

**The Importance of Describing Islam(s) for Political Science**  
*Just Telling it Like it Is 2.0: Descriptive Research Workshop*

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As a Political Science scholar studying the role of religious ethics in how Muslims engage their sociopolitical contexts, I find the literature about religion and Islam(s) in my own discipline to be lacking, at best, and intellectually violent, at worst. If religion is considered relevant to the studies of politics at all, it is often in interrogating the causal relationship between religion and, often in the case of Islam(s), violence. As recently as January 2022, the *Global Studies Quarterly* journal published an article titled “Islam and Suicide Terrorism: An Empirical Analysis.”<sup>i</sup> Unlike many other similar studies, the GSQ article did provide some description of the various Islamic schools of thought and claimed to cite religious texts. Unfortunately, the article was methodologically unsound and the mischaracterizations about a diverse and rich religious tradition were plenty. Eleven years after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Political Science has continuously asked why Muslims engage in acts of terror with little to no understanding of Islam(s) or *jihad*. The simultaneous disregard for both descriptive research and the role of religion in politics creates the conditions under which religious traditions, and Islam(s) in particular, are grossly mischaracterized. This leads to an intellectual violence in which scholars continue to ask “whether Islam is responsible for increased suicide terrorist attacks,” and this continues to be published in our journals in 2022. Good descriptive work on the richness of religious traditions and the diversity of their adherents is a necessary counterbalance to this disciplinary oversight, to put it generously.

I argue that we do not need to do all the work ourselves – we can rely on the rich descriptive work that other scholars are doing, including (and maybe especially) those outside

our discipline. In this memo, I briefly describe how my research uses interdisciplinary scholarship to fill in research gaps on religion and Islam(s) within Political Science. My research relies on describing the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community's beliefs and practices, using archival and ethnographic methods, to theorize how the Ahmadiyya simultaneously enacts resistance and conformity when responding to persecution through non-violence and by preaching its interpretation of Islam globally. Due to the dearth of accurate research on Islam(s) within Political Science, my research is interdisciplinary and the vast majority of the citations from my dissertation come from Religious Studies, Anthropology, History, Sociology, and others. While I do some of my own original archival analysis, I could not dream of doing all the historical legwork that scholars from these other disciplines have done and I am deeply grateful for how they have enriched my work. All the scholarship I use engage in politico-religious questions that are often missed because our discipline does not encourage researchers to look to other disciplines, especially in the Humanities, and I think this is a serious gap. Especially if we want to "*Just Tell it Like it Is,*" we can and should draw from the vast scholarship that other disciplines have to offer, making rich description all the more accessible to our Political Science research.

**Brief Research Background:** My research seeks to analyze how a globally persecuted Muslim minority group, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, responds to its sociopolitical contexts and state persecution through peacebuilding practices, based on the community's interpretation of *jihad*. This community originated in 1880s when India was under British colonial rule. Ahmadis self-identify as Muslim, and this identity claim has been challenged by many South Asian and global Muslim leaders since its inception. According to the Second Amendment of the Pakistani Constitution,<sup>ii</sup> passed in 1974, the Ahmadiyya rejects *khatam-i-nabuwwat* [finality of the

Prophet] and believes in a “false prophet,” which legally designates Ahmadis as a non-Muslim minority. This constitutional amendment was followed by draconian blasphemy laws in Pakistan, which heavily regulate Ahmadis’ abilities to practice Islam within Pakistan and require the signing of an anti-Ahmadi declaration for any Muslim Pakistani that seeks to vote, obtain a passport, citizenship, and dual nationality.<sup>iii</sup> The accusation that the Ahmadiyya does not believe in *khatam-i-nabuwwat* has spread across the global Muslim *ummah* [community], leading to anti-Ahmadi violence and persecution across Muslim-majority contexts, including in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and in Muslim-majority areas of the UK.<sup>iv</sup>

To ensure that this short memo is as focused and cogent as possible, I focus on the third chapter of my dissertation. In this chapter, I delineate how the Ahmadiyya has been constructed as a “subaltern” other within the Indian Muslim community in its origins during British colonial rule, and how this community will continue to identify itself as the “True Islam” despite this marginalization. The historical analysis, in particular, is inherently descriptive; I rely upon descriptive scholarship from other disciplines to contextualize contested Indian Muslim discourses, which my analytical method of discourse analysis requires in order to track how the Ahmadiyya constructs its Islamic identity vis-à-vis other Muslim communities.

**The Importance of Interdisciplinarity:** For the third chapter of my dissertation, much of my historical analysis is drawn from secondary historical accounts from scholarship in Religious Studies, History, and Sociology. The scholars I use did very careful archival analysis on the religious debates – about proper interpretations of *jihad* and the sanctity of the Prophet Muhammad – among the diverse Indian Muslim community in the late nineteenth century under British colonial rule. The founder of the Ahmadiyya, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, actively

participated in these debates, though he was not always well-received. Especially after the fall of Muslim Mughal rule, the Indian Muslim community was in a crisis. Questions of both political and religious sovereignty were at stake where seemingly religious debates were deeply political because the Indian Muslim community was seeking unity after losing political power and later leveraged this “unity” to create the Pakistani state. Ahmadis, especially, were seen as a threat to this unity. While some of the scholarship that I draw from did not actively discuss the Ahmadiyya, this politico-religious context is deeply important to understand both the nature of Ahmadi identity and how the community was constructed as a threat after the creation of the Pakistani state in 1947. Therefore, I coupled my original archival analysis of Ghulam Ahmad’s writings with the historical analysis conducted by several scholars that I describe below.

Historian Ayesha Jalal<sup>v</sup> and Religious Studies scholar Ilyse Morgenstein-Fuerst<sup>vi</sup> tell us about how, in scholarship on how *jihad* is interpreted and enacted by Muslims, the debates occurring among South Asian Muslims, especially in the onset of British colonial rule, is consistently overlooked. In fact, Morgenstein-Fuerst argues that the mid-late nineteenth century in colonial India was pivotal in the racialization of Muslims not just in South Asia but globally due to the British response to the 1857 Rebellion of the Indian Muslim community against colonial rule.<sup>vii</sup> Additionally, Religious Studies scholar, SherAli Tareen,<sup>viii</sup> centers issues of political and religious sovereignty when discussing how the Indian Muslim community was negotiating the importance of the Prophet Muhammad. Tareen convincingly argues that this debate set the “terms and stakes [that] pervade the everyday performance of Islam and shadow conversations ranging from defining blasphemy to organizing the choreography of a community’s moral and devotional life.”<sup>ix</sup> While this might seem like solely a religious issue, this point about defining blasphemy, in particular, is extremely pivotal for my study of the

Ahmadiyya because Ahmadis continue to face repression from the Pakistani government through blasphemy laws that restrict the community's ability to practice Islam. Furthermore, throughout all three accounts about these politico-religious debates in colonial India, the political unity of the Muslim community was at stake. The Indian Muslim's political sovereignty was in jeopardy and unity among the various schools of thought was required, especially once the community began articulating aspirations for a nation-state for Muslims: Pakistan. Here, the politicization of the Ahmadiyya comes to the fore. Sociologist Sadia Saeed<sup>x</sup> traces the legal exclusion of Ahmadis from these colonial origins through to the previously described blasphemy laws. Her scholarship, which also heavily relies on the description of these political and legal debates, tells us that the contemporary repression of the Ahmadiyya today can clearly trace its history to the late nineteenth century. While Saeed focuses on the legal exclusion of the Ahmadiyya, I couple her analysis with that of the Religious Studies scholars previously mentioned and discuss the importance of the politico-religious intersections within the construction of South Asian Islamic identities, and how this continues to impact Ahmadi daily practice today.

**Conclusion:** In addition to benefitting from the rich detail provided by the highly descriptive work that these scholars provided, I also found that they were making important conclusions about the political nature of the Indian Muslim anxieties about British colonial rule and how this impacts the politics of South Asian Islam today. As such, I found that these other disciplines also have important commentary to offer Political Science about political questions that we ask. This gives us the opportunity to both listen to their insights, integrate their scholarship into our own analyses, and contribute to a greater number of interdisciplinary conversations.

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<sup>i</sup> Seung-Whan Choi and Davis Brown, "Islam and Suicide Terrorism: An Empirical Analysis," *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (2022).

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- <sup>ii</sup> “Constitution (Second Amendment) Act, 1974,” *The Constitution of Pakistan on pakistani.org*, accessed October 2022, <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/amendments/2amendment.html>.
- <sup>iii</sup> “General Zia’s Notorious Ordinance XX of 1984 and the Blasphemy Law,” *The Gazette of Pakistan*, last modified April 26, 1984, <https://satp.org/Docs/Document/1165.pdf>.
- <sup>iv</sup> Francis Acquah, “The Impact of African Traditional Religious Beliefs and Cultural Values on Christian-Muslim Relations in Ghana from the 1920 to the Present: A Case Study of the Nkusukum-Ekumfi-Enyan Traditional Area of the Central Region,” 2011; “London Mosque Warned over ‘kill Ahmadis’ Leaflets,” *BBC News*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-47654430>; Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Treating Minorities with Fatwas: A Study of the Ahmadiyya Community in Indonesia,” *Contemporary Islam* 8, no. 3 (2014): 285–301; Muhammed Haron, “Africa’s Muslim Authorities and Ahmadis: Curbed Freedoms, Circumvented Legalities,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 16, no. 4 (2018): 60–74; Andi Muhammad Irawan, “They Are Not Muslims!: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Ahmadiyya Sect Issue in Indonesia,” *Discourse & Society* 28, no. 2 (2017): 162–181. Nathan Samwini, *The Muslim Resurgence in Ghana since 1950: Its Effects upon Muslims and Muslim-Christian Relations*, vol. 7 (LIT Verlag Münster, 2006); Jessica Soedirgo, “Informal Networks and Religious Intolerance: How Clientelism Incentivizes the Discrimination of the Ahmadiyah in Indonesia,” *Citizenship Studies* 22, no. 2 (2018): 191–207.
- <sup>v</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia* (Harvard University Press, 2008).
- <sup>vi</sup> Ilse Morgenstein Fuerst, *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion: Religion, Rebels, and Jihad* (Bloomsbury, 2017).
- <sup>vii</sup> Morgenstein Fuerst, *Indian Muslim Minorities*, p. 124–126.
- <sup>viii</sup> SherAli Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in Modernity* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.
- <sup>x</sup> Sadia Saeed, *Politics of Desecularization: Law and the Minority Question in Pakistan*. (Cambridge University Press, 2017).