Islam, Liberalism, and Ontology
A Critical Re-evaluation

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Scholarship on Liberalism and Islam appears to be neither scarce nor soon to be. However, Joseph J. Kaminski's *Islam, Liberalism, and Ontology: A Critical Re-evaluation* diverges from this extensive literature in its substantiveness. The work attempts an ontological analysis of the issue, whereas the bulk of other work is rather "stylistic" (9), as the literature review in the Introduction puts succinctly. Kaminski undertakes this research through "a rigorous critical analysis and deep investigation of the basic categories and constructs that comprise" (3) the relevant phenomena. To this end, unlike usual discussions of the matter, he employs a comparative political theory approach, which enables him to scrutinize Islam and Liberalism as two comprehensive doctrines.

After presenting his basic concepts, such as anti-foundationalism, ontology, and discourse in the Introduction, in Chapter 2, "Setting the table: Liberalism and its enlightenment origins", he provides a history of Liberalism. One of the important points Kaminski draws attention to is the "illiberal" (26) origins of Liberalism. Through the examples of Martin Luther, Hugo Grotius, and Emmerich de Vattel, whose works inspired modern Liberalism, he shows that illiberal side. However, Enlightenment

169

thought evolved to become more Liberal in nature since the Eighteenth century and the Revolutions. As a result, secularism, and modern scientific thought, as opposed to religion, and discussions of universal human rights and national rights have become important foundations of Liberalism. The most significant point of the chapter concerns the place of Islam in this process. By referring to the existing broad research by Hallaq, Grosfoguel, and others, Kaminski notes that Islam has always functioned as the constitutive other of Europe.

Chapter 3, "Liberalisms", deliberates on the familial relationship between the two main categories of Liberalism: comprehensive (Enlightenment) and political liberalisms. Kaminski defines comprehensive doctrines as those that "can be essentialized as a set of commonly held beliefs that are related to a wide range of values and moral commitments—both metaphysical and religious" (52). Therefore, comprehensive Liberalism, as he exemplifies via perfectionist Liberalism, has its own universal and totalizing understanding of "the good". Considering Islam is also a comprehensive doctrine with its "radically different outlooks on what constitutes the good life" (61), Kaminski asserts that a real congruence between them is arduous. Then, he discusses political Liberalism and the argument that it is not at odds with Islam because it does not deal with the matters of metaphysics and the good life. After these explorations, the major stake of the chapter is that, despite these attempts to save political Liberalism from the comprehensive one, they cannot be fully separated. Liberalism is a conception of the good regardless of its form. Therefore, a genuine congruence between Islam and political Liberalism, which is rooted in the Enlightenment, is not plausible.

Chapter 4, "Islams", investigates the question of "what is Islam?" in a way similar to the previous chapter on Liberalism. Rather than answering the question by proposing a "conclusive discursive account" of it, Kaminski demonstrates the plausibility of a "coherent account of Islam" that makes sense to the most (75). After discussing Talal Asad's and Shahab Ahmed's readings of Islam, he introduces Wittgenstein's family resemblances as a better alternative. However, he notes that, while the entities of the family resemblances category do not share a necessary common feature, this does not apply to Islam. This is because, "there are multiple common features

connected to 'Islam' as a meta-category such as Divine Revelation, the Prophethood of Mohammed and the Qur'ān among many others" (80). Hence, he offers a "prototype theory" built on family resemblances and argues that "some elements of a category are more central than others" (82). Then, quite paradoxically, he explores the core or necessary fabric that can hold the concept of Islam together. This appears paradoxical because his reasoning for family resemblances is the elusiveness of universal agreement despite providing a coherent set of basic principles (79). Indeed, this reasoning is a compatible reading with his claim to provide an ontological analysis. More significantly, it is a profound example of an ontological analysis of Islam. Nevertheless, searching for a "core" or "necessary fabric" can result in essentializing and fixing Islam into its ontic manifestations and procedures. This quest for fixity is especially apparent in his "real question": the frontiers of the web (85). Despite his heuristic concern of "too small" or "too big", my real question regarding the book would be: why do we need to have such a fixed definition – a core – to study and understand Islam, if family resemblances or discursive tradition provide something coherent enough? The definition Kaminski attempts through five pillars and six articles aims to be a general one applicable to every context and study. Another risk of fixation considers a more theological point of view: is not the impossibility of drawing or knowing these fixed frontiers what makes us humans with limited capacities instead of omniscient God? Indeed, claiming such a "necessity fabric" – rather than more fundamental elements – permits us to unconditionally declare someone outside Islam (*takfeer*). For example, a new convert, a "non-orthodox" Muslim today, and even Muslims before the Revelation of all five pillars would be outside of Islam if we take them as "necessary" without context. This contextuality can be considered one of the reasons why Muslims always end their verdicts with "AllahuAlam" (Allah knows best) – as Kaminski does at the end of the book (192). Certainly, recognizing this contextuality and ontological nature leads Kaminski towards "discursive tradition" or "family resemblances". However, the implicit positivist urge in his quests for fixation seems to be one of the main limitations that prevents the book from fully realizing its ontological analysis despite its excellent argumentation and examples.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 compare Islam and Liberalism in terms of their approaches – to moral epistemology and human rights, to the role of religion in the public sphere, and finally to law. These chapters are critical to show the impossibility and unfeasibility of a real congruence between Islam and Liberalism as comprehensive discourses. Kaminski undertakes this compresence by resorting to the primary and canonical sources of those discourses he pointed to in the previous chapters. In that sense, with their thorough literature reviews and sagacious examinations, these three chapters serve as cogent case studies for the arguments he developed beforehand.

Building on this impossibility through domain-specific ontologies of Islam and Liberalism, Chapter 8 offers Communitarianism as an alternative to Liberalism in order to understand, conceptualize or engage with Islam. While this chapter is crucial to mapping out the current socio-political discourses in a comparative way since it provides a good description and analysis of Communitarianism, it also makes the reader question the in/adequacy and self-sufficiency of Islam as opposed to Liberalism and Communitarianism: While Kaminski regards Liberalism and Communitarianism as self-sufficient frameworks or discourses that can be understood on their own terms, why does he write as if Islam lacks this ability and needs another framework to be conceptualized or understood? He successfully exemplifies the inevitable failure of "grafting liberalism" in his Conclusion using the case of Saudi Arabia (189-190). However, we do not have any reason to think that "grafting" any discourse onto Muslims will not fail. Indeed, prophets were sent to "communities", some of which attempted to burn them alive. If we limit our focus to modern societies, as he discusses, we can still see racism – and occasionally Islamophobia – as a shared value even in some Muslim societies. Therefore, while presenting Communitarianism as opposed to Liberalism is valuable to diagnose and portray the current issues and options, offering Communitarianism "in order to conceptualize an Islamic mode of socio-political organization" (165) denies Muslims agency to dream and conceptualize such an organization via Islam and deems the Islamicate insufficient to provide the tools for this craft. However, in his conclusive remarks where he calls for toleration, he effectively demonstrates this sufficiency with his references to it.

In conclusion, despite the mentioned minor and occasional paradoxes, Joseph J. Kaminski's *Islam, Liberalism, and Ontology: A Critical Re-evaluation* delivers a thorough and rare analysis of Islam and Liberalism. Its rarity mainly stems from the ontological approach he mobilizes through comparative political theory, while the dominant literature is superficial or journalistic by comparison. This approach also makes the book a valuable and necessary source for those interested in Liberalism, Islam and, in general, political theory. In that sense, the paradoxes it poses stand as opportunities to expand further and develop the discussion rather than difficulties or a stumbling block on the horizon, the horizon to which *Islam, Liberalism, and Ontology* makes a significant contribution.

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