed the inculcation of entire dispositions through a simultaneous training of the body, emotions and reason as sites of discipline until the religious virtues acquired the status of embodied habits (Mahmood 2001: 212).

Similarly, Hirschkind (2006) has studied the role of the new technological media in constructing the religious piety among the Egyptians. The study shows that the circulation of religious audios and cassettes among the ordinary people has increased cultivation the orientations toward internalizing religious knowledge, embedding the religious practices and enhancing the moral ethical sensibilities among the actors (Hirschkind, 2006:9). In a recent study, Tobin (2012) has investigated the religious piety among the ordinary middle class people in Amman focusing on diverse realms regarding the religious piety to cover practices such as Ramadan and the *hijab*, Islamic consuming and dealing with finance and banking. The study demonstrates that there are multiple varieties and processes of piety, not one form of everydayness of the piety. The pity processes among actors are negotiating the processes associated with the social relationships. Tobin's study further shows that religious actors create new type of Islamic piety in accordance with the changing and new styles. The study concludes that piety is a fragile concept which is responsive to new circumstances and transformations of everyday life.

However, it is assumed that religious piety movements give feminism particular space in its works (*daʿwah*) (Mahmood, 2005, Anwar, 2006; Abu-Lughod, 1985). Despite, the Qurʾān gives an equal balance between the male and female on the level of acting the religious practices and beliefs. This, in my mind, reflects that sexual differences have been created by social systems in Muslim societies and are not related to the Qurʾānic narratives. Therefore, the social contexts of the religious experiences and practices should be taken into account. In this regard Tong and Turner (2008) have studied women`s pity and religious practices in Malaysia. They argue that

women's interests in religious affair among the women in the Southeast Asia refers to the transformation of the status and role of relational power of women as a result of increasing high education, declining fertility and high participation of women in labor markets. The study shows that religious piety among Malaysian women refers to several factors such as transformation of ethical self among the women and decreeing a new self. The awareness of act and performing the religious practices are not merely customs, but they are considered as inner and spiritual values. The study supports that Pietization process is influenced by mobilization of religious revival moments as well as increasing the religious individualisation among women (Turner, 2008: 57).

Religious practices among the minorities are associated with more characteristics which distinct them from the people who live in Muslim societies. I want to say that the embodiment of faith in the outer space of Muslim societies has been correlated with issues such as religious identification, minority threats, construction of religious identity and expression of resistance against dominant narratives of non-Muslim societies. It should be mentioned that series of studies in the last decades have traced the religious habitus of the ordinary Muslims in non-Muslim societies. Some of these studies focus on religious habitus among the converted people (Winchester, 2008; Shanneik, 2011), feminist practices such as *hijab*, body (William & Vashi, 2007; Al-saji, 2010; Mellor, 2011; Mahamod, 2005; Bhatia, 2012; Benn, 2011) and religious privatization and individualization (Roy, 2006; Killian, 2007; Pedziwiatr, 2011), presentations of religious identity (Peek, 2005; Chaudhury, 2008; Bectovice, 2011; Güngör, et al, 2011) and everyday life (Jeldotoft, 2011; Alam, 2007).

All these studies show how actors endeavor to produce new and autonomous moral selves in heterogeneous spaces. The embodiment of faith and presentation of body negotiate the religious identity and paradox of adopting dual identity and the relationships between religious embodiments and construction of the religious agency. Hence, religious practices and their actionable functions in general should be understood from the philosophy of the common good in Islam which views the religious practices and thoughts as interactions with the well-being of the people. On public Islam and the common good, Eickelman (2006) comments:

> Social practices that are based on the idea of common good and that contributes to the shaping of public Islam including collective rituals, such as popular festivals and religious and secular commemorations. They also encompass disciplining and performative practices as diversed as Sufi rituals, regional pilgrimages, the

informal economy, the routines of modern schooling, and the use of press and modern communications technologies (xiii).

All religious ritual practices and discursive thoughts should be understood from realizing the concepts of submissions in Islam because of the significance of these ideas in all realms. Mellor and Shilling (2010) point out:

> Islam stresses submission: indeed, the word 'Islam' is the Arabic for submission and we suggest that the primary pedagogic means through which Islam is transmitted serve to enact the submission of the individual. Of particular note here is the ritual Salat, the five-times-daily prayer that is a common feature of Sunni Muslim ritual across diverse geographical and historical contexts. Salat constitutes a 'dramatic gesture of submission', beginning with the stylized, sung call to prayer, the cleaning of the body, the use of ritual space for its performance (either a mosque or prayer rug), the veiling of women and use of prayer caps by men, followed by the silent yet mouthed recitation of Qur'ānic verses during prayer cycles attended face-to-the-floor prostrations. Through these actions the submissive bodies of the faithful become vehicles for the internalization and expression of Islam (31).

Religious practices in Islamic realm are thoroughly processes that do not hinge on the dichotomy between sacred and profane or the dichotomy between spirituality and body or self and body.[1] Rather, religious practices, and particularly the faith embodiments, are in correlation with religious beliefs, religious experiences and transcendence. In Graham's (2010{1983}) account, in Islam, there is "unity of faith and actions, beliefs and practice" (59). From this point of view, there is no secular body or religious body in Islam. The actors' practices cannot be separated to religious practices and non-religious practices. All actors' practices lurk under the rite of worship (ibadah). Therefore, if these practices achieve the well of God and the Good of humanity, the problem remains to find out how the representations of religious experiences and religious practices represent the vehicle of construction of religious identity among actors.

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[1]The Islamic philosophy rejects the dichotomy made between the self and the body, considering the self and body forming one entity. For more details, see Mohammad Allwate's (1994) K*nowledge, Self and Divinity* (Beirut: Dar-Alsagi).

Representations of Religious Narrative and Configuration of Religious Identity in Islamic Realms

In Islamic narrative, the conceptualization of identity has two meanings, the categorization or identification of Muslim religious identity and description of the collective identity of Muslims (*Ummah*) as peculiar groups have set discourse and discursive practices. So it can be argued that personal identity is melted into the grand concept of *Ummah*. This does not mean, however, that traditional Islamic narratives neglect individuals, but rather, Islamic narratives, particularly the Qur'ān and Hadith, distinguish between the Islamic identity as collective identity representing the concept of *Ummah* on one hand, and the concept of self-referring to the personal affairs of the actors on the other hand[2]. It is true that the revelation occurs in plural and collective language, but this collectivity expresses the comprehensiveness of the Islamic messages including all individuals and groups without considering their sex, color and ethnic or racial compositions. One of the main interesting questions regarding the construction of religious identity in Islam is how religious identity was constructed in the early Islamic era and whether this construction has changed or transformed from state to state through time, how the relationship between personal/individual identity and collective Islamic identity can be regarded, and whether the two identities are melted into each other as I argued above or the transformation of modernity into post-modernity has created space between the two realms of the identity.

Attempting to deconstruct the evaluations of the concept of religious self-identity and its semiotic metaphors in early Islam, special attention should be given to the verses revealed in Mecca and Madinah respectively. The Maccan period had particular characteristics, traits and discourses which are different from Madinah period. The Maccan period was the period of disempowerment of declaring believers' faith and the period of instability of the belief systems among the new believers. Therefore, the Qur'ānic verses in that context focus on issues of tenet such as unity of God, faith, religious piety, fear of the Judgment's Day, God's messengers, the angels and so on. Whereas, the Madinah period was described by the Islamic classical and modern sources as an empowerment period so the Qur'ānic verses in which the Prophet focuses on the Islamic law system and the nature of Islamic state and its relationship with other

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[2]Haeri (1989) summarizes seven stations of the self as mentioned in Quran: the commanding self, the reproachful self, the inspired self, the creating self, the contented self, the self that everything is contented with and the perfected self (Haeri, Shaykh Fadhalall, 1989, *The Journey of Self*. Longmead, Elements books ltd. Pp84-87).

communities and groups. At this stage, the concept of *Ummah* was created and has always been the most argued and vital term in Islamic studies.

In this context, there are differences between Maccan and Medina verses on the level of religious self-identity among the actors. Maccan verses describe the religious self-identity of the actors as the community of believers (*mumineen*), although they emphasize on monotheism and righteous behaviour in conformity and accordance with God's revealed law. Whereas, in Madinah verses, the concept of community of believers is replaced by the concept of Muslims. Series of these verses focus on the new definition of believers. For example, the Qur'ān states:

> The Bedouins say, "We have believed." Say, "You have not [yet] believed; but say [instead], "We have submitted," for faith has not yet entered your hearts. And if you obey Allah and His Messenger, He will not deprive you from your deeds of anything. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful. And they say: Be Jews or Christians, you will be on the right course. Say: Nay! (we follow) the religion of Ibrahim, the Hanif, and he was not one of the polytheists.

Hence, submission to God and His sacred verses and obeying his Islamic law are considered the first principles of internalizing the Islamic religious identity among the actors. This summation must be based on the unity of God as empirical representative of Hanafi's principles practiced by Abraham (pbuh). Thus, transformation of the concept of believers to Muslims have occurred in faith environments and political realm in Madinah. In other words, the Qur'ān is gradating in showing the identity of Muslim character through taking into account the priority of psychological, historical, social and political contexts enveloping the individuals. So, the early revelation consolidated the religious identity of the actor gradually by giving priority to it. It is prioritizing to set layers from the most important to the least important based on social and political circumstances. The first priority is faith in religious practices and then the issues relating the state.

The early Islamic sources emphasize on the religious identity of Muslims as autonomous and independent religious self-identity. This autonomous identity can be traced in several verses in Qur'ān and Hadith, from which it has been expanded into the classical and modern Islamic narratives. The Qur'ān categorizes Muslims as monotheistic and submitted agents to God and the other group. In other words, people are divided into believers and non-believers. One of the

prominent categorization is made between Muslims and the people of other holy Books such as Torah. The categorizations between Muslims and the people of the Book have since taken both positive and negative connotations. On one hand, people of the Book are described as alliance and devotee to the Muslim community, and on the other hand, they are described as obstacle on the way of spreading Islam. In some cases some verses convey both connotations:

> Among the people of the Book are some who, if entrusted with a hoard of gold, will (readily) pay it back; others, who, if entrusted with a single silver coin, will not repay it unless thou constantly stoodest demanding, because, they say, there is no call on us (to keep faith) with these ignorant (pagans). But they tell a lie against God, and (well) they know it.

Arguably, these categorizations are associated with the historical and specific social contexts. In this regard, Donner argues that Muslim religious identity in the early Islam was conceptualized independently from confessional identities. He states that:

> The Qur'ānic evidence suggests that the early Believers' movement was centered on the ideas of monotheism, preparing for the Last Day, belief in prophecy and revealed scripture, and observance of righteous behaviour, including frequent prayer, expiation for sins committed, periodic fasting, and a charitable and humble demeanor towards others. All of these ideas and practices were quite well-known in the Near East by the seventh century, although of course in the Qur'ān they found a unique formulation (and one in a new literary idiom, Arabic). The earliest Believers thought of themselves as constituting a separate group or community of righteous, God-fearing monotheists, separate in their strict observance of righteousness from those around them-whether polytheists or imperfectly rigorous, or sinful, monotheists-who did not conform to their strict code (Donner, 2010: 68).

After the death of the Prophets and throughout the Islamic social history, the concept of *Ummah* has been crystalizing to include religious linguistic, poetical, social and psychological contents. These contents convey heterogeneous points of views from conservative and moderate to radical currents. Therefore, concepts such as religious identity, religious categorization, and the relationship between individual and collective groups are cornerstones of the structure of the

concept of *Ummah*. Maysam Al-Farūqī (2005) summarizes several meanings of *Ummah* associated with the construction of religious self-identity: 1) the concept of *Ummah* as a path and guidance for individuals and their behaviours, 2) internalizing Islamic law and its religious embodiment by individuals and groups, 3) the concept conveys a unity and singularity on the level of identifying specific systems and beliefs, 4) certain laws referring to specific rituals (*manasik*) and practices, 5) religious identity with connotations of time and life span of individuals and trajectories of life, and 6) middle *Ummah*, who is described by the Qur'ān having psychological and theological connotations in the construction of the self religious identity among actors. The moderation of internalization of the Islamic beliefs and practices spreads the good in a society and enjoins what is right and forbids what is wrong without breaching Islamic laws and social system of the Muslim societies. Hence, the religious self-identity is understood as an integral part of *Ummah*. Based on this understanding, the concept of *Ummah* makes up a reservoir of the origin of the Islamic narratives and its social and psychological representations of Muslim actors.

Streams of classical and modern Islamic scholars (Ibn al-Arabi; Iqbal, 2011 [1930]; al Faruqi, 1988; Haeri, 1989; Anwar, 2006; Schoun, 2008) understand the religious self-identity from the angle of unity of life. Ibn al-Arabi in the unity of being (*wahdat al-wujūd*) thesis argues that the universe is underlying oneness and identity of all including human identity is part of the unity of God (Chittick, 1998). In C*onstruction of Religious Thought and the Secret of Self*. Mohammad Iqbal puts the cornerstone of the construction of the personal identity and religious self-identity theory from the Islamic point of view. Iqbal stresses on the human ego arguing that the Qur'ān emphasizes on the individuality and uniqueness of man as unity of life, and the uniqueness of ego has to pass through stages that are obedience to the law and self-control. The latter is the highest form of self-consciousness or ego-hood and divine vicegerency. Indeed the three stages make up psychological developments of human identity and how this identity seeks to reach high knowledge of human ego and the super personal ego (God) in a united way. The theses of unity of life regarding of the construction of the religious identity have been adopted by Islamic Tawḥīdic paradigm. The religious self-identity based on this paradigm seeks to be united and integrated in accordance with the Islamic principle of unity which stands on the unity of Allah (God), the unity of creation, the unity of truth and knowledge, the unity of life and the unity of humanity. In this regard, the Islamic scholars understand the personal identity as an integrated

and centralized identity and not fluid and eclectic identity. However, a number of scholars such as Asad (1993); Eicelman (2006) and Soroush (2000) argues that religious self-identity is not fixed, but it is fluid and expansive and it misleads to think about personal and cultural unity. With particular emphasis, Soroush (2000) points out that the authentic self gives superiority to metaphor returning to one self will remain empty if we do not look at other vital elements of personal and cultural identity. Soroush (2000) comments:

> The bid to return to one self will remain an empty slogan at best (and a slayer of culture and source of stagnation at worst) if the boundaries of the self remain unspecified, if flexibility is denied. We cannot countenance a return to self that is counterpoised to the reconstruction of the self (165).

> As stated above, some recent scholars argue that religious identity of individuals in the modern and post-modern eras have been developed into a more autonomous self-religious identity in theory, separating Muslim religious identity and collective religious identity (*Ummah*). Scholars such as Roy (2006); Kepel (2006); Soroush (2002) and Bayat, (2007) say that Muslim societies are transiting to a new phase called post-Islamism. The previous phase revolved around the centrality of Islam of the public sphere through the dialectics of Islam, the state and the intersection between personal religious identity and collective religious identity; whereas, the second phase (post-Islamism) will present the sacralization of daily life through giving priority to the self and privatization of religiosity through focusing on religious agents on conscious sensory of self, shifting toward self-fulfillment, sacralization of self and subjective of religious experiences.

According to Roy (2006), post-Islamization is vested in multiple practices and strategies that nothing can be done with the project of reconstruction of society by the state and through an all-encompassing Islamic ideology. Contemporary re-Islamisation is a cluster of individual practices used as means of finding job, money, respect and self-esteem, in other words, the triumph of the religious self in the post-Islamism. In the same vein, Bayat (2007) points out that the new phase of religiosity is not synonym of religious individualization in western societies, but it is considered a new movement accompanied by changes in the social system of Muslim communities. *In Making Islam Democratic* (2007), Bayat states that:

The post Islamism is not only condition but is also project, so post-Islamism is nether antiIslamic nor un-Islamic or secular, rather, it represents an endeavor to fuse religiosity and right, faith and freedom. It is an attempt to turn underlying principles of Islamism on its head by emphasizing rights instead of duties, purities in place singular authorities voice, historicity rather than fixed scripture and the future instead of the past. In short, whereas Islamism is defined by the fusion of religion and responsibility, post-Islamism emphasizes religiosity and rights (18).

Based on that, religious identity among actors should be understood through the complex interactions between the Islamic religious narratives and complexities of social system and transformation in psychological traits of individuals. All these relationships should be viewed in one pot aiming to understand Muslim religious identity in contemporary days.

Conclusion

This study is an initial investigation attempting to shed light on the vitality of the Islamic religious narrative as an entrance to study of complicated issues regarding the Muslim daily lives such as the intersection between Muslim personal narratives and Islamic master (authentic) narratives, religious embodiments, religious discourses and issues related to gender, and Muslim minorities. Arguing that the previous theoretical framework dealt with construction of religious reality among Muslim agents was unable to grasp the complexity of Muslim realities neglecting Islamic (authentic) narrative sources and their representations of their endeavor. Therefore, any trial to understand realities of Muslim religious actors need to be dug back in the Islamic memory and discursive constructions of social history of the Muslims, as well as the Muslim daily life practices and narratives and their relationship with the trajectories of life.

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