

What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic

Shahab Ahmed

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The collection of the Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon houses a white jade wine jug which once belonged to the Mughal Emperor Jahāngīr. The emperor had an inscription carved on its lip, which was translated by the late Shahab Ahmed in the first chapter of *What is Islam?*:

God is Most Great [*Allāhu Akbar!*] The King of the Seven Lands! The Emperor of Emperors who spreads Justice! The Knower of the Signs, Real and Metaphorical! Abū-l-Muẓaffar Nūr-ud-Dīn Jahāngīr, the King, son of Akbar, the King! Righteous-Warrior! (68)

The point, Ahmed argues in the book, is that this is an *Islamic* wine-jug. The inscription begins with a fundamental Islamic statement that is universally recognisable – *Allāhu Akbar* – and goes on to celebrate Jahāngīr’s rule in this religious context. Other wine-cups once owned by the Mughal Emperor similarly fashion themselves in the language of Islam, drawing on the concepts of *khilāfat* (Caliphal succession), and characterising Jahāngīr as a *ghāẓī* – a Muslim warrior. Though alcohol has been almost universally forbidden by Muslim jurists, Jahāngīr’s wine-jug is clearly coherent within his own conceptualisation of Islam. The question, Ahmed suggested, is whether ‘our own conceptualization of Islam allow[s] us to understand this coherence?’ (71)

In *What is Islam?* Ahmed sets out to demonstrate that modern understandings of Islam have grown too narrow to make sense of objects such as Jahāngīr’s wine-jug, which exemplify an older Islamic tradition of epistemic diversity that was characterised by its openness to contradiction. He takes particular aim at the ‘legal-supremacist’ framing of Islam as *law*, which is adopted ‘by Western analysts and modern Muslims alike’ (129), and reproaches both groups for passing over centuries of literature, art and ethics in their willingness to take up the Salafī principle that ‘the original is authentic.’ Ahmed wants to rehabilitate poetry, figural representation in painting – and indeed, wine jugs – within our understanding of Islam as a human and historical phenomenon. This ambitious aim proves a tall order and, as I will show, Ahmed doesn’t quite succeed in establishing a definitive new definitional framework for Islam. But his argument for a broader understanding of Islam – which shifts the focus away from prescriptive discourse – is very compelling. In the five years since its posthumous

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publication this erudite and insightful volume has established itself as a landmark contribution to the work of conceptualising Islam usefully and accurately.

What is Islam? is a love letter to a flavour of Islam that dominated the region stretching from the Balkans to the Bay of Bengal from about 1350-1850 – a temporal-geographical entity which Ahmed refers to as the ‘Balkans-to-Bengal complex.’ It shifts our focus away from the Arab experience – a move reflected by the impressive linguistic variety of the evidence Ahmed marshals, which includes Malay, Pashtō and several other languages alongside Arabic and Fārsi. The book is divided into three parts. In the first (which contains only chapter 1), Ahmed sets out six provocative case-studies drawn from the Balkans-to-Bengal complex – each of which contradicts legally-derived Islamic norms in some way – and uses them to test the boundaries of our definition of Islam. In brief: is rationalist Islamic philosophy (as taught in the *madrasabs* of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex) Islamic? When Sufis claim they are no longer bound by Islamic law, is that Islamic? Are Suhrawardī’s Philosophy of Illumination (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*) and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concept of the Unity of Existence (*wahdat al-wujūd*) Islamic? Is the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfīz (and its often-disparaging attitude towards ritual piety) Islamic? What is Islamic about Islamic art, including figural representation? And finally, can the drinking of wine be Islamic? Collectively these case-studies embody ‘the Sufi-Philosophical amalgam’ – a trajectory of ideas which Ahmed positions as the primary epistemological framework of Islamic thought and practice within the Balkans-to-Bengal complex.

We might conclude that the individuals who engaged in these phenomena were simply bad Muslims. That would enable us to remove these six case-studies from an imaginary box labelled ‘Islamic’ and set them aside. And yet, as Ahmed is at pains to demonstrate, the Sufi-Philosophical amalgam was integral to the widespread experience of lived Islam for centuries and was valorised in that context. Like Jahāngīr’s wine-jugs, these six phenomena were meaningfully Islamic for those who engaged with them. This sets the bar for Ahmed’s definition of Islam: it must be broad enough to encompass these six phenomena, and the outright contradiction which was rife in the lived ‘religious’ experience of Muslims within the Balkans-to-Bengal complex. At the same time, it must retain enough unifying coherence that we can speak meaningfully of a single ‘Islam.’

It is against this measure that previous definitions of Islam fall short for Ahmed. Ahmed devotes part two of the book (which contains chapters 2 to 4), to a lengthy and painstaking deconstruction of existing models of Islam. He argues that the tendency to view Islamic law as ‘Islam-proper’ and marginalise the Sufi-Philosophical amalgam leaves us with a version of Islam which cannot make sense of the contradictions outlined in part one. Nor will it do to view Islam as a figment conjured up from multiple distinct ‘Islams’ while Muslims themselves insist a single tradition exists. Ahmed is on strong ground when he draws on the burgeoning Critical Religion approach to pick apart frameworks which separate out ‘religion’ and ‘culture,’ or ‘religion’ and ‘secular.’ He finds Marshall Hodgson’s ‘Islamic/Islamicate’ division

wanting on this basis (157-75). Phenomena placed in the ‘Islamicate’ category are arbitrarily excluded from the ‘religious’ category of Islam-proper, although the Muslims who engaged with them often made no such distinction. Ahmed’s project might be summarised by this aim alone: to extend the boundaries of ‘Islam’ to encompass the ‘Islamicate.’ Less convincing is his critique of what he views as the undue weight given to the production of ‘orthodoxy’ in Talal Asad’s concept of Islam as a ‘discursive tradition’ (270-95). Given the affinity between the two scholars’ approaches, it seems likely that Ahmed makes heavy weather of his critique in order to set his own ideas apart.

In part three (containing chapters 5 to 6), Ahmed puts forward his solution to the contradictions posed in part one. He describes Islam as a language used to make meaning from the Islamic revelation. Ahmed complicates the matter by identifying three aspects of the revelation: the Pre-Text, the Text and the Con-Text. The Text refers straightforwardly to the Qur’an and the Hadith. The Pre-Text is the higher divine truth (347) only partly revealed by the Text. The existence of unseen divine truth is traditionally accepted by Muslims (although the history of Islam is infused with disagreement over whether or not it can be made known by non-Textual means such as the philosopher’s independent reasoning or the Sufi’s mystical experience). The Con-Text is the history of hermeneutic engagement with the Pre-Text and the Text. Ahmed likens it to a city (358), with today’s citizens adding their own modern buildings to the vast sprawl of existing edifices.

Islam, then, encompasses any act of meaning-making engagement with *any one* of these three aspects of the revelation. Philosophy and Sufism are Islamic even when they sidestep the Text because they seek to engage directly with the Pre-Text. Jahāngīr’s wine-cups are Islamic because they are embedded in a Pre-Textual, Textual and Con-Textual matrix of meaning. Wine-drinking becomes Islamic whenever it is made meaningful in these terms, whether it is being forbidden or positively valorised as a heavenly indulgence for knowers of the higher truth (409). Ahmed goes even further: Sikh wrestlers in the villages of the Punjab traditionally shout ‘*Yā ‘Alī*’ – invoking the fourth caliph of Islam, who serves as a model warrior – before entering a fight. By engaging with the Con-Text of the revelation of Islam the Sikh wrestler’s act becomes Islamic in a sense – although the wrestler himself remains a Sikh and might have no idea where his ritual phrase comes from (445).

There is something to be said for the way Ahmed’s approach flattens out the category ‘Islamic.’ Consider Graeme Wood’s provocative 2015 Atlantic article, in which he argued that ISIS was ‘*very* Islamic.’¹ Ahmed’s approach suggests that while ISIS may be Islamic – as Islamic as Jahāngīr’s wine-drinking – *nothing* can be reasonably deemed ‘*very* Islamic’ from an outsider’s standpoint, as this unfairly privileges one

¹ GRAEME WOOD, ‘What ISIS Really Wants,’ *The Atlantic*, March 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>, accessed March 20, 2021.

experience of Islamic meaning-making over another. Islam, Ahmed suggests, is not centripetal but diffuse. But the strength of Ahmed's conceptualisation is also its limitation: he makes the adjective 'Islamic' so broadly applicable that it becomes difficult to discriminate between different strands of the unwieldy diversity it encompasses.

In the final pages of the book Ahmed pre-empts many of the critiques that have surfaced since his death. To call something 'Islamic,' he notes, is not to deny that it can be described meaningfully (perhaps more meaningfully) in other ways. The wrestler's shout might also be described as a 'Sikh' act, or in terms of class or race or geography. Nor is he suggesting that prescriptive and Textual traditions are not of vital importance to a coherent understanding of Islam (538).

But perhaps the most vehement responses to *What is Islam?* have come from those who feel Ahmed is being disingenuous when he says, in the first sentence of chapter 1, that he is speaking only about 'Islam as a human and historical phenomenon', and is 'precisely *not* seeking to tell the reader what Islam is as a matter of Divine Command' (5). Ahmed's arguments hit their mark precisely because, for the most part, he takes a descriptive rather than a normative approach towards Islam. When Ahmed's prose does take on a personal quality – in an eloquent passage about what Islam means to the individual Muslim (257-59) for example – it offers insight and humour. Yet there is a sense that part of his audience lies beyond the academy. (At one point he wonders why Islamic feminists and other reformers have not made more use of Pre-Textual principles to overturn challenging Textual precepts, 513).

Ahmed's insistence that contradiction *necessarily* arises from the revelation is a chink in his armour. His conceptualisation of Islam doesn't just account for contradiction, it enshrines it. He argues that disagreement and difference is structurally inherent in any engagement with the Islamic Revelation's hierarchy of truth, as those who know the 'higher' truth of the Pre-Text live by different precepts than those who know the 'lower' truth of the Text (363-77). This is certainly how many gentlemen of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex viewed Islam, but it is a view that many Muslims would not condone. Ahmed's point verges on theology, requiring us to accept that the Pre-Text and the Text, as distinct sources of divine truth, necessarily give rise to different registers of this truth. Yet many Muslims believe these two sources of truth are *necessarily* in agreement and contradiction between them is impossible. We might wonder – given Ahmed's insistence elsewhere on the equality of all experiences of Islam – whether he is quite justified in making the hierarchy of divine knowledge that infuses the Sufi-Philosophical amalgam the sole lens through which the rest of Islam is to be viewed. This undermines his protest that he is not attempting to re-centre Islam around the pluralism and ambiguities of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex (539). It also calls attention to another problem: in establishing a dichotomy between Pre-Textual traditions (Sufism, Philosophy) and Textual traditions (law, Salafism) Ahmed claims too little of the Text for the former and concedes too much of it to the latter.

The Pre-Text, after all, can only be conceived of in relation to the Text, and Muslims can only interpret the Text in light of their understandings of the Pre-Text.

Despite these limitations *What is Islam?* will rightly remain an important milestone in the contemporary study of Islam. Ahmed demands that we make room for an Islam which is broader and messier than is commonly assumed. If nothing else the reader is forced to be more self-reflective about their imagining of ‘authentic’ Islam, more cautious about separating ‘secular’ and ‘cultural’ elements from ‘Islam-proper,’ and warier of centring one aspect of Islam – such as the law – while consigning other aspects (particularly non-Arab engagements with Islam) to the periphery.