A Culture of Ambiguity
An Alternative History of Islam
Thomas Bauer
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Thomas Bauer's *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* was published in German in 2011 (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen), and was quickly recognized as the most thought-provoking book coming out of Germany's *Islamwissenschaften* in many years. Frustrated by the ever negative attitudes of the German public towards Islam and the concomitant air of Western superiority, Bauer sought to set the record straight by providing a new perspective on premodern Islamic culture, and to explain how we previously got it so wrong. He did so by interweaving brilliant insights into Arabic literature, linguistics, Islamic law, and other aspects of culture with polemics against Western and Islamic modernity and against engrained biases in Islamic and oriental studies.[1] Ten years later, through the valiant efforts of Hinrich Biesterfeldt, himself an expert in Islamic studies, and Tricia Tunstall, a highly readable English translation has finally come out, which will hopefully usher in a new round of debate about his central argument, the tolerance of ambiguity in premodern Islam.

Bauer takes the concept of ambiguity from textual studies, and then expands its application in psychology to cultural history, to denote the ability or willingness of a significant segment of a society or social group to hold contradictory or at least 'different meanings […] associated with an act, term, or object […] *at the same time*' as equally valid (10). The inclination toward tolerance or intolerance of ambiguity is not only a matter of personality, but a defining characteristic of larger social groups or entire societies. Throughout the book Bauer posits a contrast between 'traditional' – both 'classical' and 'postformative' (5 and 7) – Islam as ambiguity-tolerant on one hand, and modernist and *salafī* Islam as ambiguity-averse or intolerant, on the other. And just as tolerance to ambiguity is associated with more sympathetic personality traits in individuals, Bauer evidently finds it more interesting or attractive in cultural formations than its opposite.

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[1] It was extensively reviewed by CATHERINE MAYEUR-JAOUEN in *Arabica* 64 (2017), 115-127. See also ISABEL TORAL-NIEHOFF in *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 24 (2016): 187–193.

The heart of the book (chapters 2–4 and 6–8) consists of a series of case studies, starting with the variant readings of the text of the Qurʾān. In the early community under conditions of oral transmission, and in the absence of a definite bounded text authorized by the Prophet, those variants inevitably proliferated, creating what Bauer terms a 'crisis of ambiguity,' which was then reined in – or 'domesticated' – by the canonization of the ʿUthmānic text. This 'domesticated' ambiguity is enshrined in the equally canonical set of the 'Seven Readings' or 'Ten Readings' that are a well-established part of the philological approach of Islamic scholars to the Qurʾān. Western scholars have primarily studied these variants in order to establish an (unambiguous) Urtext, but Islamic scholars consider them all valid, and Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 1429) even celebrated them as an enrichment in meaning, to the point that he praised removing diacritical dots from the written text. By contrast, modernists like Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (d. 1973) find themselves aligned with salafists like the Saudi Ibn ʿUthaymīn (d. 2003) in the search for a single unambiguous reading and meaning of the text.

In chapter 3 Bauer continues his discussion of the Qurʾan, expanding the analysis from the textual to the semantic to demonstrate the idea that the 'semantic abundance of the Qurʾān is inexhaustible' (76) – until the 'theologization of the Qurʾān,' because the theologian does in fact insist on a single truth whereas the jurist has to work with probabilities. This is demonstrated in chapter 4: The canonization of ḥadīth is another effort at domestication, in reaction to their exponential proliferation, but still leaves plenty of contradictory material in place. From among it, the jurists' goal is not to separate the wheat from the chaff, but to establish probabilities corresponding to degrees of authority. The prohibition of carrion in Q 5:3 provides a fascinating example of how scholars were reluctant to just throw out or disregard a specific interpretation, and rather preferred to interpret a problem in a way that accommodated apparently contradictory statements, resulting in nuance and complexity (112).

Chapter 5 functions as the axial chapter of the book. Here Bauer argues that the complexity mentioned before is no longer appreciated in modern times because modern Islamic orthodoxy with an ambiguity-intolerant academia colluded in an unholy alliance to 'Islamicize' Islam, with the result that Islam has come to be defined, first and foremost, in terms of theology and orthodoxy, such that all other aspects of social, intellectual and cultural life are supposed to be shaped by it. Instead, Bauer claims that ambiguity and the tolerance for it are deeply engrained in the Arabic language, and the swiftness with which Arabic replaced Greek and Persian in the rapid expansion of the early Islamic empire is a first-rate cultural achievement (chapter 6). Long before Wittgenstein, Arabic speakers and scholars maintained a healthy skepticism vis-à-vis absolute truth claims, based on the realization that human understanding is always proximate and relative, because it is mediated through language (261). The resulting linguistic consciousness valued words with double

meanings, along with all kinds of word play, from the competitive practice of the writing contrafactional poems (*muʿāraḍa*) to the irreverent use of Qurʾānic quotes (*iqtibās*) in poetry on wine and love.

The realm of love and desire provides more fertile ground for ambiguity (chapter 7). Traditional Islam embraces sex as an integral part of human nature, celebrates it in *mujūn* poetry, and accepts homoerotic desire as part of life. Bauer criticizes the Western category of sexuality which by lumping together so different phenomena as love and sex inevitably skews perceptions and values. Moreover, even in its current backlash to heteronormativity, Western discourses that match or seek to match morality and sexual identity have been producing misconceptions about Islam, with the result that in the past the West has faulted 'Islam' 'for its sensuality and promiscuity, and today, as the former Western prudishness has taken hold in the region, is faulting it for this very hostility to sex and desire.

Chapter 8 juxtaposes Islamic political discourses and geographical literature. Pushing back against the 'Islamization' of Islam, Bauer argues that political thought goes far beyond legal and theological discourse, and in its panegyric, historiographical, and philosophical, and ethical-political manifestations remain distinctly secular. The stranger, ambiguous and hence a paradigmatic threat to modern society, can be embraced with equanimity. Likewise, not driven by a search for a singular universalized truth, Islamic scholars were able to observe the physical world in a detached mode of curiosity, and had no desire for colonial and missionary expansion.

It will be evident from this summary that ambiguity as a heuristic opens up fascinating perspectives on Islamic premodern cultural history that have either been neglected or misunderstood. Bauer is a lively writer who enjoys a spirited polemic;[2] his textual knowledge and range of perspectives are astounding, and his reminder of the multiplicity of discourses that allow an individual like his crown witnesses Ibn Nubāṭa (d. 1366) and Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449) to engage in deeply pious as well as playfully irreverent ones is highly welcome. The concept of ambiguity invites comparison with Shahab Ahmed's magisterial *What is Islam*, which identifies contradiction as the characteristic feature of the Islamic hermeneutical engagement with its sources.[3] Both works speak to a similar ambition to fundamentally reshape the understanding of Islam, although they differ in their approach (Ahmed writes as a practicing Muslim; Bauer as a European academic) and regional and linguistic focus (Bauer's primary expertise is in Mamluk Studies; Ahmed focuses on what he calls the Balkans-to-Bengal complex). Tragically, Ahmed did not have time to engage with Bauer's work thoroughly because it came out too late, and Bauer decided against a more serious discussion of Ahmed's ideas as part of his (modest) revisions for the

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[2] An impressive earlier example is THOMAS BAUER, 'Mamluk Literature: Misunderstandings and New Approaches,' *Mamluk Studies Review* 9, no. 2 (2005).

[3] SHAHAB AHMED, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

English edition, but Frank Griffel has critically compared both in a recent article.[4] Just as with Ahmed's fundamental concept, it is worth asking to what degree Bauer's ambiguity can actually be historicized, and thus applied to periods and regions outside the purview of the original work.

The singular focus on one explanatory paradigm in the study of vast cultural spaces is always a fraught enterprise, and ambiguity as wielded by Bauer is no exception. First, the overall argumentative and occasionally polemic thrust leaves many intriguing and important observations (about the continuity of cities from late antiquity into the Islamic period, the emotional purchase of Arabic poetry, or the place of al-Rāzī (d. 1210) in Islamic legal thought, to name just a few examples) underdeveloped, which is a pity, but understandable. More serious is the problem that ambiguity does not apply to all aspects of Islamic culture equally well. Zygmunt Bauman identifies the stranger as an ambiguous and hence threatening figure under conditions of modern nationalism, but how ambiguous is the stranger in the premodern Middle East? Given the power inherent in poetic speech, which got more than one poet killed, one wonders whether all poetic polemic was just play. The title of Book XXIII of al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) *Revival of the Religious Sciences* is *Breaking the Two Desires* (meaning hunger and sexual desire): is this really a positive attitude towards sex?[5] Many more such individual quibbles could be enumerated here.

What is included in, or excluded from this picture of Islam is often arbitrary: Bauer is an Arabist, and as a result, the wholesome Islam he presents is almost entirely based on Arabic sources from the Middle East, with a particular emphasis on the Mamluk period. The Persian-speaking world, with its vast literary and intellectual output, has vanished behind the language barrier, although its mystical tradition would have had much to contribute to the study of ambiguity; let us note that Saʿdī's *Gulistān* and Firdawsī's *Shahnāme* were read in Mamluk Cairo (nota bene in Turkish translation, another linguistic absence). Mysticism in general hardly figures in this picture of Islam, although the Sufi penchant for paradoxes and contradictions (pace Ahmed) would have presented ample material. The flippant disregard for the Ottoman period as *terra incognita* (7), omitting even a well-researched figure like ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulsī (d. 1731), will be taken up below. But even within the cultural production in Arabic before 1500 CE Bauer is self-servingly selective, when he gives short shrift to discourses that he concedes show little tolerance of ambiguity, like speculative theology (*kalām*) and philosophy (*falsafa*), and dismisses the 9th-century *Muʿtazila* as a fanatic aberration that is only appreciated by moderns who discover their own ideals in it. Are some fields of Islamic culture more Islamic than others?

The very concept of Islam and its boundaries remain a puzzle throughout the book. Shahab Ahmed had arrived at a maximally capacious definition of Islam,

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[4] FRANK GRIFFEL, 'Contradictions and Lots of Ambiguity: Two New Perspectives on Premodern (and Postclassical) Islamic Societies,' *Bustan: The Middle East Book Review* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1–21.

[5] This is noted in IRENE SCHNEIDER's review of the German version: 'Review of *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* by Thomas Bauer,' in *Der Islam* (2012) 88: 439–48.

claiming even the emperor Jahāngīr's wine goblet and the ideas of Maimonides as Islamic. Bauer in turn rejects the idea of a coherent Islamic culture or the idea of Islamic art, mocking the idea of an Islamic wine cup (no reference to Ahmed), but also the reduction of Islam to a religion, by pointing out that much 'Islamic' political thought is entirely secular. This, then, calls for a definition of religion that is never given, although one gets the impression that religion for Bauer is narrowly concerned with worship and scriptural exegesis. While one can easily agree that the panegyric discourse of praise of rulers emerges from a secular tradition, that of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda*, to say that the philosophical tradition is secular, or the tradition of statecraft, or to claim that the work of the *qāḍī* has nothing to do with religion only makes sense in a polemic against a view that holds that everything Islamic must be dictated by scripture. That Muslims might have thought of kings as imbued with sacrality (as first prominently proposed by Aziz al-Azmeh) or studied creation as a manifestation of divine signs (see e.g. Suyūṭī's Islamic cosmology) remains outside of consideration.[6] It is true that discourses of justice and statecraft assert that the world order is endangered by injustice, rather than unbelief, but this does not mean that Islamic political thinkers would not consider that world order as a divine creation in the first place. Statements how God gave a prince the qualities to rule abound (e.g. 227); if this is secular, then it is secularism at the mercy of the divine. Having criticized the 'Islamization' of Islam, not without good reason, Bauer leaves us with a de-Islamicized Islam that has no coherent historical referent, and no viable delineation.

Whichever way it is conceived of, neither Islam, nor Europe easily conform to the rigid dichotomy of tolerance vs. intolerance for ambiguity. Bauer's characterization of modern Europe as Islam's counterpart borders on caricature, and wilfully glosses over the question how continuing ambiguities in art and music might be compatible with the intolerance for ambiguity in science and philosophy.[7] Moreover, this neat dichotomy ends up being utterly ahistorical. According to Bauer it ended when Western colonialism imposed its Cartesian concept of a singular, unified, unambiguous truth upon the Middle East, resulting in Islamic modernism and Salafism. How this imposition unfolded, however, and how the Middle East swiftly adopted fundamental tenets of European modernity is not part of the book, in which the history of Islam promised in the title ends more or less in the early sixteenth century, and snapshots from the twentieth only serve as foils, without a coherent presentation. Not only the actual history of colonization, but the entire Ottoman period are simply absent, with several implications. First, one wants to ask how even such an erudite iconoclast, who throughout the book chides Islamic and 'Oriental' studies for their modernist and

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[6] Azīz Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship. Power and the Sacred Muslim, Christian and Pagan Polities* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1997); ANton M. Heinen, *Islamic cosmology; a study of as-Suyūṭī's al-Hayʾa as-sanīya fī l-hayʾa as-sunnīya, with critical edition, translation, and commentary* (Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft; Wiesbaden: In Kommission bei F. Steiner Verlag, 1982).
[7] This should have included the work of Adolf Loos, whose polemic against ornament Bauer quotes, while ignoring that Loos and Karl Kraus (one of the few European examples of ambiguity tolerance) were good friends, and that Loos' own work is actually playful and in its own way ambiguous (I owe these observations to my colleague Rudi Lindner).

disciplinary blinders, could himself be so incapable or unwilling to look beyond his own discipline to Ottoman history even if it so obviously pertains to his subject? Is this not another example of the narrow disciplinary boundaries of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies in Germany? Secondly, in the few forays into Ottoman territory we find factual errors that could have easily been avoided. For instance, making the point that the canonic punishment of death by stoning was hardly ever implemented, Bauer references one unique and well-documented case, the execution of an adulterous couple in the hippodrome in Istanbul in 1680, but inexplicably misses the essential point that the accused adulterer was Jewish, and that the episode took place in context of sectarian conflict and forced conversion.[8] His summary of the Ottoman claim to the caliphate is muddled at best (234). The linkage of *dīn wa dawla*, which Bauer dismisses as non-essential in Islam (whatever that means) is by no means modern, but standard fare in Ottoman political discourse. And a better understanding of the realities of seafaring and mapmaking might have prevented him from uncritically subscribing to Fuad Sezgin's speculations that Muslim seafarers had reached the Americas before Columbus (253).[9] But the most serious implication is a third one, namely, that any attempt to fill in the gap between the end of the Mamluk period and colonialism would quickly have shown that the very premise of Bauer's dichotomy is fatally flawed, because it rests on the assumption that the Islamic world existed by itself and unperturbed until its encounter with colonialism, despite its ancient Greek and Hellenistic heritage and major demographic and political change with the arrival of the Turks and the Mongols, to name just a few. The Ottoman Empire, including its Arab provinces, was integrated with the rest of the Mediterranean through constant interaction in warfare, migration, and trade. Does Bauer simply consider these interactions as less consequential, or was the encounter with Europe categorically different, and if so, how? The lack of an answer, or even the acknowledgement of the problem, once more underscores the dangers inherent in the attempt to shoehorn a vast and complex history into a mono-dimensional paradigm.

Ambiguity, it turns out, is an important feature of premodern Islam, but in an of itself has little explanatory purchase. Bauer has valuably shown how it is manifested in a vast kaleidoscope of cultural practices, and this merit should not be diminished, but he does not sufficiently historicize it. In conclusion of this review, and as a historian of Ottoman culture, I will offer a few thoughts how Bauer's study could be used to generate new questions, or shed new light on well-known phenomena, in order to start elucidating his 'dark ages' between the Mamluks and modernity, aka Ottoman history. We might start by acknowledging what generations of historians have shown before, that there is no neat distinction of what constitutes endogenous or exogenous change, and when the Ottomans bring change over the Mamluk period – given the

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[8] See for instance MARC BAER, 'Death in the Hippodrome: Sexual Politics and Legal Culture in the Reign of Mehmet IV,' *Past & Present* 210, no. 1 (2011): 61–91. Bauer seems to think that the biographer Muḥibbī is the only source for this incident, which is far from the truth.

[9] A more plausible study of the evidence in question is GREGORY W. MCINTOSH and NORMAN J. W. THROWER, *The Piri Reis Map of 1513* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000).

above-mentioned entanglements – it does not make sense to attribute them to external influence (which in Bauer's logic might thus make them somehow less Islamic). Ottoman imperial culture, that is, centred on the court in Istanbul, and mostly expressed in Turkish, shared the appreciation of ambiguity and playfulness in poetry. Similarly, much of what Bauer has to say about love and desire resonates with the ambivalent gendering and emotionality of this poetry.[10] On the other hand, the sacralization of the sultan as messiah, as Lord of the Conjunction (ṣāḥib-qirān), or as caliph – a title imbued with a strong dose of mysticism – clearly sets the Ottomans apart from Bauer's political secularism, making them heirs to Mongolian traditions of charismatic kingship, but the collusion of these concepts leaves room for an argument in favour of ambiguity.[11]

On the other hand, in a development now regularly described as Sunnitization, religious belonging and orthodoxy were reinforced and politicized starting in the sixteenth century, leading to more rigid sectarian or confessional boundaries. Religious activism emerging from this background brooked no ambiguity, but was clearly not independent from pre-Ottoman traditions.[12] European and Ottoman students of geography freely traded their knowledge in the seventeenth century, and natural philosophy and medicine underwent a paradigm shift towards experimental and Paracelsian ideas.[13] The compatibility between European and Ottoman quests for knowledge and truth shows that the Islamic Middle East did not have to wait to be colonized in order to change its validation of ambiguity. Whether we frame this change as indigenous Enlightenment, as Reinhard Schulze once proposed, as the seeds of Ottoman proto-modernity, as part of a process of disenchantment, it is clear that it fundamentally rests on Ottoman agency and indigenous intellectual developments.[14] That these do not happen with all of society in lockstep, but asynchronously and with much nuance is evident if we juxtapose the two towering figures of the Ottoman seventeenth century, Kātib Çelebi (d. 1657) and Evliyā Çelebi (d. after 1685) who in many ways represent two different tendencies in Ottoman culture. Nor are such

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[10] WALTER G. ANDREWS, *Poetry's Voice, Society's Song: Ottoman Lyric Poetry* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985); WALTER ANDREWS and MEHMET KALPAKLI, *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005) also show how closely this poetry and the attendant patronage system track Renaissance poetry in French, Italian, or English.

[11] CORNELL FLEISCHER, 'The Lawgiver as Messiah: The Making of the Imperial Image in the Reign of Süleymân,' in *Soliman le magnifique et son temps*, ed. Gilles Veinstein (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1992); HÜSEYIN YILMAZ, *Caliphate Redefined: The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[12] TIJANA KRSTIĆ and DERIN TERZIOĞLU, eds, *Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1450–c. 1750* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); MICHAEL A. COOK, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 323–33.

[13] GOTTFRIED HAGEN, *Ein osmanischer Geograph bei der Arbeit. Entstehung und Gedankenwelt von Kātib Čelebis Ǧihännümā* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2003); HARUN KÜÇÜK, *Science without Leisure* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).

[14] REINHARD SCHULZE, 'Das islamische achtzehnte Jahrhundert: Versuch einer historiographischen Kritik,' *Die Welt des Islams* 30, no. 1/4 (1990); MARINOS SARIYANNIS, *Perceptions ottomanes du surnaturel. Aspects de l'histoire intellectuelle d'une culture islamique à l'époque moderne* (Paris: Les Éditions du CERF, 2019).

changes articulated in programmatic statements or enacted in highly visible announcements. As Ethan Menchinger has demonstrated, it took only slight shifts in emphasis for a historical thinker like Aḥmed Vāṣıf Efendi (d. 1806) to reappropriate religious rhetoric for a call for active political reform, and a rejection of 'fatalism,' making him 'the first modern Ottoman'.[15] What is clear, however, is that the Ottoman period at no point constitutes a distinct break from 'classical' Islam, and yet over the course of the centuries even before the interaction with colonialism (and nationalism!) has changed it substantially.

In sum, the phenomenon of ambiguity and the social and cultural tolerance or intolerance for it not only gives us a new and refreshing perspective on the Arab premodern Middle East, but it can also provoke new questions in adjacent areas. If tracking ambiguity's manifestations and transformations entails a more intensive dialogue between Arabists and Ottomanists, and probably Persianists and Mughal scholars, so much the better.

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[15] ETHAN L. MENCHINGER, *The First of the Modern Ottomans* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).