Islamication – Islamization
Workshop Hamburg, May 9-10, 2023
Call for Papers

The Islamic Empire created a culture based on a divine revelation and its salvation religion. Culture and religion seem to be inextricably entangled. In other empires coming with an imperial religion. Here the assimilation of regional cultures to the imperial culture, and the conversion to the new religion can be easily separated. In the case of the Roman Empire, we have Romanization and Christianization, and a similar distinction can be made regarding the transcultural aspects of the culture of the Kushan empire and the conversion to Buddhism in Central Asia.

Is there a way to disentangle the cultural and religious aspects of the process in the Islamic case, and if so what terms should we adopt to make the distinction? Arabic does not lend us any useful terms. While the term for conversion, aslama, is undisputed, must‘arib, is always used specifically. in the context of the Arabian peninsula, it distinguishes the real, original Arabs (al-‘Arab al-‘āriba) and the descendants of Ishmael who acquired what was not their ancestral language (al-‘Arab al-musta‘riba). Later in the 11th century, it defines the acculturated non-Muslim in al-Andalus. This term would be utterly misplaced in early Islamic Iran. A similar word formation, istislām, is already used for something different: ‘submission’.

Carl-Heinrich Becker, one of the founding fathers of Islamic Studies, understood ‘Islam’, first of all as a civilizational term, not just in the narrow sense of a religion. Despite his postulate of a unified Islamic civilization (Islamische Einheitszivilisation), he already sought to distinguish the political and military process of creating an Islamic civilization from the act and consequence of simply converting to Islam (Der Islam 1910), but more than a century later, we still do not have an established terminology for these separate processes. Marshall Hodgson coined the term ‘Islamicate’ In the words of Hodgson: ‘Islamicate’ would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims (1977, p. 69).’” One context, in which Hodgson’s term works well is the adoption of aspects of Islamic civilization by people under Muslim rule who were and remained non-Muslims, not least their reception of literary Arabic as their language of lay and even religious culture. But we still lack a term for the transcultural process of the actual acculturation. Hodgson did not resolve the problem of naming this process. With the recent intervention of Shahab Ahmed (2016), who dismisses the distinction between religion and culture outright, arguing that there are no clear criteria to separate the two, the terminological debate continues.

The workshop in Hamburg has the ambitious aim of pushing this debate on terminology forward by looking at the actual historical transcultural processes across the regions leading to an Islamic yet diverse civilization, including Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Buddhists of various denominations.

Michael Cook
Princeton University

Stefan Heidemann
Universität Hamburg