Stereotypes and Prejudices on Islam
Intellectual Output 2, Unit III

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Introduction

Stereotypes and prejudices about Islam are mostly about the characteristics (or alleged characteristics) of the religion: stereotypes and prejudices related to behavior are always linked to religious prescriptions ("real Muslims must do this or that"). This idea somewhat comes from a misinterpretation of the tradition of the word *islam*, meaning "submissiveness". In some stereotypes, a Muslim is like a slave of God with no free will, and as such is compelled by his religion to act in a certain way. It explains why Islam is seen as a religion of the law, this law being the *Shariah*. Actually, a better translation of *islam* is "surrender", i.e. a Muslim has to follow God's will.

The hidden diversity

Most of the stereotypes and prejudices come from two generalizations: Islam is an unchanging monolith; all Muslims have the same beliefs and practices.

The Hui are a very old community of Chinese Muslims. The Muslim elements have blended in with the Chinese culture.

Figure 1. The minaret of the Great Mosque of Xi'an (credits)

As any religion, Islam is not static: it underwent changes through time and space. Nowadays, Islam is divided in two main denominations (Sunnah and Shi'a), and different interpretations can be found within these two groups. Actually, there are many ways to be a Muslim, and many Islams.

Even a seemingly clear notion such as the *Shariah*, which is present in the stereotype/prejudice "all Muslims must obey the *Shariah* and want everyone to live according to it", is not as clear cut as it seems. The *Shariah* is treated as a precise and well-defined set

of laws, a kind of Muslim legal code. Actually, Shariah is more a concept than a legal code, and relies on the interpretation and explanation of the *Quran* and the *hadiths*, and there are many ways to understand these prescriptions. The Muslim world can be divided according to the prevailing law school, such as the Hanafi in Turkey or the Maliki in Northern Africa.

More information on:
- The Quran, the hadiths and their interpretations
- The Sunnah
- The Shi'a
- The major law schools
- Islam and modernity
- The complex case of the images

Politics, violence and terror

One of the most widespread prejudices about Islam is that it promotes the use of violence. It is somehow linked to another stereotype/prejudice: Islam is a political ideology. In its most elaborate form, it states that Islam is a kind of totalitarian religion trying to take power in order to enforce a religious law through violence and coercion.

The question of violence and fundamentalism is dealt with in unit 5. The first step to address these issues is to show the diversity of Islam: indeed, some trends want to have a political system built around Islamic values, and some people think that violence can be used in order to create a true Islamic society, but others consider that Islam is not in conflict with democratic values and can thrive in modern and secular societies without trying to destroy them. In these cases, it is always important to be reminded of the diversity and complexity of a religion.

More information on:
- The trends in contemporary Islam