Review Essay

I Hear Islam Singing: Shahab Ahmed's *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic**

Michael E. Pregill
Boston University

At the time of Shahab Ahmed's untimely death on 17 September 2015, he left behind many admiring colleagues, students, friends, and family, as well as a weighty tome of monumental significance—*What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*.[1] It is tragic when an author's first book is published posthumously, perhaps even more so in this case given that Ahmed's work is poised to have a pervasive influence on the field of Islamic Studies and has already garnered numerous accolades. Like a supermassive celestial body, this dense book exerts an irresistible attraction and alters the intellectual trajectory of those drawn into its orbit. *What Is Islam?* poses difficult questions no one in the field can ignore, even if one disagrees with its premises, methods, or conclusions. We are collectively the poorer for being unable to engage directly with the author in the many discussions that are sure to be provoked by the book's meteoric impact.

Ahmed's book appears at a time of relative theoretical stagnation in Islamic Studies. It is not that the field is *methodologically* stagnant; in practical terms, the field is thriving, with scholars bringing a range of approaches to projects reflecting the full variety of historical and contemporary expressions of Islam. But for a

* In paraphrasing Whitman in my title, I allude to both the agency Ahmed bestows on Islam and the beauty he sees as intrinsic to it. Ahmed evokes Whitman himself, as noted in what follows.
[1] Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); 624 pp.; $39.50 hb. At the time of his death Ahmed was an Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture Associate at Harvard University.

number of complex reasons, despite this methodological diversity and the overall flourishing of the field in the last decades, attempts at conceptualizing the subject of inquiry, of reappraising it in critical terms, are rather rare. The diversity of both approaches and evidence is a major problem: no one can command all of the relevant literature, and few have a broad enough perspective to apprehend the contours of the whole and assay the implications.

Another problem is the defensive posture into which many, if not most, scholars of Islam have been forced, given the public's fixation with the conjunction of Islam and violence in particular in the last fifteen years. Confronted with a media landscape dominated by talk of 9/11, Al-Qa'ida, Afghanistan and the Taliban, the Iraq War and its consequences, the emergence of ISIS, and now complicated even further by the rising tide of Islamophobia in America and Europe, scholars are fatigued by the struggle to combat misconceptions and stereotypes. In this atmosphere, it is difficult to devote much time and attention to abstract theoretical questions or second-order reflection.

And yet, here Ahmed insistently poses the question: *What is Islam?* Strikingly, in his book, the result of more than a decade of research (and evidently a lifetime of sensitive reading in materials of an astounding scope and depth), he foregoes apologetics and seldom tackles contemporary political issues directly. Remarkably, those questions that we as scholars are so often pressed to address before students and the public in speaking, teaching, and writing (does Islam condone violence, what does Islam say about the treatment of women, and so forth) are barely mentioned here, as Ahmed treats them as problems of minor concern. Instead, he seeks to reorient the debates of our time by focusing on fundamental problems of definition. What, if anything, really unites the fifth of humanity made up of people who call themselves Muslims in all of their dazzling and dizzying diversity? What, if anything, can we say about Islam as an object of study, the presumed abstract reality that lies behind individual professions of belief?

It is exactly this task that contemporary scholars have largely abandoned, particularly because of an aversion to essentialization. The sheer global diversity of communities of Muslims that makes the field of Islamic Studies so unruly intrinsically discourages overly positivist delineations of what might unite them. Further, scholarly avoidance of definitions often seems like a reasonable response to—even an implicit repudiation of—those forces and agents who seek to dictate a specific orthodoxy to Muslims as a prerequisite of authenticity. The subject of inquiry itself vanishes: many scholars now insist there is no "Islam" in the singular, only a wealth of individually and communally constituted Islams. Further, in favoring the individual agency of Muslim actors and communities, scholars now avoid granting Islam substance as an abstract concept, let alone agency—that is, the attempt to determine whether Islam "holds" a certain belief or "says" certain things is deemed paradoxical, an oxymoron, for only Muslims as human agents can say or do things.

And yet, flying in the face of this, Ahmed insists quite unapologetically that Islam does in fact do things, is larger than individual Muslims, is real for them:

> every Muslim confronts in his or her life not merely human beings expounding the meaning of Islam, nor the memory of their beloved Prophet, nor a speaking God, but a massive *notion* called "Islam" that looms large in his or her consciousness and is present as a context of the Muslim's life . . . it exists in the consciousness and imaginary in and as a dimension that is far more than the sum of its parts and, as such, exercises agency and power by the "mere" fact of its massiveness.[2]

That is, for Ahmed, Islam is the thing that is indisputably *there* in the life and thoughts of every Muslim, that makes them Muslim, that enables them to express themselves, understand themselves as subjects, and recognize each other as Muslim when they are—as he would put it—"speaking Islamically."

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The argument of Ahmed's book, more than five hundred pages long, unfolds across three sections. Fortunately for the reader, the author's prose is lucid, vivid, and frequently witty, which helps to sustain one's attention through the course of some particularly acrobatic formulations. The book is especially noteworthy for the vast range of primary and secondary materials Ahmed adduces; even specialists in the study of Islam will likely be exposed to textual sources of which they were previously unaware, or gain new perspective on more familiar texts and authors. Further, as he charts major trajectories of older scholarship and dominant trends in the various disciplines that contribute to Islamic Studies, Ahmed's careful analysis of the presuppositions and conclusions of a host of secondary sources is valuable for anyone wishing to better understand the history of the field.

The first part of the book, innocuously entitled "Questions," draws upon a diverse body of literary material that has generally been neglected in attempts to define or conceptualize Islam. More than simply demonstrating the underappreciated range of Islamic thought and expression, this material illustrates the fallacy of relying on a commonplace definition of Islam as a set of universally accepted beliefs or practices, as a definition of this sort is incapable of accommodating such radically disparate phenomena. Ahmed discusses at some length the philosophical synthesis of Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037)—which he insists be taken seriously as *Islamic* philosophy, not simply philosophy articulated by a Muslim—whose teachings, such as the idea that the highest truths of the Unseen may be ascertained via rational reflection outside of revelation, were dubbed heretical by al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and other spokesmen of orthodoxy; the experiential-contemplative path practiced and advocated by the Sufis, a means of attaining personal revelation of higher truth that is so antinomian that it leads to such radical inversions as the idea that idolatry is actually the highest

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[2] *What Is Islam*?, 259.

modality of worship of the divine, as Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) held; the poetry of Ḥāfiẓ (d. 1390), which scoffs at the obligations of the law while exploring all aspects of the *madhhab-i ʿishq*, the intoxicating and all-consuming path of love, including homoeroticism—while at the same time presenting itself as a reimagining of the qurʾānic revelation to Muḥammad, or even its equal; the rich figurative arts of Islam, seemingly flouting the prohibition on depiction of the human form as idolatrous, yet not only adorning works of "religious" value, but themselves deeply expressive of such value, and sometimes actually celebrated as approximating the divine power of creation—exactly why jurists deemed such art to be prohibited by the *sharīʿah*; and wine drinking, not only tolerated in the face of clearly established norms of prohibition but actually valorized as deeply meaningful in itself—that is, like all of these phenomena, *as expressive and constitutive of Islam*.

Ahmed avers that this diverse array of phenomena, much of which readily strikes the average reader as completely contradictory to the foundational precepts we commonly associate with Islam, has been unjustifiably neglected in critical discussions of what Islam is. Appearing anomalous, heterodox, or plainly un-Islamic, the claims of the philosophers and the Sufis, the rich visual art produced for courtly patrons, and the openly contrarian discourses of the affective, aesthetic, and erotic expressed in classical Persian (or "Persianate") poetry have generally been relegated to the periphery. These realms of creativity are never central to attempts to define Islam, and are typically characterized as "alternative" formations within the religion of Islam, aspects of its affiliated "culture" or "civilization," or even evidence of the persistence of "secular" concerns alongside and outside of Islam, "Islam proper," what really counts as Islam in the eyes of most moderns, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. That is, all these phenomena are usually taken as expressions of something other than simply Islam; even scholars of Sufism or philosophy or art implicitly accept the common conception of Islam as something primarily constituted at its core by and stemming from the discourse of the *ʿulamāʾ* (religious scholars), the makers and representatives of "real" Islam, expressed in the normative discourses of creed, scriptural exegesis, and especially law.

This misconception is understandable, since scholars of Islam have long granted a privileged role to the *ʿulamāʾ* as the indigenous informants most credibly authorized to speak for Islam: not only is their literature taken as the most reliable representation of what the norms of Islam generally are and have been, but their hegemony in defining Islam is assumed to have been a given even for those Muslims who incline towards the "alternative" forms of expression mentioned above. That is, we typically take for granted that the Sufi and the philosopher and the *rind* or dissipated libertine drunk on (real or figurative) wine acknowledges the power of the law to dictate norms, to represent the core of Islam, and that their own path is

somehow second best, alternative, a challenge to the automatically authoritative truths of the jurists. This distortion of the field is the result of the prevalence of a "legal-prescriptive" or even "legal-supremacist" paradigm of Islam that is commonly granted hegemony by Western observers.

Ahmed argues, however, that although the modalities of conceiving and expressing Islam charted here may contradict our common conceptions of what counts as "real" Islam, the evidence simply does not bear out the claim that these are marginal, alternative, or anomalous ways of thinking about or enacting Islam—acting and speaking Islamically. Rather, these discourses were central, even ubiquitous, in the mature Islamic societies of the premodern era, endorsed by significant sectors of the population (and not, as we commonly imagine, "counter-cultural" in the slightest).

One of the critical methodological maneuvers Ahmed makes here is reorienting the definitional discussion not only to enfranchise different types of evidence, but to relocate it to a chronological and geographical frame usually ignored in attempts to identify the core or essence of the tradition. As has been widely noted, Islamicists are particularly prone to favoring the formative and classical period of Islam's development, the early centuries *anno hegirae* of an Arab (or at most Arabo-Persian) cultural elite centered on a Near Eastern and eastern Mediterranean core—the heartlands of the caliphal empire—that predominantly expressed itself in and through the classic literature of the Islamic religious sciences. Ahmed seeks to reframe the debate by turning instead to a post-classical paradigm, what he calls the Balkans-to-Bengal complex—the network of Islamic societies stretching from Eastern Europe across the Middle East, including Anatolia and Iran, all the way to Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent—as epitomizing the Islam to which scholars should direct their attention.

The fourteenth through nineteenth centuries witnessed the greatest flourishing of what is often misleadingly labeled the Persianate or Turco-Persianate civilization of the post-Mongol period, during which the communities of the Ottoman, Safavid, Mughal, and allied domains were united by a rich culture of stunning complexity and sophistication. The Arab world was part of this network, but by no means central to it. No single ethnic or linguistic grouping was dominant; rather, what united this globe-spanning *ummah*, only partially captured by the terms *culture* or *civilization*, was, simply put, their Islam.[3]

Ahmed sees the elites of this geographical region as united by a common set of values, behaviors, and norms, acculturated through a common *paideia*, utilizing a common vocabulary and discourse, and drawing on a literary canon that inculcated particular modalities of valorization and self-expression that are underappreciated in our typical understanding of what Islam is. Their Islam was not defined by scripture (at least not as limited to the literal qurʾānic text and scholastic exegesis),

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[3] For Ahmed's clearest argument in favor of this historiographic shift, see Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 73–85.

or normative, juridically-defined practice or creed. Their Islam was instead "post-formative," shaped by centuries of reflection upon the implications and potential of forms of Islam established in previous centuries, and so their Islam was grounded in a restructuring of discourse according to the patterns and paradigms of philosophy, Sufism, and the visual and literary arts—specifically those elements of Islamic expression typically judged to be peripheral, anomalous, even intrinsically un-Islamic. Their Islam was the Islam of Ibn Sīnā, of Suhrawardī and Ibn ʿArabī, of Ḥāfiẓ, of the contrarian Sufis, of the devotees of the path of love.

Here Islam was defined by the *madrasah* curriculum, but also by the ubiquitous Sufi brotherhoods, as well as by the loosely defined fraternities of philosophers and poets and courtiers and aesthetes whose ideas we might be tempted to label "secular" but for the fact that the human relationship to the Unseen, to God, to "matters of ultimate concern" and transcendent meaning, was central to all of these imaginative enterprises.[4] We might also be tempted to label this "humanism," especially given the central focus in many of these discourses on the Self, on palpably human existential concerns, but this humanism was not distinguished from Islam, not readily separable from any properly religious matters of "ultimate concern." Rather, this "Islamic humanism" was Islam itself. An embrace of paradox, ambiguity, and contradiction; an emphasis on the affective, the allusive, the aesthetic, the erotic; a recognition that the strenuous exercises of the ascetic, the lawbound efforts of the jurist, the intoxicated and ecstatic states of the lover are all equally legitimate paths of knowing and actualizing the truths of the Unseen—this is the Islam of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex that scholars have historically marginalized in constructing Islam as an object of study.

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By the time Ahmed concludes the first section of his book, he has adduced ample evidence for Islamic diversity; speaking descriptively, it is clear that Islam contains multitudes (as he paraphrases Whitman at the beginning of the book). Some might be satisfied simply to characterize Islam as including all the ways Muslims express themselves, all the things Muslims do as Muslims to express meanings they deem Islamic. But Ahmed wishes to move beyond simply showing us all of the diverse articulations that collectively make up Islam, or convincing us not to privilege one form over another when appraising Islam as an object of study. Rather, he

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[4] It is important to note that the *madrasah* curriculum was, in the period under consideration, considerably more diverse and intellectually sophisticated than the casual observer may realize, and that philosophical and Sufi works were sometimes part of that curriculum alongside more strictly juridical and exegetical texts; see Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 76–78. Religion as dealing with matters of "ultimate concern" is the well-known formulation of Paul Tillich.

wishes to explain how all this diversity may be conceptualized (and not merely characterized) as Islam, how Islam may be defined and delineated in abstract terms so as to appear as something with definable traits, not just a hopelessly inchoate body of claims, ideas, and practices.

Before taking up this task in the third section of his book, Ahmed dedicates the two hundred dense and closely argued pages of Part Two, "Conceptualizations," to assaying the relative strengths and weaknesses of previous attempts to define Islam. While most historians, anthropologists, and scholars of religion recognize the tremendous diversity of Islamic societies, they typically fail to take that diversity into account as a core trait of Islam (misconstruing it as proof that Islam *has* no essential traits). Especially conspicuous is the tendency to pay lip service to diversity while positing a circumscribed body of practices and concepts that represent the core of Islam; this inevitably imposes a kind of litmus test upon "local" varieties of Islam, which are then deemed more or less authentic depending on the degree to which the core body of practices and concepts are granted priority. At its extreme, this approach is tantamount to Salafism, in which a set of ideas and practices claimed to be "original" is elevated to paradigmatic status and granted absolute authority, with everything else—the stuff that distinguishes varieties of "local" Islam from one another—rendered contingent, epiphenomenal, or simply un-Islamic. Ahmed also takes note of the aforementioned movement of many scholars in the opposite direction, simply abandoning any hope of coherently conceptualizing Islam, in order to avoid speaking of Islam only as an abstract ideal to which Muslims must conform in order to achieve authenticity. However, this overlooks the fact that, to Muslims, there is something abstract that defines them—the Islam on account of which they are called Muslim must have some positive meaning. To deny this basic fact sometimes seems to border on nihilism.

Summarizing the vast range of theoretical material Ahmed adduces here is far beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice to say that the author is quite bold in challenging the fundamental presuppositions and conclusions (as well as pointing out the terminal shortcomings) of numerous scholars in the field, some of whose ideas have been dismissed, as well as others who are still widely read and remain critical darlings. Even those scholars whose ideas seem to have been most influential on Ahmed's own project come in for serious criticism, including Marshall Hodgson, Talal Asad, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Jacques Waardenburg. To his credit, Ahmed is never overtly polemical, but it is startling to see the foundational ideas of major figures associated with the study of Islam dismissed as hopelessly misguided in a few pages (sometimes in just a single footnote).

What many of Ahmed's readers will find most difficult to grasp—or at least to operationalize, if they are themselves scholars who teach and write with particular conceptions of Islam and the Islamic at least in the background of their work—is his fairly damning critique of the simple equation of Islam with "religion." The idea that religion, especially juxtaposed with the "secular," is a modern construct

is hardly new; this much is de rigueur, at least among religionists. Yet it can be extremely difficult to transcend the reflexive tendency to see Islam as something that is or should be primarily defined through recourse to categories embedded in Western concepts of what religion is and delineations of what its domain does and does not encompass. Time and again biases informed by these concepts have led to a privileging of a conception of Islam as defined by the ʿulamā ʾ, as fundamentally a legal-prescriptive discourse articulated in the literature of the so-called religious sciences; the result, of grave consequence for scholars, is that phenomena that do not fit into this model are given secondary importance, sidelined as expressions of culture, civilization, the secular—as anything but simply Islam. The emphasis on prescriptive and nomocentric discourse as epitomizing Islam, as an indispensable core at the communal and societal (if not individual) level, unjustly marginalizes other forms of Muslim construction of meaning as illegitimate, idiosyncratic, or superfluous.[5]

This misprision is encouraged by a widespread tendency to misinterpret *dīn*, the indigenous term that stands in for "religion" in Islamic societies; despite the recognition that *dīn* represents something more pervasive and ambiguous than the Western construct of religion encompasses, scholars commonly overlook forms of expression such as visual art, or poetry, or statecraft, or economics as being of prime significance for indicating what Muslims of the time found to be meaningful, by which we mean Islamically meaningful, meaningful as Islam, in their attempt to articulate and enact the state of being *dīndārī*, of conveying and embodying Islam. To force Muslim conceptions of what counts as *dīndārī* to conform to Western categories of what counts as religion is nothing short of "epistemological coercion"—compelling the past to conform to conceptual categories prevailing in the present.

By the end of his lengthy treatment of previous attempts to conceptualize and define Islam, it is clear that Ahmed sympathizes the most with theorists who adopt phenomenological and semiotic approaches to the problem. Thus, the work of Waardenburg, W. C. Smith, and Asad seem particularly foundational for him as he moves into what can justifiably be called his constructive project. Though he

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[5] This is not to say that Ahmed suggests that legal-prescriptive discourse is not historically significant; far from it. As his forthcoming, second posthumous publication demonstrates, that discourse could effect titanic changes in Muslim perceptions of what was thinkable, sayable, and knowable, with the reach of forces seeking to impose orthodoxy becoming increasingly ineluctable with the advent of modernity. See Shahab Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); I thank Noah Feldman profusely for providing me access to a pre-publication version of this work. The point, however, is that throughout much of Islamic history the exploratory discourses Ahmed posits as the opposite of prescriptive discourse were not "alternative" or "counter-cultural"; they were complementary and came into conflict with it far less often than we would tend to think.

seeks to refine numerous aspects of their work—for example, rejecting Smith's reliance on a distinction between faith and tradition, or Asad's characterization of Muslims as "hopeless orthodoxizers"—what Ahmed draws from these approaches is an emphasis on Islam as the result of aggregate discourse and meaning production, the product of dynamic, dialectical relationships between the individual believer, community, and tradition. This reliance on the processual (to use Asad's phrase) enables Ahmed to avoid the perennial fallacy of trying to delineate a body of core beliefs and practices that supposedly unites all Muslims.

Ahmed's conceptualization of Islam is intended to do justice to the massive diversity and variety not just of phenomena encompassed within the boundaries of Islam and thus available as loci of meaning production for Muslims on the communal and individual level, but also to the myriad incommensurable ways Muslims themselves conceive of Islam. Ahmed's conceptualization may at first blush seem opaque and overly convoluted, as when, towards the end of the book, he characterizes Islam as

> the hermeneutical engagement with different sources of Revelation (Pre-Text, Text, Con-Text) by different epistemologies in different disciplinary projects, each issuing in different Truths and Meanings of Revelation that are *spatially-arrayed* in a social *hierarchy* of truth and in a social *exteriority-interiority* of truth—that is, in acknowledgedly different forms and calibrations and isotopes of truth for different persons and places.[6]

However, Ahmed's painstaking exposition of his ideas in the almost two hundred and fifty pages of Part Three, "Re-Conceptualizations," as well as the numerous compelling examples he adduces for the reader, will, one imagines, convince all but the most theory-allergic readers of the usefulness of his enterprise. If we cannot substantiate the claim that Muslims are united by a core of universally accepted beliefs and practices, then what ties Muslims together is their common attempt to present their particular beliefs and practices as universal, as essential, plausibly to construe what they do and feel and believe as representative of Islam, doing so by means of a recurrent, widespread mode of argumentation that is itself constitutive of Islam. That is, if there is no core reality to Islam in terms of universally mandated and accepted creedal and praxial elements, then Islam can consist *only* of the language through which individual Muslims posit that their particular creeds and practices *are*, in fact, Islam, and no less Islamic than the creeds and practices of others.

We cannot hope to unpack every aspect of Ahmed's conceptualization here. The most salient points, however, may be summarized as follows. He begins with the observation that all (or virtually all) Muslims accede to the proposition represented by the *shahādah* or profession of faith (*lā ilaha ill' Allāh wa-Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*—"there is no god but God and Muḥammad is His messenger"). Though the profession itself is universal, its constituent and consequent elements—the

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[6] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 520.

existence and unity of God, the authenticity of Muḥammad's prophetic mission, the authority of the tangible artifact of that mission, the Qurʾān—are all conceived in such radically different ways that they cannot be said to constitute core concepts shared by all Muslims.

However, what does tie Muslims together is at least the basic idea that the ultimate Truth of Unseen reality (these are capitalized by Ahmed himself in rendering the evocative Arabic terms *ḥaqq* and *ghayb* respectively) broke through into the reality of our phenomenal world at a specific point in history, in an act of sublime communication with the human Prophet whose revelations are now canonized in the Qurʾān. Some Muslims believe that the ultimate Truth can only be accessed through direct engagement with Text—the historical revelation to Muḥammad as well as the *sunnah* or inspired deeds and words of the Prophet himself. The core activity of the legal-prescriptive discourse of the *ʿulamāʾ* is the hermeneutic process of direct engagement with the Text of revelation in order to define meaning for Muslims through creedal assent, specifically prescribed ritual activities, and subordination to the *sharīʿah* as articulated through jurisprudence. This is something which all observers of Islam naturally take for granted, especially since it is this aspect of Islam that is most visibly manifest in the world today.

However, all Muslims would also agree that the larger divine reality that is manifest in the words of the Qurʾān specifically and revelation more generally is not wholly encompassed in or by Text; rather, that vibrant, dynamic divine reality that lies behind the Text, which Ahmed terms Pre-Text, far surpasses it. Can that divine reality of the Unseen be accessed in other ways? The reason it is a mistake to focus upon the legal-prescriptive discourse of the *ʿulamāʾ* as primarily or exclusively definitive of Islam is that there have been a number of historically prominent, culturally significant alternatives. Thus, Islamic philosophy is the attempt to access the Truth of Pre-Text through rational contemplation; Sufism is the attempt to access it experientially. While both the philosophers and the Sufis engage with the Qurʾān, engagement with the Text as the jurists do is, in the eyes of these other groups, simply not sufficient in order for one to really grasp the Truth of the Unseen. Sometimes, they have even held that it is not necessary for doing so.

The fundamentally hermeneutic nature of Islam—that is, directed towards the production of meaning through processes of interpretation—emerges not only in Muslims' attempt to engage the Text of Revelation or the Pre-Text that stands behind it, but in the inevitable fact that such engagement occurs through the intervening medium of prior tradition—that is, the vast and varied expressions resulting from previous engagements with Truth, producing the array of meanings that Ahmed

terms Con-Text. That is, no Muslim endorses ideas or engages in behavior that is or can credibly be termed Islamic by others unless they build upon the foundation of what has gone before, of what previous communities of Muslims have recognized as plausibly Islamic.[7]

The point that Ahmed is driving home here is that all modalities of meaning-making in Muslim communities, that is, all artistic, literary, devotional, and reflective activities, are engaged with revelation in some capacity, either as direct interpretation of the truths encoded in the Qurʾān and embodied in the person of Muḥammad, or, at a more abstract level, with the higher Truth that stands behind revelation as scripture and prophetic experience, as well as with previous engagements with either or both. It is only relatively recently that Muslims have, as a condition of the exporting of Western-style modernity, come to engage significantly with truth-propositions deliberately constructed as standing outside of Islam.

Thus, in Ahmed's elegant formulation, not everything Muslims do is Islamic, but we should take seriously all Muslim expressions of meaning as Islam. It is exactly this point that allows us to enfranchise such forms of expression as fictional literature, poetry, and the visual arts (although embedded in discourses and contexts typically dismissed as other than and outside of the realm of the properly and centrally and publicly "religious"), as of prime significance for conceiving Islam and appreciating how Muslims themselves have conceived of Islam. It is also this dynamic that allows us to recognize philosophy and Sufism as equally significant to law and other discourses of the ʿulamāʾ as publicly recognized and socially sanctioned modes of Islamic meaning-making.

Ahmed is deeply concerned with explaining how plural, contradictory, and incommensurable conceptions of Islam abide together—how individual Muslims could assert mutually incongruous propositions (for instance, upholding the truth of the sharīʿah while also embracing Sufi subversions of it), or how Muslims can recognize other, radically different, forms of Islam as Islam, even when they do not agree with or approve of them.[8] Regarding the latter, the mutual legibility—and in most cases legitimacy—of disparate conceptions of Islam has been ensured by their common identity as hermeneutic engagements with Truth according to the dynamic described above; essentially, all Muslims can recognize a set of points of reference to Text, Pre-Text, and Con-Text embodied in other Muslims' Islam because their own Islam, though likely not configured identically, is configured analogously—as a negotiation of the relationship between these three hermeneutic touchstones. Simply put, Muslims recognize each other when they are "speaking Islamic," regardless of the specific idiom in which they themselves express their Islam.

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[7] For the core discussion of the Text/Pre-Text/Con-Text dynamic, see Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 348–68.

[8] For Ahmed's memorable use of the figure of a city for Con-Text, the "architectonics of Islam," described as "a built environment of meaning," see Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 357–58.

The final critical component of Ahmed's conceptualization of Islam that requires some explication here is that of spatiality. Ahmed posits that because of the intrinsic nature of revelation as it is perceived or conceived by Muslims (infinite Pre-Text versus complex, perhaps infinitely signifying, but ultimately bounded Text), different engagements with Pre-Text and/or Text yielded different epistemologies, different ways of perceiving and articulating Truth that inevitably came to correspond to a hierarchy of truths and truth-seekers; that is, a given proposition was deemed true (or rather meaningful) according to context, with its relative value determined by that context. This differentiality—again, imagined as spatial in nature by Ahmed—is hierarchical, expressed most directly in the philosophers' distinction of truths appropriate for all from those appropriate only for the elite (the ʿawāmm and the khāwaṣṣ, respectively). The truths articulated in these separate realms may contradict one another on the rational level, but critically, they do not nullify each other, instead being sustained in a state of social equilibrium. Both sets of truths can be deemed Islam, with neither cancelling out the Islam of the other.

Even more literally spatial in nature is the configuration of private versus publicly-expressed truths, as in the confinement of expressions prone to be perceived as transgressive to small social groups like Sufi brotherhoods (which nevertheless grew into substantial and socially and politically consequential corporate bodies over time) or the production of some forms of figurative art exclusively for courtly circulation and consumption. That Truth could be apprehended and expressed in a variety of ways, even contradictory and mutually incompatible ways, was taken for granted in pre-modern Muslim societies; contrary to our common stereotypes of the contrast between constraining pre-modern orthodoxy and modern liberty and freedom of conscience as a universal ideal, in point of fact, the spatial distribution of different apprehensions and articulations of Truth was commonly accepted in the sophisticated society of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex. It is only with the advent of modernity, with its characteristic emphasis on Islam as a discourse of prescription and regulation, that the imaginative and expressive capacities of the private Muslim individual, now constituted by law as a subject-citizen of the nation-state, have come to be severely reduced, with indulgence of the more exploratory aspects of Islam either forgotten or now all-too-often subject to sanction as transgressive and deviant—the only Islam permitted to abide being the nomocentric, publicly divulged one deemed fit for consumption by the masses.[9]

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[9] It bears repeating that for Ahmed spatiality is critical for sustaining the exploratory or experimental ethos in which he is so interested, especially insofar as it facilitates "tolerance" (to invoke a problematic term Ahmed avoids). Spatial distinction of truth-claims in society enables people to explore and embrace ambiguity and contradiction—even deliberately cultivating them—specifically because of the articulation of structures that support it through the differentiation of space and forms of sociability according to hierarchical and exterior/interior divisions that are anchored in the experience of revelation itself. In the last chapter Ahmed describes how and why this spatiality has collapsed due to both the advent of modernity and the global influence of Salafism (Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 514–37).

Given the far-reaching implications of *What Is Islam?*, as well as the significant attention it has already received, it is difficult to imagine that Ahmed's intervention will not have a lasting impact on the field of Islamic Studies.[10] One of the most significant methodological advances Ahmed offers here is the shift from the historical and still endemic emphasis in the field on early and classical Islam and its predominantly Arabic literary remains to a more holistic view of the development of Islam, particularly in enfranchising the coherent, sophisticated, and conspicuously understudied societies of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex. The complementary methodological pivot he also encourages, from an emphasis on the legal-prescriptive discourse of the ʿulamāʾ and their associated juristic, exegetical, and creedal sources (de facto canonical for many practitioners of Islamic Studies) to a much wider embrace of the full diversity of artistic, aesthetic, ethical, and speculative expressions of the post-Mongol period is of inestimable significance as well. As Ahmed fully recognizes, the literature and arts of this period have been extensively examined by specialists in literature and art. However, they have not been given their due in enabling a broader, richer, and ultimately more accurate representation of what Islam meant in this period.[11] Historians and scholars of religion in particular—who often seem to drive the larger academic conversations that shape historiography—must overcome their reflexive bias in favor of "classical" sources, the historic privileging of the ʿulamāʾ as exclusively defining the norms and values of Muslim communities, and, in the end, their tendency to conceive of Islam primarily in terms of the category of religion.

There are numerous subfields and subject areas that would undoubtedly benefit from such a recalibration of the conception of Islam that guides and shapes Islamic Studies. Not only has the rich, sophisticated international and transcontinental society of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex been unjustly neglected; Ahmed's new paradigm compels us to reevaluate our representation of Islam in other, even more marginal, Muslim societies—Southeast Asia, Africa, the Americas. For example, newer Muslim societies are typically approached within the frames established by anthropology, as examples of "local" Islam and—especially in the African case—analyzed in terms of "syncretism." Even when this term is avoided, the dominant concern is typically to discern how survivals of indigenous culture and religion—seemingly by definition un-Islamic—are brought into a state of equilibrium with imported (real) Islam. But in Ahmed's model, there is no such thing as the un-Islamic once something has been drawn into the sphere of Muslim valuation; all becomes

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[10] As an example of the critical reception the work has already received, see the online forum edited by Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst and Kristian Petersen, "*What is Islam* Forum—Introduction," *LA Review of Books*, 19 August 2016, http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/islam-forum-introduction/.

[11] Ahmed's gorgeous exegesis of a well-known miniature painting, Sulṭān Muḥammad's *Worldly and Otherworldly Drunkenness* (ca. 1526), provides a vivid case in point (Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 417–24).

part of the Con-Text that is drawn upon in negotiating that hermeneutic engagement with Text and/or Pre-Text. That is, nothing can be "un-Islamic" that is given value by Muslims; it is that act of valuation itself that renders something Islamic. Thus, we can at most speak of phenomena that have a long history as part of the Con-Text (and are thus more readily granted authentic "Islamic" status by insiders) and those that do not—with the latter only *newly constituted as Islamic*, just as people may be newly constituted as Muslims when they adopt that identity, but should not be qualified as less Muslim than believers from older Islamic societies.[12]

Another important conclusion one draws from Ahmed's work is that to understand what ideas and claims had particular traction and currency in Islamic societies, we must consider what people actually read, for example by taking manuscript evidence into account. For the most part, Ahmed's discussion relies on readily available printed editions; his is not an argument that rests on his having discovered some previously unknown work that offers us previously unconsidered evidence. Rather, in evaluating the social impact of prominent authors and works during the five hundred years of the dominance of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex, he repeatedly takes note of the distribution of manuscripts and printed editions in important collections in the West and the Islamic world. The fact that some texts that have barely been considered by scholars are attested in more than two dozen manuscripts in a single archive, or were printed and reprinted numerous times during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, indicates that our collective priorities have sometimes been misplaced in overemphasizing the literary productions of the early and classical periods. This impression is reinforced by the number of works Ahmed cites as widely influential for particular communities (or even many communities) in the Balkans-to-Bengal complex that are rarely encountered in graduate curricula, untranslated and perhaps even unavailable in printed editions, and known only to specialists who study specific languages or regions within that complex.

In closing, it seems important to acknowledge some of the critical shortcomings of *What Is Islam?*, which mainly have to do with conspicuous oversights in the work's argumentation. For one thing, given the centrality of hermeneutics in his conceptualization of Islam, it is peculiar that Ahmed, who is very widely read and generally meticulous about locating aspects of his argument in the established scholarship on a topic, pays very little attention to the copious theoretical literature on this subject. In particular, his notion of Con-Text appears very similar to some of the fundamental ideas associated with Gadamer's classic approach to

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[12] In a passage that is sure to attract much debate, Ahmed addresses the question that logically proceeds from this point, namely whether phenomena (e.g., beliefs, behaviors, material culture) that are part of the Con-Text and well-established as Islamic are still so when produced, endorsed, or otherwise engaged by people who are not Muslim. Ahmed's answer is yes: Maimonides is not an "Islamicate" philosopher, but rather an Islamic (or Jewish-Islamic) philosopher. On this and the complementary example of Sikh wrestlers invoking ʿAlī as they engage their opponents—an Islamic act though committed by non-Muslims—see Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 445–49.

hermeneutics, particularly in imagining it as a dialectical interplay between individual understanding and historical positionality, a dialogue between self and tradition, that produces an historically conditioned interpretation that is the result of both individual insight and socio-cultural location. Much of the established literature on hermeneutics is rather opaque, and perhaps too much investigation of this subfield of contemporary philosophy would have proved distracting for the reader, but it is nevertheless peculiar that Ahmed does so little with modern hermeneutic theory—for example, simply dismissing Gadamer in a footnote.

Another somewhat perplexing omission in the work is its total lack of acknowledgment of the insider-outsider problem. To be sure, Ahmed discusses at length the way in which various observers of Islam have significantly distorted evidence by imposing their maladroit analytical paradigms upon them. But strangely, Ahmed either did not notice, or did not care to address, the fact that the line between a purely analytical project and a constructive-normative project appears at times very blurry in his work. The whole endeavor of how one should define and conceptualize Islam has obvious normative implications, even if the author's primary intention is not to speak, to use a difficult term, "theologically." The fact of the matter is that Ahmed's work not only makes a valuable contribution to the articulation of a more sophisticated, nuanced, and subtle historical approach to Islamic societies; it also at times feels as though he is articulating a new philosophy of Islam.

This reviewer has no particular qualms about Muslim scholars producing scholarship that has constructive potential or positivist implications, though some have decried this phenomenon quite loudly. Nevertheless, there are many passages of Ahmed's work in which he seems to be implicitly calling for contemporary Muslims to reassert their connection to the more exploratory and open-ended variety of Islam that he describes and in fact celebrates, the flexible and (to use a problematic term he himself strenuously avoids) "tolerant" Islam that was socially prevalent and culturally prominent among many communities of Muslims in the past. A non-Muslim scholar could probably not so comfortably set out to valorize forgotten trajectories and modes of expression within Islam quite so persistently. One should not condemn Ahmed when one catches a glimpse of him speaking implicitly as a concerned, committed Muslim describing how Muslims themselves might renovate their conception of Islam and its potentialities, especially in validating an Islam for Muslims who perceive their Islam as a mode of thinking and feeling and acting meaningfully in the world instead of as a set of prescriptions and regulations. Such individuals are not, in his view, defying Islam but rather articulating a different sense of Islam that is, nevertheless, explicitly called Islam—an Islam that in the modern world dares not speak its name. But it is odd that he himself seems barely cognizant that he is engaged in a constructive project, or else that he simply does not deign to admit it.

Finally, the most troubling omission from *What Is Islam?* is Ahmed's near-total neglect of gender as a factor in his critical project.[13] He is careful to note that his project is not elitist, demonstrating how the characteristic value system of the literary discourses of philosophy, Sufism, the *madhhab-i ʿishq*, and so forth percolated out from *madrasah*, *khanqah*, and court into more middlebrow and popular forms of expression, and thus impacted all strata of Islamic society. Given this concern for social inclusivity, it is extremely striking that Ahmed does not avail himself of any of the noteworthy scholarship on women in Islam or the critical interrogations of gender of the last few decades to enrich the paradigm he so carefully constructs and defends here. Granted, the authorial voice of women is absent from most of the literary discourses that form the primary evidentiary base for Ahmed's conceptualization. But enormous progress has been made over the last twenty years in exploring female agency and recovering women's experience in various periods of Islamic history—and, most critically, in using this research to rethink how we conceive of and define Islam.

However, this research seems to have had no perceptible impact on Ahmed's work at all.[14] This is especially stunning given that feminist theory and scholarship would plainly have had much to contribute to nuancing and deepening his argument. As only the most obvious example, Judith Butler's classic conception of gender as performative would have been readily transferable to Ahmed's descriptions of the semiotic and discursive aspects of Muslim meaning-making, as he is essentially saying that Muslims make Islam and constitute themselves as Muslims performatively.[15] This is one of the most elementary insights contemporary scholarship on gender brings to the table. This is to say nothing of the significant and groundbreaking contributions of many women scholars in Islamic Studies

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[13] The other conspicuous lacuna in the work is Ahmed's seeming reluctance to take Shi'ism seriously as a distinct and meaningful elaboration of Islam. Nothing he says discounts it from being taken as such, but the significance of Shi'ism as a deliberately constructed alternative to other forms of Islam has no analytical salience for Ahmed—that is, the fact of explicitly articulated sectarianism is surely important, but it is unclear how it is accommodated in his paradigm. Further, Shi'i groups and individuals (at least *qua* their Shi'ism) are almost totally omitted from the discussion; the conspicuous exception is a rather objectionable and retrograde reference to the Isma'ilis as antinomian yet authoritarian (Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 510).

[14] For an incisive critique of the continuing invisibility of women as scholars and subjects in Islamic Studies, see Kecia Ali, "The Omnipresent Male Scholar," *Critical Muslim* 8 (October–December 2013) 61–73, 229–32. The one place where feminist scholarship seems to surface most conspicuously in Ahmed's work is in a rather dismissive two-page discussion of reformist approaches to the Qurʾān, including feminist hermeneutics; the scholarship of Kecia Ali and Karen Bauer is mentioned in a note, but the work of seminal figures like amina wadud is ignored, and as much attention is given to the critics of such work as to its proponents (Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 511–12).

[15] Ahmed draws a somewhat similar insight from Asad, relying heavily on the latter's notion of Islam as processual, but, as noted above, Asad's emphasis on orthodoxy is a serious stumbling-block for Ahmed. I would argue he would not have had to leap over that block had he deployed Butler instead, or drawn more substantially on a contemporary feminist scholar of Islam like Saba Mahmood, who receives only one sentence in a footnote (Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 284–85 n. 84).

whose work is totally neglected here. Ahmed's inexplicable obliviousness to these issues is a grave oversight, marring what is otherwise a landmark accomplishment. It is undoubtedly the single aspect of his project that is most ripe for rectification by scholars who take up his argument in the future, at that readily foreseeable time when *What Is Islam?* becomes a classic in the field, a stellar testament to a remarkable scholarly career cut short.