How does one compare and contrast potentially very different traditions of law without assuming any common conception of law? How does one stage a comparison of such traditions in the face of their mutual engagement under historical conditions of asymmetric power that render one of them commensurable to the other? These are some of the central questions this essay begins to address through a series of loosely related, ethnographically inspired reflections on the concept of justice within Western legal tradition and the Islamic Shari’a, with respect to modern Egypt. It focuses on the particular problem that the violation of law is seen to pose for the enactment of justice within Western legal thought and practice. Arguing that this problem is of relatively recent origin, it outlines some of the historically emergent forms of sociability, modes of authority, and structures of coercion that contribute to the formation of this problem, and that give rise to a distinctive conception of politics that persists into the present. Contrasting this with classical Shari’a thought and historical practices, the essay then points to how these forms of sociability, authority and coercion – and the concept of politics they made possible – insinuated themselves into the fabric of Egyptian society through the colonizing and modernizing projects that established European based civil law there; it also reflects on how this produced the complicated pattern of similarity, difference, commensurability and incommensurability that exists today between Egyptian civil law and Islamic Shari’a.