
BOOK REVIEW

What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic, by Shahab Ahmed. Princeton University Press, 2016. 624 pp., Hb., \$35.20. ISBN 0691164185

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Those who judge a book by its title may not even venture to take this one off the shelf: how can a twenty-first century author be so shameless as to offer another essentializing definition of Islam? However, in *What Is Islam?* Shahab Ahmed audaciously offers anything but a reductive and delimiting definition of Islam; and if a definition he submits, it is one that opens up a conceptualization of Islam to paradox, exploration, ambiguity, ambivalence, wonder, aestheticization, diffusion, differentiation, polyvalence, and contradiction, as opposed to the normative claims of twentieth century scholarship on Islam that delimit its conceptualization to scriptural-legal prescription, proscription, restriction, homogenization, monovalency, orthodoxy, agreement, authority, and control. Was he being ironic?

What Is Islam? opens with six historical facts pertaining to “the Islamic” as practiced during the “Balkans-to-Bengal Complex,” the context between 1350–1850 from the Balkans through Anatolia, Iran and Central Asia down and across Afghanistan and North India to the Bay of Bengal. These *problématiques* confront previous conceptualizations of Islam that tend to delimit “the Islamic” to scriptural-legal discourses: 1) Avicennan philosophy that effectively defined God for Muslims, 2) Sufism as practiced on the ground, 3) Illuminationism, i.e., the *ḥikmat al-ishrāq* of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191), and the Akbarian Tradition, i.e., the school of thought inaugurated by Ibn ‘Arabī, particularly the hierarchical vision of the cosmos in which the boundary between Divine transcendence and immanence is explicitly destabilized and rendered porous, 4) The *Dīvān* of Shams-ud-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ Shīrāzī (d. circa 1390), viz., the poeticization and metaphorization of the historical *being* of Muslims in terms of ambiguity, ambivalence, and love, 5) Islamic Art, viz., the way it problematizes the distinction between “religion and culture” or “the religious and the secular,” and 6) wine and wine-drinking, viz., the positive meaning and valorization given to wine-drinking *through the language of the Qur’ān and ḥadīth*.

Chapter two is dedicated to critiquing existing conceptualizations of Islam, all of which may privilege something as constitutive of Islam, identify no coherence in the various religious phenomena under investigation and thus deny the validity of the concept altogether, or define Islam as a flawed analytical category. The conceptualizations that Ahmed skillfully criticizes flounder around two main axes of deficiency: 1a) essentialization whereby Islam is restricted to, and privileges, scriptural-legal orthodoxy, 1b) or utter de-essentialization such that Islam is diffused into many “islams” with nothing to keep it tethered from irretrievable expansion; and 2) binaries whereby Islam is understood through the European, post-enlightenment lens of “the sacred” and “the secular” or “the religious” and “the cultural.” All of these are insufficient in permitting both an oenophilic poet and a Qur’ānic commentator to be Muslim and to be understood as making meaning, finding value, and uncovering t/Truth Islamically and via the divine revelatory texts (Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* literature).

In chapter three, Ahmed unfolds the consequences of post-enlightenment secularization in the study of religion and Islam. In brief, secularization had hermeneutical consequences for the way European scholars gazed at Islam. The underlying assumption of the emergent category of religion, despite every recent effort in the study of religion to uproot the field from the soil of Enlightenment modernity, is that all religion everywhere models itself off the archetype of a certain post-Enlightenment, Protestant Christianity, and functions within the following dualities: religion–science, sacred–profane, religious–secular, church–state, or religious–cultural. It also assumes religious authority to be fundamentally the proscription and prescription of doctrine and practice. Through a careful reading of primary and secondary sources, Ahmed sharply judges the category of “religion” to be insufficient in conceptualizing Islam, for it consequently excludes the poetic, aesthetic, creative, and explorative ways in which Muslims made meaning and constituted the Muslim self. Ahmed, however, ignores similar critiques of the category of religion taking place within the study of religion; if anything, he is bringing Islamic studies up to speed with the most recent scholarship in the field.

Chapter four entails a critique of Islam as cultural system (Geertz, as symbol system (Waardenburg), as system and institution (Cragg), as “cumulative tradition” (W.C. Smith), and as islams-not-Islam. But it is Ahmed’s confrontation with Talal Asad’s concept of “discursive tradition” that is most productive, for he demonstrates the predominance of “orthodoxy” in this conceptualization, and in Islam, orthodoxy is

reduced to the *sharīʿa* and *fiqh*, or the jurisprudential discursive tradition. Orthodoxy implies prescription and restriction of truth, and the more pluralistic and exploratory truth becomes (here Ahmed turns to *ṣūfī* practices), the less meaningful the concept of Islam-as-Orthodoxy becomes. Furthermore, if orthodoxy is the lens through which we see “the Islamic,” its opposite is ever emerging on the horizon: heterodoxy. Any practice or text that is not “orthodoxizing” is somehow not Islamic. Instead, Ahmed aims to conceptualize Islam as a way of being human and negotiating, deliberating, producing, and interpreting truth and meaning; it is a *process*, not an *essence*.

In chapter five Ahmed proffers his theory of Pre-Text and Con-Text with respect to the explicit Text of Revelation, which is, in my view, the most significant contribution to the fields of Islamic Studies, the study of religion, and interreligious studies (and, I might add, an excellent way to *theologize* what philosophers, poets, sufis, and artists are doing when they engage Divine Revelation). A far more operative valence is given to Islam and the Islamic through the notion of “the making of the self.” He argues that a Muslim acting as a Muslim within any given circumstance wherein *what is Islam* is at stake will react according to “his notion of the *meaning of Islam—it is meaningful action constructive and constitutive of the Self and of Islam*” (327). But what binds disparate action together as Islamic? By “witnessing” oneself to God and God’s prophet, one is constituting oneself with respect to Divine Revelation. When a human agent attests to the existence of Divine Revelation, she determines, explicitly or implicitly, just what Divine Revelation really *is*. As such, Islam is hermeneutical engagement with Text, Pre-Text, and Con-Text of revelation. The Text of revelation is the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* literature. Coherent contradiction emerges over whether and how the Pre-Text of revelation may be accessed. For the philosophers reason is the Pre-text, for the Sufis the Pre-Text is existence (*wujūd*) and experience (*dhawq*, which leads to unveiling—*kashf*), and for the theologians (*mutakallimūn*) the Pre-Text is accessed only via Text. Con-Text is the body of meaning that is the product and outcome of previous hermeneutical engagements with Revelation. Ahmed offers examples for this theory through texts and practices that refer to the spatiality of revelation, cosmological hierarchy, the interiority and exteriority of revelation, and metaphor and paradox (which render contradiction *meaningful*). To make this point, Ahmed is forced to assume boundaries between the various discursive traditions (theology, philosophy, sufism, etc.), which boundaries have recently been

demonstrated to be a construction in the mind of the Western scholar (especially in post-classical Islamic thought). However, it is clear that Ahmed did this as a heuristic device for explaining his theory; nothing he argues suggests that a post-classical Muslim figure could not rely on multiple Pre-Texts or restrict himself to a single Pre-Text while writing from and within multiple Contexts.

Ahmed applies his theory in chapter six in order to demonstrate that an Islamic society is one in which people explore and express potential meanings of t/Truth through the language and vocabulary of the revelatory Text. Islamic art, music, science, philosophy, poetry, so-called mysticism, ethics, jokes, etc., are all Islamic when they make meaning through hermeneutical engagement with Pre-Text, Text, and/or Con-Text of revelation. Ahmed redresses the meaning of the adjective “Islamic,” which has often been understood as reductively causing the described phenomenon; instead, the qualifier “Islamic” should be used when meaning is added, when it enhances or clarifies the constitution of that phenomenon, object or statement. “Obversely, how does *not* using the term Islamic deplete or distort the constitution of the phenomenon, object, or statement?” (545). Thus, applying the qualifier “Islamic” to “art” or to “terrorism” is valid only insofar as the adjective “Islamic,” conceptualized as hermeneutical engagement with Text, Pre-Text, and Con-Text, somehow augments or illuminates the artwork or act of terror under investigation and not whether or not some invisible agent known as “Islam” caused those phenomena to emerge. The issue with this conceptualization is that nearly all phenomena, texts, and objects that emerge during the Balkans-to-Bengal complex (and beyond) are at risk of being subsumed by “the Islamic.” Ahmed shows no modesty in averring that “It is not merely appropriate but is *meaningful* and *necessary* to say *Aristotle is Islamic* and *Plato is Islamic*—which means that Aristotle and Plato are made meaningful by and have particular meaning in the Muslim hermeneutical engagement with Revelation” (436). “The First Teacher” and “the Divine Plato,” as they were called by Muslim figures, were not Muslims, but their ideas were “instances” of the Pre-Text of revelation.

Nevertheless, for those working on interreligious, intercultural, or comparative theology *vis-à-vis* the Islamic tradition, this book gives the theoretical permission to engage sources outside scriptural-legal discourse. For far too long scholars have remained constrained by insufficient conceptualizations of Islam. As a Catholic comparative theologian myself,

it is absurd that somehow San Juan de la Cruz's poetic re-imagining of the *Song of Songs*, his *Cántico Espiritual*, is a rich source for Christian theology, while Jāmī's poetic re-imagining of *Sūrah* 12 of the Qur'ān (his *Yūsuf va Zulaykhā*) is judged to be empty of Islamic theological content simply because it did not fit into the category of Islam-as-orthodoxizing. Nevertheless, Ahmed unabashedly asserts nothing less than *that modern Muslims*—after the many “modernizing” reform and revival movements—*are unable to understand the Islam presented in this book (in terms of the six questions) as Islamic*. They lack the hermeneutical tools to do so, given that they have “downsized Revelation” to the Text (514–537). This was made manifest when I recently asked a Muslim, American theologian why their previous and current projects rely solely on the Qur'ān rather than drawing from the explorative discourses analyzed in Ahmed's book. The response was sobering: most Muslim readers today tend not to value those discourses anymore. For Ahmed, however, these discourses were historically the most valuable, meaningful, and *Islamic*. How might interreligious textualists who study sources from the rich and complex Islamic intellectual and spiritual traditions of the past take this disparity into account? If these texts and practices no longer matter as much today as they did in the past, what value do they have for interreligious, intercultural, and comparative theology?

Ahmed's posthumously published book will surely be discussed and debated. While he suggests that Islam is unique enough to be conceptualized on its own terms, conceptualizations of other religious traditions should also be re-orientated after reading this book. While he claims to be offering a scholarly conceptualization, his theory, as well as his writing style, borders on the theological—whence his “pan-emic” and etic language (106). There is a prescriptive edge to his words, as if he is not only writing for scholars of Islam, but also for Muslims today and thus contributing to the Islamic tradition itself. His conceptualization is valid because it functions within the closed system of Islam; viz., it begins with the historical revelation granted to the Prophet Muḥammad, and proceeds indefinitely through various acts of hermeneutical engagement with that revelation in the form of Text, Pre-Text, and Con-Text. However, arguably every religious tradition may be understood in this manner, i.e., as a closed system and on its own terms; comparison should only proceed after this is established. In this way, this book should be read by scholars of any religion, not just Islam; interreligious studies and theology only stand to

gain from engaging this monumental masterpiece. This book achieves nothing short of Ahmed's aim: to offer "a more accurate and meaningful understanding of Islam in the human experience—and, thus, of the human experience at large" (108). The subject of theology is nothing short of the experience of being human in relation to God (i.e., in relation to *revelation*), hence the import of this book to theologians and scholars of religion and interreligious studies alike.