

What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic

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BOOK REVIEW

What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic, by Shahab Ahmed, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2015, 624 pp., \$39.50 (hardback), ISBN 9781400873586

What Is Islam? is both a substantive critique of the field of Islamic studies and a radical reconceptualization of ‘Islam’/‘Islamic’ that seeks to account for the manifold and often mutually contradictory ways in which Muslims have understood, expressed, and enacted Islam – such as Persian Sufi poetry, Islamic jurisprudence, Qur’an and Hadith, *kalām*, Islamic ethical literature, Islamic art and architecture, Mughal wine cups, *falsafa*, and Sufi metaphysics. Ahmed’s analysis focuses on ‘the *historical and human phenomenon* that is Islam in its plenitude and complexity of meaning’ (5); he does not purport to make normative or theological claims as to what Islam should be or must be. His task is to coherently conceptualize Islam in a manner that is both etic and pan-emic, both external to the phenomena described by individual Muslims and also able to account for and serve the manifold self-contradictory ways that Muslims conceive of and perform Islam: ‘[A] valid concept of “Islam” must denote and connote all possible “Islams,” whether abstract or “real,” mental or social’ (104). At the same time Ahmed seeks to avoid two major pitfalls: (1) making Islam into a static essence or a category within an essentialist framework – such as proscription/prescription, ‘religion’, ‘civilization’, ‘culture’, ‘orthodoxy’, etc., and (2) rendering Islam into a totally incoherent concept by conceding that there are as many *islams* as there are communities or individuals. Ahmed’s thesis (presented in Chapter 5) is that *Islam* is best conceptualized as a *process* of *meaning-making* or *hermeneutical engagement* in which the human agent engages with the Divine Revelation granted to Muhammad in one or more of this Revelation’s hierarchical dimensions – Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text – in order to constitute meaning for himself. This hermeneutical engagement involves penetrating the spatiality of Revelation’s ‘outward’ (*ẓāhir*) and ‘inward’ (*bāṭin*) dimensions. Ahmed’s corollary thesis is that there is a major discontinuity between pre-modern Islamic hermeneutics and modern Islamic hermeneutics. All of this is elucidated through an extended argument over six chapters, which will be summarized below.

The first chapter begins by noting that the ‘correspondence and coherence between Islam as theoretical object or analytical category and Islam as real historical phenomenon ... is considerably and crucially lacking in the prevalent conceptualizations of the term “Islam/ Islamic”’ (6). Ahmed first argues that none of the existing conceptualizations of Islam in scholarly literature express a ‘coherent object of meaning’ (9). Focusing on the varied expressions of Islam enacted by Muslims living in the ‘Balkans to Bengal complex’ over the period 1350–1850 in ‘the vast geographical region extending from the Balkans through Anatolia, Iran and Central Asia down and across Afghanistan and North India to the Bay of Bengal that was home to the absolute demographic majority of Muslims on the planet’ (32), Ahmed presents the reader with six examples of ‘Islam’ from Muslim history: (1) Islamic philosophy and its claim to be superior to revealed prophetic truth; (2) Sufism with its claim that the Friends of God (*awliyāʾ Allāh*) have reached union with the Real-Truth (*al-ḥaqīqa*) and are absolved of observing the law (*sharīʿa*); (3) the worldviews of Illumination (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*) and the Unity of Existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) that seem to blur the distinction between God and creation; (4) the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfīz, the most widely read, recited, memorized, and quoted poetry in Muslim history, with its constant mention of wine drinking, erotic love, and critiques of Islamic ritualism; (5) Islamic art in light of the fact that Islamic legal discourse is generally

against the visual representation of living things; (6) wine drinking, a widespread social practice in Islamic civilization, but which is prohibited in Muslim legal discourse. Ahmed makes the point that all of these six manifestations of Islam have been normatively defined as *Islamic* by some segment of Muslims in history and yet they are all mutually contradictory: 'Muslims made themselves Muslims, thought of themselves as Muslims, and lived as Muslims in quite contrary ways' (102).

The second chapter is a critique of how Islam has been defined by most scholars, such as Katz, Hallaq, Fadel, and Schacht, solely as 'law' in terms of prescription/proscription. Ahmed rejects this model because conceiving Islam as merely law marginalizes and fails to account for the vast and far more pervasive non-legal or non-prescriptive visions of Islam. He also dismisses the recently vogue 'islams not Islam' approach because it empties the category 'Islam' of all determinate meaning. Even Marshall Hodgson's concept of 'Islamicate' is rejected on the grounds that it betrays an ambiguous unwarranted binary between a 'religious sense' of Islam as 'faith' and a nonreligious Islamicate 'social and cultural complex' (159).

In the third chapter, Ahmed takes aim at theories and methods of the study of religion, highlighting the contingent and tenuous genealogy of the category of 'religion' in Post-Enlightenment discourses. He argues that the category of 'religion' and the binaries it involves (sacred vs. profane, religious vs. secular, faith vs. culture, etc.) are too constraining, too dependent on Western Christianity, and amount to an anachronism in the case of Islam.

The fourth chapter offers a critique of Clifford Geertz's concept of 'cultural system', a critical appraisal of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's three-fold concept of Islam as faith, Platonic ideal, and historical phenomenon, and a constructive appraisal of Talad Asad's view of Islam as a 'discursive tradition'. Ahmed praises Asad's insight that Islam is better viewed as a process rather than as an object, but he takes issue with Asad's focus on 'orthodoxy' by arguing that the idea of orthodoxy limits Islam to prescriptive and regulatory discourses and marginalizes non-prescriptive 'explorative' discourses as found, for example, in Sufism.

The fifth chapter is where Ahmed constructs and presents his reconceptualization of Islam as a process of hermeneutical engagement or act of 'meaning-making' with the Revelation that effectively constructs 'Islam' for the human actor. He first instructively notes that 'the act of Revelation to Muḥammad plus the product of text of Revelation to Muḥammad does not encompass and is not co-extensive or consubstantial with the full idea or phenomenon or reality of Revelation to Muḥammad' (346). Instead, in Ahmed's view, the idea of Revelation as understood historically by Muslims has three dimensions: Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text. The Pre-Text of Revelation is the transcendent unseen domain of reality from which Revelation descends to Muhammad – a Pre-Text variously conceived in different Muslim discourses as 'the Unseen' (in the Qur'an), the Speech of God (by the *mutakallimūn* and jurists), the intelligible realm of the Universal Intellect and Soul (by the Muslim Neoplatonists and Philosophers), or pure Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) and its manifestations (by the Sufis); the Text of Revelation refers to the 'Revelatory Product' of the descent (*tanzīl*) or inspiration (*wahy*) from the Pre-Text, manifested as both the Qur'an and the Cosmos with respect to which the Pre-Text is both ontologically transcendent and immanently present; the Con-Text of Revelation encompasses the manifold and myriad of forms (ritual, law, poetry, exegesis, theology, philosophy, art, ethics, cultural practices, etc.) in which Muslims have already expressed their own hermeneutical engagements with the Revelation to Muhammad. In one respect, Ahmed's hierarchical framework of Revelation as Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text is similar to that of Mohammad Arkoun – who distinguished between the Heavenly Book or archetype, the oral recitation of the Prophet, and the Qur'an as a 'closed corpus'. Unlike Arkoun, however, Ahmed does not focus on the oral dimension of the Qur'an and its distinction from the Qur'an as text. Accordingly, Ahmed observes that all Islamic traditions approach and envisage

Revelation differently: for the *falāsifa*, the human intellect is the means of access to the Pre-Text (Divine Intellect), which is also manifest in the Cosmos; for the Sufis, the heart accesses the Pre-Text (Absolute Being) through imaginal unveiling; for the *mutakallimūn* and the jurists, the Pre-Text (Divine Speech) is accessed primarily by means of the Text. According to Ahmed, Revelation as conceived by Muslims of various stripes and affiliations turns out to be multi-dimensional and hierarchical: there is a hierarchy of meanings expressing the Pre-Text in the form of the Text and Con-Text and this hierarchy is predicated on the spatial metaphor of ‘the outward’ (*ẓāhir*) and ‘the inward’ (*bāṭin*) and expressed in the social realm through the distinction between ‘the elite’ (*al-khāṣṣ*) and ‘the commoners’ (*al-‘āmm*). If this conception of Islam as hermeneutical and self-exploratory engagement with Revelation appears to represent a marginal Sufi or Avicennian notion of Islam, then Ahmed’s argument is that this conception of Islam – consisting of ‘explorative’ discourses and not merely ‘prescriptive’ programmes – was predominant and pervasive among the beliefs and practices of Muslim individuals, communities, Sufi *ṭarīqas*, theological schools, philosophical traditions, educational literature, poetry, art and architecture, and mystical traditions of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex.

The sixth chapter contains a diagnosis of the state of modern forms of Islam as compared with pre-modern Islam, where Text-centred hermeneutics such as law and political projects have become the dominant discourses. ‘Modern Muslims have largely lost the routine hermeneutical habit of making meaning in terms of Islam from Pre-Text and Con-Text of Revelation’ (516). Modern Islamic hermeneutics is centred on the Text of Revelation, while the Pre-Text and Con-Text have been marginalized.


Ahmed’s vast erudition, which covers various academic fields, and his mobilization of primary sources from across the Islamic tradition in its linguistic, cultural, theological, and spiritual diversity, are truly impressive. However, a major omission in his analysis is his lack of engagement with the Shi‘i traditions of Islam, particularly Twelver Shi‘ism and Isma‘ilism, whose theological visions explicitly connect to Ahmed’s concept of Revelation. Ahmed pre-empts this objection by saying his examples are drawn from Sunni Islam because it is the ‘demographically major’ tradition, while Shi‘i Islam is said to contain ‘marginal or non-representative phenomena’ (104). This is a rather inconsistent approach, given that Ahmed bemoans the ‘marginality thesis’ when it concerns Islamic philosophy (14) but then evokes ‘marginality’ to avoid engaging with Shi‘i Islam. No analysis that ignores Shi‘i traditions can claim to tell us ‘what is Islam’ in a definitive way. This is because the predominantly Sunni doctrines and practices analysed by Ahmed were actually shaped and influenced through an engagement with Shi‘ism. One could read this entire book and come away having learned nothing about Shi‘i Islam. Several elements found exclusively in Shi‘i history and thought would have prefigured, confirmed, or enriched Ahmed’s conceptualization of Islam. The Shi‘i vision of the ‘Alid Imam as the ‘Speaking Qur’an’ and the pre-existent human locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) of God would have been an appropriate seventh example to situate within the Pre-Text/Text/Con-Text framework of Revelation. Far from being ‘marginal’, the Shi‘i Isma‘ilis, through the Fatimid Caliphate and their prolific *da‘wa*, presented an alternative ‘Islam’ that challenged the emerging Sunni orthodoxy supported by the ‘Abbasids and Saljuqs – a telling example of the ‘coherent contradiction’ that Ahmed sees as constitutive of Islam. Not only does Ahmed fail to engage with the rich views of prominent and influential Isma‘ili thinkers such as Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī, Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, Nāṣir-i Khusraw, or ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, but later, in a somewhat out of place remark, dismisses ‘Ismaili dogma’ as ‘authoritarianism’ (150). This is unfortunate because Ahmed’s core ideas concerning Revelation as Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text, the hierarchical levels of Revelation, the social-epistemic hierarchies of

knowledge, and the distinction between the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin*, form the bulwark of the Ismaʿili theological vision and were presented by Ismaʿili thinkers long before their elucidation by Avicenna, Ibn al-ʿArabī, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, and Mullā Ṣadrā, whom Ahmed frequently references.

What Is Islam? inaugurates a new conceptual paradigm within Islamic studies and it is to be hoped that future scholars will bring Ahmed's conceptualization to bear in analysing the worldview and contributions of specific Muslim thinkers, groups or communities, including those that Ahmed's study inadvertently marginalizes. Ahmed's work is a valiant first step towards an etic and pan-emic conceptualization of Islam, and must be further built upon to truly account for the mosaic that is the Muslim experience across space and time.

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