

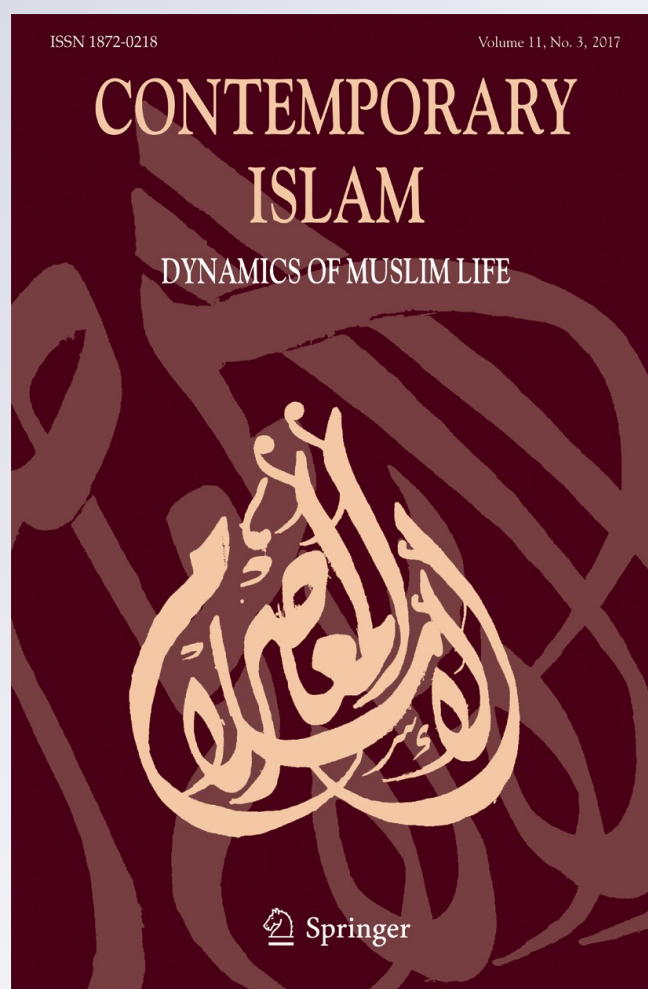
What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic Shahab Ahmed

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In this critically engaging book, Shahab Ahmed seeks to answer the question “what is Islam?” amidst the puzzling unity and diversity, by providing, as he puts it, “a new language for the conceptualization of Islam that serves as a means to a more accurate and meaningful understanding of Islam in the human experience – and thus, of the human experience at large” (p. 108). Starting with anecdotes, one concerning Muslim wine-drinkers, another concerning Islamic art, and still another how Islam makes an Arab and South Asian speak to and understand each other, Ahmed then formulates and addresses six questions drawn from primary texts from the medieval time in the region stretching from the Balkans to Bengal. The questions concern whether philosophy, Sufism, illuminationist philosophy, poetry of wine drinking and homoeroticism, the art of celebrating images, and the consumption of wine by Muslims could be regarded as Islamic. The conceptualization of the diverse range of ideas, expressions, and practices as being coherently Islamic has been underrepresented in modern scholarship and popular media produced by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. This underrepresentation is in Ahmed’s view, caused by modern tendencies to privilege texts, the early formation of Islam, and present-mindedness, and to exclude broader human and historical manifestations of one’s engagement with Revelation to Muhammad. This book would be valuable for scholars and students in upper division undergraduate courses and graduate seminars focusing on Islam and any such courses containing Islam as one of

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the subjects. Scholars and students of history, anthropology, literature, philosophy, and theology, would find it useful as a comparative and engaging work.

To support his argument, Ahmed eclectically uses primary texts, historical accounts, anthropological framework, and discourse analysis. Among other scholars of Islam, Talal Asad has a special place in Ahmed's proposal, in addressing how to organize the diversity of Islam in terms of an adequate concept (p.8), how to reach the aim at "reformulating the questions underlying a work, not at demolishing it." (p.117), how to understand law as "a mode of universalization that civilizes, legitimizes, and administers" (p.125), and how to problematize the category of religion when analyzing Islam (p.180). But Ahmed criticizes Asad for his concept of discursive tradition that could lead to the limiting notion of orthodoxy and prescriptive trajectories of Islam as necessarily the theological and the legal (p.268–81).

Before elaborating his own articulation of Islam, Ahmed criticizes a wide range of conceptualizations of Islam. In Chapter Two, he questions law or shari'ah as the standardizing paradigm of Islam, which posits Sufism, philosophy, art, and other non-legal discourses and practices as merely derivative or alternative forms of Islam. The *islams* approach is for him inadequate because we still don't know how these various islams stand to Islam and to each other. This does not mean that Islam has a core, such as the witnessing of "There is no god but God; Muhammad is the Messenger of God" because there has been always disagreement about God and how to submit to Him and about Muhammad and how to follow him (pp. 138–140). In grappling with unity and diversity and with individuality and community, Ahmed writes:

The fact that there exists a vast human community constituted at the level of the individual by an intimate sense of commonality in the meaningfulness of a something/somewhat that is experienced in all its diversity and difference as Islam is another way of saying that Islam, and not merely Islams, is, quite simply a theoretical, experiential, affective, affinitive, and semantic reality for Muslims. (p.148)

For Ahmed, scholars should approach whatever Muslims say or do is Islam as a potential site or locus for articulation for being Muslim. The next concept subject to his discussion is the use of *Islamicate* as developed by Marshall Hodgson to refer to everything cultural and worldly other than Islamic faith, the religious, or Muslim identity. For Ahmed, Islam/Islamic should have been used to refer to vocabularies, meanings, and practices of literature, art, politics, wine drinking, and so forth, so long as they are the vocabularies and meanings of the revelation to Muhammad (p.165). Even non-Muslims, such as Jews and Christians, can also be regarded as Islamic because "the God of Islam Himself identifies Judaism and Christianity as superannuated versions of the same Divine statement that He communicated to Muhammad". (p.174).

In Chapter Three, Ahmed interrogates the originally Western Christian concept of religion in conceptualizing Islam, which did not separate *din*, translated as a way of life and *dunya*, the world. Thus, a human and historical Islam would not separate the sacred and the profane because Muslims expressed their ideas, however contradictory, in terms of Islam, Ahmed argues. Then Chapter Four examines if such concepts as culture, meaning, symbol system, core and nucleus, whatever Muslims say it is, discursive tradition, orthodoxy, and process, could be useful in conceptualizing Islam. To analyze Islam as a cultural system is to him problematic because a system implies rigidity and

tends to overshadow human agency. For Ahmed, there is “a dialectic: Islam makes Muslims and Muslims make (and continue to make) Islam.” (p.258). The suggestion that Islam is simply what Muslims everywhere say it is, does not help scholars understand what makes it Islamic. The idea of Islam as a discursive tradition that relates itself to the Qur’an and the Hadith is prescriptive and emphasizes authority whereas for him Islam is full of “dynamics of accommodation and expansion” (p.274). To see Islam as an orthodoxy begs the question of how many Muslims did not orient themselves toward it. Islam is also an exploration of what is unknown, uncertain, unsettled, and new, such as the Sufi practice of *sama*’, or “audition”, which is no less meaningful than the prescriptive and the orthodox. Ahmed agrees with seeing Islam as a process, but one needs to locate what makes this specific process Islamic.

Having demonstrated the shortcomings of the existing conceptualizations of Islam, Ahmed offers his re-conceptualizations in Chapter Five, underscoring the importance of hermeneutical engagement. Jalaluddin Rumi’s *Masnawi*, for example, is for Ahmed “the historical exemplar of creative and explorative engagement with the Qur’an – that is, of exegesis by re-imagining, re-configuring, re-presenting, re-formulating, re-valoring, and re-narrating.” (p. 306). The interpretation of the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha as the embodiment of the passion of love, the love stories of *Majnun Laila*, and the humor of associating sex with a greater *jihad*, should be seen as proper expressions of being Islamic. Islam, Ahmed writes, “is a shared language by and in which people express themselves so as to communicate meaningfully in all their variety.” (p.323). In order to cope with the diverse and often contradictory human and historical phenomenon of Islam, Ahmed proposes using the concepts of Pre-Text, to refer to the larger and prior dimension of Divine Revelation; of Text, that is the Revelation in its written form; and of Con-Text, that is the whole field of Revelation produced in the course of the human and historical hermeneutical engagement with Revelation to Muhammad. The spectrum of Revelation to Muhammad is therefore broad and deep, external and internal, and hierarchical (elite and commoners), literal and metaphorical, and private and public.

In Chapter Six, Ahmed elaborates the applications and implications of such re-conceptualizations. Thus the question “what is Islamic art?” becomes the question “What does this art object mean in terms of Islam?” A wine-cup is Islamic “precisely because of the (contradictory) values and meanings, negative and positive, that are made for wine in the hermeneutical engagement by Muslims with Pre-Text, Text, and Con-Text...” (p.409). In the same light, natural science, which is universal and rational, is Islamic because it is accessed through the Pre-Text in a manner equal to the other knowledges accessed through the Text. To answer a question if non-Muslims, such as Aristotle, Plato, Alexander the Great, Maimonides, and many others, could produce ideas and make things considered Islamic, Ahmed replies affirmatively so long as they are made meaningful in terms of Islam. Ahmed writes, “whether or not an actor is Muslim is irrelevant to the matter of whether or not the act or the product of the act is Islamic” (p.449). The same can be said of violence, legal practices, customs (*adat*), and other human and historical productions. But the challenge remains: because Muslims are faced with principles and forms, they should negotiate for themselves “the balance of truth” (p.506).

The main contribution of this book is the main focus on and elaboration of contradiction within Islam as internally coherent. But in some places it is unclear

whether Ahmed's cases are about contradiction or about difference and disagreement. We are left wondering if there are different kinds and layers of difference of being Muslim that scholars should be more specific in understanding and explaining. Regarding modern Islam's preoccupation with Text of Revelation, Ahmed realizes that it is hard to challenge. But by modern Islam, Ahmed might mean only certain forms that aim at returning to the early age of Islam, because our modern and post-modern times witness even a wider range of expression and articulation of being Muslim. On the one hand, an increased number of Muslims have invented and advocated Islamization of science, dress, banking and economics, hotel and tourism, and many more. On the other hand, other Muslim selves claim and promote their versions of secularism and liberalism. This book helps us understand and conceptualize this contradiction as something coherently Islamic, but scholars must also elaborate on what types of contradiction and disagreement, which layers of Truth and meaning, and what implications and impacts they may have on knowledge production in academia and human relations at large when almost everyone in the world today not only speaks about Islam but also talks through and engages Islam. In short, are there ideas and practices inherently Islamic rather than made Islamic? Should or can we scholars and students differentiate between the two? How do we negotiate between making value judgments and fact judgments in understanding, analyzing, conceptualizing, and teaching about Islam?

Given the focus on disagreement and contradiction, we may ask: How do we conceptualize change, apart from or in relation to diversity and contradiction? How do we conceptualize change in being Muslim? Being Muslim changes from "the pre-Islamic" time to the "Islamic" time with Muhammad and post-Muhammad, from the old generation (*salaf*) to the new generation (*khalaf*), from the predecessors (*mutaqaddimin*) to the contemporary scholars (*mutaakhirin*), and from the early time, the pre-colonial, to the colonial and post-colonial times. Conceptualization of Islam as coherently contradictory offers a fuller and wider spectrum of human and historical phenomena, but Islam's change from time to time, only implicitly addressed in this book, is an important dimension that deserves re-conceptualization due to the misrepresentation of Islam, in both scholarship and the public, as inherently static and traditional. One may say, Islam is "coherently contradictory", but it is also "coherently dynamic".